

When Sound Meets Letter

The Fusion of Forms in Toni Morrison's Fiction

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Les romans de Toni Morrison présentent une écriture poétique qui se situe à la limite du roman écrit et du conte récité ou chanté de la tradition orale. La qualité musicale de l'écriture est rendue structurellement évidente par l'intégration de schémas antiphoniques, l'implication du lecteur dans la création de l'histoire et une utilisation particulière du point de vue qui produit l'effet d'une composition musicale, avec ses différents solistes et sa superposition de sens, le tout se fondant en un ensemble harmonieux. Les éléments structurels du jazz et de toute musique afro-américaine sont ainsi présents dans chacun des six romans de Morrison.

Morrison est captivée par le pouvoir des mots, et ses livres doivent être lus à voix haute – le son des mots leur donne un sens qui va bien au-delà de ce que traduit leur représentation écrite. Seule l'écoute du livre peut permettre d'en comprendre toute la portée. Morrison transcrit ainsi les sons et les rythmes des musiques afro-américaines et joue constamment sur leur pouvoir évocatif et mimétique. Elle crée, à travers les mots et, à plus grande échelle, à travers la structure du roman, une forme nouvelle, au carrefour de deux traditions – l'une, américaine, écrite et l'autre, africaine, orale.

*"I am the name of the sound
and the sound of the name
I am the sign of the letter
and the designation of the division.
'Thunder, Perfect Mind'*

The Nag Hammadi"

Epigraph to Jazz

At the turn of the century appeared a new musical form, stemming from many different forms of Black vocal and instrumental arts, such as the Blues, spirituals or ragtime: jazz. Its freedom and modernity, its challenge of conventions and of previous musical traditions were striking. Jazz was a product of the compilation of rural and urban elements, the materialization of the change of conditions of African Americans at that period. At the heart of jazz is an appeal to the senses, a deep sensuality—and this is what Morrison tries to recreate in her novels. Just as jazzmen at the beginning of the century, she experiences with form, challenges conventions, mediates old forms into a new one.

Morrison's novels are marked by the presence of music, of jazz patterns, which betray her attempt to combine the two art forms, music and story-telling, or, at least, to recapture a long-lost form belonging to oral tradition. Story-telling and music were indissociably linked in oral tradition; stories were passed on orally through songs, epic poems, ballads or tales sung or chanted. Morrison tries to recreate in her books the lost orality of African culture, through a rhythmic and musical language, but also through structure, and the redefinition of the relationship between teller and listener, between writer and reader. She makes the two art forms fuse in a variety of ways, first through structures, with the use of constructions such as call-and-response and polyphony, then with the peculiar rhythms and sounds of her speech, and finally with her special use of typography, which achieves the fusion between sight and sound, between oral and written forms and cultures. Morrison thus redefines the relationship between the readers and the text, now based on feelings and involvement into the creative act, into the making of the story, and also establishes an alternative way to "make sense," another approach to reality and to history, while placing herself at the crossroads between two cultures, two histories, two people.

The musical quality of Morrison's writing is first present in her applying the forms of jazz to the novel. Jazz heavily draws on former musical traditions, such as those of the blues and spirituals. Those forms were characterized by the involvement of the listeners, through call-and-response patterns. Morrison transcribed these patterns into her books, and particularly in *Song of Solomon*, where the community constantly plays the role of a chorus, commenting on individual actions, singing the song of Solomon as a chorus line punctuating the whole book¹.

1. For a more detailed study of call-and-response patterns, see Maggie Sale, "Call and Response as Critical Method: Afro-American Oral Tradition and *Beloved*," *African American Review* 26 n° 1 (1992), and K. O'Shaughnessy, "Life Life Life Life: the Community as Chorus in *Song of Solomon*," *Critical Essays on Toni Morrison* (1988).

Morrison's use of antiphony is two-fold, through a thematic use of counterpoint that mirrors and comments upon its structural use. Singing in Pilate's house is always antiphonic, Pilate "taking the lead," with "Reba's sweet soprano in counterpoint." *Beloved* also is based on dialogue, and the structure of the book is encapsulated in Morrison's description of the relationship between Denver and Beloved:

Denver was seeing it now and feeling it—through Beloved. Feeling how it must have felt to her mother. Seeing how it must have looked. And the more fine points she made, the more details she provided, the more Beloved liked it. So she anticipated the questions by giving blood to the scraps her mother and grandmother had told her—and a heartbeat. The monologue became, in fact, a duet as they lay down, Denver nursing Beloved's interest like a lover whose pleasure was to overfeed the loved. (96)

This metatextual reflection shows precisely what Morrison is doing with her readers, her play on their emotional response to the story, her improvisation on the story of Margaret Garner, her "giving blood to the scraps" of newspaper that related the event, all this to involve the reader more closely and make her "monologue" become a "duet."

The interplay between voices goes beyond counterpoint and the alternation of two voices, individual and communal, and the narratives become polyphonic, multi-layered, told from every perspective, repeated from every point of view. The novels are not a whole made coherent by the unity of point of view but rather a collage of various tales, unified by a network of repetitions, of events, of motifs all used and told by the different narrators. The use of so many narrators infuses the texts with a multi-vocal quality close to the composition of a jazz piece, as H.L. Gates underlines:

*As the music critic Martin William describes this effect, "Ellington was so attuned to the sounds of his men that the very originality of textures and the daring of his harmonic language were determined not in the abstract but in his inquisitiveness about, let us say, how his reed player's low A-flat might sound when juxtaposed with the brassman's cup-muted G." And no matter how long his musicians performed their improvisations, no matter how bold or inventive or virtuosic their flight's harmony might be, they always performed within the certain logic of their composer's frame—they always, in other words, were performing with quotation marks round their improvisations and solos. It is the same effect that Morrison has achieved in *Jazz*, a luminously literary rendering of an art of composition that Duke Ellington perfected in the summer of 1926.²*

2. Henry Louis Gates, Jr, *The Signifying Monkey* (New York and Oxford: Oxford UP, 1988) 54.

The narrator of *Jazz* effectively hands down the narration, sometimes quite abruptly, to characters, but always remains in the background, ready to take back the narration and comment on the performances of the others, or on his own performance as a story-teller, thus always reminding readers of the presence of the authorial voice and of the limits of the creative process. Joe's and Dorcas's monologues are then within quotation marks, showing that the tale is still framed and controlled by the narrator. Singing in Pilate's house in *Song of Solomon* mirrors this narrative strategy, Pilate always leading, even when other voices join in and add their particular sound to the music: "Pilate began to hum as she returned to pluck the berries. After a moment, Reba joined her, and they hummed in perfect harmony until Pilate took the lead. [...] When the two women got to the chorus, Hagar raised her head and sang too." (49) The voices of the books also "hum in perfect harmony" when they get to choruses, present through repetition and riff motifs. The balancing of perspectives is achieved through these repetitions of the story or parts of the story by several narrators, much as musical themes are repeated by different instruments or sections in an orchestra. Repetition in jazz is epitomized by the use of the riff, as Gates defines it: "The riff is a figure, musically speaking, which functions as 'something that gives any orchestra a great background.' (Jelly Roll Morton). This figure works as a short phrase repeated over the length of a chorus, more or less like an *ostinato* in classical European notation. The riff is a central component of jazz improvisation and signifyin(g) and serves as an especially appropriate metaphor for signifyin(g) and revision."³ The use of a riff is often what gives Morrison's fragmented narratives unity, first at the chapter's level, then at the novel's. In *Beloved*, many chapters are marked by the use of a riff, an *ostinato* coming back again and again: "How loose the silk, how jailed down the juice." (p.35sq); "They were not holding hands, but their shadows were." (p.58sq); "It rained./The best hand-forged iron in Georgia." (p.134sq); "Nobody saw them falling." (p.213sq); "She (is) mine." (p.246sq); "This is not a story to pass on." (p.336 sq). The repetition of these chorus lines unifies the chapters, and, at a larger level, they are repeated again, along with the recurring images of water, trinity, circle, mouth and trees, and form a network of echoes that weaves all the threads of the story together. These repetitions punctuate Morrison's narrative like bass chords in a jazz piece, giving it a peculiar rhythmic density.

Jazz foregrounded a new rhythmic density, the use of new rhythms and sounds (such as the frequent use of *glissandos*, or "squealing" notes). Morrison also tries to reproduce these rhythms and sounds in her books,

3. *Ibid.* 214.

so her novels are made to be read aloud, talked or sung, rather than simply read with the eyes. This concern for the aural power of words is made evident in the epigraph to *Jazz*:

*I am the name of the sound
and the sound of the name
I am the sign of the letter
and the designation of the division.
"Thunder, Perfect Mind"*

The Nag Hammadi

The quotation suggests a close interdependence between the different forms of a sign, its oral and written representations. Words are sounds, and writing is more than close to talking, which leads us back to the oral tradition, societies in which words were not written down but stories were told, and the art of telling relied on sounds, rhythms and gestures as much as on the words themselves. Morrison wants to translate this orality into her prose, but not in a traditional way:

More important to me than making a statement on a kind of language, is a way to get what was felt and meant. I always hated with a passion when writers rewrote what black people said, in a kind of phonetic alphabet that was inapplicable to any other regional pronunciation. There is something different about that language, as there is about any cultural variation of English, but it's not saying "dis" and "dat," it is the way words are put together, the metaphors, the rhythm, the music—that is the part of the language that is distinctly black to me when I hear it.⁴

This attempt to reproduce the speech of black people is reminiscent of the attempt of jazz musicians to reproduce on their instruments the special effects of the voices of singers. It leads to the more and more frequent use of glissandos, "squealing" notes, harmonic sounds, stresses, crisp striking-ups, vibrato, "dirty" sonorities, blue notes, growl—all this creating a new corpus of very expressive sounds. New sounds, unusual sonorities and rhythms are what Stamp Paid hears in *Beloved* when he draws near to 124. The following chapters are full of new word orders, rhythms and sounds, they will translate what has never been spoken: "When Sethe locked the door, the women inside were free at last to be what they liked, see whatever they saw and say whatever was on their minds. Almost. Mixed in with the voices that surrounded the house, recognizable but indecipherable to Stamp Paid, were the thoughts of the women of 124, unspeakable thoughts, unspoken." (245)

4. Toni Morrison, "Unspeakable Things Unspoken: The Afro-American Presence in American Literature," *Michigan Quarterly Review* 28 n° 1 (5 April 1989) 36.

To “break the back of words” and say things beyond language, Morrison uses its evocative power. The very sound of the word expresses its meaning, and prompts feelings and sensations that reading only instead of hearing could not conjure up. When Milkman receives notice of Guitar’s being after him, the language he uses is very rhythmic, composed of short, sharp words, harsh sonorities, with many dental consonants, [t] and [d], and the repetition of words and sentences evoke the ticking of the clock that counts down Milkman’s last moments until his death: “Guitar is bidding his time. Guitar is bidding his time. Your Day has come. Your Day has come. Guitar is bidding his time. Guitar is a very good Day. Guitar is a very good Day. A very good Day, a very good Day, and bidding, bidding his time.” (*Song of Solomon* 330) The sounds here give an impression of breathlessness and oppression, going far beyond the meaning of words.

Morrison also uses rhythm to make her style sound close to jazz. In *Jazz*, the rhythm of her writing is cut-up, full of split constructions, to suggest syncopations: “Open their napkin wide as you please and not a catface anywhere. She was polite at the lunch of course. Distracted she was. About Dorcas, probably.” (72) Her frequent use of ternary rhythms or constructions is also close to the frequent use of ternary bars like six/eight or nine/eight and triplets in jazz. The chapters of the voices in *Beloved* are based on ternary constructions and repetitions, each woman talking in turn and answering one another.

The trio of the three women is highly musical, and it is its sounds and rhythms that give it its unity. It is presented as a poem or the lyrics of a song, each woman talking or singing a line of her own. (264-267) They improvise a song on the theme “You are mine” and this sentence is repeated over and over again, like a chorus or leitmotif on which they improvise all in turn. Then at the end of the chapter they all say it, and their voices merge as in the final chorus of a jazz piece. The play on repetitions infuses a musical quality to the trio, one asks a question, another answers, always repeating at least one word from the question. The song is also unified by the phonetic anaphora of [j] on every line: “Yes I was on the other side./You came back because of me?/Yes./You rememory me?/Yes. I remember you./You never forgot me?/Your face is mine.” (265) There are four chapters of the voices, the first three, monologues, or solos, by each of the women, then one chapter with two duets, and then two trios, the voices thus gradually becoming one song. *Beloved*’s solo (259-263) is the most musical one, unsurprisingly, and the one closest in theme to their common African heritage. She speaks for all the sixty million anonymous, voiceless slaves. The rhythm of her speech is given by the blanks, like crotchet rests in musical notation, but the absence of punctuation and the pauses imposed by the natural need for breath suggest the continuity of jazz sessions, an endless improvisation on a theme. Morrison constantly

plays on pairs of words, balancing them, opposing and uniting them in turn, pairs like “she” and “I,” “now” and “always,” and plays on repetitions of terms like “hot/a hot thing” or “her face is mine.” Many alliterations give an inner rhythm to the discourse, like the repetition of the sibilants [s], [ʃ] and [θ] in “Sethe’s the face that left me see her and I see the smile [...] her smiling face is a place for me.” The rhythm, stressed by the repetitions, is very entrancing, rising and falling, with many gradations, leading from very short sentences to long, emphatic ones—and suddenly, almost brutally, the language resumes a low, broken speech, betraying difficult melodies. These fluctuations of rhythm are also the mimetic evocation of the motions of the ships that took black slaves from Africa to America. The musical quality of the language precisely suggests what words cannot say, how difficult the “re-memory” is, how things stay in the back of their minds and cannot surface in any articulate form, how the attempt to express them only produces an apparently broken, nonsensical speech. Music, sounds and rhythms are what gives the speech unity and meaning, what explains the brokenness, what goes “beyond the back of words” and touches the pain, the heart of their personalities, and at the same time has a healing value because it links them back to their African heritage, and all the generations together in an effort to transcend the pain.

Morrison, just like a blues singer, is very preoccupied with the evocative power of her words, and we can sometimes feel that she herself is carried away by the sound of her words, as when she describes the song that lies in the voices of Southern girls in *The Bluest Eye*:

They come from Mobile. Aiken. From Newport News. From Marietta. From Meridian. And the sound of these places in their mouths make you think of love. When you ask them where they are from, they tilt their heads and say Mobile and you think you’ve been kissed. They say Aiken and you see a white butterfly glance off a fence with a torn wing. They say Nagadoches and you want to say “Yes, I will.” You don’t know what these towns are like, but you love what happens to the air when they open their lips and the names ease out.

Meridian. The sound of it opens the window of a room like the first four notes of a hymn. Few people can say the names of their home towns with such sly affection. (67)

Morrison often uses phrases for the particular atmosphere they evoke, for how speakerly they are. She wants them to surprise, to make the reader react and feel a certain way, and this is what she explains about the use of numerals in *Beloved*: “There is something about numerals that makes them spoken, heard, in this context, because one expects words to read in a book, not numbers to say, or hear. And the sound of the novel, sometimes cacophonous, sometimes harmonious, must be an inner sound

or a sound just beyond hearing, infusing the text with a musical emphasis that words can do sometimes even better than music can.”⁵

Often, the words that she uses bespeak so much an ambiance, or a state of mind, that they become mimetic and symbolic of a train of thoughts or a personality. The very sound of Macon’s and Pilate’s speeches symbolizes all the difference there is between them; between warm and caring Pilate, whose voice “made Milkman think of pebbles. Little round pebbles that bumped up against each other.” (*Song of Solomon*, 40), round words, short and simple, almost delicate, and Macon, whose words are just as short, but sound incisive, sharp and harsh, indicative not of simplicity but economy of feeling and concern for his family: “His hatred of his wife glittered and sparkled in every word he spoke to her.” (10) A disordered state of mind is symbolized by disordered words, repetitions forming an endless circle of pain with no way out, as Valerian’s thoughts at the discovery of his wife’s past conduct show in *Tar Baby*: “But I will need several lives, life after life after life after life, one for each wound, one for each trickle of blood, for every burn. I will need a life time of blood tears for each one of them. And then more. Lives upon lives upon lives for the the the the. Hurt.” (202)

Finally, one of the most frequent examples of the importance given to orality is the recurrent use of mimetic sounds and onomatopoeia. This concern links Morrison to blues singers who

*declaimed or hollered the words in protest or anger, moaned them soft and low in sadness and sorrow. Sometimes the words assumed their shapes as they emerged from seemingly formless murmurings, sometimes they were nailed with vocal hammer-blows half-shouted, half-sung to the beat of the music. There were times when words were dispensed with altogether: when they were supplanted by long-drawn groans and hummed phrases or by the utterance of joyous if unrecognizable syllables—scat vocals that were eloquent with abstract meaning. A singer’s words might be brutally stabbed home; then punctuated with shrill falsetto cries; then uttered softly and scarcely audibly.*⁶

Milkman’s initiatory hunt at the end of *Song of Solomon* is marked by the use of onomatopoeia to describe the sound of nature, all the things beyond language, that need another way to be told: “All those shrieks, those rapid tumbling barks, the long sustained yells, the tuba sounds, the drumbeat sounds, the low liquid *howm howm*, the reedy whistles, the thin *eeeees* of a cornet, the *unh unh unh unh* bass chords. It was all language.” (278) And *Tar Baby* concludes on an onomatopoeia, giving back to Son the living heritage of his ancestors, the music of the “hundred blind cavaliers”:

5. *Ibid.* 31.

6. Paul Oliver, *Blues Fell This Morning: Meaning in the Blues* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1988) 268.

“He ran. Lickety-split. Lickety-split. Looking neither to the left nor to the right. Lickety-split. Lickety-split. Lickety-split. Lickety-split.” (264), the novel ending on an ad-libitum coda suggesting the continuity of the tradition Son has chosen to bear.

In translating sounds into her books, Morrison places herself at the crossroads between ear and eye, between two worlds, that of the white civilization, symbolized by writing, reading and looking, by the eye—and, therefore, appearances—and the black American world of oral culture, based on sound and telling, on the ear. The interplay of two cultures is at the heart of the quest for identity present in most of Morrison’s novels, in which the individual has to mediate the oral knowledge of the black community with the knowledge necessary to live in a modern, white world.

The emphasis put on sight in *The Bluest Eye*, as opposed to sound, is destructive and alienating. Sight insists on individuality, on appearances, and generates a detached and uncaring attitude. Pecola cannot sort out her feelings, she does not have Sethe’s or Paul D’s ability to make up a tune to express her feelings, and it keeps her away from the community, as T. Harris explains:

Her adventures, like those of her father, would become coherent only in the head of a musician, or in the structural composition of a novel that resembles a blues creation. Yet the blues are a way for people to touch their pain and that of others, to sing of what, in any given instance, is but an individualistic account of collective suffering. But Pecola is unable to articulate the pain she feels or channel it through the form of the blues. Like her belief in fantasies derived from outside the black community, her state of the blues is familiar, but she has no model for it to serve as a way of connecting her to the community rather than cutting her off from it.⁷

But vision is not always destructive, especially when it is closely related with hearing. In Morrison’s novels, one has to see, even to watch the text in order to hear it: the typography is indissociably linked to the text’s musicality—Morrison’s writing is also the writing down of a musical form.

One of the first indications about music and sound that we get when opening a novel is given by its typography. The way in which words appear on the page, spaces, presentation pages—all of this suggests something that goes beyond reading. When we open *Sula*, the front page seems to represent a stave, SULA is written within it, and two notes appear, one above the staff and one below. They foreshadow the fact that *Sula* is an artist (even with “no art form”) and that the book will follow a musical pattern, will be written according to musical forms, structured by silences

7. Trudier Harris, “Reconnecting Fragments: Afro-American Folk Tradition in *The Bluest Eye*,” *Critical Essays on Toni Morrison* (1988) 137.

or crotchet rests and follow an antiphonal pattern. The position of the two notes also suggests how Nel and Sula are two extreme characters, but two extremes that will be reconciled, since *SULA* is written in the middle, with Nel's "fine cry, loud and long" of "girl, girl, girlgirlgirl." (174) The higher note may be the main melody and the lower the counterpoint, but they are both essential to the balance of the piece, and the counterpoint enhances the meaning of the first song. Still in *Sula*, the titles of the parts and chapters appear framed by staves, constantly reminding the reader that a new movement is about to begin, with its own mood and tempo, but always belonging to the whole. The chapter titles are dates, which is reminiscent of the numbering of bars in a musical piece, keeping track of how much has been sung so far, and providing one of the threads that runs throughout the book. The bars are numbered chronologically, in a linear way, but still, a music piece is unified by repetitions and variations on a theme: the musical allusion mirrors Morrison's narrative process, which recalls Sula's story chronologically, but weaves a whole network of repetitions and riffs that give its true meaning to the book.

The new rhythmic density at the heart of jazz, coming from African rhythms, with claps on the second and fourth beats, the "weak" ones in European music, had the effect to accentuate off-the-beat notes and produce syncopated rhythms. This off-the-beat effect can be traced in Morrison's novels in several typographical signs. This is particularly evident in *Jazz*, when, at the end of each chapter, a page or two are left blank for the next chapter to begin on an odd page number. Then this new chapter only begins on the second half of the page, with a large capital letter in bold type, suggesting the stress on the second half of the beat. This is comforted by the structural use of call-and-response at the beginnings of the chapters of *Jazz*. A call is made at the end of each chapter, and the response is given at the beginning of the following one, sometimes directly answering a question (187), always taking up at least a word from the last paragraph. All the first sentences are short responses:

- 27: Or used to.
- 53: Like *that day* in June.
- 89: The *hat*.
- 117: And when spring comes to *the City*, ...
- 137: Risky ... *state of mind*.
- 165: Anything like *that* ...
- 187: There *she* is. (answering: "But where is she?"
in the previous chapter)
- 195: *Sweetheart*.
- 219: Pain.

(My emphasis on the repeated elements.)

Each scrap of sentence is an answer, linked through structural and thematic elements to the last one from the preceding chapter, and they would have no meaning without reference to the previous ones. Call-and-response is here also present in the play on points of view. Each call is made by a specific narrator, either a first-person speaking character or an inside perspective provided by the omniscient form of the narrator, faithfully reproducing the pattern of alternation between voices. This use of call and response is complemented by typography, adding the necessary accents and emphases, as in musical notation.

Blanks often give the impression to be crotchet rests, punctuating the discourse and giving an inner rhythm. This is noticeable in *Beloved*, in the “chapters of the voices” (259-263). There, punctuation is replaced by blanks, silences to allow the reader to pause according to the rhythm of his/her own breathing and the natural rhythms of speech. The blanks here make the discourse appear multiple, coming from many different voices that merge to form a musical ensemble where each instrument has its importance and is complementary to the others, which play a harmonious tune even though they have different lines, for they talk about the same painful experience of the Middle Passage.

At the beginning of *The Bluest Eye*, spaces are also fundamental. The lines from the reader’s primer are first normal, double-spaced and punctuated; then, repeated a second time, punctuation disappears and spaces between lines too; then spaces between words are altogether removed. Reading aloud the first extract produces a calm and normal speech. The second extract sounds more confused, the right tones are hard to put on words since there is no punctuation and no large spaces to indicate periods or pauses, as in *Beloved*, and we can already feel how confused Pecola’s state of mind is. But reading aloud the third extract is impossible, as it is impossible for Pecola to articulate her grief and therefore be able to live with it. While reading only is still possible, (even if difficult), the sound of the text suggested by the typography shows that talking of Pecola’s grief is just as impossible for us as it is for her. Each new chapter is preceded by an extract of the graded reader, but always presented in a new way. It could represent Morrison’s own improvisation on the theme of the graded reader, her reaction to a standard tune—a negative reaction since she exposes how nonsensical it is, because family structures are far more complicated than being happy, laughing and playing. The superposition of the two tunes, the one sung by the dominant culture in the graded reader and the one sung by Pecola, is mirrored by the superposition of two musical traditions: the book is structured according to seasons, as in Vivaldi’s *Four Seasons*, but what gives its real structure to the book and its real meaning is not classical music, it is not the graded reader, but it is the blues song lying behind the surface, organized by Morrison and

counterpointing all classical patterns. The characters all give at some point their own reflections and improvisations on a theme, which is marked by the use of italics, as for Pecola, Pauline and Cholly. Italics then are the graphic mark of the beginning of a solo. Claudia's monologues are not in italics, since she is the narrator, she leads the piece, but still they lack right margin justification, which could express her attempt to separate her solos from the others', to sing a different tune from the community that does not understand Pecola, when she and Frieda try their best to help her.

The use of italics is the sign that most help readers to read the text aloud. It is a device Morrison uses to make her style appear "meandering, effortless, spoken."⁸ Italics are used to emphasize the sounds of conversations, the way people say things and accentuate them. Songs or simili-songs (as Pecola's blue-eye threnody) are always in italics to underline the difference in utterance. In *Beloved*, the "songs" of the three women in the house really appear as songs thanks to typography, they appear as poems on the page, written line by line, and, once more, it is typography which shows us how to read the text. These attempts to make orality live through writing are what give Morrison's writing much of its strength and power of evocation, and make it close to poetry.

The translation into writing of musical patterns was a first step towards Morrison's creation of a form based on orality. In writing down Afro-American music, she transformed the musical form, since jazz is a music of improvisation and unpredictability, and therefore, not very often written down; when it is, only the basic chords and melodic line appear. Morrison however manages to recreate this unpredictability in her novels, mainly in *Jazz*. There, the unpredictability is evidenced with the use of an unreliable narrator who constantly sends us on false tracks, underlining the fact that the events were completely unpredictable. On p.5, (s)he tells us that "Violet's next plan—to fall back in love with her husband—whipped her before it got on a good footing," whereas she does fall back in love with him (and him with her, fortunately) in the end of the novel, obliging the narrator to conclude on an improvised piece to comment on the nature of their new love. Then (s)he tells us that "what turned out different was who shot who," (6) when nobody shoots anybody, or even tries to. But in the end, (s)he exposes his/her unreliability: "It infuriates me to discover again how unreliable I am. [...] I thought I knew them and wasn't worried that they didn't really know about me. Now it's clear why they contradicted me at every turn: they knew me all along." (220) Morrison here presents her characters as having a mood of their own, and the direction of the book not

8. Toni Morrison, "Rootedness: The Ancestor as Foundation," *Black Women Writers (1950-1980): A Critical Evaluation* (1984) 341.

depending on her own will only, but on exterior factors that make the direction of the story completely unpredictable. Unpredictability can also be traced in the abrupt changes of narrators, without warning, sometimes right in the middle of a sentence. In this way, Morrison has managed, according to Gates, “to create an ensemble of *improvised* sound out of a *composed* music. Riffing on those two great geniuses [Faulkner and Ellington] of American literature and music.”⁹

Unpredictability forces the reader to come into the text and make a judgement for him/herself, to “*feel*” the action and draw conclusions from it rather than let himself be guided by what is *said* and the conclusions of his *mind*. This appeal to strong feelings is also present in Morrison’s books, urging the reader to react to what (s)he is reading. These reactions are at the heart of the internal dynamics of the books. The story and what can be drawn from it depend on these reactions, and the interaction helps redefine the relationship between author, reader and text.

The reader is often directly addressed or provoked, asked to react strongly right from the beginning of a book, as Morrison explains about *Beloved*:

The in medias res opening that I am so committed to is here excessively demanding. It is abrupt and should appear so. No native informant here. The reader is snatched, yanked, thrown into an environment completely foreign, and I want it as the first stroke of the shared experience that might be possible between the reader and the novel’s population. Snatched just as the slaves were from one place to another without preparation and without defence. No lobby, no door, no entrance—a gang plank perhaps (but a very short one). And the house into which this snatching—this kidnapping—propels one, changes from spiteful to loud to quiet, as the sounds of the body of the ship itself may have changed.¹⁰

The holes left in the narrative by such beginnings are a way to invite in the narrative something more than what is said, a way for the reader to *feel* an experience rather than *read about* it. The reader is asked to account for this experience, to read and see what is hidden by the holes, to recognize their presence, as Milkman in *Song of Solomon*: “Yet there were many missing pieces. Susan Byrd, he thought—she would have to know more than she told him.” (304) The reader also has to find the missing pieces, but there is no Susan Byrd to help him or her. The book itself is the answer, and the reader’s response is part of the book—he has to analyse

9. Henry Louis Gates, Jr, “Jazz,” *Critical Perspectives Present and Past: Toni Morrison* (1993) 55.

10. Toni Morrison, “Unspeakable Things Unspoken: The Afro-American Presence in American Literature,” *Michigan Quarterly Review* 28 n° 1 (5 April 1989) 36.

his own feelings and interpretation to fill in the blanks. The reader has to “figure out” what the spaces should be filled with, as the narrator of *Jazz* says:

I started out believing that life was made just so the world would have some way to think about itself, but that it had gone awry with humans because flesh, pinioned by misery, hangs on to it with pleasure. Hangs on to walls and a boy's golden hair; would just as soon inhale sweet fire caused by a burning girl as hold a maybe-yes maybe-no hand. Something is missing there. Something rogue. Something you have to figure in before you can figure it out. (227-228)

The reader is here (as in *Jazz*) included within the community-chorus of the book, partaking of the lives of the characters, part of the entity that comments and reacts to the characters, society and life in general.

Another means to let the reader come into the story and draw his own interpretations is the use of an extremely fragmented narration. This device is evident on a small scale in *Beloved's* monologue. The discourse is fragmented, cut up, with spaces and incomplete sentences, dispersed between the voices of all slaves, but in the end becomes a whole thanks to the unity of feeling, repetitions and the dissemination of symbols, and becomes one with the history of all African-Americans, into a process analogous to that of the blues, as described by Baker: “Rather than a rigidly personalized form, the blues offer a phylogenetic recapitulation—a non-linear, freely associative, non-sequential meditation of species experience.”¹¹

Fragmentation is an essential aspect of blues lyrics, as J.E. Berendt points out:

Il serait possible de fournir maints exemples de cette discontinuité du blues, alors qu'il paraît difficile d'en trouver un seul dont chaque mot constitue la suite logique de ce qui précède. Il serait erroné de croire que cela correspond à une incapacité à créer une continuité. Non, la continuité n'est pas le propos. Les lignes et les strophes ont une qualité impressionniste. Elles sont liées les unes aux autres comme les touches de peinture sur un tableau. [...] Dès que vous prenez un peu de recul, l'ensemble s'agence en un tout. Le « tout » du blues est l'humeur, l'atmosphère blues. Celle-ci crée sa propre continuité. Tout ce qui se présente à l'esprit – événement, souvenir, pensée, phantasme – se fond dans l'humeur du blues, et il en découle... le blues.¹²

11. Houston A. Baker, *Blues, Ideology and Afro-American Literature: A Vernacular Theory* (Chicago and London: the UP of Chicago, 1987) 5.

12. Joachim Ernst Berendt, *Le Grand Livre du Jazz : Des Origines au New Orleans* (Paris, Ed. du Rocher, 1986) 204.

Song of Solomon mirrors this process of splitting narration and chronology, and Milkman's quest is mimetic of the reader's work of piecing the story back together. The book is unified by the blues song and the atmosphere attached to its singing. The song here is symbolic of the inheritance of the African American past, part of Pilate's collection as well as her bag of bones and the rocks she picks in every state she goes through in her life. Piecing back the story is a puzzle in which each clue leads to another one, creating further suspense and questioning, and the reader has to work like Milkman, a parodic detective, and put the parts in the right order.

Fragmentation often forces the reader to see and think for himself, to give his own interpretation of the facts. In *Jazz*, the narrator is so unreliable that the reader has to think alone about what is going to happen, not waiting for the narrator's suggestions. This unreliability applies to moral or general judgements as well: the narrator often comments on life and the action of the novel, but the reader cannot give his opinion more importance than any other expressed in the book. The fragmentation of points of view allows the reader to see from all the perspectives available, and thus enables him to have a very accurate view of the action, and to go deeper into the analysis than a straightforward narration would have allowed, as P. Page notes:

The pattern cuts at least two ways for readers as well. The narrative fragmentation denies readers the expected level of immediate comprehension and forces them to wait for explanation, to remember previously narrated fragments and to piece together the narrative chronology. And yet, partly because of the necessity for readers' active participation, the cumulative effect of the intensive exploration of the characters' memory is profound. In addition, as D. Kenneth Mano points out, the "allusive, oblique" narrative form enables Morrison to avoid the excessive melodrama a more straightforward form would have produced.¹³

Finally, the last, but not least, device Morrison uses to have the reader participate into the creative process is the use of open endings. Baby Suggs, in *Beloved*, epitomizes the response expected from the reader to Sethe's act (and to the rest of the character's reactions): "They came in her yard anyway and she couldn't approve or condemn Sethe's rough choice." (221) All the different perspectives allowed into the text prevent the reader from choosing, but he is still asked to react, to analyse his feelings just as the rest of the community surrounding Sethe, to remember painful

13. Philip Page, "Circularity in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*," *African American Review* 26 n° 1 (1992) 36-37.

episodes with them, and only through this act of common remembering can healing be possible, as M. Sale underlines:

*A different example, one external to the text, is how Morrison's representation of Sethe and her act of infanticide challenges readers to examine their own responses to this event and the circumstances surrounding it. Beloved presents and clarifies social problems without resolving them, and so raises, or calls out, issues to be discussed, or to be responded to, by readers or the community. This call for community response is part of the contemporary healing process that the text is involved in.*¹⁴

Morrison, in keeping with the multiplicity of voices, gives a multiplicity of answers to the questions and dilemmas posed by the texts, but, as for Jadine in the end of *Tar Baby*, “the same sixteen answers to the question What went wrong? kicked like a chorus line. Having sixteen answers meant having none. So none it was. Zero.” (250) The last chapter of *Tar Baby* bears no chapter number, unlike all the other ones, as if the book was not finished. It appears like something added, it is one possible end, but not The End since it is not part of the series that links the other chapters of the book. It suggests both the absence of answers and their multiplicity—one and the same thing. The reader is free to give his own interpretation of the theme, to change the end or leave it as it is—the invitation of the blank page at the beginning of the chapter gives him total freedom to enter the book and become part of the creative process, to make the story live through his own emotions and interpretations, in the same way that dilemma tales were left open to the conjectures of the listeners, or jazz pieces have no closure. All of Morrison's novels have open endings: *The Bluest Eye* begins with a cursory summary of the plot, “*Pecola was having her father's baby. There is really nothing more to say—except why. But since why is difficult to handle, one must take refuge in how.*” (9) The rest of the text reflects on these first sentences, but the question “why” remains, left unresolved but still present just beneath the surface throughout the text, leaving it for the reader to answer. *Sula* ends with many questions unresolved—what has she done during her ten-year absence? What will Nel do with her new awareness of feelings?—and the novel ends on a circle that suggests endless repetition rather than closure: “It was a fine cry—loud and long—but it had no bottom and had no top, just circles and circles of sorrow.” (174) Just like the novel, which begins *in medias res* (“no bottom”), ends without closure (“no top”), and leaves only the interplay of emotions (“circles and circles of sorrow”). Will Guitar shoot Milkman at the end of *Song of Solomon*? Will Son stay with the blind

14. Maggie Sale, “Call and Response as Critical Method: African American Oral Tradition and Beloved,” *African American Review* 26 n° 1 (1992) 44.

horsemen or try to join Jadine in Paris in *Tar Baby*? ... Endless questions remain, and the reader has to make his own improvisation within the frame of the novel and his/her own concluding phrase— just like the last solo in a jazz piece.

All these devices are subordinate to Morrison's aim, which is to create a story that will be visually and orally compelling so as to draw in the reader and force him to react, without ever relaxing her grip on his emotions. This is achieved through an appeal to feelings close to that of music, a "feeling of hunger" that compels the reader to read on and know more, creating the "quality of hunger and disturbance that never ends" that Morrison sees in jazz and wants to reproduce. Denver exposes this creative process when she "swallowed twice to prepare for the telling, to construct out of the strings she had heard all her life, a net to hold Beloved." (94) The relationship between the two (Denver and Beloved) shows how interactive the teller-listener relation is, how each listens to the other, and how, to "construct a net" that will hold the reader, Morrison, as Denver, has to let the (implied) reader react so as to adapt the story to his sensibility.

The reader feels compelled to read on precisely because Morrison encompasses him into the community who reacts to the story, lays his emotions along those of Stamp Paid, Ella, Paul D and the other members of the community, granting them as much importance, to create a sense of shared experience, as she explains: "I mean a novel written a certain way can do precisely what spirituals used to do. It can do exactly what spirituals or jazz or gossip or stories or myth or folklore did—that stuff that was a common wellspring of ideas and again the participation of the reader in it as though it's not alien to him. The people he may not know, but there is some shared history."¹⁵

One element that was particularly compelling to the listeners of the blues and jazz was the rhythm that embraced them and drew them to participation, just as preachers drew their audiences to respond through the entrancing inflexions of their sermons. In Morrison's novels, the rhythm of the narratives, which is never linear, is always compelling too. The pace of *Song of Solomon*, for instance, quickens gradually; very slow in the first part, it accelerates in the second, the song, repeated more and more frequently, punctuating the action as a bass chord, heightening the tension and the ritual quality of the book, pounding like the drums in a rite of initiation. The likeness to a detective story, the search for clues, and the menace of Guitar constantly hovering on Milkman's life create suspense and a "hunger" to get to the end, to finish the jigsaw, and the tension never

15. Bessie W. Jones and Audrey Vinson, "An Interview with Toni Morrison," *Conversations with Toni Morrison* (1994) 183.

relaxes, remaining even after the book is closed, since we do not know what happens to Milkman.

The pace of the novel also makes readers conjecture about the following pages, and Morrison uses this as the novel's "secret drive," much as the "music's secret drive" she describes in a potentially metatextual passage in *Jazz*: "Under the ceiling pairs moved like twins born with, if not for, the other, sharing the partner's pulse like a second jugular. They believe they know before the music does what their hands, their feet are to do, but that illusion is the music's secret drive: the control it tricks them into believing is theirs; the anticipation it anticipates." (65) Morrison here reestablishes her authority in the novel, challenged by the comments of the narrator, as the leader of the song, clearly placing the implied reader within the community who responds, who knows what to respond to *her* call. Morrison thus points out the essential work of accounting for the implied reader's emotions, of responding herself to these emotions, but still reminds us that she directs the book, and manipulates readers as well as characters to make her composition alive, to direct the chorus of all the characters, including readers, composing her fiction.

Morrison's concern with emotions is reminiscent of one of the main characteristics of the blues, which is to be far more concerned with expressivity and feelings than with conventional structures. Expressivity is always far more important than aesthetics—form follows content. What is important to the jazz or blues musician is to express his own mood at that particular moment in his own terms, so that the audience can feel the height of his emotion. Paul Oliver points out this force of sensibility in the blues:

The most astonishing aspect of the blues is that, though replete with a sense of defeat and down-heartedness, they are never intrinsically pessimistic; their burden of woe and melancholy is dialectically redeemed through sheer force of sensuality, into an almost exultant affirmation of life, of love, of sex, of movement, of hope. No matter how repressive was the American environment, the Negro never lost faith in or doubted his deeply endemic capacity to live. All blues are a lusty, lyrical realism, charged with taught sensibility.¹⁶

In the same way, Morrison's books are first concerned with feelings, with the transmission of an emotion through all the means available, where form follows content: the novels are given their shape by the way characters react and feel as in *Beloved*, where the form reflects the difficulty of remembering and the necessity of dis(re)membering to reconstruct a coherent life out of the scattered parts.

16. Paul Oliver, *Blues Fell This Morning: Meaning in the Blues* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1990) XV.

Her writing being close to music, Morrison also seeks to make a certain impression on her reader through the sound of her writing, close to the impression music makes, close to the feelings of the young girls in *The Bluest Eye* listening to the sounds of the conversations of the adults: “The words ballooned from the lips and hovered about our heads—silent, separate and pleasantly mysterious.” (14) And the only means Morrison has to describe this attraction for words is through metaphors of music and dance:

Their conversation is like a gently wicked dance: sound meets sound, curtsies, shimmies and retires. Another sound enters but is upstaged by still another: the two circle each other and stop. Sometimes their words move in lofty spirals; other times they take strident leaps, and all of this is punctuated with warm-pulsed laughter—like the throbs of a heart made of jelly. The edge, the curl, the thrust of their emotions is always clear to Frieda and me. We do not, cannot know the meaning of all their words, for we are nine and ten years old. So we watch their faces, their hands, their feet, and listen for truth in timbre. (16)

The words of the novel themselves talk about the emotions of the characters, and their sounds have a power of evocation, a “truth in timbre,” that reveals more than their meaning discloses and appeals to the senses, in the same way music does. *Jazz* exemplifies the range of emotions that Morrison uses in her books, and these emotions are always created in the characters by the music of the City, which suggests what to do, what to feel, and how to act. In *Beloved*, the constant play on emotions draws us close to Sethe, sympathizing with her pain and the terrible price she had to pay for her overwhelming maternal love, while at the same time, moral considerations draw us close to Stamp Paid and Ella’s positions, repelled as they are by the infanticide—but the balancing of one emotion against the other prevents us from taking a clear-cut position.

The reliance on feelings and emotions can also be traced in her use of supernatural elements: her world extends its frontiers far beyond the limits of “reason” and seeks to embrace the subjectivity of life’s experiences, to render the living of the experience rather than the experience itself. The interplay of emotions is at the heart of the response Morrison wants to get into her books, as she says, “Critical conviction should be inspired by a response to the work, not by external agendas. The text should become a problem of passion, not a pretext for it.”¹⁷ This response is inherent to Afro-American literature, according to Gates: “Matters of origin and genesis,

17. Toni Morrison, “Unspeakable Things Unspoken: The Afro-American Presence in American Literature,” *Michigan Quarterly Review* 28 n° 1 (5 April 1989) 10.

therefore, become secondary in literary analysis. The spirituals make the language contain a turn of mind, simple and sublime, poignant and compact, concrete—the poetry of an ancient race passing through the throes of an enforced return into the epoch of an alien and dominating civilization.’—yet transcendent.”¹⁸

What is at the heart of the novels is to have the reader live the experience at the same time as the characters, identify to them as the listeners to the blues singer:

*Usually the listeners quickly recognize the situation which is revealed to them and its implications and they often echo the singer. It is sufficient to see their faces light up and to listen to the laughter of complicity or the shouts of approval or encouragement—I hear you ! Right on ! That’s the truth ! Tell it like it is !—to realize that it is not an abject complaint that we are hearing and that the blues are often something radically different. When the audience identifies with the situation and the content of the song and responds to the often disguised message, one witnesses the sharing of a common experience which sustains the participants.*¹⁹

This identification with the singer allows a certain form of healing in drawing the community together, and enabling others to see life from the same perspective as the singer does. Morrison seeks the same reaction from her readers, she wants them to recognize the human dilemma in the situation she writes about, and to come so close to the perspectives of the characters that reasonable judgement is not possible anymore—reason is not the criterion. The reader must feel trapped in the same circle, feel the same things as the characters, understand them completely. Morrison explains how this identification to an experience, to the feelings of the characters, works in *The Bluest Eye*:

*He or she [the reader] can feel something visceral, something striking. Then we [you, the reader, and I, the author] come together to make this book, to feel this experience. It does not matter what happens. I tell you at the beginning of The Bluest Eye on the very first page what happened, but now I want you to go with me and look at this, so when you get to the scene where the father rapes the daughter, which is as awful a thing, I suppose, as can be imagined, by the time you get there, it’s almost irrelevant because I want you to look at him and see his love for his daughter and his powerlessness to help her pain. By that time his embrace, the rape, is all the gift he has left.*²⁰

18. Henry Louis Gates, Jr, *Figures in Black: Words, Signs and the Racial Self* (New York and Oxford: Oxford UP, 1989) 193.

19. Robert Springer, “Black Solidarity as Expressed in the Blues,” *GRAAT* n° 9 (1992) 135-136.

20. Claudia Tate, “Toni Morrison,” *Conversations with Toni Morrison* (1994) 165.

This involvement of the reader in the novel is essential to its cathartic aspect, to its taking up the “healing power” that music has lost to whites, according to Morrison, and the readers feel a compulsion to follow her advice at the end of *Beloved*: “It was not a story to pass on,” or in the end of *Jazz*, with her open invitation for the reader to go through the same liberating process of remembering and healing as the characters, and to answer the call for freedom of the music of the City, as Joe and Violet are now doing, an appeal to re-create the book in one’s own words—to “pass on” the story: “But I can’t say that aloud; I can’t tell anyone that I have been waiting for this all my life and that being chosen to wait is the reason I can. If I were able I’d say it. Say *make me, remake me*. You are free to do it and I am free to let you because look. Look where your hands are. Now.” (229, my emphasis.)

The fusion of the two forms, musical and literary, is meant to create a new means to “make sense,” to apprehend reality, as we can see in *Song of Solomon*. There, music leads Milkman to his real identity, to a new, whole self. There is a constant play between “sing” and “sign”: every time the song is sung, Milkman gets a sign that will help him define reality, himself and others. For Milkman, music has a power of definition greater than that of language alone. Morrison thus points out to an alternative means to make sense of reality, and combines the powers of language and music, which brings Milkman to a better understanding of reality than his father’s, who relies on language only, and better than Pilate’s, who relies on music only. Only through the combination of music and language, through the ability to combine the true meaning of the words with their singing, can Milkman understand his history and find his real name. Singing defines every key moment of his life: the song of Solomon accompanies all the moments that will define his identity: his birth, his first visit to Pilate, his arrival at Shalimar, the day after the hunt, etc... Each new verse or line added to the song is paralleled by a new awareness for Milkman, the awareness of who he is, of what he is, of what he should be. The song will also help him understand other individuals and his responsibilities towards them, it will help him organize the world and establish a certain set of values. Morrison precisely wants to recreate this new means to make sense at the novel’s level, in fusing the written and oral words, and making her novels sing.

This is precisely what Morrison does in writing, she balances the oral culture of Africa with the dominantly visual culture of America, so destructive in *The Bluest Eye*, to make a novel, the place where sound can meet letter, and oral and visual cultures can be incorporated into a form that transcends them both. This new form, midway between two cultures, is what enables Morrison to recapture a lost culture, to mediate past and present, to incorporate the lost culture of Africa into present life, and the hybrid form becomes symbolic of a hybrid culture.