

Universität Trier
Fachbereich II – Anglistik
Literaturwissenschaft

***Vernacular Traditions:
The Use of Music in the Novels of Toni Morrison***

Schriftliche Prüfungsarbeit zur Erlangung der Doktorwürde

**vorgelegt von
Christine Spies**

- 1. Betreuer: Prof. Dr. Wolfgang Klooß**
- 2. Betreuer: Prof. Dr. Gerd Hurm**

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I Introduction

“All art constantly aspires towards the condition of music.”¹ This exceedingly applies to the novels of Nobel laureate Toni Morrison, who considers music “an art form that opens doors, rather than closes them, where there are more possibilities, not fewer.”² Her effort is to make “aural literature”³ which “has to read in silence [...] but it also has to *sound*.”⁴ To achieve this quality, Morrison makes ample use of musical properties and elements of African American vernacular in her novels.

The *vernacular*, deriving from Latin *vernaculus* (“native”) which is taken from *verna* (“slave born in his master’s house”),⁵ describes something “native or peculiar to a particular country”⁶ in the context of arts. African American *vernacular* comprises linguistic elements as well as musical genres.⁷ Within language, the oral traditions of storytelling, the originally West African concept of the power of naming *nommo*, testifying, and *Signifying*⁸, constitute important parts of the vernacular. In music, forms such as hollers, work songs, ring shouts, spirituals, blues and jazz, as well as contemporary rap, are indigenous to African Americans, although nowadays some are equally performed by members of different ethnicities.

The storytelling of the black community has its roots in West African griots bearing the traditions, religious beliefs, history, and folklore of their people in stories, rituals, myths, and songs. African American folktales often contain supernatural elements.⁹ Time in West African worldview is cyclical,¹⁰ and so are numerous

¹ Cf. Walter Pater, *The Renaissance: Studies in Art and Poetry*. London: Macmillan 1914. 135. Emphasis original.

² Cf. Robert Stepto, “Intimate Things in Place: A Conversation with Toni Morrison. 1976.” In: Danille Taylor-Guthrie (ed.), *Conversations with Toni Morrison*. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1994. 10-29. 28.

³ Cf. Christina Davis, “An Interview with Toni Morrison. 1986.” In: Taylor-Guthrie, 223-233. 230.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 230. Emphasis original.

⁵ Cf. Henry Louis Gates, Jr., *The Signifying Monkey. A Theory of Afro-American Literary Criticism*. New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988. 6.

⁶ Cf. Houston A. Baker, Jr., *Blues, Ideology, and Afro-American Literature. A Vernacular Theory*. Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1984. 2.

⁷ Cf. Henry Louis Gates, Jr., Nellie Y. McKay (eds.), *The Norton Anthology of African American Literature*. New York: Norton 1997. 1.

⁸ “Signifying” within the African American vernacular is often written in upper-case, in order not to be confused with the use and meaning of its Standard English homonym. This practice will also be followed in this paper, whereas the spelling will remain the same although some scholars leave out the final g or put it in brackets to distinguish the words even more.

⁹ Cf. Georgia Writers’ Project, *Drums and Shadows*. Westport: 1976.

¹⁰ Cf. Susan Bowers, “*Beloved* and the New Apocalypse.” In: David Middleton (ed.), *Toni Morrison’s Fiction. Contemporary Criticism*. New York and London: Garland Publishing, 2000. 209-230. 212.

folktales.¹¹ The stories are transmitted orally, they are being told, memorised, and retold, thereby undergoing changes at times.¹² Frequently, these tales are open-ended, containing a message or a moral at the same time as a deliberate ambiguity.¹³ “[I]t’s an ongoing thing and the reader or the listener is in it and you have to THINK.”¹⁴ Audience participation is an important feature, which manifests itself in call and response patterns.¹⁵ Morrison is very much aware of this property and makes ample use of it: “The reader supplies the emotions. The reader supplies even some of the color, some of the sound. My language has to have holes and spaces so that the reader can come into it.”¹⁶ “Then we (you, the reader, and I, the author) come together to make this book.”¹⁷

Nommo, the power inherent in language with the potential of shaping reality, even taken for “the force of life itself,”¹⁸ is strongly connected to these antiphonal (call and response) patterns. In West Africa, religious and magical rituals were said to be performed with the help of *nommo*. It was also vital to accomplish an understanding of the universe and its development.¹⁹ To name something was to establish magical control over it.²⁰ Naming is still important for African Americans. It includes the traditional choosing of names out of the Bible at random, as well as naming and renaming oneself, and the significance of nicknames. Therefore, it is seen as a serious insult to call somebody out of one’s name.

Naming what you see and what you experience, thereby preserving it and making it known, is called testifying. Naming and testifying are assigned healing and transforming powers; they are a means of claiming and shaping African American culture and heritage.²¹ Throughout the centuries, African Americans have been

¹¹ Cf. LeRoi Jones, *Blues People. Negro Music in White America*. New York: William Morrow and Company, 1963. ⁵1969. 31.

¹² Cf. Nellie McKay, “An Interview with Toni Morrison. 1983.” In: Taylor-Guthrie, 138-155. 152p.

¹³ Cf. Davis in Taylor-Guthrie, 232.

¹⁴ *Ibid.* Emphasis original.

¹⁵ Cf. Alma Jean Billingslea Brown, *Crossing Borders Through Folklore*. Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1999. 85.

¹⁶ Cf. Claudia Tate, “Toni Morrison. 1983.” In: Taylor-Guthrie, 156-170. 164.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 84.

¹⁸ Cf. Brian Dorsey, *Spirituality, Sensuality, Literality. Blues, Jazz and Rap as Music and Poetry*. Austrian Studies in English 86. Wien: Braunmüller, 2000. 12.

¹⁹ Cf. Johanna X. K. Garvey, “That Old Black Magic? Gender and Music in Ann Petry’s Fiction.” In: Saadi A. Simawe, *Black Orpheus. Music in African American Fiction from the Harlem Renaissance to Toni Morrison*. New York and London: Garland Publishing, 2000. 119-151. 134.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 147.

²¹ Garvey, 132p.

testifying to their history, their sufferings, and their circumstances in songs, stories, and for a long time, in *slave narratives*²².

Alongside testifying, *Signifying* is another important element of the African American vernacular. It embraces many different features and can be traced back to the Yoruba trickster figure of Esu-Elegbara, which is succeeded in the New World by the Signifying Monkey. Esu-Elegbara,²³ who is endowed with a special talent for language and rhetorics, stands for the use of formal language and its interpretation as well as for double-voiced utterances²⁴ through his mediating role as the only messenger of the gods.²⁵ He interprets their will to Man and transmits Man's longings to the gods. "Esu is the guardian of the crossroads, master of style and of stylus, the phallic god of generation. [...] [L]inguistically Esu is the ultimate copula, connecting truth with understanding, the sacred with the profane, text with interpretation, the word [...] that links a subject with its predicate,"²⁶ since his name is the Yoruba equivalent of the verb "to be," he "connects the grammar of divination with its rhetorical structures."²⁷ In the myth about Esu, he is summoned to the gods, because they did not receive enough offerings from Man. Now Esu has to obtain a kind of oracle consisting of sixteen palm-nuts, which he is given by monkeys. His task is to go to sixteen special places of the world in order to inquire about the meaning of the nuts. Having learnt that, he must report it to the gods and afterwards to Mankind. When the humans receive this divine message, they prepare offerings again.²⁸ Without the help of the monkeys, Esu would not have been able to fulfil his task, so their role in the myth is crucial.

In the process of the transmission from Western Africa to the New World, the Esu figure was replaced by the Signifying Monkey. Unfortunately, it is not quite clear how and why this change took place – it might have been the effect of confusion, since the Monkey does appear in many African tales, even together with the Lion and the

²² Slave narratives were accounts of the life of slaves. They were mostly autobiographical, written or orally transmitted when the authors were finally free, either legally or after a successful escape. Ironically, for a long time a white person had to promote the narrative for propaganda purposes or to grant it credibility, i.e., to testify to it. Cf. Lisa Clayton Robinson, "Slave Narratives". In: Kwame Anthony Appiah, Henry Louis Gates, Jr. (eds.), *Microsoft, Encarta Africana, 3rd edition*. 2000.

²³ The best-known version of the Esu-Elegbara myth stems from Yoruba culture. Frequently, he is merely called "Esu". In versions of other peoples – as in that of the Fon – he is called "Legba", whereas he is known as "Jigüe" in Cuba, which was a meeting point of Yoruba and European Hispanic culture. In order to prevent confusion, he will merely be called "Esu" in this paper. Cf. Gates, *Signifying Monkey*. 17.

²⁴ Cf. Gates, *Signifying Monkey*. XXp.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 6.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 6.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 6.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 14.

Elephant.²⁹ Furthermore, Esu is called “the father of the Monkey”³⁰ in a Fon myth about the first humans. There, he transforms “two of the earth’s four primal beings into monkeys.”³¹ And *Monkey* is also one of Esu’s bynames.³² Even the description of his physical appearance bears resemblance to a monkey: He is of very dark colour, has long hair and, more importantly, pointed teeth.³³

The jigue was born in Oriente. / The jigue came from the waters. / [...] A dark jigue is watching / With a great length of hair... / His teeth are pointed / And his intentions are sharp. / [...] The jigue was born in Oriente / And brought there from Africa, / where he had been a monkey: the last / monkey who fell into the water; / [...] Jigue-monkey, / monkey-jigue, / nganga-jigue / jigue-nganga;³⁴

In this Cuban adaptation of the myth, Esu is identified as African, he is called a monkey, and he is associated with water, which accounts for the Middle Passage³⁵. “Nganga” is an expression in the West African language KiKongo meaning “medicine” or “magic” – in this way, the trickster nature of this figure is made evident. Gates quotes Tula Kia Mpansu Buakasa, who even translates “nganga” as “interpreter.” The name “Jigue” is derived from the Efik-Ejagham word “jiwe” – meaning “monkey.”³⁶ The numerous cross-references between Esu and the Monkey suggest that the Signifying Monkey can safely be taken as the African American successor to West African Esu, even though the entire process of this transformation must remain in the dark. These tales of the Signifying Monkey deal with the manipulative use of language.

Deep down in the jungle so they say
There’s a signifying monkey down the way
There hadn’t been no disturbin’ in the jungle for quite a bit,
For up jumped the monkey in the tree one day and laughed
“I guess I’ll start some shit.”³⁷

The Monkey then starts to tell the Lion a lie about the Elephant, who had supposedly been talking badly about the Lion, and so plays the two off against each other. The Lion then tries to get back at the Elephant and is beaten in a subsequent fight. Similar to the

²⁹ Ibid., 15p.

³⁰ Ibid., 17.

³¹ Ibid., 17.

³² Ibid., 17.

³³ Ibid., 17.

³⁴ Excerpts from Teofilo Radillo’s *The Song of the Jigue*. Cited after Gates, *Signifying Monkey*, 17-20.

³⁵ The forced transport of slaves from Africa to the New World.

³⁶ Ibid., 18.

formulaic opening, there is a typical ending to the many versions of toasts about the Signifying Monkey.³⁸

“Monkey,” said the Lion,
Beat to his unbooted knees,
“You and your signifying children
Better stay up in the trees.”
Which is why today
Monkey does his signifying
A-way-up out of the way.³⁹

The Lion, defeated first by falling for the Monkey’s words and then by his beating by the Elephant, wants to avenge himself on the Monkey, making clear what he wants to punish the Monkey for. “Said, ‘Monkey, I’m not kicking your ass for lyin’, / I’m kicking your hairy ass for *signifyin*’.”⁴⁰ The poems about the Signifying Monkey can be seen as the root of African American *Signifying*, which nowadays contains a manifold of language games.

“Thinking about the black concept of Signifyin(g) is a bit like stumbling unaware into a hall of mirrors: the sign itself appears to be doubled, at the very least, and (re)doubled upon every closer examination.”⁴¹ In fact, as Gates quotes Roger D. Abrahams, “Signifyin(g) can mean any number of things” from “the ability to talk with great innuendo” to “the propensity to talk around a subject, never quite coming to the point” just as much as “making fun of a person or situation.”⁴² An important element of *Signifying* is the game of “The Dozens,”⁴³ a verbal fight with the objective to insult and abuse the participants’ relatives, particularly their mothers. Emotional strength is tested and the first of the opponents - usually black boys - to turn angry, loses.⁴⁴ *Signifying* involves double-voicedness and revision; in this context intertextuality plays a major role, for known texts are varied and given a new meaning. Closely connected are irony, satire, and parody as means of *Signifying*, as well as the use of magic, indeterminacy,

³⁷ Gates, *Signifying Monkey*. 55.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 55.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 55.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 57. Emphasis original.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 43. Other scholars, such as Stephen Henderson, also deal with the topic of Signifying, but Gates’ study is the most exhaustive and most useful. Hence, it serves as the basis for the explanation of Signifying in this paper.

⁴² *Ibid.*, all quotations are taken from page 75.

⁴³ This term goes back to the 18th century meaning of the verb “to dozen”: to stun or stupefy through language. Cf. Gates, *Signifying Monkey*. 71.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 68.

ambiguity and open-endedness – so important in African American storytelling.⁴⁵ Related to this linguistic practice are also testifying and calling out of one's name.⁴⁶ Taking into account all of these properties, "Esu is the indigenous black metaphor for the literary critic,"⁴⁷ and *Signifying* is "the figurative difference between the literal and the metaphorical, between surface and latent meaning."⁴⁸ As literary qualities of *Signifying*, Gates mentions intertextuality as a means of revision, the play of voices as in a *Talking Book*⁴⁹, and "rewriting the Speakerly", meaning the parody or pastiche of given texts.⁵⁰ African American music also *Signifies*, but prior to the explanation of how this is done, the different musical forms themselves need examination.

"Music was not only something to do but also a way of doing it"⁵¹ for African Americans, since all kinds of work were usually accompanied by singing to break the monotony of work and to motivate the workers.⁵² Therefore, it is not surprising that the most basic form of African American music, the holler, stems from slavery times and had its origin in the fields.⁵³ The holler could be compared to a short motif, sung in isolation. It functioned as a form of communication and often signalled the singer's approach. Hollers were highly individualised, and singers could be identified on account of their respective hollers. By hollering, a slave could establish contact with another one further away. Work songs developed from the extension and creative amplification of hollers. They commented upon the work that was done and helped to lift the singer's moral. While the hollers were uttered solo, work songs were communal, in order to harmonise the work and to give it its rhythm. Often, a lead singer sung a line or a verse, and the others contributed a chorus, thereby following an antiphonal pattern.

Alongside these secular genres, there was sacred music, too. These so-called spirituals possessed many African elements, for example call and response patterns,

⁴⁵ Gates, *Signifying Monkey*, 6.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 51p.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 9.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 82.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, XXVII. A *Talking Book* makes use of free indirect discourse to present the text itself as a dynamic character, reflecting a considerable amount of self-consciousness in a hybrid character, who is neither the novel's protagonist nor a narrator separate from the book. Cf. Gates, *Signifying Monkey*. XXVII.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, XXVII.

⁵¹ Cf. Dorsey, 35.

⁵² Cf. Eileen Southern, *The Music of Black Americans. A History*. New York: Norton, 1971. 153.

⁵³ For the development of African American musical forms, cf. John W. Work, *American Negro Songs and Spirituals*. New York: Bonanza Books, 1940; James Weldon Johnson and J. Rosamond Johnson, *The Book of American Negro Spirituals*. New York: The Viking Press, 1969; Paul Oliver: "Blues, the Growth of a Genre." and "Music: African American" [no author mentioned] In: Appiah and Gates, *Encarta Africana*; Southern.

while they dealt with Biblical themes and heroes, which reflects the (sometimes forced) encounter with Christianity.⁵⁴ Other central themes were freedom and the reaffirmation of the traditional worldview.⁵⁵ They described the slaves' ordeals, the various sufferings of Biblical peoples, and salvation. Often, motifs of death and resurrection conveyed the double meaning of the wish to escape from slavery, the lyrics having double or multiple referents.⁵⁶ The dual character of many lyrics goes hand in hand with the slaves' frequent practice of Christianity as an "outward manifestation of deeper African religious concerns."⁵⁷ Partly using Christianity as a mask, they simultaneously practised African rituals and held on to their mythology. The rhythm of the spirituals, although at first sight often organised according to three or four beats per measure, was often replenished with cross-rhythms, syncopations, poly-rhythms and off-beats which defied exact European notation. Similarly, the harmonies of the songs were hard to put down on paper, since while often adhering to pentatonic scales⁵⁸, blue notes⁵⁹ were extensively used.⁶⁰ Spirituals were not only a medium for slaves to adapt and transcend their situation by means of hidden references in the text, but also a source of information.⁶¹ Messages about secret meetings or imminent flight attempts could be conveyed without the slave masters' understanding. Although on the surface the difference between sacred and secular forms of music seems clear, the division was not always possible⁶² – some of the work songs touched religious concerns, while spirituals dealing with slave life could easily be taken for work songs at times.

Another religious practice involving music was the ring shout. It included Christian and African rituals, ancestor worship, communication and teaching through storytelling; it merged music and dance. While spirituals and other genres of African American music were recited, the people involved moved in circles and shuffled along. Again, there was usually a lead singer and the community joined in a chorus, following

⁵⁴ Cf. Jacquelyn A. Fox-Good, "Singing the Unsayable: Theorizing Music in Dessa Rose." In: Simawe, 1-40. 21.

⁵⁵ Cf. Dorsey, 57.

⁵⁶ Fox-Good, 22.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 24.

⁵⁸ A scale consisting of five notes only.

⁵⁹ Notes not belonging to neither major, minor, nor pentatonic scales; a note which is not sung clearly, often between two notes belonging to the scales.

⁶⁰ Cf. Dorsey, 46; Fox-Good, 25.

⁶¹ Cf. Dorsey, 38.

⁶² Cf. Gates and McKay, 5.

the ubiquitous technique of antiphony,⁶³ which was not always linear, but “overlapping, producing ‘unorthodox harmonic sounds’”⁶⁴ leading to heterophony.

Evolving out of the sacred and secular folk music of African-Americans living in the South during slavery and Reconstruction, the blues first emerged as a clearly definable work song genre in the second half of the nineteenth century. [...] By the 1890s, all of those ingredients necessary for this new folksong form had matured into the music identified as the blues, which was soon to become the most popular form of music in America.⁶⁵

The colloquial reference to this form of music as “blues” is documented in the early 1800s.⁶⁶ In spite of the spiritual being one of the forerunners of blues, major differences can be detected: “The spirituals are choral and communal, the blues are solo and individual. The spirituals are intensely religious, and the blues are just as intensely worldly.”⁶⁷ The relation of the blues to spirituals is comparable to that of “Saturday night to Sunday morning.”⁶⁸ Nevertheless, some songs are termed “blues-spirituals.”⁶⁹ The blues form a synthesis of numerous elements coming from work songs, hollers, spirituals, folk philosophy, humor, lament and many more.⁷⁰ However, the blues mostly confronted problems such as poverty, racial oppression, migration, and personal disasters. These songs served to ease pain and let out frustration and despair, to affirm life and restore optimism.⁷¹ Paul Oliver saw blues lyrics as “a form of social history that mirrored American social conditions and made personal responses to those conditions.”⁷² Ralph Ellison’s famous and frequently quoted definition of the nature of blues runs as follows:

The blues is an impulse to keep the painful details and episodes of a brutal experience alive in one’s aching consciousness, to finger its jagged grain, and to transcend it, not by the consolation of philosophy but by squeezing from it a near-tragic, near-comic lyricism. As a form, the blues is an autobiographical chronicle of personal catastrophe expressed lyrically.⁷³

⁶³ Cf. Dorsey, 33.

⁶⁴ Cf. Fox-Good, 25; Southern, 210.

⁶⁵ Cf. Dorsey, 53.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 54.

⁶⁷ Cf. Work, 28.

⁶⁸ Cf. William L. Andrews (ed.), *The Oxford Companion to African American Literature*. New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997. 85.

⁶⁹ Cf. Southern, 336.

⁷⁰ Cf. Baker, 5 and 188.

⁷¹ Cf. Dorsey, 51.

⁷² *Ibid.*, 66.

⁷³ Cf. Ralph Ellison, “Richard Wright’s Blues.” 1945. In: *Shadow and Act*. New York: Random House, 1964. 74-94. 78p.

The typical blues singer was a “footloose wanderer who changed his sexual partners as often as his address.”⁷⁴ Therefore, the blues were often associated with the lowly and rejected by respectable people.⁷⁵ There were two main forms of the blues: the country blues, mainly sung by men with guitars or banjos, and the city blues, sung by women in the 1920s and 1930s, accompanied by a piano or an orchestra.⁷⁶

While the blues were vocally oriented, jazz, having developed (among other sources) out of city blues and ragtime - emphasised the instruments, thereby trying to recreate a singing style characterised by blue notes.⁷⁷ The beginnings of jazz are commonly positioned around the turn of the 19th to the 20th century.⁷⁸ A typical jazz piece consists of a limited amount of core material and many variations due to the musicians’ turn-taking in improvising and playing solo. In jazz, performers are composers, making up the pieces as they go along. Repetition, variation, and improvisation are the most salient features, and again, antiphony plays a major role in the music.⁷⁹ This description of jazz music limits itself to the absolute basics, because there are too many different styles competing with each other.⁸⁰ “Nobody agrees on anything about jazz (except that it survived beautifully and blossomed), but everybody thinks they know all about it, anywhere in the world. There is an interesting ownership of jazz.”⁸¹

Through improvisation and the variation of so-called riffs (repeated phrases) in jazz, musicians *Signify* upon each other. Repetition and revision, thereby emphasising the difference, are important methods of *Signifying* and can equally be found in language and music. The quotation of a song or the careful allusion to song titles within other pieces of music, as well as the adaptation of song forms are further means of *Signifying*, just as the incorporation of children’s games or folk rhymes into music.⁸² The most obvious form of *Signifying* in African American music might be found within the lyrics of the songs – either in the hidden allusions of spirituals, or as regards the use

⁷⁴ Cf. Dorsey, 70.

⁷⁵ Cf. Southern, 336.

⁷⁶ Ibid., 335p.

⁷⁷ Ibid., 363 and 376.

⁷⁸ Cf. LeRoi Jones, 17.

⁷⁹ Cf. Southern, 363.

⁸⁰ For this paper, the features most kinds of jazz have in common are more important than the differences between the various sub-categories. Furthermore, the jazz played in Harlem in the 1920s is what Morrison is making use of and talking about in her novel *Jazz*.

⁸¹ Cf. Madhu Dubey, “Narration and Migration: *Jazz* and Vernacular Theories of Black Women’s Fiction.” In: *American Literature* 10:2 (1998). 291-316. 295.

⁸² Cf. Dorsey, 29p.

of irony and other rhetorical means in the blues. By dealing with personal sufferings and naming them, the blues summon the power of *nommo* and they are testifying, thereby transcending the bleak situation, adapting it to one's own needs and through this reinterpretation, *Signifying* upon it.⁸³ "Musical Signifyin(g) is the rhetorical use of pre-existing material as a means of demonstrating respect or poking fun at a musical style, process, or practice through parody, pastiche, implication, indirection, humor, tone play or word play, the illusion of speech or narration, or other such troping mechanisms."⁸⁴ And if there is a contrast between the extremely sad lyrics and the sometimes very happy instrumental part of a blues song, this certainly symbolises yet another form of *Signifying* by undermining the meaning of one level by contrasting it with the other; the two levels - language and music - are communicating with and commentating on each other.

"Blues, work songs and hollers, and such verbal forms as folktales, boasts, toasts, and dozens are functions of the black masses' relationship of 'identity' vis-à-vis mainstream culture."⁸⁵ In the black community, music fulfils various functions: it serves as a form of oral communication, it sets value standards, and it is definitely a means of survival. For centuries, African Americans had to find a way of expressing themselves and their needs under the hard restrictions of slavery and later still under the oppression of white society, so they transformed much of their "social energy into cultural energy."⁸⁶ The importance of music in order to fulfil vital needs results in the subversion of the "mind-body split inherited from Cartesianism."⁸⁷ Thus, the use of music as a means of communication and commentary on life's situations thus subverts the "tyranny of Western rationality,"⁸⁸ a fact Toni Morrison is well aware of in writing her novels:

There has to be a mode to do what the music did for blacks, what we used to be able to do with each other in private and in that civilization that existed underneath the white civilization. I think this accounts for the address of my books. I am not explaining anything to anybody. My work bears witness and suggests who the outlaws were, who survived under what circumstances and why, what was legal in the community as opposed to what was legal outside it.

⁸³ Cf. Garvey, 132p. and 147.

⁸⁴ Cf. Dorsey, 39.

⁸⁵ Cf. Baker, 68.

⁸⁶ Cf. Dorsey, 38.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 36.

⁸⁸ Cf. Fox-Good, 4.

All that is the fabric of the story in order to do what the music used to do. The music kept us alive, but it's not enough anymore.⁸⁹

She acknowledges the importance of music, while at the same time she also recognises its limits. For her, the solution is to be found in the blending of music and literature: "I know that my effort is to be like something that has probably only been fully expressed perhaps in music, or in some other culture-gen that survives almost in isolation because the community manages to hold on to it."⁹⁰ Apart from Morrison's novels, several of her other works touch upon musical matters. Her short story *Recitatif*⁹¹ takes its title from a hybrid mode between singing and speaking. In addition to that, Morrison has written the lyrics to various song cycles, namely *Honey and Rue*⁹², *Four Songs*⁹³, *Spirits in the Well*⁹⁴, and *Sweet Talk*⁹⁵. Lately, Morrison has been writing the libretto for an opera entitled *Margaret Garner*, a work commissioned by and to be premiered at Michigan Opera Theatre in May 2005. Once more, Morrison has co-operated with composer Richard Danielpour.⁹⁶ Asked about the relationship between her novels and her contributions to the song cycles, Morrison points out the musical quality she perceives in her works. She explains that she tried to capture a certain mood in her lyrics, which the respective composers or singers then had to transfer to music. In her novels, however, she aims to insert all these facets into her choice of words.⁹⁷

Walter Göbel, who calls music the mother tongue of African Americans, agrees that Toni Morrison widely relies on oral culture, the vernacular, folklore, music and magic in her works.⁹⁸ Vernacular traditions and the use of music will be investigated in all of Toni Morrison's novels.⁹⁹ This study will be subdivided into three major parts. In

⁸⁹ Cf. Thomas LeClair, "The Language Must Not Sweat: A Conversation with Toni Morrison." In: Taylor-Guthrie, 119-128. 121.

⁹⁰ Cf. McKay in Taylor-Guthrie, 152.

⁹¹ Toni Morrison, "Recitatif. (1983)" In: *The Norton Anthology of American Literature, Vol.2*. New York: Norton, 1998. 2078-2092.

⁹² Morrison's poems were set to music by André Previn in co-operation with Kathleen Battle. Cf. Toni Morrison, André Previn, *Honey and Rue*. Deutsche Grammophon, 1995.

⁹³ These poems were also set to music by André Previn. Cf. André Previn et. al., *Music from Luzerne*. Albany Records, 2000.

⁹⁴ Morrison's lyrics and Richard Danielpour's music were commissioned for singer Jessye Norman and have been performed in concert on several occasions. Unfortunately, they have not been published on CD so far. Cf. <http://www.recmusic.org/lieder/d/danielpour.html>, 22nd of November 2003.

⁹⁵ Richard Danielpour also set these lyrics to music. As in the case of *Spirits in the Well*, the songs have not been published on CD. Cf. <http://www.recmusic.org/lieder/d/danielpour.html>, 22nd of November 2003.

⁹⁶ Cf. http://www.freep.com/entertainment/newsandreviews/mot20_20030220.htm. 20th of February 2003.

⁹⁷ Cf. Toni Morrison, *Reading at the Royal Festival Hall*, London. 5th of December 2003.

⁹⁸ Cf. Walter Göbel, *Der afroamerikanische Roman im 20. Jahrhundert. Eine Einführung*. Berlin: Erich Schmidt Verlag, 2001. 54 and 139.

⁹⁹ Toni Morrison, *The Bluest Eye*. 1970. New York: Washington Square Press, 1972. (TBE)

the first, the actual use of music – characters singing or listening to music – will be examined. The functions of respective musical renditions as well as their consequences, such as the transmission of cultural legacies and the maintenance of connections with the African American heritage through music are going to be looked at. An analysis of how music can constitute a community and at the same time define outsiders is followed by an examination of the inherent power of music to facilitate survival by assisting memory and expressing protest and resistance. Music can express and refer to both artificiality and nature, it is capable of numbing people and of saving them at the same time; in many cases, music is empowering. The following part is to deal with the transfer of musical properties to the novels regarding structure and content. Call and response, rhythmical devices, and musical patterns such as themes and variations are applied to the structure of the novels, and their functions – both in the novels as well as concerning Morrison’s intentions for appropriating them - are going to be analysed. Subsequently, the content of different songs is supposed to be put into context with the novels’ stories. The third part will deal with vernacular traditions, which are related to and used in music. Storytelling and folktales, as well as testifying and *Signifying* in Toni Morrison’s novels will be examined. Although the importance of naming well could be explored from the points of view of Western philosophy (in the traditions of Martin Heidegger or George Steiner) or linguistics (following the school of thought of Edward Sapir and Benjamin Whorf), and despite the fact that the use of intertextuality could be seen in relation to postmodernism, and that some of the tricksters could have well been taken out of a Gothic novel, the general framework for the exploration of the novels and the topics connected to them will be that of music and the African American vernacular.

Sula. 1973. London: Vintage, 1998. (*Sula*)
Song of Solomon. 1977. London: Vintage, 1998. (*SoS*)
Tar Baby. 1981. London: Picador, 1993. (*TB*)
Beloved. 1987. London: Vintage, 1997. (*Beloved*)
Jazz. 1992. New York: Signet 1992. (*Jazz*)
Paradise. London: Chatto & Windus, 1998. (*Paradise*)
Love. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2003. (*Love*)

Quotations from the novels will be given within the text itself. Page numbers refer to the editions mentioned above, which will be cited with the help of the titles or abbreviations in brackets. Due to their frequent deviations from Standard English, quotations from the novels and from secondary sources will be given without marking these differences. Original emphasis in quotations from the novels will not be pointed out separately.

II Musical Performers and Listeners

I Mediator of Cultural Legacies: *The Blues*

“Morrison accompanies the actions and dialogues of her novels with a sound track of gospel songs, folk tunes, standards and blues, and many of her characters sing, hum, or whistle their way through scenes of joy and trouble.”¹⁰⁰ In the case of *The Bluest Eye*, the blues has a large impact on Claudia, the narrator. She describes her mother’s singing in extremely lyrical language.

If my mother was in a singing mood, it wasn’t so bad. She would sing about hard times, bad times, and somebody-done-gone-and-left-me times. But her voice was so sweet and her singing-eyes so melty I found myself longing for those hard times, yearning to be grown without “a thin di-i-ime to my name.” I looked forward to the delicious time when “my man” would leave me, when I would “hate to see that evening sun go down...” ‘cause then I would know “my man has left this town.” Misery colored by the greens and blues in my mother’s voice took all of the grief out of the words and left me with a conviction that pain was not only endurable, it was sweet. (*TBE*, 24)

Claudia informs us that her mother used to sing after having been annoyed or angry at somebody or with something: “Then, having told everybody and everything off, she would burst into song and sing the rest of the day.” (*TBE*, 23) The way in which the singing is described, the cathartic quality of the music becomes obvious,¹⁰¹ as for Mrs. MacTeer singing constitutes a cleansing ritual and establishes a validation of her self.¹⁰² In Stephen Henderson’s view, the blues are “a music and a poetry of confrontation – with the self, with the family and loved ones, with the oppressive forces of society, with nature, and, on the heaviest level, with fate and the universe itself.”¹⁰³ By confronting such problems, blues lyrics affirm the misery, thus helping the singer to transcend them, appropriate them, and so to ultimately reach a catharsis necessary in order to face life and the present anew.¹⁰⁴ For Claudia, music unites the senses - it blurs the borders between pleasure and pain; Claudia longs to share the experience sung about in those

¹⁰⁰ Cf. Anthony J., “Toni Morrison’s Literary Jazz.” In: *CLA Journal*. 32 (1989 March). 267-283. 268.

¹⁰¹ Cf. Cat Moses, “The Blues Aesthetic in Toni Morrison’s *The Bluest Eye*.” In: *African American Review* 33:4 (1999, Winter). 623-636.

Cited after: http://findarticles.com/cf_0/m2838/4_33/59024884/print.jhtml, 30th of June 2002.

18 pages, 2.

¹⁰² Cf. Deanna M. Garabedian, “Toni Morrison and the Language of Music.” In: *CLA Journal* 41 (1997/98). 303-318. 306.

¹⁰³ Cf. Dorsey, 50.

blues. She not only takes it for granted that it is part of what life holds in stock for her, but is also sure that sadness and grief of that nature can be overcome, dealt and done with – not least through the cleansing process of singing the blues. Claudia very much depends on music for sustenance: “I want to sit on the low stool in Big Mama’s kitchen with my lap full of lilacs and listen to Big Papa play his violin for me alone.” (*TBE*, 21)

“*The song is no stranger, can never be lost.*”¹⁰⁵ The content of stereotypical blues songs is so commonly known that the blues include folk wisdom and folk believe and reflect the attitudes of the black society. When Mrs. MacTeer “hate[s] to see that evening sun go down,” (*TBE*, 24) she quotes a line of the “St. Louis Blues.”¹⁰⁶ In the song, a woman has been left by her lover for a woman from St. Louis. Of course, the singer is sad, but she shows strength and self-confidence a few lines further down: “Got de St. Louis blues, jes as blue as I can be / Dat man got a heart lak a rock cast in de sea / Or else he wouldn’t have gone so far from me.”¹⁰⁷ She blames the man and continues to believe in herself. She then consults a gypsy fortune teller, who advises her to try to win back her lover, who is the “Blackest man in de whole St. Louis / Blacker de berry, sweater is de juice...”¹⁰⁸ The song ends with “a blond headed woman makes a good man leave the town [...] / But a red headed woman make a boy slap his papa down.”¹⁰⁹ The St. Louis Blues is well-known to Claudia, she regularly hears her mother singing it. And she internalises the common values it transports.¹¹⁰

Claudia habitually dismantles the white baby-dolls given to her as a present, and she even feels the wish to do the same with white girls. (*TBE*, 19-22) She is unwilling to identify with them, but more than that, she is unable to understand why they – and not girls like herself - are considered so cute even by the black community. The reasons for the prevailing beauty ideal of blond hair and blue eyes are beyond her reach. She does not want to be compared with white baby-girls, who will eventually turn out to be just another of these blond women who make lovers leave. Furthermore, in the song, red headed women are portrayed to be superior to the blondes. Since in African American slang, “red headed” often stands for a spirited, lively, and sexy black woman, it can be concluded that this song does not talk of red hair at all. Claudia yearns for a black

¹⁰⁴ Cf. Craig Hansen Werner, *Playing the Changes. From Afro-Modernism to the Jazz Impulse*. Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1994. XXI p.

¹⁰⁵ Cf. Baker, 64. Emphasis original.

¹⁰⁶ Cf. W.C. Handy, *St. Louis Blues*. In: Gates and McKay, 24p.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, 24.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, 25.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, 25.

beauty ideal. After a verbal fight with Maureen Peal, a “high-yellow dream child,” (TBE, 52) she wonders, “[w]hat was the secret? What did we lack? Why was it important?” (TBE, 61p.) – why was Maureen believed to be cute merely on account of the lighter shade of her skin? But her knowledge of the song which enhances the value of black skin (“Blacker de berry, sweater is de juice”), helps both her and Frieda. “Guileless and without vanity, we were still in love with ourselves then. We felt comfortable in our skins. [...] The *Thing* to fear was the *Thing* that made *her* beautiful, and not us.” (TBE, 62) Even though Claudia is confronted with a society that disregards her skin colour in favour of a complexion much lighter than her own, she does not lose her self-esteem. Well prepared by her loving mother’s singing, she follows her own ideals.

Pecola Breedlove, on the other hand, does not know songs like these. Her mother, Pauline Breedlove, does not pass on any such salvatory values to her. She only induces in her a self-hatred, which helps to pave the way to Pecola’s eventual insanity. Pauline even favours the white girl in the household she is working for over her own daughter. When Pecola by accident ruins a peach cobbler, she is physically and verbally abused by her mother, (TBE, 86) whereas the little white girl, having started to cry, is comforted by Pauline. (TBE, 87) During her pregnancy with Pecola, Pauline had spent a lot of time in the cinema. With the movies, she also gradually absorbed white beauty ideals. “I ‘member one time I went to see Clark Gable and Jean Harlow. I fixed my hair up like I’d seen hers on a magazine. A part on the side, with one little curl on my forehead. It looked just like her. Well, almost just like.” (TBE, 97) So when she looks at her baby, all she sees is “a black ball of hair.” (TBE, 98) “A cross between a puppy and a dying man. But I knowed she was ugly. Head full of pretty hair, but Lord she was ugly.” (TBE, 100) Even by her own mother, Pecola has been denied the slightest notion of being valuable or worthy of love. So she escapes in her obsessive and disastrous wish for blue eyes:

*Pretty eyes. Pretty blue eyes. Big blue pretty eyes.
Run, Jip, run. Jip runs, Alice runs. Alice has blue eyes.
Jerry has blue eyes. Jerry runs. Alice runs. They run
with their blue eyes. Four blue eyes. Four pretty
blue eyes. Blue-sky eyes. Blue-like Mrs. Forrest’s
blue blouse eyes. Morning-glory-blue-eyes.*

¹¹⁰ Cf. Moses, 4.

Alice-and-Jerry-blue-storybook-eyes. (TBE, 40)

Pecola prays for blue eyes “[e]ach night without fail.” (*TBE*, 40) She believes that, if only her eyes turned blue, all her problems would be solved: her lack of identity and self-esteem, the problems between her parents whose relationship consists of fights, her brother’s multiple attempts at running away, the way she is treated by the teachers who hardly talk to her, by the children who make fun of her, and by shop-keepers like Mr. Yacobowsky who does his best to ignore her as far as possible. Naturally, Pecola’s wish must remain unfulfilled, and so she continues in her condition of self-hatred instead of criticising a devastating beauty ideal and letting out her anger the way Claudia is able to.

Because of her father’s attempt to set their house on fire, Pecola lives with the MacTeer family for some days. There, she drinks large amounts of milk out of a cup portraying Shirley Temple. (*TBE*, 22) She could have drunk water, but milk is white – and so is Shirley Temple. Pecola adores her, just as she adores the picture of Mary Jane, which is on the wrapper of a certain type of candy. Pecola does not only like looking at these pictures:

A picture of little Mary Jane, for whom the candy is named. Smiling white face. Blond hair in gentle disarray, blue eyes looking at her out of a world of clean comfort. The eyes are petulant, mischievous. To Pecola they are simply pretty. She eats the candy, and its sweetness is good. To eat the candy is somehow to eat the eyes, eat Mary Jane. Love Mary Jane. Be Mary Jane.
Three pennies had bought her nine lovely orgasms with Mary Jane. Lovely Mary Jane, for whom a candy is named. (*TBE*, 43)

Pecola definitely lacks Claudia’s knowledge of her mother’s blues song, since she attributes all her values to white skin. Having been told that her first menstruation means that she could have babies now, and that for this to happen, somebody had to love her, Pecola is irritated. Without knowing what it feels like to be loved by somebody, for she does not receive any kind of affection from her own family, helpless Pecola wonders, “How do you do that? I mean, how do you get somebody to love you?” (*TBE*, 29) And even though Claudia, who due to a caring family never had to ask herself this question, cannot provide an answer, she has a suspicion: “It would involve, I supposed, ‘my man,’ who, before leaving me, would love me. But there weren’t any babies in the songs my mother sang. Maybe that’s why the women were sad: the men left before they could make a baby.” (*TBE*, 29) Claudia consciously turns to her

mother's song as a source of knowledge. Adept at interpreting her mother's songs and actions, Claudia first learns that something is wrong when her mother is singing and acting strangely at the same time.

I entered the house, as the house was bursting with an uneasy quiet. Then I heard my mother singing something about trains and Arkansas. She came in the back door with some folded yellow curtains which she piled on the kitchen table. I sat down on the floor to listen to the song's story, and noticed how strangely she was behaving. She still had her hat on, and her shoes were dusty, as though she had been walking in deep dirt. She put on some water to boil and then swept the porch; then she hauled out the curtain stretcher, but instead of putting the damp curtains on it, she swept the porch again. All the time singing about trains and Arkansas. (*TBE*, 78)

Claudia, for whom "song represents something much deeper than sound,"¹¹¹ waits for her mother to finish the song and then goes to see her sister Frieda, who is crying since the MacTeers' tenant has touched her indecently. When their father finds out about this outrage, he furiously throws a tricycle at Mr. Henry's head and beats him. (*TBE*, 80) Both parents stand up for their children and do their best to safeguard them – quite unlike Pecola's parents.

Not only do the Breedloves fail to protect their daughter from outside evil, they themselves are the ones to harm her. Pecola is raped by her own father (*TBE*, 127-129), and subsequently becomes pregnant. She tells her mother, who instead of helping her daughter, does not believe her. (*TBE*, 155) Hurt and left to her own devices, Pecola seeks redemption in her quest for blue eyes. She goes to see Soaphead Church, a self-appointed magician, who makes her kill an old dog with poisoned meat and believe that it is an offering going to achieve her the fulfilment of her desire. That is the last straw for Pecola. Convinced of having blue eyes, she turns schizophrenic. (*TBE*, 150-158) "So it was. A little black girl yearns for the blue eyes of a little white girl, and the horror at the heart of her yearning is exceeded only by the evil of fulfilment." (*TBE*, 158)

Pecola as well as Claudia and Frieda turn to magic in their attempt to solve problems. Neither of them succeeds, but whereas Pecola directs herself at an evil man suffering of hubris and who is not at all respected by the community, the MacTeer girls try their luck at a form of magic deeply embedded in folk belief: "*But so deeply concerned were we with the health and safe delivery of Pecola's baby we could think of*

¹¹¹ Cf. Garabedian, 305.

nothing but our own magic: if we planted the seeds, and said the right words over them, they would blossom, and everything would be all right." (TBE, 9) The killing magic of Soaphead Church drives Pecola into madness and causes her to lose the rest of a self she had been clutching to, while the essentially life-giving magic of Claudia and Frieda – a kind of magic they had absorbed together with their mother's blues - merely goes without any consequences. Unlike Pecola, Claudia can always rely on her remembrance of good times spent listening to her grandfather's and her mother's music. These moments "have instilled in Claudia the possibility of another world, a black one, in which she has 'security and warmth' that will never be available to Pecola."¹¹²

¹¹² Cf. Trudier Harris, *Fiction and Folklore. The Novels of Toni Morrison*. Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1991. 44.

2 *The Dirge of a Choir and three Soloists*

The Bottom in *Sula*, a rather poor dwelling in the hills of Medallion, Ohio, “wasn’t a town anyway: just a neighborhood where on quiet days people in valley houses could hear singing sometimes, banjos sometimes,” and where women were “doing a bit of cakewalk, a bit of black bottom, a bit of ‘messing around’ to the lively notes of a mouth organ.” (*Sula*, 4) Despite the fact that the predominantly black population is living in such a desolate place, where farming is hard and winters are fierce (*Sula*, 5), they are still laughing, singing, and dancing. On the surface, this behaviour might be judged as a mere manifestation of their personal *joie de vivre*, but on a deeper level, the people are laughing to keep from crying, and their songs and dances also include profound notions of anguish. Just as in blues songs, where problems are confronted in order to ease suffering, their “laughter was part of the pain.” (*Sula*, 4) The music-making empowers the community and enables them to face life’s challenges together. They could, therefore, lead a peaceful and harmonic life everafter, were it not for two soloists, Sula and Shadrack, who do not wish to submit to the choir’s regulations of tune and time.

Sula is like “an artist with no artform,” (*Sula*, 121) and the community perceives her as dangerous because of her marked difference from them. She is set apart by a strangely shaped birthmark above one of her eyes, which keeps on changing its colour. (*Sula*, 52p.) In addition to the rumours about her, she lives up to her doubtful reputation and proves her recklessness when she and her friend Nel are assaulted by a group of boys and Sula ostentatiously cuts off one of her own fingertips: “If I can do that to myself, what you suppose I’ll do to you?” (*Sula*, 54p.) When many years later little Teapot knocks on Sula’s door and falls down the steps, his mother claims that Sula, who had merely wanted to help him, was responsible for the accident. Subsequently, Mr. Finley chokes on a chicken bone and dies while looking at Sula. (*Sula*, 114) Now the community is fully convinced that Sula is a witch and they believe that God has an additional evil side: “He was not the God of three faces they sang about. They knew quite well that He had four, and that the fourth explained Sula.” (*Sula*, 118) Barring their doors with broomsticks and sprinkling salt on the steps of their porches, they seek remedy and protection by abiding to upon old folk believes. (*Sula*, 113)

Apart from being outcast by the community, Sula also isolates herself by offending them with her disrespect for their habits: “She came to their church suppers without underwear, bought their steaming platters of food and merely picked at it –

relishing nothing, exclaiming over no one's ribs or cobbler. They believed that she was laughing at their God." (*Sula*, 115) Furthermore, Sula, who grew up seeing her mother Hannah having a great number of ever changing lovers, also has uncountable affairs with married men. The community even suspects "that Sula slept with white men," (*Sula*, 112) an act they could not tolerate under any circumstances. Ajax, however, is the only man Sula is really interested in. She is about to fall in love with him when he leaves her, and one day Sula wakes up with a tune in her head. Believing at first that she herself must have made it up, she suddenly remembers both the title and the lyrics of the song. "There aren't any more new songs and I have sung all the ones there are. I have sung them all. I have sung all the songs there are." (*Sula*, 137) In a way, this is the *résumé* of her life: For many years she has experimented with herself and others, pursued different paths both in the Bottom and at other places, and now she has come to a halt. Disillusioned and left alone by the world and his dog, she is not interested in exploring life any longer. With the thrill gone, she resigns, falls ill, and after some weeks she dies.

Just as Sula does not realise that by singing to herself "*I have sung all the songs all the songs I have sung all the songs there are,*" (*Sula*, 137) she is in fact creating a new song, she also cannot acknowledge that yet another challenge might have been in store for her, namely that of trying to accommodate to the values and standards of the community. At the same time it becomes clear that a traditional life with a husband and children is indeed not an option for Sula, since she dreams about "the acridness of gold, [...] the chill of alabaster and [...] the dark, sweet stench of loam," (*Sula*, 137) which are all elements of her fantasies during her sexual encounters with Ajax. He is the only man who does not bore Sula, and with his departure all other men are of no interest to her any longer. Yet, she is aware of the fact that their relationship would have been destructive: "Soon I would have torn the flesh from his face just to see if I was right about the gold and nobody would have understood that kind of curiosity." (*Sula*, 136) Therefore, by claiming to have "sung all the songs there are," (*Sula*, 137) she rather acknowledges the end of her adventures and thereby seals the end of the only way of life she considers worth living.¹¹³

¹¹³ Toni Morrison wrote the lyrics to various song cycles. One of them, *Spirits in the Well*, was put to music by Richard Danielpour. While the second song is entitled "At some point, the world's beauty is enough," the cycle ends with a piece called "There are no new songs." Judging by the titles, it seems as if Morrison transposed Sula's feelings into her poems/songs. As the cycle has so far merely been performed

Shadrack is a veteran of World War I. His memories of the war and especially the horrific death of one of his comrades has rendered him partly insane. (*Sula*, 8) During his stay in hospital, he suffers from hallucinations about his hands growing to an enormous size, and he has lost every notion of identity. (*Sula*, 9p.) Only when he glimpses at the reflection of his face in the water of a toilet does he start to regain some sort of control. (*Sula*, 13) But ever since that time Shadrack has felt the threat of disorder taking over anew. Therefore, he begins “a struggle to order and focus experience. It had to do with making a place for fear as a way of controlling it. He knew the smell of death and was terrified of it, for he could not anticipate it.” (*Sula*, 14) His remedy lies in the institution of “National Suicide Day.” (*Sula*, 14) Every year at the third of January he walks the streets of the Bottom carrying a hangman’s rope and a cowbell, trying to convince people that all killing – be it suicide or the killing of others – should take place that very day, so “the rest of the year would be safe and free.” (*Sula*, 14) Shadrack invents “National Suicide Day as a catharsis for the evil within his memory.”¹¹⁴

Understandably, the inhabitants of the Bottom are at first scared by the parade, the bell, and the shouting, but gradually they are getting used to it. “Once the people understood the boundaries and nature of his madness, they could fit him, so to speak, into the scheme of things.” (*Sula*, 15) National Suicide Day even enters communal language, it is included into their thoughts, given as an explanation for things gone wrong, and it influences the planning of events, as weddings are scheduled for other days: “OK, but make sure it ain’t on Suicide Day. I ain’t ’bout to be listening to no cowbells whilst the weddin’s going on.” (*Sula*, 16) Even when people avoid planning important activities for National Suicide Day, Shadrack’s “annual danse macabre”¹¹⁵ gives them something to talk about, to rub against, and to respond to.¹¹⁶ It “nurtures and sustains the collectivity of the neighborhood”¹¹⁷ and becomes “a part of the fabric of life up in the Bottom of Medallion, Ohio.” (*Sula*, 16) Within *Sula*, a novel strongly concerned with the issue of death, Shadrack’s new tradition “symbolizes the nihilistic

in concert and has not yet been published, it has however not been possible to validate this hypothesis on the basis of the lyrics themselves.

Cf. <http://www.recmusic.org/lieder/d/danielpour.html>, 22nd of November 2003.

¹¹⁴ Cf. D. Quentin Miller, “‘Making a Place for Fear’: Toni Morrison’s First Redefinition of Dante’s Hell in *Sula*.” In: *English Language* 37:3 (2000 March) 68-75. 71.

¹¹⁵ Cf. Okonjo Chikwenye Ogunyemi, “*Sula*: ‘A Nigger Joke,’” In: *Black American Literature Forum* 13 (1979) 130-133. 132.

¹¹⁶ Cf. Trudier Harris, 67.

¹¹⁷ Cf. Billingslea Brown, 5.

and suicidal tendencies of twentieth-century man with his World Wars.”¹¹⁸ Although this is what Shadrack is trying to communicate to the people of the Bottom, he fails to make them understand his message, for due to his war-time experience he does not share their language any longer.¹¹⁹

Shadrack, the pariah, feels closely connected with Sula, his ostracised counterpart in the Bottom. After incessant years of following his own ritual, Sula’s death gives rise to Shadrack’s doubts concerning the success of his efforts. After Sula has passed away, Shadrack, who misses her, for the first time considers the possibility of giving up on his parade. Nevertheless, he decides to “invite them to end their lives neatly and sweetly” (*Sula*, 158) one last time and makes his way through the streets of the Bottom. Since Shadrack assumes his role only half-heartedly this time, he does not tie his rope thoroughly and “his bell had a tinny unimpassioned sound.” (*Sula*, 158) Even though Shadrack’s call to the people is not as strong and convinced as it used to be the years before, the differences marking this particular National Suicide Day are to be situated on behalf of the community’s response. “Never before had they laughed. Always they had shut their doors, pulled down the shades and called their children out of the road.” (*Sula*, 159) Shadrack is uncomfortable with their new reaction, “but he stuck to his habit – singing his song, ringing his bell and holding fast to the rope.” (*Sula*, 159) And for the first time Shadrack does not remain the single member of the parade: more and more people start to follow him and join in his singing; dancing and laughing they “formed a piper’s band behind Shadrack.” (*Sula*, 159) Whereas in other instances in Morrison’s novels music and dance help her characters or even save them, in this situation they are their condemnation. When communal music is to be salvatory, the participants need a certain basis of respect for each other. Shadrack’s followers, however, merely mock him and show him no respect whatsoever. Thus, their singing and dancing also contain evil elements, and as some of the characters notice this, they do not take part in it: “Others, who understood the Spirit’s touch which made them dance, who understood whole families bending their backs in a field while singing as from one throat, who understood the ecstasy of river baptisms under suns just like this one, did not understand this curious disorder, this headless display and refused also to go.” (*Sula*, 160) Although at first sight the choir, formed by the community, and

¹¹⁸ Cf. Ogunyemi, 132.

¹¹⁹ Cf. Trudier Harris, 61.

Shadrack, the soloist, merge to perform one song, their music is not at all the same. Disaster ensues.

When Shadrack and his entourage reach the construction site of a tunnel, they are reminded of their shattered dreams, since they had hoped in vain to be employed in the project and thus be able to escape their poverty to a certain degree. (*Sula*, 161) Their anger and frustration together with the ecstasy resulting from their singing and dancing culminate in the cataclysmic attempt to wreak havoc at the building site. “Old and young, women and children, lame and hearty, they killed, as best they could, the tunnel they were forbidden to build.” (*Sula*, 161) They are literally going to far and their advance into the tunnel causes a landslide which kills a great number of them. While their mocking music had turned them into a destructive mob, Shadrack’s song comes to an end: “Having forgotten his song and his rope, he just stood there high up on the bank ringing, ringing his bell.” (*Sula*, 162) Commemorating their deaths, his bell “is a knell, that summons [them] to Heaven, or to Hell.”¹²⁰

At Chicken Little’s funeral the community gathers to sing *Nearer my God to Thee*¹²¹ and *Precious Memories*. (*Sula*, 64) During the sermon, they both mourn the drowning of the little boy and they reminisce about their own lives, possibly spurred by the lyrics of *Precious Memories*:

Precious father, loving mother
Fly across the lonely soul
To the home scenes of my childhood
With fond memories appear

Precious memories, how they linger
How they ever flood my soul
In the stillness of the midnight
Precious sacred scenes unfold.¹²²

They lament the loss of their own childhoods, other dead children, and sad scenes of many years ago. As in the song, which stresses the memories as such, not the suffered pain itself, “but the remembrance of it” (*Sula*, 65) is the hardest for them to deal with.

¹²⁰ William Shakespeare, *Macbeth*. London: Arden, 2002. 50. Act II, Scene I.

¹²¹ According to some survivors of the sinking of the *Titanic*, this song was the last to be played by the ship’s orchestra. It therefore suits this funeral in two ways: as a hymn to pray for the fast acceptance of the deceased into heaven, and as a commemoration of Chicken Little’s drowning. Cf. <http://www.cyberhymnal.org./htm/n/m/nmgthee.htm>, 22nd of November 2003.

¹²² Anonymous, *Precious Memories*. There are many versions of this hymn, each with slight alterations in their lyrics. For this version cf. <http://www.keysiteservices.com/members/gospelmusic/Gospel.htm>, 22nd of November 2003.

Although each individual deals with personal grievances, the members of the community eventually assume common action:

They spoke, for they were full and needed to say. They swayed, for the rivulets of grief or of ecstasy must be rocked. And when they thought of all that life and death locked into that little closed coffin they danced and screamed, not to protest God's will but to acknowledge it and confirm once more their conviction that the only way to avoid the Hand of God is to get in it. (*Sula*, 65p.)

Having commemorated their respective troubles, they are then ready to channel their powers into communal mourning, which finally helps them overcome the grief over the senseless death of Chicken Little and to fill the gap the boy has left in their community.

Upon Sula's death the community reacts quite differently: They do not even pay her their last respects. When she learns about Sula's end, Teapot's Mamma exclaims "Ho!" like the conductor on the train when it was about to take off except louder, and then did a little dance." (*Sula*, 172) Disregarding their own codes of decent behaviour, the community members do not perform the usual activities as washing and dressing the corpse. Neither do they help the police to complete the necessary formalities, nor do they involve themselves in the organisation of the funeral. Waiting at the edge of the cemetery, they are not even dressed in mourning clothes. (*Sula*, 172p.) When the funeral itself is over, they finally approach Sula's grave and together they entone *Shall We Gather at the River?*, but as soon as rains sets in, they hurry home. (*Sula*, 173) The women do not sing in order to show respect for the dead woman, but to follow "a tradition much larger than their momentary rejection for Sula,"¹²³ so nothing can come between themselves and God. Despite their disbelief of her entering heaven by metaphorically crossing Jordan, the people sing this hymn and are "self-righteously able to congratulate themselves for being generous even to one of the devil's disciples."¹²⁴ Whereas the song's content refers to "the river in Revelation's vivid description of an otherworldly heaven,"¹²⁵ the suggestion of gathering at a river both alludes to Chicken Little's drowning in the river, even more so as the accident was Sula's fault, and to their own subsequent deaths at the river tunnel, for which the hymns last stanza is more than programmatic:

¹²³ Cf. Trudier Harris, 79.

¹²⁴ Ibid, 84.

¹²⁵ Cf. Maxine Montgomery, "A Pilgrimage to the Origins: The Apocalypse as Structure and Theme in Toni Morrison's *Sula*." In: *Black American Literature Forum* 23:1 (1989) 127-137. 136.

Soon we'll reach the shining river,
Soon our pilgrimage will cease;
Soon our happy hearts will quiver
With the melody of peace.¹²⁶

As Sula's complete name is Sula Mae Peace, the last word of the song links her death to the events on National Suicide Day. Thus, the community's hypocritical question *Shall We Gather at the River?* is answered by Shadrack's call on National Suicide Day, leading them not only to the river but into it, in a manner similar to that of the Pied Piper in Hamelin.¹²⁷

One of the occupants of Sula's home is Tar Baby. In contrast to being a "quiet man who never spoke above a whisper," (*Sula*, 39) he is a talented singer. With his voice he is able to get to the very heart of people's emotions: "They just listened to him sing, wept and thought very graphically of their own imminent deaths." (*Sula*, 40) As Tar Baby likes to get drunk due to his depressive inclination as well as his longing to die (*Sula*, 40), his intonations of such songs as *In the Sweet By and By*¹²⁸ or *Abide With Me*¹²⁹, which are strongly focussed on the prospects of a better afterlife, turn out to be very authentic and heart-felt. Although the people enjoy listening to him singing, they do not fully accept his attitudes towards life, "for they had little patience with people who took themselves that seriously. Seriously enough to try to die." (*Sula*, 41) While for some time music had helped Tar Baby to face life¹³⁰ (*Sula*, 69) "it was natural that he, after all, became the first one to join Shadrack – Tar Baby and the deweys – on National Suicide Day." (*Sula*, 41) Just as *Shall We Gather at the River?*, *In the Sweet By and By* hints at a river as the boundary between a miserable existence before death and a blessed existence in afterlife, the song establishes a further connection between Sula and her death, Chicken Little's drowning as well as the dying of many members of the community on National Suicide Day. The hymn's refrain suggests: "In the sweet by and

¹²⁶ Cf. <http://www.cyberhymnal.org/htm/s/w/swgatriv.htm>, 22nd of November 2003.

¹²⁷ Cf. Missy Dehn Kubitschek, *Toni Morrison, A Critical Companion*. Westport and London: Greenwood Press, 1998. 63; Ogunyemi, 132.

¹²⁸ According to the author of the lyrics, Sanford Fillmore Bennett, Joseph P. Webster, the composer, "was of an exceedingly nervous and sensitive nature, and subject to periods of depression, in which he looked upon the dark side of all things in life." Cf. <http://www.cyberhymnal.org/htm/i/n/intstbab.htm>, 23rd of November 2003.

¹²⁹ Cf. <http://www.cyberhymnal.org/htm/a/b/abidewme.htm>, 23rd of November 2003.

¹³⁰ This is a further analogy to composer Joseph R. Webster, as Bennett claims that he could "rouse him up by giving him a new song to work on." <http://www.cyberhymnal.org/htm/i/n/intstbab.htm>, 23rd of November 2003.

by / We shall meet on that beautiful shore;”¹³¹ whereas the group of singing and dancing people gather at the banks of the river:

We shall sing on that beautiful shore
The melodious songs of the blessed;
And our spirits shall sorrow no more,
Not a sigh for the blessing of rest.¹³²

Instead of singing constructively on the basis of such honourable and good intentions described in the song, the novel’s mob gets out of control and merely achieves death and destruction. “The river is not symbolic of having lived and worked faithfully in God’s vineyard, but of the frustration that has attended their lives in this world.”¹³³

To stress the differences between the respective inhabitants of the Bottom in *Sula*, Morrison uses various styles of music. The community speaks as one against Sula and Shadrack, thus forming a kind of choir, while their singing as such functions to keep the community together. It helps them to relate to society and to find their individual place in it. The choir features Tar Baby as a soloist, who is nevertheless not seen as a complete member of the community, as “[e]ven the women at prayer meeting who cried when he sang ‘In the Sweet By-and-By’ never tried to get him to participate in the church activities.” (*Sula*, 40) The choice of the hymns sung by Tar Baby and the community echoes a drowning and foreshadows the “destruction of the community [...] through Sula’s element - water,”¹³⁴ thereby adding to the novel’s preoccupation with death and water. Furthermore, the choir affirms its cohesion by singing, while at the same time it excludes the two independent soloists, Sula and Shadrack, who are left to sing their own songs of glory. Together, the hymns sung by Tar Baby and the choir, Sula’s song of resignation, and especially Shadrack’s sounding of the knell, turn *Sula* into an ongoing dirge.

¹³¹ Ibid.

¹³² Ibid.

¹³³ Cf. Trudier Harris, 84.

¹³⁴ Cf. Carolyn M. Jones, “*Sula and Beloved: Images of Cain in the Novels of Toni Morrison.*” In: *African American Review* 127:4 (1993) 615-626. 623.

3 *The Griot's Song of Flying*

Song of Solomon opens with an insurance agent wanting to fly away from the roof of a hospital with the help of artificial blue wings. This scene, set in February 1931, is visually embellished with rose petals of red velvet falling into the snow, and the ongoing are accompanied by a woman's singing.

Her head cocked to one side, her eyes fixed on Mr. Robert Smith, she sang in a powerful contralto:

*O Sugarman done fly away
Sugarman done gone
Sugarman cut across the sky
Sugarman gone home.... (SoS, 6)*

The song is likened to “the helpful and defining piano music in a silent movie,” (SoS, 6) thus serving as a sort of commentary. It transfixes the audience, and together with the rose petals, it could be taken for “some form of worship.” (SoS, 6) Among the crowd of people there is a pregnant woman. The singer approaches her, still humming, and predicts that the baby will be born by the next morning, although this is actually much too early. (SoS, 9) Later on we learn that the singer was Pilate Dead and the pregnant woman was her sister-in-law Ruth Dead (née Foster), and that her baby, Milkman, was indeed born on the very day Pilate predicted. With her song, Pilate connects the attempted flight of Robert Smith with the baby to be born, whom she refers to as a “little bird.” (SoS, 9) The song affirms Pilate's ability “to use the past as a source of strength for the present and hope for the future;”¹³⁵ it establishes a new community consisting of the present spectators.¹³⁶

Milkman, born Macon Dead III, is Pilate's nephew. For all of his life, he feels an urge to be able to fly.

Mr. Smith's blue silk wings must have left their mark, because when the little boy discovered, at four, the same thing Mr. Smith had learned earlier – that only birds and airplanes could fly – he lost all interest in himself. To have to live without that single gift saddened him and left his imagination so bereft that he appeared dull even to the women who did not hate his mother. (SoS, 9)

¹³⁵ Cf. Joyce Ann Joyce, “Structural and Thematic Unity in Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon*.” In: *CEA-Critic. An Official Journal of the College English Association* 49:2-4 (1986-1987). 185-198. 197.

¹³⁶ Cf. Billingslea Brown, 97.

Pilate's song, though, accompanies him for a very long time. At the age of twelve he visits his aunt, albeit his father does not want him to have any contact with her. Milkman is vexed by Pilate's appearance. She familiarises him with the sky: "'See that streak of sky?' She pointed to the window. 'Right behind them hickories. See? Right over there.'" (*SoS*, 42) and shortly afterwards, she starts to sing together with her daughter Reba and her granddaughter Hagar while Milkman is listening.

Pilate began to hum as she returned to plucking the berries. After a moment, Reba joined her, and they hummed together in perfect harmony until Pilate took the lead:

*O Sugarman don't leave me here
Cotton balls to choke me
O Sugarman don't leave me here
Buckra's arms to yoke me...*

When the two women got to the chorus, Hagar raised her head and sang too.

*Sugarman done fly away
Sugarman done gone
Sugarman cut across the sky
Sugarman gone home.*

Milkman could hardly breathe. Hagar's voice scooped up what little pieces of heart he had left to call his own. (*SoS*, 49)

Milkman falls in love with Hagar, and he feels a very strong connection with Pilate, who habitually sings in order to follow her dead father's command: "Sing." (*SoS*, 208)

Many years later, Milkman comes across this song again, although at first he does not recognise it. He is on a quest for gold, which eventually turns into the quest for identity and family roots. In Danville, Pennsylvania, he meets people who had been friends of his grandfather (Macon Dead I), his father (Macon Dead II), and his aunt Pilate. He even meets Circe, the midwife present at both his father's and Pilate's birth. It is from her that Milkman learns the original names of his grandparents: Jake¹³⁷ and Sing. He continues to Shalimar, where he listens to children singing and playing "a kind of ring-around-the-rosy or Little Sally Walker game." (*SoS*, 264) The lyrics "Jay the only son of Solomon / Come booba yalle, come booba tambee / Whirl about and touch the sun / Come booba yalle, come booba tambee..." do not mean anything in particular

¹³⁷ Jake had changed his name to Macon. This topic will be dealt with in another chapter of this paper.

to Milkman. He watches the boy in the middle of the children's circle imitating an airplane and letting himself fall to the earth, accompanied by the lines "Solomon rye balaly shoo; yaraba medina hamlet too [...] Twenty-one children the last one Jay!" (*SoS*, 264) To Milkman, these words seem to be nonsense creations. The song merely reminds him of his childhood, since he had never been asked to play these games and had only been watching other children perform them.

Milkman goes through several initiation processes and continues his search for information about his family. Only then, with his widened knowledge and his new ability to listen carefully, he is able to recognise the children's song. He watches their game again and is surprised to hear that at a certain point they start immersing another song into their game. It is the "one he heard off and on all his life. The old blues song Pilate sang all the time: 'O Sugarman don't leave me here,' except the children sang, 'Solomon don't leave me here.'" (*SoS*, 300) By this time he knows that his grandfather's original name had been Jake, and he identifies him as the very Jay the children are singing about. Due to the knowledge he has gained about his ancestors so far, he is able to decipher the song almost completely: Jay is his grandfather, whose father was called Solomon. Solomon had left his wife Ryna who had not been able to cope with his departure and subsequently turned crazy. Of the twenty-one children Solomon had had, he wanted to take Jake with him, but he did not manage to do so. Therefore, Jake was raised in the house of an Indian family, where also Sing, Milkman's grandmother, was living. (*SoS*, 302-304)

Equipped with the knowledge of the song, Milkman continues with his investigation of his ancestors' past. He learns from Susan Byrd that Solomon, his great-grandfather, had been a "flying African," (*SoS*, 322) who had been able to literally fly by himself. Now Milkman fully understands the song, and his lifelong obsession with flying becomes understandable; Milkman finally closes the gaps in his knowledge about his ancestors, and after swimming in a river constantly singing Pilate's and the children's song, he makes his way home.

Having arrived there, he wants to share his findings with Pilate. But before he can do so, Pilate knocks him down with a bottle, ties him, and puts him into her cellar. (*SoS*, 321-333) Again the song rescues Milkman. His mind travels back to Ryna, who had lost her mind due to a broken heart. (*SoS*, 332) And since he left Hagar similar to the way in which Solomon had left Ryna, Milkman is able to infer that something must have happened to Hagar. He remembers Pilate's repetition of her father's words: "You

just can't fly on off and leave a body." (*SoS*, 332) Being certain now that Hagar is dead and knowing Pilate's interpretation of these words, Milkman draws back to his knowledge of Jake and Solomon based on the song. He finally understands that Jake/Macon had been referring to his own father who really flew away leaving him. And he had called for his wife named Sing. (*SoS*, 333)

Singing her blues song, Pilate "creates an atmosphere in which analysis can take place."¹³⁸ She associates Milkman and the song as early as the day before his birth, in circumstances strongly connected with the theme of flying. As powerful as Milkman's lifelong obsession with flying appears the omnipresence of Pilate's song – a song which features a flying man as its theme. But the song does more than that – it ensures that the "fathers may soar / and the children may know their names." (*SoS*, epigraph) The children sing about it and hence keep the story alive. "That is one of the points in *Song*: all the men have left someone, and it is the children who remember it, sing about it, mythologize it, make it a part of their family history."¹³⁹ In the characters of the song, Milkman recognises some of his own ancestors, thereby learning about his family's past as well as about his cultural roots.

Milkman deciphers the twin text of history: song and genealogy. In so doing, he reconstructs a dialectic of historical transition, where individual genealogy evokes the history of black migration and the chain of economic expropriation from hinterland to village, and village to metropolis. The end point of Milkman's journey is the starting point of his race's history in [his] country: slavery.¹⁴⁰

He rediscovers traditional values such as the feeling of belonging and togetherness between family members and the duty of assuming responsibility for his own actions. It is when Milkman thinks of Hagar that he first hears the complete version of the song, (*SoS*, 300p.) and it is due to his knowledge of the song and everything connected to it that he accepts his responsibility in her fate and death. (*SoS*, 332) Only with his awareness of all this can Milkman make the story come full circle by altering Pilate's interpretation of her father's words. So Pilate, the griot, is learning with the help of a song – *her* song. She had been singing it for all her life without any knowledge of its meaning and its connection with her family. She had been singing her song in the same

¹³⁸ Cf. Joyce M. Wegs, "Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon*. A Blues Song." In: *Essays in Literature* 9:2 (1982 Fall) 211-223. 212.

¹³⁹ Cf. Mel Watkins, "Talk with Toni Morrison. 1977." In: Taylor-Guthrie, 43-47. 46.

way the children of Shalimar had: “The music of this novel is the umbilicus between these children and the men and women they become.”¹⁴¹ Hence, the song substitutes the navel Pilate lacks.

Without the misunderstanding of her father’s supposed command, Pilate would not have sung and Milkman would neither have been able to find his identity nor his cultural roots. And Pilate’s singing has more powers: It forms very strong ties between herself, Reba, and Hagar. The hut they live in can barely be called a house, but it definitely is a home. This is obvious to Macon, when he is standing outside their window listening to the three of them singing. He compares the situation to his house, which - despite its being a lot more luxurious - is not a home at all.¹⁴² (*SoS*, 28-32) “In contrast to this ‘dead’ house, three generations worth of women in Pilate’s home can live and breathe and sing in harmony.”¹⁴³ Macon is spell-bound by the song of the three women, and even afterwards, he is unable to leave. Together with her daughter and her granddaughter, Pilate literally “articulates the pain Macon feels and thereby soothes his wounds.”¹⁴⁴

Interestingly, this is not the only example in the novel where singing is appropriated as a means of comfort. At Milkman’s first visit to Pilate’s house, Reba has tears running down her cheeks and Hagar is extremely unhappy - until Pilate starts humming her song. When first Reba and then also Hagar join in the tune, they manage to overcome their sadness. (*SoS*, 49) At Hagar’s funeral, Pilate and Reba are singing a duet of “Mercy!” and “I hear you!” (*SoS*, 316-318) The shouting and singing of “Mercy” reaches back to the novel’s beginning of Mr. Smith taking Mercy Hospital as the starting point of his “flight,” so again, the powers of song and the theme of flying join forces. Pilate subsequently turns to a lullaby she used to sing for Hagar: “*Who’s been botherin my sweet sugar lumpkin?*” (*SoS*, 318). Both women use song to articulate their grief and their pain of loss.¹⁴⁵ In the end, Milkman assumes the role of a comforter. When Pilate is dying, she urges him to sing for her, which he does: “Sugargirl don’t

¹⁴⁰ Cf. Susan Willis, “Eruptions of Funk: Historicizing Toni Morrison.” In: Henry Louis Gates, Jr. (ed.), *Black Literature & Literary Theory*. New York and London: Routledge, 1984. 263-285. 271.

¹⁴¹ Cf. Karla F. C. Holloway, “The Lyrics of Salvation.” In: Karla F. C. Holloway and Stephanie A. Demetrakopoulos, *New Dimensions of Spirituality. A Biracial and Bicultural Reading of the Novels of Toni Morrison*. Westport and London: Greenwood Press, 1987. 101-114. 109.

¹⁴² Cf. Garabedian, 313.

¹⁴³ Cf. Gay Wilentz, “Civilizations Underneath: African Heritage as Cultural Discourse in Toni Morrison’s *Song of Solomon*.” In: Middleton, 109-133. 117.

¹⁴⁴ Cf. Trudier Harris, 114.

¹⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 114.

leave me here / Cotton balls to choke me / Sugargirl don't leave me here / Buckra's arms to yoke me." (*SoS*, 336) He is singing Pilate's song for her, thereby easing her death. By changing "Sugarman" to "Sugargirl," he is "putting himself in the place of those left behind."¹⁴⁶ Milkman, having reached a full understanding of the song's message, assumes responsibility. "It took a while for him to realize that she was dead. And when he did, he could not stop the worn old words from coming, louder and louder as though sheer volume would wake her." (*SoS*, 336) While soothing his dying aunt, Milkman is comforting his own pain with the help of the song. Now he has to take over Pilate's role and he is finally able to become the griot, since "[n]ow he knew why he loved her so. Without ever leaving the ground, she could fly." (*SoS*, 336) Milkman is also willing to bear his responsibility, "[f]or now he knew what Shalimar knew: If you surrendered to the air, you could *ride* it." (*SoS*, 337)

Song of Solomon emphasises the significance of the oral tradition in African American culture.¹⁴⁷ Pilate's blues, the novel's "haunting ballad,"¹⁴⁸ accompanies the events like a soundtrack.

Song of Solomon is a beautiful statement on the survival of the legacy and on the legacy of survival; on the power of memory, collective memories kept alive through names, stories, words, and songs, on the power of music that accompanies all the rituals of life, from birth to death, and through which feelings and the totality of experience are expressed. Transmitted orally from mouth to mouth and ear to ear, the legacy endures. Its secret is revealed but its secrecy remains. The song that weaves its way through the book is the sacred text: a proclamation available to all, and the repository of secrets. In its way of encoding messages as spirituals did, of yielding and keeping its secrecy, it becomes also the epitome of all narrative.¹⁴⁹

¹⁴⁶ Cf. Wendy Harding and Jacky Martin, *A World of Difference. An Inter-Cultural Study of Toni Morrison's Novels*. Westport and London: Greenwood Press, 1994. 74.

¹⁴⁷ Cf. Katharina Gutmann, *Celebrating the Senses: An Analysis of the Sensual in Toni Morrison's Fiction*. Tübingen and Basel: Francke, 2000. 65.

¹⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 80.

¹⁴⁹ Cf. Geneviève Fabre, "Genealogical Archaeology of the Quest for Legacy in Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon*." In: Nellie Y. McKay, *Critical Essays on Toni Morrison*. Boston, Massachusetts: G.K.Hall & Co. 1988.105-114. 113.

4 *The Music of Artificiality and Nature*

Toni Morrison is aware of the fact that “really listening to music – as opposed to just having the stereo on for background – requires concentration, intelligence, and imagination.”¹⁵⁰ It can therefore safely be assumed that in *Tar Baby* she consciously demonstrated the peculiar handling of classical music of the character named Valerian: He is a white retired candy-manufacturer, who has taken up residence on a tropical island in the Caribbean. On the premises, he has a greenhouse installed, in which he cultivates plants originating from the Northern Temperate Zone. Despite all the luxury available to him, Valerian does not really feel at home on his island. He frequently retreats into the greenhouse, where he fills the air with classical music.

Long before the Principal Beauty had removed her sleeping mask, he turned the switch that brought the “Goldberg” Variations into the greenhouse. At first he’d experimented with Chopin and some of the Russians, but the Magnum Rex peonies overwhelmed by all that passion, whined and curled their lips. He settled finally on Bach for germination, Haydn and Liszt for strong sprouting. After that all of the plants seemed content with Rampal’s Rondo in D. (*TB*, 10)

Whereas Valerian believes in the nurturing powers of music for his plants, he also uses it as a form of escape for himself, as he “[r]elaxes a little, that’s all. Drinks a bit, reads, listens to his records.” (*TB*, 11) He tries to “evade a modern world of disorder and meaninglessness,”¹⁵¹ when he withdraws to the artificial and controllable world of his greenhouse. Although he has left Philadelphia for good and does not seriously intend to return, his need for both the flowers and the music he had been used to on the continent prove his repressed longing for a return - an unfulfilled urge Valerian’s servant Ondine criticises: “If he wants hydrangeas he should go back home. He hauls everybody down to the equator to grow Northern flowers?” (*TB*, 11) It has become a ritual for Valerian to postpone certain activities to their possible return to Philadelphia, but those are empty words and merely another form of self-deception. (*TB*, 11) Instead of translating his words into action, Valerian continues with his immersion into the world of his invaluable flowers and drowns himself in sound and alcohol.

¹⁵⁰ Cf. Taylor-Guthrie, 243.

¹⁵¹ Cf. Terry Otten, “The Crime of Innocence in Toni Morrison’s *Tar Baby*.” *Studies in American Fiction* 14:2 (1986) 153-164. 155.

Throughout his life, music had provided a source of strength and endurance for Valerian, since it would have been much more difficult for him to get through his first marriage or his military service without the help of his beloved records. (*TB*, 49) Hence, it seems logical that Valerian turns towards music whenever a problem arises, but the situation is different on the island. Here, Valerian's life does not take place in his natural environment. He cannot get accustomed to the climate, his choice of clothing does not accommodate his needs, and the greenhouse is the only place where he feels comfortable. (*TB*, 18) Without help from outside, Valerian is predetermined to wither in the same way as his plants fail to prosper without the influence of natural elements such as the wind affecting pollination. In Philadelphia, his choice of plants as well as the music had corresponded with the environment, but both are misplaced in the Caribbean – and so is Valerian. Therefore, the same music which had helped him to overcome difficult situations before cannot develop the same power on the island.

Valerian retreats into the greenhouse to numb his wish to return to Philadelphia, to avoid having to face the poor state of his marriage with Margaret, and to deal with his disappointment of what has become of his son Michael. Valerian is convinced that Michael's weaknesses result from his awkward relationship with his mother, as he remembers various instances when he had found the boy, who had taken refuge in a cabinet, humming a song to himself. (*TB*, 74) "I'd come home and he'd be under the sink again, humming that little, I can't tell you how lonely, *lonely* song. I wasn't imagining it; it was lonely." (*TB*, 74) This singing is part of Valerian's affection for his son: "But I loved him. Just like I loved the boy under the sink, humming." (*TB*, 75) Yet, he does not really inquire about the little boy's motivation for hiding and comforting himself by singing. The memories of his son's sad song do not keep him from enjoying the comfort of his greenhouse suffused in music. Only years later, when Valerian has learned about Margaret's maltreatment of their then two-year-old son, a new light is cast on the memories of Michael's song. Hurt and shocked by the truth he had tightly shut his eyes to before, Valerian cannot follow his usual habits any longer. "Valerian stayed mostly in his room; the greenhouse remained untended, the mail unread. Silence pressed down on the dahlias and cyclamen – for there was no diet of music anymore." (*TB*, 237) It takes weeks for Valerian to return to the greenhouse, but it is not a haven for him any longer. In comparison with Michael's suffering, Valerian's other problems had been bearable; now, his conscience does not permit him to enjoy his music or cherish his plants any more. For the first time, Valerian assumes responsibility instead of escaping

into his self-created reserve. “He had not known because he had not taken the trouble to know.” (*TB*, 245) After having spent his whole life listening to complicated masterpieces of classical music, he utterly failed to understand Michael’s simple song and thus, his little child’s most fundamental needs. Valerian “had chosen not to know the real message that his son had mailed to him from underneath the sink. All he could say was that he did not know. He was guilty, therefore, of innocence.” (*TB*, 245)

When Valerian realises that he cannot change the past, he neglects his formerly treasured plants, but resorts to the music of oblivion. Peter Erickson even evaluates Valerian’s combination of music and alcohol as the mimicry of a “quasi-maternal symbiosis in which the illusion of purity can be maintained.”¹⁵² Parallel to the decay of the flowers, Valerian lets himself go. “He was drenched in music and although his fingers shuddered occasionally, his head-of-a-coin profile moved accurately to the tempo.” (*TB*, 287) Deluding himself even more, he wants to believe in his return to Philadelphia. His butler Sydney, who has switched off the music, has to turn it back on, so Valerian can calm down again. “Valerian smiled then, and his fingers danced lightly in the air.” (*TB*, 289)

The artificiality of the greenhouse and the classical music played in it are contrasted with the abundance of nature on the edenic island. Endemic plants and animals are the truly animate and productive objects, and by and by they successfully reclaim their territory. As the soldier ants had eaten through the wires, Valerian’s record player and speaker system have to be transferred into the greenhouse. (*TB*, 286) Sydney even has the impression that “the trees were jumping up overnight.” (*TB*, 287) As Valerian no longer manipulates the plants in the greenhouse, they are left to their own devices. “Isle des Chevaliers filled in the spaces that had been the island’s to begin with.” (*TB*, 244)

In contrast to Valerian, Son seems closely connected with nature. Already his arrival on the island is facilitated by the forces of nature, as avocado trees literally offer their fruit to him. (*TB*, 135) Having stilled his hunger for the moment, Son approaches the house in search for potable water and catches a glimpse of a piano. (*TB*, 135) The sight of the musical instrument sparks his idealised memories of his past, when he used to attend piano lessons while his friends were listening and waiting for him. (*TB*, 136)

¹⁵² Cf. Peter Erickson, “Images of Nurturance in Toni Morrison’s *Tar Baby*.” In: *CLA Journal* 28:1 (1984) 11-32. 16.

“He came to get a drink of water, tarried to bite an avocado, stayed because of the piano, slept all through the next day because Drake, Soldier and Ernie Paul kept him awake in the night.” (*TB*, 137) Thus, music and nature cooperate to draw Son to the mansion and to keep him there. Whereas Valerian, the guardian of a constructed world, quite passively absorbs music, Son, the child of nature, actively produces music. Likewise, Valerian’s understanding of the needs of his plants is limited, as he cannot understand why some of his flowers fail to bloom. Son, on the other hand, grasps the problem in an instance and flicks at the cyclamen’s stems. When Valerian is worried, Son explains: “I know all about plants. They like women, you have to jack them up every once in a while. Make em act nice, like they’re supposed to.” (*TB*, 149) Whereas his views on women must be considered controversial, he at least turns out to be right concerning the flowers, since shortly afterwards they actually start to bloom. (*TB*, 165)

Valerian and Son share their use of music as a means of endurance. Music had helped Valerian through his military service, and the thought of playing the piano comforted Son during the war: “he thought of sitting in a dark and smoky joint [...] and him hidden behind the piano, surrounded and protected by the bass the drum the brass – taking eight once in a while but mostly letting his hands get to the crowd softly pleasantly. His hands would be doing something nice and human for a change.” (*TB*, 137) Even though he does not play well after his dishonourable discharge, the act of playing itself already helps him to carry on. (*TB*, 137) Son plays the piano for a living and his life seems to work out for him until he finds his wife in bed with another man. Losing control, he kills the two of them. As he has to flee subsequently, he is also forced to quit making music. (*TB*, 177)

Nevertheless, music provides Son with a sense of security. When he is testing the limits of how far he can go with Jadine, he remains close to the piano. The proximity of the musical instrument even gives him the strength and the courage to apologise to Jadine for his former bad behaviour towards her. To both prove the honesty of his appeal and to impress her, Son proposes to play a song for Jadine. (*TB*, 157) She, however, refuses: “I don’t like what you did, hear? So don’t play any songs for me.” (*TB*, 158) The same music which allows Son to stay in control threatens Jadine’s sense of safety; therefore, she declines his offer. “He did not know that all the time he tinkled the keys she was holding tight to the reins of dark dogs with silver feet. For she was more frightened of his good looks than she had been by his ugliness the day before.” (*TB*, 158)

In general, Jadine is obsessed with the idea of keeping her hand firmly on the helm, a peculiarity which even endangers her life when she is sunk into the swamp. She is a character who has not yet found her true identity and keeps on crossing the borders between different worlds and, likewise, different parts of her personality: Jadine moves between Isle des Chevaliers and the fashion-induced world of Paris; depending on the situation, she feels connected to her uncle and aunt, to Valerian, to Son, or to no one at all. At Sein de Vieilles, she looks at the untouched landscape as if it were an illustration in an art history book when she sinks into the mud. Her first instinct is to struggle against the forces pulling her down, but this makes her sink in even further. Only when she realises that she has to literally let go of artificiality and become one with nature instead is she able to get hold of a tree. “She tightened her arms around the tree and it swayed as though it wished to dance with her.” (*TB*, 183) Once more, connections to nature and to music are depicted as the two sides of the same coin, thereby repeating both Son’s close relationship with nature and his abilities as a musician. Jadine herself evaluates the situation as a salvatory dance with nature:

Don’t sweat or you’ll lose your partner, the tree. Cleave together like lovers. Press together like man and wife. Cling to your partner, hand on to him and never let him go. [...] Sway when he sways and shiver with him too. Whisper your numbers from one to fifty into the parts that have been lifted away and left tender skin behind. Love him and trust him with your life because you are up to your kneecaps in rot. (*TB*, 184)

Although her judgement is correct, Jadine’s understanding is merely born from necessity and disappears as soon as she is out of danger again, when she cannot identify the very tree she had been holding on to some minutes before. (*TB*, 185) “The insistent repetition of the tree wanting to dance with Jadine is Morrison’s way of inscribing this love affair in a Black cultural context,”¹⁵³ as it contains dances for every waystation of life. Jadine, who has not fully accepted her black identity, is still unable to truly hand over control the way a dancer does when guided by a partner, and consequently, she remains on the search for her role in life as well as her position within the world throughout the entire novel. She is too accustomed to fighting certain elements of nature and hence unable to rely on their salvatory properties – Jadine dances alone. Nevertheless, she comes to represent for Son “all the music he had ever wanted to play,

¹⁵³ Cf. Judylyn S. Ryan, “Contested Visions / Double Visions in *Tar Baby*.” In: *Modern Fiction Studies* 39:3-4 (1993) 597-621. 609.

a world and a way of being in it,” (*TB*, 301) “a metaphor made all the more significant because music represented to him the most meaningful part of his life.”¹⁵⁴ Son is in love with Jadine from the first moment on. When he is watching her sleep, he tries to make her dream of men singing “‘If I Didn’t Care’ like the Ink Spots, and he fought hard against the animal smell and fought hard to regulate his breathing to hers, but [...] he barely had time to breathe into her the smell of tar and its shiny consistency before he crept away.” (*TB*, 120) Son wants to assimilate Jadine into his world – that of his hometown Eloë and his roots. To him, the music represents a memory of his haven, and it refers directly to the relationship between Son and Jadine, as it foreshadows his bewilderment by his feelings for her: “If I didn’t care honey child, mo’ than words can say. If I didn’t care baby, would I feel this way? Darlin’ if this isn’t love, then why do I thrill so much? What is it that makes my head go ‘round and ‘round while my heart just stands still so much?”¹⁵⁵ Jadine, who is frequently associated with the colour of honey (*TB*, 119, 120, 301), is the object of Son’s desire. Whereas he is in close contact with nature, Jadine is said to have lost her “ancient properties.” (*TB*, 308) By trying to influence Jadine’s dreams and to induce in her the smell of tar, Son is attempting to restore these qualities to her.

Within *Tar Baby*, music functions as a catalyst for the dichotomy of artificiality and nature. Being an element of either, Valerian’s self-created world of the greenhouse and Son’s life at the very pulse of nature, its common properties become visible, as it serves Valerian and Son as a means of endurance in troublesome situations. However, its powers are more effective in connection with nature and the real world: Son is enabled by his own music-making to get on in life and reclaim control of his destiny, whereas the passive listener Valerian, on the other hand, simply represses his problems instead of solving them. In the same way as Jadine moves between the two worlds, testing their respective inherent possibilities, the use of music in different situations illustrates various approaches to the imponderabilities of life between artificiality and nature, rationality on the one hand and the realm of ancient properties on the other.

¹⁵⁴ Cf. Patricia Magness, “The Knight and the Princess. The Structure of Courtly Love in Toni Morrison’s *Tar Baby*.” In: *South Atlantic Review* 54:4 (1989), 85-99. 88.

¹⁵⁵ Cf. <http://www.lyricsdepot.com/the-ink-spots/if-i-didnt-care.html>, 23rd of November 2003.

5 *The Music of Memory, Resistance, and Survival*

Baby Suggs “let her great heart beat in their presence.” (*Beloved*, 87) The ex-slave who was bought free by her son’s extra labour, shares her life, her feelings, and her convictions with her community. For many years, she summons the people together at a clearing in the forest.

Then she shouted, “Let the children come!” and they ran from the trees toward her.

“Let your mothers hear you laugh,” she told them, and the woods rang. The adults looked on and could not help smiling.

Then “Let the grown men come,” she shouted. They stepped out one by one from among the ringing trees.

“Let your wives and your children see you dance,” she told them, and groundlife shuddered under their feet. (87)

Finally she called the women to her. “Cry,” she told them. “For the living and the dead. Just cry.” And without covering their eyes the women let loose.

It started that way: laughing children, dancing men, crying women and then it got mixed up. Women stopped crying and danced; men sat down and cried; children danced, women laughed, children cried until, exhausted and riven, all and each lay about the Clearing damp and gasping for breath. In the silence that followed, Baby Suggs, holy, offered up to them her great big heart. (*Beloved*, 87p.)

Baby Suggs is an uncalled preacher whose community assembles following her orders. The ritual involving shouting, crying and dancing based on music and rhythm, precedes Baby Suggs’ sermon, in which she advises her audience to love themselves and every part of their body, since nobody else is going to do it. This message is a result of having lived a life in slavery where even a slave’s body belonged to a master. At the end of her sermon, the climax of which consists in the order to “love your heart,” Baby Suggs presents the prize to be won: “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.” (*Beloved*, 88)

The elements and the course of these proceedings are strongly reminiscent of a ring shout, which connects both Christian and African components, as the content of the music has its roots in Christian faith and its form is derived from African predecessors. Baby Suggs’ motives are in accordance with Christian values. She wants to help her community to cope with life, and she wants to give them hope. Nevertheless, she

preaches very worldly contents. Her words are embedded in audience participation as singing, shouting, crying, and dancing – Baby Suggs calls, and the community responds. The whole ritual serves to fortify the members of the congregation for their present and future. By pointing out their opportunities as free people, Baby Suggs recalls the denial of these possibilities in slavery. The people might still have a hard life, but at least they are free, and they should be grateful for that. Both, Baby Suggs and the community, are able to let their heart-felt emotions run free. Baby Suggs demonstrates how to claim one’s own self, body and identity. As a consequence, “[t]hey cry, dance, and laugh in celebration of the humanity they have bestowed upon themselves.”¹⁵⁶ The meetings in the clearing turn into a “collective, ceremonial act of healing,”¹⁵⁷ in which Baby Suggs is the medium who grants voice to the congregation.¹⁵⁸

Paul D, however, is a “singing man.” (*Beloved*, 39) He is used to singing while doing his work.

He was up now and singing as he mended things he had broken the day before. Some old pieces of song he’d learned on the prison farm or in the War afterward. Nothing like what they sang at Sweet Home, where yearning fashioned every note.

The songs he knew from Georgia were flat-headed nails for pounding and pounding and pounding. (*Beloved*, 40)

Paul D’s reasons for singing are various and differ from situation to situation. At Sweet Home, where he was as a slave, he sang together with his fellow slaves, Paul A, Paul F, and Halle. Singing served as a means of survival by feigning a certain amount of normality in a life full of suppression. Apart from that, it further enhances the ties between the slaves - except for Sixo, another member of the group, who does not believe in this false reality: “[H]ow they laughed and played and urinated and sang. All but Sixo, who laughed once – at the very end.” (*Beloved*, 23)

Apart from simulating a better reality, the men’s songs are filled with yearning to be free. They have no possibility to openly complain about their slave status, so they transform their feelings into music, either into spirituals (like “Storm upon the Waters”) or work songs: “Little rice, little bean, / No meat in between. / Hard work ain’t easy, / Dry bread ain’t greasy.” (*Beloved*, 40) Although we get to know this song while Paul D

¹⁵⁶ Cf. Trudier Harris, 173.

¹⁵⁷ Cf. Gurleen Grewal, *Circles of Sorrow, Lines of Struggle. The Novels of Toni Morrison*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2000. 106.

¹⁵⁸ Cf. Trudier Harris, 174.

is at Cincinnati, the work songs he and the other men used to sing must have been of a similar kind. “Slaves sing most when they are most unhappy. The songs of the slave represent the sorrows of his heart; and he is relieved by them, only as an aching heart is relieved by its tears.”¹⁵⁹ Without the right of free speech, the creative process of making up songs helps the slaves to stay mentally sane. Their “‘garbled words’ and ‘tricked syllables’ [...] show the contemporary reader that the sound reflects more of the slaves’ humanity than the words could ever reveal.”¹⁶⁰ Similarly, “Paul D’s songs help him to reconstruct the broken pieces of his past life in Georgia more than to reset and glaze the table at 124 Bluestone Road.”¹⁶¹ When he adapts the songs to his own needs, he establishes “an element of personal testimony”¹⁶² via music.

Sixo, “the wild man,” (*Beloved*, 11) does not participate in the concept of singing for pleasure, and we do not know if he takes part in the work songs. Yet, he also needs music to retain his mental health. “Sixo went among trees at night. For dancing, he said, to keep his bloodlines open, he said.” (*Beloved*, 25) Sixo is set apart from the others on Sweet Home by the different rituals he performs. He seems to be more deeply rooted in his African heritage than the others, for at some point he stops speaking English – he does not see any future in it; (*Beloved*, 25) he does not want to learn how to count – out of the fear of then forgetting things more important to him; (*Beloved*, 208) and the others perceive him as a somewhat more spiritual being – they are only brave enough to laugh at his habits in daytime “when it was safe.” (*Beloved*, 25)

Singing is even used as a form of communication within the group of slaves. Upon hearing the signal telling him that the time for the escape has come, Halle passes on his knowledge wrapped in a song: “Hush, hush. Somebody’s calling my name. Hush, hush. Somebody’s calling my name. O my Lord, O my Lord, what shall I do?” (*Beloved*, 224) Although this could well be just another spiritual, the other slaves effortlessly decode the message and carry out their plans trying to escape from the plantation.

Unfortunately, these plans solely work out for Sethe and her children. The fate of Halle remains widely unknown, Paul A is hanged, Paul D and Sixo are caught. The

¹⁵⁹ Cf. Frederick Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*. Boston: Published at the Anti-Slavery Office, 1845. Edition used: New York: Anchor Books, 1989. 15.

¹⁶⁰ Cf. Peter J. Capuano, “Truth in Timbre: Morrison’s extension of Slave Narrative Song in *Beloved*.” In: *African American Review*, Spring 2003. Cited after: http://www.findarticles.com/cf_0/m2838/1_37/100959603/print.jhtml. 10 pages. August 2003. 5.

¹⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 3

¹⁶² *Ibid.*, 3.

two of them are being tied, when Sixo begins to sing a song. He sings in a language Paul D does not understand; nevertheless, the sound is perfectly intelligible and full of “hatred so loose it was juba.” (*Beloved*, 227) His “misunderstanding of the words to Sixo’s song [...] shows the reader how the words to slave songs are belittled by the content of their sound.”¹⁶³ In Capuano’s opinion, Morrison’s inclusion of the word “juba” reinforces “the connection between Sixo and Paul D and calls the reader to look at them not as slaves, but as human beings with a native culture,” as he explains that the term stands for the “chief drummer in the jubilee songs who pounded out the rhythms on celebration days of black culture.”¹⁶⁴

Sixo does not even stop singing when he learns that he is going to be killed. When his feet are already on fire, he ends his song only to substitute it by laughter and shouts of “Seven-O! Seven-O!” (*Beloved*, 226) Unable to free himself and escape, Sixo is voicing his resistance with the help of his music. The slave master realises that Sixo’s body might be ruled over, but that neither his mind and nor his spirit can ever be conquered. His song “makes him far too human to shoot,”¹⁶⁵ so the white man hits him to stop his singing. Sixo shouts “Seven-O!”, because he knows that his lover – pregnant with his child – is successfully escaping in the meantime. Although he himself has to die, his spirit as well as his child (will) live on. Therefore, his song represents both a music of resistance and a music of survival.

Paul D is sent to a prison farm in Georgia, where he is forced to be a member of a chain gang. The men accompany their monotonous work with songs, and the music helps them to synchronise their work. These songs are the only form of emotional outlet available to the men.

They sang it out and beat it up, garbling the words so they could not be understood; tricking the words so their syllables yielded up other meanings. They sang the women they knew; the children they had been; the animals they had tamed themselves or seen others tame. They sang of bosses and masters and misses; of mules and dogs and the shamelessness of life. They sang lovingly of graveyards and sisters long gone. Of pork in the woods; meal in the pan; fish on the line; cane, rain and rocking chairs. (*Beloved*, 108)

The topics they thematise are related to both their past and their insufferable present. Even death seems preferable to the appalling situation they are in, yet, “[a] man could

¹⁶³ Ibid., 7.

¹⁶⁴ Ibid., 7.

¹⁶⁵ Ibid., 6.

risk his own life, but not his brother's." (*Beloved*, 109), and so the only thing they can do is sing. While the men cannot change their situation, they channel their feelings by singing about them. This act of transcendence enables them to put up a kind of resistance – however subtle –, and to at least be the masters of their own minds. The men chained together do not possess any weapons to actually kill their cruel overseers, so they figuratively kill them in their songs. These songs have the same functions as Sixo's in so far as they are a means of emotional survival and resistance.

While Paul D has kept on singing, freedom has changed his songs for good. When he is doing repair work in Sethe's house, he accompanies his actions by making up a song: "Bare feet and chamomile sap. / Took off my shoes; took off my hat." (*Beloved*, 40) The bare feet are both Sethe's and his own; Sethe had been in a hurry to get rid of the chamomile sap on her legs and feet, when Paul D arrived at her house. And since Sethe welcomed him to stay, Paul D could rid himself of his shoes, too. Thus, Paul D is creatively revisioning his arrival at 124 Bluestone Road. Nevertheless, he does not yet voice his fears, although "[i]t was tempting to change the words (Gimme back my shoes; gimme back my hat)." (*Beloved*, 40) Paul D is not sure if it will be possible for him to stay with Sethe, because he has never been able to remain with a woman for an extended period of time. And contrary to Sethe, neither the spirit in the house nor Sethe's daughter Denver have made him feel a welcome guest. So Paul D senses a discomfort he does not express acoustically for the time being.

Yet, songs remain a means for him to face life's atrocities. Paul D was forced to witness how Halle covered his face in butter as the consequence of having had to watch how Sethe was stolen her mother's milk – a sight Halle could not cope with. Just as Halle could not help Sethe, there was nothing Paul D could do for Halle, for he himself had been gagged with the bit¹⁶⁶ and tied. (*Beloved*, 72) Paul D has never been able to shake off these memories nor those about Sixo, and he has never even been capable of talking about them before telling Sethe. He adds, "I never have talked about it. Not to a soul. Sang it sometimes, but I never told a soul." (*Beloved*, 71) In his music, Paul D at once preserves his memories and transcends them, making them bearable merely in song.

Paul D, in doubt of his own manhood, is sure that both Halle and Sixo were men and not boys. (*Beloved*, 220) He compares himself to them and he wonders what it is

¹⁶⁶ An instrument of torture humiliating slaves and depriving them of their ability to speak.

that makes a man. Recalling his capture and Sixo's brave way of dying, "[h]e thinks he should have sung along. Loud, something loud and rolling to go with Sixo's tune." (227) Paul D is convinced that Sixo's singing in the face of death has indisputably proven him a real man, whereas he is still not sure about his own person.

Apart from her children, Sethe is the only one to successfully escape from Sweet Home. But she owes her survival to Amy, a white girl who helped her when she had almost given up. Sethe runs away while being pregnant with Denver. Having been whipped by schoolteacher¹⁶⁷, her entire back is torn; and from walking barefoot her feet are in a very bad shape. Amy helps Sethe make her way to a lean-to, where she takes care of Sethe's back and her feet. Afterwards she starts singing: "*When the busy day is done / And my weary little one / Rocketh gently to and fro;[...] / Then from yonder misty skies / Cometh Lady Button Eyes.*" (*Beloved*, 80p.) At the end of the song, she repeats its last line. This song appears almost like a direct address of Sethe, whose strange eyes are pointed out repeatedly throughout the novel: "Halle's girl – the one with iron eyes [...] irises the same color as her skin, which, in that still face, used to make him think of a mask with mercifully punched-out eyes." (*Beloved*, 9)

Amy's voice not only soothes Sethe, but also the baby she visualises as an antelope: "The sound of that voice, like a sixteen-year-old boy's, going on and on and on, kept the little antelope quiet and grazing." (*Beloved*, 34) Shortly before Amy's arrival, Sethe had almost given up. She then "waited for the little antelope to protest." (*Beloved*, 30) Not sure why she imagines her baby as an antelope, for she has never in her life seen one, Sethe is reminded of her mother performing a dance with that name. (*Beloved*, 31) Her memories are interrupted by Amy's approach. Amy's voice tranquillises the "little antelope," and her song, which she learnt from her mother long since dead, links Amy to Sethe and her dead mother. Apart from providing comfort, the song connects the past (the dead mothers) with both the present (Sethe and Amy) and the future (the baby soon to be born).

The antelope dance is a musical tie between Sethe and her mother. And Sethe is also connected to her children via song. She once made up a lullaby for her children: "[H]igh Johnny, wide Johnny. Sweet William bend down low. [...] Jackweed raise up high, [...] Lambswool over my shoulder, buttercup and clover fly." (*Beloved*, 271) When she hums this song, *Beloved* has already been at Sethe's house for a long time.

¹⁶⁷ Although used as a name, "schoolteacher" is written in lower-case throughout the novel.

(*Beloved*, 175) “‘I made that song up,’ said Sethe. ‘I made it up and sang it to my children. Nobody knows that song but me and my children.’ / Beloved turned to look at Sethe. ‘I know it,’ she said.” (*Beloved*, 176) This is the point at which Sethe is finally convinced that Beloved is her dead daughter’s reincarnation. Between Beloved’s singing and Sethe’s ultimate epiphany, Sethe is reminded of a conversation she once had with Baby Suggs about one of her daughters, and of the moment when her own mother was pointed out to her. Therefore, Sethe’s song not only connects her and her children, it reaches into the past and refers to many more mothers and daughters. What they all have in common is that they have been separated from each other. Although some of them are dead, they live on in the memory triggered by the song. Furthermore, Sethe re-establishes her people’s tradition by creating a song for her children.¹⁶⁸

Sethe was saved by Amy and her song, and she is saved once more with the help of music. Believing that Beloved is her daughter, Sethe concentrates all her thoughts and all her energy on her. She tries to explain to Beloved the reasons for her deed, and she wants to make her understand. While Sethe suffers physically and mentally, Beloved grows bigger and stronger, just like her needs. “A complaint from Beloved, an apology from Sethe.” (*Beloved*, 241) “Sethe was trying to make up for the handsaw; Beloved was making her pay for it.” (*Beloved*, 251) Sethe does not perceive the destructive pattern, so she continues to do everything possible for Beloved.

She was not like them. She was wild game, and nobody said, Get on out of here, girl, and come back when you get some sense. Nobody said, You raise your hand to me and I will knock you into the middle of next week. Ax the trunk, the limb will die. Honor thy mother and father that thy days may be long upon the land which the Lord thy God giveth thee. I will wrap you round that doorknob, don’t nobody work for you and God don’t love ugly ways. (*Beloved*, 242)

Denver is the only one to know that something needs to be done in order to help Sethe and to nourish the three of them, since her mother has quit work, and the small amount of food they have almost exclusively goes to Beloved. So Denver turns to the community for help. “Nobody was going to help her unless she told it – told all of it.” (*Beloved*, 253) Many women of the community also believe that Beloved is a reincarnation of the daughter Sethe killed, and although “[y]ou can’t just up and kill your children [...], the children can’t just up and kill the mama.” (*Beloved*, 256) Even though the women do not at all approve of Sethe’s deed or the pride they find her guilty

¹⁶⁸ Cf. Gutmann, 83.

of, they are ready to help. So they gather in front of 124 Bluestone Road in order to somehow try to exorcise the ghost. They bring along with them Christian faith as well as any objects they attribute magical powers to. “[A]nd then Ella hollered. / Instantly the kneelers and the standers joined her. 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.” (*Beloved*, 259) Sethe attributes the sound she hears to that of the clearing years ago, “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 podes off chestnut trees. It broke over Sethe and she trembled like the baptized in its wash.” (*Beloved*, 261) Sethe leaves the house and recognises a white man approaching. Like in a *déjà-vu*, she takes him for schoolteacher trying to recapture her and her children again. Having learnt from the past and empowered by the music, this time she does not attempt to protect her children from slavery by killing them but attacks him instead. While Denver and the women manage to prevent Sethe from hurting the white man, *Beloved* disappears without a trace.

Beloved is dispelled not by an individual but a communal act. The women draw upon their ancient mythology in combination with incantations and songs of both pagan and religious origin.¹⁶⁹ “One of the simplest and most direct ways of praying and meditating is through singing, and singing in community is exceptionally powerful.”¹⁷⁰ The act of singing can be compared to a sort of witch doctor causing an evil to leave.¹⁷¹ Singing is associated with the sacred act of baptism, which is more powerful than *Beloved*, for she is exorcised by it. And Sethe, having been an outsider of the community for many years, is sung “back into its embrace” lead by Ella.¹⁷² In the women’s singing she detects the cultural memory, “the force of *nommo*, that has not died with Baby Suggs.”¹⁷³ Sethe is offered a new life with a new beginning.¹⁷⁴

Once more bereft of *Beloved*, Sethe is lying on Baby Suggs’ bed, when Paul D finds her. She still suffers from *Beloved*’s departure and therefore sings the song she

¹⁶⁹ Cf. Trudier Harris, 161p.

¹⁷⁰ Cf. Bobby McFerrin, *Circlesongs*. Sony Music: 1997. Leaflet, 1-13. 2.

¹⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 162.

¹⁷² Cf. David Lawrence, “Fleshly Ghosts and Ghostly Flesh: The Word and the Body in *Beloved*.” In: Middleton, 231-246. 241.

¹⁷³ Cf. William R. Handley, “The House a Ghost Built: *Nommo*, Allegory and the Ethics of Reading in Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*.” In: *Contemporary Literature* 36:4 (1995 Winter) 676-701. 699.

made up for her children. Sethe thinks about her mother and remembers how her two sons left her. Her statement about Beloved, “[s]he was my best thing,” is corrected by Paul D, “You your best thing, Sethe. You are.” (*Beloved*, 272p.) Paul D now is the perfect companion for Sethe, which becomes obvious in a new version of his song:

*Bare feet and chamomile sap.
Took off my shoes; took off my hat.
Bare feet and chamomile sap
Gimme back my shoes; gimme back my hat.*

*Lay my head on a potato sack,
Devil sneak up behind my back.
Steam engine got a lonesome whine;
Love that woman till you go stone blind.*

*Stone blind; stone blind.
Sweet Home gal make you lose your mind. (*Beloved*, 263)*

This song chronicles Paul D’s fate from the moment of his arrival in Cincinnati. The first two lines refer to the instance in which he saw Sethe and decided to stay at her house, whereas the fourth line is the product of his doubts. When Beloved’s presence forced him to leave the house and its humble luxury of a bed, Paul D sought his resting place elsewhere – namely in the cold house. Beloved visited him there and seduced him against his will, so she appears to be the devil who sneaked up behind him. However, this line can also be understood differently: Stamp Paid told Paul D about Sethe’s deeds, which makes Paul D leave 124 Bluestone Road totally. He does not understand Sethe, and it is the haunt of her past which forces him to depart. The steam engine, a current element of blues songs, invokes in him the wish to leave town, but he decides to stay on – out of his love for Sethe. The song turns into a love song for her, and the story of Paul D’s travels converges with that of Sethe, the Sweet Home girl.¹⁷⁵ Paul D’s musical rendition spans the time from his first day at Sethe’s house to his ultimate return to Sethe; and their reunification is only possible after Sethe’s re-admission into the community has taken place.¹⁷⁶ Paul D and Sethe “got more yesterday than anybody. [They] need some kind of tomorrow.” (*Beloved*, 273) By singing a love song to Sethe, Paul D literally “put[s] his story next to hers.” (*Beloved*, 273)

¹⁷⁴ Cf. Harding and Martin, 100.

¹⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 100.

¹⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 100.

6 “The Music’s Secret Drive”¹⁷⁷: Protest, Temptation, and Reconciliation

“[M]usic was everywhere and all around.”¹⁷⁸ This statement refers to Morrison’s childhood, but it might also be applied to her novel *Jazz*. Contrary to the other novels dealt with so far, the characters of *Jazz* do not produce their own music, they rather listen and dance to music performed by a band or reproduced by records. And apart from the characters listening to music, the ominous narrator reacts to - and comments on - the music of the city. “Below is shadow where any blasé thing takes place: clarinets and lovemaking, fists and the voices of sorrowful women. A city like this one makes me dream tall and feel in on things. Hep. It’s the bright steel rocking above the shade below that does it.” (*Jazz*, 15) This description connects the music to the city’s architecture as well as to its inhabitants. While the people on the ground are occupied with the fulfilment of truly fundamental needs and desires, associated with the music of the clarinets, further up in the air the scene is dominated by metal, leaving space for dreams and aspirations to higher things. The clarinets stand for the “dark and low-down emotions of grief and uncontrollable passion,”¹⁷⁹ whereas the brass instruments symbolise the “clean, bright, uplifting emotions of joy, freedom and self-control.”¹⁸⁰ In spite of this allegedly sharp dichotomy, the borders between the two kinds of music appear blurred:

A colored man floats down out of the sky blowing a saxophone, and below him, in the space between two buildings, a girl talks earnestly to a man in a straw hat. He touches her lip to remove a bit of something there. Suddenly she is quiet. He tilts her chin up. They stand there. [...] By the way his jaw moves and the turn of his head I know he has a golden tongue. (*Jazz*, 17)

At first, the two people merely talk; but under the influence of the music as a catalyst of emotions, they are drawn to more basic feelings. The saxophone, termed a woodwind instrument despite its corpus of brass, is itself a hybrid.¹⁸¹ Therefore, it perfectly bridges the gap between actions dominated by the intellect and those steered by emotions.

Moreover, the music is not only capable of influencing people’s behaviour – it “can change the weather. From freezing to hot to cool.” (*Jazz*, 67) Furthermore, the

¹⁷⁷ (*Jazz*, 83)

¹⁷⁸ Cf. Betty Fussell, “All That Jazz.” In: Taylor-Guthrie, 280-287. 284.

¹⁷⁹ Cf. Anthony J. Berret, “Jazz: From Music to Literature.” In: Nellie Y. McKay and Kathryn Earle (ed.), *Approaches to Teaching the Novels of Toni Morrison*. New York: MLA, 1997. 113-117. 114.

¹⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 114.

music even controls the characters and anticipates their actions. (*Jazz*, 83) The narrator is sensitive to these observations and interprets them for the reader. These statements about the music and its power add to the creation of the setting as a city, where music is always present and where it forms an important part of people's lives, whether they like it or not. This prepares the reader for Alice Manfred's attitude towards the different kinds of music she is exposed to.

Alice Manfred is watching a march on Fifth Avenue in 1917. It is a protest march after a period of race riots, and the only sound to be heard is that of "drums saying what the graceful women and the marching men could not. What was possible to say was already in print on a banner that repeated a couple of promises from the Declaration of Independence and waved over the head of its bearer. But what was meant came from the drums." (*Jazz*, 69) Alice has lost her sister and her brother-in-law in the course of the riots and is now in charge of her orphaned niece. She listens to the drums hoping that they take away her fears. They express the hurt she feels as well as that of the silent marchers; the drums' wordless sound organises and voices her emotions. The drums help Alice to deal with her grief and face her new situation with confidence, and hence she frequently turns back to these drums to find support and rescue: "Alice carried that gathering rope with her always after that day on Fifth Avenue, and found it reliably secure and tight – most of the time. Except when men sat on windowsills fingering horns, and the women wondered 'how long.'" (*Jazz*, 75)

While the drums provide Alice with a means enabling her to cope with her circumstances, the blues and jazz music of the city uneases her. It is free instead of organised, and it is very emotional. Alice, who perceives it as "dirty, get-on-down music," (*Jazz*, 74) is convinced that this kind of music "made you do unwise disorderly things. Just hearing it was like violating the law." (*Jazz*, 74) She reacts strongly to the music which serves as a scapegoat and interprets it as a constant threat. It makes her angry at the misery in her own life and that of the people she knows. (*Jazz*, 76) Alice's husband left her for another woman (*Jazz*, 108p.), and now Alice is trying to keep such feelings as love or sexual desire at bay, both regarding herself as well as her niece. Therefore, this kind of music so heavily associated with brothels and fleshly pleasures,¹⁸² obviously endangers Alice's self-control and, more than that, her attempts at protecting her niece from the evil she is afraid of.

¹⁸¹ This is due to its close relation to the clarinet and the wooden blade in its mouthpiece.

¹⁸² Cf. Jill Matus, *Toni Morrison*. Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 1998. 139.

But while Alice tries to avoid this “dangerous” kind of music, “[i]t was impossible to keep the Fifth Avenue drums separate from the belt-buckle tunes vibrating from pianos and spinning on every Victrola.” (*Jazz*, 76) The drums and the music seem to be the two sides of the same coin. The drums express protest and fury, and the music Alice believes to be “just colored folks’ stuff” (*Jazz*, 75) contains “a complicated anger.” (*Jazz*, 75) So the two kinds of music seem to spring from the same source. Hence, try as she might, Alice is unable to evade the blues.

Wondering at this totally silent night, she can go back to bed but as soon as she turns the pillow to its smoother, cooler side, a melody line she doesn’t remember where from sings itself, loud and unsolicited, in her head. “When I was young and in my prime I could get my barbecue any old time.” They are greedy, reckless words, loose and infuriating, but hard to dismiss because underneath, holding up the looseness like a palm, are the drums that put Fifth Avenue into focus. (*Jazz*, 77)

Alice depends on the drums, and because of that, she cannot completely rid herself from the blues and the jazz. Similarly, her influence on her niece is not as strong as the impact the music has on the girl. Dorcas is attracted to the music precisely because of its sexual undertones:

While her aunt worried about how to keep the heart ignorant of the hips and the head in charge of both, Dorcas lay on a chenille bedspread, rickled and happy knowing that there was no place to be where somewhere, close by, somebody was not licking his licorice stick, tickling the ivories, beating his skins, blowing off his horn while a knowing woman sang ain’t nobody going to keep me down you got the right key baby but the wrong keyhole you got to get it bring it and put it right here, or else. (*Jazz*, 77)

The licorice stick is a clarinet, the ivories are the (white) keys of a piano, and the skins are those of drums – all typical instruments of jazz. The song the woman might sing contains open sexual references – a feature of many blues songs sung by artist as Ma Rainey or Bessie Smith during the 1920s. While there are also other blues songs to be heard, Dorcas is indulging in thoughts about this kind of city blues typical of the “Red Hot Mamas,” as the singers were commonly labelled.¹⁸³ Alice is conscious of her helplessness in comparison with the music: “[S]he was no match for a City seeping music that begged and challenged each and every day. ‘Come,’ it said. ‘Come and do

¹⁸³ Cf. Katherine Boutry, “Black and Blues: The Female Body of Blues Writing in Jean Toomer, Toni Morrison, and Gayl Jones.” In: Simawe, 91-118. 95.

wrong.” (*Jazz*, 88) Regarding the drums, her perception of music differs even more from that of her niece. An “all-embracing rope of fellowship, discipline and transcendence” (*Jazz*, 78) for Alice, the drums represent a sort of starting point for Dorcas. Just as Alice, she is quite conscious of the connection between the drums and the other kind of music, but she rather focuses on the city’s blues and jazz. Dorcas connects the drums to East St. Louis, where her parents died, but in sharp contrast to her aunt, she reacts to them by internalising the sexual qualities of the blues and jazz patterns. “[T]he bright wood chip sank further and further down until it lodged comfortably somewhere below her navel. She watched the black unblinking men, and the drums assured her that the glow would never leave her, that it would be waiting for and with her whenever she wanted to be touched by it.” (*Jazz*, 78)

Alice’s fears for Dorcas come true, as her niece secretly attends parties where jazz and blues records are played. And Dorcas is one of those women who dance “close and shameless or apart and wild;” (*Jazz*, 74) and act provocatively. (*Jazz*, 84) At one of these parties, while dancing with her new boyfriend, Dorcas is shot by her former lover Joe Trace.

Joe’s motivation for killing Dorcas remains incomprehensible even to himself. He had still been in love with Dorcas and incapable of coming to terms with the fact that she had left him. Looking for her, he visited a beauty parlor, where he listened to music.

I dismissed the evil in my thoughts because I wasn’t sure that the sooty music the blind twins were playing wasn’t the cause. It can do that to you, a certain kind of guitar playing. Not like the clarinets, but close. If that song had been coming through a clarinet, I’d have known right away. But the guitars – they confused me, made me doubt myself, and I lost the trail. (158)

Without realising what he is really doing, Joe enters the party carrying a gun. Despite his self-delusion that he is not hunting for Dorcas and that she is not prey, he shoots her. Joe blames the music he heard before. He is convinced of having been deceived by trusting the wrong instrument – while a clarinet could make you suspicious or distrustful, a guitar is capable of lulling you into a false sense of security or truth. Therefore, Joe, who had been a passionate hunter in earlier years, acts contrary to his hunter’s ethos and kills Dorcas despite his conviction of her being female and therefore

not prey. He realises that “like the guitar, he has been played”¹⁸⁴ – yet, not by any conventional character, but by music itself. Adept at understanding and interpreting “the music the world makes” (*Jazz*, 208) – the sounds of running water or of the wind in the trees –, Joe is incompetent at understanding the city’s music.

The scene of Dorcas’ death is rendered via music. “The record playing is over. Somebody they have been waiting for is playing the piano. A woman is singing too. The music is faint but I know the words by heart.” (*Jazz*, 225) “I don’t know who is that woman singing but I know the words by heart.” (*Jazz*, 226) While these statements seem to reflect Dorcas’ thoughts, they could just as well be the narrator’s remarks, for shortly afterwards we are told that at that stage the music has changed. “You would have thought everything had been forgiven the way they played. The clarinets had trouble because the brass was cut so fine, not lowdown the way they love to do it, but high and fine like a young girl singing by the side of a creek, passing the time, her ankles cold in the water.” (*Jazz*, 228) The music comments on what has happened. Its deceiving quality is hinted at, because in fact nothing has really been forgiven, and Joe still has to live with the murder of his lover. The girl alluded to could either be Dorcas, who was young, or Wild – Joe’s alleged mother –, who lives in unity with nature.

The music even audibly connects Dorcas’ death to Joe’s guilt. Violet “had been listening to the music penetrate Joe’s sobs, which were quieter now.” (*Jazz*, 229) Violet is Joe’s wife. Joe’s affair with and his murder of Dorcas have left her devastated. Joe and Violet hardly talk to each other any longer, and Violet turns to Alice Manfred for understanding. This is particularly delicate, since at the funeral Violet attacked Dorcas’ body – a deed resulting from the “cracks” in her personality. Violet does not want to accept that her husband has betrayed her, nevertheless, she tries to explore the reasons for his behaviour. Meanwhile, Joe has become broken-hearted and depressed. He mourns for the very girl he himself has killed. The gap between Violet and Joe seems eternal. But the music promises forgiveness, and Dorcas’ friend Felice helps Joe and Violet to step on common ground again.

Felice, “another true-as-life Dorcas, four marcelled waves and all,” (*Jazz*, 230) is invited in by Violet. Felice carries a record with her, but unfortunately Joe and Violet do not possess a record player. However, while Felice is there, they all hear music coming from the neighbourhood, and Joe and Violet begin to dance together. “Mr. Trace moved

¹⁸⁴ Cf. Barbara Williams Lewis, “The Function of Jazz in Toni Morrison’s *Jazz*.” In: Middleton, 271-281. 276.

his head to the rhythm and his wife snapped her fingers in time. She did a little step in front of him and he smiled. By and by they were dancing. Funny, like old people do, and I laughed for real. Not because of how funny they looked. Something in it made me feel I shouldn't be there. Shouldn't be looking at them doing that." (*Jazz*, 249) The combination of Felice's presence and the music bring about the reconciliation between the two.¹⁸⁵ And although the past cannot be changed, it needs not be replayed. The relationship between Joe and Violet is not the same as when they danced together on the train to the city (*Jazz*, 44p.), but again it is the dancing that brings them close together and starts to forge strong bonds of unity again. Moreover, the music puts Joe and Violet back into touch with the community they have been isolated from.¹⁸⁶

Where in the other novels the characters themselves use the power of music to achieve something, the characters in *Jazz* are rather exposed to music manipulating them. Acting as a force of its own, the music influences their emotions and helps them to overcome hard times, but at the same time it makes them afraid of its power. The music serves both as a scapegoat and a focus of desires. It can make people lose their heads, yet, it can bring about reconciliation. Morrison comments on jazz: "You have to make something out of a mistake, and if you do it well enough it will take you to another place where you never would have gone had you not made that error."¹⁸⁷ This exactly holds true for the story of Joe and Violet Trace. And without the power of music, neither Joe's mistake nor their reconciliation would have taken place. "In her previous novels, jazz serves as the 'soundtrack' for the events in human lives. However, in *Jazz* these positions are reversed. The human stories play back-up to the dazzling improvisation rendered by the music itself. Though unnamed, jazz is the essential narrator of the novel."¹⁸⁸ Hence, the music is not being played by the characters, the characters are being played by the music.

¹⁸⁵ Cf. Boutry, 105.

¹⁸⁶ Cf. Aoi Mori, "Embracing Jazz: Healing of Armed Women and Motherless Children in Toni Morrison's *Jazz*." In: *CLA Journal* 42 (1998/1999) 320-330. 329.

¹⁸⁷ Cf. Toni Morrison, "The Art of Fiction." In: *Paris Review* 128 (1993) 83-125. CXXXIV.

¹⁸⁸ Cf. Paula Gallant Eckard, "The Interplay of Music, Language, and Narrative in Toni Morrison's *Jazz*." In: *CLA Journal* 38 (1994) 11-19. 13.

7 *Dead Music and the Music of Salvation*

“*Paradise*, [...] while also bathed in music, has little if any of the harmony that buoys *Song of Solomon*. The music in *Paradise*, until the metamorphosis of the Convent’s residents at the very end, is impersonal, it’s listeners are passive recipients, hence it cannot be empowering.”¹⁸⁹ The first occupants of the Convent, Mother Superior and Connie, do not have a radio or any other musical equipment, a circumstance Mavis regrets, since first the singing of a hitchhiker and then the music droning on her car radio had carried her through her long journey. After the suffocation of her two youngest children in her car, Mavis has fled from her family afraid of the revenge of her husband together with the remaining children. She not only tries to escape the imminent danger, but also her dreadful memories as well as her guilty conscience. The hitchhiker’s songs of “true love, false love, redemption; songs of unreasonable joy” (*Paradise*, 35) help her to channel her grief into the songs, thereby making it bearable. “Mile after mile rolled by urged and eased by the gorgeous ache in Bennie’s voice.” (*Paradise*, 35) When Bennie has left, Mavis turns on the radio and sings along herself whenever one of the hitchhiker’s songs is played. (*Paradise*, 35) It is, however, not only the music which keeps her going, but the perfect role-model of the hitchhikers demonstrating her how to survive on the road. Mavis, run out of fuel and completely lost, decides not to give up but to take matters into her own hands when she tries to remind herself of what the girls would have done in her place. (*Paradise*, 37) Yet, even as Mavis is sitting in the Convent’s kitchen, she keeps on missing music. “Now the radio was across a field, down one road, then another. Off. In the space where its sound ought to be was ... nothing. Just an absence, which she did not think she could occupy properly without the framing bliss of the radio. From the table where she sat admiring her busy hands, the radio absence spread out.” (*Paradise*, 42) Having grown dependent on listening to music as a means of pushing aside the past, Mavis has not yet made her peace with herself.

The next girl to arrive at the Convent is Gigi, whom Mavis does not get along with for a long time. Their mutual dislike culminates first in a verbal and then in a physical fight after K.D.’s and Arnette’s wedding. (*Paradise*, 167p.) After that incident, music brings about the necessary reconciliation, when Gigi turns on the radio she had

¹⁸⁹ Cf. Nada Elia, *Trances, Dances and Vociferations. Agency and Resistance in Africana Women’s Narratives*. New York and London: 2001. 128.

brought to the Convent and dances to it. “When last year’s top tune ‘Killing Me Softly’ came on, it was not long before they all followed suit. Even Mavis. First apart, imagining partners. Then partnered, imagining each other.” (*Paradise*, 179) In addition to overcoming their former grudges against each other by dancing together, they take an important step in the process of forming a community, although the music does not “offer them the therapy that Pilate’s song about her family offers her.”¹⁹⁰ The relief the music provides them is only temporary. Admittedly, they are acting as more of a union after the dance and their memories are momentarily silenced,¹⁹¹ but they still suffer from their personal problems, which keep them from truly helping each other. The only character aware of this is Connie, who later on affects the change from passive reception to active creation of music. As long as the women solely react to music played on the radio, it remains out of their control and does not entirely function as a life-giving force. On the contrary, numerous allusions to death are associated with music,¹⁹² as when Mavis is “mourning the inferior rendition” of her singing as compared to that of Bennie (*Paradise*, 35), or when the Convent women are dancing to a song called “Killing me softly.” (*Paradise*, 179) In order to gain power over their destinies, the women not only have to assume control over music by making it their own, but rather by producing it themselves.

Within Ruby, the site of the Oven occupies a semi-sacred position. Having been used during baptisms in the years of the town’s foundation (*Paradise*, 103) and being the focal point representing its history, it now functions as the meeting place for the younger generations. (*Paradise*, 111) “The Oven whose every brick had heard live chords praising His name was now subject to radio music – music already dead when it filtered through a black wire trailing from Anna’s store to the Oven like a snake.” (*Paradise*, 111) Deacon Morgan’s inherent criticism of these new conditions reflects the older generation’s disrespect for the tastes and habits of their descendants. Apart from religious hymns and choral pieces, music is considered evil by the founders of Ruby, who equal its influence to “[w]ickedness in the streets, theft in the night, murder in the morning. Liquor for lunch and dope for dinner.” (*Paradise*, 274) By denying the young people their own place in the town’s history as well as their own voice, they keep them

¹⁹⁰ Cf. Elia, 129.

¹⁹¹ Ibid., 130.

¹⁹² Ibid., 129.

from making their own music. The result is a numbed and isolated generation listening to “music already dead.” (*Paradise*, 111)

Whereas communal singing and dancing often strengthen the ties between individual members of a group, this is not the case at K.D.’s and Arnette’s wedding – neither in the church nor at the ensuing reception – since the occasion lacks the necessary mutual goodwill. Bride and bridegroom have been forced into wedlock for the sake of compliance with moral codes; hence, their liaison is not based on love but on an agreement between their respective families. (*Paradise*, 56-61) Likewise, Reverend Pulliam’s sermon and Reverend Misner’s counter-sermon emphasise the gap(s) between the world-views of their denominations, thereby also representing the differences between their particular followers as well as the different generations living in Ruby. (*Paradise*, 141-155) The music at church thus provides an emotional outlet for all the accumulated tension. “When finally Kate Golightly touched the organ keys and the couple turned around to face the congregation, Soane cried. Partly at the sad bright smiles of the bride and groom, partly in dread of the malice, set roaming now, and on its way to her house.” (*Paradise*, 155)

Soane’s anticipation of impending troubles at the wedding reception is justified, as subliminal resentments between the guests threaten to erupt. In order to prevent this, Soane turns towards music. “Pastor Cary – soothing and jovial – was the best bet for keeping things steady. He and his wife, Lily, were treasured for their duets, and if they could get some music going...” (*Paradise*, 155) Even Steward is aware of the danger that the dense atmosphere release itself in confrontations, “silently urging his twin to try somebody else – the Male Chorus, Kate Golightly – quick before Pulliam took it in his head to pray them back into battle stations or, Lord help us, Jeff began reciting his VA grievances.” (*Paradise*, 156) Instead of solving their underlying problems, the community takes refuge in hymns – a conduct in stark contrast to the peaceful content of their songs of praise, thus rendering the religious music hypocritical. It functions as a further illustration of how numerous members of the community preach love while actually practising hatred. Religious hymns, traditionally associated with salvation, serve to keep up appearances and are emptied of their original powers in this context. Therefore, the sudden interruption by profane radio music being played by the young people at the nearby Oven, although being perceived as scandalous by some wedding guests, cannot dishonour the sacred hymns any further. “Inside, outside and on down the road the beat and the heat were ruthless.” (*Paradise*, 157) The different kinds of

music symbolise the abyss between the extremes of opinions held by the respective groups within the population of Ruby: Whereas one person believes that the young people dancing at the Oven are simply having fun, Reverend Pulliam and his wife are convinced that this kind of behaviour provides clear proof of “already advanced decay,” which has to be confronted. (*Paradise*, 157)

At the Oven, young Rubyites are singing and swaying to radio music and the Convent girls’ dancing. (*Paradise*, 157) As some of the town’s girls disapprove of the situation, they are possibly afraid of competing for male attention. Nevertheless, this spontaneous and communal outburst of song and dance could provide an opportunity for the Convent girls to integrate themselves into the community of Ruby, and even the “dead music” coming from the radio could be sustaining¹⁹³ – were it not for the older generation. The group of young people, bored by the wedding’s hymns and lack of alcohol, resort to the Oven and are joined by the Convent girls. Whereas the playing of modern radio music outside already constitutes an act of open rebellion against the traditional music inside, things get out of hand when the apparently drunk Convent girls start riding bicycles without even attempting to keep their skirts from flying up, thereby carelessly challenging the stiff moral standards of the more conservative wedding guests. “The boys laugh,” (*Paradise*, 158) – but for a group of their fathers this provocation, while distracting from the contentions within Ruby, figures as the last straw in their decision to declare war on the Convent girls.

Unfortunately, the joint dancing at the Oven does not help the Convent girls; on the contrary – it complicates both their relationship with the residents of Ruby and with each other. Back at the Convent, they frequently listen to radio music and remain isolated despite living with others. Instead of being responsive to each other, they indulge in their individual sufferings and self-deceptive dreams until Consolata, tired of so many people living alongside each other rather than with each other, decides to alter their situation. (*Paradise*, 222) A summary of her life is followed by the story of “Piedade, who sang but never said a word.” (*Paradise*, 264) After these accounts, the other women eventually start to unfold themselves, conveying their own stories to each other via “loud dreaming.” (*Paradise*, 264) Later, the women draw images of themselves onto the floor and from then on, they project their fears and obsessions onto these representations. (*Paradise*, 265) Consolata’s therapy for the women, which

¹⁹³ This concept is successfully applied in Brian Friel’s drama *Dancing at Lughnasa*.

culminates in a shared dance in the rain, seems to work out, for “the Convent women were no longer haunted.” (*Paradise*, 266) Having relieved themselves of their sorrows and after celebrating the liberating effect by dancing together,¹⁹⁴ the girls are experiencing the salvatory quality of music; their cleansing is total and it seems as if the rain is baptising them into a new state of spiritual wholeness. (*Paradise*, 284p.) “If painting can help humanity, music connects it to divinity.”¹⁹⁵

Consolata’s intervention with the guidance of Piedade’s singing as well as the rain dance provide spiritual salvation at the last minute, since this celebration is followed by the brutal assault against the Convent. The women are killed in the course of events, but their corpses vanish subsequently, and – apart from Consolata – every one of them appears once more, having returned to people of their respective past to make up with them or prove her newly found strength. (*Paradise*, 309-318) The novel ends with an image of Piedade singing and a woman with the same attributes as Consolata, listening to her. After having provided a haven for the Convent girls, Consolata herself has come “back home to love begun.” (*Paradise*, 318) Having accomplished the difficult task of leading them to a spiritual liberation, Consolata and Piedade are waiting for a new assignment, for new souls to be saved: “Another ship, perhaps, but different, heading to port, crew and passengers, lost and saved, atremble, for they have been disconsolate for some time. Now they will rest before shouldering the endless work they were created to do down here in Paradise.” (*Paradise*, 318)

Radio music had helped Mavis up to a certain level, it provided a common denominator for the Convent girls to get along with each other, but it could not get them any further concerning the various shades of their past. In the town of Ruby, radio music – apart from figuring as a weak means of rebellion – represents the younger generation’s lack of place in history by illustrating their lack of an own voice. Just as most of the characters indulge in listening to music in order to repress their memories, the music at the wedding is being instrumentalised to cover the strained relationships between the Rubyites. Thus, the hymns sung without true conviction become as trivial and dead as passively consumed radio music. It is only when characters honestly try to help each other and every single one of them equally contributes to the attempt – following the example of Consolata and the Convent women – that music can be

¹⁹⁴ Cf. Dehn Kubitschek, 167.

¹⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 186.

salvatory in the context of this novel. Solely in that case, “[s]ong is the way home, the way to heaven, and the only paradise we’ll ever know.”¹⁹⁶

¹⁹⁶ Ibid., 186.

“The words dance in my head to the music in my mouth.” (*Love*, 3) This strong connection between words and music presented by a woman called L in *Love* is characteristic of all of Toni Morrison’s novels. In this – her latest – literary work, music operates within different realms, namely that of the mysterious character L who keeps on humming, and that of blues and jazz being played at Bill Cosey’s seaside resort.

The novel already starts with L’s humming as a reaction to the decline in moral standards she believes to be witnessing. With her humming, she criticises the sexually risqué behaviour of the times and experiences going hand in hand with a negative attitude towards silence. (*Love*, 3) L intends to subtly exert influence on the course of events, as she is convinced that her “humming encourages people; frames their thoughts,” (*Love*, 3) and helps them to do brave things. Identifying with her tune, she describes herself in terms of “movie music” (*Love*, 4) playing in the background of crucial scenes. After hinting at husbands who commit adultery, L alludes to the women left behind by referring to Ella Fitzgerald’s *Mood Indigo*.

Always get that mood indigo,
Since my baby said goodbye.
In the evenin’ when lights are low,
I’m so lonesome I could cry.

‘Cause there’s nobody who cares about me,
I’m just a soul who’s
Bluer than blue can be.
When I get that mood indigo,
I could lay me down and die.¹⁹⁸

In L’s opinion, this song “*can change the way you swim. It doesn’t make you dive in, but it can set your stroke, or trick you into believing you are both smart and lucky. So why not swim farther and a little farther still? What’s the deep to you? It’s way down below, and has nothing to do with blood made bold by coronets and piano keys, does it?*” (*Love*, 4) In the song, one lover has been left by the partner and is now so desperate to even consider the benefit of committing suicide for love as opposed to a miserable life without a caring counterpart. According to L, *Mood Indigo* can make a listener reckless

¹⁹⁷ (*Love*, 35)

¹⁹⁸ Cf. <http://www.sing365.com/music/lyrics.nsf/PrintLyrics?openForm&ParentUnid=E7FB3EB5200A55>

and might thus lead to a premature death. Whereas L is convinced that music has the power to drive people into doing things they might not be doing otherwise, or at least to reinforce their formerly weak determination, she humbly relativises her own power: “*My hum is mostly below range, private; suitable for an old woman embarrassed by the world; her way of objecting to how the century is turning out.*” (Love, 4)

L’s passage at the beginning of *Love* possesses the same function as that of an overture in an opera: It introduces the most important themes and characters; moreover, it foreshadows the atmosphere of the events to come. “Her sections are melodic prose layered with a rhythmic wisdom that feels almost prophetic.”¹⁹⁹ L, who relates details of what has taken place at Cosey’s Resort throughout the novel and explains as well as rectifies them, alludes to Bill Cosey’s adultery with Celestial when she mentions the “*husband [...] walking the beachfront alone wondering if anybody saw him doing the bad thing he couldn’t help.*” (Love, 4) These characters are not the only ones in pursuit of sexual adventures, since handsome men “*came partly for the music but mostly to dance by the sea with pretty women.*” (Love, 6) Although, of course, dancing does not equal sexual encounters, Morrison establishes this connection herself when she hints at “*couples [...] sneaking off in the dark*” while “*the remaining dancers would do steps with outrageous names.*” (Love, 34) L points to circumstances amiss by contrasting “*the outside loneliness*” with the promise of “*ecstasy and the company of all your best friends*” (Love, 7) inside the hotel, all the time stressing the presence of music. While her own humming remains in the background, the piano music at the hotel distracts from and covers the “*hurt jamming those halls and closed up rooms.*” (Love, 7)

L’s mysterious presence in the novel is increasingly complicated when she admits that before having been “*reduced to singsong, I saw all kinds of mating.*” (Love, 63) It turns out that L is already dead, yet, still speaking to the reader. What is left of her is her humming, her singsong; hence, music is presented as the essence of all being, as the link between the living and the dead, between the mystic and the rational. This impression is strengthened by her tales of “*Police-heads,*” strange creatures who “*liked to troll at night, too, especially when the hotel was full of visitors drunk with dance music, or salt air, or tempted by starlit water,*” (Love, 5p.) and whom she believes to be responsible for the drownings of a clarinet player and his bride as well as of two

0E48256AAB0009684F, 20th of November 2003.

¹⁹⁹ Cf. Lorraine Rice, *Africana Reviews: Love*. November 11, 2003.

<http://www.africana.com/reviews/books/bk20031111love.asp>, 1st of December 2003.

children. In the last paragraphs of the novel, L describes her encounters with Celestial at Bill Cosey's grave, and once again music seems to bridge the boundary between life and death: Celestial, either not aware of L's presence or ignoring it, is singing to her deceased lover, while L cannot resist joining in and hums along. (*Love*, 202)

Apart from L's humming, the novel abounds in blues and jazz music being played at the hotel. For its owner Bill Cosey, music provides a means of rebellion as well as self-affirmation. Having suffered because of his father's avarice, Bill invests his share of the inheritance in "*things Dark cursed: good times, good clothes, good food, good music, dancing till the sun came up in a hotel made for it all.*" (*Love*, 68) However, he does not act out of pure spite against his dead father, since also financial interests lead him on. Bill Cosey knows that "*where there was music there was money.*" (*Love*, 102) He puts all his energy into the creation of a resort which accommodates all different kinds of needs: those of musicians worrying about the safety of their instruments and hoping for an audience really honouring their talent, as well as those of guests struggling to make their fortune despite racial discrimination. "*He wanted a playground for folk who felt the way he did, who studied ways to contradict history.*" (*Love*, 103)

Of course, Bill's thoughtfulness about the musicians' comfort is no end in itself but rather another economic consideration. If the conditions at the hotel satisfy the musicians, they provide Bill with valuable publicity and thus help him to engage even more high quality artists, who in their turn attract additional guests. (*Love*, 102p.) As long as segregation is in effect, Bill's plans work out; his resort functions as a "school and a haven where people debated death in the cities, murder in Mississippi, and what they planned to do about it other than grieve and stare at their children. Then the music started, convincing them they could manage it all and last." (*Love*, 35) As soon as circumstances have changed, the same clientele of privileged blacks, who had been regular guests at Cosey's Resort, "*boasted in the sixties about Hyatts, Hiltons, cruises to the Bahamas and Ocho Rios.*" (*Love*, 8) Yet, although integration figures prominently in the changing vogue of holiday destinations, L gives another important reason for the eventual ruin of the hotel: After Bill's death, when the financial situation has already deteriorated, Heed takes over the management of the hotel and cannot afford to pay for live music any longer. With the loss of the "*once-in-a-lifetime combination*" (*Love*, 103) of good food and the performance of high quality musicians, which had rendered the hotel unique, rich guests travelling there from all over the country cease to appear, since

“a sixteen-year-old disc jockey working a tape player appealed only to locals. No one with real money would travel distance to hear it, would book a room to listen to the doo-wop tunes they had at home; would seek an open-air dance floor crowded with teenagers doing dances they never heard of and couldn’t manage anyway.” (*Love*, 35)

For many years, Bill has been neglecting and betraying his wife Heed. The rupture between the couple is foreshadowed when *Harbor Lights* is being played at Christine’s birthday party. (*Love*, 168) “I saw the harbor lights / They only told me we were parting”²⁰⁰ at once hints at Christine’s repeated departures from her father’s house as well as at the relationship between Heed and Bill. In their wedding night, Bill had taken her to the beach, where he merely caressed her instead of consummating their marriage, (*Love*, 77p.) but such loving behaviour has long been missing: “How could I help if tears were starting / Goodbye to tender nights beside the silv’ry sea.”²⁰¹ All tenderness between them abruptly disappears when Bill puts her across his knee at Christine’s party, thereby publicly humiliating her. In addition to that, Bill has not confessed his love to Heed since 1947, “and she listened for twenty-four years.” (*Love*, 130) “Some other harbor lights,”²⁰² embodied by Celestial, have absorbed Bill’s love and Heed is fully conscious of the fact. Moreover, Bill Cosey has a reputation for his boat parties in which hand-selected guests are being entertained by so-called “sporting women,” (*Love*, 40, 188) such as Bill’s true love Celestial, therefore Heed cannot get through to Bill despite her longing for him – “[b]ut you were on the ship and I was on the shore.”²⁰³

Just as in *Jazz*, where music is held responsible for all kinds of problematic behaviour in a great number of instances, (*Jazz*, 76, 144, 158) Heed names Jimmy Witherspoon’s rendition of *Ain’t nobody’s business if I do* as the reason for her adulterous affair with Knox Sinclair, (*Love*, 172) as the song convinces her to give in to temptation. Heed, who is constantly being criticised by both Christine and May, seems to identify with the song’s lyrics and to take her cue from it:

There is nothing I can do
Nothing I can say
That folks don’t criticise me
But I’m gonna do

²⁰⁰ Cf. <http://www.lyricsdepot.com/the-platters/harbor-lights.html>, 20th of November 2003.

²⁰¹ Ibid.

²⁰² Ibid.

²⁰³ Ibid.

Just what I want to anyway
Don't care if they all despise me.²⁰⁴

As all of Heed's activities are dragged through the mud anyway, the song empowers her to do something for herself for once in her life; it enables her to take these liberties. Aware of the fact that her husband is constantly betraying her, she questions his moral authority over her by publicly "dancing with a man in a green zoot suit." (*Love*, 168) Apart from the fact that Cosey's dress code does not usually allow for zoot suits, (*Love*, 103) Heed's dance is very provocative, thus presenting an act of open rebellion against her husband, whom she might as well challenge with the very words of the song: "You try to tell me I got no right to sing the blues / What gives you the right to tell me what I should do? / It ain't nobody's , ain't nobody's business if I do."²⁰⁵

L's continuous humming links the different realms of reality within the novel, it connects the world of the living with that of the dead, also serving as a sometimes critical commentary. The novel opens with her humming and it closes with it. L's first section can be likened to an overture, whereas her following turns appear as some sort of interludes. She foreshadows events and attributes them their adequate meanings, where understanding has been hindered by the sketchiness of other characters' views. The background music supplied by L encourages people to put intentions into action, and it fits in nicely with the events portrayed or hinted at. *Mood Indigo*, *Harbour Lights*, and *Ain't nobody's business if I do* all relate to the events of the novel and can be seen as musical variations of the ongoings. Music is what differentiates Bill Cosey's hotel and what turns it into a commercial success. Whereas Bill's interest in music is a form of rebellion against his deceased father, he and his guests alike use music and its empowering properties to prove their own abilities to a hostile and segregated world trying to bring them down. With *Love*, Morrison, who frequently confirms to "take [her] cue from music,"²⁰⁶ has once more proven her ability to handle the "26 letters of the alphabet" as if they really were "musical notes."²⁰⁷

²⁰⁴ Cf. <http://www.geocities.com/BurbonStreet/Delta/2541/blsaffir.htm>, 20th of November 2003. Originally recorded by Bessie Smith, this song has been covered by a great number of artists.

²⁰⁵ Ibid.

²⁰⁶ Cf. Diane McKinney-Whetstone, "The Nature of Love: Novelist Diane McKinney-Whetstone talks with Toni Morrison about her new novel, the literary scene and what comes next." *Essence*, 3rd of October 2003. Cited after: http://www.findarticles.com/cf_0/m1264/6_34/108549740/print.jhtml, 2nd of December 2003.

²⁰⁷ Cf. Anonymous, "In Praise of Outlaw Women." *Los Angeles Times*. Cited after: <http://www.theage.com.au/articles/2003/11/14/1068674385310.html>, 1st of December 2003.

III Transfer of Musical Properties

I Structure

1.1 Call and Response as an Element of Structure

Toni Morrison's novels abound in characters performing or listening to music. Music mediates cultural values, it serves the characters' various needs from remembrance to survival, it expresses their emotions, and it enormously adds to the novels' atmospheres. But Morrison's novels do not merely include music, they are even constructed like pieces of music. "Fiction written under the influence of music naturally aspires to imitate musical structures and tends to emphasize the sound and the rhythmic patterns of language. [...] Writers use their language as their own musical instruments, pushing the conventional semantic and syntactic patterns to express the unsayable of the emotional and spiritual experiences."²⁰⁸ This definitely applies to Toni Morrison, who in her fiction not only tries to combine print and oral literature, but even encourages her readers to respond "[i]n the same way that a musician's music is enhanced when there is a response from the audience."²⁰⁹ She achieves this goal by following specific patterns of African American music, above all that of call and response. "Call and response, then, is African American analysis: a process that, by admitting diverse voices and diverse experiences, supports a more inclusive critique than any individual analysis."²¹⁰

Stephen Henderson calls blues "a music and a *poetry* of confrontation – with the self, with the family and loved ones, with the oppressive forces of society, with nature, and, on the heaviest level, with fate and the universe itself."²¹¹ In *The Bluest Eye*, the reader is confronted with two competing realities – that of the white Dick-and-Jane primer versus the one of the black community. The novel's main plot focusses on Pecola Breedlove; and the chapters dealing with the Breedlove family may be seen as the verses of a blues song. The chapter headings, consisting of the primer text, thereby form that sad song's chorus.²¹² These headings always precede the chapters focussed on

²⁰⁸ Cf. Saadi A. Simawe, "The Agency of Sound in African American Fiction." In: Simawe, XIX-XXV. XXIII.

²⁰⁹ Cf. Toni Morrison, "Rootedness: The Ancestor as Foundation." In: Mari Evans (ed.), *Black Women Writers (1950-1980). A Critical Evaluation*. New York, 1984. 339-345. 340.

²¹⁰ Cf. Craig Hansen Werner, "Jazz: Morrison and the Music of Tradition." In: McKay and Earle, 86-92. 86.

²¹¹ Cf. Dorsey, 50. Emphasis original.

²¹² Cf. Garabedian, 303.

a member of the Breedlove family. Therefore, the title lines and the Breedlove chapters complement each other like the elements of call and response.

The novel starts with three versions of the primer text: The first uses double spacing in standard orthography and punctuation, the second is set in single spacing and lower-case letters without punctuation, and the third dispenses with upper-case letters, punctuation and gaps between the words at all. (*TBE*, 7p.) The chapter headings are most similar to the third version, since the words are put together without any blanks. It is written in upper-case, however; there is no punctuation, and the margins of words or sentences do not coincide with those of the lines.

The first heading refers to a very pretty green and white house with red doors. (*TBE*, 30) This is the call, which is answered by a description of the place the Breedloves live in - an abandoned store so ugly it makes people wonder why it has not been pulled down already. (*TBE*, 30) Shortly afterwards it becomes clear that this building does not provide a loving home, for “[e]ach member of the family [is] in his own cell of consciousness, each making his own patchwork quilt of reality – collecting fragments of experience here, pieces of information there.” (*TBE*, 31) The people in the house do not seem to lead a life worth to be termed as such, because the “only living thing in the Breedloves’ house was the coal stove.” (*TBE*, 33) The neat and picturesque house of the heading is countered by the Breedloves’ bleak dwelling. The juxtaposition of the two buildings makes the one appear more beautiful, and the other even uglier.

The green and white house is inhabited by mother, father, Dick, and Jane. (*TBE*, 34) Similarly, the Breedlove family also consists of the parents, a son, and a daughter. But while the primer family is very happy, the Breedloves can hardly be called a family. Pauline and Cholly Breedlove fight with each other so often that an “unquarreled evening hung like the first note of a dirge in sullenly expectant air.” (*TBE*, 36) Love has long left Cholly’s and Pauline’s relationship. Whereas Cholly seeks consolation in alcohol, Pauline perceives herself as a kind of martyr. (*TBE*, 36p.) Both parents do not show any kind of affection for their children, as a result of which Sammy habitually runs away, (*TBE*, 38) whereas Pecola seeks release in her fantasies of possessing blue eyes. (*TBE*, 40) Family bonds do not seem to play an important role in this conglomeration of people. The call for a happy little family is answered by the reality of an assembly of individuals which can solely be called a family on the mere basis of the blood relationship between them. In the case of the Breedloves, blood is not – as the

proverb suggests - thicker than water. Again, the chapter inverts the image of its heading.

Likewise, the cat about to play with Jane (*TBE*, 67) is countered by another one which is first thrown at Pecola, injuring her with its claws, and subsequently at the window, as a result of which it dies. Although Pecola is herself a victim and not to be held responsible for the violence done to the cat, she gets blamed by Geraldine, the owner of the cat. This scene is the very opposite of a harmless little girl's playing with a cat.

Pauline Breedlove is the subject of the next chapter headed with the primer text. The mother in that passage is described positively - she laughs and might be going to play with Jane. (*TBE*, 88) The chapter deals with Pauline's life from her childhood to the present. In the course of her life, she has never really experienced long periods of happiness. Instead of being able to laugh, she bears her alcohol-addicted husband. And since she believes herself and her children to be ugly, she does not devote much time to them. Instead of calling her "mother," they address her as Mrs. Breedlove, so she hardly appears to laugh, let alone play with them.

Even more obvious than the contrast between the mother in the primer and Pauline is that between Cholly and the father figure. In the primer heading, the father is strong, he is smiling, and he might play with Jane. (*TBE*, 105) Cholly is strong as well - but he does not use his physical strength to protect his daughter. While normally a father uses all his powers to protect his children, Cholly utilises his to harm his daughter. He does play with Pecola, but in the worst possible sense - he rapes her. The chapter dealing with Cholly supplies details of his life, which help to explain his horrible deed without being able to excuse it. The perfect father of the primer is responded to with its utterly distorted reflection of a father harming his children instead of providing them with love and safety.

The dog of the primer text (*TBE*, 130) also has its counterpart in one of the novel's chapters: Bob, an old dog, stays at the porch of the house where Soaphead Church is living. Soaphead hates the dog and would like to kill it, but only refrains from doing so, since he is revolted by the idea of having to approach it. So when Pecola enters the scene, he makes her feed the dog with a piece of poisoned meat. Pecola has no idea of what she is doing and even strokes the dog gently. When it dies, Pecola, therefore, is shocked. This is the second time she is confronted with the death of an animal which, as a pet, should normally be loved and not killed.

The most ironic antagonism is that between the last heading and its succeeding chapter:

LOOKLOOKHERECOMESAFRIENDTHE
FRIENDWILLPLAYWITHJANETHEYWI
LLPLAYAGOODGAMEPLAYJANEPLAY (*TBE*, 150)

Whereas all the other characters of the primer had a horrible, yet existing counterpart in Pecola's life, this friend is imaginary, but not less horrible. After the rape, her experience with Soaphead Church, and the dog's death, Pecola has turned schizophrenic. She now believes to possess blue eyes, and she leads conversations with her alter ego, whose main task is to constantly assure her that indeed she has the bluest eyes of all. Her schizophrenia is the last verse in the blues of her life.

In all instances, the ideals of the primer text have become subverted by appallingly distorted mirror images in the life of Pecola Breedlove. The headings, serving as a sort of chorus to the stanzas of Pecola's blues, intensify the dreadful situation she is in. The primer text depicts the harmless environment of a prototypical white family – an image which is sarcastically undermined by the life Pecola has to lead in her poor and loveless black family. The patterns of call and response link the community with the experience of an individual.²¹³ Likewise, the white community as depicted in the primer, is answered by Pecola's individual misery. Call and response is a means of African American analysis, offering the possibility of a more profound critique,²¹⁴ which becomes most obvious in the antiphonal structure of *The Bluest Eye*.

²¹³ Cf. Hansen Werner, *Playing the Changes*. XVIII.

²¹⁴ *Ibid.*, XVIII.

1.2 Call and Response as a Device of Analysis

1.2.1 Sula's Call for Definition

Toni Morrison compares Sula and Nel to the two sides of a Janus head,²¹⁵ asserting that “there was a little bit of both in each of those two women, and that if they had been one person, I suppose they would have been a rather marvellous person. But each one lacked something that the other one had.”²¹⁶ The two contrasting girls complement each other as did the nightshade and blackberry bushes in the hills of the Bottom. (*Sula*, 3) Whereas Morrison likens Sula to the exotic and toxic nightshade, she attributes Nel to the innocuous blackberry. Despite their differences, “both plants thrived there together when the place was still a neighborhood, just as Sula and Nel counterbalanced each other as long as they were still part of their community.”²¹⁷ From the point of view of the Medallion people, it seems obvious that Sula is evil and Nel is good, yet – just as Eva mistakes Nel for Sula claiming that there “[n]ever was no difference between you,” (*Sula*, 169) or Sula questions Nel “[a]bout who was good. How you know it was you?” (*Sula*, 146) – the novel can also be interpreted as “an extended satire on binary (reductive, clichéd) thinking.”²¹⁸ As a consequence of her flamboyancy, Sula oscillates between various call and response relations, namely those between herself and her friend Nel, between herself and Shadrack, the other pariah, and between herself and the community. In each case, this call and response structure between the characters provides an opportunity for self-definition, either for Sula, who is forever experimenting with her life, or for her soulmate Nel, for Shadrack, who feels a close connection between them, or for the community acting to spite her.

Although Sula is the title character, the reader is first introduced to Nel, who comes from a very quiet and ordered home with strict rules and moral codes. Sula, on the other hand, grows up in her grandmother's house which is full of people at all times and thus generally abounds in activity. When they befriend each other, both girls cherish the atmosphere of the other's habitation as it helps them to fulfil a need which had been present in their lives: Nel, oppressed by her mother's stern expectations of her, is liberated by the commotion at Sula's place, and Sula, in need of steadiness, treasures

²¹⁵ Cf. Betty Jean Parker, “Complexity: Toni Morrison's *Women*. 1979.” In: Taylor-Guthrie, 60-66. 62.

²¹⁶ Cf. Stepto in Taylor-Guthrie, 13.

²¹⁷ Cf. Monika Hoffarth-Zelloe, “Resolving the Paradox?: An Interlinear Reading of Toni Morrison's *Sula*.” In: *Journal of Narrative Technique* 22 (1992), 114-127. 115.

the quiet peace of Nel's home. Likewise, before they met, both Nel and Sula "were solitary little girls whose loneliness was so profound it intoxicated them and sent them stumbling into Technicolored visions that always included a presence, a someone, who, quite like the dreamer, shared the delight of the dream." (*Sula*, 51) In the same way as the respective households complement each other, the girls have found their soulmate despite the obvious contrasts in their fairytale dreams. Whereas Nel pictures herself as a sort of princess in wait, Sula's dream presents her in terms of a brave, fictitious hero congruent with the male role model (*Sula*, 51p.) The call emanated by each girl's dream is answered by the arrival of the other. Not only does their friendship help them "to grow on," (*Sula*, 52) but precisely their difference makes them find "relief in each other's personality." (*Sula*, 53)

At the age of twelve, Sula overhears her mother confessing that she loves her daughter but does not like her, a statement which leaves her flummoxed. She is only shaken out of her bewilderment by Nel's call which seems to come at exactly the right time, and the two of them run towards the river. (*Sula*, 57) When they lie down in the shade, Nel starts to toy around with some blades of grass and Sula joins in the play. "In concert, without ever meeting each other's eyes, they stroked the blades up and down, up and down." (*Sula*, 58) Every time Nel invents a new type of activity, Sula immediately follows her example, until both dig holes with a twig and they bury all sorts of things in them. Their unison action solidifies their friendship even further and thus accommodates Sula's desperate need of belonging after having had to cope with her mother's hurtful words.

Chicken Little's arrival finds the girls in this "unspeakable restlessness and agitation" (*Sula*, 59), a condition not to be confused with aggression, since the course of events leading to his drowning clearly shows the traits of an accident as the boy slips from Sula's hands when she is trying to please him by swinging him around. (*Sula*, 60) His death might have been Sula's fault, but it surely was not her intention, and she has not yet grasped the situation when Nel already regains speech pointing out that "[s]omebody saw." (*Sula*, 61) Chicken Little might have died at Sula's hands, but Nel had been the one to watch, hence it becomes difficult to decide which of the girls is good and which is evil. At the funeral, even Nel herself is not sure about this: "Although she knew she had 'done nothing,' she felt convicted and hanged right there

²¹⁸ Cf. Rita Bergenholtz, "Toni Morrison's *Sula*. A Satire on Binary Thinking." In: *African American Review* 30:1 (1996), 89-98. 89.

in the pew – two rows down from her parents in the children’s section.” (*Sula*, 65) The issue of guilt is raised again when Eva confronts Nel many years later, accusing her of Chicken Little’s death. In her opinion, Nel – just as Sula - bears the guilt for the deed through her presence at the event and more so, through her watching it without assuming counteraction. (*Sula*, 168) However, Eva merely answers Nel’s question of whether she believes her to be guilty with another question: “Who would know that better than you?” (*Sula*, 169)

Sula is a social outcast whose golden rule is to follow none but her own. Curious about her existence, she “knows all there is to know about herself because she examines herself, she is experimental with herself, she’s perfectly willing to think the unthinkable thing.”²¹⁹ As she disrespects the order of the community by ignoring her numerous lovers’ marital bonds, or by transferring her grandmother Eva to an old people’s home, she is subject to many rumours and commonly considered evil. Nel, on the other hand, not only “knows and believes in all the laws of that community. She is the community. She believes in its values.”²²⁰ At first glance, this seemingly clear allocation of roles is repeated when Sula has an affair with Nel’s husband Jude: Living up to her reputation, vicious Sula cheats on her trusting friend Nel and - quite understandably - Nel is hurt and unforgiving. (*Sula*, 105p.) Three years later Sula is ill in bed when Nel visits her rather out of courtesy than for the sake of their old friendship. She accuses Sula of not loving her “enough to leave him alone. To let him love me. You had to take him away.” (*Sula*, 145) Sula, however, “had not thought at all of causing Nel pain when she bedded down with Jude. They had always shared the affection of other people. [...] Marriage, apparently, had changed all that, but having had no intimate knowledge of marriage, [...] she was ill prepared for the possessiveness of the one person she felt close to.” (*Sula*, 119) Therefore, Sula is not capable of understanding Nel’s inability to forgive her and is thus questioning the honesty of their friendship. (*Sula*, 145)

The close relationship between Sula and Nel had been an important factor for both their lives, as their different views had called and responded on each other, thereby providing a steady flow of conversation and evaluation. For Sula, hell is constituted by “doing anything forever,” whereas in Nel’s view, “[h]ell is change.” (*Sula*, 108) Of course, both positions have their own right, and only when Sula misses the continuity of Nel’s friendship and Nel feels the necessity for change, the two of them are liberated.

²¹⁹ Cf. Stepto in Taylor-Guthrie, 14.

²²⁰ Ibid.

Until their break, Nel's presence had answered the call of the gap in Sula's personality, as Sula "had clung to Nel as the closest thing to both an other and a self, only to discover that she and Nel were not one and the same thing." (*Sula*, 119) For Nel, on the other hand, "[t]alking to Sula had always been a conversation with herself." (*Sula*, 95) It even went so far that "they themselves had difficulty distinguishing one's thoughts from the other's." (*Sula*, 83) Their respective shortcomings had been answered by the fortes of the other, and neither can live on happily after their rupture. Whereas Sula literally dies, (*Sula*, 149) all liveliness leaves Nel who feels choked by an imaginary gray ball. (*Sula*, 109p.) This result illustrates Morrison's view "that if you really do have a friend, a real other, another person that complements your life, you should stay with him or her. And to show how valuable that was, I showed a picture of what life is without that person, no matter how awful that person might have treated you."²²¹ Sula comes to realise this when she is calling Nel one last time at her own death: "Well, I'll be damned, [...] it didn't even hurt. Wait'll I tell Nel." (*Sula*, 149) Her call is answered, albeit many years later. An encounter with Shadrack spurs Nel's memories of Sula, and as her eye begins to prickle, she slowly comes to understand that her suffering had been caused by the loss of her friendship with Sula and not that of her unfaithful husband. Finally, she is able to let out her pain and thus liberate herself instead of locking it up inside. Her realisation that "[w]e was girls together" and her subsequent cry of "O Lord, Sula" help her to come full circle, even if she now has to face "circles and circles of sorrow." (*Sula*, 174) Despite this painful epiphany, Sula's call and Nel's response have a salvatory effect, as their "concluding statements in the novel are messages to each absent other across the breaches of space and time."²²²

At Chicken Little's drowning, the girls become aware that Shadrack might have witnessed the ongoing, and Sula screws up all her courage to enter his house. Had she been afraid of him before, the order and neatness she finds there make her doubt that she is in the right place, as it does not seem to fit the publicly crazy Shadrack she knows about. (*Sula*, 61p.) Although she cannot bring herself to ask him if he had seen the accident, Shadrack, wanting to soothe Sula, smiles at her and answers "[a]lways." (*Sula*, 62) With his house by the river and because of his life as a fish seller, Shadrack himself is strongly associated with water. Since he perceives Sula's birthmark as a resemblance

²²¹ Cf. Koenen in Taylor-Guthrie, 73.

²²² Cf. Robert Grant, "Absence into Presence: The Thematics of Memory and 'Missing' Subjects in Toni Morrison's *Sula*." In McKay, *Critical Essays*. 90-103. 100.

of a tadpole, that was how “he knew she was a friend – she had the mark of the fish he loved.” (*Sula*, 156) He responds to Sula’s unspoken call with the only comfort he understands – permanency. “So he had said ‘always,’ so she would not have to be afraid of the change – the falling away of skin, the drip and slide of blood, and the exposure of bone underneath.” (*Sula*, 157) Shadrack is unaware of the fact that this scares Sula even more, as she frets nothing more than sameness. Quite unlike her counterpart, Sula does not feel closely connected to Shadrack at all. Nevertheless, “Shadrack’s words prove prophetic for Sula despite his own misunderstanding about permanency,”²²³ after all, Sula experiences death as a continuation rather than an end. (*Sula*, 149)

The asymmetric evaluation of the relationship between these two pariahs is further illustrated when Dessie tells Cora about Shadrack having greeted Sula and even tipped his hat for her, which stands in stark contrast to his usual habits. Sula does not return this polite gesture and runs away instead, while Shadrack – unable to comprehend this reaction – keeps on tipping his hat. (*Sula*, 117) Four years later, shortly after Sula’s death, Shadrack once more responds to a call Sula has not issued by dedicating that year’s National Suicide Day to her. (*Sula*, 158p.) In the course of this parade, a large part of the community dies, and thus, Shadrack indirectly avenges their mean reactions to Sula’s death. Even after that incident, Shadrack remains the link to Sula, when Nel is reminded of her former friend upon encountering Shadrack. It is in that instance that Nel becomes aware of Sula’s presence, and her epiphany occurs. Many years after Sula’s death, Nel and Sula are reunited, reminiscent of the time when they were “two throats and one eye” (*Sula*, 147), which is symbolised in Nel’s eye beginning to twitch and burn as an echo of Sula’s mysterious birthmark over one of her eyes. (*Sula*, 174)

The unequal pattern of call and response between Sula and Shadrack highlights the different forms of otherness in relation to the community. In spite of the latter’s perception of the outcasts as “[t]wo devils,” (*Sula*, 117) Sula and Shadrack are not at all the same: Shadrack’s evident irrationality takes on very ordered forms, as in his repetitive enactment of National Suicide Day, whereas Sula’s alleged maliciousness merely follows its own rules. Morrison explains: “Shadrack, I just needed, wanted, a form of madness that was clear and compact to bounce off of Sula’s strangeness. [...] And I wanted the town to respond to him in one way and to her in another. They’re both

²²³ Cf. Michele Pessoni, “‘She was laughing at their God:’ Discovering the Goddess Within in *Sula*.” In: *African American Review* 29:3 (1995). 439-451. 449.

eccentrics, outside the law, except that Shadrack's madness is very organized."²²⁴ The fact that the people of the Bottom know what to expect of Shadrack renders them less afraid of him. They even accept him up to a certain level as "one of the wounded whose injury is more intense than their own,"²²⁵ and they support him by buying his fish. In stark contrast, they are really afraid of Sula, whom they suspect to be a witch; they even try to protect themselves from her by performing counter-conjure. (*Sula*, 113)

Sula's supposed viciousness challenges the community into action. Her character is moulded as being flawed not in itself, but "in relationship with the community, not pathological as an individual. So I don't find her evil as a single evil person, but she was used as though she were, which is helpful for the townspeople."²²⁶ As a response to Sula's alleged misdeeds, the community members make efforts to prove exemplary in all respects, thereby expelling Sula even further. They use the rumours about Sula to raise themselves above her by even surpassing themselves at times. Betty, alias Teapot's Mamma, received her nickname as a mocking of her greatest failure: Before Sula's appearance in the focus of attention, Teapot's Mamma has in no way been a model mother for her son. Only when Teapot hurts himself at Sula's door and she is blamed for the accident, does the boy's mother really start to look after her son. "The very idea of a grown woman hurting her boy kept her teeth on edge. She became the most devoted mother: sober, clean and industrious." (*Sula*, 114) Treating Sula as a scapegoat, the Medallion people stick together against her. "They began to cherish their husbands and wives, protect their children, repair their homes and in general band together against the devil in their midst." (*Sula*, 117p.) By elevating themselves through their morally impeccable conduct, the community "defines itself against her iconoclasm."²²⁷ Sula's reputation as well as her unconventional behaviour thus function as a "catalyst of good,"²²⁸ which is sustaining and life-giving for the very community that spites her.²²⁹ This call and response relation between Sula and the people of the Bottom becomes even more obvious when it is dissolving, for Sula's death also takes away their motivation for their extraordinarily good behaviour. "The tension was gone and so was the reason for the effort they had made. Without her mockery,

²²⁴ Cf. Stepto in Taylor-Guthrie, 21p.

²²⁵ Cf. Trudier Harris, 61.

²²⁶ Cf. Koenen in Taylor-Guthrie, 68.

²²⁷ Cf. Jeanne Rosier Smith, *Writing Tricksters. Mythic Gambols in American Ethnic Literature..* Berkeley et alii: University of California Press, 1997. 114.

²²⁸ Cf. Hoffarth-Zelloe, 117.

²²⁹ Cf. Smith, 116.

affection for others sank into flaccid disrepair.” (*Sula*, 153) Her death, therefore, not only prefigures the literal dying of the people on National Suicide Day, but it already alludes to the decay of the entire community.²³⁰ Only several years afterwards, people start leaving the Bottom, and life has changed for those remaining behind. “It was sad, because the Bottom had been a real place. [...] Maybe it hadn’t been a community, but it had been a place. Now there weren’t any places left, just separate houses with separate televisions and separate telephones and less and less dropping by.” (*Sula*, 166)

It might seem that such a libertine character as Sula would have been better off in a more urban environment or a more open society. However, the community of the Bottom provides a place for her, if only that of its outcast. Sula likes to provoke and to experiment, and she needs rules against which to define herself. Toni Morrison’s “own special view is that there was no other place where she could live. She would have been destroyed by any other place; she was permitted to ‘be’ only in that context, and no one stoned her or killed her or threw her out.”²³¹ Although Sula is considered malign, the people do not fight her directly, as in their opinion “[t]he presence of evil was something to be first recognized, then dealt with, survived, outwitted, triumphed over.” (*Sula*, 118)

The area of tension created by the controversial character of Sula establishes call and response relations with Nel, Shadrack, and the community, which in each case provide opportunities for definition. Sula, who continues on a quest for identity throughout the novel, needs Nel to draw near to the completion of a self, as Nel’s character seems to fill the gaps of Sula’s personality and vice versa. The mentally unbalanced loner Shadrack is sustained by his imagined closeness to Sula, who on her behalf does not return his feelings but is nevertheless associated with him. Without Sula’s much rumoured about presence, the community does not continue to fulfil its own ambitious standards, since they now lack Sula’s conjectural moral corruptness that had served as a dark foil basis on which they could define themselves. It can too easily be forgotten that despite all the gossip about Sula, “she never does anything as bad as her grandmother or her mother did.”²³² The real moral value of the community members’ good deeds has to be questioned, after all they are less a result of their pious or well-meaning convictions than a mere reaction to oppose Sula; hence, at least part of

²³⁰ Cf. Dehn Kubitschek, 53.

²³¹ Cf. Morrison, “Rootedness”. 343.

²³² Cf. Stepto in Taylor-Guthrie, 15.

the credit is due to her, even though that had not been her intention. Likewise, the seemingly obvious identification of Nel as moral and Sula as immoral cannot be carried out – both of them have made mistakes (Sula by betraying Nel, Nel by breaking up her friendship with Sula, both are to a certain extent responsible for Chicken Little’s death.) Therefore, all call and response relations occurring on various levels in *Sula* do challenge traditional notions of good and evil without providing the reader with an unambiguous solution.

1.2.2 Call and Response as a Reflection on Life and Death

Sula, with all her individualism and her unchanneled creativity, lacks an appropriate artistic outlet for her emotions. According to Morrison, “if Sula had any sense she’d go somewhere and sing or get into show business.”²³³ As a consequence of her failure to do so, “like any artist with no art form, she became dangerous.” (*Sula*, 121) That music could have helped her to cope with life is indicated when she attempts to take refuge in it after Ajax’s departure. The result of Sula’s love for Ajax could have been poetry, had she only been interested in it.²³⁴ Art might have assisted her to create something constructive in any case.

In want of such facilities, Sula’s encounters with Ajax arouse her desire for destruction, derived from her unlimited curiosity and not, as one might suspect, from aggression. Sula’s and Ajax’s sexual intercourse is interspersed with her most secret impulses in a call and response pattern. In spite of being engaged in the most live-creating activities imaginable, Sula’s mind is occupied with issues of deconstruction. These italicised passages describe her phantasies of removing layer after layer of Ajax’s body in order to arrive at the essence of his being, which she imagines to be of loam as she is approaching her climax. Their perfect sexual unity coincides with Sula’s notion of mingling with Ajax’s loam by adding water, the element associated with her throughout the entire novel: “*I will water your soil, keep it rich and moist. But how much? How much water to keep the loam moist? And how much loam will I need to keep my water still? And when do the two make mud?*” (*Sula*, 131) In Sula’s imaginary scraping away of skin, bones, gold, and alabaster to get to the basis of loam, the act of creation, inherent to sexual activities, is reversed. The call of life is responded by images of death, especially since Sula does not picture Ajax’s body within human categories of flesh and bones alone, but in terms of such unorganic materials as gold and alabaster. She can only fathom a fertile relationship with Ajax when all constraints of civilisation have been removed and life has been traced back to its starting point. In her view, many layers seem to obstruct truly nurturing love. Taking away layer by layer might be a destructive act, but in Sula’s understanding it is the only way leading to the essence of life.

²³³ Cf. Parker in Taylor-Guthrie, 65.

²³⁴ Cf. Diane Matza, “Zora Neale Hurston’s *Their Eyes Were Watching God* and Toni Morrison’s *Sula*: A Comparison.” In: *MELUS* 12:3 (1985), 43-54. 52.

Sula keeps on defining Ajax along the lines of her imagination even after he has left her. She still believes that between his black skin and his core of “warm loam” layers of gold and alabaster are to be found. (*Sula*, 135) At the same time, she is aware of the uniqueness of her imagination, as she admits: “Soon I would have torn the flesh from his face just to see if I was right about the gold and nobody would have understood that kind of curiosity. They would have believed that I wanted to hurt him just like the little boy who fell down the steps and broke his leg and the people think I pushed him just because I looked at it.” (*Sula*, 136p.) This thought occupying Sula after Ajax’s departure, directly responds to the passages during their former intercourse. By leaving her, Ajax might have saved his life.

Although these parts of the text merely involve Sula and Ajax, they also solidify Sula’s spiritual connection with Shadrack, the character most closely associated with death in *Sula*. “When Sula lyrically strips away the different layers of Ajax’s being, she is engaged in a potentially deadly act. These different layers ‘fall away’ in a way resembling the headless soldier’s ‘falling away of skin.’”²³⁵ Thus, the call and response pattern links the prototypical site of killing - the battlefield - with the contrasting image of characteristically life-giving sexuality.

By juxtaposing such contrary concepts as life and death in a call and response pattern, the ambiguity of Sula’s character is further emphasised. Although she does not follow her impulse to peel away the different layers of Ajax’s body, she might never ever dismiss the option. In her idiosyncratic view, this would constitute a gesture of love and lead her to a kind of absolute unity with Ajax she is unable to achieve by any other means. The effect of this bizarre perception once more illustrates Sula’s strangeness and her difference from her fellow human beings. In the case of Sula, even such apparently clear-cut binary concepts as good and evil or life and death are constantly being redefined, revalued, and are by no means absolute entities.

²³⁵ Cf. Biman Basu, “The Black Voice and the Language of the Text: Toni Morrison’s *Sula*.” In: *College Literature* 23:3 (1996) 88-103. 99.

1.2.3 Milkman's Journey to Responsibility

In her novels, Toni Morrison makes ample use of call and response patterns, on the structural level as well as within the texts themselves. In *Song of Solomon*, Milkman takes part in a hunt. Unable to keep up with his fellow hunters, he is resting under a tree when he suddenly starts to wonder about the meaning of the word “deserve.” (*SoS*, 276p.) One whole paragraph is interspersed with that term - it appears six times. Milkman remembers thinking all the time that he did not deserve anything he did not actually want. The word reverberating in his mind, he comes to the following conclusion: “Apparently he thought he deserved only to be loved – from a distance, though – and given what he wanted.” (*SoS*, 277) Milkman acknowledges that his attitude had merely been the refusal to accept responsibility for anything or anyone other than himself. It is through the confrontation of the word “deserve” with the incidents in which Milkman has been using it that he comes to understand his situation. Milkman then listens to the communication between the hunters and their dogs:

That long *yah* sound was followed by a specific kind of howl from one of the dogs. The low *howm howm* that sounded like a string bass imitating a bassoon meant something the dogs understood and executed. And the dogs spoke to the men: single-shot barks – evenly spaced and widely spaced – one every three or four minutes, that might go on for twenty minutes. [...] 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 *eeeeee*'s of a cornet, the *unh unh unh* bass chords. It was all language. [...] No, it was not language; it was what there was before language. (*SoS*, 278)

The call and response going on between the hunters and their dogs is described in very musical terms. And Milkman, who through his initiation process has learnt to listen closely and properly, is able to recognise the underlying pattern. At first, he believes it to be a kind of language, but then he realises that this is something more basic, more natural. Milkman understands that these sounds “rebuild a community which welcomes all creatures, products and forces of nature.”²³⁶ Through this analysis, Milkman is more closely connected to the earth, and because of this he is able to sense the danger waiting behind him in the form of Guitar, who is trying to kill him. Luckily, Milkman is able to escape.

²³⁶ Cf. Berret, “Literary Jazz.” 276.

When he meets the other hunters again to share the prey, Milkman remains under the impression of the night that lies behind him. Together they skin the bobcat, and the procedure is larded with phrases Guitar once uttered in a conversation with Milkman. Every single action is countered with one of these phrases, starting with the slicing open of the cat. “*Everybody wants a black man’s life.*” (SoS, 281) This links the killing of the cat to Guitar’s attempt at killing Milkman, whose life is not even safe from his friend’s attack. Guitar is part of a group called the “Seven Days.” They avenge every assassination of a black person with a similar murder of a white person. In Guitar’s opinion, “[i]t is about love. What else?” (SoS, 282) This phrase is set against the action of offering Milkman the cat’s heart. The sarcasm of attributing love to the killing of something is enhanced by this juxtaposition of love and ripping out a heart – the very symbol of life and affection - from a body. Even though Milkman survived Guitar’s attack, he is still in danger. “Milkman looked at the bobcat’s head. The tongue lay in its mouth as harmless as a sandwich. Only the eyes held the menace of the night.” (SoS, 283) This is a clear reference to Guitar, whose eyes are frequently likened to those of a cat. (SoS, 8) Milkman is familiar with Guitar’s words, he knows them by heart and they are no more threatening to him than the cat’s tongue. Yet, the eyes make clear that the danger prevails. The pattern of call and response in this passage stresses the essential contrasts of life and death as well as of love and violence. The focal point of this consideration is Guitar’s opinion that “[e]verybody wants the life of a black man.”²³⁷ (SoS, 282)

Milkman comprehends that he cannot escape Guitar, and in the end he even acknowledges that he has to actively confront him. It is soon after Pilate has died when Milkman challenges Guitar:

“Guitar” he shouted.
Tar tar tar, said the hills. [...]
 “Here I am!”
Am am am am, said the rocks.
 “You want me? Huh? You want my life?”
Life life life life. (SoS, 337)

Milkman has learnt through his initiation process and the lesson taught by the song that he has to assume responsibility and come to terms with his identity. The call and

²³⁷ Cf. Linda Krumholz, “Dead Teachers: Rituals of Manhood and Rituals of Reading in *Song of Solomon.*” In: *Modern Fiction Studies* 39:3-4 (1993 Fall/Winter) 551-573. 562p.

response pattern develops via the echo between his shouts and nature. Milkman is now in unity with nature, he accepts his blackness alongside the history connected to it. This becomes obvious in the repetition of the word “tar.” Milkman has finally found his identity stressed by the words “am” and “life.”²³⁸ Numerous other instances of call and response have prepared Milkman to correctly interpret his own interaction with nature and Guitar. He has learnt not to evade problems and run away from them; instead, he quite literally flies towards them – “[a]s fleet and bright as a lodestar he wheeled toward Guitar and it did not matter which one of them would give up his ghost in the killing arms of his brother.” (*SoS*, 337) Here again, antiphony highlights the dichotomy of life and possible death. By offering his life to Guitar, Milkman is eventually able to fly. Therefore, it does not matter whether he survives or not, for he has successfully learnt his lesson. Morrison makes the ending ambiguous, not answering the question whether one of them actually dies.²³⁹ The analysis offered through the antiphonal pattern merges into an ongoing process of call and response between the novel’s ending and the reader.

²³⁸ Cf. Wegs, 222.

²³⁹ Cf. Charles Ruas, “Toni Morrison. 1981.” In: Taylor-Guthrie, 93-118. 111.

1.2.4 Blind Horsemen and the Napoleonic Code

Tar Baby not only takes its title from a famous African American folktale, it also makes numerous references to such stories and again focusses on myth by providing narratives debating the disputed origin of the island's name as Isle des Chevaliers. The two predominant versions explaining the derivation of its name call and respond on each other, thereby also shedding light upon the respective advocates of each theory. The contrasting tales are connected to different world views which represent Western as well as African American concepts.

Valerian, the white owner of the island's estate called "L'Arbe de la Croix," clings to the version in which the chevaliers denominate one hundred French horsemen, whose arrival itself is left to speculation, riding one hundred horses all over the hills every night. (*TB*, 44p.) They are still in full and shining armour and continue to abide to the Napoleonic Code even after eternal years. (*TB*, 207) To Valerian, this notion signifies the maintenance of morals as well as the observance of law and order as a contrast to the powerful nature which is always threatening to seize power on the island.

The narrative Son subscribes to has been circulated by Gideon and Thérèse, two local servants working for Valerian. Following their rendition, a ship with French people, horses, and African slaves aboard sank off the island's coast. The slaves were part of "a race of blind people descended from some slaves who went blind the minute they saw Dominique." (*TB*, 153) Without the property of sight, they obviously faced difficulties in determining the direction they were swimming to; hence, they "floated and trod water and ended up on that island along with the horses that had swum ashore." (*TB*, 153) The merely partially blind were once more captured by the French, whereas the completely blind slaves succeeded to hide in the jungle, orienting themselves with the help of "the eye of the mind." (*TB*, 153) According to this version, they turned into the chevaliers featuring in the island's name, but unlike the French soldiers presented with all their glamorous equipment, the blind slaves roamed the hills naked "and had done so for hundreds of years. [...] They had floated in strange waters blind, but they were still there racing each other for sport in the hills behind this white man's house." (*TB*, 207) Instead of following some man-made rules, the riders rather rely on properties and resources not to be grasped within traditional Western beliefs by maintaining primal

and instinctual links with nature.²⁴⁰ Within the logic of this tale, the slaves deliberately went blind, in order to not let the beauty of the landscape trick them into believing that a kind of paradise was awaiting them – when in reality they were facing a life of hard and unfree labour.²⁴¹ By omitting the slaves in Valerian’s version of the tale, the horrors of both the Middle Passage as well as of slavery itself are denied. The explicit reference to their willed blindness, on the other hand, restores their dignity by granting them their own history.

These two versions of the tale with all their connotations are directly juxtaposed in the course of events taking place at the cataclysmic Christmas dinner in Valerian’s house. (*TB*, 207) They call and respond to each other in the same way as Valerian’s and Son’s opinions of what is right and what is wrong diverge. Whereas Valerian feels justified and righteous in his dismissal of Gideon and Thérèse for their theft of apples, Son is furious about this ruthless decision and confronts Valerian. Their differences seem irreconcilable: “The man who respected industry looked over a gulf at the man who prized fraternity.” (*TB*, 206) The respective explanations of the horsemen’s identity enhance and illustrate the abyss between Valerian’s and Son’s attitudes. Valerian only looks at the fact of the theft without regarding the wishes and needs of the people working for him. Despite his own condition of being an intruder on the tropical island, he subsumes the surroundings together with their history into his own heritage. In his imperialistic thinking, it remains unfathomable that a myth leading to the name of an entire island could commemorate black slaves rather than white warriors. Son, however, tries to look behind the scenes. Instead of referring to Gideon and Thérèse as yardman and Mary as all the others do, he takes an interest in their real names, their history, and their cravings. Likewise, the narrative involving the blind horsemen proves more convincing to him, as they seem to be perfectly adapted to their surroundings, just like Son himself: “They knew the rain forest when it was a rain forest, they knew where the river began, where the roots twisted above the ground; they knew all there was to know about the island and had not even seen it.” (*TB*, 207)

Whereas Valerian’s version of the tale represents the white and Westernised world and Son’s stands for African American concepts, Jadine’s perception of Valerian’s story triggers her memories of the woman in Paris who symbolises African values together with ancient properties, and makes Jadine feel inauthentic. “She tried to

²⁴⁰ Cf. Billingslea Brown, 71.

²⁴¹ Cf. Ryan, 604.

visualize them, wave after wave of chevaliers, but somehow that made her think of the woman in yellow who had run her out of Paris. She crawled back into bed and tried to fix the feeling that had troubled her.” (TB, 45) Jadine is a black woman who grew up in the white household her uncle and aunt are working in. Their employer Valerian also sponsored Jadine’s university education. Apart from being a Sorbonne graduate, Jadine, who is rather light-skinned, works as a fashion model in Paris. Both her personal history as well as her light skin colour add to her problem of feeling torn between the worlds. An orphan in more than the literal respect, she has not yet found her true identity, which is symbolised by her inability to picture the horsemen as being white Frenchmen or her uneasiness upon the vision of the African woman with the yellow dress seeming to criticise her inauthenticity. In Jadine’s case, the call of an inappropriate tale is answered by her self-image of insufficiency.

Jadine’s entire personality calls on the response of Son, who not only treasures his African American heritage but even turns it into a quasi-sacred notion in the glorification of his all-black hometown Eloe. Thus, Jadine and Son “form the centerpiece for a spiraling web of relationships – between Black women and Black men; between different generations, classes and races; between the West and the Third World.”²⁴²

Influenced by her Western studies, Jadine considers African art inferior: she prefers the famous *Ave Maria* over gospel music, and in her opinion “Picasso is better than an Itumba mask. The fact that he was intrigued by them is proof of *his* genius, not the mask makers.” (TB, 72) Jadine not only fails to appreciate every kind of art within its respective culture, thereby underestimating the value of true originality, she even lacks the most basic knowledge of how these works of art function for and within their community and its traditions. Few are the moments in which Jadine becomes aware of her deficiencies regarding her own heritage, as when she is feeling disconcerted by Son’s outward appearance: “There was no denying the fact that looking at his face and keeping her voice stern required some concentration. Spaces, mountains, savannas – all those were in his forehead and eyes. Too many art history courses, she thought, had made her not perceptive but simpleminded. She saw planes and angles and missed character.” (TB, 159) Furthermore, Jadine’s history of art determination even makes her blind to immediate danger – while evaluating the swamp in terms of paintings or indeed

²⁴² Cf. Judith Wilson, “A Conversation with Toni Morrison. 1981.” In: Taylor-Guthrie, 129-137. 130.

“an elegant comic book illustration,” (*TB*, 183) she gets stuck in the mire. There, in the perils of the jungle, Jadine is able to save herself by momentarily letting go of her academic education and involving in a dialogue with nature, symbolised in her holding on to a tree wishing “to dance with her.” (*TB*, 183)

As soon as she is back on *terra firma*, however, she fails to evaluate her rescue correctly. Quite unlike the mysterious swamp women she did not notice “hanging in the trees,” (*TB*, 183) who perceive tar as a sacred entity, “knowing as they did that the first world of the world had been built with their sacred properties; that they alone could hold together the stones of pyramids and the rushed of Moses’s crib;” (*TB*, 184) Jadine, more than anything else, desires to rid herself of the tar on her legs, although this incident could have helped her to advance in her quest for identity. Instead, the tar is anathema to Jadine and hence “becomes a metaphor for possible emotional entrapment.”²⁴³ When Son informs her that these swamp women “mate with the horsemen up in the hills,” (*TB*, 185) Jadine does not inquire any further and orders Son to “shut up. Just shut up” instead. (*TB*, 185) Again the narrative of the horsemen interferes in the novel, emphasising the various characters’ differences in perception. Whereas in certain circumstances Son is ready to accept the existence of spirits (“[i]n a swamp, I believe,” *TB*, 92), Jadine altogether refuses to discuss the question and thereby represses a possibility of finding her place in the world with the help of femaleness that “could rescue her from the materialistic, nonculturally black life-style that she leads.”²⁴⁴

In contrast to Jadine, Son readily holds on to old traditions. Obviously being in his element in Eloë, he truly feels at home and identifies with the people living there. “Anybody ask you where you from, you give them five towns. You’re not from anywhere. I’m from Eloë.” (*TB*, 268) He defines himself in relation to “those pie ladies from his hometown. They are his past. They are anchors for him – just the notion of them at those church suppers.”²⁴⁵ Whereas Jadine feels uncomfortable in the uncultivated parts of Isle des Chevaliers and even suffocated at Eloë (*TB*, 254), Son cannot fathom leading his life in New York. “‘Make it in New York.’ That’s not life; that’s making it. I don’t want to *make* it; I want to *be* it.” (*TB*, 268) On the island, Son quickly adapts to his environment to such an extent that Thérèse even believes him to be one of the horsemen of the story. (*TB*, 107) At the novel’s close, Thérèse takes Son to a

²⁴³ Cf. Trudier Harris, 143.

²⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 143.

²⁴⁵ Cf. Wilson in Taylor-Guthrie, 131.

remote place of the island, where he is forced to decide on whether to really become one of them. His blind running in the end, “[l]ooking neither to the left nor to the right. Lickety-split,” (*TB*, 309) suggests that he seems to have merged with the horsemen and joined forces with nature.

Nevertheless, Son also suffers from personal shortcomings: He is so focussed on his idealised image of Eloë and the past that he fails to take into account neither flaws nor the future. Only by looking at the pictures Jadine has taken at Eloë does he admit that something is lacking there, too. The photographs provide him with a less subjective view on his hometown, taking away the comfort his glossed over memories had allowed him. “It all looked miserable in the photographs, sad, poor and even poor-spirited.” (*TB*, 297) From this new perspective, Son perceives the people in the pictures as looking “stupid, backwoodsy, dumb, dead...” (*TB*, 275)

Son’s inability to adjust to modern life and accept new ways of finding one’s place in it clashes with Jadine’s overdetermined concentration on independence, in turn going hand in hand with a complete rejection of tradition. They “had no problems as far as men and women are concerned. They knew exactly what to do. But they had problems about what work to do, when and where to do it, and where to live.”²⁴⁶ Both, Son and Jadine, want to spare their counterpart from their own understanding of misery based on their respective experience in each other’s preferred environments. Jadine, who feels threatened by a vision she suffered during the night in Eloë, “thought she was rescuing him from the night women who wanted him for themselves, wanted him feeling superior in a cradle, deferring to him; wanted her to settle for wifely competence when she could be almighty, to settle for fertility rather than originality, nurturing instead of building.” (*TB*, 271) This image is directly countered by Son’s fears. He neither trusts Valerian nor most other white people, which is the reason he wants to protect Jadine from their influence. “He thought he was rescuing her from Valerian, meaning them, the aliens, the people who in a mere three hundred years had killed a world millions of years old.” (*TB*, 271) Neither of them takes into consideration that their own anxieties might not be shared by the other. Their fears as well as their remedies call and respond on each other, culminating in the novel’s most crucial questions: “Mama-spoiled black man, will you mature with me? Culture-bearing black woman, whose culture are you bearing?” (*TB*, 272) The central dilemma according to

²⁴⁶ Cf. McKay in Taylor-Guthrie, 147.

Morrison is that “if your values are like Jadine’s very contemporary, then you lose something if the past is anathema to you. On the other hand, if you are like Son and you are only concerned about the past, and you can’t accommodate yourself to anything contemporary, you lose also.”²⁴⁷ Once more, Morrison uses the technique of call and response to raise the issue of the novel’s central theme. Just as much as she does not provide a clear-cut answer to the question of whether the mythical horsemen roaming the hills of the island are French soldiers or blind slaves, she does not supply a simple solution for Son and Jadine.

With the help of Thérèse acting as an “intermediary between humankind and nature,”²⁴⁸ Son’s role in the novel is redefined, as his joining with the legendary horsemen can be interpreted as a kind of “atonement for previous human trespasses.”²⁴⁹ Nature readily assists his progress by accepting Son’s offer. Throughout the novel, parts of wildlife and nature continue to comment on the ongoings. Choruslike, all of nature is “thinking and feeling and watching and responding to the action going on in *Tar Baby*, so that they are in the story: the trees hurt, fish are afraid, clouds report, and the bees are alarmed,”²⁵⁰ which reflects Morrison’s conviction of “the deepest and earliest secret of all: *that just as we watch other life, other life watches us.*”²⁵¹ Sure enough, the thoughts of animals as well as plants annotate the characters’ activities. Unable to believe in the outrageous luxury (and cruelty) of Jadine’s fur coat consisting of the hides of ninety baby seals, the emperor butterflies draw near her window to convince themselves of its existence. (*TB*, 86) When Jadine is angry and swearingly mutters “horseshit!,” a nearby avocado tree first believes in her misuse of the word and “then folded its leaves tightly over its fruit.” (*TB*, 127) This response by nature stands in stark contrast to another avocado tree’s behaviour regarding Son. In his case, one of these trees positively offers its fruit for his nourishment when he most urgently needs it: “The avocado swung forward and touched his cheek. Why not? He thought, and placed three fingers on either side of the fruit and bit it where it hung.” (*TB*, 135) Jadine’s estrangement from her heritage as well as from nature evokes criticism by the butterflies and an attitude of reserve by nature. Contrary to her, Son perceives himself as a part of nature and he is

²⁴⁷ Cf. Bessie W. Jones and Audrey Vinson, “An Interview with Toni Morrison. 1985. In: Taylor-Guthrie, 171-187. 178.

²⁴⁸ Cf. Trudier Harris, 147.

²⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 146.

²⁵⁰ Cf. Morrison, “Rootedness.” 341p.

²⁵¹ Cf. Toni Morrison, “Memory, Creation, and Writing.” In: *Thought* 59:235 (1984) 385-390. 390. Emphasis original.

sensitive to the world around him, which renders him welcome by nature. Thus, in addition to being a commentary on the ongoings in the novel, the chorus-like description of nature responding to human activity serves as “a measure of how far humans have transgressed against their own potential to be a part of the world beyond their petty concerns.”²⁵² Son and Jadine have to decide which route to take, whether to favour either the version featuring the blind horsemen or the Napoleonic code. It will not be an easy decision, and both will have to learn from each other in order to come full circle. If they succeed in doing so, and the novel’s end does not provide an answer to this question, then nature might approve of them, “welcoming the potential for the best in themselves, the potential to sing a song of unity that will resound through the hills of the island in a blend of humanature and naturekind.” [*sic!*]²⁵³

²⁵² Cf. Trudier Harris, 149.

²⁵³ *Ibid.*, 150.

1.2.5 “Unspeakable Thoughts, Unspoken”²⁵⁴

In *Beloved*, connections and meanings which appear isolated in the first part, are made to converge in the second of three unequal parts.²⁵⁵ It is in the last third of the novel that Sethe, Denver, and Beloved perform their soli, which are followed by a trio of their voices. (*Beloved*, 200-217) These soli are written in the style of improvisations, where one thought or memory triggers the next.²⁵⁶ The characters “re-memory”²⁵⁷ incidents of their lives; they try to explain their past and their actions. The four soli (there are two versions of Beloved’s) all refer to Beloved and share the strong notion of mutual possession.

Sethe’s solo opens as follows: “BELOVED, she my daughter. She mine. She come back to me of her own free will and I don’t have to explain a thing.” (*Beloved*, 200) In the course of the solo, Sethe moves back and forth between the memory of her mother’s death, the milk for her baby, the whipping by schoolteacher, her reasons for trying to kill her children, and Baby Suggs, always circling around the knowledge that “[s]he come back to me, my daughter, and she is mine.” (*Beloved*, 204)

Denver starts with “BELOVED is my sister.” (*Beloved*, 205) She remembers the baby ghost, her brothers, her fears of Sethe, and the bad dreams she used to have for a long time. She recapitulates what she knows about her father Halle, and she recalls Baby Suggs and her sermons. Nevertheless, she also focuses on Beloved: “She’s mine, Beloved. She’s mine.” (*Beloved*, 209)

Then it is Beloved’s turn. “I AM BELOVED and she is mine.” (*Beloved*, 210) Her memories are confusing; they comprise recollections of being on a ship, of dead men, of people lying in piles somewhere. Beloved mentions a man she loved because of his song. Yet, the strongest image is that of a special woman. This woman has the face Beloved wanted; she has no earrings, and she falls into the sea. Beloved remembers this woman carrying a basket and picking flowers, and she recalls looking for that woman’s face in the water. This solo is visually differentiated from the others by quadruple spacing between sentences and double gaps between paragraphs. In musical terms, these

²⁵⁴ Cf. *Beloved*, 199.

²⁵⁵ Cf. Eusebio L. Rodríguez, “The Telling of *Beloved*.” In: Solomon O. Iyasere and Maria W. Iyasere (eds.), *Understanding Toni Morrison’s Beloved and Sula. Selected Essays and Criticisms of the works by the Nobel Prize-winning Author*. New York and Troy: Whitston Publishing Company, 2000. 61-82. 66.

²⁵⁶ This could also be seen as a stream-of-consciousness, but since this chapter deals with musical properties, it seems more appropriate to use musical terminology.

spaces can be seen as pauses used to slow down the voice.²⁵⁸ This solo is followed by its variation, which systematises Beloved's thoughts and supplies the information necessary to understand more of Beloved's inner life. It opens parallel to the first version, but this time the woman picking flowers is identified as Sethe. Therefore, this solo circles on Sethe and on Beloved's forced separation from her, because in her rememory, Sethe left her by jumping into the water. The solo closes with "I will not lose her again. She is mine." (*Beloved*, 214)

What follows is a section of "unspeakable thoughts, unspoken" expressed with the help of musical devices. (*Beloved*, 199) A threnody, consisting of a trio of voices is set in a call and response pattern. Despite the fact that the utterances seem to respond to each other, it becomes obvious – with the help of the preceding sections – that the voices are not always talking about the same topic, although the answers could be the same: "You rememory me?" "Yes. I remember you." (*Beloved*, 215) Assuming that the question is put to Beloved by Sethe, the answer could be taken as uttered by Beloved, the daughter, remembering her mother, Sethe. However, since Beloved believes Sethe to be the woman who was picking flowers in Africa and who was with her on the ship, this solution is to be doubted, but it can be taken for granted that Sethe does not suspect any misunderstanding at that point. Although the speakers are not identified, the first paragraph can be attributed to Sethe and Beloved (*Beloved*, 215), and the second one to Denver and Beloved. (*Beloved*, 215p.) The centre of the trio is formed by the word "Beloved," (216) and from now on the voices of the three women intermingle. Beloved blurs the borders of her identity: "Will we smile at me?", (*Beloved*, 215) "You are my face; you are me" (*Beloved*, 216) or "I am you." (*Beloved*, 216) The trio thus ends:

I waited for you
You are mine
You are mine
You are mine (*Beloved*, 217)

Since it is not clear which lines belong to whom, "I waited for you" could have been the thought of all three women: Sethe had been waiting for Beloved, Denver for Beloved, and Beloved herself for Sethe. Both Sethe and Denver want to possess Beloved, while she wants to own Sethe. This trio can be conceived as the novel's focal point. Here, the

²⁵⁷ Cf. *Beloved*; Morrison uses this term to indicate the activity and productivity involved in the process of remembering.

²⁵⁸ Cf. Rodríguez in Iyasere, 73.

desires of Sethe, Denver, and Beloved converge, while the action is limited to a minimum. Since Paul D has left the house, the timing for this trio is such that the characters involved are reduced to the family members. Due to Beloved's questions and knowledge of personal details Sethe has come to consider Beloved her daughter and is therefore receptive. The three individuals combine their questions and desires in a trio which culminates in the final statement "You are mine." (*Beloved*, 217)

While on the surface, unity has been achieved, the underlying (possibility of) misunderstandings further separate the three women, who now believe that matters have been cleared up and therefore feel no need to question each other's identity again. This paradox is emphasised by the antiphonal style. The *crescendo*²⁵⁹ of voices starting with the soli and converging into a trio sheds light on Beloved's ominous origin without solving its mystery. The importance of these soli and the succeeding fugue-like trio, in which components of the earlier soli call and respond to each other, is not to be neglected, especially since it is the only section of the novel where the reader is granted direct insight into Beloved's inner life. Just as the voices, the different possibilities of Beloved's nature – oscillating between a survivor of the Middle Passage, a girl who used to be held captive by a white man for years and is free now, as well as the reincarnation of Sethe's "crawling-already? baby" (*Beloved*, 99) – again appear to call and respond upon each other. They are either supported or contradicted by the various conceptions and interpretations inherent in the soli and the trio. None of them is ultimately contradicted, and none is conclusively verified. Antiphony is once more used as a device of analysis - both within the novel and between the text and its readers.

²⁵⁹ Musical command to gradually enhance the volume.

1.2.6 “The Furrow of His Brow”²⁶⁰ – Nailing Down Meaning

“If my work is to be functional to the group [...] it must make it possible to prepare for the present and live it out, and it must do that not by avoiding problems and contradictions but by examining them; it should not even attempt to solve social problems, but it should certainly try to clarify them.”²⁶¹ This statement, given many years prior to the publication of *Paradise*, foreshadows the core of the matter of Toni Morrison’s seventh novel, a work characterised not by the harmony between its characters but by its overwhelming multitude of seemingly irresolvable dichotomies. In one way or the other, most of the prevailing contrasts can be traced back to the controversial issue of the inscription on the Oven, which had originally been placed there by Steward and Deacon Morgan’s grandfather, who had used four iron nails to forge the words in order “to say something important that would last.” (*Paradise*, 14) Unfortunately, this intention is not crowned with success, as some of the letters are lost when the Oven is taken away from Haven and erected anew in Ruby. (*Paradise*, 86) Due to this inexplicable misfortune, the exact wording of the motto itself is under discussion, thereby dividing the inhabitants of Ruby. “Despite the fact that the command was etched in iron, it has been forgotten, for it was first written, but never spoken, by one of the free, proud, Old Fathers. Originating in print rather than orality, the admonition was never allowed to inscribe itself in the semiotic.”²⁶² In the end, the inscription, which “seemed at first to bless them; later to confound them; finally [...] announce[d] that they had lost.” (*Paradise*, 7)

The older generation insists that “Beware the Furrow of His Brow” (*Paradise*, 87) corresponds to the original words, a conviction indicating a close affinity to the strict kind of attitudes reflected in the Old Testament. “Requiring law, order, and the preservation of the status quo, they opt for an Old Testament deity whose furrowed brow enforces an implacable regime of cosmic justice.”²⁶³ The younger generation of Rubyites, on the other hand, prefers the phrasing of “Be the Furrow of His Brow,” which their fathers interpret as blasphemy, since according to their opinion, “‘Be’

²⁶⁰ Cf. *Paradise*, 86.

²⁶¹ Cf. Morrison, *Memory*. 389.

²⁶² Cf. Elia, 129.

²⁶³ Cf. Philip Page, “Furrowing all the Brows: Interpretation and the Transcendent in Toni Morrison’s *Paradise*.” In: *African American Review*, 35 (2001).

Cited after: http://www.findarticles.com/cf_0/m2838/4_35/82554810/print.jhtml, 14 pages, 3. 10th of August 2003.

means you putting Him aside and you the power.” (*Paradise*, 87) They do not seriously try to understand Destry’s explanation that the members of the young generation not at all wish to elate themselves to God-like level but rather perceive themselves as His instrument, a view which can be aligned with the messages of the New Testament.²⁶⁴ Steward, who totally disagrees with this notion, later even wonders “if that generation – Misner’s and K.D.’s – would have to be sacrificed to get to the next one. The grand- and great-grandchildren who could be trained, honed as his own father and grandfather had done for Steward’s generation. No breaks there; no slack cut then. Expectations were high and met.” (*Paradise*, 94)

Although the discussion between the advocates of the respective views is rendered in terms of a conversation, it becomes obvious that the younger people do not stand a fair chance against their fathers accusation that they “didn’t want to discuss; they wanted to instruct,” (*Paradise*, 84) whereas they themselves do not grant the younger generation’s words equal value: “But the young people – what they say is more like backtalk than talk.” (*Paradise*, 85) Royal Beauchamp cannot accept this judgement and retorts: “What is talk if it’s not ‘back’? You all just don’t want us to talk at all. Any talk is ‘backtalk’ if you don’t agree with what’s being said... Sir.” (*Paradise*, 85) He might be right, yet, he is preaching to deaf ears – a problem Reverend Misner clearly identifies: “We’re here not just to talk but to listen too.” (*Paradise*, 85) The older generation of Rubyites, however, only wants to listen to ideas in line with their own, not wanting to make the slightest compromise. “Their attitude violates a central process of African American culture, call-and-response. In call-and-response, a leader issues a call, group members respond, and the leader then issues a new call modified or directed by the responses.”²⁶⁵ Instead of taking into account the concerns of their sons and achieving a sort of reconciliation, the older generation is merely ready to permit them their part in Ruby’s history as long as they abide to the given interpretation without protest. “The oven already has a history. It doesn’t need you to fix it.” (*Paradise*, 86) Steward even goes so far as to threaten anyone wanting to tamper with the Oven’s inscription: “If you, any one of you, ignore, change, take away, or add to the words in the mouth of that Oven, I will blow your head off just like you was a hood-eye snake.” (*Paradise*, 87)

²⁶⁴ Cf. Justine Tally, *Paradise Reconsidered. Toni Morrison’s (Hi)stories and Truths*. FORECAAST (Forum for European Contributions to African American Studies) Vol. 3. Hamburg, 1999. 69.

²⁶⁵ Cf. Dehn Kubitschek, 184.

In this bogged down attitude lies a core problem of the community in Ruby: “[T]hese people had wonderful stories to tell about their fathers and their grandfathers and nothing to say about themselves. Nothing to pass on. That is when you freeze history.”²⁶⁶ In addition to the fact that the older generation of Rubyites only talks about the past and their ancestors, they also impose this standstill on their descendants by not allowing them to take part in the creation of their own history. “As though, rather than children, they wanted duplicates.” (*Paradise*, 161) As a consequence, “[m]ore oral history will be lost because the younger generation ruthlessly derides orality. Not invited to participate in call-and-response, forced to listen silently, the young will not retell the stories that imprison them. Like the Oven, oral tradition no longer unites the community.”²⁶⁷

It does, therefore, not come as a surprise that “the brows of many of the characters are furrowed in anger, frustration, or perplexity.”²⁶⁸ Two important representatives of the different camps are Reverend Pulliam and Reverend Misner, whose opposing views are rendered in a call and response manner on the occasion of the wedding between K.D. and Arnette. Rather than being a love match, this marriage – the result of an agreement between the respective fathers – is intended to reconcile the families of bride and bridegroom by accommodating their conservative expectations of decency. Reverend Pulliam’s pessimistic homily in the course of the ceremony is thus utterly out of place. Instead of contributing to the fragile hopes of peace between the families as much as between the different groups in Ruby, his words further inflame the already passionate contentions between the people. In accordance with the Old Testament concept of “an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth,”²⁶⁹ “Pulliam preaches a traditional message of human sinfulness and divine retribution. Clearly a divisive force, he destroys any potential unity at the Fleetwood-Morgan nuptials.”²⁷⁰ Parallel to the older generation’s version of the Oven’s inscription, Pulliam spreads “a message of patriarchy, tradition, patience, and separation.”²⁷¹ In his view, Reverend Misner’s more

²⁶⁶ Cf. A. J. Verdelle. “Paradise Found: A Talk with Toni Morrison about Her New Novel.” In: *Essence*, February 1998. 3 pages. 2. Cited after: http://www.findarticles.com/cf_0/m1264/n10_v28/20187690/print.jhtml, 10th of August 2003.

²⁶⁷ Cf. Dehn Kubitschek, 185.

²⁶⁸ Cf. Page, 1.

²⁶⁹ Cf. Matthew 5:38.

²⁷⁰ Cf. Dehn Kubitschek, 177.

²⁷¹ Cf. Julie Cary Nerad, “The Oven (Paradise).” In: Elizabeth Ann Beaulieu (ed.), *The Toni Morrison Encyclopedia*. Westport and London: Greenwood Press, 2003. 257-258. 258.

liberal approach merely consists in “letting children talk as if they had something important to say that the world had not heard and dealt with already.” (*Paradise*, 143)

In the schedule of the ceremony, Reverend Misner is to deliver his sermon immediately after that of Reverend Pulliam. What was originally intended as an ecumenical cooperation between the ministers turns into open confrontation. After having had to listen to Pulliam’s shattering and hardly hope-inducing view that “you do not deserve love regardless of the suffering you have endured,” (*Paradise*, 141) Misner is unable to pronounce the conciliatory words he had planned for the occasion. (*Paradise*, 144) Momentarily at a loss for words, due to his disbelief of the provocation he has just been faced with, Misner takes a cross off a wall, showing it to the congregation. (*Paradise*, 145p.) With this demonstration he wills them to understand the message underlying this most fundamental sign of Christianity. “So he stood there and let the minutes tick by as he held the crossed oak in his hands, urging it to say what he could not: that not only is God interested in you; He *is* you.” (*Paradise*, 146) This interpretation again underpins the younger generation’s wish to inscribe the oven with “Be the Furrow of His Brow,” as it would then figure as “a message of democracy, change, empowerment, and involvement.”²⁷² For Misner, the cross is not only the most powerful sign to represent God’s love; it gives everyone reason to hope for His love.

Remove it, as Pulliam had done, and Christianity was like any and every religion in the world: a population of supplicants begging respite from begrudging authority; harried believers ducking fate or dodging everyday evil; the weak negotiating a doomed trek through the wilderness, the sighted ripped of light and thrown into the perpetual dark of choicelessness. (*Paradise*, 146)

As is exemplified in the Oven’s inscription, “*Paradise* affirms neither written nor oral culture, however, showing instead the inherent unreliability of all human communication.”²⁷³ Forged iron does not last long enough to conserve the inscription, failing to nail down its meaning once and for all, and neither can spoken words exclude doubts, as the correctness of Esther’s memory of feeling the shapes of the letters is also distrusted. (*Paradise*, 83) Matters are similarly confusing when it comes to the very history of Ruby itself, as both oral as well as written history prove to be incomplete and flawed to some extent. On the one hand, Steward and Deacon are presented as reliable sources of information; it is claimed that “[b]etween them they remember the details of

²⁷² *Ibid.*, 258.

everything that ever happened – things they witnessed and things they have not.” (*Paradise*, 13) Nevertheless, their stories also contain gaps, as it has not been transmitted whether Steward’s and Deacon’s grandfather Coffee renamed himself Zechariah Morgan after “Zacharias, father of John the Baptist? or the Zechariah who had visions?” (*Paradise*, 192) Neither can Steward give a definite answer concerning the derivation of his grandfather’s (and therefore also his own) surname: “he thought it was Moyne originally, not Morgan. Or Le Moyne or something, but, ‘Some folks called him Black Coffee. We called him Big Papa. Called my daddy Big daddy,’ as though that ended it.” (*Paradise*, 192)

Patricia Cato wants to fill in the gaps of the orally transmitted story of the Rubyites by organising it into the various genealogies of the fifteen original families who were the founders of Haven and whose members had set off on the journey eventually leading to the foundation of Ruby. Although she intends her work to be “a gift to the citizens of Ruby,” (*Paradise*, 187) people are not well disposed towards the project. They take offence when Patricia uses her students’ autobiographical compositions as the basis of her research, worrying that “their children [were] being asked to gossip, to divulge what could be private information, secrets even.” (*Paradise*, 187) Cooperating with her to a certain extent, Patricia is granted access to family Bibles, but she is denied a look into letters or marriage certificates. “The women narrowed their eyes before smiling and offering to freshen her coffee.” (*Paradise*, 187) This refusal only emphasises the mystery about “women who, like her mother, had only one name,” (*Paradise*, 187) thereby increasing Patricia’s impetus to unravel the hidden secrets. In contrast to the “town’s official story, elaborated from pulpits, in Sunday school classes and ceremonial speeches,” (*Paradise*, 188) other – possibly unpleasant – parts of the story are entirely left in the dark. “Everything anybody wanted to know about the citizens of Haven or Ruby lay in the ramifications of that one rebuff out of many. But the ramifications of those ramifications were another story.” (*Paradise*, 189)

The importance of the foundation history of Ruby is even enhanced by its inclusion into the annual nativity play. Instead of merely portraying the Biblical story, its content is mixed with that of the Disallowal, the infamous rejection the Founding Fathers of Ruby had suffered. Hence, not just one but nine holy families figure in the traditional Ruby version of the pageant, thereby simultaneously representing the nine

²⁷³ Cf. Dehn Kubitschek, 185.

families who founded the town. When suddenly only seven couples enact the pageant, both Reverend Misner and Patricia wonder about the implications of this change. (*Paradise*, 208pp.) Misner fails to understand the ongoings and asks Patricia for clarification: “Well help me figure this place out. I know I’m an outsider, but I’m not an enemy.” Agreeing that he is no enemy, Patricia explains: “But in this town those two words mean the same thing.” (*Paradise*, 212) This conviction also leads her to understand the actual reasons for the change in the play. In the course of her research, she has come to suspect the covert existence of race rules in the community of Ruby, as each of the nine founding families “had the little mark she had chosen to put after their names: 8-R. An abbreviation for eight-rock, a deep deep level in the coal mines. Blue-black people, tall and graceful, whose clear, wide eyes gave no sign of what they really felt about those who weren’t 8-rock like them.” (*Paradise*, 193) As a reaction to the infamous Disallowal, in which the original families had not been permitted to stay longer than one night in a town inhabited by rather light-skinned African Americans, they then inverted these colour restrictions. (*Paradise*, 195) Patricia is convinced that the line of her family has been taken out of the pageant because of their relatively light skin colour. Understanding that in the Rubyites’ view such people were “[n]ot good enough to be represented by eight-year-olds on a stage,” (*Paradise*, 216) Patricia finally burns all her notes comprising her collection of Ruby’s history. (*Paradise*, 216p.)

It had been her intention to write down the story of the town and its families, to fill all the gaps as objectively as possible. The rendition of the pageant, however, proves to her that the voids in oral history are not accidental but intended, thereby convincing her of the futility of her attempt. The founders of Ruby not so much fear the rules and regulations of God, they rather abide to their own laws: “The generations had to be not only racially untampered with but free of adultery too. [...] It wasn’t God’s brow to be feared. It was his own, their own. Is that why ‘Be the Furrow of His Brow’ drove them crazy?” (*Paradise*, 217) The older generations’ version of the Oven’s inscription can be aligned with the oral history of Ruby, in which unspoken (and unwritten) rules are nevertheless understood and abided to. Patricia’s endeavour to put the written adaptation next to it must needs be rejected by them, as such a text would make these covert regulations visible. Changes easy to be applied to oral renditions do not pass unnoticed or that easily within a firm written history. When Patricia eventually identifies the older generation’s belief that only “[u]nadulterated and unadulteried 8-rock blood held its magic as long as it resided in Ruby. That was their recipe. That was

their deal for Immortality,” she realises that as a consequence, “everything that worries them must come from women.” (*Paradise*, 217)

Indeed, the attack on the Convent women is plotted and carried out by male representatives of the founding families, most of them still belonging to the older generation, whereas Lone, together with other women and more liberal men, tries to avert the ensuing disaster. Assuming the validity of Patricia’s view, they must necessarily feel threatened by the presence of these women of unknown origins, who belong to different races, lead their lives mostly without men, and who refuse to submit to the patriarchal rules of Ruby society. Similar to the process of a witch hunt, the men unjustifiedly blame the Convent women for all kinds of social evils taking place in Ruby. Just as the older men’s insistence on the first version of the Oven’s inscription subdues the younger generation, the imperturbable belief in the unwritten blood rules leads to the destruction of the Convent women. But despite their attempt to permit only their own approaches to life, the very attack on the women, planned to delete any alternative way of life, gives rise to yet another duality, as two main explanations of the ongoingings at the Convent emerge. Upon Misner’s return from a journey, “Pat gave him the two editions of the official story,” (*Paradise*, 296) none of which coincides with the true course of events nor with the men’s firm determination to kill the women. In Patricia’s opinion, which is supported by the novel itself as well as by Lone’s account, “nine 8-rocks murdered five harmless women (*a*) because the women were impure (not 8-rock); (*b*) because the women were unholy (fornicators at the least, abortionists at most); and (*c*) because they could – which was what being an 8-rock meant to them and was also what the ‘deal’ required.” (*Paradise*, 297)

Patricia’s evaluation of the events is just one more in a conglomeration of stories developed alongside the two prominent versions. “Other than Deacon Morgan, who had nothing to say, every one of the assaulting men had a different tale and their families and friends (who had been nowhere near the Convent) supported them, enhancing, recasting, inventing misinformation.” (*Paradise*, 297) And just like Richard, who “didn’t believe either of the stories rapidly becoming gospel,” (*Paradise*, 297) even the reader cannot be sure about the exact ongoingings, as the course of events is not reported from a totally objective point of view, but the perspective during the most devastating parts of the assault is influenced by that of Steward and his partners in crime. “Like the

broom in *The Sorcerer's Apprentice*, the versions increase exponentially."²⁷⁴ Therefore, the coexistence of different stories calling and responding on each other once more stresses Morrison's point of indeterminacy, which has already been alluded to in the opposition of oral versus written history as well as the dichotomy of possible inscriptions. "Aware that almost any apparent fact can be undercut, the reader rejects the two absolutist premises on which Ruby's social structure is built: first, that eternal truth can be known, and second, that the founders of Ruby know it."²⁷⁵

What is left to speculation in all of the tales is a plausible explanation of whether the women managed to survive against all odds, or respectively, of what happened to their corpses. Lone is certain that the disappearance of the bodies provides evidence that

God had given Ruby a second chance. Had made Himself so visible and unarguable a presence that even the outrageously prideful (like Steward) and the uncorrectably stupid (like his lying nephew) ought to be able to see it. He had actually swept up and received His servants in broad daylight, for goodness' sake! right before their very eyes, for Christ's sake!"(*Paradise*, 297p.)

As various versions of the story illustrate that the members of the older generation have discredited themselves through their dishonourable attack on helpless women, their former authority as well as their incontestable claim to moral superiority subsides just as their symbol, the Oven, lopsidedly slides into the mud. Rather than arguing any longer, the young people directly proceed to action. "No longer were they calling themselves Be the Furrow of His Brow. The graffiti on the hood of the Oven now was 'We Are the Furrow of His Brow.'" (*Paradise*, 298) The Oven's decay, "an ignominious ending for a monolith which has outlasted its usefulness,"²⁷⁶ thus parallels the falling apart of the community in Ruby, while at the same time, the young people's inscription foreshadows their intention not to repeat their fathers' mistake of seizing absolute authority over the past nor over the future. Their new motto "with its replacement of the imperative by the declarative mood, implies that they are indeed engaging in this participation, that they are explicitly joining with each other, with the other participants in the novel, and with the cosmos in a mutually ongoing process of creativity."²⁷⁷

²⁷⁴ Cf. Page, 4.

²⁷⁵ Cf. Dehn Kubitschek, 183.

²⁷⁶ Cf. Tally, *Paradise*, 54.

²⁷⁷ Cf. Page, 3.

In *Paradise*, call and response operates between the respective Oven inscriptions, between the generations, between oral and written history, and in general, between different attitudes towards what is accepted as truth. Neither oral history, symbolised in the retelling of the Oven's supposed original motto, in the emphasis on Steward's enormous memory, as well as in the performance of the pageant, nor written history, as the forged iron inscription and Patricia's incomplete collection of genealogies, are fully capable of conveying absolute truth. Likewise, only the entirety of stories about the attack on the Convent get close to a realistic description of the events. Neither is the older generation absolutely wrong, nor is the approach of their descendants completely correct, at least as long as they do not listen to each other. Only by applying the principle of call and response does the community of Ruby stand a chance to survive. "Multiple, continually created meanings allow – require – both the active imagination and the furrowed brows not only of the author but also of the characters and the readers."²⁷⁸ As she is persistently contrasting characters, stories, ideas, and interpretations, Morrison also encourages double reading.²⁷⁹ The novel features a whole network of stories and opinions, which all affect each other and provide "a meaning greater than the sum of all its parts,"²⁸⁰ and therefore impossible to be nailed down unambiguously once and for all. This strategy casts light on the mechanisms involved in the construction of history, at the same time stressing the importance of memory and including the reader in the creation of the narrative.²⁸¹ By juxtaposing a great number of dichotomies in a call and response manner,

Morrison wants to avoid being authoritarian. So she issues her call, but it is a call that initiates, that opens rather than closes, dialogue, that requires re-reading and interactive discussion, that generates multiple responses. Readers cannot help but respond, and they will respond in their wonderful diversity; they will witness the mysteries of the text.²⁸²

²⁷⁸ Ibid., 3.

²⁷⁹ Cf. Tally, *Paradise*, 49.

²⁸⁰ Ibid., 55.

²⁸¹ Ibid., 57.

²⁸² Cf. Page, 12.

1.2.7 Love: A Place the Streets do not Go

“Meaning comes in the structure, meaning comes in the palate, in what’s underneath,”²⁸³ asserts Toni Morrison. It is therefore not surprising that the crucial conversation between Heed and Christine in *Love* is presented via the device of call and response. Their exchange, taking place after a short fight rendering one of them severely injured and the other only slightly, is their first direct verbal exchange after endless years of silence. “Language, when finally it comes, has the vigor of a felon pardoned after twenty-one years on hold. Sudden, raw, stripped to its underwear.” (*Love*, 184) Only now, secluded from the world around them and one woman close to death, are they able to get to the bottom of their relationship, which for many years has been burdened with misunderstandings and misapprehensions. This situation, described by Morrison as Heed’s and Christine’s chance “to possibly exorcise Bill Cosey from their lives,”²⁸⁴ supplies the women with formerly withheld information about each other’s fears and shame which had contributed to the loss of their friendship, although some details are still being retained. It is “an honest conversation at last, but even then they don’t say the real thing.”²⁸⁵

As girls, Heed and Christine had been friends with each other despite their different origins. Whereas Christine belonged to the then quite wealthy Cosey family, Heed’s origin lay in a poor and disrespected background. The two girls were even so close that, according to L, Heed “*belonged to Christine and Christine belonged to her.*” (*Love*, 105) Although May does not seem happy about Christine’s choice of companion, the girls stick together. “*It’s like that when children fall for another. On the spot, without introduction [...] Parents can be lax or strict, timid or confident, it doesn’t matter [...] whatever kind they are, their place is secondary to a child’s first chosen love.*” (*Love*, 199) L describes their friendship as “*a mix of surrender and mutiny they can never live without,*” (*Love*, 199) and indeed, even when they are no longer on speaking terms, deep down inside, they continue to care about each other. Their final break comes with Heed’s marriage to Christine’s grandfather Bill, a liaison that “*laid the brickwork for ruination.*” (*Love*, 104) Whereas Christine feels neglected and comes to view her grandfather as “the powerful one who abandoned his own kin and

²⁸³ Cf. Toni Morrison, *Reading at the Royal Festival Hall*, London. 5th of December 2003.

²⁸⁴ Ibid.

²⁸⁵ Ibid.

transferred rule to her playmate,” (*Love*, 165) Heed cannot understand why Christine’s behaviour is suddenly so different. Upon her return from her honeymoon, Heed is desperate to tell Christine all about it; but as Christine does not understand why she was not allowed to accompany the couple, she is angry with Heed. (*Love*, 127)

Nevertheless, the two women “avoid rehearsing accusations, a waste of breath now with one of them cracked to pieces and the other sweating like a laundress.” (*Love*, 184) In the course of the ensuing conversation, both admit to having made mistakes, trying to explain their former behaviour to each other. Whereas years before, Christine had used their secret language to accuse Heed of being a slave who had been bought with a year’s rent and a candy bar, (*Love*, 129) Heed, who had been devastated at the time, in a way concedes to this harsh judgement. By defending Christine’s mother, “[a]t least she didn’t sell you,” (*Love*, 184) she implies that she herself has indeed been sold by her parents. Christine on her behalf is responsive to Heed, acknowledging her mother’s impact: “I bet she made your life a horror movie.” (*Love*, 185)

When Heed recounts a story of how she tricked Boss Silk, Christine answers “Hey, Celestial.” (*Love*, 188) This interjection reminds the two women of a day they spent on the beach, when they heard a man using these words towards a young woman in a conspiratorial tone. “And from then on, to say ‘Amen,’ or acknowledge a particularly bold, smart, risky thing, they mimicked the male voice crying ‘Hey, Celestial.’” (*Love*, 188) This phrase represents the close connection between the two women. “Except for the words they had invented for secrets in a language they called ‘idagay,’ ‘Hey Celestial’ was their most private code. Idagay was for intimacy, gossip, telling jokes on grown-ups. Only once was it used to draw friendly blood.” (*Love*, 188) This incident, in which Christine had attacked Heed in idagay, opened up the abyss between the two. This gulf is now being closed again by the conciliatory utterance of “Hey, Celestial.” The women no longer fight, they rather call and respond to each other, thereby affirming the basis of their friendship. Finally, Heed is able to tell Christine how much her accusation had hurt her, a confession which brings Christine to voice her own pain. Instead of insisting on their former views, they are reunited: “Poor us.” (*Love*, 188) In retrospective, they agree that as little girls they did not do any wrong and were merely “[t]rying to find a place when the streets don’t go there.” (*Love*, 189) Rather than blaming each other for all that went wrong, they identify Bill Cosey and his treatment of them as the root of their problems. Consenting that “[o]nly a devil could

think him up,” this part of the conversation again ends in an affirmative and responsive “Hey, Celestial.” (*Love*, 190)

Although they have now overcome their separation, neither Heed nor Christine are able to voice their innermost memories of how their friendship had been disturbed. Heed had run up the stairs in the hotel to fetch a game from Christine’s room, wiggling her hips to the music she heard from the bar, when she encountered Bill Cosey. Feeling attracted to the little girl in the bathing suit, he touched her indecently. (*Love*, 190p.) Heed blames herself for Cosey’s misbehaviour, as she believes that the shaking of her hips must have provoked him. When she finds Christine with traces of vomit on her bathing suit and unable to meet her friend’s eyes, “Heed can’t speak, can’t tell her friend what happened. She knows she has spoiled it all.” (*Love*, 191) But Christine did not witness the scene between her grandfather and Heed. The sight that had made her sick was that of Bill Cosey masturbating at the window of Christine’s room. (*Love*, 192) None of the girls is able to tell the other what has happened, because similar to children who feel responsible for a fight between their parents, they blame themselves as the cause for the incidents. “It wasn’t the arousals, not altogether unpleasant, that the girls could not talk about. It was the other thing. The thing that made each believe, without knowing why, that this particular shame was different and could not tolerate speech – not even in the language they had invented for secrets.” (*Love*, 192) Even many years later, they can’t bear to tell each other what happened, as they seem to lack an appropriate language to utter their profound feelings of shame. “Idagay can’t help them with that.” (*Love*, 192) According to Morrison, “Human beings haven’t found intrepid language to communicate. They don’t talk, they don’t say it, or the other one can’t hear it.”²⁸⁶ She regrets that in many cases there is “no language of love at all, no language of peace,”²⁸⁷ whereas Heed and Christine – despite keeping their last secrets from each other – are at least capable of retrieving love and peace in the end. After an eternity of silence and enmity, the two women mourn that Bill Cosey had taken one away from the other, thereby temporarily destroying their friendship. It is almost too late when they finally testify to the importance of their relationship, and it comes like a powerful clap of thunder when the woman at the brink of death manages to tell the other with her last ounce of strength: “Love. I really do.” (*Love*, 194)

²⁸⁶ Ibid.

²⁸⁷ Ibid.

This is the first instance – apart from the title – that the word “love” is actually used. Morrison explains that “you have the absence, because you have no language in which to say these things.”²⁸⁸ All the times before, the feeling of love is merely paraphrased, thereby marking its absence and accumulating its power for the sake of the intensification of this outburst. In contrast to the insulting use of *idagay* many years before, it is now employed in its original sense: as a sort of comfort, helping to tighten the connection between the two women. The confession of love from one of the women is answered by an affirmative and caring “Ush-hidagay.Ush-hidagay.” (meaning “Hush”, *Love*, 194) from the other. Their last conversation while both of them are alive is conveyed in a call and response manner without identifying the respective speaker. Although it is quite probable that Heed is the one to die while Christine survives, the indeterminacy is intentional. When Stuart Hall asked Morrison about the significance of Heed’s death for the novel, she returned the question: “How did you know who died?”²⁸⁹ In a way similar to the chapter of *Beloved*, in which the voices overlap and the reader has to speculate about who is speaking, the call and response pattern of Heed’s and Christine’s conversation is meant to prove that “it doesn’t matter who dies. They are now together, what they were before.”²⁹⁰ Their renewed unity even enables them to overcome death, as their conversation continues beyond this boundary. In *Love*, Morrison wanted to portray the feeling of love not as mere happenstance, but as something to be earned. She wanted to give back to the word its original, complicated quality to counter the prevalent emptying of its meaning in contemporary society.²⁹¹ As honest love without ulterior motives is rare and love is often taken for granted, no direct streets lead to the fulfilment of this quest. Against all odds, Christine and Heed have managed to overcome all obstacles and once more indulge in the kind of pure love, which is usually only found between children before it is being corrupted by adults,²⁹² a love that “*bears watching, if you can stand to look at it.*” (*Love*, 199) The culmination of the call and response exchange between Heed and Christine in the voicing of “Love” symbolises their final reconciliation, while at the same time it functions as the climax of the entire novel. Morrison thereby analyses in a powerful and illustrative way not only the long-lasting absence of love, but also its final – sometimes invincible – quality.

²⁸⁸ Ibid.

²⁸⁹ Ibid.

²⁹⁰ Ibid.

²⁹¹ Ibid.

²⁹² Ibid.

1.3 Rhythmical Language

“Every life to me has a rhythm, a shape – there are dips and curves as well as straightaways. You can’t see the contours all at once.”²⁹³ This remark by Toni Morrison could well be her summary of *Beloved*, the story of which unfolds in many curves and circles, adding one fragment to the other in non-chronological order. The repetition of many words and phrases gives the narrative its shape and rhythm. “The structural ordering of this ‘aural’ novel is not spatial but musical.”²⁹⁴ In his excellent study on *Beloved*, Rodríguez compares the novel to a blues performance. According to his interpretation, the narrator controls the story of Sethe and her family, using the memories of Sixo, Stamp Paid and Baby Suggs as if to willfully syncopate it, “turning beats into offbeats and crossbeats, introducing blue notes of loneliness and injustice and despair, generating, at the end, meanings that hit her listeners in the heart, that region below the intellect where knowledge deepens into understanding.”²⁹⁵ On a smaller scale words, phrases, and images are repeated in order to generate rhythmical meanings.²⁹⁶

The three parts of the novel are opened with parallel structures: “124 WAS SPITEFUL,” (*Beloved*, 3) “124 WAS LOUD,” (*Beloved*, 169) “124 WAS QUIET.” (*Beloved*, 239) These parallelisms create a rhythmical tension between the chapters, simultaneously setting the tune for their respective atmospheres. The repetition of the house number serves to highlight the fact that the novel’s present is mainly set inside this house characterised by its ever-changing moods.

A similar repetition of syntactical structures can be found in Sethe’s memory of her escape from Sweet Home.

All I knew was I had to get my milk to my baby girl. *Nobody* was going to nurse her like me. *Nobody* was going to get it to her fast enough, or take it away when she had enough and didn’t know it. *Nobody* knew that she couldn’t pass her air if you held her up on your shoulder, only if she was lying on my knees. *Nobody* knew that but me and *nobody* had her milk but me. (*Beloved*, 16; Emphasis mine)

Five successive main clauses start with the word “nobody,” stressing Sethe’s importance in the rescue of her youngest child. Sethe is the only one able to nurse the

²⁹³ Tate, 163.

²⁹⁴ Cf. Rodríguez in Iyasere, 62.

²⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 62.

girl, she is the only one to provide the milk. And she is the only one to know the baby's habits. These parallel sentences speed up the narrative and demonstrate as well as imitate the hurry Sethe is in. Seen in retrospect, Sethe's pride of her successful flight is foreshadowed in her indispensability for her child, emphasised by the rhythm of this paragraph. Sethe is not merely proud of her flight, but also of her desperate attempt to save her children from slavery, despite its horrifying and frightful outcome.

Paul D is conscious of this and comes to understand that "more important than what Sethe had done was what she claimed. It scared him." (*Beloved*, 164) This conclusion results from a paragraph in which Paul D evaluates Sethe's changed personality. Within seven lines, "[t]his here Sethe" (*Beloved*, 164) initiates three sentences. "This here new Sethe didn't know where the world stopped and she began" (*Beloved*, 164) sums up Sethe's peculiarity described throughout the paragraph. The repetition of this phrase fortifies the contrast between the Sethe Paul D knew at Sweet Home and the woman she has turned into. The demonstrative "this" singles her out from everybody else, just as her deed has isolated Sethe from the community. She is pointed out linguistically like an oddity to be stared at in a disbelief similar to Paul D's.

But Morrison does not only structure single paragraphs by creating rhythm – verbal beats actually set the pace for entire passages. Paul D's escape from the prison farm is accompanied by an underlying beat of seemingly eternal rain.

Live rolled over dead. Or so he thought.
It rained.
Snakes came down from short-leaf pine and hemlock.
It rained.
[...] The men could not work. [...]
It rained.
[...] They squatted in muddy water, slept above it, peed in it. (*Beloved*, 109p.)

The drumming down rain relieves the men by offering them a pause from their hard work, it then endangers them in their underground boxes, and eventually, it provides them their only chance to escape from their imprisonment. Even afterwards the rain is an ally of their flight, since it washes away the men's scent and thus hinders the tracking dogs to follow their traces. (*Beloved*, 112) The rhythm of the rain is almost as important and life-sustaining for Paul D as his own heartbeat.

²⁹⁶ Ibid., 63.

Thus, Paul D's motion from captivity to liberty is rendered rhythmically, just as his displacement from Sethe's house seems organised according to the beats of repeated sentences. Paul D believes himself to be directed by Beloved. One day he is apparently prevented from sleeping in Sethe's bedroom and spends his nights in a rocking chair instead. "It went on that way and might have stayed that way but one evening, after supper, after Sethe, he came downstairs [...] and didn't want to be there." (*Beloved*, 115) He then sleeps in Baby Suggs' former bedroom and afterwards in the storeroom. Every station of his movement is ended with the same formulaic phrase, until Paul D eventually sleeps in the separate cold house, which can be seen as a symbol of his emotional status. (*Beloved*, 115p.) Although it seems as if Paul D was acting out of his own volition, he himself does not understand what causes his urge to constantly change places. The strangeness of this behaviour is accentuated through the repetition of the phrase, which seems like both the chorus of a song as well as an incantation reminiscent of fairy tales.

During his stay in the cold house, Paul D is afflicted by Beloved's visits. She seduces him against his will, and eventually he is forced to give in to her order: "I want you to touch me on the inside part and call me my name." (*Beloved*, 116) The whole procedure is narrated against the ground beat of Beloved wanting Paul D to follow her command, the two parts of which she alternately repeats. Had the preceding section been similar to fairy tales in its magical movement and its formulaic repetition, the image of a fairy tale is now inverted – even though Beloved promises Paul D to leave as soon as he calls her name, she does not do so. (*Beloved*, 117) Beloved is empowered by Paul D's calling of her name, whereas in a fairy tale this would rather have established his dominion over her. However, it is Paul D who is clearly controlled by Beloved, a fact which becomes clear through the repetition of her orders and his eventual surrender to them. The section ends with Paul D repeatedly uttering "Red heart" (*Beloved*, 117), a fact that not only draws upon rhythmic patterns but also alludes to the pulse as the primal and prototypical beat originating from the very centre of life itself.

The verbal structure of repetition points out the power of the spell Beloved has cast on Paul D, for the red heart he refers to is his own. Before, he had locked all his suppressed feelings and hurtful memories of his past into what he thinks of as a "tobacco tin." (*Beloved*, 113) "By the time he got to 124 nothing in this world could pry it open." (*Beloved*, 113) Yet, Beloved's seduction causes it to open and be replaced again by Paul D's proper heart. Beloved's identity remains in the dark, but she seems to

possess supernatural powers. She is able to cause the tobacco tin to open precisely because she does not belong to this world.

When Paul D learns about Sethe's deed from Stamp Paid, he refuses to believe it, because from his point of view, the newspaper portrait of Sethe shows "a mouth that was not Sethe's" (*Beloved*, 156) Paul D is both unwilling to believe and incapable of coming to terms with what he is being told, so he falls back on his conviction that due to the "incorrect" depiction of the woman's mouth, the story cannot be associated with Sethe. He is obsessed with this notion which disrupts the course of his thoughts as often as eleven times. (*Beloved*, 154-158) The repetition is irregular and can be compared to off-beats in a blues performance. They fall out of the pattern and serve to undermine the truth of the facts Paul D has to face, just as off-beats counter the regular rhythm of a piece of music.

After his talk with Sethe, Paul D leaves 124 and takes refuge in the cellar of the church. There he remembers the original plan they had for their escape from Sweet Home. The plan is laid out nicely, but soon has to undergo modifications. Each deviation from the original layout is explained in a paragraph starting with the single drumbeat "But." (*Beloved*, 223) As a result, the paragraphs seem to form the counterpoint to the successful escape - every little "but" gradually adds to the failure of the plan.

When Beloved finds ice skates, the three women get out to the frozen creek to make use of them. The description of Sethe, Beloved, and Denver skating is framed by chorus-like sentences: "Nobody saw them falling" (*Beloved*, 174) at the beginning and "[n]obody saw them fall." (*Beloved*, 175) at the end. The introductory sentence is repeated twice within the section (*Beloved*, 174). Sethe is described as being "on all fours" (*Beloved*, 175) for a while, an image inverting Paul D's statement, "[y]ou got two feet, Sethe, not four." (*Beloved*, 165) This section of the novel is crucial for Sethe. She knows that she has lost Paul D, but she gradually comes to realise that Beloved must be her reincarnated daughter, which sets the tune for a destructive family relationship. And "nobody saw them falling" on the ice, where they are strengthening the ties between them. But even gravity seems to defy their notion of proximity. They are three and alone, nevertheless - outsiders to the community. Therefore, they drift into their own world and dispense with the sort of reality they had been in before - "[n]obody saw them fall" from reason. From then on, Sethe focuses all her energies on Beloved to

make up for her deed and to make her understand. Yet, *Beloved* is unwilling to forgive, and while Sethe suffers, *Beloved* prospers all the more.

The passages structured rhythmically through a chorus are all crucial for the course of the novel. Morrison thus emphasises their importance. “It’s the rhythm and where you place the metaphors”²⁹⁷ – this is what Morrison believes to be remarkable about her style. And she is right. The rhythm not only connects passages, it heightens the effect of metaphors and successfully links the novel to a blues performance. The use of a chorus both draws back to call and response and creates a rhythmical tension between different parts of the action. These rhythmical effects hence function as the novel’s heartbeat.

Such rhythmic effects are not limited to the larger scale of whole paragraphs, but they also appear within single phrases. Two contrasting devices appear worth mentioning: The attempt to slow down action as well as its counterpart aiming to accelerate it rhythmically. “[S]uddenly there was Sweet Home rolling, rolling, rolling out before her eyes.” (*Beloved*, 6) Sethe cannot escape her memory of Sweet Home’s beauty despite the terrible life she had been leading there. The way her memories are rendered, the reader is granted enough time to ponder that beauty; then, very slowly, the images change. Inevitability and the notion of time standing still are also created at another stage, when Paul D remembers how he and the other men were forced to indirectly witness the first sexual intercourse of Sethe and Halle. “It had been hard, hard, hard sitting there erect as dogs, watching corn stalks dance at noon.” (*Beloved*, 27) The repetition serves as a *ritardando*²⁹⁸ for the reader, who has the opportunity to pause and share the character’s perceptions and emotions for a slightly extended period of time. In contrast to this, *staccato*²⁹⁹ beats create an *accelerando*³⁰⁰. When Sethe recognises schoolteacher as he approaches 124 Bluestone Road, she reacts as fast as possible. “And if she thought anything, it was No. No. Nono. Nonono. Simple. She just flew.” (*Beloved*, 163) Towards the end of the novel, when the women gather in front of her house and Mr. Bodwin approaches the house, Sethe mistakes him for schoolteacher. “And if she thinks anything, it is no. No no. Nonono. She flies.” (*Beloved*, 262) In both instances, Sethe has no time to really consider alternative actions, therefore her thoughts are reduced to basic feelings of resistance. The speed with which she attacks is imitated

²⁹⁷ Cf. Taylor-Guthrie, XIII.

²⁹⁸ Command to slow down the tempo in a piece of music.

²⁹⁹ Command to play a tone in a very short and hammered fashion.

in the short words and phrases. “These staccato drumbeats – single, double, triple – translate Sethe’s fears of the threatening white world into ominous sounds. Word-sounds enact the rhythmic steps of a dance.”³⁰¹ The necessity for Sethe to come up with a fast solution is made clear through the accelerating effect of the staccato beats.

Beloved contains many rhythmical devices both within single phrases and on the level of larger passages. Therefore, Rodríguez certainly has a point when he states, “The reader has to be a hearer too. For the printed words leap into sound to enter a consciousness that has to suspend disbelief willingly and become that of a child again, open to magic and wonder.”³⁰²

³⁰⁰ Command to increase the tempo in a piece of music.

³⁰¹ Cf. Rodríguez in Iyasere, 66.

³⁰² *Ibid.*, 62.

1.4 Improvisation

Apart from the imitation of call and response patterns and the creation of rhythmic effects, Morrison adapts another feature of African American music in her novels – improvisation. The character most closely associated with improvisation in *Tar Baby* is certainly Son, who is described as a man who is lacking “human rites: unbaptized, uncircumcised, minus puberty rites or the formal rites of manhood. Unmarried and undivorced. He had attended no funeral, married in no church, raised no child. Propertyless, homeless, sought for but not after. There were no grades given in his school, so how could he know when he had passed?” (*TB*, 166p.) In want of formal education, Son has had to resort to improvisation for all his life. Like “that great underclass of undocumented men,” (*TB*, 167) Son lacks a valid identity card and possesses a selection of forged papers featuring various names instead. (*TB*, 174p.)

And although there were more of his kind in the world than students or soldiers, unlike students or soldiers they were not counted. They were an international legion of day labourers and musclemen, gamblers, sidewalk merchants, migrants, unlicensed crewmen on ships with volatile cargo, part-time mercenaries, full-time gigolos, or kerbside musicians. (*TB*, 167)

In the tradition of a travelling bluesman, Son also subscribes to the “refusal to equate work with life and an inability to stay anywhere for long.” (*TB*, 167) As a consequence, Son, who “did not always know who he was, but always knew what he was like,” (*TB*, 166) has managed to follow his own instincts and develop his own strategies of survival.

This property comes in handy when he jumps ship and gives in to the currents rather than fighting them. In this way, he is able to regain his strength. The mysterious water-lady, who had prevented him from swimming directly towards the shore, “nudged him out to sea.” (*TB*, 2p.) What might seem dangerous at first, enables Son to approach and eventually get on board of a boat he had not seen before. Thus, the ability to improvise and abandon former plans saves Son from the possibility of drowning. Improvisation literally saves his life once more when he arrives at the island one night. After a long walk, he is looking at Valerian’s house from a distance, leaning on a tree. Moving his hand a bit, he gets hold of a fruit. “It smelled like an avocado, felt like an avocado. But suppose it wasn’t.” (*TB*, 135) Son casts away his doubts and devours the fruit. Driven to the house by thirst, he stays in its surroundings for altogether twelve

days, sleeping during the days and looking for food during nighttime. (*TB*, 137) Son, who “didn’t like to think too far in advance anyway” (*TB*, 139) is still indecisive as to what to do next, and merely little impulses lead him on. He is able to adapt to a large number of situations via improvisation. Managing “a face for everybody,”³⁰³ he believes in making up explanations on the spot rather than presenting “a ready-made story because, however tight, prepared stories sounded most like a lie. The sex, weight, the demeanour of whomever he encountered would inform and determine his tale.” (*TB*, 3) After having told Valerian that he has spent some days around Sein de Vieilles, Son is asked whether he believes in the existence of spirits and claims: “In a swamp, I believe.” (*TB*, 92) Although this assertion could also be meant to distract Valerian, it adds to Son’s perfect adaptation to his varying surroundings. Instead of clinging to absolute convictions, Son lets his beliefs and actions be influenced by the respective situation, a pattern which has frequently helped him getting off the hook. This improvisational strategy is further enhanced by Son’s use of different identities. Son “was the name that called forth the true him. The him that he never lied to, the one he tucked in at night and the one he did not want to die. The other selves were like the words he spoke – fabrications of the moment, misinformation required to protect Son from harm and to secure that one reality at least.” (*TB*, 139) Thus, improvisation helps the travelling bluesman Son to survive both in the realms of the natural world, since the sea as well as the plants cooperate with him, and in the complicated world of human beings where such a free man as Son is continuously forced to find his own solution.

In the blues, improvisation plays a very important role, since the singer catalyses personal sufferings through the creative process of incorporating them into a song. The role of the song for Paul D and his fellow prisoners has already been elaborated on. But their joint singing provides them with yet another skill – that of communal improvisation. They are used to follow the commands of Hi Man and accustomed to trust each other, for this is their sole possibility of surviving. Their songs serve as means of communication and they carry meanings exclusively intelligible to the members of the chain gang. Only because of their practice in improvising and interpreting the improvisations of their fellow-sufferers, the men are able to transfer this capacity into a successful escape.³⁰⁴ As in jazz, where improvisation is the result of extended practice,

³⁰³ Cf. Smith, 129.

³⁰⁴ Cf. Alan J. Rice, “It Don’t Mean A Thing If It Ain’t Got That Swing. Jazz’s Many Uses for Toni Morrison.” In: Simawe, 153-180. 166.

the men reach back to their singing routine for their communal improvisation. Their actions have to be in tune with those of their fellows just like the unity of a band depends on the efforts of every single member. But the men are accustomed to communicate through music rather than mere language, so “[t]hey talked through that chain like Sam Morse.” (*Beloved*, 110) A yank at the chain, passed on from one gang member to the next, signals them the right moment to dive through the mud into liberty. “Their improvisational leap comes not from individual effort but from a collective will that has emerged as a central facet in African American culture.”³⁰⁵

³⁰⁵ Ibid., 166.

1.5 Themes, Variations, Recurrent Riffs

While all of Toni Morrison's novels analysed in this study make use of musical techniques in many ways, *Jazz* carries the blending of art forms to extremes. Although apart from the novel's title, the word jazz is never actually mentioned, the book pulsates like a piece of jazz and can be seen as its literary paraphrase.³⁰⁶ Morrison comments on *Jazz*:

The book is a jazz gesture. Jazz is improvisational. You must be creative and innovative in performance. Even errors take you on to a new level of attainment. Writing is another form of music. There was a time when black people needed the music. Now that it belongs to everybody, black people need something else which is theirs. That's what novels can do, what writing can do. I write in order to replicate the information, the medicine, the balm we used to find in music.³⁰⁷

Morrison succeeds in her aim to make her novel similar to music, since *Jazz* "breathes the rhythms, sounds, and cadences of jazz music, radiating and enunciating, reflecting and recreating the music's central ideas, emotions, and aural idiosyncrasies perhaps as well as written prose can."³⁰⁸ The novel consists of unnumbered and unequal sections, which are separated by blank pages. These chapters do not have headings. The structure between and within the sections is based on multiply intertwined soli,³⁰⁹ stressing the improvisational nature of jazz, as many chapters resume the ideas of their predecessors in incomplete sentences.³¹⁰ The narrative comprises many repetitions, amplifications, and variations.³¹¹ Apart from the narrator, incidents and memories are mediated through the perspectives of the various characters presented. These multiple voices, whose renditions can be seen as their respective soli, pay tribute to the egalitarian nature of jazz, in which all members of a combo are equally important.³¹² Themes are established and picked up in later variations, fragments of stories and memories are supplied like riffs in jazz. The entire structure of this novel can be seen as being heavily indebted to

³⁰⁶ Cf. Susanne Weingarten, "Die Schwarze für Weiße." In: *Der Spiegel*, Nr. 33, 16th of August 1993. 146-149. 148.

³⁰⁷ Cf. Alan J. Rice, 168p.

³⁰⁸ Cf. Nicholas F. Pici, "Trading Meanings: The Breath of Music in Toni Morrison's *Jazz*." In: *Connotations* 7:3 (1997-98) 372-398. 372.

³⁰⁹ Cf. Göbel, 139.

³¹⁰ Cf. Herbert William Rice, *Toni Morrison and the American Tradition. A Rhetorical Reading*. New York: Peter Lang, 1998. 129.

³¹¹ Cf. Linden Peach, *Toni Morrison*. Houndmills: Macmillan Press LTD, 2000. 133.

³¹² Cf. Pici, 373.

this particular style of music.³¹³ And Morrison openly admits, “The jazz-like structure wasn’t a secondary thing for me – it was the *raison d’être* of the book.”³¹⁴

This statement alone should suffice to counter Alan Munton’s refusal to establish the connection between music and literature in Morrison’s novels.³¹⁵ Unfortunately, Munton already fails to understand the apocalyptic nature of Sula’s message when she claims that she will eventually be loved “when Lindbergh sleeps with Bessie Smith,” (*Sula*, 145) and points out the impossibility of the enterprise due to the two people already being dead. Munton is reluctant to admit the existence of riffs in Morrison’s *Jazz*, because he cannot bring himself to believe that she is indeed resorting to “a musical device that had lost its initial energy by 1940, thirty years before she published her first novel.”³¹⁶ Apart from the fact that riffs are still in regular use across different genres of music even today, Munton’s evaluation does not take into account that the novel is set in the 1920s, a time in which the riff dominated jazz music. Furthermore, Munton cannot imagine that prose can be rhythmic³¹⁷; however, almost all of Morrison’s novels prove the contrary. He also claims that musicians themselves do not tend to perceive their work as *Signifying*. This notion is explicitly countered in the lyrics of Carol King’s *Jazzman*.³¹⁸ In Munton’s opinion, “Jazz and fiction should be kept separate, therefore. An historical justification for this is that early African-American music, out of which aspects of jazz eventually emerged, was the lived alternative to a literacy suppressed by slavery.”³¹⁹ However, it was an alternative to the written word because of its similar properties. Bereft of the faculty of reading and writing, the slaves had to resort to devices appropriate to carry the same messages, thus music has evolved as a means of communication similar to that of language. Whereas Justine Tally tends to follow Alan Munton’s argument, she at least concedes that in “*Jazz*, the music in effect becomes the perfect metaphor for language and its development in literature.”³²⁰ This close connection between music and literature is by

³¹³ Cf. Marilyn Mobley, “The Mellow Moods and Difficult Truths of Toni Morrison.” In: *The Southern Review* 29:3 (1993) 614-628. 621.

³¹⁴ Cf. Carolyn M. Jones, “Traces and Cracks: Identity and Narrative in Toni Morrison’s *Jazz*.” In: *African American Review* 31:3 (1997) 481-495. 492.

³¹⁵ Cf. Alan Munton, “Misreading Morrison, Mishearing Jazz: A Response to Toni Morrison’s *Jazz* Critics.” In: *Journal of American Studies* 31:2 (1997) 235-251.

³¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 241.

³¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 241.

³¹⁸ Cf. Carol King, *Jazzman*. Lyrics: Cf. <http://www.lyricsdownload.com/download/k/king-carole/Lyrics%20-%209.htm>, 20th of September 2002.

³¹⁹ Cf. Munton, 251.

³²⁰ Cf. Justine Tally, *The Story of Jazz: Toni Morrison’s Dialogic Imagination*. Hamburg: Lit, 2001. 65.

no means unilateral, as famous jazz musician Paul Wertico recommends for the creation of a solo to imagine “characters and a plot... You introduce these little different [musical] things that can be brought back out later on; and the way you put them together makes a little story. That can be [on the scale of] a sentence or a paragraph... The real great cats can write novels.”³²¹

The story of the novel is summarised in its first paragraph. However, as Duke Ellington states, “[i]t don’t mean a thing if it ain’t got that swing.”³²² The opening paragraph is like the melody in the typical twelve-bar structure of a blues song. The theme is established, but the true musicality lies in the later variations on that theme. We know the outcome of the story, but nevertheless, we are not yet moved by it, since so far we have not got to know the characters well enough. Moving back and forth in time, the actions leading to Joe’s murder of Dorcas and Violet’s reactions to this deed, are supplied through varying points of view.

At first the narrator provides background information on how Violet gathers knowledge about her female rival. (*Jazz*, 13p.) And it is again the narrator who discloses how Joe got in touch with Dorcas: “Long before Joe stood in the drugstore watching a girl buy candy.” (*Jazz*, 36) Shortly afterwards, the narrator starts to implore Joe’s memories of Dorcas, of what he liked in her, and of his fears. “Even then, listening to her talk, to the terrible things she said, he felt he was losing the timbre of her voice and what happened to her eyelids when they made love.” (*Jazz*, 40) His memories of Dorcas are interrupted by those he has of Violet, thus delivering background information of Joe’s and Violet’s past. After recalling how they came to the City, Joe remembers that he told Dorcas things he never mentioned to Violet. (*Jazz*, 50) Later on the narrator takes over again, describing the places Joe and Dorcas used to visit together. (*Jazz*, 65) Then the perspective changes anew: “Toward the end of March, Alice Manfred put her needles aside to think again of what she called the *impunity* of the man who killed her niece just because he could.” (*Jazz*, 93) She contemplates Joe’s deed and is flabbergasted that “[h]e just did it. One man. One defenseless girl. Death. A sample-case man. A nice, neighborly, everybody-knows-him man. The kind you let into your house.” (*Jazz*, 93) She also thinks about Violet, “[t]he woman ruined the service, changed the whole point and meaning of it and was practically all anybody talked about

³²¹ Cf. Paul Berliner, *Thinking in Jazz: The Infinite Art of Improvisation*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994. 202. Ellipses and brackets in original.

³²² Cf. Williams Lewis, 271.

when they talked about Dorcas's death and in the process had changed the woman's name. Violent they called her now." (*Jazz*, 96) After one of her visits at Alice Manfred's house, Violet is sitting in the drugstore "wondering who on earth that other Violet was that walked about the City in her skin; peeped out through her eyes and saw other things." (*Jazz*, 111) The reader gains insight into Violet's inner life and her personal cracks, which have led her to cut the face of the dead girl and release the birds in winter. Violet distances herself from that part of her personality, although she has to acknowledge: "[N]O! *that* Violet is not somebody walking round town, up and down the streets wearing my skin and using my eyes shit no *that* Violet is me!" (*Jazz*, 118p.) The narrator takes us back to Joe on the day of his desperate act of violence. "Because he has never messed with another woman; because he selected that young girl to love, he thinks he is free [...] free to do something wild." (*Jazz*, 144) After this description, Joe starts to speak again, explaining how he "changed into new seven times." (*Jazz*, 148) These transitions include the course of his migration from the South to the North. He then again addresses his fear of losing Dorcas and how he was looking for her. (*Jazz*, 156p.) One more time Joe's perspective prevails. He remembers his hunt for Wild and connects it to his search for Dorcas. In the following passage, sections dedicated to Wild and Dorcas – as perceived by Joe – alternate. (*Jazz*, 213-218) In the meantime, Joe has reached the party and the dominant point of view is that of Dorcas. She recalls how she ended her relationship with Joe, and is sure that he is looking for her. (*Jazz*, 221) The shot is not mentioned at all, instead the reader is informed about Joe's presence via Dorcas: "He's here. Oh, look. God. He's crying. Am I falling? Why am I falling? Acton is holding me up but I am falling anyway." (*Jazz*, 224) Although Dorcas knows who has shot her, she does not tell; she rather focuses her last thoughts on music. "Listen. I don't know who is that woman singing but I know the words by heart." (*Jazz*, 226) Joe's explanation for his deed is eventually given: "Scared. Didn't know how to love anybody." (*Jazz*, 248)

This turn-taking in providing different fragments of the story is comparable to the solo parts in jazz which are divided between the various members of a band. Neither the narrator nor one single character is entitled to present all of details, especially since no one would be capable of knowing all the facts necessary. Every single unit adds to the whole - the theme presented in the first paragraph. The shifts in emphasis as well as in perspective cause variations of the original story similar to those of a theme in music. Jazz is characterised by frequent breaks; likewise, the characters' turns interrupt and

thus break up each other's stories. Due to the varying points of view and the non-chronological order of the fragments, the tense keeps on shifting between present, past, and past progressive. These changes further the similarities between the novel and the shifting perspectives in a jazz performance.³²³

The variations on the novel's story are further fragmented by the insertion of riffs. A riff is the repetition of a short phrase or motif, and the novel abounds in them: references to the birds, the photograph of Dorcas, Golden Gray, Wild, as well as images of hunting and deer eyes - to mention just a few. When Violet returns from Dorcas' funeral, "she took the birds from their cages and set them out the windows to freeze or fly, including the parrot that said, 'I love you.'" (*Jazz*, 11) This is paraphrased within a description of Joe's and Violet's apartment. (*Jazz*, 23) Violet is presented sitting close to the birdcages. (*Jazz*, 26) Further references to the birds and their empty cages are found throughout the novel. (*Jazz*, 39, 55, 65, 115p., 153, 258) Eventually, at Violet's and Joe's reconciliation, Joe realises that "[t]his place needs birds." (*Jazz*, 250) Similarly, descriptions of the photograph portraying Dorcas are scattered within the narrative, from the time when Violet gets the picture (*Jazz*, 14) until she hands it back to Alice. (*Jazz*, 229) Caring for the birds as well as looking at the photograph later on had been regular habits of Joe and Violet.

The story of Golden Gray is told in greater detail at one point of the novel, but it is alluded to via riffs even before, when Violet remembers the stories she has been told of the little blond boy whom her grandmother had been working for. (*Jazz*, 28) Another riff is created through the connection of the Golden Gray story with that of Wild, who is believed to be Joe's mother.³²⁴ Joe remembers the time when he met Violet. "They knew people in common; and suspected they had at least one relative in common." (*Jazz*, 42) Golden Gray plays a major role in Violet's life, although she has never met him. (*Jazz*, 120) Wild, however, is at least as important for Joe, as becomes obvious in another riff: "Standing in the cane, he was trying to catch a girl he was yet to see, but his heart knew all about, and me, holding on to him but wishing he was the golden boy I never saw either. Which means from the very beginning I was a substitute and so was he." (*Jazz*, 120) "The narrator is jazz artist, linking in this story Joe's traces and Violet's cracks and us."³²⁵ While the characters integrate memories of their pasts in their

³²³ Cf. Pici, 387p.

³²⁴ Cf. Carolyn M. Jones, 487.

³²⁵ *Ibid.*, 487.

respective soli, they also include riffs like these, which contribute to the novel's aim of imitating the structures of jazz. "A sense of jazz – the jam session – can also emerge from an interplay of voices improvising on the basic themes or motifs of the text, in key words or phrases."³²⁶ The various speakers drift from one thought to the next the way a jazz musician improvises by falling back to what has already been played.³²⁷ The novel's structure of themes and variations, which are placed against each other and which are themselves interspersed with riffs, not only imitates a piece of jazz music: It creates suspense, tension, and anticipation, while at the same time it refuses to authorise one specific version of the story.³²⁸ Starting from a story short enough to be told within one paragraph, Morrison, in her variations on that theme, unfolds the life stories of the novel's central characters and that of their ancestors, she tells the tale of migration from the South to the North, she renders impressions of life in the city. After all, "what is life but a set of variations on the same theme?"³²⁹

Apart from its musical structure, the novel also makes ample use of the power of rhythm. Similar to her methods in *Beloved*, Morrison makes her language rhythmical on all scales from single phrases to entire passages. "This here Sethe" (*Beloved*, 146) is paralleled by the mentioning of "that Violet" nineteen times within one section. (*Jazz*, 111-114) As in *Beloved*, this is done to stress the difference between diverging aspects of one and the same personality. In *Jazz*, like in *Beloved*, the repetition of whole sentences as a chorus features prominently: "He is coming for me." (*Jazz*, 221, 223, 224) And then: "He's here." (*Jazz*, 224) Dorcas has been so sure about Joe searching for her that she has already been waiting for him. This is especially strange since Joe does not consciously decide to go "hunting" for Dorcas, but is rather driven to it by the music. Quite similarly, *Jazz* also creates rhythm on the level of phrases:

Blues man. Black and blues man. Blacktherefore blue man.
 Everybody knows your name.
 Where-did-she-go-and-why-man. So-lonesome-I-could-die man
 Everybody knows your name. (*Jazz*, 143)

In the text, this appears to be a possible description of Joe. Set in the form of a blues stanza, it could actually be a twelve-bar tune. The first line can be compared to the

³²⁶ Cf. Williams Lewis, 272.

³²⁷ Cf. Alan J. Rice, 170.

³²⁸ Cf. Dubey, 301.

³²⁹ Cf. George Dreyfus. Stadttheater Trier, 15th of November 1998.

statement of the three basic chords: the tonic, the subdominant, and the dominant. While the third line continues the run-on sounds of the first, the second and fourth line form the chorus.³³⁰ Morrison enhances the jazz atmosphere by making use of expressions in the style of “tickling the ivories” or “drummers stroking the hides”, which were very common among jazz musicians.³³¹ In combination with such expressions, the use of rhythmic language and the novel’s structure of themes, variations, as well as riffs, the novel itself seems to serve as a musical score.³³² Even the novel’s narrator supports this view: “I break lives to prove I can mend them back again.” (*Jazz*, 253) Just as themes are broken apart and then rendered fragment by fragment in music, the narrator and the novel’s characters perform their soli. For Toni Morrison as well as for a jazz musician, creation as a process is more important than the final product.³³³ The story of *Jazz* might not yet “mean a thing” in the first paragraph, but the way Morrison orchestrates it and furnishes it with life, rhythm, and music, it definitely has “that swing” in its final form as a novel.

³³⁰ Cf. Eusebio L. Rodrigues, “Experiencing *Jazz*.” In: *Modern Fiction Studies* 39:3-4 (1993 Fall/Winter). 733-753. 734.

³³¹ Cf. Dorsey, 14.

³³² *Ibid.*, 739.

³³³ Cf. Alan J. Rice, 170.

2 *Content*

2.1 “What Did I Do To Be So Black And Blue?”³³⁴

The Bluest Eye already bears in its title the connection to the blues. When the “eye” is replaced by its homophone “I,” the title could also mean “the gloomiest self.” The novel then is “a blues enunciating the pain of the black man in America and an attempt to grapple with the pain which is sometimes existential.”³³⁵ For Ralph Ellison, the blues are “the closest approach to tragedy” in American art forms, due to their subtle combination of the tragic and the comic.³³⁶ A central part of both tragedy and the blues is catharsis, a trace which can certainly be found in *The Bluest Eye*. “All of our waste which we dumped on her and which she absorbed. And all of our beauty, which was hers first and which she gave to us. All of us – all who knew her – felt so wholesome after we cleaned ourselves on her.” (*TBE*, 159) Pecola’s role in this process is that of a scapegoat. Although the novel’s blues is about her, she does not sing it herself – therefore, the catharsis is not hers. In this sense, “it remains the story of Pecola, not Pecola’s story.”³³⁷ Many years later, Claudia has taken over performing this song. According to Sterling Brown, “you can’t play the blues until you have paid your dues.”³³⁸ Claudia has to proceed in life and evaluate the facts in retrospect before she can render Pecola’s blues. It is through this re-examination of the story that Claudia gains enough insight to facilitate the development of the cathartic quality in Pecola’s tragic story. At the same time, Claudia’s and Frieda’s childhood views provide comic relief, another feature connecting tragedy and blues songs.³³⁹

The novel is not merely structured like a blues song by making use of call and response or stanzas and choruses. Furthermore, its content can be compared to that of a blues song in the rendition of loneliness, suffering, and poverty. Without being capable of transforming her life into song, Pecola lives the blues twenty-four hours a day. “Mrs.

³³⁴ Cf. Gates and McKay, 57p.

Words by Andy Razaf, music by Thomas “Fats” Waller and Harry Brooks. Recorded by Louis Armstrong July 22, 1929 with his Orchestra. He also recorded the song in 1955 with his All Stars. Cf. <http://tinpan.fortunecity.com/riff/11/frame/b9.html>, 20th of September 2002.

³³⁵ Cf. Chikwenye Okonjo Ogunyemi, “Order and Disorder in Toni Morrison’s *The Bluest Eye*.” In: *Critique* 19:1 (1977) 112-120. 114.

³³⁶ Cf. Baker, 174.

³³⁷ Cf. Katherine J. Mayberry, “The Problem of Narrative in Toni Morrison’s *Jazz*.” In: Middleton, 297-309. 301.

³³⁸ Cf. Jane Olmsted, “Black Moves, White Ways, Every Body’s Blues. Orphic Power in Langston Hughes’s *The Ways of White Folks*.” In: Simawe, 65-89. 65.

³³⁹ *Ibid.*, 70.

MacTeer can sing about ‘hard times, bad times, and somebody-done-gone-and-left-me times,’ and about ‘trains and Arkansas’; and Poland can sing about ‘blues in [her] mealbarrel /Blues up on the shelf,’ but Pecola can give both of them lessons in living the blues.”³⁴⁰ Pecola’s life and her discomfort with herself, her self-hatred and her yearning to be white are similar to the famous blues song (*What Did I Do To Be So Black And Blue?*) The song is not mentioned in the novel, but it could well serve as an underlying role-model for the figure of Pecola. Just as Pecola, the song’s subject is lonely and convinced that “‘cause I’m black I’m blue.”³⁴¹ “Wish I could fade,”³⁴² thinks the subject of the song, while Pecola yearns for blue eyes. Apart from the few days she spent at the Breedloves’ house where she got to know Claudia and Frieda, Pecola does not have any friends: “No joys for me, / No company, / Even the mouse / Ran from my house.”³⁴³ The Breedloves do not have any pets; and both the cat and the dog Pecola approaches die. Pecola admires Shirley Temple and Mary Jane. She wants to be like them: “I’m white inside, / It don’t help my case, / ‘Cause I can’t hide what is on my face.”³⁴⁴ If Pecola gets into the focus of attention at all, it is only to be tormented. Other children call her names: “When you are near / They laugh and sneer, / Set you aside / And you’re denied. / What did I do to be so black and blue?”³⁴⁵ Whereas the song’s subject does not actually try to change skin colour, Pecola continues her quest for blue eyes. She turns schizophrenic and starts talking to an imaginary friend, as soon as she believes in having them. “How will it end? / Ain’t got a friend, / My only sin is my skin. / What did I do to be so black and blue?”³⁴⁶ Unlike the blues subject, Pecola is not capable of questioning her own fate any longer. Furthermore, she is unable to channel her pain and suffering through the blues in order to transcend it, and is therefore held captive in her miserable situation³⁴⁷ which separates her from the community even more. Only Claudia, who is strongly connected to the rescuing power of human bonding and knows about the cathartic qualities of this specific variety of music, can sing Pecola’s blues.

According to Morrison, the details of Pecola’s and her father’s lives would “become coherent only in the head of a musician.” (*TBE*, 125) In the same way as

³⁴⁰ Cf. Trudier Harris, 26.

³⁴¹ Cf. Gates and McKay, 57.

³⁴² *Ibid.*, 57.

³⁴³ *Ibid.*, 57.

³⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 57.

³⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 58.

³⁴⁶ Cf. Gates and McKay, 58.

Pecola could be the prototypical subject of a blues song, her father's life contains various references to the contents of blues songs. For many years, he has constantly been moving from one place to another. In numerous blues songs, the male singer tells a tale of someone wandering, while female singers often elaborate on their men's departures. Furthermore, there is a strong connection between blues songs and trains,³⁴⁸ as can be seen in Mrs. MacTeer's singing about "trains and Arkansas." Cholly's restlessness is reminiscent of this impact of movement in the blues. Before he meets Pauline, Cholly is exactly like the subject of this blues song: "Well I'm a po' boy, long way from home. / No spendin' money in my pocket, no spare meat on my bone."³⁴⁹ Even many years later, he has not found his way out of poverty. Baker characterises blues life as "the economically determined, ground-level existence that emerges from the codifications of Afro-American folklore – in particular and most expressly from the Afro-American blues. [...] 'Blues life' is energized by blues song. One might say that the 'triumph' of a culture over a bleak situation is announced in the *singing* itself."³⁵⁰ While the Breedloves definitely live at subsistence level, they do not have any deeper connection neither with the community nor with its traditions. Whereas they live the life described in blues songs, they all lack the knowledge and the faculty of singing the blues.

³⁴⁷ Cf. Trudier Harris, 26.

³⁴⁸ Cf. Baker, 6p.

³⁴⁹ Cf. *Ibid.*, 199.

³⁵⁰ Cf. *Ibid.*, 115p.

2.2 *Beloved: A Spiritual*³⁵¹

Morrison's *Beloved* abounds in song and sound, and the text frequently employs musical structures. Even the novel's content can be seen in relation to music, especially with regard to spirituals. While *Down by the Riverside* is referred to in the text, the contents of numerous well-known spirituals can be traced in the novel. Baby Suggs urged Sethe to "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. Lay all that mess down. Sword and shield." (*Beloved*, 86) Sethe remembers this advice when she is unsure about how to proceed in her life after having learnt some details of Halle's fate (*Beloved*, 86) and after Paul D's departure from her house. (*Beloved*, 173) The song helps her to accept her life the way it is and to pursue her own way, without trying to justify her deeds all the time.

Sethe wanted to kill all of her children in order to spare them a life in slavery, and she succeeded in killing one of her daughters. Even years after, she is still convinced that her act in the heat of the moment had been right. "It ain't my job to know what's worse. It's my job to know what is and to keep them away from what I know is terrible. I did that." (*Beloved*, 164) In Sethe's eyes, even death is to be preferred over slavery, an idea also inherent in the spiritual *Oh, Freedom!*

Oh, freedom,
Oh, freedom,
Oh, freedom over me!
An' befo' I'd be a slave,
I'll be buried in my grave,
An' go home to my Lord an' be free.³⁵²

Sethe's plan was to put her children "where they'd be safe" (*Beloved*, 164) and then to commit suicide. Since she considers her children her "best thing," (*Beloved*, 251) she does what she believes to be best for them.

Sethe barely knew her own mother, who is long since dead. Paul D never got to know his mother, neither did Baby Suggs. They really are "motherless children." Denver has very often felt alone and neglected by Sethe, and especially when Sethe and

³⁵¹ Cf. Karla F. C. Holloway, "Narrative Time / Spiritual Text. *Beloved* and *As I Lay Dying*." In: Carol A. Kolmerten et alii (eds.), *Unflinching Gaze. Morrison and Faulkner Re-Envisioned*. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1997. 91-98.

³⁵² Cf. Gates and McKay, 15p.

Beloved direct all their energies towards each other, she is metaphorically motherless although her mother is alive. Depending on the interpretation of Beloved's origin, she is another "motherless child." Taking it for granted that before coming to 124 she had been locked up by a white man, she never got to know her mother. If she is seen as a survivor of the Middle Passage, the woman she keeps on talking about as her mother left her by jumping into the ocean. And if she is Sethe's daughter, she is motherless during the time between her murder and Sethe's recognition of Beloved. The question, whether a mother who kills her child is a true mother, remains unsolved. Maybe Sethe has never really been a mother to Beloved. The presence of so many "motherless children" strongly alludes to the spiritual called *Motherless Child*.

Sometimes I feel like a motherless child,
Sometimes I feel like a motherless child,
Sometimes I feel like a motherless child,
A long ways from home.³⁵³

None of the characters really knows what to consider home. Baby Suggs, Sethe and Paul D spent large periods of their lives on plantations, but even though one of them was called "Sweet Home," it did not provide anything like a home. For a long time, the haunted house of 124 neither fulfils the demands of a home. And whatever Beloved's history – she has definitely been lacking any kind of safe geographical or familiar haven as well.

When Baby Suggs reaches Cincinnati and becomes finally free, she experiences a new, almost epiphanic moment: "[S]uddenly she saw her hands and thought with a clarity as simple as it was dazzling, 'These hands belong to me. These *my* hands.' Next she felt a knocking in her chest and discovered something for the first time in her life: her own heartbeat. "Had it been there all along? This pounding thing? She felt like a fool and began to laugh out loud." (*Beloved*, 141) If her hands were indeed new, she would not have felt any differently. This sensation is reminiscent of two verses in a spiritual called *Hallelujah*: "Looked at my han's an my han's looked new. / Looked at my feet an' they looked so too."³⁵⁴

At the Bodwins' house, Baby Suggs is invited to sit down and is served a drink instead of getting it herself for the first time in her life. (*Beloved*, 143) This is a situation

³⁵³ Cf. Johnson, 41.

³⁵⁴ Cf. Work, 211.

parallel to the content of *Sit Down Servant, Sit Down*: “Sit down servant, Sit down! / Sit down an’ rest a little while. / Know you mighty tired so sit down.”³⁵⁵

Baby Suggs’ calls and her sermons at the clearing could be accompanied by *Walk Together Children*.³⁵⁶

Walk together children,
Don’t you get weary,
[...] Oh, talk together children,
Don’t you get weary, [...]

Sing together children,
Don’t you get weary,
[...] Oh, shout together children,
Don’t you get weary,
There’s a great camp meeting in the Promised Land.

Baby Suggs summons her community together in a fashion similar to the invitations in the song when she tells the children to laugh, the women to cry, and the men to dance. She also tries to encourage them not to get weary, however, instead of focussing on life after death she directs them to their worldly existence. (*Beloved*, 87p.)

It is Baby Suggs who attributes the community’s failure to warn them about schoolteacher’s approach to the excess of the feast the day before as if the song *Can’t you live humble*³⁵⁷ is echoed in the “celebration of blackberries that put Christmas to shame.” (*Beloved*, 147) “Too much, they thought. [...] Loaves and fishes were His powers – they did not belong to an exslave. [...] It made them furious.” (*Beloved*, 137) “Can’t you live humble? / Praise King Jesus!”³⁵⁸ For one day, Baby Suggs and Sethe did not live humble, and instead of praising Jesus, they even mocked his powers in their seemingly inexhaustible supply of food.

Denver loves to listen to, think about, and tell the conditions of her own birth. (*Beloved*, 29, 77) “I Love to Tell the Story” is a line from a popular hymn:

I love to tell the story of unseen things above
Of Jesus and His glory, of Jesus and His love
I love to tell the story because I know ‘tis true

³⁵⁵ Cf. Work, 65.

³⁵⁶ Cf. Gates and McKay, 9.

³⁵⁷ Cf. Johnson, 138.

³⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 138.

It satisfies my longings as nothing else can do.³⁵⁹

While the hymn deals with the story of Jesus' resurrection, Denver's story concentrates on another instance of survival against all odds. The song's subject turns to the Biblical story for sustenance. Likewise, Denver strongly depends on her story for emotional fulfilment.

Halle, Sethe's husband and Denver's father, was the only one at Sweet Home to learn how to count and calculate. He was convinced that "[i]f you can't count they can cheat you. If you can't read they can beat you." (*Beloved*, 208) These thoughts are very similar to those of *Learn to Count*, a common toast:

Naught's a naught,
Five's a figger.
All fer de white man,
None fer de Nigger.

Ten's a ten,
But it's mighty funny;
When you can't count good,
You hain't got no money.

Sethe and Paul D "got more yesterday than anybody. [They] need some kind of tomorrow." (*Beloved*, 273) Paul D offers Sethe "a life, girl. A life." (*Beloved*, 46) When he is beginning to see a future for himself and Sethe, they tell each other hurtful details of their respective pasts. (*Beloved*, 68p.) "If I can't tell my future, I won't tell my past"³⁶⁰ is a line from a spiritual paralleling this attitude and behaviour. Before Paul D arrived at 124 Bluestone Road, he never talked about certain parts of his life: "I'm awful lonesome, all alone and blue / Ain't got nobody to tell my troubles to."³⁶¹ For him, Sethe is the only one he can reveal to even the most humiliating details of his past. He tells her about the day he had to wear the bit and even felt inferior to a rooster. (*Beloved*, 69-71) Paul D can bear to talk about this experience to Sethe, because she has shared that part of his life and she has never made him feel ashamed even in the most embarrassing situations. (*Beloved*, 273) Nevertheless, Paul D is never sure about his own masculinity. Mr. Garner, his master at Sweet Home, called him and his fellow

³⁵⁹ Cf. Carolyn A. Mitchell, "'I Love to Tell the Story': Biblical Revisions in *Beloved*." In: Iyasere, 173-189. 187.

³⁶⁰ Cf. Work, 30.

³⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 31.

slaves “men,” quite unlike the other slave owners, who called their slaves “boys.” (*Beloved*, 125) Paul D, who had been believing in his manhood while Mr. Garner was alive, changes his opinion when schoolteacher takes over. “A truth that waved like a scarecrow in rye: they were only Sweet Home men at Sweet Home. One step off that ground and they were trespassers among the human race.” (*Beloved*, 125) Later, Paul D tries to look at himself with Sixo’s eyes, and he wonders about his own possible status had he been on the Middle Passage. (*Beloved*, 220) His feelings are very similar to those of the bluesman Big Bill Broonzy: “*I worked on a levee camp and the extra gangs too / Black man is a boy, I don’t care what he can do. / I wonder when – I wonder when – I wonder when will / I get to be called a man.*”³⁶²

There is even a blues song summarising Stamp Paid’s attitude: “If you see me coming, better open up your door, / If you see me coming, better open up your door, / I ain’t no stranger, I been here before.”³⁶³ He has supported many ex-slaves during their escapes, and has been helping people for all his life whenever he could without ever wanting any payment. The only compensation he expects is that the doors of these people’s houses are always open to him, that he can enter without the formality of first having to knock on their doors. (*Beloved*, 172)

While except for *Down by the Riverside*, none of these spirituals, toasts, or blues are mentioned in the novel, their contents are so closely related to its plot and its characters that they could well form a soundtrack to accompany the novel. The original singers of spirituals were slaves, and *Beloved*, although mainly set during the time of Reconstruction, deals with slavery and its immediate consequences. In spite of the fact that the characters are legally free, their memories are still imprisoned by slavery. *Beloved*, a novel about slavery and freedom, joys and sorrows, a text providing so many links to underlying spirituals, could hence itself be called a literary version of a spiritual.³⁶⁴

³⁶² Cf. Baker, 15.

³⁶³ *Ibid.*, 2.

³⁶⁴ Cf. Ellen J. Goldner, “Other(ed) Ghosts: Ghothicism and the Bonds of Reason in Melville, Chestnutt, and Morrison.” In: *MELUS* 24:1 (1999 Spring) 59-83. 66.

2.3 Romantic Love and Forbidden Fruit

“I thought it was the most romantic Juliet notion.”³⁶⁵ This is Toni Morrison’s attitude regarding Dorcas’ protection of her own murderer. *Jazz* combines the themes of romantic love with the attraction of affairs on the sly, thereby taking up typical elements of blues and jazz music. “*Jazz* is risky like the city, but its risk is its charm.”³⁶⁶ This summary of the novel by Michael Wood could also be applied to urban blues and jazz, two forms of music which often deal with love, affairs, sexuality, and violence.³⁶⁷ The “Race Music” of the early 1920s, mostly performed by female singers, had a very low reputation, to a large extent caused by the dubious image created for and by these women.³⁶⁸ In the songs of famous artist such as Ma Rainey, Ida Cox, or Bessie Smith, female sexuality was publically addressed for the first time.³⁶⁹ “Song became a smooth, black, grooved body”³⁷⁰ to record listeners. The music was mainly distributed via records, and the publishing companies played a pivotal role in ascribing the image onto female blues singers as “Red Hot Mamas.” The sexual content of the classic women’s blues was stereotyped and financially exploited by the record companies.³⁷¹ They even contributed to the general notion of the music’s violent powers, as can be concluded from an advertisement of Okeh Records: “That lowdown Blues of yours on Record No. 8345 is sure goin’ to riot your friends.”³⁷² Ida Cox sang about the seductive character of the music in the *Preaching Blues*: “And the Blues grabbed mama’s chile and throwed me all upside down.”³⁷³ Even segregationists believed in the blues as a moral danger; they warned against “the screaming, idiotic words, and savage music of these records [...] undermining the morals of our white youth in America.”³⁷⁴ The music became more and more commercialised, which resulted in a separation from its folk roots.³⁷⁵

³⁶⁵ Cf. Deirdre Donahue, “*Jazz* symbol of liberated black souls.” In: USA Today, 30th of April, 1992. Quoted after <http://www.usatoday.com/life/enter/books/oprah/o006.htm>. (20th of September 2002)

³⁶⁶ Cf. Christine Braß and Antje Kley, “*Will the parts hold?*” *Erinnerung und Identität in Toni Morrison’s Romanen Beloved und Jazz*. Tübingen: Gunter Narr Verlag 1997.

³⁶⁷ Cf. Herbert William Rice, 120.

³⁶⁸ Cf. Gutmann, 85.

³⁶⁹ Cf. Boutry, 91p., and Dorsey, 103.

³⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 92.

³⁷¹ Cf. Dubey, 300.

³⁷² Cf. Boutry, 99.

³⁷³ *Ibid.*, 99.

³⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 101. While the record companies created the image of the blues as being risky, the segregationist’s warnings against them have to be judged differently. They detected the danger of the music in their inability to understand it. Of course, their racist views rendered them unable to adequately judge the quality of the music at all.

³⁷⁵ Cf. Garvey, 130.

Therefore, it subsequently lost its earlier salvatory function.³⁷⁶ Due to its often erotic contents,³⁷⁷ the image of jazz as whorehouse music substituted that of jazz as an icon of a new urban culture.³⁷⁸

Morrison's *Jazz* links "classic blues themes of love and loss"³⁷⁹ and "the romaniticism of jazz"³⁸⁰ with "urban discourses about jazz and sexuality that emerged in the 1920s."³⁸¹ If jazz is equated with sexuality, the relationship between Joe and Dorcas is jazz.³⁸² Both Joe and Dorcas share similarities with the music and its contents. The origins of jazz are mysterious, there is not one single and reliable trace to be found.³⁸³ Joe named himself "Trace," because he was the "'trace' [his parents] had disappeared without." (*Jazz*, 148p.) Joe, "a faithful man near fifty," falls in love with Dorcas. (*Jazz*, 144) He is attracted not only to her, but also to the "'bluesy' action of having an affair."³⁸⁴ This relationship, initially dominated by romantic love, is later characterised by loss, as Dorcas leaves Joe. But Joe, the novel's "[b]lacktherefore blue man"³⁸⁵ (*Jazz*, 143) cannot cope with this situation. When he kills Dorcas at a party, she is dancing to music produced by a record player. Tom Lutz points out that "parties at which fights break out are more often those at which a phonograph rather than live music is being played."³⁸⁶ Thus, the atmosphere Morrison creates in her description of the murder has a very authentic touch.

The character aspiring most strongly towards ideas conveyed in the blues is clearly Dorcas. She strives to be "the quintessential blueswoman,"³⁸⁷ which already becomes evident in her contentment about the constant availability and the omnipresence of the music she thinks about in highly sexualised terms. (*Jazz*, 77) Dorcas is very concerned with her outward appearance and she is determined to instrumentalise music and dance to live out her sexuality. "There was a night in her sixteenth year when Dorcas stood in her body and offered it to either of the brothers for a dance." (*Jazz*, 82) She has to suffer loss, when she is "acknowledged, appraised and

³⁷⁶ Cf. Gutmann, 85.

³⁷⁷ Cf. Dorsey, 103.

³⁷⁸ Cf. Dubey, 300.

³⁷⁹ Cf. Gallant Eckart, 11.

³⁸⁰ Cf. Pici, 374.

³⁸¹ Cf. Dubey, 301.

³⁸² Cf. Herbert William Rice, 122.

³⁸³ *Ibid.*, 121.

³⁸⁴ Cf. Boutry, 102.

³⁸⁵ Cf. (*What Did I Do*) to *Be So Black And Blue?* Gates and McKay, 57p.

³⁸⁶ Cf. Tom Lutz, "Claude McKay: Music, Sexuality, and Literary Cosmopolitanism." In: Simawe, 41-64. 54.

dismissed in the time it takes a needle to find its opening groove.” (*Jazz*, 85p.) This immediately results in her disapproval of her own body, which seems unworthy to her. “Although it is young and all she has, it is as if it had decayed on the vine at budding time.” (*Jazz*, 86) She defines herself not only through her body as such, but through its possible appeal to others, which is one of the reasons why dancing is still very important to Dorcas in her relationship with Joe. She wants to go to bars where they can dance or “sit there at the table, looking siditty by the lamplight and listen to the music and watch the people.” (*Jazz*, 54) Although Dorcas left Joe, and he is the one suffering loss, she really becomes a blueswoman in the end: “Protecting Joe by refusing to name him, Dorcas acknowledges the chance he gave her to live a blues song through their affair. Linguistically, Dorcas takes on a blues persona by calling herself ‘Mama’ as she dies.”³⁸⁸

The romantic affair between Joe and Dorcas is not trying to hide its illegitimacy. The two lovers even use the metaphors of the tree of knowledge and the expulsion from paradise when they are talking about their affair. Joe is convinced that there is “no point in picking the apple if you don’t want to see how it taste.” (*Jazz*, 54) He calls Dorcas the “reason Adam ate the apple and its core.” (*Jazz*, 160) Joe is so in love with Dorcas that he would do anything for her; he would for instance “strut out the Garden, strut! As long as you held on to my hand, girl.” (*Jazz*, 162) Both Joe and Dorcas are attracted to the risk of their affair as strongly as Adam and Eve were drawn to the forbidden fruit. Dorcas does not only risk her life for the bluesy notion of her liaison, she even sacrifices it by not letting anyone help her when she is shot. (*Jazz*, 248) Her last message to Joe again refers to the appeal of the forbidden fruit: “There’s only one apple. [...] Just one. Tell Joe.” (*Jazz*, 248) While Dorcas is dying, the music coming from the phonograph is replaced by a female singing voice. This musical substitution is paralleled by a woman wiping Dorcas’ blood off Acton’s clothes. Thus, both in music and in life, “a live woman takes center stage.”³⁸⁹ Dorcas, whose life has been oriented towards romantic love, loss, and the attraction of forbidden fruits, comes to be a true blueswoman in her death.

³⁸⁷ Cf. Boutry, 101.

³⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 104.

³⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 104p.

IV Music and Vernacular Traditions

1 *Storytelling*

“It is only in music [...] that the Negro in America has been able to tell his story.”³⁹⁰ Music as the bearer of history and tradition is common in the fiction of Toni Morrison. She not only lets her characters sing or listen to music, but also instrumentalises musical properties by imitating its structures and conveying its typical contents. Furthermore, she makes extensive use of vernacular traditions which are used in music or at least stand in close connection with it. The West African griots kept the history and the stories of their people alive in oral traditions such as song and storytelling. Strictly speaking, storytelling was often facilitated by music. Also the structure of *Sula* shares characteristics with and thereby links various genres: The beginning of the novel is reminiscent of the formulaic opening of traditional European fairy tales, the sense of humour evident in the “Nigger Joke” can be aligned with that of African American folktales, and the sketchy structure focussing merely on significant events in the characters’ lives parallels the organisation of both a ballad and a jazz composition.³⁹¹

Although the plot in *Sula* is developed in a linear manner, there is no strict continuity, as Morrison either leaps from one character to another or leaves a great number of years unaccounted for. Undoubtedly, the events she chooses to depict are of crucial importance to the novel itself. In the case of Shadrack, we are informed about the reasons for his difference, the consequences of his madness manifest in his foundation of National Suicide Day, and his significance for the community of the Bottom. The lives of Sula and Nel are portrayed in the manner of a *Bildungsroman*, in which the development of a protagonist is shown from childhood to an epiphanic stage in adulthood, when a crisis has been overcome and dealt with. The description of Sula even leads beyond these borders of the genre, as it does not stop with her death. Nel’s quest, on the other hand, is only completed when she realises that it was Sula whom she has been missing for many years and not her husband. Three generations of women form the families of both Nel and Sula. “In each, the traits of the grandmother reappear, with different manifestations, in the granddaughters.”³⁹² Whereas Eva occupies a more important role in the novel, Nel’s mother and grandmother as well as Sula’s mother

³⁹⁰ Cf. Simawe, XXI.

³⁹¹ Cf. Trudier Harris, 53.

³⁹² Cf. Dehn Kubitschek, 55.

mostly serve to highlight and explain the behaviour and convictions of the girls themselves. Nel's attraction to Sula can be traced back to the independent lifestyle of her grandmother Rochelle, whereas the chaos in Sula's home makes it plausible that she is fascinated by the order and quiet she finds at Nel's house. Hence, the presentation of Sula's and Nel's families above all contribute to an understanding of the girls' personal histories. It is therefore possible to merely pause upon the most crucial stages and turning points of their developments. This method of "leaping and lingering"³⁹³ is closely related to that of storytelling, in which "memory could be subject to error, such standout scenes insured the singer a better chance of recalling what the audience was most interested in – the criminal activity surrounding rape, death, murder, handling, and infanticide, and the pathos surrounding unrequited love. If there are valleys and peaks in an individual's life, then the peaks consistently receive attention."³⁹⁴ The large number of deaths and their presentation in *Sula* follow the same pattern inherent in both the ballad form as well as jazz compositions: "the theme of death has many variations and improvisations upon it as Morrison manifests its meaning for various of the characters. Death is the stable point of this jazz composition, the center to which each year returns in spite of its individual departure."³⁹⁵

The novel opens in a style similar to that of a Western fairy tale by putting the reader into a remote place of times long gone by: "In that place, where they tore the nightshade and blackberry patches from their roots to make room for the Medallion City Golf Course, there was once a neighborhood. It is called the suburbs now, but when black people lived there it was called the Bottom." (*Sula*, 3) Yet, unlike the prototypical fairy tale, it is made clear rather quickly that the ending is not going to be unlimitedly happy, as "[t]here will be nothing left of the Bottom (the footbridge that crossed the river is already gone), but perhaps it is just as well, since it wasn't a town anyway." (*Sula*, 3p.) Subsequently, any possible similarity to a fairy tale is undermined when the events leading to the name of the neighbourhood are revealed. "A joke. A nigger joke. That was the way it got started." (*Sula*, 4) What follows is a story reminiscent of an African American folktale as those in the collection of *Uncle Remus*³⁹⁶ stories, in which the black slave is frequently portrayed as feeble-minded but well-meaning. In the case of *Sula*, a slave is promised freedom and a quantity of bottom land as a reward for

³⁹³ Cf. Trudier Harris, 57.

³⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 58.

³⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 59.

complicated tasks. When he succeeds, the farmer does not want to give up his fertile land of the valley and therefore tricks the slave by allotting him a piece of land in the hills. The slave of course questions his master about the land high up in the hills, to which the white farmer replies: “High up from us, [...] but when God looks down, it’s the bottom. That’s why we call it so. It’s the bottom of heaven – best land there is.” (*Sula*, 5) This story exemplifies the way in which black people have been subjected to the dominance of white *logos*.

The black slave is disenfranchised of the fertile valley land that should rightfully be his, not because of his ignorance but because of the duplicity inherent in the white man’s logic and language, that controlling power which the white man wields in the form of the *logos*. The slave is in no position to argue, since it is a verbal contract to which he has committed and the *logos* [...] is controlled by the white master.³⁹⁷

Thus, the story about the Bottom “presents two archetypes of African-American folklore: the white man of means and the ‘blinking,’ almost minstrel black man who learns too late the true nature of the bargain he has made.”³⁹⁸ However, this constellation does not remain unchallenged, as the people living in the area of the Bottom manage to turn it into a neighbourhood and make their modest living in its surroundings. Despite the difficult farming conditions, “it was lovely up in the Bottom.” (*Sula*, 5) The beauty of the trees even makes hunters wonder whether “the white farmer was right after all. Maybe it was the bottom of heaven.” (*Sula*, 6) This twist aligns the tale once more with African American folktales, only this time in a form more closely related to those in which the black slave prototypically manages to outwit his master, as can be found in the collection of Roger D. Abrahams.³⁹⁹

The differences in the outcome of these stories are a consequence of the different racial backgrounds of their respective editors. Joel Chandler Harris was a white Southerner, who had heard these stories in his childhood. Being white, he surely had not been told any version of the tales in which white people fought a losing battle, as this could have put the storyteller in a dangerous position. Harris himself wrote down the stories as a reassurance for their white audience during the time of Reconstruction,

³⁹⁶ Cf. Joel Chandler Harris, *Uncle Remus. His Songs and His Sayings*. 1880. New York: Penguin, 1986.

³⁹⁷ Cf. Timothy B. Powell, “Toni Morrison: The Struggle to Depict the Black Figure on the White Page.” In: Middleton, 45-60. 52.

³⁹⁸ Cf. Trudier Harris, 55.

which accounts for the relatively harmless and ingenuous figure of Uncle Remus, the storyteller. Abrahams, on the other hand, aims to reproduce the stories as faithfully as possible to the versions told within the African American community. By having the white farmer defeating the black slave, and by then giving the whole situation a turn via a change in perspective, Morrison is able to answer both storytelling traditions at once, which proves to be a stroke of genius. Likewise, the story turns into a “nigger joke. The kind white folks tell when the mill closes down and they’re looking for a little comfort somewhere. The kind colored folks tell on themselves when the rain doesn’t come, or comes for weeks, and they’re looking for a little comfort somehow.” (*Sula*, 4p.) In contrast to the slave in the tale, the people appropriate the words, make them their own, and cannot be cheated by them any more. “*Sula* too is ‘just a nigger joke,’”⁴⁰⁰ and as long as the people in the Bottom manage to carry on, “the last laugh is really on the whites, because they have not been able to destroy the will to survive of those blacks up in the Bottom. Indeed, the philosophy exemplified in the Bottom is one of survival at all costs, of making all mountains, built by whites or blacks, into mole hills.”⁴⁰¹

This stance is put into action by Eva’s attempts to provide for all of her children after having been left by her husband BoyBoy. Rumour goes that she sacrificed one of her legs for the sake of her children. Various stories coalesce around Eva’s loss: “Somebody said Eva stuck it under a train and made them pay off. Another said she sold it to a hospital for \$10,000 – at which Mr. Reed opened his eyes and seked, ‘Nigger gal legs going for \$10,000 a *piece*?’ as though he could understand \$10,000 a *pair* – but for one?” (*Sula*, 31) Eva herself does nothing to prevent these speculations, nevertheless withholding a realistic account of what had happened. She keeps on entertaining children by expounding “[h]ow the leg got up by itself one day and walked on off. How she hobbled after it but it ran too fast. Or how she had a corn on her toe and it just grew and grew and grew until her whole foot was a corn and then it traveled on up her leg and wouldn’t stop growing until she put a red rag at the top but by that time it was already at her knee.” (*Sula*, 30p.) Her versions are in accordance with African American folk beliefs, since the remedies she proposes are typical of those applied in folk magic. Hence, these stories seem plausible to the children listening to them and magnify the mystery about the lost leg. As Morrison does not solve the riddle and refuses to supply

³⁹⁹ Cf. Roger D. Abrahams (ed.), *African American Folktales. Stories from Black Traditions in the New World*. New York: Pantheon, 1985.

⁴⁰⁰ Cf. Ogunyemi, 130.

the reader with a definite explanation for the absence of the leg, the multitude of stories surrounding it emphasises the open-ended quality of Eva's story, which is also characteristic of African American folktales as such.

Eva appropriates her disfigurement not by hiding it but by putting it into public display: "Her dresses were mid-calf so that her one glamorous leg was always in view as well as the long fall of space below her left thigh." (*Sula*, 31) She even draws part of her strength from her situation. After all, her position on a low wagon made people look down on her physically without noticing it – however, her mere presence gave them "the impression that they were looking up at her, up into the open distances of her eyes, up into the soft black of her nostrils and up at the crest of her chin." (*Sula*, 31) Whatever the true story, the inhabitants of the Bottom admire Eva for her uncompromising willingness to sacrifice part of herself for the sake of her children, which they continue to believe in according to their own hypotheses. In stark contrast to them, Sula does not evaluate Eva's deed in such a positive way and even upbraids her grandmother with it: "Just 'cause you was bad enough to cut off your leg you think you got a right to kick everybody with the stump." (*Sula*, 92p.) This reproach affects the final rift between the two women and prefigures Sula's ultimate break with the community as well as with her friend Nel. The various tales have long become "an 'open' space for communal storytelling, for oral interpretation and re-creation within the Peace family and the community at large,"⁴⁰² but Sula refuses to take part in the conjectures about the mysterious loss of Eva's leg.

By negatively reinforcing the stories, Sula shows a disrespect not only for Eva but for the tradition itself. [...] The lore is not entertaining for her; she uses it to control Eva's behavior and finally to threaten her. She redefines the function of folklore by telling her stories as a leveling device to gain power over Eva and to diminish her self-concept in the process. She therefore simultaneously devalues the vibrancy and purpose of the oral tradition while strengthening her reputation as a *ba-ad* woman.⁴⁰³

In *Sula*, Morrison acts as a storyteller in the African American tradition by structuring her novel according to typical arrangements of both the ballad form, exemplified in her limitation to a relatively small selection of events in her characters' lives, as well as that of a jazz composition, manifest in the constant variation of the

⁴⁰¹ Cf. Trudier Harris, 56.

⁴⁰² Cf. Grant in McKay, 96.

same theme. In addition to these narrative devices serving as the novel's backbone, storytelling also plays a crucial role for the characters, as can be seen in the connective exchange of stories between Eva and the community, which at the same time further accentuates Sula's status as an outsider. Eva's own tales as well as the mutual sharing of the "nigger joke" prove the empowering properties of storytelling as soon as the contents of what is being told are appropriated and thus affirmed by the narrator.

Morrison also draws on forms as the blues to mediate and communicate the stories of individuals as well as their cultural heritage. "Whatever else the blues was it was a language."⁴⁰⁴ Dealing with incidents of people's life stories, the blues transcend the original events through appropriation and variation – elements also very common to African American storytelling. This becomes especially evident in *Song of Solomon*, where "stories of various kinds are key to the structuring of the novel, and the presentation of everybody's versions of events about themselves and others – frequently contradictory – reflects the essence of the African-American storytelling tradition."⁴⁰⁵

In the fashion of singers rendering the sufferings they had to go through, Pilate, Macon, and Ruth sing the blues of their respective pasts. The three accounts interlink at certain points, and eventually add up to the story of Milkman's birth and the circumstances leading to it. Despite their contradictions, the different versions help to explain the behaviour of the characters and the relations between them. Milkman's life is a consequence of Pilate's, Macon's, and Ruth's blues, which run together and affect each other.

Macon's blues consists of his disappointment regarding Pilate and Ruth. Pilate and Macon had been almost inseparable during the time of their childhood. When their father was shot, they had to hide and run away. Somewhere in a cave they find gold, but they cannot take it with them immediately. Pilate convinces Macon to leave it there. After a fight, they separate and lose sight of each other for a long time. Macon returns to the cave a few days afterwards, and since the gold is not there any longer, he suspects that Pilate has betrayed him and that she wanted it all to herself. (*SoS*, 20) Macon is inconsolable and unable to forgive Pilate. So when she finds him again years afterwards, he is still angry at her and does not want to have her in his house. Macon's disappointment in his wife results from her awkward relationship with her father. Dr.

⁴⁰³ Cf. Trudier Harris, 69.

⁴⁰⁴ Cf. Baker, 188.

⁴⁰⁵ Cf. Trudier Harris, 88.

Foster was present at Ruth's delivery of her daughters Magdalene and First Corinthians, a fact Macon did not like, because it seemed inappropriate to him. When Dr. Foster died, Macon caught Ruth "[l]aying next to him. Naked as a yard dog, kissing him. Him dead and white and puffy and skinny, and she had his fingers in her mouth." (*SoS*, 73) From then on, the relationship between Macon and Ruth is utterly disturbed and he withdraws from her as much as he can. Then Pilate interferes - since Ruth tells her that she wants to have another baby, Pilate gives her some medicine to mix into Macon's food. This powder is an aphrodisiac, and Ruth becomes pregnant with Milkman as a result. Macon feels deceived and does not want the baby to live. (*SoS*, 125) Thus, he forces Ruth to undergo different ordeals in order to kill the unborn child. When Pilate finds out about this, she frightens Macon with a voodoo-like doll, which finally keeps him from attempting to abort the baby. (*SoS*, 133) In Macon's opinion, he has been betrayed by Pilate in childhood, by his wife through her incestuous relationship with her father, and ultimately by the two of them tricking him into resuming physical contact with his wife again. Therefore, he does not want the baby to live in the beginning, and later on his relationship to Milkman is restricted to reproaches or commands.

According to Pilate, Macon is wrong in his assumption about her betrayal. Her blues starts with her being left alone by Macon after their fight at the cave. (*SoS*, 141) Pilate's peculiarity is due to the fact that she was born without a navel. This makes her an outsider to community and accounts for her not having a husband, because whenever people learnt about her lack, they were afraid and did not want to come near her. So Pilate has been wandering for many years, partially accompanied by her daughter Reba. It is only when Hagar, her granddaughter, is born, that she settles down. People are still afraid of her, but since she is very helpful and has uncommon powers, she is able to live her life as a bootlegger on the fringe of society. "She was a natural healer, and among quarreling drunks and fighting women she could hold her own, and sometimes mediated a peace that lasted a good bit longer than it should have because it was administered by someone not like them." (*SoS*, 150) Pilate draws strength from her close connection to her dead father, who frequently appears to her, but she suffers from her brother's rejection. "Pilate would have moved on immediately except for her brother's wife, who was dying of lovelessness." (*SoS*, 151) Her motive for interfering with the relationship between Ruth and Macon was merely characterised by her wish to help Ruth regain her husband's love; she had no intention of making her brother unhappy whatsoever.

Ruth's blues comprises the loveless relationship between herself and her husband. She suffers from the distance between them, especially the prospect of a forced celibacy after the births of her daughters. Ruth denies that she has had an incestuous relationship with her father, she merely describes their connection as having been very close. According to her, Macon killed her father by taking away his medicine without her knowing it. Even beyond his death, Ruth maintains her strong connection to Mr. Foster by spending entire nights at his grave, "To talk. To talk to somebody who wanted to listen and not laugh at me. Somebody I could trust. Somebody who trusted me. Somebody who was ... interested in me. For my own self. I didn't care if that somebody was under the ground." (*SoS*, 125) She is extremely lonely and desperate to be touched, so she nurses Milkman until the age of four, and she only gives up the habit when she is caught by the janitor one day. (*SoS*, 14)

Many of these different aspects of the characters' histories are passed on to Milkman during their talks with him. Pilate tells him about her past when he visits her. Macon informs his son about his version after Milkman has beaten him in order to protect Ruth, and Ruth delivers her account when she is on the train together with Milkman, who had secretly followed her to the cemetery. The different blues stories form the individual voices of yet another – that of Milkman's birth, which itself is wrapped in song. The topic of this song touches upon the essential roles of men and women in the blues: "When a woman takes the blues, / She tucks her head and cries; / But when a man catches the blues / He catches er freight and rides."⁴⁰⁶ The behaviour of the men and women in this song is similar to that of the characters in the "Sugarman"-song. Solomon leaves, and Ryna goes mad with crying. The typical story is re-enacted over and over again. In real life, Milkman takes over the role of Solomon as soon as he leaves Hagar, who herself assumes Ryna's position by grieving over her loss until she dies of it. Thus, the blues as a storytelling device could be perceived as the underlying matrix of *Song of Solomon*.

Another important feature of African American storytelling is its open-endedness. "You don't end a story in the oral tradition – you can have the little message at the end, your little moral, but the ambiguity is deliberate because it doesn't end."⁴⁰⁷ Morrison aims to imitate this trait not least because she identifies a similar quality in music:

⁴⁰⁶ Cf. Wegs, 212p.

⁴⁰⁷ Cf. Davis in Taylor-Guthrie, 232.

Classical music satisfies and closes. Black music does not do that. Jazz always keeps you on the edge. There is no final chord. There may be a long chord, but no final chord. And it agitates you. Spirituals agitate you, no matter what they are saying about how it is all going to be. There is something underneath them that is incomplete. There is always something else that you want from the music. I want my books to be like that – because I want that feeling of something held in reserve and the sense that there is more – that you can't have it all right now.⁴⁰⁸

At the end of *Song of Solomon*, high and dry we are left hanging in the air with Milkman. We do not know whether he will live or die. “Morrison, in the manner of African women storytellers, weaves a tale to confound our notions of reality and leaves us with a dilemma that, in finishing the novel, we have to solve.”⁴⁰⁹ But since Milkman's development and acceptance of both his heritage and the responsibility resulting from it are more important than the question of his survival, this ambiguous ending does not represent the proverbial cliff-hanger.⁴¹⁰ *Beloved* as well has a very open ending. It is not at all clear what happens to Beloved, and even her identity remains mysterious. A boy remembers seeing “a naked woman with fish for hair.” (*Beloved*, 267) Her footprints appear and disappear, and “[e]verybody knew what she was called, but nobody anywhere knew her name.” (*Beloved*, 274p.)

Beloved not only possesses an open ending typical of African American storytelling, it also incorporates its notion of circularity. Having developed from their West African heritage, African American oral traditions perceive time as being circular, which is reflected in storytelling and in music. “Circles occur not only in space, but in sound.”⁴¹¹ In music as well as in literature, circularity can be achieved by repetitions and variations of motifs or by call and response patterns. “The past, until you confront it, until you live through it, keeps coming back in other forms. The shapes redesign themselves in other constellations, until you get a chance to play it over again.”⁴¹² In *Beloved*, the past has returned to the present in the shape of Beloved as the reincarnation of Sethe's murdered daughter. But the novel is not merely circular in its content – its whole structure with its juxtapositions of the present and different levels of the past together with dream-like sequences as the trio chapter reflects this circularity. Just as

⁴⁰⁸ Cf. McKay in Taylor-Guthrie, 154.

⁴⁰⁹ Cf. Wilentz, 129.

⁴¹⁰ Cf. Leslie A. Harris, “Myth as Structure in Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon*.” In: *MELUS* 7:3 (1980) 69-76. 71.

⁴¹¹ Cf. McFerrin, 5.

Sethe orbits around the subject when explaining her deed to Paul D, (*Beloved*, 163) the very novel constantly restricts itself to offering only bits and pieces of this story before eventually giving away some more facts half-way through. But even when the sequence of events during Sethe's desperate attempt to kill her children is presented, it is done via the perspective of one of schoolteacher's nephews – hence, Sethe's inner life and the reasons for her decision remain concealed until much later. Circularity in *Beloved* can also be detected in the story of Denver's birth. Fragments of the circumstances of Sethe's escape and her delivery of Denver are distributed throughout the novel: Some parts are reported from Sethe's point of view (*Beloved*, 16), some are filtered through Denver's re-memory of what her mother has told her. (*Beloved*, 29) At times, the perspective oscillates between Sethe's and Denver's, (*Beloved*, 30p.) and once even Beloved asks Denver, "Tell me how Sethe made you in the boat." (*Beloved*, 76) Denver uses the story of her birth as a kind of talisman she regresses to whenever she needs to, and Beloved practically feeds on listening to stories. (*Beloved*, 58) Thus, the novel itself thereby emphasises the circularity and the power of storytelling in African American oral tradition. "In *Beloved*, Toni Morrison concocts a sequence of events in which she shares with her characters the creation of her novel. In the tradition of storytelling and composition, they are as much artists as she."⁴¹³

In *Paradise*, the process of storytelling is conveyed via the presentation of a pageant which interlaces the history of the Disallowal with the Christmas story. Whereas the combination of secular events with the sacred Bible story enhances the status of the first, as the founding fathers of Ruby clearly intend to do to some extent, it also renders the memory of the events sacrosanct. The enactment of such a pageant concerning the history of a community can have a cathartic and thereby healing effect, as it is capable of commemorating the sufferings people have had to go through. It can counteract fragmentation and provide people with an image of who they are. According to the belief that contemporary problems are often the result of ancestral anger, history and the roots of evil have to be scrutinised in order to successfully tackle the present. Such plays, which often involve music in addition to orature, are commonly practised by African Americans in different regions.⁴¹⁴ In *Paradise*, however, the performance of

⁴¹² Cf. Gail Caldwell, "Author Toni Morrison Discusses Her Latest Novel *Beloved*." In: Taylor-Guthrie, 239-245. 241.

⁴¹³ Cf. Trudier Harris, 164.

⁴¹⁴ Cf. Erna Brodber, *Reading at Trier University*, 23rd of June 2003. Jamaican novelist and psychologist Erna Brodber described the productions of pageants by African Americans throughout the Caribbean, all

the pageant by children belonging to the community of Ruby does not unite the population of the town, as the number of doubles for the Holy Family varies. Had there been nine families during many years, representing the founding families of Ruby, the production is reduced to seven. This decrease symbolises the exclusion and devaluation of the respective families from the core of Ruby's community. In *Paradise*, the originally healing power of storytelling is turned into a force of destruction.

Her latest novel *Love* is a "meandering, multi-level Morrisonic tale of a dead resort owner and the women who loved him."⁴¹⁵ The most disconcerting and at the same time compelling voice, however, is that of L, a bizarre character who functions as "a Greek chorus to Morrison's rotating cat-fight."⁴¹⁶ It is by means of her reflections that the reader is informed about the background of the characters as well as the story of Cosey's sea side resort. L's paragraphs circle around events in various time levels, namely the past and the present. Even she herself is not exempt of this circularity, as it is revealed that she is already dead at the time she is telling the story - a stage she describes as "just more of the same." (*Love*, 135) Consequently, she has not even completely left her former workplace: "Café Ria is what it's known as, and like a favored customer spoiled by easy transportation, I glide there still." (*Love*, 65) Apart from thus featuring circularity in the structure of the novel, Morrison also includes repetitions in her cast of characters. Whereas Junior reminds L of Celestial ("This Junior girl – something about her puts me in mind of a local woman I know. Name of Celestial" *Love*, 67,) her stigmatised background likewise echoes that of Heed. In this case, circularity not only proves that history repeats itself, moreover, it connects Heed with one reason for her unhappy marriage, personified in the character of Celestial.

Love is "predominantly constructed around contesting women's voices – though at the centre lies the figure of one man, Bill Cosey, who has touched the lives of each of the women with a greater or lesser degree of intimacy."⁴¹⁷ Cosey himself is not called

aiming to return people their own history. She also pointed out that Reggae music frequently shares the same aim.

⁴¹⁵ Cf. Linton Weeks, "Toni Morrison, Pulling Readers Deeper and Deeper. The Nobel Laureate Takes Pride in Being Difficult." In: *Washington Post*, 15th of November 2003. Cited after: <http://www.washingtonpost.com/ac2/wp-dyn/A43226-2003Nov14?language=printer>, 16th of November 2003.

⁴¹⁶ Cf. John Freeman, "Toni Morrison: Love at the Last Resort." In: *Independent*, 21st of November 2003. Cited after: http://enjoyment.independent.co.uk/low_res/story.jsp?story=465925&host=5&dir=204, 24th of November 2003.

⁴¹⁷ Cf. John McTernan, "Black America Finds its Voices." In: *Scotland on Sunday*, 23rd of November 2003. Cited after: <http://www.news.scotsman.com/print.cfm?id=1291202003&referringtemplate=>, 24th of November 2003.

upon to speak for himself; the women shape their impressions of his attitudes and actions instead. Through the circular structure, various incidents are reported from different points of view, their sum providing a certain level of objectivity regarding the course of events. With every piece of information, the reader has to go on another round to evaluate the new situation. “Each memory or revelation alters our assessment of the situation, sometimes drastically, stirring up questions. Are the two old ladies more sinned against than sinning? Which is the more wronged? Was Cosey a good man or not? And, most important of all, whom did he love best?”⁴¹⁸ Every chapter of the novel takes its title from Bill Cosey’s particular relationships to the women by naming “the roles he fulfilled or failed to fulfil for five generations of women,”⁴¹⁹ and not even the totality of all these renditions completely solves the mystery of the true nature of this man. In addition to this open-endedness regarding Bill Cosey’s motivations, the novel does not hint at Junior’s possible destiny. Likewise, the future of Christine’s and Heed’s friendship, which continues after the death of one of them, is left to speculation. Apart from Celestial, whose identity is left in the dark, the status of L between life and death raises more questions than it is able to answer. Instead of providing easy answers, L draws the readers into the enigma of the novel with her initial hum, and she leaves them to be haunted by its constant humming, maybe inviting them to join in.⁴²⁰ Thus, circularity and open-endedness are joined in the story of *Love*. Once more Toni Morrison manages to leave “no doubt that she is the master of this text, and that she holds its keys.”⁴²¹ Massive, dense and complex as the novel might be, there is no doubt that “the storytelling is seamless.”⁴²²

⁴¹⁸ Cf. Laura Miller, “‘Love’: Extreme Emotions and Unthinkable Deeds.” In: *The New York Times*, 2nd of November 2003. Cited after: <http://www.nytimes.com/2003/11/02/books/review/02LAURAT.html>, 2nd of November 2003.

⁴¹⁹ Cf. Penny Hueston, “Soulful Tale of Tangled Lives.” In: *The Age*, 18th of October 2003. Cited after: <http://www.theage.com.au/articles/2003/10/15/1065917472507.html>, 20th of October 2003.

⁴²⁰ Cf. McFerrin, *Circlesongs*.

⁴²¹ Cf. Freeman.

⁴²² Cf. Lorraine Rice.

2 *Folktale*

2.1 “All God’s Chillen Had Wings”,⁴²³

In *Song of Solomon*, flying is the central metaphor. The novel starts with Mr. Smith’s attempt to fly and Pilate singing a song about flying. This song not only supplies the genealogy of Milkman’s family but also links him back to his African American roots, the experience of slavery and racial suppression. Morrison “uses folklore to buttress the structure of her novel.”⁴²⁴ The song’s central character actually flies away, an ability he has in common with the heroes of numerous African American folktales. Morrison explicitly insists that her reference is to be taken literally:

[I]t is about black people who could fly. That was always part of the folklore of my life; flying was one of our gifts. I don’t care how silly it may seem. It is everywhere – people used to talk about it, it’s in the spirituals and gospels. Perhaps it was wishful thinking – escape, death, and all that. But suppose it wasn’t. What might it mean? I tried to find out in *Song of Solomon*.⁴²⁵

The folktale *All God’s Chillen Had Wings* deals with African people who could fly. “Once all Africans could fly like birds,”⁴²⁶ but eventually their wings were taken away to punish them for their many trespasses. However, some were overseen, and with the help of magic words they still are in possession of their ability. Depending on the version of the folktale, either an individual or a group of Africans - having been transported to America - is presented as taking off and flying back to Africa when being mistreated by a slave master. Legends about flying people first evolved during the Middle Passage, when many slaves jumped overboard preferring death to subjugation – an act which was interpreted as flying back home.⁴²⁷

In the novel’s song, Morrison includes the lines “*Come booba yalle, come booba tambee*” and “*Come konka yalle, come konka tambee.*” (*SoS*, 303) Similar lines can be detected in various collections of folktales.⁴²⁸ The anthropologist Wyatt MacGaffey interprets these lines as a version of the KiKongo phrase “Kumbuba yal’e, kumbuba

⁴²³ Cf. Gates and McKay, 103-105. Hughes and Bontemps, 62.

⁴²⁴ Cf. Trudier Harris, 12.

⁴²⁵ Cf. LeClair, 122.

⁴²⁶ Cf. Gates and McKay, 103.

⁴²⁷ Cf. Wilentz, 129.

⁴²⁸ Cf. Virginia Hamilton, *The People Could Fly: American Black Folktales*. New York: Knopf 1985. 169. Cited after Matus, 79. Georgia Writer’s Project, *Drums and Shadows*, 79.

tambi,”⁴²⁹ meaning “to strike my leg at him/her/it; to strike my footprint at myself.”⁴³⁰ Albeit it can safely be concluded that the lines of Morrison’s song are based on those occurring in folktales, it is not very likely that their translation played a major role for the lyrics of her song. Morrison points out that in her family there was a song similar to the one in *Song of Solomon*, also functioning as a genealogical description. “The song that my mother and aunts know starts out, ‘Green, the only son of Solomon.’ And then there are some funny words that I don’t understand. It’s a long sort of children’s song that I don’t remember.”⁴³¹ Therefore, it is possible, that Morrison chose these lines to create a sense of authenticity, especially since the KiKongo phrases are featured as being part of a “children’s foot-stamping dance-song.”⁴³² Due to the names and “nonsense” words it uses, the song in the novel bears the strongest resemblance to the folktales in the collection of the Georgia Writers’ Project *Drums and Shadows*.⁴³³ Whereas in most of these tales groups of people are flying away, only two have individuals leaving all on their own. Morrison has chosen the least common version as the basis of her song.⁴³⁴ And instead of focussing on where the character is flying to, her emphasis is on the newly gained ability to fly and the metaphorical meaning she connects to this competence.

“*O Solomon don’t leave me here*” (*SoS*, 303) is an alteration of the traditional African phrase “Go not away from me.”⁴³⁵ The enumeration of names in the fourth stanza of the song “Yaruba Medina Muhammet” and “Nestor Kalina Saraka” (*SoS*, 303) is a reference to names appearing in *Drums and Shadows*, at the same time it establishes a connection to African roots and influences. African American reality during the times of slavery is hinted at in the song’s refrain: “*O Solomon don’t leave me here / Cotton balls to choke me / O Solomon don’t leave me here / Buckra’s arms to yoke me.*” (*SoS*, 303) When talking about their masters, slaves often called them “Buckra” since many female slaves were raped by their masters, the reference to “[c]otton balls” must be

⁴²⁹ Cf. Kimberly W. Benston, “Re-Weaving the ‘Ulysses Scene’: Enchantment, Post-Oedipal Identity, and the Buried Text of Blackness in Toni Morrison’s *Song of Solomon*.” In: Hortense J. Spillers (ed.), *Comparative American Identities. Race, Sex, and Nationality in the Modern Text*. New York and London: Routledge 1991. 87-109. 105.

⁴³⁰ *Ibid.*, 108.

⁴³¹ Cf. Jones and Vinson in Taylor-Guthrie, 173.

⁴³² Cf. Benston, 108.

⁴³³ Cf. Susan Blake, “Folklore and Community in *Song of Solomon*.” In: *MELUS* 7:3 (1980) 77-82. 80.

⁴³⁴ *Ibid.*, 80.

⁴³⁵ Cf. Peter Bruck, “Returning to One’s Roots: The Motif of Searching and Flying in Toni Morrison’s *Song of Solomon*.” In: Peter Bruck and Wolfgang Karrer (eds.), *The Afro-American Novel Since 1960*. Amsterdam: Grüner Publishing Co. 1982. 289-304. 303.

understood in sexual terms. The women were subdued to the sexual violence of their white masters. But as the song is part of a children's game, the specific meaning of these words is hidden under the seemingly harmless mentioning of materials the slaves had to work with in everyday life.

The song connects Milkman to his immediate ancestors, to slavery, and to his African roots. Stories, such as Solomon's, "have been encapsulated in the orature of the women – left behind not only to sing the blues but to sing of home."⁴³⁶ The song, dealing with the central metaphor of flying, is itself a metaphor; it serves as a meta-narrative within the novel.⁴³⁷ In *Song of Solomon*, "[f]iction is like a melody in which, in spite of their differences, heroes and nonheroes find a justification in the general harmoniousness of the whole, or to put it differently, the song is what remains when incidents have been forgotten."⁴³⁸

⁴³⁶ Cf. Wilentz, 114.

⁴³⁷ Cf. Harding and Martin, 160.

⁴³⁸ *Ibid.*, 160.

2.2 “Tar Baby”⁴³⁹

Morrison’s novel *Tar Baby* directly derives its title from a very famous ancient African American folktale, which has been numerous recorded in both oral as well as written sources, reaching from tales told in Africa in the 1600s to a Walt Disney film screened in the 1950s.⁴⁴⁰ In most of these versions, Brer Rabbit⁴⁴¹ features as the trickster who starts out “being the aggressor; he then degenerates to victim; and he finally succeeds in escaping or ends up being eaten by the animals he has tried to trick.”⁴⁴²

For Morrison, “*memory* meant recollecting the told story. I refused to read a modern Westernized version of the story, selecting out instead the pieces that were disturbing or simply memorable: fear, tar, the rabbit’s outrage at a failing in traditional manners (the tar baby does not speak).”⁴⁴³ Morrison preferred to depend on her own memory rather than to “trust the literature and the sociology of other people to help me know the truth of my own cultural sources.”⁴⁴⁴ In this way, Morrison subscribes to the view that “a tale recounted from mouth to mouth personalizes experience, making it not the possession of any teller but the possession of the whole wide community whose tale it is, much as the blues singer’s task invites the world to dance.”⁴⁴⁵ By taking an orally transmitted version of the tale as the basis of her novel, she continues the call and response process taking place between the different sources and versions of this particular folktale without trying to assume authority over the tale itself. Although she admits that something in the story “bothered [her] madly”⁴⁴⁶ and even frightened her in spite of its happy ending⁴⁴⁷, she perceives a nourishing quality in the tale.⁴⁴⁸

⁴³⁹ Cf. “The Wonderful Tar Baby Story.” In: Joel Chandler Harris (ed.), *Uncle Remus. His Songs and His Sayings*, New York: Penguin, 1986. 57-59. “How Mr. Rabbit was too sharp for Mr. Fox,” *Ibid.*, 62-64. Abrahams, “Tricking All the Kings,” 136-140. Langston Hughes and Arna Bontemps (eds.) *The Book of Negro Folklore*. New York: Dodd, Mead & Co, 1958. 75p. These sources are only able to give an impression of the vast corpus of “Tar Baby” tales. Although the characters of the tales differ at times, the essence of the stories remains the same.

⁴⁴⁰ Cf. Dehn Kubitschek, 19.

⁴⁴¹ For the sake of uniformity, I will use the spellings of “Brer Rabbit” and “briar patch” throughout the paper, except for direct quotations featuring a different orthography.

⁴⁴² Cf. Trudier Harris, 116.

⁴⁴³ Cf. Morrison, *Memory*. 389.

⁴⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 386.

⁴⁴⁵ Cf. Eleanor W. Traylor, “The Fabulous World of Toni Morrison: *Tar Baby*.” In: McKay, 135-150. 137.

⁴⁴⁶ Cf. Ruas, 102.

⁴⁴⁷ Cf. LeClair, 122.

⁴⁴⁸ Cf. Ruas, 115.

The figure of Brer Rabbit in African American oral tradition is controversial. On the one hand, his personality as a “sneaking, selfish, greedy dissembler,”⁴⁴⁹ who is constantly on the lookout for opportunities to dupe others, is disreputed and used didactically to illustrate unacceptable behaviour. However, in the context of racial suppression and especially so in the era of slavery, this trickster is revalued. His wheeling and dealing is then understood as a form of rebellion against an excessively powerful oppressor. Whereas many tricksters possess sacred powers, Brer Rabbit is devoid of them and thereby also reflects the prohibition of African religious traditions in white slaveholder society. His role therefore changes, and “Br’er Rabbit’s wit, humor, and unfailing ability to survive in a world where the odds are overwhelmingly stacked against him make him tremendously appealing.”⁴⁵⁰ In spite of his lack of sacred properties, “Br’er Rabbit retains mythic power, inspires listeners, and builds culture.”⁴⁵¹ The tale then teaches its audience that in circumstances in which direct resistance only brings forth disaster, “blacks must learn to fool the white masters by wearing a mask – playing the part that the whites expect.”⁴⁵² Whereas in a non-racialised situation, community itself has to suffer the consequences of such trickery, in slaveholding societies the victim is the white suppressor.⁴⁵³ These differences regarding the standing of Brer Rabbit tales across cultures, namely those of Africans, African Americans, and white people, influence the respective interpretations of the stories themselves. Hence, the controversy inherent in the Tar Baby folktale is directly transferred to Toni Morrison’s novel of the same title, with the effect that the complexity of the tale inevitably leads to an interlinking multitude of necessary perspectives and interpretations.

In many versions of the folktale, Brer Rabbit steals food from a white farmer, who, upon the discovery of the plundering, decides to construct a tar baby in order to trap the thief with it during his next raid. When Brer Rabbit returns, he greets the tar baby but does not receive an answer. The tar baby refuses to speak to Brer Rabbit, who threatens to strike at it if the silence is to continue. As the tar baby remains silent, Brer Rabbit beats it, by and by getting completely stuck on it. Thus trapped, he is found by the farmer, who intends to kill him. Aware of the fact that the farmer wants to inflict the

⁴⁴⁹ Cf. Smith, 112.

⁴⁵⁰ Ibid., 112.

⁴⁵¹ Ibid., 112.

⁴⁵² Cf. Dehn Kubitschek, 109.

⁴⁵³ Ibid., 109.

greatest possible pain on him, Brer Rabbit begs him to do anything but throw him into the briar patch. These pleas convince the farmer that this is the worst conceivable punishment for Brer Rabbit, therefore, he flings him directly into the briar patch, where the trickster triumphantly exclaims that this is the very place in which he has been born and bred. Brer Rabbit has cunningly succeeded to save his life by recognising the farmer's cruelty and, more importantly, by remembering his cultural roots.⁴⁵⁴

Morrison did not intend to merely recount the tar baby story: "I fondled it, scratched and pressed it with my fingertips as one does the head and spine of a favourite cat – to get at the secret of its structure without disturbing its mystery."⁴⁵⁵ She thus presents "the folktale as a dynamic, living entity, which responds to but is never fully controlled in the hands of its storytellers."⁴⁵⁶ Similarly, the many opposing views and attitudes included in *Tar Baby* are never completely in accordance with those of the author, as many details are relayed from the points of view of the novel's characters, who continuously shape their stories the way they suit them best. "Because *Tar Baby* examines myth-making, the reader must be particularly careful not to accept any character's evaluation of any other character at face value. Each character oversimplifies the others to maintain a myth that gives him or her emotional safety or comfort."⁴⁵⁷

In the novel, Son forces Jadine to listen to one version of the folktale while he is violating her at the same time. "He made him a tar baby. He made it, you hear me? He made it!" (*TB*, 273) These are the words with which Son leaves Jadine; he does not inform her (and thus, also the reader) of the ending of the tale. By emphasising the artificiality of the tar baby, Son implicitly accuses Jadine of being Valerian's "unthinking tool of the white world"⁴⁵⁸ with the sole function to "attract and entrap,"⁴⁵⁹ an interpretation closely related with that of Morrison herself. She explains her line of thoughts: "I just gave these characters parts, Tar Baby being a black woman and the rabbit a black man. I introduced a white man and remembered the tar. The fact that it was made out of tar and was a black woman, if it was made to trap a black man – the

⁴⁵⁴ Cf. Smith, 128.

⁴⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 127.

⁴⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 127.

⁴⁵⁷ Cf. Dehn Kubitschek, 99.

⁴⁵⁸ Cf. Craig H. Werner, "The Briar Patch as Modernist Myth: Morrison, Barthes and *Tar Baby* As-Is."

In: McKay, 150-167. 162.

⁴⁵⁹ Cf. Billingslea Brown, 74.

white man made her for that purpose.”⁴⁶⁰ Against the backdrop of this remark it is interesting to note that Uncle Remus, the narrator relating the Tar Baby story in Joel Chandler Harris’ version, refers to the tar baby as being female, whereas most other renditions do not reveal its gender at all. It would, however, be too short-sighted to claim that Morrison’s knowledge of the tale was merely based on its record by a white writer, as the Gullah people did not use pronouns or gender markers consistently.⁴⁶¹ Therefore, one has to bear in mind that in the novel the position of the tar baby can also be occupied by a male character; similarly, Jadine’s femininity does not restrict her to the role of impersonating the tar baby.

The setting and situation on the island suggest a comparison of Valerian with the proprietor of a prototypical plantation. He is the rich, white owner of L’Arbe de la Croix, who employs African Americans as his servants: Ondine and Sydney, whom he has known all his life and whose mother tongue is English, work at his house; Gideon and Thérèse, who come from the Caribbean, whose native language is French, and whose names Valerian does not bother to find out, calling them yardman and Mary instead, perform lower tasks. Jadine is Ondine’s and Sydney’s orphaned niece, who is raised in Valerian’s household. He even pays for her education. In a way, she can therefore be seen as the product of his fabrication, and hence, as a tar baby. This notion is supported by her preference of Picasso over an Itumba mask or of the *Ave Maria* over gospel music. (*TB*, 72) Morrison succeeded in presenting Jadine as being “almost ‘constructed’ by the Western thing, and grateful to it.”⁴⁶² Jadine’s beauty and her rather light complexion enable her to become a well-paid fashion model in Paris. Furthermore, her skin colour eases a close contact with Valerian and his wife Margaret, who are otherwise to some extent prejudiced against African Americans and try to maintain their position of supposed superiority. Although Valerian has known Sydney and Ondine for all his life, he still keeps his distance, merely perceiving them as his servants. Whereas Jadine loves her uncle and aunt, she does not identify with them culturally and rather orients herself towards the white world, despite Margaret’s frequent attempts to pigeon-hole her on the issue of her skin-colour. “She was uncomfortable with the way Margaret stirred her into blackening up or universalling out, always alluding to or ferreting out what she believed were racial characteristics.

⁴⁶⁰ Cf. Ruas, 102.

⁴⁶¹ Cf. Trudier Harris, 119.

⁴⁶² Cf. Wilson, 134.

She ended by resisting both, but it kept her alert about things she did not wish to be alert about.” (*TB*, 62) In addition to influencing her by facilitating her Western education, Valerian has partly managed to create Jadine regarding her sense of cultural belonging. When Son arrives on the island, he figures as the mischievous intruder who has to be trapped. A trespasser in the house, he is also exposed as the thief of food, just like Brer Rabbit in the tale. He might have been found near Margaret’s bedroom, yet, the tar baby which forced him to remain in the house is actually Jadine, for “he had not followed the women,” (*TB*, 133) but the sight of Jadine sleeping compelled him “to extend his stay until he was literally spending the night with her gratified beyond belief to be sitting on the floor, his back against the wall, his shirt full of fruit (and meat if he could find any), in the company of a woman asleep.” (*TB*, 138) To everybody’s surprise, Valerian invites Son to dinner, a situation most of the characters are unable to deal with. “For the first time in his life, Sydney had dropped something.” (*TB*, 91) Even though Valerian keeps up appearances, Jadine gets the impression that he “was comforted, made more secure, by her presence at the table. That she exercised some restraint on the man; that Valerian believed that in her presence the man might be kept manageable.” (*TB*, 91) While Jadine is wondering about this sensation, she utterly fails to comprehend the mechanisms at work which further immerse her into the role of the tar baby.

Whereas this allocation of roles blends in nicely with the folktale, it is by no means exhaustive and neither constitutes the only feasible solution. Morrison explicitly emphasises Jadine’s dilemma: “The tragedy of the situation was not that she *was* a Tar Baby, but that she *wasn’t*.”⁴⁶³ The paradox of this view is based on the connotations of the term tar baby itself, which on the one hand describes the man-made figure of the folktale. On the other hand, the expression is also used as a derogatory name for a black person. Morrison even attributes it a third meaning by pointing out the sacred properties of tar within the African American community, referring to her discovery of the existence of a “tar lady in African mythology. [...] At one time, a tar pit was a holy place, at least an important place, because tar was used to build things. It came naturally out of the earth; it held together things like Moses’s little boat and the pyramids. For me, the tar baby came to mean the black woman who can hold things together.”⁴⁶⁴ Albeit meeting the requirements to be called a tar baby as understood in the folktale, Jadine is hardly likely to be called by that name on the basis of the other facets of

⁴⁶³ Cf. Ruas, 102.

⁴⁶⁴ Cf. LeClair, 122.

meaning, since her complexion grants her an intermediate status between the realms of black and white, and she has not yet fully appropriated her cultural roots within the African American community. Jadine is severely troubled by her encounter with the woman with “skin like tar” (*TB*, 42) in Paris. That “woman’s woman – that mother/sister/she; that unphotographable beauty – took it all away,” (*TB*, 43) making Jadine feel inauthentic by overemphasising those features Jadine lacks completely. This vision forms the first stage of Jadine’s quest, followed by her adventure in the swamp, when she literally sinks into tar. As long as her life is in danger, Jadine holds on to the tree wanting to dance with her, but the moment she is saved, her newly found awareness of an animate world dissolves again. Even though for a long time Jadine manages to cling to her self-image as an independent modern woman, she starts to sense a void in herself, symbolised in her perturbation concerning the woman in Paris.

Although Jadine falls for Son, she is not at ease in his presence initially: “With him she was in strange waters. She had not seen a Black like him in ten years.” (*TB*, 126) Son, who is deeply rooted in his black heritage, personifies the perfect opposite of Jadine’s Westernised personality. But Morrison does not criticise Jadine’s schooling as such: “No Black woman should apologize for being educated or anything else. The problem is not paying attention to the ancient proprieties – which for me means the ability to be ‘the ship’ *and* ‘the safe harbor.’ Our history as Black women is the history of women who could build a house *and* have some children, and there was no problem.”⁴⁶⁵ Jadine does not show any real inclination towards building a family or restricting her life to the role of mothering as, for instance, the women in *Eloe* do. That is the reason why she is so terrified of her night vision in *Eloe*, when she is faced with a number of women standing at her bed and exposing their breasts towards her, Jadine’s mother and her aunt Ondine amongst them, while the African woman from Paris holds out three eggs to Jadine. (*TB*, 260p.) The appearance of these women symbolises their call for Jadine to become a fertile and nurturing woman, but she perceives it as an attempt to “get her, tie her, bind her. Grab the person she had worked hard to become and choke it off with their soft loose tits.” (*TB*, 264) She cannot conceive of their gesture as an offer of “nurturance and even the opportunity to reconnect, to reestablish the bonds of racial and gendered kinship she has denied and lost.”⁴⁶⁶

⁴⁶⁵ Cf. Wilson, 135.

⁴⁶⁶ Cf. Billingslea Brown, 74.

Whereas Son feels safe and at home in Eloë – he is clearly in his briar patch – , Jadine experiences the place as a threat to her way of life and her personality. The perspective shifts again when Son and Jadine leave Eloë: She remains silent throughout the journey, which can be understood as an echo of the tar baby’s silence. “[L]ike Br’er Rabbit who swats at the tar baby for her rudeness, Son becomes even further enmeshed in his affection for Jadine.”⁴⁶⁷ In spite of his similarities with Brer Rabbit in the briar patch, Son and the night women function as tar babies for Jadine trying to trap her into a limited traditional lifestyle. This might suggest that Morrison seems to prefer such a way of life over emancipation and independence, but the confrontation between Jadine and her aunt Ondine proves that this would be an overly simplified approach.

When Jadine returns to the island after her split with Son, she worries that Ondine and Sydney, who had been in fear of losing their work, would request her to look after them. Her conflicting emotions are foreshadowed, since her “legs burned with the memory of tar,” (*TB*, 275) when Jadine is close to Sein de Vieilles, recalling the swamp incident and reminding her of alternative approaches towards life. Exhausted after her destructive relationship with Son, Jadine hopes that she will not be obliged to help: “Please don’t need me now, not now. I can’t parent now. I cannot be needed now. Another time, please. I have spent it all. Please don’t need me now.” (*TB*, 282) Ondine assures her that nothing is required of her, but tries to explain to Jadine what she is lacking.

Jadine, a girl has got to be a daughter first. She have to learn that. And if she never learns how to be a daughter, she can’t never learn how to be a woman. I mean a real woman: a woman good enough for a child; good enough for a man – good enough even for the respect of other women. [...] I’m just saying what a daughter is. A daughter is a woman that cares about where she come from and takes care of them that took care of her. No, I don’t want you to be what you call a parent. Not me, and not Sydney either. What I want from you is what I want for you. I don’t want you to care about me for my sake. I want you to care about me for yours. (*TB*, 283)

Ondine is attempting to get across to Jadine the necessity to acknowledge her own cultural history and heritage. In Morrison’s words, “[t]here’s no reason for her to be like Ondine – I’m not recommending that – but she needs a little bit of Ondine to be a complete woman.”⁴⁶⁸ With this view, Ondine figures as yet another tar baby trying to lure Jadine into an awakening sensitivity towards her cultural heritage. Jadine is blind to

⁴⁶⁷ Cf. Smith, 6.

the possibility of nurturing and building,⁴⁶⁹ whereas she could easily become a more complete individual if only she once asked herself: “Culture-bearing black woman, whose culture are you bearing?” (*TB*, 272) As long as she refuses to do that, “Jadine fails to become a tar baby in its richest sense: that is, a true daughter of the African tar lady who represents the bonding property of tar, an ‘ancient property’ strong enough to bond together a people’s tradition.”⁴⁷⁰

Both Son and Jadine share traits of either Brer Rabbit and the tar baby, as each wishes to entice the other into moving to their respective briar patch. “The tar baby tale as a metaphor of entrapment has one meaning for Jadine and another for Son.”⁴⁷¹ Jadine feels safe in New York. To her, the city “is home, she thought with an orphan’s delight: not Paris, not Baltimore, not Philadelphia. This is home. The city had gone on to something more interesting to it than the black people who had fascinated it a decade ago, but if ever there was a black woman’s town, New York was it.” (*TB*, 223) Jadine would like to transform Son, who clings to his improvisational way of life as much as to the traditions he grew up with in the all-black town of Eloë, into a conformist, pressing him to enrol for academic courses or to embark on regular work. (*TB*, 265) Therefore, Jadine serves as the tar baby tempting Son to assume a Westernised lifestyle. Son, on the other hand, does not comply with Jadine’s attitudes: “Make it in New York. I’m tired of hearing that shit. If I make it in New York, then that’s all I do: ‘Make it in New York.’ That’s not life; that’s making it. I don’t want to *make* it; I want to *be* it.” (*TB*, 268) His briar patch is his hometown Eloë. “Anybody ask you where you from, you give them five towns. You’re not *from* anywhere. I’m from Eloë.” (*TB*, 268) He accuses Jadine of abandoning her family and her heritage. In his view, Jadine’s college education is useless, since has not provided her with knowledge about her own culture.

The truth is that whatever you learned in those colleges that didn’t include me ain’t shit. What did they teach you about me? What tests did they give? Did they tell you what I was like, did they tell you what was on my mind? Did they describe me to you? Did they tell you what was in my heart? If they didn’t teach you that, then they didn’t teach you nothing, because until you know about me, you don’t know about yourself. And you don’t know anything, anything at all

⁴⁶⁸ Cf. Ruas, 104.

⁴⁶⁹ Cf. Marilyn Mobley, “Narrative Dilemma: Jadine as Cultural Orphan in Toni Morrison’s *Tar Baby*.” In: *The Southern Review* 23:4 (1987) 761-770. 768.

⁴⁷⁰ Cf. Billingslea Brown, 76.

⁴⁷¹ Cf. Sandra Pouchet Paquet, “The Ancestor as Foundation in *Their Eyes Were Watching God* and *Tar Baby*.” In: Middleton, 183-206. 204.

about your children and anything at all about your mama and your papa. You find out about *me*, you educated nitwit! (*TB*, 267)

Neither of them is willing nor able to face a life in the favourite surroundings of the other, a refusal which runs parallel to their inability to accept their counterpart's different approach to life and the value of their cultural heritage – they keep on living in different worlds, a fact which brings about the eventual break-down of their relationship. Despite their irreconcilable differences, Jadine and Son were “equally attracted to each other, equally willing to use and abuse the other, equally anxious and willing to control the other.”⁴⁷² Their influence on each other has left marks on them, as they are both rendered unable to continue in their former briar patch without the presence of the other. They alternately return to Isle des Chevaliers in a vain search of their counterpart. Subsequently, Jadine escapes from the island aboard an airplane heading to Paris, determined to eventually try and find her place in life.

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. She would go back to Paris and begin at Go. Let loose the dogs, tangle with the woman in yellow – with her and with all the night women who had *looked* at her. No more shoulders and limitless chests. No more dreams of safety. No more. Perhaps that was the thing – the thing Ondine was saying. A grown woman did not need safety or its dreams. She *was* the safety she longed for. (*TB*, 292)

This paragraph once more presents Jadine in the role of the trickster, since the “sixteen answers” recall Esu’s oracle of sixteen palm nuts leading to different answers in sixteen places of the earth; Jadine’s journey thus parallels Esu’s quest for truth. At the same time, Jadine’s vow to start from scratch again in Paris alludes to Pilate’s resolution in *Song of Solomon* to throw “away every assumption she had learned” and to begin “at zero.”⁴⁷³ (*SoS*, 149) Although Jadine still has a long way to go, she undergoes a sort of epiphany concerning Ondine’s recommendations – she is on the right track in the end. Had she ignored the value of ancient properties before,⁴⁷⁴ she now at least acknowledges their existence. Jadine has come to understand that instead of choosing between nurturing and building, fertility and originality, she has to reach a compromise allowing her to combine these roles. Contrary to her situation during most of the novel,

⁴⁷² Cf. Trudier Harris, 125.

⁴⁷³ Cf. Smith, 135.

⁴⁷⁴ Cf. Trudier Harris, 137.

Jadine is now in a closer relationship with nature, as her recognition of the futility of dreams for the sake of safety is imitated by the subsequent description of the life of soldier ants. The sole purpose for a male ant is mating. “Frenzied, he flies into the humming cloud to fight gravity and time in order to do, just once, the single thing he was born for. Then he drops dead, having emptied his sperm into his lady-love.” (*TB*, 293) The tasks of a female soldier ant, however, are more complex, including the search for the best place to settle and feeding the larvae. “Bearing, hunting, eating, fighting, burying. No time for dreaming, although sometimes, late in life, somewhere between the thirtieth and fortieth generation she might get wind of a summer storm someday.” (*TB*, 294) Likewise, Jadine now has to face reality, abandon her limiting dreams and grow up instead. “But soldier ants do not have time for dreaming. They are women and have much to do. Still it would be hard. So very hard to forget the man who fucked like a star.” (*TB*, 294)

Son, whose skin colour and wildness connect him to the derogatory connotation of the term tar baby,⁴⁷⁵ also deserves to be called by this name in the more positive sense as the bearer of traditions. Then again, he abounds in characteristic traits of the trickster. He is a storyteller and a musician, born to improvise, to create a mask for any given situation. “Like the trickster who moves in all worlds, Son crosses boundaries easily. In borrowed suits and silk pajamas, he moves effortlessly from Valerian, the rich white employer who calls Gideon ‘Yardman,’ to Therese, the mystic islander who refuses to even ‘acknowledge the presence of the white Americans in the world.’”⁴⁷⁶ When he is found in Margaret’s bedroom, Son evokes the image of “the ignorant, hunger-driven, asexual ‘coon’ running from his own shadow. He becomes in dialect and posture something that exists only in Valerian’s head.”⁴⁷⁷ Like Jadine, who believes that in her interaction with white people she “needed only to be stunning, and to convince them she was not as smart as they were. Say the obvious, ask stupid questions, laugh with abandon, look interested, and light up at any display of their humanity if they showed it,” (*TB*, 127) Son is wearing a mask in order to get out of a prickly situation. He masterfully uses the power of words traditionally associated with tricksters to prove his ability to outsmart others. By embodying the “stereotype of the happy, grinning,

⁴⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 120.

⁴⁷⁶ Cf. Smith, 130p.

⁴⁷⁷ Cf. Trudier Harris, 121.

asexual darcy,” Son diverts suspicion from himself as a possibly threatening intruder.⁴⁷⁸ Son’s behaviour further illustrates the strategy that has already helped the trickster: “Once captured, one should use what one knows about whites – their cruelty and their ignorance of black experience (the briar patch) – to create an effective mask that will allow for escape.”⁴⁷⁹

When he returns from New York to the Caribbean searching for Jadine, Son asks Gideon and Thérèse for help and is told that she has already left the island. (*TB*, 300) Alma Estée, who is angry at Son for having forgotten to buy her the wig he had promised her, even tells him that Jadine had met and passionately kissed a “man with yellow hair and blue eyes and white skin” (*TB*, 302) at the airport. This piece of information, although most probably a lie, severely disturbs Son, since “he had not wanted to love her because he could not survive losing her. But it was done. Already done and he was in it; stuck in it and revolted by the possibility of being freed.” (*TB*, 303) Nevertheless, he is determined to follow Jadine and therefore needs to return to Isle des Chevaliers in order to find out her address. Thérèse offers Son to help him by ferrying him over to the island during the night, but she does not steer the boat to the dock. Son is taken to a remote place of Isle des Chevaliers instead. When Son inquires about her strange choice of a landing place, she assures him that “[t]his is the place. Where you can take a choice. Back there you say you don’t. Now you do.” (*TB*, 307) As he still fails to understand what Thérèse is on about, she explains her reasons. She had not at all planned to help him get to L’Arbe de la Croix and rather suggest he meet the mythic horsemen and become one of them.

The men are waiting for you. [...] You can choose now. You can get free of her. They are waiting in the hills for you. They are naked and they are blind too. I have seen them; their eyes have no colour in them. But they gallop; they race those horses like angels all over the hills where the rain forest is, where the champion daisy trees still grow. Go there. Choose them. (*TB*, 308)

After hesitating shortly, Son really makes his decision. He does not seem to aim for the direction of Valerian’s estate any longer, but joins forces with nature instead. “The mist lifted and the trees stepped back a bit as if to make the way easier for a certain kind of man. Then he ran. Lickety-split. Lickety-split. Looking neither to the left nor to the right. Lickety-split. Lickety-split. Lickety-lickety-lickety-split.” (*TB*, 309) Morrison had

⁴⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 122.

⁴⁷⁹ Cf. Werner, 155.

wanted Son to be “left with a wide-open choice at the end.”⁴⁸⁰ Deciding in favour of his search for Jadine would have meant his joining “the twentieth century as a kind of half-person like Jadine,”⁴⁸¹ her presence would have forced him to abandon part of his ancient properties, yet he is able to resist this particular tar baby. By concluding the novel with “lickety-split,” Morrison succeeds in attributing her work “the sound of the Tar Baby story”⁴⁸² and once more alluding to Son as the prototypic personification of the mythic Brer Rabbit. He is perfectly born into that role, when he first “crawls, then stands up, he stumbles, then he walks, and last, he runs, and his run is lickety-split, lickety-split, which has a movement of some confidence, and also suggests the beat of a rabbit running”⁴⁸³ back to its briar patch. Thus, the folktale and the novel are joined by their common sound. Morrison tries “to provide every opportunity for that kind of stimulation, so that the narrative is only one part of what happens, in the same way as what happens when you’re listening to music, what happens when you look at a painting.”⁴⁸⁴ Simultaneously, Son’s rabbitlike “footsteps echo the voices of the storytellers of the Afro-American tradition as he walks toward the ever-present, ever-changing tar baby that tempts him to remove his eyes from the woman who can help him forge a unified mythic consciousness.”⁴⁸⁵

Alongside such evident representatives of tar babies and/or tricksters as Jadine and Son, the novel also suggests a number of others. Whereas Son can be seen as Brer Rabbit intruding the farmer’s haven, in this case Valerian’s property on Isle des Chevaliers, the perspective can also be converted, turning Valerian into the trespasser. Son’s close ties with nature make the island’s wilderness his briar patch, for which Valerian is ill-equipped. He can merely endure his environment by taming it, by fighting its wildlife, and by superimposing his own ideals onto his surroundings. In contrast to Valerian, Thérèse is perfectly adapted to the island. Rumoured to be a descendant of the “blind race,” (*TB*, 152) her eyesight is actually limited. She claims to “see better in the dark,” (*TB*, 305) a property that enables her to take Son safely to Isle des Chevaliers. In addition to her links with the blind horsemen, the character of Thérèse, who as a ferrywoman also recalls the mythic Cheron, “challenges the limits of

⁴⁸⁰ Cf. Ruas, 107.

⁴⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 106.

⁴⁸² Cf. McKay in Taylor-Guthrie, 150.

⁴⁸³ *Ibid.*, 150.

⁴⁸⁴ Cf. Ruas, 108p.

⁴⁸⁵ Cf. Werner, 166.

western perception, and affirms the primacy of ancestral roots”⁴⁸⁶ through her nourishing quality symbolised in her “magical breasts” still capable of nursing babies despite her old age. (*TB*, 112) Sydney’s and Ondine’s failure to recognise Thérèse when Gideon continues to take her to the island after each of her dismissals emphasises both their lack of interest as well as Thérèse’s ability to hide her true personality, which can be understood as her enactment of “the myth that all blacks look alike.”⁴⁸⁷ Furthermore, she is a gifted storyteller able to transcend the boundaries of a single language by starting off her tales in English and concluding them in French. The sum of these features grants her a trickster-like status as well. Her presence and remarkable power in the novel serve “to remind us that ‘discredited knowledge,’ in Morrison’s terms, is valid and powerful.”⁴⁸⁸ Thérèse, whose briar patch is the Caribbean with all its mythological heritage, “reenacts a traditional Br’er Rabbit adventure,”⁴⁸⁹ when she and Gideon try to steal some apples from the Streets’ household. What Thérèse has forgotten is, however, that Brer Rabbit is merely able to escape due to his knowledge and apprehension of the farmer’s weakness. Her stubborn self-imposed blindness towards the existence of white Americans is therefore limiting and does not bring about liberation – as a consequence of the theft, Gideon and Thérèse are dismissed for sure. Whereas Valerian and Margaret regard black people as tar babies emanating the danger of losing control, Thérèse “views the tar baby as any contact with the white world, or any contact with a black person who has absorbed the values of that world.”⁴⁹⁰

By thus presenting the process of dehumanising others by refusing to allow for other interpretations or perspectives, “Morrison exposes the danger of willed ignorance.”⁴⁹¹ In her novel, she “does not revive the tar baby folktale merely to entertain us. Instead, to use her words, she ‘dusts it off,’ transforms it, and entraps us with its rich, metaphorical complexity. As a cautionary tale for our time, *Tar Baby* criticizes much, but beneath the critique and implicit in the warning is an affirmation that can heal even as it instructs.”⁴⁹² The open ending counters traditional Western folktales in which “they all drop dead or live happily ever after,”⁴⁹³ thus leaving space for the reader’s very

⁴⁸⁶ Cf. Smith, 129.

⁴⁸⁷ Cf. Werner, 157.

⁴⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 137.

⁴⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 137.

⁴⁹⁰ Cf. Dehn Kubitschek, 110.

⁴⁹¹ Cf. Smith, 139.

⁴⁹² Cf. Mobley, *Narrative Dilemma*. 770.

⁴⁹³ Cf. Marsha Darling, “In the Realm of Responsibility: A Conversation with Toni Morrison. 1988.” In: Taylor Guthrie, 246-254. 253.

own interpretations and suppositions to fill the gap. Just like traditional African American folktales, Morrison's novel is "told in such a way that whoever is listening is in it and can shape it and figure it out. It's not over just because it stops. It lingers and it's passed on."⁴⁹⁴ By assigning her characters overlapping roles in regard to the protagonists of the folktale, Morrison "makes it impossible to delineate clearly agents of good and evil; qualification of some sort is always necessary. [...] Morrison gives new dimensions to the racial and sexual dynamics inherent in that folktale."⁴⁹⁵ *Tar Baby* is "a polyphonic novel, exposing conflicts in the African American community between the inner self and the outer self, between the self and community."⁴⁹⁶ It examines the relationship between spoken and written narrative by assigning roles deriving from one source to characters in the other. "When a folktale as stubbornly complicated as the 'Tar Baby' story is a subtext, the writer must convert higher algebra into even higher calculus. This Morrison does, with an unstoppable voice that is compellingly her own."⁴⁹⁷ In this novelistic masterpiece, a multitude of possible interpretations invites the audience to solve the riddle set by the folktale and the novel, and to add yet another reading to them. "For Jadine, for Son, for Toni Morrison, the tar baby is everywhere. The briar patch remains to be seen."⁴⁹⁸

⁴⁹⁴ Ibid., 253.

⁴⁹⁵ Cf. Trudier Harris, 126p.

⁴⁹⁶ Cf. Pouchet Paquet, 204.

⁴⁹⁷ Cf. Robert G. O'Meally, "Tar Baby. She Don' Say Nothin'" [Sic!] In: McKay, *Critical Essays*. 33-37.

⁴⁹⁸ Cf. Werner, 166.

3 *Testifying: Affirmation and Bearing Witness*

When the jazzman's testifyin' a faithless man believes
He can sing you into paradise or bring you to your knees.
It's a gospel kind of feelin', a touch of Georgia slide,
a song of pure revival and a style that's sanctified.⁴⁹⁹

As the famous lines by Carol King suggest, jazz and testifying often go hand in hand. According to Houston A. Baker, blues is an “affirmation of human identity in the face of dehumanizing circumstances.”⁵⁰⁰ By singing Pecola's blues in *The Bluest Eye*, Claudia not only makes known the details of this sad story. She affirms Pecola's humanity by making the audience feel sympathy for her, whereas the community is merely interested in Pecola's story in order to obtain new gossiping material. Therefore, Claudia testifies to Pecola's sufferings and to the community's failure.⁵⁰¹ Claudia makes sure that neither Pecola's pain nor the community's shame can be forgotten.⁵⁰² Her cathartic role as a storyteller is based on her internalisation of cultural legacies – such as that of testifying – derived from her knowledge of the blues. From this point of view, Pecola can be regarded as an “abject tabula rasa,”⁵⁰³ while Claudia, the narrative's blues subject, bears witness to the community's blues.⁵⁰⁴

China, Poland, and the Maginot Line are the names of the three prostitutes in *The Bluest Eye*. Their names, which they have chosen themselves, reflect their “refusal to be coopted. In their occupations as whores, the women bear the same relationship to patriarchy that the occupied territories of China, Poland, and France [...] have to Japan and nazi Germany in World War II.”⁵⁰⁵ Despite their status of occupation, these countries “were not annihilated and their cultural values did not crumble.”⁵⁰⁶ The same is true of the three women who neither have illusions about their work nor about their financial situation.⁵⁰⁷ They are even able to transcend their condition by testifying to it in their stories and songs. Poland, who is described as “forever ironing, forever singing,” (*TBE*, 44) testifies to her poverty by singing about the “blues in my mealbarrel

⁴⁹⁹ Cf. Carole King, *Jazzman*.

⁵⁰⁰ Cf. Baker, 190.

⁵⁰¹ Cf. Moses, 11.

⁵⁰² *Ibid.*, 13.

⁵⁰³ *Ibid.*, 2.

⁵⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, 2.

⁵⁰⁵ Cf. Grewal, 38.

⁵⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, 38.

⁵⁰⁷ Cf. Keith E. Byerman, “Beyond Realism: The Fictions of Toni Morrison.” In: Harold Bloom (ed.), *Toni Morrison*. New York and Philadelphia: Chelsea House Publishers, 1990. 55-84. 60.

/ Blues up on the shelf,” (*TBE*, 44) and to the lack of a lover (in contrast to a customer) by the “[b]lues in my bedroom / ‘Cause I’m sleepin’ by myself.” (*TBE*, 44) By naming the blues she lives, Poland calls down the power of *nommo*, the magic power of the word, which is the very basis of the music.⁵⁰⁸ China affirms the poverty she has been in for all her life in her story about the first pair of drawers, which, given to her at the age of fifteen, she did not know how to use. (*TBE*, 46) The three women are comfortable with the way they lead their lives: “They were whores in whores’ clothing, whores who had never been young and had no word for innocence. [...] If Pecola had announced her intention to live the life they did, they would not have tried to dissuade her or voiced any alarm.” (*TBE*, 48) They use the blues and other forms of the vernacular “less to express personal problems than to entertain through reminders of the nature of the world in which they live. These folk arts enable them to transcend the private obsessions of other characters.”⁵⁰⁹ By affirming their lifestyle instead of hiding it, the three women repossess the bodies they sell for a living and thus manage to make their lives their very own.

In *Song of Solomon*, Pilate and Reba are testifying at Hagar’s funeral through their call and response formula. When Pilate calls out “Mercy!”, Reba affirms that this call is being witnessed by answering “I hear you!” (*SoS*, 316-318) Then Pilate addresses the congregation as well as individuals by identifying Hagar as “[m]y baby girl.” (*SoS*, 318) This testifies to the relationship between Pilate and Hagar as it singles out Hagar from everybody else. And finally, “Pilate trumpeted for the sky itself to hear, ‘And she was loved!’” (*SoS*, 319) Hagar died believing that she was not worthy of love, because Milkman did not have strong feelings for her any longer. The fact that he left her broke both her heart as well as her will to live on. Therefore, Pilate’s testifying that Hagar had indeed been loved, gains further importance. Since it is too late for Hagar herself to learn this, everybody else needs to know about it. It testifies to Hagar’s life and her importance for both her mother and her grandmother. In order to come to terms with the girl’s death, Pilate has to make sure that all people present are well-informed about Hagar’s life.

The central blues song of *Song of Solomon* helps Milkman to assume responsibility. He testifies to his ancestors and their history by singing a song for Pilate. Before, he had not been interested in his cultural roots; his main interests had

⁵⁰⁸ Cf. Moses, 8.

⁵⁰⁹ Cf. Byerman, 60.

been centred on his own welfare. He had more or less adopted his father's attitude regarding property as the greatest good to achieve, and his nickname had borne witness to his "black identity whitened."⁵¹⁰ Whereas, throughout his life, he had been evading problems instead of tackling them, Milkman – empowered by the knowledge of this particular song – is able to look at things from a new perspective. On his journey back home, he wonders about the names of people and places, and for the first time, he is aware that names have a concrete history:⁵¹¹

He closed his eyes and thought of the black men in Shalimar, Roanoke, Petersburg, Newport News, Danville, in the Blood Bank, on Darling Street, in the pool halls, the barbershops. Their names. Names they got from yearnings, gestures, flaws, events, mistakes, weaknesses. Names that bore witness. Macon Dead, Corinthians, Mikman, Guitar, Railroad Tommy, Hospital Tommy, Empire State (he just stood around and swayed), [...] Humpty-Dumpty, Blue Boy, [...] Muddy Waters, Pine Top, Jelly Roll, Fats, Leadbelly, Bo Diddley, [...] Jim the Devil, Fuck-Up, and *Dat Nigger*. (*SoS*, 330)

His "enumeration of names [...] offers powerful testimony to the need for names that confer distinction and 'bear witness.'"⁵¹² These names testify to the history of communities, which has otherwise been misrepresented or forgotten.⁵¹³

Milkman's grandfather Jake accepted the name of Macon Dead, which was given to him erroneously by a drunken official when he registered as a free man. Milkman had never been able to understand why his grandfather did not just keep his original name, but now he realises that Macon's aim was to reappropriate the name given to him, a maxime supported by Ralph Ellison: "Our names, being the gift of others, must be made our own."⁵¹⁴ Milkman recognises that his grandfather's choice was an important part of his resolution to create a new (hybrid) identity out of his past as a slave.⁵¹⁵

Pilate was named by random choosing from the Bible. Her father insisted on the name he put his finger on despite both its obvious negative connotations and the fact that the baby was a girl. Illiterate as he was, he chose the name not for its original

⁵¹⁰ Cf. Grewal, 71.

⁵¹¹ Cf. Byerman, 75.

⁵¹² Cf. David Cowart, "Faulkner and Joyce in Morrison's *Song of Solomon*." In: *American Literature* 62:1 (1990 March) 87-100. 91.

⁵¹³ Cf. Robert Holton, "Bearing Witness: Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon* and *Beloved*." In: *English Studies in Canada* 20:1 (1994 March) 79-90. 83.

⁵¹⁴ Cf. Lucinda H. MacKethan, "Names to Bear Witness. The Theme and Tradition of Naming in Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon*." In: *CEA-Critic* 49:2-4 (1986-87 Winter-Summer) 119-207. 199.

⁵¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 204. Such an attitude is also reminiscent of Frantz Fanon's model of decolonialisation.

meaning, but for its shape, which reminded him of a larger tree protecting a row of smaller trees. (*SoS*, 18) By “allowing inscribed characters to speak through their own physical characteristics,”⁵¹⁶ he redefines writing and thus testifies to this tradition of naming. For Morrison, whose mother’s name Ramah was also chosen from the Bible at random, this procedure reflects the enormous respect people had for the Scripture.⁵¹⁷ Pilate’s father copied her name onto a piece of paper and put it back into the Bible. “It come from the Bible. It stays in the Bible.” (*SoS*, 19) When he dies, Pilate takes this paper and puts it into a little brass box, which she has then made into an earring. Hence, she not only accepts her name but moreover actively affirms it and makes it her own, thereby completing the very process of naming her father had initiated.⁵¹⁸ “Her name is her charm, symbolizing her love and acceptance of who she is and her resolution to live according to her own lights. The name must bear witness to her life, not her life to the name.”⁵¹⁹

Milkman eventually comes to understand that “the power to give a name is a trifle; the power to give a name its meaning is the power over life itself.”⁵²⁰ Initially, Milkman does not even know the meaning of his own name. Although he has been using his surname “Dead” as a talisman against physical death, he was not aware that it actually described the state of his spirit.⁵²¹ While his nickname is a testimony to his mother’s desperate yearning to be loved, his surname bears witness to his own and his father’s lost connection with their cultural roots.⁵²² With the help of the song, Milkman pays closer attention to the power of names, which finally enables him to claim kin with his ancestors.⁵²³ “My grandfather. Wow! Woooee! Guitar! You hear that? Guitar, my great-granddaddy could flyyyyyy and the whole damn town is named after him. Tell him, Sweet. Tell him my great-granddaddy could fly.” (*SoS*, 328) Milkman not only

⁵¹⁶ Cf. Jan Stryz, “Inscribing an Origin in *Song of Solomon*.” In: *Studies in American Fiction* 19:1 (1991 Spring) 31-40. 32.

⁵¹⁷ Cf. Anne Koenen, “The One Out of Sequence. 1980.” In: Taylor-Guthrie, 67-83. 80.

⁵¹⁸ Cf. Stryz, 33.

⁵¹⁹ Cf. MacKethan, 206.

⁵²⁰ Cf. Christian Moraru, “Reading the Onomastic Text: ‘The Politics of the Proper Name’ in Toni Morrison’s *Song of Solomon*.” In: *Names* 44:3 (1996 September) 189-204. 196.

⁵²¹ Cf. Naomi van Tol, “The Fathers May Soar. Folklore and Blues in *Song of Solomon*.” Cited after: <http://www.spiny.com/naomi/thesis.htm>, 30th of September 2002.

⁵²² Cf. Ashraf H. A. Rushdy, “Rememory: Primal Scenes and Constructions in Toni Morrison’s Novels.” In: Middleton, 135-161. 153.

⁵²³ Cf. Robert Hayden, “To Live upon These Shores.” In: Maria Diedrich and Henry Louis Gates, Jr., *Black Imagination and the Middle Passage*. New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999. 99-116. 99.

acknowledges the connection with his ancestors, he feels the need to testify to it by telling everyone about their achievements.⁵²⁴

Milkman's final and most important acts of testifying and affirmation are his recital of the song for Pilate and his active confrontation with Guitar. By singing the song, he affirms the legacy passed on to him via Pilate from their ancestors. He is now able to assume responsibility for himself. Instead of running away from problems, as he has done for the largest part of his life, he faces the conflict with Guitar in order to solve it for good. It is only after having been firmly rooted in the past he eventually acknowledges that he is finally able to fly.

Morrison's technique of naming in the novel bears witness to the importance of the Bible for both herself and her people. "The Bible wasn't part of my reading, it was part of my life."⁵²⁵ The custom of choosing Biblical names dates back to slavery, when slaves felt the need to see their names written down and wanted them inscribed in their masters' Bibles. Therefore, the names had to be selected from the Bible.⁵²⁶ By including such names as Sing(ing Bird), Crow(ell), and Jay in Milkman's heritage, Morrison not only bears witness to his Indian ancestors but also testifies to an "ancient faith in the kinship between humans and animals."⁵²⁷

"Power for Morrison is largely the power to name, to define reality and perception."⁵²⁸ This is comprehensible in the black community's appropriation of place names. "Doctor Street" has lost its original, yet unofficial, name and is officially called "Mains Avenue." But the black community does not acknowledge this name and terms it "Not Doctor Street" as a consequence of official notices saying that this street "had always been and would always be known as Mains Avenue and not Doctor Street." (*SoS*, 4) While the community's reappropriation of the name *Signifies* on this official announcement, it also testifies to its regained power to name. The negation of the original name even affirms it.⁵²⁹ They call the hospital on this street "No Mercy Hospital" instead of "Mercy Hospital" (*SoS*, 4) in order to demonstrate their disregard of it, because for many years, it had not admitted the treatment of any black patients

⁵²⁴ Concepts very similar to those of this paragraph can also be found in Brian Friel's drama *Wonderful Tennessee*.

⁵²⁵ Cf. Stepto, 97.

⁵²⁶ Cf. Andrews, 524.

⁵²⁷ Cf. Berret, "Literary Jazz." 276.

⁵²⁸ Cf. Cynthia A. Davis, "Self, Society and Myth in Toni Morrison's Fiction." In: Bloom, 7-25. 7. This notion is neither exclusive to Morrison nor to the black community, since it is paralleled in Brian Friel's drama *Translations*.

⁵²⁹ Cf. Moraru, 193.

inside its realms. The community re-establishes its power of naming by altering the official terminology: “The renaming through which they redefine both the word and themselves sets forth their personality, brings about a spectacular change of nominal status: it is only now that the place name becomes a *proper* place name.”⁵³⁰ It has finally been appropriated.

Morrison’s aim is not restricted to the appropriation of names. “I know I can’t change the future but I can change the past. It is the past, not the future, which is infinite. Our past was appropriated. I am one of the people who has to reappropriate it.”⁵³¹ She is, of course, talking about slavery and the Middle Passage, and *Beloved* bears witness to both. The novel is dedicated to “Sixty Million and more.” This number is a careful estimate at the incredibly vast number of people who were transported from Africa to the New World. The majority of these people never reached America, because they either died under the inhumane circumstances they were subdued to, or committed suicide in the course of the passage. In *Beloved*, references to the Middle Passage can be found, among others, in the character of Beloved herself. Beloved (or at least one dimension of her multi-layered persona) can be seen as a representative of the people who had been forced to suffer the Middle Passage. Depending on which reading of her character one applies, she might have been a survivor of this transport. This view could be supported by her many allusions to ships, people in piles, or the mysterious woman jumping into the sea. Beloved’s strong association and obsession with water underpins this interpretation. Morrison’s motivation for writing *Beloved* was to fill a gap. “There was some deliberate, calculated, survivalist intention, to forget certain things. [...] [T]here was almost no reference to the ships. [...] I know no songs about it. I know no stories about it.”⁵³² No one had borne witness to this part of the history. While Sethe’s story portrays the horrors of slavery and its consequences, Beloved testifies to the Middle Passage. “Beloved is, finally, not a name, but the single word on a gravestone, a memorial to all those – sixty million and more [...] – whose names and testimonies have not been recorded.”⁵³³

⁵³⁰ Ibid., 193.

⁵³¹ Cf. Taylor-Guthrie, XIIIp. This is yet another parallel to the Irish dramatist Friel, who deals with similar topics in *Making History*.

⁵³² Cf. Catherine Gunther Kodat, “A Postmodern *Absalom, Absalom!*, A Modern *Beloved*. The Dialectic of Form.” In: Kolmerten, 181-198. 195. Whereas Morrison must be conscious of the *Amistad*-mutiny, her statement can be seen as an emphasis of the lack of a corpus of stories concerning this part of history.

⁵³³ Cf. Holton, 88.

Testifying also plays a major role within *Paradise*. First of all, Deacon Morgan makes a downright pilgrimage in order to testify, as he approaches Reverend Richard Misner's house barefooted some time after the attack on the Convent. (*Paradise*, 300p.) He has been feeling out of place since the event, and above all, he has undergone a serious estrangement from his twin brother Steward. "Deacon Morgan had never consulted with or taken into his confidence any man. All of his intimate conversations had been worldless ones with his brother or brandishing ones with male companions." (*Paradise*, 301) It is therefore not surprising that in this unfamiliar situation, "[h]is words came out like ingots pulled from the fire by an apprentice blacksmith – hot, misshapen, resembling themselves only in their glow," (*Paradise*, 301) and he seems to beat about the bush initially. "Then he told him of his grandfather who walked barefoot for two hundred miles rather than dance." (*Paradise*, 301) Deacon relates the story of his grandfather Zechariah, formerly known as Coffee, and his twin brother Tea. When some white people had wanted to force them to dance for them, Tea complied with the demand. Coffee, however, resisted and got shot into his foot. "From that moment they weren't brothers anymore." (*Paradise*, 302) Some time later, Coffee plans to leave the town together with several other men, yet, he does not ask Tea to accompany him. Deacon now evaluates his situation with Steward against the backdrop of their grandfather's story. For many years, he had been convinced that Coffee should have been able to forgive his brother. "Tea was his twin, after all. Now I'm less sure." (*Paradise*, 303) After the raid on the Convent, Steward appears in a different light to Deacon, whose new perspective parallels that of Coffee: "He saw something that shamed him. The way his brother thought about things; the choices he made when up against it. Coffee couldn't take it. Not because he was ashamed of his twin, but because the shame was in himself." (*Paradise*, 303) Despite his hard feelings against his twin brother Steward, Deacon considers Richard's advice that "[t]o lose a brother is a hard thing. To choose to lose one, well, that's worse than the original shame, wouldn't you say?" (*Paradise*, 303) After a long time of taking stock of himself, Deacon finally acknowledges his faults: "I got a long way to go, Reverend." (*Paradise*, 303) Deacon's testifying of an inglorious part of his heritage as well as his awareness of history about to repeat itself enable him to transcend his former resentments against his brother; he humbly affirms his own fallibility but is determined to improve.

Another kind of testifying is taking place at the Convent. When Consolata cannot endure the tension between some of the women and the general drift any longer,

she decides to change the way of life at the Convent. After having reconsidered various situations of her life, namely her short relationship with Deacon and her numerous instances of “stepping in” to save Mary Magna’s life, Consolata says goodbye to the God she has been serving all her life when she is visited by a mysterious stranger. She then sets out to prepare a special menu for her house mates. Sections, in which her progress is described, are positioned in a call and response manner between passages dealing with the current situations of the respective Convent women, their thoughts, and the memories haunting them. (*Paradise*, 252-262) “I call myself Consolata Sosa. If you want to be here you do what I say. Eat how I say. Sleep when I say. And I will teach you what you are hungry for.” (*Paradise*, 262) Consolata clearly assumes command and her calling herself by her full name instead of the more familiar “Connie” testifies to her newly found position of authority.⁵³⁴ She offers them the possibilities of either staying on in the Convent but living according to her terms or to leave the place for good. “No one left. There were nervous questions, a single burst of frightened giggling, a bit of pouting and simulated outrage, but in no time at all they came to see that they could not leave the one place they were free to leave.” (*Paradise*, 262) Some days later, the women scrub the cellar floor, position a great number of candles, take off their clothes and lie down on the floor, following Consolata’s directions. “When each found the position she could tolerate on the cold, uncompromising floor, Consolata walked around her and painted the body’s silhouette. Once the outlines were complete, each was instructed to remain there. Unspeaking. Naked in candlelight.” (*Paradise*, 263)

After Consolata’s introductory speech comprising an enigmatic account of her own life, she tells the women of an edenic place and “of a woman named Piedade, who sang but never said a word.” (*Paradise*, 264) Her narration serves as a kind of initiation for the other women, since Consolata’s story “unleashes theirs, and the ‘loud dreaming’ begins, stories of pain and loss articulated, shared, mixed.”⁵³⁵ The women start to recount their personal sufferings and torments, thereby turning them into their respective blues. Each woman’s blues is acknowledged, affirmed and shared by the others. “And it was never important to know who said the dream or whether it had

⁵³⁴ Although many critics (Elia, 128; Tally, *Paradise*, 42; et. al.) are convinced that her choice of words as “I call myself Consolata Sosa” instead of “My name is Consolata Sosa” increases this effect, it is also likely that the syntax she uses is intended to reflect her South American roots, as this is the exact structure such a sentence would have in a Romance language. Her phrasing can therefore be understood as a word-by-word translation from Portuguese. This interpretation is supported by the fact that later on, Consolata cryptically relates the story of her life using a form of syntax unintelligible to the others. (*Paradise*, 263)

⁵³⁵ Cf. Tally, *Paradise*, 43.

meaning.” (*Paradise*, 264) Guided into such spiritual therapy by Consolata, “the Convent women finally recover from their past physical and spiritual abuses.”⁵³⁶ The women are testifying with the help of loud dreaming,

creating collective memories that articulate the pains of women who have been beaten, gang raped, and abused, women who have lost their children, who were betrayed by their mothers, who were turned into sex toys, or who somehow made a mess of their own lives. As they voice the emotional pain that accompanies this abuse, they are able to rise above it.⁵³⁷

The loud dreaming functions as a climax in which the women’s various stories, aspects of which have so far been related in the call and response sections with Consolata’s preparations, are joined together to form a unity; their individual sufferings merge into an empowering single blues shared by all of them. Together with the others, Mavis forces herself to once again go through the situation in which her babies died. Gigi, whose real name is Grace, admits her disappointment in her parents. Her name, which is identical to that of her mother (*Paradise*, 73), is testifying to the underlying unity between them she is trying to re-establish. Seneca is helped to face her persistent self-mutilation, and Pallas eventually acknowledges the reality of her pregnancy. (*Paradise*, 264p.)

In addition to their various accounts, they eventually start to individualise the templates of their bodies drawn onto the cellar floor. This procedure enables them to project their self-destructive torments not on themselves any longer but onto their representations instead, thereby further acknowledging and affirming their personal histories. Had their storytelling already carried a blueslike cathartic quality, this is even enhanced by the women’s extended projections, which can be interpreted as the realisation of an *efunesque* ritual, whereas *efun* is a kind of sacred chalk that plays an important role within Yoruba culture. It is claimed to possess “the power to transform the negative energy within an entity into a positive potential.”⁵³⁸ The representations contribute to the women’s progress indeed. “With Consolata in charge, like a new and revisited Reverend Mother, feeding them bloodless food and water alone to quench their thirst, they altered. They had to be reminded of the moving bodies they wore, so seductive were the alive ones below.” (*Paradise*, 265) The therapy, imposed on the women by Consolata, is effective in the end: “Unlike some people in Ruby, the Convent

⁵³⁶ Cf. Elia, 128.

⁵³⁷ Ibid., 131.

women were no longer haunted.” (*Paradise*, 266) Their spiritual cleansing is completed by their communal dance in the rain, in which they are finally able to rid themselves of their past traumata.

Seneca embraced and finally let go of a dark morning in state housing. Grace witnessed the successful cleansing of a white shirt that never should have been stained. Mavis moved in the shudder of rose of Sharon petals tickling her skin. Pallas, delivered of a delicate son, held him close while the rain rinsed away a scary woman on an escalator and all fear of black water. Consolata, fully housed by the god who sought her out in the garden, was the more furious dancer, Mavis the most elegant. Seneca and Grace danced together, then parted to skip through fresh mud. Pallas, smoothing raindrops from her baby’s head, swayed like a frond. (*Paradise*, 283)

Testifying has helped the women transcend their pain and it has possibly even granted them another chance. Considering that the women are shot during the attack on the Convent, it is surprising that they reappear afterwards, leaving open the question of what has really happened to them. In any case, the changes brought about in the Convent enable them to actively confront the people involved in their former suffering. Had the women seen themselves as victims before, they now assume responsibility and take charge of their situation. Gigi reconciles with her father, Mavis with her daughter Sally. Pallas, whose name invokes one of the bynames of the Greek goddess Athene⁵³⁹, appears at her mother’s house carrying a sword. Pallas’ mother is an artist, and Athene also represented art. She is traditionally depicted carrying a sword, therefore Pallas’ name as well as her appearance *Signify* on her namesake. Whereas she does not directly make it up with her mother, Pallas has named her son Divine (*Paradise*, 291), which is her mother’s nickname. (*Paradise*, 181) This act of naming thus testifies to her indirect reconciliation with her mother. Even Seneca once more encounters her mother/sister. As a little girl, she has been living with Jean, whom she believed to be her sister, but who is really her mother. After having been left by her, Seneca spent many years in foster homes. Her name testifies to her undemanding nature and modesty by aligning her with her namesake, the Roman philosopher Seneca, who was a member of the Stoics, preaching virtue, compassion, and modesty. These characteristics make the girl a welcome child in the foster homes for a long time. Seneca meets her mother, who remembers her name but is mistaken about their former address and therefore only

⁵³⁸ Cf. Ryan, 605.

⁵³⁹ Cf. Michael Grant, John Hazel. *Lexikon der antiken Mythen und Gestalten*. 1980. München: dtv 2001. 79-81, 317p.

realises that she had really been speaking to her daughter when it is too late. Jean erroneously apologises to Seneca for having mistaken her for somebody else, and Seneca replies, “[t]hat’s okay. Everybody makes mistakes,” (*Paradise*, 317) thereby implicitly forgiving her mother for having abandoned her years ago. Consolata returns to the edenic place she had described to the other women and to the presence of Piedade. Hence, all of the Convent women have eventually managed to reach fulfillment with the help of testifying and affirmation. In a style sanctified within African American cosmology, their testifying has indeed been turned into a “song of pure revival,”⁵⁴⁰ singing them into paradise.

⁵⁴⁰ Cf. Carol King, *Jazzman*.

4 *Signifying: “To Rename is to Revise, and to Revise is to Signify”*⁵⁴¹

4.1 Names

When the jazzman’s signifyin’, and the band is windin’ low.
It’s the late night side of morning in the darkness of his soul.
He can fill a room with sadness as he fills his horn with tears.
He can cry like a fallen angel when risin’ time is near.⁵⁴²

Signifying is an essential element of African American music,⁵⁴³ especially of the blues and varieties of jazz, which are characterised by their repetition and revision of motifs and themes. The alteration of a theme gives an additional level of meaning to the original. “The material, thus, slips into irreversible difference.”⁵⁴⁴ In Baker’s view, the rendition of one blues song is connected to the blues code as a whole in such a way that it *Signifies* on it.⁵⁴⁵ This is to say that a single blues song does not only stand for itself, it represents the blues as such. Thereby, the single blues song also acquires an extension of meaning. Morrison defines Black literary style as “a putting together of all sorts of things. It’s cleaning up the language so that old words have new meanings.”⁵⁴⁶ And giving old words new meanings is exactly what Morrison does in her novels by her peculiar choice of naming.

The central character in *The Bluest Eye* is called Pecola Breedlove. Her first name allows various interpretations. It *Signifies* on the Latin word for sin, *peccatum*. While Pecola herself does not sin, almost everybody else misuses her as a scapegoat, and, by raping her, her father commits one of the worst sins that can be imagined. Therefore, Pecola is a personification of sin despite her innocence and purity of character. It is impossible to look at Pecola without thinking of her father’s crime against her. In the audiobook of *The Bluest Eye*,⁵⁴⁷ Morrison herself pronounces the name Pecola almost as a homophone of *piccola*, the Italian word for “little girl.” Thereby Pecola’s helplessness as a little girl who is forced to defend herself against a grown man is especially underlined. Maureen Peal (the light-skinned girl whose surname *Signifies* on “to peel”) mistakes Pecola’s name for that of a character in the

⁵⁴¹ Cf. Gates, *Signifying Monkey*. XXIII.

⁵⁴² Cf. Carol King, *Jazzman*.

⁵⁴³ Cf. Hansen Werner, *Playing the Changes*. XIX.

⁵⁴⁴ Cf. Baker, 5.

⁵⁴⁵ Cf. Baker, 6.

⁵⁴⁶ Cf. Wilson in Taylor-Guthrie, 136.

⁵⁴⁷ Cf. Toni Morrison, *The Bluest Eye*. New York: Random House, 1994. Audiobook. Read by Toni Morrison and Ruby Dee.

film *Imitations of Life*. The protagonist, Peola, is the visual opposite of Pecola because of her light skin. The girl is passing⁵⁴⁸ and hates her mother for being black.⁵⁴⁹ Pecola, however, is dark-skinned and she mainly hates herself. Since Pauline used to frequently attend the cinema during her pregnancy with Pecola, it is quite likely that she chose her daughter's name after the model of a film character. By linking Pecola with Peola, Morrison *Signifies* upon the practice of passing, which she openly criticises.

Pecola and her family are called Breedlove. Although Morrison maintains that she chose this surname since to her it simply was a very common and ordinary name,⁵⁵⁰ it does *Signify* upon the situation in that family. Instead of loving their offspring, as the name would suggest, Pauline and Cholly are indifferent towards their children and even violate them. If we trust in her reasons for choosing this name, then why did she not attribute it to a family in which the parents love their children? Morrison is too considerate about small details in her novels for this irony to pass unnoticed.

The memory of a name functioned as Morrison's starting point for *Sula*, and the issue of naming, remaining important throughout the novel, is once more appropriated for the sake of *Signifying*. Morrison remembered the "shadow of a woman"⁵⁵¹ her mother knew, who was called Hannah Peace. Whereas she is unable to recall much of the woman herself, the name has become fixed in her mind. "But most of all I remember her name – or the way people pronounced it. Never Hannah or Miss Peace. Always Hannah Peace. And more: something hidden – some awe perhaps, but certainly some forgiveness. When they pronounced her name they [...] forgave her something."⁵⁵² Morrison explains that "sometimes the real names are so much better than any name you can make up,"⁵⁵³ and therefore, she "used the name because [she] couldn't not use it,"⁵⁵⁴ but did not model the character after the real life woman. In addition to that, Eva's, Hannah's and Sula's surname Peace also reflects the time in which the novel was written, as Morrison began working on it in 1969, which was an era of widespread and

⁵⁴⁸ Passing: When someone of African American descent with a complexion light enough to be taken for white rejects his heritage and pretends to be white.

⁵⁴⁹ Cf. Juda Bennett, "Toni Morrison and the Burden of the Passing Narrative."

Cited after: http://www.findarticles.com/cf_0/m2838/2_35/7782877/print.jhtml, 30th of September 2002, Pages 1-14, 3.

⁵⁵⁰ Cf. Stepto, 80.

⁵⁵¹ Cf. Morrison, *Memory*. 386.

⁵⁵² *Ibid.*, 386.

⁵⁵³ Cf. Koenen, 80.

⁵⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 80.

important political activity. Patricia Hunt therefore reads “*war and men* to be as central to this novel as *peace and women*.”⁵⁵⁵

Sula’s name, at times wrongly believed to be a new coinage,⁵⁵⁶ already hints at various of her characteristics. She is associated with water throughout the novel. Amongst other meanings, her name designates a type of seabird, and thus a species “associated with a dual environment”⁵⁵⁷ just like the tadpole, which some observers in the novel believe to be resembled in Sula’s ambiguous birthmark. According to Morrison’s assistant René Shepperd, the word “sula” literally translates as “water” in the Twi language spoken in Ghana.⁵⁵⁸ “In the Babangi language, it means any one of or a combination of the following: (1) to be afraid, (2) to run away, (3) to poke, (4) to alter from a proper condition to a worse one, (5) to be blighted, (6) to fail in spirit, (7) to be overcome, (8) to be paralyzed with fear, or (9) to be stunned.”⁵⁵⁹ Most of these translations can be applied to Sula, indeed. Whereas she is rarely afraid, Shadracks promise of “Always” torments her. (*Sula*, 63) She does run away from the house after having overheard her mother’s comment that she loves her daughter without liking her. (*Sula*, 57) Immediately afterwards, Sula symbolically undergoes a sort of initiation together with Nel by poking twigs “rhythmically and intensely into the earth, making a small neat hole that drew deeper and wider with the least manipulation of her twig.” (*Sula*, 58) Sula actually fails in spirit when her friendship with Nel is shattered and her lover Ajax leaves her. His departure makes her despair, and she resigns: “There aren’t any more new songs and I have sung all the songs there are.” (*Sula*, 137) As she falls sick and eventually dies, her condition clearly deteriorates; nevertheless, she is stunned at her post-mortem discovery that “it didn’t even hurt.” (*Sula*, 149) Most applicable to her life, however, is the translation of her name as “to be blighted,” as Sula is also constantly related to fire as well as to water. Since she watched her mother burn to death without intervening to save her, (*Sula*, 78) the people in the Bottom come to believe that

⁵⁵⁵ Cf. Patricia Hunt, “War and Peace: Transfigured Categories and the Politics of *Sula*.” In: *African American Review* 27:3 (1993) 443-459. 444.

⁵⁵⁶ Cf. Karen Stein, “‘I Didn’t Even Know His Name’: Names and Naming in Toni Morrison’s *Sula*.” In: *Names* 28:3 (1980) 226-229. 228. It seems ironic that the author’s own name does not appear anywhere near this article and can only be found out by bibliographic research.

⁵⁵⁷ Cf. Mae Gwendolyn Henderson, “Speaking in Tongues: Dialogics, Dialectics, and the Black Woman Writer’s Literary Tradition.” In: Cheryl A. Wall (ed.), *Changing our own words: Essays on Criticism, Theory, and Writing by Black Women*. Rutgers University Press, 1989. 16-37, 28.

⁵⁵⁸ Cf. Sheldon Brivic, “Toni Morrison’s Funk at *Finnegans Wake*.” In: *Joyce Studies Annual* (1998) 158-173. 162p.

⁵⁵⁹ Cf. Vashti-Crutchter, Lewis, “African Tradition in Toni Morrison’s *Sula*.” In: *Phylon* 48:1 (1987) 91-97. 91.

her birthmark really symbolised “Hannah’s ashes marking her from the very beginning.” (*Sula*, 114)

Sula’s name can also be related to the Bible, as Patricia Hunt interprets the name Sula to be an anagram of Saul, and the protagonist’s full name Sula Mae as a near correlative of Samuel. The Biblical book of *Samuel* is centrally concerned with war. Following Hunt’s hypothesis, Sula’s name together with its Biblical implications combines in itself the issues of war and peace.⁵⁶⁰ In addition to the fact that Morrison’s novel indeed thematises war, Hunt’s explanation is supported by the Bible itself, since Samuel’s mother, just like Sula’s, was called Hannah.⁵⁶¹ However, this choice of names in the novel is subverting the Biblical story insofar as Morrison’s Hannah, unlike her Biblical forerunner, does not like her child. The Hannah of the Bible so insistently loves her son that she dedicates his very life to God.⁵⁶² At the end of the novel, Nel experiences an epiphanic moment when she suddenly understands that instead of missing the husband who had left her, she had really been missing her friend Sula. “We was girls together, [...] O Lord, Sula.” (*Sula*, 174) Her cry *Signifies* on David’s lament for the deceased Jonathan: “thy love to me was wonderful, passing the love of women.”⁵⁶³ Sula and Samuel are both unconventional, and in her particular way, Sula is even prophetic. Nevertheless, her prophecy does not echo the Bible, but *Signifies* on it. In *Leviticus*⁵⁶⁴, God’s laws regarding limitations of sexual contacts are specified, prohibiting intercourse between related partners, homosexual relations, as well as sodomy. In Sula’s preview of the time in which she will be loved, some of the Biblical laws as well as various socially imposed restrictions on sexual relationships, the borders between races, species, and time-levels are dissolved.

After all the old women have lain with the teen-agers; when all the young girls have slept with their old drunken uncles; after all the black men fuck all the white ones; when all the white women kiss all the black ones; when the guards have raped all the jail-birds and after all the whores make love to their grannies; after all the faggots get their mothers’ trim; when Lindbergh sleeps with Bessie Smith and Norma Shearer makes it with Stepin Fetchit; after all the dogs have fucked all the cats and every weathervane on every barn flies off the roof to mount the hogs . . . then there’ll be a little love left over for me. And I know just what it will feel like. (*Sula*, 145p.)

⁵⁶⁰ Cf. Hunt, 445.

⁵⁶¹ Cf. 1 Samuel 1:20

⁵⁶² Cf. 1 Samuel 1:11 and 1:28.

⁵⁶³ Cf. 2 Samuel 1:26.

⁵⁶⁴ Cf. Leviticus 18.

Unlike Samuel, Sula is also an apocalyptic character.⁵⁶⁵ Morrison's allusion to the Bible through her choice of names must not be misunderstood as an intention to totally align her characters with their namesakes. Moreover, it is her way of challenging given interpretations of these Biblical texts.⁵⁶⁶

Eva's name of course *Signifies* on Eve in *Genesis*, "the mother of all living."⁵⁶⁷ And indeed, Eva "functions as a mother toward much of Medallion."⁵⁶⁸ Apart from naming her own children, she also allocates names to other people, thereby exercising power over them, since traditionally, "the nomenclator has the power."⁵⁶⁹ The names chosen by Eva turn into the names these people come to be known by.⁵⁷⁰ She ironically calls a light-skinned man Tar Baby, *Signifying* on the folktale and on the character's association with black people. After all, the police who believe him to be white nevertheless treat him just as badly as they treat black men, because they despise him for living in a black neighbourhood out of his own free will. (*Sula*, 133) "Like the folkloric Tar Baby, he is stuck in his fate with blacks."⁵⁷¹ The power of naming "has ironic ramifications in *Sula*, for the naming process often has unexpected, even dangerous consequences."⁵⁷² This becomes evident in the case of the deweys, three boys of different ages and races, each of whom Eva calls dewey⁵⁷³. Gradually, the boys lose their identities, turning into an unholy trinity and making it impossible for anyone to tell them apart. "They are nonentities – indistinguishable, imbecilic – and disappear from the scene without leaving a mark of having existed, except for the memory of their remarkable teeth. The name is lower-cased for obvious reasons."⁵⁷⁴ The lack of an individualised name reflects the absence of emotional sustenance, which prevents them from growing physically and emotionally. Their literal shortcomings are indicative of the "limitations in Eva's mothering."⁵⁷⁵ Although she "provides shelter and food for the deweys, she is about as much a mother to them as Teapot's Mamma is to him before his encounter with Sula."⁵⁷⁶ By naming the three boys alike, Eva has determined their fate,

⁵⁶⁵ Cf. Hunt, 452.

⁵⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 452.

⁵⁶⁷ Cf. Genesis 3:9.

⁵⁶⁸ Cf. Dehn Kubitschek, 62.

⁵⁶⁹ Cf. Bergenholtz, 96.

⁵⁷⁰ Cf. Stein, 227.

⁵⁷¹ Cf. Ogunyemi, 132.

⁵⁷² Cf. Stein, 226.

⁵⁷³ Despite serving as a name, the word is solely used in lower case in the novel.

⁵⁷⁴ Cf. Ogunyemi, 132.

⁵⁷⁵ Cf. Dehn Kubitschek, 59.

⁵⁷⁶ Cf. Trudier Harris, 65.

as their name itself *Signifies* on “Thomas E. Dewey, who was the Republican nominee for president in 1944 and 1948, and who became known as the ‘me-too’ candidate because many found his views indistinguishable from those of his opponents.”⁵⁷⁷ For Eva, “the process of naming, unnamng, and renaming is an ironic assertion of authority, a recognition of the plurality of meaning, and a statement of self-affirmation.”⁵⁷⁸ For the people named by her, however, it can be disastrous. “Morrison’s Eva is Adam in her power to name, and she is also life-taking.”⁵⁷⁹

Whereas the deweys figure as the epitome of childish men in the novel, the name of Eva’s husband BoyBoy aligns him with a limited stage of development. By suggesting an eternal childhood, it *Signifies* on the racist habit of calling black men boys.⁵⁸⁰ BoyBoy’s behaviour of abandoning his wife and three children in quest of adventures does not show him as a responsible adult. His name also *Signifies* on that of the Biblical Eve’s husband, whose name Adam translates as “man.”⁵⁸¹

The community lives in a place called the Bottom despite its location in the hills, suggesting a world upside-down. The white farmer in the tale of how the area received its name persuaded the black slave that it is “the bottom of heaven,” (*Sula*, 5) a description which alludes to the meaning of the word Babylon as “the gate of God.”⁵⁸² Just like its Biblical forerunner, the Bottom does not last. Officially, it forms part of the town of Medallion, which “evokes an object that is, by definition, doubly inscribed.”⁵⁸³ This dichotomy is persistent throughout the entire novel, as notions of good and evil are constantly juxtaposed. Sula and Nel really are like the two sides of the same coin.

The connection between the Bottom and Babylon is further continued in the character of Shadrack, whose name is derived from the Biblical Shadrach, an Israelite nobleman held captive by the Babylonians together with his companions Meshach and Abednego. Their king Nebuchadnezzar has created a golden idol and wants to force Shadrach to worship it. Shadrach however, even at the prospect of being thrown into a fiery furnace, refuses to honour this idol. “If it be so, our God whom we serve is able to

⁵⁷⁷ Cf. Joseph H. Wessling, “Narcissism in Toni Morrison’s *Sula*.” In: *CLA Journal* 31:3 (1988) 281-298. 296.

⁵⁷⁸ Cf. Marilyn Mobley, *Folk Roots and Mythic Wings in Sarah Orne Jewett and Toni Morrison*. Louisiana State University Press, 1991. 104.

⁵⁷⁹ Cf. Hunt, 451.

⁵⁸⁰ Cf. Reddy, 34.

⁵⁸¹ Cf. Stein, 228.

⁵⁸² Cf. Hunt, 447.

⁵⁸³ Cf. Maggie Galehouse, “‘New World Woman’: Toni Morrison’s *Sula*.” In: *Papers on Language and Literature* 35:4 (1999) 339-362. 344.

deliver us from the burning fiery furnace, and he will deliver us out of thine hand, O king. / But if not, be it known unto thee, O king, that we will not serve thy gods, nor worship the golden image which thou hast set up.”⁵⁸⁴ Although Shadrach and his companions are thrown into the fire, they are not harmed, whereupon Nebuchadnezzar converts to believing in their God.⁵⁸⁵ In the novel, the furnace Shadrack has to enter is World War I. Whereas he survives it physically, his psyche is forever damaged by the cruelty and violence he has been forced to witness. The image of a fellow soldier’s head being blown away while the body keeps on running for a while has permanently burned itself into Shadrack’s consciousness and accounts for his madness. “Like his biblical namesake, then, Shadrack doggedly defends and enforces the parameters of his own reality. Just like his namesake, Shadrack is also saved from death at the end of *Sula*, when National Suicide Day fulfills the prophecy of its name.”⁵⁸⁶ However: Whereas the Biblical Shadrach is a true believer, “God is decisively dead in Shadrack’s universe.”⁵⁸⁷

Shadrack is determined by his experience during the war, thereby contrasting the very name of Sula Peace. Both of them are affiliated with water, Sula’s name echoing that of a seabird, and Shadrack’s that of a fish, namely the shad, which is a common food fish in North America.⁵⁸⁸ Just as unfitting as Sula’s surname is that of her friend Nel Wright, which is *Signifying* on “being in the right.” Although her mother Helene tries to always do the right thing by keeping up high moral standards, she does not succeed. Even Nel’s position is challenged, as she is not innocent at Chicken Little’s death. When her husband Jude, whose name *Signifies* on that of Judas, the traitor to Jesus, betrays her with Sula, Nel does not attempt to save their friendship. In Sula’s eyes, Nel has thus failed her, and she asks her friend “If we were such good friends, how come you couldn’t get over it?” (*Sula*, 145) Had Nel believed that her surname described her personality, Sula is also deceived by a name: For all her life, she had believed that the man who eventually becomes her lover was called Ajax, a name that calls upon a brave hero of the Trojan War, who was punished for his attempt to kill his companion Odysseus out of greed.⁵⁸⁹ But while he dies in the myth, he is merely arrested and put on trial for his misdeeds in the novel. When Ajax in Morrison’s novel leaves Sula, he forgets his driving licence. Sula eventually finds it and is astonished and

⁵⁸⁴ Cf. Daniel 3:17-18.

⁵⁸⁵ Cf. Daniel 3.

⁵⁸⁶ Cf. Galehouse, 346.

⁵⁸⁷ Cf. Pessoni, 447.

⁵⁸⁸ Ibid., 448.

devastated at her discovery that the document identifies him as Albert Jacks. “But what was this? Albert Jacks? His name was Albert Jacks? A. Jacks. She had thought it was Ajax. All those years.” (*Sula*, 135) She cannot bring herself to believe that “when for the first time in her life she had lain in bed with a man and said his name involuntarily or said it truly meaning *him*, the name she was screaming and saying was not his at all.” (*Sula*, 136) She blames herself for his leaving her: “I didn’t even know his name. And if I didn’t know his name, then there is nothing I did know and I have known nothing ever at all since the one thing I wanted was to know his name so how could he help but leave me since he was making love to a woman who didn’t even know his name.” (*Sula*, 136) The knowledge of a name can be empowering, as a “name indicates the essence of a human being, and Ajax has not given Sula that deep understanding of herself.”⁵⁹⁰

In *Song of Solomon*, naming plays a dominating role. The description of Ruth breast-feeding Milkman alludes to *Rumpelstiltskin*, (*SoS*, 13) a fairy tale in which the knowledge of a person’s name is equivalent to exceeding power over this person. By including this intertextual reference, Morrison establishes the topos of naming via the process of *Signifying*.⁵⁹¹ While Ruth is compared to the Miller’s daughter of the fairy tale, Milkman’s secret name becomes known.⁵⁹² The names of the principal women in the novel are of Biblical origin and mostly emphasise the irony of the situations they are in. Although Macon believes Pilate to be a traitor, she “does not wash her hands off him and his family but is ready to help whenever she can.”⁵⁹³ Her name both *Signifies* on the Biblical Christ-killing Pilate and on its homophone pilot.⁵⁹⁴ The image of her Biblical namesake is completely subverted by Pilate. By providing guidance for Milkman, she eventually helps him to learn how to fly. Therefore, from the very beginning of the novel, her name implies her special connection to the sky.

Ruth’s Biblical namesake was a widow overly faithful to her mother-in-law: “Where thou diest, will I die, and there will I be buried: the Lord do so to me, and more also, if ought but death part thee and me.”⁵⁹⁵ In the novel, Ruth’s mother-in-law has died long ago. Instead, Ruth is faithful to her own dead father with whom she maintains

⁵⁸⁹ Cf. Grant and Hazel, 25p.

⁵⁹⁰ Cf. Jones, 623.

⁵⁹¹ Cf. Jacqueline de Weever, “Toni Morrison’s Use of Fairy Tale, Folk Tale and Myth in *The Song of Solomon*.” [Sic!] In: *Southern Folklore Quarterly* 44 (1980) 131-144. 144.

⁵⁹² *Ibid.*, 134.

⁵⁹³ *Ibid.*, 131; Matt. 27:24.

⁵⁹⁴ Cf. Melvin Dixon, “If you Surrender to the Air...” In: McKay, *Critical Essays*. 27-30. 29.

⁵⁹⁵ Cf. Ruth 1:17.

a strong affiliation.⁵⁹⁶ Although she is no widow, the celibate life she leads as a consequence of her husband's rejection is similar to that of a widow. Reba's name is an abbreviation of Rebecca. The Biblical Rebecca was an exemplary wife,⁵⁹⁷ whereas Reba is not married at all and rather enjoys a promiscuous life with many lovers.⁵⁹⁸ In the novel, Magdalene called Lena and First Corinthians are adult virgins. Their names *Signify* upon the Biblical Magdalene, a reformed prostitute,⁵⁹⁹ and the First Epistle of Paul to the Corinthians, in which he warns against indecencies⁶⁰⁰ and treats questions regarding marriage.⁶⁰¹ Only Hagar does not differ very much from her Biblical forerunner, the handmaiden of Sarah, who cannot conceive any children. Therefore, Hagar is selected to bear a child to Abraham. After the birth, Sarah dismisses Hagar.⁶⁰² In the novel, Hagar is also cast out – Milkman leaves her once he gets tired of her.⁶⁰³ Albeit the Biblical names in the novel rarely fit the characters, they function as secret names transforming the Biblical text.⁶⁰⁴

The men's names in *Song of Solomon* are reminiscent of folk tales as they define their characters.⁶⁰⁵ “Many Blacks took particular surnames for reasons other than to establish a historical link with their own family, especially since it was often difficult or impossible to do so, at the very least, they wanted the privilege of selecting a name and thereby establishing their right to make a choice.”⁶⁰⁶ Nevertheless, Jake accepted the name of Macon Dead as the outcome of a confusion. Being asked where he was born, he answered “Macon.” Questioned about his father, Jake replied, “He's dead.” (*SoS*, 53) The clerk taking down this information was drunk, and so he put everything in the wrong spaces, the result of which was the name Macon Dead. This “bogus appellation even hints at its own ultimate effect: it ‘makes dead.’”⁶⁰⁷ The first Macon Dead was assassinated by white men. The second and the third, alias Milkman, are so far removed from their ancestors and their cultural heritage that they appear to be spiritually dead. Milkman's nickname was given to him by Freddie, the janitor, who

⁵⁹⁶ Cf. de Weever, 132.

⁵⁹⁷ Cf. Gen. 24-25.

⁵⁹⁸ Cf. de Weever, 132.

⁵⁹⁹ Cf. Mark 16: 9.

⁶⁰⁰ Cf. 1 Cor. 5,9.

⁶⁰¹ Cf. 1 Cor. 7,1-40.

⁶⁰² Cf. Gen. 16:6.

⁶⁰³ Cf. de Weever, 132.

⁶⁰⁴ Cf. Wilentz, 120.

⁶⁰⁵ Cf. de Weever, 131p.

⁶⁰⁶ Cf. J. L. Dillard, *Black Names*. Contributions to the Sociology of Language (13). The Hague: Mouton, 1976. 23.

witnessed his extended breast-feeding by his mother. Even though the story of its coinage implies a strong connection with his mother, Milkman is quite indifferent about her. Morrison is *Signifying* again with the name of Milkman's friend Guitar, who begot this name out of his strong wish to possess such an instrument. While he adds another tone to Milkman's life, he does not enhance its harmony. He even attempts to kill Milkman – significantly by trying to strangle him with a wire, which can be seen as a symbol of a Guitar's strings.⁶⁰⁸ Guitar belongs to a group of men who call themselves the "Seven Days." They avenge every murder of black people by a similar assassination of the same number of white people. Their name *Signifies* upon the Creation, which took place during span of seven days.⁶⁰⁹ The men's occupation, however, is destruction instead of creation.

The central character of the novel's song is Milkman's great-grandfather, whose name continually shifts between Solomon, Sugarman, Shalimar, Shalleemone, and Charlemagne. Each of these names offers a new context for self-invention, linking Solomon with either a Biblical background, folktales, or his African heritage. The multiple character of his name connects both the men and the women of his family in the same way as his song serves as a bond between them. In the Bible, Ruth is one of Solomon's ancestors. The characters in the novel, however, are not directly related and Ruth is also younger than Solomon. The rearrangement and muddling of Biblical genealogy implies the cultural hybridity of people who have been uprooted from their countries and their native languages.⁶¹⁰

Furthermore, Morrison is also *Signifying* through the names of animals and places.⁶¹¹ Solomon is taking off from a place called Solomon's Leap. This might be interpreted as a parody of Plymouth Rock. Whereas Plymouth Rock stands for the arrival of white settlers at the Promised Land, Solomon's Leap celebrates a black man's departure from a country hostile to him.⁶¹² Macon and Pilate grew up on a farm called Lincoln's Heaven. Their horse was called President Lincoln, the foal Mary Todd, the cow Ulysses S. Grant, and the hog General Lee. (*SoS*, 52) President Lincoln was not only a horse, but a mare. While the original Mary Todd used to be Lincoln's wife, the

⁶⁰⁷ Cf. Cowart, 89.

⁶⁰⁸ Cf. Kathleen O'Slaughnessy, "Life life life life": The Community as Chorus in *Song of Solomon*." In: McKay, *Critical Essays*. 125-133. 129.

⁶⁰⁹ Cf. Gen. 1:1-2:25.

⁶¹⁰ Cf. Joyce, 195.

⁶¹¹ Cf. Herbert William Rice, 60.

⁶¹² Cf. Göbel, 26.

order is changed at the farm. And the names of two generals fighting against each other in Civil War serve as names of livestock at the farm. For Macon, “[t]hat was the way he knew what history he remembered.” (*SoS*, 52) Although the original reason for this choice might have solely been to appear funny, their connection with the animals Macon liked helps him to also be sympathetic to the historical personalities serving as role-models. This becomes especially ironic in Macon’s good-will towards General Lee (who fought for the South in Civil War), because he remembers slaughtering the hog with the same name and eating its meat. “General Lee was all right by me. [...] Finest general I ever knew. Even his balls was tasty.” (*SoS*, 52) To attribute these historically important names to animals is Morrison’s tongue-in-cheek way of rewriting history. Thus, *Song of Solomon*

explores the reclamation of the past as a slow process of dismantling imposed cultural constructions and reconstructing from obscured remains a uniquely different world-picture. Significantly, the vehicle Morrison uses for this exploration is language itself – names, words, fragmented phrases, a song – which, decoded from semantically distortive contexts and interpreted anew within their context of origin, cohere into a fully signifying narrative.⁶¹³

The main setting of *Tar Baby* is located on the Caribbean island of Isle des Chevaliers, where Valerian and the members of his household live on a property he calls L’Arbe de la Croix. “The name is a tease: ‘arbe’ is not quite ‘arbre,’ yet we think of tree, increasingly, in this context, of the primeval tree of paradise. The ‘croix’ foreshadows the agony that the house’s inhabitants will experience and the redemption they may or may not attain to.”⁶¹⁴ Valerian’s choice of this name can be seen as a self-regarding gesture insofar as the reference to Christ’s agony suggests “the white man’s burden.”⁶¹⁵ In addition to the Biblical allusions of paradise and the crucifixion of Christ, the Croix also hints at the suffering of the Haitian labourers who built the house under terrible working conditions. Therefore, “Valerian’s vision of Isle des Chevaliers shares with the antebellum South a self-aggrandizing mythology of knights and chivalry.

⁶¹³ Cf. Deborah Guth, “A Blessing and a Burden: The Relation to the Past in *Sula*, *Song of Solomon* and *Beloved*.” In: *Modern Fiction Studies* 39:3-4 (1993 Fall/Winter) 575-596. 579.

⁶¹⁴ Cf. Lauren Lepow, “Paradise Lost and Found: Dualism and Edenic Myth in Toni Morrison’s *Tar Baby*.” In: *Contemporary Literature* 28:3 (1987) 363-377. 367.

⁶¹⁵ Cf. Evelyn Hawthorne, “On Gaining the Double-Vision: *Tar Baby* as Diasporan Novel.” In: *Black American Literature Forum* 22:1 (1988) 97-107. 102.

Valerian defines the chevaliers of the island's name as napoleonic soldiers, thus linking himself with past imperial glories."⁶¹⁶

This attitude blends in perfectly with Valerian's name *Signifying* on that of Publius Licinius Valerianus, the Roman emperor in the 3rd century AD, who was "captured by enemy horsemen and held prisoner for the rest of his life."⁶¹⁷ This might be an explanation for Valerian's preference of the horsemen being French soldiers abiding to the Napoleonic Code rather than blind slaves of African descent. Valerian, who behaves as if he were indeed the emperor of the island,⁶¹⁸ is depicted as having a "head-of-a-coin-profile." (TB, 287) Nevertheless, he is "contrasted with the novel's conspicuous emperor butterflies, who have true dominion over the island, while Valerian is merely the false coinage of an emperor."⁶¹⁹

As a counterpoint to Valerian's pseudo-royal name, Morrison positions Marie Thérèse Foucault. Her first and middle name recall that of the French queen between 1660 and 1683. Whereas Valerian is misplaced in the Caribbean, Thérèse is clearly in her kingdom there. As Gideon continues to take Thérèse to the island after each of her dismissals by the Streets', explaining that she was called Mary, her first name *Signifies* on her employers' assumption that all black people look alike and even Ondine's and Sydney's inability to recognise her as the identical woman returned. "She looked a little different to the occupants of L'Arbe de la Croix each time, except for her Greta Garbo hat. They all referred to her as Mary and couldn't ever be wrong about it because all the baptized black women on the island had Mary among their names." (TB, 38) Apart from Son, the occupants of L'Arbe de la Croix disrespectfully call Thérèse Mary and Gideon yardman without taking any interest in their real names, and thus, in their identity or history. This behaviour reflects Valerian's and Margaret's inherent racist stance as well as Ondine's and Sydney's "lack of loyalty to their own people."⁶²⁰ However, this prerogative of naming is not only exercised by the superordinate,⁶²¹ as Thérèse retaliates by referring to Ondine as "machete-hair" (TB, 104), to Sydney as "the fast-ass" (TB, 107) and as "bow-tie" (TB, 107), and to Jadine as "the copper Venus." (TB, 115) Thérèse with her limited eyesight and her access to alternative knowledge also *Signifies* on Teiresias, the blind seer of Thebes, who was able to understand the language of birds

⁶¹⁶ Cf. Dehn Kubitschek, 102.

⁶¹⁷ Cf. Lepow, 368.

⁶¹⁸ Cf. Hawthorne, 102.

⁶¹⁹ Cf. Lepow, 368.

⁶²⁰ Cf. Dehn Kubitschek, 97.

and to use his insight to help others.⁶²² Like him, Thérèse does not need conventional eyesight to find her way. She is “an enigmatic Tiresian source of illumination and gives guidance to the African orphans of the New World, specifically the American Son Green and her nephew Gideon.”⁶²³ Her access to certain kinds of knowledge contrary to that of the Western tradition is also *Signified* on via her surname Foucault, as French philosopher and literary theorist Michel Foucault in some of his works questioned traditional structures and concepts, trying to trace their origins.⁶²⁴ By *Signifying* on him, Morrison enhances the status of Thérèse. Connecting French literary theory with Thérèse’s alternative knowledge, “Morrison apprehends myth both as a tool of Euro-American power and as a reservoir of historical knowledge capable of resisting that power.”⁶²⁵

Son’s self-chosen name reflects his close affiliation with nature, since he can be evaluated as a true son of nature, especially when taking into account his surname Green. At the same time, however, “memories of the racist designation of Black men as ‘boys’ and the paternalistic view of all Black people as childlike”⁶²⁶ are evoked, just as with Jadine’s surname Childs. Jadine’s dilemma is ironically alluded to in her surname, since she is an orphan, unable to readjust to her heritage, and thus, ultimately no one’s child.⁶²⁷ She is sometimes referred to as Jade, which as a verb translates as “to make or become dull, worn-out, or weary, as from overwork or overuse.”⁶²⁸ And indeed, Jadine is worn-out and weary of her life in Paris. Significantly, Son does not accept her name as Jade, when she tells him so. “He shook his head as though he knew better,” (*TB*, 115) possibly attempting to convince her of her heritage by rather acknowledging her full name.

In *Beloved*, Morrison is not only rewriting history, she is giving voice to those who so far had been voiceless. We do not know the original name of Sethe’s crawling-already? baby. Sethe has the word *Beloved* inscribed on the tombstone, because she can only afford one word, and the single phrase she remembers of the funeral service is

⁶²¹ Cf. Ryan, 696.

⁶²² Cf. Grant and Hazel, 386-388.

⁶²³ Cf. Hawthorne, 100.

⁶²⁴ Cf. e.g. Michel Foucault, *Archeology of Knowledge*. A. M. Sheridan (translator). London: Tavistock Publications Ltd. 1972.

⁶²⁵ Cf. Werner, 151.

⁶²⁶ Cf. Ryan, 606.

⁶²⁷ Cf. Billingslea Brown, 75.

⁶²⁸ Cf. Noah Webster, *Encyclopedic Unabridged Dictionary of the English Language*. Avenel: Random House, 1989.

“Dearly Beloved.” (*Beloved*, 5) Morrison is *Signifying*, because the preacher’s words did not name any individual, it was his address to the community. It “names everyone who is intimately loved, but does not name the forgotten.”⁶²⁹ The phrase “Dearly Beloved” is also typical of wedding ceremonies. Hence, it is *Signifying* on the ceremony Sethe and Halle never had. “‘Beloved’ is insufficient as a name but sufficient as a call.”⁶³⁰ After Beloved’s disappearance, “[e]verybody knew what she was called, but nobody anywhere knew her name.” (*Beloved*, 274) When “all trace is gone,” the novel ends with the word “Beloved.” (*Beloved*, 275) Thus, the name finally includes not only those who are remembered, but also the “[d]isremembered and unaccounted for” (*Beloved*, 274) - those who are unnamed.⁶³¹ “Beloved is the You in you” was Morrison’s answer to a question by Thandiwe Newton, who played Beloved in the film based on the novel.⁶³²

Even the name Beloved is *Signified* upon in the novel. The white girl who helps Sethe during her escape is called Amy, a name deriving from Old French and meaning Beloved.⁶³³ Another accomplice of Sethe’s flight is Stamp Paid, whose original name is Joshua. He ferries Sethe across the Ohio river. In the Bible, Joshua is the successor to Moses. “Now after the death of Moses the servant of the Lord it came to pass, that the Lord spake unto Joshua the son of Nun, Moses’ minister, saying, Moses my servant is dead; now therefore arise, go over this Jordan, thou, and all this people, unto the land which I do give to them, even to the children of Israel.”⁶³⁴ Like his Biblical namesake, he leads his people from a state of slavery to the land of freedom.

Sethe has been named after her father Seth. This is another name deriving from the Bible, where Seth is the third son of Adam.⁶³⁵ After Cain’s murder of Abel, Seth is the substitute for Adam’s dead son. At Sweet Home, Sethe substitutes Baby Suggs.⁶³⁶ The Hebrew name Seth translates as “granted” or “appointed,”⁶³⁷ and Sethe is the one

⁶²⁹ Caroline Rody, “Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*: History, ‘Rememory,’ and a ‘Clamor for a Kiss.’” In: Iyasere, 83-112. 96.

⁶³⁰ Cf. William R. Handley, “The House a Ghost Built: *Nommo*, Allegory, and the Ethics of Reading in Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*.” In: *Contemporary Literature* 36:4 (1995 Winter) 676-701. 680.

⁶³¹ Cf. Rody, 96.

⁶³² Cf. <http://www.inform.umd.edu/Eclipse/eclipse/98-10-13/98-10-13-woodards.html>. Curiously enough, the actor’s first name, Thandiwe, is Zulu for Beloved. 30th of September, 2002.

⁶³³ Cf. Rodríguez in Iyasere, 69. Note the name *Aimée* (Beloved) as well as the verb *aimer* (meaning “to love”) in present-day French.

⁶³⁴ Joshua 1:1-2.

⁶³⁵ Cf. Gen. 4:25.

⁶³⁶ Cf. Harding and Martin, 142.

⁶³⁷ Cf. Mae G. Henderson, “Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*. Re-Membering the Body as Historical Text.” In: Spillers, 62-86. 78.

child singled out by her mother. Sethe's mother had killed all the children she was forced to conceive after having been raped by white men, and only kept Sethe, who had been fathered by a man she loved. (*Beloved*, 62) But the name Seth is not merely connected with the Bible – the Egyptian god of confusion, who “gleefully breaks taboos and violates the limits that preserve order”⁶³⁸ bears the same name. Sethe also commits an act of sacrilege and subverts the order of nature by killing her own daughter. “To Sethe, the future was a matter of keeping the past at bay.” (*Beloved*, 42) Although in vain, she is trying her best to not remember details of her past. This fact is *Signified* upon in the name of Sethe echoing that of Lethe, the Greek mythological river of forgetfulness in Hades.⁶³⁹ Moreover, according to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, Sethe means atonement. “Thus, the tension between repressing the traumatic past and working through the trauma is built into her name.”⁶⁴⁰

In *Jazz*, Joe Trace chose his surname because his parents disappeared without leaving a trace. Joe thus reappropriates his fate as an orphan, because according to his understanding, he is the “Trace, what they went off without.” (*Jazz*, 149) Joe is raised by “Henry Lestory or LesTroy or something like that,” (*Jazz*, 176) who is called Hunters Hunter (*Jazz*, 196) as a document of his exceptional talent in reading trails. The two versions of the surname lead to two possible interpretations: Lestory *Signifies on le story*,⁶⁴¹ while LesTroy hints at Homer's *Odyssey*.⁶⁴² Golden Gray, whose first name reflects his blond hair, is looking for his father Henry Lestory, when he frightens Wild, a naked pregnant woman, in the woods. She runs into a tree and faints. Golden Gray takes her to the nearest house, which is that of Henry Lestory. (*Jazz*, 173-183) Although this chapter comes fairly late in the novel, it is where the stories of almost all of the novel's characters intersect. Henry Lestory's son Golden Gray had been taken care of by True Belle, Violet's grandmother. Her stories about the little boy exert a deep impact on Violet.

⁶³⁸ Cf. Mae G. Henderson, 86.

⁶³⁹ Cf. Helen Lock, “‘Building Up from Fragments’: The Oral Memory Process in Some Recent African-American Written Narratives.” In: Kostas Myrsiades and Linda Myrsiades (eds.), *Race-ing Representation. Voice, History, and Sexuality*. New York and Oxford: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 1998. 200-212. 203.

⁶⁴⁰ Cf. Holton, 87.

⁶⁴¹ Cf. Roberta Rubenstein, “History and Story, Sign and Design. Faulknerian and Postmodern Voices in *Jazz*.” In: Kolmerten, 152-164. 158. Homer, *The Odyssey*. Translated by Alexander Pope. Cited after: <http://www.ibiblio.org/gutenberg/etext02/dyssy10b.txt>, 20th of December 2003.

⁶⁴² Cf. Kathleen Morgan, “The Homeric Cyclops Episode and Otherness in Toni Morrison's *Jazz*.” In: *Classical and Modern Literature* 18:3 (1998) 219-229. 224. This intertextual connection will be examined in a later chapter.

It is at Henry Lestroy's house that the stories of Golden Gray and Wild converge. Although Morrison does not make it explicit, she alludes to further connections between the two. When Joe is looking for Wild, he finds a cave with things that might belong to her. Among them are "a pair of man's trousers with buttons of bone. Carefully folded, a silk shirt, faded pale and creamy – except at the seams. There, both thread and fabric were a fresh and sunny yellow." (*Jazz*, 217p.) The clothes fit the description of Golden Grays attire when he came to Henry Lestroy's house. "Morrison may be encouraging us, here, to write what Umberto Eco calls a 'ghost chapter' about the possible union of Wild [...] and Golden Gray."⁶⁴³ Joe believes that Wild is his mother, therefore he keeps on searching for her. Although Hunters Hunter constantly reminds him that "she ain't prey. You got to know the difference." (*Jazz*, 207), Joe's quest for her is very similar to a hunt. He is looking for traces of her and reading her trails in a fashion similar to his search for Dorcas years later. While Wild is frequently described as having "deer eyes" (*Jazz*, 182, 183, 193), the name Dorcas translates as deer or gazelle.⁶⁴⁴ Thus, Dorcas' name *Signifies* on herself being hunted down by Joe despite his outspoken belief that she is not prey. (*Jazz*, 213) *Le story* of *Jazz*, consisting of multiple plot lines, circles around the person and the house of Hunters Hunter alias Henry Lestroy as its focal point.

Ruby is the name of Steward and Deacon Morgan's sister. At the same time, the town in *Paradise* has been named after her as a form of honour for the first person of the founding families to die. But a ruby is also a gem *Signifying* on the multiplicity of views in the novel. "True things, like stories, have many facets. Like diamonds, the ruby has multiple sides all reflecting light like a prism. Unlike the diamond the ruby is blood red, and the stories of *Paradise* are all marked with violence."⁶⁴⁵ Steward's first name hints at his inclination to seize control with the aim to establish what he believes to be law and order. His twin brother's first name Deacon, on the other hand, alludes to the spark of true piety to distinguish him from Steward after the attack on the Convent. Steward is not even sure about the etymology of their surname, supposing it was "Moyné originally, not Morgan. Or Le Moyné or something," (*Paradise*, 192) which Justine Tally interprets as a cryptogram of "money" and thus as "the root of all evil, and

⁶⁴³ Cf. Martha J. Cutter, "The Story Must Go On and On: The Fantastic, Narration, and Intertextuality in Toni Morrison's *Beloved* and *Jazz*."

Cited after: http://www.findarticles.com/cf_0/m2838/1_34/62258906/print.jhtml, 30th of September 2002, 1-18. 9.

⁶⁴⁴ Cf. Carolyn M. Jones, 482.

the breakdown of black solidarity.”⁶⁴⁶ This assumption is plausible, considering the fact that the bank with all the money belonging to the citizens of Ruby is in the firm hands of Steward Morgan, who rules over it relentlessly, refusing to weaken his principles in order to help a fellow citizen. The rationale at work in Ruby seems to be “the more money, the fewer children; the fewer children, the more money to give the fewer children.” (*Paradise*, 193)

Steward’s and Deacon’s father was addressed as Big Daddy, their grandfather Coffee/Zechariah commonly referred to as Big Papa. These titles mock the twins, who are no such larger-than-life fathers themselves, as Steward and Dovey never had any children, and Deacon’s and Soane’s sons have both been killed in war. “The Morgan line was crop feeble.” (*Paradise*, 192)

“Streets of Ruby are named for the Gospels (Matthew, Mark, Luke and John) plus Peter, the rock of the Christian Church; when it becomes necessary to extend the streets to the other side, the new additions become Cross Matthew, Cross Mark, etc., with their obvious implications.”⁶⁴⁷ This act of naming takes on the form of hubris, suggesting that the citizens of Ruby are constantly “walking the straight and narrow of righteousness,”⁶⁴⁸ a notion which is utterly subverted in the contentions between the different groups of Ruby and ultimately, in the murderous attack on the Convent women.

Whereas the names of Ruby’s founding families have turned into evocations of power and respect, Patricia detects some gaps in a number of genealogies. Of some women no surname is known, leading to a loss of history and symbolising an unaccepted part of their identities within the community of Ruby, especially since these women were frequently of a lighter complexion than the 8-rock families in charge. (*Paradise*, 197) Even Patricia’s own mother is seen as “a wife with no last name, a wife without people, a wife of sunlight skin, a wife of racial tampering.” (*Paradise*, 197) Thus, the refusal to conserve a name and the consequent erasure of personal history prove the degree of intolerance in which Ruby is suffused.

In the Convent, on the other hand, “names and naming take on the value of affirmation, the inscribing of the self. In contrast to her time spent with Norma, who

⁶⁴⁵ Cf. Tally, *Paradise*, 41.

⁶⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 26.

⁶⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 69.

⁶⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 70.

never even asked her, the women who take Seneca in reaffirm her individuality”⁶⁴⁹ by calling her name. (*Paradise*, 138) Not only does Consolata ask for the names of the women arriving at the Convent, she even advises them on the issue. Not satisfied with Gigi’s account of her name, she insists, “Gigi Gigi Gigi Gigi Gigi. That’s what frogs sing. What did your mother name you?” (*Paradise*, 73) Learning that the girl bears the same name as her mother Grace, she is content. “Grace. What could be better?” (*Paradise*, 73) Consolata thus shows an interest in the girl’s personal history, trying to redirect her towards her family at the same time. When Pallas is encountered by Billie Delia, she is unable to speak as a result of the shock from having been raped. Asked for her name, she writes it down “in the dirt with her toe. Then slowly, imitating the girl’s earlier erasure with the vomit, she kicked her name away, covering it completely with red dirt.” (*Paradise*, 175) This gesture *Signifies* on the paradoxical shame and self-loathing many rape victims experience. Pallas’ deletion of her name thus figures as an attempt to make the memory of the event disappear alongside with her identity. Several days later in the Convent, Pallas has regained her voice and explains that she has been given her name by her father. Her mother’s name Divine is shortened to Dee Dee. Pallas has been betrayed by her mother, therefore her father’s act of naming her reflects his closer relation to his daughter as opposed to his wife’s lacking loyalty. When Pallas later on names her son Divine after her mother, this can be seen as a sign of forgiveness. Consolata, who for some time is being called Connie, reaffirms her personal roots in the reclamation of her full name, as has already been exemplified. Her name suggests healing and soothing qualities, and indeed, she strives to make peace between the Convent women; she comforts them, and longs for their consolation with their respective histories.

In the course of her research, Patricia comes across the information that Steward’s and Deacon’s grandfather, originally called Coffee “a misspelling of Kofi, probably” (*Paradise*, 192), has changed his name to Zechariah upon his departure from Haven. Patricia does not believe that he has chosen “Zacharias, father of John the Baptist” (*Paradise*, 192) as his namesake; she is rather convinced that he has named himself after

the Zechariah who had visions [...] The one who saw scrolls of curses and women in baskets; the one who saw Joshua’s filthy clothes changed into rich

⁶⁴⁹ Ibid., 42.

ones; who saw the result of disobedience. The punishment for not showing mercy or compassion was a scattering among all nations, and pleasant land made desolate. All of that would fit nicely for Zechariah Morgan: the curse, the women stuffed into a basket with a lid of lead and hidden away in a house, but especially the scattering. The scattering would have frightened him. The breakup of the group or tribe or consortium of families or, in Coffee's case, the splitting up of a contingent of families who had lived with or near each other since before Bunker Hill. (*Paradise*, 192)

His name thus *Signifies* on one of the prerequisites of Ruby's fall. Taking this fear of scattering to an extreme, the founding fathers fight partnerships between members of different races, making it an unwritten law not to enter relationships with lighter-skinned partners. Those transcending this covert regulation are punished by a gradual exclusion from Ruby's community.

One of the protagonists in *Love* is merely called L. Although her full name is never expressed literally, it is explained as "*the subject of First Corinthians, chapter 13,*" (*Love*, 199) and can therefore safely be taken to be the abbreviation of Love.⁶⁵⁰ Indeed, this character seems to be a personification of love, or rather of charity, and none of the others suspect her to be responsible for Bill Cosey's death – an act of killing which subverts the very notion of love. (*Love*, 200) Nevertheless, L's motivation for ending Bill Cosey's life was not based on selfish needs at all; she rather tried to protect the members of his family from the consequences of his last will, in which he wanted to bequeath almost everything to his lover. "*They never saw the real thing – witnessed by me, notarized by Buddy Silk's wife – leaving everything to Celestial. Everything. Everything. Except a boat he left to Sandler Gibbons. It wasn't right.*" (*Love*, 200) Love is blind, and Bill Cosey "*didn't understand: a dream is just a nightmare with lipstick. Whether what he believed was true or not, I wasn't going to let him put his family out in the street.*" (*Love*, 201) L's name of course *Signifies* on the novel's title as well as on its theme, questioning the very nature of love.

Also Heed the Night's name bears resonances of *First Corinthians*, in which the notion of taking heed is contained several times. "But take heed lest by any means this liberty of your's become a stumblingblock to them that are weak."⁶⁵¹ Heed herself was not free in her marriage to Bill Cosey, since he had merely asked her parents' consent and not hers. Christine once accuses Heed of being a slave for having been bought with

⁶⁵⁰ Although this chapter does not specify the word love itself and rather uses the term of charity, it can be assumed that by the use of this name Morrison also wants to allude to a more worldly concept of love.

⁶⁵¹ Cf. 1 Cor. 8:9.

a year's rent and a candy bar, (*Love*, 129) reversing and thereby *Signifying* upon the Biblical line "[Y]e are bought with a price; be not ye the servants of men."⁶⁵² Yet another parallel between Heed the Night and the content of *First Corinthians* can be established: Heed was a child when she got married to Bill Cosey, and thus, still a virgin. Just like his decision is not completely condemned in *Love*, the Bible text partly provides a justification. "But if any man think that he behaveth himself uncomely toward his virgin, if she pass the flower of her age, and need so require, let him do what he will, he sinneth not: let them marry."⁶⁵³ This is however relativised by an ensuing passage: "So then he that giveth her in marriage doeth well; but he that giveth her not in marriage doeth better,"⁶⁵⁴ a statement which can be applied as a judgement on Heed's parents.

Bill Cosey's life achievement was the creation of his resort, which really figured as a cosy haven for his guests. In his role as a husband to Heed or a grandfather to Christine, however, he fails to provide them with a truly cosy home. Living on 1 Monarch Street, (*Love*, 19) he behaved as though royal, the other members of the household being reduced to "court personnel fighting for the prince's smile." (*Love*, 37) All his energy is directed into the hotel, in which he allows for everything his father, Daniel Robert Cosey, shortened to DRC and utilised as Dark, would have despised. (*Love*, 68) Dark's nickname appropriately describes his personality, since he did everything for money - he even betrayed his own community by serving as an informant about his people for (white) police.

Junior has chosen Viviane "[w]ith an e" (*Love*, 21) as her surname, trying to thus reconnect to her mother through the use of her first name, although she had failed to name her as a baby, leading to her father calling "the newborn 'Junior,' either after himself - or after his longing, for although Vivian already had four boy children, none of them was Eathan's." (*Love*, 55) Junior, however, remains unsuccessful in getting people to call her June, which can be seen as her futile attempt to cut her links with her father who had left the family when she was still a little child. Christine, who refuses to call the girl June, evaluates her as "the lying Miss Junior-but-you-can-call-me-June" (*Love*, 22) and Heed's reaction to her is similar in her "instant dislike of the Junior-but-you-can-call-me-June person." (*Love*, 25p.) Probably the name of June *Signifies* on the

⁶⁵² Cf. 1 Cor. 7:23.

⁶⁵³ Cf. 1 Cor. 7:36

⁶⁵⁴ Cf. 1 Cor. 7:38.

prospect of the continuation of misunderstandings and open confrontations between Heed and Christine, many of which have been brought about by May – after all, May is followed by June in the year’s circle. This implication might account for the women’s similar reaction to the girl’s name. In any case, Morrison continues to use her instrument of *Signifying* in her most recent novel *Love*. By intertextually referring to the Bible with the help of names, Morrison challenges traditional notions of love and presents her readers with her interpretation of this most basic feeling.

Morrison is frequently *Signifying* through the names she chooses for the characters of her novels. At times, the implications of the names supply further information about the characters in the style of *telling names*. In other instances, these references serve as a counterpoint to the figures named by subverting their personalities. Often, the name “approaches but misses, in varying degrees, the congruence suggested by the context in a manner analogous to the defeat of expectation, through the deferment or acceleration of stress, in syncopated music.”⁶⁵⁵ This pattern is similar to that of musical off-beats.⁶⁵⁶ In some cases, as in *Jazz*, Morrison not only *Signifies* on the person named or the details connected with that person, but on the very process of storytelling itself.

⁶⁵⁵ Cf. Samuel Allen, “Review of *Song of Solomon*.” In: McKay, *Critical Essays*. 30-32. 31.

⁶⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 31.

4.2 Tricksters

Originally, *Signifying* has been the domain of tricksters such as Esu and his successor, the Signifying Monkey, who used *Signifying* in the sense of “rhetorical structures in which words had multiple meanings.”⁶⁵⁷ *Signifying* in connection with writing is peculiar to Esu, whereas oral discourse and *Signifying* through figurative speaking is believed to be typical of the Signifying Monkey.⁶⁵⁸ Many traditional tricksters have in common that their origins remain unexplained and they are believed to possess the power to change their shapes.⁶⁵⁹ “In virtually all cultures, tricksters are both folk heroes and wanderers on the edges of the community, at once marginal and central to the culture. Tricksters challenge the status quo and disrupt perceived boundaries.”⁶⁶⁰ Morrison makes use of trickster figures to “combat racial and sexual oppression and to affirm and create personal and cultural identity.”⁶⁶¹

Sula herself can certainly be seen as a kind of trickster, since she transcends any kind of boundaries, even that of her own death. Like some other of Morrison’s characters, Sula continues to speak after she has died, (*Sula*, 149) marking her defiance of Western concepts of linear time. “True to her trickster’s sense of comedy, her own death makes her smile as she experiences no break in consciousness but a freedom from physical responsibility.”⁶⁶²

But Sula is already set apart from other human beings during her life, symbolised by her ominous birthmark, which is alternately interpreted as a stemmed rose, a tadpole, and a representation of Hannah’s ashes. This feature aligns her with West African priestesses, who often distinguished themselves with body markings, “which were often water creatures, and experts would know from the markings on a particular woman to what god the priestess had been vowed.”⁶⁶³ Both Sula and Shadrack are described using symbols of water. In Yoruba culture, “[l]akes, streams,

⁶⁵⁷ Cf. Hélène Christol, “The African American Concept of the Fantastic as Middle Passage.” In: Diedrich and Gates, 164-173. 165.

⁶⁵⁸ Cf. Gates, *Signifying Monkey*. 21.

⁶⁵⁹ Such figures are not exclusive to the African American tradition. They can even be found in such popular science fiction series as *Star Trek – Deep Space Nine*. There, a figure called Odo, is a so-called shape-shifter, to a large extent possessing the same properties as tricksters in so far as he can transcend time, change his shape, and his origins are mysterious. Interestingly, he relaxes in a state of being liquid. Representing a displaced person, he aims to change the behaviour of the community.

⁶⁶⁰ Cf. Smith, 2.

⁶⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 2.

⁶⁶² *Ibid.*, 118p.

⁶⁶³ Cf. Vashti-Crutcher, 93.

and rivers have always been associated with divinities and spirits.”⁶⁶⁴ Many of these spirits are rumoured to resemble ordinary men, apart from differences regarding their hands and feet.⁶⁶⁵ Whereas Shadrack himself perceives his hands to change into monstrous beings while he is in hospital, (*Sula*, 9) Sula is soothed by the sight of his hands, believing that “no one with hands like that, no one with fingers that curved around wood so tenderly could kill her.” (*Sula*, 62) If Sula is understood to be a kind of priestess vowed to Shadrack as her god, Chicken Little’s death has to be interpreted as a sacrifice to the river god imitating traditions common throughout the Bight of Benin.⁶⁶⁶ Through their affinities to water spirits, “Sula and Shadrack represent black sons and daughters of America who would be more at home in Africa. In traditional African cultures, they would be neither pariahs or mysteries, since both represent tradition and a profound rootedness in African cosmology. To the people of the Bottom, Sula is an enigma and Shadrack a downright shame.”⁶⁶⁷

Like a trickster, Sula’s presence catalyses the community towards a better behaviour. By conceiving Sula as the fourth face of God, the people living in the Bottom turn her into an evil “to be first recognized, then dealt with, survived, outwitted, triumphed over,” (*Sula*, 118) thereby applying trickster strategies themselves.⁶⁶⁸ Sula’s promiscuity and her disregard of the community’s morality “most closely approximates the world in which Brer Rabbit lives. [...] Sula exhibits the folk logic and folk amorality of the trickster.”⁶⁶⁹ Her ties with this cosmology are hinted at when a plague of birds announces Sula’s return to the Bottom, (*Sula*, 89) when an early frost sets in shortly after her death, reflecting her influence over some forces of nature, (*Sula*, 151) and when Nel suddenly perceives Sula’s presence at the novel’s close, (*Sula*, 174) which blends in with African American folk beliefs that “spirits linger in the most remote and desolate places.”⁶⁷⁰ Just like the question of whether Sula is ultimately good or evil is impossible to answer, “[w]e cannot, finally, judge Sula’s life, because she refutes any and all value systems on which we might base judgement. Sula is perhaps most like the trickster in her resistance to critical evaluation. Likewise in resisting our analysis,

⁶⁶⁴ Ibid., 93.

⁶⁶⁵ Ibid., 93.

⁶⁶⁶ Ibid., 93.

⁶⁶⁷ Ibid., 92.

⁶⁶⁸ Cf. Smith, 116.

⁶⁶⁹ Cf. Trudier Harris, 72.

⁶⁷⁰ Cf. Alisha R. Coleman, “One and One Make One: A Metacritical and Psychoanalytic Reading of Friendship in Toni Morrison’s *Sula*.” In: *CLA Journal* 37:2 (1993) 145-155. 148.

Morrison's literary experiment with *Sula* works: the trickster once again eludes interpretation."⁶⁷¹

Pilate in *Song of Solomon* can be seen as either a conjure woman and natural healer, or as a trickster. Her birth took place under mythical circumstances, since her mother was already dead when Pilate struggled out of the womb by herself.⁶⁷² Pilate does not have a navel, which makes people believe that she possesses supernatural powers. "Who knows what Pilate knows?" (*SoS*, 206) And indeed, Pilate maintains a strong connection with her dead father. His ghost keeps on visiting her, and she follows his commands. Milkman is aware of Pilate's exceptional nature: "[T]his old black lady – in her late sixties, but with the skin and agility of a teen-aged girl – had brought him into the world when only a miracle could have." (*SoS*, 210) When Milkman and Guitar are arrested for robbing her, Pilate puts on an "Aunt Jemima Act" (*SoS*, 209) to free them from the police, thereby fulfilling white stereotypes of the "quintessential mammy, overweight, heavy-busted, strong, and religious [...] who cooks, cleans, and nurtures."⁶⁷³ She does what the police expect of her and extends it a bit for her own amusement.⁶⁷⁴ More than that, Pilate appears smaller than she really is. Normally a very tall woman, "she didn't even come up to the sergeant's shoulder – and the sergeant's head barely reached Milkman's own chin. But Pilate was as tall as he was." (*SoS*, 206) As soon as Milkman and Guitar are free again, "Pilate was tall again." (*SoS*, 207) Here, Morrison "manipulates [...] the reader's perceptual and sensuous experience in such a way as to demand active participation. To 'fill the gap,' the reader must adhere to belief or willingly suspend disbelief in Pilate's magic."⁶⁷⁵

In order to supply an explanation for the bones in the sack Milkman and Guitar have stolen, Pilate "weaves a 'sambo' story"⁶⁷⁶ for the police. She tells a story about an incident which might have taken place, but is completely invented. In this story, she is *Signifying* through her use of a Biblical quotation. "Bible say what so e'er the Lord hath brought together, let no man put asunder – Matthew Twenty-one: Two." (*SoS*, 207) In fact, her quotation derives from either *Matthew* 19:6 or from *Mark* 10:9. The section she refers to, however, contains the words of Jesus directed to two of his disciples: "Go into

⁶⁷¹ Cf. Smith, 120.

⁶⁷² This is reminiscent of William Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, in which the protagonist can only be defeated by a man who has not been born by a woman.

⁶⁷³ Cf. Billingslea Brown, 25.

⁶⁷⁴ Cf. Brenda Marshall, "The Gospel According to Pilate." In: *American Literature* 57 (1985) 486-489. 487.

⁶⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 49.

the village over against you, and straightway ye shall find an ass tied, and a colt with her: loose them, and bring them unto me.”⁶⁷⁷ Through her allusion to this passage, Pilate *Signifies* on Milkman and Guitar by implicitly calling the two of them a colt and an ass without their noticing it.⁶⁷⁸

Like Pilate, Beloved is also able to change her shape. Although her character could easily be interpreted within the realms of the *Gothic novel*, it seems more appropriate to regard her as a trickster figure in the context of this paper. The figure of Beloved is extremely ambiguous. On the one hand, she is the spirit of the baby Sethe killed. In the African American tradition, ghosts and spirits are believed to be real. For Morrison, “the purpose of making her real is making history possible, making memory real – somebody walks in the door and sits down at the table so you have to think about it, whatever they may be.”⁶⁷⁹ She chose to turn Beloved first into a spirit and then into a flesh-and-bone appearance at 124, because in this way, “history is in the house, and it’s got an attitude.”⁶⁸⁰ The other characters have no choice but to deal with Beloved in one way or the other. Within African American beliefs, “it’s very easy for a son or parent or a neighbor to appear in a child or in another person.”⁶⁸¹ On the other hand, Beloved appears to be the reincarnation of Sethe’s baby. “And she must function like that in the text.”⁶⁸² Beloved’s knowledge of Sethe’s song and her memory of the earrings Sethe used to play with for her baby support the interpretation of Beloved as a girl come to life again. But Beloved’s sparse information about her life before arriving at 124 allows for her to be taken as the private slave of a white man, who had allegedly kept her locked up all the time. Yet, Beloved remembers details of being on a bridge, which can be seen as the bridge of a ship, as the transition from life to death, or as the transport in the course of the Middle Passage connecting Africa to the New World. Her accounts of people jumping into the ocean or lying piled up offer the possibility of seeing in her a survivor of the Middle Passage. Despite the fact that the ban on the import of slaves to the United States had come into effect in 1807, many violations of this law had been documented as late as the 1850s and 1860s.⁶⁸³ From a chronological point of view, Beloved could be one of the last slaves to partake in the Middle Passage. The marks on

⁶⁷⁶ Cf. Wilentz, 118.

⁶⁷⁷ Cf. Matthew 21:2.

⁶⁷⁸ Cf. Herbert William Rice, 64.

⁶⁷⁹ Cf. Darling, 249.

⁶⁸⁰ Cf. Toni Morrison, *Reading at the Royal Festival Hall*, London.

⁶⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 249.

⁶⁸² *Ibid.*, 247.

her forehead can either be seen as African tribal marks⁶⁸⁴ or as scars resulting from a short moment in which Sethe left Beloved unattended on Sweet Home. The song she remembers could be an African folksong which Sethe knew subconsciously and which she could have imagined to have invented. Maybe the earrings Beloved asks about are those her real mother had. While none of these interpretations can be validated nor contradicted, some seem to depend on just too many coincidences.⁶⁸⁵ Nevertheless, the riddle of Beloved's identity cannot be ultimately solved, as the text itself "values the articulation of multiple perspectives."⁶⁸⁶

By clarifying Beloved as a trickster figure, no decision has to be taken – she need not be the one or the other, she can be perceived as a conglomeration of all personalities involved. In Yoruba culture, Esu represents three simultaneous stages of existence, the past, the present, and the unborn. Symbolising "the principle of discourse,"⁶⁸⁷ Esu facilitates the parallel occurrence of these oppositional time levels, while the notion of contradiction is rendered practically impossible.⁶⁸⁸ Beloved as well disturbs the ordinary sequence of time levels. Similar to ancient attavistic notions of cyclical time, Beloved takes the reader "from the present to the past and back again."⁶⁸⁹ In Teofilo Radillo's *The Song of the Jigue*, the figure deriving from Esu and eventually turning into the Signifying Monkey, is portrayed as emerging from water.⁶⁹⁰ Likewise Beloved, who represents the collective unconscious of African American culture,⁶⁹¹ walks out of the water fully dressed. (*Beloved*, 50) In the figure of Beloved, "the gap between Africa and Afro-America and the gap between the living and the dead and the gap between the past and the present does not exist."⁶⁹²

Even Beloved's personality can be compared to that of a trickster. "In her amorality, Beloved shares kinship with some of the tricksters of tradition – ever guided by personal desires."⁶⁹³ Beloved's shape is changeable, too. "Among the things she

⁶⁸³ Cf. Cutter, 4.

⁶⁸⁴ Ibid., 4.

⁶⁸⁵ Ibid., 5.

⁶⁸⁶ Ibid., 6. The equal value of multiple perspectives can be traced to modernist and post-modernist approaches to literature.

⁶⁸⁷ Cf. Gates, *Signifying Monkey*, 37.

⁶⁸⁸ Ibid., 37.

⁶⁸⁹ Cf. Wilentz, 212.

⁶⁹⁰ Cf. Gates, *Signifying Monkey*, 17-20.

⁶⁹¹ Cf. Wilentz, 216.

⁶⁹² Cf. Darling, 247.

⁶⁹³ Cf. Trudier Harris, 160p.

could not remember was when she first knew that she could wake up any day and find herself in pieces. She had two dreams: exploding, and being swallowed.” (*Beloved*, 133) In the shed with Denver, Beloved suddenly disappears, although she has not gone through the door - a “magical appearance on a stump, the face wiped out by sunlight, and a magical disappearance in a shed, eaten alive by the dark.” (*Beloved*, 123) She reappears again out of nowhere. “No footfall announces her, but there she is, standing where before there was nobody when Denver looked. And smiling.” (*Beloved*, 123) When the women of the community gather in front of Sethe’s house, they can also see Beloved. “The devil-child was clever, they thought. And beautiful. It had taken the shape of a pregnant woman, naked and smiling in the heat of the afternoon sun. Thunderblack and glistening, she stood on long straight legs, her belly big and tight. Vines of hair twisted all over her head. Jesus. Her smile was dazzling.” (*Beloved*, 261)

In *Jazz*, Wild is described as a “naked berry-black woman” (*Jazz*, 171) who is pregnant. (*Jazz*, 172) Morrison admits that Wild might possibly represent Beloved, who had run away and ended up in Virginia.⁶⁹⁴ Playing a “sophisticated literary game of ‘what if,’”⁶⁹⁵ Morrison created enough similarities between Beloved and Wild – the pregnancy, the colour of skin, their babygirl laugh – to support such a view. She points out that the dates of Beloved’s disappearance and Joe’s birth are the same.⁶⁹⁶ Beloved’s identity, going “from imagination to humanoid to legend” is overdetermined, but in the end, she remains alone.⁶⁹⁷ Hers is “not a story to pass on,” (*Beloved*, 274p.) which might either be taken as a story not to be transmitted any further, or as something not to be overlooked. Through this double meaning, Morrison is *Signifying* on the act of storytelling, the importance of testifying, and the very act of her own writing – a method to be continued in *Jazz*.

According to Morrison, her novels *Beloved*, *Jazz*, and *Paradise* form a loose trilogy. While Wild in *Jazz* might be identical to Beloved in the novel of the same name, *Jazz* carries on with that style of *Signifying* which ended *Beloved*. Only this time, the trickster is not a single character but the book’s ominous narrator. Of all her novels, Morrison most profoundly uses African American music in *Jazz*. “If jazz is a music the performer composes himself, then this novel she calls *Jazz* is a book that writes

⁶⁹⁴ Cf. Cutter, 7p.

⁶⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 7.

⁶⁹⁶ Cf. Rubenstein, 160.

⁶⁹⁷ Cf. Trudier Harris, 163p.

itself.”⁶⁹⁸ It is a perfect example of what Gates defined as a *talking book* by its frequent use of *free indirect discourse*. The indeterminacy of the trickster-like narrator, “sometimes seeming human, sometimes something else,”⁶⁹⁹ gives further rise to this interpretation. Morrison herself is very explicit about *Jazz*: “[T]he voice is the voice of a talking book [...] but few people read it like that. [...] I deliberately restricted myself using an ‘I’ that was only connected to the artifact of the book as an active participant in the invention of the story of the book, as though the book were talking, writing itself, in a sense.”⁷⁰⁰

In the novel, “Morrison creates a narrative strategy that combines the movement of music and the structure of tragedy; more specifically, she uses the improvisational quality of music to deconstruct the form of tragedy, allowing a reconstruction of identity to emerge that is not determined, but fluid and improvisation.”⁷⁰¹ This indeterminacy is taken to the extreme of an anonymity leading to the reader neither being informed about the narrator’s name nor gender. The narrator is very cautious about maintaining this secrecy. “I haven’t got any muscles, so I can’t really be expected to defend myself. But I do know how to take precaution. Mostly it’s making sure no one knows all there is to know about me. Second, I watch everything and everyone and try to figure out their plans, their reasonings, long before they do.” (*Jazz*, 16p.) The reader gets to know the narrator merely through the medium of language, a fact linking the narrative authority with Esu, whose indeterminacy is continued in the vernacular as an indispensable element of interpretation.⁷⁰²

The voice in *Jazz* is sometimes seen as the voice of the city or that of jazz music itself. Its first word is “Sth,” which can be taken as a gossipy, conspirational utterance to get someone’s attention, but it could also be the sound the needle of a record player produces when it is finding its groove.⁷⁰³ Recording metaphors are widely used throughout the novel. At a party, “Dorcas has been acknowledged, appraised and dismissed in the time it takes for a needle to find its opening groove.” (*Jazz*, 85p.)

The narrator of the novel does not tell its story in a traditional way. Instead of presenting facts, predictions about possible developments are made, often proving to be false. With its many themes and variations, the novel is highly improvisational through

⁶⁹⁸ Cf. Gutmann, 71.

⁶⁹⁹ Cf. Cutter, 10.

⁷⁰⁰ Cf. Rubenstein, 162.

⁷⁰¹ Cf. Carolyn M. Jones, 481.

⁷⁰² Cf. Gates, *Signifying Monkey*. 22.

the narrator's near-instinctive understanding of the ongoings, which is obviously "not *prior* to but, rather, *subject to* the unfolding narrative events."⁷⁰⁴ At times, the narrator admits to inventing parts of the story and to rendering imagined characteristics. The story of Golden Gray is commented by the narrator, "I like to think of him that way." (*Jazz*, 178) But shortly afterwards, the narrator is aware of having been wrong. "What was I thinking of? How could I have imagined him so poorly?" (*Jazz*, 190) Without a clear separation between the narrator's thoughts and the novel's facts, the narrative voice is "becoming indistinguishable from the story it makes."⁷⁰⁵ At the end of the novel, the narrator, who has been trying to hide and watch the ongoings from a distance, admits to be predictable. "This confession on the narrator's part is Morrison's literary approximation of the spontaneity and riskiness of jazz: as the musician willingly surrenders control to the medium itself, so the narrator of *Jazz* relinquishes its power over the loves of the characters it has created."⁷⁰⁶ Like in jazz, where notes do not always need to be played at their exact pitch or rhythm, the narrator does not reproduce the stories faithfully. This opens the door to reinterpretations of stories and of history.⁷⁰⁷ Yet, the narrator has been wrong in foreshadowing a second murder:

So I missed it altogether. I was sure one would kill the other. I waited for it so I could describe it. I was so sure it would happen. That the past was an abused record with no choice but to repeat itself at the crack and no power on earth could lift the arm that held the needle. I was so sure, and they danced and walked all over me. [...] I was the predictable one. [...] I overreached and missed the obvious. (*Jazz*, 254)

Although jazz is a very free form of music, which not only allows for but depends on improvisation, the musicians of a band have to pay attention to each other. "One of the worst accusations that can be flung at a [jazz] musician is that 'he doesn't listen.'"⁷⁰⁸ This is exactly what the narrator did. Instead of watching and listening to the people, the narrator only half-listened, to the avail of being proven wrong in the end.

The narrator's identity is blurred further by the loss of anonymity within the novel: "And when I was feeling most invisible, being tight-lipped, silent and

⁷⁰³ Cf. Boutry, 103.

⁷⁰⁴ Cf. Rubenstein, 158. Emphasis original.

⁷⁰⁵ Cf. Matus, 124.

⁷⁰⁶ Cf. Rubenstein, 162. Such an understanding reminds of Pirandello's play *Six Characters in Search of an Author*.

⁷⁰⁷ Cf. Alan J. Rice, 157.

⁷⁰⁸ Cf. Grewal, 135.

unobservable, they were whispering about me to each other. [...] That when I invented stories about them – and doing it seemed to me so fine – I was completely in their hands, managed without mercy.” (*Jazz*, 254) While the narrator is in the hands of the people, the book is in the hands of the reader. “Look where your hands are. Now.” (*Jazz*, 265) Since the narrator is identical with the book, according to Morrison, the result is “a love song of a book talking to the reader.”⁷⁰⁹

I myself have only known it in secret, shared it in secret and longed, [...] to be able to say out loud [...]: *That I have loved only you, surrendered my whole self reckless to you and nobody else. That I want you to love me back and show it to me. That I love the way you hold me, how close you let me be to you. I like your fingers on and on, lifting, turning. I have watched your face for a long time now; and missed your eyes when you went away from me. Talking to you and hearing you answer – that’s the kick.* (*Jazz*, 264)

By playing with language and hiding its real identity, the narrative voice has all the time been *Signifying* on us as well as on the process of storytelling. “It is like the trickster Esu with its invented tales, double voice, and engaging wordplay. Through its innovative treatment of music and personification in jazz, the novel *Jazz* signifies on Morrison’s earlier works and those of other African American writers.”⁷¹⁰

Paradise is suffused with trickster figures. In her portrait of Lone, Morrison might even be slightly *Signifying* on her own grandmother, “who could not read but was famous as a skilled midwife.”⁷¹¹ This profession is occupied by Lone, who “represents the life-force of Ruby. An orphan picked up by Fairy DuPres on the track to Haven, Lone, whose name contributes to her unique state, is elderly in the 1970s. Both Fairy’s name and Lone’s foundling status give her development a fairy-tale air.”⁷¹² Apart from giving life to people by facilitating their birth, Lone restores life through her particular form of conjuring. Her spiritual power, as well as Consolata’s, “links the narrative with the African (American) tradition,”⁷¹³ whereas their “gift of ‘sight without seeing’ connects them to other Morrison characters such as Pilate of *Song of Solomon* and Thérèse of *Tar Baby*, also guardians of the African American legacy.”⁷¹⁴ Lone calls her spiritual intervention “stepping in,” (*Paradise*, 245) Consolata, on the other hand, is

⁷⁰⁹ Cf. Dubey, 307.

⁷¹⁰ Cf. Eckard, 19.

⁷¹¹ Cf. Dehn Kubitschek, 4.

⁷¹² *Ibid.*, 175.

⁷¹³ Cf. Tally, *Paradise*, 46.

⁷¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 46.

more comfortable with the notion of her interference as an act of “seeing in.” (*Paradise*, 247) Whatever their conjuring is called,

[l]ike versions of the African deity Legba, who interprets the workings of the cosmos to human beings, [...] Lone’s and Connie’s actions are extensions of the act of interpreting. For by stepping in or seeing in to another person and spiritually pulling him or her back to life, Lone and Connie engage in acts of extreme self-projection, of ultimate empathy, of total transfer of the self to the other.⁷¹⁵

Like prototypical tricksters, Lone and Consolata reach beyond the realms of life and death by transcending boundaries of self and other. Consolata shares many traits with conjurers, since they are often located “in mysterious places: on the edges of towns, in caves, or in seemingly-abandoned shacks.”⁷¹⁶ Consolata has been brought up in the Christian faith, therefore she is at first afraid of her mysterious talent, believing it to be evil. “Like devilment. Like evil craft.” (*Paradise*, 246) Lone, however, is convinced that these spiritual powers are actually a gift of God. “Don’t be a fool. God don’t make mistakes. Despising His gift, now, that is a mistake. You calling Him a fool, like you?” (*Paradise*, 246) Her insistence on God’s infallibility *Signifies* on Einstein’s conviction commonly phrased as “God doesn’t play dice.”⁷¹⁷ Whereas Einstein, who could never bring himself to believe in the validity of the quantum theory, was wrong in this rare instance, Lone is possibly just as misled in her assessment of their spiritual power. “Conjuring, a syncretic blend of world religions and beliefs, operates on a number of levels in Africana literature. Like the ring shout, which developed among slaves who were not allowed to openly practice their religious beliefs, conjuring allows for the articulation, in a hostile environment, of African worldviews about the spiritual world.”⁷¹⁸ Therefore, this interpretation of Lone’s view can be supported by Consolata’s bidding farewell to the Christian God she had believed in all her life and her welcoming of her strange visitor, who also carries trickster-like attributes.

⁷¹⁵ Cf. Page, 5.

⁷¹⁶ Cf. Elia, 142.

⁷¹⁷ This quotation is based on Einstein’s doubts of the theory of quants. Uneasy with its inherent high degree of arbitrariness, he wrote to his friend Max Born: “Jedenfalls bin ich überzeugt davon, daß *der* nicht würfelt.” Albert Einstein, “Brief an Max Born, 4. Dezember 1926.” In: Einstein-Born, *Briefwechsel* 1916-1955. München: Nymphenburger, 1969. 127.

My translation: “At any rate, I am convinced that *He* does not play dice.” As is the case with a large number of Einstein-quotations, this sentence has undergone various modifications.

⁷¹⁸ Cf. Elia, 140.

As Consolata “acquires her powers to raise the dead, the greenness fades, until her eyes eventually lose all color.”⁷¹⁹ Her visitor, however, is described as possessing the very green of the eyes she used to have as well as tea-coloured hair. (*Paradise*, 252) Since she has said good-bye to the God of Christianity, this man now serves as her new spiritual guide, whose strong connection with her is suggested by his similarities to herself. Possibly she is addressing him, when, during the raid at the Convent, she is suddenly “distracted by something high above the heads of the men. ‘You’re back,’ she says, and smiles.” (*Paradise*, 289) If this is the case, then his presence might have caused the mysterious disappearance of the women’s bodies as well as their reappearance in the form of revenants, albeit this must needs be restricted to speculation.

Also Dovey is visited by a mysterious friend. She does not ask him for his name, afraid that this might break the spell, and never even tells anyone else of these visits. Perfectly at ease in his presence, the few times spent with him provide a kind of escape for her, however temporarily.⁷²⁰ This man proves to be the complete opposite of her husband in that he cares to listen to her and values her opinions, while Steward “waits for her to ‘come round’ to his version of history.”⁷²¹

Another mysterious figure has played a major role in the foundation of Ruby: Zechariah, who led the group of people leaving Haven, prayed for spiritual assistance, when a walking man appeared to him, from then indicating the way for Zechariah. “Nobody saw the walking man but Zechariah and sometimes a child.” (*Paradise*, 98) His appearance is *Signifying* on God’s spiritual guidance assisting Moses to lead his people to the Promised Land, thus reinforcing “the Old Fathers’ sense of their divine mission.”⁷²² Even the location on which Ruby is to be built is determined by this trickster-figure. “The walking man was still there, removing items from his satchel and putting others back. Even as they watched, the man began to fade. When he was completely dissolved, they heard the footsteps again, pounding in a direction they could not determine: in back, to the left, now to the right. Or was it overhead? Then, suddenly, it was quiet.” (*Paradise*, 98) This is taken as a sign by Zechariah: “Here,” he said. “This is our place.” (*Paradise*, 98) Possibly Dovey’s friend is a reincarnation of this walking man, intending to check how the town has turned out. Whether or not these two figures

⁷¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 144.

⁷²⁰ Cf. Dehn Kubitschek, 175.

⁷²¹ Cf. Tally, *Paradise*, 47.

are identical, they represent the epitome of a walking bluesman by arriving and disappearing any given time.

Even more confusing than these apparitions are those of the Convent women after the attack, the description of which strongly implies that all of them are being killed in the course of events. Nevertheless, their bodies disappear without a trace, and against all odds, the women surface once more in the novel. “Unless the reader wants to believe the rather unconvincing possibility that these women were not murdered, [...] Morrison offers the reappearance of these ‘ghosts’ right out of the African belief system.”⁷²³ Thus, the women return in the form of revenants. In the African sacred cosmos – as in many attavistic societies – , time is not conceived of as being linear but circular. “When individuals die, they remain present in their communities in much the same way that they did in life.”⁷²⁴ They continue to linger as long as they are remembered, a part taken over by Billie Delia in *Paradise*. “Billie Delia was perhaps the only one in town who was not puzzled by where the women were or concerned about how they disappeared. She had another question: When will they return? When will they reappear, with blazing eyes, war paint and huge hands to rip up and stomp down this prison calling itself a town?” (*Paradise*, 308) Picturing them in terms of tricksters, Billie Delia “could see their pointy teeth,” (*Paradise*, 308) and thus aligns them with an attribute characteristic of the prototypical trickster Esu-Elegbara. All of these trickster figures together

and the characters’ beliefs in them suggest that the fictional reality in this novel extends beyond the material and the perceived. Ordinary methods of knowing and interpreting – exemplified by Patricia’s charts and notes – will not suffice, but instead deeper, more transcendent, more holistic kinds of knowing and interpreting, as modeled by Lone and Consolata, are required.⁷²⁵

Trickster figures are also present in *Love*, in the form of the ominous Police-heads only mentioned by L, who “liked to troll at night, too, especially when the hotel was full of visitors drunk with dance music, or salt air, or tempted by starlit water.” (*Love*, 5p.) Roaming the sea shore, they seem to work as a kind of corrective punishing malefactors of all kinds (as adulterers or trespassers) by drowning them. The only person able to

⁷²² Cf. Page, 10.

⁷²³ Cf. Tally, *Paradise*, 47.

⁷²⁴ Cf. Dehn Kubitschek, 22.

⁷²⁵ Cf. Page, 10.

defy their punishment despite taking too many liberties is Celestial, the “sporting woman,” who is Bill Cosey’s lover. L once watched as she

got up, naked as truth, and went into the waves. The tide was out, so she had to walk a long time for the water to reach her waist. [...] Police-heads were on the move then. They had already drowned the Johnson boys, almost killed the cannery girl, and who knew what else they had in mind. But this woman kept on wading out into black water and I could tell she wasn’t afraid of them – or of anything – because she stretched, raised her arms, and dove. [...] Then she – well, made a sound. I don’t know to this day whether it was a word, a tune, or a scream. All I know is that it was a sound I wanted to answer. Even though, normally, I’m stone quiet, Celestial. (*Love*, 106)

Just as L is spellbound by Celestial’s presence, so are Heed and Christine upon the mere calling of her name, turning it into a secret and powerful code between them. Celestial herself is able to fight off danger with the help of language – whichever specification it might have belonged to – a faculty she shares with tricksters such as Esu. Enthralled by her sexuality, Bill Cosey cannot make himself discard Celestial as his lover despite his two marriages; consequently, Celestial neither lets go of Bill, whose grave she visits frequently, urging him in her song to “[c]ome on back, baby. Now I understand. Come back, baby. Take me by the hand.” (*Love*, 202) L, who listens to Celestial’s singing and hums along with it, is long dead, but figures as the narrator of large sections in the novel nevertheless. This makes her a trickster figure, too, aligning her with a great number of Morrison’s most powerful characters who are able to transcend death. Whereas Celestial is representative of loose morals and the Police-heads inhabit the other extreme by punishing moral failure, L’s comments criticise both attitudes and refer the reader towards the notion of love. Just like L’s voice, which endures even beyond her death, the story of *Love* “resonates in the mind long after the last page is turned.”⁷²⁶

⁷²⁶ Cf. Mc Ternan.

4.3 Intertextuality

In jazz performances as well as in literature, *Signifying* functions as “a mode of formal revision.”⁷²⁷ Intertextuality represents a literary means of revision, and Toni Morrison’s novels have frequently been examined from this point of view.⁷²⁸ It can be argued that in the theme of *The Bluest Eye* Morrison was *Signifying* on *No Images*⁷²⁹, a poem by William Waring Cuney. As has been outlined before, Pecola is characterised by an immense self-hatred, believing herself to be ugly – “She does not know / Her beauty.” Pecola wants to be white, “She thinks her brown body / Has no glory.” Unlike Claudia, who is familiar with her roots and traditions, Pecola completely lacks this connection. “If she could dance / Naked / Under palm trees / And see her image in the river / She would know.” Instead, Pecola does not see herself within her heritage, but looks upon herself from the point of view of white people. “But there are no palm trees / On the street,” nothing to help Pecola understand her value and her beauty free from destructive models imposed on her by a hostile society - “[a]nd dishwasher gives back no images.”⁷³⁰ Pecola is washing dishes when her father sexually abuses her. The intertextual references intensify the horror of Pecola’s ordeal. They emphasise the importance of self-assurance in the formation of an intact identity. The character of the poem as well as Pecola both lack this self-confidence. Having lost the connection to their cultural roots, they hate themselves instead of taking pride in their heritage.

Other intertextual relations are conveyed in Morrison’s choice of protagonists. Her “novels are peopled with conventionally evil characters, outsiders in a decadent, white-dominated culture, Cains and Liliths in the guise of Cholly Breedlove (*The Bluest Eye*) or Sula (*Sula*) or Guitar (*Song of Solomon*) or Son (*Tar Baby*).”⁷³¹ The Lilith figure was first mentioned in the Sumerian king list dating from circa 2400 BC in the form of a she-demon.⁷³² In the Sumerian epic *Gilgamesh and the Huluppu Tree*, Lilith is said to be living in a tree at the bank of the Euphrates around the time of Creation.⁷³³ The Talmud presents Lilith as Adam’s first wife before Eve’s creation. As she did not submit to Adam, their relationship was not fulfilling. Unlike Eve, whose dependency is

⁷²⁷ Cf. Gates, *Signifying Monkey*. 60.

⁷²⁸ Cf. e.g. the great number of publications on intertextuality with Faulkner’s works.

⁷²⁹ Cf. <http://www.dclibrary.org/blkren/bios/cuneyww.html>, 30th of September 2002.

⁷³⁰ *Ibid.*, all quotations in this paragraph are taken from *No Images* by William Waring Cuney (1926).

⁷³¹ Cf. Otten, 153.

⁷³² Cf. Raphael Patai, *The Hebrew Goddess*. Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1995. 221.

⁷³³ *Ibid.*, 222.

attributed to her creation out of Adam's rib, Lilith was created from dust, just like Adam. She therefore refuses to surrender to the inferior position during sexual intercourse. "When Lilith saw that Adam was determined to overpower her, she uttered the magic name of God, rose into the air, and flew away to the Red Sea, a place of ill-repute, full of lascivious demons. There, Lilith engaged in unbridled promiscuity and bore a demonic brood of more than one hundred a day."⁷³⁴ Lilith is presumed to have the power to kill little children, who can only be protected from her with the inscription of the names of three angels on an amulet.⁷³⁵ The Bible, on the other hand, merely contains a single short reference to Lilith, when Isaiah describes an apocalyptic vision of God's vengeance: "The wild-cat shall meet with the jackals / And the satyr shall cry to his fellow, / Yea, Lilith shall repose there / And find her a place of rest."⁷³⁶ In spite of the fact that Lilith is just mentioned once in the Bible, the myth about her can be attributed to two competing versions of creation in *Genesis*. Male and female are created simultaneously in *Genesis* 1:27, nevertheless, in the second account given in *Genesis* 2:15-25, Eve is formed from Adam's rib, consequently, "Lilith assumes that she is equal to man while Eve knows she is not created as Adam's equal."⁷³⁷

Kathryn Seidel connects Sula with Lilith based on a number of similarities between them. In her opinion, Morrison retells "the Lilith narrative by pairing her archetypal figure with a female opposite who can be called the Eve figure."⁷³⁸ Like Lilith, who lives by the water, Sula is frequently associated with that element. Both Lilith and Sula lead promiscuous lives and question authority. And most clearly of all parallels, Lilith endangers the lives of young children, whereas Sula, however unintentionally, is responsible for the death of Chicken Little. Lilith insists on the female superior position in sexual intercourse, likewise, Sula is described as "towering above" (*Sula*, 129) Ajax. Lilith and Sula become pariahs "because of [their] assertion of preference in [their] sexual expression, [their] desire for independence from men, and [their] attempts to define [themselves]."⁷³⁹ When Lilith has left Adam, God agrees to create a new mate for Adam. Whereas Lilith is identified with the death of children, Eve then becomes the archetypal mother. This opposition is paralleled in *Sula*, where Eva

⁷³⁴ Ibid., 223.

⁷³⁵ Ibid., 224.

⁷³⁶ Cf. Isaiah 34:14.

⁷³⁷ Cf. Kathryn Seidel, "The Lilith Figure in Toni Morrison's *Sula* and Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*." In: *Weber Studies* 10:2 (1993) 85-94. 89p.

⁷³⁸ Ibid., 85.

⁷³⁹ Ibid., 89.

advises Sula “to have some babies. It’ll settle you.” (*Sula*, 92) Sula, however, completely refuses to take on the role of motherhood. “I don’t want to make somebody else. I want to make myself.” (*Sula*, 92) The apocalyptic reference to Lilith in the Bible is echoed in Sula’s vision of the time when she will be loved.

Parallels with the Lilith myth are also included in *Beloved*. “Sethe’s successive pregnancies and the recurring image of her breasts dripping with milk encode her mythically as a Great Mother Goddess figure.”⁷⁴⁰ Her flight from Sweet Home being followed by schoolteacher and the nephews reiterates and subverts Lilith’s persecution by the three angels.⁷⁴¹ Denver, born on a boat in the course of Sethe’s escape, almost drowns, a fact aligning the novel once more with the Lilith topos. Like Lilith, who is known for killing children, Sethe eventually kills one of her children, however, in a situation of utmost despair. Whereas Lilith is rumoured to drink the blood of her victims, Sethe does not drink her daughter’s blood, but inadvertently makes her nursing baby drink some of it alongside with her milk.⁷⁴² In some legends, Lilith is portrayed to be “sexually voracious, eager and demanding of her lovers, constantly challenging taboos on sexual activity.”⁷⁴³ This trait is conveyed in *Beloved*’s seduction of Paul D. Like Lilith, she is “initially alluring [...], but then becomes terrifying and menacing”⁷⁴⁴ to him. By adapting the Lilith myth in *Beloved*, Morrison problematises motherhood as such. “Only when the demon mother is deconstructed can mothers and children interact as full human beings, free of mythologies that would limit and damage them.”⁷⁴⁵

Just like Morrison in *Sula* and *Beloved*, “African-American women writers have reinterpreted the story of Lilith as a narrative of a woman who began her life with a confident sense of self identity, and who has equal status, rights, and privileges with men.”⁷⁴⁶ In some commentaries it is suggested that “Lilith flees from God and Adam (the white men) over the Red Sea to the safety of (black) Africa,”⁷⁴⁷ thereby suggesting Lilith’s connection with Africa and thus, the African American heritage. By *Signifying*

⁷⁴⁰ Cf. Shirley Stave, “Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* and the Vindication of Lilith.” In: *South Atlantic Review* 58:1 (1993) 49-66. 51.

⁷⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 51.

⁷⁴² *Ibid.*, 51p.

⁷⁴³ *Ibid.*, 55.

⁷⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 58.

⁷⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 65.

⁷⁴⁶ Cf. Seidel, 85.

⁷⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 86.

on the Lilith myth, Morrison creates a “corrective to stereotypical images of African American women as the domestic victims of men or as sensual libertines.”⁷⁴⁸

In *Sula*, Morrison is also *Signifying* on the Bible itself. “Sula Peace lived in a house of many rooms,” (*Sula*, 30) alludes to the *Gospel according to John*, in which Jesus states: “In my Father’s house are many mansions.”⁷⁴⁹ This prospect is to comfort his disciples and to provide them with hope, as everyone will be provided for. Although Eva’s house actually contains a great number of rooms, many people live there and have enough to eat, Sula is not cared for in other respects. The juxtaposition of these two statements thus highlights the absence of spiritual nourishment at Sula’s home and *Signifies* on the issue that Joseph, the joiner, was not Jesus’ real father (although he did not fail him in any respect). The house might be located at 7, Carpenter’s Road, but Christ is not going to be found there.

D. Quentin Miller compares *Sula* to Dante’s *Divine Comedy*. In his opinion, the fires occurring in *Sula* “parallel the flames of Hell in the *Inferno*.”⁷⁵⁰ He aligns Nel’s name with the first word of Dante’s *Inferno* in the Italian original. Whereas this comparison might be a bit weak, the further data in his comparison is more convincing. At the beginning of the *Inferno*, the place is described as being located “al pie d’un colle giunto – at the bottom of a hill.”⁷⁵¹ The Bottom in *Sula*, ironically called the “bottom of heaven,” is on top of a hill, thereby subverting Dante’s hell. Morrison’s novel closes with “circles and circles of sorrow,” (*Sula*, 174) which can be seen as an echo of Virgil’s image of hell as “an eternal place / where you will hear howls of desperation.”⁷⁵² The eternity inherent in this description is rendered in *Sula*’s imagination of “the real hell of Hell” being “that it is forever.” (*Sula*, 107) Rather than simply alluding to Dante’s *Inferno*, Morrison is *Signifying* on it, questioning traditional notions of hell, and once more appropriating a Western text for her purposes.

Already the title of *Song of Solomon* contains intertextual references to the book of the Bible called either *Song of Solomon*, *Song of Songs* or *Canticles*. The central character of the novel’s song is also called Solomon, and naturally, the novel borrows its title from this song. The name Solomon is derived from the Hebrew form of

⁷⁴⁸ Ibid., 93.

⁷⁴⁹ Cf. John, 14:2.

⁷⁵⁰ Cf. Miller, 69.

⁷⁵¹ Ibid., 69.

⁷⁵² Ibid., 70.

Shelomo, meaning “the peacable.”⁷⁵³ Although in Morrison’s family there was a similar song to that of the novel, in which the central character was named Solomon as well, it can be presumed that she also intended these interferences with the Bible. The life of the Biblical Solomon, who was a successor of David, is documented in a notoriously famous compilation of love verses.⁷⁵⁴ In these stanzas the beloved says, “I am black, but comely.”⁷⁵⁵ In the novel, one of Milkman’s lessons is to trace his African heritage and take pride in his being black. Morrison’s Solomon is overdetermined by the numerous possible variations of his name. The version of Shalimar is similar enough to Hebrew Shelomo, and both bear resemblance to the bride featured in the *Canticles*, who is called a “Shulamite maiden.”⁷⁵⁶ According to the Biblical source, a woman is looking for her lover and inviting him to her mother’s vineyard. Hagar is also searching for Milkman; she would be happy to convince him to return to her and to her grandmother’s winehouse. Nevertheless, Milkman does not return. Hagar eventually dies from the consequences of her unrequited love for Milkman – “love is strong as death.”⁷⁵⁷

Although the novel does not incorporate the entire story of the Biblical Solomon, the structure of the *Canticles* can still be partly applied to that of Morrison’s *Song of Solomon*. The first part⁷⁵⁸ can be subsumed under the heading of “Songs of the bride,”⁷⁵⁹ the bride in the novel being Hagar. When she is looking for Milkman after he has left her, this quest resembles the “search for the lost bridegroom.”⁷⁶⁰ What follows is a section about “The bride’s beauty.”⁷⁶¹ This is intensively *Signified* upon by Hagar’s self-destructive attempt to change her appearance in order to better live up to super-imposed white beauty ideals. She is convinced that, because of her frizzy hair, Milkman has good reason not to love her. The relationship between Pilate and her brother Macon *Signifies* on the section in the *Canticles* dealing with brothers and sisters.⁷⁶²

Tar Baby also abounds in intertextual references, namely to the *Book of Genesis*, to Zora Neale Hurston’s *Their Eyes Were Watching God*⁷⁶³, Richard Wright’s *Native*

⁷⁵³ Cf. Cowart, 97.

⁷⁵⁴ In order to avoid confusion, the Biblical text will be quoted under the heading of *Canticles*.

⁷⁵⁵ Cf. Cant. 1:5.

⁷⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 6:13. ; Stryz, 38.

⁷⁵⁷ Cf. Cant. 8:6.

⁷⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 1:1-7.

⁷⁵⁹ Cf. Nancy Applegate, “What’s in a Name? Morrison’s *Song of Solomon*.” In: *Notes on Contemporary Literature* 27:4 (1997) 2-3. 3. All headings in this paragraph are taken from this source.

⁷⁶⁰ Cf. Cant. 5:2–6:2.

⁷⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 6:4-7:9.

⁷⁶² *Ibid.*, 8:1-8.

⁷⁶³ Cf. Zora Neale Hurston, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. 1937. New York: Virago Press 1986.

*Son*⁷⁶⁴, Eugene O’Neill’s *The Hairy Ape*⁷⁶⁵ and *Emperor Jones*⁷⁶⁶, Susan Glaspell’s *The Verge*⁷⁶⁷, William Shakespeare’s *Macbeth* and *The Tempest*⁷⁶⁸, and Frank Sinatra’s famous song *New York, New York*⁷⁶⁹. The setting on the island recalls that of the Garden Eden,⁷⁷⁰ with Son, the intruder, symbolising the intrusion of the snake. His presence forces the others to face “their own flawed humanity.”⁷⁷¹ By articulating his forbidden desires, Son wants Jadine “to acknowledge the ‘darker’ side of herself, the authentic self obscured in the distorted mirror of her adopted Eden.”⁷⁷² Although paradise does not fall at Son’s intrusion, just as in the Biblical text, decay is brought about by circumstances involving apples. Gideon and Thérèse have stolen apples intended for the Streets’ christmas dinner, and Valerian dismisses them as soon as he finds out about the theft. Like the Biblical snake, who questioned the authority of God, Son drives people apart by questioning Valerian’s action. However, unlike the snake’s, Son’s intentions are good. After all, Thérèse’s uncontrollable yearning for apples has been brought about by Valerian himself, as it is a result of a gift of some time ago. He has thus generated “a need in the people that they cannot readily satisfy in their circumstances or in that physical environment.”⁷⁷³ Valerian, quite a fallible character himself, can by no means be compared to God in his temptation of Thérèse and Gideon. Morrison’s version of the Garden of Eden is not an exact parallel of the Bible, however, as the roles of good and evil are constantly turned around. Her rendition of the Biblical story therefore serves to challenge traditional interpretations and urges her readers to re-assess their judgements over and over again. By *Signifying* on the Biblical paradise in *Tar Baby*, Morrison “describes the passage from innocence to experience with biblical and theological elements. [...] In all this she incorporates the black search for identity.”⁷⁷⁴

Numerous are Morrison’s references to Hurston’s *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, especially concerning the two female protagonists of the novels. Jadine’s name almost sounds like Janie, and both of whom are orphans raised by close relatives. Both

⁷⁶⁴ Cf. Richard Wright, *Native Son*. 1940. London: Picador, 1995.

⁷⁶⁵ Cf. Eugene O’Neill, *Three plays: Anna Christie, The First Man, The Hairy Ape*. 1922. New York: Boni and Liveright, 2000.

⁷⁶⁶ Cf. Eugene O’Neill, *Plays: First Series, The Straw, The Emperor Jones, and Diff’rent*. New York, Boni and Liveright, 1922.

⁷⁶⁷ Cf. Susan Glaspell, *The Verge*. Boston: Small, 1922.

⁷⁶⁸ Cf. William Shakespeare, *The Tempest*. London: Arden, 2002.

⁷⁶⁹ Cf. http://www.cool-lyrics-place.com/New_York_New_York_Lyrics.html. 14th of January 2004.

⁷⁷⁰ Cf. Gen. 2-3.

⁷⁷¹ Cf. Otten, 156.

⁷⁷² Ibid., 157.

⁷⁷³ Cf. Hawthorne, 102.

women are mulattos; while Janie is unable to identify herself on a photograph at first because she is not realising that she is the black girl⁷⁷⁵, Jadine fails to establish connections to her black heritage. She perfectly embodies what Janie is told by her grandmother: “You know, honey, us colored folks is branches without roots and that makes things come round in queer ways.”⁷⁷⁶ “Both Janie and Jadine repudiate the values of their surrogate parents in their conscious quest for selfhood.”⁷⁷⁷ Just like Janie, who together with her second husband Joe Starks comes to live in the all-black town of Eatonville, Jadine and Son spend time in Eloë, which is also inhabited by black people only. In both towns, the women cannot fully develop. Both are eventually beaten by their lovers, as Tea Cake hits Janie to make a claim of possession,⁷⁷⁸ whereas Son and Jadine attack each other after their return from Eloë. (*TB*, 266) Just like the two women appear to be quite similar to each other, so do Tea Cake and Son, who are both independent men as well as musicians.

When Son is found in Margaret’s closet, the scene evokes Bigger Thomas’ presence in Mary’s bedroom in *Native Son*. In both cases, a black man is illegally staying near a white woman. Bigger, who is working as a chauffeur in Mary’s home, is allocated the room of his predecessor Green,⁷⁷⁹ a word *Signified* upon through Son’s very same surname. After taking home his employer’s hopelessly drunk daughter Mary, Bigger carries her to her bed, unable to take his eyes off her, when Mrs Dalton enters. She does not notice Bigger, who is afraid of being caught in the girl’s bedroom, a situation inevitably leading to the accusation that he had wanted to rape her. Therefore, when Mary tries to sit up in bed, he pushes her back and puts a pillow onto her face in order to prevent her from making a noise. Although all of this takes place in the presence of Mrs Dalton, she is not aware of anything, as she fails to see Bigger in the dark. Whereas Bigger is guilty of killing Mary, he had not intended to rape her.⁷⁸⁰ Likewise, Son, who is caught in Margaret’s bedroom, has merely chosen the place to hide himself in daytime. Nevertheless, Margaret is convinced that the only thing on his mind was to rape her. Throughout the novel, Margaret is attributed Marian symbols, as in the repeated specification of her “blue-if-it’s-a-boy blue eyes,” (*TB*, 21) or Valerian’s

⁷⁷⁴ Cf. Otten, 163.

⁷⁷⁵ Cf. Hurston, 21.

⁷⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 31.

⁷⁷⁷ Cf. Pouchet Paquet, 186.

⁷⁷⁸ Cf. Hurston, 218.

⁷⁷⁹ Cf. Wright, 98.

⁷⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 121-128.

impulse to kneel down in her presence. (*TB*, 14) This association of Margaret with the Mother of God at once *Signifies* on Mary in *Native Son* and on Margaret's inability to be a good mother to her son.

Taking her cue from Jadine, Margaret calls Son a nigger. But she is then taking her racist disposition to the extreme of identifying him with a gorilla, a notion Jadine is very much unsettled by. "She had volunteered nigger – not gorilla." (*TB*, 129) This comparison between a man and a primate *Signifies* on Eugene O'Neill's drama *The Hairy Ape*, in which the white (but as a result of his work extremely dirty and thereby blackened) seaman Yank is repeatedly referred to as a hairy ape: first of all in the presence of Mildred Douglas, who is described as the epitome of whiteness both in her complexion as well as in her choice of dress,⁷⁸¹ similar to the depiction of Margaret in *Tar Baby*. Son, like Yank, has spent a large part of his life on sea. Mildred calls Yank a "filthy beast,"⁷⁸² and Margaret thinks of Son as an ape. (*TB*, 86) Although Yank loses his life upon entering a gorilla cage out of his own will, he has somehow found his briar patch, since Yank has kept on insisting throughout the play that, in contrast to people like Mildred, he belongs. Whereas Son also asserts his sense of belonging, especially during his stay in Eloë, but does not lose his identity, Yank turns his appellation as a hairy ape into a self-fulfilling prophecy, and gradually turns his personality into that of a hairy ape. His only possibility is therefore to enter the gorilla cage, and the closing stage directions suggest that "perhaps, the Hairy Ape at last belongs."⁷⁸³ Son, on the other hand, eventually finds his briar patch at the novel's close. By attributing his departure with the typical sounds associated with Brer Rabbit, Morrison suggests that Son's journey through the jungle will be met with success. This image of a black man running through the wilderness of a Caribbean island evokes and inverts O'Neill's *Emperor Jones*, since the play's protagonist does not get along in the jungle at all. He is as unadapted to a life on such an island as is Valerian, Morrison's white protagonist bearing the name of an emperor, whose misplacement is symbolised in his urge to artificially grow plants of the Northern Hemisphere in the Caribbean with the help of a greenhouse. This interference with nature *Signifies* on Claire's obsession to create new forms of plant life in Susan Glaspell's drama *The Verge*. In contrast to Emperor Jones,

⁷⁸¹ Cf. Jones, *Hairy Ape*, 213.

⁷⁸² *Ibid.*, 214.

⁷⁸³ *Ibid.*, 260.

who is tormented and rendered insane by images of his racial history, Son has appropriated the same history and draws upon it for his own purposes.

After the cataclysmic Christmas celebration, Margaret finally faces her maltreatment of her son Michael during his childhood. Since she cannot undo these acts of violence, she desperately tries to clear herself – naturally, without success – of her guilt as well as of her shame by obsessively washing her red hair. “That was the future, her job at hand was to reveal the past. Right now she had to wash her hair, *hard*. Soap it with mountains of lather, and rinse it over and over again. Then she sat in the sun against every instruction ever given her about the care of her hair, and let it dry.” (TB, 237) Margaret’s fruitless compulsion to self-cleansing *Signifies* on Macbeth’s ineffectual attempt to wash his hands off his guilt concerning the murder of Duncan. “Will all great Neptune’s ocean wash this blood / Clean from my hand? No, this my hand will rather / The multitudinous seas incarnadine, / Making the green one red.”⁷⁸⁴

In addition to *Signifying* on Shakespeare’s *Macbeth* in this instance, the entire novel of *Tar Baby* can be interpreted as a revision of *The Tempest*. This play, allegedly Shakespeare’s last, has undergone a great number of adaptations, not least as a consequence of its adaptability to (post-)colonial circumstances. Just like Morrison’s novel, *The Tempest* is mainly set on an island in the New World. Just like the white European Prospero, who reigns over the natives, white Valerian seizes power on the island, ruling over the people of his household. Both Son and the Native Caliban are associated with wildness and believed to be ruled by their physical impulses rather than white colonialist reason. Ariel is Prospero’s devoted servant, similarly, Sydney faithfully works for his employer Valerian.

Representing different class interests, the various characters in *Tar Baby* play out the tensions between Prospero, Ariel, and Caliban and the attendant themes of power, betrayal, and resistance. In a complication of the *Tempest* plot, Morrison has Son (Caliban) fall in love with the Sorbonne-educated, mulatta Jadine, who in her role as Miranda is more Valerian’s daughter than her foster-father/uncle Sydney’s.⁷⁸⁵

⁷⁸⁴ Cf. *Macbeth*, Act II, Scene II. The attempt to rid oneself of guilt through the washing of hands of course derives from the Bible. Before sentencing Jesus to death and thus accommodating to the people’s will, Pilate publically washes his hands, stating: “I am innocent of the blood of this just person, see ye to it.” Matthew 27:24.

⁷⁸⁵ Cf. Grewal, 83.

Even Son's close affinity to nature is prefigured in the character of Caliban, who "like the island he inherited is at once a landscape and a human situation."⁷⁸⁶ Like Prospero, who "'twixt the green sea and the azured vault / Set roaring war"⁷⁸⁷ on the island, Valerian is indirectly responsible for the violence having been inflicted on his island during the construction of L'Arbe de la Croix. "In *Tar Baby*, ecological damage is the visible counterpart of cultural displacement, both long-term effects of colonization. The landscape ravaged by the dictates of capitalism becomes a metaphor of cultural rootlessness in a novel whose characters are displaced or in exile of one kind or another."⁷⁸⁸ Just like Shakespeare's play, *Tar Baby* constantly revolves around the relation between nature and artificiality, between traditional knowledge and folk wisdom based on heritage and institutional Westernised education. Similar to Caliban and Miranda, who embody these contrasts, Son and Jadine are juxtaposed as the outer realms of these oppositions. By explicitly identifying Son with Caliban, (*TB*, 167) Morrison ultimately clarifies the island as his briar patch, therefore making it completely inconceivable that he could lead his life as a complete person in the megalopolis New York, one of the capitals of Western society.

Unlike Jadine, Son does not subscribe to the message of Frank Sinatra's song *New York, New York*, which proclaims that anyone able to "make it there," is capable of making it anywhere. Son, on his behalf, is convinced: "If I make it in New York, then that's all I do: 'Make it in New York.' That's not life; that's making it." (*TB*, 268) He knows that he is never going to be "king of the hill – top of the heap" in New York and rather clings to the briar patch of his own "little town blues."⁷⁸⁹ His only chance to become "king of the hill" is to join the island's mythic horsemen. By appropriating such icons of Western culture as the plays of Shakespeare and O'Neill, Morrison adds further emphasis on the circumstances in her works, as supposedly fixed interpretations are suddenly called into question and have to be re-assessed. Her use of Hurston's and Wright's texts, on the other hand, not so much reinterprets the novels *Signified* upon as it reaffirms them and some of the messages they convey. The seemingly familiar setting of the Garden of Eden is peopled by new characters, forcing the readers to analyse the allocation of roles to the various characters as well as to arrive at their own interpretations of good and evil. Son's idiosyncratic approach to Sinatra's world-famous

⁷⁸⁶ Ibid., 84.

⁷⁸⁷ *The Tempest* Act V, Scene I.

⁷⁸⁸ Cf. Grewal, 85.

song illustrates the fact that the very same place can provide a briar patch for one person and be perceived as hell itself by another.

Beloved also uses the Bible to signify. “I am my beloved’s, and my beloved is mine”⁷⁹⁰ is echoed in the soli of Sethe, Denver, and Beloved, “BELOVED, she my daughter. She mine.” (*Beloved*, 200), “She’s mine, Beloved. She’s mine.” (*Beloved*, 209), “I AM BELOVED and she is mine” (*Beloved*, 210) and eventually in the threnody of voices postulating “You are mine.” (*Beloved*, 217) When the women gather to save Sethe, 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.” (*Beloved*, 259) But according to the Bible, “[i]n the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.”⁷⁹¹ The word is replaced by the sound of singing, therefore, the music develops more power to exorcise Beloved than any words ever could. This intertextual relationship emphasises Beloved’s strange identity. Driven away by mere sound instead of words, she must have sprung from pre-Christian sources. Then again, parallel to Christ who died on a Friday at three o’clock in the afternoon, Beloved is exorcised “at three in the afternoon on a Friday so wet and hot Cincinnati’s stench had traveled to the country.” (*Beloved*, 257)

But *Beloved* not only *Signifies* on the Bible, its intertextuality comprises both the well-known model of the *slave narrative* and Mark Twain’s famous novel *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*.⁷⁹² A typical slave narrative is written in retrospect, after the slave has reached freedom, culminating into a triumph of justice. Nevertheless, *Beloved* deconstructs this traditional pattern. Instead of being set during slavery, its story takes place in the time of Reconstruction. And although the characters are no longer enslaved, they still have not reached full spiritual freedom. Usually, slave narratives are linear and written from a single point of view. Once again, *Beloved* does subvert tradition through its circular structure and its many different perspectives.⁷⁹³

In *Beloved* and in *Huck Finn* some of the names are the same.⁷⁹⁴ For instance, Sethe does not want to shop at Phelps’ store, whereas in *Huck Finn* there is a farm

⁷⁸⁹ Cf. All quotations in this paragraph unless indicated otherwise are taken from Sinatra, *New York*.

⁷⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 6:3.

⁷⁹¹ Cf. John 1:1.

⁷⁹² Mark Twain, *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. New York: Charles L. Webster, 1885.

⁷⁹³ Cf. Jürgen C. Wolter, “‘Let People Know Where Their Power Is’: Deconstruction and Re-Membering in Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*.” In: *Zeitschrift für Anglistik und Amerikanistik* 45:3 (1997) 236-246. 239

⁷⁹⁴ Cf. Sylvia Mayer, “‘You Like Huckleberries?’ Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* and Mark Twain’s *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*.” In: Maria Diedrich and Werner Sollors (eds.), *The Black Columbiad: Defining*

which belongs to a family called Phelps. Sethe works at Sawyer's restaurant, and Huck's best friend is - of course - Tom Sawyer. But more important than the mere similarity of names is Sethe's encounter with Amy, who helps her, the fugitive slave, in the course of her escape. Like Amy, Huck also supports a slave running. Amy hints at her intertextual alter ego Huck by asking Sethe, "You like huckleberries?" (*Beloved*, 32) Although both Amy and Huck help a slave to escape, both of them are "strongly influenced by the perverted moral codes of the slaveholding society."⁷⁹⁵ Huck has qualms helping Jim, because he senses the "guilt" of stealing from Jim's master. And Amy, herself an outcast, has internalised her notion of superiority over black people. "We got a old nigger girl come by our place.[...] She don't know nothing, just like you. You don't know a thing." (*Beloved*, 80) While Huck intends to head out for the territory, Amy is on a quest for velvet, which, to her, is "like the world was just born." (*Beloved*, 33) Both set out for something new, pure, and untouched. *Beloved* is also *Signifying* on *Huck Finn* through its distinct alterations. Instead of a boy it is Amy who appears. And whereas Tom Sawyer and Huck Finn play tricks on Jim in the end, not telling him that he is already free, Amy does nothing like that to Sethe. "Morrison's intertextual engagement with *Huck Finn* – her shifts in thematic emphasis, her expanding repetitions, her critical additions and refusals – must, however, ultimately be regarded as a formal technique to support her central goal in *Beloved*: to make visible what has been absent."⁷⁹⁶

Apart from the Bible and literary oeuvres, Morrison also *Signifies* on Greek mythology. In *Song of Solomon*, Robert Smith's attempt to fly with wings he himself has constructed and the entire flying motif are strongly reminiscent of the story of Daedalus and Icarus in this well-known Greek myth. Daedalus and his son Icarus are held captive on Crete. Out of wax and feathers they construct wings and start flying towards freedom. While Daedalus escapes to Sicily, Icarus becomes so exhilarated by his flight that he gets too close to the sun, which subsequently causes his wings to melt. His death is thus the result of hubris. In *Song of Solomon*, however, the "conflict is not between *hubris* and common sense, but between 'absolute' freedom and social responsibility."⁷⁹⁷ It is only when Milkman accepts his roots as well as responsibility for

Moments in African American Literature and Culture. Cambridge, Massachusetts and London: Harvard University Press, 1994. 337-346.338.

⁷⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 339.

⁷⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 346.

⁷⁹⁷ Cf. Davis in Bloom, 18. Emphasis original.

his actions that he becomes capable of flying. Robert Smith, who used to be a member of the “Seven Days,” chose freedom – therefore his flight could not really be successful. Morrison acknowledges that some readers might take her flight motif as an imitation of the Icarus tale, but she clarifies that she is really writing about Africans who could fly.⁷⁹⁸ This awareness of the possible connection proves that at least a *Signifying* relation between her novel and Icarus can be justified.⁷⁹⁹

In the course of his journey, Milkman encounters Circe, the midwife present at his father’s and his aunt’s birth. Her character obviously *Signifies* on Circe in Homer’s *Odyssey*.⁸⁰⁰ After Milkman’s encounter with Circe, who is described as a witch-like character, he follows her instructions and sets out to find the cave Pilate and his father had told him about. In the *Odyssey*, Circe indeed is a witch. She helps Odysseus to descent to the underworld, where he is given further directions in order to find his way home. In Milkman’s case, the cave is the turning point at which his quest for gold turns into the quest for the song and his ancestral roots.⁸⁰¹

Morrison again *Signifies* on the *Odyssey* in *Jazz*. Golden Grays father is called Henry Lestroy or LesTroy. The second version of his surname calls him a Trojan. In Homer’s Cyclops episode, Odysseus and his men are held captive in the cave of Polyphemus, the cyclops. They have entered without having shown any respect for his home or his property. After having been blinded by Odysseus, Polyphemus asks him who he is. Odysseus answers that his name is “nobody” – which is true, since this is how Odysseus’ name translates. When Odysseus and his men escape, Polyphemus tells everyone that he had been blinded by nobody. When Golden Gray enters the house of Henry LesTroy, he rummages around looking for something to eat or drink, until he eventually finds some liquor. Before learning that Golden Gray is his son, Henry LesTroy enters his house, finding a stranger who has drunk all of his alcohol. He cannot understand this, since it is against the rules of his community. “But nobody, nobody, drank a man’s liquor in his house unless they knew each other well.” (*Jazz*, 200) The Cyclops episode is the archetypal encounter with Otherness in Western literature and the story of Golden Gray *Signifies* on this confrontation. Whereas Odysseus does not change his perception of Polyphemus as an inferior being, Golden Gray, who initially

⁷⁹⁸ Cf. Stepto, 122.

⁷⁹⁹ It should be noted that Morrison has a minor in Classical Literatures.

⁸⁰⁰ The practice of intertextually referring to Homer’s *Odyssey* became most famous in *Ulysses* by James Joyce.

⁸⁰¹ Cf. de Weever, 142.

regarded his black father as uncivilised and himself as civilised, comes to accept his black heritage and no longer underestimates or misjudges his father. When Morrison reverses the details of the *Odyssey*, she is again making visible what has been absent.

More than anything else, *Paradise* can be evaluated as Morrison's spin on Utopian literature. In contrast to that literary tradition, however, she not merely presents her reader with one utopia, but with three of them. The Founding Fathers of Ruby intend to build their town following their own interpretations of right and wrong and making up their own (covert) laws and regulations. Theirs is a male-dominated society, in which the women's views are disregarded. Based on racist attitudes, they strive to prevent the scattering of the original families; therefore, they perceive everyone different from them as a potential threat. This eventually leads to their savage attack on the Convent women, whose form of life presents the second type of utopia in the novel. Living several miles from the next settlement, the women in the Convent lead their lives free from male domination. Neither their various racial backgrounds nor their differences in social class are of any consequence for these women, most of whom have ended up in the former Convent after incidents of personal suffering. Despite some quarrels between them, they are taking care of each other, attempting to provide a haven. Ironically, the town the original settlers of Ruby had left was called Haven, however, without supplying the comfort, care, and security to be expected there. When Ruby is built, it is seen as a second chance, a New Haven. (*Paradise*, 177) But just as this possible town name is substituted by another, the attempt is not met with success. The third concept featuring utopia patterns is contained in Consolata's image and description of paradise,

a place where white sidewalks met the sea and fish the color of plums swam alongside children. She spoke of fruit that tasted the way sapphires look and boys using rubies for dice. Of scented cathedrals made of gold where gods and goddesses sat in the pews with the congregation. Of carnations tall as trees. Dwarfs with diamonds for teeth. Snakes aroused by poetry and bells. Then she told them of a woman named Piedade, who sang but never said a word. (*Paradise*, 263p.)

Notably, in her perception of paradise no forbidden fruit is mentioned, and likewise, the snake is not at all described as an evil force. Her inversion of traditional notions of paradise thus *Signifies* on the Biblical story. Despite Billie Delia's reference to Ruby as a "noplac," (*Paradise*, 308) which is one of the possible interpretations of the term

utopia, the town has rather turned out a *dystopia*, and thus, a failure in some respects. Neither does the microcosmic utopia of the Convent remain intact after the attack. Hence, the only persisting utopia in *Paradise* is the mysterious world invoked by Consolata and the spiritual force of Piedade, promising to be an *eutopia*, hence, a true haven in the end. Morrison succeeded to turn her novel into “an interrogation of the idea of paradise,”⁸⁰² especially since “the search for a utopian society [...] picks up where the other novels leave off in handling the dilemma of at once representing a powerful utopian desire and at the same time representing a thoroughgoing scepticism concerning the possibility of its fulfillment.”⁸⁰³

“There were nine large intact families who made the original journey, who were thrown out and cast away in Fairly, Oklahoma, and went on to found Haven.” (*Paradise*, 188) The incident in which these people were refused an extended stay in Fairly on account of their dark complexion is from then on referred to as the “Disallowing.” (*Paradise*, 189) The people’s long journey up to their final destination of Ruby is once again *Signifying* on the Bible by reworking the story of Moses liberating his people from the yoke of slavery and leading them to the Promised Land,⁸⁰⁴ which has been “the most treasured part of the Bible for slaves during the antebellum period and beyond.”⁸⁰⁵ Aware that “God had warned the Israelites who crossed over into Canaan not to mix with indigenous people and had given them the right to cleanse the land through the spilling of blood,”⁸⁰⁶ this is exactly what the Rubyites do. They enforce racial codes and kill those who threaten to suffuse their system by virtue of their mere otherness.

But Morrison also *Signifies* upon her own work. In spite of starting her novel with “[t]hey shoot the white girl first,” (*Paradise*, 3) she does not reveal the identity of this first victim, a method she already applied in her short story *Recitatif*⁸⁰⁷. There, two girls who “looked like salt and pepper”⁸⁰⁸ get to know each other in an orphanage. Already in this short story (written in 1983), Morrison does not identify which of the

⁸⁰² Cf. Verdelle, 1.

⁸⁰³ Cf. Tally, *Paradise*, 19.

⁸⁰⁴ Cf. Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy.

⁸⁰⁵ Cf. Reggie Young, “*Paradise* (book review).” In: *Christian Century*, March 18th 1998. Cited after: http://www.findarticles.com/cf_0/m1058/n9_v115/20460267/print.jhtml, 22nd of August, 2003.

⁸⁰⁶ *Ibid.*

⁸⁰⁷ Cf. Morrison, *Recitatif*.

⁸⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, 2079.

girls belongs to which race. Even the clues some critics⁸⁰⁹ believe to spot are so cunningly contradictory, that no ultimate decision can be taken. This blurring of racial differences is matched by Morrison's choice of the story's title, a recitatif inhabiting a space between singing and speech. "Morrison's connotation of an operatic recitative – a middle ground between verbal expression and musical expression – is particularly appropriate given the parallel significance of oral storytelling and musical signification in African and African American culture."⁸¹⁰ Similarly to the content of this short story, various hints could be followed in an attempt to disclose the identity of the white girl, an approach Morrison vehemently discourages. "I wanted the readers to wonder about the race of those girls until those readers understood that their race didn't matter. I want to dissuade people from reading literature in that way."⁸¹¹

Missy Dehn Kubitschek compares Morrison's trilogy of *Beloved*, *Jazz*, and *Paradise* to the three parts of Dante's *Divine Comedy*, corresponding to *Inferno*, *Purgatorio*, and *Paradiso*.⁸¹² She points out that Morrison's inclusion of divine figures alludes to Dante's religious imagery. In her reading, "Dante's paradise transcends earth, whereas Morrison's shows earth and the spiritual world as inextricably mixed."⁸¹³ This holds certainly true for large parts of the novel, but fails to account for its ending, in which only the least tangible version of paradise, that of Consolata's vision, seems to have the chance to endure. Nonetheless, the influence of spirits in human life reflects a traditional African view. "Whereas the *Divine Comedy* poetically expresses Catholic cosmology, *Paradise* conveys an Africanist, feminist religious sensibility."⁸¹⁴ The Convent women's purifying dance in the rain can be seen as *Signifying* on Dante's cleansing bath in Lethe, the river of forgetfulness, which makes him transcend all his sins.⁸¹⁵ The image Morrison evokes at the end of *Paradise* does indeed share a sense of atmosphere with the ending of Dante's work. Morrison emphasises "the ease of coming back to love begun," (*Paradise*, 318) whereas "the will roll'd onward, like a wheel / In even motion, by the Love impell'd;"⁸¹⁶ in both cases, love is the driving force. The

⁸⁰⁹ Cf. Shirley Goldstein, "Race and Response, Toni Morrison's *Recitatif*." In: *Short Story* 5:1 (1997) 77-86.

⁸¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 84.

⁸¹¹ Cf. Tally, *Paradise*, 85.

⁸¹² Cf. Dehn Kubitschek, 163.

⁸¹³ *Ibid.*, 163.

⁸¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 163.

⁸¹⁵ Cf. Dante Alighieri, *Divine Comedy, Paradise*. Canto XXVII. Translated by H.F.Cary. Cited after: <http://www.ibiblio.org/gutenberg/etext97/0ddcc10.txt>, 20th of December 2003.

⁸¹⁶ Cf. *Ibid.*, Canto XXXIII

movement of the wheel is recreated by the rolling waves at the shore of Morrison's *Paradise*. Morrison's indication of a return echoes the sense of circularity conveyed in Dante's last verses. In contrast to Dante, however, Morrison implies that as "long as the idea of 'paradise' rests on excluding those who are unworthy, human-created utopias will fail because all human beings have the capacity for sin and violence. Paradoxically, only by accepting evil in ourselves and others can we enjoy a true haven."⁸¹⁷

⁸¹⁷ Cf. Dehn Kubitschek, 163.

4.4 Epigraphs

“An epigraph to a book is like a key signature in music.”⁸¹⁸ In many of her novels, Morrison is *Signifying* through her epigraphs. Morrison opens her novel *Sula* with two epigraphs. In the first, dedicated to her sons, she points out that “[i]t is sheer good fortune to miss / somebody long before they leave you. / This book is for Ford and Slade, whom / I miss although they have not left me.” Although this statement might seem paradox, Morrison thus “unsettles the very sense of to *miss* and intimates the impossibility of any representation not informed by missing meanings.”⁸¹⁹ She rewrites an unspecified future absence into the presence, which challenges the very notion of missing someone, as one might think that reasons for a separation other than death must be possible to overcome. By sharpening her reader’s senses to this idea, Morrison foreshadows Nel’s fundamental misinterpretation which is only corrected at the end of the novel. Nel’s husband had betrayed her with Sula and then left her. Whereas for many years Nel is convinced of missing her unfaithful husband, she only realises very late that she has been missing Sula all the time. Had she understood this earlier, her problem could have been solved, at least as long as Sula was alive. So she had been there and missed at the same time, however unwittingly. The epigraph also *Signifies* on the community’s lack of missing Sula despite the cathartic effect she had on the people, as well as on her absence throughout much of the book, in which she is being missed by the readers.

Likewise, the second epigraph, a quote from *The Rose Tattoo*⁸²⁰ “foreshadows the replication of signs, the overdetermination of meanings, and the thematics of self in the subsequent text.”⁸²¹ Sula’s question of “I can do it all, why can’t I have it all?” (*Sula*, 142) is prefigured in the epigraph’s assertion “I had too much glory.”⁸²² In Tennessee Williams’ drama, the protagonist Serafina delle Rose finds her purpose in life in her passionate love for her husband, whose rose tattoo on his chest symbolises their love. When he is killed, she defies the legal prohibition against cremation and has to stand for trial. Many years later, she learns that her husband had indeed been betraying her, and Serafina finally turns towards life again. Like Nel in *Sula*, she had

⁸¹⁸ Cf. Margaret Atwood, “Haunted by Their Nightmares.” In: Bloom, 143-147. 147.

⁸¹⁹ Cf. Rachel Lee, “Missing Peace in Toni Morrison’s *Sula* and *Beloved*.” In: Iyasere, 277-296. 279.

⁸²⁰ Cf. Tennessee Williams, *The Rose Tattoo*. London: Secker & Warburg, 1951.

⁸²¹ *Ibid.*, 279.

⁸²² *Ibid.*, 279.

abdicated “her responsibilities to herself and others following the loss of her husband.”⁸²³ But Serafina also shares characteristics with Sula, as each woman challenges the pettiness of their communities and “maintain a solipsistic world view which allows [them] to proclaim that ‘nobody knew my rose of the world but me.’”⁸²⁴ Serafina strives to battle death, but Sula actually succeeds, as she continues to exist even after. “Both Morrison and Williams are intent upon inducing their audiences to ask very basic questions about the nature of love and to transcend their own preconceptions in order to come to terms with the tragedy perpetrated in the name of love.”⁸²⁵

The epigraph of *Song of Solomon* reads “For fathers may soar / And the children may know their names.” The line can be seen as an intertextual reference to the content of blues songs, in which very often women are left by their men, and they and their children sing blues songs about their misery. Likewise, the epigraph refers to flying people as those in African folktales. More specifically, the inscription already hints at the novel’s central themes – flying and the knowledge of names. It foreshadows the content of the song in which Solomon flies away leaving his children to sing about him. At the same time, Milkman’s process of learning his name and gaining knowledge of his heritage is anticipated.

Like *Sula*, *Tar Baby* contains two epigraphs. In the first, Morrison dedicates the novel to a number of women, her mother, grandmother and sister among them, claiming that all of them “knew their true and ancient properties.” This statement *Signifies* on one of the novel’s themes, since Jadine is repeatedly said to have lost her ancient properties, which is interpreted as her major fault. The names of Morrison’s family members evoke continuity and a reliance on traditional values. “Morrison indirectly includes herself as one of those sisters who has remained true to her identity as an African American woman.”⁸²⁶ Eleanor W. Traylor evaluates the women as “guides to whom the narrative voice of the writer is accountable.”⁸²⁷ In addition to foreshadowing elements of the novel, the first epigraph is also connected to the second as far as these women literally constitute the “house of Chloe,” since Toni Morrison’s original name was Chloe Anthony Wofford. “Taken together, dedication and epigraph create a curious parallel

⁸²³ Cf. C. Lynn Munro, “The Tattooed Heart and the Serpentine Eye. Morrison’s Choice of an Epigraph for *Sula*.” In: *Black American Literature Forum* 18:4 (1984) 150-154. 150.

⁸²⁴ *Ibid.*, 150.

⁸²⁵ *Ibid.*, 154.

⁸²⁶ Cf. John N. Duvall, “Descent in the ‘House of Chloe’: Race, Rape, and Identity in Toni Morrison’s *Tar Baby*.” In: *Contemporary Literature* 38:2 (1997) 325-349. 328.

⁸²⁷ *Ibid.*, 328.

between Morrison's relation to her women relatives and Jadine's struggle with the 'night women.'"⁸²⁸

The second epigraph is derived from the Bible: "For it hath been declared / unto me of you, my brethren, by them / which are of the house of / Chloe, that there are / contentions among you."⁸²⁹ In his epistles, Paul wanted to help converting the heathens of Corinth to Christians. This task was especially complicated due to the many divisions between these people regarding social status as well as their adherence to different (religious) authorities. The small group of characters in *Tar Baby* is similarly divided, belonging to different races, social classes, nationalities, and possibly also religious denominations. There are definitely contentions among them, as foreshadowed by the epigraph. Paul's epistle continues with the question "hath not God made foolish the wisdom of this world?"⁸³⁰ Although this passage does not form part of Morrison's epigraph, it must nevertheless be taken into account, for the novel does not restrict itself to dealing with the respective contentions among the characters but also juxtaposes different concepts of wisdom and knowledge in the opposition of ancient properties versus Western rationality.

Beloved, which - according to Atwood - is "written in major,"⁸³¹ is dedicated to "Sixty Million and more." This is the number of people who have been abducted from their original African countries and forcefully transported to America. Only a small percentage survived this passage. Morrison's novel bears witness to this cruel episode of history, giving voice to the "disremembered and unaccounted for." (*Beloved*, 274) This dedication can only be understood in the context of the whole novel, in which *Beloved* represents these sixty million and more. The second epigraph is once again taken from the Bible: "I will call them my people, / which were not my people; / and her beloved, / which was not beloved. / ROMANS 9:25." This *Signifies* on the unsolved question of *Beloved*'s identity. Actually, she might of course be called *Beloved* without necessarily having to be Sethe's daughter. Or - no matter who she is and where she came from - she was not beloved. Nevertheless, this quotation offers hope and reconciliation, since in the Bible it continues, "[a]nd it shall come to pass, / that in the place where it was said unto them, / Ye are not my people; / there shall they be called

⁸²⁸ *Ibid.*, 332.

⁸²⁹ Cf. 1 Cor. 1:11.

⁸³⁰ Cf. 1 Cor. 1:20.

⁸³¹ *Ibid.*, 147.

the children of the living God.”⁸³² This solves the question of identity by rendering it unimportant, as redemption is finally granted to everyone. Margaret Atwood is sure that the author was aware of this implication, for “Toni Morrison is too smart, and too much of a writer, not to have intended this context.”⁸³³

The epigraph of *Jazz* is taken from a collection of Gnostic texts: “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 *Nag Hammadi*⁸³⁴ is a set of Coptic texts, which were found in Egypt in 1945. By drawing on a text from this collection, Morrison uses the “African voice as foundation.”⁸³⁵ Gnosticism is concerned with knowledge as the basis of understanding. This confusing epigraph plays with Western concepts of logic and fixed referentiality. It “foregrounds the power relations inherent in nomenclature.”⁸³⁶ But the epigraph leaves out a line of the *Nag Hammadi*: “I am the knowledge of my name.”⁸³⁷ This omission *Signifies* on Joe’s lack of knowledge about his parents, and therefore, also about his name. The identity of the narrator in the epigraph is as obscure and confusing as that of the novel’s narrative voice. The epigraph anticipates the significance of sound and music as well as the importance of playful language within the novel. It prepares the reader to set aside Western notions of logic and to rather embark on an enterprise guided by language and music. Both the epigraph and the novel following it give up many riddles. But, as Bently Layton points out, “while riddles have solutions, however, ‘most Gnostic texts’ (like *Jazz*) ‘do not.’”⁸³⁸

The epigraph to *Paradise* is taken from the last verses of the very same Gnostic text, a fact that links the novel to its predecessor, indicating at the same time that it is intended as the final part of the trilogy formed by *Beloved*, *Jazz*, and *Paradise*. Once more, the Gnostic text might be interpreted as a riddle, especially since the identity of the narrator remains mysterious. By pointing out the many “pleasant forms which exist in numerous sins, / and incontinencies, / and disgraceful passions, / and fleetin pleasures, / which (men) embrace until they become sober / and go up to their resting

⁸³² Cf. Romans 9:26.

⁸³³ Cf. Atwood, 147.

⁸³⁴ Cf. Gnostic Society Library (ed). *Thunder, Perfect Mind*. Translated by George W. MacRae. Cited after: <http://www.webcom.com/gnosis/naghamm/thunder.html>, 20th of December 2003.

⁸³⁵ Cf. Hansen Werner, *Playing the Changes*. 302.

⁸³⁶ Cf. Vincent A. O’Keefe, “From ‘Other’ Sides of the Realist Tracks: (A)gnostic Narratives in Toni Morrison’s *Jazz*.” In: *The Centennial Review* 41:2 (1997 Spring) 331-49. 334.

⁸³⁷ *Ibid.*, 346.

⁸³⁸ *Ibid.*, 347.

place,” in her epigraph, Morrison confronts her readers with a kind of pattern that serves as a useful tool in the reading of her novel. The reader therefore has to evaluate the characters’ actions against the backdrop of this text, judging whether they are to be seen as sinful or not. Although men are specified in this text as those who have to become sober after having sinned, the word is put into brackets. Whereas this might be a consequence of many causes in the *Nag Hammadi* – possibly the word is not completely legible in the original or it might be a matter of translation – this feature gains importance in the context of Morrison’s novel, since indeed, a large number of men commit grave sins, become disgracefully passionate over the words of the Oven, follow “fleeting pleasures,” as Deacon in his short relationship with Consolata or K.D.’s numerous amorous episodes, only becoming sober after the attack on the Convent. A number of women, on the other hand, also have to let go of wrongdoing in their former lives. The “resting place” specified in the Gnostic text *Signifies* on Consolata’s vision of paradise, in which she finds Piedade, her spiritual guide: “[a]nd they will find me there.” Piedade is similarly mysterious and ephemeral as the narrator of the *Nag Hammadi*; the Convent women’s return in the form of revenants indeed suggests that “they will live, / and they will not die again.”

Morrison uses a broad spectrum of vernacular devices to *Signify*. The names she uses characterise her figures, and often they invert the historical background originally connected with these names. Thus, they serve as a sort of commentary on the characters. Reaching back to Esu and the Signifying Monkey, Morrison shapes some of her characters as trickster figures. These reflect the element of the supernatural, which plays an important role in African American beliefs. Intertextual references *Signify* on well-known (literary) texts and vice versa. In her epigraphs, Morrison comments on her novels, she literally sets the tune for them. Like a jazz musician, Morrison constantly turns back to vernacular traditions of language and music.

Jazzman take my blues away; make my pain
the same as yours with every change you play.
Oh lift me, won’t you lift me with ev’ry turn around.
Play it sweetly, take me down, oh jazzman.⁸³⁹

⁸³⁹ Cf. Carol King, *Jazzman*. This song is *Signified* upon in *The Simpsons*, the popular cartoon famous for its critical approach towards American society, when Lisa Simpson dedicates her cover version to a character called Bleeding Gums.

V Evaluation and Conclusion

“In her novels, Morrison seeks to restore the oral literatures of black people, the mix of blues and jazz and gossip and tales; she also wants to tell her stories in a voice that can incorporate high culture and low, Greek tragic choruses and gospel songs, so ‘you don’t feel the jumps.’”⁸⁴⁰ Her use of music and vernacular traditions is manifold. Not only are singing and dancing frequent elements in her novels, but the patterns and content of music are transferred to her texts. “Like a griot, preacher, or blues singer, Morrison uses inventories and variations to make her case.”⁸⁴¹ She employs vernacular traditions as storytelling, testifying, and *Signifying* in her novels.

The Bluest Eye highlights the importance of cultural legacies such as the ones transmitted in blues. The music supplies an emotional outlet, allowing for a cathartic effect and the possibility of transcending unpleasant situations. “Morrison colors the misery she depicts with the blues and greens of her voice,”⁸⁴² thus making bearable Pecola’s tragic story. The songs Morrison makes her characters sing tighten the connections and bonds between them. Family ties are enhanced, as in the case of Mrs. MacTeer and Claudia, and the same holds true for Pilate, Reba, and Hagar in *Song of Solomon*. In *Sula*, music enforces the cohesion between the members of the community when they are faced with what they perceive as danger. Music also turns a number of individuals in *Paradise* into a strong and powerful group, when the Convent women eventually dance in the rain, whereas in *Love*, music encourages people to take their destinies into their own hands.

Furthermore, the use of music in Morrison’s novels creates links with the African American heritage and the characters’ ancestors. By establishing these references via music, the author emphasises the importance of oral traditions in preserving an African American identity. “Kill your ancestors, you kill all. There’s no future, there’s no past, there’s just an intolerable present. And it is intolerable under the circumstances, it’s not even life.”⁸⁴³ Milkman learns through his family’s song about his roots and his heritage. Likewise, knowledge about cultural legacies has traditionally been incorporated in African American music. Jadine’s estrangement from her ancestors

⁸⁴⁰ Cf. Fussell, 285.

⁸⁴¹ Cf. Linda Dittmar, “‘Will the Circle be Unbroken?’ The Politics of Form in *The Bluest Eye*.” In: *Novel* 23:2 (1990) 137-155. 150.

⁸⁴² *Ibid.*, 152.

⁸⁴³ Cf. Koenen, 73.

and her heritage in *Tar Baby* is rendered, amongst others, via her preference of Western classical music over Gospel songs. Similarly, Morrison symbolises the young Rubyites' lack of their own history as well as their own voice in *Paradise* in their passive consumption of comparatively dead radio music instead of their own participation in music making.

“This music is an integrate part of the African American soul. It not only brings back the sensual, physical side of life, however, but also the connection back to nature and the southern country roots of most of Morrison’s characters.”⁸⁴⁴ In *Tar Baby*, Son is a musician, an embodiment of the prototypical wandering bluesman, and he also maintains strong connections to nature. He feels safe either in the presence of a piano or in the untamed wilderness of the island. Here and in Morrison’s other novels, knowledge is channeled via devices based on sensual and emotional experience instead of mediating merely through cognitive means centred on logic. Music constitutes such an important element in the understanding of the novels that “words in Morrison’s work can only start making sense in combination with sound and music. Hence, sound serves as a mediator between African and European American culture, translating complicated eternal verities and processing them into a form which Morrison’s characters and hopefully, readers can understand.”⁸⁴⁵

The characters use music to keep alive their memories of the past, however hurtful they might be. Sometimes the music triggers memories, just as the smell of madeleines in Marcel Proust’s *À La Recherche du Temps Perdu*. Hard times are transcended with the help of music, thus it is the music that leaves the way open for survival. Music as a polysemic vehicle at once expresses “the awakening social consciousness of the African American community, as well as the persistence of the African collective memory.”⁸⁴⁶ The characters in the novels, often deprived of other possibilities, voice their resistance in songs. Music can exclude individuals from community, as when Macon listens to the singing of Pilate, Reba, and Hagar while standing outside their house, but on the other hand it may also serve to establish a community, as shows the women’s musical embrace of Sethe at the end of *Beloved*. In *Sula*, the hymns sung by the community further illustrate the protagonist’s status of a pariah, while at the same time they foreshadow the decay of the entire place. Son’s

⁸⁴⁴ Cf. Gutmann, 85.

⁸⁴⁵ Ibid., 107.

⁸⁴⁶ Cf. Elia, 8.

natural approach to music underlines his belonging, whereas Valerian, feeling misplaced on the island, resorts to a kind of music which is comparatively artificial and positively alien to his environment.

Morrison also uses music to embellish the setting and to intensify the atmosphere of *Jazz*. The drums at parades on Fifth Avenue relate to historical events. Their omnipresent, monotonous sound clarifies the impact of these incidents for the black community. The jazz of the Roaring Twenties serves as a counterpoint to the rhythm of the drums. Alice Manfred voices the fears people had about this wild and free kind of music, which represented an “embodiment or carrier of values which called into question those of white American culture of the past and present; jazz was as natural a medium of rebellion against the standards of prosperous middle class America which had given the young everything except what they really needed: communality, warmth and emotional honesty.”⁸⁴⁷ Blues and jazz were commonly associated with base desires, they had a very low reputation among people who believed themselves to be more respectable than others. The sexual contents of blues songs, the pet peeve of Alice Manfred, is exactly what attracts Dorcas and other young people to the music. Although jazz incorporates some of the values fundamental to the Declaration of Independence, such as freedom and individuality, the erotic undertones and the seeming anarchy of the music account for its controversial standing.⁸⁴⁸ A kind of music which is composed during its performance is utterly contrary to the listening habits of an audience conditioned to music of European descent. As a consequence, jazz “functioned as a critique of the dominant value system.”⁸⁴⁹ By moving such a form of music centre stage, Morrison challenges a perception of her novels from the points of view of Western rationality and logo-centrism. But jazz – with its consecutive soli – can also be seen as a form of conversation. The musicians are communicating “with each other, with the tradition and with the dancing or listening audience.”⁸⁵⁰ Morrison’s works, which permanently oscillate between African American and European values, are in constant dialogue with vernacular traditions as well as with her readers. She not only allows for reader participation, she explicitly welcomes it. “Narrative is radical, creating us at the very moment it is being created.”⁸⁵¹ Like jazz, which is composed at the same

⁸⁴⁷ Cf. Alan J. Rice, 158p.

⁸⁴⁸ Ibid., 160.

⁸⁴⁹ Ibid., 158.

⁸⁵⁰ Ibid., 160.

⁸⁵¹ Cf. Toni Morrison, *The Nobel Lecture in Literature 1993*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2000. 27.

instance of its performance with the listeners partaking through dance, her narrative affects and moves the audience as soon as they have the chance to participate. Morrison wants to achieve “that intimacy in which the reader is under the impression that he isn’t really reading this; that he is participating in it as he goes along.”⁸⁵² Her incorporation of jazz is an attempt to testify “to the music’s original powers of cultural unification.”⁸⁵³ In *Love*, music plays an equally important role. Whereas L’s humming and her comments can be compared to a soundtrack, the music being played at Cosey’s resort convinces the people of having opportunities in life against all odds. Just as in *Sula*, where the lyrics of several songs are used ironically and foreshadow events to come, music is used to comment on the ongoing in *Love*. Following Alice Manfred’s attitude in *Jazz*, music is also blamed as the source of a wrongdoing in *Love*, when Heed embarks on a love affair with a hotel guest.

Morrison incorporates musical properties in her works and transfers them to her novels. She uses antiphony to structure her works, as in *The Bluest Eye*, where the primer text and the actual plot work together as a call and response pattern, thus further emphasising the insuperable gap between the ideal of a life in the safety of white middle class and the horrors of Pecola’s existence. In *Sula*, call and response function on various levels, namely in the protagonist’s juxtapositions with Nel, the community, and Shadrack on the one hand, and on a verbal level between the description of the action and Sula’s interspersed thoughts during her intercourse with Ajax on the other. Whereas the former oppositions visualise the tensions Sula is subjected to, portray the advance of her quest for identity, and challenge traditional notions of good and evil, the second instance of call and response highlights the extent of Sula’s otherness and her ambiguity of character. In *Song of Solomon*, crucial episodes in Milkman’s development are rendered via antiphonal language. The most challenging and confusing chapters of *Beloved* make use of call and response: The respective soli of Sethe, Denver, and Beloved call and respond to each other, their “unspeakable thoughts, unspoken” converge in a trio of voices. As the terrors of the characters’ lives are unspeakable, but not inexpressible, they are not articulated in conventional language but through the use of antiphony. “Music permits the evasion of the word and the sign, even as it remains, crucially, within the zone of signification.”⁸⁵⁴ Call and response as a vernacular device

⁸⁵² Cf. Nicholas F. Pici, 375.

⁸⁵³ *Ibid.*, 394.

⁸⁵⁴ Cf. Fox-Good, 13.

of analysis breaks down hierarchies, equating all elements on the same level. In the trio chapter of *Beloved*, the family roles of being a mother, a daughter, or a sister, are devalued as the women's perceptions and desires culminate in a sinister "You are mine." In *Paradise*, call and response relations feature between oral and written history, Old and New Testament, the old and the young generation, Ruby and the Convent, or between black and white – all converging on the question of ultimate truth, on the issue of tolerance, and the notions of war and peace. In *Love*, the crucial conversation between Heed and Christine, which brings about reconciliation after many years of silence, is rendered antiphonically. They affirm each other's presence and thoughts in formulaic responses, and their regained friendship culminates in the voicing of their friendly "Love," an utterance which at the same time forms the novel's climax.

Morrison's novels are saturated with "cultural resources – from the vernacular uses of English to the desire-laden sound of the blues and the deft improvisations of jazz – that have sustained black people from the Middle Passage to the present."⁸⁵⁵ Her language is very musical, often rhythmical; and by employing improvisation, Morrison thus makes her novels resemble pieces of music. *The Bluest Eye* and *Song of Solomon* could be blues songs, *Sula* recalls a dirge, *Beloved* comes closest to a spiritual, *Jazz*, of course, resembles a jazz performance, and *Love* might be compared to a soundtrack. Many elements of her novel's contents can be traced back to those of spirituals, work songs, and blues songs. As these songs reflect important details in people's lives, describing the circumstances they lived in, their incorporation as underlying subtexts of the respective novels accentuates the authenticity of the African American experience Morrison describes.

In her novels, she wants to recreate the originally life-sustaining power of black music before its commercialisation during and after the 1920s, the quality it possessed when it was still influenced by tradition rather than being determined by economical speculations and audience expectations. Morrison aims to authentically reflect the cultural values of the African American community. Therefore, she also includes magic and folk beliefs in her novels.

The mythology has existed [...] in black culture – in the music, gospels, spirituals, jazz. It existed in what we said, and in our relationship with each other in a kind of village lore. The community had to take on that responsibility of passing from one generation to another the mythologies, the given qualities,

⁸⁵⁵ Cf. Mobley, *Mellow Moods*, 615.

stories, assumptions which an ethnic group that is culturally coherent and has not joined the larger mainstream keeps very much intact for survival.⁸⁵⁶

Another important issue that features prominently in Morrison's novels are elements of the supernatural, since to her and to many black people, they are a natural part of their heritage. Having been asked whether she believed in ghosts, Morrison replied, "Yes. Do you believe in germs?"⁸⁵⁷ Morrison, the "guardian of verbal art,"⁸⁵⁸ populates her novels with supernatural beings who can fly, change their shapes, and even transcend the boundaries of time and death. Despite the fact that since Albert Einstein's theory of relativity time can no longer be regarded as an absolute, and although "for those of us who believe in physics, this separation between past, present and future is nothing but an illusion, however, tenacious,"⁸⁵⁹ the traditional Western notion of time has remained linear and irreversible – an understanding Morrison however undermines in the structure of her novels as well as in her creation of characters arising from death. "According to West African belief, the dead live as long as they are remembered."⁸⁶⁰ Characters such as Sula, Jake in *Song of Solomon*, Beloved, the Convent women in *Paradise*, or L in *Love*, represent this concept. Since nowadays, people hardly ever sit down to tell each other stories, Morrison feels the need to fill this gap in her novels. She follows African American traditions of storytelling in the open-endedness and circularity of her texts, and in her view, audience participation is a vital element of successful storytelling. Thus, her texts also imitate the violations of conventional notions of time, the circularity, as well as the open character of jazz music. Morrison's stories intend to familiarise the audience with their cultural heritage and the world of their ancestors. She makes use of African American folktales, as in *Song of Solomon*, where the leitmotif is that of the flying Africans, thereby successfully linking her characters with their African roots. Mythology and folktales are used to reinterpret the present in order to avoid mistakes and move on in life.

The African heritage comprises a past of enslavement and suppression, which has to be testified to. "Memory was for the slaves what it continued to be for contemporary African Americans, an instrument of survival. To remember is to revive,

⁸⁵⁶ Cf. Ruas, 112.

⁸⁵⁷ Cf. Watkins, 46.

⁸⁵⁸ Cf. Gutmann, 62.

⁸⁵⁹ Cf. Albert Einstein, Michele Besso, *Correspondance 1903-1955*. Paris: Hermann, 1972. 538.

⁸⁶⁰ Cf. Grewal, 107.

to survive, to rename, to re-possess.”⁸⁶¹ Morrison most clearly bears witness to the atrocities of those times in *Beloved*, which deals with slavery and its inhumane consequences. Despite the horrors connected to their destinies, Morrison feels the need to account for the sixty million and more people who have been abducted and enslaved. Morrison is convinced that storytelling can help African Americans to “retrieve their ancestors from the ash heap of American ‘history.’”⁸⁶² To her, it is paramount that they must not be forgotten, therefore she transposes exemplary life stories into literature. “Language alone protects us from the scariness of things with no names.”⁸⁶³ In many of her novels, Morrison uses names to testify to the characters’ identities in affirmation. They have to appropriate their names by living up to them and this denominational affirmation of a name leads to the active repossession of their ancestral pasts.

To go one step further, Morrison not only bears witness and affirms her cultural heritage in her novels, she

makes words her own, appropriating them from the language of the majority culture and shifting their focus. Morrison decenters and deforms literary language, making it appropriate for telling a blue/Black tale. This is rather like the jazz musicians who add to the music’s traditional sounds by incorporating distinctive oral modes from their vernacular roots and using these to distance their music from the mainstream.⁸⁶⁴

An important feature of African American vernacular is the tradition of *Signifying* consisting of word play and the reinterpretation of words, going back to West African tricksters such as Esu, the interpreter and mediator. “Oppressive language does more than represent violence; it is violence; does more than represent the limits of knowledge, it limits knowledge.”⁸⁶⁵ Hence, words need to bring forth new meanings and necessitate reinterpretation. Many of Morrison’s characters have Biblical names. Through this choice, Morrison accounts for the importance of the Scripture to her people and the tradition of choosing names from the Bible at random. However, these names hardly ever fit the characters bearing them. However, their names add nuances to the understanding of these figures, since their actions have to be judged in polarisation

⁸⁶¹ Cf. Orquídea Ribeiro, “History and Memory in Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*.” In: Maria Diedrich and Carl Pedersen et. al. (eds.) *Mapping African America. History, Narrative Formation, and the Production of Knowledge*. Hamburg: LIT, 1999. 163-173.163.

⁸⁶² Cf. Robert Broad, “Giving Blood to the Scraps: Haints, History, and Hosea in *Beloved*.” In: *African American Review* 28:2 (1994) 189-196. 192.

⁸⁶³ Cf. Morrison, *Nobel Lecture*. 28.

⁸⁶⁴ Cf. Alan J. Rice, 161.

⁸⁶⁵ Cf. Morrison, *Nobel Lecture*. 16.

to the background of their Biblical forerunners. The choice of names and the creation of intertextual relationships in the novels stress the notion and importance of difference: “Word-work is sublime, she thinks, because it is generative; it makes meaning that secures our difference – the way in which we are like no other life.”⁸⁶⁶

Trickster figures such as Sula, Pilate, *Beloved*, Consolata, or L, enhance this difference between Western concepts and traditional African American beliefs. They “typically combine aspects of the black vernacular, the history of oral narration, and the flexibility of musical forms, like jazz and blues.”⁸⁶⁷ In a Western novel, such supernatural beings would encourage a reading in the tradition of the *Gothic novel*, thereby reducing these figures to a fictional status. In contrast to this, tricksters are an important element of African American folk beliefs up to the present day. The acceptance of their actual existence counters and subverts Western concepts of logic and rationality. Their appearance in Morrison’s novels hits “below the Cartesian belt,”⁸⁶⁸ thereby offering a new experience facilitating the reinterpretation of supposedly definite meanings.

Morrison’s intertextual references to an immense number and a great variety of texts deeply embedded in the Western canon – reaching from the Bible to Greek mythology, from Gnostic texts to the Lilith myth, from Shakespeare’s *Macbeth* and *The Tempest* to Mark Twain’s *Huck Finn*, from the *Divine Comedy* to landmarks of Modern American Drama – also rely on difference. They do not completely deconstruct the original text, but rather make visible what has been missing. Milkman’s variation on Icarus proves successful, for he leaves the novel flying and not falling. Like Odysseus, he has been aided by Circe, but instead of approaching the underworld, his destination is the sky. Icarus’ cardinal fault had been his hubris, whereas Milkman’s achievement lies in surmounting the earlier overestimation of his personal abilities. Odysseus, on the other hand, had entered the cave of Polyphemus completely convinced of him being culturally superior to the uncivilised cyclops. At his escape his perception has remained the same. This notion is altered in Morrison’s depiction of the confrontation between Golden Gray and Henry LesTroy. While Golden Gray had believed in his superiority based on his light complexion, he comes to accept his African American heritage and

⁸⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 22.

⁸⁶⁷ Cf. Jennifer Andrews, “Reading Toni Morrison’s *Jazz*: Rewriting the Tall Tale and Playing with the Trickster in the White American and African-American Humour Traditions.” In: *Canadian Review of American Studies / Revue canadienne d’études américaines* 29:1 (1999) 87-107. 89.

⁸⁶⁸ Cf. Rodríguez, “Experiencing *Jazz*.” 750.

revalidates his father by seeing him in a new light. *Tar Baby* revisits both Shakespeare's *The Tempest* as well as a famous African American folktale. Whereas characters and situations of the sources are adapted, the allocation of roles is neither irrevocable nor absolute, hence allowing for ever new interpretations. Parallels between Morrison's novel and Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, on the other hand, underline the existence and continuity of African American literary history. Although Huck Finn helps a runaway slave to escape, he is not sure about the righteousness of his deed, since he never questions the institution of slavery as such. His figure is *Signified* upon in the character of Amy, the runaway girl supporting Sethe during her escape. Even though she is not unbiased either, as her sometimes racist discourse clearly shows, Amy assists Sethe and tends her wounds as best as possible, whereas Huck continues to play tricks on Jim. *Paradise* problematises notions of war and peace by *Signifying* on Utopian literature and thematises questions of race and tolerance by referring to Morrison's short story *Recitatif*.

In her epigraphs, Morrison provides clues about the novels to follow. They *Signify* on the texts and on African American heritage as well as on the folk traditions of storytelling. Especially the epigraph of *Jazz* quite clearly points out that for a proper understanding of Morrison's novels, the reader has to set aside approaches purely based on logic and rationality. To adequately absorb all the details of the texts, vernacular traditions and African American music alike have to be taken into account. With novels abounding in musical references of various kinds, Morrison

could be seen as a functioning second line herself to jazz musicians, responding to their calls from her own position in the literary world, interpreting their concerns and feelings for a (sometimes) different audience. Her oft-stated claim that the music is no longer enough on its own to sustain African Americans is justification enough for her role as interpreter of her musical heritage to a modern audience.⁸⁶⁹

Although she is not a musician herself, Morrison is such a virtuoso writer that her novels are both, exemplary in literature as well as musical masterpieces. According to Morrison, "[m]usic makes you hungry for more of it. It never really gives you the whole number. [...] The literature ought to do the same thing. I've been very deliberate about that. The power of the word is not music, but in terms of aesthetics, the music is the

⁸⁶⁹ Cf. Alan J. Rice, 168.

mirror that gives me the necessary clarity.”⁸⁷⁰ Her readers’ feelings at finishing Morrison’s books might be comparable to her own: “I feel something missing. I miss the characters, their company, the sense of possibility in them.”⁸⁷¹ Pleased to be told that her novels have the ability to haunt, Toni Morrison does not “want to write books that you can close [...] and walk on off and read another one right away.”⁸⁷² She is rather interested in audience participation: “I want somebody to say amen!”⁸⁷³ Toni Morrison describes her metaphorical and musical style together with the complex structures of her novels as her way of engaging her readers in a call and response process, as she wants “to have this kind of dance going on between me and you.”⁸⁷⁴ I, for my part, could keep on dancing all night long.

⁸⁷⁰ Ibid., 177.

⁸⁷¹ Cf. Tate, 170.

⁸⁷² Cf. Darling, 253.

⁸⁷³ Cf. Davis in Taylor-Guthrie, 231.

⁸⁷⁴ Cf. Toni Morrison, *Reading at the Royal Festival Hall*, London.

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VII Appendix

St. Louis Blues

I hate to see de evenin' sun go down
I hate to see de evenin' sun go down
Cause mah baby, he done lef' dis town

Feelin' tomorrow lak I feel today
Feelin' tomorrow lak I feel today
I'll pack mah trunk, an' make mah getaway

St. Louis woman wid her diamon' rings
Rulls dat man aroun' by her apron strings
'Twant for powder an' for store-bought hair
De man I love would not gone nowhere

Got de St. Louis blues, jes as blue as I can be
Dat man got a heart lak a rock cast in de sea
Or else he wouldn't have gone so far from me

Been to de gypsy to get mah fortune tol'
To de gypsy, done got mah fortune tol'
Cause I'm most will 'bout mah jelly roll

Gypsy done tol' me, "Don't you wear no black"
Yes, she done tol' me "Don't you wear no black."
Go to St. Louis, you can win him back"

Help me to Cairo; make St. Louis by mahself
Git to Cairo, find mah ol' frien', Jeff
Gwine to pin mahself close to his side
If I flag his train, I sho can ride

I loves dat man lak a schoolboy loves his pie
Lak a Kentucky Colonel loves his mint an' rye
I'll love mah baby till de day I die

You ought to see dat stovepipe brown o' mine
Lak he owns de Dimon' Joseph line
He'd make a cross-eyed 'oman go stone blind

Blacker than midnight, teeth lak flags of truce
Blackest man in de whole St. Louis
Blacker de berry, sweater is de juice...

A black headed gal make a freight train jump de track
Said, a black headed gal make a freight train jump de track
But a long tall gal makes a preacher "Ball de Jack"

Lawd, a blond headed woman makes a good man leave the town
I said, blond headed woman makes a good man leave the town
But a red headed woman make a boy slap his papa down.

(What Did I Do to Be So) Black and Blue?

Out in the street,
Shufflin' feet,
Couples passin' two by two.
While here am I,
Left high and dry,
Black, and 'cause I'm black I'm blue.

Browns and yellors,
All have fellers,
Gentlemen prefer them light.
Wish I could fade,
Can't make that grade,
Nothin' but dark days in sight.

Cold empty bed,
Springs hard as lead,
Pains in my head,
Fell like old Ned.
What did I do to be so black and blue?

No joys for me,
No company,
Even the mouse
Ran from my house.
All my life through, I've been so black and blue.

I'm white inside,
It don't help my case,
'Cause I can't hide what is on my face.
I'm so forlorn,
Life's like a thorn,
My heart is torn.
Why was I born?
What did I do to be so black and blue?

Just 'cause you're black,
Folks think you lack,
They laugh at you and scorn you too.
What did I do to be so black and blue?

When you are near,
They laugh and sneer,
Set you aside
And you're denied.
What did I do to be so black and blue?

How sad I am, each day I feel worse.
My mark of Ham seems to be a curse.

How will it end?
Ain't got a friend,
My only sin is my skin.
What did I do to be so black and blue?

Poor Boy

Well I'm a po' boy, long way from home.
Well I'm a oi' boy, long way from home.
No spendin' money in my pocket, no spare meat on my bone.

Down by the Riverside

I'm gonna lay down my sword and shield
Down by the riverside
Down by the riverside
Down by the riverside
I'm gonna lay down my sword and shield
Down by the riverside
Study war no more

Oh, Freedom!

Oh, freedom,
Oh, freedom,
Oh, freedom over me!
An' befo' I'd be a slave,
I'll be buried in my grave,
An' go home to my Lord an' be free.

There'll be singin',
There'll be singin',
There'll be singin' over me!
An' befo' I'd be a slave,
I'll be buried in my grave,
An' go home to my Lord an' be free.

Motherless Child

Sometimes I feel like a motherless child,
Sometimes I feel like a motherless child,
Sometimes I feel like a motherless child,
A long ways from home.

Sometimes I feel like an eagle in de air
Some-a dese mornin's bright an' fair
I'm goin' to lay down my heavy load;
Goin' to spread my wings an' cleave de air.

Halleluja

Hallelujah! Hallelujah!
I do belong to that ban', hallelu!
Looked at my han's an my han's looked new.
Looked at my feet an' they looked so too.

I do belong to the ban' hallelu!

Sit Down Servant, Sit Down

Sit down servant, Sit down!
Sit down servant, Sit down!
Sit down servant, Sit down!
Sit down an' rest a little while.
Know you mighty tired so sit down,
Know you mighty tired so sit down!

Walk Together Children

Walk together children,
Don't you get weary,
Walk together children,
Don't you get weary.
Oh, talk together children,
Don't you get weary,
There's a great camp meeting in the Promised Land.

Sing together children,
Don't you get weary,
Sing together children,
Don't you get weary,
Oh, shout together children
Don't you get weary,
There's a great camp meeting in the Promised Land

I Love to Tell the Story

I love to tell the story of unseen things above
Of Jesus and His glory, of Jesus and His love
I love to tell the story because I know 'tis true
It satisfies my longings as nothing else can do.

I love to tell the story
Twill be my theme in glory
To tell the old, old story
Of Jesus and His love.

Can't you live humble?

Can't you live humble?
Praise King Jesus!
Can't you live humble
To de dyin' Lam'

Blues 1

Seems like every minute goin' to be my last,
Seems like every minute goin' to be my last,
If I can't tell my future, I won't tell my past.

I'm awful lonesome, all alone and blue
I'm awful lonesome, all alone and blue
Ain't got nobody to tell my troubles to.

Blues 2

*I worked on a levee camp and the extra gangs too
Black man is a boy, I don't care what he can do.
I wonder when – I wonder when – I wonder when will
I get to be called a man*

Blues 3

If you see me coming, better open up your door,
If you see me coming, better open up your door,
I ain't no stranger, I been here before.

Blues 4

When a woman takes the blues,
She tucks her head and cries;
But when a man catches the blues
He catches er freight and rides.

No Images

She does not know
Her beauty;
She thinks her brown body
Has no glory.

If she could dance
Naked
Under palm trees
And see her image in the river
She would know.

But there are no palm trees
On the street,
And dishwater gives back no images.

Jazzman

Lift me, won't you lift me above the old routine;
Make it nice, play it clean jazzman.

When the jazzman's testifyin' a faithless man believes
he can sing you into paradise or bring you to your knees.
It's a gospel kind of feelin', a touch of Georgia slide,
a song of pure revival and a style that's sanctified.

Jazzman take my blues away; make my pain
the same as yours with every change you play.
Jazzman, oh jazzman.

When the jazzman's signifyin', and the band is windin' low
it's the late night side of morning in the darkness of his soul.
He can fill a room with sadness as he fills his horn with tears.
He can cry like a fallen angel when risin' time is near.

Jazzman take my blues away; make my pain
the same as yours with every change you play.
Oh lift me, won't you lift me with ev'ry turn around.
Play it sweetly, take me down, oh jazzman.

Nearer, My God, to Thee

Refrain:

*Nearer, my God, to Thee,
Nearer to Thee!*

Nearer, my God, to Thee, nearer to Thee!
E'en though it be a cross that raiseth me,
Still all my son shall be, nearer, my God, to Thee.

Though like the wanderer, the sun gone down,
Darkness be over me, my rest a stone.
Yet in my dreams I'd be nearer, my God to Thee.

There let the way appear, steps unto heav'n;
All that Thou sendest me, in mercy given;
Angels to beckon me nearer, my God, to Thee.

Then, with my waking thoughts bright with Thy praise,
Out of my stony griefs Bethel I'll raise;
So by my woes to be nearer, my God, to Thee.

Or, if on joyful wing cleavin the sky,
Sun, moon, and stars forgot, upward I'll fly,
Still all my song shall be, nearer, my God, to Thee.

There in my Father's home, safe and at rest,
There in my Savior's love, perfectly blest;
Age after age to be, nearer my God to Thee.

Precious Memories

Precious memories, unseen angels
Sent from somewhere to my soul
In the stillness of the midnight
Precious sacred scenes unfold.

Precious father, loving mother
Fly across the lonely soul
To the home scenes of my childhood
With fond memories appear

Precious memories, how they linger
How they ever flood my soul
In the stillness of the midnight
Precious sacred scenes unfold.

As I travel on life's pathway
I know not what life shall hold
As I wander hopes grow fonder
Precious memories flood my soul.

Abide with Me

Abide with me; fast falls the eventide;
The darkness deepens; Lord with me abide.
When other helpers fail and comforts flee,
Help of the helpless, O abide with me.

Swift to its close ebbs out life's little day;
Earth's joys grow dim; its glories pass away;
Change and decay in all around I see;
O Though who changest not, abide with me.

Not a brief glance I beg, a passing word;
But as Though dwell'st with Thy disciples, Lord,
Familiar, condescending, patient, free.
Come not to sojourn, but abide with me.

Come not in terrors, as the King of kinds,
But kind and good, with healing in Thy wings,
Tears for all woes, a heart for every plea –
Come, Friend of sinners, and thus abide with me.

Thou on my head in early youth didst smile;
And, though rebellious and perverse meanwhile,
Thou hast not left me, oft as I left Thee,
On to the close, O lord, abide with me.

I need Thy presence every passing hour.
What but Thy grace can foil the tempter's power?
Who, like Thyself, my guide and stay can be?
Through cloud and sunshine, Lord, abide with me.

I fear no foe, with Thee at hand to bless;
Ills have no weight, and tears no bitterness.
Where is death's sting? Where, grave, thy victory?
I triumph still, if Thou abide with me.

Hold Though Thy cross before my closing eyes;
Shine through the gloom and point me to the skies.
Heaven's morning breaks, and earth's vain shadows flee;
In life, in death, O Lord, abide with me.

Shall We Gather at the River?

Refrain:

*Yes, we'll gather at the river,
The beautiful, the beautiful river;
Gather with the saints at the river
That flows by the throne of God.*

Shall we gather at the river,
Where bright angel feet have trod,
With its crystal tide forever
Flowing by the throne of God?

On the margin of the river,
Washing up its silver spray,
We will talk and worship ever,
All the happy golden day.

Ere we reach the shining river,
Lay we every burden down;
Grace our spirits will deliver,
And provide a robe and crown.

At the smiling of the river,
Mirror of the Savior's face,
Saints, whom death will never sever,
Lift their songs of saving grace.

Soon we'll reach the shining river,
Soon our pilgrimage will cease;
Soon our happy hearts will quiver
With the melody of peace.

In the Sweet By and By

Refrain:

*In the sweet by and by,
We shall meet on that beautiful shore;
In the sweet by and by,
We shall meet on that beautiful shore.*

We shall sing on that beautiful shore
The melodious songs of the blessed;
And our spirits shall sorrow no more,
Not a sigh for the blessing of rest.

To our bountiful Father above,
We will offer our tribute of praise
For the glorious gift of His love
And the blessings that hallow our days.

If I Didn't Care

I I didn't care more than words can say
If I didn't care would I feel this way?
If this isn't love then why do I thrill?
And what makes my head go 'round and 'round
While my heart stands still?

If I didn't care would it be the same?
Would my ev'ry prayer begin and end with just your name?
And would I be sure that this is love beyond compare?
Would all this be true if I didn't care for you?

Monologue:

*If I didn't care honey child, mo' than words can say.
If I didn't care baby, would I feel this way?
Darlin' if this isn't love, then why do I thrill so much?
What is it that makes my head go 'round and 'round and 'round
while my heart just stands still so much?*

If I didn't care would it be the same?
Would my ev'ry prayer begin and end with just your name?
And would I be sure that this is love beyond compare?
Would all this be true if I didn't care for you?

Killing Me Softly

Refrain:

*Strumming my pain with her fingers,
singing my life with her words,
killing me softly with her song,
killing me softly with her song,
telling my whole life with her words,
killing me softly with her song.*

I heard she sang a good song, I heard she had a style.
And so I came to see her and listen for a while.
And there she was this young girl, a stranger to my eyes.

I felt all flushed with fever, embarrassed by the crowd,
I felt she found my letters and read each one out loud.
I prayed that she would finish but she just kept right on.

She sang as if she knew me in all my dark despair
And then she looked right through me as if I wasn't there.
But she just came to singing, singing clear and strong.

New York, New York

Start spreading the news, I'm leaving today
I want to be a part of it – New York, New York
These vagabond shoes, are longing to stray
Right through the very heart of it – New York, New York

I wanna wake up in a city, that doesn't sleep
And find I'm king of the hill – top of the heap

These little town blues, are melting away
I'll make a brand new start of it – in old New York
If I can make it there, I'll make it anywhere
It's up to you – New York, New York

New York, New York
I want to wake up in a city, that never sleeps
And find I'm a number one, top of the list, king of the hill
A number one

These little town blues, are melting away
I'm gonne make a brand new start of it – in old New York
And if I can make it there, I'm gonne make it anywhere

It's up to you – New York, New York.

Mood Indigo

You ain't been blue; no, no, no.
You ain't been blue,
Till you've had that mood indigo.
That feelin' goes stealin' down to my shoes
While I sit and sigh, "Go 'long blues."

Always get that mood indigo,
Since my baby said goodbye.
In the evenin' when lights are low,
I'm so lonesome I could cry.

'Cause there's nobody who cares about me,
I'm just a soul who's
Bluer than blue can be.
When I get that mood indigo,
I could lay me down and die.

Harbor Lights

I saw the harbor lights
They only told me we were parting
The same old harbor lights that once brought you to me
I watched the harbor lights
How could I help if tears were starting
Goodbye to tender nights beside the silv'ry sea.

I long to hold you near and kiss you just once more
But you were on the ship and I was on the shore

Now I know lonely nights
For all the while my heart is whisp'ring
Some other harbor lights will steal your love from me

I long to hold you near and kiss you just once more
But you were on the ship and I was on the shore.

Now I know lonely nights
For all the while my heart is whisp'ring
Some other harbor lights will steal your love from me.

'T Ain't Nobody's Business

There is nothing I can do
Nothing I can say
That folks don't criticize me
But I'm goone do
Just what I want to anyway
Don't care if they all despise me

If I go to church on Sunday
And I honkytonk all day Monday
Ain't nobody's business if I do

And if I should get a feeling
I wanna dance upon the ceiling
Ain't nobody's business, oh it ain't nobody's business if I do

If I stay out all night
Spend all my money, well that's all right
It ain't nobody's business if I do

You try to tell me I got no right to sing the blues
What gives you the right to tell me what I should do?
It ain't nobody's business, ain't nobody's business if I do

Well it ain't nobody's business
It ain't nobody's business
You know it ain't nobody's business
Ain't nobody's business what I do
You know it ain't nobody's business
Ain't nobody's business if I do.

VIII Zusammenfassung

Das Romanwerk der afroamerikanischen Literaturnobelpreisträgerin Toni Morrison verbindet auf verschiedenen narrativen Ebenen Konzepte des Vernakularen, d.h. verschiedener mündlicher Traditionen, mit der Verwendung von Musik. Die Autorin selbst definiert ihre Zielsetzung als den Versuch, ihren Texten eine auditive Qualität zu verleihen, indem sie auf sprachlicher Ebene auf Elemente des afroamerikanischen Vernakularen rekurriert, die in fast allen ihren Ausformungen letztlich in der Tradition afrikanischer Griots verankert sind, welche ihrerseits seit Generationen durch das Erzählen von Geschichten Facetten der Kultur ihres jeweiligen Volkes überliefert haben. Fundamentaler Bestandteil dieser Praxis ist neben Musik und Tanz auch die Beschwörung der mystischen Kraft des *Nommo*, das durch die Benennung der Dinge Macht über diese verleihen soll. Eng verwandt mit dieser Überzeugung ist *Testifying*, das Zeugnis-Ablegen, um sich die Welt einschließlich ihrer bedrohlichen Missstände durch Affirmation zu Eigen zu machen. *Signifying*, für das es in dieser Bedeutung kein deutsches Äquivalent gibt, geht auf Mythen über Trickster-Figuren zurück und steht vor allem für den kreativen und bisweilen manipulativen Umgang mit Sprache und Texten, wobei Umdeutung, Differenz und Mehrdeutigkeit eine herausragende Rolle spielen. Nicht der reine Inhalt, sondern dessen jeweilige Interpretation steht im Vordergrund. Somit ist Intertextualität als herausragendes Element des *Signifying* anzusehen, wobei selbst *Testifying* Teil des *Signifying* werden kann.

Beide Konzepte, *Testifying* und *Signifying*, sind auch Bestandteile afroamerikanischer Musik. Schon solche Lieder, die Sklaven zur Koordination ihrer gemeinschaftlichen Arbeit gesungen hatten, thematisierten ihre jeweilige Lebenssituation. Das Formulieren ihrer Ängste und Sorgen ermöglichte ihnen für eine kurze Zeit eine innere Flucht aus ihrer ausweglosen Lage. In den eher geistlich orientierten *Spirituals* hingegen finden sich durch verschlüsselte Andeutungen erste Anklänge des *Signifying*, etwa wenn Texte oberflächlich betrachtet auf eine bessere Existenz im Jenseits verweisen, während sie subtil auf konkrete Fluchtmöglichkeiten hindeuten. Im Blues vereinen sich *Testifying* und *Signifying* durch die kathartische Affirmation widriger Lebensumstände und sprachliche Anspielungen aller Art. Auf instrumentaler Ebene greift der Jazz das Konzept des *Signifying* auf, indem der prototypische Aufbau der Musik dem Muster der Variation einzelner Motive folgt.

Ähnlich der literarischen Intertextualität handelt es sich somit um Wiederholung mit Differenz, deren Resultat eine neue Interpretation ist. Wie die Darbietungen afrikanischer Griots fordern alle Arten afroamerikanisch geprägter Musik zur aktiven Teilnahme des Publikums auf – eine Absicht, die auch Toni Morrison in ihren Romanen verfolgt.

Die vorliegende Arbeit gliedert sich in drei große Abschnitte: Im ersten wird untersucht, wie Musik direkt in den Romanen eingesetzt wird, indem Morrison ihre Charaktere singen, tanzen oder den Liedern anderer zuhören lässt. Der folgende Teil beleuchtet die Übertragung struktureller und inhaltlicher Elemente von Blues und Jazz auf die Texte, und im letzten Abschnitt wird die Verknüpfung musikalischer Aspekte mit vernakularen Traditionen wie Geschichtenerzählen, *Testifying* und *Signifying* thematisiert.

Während in *The Bluest Eye* die Protagonistin Pecola zwar den Blues lebt, vermittelt seine kathartische Qualität aber nur Claudia das notwendige Selbstwertgefühl, um in einer von Weißen geprägten Gesellschaft überleben zu können. Sie kann durch den Gesang ihrer Mutter auf eine eigene Tradition zurückgreifen und so ihre Rolle als Teil einer Gemeinschaft erkennen. In *Sula* stehen die apokalyptisch-seduktive Musik Shadracks und der scheinheilige Gesang der Gemeinde anlässlich Sulas Beerdigung in ironischem Verhältnis zu dem gesamten Romangeschehen. Ein Bluesstück bildet das Rückgrad des Romans *Song of Solomon*. Das Lied, das sich wie ein roter Faden durch den gesamten Text zieht, verbindet einzelne Figuren miteinander, mit der Genealogie ihrer Familie sowie mit ihrer entsprechenden Tradition und dem zugehörigen kulturellen Erbe. Erst das Dechiffrieren dieses Textes verhilft dem zunächst desinteressierten Protagonisten Milkman, sich zu einer ausgereiften Persönlichkeit zu entwickeln, die sich im Einklang mit ihren Wurzeln befindet. In *Tar Baby* reflektiert der Umgang der Figuren mit Musik deren jeweilige Weltanschauung: Valerians Außenseiterstatus auf der tropischen Insel „Isle des Chevaliers“ geht einher mit seiner Vorliebe für klassische Musik, die in diesem Kontext ebenso deplatziert ist wie seine nur in der künstlichen Umgebung eines Treibhauses überlebendefähigen Pflanzen. Soms enge Verbindung mit der Natur hingegen wird auch durch seine Präferenz für die Musik der Neuen Welt untermauert, während Jadies Hybridität als schwarze Frau, die stark von westlichen Einflüssen geprägt ist, sich auch in ihrem Kunstgeschmack wiederfindet, da sie die von afrikanischen Vorbildern beeinflussten Werke Picassos den Originalvorlagen vorzieht und auch musikalisch mehr Gefallen an

westlichen Werken als an afroamerikanischen Genres findet. In *Beloved* stärkt Musik den Zusammenhalt innerhalb der Gemeinschaft, wenn Baby Suggs in der Form eines *Ring Shouts* Gesang, Tanz und religiöse Riten miteinander verbindet. Im Falle Sixos und Paul Ds hilft Musik, Widerstand zu leisten und körperlich oder zumindest mental zu überleben. Lieder unterstützen die Erinnerung an Familienmitglieder und ermöglichen das gegenseitige Erkennen. Bei drohender Gefahr gibt die Musik der zusammengedrängten Gemeinschaft der Frauen die Kraft, das Böse in die Flucht zu schlagen. Auch in *Jazz* kommt verschiedenen Arten von Musik eine essentielle Bedeutung zu, wenn Alice Manfred in ihr einen Sündenbock für Gewalt und sexuelle Verführung sieht, während Jazzklänge die Basis für die Versöhnung zwischen Joe und Violet bilden. In diesem Roman Morrisons ist Musik omnipräsent, und ihre Auswirkungen sind überall zu spüren. Zwei Arten von Musik dominieren *Paradise*: Vorwiegend passiv rezipierte Radiomusik und aktiver Gesang. Obwohl auch die Musik aus dem Radio bedingt positive Auswirkungen auf ihre Zuhörer haben kann, steht sie doch auch für eine Generation, die neben dem Mangel an einer eigenen Geschichte über keine eigenen Lieder verfügt. Im Kontrast dazu verschafft das gemeinsame Singen und Tanzen den Frauen in der ehemaligen Klosterschule nahe der Stadt Ruby ein Transzendenzerlebnis, das sie letztlich sogar zu befähigen scheint, den Tod zu überwinden. Der Hotelbesitzer Bill Cosey in Morrisons aktuellem Roman *Love* nutzt die Auftritte bedeutender Musiker zu vorwiegend kommerziellen Zwecken, doch sieht er ihr auch die Möglichkeit, indirekt gegen seinen verstorbenen Vater zu rebellieren, denn dieser war vehement gegen jegliche Form der Ausgelassenheit eingestellt gewesen. Bills Ehefrau Heed the Night macht das Lied *Ain't Nobody's Business if I Do* verantwortlich für ihren Seitensprung; der Text lässt sich weiterhin – ebenso wie *Harbor Lights* – als Kommentar bezüglich der Verhältnisse zwischen den einzelnen Charakteren heranziehen. Schließlich untermalt die mysteriöse Figur L das Romangeschehen durch eigene Erzählpassagen sowie ihr allgegenwärtiges Summen, das sowohl als eine Art Hintergrundmusik als auch als Kritik an dargestellten moralischen Missständen dient. Ist ihr Summen zu Beginn des Romans mit der Funktion der Ouvertüre einer Oper vergleichbar, so kann das Werk auch erst durch ihr Summen beschlossen werden.

Ein herausragendes strukturelles Merkmal der Musik, das Morrison in ihre Narrativik überträgt, ist die *Antiphonie*. Dieser Wechsel aus Ruf und Antwort (*Call and Response*) ist eine fundamentale Praxis, sowohl innerhalb afroamerikanischer Musik als

auch im Rahmen des Geschichtenerzählens, da so Ansichten Einzelner von der Gruppe affirmativ bestätigt und von allen angenommen werden können; Einzelschicksale werden somit zum geistigen Eigentum aller Mitglieder einer Gemeinschaft. In ihrem ersten Roman, *The Bluest Eye*, stellt Morrison jedem Kapitel einen Auszug aus einer Lesefibel voran, die das idealisierte Leben einer weißen Familie aus dem Mittelstand porträtiert. Diese Abschnitte kontrastieren die Inhalte der Romankapitel selbst und werden durch deren Handlung dekonstruiert. Der Call-and-Response-Prozess zwischen diesen einzelnen Textbausteinen betont die dargestellten Grausamkeiten im Leben Pecolas und führt zu einer sarkastischen Umdeutung des Fibeltextes. Gleichzeitig dienen die Szenen aus dem Leben der intakten weißen Familie als Refrain im bluesartigen Leben Pecolas.

Antiphonie wird auch als Mittel zur Analyse eingesetzt. So kann die jeweilige Position Sulas gegenüber der Gemeinschaft und ihren einzelnen Mitgliedern als ein Call-and-Response-Verhältnis betrachtet werden, das einerseits der Protagonistin hilft, sich selbst und ihre Identität zu ergründen, während es andererseits verdeutlicht, in welchem Ausmaß sich die Gemeinschaft ausschließlich über ihre Opposition gegenüber Sula definiert. Sula, die konstant zwischen Gut und Böse changiert und dadurch diese Konzepte unterminiert, hebt sogar die Dichotomie zwischen Leben und Tod auf: Die Beschreibung des lebenspendenden Geschlechtsakts wird mit Hilfe der Antiphonie durch Sulas inneren Monolog, innerhalb dessen sie ihren Partner zerstört, unterbrochen.

Call-and-Response-Prozesse finden in *Tar Baby* zwischen Schwarz und Weiß statt, zwischen Tradition und Moderne manifestiert in den verschiedenen Interpretationen der mythologischen Inselgeschichte. Während die Einheimischen die Ansicht vertreten, die namensgebenden Reiter seien Angehörige einer Rasse entfloherer blinder Sklaven, verfolgen eher westlich geprägte Charaktere die Auffassung, in dem Mythos handele es sich um an den Napoleonischen Code gebundene französische Soldaten.

In *Beloved* wird der Höhepunkt des Romans mit Hilfe von Call and Response wiedergegeben. Auf Textpassagen, die als Soli der respektiven Figuren angesehen werden können, folgt ein Abschnitt, in dem die einzelnen Stimmen zusammengeführt und die Identitäten der drei Frauen verschmolzen werden. Dies trägt der mysteriösen Herkunft Beloveds Rechnung, denn deren abschließende Klärung erweist sich als ebenso unmöglich wie die Zuordnung einzelner Textfragmente zu den jeweiligen Sprecherinnen.

Ähnlich der Dichotomien in *Sula* und *Tar Baby* ist auch *Paradise* durch eine Anzahl an Oppositionen gekennzeichnet, in deren Fokus der Streit zwischen zwei Generationen um den Wortlaut einer Inschrift steht. Gegensätze zwischen den Generationen, zwischen den Einwohnern der Stadt und den Bewohnerinnen der ehemaligen Klosterschule, zwischen mündlicher und schriftlicher Überlieferung scheinen unüberwindbar und münden in einer Dekonstruktion des Konzeptes absoluter Wahrheit. Auf Grund des Mangels an Kooperationsbereitschaft zwischen den einzelnen Mitgliedern der Gesellschaft entwickelt sich kein funktionierendes Call-and-Response-Prinzip, das zu einer Synthese führen könnte. Somit stehen sich Form und Inhalt konträr gegenüber.

Wie schon in *Beloved* kennzeichnet Antiphonie auch in *Love* den Höhepunkt des Romans. Nach Jahren des Schweigens finden Heed und Christine zum Gespräch zurück, sie erkennen die Beiträge der jeweils anderen durch Zustimmung an, und ihre Versöhnung kulminiert in dem Wort „Love“, das – abgesehen vom eigentlichen Titel des Romans – bis zu dieser Stelle auffallend vermieden wurde und nun unterstützt durch die Call-and-Response-Technik mit der Vehemenz und Eindringlichkeit eines Donnerschlags ins Bewusstsein der Leserschaft tritt.

Morrison, die in allen ihren Romanen rhythmische Elemente einarbeitet, erachtet diese neben der spezifischen Metaphorik als charakteristische Eigenschaften des afroamerikanischen Vernakularen. Besonders deutlich strukturiert sie sowohl in *Beloved* als auch in *Jazz* ganze Kapitel durch die anaphorische Wiederholung einzelner Phrasen oder Wörter. Immer wieder werden innerhalb eines Abschnittes bestimmte Wörter wiederholt, und auch auf der Satzebene kommt es zu Aneinanderreihungen identischer Begriffe. Durch diese Rhythmisierung werden Passagen besonders hervorgehoben; Silben wirken wie Paukenschläge, und je nach Situation kann das Resultat das Tempo der Handlung verändern.

Auch die für den Jazz elementare Improvisation integriert Morrison in ihre Texte. So kann Son in *Tar Baby* nur überleben, weil er geübt im Improvisieren ist. Noch wichtiger wird diese Fähigkeit im Falle Paul Ds in *Beloved*: Er ist Teil einer *Chain Gang* in einem Gefangenenlager in Georgia, als sich eine riskante Möglichkeit zur Flucht bietet. Da die äußeren Umstände eine direkte Kommunikation zwischen den aneinander geketteten Männern verhindern, müssen sie als Gruppe improvisieren, was ihnen letztlich nur gelingt, weil sie durch ihre vorherige von ständigem Gesang begleitete Arbeit Mechanismen der Improvisation entwickelt hatten. Call-and-

Response-Strukturen und das Agieren als Einheit sind ihnen in Fleisch und Blut übergegangen, so dass sie einander blind vertrauen können.

Der Roman *Jazz* folgt dem Aufbau eines Jazzstücks, indem zu Beginn ein Thema vorgegeben wird, das im Folgenden durch wechselseitige Variation fortgeführt und weiterentwickelt wird. Verschiedene Perspektiven der Charaktere entsprechen den jeweiligen Soli von Musikern. Wie im Jazz selbst steht weniger das Endprodukt (die eigentliche Handlung wird in einem Absatz vorweg genommen) als der Entstehungsprozess im Vordergrund. Zwar warnen Kritiker wie Alan Munton vor einer so eng an der Musik orientierten Interpretation, doch Morrison selbst verweist auf den Jazz als Existenzgrundlage für diesen Roman.

Neben strukturellen Aspekten überträgt Morrison auch inhaltliche Elemente der Musik auf ihre Texte. Die Haltung des Lyrischen Ichs in dem Blues *What Did I Do to be so Black and Blue* wird im mangelnden Selbstbewusstsein Pecola Breedloves und ihrer Familie wiedergegeben, die alle ihrer schwarzen Hautfarbe wegen mit Komplex beladen sind. Noch deutlicher wird die Übernahme Musikinhalten in *Beloved*, dessen Handlung Elemente einer großen Anzahl an Spirituals wie *Down by the Riverside*, *Motherless Child*, *Walk together Children*, *This Little Light of Mine* oder *Oh, Freedom* reflektiert. Auch die Figuren in *Jazz* sind von der Musik inspiriert, wenn Joe und Dorcas veranlasst durch den Inhalt vieler Bluesongs eine Affäre eingehen oder wenn die ebenfalls in der Musik thematisierte Gewalt ausgelebt wird.

Als grundlegende mündliche Tradition kann das Geschichtenerzählen angesehen werden, das Morrison nicht nur selbst praktiziert, sondern häufig auch explizit thematisiert. Die Verbindung zur Musik entsteht wiederum dadurch, dass der Blues selbst als eine Art Sprache angesehen werden kann und einige Charaktere Morrisons durch das Erzählen ihrer Lebens- und Leidensgeschichte im übertragenden Sinne den Blues singen. In *Sula* imitiert Morrison die Möglichkeit der aktiven Teilnahme der Zuhörer am Beispiel Evas, von deren persönlicher Geschichte mehrere Versionen existieren, die sie alle gleichrangig nebeneinander stehen lässt. Typische Merkmale afroamerikanischer Geschichten sind weiterhin ein offenes Ende sowie eine gewisse (auch im spezifischen Zeitkonzept wiederzufindende) Zirkularität. Diese Elemente kommen besonders in *Song of Solomon*, *Beloved* und *Love* zum Vorschein, wobei die Aufführung des Krippenspiels in *Paradise* die traditionelle Verknüpfung von Musik mit der Aktion des Erzählens – auch um der Tradierung der eigenen Geschichte Willen – repräsentiert.

Morrison verarbeitet ausserdem traditionelle afroamerikanische Erzählungen: Der Blues in *Song of Solomon* greift inhaltlich auf das weit verbreitete Folktales *All God's Chillen Had Wings* zurück, während schon der Titel von *Tar Baby* auf eine Erzählung gleichen Titels verweist. Durch diese Gegenüberstellung mit traditionellen Folktales eröffnet die Autorin eine weitere hermeneutische Ebene.

Alle Romane Morrisons beinhalten Elemente des *Testifying*, häufig in Kombination mit *Nommo*, so etwa durch die Umformung von Namen wie im Falle der „Not Doctor Street“ in *Song of Solomon*, die von der weißen Autorität explizit als „Mains Avenue and not Doctor Street“ bezeichnet wurde. Der Volksmund deutet diese Anweisung gemäß eigener Wünsche um, macht sich damit den Namen zu Eigen und erreicht so ein gewisses Maß an Selbstbestimmung. Claudia erzählt in *The Bluest Eye* die Geschichte Pecolas und legt dadurch Zeugnis ab über deren Leiden sowie die Versäumnisse der Gemeinschaft. Die Wiedergabe der Begebenheiten und die Akzeptanz dieses Versagens erzeugen eine bedingte Katharsis, wie sie auch im Blues zu finden ist. In *Song of Solomon* legen Reba und Pilate bei der Beerdigung Hagars Zeugnis über deren vergangenes Leben ab, um es ein letztes Mal in das Bewusstsein der anwesenden Gemeinde zu rufen. Das *Testifying* der Frauen in *Paradise* trägt Züge einer christlichen Beichte, wenn sie alle nacheinander ihre persönlichen Hintergründe schildern. Trotz der bisweilen schrecklichen Details nehmen die Frauen die jeweiligen Geschichten der anderen an, was wiederum einen kathartischen Effekt bewirkt und letztlich die Möglichkeit zur Transzendenz eröffnet.

Morrison ist eine Meisterin des *Signifying* und kaum ein Name ihrer Charaktere eröffnet nicht diese Dimension sprachlicher Anspielungen. Unzählige verweisen auf literarische, geschichtliche und besonders biblische Vorbilder, die allerdings selten direkt übernommen werden. Häufig kontrastieren die Figuren mit ihren Namenspatronen, so dass entsprechende Eigenschaften ironisch hervorgehoben werden. Die Wahl der Namen ist somit ein wichtiges Element zur Charakterisierung der Figuren – ein Effekt, der besonders in Kombination mit dem Konzept des *Nommo* weiter verstärkt wird. Auch inhaltlich finden sich unzählige intertextuelle Bezüge zwischen den Romanen und literarischen oder musikalischen Vorlagen aller Art, die von der Bibel über die griechische Mythologie und Shakespeare bis zu Sinatras „New York, New York“ reichen. Durch diese Andeutungen und die Umdeutung bereits vorhandener Werke weist Morrison auf Lücken in den Texten hin und stellt deren afroamerikanische Rezeption heraus. Auch die Epigraphen der Romane, die zudem als weiterer

Kommentar und Einstimmung auf die folgenden Texte dienen, haben weitgehend intertextuellen Charakter. Die große Anzahl an Trickster-Figuren in den Romanen folgt ebenfalls afroamerikanischen vernakularen Traditionen, innerhalb derer diese spirituellen Wesen teilweise als real existierend angesehen werden. Der afrikanische Ur-Trickster Esu-Elegbara sowie sein Nachfolger in der Neuen Welt, das *Signifying Monkey*, sind Personifikationen des manipulativen, interpretativen und kreativen Umgangs mit Sprache, der Spiegelung und unendlichen Dopplung von Bildern. Die Figur *Beloveds* mit ihrer mysteriösen Herkunft, die zu einer großen Zahl an Interpretationen einlädt, kann stellvertretend für die vielen Trickster-Figuren in Morrisons Romanen genannt werden.

Morrisons narrative Technik, in ihren Romanen musikalische Elemente mit Aspekten afroamerikanischer Tradition und grundlegenden Texten des westlichen Kanons zu verknüpfen, ermöglicht es der Autorin, zwischen den Kulturen zu vermitteln und ihren Werken dennoch eine authentische „schwarze Stimme“ zu verleihen. Indem sie so Aspekte der (afro)amerikanischen Geschichte in Erinnerung ruft, eröffnet sie Alternativen zu rein kartesisch geprägten Denkmustern und nutzt Eigenschaften der Musik, um innerhalb ihrer Werke Türen zu öffnen, statt diese zu schliessen.