Beyond the "Literary Habit": Oral Tradition and Jazz in *Beloved*

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The number and variety of responses to Toni Morrison's 1987 novel *Beloved* are ample testimony to Morrison's ability to move her readers, to involve them and make them (as she claims) "part of the creative process" (Bonetti). In re-visioning slave history through the story of Sethe, a woman who is haunted both by her past as a slave and by the violence she is driven to as a result of that past, Morrison has created her most complex and (with perhaps the exception of *Tar Baby*) most controversial work to date. The controversy stems in part from the power of the subject matter and the frankness with which Morrison addresses it, in part from the mystery surrounding the title character—an example of the deliberate ambiguity that has delighted and frustrated Morrison's readers throughout her career. Perhaps even more powerful than the story Morrison tells, however (and more potentially disturbing, for some readers), is the way she tells it, the innovative choices she makes that have driven many critics to find a new generic or structural model for their interpretations.

In a 1983 interview with Kay Bonetti, Morrison talks about her struggle to write a new kind of novel:

I wanted...the books...to have an effortlessness and an artlessness, and a non-book quality, so that they would have a sound.... And the closest I came, I think, to finding it was in some books written by Africans, novels that were loose...the kind that people could call unstructured because they were circular, and because they sounded like somebody was telling you a story. Yet you knew it was nothing simple, as simple as that—it was intricate.... I wanted the sound to be something I felt was spoken and more oral and less print.

In responding to the charges of ambiguity levelled against her work, Morrison aligns her fictional craft with that of the musician:

I don't want them [the novels] to be unsatisfying, and some people do find it wholly unsatisfying, but I think that's the habit, the literary habit, of having certain kinds of endings. Although we don't expect a poem to
end that way, you know, or even music doesn’t end that way, certain kinds of music. There’s always something tasty in your mouth when you hear blues, there’s always something left over with jazz, because it’s on edge, and you’re never satisfied, you’re always a little hungry. (Bonetti)

Morrison’s equation of her art with both music and storytelling suggests that, as critics, we must come to her work with a new set of assumptions, based not on what Morrison calls the traditional “pyramid” form (with rising action, climax, denouement, etc.) but on forms arising from the oral tradition, in which song and story intertwine and are often inseparable.

Anthony J. Berret, in a far-ranging discussion of the earlier novels *The Bluest Eye*, *Song of Solomon*, and *Tar Baby*, asserts Morrison’s dependence on “music as a model for her writing” (268), and suggests that jazz in particular is central to Morrison’s work. Other critics and reviewers note the “lyrical” quality of Morrison’s prose as well, and if we are to find a way to deal with those elements of Morrison’s fiction viewed by some readers as critical problems (her ambiguity, her loose, even “fragmented” narrative structure, her endless repetition of themes, images, whole stories), it seems obvious that music is an appropriate, if not the most appropriate, critical tool. While Judith Thurman’s “operatic” perspective is a useful one, jazz is an even more revealing lens through which to view *Beloved*, in combination with the precepts of the oral tradition of performance from which jazz derives (see Stearns, among others).

One element of Morrison’s narrative style that may prove problematic for readers of *Beloved* is the way in which, while maintaining an omniscient point of view, Morrison shifts the narrative perspective from the consciousness of one character to that of another. Close examination of these passages reveals not confusion, however, but the intricacy Morrison has spoken of wanting to achieve. The shifts are carefully orchestrated so that when the perspective changes, the new consciousness we are aware of is picking up a thread of the melody established by the formerly dominant consciousness. A process of interchange that is very musical in form, the theme-and-variation sort of movement so central to the art of jazz, takes place (the technique also exhibits the parataxis often noted by oral tradition scholars). One necessarily lengthy excerpt from the second chapter of Part One provides a stunning illustration of Morrison’s technique. Sethe and Paul D are in bed after their first sexual encounter, both awake, both disappointed:

Nothing could be as good as the sex with her Paul D had been imagining off and on for twenty-five years. His foolishness made him smile and
think fondly of himself as he turned over on his side, facing her. Sethe’s eyes were closed, her hair a mess. Looked at this way, minus the polished eyes, her face was not so attractive. So it must have been her eyes that kept him both guarded and stirred up.... Maybe if she would keep them closed like that...But no, there was her mouth. Nice. Halle never knew what he had.

Although her eyes were closed, Sethe knew his gaze was on her face, and a paper picture of just how bad she must look raised itself up before her mind’s eye. Still, there was no mockery coming from his gaze. Soft. [...] Not since Halle had a man looked at her that way: not loving or passionate, but interested, as though he were examining an ear of corn for quality. [...] 

Sethe made a dress on the sly and Halle hung his hitching rope from a nail on the wall of her cabin. And there on top of a mattress on top of the dirt floor of the cabin they coupled for the third time, the first two having been in the tiny cornfield Mr. Garner kept because it was a crop animals could use as well as humans. 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.

Sethe smiled at her and Halle’s stupidity. Even the crows knew and came to look. Uncrossing her ankles, she managed not to laugh aloud.

The jump, thought Paul D, from a calf to a girl wasn’t all that mighty. Not the leap Halle believed it would be. And taking her in the corn rather than her quarters, a yard away from the cabins of the others who had lost out, was a gesture of tenderness. Halle wanted privacy for her and got public display. Who could miss a ripple in a cornfield on a quiet cloudless day? (25-27)

The complex pattern that is established in this chapter includes not only the unconscious mental interplay between the two characters, but also a physical exchange—the stretching and stirring and turning of both characters, trying to disguise their wakefulness from one another. Sethe and Paul D share that combination of self-absorption and awareness of others that is a trademark of jazz musicians. They take thematic and imagistic cues from one another, seemingly unaware of the content of each other’s thoughts but increasingly aware of their direction. They repeat motifs—eyes, faces, corn—on different instruments. Paul D’s style is rueful, sometimes raunchy, Sethe’s gentler, but still self-amused. It is in passages like this one that it becomes obvious how Morrison’s text invites—and generously repays—examination within a musical context.

Another stumbling block for readers used to traditional novelistic form is the repetition of scenes and stories that recurs throughout the novel, repetition on a much larger scale than that of the shared motifs in the passage quoted earlier. The stories of Denver’s birth and of
Sethe’s degradation at the hands of the schoolteacher and his nephews when they take her milk are among those repeated several times, from different perspectives and in varying length and detail, throughout *Beloved*. The jazz vantage point can be usefully applied here again (especially in terms of the theme-and-variation movement between voices, or instruments), but perhaps even more applicable is an awareness on the reader’s part of the other non-written tradition Morrison consciously draws upon—the storytelling tradition that, like jazz, springs from native African culture.

Morrison’s awareness of this tradition is effectively established in novels like *Tar Baby* and *Song of Solomon*, both of which are structured around ideas based on folktales from the black oral tradition. *Tar Baby*, of course, stems from the story of Brer Rabbit and the tar baby he encounters, a story we recall from Joel Chandler Harris’s collection of “Uncle Remus” tales, but one whose existence in oral circulation significantly predates Harris’s racist framing device (and which probably originates in an African trickster tale). *Song of Solomon* has its roots in traditional African tales of the Salt-Eaters, in which black people, gifted with the ability to fly—even after having been taken as slaves to America—lose that ability after adopting the practice of eating salt (Bonetti).

Though obviously slave tales made up a significant percentage of the stories in oral circulation in black slave culture (and Sethe’s story is taken from one of many documented accounts, a newspaper story of a woman who killed her children, then drowned herself, to avoid being taken back into slavery), what is significant in *Beloved* is not the symbolic reproduction of a particular oral account, but Morrison’s awareness of the way tales circulate in an oral culture. Stories in oral cultures serve many of the same purposes as the repeated stories in *Beloved*: the transmission of historical data, the preservation of cultural values and ideas, the education and entertainment of children (and adults). The knowledge transmitted is not static, however, though essential details may be retained. It is enriched and modified with every telling, and by each different storyteller. Tales are told over and over again, as often as they are called for by the listeners, or as often as the (actual or ceremonial) need for their telling occurs. The story of Denver’s birth serves different purposes for Sethe and Denver and Beloved, and is related by different tellers (Sethe and Denver) in ways designed to benefit both hearer and teller. Denver, for instance, derives great personal satisfaction not only from savoring the exciting details of her entry into the world, but from feeding (almost literally) those details to the Sethe-hungry Beloved as well, in a process that—for a while, anyway—nourishes them both. The story of Sethe’s trial at the hands of the schoolteacher’s nephews is more often and more
variously repeated, and is a harder one for readers to hear over and over again—readers like Stanley Crouch may simply accuse Morrison of “losing control” (42). For Sethe and for Morrison, however, the story is significant of that which must not be forgotten about slavery, and Morrison’s coining of the word “rememory” only underlines both the function and the repeated nature of the story.

Repetition in Beloved also occurs on another level throughout the novel, a level also at work both in jazz and in storytelling (which really differ more significantly in media than in anything else). A sophisticated system of repeated motifs is at work in Beloved, some motifs functioning merely as ornaments—grace notes, if you will—while others carry thematic content. A motif, in the study of folklore and the oral tradition, is the smallest recognizable repeatable element of a story, and Beloved contains many such elements. Shoes, colors, hearts, trees—all occur again and again in various forms and with fascinating frequency. Paul D’s tobacco-tin heart maintains, as a motif, basically the same form throughout the novel (though the container/organ itself is shown at different degrees of “open-ness”), while the tree motif occurs in many different forms, all intricately linked to slavery or the lives of particular slaves: the “tree” of whip-scars on Sethe’s back, hanging trees, the tree at Sweet Home that Paul D calls Brother, and the trail of trees he follows (at the advice of the Indians) to reach the North. The repetition of the shoe motif is of course linked to Baby Suggs’s training as a cobbler—and Baby Suggs, even dead, is a powerful force throughout the novel—but more importantly, it may also be meant to draw our attention to shoes as status symbols denied to most slaves. The skill of repairing shoes, taught to Baby Suggs as a slave, is then used by her as an ex-slave to gain a measure of status (part of which is supplied by her “holy” role) which eventually excites a jealousy that leads to tacit betrayal. As a result of this betrayal, Baby Suggs loses faith and dies, we are led to believe, from a lack of color and weariness of heart. The tiny shock of recognition we receive with each recurrent motif is akin to the pleasure we derive from identifying familiar phrases in a complex jazz performance.

The portions of Beloved that are most recognizably innovative in form (and most puzzling for critics) occur toward the end of the novel, as the second, third, fourth, and fifth chapters of Part Two. By the end of the last of these sections, the arrangement of the words on the pages looks a lot like poetry, and at least one critic (House) suggests that we should read this final section like poetry, line for line. Not surprisingly, the resemblance to poetry established, these portions are those that most resemble, structurally, a musical composition, and in particular a jazz ensemble piece.
One of the mainstays of jazz performance is the jam session, during which several musicians come together to participate in a unique musical experience. The session is often marked by a series of solo performances by different musicians, almost always improvised, created out of the musician’s stock of knowledge about the possibilities inherent in a particular range of notes for every standard key, and featuring a number of recognizable “riffs.” The soloists draw on the performances that precede theirs, and usually incorporate certain elements from those performances into their own, varying them and surpassing them in a productive kind of one-upmanship that is designed to highlight the particular capabilities of each different instrument. The session usually culminates in an ensemble performance, the musicians meshing their solo efforts in what can be, to the uninitiated, a complex cacophony of sound.

The latter chapters of Part Two exemplify in Morrison’s medium what jazz artists achieve in music. The opening lines of each section are convincing enough evidence that each speaker is pursuing her particular variation on the same theme: “Beloved, she my daughter. She mine” (200); “Beloved is my sister. I swallowed her blood right along with my mother’s milk” (205); “I am Beloved and she is mine” (211, 214). Each voice continues in a vein which exploits the needs of the individual (instrument) and with a style that is highly individualized. Sethe’s variation on the Beloved theme is one of explanation and expiation, a gathering together of the concerns that have compelled her throughout the novel. Denver’s variation is the preservation of her self and her rediscovered sister, a process that reveals (again) her fear of Sethe and her idealized notion of her father. Beloved’s variations deal with loss and identification, and the rediscovery of a mother figure—the gaps in her language closing (as visually the words on the page draw closer together) as her resolve strengthens and her awareness increases.

When the voices are integrated after Beloved’s second solo performance, the same variations are revisited, this time in call-and-response fashion. Sethe and Beloved begin: “Tell me the truth. Didn’t you come from the other side? / Yes. I was on the other side. / You came back because of me? / Yes” (215). Denver and Beloved are then paired: “She said you wouldn’t hurt me. / She hurt me. / I will protect you. / I want her face. / Don’t love her too much. / I am loving her too much” (216). The three voices are then brought together in an urgent polyphony: “Beloved / You are my sister / You are my daughter / You are my face; you are me...I have your milk / I have your smile / I will take care of you...You are mine / You are mine / You are mine” (216-17). One can almost hear the punchy, chorded emphasis on the word mine—undoubtedly one of the most frequently repeated words in the novel.
Paul Whiteman has written that jazz is “not the thing said, but the manner of saying it” (Qtd. in Sargeant 27), and while in *Beloved* “the thing said” is essential to Morrison’s project, “the manner of saying it” is certainly no less important. Morrison’s indebtedness to oral/musical tradition is reflected in a variety of ways in her work, and her insistence upon the reader as “part of the creative process” is one more link to that tradition and its manifestation in jazz. While Morrison’s authoritative position for this particular text is undisputed, the implication is there that the *Beloved* experience differs for every audience, and with each successive performance. Just as a jazz audience may influence the performance by its response, so are our readings of *Beloved* shaped by what we bring to it. When we come to the text entrenched in our “literary habit,” *Beloved* may overwhelm us, appall us, even frighten us. When we come with an understanding of oral/musical traditions, the novel’s capacity for frenetic movement, for harmony and discord, purity and excess, engages us in a (re)memorable performance.

**Works Cited**


