

Written Sounds and Spoken Letters: Orality and Literacy in Toni Morrison's *Beloved**

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Ever since its publication, the narrative structure of Toni Morrison's novel *Beloved* (1987) has been a popular topic of critical debate. In view of the novel's complex architecture, this pronounced critical interest is not particularly surprising—Morrison's narrative offers an intricate network of interacting perspectives that simultaneously confirm and question each other so that it is sometimes hard to determine who is telling the story and what is happening in the novel's fictional world. Most critics analyzing the novel's narrative texture conclude that *Beloved* is closer to storytelling than novel writing and that existing narratological models need to be revised with regard to Morrison's work. Cheryl Hall, for instance, argues that "as critics, we must come to [Morrison's] 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" (90).

The general impression that Morrison's text bears resemblance to a storytelling session is no coincidence because oral traditions obviously have been an important aesthetic and stylistic model for Morrison. She wants her stories to "appear oral" ("Rootedness" 341) and tries to achieve

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For the original article as well as all contributions to this debate, please check the *Connotations* website at <<http://www.connotations.de/debbergthaller01613.htm>>.

an effortless and an artless, 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. ... I wanted the sound to be something I felt was spoken and more oral and less print. (qtd. in Hall 89)

Most critics identify this oral quality of Morrison's writing as an important stylistic device, which not only characterizes Morrison's art and confirms her status as an outstanding writer, but which she also uses to challenge Western concepts of history and subjectivity. Morrison's combination of different voices, for example, allows a *community* rather than a single voice to tell a story, and the interplay of perspectives undermines the idea of a single, objective history, which always tells the story of the winner and usually further marginalizes and excludes its victims (cf. Ippolito 192; Sale 42; Pérez-Torres, "Between" 193-98).

In his essay "Dis(re)membering History's *revenants*: Trauma, Writing, and Simulated Orality in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*," Hannes Bergthaller also examines oral elements in Morrison's novel *Beloved*. Rather than focusing on history and subjectivity, however, Bergthaller connects Morrison's style with the attempt to deal with and overcome the trauma of slavery:

Beloved [...] is full of descriptions of communal story-telling, call-and-response preaching and choir singing. It is these 'oral' interactions which help the victims of slavery, as they are depicted in the novel, to remember their past and thereby to 're-member,' to heal, both themselves and their fractured community. [...] [B]y recovering and "working through" traumatic aspects of the national past which have been violently repressed (LaCapra 89), the novel enacts a communal healing process. (118)

This healing process is not restricted to the novel's fictional world—the community that is established through the use of oral elements also includes the readers and draws them into the world of the characters, creating a space of intimacy that allows the audience to relive the characters' situation:

Just as antiphonal narration creates an intimacy between Denver and Beloved [...] so *Beloved* is assumed to create a space into which the reader must step in order to fulfill its promise of communal restoration. The novel would thus do for the reader what Beloved does for Denver, allowing him to "see" and "feel" like the characters in the novel do [...]. (Bergthaller 128)

The idea that Morrison uses her novel to re-member the African American community and to initiate a healing process that goes beyond her fictional world is not new, and several critics have expressed similar views (see, for example, Krumholz). In contrast to many other scholars, however, Bergthaller goes a step further, because he not only identifies and interprets oral elements in Morrison's text but also acknowledges that *Beloved* nevertheless is a *novel* written by a single author rather than a communally told story. Uncritically taking Morrison's novel for an oral story

effectively conflates "the representation of cultural practices with the latter's operativity" (Schinko 303n; my translation). In other words, it assumes that the novel itself can function in the same way as the scenes of antiphony and oral instruction which the novel describes—that orality can be successfully simulated, as it were, in a written text. (Bergthaller 129)

Rather than classifying Morrison's work as an oral text, Bergthaller consequently describes the novel as *simulated orality*, i.e., the novel employs elements of orality but transforms them into a written text.

One could assume that this insight seriously undermines the novel's effectiveness, as if Morrison's text was a magic trick that only works as long as the illusion of orality is maintained. Bergthaller explains, however, that the reading of Morrison's narrative as an oral story ignores an important component of Morrison's work because it entails "a sidelining of the text *as text*" (131). In order to be fully effective, Bergthaller maintains, the intimacy that is created through the illusion of orality "must break down as the reader puts down the book" (134) because only a written text can allow the characters to heal and to move on while preserving Beloved's fate on the pages of a novel at the same time.

I agree with Bergthaller's argument that Morrison needs the illusion of orality and the reality of the written text in order to develop the narrative's full potential. However, I would even go a step further and suggest that Morrison does not develop and destroy the illusion of orality but rather employs an extended form of orality which openly and simultaneously combines written and oral elements. This complementary narrative structure is not merely a stylistic device but an integral part of Morrison's artistic agenda to challenge Eurocentric perspectives and to write a distinctively *African American* kind of literature.

A passage that can be used to illustrate this idea is also a central passage in Bergthaller's essay, the exorcism of *Beloved*. Pregnant and constantly growing, *Beloved* has drained away almost all of Sethe's energy when the women of the black community finally decide to intervene:

Some brought what they could and what they believed would work. Stuffed in apron pockets, strung around their necks, lying in the space between their breasts. Others brought Christian faith—as shield and sword. Most brought a little of both. (*Beloved* 257)

They stopped praying and took a step back to the beginning. In the beginning there were no words. In the beginning was the sound, and they all knew what that sound sounded like [...]. For Sethe it was as though the Clearing had come to her with all its heat and simmering leaves, where the voices of women searched for the right combination, the key, the code, the sound that broke the back of words. Building 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. (*Beloved* 259-61)

Bergthaller argues that Morrison celebrates orality in this passage because it “exalt[s] the power of the human voice to heal and to bring into being” (131): “Through their song, the women avail themselves of the creative power of ‘nommo’¹ in its purest form. Morrison's wording explicitly sets it into opposition to a Western (more specifically, a Judeo-Christian) understanding of language, pointing to the continuing presence of African origins” (132).

It is tempting to read the passage in this manner, because superficially it seems indeed as if Morrison rejected the Judeo-Christian model in favor of the African concept of *nommo*—after all, she turns the biblical “[i]n the beginning was the Word” (John 1:1) into “in the beginning was the sound.”² A closer look at the passage reveals, however, that Morrison does not reject the biblical model in this passage—she rather *extends* it in an African American way because the idea of sound includes not only the creative power of *nommo* but also the *word* and other forms of human and non-human utterances.

This extension of the human voice is important in several ways. First and foremost, the sound is the only way to communicate with the ghost: With their song, the women go back to a time *before* the word, and only this preverbal utterance can reach the ghost whereas spoken words cannot, as Sethe's and Denver's earlier attempts to communicate with the invisible baby ghost reveal:

[...] Sethe and Denver decided to end the persecution by calling forth the ghost that tried them so. Perhaps a conversation, they thought, an exchange of views or something would help. So they held hands and said, “Come on. Come on. You may as well just come on.”

The sideboard took a step forward but nothing else did. (*Beloved* 4)

The sound's inherent potential to address the ghost is linked to another important feature of the woman's song: pain, whether physical or psychological, eludes language but can find expression in sound. As Elaine Scarry points out, pain entails a “resistance to language” (5)—indeed, “[p]hysical pain does not simply resist language but actively destroys it, bringing about an immediate reversion to a state anterior to language, to the sounds and cries a human being makes before language is learned” (4). It is therefore no coincidence that the sound rather than the word is able to reach *Beloved*, the incarnation of slavery and the embodiment of trauma and pain.

Furthermore, the sound is also important because it “[breaks] the back of words.” The sound thus does away with the abuses of language such as schoolteacher's definitions which allowed him to classify Sethe and her children as animals rather than human beings.³ In

this respect, it is indeed the sound that is a new beginning: it drives Beloved away, saves Sethe's life, and redeems both Sethe and the community around her because it provides both parties with the chance to correct the mistakes of the past.⁴ In short, it finally gives both Sethe and the community the strength to leave the past, the "Sixty million / and more" mentioned in the book's epigraph, behind.

Despite the modification of the biblical text, however, Morrison's sound is still part of a deeply religious and Christian experience, as the image of baptism—the central symbol of the Christian community—indicates: the sound becomes a powerful wave, and Sethe trembles "like the baptized in its wash" (*Beloved* 261). The sound consequently has a religious function in *Beloved*, and it is part of a syncretic ceremony that draws on both Christian and non-Christian sources: The women bring African charms "[s]tuffed in apron pockets, strung around their necks, lying in the space between their breasts" to exorcise the ghost, but they also bring "Christian faith—as shield and sword" (*Beloved* 257). Similarly, their song is Christian and biblical ("In the beginning was ...") but also some kind of African conjure ("... the sound"). The sentence is, to use Mikhail Bakhtin's words, "a mixture of two social languages within the limits of a single utterance" (358), but just as the biblical model, it signals the presence of a metaphysical sphere and facilitates atonement and redemption.

The modified quotation does consequently not imply departure from Christianity but religious appropriation: the biblical text is still present and discernable, but at the same time, it has been incorporated into the system of African American culture. Neither of the two traditions can dispel the ghost on its own, but their combination becomes a powerful tool. Morrison's quotation does thus not imply a competition between biblical and African traditions, but rather describes and highlights the development of a modified and updated version of Christianity that acknowledges and caters to the needs of an African American community.

This combination of American and African traditions is an important and recurring motif in Morrison's work. Often, Morrison mixes

African and American religious traditions to signal the compatibility of African and American cosmologies. In *Beloved*, for example, Baby Suggs's services in the Clearing serve as a powerful example of the successful combination of Christian and non-Christian traditions. At first, these meetings seem to have little in common with Christian services since Baby Suggs is an "unchurched preacher" (87) and speaks about the need to love one's body rather than about sin and redemption:

After situating herself on a huge flat-sided rock, Baby Suggs bowed her head and prayed silently. The company watched her from the trees. They knew she was ready when she put her stick down. Then she shouted, "Let the children come!" and they ran from the trees toward her [...]. She did not tell them to clean up their lives or to go and sin no more. She did not tell them they were the blessed of the earth, its inheriting meek or its glorybound pure. She told them that the only grace they could have was the grace they could imagine. That if they could not see it, they would not have it.

"Here," she said, "in this here place, we flesh; flesh that weeps, laughs; flesh that dances on bare feet in grass. Love it. Love it hard [...]. *You got to love it, you!*" (*Beloved* 87-88)

Despite these seemingly unchristian commands, the meetings are part of black Christian church life in the winter, and Baby Suggs is clearly connected to Christian imagery: Even though she distances herself from Matthew 5:5 ("Blessed are the meek: for they shall inherit the earth"), Baby Suggs's words nevertheless evoke the Sermon on the Mount and suggest a connection between Baby Suggs and Jesus; the rock she chooses as a pulpit reminds the reader of the "rock" and founder of the Christian church, Saint Peter; the staff she puts down once she is ready to preach is reminiscent of the staff Moses used to lead the Israelites and to divide the Red Sea; and her invitation to "let the children come" clearly alludes to Jesus's famous call: "[s]uffer little children, and forbid them not, to come unto me; for of such is the kingdom of heaven" (Matt. 19:14; cf. Ryan 280).⁵ Moreover, the command to love is, of course, a deeply Christian advice, even if the victims of the dehumanizing forces of slavery have to learn to love and to re-member themselves before they can truly love their neighbors. As

Emily Griesinger explains, Baby Suggs's services are "[n]ot *typically* Christian because they say nothing about God or Jesus Christ" but they are "*genuinely* Christian nevertheless in their assertion that human life is holy, all of it, and needs to be loved" (693). As many scenes in Morrison's novel, Baby Suggs's services are thus neither African nor Christian, but draw on a number of different sources and combine Western and non-Western traditions.⁶

Morrison's religious blends are one example of her stylistic combination of different cultural cosmologies—her combination of oral and written traditions are another. Her narratives are thus not novels that pretend to be oral texts but rather novels that incorporate elements of orality. They are, as Edward Dauterich puts it, a *hybrid* form of expression, which actively uses the combination of different traditions to create something new and distinctively *African American* (cf. 26).

The idea that the space between two cultures can be a zone of innovation has been a popular topic of critical debate in the last two decades. Critics such as Homi Bhabha, Gloria Anzaldúa, and Mary Louise Pratt have developed various concepts to map the space of intercultural contact and to explain and interpret the forces at work in these zones. Homi Bhabha, for instance, calls the zone in between two cultures *Third Space* and claims that this zone "gives rise to something different, something new and unrecognisable, a new area of negotiation of meaning and representation" (Bhabha, "Space" 211). This *Third Space*, "though unrepresentable in itself, [...] constitutes the discursive conditions of enunciation that ensure that the meaning and symbols of culture have no primordial unity or fixity; that even the same signs can be appropriated, translated, rehistoricized and read anew" (*Location* 37). As a result, these "'in-between' spaces provide the terrain for elaborating strategies of selfhood—singular or communal—that initiate new signs of identity, and innovative sites of collaboration, and contestation, in the act of defining the idea of society itself" (*Location* 1-2).

In a similar manner, Gloria Anzaldúa describes the borderland in-between two cultures as a space of new social and societal develop-

ments: "Living on borders and in margins [...] is like trying to swim in a new element, an 'alien' element. There is an exhilaration in being a participant in the further evolution of humankind, [...] dormant areas of consciousness are being activated, awakened" (19). For critics such as Bhabha and Anzaldúa, being "in-between"—hybridity—is thus no longer a handicap but rather an advantage that gives rise to a new form of cultural agency, which is not accessible from a monocultural position.

Both Bhabha and Anzaldúa are aware of the frictions that also are part of the contact zone. As Anzaldúa puts it, "[i]t's not a comfortable territory to live in, this place of contradictions. Hatred, anger and exploitation are the prominent features of this landscape" (19). Nevertheless, these critics see those traditionally located at the margins of a society—members of ethnic minority cultures—at the center of societal innovation since they can combine, negotiate, and redefine different cultural, social, and linguistic perspectives.

Toni Morrison expresses similar ideas in her narratives. Her novels are neither African nor American but *African American*, and this African Americaness expresses itself in plot elements, images, intertextual references, and in stylistic devices such as the combination of oral and written features. As a result, *Beloved* is not a novel that *pretends* to be an oral story, and it is certainly not a magic trick that depends on the illusion of orality, but Morrison combines orality and literacy to create something new and distinctively black.

The effect of this combination goes beyond aesthetic play and fulfills several functions at once: On the plot level, oral elements such as patterns of call and response and a plurality of voices help to establish a fictional community, which is necessary to initiate both individual and communal healing. As Morrison explains,

There is a necessity for remembering the horror, but of course there's a necessity for remembering it in a manner in which it can be digested, in a manner in which the memory is not destructive [...]. And no one speaks, no one tells the story about himself or herself unless forced. They don't want to talk, they don't want to remember, they don't want to say it, because they're

afraid of it—which is human. But when they do say it, and hear it, and look at it, and share it, they are not only one, they're two, and three, and four, you know? The collective sharing of that information heals the individual—and the collective. ("Realm" 247-48)

The healing process that Morrison describes here depends on the *spoken* word because only oral exchanges are truly participatory, polylogic, and additive (cf. Ong 37, 45-46). In addition, an oral text is transient; it can be shared in the protected circle of the community, but at the same time (and in contrast to a written text), an oral story ceases to exist once the speaker(s) fall(s) silent. This transient quality of oral texts plays an important role in Morrison's *Beloved*, because forgetting is a necessary skill in the novel's fictional world: the ghost of the past—Beloved—needs to be exorcized if the characters want to live. Beloved's story is, thus, "not a story to pass on" (275) as only those who can leave their traumatic past behind have the chance of a future.

On a metanarrative level, however, Morrison makes clear that Beloved's story—the story of slavery—also must *not* be forgotten. Slavery is, as Morrison argues in an interview with Bonnie Angelo, part of a "national amnesia" ("Pain" 120), and to remember its victims was one of Morrison's primary concerns when she wrote the novel:

There is no place you or I can go, to [...] recollect the absences of slaves; nothing that reminds us of the ones who made the journey and of those who did not make it. There is no suitable memorial or plaque [...]. There's no three-hundred-foot tower. There's no small bench by the road [...]. And because such a place doesn't exist (that I know of), the book had to. ("Bench" 44)

Paying attention to the forgotten and neglected—calling "her beloved, which was not beloved," as Morrison puts it in the epigraph of her novel—*Beloved* becomes a literary memorial for those who have suffered from slavery and its consequences. Beyond the characters' fictional world, Beloved's story is thus a story that must not be *passed* on in the sense that the book tells a story that must not be ignored (cf. Henderson 83; Pérez-Torres, "Knitting" 130).

The hybrid structure of Morrison's novel—its combination of oral and written elements—supports this dual objective: elements of orality turn the narrative into a seemingly spoken account that re-members the community, heals the characters, and can be forgotten once the demon of the past has been faced. Simultaneously, the written text preserves the story of *Beloved* on the pages of a book and makes sure that her fate does not fall into oblivion: "Like the ghost's footprints, the written words remain, a reminder of that which had to be 'dis(re)membered' in order for the community to re-member itself" (Bergthaller 134).

To fathom Morrison's novel, one has to detect both the written text and the oral story. Rather than reading the novel as simulated orality which "must break down as the reader puts down the book and the words on the page collapse back into bare letters" (Bergthaller 134), I would suggest reading the narrative as a text that tries to be oral and written at the same time. The constant interplay of these two different expressive levels—its hybrid nature—significantly contributes to the novel's multidimensional structure, but it is also an expression of Morrison's status as an *African American* writer. Despite slavery and despite everything that has happened, Morrison suggests, a black existence in the United States is not only possible but also profitable because it entails a form of cultural agency which monocultural traditions lack. The cultural power inherent in the African American tradition is strong enough to both remember and forget the ghost of the past and thus the basis for a promising future.

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NOTES

¹William R. Handley defines the West African term *nommo* as “the magic power of the word to call things into being” (677; cf. Jahn 124-26; Bergthaller 125). Morrison addresses and acknowledges this power in one of her interviews: “I sometimes know when the work works, when *nommo* has effectively summoned, by reading and listening to those who have entered the text” (“Unspeakable” 33).

²All Bible references are to the King James Version.

³While teaching his nephews, Sethe’s former master schoolteacher used the defining power of language to turn slaves into a subhuman species: “Schoolteacher was standing over one of them [his nephews] with one hand behind his back [...] when I [Sethe] heard him say, ‘No, no. That’s not the way. I told you to put her [Sethe’s] human characteristics on the left; her animal one on the right. And don’t forget to line them up’” (*Beloved* 193).

⁴The passage describing the exorcism mirrors the scene of the murder: When young Sethe realizes that the slave catcher has found her, she attacks and kills her daughter in a desperate attempt to protect her, and the community passively watches the scene. When a benevolent white man approaches Sethe’s home eighteen years later during the exorcism and Sethe is convinced that the slave catcher has come to claim her child once more, she tries to attack the *white man*—this time, however, the community steps in to save an innocent life.

⁵Morrison only alludes to the King James Version, but she directly quotes the Revised Standard Version, the New International Version, and the English Standard Version: “Let the children come to me, and do not hinder them; for to such belongs the kingdom of heaven.”

⁶For a more detailed discussion of the combination of African and American religious elements in Morrison’s fiction, see Höttges 83-158.

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