

Toni Morrison

Writing the Moral Imagination

Valerie Smith

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Valerie Smith
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INTRODUCTION

Toni Morrison ranks among the most highly-regarded and widely-read fiction writers and cultural critics in the history of American literature. Novelist, editor, playwright, essayist, librettist, and children's book author, she has won innumerable prizes and awards and enjoys extraordinarily high regard both in the United States and internationally.¹ Her work has been translated into many languages, including German, Spanish, French, Italian, Norwegian, Finnish, Japanese, and Chinese and is the subject of courses taught and books and articles written by scholars all over the world. It speaks to academic and mass audiences alike; scholars have interpreted her work from myriad perspectives, including various approaches within cultural studies, African Americanist, psychoanalytic, neo-Marxist, linguistic, and feminist methodologies, while four of her novels were Oprah's Book Club selections. She invites frequent comparison with the best-known writers of the global canon: Virginia Woolf, William Faulkner, Zora Neale Hurston, James Joyce, Thomas Hardy, Gabriel Garcia Marquez, Wole Soyinka, Chinua Achebe, and others. Because of her broad appeal, throughout her career, readers and critics alike have sought to praise Morrison by calling her work "universal."

The adjective "universal" has typically been applied to work in any medium that speaks to readers, viewers, or audience members

whatever their race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, age, or socio-economic status. Art described as “universal” is contrasted implicitly or explicitly with work that is labeled “provincial,” that is, more explicitly grounded in the culture, lore, or vernacular of an identifiable group. But for all its “universality,” Morrison’s writing is famously steeped in the nuances of African American language, music, everyday life, and cultural history.² Even more precisely, most of her novels are concerned with the impact of racial patriarchy upon the lives of black women during specific periods in American history, such as the Colonial period, or the eras of slavery, Reconstruction, Jim Crow, and Civil Rights.

It should not surprise us that Morrison considers the appellation “universal” to be a dubious distinction. In a 1981 interview with Thomas LeClair she remarks:

It is that business of being universal, a word hopelessly stripped of meaning for me. Faulkner wrote what I suppose could be called regional literature and had it published all over the world. It is good – and universal – because it is specifically about a particular world. If I tried to write a universal novel, it would be water.³

Here Morrison famously challenges the notion that universal art is unmarred by markers of cultural specificity. Instead, she argues that only by being specific can a work truly be universal. Rather than aspiring to a culturally de-racinated discourse, then, in her fiction she seeks ways of writing about race without reproducing the tropes of racism, or as she puts it in a 1997 essay entitled “Home”: “How to be both free and situated; how to convert a racist house into a race-specific yet nonracist home.”⁴

As Dwight McBride, Cheryl A. Wall, and others have argued, one way to understand Morrison’s career is to consider the interconnections among her roles as writer of fiction and nonfiction, editor, and teacher.⁵ On numerous occasions she has herself eschewed the distinction between scholarship or criticism and the creative arts, as for example, she writes in a 2005 essay:

It is shortsighted to relegate the practice of creative arts in the academy to the status of servant to its scholarship, to leave the practice of creative arts along the edge of the humanities as though it were an afterthought,

an aspirin to ease serious pain, or a Punch-and-Judy show offering comic relief in the midst of tragedy.⁶

Her adroit use of language notwithstanding, at their core, all of her novels provide astute analyses of cultural and historical processes. Likewise, their critical insightfulness notwithstanding, Morrison's essays and articles make powerful use of narrative and imagery. One never forgets that she is a novelist writing analytic prose or a social and cultural critic writing fiction.

She has been a teacher, editor, critic, and fiction writer, and throughout her career, she has worked in two or more of these areas simultaneously. She taught at a number of colleges and universities while writing fiction, and she published five novels during the period when she both worked as senior editor at Random House and taught. As she continues to produce one path-breaking novel after another, she has also written influential speeches, critical and political essays and articles, libretti, a book of literary criticism, several children's books, and edited two interdisciplinary cultural studies volumes. Moreover, the project of her work outside the realm of fiction writing is tied inextricably to the aims of her fiction itself. To understand the extent of her contributions and achievements, then, it behooves us to consider the nature of those connections.

Throughout her critical writing, Morrison asserts that the role of the reader must be active, not passive; indeed, she suggests that the reader must be actively engaged with the author in a dynamic process out of which textual meaning derives. In "The Dancing Mind," her 1996 acceptance speech delivered on the occasion of receiving the Distinguished Contribution to American Literature Award from the National Book Award Foundation, she writes:

Underneath the cut of bright and dazzling cloth, pulsing beneath the jewelry, the life of the book world is quite serious. Its real life is about creating and producing and distributing knowledge; about making it possible for the entitled as well as the dispossessed to experience one's own mind dancing with another's; about making sure that the environment in which this work is done is welcoming, supportive.⁷

In part, this view of the relationship between reader and writer reflects the influence of other forms of cultural production and

performance, such as dance, oratory, and jazz, upon her work. As she observes in an essay entitled “Rootedness: The Ancestor as Foundation”(1984), in her writing she seeks to inspire her reader to respond to a written text as she or he would to a worship service or a musical performance:

[Literature] should try deliberately to make you stand up and make you feel something profoundly in the same way that a Black preacher requires his congregation to speak, to join him in the sermon . . . that is being delivered. In the same way that a musician’s music is enhanced when there is a response from the audience. Now in a book, which closes, after all – it’s of some importance to me to try to make that connection – to try to make that happen also. And, having at my disposal only the letters of the alphabet and some punctuation, I have to provide the places and spaces so that the reader can participate. Because it is the affective and participatory relationship between the artist or the speaker and the audience that is of primary importance, as it is in these other art forms I have described.⁸

This quality of engagement is also important to her work because it is a means through which she dismantles the hierarchies that undergird systemic forms of oppression. For Morrison, language and discursive strategies are not ancillary to systems of domination. Rather, they are central means by which racism, sexism, classism, and other ideologies of oppression are maintained, reproduced, and transmitted. As a writer, she may not be inclined or equipped to intervene in the policy arena to bring about social change, but she seeks to use her artistic talents to illuminate and transform the ways in which discursive practices enshrine structures of inequality: “eliminating the potency of racist constructs in language is the work I can do.”⁹ For this reason, Morrison does not spoon-feed meaning to her readers. For her fiction to serve the function she intends, the reader must be willing to re-read, to work. Hence her novels refuse to tell us overtly what they mean:

[Her novels other than *Sula*] refuse the ‘presentation’: refuse the seductive safe harbor; the line of demarcation between the sacred and the obscene, public and private, them and us. Refuse, in effect, to cater to the diminished expectations of the reader, or his or her alarm heightened by the emotional luggage one carries into the black-topic text.¹⁰

Elsewhere she has written: “I want my fiction to urge the reader into active participation in the non-narrative, nonliterary experience of the text, which makes it difficult for the reader to confine himself to a cool and distant acceptance of data. . . . I want to subvert [the reader’s] traditional comfort so that he may experience an unorthodox one: that of being in the company of his own solitary imagination.”¹¹

The opening of *Beloved*, for example, unsettles the reader epistemologically in order to invoke the slaves’ experience of dislocation. Similarly, the reader of *A Mercy* is likely to be confused by references and allusions to events that have yet to unfold; our disorientation enacts the confusion of the novel’s seventeenth-century characters making their way within a world that will become the United States of America.

Moreover, in her fiction and criticism alike, she considers the strategies by which racial ideologies are constructed, maintained, and circulated. One of her most famous essays, “Unspeakable Things Unspoken: The Afro-American Presence in American Literature” (1989), provides the framework of her influential book-length study, *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* (1992). Here she explores the significance of the silence surrounding the topic of race in the construction of American literary history. For her, many critics’ refusal to acknowledge the role of race in the making of the US literary canon exemplifies the unspeakability of race in American culture. To her mind, custodians of the canon retreat into specious arguments about quality and the irrelevance of ideology when defending the critical status quo against charges of racial bias. Moreover, Morrison is skeptical about arguments based on the notion of critical quality, given that aesthetic judgments are inevitably subjective, often self-justifying, and contested.

In this essay she also reflects upon some of the ways in which scholars of African American literature have responded to attempts to delegitimize black literary production. While some critics deny the very existence of African American art, African Americanists have rediscovered texts that have long been ignored, underread, or misinterpreted; have sought to make places for African American writing within the canon; and have developed innovative strategies of interpreting these works. Other critics dismiss African American art as inferior – “imitative, excessive, sensational, mimetic . . . and unintellectual, though very often ‘moving,’ ‘passionate,’ ‘naturalistic,’ ‘realistic,’ or sociologically

‘revealing.’”¹² Those critics, Morrison notes, often lack the acumen, inclination, or commitment to understand the complexity of African American literature. In response to such judgments, African Americanists have mobilized and interpreted recent theories and methodologies (such as deconstruction, psychoanalysis, feminism, and performance theory, to name a few) in relation to African American texts in order to intervene in current critical discourses and debates. Morrison also sharply criticizes those who seek to ennoble African American art by assessing it in relation to the ostensibly universal criteria of Western art. She remarks that such comparisons fail to do justice both to the inherent qualities of the texts and to the myriad traditions of which they are a part.

She describes three strategies critics might utilize in order to undermine such efforts to marginalize African American art and literature. To counteract such assaults on forms of black cultural production, she first proposes that critics develop a theory of literature that responds to the tradition’s vernacular qualities: “one that is based on its culture, its history, and the artistic strategies the works employ to negotiate the world it inhabits” (p. 11). Second, she suggests that the canon of classic, nineteenth-century literature be reexamined to illuminate how the African American cultural presence is expressed even in its ostensible absence from white-authored, ostensibly race-neutral texts. Third, she recommends that contemporary literary texts, whether written by white authors or authors of color, be studied for evidence of this presence.

“Unspeakable Things” centers on the second and third strategies; here, Morrison seems intrigued with the rich possibilities contained in the idea of absence:

We can agree, I think, that invisible things are not necessarily “not-there;” that a void may be empty, but it is not a vacuum. In addition, certain absences are so stressed, so ornate, so planned, they call attention to themselves; arrest us with intentionality and purpose, like neighborhoods that are defined by the population held away from them. (p. 11)

Her incisive reading of Herman Melville’s *Moby-Dick* as a critique of the power of whiteness exemplifies the second strategy she outlines and indicates the subtext of race that critics of that classic text long ignored. She demonstrates the third strategy by analyzing the opening sentence

of each of her novels to suggest ways in which African American culture becomes legible in black texts. Morrison's readings of her own prose display the acuity of her critical sensibility and her use of language to reveal the subtleties of African American cultural life.

Her book-length critical study, *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* (1993), is now widely understood to be an extraordinarily influential contribution to discussions of race and US literature. It expands upon the enterprise of "Unspeakable Things" and explores the impact of constructions of race upon a range of key texts in the American literary tradition. As part of the complex project of this work, Morrison establishes the discourses of race within which texts by Willa Cather, Melville, Edgar Allan Poe, Ernest Hemingway, and others participate. By making explicit the assumptions about race inscribed within the texts upon which she focuses, Morrison reveals the centrality of ideas of whiteness and blackness to the idea of America. As she writes:

It has occurred to me that the very manner by which American literature distinguishes itself as a coherent entity exists because of this unsettled and unsettling population [Africans and African Americans]. Just as the formation of the nation necessitated coded language and purposeful restriction to deal with the racial disingenuousness and moral frailty at its heart, so too did the literature, whose founding characteristics extend into the twentieth century, reproduce the necessity for codes and restriction. Through significant and underscored omissions, startling contradictions, heavily nuanced conflicts, through the way writers peopled their work with the signs and bodies of this presence – one can see that a real or fabricated Africanist presence was crucial to their sense of Americanness.¹³

In the introductions to her two edited collections, Morrison draws analogies between constructions of race in literature and in real life to explore how strategies of racialization functioned within the discourse surrounding two high-profile cultural events from the 1990s. In "Introduction: Friday on the Potomac," which begins *Race-ing Justice, En-gendering Power: Essays on Anita Hill, Clarence Thomas, and the Construction of Social Reality* (1992), Morrison refers to Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* to demonstrate that because of the proliferation of racist and sexist stereotypes, both then-Supreme Court nominee Clarence Thomas and Anita Hill (his former attorney-adviser and

special assistant who accused him of sexual harassment) were rendered at once overly familiar and incomprehensible during Thomas's Senate confirmation hearings.¹⁴ Reading the figure of Thomas and the discourse surrounding the hearings in light of Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*, she explores some of the historically-grounded patterns of domination, acquiescence, and resistance that are reenacted in contemporary cultural and political debates. As Sami Ludwig has noted, in her introduction, "Morrison takes the binary out of the realm of mere language structure and contextualizes it in a historical realm of human interaction."¹⁵

Likewise, in "The Official Story: Dead Man Golfing," the introduction to *Birth of a Nation'hood: Gaze, Script, and Spectacle in the O. J. Simpson Case* (1997), Morrison reads Herman Melville's "Benito Cereno" in relation to Simpson's 1994 criminal trial for the murder of his ex-wife Nicole Brown Simpson and her friend Ronald Goldman. In her analysis, she explores ways in which raced and gendered national narratives produce an official story that eclipses actual events.

* * *

Toni Morrison was born Chloe Ardelia Wofford on February 18, 1931, in Lorain, Ohio, a multiracial steel town. Her parents and other members of her extended family bequeathed to her both a legacy of resistance to oppression and exploitation and an appreciation of African American folklore and cultural practices. Both sets of grandparents migrated from the South to Ohio in hopes of leaving virulent forms of racism behind and finding greater opportunities for themselves and their children; her maternal grandparents came from Alabama, and her father's family came from Georgia.

The music, folklore, ghost stories, dreams, signs, and visitations that are so vividly evoked in her fiction pervaded Morrison's early life and inspired her to capture the qualities of African American cultural expression in her prose. Indeed, Morrison and her critics alike have described the influence of orality, call and response, jazz and dance in her narratives. Yet the presence of myth, enchantment, and folk practices in her work never offers an escape from the sociopolitical conditions that have shaped the lives of African Americans. Cultural dislocation, migration, and urbanization provide the inescapable

contexts within which her explorations of the African American past occur.

Literature also played an important role in her childhood and youth. The only child in her first-grade class who was able to read when she entered school, Morrison read widely across a variety of literary traditions as an adolescent and considered the classic Russian novelists, Flaubert, and Jane Austen among her favorites. She was not exposed to the work of previous generations of black women writers until she was an adult. Her delayed introduction to the work of earlier black women writers does not, to her mind, mean that she writes outside that tradition. Rather, the thematic and aesthetic connections between her work and theirs confirm her sense that African American women writers conceive of character and circumstance in specific ways that reflect the historical interconnections between and among constructions of race, gender, sexuality, class, and region. As she remarks in a conversation with the novelist Gloria Naylor:

[People] who are trying to show certain kinds of connections between myself and Zora Neale Hurston are always dismayed and disappointed in me because I hadn't read Zora Neale Hurston except for one little story before I began to write. . . . The fact that I never read her and still there may be whatever they're finding, similarities and dissimilarities, whatever such critics do, makes the cheese more binding, not less, because it means that the world as perceived by black women at certain times does exist.¹⁶

Morrison has observed that although the books she read in her youth “were not written for a little black girl in Lorain, Ohio . . . they spoke to [her] out of their own specificity.” Her early reading inspired her later “to capture that same specificity about the nature and feeling of the culture [she] grew up in.”¹⁷

After graduating with honors from Lorain High School, she enrolled at Howard University, where she majored in English and minored in classics and from which she graduated in 1953. She describes the Howard years with some measure of ambivalence. She was disappointed with some features of life at the university, which, she has said, “was about getting married, buying clothes and going to parties. It was also about being cool, loving Sarah Vaughan (who only moved her hand a little when she sang) and MJQ [the Modern Jazz Quartet].”¹⁸

But she was inspired by her participation in the Howard University Players, a student-faculty repertory troupe that took plays on tour throughout the South during the summers. As Susan L. Blake suggests, these trips enhanced the stories of injustice Morrison's grandparents had told her about their early lives in Alabama.¹⁹

After Howard, she received an MA from Cornell University in 1955, where she wrote a thesis on the theme of suicide in the works of William Faulkner and Virginia Woolf. She then taught at Texas Southern University in Houston from 1955 to 1957 and for 5 years at Howard, where her courses included the freshman humanities survey that focused on "masterpieces of Western literature from Greek and Roman mythology to the King James Bible to twentieth-century novels."²⁰ Her students at Howard included one of the future leading figures in African American literary and cultural studies, Houston A. Baker, Jr.; future autobiographer Claude Brown; and the future leader of the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee, Stokely Carmichael. While at Howard she married Harold Morrison, a Jamaican architect, in 1958 (they divorced in 1964) and had two sons, Harold Ford and Slade Kevin. During this period she also joined a writers' group, for which she wrote a young story about a young black girl who wanted blue eyes. That story would become the basis of her first novel.

When her marriage ended, Morrison returned to Lorain with her two young sons for an eighteen-month period. Subsequently, she began to work in publishing, first as an editor at L. W. Singer, the textbook subsidiary of Random House in Syracuse, New York, and then as senior editor at the headquarters of Random House in Manhattan. While living in Syracuse, she worked on the manuscript of her first novel at night after her children were asleep. In her conversation with Gloria Naylor, she suggests that work on the novel became a way for her to write herself back into existence:

I had written this little story earlier just for some friends, so I took it out and I began to work it up. And all of those people were me. I was Pecola, Claudia. . . . I was everybody. And as I began to do it, I began to pick up scraps of things I had seen or felt, or didn't see or didn't feel, but imagined. And speculated about and wondered about. And I fell in love with myself.²¹

She sent part of a draft to an editor who liked it enough to suggest that she finish it. Holt, Rinehart, and Winston published *The Bluest Eye* in 1970.

Although Morrison was not familiar with much writing by other African American writers when she began her first novel, she has had a profound impact upon the careers of a range of black authors. As senior editor at Random House, she edited influential texts in African American cultural and intellectual history, including *Angela Davis: An Autobiography*, Davis's *Women, Race, and Class*, Ivan Van Sertima's *They Came Before Columbus*, and Muhammad Ali's *The Greatest, My Own Story*. Moreover, she brought a number of black writers to that publisher's list, including Toni Cade Bambara, Wesley Brown, Lucille Clifton, Henry Dumas, Leon Forrest, June Jordan, Gayl Jones, John McCluskey, and Quincy Troupe.²²

As Cheryl Wall argues, one can trace deep connections between Morrison's editorial work and her fiction in several ways. Generally speaking, she and the authors she published sought to preserve the lives, voices and wisdom that have been left out of mainstream histories. Moreover, *The Black Book* (1974) the legendary compendium of ephemera, photographs, songs, photographs, and dream interpretations that she edited, documents the creativity and resilience, suffering and pain of both famous and unknown African Americans during and after slavery. That book contains the article about Margaret Garner's murder of her daughter that inspired *Beloved*.

To date, Morrison's publications include ten novels, six books for children, one short story, one book of literary criticism, one edited and one co-edited volume of cultural criticism, and scores of critical essays, reviews, and articles. In her essays and interviews, she often compares the craft of writing to dance, music, and painting.²³ Her fiction reflects the influence of other art forms, such as jazz, dance, photography, and the visual arts, and she frequently collaborates with other artists. She has written a play, *Dreaming Emmett*, which premiered at the Marketplace Theater in Albany, New York in 1986, song cycles with composers, and the libretto for the opera "Margaret Garner" with music by Richard Danielpour. After premieres in Detroit, Cincinnati, and Philadelphia, "Margaret Garner" was staged in Charlotte, North Carolina, in 2006 and opened at New York City Opera in September 2007.²⁴

In fall 2006, the Musée du Louvre in Paris invited her to participate in its “Grand Invité” program, under the auspices of which she curated a month-long series of events on the theme of “The Foreigner’s Home.” Using Théodore Géricault’s painting “The Raft of the Medusa” (1819) as a point of departure, Morrison organized a multidisciplinary program “focused on the pain – and rewards – of displacement, immigration and exile.” She participated in readings, lectures and panels, and invited artists and curators from around the world to explore this theme. Highlights included a panel discussion on the subject of displacement and language featuring Morrison, Edwidge Danticat (a US writer born in Haiti), Michael Ondaatje (a Sri Lanka-born writer educated in the United Kingdom and living in Canada), and Boubacar Boris Diop (a Senegalese novelist who writes in French and Wolof); an exhibit that paired drawings by Géricault, Charles Le Brun, Georges Seurat, and Edgar Degas with films and videos that focused on the body; and an installation entitled “Foreign Bodies” inspired by Francis Bacon’s last, unfinished portrait. In this last piece, the American choreographer William Forsythe and the German sculptor and video artist Peter Welz produced a dance in which Forsythe, with graphite attached to his hands and feet, performed on a large sheet of white paper: “thus a dance inspired by a drawing became itself a drawing.”²⁵

Throughout her career Morrison has taught at a number of colleges and universities, including Yale, Bard, the State University of New York at Purchase, and the State University of New York at Albany. From 1988 until her retirement in 2006, she held the Robert F. Goheen Professorship of the Humanities at Princeton University. While at Princeton she taught a range of courses on African American literature and creative writing. As Wall notes, in one course she “tried out the ideas of the Africanist presence in American literature that became the core of her influential volume, *Playing in the Dark*.”²⁶ Out of her interest in the fruits of cross-disciplinary artistic conversation, Morrison also pioneered the Princeton Atelier Project, a program that brings guest artists to campus for intensive, collaborative residencies to work with each other, students, and faculty. Atelier artists have included choreographer Jacques d’Amboise, vocal group Anonymous 4, percussionist Evelyn Glennie, cellist Yo-Yo Ma, novelists A. S. Byatt and Gabriel Garcia Marquez, composer Richard Danielpour, filmmaker Louis Massiah, visual artist Irina Nakhova, singer/songwriter Bernice Johnson Reagan, and theater director Peter Sellars.

In her magisterial Nobel Lecture in Literature, delivered in 1993, Morrison brilliantly interweaves narrative and interpretation to offer a meditation on the power of language and the role of the artist. She opens with the story of an elderly, blind, wise woman and the young people who visit her, seeming to make a mockery of her reputation as a clairvoyant. Knowing that she is unable to see, they ask her if the bird they are carrying is alive or dead. After a long pause, the woman replies: “I don’t know whether the bird you are holding is dead or alive, but what I do know is that it is in your hands. It is in your hands.”²⁷ In Morrison’s reading, the bird is language and the woman is “a practiced writer” (p. 12). The woman’s response to their question “shifts attention away from assertions of power to the instrument through which that power is exercised” (p. 12). She asserts that the future of language, and by extension of humanity, is in their hands.

Morrison uses this story to reflect upon the distinction between language that is dead and language that lives, suggesting that the role of the artist is to keep the word alive in the face of myriad forces – the state, the academy, science, the media – that at their worst are invested in its demise. A dead language is not one that is no longer spoken or used:

Unreceptive to interrogation, it cannot form or tolerate new ideas, shape other thoughts, tell another story, fill baffling silences. . . . Oppressive language does more than represent violence; it is violence; does more than represent the limits of knowledge; it limits knowledge. (p. 14)

In contrast, language that is alive has the power to represent the richness, the mystery, the contradictions, and the uncertainties of individual and communal lives as they are lived:

The vitality of language lies in its ability to limn the actual, imagined and possible lives of its speakers, readers, writers. Although its poise is sometimes in displacing experience it is not a substitute for it. It arcs toward the place where meaning may lie. . . . Word-work is sublime . . . because it is generative; it makes meaning that secures our difference, our human difference – the way in which we are like no other life. (p. 20)

The story does not end here, however, for Morrison offers an alternate reading of the encounter between the young people and the

elderly woman, this time from the point of view of the young people. What if, she asks, there is no bird; if their visit is not meant to mock but rather to solicit wisdom from her? What are the implications of her choosing the self-protectiveness of her cryptic response over the open-ended possibilities of narrative? The young people need the knowledge gleaned from her experience if they are to carry her legacy into the future. In the end, the woman and the youths reach a moment of mutual understanding, born from the questions the young people ask and the lives from the past they imagine. In the closing words of the speech, the woman says:

Finally . . . I trust you now. I trust you with the bird that is not in your hands because you have truly caught it. Look. How lovely it is, this thing we have done – together. (p. 30)

This story resonates with the aesthetic values to which Morrison repeatedly returns. It recalls the transactional relationship between artist and reader, for the meaning of the story lies in neither reading alone but in the interaction between the two perspectives on the encounter. It recalls her assertion that an absence is not a void but a type of presence. And it expresses her confidence in the wisdom that emerges from paradox rather than the reliance upon false certainties.

Morrison's insistence throughout her career that our common humanity can be found in the specificity of our individual and cultural differences seems strikingly prescient from the vantage point of the second decade of the twenty-first century. After the election of Barack Obama as President of the United States, pundits and many average Americans alike have been quick to declare that the United States has entered the era of post-racialism.²⁸ Not only is it naïve to assume that the election of an African American president would mean the end of racism when so many markers of racial inequality still exist,²⁹ but the urge to cloak oneself (or the nation) in the mantle of "post-race" also betrays an eagerness, if not a desperation, to run from the history and the current state of racial formations in the nation. Those who cling to the notion of "post-race" fail to distinguish between racism on the one hand and, on the other hand, discursive practices that acknowledge, analyze, and resist the mechanisms through which processes of racialization are enacted. Moreover, they fail to acknowledge that the

history and experience of race and racialization processes can yield more than racist language or a discourse of blame and victimization; they imply that there is something inherently shameful in the very language of racial specificity itself. Throughout her writing, whether in fiction or nonfiction, Morrison shows us that however violent, exploitative, and dehumanizing, the history and experience of racial formations have led to complex and rich emotional, cultural, and artistic responses, responses which artists are uniquely positioned to explore, illuminate, preserve, and represent. As she writes in her essay called “Home:”

As an already- and always-raced writer, I knew from the very beginning that I could not, would not, reproduce the master’s voice and its assumptions of the all-knowing law of the white father. . . . If I had to live in a racial house, it was important, at the least, to rebuild it so that it was not a windowless prison into which I was forced, a thick-walled, impenetrable container from which no cry could be heard, but rather an open house, grounded, yet generous in its supply of windows and doors. Or, at the most, it became imperative for me to transform this house completely. (p. 4)

Notes

- 1 A partial list of her many prizes and awards includes the National Book Critics Circle Award, the American Academy and Institute for Arts and Letters Award, the Robert F. Kennedy Book Award, the American Book Award, the Anisfield-Wolf Book Award in Race Relations, the Pulitzer Prize, the MLA Commonwealth Award in Literature, the Nobel Prize for Literature, the Condorcet Medal (Paris), the Pearl Buck Award, the Rhegium Julii Prize for Literature, the National Book Foundation’s Medal of Distinguished Contribution to American Letters, the National Humanities Medal, the Pell Award for Lifetime Achievement in the Arts, the Cavore Prize (Turin, Italy), the United Nations Secretary General Lecturer, and the Amnesty International Lecturer. In 2012, Morrison received the Presidential Medal of Freedom.
- 2 As she observes, “If my work is faithfully to reflect the aesthetic tradition of Afro-American culture, it must make conscious use of the

- characteristics of its art forms and translate them into print: antiphony, the group nature of art, its functionality, its improvisational nature, its relationship to audience performance, the critical voice which upholds tradition and communal values and which also provides occasion for an individual to transcend and/or defy group restrictions.” See “Memory, Creation, and Writing,” *Thought: A Review of Culture and Ideas* 59 (December 1984): 388–389.
- 3 Thomas Le Clair, “The Language Must Not Sweat: A Conversation with Toni Morrison,” in *Conversations with Toni Morrison*, ed. Danille Taylor-Guthrie, (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1994), p. 124.
 - 4 Toni Morrison, “Home,” in *The House That Race Built: Black Americans, U. S. Terrain*, ed. Wahneema Lubiano (New York: Pantheon, 1997), p. 5.
 - 5 See, for example, Dwight McBride, “Toni Morrison, Intellectual,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Toni Morrison*, ed. Justine Tally (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), pp. 162–174 and Cheryl A. Wall, “Toni Morrison, Editor and Teacher,” also in *The Cambridge Companion to Toni Morrison*, pp. 139–150.
 - 6 Toni Morrison, Gayatri Spivak, and Ngahuia Te Awekotuku, “Guest Column: Roundtable on the Future of the Humanities in a Fragmented World,” *PMLA* 120 (2005): 717.
 - 7 Toni Morrison, “The Dancing Mind,” in *Toni Morrison: What Moves at the Margin: Selected Nonfiction*, ed. Carolyn C. Denard (Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 2008), p. 190.
 - 8 Toni Morrison, “Rootedness: The Ancestor as Foundation,” in *Black Women Writers (1950–1980): A Critical Evaluation*, ed. Mari Evans (New York: Doubleday, Anchor Books, 1984), p. 341.
 - 9 Morrison, “Home,” p. 4.
 - 10 Toni Morrison, “Unspeakable Things Unspoken: The Afro-American Presence in American Literature,” *Michigan Quarterly Review* 28 (1989): 24.
 - 11 Toni Morrison, “Memory, Creation, and Writing,” *Thought A Review of Culture and Ideas* 59 (December 1984): 387.
 - 12 Toni Morrison, “Unspeakable Things Unspoken,” p. 9.
 - 13 Toni Morrison, *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992), pp. 5–6.
 - 14 For an insightful analysis of the underlying ideologies of race, sex, and class that structured the discourse surrounding the Clarence Thomas Senate confirmation hearings, see Lisa B. Thompson, “Spectacle of the Respectable: Anita Hill and the Problem of Innocence,” in *Beyond the Black Lady: Sexuality and the New African American Middle Class* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2009), pp. 21–42.
 - 15 Sami Ludwig, “Toni Morrison’s Social Criticism,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Toni Morrison*, p. 127.

- 16 Gloria Naylor and Toni Morrison, "A Conversation," *Southern Review* 21 (July 1985): 589–590.
- 17 Susan L. Blake, "Toni Morrison," in *Dictionary of Literary Biography*, Vol. 33, *Afro-American Fiction Writers after 1955*, ed. Thadious M. Davis and Trudier Harris (Detroit, MI: Gale Research Co., 1984), p. 188.
- 18 Blake, p. 188.
- 19 Blake, p. 188.
- 20 Cheryl A. Wall, "Toni Morrison, Editor and Teacher," p. 146.
- 21 Naylor and Morrison, "A Conversation," p. 576.
- 22 As Cheryl Wall observes in her thoughtful study of Morrison as teacher and editor: "No other editor before Morrison or since has boasted a comparable list of African American writers. As an editor, she helped to define two decades of African American literary history." Cheryl A. Wall, "Toni Morrison, Editor and Teacher," p. 139.
- 23 See, for example, "Memory, Creation, and Writing"; "The Dancing Mind"; and "The Art of Fiction CXXXIV: Toni Morrison," interview by Elissa Schappell and Claudia Brodsky Lacour, *Paris Review*, 35 (Fall 1993): 82.
- 24 Her collaborations with composers include: "Honey and Rue," a cycle of six songs commissioned by Carnegie Hall for Kathleen Battle with music by Andre Previn; "Four Songs" with music by Andre Previn premiered by Sylvia McNair; "Sweet Talk" written for Jessye Norman with music by Richard Danielpour; "Spirits in the Well" written for Jessye Norman with music by Richard Danielpour; and "Woman.Life.Song" commissioned by Carnegie Hall for Jessye Norman with music by Judith Weir. In 2011, Morrison's collaboration with director Peter Sellars and composer Rokia Traoré entitled *The Desdemona Project* was performed in Vienna, Brussels, Paris, Berkeley, New York and Berlin; in 2012 it was performed in London. This production is a response to Shakespeare's *Othello* that focuses on the relationship between Desdemona and Barbary, her African nursemaid.
- 25 Alan Riding, "Rap and Film at the Louvre? What's Up with That?" *The New York Times*, November 21, 2006. Web May 2, 2010.
- 26 Wall, p. 146.
- 27 Toni Morrison, *The Nobel Lecture in Literature, 1993* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1993), p. 11. Subsequent references will be to this edition.
- 28 For example, after President Obama's first State of the Union address on January 27, 2010, MSNBC commentator Chris Matthews remarked: "I was trying to think about who [Obama] was tonight. It's interesting: he is post-racial, by all appearances. I forgot he was black tonight for an hour. You know, he's gone a long way to become a leader of this country, and past so much history, in just a year or two. I mean, it's something we don't even think about. I was watching, I said, wait a minute, he's an

African American guy in front of a bunch of other white people. And here he is president of the United States and we've completely forgotten that tonight – completely forgotten it. I think it was in the scope of his discussion. It was so broad-ranging, so in tune with so many problems, of aspects, and aspects of American life that you don't think in terms of the old tribalism, the old ethnicity. It was astounding in that regard. A very subtle fact. It's so hard to talk about. Maybe I shouldn't talk about it, but I am. I thought it was profound that way." "Chris Matthews: 'I Forgot Obama Was Black For An Hour,'" http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2010/01/27/chris-matthews-i-forgot-o_n_439701.html, April 26, 2010.

- 29 I have in mind such factors as persistent gaps in black and white educational achievement and wealth and racially disparate incarceration rates, to mention but a few examples.

CHAPTER 1

The Bluest Eye and Sula

The Bluest Eye

The Bluest Eye (1970), Morrison's first novel, juxtaposes two moments in twentieth-century US culture. The novel centers on a set of traumatic events in the life of Pecola Breedlove, a young African American girl, in the 1940s. Claudia MacTeer, Pecola's friend and the principal narrator, reflects upon these events both from her childhood point of view and from her adult perspective in the late 1960s. In its heightened attention to the politics of aesthetics, *The Bluest Eye* is certainly born out of the racial self-consciousness of the 1960s. But the novel also evokes the advantages and liabilities black migrants from the South encountered as they adapted to their new lives in the North (in this case, Lorain, Ohio) during the postwar era. In seeking wider opportunities for themselves and their children, they escaped the most virulent forms of racial oppression. But they risked becoming alienated from the values and practices that had sustained previous generations of African Americans.

In *The Bluest Eye*, this sense of alienation is most powerfully expressed in the form of racial self-loathing. Many of the characters have internalized the effects of the selfsame hegemonic social and political policies and practices that brutalized them; they display not only a contempt for African features and social practices associated with black culture, but also a reverence for standards of beauty associated with whiteness.

Furthermore, the roots of their self-disgust lie so deep, that they do not recognize them for what they are. Instead, they project those feelings upon the most vulnerable members of their community, in this case the young Pecola. By the end of the novel, she has been destroyed not only by her rape at the hands of her father, but by the abuse that members of her community heap upon her.

In her “Afterword,” published in 1993, Morrison describes the moment from her childhood out of which the novel grew. When an elementary school friend expressed a desire for blue eyes, the young Morrison feigned sympathy, but was actually “violently repelled” by the mere idea of the radical alteration of her friend’s appearance: “very blue eyes in a very black skin.”¹ She recalls that when she heard her friend’s wish, she realized for the first time that “Beauty was not simply something to behold; it was something one could *do*” (p. 209). Years later, she still wondered about “the gaze that had condemned” (p. 211) her friend and that her friend had subsequently internalized. *The Bluest Eye* offers a poignant and distilled exploration of the impact of dominant standards of beauty upon those who fall short of those cultural norms. By examining the pernicious effects of racial self-loathing upon the characters, the novel reveals ways in which African American communities are implicated in the valorization and circulation of these aesthetic ideals and the qualities they have come to symbolize.

The novel actually begins three times, a harbinger of the multiplicity of perspectives from which it is told. Before the narrative actually starts, the book opens with an excerpt from a Dick and Jane primer, one of a series of Basic Readers published by Scott, Foresman and Company from 1930 until the late 1960s. These primers both taught generations of children to read through the introduction and repetition of simple words, and also established as normative an idealized vision of a suburban, nuclear, middle-class white family. The second beginning, in italics, is told from the perspective of the adult Claudia. It identifies the year when the events of the novel occurred, mentions Pecola’s tragic circumstances, and introduces some of its dominant metaphors, such as seeds and earth. The third beginning, told from Claudia’s childhood perspective, actually launches the narrative.

The excerpt from the primer reads as follows:

Here is the house. It is green and white. It has a red door. It is very pretty. Here is the family. Mother, Father, Dick, and Jane live in the

green-and-white house. They are very happy. See Jane. She has a red dress. She wants to play. Who will play with Jane? See the cat. It goes meow-meow. Come and play. Come play with Jane. The kitten will not play. See Mother. Mother is very nice. Mother, will you play with Jane? Mother laughs. Laugh, Mother, laugh. See father. He is big and strong. Father, will you play with Jane? Father is smiling. Smile, Father, smile. See the dog. Bowwow goes the dog. Do you want to play with Jane? See the dog run. Run, dog, run. Look, look. Here comes a friend. The friend will play with Jane. They will play a good game. Play, Jane, play. (p. iii)

This excerpt is repeated twice; the first time with no punctuation, no capitalization except for the initial “H,” and with the lines spaced closer together. The second time, all the words are run together, and the space between lines has been decreased even further.

The transformation of the passage from a familiar text to the frenzied rush of letters serves multiple functions. First, the excerpt establishes the standard against which Morrison’s characters are measured, measure themselves, and are found lacking. Second, it prompts readers to take notice of a passage so familiar that one might overlook it. With neither punctuation, spaces between words, nor capitalization, the passage teeters on the brink of meaninglessness, and the standard of value it articulates and circulates is exposed as arbitrary. And third, the concatenation of letters in the second repetition anticipates the action of the novel, since many of the touchstones of the passage factor into Pecola’s traumatic decline: the house, the family, the cat, the dog, the friend. Read in light of her own family circumstances, as well as her encounters with Maureen Peal, Junior, Geraldine, and Soaphead Church, the repetition of the word “play” becomes more than a way of introducing a new vocabulary word. Here it imitates the relentless pressure Pecola feels from standards of value she will never attain. Indeed, the final version is emblematic of Pecola’s psychological deterioration; by the end of the novel she is shattered by her own sense of shame and by the self-loathing that others project upon her.

Although *The Bluest Eye* centers on Pecola, Morrison chose not to tell the story from her point of view because, as she writes: “the weight of the novel’s inquiry on so delicate and vulnerable a character could smash her and lead readers into the comfort of pitying her rather than into an interrogation of themselves for the smashing” (p. 211). Moreover, by expanding her focus to encompass an entire community,

Morrison ensures that her reader will understand that Pecola's story is far from idiosyncratic. Not only are there three narrators – Claudia MacTeer as both an adult and a child as well as an omniscient narrator – but the text also includes the backstory of the children and adults who have a hand in Pecola's psychological wounding and who are wounded themselves. In projecting their internalized self-loathing onto a child, they exemplify how “the demonization of an entire race could take root inside the most delicate member of society” (p. 210).

The structure of *The Bluest Eye* underscores the proliferation of stories and of narrative voices within the novel. The body of the text is divided into four chapters (each named for a different season of the year) that are, in turn, subdivided. Each chapter begins with an episode, usually involving Pecola, told from the point of view of Claudia the child but shaped by her adult reflections and rhetoric. Claudia's accounts are then followed by one or two stories told by an apparently objective, omniscient narrator. This narrator usually recalls information to which Claudia would not have had access: she tells stories from Pecola's life that involve other characters and weaves flashbacks from these other lives into Pecola's story. In addition, in each chapter, several garbled lines from the primer separate Claudia's voice from the omniscient narrator's and foreshadow the tensions contained within the story that follows.

The chapters juxtapose the 1940s, the eternal present of the primer, and the 1960s. The different narratives and moments in each chapter provide variations on a particular theme; these stories address indirectly the consequences of desiring qualities and possessions that will always be unattainable. By using this technique of repetition with a difference, Morrison reveals the interconnectedness of human lives and the inextricability of past and present. The structure of the novel suggests that readers must place Pecola's story within the context of systemic social practices and beliefs in order to comprehend it.

Claudia MacTeer is strong and self-assertive. Her household comprises a nuclear family that includes her parents, her sister Frieda, and herself, and yet it, too, departs from the hegemonic norm described in the primer: their house is old and cold, not white and green. The MacTeers share the home with roaches, mice, and briefly with a predatory boarder, not with a cat and dog. Unlike the mother in the primer, Mrs. MacTeer does not laugh much. She is a quick-tempered woman

who does not mince words when she confronts either a large or small offense. But Claudia recalls the healing presence of her family during a childhood illness: her sister sang a sentimental song to comfort her, and her mother forced her to swallow Vicks salve and massaged the ointment into her chest to help her breathe. From her adult perspective, Claudia appreciates these gestures. She looks back on her childhood and sees that while her experience may not have conformed to the Dick and Jane ideal, she was surrounded by love:

Love, thick and dark as Alaga syrup, eased up into that cracked window. I could smell it – taste it – sweet, musty, with an edge of wintergreen in its base – everywhere in that house. It stuck, along with my tongue, to the frosted windowpanes. It coated my chest, along with the salve, and when the flannel came undone in my sleep, the clear, sharp curves of air outlined its presence on my throat. And in the night, when my coughing was dry and tough, feet padded into the room, hands repinned the flannel, readjusted the quilt, and rested a moment on my forehead. So when I think of autumn, I think of somebody with hands who does not want me to die. (p. 12)

This passage exemplifies the power of memory to render space symbolic, and the power of narrative to resist hegemonic norms. Through Claudia's eyes, the love that surrounded her transformed the material deprivations of her childhood home into expressions of comfort and security. Her home may have failed to live up to the ideal presented in the primer, but it comes to life in the form of cold wind seeping through a cracked window, the smell of Vicks salve, the sensation of a hot flannel cloth on her neck and chest.

During the fall of 1940 when the novel begins, Pecola and her family are temporarily homeless because Cholly, the alcoholic father, has accidentally set their house afire. Until the family can find a new place to live, the County places Pecola with the MacTeers. Claudia is too young to worship the ideal of beauty that white dolls and little white girls embody and that so many of the black people around her adore. But she is old enough to sense the power they wield over not only Frieda and Pecola, but over the adults in her community as well. Indeed, the seeds of Claudia's power as a narrator are evident in her childhood behavior and preferences. She disdains the white dolls that adults and older girls worship and expect her to value and believes that they have usurped the adoration that rightfully belongs to her.

Instead of treasuring these symbols of white femininity, Claudia takes them apart in hopes of uncovering the mystery of their power.

The MacTeers may fail to fulfill mainstream ideals of a happy family, and they may succumb to the worship of white beauty, but they are able to create an undeniably loving home for their children. In contrast, Pecola's parents, Pauline and Cholly Breedlove, carry deep wounds from their earlier lives, and they take out their frustrations on their children and on each other. Born and raised in Alabama, Pauline found "the end of her lovely beginning" at the age of two, when she stepped on a rusty nail; the wound festered, leaving her with a damaged foot and a limp. To her mind, this deformity explains why she alone lacks a nickname (even her own children call her "Mrs. Breedlove"); why there are no stories about her to secure her place in family memories; and "why she never felt at home anywhere, or that she belonged anyplace" (p. 111). Without a place in the family's oral lore, she found comfort in quiet and solitude, and especially in organizing her own possessions and those of her employers.

She meets Cholly after her family migrates to Kentucky, and he initially fulfills her fantasies for a rich intimate and romantic life. But after they move to Ohio, their marriage deteriorates, at least in part, because of her inability to find and establish community and friendships in the north. A child of the segregated south, she is unaccustomed to living in close proximity to whites, of whom she is afraid. Moreover, other black women scorn her country ways, and Cholly comes to resent her emotional dependency and her financial demands on him. Out of frustration, he turns to drink, and their quarrels grow increasingly violent.

Eventually, Pauline can only satisfy her fantasies of romantic love by imagining herself inside the Hollywood world of make-believe order and beauty. Ironically, she confronts the hollowness of her dream and the disjuncture between her fantasies and her lived experience in a movie theater. Watching a Jean Harlow film, her hair styled like Harlow's, she bites into a piece of candy and accidentally extracts a tooth. The loss of her rotten tooth awakens her to the depths of her own despair; from that moment on, she lets everything go – her appearance as well as her housekeeping – and embraces what she believes to be her own ugliness. Finding solace only in her devotion to respectability, she dedicates herself to a church "where shouting is frowned upon (p. 126)," and to maintaining the home of the Fishers,

the prosperous white family for whom she works. With the Fishers she can throw herself into her love of order; there she finds beauty, fastidiousness, and approbation. With them, she even finds her only nickname, "Polly."

Pauline's self-contempt is powerfully in evidence during the scene in which Pecola and the MacTeer sisters stop by to see her at the Fishers'. When Pecola accidentally spills a freshly baked deep-dish berry cobbler all over the floor her mother has just cleaned, scalding her bare legs with the hot juice, Mrs. Breedlove slaps her repeatedly; her tirade makes clear that the floor and the little white Fisher girl are more important to her than her own daughter. She speaks to Pecola with words Claudia describes as "hotter and darker than the smoking berries," but as she comforts the Fisher girl, "the honey in her words complemented the sundown spilling on the lake" (p. 109).

Cholly is likewise trapped in his traumatic past; unable to make peace with his own suffering, he destroys his own life and the lives of those around him. As a child he was abandoned by his parents but raised by his loving Great Aunt Jimmy in Georgia. His downward spiral begins during his adolescence; on the day of Aunt Jimmy's funeral, grief, sex, and racial violence converge. Numbed and confused by the loss of his aunt, Cholly leaves the family gathering after the burial with some of his teenaged cousins to wander in the woods. When he is about to lose his virginity with his cousin Darlene, two white hunters discover them. Turning Cholly's and Darlene's sex play into blood sport, they hold the teenagers at gunpoint; the men leave when they realize that Cholly and Darlene are too humiliated to reach their climax.

In the days to come, Cholly finds that he cannot hate the white hunters. Instead, he directs his hatred toward Darlene, the witness to his humiliation and the person he failed to protect. He goes to Macon in search of the father who had abandoned him only to be harshly rebuffed. Only then does he realize how deeply he misses Aunt Jimmy. While she was alive, he did not know how to respond to her physicality and was often repelled by the smell and appearance of her aging body. But alone on the streets of Macon, when he remembers the very things that he had once found disgusting – her asafetida bag, gold teeth, purple head rag, crooked fingers – he is overcome with grief, for those very characteristics and possessions remind him of what he lost when she died.

Cholly's upbringing failed to prepare him for the responsibilities of family life. The sight of Pecola scratching the back of her calf with her toe reminds him of the way Pauline stood the first time he saw her. The structure of the narrative suggests that because of his past deprivations, he does not know what to make of his daughter's vulnerability. The only response available to him is sexual, and thus, in his drunken stupor, he rapes her.

As the adult Claudia explains, black people relegated to a marginal position in Jim Crow culture were hungry for home ownership and prided themselves excessively on maintaining their surroundings. Renters like the Breedloves occupied a lower position on the social hierarchy than owners. And those like Cholly, who through their personal weaknesses lose even the homes they rent, placing their families "outdoors," have positioned themselves "beyond the reaches of human consideration" (p. 18).

Indeed, the home the Breedloves rent expresses the traumatic environment within the family. They live in a building designed to be a storefront, a retail establishment that has been barely repurposed to serve as a residence. By the 1960s, their former home has become a store; before that it was a pizza parlor where young men congregated; before that the building was a Hungarian bakery; and before that a family of gypsies used it as "a base of operations" (p. 34). Before that, the Breedloves lived there. Each subsequent use of the property on the southeast corner of Broadway and Thirty-fifth Street in Lorain is steeped in local lore – the young men congregated there; the Hungarian baker was famous for his pastries; and the girls in the gypsy family, clad in their elaborate dresses, hid "the nakedness . . . in their eyes"(p. 34). In contrast to these vivid accounts preserved in the folklore of the community, the Breedloves have left a minimal impact. The "realtor's whim" in which they live lacks private spaces and contains rooms that do not serve the purpose for which they were designed. Their furniture is randomly distributed, and no one has privacy. Worse, the furniture lacks any of the positive associations that animate personal possessions in memory and the imagination. Any associations the furniture does carry are negative, reminders of shameful transactions or encounters that permeate the space.

Pecola lives in a brutal environment, but she possesses a rich inner life and astute powers of perception that have the power to buoy her spirit. For instance, she displays a glimmer of confidence and pride

when she admires the dandelions and cracks in the sidewalk she sees on her way to Yacobowski's store to buy candy. But on her way home from the store, after she has been humiliated by the contemptuous way Yacobowski treats her, she can only see in the dandelions and the crack in the sidewalk an image of the ugliness she believes others see when they look at her. It would be better if she were angry, for anger presumes "an awareness of worth" (p. 50). But instead, she feels shame, for she has internalized the contempt that others feel for her. On the verge of tears, she gets no comfort from her identification with the dandelions and the cracks – she can now only see them as others perceive them – as weeds and defects. Instead, she soothes herself with the candy she has bought – Mary Janes, a sticky sweet candy named for the little blond-haired, blue-eyed white girl whose image appears on the wrapper.

Pecola fetishizes blue eyes because for her, they are both a window into "a world of clean comfort" (p. 50), and an emblem of unattainable beauty. Just as she drank vast quantities of milk out of the Shirley Temple cup at the MacTeers' home in hopes of becoming Shirley Temple, so too does she consume the candy in hopes that she can escape her own body, her own life, and become Mary Jane. Indeed, when her parents fight, Pecola prays to disappear; through the power of her imagination, she feels her body parts disappearing, except for her eyes. Since she cannot make her eyes disappear, she cannot eliminate her power of visual perception and thus she cannot believe herself to be invisible. She has come to believe that if her eyes were beautiful, then she would be different, and so she prays for blue eyes.

The second chapter of the novel, "Winter," exemplifies the way Morrison connects structure and content. At the beginning of "Winter," Claudia recalls the images of security that she and her family associate with the season. Her memories invoke the presence of her father and the home remedies that kept the threat of cold away. The events Claudia and the omniscient narrator describe in this chapter remind us of "pneumonia weather" (as it is called in the vernacular) – warmth that turns abruptly cold. Claudia describes a day on which she is doubly disappointed; the omniscient narrator describes how Pecola is wounded by a woman she longs to become.

Their triumph over a gang of bullies briefly binds the MacTeer sisters, Pecola, and Maureen Peal together. Claudia and Frieda MacTeer usually scorn Maureen, "the high-yellow dream child with long brown

hair”(p. 62), but the three of them join forces to protect Pecola from a group of boys who tease her about her dark skin and taunt her about her father’s sleeping habits. As the narrator observes, the qualities the boys mock in Pecola are the ones of which they are ashamed in their own lives. Indeed, their insults are one of many examples of the kind of scapegoating to which Pecola is subjected in her community, where people project their self-hatred onto her.

The MacTeers’ friendship with Maureen turns out to be short-lived; companionability quickly gives way to jealousy, and the girls begin to fight with each other. The MacTeer sisters cannot forgive Maureen the possessions and characteristics they envy: her wealth, long hair, and fair skin. Her conversation reflects her self-absorption and sense of entitlement and makes them uncomfortably aware of their own proximity to Pecola’s condition of deprivation. When they lash out at Maureen, she resorts to the most powerful weapon in her arsenal, her disgust for their dark skin: “I *am* cute! And you ugly! Black and ugly black e mos. I *am* cute!” (p. 73).

When the MacTeer girls arrive home that afternoon, they find momentary consolation from their parents’ boarder, Mr. Henry, who is all too ready to cheer them with money for candy and ice cream. For the second time that day their delight turns to sadness, however, for they discover that Mr. Henry has sent them off not out of generosity but out of self-interest: he wants to be free to entertain a pair of prostitutes known as China and the Maginot Line. They thus become unwitting partners in maintaining a sexual secret, one that haunts them later when Mr. Henry molests Frieda. Their betrayal by both Maureen and Mr. Henry reveals how vulnerable they are outside of the safety of their immediate family.

This chapter concludes with the omniscient narrator’s account of Pecola’s interaction with Junior, one of her black middle-class schoolmates, and his mother, Geraldine. Pecola’s encounter with Junior and Geraldine, like her relationship with her own parents, provides a window into the roots of racial self-loathing. Geraldine is part of a wave of upwardly mobile black women who migrated to the north in search of a better life. On the one hand, these women carry a deep love for their past; they “soak up the juice of their home towns and it never leaves them” (p. 81). But on the other hand, in their quest for respectability, they seek to eradicate from their lives many of the qualities they associate with that past, what the narrator calls “the dreadful

funkiness of passion, the funkiness of nature, the funkiness of the wide range of human emotions” (p. 83). Obsessed with order, discipline, and cleanliness, Geraldine epitomizes this type of woman. She loves and receives more comfort from her cat than she does either her husband or son, and she associates poor, dark-skinned black children with the “funk” she so desperately needs to escape.

Junior senses that his mother prefers the cat to him; unable to express his anger at her, he directs his rage toward the cat and toward other children. Under the guise of inviting her to play with his cat, he invites Pecola to his home while his mother is out. Awed by the beauty and order of his home, she is caught off guard when Junior shuts her in a room and then tortures (and possibly kills) the cat. When Geraldine returns to find her cat injured, and a dirty, disheveled Pecola in her house, she looks at the child and sees only the markers of impoverished black life she has so energetically sought to escape: the cheap, dirty torn clothing, uncombed hair remind her of the unkempt girls and women of Mobile.

Like Maureen and Mr. Henry, Geraldine represents a false spring. As a young girl in the South, Geraldine was raised to be meticulous, religious, sexless, and unemotional. She is described as if she were a type, not an individual, in order to emphasize the extent of her assimilation; she is so thoroughly socialized and commodified that nothing special or unique about her remains.

The ensuing flashback from Geraldine’s point of view explains the vehemence with which she ejects Pecola from her house. Geraldine’s adulthood has been a slow process of eradicating “the funk,” the disorder and sensory assault she associates with blackness. In Pecola’s face she confronts the image of all she has tried to escape and feels as if her private territory has been invaded.

An excerpt from the garbled version of the primer separates Claudia’s story from that of the omniscient narrator. Here, as in each of the chapters, these lines comment ironically on the content of the chapter. In “Winter” we read: “SEETHECATITGOESMEOWMEOWCOMEANDPLAYCOMEPLAYWITHJANETHEKITTENWILLNOTPLAYPLAYPLA.” The correctly punctuated version of these lines might evoke the cliché of the coy household cat too finicky to play. But the scenario at Geraldine’s house to which the lines refer is as jumbled as the lines are themselves. For one thing, as the narrator tells us, the cat has replaced both Geraldine’s husband and her son in her affections.

Moreover, the cat is central to the episode the chapter describes. Junior lures Pecola into his house by promising to let her play with his cat. He tortures and perhaps kills the cat when he finds that it and Pecola are drawn to each other. So if Geraldine's cat will not play, it may well be because it is dead.

This chapter thus shows some of the forms that overinvestment in an alien cultural standard may take. Like Pecola, Maureen and Geraldine yearn to be white. Pecola's aspirations are entirely unattainable, since they take the form of a desire for blue eyes. Maureen and Geraldine aspire to intermediate goals that are more easily accessible. But their desires spring from a hatred of what they are that is as profound as Pecola's. By juxtaposing these and other stories to Pecola's, Morrison displays the dimensions of her protagonist's condition.

Soaphead Church, the misanthrope, is the extreme expression of this tendency toward self-loathing. He is introduced as "an old man who loved things, for the slightest contact with people produced in him a faint but persistent nausea" (p. 164). Repelled by the possibility of contact with other people, except little girls, he yearns instead for objects that humans have touched.

Soaphead comes by his racial self-loathing naturally. He is descended from a line of people who marry others of mixed racial parentage in order to distance themselves from their African origins. In Lorain he can be both part of and separate from the rest of the community by serving as a "Reader, Adviser, and Interpreter of Dreams." It is thus no surprise that once she becomes pregnant, Pecola visits him to request blue eyes. He sees in her an "ugly little girl" who "wanted to rise up out of the pit of her blackness and see the world with blue eyes" (p. 174). Instead of helping her, he tricks her into killing his landlady's elderly dog, thus sending her further into madness. This chapter ends with Soaphead's letter to God in which, as John N. Duvall argues, he reveals a modicum of transformation and self-awareness:

However arrogant and unbalanced he may be, in the act of writing, Church has made a minimal movement from consciousness to self-consciousness; witnessing Pecola's felt revelation serves as Church's own revelatory moment inasmuch as it takes him from a position of nonimplication (his belief that his life allows him to be a witness to 'human stupidity without sharing it or being compromised by it') to one that recognizes his implication.²

For all his perversity, Soaphead is insightful. He anticipates the view of the community at which Claudia arrives at the end of the novel when he describes the people he knew back home in the Caribbean:

We in this colony took as our own the most dramatic, and the most obvious, of our white masters' characteristics, which were, of course, their worst. On retaining the identity of our race, we held fast to those characteristics most gratifying to sustain and least troublesome to maintain. Consequently we were not royal but snobbish, not aristocratic but class-conscious; we believed authority was cruelty to our inferiors, and education was being at school. We mistook violence for passion, indolence for leisure, and thought recklessness was freedom. We raised our children and reared our crops; we let infants grow, and property develop. Our manhood was defined by acquisitions. Our womanhood by acquiescence. And the smell of your fruit and the labor of your days we abhorred. (p. 177)

By the end of the novel, Pecola has suffered a mental breakdown as a result of the trauma she has experienced. In the penultimate section of the book, she is engaged in an intense conversation with someone she calls a friend. But the "friend" to whom she is speaking is her alter ego; we can tell from their exchange that she believes that she now has blue eyes, and that all she wants to do is to admire them in the mirror. We also learn that since Soaphead gave her her blue eyes, no one will meet her gaze.

The adult Claudia remembers Pecola wandering the streets, flailing her arms like a grotesque and wounded bird unable to fly. Claudia rightly realizes that the entire community had failed her. Pecola has not gone mad because of the rape and Soaphead's deception alone. The scapegoating that has played such an instrumental role in the cycle of racial self-loathing has also contributed to her destruction. In language that recalls Soaphead Church's letter to God, Claudia recognizes the hollowness of the community's pantomime of virtue. So thoroughly damaged by the racist regime whose values they have internalized, they are able only to perform the weaker version of the attributes to which they aspire:

. . . we were not strong, only aggressive; we were not free, merely licensed; we were not compassionate, we were polite; not good, but well behaved. We courted death in order to call ourselves brave, and hid like

thieves from life. We substituted good grammar for intellect; we switched habits to simulate maturity; we rearranged lies and called it truth, seeing in the new pattern of an old idea the Revelation and the Word. (p. 206)

Sula

Morrison's second novel, *Sula*, confounds binary oppositions. As Deborah E. McDowell has observed, in reading this work, "We enter a new world . . . a world where we never get to the 'bottom' of things, a world that demands a shift from an either/or orientation to one that is both/and, full of shifts and contradictions."³ Indeed, throughout the text, Morrison interrogates the ground upon which individual and collective identities are constructed.

Sula is divided into two sections and then subdivided into chapters entitled by dates ranging from 1919 to 1965. It opens with a prologue narrated from the point of view of the present which tells the story of its setting, a community called the Bottom. The narrator establishes that the novel takes place during a moment in the life of the town when it was animated by black people's music, stories, dance, and rituals. But like many municipalities across the country, Medallion, Ohio (the fictional town within which the Bottom is located) was transformed by urban renewal, part of a national effort during the 1950s through the 1970s to improve so-called blighted areas of cities and towns.⁴ Places such as the Time and a Half Pool Hall, Irene's Palace of Cosmetology, and Reba's Grill were leveled to make room for the Medallion Golf Course and the suburbs. *Sula* is thus situated in a place of change and loss. Here the interests of working African American men and women have been displaced in favor of the creation of white leisure cultural spaces.⁵

The narrator goes on to describe the way in which the Bottom, the ironically named community, received its name. In her words, the story is "a nigger joke."⁶ A white farmer promised his slave freedom and a piece of bottomland in exchange for performing some laborious tasks. When the time came for the farmer to make good on his word, he tricked the slave into believing that the term "bottomland" actually referred to land in the hills. That land may be high up from a human perspective, the farmer says, but from God's point of view, it is "the bottom of heaven" (p. 5). As it turns out, the land in The Bottom may