

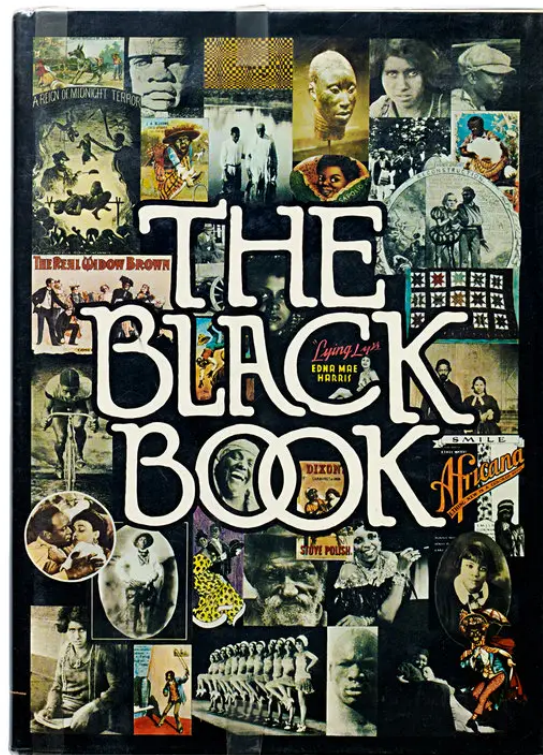
# RADICAL TEACHER

A SOCIALIST, FEMINIST, AND ANTI-RACIST JOURNAL ON THE THEORY AND PRACTICE OF TEACHING

*Teaching Note*

## Reading Blackness as a Rhizome with Toni Morrison's Preface to *The Black Book*\*

by Laboni Mukherjee



TONI MORRISON'S *THE BLACK BOOK*

In an M.A. (English) class in the University of Hyderabad, I discussed Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari's concept of a rhizome, as outlined in their "Introduction" to *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*. Deleuze and Guattari define the rhizome as a system formed of collections with multiple dissimilar, heterogenous components. These components are not trapped inside a closed system. Rather, they can separate from the collections and join infinite other collections, and are not arranged or controlled by a unitary ideological principle governing the collection. Deleuze and Guattari posit the rhizome as an antithesis to an "organism" and a "root" system, which they define as closed and bound, and arranged in strictly controlled, hierarchal, and homogenous layers ("strata") within a single domain. The "organism," or the "root" system, is governed by an omnipotent, unitary ideological principle. Unlike the root system, the rhizome's components can be detached from the collection and be connected to infinite other collections through "lines of flight," which are pathways made when potential connections between components and collections become actualized. Further, to differentiate the rhizome (open, playful, and continuously re-constituting) from the "organism," Deleuze and Guattari refer to the rhizome as an "assemblage".

As I conducted this particular class as part of a Literary Theory course, I was expected to focus primarily on the definition and characteristics of a rhizome, but since it is a difficult and abstract concept, I also wanted to provide the students with an example of the application of the theory onto a literary text. In particular, the rhizome contains strategies which can be used to read marginalised communities' liberation from oppressive communities, regimes, and narratives. Concepts like the "root-book", "organismic metaphor", "stratification", "territory" can be used by students to read the fixing of certain communities to narratives and signs justifying their subordination to dominant communities. On the other hand, concepts like the "rhizome", with its capacity of endless proliferation in all directions, the "assemblage", the "body without organs" (a system that escapes the above-mentioned metaphor of the organism), and "lines of flight" can be used to read marginalised communities' liberation from oppressive ideologies and their multifarious proliferation and connection to various other alternative and subversive ideologies. The inherent political position of a rhizome against the consolidation of power by any ideology merits discussion in a literary theory classroom along with discussions of its more technical aspects. I realized that to discuss the ideas of the rhizome, it would be best to discuss what a theory *does* as much, or even more, than what a theory *is*.

Studying literature of a particular community or class is bound to have some impact on reading literary theory. My studies in African-American women's literature have considerably inflected and refracted my approach to literary theory with critical race theory and thoughts of Blackness and anti-Blackness. In India, much of the Black theoretical tradition is addressed in separate, sporadic and usually optional papers or modules on African American

literature, which leaves the more widely attended literary theory classroom largely whitewashed. As a result, I considered interrogating and reading "colour-blind" literary theories from Black perspectives to make the classroom adequately anti-racist. To do this, I decided to introduce Toni Morrison's preface to *The Black Book*, edited by Middleton A. Harris et. al as a conversation-piece to the "rhizome". I planned my class around the argument that an anti-Black "root" system exists in which anti-Black society narrates Blackness in terms of its difference from normative whiteness and the Black person's position of an "ex-slave". Such a limited narrative of Blackness attempts to trap Black people within an anti-Black closed, strictly controlled and layered root system, akin to an organism, and tries to prevent their attempts to get out of the system and connect themselves to other sign-collections, in order to define Blackness in non-oppressive ways. The anti-Black ideology of white supremacy is the unitary, totalitarian principle governing this "organism". *The Black Book* represents a creative attempt to detach Blackness from the anti-Black "root narrative". The preface to *The Black Book* destabilises this anti-Black narrative by connecting the sign "Black" to several other external collections like food, inventions, music, sports, artifacts, military and historical achievements, mysticism, spirituality, and fashion. It simultaneously acknowledges and undermines the sign's old connections to slavery, racism, and Black death. It allows multiple positive meanings of "Black" to proliferate in all directions, away from the ideological supremacy of signs of trauma, death, and non-being, without holding up any particular meaning of the sign "Black" as the single, controlling ideology. Further, the preface and the scrapbook prevent dehumanising associations of Black people with the body as opposed to the mind by connecting Black people not only to collections of signs connoting food, entertainment, or sports, but also to collections of signs connoting inventions, arts and spirituality.

This argument enabled the application of the rhizome on a literary text, and also foregrounded a discourse on the multiplicity of Blackness. I hoped to destabilise the usual training in African-American literature the M.A. students were acquainted with, which concentrates largely on narratives of Black suffering or struggle (like the Middle Passage, Jim Crow, or the Civil Rights Movement). A syllabus of Black studies should not make suffering or struggle its sole epistemological axes, and should account other forms of Blackness, particularly iterations of Black joy.

The structure of *The Black Book* itself influenced my decision to introduce its preface as a text in the classroom. Presented as a scrapbook of Blackness, replete with scraps from archives detailing the history of slavery (like newspapers and bills of sale), racist advertisements, patents of inventions by Black people, playbills and flyers detailing Black entertainment, lynching postcards, photographs of Black-made artifacts like quilts, and news reports of Black achievement. *The Black Book* shows a collection made of heterogenous components with no component becoming the sole organizing or controlling idea of the collection. Apart from the obvious physical

limitations of the printed book's first and last pages, the scrapbook encourages its readers to read it *in medias res*, and many of its pages are arranged to discourage easy top-to-bottom, left-to-right reading. For example, many of the pages are composed of newspaper cutouts, images and other pieces of text, each piece of text bearing different fonts and font-sizes, and many of the cutouts interrupting and taking space within other pieces of text. This book helped me introduce a rhizomatic text to the classroom in a very short period of time, while solely textual works (like novels) may have needed more time to unpack.

The classroom proceedings started with in-depth readings and discussions on the features of a rhizome. We discussed the rhizome's counter-point – the root-book – as well as the hierarchical and unitary ideas of the organismic metaphor, stratification, and territory, and then contrasted these concepts to the heterogeneous, open and continually shifting concepts of the rhizome, the body without organs, and lines of flight. I also explained how each component of a rhizome can possibly connect to infinite external collections, and there is no beginning, middle, or end, and no single principle or ideology

governing the rhizome. I cited a piece of ginger as an example of the rhizome. One of the students voiced her confusion, and argued that an isolated piece of ginger, once planted in the soil, becomes the beginning, the unitary condition governing the whole plant system. I attempted to counter by stating that the ginger piece planted in the soil is a "break" in an erstwhile rhizomatic system, and that the re-planting of the piece of ginger is not the start of a new plant-system but a continuation of the old, broken one. However, I also acknowledged the difficulty in finding a perfect representation of Deleuze and Guattari's unending rhizome in real life. This detour proved important to my subsequent discussions about the scope and limits of *The Black Book*.

Another student asked me the difference between a "bricolage" and a "rhizome," a question that bears strongly on our subsequent study of the scrapbook format of *The Black Book*. From their individual study of Claude Levi-Strauss, they understood the bricolage as something new made out of various pre-existing materials available at hand. In a bricolage, the materials constituting it "had not been especially conceived with an eye to the operation for which they are to be used" (Derrida 360). I explained that, to an extent, the bricolage can be thought of as an example of Deleuze and Guattari's "assemblage." Both are

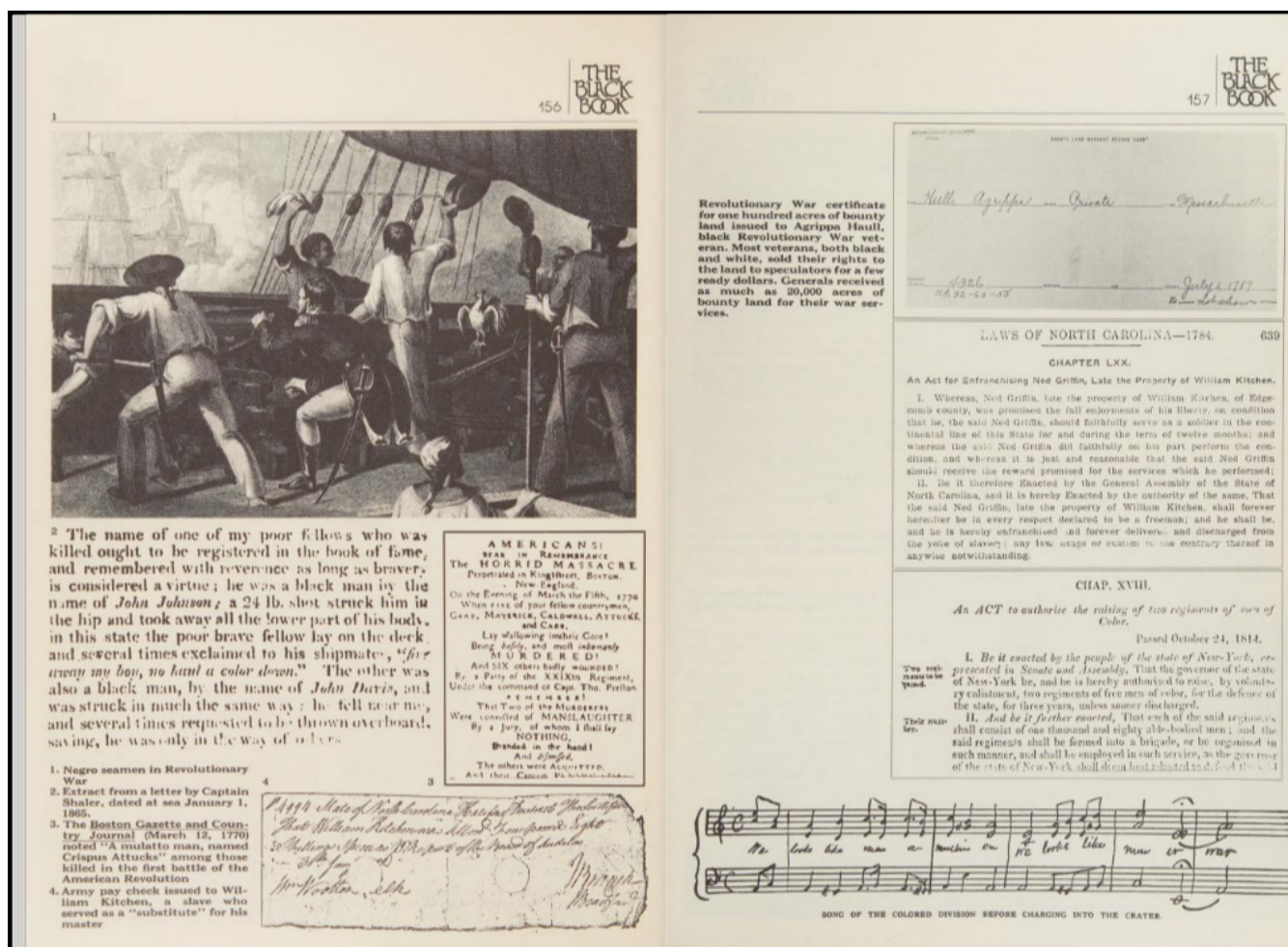


FIGURE 1: PAGES FROM *THE BLACK BOOK* AS AN EXAMPLE OF ITS SCRAPBOOK-LIKE STRUCTURE (HARRIS 156-157)

collectives made out of components which can exist outside the collective, and function in ways different from the mandates of the collective. Neither an assemblage nor a bricolage is controlled by a sole organizing ideological principle. However, the bricolage does not have the ever-changing and ever-expanding properties of a rhizome – once constituted, the components do not detach from the collective and join other collectives. The student, in a note he generously shared with me, wrote how the rhizome is “generative” and “always in flux,” as opposed to the fixity of the constituted bricolage.

The conversation ended there, but it set me thinking about the “bricolage”-like structure of *The Black Book*. The archivists in the project can be read as “bricoleurs,” handymen – they made a collective out of whatever scrap they could find. The scraps and materials in the book were not made for the purpose of filling in the book (unlike the words and sentences in a novel, for instance), but were rather brought together in an uneasy, contingent unity to make the book. It proved interesting to me that a text like *The Black Book*, cited by me as an example of one theoretical concept (a rhizome), became an inadvertent example of a completely different theoretical concept (a bricolage). Further, the bricolage aspects of the text influenced my subsequent reading of its structure, which I will illustrate a little later.

Through Toni Morrison’s preface to *The Black Book*, we first discussed “Blackness” and found that, in white supremacist society, the term tends to be inextricable from racism, police brutality, and slavery, with a few mentions of Black triumph (like Barack Obama and Oprah Winfrey). Morrison’s preface initially acknowledges the narratives of slavery and colorism, but then shows how the sign “Black” exceeds these narratives. Her description of *The Black Book* as a keeper of all things “Black” *between* its physical dimensions situates Blackness in a state of “in-betweenness”, spreading outwards towards all possible directions (top, bottom, left, right) and connecting to multiple assemblages in its wake. This echoes Deleuze and Guattari’s claim that the rhizome has “neither beginning nor end, but always a middle (milieu) from which it grows and which it overflows” (21), and posited Blackness as being innately rhizomatic. Morrison destabilises any chronology with which we can approach Blackness, and therefore challenges our reading of Blackness as a residue of Slavery. Rather, she posits Blackness as a vibrant, thriving phenomenon in the present. Morrison then connects Blackness to various other collections as an act of “survival”, and pointed out the various collections – food, entertainment, science and technology, sports, spirituality, arts, and everyday life. By pointing out these various collections, and by showing the students their corresponding pages in the book, I tried to show them how “Blackness” is an ever-expanding multiplicity, and that there are as many definitions of “Blackness” as there are Black experiences.

I then challenged the students to think how the printed book form is restricted by a boundary, to an extent. Despite the book’s claims of dispersing “Blackness” to different external collections, it binds all these different collections within its physical limits (the cover, the first and last pages). In that respect, *The Black Book*, by itself, is more like a bricolage than a rhizome. However, Morrison suggests that “Blackness” itself escapes the bounded collection of *The Black Book*: “I have journeys to take” (Morrison n.p.). Taking cue from the student’s earlier question about the limits of considering a piece of ginger as a rhizome, I proposed that *The Black Book* can be treated as a broken-off piece from a larger rhizome of Black texts, images, artifacts and other scraps of a Black archive. We ended our discussion with a brief discussion on the importance of multi-textuality in adequately apprehending Black experience.

## \*Acknowledgment

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