Testimony to the Slavery: 
Toni Morrison’s Retrospect to Slave Narrative in 
Beloved

Xin WANG 
Sichuan University

Introduction
The slavery system in the United States was a site of painful memory in African American’s history. Writing and rewriting this past become an important job. In the 1770s, American Slave Narrative first emerged to testify the cruelty of slaveholders, and with the development of abolition movement and ending of the Civil War, the 19th century saw a flowering of this genre. Slave narrative provided a testimony to the ex-slaves’ suffering, including parting of family, beating, rape, brutal treatment, their fight and escape, with flexible rhetorical strategies in order to sharpen its political focus. And in 1987, with rewriting of this part of history, Bernard W. Bell defined “neo-slave narratives” as “residually oral, modern narratives of escape from bondage to freedom”[1]. Neo-slave narrative provided a retrospect to the past, many writers, such as Toni Morrison, Octavia Butler, and David Bradley and so on,
participated in this rewriting. Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* is one of neo-slave narrative works which represents how Seth and Paul D, a pair of ex-slaves, escaped from the South but still haunted by the memory. In depicting the suffering and returning of the terrible memory, Morrison offers a picture of the past, and testifies African American’s history in a virtual way.

I. A Testimony of Slavery

In writing *Beloved*, Morrison investigated a lot of documents and based this fiction on the true story of Margaret Garner, a slave woman in Boone County, Kentucky, who killed her own child in front of the slave hunters’ eyes. Like other writers of neo-slave narratives, Morrison confronted the difficulty to bring the life story to paper, and revive the buried memory. Seth and Paul D are depicted as two ex-slaves in the antebellum South, and Morrison consulted a lot of reference in the slavery time to expose the brutality of slavery system. In an interview with Marsha Darling, Morrison admitted that her writing required her to supplement historical research with the resources of the imagination:

> I did research about a lot of things in this book in order to narrow it, to make it narrow and deep, but I did not do much research on Margaret Garner other than the obvious stuff, because I wanted to invent her life, which is a way of saying I wanted to be accessible to anything the characters had to say about it. Recording her life as lived would not interest me, and would not make me available to anything that might be pertinent. I got to a point where in asking myself who could judge Sethe adequately, since I couldn’t, and nobody else that knew her could, really, I felt the only person who could judge her would be the daughter she killed…[Baner] wasn’t tried for killing her child. She was tried for a real crime, which was running away—although the abolitionists were trying very hard to get her tried for murder because they wanted the Fugitive Slave Law to be unconstitutional. They did not want her tried on those grounds, so they tried to switch it to murder as a kind of success story. 

In this speech, Morrison told the readers the reason why she adopted Beloved is due to the persistence of the past. Represented by this ghost girl, Morrison’s narrative is first of all proved to be a testimony, which provides knowledge about a forgotten social class and exposes the miserable situation of this class. As Jean Franco points out, testimony represents a social class participating in the public sphere, and the knowledge about this oppressive and silent class makes an important element in testimony. The revealing of the truth in history is important, and Morrison in this way shares the memory of the cruel past with depiction of the
traumatic moment. Sethe and Paul D are treated like animals in the Sweet Home: Seth is whipped harshly and had her breast milk stolen by the nephew of Schoolteacher. Her body is covered with scars and on her back, the beating left a flower tree which continuously reminds her and her friends of the past. Similar to this wound, the bit in Paul D’s mouth and the roasting body of Sixo, one of the Sweet Home Men, all lock African Americans’ tragic memory upon their black bodies.

These scars and wounds are not coined or imagined by Morrison, but a testimony of the slavery first represented by the slave narrative. Frederic Douglass, for example, in his *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave*, described how Covey whipped and beat him frequently, and how Covey broke him, “I was broken in body, soul, and spirit,” Douglass confessed. “My natural elasticity was crushed, my intellect languished, the disposition to read departed.”[4] Another writer, Solomon Northup, echoed in his account of the brutal beating of his friend Patsey, and Northup recalled how the mistress even looked and checked the wound with “an air of heartless satisfaction”[5]. Moses Roper reported how his owners put the slaves in painful contraptions, and whipped them and then washed the wounds with salt water. Despite these former slaves’ desire for forgetfulness, they will be awoken again and again in nightmare, and only the slightest sensation will trigger memories that will destroy them.

II. The Return of the Repressed

The haunted memory brings the traumatic past back, and let the victims suffer once more of the lost and the lack. According to Lacan, the psychical construction of identity includes three stages, i.e. the “real”, the “imaginary”, and the “symbolic”. Lacan suggests that a subject is born into the real as a “body in pieces or a fragmented self. But in this stage, the subject does not experience lack in the real”[6]. Then during what Lacan calls the mirror stage, the subject visualizes an imaginary self that reflects a perfect, unified, totalized image. But with the miserable past, the ex-slaves find it hard to open their heart in which buried the secrets and pain that they do not want to confront again. For example, Paul D refuses to speak fully of his suffering in the slavery, “in that tobacco tin buried in his chest where a red heart used to be. It’s lid rusted shut”[7]. As many slave narrative shows, the slaves experienced “a traumatic moment” in the words of the historian Willie Lee Rose, when they realized they are not human but objects in the slaveholders’ eyes, and
could be sold as goods. The slaves did not belong to their parents, but to their owners. Many ex-slaves in their childhood had to endure hardship and horrors, and witnessed parting of families and harsh punishments. This moment stood apart in the ex-slave’s memory, and then later this memory returned, even after they escaped to the North, they could not get rid of the traumatic past. Almost all slave narratives bear a similar opening, “I was born...” and this opening announcement of the slave’s birth without a known birthday or clear sense of parentage reveals their traumatic fact.

Not only with the absence of parentage, but also with the social consciousness that these ex-slaves are forced to accept a split self in the imaginary stage. African Americans are humiliated not only physically, but also spiritually. In the old South, racialism prohibits Slaves’ development of a unified self. As Allen Tate points out, “The South, afflicted with the curse of slavery—a curse like that of original sin, for which no person is responsible—had to be destroyed, the good along with the evil.” [8] This curse of slavery descends both on the white and the black. For the white, they create an ideal of fraternity, happiness and honor, but with an inevitable defeat, they find the truth is only with fratricide, misery and humiliation. With the desire of the join of the other, the dominant white includes African Americans to be a supplementary of this loss. The latter exists then as the deepest desire in the white’s unconsciousness, tinged with negativity, in which African Americans are revealed as the ones who cannot assert a meaningful identity, neither can command the same respect and integrity as that of whites.

_Beloved_ thus points to a paradox central to the ex-slaves: one can never have a complete identity. In other words, the African Americans bear double consciousness. According to W. E. B. Du Bois, an African American is

>a sort of seventh son, born with a veil, and gifted with second sight in this American through the revelation of the other world. It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others. [whites]... two unreconciled strivings...[and] longing ... to merge his double self into a better and truer self. In this merging he wishes neither of the older selves to be lost [...] He simply wishes to make it possible for a man to be both a Negro and an American. [9]

This double-consciousness, a result of intermingling identification of objectifying oneself and desire for a status of subject, paradoxically enables those on the margin to move from that position. In Lacanian mirror stage, the child first visualizes an
imaginary self that reflects a perfect, unified, totalized image. In *Beloved*, Seth is served first as this mirror in Paul D's imaginary construction of self. In his gaze to this woman, he sees himself as a young, strong man, full of masculinity. But also under the gaze of the Other, Mr. Garner, Schoolteacher, he is just a proof to show the white's ideal of fraternity, or obedience to the slave owners. The encounter with Seth turns out to unveil Paul D's dusted memories, and he remembers his image in rooster Mister's eyes. “Mister, he looked so...free. Better than me. Stronger, tougher.”[10] Paul D's inferiority to this rooster crushes any dream faked by slave owners. At that moment, he realizes his impotency to be a full man. The fear of castration blocks his way to seek the subjectivity, and the anxiety to return to the wholeness keeps him quivering for 86 days until he establishes his masculinity with his hammer's shaft. 

In this double consciousness, Paul D is only a temporal repetition of his ancestors, and this doubling will be proliferated into infinite repetitive of the same fate of “sixty million and more”. On this chain of Being, Paul D's presence is only a shadow of past, a return of the dead ghost as well. An interesting example illustrates his embarrassed condition. When Paul D took Seth and Denver out, Seth saw their three shadows looked like they are holding hands, and this scene consoled and pleased her. To Seth, the shadows were just the physical proof of the existence of the other side of the doubling consciousness. Even if their physical selves did not so tightly connect, their spiritual sides could freely dance. After Beloved's appearance, however, Seth realized that that shadow among them three was not Paul D, but that of Beloved. Where was Paul D, then? Without a shadow, his existence was just a futile repetition of dead souls, or his place was occupied by a void symbol of the past, by the memory dedicated to those once being beloved.

III. Attainment of Literacy and Self-fashioning

Therefore, when the mirror stage ends, the subject's apparent wholeness begins to dissolve, being split into the doubling. The subject's sense of unity crumbles because the imaginary wholeness is a virtual one, always being interrupted by outside forces. Accordingly, the subject is ushered into the symbolic order, i.e. a sign system. In this Lacanian symbolic structure, “language and laws of society divide the self and establish it as a subject of lack […]. As a result, the divided subject constantly seeks a fictional unified self”[11]. Therefore, the lack and the attempts to recapture it in the symbolic create a constant tension, yet this seek of unity is often intervened by patriarchal force and the subsequent hegemony of language. In accordance with the
effort to complete the lack, the symbolic realm then, characterized by language, creates the subject. Lacan explains, “It is the world of words that creates the world of things [...]. Man speaks [...] but it is because the symbol has made him.” In the South, however, the symbolic structure is more a racist social order that gives more power to white males and renders African Americans subserviently. To maintain the position of power, the white dominant order must perpetuate this symbolic order. Consequently, African Americans were deprived of the power of discourse, not only the right to learn writing, but also that of utterance. Therefore, if Halle’s talent of writing was a rebel to suppression, the iron bit in Paul D’s mouth obliterated his identification as a human. And Sixo’s yelling of “Seveno” then consummates his subjectivity since he entitled his offspring the power of language to have altered the symbolic structure before his death. These slaves’ attempt to acquire their identity also included Baby Suggs’ insistence of her name as Baby instead of Jenny, and Seth’s self-prostitute to empower the inscribing of Beloved on the tombstone, let alone Seth’s revolt to be classified into the animal group.

Booker T. Washington’s *Up from Slavery* mentioned, “[When we] look facts in the face, we must acknowledge that, notwithstanding the cruelty and moral wrong of slavery, the ten million Negroes inhabiting this country, who themselves or whose ancestors went through the school of American slavery, are in a stronger and more hopeful condition, materially, intellectually, morally, and religiously, than is true of an equal number of black people in any other portion of the globe.” The attainment of literacy becomes important to gain freedom and in other words, a symbol of freedom. As the slave narrative shows, many ex-slaves are liberated not only the body and thoughts, but also subjectivity through telling, in which African Americans receive, rather than lost, social purpose and attention in a public sphere. The ability of literacy empowers African Writers to confess, and wins them freedom both physically and spiritually. In Frederick Douglass’s *Narrative*, he tells his readers: “You have seen how a man was made a slave, you shall see how a slave was made a man.” This self-awareness and self-realization are achieved by the writing, in which they first of all have their own words, let alone their own voices. And also in writing, they can lengthen the distance with the past, so they can achieve a position as a subject. The traumatic memory got healed, partly, in their telling and retelling, and thus freedom represented a free and independent voice, and most often proved by their own changes of the last name after they got freedom.

In *Beloved*, Sethe, Baby Suggs and Paul D encountered not only the story from
the past, but also involve in the incarnation of their own history as well as the construction of their identity. Beloved’s presence allowed the ability of Sethe to tell, and through this telling, Sethe regained herself a full and complete past. Sethe’s words conveyed recollections she could never utter to another. Baby Suggs tried to help other fugitive slaves by her message, and this is another way for her to heal her suffering body, with legs, back, head, eyes, hands, kidneys, womb, and tongue broken by slavery. She yearned to restore the bodies and spirits of the former slaves through her sermons. Telling and confessing let painful memory heal.

**Conclusion**

Like the attempting in slave narrative in which the ex-slave authors achieve self-fashioning, Morrison’s job also plays a role of retrospect and gaze to the past. Her meditation creates a subversive voice to bring back those oblivions. To see means to observe from the inside, while to gaze is from a place outside of the self. Morrison’s texts highlight the gaze of the other or the real. This “interested, uncritical eyes of the other” [15] will discover African Americans’ own desire to be “truer self” in Du Bois’s double unconsciousness. Rather, through objectification of the dominant, the gaze allows a cultural alteration. As a result, the marginalized other gains agency in Morrison’s work. As Dickson D. Bruce, Jr. suggested, “The narratives’ authors and audiences agreed that individuals who had experienced slavery had something to say about the character of the institution, and that what they had to say could not be ignored.” [16] *Beloved* proves a testimony of slavery and helps to reconstruct the history.

**Notes:**

[1] Bernard W. Bell, *The Afro-American Novel and Its Tradition*. Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1987, p. 289.

[2] Marsha Darling, “In the Realm of Responsibility: A Conversation with Toni Morrison”, *the Women’s Review of Books* 5 (March 1988): 5.

[3] Jean Franco, “Going Public: Reinhabiting the Private”, George Yudice, Jean Franco, and Juan Flores, eds., *On Edge: the Crisis of Contemporary Latin American Culture*. Minneapolis: U. of Minnesota Press, 1992, pp. 65-83.

[4] Audrey A. Fisch, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to the African American Slave Narrative*. Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007, p. 82.

[5] Ibid., p. 196.

[6] Evelyn Jaffe Schreiber, *Subversive Voices: Eroticizing the Other in William Faulkner and Toni Morrison*. Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, 2001, p. 8.
[7] Toni Morrison, *Beloved*. Beijing: Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press, 2000, pp. 72-73.

[8] Lee Jenkins, *Faulkner and Black-White Relations: A Psychoanalytic Approach*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1981, p. 3.

[9] W.E.B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk*. New York: Library of America, 1990, pp. 2-7.

[10] Toni Morrison, *Beloved*. Beijing: Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press, 2000, p. 72.

[11] Evelyn Jaffe Schreiber, *Subversive Voices: Eroticizing the Other in William Faulkner and Toni Morrison*. Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, 2001, p. 10.

[12] Ibid., p. 11.

[13] Louis R. Harlan and John W. Blassingame, eds., *The Autobiographical Writings*, Vol. 1. (of The Booker T. Washington Papers). Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1972, pp. 222-23.

[14] Frederick Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave*, ed., Deborah E. McDowell. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1999, p. 63.

[15] Toni Morrison, *Beloved*. Beijing: Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press, 2000, p. 118.

[16] Audrey A. Fisch, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to the African American Slave Narrative*. Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007, p. 35.

---

**Xin Wang**, Ph. D. and associate professor of English, College of Foreign Languages and Cultures, Sichuan University. Her academic interests cover American Literature and Literary theories. Her publications include several articles on the American Southern writers. This paper is under her Provincial-Level Research Project (Code:SC12B049). Her most recent scholarly book is *Trauma, Memory, and History: A Study of the Southern Fiction of Trauma* (forthcoming by the Sichuan University Press).