Speaking Unspeakable Thoughts and Breaking Invisible Barriers: Motherhood and As I Lay Dying and Beloved

by Susan Wilson

The struggle to provide one's children with what they need both to function successfully in society and to carry forth their familial and cultural heritage is one of the pivotal battles a mother must fight; it takes on an especial challenge when society and personal culture are at odds with one another, and the mother must decide on which side of the debate she wants her children to fall (and whether or not it is her decision to make). Both William Faulkner and Toni Morrison (in As I Lay Dying and Beloved, respectively) draw such a fault line down the issue of language: Addie and Sethe (along with Baby Suggs) pass on language as a way of establishing who they are, who their people are, within the next generation. In societies where the role of mother is constrained or limited by patriarchal and/or racist social constructs, Addie and Sethe are able to subvert the offending paradigm by instilling the same values and ideas that matter to them in their children: Addie leaves her children with a desire for something beautiful, something beyond the static, stagnant household they were born into while Sethe attempts to give her children a freedom, an independence from the horror of slavery, that she herself was never able to truly enjoy. They work within the socio-political structure of motherhood to plant a seed that attempts to disrupt the system (Addie raises her children to be dissatisfied with the life Anse represents and Sethe reasserts her matriarchal power by shifting control of her children from slave masters back to herself); despite, however, their most valiant efforts to gain freedom through the abstraction of/ascension beyond language, neither the mothers nor their children were able to escape the confining reality of the societies in which they live.

The first and most elemental expression of language a mother can impart on her child is that of naming: in the context of Beloved, naming offers an opportunity to assert an individual identity independent from the strictures of slavery.

Naming is an act of creation. The named - whether person, place, or object - is identified or marked by the namer as distinctive, unique, the occupant of a discrete space in the universe. To name is also to claim dominion: naming children, slaves, domestic animals, or real estate is an announcement of figurative, if not literal, ownership of the named, as well as an indication of the namer's relationship to or sentiments about the named. (Hayes)

Baby Suggs rejects the white legal name of Jenny she had been assigned somewhere down the line in favor of the term of endearment her man once called her: "just as Sethe retains Beloved as the name of her slaughtered child, Baby holds on to her name as an exteriorized affect and the foundation of a self one can love" (Cummings 566). Paul D, however, has a harder time throwing away white-imposed names, as the only name he has ever known is the one given to him and his brothers by Garner, and he is thus less able to determine whether the other Garner-given name (of "man") applies to him by nature of his own merits or if it were simply another empty, ill-fitting term that a white man threw around. "Garner called and announced them men but only on Sweet Home, and by his leave. Was he naming what he saw or creating what he did not?" (Morrison 220) If that white-given name is as meaningless as the personal name given to Baby Suggs, does that mean that Paul D's manhood depends wholly on the whim of his master? "What would he have been anyway before Sweet Home without Garner? In Sixo's country, or his mother's? Or, God help him, on the boat? Did a whiteman saying it make it so? Suppose Garner woke up one morning and changed his mind? Took the word away" (Morrison 220-221). Paul D does not know what, if anything, exists beyond the word, and consequently has difficulty relating the proper name to the meaning it implies. Addie, however, is able to recognize that it is that very indefinable something beyond, not the given name itself, that matters.

As the children of Addie Bundren they are partly immune to the patriarchal linguistic machine because they will inherit her disbelief in it. More than that, though, the fact that they are a biological part of her means that any name given to them will not interfere with how she sees them or interacts with them. (Hewson)
Addie does not care what her children are named because she identifies not with their names, but with their essences: "... when I would think Cash and Darl that way until their names would die and solidify into a shape and then fade away, I would say, All right. It doesn't matter. It doesn't matter what they call them" (Faulkner 173). It is not important to Addie that she control the signifier as long as she has a hold on the signified: "the qualifying and quantifying of the boys is left to others, to the masculine language of patriarchy" (Hewson). Language as it stands does not belong to Addie, just as it does not belong to the African-American slaves, and to subvert the system, they both must reach outside it in order to not be consumed by it.

Language, in the world of slavery, represents "the reversal of a relationship of forces, the usurpation of power, the appropriation of a vocabulary turned against those who had once used it" (Foucault, qtd. in Cummings 533). The English language is inherently foreign and alien to African culture, and inherently representative of the white oppression of slaves. The acceptance of the English language as a means of communication and representation among slaves, while a necessity for survival, is a highly visible and internally disruptive means of internalizing the culture of the slaveholders.

At one end of the pedagogical process stands the master teacher/disciplinarian to whom belongs the power of defining; he reproduces the relations of domination and subordination particular to the ruling order. At the other end lies the student/subject who, in internalizing the master.s lessons, finds herself/himself a captive of the dominant ideology specific to his or her (e)state. (Cummings 561)

One of the battles, therefore, that Sethe and other freed/runaway slaves must face while attempting to reclaim (or claim for the first time) a sense of self outside the construct of slavery, is to reclaim a hold on their own language, their own means of communication, separate from and foreign to the white world they have inhabited: the characters in Beloved, as in "other narratives of origin, [attempt to] reconstruct, restore, and rename" (Cummings 553). Language, as it stands, is an invention of white men and consequently the slaves should have no mastery of it, and definitely have no ownership of it. Sixo, after stealing a shoat, claims to the schoolteacher that he did not steal it: he killed it, butchered it, cooked it, and ate it, but claimed to schoolteacher that it was not stealing, but rather:

"Improving your property, sir."
"What?"
"Sixo plant rye to give the high piece a better chance. Sixo take and feed the soil, give you more crop. Sixo take and feed Sixo give you more work."
Clever, but schoolteacher beat him anyway to show him that definitions belonged to the definers.not the defined. (Morrison 190)

Sixo is stepping out of his place by assuming a command of a language that does not belong to him. the language of schoolteacher has no role being manipulated by a slave.

By beating Sixo for using language and logic, by asserting ownership of definitions, Schoolteacher illustrates the social and linguistic construction of meaning, and the absence of absolute meaning. Asserting ownership of definitions, of meaning, undermines any transcendent quality. Again the ownership of language is emphasized as Sixo rejects the language of the master because "there was no future in it" (Morrison 25). He cannot command it because it is governed by Schoolteacher and its use still renders him voiceless. (Fuston-White)

The English language itself cannot provide slaves with the level of expression they desire, as they have, according to the slave masters, no right to possess English in the first place. The language(s) the slaves inherently have such rights to possess have long since been lost. for the most part, the language of Africa, of their heritage, no longer exists in the generations of American slaves who have fewer direct ties to their motherland.
The master's language which silenced slaves exacted an especially harsh penalty on those in the Middle Passage, who had proven so easily erased from the cultural text. When offering them a voice through *Beloved*, Morrison must face their utter lack of a comprehensible language that could create a cultural presence. Not only have tradition and history all but ignored them, language has been denied them. (Fuston-White)

Sixo is able to reconcile his split slave identity torn between dual (and dueling) cultural influences by simply rejecting white American culture (of which English is a pivotal part) in favor of his African heritage and native tongue.

The power over language Sixo takes for himself is due in large part to his claim to a larger sense of African culture and history. His approach to language is to strive beyond the syntax and vocabulary that has been given to him and instead grasp at something deeper, richer, truer. Sethe and the other women, similarly, are able to reach back into an innate communal mode of communication, outside of the unwelcome, unasked-for construct of the English language. For "in the beginning there were no words. In the beginning was the sound, and they all knew what that sound sounded like" (Morrison 259). The challenge, then, lies not in determining the meaning of white-created words, but in going back to the meaning behind words in the first place. "The women, like the men on the chain-gang who spoke not with words, but whose eyes had to tell what there was to tell. (Morrison 107) have access to the semiotic or to a language rooted in the body and altogether more ordinary than formal speech" (Cummings 566-567). By channeling a sort of collective female African spirit, they are able to not only break out of the bonds slavery left (however transiently) on their souls and reclaim an identity that is theirs and theirs alone, completely separate from the white master-black slave paradigm.

For Sethe it was as though the Clearing had come to her with all its heat and simmering leaves, where the voices of women searched to the right combination, the key, the code, the sound that broke the back of words. Building voice upon voice until they found it, and when they did it was a wave of sound wide enough to sound deep water and knock the pods off chestnut trees. It broke over Sethe and she trembled like the baptized in its wash. (Morrison 262)

By reaching beyond language to the heart of communication, the communication between beings and souls and spirits (all of which slavery forbade them to possess, at least publicly), Sethe and the other women are able to escape the binds of words and bask in the true real beauty of free, unrestricted, undefined vocal expression.

[Frederick] Douglass reports early in his narrative: "I have sometimes thought that the mere hearing of those songs would do more to impress some minds with the horrible character of slavery, than the reading of whole volumes of philosophy on the subject could do" (quoted in Capuano).

Through songs, slaves (and former slaves) are able to reach back into communal cultural consciousness and strike upon the heart of their common existence, their shared suffering, their collective joy. Slave songs, these "fundamental assessments of the collective human experience" (Melvin Dixon, quoted in Capuano), "become the ultimate projection of the human experience. One where words have no meaning and the sound carries every inch of sorrow and despair harbored inside the members of the enslaved community" (Capuano). Morrison's inclusion of slave songs in the Clearing, in the mouth of Sixo, outside 124, "calls the reader to look at them not as slaves, but as human beings with a native culture" (Capuano). The characters in *Beloved* are able to make contact with that latent cultural past through rejecting the English language that has been forced upon them and instead finding ways to communicate that transcend language as it is conventionally understood.

Language can also be co-opted, however, to possess meaning that does not inherently exist in the apparent external significance of words themselves.
In what the reader is told repeatedly is "not a story to pass on" (Morrison 1988, 274-75), Morrison adeptly wields the instability of language, revealing the slipperiness of the sign, where "word-shapes" (Morrison 99) vanish or splinter into symbolic fragmentation in attempts to recount the unspeakable (Morrison 210-13), in no small part because language, we are told, has been appropriated by "the definers-not the defined" (Morrison 190) (Coonradt).

By breaking down language and separating the spoken from the signified, language takes on a flexibility, a mutability, and to some extent, a fluid indefiniteness, that is able to communicate that which cannot be spoken. Addie makes it clear from the start that she puts little value in the significance of structured language: "I had been used to words for a long time. I knew that that word [love] was like the others: just a shape to fill a lack; that when the right time came, you wouldn’t need a word for that anymore than for pride or fear" (Faulkner 172). To her, words are nothing more than na""ove and simpleminded attempts to label that which cannot (and need not) be labeled; they "don’t ever fit even what they are trying to say at" (Faulkner 171), they "are just the gaps in people’s lacks, coming down like the cries of the geese out of the wild darkness in the old terrible nights, fumbling at the deeds like orphans to whom are pointed out in a crowd two faces and told, That is your father, your mother" (Faulkner 174). The words people use are not sufficient to describe or contain the deeds, actions, and truths of the world, and Addie rejects them and the power other people place in their semblances in favor of developing her own sense of meaning, separate from the utilitarian baseness of words and transcending to a form of tangible, perceptible language. She is able to disintegrate the name of "Anse" until "I could see the word as a shape, a vessel, and I would watch him liquefy and flow into it like cold molasses flowing out of the darkness into the vessel, until the jar stood still and motionless; and then I would find I had forgotten the name of the jar" (Faulkner 173). Words themselves do not hold meaning, and in fact the deepest, most intimate meaning Addie is able to describe only in the void of words: "the shape of my body where I used to be a virgin is in the shape of a "(Faulkner 173). To Addie, language is not a means to communicate the reality of life: it is simply a construct erected to simplify that reality that, with enough thought, she can dismantle to again reach the meaning lurking beneath.

The role motherhood forces Addie and Sethe into, however, allows them the opportunity to pass on their own approaches to language and the victories they have won through subverting it. The tragedy, however, lies in the inevitability that the struggles (and failures) of the mother to fully conquer language will also fall to her children, as the construct she is attempting to transcend is no less a confining force in the world of her children than in her own. Thus Addie’s inability to fully express herself through words is passed on, in one strain or another, to her children. Cash attempts to use words in a logical, reasoned fashion (with logical, reasoned lists), but they break down when he endeavors to address any emotional reality (even in his list, he devolves into a discussion of animal magnetism, which his language is utterly unable to fully express). He does not express emotion through his language (especially not his spoken words, as he regularly allows himself to be interrupted by Jewel and never voices the obvious pain his leg must cause him). Darl is able to know things without words (Dewey Dell’s pregnancy, Jewel’s parentage):

He said he knew without the words like he told me that ma is going to die without words, and I knew he knew because if he had said he knew with the words I would not have believed that he had been there and say us. But he said he did know and I said "Are you going to tell pa are you going to kill him?" without the words I said it and he said "Why?" without the words. And that’s why I can talk to him with knowing with hating because he knows. (Faulkner 27)

Darl is able to use words and not-words to connect with his siblings: he talks without speaking to Dewey Dell, he shares common memories and motivations with Cash, he relates to Vardaman’s fish-mother image with a similar horse-mother image for Jewel. Jewel, meanwhile, resorts to actions rather than words, expressing the deed behind the word openly: he never mentions the fact that he sold his horse to get the team, he simply does it. He has no need for verbal explanation. Dewey Dell continually struggles with finding the words to describe her situation and her desires (she doesn’t even say yes to Lafe; she defers her verbal approval in favor of inadvertent acceptance through action). Even Vardaman shares Addie’s disregard for the strictures of language, repeatedly stretching the definition of mother to include fish, horses, and other symbolic identities beyond the traditional sense of the word. Vardaman creates his own
frame of reference, his own sense of language.s tangible fluidity: "Vardaman. I am not anything. I am quiet. You, Vardaman" (Faulkner 56). Like Addie, Vardaman is able to abstract the "reality" of a word into something deeply resonant to himself: while watching Jewel.s horse, he observes that

It is as though the dark were resolving him out of his integrity, into an unrelated scattering of components--an illusion of a coordinated whole of splotched hide and strong bones within which, detached and secret and familiar, an is different from my is. I see him dissolve.legs, a rolling eye, a gaudy splotching like cold flames.and float upon the dark in fading solution; all one yet neither; all either yet none. (Faulkner 56-57)

Just like Addie, Vardaman creates meaning not through the rigid and hollow strictures of language, but through the immeasurable darkness behind them. For all of Addie.s direct absence in the novel, her disregard for the dull empty echoes that words embody and her quest for a richer, truer, and more substantial reality beyond the cavernous realm of language (and that quest.s risk of futility) carry through in her children.

As Addie leaves her children with a sense of dissatisfaction with the words, and the life, they have been given, so does Sethe attempt to leave her children with an understanding of the world beyond words that she has spent much of her own life struggling to control. Addie looks towards the shape behind words to ground her reality while Sethe reaches for the timeless and ever-present reality of rememory.

Carole Boyce Davies defines rememory as "the re-membering or the bringing back together of the disparate members of the family in painful recall," involving "crossing the boundaries of space, time, history, place, language, corporeality and restricted consciousness in order to make reconnections and mark or name gaps and absences" (17). (quoted in Washington)

Sethe.s concept of rememory involves a stable depository of communal memory that is tangible and accessible to all who interact with it. Words and things are better described as pictures, pictures that last beyond individual memory:

If a house burns down, it.s gone, but the place.the picture of it.stays, and not just in my rememory, but out there, in the world. What I remember is a picture floating around out there outside my head. I mean, even if I didn.t think it, even if I die, the picture of what I did, or knew, or saw is still out there. Right in the place where it happened. (Morrison 36)

Sethe.s choice of using images, permanent physical images, to define her world, "bears no pretense to universal or essential human experience. It points to its limit of expressiveness, implying that experience exceeds the violence of language" (Khayati). The markers of meaning in Sethe.s world are not verbal definitions: they are visual, visceral, responses to stimuli that can be accessed by anyone and everyone. Sethe knows the pain these rememories hold, and she knows that her daughter runs the risk of reliving the same excruciating moments she went through first-hand if she does not warn her of the danger.

Although Sethe, as most Africana people, cannot safely re-member without sliding into an abyss of pain, she can and does articulate the painful uncontrollable process of rememory to Denver, and explains why she had to open her pot of creativity and place her best, most exquisite and magical creations safely inside it.away from the ever-threatening force of rememory and the more terrifying threat of repetition. (Washington)

Sethe cannot escape her rememories, but she can do her best to protect Denver from experiencing them, to save her from "a past that cannot be outrun, a past that follows, taints, and tickles" (Washington). The risk, however, in trying to rid her children.s lives of all remnants of her past lies in the dominant role in which that action places her. "By using @jé [a female African spirit, keeping the world in order and punishing those who deserve it] to save her daughter and exorcise the force of Sweet Home from her and her progeny's existence, Sethe consecrates an infinitely more powerful space of rememory"(Washington), but she simultaneously adds horrific rememories (i.e., killing her daughter) of her own.
This cycle (blocking out old remembrances by creating new ones) begins in the nature of motherhood tainted by slavery itself. The inherent owner/owned relationship of mother/daughter is perverted by the actual owner/owned relationship of master/slave.

Morrison's portrayal of the natural and complete circle of mother and child, disrupted and broken in two by the unnatural force of slavery, is so horrifying in its atrocity that this thematic thread becomes a riveting focus for me within the tapestry in its entirety. Sethe, whose "best thing she was, was her children," (308) possesses a fierce maternal instinct; she views her children as an integral part of herself in an implication of ownership. Her children rightfully belong to her. Yet this essential maternal instinct is corrupted when viewed in the context of slavery. For a slave cannot "own." Not her individuality. Not her children. Not her milk. Nothing is sacred for those enslaved. (Mock)

Sethe attempts to negate the evil of slavery by removing her children from it, no matter the cost, but in doing so, replicates the same detrimental relationship of slavery upon her own maternal relationship with her children. She claims complete and total ownership of them, with the right to grant and rescind their lives as she sees fit. Rather than eradicating the legacy of slavery, Sethe simply brings its destructive influence into even sharper relief.

Just as Sethe is driven to apply the manners of slavery to her children in an attempt to erase its effects, Addie is forced to accept the mantle of traditional motherhood in order to have any influence over how her children perceive the world. Addie, who is instinctively resistant to motherhood ("and when I knew that I had Cash, I knew that living was terrible and that this was the answer to it...I knew that...my aloneness] had never been violated until Cash came" (Faulkner 171-172)), must accept her role in order to have any hope of breaking the cycle of patriarchal Southern living. Addie may have lived a life where "men may enter [women] anytime they like, and a woman's body houses the man's children as well. Every member of a family has entered and exited the mother's body, though she has entered none of theirs--nor will she ever" (Kincaid), but she did not have to raise children with the same sexist, static approach. Addie's own approach to motherhood, however, is at least in her sense contrary to the generally accepted notion of what it means to be a "mother" ("motherhood was invented by someone who had to have a word for it because the ones that had the children didn't care whether there was a word for it or not" (Faulkner 171-172)). "Though she does not state so explicitly, it seems safe to assume that she is thinking of men, that it is men who have created the verbal category of motherhood in an attempt to quantify and know what is foreign to them" (Hewson). Anse, who refuses to work for fear of sweat, who hates the road for representing movement and action, is the masculine antithesis of Addie's feminine fruitfulness: "through the process of Addie's monologue and the combined actions and thoughts of her children, the dynamic feminine and maternal principle which she maintains negates the stolid and unmoving male principle, and Addie herself becomes a possible source of female power in the book" (Hewson). Addie chooses to make her children extensions of herself, and thus exerts a power over them that is both mandated by and subversive of traditional Southern gender roles, as her children emulate her (and thus her distrust and dislike of patriarchal constructs, of language, society, and the like). Her "belief in the female ideal of intuitive and intense relationships, as well as her suspicion of language's inability to describe them, is able to outwit and outlast the rigid and obdurate male model" (Hewson) and consequently "the male Bundren children eschew the patriarchal model, presented in the figure of Anse, in favour of the emotionally active feminine principle. Addie has taught them the importance not of language but of feeling" (Hewson). Addie's role as a mother facilitated her children's progression from being confined by a male mode of stagnancy to seeing the possibility and potential that lies in a more female realm of advancement and beauty, and, as much as Addie herself may go against the gender roles that cast her in that part, it is only through motherhood that she was able to exercise her influence over a new generation.

The role of motherhood in Beloved is no less crucial, as the only hope for continuing ties back to African culture lies wholly in the hands of the mother:

The prosperity of the black community depends on the existence of the "motherline," a term borrowed from Naomi Lowinsky that refers to a knowledge of an ancestral heritage. At the same time, there needs to be the
To adequately prepare their children for a life in a society that does not recognize them as people, and clearly does not accept their cultural background as one of having any worth or value, mothers must break out of the white-imposed idea of motherhood (especially their perception of African-American motherhood, as masters saw no need to even consider the rights of a slave mother to influence her children: "slavery, more than any historical event, fractured the motherline by denying blacks their humanity and causing the permanent fragmentations of families" (Valdés)) in order to truly play a positive role in their children.s lives: "in accepting patriarchal values of the prevailing culture, the community moves away from one that validates the work of women. Mothers who conform to dominant culture therefore cannot adequately inform their children of the teachings of the black community" (Valdés). Sethe works to establish a new vocabulary, where she and Beloved and Denver can speak unspeakable thoughts freely, a new conception of memory severed from a sense of individual ownership, in order to leave her children with a sense of the culture that was robbed from them.

Africans stolen from their homeland were forced to abandon their African language and culture and replace it with a new language and culture of oppression. Sethe's back carries this new code under which she is to live, the code of domination in which the definer may inscribe his definition upon the very flesh of the defined. According to Hortense Spillers, the oppressed bodies carry on their flesh a "cultural text" which can explain the values of the culture (67). Such is the case with the tree that grows on Sethe's back. While the scarred flesh is dead, the tree is "growing." The cultural text remains alive and continues to speak in a discourse of oppression. (Fuston-White)

Both Sethe and Addie work to subvert the traditional, patriarchal mode of interpretation and understanding through their own unique approaches to motherhood and the art of meaningful communication, but despite their greatest efforts, they still have to work within the system they are attempting to overthrow, and just as their attempts were frustrated within their own lives, so too will their children.s lives walk a frustrating balance between a recognition of something greater and an inability to fully reach it: their children may be better equipped with ways in which to communicate and function, but the world of oppression their mothers attempted to subvert is no less of a repressive force in their lives than it was in those that preceded; the effect Sethe and Addie have is not so much on the world itself, but in arming the next generation with better tools with which to fight it.

Works Cited


