

RACE, GENDER AND IDENTITY: A STUDY OF TONI MORRISON'S NOVELS

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ABSTRACT

The present paper means to deliver the view of the world in the postcolonial period through the novels of Toni Morrison.

Morrison in her novels, through her conscious use of the impact of racism psyche of the African-Americans, rouses us out of our complacency and shocks us into the recognition of various possibilities. Not only is she conscious of many ways of portraying the issue of race, lest her novels became stereotyped; but more importantly the problem of race gets entwined with the problem of class and gender. It is this characteristic of her work that makes for its rich complexity and its compelling and continued interest.

Keywords: Racism, Social Discrimination, Unwillingness, Deprivation, Hybridity, Alienation, Multiculturalism, Loss of Nature, Marginality.

INTRODUCTION

Toni Morrison's first novel, *The Bluest Eye*, published in 1970, focuses intently on the 1993 *Afterword* to the novel, Morrison explicitly ties the issue of beauty in *The Bluest Eye* to the politics of racial beauty and identity in the 1960s. She writes: "The reclamation of racial beauty in the sixties stirred these thoughts [about beauty], made me think about the necessity for the claim. Why, although reviled by others, could this beauty not be taken for granted within the community?... The assertion of racial beauty [in the novel] was...against the damaging internalization of immutable inferiority originating in an outside gaze." Rejecting that internalization of the (white) outside gaze was part of the project of the Black Arts Movement. Essays such as Ron Karenga's "Black Cultural Nationalism," Larry Neal's "The Black Arts Movement," and Morrison's own "What the Black Woman Thinks About Women's Lib" -all written during this period -each discuss the black struggle to be free of white ideas, aesthetic or otherwise. A representative poem of the period, Don L. Lee's "The Primitive," illustrates the dominant Black Arts theme of rejecting colonization in the lines, [whites] christianized us. Raped our minds with: "T.V. & straight hair *Reader's Digest* & bleaching creams, tarzan & jungle jim, ...European history & promises. Those alien concept of whiteness." During the Black Arts Movement writers delineated the impact of the cultural colonization of the black community by Euro-American culture and values and actively pursued a black aesthetic. Using a decolonization framework for periodizing Morrison's work thus embraces both her recurring concerns as well as her literary origins during the Black Arts period. Morrison's first four books, *The Bluest Eye*, *Sula*, *Song of Solomon* and *Tar Baby*, constitute Morrison's struggle with colonization, both for her characters and their communities, as well as in her own writing. We can see this pattern in the dialogical way in which

Morrison frames her early novels: *The Bluest Eye* is framed with a deconstructive dialogue with the Dick and Jane children's book; *Sula*, with the Bible; *Song of Solomon*, with the American capitalist success myth. With *Tar Baby*'s explicit identification of colonization as a central issue, Morrison finally breaks free from the need to focus primarily on white ideas, aesthetic or otherwise; following *Tar Baby*, Morrison begins publishing a trilogy, of which we now have seen *Beloved* and *Jazz*. Published, a trilogy focused on black history and written primarily within an African American cultural perspective. In contrast to the concern with white frames in the early novels, both *Beloved* and *Jazz* takes as their frames historically documented events in black lives: *Beloved*, on the case of Margaret Garner; *Jazz*, on a photo taken by James Van Der Zee that appears in *The Harlem Book of the Dead*. One of the many thematic concerns that can be clarified by a periodization of Morrison's work based on her struggle with colonization is her treatment of beauty throughout her work.

In the novels before *Tar Baby*, Morrison repeatedly depicts black female characters engulfed by white ideals of beauty. In *The Bluest Eye*, Pecola's desire for blue eyes reflects a community absorbed by white ideas of what is beautiful. References to idols of white female beauty, Greta Garbo, Ginger Rogers, Jean Harlow, and to the child icon of beauty, Shirley Temple, bespeak an obsession with a standard of white female beauty that, in turn, renders black women and girls invisible. Pecola's insanity at the end of the novel mirrors, Morrison suggests, a cultural insanity that threatens the black community's identity and strength. Likewise, in *Sula*, Nel is raised in accordance with white ideas of beauty. She is told to pull on her nose to make it "nice," and endures the hot comb in her mother's pursuit of smooth hair for her. In *Song of Solomon*, the Hagar subplot revisits the maddening effects of internalized white standards of female beauty on black women. When Hagar sees the new object of Milkman's affections, a girl with light skin and smooth, long hair, she begins an obsessive downward spiral, attempting to buy and "put on" those markers of beauty more in accordance with received notions of white-identified beauty. Part of Milkman's quest in the novel is to come to an appreciation and acceptance of a beauty based on black ideals, as reflected in his taking a lock of Hagar's hair with him upon returning to Not Doctor Street. In *Tar Baby*, Morrison's struggle with the colonization of African American beauty by white notions of beauty comes to a head in her portrait of a colonized black beauty, Jadine. Unlike the previous three female characters, who are hurt by, struggle with, and ultimately succumb to internalized views of beauty, Jadine is thoroughly happy with a definition of beauty based on white standards, because she fits it. In fact, Jadine struggles not against a white-defined standard of female beauty, but against a black-defined beauty, as represented by the woman in yellow who haunts her dreams, because it reminds her of her inauthenticity. The character in *Tar Baby* who is personally hurt by white standards of beauty, Alma Estee, as exemplified in her grotesque russet wig, is a marginal character. Thus, Morrison makes an important shift in her handling of the ideas of beauty and colonization in *Tar Baby*, for by moving away from focusing on the personal devastation caused in black women by internalized ideas of white female beauty to instead concentrating on a black woman who fully identifies with and achieves those internalized standards, Morrison shifts her concern away from the African American community of blacks who identify with white culture to the extent that they reject their own. Jadine is not absorbed only by white culture's definition of beauty, she fully identifies with European cultural values about art, nature, family, and money.

Tar Baby also represents a departure from Morrison's earlier depictions of beauty in its plurality of beauty ideals. While in the earlier novels the idea of beauty seems to be dominated by white standards, in *Tar Baby* Morrison represents and elaborates on alternatives. First, several types of female beauty are represented: a white female beauty, Margaret; a white-identified black female beauty, Jadine; and a black-identified black female beauty, the woman in yellow. Second, characters discuss differing aesthetic values throughout the novel, with Jadine favoring Picasso and hating the

swamp, with Valerian preferring his hot-house blooms to the tropical vegetation outdoors, and with the emperor butterflies deploring the sealskin coat Jadine adores. There are aesthetic and cultural choices available to the characters in this novel chooses natural beauty over her previous high-class, artificial beauty object persona. Jadine chooses to reject the swamp women and Son, and decides to return to her life in Europe, and thus chooses to remain colonized. By placing this issue of beauty and aesthetic value in the context of colonization, and by making colonization a choice rather than an inescapable fact (once your options are made available), Morrison is then free in *Tar Baby* to reject colonization by white ideas and choose a decolonized stance. When Jadine's plane takes off and she leaves the novel, Morrison in effect says goodbye to colonization in her work and turns the novel's attention to the black cultural mythos of the blind horsemen and the tar baby folktale.

Morrison's work after *Tar Baby* continues this decolonized focus on black history and culture. Morrison's primary dialogue with and critique of white culture becomes tertiary with *Tar Baby*.

Paralleling this general shift in emphasis between Morrison's early and later periods, *Beloved* depart from Morrison's first four novels in its complete disinterest in the colonization of black female beauty by white ideals. The main female characters simply don't think about whether they fit prescribed notions of beauty, nor are they held to a beauty standard within or without the community. The two instances where beauty becomes an issue are minor, and unrelated to colonization. First, Paul D, who had initially found the scars on Sethe's back beautiful, reacts negatively after having sex with her and thinks her back is a "revolting clump of scars". Both he and Sethe are having doubts and thinking of how little the other measures up. Second, *Beloved* is described as beautiful, which is part of her magical effect on others. Both of these are quite unlike the trap of white-identified female beauty elaborated on in the early novels. Thus, the lack of the female beauty issue in *Beloved* supports reading Morrison's post-*Tar Baby* work as decolonized. However, it could be argued that *Beloved* does not reflect a post-*Tar Baby* decolonized stance because it constitutes Morrison's dialogue with and critique of white versions of the history of slavery. *Beloved* certainly offers an alternative version of the slavery experience, written as it is from the perspective of African Americans, both free and enslaved. But *Beloved* is not focused on correcting white versions of slavery, of Margaret Garner, or even on depicting the horrors of slavery, although it does, in effect, do these; instead, the central focus in the novel is on the inner realities and interpersonal relationships of the central black characters, while the white characters remain marginal. Furthermore, *Beloved's* (and *Jazz's*) focus on primary philosophical issues such as memory, identity, time, and love, issues that are not circumscribed by any dominant cultural frame, suggest a turning away in her later work from a primary focus on cultural colonization. In *Jazz*, Morrison picks up the theme of beauty but treats it from a decolonized perspective by signifying on it. In many ways, *Jazz* is about signification. The epigraph, "I am the name of the sound / and the sound of the name. / I am the sign of the letter / and the designation of the division," from The Nag Hammadi, frames the novel's playing on the division between signs and their referents. Joe and Violet's last name is Trace, taken by Joe after being told his parents "disappeared without a trace", surely signifying on Jacques Derrida's concept of the trace left by the absent sign in the process of signification. Signs proliferate throughout the novel: Dorcas' photo on the mantel is a sign of the dead girl, a sign which in its difference (to differ and defer) marks the trace of her presence in Joe and Violet's minds as well as her absence in death, and which signifies differently depending on the beholder; Joe tells of waiting to learn his mother's identity, asking that "All she had to do was give him a sign" and he would know it was the wild woman who was his mother.

Morrison has fun in *Jazz* with the proliferation of meanings offered by the process of signification, as in the case of Malvonne, who, upon discovering the sack of mail her nephew had stolen, reads the

letters and makes additions that alter the senders' intended significance. Under signification, meaning while multiple, cannot finally be determined. Cause and effect, arche and telos, become separated when signs are at play. While indeterminacy can be disorienting, there is a freedom and lightheartedness associated with signifying. One is free of oppressive meanings; one escapes being determined by a final, transcendental signified. From this post-modern, decolonized stance, the novel of Morrison's later period revoice and revise those of her earlier period.

For example, Morrison signifies in *Jazz* on the meanings of female beauty in her first novel, *The Bluest Eye*, in which the white ideals of beauty were oppressive determinants of Pecola's identity. We can say of *The Bluest Eye* that signs of white beauty throughout the culture were internalized by the black community. We can say that, according to that discourse of signs, Pecola was rendered invisible. We can even say that the sign system of beauty (along with the rape by her father) drove her mad. We cannot make such statements about beauty in *Jazz*. In *Jazz*, Morrison signifies on the signs from *The Bluest Eye*, but her characters and the novel escape being determined by them. They remain at play, never resting with a final signified. And that breaks their power. The first sign in *Jazz* that Morrison is signifying on *The Bluest Eye* from a decolonized position comes in Morrison's repetition and revised use of the narrator Claudia's opening comment, "Quiet as it's kept, there were no marigolds in the fall of 1941". In *Jazz*, this phrase reappears in the first section in the narrator's disclosure about Violet: "but quiet as it's kept, she did try to steal that baby although there is no way to prove it". Such repetition of a phrase might seem coincidental, were it not for Morrison's newly published *Afterword* to the 1993 edition of *The Bluest Eye*, in which she discusses at length her use of that opening sentence in *The Bluest Eye* as representative of her writing at that time. As the *Afterword* makes clear, Morrison is looking back with a critical eye at her early work, noting its limitations, and, in *Jazz*, playing with its possibilities. Morrison also signifies in *Jazz* on the color and musical motifs of *The Bluest Eye*. The blue eyes Pecola longs for are not only blue because they represent a white, Aryan ideal, but because her desire for them and the madness that brings is a theme suitable for a blues song. As Ralph Ellison defines it, the blues is an impulse to keep the painful details and episodes of a brutal experience alive in one's aching consciousness, to finger its jagged grain, and to transcend it, not by the consolation of philosophy but by squeezing from it a near-tragic, near-comic lyricism. As a form, the blues is an autobiographical chronicle of personal catastrophe expressed lyrically. Pecola has the blues and cannot sing them away. She is "the bluest I." In *Jazz*, however, the blues is transposed into jazz, which, while grounded in the "blues impulse" that acknowledges the painful realities of a complex experience, transforms blues materials into something different.

As Craig Werner explains the relationship between the blues and jazz impulses, "the jazz impulse provides a way of exploring implications, of realizing the relational possibilities of the (blues) self, and of expanding the consciousness of self and community through a process of continual improvisation". In *Jazz*, Morrison, like any jazz artist, whose work is, according to Ellison, "an endless improvisation upon traditional materials", takes her earlier, blues materials and improvisationally explores their implications and envisions alternative possibilities. While the tragedy of Joe and Violet's love triangle is the stuff of a classic blues song, it becomes a far more complex, free-wheeling jazz piece. Violet, unlike Pecola, is not "the bluest V although she has the blues; instead, she is violet, a color suggesting a more nuanced understanding of the complex realities before her. Morrison signifies directly on the issues of beauty and colorism in *Jazz* in her depictions of Joe, Violet, Golden Gray, and Dorcas and adopts a decolonized stance toward their involvement with beauty ideals. Joe and Violet are both purveyors of beauty ideals: he, with his case of "Cleopatra" beauty products for black women; she, as the neighborhood hairdresser who presses, trims, and curls black hair. Both are haunted, in a sense, by a past involving Golden Gray, the white-appearing

mulatto offspring of Miss Vera, who Violet's grandmother True Belle helped raise and adored and whose encounter with Joe's probable mother, Wild, has been passed on to Joe by Hunter's Hunter. Beautiful, blond, elegant Golden Gray is a trace in the novel, a trace of the allure of white-identified beauty ideals, as well as a trace of plantation mythology in American literature that plays out in Faulkner's work. Having rejected the colonizing plantation frame in *Tar Baby*, Morrison in *Jazz* takes a decolonized position and jams on the myth. Golden Gray, like Faulkner for Morrison, still has influence and is a predecessor for Violet, but no longer colonizes Violet's mind. Near the end of *Jazz*, Violet tries to explain to Felice what had gone wrong in her life; how she had wished she were "White. Light. Young again". Violet traces this to the stories True Belle had told her about Golden Gray: "He lived inside my mind. But I didn't know it till I got here. The two us. Had to get rid of it"). Felice asks how she did that, and Violet replies, "Killed her. Then I killed the me that killed her." Felice asks, "Who's left?" Violet answers, "Me" Morrison describes here a process of decolonization in which Violet must destroy the internalized white beauty ideal that's in her mind, as well as the destructive part of her that killed it.

What's left is a decolonized self. The depiction of Dorcas also signifies on the traces of white beauty ideals in the black community from a decolonized perspective in which those standards ultimately lack power. Dorcas has the right signs of "beauty": "creamy" skin tone and hair the narrator suspects she "didn't need to straighten". And Dorcas is very involved in beauty as something valuable. Felice relates how Dorcas's reaction to the photo of her dead parents was that "Dorcas couldn't get over how good looking they both were". In fact, according to Felice, "She was always talking about who was good looking and who wasn't". But Dorcas's signs of and involvement with beauty don't, finally, signify that she is beautiful, Morrison points out. As Felice muses, "Dorcas should have been prettier than she was. She just missed. She had all the ingredients of pretty too. Long hair, wavy, half good, half bad. Light skinned. Never used skin bleach. Nice shape. But it missed somehow. If you looked at each thing, you would admire that thing – the hair, the color, the shape. All together it didn't fit". Just as blue eyes won't make Pecola beautiful according to a white-infused beauty ideal, neither will having all the signs of it make Dorcas pretty. Dorcas, as her name implies, is a dorky schoolgirl with pimples. Furthermore, the power of the white-identified beauty attributes Dorcas does have is substantially diminished in *Jazz*, as compared to *The Bluest Eyes*, because Dorcas is dead. The signifying on beauty in *Jazz* breaks the power of beauty over the characters and their community because of their self-reflexiveness and sense of having choices, two markers of a decolonized self exemplary of Morrison's recent work to date. Ultimately, Joe and Violet become aware of their issues and choose not to remain stuck on them. Joe, for example, when Felice asks if he is still stuck on Dorcas, responds, "Stuck ? Well, if you mean did I like about what I felt about her. I guess I'm stuck to that". Joe explicitly states it is not Dorcas and her signs of beauty he is stuck on; rather, he now understands it is the issues from his past he projected onto her that he must handle. By the end of the novel Joe chooses Violet, although he had not done so before. Making choices is a motif the novel returns to again and again: Violet chooses Joe, although Joe didn't choose Violet; Joe chooses Dorcas, although when Acton chooses her, she dumps Joe. And Golden Gray, When he meets his father, Hunters Hunter, hear him demand, "Be what you want – white or black. Choose. But if you choose black, you got to act black, meaning draw your manhood up". In *Jazz*, Morrison's characters choose their affinities. Morrison's central concern in her later work with self-reflexive African American characters focused on issues of identity, memory, and love differs radically from her focus in her early work with black characters' struggles with the effects of psychological and cultural colonization.

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