THE RESTORATIVE POWER OF SOUND
A Case for Communal Catharsis in Toni Morrison’s Beloved

Roxanne R. Reed

This article examines the spiritual leadership of Baby Suggs and the other women in the novel Beloved. Asserting that sound, embodied as cries and utterances, has significance that in many ways surpasses that of identifiable music, Reed situates the women’s practices in the novel as a womanist theological tradition that considers the unique experiences of black women spiritual leaders. Through utterances such as women’s preaching, narrative, cries, and moans, sound becomes the vehicle for communal restoration and the means by which the women in the novel demonstrate spiritual authority and feminine theological practice. Ultimately, the spiritual leadership of Baby Suggs provides the needed guidance in order for the community to attain its salvific goal through the restoration of the novel’s protagonist, Sethe.

Toni Morrison’s novel Beloved is a story of communal healing and restoration set in the postslavery era. Through her use of “re-memory,” a recurrent narrative device in many of her novels, Morrison creates a parallel story set within the antebellum period. This parallel setting provides the necessary context for the story of Sethe, the novel’s protagonist. An escaped slave, Sethe and her newborn daughter, Denver, come to the home of Sethe’s mother-in-law, Baby Suggs. Three of Sethe’s children are already in the home: two sons, Buglar and Howard, and another young daughter, whom Sethe refers to only as “crawling-already?” Sethe and her four children live in freedom for almost a month, with waning hope of the arrival of Sethe’s husband and Baby Suggs’s youngest son.

The author is grateful to Jacquelyn McClendon, Susan Cook, Eileen Hayes, and Karen Flynn for their generous contributions of time, insight, and suggestions in the shaping of this article. It has made all the difference.
Halle, also an escaped slave. Halle had already purchased Baby Suggs's freedom. Though she was advanced in age and physically worn when she was liberated, Baby Suggs used what she had left to help the people in the community, her heart; she became a preacher.

When Schoolteacher comes to claim Sethe and her offspring, seeing death as the only alternative to a life of enslavement, Sethe decides to take the lives of her children and herself. “Crawling-already?” is the only one she kills before Stamp Paid, the old man who brought her across the Ohio River to Baby Suggs's house stops her. As she arranges for a headstone to mark the grave, Sethe names the dead child Beloved, recalling the way in which the preacher addressed those attending the funeral, “Dearly Beloved.” Ostracized from the community for the killing, the remainder of the story relates Sethe's journey of spiritual healing and restoration, which ultimately becomes the journey of the community as a whole. The only means of restoration for Sethe, and the community, is the guidance of Baby Suggs's spirit and her teachings as a preacher, particularly remembrances of her preaching in the Clearing, the space she claimed as her pulpit.

When the novel opens in 1873, nine years have elapsed since the killing and Baby Suggs's passing. The reader learns that a ghost, presumably that of Beloved, is a constant presence in the home. The ghost's torment causes Howard and Buglar to run away, leaving Sethe and Denver alone to contend with it. Throughout the novel, the “goodness” of Baby Suggs's life-restoring spirit contends with the life-depleting “evil” of Beloved's spirit.

The prominence of ghosts in Morrison's larger body of writing complements other culturally relevant themes that establish the historical core of Beloved's narrative. Particularly in African philosophy and theology, the ancestral spirits work in conjunction with deities to provide direction and empowerment to the living. This ideology is represented, for instance, in the African philosophy muntu, meaning humanity, which simply recognizes the presence of the dead among the living. My examination here is of the spiritual leadership role of Baby Suggs and the part she plays in the restorative process for both Sethe and the community at large. I explore Baby Suggs's spiritual leadership, as well as that of other women in the novel, by examining the role of music, sound, utterance, and melody, which serve to establish a communal sensibility.

Music is a standard part of Morrison's narrative constructions. Jazz, Song of Solomon, and even Morrison's most recent novel, Love, employ music to varying degrees. Jazz is the most obvious example, in which Morrison personifies the music, creating, in effect, another character. Song of Solomon is most like Beloved in the way music enters to resolve personal and/or communal conflicts, serving as musical tropes: the insertion of music gives new dimension to the narrative, but it does so to address some specific need. It is not merely ancillary or incidental, but recurring. The two novels are also similar in the ways Morrison uses music to assert the voices of her female characters. Karla F. C. Holloway,
particularly in her reading of Morrison’s *Song of Solomon*, and Aoi Mori explore the connection between the identity of Morrison’s female characters and the presence of song. Holloway and Mori are exceptions in their feminist interpretations of music in Morrison’s novels.¹ The more typical readings offered by scholars address music only in terms of its general historical implications or as a casual backdrop for the narrative.

I distinguish *Beloved*, however, from Morrison’s other novels and subsequently from other scholarly considerations of the music, suggesting that sound in *Beloved*, embodied as cries and utterances, has significance that in many ways surpasses that of identifiable musical sound. While these utterances eventually become articulated as music or song, prior to this the reader must intuit the music. Morrison wanted the novel *Beloved* to have “a non-book quality”: “I wanted the sound to be something I felt was spoken and more oral and less print.”² Morrison’s ideal here was to achieve an overall aural experience of the novel. By incorporating a refrain-like phrase throughout the story—“In the beginning was the sound, and they all knew what that sound sounded like”³—Morrison reminds the reader of sound’s primacy over written text and suggests a historical time without relying upon a defined chronology. Sound serves as a kind of discourse in the novel, even though it is unarticulated, unformed, and undefined. The legitimacy of this sound is anchored in the ancestral heritage, in their African foreparents’ art and practice of storytelling, which incorporated both sound and word.

Morrison’s historical premise facilitates my aim to provide musical context for the utterance, the inarticulate sound, and in this to show the impact on character and narrative development. The sound is void of word and void of melody; it is demonstrated in a wordless cry, holler, moan, or wail. Presaging the music of slave culture, utterance is integral to the development of its subsequent African American vernaculars, including work songs, sacred spirituals, and the blues. The same type of utterance comes through women’s voices in the re-created worship setting of the Clearing. Through their voices, sound and utterance take on life and meaning, coming fully into music and song when their voices join at the end of the novel. The music becomes the vehicle for communal restoration and is the means by which the women in the novel demonstrate spiritual authority and feminine theological practice.

Feminist theologians have drawn on feminist theory as a point of departure for addressing women's resistance to patriarchy and male dominance in the religious and spiritual sphere. However, the term womanist, coined by author Alice Walker, draws on black women's lived experience and has become an accepted theoretical construct for defining social and cultural circumstances specific to black women. Predominant in the 1980s and 1990s, womanist theory remains important as a theoretical point of departure, particularly from a theological and spiritual perspective. Womanism broadens the scope of existing feminist theological reflection. In the context of the present discussion, for example, Walker's focus on community provides a valuable perspective. Walker stated that womanist means "committed to survival and wholeness of entire people, male and female . . . traditionally universalist . . . traditionally capable." Walker introduced her concept of womanism through the maternal, the imparting of survival wisdom from mother to daughter. In Morrison's Beloved, the community at large becomes the daughter in need of direction, and Baby Suggs becomes the communal mother.

Examining a gendered perspective of music and sound and the roles of spiritual authority necessitates acknowledgment of the relevance of black women's experience as spiritual leaders in multiple formal and informal contexts. Oral traditions (storytelling, prayers, personal stories, and musical expression) rather than written traditions shaped the spiritual and religious identity of both black men and women in slave culture. Morrison's reliance upon preaching as an African American folk religious practice makes her writing a distinct expression of African American culture and heightens the musical sensibility of the narrative. However, while the manner of expression known as black folk preaching, which borrows from all of the above oral expressive forms, has been firmly established as culturally distinctive, it is a type of expression subsumed under patriarchal privilege, and as such enjoys a kind of formal status. For women, oral forms such as storytelling and singing remain within the domain of informal expression, and from Emancipation on, women were the primary purveyors of these practices. As a defining trait of their unique religious voice, these oral forms have not been examined thoroughly enough as conduits of black women's formal preacherly voice.

I do not draw on womanist theology alone, however, but consider it in concert with more recent theoretical ideas of women's spiritual place and authority that contemplate physical as well as rhetorical place. Within a womanist theological context, I propose a series of binaries—community versus individual, emotion versus reason, and word versus song—that informs my analysis of women's spiritual leadership, in general, and Baby Suggs's spiritual leadership, in particular.

See Alice Walker, In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens (San Diego: Harcourt Brace, 1983), for complete definitions of womanist.
Women's Preaching and Song as Alternative Space

From a womanist theological perspective, Baby Suggs represents a challenge to the traditional male dominance of the black church. M. Shawn Copeland noted that "the term womanist makes visible and gives voice to African American women scholars in religion who are in the midst of the struggle to shape a distinctive perspective that takes seriously the experiences and traditions of black women as a source for theologizing on the black experience." But the struggle to legitimize and give voice to the religious experiences of black women is not the sole responsibility of religious scholars. In fact, the ethical and religious womanist voice is often heard through the literary narrative, along with, as Copeland made clear, other traditions, such as prayers and personal stories, where black women often find rhetorical agency.

Beloved evinces womanist theologizing in two specific ways. One, which I have already alluded to, is the maternal, the passing down of survival wisdom through stories in the form of song; the second is preaching. Baby Suggs represents one of many maternal figures in the novel, but her preacherly voice, embodied as the feminine, more directly invokes a womanist interpretation of Morrison's text. In the broader feminist sense of patriarchal resistance, women's preaching suggests one practical means of challenging male-dominated space. Together with song, which is also distinctly feminine and maternal, the preached word intimates a clearly defined gender difference that serves the black woman theologian's objective of finding a means by which to ground and articulate black women's experience, while simultaneously serving the community as a whole. However, the expressive attributes that relegate black women's preaching to an informal status relative to the preaching of black men also stem from a broader history of male preaching.

In The Gendered Pulpit: Preaching in American Protestant Spaces, Roxanne Mountford recounts nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century treatises on preaching in which the identity of the male preacher was constructed based on a "cult of masculinity" pervasive in the mid- to late nineteenth century. Mountford notes, "Even as the Holiness tradition, the Quakers, and other dissenting groups encouraged women to preach and as African Americans were becoming..."

A number of black women religious scholars fashioned a roundtable discussion in which they considered and contested the term "womanist." The roundtable, entitled "Christian Ethics and Theology in Womanist Perspective," appeared in the Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion 5, no. 2 (Fall 1989): 83–112. Contributors were Cheryl J. Sanders, Katie C. Cannon, Emilie M. Townes, M. Shawn Copeland, bell hooks, and Cheryl Townsend Gilkes. (Quotation here is from page 101 of M. Shawn Copeland's piece in the roundtable.) Sanders put forth the controversial question of whether or not "womanist" is a term appropriate for use in a theological-ethical context because of what she believed to be its fundamentally secular origins. Other respondents supported the necessity of the term for woman-centered theology. For a recent continuation of the category womanist, see "Must I Be Womanist?" Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion 22, no. 1 (Spring 2006): 85–134.
renowned for their oratorical arts, the ideological work of mainline homileticians ensured that the art of preaching was formally articulated as a rhetorical art for white men. Further, these ideals of masculinity "privilege[d] universal qualities and concerns over local politics and everyday life . . . above the grounded, specific needs of communities." Thus the rhetorical practice itself as well as its purpose of salvation contrast directly with womanist preaching practices and ideals of community building.

By considering physical space, both architectural and geographical, as locations of preaching, Mountford argues that the rhetorical act of preaching is also contested, gendered space. Relegated to alternative spaces, such as the open, natural environment apart from the physical edifice of the church, women exercise more control and inevitably success in achieving the goals of community. Women's reliance on narrative, particularly personal and informal sources, counters the tendency of male preachers to use abstract or nonpersonal narrative and biblical sources of narrative text to advance their sermonic message. As with alternative pulpit spaces, women's use of informal sources serves as a different means of sermonic expression, not in deference to the Bible, but in conjunction with it. Women's reliance upon alternative spaces and narratives results when other avenues are restricted, as they often are in patriarchal systems.

Borrowing from Richard Niebuhr, who uses the term theographia to describe the materials that constitute formal religious literature, Karen Baker-Fletcher has asserted that materials constituting formal religious literature are often composed of informal sources such as the written and oral expressions of African American women: spiritual autobiography, personal narrative, prose, poetry, and even prayers. What is implied is a resource other than the Bible for inspired preaching and potential teaching. Although the Bible is unequivocally the authoritative theological text and source of teaching for Christians, the Bible is linked inextricably to a masculinist practice of theology and preaching.

I propose that sound as a discourse in Beloved informs a feminine-associated theological practice that is borne out in the narrative. Gwendolyn Mae Henderson suggests that narrative replaces the written word, not only as a story within the novel but historically as it regards slaves and their ability to shape historical reality. Memory in Beloved is the critical form of narrative that Morrison uses to shape such a reality. But the more critical question that Henderson poses is

---

7 Theographia is a concept Karen Baker-Fletcher presents for interpretation in multiple sources, including her book A Singing Something: Womanist Reflections on Anna Julia Cooper (New York: Crossroad, 1994). The use of prayers as informal religious literature is a more recent interpretation, and is used by other scholars such as Katie G. Cannon.
how does one take such disparate memories and images and fashion them into a language? We can find one response in the song-speech continuum. Forms of expression that are indicative of song-speech include chanting or intoning, and in a more specific context, the chanted or intoned sermon. The practice of intoning utilizes a relatively narrow range of pitches that, when executed, approximates the pitch range of the speaking voice. Along with narrative context, the natural inflections used in speech determine tonal direction. While at once both musical and spoken, there is no discernable melodic direction, which is arguably the defining feature of music.

At the most rudimentary level, the articulation of sound, in both song and speech, is indistinguishable—both are utterance. Neither musical utterance nor spoken utterance requires mutually intelligible text; nonetheless, within a given set of cultural circumstances, communication takes place. Sound suggests an articulation, a starting point for and eventual transition to something more universal, song.

In *Beloved*, sound as cry, as utterance, is also feminine-associated articulation, where there is a point of connection, rather than an abstraction. Song itself, the fully articulated expression of sound, metaphorically represents Sethe's full remembrance and reconciliation, and the point at which each individual's fragmented bits and pieces of memory (as sound) come together to form a newly created expression drawn from the past.

I suggest that the juncture between the fully articulated melody and the fully articulated word is a historical and narrative moment that Morrison attempts to isolate and make audibly perceptible for the reader in her effort to create the sound-focused, non-book quality she desires. Morrison also uses imagery and literary devices, but such strategies only partially accomplish her goals. In borrowing from particular formulaic patterns often employed in black folk preaching, she is most successful. Note the following passage from one of Baby Suggs's preacherly performances, in which the phrasing suggests a rhythmic pattern typically found in black preaching. Emphasis on the initial word in each of the short phrases suggests an accented beat followed by an unaccented beat or beats, which has a musical interpretation, namely the triplet figure.

The successive parallel phrases of the extended narrative suggest a quasi-intoning expression. The brief statements join together to express a fully articulated narrative idea, rather than the fragmented statements alone.

---


10 Jon Michael Spencer notes the triplet figure as the most common type of phrasing occurring in black preaching. While Spencer bases his conclusions on sermons by men, I argue for the triplet figure in black women's preaching as one of the common devices between black male and female preachers. See Jon Michael Spencer, *Sacred Symphony: The Chanted Sermon of the Black Preacher* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1987).
"Love your hands! Love them. Raise them up and kiss them. Touch others with them, pat them together, stroke them on your face' cause they don't love that either. You got to love it, you! And no, they ain't in love with your mouth. Yonder, out there, they will see it broken and break it again. What you say out of it they will not heed. What you scream from it they do not hear. What you put in it to nourish your body they will snatch away and give you leavings instead. No, they don't love your mouth. You got to love it.” (88)

While much in this example mimics gestures associated with the black male preacher, the essence of womanism is in Baby Suggs's sermon-message. The sermon reestablishes a sense of self-love. Her reliance is not upon the Bible, but upon her own lived experience and recovery of self in her postslavery life.

Song, unlike the written word, which is often perceived as permanent and unchanging, allows for change as new versions arise with the successive generations who hear it. The importance of song as a maternal signifier rests not only with the tendency of women in some cultures, particularly mothers, to be the oral historians (storytellers) of a community, but also it stands in opposition to the male-identified written word. While song is crucial to the black community as a whole, the responsibility of passing on a song from one generation to the next is often seen as primarily the role of the mother.

Song substituted for words expresses a needed feminine sensibility in opposition to the masculine implications of words. Even more specifically, song suggests the maternal, the closest association with the feminine, and the most common representation of the feminine within the novel. Sethe and Amy Denver, the young woman who helps her birth Denver and for whom the child is named, refer to the transferring of song from mother to child. In the case of both Sethe and Amy Denver, the maternal song becomes a point of emotional connection and familial identity. Aoi Mori suggests that the absence of artistic culture, particularly song, in the lives of Morrison's female characters isolates them from the rest of the community and inevitably cements their inner devastation. According to Mori, “Any lack of musical expression seems to have a serious effect on Morrison's characters, preventing them from developing an identity and cultivating a communal relationship with other people.”11 The inability to cultivate a communal relationship affects not only the individual but eventually the entire community as well. The notion of nursing as well as nurturing provides a ready link to the maternal and to a woman-centered method of response that recognizes the necessity of communal intervention to assist ailing community members.

The emphasis on communal restoration is the result of several gendered implications of spirituality, which I have already suggested are part of the wom-

Reed: The Restorative Power of Sound

The feminine represents a continuum of communal ideals in contrast to the masculine, which represents discontinuity. For example, in the novel, reason and rationality, and earthly or grounded thinking, generally associated with men, are evident when Paul D, a former slave from the Sweet Home plantation, enters Sethe's house at 124 Bluestone for the first time. He exclaims to Sethe, “What kind of evil you got in here?” Sethe replies, “It’s not evil, just sad” (8). Not only does Paul D pass judgment on the presence, but out of his own fear he also asserts authority in challenging the presence, assuming that it is his place to expel the ghost, and, further, that it is what the women need, regardless of what they want.

Paul D was shouting. . . . “Leave the place alone! Get the hell out!” A table rushed toward him and he grabbed its leg. Somehow he managed to stand at an angle and, holding the table by two legs, he bashed it about, wrecking everything, screaming back at the screaming house. “You want to fight, come on! God damn it! She got enough without you.” (18)

Afterward, Denver voices her resentment of the man “who had gotten rid of the only other company she had.” When Beloved returns in physical form, Paul D leaves Sethe's house, unable to compete with the ghost for Sethe's attention. Paul D wants to take on the role of protector; however, his ignorance of the complex maternal layers that bind Beloved to Sethe and to Denver relegate him to bystander. The women in the community take a wholly different approach to assisting Sethe. The women first gather and assess the situation with Sethe and the ghost. Once they agree on an approach, the women then act as a community, in contrast to Paul D’s ineffective individual effort. But even more important, the women challenge Beloved on a spiritual level by invoking God through prayer and song. When confronted with the physical presence of the “evil,” though clearly shocked, they are undeterred, and their singing and prayers overpower the spirit of Beloved, attesting to the effectiveness of the informal in achieving the desired communal goal of restoration.

There is a strong juxtaposition in the novel of non-culturally specific ideals of the maternal including early nurturing and teaching with culturally specific ideals of matrilineal authority. The presentation of Baby Suggs as an authoritative figure is rooted in maternal practice: that is in the experience of caring for children through preserving their lives, nurturing their growth, and teaching them how to survive in the brutal social world of which they are a part. The words she speaks are nurturing words, offering solace and teaching to the people around her, people for whom she cares as if they were her children. Moreover, the words and experience she offers them are nurturing and growth-producing. She is leading those who listen to begin to grow into authentic self-love, something for which their experience in slavery and even out of it has not provided. As a mother empowers and
enables a child to grow into the self-awareness and self-acceptance of an adult and true subject, so Baby Suggs sought to empower and enable those who listened to her preach.\textsuperscript{12}

Morrison's need to provide a "non-book quality[,...] a sound," is ultimately more than a structural device; it pleads the case for a womanist understanding of "voice" in direct contrast to word and text, which have masculine implications. In addition to the distinguishing traits cited earlier of feminine and masculine preaching, the masculine, according to Holloway, suggests fixity, the formalized, and the temporal; while timelessness characterizes song and the feminine.\textsuperscript{13} Ultimately, the social implications also vary. The masculine acknowledges only the individual self; the feminine acknowledges self in relationship to community, and the willingness, if necessary, to sacrifice self for the preservation of community. Baby Suggs becomes the sacrifice, her function shifts from an active preaching role into an ancestral role.

The implication that the authoritative spiritual leadership role can happen through song recalls the actual situation of nineteenth-century women preachers. Because of their exclusion from traditional pulpits, women were in a position to redefine preaching and their own ministerial space. Black women preachers of the nineteenth century were often invited to preach, or, more accurately, to exhort,\textsuperscript{14} for special services. With lesser frequency, women substituted for an absent pastor, but never from the pulpit. The typical role for these women was to lead Bible studies or to assist in another teaching capacity. More commonly, they fulfilled their desire to preach through itinerant evangelism, which gave them more freedom and control in preaching. Baby Suggs defines her own pulpit in the Clearing.

[She] visited pulpits. . . . In winter and fall she carried it to AME's and Baptists, Holinesses and Sanctifieds, the Church of the Redeemer and the Redeemed. . . . When warm weather came, Baby Suggs, holy, followed by every black man, woman and child who could make it through, took her great heart to the Clearing—a wide-open place cut deep in the woods nobody knew for what at the end of a path known only to deer and whoever cleared the land in the first place. (87)

By the end of Beloved, the space in front of Baby Suggs's home is transformed

\textsuperscript{12} Colleen Carpenter Cullinian, "A Maternal Discourse of Redemption: Speech and Suffering in Morrison's Beloved," Religion and Literature 34, no. 2 (Summer 2002): 94–95. Cullinian defines the maternal not in terms of gender, but rather in terms of who is willing to do the maternal work. She states three criteria for her definition: preservation of life, fostering of growth, and social acceptability.

\textsuperscript{13} Holloway, "Lyrical Dimensions of Spirituality."

\textsuperscript{14} \textit{Exhort}, here, meaning to expound on a given biblical text or religious theme in the manner of teaching a lesson, rather than preaching, which is more concerned with style of delivery.
into a re-created church atmosphere, framed by the praying and singing.\textsuperscript{15} In the same way that a natural setting creates a particular alternative space for the woman preacher’s authority, so does song. Beginning as sound, song creates a unique space for women’s authoritative and preacherly voice, offering as it does an alternative to masculine-identified, words-only text. Part of this feminine connection with song is its ability to evoke an emotional response that supercedes words alone. Herein, we can most clearly understand Morrison’s need to create a sound, something more than the words alone.

Much like the unchurched, uneducated Baby Suggs, black women preachers of the nineteenth century exercised alternative means to pursue their call to spiritual leadership and preaching. Carolyn Meussig suggests that even women of the medieval period who were called to preach exercised a number of alternatives in teaching and preaching the Word. According to Meussig, “A woman’s ability to instruct was connected with divine inspiration; schooling played no role in her skill to communicate theology and biblical knowledge.”\textsuperscript{16} Meussig also suggests that singing presented another kind of spiritual teaching available to women, and she asks whether singing can be a meaningful parallel to preaching. She concludes that “through their own distinctive instruction, these women inspired and assisted others in their spiritual development. Thus their enlightened lessons are described as singing, the effects of their songs on the listeners equal or surpass the desired effects of preaching,” and therefore present an alternative to the formality associated with male preaching.\textsuperscript{17}

\textsuperscript{15} At this point in the film version of \textit{Beloved}, Sethe is unaware of the ritual occurring outside. Only when the lead singer begins to sing does Sethe stop her intense activity of chipping ice and begin to walk toward the singing. She pauses briefly on the porch, then suddenly starts toward a figure she presumes to be Schoolteacher. She strikes out at him with the ice pick she has slipped into her pocket, but is restrained by the company of women. Very effectively, the camera action slows at this point to a frame-by-frame tempo as she falls back into the arms of the women, dramatizing the effect of water as a body is submerged. The submersion serves symbolically as a baptism, suggesting the ritual of being baptized into salvation. The baptism is also used to describe the pouring out of the Holy Spirit. Baby Suggs as the manifestation of the Holy Spirit becomes the Word (the “river of living water”) that instantaneously, like the sound, breaks over Sethe. The moment recalls the powerful practice of hymn raising in the black folk church and is further heightened by using late gospel legend Dorothy Love Coates as the lead singer, Ella. \textit{Beloved}, directed by Jonathan Demme (1988).

\textsuperscript{16} Carolyn Meussig, ”Prophecy and Song: Teaching and Preaching by Medieval Women,” in \textit{Women Preachers and Prophets through Two Millennia of Christianity}, ed. Beverly M. Kienzle and Pamela J. Walker (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1998), 147–48. Although Meussig’s argument is based on women historically and culturally distant from the womanist preacher, the broader concept of alternative preaching through song makes a strong case for song as it is used in this womanist context.

\textsuperscript{17} Ibid., 152.
Achieving Communal Salvation

The process of spiritual development is figured in Morrison's novels as salvation. The concept of re-memory (remembrance) recurs in Morrison's novels and facilitates the redemption. The catalyst for re-memory comes through sound, and for the characters in *Beloved* sound assures communal salvation as the ultimate goal. Morrison recasts the well-known scriptural verse "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God and the Word was God" (John 1:1, KJV). Morrison's version states: "In the beginning there were no words. In the beginning was the sound, and they all knew what that sound sounded like" (259). Morrison suggests two things in this recasting. First, that there is simultaneity between word and sound, and subsequently, interdependence between the two. Second, that there is a familiarity regarding the sound, which intimates the necessary collective recognition and subsequent action leading to the salvation of the community.

Baby Suggs is the figure responsible for aiding the community members in bridging sound and memory in order to achieve salvation. Acknowledged in the community as a preacher of the Word, she "accept[ed] no title of honor before her name, but allow[ed] a small caress after it, she became an unchurched preacher, one who visited pulpits and opened her great heart to those who could use it" (87). In doing this, Morrison gives new dimension to the importance of women and the role of the maternal, which remains essential to this narrative; we see this in Sethe's maternal position. But more significant, we see Baby Suggs not only in the role of nurturer to her family but also in the role of spiritual nurturer to an entire community.

In the novel, Baby Suggs's preaching is one aspect of her life that parallels the spiritual and earthly life of Christ. Although not a child in the physical sense, the appellation Baby evokes the Baby Jesus. Coupled with her self-discovery and newly gained freedom, it also implies a childlike newness and innocence, as with Christ's birth. She experiences a rebirth, for all intents and purposes, spiritually and seemingly physically. "Suddenly she saw her hands and thought with a clarity as simple as it was dazzling, 'These hands belong to me.' . . . Next she felt a knocking in her chest and discovered something else new: her own heartbeat" (141). She decides to share with others the joy of this self-discovery, like Christ, assuming the role of a folk preacher; and finally, like Christ, transitioning from her earthly role to a spiritual role in order that the community might come to full awareness of its own salvation. This last parallel is a pivotal point for Baby Suggs, marking the recognition of her spirit-self as not exclusive to Christ and Christianity, but to her ancestral self and heritage.

---

18 Baby Suggs's full name, written by Morrison as "Baby Suggs, Holy," incorporates the distinction of "Holy" as an acknowledgment of her preacherly status in lieu of the formal title that usually precedes the name (for example, Reverend or Bishop).
For Baby Suggs to assume as her own pulpit the “wide open” space called the Clearing suggests her ability to reach beyond the restricted walls of the traditional pulpit to a broader community. Dolan Hubbard notes that “what is implicit in Baby Suggs’s standing outside the traditional church becomes explicit at the novel’s conclusion. Salvation for black women lies within the restructuring of the process of salvation.” Mountford suggests that it is these natural spaces, such as represented by the Clearing, that in fact give women preachers their authority. Distanced from the structured, hierarchical spaces of traditional pulpits, natural settings engender a sense of purity and emotion that emphasizes personal faith. Baby Suggs’s role as a preacher in the Clearing is the first stage of her spiritual leadership development. In the Clearing, one by one she calls the community members to her: “‘Let the children come!’” “‘Let your mothers hear you laugh.’” “‘Let the grown men come.’” “‘Let your wives and your children see you dance.’” To the women, she simply commands, “‘Cry [out] . . . for the living and the dead’” (87–88). Suggs’s simple command to cry foreshadows the cries and prayers of the women when they come together at the novel’s end. While in the Clearing, in Christ-like fashion, she endows women with authority to nurture the community. That Baby Suggs specifies “‘for the living and the dead. Just cry,’” once again cements an ancestral connection. But it is also a connection to the Holy Spirit.

An important step in Baby Suggs’s transition to her ultimate spiritual role of ancestral/Holy Spirit occurs when what began as a meal for a small gathering becomes a lavish feast given just twenty days after the arrival of Denver and Sethe. This episode is a recontextualization of the miracle of the five loaves and two fish.

124 [Bluestone], rocking with laughter, goodwill and food for ninety, made them angry. Too much, they thought. Where does she get it all, Baby Suggs, holy? Why is she and hers always the center of things? How come she always knows exactly what to do and when? Giving advice; passing messages; healing the sick, hiding fugitives, loving, cooking, cooking, loving, preaching, singing, dancing and loving everybody like it was her job and hers alone. . . . It made them furious. . . . The scent of their disapproval lay heavy in the air. (137)

In the days following the feast, Sethe’s attempt to take the lives of her children and herself rather than go back to Sweet Home with Schoolteacher compounded the community’s disdain. The horror of Sethe’s act, and the circumstances of slavery that drove her to commit it, made Baby Suggs believe her preaching about self-love and communal wholeness had been a lie. “Her au-
thory in the pulpit, her dance in the Clearing, her powerful Call—all that had been mocked and rebuked by the bloodspill in her backyard." She stopped preaching the Word and retired to her room to contemplate color (177).

Baby Suggs's room, the keeping room, symbolizes a place of rest for Baby Suggs. However, the concept of a keeping room has a historical antecedent in the sixteenth century in the term keep, "the innermost and strongest structure or central tower of a mediaeval castle." The keep was intended as a place of refuge and protection, which it was for Baby Suggs. Even more important, the keeping room represents a period of preparation and a transitional space between her earthly ministry and her future ancestral role. The musical occurrence at the end of the novel affirms the completion of Baby Suggs's own transition to her rightful ancestral place.

Music as Restoration

Music in Morrison's writing is both implicit and explicit. When coupled with the maternal, it strengthens the woman-centered spiritual process needed to bring communal salvation. Mori asserts that musical expression is critical to restoration; there is a sense of consistency between Morrison's novels and Mori's thought. In Beloved, this restoration occurs only at the novel's end.

Overall, I view Beloved as an example of Morrison's implicit use of music, meaning that there is no direct musical reference to song or its elements. However, throughout the novel there are explicit musical moments, two of which are significant for their association with the maternal. Amy Denver sings the following song during a moment of reprieve in her assistance to Sethe.

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

21 Color functions as an oppositional metaphor to the bleakness of her family's circumstances surrounding the killing.
23 Mori, Toni Morrison and Womanist Discourse; and Holloway, "Lyrical Dimensions of Spirituality," 205. Holloway illustrates that in the novel Song of Solomon Morrison figures music as a means of redemption. In the more explicit sense, it directs the character Milkman "back to his spiritual and Ancestral place."
24 The text is taken from a set of love songs credited to Eugene Field (1894).
Amy pauses, stating, “That’s my mama’s song. She taught me it” (81).

Paul D also sings, which is atypical for the men in the novel, who in fact, are rendered silent for the most part. The narrator, in sharing Sethe’s reflection on Paul D’s arrival, relates that

kneeling in the keeping room the morning after Paul D came, she was distracted by the two orange squares that signaled how barren Bluestone really was. He was responsible for that. Emotions sped to the surface in his company. Things became what they were: drabness looked drab; heat was hot. Windows suddenly had view. And wouldn’t you know he’d be a singing man. (39)

Paul D’s presence and singing conjure in Sethe a nostalgic longing for Sweet Home (the Sweet Home before Schoolteacher) and the only sense of real community Sethe can recall. Although she seems to experience an awakening, Paul D’s singing is ultimately nonrestorative, functioning only to facilitate the work he performs. For all his efforts, none of the songs suit this new setting. “They didn’t fit, these songs. They were too loud, had too much power for the little house chores he was engaged in. . . . So he contented himself with mmmmmm-mmm, throwing in a line if one occurred to him” (40).

The final explicit instance of music is a tune Beloved hums, which Sethe states “was only known to her and her children.”

When the click came, Sethe didn’t know what it was. Afterward it was clear as daylight that the click came at the very beginning—a beat, almost, before it started; before she heard three notes; before the melody was even clear. Leaning forward a little, Beloved was humming softly. . . . “I made that song up. . . . Nobody knows that song but me and my children.” . . . Beloved turned to look at Sethe. “I know it,” she said. (175–76)

Unlike Paul D’s humming, which expresses the absence of forgotten words, Beloved’s humming marks a point of connection and familiarity. But even the utterances before the humming, the clicks, communicate to Sethe, idealizing the maternal legacy of oral tradition through song.

The click anticipates the discernible melody that follows later. The anticipation, or, more commonly, the pick-up, as it is called, functions as a preparatory beat before the crucial downbeat in the first full measure of a piece. In some cases, the pick-up can involve several beats leading to the first complete

---

25 The notion of the click, or more properly click speaking, is what remains of an ancient language. Extant now only in a few African groups, click speaking is found in South Africa and East Africa. Recent research on click-speaking languages theorizes that such languages developed from a single source. Note the work of Joanna Mountain et al., "African Y Chromosome and mt DNA Divergence Provides Insight into the History of Click Languages," *Current Biology* 6, no. 13 (2003): 464–73.
measure. In effect, it already communicates something to the listener about the music and the melody: mood, tempo, style. The click in African click-speaking languages, or more precisely the click consonant, communicates by anticipating a word or replacing a word altogether.

Similarly, Beloved's clicks inform Sethe about the melody she recognizes as her own. The click accompanied by an intimate visceral recognition (re-memory) acknowledges the familial relationship and creates the pivotal point of restoration for the individual and the collective. The invocation of memory through sound establishes meaning and coherence. Inevitably expressed as melody, meaning, however, does not rely upon melody.

Holloway suggests that inherent in the voices of women in Morrison's novels is the ability to sing maternal songs and, through singing, preach cultural wisdom. Further, Holloway argues that maternal songs "dictate cultural identity and bring order to the African-American community." In a similar assertion of spirituality and ideology in contemporary black women's literature, Judylyn Ryan states, "Black women writers . . . view the survival of African peoples throughout the globe as part of a deliberate and comprehensive agenda, one in which an African-centered spirituality was and remains a central component, one in which women fulfill important spiritual and social leadership roles." Ryan implies the ancestral figure, although she does not make direct reference to it.

As ancestral/Holy Spirit, Baby Suggs becomes the utterance, in essence, the very embodiment of the word/sound itself that is key to the healing of the fractured community. The heightened moment when the "right combination" is found is simultaneous with the sound becoming song, and individual tongues becoming one collective tongue.

Denver saw lowered heads, but could not hear the lead prayer—only the earnest syllables of agreement that backed it: Yes, yes, yes, oh yes. Hear me. Hear me. Do it, Maker, do it. Yes . . . Then Ella hollered. . . .

As ancestral/Holy Spirit, Baby Suggs becomes the utterance, in essence, the very embodiment of the word/sound itself that is key to the healing of the fractured community. The heightened moment when the "right combination" is found is simultaneous with the sound becoming song, and individual tongues becoming one collective tongue.

Denver saw lowered heads, but could not hear the lead prayer—only the earnest syllables of agreement that backed it: Yes, yes, yes, oh yes. Hear me. Hear me. Do it, Maker, do it. Yes . . . Then Ella hollered . . .

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. (258–59)

---

26 Holloway, "Lyrical Dimensions of Spirituality," 203.
28 A parallel to the ancestral role in certain Christian denominations is the Holy Spirit and the cry resembles the gift of speaking in tongues, which is considered a direct line of communication to the Holy Spirit and to God. The Holy Spirit is described as "rivers of living water" (John 7:38, KJV). As one is filled with this "living water," she begins to speak with other tongues as the Spirit gives utterance (Acts 2:4, KJV). Although it is an individual and private occurrence, the collective event strengthens the sense of community with other believers.
Sound ultimately serves as a metaphorical baptismal pool and Sethe becomes immersed. However, the necessity of collective action to save the individual also makes Sethe's baptism a test of communal wholeness. The community's success is determined in the initial utterance made by the collective of women; for in that moment, Baby Suggs's transition is complete and communal restoration begins: “The voices of women searched for the right combination, the key, the code, the sound that broke the back of words. Building voice upon voice until they found it, and when they did it was a wave of sound wide enough to sound deep water and knock the pods off chestnut trees. It broke over Sethe and she trembled like the baptized in its wash” (261).

The aural effect of hymn raising, alluded to in the scene described above, is the result of the style of singing that African American music scholar Eileen Southern has described.

This kind of singing was distinctive for its surging, melismatic melody, and its heterophonic texture. . . . The combination of the very slow tempo and surging melismatic melody gave the impression of a music without rhythmic patterns, but underlying the whole was a steady relentless pulse, emphasized by the foot-patting of the singers. The quality of the singing was distinctive for its shrill, hard, full-throated, strained, raspy, and/or nasal tones with frequent exploitation of falsetto, growling, and moaning. 29

The extramusical utterances—the growls, groans, and moans that Southern describes—are all variants of the cry and the defining trait of hymn raising in the black cultural tradition. Hymn lining and lining out as performance practices suggest a syncretism between culture and history that accentuates the blurring between the cry as inarticulate expression (utterance) and reading (or singing) as articulated expression. Generally a feminine ideal, within this culturally specific framework, the cry, in juxtaposing word and song, also juxtaposes male and female, rendering it a natural agent of communal restoration.

The patterns of binary opposition that I have discussed, particularly the word/song binary, suggest the intent of the narrative to achieve communal restoration consistent with womanist theological perspectives. Communal restoration, the primary underpinning of Morrison’s novel, ultimately takes place in a collective performance of the text.

---
