

Signifyin' the Unsayable Past in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*: The Case of the Newspaper Cutting

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In her novels, Toni Morrison rewrites the history of African Americans from their own perspective, in fictional form. Rewriting African American history fictitiously means the rewriting of the history of slavery and its effects today, i.e., racism, imaginatively. In *Playing in the Dark* (1992), Morrison explicitly problematizes the fact that any written work, especially in English, is essentially following a white tradition: that the implied default race of books is white. As a novelist, Morrison seeks to find the appropriate literary form for the representation of the legacy of slavery and often relies on the tradition of the slave narrative. She writes from the perspective of African Americans who suffered from slavery, focusing on female experiences in particular. Furthermore, the language of her narratives is interwoven with the patterns of the African American vernacular idiom.

Rewriting the history of African American women and reconsidering the legacy of slavery in their lives is connected to Morrison's project on language. On the one hand, she aims to unravel the use of racialized language, that is, "the explicit insertion into everyday life of racial signs and symbols that have no other meaning than pressing African Americans to the lowest level of the racial hierarchy" (Morrison, "On the Back"). She calls this language usage race talk and emphasizes the novelist's ability to showcase and criticize such language ("Nobel Prize Lecture").

Another racially self-aware aspect of Morrison's language use is the incorporation of elements of African American vernacular culture into her fictive texts. These elements include rhythmic patterns, music and song, religious themes and forms, and vernacular discourse in particular, as parts of the legacy of the Black Atlantic, also the title of an influential book by Paul Gilroy published in 1993. In this, he highlights elements of transatlantic African culture like music and religion as the primary means for communicating the experience of Black modernity by the transatlantic black cultural community (*Black Atlantic* 18, 36). Gilroy refers to Morrison's 1987 book *Beloved* as an excellent example of thematizing the problem of black agency in its retelling of the slave past (*Black Atlantic* 64-69), but he does not go into detail about the role of African music or religion in the novel. That project is performed by Lars Eckstein in *Re-Membering the Black Atlantic* (2006). In order to gain more insight into the particular African American practices of rewriting the slave past as transatlantic, this paper studies one aspect of vernacular language use in *Beloved*.

This essay surveys how Morrison's *Beloved* rewrites African American history and the legacy of slavery by exposing racism encoded in language use through the example of the "newspaper cutting" in the novel. *Beloved* reverses existing accounts

of the slave experience both from the perspective of the characters' interactions and from the perspective of literary tropes used in it. The novel places oral and indirect communication over the formal system of writing, and by doing this produces a hybridized account of the slave experience. The paper focuses on how the contrast between written and oral storytelling is played out in the several uses of the newspaper cutting in the novel. The newspaper cutting tells Sethe's story from the perspective of a white man, replete with images, while its several reproductions represent its chain of oral interpretations by the diverse racialized characters, eventually resulting in a hybridized story.

The essay maps the emergence of Morrison's project in her theoretical articles first; then, it proceeds to consider the use of the newspaper cutting as a trope of the "talking book" in African American fiction. Eventually, it traces the oral versions of the cutting in the novel in order to examine the patterns of retelling as the process through which the racist language use that carries the legacy of slavery is processed and hybridized.

Rewriting the Slave Past

In her article "The Site of Memory," Morrison claims that she does not trust existing accounts of the history of slavery, accounts that may come from white authors or authors of color with a limited perspective. Accounts from whites disregarded the stories of Africans, but African Americans slaves themselves wrote carefully censored accounts. As Morrison puts it, "popular taste discouraged writers from dwelling too long or too carefully on the more sordid details of their experience." Too shocking details were usually veiled over by silence or careful rendering. A case in point is Linda Brent's story of sexual abuse where the white editor, Lydia Maria Child, takes responsibility for drawing the veil from this in/delicate subject and its monstrous nature (190, 191). Morrison claims there is no mention of the interior life of slaves in slave narratives, either. As a novelist, she would like to reconstruct the world based on existing textual remains, the images in existing narratives. She wishes to fill in the blanks these images or pictures indicate in the existing narratives (192).

In her essay "Memory, Creation, Writing," Morrison explains the nature of this retelling as a confrontation with the received reality of the West. "My compact with the reader is not to reveal an already established reality. . . . In the Third World cosmology, as I perceive it, reality is not already constituted by my literary predecessors in Western culture." She adds: "[my work] must centralize and animate information discredited by the West . . . as lore or gossip or magic or sentiment" (388). Also, to reflect the traditions of African American culture faithfully, her work "must make conscious use of the characteristics of its art forms: antiphony, the group nature of art, functionality, improvisational nature, its relation to performance, the critical voice in it" (389). Music is a primary source for her, a kind of key to Afro-American artistic practices; she told Paul Gilroy (*Small Acts* 181).¹

African art forms are connected to the theme of healing, which is an added feature of Morrison's stories of the slave past. In general, Caroline Rody explains

that Morrison's novels take over the healing function of African tales and music (24). Rachel Kaadzi Ghansah explains this feature by saying that Morrison's novels make ordinary black life fantastic and magical, and names this Morrison's "radical vision," or rather, her radical *revision* of the past. More specifically for *Beloved*, Ashraf H. Rushdy claims that Sethe's two daughters embody two contexts for their mother's act. Denver is associated with a healing potential as the alternative for Beloved's critique of it ("Daughters, Signifyin[g]" 47-50).

It is well known that *Beloved* itself was written as a response to an actual article that gives a white minister's eye-witness account of Margaret Garner, a slave woman in jail, who had murdered her child. The brief article, "A Visit to a Slave Mother Who Killed Her Child," was written by a minister, P. S. Bassett, and published on February 12, 1856, in *The American Baptist*. That article had been republished in *The Black Book* of documents on black history edited by Morrison in 1974 (Harris 10). However, the later events of Garner's actual story bear no relation to the events narrated in *Beloved*.

In the novel *Beloved*, one finds repeated references to a fictitious newspaper cutting that reported Sethe's act for white readers. Not surprisingly, perhaps, one never gets to read the text of this actual newspaper cutting in the novel. Instead, the retellings of this cutting illustrate rewriting as revision from the African American perspective. Most likely, we are all familiar with Morrison's basic story: Sethe, the enslaved African American mother, runs away and hides with her four children in Cincinnati, Ohio. After four weeks, they are found by slave catchers. Wanting to save her children from slavery, Sethe begins to kill the children one by one but manages to cut the throat only of the two-year-old girl. In the novel, a newspaper clipping reports this story and illustrates it with a drawing of the woman's face. The clipping itself is produced by Stamp Paid, a man from the local black community, eighteen years after it appeared in the paper. The old man informs Paul D, Sethe's new lover, about the murder because he is ignorant about the circumstances of the child's death and Sethe's responsibility. Paul D is illiterate and views the clipping, text, and drawing with suspicion:

Because there was no way in hell a black face could appear in a newspaper if the story was about something anybody wanted to hear. A whip of fear broke through the heart chambers as soon as you saw a Negro's face in a paper, since the face was not there because the person had a healthy baby, or outrun a street mob. Nor was it there because the person had been killed, or maimed or caught or burned or jailed or whipped or evicted or stomped or raped or cheated, since that could hardly qualify as news in a newspaper. It would have to be something out of the ordinary—something whitepeople would find interesting, truly different, worth a few minutes of teeth sucking if not gasps. (164)

Paul D. looks at the drawing, says it does not resemble Sethe and refuses to believe the accusation. Instead, he goes to Sethe to ask her about it. He takes it for granted that the official written text is not to be trusted.

Morrison's task at hand is to reconstruct, from representations of slavery like the one that appeared in the paper, new texts that provide the absent accounts of the interior or psychological life of the victims of the peculiar institution.

Signifyin' and the "Talking Book" in *Beloved*

In what follows, the problem of the "reconstruction of the story of slavery" in *Beloved* will be put into broader critical contexts, both post-structuralist and post-colonial. Firstly, I wish to show that the way *Beloved* retells the story of horror, the killing, can be related to African American vernacular discourse through Henry Louis Gates Jr.'s 1988 concept of signifyin'. Secondly, the role of Gates' other trope, "the talking book," will be discussed in order to see its potential for a critical representation of the slave past.

Looking for a master trope that would characterize the mode of African American vernacular language use, Gates picks the story of the Signifyin' Monkey from African American folk culture and claims that the mode of speech used by the Monkey, signifyin', is characteristic of the African American vernacular language use in general. He defines signifyin' as "parody and satire: repetition with a difference," an indirect form of communication where parodic tropes are used instead of names. Gestures by whites are repeated with a parodic intent. Insults are another category of signifyin'; for instance, the street game of insults called "the dozens." Hints, the play of body language, verbal horseplay are other aspects of signifyin'. Teaching adolescents to "signify" is a form of rhetorical training among African Americans, the process of learning how to talk through indirection, tropes, insults, jokes that make up an encoded vernacular language. Rapping is also a subgroup of signifyin', the lyrics in rap music being another set of examples of the practice. Apart from being parodic of the other's language, this way of speaking is also self-referential, and there are "things which are never made explicit" in it (*Signifying Monkey* 67, 69, 70, 83).

In *Beloved*, the characters are often involved in signifyin' about their experience of slavery. The verbal interactions between Sethe and Paul D can be understood as such, as can the ones between Paul D and Stamp Paid on Sethe. The first scene of the book, Sethe, meeting Paul D after eighteen years, is based on flirtatious verbal foreplay, a process of signifyin'. After Paul D jokes about Sethe being barefoot as a basic condition, he declares he wants to join her in being barefoot. He begins to take his shoes off on the porch, to undress. Then he says that although he looks good, he feels terrible, the word "bad" in the sentence indicating sexual desire, a meaning enhanced by facial nonverbal language. Sethe understands this implication fully, but before they act on it, she asks him about her ex-husband. Paul D lies that he knows nothing, although he saw the husband gone mad from the sight of the horrors occurring on the plantation. In return, he asks about men in Sethe's life, and hearing there are none, he proceeds with his advances.

Another example of signifyin' as indirect communication is Sethe and Paul D's conversation on the issue of the newspaper clipping. Paul D asks Sethe about the newspaper clipping to probe the insinuations of old Stamp Paid and make fun of them. He is not asking the question straight but shows the clipping, text, and drawing, ready for a laugh about the absurdity of the idea. To his surprise, Sethe answers with indirection: she provides no answer to the unasked question but responds, mainly to Paul D's kind facial expression, by beginning to tell him about the last days on the plantation, her humiliations, her freedom, and her fear for her children when

they were recaptured. So by indirection also, Paul D understands at once that the accusations are correct, and the drawing, although inaccurate, is indeed a rendering of Sethe. To cover up his dismay, he makes up a blatant lie: saying he is not leaving her, he leaves Sethe at once. Sethe, for her part, knows what is going on.

Many more isolated examples of repetition with difference, parody, indirection, verbal horseplay indicate the strong presence of vernacular indirect/satirical language use in *Beloved*. Proceeding to another signifyin', signifyin' on the level of narration, I want to pinpoint the workings of one specific trope of signifyin' in *Beloved*. Gates not only defines signifyin' as a mode of speech but also shows its mocking presence in African American literary discourse. The first and significant genre in African American literary discourse is the slave narrative, and Gates locates an essential trope of the classical slave narrative that can also be found in *Beloved*.

Gates claims that the underlying parodic tone of signifyin' is present in the earliest slave narratives already, and he locates another master trope of this in the figure of the talking book. He explains that the need to write the story of one's freedom from slavery at the outset was also the act of placing the blacks' voice in the text of Western letters (*Signifying Monkey* 131). Racist white rhetoric centered claims about the inhumanity of blacks in their inability to think abstractly or excel in arts or sciences; therefore, the best way to attack, challenge and undermine these claims was to represent their ability to do arts and sciences by writing an autobiography. The autobiography itself is the story of how humanity, as defined by the West, has come into being. As Gates puts it: slave narratives "make the white written text speak with a black voice" (*Signifying Monkey* 131). The slave narrative speaks the black face that is initially invisible and voiceless into existence for the white audience. The black face acquires its voices through intertextual references to Western texts and other slave narratives as well.

An example of the process of writing oneself into existence is Ukawsaw Gronniosaw's slave narrative entitled *A Narrative of the Most Remarkable Particulars in the Life of James Albert Ukawsaw Gronniosaw, an African Prince, As Related by Himself* from 1772 (Gates, *Signifying Monkey* 137-39). Gronniosaw describes how, at the age of fifteen, he was persuaded by white travelers to leave his motherland, and eventually sold as a slave. On the slave ship, he saw the captain read from a prayer book. He eagerly went to the book and put it to his ear so that it talked to him, too, but for him, it remained silent. Gronniosaw concluded the book does not talk to him because of his black face, his inferiority. Gates capitalizes on the trope of the talking book by claiming that the talking book's refusal to talk represents the central scene against which the writing of Gronniosaw's autobiography must be read. When the talking book does not talk, Gronniosaw realizes he has to make his face white, metaphorically, to make the book talk to him. The talking book talks to him only if his position changes from black to white. Accordingly, at the age of sixty when he writes his narrative, he is fluent in English and Dutch, a free man, has an English wife, is a father of her child and their mulatto children, is an approved Calvinist, can use Western patterns of storytelling and can even provide a trope of the story of how his face became white, and claims that books can talk to him (Gates, *Signifying Monkey* 139).

The trope of the talking book as a means to determine the author's "whiteness," i.e., the speaker's ability to place his voice in the text of western letters, reoccurs

in several early slave narratives, as Gates demonstrates. It is a figure of speech that indicates the central issue at stake in writing the slave narrative: to prove the humanity of its author, the enslaved black and make the information he or she provides audible and acceptable for western ears. Later on, in nineteenth-century slave narratives, there is an extra emphasis on learning to read and write, on the role of books in the life of the enslaved person, and also in the making of the narrative that is written by himself/herself.

In the early slave narratives, especially, and also in their nineteenth-century counterparts, the story of the book was a story of assimilation. When Gates insists it is a trope, he also stresses the ambiguous nature of this figure of speech and highlights the tensions the trope also represents. The trope of the talking book, Gates claims, exposes the tension of the black voice in a white voice, the tension of the vernacular in the learned, the tension between the oral and the written (139). The question is this: can this trope be traced in twentieth-century versions of the slave narrative? If yes, in what ways is it present?

In *Beloved*, the story of the newspaper clipping resonates with the story of the talking book as a trope. Initially, slaves learned to read and write to prove their humanity to whites, to make the talking book eventually talk to them, too. In *Beloved*, the clipping does not talk to Paul D or Sethe, as they cannot read or write fluently. Interestingly, they do not strive to learn their language. Instead, Paul D distrusts the writing as it is, because of the perspective it represents; instead, he strives to learn the other story that is not told by the clipping, the story that is hidden by it. That is why he goes to Sethe to ask about the hidden story indirectly, and he gets a similarly indirect answer about the circumstances of the act that would explain it. However, Paul D takes the answer to be about monstrosity, inhumanity. He tells Sethe she has two legs, not four: in other words, he questions Sethe's humanity. In reacting like this, Paul D involuntarily reads the act according to the notions of the white world. Paul D's first reaction follows a white coded pattern, so he fails to "read" Sethe. Later, when old Stamp Paid sees the couple has split up because of his news and Paul D begins to drink seriously, Stamp Paid supplements his previous reading of the clipping. Previously he drove his point home by reading the text of the clipping to Paul D, but now he adds his own version by telling Paul D that Sethe's deed was about love and not hatred: "It ain't what you think. . . . She ain't crazy. She love those children. She was trying to outhurt the hurter" (234). Paul D finds it hard to believe this version of the story, it takes him half a year to react, during which time Sethe almost dies.

The trope of the talking book is reversed in *Beloved*. The clipping fulfills the function of the talking book trope, but it works *differently*. Instead of representing the process of learning to use the texts of the West, here, the clipping represents the harm the Western texts have done to the representation of the experience of slavery. It is not only that Western texts cover up the other's story, but they also prevent individuals within the African American community from narrating and understanding themselves and each other. *Beloved's* version of the talking book, the clipping, disclaims the connection to the trope of the talking book, to the idea that the ability to do arts and sciences would be the measure of the black person's humanity.

Signifyin' or Hybridizing: the Garner Story in *Beloved*

Paul Gilroy thematized the rewriting of Margaret Garner's story in *Beloved* as one that accentuates a Black Atlantic person's agency in being able to choose between death or slavery. The use of the Garner story can be connected to the Black Atlantic slave culture further by tracing vernacular elements in its reappearance. If one explores in what ways the Garner story is represented in the text, one will find five appearances, or versions, of it. Some of these episodes have been considered as acts of signifyin'.

The first mention of the killing is buried well in the story. It occurs after Baby Suggs' magic feast. She is listening into the air, as the sense of danger she cannot name dominates the telling of the events. After the murder, she is the one who snatches the dead child from its mother in exchange for the living. The second appearance of the story comes in the form of the newspaper cutting. The third appearance comes by way of Sethe's response to Paul D's question about her possible involvement in it. The fourth representation occurs later when old Stamp Paid sees the couple split up because of his news, and Paul D has begun to drink seriously. This is the incident when Stamp Paid supplements his previous reading of the clipping. Previously he drove his point home by reading the text of the clipping to Paul D, but now he adds his own version by telling Paul D about what happened in that yard at the Sweet Home plantation eighteen years before. It is after considering Stamp Paid's oral version of the story and the ritual exorcising of the ghost of the dead child by the local community that Paul D returns to Sethe.

The fifth appearance of the crime is a reenactment of the horror. It happens during the ritual exorcising of the ghost by local women who had ignored Sethe through the past nineteen years because of her act. Denver asks for their help, for their intervention, and some thirty women of the community appear to exorcise the ghost by singing. They hum and wail when Sethe and Beloved step out to the porch and begin singing to get rid of the ghostly presence. They are singing mightily when Mr. Bodwin drives by to pick up Denver and take her to work. Sethe mistakes the white man for a slave-catcher who has come to retake her Beloved and rushes forward with a knife to kill him. The women and Denver catch her and hold her down, and during this turmoil, Beloved disappears.

The different re-presentations of the Garner-story offer different modes of reconstructing it. The first new version retells it as part of the story of the community; the act is understood as a result of a lack of solidarity within the Black community. The second new version (third appearance) retells the act as an option one takes when isolated. Thirdly, the cutting represents the white version of the story. Sethe's indirection is a version that offers possible contexts as an explanation by way of indirection. Stamp Paid's added oral storytelling represents the total reversal of the white version. Finally, the communal reenactment of the situation has a ritual quality. The singing and exorcising help deal with the past, the knife is now turned against the believed aggressor as a posited heightened version of agency.

The five different versions of the Garner story offer a variety of takes on the events one can think of as verbal play, indirection, healing ritual. The different versions

lead from reproachful to hopeful. The versions can be thought of as a process of signifyin' on the theme of the Garner story, a process of verbal replay in which the omniscient white perspective is relativized. The white perspective, symbolized by the newspaper cutting, is the missing point of origin in the novel. It is the normative, dismissive reading of Sethe's murderous act that is hybridized through its different versions that appear in the novel. In effect, this "document" resembles not only the actual document one knows Morrison had herself found for *The Black Book*, but also functions as a metaphor of the official white accounts about the history of slavery to which the book produces a supplement.

Conclusion

The post-structuralist concept of signifyin' by Gates gains an added role in the scrutiny of the slave past. It becomes a method of unraveling knowledge about "proceedings too terrible to relate" (Morrison, "The Site of Memory" 191) the silent horrors of slavery. In other words, in the case of *Beloved*, signifyin' about the killing becomes a way to produce a racially marked memory of it. Signifyin' about the slave past becomes a method of remembering the terrors of the past that originates in telling stories in the African folk tradition: one that challenges the white memory of the slave past in a hybridized form. Therefore, acts of signifyin' in *Beloved* can be reinterpreted as elements of Black Atlantic experience, targeting the anxiety of the co-existence of racially white and racially black experiences prompted by the "same" phenomenon.

Note

1. The role of African elements in Morrison's work foregrounds the general question of how to represent the legacy of slave culture in African American novels: as limiting or as potentially useful (Rushdy, "Daughters, Signifyin[g] History" 45; Rushdy, "Slavery and Historical Memory" 236). Similarly, Sundquist, in his *Hammers of Creation*, surveys African American authors' changing relationship to the African legacy from the turn of century rejection to incorporation. From this perspective, Gilroy's account of the use of African music and ritual shows the critical potential of African elements. In the face of these powerful surveys, it seems odd to me that some contemporary accounts of Morrison's relation to Africa do not refer to this general question implied by the use of African elements but enumerate extensive lists of thematic connection (see Higgins, *Religiosity, Cosmology, & Folklore* 29-31; Jennings, *Toni Morrison and the Idea of Africa* 2-3; Zanditu-Selassie, *African Spiritual Traditions* 145).

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