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The Aural in *Beloved*

Jody Morgan

Faculty Sponsor: Dr. Samuel Kimball

I know that my effort is to be *like* something that has probably only been fully expressed perhaps in music . . . Writing novels is a way to encompass this-this something.

Toni Morrison (Mckay, 152)

In an interview with Christina Davis, Toni Morrison describes her writing as “aural literature . . . because I do hear it” (230). *Beloved* is a particularly rich example of Morrison’s “aural literature”, literature which sounds and resounds. In an interview with Paul Gilroy, Morrison elaborates that these sounds are primarily musical: “My parallel is always the music, because all of the strategies of the art are there . . . music is the mirror that gives me the necessary clarity . . .” (81). In *Beloved*, music is the medium through which the characters express their innermost painful memories, memories otherwise unable to be expressed in language. In fact, in a world where black were called animal and subhuman, words were weapons against slaves. Therefore, blacks in the novel turn to music to find expression.

Though special attention has been paid to the music in *Beloved* of late (at least four articles in 2006), these critics have failed to note the extent of music’s role in the novel and its relation to the novel’s overarching theme, namely how music expresses what cannot be said in words. Maggie Sale has noted that Morrison uses the musical technique of call-and-response but has not explained how this technique is significant to the plot and the outcome of conflicts, and to the existential vision of the novel. Instead in Sale’s article, “Call and Response as Critical Method: African-American Oral Traditions in *Beloved*,” she argues that “call-and-response patterns provide a basic model that depends and thrives upon audience performance and improvisation, which work together to ensure that the art will be meaningful or functional to the community” (41). In essence, Sale argues that call-and-response is a technique dependent of the reader’s participation outside the novel and does not render meaning in itself through the characters. Against Sale, I argue that the meaning of the novel is not a product of musical techniques but is in the music itself. The following sections investigate the aural in *Beloved* is all its significance.

The Value of Music

In *Beloved*, the ex-slaves must negotiate their existence in light of centuries of others naming them subhuman, nothing short of objects: indeed, their bodies were not their own. The consequences of the past still imprison the small black community when the protagonist Sethe kills her daughter, Beloved, to prevent the family from returning to slavery. As a result, Sethe and her family are haunted by Beloved’s ghost and the community as a whole haunted by Sethe’s crime and their inability to understand why she kills her own child. In their efforts to heal the pains of slavery, Sethe and the community turn to music as a way to establish themselves as individuals and to negotiate their trauma.

Paul D in particular uses music as a coping mechanism. This is fitting because Paul D’s trauma involves two incidents of forced silence. In first instance occurs when Schoolteacher, the new master of Sweet Home, forces a bit in Paul D’s mouth. Sethe knows the pain of the bit, “how offended the tongue is, held down by iron, how the need to spit is so deep you cry for it” (84). Though she knows the pain, Sethe asks Paul D to tell her about the experience. Paul D,

however, does not know if he can. "I don't know. I never have talked about it. Not to a soul. Sang it sometimes, but I never told a soul. . . . Maybe. Maybe you can hear it. I just ain't sure I can say it. Say it right, I mean" (85). Paul D is not sure if he can articulate his pain in words, words that were taken from him with the bit. What he is unable to say to Sethe in words Paul D has said in song. Paul D not sure he can "say it right" because saying is perhaps inadequate.

Paul D is unable to articulate his pain in words not only because Schoolteacher silences his mouth, but also because Schoolteacher takes away the one word Paul D needs most to function: man. Before Schoolteacher, Mr. Garner had called all the slaves men, and the believed it. "Is that where the manhood lay? In the naming done by a whiteman who was supposed to know . . . In their relationship with Garner . . . they were believed and trusted, but most of all they were listened to . . . It was Schoolteacher who taught them otherwise . . . They were only Sweet Home men at Sweet Home" (147). Paul D wonders if this belief in manhood was only in the words of Mr. Garner, words easily changed and denounced by Schoolteacher. By taking away this one word, Paul D questions his entire existence. Schoolteacher does not call Paul D a man, only slave and object. The meaning of "man" was not intrinsic but conditional according to those in power. Garner "listened" to the slaves, and only when one is listened does one effectively have a voice. Since words no longer have meaning, Paul D will attempt to affirm himself through music.

Before Paul D can find meaning through music, however, his mouth is forced silent again. Paul D is sold and ultimately becomes a prisoner working on a railroad in Georgia. Here, Paul D and the other workers are forced to perform oral sex on the guards: "Kneeling in the mist they waited for the whim of a guard, or two, or three. Or maybe all of them wanted it. . . . Occasionally a kneeling man chose a gunshot in his head as the price, maybe, of taking a *bit* of foreskin with him to Jesus" (127, my emphasis). Paul D and the others suffer this other "bit" that hinders their ability to talk as men. Paul D and the other prisoners turn these oral violations into musical violence:

And they beat. The women for having known them and no more, no more; the children for having been them but never again. They killed a boss so often and so completely they had to bring him back to life to pulp him on more time. . . . they beat it away. Singing love songs to Mr. Death, they smashed his head. More than the rest, they killed the flirt whom folks called Life for leading them on. (128)

In this lyrical passage the workers use hammers to break the rocks as well as keep time like percussionists who keep time by beats. The workers also sing musical bits to articulate their pain: "With a sledge hammer in his hands and Hi Man's lead, the men got through. They sang it out and beat it up, garbling the words so they could not be understood; tricking the words so their syllables yielded up other meanings" (128). The workers must "trick the words" in order to trick the guards' ears, lest the guards know they are being symbolically murdered through song. To protest openly meant a sure and quick death. The syllables yield up other meanings for the guards, but all the prisoners understand each other. Song becomes the only form of protest and the only way these men can express and share their pain.

Paul D's protest through song is passive, nonconfrontational. Sixo, however, openly opposes Schoolteacher through song. As Paul D remembers Sixo, "now *there* was a man" (26), perhaps the only man a Sweet Home who did not need Garner to tell him he was a man. Being the only one who knew when and where the caravan would be to lead them out of Sweet Home, Sixo plans for the slaves' escape. When Sixo and Paul D are captured, Sixo openly defies Schoolteacher through song: "Sixo turns and grabs the mouth of the nearest pointing rifle. He

begins to sing . . . All the whitemen have to do is wait. For his song, perhaps, to end? Five guns are trained on him while they listen” (266). Sixo grabs the mouth of the gun, the mouth that would kill him, and begins to sing. Schoolteacher wants both men alive, but after hearing Sixo’s song changes his mind: “this one will never be suitable.’ The song must have convinced him” (266). Paul D does not make out the words Sixo sings, but “understood the sound: hatred so loose it was juba” (268). Juba is “a species of dance or breakdown practiced by the Black inhabitants of the southern United States, accompanied by clapping of hands, patting of the knees and things . . . and a refrain in which the word *juba* is frequently repeated” (OED). Sixo’s juba song is as violent as the mouth of a gun. Previously, Schoolteacher had beat Sixo “to show him that definitions belonged to the definers-not the defined” (225). Sixo, however, is able to express a kind of violence that cannot be defined, not even by Paul D. In response, Schoolteacher begins to burn Sixo alive on a tree while Sixo defiantly laughs, chanting “Seven-O! Seven-O! because “his Thirty-Mile Woman got away with his blossoming seed” (270). Sixo knows that his Thirty-Mile Woman is carrying his offspring, Seven-O, to safety. Since the fires will not start quick enough, they “shoot him to shut him up. Have to” (267). Not able to bear Sixo’s defiant song, they finally silence Sixo. Sixo, however, ultimately has the last word, the word of the child who will live beyond him in safety.

While Paul D and Sixo use music as a weapon and form of protest, Baby Suggs discourages violence and offers inspirational music to help heal the community. In her reenactment of Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount, Baby Suggs preaches to the masses, calling for them to love their bodies even though the whites despise them, especially their mouths:

You got to love it, you! And no, they ain’t in love with your mouth. Yonder, out there, they will see it broken and break it again. What you say out of it they will not heed. What you scream from it they do not hear. What you put into it to nourish your body they will snatch away and give you leavins instead. No, they don’t love your mouth. You got to love it. (104)

Baby Suggs acts as the dissenting voice against all others who might have hated their mouths and whatever came from them. She then encourages the community to find within themselves a feeling of love and to sing with their mouths: “Saying no more, she stood up then and danced with her twisted hip the rest of what her heart had to say while the others opened their mouths and gave her the music. Long notes held until the four-part harmony was perfect enough for their deeply loved flesh” (104).

The perfect harmony is destroyed, however, after an instance of deadly silence. After Sethe’s arduous journey to 124, Baby Suggs celebrates with a communal feast. Though the community participates in the festivities, they grow mad at the overabundance of food. “Baby Suggs’ three (maybe four) pies grew to ten (maybe twelve). Sethe’s two hens became five turkeys” (161). To the townspeople, this is too much like the miracle performed by Jesus on the shores of Galilee: “Loaves and fishes were His powers-they did not belong to an ex-slave who had probably never carried one hundred pounds to the scale . . . who had, in fact, been *bought out* of [slavery] by a doting son . . .” (162-63). Perhaps not knowing (or not caring) about Baby Suggs’ troubled past of lost children and rapes, the townspeople become jealous of her good fortune. Baby Suggs realizes that “her friends and neighbors were angry at her because she had overstepped, given too much, offended them by excess” (163). The next day, Schoolteacher rides into town with three other men. They are looking for Sethe but no one warns her of the impending danger. Their silence sends Schoolteacher straight to 124.

Stamp Paid, who had helped Sethe and other escaped slaves across the river to freedom, reflects why the community kept silent: “Nobody had warned them, and he’d always believed it wasn’t the exhaustion from a long day’s gorging that dulled them, but some other thing-like, well, meanness-that let them stand aside, or not pay attention, or tell themselves somebody else was probably bearing the news . . .” (185). Stamp Paid knows there could be no mistaking Schoolteacher’s ill intentions because he had “the Look . . . The righteous Look every Negro learned to recognize along with his ma’am’s tit” (184-85). Sethe had learned the lesson of Schoolteacher’s look at Sweet Home. Once while Schoolteacher was teaching his nephews a lesson, Sethe watches and listens: “No, no. That’s not the way. I told you to put her [Sethe’s] human characteristics on the left; her animal ones on the right. And don’t forget to line them up” (228). Sethe learns that Schoolteacher sees her as no more than quasi-human. Already knowing what the Look entails, the moment Sethe sees Schoolteacher’s hat heading towards her home, she takes her children to the shed to kill them. She manages to cut Beloved’s throat with a saw before being apprehended. As the four men approach the house they notice the silence, “road was so quiet they thought they were too late” (174). And as the townspeople watch Sethe being led away, they “stopped murmuring” (179). They stare at her in silence, Sethe’s head held “a bit too high” in what the townspeople viewed as her arrogance (179). Had Sethe left the shed devastated, guilty for her actions, the townspeople would have sung for her but instead they keep silent:

Otherwise the singing would have begun at once, the moment she appeared in the Doorway of the house on Bluestone Road. Some cape of sound would have quickly been wrapped around her, like arms to hold and steady her on the way. As it was, they waited till the cart turned about, headed west to town. And then no words. Humming. No words at all. (179)

The result of the Sethe’s murder and the towns’ silence is a community in disunity and henceforth music as a vehicle for the expression of unhealed and unhealing pain. At the burial of Baby Suggs, the community cannot stand what they view to be Sethe’s pride as she “stood there not joining in the hymn the others sang with all their hearts” (202). Singing hymns about peace and love does not disguise the atmosphere of hate, the real nature of the harmony: “So Baby Suggs, holy, having devoted her freed life to harmony, was buried amid a regular dance of pride, fear, condemnation and spite” (202).

As unable as Sethe is to explain Beloved’s death in words, so are others unable to hear it. When Denver asks Sethe about the murder, Denver goes deaf, “She went deaf rather than hear the answer” (123). Denver’s hearing was “cut off by an answer she could not bear” (122). Sethe is not quite able to justify her actions in words when she tries to explain to Paul D, “she knew that the circle she was making around the room, him, the subject would remain one. That she could never close in, pin it down for anybody who had to ask” (192). Sethe is not able to find the words to tell of her pain just as Paul D is not able to put into adequate words the pain of the bit. The result of hearing Sethe’s secret has an opposite affect on Paul D. Rather than Denver’s deafness, Paul D hears a “roaring in [his] head” (193). The answer to “why” is inaccessible with words but is describes as “unspeakable thoughts, unspoken” (235).

Only after Sethe recognizes Beloved as her resurrected daughter are the “unspeakable thoughts, unspoken” able to be heard (235). And the key for Sethe is a song. “The click came at the very beginning-a beat, almost, before it started; before she heard three notes; before the melody was even clear. Leaning forward a little, Beloved was humming softly” (206-207). Beloved is humming a lullaby Sethe invented for her children. “Nobody knows that song but me

and my children” (207). To Sethe, the lullaby she created especially for her children is irrefutable evidence of Beloved’s identity. Sethe, Beloved, and Denver unite their “unspeakable thoughts, unspoken” (235).

The uniting of Sethe, Denver and Beloved’s thoughts is the moment they identify each other as family. Thought the voices are “unspeakable” and “unspoken”, Stamp Paid can hear them and describes the roaring that comes from the thoughts:

. . . hasty voices-loud, urgent, all speaking at once so he could not make out what they were talking about or to whom. The speech wasn’t nonsensical, exactly, nor was it tongues. But something was wrong with the order of the words and he couldn’t describe or cipher it to save his life. All he could make out was the word *mine*. (202-203)

The words mingle too much for Stamp Paid to recognize any but the one word they share at the end. Ironically, by claiming each other as mine, the women claim an ownership of each other more binding than slavery’s binds. Unlike slavery, however, this possession binds them through love. This love will hopefully heal their wounds and unite them as a family.

Thought the women blissfully claim each other in love, the cacophony of “unspeakable thoughts, unspoken” does not heal the family; quite the contrary, the home spirals out of control. “Sethe was trying to make up for the handsaw; Beloved was making her pay for it. But there would never be an end to that, and seeing her mother diminished shamed and infuriated [Denver]” (295). The trio is no “diminished” like a diminished chord-highly dissonant and needing resolution. Therefore it is little wonder the resolution comes in the form of a song.

The same community who abandoned Sethe in silence twenty years before will save her through song. Many like Ella “didn’t like the idea of past errors taking possession of the present” and so they gather around the home to exorcise the ghost (302). “They stopped praying and stood 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” (305). This is an ironic twist to John 1:1, “In the Beginning was the Word.” Though the scripture claims that there was a word in the beginning, Stamp Paid reflects that words were powerless to save Baby Suggs: “the mouth that spoke the Word, didn’t count. They came into her yard anyway” (212). Words are not going to save Sethe either. Words belong to the world of Schoolteacher who used his notebook to record the horrors of Sweet Home and society’s justifications for slavery. Only a “sound” can save Sethe from her past and this sound is music:

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. (308)

This perfect combination of sound is the key to eliminating years of hate, oppression, selfishness, and pride that lingered in the atmosphere for twenty years. This sound is able to “break the back of words” such as the oppressive words of Schoolteacher; the words that would call Sethe and other blacks subhuman, objects. This music is so powerful that Sethe, who has stood firm through the most harrowing experiences, trembles. Like a baptismal, Sethe is washed with the sound and is made clean. The entire community unites in music, becoming the subjects, individuals with the right to a voice.

Songs in *Beloved*

Throughout *Beloved*, characters sing a variety of songs. Many are adaptations of spirituals and blues songs while others are unique to the novel. These songs also provide *Beloved* a unique aural quality. If one is familiar with the songs, he can hear them in his mind as he reads along. And even if one is not familiar, he can easily imagine the kind of sound it makes given the context it is sung and the lyrics. The characters use these songs to express feelings they often otherwise cannot speak.

No one in the novel sings more than Paul D. The first song introduced in the novel is sung by Paul D, an adaptation of “Sis Joe.” Appropriate enough, “Sis Joe” is a railroad song. In her article, “Toni Morrison and ‘Sis Joe’: The Musical Heritage of Paul D,” Lenore Kitts explores the origins of “sis Joe” and its use in the novel. Paul D sings:

Little Rice, little bean
No meat in between,
Hard Work ain’t easy,
Dry bread ain’t greasy (48).

Kitts comments on how the rhythmic structure of the song reflects that of hammering nails on the rail: “Tetrameter is common in this repertory because the caesura after two beats marked the activity of swinging the axe, hammering the railroad spike, or breaking up rock” (506). Using an authentic railroad work song, Morrison introduces a historical context to Paul D’s song. This history reminds one that this novel is not merely a fictional tale but an adaptation of real life and real horrors suffered.

Another song Paul D sings is a variation of the blues song “Trouble in Mind” and “I’ve Got to Roll.” Paul D sings his variation after he throws the baby ghost out of the house and is cleaning the mess he made, “He was up now and singing as he mended things he had broken the day before” (48). This line implies that to mend something requires a song, a broken spirit being no exception. Paul D sings the following:

Lay my head on the railroad line,
Train come along, pacify my mind.
If I had my weight in lime,
I’d whip my captain till he went stone blind. (48)

The stanza from “Trouble in Mind” as sang by Richard M. Jones reads:

I’m gonna lay my head
On some lonesome railroad line
And let the two nineteen
Satisfy my troubled mind. (<http://www.redhotjazz.com/jones.html>)

Like most folk songs, the lyrics change depending on the mood of the singer. The mood Paul D wants to capture is the futility and hopelessness of working on the railroad. When Paul D sings “Lay my head on the railroad line”, he laments an awful irony: he is building a rail he will never ride for people who will never know the lives ruined for their comfort.

Paul D also quotes from “I’ve Got to Roll,” a folk song recorded by soul singer Josh White:

If I’d a-had my weight in lime
I woulda whupped that cap’n till he went stone blind

These lines from “I’ve Got to Roll” portray the rage Paul D feels and his desire to kill his oppressors. “I’ve Got to Roll” is in C minor (see figure 1 below).

Ham and eggs, _____ Pork and beans. _____ Woul-da et more _____

But the cook was so mean. _____ I got-ta roll _____ Roll in a hur-ry, _____

Make it by the side of the road, _____ Make it by the side of the road.

Figure 1: "I've Got to Roll" (<http://sniff.numachi.com/pages/tiGOTROLL;ttGOTROLL.html>)

Most songs that people would describe as sad, depressing, or mournful are in minor keys. Minor keys create dissonance, in this case with the lower third not of the scale. Like the flattened nails of the rail, the E-flat creates the sad quality of the melody, portraying the sadness and murder-rage within Paul D.

While Paul D's songs are rhythmic and sad, Baby Suggs uses inspirational songs to uplift people's spirits. Baby Suggs' advice to Sethe is a direct quotation from "Down by the Riverside." Baby Suggs tells Sethe, "Lay em down, Sethe. Sword and shield. Down. Down. Both of em down. Down by the riverside. Sword and shield. Don't study war no more" (101). The lyrics to "Down by the Riverside" and score sample (figure 2) are as follows:

Gonna lay down my sword and shield
 Down by the riverside
 Down by the riverside
 Down by the riverside
 Gonna lay down my sword and shield
 Down by the riverside
 Ain't gonna study war no more.

Voice

Piano

5

5

lay down my sword and shield down by the ri ver side

Pno.

Figure 2: "Down by the Riverside" (Higginsen, 29).

Unlike "I've Got to Roll," "Down by the Riverside" is in a major key. Major keys create sounds that register more consonantly to the ear than minor keys. For this reason, many songs that people describe as happy and fun are in major keys. Baby Suggs uses this happy sounding,

inspirational song to uplift the masses and preach the Word. Baby Suggs wants Sethe and the community to lay down their swords and shields, their weapons and barriers that keep them from living peacefully.

Unlike the songs Paul D and Baby Suggs use, the following songs cannot be found outside the novel in song form. “Lady Button Eyes” is a poem that Morrison uses as a song in the novel. When Sethe is walking to Ohio in her last trimester, she is helped by a white girl named Amy. As they walk through the forest, Amy sings “Lady Button Eyes”:

When the busy day is done
And my weary little one
Rocketh gently to and fro;
When the night winds softly blow,
And the crickets in the glen
Chrip and chirp and chirp again;
Where ‘pon the haunted green
Fairies dance around their queen,
Then from yonder misty skies
Cometh Lady Button Eyes. (95)

Amy tells Sethe “that’s my mama’s song. She taught me it” (95). The song, however, is actually a poem written by Eugene Field (Field, 61-63). Though there is no way to know for certain what Amy’s song sounds like, since it is her mother’s song we can infer that it might sound like a lullaby. Lullabies are traditionally soothing songs to help children sleep. “Lady Button Eyes,” apart from being a children’s poem, could be a lullaby because Amy’s song keeps Denver quiet enough in the womb to allow Sethe to walk: “Sethe could hear her humming away in the bushes as she hunted spiderwebs. A humming she concentrated on because as soon as Amy ducked out the baby began to stretch” (94). Significantly, Amy sings only stanzas one, two, and four of the five stanza poem, leaving the numbers 124. 124 is the address of the home Sethe is traveling towards. 124 is also where she will ultimately kill her third child, the three missing from the address and the song. The third stanza, appropriately enough, is about a ghost:

Cometh like a fleeting ghost
From some distant eerie coast;
Never footfall can you hear
As that spirit fareth near-
Never whisper, never word
From that shadow-queen is heard.
In ethereal raiment dight,
From the realm of fay and sprite
In the depth of yonder skies
Cometh Lady Button-Eyes

This missing stanza alludes to the missing child who becomes a ghost. The narration even describes Beloved as having eyes like buttons, “big and black” (66). From the onset of the novel, Sethe bids Beloved to come just as the song bids Lady Button Eyes to come: “But if she’d only come, I could make it clear to her” (5).

Sethe’s lullaby is another scarcely audible song in *Beloved* especially since it is scattered, dismembered in two different parts of the novel. After Sethe discovers Beloved to be her reincarnated daughter, she spends all her time with Beloved, singing only for her, “Even the song that she used to sing to Denver she sang for Beloved alone: ‘High Johnny, wide Johnny,

don't you leave my side Johnny" (282). The next verse is heard by Paul D at the end of the novel as he is looking for her. He hears the song as he approaches, "Someone is humming a tune. Something soft and sweet, like a lullaby. Then a few words. Sounds like 'high Johnny, wide Johnny. Sweet William bend down low . . . Jackweed raise up high . . . Lambswool over my shoulder, buttercup and clover fly" (319-320). Johnny probably refers to a flower plant called Johnny-one-up. Sweet William and Buttercups are also flowers. What significance the plants have in the song, only Sethe and her children know: "I made that song up . . . I made it up and sang it to my children. Nobody knows that song but me and my children" (207).

Conclusion

Morrison creates a beautiful and haunting account in the form of what she calls "aural literature." Music provides an opportunity to express what words cannot say, words not adequate to express the variety of intense emotions felt by the characters. Paul D needs music to cope with the trauma of forced silence. Sixo uses music as a defense against those who want to harm him. Baby Suggs uses music to heal the community, and not until the end does the community sing to save themselves and Sethe from the haunting past. Music extends through every aspect of *Beloved*, from the songs sung to the psychology of the characters. Through words, Morrison creates not only a text rich in meaningful sound but a text which in itself "breaks the back of words" (308). *Beloved* is dedicated to the "sixty million and more" slaves who died and never had a voice. These millions of voices were silenced not only by people but also by the language that would call them inferior, objects. These millions of voices unspeakable, unspoken cannot be heard through language but require a different medium—the aural.

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