Re-membering: *Beloved* and slave narrative

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In her ground-breaking work of literary criticism, *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*, the American novelist and scholar Toni Morrison argues that critics and literary historians shun the notion that the black presence in America has had any effect upon the vast literary output produced by Americans throughout the years during or after abolition. Most notably, she refers to an all-pervading sense of ‘white exclusivity’ which pervades the more erudite echelons of white American ‘literary historians and critics’ (Morrison 1993, 4). Her suggestion leads one to wonder just how much the African-American experience is dislocated from that of their white American country-people. Indeed, Morrison assiduously argued that at the time (1992), there was a gaping abyss within the literary world, where the recognition and acceptance of black Americans should, or could, sit comfortably within the consciousness of white American literary thinking. A term she coined, ‘Americaness’, gives light to the problematic issue of racial difference, which has created a narrative, a concept of African-American identity construed, as Morrison argues, through a dubious past of ambiguous morality as a means of ‘policing’ class issues and accountability (1993, 7). Morrison’s implications are clear: some white Americans are guilty of eschewing historical truth in favour of re-inscribing a less disturbing, more favourable light on their history of slavery and its legacy. However, it should be noted that Morrison produced this work twenty years ago and some progress has been made in this arena since then.

Perhaps one might surmise that Morrison’s motives in her 1987 Pulitzer prize winning novel, *Beloved*, are rather unambiguous, since the text is a site of remembering, of exploring the horrors of the slave trade from an intense and intimate experience; a memorial far removed from a whitewashing of history from ‘Americaness’. *Beloved* is an unremitting and harrowing novel, intricately built upon the experiences of its characters. Through the fragmented form of postmodernism, Morrison has the opportunity to juxtapose snippets of memories, clippings of experience and mix together a collective lifetime of trauma. As a patchwork of memory, the text collages the past. Thus, the text becomes a site of re-membering the lives of those who were wholly ‘taken’ through centuries of slavery. The concept of re-membering is two-fold: it is a process of reflection and recollection but it is also fundamentally a process of re-connecting, of putting something broken back together again. Indeed, the weight of memory in *Beloved* is an almost insurmountable force from which Morrison allows the reader no
repeive. The black characters are so heavily burdened with the memory of slavery that they have become frozen in time, locked in a memory too torturous to face, too devastating to leave behind; they are in a kind of ‘no place’, both emotionally and physically.

It is exactly this ‘no place’ that creates a space in which Morrison can explore notions of black identity within the American consciousness and, more significantly, it allows for the barely scabbed wound of slave memory to be ripped off. The tightly woven slave narrative pushes historical ‘facts’ into submission and replaces them with a deeper, arguably more truthful and realistic ‘filling of the gaps’; the novel ‘probes ... the repressed memory of slavery in the make-up of the American nation’ (Tally 2007, 43). When the main character, Sethe, claims that this story is not to be passed on (Beloved, 324) the meaning is two-fold: it is not a story for the re-telling, neither is it to be passed by, forgotten. Like the fish devouring the bodies of slaves thrown overboard, so too have the novel’s characters been eaten alive; the memory of slavery, in one shape or another, has consumed them. Each one carries their own sadness, each one locked in their own prisons, dislocated from themselves and from each other. It is the constant shifting from one character point of view to the next (Sethe, Beloved, Denver, Paul D, Stamp Paid, Sixo, Baby Suggs to name but a few), which ‘enables the novel to mimic and reflect the process of memory’ (Tally 2007, 44). Their memories are fleeting fragments, too heavily laden to allow the flood-gates to open; they drip insidiously, flowing in and out of the text and gradually building into a force which finally burdens the dam. Once this dam has been compromised, the protagonists, Sethe and Paul D, who have both endured a life-time of psychological abuse, physical oppression and sexual degradation as former slaves, have no alternative but to face their past and confront the unspoken memories which have haunted them for so long. Freedom for Sethe and Paul D is only a hollow word; it is mythical and dubious in equal measure, endlessly and deafeningly reverberating off their invisible prison walls.

For Paul D, memories are physically secured, he hides them away in a tightly sealed, rusted ‘tobacco tin’ (Beloved, 86). His experiences have been so traumatic that perhaps his basic survival instinct has demanded that the all-pervading memories of his past be compartmentalised, locked away and desperately ignored. The psychiatrist, Judith Herman, suggests that ‘the ordinary response to atrocities is to banish them from consciousness’ (cited in Brooks 2000, 6). Thus, the severity of trauma at the hands of white domination has had serious psychological implications for Paul D. The desperate need to repress his memories is problematic, not just for Paul D but for all the black characters. Their insistence
to lock away the past, to disguise the pain, only serves to further entrap them inside the web of their trauma. Sethe is convinced by the need to suppress memories. The magnitude of their shared history, the sheer weight of a burdened catalogue of cruelty and dehumanisation can never be fully articulated by the characters, perhaps this is because, they have avoided the memories for so long; pain and reality are one. So interwoven is the legacy of slavery and the future of the ‘freed’ slaves, that the memories have become a living nightmare. The indeterminable reality of their memories reinforces the impossibility of living with them and abandoning them.

According to Carl Plasa, Beloved ‘focuses precisely on the ways in which slavery violates, structures and determines the physic life of the black subject’ (1998, 43). Certainly this can be witnessed through the circumstances and memories of Sethe’s baby daughter. Her status as a slave all but eradicates the possibility of Sethe being a mother. Indeed, every aspect of her motherhood is controlled, dominated and under the threat of her white suppressors. The memory of the murdered baby’s final resting place is mixed with the bitter memories of having to prostitute herself in order to have one word engraved on her headstone, the only word that mattered, the baby’s name, Beloved. Haunted by Beloved, her youngest child, whom she murdered in order to liberate her from a life of slavery, Sethe’s memories continue to taunt her at every turn: the violation and degradation at the hands of white slave masters is so absolute it has engulfed her entire psyche. Plasa’s argument is pertinent in this respect, as Sethe’s life and, arguably, each of the lives of the other black characters, are shaped by white violence in one form or another. Her soul balances precariously on a heavily weighted, unfairly balanced scale, as she struggles to overcome the aftermath of her past throughout the novel. The deconstruction of Sethe, the slave, is only made possible through a collective effort. That is to say, away from the oppression of the somewhat ironically named Sweet Home plantation in Kentucky and white supremacy, members of the black community, through their shared experiences of slavery, offer each other a collective healing force which has the power to exorcise the past and re-build a future.

The fundamental ingredient to this healing process is through the act of re-membering. Collectively, the black community has the power in their hands to free their minds and souls of the horrors of slavery and to make whole what has been systematically smashed through the years the institution has stolen from them. Justine Tally argues that ‘memory only functions within society through stories, ritual, celebrations and commemoration’ (2009, 39). Through the act of sharing memories, by threading together a tapestry of experience, one is able to re-create ‘the act of recollection’ (ibid., 39). Arguably, it
is easier to share the burden of re-membering with a fellow intimate. Certainly when Paul D arrives at Sethe’s house they very quickly, perhaps even involuntarily, begin to recall the past. There would appear a need for them to mentally work through the ‘place’ which has haunted them for so many years. Sethe and Paul D are clearly united in their shared history at Sweet Home; it offers them the possibility of a collective experience, a chance to ease the burden. As Channette Romero points out, ‘Morrison uses the novel genre to point out the power that stories have for community building’ (Romero 2005, 418). The act of recollecting their history provides a bond; the art of storytelling blends fact with fiction and serves to ease the pain of reality. Thereby, Paul D and Sethe’s solidarity, their sense of ‘community’, is perhaps the one thing that proffered the sole chance of survival in the face of such relentless dehumanisation at Sweet Home and in the wider world.

One cannot underestimate the power of the human need to belong and feel a sense of identity. According to Simone de Beauvoir, prior to domination subjugated peoples lived autonomously within their own cultures. As such, in the face of oppression and the dismemberment of a culture, the peoples ‘retained at least the memory of former days; they possessed in common a past, a tradition, sometimes a religion or culture’ (de Beauvoir 1997, 25). Certainly the slaves’ sense of community at Sweet Home can be thought of as an act of maintaining an identity. However, it is possible to argue that through their community, their rituals and their nuances, the slaves at Sweet Home were in fact preserving their history; memory cannot be lost in the face of such unity. The text continues to offer similar opportunities to consider how slaves may have attempted to preserve memory. Sethe’s mother-in-law, Baby Suggs was the black community’s spiritual epicentre. The sermons in the woods of this inspirational mother-figure served as a cathartic release to the horrors of the past. Through her, African-American slaves could attempt to retain a culture which provided a much needed output of pain and loss; hope for better times. It is interesting to note that the sermons were held in a ‘clearing’ in the woods; this might be considered as representing the need for a psychological space in which to tackle the repressed memories of slavery and encourage the healing process. The clearing should also be thought of as a symbolic representation of a place, away from white oppressors, which allowed the Negroes autonomy and freedom to re-member their fragmented memories and lives. By definition, autonomy is a condition of independence, where rules can be made and self-governance can prevail. Therefore, in this microcosmic clearing, the black community has the precious opportunity to forge and preserve their culture and humanity.
One of the most salient aspects of African American culture is music, a private vernacular which, as Alan Rice suggests, often served as an act of resistance against white oppression. The term ‘funk’, as Rice points out, is a reworking of a colloquial African-American term for ‘bad smell’. The word, then, has evolved through African-American culture, to express a ‘particular soul quality in black music’ (Rice 2003, 148). Significantly, Rice argues that Morrison’s work explores notions of ‘funk’ within her novels. This can be seen in the clearing scene of Beloved; ‘the “eruption of funk” literally juxtaposes an alternative reality to that ... which encourages African Americans to forget their cultural roots’ (Rice 2003, 148). These sermons are an essential component to the collective history and remembrance of the black Diaspora and as such offer the ‘space’ to hold onto their culture; to maintain their identity. Building on Rice’s work, Lars Eckstein suggests that Beloved is a novel heavily imbued, even if rather subtly, with a ‘jazzthetic’ tone. Rather, the novel ‘relies on the sounds and rhythms of black music’ (Eckstein 2006, 272). To this end, one can argue that the significance of this ‘jazzthetic approach’ is paramount to the healing capacity of Baby Suggs’s sermons. Indeed, Paul Gilroy affirms that black music, particularly the disjointed and fragmented nature of jazz, offers ‘a place in which the black vernacular has been able to preserve and cultivate ... the presence of death which derives from slavery and a related ontological state that I want to call the condition of my pain’ (cited in Eckstein 2006, 273). It is this ‘pain’ which so eloquently soothes the memory and reality of slavery through the act of re-cultivating and preserving a dismembered community. However, the most crucial and powerful ‘jazzthetic’ strategy employed by Morrison is the use of music to drive Beloved out of the community. Certainly this gesture can be thought of as a metaphor for exorcising the demonic presence of slavery out of the community in order for that community to evolve from the bondage of their historical captivity, both physically and psychically. Eckstein suggests that ‘Beloved ... embodies a part of Sethe’s unresolved and repressed past’ (2006, 271). As such, Beloved represents the collective past of African Americans which asserts the importance of her exorcism within the text; it is vital then that this ‘haunting’ be expelled; the voices of Sethe’s community came together to rid not only Sethe but themselves of their traumatic past. The very fact that Morrison chose music, which is central to African American slave culture, should not be dismissed lightly. The healing capacity of the music intrinsic to their culture allows Morrison to highlight the paradoxical difficulties African Americans have to live with, in order to forget and re-member. Although Sethe is released of her child, Beloved, who represents in one sense the symbolic trauma of slavery’s past, she is not released from her deepest haunting – white supremacy. Thus, the pain cycle continues.
In an interview in 1988, Toni Morrison was asked about the responsibilities one should assume in regards to the African Diaspora. In particular, Morrison referred to the importance of creating a narrative which accounts for those ‘lost’ during the slave trade, those that died during the Middle Passage (the leg of the slave-ship journey from the West coast of Africa across the Atlantic to America, where the slaves were then sold for goods), and those that survived. The need to account for and to take responsibility clearly drives both Morrison and the novel. Significantly, Morrison suggests that the millions of dead from the Middle Passage have been doubly effaced; ‘nobody thinks about them ... they never survived in lore; there are no songs or dances or tales of these people’ (Darling and Morrison 1988, 5). Morrison’s own understanding of this absence can be attributed to the very traumatic nature of the Middle Passage; the unspeakable horrors inflicted upon an unwilling cargo. As Morrison suggests the likelihood of this vacuum was created purely from a survivalist perspective; ‘People who did dwell on it ... it probably killed them ... the people who did not dwell ... probably went forward’ (ibid., 5). Here it is feasible to argue that Morrison reinforces the notion that, in order to create a future, the past must be healed. It is from this praxis that Beloved herself can be thought of as central to the text; she is both the ‘problem’ and the possibility of salvation.

Certainly, the mysterious character Beloved has multifarious facets; one possibility is that she might be thought of as the literal embodiment of the Middle Passage. She represents the millions of unknown whose stories were never available to be told, whose lives were consumed by the sea. In this sense then, Beloved might be thought of as a trope employed by Morrison, which allows the possibility for these souls to be recovered and remembered. Indeed, in the novel Beloved first appears like an apparition, out of water (Beloved, 60). Her arrival is less ambiguous than one might expect, rather, one is unable to deny the allusion. Morrison suggests that ‘the language of both experiences – death and the Middle Passage – is the same’ (Darling and Morrison 1988, 5). Hence, in Part Two of the novel, Beloved’s first person narrative, her stream of consciousness allows the reader unrestricted access into the belly of the slave ship, it allows one to fully acknowledge the horrors of life on board. However, more than that, the language, as Morrison suggests, is the same as in the Middle Passage. There is no punctuation, no coherence; the confused text imitates the disorientation of the kidnapped Africans. Indeed, in her Foreword to the 2005 edition of the novel, Morrison claims that her intention was to create an environment whereby life would be ‘violently disrupted by the chaos of the needy dead’ (Beloved 2005, xiii). Certainly, this effect is achieved through the distorted language. The language has a chilling effect, it demands attention; one has to grapple to find a comfortable position from which to decode it.
Language is similarly destabilised when Beloved fights to make verbal sense of her visual surroundings, to find words for pictures (*Beloved*, 248). It is not a great leap of faith to suppose that the enslaved Africans would not have understood English, much less spoken the language. Therefore, one might suggest that Beloved’s disorientation, in the final chapters of Part II, whereby she questions how one is able to communicate when one has no language to employ, (*Beloved* 248) echoes Zora Neale Hurston’s assertion that ‘the white man thinks in a written language and the Negro thinks in hieroglyphics’ (quoted in Leitch et al. 2001, 1146). This is not to suggest that intellectually the slaves were in any way inferior to their white masters, simply that language for them existed in an environment which suppressed its evolution. As Hurston observes, the slave, having had English ‘transplanted on his tongue’, coupled with the illegality of educating slaves, meant that their language became dominated by pragmatics, by the action, by the object (ibid., 1146). This concept can be explored in Beloved’s Middle Passage extract where she describes the white slave masters as men without skin and, the sea as blue water (*Beloved*, 248 & 252). These rough synonyms might be thought of as a strategy to mirror the alienation of the enforced assimilation of enslaved Africans into Western culture. This assimilation threatens the language of the slaves, it threatens their culture and identity, and it threatens their memories.

Moreover, the effect of being subjugated, debased of language and alien to a ruling ideology, marginalises the slaves to the point of near invisibility. Tally argues that ‘absence of memory is just as socially constructed as memory itself’, and that groups who insist on their right to history, who insist on imprinting their experiences into the history books, have the unenviable feat of ‘challenging the power structure of society’ (2009, 30). That is to say, their claim is far more dominated by politics than by the magnitude of their experiences. The politics to speak of are, in this case, unquestionably related to white accountability and racial difference. Tally’s point suggests that the memory of the Middle Passage has been effaced by a dominant and all-pervading white supremacy. Lurking just beneath the surface of all the characters is a tacit knowing, an unspoken haunting of the Middle Passage. Beloved is the symbolic representation of this haunting, she is the familiar unfamiliar; the unspeakable thing unspoken. Each character recognises something in her, but whatever it is they feel, that ‘thing’ is just out of reach, abstruse and impalpable. The ‘haunting’ permeates through all of the Black characters and determines their lives from its very ‘captive’ nature. In this sense, then, each of the characters finds that their identity is fluid; they have been constructed and deconstructed through their white suppressors’ ideology; their memories denied ‘closure’.
References


