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DISCURSIVE STRATEGIES OF HISTORICAL TRAUMA: REMEMORY AND THE POETICS OF WITNESS IN TONI MORRISON'S BELOVED

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Abstract: Within the broader study of the discursive strategies of African American writers in American literature, this article analyses the neologism "rememory" in Toni Morrison's Beloved (1987) as a fully developed discursive structure for representing a historical trauma — chattel slavery and the Middle Passage — that resists conventional narration. Where official archives systematically excluded the interior life of the enslaved, Morrison constructs a counter-discourse in which the past is figured as materially persistent, spatially located and bodily inscribed. Integrating trauma theory (Caruth, LaCapra, Herman), cultural-memory studies (Halbwachs, Assmann, Eyerman) and the critical grammar of Hortense Spillers, the study identifies four discursive operations through which rememory functions: the externalization of memory into place; the embodiment of history as corporeal text; ghost discourse as the return of the repressed; and fragmented, non-linear temporality as the formal correlate of traumatic experience. The article concludes that rememory constitutes both a theme and a method, converting the reader from a recipient of information into a participant in a community of witness.

Keywords: Toni Morrison, Beloved, rememory, historical trauma, cultural memory, ghost discourse, slavery, narrative temporality, witness.

Introduction

Toni Morrison occupies a central place within the tradition of discursive strategies developed by African American writers, and Beloved is among the most ambitious realizations of that tradition in the literature of historical trauma. Loosely founded on the documented case of an enslaved woman who killed her own child rather than see her returned to bondage, the novel refuses both the documentary realism of conventional historical fiction and the consolations of purely symbolic representation. In their place it elaborates a distinctive conceptual instrument that Morrison names rememory. The term, voiced by the protagonist Sethe, designates a mode of relation to the past that differs fundamentally from ordinary recollection: the past is not merely recalled by a remembering subject but persists independently, lodged in places and in bodies, capable of being encountered by those who never lived it.

The analytical problem this article addresses is the gap between the historical experience of slavery and the representational resources available for rendering it. The interior lives of the enslaved were seldom recorded by those permitted to write, and the enslaved themselves were largely barred from writing; the result is what Morrison describes as a body of discredited knowledge that lies outside documented history. The central question, then, is how literary discourse can give form to experience that the archive omits. This study argues that rememory answers that question by functioning as a discursive structure — a patterned set of linguistic and narrative operations — rather than as a single metaphor, and it sets out to specify those operations precisely.

Theoretical framework

The analysis draws on three converging bodies of theory. Trauma theory provides the first. Cathy Caruth's account of trauma as an experience that is registered but not assimilated, returning belatedly through intrusive repetition, illuminates the novel's structure, in which the murdered

child returns first as a haunting presence and then in embodied form. Dominick LaCapra's distinction between acting out — the compulsive repetition of the traumatic scene — and working through — a critical engagement that secures distance without denial — frames the novel's movement from Sethe's consuming fixation toward the tentative reclamation of selfhood at its close. Judith Herman's observation that the conflict between the impulse to deny atrocity and the impulse to proclaim it constitutes the central dialectic of trauma describes the formal oscillation between disclosure and concealment that organizes the narrative.

Cultural-memory studies supply the second framework. Maurice Halbwachs's thesis that memory is socially framed, and Jan Assmann's distinction between communicative memory transmitted in everyday interaction and cultural memory institutionalized through texts and ritual, clarify how Morrison stages the transition of a private trauma into collective remembrance. Ron Eyerman's concept of cultural trauma — slavery experienced by later generations as a ground of identity rather than as direct event — explains the novel's address to readers who inherit a history they did not undergo. The third framework is Hortense Spillers's analysis of the "American grammar" through which slavery reduced the enslaved woman to flesh and denied her the social standing of mother, which is indispensable for reading the novel's treatment of maternal bonds.

Method

The study employs close discourse and narratological analysis of representative passages, attending to lexis, syntax, figuration, focalization and temporal organization. Primary attention falls on Beloved, with corroborating reference to Morrison's essayistic statements on her own practice, particularly her account of literary archaeology and of the writer's task as ripping the veil drawn over proceedings too terrible to relate. Quotation from the primary text is kept deliberately minimal and paraphrastic, in keeping with scholarly convention and copyright limits; the emphasis throughout is on the reconstruction of discursive patterns rather than on the citation of extended passages.

Analysis

Embodiment of history as corporeal text. The second operation inscribes history on the body. The scarring across Sethe's back, named by another character as a tree, converts the record of a brutal whipping into a text legible through touch rather than sight. When Paul D reads this corporeal inscription with his hands, the novel stages historical recovery as a tactile rather than archival act. The body thus becomes a site where what the document omits is preserved; rememory works by accessing the somatic registers in which trauma is stored when language fails. This embodiment also governs the representation of violation: the theft of Sethe's milk is rendered in stark, declarative syntax whose very restraint conveys the inadequacy of language to the offence and the reduction of the enslaved mother to livestock.

Ghost discourse and the return of the repressed. The third operation is the ghost. In Beloved the spectral is not an anomalous intrusion into a realist frame but a structural principle grounded in an African-derived cosmology in which the boundary between the living and the dead remains permeable. The matter-of-fact narrative tone, which presents the supernatural without rationalizing commentary, positions the reader within that worldview rather than outside it. The returned child operates on two registers at once: as Sethe's murdered daughter demanding the love she was denied, and as a representative of the Middle Passage dead, her fragmented monologue carrying images and pronouns that exceed any single consciousness. Ghost discourse thus makes visible what official history rendered invisible, while its insatiable hunger literalizes the way an unmourned past can consume the present.

Fragmented, non-linear temporality. The fourth operation is formal. The narrative moves between the novel's present and multiple moments of the past without clear chronological markers, withholding the central event and disclosing it only gradually through partial, contradictory accounts. This structure is the formal correlate of Sethe's difficulty in believing in time: where some things pass and others remain, linear succession gives way to a circulating temporality in which the traumatic scene retains its immediacy. In Beloved's monologue the collapse of punctuation and verb tense enacts the eternal present of traumatic memory, in which the speaker is always crouching, always now. Temporality, in short, is not the neutral medium of the story but itself a bearer of meaning.

Discussion

The four operations are not discrete techniques deployed in turn but mutually reinforcing dimensions of a single discursive structure. Externalized place provides the ground that the embodied subject traverses; the ghost is the figure in which externalized and embodied memory converge, the past made flesh and demanding reckoning; and non-linear temporality is the form that allows all three to coexist within one narrative present. Their combined effect is to constitute the reader as a witness. Morrison has described her aim as converting historical fact into historical act and making the reader a participant in a community of witnesses; the discourse of rememory is the mechanism of that conversion. By requiring readers to assemble meaning from fragments, to read bodies and places as texts, and to accept the ghost as real within the world of the novel, the narrative transfers the labour of remembrance onto its audience.

This reading also clarifies the novel's celebrated refrain concerning a story that is not to be passed on. The phrase is genuinely polyvalent: to pass on means at once to transmit, to decline and to die. The formulation therefore insists on the necessity of remembrance in the very act of acknowledging the story's resistance to transmission. Rememory does not promise cure or closure; it offers, instead, a way of living with a past that remains present, honouring the dead without permitting them to dominate the living. The dedication to the sixty million and more positions the entire novel as an act of collective mourning, a discursive monument erected where, as Morrison observed, no physical memorial exists.

Conclusion

Rememory is Toni Morrison's answer to the representational problem posed by a trauma that the archive omits and that conventional narrative cannot contain. As this article has shown, it operates through four coordinated discursive operations — the externalization of memory into place, the embodiment of history in the body, ghost discourse as the return of the repressed, and fragmented non-linear temporality — which together transform memory from a private faculty into a shared, material and inheritable structure. Rememory is therefore simultaneously a theme within the novel and a description of Morrison's method, the means by which she accesses and represents experiences excluded from documented history. Its significance reaches beyond Beloved: the model offers analytical resources for any literature that seeks to give form to collective trauma and to recover histories that official discourse has suppressed. Further research might test the framework against Morrison's other novels and against comparable projects of traumatic recovery in postcolonial and diasporic literatures.

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