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Not So Fast, Dick and Jane: Reimagining Childhood and Nation in *The Bluest Eye*

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In *The Bluest Eye*, Toni Morrison challenges America's complacent belief in its benevolent self-image through representations of children who experience race, class, and gender oppressions. She is not the first African American author to use images of childhood to undermine cherished conceptions of national identity. In his 1845 slave narrative, Frederick Douglass condemns American democracy and Christianity through detailed accounts of his own childhood as a slave. Similarly, Pauline Hopkins confronts the ideal of an all-white American nation by placing the image of a black baby next to an American flag on the cover of her October 1900 issue of *The Colored American Magazine*. Morrison, however, centralizes childhood more deeply than her predecessors. Anticipating the currently emerging field in childhood studies, Morrison puts the concept of childhood itself under scrutiny. In *The Bluest Eye*, a child provides the primary voice through which the reader hears, the primary lens through which the reader sees, and the object of the reader's gaze.

My interest in the novel's children centers on Morrison's treatment of their supposed innocence. In her critical work, *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*, Morrison comments on "thematics of innocence" that typically define Americanness in literature. She asks, "What are Americans always so insistently innocent of?" (44-45). I contend that, in *The Bluest Eye*, Morrison first explored this question, and the implications of its answer, long before she explicitly asked it. This article first

emphasizes the connection between thematics of *childhood* innocence in American culture and an ideology of *national* innocence. Next, I argue that Morrison's allusions to the Dick and Jane Basic Readers highlight images of childhood that promote superficial and ahistorical conceptions of the United States. I show how Morrison contrasts these images with child-characters painted as intimate extensions of long familial, socio-economic, and national histories that contradict the innocent ideal. From public education I turn to popular culture. Through Morrison's references to Shirley Temple, I examine images of children as both producers and consumers of commodities that are themselves ironically charged with the ideology of childhood innocence. Finally, I analyze Morrison's allusion to John M. Stahl's film, *Imitation of Life* (1934), to better understand the symbolic significance of both Pecola's body and Claudia's consciousness. Throughout these analyses, I argue that Morrison shows us the counterhegemonic potential of reimagining childhood in the context of history. She portrays children as victims, activists, recorders, and even oppressors—all as a way of demythologizing the "innocent" past.

Almost a century after Pauline Hopkins's child-image challenged the southern opposition to Reconstruction, Morrison confronts another tense political climate, publishing her first novel during the transition between a waning Civil Rights Movement and the backlash that emerged against it. Morrison faced the repercussions of civil rights legislation in their infancy, but the nation's anxiety about questions of race, class, and gender equity continued to evolve, creating the neo-conservative paranoia regarding "reverse discrimination" and immigration that continues today. By the 1990s, the growth of such conservatism ushers in what Henry Giroux calls "organized forgetting," a phenomenon where Americans look nostalgically back to a "mythic" pre-Civil Rights Era (*Channel 77*). Claiming that children often serve as "signposts" for America's self-image, Giroux finds evidence of such nostalgia in 1970s Hollywood. He explains that 1970s films such as *The Last Picture Show* and *American Graffiti* "resurrected white, suburban, middle-class youth in the nostalgic image of Andy Hardy and Frankie Avalon" (*Channel 35*, 42). In this mythically innocent past, domestic unrest evaporates while post-war prosperity thrives,

despite such tragic realities as the lynching of fourteen-year-old Emmett Till in 1955.

Popular representations of American youth have grown increasingly dark since the days of Frankie Avalon, however. According to Giroux, this phenomenon reflects an ongoing crisis in American society and democracy, yet he explains that Hollywood's images of troubled youth also blame the victim, silencing child-figures by ignoring the socioeconomic contexts that produce suffering (*Channel 35*, 42-44, 86). While acknowledging the loss of childhood innocence, such representations preserve its ideal by suggesting that children themselves have ruined childhood. In contrast, Morrison lets her child-characters speak while critically invoking their socio-economic contexts. Instead of blaming the children for their own suffering, she blames their families, their community, and, ultimately, their nation.

Morrison situates her narrator, Claudia, and her protagonist, Pecola, on the cusp of the "mythical" post-war period. The novel begins in 1940, a time when Michael Rogin contends that Americans had begun to look beyond the domestic worries of the Depression to define America's role in a growing international conflict. According to Rogin, domestic concerns about ethnicity and class dominated American politics from 1870 to the New Deal, but World War II "provided the occasion for the emergence of the national-security apparatus." Rogin locates the residue of emerging national fears in film, explaining that Hollywood immediately tuned in to the anxieties that came with war. As early as 1940, therefore, films such as *Murder in the Air* had traded in their mobsters for the spies and fake identities that encompass the fresher material of international intrigue (237, 246, 2).

Conversely, in a war-time setting that barely acknowledges the looming threat of military conflict, *The Bluest Eye* clearly subordinates national and international matters to local interests. In the small towns of Morrison's midwestern United States, concerns about how to keep children warm, fed, and healthy supersede questions about the nation's role in an escalating conflict abroad. Furthermore, while 1940 marks the eve of both war and economic recovery in American history books, it also marks the year Richard Wright's *Native Son* kicked off an angry protest movement against racism. Morrison captures this underrepresented aspect of Ameri-

can history. Thus, when 1970s America had already begun to assemble nostalgic myths about suburban life during and after World War II, Morrison focuses on family, education, and popular culture to expose childhood innocence as a pervasive ideology that simultaneously perpetuates and mystifies the harsher realities of white nationalist hegemony. In a wrenching narrative of childhood without innocence, she evokes the forgotten domestic tensions that simmered in the 1940s and boiled over in the 1950s.

The Bluest Eye explores the contrast between oppressed local culture and innocent national ideal through the friction that erupts between Pecola's life and 1940s models of childhood. Morrison first locates such models in pedagogy by subversively appropriating William Elson and William Gray's nationally recognized Dick and Jane stories. Many of Morrison's critics have commented on her reference to the Elson-Gray primers. Mark Ledbetter explains their importance in literary terms, arguing that they establish a victimless "masterplot" for the novel (28). Nancy Backes points out that the primers offer an ideal that does not exist for anyone (even white middle-class children) (47), while Andrea O'Reilly argues that the books instruct pupils in the ideology of the family (87). According to Gurleen Grewal, primers prime, or make ready, and Morrison shows how they prime black subjects (125). The thread that connects these observations: they all point to ways that the primers contribute to a national ideology of innocence. According to some educators, schools teach more than math, science, and literacy. They reproduce existing class structures, reinforce dominant ideologies, and bolster the political power of the state in capitalism (Aronowitz and Giroux 65). Similarly, Dick and Jane primers not only posit the literary "masterplot" in *The Bluest Eye*; as textbooks in America's public schools, Morrison suggests they posit a *national* masterplot that defines Americanness within the parameters of innocent white middle-class childhood.

Dick and Jane's popularity grew immensely in the 1940s, but the characters originate in the 1930s. In books such as the primer, *Dick and Jane* (1930), the authors characterize safe American childhoods that thrive in families that defy depression-era hardships with economic and social stability. After World War II, Cold War politicians assigned such families both a practical and a symbolic role in combating the threat of communist takeover in the

United States. Elaine Tyler May argues that creating and caring for healthy families became the patriotic responsibility of women who were expected to leave their wartime jobs to raise children and bolster the world's capitalist population. In the uncertainty of the nuclear age, she adds, women were expected to make domestic spaces into safe havens, figurative (and sometimes literal) bomb shelters for frightened Americans. The era's popular culture reflects such expectations. As early as 1941, according to May, Hollywood films such as *Penny Serenade* emphasized motherhood, associating beauty with maternity and positioning children as "moralizing" and "harmonizing" agents in families (125). Similarly, Rogin argues that Hollywood films of the 1940s, '50s and '60s associated Communism with public and private instability, portraying seductive women as Communist spies and family patriarchs as loyal patriots. He argues that in films such as *I Was a Communist* (1951), *My Son John* (1952), and *The Manchurian Candidate* (1962), the loving family is equated with the nation (247-51). Consequently, as the cornerstone of postwar prosperity and security, nuclear families like Dick and Jane's signaled the triumph of American democracy and capitalism (May xviii, 121).

The Elson-Gray curriculum surrounding Dick and Jane reflects these attitudes, placing responsibility for the nation's future prosperity and security squarely on the shoulders of middle-class children. From the outset in 1930, the *Basic Readers* invite young students to "come with me, your book-comrade, I can carry you into the homes of some brave and true American boys and girls. They will tell you how you, too, may become a helpful American citizen" (9). In the stories of units such as "Little American Citizens," young white children serve their country through self-sufficiency, self-sacrifice, and bravery. Similarly, the unit "Busy Workers and their Work" underscores the inherent morality and practical necessity of hard work while connecting it to the technological and territorial expansion of the deserving nation. Proponents of Cold War politics burdened only white children and their families with such patriotic sentiments, however. Since the government housing subsidies that prompted whites to flee crowded cities excluded African Americans, few black families occupied the suburbs that demonstrated America's successes to the world (May xx). Thus, by associating white suburban families with

prosperity, morality, and patriotism, Americans painted black urban working-class families as un-American. Eventually, the Moynihan Report of 1965 outwardly dissociated black families, and especially black women, from the national ideal by characterizing black family life and its matriarchal aspects as “a tangle of pathology” that deviated sharply from the American standard (qtd. in Stacey 5).

Likewise, despite their emphasis on historical figures and events, the primers in general never allude to events such as conquest, slavery, immigration, or exclusion. In fact, beyond the occasional appearance of a “savage” Indian, they never feature nonwhite Americans. The Dick and Jane books in particular exist almost entirely outside of history—as if no thing and no time exists beyond the suburban present. They therefore treat American childhood as an abstraction that excludes all but white middle-class children. Given the emphasis on citizenship and Americanness, Dick and Jane inhabit what Lauren Berlant would call the national bodies of “abstract citizenship.” Through the abstraction of citizenship, she argues, Americans assume all citizens have access to the Rights of Man, regardless of race, class, and gender differences. In reality, only white male citizens possess these Rights; thus, she explains, the white male body *is* the abstract body (113). Since Jane never complains about her forced domesticity or her subordination to Dick, she lets the privileges of Dick’s innocent world stand for the experience of *all* American childhoods. Reinforcing the abstraction, primers before 1965 deport color, gender, and poverty to “other lands,” implicitly defining such variations as culturally un-American or politically irrelevant. Significantly, Morrison’s allusion to actual pedagogical texts artistically engages the real, concretely marking the centrality of such disavowal in the lives of America’s children while also asking us to consider the ways in which images of “innocent” children are themselves hardly innocuous.

Some public schools still used the Elson-Gray readers in 1970, despite growing concerns over their treatment of race and gender. While Morrison’s publication of *The Bluest Eye* responded to the controversy three decades ago, her appropriation remains urgent today. The primers, long out of use, have acquired new appeal in a nostalgia-driven collectors’ market that demonstrates how many

Americans yearn for the fantasy of a mythically homogenous pre-Civil Rights era. In *Growing Up with Dick and Jane: Learning and Living the American Dream* (1996), the authors capitalize on collector desires. Their book jacket advertises, “They’re back!” while entreating readers to “step back into the innocent watercolor world of Dick and Jane.” Collector websites also feature nostalgia as their most salient selling point. On the Scott Foresman and Co. website, the seller remarks: “To many Americans, the simple phrase, “*See Spot Run*” brings a warm and nostalgic smile. . . . Check out the books and reflect on your childhood and feel warm and cozy with the memories. Ahhh, when life was simple. . .” (sic). The implications of childhood’s “simpl[icity]” come clear when Dave Schultz, another collector, makes unapologetic references to the changes of the Civil Rights Movement. He registers irritation over the way many Americans now think about race, class, sexuality, gender, and family. He says:

It was an innocent time. . . . Cars had style, and toys such as wagons, trikes, and pedal cars were made out of metal. Father worked and Mother (with a freshly pressed dress on and dinner on the table) waited at the door for him to come home.

There were no microwaves. . . bus drivers were nice, schoolteachers cared, and the corner store had penny candy. . . . It was a different era where second graders could read Dick’s use of the word queer and third graders could read a story called “Tar Baby.”

The Bluest Eye unravels profiteering reveries at every turn. While offering a sharply different version of 1940s family and childhood, Morrison suggests that familial “pathologies” do not simply spring from individual shortcomings. Just as the Dick and Jane stories equate white privilege with a historyless version of Americanness, the poverty and suffering of Morrison’s Breedlove family symbolizes America’s brutal history of racial persecution in the United States. The Breedloves emerge from a history of what Grewal calls a “race-based class structure of American society that generates its own pathologies” (118).

Through an innovative literary form that both fragments and compresses her primer-imitation, Morrison emphasizes the historical gloss by which Elson and Gray sanitize American family life.

Pin-chia Feng argues that, in the fragments, the narrator acts out Claudia's rage, dismembering the white narrative as Claudia dismembers her white baby dolls (53). Similar to Claudia's pile of plastic body parts, Morrison creates a jumble of words that together symbolize the incoherence of America's mythic homogeneity. While compressing words and sentences, however, she also dissects the stories, separating their standardized elements into isolated and unintelligible phrases such as "SEEFATHERHEIS-BIGANDSTRONG" and "SEEMOTHERISVERYNICE" (105, 88). While highlighting the meaninglessness of the Dick and Jane formula, Morrison uses the string of letters as chapter headings that in part determine the shape of her narrative. In the contrast between such unnaturally elongated phrases and the depth and density of the lengthy paragraphs that follow on the page, Morrison visually illustrates the shallow ahistoricism of the white text. In addition, she complements form with content, filling the "SEEFATHER" and "SEEMOTHER" chapters with complex histories that articulate Cholly's sense of powerlessness and Pauline's sense of worthlessness. By including narratives that would not otherwise fit into the simplified space of a Dick and Jane primer, Morrison shows how national narratives of the white middle-class family obscure the way unjust histories can shape a family's struggling present.

In "SEEFATHER," Cholly endures a life marked by powerlessness from his birth. After suffering familial abandonment and sexual humiliation, Cholly says he feels "small, black, helpless" (119). Vanessa Dickerson argues that Cholly is a "naked father," an emasculated figure who is incapable of accumulating wealth or playing the patriarch (111, 116-17). Morrison emphasizes such powerlessness when Cholly accepts a new couch that arrives broken in half, but she seals his fate in a scathing critique of American meritocracy when he literally dies "in the workhouse," forever trapped in a cycle of working poverty (159). Similarly, the "SEEMOTHER" section articulates Pauline's feelings of worthlessness. The ninth of eleven children, Pauline grows up in a "cocoon" where she develops a "general feeling of separateness and unworthiness" (88). When she loses her tooth while emulating Jean Harlowe at the movie theater, Pauline gives in to the intra-racial prejudice of Lorraine, Ohio's Northern black women and

“settle[s] down to just being ugly” (98). At a time when Americans associate fatherhood with upward mobility and motherhood with beauty, Cholly and Pauline fall far short of America’s patriotic ideal for parents.

Through Cholly and Pauline, Morrison suggests that parents who emerge from histories of oppression might reproduce that degradation within the family unit. Instead of providing for and protecting his family, Cholly burns down the insular domestic space that should have symbolized not only his family’s, but the nation’s affluence and security. Similarly, Pauline feels no patriotic obligation to nurture the offspring that, to her, reflect her own ugliness. Instead, having learned that a white family’s servant wields far more power than a black family’s mother, she spends all of her time working as a domestic for the Fishers, where “Power, praise, and luxury were hers” (101).

Unlike Dick and Jane, whose innocent lives spring spontaneously into the present, Morrison connects the lives of children to the joy, suffering, and coping of their parents. She offers a gendered response to Pauline’s abandonment when she pairs Pecola with her brother Sammy. In the post-slavery tradition of his wandering father and grandfather, Sammy runs away at least twenty-seven times by the age of fourteen. Conversely, “Restricted by youth and sex,” Pecola stays home and “experiment[s] with methods of endurance” (38). Furthermore, Sammy’s escape leaves her alone to emulate the Dick and Jane standard that according to Deborah Cadman, creates the Breedloves’ feelings of worthlessness (76). When Cholly recognizes his own failures in Pecola’s unhappiness, he feels an “accusation” that fills him with guilt. He elicits the Dick-and-Jane ideal when he looks at Pecola as “a child, unburdened,” and wonders, “why wasn’t she happy?” (127).

Instead of serving as a “moralizing” force, Pecola’s abject presence provokes Cholly to rape her in what Lothar Bredella argues is “the pain of a love which can only be expressed destructively” (372). Through Cholly’s inability to express love constructively, Morrison paints a picture of black fatherhood so incapacitated that it sacrifices its children to save itself. Likewise, when the sight of Pecola’s abused body on the kitchen floor incites Pauline to beat instead of comfort her daughter, Morrison portrays a similarly affected motherhood, suggesting that histories of suffering not only

debilitate parents, but turn them from nurturers into oppressors. By juxtaposing the Breedloves with Dick and Jane, Morrison attributes their “pathologies” in part to the pathology of a nation that defines its own virtue through an ideology of childhood innocence that ironically allows for the expendability of children like Pecola.

Morrison’s distortion of her primer look-a-like accentuates her ideological critique of Dick and Jane, but she also infuses the muddle with a more literal meaning. Elson and Gray produced the Basic Readers to promote literacy, not specifically to propagate destructive ideologies. Through the ideological content, however, Elson and Gray point to *who* they expected to educate—who they envisioned as the nation’s future citizens. While Morrison’s ideological critique suggests that the primers alienate students who do not fit the white middle-class standard, her garbled imitation makes the very tools designed to teach literacy into a symbol of forced illiteracy—as if the alienated reader could never decipher them.

While discounting the books’ racism, Kismaric and Heiferman celebrate the Dick and Jane stories for teaching eighty-five million children to read. In contrast, Morrison suggests that, from their inception, Elson-Gray primers participated in a national *ill*iteracy campaign that systematically disenfranchised young black Americans, especially young black girls. Significantly, Elson and Gray published Dick and Jane amid intense national resistance to the idea that the nation was obligated to educate black youths. Institutionalized efforts to sabotage black literacy began during Reconstruction and extended through the Jim Crow era, disenfranchising black parents and their children throughout most of the twentieth century (Anderson 33-35). Since illiterate parents must rely on schools to educate their offspring, Morrison’s critique suggests yet another way that histories of discrimination might interfere with a family’s ability to protect or empower its children.

Morrison joins a tradition of similarly concerned African American writers that ranges from ex-slaves such as Frederick Douglass and Harriet Jacobs to twentieth-century intellectuals such as Malcolm X, bell hooks, Patricia Hill Collins, and Angela Davis. Like many of her contemporaries, Morrison looks beyond the reading curriculum; she presents teachers who explicitly thwart the education of their black students. Aronowitz explains that, in

elementary schools, teachers serve as “surrogate parents,” figures who regularly remind students of how the school system perceives them. He adds that teachers’ evaluations of students often reflect the expectations of the students’ economic class rather than the quality of their intellect (81, 76-79). Although he omits racial factors from his discussion, race is an implicit consideration in the 1940s when Jim Crow laws confined many black Americans to the unskilled labor pool that Aronowitz studies. Morrison highlights the racial aspect of his argument with representations of teachers who reinforce existing hierarchies by consistently favoring lighter students. In Lorraine, Ohio, schoolteachers favor Maureen Peal, “a high-yellow dream child” who “enchanted the entire school.” Stewing over how teachers “smiled encouragingly” when they called on Maureen, Claudia complains that such favoritism makes her and Frieda feel “lesser” (52-53). Similarly, Pecola notes that her teachers “tried to never glance at her, and called on her only when everyone was required to respond” (40).

While Claudia wonders what made Maureen different, what was the “*Thing* that made *her* beautiful and not us?” she and Frieda try to resist their feelings of inadequacy by dubbing Maureen “six-finger-dog-tooth-meringue-pie” (61, 53). Significantly, Morrison attributes Maureen’s power not just to lightness, but to its beauty. Likewise, Kismaric and Heiferman point to this power when they claim that, despite settling for “second banana in a famous brother-sister act,” readers can find “a lot to envy about Jane.” They admire her because “Her perky dresses never wrinkle or get dirty. . . . Her blond, wavy hair is not too curly. . . not too frizzy,” and she is “not too fat or too thin” (23). The teachers in *The Bluest Eye* exhibit similar values, leaving Claudia to desperately wonder, “What was the secret? What did we lack? Why was it important?” (61). Through Claudia’s anxiety, Morrison points to the particular predicament of black *girls* in a white nation. For power they need beauty, and for beauty they need whiteness. Without the familial support that strengthens Claudia and Frieda, and unlike her brother who transforms “ugliness” into “a weapon to cause others pain,” Pecola succumbs to the “*Thing*” (35). She accepts that it “made her ignored or despised at school, by teachers and classmates alike” (39). At school, therefore, Pecola learns her place outside an abstracted standard of citizenship.

In *The Bluest Eye*, multiple narratives of childhood encompass a broad spectrum of school systems and families that cooperatively perpetuate racial hierarchies. In addition to Pecola's family and school, Morrison offers Geraldine, an upper-class, light-skinned girl whose wealthy family and private education teach her to value lightness over darkness. Furthermore, in Soaphead Church, a "cinnamon-eyed West Indian" who learned young that his family's white supremacy earned them consistent recommendations for study abroad, Morrison evokes a colonial geography that posits global implications for racist education systems. In *The Bluest Eye*, such families and schools produce ideologies of innocence, not innocent children. Surrounded by them, Pecola learns the paradoxical necessity of erasing herself if she hopes to mature into a politically visible subject.

Morrison buttresses the ideological work of compulsory school with images of popular culture. Giroux emphasizes the explosion of kid-specific media and advertising that erupted in the 1990s, asking, "what non-commodified public sphere exists to safeguard children?" (*Mouse* 20). *The Bluest Eye* suggests, however, that the media already bombarded black communities and their children with commercial messages in the 1940s. Susan Willis agrees, arguing that such messages equate American culture with white culture in the novel (173). Pauline only encounters the image of Greta Garbo when she discovers the cinema as an adult. When Henry moves into the McTeer house, however, he flatters young Claudia and Frieda with an already familiar reference to "Garbo and Rogers." In addition, Maureen admits that she learned from her mother to emulate the almost white Peola over her "black and ugly" mother, Delilah, in Stahl's film, *Imitation of Life* (57).

Like Maureen, Pecola looks to Hollywood for standards of female beauty and, thus, power. Having never seen *Imitation of Life*, she idolizes Shirley Temple, a depression-era icon whose childhood frivolity conveyed hope to the struggling nation. Despite the common theme of orphanhood in Temple's films, titles such as *Curly Top* (1935) and *Little Miss Broadway* (1938) preserve childhood innocence by reducing adversity to a plot device. Presaging the moralizing and harmonizing role that children supposedly played for their families during the Cold War, Temple's characters, Elizabeth and Betsy respectively, pull themselves

up by their bootstraps. They both charm wayward (and wealthy) bachelors into marrying financially bereft women so that the happy couple can adopt their orphaned matchmaker. These child-characters understand that their power resides in the childish sex appeal of blonde hair and blue eyes. In *Curly Top* especially, Elizabeth flirts with her eventual benefactor, Mr. Morgan, while on their “first date.” Through the childish naiveté of Temple’s characters, however, the films easily attribute powers of seduction to willful determination, not white beauty. In the song “Be Optimistic” from *Little Miss Broadway*, Temple advises her fellow orphans that if they “just smile,” someone will love them.

Like Dick and Jane, Temple’s characters exist in a state of innocence, only brushing with larger socio-economic and historical contexts. They operate, therefore, like Pecola’s racist schoolteachers, implicitly blaming darker victims who must endure rather than transcend their own suffering. Morrison highlights the power of such blame when Pecola begins to menstruate shortly after drinking three quarts of milk from a Shirley Temple cup. While nursing herself to maturity on Temple’s standard of female beauty, Pecola cultivates a self-loathing that prompts her to ask Claudia and Frieda, “how do you get somebody to love you?” (29). Since edicts like Temple’s “just smile” occlude the oppressive histories that might otherwise explain Pecola’s loveless family, Temple offers Pecola no one to blame but herself.

As a national icon, Temple illustrates the connection between the ideology of childhood innocence and the ideology of national innocence. Kimberly B. Hébert argues that images such as Temple’s organize Western culture around whiteness, creating “destructive images of African-descended and other black peoples who share the same space of neighborhood and nation” (193). By comparing Temple’s coquettish performances to Harriet Beecher Stowe’s Topsy from *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, Hébert argues that Temple’s style originates not in whiteness, but in the white appropriations of blackness seen in minstrelsy. If, as Hébert argues, Temple offers a “white-faced performance of blackness” (190, 193), then her national acceptance suggests that American whiteness is itself a performance of blackness. Furthermore, her popularity also illustrates how the guise of childhood innocence so easily mystifies the irony. Despite her age, Claudia lacks the

naiveté that supposedly characterizes childhood. Instead, she views Temple's performance as a trespass into black culture. She says, "I hated Shirley. Not because she was cute, but because she danced with Bojangles, who was *my* friend, *my* uncle, *my* daddy, and who ought to have been soft-shoeing it and chuckling with me" (19). In contrast, a captivated Pecola embraces the example of how her own blackness should look in the abstract.

Pecola outwardly emulates Temple in the novel, but Morrison directly connects Pecola to Stahl's Peola when she signifies on the name. By inserting the letter "c" into "Pecola," Morrison creates a name that is the same, yet different from Peola's. She highlights the distinction when Maureen mistakenly asks, "Pecola? Wasn't that the name of the girl in *Imitation of Life*?" (57). With the allusion, Morrison suggests that each narrative complements the other. Interestingly, Berlant bases her theory of abstract citizenship on the same story, using it to discuss the difference between having a visible body and being a visible subject in a capitalist public sphere. Berlant explains that Peola relinquishes her black body and passes for white because she understands that to "choose to be visible in a culture of abstraction. . . would be to choose a form of slavery" (127). Faced with political and economic dispossession, Peola rejects her black mother, Delilah, so she can adopt the invisible, but juridically defined, politically and economically empowered white subject position that she associates with the abstracted qualities of white beauty.

Pecola shares Peola's desires, but she occupies a different body, a variation Morrison captures through their similar, but different names. When Claudia compares Maureen's long beautiful braids to lynch ropes, Morrison offers a chilling metaphor that portends the stakes raised by the corporeal differences between Peola and Pecola. Unlike the light Peola, Pecola inhabits a dark, unabstracted body. Berlant calls the body's visible qualities, the parts that resist abstraction, "surplus corporeality" (112-14). Burdened with such "surplus," society can "see" and thus, reject Pecola. Morrison articulates Pecola's struggle between visible body and visible subject when the immigrant grocer, Mr. Yacobowski, registers a "total absence of human recognition" while looking at her. The scene also emphasizes the connection between American consumerism and subjectivity by showing how Pecola's corporeality, like

her father's, interferes with her role as a consumer. Finding nothing "desirable or necessary" about trying to "see" Pecola, Yacobowski intimidates her into silence, asking, "Christ. Kantcha talk?" (emphasis in original 42). As Yacobowski proves his own whiteness through exclusion, Morrison suggests that Americans stir the nation's melting pot over flames fed by silenced black bodies.

Pecola rejects her place as a non-consumer, praying every night to rid herself of her surplus corporeality. When she lies in the darkness of her parents' store-front home and whispers, "Please God. . . . Please make me disappear," she tries to force her body into the Dick and Jane abstraction. Although "Little parts of her body faded away," she ultimately fails because her eyes remain. Pecola says, "They were everything. Everything was there, in them" (39). More than the physical evidence of her surpluses, Pecola's eyes represent her consciousness, her ability to see the "ugliness" she associates with blackness. Without the ability to "see"—or without the "c"—Pecola believes she can be Peola; she hopes to enact her own blue-eyed, white-faced version of blackness. Paradoxically, for successful abstraction, Pecola must endure self-erasure *and* blindness, a self-lynching that Furman calls, the "awful safety of oblivion" (19)—what I call childhood innocence.

Contrary to Pecola's self-annihilating fantasies, Peola's dark mother, Delilah, outwardly accepts her lot as an invisible subject in a visible body as she labors for Bea's pancake business. Berlant reads Delilah as an allusion to Aunt Jemima. While Jemima's black-faced trademark represents a site of collective American identity rooted in historical amnesia, however, Berlant argues that Delilah's character is more complex (122-25). Revealing a suppressed subjectivity in brief asides to the film's audience, she tells her employer, Bea, "Yesm. We all starts out [intelligent]. We don't gets dumb till later on." Berlant asks, "What is 'dumbness' here, if not Delilah's name for the mental blockages to rage and pain—what I earlier called 'the-will-to-not-know'—that distinguishes the colonized subject?" (126). While Berlant refers to Peola's willful denial, Delilah's use of "dumb" also alludes to the silence of muted black bodies like Aunt Jemima's. In contrast to these "dumb" bodies, Stahl lets Delilah's body speak in life and in death. Berlant argues that, in her funeral scene, Delilah emerges as a site of collective identity in a black public sphere that demythologizes the

homogenous nation. Instead of representing amnesia (like Jemima), Delilah's corpse represents "pain, memory, history, and ritual" (124-25).

Through the intertextuality between *The Bluest Eye* and *Imitation of Life*, Morrison illuminates Pecola's relationship to Shirley Temple. In *Imitation of Life*, Bea puts a white face on Delilah's labor and body, exploiting them for her own benefit. Similarly, in *The Bluest Eye*, Shirley Temple and her creators profit by putting her white face on the black music and culture embodied by Bojangles. Delilah advises Peola to "submit," and suppress her rage over such injustices, but Peola refuses. Similarly, Pecola cannot endure invisibility and "dumbness." Instead, she wants to embody the Shirley Temple trademark—to consume and be consumed like the quintessential American child. While Pecola behaves like Peola, however, she operates in the narrative like Delilah. When Claudia invokes Pecola's pregnant body, she inscribes it, like Delilah's, with the "pain, memory, history, and ritual" of their community. Claudia, therefore, substitutes Pecola's body for the Temple trademark that would otherwise offer little more than nostalgic banalities about 1940s America.

In *The Bluest Eye*, Pecola's pregnancy and psychosis represent extreme consequences of racism. By weaving Pecola's story into a web of very different but interconnected narratives, however, Morrison suggests that the erasures of abstraction occur in layers, rather than as an absolute. Claudia, who despises Shirley Temple, minimally resists the self-effacing impetuses that seduce Pecola. In contrast, with lighter skin, greater economic stability, and long familial and pedagogical histories that promote assimilation, Maureen, Geraldine, and Soaphead all suppress their "surpluses." To complicate matters, however, Morrison dissociates their abstraction from the hoped-for empowerment of citizenship. Instead, all of these characters endure varying degrees of powerlessness while also suffering a devastating lack of familial or communal intimacy. Through their social and political bankruptcy, Morrison suggests that self-abstraction offers nothing more than a false promise to black Americans.

Furthermore, since Morrison arranges these peripheral characters in separate but inextricable stories that defy linear narration, she simultaneously culminates multiple and contemporaneous

histories in the specter of Pecola's demise. The protagonist of each subplot participates in Pecola's oppression. To defend herself against Claudia and Frieda, Maureen denies her own blackness in a taunt that crushes Pecola. She calls all three girls "Black and ugly black e mos" (61). Similarly, when Geraldine finds Pecola in her home, she suppresses the eruption of surplus corporeality that Pecola symbolizes by ordering the "nasty little black bitch" out of the house (75). Finally, to preserve the illusion of his own power, Soaphead persuades Pecola that he has given her the blue eyes she desires. As these characters variously label, degrade, and define Pecola's body so as to disavow the realities of racism in their own lives, Morrison suggests that they mirror the work of a nation that ironically invests in the ideology of childhood innocence at the expense of its children.

With these overlapping narrative circles, Morrison's literary form shows how seemingly isolated experiences of oppression can interconnect and compound each other to corrupt individuals as well as their families, communities, or nations over time. As adults like Geraldine and Soaphead Church unwittingly cooperate to create a Dick-and-Jane-style innocence within their individual and communal lives, Morrison puts insight into the eyes of a child who already recognizes the perils of such aspirations. Claudia holds the entire town responsible for Pecola's tragic end when she says, "All of us—all who knew her—felt so wholesome after we cleaned ourselves on her. We were so beautiful when we stood astride her ugliness." Since love, according to Claudia, "is never any better than the lover," even those who loved Pecola, especially Cholly and his legacy of powerlessness, could not save her (159).

While Morrison clearly indicts African American communities for their acceptance of oppressive ideologies, Claudia goes further, implicating the nation in Pecola's demise when she explains, "I even think now that the land of the entire country was hostile to marigolds that year. This soil is bad for certain kinds of flowers" (160). Furthermore, Claudia explains her unwillingness to let Temple's version of innocent American childhood go unchallenged. Through the mouth of a child Morrison tells us that no good can come from innocence or nostalgia. Claudia aligns the former with the devastation of rape when she says, "*Our innocence and faith were no more productive than [Cholly's] lust or despair*"

(emphasis in original 9). She criminalizes the latter when she shows that America's nostalgia for past wartime patriotism or postwar bliss masks a desire for a time when community and nation refused to "see" the destruction of little black girls like Pecola.

In the early 1970s, when Giroux suggests nostalgia for wartime America first emerges, Morrison critic Sara Blackburn defensively complains that "Toni Morrison is far too talented to remain only a marvelous recorder of the black side of provincial American life." She advises Morrison to "address a riskier contemporary American reality. . . and take her place among the most serious, important, and talented American novelists" (qtd. in McKay 5). In Blackburn's narrow view, Morrison should write about white people and their prosperous nation, not black people and their struggling town. By bringing nationally recognized child-figures to a small Ohio town, however, Morrison connects local and national. Additionally, in the contrast between Pecola's demise and Claudia's survival, Morrison suggests that childhood experiences might encompass anything from blind and silent victimization to insightful narration and resistance. With such a revelation, Morrison leaves the ideologies of innocent childhood and benevolent nation standing with Pecola at the local garbage heap. She suggests that childhood innocence is neither a reality nor an ideal. Instead, she asks us to consider it apart from children, to explore what other, seemingly unrelated investments we might have in preserving it.

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