

**Scarification and Collective Sympathy:
An Analysis of Rememory in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*
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Introduction

Much has been written on Toni Morrison's conception of "rememory". This investigation seeks to relate her characters' use of the term, throughout *Beloved*, and its interrelatedness with scarification—those inflicted by others, and those self inflicted. In addition to the analysis of this relationship, i.e., between "rememory" and scarification, the concept of the "broken-slave" will be discussed. It will be demonstrated that a "broken-slave" is the ultimate representation of scarification, both for members of the slave community and within the economics of slavery. Finally, I will present and discuss the concept of "collective sympathy" in relation to the many accounts of "rememory" offered throughout *Beloved*.

On the Conception of "Rememory" and Collective Sympathy

In a discussion of "rememory," Caroline Rody writes,

"Rememory" as trope postulates the interconnectedness of minds, past and present...[it] is an active, creative mental function...[using] one's imaginative power to realize a latent, abiding connection to the past...[it is] a trope for the problem of reimagining one's heritage (Rody, 1995, 101-102).

This interconnectedness between the characters, especially Sethe, the main protagonist of the novel, and Beloved, the reincarnation of her murdered daughter, functions as a nexus of woven memories.¹ There are two key distinctions, however, between memory and "rememory". First, the divergence between memory and "rememory" rests in the facticity of "rememory".² The experience of an event or person, a building, or story can be forgotten, but *that* one had such an experience is fixed; it cannot be denied though it can be forgotten. The second key distinction rests in the intersubjectivity of "rememory," which allows the characters to share in the other's suffering. It is not merely that the characters remembered the brutal events of Sweet Home and 124 Bluestone, but that the characters shared in this collective experience. The interconnectedness and intersubjectivity of their shared experiences, serves as the foundation for

their “rememory”. “Rememory,” then, is the interrelation of shared experiences, independent to one’s recollection of the experience.

It is important to note, however, that we—as readers—share in the “rememory” of these fictional characters. Ashraf Rushdy writes,

These “rememories” not only exist outside the agent’s mind but are available to anyone who enters the sphere of the action...rememory...is never only personal but always interpersonal (Rushdy, 1990, 303-304).

This interpersonal or intersubjective experience is open to everyone. That the characters of Morrison’s *Beloved* are fictional, in no way undermines the facticity of their “rememory”. The many atrocities described within the novel, are shared memories for Morrison’s readers. We have experienced Sethe’s desperation at 124 Bluestone when confronted with her children’s enslavement. We have been angered by the brutalization that befell Sethe at the hands of Schoolteacher’s nephews. And we have endured the psychological conflicts of *Beloved*’s return and her insistence on hearing stories Sethe has long since forgotten.³ In short, we have learned to sympathize, through the shared “rememories” among Morrison’s characters. To demonstrate this notion, Pin-Chia Feng writes,

Rememory mobilize[s] the collective force of the community and though the power of sympathy free traumatized characters from layers of repressed memories and further empower them to battle against imposed racial, sexual, and class oppressions (Feng, 2002, 154).

The power of a sympathetic character, to cross the racial divide, is exemplified by Sethe’s interaction with Amy Denver, the young, white, indentured servant. After having birthed Denver Suggs, named after the benevolent Amy Denver, the duo discuss Sethe’s swollen feet. Amy comments, “I know a woman had her feet cut off they was so swole.” (42). She adds, “Well I was just fishing there and a nigger floated right by me. I don’t like drowned people, you? Your feet reminded me of him. All swole like” (42). What followed next, however, transcended the mere observation of Sethe’s swollen feet. It was not, simply, that Amy Denver recognized Sethe’s discomfoting swollen feet, but that she *intended* on easing Sethe’s discomfort. Morrison writes, “Then she did the magic: lifted Sethe’s feet and legs and massaged them until she cried salt tears” (42).

This “magic” is the power of sympathy, the power for the most mundane act, such as massaging someone’s feet, to transcend the limitations of Sethe’s enslavement. Though their plight was not similar, Amy Denver understood and recognized Sethe’s humanity, i.e., her ability to suffer. The “magic,” then, was encapsulated within a touch. Sethe’s damaged and swollen feet triggered Amy Denver’s own “rememories” of her past, “rememories” of death. Thus, in this scene, Morrison has juxtaposed the conflicting images of birth and death, the present and the past, the plight of slave and the “magic” of a sympathetic character. Amy Denver’s understanding of this “magic” is further demonstrated by her claim that, “Anything dead coming back to life hurts” (42.). Though an indentured servant, Amy fully understands the power and interrelatedness of her “rememories,” and her claim that, “Anything dead coming back to life hurts,” is an allusion to the return of Beloved later in the novel.

With respect to the conception of sympathy, Deborah Ayer Sitter writes, “Morrison compels her readers to recognize Sethe’s dilemma and in so doing precludes judgment and promotes sympathy” (Sitter, 1992, 27). Sympathy, then, should follow from “rememory,” which is often triggered by physical and mental scars. Thus, in suggesting that one “ought” to sympathize with various characters presented in the novel, I am further suggesting that Morrison’s conception of “rememory” is imbued with ethical prescriptions—allowing our sympathy to serve as a balm to the scars of slavery.

Physical Scarification and “Rememory”

These “scars of slavery” have marred the slave population with battered bodies and shattered minds. Each scar, moreover—be it physical or mental—has a story, and each story elicits the ethical responsibility of sympathizing for the character’s plight.⁴ As is often the case with severe trauma, however, many of the characters have either forgotten or suppressed their memories.⁵ Some scars remain concealed, but others, unfortunately, are housed within the flesh, marking the slaves with a constant—physical—reminder of their suffering. Sethe recounts one such scar, saying, “I got a tree on my back and haint in my house” (18). The “tree” Sethe is referring to is a large scar resulting from a server beating she received—while pregnant—from Schoolteacher, who accepts control of Sweet Home after the death of Mr. Garner. Sethe recounts the event that preceded the beating to Paul D, a former slave and friend from Sweet Home. She

says, “After I left you, those boys came in there and took my milk. That’s what they came in there for. Held me down and took it.” (19). In confidence, Sethe told Mrs. Garner about her violation at the hands of Schoolteacher’s nephews. Upon discovery, however, Sethe was punished for informing Mrs. Garner, and beaten with cowhide after having her milk taken.

Of great importance, moreover, is Sethe’s statement that, “Schoolteacher made me open up my back, and when it closed it made a tree. It grows there still” (20). Her claim that “it grows there still” suggests that Sethe is still suffering from the psychological trauma of having her milk taken and the violent beating she endured. Not only is the scar a continual reminder of her abuse at Sweet Home, it is an intrusion of the past into the present. It is continuous with the present. Sethe’s rememory of this intrusion surfaces after having sex with Paul D. She thinks to herself, “[Men] encouraged you to put some of your weight in their hands and as soon as you felt how light and lovely that was, they studied your scars and tribulations” (26). Thus, Sethe’s scar detracts from her identity, suggesting that men study *it* rather than her. In addition, the scar interferes with the present. It is an intrusion of the past into the present, which explains why “it grows there still”.

There is, however, another intrusion of the past, which pertains to Sethe’s scar. It is older and more insidious, than the beating she received from Schoolteacher. As a child, Sethe had wanted a scar of her own.⁶ At that age, she could not possibly fathom the atrocities that would befall her, but she desperately wanted to feel a connection with her mother. Her mother was simply known as ma’am. Sethe recounts the only vivid memory of her mother to Beloved, the reincarnation of her murdered child—a child murdered by her own hand, saying,

[ma’am] opened up her dress front and lifted her breast and pointed under it. Right on her rib was a circle and a cross burnt right in the skin...I am the only one got this mark now. The rest dead. If something happens to me and you can’t tell me by my face, you can know me by this mark (72).

The connection Sethe felt to her mother’s brand is perverted by the institution of slavery. Sethe wants one also, saying, “Mark me, too...Mark the mark on me too” (73). The horrible truth would not be revealed to Sethe until she became an adult. Her mother refused to mark her, and slapped her face instead. Sethe notes, “I didn’t understand it then. Not till I had a mark of my own.” (73). Thus, the physical scar, be it a brand or ravaged skin, serves to initiate one’s

“rememory” of the past. Both the scar, then, and the “rememory” of the past coexist with the present. Others, who bore witness to the atrocities a given character was made to endure, participate in the shared “rememory” of that character. Though the scar may belong to another, each observer—including the reader—suffers with each retelling of the story. This continual reminder of one’s persecution is enough to drive one mad. Such is the case for Halle Suggs.

Mental Scarification and the Broken Slave

Mr. Garner was known to boast of his ability to control his slave population. Rather than treating them like animals, he said, “...my niggers is men every one of em. Bought em thataway, raised em thataway. Men every one” (12). Garner believed that he had to be smarter and tougher than his slaves were if he wanted to control them. He allowed his slaves to carry guns and to marry, as a gesture of confidence in his slaves, which would not have been tolerated outside of Sweet Home. Unfortunately, this act of “goodwill” did not prepare the slaves for the reality of institutionalized slavery. Once he died, he was replaced by Schoolteacher and his sadistic nephews, which devastated the slave population at Sweet Home.

Mr. Garner had allowed Sethe to marry and she chose Halle Suggs as her husband, but lost contact with him in her attempt to escape Sweet Home. For years, she thought Halle had abandoned her and their four children. In a discussion with Paul D, however, Sethe discovers the truth. Paul D says, “The day I came in here. You said they stole your milk. I never knew what it was that messed [Halle] up. That was it, I guess. All I knew was that something broke him” (81). Sethe is horrified to realize that Halle witnessed her humiliation at the hands of Schoolteacher’s nephews, saying, “He saw them boys do that to me and let them keep on breathing air? He saw? He saw? He saw?” (81). Paul D reiterates the devastation the event had on Halle’s mind. “It broke him Sethe,”⁷ is all he says.⁸

It is important to note that the “broken” slave is not the domesticated or docile slave often spoken of in discussions of the Elkin’s thesis.⁹ Throughout the novel, the suggestion that a slave has been broken implies that the slave has lost his mind, and thereby rendered unfit for slavery. Though Sethe killed Beloved, she had not been a broken slave. The narrator informs us, “Other people went crazy, why couldn’t she? Other people’s brains stopped, turned around and went on to something new, which is what must have happened to Halle” (83). In her discussion of Sethe’s

murder of Beloved, Jeanna Fuston-White writes, “It was not madness, but the reality of slavery, that drove Sethe to kill her child, fully aware of the act and its brutality, as well as its compassion” (Fuston-White, 2002, 464).

Sethe’s rage resulted from an understanding of the horrors of slavery, rather than from her descent into madness. Hope was not a luxury any slave could afford, and Sethe knew too well that though she could hope for the wellbeing of her children, the grim reality was that they too would have suffered as she had. This refutation of the future, of hope, is exemplified in a discussion between Sethe and Denver.

“Maybe we should unbraided it?” asked Sethe.

“Uh uh. Tomorrow.” Denver crouched forward at the thought of a fine-tooth comb pulling her hair.

“*Today is always here,*” said Sethe. “*Tomorrow, never*” (italics mine), (72).

Later in the novel the concept of an empty hope returns when Paul D recounts the psychological trauma he received while in Georgia. Though he bore no physical scar, the effects of the chain-gang scarred him for life. He says,

...they killed the flirt whom folks called Life for leading them on. Making them think the next sunrise would be worth it; that another stroke of time would do it at last. Only when she was dead would they be safe (128).

Sethe places importance on today rather than tomorrow, because, as she said, “Being alive was the hard part” (8). Her distinction between the harsh reality of her everyday life and the false hope of freedom and family is mirrored by Paul D’s allegorical language. The sunrise ushers the hope for tomorrow, only to realize, however, that tomorrow brings the same tribulations as those previously endured in the past. Their “rememories” are shared across a nexus of despair. For Sethe and Paul D, their lives are lived either in the past or in the present, but never in the future. They have survived, where so many others have died, viz., the five other Sweet Home men and Beloved, because of their instance to remain focused on the present. Thus, the language of hope within the economics of institutionalized slavery bears enough heft to crush the spirit of the most resilient slave. A broken slave, then, is the ultimate representation of scarification, both for members of the slave community and within the economics of slavery.

The Broken Slave and the Economics of Slavery

Specific to the economics of slavery, the broken slave is worthless. In recounting the murder of Beloved, the narrator informs us that, “Unlike a snake or a bear, a dead nigger could not be skinned for profit and was not worth his own dead weight in coin” (174-175). Sethe understood that, for Schoolteacher, her children were only valuable insofar as they were fit for labor. To render them unfit for labor meant they had no value, which is not to say they were without intrinsic value, i.e., not the value given to human life—as such, they were robbed of their instrumental value. Sethe’s children, and all slaves for that matter, were only valuable insofar as their free labor produced a product that could be sold for profit. A slave was “property that reproduced itself without cost” (269). No one understood this better than Sethe. Mary Elliott discusses this conception in terms of “commodified subjectivity”. She writes,

...a postcolonial analysis of *Beloved*...helps us read Sethe’s self-actualization as a resistive process against objectifying colonial definitions of black identity...[which]...serve to recontextualize Sethe’s motivations for murdering her child, the subsequent ostracism by her community, her obsessive love for Beloved, and her final release for the ideological confines of colonial commodification (Elliott, 2000, 182).

This release from the “confines of colonial commodification” is a revolutionary act against the established power relations between the institution of slavery and the slave. In refusing to submit to the oppressive power of institutionalized slavery, Sethe acts as a revolutionary. Her resistance to this power is, therefore, also an act of power. Thus, the dynamics of power and resistance, on the one hand, and commodification and self-actualization, on the other, creates the necessary conditions wherein Sethe can justify her act of infanticide as an act of love. This power dynamic is discussed by Michel Foucault. He writes,

Where there is power, there is resistance, and yet, or rather consequently, this resistance is never in a position of exteriority in relation to power. Should it be said that one is always “inside” power, there is no “escaping” it, there is no absolute outside where it is concerned (Foucault, 1990, 95).

When Schoolteacher arrives at 124 Bluestone and realizes that Sethe has attempted to take the lives of her children, he assumes that she has gone crazy. The narrator informs us, “But now she’d gone wild, due to the mishandling of the nephew who’d overbeat her and made her

cut and run” (176). Sethe, however, had not gone wild. She loved her four children and would sooner kill them than give them to Schoolteacher, but we are told, “The whole lot was lost now. Five.” (176). Schoolteacher realizes that Sethe too is unfit for labor. The broken slave is too scarred, thereby crippling the economy of slavery. Sethe and her four children were useless, i.e., without instrumental value, forcing Schoolteacher to leave empty handed. Sethe truly believed that dying was easy, that “Being alive was the hard part” (8). Thus, her love for her children afforded them an easy death rather than a hard life. This conception of love, however, was scrutinized in a conversation with Paul D. The narrator notes,

This here Sethe talked about love like any other woman; talked about baby clothes like any other woman, but what she meant could cleave bone. This here Sethe talked about safety with a handsaw...more important than what Sethe had done was what she claimed (193).

Granted, Sethe attempted to kill her children while claiming she loved them, but Paul D disapproves. He says, “Your love is too thick” (193). To which Sethe replies, “Love is or it ain’t. Thin love ain’t love at all” (194). The economics of slave labor could not exercise force over Sethe’s love for her children. Sethe would not yield her love to this force because she recognized that her children were more than just instruments of labor. Sethe tells Paul D,

...when I stretched out my arms all my children could get in between. I was that wide. Look like I loved em more after I got here. Or maybe I couldn’t love em proper in Kentucky because they wasn’t mine to love. But when I got here, when I jumped down off that wagon—there wasn’t nobody in the world I couldn’t love if I wanted to (190-191).

Schoolteacher would never attribute such high-order thinking to a nigger, much less a woman. The institution of slavery blinded him to the complexities of Sethe’s mind. Sethe truly understood the profundity of slave labor and recognized that if “Love is or it ain’t,” i.e., if one’s love is unconditional, then infanticide is justifiable insofar as it protects, and secures her children from a lifetime of pain and suffering. Her love, then, defeated the oppressive forces of institutionalized slavery by keeping her children safe from a lifetime of subjugation.

Collective Sympathy and the Process of Healing

Freedom can present its own difficulties for a community of freed slaves. Morrison explores this building tension as it takes shape at 124 Bluestone once Sethe arrives. A large meal was prepared, “food for ninety,” which made many members of the community jealous (161).

The narrator explains,

It made them furious. They swallowed baking soda, the morning after, to calm the stomach violence caused by the bounty, the reckless generosity on display at 124. Whispered to each other in the yards about fat rats, doom and uncalled-for pride (162).

Baby Suggs was simply a generous woman. She harbored no ill intent with her celebration, but members of the community resented her for what she was afforded. Though the freed slaves of Cincinnati, Ohio were beyond the oppressive forces of institutionalized slavery, they were still psychologically conditioned for self destruction. As the late Bob Marley said, “Emancipate yourselves from mental slavery, none but ourselves can free our minds.”¹⁰

Baby Suggs realized that if Sethe were to move beyond slavery, if she was to embrace the present and the possibility of tomorrow, she would have to “lay it all down”. The narrator adds, “Sethe was trying to take her advice: *to lay it all down, sword and shield*. Not just to acknowledge the advice Baby Suggs gave her, but actually to take it” (203). Sethe could not progress forward, she could not begin to live her life were she to dwell on the hardships of her past, and so she acted. We are told,

Anybody feeling sorry for her, anybody wandering by to peep in and see how she was getting on (including Paul D) would discover that the woman junkheaped for the third time because she loved her children—that woman was sailing happily on a frozen creek...two paces onto that creek, she lost her balance and landed on her behind. The girls, screaming with laughter, joined her on the ice (205).

Sethe was determined to begin her process of healing, of making amends for the desperate slaughter of her daughter and the trauma she endured under the institution of slavery. I disagree with many others who claim that her self-actualization and the resolve to her psychological torment *required* Paul D’s assertion that, “You your best thing, Sethe. You are” (322).¹¹ Sethe recognize this fact *independent* to Paul D’s assertion, which is evident in the fact that she, of her

own volition, decided, “*to lay it all down, sword and shield*” (203). On the ice, skating with her daughters, Sethe is finally able to laugh. She has begun the process of healing in recognizing that only she can take control of her life.

Control is not only measured in what an individual is able to attain but what one is willing to sacrifice. We are told that, “the pain was unbearable when they ran low on food, and Denver watched her mother go without—pick-eating around the edge of the table and stove”(285). 124 Bluestone was preparing to devour Sethe, without intervention she would surely have died. The problem, however, was that members of the community still harbored a twofold resentment for Sethe. They were jealous of Baby Suggs’ flamboyant generosity, when she was living, and were infuriated by Sethe’s murder of Beloved.

Denver took the initiative to seek employment, as Sethe was growing sicker with the passing of each day. After hearing of Sethe’s condition, Lady Jones, a schoolteacher, “gave [Denver] some rice, four eggs and some tea” (292). Despite her generosity, however, Sethe’s condition worsened. Denver sought help from the Bodwins, sympathetic abolitionists, but needed to convince their maid, Janey, that her mother was in dire circumstances. Despite Denver’s initial reluctance, she told Janey everything.

It was a little thing to pay, but it seemed big to Denver. Nobody was going to help her unless she told—tols all of it. It was clear Janey wouldn’t and wouldn’t let her see the Bodwins otherwise (298).

After hearing their story, “The news that Janey got hold of she spread among the other coloredwomen” (300). Finally, we are told that, “It was Ella more than anyone who convinced the others that rescue was in order” (301).

Because of Denver’s initiative, the community was sympathetic to Sethe’s dilemma, and they decided to act on her behalf. Mr. Bodwin’s arrival, specifically his hat and masked face, triggered Sethe’s memory of Schoolteacher’s attempt to collect her children. Morrison uses nearly the same language to describe Sethe’s state of mind in both cases.

...[Sethe] saw them coming and recognized schoolteacher’s hat, she heard wings. Little hummingbirds stuck their needle breaks right through her headcloth into her hair and beat their wings. And if she thought anything, it was No. No. Nono. Nonono. Simple. She just flew. (192)

Guiding the mare, slowing down, his black hat wide-brimmed enough to hide his face but not his purpose. He is coming into her yard and he is coming for her best thing. She hears wings. Little hummingbirds stick needle breaks right through her headcloth into her hair and beat their wings. And if she thinks anything, it is no. No no. Nonono. She flies. The ice pick is not in her hand; it is her hand (308-309)

The circumstances, however, were drastically different. Though Sethe may have been justified in the murder of Beloved, were she to kill Mr. Bodwin, she would have surely been a broken slave. Denver's initiative, coupled with the collective sympathy of the community, saved Sethe from utter insanity. She was a woman on the brink of madness, on the brink of murder, on the brink of complete self annihilation,¹² but the communal intervention offers hope for tomorrow, for the time being, however, Sethe desperately needed to rest.

Notes

¹ In discussing time, Sethe says, "Places, places are still there. 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" (43). Denver, then asks, "Can other people see it?" (43). The discussion of the interconnectedness of "rememory" rest on its accessibility to others. Sethe responds, "Oh yes. Oh, yes, yes, yes....It's when you bump into a rememory that belongs to somebody else. Where I was before I came here, [Sweet Home] that place is real. It's never going away" (43).

² Facticity is defined as, "whether a commitment is apt for truth". See *Oxford Dictionary of Philosophy*.

³ See Morrison, (73-75).

⁴ Thus, the narrator implores us that, "This is not a story to pass on" (324). To sympathize is to recognize that retelling the story infuses the past into the present. In retelling the story, the storyteller invokes the shared "rememories" of one's suffering. It is to make one's suffering present.

⁵ After Paul D shared the horrors of his experience with the bit, Sethe began rubbing his knee in an attempt to calm him. She thinks to herself, "Nothing better than to start the day's serious work of beating the past" (86).

⁶ Sethe tells her mother, "Mark me too...Mark the mark on me too" (73).

⁷ Morrison, (82)

⁸ Halle smeared butter and clabber "all over his face because the milk they took was on his mind" (83).

⁹ The Elkins thesis is a controversial argument suggesting that the "Sambo" is a personality type that has evolved from slavery. Elkins offers historical and psychological accounts for this behavior. His argument, however, generalizes as it fails to account for the role of slave revolts and tacit means of resistance. See, Elkins, S.M. (1959) *Slavery*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

¹⁰ Bob Marley. "Redemption Song" *Uprising*. Polygram Records. 1980.

¹¹ Stephanie Demetrakopoulous writes,

Paradoxically, while she appears to have a strong self because of her pride and independence, she marshalls her prodigious strength only to maintain a home for Denver and Baby Suggs. Her idea that her children are her best parts, her best self (ultimately her *only* self) becomes such a motif in Sethe's characterization that her dilemma is resolved by Paul D's telling her, "You are your best thing, Sethe. You are" (Demetrakopoulous, 1992, 54).

¹² The narrator notes, "And if he bathes her in sections, will the parts hold?" (321).

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