

Re-membering Memory: Understanding the roles of memory and rememory in *Beloved*¹

Memory and remembering keep the characters of *Beloved* in constant conflict with their past as they navigate their present. Sethe struggles to keep her memory under control, to keep it from seeping into her present. We see memory well up in Sethe at the most mundane of times (running through a field of camomile) and she must perform the “serious work of beating back the past” (86). Throughout *Beloved*, Morrison uses memory to explore the impact of past trauma. Memory is often perceived as purely psychological and emotional where actions and consequences are only processed by the mind. Additionally, the memory depicted in *Beloved* is transferable, communal; that is it is shared between people, even those who did not directly experience the event. While understanding the full range of traumas of the characters in *Beloved* is outside the scope of this essay, I will specifically address the repercussions of Sethe’s decision to save her children by attempting to kill them. Through memory, Sethe explores her past from a distinctly cerebral standpoint and she passes her memories as stories onto Denver. Denver’s ability to tell Sethe’s story as a part of her own indicates that this psychological memory acts as a kind of connective tissue between characters. In addition to the important presence of memory, Morrison also defines the idea of *rememory*— an opportunity for a physical involvement in memory. Through rememory, memory may be re-lived physically in the body, new (or old) actions may be considered and tried again. In this way, characters create a new memory in conflict with the old, traumatic one. Morrison also hints that unlike memory, rememory may be shared but it cannot be completely transferred, and thus responsibility and choice cannot be transferred. Subsequently, it falls on the rememberer to live in the rememory and enact the physical change or action. The emphasis on the physical involvement of the body, instead of the

¹ *Beloved*. Toni Morrison (2007).

pure psychological rumination of memory, indicates a break in the cycle of psychological trauma and perhaps a means of healing. Through an exploration of the differences between memory and rememory, Morrison carefully explicates an important, but often lost, connection between the past and the physical present. In doing so, she creates a space in which her characters may re-evaluate their decisions and presents an opportunity for a re-doing of memory, a second chance.

Sethe seems to understand the physical necessity of rememory and its difference from memory. She is the one to first name this physical connection between memory and the body as she explains to Denver:

Some things go. Pass on. Some things just stay. I used to think it was my rememory. You know. Some things you forget. Other things you never do. 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. What I remember is a picture floating around out there outside my head. I mean, even if I don't think it, even if I die, the picture of what I did, or knew, or saw is still out there. Right in the place where it happened. (43)

Sethe emphasizes the physicalness of rememory, as something out in the world. Using a description of a house, a physical structure, Sethe explains the process of creating a rememory as something firmly *outside her head*; thus at the same time she also implicates the lack of psychological attributes. Even when the creator of the rememory is gone, the place where it has happened and where it has been remains in the physical world, thus emphasizing the physical separateness of the rememory and the one creating the rememory. Finally, Sethe explains that rememory requires physical interaction as there exists the possibility to “bump into a rememory that belongs to somebody else” (43). The physical interaction between person and rememory

need not be that of the original creator of the memory. In this way, rememory may be shared, but as I will explore later, not quite transferable.

More than just a physical thing, Morrison injects rememory with bodily attributes, the purest form of which may be Beloved herself. While Denver's interactions with Beloved indicate that she embodies this idea of rememory, it is Sethe herself who confirms that Beloved is a rememory, and that she belongs to Sethe. In the sections in which the three women of 124 circle around the ownership and claim of Beloved, it is Beloved herself who explicitly asks the long unstated question, ““You rememory me?”” she asks of Sethe (254). And Sethe replies ““Yes I remember you”” (254). Sethe claims Beloved, not only as her daughter, but as her rememory; thus Sethe is the one who must take ownership and responsibility of remembering (re-membering) Beloved.

As Morrison posits, rememory demands a physical and bodily commitment. Sethe's claim of Beloved ensures Beloved's presence only as long as Sethe is working to remember her. When Beloved pulls out a tooth, she imagines herself flying apart without Sethe present to remember her, that is hold the pieces of her body together:

Beloved looked at the tooth and thought, This is it. Next would be her arm, her hand, a toe. Pieces of her would drop maybe one at a time, maybe all at once. Or on one of those mornings before Denver woke and after Sethe left she would fly apart. It is difficult keeping her head on her neck, her legs attached to her hips when she is by herself. (157)

As a rememory, to remember Beloved is to literally gather the physical pieces of her body together and assemble them into the image of a daughter, a sister, a person. Without Sethe, Beloved cannot be re-membered. This imagery of distinct parts dropping off the body only

further reinforces the physical and bodily requirements of rememory. The imagery also subtly identifies remembering as a physical labor that demands energy.

While Morrison has established that rememory has physical requirements, memory is often a cerebral act, occurring in the mind and transferred via a telling (not a reenacting). As a story, Sethe transfers the memory of birth to Denver, however, “[s]he never told me all of it” Denver admits (90). While she knows the story of her birth, Denver still misses the physical details that Sethe knows. Thus, while Sethe can transfer this memory as a story to Denver, she cannot transfer the physical and sensory elements of the body. It is only in the presence of Beloved, the embodiment of rememory, that Denver feels and sees her birth story as though she were Sethe. As she tells this story, one she has heard many times, Denver is “seeing it now and feeling it—through Beloved. Feeling how it must have felt to her mother. Seeing how it must have looked” (91-92). It is through Beloved that Denver receives the physical and sensory signals that her mother must have been feeling during her birth. Beloved’s presence allows the participation of the body in the recall of a memory. But while the memory of her birth was transferable via a neatly packaged story, this rememory of Denver’s birth, achieved through Beloved’s presence, cannot be transferred. While Denver’s physical senses are now involved in the story, and she understands Sethe’s perspective better than before, she cannot take over the rememory as her own. Denver and Beloved do “the best they [can] to create what really happened, how it really was, something only Sethe knew because she alone had the mind for it and the time afterward to shape it” (92). Here, we see that rememory cannot be completely and totally transferred as memory can be. The rememory takes place within the body, without the original body (Sethe), there can be no true physical recreation of the event.

Rememory, in this novel, also creates space for re-action, a redoing of a past action and an opportunity to make a new decision. The most intrusive of Sethe's memories seems to be that when schoolteacher came to reclaim her and her children. She attempts to kill all her children, succeeding only in killing her first baby girl, in order to save them from this fate. To Sethe, this decision was simple, she “[c]ollected every bit of life she had made, all the parts of her that were precious and fine and beautiful, and carried, pushed, dragged them through the veil, out, away, over there where no one could hurt them” (192). This memory, so visceral but instinctive, is given some of the same physical and bodily attributes of a rememory. Sethe is collecting her children, pieces of herself, as she thinks of them. In this memory, Sethe remembers by remembering her children as parts of herself. Through rememory, Sethe is given the chance to remake this decision. With Beloved by her side, Sethe's history repeats itself, when Mr. Bodwin comes around to check on his house:

He is coming into her yard and he is coming for her best thing. She hears wings. Little hummingbirds stick needle beaks right through her headcloth into her hair and beta 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. (309)

Here Sethe relives a moment in her life that she has spent years straining to understand. This passage echoes almost word for word the description from Sethe's memory of schoolteacher's arrival at 124 to reclaim her and her children. Sethe is placed back inside this memory and given the same choice. While remembering her decision to kill her children rather than let them be taken away as slaves, it is only Sethe's mind that has access to both the past and the present in order to attempt some self-reconciliation. However, this reenactment of that day, this rememory, allows a physical access to make a new choice and a new action. Sethe determines that rather

than let her child suffer, Mr. Bodwin, the superficial schoolteacher, the one who poses the threat, will suffer. Thus, she flies with her ice pick. Additionally, there is a glaring lack of psychological input. Sethe *acts* on instinct; if she thinks anything, it is only the word *no*, repeated into nonsense. In this passage, her intent to kill whatever is coming for “her best thing” physically becomes a part of her body: the ice pick is her hand. It is only through the full bodily immersion in her memory, produced by the presence of Beloved, that Sethe is able to reconcile with her choice. We see her make a new, although equally violent choice.

I do not believe that Morrison is condoning violence for a just cause, be it infanticide or homicide, rather she is investigating the environment in which choices are made and the circumstances which would compel a change of decision. The presence of women signals the most drastic difference in environment between Sethe’s memory and this rememory. While women are an important motif throughout the novel, here they play an important and intricate part in Sethe’s rememory. In her memory, recall that Sethe gathers up her children as the best and most beautiful parts of herself. She is left to do this rebuilding (re-membering) alone. However, in the presence of women, Sethe can gather herself. These women are the ones to provide the invitation for bodily participation in Sethe’s rememory. The voices of these women search “for the right combination, the key, the code, the sound that broke the backs of words” (308). The women search for communication beyond words, finding a primitive yet effective language, one of the body. And thus, for Sethe, “it was as though the Clearing had come to her” (308). This is the Clearing where Baby Suggs preached love of the body, where people learned that they had “[f]lesh that need[ed] to be loved” (104). Thus, the group women invoke participation of the body and armed with this language, Sethe dives into her rememory to create a new memory and decision. Finally, it is through this bodily communication that Sethe is seen

once more as “[t]he singing women [recognize] Sethe at once” (308). Recognition is to identify again, to see again. It seems that these women do not merely recognize Sethe as the woman who murdered her baby girl, but as a woman on the brink of a rememory. Their role in Sethe’s ability to gather herself as herself, and not as pieces of a memory, enable Sethe to break out of her memory and participate physically in this new rememory.

It is Sixo, who finally provides a possible compromise between both memory and rememory when he thinks about his Thirty-Mile Woman. While she does exist physically, because she lives so far apart from him, the Thirty-Mile Woman materializes in this novel mainly through Sixo’s retelling of his meetings with her, his memory of her. Sixo describes this kind of mixed physical and psychological relationship to Paul D: “[s]he is a friend of my mind. She gather me, man. The pieces I am, she gather them and give them back to me in all the right order” (321). The memory of this woman seems to help Sixo recontextualize his own memories, perhaps around those he has made of her. Memory, although about the past, exists in the context and environment of the present; the mind travels back to the past while the physical body remains in the present. Rememory, as defined by Morrison, brings the past physically to meet the present. The Thirty-Mile Woman seems to be a combination of memory and rememory as she exists both in the mind through memory and in the present physically (for Paul D, Sethe may be this connection between memory and rememory because versions of her exist within his memory but also in his present). Perhaps Morrison wants us to understand, as Sixo does, that memory and rememory function together to gather the pieces of a person, jumbled by trauma, and attempt to help that person reassemble themselves in order to move forward in the present. Both the physical body and the mind are required for such processing and for the re-membering of the self.