Gleaning Silences: 
Suffering, Rememory and Subjectivity

TAK UESUGI

ABSTRACT

‘Silence’ has become a fashionable trope especially within the section of the academy concerned with the cultural history of the powerless. Denied of their voices and words to express their plights, ‘subalterns’ remain silent without marking their presence in history. To ‘give voice’ to such silences has become an important undertaking in chronicling the reality and exposing the violence of inequality and societal rule. Drawing on Toni Morrison’s novel Beloved, this essay problematizes this faith in narratives and representations. Instead I suggest that ‘gleaning silences’ can be an important ‘methodology’ to the ethnographers studying about social suffering.

Some time since the end of the War, the victims of A-bomb began to tell their stories. In schools, in public gatherings, and even in international conferences, hibakushas (the victims of a-bombs) were invited to speak about those two fatal days. To bear witness. To bear. To bare. To witness.

August 6th and August 9th, on the anniversaries of the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, hibakushas would make their appearances in public and shed their silent tears, or quietly – but firmly – retell their stories about how it was then, and how it has been since, to live with the bodies marked by the radiation. It is a plea, quiet, but passionate plea for peace. It has become customary: a minor ritual, a modest gesture, at least, to fend off forgetfulness.

This year, however, there is something different. Today (August 8, 2006), on the eve of the anniversary of the bombing of Nagasaki, hibakushas cannot hide their hesitation as they encounter the ‘requests’ for ‘self-restraints.’ Ordinarily their stories of suffering pass through many subjects and trajectories. Some would even talk about our Constitution (which is now under attack by hawkish politicians): for example, hibakushas might talk about how “out of such devastating experiences of the war, our Peace Constitution was born.” Their poisoned bodies and their sufferings give weight to their claims, and a certain

TAK UESUGI is a PhD Candidate in the Department of Anthropology at McGill University.
aura and legitimacy borne only by those who have experienced such extreme violence. But this year, many hibakushas are encountering requests to avoid talking about ‘anything political’.

‘How can there be hibakusha experiences without politics?’ They cannot hide their perplexity. What would be a hibakusha story devoid of politics? Without any links to wider political implications, their stories will be relegated to private – even narcissistic – suffering. I am reminded, therefore, of the importance—and even of necessity—for individuals suffering from past injustice to speak in the language of the public: to turn their experiences into public properties through narration, and be immortalized in turn by becoming an icon of justice and peace.

But the present essay does not tread that path. In fact, I will do injustice, by omission, to such efforts to find some meaning out of the senseless experiences of violence and suffering, and make their remembrance count—to actively engage politically with the world by re-counting their stories. Oppressive silence demands speech; forgetfulness must be warded off by remembrance. Such argument, however, might contain pitfalls and possible betrayals. Why bastardise silence? Why disturb that happy (or unhappy) absence, which (nonetheless) pleads to be left alone, and read into it, meddle with it, or even, force them into a dialogue? Why deny silence, its silence? This essay largely consists of a critique of unproblematic valorization of remembrance, language and authenticity in the face of a society that imposes silence.

Language is treacherous. Elaine Scarry (1985) argues that pain and suffering not only resist language but destroy them. Then to force such experiences of suffering into language is to distort them. Michel Foucault (1980) argues that any attempts to create a hegemonic narrative of the marginalisation risk “re-codification [and] re-colonization” of the marginalised people’s experiences through the dominant notion of the ‘real’. Then Slavoj Zizek’s (2006:11) warning appears not so off the mark: “language is a gift as dangerous to humanity as the horse was to the Trojans: it offers itself to our use free of charge, but once we accept it, it colonizes us”! The re-description of the past experiences in language, therefore, is never an innocent endeavour.

To say that some pasts are best left behind is not only to give an argument in abstract. Pasts infused with pain and loss; pasts mired with intra-communal violence; or pasts whose remembrance can incite vengeance and further violence: recalling such pasts, people may conjure up the horrors they have left behind, not only in the forms of memories and stories, but also in life – in a concrete social reality (See for example, Perera 2001, Daniel 1994). So sometimes, the sufferers choose the path of silence, bearing such poisonous knowledge deep within their bodies, and vigilantly keep watch against their return (Das 1997). Faced with such silence of the victims of appalling violence, what are the responsibilities of the ethnographers whose disciplinary ‘contract’ continues to be, to write, to say the least?
“There is a necessity for remembering the horror,” says Toni Morrison (1994:248), “but of course there’s a necessity for remembering it in a manner in which it can be digested, in a manner in which the memory is not destructive.” In her novel, Beloved, Morrison (1987) grapples with just such question through her fictional rendition of the lives of Afro-Americans during the period immediately following the Civil War. How does Morrison render such horror-ridden past like Slavery rememberable? And how does she attempt to reckon with the past that cannot, or would not, be remembered?

Set in Postbellum America, Beloved is a story about how the ex-slaves have forgotten the memory of slaves. In 1873, when the story opens, the black community of Cincinnati is shrouded in silence and secracies. Like several of her other novels, Beloved is structured through a multi-layered secrets. On the foreground, there is a house haunted by a staggering secret of a mother who murdered her own child. The novel is, in a sense, a story about how Sethe’s dead baby came back to haunt her in life in the form of a mysterious ‘stray-girl’ called Beloved, and how she was exorcised by the townswomen in the end, as if she were really a ghost. In the background of this story is the black community of Cincinnati which harbours its own secret. The horror of slavery is still fresh in their memory. In struggling to free themselves from such a traumatic past, people generally fall silent. But buried further beneath this ‘disremembered’ past is the memory of Middle Passage and those who died en route to America. By juxtaposing the fragments of these traumatic memories in ‘uncontrolled rememberings’ of her characters, Morrison elicits how such secret pasts intervene and animate the everyday world of Afro-Americans.

In writing this novel, Morrison says, she took inspiration from a story of a historical figure, Margaret Garner. A runaway slave from Kentucky, Garner (historical counterpart of Sethe) murdered her own baby when her slave-master caught up with them at her mother-in-law’s house in Cincinnati. Encountering this story in an archive, what intrigued Morrison the most was Garner’s serenity and a quiet conviction about her murderous act. She showed no remorse: not when she was caught, nor when she was later interviewed. “They will not live like that,” she said, implying that her children shall not go through what she had suffered under slavery. The horror of Garner’s claim—that she saved her baby by killing it—certainly did not escape Morrison. Yet, her comment on this story is every bit cryptic. Morrison says: “when you are the community, when you are your children, when that is your individuality, there is no division…It was for me this classic example of a person determined to be responsible” (cited in Gilroy 1993:177). But what does she mean by this? How could Sethe’s act be called ‘responsible’?

The monstrosity of Garner’s story had its own currency in the ideological commerce of Postbellum America. While Abolitionists invoked it as a weapon against Slavery, white supremacists took it as the sign of savagery. The representations of violence and suffering respond to (and construct) particular genres of testimonies which have their own particular demand for the ‘real.’ “The notion of the ‘real’ structure crisis narratives,” as Wendy Hesford and Wendy Kozol (2001) claim, the experiences and the narratives of violence are shaped by different social forces. The call for justice demands witnesses; in the wake of
conspiratorial silence that perpetuates the terror, testimonies with incontestable authenticity are called upon. But the society’s fervour to “expose the crime” by demanding realist testimonies could also end up violating the witnesses by forcing them to relive their trauma again. What are the consequences of this insistence on the evidence of violations?

The nineteenth century ‘slave narratives’ were bound by the mission to expose the inhumane nature of Slavery. But in order to appeal to the sympathy of the white audience (who had the sole power, they assumed, to abolish Slavery), the narratives had to be transformed so that they were believable to the white audience. But through this process, the ex-slaves also had to censor their experiences. In the modern time, Morrison (1994:248, my italic), of course, would refuse to write another slave narrative. Thus rather than “recording [Garner’s] life as lived [(as found in the archives)...which] would not make [her] available to anything that might be pertinent” to Garner’s life, Morrison decides to invent the lives of the people around this event. She ‘re-inhabited’ the space of the past with ‘real’ fictionalized people—as if to glean life from the graveyard of ‘whiteman’s’ archives.

Neither condoning, condemning, nor explaining it away through cultural, historical or social determinations, Morrison attempts to glean the traces of the lost and secret responsibility of a mother driven to murder her own child. But how is this responsibility related to history, community and motherhood? And what kind of subjectivity emerges from it? By weaving together the social forces and ‘re-inhabiting’ the emptied figure of Garner with ‘interior life’ through fiction, Morrison elucidates a complex interplay of ethics, responsibility, community and subjectivity at play behind Garner’s infanticide.

“The best thing that is in us is also the thing that makes us sabotage ourselves,” as Morrison (1994:208) comments, within Sethe’s murderous and ferocious attempt to be responsible for the future of her children, the readers can discern a possibility to think of a non-egocentric subjectivity in its most intimate, altruistic, yet violent manifestation. In this process, Morrison dwells upon the question ‘Why?’

As Sethe circled around her lover Paul D, hesitating to explain to him what it was like to kill her own baby, she had a sense:

That she could never close in, pin it down for anybody who had to ask. If they didn’t get it right off—she could never explain. Because the truth was simple, not a long drawn-out record of flowered shifts, tree cages, selfishness, ankle ropes and wells (Morrison 1987:163)

Sethe, a runaway slave, killed her own baby girl when she was threatened with re-enslavement. What was not so simple was what mattered the most: the question ‘Why?’ and how to rememory such a horrendous violence.

Ordinarily, time-worn wisdom of anthropology would warn us against asking this question ‘Why?’ We are told that the proper questions are asked in the forms of How and What, but not Why. This is perhaps due to our disciplinary bias against idiosyncratic, particular, subjective experiences. The question ‘Why’ precisely asks about those singular
experiences of the singular Other, whose actions and ‘being’ are irreducible to any social, cultural, or historical determinations.

This is one of the reasons why Emmanuel Levinas was suspicious of social sciences. For Levinas (1969:58) “the real must not only be determined in its historical objectivity, but also from interior intentions, from the secrecy that interrupts the continuity of historical time.” The interiority safe-guarded by secrecy is the very condition of the Other’s freedom. It allows the Other to remain outside my totality, so that the Other is always ‘pending’—incomplete. An ethical ethnography of Levinasian creed needs to ask the question ‘Why?’ without expectation of ever coming to a satisfactory answer.

Until Paul D re-entered her life, and Beloved came back to the world of the living and to her family, Sethe refused to apologize or make excuses for her murder. In remaining silent and forgoing human speech, Sethe assumes her unique and absolute responsibilities toward her child, for “as soon as one speaks,” Jacques Derrida (1995:60) says “as soon as one enters the medium of language, one loses that very singularity.” Speaking, in a sense, relieves oneself of decision-making; by speaking, explaining and excuse, one’s action, one risks “involving oneself sufficiently in the generality to justify oneself” (ibid.). In excusing oneself, the singular responsibility is assimilated into general ethics; one’s decision becomes comparable with other possibilities; and thus one forgoes his or her singular responsibility. So when Sethe attempted to explain to Paul D why she killed the baby, Sethe relinquishes her singular and unique responsibility toward her dead daughter. In trying to convince Paul D of her own conviction (that slavery was the worse predicament than death), her decision (to kill her baby) becomes debatable, abstract and theoretical as Sethe’s decision is exposed to general human ethics and evaluated.

Sethe’s murder was unpardonable. As Beloved assumes her role of Sethe’s dead baby, and as Sethe finally opens the vault of her secret and tries to explain to Beloved “what it meant—what it took to drag the teeth of that saw under the little chin” of her baby, the her other daughter, Denver, realized that “there would never be an end to” Sethe’s repentance. “Sethe was trying to make up for the handsaw; Beloved was making her pay for it” (Morrison 1987:251). The economy of guilt and atonement, completed in the act of explanation becomes a self-perpetuating cycle. No amount of reasoning and excuses could make up for such violence. So, when, at the end of the story, the townswomen finally gathered to set things rights, what broke this vicious cycle was no persuasion through reasons, but a ritual exorcism of Beloved.

‘To glean’ may be a perfectly ordinary English word. According to Merriam Webster’s dictionary, ‘to glean’ is ‘to pick over in search of relevant material.’ In her film “Gleaners and I,” Agnes Varda (2002) gave it a particular sense, which, for me, suggested a kind of renewal of discarded fragments by giving these fragments a second life. Gleaners of fields, gleaners of streets: they are the collectors of leftovers, things that were deemed worthless
by society, things that do not amount to anything. As one artist in the film suggests, pasts continue to dwell in these gleaned objects, although such pasts are no longer accessible to us. To me, it is this gesture to reckon with the immemorable past that makes ‘gleaning’ an important mode of bearing witness.

Just as Morrison (1994:253) gleaned from the historical archives the “interior life of people that have been reduced to some great lump called slaves,” the readers glean the memories of Middle Passage through the disconnected fragments in Sethe’s rememories or in Beloved’s traumatised and autistic speech. Such fragments are never assembled into a coherent whole. Things that are discarded by our conscious memories—repressed memories of hideous violence, secret and illicit responsibilities that violates community morality, or those ineffable experiences that escape language and perceptions like the sufferings of the Others—are gleaned through fragments, and those markers of losses such as fantasies, ghosts and silences. Let us briefly explore the methodological implications of ‘gleaning silences.’

The ethnographer’s dual role as both the interpreter and the (ventriloquated) writer of these ‘illegitimate’ secrets poses a dilemma. Gleaning silences and dwelling on them is only the beginning, but, as my supervisor once said, if we interpret the silences of our ethnographic Others too much, we risk reducing the otherness and the enigma of the others; but if we abandon interpretations, we end up glazing over the surface of their reality and forfeit our responsibilities toward these silences. Then, how do we overcome this difficulty? How can we write ethnographies in such a way that informants’ lives are not reified in our writings, so that we do not, through our writings, construct a monument of their sufferings?

Our attempt to glean silences is not only an attempt to invent a non-(or less-)violent modes of rescuing the past; it is also motivated by the necessity to rethink the place of characters in ethnographic writings. Can we, rather than simply interpreting the Others’ silence, communicate their silence through silence, by silence, so that our ethnographic characters remain enigmatic? In this endeavour, we might glean from the studies of other genres (such as literature and film), the strategies in writing ethnographies.

As some scholars (eg. Derrida 1986) have warned us, what is hidden within a vault of secret is not necessarily the single and authentic ‘truth’; rather, a secret always comes encrypted with the “secret of its secret” and the gesture that defies full comprehension. Capitalising on such uncertainties of silences, minority novelists and film directors have been attempting to find a way to tell a different truth, without moulding itself to the dominant mode of representation. The “unreliable narration” of protagonists, “muted plots” that are not narrated but still clearly communicated through the text, “tactile images” (Marks 2000) that speak to our bodily sensibility or “double-voiced discourses” that require attentiveness to the multicultural background of the authors: these techniques and styles in literature and films recast silence in positive light and render it meaningful without betraying what lies beneath it (Cheung 1993).
As a novelist, Morrison violates and invades the interior world of the characters. But in doing this, she also opens up the vortex, or an infinite chasm, which the readers can never grasp completely, but can only “yearn for.” In this way, the familiarity of the characters and their indelible mystery are maintained. A Bakhtian scholar, Gary Morson (1983) claims that unlike characters in Greek romance, the characters in novels are never complete. There is always some surplus of humanity that spills over the totality of the text. Provoking the everyday, and eliciting liminality within, novelists rejoice in the characters that escape their grasp. Ethnographers might also learn from their efforts to elicit liminality (rather than just talk about it) so that the everyday experiences of their informants are no longer everyday, but a singular, liminal moment, of ‘time out of joint.’

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Author contact information:
Tak Uesugi
takeshi.uesugi@elf.mcgill.ca

vis-à-vis is online at vav.library.utoronto.ca