THE LANGUAGE OF SLAVERY IN TONI MORRISON’S BELoved:
WRITING THE UNSPEAKABLE

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RESUME

ABSTRACT
Language is at the center of Toni Morrison’s novels. In Beloved, the author writes about slavery. Language comes out of a signifying process. Its acquisition by means of replacement or reappropriation results from a long historical process which has left some gaps, making sometimes unspeakable the writing on the African American experience. The fundamental point raised in this paper is the unprecedented impact of slavery on the languages deported and transformed in America throughout different phases of denial, rejection, and erasure, thus modifying cultural modes.

Mot clés : Esclavage, indicibilité, intemporalité, invisibilité, fragmentation, réappropriation.
Key words : Slavery, unspeakable, timelessness, invisibility, fragmentation, reappropriation.
“In the beginning, there were no words. In the beginning was the sound, and they all knew what that sound sounded like”.  
(Beloved, p. 259)

A diachronic study of Beloved merely draws the historiography of African American people, making gaps ever wider. A synchronic approach has the benefit of showing out of contextualization, a poetic of the unspeakable. 170 A bridge across one methodological grid and another spawns imagination through a horizontal line where signifiers easily interact and become consequently meaningful. Reappropriation as an ultimate step and muteness rejected from a vertical scheme underline the distinction between historical and fictional writing.

Language fills the gaps of an unspeakable history with its imagery. Writing makes African American history possible, imagination being a means of recreation perceived in language. Out of history, it stands as an act of rebirth shaping identities. From slavery to freedom, having linguistic stakes – language becomes not only a matter of identity, but an ideological apparatus as well. Reappropriation rendered through imagination defines the African American subject. From the silence of the past, imagination in the present unveils the writing of the unspeakable in Beloved – an extremely complex language.

The language system contained in Morrison’s text does not function according to the Saussurean mode of representation putting forth a preeminence on external objects. Utilizing a different codification, standing non-binary only with an unspeakable form, language in the text is manifested in a complete absence of signifier. Literally bereft of its acoustic form – unheard, writing has no body, or no words to describe slavery.

This is exactly the idea beyond the representation of Beloved, the main protagonist of the novel. Its volatility construed as a ghost in the story informs the absence of body sustaining language. Morrison’s writing takes to creativity that tells slavery – Beloved being par excellence a pure imagination, a concept that is essentially abstract with non-identified manifestations from the beginning up to the end. Reading the book, one question remains: who is Beloved? The ungraspable within the novel lies

indeed in a lack of concepts; the missing words that would lead to knowledge.

The writing of the unspeakable comes through indirection. In the story, the multiplicity of opinions gives a heterogeneous aspect that conceals all possibility of communication. A narrative confusion is therein created, invalidating any interpretation of the text. The fictional purpose inscribed makes writing unspeakable – even chaotic, since opposition destroys the sense of logic, or the perception of a signified. Discourse as produced by the text seems irrational, characters and narrators unreliable. Interpretation versus meaning annihilates writing, as if it is not meant to signify.

This phenomenological approach is essentially based on writing. It claims the autonomy of meaning residing in the signified – theoretically the unseen part of a sign. The access to the unspeakable is made through imagination apprehended here as a cultural thing. Imagination comes before language in the novel Beloved. Its relation with the act of writing significantly weighs on the nature of the text, as it retrieves and nullifies the identity element. Even with a shift in the written structure, the text does not show any parallel in the transfer of images. Language suffers from its impossibility to cope with blanks, sine qua nun to feed its aesthetics.

There is no hindrance to communication, though writing does not imitate language. A code confines it in a coherent whole, the absent signifier that does not refer to the language of the body. The perception of Beloved is made impossible, as writing becomes unspeakable. The signifier alluding to the words of the text is therefore the corrupt part of the linguistic sign, whose opacity serves to hide a deeper, almost ideological reality.

1. **Signifying (In)visibility**

The concept of invisibility in Beloved is treated in a way not forcibly related to the concept of blackness. It comes through characterization and gives consistency to its object. Indeed, a character is a verbal construct or an extended verbal representation of a human being. Yet, Beloved the protagonist of the novel does not fall in this category. The language of its body is inexistent, as ascertained in the opening lines: “124 WAS SPITEFUL [...] For years each put up with the spite in his own way” (Beloved, p. 3).

Morrison strives desperately to write about this complex figure, unspeakable since apprehended outside the limits of language – its invisibility being the consciousness of an absent visibility. She resorts then to imagination as a way to recapture it. Its lack of voice is a mark of oblivion, manifested through a historical erasure, a dispossession, or deprivation of language definitely showing the muteness of “a story not to pass on” (Beloved, p. 275).

The abundance of semes in the text defines a writing that reports a palpable silence. It turns into a poetic of the impossible talk between Sethe and her family. Painful and disturbing, the representation of a poltergeist in the story comes as an appropriate imagination suiting with an authorial intention. A signifying gap is left behind wordlessness. Verbalization does not appear as an ultimate resort to language, reached in the denegation of the act of writing. Compression and restriction un-write language, as writing itself happens to reflect the body of slave made invisible.

Morrison’s writing plays on the decidability of characters, considering different axes of articulation. The unspeakable first appears when Beloved is denied from the very beginning of the story the status of a character. Lacking human attributes, its identification through a personifying process is hardly readable. Second, doubts cast on its apprehension as a verbal construct irrefutably turn the language of slavery into the writing of the unspeakable. This text definitely displays a different mode of representation. Traditionally binary, its sign is made monolithic, displaced or absent – its signifier remains untied to its signified (any written form). This absence of correlation does not hinder any form of communication either, since the ostracized signified still speaks by itself.

Beloved incorporates a cultural mode of perception that pertains to the African American community. The dynamics of its narrative perfectly illustrates in a system of representation the inadequacy of its linguistic components. The gap manifested in a lack of parallelism technically reveals

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the unspeakable, which can be defined as a form of language beyond expression – verbalization unable to be spoken or written. Any attempt at writing about silent voices evokes the language of slavery, filled with voids telling the invisibility and fragmentation of characters.

2. The unspeakable fragmentation

The unspeakable in Beloved also appears in the fragmentation of language. It occurs in the act of enunciation. It is technically represented in the dislocation of the linguistic sign. Language fails to signify, turning sound into muteness. The most suggestive scene of such deconstruction in the novel is illustrated in the story of Sixo. His girlfriend Patsy is unable to find the location of the “deserted stone structure”, despite all the precision and details.

The unspeakable is as well literalized in a fragmentation that reveals slavery, with regards to Sethe’s poeticized tree on her back. Whips on the flesh turning the human body to pieces feed imagination with a blossoming tree in spring time, the sculpture of “the decorative work of an ironsmith too passionate for display” (Beloved, p. 17). The language of slavery writes the unspeakable through a displacement of the signified.

Indetermination undermines too the fragmentation of language. Not as an innocent act, it does not necessarily reveal any form of alienation. But in Sixo’s refusal there is a subversive attitude that bespeaks an anti-language. His determination not to speak English is legitimized by the lack of future in it (Beloved, p. 25). Displacement of signifiers is a reappropriation of meaning based upon silence. This seme articulates the role of language in the submission of a people. Despite the precision of Sixo’s language that “painstakingly instructed her how to get there” (Beloved, p. 24), Patsy does not manage to get to the deserted lodge.

Illocutionary, the slave’s words are not inscribed in any form of actualization as to lead to a particular and coherent perception. The lack of scheme explains their ineffectiveness, language being deprived of concepts – of any orientations that may convey either a political or an ideological vision. Out of any “signified structure”, language as a legacy is non-referential and self-contained. The inadequacies of linguistic forms account for Sixo’s final decision not to speak English as it is logocentric. The lack of double articulation is a negation of identities, since signifiers leave semantic gaps. Dismantled is the sign, as silence is made on the content of verbalization. The unspeakable fragmentation, the one elucidated in the expression “with no future in it” tells as well the slave’s perception of time and the treatment of temporality in the writing of the unspeakable.

3. Timelessness

The unspeakable comes in as a narrative instance, when time can hardly be written. Its manifestation evokes absence. The novel defines time through its volatility: “I was talking about time. […] Some things go. Pass on. Some things just stay” (Beloved, p. 35). Denying any form of inscription, time becomes a fragmentation of the coherence of meaning, as it leads to a questioning of its rationale – “It’s so hard for me to believe in it”. Its articulation regenerates signification – the unspeakable timelessness being simultaneously veiled and disclosed in a female body.

The bodily language is linked to a platonist philosophy. The representation of a burning house in the text stands for the oppressed woman whose body is literally metamorphosed. Written or metaphorized, its dissipation in the transformation of Sethe’s back into an artwork sets significance – the house made into the metaphor of the body; the body being the space of imagination.

Consummation as a symbolic act opens to polysemy. The unspeakable deriving from a profusion of signifiers defers the body. “Rememory” kept in the body opens up to infinite spaces of imagination. These “places are still there” (Beloved, p. 36) – unforgettable, indelible: “Someday you be walking down the road and you hear something or see something going on. So clear. And you think it’s you thinking it up. A thought picture. But no. It’s when you bump into a rememory that belongs to somebody else” (Beloved, p. 37). Time unfolds – its denouement marks signification as it goes, passes, and stays.

Coming through the alteration of oblivion – “Some things you forget”, and memory – “Other things you never do” – textuality turns time into an unspeakable sign, just like the burned house.

Writing considers as well the concept of “rememory”. Ubiquity and complexity reveal it as a psychic time that gives archetypal images – mental, but not individual representations ascertained by the absence of the signified in the expression of “a thought picture.” As a totalizing concept made arbitrary in the economy of Morrison’s writing, it induces a contradiction between real and unreal presence: “Where I was before I came here, that place is real. It’s never going away. Even if the whole farm – every tree and glass blade of it dies.” Between imagination and representation, “rememory” comes as a way to “think up the past”. The use of the term “bump into a rememory” serves to describe a collective consciousness coming not necessarily from a lived experience.

However in its materialization, it is shared and transmitted – “if you go there and stand in the place where it was, it will happen; it will be there for you, waiting for you.” Consciousness making possible the knowledge of the past is in an “out there” unspeakable deprived of the signified. It is a floating image, “the picture”, the place and space of imagination. Out there – “outside my head”, it is contained within language. Its body is the signifier – the graphic, acoustic, and visible form that one “bumps into.” It is the body of language that turns into the language of the body, making timelessness [in]corporeal, and the language of body unspeakable as the holding hands whose shadows are different (Beloved, p. 47).

The unspeakable comes through the slippery of signifiers in a motion that literally veils the production of meaning. Language yields signification within the articulation of nonsense apprehended in the text not as the absence of meaning, but the production of a symbolic writing through a disruption of language. It appears as an inadequacy that reaches an “out there” revealed in the shadows. From the “holding hands” to the “shadows”, writing generates an image, the place of meaning opening new perspectives – “A life”. The unspeakable in Beloved tends to be polysemic.

4. POLYSEMISM

The denial of the signified does, in no way, prevent Morrison’s writing from signifying or meaning. Defined as part of the text slipping away from the narrative project, the unspeakable out of the author’s control works as the unconscious. It participates in fiction even as an undetermined act of creation. It discloses one of the functioning principles of the signified. Affecting language more than it does with writing, the unspeakable is determined by the perception of a past that stands unreadable: “every mention of [...] past life hurt. Everything in it was painful or lost. [...] it was unspeakable” (Beloved, p. 58).

Coordinating the qualifier “painful” with “lost”, writing establishes a relation of equivalence by means of substitution. Due to the lack of a referential element, the transposition of terms literally describes the process in which the signified becomes unspeakable. Its representation remains an attempt, as the illusion of reality pre-defines a “lost” signified, one that results into a difficult and impossible language. Verbalization engenders a fragmentary writing with dismantled structures. The writing of slavery actually pushes back the borders of human imagination.

Questioning the Saussurean conception of a linguistic sign and untying the signified from the signifier, verbalization can no more report memory. Detachment making language unspeakable explains Sethe’s inability to remember the past: “Nan [...] used different words. Words Sethe understood then but could neither recall nor repeat now” (Beloved, p. 61). Her understanding is a mental apprehension, a perception of the signified independently from the signifier. It refers back to the author’s concept of a “thought picture” as an imaginary representation of the signified.

Its autonomy also affects words, as detachment within language leads to oblivion. It is rendered by a loss of the signifier, as it can be read in: “What Nan told [Sethe] she had forgotten, along with the language she told it in.” Timeless is the signified that uncovers the unspeakable memory to make Sethe’s
past similar to her present (Beloved, p. 4). As a mold giving it a shape, the disconnected signifier stands with no expression, being reduced to a sheer aesthetic object.

The knowledge of the word or rather its utilization is strictly linked to the perception of the signified. It has an ideological imprint. Insidiously working, it carries out its marks within language. But the loss of language derives from the erosion of vision it generates. In a metonymic game that raises the associative and/or commutative value of a linguistic sign, the mechanics of imperialism justifies that loss with a replacement of word, establishing writing as the norm. Dismissing any form of orality, it remains therefore an abstraction, with a dominating signified leaving its signer with no voice.

5. The Writing of the Zero Signifier

Communication is ordinarily processed in a figuration that consists in “picking up meaning out of a code” (Beloved, p. 62). Its functioning mechanism defines the frame of enunciation where a transformation of sounds into images occurs. “Usually [Sethe] could see the picture right away of what she heard” (Beloved, p. 69). Sound production, as previously mentioned, goes with the signer, and the shift towards the signified is not without incidence on the word spoken or written. Two phases come out of this process.

The first step in a communication scheme, though incidental, is subsequent to the speech act, as it designates the after-enunciation – a moment of silence with no more voice. Actualization establishes silence with a deconstructed loss. In a mental representation, this act becomes the body assimilated to the signifier. The code of the unspeakable language revealing different modes of perception refers to a signifier in a materialized form, the one that is no more acoustic but visible, this being the reason “[Sethe] could not picture what Paul D said”. The signifier as a picture is therefore linked to a concrete representation. Such apprehension obviously has an impact on language.

The second step is the perception of the signified, since it reveals the meaning of words as a projection. Linking heterogeneous forms, the signified has a conventional relation with its signer. It is an established referential standard that links the content to the form. Symbolic, the signified is rather arbitrary as opposed to the signer, which is more stable.

A word in a narrative remains as unchanged as in a speech act, even though signification can sometimes be assigned to it. In Beloved, the signified is deceitful, the signifier remains reliable as “misunderstanding more thrilling than understanding could ever be” (Beloved, p. 66). The unspeakable lies in the gaps that turn these terms irreconcilable due to the lack in that relationship of a third element – intermediary, but necessary to reach a conceptual harmony. The “picture” though unspeakable reveals language, making it more expressive. The Morrisonian signifier is somehow onomatopoetic, as it silences the signified and signifies itself.

6. Silencing the Signified

Words that compose any language reflect human experiences, making therefore speakable the perception of lives.174 No words can stand beyond the humanly possible. Experiences find within words a means of expression, whereas codified words reveal experiences within which language can be at times unspeakable. Any attempt at writing about these experiences beyond expectancies is a way of making silence either readable or audible. Their reach is the reason some representations in Beloved “could not be translated into a language responsible of humans spoke” (Beloved, p. 125).

The unspeakable comes with a “no word” formula, as it identifies the kind of writing the novel Beloved deals with. A distance is created in the description of the scene of murder (Beloved, pp. 152-153), a reported speech used as a means to disclose an authorial intention. With an undetermined object, the establishment of a narrative fallacy with regard to the ungraspable subject reveals an impossible discourse. The rejection of details and superficiality affect language, so as to show the unspeakable in the scene represented or the experience lived. The “no word” formula alludes to an impossible signifier, turning the writing of slavery into the silencing of the signified.

Indescribable emotions, sufferings, or pains leave writing with some gaps, meaningful to express silence. Language yields an absolute silence, one that is due to the absence of picture, of a mental representation. The signified remains unconceivable. Unimaginable is also the language in search of signifiers. But the “no word” formula comes as a remedy. It stands for the unspeakable giving it a flesh to signify the body – writing. But also from a semantic point of view, it is part of a writing that structurally meets the dynamics of fiction.

7. Silencing the Signifier

Language is a site of ideological conflicts, as shown in its configuration revealing a battlefield that raises the impacts of slavery. Its consequences are judged by irreconcilable characters, not only their constitutive elements. The writing of Beloved is related to unfaithful representations. Interesting enough is the scene of the newspaper clipping that Stamp Paid gives to Paul D (Beloved, p. 154). Illustrating the infanticide committed and Sethe’s picture, this sequence does not come as a questioning of slavery in terms of representation, with regards to Paul D’s doubtful attitude on the exactness of the document. It is rather an attempt at understanding what slavery has generated on language.

The novel Beloved reveals an impossible substitution, however revisited in the making of its spot. Considered as a material representation, a picture is distanced from a concept, as the signified is set apart. The picture in the newspaper is the articulation of a signifier. The shift to a symbolic description of an unrecognizable mouth – “there was no way you could take that for her mouth” – informs a parallel discourse overshadowing the perception of a signifier as a mental construct.

Paul D’s skepticism is due to a picture that does not speak much per se. In this representation, the unspeakable results from an imperceptible code conveyed in the description of Sethe in the clipping. The one that disrupts the mode of reception, influences as well expression associated with language – “The print meant nothing to him so he didn’t even glance at it”.

Recourse to mental images to the detriment of writing reveals orality. That space of inscription releases silence, readable in: “a little something around the forehead – a quietness – that kind of reminded you of her”. The possible dialog sets and liberates the voice of the oppressed, with an image turning meaningful – “the more he heard, the stranger the lips in the drawing became” (Beloved, p. 156). Signification recovered, the unspeakable language is spoken within the iteration of signifiers building a body – a unit or a metaphor of expressivity always in question.

8. A Conflagration of Voices

The unspeakable is differently approached in the scene following Paul D’s dismissal from 124. It appears as a numerical association of voices producing a “conflagration” (Beloved, p. 172), manifestly a distortion of language. The resulting fragmentation installs silence, turning the unspeakable into a plethora of voices: “[Stamp Paid] heard a conflagration of hasty voices – loud, urgent, all speaking at once so he could not make out what they were talking about or to whom”. Unarticulated, sounds may give an impossible language – noisy voices making words imperceptible. Displacement occurs with the ineffectiveness of words, signification being more a profusion of sounds than a writing of signifiers.

Generated from that motion, the unspeakable becomes a narrative instance in which writing turns ineffable. Synchronization with voices disarticulates language as suggested in: “What [Stamp Paid] heard, as he moved toward the porch, he didn’t understand”. The unspeakable derives from a contrast of redundancies whose effect lies essentially in words – motion and voices contained are actualized. Their concomitance produces harmony as Stamp Paid could only make out the word “mine”. Depriving writing of its object and leaving the text undecipherable, language becomes “a whisper”. A mumbling not signifying dresses up a barrier not telling but hiding the thoughts of women.

There is definitely meaning beyond the unspeakable, since language spoken discloses “unspeakable thoughts, unspoken” (Beloved, p. 199). The language of the women of 124 does not remain nonsensical. Signification within their twisted tongues

perceived in the [dis]order of words reveals a system of codification\textsuperscript{176}, in which is conducted the private conversation of the women of 124 – Sethe, Denver, and Beloved. Their language in comparison with the closed doors of their house informs feminism that utilizes the unspeakable as its mode of expression.

**CONCLUSION**

This paper on the writing of the unspeakable actually questions symbolism. This narrative mode with an imagery that systematically binds together the signified and the signer, seems not only deliberate, but inappropriate as well, to reveal the experience lived by the African American subject, since “\textit{In the beginning, there were no words}” (\textit{Beloved}, p. 259). A discredit on language supposed to reflect reality points out a dialectic correlation inside the establishment of perceptions. Set as an absolute signified, imagination coming from “\textit{words}” often plays tricks on writing. The language of slavery can only be heard in “\textit{the sound}” unarticulated. The unspeakable in Toni Morrison’s \textit{Beloved} is a lost imaginary rejected from a scheme of representation based essentially upon language. It only comes in the making of the novel, in the act of writing that makes \textit{Beloved} “\textit{not a story to pass on}” (\textit{Beloved}, p. 275).

Rememory is made almost impossible in \textit{Beloved} due to the loss of the signer and the prescription of a language too much conventional, culturally and ideologically oriented as to leave some gaps. Perceptions are beyond language, as it fails to tell the African American experience. The unspeakable in the narrative alludes then to the missing words or better the unnamable as it is perceived in the following passage: “\textit{Everybody knew what she was called, but nobody anywhere knew her name}” (\textit{Beloved}, p. 274). Underlining an erasure of memory through the absence of the signer, writing can only give an apparent perception of the object designated producing “\textit{sounds}” instead of “\textit{words}”. Evoking orality, sounds metonymically become “\textit{the breath of the disremembered and unaccounted for}”.

Toni Morrison’s writing is definitely an attempt at dealing with the unspeakable, apprehended as a concept based on the dislocation of the constituent parts that makes up the linguistic sign. In a sense, the treatment of the silenced signer results from a dissociation that prevents writing from extending imagination, in so much it relies on its materiality involving mainly the production of words which is judged limited.\textsuperscript{177} However, the Morrisonian signer in \textit{Beloved} is not strictly linked to Saussure’s conceptualization of the linguistic sign. Metaphoric, it rather encompasses words, gaps, fragments, and sounds – written as well as non-written forms in a dynamics that, to use Henry Louis Gates’s terminology, signifies the text.\textsuperscript{178} In other terms, the signer in the novelist’s text gets in a process of metaphorization that makes possible the writing of the unspeakable.

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