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Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*: Ironies of a ‘Sweet Home’ Utopia in a Dystopian Slave Society

JEWELL PARKER RHODES

Toni Morrison’s novel concerns the powers of memory and "rememory" of individuals and the African-American community and their ability to heal themselves and strengthen their identity through the reconstruction of the past. Memory is a disorienting, disjointed function which Morrison captures through the complex layering and interweaving of her narrative structure. The process of memory itself becomes an *event* as states of mind provide for the incremental catharsis of the self. Rememory, on the other hand, is a revisionary process of memory, of seeing things for what they were, not for what you thought them to be at the time, of seeing things again in the light of present circumstances, and of weighing the value of past events in order to build a foundation for living in the present and the past simultaneously. Rememory is a way of finding your bearings in a historical context.

Rememory within *Beloved* is used to examine the dystopian society of slavery with its attendant brutality and dehumanization as well as to examine John Garner’s tragic attempt to build a utopian society—the Sweet Home plantation within the slave context. Sethe’s memories of Sweet Home are of its sweetness and of the relative benignness of her servitude, but through rememory, Sethe comes to realize that the moral cost of maintaining the Sweet Home lies is too much and that seen from her perspective twenty years later, Sweet Home was an enslavement just as cruel as the more raw forms of slavery. Through rememory, Sethe sees that Sweet Home robbed her of even the desire to seek freedom, to escape North, and that Sweet Home’s blatant denial of the horror of slavery, its failure to remember and recognize the difference between freedom and slavery, left her unprepared to survive in a Reconstructionist society.

Sethe, the main protagonist, who usually believes that there is nothing better than "to start the day’s serious work of beating back the past" (73)—who ordinarily "worked hard to remember as close to nothing as was safe" (6) is forced into the process of using remembered events (with all the attendant conflicting and upsetting states of mind) as building blocks for the birth of a new and more whole self. At first Sethe fights against her memories, firmly repressing her remembrance of the joys of life at Sweet Home, particularly as compared to the misery of her current life. In order to move from this repressed state, with its high price of being alienated from the African-American community, to an integrated being who is firmly “re-rooted” in
the community, Sethe’s memory has to be triggered. The house she lives in, 124 on Bluestone Road, would seem to offer the perfect trigger—the ghost of the daughter she murdered while trying to escape slavery:

124 was spiteful. Full of baby’s venom. The women in the house knew it and so did the children. For years each put up with the spite in his way, but by 1873 Sethe and her daughter Denver were its only victims . . . the sons, Howard and Buglar, had run away by the time they were thirteen years old—as soon as merely looking into a mirror shattered it (that was the signal for Buglar); as soon as two tiny hand prints appeared in the cake (that was it for Howard). (Beloved, 1)

Unfortunately, the spiteful ghost is the cause of Sethe’s desire not to remember. She chooses to tolerate the pranks of the ghost rather than try and exorcise it. This passivity distracts her from memories and Sethe is willing to accept the loss of her sons and a dysfunctional relationship with her living daughter as the psychic price. Exorcism would require an examination of painful associations and though her brain deviously sends her snippets of memory, these snippets are less frightening than confronting the nexus, the core of her pain, her dead daughter, Beloved. To trigger the cathartic reaction, something presumably more sweet, something which does not encourage the defensive reaction, something which engages the self on a myriad of psychological and emotional layers—the sexual, familial, and sense of belonging to a community is what is needed to slip through the defenses against horrifying memory. That this sweetness is deceptive is almost beside the point. Nostalgia becomes a force as the “quality of memory” carries its own truth which is distinct from the “truth” of the literal past. At the novel’s heart is the remembrance of the Sweet Home Plantation:

Nothing else would be in her mind. . . . Then something . . . suddenly there was Sweet Home, rolling, rolling, rolling out before her eyes, and although there was not a leaf on that farm that did not make her want to scream, it rolled itself out before her in shameless beauty. It never looked as terrible as it was and it made her wonder if hell was a pretty place too. Fire and brimstone all right, but hidden in lacy groves. Boys hanging from the most beautiful sycamores in the world. It shamed her—remembering the wonderful soughing trees rather than the boys. Try as she might to make it otherwise, the sycamores beat out the children every time and she could not forgive her memory for that. (6)

Sethe, despite or perhaps because of twenty years of hardship since leaving Sweet Home, still remembers it as an Edenic place. Since nostalgia can change the texture of her memories, the trigger for Sethe’s unconscious has to take place outside her mind, a shift from internal to external representation.

Paul D. as “the last of the Sweet Home men” (6), as an aspect of the sweet memory made flesh, walks up to the porch of number 124 twenty years later and triggers the memory of Sethe and her self-redemption (as well as the resurrection of Sethe’s daughter Beloved from spirit to flesh and who is the crux for the characters’ transformations). Paul D. gets Sethe to act “girlish” again, to yield her body to him, and more importantly, her mind so she can
begin the hard task of reconstructing herself and learning to love herself. Bit by bit, the Sweet Home memory unfolds:

"Y'all got boys... Young boys, old boys, picky boys, stroppin' boys. Now at Sweet Home, my niggers is men every one of em. Bought em thataway, raised em thataway. Men every one."

"Beg to differ, Garner. Ain't no nigger men."

"Not if you scared, they ain't. Garner's smile was wide. "But if you a man yourself, you'll want your niggers to be men too."

"I wouldn't have no nigger round my wife."

It was the reaction Garner loved and waited for. "Neither would I," he said. "Neither would I," and there was always a pause before the neighbor, stranger, or peddler, or brother-in-law or whoever it was got the meaning. Then a fierce argument, sometimes a fight, and Garner came home bruised and pleased, having demonstrated one more time what a real Kentuckian was: one tough enough and smart enough to make and call his own niggers men. (10-11)

James Garner, owner of the Sweet Home plantation and utopian visionary, achieves an elevated social status within his Kentucky community of farmers. This status trickles down to his five male slaves... Sixo, Halle, Paul D. Garner, Paul F. Garner, and Paul A. Garner. The three Pauls are not Garner’s biological sons, but Morrison through the repetition of names emphasizes the appearance of father-son bonding to create another irony. While a white son might enjoy inheritance from his father, Garner’s black sons are disenfranchised. The patriarchal authority is not benevolent or fatherly but manipulative and exploitative. The names dehumanize the men with their lack of significant variation other than an initial (A.; D.; F.). The surname serves as an emblem to root them in place to a home they do not own. Ironically, Sixo, without a last name, seems more connected to a lineage. Sixo, “the wild man” (11), the most rebellious and spiritual of the slaves, “dance[s]... to keep his bloodlines open” (25). Thus, the absence of Sixo’s last name also underscores the notion that there is a far greater absent heritage—namely, that connected with the raiding of villages and enslavement, the heritage of a larger African family. Likewise, Halle who has lived with his mother Baby Suggs for twenty years (an extraordinary feat for a slave) is claimed by Baby as another Suggs even though Suggs is not his father and is only in a “manner of speaking” (124), her husband. Thus, Morrison implies simultaneously (and seemingly paradoxically) the right of a woman to name herself, the importance of a matriarchal tradition and the right of a woman to name her children while also hinting at the absence of black family traditions due to slavery. Sugg’s insistence that Halle is also a Suggs is a reconstruction of memory of another sort—she chooses to remember her best lover as a husband and her best son as his son. Thus, in memory, she becomes a wife and mother of a family that never existed. It is also significant that the only two slave men not named after Garner, Halle and Sixo, were the two men who tried to establish their own families. Halle, besides being a good son, married Sethe and fathered a family, and Sixo, despite distance and penalties for slave travel, forged a relationship with his Thirty-Mile Woman and planted “his blossoming seed” (229). Certainly a heritage rooted in color,
mother-child and black family bonding is more authentic and sustaining for the slaves than the heritage symbolized by the name Garner.

Blind because he can afford to be, Master Garner claims a moral superiority in thinking that he has made his slaves men because he treats them as paid labor, allows them to mate as they choose and come and go as they choose, and potentially allows them to buy themselves free. It is this extreme hubris of Garner that allows him to disguise profit beings as men created in his own image. Within the context of slavery, Garner is still stepping on the bones of individuals to elevate his own aggressive, manly status and, ultimately, god-like status. Within the context of nineteenth century slavery, African-Americans were most often thought of as animals, as beasts of burden who needed to be beaten, whipped, and prodded into work. While Garner’s vision elevates his slaves from the bestial level, it is a modest and cruel step forward—men who are disenfranchised sons eventually learn within the context of slavery that the meaning of both words (disenfranchised and sons) degenerates into illusion.

Within the abolitionist movement there were a few more seeds for a reformist utopia. Garner, however, does not need to be an abolitionist, for in his mind, his slaves are men and this notion is illogically equated with freedom. Thus, he fails to confront the true moral choice of not making any man or woman a slave (and of not imposing limitations on them to suit his own needs). Perhaps the relatively small size of Garner’s estate increases his need for stature. He is not the Master of a “Great House Farm” as cited in Douglass’ Narrative of The Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave (65). He is a prosperous small farmer with the quixotic need to be a social reformer but without the luxury of an economic system to support his radical treatment of slaves and without the moral fiber to choose between economics and his social visions.

Perversely, Garner’s treatment of his men encourages them to accommodate the hierarchical substructure. Apparent benevolence in this slave history breeds loyalty in the best sense and passivity in the worst sense. The slave men, despite their unique freedom of movement on the plantation and off, never try to escape. Deborah Gray White in her text, Ar’n’t I A Woman?, makes the compelling case that men, freed from childbearing and child care, had the best hope of succeeding as fugitive slaves (70). With the Kentucky border so close to Ohio, one cannot help but wonder why the lure of freedom would not have been more compelling. Collectively, the Sweet Home men are guilty of failing to make another moral choice involving the assertion of their own self-identity as independent and free men.

With the words “Sweet Home men . . . other farmers shook their head in warning at the phrase” (10), Morrison conveys that being men is associated with consciousness, knowledge (perhaps even rebellion). In Douglass’ Narrative, it is remarked that “learning would spoil the best nigger in the world” (78). Self-esteem and a sense of burgeoning manhood ought then to spoil the Garner men. It does not. Rather, Garner’s vision engenders a debilitating community spirit precisely because it is based on the lineage, history and vision of a particular white man and his belief in a species called “Sweet
Home men.’’ Such an unauthentic history strips the men of their individual assertion. Twenty years later, Paul D. is still remembering and cherishing the notion that:

. . . of all the Blacks in Kentucky, only the five of them were men. Allowed, encouraged to correct Garner, even defy him. To invent ways of doing things; to see what was needed and attack it without permission. To buy a mother, choose a horse or a wife, handle guns, even learn reading if they wanted to—but they didn’t want to since nothing important to them could be put down on paper.

Was that it? Is that where the manhood lay? In the naming done by a white-man who was supposed to know? Who gave them the privilege of not working but of deciding how to? No. In their relationship with Garner was true metal: they were believed and trusted, but most of all they were listened to. (125)

Nostalgia continues to delude Paul D. The relationship between the Sweet Home men and Garner was like a true metal, unbending in the fact that Garner never offers manumission papers. Paul D. knew ‘‘they were only Sweet Home men at Sweet Home. One step off that ground and they were trespassers among the human race’’ (125). Interestingly enough, Garner is never faulted and Paul D., even in memory, fails to recognize his individual right to a better, more encompassing, free life. The fact that none of the slaves felt compelled to learn reading and writing is significant. While the implication of things that are important to them are things that can be felt or experienced, the slaves nonetheless lose the opportunity through reading and writing to reflect upon their actions and feelings. This more objective rendering of experiences and sensation might have illuminated them regarding individual rights and responsibilities. Without education (ink and paper) they ‘‘ink’’ their life with slippery sensation and collective memory. When the Sweet Home men finally do try to escape (after the death of Garner and the arrival of schoolteacher) they attempt to do so in a group which makes them more vulnerable to capture and death. The myth of Sweet Home is tragically exploded. Halle goes insane, Sixo is burned, Paul A’s fate is unknown, and Paul D. is the only other male believed to have survived.2 Sold to the torturous chain gang in Alfred, Georgia, Paul D. (much like his female-half, Sethe, after the murder of Beloved) enters a twenty year, psychological tomb world of self-doubt and alienation. One can argue that in not reflecting upon the truer enslaved subtext of their lives, the Sweet Home community added ink to the tragedies which followed them.

Garner does not claim that his nigger girls are women. Perhaps because of women’s obvious reproductive functions, Garner’s hubris does not dare extend so far. Yet within the context of slave management, Mrs. Garner is meant to serve as ‘‘great Mother’’ to the womenfolk. While Mrs. Garner might have less need for hierarchical patterns working alongside women in the intimacy of the kitchen, her scope and domain are small, since by the grace of Mr. Garner, she is only allowed one slave at a time, first Baby Suggs then Sethe. Nonetheless, Sethe makes the mistake of approaching Mrs. Garner woman-to-woman, daughter-to-mother:
When [Halle] asked her to be his wife, Sethe happily agreed and then was stuck not knowing the next step. There should be a ceremony, shouldn’t there? A preacher, some dancing, a party, a something. She and Mrs. Garner were the only women there, so she decided to ask her.

"Halle and me want to be married, Mrs. Garner."
"So I heard." She smiled. "He talked to Mr. Garner about it. Are you already expecting?"
"No, Ma'am."
"Well, you will be. You know that, don’t you?"
"Yes, ma'am."
"Halle’s nice, Sethe. He’ll be good to you."
"But I mean we want to be married."
"You just said so. And I said all right."
"Is there a wedding?"

Mrs. Garner put down her cooking spoon. Laughing a little, she touched Sethe on the head, saying, "You are one sweet child." And then no more. (26)

"Sethe made a dress on the sly" (26) stealing materials from the main house, and Mrs. Garner, like a benevolent parent, allows the small deception. But despite Mrs. Garner’s patronizing tone, despite her ruthless inquiry into Sethe’s sex life (as though Sethe were an amoral cow), and despite Mrs. Garner’s oblivious denial of a wedding, Sethe does not allow into her consciousness the full implication of what it means to be a slave. Sethe, like the Sweet Home men, has a complacency, a naivete about her true status. While reproduction chains her to slavery more than a man, thus making it more difficult for her to physically "cross over" to freedom, there are no signs that mentally Sethe yearns to "cross over" at any time during the Garner reign. There is no sense of loss that once she begins having babies every year that she missed an opportunity to escape when she was single or newly married but not yet pregnant. Believing Garner’s assertion that his "niggers is men," Sethe was lulled into believing she was functioning as a relatively free woman so that there was no pressing need for her to discover a way to fulfill herself outside the boundaries of Garner-defined slavery. Her moral choice and her assertion of self are obscured.

Ironically, Sethe’s choice of a husband deflects the entire slave community from the moral choice of choosing to be free. Collectively, lust becomes their great inhibitor:

The five Sweet Home men looked at the new girl and decided to let her be. They were young and so sick with the absence of women they had taken to calves. Yet they let the iron-eyed girl be, so she could choose in spite of the fact that each one would have beaten the others to mush to have her. It took her a year to choose—a long, tough year of thrashing on pallets eaten up with dreams of her. A year of yearning, when rape seemed the solitary gift of life. The restraint they had exercised possible only because they were Sweet Home men—the ones Mr. Garner had bragged about. . . . (10)

The restraint of the men is admirable. Are we to believe that if they had not been Sweet Home men, they would have raped her? Possibly. The connection of cause and effect relationship between their collective identity and Garner’s vision of them as men is telling. Morality, in this context, is not the
result of internally motivated choice but rather externally motivated conditions. The link to a wider audience—the white men who heard Garner’s brags, is interesting since it also makes the connection of identity being dependent upon other people’s perceptions. Why would so many black men in the natural course of slavery, care so much about upholding a white man’s reputation which arises from that same white man’s control over their souls and bodies? The men need to recognize that there is no need to justify their principled decision not to rape with the “high principles” of their master. Likewise the emphasis needs to shift from the notion that collectively they let Sethe be, to the notion that they each made an individual moral choice within their small black community. Otherwise their choice not to rape is, to a degree, bogus.

The slave men, lulled into thinking they are men with “free will” (after all, they could have raped Sethe), lull Sethe into thinking she is a woman with “free will” (after all, she chose Halle as a mate). Thus, they collectively mistake the true meaning of their lives with ultimate tragic consequences for them all. Sethe’s choice of Halle is, to a degree, no choice. The subtext of Mrs. Garner saying “You are one sweet child” (26) is that Sethe’s body is a “cash crop machine” and if she had not expressed an interest in sexual relations, her owners could have demanded it of her. The issue of sexual/physical control of oneself is telling and all of the Sweet Home slaves during the Garner reign are deluded into thinking they have a measure of control. It is as though their own minds distract them from memories of having been bought, of having their ancestral ties broken. For instance, Sethe forgets she was merely “a timely present for Mrs. Garner who had lost Baby Suggs to her husband’s high principles” (10). Sexual tension, of course, is powerful enough to blind anyone. Sixo’s inability to meet his Thirty-Mile Woman and have sexual intimacy becomes a joke to release frustration in the same way that men release their sperm into calves. But frustration and rage against the unnatural circumstances of not having readily available mates never seems to surface from the characters’ unconscious. Thus as Garner’s hubris is involved in maintaining the fiction of a Sweet Home so, too, the slaves’ collective hubris needs to maintain this dream. Or, possibly unlike Garner, it is the slaves’ vulnerability and not hubris that haunts the fringe of their consciousness and encourages the mental reconstruction that the Garner plantation is indeed home and the experience is sweet, sweeter than it really is:

. . . Halle bought [Baby Suggs, his mother] with five years of Sundays. Maybe that was why [Sethe] choose him. A twenty-year-old man so in love with his mother he gave up five years of Sabbaths just to see her sit down for a change was a serious recommendation. (11)

Halle’s choice to buy his mother free is glorified while another choice is neglected. None of the men try to buy themselves free. Halle does not attempt to buy his wife and potentially his future children, free. Would this not follow naturally from the notion that if Garner’s slaves were truly internally-guided individuals (men), they would have tried to push the limits of Garner’s “utopian” vision more?
Instead of focusing on the Master, the slaves are focused on the sexual experiences between Halle and Sethe. Significantly, Sethe’s deflowering is shared by the entire community:

Both Halle and Sethe were under the impression that they were hidden. Scrunched down among the stalks they couldn’t see anything, including the corn tops waving over their heads and visible to everyone else . . . [Paul D.], Sixo and both of the Pauls sat under Brother pouring water from a gourd over their heads, and through eyes streaming with well water, they watched the confusion of tassels in the field below. It had been hard, hard, hard sitting there erect as dogs, watching corn stalks dance at noon. . . . The jealous admiration of the watching men melted with the feast of new corn they allowed themselves that night. Plucked from the broken stalks that Mr. Garner could not doubt was the fault of the raccoon . . . Paul D. couldn’t remember how finally they’d cooked those ears too young to eat. What he did remember was parting the hair to get to the tip, the edge of his fingernail just under, so as not to graze a single kernel. . . . As soon as one strip of husk was down, the rest obeyed and the ear yielded up to him its shy rows, exposed at last. How loose the silk. How quick the jailed-up flavor ran free. . . . No matter what all your teeth and wet fingers anticipated, there was no accounting for the way that simple joy could shake you. . . . How loose the silk. How fine and loose and free. (26-27)

While the indirect participation of the slave community in Halle’s and Sethe’s union is lovely, organic and natural to their collective state, it is also unlovely, inorganic, and unnatural to the individual need to mate and participate directly in the sweetness of sexuality and life. The slave community is good and necessary for survival, but it is a substitute rather than a healthy addition to family life. Their minds should be arrested by the irony that their enjoyment is stolen—vicariously, the men “steal” some of Halle’s and Sethe’s sweetness, just as they steal corn that they have raised and nurtured from Mr. Garner, and just as their hunger for unilateral and unconditional freedom is “stolen” from them to the degree that it is deflected by Garner’s utopian vision.

Sethe, most notably, has the wonder of having both a sense of her own nuclear family as well as a connectedness to the slave community. But it is not enough to make her free:

Sethe has the amazing luck of six whole years of marriage to . . . [Halle] who had fathered every one of her children. A blessing she was reckless enough to take for granted, lean on, as though Sweet Home really was one. As though a handful of myrtle stuck in the handle of a pressing iron propped against the door in a white woman’s kitchen could make it hers. As though mint sprig in the mouth changed the breath as well as its odor. A bigger fool never lived. (23-24)

In some ways, Sethe’s decision to bear children is criminally innocent.1 The tricks the mind can play to make the horrible bearable are indeed seductive. But I use the term criminally innocent because the history of Baby Suggs’, Sethe’s mother-in-law, served as a testament to the true nature of slavery:
... in all of Baby's life, as well as Sethe's own, men and women were moved around like checkers. Anybody Baby Suggs knew, let alone loved, who hadn't run off or been hanged, got rented out, loaned out, bought up, brought back, stored up, mortgaged, won, stolen, or seized. So Baby's eight children had six fathers. What she called the nastiness of life was the shock she received upon learning that nobody stopped playing checkers just because the pieces included her children. Halle was able to keep the longest. Twenty years. A lifetime. Given to her, no doubt, to make up for hearing that her two girls, neither of whom had their adult teeth, were sold and gone and she had not been able to wave goodbye. To make up for coupling with a straw boss for four months in exchange for keeping her third child, a boy, with her—only to find herself pregnant by the man who promised not to and did. That child she could not love and the rest she would not. 'God take what He would,' she said. And He did, and he did, and He did, and he did and then gave her Halle who gave her freedom when it didn't mean a thing. (23)

Slavery destroys Sugg's family directly and indirectly through her own psychological defense of not loving what she could not keep and nurture. Yet the lessons of Sugg's life seem to have no impact upon Sethe or anyone else. Knowledge about the slave state is not shared and this illustrates the vulnerability of a collective community when it becomes wedded to images of bliss instead of using remembrance of actual slave histories within and without the community.

In the aforementioned quote, the phrase that "men and women were moved around like checkers" was true of "Baby's life, as well as Sethe's own" is crucial. 'Sethe in the context of her own slave past, it is implied, knew about the disintegration of family. Sethe herself was purchased and separated from another family (brother, father, mother?) and slave community prior to coming to Sweet Home. Yet, foolishly, she does not remember these experiences, and Garner's Sweet Home encourages her to forget. Why does Morrison bother to establish a seemingly utopian slave state? Why is sweetness regarding slavery necessary in an essentially anti-slave text? One argument is that like Frederick Douglass, Morrison attempts to show that even a "humane" slave society can be detrimental on several counts. First, the slaves themselves are lulled into an acceptance of slavery—they have some dignity, but do not seek to exert free choice regarding their destinies (ignorance becomes bliss in the most tragic sense); and second, the society/utopia is not self-perpetuating since its existence is maintained by the vision of one white man. Consequently, one must conclude that the plantation serves as an ironical contrast for the pivotal action when Garner dies and schoolteacher is brought in to manage the slaves, not as men, but as what they are within the slave state, "niggers" (with the attendant bestial associations). In this context, slavery becomes even more cruel after one has known what it is to be treated not as a beast but as a (lesser) human being. Garner's "utopia" thus, in retrospect, is more menacing than an old-fashioned slave state:

Mrs. Garner, crying like a baby, had sold [Paul D.'s] brother to pay off the debts that surfaced the minute she was widowed. Then schoolteacher arrived to put things in order. But what he did broke three more Sweet Home men and punched the glittering iron out of Sethe's eyes, leaving two open ells that did not reflect firelight. (9)
Mrs. Garner cries like a baby in recognition of the fact that just as her husband's manly, fatherly role was an illusion so, too, her nurturing, motherly role is false. An appropriately infertile Mrs. Garner can't protect her substitute children. Ill with a tumor in her throat and herself subordinate in a sexist society, Mrs. Garner loses control of her husband's vision of social order. Selling Paul F. proves that all the slaves are products. The racial barrier is insurmountable in this American home and results in the failure of the mother-child bond to thrive within the novel. Mrs. Garner cannot protect her children, Baby Suggs, a baby herself regarding maternal feelings, cannot love (with the exception of Halle) her children, and Sethe loves her children so much she'd rather kill them than have them taken as slaves. These inadequate and perverted mother-child bondings, Morrison suggests, establish the fundamental relationships which are at the core of one's identity and memories. Just as Mrs. Garner sends off her "child," Paul F., to a regressive journey—the death of his "man-self" within a most assuredly harsher slave environment, Sethe will send Beloved (her crawling already? baby) so full of life, to another type of regressive journey, a "cross over" to literal death and no identity and unfulfilled hunger for the primordial, maternal bond.

The disruption of the maternal bond will haunt Sethe even as a freed woman during the Reconstruction era. It will haunt her because in retrospect she will reconstruct the Garner Sweet Home memory as the only time in her life when she was, relatively speaking, happy. This nostalgia, this mental lie, excludes her daughter Denver and prompts her to feel that: "Only those who knew [Halle, her father] ("knew him well") could claim his absence for themselves. Just as only those who lived in Sweet Home could remember it, whisper it and glance sideways at one another while they did" (13). Lonely, alienated, without a true sense of family in the 124 house or the surrounding black community, Denver is prompted to ask of Sethe and Paul D., the two survivors: "How come everybody run off from Sweet Home can't stop talking about it? Look like if it was so sweet you would have stayed" (13).

The irony is that the slaves would have stayed at Sweet Home if Garner's mortality hadn't caught up with him; and once the Emancipation Proclamation had been signed, one wonders whether the entropy and false pride of being Garner's men would have allowed for a subtle transition from unpaid labor as Garner's slaves to paid labor as Garner's tenant farmers. Halle and Sethe might still be tilling the soil for Garner or his descendants.

It is schoolteacher who "put(s) things in order" (9). Schoolteacher runs off Sethe, Halle, Sixo and the Pauls with his more accurate standard of what is meant by slavery. Schoolteacher teaches the hidden subtext of Garner's limited and hypocritical social vision. Schoolteacher finally forces the deluded slave community to protest through escape—an escape made all the more desperate for Sethe with three children sent ahead and another in her womb.
... Paul F. Mrs. Garner sold him, trying to keep things up. Already she lived two years off his price. But it ran out, I guess, so she wrote schoolteacher to come take over. Four Sweet Home men and she [Mrs. Garner] still believed she needed her brother-in-law and two boys 'cause people said she shouldn't be alone out there with nothing but Negroes. So he came. ... He beat Paul A. Not hard and not long, but it was the first time anyone had, because Mr. Garner disallowed it. (197)

Sethe overhears schoolteacher instructing his nephews:

"No, no. That's not the way. I told you to put her human characteristics on the left; her animal characteristics on the right. And don't forget to line them up."

I commenced to walk backward, didn't even look behind me to where I was headed. ... My head itched like the devil. Like somebody was sticking fine needles in my scalp. (193)

Sethe's walking backward symbolizes the retreat from Garner's original vision, the regression of the slaves downwards within the societal hierarchy of Sweet Home, and foreshadows the regression Sethe and her children will make regarding identity and selfhood during the climactic moment in the woodshed when Sethe attempts and accomplishes infanticide.

The Sweet Home men and Sethe learn about the crippling, autocratic nature of a slavemaster's power. It is Halle, who when forbidden to hire himself out to pay off the $123.70 he still owes on his mother's freedom, figures out that he and his family are nothing but products, the rich crop of slavery:

[Mr. Garner let you buy out your mother," [Sethe] said.
"Yer. He did."
"Well?"
"If he hadn't of, she would of dropped in his cooking stove."
"Still, he did it. Let you work it off."
"Uh huh."
"Wake up, Halle."
"I said, Uh huh."
"He could of said no. He didn't tell you no."
"No, he didn't tell me no. [Mother] worked here for ten years. If she worked another ten you think she wouldn't made it out? I pay him for her last years and in return he got you, me and three more coming up." (195-196)
Halle’s enlightenment about white men’s hypocrisy and power is still not quite enough to “wake” him or the others from the Sweet Home nostalgic illusion. The slaves delay planning an escape:

... we should have begun to plan. But we didn’t. I don’t know what we thought—but getting away was a money thing to us. Buy out. “Running was nowhere on our minds. All of us? Some? Where to? How to go?” (197)

Mentally, the slaves, despite schoolteacher’s lessons, still find the task of rebelling and not paying for their freedom, difficult. Garner’s manipulative vision never encouraged the slaves to question the ludicrousness of paying for their right to exist freely or the ludicrousness of paying a man who claimed ownership and moral authority over them because his skin happened to be white. The Pauls, the “sons” of Garner, the men who never knew a home other than the Sweet Home plantation, needed “the one whole night to decide” whether to escape with Halle and Sixo (221). “... They had been isolated in a wonderful lie, dismissing Halle’s and Baby Sugg’s life before Sweet Home as bad luck. Ignorant of or amused by Sixo’s dark stories. Protected and convinced they were special” (221). It is remarkable that the aura of being Garner’s “sons,” would also protect the Pauls from memories from their own direct experience in the selling of their brother, Paul F.

The ultimate violation for Sethe is the stealing of the milk from her breasts:

“... those boys [schoolteacher’s nephews] came in there and took my milk. That’s what they came in there for. Held me down and took it. I told Mrs. Garner on em. She had that lump and couldn’t speak but her eyes rolled out tears. Them boys found out I told on em. Schoolteacher made one open up my back, and when it closed it made a tree. It grows there still.”

“They used cowhide on you?”

“And they took my milk.”

“They beat you and you was pregnant?”

“And they took my milk!” (16-17)

The psycho/sexual implications of white boys feeding at the breast of a black woman resonate the mammy role that most black women were required to play in slavery and often, at times, in the prison of domestic service in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The adolescent age of the boys signals that the event too is a bridge from cruelty to sexual pleasure. Mammy as a love-object is particularly enticing because of her warm skin; and depending upon the needs of the white boys or men involved, Mammy can be recast at any time as an immoral Jezebel who deserves rape. There are also echoes of the boys viewing Sethe as an animal, as a cow with ample milk for them. But, most importantly, Morrison wants us to extend the milk metaphor to recognize that slavery, in making black women in particular (and black peoples, in general) a cash crop, denied the nurturance of black families. Halle, unbeknownst to Sethe, is up in the loft watching as the boys press themselves against the breasts which he had once touched so lovingly, and then commence to steal his own and his children’s nourishment. Black men in slavery
often witnessed the direct or indirect rape of their wives and the denial of their children. Black men were often forced into an impotent role since to struggle against white violence meant risking their own lives. So black men were forced to choose between protecting their family or self-survival. While choosing self-survival is a natural reaction, it creates guilt and a more frustrating sense of impotence since within the slave society, black men can never correct the guilt or alter the dilemma. Even within the context of Garner’s slave state, there was never truly a Sweet Home man. There was no black home to protect, no black wife that was not subject to the legal right of Garner to violate her, nor was there ever a guarantee that a Sweet Home man could provide his children with any sustenance beyond what Garner would allow. Most critically, even a Sweet Home man could not protect his children from appearing as animals to be auctioned if Garner desired or needed to raise cash. Halle, broken by these recognitions, “sit[s] by the churn . . . [with] butter all over his face” (69). Soured by slavery, malnourished as both a husband and a father, Halle loses his mind and smears his face with soured milk.

The milk/family metaphor has special significance with regards to mother-daughter bonding. The stolen milk belongs specifically to Beloved. But by the time schoolteacher has finished impressing upon Sethe all the harsh lessons of slavery, she feels compelled to destroy her baby Beloved. Sethe almost makes it, however. Unbroken by the disappearance of her husband, the stealing of her milk, she escapes, giving birth to Denver along the way:

> We was here [in freedom]. Each and every one of my babies and me too. I birthed them and I got em out and it wasn't no accident. I did that. I had help, of course, lots of that, but still it was me doing it; me saying, Go on, and Now. . . Look like I loved [my children] 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. (162)

After 28 days of freedom, schoolteacher comes to claim Sethe and her children. The contrast between the freedom experienced in Ohio and the horrible truth that the Fugitive Slave Act will support schoolteacher’s claim to take her back to enslavement in Kentucky is particularly debilitating. Just as schoolteacher is made to appear worse in the slaves’ minds after knowing the facile/facade of Garner, so the thought of becoming a slave after freedom is too much for Sethe to bear:

> Inside, two boys bled in the sawdust and dirt at the feet of [Sethe] holding a blood-soaked child to her chest with one hand and an infant by the heels in the other. She did not look at [schoolteacher]; she simply swung the baby toward the wall planks, missed and tried to connect a second time. . . . (149)

Loving her children too much to let them live in slavery, Sethe wants to put them “where they’d be safe” (164). Beloved is the only one to die. One death is enough because it graphically illustrates Sethe’s mis-love, the fault of her love being “too thick” (164). Just like slave masters, Sethe takes away the potential of her dead daughter to develop as an individual with the free will to make her own moral choices. Sethe steals control over a human life when that human life in the widest sense, does not belong to her. Beloved is
her ownself. A daughter, yes; but also her ownself. Sethe’s murdering of her
denies this. Beloved becomes the scapegoat, the blood sacrifice of her
mother and of the dystopian slave state rather than an independent being.

Appropriately, after the woodshed bloodletting, Sethe’s mind was
“homeless” (204). Infanticide is hers and slavery’s dirty secret—the viola-
tion of the ultimate taboo. Rememory allows Sethe to reclaim herself. By the
end of the novel, she chooses to make a home with Paul D. “[Paul D.’s] care
suggested a family relationship rather than a man’s laying claim” (25). In
loving Paul D., a Sweet Home man, Sethe and Paul D. can both rememory
the past in an honest and healthier way, love one another, and still nourish a
supportive family. With Paul D., Sethe can bear Beloved’s final “crossing
over” and Denver’s natural and conflicting need to be close and a separate
individual. Rememory teaches Sethe how to love neither too thickly as she
had in the past, or too thinly like Baby Suggs had during her enslavement. By
learning to love moderately, Sethe’s loving is never at the expense of herself
or at the expense of familial bonds. Sethe is awakened to the discovery that
she is her own “best thing” (273). Self-love defeats unconscious repression.

Sethe’s ultimate triumph though is that she realizes that for years she has
been making ink in the white woman’s kitchen and that for years she has
been making the ink for her own life. She says to Paul D.: “I made the ink,
Paul D. [Schoolteacher] couldn’t have done it if I hadn’t made the ink” (271).
By ink, Sethe is trying to indicate that she shares responsibility with school-
teacher and the slave state for the killing of Beloved. Sethe is no longer the
naive victim. Rememory has taught her how to handle her pain and the past
horror of slavery with honor. Through rememory, Sethe has finally achieved
not a static, nostalgic state but a vital, reflecting process of rememory and of
being more human. This rememory education is as fine as any education
Douglass might have found in his liberating books. One might argue that
rememory is the finer education, particularly within the nineteenth century,
black community’s oral tradition. Given the limited availability of black
literature, the reliance by African-Americans on rememory as text is the
healthier, more authentic recasting of the ethnic self.

The brilliance of Morrison’s Beloved lies in the way it provides twentieth
century audiences access to rememory through a written, African-American
text. It allows contemporary audiences to move along the same road that
Sethe does. Through rememory, individually and collectively, society can
become connected again to its cultural memories and history. The rememory
of Sweet Home and its desperate attempt to deny the inherent evil of slavery
and the realities of the culture surrounding it, should be kept alive as part of
our collective memories.

For the African-American community, Morrison suggests through
Sethe’s ultimate triumph, that happiness results from the rememory and
acceptance of both the pleasures and pains of our slave history, acceptance of
one’s self within the context of that history and consequently, an acceptance
and revival of a communal spirit among those who have shared similar histo-
ries and experiences. Utopia is not a place or a moment in time, rather utopia is
a process of reliving memories, recalling pleasures and pains, and succeeding
in loving the self and maintaining this sense of self while joining and loving others. As for Paul D. and Sethe, a kind of utopia lies within our own individual and collective minds and remembrances. The irony of Sweet Home is that it is ultimately not an irony. Sweet Home, like slavery in general, becomes compatible with the notion of utopia as a process. Sweet Home is a reference point, a significant focal point for a time. It is a memory to be remembered, rendering knowledge and experience to shape a sweeter tomorrow.

But Morrison does not present remembrance as a balm for the tragedies of the past. Even though Sethe and Paul D. triumph, Beloved, the tragic ghost child, continues her haunting, though she no longer torments Sethe. “Disremembered and unaccounted for, she cannot be lost because no one is looking for her” (274). Sethe’s remembrance of Sweet Home and of Beloved does not undo the tragedy of Beloved and her loss. The utopian process of remembrance cannot help Beloved. It does not diminish the horror of the past. It just makes it possible for the living to go on, to move forward, to survive. As Paul D. says at the end of the novel, “Sethe . . . , me and you, we got more yesterday than anybody. We need some kind of tomorrow” (273).

NOTES

1. Suggs is attempting to bind her child to her through the emotional and familial ties that she recognizes. Also, by keeping the name Suggs, Baby leaves open the possibility that the ‘‘husband’ she claimed’ might find her. It is also interesting to note that during the exchange on page 142, Garner, the white surrogate father, reveals his ignorance of his slave daughter’s true name and married status.

2. At this point in the novel, Paul F. had already been sold. While the slaves directly experienced the loss of Paul F., it seems to have had little impact in terms of alerting them to protest and escape.

3. As my colleague, Dennis Rohatyn, has pointed out, one may consider Sethe’s decision to bear children as the desire of the human spirit to defy horror. For scientific rationalists, one might consider Sethe’s decision as an expression of a biological imperative or as the practical result of coupling with Halle without benefit of contraception. Yet, I believe that Sethe, bought at fourteen, was old enough to realize the reproductive costs of slavery. Her home prior to Sweet Home is alluded to as a more typical plantation. If this is so, then Sethe had ample experience to see women ordered to “lie down” for breeding purposes and to see the resulting children worked as slaves and/or sold from their mother. Female slave narratives also suggest that women as young as fourteen would have been exposed to women’s discussions regarding pregnancy, mothering and birth control.

4. Terry Otten, in The Crime of Innocence in the Fiction of Toni Morrison, argues on page 87 that “After Mr. Garner’s untimely death, [the slaves] come to ‘know’ the true conditions of slavery, educated by schoolteacher and his nephews. In this initial fall they might be considered simply victims, like Adam and Eve in Romantic versions of the fall, unwitting prisoners of their own innocence. Once they move toward freedom north of the Ohio River (and east of the spurious Eden), they assume responsibility for their own ‘criminal’ acts and become ‘victims’ of their own flawed humanity as much as of the viciousness of whites.’” I disagree with this. If one argues that the slaves were ignorant simply because of Garner’s Edenic vision, then the characters are rendered patronizingly simplistic and childlike. My argument that Sethe, in particular, and the other slaves, in general, are to a degree “cruelly innocent” suggests more of a willful ignorance—as in self delusion, possibly a mechanism for
psychological self-survival. I believe Otten underestimates the education that Sethe, Suggs and her son, Halle received regarding the true nature of slavery prior to their being sold to the Sweet Home plantation. Within the Sweet Home community, this prior education would have more than likely have been shared; and, if it had not, then one can argue that Sethe, Halle, and Baby Suggs actively, willfully repressed the true meaning of slavery, and that Garner’s “utopia” helped facilitate this repression. A slightly different proof would center on the fact that Halle and Sixo both roamed far beyond the Sweet Home plantation (Sixo as a rebellious wanderer and Halle as a laborer) and they, too, ought to have been able to provide a wider education to the slave community regarding the true nature of slavery (even the 'pleasant' kind) versus freedom. Only the Pauls, who seemingly never had any direct experience with life beyond the Sweet Home plantation, might be considered as innocent as Otten prefers.

5. While Suggs represses maternal feelings for seven out of her eight children, she is nonetheless the most effective mother-figure within the novel. Once freed, Suggs is able to give full expression to her maternal feelings and she does so through her support of the wider, black community. Suggs becomes a spiritual mother who offers a black utopia via the Clearing. The distinction is quite clear—slavery distorts maternal feeling because it distorts the responses of the individual; freedom, by reasserting “free will” within the individual, helps to reassert feelings once unfelt. The nurturing legacy of Suggs is repaid when the black women of the community exorcise the ghost of Beloved from 124. The black women “mother” Sethe when she most needs it and when she has most forgotten how to mother herself.

6. One may argue that Garner in allowing Sethe the luxury of her own nuclear family with children fathered by the same parent, strips her of maternal defenses (e.g., Baby Suggs' thin love) against slavery’s distortion of the family, and breeds the conditions for Sethe’s loving becoming “too thick” (164) and destructive towards her children. So, Garner’s utopia results in death and sorrow haunting his present generation of slaves and the subsequent generation of soon-to-be “free” children—Howard, Buglar, Denver, and Beloved.

7. Schoolteacher is presented with a small s instead of a capital S to designate the name of a character. The small s makes schoolteacher a kind of everyman indicating that the lessons he taught were being taught by every slaveholder, including his brother, Garner. The small s also minimizes schoolteacher’s authority and suggests that the education he taught (with all its scientific justifications for slavery) was not worth teaching and lacked moral and ethical value. The text of Beloved itself is a form of proper schooling. Morrison instructs us in feeling and a moral/ethical condemnation of slavery.

REFERENCES