

“Signifyin(g)” upon Huck Finn:

Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* as a Cultural Artifact

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Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* (1987) successfully revises Mark Twain’s *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1885). In *Beloved*, the white girl named Amy helps the fugitive slave Sethe cross the Ohio River, while the white boy Huck helps the fugitive slave Jim go down the Mississippi.¹ As many African American writers do, Morrison not only imitates the skill but also appropriates the devices used by Twain so that she can suggest a good many possibilities for the reading of her complicated novel. The comparison between the two historical novels, focusing on the white child and the fugitive slave relationship, offers us fertile ground on which to consider how Toni Morrison responds to Mark Twain and how she is “Signifyin(g)” upon his story.²

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¹ The relationship of Amy with Sethe is often interpreted positively as a close one which blurs the boundary of races. Sylvia Mayer states that Morrison “allows the impact of human commitment to dominate this relationship. . . . Amy’s life-preserving and life-giving ‘good hands’ testify to a behavior and an attitude free from discriminatory features.” Although this reading may be defensible, their friendship is at the risk of being interpreted narrowly such that Amy behaves toward Sethe less attentively than Huck does to Jim. Wilfred D. Samuels and Clenora Hudson-Weems state that “[A]lthough their relationship resonates with the images of the classic friendship developed between Jim and Huck in Twain’s *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, one never senses that Amy achieves the level of respect for Sethe that Huck achieves for Jim.” This analysis is symptomatic of the assumption of the absolute power of the antecedent in white American literature. See Sylvia Mayer, “‘You Like Huckleberries ? Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* and Mark Twain’s *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*,” *The Black Columbiad: Defining Moments in African American Literature and Culture*, ed. Werner Sollors and Maria Diedrich. (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1994) 343; Wilfred D. Samuels and Clenora Hudson-Weems, *Beloved* (Boston: Twayne, 1990) 116.

² In *The Signifying Monkey*, Henry Louis Gates Jr. analyses the black vernacular tradition in the African American literary tradition. “Signifyin(g)” functions “as a metaphor for formal revision, or intertextuality, within the Afro-American literary tradition.” Although Gates mainly argues the intertextuality between African American texts, he shows us the examples of parody which “Signify” upon white literary forms. Gates uses “Signifyin(g)” which begins with the capital letter “S” and ends with the bracketed “g” to differentiate the “black term” from the “white term,” “signifying.” Shelley Fisher Fishkin employs “signifying,” for example, when she argues that an African American imitates a sermon delivered

The arguments of literary hybridity have begun in the late 1980s. In the 1987 conference called “The Study of Afro-American Literature: An Agenda for the 1990s,” Barbara Johnson gave a highly suggestive comment on “vernacular” in a response to Henry Louis Gates Jr.’s speech.³ In Johnson’s opinion, “vernacular” theory, which has been thought to be highly unique repository of African American expressions, cannot be limited to African American literary tradition:

Even the word “vernacular” does not name a separate realm: it comes from the Latin “verna,” which means “a slave born in a master’s home.” The vernacular is a difference *within*, not a realm outside. And the “master’s home” could not be what it is without all it has stolen from the slave. Any “vernacular” theory, cannot be based on model of mutual exclusion. Black literature and theory must “co-opt” (in Soyinka’s words) rather than expel or deny the white man within. (42)

Johnson’s insight into vernacular as a “difference *within*” has a great influence on Shelley Fishkin’s *Was Huck Black?* (1993). Fishkin makes it clear that Mark Twain’s literary imagination is greatly influenced by black vernacular. In *Was Huck Black?*, Fishkin argues that Huck is a “black” child, taking into consideration his grammar, a mode of expression, and the contents of his talk. She concludes that, although Twain stated that the model of Huck was a poor white boy, Huck’s voice is greatly affected by an African American boy called Jimmy. Moreover, she states that Huck’s satiric humor and his trait as a trickster also come from an African American called Jerry who was “signifying” upon a sermon delivered by a white preacher. Fishkin places emphasis on the interactions between African American voices and white American literature:

by a white preacher. However, following Gates, I use “Signifyin(g)” because I examine how an African American writer Toni Morrison rewrites a “black” boy, Huck Finn. See Henry Louis Gates Jr., *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African American Literary Criticism* (New York: Oxford UP, 1988); Shelley Fisher Fishkin, *Was Huck Black?: Mark Twain and African American Voices* (New York: Oxford, 1993) 53–67.

³ Gates was engaged in editing Norton anthology of Afro-American literature. Therefore, his argument was about canon-formation. As Houston A. Baker points out, in Afro-American canon formation, Gates emphasizes the importance of “vernacular roots and the formal relationships that obtain among texts in the black tradition—relations of revision, echo, call and response, antiphony, and so on” Houston A. Baker and Patricia Redmond, eds., *Afro-American Literary Study in the 1990s* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1989)

Ever since Hemingway and Faulkner paid homage to him, Twain's centrality as a major force in our culture has been secure. But if we fail to include "signifying" black philosopher in Twain's literary genealogy, and if we fail to recognize in Twain's prose the "inventive, disruptive masked and masking language" that, in Toni Morrison's view, helps make a work "Black," we will have a distorted, false, and incomplete picture of the development of American literature. (76)

Toni Morrison's *Playing in the Dark* (1992) represents the prevailing discussion of the revision of American literature. Morrison ambitiously explores the ways white American writers depict African Americans, who are hovering about the periphery of their literary imagination. Morrison is very conscious of her being an African American writer and the vulnerability caused by her status as that. In her view, the experiment to liberate language racially is very difficult. Rather, she insists on the importance of exploring the artful and sophisticated techniques which the writers employ in the attempt to be "race-free" in spite of the fact that language they use is inevitably racially oriented:

A criticism that needs to insist that literature is not only "universal" but also "race-free" risks lobotomizing that literature, and diminished both the art and the artist. I am vulnerable to the inference here that my inquiry has vested interests; that because I am African-American and a writer I stand to benefit in ways not limited to intellectual fulfillment from this line of questioning. I will have to risk the accusation because the point is too important: for both black and white American writers, in a wholly racialized society, there is no escape from racially inflected language, and the work writers do to unhobble the imagination from the demands of that language is complicated, interesting, and definitive.

(12–13, emphasis added)

In light of her own view that the work written in racially inflected language is worth reconsidering, Morrison discusses *Huckleberry Finn*, laying emphasis on Huck's "silence" toward Jim during their long journey. Her insightful interpretation of the dialogue between Huck and Jim leads to the analysis of that between Amy and Sethe.

One of the differences of the bond between the white child and the fugitive slave in *Huckleberry Finn* and *Beloved* can be acknowledged with the help of Toni Morrison's intriguing argument on Huck's ambivalent feeling toward Jim, which is not put into "words." In their funny conversation

during the journey going down the Mississippi, Morrison explodes a moment when Huck becomes speechless. Huck does not express honestly his feelings toward Jim, only thinking in his heart:

Or consider Huck's inability to articulate his true feeling for Jim to anybody other than the reader. When he "humble himself" in apology to Jim for the painful joke he plays on him, we are not given the words. . . . While Jim repeatedly iterates his love, the depth of Huck's feelings for Jim is stressed, underscored and rendered unimpeachable by Twain's calculated use of speechlessness. . . . These silences do not appear to me of merely historical accuracy—a realistic portrait of how a white child would respond to a black slave; they seem to be expert technical solutions to the narrative's complexities and, by the way, highly prophetic description of contemporary negotiation between races. (xxxvi, emphasis added)

Morrison's explanation that Huck's speechlessness toward Jim can be based on a general relationship between "a white child" and "a black slave" constructs an argument about Amy's involvement with Sethe. In that case, the matter in question is, that although Amy is explicitly acknowledged as a "whitegirl" in the text, Amy can be regarded as "black."

Mark Twain depicts antebellum America, especially from the 1830s through the 1840s. Toni Morrison also graphically illustrates antebellum America and the aftermath of the Civil War. In both *Huckleberry Finn* and *Beloved*, the fugitive black slave comes across the "white" child, and the child helps the severely injured slave. In *Beloved*, eight years have passed since the Fugitive Slave Law was passed. Sethe runs away from a plantation in spite of her pregnancy. Sethe cannot go forward any more because of being seriously injured in her feet and back. On the way to Ohio, Sethe meets a "whitegirl" named Amy Denver, who is looking for something to eat. Although Amy is in a hurry to Boston to buy velvet, she saves Sethe from being captured and in addition helps Sethe deliver her baby who is to be named after the girl. About eighteen years later, Sethe tells her daughter Denver about the encounter with Amy. The reminiscences function as a good allusion to the white boy in Twain's story:

"It wasn't no whiteboy at all. Was a girl. The raggediest-looking trash you [Denver] ever saw saying, 'Look there. A nigger. If that don't beat all.'"

(31–32, emphasis added)

“You [Sethe] got anything on you gal, pass for food?” . . . “I [Amy] like to die I’m so hungry.” . . . “Though there’d be huckleberries. . . . Didn’t expect to find no nigger woman. . . . You like huckleberries?” (32, emphasis added)

“Whiteboy,” “raggediest-looking trash,” and finally “huckleberries” suggest that Amy can be overlapped by Huck Finn. In both novels, the “white” “raggediest-looking” children heal the slaves injured by a snake.

The scene where the fugitive slave is injured by a snake and helped by the white child can be found with some differences. In *Huckleberry Finn*, contrary to Jim’s firm belief that “it was the worst bad luck in the world to touch a snake-skin” (107), Huck does not believe the superstition attached to a snake. Huck kills a snake and lays it near Jim to surprise him half as a joke. Unexpectedly, however, the trick on Jim leads to a consequence that Jim is bitten by another snake and he nearly dies:

He [Jim] was barefooted, and the snake bit him right on the heel. . . . Jim told me [Huck] to chop off the snake’s head and throw it away, and then skin the body and roast a piece of it. I done it, and he eat it and said it would help cure him. . . . Then I slid out quiet and throwed the snakes clear away among the bushes; for I warn’t going to let find out it was my fault. . . . Jim sucked and sucked at the jug, and now and then he got out of his head and pitched around and yelled; but every time he come to himself he went to sucking at the jug again. His foot swelled up pretty bug, and so did his leg; but by-and-by the drunk begun to come, and I judged he was all right. . . . And he said that handling a snake-skin was such a awful bad luck that maybe we hadn’t got to the end of it yet. (107, emphasis added)

In contrast to Jim, Sethe is not afraid of being bitten by a snake, and unlike Huck Amy heals Sethe’s swollen feet with her hands. When Amy is looking for “huckleberries,” she finds Sethe, whose feet are so seriously injured that she cannot make her way any more, crawling across the grass as if she were a snake:

“You [Sethe] ‘bout the scariest-looking something I [Amy] have ever seen. What you doing back up in here?” Down in the grass, like the snake she believed she was, Sethe opened her mouth, and instead of fangs and a split tongue, out shot the truth. “Running,” Sethe told her. . . . “What you gonna do, just lay there and foal?” “I can’t get up from here,” said Sethe. . . . “It’s a house back yonder,” she said. “. . . You stay the night

here snake get you.” “Well he may as well come on.” . . . The lean-to was full of leaves, which Amy pushed into a pile for Sethe to lie on. Then she gathers rocks, covered them with more leaves and made Sethe put her feet on them saying: “ I know a woman had her feet cut off they was so swole.” . . . Then she did the magic: lifted Sethe’s feet and legs and massaged them until she cried salt tears. “It’s gonna hurt, now,” said Amy. “Anything dead coming back to life hurts.” (34–35, emphasis added)

The communication between Sethe and Amy parallels with that of Jim and Huck, in that the “white” boy and the “whitegirl” meet the injured fugitive slaves. The matter questioned in *Beloved* is what the snake means to Sethe, when Sethe raps out “Well he may as well come on,” and whether “a white child” would behave as Amy does, when Amy works her magic saying “Anything dead coming back to life hurts” (35).

Jim, who so firmly believes the superstition attached to the snake, is completely taken in by Huck’s trick and bitten by the snake. On the other hand, Sethe, who creeps the harsh way for freedom, can successfully escape out of the danger of being bitten by “another snake” called a slave catcher. Importantly, what terrifies Sethe is not the real snakes but the slaveholders who chase her in order that they force her to return to the plantation. Having been cured, Jim still believes something fearful may happen, saying to Huck that “handling a snake-skin was such a awful bad luck that may we hadn’t got to the end of it yet” (107). The prophecy comes true at the end of the novel, that is, Jim’s freedom is belated. Delineating clearly the image of Huck and Jim, Morrison is “Signifyin(g)” upon Jim: snake-like Sethe will not be caught in the trap set by the slaveholders and can be freed in the end. Furthermore, by the same token, she is “Signifyin(g)” upon Huck, who can be thought as “black” with his double voice composed of black and white sound.

Morrison’s employment of the dual voices provides us insights into Amy’s complicated racial identity. Amy is asked whether she is a “white child” because Amy is never speechless on expressing her depth of feeling for Sethe. Morrison points out in the introduction to *Huckleberry Finn* that Huck’s speechlessness toward Jim is a sophisticated skill to resolve a complicated problem concerning Huck’s racial prejudice towards Jim. She concludes that Huck’s silence is what “a white child would” produce. Partly, Morrison’s observation of “a white child” applies to Amy who has dual voice. Just like Huck, Amy throws at Sethe racially prejudiced words such as “nigger” (32) and “What you gonna do, just lay there and foal?” (33). Nonetheless, Amy’s continuously talking with Sethe and heartfelt healing of her swollen feet are far from Huck’s speechlessness and his keeping

some distance from Jim. While Amy “did the magic” and “said” that “anything dead coming back to life hurts,” Huck just sees Jim’s sucking and sucking at the jug and just “judged he was all right”; no words for Jim. Amy’s dual voices, one of which is racially prejudiced but the other generous, kind, and in Mayer’s word “human” suggest that Amy has a complicated racial identity which is based not on mutual exclusion but compatibility. It is the same case as Huck who is “a white child” and a “black” one, as supported by Fishkin’s examination of his vernacular and the process of its formation. Morrison modifies Twain’s story through application of Huck into Amy.

Further, the resemblance between Huck and Amy is strongly reinforced by demonstrating that they are both indentured servants. In *Huckleberry Finn*, following the episode of the snake, the image of Amy also can be found in the scene where Huck disguises himself as a female indentured servant. Indentured servants were the laborers who came from Europe, especially from England, Germany, and Ireland from the seventeenth century through the early nineteenth century. On his way to the “territory,” Huck drops in on a woman called Mrs. Judith Loftus so that he can know where he and Jim are and what the people in their hometown are saying about them. Huck dresses up as a girl whose name is Sarah Mary Williams but soon he is found out by Mrs. Loftus to be a boy. Then the mistress regards Huck as a runaway indentured servant and gives him an offer of help:

“ . . . You just tell me your secret, and trust me. I’ll keep it; and what’s more, I’ll help you. So’ll my old man, if you want him to. You see, you’re a runaway ’prentice—that’s all. It ain’t anything. There ain’t harm in it. You’ve been treated bad, and you made up your mind to cut. . . .” (115, emphasis added)

In this context, it is important to remember Amy’s encounter with “a perfect stranger” because it establishes a parallel between “a runaway ’prentice girl,” Huck, and Amy. Amy is a daughter of the indentured servant who came to Boston and later went to Kentucky. So she wants to be freed by going back to Boston, as Huck says that “I reckon I got to light out for the Territory.” Amy confides her “so confidential a piece of information” to the “perfect stranger,” Sethe:

“Boston. Get me some velvet. It’s a store there called Wilson. I see the pictures of it and they have the prettiest velvet. . . . My mama worked for there here people to pay for her passage. But then she had me and since she died right after, well, they said I had to work for em to pay it off. I did, but now I want me some velvet.”

(33, emphasis added)

In addition to that, Amy reveals that she is treated badly and her father may be the very man who whips her:

“ . . . in back of the wagon, it happened again and doggone if the chickens didn’t get loose. Mr. Buddy whipped my tail. Kentucky ain’t no good place to be in. Boston’s the place to be in. That’s where my mother was before she was given to Mr. Buddy. Joe Nathan said Mr. Buddy is my daddy but I don’t believe that, you?” Sethe told her she didn’t believe Mr. Buddy was her daddy. “You know your daddy, do you?” “No,” said Sethe. “Neither me. All I know is it ain’t him.””

(80, emphasis added)

There we can find some resemblance between Huck and Amy: they are “girls” and indentured servants, who are running from their cruel fathers with hope for freedom.⁴ As Fishkin explains, Huck is “black” because not only his “voice” is influenced by that of African Americans, but also his ethical and moral concerns about the racialized society are also constructed in the environment in which Twain was brought up with African Americans. So is Amy “black,” not only because she does not speak standard English as Huck does not, but also because she grows up as the daughter of the indentured servant in the condition similar to that of African American slaves.

The environment in which Amy grows up can be imagined from a lullaby which she says her mother sings for her.⁵ The lullaby sung by Amy’s mother, who is an indentured servant, suggests that her working condition in Kentucky is severe, reminding the reader of the female slaves who are also resigned to the cruel fate. Convincing herself that Mr. Buddy is not her father, Amy begins to sing the lullaby:

When the busy is done
And my weary little one

⁴ Mayer does not mention Huck and Amy as indentured servants. She finds the resemblance in that they have “the desire to escape from the morally corrupt and cruel society,” but she doubts if they can be freed. In addition to *Huckleberry Finn*, she examines the intertextual correspondence between *Beloved* and Twain’s *Pudd’nhead Wilson* (1894). Although Morrison does not make clear whether Amy buys velvet or not, Mayer considers that Amy cannot buy velvet because the store where she goes to obtain velvet is called ‘Wilson.’ See Mayer, 343.

⁵ Mayer considers that the lullaby makes stronger the bond between Sethe and Amy, who do not have full memories of their mothers. The lullaby reminds Sethe of her mother who is also a slave. However, she does not engage in detailed analysis of the contents of the lullaby. See Mayer, 340–41.

Rocketh gently to and fro;
.....
Then from yonder misty skies
Cometh Lady Button Eyes.

Through the muck and mist and gloam
To our quiet cozy home,
Where to singing sweet and low
Rocks a cradle to and fro.
Where the clock's dull monotone
Telleth of the day that's done,
.....
Cometh Lady Button Eyes.

Layeth she her hands upon
My dear weary little one,
And those white hands overspread
Like a veil the curly head,
Seem to fondle and caress Every little silken trees.
.....
Cometh Lady Button Eyes.

(80–81, emphasis added)

This is the lullaby sung for “my dear weary little one” and, at the same time, it records the great pains the laborer takes. The song confronts the reader with the similar condition of the indentured servants and the African American slaves who are trying to sooth their babies after their work. The point that remains problematic is that the lady with “button eyes” is unidentifiable and whether the “dear weary little one” signifies only Amy. In the description of the lady with “button eyes” and her “white” hands which overspread “the curly head,” Morrison implies that the lady is a mistress of plantations where slaves work and bear their children with not-straight hair.

In fact, indentured servants had a close and complicated relationship with African American slaves. Although the indentured servants would be freed after they worked to pay for their transatlantic transportation expenses, they had to bear the severe forced labor for the term to fulfill the contract. On the one hand, as Robert Steinfield explains, the indentured servitude reinforced slavery, but as abolitionism became widespread involuntary servitude was gradually reconsidered.

Freedom for both the indentured servants and the African American slaves could not have been realized, if their relationship had been mutually exclusive rather than intricately intertwined. For this reason, the song of Amy's mother possibly evokes the days of Amy's childhood surrounded by the African Americans. Amy's double voice and "human" attitude in Mayer's sense originate in the cultural complexity of her characterization, which she shares with Huck. The two indentured servants go forward to find the "territory" where Huck finds something uncivilized and Amy has velvet.

Amy tells Sethe about velvet again and again with hope for the future in Boston. The velvet in Boston means freedom for Amy. As Amy says herself, "velvet is like the world was just born. Clean and new and so smooth" (33) and moreover, there are various colors of velvet in Boston. For Amy, Boston is a colorful city free from racial discrimination:

“. . . velvet is like the world was just born. Clean and new and so smooth. The velvet I seen was brown, but in Boston they got all colors. Carmine. That means red but when you talk about velvet you got to say 'carmine.'" She raised her eyes to the sky and then, as though she had wasted enough time away from Boston, she moved off saying, "I gotta go." (33, emphasis added)

It is certain that Amy is one of the "white" characters, but her whiteness is being questioned in her saying "the velvet I seen was brown." Acknowledging that Morrison states it is difficult for both black and white American writers to "escape from racially inflected language," the word "brown" is identified as Amy's complexity. Amy is "Signifyin(g)" upon Huck, therefore, she is a "black" girl. The word "brown" reveals that Toni Morrison's text is "Signifyin(g)" upon the canonical American story. Consequently, she can vividly describe the fugitive slave Sethe and apparently a "whitegirl," Amy.

Toni Morrison successfully rewrites *Huckleberry Finn*. The intertextuality between *Beloved* and *Huckleberry Finn* is highlighted by Morrison's description of the "whitegirl," who is in fact culturally complicated. Morrison reveals that the "whitegirl" Amy is the "Signifyin(g)" revision of the "black" boy Huck Finn. Amy plays an important role in that she helps Sethe be freed and give birth to her daughter. It means that the "white" American literature has an influence on Morrison's literary imagination. However, at the same time, the culturally intricate Amy reveals that Morrison is "Signifyin(g)" upon "white" American literature and appropriates it to her text. Therefore, Toni

Morrison's novel *Beloved* can be read as a highly complicated cultural artifact, constructed for a Many-Colored Valley.

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