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"Pain was not only endurable, it was sweet": Re-memory and Healing in *The Bluest Eye*

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Abstract

The complex structure of Toni Morrison's debut novel The Bluest Eye (hereafter BE) is intended to be open to the socio-cultural environment that surrounds it rather than closed within the text itself. Credited as a polyphonic text, BE works to defy and even disrupt dominant value judgments and normalized conceptions including issues of beauty and the ideals of family composition, both of which became critical issues at the time of the novel's composition in the mid-1960s. While critics have read the novel as a counterhegemonic-narrative operating against white dominant discourses, they are less concerned with the productive aspects of the black vernacular culture than with the investigation of the workings of whiteness in the text. In this sense, these readings seem to overlook Morrison's writerly investment in black populations and their culture that leads to racial healing. This, I argue, is the most important aspect of the text.

Referring to the concept of "re-memory," this paper focuses on the interconnections of memory, narrative, and healing in BE. Morrison creates an empathic community replete with racial feelings by transforming personal memories and previously forgotten histories into a hybrid story sharable with her readers. At the same time, however, the narrative construction poses ethical questions to readers. This paper investigates the relationship between the healing effects of BE for (black) readers and paradoxical movements in the narrative of provoking empathic response replete with racial feelings and defying such empathy at the same time.

The complex structure of Toni Morrison's debut novel *The Bluest Eye* (hereafter *BE*)is intended to be open to the socio-cultural environment that surrounds it rather than closed within the text itself. Credited as a polyphonic text, *BE* works to defy and even disrupt dominant value judgments and normalized conceptions including issues of beauty and the ideals of family composition, both of which became critical issues at the time of the novel's composition in the mid-1960s. The novel's investigation into the workings of white powerthat "pathologize" black bodies and psyche makes it a counterhegemonic-narrative operating against white dominant discourses. Indeed, critics have read this novel as such. However, *BE* also depicts the productive aspects of the black vernacular culture. Morrison's writerly investment in black populations and their cultureleads to racial healing. This, I argue, is the most important aspect of the text. In other words, *BE* serves as a literary prescription for those who are defined as "ugly" and "pathologized" by the dominant ideology at work in the mid-1960s through 1970s.

Referring to the concept of "re-memory," Morrison's aesthetic and political strategy of using a hybrid narrative that constitutes complex layers of recollections, personal and collective, images and facts, registered in a particular "site," this paper focuses on the interconnections of memory, narrative, and healing in *BE*. Morrison delves into different ways in which racial healing takes place;from the power of the erotic to the musical translation of one's pain and grief. Morrison does find the healing potential in the act of erotic, as depicted in Pauline's re-memory, but she acutely points out the dangers inherent in the erotic power. Morrison, instead, favors healing potentialities of black vernacular music. The author, in the manner of a blues musician, creates anempathic community replete with racial feelings by transforming personal memories and previously forgotten histories into a hybrid story that is sharable with herreaders. At the same time, however, the narrative construction poses ethical questionsto readers.Morrison asks for readers' responsibility in sharing Pecola's tragedy. Keeping these issues in mind, this paper endeavors to investigate the relationship between the healing effects of *BE* for (black)readers and paradoxical movements in the narrative, i.e.,provoking empathic response replete with racial feelings and defying such empathy at the same time.

The Moynihan Report and the "Imperial Gaze"

Morrison comments on the interrelation between fiction and societal reality inher Preface to *Playing in the Dark*:

> Until very recently, and regardless of the race of the author, the readers of virtually all of American fiction have been positioned as white.I am interested to know what that assumption has meant to the literary imagination. . . .How do embedded assumptions of racial (not racist) language work in the literary enterprise that hopes and sometimes claims to be "humanistic"? (xii)

This quotation evidences Morrison's writerly interests in the ways that literary texts immensely shaperacial perceptions of the world among writers and readers alike. Morrison, echoing Ralph Ellison's criticism of American fictions,[i] is concerned with the black characters' marginalized positions within the politically and racially loaded construction of the American canon (*Playing* 6). The crucial implication of this concern is derived from her acute understanding that text is open to influence and even creates an external reality. In other words, Morrison problematizes the processwhere certain racial representations and positionalities depicted in literature are transferred to society and assume symbolic power to construct societal reality, where African American people are always already marginalized and silenced. It seems natural that the process of canon formation becomes a matter of concern to Morrison. As she writes, "Canon building is empire building. Canon defense is national defense. Canon debate, whatever the terrain, nature, and range . . . is the clash of cultures. And all of the interests are vested" ("Unspeakable" 207). Morrison shows her deep concern that language in American literature, as a meditating device, is deployed by mainstream white culture to "powerfully evoke and enforce hidden signs of racial superiority, cultural hegemony, and dismissive 'othering' of people and language" (*Playing* x).

Such "othering" of African American people was imminent reality in the mid-1960s when Morrison started as a professional writer. The mono-vision of the white male gaze, what feminist critic and writer bell hooks calls the "imperial gaze— the look that seeks todominate, subjugate, and colonize"(*7*), manifested itself conspicuously within the liberal discourse of the post-World War II welfare state. In particular, this is exemplified by the publication of *The Negro Family: The Case for National Action*, known colloquially as "the Moynihan Report." Written by Daniel Patrick Moynihan, then Assistant secretary for labor in the Lyndon Johnson presidential administration, the report defines a black family of low socioeconomic status as uncivilized and pathologizes its prominent family structure characterized by "a fatherless, matrifocal (mother-centered) pattern" (16). According to Moynihan, black matrimonial family structure is "pathological" because it "is so out of line

with the rest of the American society, [it] seriously retards the progress of the group as a whole" (29). The only cure for social "pathology," according to Moynihan, is to reconcile black family collectives with the white middle-class family model by giving patriarchal authority to black men in the family. As such, the Moynihan Report normalizes white American hetero-patriarchal family ideals and promotes the bio-political, or, at least the socio-political subjugation of black populations to the fabricated white norm.

Morrison depicts the operation of such dominant ideology in the novel. The singular and superlative form of the title *The Bluest Eye* signals the supreme cultural value of white dominant groups idealized and promoted by Moynihan.[ii] The normalized white family system and its rigid concept of white beauty are dexterously incorporated into the text through the "Dick and Jane" style primer story embedded in the epigraph.

> 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. (1)

What should be noted in the primer is that it is written in imperative mood ("see," "come and play"), "suggesting the presence of . . . the controlling authority that directs both the reader and the character of the story"(Wong 471), which reminds us of Moynihan's top-down social reform. Morrison makes visible the heterogeneous processes of psychological colonization of Cholly, Pauline, and, of course, Pecola, who unanimously internalize "Dick and Jane" standards. For example, Pauline's gradual immersion into the fictive world of classic Hollywood cinema that introduced to her "the idea of romantic love" and "physical beauty," attests to this colonizing process (95). As "cinema's primary victim" (Fick 15), Pauline's immersion results in her identification with "the blinding gaze" (Feng 58), that is, the cinema screen, which colonizes her psyche and drives her to emulate white standards of beauty and moral ideals. Morrison suggests that Pauline and Pecola's longing for white beauty is something a posteriori and that their belief in black "ugliness" is a forced racial performance required by the dominant gaze.This explains Pauline's willful transformation into Polly, the maid and embodiment of the mammy stereotype, who works for the white, prosperous Fisher family. In Frantz Fanon's sense, Polly trades in her loyalty to her own black family to gain access to the white world and its privileges.[iii]As a result of leaving her own children's care so

that she could take care of the Fishers' child, Polly ultimately slips back into the "pre-Emancipation roles" of slaves (Gillan 289).In this manner, the white imperial gaze exerts a pernicious influence on the constitutions of black identities, (re-) producing the ill-matched power relations between the seer and the seen.[iv]

The Erotic Re-memory and its Dangerous Limitations

While the analysis of the white gaze's operation and its influence on the formation of black identities is certainly one of the significant themes in the text, it seems also important to pay attention to the author's writerly investment in the black vernacular culture that entails the potential for healing "pathologized" bodies and minds. Indeed Morrison emphasizes that she is writing for her "Africanist" people. She develops this perspective in an interview with Thomas LeClair:

> I write what I have recently begun to call village literature, fiction that is really for the village, for the tribe. Peasant literature for *my* people, which is necessary and legitimate but which also allows me to get in touch with all sorts of people. I think long and carefully about what my novels ought to do. They should clarify the roles that have become obscured; they ought to identify those things in the past that are useful and those things that are not; and they ought to give nourishment. (LeClair 120-21 italics in original)

It is noteworthy that Morrison finds something valuable from the past experiences of her racial group that might nourish black people. Morrison implies that a certain potential for racial healing is registered in her novel. At stake here is not the damaging effects of the white imperial gaze on the black population, but how Morrison, through her text, tries to heal these effects.

Morrison foregrounds the symbiotic relationships between recollection, memoir, and fiction in "The site of Memory," an important essay meditating on the functions of memory in her works. In the essay, Morrison suggests that her novels are similar to collective recollections combined with her personal imagination in the sense that she utilizes her recollection of past events and fragmented pieces of information and artifacts that become available to her (112-

13). When writing *Beloved*, Morrison used a newspaper piece on Margaret 'Peggy' Garner, an enslaved black woman in the pre–Civil War United States who killed her daughter rather than allowing the child to be returned to slavery. Implying her use of this piece, Morrison notes, "It's a kind of literary archaeology: on the basis of some information and a little bit of guesswork you journey to a site to see what remains were left behind and to reconstruct the world that these remains imply" ("Site" 112). Morrison suggests that certain memories or fragmented images are registered in "a site" or in "remains," which she appropriates to re-imagine and reconstruct the world in her work. As such, re-memory constitutes complex layers of recollections, both personal and collective, and images in which "various diverse forces such as haunting, artifact, the body, and 'fact' intersect to create a multilayered, heterogeneous story" (Young 107). As we can guess from Morrison's comparison to archaeology, her artistic project is intended to resist the burying of the dehumanized and erased interior lives of black populations. In other words, re-memory is an imaginative production that constitutes a "route to the reconstruction of the world" ("Site" 95). Through such imaginative and mnemonic routes, Morrison writes stories.

BE's complex narrative design, which commingles with the information provided by the authorial narrator and characterized by Claudia's performative childhood, can be interpreted as a creative act of re-memory. The Breedlove's house becomes an important mnemonic "site" in the story. The first "primer section" narrated by the authorial narrator begins with the house where the Breedloves once lived, tracing the different occupants of the property. The first paragraph begins in the present-tense: "There is an abandoned store on the southeast corner of Broadway and Thirty-fifth Street in Lorain, Ohio. It does not recede into its background of leaden sky, nor harmonize with the gray frame houses and black telephone poles around it. Rather it foists itself on the eye of the passerby in a manner that is both irritating and melancholy" (24). Then the narrator tells us that the Breedloves once lived in the store. "So fluid has the population in that area been, that probably no one remembers longer, longer ago, before the time of the gypsies and the time of the teen-agers when the Breedloves lived there, nestled together in the storefront" (25). This transition of temporality from the present to past tense suggests that the guiding narrator is looking back on past events and recollects the memories that reside in this storefront house.

The storefront house serves as the mnemonic and the emotional hinge where the Breedloves're-memory develops. The most significant re-memory restored there is that of Pauline's erotic recollection. In the scene that describes Pauline's inner thoughts and memories concerning sex with Cholly, we can find potential healing effects and nourishment for "pathologized" bodies and minds.

> *He puts his thing in me. In me. In me.. . . Now I be strong enough, pretty enough, and young enough to let him make me come. . . . I begin to feel those little bits of color floating up into me—deep in me. That streak of green from the june-bug light, the purple from the berries trickling along my thighs, Mama's lemonade yellow runs sweet in me. Then I feel like I'm laughing between my legs, and the laughing gets all mixed up with the colors, and I'm afraid I'll come, and afraid I won't. But I know I will. And I do. And it be rainbow all inside. And it lasts and lasts and lasts.* (101 italics in original)

In this scene, Pauline's body becomes a site of pleasure and desirewhere her psychological wounds heal. Pauline disregards her obsession with the visual image of her body in favor of "a perspective that privileges touch and other senses" (Griffin 521). Cholly's sensual and erotic touch provides her with an opportunity to "re-learn" to love herself. Moreover, as Farah Jasmine Griffin astutely points out, orgasm constitutes a site of agency where the body "eschews control of any kind" (528).As a site of agency, Pauline's orgasm functions as a bodily medium for presenting transformative movement toward self-respect in opposition to the dominant white value judgments that have colonized and controlled her psyche. To follow Griffin, "these moments of remembered touching, pleasure, affirmation, playfulness and laughter" work as acts of nurturing and sustenance (Griffin 529).

Significantly, this understanding of the erotic dovetails with Audre Lorde's conception of "the power of the erotic" (58). In her pioneering essay "Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power," Lorde encourages women of color to claim the erotic as "a resource within each of us that lies in a deeply female and spiritual plane" (53). In Lorde's view, the power of the erotic enables women of color, or more broadly people of color, to illuminate autonomous feelings, responsibility and self-respect that will liberate them from societal demands.In this regard, Pauline's erotic re-memory, which encourages her to embrace and love herself, presents the potential to heal her distorted psyche. Furthermore, it is noteworthy that her re-memory of the sexual act is described in the present tense: "*And it lasts and lasts and lasts*" (101 italics in original). The present tense used in this scene foregrounds the inherent nature of the erotic power within our bodies. Morrison states that such healing and empowerment are always accessible to us.

Another important way in which memories of erotic pleasure function is that they are enacted and shared with others. As Pauline recollects, these sensual memories prevent her

from leaving Cholly (*BE* 100). Her memories of pleasure shared with Cholly provide the potential power to reconcile the gap between them. As Lorde claims, "The sharing of joy, whether physical, emotional, psychic, or intellectual, forms a bridge between the sharers which can be the basis for understanding much of what is not shared between them, and lessens the threat of their difference" (56). Like Lorde, Morrison implies that the deeply private act of erotic pleasure can be a collaborative, even a communal act that works to form understandings between humans.[v]In fact, Pauline's reference to colors in the above quoted scene attests to her yearning toward rebuilding a close-knit community. The colors "*green*," "*yellow*," and "*purple*" connect to her joyful childhood memory in the South. Moreover, Cholly embodies these colors: "*When I first seed Cholly . . . it was like them berries, that lemonade, them streaks of green the june bugs made, all come together*" (90, italics in original). Therefore, while the "*rainbow*" in Pauline's re-memory seemingly represents her solipsistic ecstasy, it, as a symbolic mixture of these colors, signals Cholly's bridging presence vital to the formation of solid familial bonding.

However, it is of paramount importance to note that while Morrison explores the healing potential of the erotic, she is also keenly aware of the limitation or potential danger inherent in the power of the erotic. If sexual pleasure and desire, or more broadly, tender feelings of love, are wronged, especially when deployed hierarchically, they will lead to a violent, tragic consequence, as shown by Cholly's rape of Pecola. As Morrison notes, "The lover alone possesses his gift of love. The loved one is shorn, neutralized, frozen in the glare of the lover's inward eye" (*BE*163). Here, Morrison again employs the metaphor of the "gaze" that forms the unequal power balance between the lover/seer and the loved/seen.

Morrison further complicates issues of erotic power. She implies that Cholly's violation of Pecola is, in effect, an act of altruism, as demonstrated through his sensual touch to "give something of himself" to save "helpless, hopeless" Pecola (163, 127). In the problematical rape scene, Pecola's gesture of scratching the back of her calf with her toe reminds Cholly of Pauline at the time when he first saw her in Kentucky and provokes in him "a tenderness, a protectiveness" (128). The tragedy occurs when Cholly inappropriately exerts his erotic power to heal Pecola in the same manner as he did Pauline. Tracing his childhood story, Morrison describes that the pernicious cause of this tragedy originates in Cholly's alienation from the black community. Cholly does not know how to love his children properly becauseas a boy he was "Abandoned in a junk heap by his mother, rejected for a crap game by his father," and has "never watched any parent raise himself" (126).[vi] Consequently, this alienation makes him "Dangerously free" (125).

Thus acknowledging the implied risk of building a community based on erotic power, the author hints atan alternative mode of sharing experiences, analogous to a musical performance: "The pieces of Cholly's life could become coherent only in the head of a musician. Only those who talk their talk through the gold of curved metal, or, in the touch of black-and-white rectangles and taut skins and strings echoing from wooden corridors, could give true form to his life" (125). Here Morrison implies that musical translation and transmission of Cholly's poignant story might have saved him. However, Cholly was, in reality, unable to articulate his experiences and feelings. What kind of music, then, can address and sooth Cholly's life experience? In what ways would this music enable a sharing of one's experiences that would lead to racial healing?

Blues Community and Morrison's Re-memory

Morrison suggests that it is throughsharing of one's grief and pain that we can gain healing, and that this healing project is an important characteristic of a close-knit black folk community. This is depicted in a scene in which Miss Alice and Mrs. Gaines come to comfort Aunt Jimmy who is recovering from sickness:

> The three women sat talking about various miseries they had had, their cure or abatement, what had helped. Over and over again they returned to Aunt Jimmy's condition. Repeating its cause, what could have been done to prevent the misery from taking hold, and M'Dear's infallibility. Their voices blended into a threnody of nostalgia about pain. Rising and falling, complex in harmony, uncertain in pitch, but constant in the recitative of pain. They hugged the memories of illness to their bosom (107).

The black women's sharing of memories of pain and misery constitutes a particular cultural wisdom of cure and healing. It is also noteworthy that their articulation of pain and grief translates into music terms ("threnody," "complex in harmony," "uncertain in pitch," "the recitative of pain"). This signals that certain black vernacular music, in a metaphorical sense, works as a repository of cultural wisdom concerning racial agony and as a means of its transcendence that is crucial in the project of healing racial wounds.

Blues is one such vernacular music that Morrison particularly has in mind. Woven through the narrative of *BE* is the motif of the blues, a sign of cultural memories and healing potential. In addition to the metonymy of the white gaze, "blue" in the title *The Bluest Eye* indicates "blues feelings," such as sorrow and the pathos of black experiences.[vii] According to Ellison, "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" ("Blues" 129). Thus, blues performance works as a cultural ritual that translates collective memories of "lack, loss, and grief into poetic catharsis" (Moses 629). In the above scene, Morrison depicts the transcendent and empathic quality of black women's blues, suggesting that racial healing lies paradoxically in its tragic aspects.[viii]

While Morrison describes the disruption of the traditional black folk community and the failure of the ill-fated characters to rebuild such groups, she tries simultaneously to reconstruct the emphatic racial community beyond the textual world. The pain and misery of the characters in this "terrible story about things one would rather not know anything about" paradoxically become productive cultural resources to be shared with readers (*BE* 170). Put differently, Morrison transforms this "blue" story into a "blues" story by sharing it with her readers at the meta-level. In doing so, she composes a racial interpretive community that metamorphoses pain and suffering into potentially healing power.

The bridging effects of blues-spirited re-memory play a metaphorical and structural role in the construction of the narrative design and the textual healing project. At the heart of the author's use of the hybrid narrative form lies her desire to invite readers to participate in her narrative. In other words, re-memory fills the temporal gap between past and present, connects the sharers of experience, and aims to fill the distance between the author, characters, and readers as sharers of the story. This is attempted by Morrison's masterly deployment of two main narrators: Claudia and the omniscient/anonymous voice.

Some critics point out that *BE* has autobiographical aspects and that Claudia is Morrison's alter-ego in the novel (Malmgren 254, Willis 35). No doubt, there is ample biographical information that suggests that Claudia is Morrison's alter-ego. Morrison was born in Lorain, Ohio, and she would have been nine years old in 1940-41, the year in which the events of the novel take place (Malmgren 254). In addition, Morrison admits that the novel has an autobiographical origin; Pecola was based on a real-life elementary school classmate who had wanted blue eyes (*BE* 167).

My reading builds upon these critics, but departs from them in that I believe that the significance of the biographical information lies in Morrison's intention to transform her private memories into a story sharable with her readers. Similar to the creation of Sethe's story through a newspaper piece on Margaret Garner's story, Morrison imagined and created *BE* using her personal memories and her imagination, provoked by her hometown. This means that her debut novel is, in effect, the author's re-memory. To return to Morrison's definition of re-memory, re-memory is a hybrid story in which diverse narratives including the author's imagination, personal recollections, and collective memories converge. Both Claudia and the omniscient/anonymous narrator who collaborates with her are the strategically deployed author's voice. Claudia's childhood memoir provides bridging effects that connect the past events with the present moment of narration by the mature Claudia/Morrison.

The anonymous narrator plays a different role: that of a blues musician who voices the black Americans' collective stories. According to Houston A. Baker, anonymity is one of the key elements of blues music: "Rather than a rigidly personalized form, the blues offer a phylogenetic recapitulation—a nonlinear, freely associative, nonsequential meditation—of species experience. What emerges is not a filled subject, but an anonymous (nameless) voice issuing from the black (w)hole. . . . the 'you' (audience) addressed is always free to invoke the X(ed) spot in the body's absence" (5). The term "the black (w)hole" is Baker's pun, suggesting that blues derives from the black collective's painful experience of loss. Moreover, "the black (w)hole" signals the anonymous aspect of the blues. The anonymous voice authorizes the audience to jump into the "the X(ed) spot" or black/blank hole created in the collective narrative. Thus blues forms a nonhierarchical "intersubjectivity" (5).

Indeed, Morrison highlights the importance of thisanonymous blues voice in her works:

> I like the feeling of a told story, where you hear a voice but you can't identify it, and you think it's your own voice. It's a comfortable voice, and it's a guiding voice. . . . But that guide can't have a personality; it can only have a sound, and you have to feel comfortable with this voice, and then this voice can easily abandon itself and reveal the interior dialogue of a character. So it's a combination of using the point of view of various characters but still retaining the power to slide in and out. . . . What I really want is that intimacy in which the reader is under the impression that he isn't really reading this; that he is participating in it as he goes along("Site" 121).

Remarkably, each section of the story that the anonymous narrator recounts is introduced byexcerpts from the disrupted "Dick and Jane" mythology. These sections correspond to the content of the primer excerpts,[ix]presenting a sharp contrast between the dominant white ideals and the plight of black characters, most prominently represented by the Breedloves, who aspire,but fail to emulate those ideals. Compared to the "seasonal sections" where Claudia narrates her relatively contented childhood, the anonymous narrator's "primer sections" foreground shared histories of black lack and loss.

Pauline's rotten tooth is one such symbolically depicted loss. As Pauline recollects, she lost her front tooth when she was watching a romantic movie featuring Jean Harlow. Pauline'sloss may stand for the futility of her yearning to emulate "white beauty." Yet, more importantly, it signifies the loss of black folk community and identity. The anonymous narrator details the rotting process: "a brown speck. . . finally eating away to the root, but avoiding the nerves, so its presence was not noticeable or uncomfortable. Then the weakened roots, having grown accustomed to the poison, responded one day to severe pressure, and the tooth fell free, leaving a ragged stump behind" (90-91). This depiction is awkwardly inserted immediately after the announcement of the newly married Breedloves' move to Ohio from the rural South, indicating that Pauline's rotten tooth symbolizes her uprooting from her traditional cultural "roots." The surreptitious invasion of "a brown speck,"a poison with a shade of color lighter than black,indicates Pauline's gradual immersion intothe bourgeois standards that"light-skinned" characters such as Geraldine and Maureen Peel represent. The poisonsymbolism of urban decay eventually cuts Pauline "free" from black folk values.Morrison's metaphorical use of cavity, a very common disease in everyday life, underscores the fact that such cultural displacement is a near-universal, even an archetypal,phenomenon in collective black experiences and memories. Thus, by creating "the X(ed) spot" in which the audience/readers can participate, Morrison urges readers to become part of the author's re-memory and thereby relive and feel the characters' pain and loss as their own.Herein lies the crux of the story as a form of re-memory and potential for racial healing.

Hence, building a certain type of intimacy with its readers is the first and foremost mission thatthis story mustaccomplish.Morrison engages in this task from the beginning. Claudia invites readers to share the textual experiences with her at the beginning of the story. Shebegins as follows: "*Quiet as it's kept, there were no marigolds in the fall of 1941*" (*BE* 4 italics in original). The opening phrase "*Quiet as it's kept*" is a black vernacular phrase that

signals a moment when a secret is being disclosed. As Morrison explains, "The words are conspiratorial. 'Shh, don't tell anyone else,' and 'No one is allowed to know this.' It is a secret between us and a secret that is being kept from us" (*BE* 169). This conspiratorial bonding that Morrison tries to establishfills the distance between readers and the text. Because the secret is related to the author's private memories, the degree of intimacy between the author, the text, and the readerincreases dramatically.

Of equal significance is that this vernacular expression functions as a particular cultural code. That is, this intimacy is assumed for black readers, who (we assume) comprehend the expression. Those who lack the knowledge of the blackcultural background will not understand, or at least will have more trouble understanding, the intention of that expression. The secret to be disclosed is Pecola's rape and pregnancy by her father, but the narrators providethe complex multilayered stories of black losses rather than superficial description of the incident. In other words, readers can, by bending an ear toward these stories,learn the situation surrounding Pecola's psychological demise,and experience for themselves the sufferings and hardships of thecharacters.As Young observes, "Re-memory forces one to experience a painful collective memory again" (118). In this way, Morrison's re-memory, deploying the black vernacular as the cultural code and provoking the repressed memories and histories of the collective blackexperiences through an anonymous blues voice, incorporates (black) readers into the narrative and creates a particular interpretive community replete with racial feelings and empathy that enables racial healing.

Absent Pecola: Impossibility of Empathy

Morrison's aesthetic reconstruction of the black cultural community, premised on shared cultural knowledge and memories, may have negative effects. Even if Morrison's narrative provides spaces for racial healing ofblack populations, her textual project may be connected to,and,possibly coopted by, discourses of black essentialism because of its appeal to racial identification and empathy.

Turning our attention to the cultural politics of the mid-1960s to the early 1970s, the period of the novel's composition and publication, the black cultural movement, which adopted the slogan "Black is beautiful," was in full swing, and the concept of blackness was uncritically exalted. Monolithic romanticism on black beauty threatened to lead to the production of another dominant norm. It may be true that revolutionary movements brought about new perceptions of the concept of blackness and may have "healed" many. On the

surface, the expressive and sometimes aggressive glorification of black cultural values seems aligned with Morrison's creation of the racial interpretive community in the sense that it restores alternative perspectives on black/blue(s) experiences.

However, Morrison is certainly cognizant of the fact that such romantic notions are trapped in a logical process similar to the "Dick and Jane" mythology. Sheaptly avoids racial essentialist discourse that the empathic community is liable to forge by calling readers to account for their ethical responsibility for Pecola's tragedy. In the end, Pecola can speak only via her madness in this supposedly "polyphonic" narrative. Pecola's silence and ostracism from the Lorain community, despite her presence at center of the narrative, is created by the town's intra- and inter-racial hierarchy. The story ends with Claudia's critical introspection, reproving community members including herself:

> All of us—all who knew her [Pecola]—felt so wholesome after we cleaned ourselves on her. We were so beautiful when we stood astride her ugliness. Her simplicity decorated us, her guilt sanctified us, her pain made us glow with health, her awkwardness made us think we had a sense of humor.. . .We honed our egos on her, padded our characters with her frailty, and yawned in the fantasy of our strength(163).

Here, it is suggested that those who know Pecola fortify their egos at the expense of her personality. Repetition of the word "we" signals the ethical culpability of community members, including the readerswho empathize with them

For this reason, Morrison takes up issues concerning the ethics of sharing. Pecola, an inaccessible presencesituated at the center of the story, plays a crucial role in preventing readers' immersion into the grand narrative of blackessentialism.Morrison achieves this by urging "us" to reflect on "our" responsibility for Pecola's madness.Put differently, (black) readers' uncritical, total empathic identification with the black value system is deftly circumvented becauseof "our" complicity with Pecola'sdownfall.

The empathic distance that Morrison's re-memory creates is a masterstroke. It dovetails with what historian Dominick LaCapra calls "empathic unsettlement" (41), an ethical attitude required for writing traumatic experiences. He writes, "empathic unsettlement poses a barrier to closure in discourse and places in jeopardy harmonizing or spiritually uplifting accounts of extreme events from which we attempt to derive reassurance or a benefit" (41-2). Pecola as a

void that is unfillable by the empathy of readers creates a certain distance between readers and the text. The distance works as a metaphorical safety valve that precludes superficial racial healing ostensibly achieved by black essentialist discourse. Morrison presentsthe story of Pecola's tragic silenceas a significant form of nourishment indispensableto the formation of new black identities in the post-Civil Rights era.

[i]See Ellison "Twentieth-Century Fiction."

[ii] Feng similarly interprets the singular "eye" in the title as "the monovision of American society" (56). However, her argument lacks the socio-historical context of this gaze.

[iii] Fanon's concept of "lactification" is especially pertinent here. It is a symptom of "a neurotic refusal to face up to the fact of one's own Blackness" where "colonial women exhibit their identification with Whiteness, for example, by attempting neurotically to avoid black men and to get close to (and ultimately cohabit with) white men" (Appiah ix).

[iv] Relatedly, Cholly's social emasculation derives from his failed sexual endeavor with Darlene, which was an entertaining "spectacle" for the voyeuristic gazes of white male hunters. We may also argue, after Eric Lott's insightful analysis on the black face minstrel show, that these gazes indicate white males' erotic fascination with black male sexuality.

[v] Morrison further emphasizes this point in her description of Geraldine, a "light-skinned" black woman immersed in white bourgeois social discourses. Geraldine's lack of interests in bodily pleasureor "the funkiness of the wide range of human emotions" (*BE* 64) signals the complicit connection between white bourgeois society and sexual repression (Willis 35). Morrison criticizes Geraldine's middle-class tastes and orientation toward avoiding and disregarding bodily sensuality. Her critique is manifested in Geraldine's numbness and reluctance to construct any human connections, which is notably depicted in the scene in which she has sexual intercourse.

[vi] Cholly's fictive kinship composed of ancestor figures, including Aunt Jimmy, Blue, and M'Dear is disrupted by Aunt Jimmy's demise. Also, immediately after her death, the white hunters destroy Cholly's idea of egalitarian communitarianism, formed during his lifetime with those ancestors figures (Gillan 293).

[vii] Similarly,Ogunyemi points out that *The Bluest Eye* is a pun on "the bluest I," suggesting the pain of black experiences in America (114).

[viii] Another scene in which blues functions as black vernacular wisdom is where Mrs. MacTeer sings about "hard times" to her children so that Claudia learns that "pain was not only endurable, it was sweet" (18).The blues transmission of black cultural values immunizes Claudia, albeit temporarily, against dominant white value judgments (Moses 626-27).

[ix] For example, the section beginning with "SEEMOTHERMOTHERISVERYNICE…"deals with Pauline's story. Besides "MOTHER" section, there are sections commencing with "HOUSE," "FAMILY," "CAT," "FATHER," "DOG," and "FRIEND."

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