



Beloved as an Oppositional Gaze

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Abstract

This paper studies the strategy Morrison adopts in *Beloved* to give voice to black Americans long silenced by the dominant white American culture. Instead of being objects passively accepting their aphasia, black Americans become speaking subjects that are able to cast an oppositional gaze to avert the objectifying gaze of white Americans. Further, the novel as a whole becomes a voicing artifact that constitutes an oppositional gaze toward the silencing tendency upheld by the dominant white American culture. In this way, the black Americans manage to work out a strategy of collective coexistence in a white supremacist society.

Keywords: Objectifying white gaze, Oppositional gaze, Black subjects

As a writer willing to take on the social responsibilities ordained by a grand American national literature pertaining to the American dream, Morrison sees its incumbent on herself to write about what she believes could “bear witness to a history that is unrecorded, untaught, in mainstream education, and to enlighten our people.” (Wisker, 1993, p.80) Writing, Morrison believes, serves as a literary intervention “against the dominant white (male) structural and formal norms for literary production” to “recognize and rescue those qualities of resistance, excellence, and integrity that were so much a part of our past and so useful to us and to the generations of blacks now growing up” (Century, 1994, p.53). In other words, Morrison intends her writings for a cultural project to retrieve and give voices back to the unspeakable unspoken African American presence long obliterated and unrepresented in literary texts and art within the dominant white American culture. It seeks, in Paula Bennett’s words, “to restore the voices of those who have been ‘disappeared’ (from the *Norton Anthology of American Literature*)”, opening up thereby “the canon to a multiplicity of voices from America’s racially and ethnically excluded minorities and challenge American identity at its core in the dream of Adamic innocence that has historically sustained and justified it.” (Bennett, 1991, pp.1-8) For “writing”, Morrison seems to argue, “is a creative and revolutionary model for change”; it enables expression of cultural experience that could help discover and define a history, and as “representation of some of the possible alternatives and solutions to problems in black Americans’ lives” (Wisker, 1993, p.3). Writing then signifies, for Toni Morrison, both a process of change and a process of “empowerment”. (Wisker, 1993, p. 3) It is most evident in the fact that black Americans long objectified and ostracized by the dominating white society have obtained by this means the opportunity to disperse the dark mist long shadowed and shrouded them, and to voice their experiences of enslaved lives, which would otherwise continue to be channeled into silence.

According to Reinhardt, such a change—namely the change from forced silence into deliberate and conscious voice—is achieved largely as a result of, and in turn would be helpful to, the change within the status of black Americans from object to subject, for under slavery “the slave discursively, is always by definition the object of some subject, ‘an object’ whose own voice is necessarily absent from public discourse.” (Reinhardt, 2002, pp. 81-120) Smith seems to argue here that white gaze objectifies everything it touches. The objectifying tendency of white gaze has already been explicit when Columbus proposed to his master and mistress after he had first put his feet on the new land: “...there are, without doubt, in these countries vast quantities of gold...to gain to our holy faith multitudes of people” (McDowell, 2008)

The multitudes of Native Americans, together with Africans robbed off their native land, were like, for Columbus as for those white people who would later be recognized as the founding fathers of today’s America, gold to be dug from under the ground to add to and multiply their property. “The epistemological foundation of slavery”, Erik Dussere (2001, p333) has argued, “is the ability to see other human beings as property to be bought and exchanged and recorded in the

account book, the transformation of other (non-white) people into monetary value.” Slaves, however, were sometimes regarded by white owners as having less value than animals: they had value only when they were still alive, but when they were dead, unlike horses or other animals which could be hided for their skins after their death, they would bring nothing at all. Of this racialized gaze that reduced black Americans to the same position as or sometimes even lower than animals, Frederick Douglass was clearly aware when he was sent away after his old master Captain Anthony’s death “to be valued with the other property”:

We were all ranked together at the valuation. Men and women, old and young, married and single, were ranked with horses, sheep, and swine. They were horses and men, cattle and women, pigs and children, all holding the same rank in the scale of being, and all were all subjected to the same narrow examination...After the evaluation, then came the division. I have no language to express the high excitement and deep anxiety, which were, felt among us poor slaves during this time. Our fate for life was now to be decided. We had no more voice in that decision than the brutes among which we were ranked. (Douglass, 2001, pp.51-52).

Clearly, black Americans were denigrated under the objectifying gaze held by white Americans to an obscured and silenced status of inferiority, which, according to many, would be a profitable pretext for whites to maintain, and most important of all, to justify their status of subject and superiority. Jennifer Kelly, for example, has made with her own understanding of Franz Fanon’s most influential book *Black Skins White Masks* as a basis a trenchant statement on the importance pertaining to such a racial gaze:

The importance of the gaze is that it allows a dominant group to control the social spaces and social interaction of all groups. Blacks are made visible and invisible at the same time under the gaze. For example, when Black youth are seen it is often with a specific gaze that sees the “troublemaker” “the school skipper” or the “criminal”. Thus they are seen and constrained by a gaze that is intended to control physical and social movements. The purpose of the gaze is that it should subdue those who receive it and make them wish to be invisible. (Fanon, 1994, p.19)

The dominant group referred to here in the case of America is unmistakably the dominant white Americans. It is under the constraints of white gaze that black Americans have lost their voices about their enslaved history in America. It is wiped out legitimately from the mainstream culture.

To break the silence then would mean not ready to yield to or give away under the force of such white gaze. In other words, it is imperative for black Americans not to “receive the gaze”, and to forge up instead, in Kelly’s words, a kind of “oppositional gaze” before they could be able to break the constraints “iron-biting” their tongues.(hooks, 1992, pp.115-31) Oppositional gaze would, under such conditions, help to re-establish black Americans’ status as subject that would ultimately enable them to give voice both to their “high excitement” and to their “deep anxiety”, rather than as silenced objects ranked together with horses and pigs. To gaze is to look back, to talk back against the imposed muteness and invisibility, and to exert the right and power of subject, rather than being simply looked upon and judged as objects of some kinds.

The change of status between object and subject, on the other hand, would help disintegrate the stereotypical patterns of images prescribed by the mainstream discourse. It is due largely to the oppositional gaze exercised by black Americans as subject. Gaze, Lacan believes, is outside the subject as an object of gaze that confirms and sustains the subject’s identity: “what determines me...in the visible, is the gaze that is outside”.(Lacan, 1981, p 106) It is through the identification with the images produced as a result of the gaze outside itself that the subject gains its identity. The subject, Lacan would later say, “is constituted as a ‘given-to-be-seen’, constituted in ‘suspension ’ in a relation to the imagined gaze of the Other.” (Lacan, 1981: 118)

The distortion by or the lack of gaze from outside, if it were to be identified with, would necessarily lead to an unfavorable othered image for the object of gaze to gain its identity as subject. This assumption would prove especially true in the case of black Americans. According to Robert M. Entaman and Andrew Rojecki, authors of *The Black Image in the White Mind*, the dominant white American culture, in spite of its multicultural efforts to include black figures, has long embedded within it “a subtle message of Black skin as taboo”. (Entaman, 2008) Projected as such, black Americans would inevitably view themselves as object untalkable and invisible. About this marginal status, bell hooks suggests that black Americans “look beyond what is presented to them” as what others may call “property” or “taboo”, that they look at these objectified black images “from a critical standpoint she calls ‘an oppositional gaze.’” (Thaggert, 1998, pp. 481-91) It would produce what Lacan believes requisite for the constitution of subject, and would in turn rectify the passivity and lowness of black images under the white gaze.

Obviously, Toni Morrison has realized the importance of oppositional gaze when she made the comment while she was discussing her novels:

There are always concepts of ideals, of racial constraints, which hurts on a level that is just not real. There are some things that can really make you loathe yourself. The gaze of approval is somewhere else...I think questions come out of a different gaze. If there are five white guys judging us, then I have to think about the positive image. (Morrison, 1992)

For Morrison, American ideals emanating from Thomas Jefferson's liberalism about equality raised in *Declaration of Independence* bear strong features of racial inequality. This inconsistency in America's constitution is most (self) evident in the fact that Jefferson kept slaves meanwhile he announced that every man is created equal before the God of law. Even with the racial tolerance demonstrated by the multiculturalism formidably supported by American government cannot, Morrison would point out, escape the same flaw of racial practice such as the "still much ill-gotten gain to reap from rationalizing power grabs and clutches with inferences of inferiority and the ranking of differences." (Morrison, 1992, pp. 63-64)

In *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*, Morrison nails down race further as having "become metaphorical—a way of referring to and disguising forces more threatening to the body politics than biological 'race' ever was" and it has "assumed a metaphorical life so completely embedded in daily discourse that it is perhaps more necessary and more on display than ever before." (1992, p.63) As a result, the metaphysical use of race has occupied definitive places in the dominant white American culture, in the national character, and ought to be a major concern of the literary scholarship that tries to know it. Therefore, Morrison sees both as a writer and a literary scholar it her task to "avert the critical (racial) gaze from racial object to the racial subject." (1992, p. 90)

For Morrison, white gaze would render blacks as merely low forms of animals speaking in a manipulated way that bordering on animal groans and howls like Wesley in Hemingway's *To Have and Have Not*, or as vocally deformed capable of no utterance like the black servant in William Faulkner's *A Rose For Emily*, or as servants, Tom in Stow's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* for instance, who would take pleasure in serving white owners, etc (1992, pp.69-74). In a word, the dominant white culture has embedded within it a series of negative stereotypical images of black American people that fit easily into Edward Said's category of postcolonial Other, which Said believes would "enable to define itself positively and justify any acts of military or economic aggression it has found advantageous". (Tyson, 199, p.368) It is out of this cultural awareness and acuteness developed since her college years that Morrison is determined to cast a black oppositional gaze in *Beloved* to create from the "shadow" speaking black subjects, putting whites this time in the status of object to be gazed, to put it in her own words, writing "from the described and imagined to the describers and imaginers; from the serving to the served." (Smith and Jones, 2000, p.1065) Or as John A. Powell has stated, "challenging the dominant discourse (of silencing black presence) requires disturbing and de-centering the white gaze." (Powell, 2008)

Ever since its first appearance in 1987, Toni Morrison's novel *Beloved* has been widely acclaimed as a triumph of literary efforts by African American writers over the silencing tendency still in prominence of the dominant white American culture at a time when multiculturalism has gained the upper hand over other schools of thoughts concerning cultures. "Silence and breaking silence are central issues in the novel's plot, also as vehicles for these arguments", Wisker argues, and it manages to "give voice to the unvoiceable, rescues from silence that which perhaps must be acknowledged". (1993, p.93) Just as the Swedish Academy has noted in 1993 that Morrison is a great American author who in novels characterized by visionary force and poetic import, gives life to an essential aspect of American reality. Understood as such, Morrison's *Beloved* can be viewed as a cultural maneuver that attempts to "create a space not allowed in the dominant discourse" to make room for the expression of or about "racial Other", and as an oppositional gaze to "valorize what has been denigrated by the dominant society, an attempt to challenge the racing or Othering process." (Powell, 2008)

In *Beloved*, the oppositional gaze committed by literary imagination to a space within literary whiteness to cover the muted experiences of racial Other comes generally from three different directions, namely from black characters, from the narrator, and from Morrison herself as a black woman writer with potent cultural consciousness, with white Americans as its focal point. It would also include the gaze from black audience Morrison has intended for *Beloved* for she believes that her fiction won't work out properly without the participation of readers. As the word "opposition" itself would suggest, there exist inescapably conflicts of gazes that would further complicate the cultural project of addressing black subjectivity "in settings dominated by white culture". (Century, 1994, p.68) The gaze from various directions could, therefore, be further divided into two categories according to the nature of conflicts: the opposition of gazes within the novel, and the oppositional gaze directed towards the culturally objectifying forces engendered by white gaze outside the novel.

Microscopically speaking, *Beloved* depicts a community of black Americans endowed with the ability to think and speak against the stereotypical image of black alogia and ignorance, liberating henceforth blacks from anonymity and silence, and giving back to them simultaneously the right to gaze at the white-dominating American society during the short period of time before and after the abolition of slavery. It is through such a critical gaze that black Americans gain a rational insight into the nature of the dominant white American culture of that historical period, an insight constructive enough to provide the much-needed "mirror image" that would constitute and testify to the subjectivity of black Americans.

The change from object to subject for the black community living around the Blue Stone street under the white gaze begins with and is realized largely as a result of the female protagonist Sethe's courageous fighting against the dominant

society in and after slavery. Gazing at or looking back at white Americans then does not simply mean the exact action of gazing in its narrowest sense. Rather, it refers to whatever measures actively taken by black Americans that can lead to an objective understanding of the dominant culture, which will in turn help to establish a positive black image within that culture. In this regard, *Beloved* centers its main plots around Sethe's deepening comprehension of American society based on her own experiences, and the black gazes converge, therefore, toward a breakdown or deterring of white objectifying gaze that should drive Sethe to take infanticide, the pivotal event from which the novel evolves, as her only choice when challenged by slave-catchers greedy gaze.

Infanticide, the killing of *Beloved* to be exact, has been Sethe's *pis aller* when her children are threatened with the same hurt slavery has wrought upon her. As she later would confess, "it was all I could think of to do" (Morrison, 2000, p.191) and "had to be done quick. Quick. She had to be safe and put her where would be. But my love was tough." (Morrison, 2000, p.200) According to Stamp Paid, such a rough love is not Sethe's symptom of being crazy but her upright effort to confront violently the inhuman system of slavery, by means of which "she was trying to outhurt the hurter." (Morrison, 2000, p.234) On this "eye to eye" strategy of "taking vengeance on white Americans and dispossessing of their property" (Moore-Gilbert, 1997, pp.215-233), Nancy Jesser has made a just remark that "the invasion of 124 by the white people of Sweet Home, who are trying to re-cast Sethe and her children into their role as slaves, results in a paroxysm of violence". (1999, p.331) For Sethe, it turns out clearly a most powerful and effective gaze she could manage, for "by the time she faced him (Schoolteacher), looked him dead in the eye, he took a backward step and realized that there was nothing to claim", (Morrison, 2000, p.164) though it disrupts, Jesser would point out, "neither the racist modes of thinking nor the white supremacist structures of the large society". (1999, p.331)

As a matter of fact, infanticide has been Sethe's "rough choice" out of "no choice" (Morrison, 2000, p.164). Plausibly, its roughness lies in the fact that Sethe flies like an eagle to snatch her children away to the shed where she saws open *Beloved's* throat, and, according to Paul D, the last of Sweet Home men, lies in the fact that Sethe talks "about safety with a handsaw". (Morrison, 2000, p.164) It asserts, nevertheless, her role as subject of violence, re-writing consequently her role as object of violence by victimizing her daughter *Beloved* as property to be claimed by Schoolteacher. On the other hand, it enables Sethe to put *Beloved* "on the other side (Morrison, 2000, p.241)" where whites can no longer reach her, maim her, let alone dirtying her for Sethe believes that whites will "dirty you so bad you couldn't like yourself any more". (Morrison, 2000, p.251) Therefore, infanticide in slavery can avert white gaze of objectification, and as a result maintains black Americans' dignity and identity as human beings.

Furthermore, infanticide is not a contingent judgment Sethe has made on the scene but a prompt decision with years of meditation over and fighting against slavery as its basis. In other words, Sethe's choice has its origin in her consciousness developed right through her swaddling days. Slavery not only objectifies blacks as property growing on itself, but also denies them of every right to call themselves human beings, most important of all the right to suck mother milk one enjoys as a baby.

When still in swaddle, Sethe's was not allowed to drink her mother's milk for she was called away to work in the field after a short period of nursing: "She must of nursed two or three weeks.... then she went back in rice and I sucked from another woman whose job it was." Even during the two or three weeks of nursing, Sethe failed to get the full attention and devotion of her mother for when she "woke up in the morning, she was in line. If the moon was bright, they worked by its light." (Morrison, 2000, p.60) The surrogate mother Nan could not, on the other hand, provide Sethe with enough milk for "the little white babies got it first and I got what was left or none. There was no nursing milk to call my own; to have to fight and holler for it." (Morrison, 2000, p.200) It is so traumatic an experience that years later Sethe would continue to fight back the inhumane white gaze when her daughters' milk was threatened with greedy mossy teeth. This time her looking back appears not in the form of hollering but as a sequence of strenuous effort to defend her daughter's milk. It can be said to start with Sethe's resistance against the stealing of her milk by the two nephews of Schoolteacher. Though not stated directly in the novel whether out of her mouth, in her rememory, or by narrator(s) in the novel, it is most evident in the words Sethe carefully chosen for the accident:

The one I manage to have milk for and to get it to her even after they stole it; after they handled me like I was the cow, no, the goat, backs behind the stable because it was too nasty to stay in with the horses. But I wasn't too nasty to cook their food or take of Mrs. Garner. (Morrison, 2000, p. 200)

In choosing "goat" over "cow", Sethe enlivens and envisages for us the scene of her violent reaction to the nephews' offence in sharp contrast to the meekness and servitude expected of cows when they are milked. It also demonstrates Sethe's irritated gaze steered at the objectifying white gaze that is distinct in the fact that she is "held down and her milk stolen from as if she was a cow to nurse the white babies." (Wong, 2008)

Another incident of no less significance in provoking Sethe into infanticide is Schoolteacher's pseudoscientific experiment on categorizing her human characteristics and animal characteristics. It is something so disheartening and disgusting that Sethe feels unable to tell anybody except her ghost daughter returned flesh and bone because she believes it would justify her horrific act:

[...] this is the first time I'm telling it and I'm telling it to you because I might help explain something to you although I know you don't need me to do it. (Morrison, 2000, p.193)

Originally, Sethe "didn't care the measuring string" Schoolteacher wrapped all over her head and thought, "he was a fool", and "the questions he asked was the biggest foolishness of all". (Morrison, 2000, p.191) But as far her name is "called", Sethe is instinct enough to make a "response", in this case, turning a careful ear to what is being discussed between Schoolteacher and his two nephews. She is right on her way to get the "piece of muslim the bugs and thing wouldn't" get to Beloved when she hears school teacher say, "Which one are you doing?" And one of the boys says, "Sethe." "No, no. That's not the way. I told you to put her human characteristics on the left; her animal ones on right. And don't forget to line them up." According to Erik Dussere, the putting down on paper of human characteristics and animal characteristics along a line equals the double-entry bookkeeping taken in slavery which "see other human beings as property to be bought and exchanged and recorded in the account book, the transformation of people into monetary values." (Morrison, 2000, p.333)

Of Schoolteacher's motivation to commodify blacks as objects of exchange and exploitation, Sethe is vaguely aware as she bumps into a tree and scratches her scalp when she turns away. On that night, Sethe asks her husband Halle to make sure whether there is any difference between Schoolteacher who talks soft and her previous owner Mr. Garner who has allowed her to choose her husband, and is kind enough to allow Halle to buy his mothers out. Halle's answer that "it don't matter ... what they say is the same, loud or soft" clarifies Sethe's doubt and puts her into alert when Halle moves on that Schoolteacher doesn't want him to work extra anywhere except on Sweet Home because "it don't pay to have my labor somewhere else while te boys is small." (Morrison, 2000, pp.195-7) It dawns upon Sethe that the freedom and happiness before Schoolteacher's arrival turns out to be a sweet lie because as she remembers that her freedom to walk out of Sweet Home is valid only in Mrs. Garner's accompany. What Schoolteacher has done to Sweet Home men is, just as he has claimed, "to put things in order" (Morrison, 2000, p.8), which means returning Sweet Home to what slavery should commonly look like, that is black slaves are low forms of animals like cows to feed greedy white Americans but not to be believed in or given any forms of freedom.

Upon finding out American society under slavery as such, Sethe feels restless and begins to worry over the fate of her three children, as well as the "antelope" dancing in her stomach. (Morrison, 2000, p.34) Hence the plan to flee to freedom where nobody will "list her daughters animal characteristics", "dirty her best things" and "invade her daughter's private parts." (Morrison, 2000, p. 251) The tree-shaping beat Sethe has received later from Schoolteacher for the first time after being found guilty of telling on his two nephews for having stolen her milk disintegrates further the sweet harmony Mr. Garner has built on Sweet Home, and it hardens Sethe's to carry on the plan in spite of its partial failure on the part of Sweet Home men who were ruthlessly chastised either by being "dressed in a collar" like Paul D or being burned alive like Sixo, the latter of which anticipates the infanticide. For Sethe, her running away to where her mother-in-law Baby Suggs lives under such critical conditions is also to provide Beloved she has sent forward with milk: "because only me had your milk...You remember that, don't you; that I did. That when I got here I had milk enough for all?"(Morrison, 2000, p.197)

Taking all these factors into consideration, it is only too natural for Sethe to commit the unbelievable when her plan to freedom should fail her will either to guard for Beloved her milk or to protect from being dirtied by white Americans her dearest part Beloved, as well as her two sons and the baby girl borne on her trip to freedom. Sethe has no alternative but to plan otherwise, or as Sethe would have argued later when Beloved "accused her of leaving her behind and of not being nice to her": "my plan (of killing) was to take us all to the otherside where my own Ma'am is." (Morrison, 2000, p.203) What Beloved complains about is that Sethe is the face that voluntarily jumps into sea to leave her behind. It should also be noted here that Sethe's mother is hanged for her attempt to escape slavery, leaving behind, therefore, Sethe to suffer. So what Sethe is talking about is love for her children and the otherside is obviously the side of death, or "hell" Baby Suggs would argue when she says, "You lucky. You got three left. Three pulling at your skirts and just one raising hell from the other side."(Morrison, 2000, p.5) Infanticide is then, to return to what I have argued a little earlier, Sethe's "pis aller" that is both inevitable and reasonable. It can be understood as Sethe's indignant gaze of love shot out against the barren gaze of enrichment held steady by white Americans. At the same time white gaze gradually thaws away, a thinking black subject of benevolence is constituted upon white inhumanity, with the stereotypic black images falling apart. By "thinking subject" I mean Sethe accepts no given views without contemplation, does no things without careful consideration. For example, Schoolteacher's objectifying gaze does not blind Sethe to the fact that the white girl who helps Sethe deliver Denver is an exception to the atrocious whites:

That for every schoolteacher there would be an Amy; that for every pupil there was a Garner, or Bodwin, or even a sheriff, whose touch at her elbow was gentle and who looked away when she nursed. (Morrison, 2000, p.188)

So would Sethe think. At another point, Sethe ponders over in her mind that pilfering would prove better than accepting white discrimination and black defiance to be encountered if she were to wait for the service "with the others till every white in Ohio was served before the keeper turned to the cluster of Negro faces looking through a hole in his back

door.”(Morrison, 2000, p.189)

For Baby Suggs, white gaze in Carolina has “busted her legs, back, head, eyes, hands, kidneys, womb and tongued”, changing her as a result into” a real bargain for Mr. Garner, who took them both to Kentucky to a farm he called Sweet Home”, a farm which is worthy of its name in the fact that its owner never “pushed, hit or called her mean names” and have allowed Halle to bought her out of slavery. So Baby Suggs holds an ambivalent view toward white Americans. In the beginning, Suggs preaches in the Clearing that laughing, shouting, crying, and dancing are suitable means to look back at white Americans and to recover freed slaves from their bruised bodies. “Her faith, her love, her imagination and her great big old heart” collapse after the infanticide, for she realizes that “the heart that pumped out love, the mouth that spoke the word, didn’t count and they (slavecatchers) came in her yard anyway”. (Morrison, 1987:180) Due to her failure of such, Baby Suggs transfers her gaze to colors and recoils thereafter deeper to her original belief that “there is no bad luck in the world but whitefolks” and “there was no defence—they could prowl at will, change far from what real humans did.”(Morrison, 2000, p.244)

It is an insight Stamp Paid and Paul D won’t disagree about, but unlike Suggs, both of them fight consistently against the white gaze. In the case of Stamp Paid, he breaks the neck of her wife to stop her from being further soiled by her slave owner. After that, he changes his name from Joshua into this present name and comes to Cincinnati where he ferries and hides runaways, and has won the respect from the black community. According to Paul D, Schoolteacher tries to re-educate and re-order Sweet Home boys, and has broken “into children what Garner had raised into men”. Garner calls and announces them men and often gets beaten with bruises all over by his neighbors for this, but they are men” only on Sweet Home, and by his leave.”(210) The slavery maintained by Mr. Garner, as Paul D calls it, is a “wonderful lie, dismissing Halle’s and Baby Suggs’ life before Sweet Home as bad luck.”(Morrison, 2000, p.221) Due to his realization of this kind, Paul D plans to escape slavery by underground train, but is caught by Schoolteacher. He has also attempted to kill his new owner Schoolteacher has got for him. When chained with other prisoners for that unfulfilled murdering attempt, Paul D sings to challenge white gaze as Sixo does.

Singing, Paul D remembers, has been Sixo’s successful way to challenge the objectifying gaze of white Americans. When Sixo tries to defend himself in the language whites has claimed for themselves that his eating of the shoat is not an act of theft but an act of improving Schoolteacher’s property, “Schoolteacher beats him anyway to show that definitions belonged to the definers—not the defined.”(190) So he goes to the woods to dance and sing to “keep his blood line open”, saying that there is no future in speaking English. When he is caught with other Sweet Home slaves for their bold transgression of running way, Sixo “grabs the mouth of the nearest point rifle” and “begins to sing”. (Morrison, 2000, p.225)The white men find it difficult to shoot Sixo for singing locates his personhood, quite in opposition to the animals they see with their objectifying gaze. Only after Sixo “is through with his song” do the white men see a slave and proceed to burn him alive. (Morrison, 2000, p.226)

Likewise, the rest of the black characters in *Beloved* have cast their gaze of sorts at white Americans and each of them have obtained their own insight into the nature of the dominant white American society. A fact note-worthy is that the gaze at and insight into white society might change with persons and times as is shown in the case of Baby Suggs. Just take Denver for another example, though not as bold as her mother Sethe, she has experienced a change from fearing and disgusting of white gaze to voluntarily meeting with white gaze, her comprehension of white society takes on, accordingly, a similar characteristic of change from childish prejudice into adult maturity. When Paul D steps in 124 after eighteen years of trip, Denver is “suddenly hot and shy.” She remembers then “it has been a long time since anybody good-willed whitewoman...sat at their table, their sympathetic voices called liar by the revulsion in their eyes.” (Morrison, 2000, p.12) The traces of repulsion and arrogance Denver catches in the white gaze, together with her shyness at the stranger Paul D, demonstrates with certainty her childhood hatred and disgust she felt for white Americans for their hypocrisy and prejudice. Her hatred for white gaze, however, is mingled with her anxiety for the gaze from Emy for she is only interested in the part of story Sethe tells about her birth. Her effort to avert white gaze looses when she is forced to walk out 124 to seek work from white people after years of seclusion from outside hastened by Nelson Lord when he questions Denver about her mother’s being jailed for infanticide. But she still bears in her mind the fact that white Americans like Schoolteacher, or the father and son who have kept Ella—another important black character not to be overlooked—for their pleasure, “could take your whole self for anything that came to mind.”(Morrison, 2000, p.251) When Paul D asks her “if they treated her all right over there, she said more than all right. Miss Bodwin taught her stuff. ‘She says I might go to Oberlin. She’s experimenting on me.’”(Morrison, 2000, p.267) By “more than” Denver means that she has achieved her judgment, or in her own words, “I have my own *opinion*”, of white Americans. (252) It is clear that Denver is moving also as a thinking subject on her way to a more comprehensive and rightful gaze at them whites.

The images of white American under black gaze in *Beloved* fall easily into three groups: the cruel like Schoolteacher, and the ones who kept Ella; the open-minded like the Garners; and the good-willed like the Bodwins, and the kind Amy. It is a classification that in no way differs greatly from the one Jane Davis has made in her thought-provoking

monograph *The White Image in the Black Mind: A Study of African American Literature*. Davis believes that white images in the black imagination include such stereotypes as the overt bigot, the hypocrite, the liberal, and the good-hearted weakling. (Davis, 200, p.4) Obviously, Schoolteacher belongs to the type of overt bigot, whereas, the Garners can be called liberals for their permission to let Halle buy out his mother. The Bodwins, as Sethe and Denver see, are the good-hearted abolitionists as is clearly stated in the novel. (Morrison, 2000, p.190) But this kind of categorization, as it seems, is a little too limited. As we shall see, Schoolteacher's cruelty cannot overshadow his soft-talking manner and scientific experiment. It is in this sense that we can also call Schoolteacher a hypocrite. So the image of Americans under black gaze take on different forms, rather than being thrown into the same low status, as they will do with black Americans.

Macroscopically speaking, *Beloved* has been, as I have previously argued, a literary effort made both by Toni Morrison as the imaginative narrator outside the novel and simultaneously by the anonymous omniscient narrator inside the novel to break the silence imposed upon black Americans by literary whiteness.

As is generally agreed upon, *Beloved* was inspired by the true story of a black American slave woman, Margaret Garner who, when confronted with the slave masters, killed her baby after the infamous 1870s Fugitive Slave Act, in order to save the child from the slavery she had managed to escape. But such a story, though had caught enough white attention to be carried in the newspaper, is missing nevertheless from American history. The newspaper clipping that carries the news was only bumped into when Morrison was editing *The Black Book*, a scrapbook engaging in documenting what has been excluded from history by the mainstream culture. (Century, 1994, pp.73-81) Instead of documenting what really has happened in that book, Morrison has saved it for a literary invention about "these anonymous people called slaves. What they do to keep on, how they make a life, what they're willing to risk, however long it lasts, in order to relate to one another." (Century, 1994, p.78)

When it finally came out as a novel entitled *Beloved* 1987, *London Times* reviewer Nicholas Shakespeare likened the book to the "first singing of a people hardened by their suffering, people who have been hanged and whipped and mortgaged at the hands of [white people]...From Toni Morrison's pen it is a sound that breaks the back of words, making *Beloved* a great novel." (Century, 1994, p.78) The "back" that Shakespeare is keen on refers to the dominant white American culture that privileges some things as being center while denigrates other things as being margin or Other. The "words", on the other hand, refer to the standard white American English "that becomes the medium through which", Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin all would say, "a hierarchical structure of power is perpetuated, and the medium through which conceptions of 'truth', 'order', and 'reality' become established." (1998, p.7) What has been really constituted through that medium is a reality of cultural hegemony that engenders and enforces a black absence or black Other in American history. The silencing of black sounds, especially those about white Americans, has been regarded by many a defensive mechanism to maintain white Americans "desire for supremacy". The denial of the representation of white people in the black mind, according to Kenneth B. Clark, shields whites from looking into the "disagreeable mirror," to use James Baldwin's phrase, held up by blacks to whites. (Davis, 2000, pp.13-14)

The back of the words, namely the essence of white American culture is meticulously presented by Morrison and the narrator inside the novel through Paul D's perception of the sine qua non to be a piece of news:

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 outran 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 news in a newspaper. It would have to be something out of ordinary---something white people would find interesting, truly different, worth a few minutes of teeth sucking if not gasps. And it must have been hard to find news about Negroes worth the breath catch of a white citizen of Cincinnati. (Morrison, 2000, p.155)

It is clear then that white American culture tries every means to construct a reality clear of black presence. The only things that will arouse sufficient attention are the ones that white Americans think recreational, amusing, and ridiculous, thus throwing black Americans into a position of clown, less human as white Americans, or to put it otherwise, blacks are "often considered to be as lowly as animals". (Andriamirado, 2008) To break the back of the words is to break down the accepted black images and ideologies embodied within that cultural reality as is evident in the canonical American literary works, and to rescue in the meantime, Morrison would argue, what has been left out to "bear witness to a history unrecorded in the mainstream history" for the sake of a comprehensive cognition of America as a nation. So far as this is concerned, *Beloved* has been so successful that John Leonard, writing in the *Los Angeles Times*, called it "a masterwork", belonging "on the highest shelf of American literature.... Without *Beloved* our imagination of the nation's self has a hole in it big enough to die from." (qtd. Century, 1993, p.78) It is only in this regard that *Beloved* as a voicing artifact constitutes an oppositional gaze toward the silencing tendency upheld by the dominant white American culture.

Black gazes from both inside and outside in *Beloved*, as I have pointed out, are not thrust out as an attempt for "cognitive distortions" of white Americans as they will do with black Americans. (Davis, 2000, p.3) Nor are they cast out as an effort to constitute stereotypical white images. Rather, the examination of whiteness by black characters both

fictional and factual is oriented towards what bell hooks have outlined at the outset of “Representations of Whiteness”:

Although there has never been any official body of black people in the United States who have gathered as anthropologists and/or ethnographers whose central projects is the study of whiteness, black folks have, from slavery on, shared with one another “special” knowledge of whiteness gleaned from close scrutiny of white. ... [I] ts purpose was to help black folks cope and survive in a white supremacist society. (Morrison, 2000, p.31)

In casting such an oppositional gaze at the dominant white American society, *Beloved* manages to open up a space for black Americans to recuperate as active subjects their experiences previously blocked from the mainstream history. It offers at the same time an opportunity for black Americans to work out a strategy of collective coexistence as indicated by Sethe’s recovery from her traumatic past with the help of the other members of the black community.

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