

A Slave by Any Other Name: Names and Identity in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*

CYNTHIA LYLES-SCOTT

Florida Atlantic University, USA

Names and naming play an important part in Toni Morrison's *Beloved: A Novel*, which won the 1987 Pulitzer Prize. The story is set in 1873, a decade after the Civil War, but much of it is told through memories and flashbacks of the time when the main characters, Baby Suggs, Paul D, and Halle, were slaves. Morrison's story demonstrates differences in both intent and result when names were issued by slave owners as opposed to names bestowed by Black people themselves.

Toni Morrison's *Beloved* is an example of many different types of literature. It is a supernatural tale about a slain daughter who comes back to life. It is a love story about two people who find one another after nearly twenty years have passed. And it is a familial tale about three generations of women and how their lives were and are affected by the institution of slavery. As Patricia Waugh wrote in *Feminine Fictions*, 'Toni Morrison's novels explore the racial history of black people in terms of how their oppression is lived out through relationships within their family and yet how these same relationships carry the possibility of human dignity and connection' (213). While there are many aspects of *Beloved* that could be argued as important within the context of the novel, the one I am focusing on here is the act of naming or nicknaming as a way of reclaiming one's self and one's identity.

At the beginning, readers get an idea of the special nature of names when they are introduced to the major characters of the novel. Sethe's name has masculine origins while the *D* at the end of Paul's name denotes his being fourth in a succession of male slaves all named Paul. These facts help readers realize that the characters' names are as much a part of the novel as is the plot. As Genevieve Fabre noted in 'Genealogical Archaeology or the Quest for Legacy in Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon*:

Names are an essential part of the legacy (of black people), and names have stories which, incongruous, preposterous as they are, must be cared for . . . Blacks receive dead patronyms from whites . . . names are disguises, jokes or brand names — from yearnings, gestures, flaws, events, mistakes, weaknesses. Names endure like marks or have secrets they do not easily yield. (108–09)

Morrison's characters are named aptly and specifically. For example, Sethe was named for a black man, the only one who did not have forced sexual relations with her mother, or 'Ma'am,' as Sethe calls her. As her wet nurse Nan tells Sethe, her mother abandoned or 'threw away' her other children while saving Sethe. The difference is that she chose to have sexual relations with Seth's father. In the other situations she was raped; and rape is never a choice. 'The one from the crew she threw away on the island. The others from more whites she also threw away. Without names, she threw them. *You* she gave the name of the black man,' who most likely was Sethe's father (62). The way Sethe's mother abandoned her mulatto children draws a direct link to the rape of black slave women as a consequence of the institution of slavery.

Sethe's mother goes unnamed in the novel except for the moniker *Ma'am*, which is given to her by Nan, the black wet nurse. She is also identified by a brand consisting of a circle with a cross burned into her flesh beneath her breast. Barbara Rigney wrote in 'Breaking the Back of Words: Language, Silence, and the Politics of Identity in *Beloved*,' that marks like the one Sethe's mother has serve to distinguish their racial identity. The marks are either 'chosen or inflicted by the condition of blackness itself, by the institution of slavery which "marked" its victims literally and figuratively, physically and psychologically' (145). The purpose of these marks was not only to identify slaves, but to brand them literally and figuratively as the property of someone else. In a similar way, Rigney notes that, a slave's name, such as Paul D's and the other Pauls, did not designate an individual as self so much as a 'segment of community, an identity larger than self' (145). Moreover, Rigney observed that Sethe's name is unique because she was not named by a white slave master or overseer. Sethe's name was given to her by her mother and as such 'is a mark of blackness and of acceptance into tribe and culture' representing 'a sense of heritage and a context of relational identity' (146).

Also significant is the fact that Sethe's two daughters, Denver and Beloved, have names which come from black slave mothers — from Sethe herself and from Sethe's mother-in-law, Baby Suggs. Denver is not named geographically for the mile-high city but for the young, white girl — Amy Denver — who helped Sethe deliver her baby when as a runaway slave Sethe went into labor on her journey to Baby Suggs' house at 124 Bluestone Road. In a way, Denver has a 'white' name, but the point is that her mother chose to give it to her. And, as Rigney writes, 'Beloved, whose birth name we never learn, takes her identity from the single word on her tombstone and from the love her mother bears her' (146). In the story line, the only other designation Beloved receives is the nickname, *Already Crawling Girl*.

In 'Reconnecting Fragments: Afro-American Folk Tradition in *The Bluest Eye*,' Trudier Harris, observed that 'in their studies of nicknames in black communities, scholars have focused on the tremendous value they have, the special recognition they bestow upon an individual for a feat accomplished, a trait emphasized, or a characteristic noticed' (72). The nickname, *Already Crawling Girl*, identifies Beloved for a feat she accomplishes at an early age and thus falls directly into this category of nicknaming which indicates a kind of acceptance and love. Of course this inclusion in the black community occurs before *Already Crawling Girl* is killed by her mother, an act which ostracizes both Sethe and Denver from their community.

The black male characters in the novel, including Paul D and Stamp Paid, are also affected by the lack of identity that slavery produced. On page 11, readers are told ‘and so they were: Paul D Garner, Paul F Garner, Paul A Garner, Halle Suggs, and Sixo (meaning: Six Zero), the wild man.’ On page 91, readers meet Stamp who introduces himself with ‘Name’s Stamp, Stamp Paid.’ As mentioned earlier, Paul D is one of a series of Pauls, named in alphabetical succession by the previous slave master who owned them before they were sold to Mr Garner. By being given the same first name, with only an alphabetical character to distinguish between them, the Pauls are effectively dispossessed of their individuality and their own distinctive claim to an identity. Their names do not celebrate accomplishments, personality traits, or family conventions. The designations are solely for the benefit of the slave masters and not the self-identification of the male slaves.

However, Stamp Paid, who was given the birth name of Joshua, renounces his slave name and renames himself. He is the only former slave in the novel to accomplish this, but once he has his freedom, he still questions his self-made identity. As Morrison states:

Perhaps . . . he [Stamp Paid] had misnamed himself and there was yet another debt he owed. Born Joshua, he renamed himself when he handed over his wife to his master’s son . . . With that gift, he decided he didn’t owe anybody anything. Whatever his obligations were, that act paid them off. (184–85)

This passage not only questions the symbolic freedom from the debt of slavery, but demonstrates that, even with his supposed freedom, Stamp Paid continually suffers under the institution of slavery because the single act of handing ‘over his wife to his master’s son’ deprived him of his dignity and his manhood. Because of this self doubt, Stamp Paid continually pays, and will continue to pay with his self-inflicted misery for his freedom and his name.

In an interview with Thomas Le Clair of *New Republic* magazine, Morrison discussed her use of names in her novels. ‘I used the biblical names to show the impact of the Bible on the lives of black people, their awe of and respect for it coupled with their ability to distort it for their own purposes.’ Morrison continues, ‘I also used some pre-Christian names to give the sense of a mixture of cosmologies’ (259). But more than just discussing her use of names, Morrison also goes on to detail the psychological and historical factors behind her choices:

I never knew the real names of my father’s friends. Still don’t. They used other names. A part of that had to do with cultural orphanage, part of it with the rejection of the name given to them under circumstances not of their choosing. If you come from Africa, your name is gone. It is particularly problematic because it is not just your name but your family, your tribe. When you die, how can you connect with your ancestors if you have lost your name? That’s a huge psychological scar. (259)

Lean’tin L. Bracks concurred in her essay, ‘Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*: Evolving Identities from Slavery to Freedom,’ where she wrote that there are many stories like Sethe’s, Paul D’s, Denver’s, Stamp Paid’s, and *Beloved*’s in historical research and in the retelling of slavery. Knowing them helps us ‘decipher the code they lived and died by’ (76). But Bracks believes that personal worth and possessions owned by slaves

took on meanings of the ‘self-actualization’ manifested in loving oneself and others like oneself. She writes that it was freedom that removed limits and allowed slaves to choose their own identities and their own names. Sonia Weiss has found that after the conclusion of the Civil War, one of the first things that many freed slaves did was to cast aside the names that had been forced upon them by their former masters and adopt such new names as Freedman or Freeman to reflect their new status. Some celebrated by adopting the full forms of their shortened names. Others embellished their former names by adding prefixes or suffixes (such as an *m* in front of Edgar, resulting in the name given to civil rights leader Medgar Evers). Still others changed the spelling of their names to further distinguish them from the ones used by whites (132–33). Bracks says that the freedom to choose one’s own name was symbolic and ‘allowed one to choose possibilities in one’s own ability, instead of pinning one’s hope on the efforts of others’ (61).

However, altering their outlook was a challenge for many blacks as slavery had brought a great deal of suffering and misery into their lives. For instance, the loss of loved ones and family members, made attaining freedom the only way many slaves had to ensuring the lives of those who they had not lost yet, since they could no longer care for the ones they had lost. Bracks concludes that to reconstruct the image of the self, slaves had to embrace the history of their enslavement, which served to express and explore the boundaries of choice or the lack thereof, as well as pay tribute to

the potential and power that lies within the oppressed and opens the door to love that can heal or bring hope to the lost, damaged, and repressed. It is through this process of embracing the past in all its pain and glory that identities evolve to form a healthy people.
(76)

Of all the characters in the novel, Baby Suggs becomes perhaps the most self-identified, self-aware, and self-possessed. In fact, Baby Suggs’s definitive ‘self’ is a direct result of her rejecting the name given to her by white patriarchy and accepting black patriarchy. Readers learn that Baby Suggs is the only character in the novel named by and for a black male. In the exchange between Baby Suggs and Mr Garner, which takes place as he is delivering her into her freedom, bought and paid for by Sethe’s husband, Halle, who was Baby Suggs’ last-born child and the only one ripped from her arms and sold as a mere toddler:

‘Mr. Garner,’ [Baby Suggs] said. ‘why you all call me Jenny?’
‘Cause that what’s on your sales ticket, gal. Ain’t that your name? What you call yourself?’
‘Nothing,’ she said. ‘I don’t call myself nothing.’ (141)

According to Rigney, during the exchange between Baby Suggs and Mr Garner, when Baby Suggs answers ‘with her lack of name’ — ‘Nothing . . . I don’t call myself nothing’ — it is a testament to the ‘desolated center where the self that was no self made its home.’ Rigney goes on to write ‘Baby Suggs has no frame of reference by which to establish one, no family, no children, no context’ (145). However, I disagree. I think this scene reveals Baby Suggs to be the most self-claimed and self-identified character in the novel:

'Suggs is my name, sir. From my husband. He didn't call me Jenny.'

'What he call you?'

'Baby.'

'Well,' said Mr. Garner, going pink again, 'if I was you I'd stick to Jenny Whitlow. Mrs. Baby Suggs ain't no name for a freed Negro.'

Maybe not, she thought, but Baby Suggs was all she had left of the 'husband' she claimed.

(141)

The previous passage demonstrates that Baby Suggs never suffers from a loss of identity because of slavery; she simply did not answer to white patriarchy's identification of her *Jenny Whitlow*, but instead identified herself by the name given to her by husband Suggs. He called her 'Baby' and she in turn completes this identity by naming herself Baby Suggs in his honor.

Morrison supports the idea of Baby Suggs being self-possessed or self-owned, when in one of Sethe's flashbacks, Morrison writes as the omnipotent author about how Baby Suggs suddenly comes alive unto herself and claims her body and soul after being freed from enslavement at the hands of Mr Garner. 'Suddenly she [Baby Suggs] saw her hands and thought . . . "These hands belong to me. These *my* hands." Next she felt a knocking in her chest and discovered something else new: her own heart-beat' (141). In fact, it is from Baby Suggs, her teachings, and her example, that many other characters in the community of freed former slaves, as well as her family and loved ones, take the steps to reclaim their own identities. Baby Suggs tells the rest of the black community that 'the only grace they could have was the grace they could imagine' (88), meaning that as freed men and women, it was only their own autonomous rights and wishes that they had to fulfill, and no longer their master's. And if they could not or would not realize this, then they would remain only freed slaves; free yes, but still enslaved by their own mentality.

For example, the way Baby Suggs leads the rest of the black community of escaped and fugitive slaves in a spiritual gathering in the Clearing reveals Baby Suggs' 'self-actualization.'

'Here,' she said. 'in this place, we flesh; flesh that weeps, laughs . . . dances on bare feet in grass . . . *You* got to love it, *you!* . . . Flesh that needs to be loved . . . So you love your neck; put a hand on it, grace it, stroke it and hold it up . . . and the beat and beating heart, love that too . . . For this is the prize.' (88-89)

Baby Suggs's role in helping others become more self-actualized, as when Sethe reclaims her self through living at 124 Bluestone Road, as well as when Suggs delivers her sermons in the clearing, further demonstrates the actualization of Baby Suggs. Morrison writes, 'Bit by bit, at 124 and in the Clearing, along with the others, [Sethe] had claimed herself. Freeing yourself was one thing; claiming ownership of that freed self was another' (95).

More than just your average literary narrative, Toni Morrison's *Beloved* works on many levels to achieve a balance as a slave chronicle and a story of the loves, suffering, and spirituality of three generations of black women, whose lives were devastated by the institution of slavery. *Beloved* centers on the theme of reclaiming identity and achieving self-actualization. The motivating factor at the heart of this tale of self-actualization is the theme of naming and nicknaming, through which

many of the characters of the novel lose and reclaim their identities. However, from Morrison's perspective, as developed in *Beloved*, the institution of slavery remains so devastatingly powerful that even the characters who are now free, whether through running away or through actual emancipation, have yet to overcome their own mental enslavement. Many, as illustrated by the character of Stamp Paid, are riddled with so much self-doubt and despondency over those whom they have lost, that they are rendered impotent to progress or advancement.

Bibliography

- Bracks, Lean'tin L., 1998. 'Toni Morrison's *Beloved*: Evolving Identities from Slavery to Freedom,' *Writings on Black women of the Diaspora: History, Language and Identity*, New York: Garland Publishing, Inc., pp. 55–81.
- Fabre, Genevieve, 1988. 'Genealogical Archaeology or the Quest for Legacy in Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon*,' *Critical Essays on Toni Morrison*, by Nellie Y. McKay, pp. 105–14.
- Harris, Trudier, 1988. 'Reconnecting Fragments: Afro-American Folk Tradition in *The Bluest Eye*,' *Critical Essays on Toni Morrison*, by Nellie Y. McKay, pp. 68–76.
- Le Clair, Tom, 1983. 'An Interview with Toni Morrison,' *Anything Can Happen: Interviews with Contemporary American Novelists*, ed. by Larry MacCaffery, Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, pp. 252–61.
- McKay, Nellie Y., ed., 1988. *Critical Essays on Toni Morrison*, Boston, MA: G.K. Hall & Co.
- McKay, Nellie Y., Barbara Christian, and Deborah McDowell, 1999. 'A Conversation on Toni Morrison's *Beloved*,' *Toni Morrison's Beloved: A Casebook*, ed. by William L. Andrews and Nellie Y. McKay, New York: Oxford University Press, pp. 203–20.
- Morrison, Toni, 1987. *Beloved: A Novel*, New York: Random House.
- Rigney, Barbara Hill, 1988. 'Breaking the Back of Words: Language, Silence, and the Politics of Identity in *Beloved*,' *Critical Essays on Toni Morrison's Beloved*, ed. by Barbara H. Solomon, New York: G.K. Hall & Co., pp. 138–47.
- Waugh, Patricia, 1989. 'Postmodern Persons?' *Feminine Fictions: Revisiting the Postmodern*, London: Routledge, pp. 209–17.
- Weiss, Sonia, 1999. 'Finding Our History: African American Names,' *The Complete Idiot's Guide to Baby Names*, Indianapolis, IN: Alpha Books, pp. 131–40.

Note on Contributor

Cynthia Lyles-Scott (Wilson) was born in Holmes County, Mississippi, and as the daughter of two military officers travelled extensively throughout the country. She stopped travelling long enough to attend the University of Florida, where she earned both a Bachelor of Science degree in Journalism and a Bachelor of Arts in English: Creative Writing. After a three-year career as a newspaper and magazine reporter, Cynthia returned to Florida Atlantic University to earn her Master's in American and English literature. Although she looks forward to a future in publishing, currently, the thirty-two-year-old wife and soon-to-be mother works at FAU where her co-workers have lovingly dubbed her the *All-Powerful Wizard of Oz* because . . . well, because of all the wonderful things she does.

Correspondence to: Cynthia Lyles-Scott, Florida Atlantic University, 2325 SW 17th Avenue, Fort Lauderdale, FL 33315, USA. Email: clscott@fau.edu