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A Love Supreme: Jazzthetic Strategies in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*

Black Americans were sustained and healed and nurtured by the translation of their experience into art, above all in the music. That was functional. . . . My parallel is always the music, because all of the strategies of the art are there. . . . The power of the word is not music, but in terms of aesthetics, the music is the mirror that gives me the necessary clarity. —Toni Morrison (qtd. in Gilroy 181)

Music is everywhere and all around in Toni Morrison's novel *Beloved*.¹ In fact, it is so full of music that it seems odd that despite a flood of critical attention, Morrison's intricate tale of the fugitive slave Sethe who killed one of her children to prevent her from being carried back into slavery has seldom been discussed with regard to its musical scope.² The novel's most intense "musical" moment certainly occurs towards the end of the tale, when 30 community women succeed in driving out the mysterious and haunting child-woman *Beloved* from Sethe's home at Bluestone Road 124:

In the beginning there were no words. In the beginning there was the sound, and they all knew what that sound sounded like. . . . [T]he voices of women searched for the right combination, the key, the code, the sound that broke the back of words. Building voice upon voice upon voice until they found it, and when they did it was a wave of sound wide enough to sound deep water and knock the pods off chestnut trees. It broke over Sethe and she trembled like the baptized in its wash. (259-61)³

This passage points to the significance of music, not only in the context of *Beloved*, but also with regard to the predicament of the black diaspora at large. The assertion "In the beginning there were no words. In the beginning there was the sound, and they all knew what that sound sounded like," in an ironic subversion of John 1.1, declares the continuity of musical expression in the African American world. The passage refers less to metaphysical implications than to historical conditions, simply putting forth that the—English—word is much younger than the sound patterns of music that originated in African culture. As forms of expression handed down by generations and firmly rooted in the black community, these sounds offer an expressive potential that enables individuals to appropriate the English language and transform it according to their needs: It is the "sound that [breaks] the back of words," and it is in the sound specifically that the self-assured use of language giving voice to formerly unspeakable occurrences becomes possible. And there is a redemptive potential: Sethe and Denver are eventually redeemed of *Beloved*—who embodies a part of Sethe's unresolved and repressive past—by the sheer force of sound relying on the

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polyphony of a collective layering of "voice upon voice upon voice."

For Morrison, African American writing fundamentally relies on the sounds and rhythms of black music—as a source of narrative content, but particularly also as an aesthetic "mirror." She notes:

If my work is faithfully to reflect the aesthetic tradition of Afro-American culture, it must make conscious use of the characteristics of its art forms and translate them into print: antiphony, the group nature of art, its functionality, its improvisational nature, its relationship to audience performance, the critical voice which upholds tradition and communal values and which also provides occasion for an individual to transcend and/or defy group restrictions. (1984, 388-89)

Morrison's narrative approach can be called a "jazzthetic" one. With regard to *Beloved* in particular, her musical scope has received little critical attention. While Morrison's subsequent novel *Jazz* has been acknowledged and praised for its use of musical technique, *Beloved* has rarely been read under similar premises. This critical inattention is surprising since *Beloved*—in which Morrison avoids all kinds of immediate references to written material—bears rather clearly marked references to musical material and styles.⁴ Here I briefly discuss references to the configuration of the main characters Sethe and her daughter Denver. First and foremost, however, *Beloved* takes up jazz in its form, in its "aural" style, and in its performative orientation.⁵ Thus, I offer an extensive reading of parts of the novel in the context of John Coltrane's famous 1965 suite *A Love Supreme*. Finally, I examine the ideological implications and motivations of Morrison's adoption of jazz. To begin, however, I clear some theoretical ground on which rests the slightly uneasy relationship between literature and music.

Words into Music—Music into Words

The intimate relationship between African American music and writing has become a commonplace in critical debates. In his essay "Late Coltrane: A Re-Membering of Orpheus," Kimberly W. Benston, for instance, speaks of a shared "notion that black language leads *toward* music, that it passes into music when it attains the maximal pitch of its being" (416). But what exactly happens when language attempts to "pass" into music? How can we conceive of the intermedial dialogue between letters and sound that is so readily posited? Answers to these questions have remained vague in literary criticism, in part because the relationship between verbal language and the musical idiom is, after all, not an easy one. Traditional musicologists, for instance, often strictly deny that words can pass into music at all; they argue that the semiotics of language and of music simply work on premises altogether different from one another. Theodor W. Adorno warns in "Music, Language and Composition": "Music is similar to language. Expressions like musical idiom or musical accent are not metaphors. But music is not language. Its similarity to language points at its innermost nature, but also to something vague. The person who takes music literally as language will be led astray by it. . . . [W]hat is said cannot be abstracted from the music; it does not form a system of signs" (85). Words, Adorno implies, bear reference to things in the world, while music is largely self-referential. If music does not denote anything in particular, it should follow, then, that a translation of literature into music or vice versa is necessarily bound to fail.

More recent approaches in musicology, however, doubt the mutual exclusivity of musical and verbal meanings. First, the notion that music is something "absolute" is firmly grounded in a selective discourse on

art music. Adorno's statement is to be seen as a product of a—particularly German—ideological tradition dating back to the nineteenth century, when critics and writers such as Eduard Hanslick, E. T. A. Hoffmann, or Arthur Schopenhauer originally tried to strengthen instrumental music against the (Italian) operatic tradition.⁶ As such, the still widely shared, and especially widely taught, conception of music as a self-sustaining structure is a very narrow one that focuses on a limited number of composers of western art music; it operates by an elitist and, at the end of the day, Eurocentric, dismissal of popular, folkloristic, or non-western musical traditions.⁷

Moreover, musicologists who insist that music is purely self-referential focus on structural aspects only, thereby neglecting the pragmatic dimension of musical meaning. Recent approaches in musical semiotics and culture (Tarasti, Cook, Frith) emphasise that music cannot be fully understood by looking at an abstract structural entity, but that we have to pay particular attention to the numerous contexts in which music is performed and heard. Like language, musical meaning unfolds not only because it *is*, but also because it *does* things in particular situations. This distinction particularly obtains in performances of black music that fundamentally rely on the antiphonic dynamics between the crowd and musicians, on the expressive release of musical improvisation, and on the signifyin' on other songs and traditions. Adorno's spurious dismissal of jazz, for instance, is partly rooted in an utter incomprehension of such pragmatic aspects in African American art. Yet also beyond specific musical performances, music must not only be understood as a mere aesthetic artifact, but as cultural capital that is appropriated or rejected by individuals and groups for diverse reasons (see Frith).⁸ As such, it plays an important part in individual or collective processes of identity formation, and it interacts closely with categories of gender, class,

and, last but not least, ethnicity.⁹

In addition, advocates of "absolute" music disregard the fact that even though music may not have stable or fixed signifieds, we may only comprehend or make sense of music by associating sound with personal experiences, which, at the end of the day, are communicated verbally. Such associations are not entirely arbitrary, as musical meaning relies on specific cultural codes and generic conventions shared by particular interpretive communities.¹⁰ More importantly, musical meaning undergoes processes of intersubjective negotiation, both in the context of immediate experience in a communal performative context, and with regard to processes of distinction and the accumulation of cultural capital. As a result, certain musical styles do indeed denote certain semantic fields. With regard to black music and jazz in particular, Paul Gilroy, for instance, argues that "this music and its broken rhythm of life . . . are a place in which the black vernacular has been able to preserve and cultivate both the distinctive rapport with the presence of death which derives from slavery and a related ontological state that I want to call the condition of pain" (203). Literature may take up such semantic fields—like the death deriving from slavery—by adopting certain musical styles in its verbal framework. As I illustrate below, what Morrison takes up in *Beloved* is precisely what Gilroy refers to as the "condition of pain" that is inherent in African American music, and its particular structural, performative, and expressive conventions to both preserve and transcend it. While Morrison's novel may never fully "pass into" music semiotically, it nevertheless indeed "lead[s] toward music." Morrison *musicalizes* her fiction: she charts the origins and traditions of jazz in her particular choice of characters. On a structural level, she carefully incorporates aspects of the formal arrangement of jazz, and pragmatically, she makes use of the performative and expressive scope of black music. By help of such "jazzthetic"

strategies, Morrison succeeds in adopting the cultural capital and communal functionality that she associates with a certain type of black music, and makes it work for her prose.

Configuration and the Transcultural Foundation of Jazz in *Beloved*

Morrison associates most of the major characters surrounding Sethe and Denver in *Beloved* with oral or musical styles. Four of them, however, stand out: Baby Suggs, Sethe's mother-in-law; Paul D, Sethe's lover; Amy Denver, the "whitegirl" who helps Sethe during her flight from Sweet Home; and finally Beloved, the mysterious figure who may or may not be a reincarnation of Sethe's two-year-old daughter whose throat she cut with a handsaw.

The character Beloved is obviously steeped in African and African American traditions of oral storytelling. To count these traditions among the "musical" sources of blues and jazz seems justified if one takes into account that the oral tales have always been firmly rooted in the context of communal events of antiphonic performances.¹¹ Moreover, the transitions from verbal to musical expression are to be seen as fluid because "communicative, performative, creative, expressive, idiomatic and rhythmic characteristics establish [a] continuity within black oral culture" (Putschögl 27, my trans.). In the highly "musicalized" black oral tradition, the "spirit child" who returns after its death to haunt its parents is a core element. It features prominently in West African, particularly Yoruba, mythologies; but also in the African American oral tradition a ghost might occasionally appear among the living, as Trudier Harris points out.

It is difficult to tell whether Morrison had any particular models in mind when crafting *Beloved*, but one possible source she might allude to is a

tale recorded from the Gullah people about "Daid Aaron" (cf. Harris 156), who returns to his wife after his death. It is only when one of his wife's new suitors fiddles a fast tune and Aaron starts to dance and eventually fall apart, that peace is restored. Similarly, Beloved visions her own falling apart—"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" (133)—corresponds with the resonating description of Aaron's disintegration: "De fiddleh play mo' loud. An' crickety-crack, down an' back, de dead man go hop-pin', an' de dry bone a-droppin', dis-away, dataway, dem pieces keep pop-pin'" ("Daid Aaron" 177).

Baby Suggs, Sethe's mother in law, in turn, clearly evokes the Afro-Christian tradition of sermonising and singing. Her "call" in the Clearing adheres to the typical features of antiphonic sermonizing. These features include, for instance, the use of a "B[lack] E[nglish] rhythmic structure and sounding," a gradual intensification of the expressive effect achieved by a "rhythmical phrasing suggestive of a metrical pattern," and the use of sounding devices that eventually give way to a chanted performance (Putschögl 77, my trans.), all of which are palpable in the aural quality of Baby's sermon: "[I]n this here place, we flesh; flesh that weeps, laughs; flesh that dances on bare feet in grass. Love it. Yonder they do not love your flesh. They despise it. They don't love your eyes; they'd just as soon pick em out. No more do they love the skin on your back. Yonder they flay it. And O my people they do not love your hands" (88). At the end of her call, in a sudden turn to music and dance typical of the sermonising tradition, Baby Suggs "stood up then and danced with her twisted hip the rest of what her heart had to say while the others opened their mouths and gave her the music" (89). In this way, Afro-Christian styles such as the spiritual and gospel are also associated with the character—vocal forms that are partly based on

the harmonic material of western hymns, yet have come to be typically “black” forms of expression through their adaptation to the specific patterns of interaction and intonation typical of the African American vocal arts.

If Baby Suggs thus represents an Afro-Christian musical tradition, Paul D clearly embodies the secular tradition of the blues. Paul D, a “singing man,” is a blues character, steeped in southern or country blues. Not only do his experiences of slavery in the Deep South, of the chain gang, and of his restless wandering take recourse to typical blues topoi, *Beloved*, moreover, directly quotes from the blues repertoire in Paul D’s tunes. The lines “Lay my head on the railroad line, / Train come along, pacify my mind” (40), for instance, reproduce one of the most common motifs in the blues and were immortalized in Bertha “Chippie” Hill’s rendering of Richard M. Jones’s standard “Trouble in Mind” with Louis Armstrong on trumpet in 1926 (Okeh 8273, reissued Folkways FP 59).¹² The motif perfectly embodies the now painfully serious, now self-ironical performance typical of the blues-mood. A few lines later, after all, Chippie Hill sings: “But when I hear the whistle, Lord, / I’m gonna pull it back.” As Ralph Ellison so aptly describes in “Richard Wright’s Blues”: “The blues is an impulse to keep the painful details and episodes of a brutal experience alive in one’s aching consciousness, to finger its jagged grain, and to transcend it, not by the consolation of philosophy but by squeezing from it a near-tragic, near-comic lyricism” (78). It is indeed only in his blues that Paul D is able to express his traumatic past. When Sethe asks for his story, he replies, “I don’t know. I never have talked about it. Not to a soul. Sang it sometimes, but I never told a soul” (71).

Ultimately, though, musical expression is not a black privilege in *Beloved*. The “whitegirl” Amy Denver, who massages and encourages Sethe on her flight, and aids her in childbirth, establishes the cross-cultural invoca-

tion and generation of the blues. Amy accompanies her “repair work” (80) with a song, humming three stanzas that are quoted in the narrative framework. Cited in full, they assert:

When the busy day is done
And my weary little one
Rocketh gently to and fro;
When the night winds softly blow,
And the crickets in the glen
Chirp and Chirp and Chirp again;
Where ‘pon the haunted green
Fairies dance around their queen,
Then from yonder misty skies
Cometh Lady Button Eyes. (81)

It has been largely neglected in the critical reception of *Beloved* that Amy’s tune is not Morrison’s own, but literally quotes the first, second, and fourth stanzas of a poem by the white St. Louis poet Eugene Field titled “Lady Button Eyes” (Field 61-63). The sheer otherness of Fields’s poem when compared to Baby Suggs’s sermon or Paul D’s blues is immediately obvious. The use of a stylized Standard English collides with the Black Vernacular English of the blues and the hollers, the strictly trochaic tetrameters clash with the polyrhythmic off-beat phrasings of the work songs and sermon chants, the regular 10-line stanzas with a rigid rhyme-scheme contradict the continuous play with formal conventions in spirituals and folk blues.

Morrison does not employ Field’s poem to point to the oppositional nature of African- and European-based music, however, as the tune is clearly seen as a positive in the cautious intercultural encounter of Amy and Sethe. Jazz, Morrison seems to acknowledge here, is not—even though some critics would like to believe so—an autochthonously black form of art. While jazz resists any clear-cut definition, it seems safe to say that it first came into being in the contact zones of the Americas, and developed from certain 18th- and 19th-century forerunners. These precursors certainly are the communal drumming and storytelling sessions in the slave quarters (evoked by *Beloved*), the Afro-Christian traditions of sermonizing and singing (Baby Suggs), and the

manifestations of work songs, field hollers, and other blues (Paul D). These traditions, however, were always negotiated with elements of the European musical tradition, its harmonic structure, its instruments, and of course, with the English language.¹³ With Amy Denver, Morrison symbolically acknowledges the western legacy as a legitimate predecessor of modern black art. What is at stake is not so much an opposition of western and African styles, but the integrative power of the black musical culture, which, from its beginnings, adjusted western forms to its own needs.

As a result, one can argue that with the characters Beloved, Baby Suggs, Paul D, and Amy Denver, Morrison indeed symbolically accounts for the essential influences that went into the transcultural making of modern jazz. On these grounds, moreover, they serve as markers of a larger, discursive musicalization in *Beloved* and the employment of “jazzthetic” narrative techniques.

Jazzthetic Technique in *Beloved* and John Coltrane's *A Love Supreme*

More than one narrative sequence in *Beloved* merits close analysis regarding intermedial dialogues with traditions of black music. In a pioneering study, Alan Rice, for instance, looks closely into the rendering of Paul D's chain gang experience and its importance in establishing an ethical and ultimately liberating notion of call-and-response:

With a sledge hammer in his hands and Hi Man's lead, the men got through. They sang it out and beat it up, garbling the words so they could not be understood; tricking the words so their syllables yielded up other meanings. They sang the women they

knew; the children they had been; the animals they had tamed themselves and had seen others tame. They sang of bosses and masters and misses; of mules and dogs and the shamelessness of life. (Morrison 108)

Rice focuses on Morrison's “riffing prose style” in this sequence, and elaborates on how the men in the chain gang use the expressive potential of the musical tradition while making sure as well to “use music as a tool of communication to encode mes-

sages between themselves that White men would not be able to decipher” (Rice 164). “The jazz aesthetic,” Rice concludes, “is a mode most appropriate for the telling of stories from deep in the past, which Morrison is only just now (at the very moment she does it) telling out loud” (177).

In another sequence, Paul D leaves Sethe, Denver, and Beloved following Sethe's revelation that she killed her child. Immediately after this scene (in a moment often referred to as the “poetic” sequence), Morrison deploys an obviously “jazzthetic” arrangement of the thoughts of the three women left at Bluestone Road 124: their voices assume expressive thrust and performative quality. I want to demonstrate as much by reading the novel alongside a representative piece of jazz music.

For this purpose, it is helpful to focus on John Coltrane's famous 1964 studio recording of the four-part suite *A Love Supreme*, performed by Coltrane's so-called “classic quartet” with Elvin Jones on drums, McCoy Tyner on piano, and Jimmy Garrison on bass. The choice of this recording is not altogether arbitrary, since it can be argued that Coltrane's classic quartet and Morrison share an awareness of musical and cultural traditions and of community-related performance.¹⁴ *A Love Supreme*, moreover, particularly lends itself to an intermedial reading against *Beloved* since it already negoti-

ates words and music. Thus, in the last part of the suite, "Psalm," Coltrane "reads" on the saxophone a spiritual poem titled "A Love Supreme" (later reproduced on the album cover). Coltrane self-consciously translates verbal language and its emotional substance into instrumental music; as he states in the cover notes: "The fourth and last part is a musical narration of the theme, 'A LOVE SUPREME,' which is written in the context" (see Porter 245-48). But there is also the reverse movement from sound to language. In the first part of the suite, "Acknowledgement," Coltrane spontaneously and verbally takes up the famous four-note blues riff that Garrison has introduced on bass: after his own modulating exploration on sax, he chants the basic theme 19 times using the words "a love supreme," the importance of which was later emphasised by overdubbing the vocal track with several layers of sound. Nevertheless, the choice of Coltrane as a backdrop to reading *Beloved* is not to posit that Morrison must have had this very piece in mind. The suite is to be seen, rather, as representative of a larger, generic reference to African American musical styles.

As an aesthetic foil against which to read *Beloved*, the third and fourth parts of *A Love Supreme* are particularly helpful. Part three, "Pursuance," sets in with a 90-second solo exposition by Jones, which eventually gives way to Coltrane's sounding of the theme to the piece: a stark and simple blues riff in a minor key. Invariably on the basis of Jones's polyrhythmic foundation, the theme is first explored in an exhaustive improvisational flight by Tyner on piano and is then taken up by Coltrane on saxophone, who ends his improvisation by rephrasing the theme twice. From under a drum roll by Jones, a third exploration, this time by Garrison on solo bass, emerges and hesitatingly leads on. Garrison's lyrical contemplation eventually blends in with the polyphonic and polyrhythmic fourth part of the suite, "Psalm," characterised by

a largely free play of dialogic calls and responses between the musicians relating to Coltrane's "reading" of the title poem.¹⁵

The parallels between the suite's musical form and the formal arrangement of the sequence from *Beloved* are obvious. In Morrison's text, we also encounter a fundamental riff or theme that is varied, rephrased, and explored exhaustively in solo-excursions of Sethe, Denver, and Beloved. The core of the theme, here, consists of the phrase "Beloved. She is mine." This decree is first introduced in Sethe's voice: "Beloved, she my daughter. She mine" (200). What follows is a rhapsodic, associative explanation of this statement. The essence of the basic riff, in this context, resurfaces in certain variations—"Beloved. Because you are mine and I have to show you these things" (201)—and in true jazz fashion, Sethe closes her solo flight by returning to a phrasing of the riff in "She came back to me, my daughter, and she is mine" (204).

The next voice to set in is Denver's. She varies the line: "Beloved is my sister" (205), and takes her turn in an extensive improvisational exploration of this motif. The flight of Denver's thoughts also considers the varied theme in new contexts, revolves around them, and finally restates the fundamental riff. Thus, she ends: "She's mine, Beloved. She's mine" (209).

Finally, the third voice at Bluestone Road 124, Beloved's, also comes in. She similarly sets out with a variation of the theme: "I am Beloved and she is mine" (210). Her consequent, tormented reminiscences unfold a dragging rhythm and phrasing. She increasingly throws in lyrical phrases such as "a hot thing" (like Garrison's solo, which intersperses modifications of the four-note "a love supreme" riff established in the first part of the suite). In a subsequent section, then, the fragmentary style is abandoned, and Beloved closes by restating: "I will not lose her again. She is mine" (214).

At this stage, the narrative moves on to a passage that eventually unites all three voices and their characteristics in a polyphonic, collective chorus. The narrative text here faces its own medial boundaries. As Wolf points out,

music does not only consist of one sequence of sound, but often of several simultaneous sequences, while a work of (narrative) literature is made of one linear sequence of words only. Notably in its polyphonic form . . . music may, on the level of the signifiers, convey several layers of completely different information simultaneously and throughout a whole composition. A similar kind of "pluridimensionality" or "spatialization" can never be fully attained in verbal art. (20)

Still, a polyphonic effect may indeed be "suggested," as it were, by narrative means. Morrison does so by initially establishing a call-and-response pattern involving the by now familiar voices and phrases of the three women. First, a duet between Sethe and Beloved:

You are back. You are back.
Will we smile at me?
Can't you see I'm smiling?
I love your face. (215)

This duet, in turn, gives way to another call-and-response dialogue between Denver and Beloved:

I watch the house; I watch the yard.
She left me.
Daddy is coming for us.
A hot thing. (216)

In what follows, then, the phrases and phrasings start to blend into each other, and in place of the measured call and response, a collective, intuitive interaction of the voices sets in. The individual voices start to sound together in anaphoric convergences, and eventually seem to blend entirely in the collective incantation of the basic riff:

Beloved
You are my sister
You are my daughter
You are my face; you are me
I have found you again; you have
 come back to me
You are my Beloved
You are mine

You are mine
You are mine. (216)

The interaction of the characters here—very similar to that of the musicians around Coltrane in "Psalm"—is largely free, yet at the same time strikingly lyrical and emotionally coherent. Even though Sethe, Denver, and Beloved seem to be lost in their very personal thoughts, their voices still come together and resonate as a poetic whole (see Fig. 1).

Within the collective chorus of *Beloved*, the individual voices retain their distinctive qualities. While Denver's voice comes largely in Standard English and conveys a youthful clarity reminiscent of Tyner's handling of the piano, Sethe's voice, in contrast, seems closer to both the hoarse timbre of Coltrane's horn and the warmth of Garrison's bass. There are constant allusions to a spoken Creole, as the frequent omission of verbs and a tendency towards the simple present tense show: "Beloved, she my daughter. She mine. See. She come back to me of her own free will and I don't have to explain a thing. I didn't have the time to explain before because it had to be done quick. Quick. She had to be safe and I put her where she would be. But my love was tough and she back now" (200). The words almost step out from the page. Their aural musicality results from a rhythmical accentuation of certain sounds, as in the word "she," which is first sounded in the opening riff and rhythmically structures the following statement. Longer, floating phrases vary with sudden, exclamational stops, as in "Quick": the overall impression is of an effortless, resonating vocal presence.¹⁶ Not only in its formal arrangement, but also in its improvisational, aural presence, therefore, we are dealing with a jazz-text *par excellence*. But how does the musical quality of Morrison's text function in the larger ideological framework of the novel?

<i>A Love Supreme, Parts III-IV</i>	<i>Beloved, 200-17</i>
<p>Theme: "Resolution"</p> <p>a) First solo exploration (McCoy Tyner)</p> <p>b) Second solo exploration (John Coltrane)</p> <p>c) Third solo exploration (Jimmy Garrison)</p> <p>d) "Psalm": free play, call and response, collective improvisation</p>	<p>Theme: "Beloved. She is mine"</p> <p>a) First solo (Sethe): "Beloved, she my daughter. She mine. See. . . She come back to me, my daughter, and she mine" (200-04)</p> <p>b) Second solo (Denver): "Beloved is my sister. I swallowed. . . She's mine, Beloved. She's mine" (205-09)</p> <p>c) Third solo (Beloved): "I am Beloved and she is mine. I see her . . . a hot thing. . . She is mine" (210-14)</p> <p>d) Call and response (Sethe and Beloved) Call and response (Denver and Beloved) Polyphony (Sethe, Beloved, Denver) (214-17)</p>

Fig. 1. John Coltrane, *A Love Supreme* and Toni Morrison, *Beloved*. Formal arrangement.

Music and Trauma: The Functionality of Jazz in *Beloved*

In *The Black Atlantic*, Gilroy investigates what he refers to as the "ethics of antiphony" in black music. He draws particular attention to the communicative design of jazz, rooted in the call-and-response patterns derived from the African musical rhetoric. Beyond the improvisational interaction of groups of musicians, Gilroy argues, black music is also receptive to the input of its audience; it works towards communal identity in a process that is fundamentally rooted in the "experience of performance with which to focus the pivotal ethical relationship between performer and crowd, participant and community" (200, 203).¹⁷ Such a performative thrust is particularly palpable in *Beloved* in its call-and-response structures and aural use of language. More specifically, it is further underlined by explicit addressings to an—implied, as it were—audience, such as in the exclamation "See" in Sethe's solo exploration: "Beloved, she my daughter. She mine. See" (204).

This overt address is crucial since the "ethics of antiphony" are of major importance to the remembrance of personal or collective traumata, of what Gilroy calls the "condition of pain" inherent in black music. Jazz and blues bear an essential expressive potential of traumatic experience, even if, at first sight, they seem to be preoccupied with love and survival rather than death. This expressive potential develops first of all because music was always present in Caribbean or African American history, while the access to literacy and writing was often extremely difficult and paved with problems of censorship. Musical modes of expression were generally seen as less dangerous or subversive by the planters and officials (*cf.* Walvin 157-75). But it is particularly due to the very nature of antiphonic performances that the expression of trauma succeeds: The backdrop of egalitarian communal support serves as a "safety net" to the individual soloist, who can probe into the abysses of painful personal experience while being sure that the community will eventually force him or her to rejoin the collective chorus. In Sethe's solo excursion, for instance, it is only in the reassuring presence of an audi-

ence—of the other characters, but, by extension, also of the sympathetic reading public—that the descent into the traumatic memory of murdering her child is possible. When at the end of the novel, Paul D “wants to put his story next to hers [Sethe’s]” (273), Morrison illustrates the dialogic nature of a jazzthetic narrative scope, in which each solo call demands a response.

The encounter with personal trauma is even more dominant in *Beloved*’s solo flight. Phrases such as the repeated interjection “a hot thing,” which no longer seems to denote anything in particular, but remains pure, emotion-laden sound, emphasize the musical thrust of Morrison’s prose. In the struggle for ultimate possibilities of expression, her language indeed “leads toward music,” as Benston would have it, as it “strives to escape from the linear, logically determined bonds of denotative speech into what the poet imagines as the spontaneities and freedoms of musical form” (416). The last seconds of Coltrane’s solo in “Pursuance,” during which he desperately attempts to reach beyond the limitations of his horn’s registers, or else the solo passages in “Acknowledgement” and “Resolution” that are curiously suspended between painful dissonance and ecstatic brilliance, again, provide jazz-aesthetic examples that shed some light on *Beloved*.¹⁸ The expression of an “excess of love” in Sethe’s excursions, as well as the expression of tormenting pain and trauma in *Beloved*’s solo—like Coltrane’s explorations in *A Love Supreme*—expand the frontiers of emo-

tional expressiveness. It is only thus that “unspeakable thoughts” are not “unspoken” (199) in the sense of remaining silent. On the contrary, in a second implication of “unspoken,” they are “spoken loose,” they are phrased and sounded in a liberating, sublime gesture.

The placement of *Beloved* in the realm of African American music is Morrison’s key to overcoming the speechlessness of trauma and to engaging in a constructive dialogue with painful chapters of the past. The broken beats of the blues, spirituals, and jazz that the novel takes up are so firmly rooted in the African diaspora that they establish a secure foundation for the exploration of suffering and pain. In the expressive tradition of African American music, in the security of its off-beat phrasings, history becomes concrete without being destructive, and its stories can be told. James Baldwin puts it as follows: “Music is our witness and our ally. The beat is the confession which recognizes, changes and conquers time. Then, history becomes a garment we can wear and share, and not a cloak in which to hide, and time becomes a friend” (330). It is in the tension between the individual voice and a collective chorus that the “condition of pain” involved in the Black Atlantic experience can be fully expressed; it is in a culture of antiphony, *Beloved* teaches us, that memory is not self-destructive, and that trauma can be overcome whole.

Notes

1. All references to *Beloved* are to the 1997 Vintage edition.

2. Sethe’s memories of her childhood on the “Sweet Home” plantation are framed in song and dance (30-31, 62), there are her husband Halle’s tunes (224), and her African friend Sixo sings defiantly at his execution (225-26); her daughter Denver sings at school (120), her lover Paul D sings the blues (39-41, 71, 108-09, 263), Sethe sings for her children, *Beloved* to herself (88-89), Baby Suggs with the community (88-89), and so on. The neglect of the novel’s emphasis on music might change as more scholars and critics engage with Morrison’s libretto *Margaret Garner*, based on the same news story as *Beloved*.

3. No other issue has been as vigorously argued in the critical reception of the novel as the “true” nature of the mysterious character *Beloved*. Three major lines of interpretation can be distinguished. First, *Beloved* is held to be Sethe’s murdered daughter who returns from “another place” to the world of the living (see Edwards and Barnett). A second way of reading *Beloved* is triggered by the fact that her memories of “another place” bear unmistakable references to an actual slave ship. *Beloved*, in

this reading, cannot be Sethe's daughter; single opinions go as far as to claim that *Beloved* embodies Sethe's African mother (see Holden-Kirwan). A third version finally argues against metaphysical implications, claiming that *Beloved* is simply a young woman who has been hidden away and sexually exploited by a sadistic white farmer. As Stamp Paid recounts: "Was a girl locked up in the house with a whiteman over by Deer Creek. Found him dead last summer and the girl gone. Maybe that's her" (235). All versions are given authority in the text, and thus can mutually coexist.

4. Morrison's text foregrounds its intertextuality: *Beloved* is based on documents about the Margaret Garner fugitive slave case, and as such, it has been read in relation to antebellum slave narratives, early African American fiction, but particularly also to western modernists. As a matter of fact, however, Morrison carefully avoids marking pretexts in *Beloved*, even if they appear to be plausible sources of inspiration. Moreover, her attitude regarding the latter group is particularly defensive: "I am not *like* James Joyce, I am not *like* Thomas Hardy, I am not *like* Faulkner. I am not *like* in that sense," she claims. "I know that my effort is to be *like* something that has probably only been fully expressed perhaps in music" (McKay 152).

5. Morrison characterises her art as "aural literature—A-U-R-A-L—work because I do hear it" (Davis 230).

6. Schopenhauer, for instance, writes in *The World as Will and Idea*: "But it must never be forgotten in the investigations of these analogies [including the expression of human sentiment in the *minor* and *major* keys] that music has no direct, but merely an indirect relation to them, for it never expresses the phenomenon, but only the inner nature, the in-itself of all phenomena, the will itself. It does not therefore express this or that particular and definite joy, this or that sorrow, or pain, or horror, or delight, or merriment, or peace of mind; but joy, sorrow, pain, horror, delight, merriment, peace of mind *themselves*, to a certain extent in the abstract, their essential nature, without accessories, and therefore without their motives" (338). For an excellent study of the emancipation of music from language, see Neubauer.

7. See Born and Hesmondhalgh.

8. The term "cultural capital" is Bourdieu's, and draws on his theories of social distinction; see Bourdieu.

9. It should be noted that this hypothesis is still to be validated empirically. Within the context of a small British town, at least, an empirical study by Ruth Finnegan revealed that correlations between musical taste and categories of class, gender, and race are less significant than previously assumed. See also Born and Hesmondhalgh.

10. As Wolf illustrates by analyzing classical Baroque music: "Music may develop, and in fact did develop in historical times, a codified system of emotional 'expressions' " (32).

11. Baker refers to a "continuum of Afro-American verbal and musical expressive behaviour that begins with everyday speech and popular music and extends to works of 'high arts' " (80).

12. The theme can be found in some of the earliest documents of African American music, for instance, in Leroy "Lasses" White's *Nigger Blues* (1913): "I'm gonna lay my head / Down on some railroad line / Let the Santa Fe / Try to pacify my mind."

13. In his seminal study of *Early Jazz*, Schuller shows how African American music initially developed very much in a Creole fashion. The rhythmic complexity of African drumming, for instance, had been dramatically reduced, while accordingly, the European diatonic scales and Western harmonics were reduced to accommodate better the largely pentatonic structure of African melody; see Schuller 6-26, 38-54.

14. While Morrison propagates a decidedly "black" aesthetic that self-assuredly positions itself in the traditions of oral storytelling, the blues, and spirituals, and at the same time transforms the older models in new configurations and contexts, this occurrence initially has little to do with early forms of jazz and swing. The movement that has come to be known as "swing" was massively influenced by the financial necessity to adapt to the tastes of largely white audiences who exclusively enjoyed dance tunes. It was only with the arrival of bebop in the 1940s that a rediscovery of the complex polyrhythmic phrasings of the African tradition and an emphasis on the blues idiom fundamentally strengthened the expressive potential of African American music. However, bebop musicians relished for quite some time in an exclusive, avant-gardist aura that distanced them from large parts of the black community. This distance was no longer in place 20 years later with the development of "free jazz," which benefited from all of the artistic novelties of bebop, but also fundamentally engaged with the community and was strongly influenced by political issues. Many of the characteristics of Morrison's narrative art—namely, the explicit articulation from and for the black community, a conscious engagement with older traditions of black expression, and a simultaneous thrust towards aesthetic innovation—are likely to be encountered in "free jazz."

15. " 'Psalm,' " Kahn writes, "in fact reveals little structure at all: no metric consistency, no time sig-

nature to speak of—completely, purely rubato. And purely emotional” (122).

16. With regard to the second part of the *Beloved*-trilogy, *Jazz*, Morrison stresses the importance of uniting compositional eloquence and inventive ease in her writing, “to blend which is contrived and artificial with improvisation. I thought of myself as like the jazz musician: someone who practices and practices and practices in order to be able to invent and to make his art look effortless and graceful” (Schappell 111).

17. In a similar vein, Ellison writes in “The Charlie Christian Story” that “true jazz is an art of individual assertion within and against the group. Each true jazz moment (as distinct from uninspired commercial performance) springs from a contest in which each artist challenges all the rest; each solo flight, or improvisation, represents (like the successive canvases of a painter) a definition of his identity: as individual, as member of the collectivity and as a chain in the link of tradition” (234).

18. Another piece that invites comparisons here—not least due to the similar titles—is Coltrane’s “Dearly Beloved,” the second track on his album *Sun Ship*, also recorded in 1965 among the “classic quartet.” It features among his most spiritual and most intense recordings, and expresses an emotional range from ecstatic exuberance to utterly tormented wailing.

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