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# “Bluetopia”: music and memory in Toni Morrison’s *God Help the Child*

*Utopie bleutée : musique et mémoire dans Délivrances, ultime roman de Toni Morrison*

Article publié le 15 juillet 2024.

**Mathilde La Cassagnère**

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# “Bluetopia”: music and memory in Toni Morrison’s *God Help the Child*

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Overture: “Dissolved in a seaworld”

1. Cathartic blue

2. Orphic blue

3. Blue lines

Coda

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## Overture: “Dissolved in a sea-world”

*Full fathom five thy father lies, / Of his bones are coral made, / Those are pearls that were his eyes, / Nothing of him that doth fade, / But doth suffer a sea-change, / Into something rich and strange*  
(Shakespeare 2013: 1.2.474-79, italics in original)

- 1 In Shakespeare’s *The Tempest*, Ariel’s song conjures up Ferdinand’s father’s corpse transformed by the sea “into something rich and

strange.” Likewise, in Toni Morrison’s ultimate novel *God Help the Child*, set in present-day California, Booker’s wave-like poetry “dissolves” the trauma of slavery “in a seaworld,” turning it into something bluesy:

*You accepted like a beast of burden the whip of a stranger’s curse and the mindless menace it holds along with the scar it leaves [...] a slim line drawn on a shore and quickly dissolved in a seaworld any moment when an equally mindless wave fondles it like the accidental touch of a finger on a clarinet stop* (Morrison 2015: 149-150, italics in original).

- 2 Like her aptly named Booker character,<sup>1</sup> Morrison not only wrote to recall the tragic times of the Afro-American community, but also to reclaim—after its appropriation by the mainstream—the music originally created by her people to transfigure the trauma. As Morrison confided in an interview,

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 (Bigsby 1992: 29).

- 3 1992 was the year her opus *Jazz* (set in Harlem in the 1920s during the Jazz Age) was published—the novel which made explicit the influence of jazz music and its freeing effect on Morrison’s writing. But Morrison’s art more than “replicates” the original musical “balm”: it uses the latter’s music and orality to dissolve the written word of the novel, an artform of white European origin,<sup>2</sup> dismembering, remembering, decomposing and recomposing the black and white aesthetics, alchemizing them into “something else” in a way about which the artist was all too modest: “I try to incorporate into that traditional genre, the novel, unorthodox novelistic characteristics—so that it is in my view Black, because it uses the characteristics of Black art” (Morrison 1985: 342). Denise Heinze (1993: 15) contends that “Morrison frequently alters, substitutes, or replaces the white aesthetic by presenting or creating a black aesthetic of difference.” I would add that Morrison’s last novel—arguably her rawest and shortest—is her finest achievement in this regard, colouring the world as it does in a

“rich and strange,” iridescent kind of blue which I propose to term “bluetopia,”<sup>3</sup> some shades of which will be approached in the three movements of this reading—and listening—of *God Help the Child*.

- 4 The first movement of this paper will be devoted to the revamped, 21<sup>st</sup> century slave song flowing from the novel, where black and white voices relay each other delivering first-person solos, in a collective effort to break their chains—somehow like a colour-blind and mixed (albeit predominantly female) blend of the Freudian talking cure, Aristotelian catharsis, and jazz jam sessions.<sup>4</sup> The second movement will lend an attentive ear to the novel’s Orphic blues: like Orpheus’ severed head carried away by the river to an alien seashore, Morrison’s dismembered characters keep singing to be re-membered and transfigured by waves of blue. The last movement will aim at detecting Morrison’s incorporation, between her lines, of what some musicologists call “blue notes,” or “blue harmony”: these are “extremely difficult to reproduce on [the] paper” of a musical staff (Boutry 2000: 113), let alone in a novel.<sup>5</sup> To quote Jacquelyn A. Fox-Good, “Music’s power, I will argue with the help of [...] Julia Kristeva, explodes not out of its opposition to the power of the Word—but out of its location in ‘the place of alterity’<sup>6</sup> in the gap between signifier and signified.” (Fox-Good 2000: 10). In the bluetopia of *God Help the Child* (arguably a manifestation of this “place of alterity”), Morrison’s notes keep leaving and erasing their traces, like a swimmer’s wake in the sea.

## 1. Cathartic blue

- 5 GHC is freely inspired by Billie Holiday’s 1942 jazz classic “God Bless the Child,”<sup>7</sup> meaning that Morrison drew on the “retrospective” jazz method instead of the planned European method of musical composition: in jazz, “each new musical phrase can be shaped in relation to what has gone before” (Gioia 1988: 60–61), and creation is achieved “as process rather than as product [...] by repetitious rhythmic figures such as riffs, which help the musician to structure improvisations with reference to what has already been created” (Rice 2000: 169–170); it is a “music [which] delights in a lived, seemingly infinite, past just as it wallows in new improvisatory turns” (*id.* 172). Riffing on Holiday’s song—which itself riffs on the Bible<sup>8</sup>—Morrison’s text generates

an intersemiotic solution which alchemizes the written word and the volatility of jazz—among other components as we are about to see.

- 6 The novel unfolds as a succession of both poignant and humorous solos delivered by seven voices improvising on typically blues themes (loss, heartache, the quest for economic independence and spiritual freedom), to come to terms with excruciating traumas—child molestation and sexual abuse, infanticide, the violence of everyday racism and colourism,<sup>9</sup> 21<sup>st</sup> century oppressions for which black slavery is a constant, subliminal metaphor, a bassline resonating from the past. The septet is equally distributed between three black and three white first-person narrators (or performers) who take turns to express their blues in a succession of short chapters (or, in Booker’s case, eight poems), with an additional anonymous, omniscient third-person narrator. The six first-person narratives and poems are alive with the orality of the African American music—and its present-day offshoots such as rap, rap-battles, soul, R&B—born from the slavery and segregation periods. The reader is often directly addressed, right from the front-page dedication (“For You”), also put in the position of a psychotherapist who must piece together the puzzling outpourings of a regular set of patients undergoing a Freudian talking cure. The latter aims at provoking in the patient a “secondary abreaction”<sup>10</sup> which consists in remembering a traumatic event to revive the emotion it caused, so that the affect, which could not be coped with at the time, can be reacted to, and dealt with, in a delayed fashion—as if attending a cleansing self-performance on the stage of memory. In keeping with his white, Western ethical and aesthetic heritage,<sup>11</sup> Freud was wary of the sirens’ voices and found music “seductive but dangerous” (Sacks 2008: 321-323); he could not conceive of a musical version of his talking cure. And yet, the kinship between blues and talking cure sessions is uncanny, both in the method and the aim:

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 [...] by squeezing from it a near-tragic, near-comic lyricism. As a form, the blues is an autobiographical chronicle of personal catastrophe expressed lyrically (Ellison 1972: 78-79).

- 7 To express that "personal catastrophe," blues singers "throw together verses in a haphazard manner, [sing] the verses in a stream-of-consciousness style, and [follow] a loose, associative, nonlogical progression" (Tracy 1988: 90). Thus, both in the talking cure and the blues, the slave to the past goes through a process of delivery: memory work, utterance, expulsion of the trauma as the past is relived from a distance, screened, "fingered," fragmented, dissolved, reshuffled, recomposed, recoloured. So, here is what the listener gathers, session after session, from the cathartic blues of *God Help the Child*.
- 8 Bride (voice number two in order of performance), a glamorous, ebony-black young woman at the top of an LA cosmetics company, has a handsome lover named Booker—amateur trumpettist and poet (voice seven, composer of the eight poems disclosed near the end of the novel). Bride was born Lula Ann in a family plagued by racism and colourism—arguably the reason why she renamed herself in such a connoted way: ivory and white being the main colours of choice for wedding dresses, this probably participated in lightening her identity; "I learned how many shades of white there were: ivory, oyster, alabaster, paper white, snow, cream, ecru, Champagne, ghost, bone" (33)—those last two shades ironically reveal Bride's self-inflicted denaturing; so do the skin-lightening products sold by her cosmetics company. Little Lula Ann narrowly escaped infanticide by her light-skinned mother who, ironically as well, renamed herself Sweetness (voice one): by her own admission, Sweetness "wished [her daughter] hadn't been born with that terrible color" (5), and explains she raised the girl alone since the father, repelled by the "tar"-coloured baby (4), disowned her and left shortly after she was born. Sweetness repeatedly justifies the "strict, very strict" (7) education she gave her daughter as a necessary evil to protect her against a racist world. Once, Lula Ann was forced to silence by her mother after witnessing their white landlord rape a little boy—not to be thrown out of their lodgings. In another desperate attempt to win her mother's love, the little girl lied in court and accused her white teacher Sofia (voice four) of paedophilia, sending an innocent to prison after leaving a criminal at large. On Sofia's release after a fifteen-year jail-time (the opening event of the novel), guilt-ridden Bride pays her a visit, believing she can buy her former teacher's forgiveness; Sofia throws the

money and cosmetic gifts back in Bride’s face before beating her to a pulp. Booker leaves Bride and disappears without a trace, mystified by his lover’s befriending a child molester—we learn from the third-person narrator (voice five) that Bride never brought herself to tell Booker the truth about Sofia. To add insult to injury, Booker is still mourning his brother murdered by a serial rapist when they were children—which Booker never told Bride either. Booker’s rejection and subsequent disappearance revive the young woman’s childhood pains, so much so that her body begins to shrink, slowly changing back into a little girl’s (the only fantastic element in the novel), which no one seems to notice to her great perplexity. Despite her strange condition, Bride leaves the city on a quest for Booker. On her journey, her Jaguar crashes into a tree and she convalesces for several weeks in a cabin in the woods, home to Rain (voice six), a “bone-white” girl (83) who was prostituted by her birth-mother before being adopted—more exactly kidnapped—by a kind, hippy white couple who tend to Bride’s wounds as though she were also their daughter. Meanwhile in LA, Bride’s supposed best friend, a young white woman named Brooklyn (voice three), who was also sexually abused as a child, is stealing Bride’s job. Bride finally finds Booker at his aunt’s, the mysterious, witchy Queen Olive. Under Queen’s guidance, Bride and Booker share their unspoken secrets at last. Bride’s body grows back to normal; they restart their relationship on more solid ground and become pregnant—a new-found happiness clouded by Queen’s accidental death. Despite her crucial role, Queen is not included in the blues therapy; her rare words are only reported in indirect speech, or briefly quoted by the third-person narrator in conversations with Bride and Booker—a deafening silence to which I shall return.

- 9 Among the seven voices, Rain delivers the most poignant blues, expressing her childhood traumas, then her sorrow after Bride’s recovery and departure. The text, condensed within a short chapter and composed in the torch song style, opens and finishes with the same lament: “She’s gone, my black lady [...]. I miss my black lady” (104-106). This solo has everything that makes the “near-tragic, near-comic lyricism” of the blues as defined by Ellison:

I feel sad now she’s gone. I don’t know who I can talk to [...]. I don’t want to kill [my adoptive parents] anymore like I used to when I first got there. But then I wanted to kill everybody [...]. They think I can

read but I can’t, well maybe a little—signs and stuff. Evelyn is trying to teach me. She calls it home-schooling. I call it home-drooling and home-fooling (104).

- 10 It is the youngest voice, the “bone-white” girl’s, which performs this most harrowing blues: in reference to Shakespeare’s Ariel’s song, “of her bones are [the blues] made.” Through *Rain*, Morrison dissolves, and does away with, a patriarchal archetype shared by black and white cultures—the rugged and mature male blues singer.
- 11 The solos take on a collective dimension which involves two other compounds into the alchemy: the ancient, original European catharsis and the African American slave song. The former was defined by Aristotle as the collective, vicarious cleansing of negative emotions effected by a tragic play on its spectators. In the ancient Greek theatre, this emotional release was represented within the play itself by the chorus who occupied a part of the stage known as the orchestra—etymologically, the dancing floor. The chorus was an anonymous group of characters who behaved like onstage spectators reacting to, and commenting upon, the tragic action through song and dance, lyrically and physically expressing what the heroes could not put into their spoken words and body language, and echoing on the stage the purgation which took place in the audience. In *GHC*, the seven voices are a transformed version of that chorus which is no longer anonymous, but assumed by the main characters who are reacting to their own and to each other’s misery—with the exception of the third-person narrator who remains unidentified, uninvolved, like the odd untouched fragment of the original, Greek chorus. The latter thus morphs into a solo chain reminiscent of the Afro-American slave song which was a “release valve” (Rice 2000: 164), a collective improvisation in which the chain gangs, through a call-and-response pattern, sang of their individual pains and sorrows, so that the very chains that enslaved them became their liberating instrument:

the chains of slavery were worked upon and redefined in the African American system of signification whereby the chains as a means of enforcing enslavement were also the basis for making connection with Africa and the idea of release. Shango, the African god who presided over lightning—thus fire, thus the forge, thus iron—was present in the chains, carried over the ocean as a hard and fast de-



sire for freedom. Chains are the simultaneous embodiment of slavery and freedom (Willis 1994: 183).

- 12 The soloists of *GHC* can thus be heard as a 21<sup>st</sup> century, colour-blind chain gang who, under the double inspiration of Shango and his Greek counterpart Hephaestus, improvise their escape from the traumatic past.

## 2. Orphic blue

- 13 And what trauma, what torture inflicted by a past which tears them apart, both figuratively and literally. Booker was so close to his brother—“Adam was more than a brother to Booker [...]. He was the one who knew what Booker was thinking, feeling” (115)—that when the latter was raped and dismembered by a paedophilic serial killer, Booker was as violently torn asunder within, his soul scattered like the limbs of Orpheus, the Thracian minstrel assaulted by the Maenads, a horde of bacchantes who threw his head and lyre in the river Hebrus (Ovid 2004: 422-425). As to Lula Ann’s relationship with her mother, the latter’s colourism was such that it snapped the cord which song maintains between parent and child in healthy families; Bride’s memory of that severance is both “bright” and searing:

Bride quickly dashed a bright memory of Sweetness humming some blues song while washing panty hose in the sink, little Lula Ann hiding behind the door to hear her. How nice it would have been if mother and daughter could have sung together. Embracing that dream, she did fall into a deep sleep (87).

- 14 The pain is so haunting that Bride’s body starts reverting into a child’s, the Maenadian past taking back her femininity piece by piece:

Christ. Now what? My earrings. They won’t go in. The platinum stem keeps slipping away from my earlobe. I examine the earrings—nothing wrong. I peer at my lobes closely and discover the tiny holes are gone. Ridiculous [...]. This is impossible. After all these years, I’ve got virgin earlobes [...]. So this is what insanity is [...]. There is not a single hair in my armpit, but I lather it anyway. Now the other one. The lathering up, the shaving, calms me and I am so grateful I begin to think of other places that might need this little delight. My

pudenda, perhaps. It’s already hairless [...]. What is happening to me?  
(50-53)

- 15 The stems of the “pearl-dot earrings” (34) which, with her wardrobe in shades of white, used to lighten her person, are rejected by the black-skin regenerating in her earlobes’ “tiny holes.” Could the “virgin” ears resulting from this metamorphosis manifest Bride’s desire to retrospectively absorb the missed, forbidden motherly song? Could the constructs of Bride’s womanhood be torn apart to facilitate a remembering of, and reconciliation with, her original self—although she does not understand it yet? “It was when she stood to dry herself that she discovered her chest was flat, completely flat” (92), do we learn from the anonymous narrator during Bride’s stay at Steve and Evelyn’s (Rain’s adoptive parents):

Her shock was so great that she plopped back down into the dirty water, holding the towel over her chest like a shield.  
I must be sick, dying, she thought [...]. Fighting panic she called out to Evelyn.  
“Please, do you have something I can wear?”  
“Sure,” said Evelyn [...]. She said nothing about Bride’s chest [...].  
When Bride called her back saying the jeans were too large to stay on her hips, Evelyn exchanged them for a pair of Rain’s, which fit Bride perfectly. When did I get so small? She wondered (92-93).

- 16 The Orphic subtext regularly resurfaces via a cluster of images and situations involving the characters’ “lifeless tongue[s]” (Ovid 2004: 424), muted whenever they are made to feel (or remember feeling) rejected, ashamed, guilty, or when forced to silence by others or by self-blame and -censorship. In her sour blues after Sofia beat her up, Bride complains, “something bad has been done to my tongue because my taste buds have disappeared” (29-30). Booker, in an attempt to disclose his childhood tragedy to Bride, “felt he had something definitive and vital to say, to explain, but when he opened his mouth his tongue froze” (154). As an adolescent, he was “censured” by his family in his attempts at venting his grief over Adam’s death (117). Lula-Ann was silenced by Sweetness after having seen their landlord rape the little boy—the latter gagged as well, literally, during the crime—lest they be evicted from their lodgings (54-55); Lula-Ann shushed by her mother who forbid her to call her “Mama” (6); the

shame that keeps Bride, as an adult, from confessing to Booker what she did to Sofia. Sofia condemned to silence in her prison cell, her voice, her teaching vocation, lost. Rain forced to hold her tongue by Evelyn and Steve who will not hear about the sexual abuse her birth-mother put her through (104). Sweetness silenced in her turn by the blue letter Bride sends her with no return address:

the note on blue paper that I got from Lula Ann—well, she signed it “Bride,” but I never pay that any attention [...]. “Guess what, S. I am so so happy to pass along this news. I am going to have a baby. I’m too too thrilled and hope you are too.” I reckon the thrill is about the baby, not its father, because she doesn’t mention him at all. I wonder if he is as black as she is [...]. There is no return address on the envelope. So I guess I’m still the bad parent being punished forever till the day I die for the well-intended and, in fact, necessary way I brought her up (176-177).

- 17 And yet, just as, after Orpheus’ massacre by the bacchanals, “oh wonder!—the instrument utter[s] a plaintive moan, the lifeless tongue emit[s] a dirge and the banks [of the river] re-echo in sorrow” (Ovid 2004: 424); just as the minstrel’s severed head starts to sing again “afloat mid-stream” (*ibid.*), tongues unfreeze in the flow of the novel’s solos. This rebirth is echoed by the intradiegetic music: the records “tentatively” played by Booker’s parents after Adam’s funeral—“the encouraging sounds of Louis, Ella, Sidney Bechet, Jelly Roll, King Oliver and Bunk Johnson *floating* from the record player in the background” (116, my emphasis)—but also Booker’s trumpet, the instrument he starts to learn in the wake of the horror:

Wary of another crisis that might eliminate the soul-stretching music his father played, which Booker counted on to oil and straighten his tangled feelings, he asked his father if he could take trumpet lessons [...]. Six years later [...] Booker was fourteen and a fairly accomplished trumpet player (117-118).

- 18 Like a river, the twists and turns of life carry Booker a few more years, meandering between stimulating campus life, unsatisfying relationships, playing trumpet with bands in bars and in the streets, street fights, a few brushes with drugs and the police; and then:

Then came the day that changed him and his music. Simply dumbstruck by her beauty Booker stared open-mouthed at a young blue-black woman standing at the curb laughing. Her clothes were white, her hair like a million butterflies asleep on her head. She was talking to another woman [...]. A limousine negotiated the curb and both waited for the driver to open the door for them. Although it made him sad to see the limo pull away, Booker smiled and smiled as he walked on to the train entrance, where he played with the two guitarists (131).

- 19 Booker’s love at first sight for Bride causes “the disintegration of the haunt and gloom in which for years Adam’s death had clouded him” (132). It also “ravishes” him, in the sense meant by Roland Barthes: in “a lover’s [music], the initial scene during which I was ravished is merely reconstituted [...]. I reconstruct a traumatic image which I experience in the present but which I [play] in the past.”<sup>12</sup> Not only does Booker improvise a blues solo to “reconstitute” Bride’s presence after she left in the limousine, but he is also carried away by the music flowing from his own instrument—as Orpheus’ singing head and lyre carried away by the river:

He noticed the rain—soft, steady. The sun still blazed so the rain-drops falling from a baby-blue sky were like crystal breaking into specks of light on the pavement. He decided to play his trumpet alone in the rain anyway [...]. Still in thrall to the sheer beauty of the girl he had seen, he put the trumpet to his lips. What emerged was music he had never played before. Low, muted notes held long, too long, as the strains floated through drops of rain. Booker had no words to describe his feelings. What he did know was that the rain-soaked air smelled like lilac when he played while remembering her (131).

- 20 This musical fluid has the double power to negate the absence of the loved one, and to heal the pining blues soloist—by carrying him “on an alien shore” (Ovid 2004: 424), changing him “into [someone] rich and strange” (Shakespeare 2013). As shown in the passage above, Booker’s metamorphosis endows him with a new sensory capacity: synaesthesia, which Oliver Sacks defines as a “fusion of different senses” (Sacks 2008: 179) caused by the unusual “coactivation of two or more sensory areas of the cerebral cortex” (*ibid.* 191). Booker’s

senses dissolve and merge in a sea that shimmers on the scale of blue (“blue-black [...] baby blue [...] lilac”<sup>13</sup>), in a “blazing” chiaroscuro of sun and rain: “smell[ing] lilac,” seeing “long, too long” notes “float[ing]” in the air, feeling them “through drops of rain,” Booker is re-membered, recomposed by the music in this vision-smell-touch-hearing multimodal experience. Today’s hard sciences confirm that “hearing and playing music [...] may powerfully alter brain function and reconstruct the brain’s neural physiology” (Churchland 1988: 96). Sound infiltrates the body, is absorbed by it and “agitates” it like no other stimulus:

Dewey<sup>14</sup> believes that sound, more than other media of art, appeals to the human organism because “the connections of cerebral tissues with the ear constitute a larger part of the brain than those of any other sense.” Although it comes from outside the body, sound is intimate because it immediately and directly excites our organism and “we feel the clash of vibrations throughout our whole body.” Unlike the eye, which requires a specific level of consciousness to respond [...], the ear, Dewey maintains, is “the emotional sense” due to the natural affinity between sound and the organism of the ear: “sound agitates directly, as a commotion of organism itself” (Simawe 2000: 264).

- 21 In *God Help the Child*, though, music is more than the instrument of that healing; it too is healed and reborn, it too goes through a sea-change, turned from severing to bonding agent for lovers, families, cultures, thus recovering its power to collapse all barriers, as Orpheus’ music (before his massacre by the Maenads) moves human, animal, vegetation and vibrant matter alike: it “entranced the beasts and the rocks to follow behind him,” the “wonderful songs attracted the rocks and touched the hearts of the beasts [...], the trees [...], the rivers” (Ovid 2004: 422, 424). Thus, when Bride witnesses the strong musical bond that ties together Rain’s reconstituted family, it vicariously heals the musical cord severed by her mother when she was a girl:

Something meaty, like chicken, roasted in the oven while Evelyn and the girl chopped mushrooms and green peppers at the rough home-made table. Without warning they began to sing some dumb old hippie song.

“This land is your land, this land is my land...” [...]

Steve and Evelyn occasionally spent time after supper sitting outside singing songs by the Beatles or Simon and Garfunkel—Steve strumming his guitar, Evelyn joining him in tuneless soprano. Their laughter tinkling between wrong lines and missed notes [...].

“This land is your land, this land is my land...” (87, 91).

22 Now, even “dumb old” white folk and pop music, even the “tinkling” and giggling of false notes and missed lines, have bonding virtues. The novel’s narrative solution blends professional, amateur, black and white music under the aegis of Woody Guthrie’s tell-tale lyrics (“This Land is your land [...], my land”), dissolving all schisms in the process—including the racism (“racist malignancy,” 150) deplored in one of Booker’s poems.

23 As for Booker’s trumpet, it is emblematic of music’s metamorphosis: at first an instrument of division in his breakup with Bride, it turns into that of their reconciling. Indeed, at the start of their relationship, Booker does not share his passion for the instrument with Bride—who is indifferent, anyway, to what he does when they are not together. But after Booker’s disappearance, it is the trumpet which puts Bride on her lover’s track when, by chance, she finds an invoice from the repair shop where he left it before disappearing. At the shop, she discovers the existence of the instrument and its vital role in Booker’s life, and gets Queen’s address (where she will find Booker) from the repairmen:

guitars and horns hung on the walls and all sorts of metal pieces covered the cloth of a table. The man working there looked up from his magnifying glass to examine Bride and then the notice. He went to a cupboard and removed a trumpet wrapped in purple cloth [...]. Bride took the horn thinking she didn’t even know Booker owned one or played it. Had she been interested she would have known that that was what caused the dark dimple on his upper lip (74).

24 These dormant instruments, in pieces on the operating table or convalescing, the trumpet wrapped in its “purple cloth” (yet another shade of blue) like a butterfly in its chrysalis, are visions of music turning “into something rich and strange”—an epiphany of music’s secret kinship with silence.

### 3. Blue lines

25 A kinship made flesh in “the dark dimple” carved by the trumpet on “[Booker’s] upper lip,” as if the instrument were hushing the musician while being played. A kinship revealed to Sofia after her release from prison: “I don’t think many people appreciate silence or realize that it is as close to music as you can get” (69). It is on the fringe of silence, in between the written word and the volatile microtones of the blues, that Morrison slides her lines, making them vibrate out of a no-place bordering all at once Africa, the USA, Europe, the Orient...; “an almost imperceptible affair”<sup>15</sup> to be found in Booker’s poems.

26 As seen previously, when the young man breaks up with Bride, he also leaves his trumpet behind despite the instrument’s wondrous capacity to produce velvety, fragrant blue notes: “music he had never played before. Low, muted notes held long, too long, as the strains floated [in] rain-soaked air [that] smelled like lilac” (131). After Bride brings the instrument back to him, it turns out that the chemistry between trumpet and player is lost. Booker abandons it for good at his aunt’s funeral as if his voice, after all, had not yet found its proper instrument; the inspiration, the “personifying” inherent in blue notes<sup>16</sup> is missing, making him feel “grey” like the river in which he throws the trumpet and lets it disappear—as an Orphic lyre muted in its track:

Although heartfelt, Booker’s ceremony to honour his beloved Queen was awkward [...]: his effort at “Kind of Blue” was off-key and uninspired. He cut it short and [...] threw his trumpet into the grey water as though the trumpet had failed him rather than he had failed it. He watched the horn float for a while then sat down on the grass, resting his forehead in his palm [...]. What made him think he was a talented trumpet player who could do justice to a burial or that music could be his language of memory, of celebration or the displacement of loss? (173-174)

27 Could it be that Booker’s poems have replaced the trumpet as “his language of memory”? As the novel draws to an end, Booker’s and Morrison’s quests converge. Booker’s voice, his poetic solos, have been long in coming (only thirty pages before the end), precisely be-

cause it takes time, work, maturing, for the artist’s sound to come “out of the blue”—not without preparation nor by magic, but from an all but reachable bluetopia. Booker’s seven poems, stored among the contents of “an old-fashioned breadbox” (148) where they have been alchemizing before being handed to Bride by Queen, surprise us all the more as they surface in italics from the standard typeface, just like dynamic nuances (such as *piano*, *forte*, etc.) on a musical staff; and even though they strike the eye and are “traceable” on the page, they are impossible to comprehend: “What lovely handwriting, thought Bride, suddenly realizing that she’d never seen anything Booker wrote—not even his name. There were seven sheets [...]. She read the first page slowly, her forefinger tracing the lines, for there was little or no punctuation” (148). However difficult to comprehend, these freestyle poems are deeply moving, touching, as if they were comprehending us, penetrating us like a balm. They are quoted in full below to let them do their work: their missing punctuation and opacity of meaning allow the words to flow and to dissolve in their waves the traumatic content. Interestingly, each poem mentions a musical instrument; seven instruments altogether (cello, fiddle, clarinet, piano, banjo, oboe, tympani), as in a jazz septet—perhaps a metamorphosis of the novel’s seven voices. To which voice each instrument corresponds, and the effect of the balm, are left to the reader-listener’s imagination and sensitivity:

*Hey girl what's inside your curly head besides dark rooms with dark men dancing too close to comfort the mouth hungry for more of what it is sure is there somewhere out there just waiting for a tongue and some breath to stroke teeth that bite the night and swallow whole the world denied you so get rid of those smokey dreams and lie on the beach in my arms while i cover you with white sands from shores you have never seen lapped by waters so crystal and blue they make you shed tears of bliss and let you know that you do belong finally to the planet you were born on and can now join the out-there world in the deep peace of a cello (148-149, italics in original, my underlining). Her imagination is impeccable the way it cuts and scrapes the bone never touching the marrow where that dirty feeling is thrumming like fiddle for fear its strings will break and screech the loss of its tune since for her permanent ignorance is so much better than the quicks of life (id.).*



*You accepted like a beast of burden the whip of a stranger's curse and the mindless menace it holds along with the scar it leaves as a definition you spend your life refuting although that hateful word is only a slim line drawn on a shore and quickly dissolved in a seaworld any moment when an equally mindless wave fondles it like the accidental touch of a finger on a clarinet stop that the musician converts into silence in order to let the true note ring out loud (149-150, id.).*

*Trying to understand racist malignancy only feeds it, makes it balloon-fat and lofty floating high overhead fearful of sinking to earth where a blade of grass could puncture it letting its watery feces soil the enthralled audience the way mold ruins piano keys both black and white, sharp and flat to produce a dirge of its decay (150, id.).*

*I refuse to be ashamed of my shame, you know, the one assigned to me which matches the low priority and the degraded morality of those who insist upon this most facile of human feelings of inferiority and flaw simply to disguise their own cowardice by pretending it is identical to a banjo's purity (id.).*

*Thank you. You showed me rage and frailty and hostile recklessness and worry worry worry dappled with such uncompromising shards of light and love it seemed a kindness in order to be able to leave you and not fold into a grief so deep it would break not the heart but the mind that knows the oboe's shriek and the way it tears into rags of silence to expose your beauty too dazzling to contain and which turns its melody into the grace of liveable space (150-151, id.).*

*You should take heartbreak of whatever kind seriously with the courage to let it blaze and burn like the pulsing star it is unable or unwilling to be soothed into pathetic self-blame because its explosive brilliance rings justifiably loud like the din of a tympani (151, id.).*

- 28 The third, "clarinet" poem is metapoetic, conveying as it does the "accidental [...] silence" that lets "the true note ring out loud": here we are, nearing the bluetopia, nearly hearing the nowhere between the low, "deep peace of the cello" of the first poem and the high-pitched, "explosive din of a tympani" of the seventh. That blue no-sound returns ten pages later for an encore as the silent Japanese gong in Booker's belated, unexpected eighth poem—the odd one out:

[He] retrieved a notebook to once again put on paper words he could not speak.

*i don't miss you anymore Adam rather i miss the emotion that your*

*dying produced a feeling so strong it defined me while it erased you leaving only your absence for me to live in like the silence of the Japanese gong that is more thrilling than whatever sound may follow (161, italics in original).*

- 29 Japan is home to the haiku, to the ephemeral; its artists “keep painting the sea and its atmosphere to capture their blueness and the infinite possibilities of a single moment [...], revealing the nuances and gamut of this colour as if they were decomposing the notes of a chord” (Thomas 2023: 75-76, my translation).<sup>17</sup>

## Coda

- 30 The unheard Japanese gong seems to find its counterpart in Booker’s aunt Queen’s puzzling, deafening silence. Indeed, she is the last major character to make her entrance (thirty-five pages before the end), and the only one without a first-person solo: she is the silent guest voice of the septet, the odd one out. And what a guest: “dazzling, [with] golden discs the size of clamshells” for earrings, “woolly red hair and judging eyes [which] deleted an entire vocabulary of compliments in one stroke” (144). This deafening silence leaves volumes to the reader-listener’s imagination, all the more as the third-person narrator gives very little information about Queen’s “multiple husbands” (157) and many children—none of whom she raised “beyond the age of twelve” (159). Queen, silent and “dazzling” like a Japanese gong, between the wicked witch of western fairy tales and the medicine woman of African folklore, serves a strange broth to Bride as a welcoming gesture:

[Bride] wondered for a second if she was being seduced into a witch’s den [...]. A pot simmered on the two-burner stove [...]. Bride sat down [...] and watched Queen ladle thick soup into their bowls. Pieces of chicken floated among peas, potatoes, corn kernels, tomato, celery, green peppers, spinach and a scattering of pasta shells. Bride couldn’t identify the strong seasonings—curry? Cardamom? Garlic? Cayenne? Black pepper and red? But the result was manna (145).

- 31 Not only is this improvised “manna” a rainbow of yellow, red, green, black and ultra-violet tastes—like bluetopia light revealed by diffrac-

tion into unexpected and countless colours—but also the culinary equivalent of Edouard Glissant’s description of jazz as the “reconstitution” of “trace thoughts” with “the help of newly adopted instruments”:

While, for example, in an ethnic community on the American continent, people have kept alive the memory of [...] joy or pain from the old country and have been singing them for a hundred years or more on the various occasions of family life, the deported African has not had the opportunity of preserving these kinds of specific inheritances. But he has made something new on the basis of the only memories, that is to say the only trace thoughts, that he had left: he has created [...] art forms [...] such as the music of jazz, which has been reconstituted with the help of newly adopted instruments but on the basis of fundamental African rhythms. Although this neo-American does not sing African songs from two or three centuries ago, he re-establishes in [...] North America, through ‘trace thought,’ art forms that he offers as valid for all peoples (Glissant 2020: 7).

- 32 By playing “trace thoughts” with an orchestra of European artforms and mythologies, jazz, blues, folk music and Oriental influences, Morrison created something unique, “rich and strange,” based on her “fundamental rhythms,” for which Queen’s concoction of old and new ingredients, with old and new tools, is a metaphor. So, why not interpret the mysterious Queen as Morrison’s last manifestation, breaking from the surface of her bluetopia in a transient and yet unforgettable wake? The artist’s last encore, appearing from an unfathomable interval between her lines, between orality and the written word, the corporeal and the intangible, silence and music, remembrance and forgetting—bringing to mind Chantal Thomas’s beautiful evocation of her mother:

It seems to me that she has, without knowing it, transmitted something truly essential to me: the energy of the wake as it carves through the water, imprinted in the moment; the beauty of a path that leads to forgetting; and if there was something I wanted to celebrate about her, something of her that I wanted to try to convey, it would be, paradoxically, the figure of a woman who forgets [...]. Was this her strength or her weakness? Both, surely; and as I stand in the pouring rain, soaked in the deluge, my beach things about to be carried away by the current, borne off by a swollen wave, I find myself

wishing I were already home, lost in the music of writing, watching the curtain of rain, looking through it at something far beyond, my mother swimming, alone, unreachable, a minuscule speck against the blue immensity, an almost imperceptible dot, except in my own memory (Thomas 2019: 3).

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<sup>1</sup> Booker, aptly named not only because he is an avid reader and an experimental (albeit amateur) writer, but also in reference to Booker T. Washington, the former slave who, in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, became a Black leader and an advisor to several US presidents.

2 The novel, “a new species of writing” supposedly “founded by Mr Fielding” in 18<sup>th</sup>-century England—as phrased in the title an oft-quoted 1751 essay (author unknown)—was not, in fact, a sudden English innovation. Its progressive rise started in medieval France with Chrétien de Troyes’s romances, followed by mutations including Geoffrey Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales* and Miguel de Cervantes’ picaresque fictions, to flourish in 17<sup>th</sup>- and 18<sup>th</sup>-century France and England into its modern prose fiction form and realistic, social content. The first African American novel was recently attributed by Professor Henry Louis Gates Jr. to Harriet E. Wilson whose *Our Nig, or Sketches from the life of a Free Black*, was first published in 1859 (*The Harvard Gazette*, March 11, 2021).

3 My variation on the word “utopia,” from the Greek “no-place.” I would define “bluetopia” as an intersemiotic, unfathomable interval where black and white aesthetics are alchemized as a result of their interplay.

4 White American jazz clarinettist Mezz Mezzrow, a champion of Afro-American music, describes the birth of jam sessions in the 1920s as follows: “I think the term ‘jam session’ originated right in that cellar [at The Deuces]. Long before that, of course, the colored boys used to get together and play for kicks [...], and the idea was usually to try and cut each other, each one trying to outdo the others and prove himself best [...]. Our idea [...] was to play together, to make our improvisation really collective, using an organ background behind the one taking a solo, to see could we fit together and arrive at a climax all at once. Down in that basement concert hall, somebody was always yelling over to me, ‘Hey Jelly, what you gonna do?’—they gave me that nickname, or sometimes called me Roll, because I always wanted to play Clarence Williams’ classic, ‘Jelly Roll’—and almost every time I’d cap them with, ‘Jelly’s gonna jam some now,’ just as a kind of play on words. We always used the word ‘session’ a lot, and I think the expression ‘jam session’ grew up out of this playful yelling back and forth” (Mezzrow / Wolfe 2016: 129).

5 “The blue notes,” explains Michael Chanan quoted by Boutry, “are a sign of the African origins of jazz, of a different scale system, different methods of tuning, a different sense of timbre and rhythm, a different sense of harmony. [They] hover between the major and the minor” (Boutry 2000: 113). Hans Weisethaunet prefers to name these notes “blue harmony,” which “is based on a very subtle play of tonality, where rhythmic attack, microtonality and bending of strings creating an interplay between major and minor—but also other—intervals is of the essence [...]”. As a stylised expression of indi-

viduality, the performances occurring within the framework of ‘blue harmony’ are not that easy to transcribe, describe or copy” (Weisethaunet 2001: 107, 114). I would ask if “the framework of blue harmony” is not a contradiction in terms.

6 Kristeva 1984: 47.

7 As Holiday explains in her autobiography *Lady Sings the Blues*, she wrote the song while remembering an argument over money with her mother (who “wouldn’t give [her] a cent”) during which Holiday burst out “God bless the child that’s got his own” (Holiday 206: 85).

8 Verse one of “God Bless the Child”: “Them that’s got shall have / Them that’s not shall lose / So the Bible said and it still is news / Mama may have, Papa may have / But God bless the child that’s got his own / That’s got his own.”

9 “In [Alice Walker’s] definition, prejudicial or preferential treatment of same-race people based solely on their color” (Walker 1984: 290).

10 Abreaction is “an emotional discharge whereby the subject liberates himself from the affect attached to the memory of a traumatic event in such a way that this affect is not able to become (or to remain) pathogenic. Abreaction may [...] come about fairly shortly after the event [...]. Alternatively, it may be secondary, precipitated by a cathartic psychotherapy which enables the patient to recall the traumatic event, to put it into words and so deliver himself from the weight of affect which has been the cause of his pathological condition. As early as 1895, in fact, Freud noted that ‘language serves as a substitute for action; by its help, an affect can be ‘abreacted’ almost as effectively’” (Laplanche / Pontalis 2018: 1).

11 In “Shamans of Song: Music and the Politics of Culture in Alice Walker’s Early Fiction,” Saadi A. Simawe confirms: “Plato’s distrust of music and poetry and his ultimate abolishment of them from his ideal republic stems from his fear that music and lyric poetry, that is, songs, nourish emotions and passions and eventually make men effeminate [...]. To a large extent, the traditional rivalry between religion and music over the human soul has been a central issue in any discussion of the moral impact of music on humans, which accounts for the fact that most of the subversive thinkers usually embrace without fear all ambiguities in music [...]. In his *Confessions*, [Saint] Augustine poignantly reveals his inner struggle between his susceptibility to music and fear of sin. Confessing that ‘the pleasures of the ear had a more tenacious hold on me, and had subjugated me,’ Augustine is as keenly aware

as Plato that moral dangers are inherent in the very nature of music” (Simawe 2000: 78–80, 90, 101–102, 233, 242).

12 Barthes original text: “In a lover’s discourse, the initial scene during which I was ravished is merely reconstituted [...] I reconstruct a traumatic image which I experience in the present but which I conjugate (which I speak) in the past” (Barthes 2002: 193).

13 This scale of blue is a strange reminiscence of—and remedy to?—the “shades of white” (“ivory, oyster, alabaster, paper white, snow, cream, ecru, Champagne, ghost, bone,” 33) in which Bride has clad and denatured herself since her joining the cosmetics company.

14 Dewey 1980: 237.

15 “It may involve a glide, either upward or downward [...]. This may be a microtonal, almost imperceptible affair, or it may be a slur between notes a semitone apart, so that there is actually not one blue note but two. A blue note may even be marked by a microtonal shake of a kind common in Oriental music” (Van Der Merwe 1992: 118–119).

16 Blue notes are not only a matter of microtones. They also “involve an idea of ‘personifying’ each and every note [...] with a bend or a vibrato [...] in such a way that the skilled listener only needs to hear one single note in order to recognize and feel the presence of the sound of a B.B. King as being distinct from Albert King, Albert Collins, Buddy Guy, or players like Peter Green, Eric Clapton or Jimi Hendrix” (Weisethaunet 201: 101).

17 « Les artistes japonais [...] sont infatigables pour peindre la mer et son atmosphère, pour capter son “bleuté” ; ils parviennent à saisir les infinies possibilités d’un seul moment dans la nature, comme si les nuances de couleurs, la gamme exposée, décomposaient les notes d’un accord ».



## English

“Full fathom five thy father lies, / Of his bones are coral made, / Those are pearls that were his eyes, / Nothing of him that doth fade, / But doth suffer a sea-change, / Into something rich and strange” (*The Tempest*, 1.2). In Shakespeare’s *The Tempest*, Ariel’s song conjures up a corpse transformed by the sea “into something rich and strange.” Likewise, in Toni Morrison’s ultimate novel *God Help the Child*, set in present-day California, Booker’s wave-like, italicized poetry “dissolves” the trauma of slavery “in a seaworld,” turning it into something bluesy: “You accepted like a beast of burden the whip of a stranger’s curse [...] along with the scar it leaves [...] a slim line drawn on a shore and quickly dissolved in a seaworld any moment when an equally mindless wave fondles it like the accidental touch of a finger on a clarinet stop” (Morrison 2015: 149-150).

Like her aptly named Booker character (an avid reader, trumpetist, and experimental writer named after a former slave become advisor to several US presidents), Morrison not only wrote to recall the tragic times of the Afro-American community, but also to reclaim—after its appropriation by the mainstream—the music originally created by her people to transfigure the trauma. As Morrison confided in an interview, “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” (Bigsby 1992: 29). Morrison’s writing more than “replicates” the original musical “balm”: it uses the latter’s music and orality to dissolve the written word of the novel—an artform, consensus has it, of white European origin—, dismembering, remembering, decomposing and recomposing the black and white aesthetics, alchemizing them into “something else.” Morrison’s ultimate novel is her finest achievement in this regard, colouring the world as it does in a “rich and strange,” iridescent kind of blue which I propose to term “bluetopia” (my variation on the word “utopia,” from the Greek “no-place”). I would define “bluetopia” as an intersemiotic, unfathomable interval where the two aesthetics become alchemized as a result of their interplay. This paper is an approach in three movements of this bluetopia.

The first movement will be devoted to the 21<sup>st</sup> century slave song flowing from *God Help the Child*, where black and white voices relay each other delivering first-person solos, in a collective effort to break their chains—somehow like a colour-blind and mixed blend of the Freudian talking cure, Aristotelian catharsis, and jazz jam sessions. The second movement will lend an attentive ear to the novel’s Orphic blues: like Orpheus’ severed head carried away by the river to an alien shore, Morrison’s dismembered characters keep singing to be re-membered and transfigured by waves of blue. The last movement will aim at detecting the “blue notes,” or “blue harmony” (as musicology qualifies them) incorporated by Morrison between her lines—a genuine feat as such notes are almost impossible to reproduce on a musical staff, let alone in a novel.

## Français

À cinq brasses sous les eaux ton père est gisant, / Ses os sont changés en corail / Ses yeux sont devenus deux perles ; / Rien de lui ne s’est flétri. / Mais tout a subi dans la mer un changement / En quelque chose de riche et de rare. (*La Tempête*, Acte I scène 2). Dans *La Tempête* de Shakespeare, la chanson d’Ariel évoque un corps transformé par la mer « en quelque chose de riche et de rare ». De même dans *Délivrances*, ultime roman de Toni Morrison, dont l’action se déroule de nos jours en Californie, la poésie de Booker dissout et transforme le trauma de l’esclavage dans ses vagues à la fois teintées de blues et inspirées du monde aquatique.

Tout comme Booker, passionné de lecture, de musique, et poète expérimental, Morrison écrivait non seulement pour évoquer le passé tragique de la communauté afro-américaine, mais aussi pour rendre ses notes de noblesse à une musique passée dans le mainstream : celle que ses ancêtres avaient créée pour sublimer l’horreur de l’esclavage. Comme le confiait Morrison dans un entretien, « il fut un temps où cette musique était vitale pour le peuple noir. Mais maintenant que tout le monde se l’est appropriée, nous avons besoin d’inventer autre chose qui nous appartienne. La forme romanesque peut nous y aider, et c’est pourquoi j’écris, afin de retrouver ce baume salvateur qu’était la musique de mes ancêtres. » L’écriture de Morrison ne se contente pas de « retrouver ce baume » : elle en extrait l’oralité et la musique pour y dissoudre la lettre du roman, forme artistique dont l’origine blanche européenne fait consensus, fusionnant les esthétiques noire et blanche afin de les recomposer en « quelque chose de riche et de rare ». Le plus bel exemple de cette alchimie nous est sans doute offert dans *Délivrances*, où le monde se teinte d’un blues aux mille et une nuances, est recomposé par l’artiste en utopie bleutée : un monde intersémiotique presque inatteignable, niché dans l’intervalle insondable où jouent et s’entremêlent les deux esthétiques. La présente étude propose une approche en trois mouvements de cette utopie bleutée.

Le premier mouvement sera consacré au chant d’esclaves qui s’élève du roman, où se relayent à la première personne solistes noirs et blancs en un effort collectif pour briser leurs fers ; dans cet ensemble transculturel, la cure par la parole freudienne le dispute à la catharsis aristotélicienne et à l’improvisation des jazz sessions. Dans le deuxième mouvement, on prêtera une oreille attentive au blues orphique qui se dégage du texte : telle la tête coupée du musicien emportée par la rivière vers un rivage étranger, les personnages meurtris de Toni Morrison (re)trouvent leurs voix pour se réinventer. Dans le dernier mouvement de cette étude, on tâchera de détecter ce que l’écrivaine glisse entre ses lignes : des « notes bleues » — comme le diraient les musicologues — véritable gageure tant il est difficile, voire impossible, de les transcrire sur une portée musicale, d’autant plus dans un roman.

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**Mots-clés**

Blues, jazz, catharsis, synesthésie, alchimie, notes bleues, Orient, silence

**Keywords**

Blues, jazz, catharsis, synaesthesia, alchemy, blue notes, Orient, silence

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