

TONI MORRISON AND THE LITERARY CANON:
WHITENESS, BLACKNESS, AND THE CONSTRUCTION OF
RACIAL IDENTITY

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ABSTRACT

Toni Morrison, in *Playing in the Dark*, observes the pervasive silence that surrounds race in nineteenth-century canonical literature. Observing the ways in which the “Africanist” African-American presence pervades this literature, Morrison has called for an investigation of the ways in which whiteness operates in American canonical literature.

This thesis takes up that challenge. In the first section, from Chapters One through Three, I explore how whiteness operates through the representation of the African-American figure in the works of three eminent nineteenth-century American writers, Harriet Beecher Stowe, Walt Whitman, and Mark Twain. The texts studied in this regard are: *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, *Leaves of Grass*, and *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. This section is not concerned with whether these texts constitute racist literature but with the ways in which the study of race, particularly whiteness, reveals the contradictions and insecurities that attend (white American) identity.

As such, Morrison’s own fiction, written in response to white historical representations of African-Americans also deserves attention. The second section of this thesis focuses on Morrison’s attempt to produce an authentically “black” literature. Here I look at two of Morrison’s least studied but arguably most contentious novels particularly because of what they reveal of Morrison’s complex position on race. In Chapter Four I focus on *Tar Baby* and argue that this novel reveals Morrison’s somewhat essentialist position on blackness and racial, cultural, and gendered identity, particularly as this pertains to responsibilities she places on the black woman as culture-bearer. In Chapter Five I argue that *Paradise*, while taking a particularly challenging position on blackness, reveals Morrison’s evolving position on race, particularly her concern with the destructive nature of internalized racism.

This thesis concludes that while racial identities have very real material consequences, whiteness and blackness are ideological and social constructs which, because of their constructedness, are fallible and perpetually under revision.

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NOTE ON REFERENCES AND ABBREVIATIONS

I have followed the MLA guide to referencing in this thesis. See Gibaldi, Joseph. *MLA Handbook for Writers of Research Papers*. 6th Ed. New York: The Modern Language Association of America, 1999.

The following abbreviations are used in this thesis:

<i>AHBF</i>	<i>Adventures of Huckleberry Finn</i>
<i>AS</i>	<i>Against Slavery: An Abolitionist Reader</i>
<i>BC</i>	<i>Between Camps</i>
<i>BSWM</i>	<i>Black Skin, White Masks</i>
<i>CC</i>	<i>Color Conscious: The Political Morality of Race</i>
<i>DP</i>	<i>Difference and Pathology: Stereotypes of Sexuality, Race, and Madness</i>
<i>GT</i>	<i>Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity</i>
<i>IMFH</i>	<i>In My Father's House: Africa in the Philosophy of Culture</i>
<i>HG</i>	<i>Home Girls: A Black Feminist Anthology</i>
<i>LC</i>	<i>Loose Canons: Notes on the Culture Wars</i>
<i>LG</i>	<i>Leaves of Grass and Other Writings</i>
<i>LT</i>	<i>Love and Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class</i>
<i>PD</i>	<i>Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination</i>
<i>PS</i>	<i>Paradise</i>
<i>RSL</i>	<i>Race, Slavery and Liberalism in Nineteenth-Century American Literature.</i>
<i>TB</i>	<i>Tar Baby</i>
<i>TBA</i>	<i>The Black Atlantic</i>
<i>TSD</i>	<i>The Stowe Debate: Rhetorical Strategies in Uncle Tom's Cabin</i>
<i>TWN</i>	<i>To Wake the Nations: Race and the Making of American Literature</i>
<i>WWA</i>	<i>Walt Whitman's America: A Cultural Biography</i>
<i>WRC</i>	<i>We Real Cool: Black Men and Masculinity</i>
<i>QCI</i>	<i>Questions of Cultural Identity</i>
<i>UTC</i>	<i>Uncle Tom's Cabin or, Life Among the Lowly</i>

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INTRODUCTION

Race, Literature and the Making of a Nation

Race theorist Ian F. Haney Lopez notes that race is “neither an essence nor an illusion, but rather an ongoing, contradictory, self-reinforcing, plastic process subject to the macro forces of social and political struggle and the micro effects of daily decisions” (165). Lopez’s wide-ranging description is a useful one; particularly when seeking to understand the ambiguous but persistent role that race has historically assumed in American social and political life. Since the arrival of the first slaves from Africa to the state of Virginia in 1617, race has been an elusive but determining factor in terms of American national identity. The American notion of a manifest destiny was profoundly interlinked with racialized and often racist ideologies regarding the innate inferiority of indigenous populations but particularly of black people.¹ In *America: The New Imperialism*, V.G. Kiernan notes that America was “the vision of a new civilization that would be a model for all mankind,” but the irony was that American independence in 1776 “also stimulated thinking about race and racial inequality as the needful justification for slavery, something hitherto taken for granted, with the result that America now became “a consciously racist society” (2, 24). Reginald Horsman observes that:

Since the seventeenth century, Americans had proceeded in law and custom as though the blacks were essentially different. The presence of large numbers of

¹ Howard Zinn’s *A People’s History of the United States* gives an illuminating delineation of the nation from the perspective of those dispossessed, marginalized and subjugated in its establishment. This thesis’s focus on Euro-American representation and treatment of African-Americans is not to trivialize the experiences of Native Americans and other racial groups, but to highlight that historically African-Americans in America are the index by which the inferiority of all “other” races is measured. In her interview with Bonnie Angelo in 1989, featured in *Time Magazine* and entitled, “The Pain of Being Black,” Toni Morrison argues that “black people have always been used as a buffer in this country between powers to prevent class war, to prevent other kinds of real conflagrations.” She elaborates:

If there were no black people here in this country, it would have been Balkanized. The immigrants would have torn each other’s throats out, as they have done everywhere else. But in becoming an American, from Europe, what one has in common with that other immigrant is contempt for *me*—it’s nothing else but color. Wherever they were from, they would stand together. They could all say, *I* am not *that*. So in that sense, becoming an American is based on an attitude: an exclusion of *me*.

blacks in the debased condition of slavery and the grassroots white antipathies toward these blacks clearly made many Americans extremely receptive to theories of inherent racial difference, indeed it helped create a scientific attitude of mind that was willing, even anxious, to develop such theories . . . many Americans eagerly grasped at new racial theories which placed the onus of black slavery on the blacks themselves; they were slaves because their innate ability best fitted them to be slaves. (102-3)

The black figure became concomitant with and inseparable from slavery, so that, as Winthrop D. Jordan notes, “the Negro’s color attained greatest significance not as a scientific problem but as a social fact” (20).² George M. Frederickson suggests that in the United States an invidious group identity had been forced on all African-Americans —not only because they were or had been slaves,” but also because of their racial visibility, —a palpable physical difference, which made it easy for blacks to be singled out as victims of stigmatization and discrimination whenever social tensions prompted insecure whites to buttress their own self-image at the expense of a noticeably different group” (40-41).³

Frederickson’s observation is instructive. It highlights how, in the founding of America, racial categorization, in which the black person was easily identified and reduced to stereotypes, was part of the process of developing and protecting white America’s inchoate sense of self. Indeed, it is testimony to the self-serving nature of whiteness that the Declaration of Independence, which states that —all men are created equal and independent; that from that equal creation they derive rights inherent and inalienable, among which are the preservation of life, and liberty, and the pursuit of happiness,” did not include African-Americans.⁴ Similarly, America’s Constitution, which ruled African-Americans —three fifths of all other Persons,” did not consider them part of the citizenry.⁵ Furthermore, as tensions developed between the Northern and Southern states, the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850 was less a revelation of the threat

² For further information on the scientific and biological theories of race at this time see John Randal Baker’s *Race*, and Stephen Jay Gould’s *The Mismeasure of Man*.

³ For another perspective on the construction of the white race see Theodore W. Allen’s *The Invention of the White Race*.

⁴ For a full study of America’s Declaration of Independence see Thomas Jefferson’s —Notes on the State of Virginia,” *Writings*, and Carl L. Becker’s *The Declaration of Independence: A Study in the History of Political Ideas*.

⁵ See Article 1 of the American Constitution in *The Origins of the American Constitution: A Documentary History*, ed. Michael Kammen (39-44). For more recent and sophisticated arguments regarding the extent of the Constitution’s racism see, for example, Arthur Riss’s *Race, Slavery and Liberalism in Nineteenth-Century American Literature*, more fully discussed in the chapter on *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*.

Northern ideas posed to slavery than it was a compromise which attempted to head off the secession that led to the Civil War from 1861-1865.⁶ After the Emancipation Proclamation of 1863, black Americans were actually subjected to increased and more overt forms of racism. The “Black Codes,” designed to curtail the rights of newly liberated slaves, were instituted in the South immediately after the Civil War, and the Reconstruction period from 1865-1877 was characterized by institutionalized violence against blacks and legalized segregation typically referred to as “Jim Crow” laws.⁷ C. Vann Woodward notes that the Reconstruction period “constituted the most elaborate and formal expression of sovereign white opinion” and the African-American “was made painfully and constantly aware that he lived in a society dedicated to the doctrine of white supremacy and Negro inferiority” (7, 17-18).⁸ Gale Elizabeth Hale explains that Jim Crow segregation “depended upon the myth of absolute racial difference, a translation of the body into collective meaning, into culture” (40).

As a result of such a history, today, as cultural and sociological theorist Richard Dyer notes in *White*, “to talk about race is to talk about all races except the white” (18). Kobena Mercer, expanding on Dyer’s observation, argues that “the difficulty in theorizing whiteness as a racial or ethnic identity lies precisely in its ‘invisibility’, precisely because it is so thoroughly naturalized in dominant ideologies of race and racism as to be invisible as an ethnicity in its own right” (215). One of the key areas in which race can be seen to operate as an “invisible” but pervasive ideological, cultural and social investment for white Americans is in the literature of the American Renaissance. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. observes that race, “in much of the thinking about the proper study of literature in this century, has been an invisible quality, present implicitly at best” (LC 45). But it is African-American author and critic Toni Morrison’s groundbreaking critical work which has been largely responsible for breaking the silence surrounding race in the study of America’s nineteenth-century white canonical literature.

⁶ The Act made it illegal for anti-slavery supporters to aid and abet runaway slaves. Any assistance rendered to a runaway slave was punishable by a fine or a term of imprisonment.

⁷ For more information on the “Black Codes” see Thomas F. Gossett’s *Race: The History of an American Idea*.

⁸ For further discussion on segregation and the phenomenon of “Jim Crow” see C. Vann Woodward’s *The Strange Career of Jim Crow*, 3rd Revised Edition.

In her 1989 essay, “Unspeakable Things Unspoken,” Morrison highlights the inextricable links between canonical literature, national character, and whiteness. Noting that “[c]anon building is Empire building” (8), she states that “[i]t only seems that the canon of American literature is ‘naturally’ or ‘inevitably’ ‘white’ . In fact it is studiously so” (14). Indeed, Morrison argues, the fact that the canon continues to be “studiously” white is highlighted in the persistent scholarly evasion of the issue of race generally, and of the African-American presence specifically. Her seminal critical text, *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*, published in 1992, revolutionized the study of the American literary canon. Here, Morrison, expanding on her earlier essay, notes that:

In matters of race, silence and evasion have historically ruled literary discourse. Evasion has fostered another, substitute language in which the issues are encoded, foreclosing open debate. The situation is aggravated by the tremor that breaks into discourse on race. It is further complicated by the fact that the habit of ignoring race is understood to be a graceful, even generous liberal gesture. (PD 9-10)

The “liberal gesture” of evading race, however, in fact elides the way in which the African-American presence has curiously and crucially informed and shaped America’s national literature. She argues that we cannot ignore the pervasive “Africanist” presence which, whether “real or fabricated” is, “reflexive; an extraordinary meditation on the self; a powerful exploration of the fears and desires that reside in the writerly conscious” (PD 17). Herein, the “Africanist persona” is:

a term for the denotative and connotative blackness that African peoples have come to signify, as well as the entire range of views, assumptions, readings and misreadings that accompany Eurocentric learning about these people. As a trope, little restraint has been attached to its uses. As a disabling virus within literary discourse, Africanism has become, in the Eurocentric tradition that American education favors, both a way of talking about and a way of policing matters of class, sexual license, and repression, formations and exercises of power, and meditations on ethics and accountability. Through the simple expedient of demonizing and reifying the range of color on a palette, American Africanism makes it possible to say and not to say, to inscribe and erase, to escape and engage, to act out and act on, to historicize and to render timeless. It provides a way of contemplating chaos and civilization, desire and fear, and a mechanism for testing the problems and blessings of freedom. (PD 6-7)

Morrison here highlights how the multi-faceted deployment of the African-American presence in America's canonical literature both influenced and made possible certain forms of self-perception for white Americans, particularly the contemplation of freedom and (racial) exceptionalism upon which the nation was founded.

The black presence in nineteenth-century American literature was thus inextricable from the construction of whiteness. Morrison observes that the "slave population, it could be and was assumed, offered itself up as surrogate selves for meditation on problems of human freedom." For "in the construction of blackness *and* enslavement could be found not only the not-free but also, with the dramatic polarity created by skin color, the projection of the not-me" (*PD* 37-38). She notes that deploying a deliberate process of "Africanism" is the "vehicle by which the American self knows itself as ... a progressive fulfilment of destiny" (*PD* 52). Her remarks echo those made by Ralph Ellison who observes that:

Since the beginning of the nation, white Americans have suffered from a deep inner uncertainty as to who they really are. One of the ways that has been used to simplify the answer has been to seize upon the presence of black Americans and use them as a marker, a symbol of the limits, a metaphor for the "outsider". Many whites could look at the social position of blacks and feel that color formed an easy and reliable gauge for determining to what extent one was or was not American. ("Going to the Territory" 583)

Both writers observe that the African-American figure in America's national literature was crucial to the notion and formulation of white Americanness. Morrison also notes the following:

Here in that nexus, with its particular formulations, and in the absence of real knowledge or open-minded inquiry about Africans and African-Americans, under the pressures of ideological and imperialistic rationales for subjugation, an American brand of Africanism emerged: strongly urged, thoroughly serviceable, companionably ego-reinforcing, and pervasive. (*PD* 8)

The African-American presence in American canonical literature crucially reveals more about the character of white America than it does about blacks, but because this has not been openly acknowledged, the effect has been, as Morrison argues, "to enforce

invisibility through silence” and “to allow the black body a shadowless participation in the dominant cultural body” (*PD* 9). The silence surrounding the serviceability of blacks through literary representation in white America thus denies the ways in which the African-American presence moved that literature. Noting that the African-American is “an inescapable part of the general social fabric” of the nation, James Baldwin argues that “[i]n our image of the Negro breathes the past we deny, not dead but living yet and powerful ... wherever the Negro face appears a tension is created, the tension of a silence filled with things unutterable” (125, 22).

Morrison’s call, then, is for a search “for the ghost in the machine”; for the ways in which the presence of African-Americans “has shaped the choices, the language, the structure – the meaning of so much American literature” (“Unspeakable” 11). Such a project is crucial, she argues, as the “re-examination of founding literature in the United States for the unspeakable unspoken may reveal those texts to have deeper and other meanings, deeper and other power, deeper and other significances” (“Unspeakable” 14). Morrison thus calls for a study of “the impact of racism on those who perpetuate it ... a serious intellectual effort to see what racial ideology does to the mind, imagination, and behavior of masters” (*PD* 11-12). She correctly warns that failure to revisit America’s canonical literature risks “lobotomizing that literature, and in diminishing both the art and the artist” (“Unspeakable” 13).

Making Whiteness Visible

The first section of this thesis takes up Morrison’s challenge. In the first three chapters I focus on the work of three eminent nineteenth-century American writers, namely, Harriet Beecher Stowe, Walt Whitman, and Mark Twain. The selection of these authors is deliberate in order to highlight the contentious nature of the (American) canon in the first place. While the canon serves to establish literary precursors based on artistic and conceptual merit, it also highlights the politically and ideologically exclusive character of the establishment which is linked to and, arguably, inseparable from, national concerns

and agendas.⁹ Although not officially acknowledged as a part of the American literary canon, Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* is said to have played, in its portrayal of Uncle Tom's plight, a significant part in the abolition of slavery. As Denise Kohn *et al* note, Stowe "has a complex mythic status in American consciousness: she is supposed to have single-handedly brought the abolitionist crusade against slavery to fruition yet also to have created our culture's most pernicious image of African Americans." As a result, "her work has been too influential and controversial ever to be forgotten" (xiii). *Uncle Tom's Cabin* was indeed a seminal novel in nineteenth-century America despite continuing arguments concerning its artistic merit and over whether the exclusion of the novel from the American literary canon is linked to the fact that the canon has historically been the preserve of the white American male.¹⁰ In many of these debates, Stowe's novel has been compared with Mark Twain's classic, *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. Jonathan Arac notes that from the 1920s, after the death of Twain,

it became common to compare *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and *Huckleberry Finn*, to the detriment of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. One of the modes by which the hypercanonization of *Huckleberry Finn* proceeded was by competitively draining the prestige of Stowe's work, which increasingly became a novel that everyone knew had been famous, but no one any longer read. (92)

Significantly, the debates surrounding the two novels have revealed the extent to which America's canonical literature has been invested in the issue of race. Justin Kaplan argues in his essay, "Born to Trouble" (1984), that "[i]s a historical portrait of slaveholding society, Mark Twain's novel is probably more faithful as well as less stereotypical than Harriet Beecher Stowe's beloved *Uncle Tom's Cabin*" (356), whose portrait of the self-denying Tom has been lambasted as melodramatic. Similarly, in *The Jim Dilemma* (1998), Jocelyn Chadwick-Joshua argues that Twain's portrait of Jim is

⁹ Indeed, Ashraf H. A. Rushdy argues that the canon has historically served to "stabilize and reify the kinds of identities necessary for the maintenance of national traditions" (17). This point is especially important with regard to African-American literature. Rushdy notes that the act of preserving the canon has "also affected the ways the texts produced within minority cultures get read" (11). In *To Wake the Nations* Eric J. Sundquist explains that: "it remains difficult for many readers to overcome their fundamental conception of 'American' literature as solely Anglo-European in inspiration and authorship, to which may then be added an appropriate number of valuable 'ethnic' or 'minority' texts, those that closely correspond to familiar critical and semantic paradigms" (7).

¹⁰ I explore this further in the chapter on *Uncle Tom's Cabin*.

more sympathetic to African-Americans than Stowe's representation of Tom. These critics echo T. S. Eliot's statement in 1950 that *Huckleberry Finn* is "far more convincing indictment of slavery than the sensationalist propaganda of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*" (AHBF 350). But not everyone agrees. Jane Smiley, for example, argues in "By It Ain't So Huck" (1998), that *Huckleberry Finn*'s portrayal of the runaway "nigger" Jim, which functions in the tradition of nineteenth-century minstrel shows in the South, evinces a racialism more detestable than *Uncle Tom's Cabin*.¹¹

What is most interesting here is the repeated critical concern with the level of racialism in these novels rather than with the reason for that racialism in the first place. Saidiya V. Hartman highlights that there is, in fact, negligible difference between Stowe's use of melodrama and Twain's use of the tropes of minstrelsy: "both generated enjoyment" (26). Melodrama and minstrelsy, both powerful and popular nineteenth-century representational forms, worked to obfuscate the African-American's humanity by creating a spectacle for white America's consumption: the "[i]ndiscriminate use of the black body made possible the pleasure of terror and the terror of pleasure. Within this framework, suffering and shuffling were complimentary" (29). Similarly, Walt Whitman, celebrated as America's quintessential bard, attempted to exhort the equality of African-Americans in his vision of a democratic nation, but his ambivalent representation of African-American figures such as the runaway slave, Ethiopia, and Lucifer in his collection of poetry, *Leaves of Grass*, consistently undercuts his radical position.

Through a close examination of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, *Huckleberry Finn*, and *Leaves of Grass*, then, this thesis investigates the ways in which these texts inadvertently and deliberately reinscribe the primacy and superiority of whiteness through their authors' representations of an "Africanist" African-American presence. By focusing on the means by which these so-called "liberal" nineteenth-century texts participate in both race and canon formation, I show that they tend to re-present and reinforce nineteenth-century racialized theories of the inferiority of blacks. This thesis is not concerned with establishing a racist agenda within this literature, but in exploring how the construction of

¹¹ It is important to note the difference between racialism and racism. Racialism involves the attribution of particular stereotypes as essential traits of a specific race. Racism, by contrast, involves calling up these supposedly distinct racial attributes in an often derogatory manner and with intentional prejudicial consequences.

blackness and whiteness in these canonical texts is inevitably concomitant, and what this suggests about the racialized nature of American literary and national identity formations. As Ashraf H. A. Rushdy contends, we need to “expose and then dispense with the belief that institutions of literary production and evaluation are autonomous and free from the material interests and practices of the society in which they operate” (13). In fact, I would suggest that these three authors, through their writing, reveal themselves to be perpetrators but also victims of a racialized social system which subverted and complicated all ethical forms of human relationships. As Sandra Gunning notes, nineteenth-century white writers “abided by certain tenets of white supremacy, albeit to vastly differing degrees.” Yet “the value they bring as subjects of study lies not in tracking the conservatism of their vision, but in analyzing the meaning of their struggle to work through the moral contradictions of the racial and literary politics of their era” (12-13).

While acknowledging the contribution Stowe, Whitman, and Twain have made to the development of American literature, I show that their representation of blackness is linked to their representation of the white American self and, therefore, that the issue of race is one of the central and influential reasons for the canonization of their work. At the same time, the challenge this thesis assumes is, as Mercer proposes, “to make whiteness visible . . . as a culturally constructed ethnic identity historically contingent upon the violent denial and disavowal of ‘difference’” (215). My work also follows Hale’s suggestion that there is a real need to “[g]ive whiteness a color,” by exploring the ways in which “blackness has served American whiteness” (3).

Yet, any examination of ‘whiteness’ must necessarily include an interrogation of ‘blackness’, for to interrogate only ‘whiteness’ would be to reaffirm the centrality and normative value of ‘whiteness’ in our understanding of race and racial identity. As Stuart Hall suggests, any identity is “not a natural but [a] constructed form of closure” (*QCI* 5), and thus my study also includes an examination of the representation of racial identities in Morrison’s own form of African-American writing. This is in order to decode what these constructions in her novels imply of ‘blackness’ (and ‘whiteness’), and to assess their efficacy in countering America’s hegemonic racialized discourse.

Toni Morrison and Blackness

Toni Morrison is unarguably America's most prominent African-American author. Her fiction and critical work has, in her own lifetime already, not only secured her a place in, but permanently shifted the face of, the American literary canon. Morrison has received various literary accolades in recognition of her contribution to American literature.¹² She is also one of the literary establishment's most outspoken and contentious critics, insisting, significantly, on being called "a black woman novelist" (qtd. in Caldwell 243). Indeed, her work, like that of other African-American writers, has been characterized by a need to assert the artistic and political value of blackness within and against the ideological and cultural hegemony of whiteness. In an interview with Christina Davis in 1986, Morrison asserts that "the reclamation of the history of black people in this country is paramount in its importance ... and the job of recovery is ours" (413). Her statement highlights a critical concern of her fiction: the necessary retrieval of a black historical "culture" in the affirmation of a distinct black identity.

Nevertheless, even as she asserts this necessity, Morrison also problematizes it. Certainly Linden Peach argues that her work is not to be read as merely oppositional. He maintains that Morrison's "novels are not simply reactions to or inversions of European models, but, because of their African-American origins, attempt to pursue subjects and narrative possibilities which had not been previously realised in fiction" (2). Her work is, significantly, instructive of the agenda of African-American literature. Peach explains that for African-American writers "the novel has been an important vehicle to represent the social context, to expose inequality, racism and social injustice," and thus "Morrison's work should be seen as being proactive in an African-American context rather than being reactive to a European tradition" (2, 17). Morrison has stated in a conversation with Alice Childress, which originally appeared in the *Black Creation Annual* in 1974, that the artist is "a politician" and thus he/she "bears witness" to the lives and lived experience of black people. She adds, instructively, that "Black people must be

¹² Morrison was awarded the National Book Critics' Circle Award for fiction in 1978 for her third novel *Song of Solomon*, published in 1977. In 1988 she received the Pulitzer Prize for fiction for *Beloved*, published in 1987, which has become the most popular, most taught, and most well-known of her novels. Subsequent to *Jazz*, Morrison's sixth novel published in 1992, she was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1993, thus cementing her position as one of the world's and America's foremost authors.

the only people who set out our criteria in criticism. White people can't do it for us" (3-6).

Morrison's statement that whites cannot set the criteria in criticism of black literature is controversial but relevant. Until very recently there has been a general dearth of critical appreciation for African-American literature, as well as a trivializing of such work, which is typically set against standards established by mainstream white American literature. In an interview with Claudia Tate in 1983 Morrison suggested that the situation was due to limited perceptions and knowledge: —Critis generally don't associate black people with ideas. They see marginal people; they just see another story about black folks. They regard the whole thing as sociologically interesting perhaps but very parochial" (—Toni Morrison" 160). In an interview in *Time Magazine* with Bonnie Angelo in 1989, Morrison's comments indicated that nothing had really changed: —Black literature is taught as sociology, as tolerance, not as a serious, rigorous art form" (258).¹³ In the same year, Morrison bemoaned the myopic representations of black people in canonical white literature. In a conversation with Bill Moyers in 1989, she castigated the —silence" that accompanies this misrepresentation, especially so in nineteenth-century literature: —Blacks don't speak for themselves in the texts" (262). In fact, she argued, black characters are typically

discredited and ridiculed ... all of these negative things that white Americans feared are projected onto this presence, so that you find these extraordinary gaps and evasions and destabilizations. The chances of getting a truly complex human black person in an American book in the nineteenth century were minimal. (264)

Through her fiction, Morrison attempts to fill in the —extraordinary gaps and evasions and destabilizations" in the representation of African-American experience within American literature. The contentious nature of such a project can be seen in the ways in which Morrison has come under fire from the literary establishment for her representations of black identity. Betty Fussell, in 1992, notes that: —Many accuse her of a racist agenda that interferes with both scholarship and art. Her essays have been criticized as political stump speeches and her novels as portentous and gushy" (285). Ann

¹³ This interview also appears in *Conversations with Toni Morrison* (255-61).

Snitow's 1987 review for *The Village Voice Literary Supplement* largely discredited *Beloved* as melodramatic. Most notably, Stanley Crouch, in his *New Republic* review, proclaimed *Beloved* "a blackface holocaust novel [which] seems to have been written in order to enter American slavery into the big-time martyr ratings contest, a contest usually won by references to, and works about, the experiences of the Jews" (qtd. in Travis 180).

But Kwame Anthony Appiah notes that for African-American writers, "[t]he simple gesture of writing for and about oneself ... has profound political significance" (*IMFH* 88), and certainly this is historically true. The founders of African-American literature were escaped slaves whose narratives, often described as "written by himself" or "written by herself," literally "wrote" the black American self into existence. Morrison's literature thus attempts a continuation of this trajectory of African-American writing.¹⁴ The crucial distinction, however, is that Morrison is not, like the authors of slave narratives, writing back to white people but writing for black people. In an interview with Charles Ruas in 1981, Morrison notes that she felt that traditional African-American literature did not address the black community: "I didn't feel they were telling *me* something. I thought they were saying something about *it* or *us* that revealed something about *us* to *you*, to others, to white people, to men" (96). Morrison is concerned, in her work, to imagine African-Americans for themselves:

it is no longer acceptable merely to imagine us and imagine for us. We have always been imagining ourselves.... We are the subjects of our own narrative, witnesses to and participants in our own experience, and, in no way coincidentally, in the experiences of those with whom we have come in contact. We are not, in fact, "other". We are choices. ("Unspeakable" 9)

¹⁴ Slave Narratives have been historically contentious literature. As autobiographical text, the slave narrative has had the burden not only of asserting the value of black slave narrative in antebellum America, but also of proving the author's veracity, and therefore the genre's, applicability. William L. Andrews explains that slave narratives were inherently "self-authenticating": "During the antebellum era, when black narrative in the United States developed into a highly self-conscious and rhetorically sophisticated tradition, black writers who aimed at a serious hearing knew that the authority they aspired to was predicated on the authenticity that they could project into and through a text" ("The Novelization of Voice in Early African American Narrative" 23). Put quite differently by Henry Louis Gates, Jr., writing for slaves was "a commodity which they were forced to trade for their humanity" ("Writing 'Race,' and Difference it Makes" 9). For further reading on the history of the African-American novel, see *Slavery and the Literary Imagination*, ed. Deborah E. McDowell and Arnold Rampersad, *Cambridge Companion to the African American Novel*, ed. Maryemma Graham, and *The Cambridge Companion to the African American Slave Narrative*, ed. Audrey Fisch.

Morrison's position here is that black identity is a creative choice for black people, one that defies the stereotypical representations by white culture. In her interview with Ruas, Morrison stated that African-Americans "are perceived as the lowest of the classes because we can be identified that way" (117). She notes that, in a culturally (white) hegemonic society, "the question of difference, of essence, is critical" ("Unspeakable" 11). Her fiction attempts to resuscitate African-American culture and identity as a viable entity in America's history by giving a creative and complex voice to the lives of black Americans.

Certainly her fiction appears to answer to her own question: "What makes a work Black?"¹⁵ It is characterized by the idea that the recovery of a common social and gendered history, culture, and language is possible. In interviews Morrison purports to offer a distinctly black culture and ideology, and in her fiction this is most often achieved by means of a generic hybridity which fuses literary traditions with orality (the folk-tale, prayer, field holler, hymn, and traditions of call-and-response), in the attempt to attain an African-American voice and identity.

Toni Morrison and the Politics of (black) Identity

Morrison was born in Lorain, Ohio, in 1931, and her writing is undoubtedly influenced by the race-based political events such as the civil rights movements that galvanized 1960s America. Indeed, as John Duvall notes of the persistent but ever-changing classification of African-Americans: "In the seventy years of her life, Morrison has been identified—whether by legal documentation or by social custom—as 'Negro', 'Colored', 'Black', 'Afro-American', and 'African American'" (2-3). Morrison's lifetime has spanned some fundamental changes from legalized segregation to the election of America's first black president. Thus, Duvall argues, "it does matter to her that she grew up in pre-civil rights America, just as it matters that she became a writer in post-civil

¹⁵ In her essay, "Unspeakable," Morrison specifically suggests that: "The most valuable point of entry into the question of cultural (or racial) distinction, the one most fraught, is its language – its unpoliced, seditious, confrontational, manipulative, inventive, disruptive, masked and unmasking language" (11). A crucial point, however, in establishing identifiably "Black" literature, is whether elemental characteristics of personality, behaviour, and so on are inseparable from elements of language and form.

rights America” (2). David Theo Goldberg notes that in a racialized culture “racial identity itself becomes the space from which resistance is launched, the stage of self-assertion” (110). Thus, while Morrison plays down the influence of the male-centred Black Aesthetics movement of the 1960s on her work, its political ideologies of racial (self-) awareness, pride and solidarity resonate in her writing, particularly in her early novels.¹⁶ According to Peach, the crucial tenet of Morrison’s fiction is “the pursuit of individual advancement by black people in a white-determined nation and culture at the expense of their black ancestry; and the reclamation of black solidarity” based upon the “memory of slavery and white America’s continual denial of black people” (4).

Morrison’s early fiction, *The Bluest Eye* (1970), *Sula* (1973), *Song of Solomon* (1977), and *Tar Baby* (1981), details the corrosive effects of white hegemonic ideology and culture on black cultural and communal identity. These novels articulate the need for cultural memory and consciousness in the assertion of a contemporary individual identity. In her interview with Betty Jones and Audrey Vinson in 1985 Morrison explained that: “I am geared toward the past, I think, because it is important to me; it is living history” (171). In fact, in these novels, she suggests that individual black identity is a necessary extension of its ancestral black community. In an interview with Elsie B. Washington which first appeared in *Essence* magazine in 1987, Morrison stated of the black ancestral community, “[i]t’s DNA, it’s where you get your information, your cultural information. Also it’s your protection, it’s your education” (238).

Morrison has, accordingly, distinguished her work as proudly and unapologetically “black.” She has stated in her conversation with Claudia Tate that “[w]hen I view the world, perceive it and write about it, it’s the world of black people” (157). In an interview with Thomas LeClair in 1981 she candidly declared: “I write what 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.... From my perspective, there are only black people” (370, 374). In her interview with Jones and Vinson she explained that “in

¹⁶ The Black Aesthetics movement was a corollary of the ambitious and influential Harlem Renaissance of the 1920s and ‘30s in which urban black artists and intellectuals sought to assert the value of blackness by attempting to forge a distinctly black art and identity. The notion of the “New Negro,” a term coined by Alain Locke, attempted to “repair a damaged group psychology and reshape a warped social perspective” (qtd. in Huggins 52) that grew out of the failed Reconstruction project and a continued disillusionment with American race relations. See *Voices from the Harlem Renaissance*.

trying to write what I call Black literature which is not merely having Black people in or being Black myself, there seems to be something distinctive about it and I can't put it into critical terms. I can simply recognize it as authentic" (175).

I must confess to uneasiness with Morrison's descriptions of a "black" literature when she deploys terms such as "authentic" and "essential." I am concerned with the racial assumptions and implications of such comments which are suggestively reductive and elide the complexity and rich plurality of black identity and culture. In 2009, when Morrison presented a reading at the Ecole Normale Supérieure in France, Paris, while I was a student there, I was privileged to ask the author herself to address this issue. Morrison's answer was interesting: "Do people ever ask why Joyce wrote for the Irish? Or Dostoevsky for the Russians? Why is it when a black person says he/she is writing for blacks people respond in furore?" This gave me some insight into Morrison's complicated agenda which highlights the extent to which we, as readers, whoever we may be as people, still tend to read literature through a white lens. That is, we are educated and socialized into reading white literature as the norm, whether overtly racialized or not, and we are taught, often in very subtle ways, to distinguish and judge all other literature against it. This recalls Mercer's observation that whiteness is so "naturalized" as to be "invisible as an ethnicity in its own right." As such, in an interview with Judith Wilson in 1981, Morrison stated that her distinct "style" of black literature is "not pejorative; it's a clarifying statement" (136). In her interview with Ruas, Morrison explained that: "I was very conscious of trying to capture in writing about what black life meant to me, not just what black people do but the way in which we look at it" (100). Her commitment to producing "black literature," then, is, by her perception, not racist, but rather, a considered response to pervasive white hegemonic ideology.

Still, Morrison's claim to be writing an "authentic" black literature is not unproblematic. Apart from the fact that Joyce wrote of but not necessarily for the Irish, he, as well as Dostoevsky, and even Morrison herself, is arguably regarded as a world rather than specifically national writer. But Morrison appears to suggest the possibility of a literature that delineates and speaks to people's racial and cultural homogeneity. Her comments also seem to suggest, rather narrowly, the existence of an essential biological blackness to which no other races or cultures are privy. In her talk of "DNA," she

intimates that ‘black’ culture is not just culture; it is in the genes, inherited along with skin colour. Paul Gilroy explains that when culture and race are brought into contact with each other, culture “is transferred into a pseudobiological property of communal life” (“One Nation” 266-67). Appiah highlights that in this situation race “works as an attempt at a metonym for culture; and it does so only at the price of biologizing what *is* culture or ideology” (“The Uncompleted Argument” 36). In this way, Morrison’s claim to an innate cultural identity inadvertently rehearses the racialized theories that informed nineteenth-century literature. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. has observed the irony that the assertion of a black voice and identity in African-American literature has not served to “obliterate the difference of race; rather, the inscription of the black voice in Western literatures has preserved those very cultural differences to be repeated, imitated, and revised in a separate Western literary tradition, a tradition of black difference” (“Writing ‘Race,’ and the Difference it Makes” 12). Gates elaborates that race only “pretends to be an objective form of classification”; it is, in fact, “a dangerous trope.” He observes that despite its metaphorical nature, race has a formidable power:

Race has become a trope of ultimate, irreducible difference between cultures, linguistic groups, or adherents to any specific belief systems ... [and we refer to race] to *will* this sense of *natural* difference into our formulations. To do so is to engage in a pernicious act of language, one which exacerbates the complex problem of cultural or ethnic difference, rather than to assuage or address it. (“Writing ‘Race,’ and the Difference It Makes” 5)

While critics have noted the slippages that can occur between racialism and racism, Morrison has continued to defend her belief in the possibility of an authentic racial and cultural identity. She has also criticized the current post-modern outlook in cultural and literary studies as a convenient attempt by those who, concerned to preserve the status quo of race relations, try to evade all talk of (the significance of) race:

Suddenly (for our purposes, suddenly) ‘race’ does not exist. For three hundred years black Americans insisted that ‘race’ was no usefully distinguishing factor in human relationships. During those same three centuries every academic discipline, including theology, history, and natural science, insisted ‘race’ was *the* determining factor in human development. When blacks discovered that they had shaped or become a culturally formed race, and that it had specific and revered

difference, suddenly they were told there is no such thing as race, biological or cultural, that matters and that genuinely intellectual exchange cannot accommodate it. In trying to come to some terms about race and writing, I am tempted to throw my hands up. It always seemed to me that the people who invented the hierarchy of race when it was convenient for them ought not to be the ones to explain it away, now that it does not suit their purposes for it to exist. But there *is* a culture and both gender and race inform and are informed by it. (~~Unspeakable~~ 3)

Morrison's argument here is significant. Trina Grillo and Stephanie M. Wildman note that ~~part~~ of the privilege of whiteness is not to think about race" (653), whereas for African-Americans especially, race has historically had profound impact on their lives. Saying that race, as post-modern critics do, is grounded in discourse does not explain it away, does not suggest that it has not had – and continues to have – devastating consequences. David Roediger argues that ~~for~~ all its insubstantiality race is a very powerful ideology" (2). While race is ~~ideologically~~ constructed, it is constructed from real, predictable, repeated patterns of life ... it is this *connection* to reality that gives race such a powerful ideological appeal... Race is thus both unreal and a seeming reality" (5-6). To say that race is a trope is not to trivialize it but, in fact, to see it as an *a priori* that determines material reality. Indeed, David B. Wilkins notes of the socio-historical condition of African-Americans that ~~u~~nlike whites, blacks cannot forget for one minute that they have a race; a race that links each individual black to the fate of every black." Black Americans ~~know~~ that their individual chances for achieving success in America are linked to the advancement of the race as a whole" (22).

Cornel West, whose book, *Race Matters*, delineates ~~what~~ *race* matters have meant to the American past and how much race *matters* in the American present" (xxvi), notes that ~~the~~ problem of the twenty-first century remains the problem of the color-line ... the legacy of white supremacy lingers" (xiv). Paul C. Taylor argues that ~~r~~acialism has changed considerably but not fundamentally." He notes that ~~r~~acial discourse – whatever the underlying reality, biological or otherwise, that it may or may not represent – has shifted over time, woven itself into the politics and culture of societies the world over, and inspired all sorts of not obviously natural practices and behaviors" (*Race* 80, 13-14). Certainly Barack Obama will go down in history as America's first African-

American president, but race played a central part in his election.¹⁷ Still more recently, prominent African-American literary critic and professor, Henry Louis Gates, Jr., was arrested in July 2009 for disorderly conduct after a white police officer suspected him of breaking into his own house at Harvard University. The incident made international headlines, with Gates's colleagues calling his arrest a "clear case of racial profiling" (Trujillo par. 2). Allen Counter argued that "[w]e do not believe that his arrest would have happened if Professor Gates was white" (Trujillo par. 15). Prominent and controversial African-American minister, Reverend Al Sharpton, responded with a quip that linked the incident to a history of police harassment and abuse of African-American citizens: "I have heard of driving while black and even shopping while black, but now even going to your own home while black is a new low in police community affairs" (Trujillo par. 17).¹⁸ As Paul Taylor notes, race has so "saturated and shaped" society (*Race* 26) that it has very material existence and consequences. Race is both a discursive construct and a lived reality. As such, for most black Americans, black (individual) identity is predicated upon and inseparable from the black (cultural) community.

In her interview with Washington, Morrison explained the importance of black allegiance to a black cultural heritage and to the African-American ancestors: "They were responsible *for* us, and we have to be responsible *to* them.... And if you ignore that, you put yourself in a spiritually dangerous position of being self-sufficient, having no group that you're dependent on" (238). Morrison here asserts the interdependency of cultural heritage and black (communal) identity. Her comments convey her astute awareness that one of the predominant ways in which black Americans survived the holocaust of slavery was through racial cohesion. While post-modern thought has begun to thoroughly challenge race as a determinative category, African-Americans have, ironically, clung to race as a means of remembrance and racial and cultural survival. bell hooks argues in *Yearning* that while post-modern critique of essentialism is necessary to "define the narrow, constricting notion of blackness" (28) and challenge "the idea that there is only one legitimate black experience" (37), we cannot dismiss notions of authentic cultural identity altogether because:

¹⁷ I elaborate on this in the chapter on *Uncle Tom's Cabin*.

¹⁸ See also Brandon M. Terry's, "A Stranger in Mine Own House: Henry Louis Gates, Jr. and the Police in 'Post-Racial' America."

Already coping with a sense of extreme fragmentation and alienation black folks cannot afford the luxury of such dismissal... There are many habits of being that were a part of traditional black folk experience that we can re-enact, rituals of belonging. To reclaim them would not be a gesture of passive nostalgia; it would reflect awareness that humanizing survival strategies that were employed then are needed now. (38-39)

hooks thus does not argue for a suspension of disbelief in race but registers here the complexity of black identity. Black Americans have historically been prescribed an identity at the same time that they have been denied one; thus their identity is both unreal and real. Put more colloquially, hooks notes that "black folks" would typically respond to post-modern critique of racial identity with the rebuff: "Yeah, it's easy to give up identity, when you got one" (28). Morrison's fiction would appear to be an attempt at communal *self*-reclamation and *self*-realization.

But Stuart Hall and Paul Du Gay note that identities "emerge within the specific modalities of power" (QCI 4), and Morrison's assertion of an authentic black identity is not exempt. Her claim to authenticity is a problematic assertion that works within the "modalities of power" for we cannot avoid the extent to which identity has historically been socially constructed for a particular ideological and political purpose. This is not, however, to dismiss its significance. As Gates, Jr. has noted, "to say ethnic identity is socially constructed is not to say that it is somehow unreal" (LC 123). It is to realize that race "is a text (an array of discursive practices), not an essence" (LC 79). It is merely to note, as Rushdy does, that "the issue of 'difference' is not abstracted from social relations; it is a product of them" (7). Thus, as Duvall argues, "this kind of epistemological affirmative action," this assertion of a unique, essential black identity, "has its limits" (16).

Indeed, Morrison's reference to "tribe" and "village" in her interview with LeClair is troubling. Both terms are politically-loaded and suggest an idealized vision of blackness connected, nostalgically and romantically, with Africa. What we have is a racialization of space and, furthermore, blackness is here seemingly contingent on inherited traits and is presented as the natural state of an organic cultural community of which the black person is inherently a part. Morrison's talk of "essence" and "tribes" problematically suggests that cultural and racial identity is *a priori*. She elides the way that race, like gender, is

discursively created, subject to the ideological demands of a given society or historical, cultural, or political milieu; that identity is a process of socialization rather than inherent. In response to those critics who have proudly pronounced Morrison's literature "afrocentric," Barbara Christian warns that the use of the term *centrism* betrays the fact that Afrocentrism is generated from narrow nationalist Western thinking, that is akin to Eurocentrism, which it apparently opposes but also mimics." Thus many claims to afrocentrism:

undercut the very concept they intended to propose—that there are different interpretations of history and different narratives, depending on where one is positioned, in terms of power relations as well as distinctive cultures and that there are, given the various cultures of our world, multiple philosophical approaches to understanding life. ("Fixing Methodologies" 7)

Notwithstanding that there is no such thing as an African culture – there are numerous African cultures – any claims to cultural or racial authenticity belie the fact that cultures are inherently hybrid.

Duvall also notes the troubling irony of Morrison's position on race. He observes that for Morrison "[w]hen it comes to white identity, the very notion of authenticity is inauthentic. But although she demystifies whiteness her relation to blackness is more complex and seems to hold out hope for both authenticity and essence" (15). While Morrison typically berates canonical literature for its racialism and racism, she too appears to endorse and participate in a racialism that could be read as racist – the advocacy of an essence which necessarily "distinguishes" blacks from, and excludes, other racial groups. She overlooks that her notion of blackness is negatively arrived at in relation to whiteness. It is, partly at least, a product of that which it negates. Indeed, Homi K. Bhabha notes that "to exist is to be called into being in relation to an otherness" (44). Morrison's assertion of black cultural "difference" becomes, then, inadvertently, a repetition, imitation, and revision of a pervasively racialized culture.

This contradiction is significant for it registers the ideological ambiguity that pervades Morrison's treatment of race in her novels, particularly her early fiction. She has stated in her essay "Rootedness" (1984) that: "There must have been a time when an artist could be genuinely representative of the tribe and in it; when an artist could have a tribal or

racial sensibility and an individual expression of it” (339). Her yearning tone here suggests that Morrison appears to see herself as the kind of artist who is able to be rooted in and representative of her black community. As such, Duvall notes that the “tension between identity as a biological essence and identity as social construction is perhaps the central motivating opposition in her work” (9), and “[i]t is perhaps Morrison’s enactment of a dialogue between identity as essence and identity as construction that makes her fiction as powerful and poignant as it is” (16).

Morrison’s fiction is certainly complex. While affirming the value of modes of speech, behaviour and community that have been marginalized and denigrated by white culture, she appears at times to vacillate precariously between the (re)construction of race and an essentialism which makes certain assumptions which are themselves, arguably, prejudiced, marginalist, and exclusionary. In the fourth and fifth chapters of this thesis I explore the ways in which Morrison’s fiction has evolved by focusing on two of her works which have attracted the least critical attention: *Tar Baby* (1981) and *Paradise* (1997). Of her early works, *Tar Baby* is, for me, Morrison’s most problematic novel. *Tar Baby*, which delineates the relationship of a young cosmopolitan woman, Jadine, with a rurally-rooted young man, Son, is arguably one of Morrison’s least examined texts and I would suggest that this is precisely because of the novel’s troubling position on African-American cultural and social mobility. Through the questions Morrison raises about Jadine’s (lack of) racial authenticity she seems to suggest that the responsibility for racial and cultural continuity falls on the black woman. In addition, through her use of African-American folklore, Morrison seems to assert that an authentic ‘black’ cultural identity is not only desirable but possible.

Salman Rushdie has argued that the notion of authenticity is a chimera; a deliberate fiction of the mind. He proposes that this “bogy of authenticity,” is the “respectable child of old-fashioned exoticism.” It demands that “sources, forms, style, language and symbol all derive from a supposedly homogeneous and unbroken tradition ... it is completely fallacious to suppose that there is such a thing as a pure, unalloyed tradition from which to draw” (67). Certainly no tradition is original, for all cultures borrow from, manipulate, and revise others as Morrison’s use of the *Tar Baby* folktale ironically highlights. But Morrison’s advocacy of an authentic black culture in *Tar Baby*, suspiciously attempts to,

as Gilroy proposes, “recycle the past continually in an essentially unmodified mythic form” (BC 85) ignoring, as Appiah highlights, the “multiplicity of [our] heritage” (IMFH 105).

Indeed, one of the greatest ironies of Morrison’s and critics’ claims to the relevance of her “black” literature is that it evades the extent to which her fiction is influenced by white literary European traditions. Critics have recently noted the influence of Western authors on Morrison’s fiction,¹⁹ and some have explored the influence of the Greek Classics, for example, on her work.²⁰ In her interview with Jones and Vinson, Morrison noted the “relationship between Greek tragedy and the Black experience” as well as the fact that Greek knowledge, like black tradition, is typically “community oriented” (176-77). Similarly, Morrison’s *Playing in the Dark* reveals her extensive reading of classic European writers. Marc Conner observes that “Morrison herself has noted that any critical view that would blind itself to her training in western, even classical background is misguided” (xii). The irony then of Morrison’s repeated insistence on her own work as primarily “black” literature, a position which has been uncritically repeated in many scholarly responses to her work, is that it obscures the extent to which her writing, indeed, all culture, and therefore, all literature is hybrid. Her advocacy of racial authenticity also serves, in Gilroy’s words, to “observe, organize, and regulate the social body” (BC 63). Hall and Du Gay argue that identities are “more a product of the marking of difference and exclusion, than they are the sign of an identical, naturally constituted unity.” Identities have “the capacity to exclude, to leave out, to render ‘outside’, abjected” (QCI 4). Indeed, Wilkins notes that the problem with “making race a central feature of identity” is that it invariably “runs the risk of replacing the tyranny of racism with the tyranny of racial expectations” (7).

My final chapter explores the ways in which Morrison’s later fiction appears to be aware of the fact that an endorsement of black identity also participates in a process of

¹⁹ Morrison wrote her Masters dissertation on William Faulkner and Virginia Woolf while at Cornell University in 1955. For further reading on the influence of Faulkner, James, and Woolf on Morrison’s fiction and vice-versa see, for example, Philip M. Weinstein’s *What Else But Love?*, Carol A. Kolmerten et al.’s *Unflinching Gaze: Morrison and Faulkner Re-Envisioned*, Patricia McKee’s *Producing American Races*, and Lisa Williams’s *The Artist as Outsider in the Novels of Toni Morrison and Virginia Woolf*.

²⁰ See, for example, Tessa Roynon’s “Toni Morrison and the Classical Tradition,” Tracey L. Walters’s *African American Literature and the Classicist Tradition: Black Women Writers from Wheatley to Morrison*, and Justine Tally’s *The Cambridge Companion to Toni Morrison*.

“othering” which, as Goldberg highlights, “extends the silences of those racially othered, wipes away as it claims to clean up the historical subjectivities and subjections of racialized Others, of othering, of othering itself” (208). The “tyranny of racial expectations” can be seen to operate in *Paradise*, whose central premise is that racial, cultural, and gendered “othering” is, in fact, an “othering” of the self. This is perhaps one of the reasons behind the relative unpopularity of *Paradise* which, like *Tar Baby*, has not attracted the same kind of celebratory critical attention as her other novels. *Paradise* deals with a black community which, in attempting to assert a proud black cultural identity, rehearses, because it has internalized, the pervasive racist discourse that shaped America. In *Paradise*, Morrison appears to problematize her previous position on black identity and to suggest that any attempt to establish a pure racial identity is invariably premised on the exclusion of the Other and a rejection of the self. Thus, I argue that Morrison’s more recent fiction, from *Beloved* (1987) to *A Mercy* (2008), is more interrogative and “open”, exhibiting a growing appreciation of the complexity of black cultural identity and revealing that her position on race is not static, but, due to the questions her novels raise, constantly evolving.

Duvall has noted that the profound dilemma for scholars of Morrison’s fiction is that there is so much to “celebrate in her texts,” but “there are moments when celebration needs to give way to critical engagement and that’s where things get mighty uncomfortable” (6). Morrison at times can be seen to advocate a mythical “blackness” very similar to that which she has so carefully delineated in her writing on white American canonical fiction. But, in *Playing in the Dark*, Morrison herself has called for an “adult discourse” on race (10), and thus it is important that her fiction be similarly interrogated for its contribution to identity politics in American literature and culture. The thesis acknowledges the significance and aesthetic value of Morrison’s attempt to rewrite African-American representation and reposition the African-American presence in American culture, but it also seeks to investigate how the American canon, and her fiction produced in response to it, are involved, though in very different ways, with articulating a racialized and thus, potentially *racist* discourse and ideology. Morrison’s novels are particularly interesting in that they posit the possibility of the “recovery” of a

black essence, even as they complicate it, forcing us, as Gilroy suggests, to “read and rethink this expressive counter-culture” (*TBA* 38).

Eric J. Sundquist has proposed that “in the case of both white and black authors, the key is to understand the authorial context, the historical moment and reigning cultural pressures, even the deliberate strategies employed for producing signs of both racial consciousness and racial antagonism” (*TWN* 9). In an attempt to disrupt assumptions about race in the evolving canon of American literature, and to evaluate and extend the debates that surround race, the thesis will offer a critique of the construction of both ‘whiteness’ and ‘blackness’, and will propose that the representation of race, as a socio-cultural and historically contingent construct, is inevitably volatile, perpetually under revision, and, in literature, always being rewritten.

CHAPTER ONE

Whitewashing Blackness: Gender, Sexuality, and Religion in Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*

Uncle Tom as a text of culture

In May 2008, the German newspaper *Die Tageszeitung* caused an international furore when it published an article with a picture of the White House under the headline “Uncle Barack’s Cabin.”¹ The White House has long been a metonym for the American president and thus the headline associating the White House with Barack Obama, then Democratic presidential candidate, has racialized and racist implications. The suggestion that the White House was soon to become a cabin for “Uncle Tom” ridicules the idea of a black presidency and insinuates Obama’s subservience to white people – behaviour viewed as traitorous to his race.² As Sarah Smith Ducksworth reveals, the term “Uncle Tom” is commonly used to describe the self-denigrating behaviour of some African-Americans who pander to the will of white people: “The biggest idiot in the black world becomes known as an Uncle Tom, a model for every emasculated, servile, simple-minded, self-hating black person in America” (233).

Defending his position as satirical, the deputy editor-in-chief of *Die Tageszeitung*, Reiner Metzger, explained that the headline “is supposed to make people think about these stereotypes. It works on many levels.” Metzger argued that the issue of race surrounded Obama in the presidential election campaign: “The fact that he is African-American plays a constant role in the campaign, but no one talks about it explicitly. One can play with that fact” (par. 6-7). Metzger’s comment significantly highlights the silence

¹ Gary Smith, executive director of the American Academy in Berlin, a private centre which promotes trans-Atlantic relations, told *Spiegel Online* that the headline left him “speechless. ‘Uncle Tom’ is a racial slur, and the Taz editors clearly sacrificed substance and principle for an unreflected laugh.” Representatives of Germany’s black community reacted with indignation. Yonis Ayeh, a board member at the Initiative of Black People in Germany (ISD) which represents the interests of black Germans – an estimated 500,000 within Germany’s population of 82 million – said, “I find the Taz cover very problematic. The newspaper is comparing Obama with Uncle Tom, a subservient slave. I’m sure Obama doesn’t see himself like that. It transmits an image of black people as submissive, uneducated people, which is simply not true.” See David Gordon Smith, “Uncle Barack’s Cabin.”

² Most notoriously, Reverend Jesse Jackson, himself a former presidential candidate, was infamously caught on tape expressing his disdain for Obama. He accused the then Democratic presidential nominee of moralizing and “talking down to black people.” See Charles Hurt, “Jesse’s a ‘Nut’ Job.”

that haunts discussions on race in contemporary American society. Despite its instant success as an antislavery text in the nineteenth-century, the fact that “Uncle Tom” as a pejorative term is still used in reference to black men is illustrative of the continued significance of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* in the persistent tensions surrounding race and racial representation in American society. Interestingly, *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* is also entitled *Life Among the Lowly* which ambiguously suggests the “lowly” status of African-Americans and which goes some way to understanding the novel’s currency and contentiousness in contemporary American culture.

Published in 1852, *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* traces the life of an African-American slave who is forcibly removed from his family to settle the financial debt of his master. Originally serialized in the antislavery paper *The National Era* in 1851 before being published as a two-volume book, Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* was a response to the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850, and was published as a protest against the institution of slavery. In the novel’s preface, Stowe states that the objective of her novel is to highlight “the evils of slavery” and to “waken sympathy and feeling for the African race, as they exist among us; to show their wrongs and sorrows, under a system so necessarily cruel and unjust as to defeat and do away the good effects of all that can be attempted for them, by their friends, under it” (*UTC* xiii). Michelle Wallace notes that *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* was the first novel to sell over a million copies in America, selling 500 000 copies within a matter of days and over 300 000 copies nationwide in its first year (141). Denise Kohn *et al* delineate the specific transatlantic influence of Stowe’s writing and note the numerous European translations and pirated copies of the novel. They reveal that sales of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* in Great Britain in fact “surpassed those in America by more than half a million copies, with some 1.5 million copies sold around Britain and its colonies” (xvii), making Stowe the “most internationally visible American writer of her time” (xi).³ Indeed, Elizabeth Ammons notes that the novel sold more “copies than any other book in the world except the Bible,” and states that “the popularity of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* had no precedent” and “turned Harriet Beecher Stowe into the most celebrated

³ In *Transatlantic Stowe: Harriet Beecher Stowe and European Culture*, Kohn *et al* note that “[r]eaders across Europe interpreted the story [of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*] not solely as American but as a text that spoke for them; it became a book that reflected issues of oppression and reform in their own nations” (xviii). At the same time, “the novel also became a vehicle for European critiques of the United States, exposing the hollowness of some of its treasured ideals” (xxiii).

author in the world (*UTC* viii). Moreover, its political influence and significance in the United States is evidenced in the words of President Abraham Lincoln, who in 1863 greeted its author with the proclamation, “So this is the little lady who started this great big war” (qtd. in Lowance, Jr., *TSD* 3).⁴

In literary circles, the novel was lauded for its faithful depiction of the life of a slave under such an inhumane system. A nineteenth-century review by French writer George Sand in 1852 attests to her view of the novel’s emotional effectiveness. For Sand, the novel: “penetrates the breast, pervades the spirit, and fills us with a strange sentiment of mingled tenderness and admiration for a poor negro lacerated by blows, prostrate in the dust, there gasping on a miserable pallet, his last sigh exhaled towards God” (461). Twentieth-century critic, Robert S. Levine, observes in his analysis, in 1992, of the novel’s reception that at the time of its publication, many African-Americans endorsed *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*. Particularly so Frederick Douglass, the former slave turned eminent scholar, writer, and journalist. Levine argues that in his utilization of the novel in his own anti-slavery journalism:

Douglass sought to make *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* do the cultural work that he wanted it to do. That a figure such as Douglass truly believed Stowe’s novel could counteract the effects of the Compromise of 1850 should temper our scepticism about Stowe’s large intentions and achievements and about her complicity in the power structure. (541)

Levine’s comment that the novel’s endorsement by African-Americans should allow a more general assessment of Stowe’s intentions and her novel’s political achievements highlights the controversy, especially with contemporary audiences, that has surrounded this text’s representation of slavery generally, and of the African-American specifically.

In her essay, “Sentimental Power,” Jane Tompkins observes that despite *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*’s popularity and socio-political influence, the novel is still today not explicitly

⁴ For an analysis of the debate over the issue of slavery in the build up to the Civil War see the following: Martin Klammer’s *Whitman, Slavery and the Emergence of Leaves of Grass*, and David Reynolds, “Politics and Poetry: *Leaves of Grass* and the Social Crisis of the 1850s,” and *Walt Whitman’s America: A Cultural Biography*.

acknowledged as part of the American literary canon.⁵ Tompkins attributes this omission to the patriarchal nature of the American literary establishment that excluded the novel on the grounds of its female sentimentality. But I would argue that *Uncle Tom's Cabin* has been omitted for yet other reasons: on the one hand, because of its poignant representation of an embarrassing legacy in American history and, on the other, because of its equally embarrassing essentialist depiction of the African-American. Either way, the novel inadvertently highlights the pervasive racialism and racism of white America.

Since the time of its first publication, reactions to the novel have continued to be strongly for or against it. Thomas F. Gossett, in 1985, highlights the proliferation of anti-Uncle Tom literature which pervaded the nineteenth-century (Southern) market in order to counter Stowe's representation of the cruelty of slavery. He notes that some of this anti-Uncle Tom literature included, *Aunt Phillis's Cabin* (1852), *North and South* (1852), *Uncle Robin, in His Cabin in Virginia*, and *Tom without One in Boston* (1853) and, more recently, J. C. Furnas's *Goodbye to Uncle Tom* (1956) ("Anti-Uncle Tom Literature" 442-53). At the same time, since 1852, the "Uncle Tom" persona has become one of the best known representations of black identity in white American popular culture. Michelle Wallace describes the minstrelization of this personality in theatres and in film throughout the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and notes how "Uncle Tom" was conveniently transformed into a comic figure performed by black-faced white actors for the amusement of white audiences.⁶

Literary debate over the novel continues and some contemporary critics have attempted to defend the novel against attacks of racism by highlighting its subversive qualities. For instance, Thomas Graham, in 1973, noted Stowe's advocacy of the "full, equal brotherhood of all men" and argues that, while "some of the attitudes and ideas expressed in her [book] may have tended to reinforce existing ideas of Negro inferiority,"

⁵ Debates surrounding the canonization of Stowe's novel have, due to the efforts of critics such as Tompkins, been revived. Kohn *et al* note that although "scholars have restored Stowe to the canon," this has been "in relation to American literary culture" (xiv).

⁶ For information on *Uncle Tom's Cabin's* theatrical success and its contribution to minstrelsy see Michelle Wallace's "Uncle Tom's Cabin: Before and after the Jim Crow Era," and Sarah Meer's *Uncle Tom Mania: Slavery, Minstrelsy and Transatlantic Culture in the 1850s*. Kenneth Warren notes that dramatizations of Stowe's novel influenced the literature of Henry James and the racist text, *The Leopard's Spots*, by Thomas Dixon. See "The Persistence of Uncle Tom," *Black and White Strangers*. For the novel's influence on the London stages see Kohn *et al*, *Transatlantic Stowe*.

Stowe has been largely misrepresented in her attempts —to establish a humanitarian and sometimes uncommonly perceptive point of view” (622, 614). Graham’s reference to Stowe’s ~~humanitarianism~~” highlights one of the areas for which the novel has been highly criticized: its excessive use of sentimental rhetoric, a dependency on (Christian) feeling which is not necessarily egalitarian and which finally proves ineffective in ending slavery.⁷

Arthur Riss, in 1994, attempted to reconcile extremes by looking closely at racialized notions of personhood in mid-nineteenth-century America. He notes that African-Americans were considered human but did not possess the rights of citizenship that qualified them as persons: even ~~proslavery~~ thinkers recognized the Negro as a human being but not as a person, regarding the Negro as an essentially different species of human and therefore as ineligible for the legal rights and ethical regard inalienably guaranteed to persons” (*RSL* 7). The nineteenth-century category of personhood was not, contrary to contemporary liberal arguments, *a priori*; that is, the person did not exist prior to his/her social context. Riss argues that Stowe’s use of racialism, her emphasis on the African-American’s instinct for Christianity, necessarily motivates her novel’s progressive politics. He asserts that Stowe ~~advocates~~ the abolition of slavery not by discrediting racialism but by advocating a stronger sense of biological racialism” for, Riss argues, the ~~racialist~~ claim about the African’s instinct for Christianity is clearly a powerful strategy to secure white sympathy for the Negro slave” (~~Racial Essentialism and Family Values~~” 517, 519). Thus, he states, Stowe’s biological essentialism is necessarily inseparable from her sentimental rescue of the black slave: —Stowe can persuade her readers to hate slavery only because she can rely on the fact that they can be convinced to love particular racial stereotypes” (*RSL* 63). In *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, ~~rather~~ than deny or transcend the grossly biological nature of the African (as the modern liberal would), Stowe sets out to redescribe this grossly biological nature in positive terms” (*RSL* 63). Stowe’s biological essentialism worked, Riss insists, —not ~~by~~ denying

⁷ Gregg Camfield observes in —Sentimental Liberalism and the Problem of Race” that sentimentalism —which is latent in political and social ideology and has been since the inception of the nation, comes strikingly to life around questions of race” (102). With sentimentalism attempting to reconcile the social with the moral, Ann Douglass argues that the ~~sentimentalization~~ of theological and secular culture was an inevitable part of the self-evasion of a society both committed to laissez-faire industrial expansion and disturbed by its consequences” (12).

that the African possessed a racial essence, but by attributing to the Negro a positive essence,” that is, their innate affinity for Christianity (*RSL* 65).

Riss proposes that Stowe’s use of essentialism functions within the confines of the racialized rhetoric of the time. Thus, he argues that:

To condemn Stowe’s racial essentialism as intrinsically racist is to invoke an absolute notion of the ‘person’ that forecloses any exploration of the consequences and motives of Stowe’s political project. It is to impute an inevitable political outcome to a particular account of personal identity rather than acknowledge the specific and multitude effects that originate from such an account. (*RSL* 85)

Stowe’s racialism, Riss insists, thus positively articulates the instinctive Christian character of the African-American, and quite successfully secures white sympathy for the enslaved race. He also notes that Stowe’s “sentimental sympathy always remembers race because race is what makes us what we are” (*RSL* 109).

Riss’s argument is interesting and persuasive from the standpoint of nineteenth-century scientific reasoning.⁸ Indeed, he is correct to question, as he does, the contemporary assumption that the Declaration of Independence “possesses an obvious anti-slavery meaning” when the “question of whether the Negro counted as a Man preoccupied antebellum culture” (*RSL* 5). But Riss also elides the way in which Stowe’s

⁸ At least since the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the notion of what constitutes a person and what rights persons are entitled to have been agreed upon. But Thomas F. Gossett in *Race* highlights that:

If there is one conviction which unites modern liberals, it is a resistance to the idea of explaining innate character and capacity on the basis of race. We need to understand that liberalism only recently acquired that conviction. The liberals of the later part of the nineteenth century and the first part of the twentieth century were frequently not, it is painfully clear, liberal on the subject of race.... They relied too heavily on biological analogies. In their theories, the different races of men have a relationship to one another something like that of different species among the lower animals. Struggle among the lower species in the lower animal world became, when applied to men, a struggle among races. Thus, while they attacked theories of society based upon conflict among individuals, they actually encouraged theories of society based upon conflict among the races. As long as this line of thought persisted, the result almost inevitably was more and more racism. (174-75)

In *The Black Image in the White Mind* George M. Frederickson concurs that southerners could mean two different things when questioning the applicability of the Declaration of Independence: “They could reject the idea of equality in general ... or they could reject simply the interpretation of it which included the Negro as a man created equal to the whites. Those who embraced the second option saw themselves as preserving the egalitarian philosophy as a white racial prerogative” (61).

advocacy of biological racialism – in her case, the African’s “instinct” for Christianity – is a problematic (even if in its time a successful) method of procuring sympathy. He ignores that Stowe’s reductive stereotypes pigeonhole the African-American into a specific and convenient identity which denies both subjectivity and individuality. Stowe’s emphasis on the essential character of blacks reinforces, whether inadvertently or not, the notion of a fundamental and indissoluble difference between blacks and whites.⁹ The fallacious construction of race in *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* therefore partakes in a discourse common to most nineteenth-century thematizations of racial difference. Stowe’s belief in the African-American’s natural affinity for Christianity may have indeed had positive effects for the anti-slavery cause, but her use of biological racialism to procure sympathy asserts as it entrenches the notion of white supremacy. Her sympathetic assertion of biological racialism is thus only effective from a standpoint of the innate supremacy of whiteness.

Stowe’s attitude to African-Americans is, I argue, typical of many nineteenth-century “liberal” or “progressive” writers. As William and Jane H. Pease note, antislavery crusaders were generally “beset by a fundamental ambivalence in their attitude toward the Negro himself” (1). They note that for

all their belief in equality, for all their efforts to raise the Negro above the debilitating influences of adverse environment, the abolitionists were never wholly convincing. Much of what they said betrayed an implicit and at times explicit belief in racial inferiority ... the abolitionists themselves were usually unconscious of their expression of prejudice ... prejudice played a more pervasive role than the logic of consistency would admit. (685-86)

Stowe is no exception here. *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, despite its anti-slavery stance, “participates in and sustains certain racist stereotypes that had historically been part of a proslavery argument” (Stokes 55), and in so doing reveals an “inconsistency between

⁹ In this way Stowe rehearses the racist beliefs of, for example, that nineteenth-century French philosopher, Arthur de Gobineau who, in his *Selected Political Writings*, affirms white civilization when he categorically states that “the majority of the African races have never been able to shake themselves free from their impotence.... This sums up the political ideas of these embryo societies, which have lived on in their imperfect state, without possibility of improvement, as long as the human race itself” (61). See also John Randal Baker’s *Race*, which appears to support such racist beliefs based on the biological and, therefore, inherent differences of the races; or Stephen Jay Gould’s *The Mismeasure of Man* which examines a range of nineteenth-century race theories; and Emmanuel Chukwudi Eze’s *Race and the Enlightenment: A Reader* which traces biological and concomitant philosophical theories that exacerbated racism during the Enlightenment period of the eighteenth century.

theory and practice that plagued the nineteenth-century Congress as well as the framers of the Constitution” (Lowance, Jr., *AS* 4).

This ambivalence can be seen in her preface, where Stowe notes:

In this general movement [to abolish slavery], unhappy Africa at last is remembered; Africa, who began the race of civilization and human progress in the dim, gray dawn of earlier time, but who, for centuries, has lain bound and bleeding at the foot of civilized and Christianized humanity, imploring compassion in vain.

But the heart of the dominant race, who have been her conquerors, her hard masters, has at length been turned towards her in mercy; and it has been seen how far nobler it is in nations to protect the feeble than to oppress them. Thanks be to God, the world has at last outlived the slave-trade! (*UTC* xiii)

The proper response to blackness advocated here is the paternalistic pity of the dominant white race. Ironically, pity is a sentiment and therefore curiously pleasurable. As such, literary representations that evoke pity can never really take issue with the cause of suffering, with that which ultimately inspires pleasure. It is difficult to ascertain if Stowe’s reference to “bond” Africans refers to them as being bound in slavery or a state of primitivism. But the image of a white Christ – symbolic of the white race – is also superimposed onto this general imagery of black oppression and subservience so that what is highlighted is (God-given) white superiority. Whites are cautioned to remember that they are indeed responsible for protecting their “feeble” black kin. Stowe’s statement above reveals that while whites could conceive of African-American humanity (which has potential to be a “civilized and Christianized humanity”), they could less easily conceive of black equality.

As a protest novel, *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* is, for James Baldwin, wholly ineffectual. Proclaiming it “a very bad novel,” he suggests that protest novels suffer in their didacticism and expose the conditions that have produced them:

They emerge for what they are: a mirror of our confusion, dishonesty, panic, trapped and immobilized in the sunlit prison of the American dream.... The failure of the protest novel lies in its rejection of life, the human being, the denial of his beauty, dread, power, in the insistence that it is his categorization alone which is real and which cannot be transcended. (16, 18)

Baldwin's imagery of the "sunlit prison" here suggests a complicity in maintaining racism. White American protest literature such as Stowe's, in its very ambivalence, sustains the chimera that is "the American dream." Baldwin himself moved to Europe because he found life as a black male writer and a homosexual impossible within the racialized Christian hierarchies of 1950s American society. His objection to Stowe's protest novel illustrates, in part, its failure fundamentally to change the social landscape of the United States. While advocating the slave's humanity, which creates the illusion of the equality and independence of all people, particularly African-American, Stowe's novel is simultaneously, to use Baldwin's words, "trapped" and "immobilized" by its own "confusion" and "dishonesty," that is, by the fundamental belief in the essential difference and inferiority of black people.

In this chapter, I argue that despite its successful contribution to abolishing African-American slavery, *Uncle Tom's Cabin* participates and is entrenched in a racialized discourse endemic to nineteenth-century America: an insistence that racial categorization is, as Baldwin highlights, "real" and "cannot be transcended." Despite Uncle Tom's heroic representation, and Stowe's simultaneous exhortation of African-American humanity, I demonstrate how she engages in a complex form of "whitewashing" that betrays a fundamental belief in black inferiority and inequality. By whitewashing I mean that Stowe, far from recognizing black equality, utilizes a deliberate and complex representational process that assimilates blackness into whiteness in order to win sympathy for some of her black characters. As I illustrate, blackness is here co-opted in order to universalize and foreground whiteness.

Stowe's whitewashing curiously involves what Julia Kristeva, in her seminal essay, *Powers of Horror*, has termed the process of "abjection." She highlights that in establishing identity, rejection of the Other within is crucial to the process: "I expel myself, I spit myself out, I abject myself within the same motion through which I claim to establish myself" (3). The abject is that which fundamentally "disturbs identity, system, order." It occupies that precarious space located "in-between," and is characterized by "the ambiguous, the composite" (4). The abject is "something rejected from which one does not part" (4). With its allusions to the corporeal, abjection is highlighted as an intricate and intimate process in which the rejection of the Other is simultaneously a

rejection of the self. For, fundamentally, abjection is a form of “primal repression” which is the “ability of the speaking being, always already haunted by the Other, to divide, reject, repeat” (12).

I suggest in this chapter that Stowe’s “whitewashing” of Uncle Tom – a process entailing his feminization, the utilization of the female-centred domestic genre, and his representation as a Christian – is a literary enactment of Kristeva’s process of abjection. Kristeva notes that “abjection is above all ambiguity. Because, while releasing a hold, it does not radically cut off the subject from what threatens it—on the contrary, abjection acknowledges it to be in perpetual danger” (9). Abjection, Kristeva suggests, “is a precondition of narcissism” (13; emphasis in original). In this way, I suggest that in her representation of Uncle Tom, her idealized black figure, Stowe betrays an underlying desire for and fear of blackness which lies specifically within the domain of black male sexuality, and which in turn works to highlight the seeming innate morality and superiority of whiteness.

Feminizing Uncle Tom: Sexuality and Gender as Anxieties of Race

Sander L. Gilman in *Difference and Pathology* argues that “[h]uman sexuality, given its strong biological basis, not unnaturally is often perceived as out of the control of the self. . . . For a secure definition of self, sexuality and the loss of control associated with it must be projected onto the Other” (24). As Joel Kovel explains in *White Racism*, in nineteenth-century white America, “whatever is forbidden and horrifying in human nature, may be designated as black and projected onto a man whose dark skin and oppressed past fit him to receive the symbol” (65-66). This is applicable to Stowe’s representation of blackness in *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*. Abjection of black sexuality is the assertion of control of that which is repressed within the white self.

Uncle Tom is depicted in the novel not merely as a slave but also as a husband and father, clearly highlighting Stowe’s intent that Tom be read as a familial figure. This is evidenced in his interaction with his children. His sensitivity as a father is highlighted in the scene in which he discovers he has been sold and will soon be separated from his family:

Here he turned to the rough trundle-bed full of little woolly heads, and broke fairly down. He leaned over the back of the chair, and covered his face with his large hands. Sobs, heavy, hoarse and loud, shook the chair, and the great tears fell through his fingers on the floor: just such tears, sir, as you dropped into the coffin where lay your first-born son. (*UTC* 34)

Here, Stowe attempts to demonstrate that Tom is a father like all (white) fathers, a man like all (white) men, but in his capacity for expressing his sorrow by weeping, she also shows him possessing a feminine quality at odds with conventional masculinity.¹⁰

Uncle Tom is not, however, wholly deprived of his masculine attributes. Stowe reveals that Tom is, physically, a “large, broad-chested, powerfully-made man,” with a face “characterized by an expression of grave and steady good sense, united with much kindness and benevolence. There was something about his whole air self-respecting and dignified, yet united with a confiding and humble simplicity” (*UTC* 18). His title “Uncle” in this instance suggests a communal as well as familial role. Further, while his complacency with his lot within slavery certainly points to black subservience, Tom’s steadfastness and principled defiance of Legree’s manipulation of his morality, for example, suggests a masculine and Christian strength of character. But Tom, who has a “gentle, domestic heart” (*UTC* 81), and a “voice as tender as a woman’s” (*UTC* 87), is also fashioned, like middle-class white women, as emotive, yielding and passive. Tom is scripted according the conventions of a popular feminine literary mode – the domestic genre.

The domestic genre was a mode of story-telling that appealed to the sensitivities and sensibilities of nineteenth-century middle-class white American women.¹¹ The genre helped develop what feminist historian, Barbara Welter, originally termed the “cult of true womanhood.”¹² Hazel V. Carby expands upon the term by arguing that the genre

¹⁰ Winfried Fluck suggests in “The Power and Failure of Representation in Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*,” sentimentalism’s connection with femininity when he notes that “it is this the power of the heart, of natural emotion and moral sentiment, to penetrate to the perception of a moral order – a sentimental epistemology which also has the effect of putting women in the position of superior moral authority” (322).

¹¹ Ann Douglass argues that there is an “intimate connection between critical aspects of Victorian culture and modern mass culture,” and identifies what Stowe called “Pink and White Tyranny”: the drive of nineteenth-century women to gain power through the exploitation of their feminine identity” (5, 8).

¹² See Barbara Welter’s *Dimitry Convictions*, 1997. Here, she describes the basic tenets or “cardinal virtues” of the “cult of true womanhood” as “piety, purity, submissiveness and domesticity.... With them [the woman] was promised happiness and power” (21).

institutionalized the ~~ex~~clusion of black women from dominant codes of morality” (39).¹³ Jane Tompkins describes it a genre ~~w~~ritten by, for, and about women” (269), advocating a particularly white feminine worldview replete with, for instance, the feminine virtues of decorum and chastity. The domestic genre was typically romantic, and relied heavily on sentimental rhetoric – the emphasis on feeling – as a means of emotive persuasion. Interesting correlations can be made between Stowe’s elaboration on the innate, essential character of (white) womanhood and her representation of Uncle Tom. In her essay, ~~A~~ppel to the Women of the Free States,” Stowe states that: ~~H~~owever ambition and the love of political power may blind the stronger sex, God has given to woman a deeper and more immovable knowledge, in those holier feelings, which are particular to womanhood, and which guard the sacredness of the family state” (*UTC* 427). It is worth noting therefore that her black protagonist, Uncle Tom, like women, is also shown to possess a ~~d~~eeper and more immovable” sensibility. As the novel’s title suggests, and the narrator’s elaborate detail of his cabin highlights, Tom is firmly associated with hearth and home.¹⁴ Carby thus argues that Stowe ~~w~~as unable to embody the values of true womanhood in a black female character and, instead, bestowed them upon her protagonist, Uncle Tom, a black male” (34).¹⁵

¹³ The popularity of the domestic genre in the nineteenth-century is evidenced in its appropriation and utilization by African-Americans authors who, in calling for the abolition of slavery, used it to appeal to the sensibilities especially of white readers. Former slave Harriet Jacobs’s autobiography, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, for example, relies on elements of the domestic genre which Frances Smith Foster describes here as ~~m~~elodramatic and feminist” (320). The novel’s preface makes a special plea to white ~~w~~omen of the North” in order to ~~a~~rouse” them ~~t~~o a realizing sense of the condition of two millions of women at the South, still in bondage, suffering what I have suffered” (5). But, as Jacobs’s narrative shows, the genre had its moral and political limitations. In its appeal to feminine virtue and decorum, it typically omitted certain (sexual) indelicacies, ~~u~~nsuitable for its white audience. Details of Jacobs’s experiences of slavery – her sexual harassment by her master, Dr Flint, and her subversive’ decision to give herself to another man – are necessarily ~~p~~runed” (6), edited to abide with conventional mores that rehearse and reinforce white ideas of sexual and moral purity. For further discussion on the effectiveness of Jacobs’s text see Michelle Burnham’s essay, ~~b~~opholes of Resistance: Harriet Jacobs’ Slave Narrative and the Critique of Agency in Foucault,” and Foster’s essay, ~~r~~ising Incidents,” *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, 278-94; 312-29. For articles arguing Jacobs’s generic and self-censorship see James Olney’s ~~I~~ Was Born’: Slave Narratives, Their Status as Autobiography and as Literature,” and Andrew Levy’s ~~D~~ialect and Convention: Harriet A. Jacobs’s *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*.”

¹⁴ See Chapter IV, ~~A~~Evening in Uncle Tom’s Cabin” (16-27).

¹⁵ Certainly Stowe’s representation of black women in her novel is interesting. Uncle Tom’s wife, the dark-skinned Aunt Chloe, while she is the Shelby’s cook and revels in her feminine domain – the kitchen, simultaneously exhibits, in her treatment of her children and Tom, an almost manly strength of character, whereas Tom is gentler and more submissive. Cassy, the ~~q~~uadron” slave mistress of Tom’s new master, Simon Legree, exhibits a hardness and bitterness which is the result of her failed relationships with her white lovers, the sale of her children and her infanticide of one them as well as her mistreatment at the

The feminization of Tom is thus a deliberate gesture by Stowe to argue for a more sensitive, less violent approach to the increasingly divisive issue of slavery. In Stowe's depiction, Tom's masculinity is rendered non-threatening and, in fact, ideal. In his association with patriarchy and the home, Tom, as Elizabeth Ammons argues, broaches Stowe's case for "non-violent resistance to the corrupting influence of slavery as the only hope for the permanent eradication of a system based on violence" (173). The home, according to Tompkins, becomes the "center of the community and community [the center] of the nation" (283-84), so that Tom, who we might understand as the novel's *heroine*, "calls into question the whole structure of American society" (286). Tom's feminization, his affiliation with the home is, according to Tompkins, politically subversive.

Many critics have, however, taken issue with Tom's feminine representation, arguing that his emasculation betrays white people's underlying fear of black male sexuality. Sander Gilman notes that "[b]y the eighteenth century, the sexuality of the black, both male and female, becomes an icon for deviant sexuality in general" ("Black Bodies, White Bodies" 228). Peter Stoneley argues, in "Sentimental Emasculations," that in nineteenth-century white American literature, "blackness calls forth or threatens to desubliminate white desire, and a variety of works show white writers moving between the sexual allure of blackness and the need to reaffirm the superiority of white discipline" (57). He argues that Stowe finally "cannot quite convince herself that blackness is not connected with ungovernable passion" (61). Indeed, Kobena Mercer notes in *Welcome to the Jungle* that, historically, representations of black male sexuality are inseparable from expostulations of racial identity. He argues that black male sexuality "projects the fear of a threat not only to white womanhood, but to civilization itself, as the anxiety of miscegenation.... Sex is confirmed as the *nature* of black male identity" (185). Sexuality is synonymous with blackness, hence historic attempts to destroy or negate black sexuality. From this point of view Tom's effeminacy ironically points to by attempting to

hands of Legree. Eliza Harris, the Shelby's "mulatto" servant, who is, we discover later, also Cassy's daughter, bravely escapes from the trader, Haley, who wants to buy her son, Harry, marking her strong but feminine maternal commitment. I would suggest that in the gradation of their skin colour and concomitant sexuality, Stowe intimates these women's proximity to the mores of true white womanhood. Aunt Chloe is, in her blackness, registered as almost asexual and stereotypical, whereas Cassy's feminine morality and gentility is compromised by an institution that subverts the norms of feminine respectability, and Eliza, who is closest to white, remains steadfastly loyal to the virtues of white womanhood.

evade, reinforces by underplaying, the myth of a menacing black sexuality. The use of the appellation “Uncle” complicates his sexuality, positing him as a generic father figure and therefore less threatening sexually.¹⁶ His feminization betrays Stowe’s anxiety about black male sexuality. In the novel it is painstakingly contained: managed within Tom’s relationship with Eva.

The relationship between Tom and Eva is an unusual one, seemingly innocent, but characterized by an uncanny, ambiguous intimacy which suggests or anticipates sexual fulfilment. This proposition is undoubtedly controversial for not only would a (consensual) relationship between a black slave and a white girl be unusual in nineteenth-century America, but Eva’s age would also preclude such a possibility. Yet, from their initial encounter, Stowe hints at a sexual undertone to their relationship. On a boat to his new life, after being sold by his financially decrepit master, Mr Shelby, Tom saves Eva from falling into the Mississippi River. Having done so, he proceeds to study her in a curiously suggestive manner:

Tom watched the little lady a great deal, before he ventured on any overtures towards acquaintanceship. He knew an abundance of simple acts to propitiate and invite the approaches of the little people, and he resolved to play his part right skilfully. He could cut cunning little baskets out of cherry-stones, could make grotesque faces on hickory-nuts, or odd-jumping figures of elder-pith, and he was a very Pan in the manufacture of whistles of all sizes and sorts. His pockets were all full of miscellaneous articles of attraction, which he had hoarded in days of old for his master’s children, and which he now produced, with commendable prudence and economy, one by one as overtures for acquaintance and friendship. (UTC 127)

Stowe’s imagery here evokes the innocence of “acquaintance and friendship,” but her tone and language also invoke the sexual seduction of Eva by a predatory black male. Tom’s incessant watching of Eva suggests behaviour so implicitly menacing that Ducksworth describes this passage as providing the reader with “a mustard seed of

¹⁶ Adult African-Americans were designated the terms “Uncle” and “Aunt” to give the illusion of familial relations, and therefore racial harmony, between black and white Americans despite black slavery. The use of these familial appellations also complicates black sexuality, positing black men as generic father figures and black women as maternal. For further discussion on the relationship of Southern whites to their black slaves see Gale Elizabeth Hale’s *Making Whiteness*.

suspicion that Tom, though simpleminded, could have been a dangerous paedophile” (227). Indeed, the innocence of the way in which he attracts Eva is undermined by the fact that his is the ~~v~~ery Pan in the manufacture of whistles” and by the words ~~g~~rotesque” and ~~e~~unning” which suggest instead the nefarious nature of his actions.¹⁷ In his reading of the novel Baldwin reiterates that Uncle Tom, ~~u~~ntrustworthy and sexless, needed only to drop the title Uncle to become violent, crafty, and sullen, a menace to any white woman who passed by” (22).

Tom’s desire is specific. Eva represents white (upper-class) female sexuality, and the hint at the threat of miscegenation is strengthened by the term ~~l~~ittle lady,” which highlights her youth while simultaneously suggesting a nascent sexuality, something which, under Tom’s vigilant gaze, is disturbingly apparent. Indeed, ~~t~~he little one was shy ... and it was not easy to *tame* her” (UTC 127; emphasis added). The word ~~t~~ame” is instructive. It ambiguously hints at something within Eva that needs subduing while also suggesting the aggressiveness of Tom’s masculinity. Stowe’s ambiguity on sexuality is readily apparent. She characterizes Tom as effeminate in order to mask her belief in the conventional perception of the innate, and racially threatening, sexuality of the black male.

Herein lies Stowe’s complicity in the process of abjection. By suggesting the invidiousness of Tom’s blackness, she positions it against the seeming innocence of Eva’s whiteness. Tom and Eva’s meeting is characterized by desire necessarily toned down, rejected by Stowe to reinforce the idea of distinct sexualities and races’. Kristeva notes of the abject that: ~~I~~t lies there, quite close, but it cannot be assimilated. It beseeches, worries, and fascinates desire, which nevertheless, does not let itself be seduced” (1). Stowe’s play on the seduction motif, typical of the romantic domestic genre, suggests Tom’s blackness and Eva’s whiteness as both temptation and threat. But Stowe carefully contains their desire. She disguises the sexual tenor of the above scene by repressing both their sexualities. Tom, Stowe stresses, has ~~t~~he soft, impressible nature of his kindly race, ever yearning toward the simple and childlike” (UTC 127). He is

¹⁷ Glen A. Love notes that, according to Phillippe Borgeaud’s study of *The Cult of Pan in Ancient Greece*, in classical civilization, ~~t~~he Greek god Pan is an Arcadian and, for the Greeks, Arcadia symbolized the original life. The ancient Arcadians were seen in Greek mythology as rough, bestial, wild primitives who occupied their barren and forbidden region as Pre-Selenians, that is, older than the time when the moon rose for the first time” (75). See *Practical Ecocriticism: Literature, Biology, and the Environment*.

fundamentally harmless, sexually and racially impotent. Likewise, Eva's 'childishness' is emphasized: "the little one was not what you would have called either a grave child or a sad one. On the contrary, an airy and innocent playfulness seemed to flicker like the shadow of summer leaves over her childish face, and around her buoyant figure" (UTC 126). Eva's diminutive stature and amiable temperament – she is the "little one," with the "childish face," and an "airy and innocent playfulness" comparable to a "canary-bird" (UTC 127) – highlights her sexual innocence.

Ironically, however, it is Eva who, playfully "putting her arm around her father's neck," declares of Tom, "I want him" (UTC 130). While still a child Eva articulates a clear awareness of her ability to possess Tom should she so wish. Her desire, within the context of slavery, is couched in the language of commerce and commodity. So, for instance, she tells her father, "You have money enough, I know" (UTC 130), thereby revealing her acculturation to what Shannon Sullivan describes as "whiteness as possession" – that is, "not just the act of owning, but also the obsessive psychosomatic state of white owners" (122). She explains that white habitual, that is, unconscious, acquisitional privilege demonstrates "how white domination is located, so to speak, in both the individual person and the world in which she lives" (1-2). In a world of white privilege, Sullivan notes, "habits that privilege whiteness will result, and these habits in turn will tend to reinforce the social, political, economic, and other privileges that white people have" (4). Eva 'wants' Tom, because as a slave, he is symbolic of white 'natural' ability to own blackness, corporeally and metaphysically.

Stowe's emphasis on Eva's playful nature elides the sexual undertone of her declaration. But as Hortense J. Spillers notes, her statement masks white feminine desire for the black male. She notes that the "striking simplicity of 'I want him', so unlike the perfectly complicated and elaborate speech of Eva on other fictional occasions, does not invite gloss." Spiller asks, however, "what does [Eva's statement] mean, and in particular nearness to money?" (558). She concludes that to her, it seems that "Stowe dispatches the child to do a woman's job," so that

we have hold, it seems, of what becomes, in the course of things in the United States, so scandalous an admission for Anglo-American women to make that it describes a site of marginality. 'Desire' in *any form* for the female must be

silenced, cut out, banished, ‘killed’ off, and in particular with reference to the African male sexuality, here rendered ‘harmless’ under the auspices of a Christian and ‘civilizing’ mission. (558)

As Spillers notes, Eva’s sexuality is toned down in her aesthetic representation to emphasize a transcendent morality concomitant with her pure white status.

Richard Dyer argues that although whiteness is typically represented as invisible or neutral, the colour white ~~–does~~ carry the more explicit symbolic sense of moral and also aesthetic superiority” (70). Stowe’s highly idealized portrait of Eva endorses this position. We are told of Eva that:

Her form was the perfection of childish beauty, without its usual chubbiness and squareness of outline. There was about it an undulating and aerial grace, such as one might dream of for some mythic and allegorical being. Her face was remarkable less for its perfect beauty of feature than for a singular and dreamy earnestness of expression, which made the ideal start when they looked at her, and by which the dullest and most literal were impressed, without exactly knowing why. The shape of her head and the turn of her neck and bust was peculiarly noble, and the long golden-brown hair that floated like a cloud around it, the deep spiritual gravity of her violet blue eyes, shaded by heavy fringes of golden brown,—all marked her out from other children, and made every one of them turn and look after her, as she glided hither and thither on the boat. (*UTC* 126)

Eva’s perfection is unparalleled. She is, with an ~~–undulating~~ and aerial grace,” a ~~–mythic~~ and allegorical being”; the archetype of whiteness. This symbolism, by which white beauty is posited as what Dyer calls ~~—the~~ purest expression of the human race itself” (22), is Stowe’s racial standard by which all other characters, but especially the black characters are measured. This idealized portrait of whiteness suggests whites as ~~–a~~ pure race whose noble qualities of superior beauty, intellect, initiative, and ability to conquer and govern had been concentrated through avoidance of dilution by inferior stock” (Babb 40).

If we are in any doubt about the racialized implications of Stowe’s depiction of Eva we need only consider her characterization of Topsy. She is Eva’s notable black Other, a girl described as ~~–the~~ blackest of her race” with ~~—something~~ odd and goblin-like about her appearance,” something ~~–heathenish~~” (*UTC* 206-7). In fact, Eva and Topsy are carefully contrasted by Stowe:

There stood the two children, representatives of the two extremes of society. The fair, high-bred child, with her golden head, her deep eyes, her spiritual, noble brow, and prince-like movements; and her black, keen, subtle, cringing, yet acute neighbor. They stood the representatives of their races. The Saxon, born of ages of cultivation, command, education, physical and moral eminence; the Afric, born of ages of oppression, submission, ignorance, toil, and vice! (*UTC* 213)

Stowe's careful delineation of the two girls as representative of their distinct races is hardly subtle. She seems to suggest that centuries of cultivation have produced the character of the white race while a lack of proper cultivation has resulted in the depravity of the black race. Topsy is Eva's "neighbor," proximate to but distanced from whiteness. She is rendered as a grotesque but representative illustration of blackness.

That Eva was "the perfection of childish beauty, without its usual chubbiness and squareness of outline" positions her between childhood and womanhood at the same time that her sexuality is suggestively negated. She is described as:

Always dressed in white, she seemed to move like a shadow through all sorts of places, without contracting spot or stain; and there was not a corner or nook, above or below, where those fairy footsteps had not glided, and that visionary golden head, with its deep blue eyes, fledged along. (*UTC* 126)

The words "spot" or "stain," while employing the political correctness befitting the domestic genre, suggest Stowe's anxiety concerning white female sexuality, and hence, racial purity. While she attempts to position Eva as the "repository of cleanliness, of virtue" (Roberts 36), Stowe reveals that white women are, by inference, inherently sexual beings capable of contracting "spot or stain." This highlights, as Dyer notes,

the conundrum of sexuality for whites, the difficulty they have over the very mechanism that ensures their racial survival and purity, heterosexual production. To ensure the survival of the race, they have to have sex – but having sex, and sexual desire, are not very white: the means of reproducing whiteness are not themselves pure white. (26)

The white woman is both sexual and asexual, highlighting, as Dyer puts it, the "conundrum" of white sexuality. Ruth Frankenburg's study of "white women's places in the racial structure of the United States at the end of the twentieth century" in *White Women, Race Matters*, is applicable to the study of nineteenth-century white women,

particularly Eva, in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. She argues that white women's lives, particularly their sexuality, are "sites for the reproduction" of racialized notions of identity (1). White women, Frankenburg observes, emerge as racialized "repositories of the key elements of the history of the idea of race in the United States" (239). White female sexuality sustains the burden of the very idea of whiteness, yet, as Dyer argues, "their very whiteness, their refinement, makes of sexuality a disturbance of their racial purity" (29).

Implicit also in Stowe's words, "spot" or "stain," is a contaminating blackness. Kovel notes that references to "spot" or "stain" historically allude to dirt which symbolizes "anything that can pass out of the body" and that therefore "should not pass back into the body, nor even touch it" (84). Significantly, dirt

represents a set of peculiar fantasies based upon bodily experience. The central aspect of bodily experience upon which this tissue of daydreams rests is, of course, the act of defecation, and the central symbol of dirt throughout the world is feces, known by that profane word with which the emotion of disgust is expressed: shit. (87)

Figuratively, then, blackness elicits emotions of disgust and repulsion, and metaphysically, the bodily act of defecation – of abjection. Blackness is figured as a contaminant, and black male sexuality has typically been the underlying threat to white purity.¹⁸

Stowe's anxiety with race and sexuality is highlighted at the beginning of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* in her close attention to the mixed-race Harris family. The young "quadroon" Harry Harris is described as having "something in his appearance remarkably beautiful and engaging. His black hair, fine as floss silk, hung in glossy curls about his round, dimpled face, while a pair of large dark eyes, full of fire and softness, looked out

¹⁸ References to 'black' contamination pervade nineteenth-century and early twentieth-century American literature. In the nineteenth-century classic, *The Scarlet Letter*, the fragility of white purity is inferred in the character of Pearl, whose mother Hester Prynne is an adulteress who defies the sexual and cultural mores of seventeenth-century Puritan society. Pearl, who is always lured by the dark forest and its resident "Black Man," is portrayed as wild and daemonic and has interesting parallels with the description of Topsy in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. In William Faulkner's post-bellum twentieth-century novel, *The Sound and the Fury*, Caddy's deviant sexuality is symbolic of the degraded social, cultural and racial status of the white Compson family. Caddy is called a "nigger wench" (119) by her misogynist brother, Jason, suggesting that her promiscuity is concomitant with blackness.

from beneath the rich, long lashes” (*UTC* 3). Harry’s parents, Eliza and George, are similarly described, with the emphasis on their beautiful almost ‘white appearance. In fact, George is white enough to pass as Spanish, and both his sister and wife are connected to French gentility. George is notably described as ~~—~~very tall, with a dark, Spanish complexion, fine, expressive black eyes, and close-curling hair, also of glossy blackness.” He also has a ~~—~~well-formed aquiline nose, [and] straight thin lips” (*UTC* 92), which render him more white than black. Stowe’s narrator explains that George, from his father’s side had ~~—~~inherited a set of fine European features” and only the ~~—~~slight mulatto tinge” of his slave mother (*UTC* 94). But Stowe’s careful delineation of her mixed-race characters’ physicality suggests a wariness of sexual and racial impurity and functions as a subtle caution against miscegenation. Dyer notes that inter-racial heterosexuality

threatens the power of whiteness because it breaks the legitimation of whiteness with reference to the white body ... if white bodies are no longer indubitably white bodies, if they can no longer guarantee their own reproduction as white, then the natural ‘basis of their domination is no longer credible. (25)

Stowe’s explicit reference to mixed races not only implies an anxiety with the delegitimation of whiteness (under slavery), but suggests an anxiety with a particular kind of inter-racial sexuality, both desirable and repulsive. The Harrises may have white blood, but they are not pure white.

Kristeva notes that the abject and abjection are ~~—~~my safeguards. The primers of my culture” (2), and certainly abjection appears to be the primer of Stowe’s whiteness. We are reminded, through the representation of the Harris family and Uncle Tom, of their impurity which simultaneously works to reinforce the notion of an authentic, pure whiteness. In the process of asserting whiteness is the simultaneous process of abjecting blackness. Kristeva notes that: ~~—~~experience abjection only if an Other has settled in place and stead of what will be me. ‘Not at all an other with whom I identify and incorporate, but an Other who precedes and possesses me, and through such possession causes me to be” (10). The construction of the self is premised on the rejection of the Other who always exists prior to the self. In Stowe’s novel, the black ‘Other causes the white self to be, inadvertently highlighting the complex nature of establishing racial identity. Kwame Anthony Appiah notes that ~~—~~[e]ven if the concept of race *is* a structure

of oppositions ... it is a structure whose realization is, at best, problematic and, at worst, impossible" ("The Uncompleted Argument" 35). Racial identity is fundamentally an ideology with no referents in biological fact. The self invests in the idea of race in order to procure identity. For all Stowe's attestations to Eva's racial loftiness and purity, her inescapable, intimate Other'/self is the (idea of the) black Tom. Stowe's assertion of whiteness, then, is, ambiguously, contingent on the abjection of blackness, for white identity in *Uncle Tom's Cabin* is conceivable only through the black Other.

The notion of white selfhood' being predicated on the black Other is evidenced in the particularly romantic, if not apotheosized, representation of Tom's affection for his mistress. As Stowe's narrator describes it:

He loved her as something frail and earthly, yet almost worshipped her as something heavenly and divine. He gazed on her as the Italian sailor gazes on his image of the child Jesus,—with a mixture of reverence and tenderness; and to humor her graceful fancies, and meet those thousand simple wants which invest childhood like a many-colored rainbow, was Tom's chief delight. (*UTC* 224)

Here Tom's desire for Eva is transformed as he worships at the altar of whiteness. Explicit in this description of Eva is whiteness as symbolically holy and therefore an explicit" ideal (Dyer 70). Whiteness here is seemingly emptied of its physicality and divorced from sexuality. Tom endorses this vision of whiteness not just by worshipping Eva, but by being, to use Toni Morrison's term, serviceable" (*PD* 8) — to humor her graceful fancies" was Tom's chief delight." Again, Stowe reminds us that Eva is a child, but akin to the most powerful of all children: theimage of the child Jesus." She has previously been associated with the male, prince like" (*UTC* 213), and with her father's white financial power, highlighting how her race positions her above Tom whose subservience and association with femininity is illustrative of a feeble" black race.

Like the Spanish" George, Tom is figured here as Mediterranean, the Italian sailor" who is not quite white. Italians were not fully recognized or classed as white" in nineteenth-century racialized America. They too, like African-Americans, were categorized as racial Others" and treated with contempt. Yet Italians were not black either, so by virtue of skin colour, were privileged above blacks. Valerie Babb in

Whiteness Visible describes the process whereby the disparate European ethnicities gradually became white Americans:

Though group identity among white ethnics remained factional, and though ethnic identification remained, heterogeneous European communities increasingly would coalesce into a white race that viewed itself as prototypically American ... whiteness, an imagined, created category, had fashioned a dominant American racial group out of a European patchwork quilt. It cemented varied white European populations into a unified nation state and located social power in one group. (36-37)

By figuring Tom as an “Italian sailor” Stowe thus alludes to his Otherness at the same time that she whitewashes him of a blackness too grotesquely physical to associate romantically with whiteness. His becomes a yearning for assimilation into whiteness, which is achieved, as the reference to the Italian sailor’s piety indicates, by his incorporation into the Christian religion.

Christianizing Tom: Christianity and the Construction of Race

In *Christianizing Tom*, Stowe’s anti-slavery text reinforces the racialized notion of black cultural and metaphysical inferiority which necessitates integration into superior whiteness. *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* shares remarkable parallels with George Fitzhugh’s *Cannibals All! or, Slaves Without Masters*, which provides a Christian argument for slavery. Fitzhugh argued that slavery, as “a series of subordinations, is consistent with Christian morality ... for we cannot efficiently protect those whose conduct we cannot control” (qtd. in Faust 291-92). To protect the weak, explains Fitzhugh, “we must first enslave them” (qtd. in Faust 293). Although Stowe opposes slavery, her paternalistic “Christian morality,” like Fitzhugh’s, participates in a possessive investment in whiteness in which white civilization can only be realized through or against black barbarity. As Fitzhugh notes, with no degree of irony: “How fortunate for the South that she has this inferior race, which enables her to make the whites a privileged class” (qtd. in Faust 276).

Despite being sold off by Mr Shelby and suffering the abuses of his new master, Simon Legree, the enslaved Christian Tom is described as “steady, honest, capable” (*UTC* 2). Having “got religion at a camp-meeting, four years ago” (*UTC* 2), and as a

‘preacher’ within his own slave community, his is also the civilizing mission of his black people:

Uncle Tom was a sort of patriarch in religious matters, in the neighborhood. Having, naturally, an organization in which the *morale* was strongly predominant, together with a greater breadth and cultivation of mind than obtained among his companions, he was looked up to with great respect, as a sort of minister among them; and the simple, hearty, sincere style of his exhortations might have edified even better educated persons. But it was in prayer that he especially excelled. Nothing could exceed the touching simplicity, the child-like earnestness, of this prayer, enriched with the language of Scripture, which seemed so entirely to have wrought itself into his being, as to have become a part of himself, and to drop from his lips unconsciously; in the language of a pious old negro, he ‘prayed right up’. And so much did his prayer always work on the devotional feelings of his audiences, that there seemed often a danger that it would be lost altogether in the abundance of the responses which broke out everywhere around him. (UTC 26)

As a ‘civilized’ Christian, Uncle Tom’s representation above is convenient and serviceable to whiteness. Stowe’s white paternalism is shown not only in her description of his “touching simplicity,” and “childlike earnestness,” but also in her reminder that even within ‘civilized’ black Christians the uncontrollable African element lurks —in abundance” of their “devotional feelings.” This underscores the novel’s pervasive tropes of white fear and superiority. In Stowe’s infantilization of Tom is the containment of his threatening sexuality. By contrast, Eva’s racial authority is cemented in her characterization as the possessor of both maturity and wisdom, and white “prince-like,” male, financial, Christian power. Thus, despite Tom’s representation as a father figure, Eva is shown to be the parent in their relationship.

Stowe’s description of Tom deliberately employs the sentimental rhetoric of the domestic genre, participating in what George Frederickson terms “romantic racialism,” a particular rhetorical and ideological custom of abolitionists who were against the institution of slavery and its inhumanity, but were not wholly convinced of black equality. Frederickson reveals the complex nature of romantic racialism by explaining that it “was a philosophy that could easily be transmuted into an overt doctrine of Negro inferiority, distinguished from harsher forms of racism only by a certain flavor of humanitarian paternalism” (125). Indeed, he adds that:

Although romantic racialists acknowledged that blacks were different from whites and probably always would be, they projected an image that could be construed as flattering or laudatory in the context of some currently accepted ideals of human behaviour and sensibility. At its most tentative, the romantic racialist view simply endorsed the ‘child’ stereotype of the most sentimental school of proslavery paternalists and plantation romancers. (102)

This paternalistic attitude ironically divested African-Americans of their humanity, blurring the distinction between proslavery and abolitionism. As Frederickson notes, “benevolent reformers tended to see the Negro more as a symbol than as a person, more as a vehicle for romantic social criticism than as a human being with the normal range of virtues and vices” (109). Certainly Uncle Tom is reduced to a symbol. He is symbolic of Stowe’s ideal “white” black figure. Uncle Tom is desirable (as a hero) because he is a Christian, which means he is on his way to becoming (but not quite) white.

But as illustrated above, Stowe’s Christian sentimentality also betrays an anxiety about Tom’s innate “African” blackness. Winthrop Jordan notes that from the outset “vis-à-vis the Negro” the term Christian “seems to have conveyed much of the idea and feeling of *we* as against *they*: to be Christian was to be civilized rather than barbarous, English American rather than African, white rather than black” (94). Tom’s Christian behaviour can never be innate, and is incommensurable with the natural behaviour of African-Americans whose threatening abundant “responses” suggest their inherent savagery.

Blackness, in its raw form, is always a menacing reality in the novel. The rebellious George Harris – despite his “white” appearance and paternally inherited “high, indomitable spirit” (*UTC* 94), the mischievous Quimbo and Sambo, and the grotesque Topsy, exhibit an unruly, unrefined “Africanist” blackness. Stowe’s representation of these black characters underwrites nineteenth-century’s racialized representations of the “Negro,” and is a reminder of what is always already innate but disciplined through Christianity. Interestingly, all these black characters also undergo a process of “Christianizing”. George’s bitterness at racial inequality is subdued somewhat when he attains freedom with his family in Canada. He achieves a sense of dignity, in Stowe’s eyes, when he professes, at the novel’s end, a desire to return to his “country” – Africa – and develop his own black race through Christianity (*UTC* 376). Quimbo and Sambo are so humbled by Uncle Tom’s Christian humility and perseverance that they too “believe”

in Tom's Jesus and repent (*UTC* 359). Topsy is so moved by the influence of Eva's Christian goodness and generosity that she became a member of the Christian church ... and showed so much intelligence, activity and zeal, and desire to do good in the world, that she was at last recommended, and approved, as a missionary to one of the stations in Africa" (*UTC* 377).

Africa becomes a racialized place in the novel. Frederickson notes that in proslavery writings, "Africa was and always had been the scene of unmitigated savagery, cannibalism, devil worship and licentiousness," hence the slave's docility was not so much his natural character as an artificial creation of slavery" (49). As long as the control of the master was firm and assured, the slave would be happy, loyal, and affectionate; but remove or weaken the authority of the master, and he would revert to type as a blood-thirsty savage" (53-54). Indeed, Stowe's account of the "African" in *The Key to Uncle Tom's Cabin* justifies her need to control, if not master, Tom's innate black identity:

The vision attributed to Uncle Tom introduces quite a curious chapter of psychology with regard to the negro race, and indicates a peculiarity which goes far to show how very different they are from the white race. They are possessed of a nervous organisation peculiarly susceptible and impressible. Their sensations and impressions are very vivid, and their fancy and imagination lively. In this respect the race has an Oriental character, and betrays its tropical origin.... Like Oriental nations, they incline much to outward expressions, violent gesticulations, and agitating movements of the body.... The African race, in their own climate, are believers in spells, in fetish and obi, in the evil eye, and other singular influences, for which probably there is an origin in this peculiarity of constitution. The magicians in scriptural history were African; and the so-called magical arts are still practised in Egypt, and other parts of Africa, with a degree of skill and success which can only be accounted for by supposing peculiarities of nervous constitution quite different from those of the whites. (*UTC* 420-21)¹⁹

¹⁹ Stowe's reference to the "Oriental" character of the African is interesting and, in its ideology, can be linked to Frederickson's theory of "romantic racialism." The concept of Orientalism more typically refers to the "othering," by European nations, of Eastern nationalities, but has parallels with white American perceptions of Africa(ns). Edward Said notes in *Orientalism* that the Orient was "almost a European invention, and had been since antiquity a place of romance, exotic beings, haunting memories and landscapes, remarkable experiences" (1). Orientalism "is a Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient.... It also tries to show that European culture gained in strength and identity by setting itself off against the Orient as a sort of surrogate and even underground self" (3).

Stowe here makes what Morrison has described in *Playing in the Dark* as immediate and familiar associations “between darkness and desire, darkness and irrationality, darkness and the thrill of evil” (*PD* 87). Her generalizations undermine black cultural behaviour and participate in a deliberate discursive process of racial Othering and stereotyping.

bell hooks notes that stereotypes —however inaccurate, are one form of representation. Like fictions, they are created to serve as substitutions, standing in for what is real.” Significantly, stereotypes —abound when there is distance. They are an invention, a pretence that one knows when the steps that would make real knowing possible cannot be taken—are not allowed” (“Representing Whiteness” 341). Stereotypes deliberately disallow and disavow knowledge; they —perpetuate a needed sense of difference between the ‘self’ and the ‘object’, which becomes the ‘Other’. Because there is no real line between self and the Other, an imaginary line must be drawn” (Gilman, *DP* 18). Stowe’s crude —mental representations” (Gilman, *DP* 17) of black difference certainly perpetuate racial disparity. As Homi K. Bhabha notes in *Location of Culture*, the use of the stereotype is reductive and deterministic: —a form of knowledge and identification that vacillates between what is always ‘in place’, already known, and something that must be anxiously repeated” (66). Stereotype is —contained within the fantasy of origin and identity” (67), and is the —ineradicable sign of *negative* difference” (75).

But at the same time, the stereotype emerges as —a response to anxiety” and “[a]nxiety arises as much through any alteration of the sense of order (real or imagined) between the self and the Other (real or imagined) as through the strains of regulating repressed drives” (Gilman, *DP* 19). Stowe states that “[t]he fact is, that the Anglo-Saxon race—cool, logical, and practical—have yet to learn the doctrine of toleration for the peculiarities of other races” (*UTC* 421). She hints at the regulated and repressed nature of whiteness, but her emphasis on —peculiar” differences at the same time suggests the unusualness, and therefore, inferiority, of blacks. Vron Ware and Les Back suggest that we examine —how white dominance is rationalized, legitimized, and made ostensibly normal and natural” (24). By extension such a depiction of blackness privileges whiteness against the backdrop of African primitivism and points to —intrinsic’ human inadequacies as endemic to nonwhites” and uses —these as rationales for racial privileging” (Babb 170).

Stowe's Christianizing of Tom, then, is significant, for not only does it rationalize and enable the (textual and political) control of an innately unbridled blackness by whiteness, but it also emphasizes the normality of white superiority. It is important to note the self-interested nature of white Christian rhetoric in America's colonial era. The Puritan Cotton Mather wrote, in 1706, an essay whose ideologies resonate in *Uncle Tom's Cabin* a century later. He suggests of "Negroes" that it is necessary to instruct them in the Christian religion, for:

To *Christianize* them aright, will be to *fill them with all Goodness. Christianity* is nothing but a very Mass of Universal *Goodness*. Were your *Servants* well tinged with the spirit of *Christianity*, it would render them exceeding *Dutiful* unto their *masters*, exceeding *Patient* under their *Masters*, exceeding faithful in their *Business*, and afraid of speaking or doing any thing that may displease you. (qtd. in Lowance, Jr., *AS* 19-20)

The Christianity of blacks is serviceable to whiteness; it fulfills the purpose of emphasizing white superiority. In fact, Tom's Christianity is evidence of an ideological and psychological whitewashing.²⁰ There is a general "uncomplaining patience, and contentment" (*UTC* 124) in Tom's attitude to slavery, and his reaction to his fellow slave, Cassy's, urgings to escape with her from Legree's tyranny confirms this. Tom resists her temptations by equating the suffering of slaves with that of Christ's followers in the Bible:

Didn't they all suffer?—the Lord and all his? It tells how they was stoned and sawn asunder, and wandered about in sheep-skins and goat-skins, and was destitute, afflicted, tormented. Sufferin' an't no reason to make us think the Lord's turned agin us; but jest the contrary, if only we hold on to him, and doesn't give up to sin. (*UTC* 314)

Stowe draws upon the biblical imagery of God's faithful and trusted servant, Job, whose steadfast allegiance to God despite his suffering suggests that suffering is, similarly, a

²⁰ In *Wretched of the Earth*, Fanon highlights the parallels between the process of colonization and African-American slavery. He states that: "When we consider the efforts made to carry out the cultural estrangement so characteristic of the colonial epoch, we realize that nothing has been left to chance and that the total result looked for by colonial domination was indeed to convince the native that colonialism came to lighten their darkness" (169). Christianity elicited the same effect during slavery – to convince the African-American that Christian religion would "lighten his darkness." Evidently, Tom's "darkness" is lightened by Christianity.

God-given lot, one he must embrace and accept rather than resist. As the white Clergyman in the novel states: “It’s undoubtedly the intention of Providence that the African race should be servants,—kept in a low condition” (*UTC* 107). He draws on the biblical verse in Joshua in which the Gibeonites are “cursed” into being eternal “bondmen, and hewers of wood and drawers of water” for the Israelites (9. 23). This parallels the biblical story of Ham, Noah’s son, who, having seen his father naked and laughed at him, is cursed together with the descendants of his son Canaan into being the eternal “servant of servants” to his brethren (Gen. 9. 25). That Christian religion has conveniently defined blacks as the descendants of Ham, suggests their racial deviancy. Interestingly, the curse of Ham also links blacks with sexuality, and Tom’s complacency, his acceptance of and desire to be assimilated into whiteness thus highlight a belief in black inferiority.²¹

Frederick Douglass, who spoke from the authoritative position of an ex-slave and abolitionist argued, however, that Christianity:

is a mere covering for the most horrid crimes,—a justifier of the most appalling barbarity,—a sanctifier of the most hateful frauds,—and a dark shelter under which the darkest, foulest, grossest, and most infernal deeds of slaveholders find the strongest protection. (117)

Douglass here hints at the unspeakable physical and sexual abuse perpetuated by slaveholders. In explicating abjection, Kristeva implies the violent nature by which identity is achieved: “There looms, within abjection, one of those violent, dark revolts of being, directed against a threat that seems to emanate from an exorbitant outside or inside, ejected beyond the scope of the possible, the tolerable, the thinkable” (1). Tom’s physical beating by Legree, the physical abjection of his blackness, occupies the space, for Stowe, outside “the possible, the tolerable, the thinkable.” Stowe’s narrator laments the fact that “[s]cenes of blood and cruelty are shocking to our ear and heart. What man

²¹ Prominent twentieth-century African-American activist, Malcolm X, observed in his *Autobiography* that African-Americans continued to be dominated by whites through Christianity. He argued that Christian religion taught the “Negro” to “hate everything black, including himself. It taught him that everything white was good, to be admired, respected, and loved.” Christianity “further deceived and brainwashed this Negro” to always turn the other cheek, and grin, and scrape, and bow, and be humble, and to sing, and to pray, to take whatever was dished out by the devilish white man; and to look for his pie in the sky, and for his heaven in the hereafter, while right here on earth the slavemaster white man enjoyed his heaven” (163).

has nerve to do, man has not nerve to hear. What brother-man and brother-Christian must suffer, cannot be told us, even in our secret chamber, it so harrows up the soul” (*UTC* 358).²² Here, a tentative silence surrounds the violent abjection of Tom’s blackness, for it implicates whiteness in that very abjection. That Legree’s cruelty, in which he is “foaming with rage” (*UTC* 358), is too shocking to speak of, suggests whiteness as a lewdness projected onto the Other.

But Stowe restores whiteness by conflating humanity with Christianity and by advocating Christian fraternity in the face of suffering. Stowe’s narrator equates Tom’s suffering, his black abjection, with Christ’s crucifixion:

But, of old, there was One whose suffering changed an instrument of torture, degradation and shame, into a symbol of glory, honor, and immortal life; and, where His spirit is, neither degrading stripes, nor blood, nor insults, can make the Christian’s last struggle less than glorious. (*UTC* 358)

Tom’s suffering is transformed into a sublime experience and is essentially redemptive. Stowe here comes dangerously close to glorifying suffering and, therefore, slavery. She ambiguously suggests that this pain is a necessary price to pay, the “Christian’s last struggle.” It is not clear whether this refers to the struggle to end slavery or cautions against black revolt. But what is clear is that Stowe here shifts attention from actual black people suffering under slavery to that of white Christians seeking to help them.

Uncle Tom’s Transformation into Whiteness

Kristeva notes that abjection is “inaccessible except through jouissance” (9), it is through sublimation that the object is kept “under control”; abjection is “edged with the sublime” (11). Stowe similarly suggests that Tom’s suffering under slavery is the means by which he attains a higher, white self. In Tom’s violent beating and his impending death which confirm his assimilation into whiteness, is the ecstatic experience of a higher self:

²² This echo of the ghost’s words in *Hamlet* suggests that slavery, like hell, is a state that cannot ever be fully represented. In her preface, Stowe states that “what may be gathered of the evils of slavery from sketches like these, is not the half that could be told, of the unspeakable whole” (xiii).

Suddenly everything around him seemed to fade, and a vision rose before him of one crowned with thorns, buffeted and bleeding. Tom gazed, in awe and wonder, at the majestic patience of the face; the deep, pathetic eyes thrilled him to his inmost heart; his soul woke, as, with floods of emotion, he stretched out his hands and fell upon his knees,—when, gradually, the vision changed: the sharp thorns became rays of glory; and, in splendor inconceivable, he saw that same face bending compassionately towards him, and a voice said, He that overcometh shall sit down with me on my throne, even as I also overcame, and am set down with my Father on his throne. (UTC 339-40)

That everything around Tom seems to ~~fade~~” as he is confronted by a ~~vision~~,” foregrounds whiteness as redemptive. With his soul awakened, Tom is, metaphysically, revived, and that he ~~stretched out his hands and fell upon his knees~~,” suggests a sacrificial forfeiting of his black self in his desire for assimilation into whiteness. Tom’s association with the iconic figure of Christ recently crucified insinuates a parallel transfiguration into whiteness experienced by Tom. In death, he will attain Christ’s white ~~throne~~.²³

Tompkins argues that the thematic significance of death works as a powerful ~~ethic~~ of sacrifice on which the entire novel is based” (272). But she ignores how Tom’s suffering and sacrifice is inextricably linked to racial identity. Baldwin notes that Tom’s ~~triumph~~ is metaphysical, unearthly; since he is black, born without the light, it is only through humility, the incessant mortification of the flesh, that he can enter into communion with God or man” (14).²⁴ Whiteness is thus ultimately self-serving, for its survival is dependent on the purgation of blackness.²⁵ Kristeva highlights that abjection ~~kills~~ in the

²³ Winfried Fluck also argues that Tom’s fate can be found in the analogy to the story of Christ: ~~the~~ sentimental affirmation has thus to turn to the level of typological thought, that is, to a method of interpretation which gives moral meaning to characters and events by drawing on analogies of the Bible” in order to ~~stabilize~~ the increasingly difficult sentimental affirmation by reference to a holy text that can serve as supreme evidence of the existence of a moral order” (331).

²⁴ Sundquist argues of Tom’s Christ-like martyrdom that it is also linked to his feminization and nineteenth-century sentimentality: ~~an~~-resistance is a special source of feminized, spiritual power ... Tom’s crucifixion by Legree has powerful emotive consequences but, in the novel, lacks an applicable political meaning; the final deliverance from slavery, as the novel portrays it with no little ironic tension, will come from the paternalistic white God in his good time.” Ultimately, Sundquist contends that ~~Stowe~~ was willing to grant African-Americans the language of sentiment, but she withheld the language of liberty” (TWN 109).

²⁵ Ezra Tawil suggests that *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* hereby also follows the trajectory of the nineteenth-century domestic frontier romance ~~according~~ to which the passing away of the racial other is, if not exactly spiritually redemptive, essentially reproductive vis-à-vis the material development of the national landscape and the triumphant onward march of civilization.” He explains that ~~wile~~ Tom does not, like these others,

name of life—a progressive despot; it lives at the behest of death—an operator in genetic experimentations; it curbs the other’s suffering for its own profit” (15-16). In Tom’s beating, his prelude to death, Stoneley suggests that we might say “Tom is having his erotic blackness beaten out of him,” and that in these “acts of purgation,” America “in the large is performing a righteous expulsion of its capacity for desire,” so that “Tom’s violent death, though deplored, is also celebrated as a victory, as a way of making the nation safe” (63).²⁶ Tom significantly hears a “higher voice” saying, “Fear not them that kill the body” and “His soul throbbed,—his home was in sight,—and the hour of release seemed at hand” (*UTC* 357). Tom’s beating and death is thus a “release” from black corporeality. This necessarily achieves racial harmony with Stowe’s white readership and alleviates fears of black insurrection. Tom’s death, his literal and literary abjection, thus has larger political ramifications for it signals the pre-eminence of a white worldview.

Stowe’s principal concern with the preservation of whiteness is clearly evinced at the novel’s end. Here, if America does not address and redress the issue of slavery, she envisages a future where “nations are trembling and convulsed” (*UTC* 388). Stowe’s vision is both millennial and timely, foreshadowing America’s bloody Civil War. More pertinently, however, her novel attempts to rid the United States not just of slavery but also of blackness altogether. Along with Uncle Tom’s death, Stowe’s central “black” characters are repatriated to Africa. Notably, George Harris and his family, and Topsy choose to return. Despite George’s adamant demands for equality and his position that African-Americans “ought, in particular, to be allowed *here*. We have *more* than the rights of common men;—we have the claim of an injured race for reparation” (*UTC* 375), he finally returns to Africa. In a letter to a friend he contends that “[i]t is with the oppressed, enslaved African that I cast in my lot; and, if I wished anything, I would wish

go “back” to Africa, even his dying is figured as a return, for it employs a traditional semantic association between death and homecoming” (*The Making of Racial Sentiment* 183).

²⁶ Tom’s beating bears an uncanny affiliation with the institutionalized lynching of African-American men in the late nineteenth and early twentieth-centuries. Sandra Gunning explains in *Race, Rape, and Lynching* how black male sexuality, transformed into the trope of “rapist,” reflected post-Civil War anxieties about white political and sexual disenfranchisement: “Sexuality and political agency became increasingly linked in the figure of the black rapist precisely because of the dependent definition of citizenship on definitions of (white) manhood” (7). Lynching was not merely about white manhood, however: “the trope of black rape functions as a multilayered metaphor to structure and articulate latent anxieties over black and white self-construction” (4). Indeed, Frederickson describes lynching as follows: “an ultimate sociological method of racial control and repression, a way of using fear and terror to check “dangerous” tendencies in a black community considered to be ineffectively regimented or supervised” (272-75).

myself two shades darker, rather than one lighter.” George asserts that the “desire and yearning of my soul is for an African *nationality*. I want a people that shall have a tangible, separate existence of its own” (*UTC* 374). He adds, “I think that the African race has peculiarities, yet to be unfolded in the light of civilization and Christianity, which, if not the same with those of the Anglo-Saxon, may prove to be, morally, of even a higher type” (*UTC* 375-76).

George is also figured, like Topsy, as a missionary, a kind of saviour destined to save Africa from savagery and elevate it, through Christianity, to civilization. Again, blackness is subjected to whitewashing. But, more fundamentally, Stowe’s representation conveys her allegiance to the gradualist sentiment that also pervaded the abolitionist movement. Christina Zwarg argues that gradualism “suggests an impossible regression, a return to Africa which darkens the language of democracy by its power of exclusion” (580).²⁷ Indeed, by arguing “that the American Negro craved ‘an African *nationality*,’ [colonizationists] were implying that American nationality could never really include the blacks” (Frederickson 117). Finally, Stowe cannot quite fathom the African-American as a racial equal and she cannot envision an America inhabited by both white and black subjects.²⁸

Stowe’s fundamental lack of genuine conviction is evidenced in what I have shown to be her over-reliance on sentimentality through her use of the domestic genre, her feminization, and Christianizing, of Tom. *Uncle Tom’s Cabin’s* racial impotence, its inability to render an accurate portrayal of slavery, is highlighted at the novel’s end. The narrator tells us that the author has tried in the novel to represent slavery as

a *living dramatic reality*. She has endeavored to show it fairly, in its best and its worst phases. In its *best* aspect, she has, perhaps, been successful; but, oh! who

²⁷ “Gradualism” refers to the situation in which opponents of slavery called for the gradual colonization of the African-American rather than the immediate abolition of slavery. Many abolitionists advocated the immigration of the “Negro” to Liberia, a nation on the coast of West Africa founded in 1821 by the American Colonization Society as a home for free African Americans. Before the end of the Civil War, fifteen thousand immigrants from America settled in Liberia.” See notes in *UTC* (374).

²⁸ Gregg Crane suggests that the “promise of Stowe’s antislavery jurisprudence is ultimately limited by her inability to imagine natural rights fully as the moral consensus and fundamental entitlement of a racially diverse community, and it is troubled by the unresolved tension between expiatory sympathy and revolutionary wrath in her notion of natural rights sentiment.” See “Dangerous Sentiments: Sympathy, Rights, and Revolution in Stowe’s Antislavery Novels” (181).

shall say what yet remains untold in that valley and shadow of death, that lies the other side?... The writer has given only a faint shadow, a dim picture, of the anguish and despair that are, at this very moment, riving thousands of hearts, shattering thousands of families, and driving a helpless and sensitive race to frenzy and despair. (*UTC* 383-84)

Sentimentality eclipses reality in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, necessarily precluding an accurate portrayal of blackness within slavery. While Stowe's attempt to raise her reader's sympathy is heartfelt, she continues to see enslaved people as a "helpless" race driven to "frenzy" in their suffering. But this masks Stowe's anxiety about the seeming contaminating nature of blackness and the apparent repressed nature of whiteness.

Sympathy and pity for this race are all Stowe asks for at the close of her novel:

But, what can any individual do? Of that, every individual can judge. There is one thing that every individual can do,—they can see to it that *they feel right*. An atmosphere of sympathetic influence encircles every human being; and the man or woman who *feels* strongly, healthily and justly, on the great interests of humanity, is a constant benefactor to the human race. (*UTC* 385)

The distinct tone of impotence attests to the novel's limitations. Finally, Stowe seems to suggest that it is enough that one "feels" right where one is unable to effect change. The emphasis on feeling illustrates white compunction to act on the institution of slavery and perpetuates a form of sentimental racism, which, because it is so caught up in a highly romanticized vision of life, is unable, in fact, unwilling, to face up to and change reality. Ann Douglass, reiterating Baldwin, argues that sentimentalism "provides a way to protest a power to which one has already in part capitulated. It is a form of dragging one's heels" (12). Eric Sundquist suggests that "[s]entiment, not anti-slavery, made the book popular" and in "retreatment of black character ... Stowe's novel embraces the very tensions that divided the nation" ("Slavery, Revolution, and the American Renaissance" 18, 19). The lack of a genuine conviction in racial equality, then, fundamentally thwarts Stowe's objective, and reveals *Uncle Tom's Cabin* to be an intricate part of the racialized ideological and social fabric of America.

CHAPTER TWO

“I Celebrate Myself”: Whiteness and the Black Body in Walt Whitman’s *Leaves of Grass*

Whitman: A Democratic Vision of America

Walt Whitman’s poetry, innovative and contentious, is indicative of the period typically referred to as the American Renaissance. In this historical period, American writers saw themselves as finally severing ties with Europe and its purportedly archaic and conservative traditions in favour of the representation of a New World with its own unique identity.¹ In 1866, William D. O’Connor, a good friend of Whitman’s, described *Leaves of Grass* as just such a distinctly American epic: “sprung from our own soil; no savor of Europe nor of the past, nor of any other literature in it; a vast carol of our own land, and of its Present and Future; the strong and haughty psalm of the Republic” (23).²

Whitman’s poetry, deeply immersed in its times, paralleled America’s own national “grand experiment” in creating a new political reality (“Democratic Vistas” 948). Democracy is a central theme in Whitman’s poetry, symbolizing his idea of America as a progressive people and nation. His collection of poems, *Leaves of Grass*, which he revised and republished in variant editions from 1855 until the final 1891-1892 deathbed edition, attempted to give poetic voice to the fundamentals of a democratic America. The principles informing his poetry are central to America’s self-perception and by the twentieth century this had earned Whitman the title of quintessential American bard.³

¹ For a view on Whitman’s place in the American Renaissance see F.O. Matthiessen’s *American Renaissance: Art and Expression in the Age of Emerson and Whitman*.

² For further commentary on the history of the reception of Whitman’s poetry see *A Century of Whitman Criticism*.

³ In a letter to Whitman in 1855, Ralph Waldo Emerson identified *Leaves of Grass* as “the most extraordinary piece of wit & wisdom that America has yet contributed.” Emerson adds, “I rubbed my eyes a little to see if this sunbeam were no illusion; but the solid sense of the book is a sober certainty. It has the best merits, namely, of fortifying & encouraging” the idea of a democratic America (1). Henry David Thoreau, in a letter to H. G. O. Blake in 1856, pronounced Whitman “apparently the greatest democrat the world has seen” (5). In 1865, Henry James said of Whitman’s poetry that, it “may be rough, it may be grim, it may be clumsy ... but it is sincere, it is sublime, it appeals to the soul of man, it is the voice of a people” (16).

That Whitman's poetry was and has since been seen as vital to expressing the American national conscience and identity is significant. *Leaves of Grass* (1855-1892) was published at a particularly turbulent time in American political history. The threat of the secession of states, a growing disillusionment with party politics and government, the threat of slavery and its expansion (westward), and the real prospect of national dissolution, inspired and informed his patriotic and nativistic poetry.⁴ As David S. Reynolds argues, Whitman wrote *Leaves of Grass* in response to these tensions and the increasing threat of civil war. Reynolds notes that his poetry underwent significant changes —inresponse to the shifting political climate of the 1846-55 period” and highlights that the poetry we now regard as characteristic only emerged during and after this period:

Many of the things we commonly associate with Whitman's poetry – its air of defiance, its radical egalitarianism, its unabashed individualism, its almost jingoistic Americanism – had been largely absent from his apprentice writings and appeared in his work only as social conditions worsened to the degree that he took on a self-appointed cultural rescue mission. “Of all the nations,” he wrote in the 1855 preface to *Leaves of Grass*, “the United States ... most need poets.” When he wrote these anxious words, the phrase “the United States” was virtually an oxymoron. Sectional animosities had flared up in 1850 with the congressional debates over slavery and then had exploded into full view in 1854 with the passage of the Kansas-Nebraska Act, which repealed the Missouri Compromise and opened up the western territories to slavery. The states, soon to be at war, were hardly united. (“Politics and Poetry” 66)

In the preface to the 1855 edition to *Leaves of Grass* Whitman states that the poet is —the arbiter of the diverse” (620) and the 1855 poem that would, in later editions, become —Song of Myself,” attempts to redress national political tension by envisaging a universal, united American identity: “I celebrate myself, / And what I assume you shall assume, / For every atom belonging to me as good as belongs to you” (1-2). Whitman's celebration of his self is similarly the celebration of every American individual, and symbolizes the celebration of the nation as a whole. Indeed, Whitman's vision of America is reflected in

⁴ For further information regarding the historical political context of Whitman's poetry see David S. Reynolds's essay, “Politics and Poetry” (66-69), and *WWA*.

the imagery of the titular "Grass" which, representative of the seemingly ordinary and mundane, actually describes, as Malcolm Cowley notes in 1959, the "miracle of common things and the divinity (which implies both the equality and the immortality) of ordinary persons" (238).⁵ For Whitman, "[t]he United States themselves are essentially the greatest poem" (*LG* 616).⁶

The poet is central to Whitman's vision of America's promise. His poetry is that "imaginative literature" which provides the ideological foundation of American culture ("Democratic Vistas" 934-49). Whitman's poet appears to embody the status often associated with the bards of (Greek) Classical Civilization.⁷ Through him "forbidden voices" are spoken (516) and, as Whitman sees it, the poet is the embodiment of democracy and a significant mediator of a new and progressive American culture. This is reflected in Whitman's poetic form which, like his content, is typically innovative.

Whitman typically experimented with irregular metre and free-verse which gained him the criticism of his peers. In 1855, Charles Eliot Norton said of *Leaves of Grass*: "The poems ... are neither in rhyme nor blank verse, but in an excited prose broken into lines without any attempt at measure or regularity, and, as many readers will perhaps think, without any idea of sense or reason" (2). In 1868, Ferdinand Freiligrath noted of Whitman's poems that "[t]he lines are arranged like verses, to be sure, but verses they are not. No metre, no rhyme, no stanzas. Rhythmical prose, ductile verses. At first sight rugged, inflexible, formless." But, he added, "for a more delicate ear, not devoid of

⁵ In his 1855 preface, Whitman elaborates that "the genius of the United States is not best or most in its executives or legislatures, nor in its ambassadors or authors or colleges or churches or parlors, nor even in its newspapers or inventors ... but always most in the common people" (*LG* 617). His poetry is thus characterized by vignettes in which he celebrates the moments of beauty, pain, wonder or loss in the ordinary lives of a wide range of Americans. In what becomes "Song of Myself," Whitman sings, amongst many, of the "mate" who "stands braced in the whale-boat" with his "hance and harpoon," the "duck-shooter" who "walks by silent," the "spinning-girl" who "retreats and advances to the hum of the big / wheel," and the "farmer" who "stops by the bars as he walks on a First-day loafe / and looks at the oats and rye" (268-72).

⁶ In "Democratic Vistas" (1871) Whitman expounds on his vision of American character. Here he attempts to instill a sense of renewed faith and hope in a united America. Using "America and democracy as convertible terms," he implores America to see itself as "a nationality superior to any hither known, and out-topping the past" (930-31). He envisions an "American stock-personality" (936) – original (933), with a "moral conscience" (937), people-oriented (943) and, essentially egalitarian (962-63).

⁷ In "Song of Myself" Whitman describes the role of the poet as that of the seer, the bearer of divine wisdom: "Stop this day and night with me and you shall possess the / origin of all poems" (32) and, "I am an acme of things accomplish'd, and an encloser of / things to be" (1148). The poet is egalitarian, the "mate and companion of all people, all just as immortal / and fathomless as myself" (136). He is the authoritative but representative orator: "And what I assume you shall assume" (2).

euphony. The language homely, hearty, straightforward, naming everything by its true name, shrinking from nothing, sometimes obscure” (31-32). Robert Louis Stevenson, in 1878, wrote of Whitman, “[h]e has chosen a rough, unrhymed, lyrical verse; sometimes instinct with a fine processional movement; often so rugged and careless that it can only be described by saying that he has not taken the trouble to write prose. I believe myself that it was selected principally because it was easy to write” (67-68).

The comments of Whitman’s nineteenth-century critics, although often disparaging, are interesting for they highlight what is now often viewed as the radical compatibility of Whitman’s poetic form and content. Whitman’s experimental style – his “rough, unrhymed, lyrical verse” – is seen to parallel his controversial but liberatory content in his attempt to invent a suitable poetics for his democratic America.

Whitman’s poetry, rough and real, would seem to appeal to the masses, the very “common people” of whom he wrote. But the reality of his reception was quite different. As Reynolds points out, “[t]he irony was that while he was appreciated by a growing number of the educated elite, he remained, as one of his contemporaries put it, ‘caviare to the multitude’” (*WWA* 5). In fact, in 1882, *Leaves of Grass* was banned as obscene and even immoral literature, pointing to a conservatism in both the public and the reviewers, who were intolerant of Whitman’s poetry, particularly his presentation of sexuality.⁸ It is ironic that one of Whitman’s most conventional poems both in form and content, “Captain! My Captain!” which was a eulogy to the assassinated president Abraham Lincoln, became his most widely known poem.⁹

Reynolds highlights the poet’s frustration at the public’s inability to recognize his experimental poetry as a sign of his poetic genius. He observes that Whitman had

⁸ Whitman’s poetry is characterized by exhortations of sexual equality mediated by the poet himself. In “Song of Myself” the speaker asserts that he is “the poet of the woman the same as the man” (425), and remarks in “A Woman Waits for Me” in “Children of Adam” that women are “not one jot less than I am” (15). He addresses the issue of the homo-social, and often the homoerotic. In “Calamus” Whitman travels “Paths Untrodden,” “Resolv’d to sing no songs to-day but those of manly / attachment ... To celebrate the needs of comrades” (12-16). Sex is recognised as a spiritual activity, and is sanctioned as a natural, even necessary part of human relationships. In “A Woman Waits for Me” Whitman’s speaker asserts, “Without shame the man I like knows and avows the / deliciousness of his sex, / Without shame the woman I like knows and avows hers” (9-10). In “Song of Myself” he pronounces that “Copulation is no more rank to me than death is / I believe in the flesh and the appetites” (521-22).

⁹ Whitman himself expressed light-hearted regret at writing “Captain! My Captain!” Michael Moon notes that “the poet confessed that he did not feel at ease with its regularity.... He also expressed humorous irritation that the poem had succeeded with the public as his other poems had not. ‘I am almost sorry I ever wrote the poem’” (*LG* 284).

intended to be an agent of social change” (*WWA* 5), but instead encountered a reading public and literary critics apparently hostile to his poetry. In 1865, for example, William Dean Howells bemoaned the ineffectiveness of Whitman’s war poetry in “Drum Taps.” He notes that “[a]t first, a favourable impression is made by the lawlessness of this poet,” but the reader is finally put off by his poems’ lack of substance:

They give a strange, shadowy sort of pleasure, but they do not satisfy, and you rise from the perusal of this man’s book as you issue from the presence of one whose personal magnetism is very subtle and strong, but who has not added to this tacit attraction the charm of spoken ideas.... So long, then, as Mr Whitman chooses to stop at mere consciousness, he cannot be called a true poet. We all have consciousness; but we ask of art an utterance. (8-10)

In 1898, John Jay Chapman emphasized the detached idealism of *Leaves of Grass*: “The man knew the world merely as an observer, he was never a living part of it, and no mere observer can understand the life about him.” Overall, “he solves none of the problems of life and throws no light on American civilization” (105-6). Later, in 1955, Richard Chase would pronounce Whitman’s moral vision “dubious and contradictory” (258).

I extend these arguments by exploring in this chapter what I describe as the pervasive ambivalence, and the fundamental impotence, of Whitman’s poetry. His poetry, largely idealistic, is typically evocative and inspirational but lacks the integrity and urgency reflected in actual encounters. Whitman’s poetry speaks of, but not to, reality. His poetry is future-oriented; it “bind[s] its vision toward the future” (“Democratic Vistas” 979) rather than the present. Helen Vendler notes that its lyricism speaks intimately “to the reader-in-futurity.” She argues that: “The intrinsic and constitutive ability of the lyric to create intimacy is perhaps most striking when the object of intimacy can never be humanly seen or known, yet can be humanly addressed” (4). Present “desire calls into being an image of possibility not yet realized in life, but—it is postulated—realizable” (8). Vendler’s argument that Whitman’s poems address the invisible “object of intimacy [who] can never be humanly seen or known, yet can be humanly addressed” is especially pertinent as it helps, I believe, to explain his representation of the major catalyst of America’s Civil War – the African-American. Whitman’s representation of the African-

American is typically ambivalent. He is unable to comprehend the black slave figure and, instead, seems often to speak to a black identity in the future.

Whitman's poetry appears to be a revolutionary adaptation of the Constitution for its inclusion and intricate delineations of the "Negro" population of America, as well as for its bold and novel idea of the humanity and equality of black people. In his notebook entries Whitman notably pronounces himself the mediator, synthesizer and, finally, equalizer, of seeming racial differences and hierarchies: "I am the poet of slaves and of the master of slaves ... I go with the slaves of the earth equally with the masters."¹⁰ Undoubtedly, this philosophy of racial equality is one of the primary reasons his poetry resonated, and continues to resonate, so well with African-Americans. Reynolds notes how the ex-slave and abolitionist lecturer, Sojourner Truth, enquired after the author of *Leaves of Grass* when it was read aloud but then pronounced: "Never mind the man's name—it was God who wrote it, he chose the man—to give his message" (*WWA* 148). Martin Klammer also notes how, in 1953, the African-American poet and scholar Langston Hughes published a column in the African-American newspaper, the *Chicago Defender*, praising Whitman's poetry. *Leaves of Grass*, for Hughes, "contains the greatest poetic statements on the real meaning of democracy ever made on our shores" and "certainly there has been no clearer statement made on equality or civil or political rights" (qtd. in Klammer 1). His poetry is significant to African-Americans for its democratic message of racial inclusivity and egalitarianism. Indeed, the idea of equalizing the races is a trajectory of Whitman's universalizing vision in which his speaker proclaims: "In all people I see myself, none more and not one barley- / corn less" ("Song of Myself" 401).

But the notion of the singular poet as the embodiment of the multiple, which is a central motif in Whitman's poetry, is problematically ambivalent. This goes some way to highlighting the complexity and, in the end, failure of his idealistic poems generally, and his representations of African-American's specifically. Whitman sees himself, impossibly, as the "poet of slaves *and* of the master of slaves" and one who goes with

¹⁰ For Whitman's original notebook entries see *The Collected Writings of Walt Whitman. Notebooks and Unpublished Prose Manuscripts. Vol 1: Family Notes and Autobiography Brooklyn and New York*. According to Editor, Edward F. Grier, Whitman's notebook was in use between 1847 and 1855.

“the slaves of the earth *equally* with the masters” (emphasis added), idealistically discounting the very complex context – slavery – which precluded such a possibility. In a situation in which the slave was not even considered fully human by the Constitution let alone equal to white people, Whitman’s work is haunted by the pervasive tensions of American race relations.

Klammer examines the experimental entries in Whitman’s 1847 notebooks which reveal that “in both journalism and poetry Whitman’s struggle to articulate his slavery views produces new forms of expression” (41). Notably, a series of images includes “for conflicting, highly charged ‘pictures’ of African Americans which ... largely reinforce dominant antebellum stereotypes and cultural attitudes toward blacks.”¹¹ But at the same time, Klammer argues, “the variety of these images suggests Whitman is thinking of African Americans in a broader, and perhaps more humane, way” (96). In “Uncollected Poems” (LG 560-88), in the picture of a blind black man, for example, he states: “And here an old black man, stone-blind, with a placard on his / hat, sits low at the corner of a street, begging, humming / hymn-tunes nasally all day to himself and receiving small / gift” (108-9). In a portrait of a slave work-gang, he declares: “And here are my slave-gangs, South, at work upon the roads, / the women indifferently with the men—see, how clumsy, / hideous, black, pouting, grinning, sly, besotted, sensual, / shameless” (78-79). Whitman may have been attempting to portray a humane, sympathetic and supposedly real portrait of blackness here, but if so, this is undercut by his utilization of nineteenth-century racist stereotypes which portrayed black people as inherently lazy, dependent, and physically and morally “hideous.” The ambivalence registered in his notebooks would inform and characterize his representations of African-Americans in *Leaves of Grass*.

Ed Folsom argues that Whitman’s is an “attempt to become that impossible representative American voice” (50). He suggests that:

Whitman was a poet embedded in his times, and his times—not unlike our own—were a period of intense disagreements about the significance and importance of

¹¹ Michael Moon notes that in 1861 “Pictures” was “to be a poem in the projected but never published *Banner of Daybreak*.” “Pictures” was first published in Emery Holloway’s “Whitman’s Embryonic Verse,” *SWR* 10 (July 1925), and reprinted, with introduction and notes by Holloway, as *Pictures: An Unpublished Poem* in 1925 (LG 560).

racial difference. His career demonstrates his struggle with his times—and with himself—over the issue of race in the United States.... One of the most instructive aspects of Whitman's poetry is its inscription of the distance and slippage between ideals and reality. For all its lofty aspirations, Whitman's poetry is embedded in the messy pragmatics of compromise and equivocation, and because of that, we can hear within it some of the tensions at the heart of American history. (45)

There is a disparity between Whitman's journalism and his poetry that certainly registers the "tensions at the heart of American history" and undermines his poetic idealism.¹² His journalism on African-Americans frequently makes use of racialized, if not racist, ideology. Reynolds notes the following statement by Whitman in 1858, in the *Daily Times*:

Who believes that Whites and Blacks can ever amalgamate in America? Or who wishes it to happen? *Nature* has set an impassable seal against it. Besides, is not America for the Whites? And is it not better so? As long as the Blacks remain here, how can they become anything like an independent and heroic race? There is no chance for it. (*WWA* 372-73; emphasis added)

Whitman's journalism betrays anxiety over an impending Civil War as well as his ambivalence on the race issue. As I show, his poetry, while seeing potential in the African-American in a manner not expressed in his journalism, simultaneously reinforces the idea of a dependent black race. Whitman's reference to "Nature" in the above quotation is telling for this invokes the language of determinism central to nineteenth-century racial and racist theories. Reynolds notes that in this period "there was an emerging consensus among scientists and phrenologists that there was a hierarchy of races, with the Caucasian on top and all others, including the African, below" (*WWA* 132).¹³

¹² Whitman's ambivalence reflects the national attitude to African-Americans and slavery. President Lincoln himself did not believe in the equality of blacks, and Reynolds notes that he "doubted the races would mix well in America" (*WWA* 125). Likewise, Whitman was recorded as saying, despite his poetic exhortations of black humanity, "I do not wish to say one word and will not say one word against the blacks—but the blacks can never be to me what the whites are.... The whites are my brothers & I love them" (*WWA* 471).

¹³ A notable advocate of this consensus was Louis Agassiz (1807-1873), a Swiss-born naturalist who migrated to America in the 1840s and, subsequent to his encounter with African-Americans, put forward a doctrine of polygeny. In it, he argued that the inferiority of black people necessitated not merely the hierarchization, but separation, of the human races as distinct species. Stephen Jay Gould notes in *The*

Both Whitman's poetry and his journalism portray his belief in black inferiority. In fact, his journalism clearly articulates his repulsion at blackness. Charles I. Glicksberg notes that when Whitman wrote of the emancipated African-Americans, he wrote of the ex-slaves he encountered as —so many wild brutes let loose,” and remarked that, —I didn't think there was so many darkeys, (especially wenches,) in the world” (329-30).¹⁴ Significantly, Whitman writes these words in 1866 (post-Civil War) while watching a parade of African-Americans in the District of Columbia on the anniversary of black emancipation. The Reconstruction period was characterized by Negro suffrage, and it is clear from his words here that he did not consider the African-American fit for American citizenship.

As Ken Peeples, Jr. argues, Whitman ultimately —did not consider the slave equal to whites as individual human beings, but felt that slavery as an institution was immoral and harmful to the democratic ideals of his America” (22). In his comments on —brutes” and —darkeys” Whitman voices, in the face of the emancipation of slaves, a widespread concern for the threat to white labour. As a member of the Free Soil Movement, a political party established in 1848 in opposition to the expansionist Wilmot Proviso, Whitman felt that extension of slavery into new territories would threaten white working-class labour. The Free Soilers called for —free soil, free labor, [and] free men” and, as Klammer notes, —caared more about the rights of whites than about the rights of blacks” (30), considering any situation in which white labourers worked in competition with black slaves as degrading to the independence and dignity of whites.¹⁵ Glicksberg asserts of Whitman's attitude that it is —one thing to be opposed to slavery, in principle; it is another to fight staunchly, in the face of odds, to destroy it as an institution; and it is still another to regard the Negro as a man, as actually an equal, entitled to all the rights and privileges of citizenship” (330). Moreover, he notes that a —man who in 1866, wrote of

Mismeasure of Man that Agassiz concluded in 1863 that —[s]ocial equality I deem at all times impracticable. It is a natural impossibility flowing from the very character of the negro race” (48).

¹⁴ Similarly, Reynolds, in noting that although President Lincoln —eschewed the overt racism shown by many of his contemporaries, he could call an adult man ‘boy’, and he enjoyed jokes about ‘niggers’, ‘Sambos’, and ‘pickaninnies’” (*WWA* 125), highlights the embeddedness of nineteenth-century whites in a racialized and racist idea of black inferiority.

¹⁵ George Lipsitz argues that white people also profit from their investment in whiteness socially, economically and structurally. The Free Soil Movement evinces this philosophy in practicing a —system for protecting the privileges of whites by denying communities of colour opportunities for asset accumulation and upward mobility” (viii).

Negroes as ‘darkies’, could not possibly regard them as equals, men and women fit for the privilege of citizenship. Nor could he, as a poet, do them justice in his verse” (331).

Whitman’s ambivalence on the issue of race and his belief in the inherent superiority of whites is expressed in his poetry. I intend here to extend Glicksberg’s observations as well as Folsom’s argument as to the impossibility of Whitman’s representative voice; to examine how the poet was embedded in an ideologically and politically divided culture. He may certainly have had a liberal philosophy and noble intentions – consistent with his democratic ideology – regarding the African-American, but Whitman was also caught up in a racialized culture so thoroughly pervasive that his poetry is finally unable to transcend, and in fact bears witness to, the disabling nature of racial ideology in American social and cultural life.

The African-American figures in Whitman’s poetry: the runaway slave, the hounded slave, the Negro drayman, a slave at auction, Lucifer and Ethiopia, are representations of black people who exhort the fundamental humanity, and therefore, equality of blacks. But I examine how Whitman’s representations appear politically expedient rather than genuine attempts at articulating black equality.¹⁶ Whitman, like his nineteenth-century literary contemporaries Harriet Beecher Stowe and Mark Twain, manipulates an African-American figure and ‘character’ reflective of a particularly white ideology and vision of America. He achieves this through his emphasis in *Leaves of Grass* on the corporeality – the body – of the African-American. Notably, only two of Whitman’s African-American figures actually speak, that is, linguistically articulate subjectivity. In this way the African-American figure is rendered, as Susan Bordo argues of the female body, a “*text* of culture ... a *practical*, direct locus of social control” (2362). Bordo elaborates that “our bodies are trained, shaped, and impressed with the stamp of prevailing historical forms of selfhood, desire, masculinity, femininity” (2363). The black body in Whitman’s poetry operates in much the same way, as the regulated articulation of white “selfhood” and

¹⁶ In “Democratic Vistas” Whitman stresses “the identity of the Union at all hazards” (942), “of cohesion at all cost” (941). This theory that Whitman’s poetry is predominantly motivated by preserving the Union is consistently argued by several of his critics. Jerome Loving argues, similarly to Reynolds, that Whitman’s “early poetry was generally maudlin and conventional, but the Compromise of 1850, which postponed the southern ‘rebellion’ a decade by putting new teeth into the existing Fugitive Slave Law, gave him an original topic as well as his free-verse rhythm, which echoed, perhaps, the fiery speeches of that particular period” (“The Political Roots of *Leaves of Grass*” 102).

–desire.” In *Leaves of Grass*, the black body is a text upon which whiteness is written and inscribed.

The Runaway Slave

Whitman’s runaway slave in “Song of Myself” is a case in point. Written in reaction to the Fugitive Slave Law of 1850 which not only sanctioned the recapture of fugitive slaves in the Free States, but penalized those who helped slaves by way of a fine or imprisonment, the vignette is of a runaway slave who is aided by a white speaker. The speaker’s actions during this encounter are supposedly benevolent but the vignette is fraught with the tension of objectifying blackness and articulating whiteness instead.

The stanza’s opening, with the onomatopoeic “crackling” “twigs of the woodpile,” anticipates the entrance of the debilitated slave, “limpsy and weak” (190). The speaker’s reception of the slave is physically sensual – he “hear[s],” “[sees],” and then proceeds to touch, the fugitive (190-96). This suggests not just the ethical extension of the white self, but alludes to genuine identification of white with black. Yet, Whitman’s emphasis on the slave’s body and his physicality also highlights the distance between black and white experiences of nineteenth-century America – between slaves and free. The runaway slave is, with “swarted body and bruised feet” (192) and his stereotypically “revolving eyes,” and in his “awkwardness” (195), the epitome of black suffering, while the white speaker, who generously cares for the slave, is portrayed as a Christ-like saviour. The pervasive religious intonations of this scene suggest the sanctified, and therefore sanctioned, white dominion of blackness.

The speaker repeatedly emphasizes his own actions in his encounter with the runaway slave. Here Whitman seems to be identifying with or seeking to present the viewpoint of a member of the Abolitionist Crusade,¹⁷ or a similar anti-slavery perspective:

¹⁷ The Abolitionist Crusade, a period of radical resistance by abolitionists to slavery in America from 1830-1865, defied the 1850 Fugitive Act. Members, unlike more conservative abolitionists, believed in the full racial equality of blacks and whites, and advocated the immediate and unconditional emancipation of slaves. The Anthony Burns case was a notable instance of the strength, and divisiveness, of the Fugitive Slave Law. As a fugitive slave, Burns escaped to the free state of Boston, but was there captured and returned in chains under military guard to Virginia. For further information on the Abolitionist Crusade see Mason I. Lowance, Jr.’s *Against Slavery*.

And brought water and fill'd a tub for his sweated body and
 bruis'd feet,
 And gave him a room that enter'd from my own, and gave him
 some coarse clean clothes,
 And remember perfectly his revolving eyes and his
 awkwardness,
 And remember putting plasters on the galls of his neck and
 ankles (192-96)¹⁸

There is, seemingly, no limit to the speaker's compassion and benevolence which are emphasized by the incessant repetition of "And." In fact, the runaway slave stays with the speaker for an entire week "before he was recuperated and pass'd / north" (197). The focus of this description, however, is not the slave but the speaker's noble deeds, valorised by the pervasively possessive first-person pronouns, "I," "me" and "my." Whitman's brand of humanitarianism is fundamentally self-serving because, as Glicksberg aptly observes, the emphasis is on pity, and "pity, no matter how genuine, is not the same thing as the conviction that the slave is entitled to complete equality of treatment as a human being." Indeed, "pity is the negation of this sense of equality, for one cannot help but feel superior to the one who is the object of pity" (328). The emphasis is largely on white benevolence. The speaker's pity transforms another subject (the African-American) into an object (the pathetic body), thus unwittingly asserting white supremacy and highlighting whiteness as narcissistic.

The white speaker's actions are, in fact, paternalistic. Elizabeth Fox-Genovese points out that paternalism "invokes a specific metaphor of legitimate domination" (64). That is, one's authority (albeit protective) over the Other is endorsed as necessary. Whitman's speaker's treatment of the runaway slave certainly invokes the notion of white legitimate domination of blackness. Rather than draw the reader's attention to the pain and suffering of the slave, for whose situation and person we are meant to sympathize, the speaker dominates the runaway slave's identity and subjectivity to the extent that he detracts attention from, and objectifies, the slave. The syntax of the last sentence of the vignette is, interestingly, inverted in order to highlight the speaker not the slave: "I had him sit

¹⁸ In this essay I will be referencing from Whitman's final deathbed edition (1891-1892) of *Leaves of Grass*, but where the excerpt is excluded from the deathbed edition I will quote from the last existing version.

next to me at table” (198). There is something disturbingly possessive in the speaker’s treatment of the slave. The slave notably does not speak or possess agency – he is silent, and continually acted upon by the speaker. It is, strangely, a situation that reaffirms the runaway slave’s enslaved position. Despite that he has run away, the runaway slave is helpless and physically suffering. He is presented as typically dependent and his subjectivity is negated. Klammer concurs that “the slave’s identity is elided: he is no longer an actor but rather a body acted upon, objectified and consumed by the speaker’s passion to assert his own humanitarianism” (123).¹⁹ It is difficult moreover, to gauge the speaker’s sincerity when the vignette ambiguously concludes with the description of his “fire-lock lean’d in the corner” (198). We do not know whether the speaker intends to use the firearm to protect the slave or defend himself against the slave.

The Negro Drayman

The speaker’s ambiguous position in the vignette of the runaway slave betrays blackness as a threat, and this is a pervasive motif even in Whitman’s representation of the statuesque “Negro” drayman. Here, Whitman’s exaltations of the “Negro” drayman’s commanding gait in “Song of Myself” are an attempt at recovering the dignity and equality of the African-American:

The negro holds firmly the reins of his four horses, the block
 swags underneath on its tied-over chain,
 The negro that drives the long dray of the stone-yard, steady
 and tall he stands pois’d on one leg on the string-piece,
 His blue shirt exposes his ample neck and breast and loosens
 over his hip-band,

¹⁹ Frederick Douglass’s *Narrative of the Life of an American Slave*, highlights the extent to which the black figure is objectified in slavery. It is through his body that Douglass is known in white society as something less than human, and that is why Douglass’s retaliation to the beating by his master Covey is, significantly, also physical. He famously states: “You have seen how a man was made a slave; you shall see how a slave was made a man” (107) and, when he fights back, Douglass is transformed from merely a body to a human being. There is a shift from object of abuse to agent of his own life. Douglass explains: “[I] revived within me a sense of my own manhood. . . . It was a glorious resurrection, from the tomb of slavery, to the heaven of freedom. . . . I now resolved that, however long I might remain a slave in *form*, the day had passed forever when I could be a slave in fact” (113; emphasis added). Douglass here highlights how for slavery to function effectively, the African-American could be known only corporeally. The body thus becomes, for white people, a cultural site of blackness.

His glance is calm and commanding, he tosses the slouch of
 his hat away from his forehead,
 The sun falls on his crispy hair and mustache, falls on the
 black of his polish'd and perfect limbs. (225-29)

As Karen Sanchez-Eppler points out, the portrait of the drayman recalls the engraved frontispiece of Whitman aged 35, in 1854, in the first edition (1855) of *Leaves of Grass* (926).²⁰ The description of the “Negro” drayman suggests that with every aspect of his stance and appearance he is the epitome of human perfection. The drayman echoes the self-possessed nonchalance of Whitman’s portrait: “His glance is calm and commanding, he tosses the slouch of / his hat away from his forehead” (228). The conflation of Whitman’s image with the drayman’s suggests the fluidity of identification, and his representation significantly highlights how the drayman’s collected self-assurance, his existential self-worth, like that of his white compatriots, commands respect. It is unclear whether he is a slave or free, but the drayman is depicted, positively, as a man of labour. The drayman’s physical poise asserts his dignity, and emphasizes, physically, his demand for recognition. Whitman’s focus on the drayman’s body here is an attempt to subvert stereotypical images of the black figure as meek and subservient, and Klammer notes the inversion of his previous representation of the runaway slave. Here, the “fearful fugitive slave of the earlier section has become his own master,” and Whitman registers a “hopeful vision of the future” for the African-American (126).

In his description of the “Negro” drayman, Whitman crosses the boundaries of what was then considered racially acceptable by traversing into the realm of sexuality. His physical representation of blackness is charged with an eroticism not unlike his descriptions of white men generally, suggesting the desirability even of the black man. The drayman, whose “blue shirt exposes his ample neck and breast and loosens / over his hip band” (228), is described with a sensuality that recalls the homoerotic image of the twenty-eight young men bathing by the shore while being silently watched by a woman in “Song of Myself.” That section is charged with erotic voyeurism: “The beards of the young men glisten’d with wet, it ran from / their long hair, / Little streams pass’d all over their bodies, / An unseen hand also pass’d over their bodies, / It descended tremblingly

²⁰ See portrait number 2 in “An Album of Whitman Portraits” (*LG*).

from their temples and ribs” (210-12). Their sexuality, like that of the drayman, is endorsed and celebrated.

There is something different, however, in Whitman’s speaker’s attraction to the twenty-eight young men bathing and his attraction to the “Negro” drayman. There is a certain alienating distance between the speaker and the drayman while the relationship with the twenty-eight men appears governed by familiarity. The speaker, who represents the figure of the watching woman, asks: “Where are you off to lady? for I see you, / You splash in the water there, yet stay stock still in your room” (206). Michael Moon notes of the speaker’s embodiment of the woman that this “serves to bring the excluded figure through the window and incorporate her into the ‘fluid’ circle” (857). In this way, the speaker is identified within the group. The speaker’s actions, whose “hand also pass’d over their bodies,” indicates the intimacy and participatory behaviour of the group.

The picture of the drayman, however, is governed by observation, by a sense of awe which initiates distance. Whitman’s speaker seems unable to perceive the drayman with the same sense of sexual intimacy with which he portrays the twenty-eight young men. This betrays a lack of sincere identification on the part of the speaker. Rather, it suggests an inherent anxiety, a fear of blackness. The twenty-eight young men are *subjects* of attraction where the drayman remains an *object* of the speaker’s attraction. The drayman is figured as a *specimen* (rather than a being) of Whitman’s attraction.

The image of the drayman’s “plish’d and perfect limbs” (228) thus becomes disturbing for its allusion to nineteenth-century theories of the physical, animal nature of black people. Kobena Mercer notes that historically the “essence” of black male identity lies in the domain of sexuality” (174). George Yancy argues that the “black body is always already codified ... then ontologized; its being gets frozen into something that should be avoided, a thing rendered suspect *a priori*” (10). Whitman, then, implicitly rewrites upon the drayman’s body a text of blackness concomitant with white notions of black sexuality. James Baldwin contends that the black body in white texts always exudes a “ruder, more erotic beauty” (204), and Frantz Fanon argues that the black male body is always “ordetermined from without” (*BSWM* 116). That is, invariably determined by his/her physicality, the “archetype of the lowest values is represented by the Negro” (*BSWM* 189). Indeed, the portrait of the drayman, with his “ample neck and breast”

(227), is also animal-like. Whitman's speaker simultaneously strips the drayman of the very humanity with which he tries to endow him. In the end, the black drayman is stripped of subjectivity and transformed into the ambiguous image of the "picturesque giant" (230), mysteriously timeless and ahistorical.

The Hounded Slave

Whitman's attempt at imaginative identification is again thwarted in his representation of the hounded slave in Section 33 of "Song of Myself." Here, his imaginative focus on the experience of slavery for the African-American is more graphically and traumatically described than in his portrait of the runaway slave. Whitman's speaker seems to transcend mere sympathetic feeling to encompass the empathetic act of being, of experience. In this poem the speaker vicariously *becomes* the slave. The speaker asserts:

I am the hounded slave, I wince at the bite of the dogs,
Hell and despair are upon me, crack and again crack the
marksmen,
I clutch the rails of the fence, my gore dribs, thinn'd with the
ooze of my skin,
I fall on the weeds and stones,
The riders spur their unwilling horses, haul close,
Taunt my dizzy ears and beat me violently over the head with
whip-stocks. (837-43)

The speaker's "I" here is the embodiment of the slave's identity. The speaker feels the excruciating pain – the physical abuse – of the hounded slave. The imagery is deliberately and palpably intense. The speaker feels the agonizing "bite of the dogs," the sound of the marksmen's guns and feels the blood ooze on his skin. Klammer aptly observes that the vignette thus becomes a slave's narrative, for here Whitman's speaker "makes the final leap of the sympathetic and imaginative self: not merely from observer to participant, but from wholly self to wholly other, from object to subject, from 'he' to 'I.'" Whitman, Klammer argues, appears to realize that to "truly sympathize with the black experience, one must imaginatively, passionately, enter into it" (131).

In this light, the speaker asserts:

Agonies are one of my changes of garments,
 I do not ask the wounded person how he feels, I myself
 become the wounded person,
 My hurts turn livid upon me as I lean on a cane and observe. (844-45)

The speaker and the hounded slave's identities are interchangeable; they are, apparently, one in their experience of slavery. But Whitman's speaker fails, crucially, to act upon his imagined feelings of the hounded slave's experience of slavery. His speaker is able to envisage the other, but is, finally, unable to transcend the self into a position of agency. Impotently, the speaker "~~lean[s]~~ on a cane and observe[s]" (845), and the image of the tortured and harassed slave, "~~taunt[ed]~~" and beaten "~~violently~~ over the head with whip-stocks," while profoundly realistic, is finally disappointing.

Winthrop Jordan notes of abolitionism that empathy was the predominant sentiment informing this political position: —"Empathy was of course a strong element in humanitarianism, and empathy implied equality, if only in a very limited sense" (365). In her analysis of empathy, however, Saidiya Hartman asks a crucial question: —"Can the white witness of the spectacle of suffering affirm the materiality of black sentience only by feeling for himself?" She suggests that we need to consider the "~~precariousness~~ of empathy and the thin line between witness and spectator" (19). For, in the imaginative projection of the self into the other, Hartman argues that the "~~object~~ of identification threatens to disappear" (19). She elaborates:

the effort to counteract the commonplace callousness to black suffering requires that the white body be positioned in the place of the black body in order to make this suffering intelligible ... empathy is double-edged, for in making the other's suffering one's own, this suffering is occluded by the other's obliteration. (19)

Hartman adds that this highlights "~~the~~ dangers of a too-easy intimacy, the consideration of the self that occurs at the expense of the slave's suffering, and the violence of identification" (20). Her astute definition of empathy is applicable to Whitman's portrayal of white empathy towards the experience of American slaves. Whitman's speaker enacts a "~~violence~~ of identification" in that the hounded slave's suffering and identity is necessarily obliterated in order to assert the speaker's identification with the slave. The "~~I~~" of the speaker's poem is no longer that of the hounded slave but that of the

speaker. Whiteness is narcissistically foregrounded as the speaker's identity is superimposed onto and subsumes that of the slave's. It is thus significant that the hounded slave, like the runaway slave, does not speak. The articulation of the slave's subjectivity is elided by the speaker's voice and his assumption of the slave's identity.

Empathy thus becomes the convenient articulation of white guilt. White guilt is projected onto and undermines black degradation represented by the slave: —My hurts turn livid upon me as I lean on a cane and observe” (846). Worse still, there is something self-indulgent about the speaker's comment here. The speaker claims all the moral rectitude of feeling the —livid” hurt imaginatively while remaining safely at a distance as a white observer. The guilt of inaction is not merely the inadvertent confession of white complicity in black suffering, but the confession of white spectatorship. Guilt without restitutive action is merely the evasion of moral responsibility, and any genuine attempt at imaginative identification is thwarted by the psychological distance between the two. In *Postmodern Ethics*, Zygmunt Bauman argues that “[p]roximity is the realm of intimacy and morality; distance is the realm of estrangement and the Law” (83). This recalls Chapman's observation as early as 1898 that Whitman comes across as merely an —observer” of life. Certainly his speaker's physical but, more significantly, ideological and psychological distance from the hounded slave places him in —the realm of estrangement” rather than that of —intimacy and morality.” This reveals an ideologically embedded subject who is unable, finally, to overcome societal and cultural norms associated with whiteness; that is, the privilege of being white allows him the security of distance.

The Slave at Auction

Whiteness as ideological and material sanctuary is inadvertently reiterated in section 7 of —Sing the Body Electric.” This vignette re-enacts the sale of a slave at auction. Here, Whitman invokes a central motif of slavery — the physical examination and eventual sale of the slave on the auction block. Whitman would have undoubtedly witnessed one of

these events, and he shows here his familiarity with popular literary culture.²¹ The abolitionist novel *Uncle Tom's Cabin* similarly highlights the inhumane nature of the auction block. The narrator describes an auction scene where the slave trader Haley is examining slaves for purchase:

Haley here forced his way into the group, walked up to the old man, pulled his mouth open and looked in, felt of his teeth, made him stand and straighten himself, bend his back, and perform various evolutions to show his muscles; and then passed on to the next, and put him through the same trial. Walking up last to the boy, he felt of his arms, straightened his hands, and looked at his fingers, and made him jump, to show his agility. (102)²²

Sanchez-Eppler notes that “on the auction block, regardless of whatever claims to identity a slave might express, he or she is nothing but body, flesh for sale.” The slave at auction provides the “quintessential instance of what it means for one’s identity to be entirely dependent upon one’s body ... one central example of the completely corporeal person” (926).

Whitman, however, utilizes the image of a slave at auction in order to subvert it. His speaker assumes the persona of the auctioneer singing the value of the African-American: “Gentlemen look on this wonder, / Whatever the bids of the bidders they cannot be high enough for it” (98). He declares:

In this head the all-baffling brain,
In it and below it the makings of heroes.

Examine these limbs, red, black, or white, they are cunning in
tendon and nerve,

²¹ Whitman grew up on Long Island (in the North) where slavery was introduced as early as 1660. The institution was only abolished in 1828 when the poet was nine years old. In this way, Whitman was familiar with slavery. But it was in his brief time spent in the South, in New Orleans in 1848, that Whitman was fully exposed to the practices associated with slavery. There he worked for the *Crescent*, a pro-slavery newspaper which ran regular advertisements of local planter auctions. Martin Klammer states: “Whitman likely attended one or more of these auctions where planters lounged at a bar sipping brandy and water and the slaves filled the benches in small rooms” (56).

²² Former slave Solomon Northup describes the treatment of slaves by a slave trader at auction: “He would make us hold up our heads, walk briskly back and forth, while customers would feel of our hands and arms and bodies, turn us about, ask us what we could do, make us open our mouths and show our teeth, precisely as a jockey examines a horse which he is about to barter for or purchase.” See “Slave Auction Described by a Slave, 1841” (*UTC* 406-8).

They shall be stript that you may see them.

Exquisite senses, life-lit eyes, pluck, volition,
Flakes of breast-muscle, pliant backbone and neck, flesh not
flabby, good-sized arms and legs,
And wonders within there yet. (102-9)

The speaker does not merely subsume the role of the auctioneer, but is a spiritual and metaphysical auctioneer. Whitman's speaker here inverts the language of a degrading enterprise by glorifying and exalting the slave to his white audience. Whitman's objective is readily apparent – he seeks to undermine not merely the listener's expectations but the enterprise of slavery itself. His speaker is in the business of endorsing subjectivity not objects.

The emphasis on the slave's physicality here points to African-American existential worth as located in the body. The black slave is a living "wonder" (98) whose value exceeds white commodification: "Whatever the bids of the bidders they cannot be high enough for it" (98). Whitman undermines the conventional economic and physically degrading symbolism of the auction block by suggesting the exceeding human value of the African-American. His speaker stresses the absurdity of an institution which deals in the sale of life:

Within there runs blood,
The same old blood! the same red-running blood!
There swells and jets a heart, there all passions, desires,
reachings, aspirations,
(Do you think they are not there because they are not
express'd in parlors and lecture-rooms?) (109-12)

The stress on blood here highlights the commonality of all people. Blood is that common denominator which undermines notions of racial hierarchy. Slaves, with "the same old blood" are human, just like whites and, similarly, have "passions, desires, / reachings, aspirations." In "Song of Myself" Whitman acknowledges the unifying diversity of all persons, the "red, yellow, white playing within" him (240). Klammer thus suggests that the African-American here is significant —to the poet's conceptions of human dignity and equality, to his vision of a fully inclusive, multiracial democracy, and to his own self-

realization” (127). In Whitman’s urgent demand for his audience to “[e]xamine these limbs, red, black, or white” (104), is “a visual representation of what the poet hopes the United States can become: a complete, equal, and undifferentiated amalgamation of races” (Klammer 144).

But Whitman’s physical representation of the African-American which purports to racial universalism is also disquieting. His description of the slave at auction recalls Sojourner Truth’s description of the treatment of slaves. In her experience as a Northern slave, she recalls the treatment of slaves as concomitant with that of animals. Auction day is described as the day “slaves, horses, and other cattle” were sold (579).²³ The distinction between the black being and the animal is erased. Whitman’s invocation of the slave’s corporeality – “his Flakes of breast-muscle, pliant backbone and neck, flesh not / flabby, good-sized arms and legs” – similarly blurs the line between human and animal. His use of oratory, then, becomes undermined. It is interesting to note that although Whitman’s speaker evokes a sense of community and identity with the slave, he asserts his community with the white “Gentlemen” at auction, not the slave on the auction block. He relies on an exploitative dialectic which underpins nineteenth-century scientific or biological racism. The speaker’s call to “look” and “examine,” is not only the call of the auctioneer, but also the call of the nineteenth-century scientist examining the object of his study. Descriptions of the slave’s body become, paradoxically, reductive. The slave here is, like the “Negro” drayman, relegated to the realm of animal.

Moreover, Whitman’s reference to blood is ambiguous. Sanchez-Eppler argues that Whitman’s emphasis on (running) blood uncannily “evokes blood as a physical equalizer [which] too easily recalls the bloody backs of whipped slaves” (928). Indeed, Harriet Jacobs’s recollection of the beating of slaves on a neighbour’s, Mr Conant’s, plantation problematizes Whitman’s use of blood as a racial equalizer. Jacobs notes that one slave “who stole a pig from this master, to appease his hunger, was terribly flogged.” After running away and returning, he is discovered by Jacobs’s friends: “They carried him in, and laid him on the floor. The back of his shirt was one clot of blood. By means of lard, my friend loosened it from the raw flesh. The master said he deserved a hundred more

²³ For further information on Sojourner Truth’s life see “Narrative of Sojourner Truth: A Northern Slave” in *Slave Narratives*, eds. William L. Andrews and Henry Louis Gates, Jr.

lashes" (41). The slave's blood here functions, implicitly, as a marker of racial difference, of black inferiority. As Toni Morrison elucidates, blood functions as a pervasive fetish –especially useful in evoking erotic fears or desires and establishing fixed and major difference where difference does not exist or is minimal" (*PD* 68).

Whitman's speaker's emphasis on blood unwittingly asserts what Morrison observes as the "categorical absolutism" of black "savagery" (*PD* 68). This is further evinced in Whitman's stereotypical representations of the African-American in section 19 of "Song of Myself." Here, Whitman imagines a "meal equally set" (372) in which no one is excluded:

The kept-woman, sponger, thief, are hereby invited,
The heavy-lipp'd slave is invited, the venerealee is invited;
There shall be no difference between them and the rest. (375-78).

The savage-like "heavy-lipp'd" African-American, a description frequently used in Whitman's poetry, is situated within a marginalized population – alongside the prostitute, the criminal, and the diseased. This association is repeated in section 24 where the slave is linked to "prisoners," the "diseas'd and despairing," and "thieves and dwarfs" (509). Klammer, quoting Betsy Erkkila, suggests that Whitman's categorization here bears "the traces of oppressive, hierarchic order" in its "consistent depiction of blacks in subordinate positions [and] ... the descriptions rehearse, rather than reject, conventional roles and perceptions of blacks" (127-28).

The sketch of the slave at auction ends ambiguously. The speaker asks:

How do you know who shall come from the offspring of his
offspring through the centuries?
(Who might you find you have come from yourself, if you
could trace back through the centuries?). (116-18)

The speaker's concern with tracing ancestry suggests white anxiety with racial purity. His accusatory tone suggests that the notion of racial purity under slavery is fallible. The hint at miscegenation recalls Harriet Jacobs's crucial question in her slave narrative which reveals the fallibility of racial categorization: "Who can measure the amount of Anglo-

Saxon blood coursing in the veins of American slaves?” (39). The speaker’s concern with notions of racial purity appears to anticipate universalized identities as well as to predict the rise of black people in the future of the United States. But it is difficult to tell whether this is a positive prophecy or the expression of white anxiety at black retribution.

Lucifer

Whitman’s representation of blackness in “Lucifer,” an image both prophetic and apocalyptic, is similarly ambivalent. As the symbol of light, Lucifer initially may appear to be a positive vision of black upliftment. But, having been cast out of Heaven, he is more typically the symbol of moral and spiritual darkness. The Lucifer of Whitman’s poetry is a menacing figure of racial vengeance. “Lucifer” initially formed part of Whitman’s 1855 edition, but it is telling that this portrait of the black figure was excluded from later editions and from the final edition of *Leaves of Grass*.²⁴ With the end of the Civil War and the implementation of the Reconstruction project to integrate emancipated slaves, racial relations were tense and volatile. Folsom observes that even since the 1850s “[s]lave revolts in the South—already numbering in the hundreds—were multiplying ... and a racial war was threatened” (49). The threat of blackness became more palpable after black emancipation and whites reacted with institutional and physical violence. The powerful black figure of Lucifer, then, becomes a symbolic threat to whiteness, and Whitman’s decision to exclude “Lucifer” suggests an awareness of the poem’s historical and political expediency.

The portrait of Lucifer has a strangely immediate and prophetically ominous tone:

Now Lucifer was not dead.... or if he was, I am his
sorrowful terrible heir;
I have been wronged.... I am oppressed.... I hate him that
oppresses me,
I will either destroy him, or he shall release me. (127-29)

²⁴ Michael Moon notes that “Lucifer” was “retained in ‘The Sleepers’ without significant verbal change from the first *LG* edition until 1876” (*LG* 548). But, Karen Sanchez-Eppler notes that Whitman omitted “Lucifer” from the 1881 edition of *Leaves of Grass*. See “To Stand Between: A Political Perspective on Whitman’s Poetics of Merger and Embodiment” (938).

The speaker emphatically embodies the psychology of the African-American slave. As Lucifer's heir, he seeks vengeance on behalf of all black people and here appears to allude to black political mobilization in the future.²⁵ His is an indictment of white people's oppression of black people. Lucifer recalls but subverts the "limpy and weak" image of the runaway slave in "Song of Myself." He is a powerful image of vengeance and articulates his sense of black agency and, as Folsom observes, he "has powerful access to his own subjectivity" (51). The African-American figure here is the unconventional image of authority, reclaiming the dignity of his and his people's humanity.

Whitman allows Lucifer an authoritative and distinct voice which articulates the pain and bitterness of the African-American experience of slavery:

Damn him! how he does defile me,
How he informs against my brother and sister, and takes pay
for their blood,
How he laughs when I look down the bend after the steamboat
that carries away my woman.

Now the vast dusk bulk that is the whale's bulk.... it seems
mine,
Warily, sportsman! though I lie so sleepy and sluggish, my tap
is death. (130-34)

The slave condemns the institution of slavery and those that sanction and profit from it. White (and perhaps black) informers are rendered inhumane in that they substitute life for money. The callous pleasure of the slave-owner is the psychological pain of the slave who is torn from his family. Through the threatening image of Lucifer, then, Whitman simultaneously brings attention to America's racial injustice and highlights the transcendental possibilities for a population largely undermined and degraded.

²⁵ I have in mind here the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s which was a significant turning-point for African-Americans in American history. A largely non-violent movement, especially under the leadership of Martin Luther King, black people (especially in the North) in the late 1960s (1965-1968) participated in riots and protests. Anthony W. Marx explains that this "was an assertion of black identity and anger.... The riots indicated and reinforced that racial identity and mobilization had become national in scope" (239-40). C. Vann Woodward explains that at the same time these acts typically attacked "symbols of white authority" (191).

Yet, at the same time, Whitman's portrayal of Lucifer betrays an anxiety over an engulfing blackness. As the incendiary image of a black fallen angel, he is typically associated with darkness and terror. In keeping with the portrait's biblical tone, Whitman inadvertently rehearses the black/white, evil/good binaries typical of nineteenth-century Manichaeism. Thus, it is difficult to ignore the negative connotations that underpin Lucifer's representation. Whitman's Lucifer finally does not satisfy as the African-American is again posited as *something* enigmatic. The curious final image of the "vast dusk bulk that is the whale's bulk" (133), as Klammer suggests, demonstrates, on the one hand, the "slave's complete alienation from the human community. He has been degraded to the status of an animal, outside the pale of humanity," and on the other, "captures the complexity and power and the [black man's] experience" (153-54). Whitman's metaphoric representation of the African-American figure suggests both the animal nature of black people as well as their pervasive, weighty, presence in the American conscience and cultural life. But, Lucifer's reduction to metaphor more tellingly reflects white alienation from black people.²⁶

Ethiopia Saluting the Colors

White alienation from and anxiety about blackness is reiterated in the poem, "Ethiopia Saluting the Colors." Composed in 1867, "Ethiopia" first appeared in *Leaves of Grass* in 1871 and again in 1876. It was later transferred to "Drum Taps," the section dealing with the Civil War, in 1881. "Ethiopia" delineates an encounter between an old black woman and a Northern soldier during Sherman's Union troop's march into the South during the Civil War.²⁷ The Northern soldier speaks:

²⁶ The image of the whale recalls Herman Melville's use of the whale as an allegory for race in the American epic *Moby Dick*. Melville's metaphor also alludes to racial alienation. *Moby Dick*, an allegory for whiteness is described as: "yet so mystical and well nigh ineffable ... that I almost despair of putting it in a comprehensible form" (168).

²⁷ For further information on General Sherman and his troop's movement into the South during the Civil War, see Ed Folsom's "Lucifer and Ethiopia: Whitman, Race, and Poetics before the Civil War and After" (45-95). Ed Folsom notes that except for a "marginalized black regiment," Sherman's troop was "an all-white outfit" (69). Folsom adds that Sherman's march into the South was not fundamentally about freeing black slaves, but about exacting revenge on Southern secessionists.

Who are you dusky woman, so ancient hardly human,
 With your woolly-white and turban'd head, and bare bony feet?
 Why rising by the roadside here, do you the colors greet?

('Tis while our army lines Carolina's sands and pines,
 Forth from thy hovel door thou Ethiopia com'st to me,
 As under doughty Sherman I march toward the sea.) (1-6)

The menacing and vengeful male figure of "Lucifer" is here replaced by that of an emancipated old woman. The Northern soldier is unfamiliar with her "race" and exoticizes her at the same time that he attempts to know her. Ethiopia, "so ancient hardly human," is, symbolically, a racial mystery.

The soldier's approach reflects historical attitudes to the black African "other". In Greek classical civilization "Ethiop" was a term commonly used, non-derogatively, to describe black people. But during the colonization period, Ethiopia was the single country not to succumb to European domination. As such, the country was considered by both black and white in the West as the land of the "Africans."²⁸ Ethiopia thus calls to mind blacks as a regal, independent people, as evidenced in her turbaned head adorned in the "yellow, red and green" of her country (14). But her forlorn representation also recalls the white colonial subjugation of black Africa.²⁹ That Ethiopia is "dusky" and "so ancient hardly human" suggests a primitive blackness at odds with Western American civilization. The Africanization of Ethiopia functions as what Morrison describes as an "organizing coherence," which becomes the "operative mode of a new cultural hegemony" (*PD* 8) in white canonical literature. Simone de Beauvoir notes that although the American citizen "profoundly baffles the average European," he is not "considered as being 'mysterious': one states more modestly that one does not understand him." But in the encounter of racial difference "there is mystery in the Black, the Yellow, in so far as they are considered absolutely as the inessential Other" (1412). "Ethiopia's" exoticization similarly renders her the absolute "Other."

²⁸ For more discussion on Ethiopia in the American consciousness see Ed Folsom's "Lucifer and Ethiopia: Whitman, Race, and Poetics before the Civil War and After" (59-64). For more in depth discussion on racism in classical times see Benjamin Isaac's *The Invention of Racism in Classical Antiquity*.

²⁹ While it is not common to relate American slavery to European imperialism and colonization of African countries, American slavery contained and employed the fundamental precepts of imperialism and colonization, that is, the exertion of power and domination over the "other" in order to expand one's territories. It is indisputable today that America was built on the backs of slaves.

Tellingly, it is the Northern soldier who initiates dialogue, and that he starts by, and continues with, questioning Ethiopia highlights his cultural and racial superiority and, by contrast, her inferiority. Her reply grounds her in obscurity:

*Me master years a hundred since from my parents sunder'd,
A little child, they caught me as the savage beast is caught,
Then hither me across the sea the cruel slaver brought. (7-9)*

Her speech is notably italicized and syntactically distorted, rendering her not just primitive – the words “sunder'd” and “hither” are linguistically archaic – but unfathomable and unknowable. Ethiopia's tone is pathetic, child-like; she presents herself, without any agency, as the victim of whiteness, captured as she is a hundred years earlier. While it would appear that Whitman is trying to highlight white atrocities here, Folsom observes that her voice is all *object* instead of subject ... and her self, [like the runaway slave], is defined by its being acted upon rather than acting” (67-68). “Ethiopia” is the “savage beast” (7) of the white imagination.

Folsom argues that in Ethiopia's “non-threatening and accommodating” presentation, “she is the sought-after, postwar, emblematic black for white America” (66). In this way she might be said to resemble a particular nineteenth- and early twentieth-century black female stereotype – the Mammy. Typically presented as asexual, the Mammy figure was a significantly romanticized myth of patriarchal white society concerned with articulating an ideal femininity and sustaining the idea of innate black affection for whites. She typically worked as a domestic worker in white Southern households and was characterized as instinctively nurturing and maternal (to white children). As Gale Elizabeth Hale highlights, Mammy embodied “the fiction of continuity between the Old South and the new southern world, anchoring the emerging white middle class within a romanticized conception of the antebellum plantation elite” (101).³⁰ “Ethiopia” is reduced to a conveniently racialized feminine type underpinned by her wagging “high-borne turban'd head” and her rolling “darkling eye” (11).

³⁰ Elizabeth Fox-Genovese notes that the Mammy figure symbolized the image of “organic harmony” projected by “a woman who suckled and reared white masters.” Her image effectively displaced “sexuality into nurture and transformed potential hostility into sustenance and love” (292). In this way, the Mammy was an avid protector and signifier of the perceived norms and values of whiteness – of white hegemony.

But Ethiopia, in her uncanny presence, is not completely ~~non~~-threatening.” There is a genuine discontinuity of vision between the two speakers in the poem which points to the tension in Whitman’s vision of post-Civil War racial relations. The young Northern soldier is representative of America’s Civil War present, and his voice registers the anxiety of white Americans having to reckon with the unavoidable presence of the black Other who seems unknowable. The vignette notably ends with his question: —“~~At~~ the things so strange and marvelous you see or have seen?” (15). Although she appears embedded in an ideology of black primitivism and subservience, the ambivalent representation of Ethiopia not only disrupts the notion of an idealized Mammy figure, but also suggests that she is implicitly threatening. Ethiopia is representative of a ~~“fateful”~~ blackness, which, emancipated, presents a threat to the stability of white political, social, and ideological identity. The soldier’s anxious curiosity and Ethiopia’s obscurity destabilize the security of that which he represents – whiteness.

In his poetry, then, Whitman’s emphasis on the black body is coterminous with his idea of the body as equivalent to the soul. But, within a racialized context, Whitman’s emphasis on the black body is also reductive, divesting the African-American figure of the very humanity with which he attempts to endow him/her. His African-American figures are often reduced to black stock types that pervaded nineteenth-century America, thus hindering the effectiveness of Whitman’s poetry in attempting to articulate the equal humanity of the African-American.

Whitman’s paralyzing ambivalence on the race issue is a reflection of his times. African-Americans are frequently objectified in Whitman’s efforts to humanize them. The black body becomes simultaneously the site of human commonality and equality, and one of objectification and subjugation. Blackness emerges as a complex and obscure phenomenon, impenetrable to the white imagination, inconceivable and fundamentally foreign. This failure at identification highlights the pervasiveness of, and Whitman’s embeddedness in, nineteenth-century racialized and racist ideology. His struggle in representing the African-American suggests the struggle of whiteness against itself; its struggle to articulate an identity separate from but invariably contingent upon (a perceived) blackness.

Torn between national unity and an apparently engrained belief in the racial inferiority of black people, Whitman cannot, and largely does not, manage to adequately articulate their lived experiences. His poetry, his vision of a democratic America, is of “hopeful green stuff woven” (“Song of Myself” 101). But, as Klammer suggests, Whitman’s “America is not a place but an idea” (117).

CHAPTER THREE

“Comrades and Yet Not Comrades”: Racial Friendship in Mark Twain’s *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*

In 1982, John H. Wallace, a former administrator at the Mark Twain Intermediate School in Fairfax County, Virginia, revived the argument against the teaching of *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* in American high schools by asserting that the novel —is the most grotesque example of racist trash ever written” (309).¹ In, “The Case against *Huck Finn*,” Wallace argued that his view of the novel was shared by African-American educators, teachers, parents and students. His statements highlight the persistent debate surrounding Mark Twain’s representation of the African-American, despite the novel’s status as American canonical literature. For example, in 1957, the National Association for the Advancement of Coloured People (NAACP) condemned the novel as “racially offensive,” and the New York City Board of Education removed *Huckleberry Finn* from the approved textbook lists of elementary and junior high schools. In 1984, in an article entitled, “Morality and *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*,” African-American literary critic Julius Lester argued that the novel lacked morality and undermined the condition of black people under slavery. In the same year Mark Twain’s biographer, Justin Kaplan, retaliated in a lecture entitled, “Born to Trouble.” Kaplan argued against what he viewed as the myopic reasoning of his fellow critics who, in his view, failed to see the novel’s “underlying spirit and intention,” as that of “matchless satire on racism, bigotry, and property rights in human beings” (356).

¹ The 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education* decision to desegregate American schools exposed *Huckleberry Finn* to mixed, specifically black, racial scrutiny and influenced its withdrawal in 1957. Wallace’s statement was in reaction to the reinstatement and re-institutionalization of *Huckleberry Finn* after it had been temporarily removed from approved elementary and junior high reading lists. Wallace’s “The Case against *Huck Finn*” first appeared in *Satire or Evasion? Black Perspectives on Huckleberry Finn*, eds. James S. Leonard, Thomas A. Tenney and Thadious M. Davis (Durham NC.: Duke UP, 1992). Scrutiny of the novel has not been limited to academia. Following Wallace’s indictment of the text, it was, on 4 February 1985, debated on American prime-time television – ABC “Nightline” – in a show entitled “*Huckleberry Finn*: Literature or Racist Trash?” John Wallace debated with Nat Hentoff whose defense of, and impatience with, calls to remove *Huckleberry Finn* resulted in Hentoff’s own novel, *The Day They Came to Arrest the Book*, which details what he sees as the censorship of *Huckleberry Finn* by critics such as Wallace. See Jonathan Arac’s *Huckleberry Finn as Idol and Target*.

Kaplan, who argues that no one with “even the barest minimum of intelligent response” would consider the novel “racist” (356), supports the novel’s elite position which, Peaches Henry argues, conveniently protects it from the critical and scholarly interrogation it deserves. In her essay, “The Struggle for Tolerance” (1992), she argues that:

To condemn concerns about the novel as the misguided rantings of know-nothings and noisemakers is no longer valid or profitable; nor can the invocation of Huck’s immunity under the protectorate of ‘classic’ suffice. Such academic platitudes no longer intimidate. (363)

She adds, furthermore, that given *Huckleberry Finn*’s “high position in the canon of American literature, its failure to take on mythic proportions for, or even be a pleasant read for, a segment of secondary school students merits academic scrutiny” (363). Indeed, Elaine and Harry Mensh highlight that the conflict over the novel’s fictional racial representations has important ramifications for America. The argument over fictional black-white relations is also an

argument over nonfictional black-white relations: over black images in white minds, unequal authority along racial lines, conflicting perceptions of black-white amity, and—because of the classic’s unique place in the national consciousness—differing interpretations of the American dream. (2)

Huckleberry Finn, which was published in 1885, after the Civil War and the emancipation of African-American slaves, tells the story of a young and poor white Southern boy escaping Southern “civilization” with a black fugitive from slavery, Jim. The novel not only appears to endorse the distinctly American notion of the manifest destiny of all white Americans, but at moments also suggests the possibility, through individual will, of the genuine transcendence of socially constructed racial differences. *Huckleberry Finn* is an implicit critique of the moral depravity of white Southern adult society, which often runs contrary to its foundational Christian ethos. Miss Watson, Pap, Duke and King, the Grangerfords and the Shepherdsons, are all instances of Mark Twain’s satiric attack on an ethically inadequate white society.

When it was first published, the reception of *Huckleberry Finn* was not entirely favourable. It was denounced as irreverent and immoral writing by genteel critics and was subsequently banned by the Concord Public Library of Massachusetts.² The Boston *Transcript* (1885) reported that the Library committee regarded *Huckleberry Finn* as “rough, coarse and inelegant, dealing with a series of experiences not elevating, the whole book being more suited to the slums than to intelligent, respectable people” (qtd. in *AHBF* 308). The Springfield *Republican* (1885) described *Huckleberry Finn* as “trashy and vicious” and pronounced it “no better in tone than dime novels which flood the blood-and-thunder reading population” (qtd. in *AHBF* 308).

But the history of *Huckleberry Finn*’s reception is largely positive. In 1885, mainstream reviewer, Brander Matthews, in the London *Saturday Review*, said that “[f]or one thing, the skill with which the character of Huck Finn is maintained is marvellous ... that Mark Twain is a literary artist of a very high order all who have considered his later writings critically cannot but confess” (330-31). Twain’s creative characterization of a “genuine boy” (331), Matthews argues, is astute and unparalleled. Early twentieth-century critics also stressed Twain’s artistic prowess and pronounced *Huckleberry Finn* a literary “masterpiece.” In 1935, Ernest Hemingway, Jonathan Arac notes, “claimed, in a sentence from *The Green Hills of Africa*, that all modern literature comes from *Huckleberry Finn*” (5). Lionel Trilling’s 1948 essay, “The Greatness of *Huckleberry Finn*,” as Arac observes, “authenticated the work as a masterpiece of world literature, elevating the popular art form of prose fiction to the elite level of epic, tragedy, and aristocratic verse drama” (19).³ Trilling here pronounced the novel “one of the world’s great books and one of the central documents of American culture” (101). T. S. Eliot’s “Introduction to *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*” (1950) notes the centrality of the Mississippi River in providing the novel with “its form” (351), and he alludes to its control of the relationship between Huck and Jim.

² This move ironically escalated the novel’s public appeal and resulted in its impressive sales figures. Typical of Twain’s wit, he responded that the Concord Public Library committee “have expelled Huck from their library as trash and suitable only for the slum”. That will sell 25, 000 copies for us sure” (qtd. in Vogelback 265). See “The Publication and Reception of *Huckleberry Finn* in America.”

³ Trilling’s essay appears as “*Huckleberry Finn*” in his collection *The Liberal Imagination* which was first published in 1950.

Notably, however, these critics avoid any thorough consideration of the racial relationship of Huck to Jim, and focus instead on the more technical aspects of form and style. Arac describes this uncritical idolatry of *Huckleberry Finn* as “hypercanonization,” an approach, he argues, which has led to the valuing of the novel “as a masterpiece of world literature and as the highest image of America” (6). Indeed, even for those early critics who ventured into exploring the role of race in the novel, *Huckleberry Finn* is lauded as a subversive masterpiece. In 1885, Brander Matthews praised Twain’s original representation of the “Negro” saying, “[t]here have been not a few fine and firm portraits of negroes in recent American fiction ... the essential simplicity and kindliness and generosity of the Southern negro have never been better shown” (333). This attitude that *Huckleberry Finn* gives an apt, if not generous, representation of African-Americans remains current. In *Refiguring Huckleberry Finn* (2000), Carl F. Wieck hails Twain “the author of one of the most powerful problack novels ever written” (117), and argues that Twain, “like Abraham Lincoln,” was “driven by a powerful sense of justice” (118).

These recurrent readings of *Huckleberry Finn* as profoundly “problack” are perplexing for me. Thus, both Matthews’s and Wieck’s appraisals deserve some exploration. Matthews’s praise for Twain’s representation of the Southern “Negro” betrays his own racialized views of African-Americans. His reference to the “essential simplicity and kindliness” of “Negroes” has much in common with the nineteenth-century stereotypes which popularized Stowe’s self-effacing black hero, Uncle Tom, for example. This shared consensus among white authors and critics about the accuracy of Twain’s representation of Jim highlights their embeddedness in a culture of deliberately mythologized racial categories, and points to the need in white America to construct a particular fiction of blackness. Wieck’s position emerges as more emotive than factual when we consider that Abraham Lincoln, the American president commonly praised for liberating the African-American, clearly stated that his motivation was not a belief in the equality of, or even empathy for, blacks but that of preserving the Union.⁴ Wieck thus joins many critics who overlook the novel’s disparaging representation of African-

⁴ Howard Zinn notes a letter from Lincoln to the editor of the New York *Tribune* in August 1862. Lincoln candidly states: “My paramount objective in this struggle is to save the Union, and is not to either save or destroy Slavery. If I could save the Union without freeing any slave, I would do it” (187).

Americans in order to emphasize *Huckleberry Finn*'s noble intentions and the significance of Huck's feelings toward Jim, tying these to notions of truth and justice.

Jane Smiley has argued against such "meretricious" criticism which has tried to maintain *Huckleberry Finn*'s canonical status and rescue it from attacks of racism.⁵ She highlights that this kind of criticism:

precisely mirrors the same sort of meretricious reasoning that white people use to convince themselves that they are not racist. If Huck *feels* positive toward Jim, and *loves* him, and *thinks* of him as a man, then that's enough. He doesn't actually have to act in accordance with his feelings. White Americans always think racism is a feeling, and they reject it or they embrace it. To most Americans, it seems more honorable and nicer to reject it, so they do, but they almost invariably fail to understand that how they feel means very little to black Americans, who understand *racism as a way of structuring American culture, American politics, and the American economy*. (357; emphasis added)

Smiley's observation is an important reminder of the structural racism that underpins the emphasis on sentiment or feeling pervasive in nineteenth-century white literature.

Sentiment is the primary mode of Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, and pity is the major reaction of Walt Whitman's speaker to the runaway and hounded slaves in *Leaves of Grass*. These texts articulate a nostalgic desire for a specific kind of Negro who is able to serve the moral ends of whiteness and, as I show, *Huckleberry Finn* is no exception.

Twain's use of sentiment, not unlike that of Stowe and Whitman, elides the necessity of genuine action against racial prejudice and the institution of slavery. As Smiley highlights, feeling conveniently obfuscates the fact that —the only racial insight Americans of the nineteenth or twentieth century are capable of is a recognition of the obvious—that blacks, slaves and free, are human" (358). But in nineteenth-century America black people were not perceived as equal in humanity, as evidenced by the Constitutional ruling that the African-American only constituted three fifths of a person, which was contrary to the Declaration of Independence which proclaimed all men created equal.

⁵ Notable contemporary critics who have endorsed such arguments in defense of the novel include: Justin Kaplan, "Born to trouble," and Shelley Fisher Fishkin, *Was Huck Black?*

In “This Amazing, Troubling Book,” Toni Morrison assesses her own response to *Huckleberry Finn* by recording her reactions, on several occasions, as a young reader: “It provoked a feeling I can only describe now as muffled rage, as though appreciation of the work required my complicity in and sanction of something shaming” (385). Despite Twain’s attempt at a humane representation of Jim, Morrison argues that his use of minstrelsy in his characterization of Jim occludes the seriousness of Twain’s real, impossible questions about Jim as a racial equal and father figure to Huck. Noting Twain’s “over-the-top minstrelization” of Jim, she argues that:

Predictable and common as the gross stereotyping of blacks was in nineteenth-century literature, here, nevertheless, Jim’s portrait seems unaccountably excessive and glaring in its contradictions—like an ill-made clown suit that cannot hide the man within. Twain’s black characters were most certainly based on real people. His nonfiction observations of and comments on ‘actual’ blacks are full of references to their guilelessness, intelligence, creativity, wit, caring, etc. None is portrayed as relentlessly idiotic. Yet Jim is unlike, in many ways, the real people he must have been based on. (“This Amazing, Troubling Book” 388)⁶

In this chapter I extend Morrison’s position by examining Twain’s utilization of blackface minstrelsy in the representation of Jim. I argue that, despite his shifting, unstable and complex representation in the novel, Jim is the sentimental articulation of a particular kind of “Negro” familiar to nineteenth-century Southern America.⁷ As I show, notwithstanding *Huckleberry Finn*’s great potential as radical fiction, the trope of minstrelsy renders Jim a conveniently burlesque representation of blackness. While some have rationalized this as part of the novel’s generic comedic mode,⁸ I show, through close examination of the minstrel as comedic figure, how Twain’s representation of blackness

⁶ For the influence of black character in Twain’s novel see “A True Story, Repeated Word for Word as I heard It.” Based on a story told by “Aunt Rachel” who was actually Mary Ann Cord, a former slave and a servant at the Clemens family summer home in New York, Cooley notes that this was “Twain’s first contribution to the *Atlantic Monthly* (1874) and his first sustained attempt to represent African American speech” (320) in order to delineate the black personality. See *AHBF* (320-23).

⁷ This thesis acknowledges and will show that Jim is not simply represented as a clown in the novel and that Twain’s apparently ingrained racism somehow, and at times, deserts him at crucial moments.

⁸ Mark Twain’s use of satire has been said to essentially critique racism. Kaplan, for example, applauds Twain’s satiric “commitment to truth-telling and to a frequently brutal, painful realism” (“Born to Trouble” 357). But Fishkin, who defends Jim’s characterization as largely authentic and praises his relationship with Huck, asks: “[c]an satire play a catalytic role in shaping people’s awareness of the dynamics of racism, or do satire’s inherent ambiguities invite too much evasion and denial?” (143).

is problematic. I argue that Twain's depiction of Jim is a grossly overdone representation in the trope of minstrelsy and that through the use of this trope the novel participates in ultimately rehearsing, rather than critiquing, nineteenth-century (literary) stereotypes of black people. *Huckleberry Finn* was clearly intended for a white audience, and it is particularly significant that the novel was published after the Civil War of 1861-1865 and at the end of America's failed Reconstruction project. Twain's depiction of the African-American figure is not merely the (re-)articulation of racial disdain by white America for African-Americans but, in the minstrel-like representation of Jim, conveys a form of sentimental racism, a complex but distinct nostalgia for an idyllic past characterized by white superiority.

Blackface Minstrelsy and the Anxieties of Race

Blackface minstrelsy was a curious but popular form of mass entertainment for nineteenth-century white America. Initiated by three men, Thomas Rice, Dan Emmett and Edwin P. Christy in 1843, white performers would blacken their faces and proceed to imitate what they perceived as uniquely black culture, dialect and behaviour.⁹ In his *Autobiography* Twain recalls, with boyish exuberance, the nineteenth-century "nigger shows":

The minstrels appeared with coal-black hands and faces and their clothing was a loud and extravagant burlesque of the clothing worn by the plantation slave of the time.... The minstrel used a very broad Negro dialect; he used it competently and with easy facility and it was funny—delightfully and satisfyingly funny.... Their lips were thickened and lengthened with bright red paint to such a degree that their mouths resembled slices cut in a ripe watermelon. (64-65)

He adds, somewhat nostalgically: —"In my mind it was a thoroughly delightful thing and a most competent laughter-compeller and I am sorry it is gone" (66).

⁹ For further information regarding the initiation and history of blackface minstrelsy, see T. Allston Brown, "The Origins of Minstrelsy," in Charles H. Day, *Fun in Black or Sketches of Minstrel Life* (New York: DeWitt, 1874), Hans Nathan, *Dan Emmett and the Rise of Early Minstrelsy* (Norman, Oklahoma: U of Oklahoma P, 1962), Robert C. Toll, "Behind the Grinning Mask: Blackface Minstrelsy in Nineteenth Century America," (Diss. U of California, Berkeley, 1971), and Alexander Saxton's "Blackface Minstrelsy," *The Rise and Fall of the White Republic: Class Politics and Mass Culture in Nineteenth-Century America* (London: Verso, 2003) 165-82.

While Twain's enjoyment of minstrelsy may be argued to be relatively innocent, Ralph Ellison suggests that the minstrel show's chaotic dramatization of 'blackness', with its Negro-derived choreography, its ringing of banjos and rattling of bones, its voices crackling jokes in pseudo-Negro dialect, with its nonsense songs, its bright costumes and sweating performers" constituted "a ritual of exorcism" ("Change the Joke and Slip the Yoke" 102). Ellison's description highlights the grotesque nature of minstrelsy and reveals that it signified more than just the performance of blackness: "Negro slavery went to the moral heart of the American social drama, and here the Negro was too real for easy fantasy, too serious to be dealt with in anything less than a national art. The mask was an inseparable part of the national iconography" ("Change the Joke and Slip the Yoke" 102). The mask of minstrelsy disguised white desire for and anxiety over black subjectivity. Minstrelsy functioned as both a celebration and denigration of blackness, thus highlighting the devious, even depraved, way in which whites lived their Americanness.

Black 'mannerisms' were typically imitated for the express purpose of fascinating and amusing a white audience seemingly removed from, but enthralled by, the 'peculiarities' attributed to blacks. In *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, the young quadroon, Harry Harris, appropriately called "Jim Crow" (3), expertly performs black 'behaviour' to the delight of Mr Shelby and the slave trader, Haley. First, Harry "commenced one of those wild, grotesque songs common among the negroes, in a rich, clear voice, accompanying his singing with many comic evolutions of the hands, feet, and whole body." With further prompting, Harry's flexible limbs instantly "assumed the appearance of deformity and distortion, as, with his back humped up, and his master's stick in his hand, he hobbled about the room, his childish face drawn into a doleful pucker, and spitting from right to left, in imitation of an old man" (UTC 3). In this instance, it is, ironically, a 'black' child performing blackness. But, as Ellison highlights, "[t]he racial identity of the performer was unimportant, the mask was the thing . . . and its function was to veil the humanity of Negroes thus reduced to a sign, and to repress the white audience's awareness of its moral identification with its own acts and with the human ambiguities pushed beyond the mask" ("Change the Joke and Slip the Yoke" 102-3). Blackface minstrelsy was thus a mask by which white Americans lived their whiteness at the same time that it reduced

black humanity to a symbol. Blackness, full of meaning, was in this way seemingly emptied of any moral or existential significance in and for the white imaginary.

In the 1840s American minstrelsy's imitation of black culture drew largely from black folk song and purported a commonality between the black slave and working-class white America. Robert C. Toll notes that white minstrels, like abolitionists, —~~pic~~ured Negroes as having deep human affections and sensitivities, as being abused as slaves, and as trying to escape" oppression (44). He adds that minstrelsy became ~~the~~ most popular entertainment form in the nation partly because it incorporated nationalistic boosterism and the folkbased content of other shows into its routines" (40). For minstrels, black folk song expressed a universally spiritual and communal experience of slavery – black and white. The black figure became a symbol of oppression familiar to and identifiable with poorer whites.

Minstrelsy, like slavery, became an extremely lucrative business. But in the build up to and the aftermath of the Civil War, and as a result of increased industrialization and commercialization, Americans experienced a heightened sense of class consciousness. The economic and social distances between lower- (working class) and middle-class whites were widening at the same time as the social and economic mobility of black people, especially those in the North-East, was rising. Minstrelsy thus attempted to lessen the ideological and economic gap between white Americans, advocating instead a racial commonality that transcended economic disparities while articulating sentimental nostalgia for an idyllic past marked by black inferiority and servility. The commodification of African-American culture provided a way to give political and social expression to white contempt for and increased anxiety towards black people. From the mid-1850s onward minstrel shows thus emphasized racial distinctions and expressed increasing hostility toward blacks. Toll notes that ~~the~~ tone of minstrelsy sharply changed as its folk and anti-slavery content dramatically decreased" (45). Blacks, he explains, ~~might~~ be like the audience in being oppressed common people, but at the same time they were very, very different – and inferior" (44). Indeed, one song from a minstrel act depicting river boatmen is telling:

My mama was a wolf

My daddy was a tiger
 I am what you call de old Virginny Nigger
 Half fire half smoke
 I am what you call de eighth wonder. (qtd. in Toll 40)¹⁰

As such an example illustrates, the African-American is posited as a biological and racial aberration and anomaly – the “eighth wonder.”

The creation of two distinct black types – the servile plantation darkey and the uppity Northern dandy – expressed a racial prejudice normalized by class that emphasized white superiority. In the comic denigration of the “new” “Negro,” minstrel shows participated in a sentimental defence of slavery. They expressed nostalgia for the seemingly benign institution by reinforcing the popular notion of the South as a symbol of a collective (black and white) community associated with idyllic rural plantation life. Alexander Saxton, examining the lyrics from a number of shows, argues that minstrelsy “faithfully reproduced the white slaveowners’ viewpoint”:

Old Massa to us darkies am good
 Tra la la, tra la la
 For he gibbs us our clothes and he gibbs us our food. (“Blackface Minstrelsy” 18)¹¹

Here, despite “Jacksonian principles of upward mobility,” slaves are depicted as loving their masters and fearing freedom, because, as Saxton conjectures, “presumably, they were incapable of *self*-possession” (18).

Eric Lott’s critical study of blackface minstrelsy in *Love and Theft* argues that, in this way, minstrelsy highlighted a relationship between whiteness and blackness that operated not so much on the real power of the former, but as a warped signifier of white power displaced. Minstrelsy captured an antebellum structure of racial feeling: “Minstrelsy brought to public form racialized elements of thought and feeling, tone and impulse, residing at the very edge of semantic availability, which Americans only dimly realized they felt, let alone understood” (*LT* 6). The blackface mask was therefore “less a sign of absolute white power and control than of panic, anxiety, terror and pleasure” (*LT* 6).

¹⁰ This song is taken from *Christy’s Plantation Melodies* (New York, 1851). Toll notes that Roger Abrahams suggested this American frontier boast — “my have been influenced by the boasts of characteristic [African-] American tradition” (40).

¹¹ Saxton quotes this verse from *Christy’s Panorama Songster* (New York: Murphy, n.d. [1850?]) 79.

Minstrelsy, he adds, was ~~less~~ a *repetition* of power relations than a *signifier* for them—a distorted mirror, reflecting displacements and condensations and discontinuities between which and the social field there exist lags, unevennesses, multiple determinations” (LT 8). Because of widening class differences between whites, poorer whites used minstrelsy as an attempt to articulate their racial superiority to blacks. Thus, minstrelsy simultaneously expressed and highlighted their racial frustration, insecurity, and impotence.

In *Huckleberry Finn* the anxiety of poor whites over black upward mobility is most evident in Huck’s father, Pap’s, racial tirade against the ~~free~~ nigger,” a professor of a college. Pap describes him as:

a mulatter, most as white as a white man. He had the whitest shirt on you ever see, too, and the shiniest hat; and there ain’t a man in that town that’s got as fine clothes as what he had; and he had a gold watch and chain, and a silver-headed cane—the awfulest old gray-headed nabob in the State. And what do you think? they said he was a p’fessor in a college, and could talk all kinds of languages, and knowed everything. And that ain’t the wust. They said he could *vote*, when he was at home. Well, that let me out. Thinks I, what is the country a-coming to? (AHBF 39)

While Pap’s racism is clearly the target of Twain’s satire here, his description registers his outrage that this black man is ~~most~~ white,” possessed of all the signifiers of whiteness: education, the franchise, and appearance indicative of a settled form of existence, expressed in expensive accessories. Cheryl I. Harris explains that historically, ~~[i]~~n ways so embedded that it is rarely apparent, the set of assumptions, privileges and benefits that accompany the status of being white have become a valuable asset.” Whites ~~have~~ come to expect and rely on these benefits, and over time these expectations have been affirmed, legitimated, and protected by the law” (76). Despite his achievements, the college professor is, for Pap, an affront to racial and social norms. At the same time, Pap’s attempt to diminish the professor’s status highlights his own racial and class insecurities.

Blackface minstrelsy, like Pap’s diatribe above, was an attempt to assert white supremacy through the symbolic fixing of blackness in the American imaginary. This, at the same time, curiously revealed the fictitious principles upon which notions of whiteness (and race) are built. Lott describes minstrelsy as:

a ferocious investment in demystifying and domesticating black power in white fantasy by projecting vulgar black types as spectacular objects of white men's looking. This looking always took place in relation to an objectified and sexualized black body, and was often conjoined to a sense of terror ... minstrel characters were simply trash-bin projections of white fantasy, vague fleshy signifiers that allowed whites to indulge at a distance all they found repulsive and fearsome.... In other words, the repellent elements repressed from white consciousness and projected onto black people were far from securely alienated—they were always already inside, part of us. ("Love and Theft" 36)

In the convenient fictive "trash-bin" expressions of blackness by white Americans was the revelation of a simultaneous loathing of, and desire for, the black figure already within. In fact, blackface minstrelsy revealed, paradoxically, a strangely intimate relationship between blacks and whites. In that minstrelsy purported to be a representation of the Other, it also alluded to the Other within and thus highlighted the fluidity, instability and performativity of racial constructions.¹²

But although blackface minstrelsy was very obviously representational artifice and critiqued the very notion of an original identity, its power lay in its allusion to the real. In Lott's discussion of minstrelsy he highlights blackface as what he calls "The Seeming Counterfeit." Here, "[t]o the extent that such acts merely seemed, they kept white involvement in black culture under control, indeed facilitated that involvement." The "power disguised by the counterfeit was also invoked by it.... The counterfeit was a means of exercising white control of subversive cultural forms as much as it was an avenue of racial derision" ("The Seeming Counterfeit" 228-29). Indeed, Saidiya Hartman argues that minstrelsy "ultimately restored the racial terms of social order":

The abrogation of social order and the loosening of the strictures of identity enabled by the blackface mask in turn fortified a repressive and restrictive reception of blackness, which, although elastic enough to permit white self-exploration, could not trespass the parameters established to maintain racial hierarchies. (29)

¹² Ironically, as minstrelsy is fundamentally a *performance* of race, it renders the integrity of racial categories and their attendant racial assumptions questionable, if not obsolete. For what Judith Butler says of gender is true also of race: "what we invoke as the naturalized knowledge of gender, is in fact, a changeable and revisable reality" (*GT* xxiii). In blackface minstrelsy's parody of race is the revelation, to use Butler's words, that the original is "nothing other than a parody of the *idea* of the natural and the original" (*GT* 41). That a white person could (re-)enact blackness therefore questions naturalized essence and highlights the social constructedness of both whiteness and blackness.

Hartman observes that blackface minstrelsy may have enabled the elasticity of (self-) identification for whites, but that it reinforced the limited perceptions of blackness and maintained white supremacy. She adds that:

the donning of blackface, and the audience's consequent identification with the minstrel mask provided whiteness with a coherence and illusory integrity dependent upon the relations of mastery and servitude and the possession of a figurative body of blackness, whether to initiate abolitionist passions or cultivate white working-class consciousness. (32)

Minstrelsy was thus evidently a performance but in its derision of the black race' exercised, covertly, white control and supremacy by suggesting the authenticity of such falsified black cultural acts. Its fundamental power lay in the cultural possession of black people by dispossessing them of "control over elements of their own culture and over their own cultural representations generally" (LT 18).

In *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, Mark Twain shrewdly exploits this trait of blackface minstrelsy. Jim's characterization is a literary performance of the seemingly dim-witted plantation slave which nevertheless hints at the authenticity of that racial and cultural representation. I examine this means of black cultural (dis)possession by way of a careful delineation of Twain's deployment of minstrelsy, the African-American' dialect, and the pictorial representations in *Huckleberry Finn*.

Jim's "ill-made clown suit"

Jim's Superstition

Jim's name suggests an affiliation with "Jim Crow," a term derived from the white folk song used to describe a black person, especially a singer, clown, or minstrel in nineteenth-century America, and our first encounter with his character is telling.¹³ One of

¹³ The term "Jim Crow" originated in the North but became popular in the South after the failed Reconstruction period and suggested black contentedness with their racial and social lot. Anthony Marx notes, however, that while "the term referred to the popular imagery of blacks as 'cheerful and merry' in their inferior position the reality was vicious segregation ... imposed according to race" (*Making Race and Nation* 140-41).

the major areas for American minstrel ridicule was the black population's penchant for superstition. Folklore is arguably a central part of African-American culture and, according to Richard Wright, "arise out of a unified sense of a common life and a common fate" (qtd. in Huggins 397). African-American folklore, then, is a form of storytelling often enlisted in the evocation of an ethnic heritage, to stimulate cultural cohesion, identity, and pride, and it can offer an alternative (often spiritual) way of comprehending the world in light of common lived experiences. But Twain's use of folklore in his novel is fundamentally derisive. For Twain, the evocation of the otherworldly is to suggest the irrationality of the African-American 'race', and to assert its limited civilization.

In Jim's representation, Twain plays on the racial stereotype of the black person as inherently superstitious. Early in the novel, Jim is presented as being deep in slumber and being played tricks upon by the young pranksters Huck and Tom. Afterwards, when his hat is slipped off his head and hung on the limb of a tree "right over him" by Tom, Jim, unable to explain this phenomenon, claims that the "witches bewitched him and put him in a trance, and rode him all over the State, and then set him under the trees again and hung his hat on a limb to show who done it" (*AHBF* 19). Jim's story and his pride over his new found notoriety are used to create racialized humour pointing to the credulous nature of the black community. Huck mocks Jim's story of his frolic with the witches: "Jim was monstrous proud about it, and he got so he wouldn't hardly notice the other niggers ... and he was more looked up to than any nigger in that country" (*AHBF* 19). Huck adds that Jim was "most ruined, for a servant" (*AHBF* 19) as a result of his fame and his condescending tone highlights that both Jim and his culture remain ridiculous in white eyes.

Moreover, Jim wears a "five-center piece around his neck with a string and said it was a charm the devil give to him with his own hands and told him he could cure anybody with it and fetch witches whenever he wanted to" (*AHBF* 19). Jim is so embedded in the 'African-American' tradition of superstition that, a little later, Huck enlists his help to find out the reason for Pap's arrival after Huck is informed of his fortune of "[o]ver a hundred and fifty dollars" (*AHBF* 28). Huck tells us that "Miss Watson's nigger, Jim, had a hair-ball as big as your fist, which had been took out of the

fourth stomach of an ox, and he used to do magic with it. He said there was a spirit inside of it, and it knowed everything” (AHBF 29). Jim, who ~~kn~~“knowed all kinds of signs” (AHBF 56), has a predisposition to the superstitious which is instructive of the entire black ‘race’. We also encounter other ~~N~~“Negroes” engaging with the spiritual world. The ~~N~~“Nigger” who attends to the captured Jim at the Phelps’s homestead at the end of the novel has his hair ~~a~~l tied up in little bunches with thread. That was to keep witches off” (AHBF 244).

Interestingly, however, Huck himself is prone to superstition. In the first chapter, feeling so ~~lon~~“lonesome” and yearning for the company of Tom, a spider walks over his shoulder and, flipping it off, it lands on and shrivels up in the candle light. Huck muses:

I didn’t need anybody to tell me that that was an awful bad sign and would fetch me some bad luck, so I was scared and most shook the clothes off of me. I got up and turned around in my tracks three times and crossed my breast every time; and then I tied up a little lock of my hair with a thread to keep witches away. But I hadn’t no confidence. (AHBF 16)

Huck performs the ritual but his attitude to superstition is registered as childish. He also has no real confidence in the superstitious practice. That he, as a child, is implicitly perceptive of the limits of superstition suggests an immaturity in black adults – superstition is a childishness out of which they never grow. Huck authoritatively informs us that ~~N~~“Niggers is always talking about witches in the dark by the kitchen fire” (AHBF 19).

Twain’s literary representation of the African-American is broadly characteristic of white Western representations of the black colonized subject, as Fanon has shown in *The Wretched of the Earth*. Here he argues that in the white perspective, ~~th~~“the customs of the colonized people, their traditions, their myths – above all their myths – are the very sign of that poverty of spirit and of their constitutional depravity” (32). Jim’s unquestioning belief in the superstitious suggests that African-Americans and their culture are aberrant and primitive, and creates a distancing effect which sustains and strengthens white racial superiority.

Jim's "Africanist" Dialect

Jim's African-American dialect is another telling instance of Twain's deployment of minstrelsy in *Huckleberry Finn*. The preface to the third Norton Critical Edition, edited by Thomas Cooley, notes the importance of Twain's use of speech:

Whether Huck Finn's voice is black or white, it is his speaking voice that, along with Mark Twain's evocation of the great river, gives Huck's narrative its distinctive place in American literature.... This is the language of speech, and it is very different from the language in which most American literature was written before 1885. (*AHBF* viii)

Certainly Twain's innovative use of American vernacular speech as a literary language has a profoundly emotive effect. At the novel's beginning, for instance, a lonely Huck, having been subjected to and desiring to escape the civilizing mission of Miss Watson, muses:

The stars was shining, and the leaves rustled in the woods ever so mournful; and I heard an owl, away off whooing about somebody that was dead, and a whippowill and a dog crying about somebody that was going to die; and the wind was trying to whisper something to me and I couldn't make out what it was, and so it made the cold shivers run over me. (*AHBF* 16)

Huck's vocabulary here poignantly evokes a sense of his loneliness. But more significantly, it is indicative of his marginal (class) status, which aligns him with African-American vernacular.

In *Was Huck Black?*, Shelley Fisher Fishkin asserts the positive influence of Jim's African-American vernacular by noting that Huck's voice has its roots in African-American dialect (28). Indeed, Twain's recollection of the "little darkey boy" who had occasion to serve him in his days as a public lecturer suggests black rhetorical influence on *Huckleberry Finn*. In his essay, "Sociable Jimmy," which was published before the novel, Twain asks the "wide-eyed, observant" Jimmy if he had a good Christmas, and whether he indulged in the typical Christmas activity of excessive drinking. Jimmy replies, "Oh, no, Sah—I don't never git drunk—it's de *white* folks—dem's de ones I

means. Pa used to git drunk, but dat was befo' I was big—but he's done quit. He don' get drunk no mo' now" (249). Huck shares a dialectical affinity with both the young Jimmy and the adult fugitive Jim which is indicative of his marginal class status and which would have undoubtedly exposed him to African-American idiom.

But, as James R. Kincaid argues, Fishkin's insistence on ~~the~~ direct connections among Jimmy and blackness and Huck" is ~~—~~æductive chain [that] leaves both Huck and blackness diminished, caricatured" (384). Thus, Kincaid observes, while Fishkin addresses ~~the~~ blunt charge of white literary tradition ~~_~~appropriating' black experience, she does not consider the possibility that her reassuring book may simply make things comfy again, make Huck into a cute little ~~_~~darkey' like Jimmy" (385). Indeed, as I show, Jim's characteristically black dialect is especially and deliberately ~~—~~Africanized" for the purpose of rendering him incomprehensibly comical and therefore ~~_~~Other' to whiteness.

Take, for instance, Jim's incessant pronunciation of a Jew's harp as a ~~—~~juice-harp" (*AHBF* 268). Huck, being white, is able to correctly identify and pronounce it as a ~~—~~jewsharp" (*AHBF* 268). The misspelling here is important. ~~—~~ewsharp" and ~~—~~juice-harp" sound the same, so this is not the transliteration used elsewhere (arguably) to indicate the sounds of the words as pronounced in African-American dialect. The misspelling points instead to Jim's misunderstanding of the word – what he misunderstands is a racialized description of an instrument punned on by Twain. The joke is, effectively, on Jim. As Henry Louis Gates, Jr. asserts, language is the ~~—~~sign" of (racial) difference and hierarchy: ~~—~~language use signifies the difference between cultures and their possession of power, spelling the difference between the subordinate and super-ordinate" (*LC* 51). As a ~~—~~most vivid and crucial key to identity" (Baldwin 781), Jim's dialect suggests his intellectual, racial and cultural inferiority.

James Weldon Johnson argues that there is a ~~—~~ mold of convention in which Negro dialect" has been set. African-American dialect as it is typically represented in literature ~~—~~is not capable of giving expression to the varied conditions of Negro life in America, and much less is it capable of giving the fullest interpretation of Negro character and psychology" (qtd. in Huggins 301).¹⁴ Lawrence Levine notes of black dialect that ~~the~~

¹⁴ Aldon Lynn Nielsen reiterates that: ~~—~~It is crucial that we recall that realism of linguistic representation, like social and magical realism in the novel, is a carefully constructed literary style, not a scientific

variety and subtlety of Negro speech was frequently reduced to what the [white] auditor thought Negroes spoke like” and “their desire to indicate the exotic qualities of black speech led them to utilize . . . misleading and superfluous spellings” (xv). Jim’s dialect, as Morrison has argued of his representation, forms part of his “—I-made clown suit.”

Consider Twain’s representation of Jim’s dialect in his explanation to Huck of his flight from slavery:

Well, you see, it ‘uz dis way. Ole Missus—dat’s Miss Watson—she pecks on me all de time, en treats me pooty rough, but she awluz said she wouldn’t sell me down to Orleans. But I noticed dey wuz a nigger trader roun’ the place considable, lately, en I begin to git oneasy. Well, one night I creeps to de do’, pooty late, en de do’ warn’t quite shet, en I hear ole missus tell de widder she gwyne to sell me down to Orleans. . . . I never waited to hear de res’. I lit out mighty quick, I tell you. (*AHBF* 55)

This scene broadly conveys the anxiety and fear experienced daily by slaves not in charge of their own lives. But the deliberate misspellings and mispronunciations of Jim’s dialect undercut the seriousness of his situation and our sympathy for him. It is hard to sympathize with Jim’s predicament, his treatment at the hands of Miss Watson, and his impending sale which prompts his flight, when his dialect renders him predominantly comical. Johnson argues that the reductive representation of African-American dialect perpetuates stereotyping. He asserts that the “—Negro” has achieved a certain niche “—as a happy-go-lucky, singing, shuffling, banjo-picking being or as a more or less pathetic figure [and] “—Negro” dialect is naturally and by long association the exact instrument for voicing this phase of Negro life” (qtd. in Huggins 300). In *Huckleberry Finn*, Jim is conventionally fashioned as both humorous and pathetic, and his dialect recalls how African-American vernacular was utilized for comical entertainment in minstrel shows. There are obvious parallels between the minstrels’ “—talk” in *Christy’s Panorama Songster* as mentioned earlier in this chapter, and Jim’s childish rhetoric. The “—Niggers” in that show laud the generosity of “—Old Massa” who “—gibs us our clothes and he gibbs us our food,” while Jim notes that Miss Watson treats him “—pooty rough” (emphasis added). The

recording of actual speech. It is a fictive orthography adopted for the purpose of conveying an entire literary ideology via style. Even the most lifelike literary representations of colloquial speech only infrequently correspond with exactitude to the recorded utterances of actual speaking subjects” (*Black Chant* 9).

objective of the manipulated dialect is the same – to suggest the child-like dependency of the African-American on the white master or mistress.

It could be argued, however, that Jim's 'hybrid' English dialect is subversive; that it is a communal language identifiable particularly among black American slaves and therefore antagonistic of complete subjugation by whiteness. Andrew Levy's study of black slave dialect in Harriet Jacobs's *Incidents* reveals that slave dialect was less a "degenerate form of Standard English than a para-language ... designed to clarify ambiguity through context and tone to speakers while withholding information from non-speakers" (208). Indeed, Eric Sundquist argues that black dialect might "indicate a powerful mode of cultural self-preservation and determination" and that "it should be recognized as a signifying alternative, another cultural language that has historically conditioned and transfigured white English while drawing force from its own liminality" (*TWN* 308).¹⁵ The premise of Fishkin's argument in *Was Huck Black?* is that Twain had close contact with and a profound interest in black people's oral and folk traditions. Thus, she argues, his use of their dialect purposefully deconstructs and critiques the established categories of 'blackness' and 'whiteness'.

Kincaid, however, and I think rightly, accuses Fishkin here of "muddying distinctions, mixing weak claims with strong" (383). Certainly Fishkin's argument that Huck is 'black' "by association" as it were, becomes strangely nationalistic, erasing differences between black and white Americans to make her point for Twain's position as an innovative American writer. Moreover, we cannot ignore how Jim's dialect positions him within the paradigm of minstrelsy and the exotic "African." Even Fishkin contends that Jim's voice is ultimately diminished and "retains enough of minstrelsy in it to be demeaning and depressing" (107). Jim's dialect, like that of Stowe's Uncle Tom and Whitman's Ethiopia, is purposely distorted to render him racially Other, significantly foreign. Morrison asserts that we must not ignore in white nineteenth-century literature:

the ways in which specific themes, fears, forms of consciousness, and class relationships are embedded in the use of Africanist idiom: how the dialogue of

¹⁵ In chapters 4 and 5 I explore how Toni Morrison's use of black dialect is far more creative, showing possibilities of meaning, and an inherent metaphoricity, which is absent from Jim's speech in *Huckleberry Finn*.

black characters is construed as an alien, estranging dialect made deliberately unintelligible by spellings contrived to disamiliarize it; how Africanist language practices are employed to evoke the tension between speech and speechlessness; how it is used to establish a cognitive world split between speech and text, to reinforce class distinctions and otherness as well as to assert privilege and power. (PD 52)

Morrison's reference to the evocation of tension between "speech and speechlessness" in "Africanist idiom" is instructive. Jim's dialect is a meta-narrative for an aberrant and alien black identity, one which simultaneously asserts white "privilege and power."

Twain's manipulation of African-American vernacular, then, is hardly innocent. In *The Dialect of Modernism*, Michael North observes that post-Reconstruction and twentieth-century white American literature's use of dialect took "readers imaginatively back in time as the South was being taken politically back in time. And it fed nostalgia for a time when racial relationships had been simple and happy, a[t] least for whites." Ultimately, however, "the unequal effects of the racial mimicry of the dialect tradition ... represented imaginative licence for its white practitioners but quite literal imprisonment for blacks" (22-23). Twain's manipulation of black dialect in *Huckleberry Finn*, which purports to actually represent the voice of the African-American, while stereotyping and mocking that voice, points to white nostalgia for a romanticized past which conveniently locks the African-American in a position of subservience.

Jim as a Portrait of Blackness

Similarly, the pictorial depiction of Jim in *Huckleberry Finn* further endorses his representation as an object of ridicule. It must be noted that most of the characters are caricatured in the novel's illustrations, but Jim's pictorial representation, as drawn by Edward Kemble for the first edition, is an exaggerated stereotypical portrait of the nineteenth-century "plantation darkey."¹⁶ Jim is drawn as the woolly-haired, monstrously red-lipped, rolling-eyed "Negro" so common to nineteenth-century white literature.¹⁷

¹⁶ For Kemble's illustrations see the Norton Critical Edition of *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, ed. Thomas Cooley.

¹⁷ Chapters 2, 12, 14, and 24 of *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* provide notable examples.

Consider Stowe's description of Topsy, a newly arrived servant in the St. Clare household:

She was the one of the blackest of her race; and her round, shining eyes, glittering as glass beads, moved with quick and restless glances over everything in the room. Her mouth, half open with astonishment at the wonders of the new Mas'r's parlor, displayed white and brilliant set of teeth. Her woolly hair was braided in sundry little tails, which stuck out in every direction. The expression of her face was an odd mixture of shrewdness and cunning, over which was oddly drawn, like a kind of veil, an expression of the most doleful gravity and solemnity. She was dressed in a single filthy, ragged garment, made of bagging; and stood with her hands demurely folded before her. Altogether, there was something odd, and goblin-like about her appearance. (*UTC* 206-7)

In *Leaves of Grass* black humanity is similarly undermined by Whitman's "Negro," typically "heavy-lipp'd" and with "evolving eyes." Like Twain, these authors utilize static, stereotypical representations of African-Americans similar to those utilized in popular minstrel shows. Tellingly, Twain's specific choice of Kemble as the illustrator for his novel sanctions these pervasive prejudicial racial attitudes.¹⁸

While Twain proved impatient with Kemble's first attempts at cartoons of *Huckleberry Finn*'s white characters, Earl F. Briden highlights that he never identified any of Kemble's drawings of his black characters for criticism (315).¹⁹ Twain was undoubtedly familiar with Kemble's specialization in Negro caricature and it seems he found nothing inconsistent or offensive about his static representations of black people. Thus, despite the potential within the novel for a more rounded characterization, Twain restricts Jim within the generic frame of the minstrel figure. Kemble's pictorial representation, not Jim, fits perfectly Twain's minstrel-like characterization in words. Briden aptly observes that "Jim is flattened out emotionally and intellectually" and, "trapped within this comic idiom, so to speak, Kemble's Jim can only remain a static type, a pictorial reminder of the emphasis of comedy" (315).

¹⁸ Edward Windsor Kemble established his career in the late nineteenth-century magazines, *Century Magazine* and *Life*, as a delineator of the Southern Negro. He produced illustrations that were typically reductive, depicting black Americans as a stereotypically comical people.

¹⁹ Kaplan notes that "Kemble's Huck, at first, was a trifle too 'Irishy' or 'ugly' for Clemens' [Twain's] taste. Some of the pictures were too violent, 'forbidding', or 'repulsive', and one of them had to go altogether" (*Mr. Clemens and Mark Twain: A Biography* 263).

Jim and Huck: An Illusory Friendship?

What are we as readers meant to make of the image of Jim as the minstrel figure, the dim-witted plantation darkey, in the context of his relationship with Huck and all that has been claimed for it? Chadwick-Joshua's observation that Jim's subversiveness, his use of "humor" which, "serves as an anchor to explore serious and sensitive issues" (32) and positions him as a "trickster figure," is not incorrect (69). Forrest G. Robinson argues that at times Jim deliberately assumes a minstrel mask, because this "simulated identity, he knows, is his best defence against white cruelty and infidelity" (383). These readings may go some way to explaining Twain's complex representation of the character. But we cannot ignore that any wit and wisdom Jim may possess is consistently played down by Huck's white, and therefore superior, rationalizations. Indeed, Jim points out the absurdity of Huck's biblical story of King Solomon who threatens to divide a child in two with his sword to prove its parentage by asking an equally absurd question: "En what use is a half a chile?" (AHBF 88). He reduces Huck's comparative illustrations of French people's linguistic difference by asking: "Is a cat a man, Huck?" (AHBF 89). Frustrated with their discussion, Huck concedes that "you can't learn a nigger to argue. So I quit" (AHBF 90). Jim's intelligence is negated by his race and, as I show, Huck ultimately cannot see past Jim's racial identity. Although Huck has previously lauded Jim's intellect and rationality, "he was most always right; he had an uncommon level head, for a nigger," Huck qualifies Jim's cleverness as a racial anomaly (AHBF 86).²⁰

But Huck does, later, humble himself to a "nigger" and he "warn't ever sorry for it afterwards, neither" (AHBF 95). There are moments in the novel where we witness Huck and Jim's relationship transcend the strictures of race and that highlight Huck's psychological and moral self-development and Jim's humanity. When Huck is reprimanded by Jim for disappearing from the raft and lying about it, his behaviour is honestly depicted for what it is: "Dat truck dah is *trash*; en trash is what people is dat puts

²⁰ Contrary to Chadwick-Joshua's supposition in *The Jim Dilemma* that in Huck and Jim's verbal battles Jim appears as Huck's superior adversary, Elaine and Harry Mensh highlight that even these verbal battles formulaically fall within the paradigm of minstrelsy. For example, in their dialogue on Jackson's island "Huck plays an interlocutor, and Jim an endman (the endmen mocked the interlocutors' pomposity, but he was definitively presented as their superior)" (48). Ultimately, Huck's treatment of Jim "appears to reflect a generic racism rather than a special animus toward his companion" (53).

dirt on de head er dey fren's en makes 'em ashamed" (*AHBF* 95). Jim is also genuinely caring, explaining that:

When I got all wore out wid work en wid de callin' for you, en went to sleep, my heart wuz mos' broke bekase you wuz los', en I didn' k'yer no mo what become er me en de raf'. En when I wake up en fine you back agin, all safe en soun', de tears come en I could a got down on my knees and kiss' yo' foot I's so thankful. (*AHBF* 95)

Huck is humbled at the reprimand, and remorseful: ~~that~~ was enough. It made me feel so mean I could almost kissed *his* foot.... I didn't do him no more mean tricks, and I wouldn't done that one if I'd a knowed it would make him feel that way" (*AHBF* 95).

Jim is also protective of Huck. In a notable incident, he avoids telling Huck of his father's grotesque death: ~~H~~'s a dead man. Yes, indeedy; naked, too. He's been shot in de back. I reck'n he's been dead two er three days. Come in, Huck, but doan' look at his face—it's too gashly" (*AHBF* 61-62). For his part, Huck is committed to seeing Jim achieve freedom and sometimes assumes a mature, adult posture: ~~I~~made Jim lay down in the canoe and cover up with the quilt, because if he set up, people could tell he was a nigger a good ways off" (*AHBF* 62), or cross-dresses in order to return to St. Petersburg and assess their safety (*AHBF* 66). Although Huck is not in nearly as much danger as Jim, a fugitive slave, it is instructive that he returns from St. Petersburg with the urgent instruction to ~~G~~up and hump yourself, Jim! There ain't a minute to lose. They're after us" (*AHBF* 72; emphasis added). Huck and Jim form a genuine community on the Mississippi river that defies and transcends social mores:

We caught fish, and talked, and we took a swim now and then to keep off sleepiness. It was kind of solemn, drifting down the big still river, laying on our backs looking up at the stars, and we didn't ever feel like talking loud, and it warn't often that we laughed, only a little kind of a low chuckle. (*AHBF* 75)²¹

²¹ The River, as a trope of nature, contains Huck and Jim's relationship here within the realm of the pastoral which, as Hartman observes, finds expression in the ~~is~~ion of mutuality and organic order" (53). While the allusion is to (racial) equality and community, the reality, argues Hartman, is the ~~p~~aternalistic dependency and reciprocity" between master' and slave (52).

Together on the raft, they “feel mighty free and easy and comfortable” (AHBF 134) and this idyll is cemented by Jim’s affectionate term for Huck – “honey” (AHBF 63).²²

Indeed, compared to Huck’s abusive Pap, Jim is posited as his surrogate father, suggesting that their relationship is Twain’s commentary on the emotionally impoverished inadequacy of Huck’s white father as well as Twain’s belief in the innate humanity of the African-American. Significantly, Twain also affords the reader insight into Jim’s private family life. In a poignant instance, a homesick Jim, “moaning and mourning” (AHBF 170), recounts with deep regret and sorrow an incident in which he mistreats his mute daughter. For that brief moment we imagine Jim as a genuinely sensitive father and husband. Huck muses: “I do believe he cared just as much for his people as white folks does for theirs. It don’t seem natural, but I reckon it’s so” (AHBF 170).

Twain’s tender portrait of Jim underscores Huck’s moral and psychological dilemma. Here, Huck is able to see through and debate the veracity of, and his socialization into, his white society’s racialized mores. Huck remarks of Duke and King’s pretence at being the brother of the dead Peter Wilks: “Well, if ever I struck anything like it, I’m a nigger. It was enough to make a body ashamed of the human race” (AHBF 176). His semantic identification with “nigger” highlights Huck’s despondency with white society’s behaviour which consistently runs against its proclaimed Christian principles. Later, when Duke and King are tarred and feathered, Huck ponders: “It was a dreadful thing to see. Human beings *can* be awful cruel to one another” (AHBF 239). It is testimony to the sincerity of Jim and Huck’s relationship, and Huck’s growing enlightenment, that he is hounded by his conscience into freeing Jim when he is recaptured. When Huck, instead of informing Miss Watson of Jim’s whereabouts, pronounces “All right, then, I’ll go to hell,” we witness the triumph of a personal sense of what is ethical over limited social principles and convention (AHBF 223).

That is why the novel’s ending is so thoroughly disappointing. In what has been called the Evasion episode, Tom Sawyer re-appears and persuades Huck, against his better judgement, to simulate what would be Jim’s escape from the Phelps’s farm. Jim is,

²² For a discussion on the homo-erotic in *Huckleberry Finn* see Leslie Fiedler’s “Come Back to the Raft Ag’in, Huck Honey,” *The Collected Essays of Leslie Fiedler* Vol. 1, and Chadwick Hansen’s argument against Fiedler in “The Character of Jim and the Ending of *Huckleberry Finn*.”

despite our prior insight into his humanity, subjected to numerous, and often dangerous, pranks and is reduced again to the minstrel figure to whom we were introduced at the novel's beginning. The sharp and challenging Jim we and Huck have come to know is subsumed in his concession to Huck and Tom's frivolous actions to free him: "Jim he couldn't see no sense in the most of it, but he allowed we was white folks and knowed better than him" (AHBF 256). Twain's exploration of the possibilities of non-racial community are trivialized, if not thwarted, by the novel's final chapters which see Jim endure the white boys' absurd game to free him, although already freed by Miss Watson, and Huck's final decision to "light out for the Territory" (AHBF 296).

While T. S. Eliot argued that *Huckleberry Finn*'s close has the "right, the only possible concluding sentence" (AHBF 354), James Kastely laments the loss of racial community: "One thing is beyond doubt at the end: Huck and Jim can never come together in the way they were on the river. The pathos of the novel resides not in the impossibility of freedom but in the fact that community was achieved and lost" (414). Leo Marx describes the ending as the novel's "glaring lapse of moral imagination" (35). He suggests that many readers are unnerved by the novel's end because "they rightly sense that it jeopardizes the significance of the entire of novel. To take seriously what happened at the Phelps farm is to take lightly the entire downstream journey. What is the meaning of the journey?" (27-28). But Morrison, I believe, comes closest to articulating the difficult truth about Jim and Huck:

Pleasant as this relationship is, suffused as it is by a lightness they both enjoy and a burden of responsibility both assume, it cannot continue. Knowing the relationship is discontinuous, doomed to separation, is (or used to be) typical of the experience of white/black childhood friendships (mine included), and the cry of inevitable rupture is all the more anguished by being mute. Every reader knows that Jim will be dismissed without explanation at some point; that no enduring adult fraternity will emerge. ("This Amazing, Troubling Book" 388)

Henry Nash Smith argues that Twain's ending reflects "his own lack of firm ground to stand on in challenging the established system of values" (84).²³ As Morrison's analysis

²³ James M. Cox argues that Huck's conscience is the tyrant from which he seeks freedom. I agree that "Huck's central mode of being is that of escape and evasion" (308). That is, Huck's conscience is so

above suggests, the relationship between Huck and Jim is a literary wish-fulfilment, and she notes that Twain protects himself from the pain of its impossibility in his over-the-top presentation of Jim. Thus, I would argue that Jim's pervasive representation as a minstrel figure anticipates *Huckleberry Finn*'s impotent end. In my opinion, Twain successfully hints, throughout the entire novel, at Jim's degradation and the futility of his relationship with Huck.

Most notably, despite Huck's personal development, he continually refers to Jim as "Nigger." The racist epithet is the primary reason *Huckleberry Finn*'s suitability for young and contemporary readers has been repeatedly questioned.²⁴ Leslie Espinoza and Angela P. Harris explain that historically, to be a "nigger" is "to have no agency, no dignity, no individuality, and no moral worth; it is to be worthy of nothing but contempt" in the white imaginary (443). The term is a discursive marker of seemingly innate and irrevocable (derogatory) racial difference.

Critics maintain, however, that Twain's use of the term is historically accurate, and therefore, unavoidable. David L. Smith argues that it is "difficult to imagine how Twain could have debunked a discourse without using the specific terms of that discourse," and suggests that, finally, "Nigger" is Twain's subversive attack on racism (367). Even Thomas F. Gossett in his influential text on American racial ideology, *Race: The History of an American Idea*, appeals to ethnic minorities to realize that "such aspersions ... are important solely from the standpoint of past history" (443-44).

But John Alberti rightly cautions against this approach, suggesting instead that readers should ask "what benefits Huck derives from maintaining this racial distinction" (924). Both Smith's and Gossett's reasoning about the historical accuracy of the term conveniently ignores the ways in which white people have benefited from the racial,

embedded in whiteness that the novel evades any real attempt at racial recognition and harmony. See "Attacks on the Ending and Twain's Attack on the Conscience" (305-12).

²⁴ John H. Wallace asserts that the term "nigger" and having to read the novel out loud is "humiliating and insulting to black students. It contributes to their feelings of low self-esteem and to the white students' disrespect for black people. It constitutes mental cruelty, harassment, and outright racial intimidation." He concludes that the "attitudes developed by the reading of such literature can lead to tensions, discontent, and even fighting," and argues thus that this justifies *Huckleberry Finn*'s removal from required reading lists of public schools (310). As a result, Wallace famously adapted *Huckleberry Finn* by removing all references of the racist epithet. See Jonathan Arac, *Huckleberry Finn as Idol and Target* (67). I concur with Morrison, however, who argues that this is a "purist yet elementary kind of censorship designed to appease adults rather than educate children. Amputate the problem, band-aid the solution" ("This Amazing, Troubling Book" 386).

social, and psychological degradation of black Americans, and how the term is a perpetual and crude reminder of their historically subordinate status.²⁵ “Nigger,” like Morrison’s definition of “Africanism,” should be considered as a term for the denotative and connotative blackness that [African-American] peoples have come to signify” (*PD* 6). Morrison notes that “[r]eading ‘nigger’ hundreds of times embarrassed, bored, annoyed—but did not faze me” (*This Amazing, Troubling Book* 386), and observes that the term “nigger” is “inextricable from Huck’s deliberations about who and what he himself is—or, more precisely, is not” (*PD* 55). Despite Huck’s deepening emotional bond with Jim he insists on utilizing a term that marks their distinction. Huck thus consciously invests in his whiteness – that which, despite his lower class status, imbues him with an intrinsic value not afforded Jim in a racialized society. Here, Huck’s white identity and whiteness become “sources of privilege and protection” – an “active property” (Harris 78, 81).

Huck’s incessant repetition of the epithet belies Smith’s assertion of its subversive function because its use is so casual as to undermine its apparently ironic function. As Mensch point out, “from a literary standpoint repetition overwhelms function” (106), and so long as “niggers” exist in Huck’s mind, nothing he feels for Jim can prevent him from merging his friend with that invidious construct” (88).²⁶ Indeed, when Huck (pretending to be Tom) fabricates for Mrs Phelps the story of a steam-boat that blew “out a cylinder head,” he states that it hurt no-one but it “[k]illed a nigger” (*AHBF* 230). Huck’s deliberate use of whiteface to protect himself here makes it increasingly difficult to make sense of his continued use of the term even after he has formed such an intimate community with Jim on the raft.

²⁵ Randall Kennedy describes “Nigger” as “a key word in the lexicon of” American race relations (4) and concedes that one cannot ignore “the ideological baggage that burdens the term *nigger*” (70). Indeed, Martin Luther King, Jr.’s *A Testament of Hope*, quoted by Kennedy, highlights the way in which African-Americans have been historically degraded through a specific process of naming. King writes that, under the etiquette of Jim Crow, “your first name becomes ‘nigger’ and your middle name becomes ‘boy’ (however old you are) and your last name becomes ‘John’” (36). James Baldwin recalls how, as the only black person in a small village in Switzerland, he was subjected daily to the taunts of “Neger!” by local children. He explains that they “have no way of knowing the echoes this sound raises in me” (119).

²⁶ Peaches Henry adds that even if Twain used the term as a synonym for slave, “the implications of the word do not improve; ‘nigger’ denotes the black man as commodity, as chattel.” So, “to impute blacks’ abhorrence of ‘nigger’ to hypersensitivity compounds injustice with callousness and signals a refusal to acknowledge that the connotations of ‘that word’ generate a cultural discomfort that blacks share with no other racial group” (366-67).

Huck's continued racial consciousness underscores Twain's awareness of what Du Bois famously identified as the "color line" that would persist into the twentieth-century (15). Although conscious that slavery was a "bold, grotesque and unwarrantable usurpation" (*Autobiography* 32), Twain notes of his childhood relationships with blacks that "[w]e were comrades and yet not comrades; color and condition interposed a subtle line which both parties were conscious of and which rendered complete fusion impossible" (*Autobiography* 6). Twain's acute perception of the precariousness of racialized relationships – "comrades and yet not comrades" – crucially informs Huck and Jim's precarious, and finally, impossible friendship.

His community with Jim on the raft is, as a consequence of a pervasive racialization, rendered suspicious. There is no denying the intimacy of the relationship achieved, but Huck's subconscious motives become questionable. Noting the silence that pervades the scene following Jim's confession of parental neglect of his own daughter, Morrison notes that "[t]he withholdings at critical moments, which I once took to be deliberate evasions, stumbles even, or a writer's impatience with his or her material, I began to see as otherwise: as entrances, crevices, gaps, seductive invitations flashing the possibility of meaning" ("This Amazing, Troubling Book" 388). The silence that permeates an abruptly ended scene which offers no further enlightenment on Jim as a person, and is followed by Jim's humiliating textual objectification by Duke and King as a "*Sick Arab—but harmless when not out of his head*" (*AHBF* 171), suggests the possibility of Jim, a black man, as a better, if not ideal, father for Huck. But Morrison highlights that:

As an abused and homeless child running from a feral male parent, Huck cannot dwell on Jim's confession and regret about parental negligence without precipitating a crisis from which neither he nor the text could recover. Huck's desire for a father who is adviser and trustworthy companion is universal, but he also needs something more: a father whom, unlike his own, he can control. ("This Amazing, Troubling Book" 389-90)

Certainly Huck's often degrading treatment of Jim – the snake incident is a notable example – posits Jim as Huck's racial and cultural subordinate. Huck's (and later Tom's) tricks on Jim undermine his authoritative paternal agency, and it is difficult for the reader

to perceive of Jim as a rational adult.²⁷ Moreover, in that Twain sends a black adult male down the river with a white child, the typical parent-child relationship is inverted. Jim's ability to escape to freedom in the North is dependent on Huck's assistance, and we witness Jim, on many occasions, helpless when alone. When, for example, their raft is wrecked and Huck and Jim are separated, Jim tells Huck that he "judged it was all up with *him* ... for if he didn't get saved he would get drowned; and if he did get saved, whoever saved him would send him back home so as to get the reward, and then Miss Watson would sell him south, sure" (*AHBF* 86). Jim recognizes that he is helpless without Huck. He is dependent on and invests within Huck the moral responsibility of *leading* Jim to freedom. This is contrary to Chadwick-Joshua's assertions that Jim is ultimately the novel's hero, with a "clear perception of himself as a man" (xii). Ellison has observed that "Twain fitted Jim into the outlines of the minstrel tradition, and it is from behind this stereotype mask that we see Jim's dignity and human capacity—and Twain's complexity—emerge" ("Change the Joke and Slip the Yoke" 104).²⁸ But even Ellison contends that it is Jim's "source in this same tradition which creates that ambivalence between his identification as an adult and parent and his 'boyish' naiveté, and which by contrast makes Huck, with his street-sparrow sophistication seem more adult" ("Change the Joke and Slip the Yoke" 104). Jim is finally, as Ellison observes, a "white man's inadequate portrait of a slave" ("Change the Joke and Slip the Yoke" 112).

Morrison adds that only a black (male) slave can deliver all Huck desires: "Because Jim can be controlled, it becomes possible for Huck to feel responsible for and to him—but without the onerous burden of lifelong debt that a real father figure would demand. For Huck, Jim is a father-for-free" ("That Amazing, Troubling Book" 390). Morrison notes that this also helps to solve another problem:

²⁷ While many critics argue that Jim is a representative paternal figure and the moral touchstone of the novel, it is hard to ignore Jim's child-like complacency, completely within the paradigm of minstrelsy, as the willing butt of Huck and Tom's "jokes". Jim is, suggestively and to a certain degree, complicit in his degradation. Hartman notes, however, that minstrelsy renders visible the "affiliations of spectacle and sufferance. And, accordingly, fun and frolic become the vehicles of the slave's self-betrayal *and* survival" (37; emphasis added).

²⁸ Critics like Fishkin have used this as evidence of Twain's subversive representation of the African-American figure. That a black intellectual like Ellison was able to observe the complexity of Jim's characterization, the argument would seem to be, undermines arguments that Twain's representation of black people was fundamentally racist.

how effectively to bury the father figure underneath the minstrel paint. The forgone temporariness of the friendship urges the degradation of Jim (to divert Huck's and our inadvertent sorrow at the close), and minstrelizing him necessitates and exposes an enforced silence on the subject of white fatherhood. (—"This Amazing, Troubling Book" 388)

Whiteness, especially as associated with the white male adult, is necessarily reprieved in the novel from the investigation it deserves.

But Huck and Jim's journey is a pertinent journey into the heart of white darkness. For all his moralizing about the social and ethical consequences of aiding the escape of a runaway slave, Huck is concerned primarily with his own well-being. When Huck, after contemplating his moral dilemma, famously declares, —"All right, then, I'll go to hell," he reveals a concern not with Jim's, but his own welfare. Huck reasons:

And then think of *me*! It would get all around, that Huck Finn helped a nigger to get his freedom; and if I was to ever see anybody from that town again, I'd be ready to get down and lick his boots for shame.... The more I studied about this, the more my conscience went to grinding me, and the more wicked, and low-down and ornery I got to feeling. And at last, when it hit me all of a sudden that here was the plain hand of Providence slapping me in the face and letting me know my wickedness was being watched all the time from up there in heaven, whilst I was stealing a poor old woman's nigger that hadn't ever done me no harm, and now was showing me there's One that's always on the lookout, and ain't a-going to allow no such miserable doings to go only just so fur and no further, I most dropped in my tracks I was so scared. Well, I tried the best I could to kinder soften it up somehow for myself, by saying I was brung up wicked, and so I warn't so much to blame; but something inside of me kept saying, "There was the Sunday School, you could a gone to it; and if you'd a done it they'd a learnt you, there, that people that acts as I'd been acting about that nigger goes to everlasting fire". (A H B F 221-22)

Despite the fact that Huck is actually running away from such Christian —civiliz[in']" in the first place (A H B F 13), and which elicits such a profound sense of —loneliness" that he wishes he —was dead" (A H B F 16), he is apparently haunted by it. Huck is so nurtured into whiteness that white Christian —morality' weighs down his sense of the importance of freeing Jim. In spite of his dismissal of Miss Watson's Christian, civilizing

teachings,²⁹ Huck views freeing Jim as tantamount to hell, and Huck's decision to forego heaven reveals not sympathy with the plight of the "Negro," but sympathy with his own moral quandary. Huck may show personal growth in his attitude to Jim, but he is finally so psychologically immersed in, so acculturated to, a racist ideology that this precludes his ability to perceive Jim's equality. Huck's friend and father-figure remains, in his private assessment, "a poor old woman's nigger." Huck's sense that a continued relationship with Jim as a paternal figure is not possible forms part of his inner capitulation to white values and his outer submission to Tom's ridiculous games.

In *Learning to Be White*, this is Thandeka's argument concerning the "wages for whiteness" (77). She argues here that white people are not innately white, but "become white in order to survive" (77), and notes that they become so at "moral cost to themselves" (83).³⁰ Huck's moral cost to himself, his need to survive in white society, is that he forfeits, at the end, a strong sense of what is right in order to remain within his community of whiteness. Thandeka explains that the white "child learns to silence and then deny its own resonant feelings toward racially proscribed others, not because it chooses to become white, but because it wishes to remain within the community that is quite literally its life" (24). Being white, Thandeka highlights, thus becomes a "matter of survival, not a privilege but a penalty" (8), because the child's "impulse to moral action" is slain "by his own fear of racial exile" (9). That is why, despite his own decision to help free Jim, Huck finds it difficult to fathom the fact that Tom, "a boy that was respectable, and well brung up; and had a character to lose; and folks at home that had characters," would help "steal that nigger out of slavery. That was the thing that was too many for me" (*AHBF* 242). Tom's presence elicits in Huck a sense of belonging where he had previously harboured "this deeply private feeling of not being at home within [his] own white community" (Thandeka 13).

²⁹ In one notable scene, Huck notes that Miss Watson, after supper, "got out her book and learned me about Moses and the Bulrushers; and I was in a sweat to find out all about him; but by and by she let it out that Moses had been dead a considerable long time" (14) so, Huck concludes, "I didn't care no more about him; because I don't take no stock in dead people." (15).

³⁰ Mary Ellen Goodman's study of *Race Awareness in Young Children* notes of a four-year old child Jimmie that he came into the world "quite naked, culturally as well as physically. He had only a body—a body stocked with possibilities, a large number of which would appear in due course." But, she notes that due to social pressures that operate "quite automatically and almost inevitably.... In the process he has learned the ways *and* many of the *values* current in his world" (39).

Huck persistently grapples with his socialized perceptions of black people and what he believes to be correct behaviour. When Jim confides in Huck his desire to buy his wife out of slavery when free, after which, ~~they~~ they would both work to buy the two children, and if their master wouldn't sell them, they'd get an Ab'litionist to go and steal them" (*AHBF* 110), Huck considers Jim's statement —~~sub~~ a lowering of him" (*AHBF* 111). For Huck, Jim's statement is expressive of black insincerity and reflective of Jim's ingratitude. Huck muses: ~~It~~ most froze me to hear such talk. He wouldn't ever dared to talk such in his life before. Just see what a difference it made in him the minute he judged he was about free. It was according the old saying give a nigger an inch and he'll take an ell" (*AHBF* 110). Huck has been nurtured into an ethical framework of white superiority and as he privately assesses his conversations with Jim, his fear is readily apparent, and with it, Jim is reduced again to the stereotypical ~~nigger~~."

Huck's self-denial, his decision to ~~go~~ to hell" rather than see Jim remain a slave, becomes, then, an assertion of his white supremacy – morally achieved. That is, Huck's claims to a transcendent morality are concomitant with, and inseparable from, his white identity. His decision to forfeit heaven and his awareness of the gravity of this decision here is possible only because he is acculturated into the mores of whiteness. Huck's decision is, inversely, what George Lipsitz's study calls a ~~po~~possessive" investment in whiteness – a subconsciously ~~po~~poisonous system of privilege that pits people against each other and prevents the creation of common ground" (vii, xix). *Huckleberry Finn* explores what Kastely terms an ~~eth~~ethics of self-interest" (413), for Huck's seeming moral growth is actually an inverse recognition and assertion of his racial authority. His actions to free Jim from slavery are undermined by a pervasive concern with his white self. Whiteness is thus, as Mason Stokes highlights, ~~vis~~ible as narcissism," as that psychological condition ~~wh~~whereby a consideration of the other is first and foremost a consideration of the self" (53), for Huck's attitude has ~~th~~larger purpose of articulating and buttressing the ego, the self" (72).³¹

Sadly, after all he and Jim have been through, Huck can pronounce proudly of Jim's loyalty to Tom that ~~I~~knowed he was white inside" (*AHBF* 279). This statement makes

³¹ Some critics have celebrated this episode as Huck's metaphysical accomplishment. Most notably, Lionel Trilling claimed that Huck and Jim had formed a ~~com~~community of saints" (104). James Kastely suggests that ~~Huck~~ achieves his full humanity because he freely takes responsibility for another" (433).

all sorts of suggestions about Huck's unshakeable sense of the inferiority of blackness. Huck understands Jim's risking his freedom by calling for a doctor for Tom when he has "a bullet in the calf of his leg" (*AHBF* 279) as indicative of an inner white self. Jim's morality, his decision not to "budg[e] step" (*AHBF* 279) until Tom is aided, is, for Huck, not a part of Jim's individual integrity, but his successful adoption of white values. That Huck finally describes his friend, Jim, as "white inside," points undeniably to the continued force of race in their relationship. Huck cannot accept Jim as wholly black; in order to accept his love for his friend he must immerse him into his idea of whiteness. For Huck, Jim's morality, despite his lived sense of the depravity of white society, can only be understood as concomitant with whiteness.

Ironically, then, Jim's black self is negated at the same time that it is highlighted. Whiteness is only definable against the spectre of blackness and Jim thus becomes essential to Huck's definition of himself as a free, white American. Gale Elizabeth Hale in *Making Whiteness* observes that in the late nineteenth-century, despite growing concerns about the necessary emancipation of the "Negro," "American culture already associated dark skin with bondage, the very opposite of self-determination, the value that sat at the symbolic center of American identity" (18).³² Despite Huck's low-class, rural background, he is, by virtue of his "race," always already superior to Jim; that is, his status as a free white American is contingent upon Jim's contrary status as a black slave. Ironically, then, Huck requires, in fact, depends upon, Jim's inferior servile status. Huck's decision at the end to "light out for the Territory" (*AHBF* 296) is, finally, a manifestation of his white identity and agency, reaffirming what white America saw as its destined expansion into frontier territory. That Twain reverts to Jim, the minstrel figure, at the novel's end, highlights the psychological and ideological pervasiveness of whiteness. Both Huck and Jim are embedded in a racialized culture apparently inescapable and insurmountable. Huck cannot transcend his overarching whiteness, and Jim is consistently oppressed by it, locked into a degraded black identity.

³² Baldwin's *Collected Essays* reveal that "it was impossible for Americans to accept the black man as one of themselves, for to do so was to jeopardize their status as [free] white men" (127).

The significance of *Huckleberry Finn* to American literature is, contrary to John Wallace's assertions, not negated by this reading.³³ Neither is its centrality in the American literary canon undermined. The novel remains instructive of the role that race has played and still plays in shaping American ideology and culture and its concomitant literature. Like Stowe and Whitman, Twain needs the African-American to sustain a particularly white American worldview. Huck needs Jim to assert his whiteness through the moral dilemma presented by Twain of freeing a black slave. Huck's privileged identity as a free white American is inseparable from Jim's status as an enslaved African-American. The "Africanist presence" in nineteenth-century canonical literature is a necessary and convenient presence. *Huckleberry Finn* reveals, inadvertently, the significance of the African-American to America's national history and identity. Smiley notes that there is more to be learned about the American character *from* its canonization than *through* its canonization" (356). Du Bois's crucial question, "[w]ould America have been America without her Negro people?" (176), I believe receives ample response in the representations of racialized American identity, the black and the white, in *Huckleberry Finn*.

³³ I refer here to Wallace's attempts to censor the novel as proscribed reading from high school curricula.

CHAPTER FOUR

Toni Morrison's *Tar Baby* and the Culture-bearing Black Woman

Of her earlier works, *Tar Baby*, in my opinion, most highlights Toni Morrison's problematic position on race generally and on blackness specifically. Some critics have claimed that it is one of Morrison's easier reads, appealing to both black and white readers. Indeed, subsequent to *Tar Baby*'s publication in 1981, Morrison became the first black American woman featured on the cover of *Newsweek*. *Tar Baby* was on the *New York Times* best-seller list for four months and Morrison went on a European tour to promote the book. Valerie Smith's 1981 review pronounced *Tar Baby* "the most ambitious of Morrison's works" (39) and, in 1988, Nellie Y. McKay's introduction to *Critical Essays on Toni Morrison* stated that *Tar Baby*, like *Song of Solomon*, "is considerably less confusing, threatening, or intimidating for white readers than the earlier books" (6).

Various critics have, however, lamented the novel's apparent failures. Robert G. O'Meally observed, in 1981, that *Tar Baby* "is often very intriguing," yet also "deeply flawed" (33). James Coleman's 1986 review registers his frustration with Morrison's "unclear directions and garbled messages [that] leave the reader in a muddle in the end." He contends that *Tar Baby* is "unsatisfying" because, "Morrison does not successfully develop and deal with the major implications" of her novel. It "does not clearly show us what Morrison is saying about the place of white Western values in the value systems of Blacks late in the twentieth century" (72). Perhaps as a result of this, Malin Walther Pereira, writing in 1997, observed that *Tar Baby* is "the least admired, the least researched, and the least taught of her novels ... and has received little critical attention generally, and virtually no critical attention in the past five years." Pereira notes that the novel's "ambivalences, refusal of answers, and weaknesses in plot and characterization reveal tensions in Morrison's process as a writer," and suggests that "perhaps *Tar Baby* seems problematic and unsatisfying to many of us precisely because it functions as a transitional text in Morrison's oeuvre" (72).

I agree that *Tar Baby* is a difficult text. Unlike her earlier fiction, Morrison does not as clearly delineate her position on blackness in this novel. As Pereira suggests, *Tar Baby* functions as a “transitional text” which reflects the political and social shifts in race-relations and representations, particularly black identity, occurring in 1960s and ‘70s America onward.¹ Thus the position Morrison takes is often difficult to pin down. On the one hand, the novel suggests, if not advocates, an essentialist position on black identity; but on the other, *Tar Baby* appears to speak to the complexities that attend contemporary black identity in an evolving political and social milieu. Furthermore, *Tar Baby* also seems responsive to the gendered inflections of racial identity. At times, however, as I will demonstrate, the novel disturbingly insinuates the existence of an innate black female identity – one which is, ironically, culturally determined. It questions those modern black women who do not conform as traditional culture-bearers and suggests that they are not only racially treacherous but culturally insufficient. In an interview with Nellie McKay, Morrison insists that in her view as an author, the issue between the male and female protagonists, Son and Jadine, in *Tar Baby*, is not about gender, but about “what their responsibilities were in being black. The question for each was whether he or she was really a member of the tribe” (“An Interview” 404).²

Morrison’s reference to “tribe” is interesting. It is a politically loaded and archaic term that highlights black identity as ethnicity and thus insinuates a racial and cultural essentialism. Stuart Hall observes that the term ethnicity “acknowledges the place of history, language and culture in the construction of subjectivity and identity,” but he warns of the “dangers of ‘ethnicity’ as a concept” because the “grounding of ethnicity in difference was deployed, in the discourse of racism” (“New Ethnicities” 93). Morrison’s talk of “tribe[s]” suggests her own attempt at what Hall terms the “imaginative rediscovery” (“Cultural Identity and Diaspora” 224) of an essential black identity, and carries with it the traces of racist discourse rooted, negatively, in cultural difference.

In an interview with Cecil Brown in 1995, Morrison discloses her position on gendered black identity. In response to Brown’s rather loaded question as to whether she

¹ I refer here to the progressive results of the Civil Rights Movement which saw black Americans legally incorporated into and transforming race-relations in American society. For a delineation of the historical transition of America see, for instance, Howard Zinn’s *A People’s History of the United States*.

² This interview appears in *Toni Morrison: Critical Perspectives Past and Present* (396-411).

felt her writing advocated the idea of the “estrating woman,” Morrison stated: “[t]his is serious business. And I’m not going to make choices between my sons and brothers and some white folk. That ain’t no choice. I’m not in that gender fight” (471). In some quarters, Morrison’s writing has been described as sexist, as depicting black men in a stereotypically deprecating manner and as being derived from a “white feminist agenda.”³ This goes some way to explaining Morrison’s forthright refutation here and her foregrounding of black cultural community speaks to the complex position of black subjectivity in white America.

But, whereas Judith Butler would argue that gender is a social construct that is necessarily performative,⁴ Morrison has repeatedly suggested in interviews that gendered identity (male or female) is necessarily rooted in black cultural community. Barbara Hill Rigney observes of Morrison’s fiction that “there can be no isolated ego striving to define itself as separate from the community, no matter how tragic or futile the operations of that community might be ... ‘self’ lies in blackness rather than in any subjectivity or uniqueness” (38). In an interview with Claudia Tate in 1983, Morrison categorically stated that: “Black people take their culture wherever they go.... You can change the plate, but the menu would still be the same” (“Foni Morrison” 158). Her comment here suggests, positively, a communitarian black identity characterized by cultural specificity. At the same time, however, the ‘plate and menu’ metaphor is somewhat reductive. Black people are presented as a homogeneous, inherently culture-bearing people. The statement is determinative and suspiciously essentialist, eliding individual specificity within black communities. It is also exclusivist because the statement implies a characteristic particular to blacks.

Tar Baby is Morrison’s fourth novel to tackle the issue of cultural consciousness and allegiance within the black community. But the novel is problematic because it takes, at

³ Most notably, Stanley Crouch, in his 1987 *New Republic* review which was reprinted in his book, *Notes of a Hanging Judge*, claimed that Morrison’s focus on gender oppression derived from a “white feminist agenda” and “simply reinscribes the age-old stereotypes of black male (mis)behaviour.” He stated that *Beloved*, specifically, is “designed to placate sentimental feminist ideology, and to make sure that the vision of black woman as the most scorned and rebuked victims doesn’t weaken.” See Molly Abel Travis’s “*Beloved* and *Middle Passage*: Race, Narrative and the Critic’s Essentialism” (180).

⁴ It is important to note, however, that Butler does not discount the significance of cultural subjectivity. In “Gender Trouble, Feminist Theory, and Psychoanalytic Discourse,” she notes that “this question of being a woman is more difficult than it perhaps originally appeared, for we refer not only to women as social category but also as a felt sense of self, a culturally conditioned or constructed subjective identity” (201).

times, an almost absolutist position on blackness. It is, for me, even more problematic for its suggestion that black women are necessarily responsible for bearing the culture of the black community. Thus, like Pereira, I would argue that *Tar Baby* is a significant novel because it suggests a certain angst on the part of Morrison regarding the position of black culture and community in an evolving American society. In *Tar Baby*, Morrison registers her awareness of an evolving, modern black subjectivity at the same time that she reiterates her political commitment to the crucial importance of deep cultural memory, of keeping the past alive to construct a better future” (Chabot-Davis 242). These are the central tensions in the novel as indicated by Morrison’s use of the tar baby folktale.

The Tar Baby Folktale as a Black Cultural Narrative

Tar Baby’s title and content is derived from a particular African-American folktale popularized in late nineteenth and early twentieth-century America by white writer Joel Chandler Harris. In Harris’s tales of Brer Rabbit in *Uncle Remus: His Songs and His Sayings*, Uncle Remus, the black narrator, tells bed-time stories to a little white boy who is the son of his employer.⁵ In African-American folklore Brer Rabbit, supposedly weaker but always managing to outwit the stronger animals, is traditionally an animal symbolizing both subversion and revolt. Lawrence Levine notes that Rabbit served as a trickster figure “obsessed with manipulating the strong and reversing the normal structure of power and prestige” (105). Significantly, while Harris’s original stories relate incidents between the tormenting Brer Fox and the clever Brer Rabbit, Brer Fox’s persona has over the years been transformed into that of the white farmer. Rabbit thus became a significant trope of the ideological black manipulation of white domination during and after slavery.

⁵ The first edition of *Uncle Remus: His Songs and His Sayings* was published in 1880. See *The Complete Tales of Uncle Remus*, ed. Richard Chase (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1955) 6-8. Uncle Remus is a post-Civil War figure and, as such, is an emancipated black. The retention of the title “Uncle,” typically applied to older black people, however, is telling. It highlights the tensions that pervaded black and white relations after emancipation and hints at the persistent (white) romantic myth of a South characterized by black and white racial harmony and black dependency. While Harris was a self-proclaimed liberal who did much for the upliftment of blacks, his tales are problematic for their reiteration of the faithful “darkey” stereotype as well as their nostalgic evocation of the antebellum plantation past. See “Charles Chesnut’s Cakewalk” in Eric Sundquist’s *To Wake the Nations*, and Jennifer Ritterhouse, “Reading, Intimacy, and the Role of Uncle Remus in White Southern Social Memory” (585-622), for the debates surrounding Harris’s white use of African-American folklore.

Rabbit therefore functioned to parody white society while simultaneously evoking the strategic survival of black people. Eric Sundquist notes that “Brer Rabbit’s victories over the fox and other strong animals are motivated by the transparent aggression and obsequious mocking contempt of the slave for his master, or the black man for his white boss” (*TWN* 340-41). Like “other trickster figures, he may be read as the generalized symbol of anarchic revolt against limiting controls and suppressive power, whether moral, political, or social” (*TWN* 343).

In the Tar Baby folktale Rabbit’s intellectual curiosity, however, is rewarded with his capture. Intrigued and provoked by the silent contraption made of sticky tar to trap him, Rabbit addresses the tar baby but receives no response. He is offended by what he perceives as the tar baby’s lack of manners, and so strikes it but is progressively and helplessly stuck. Fortunately, after much frustrated wrestling with it, Rabbit dupes the white farmer into releasing him by pleading not to be thrown into the briar patch. He thus outwits the tar baby and, by extension, the white farmer. In the tradition of African-American folklore the tale has moral resonance. The tar baby comes to represent a “sticky situation” that is apparently only aggravated by additional contact. The trickster may have been duped, but Rabbit learns his lesson and manages to escape the perils of whiteness represented by the tar baby because it is made by the white farmer specifically to trap him.

As a self-reflexively ethnic form of story-telling, Morrison’s attention to folklore in her fiction highlights her embeddedness in black cultural values and traditions. William R. Bascom notes that folklore typically “mirror[s] the familiar details of culture” and functions in “validating culture, in justifying its rituals and institutions to those who perform and observe them” (292). Folklore, then, highlights the relationship between black individual and communal identity. As Susan L. Blake puts it, folklore is, by definition “the expression of community—of the common experiences, beliefs, and values that identify a folk as a group” (77). In her use of folklore, Morrison asserts an alternative black epistemology traditionally derided and marginalized in mainstream hegemonic Western culture. In an interview with Charles Ruas in 1981, she explains that:

Words like *lore* and *mythology* and *folk tale* have very little currency in most contemporary literature. People scorn it as discredited information held by discredited people. There's supposed to be some other kind of knowledge that is more viable, more objective, more scientific. I don't want to disregard that mythology because it does not meet the credentials of this particular decade or century. I want to take it head on and look at it. It was useful for two thousand years. We also say *primitive*, meaning something terrible. Some primitive instincts are terrible and uninformed, some of them are not. (113)

Morrison's use of "primitive" here points to her sense of an epistemology of African derivation. Noting that the "passing on of cultural values and personal history [was] traditionally a woman's domain" (*Binding Cultures* xii), Gay Wilentz argues that Morrison is an "Afrocentric storyteller" because "her discourse is based in the values and traditions of an African heritage which informs the African-American community" ("Civilizations Underneath" 74). In *Song of Solomon*, which appropriates the myth of the flying Africans, Morrison asserts, through the female cultural guide, Pilate, the "values and traditions" of community extended to African-Americans by their slave ancestors. Morrison also notes thus that "[w]hen I use [Western] mythology in my text it's usually to show that something has gone wrong, not right," that the characters are "outside of their history, so to speak" (qtd. in Brown 461). Indeed, Milkman's individualistic modern lifestyle is undercut by an African oral myth to highlight the loss of, and the need to, reassert black cultural identity. Richard M. Dorson, noting the submergence of folklore in modern culture, thus argues that "[f]olklore can be a unifying and nationalizing factor when utilized by a repressed people seeking to establish their political and cultural identity" (8).

Morrison's use of the Tar Baby folktale follows the same trajectory of disseminating cultural and racial awareness. *Tar Baby* is interesting and pertinent, however, in that Morrison here effects a (re-)appropriation and manipulation of Harris's Tar Baby folktale. She effectively "signifies" upon whiteness while asserting black cultural forms. In *The Signifying Monkey* Henry Louis Gates, Jr. argues of African-American texts that "[t]he relationship that black 'signification' bears to the English 'signification' is, paradoxically, a relation of difference inscribed within a relation of identity" (45). He explains that "[t]o revise the received sign (quotient) literally accounted for in the relation represented by *signified/signifier* at its most apparently denotative level is to critique the

nature of (white) meaning itself, to challenge through a literal critique of the sign the meaning of meaning” (47). Signification entails a “black act of (re) doubling,” of “black double-voicedness; because it always entails formal revision and an intertextual relation” (48, 51).

This has significant ramifications for Morrison’s (re-)appropriation of the black folktale in *Tar Baby*. She reclaims that which was originally black, and (re-)configures it for the ideological and political ends of blackness. Craig H. Werner notes that the African-American tradition “encourages awareness of both sign and myth. To accept a myth without excavating its reservoir of repressed history, from an [African]-American perspective, would be to accept the obliteration of one’s identity” (152). Morrison hereby effectively excavates the history of African-American community and tradition and “adapts the folk sensibility to the is-ness of contemporary [African]-American experience” (156). Much like Isadore Okpewho who argues the “basic play interest of a great deal of oral narratives” (57), she exploits the “play” aspect of folklore/myth both to highlight and to interrogate the authenticity of blackness and black cultural truths, especially as it applies to contemporary society.

But Morrison’s use of folklore in *Tar Baby* is not unproblematic. Bascom notes how folklore can function as a means of “applying social pressure and exercising social control” by maintaining cultural conformity (294). Richard Slotkin argues in “Myth and the Production of History” that:

mythological narrative does not admit a multiplicity of perspectives, and is not arranged to encourage questions ... about the values that shape history. Mythic narrative embodies tradition and invokes belief. Its primary appeal is to ritualized emotions, habitual association, memory, nostalgia. Its representations are symbolic and metaphoric, depending for their force on an intuitive recognition and acceptance of the symbol by the audience. The purpose of myth is always ideological, never purely descriptive let alone analytic. It is invoked as a means of deriving usable values from history, and of putting those values beyond the reach of critical demystification. (83)

Folklore also functions didactically and has, as Slotkin notes, “the tendency to treat ideas, metaphors, and linguistic conventions as if they were palpable aspects of material reality,” so that in its “ification” is a “falsification” of experience” (73-74).

Morrison's statement to Ruas suggests that she seems to see her novel's use of the folktale functioning in these terms. *Tar Baby* centres on a young cosmopolitan black woman, Jadine, and a rurally-rooted black man, Son, whose relationship is problematized by their different ideologies on blackness. Morrison explains:

So I just gave these characters parts, Tar Baby being a black woman and the rabbit a black man. I introduced a white man and remembered the tar. The fact that it was made out of tar and was a black woman, if it was made to trap a black man—the white man made her for that purpose. That was the beginning of the story. (102)

John Duvall notes in *Identifying Fictions* that “while Morrison herself in her criticism has written of the dangers of fetishizing blackness, the critical commentary on her fiction frequently becomes complicit with that fetishization” (7). Indeed, especially in the case of *Tar Baby*, Morrison's own explanation of her novel in published interviews often offers so narrow an interpretation that it threatens to completely undermine the complexity of the novel's vision of black identity and subjectivity. In her statement here Morrison herself appears to fetishize blackness by explaining how her female protagonist, Jadine, functions in terms of the folktale, by virtue of her cultural inauthenticity. She seems to suggest that Jadine's role, having being made by the white man, is nothing more than to trap Son who takes the part of Rabbit from the folktale. Morrison reiterates this position in an interview with Judith Wilson in 1981: “In the original story, the tar baby is made by a white man—that has to be the case with Jadine. She has to have been almost ‘constructed’ by the Western thing, and grateful to it” (134). She further insinuates Jadine's racial treachery by explaining to Ruas that “[w]herever there was tar it seemed to me a holy place. ‘Tar Baby’ is also a racial slur, like ‘nigger,’ and a weapon hostile to the black man. The tragedy of the situation was not that she *was* a Tar Baby, but that she *wasn't*” (102). Morrison suggests here that Jadine is the tar baby but lacks the essential qualities; that is, she is black, but does not have the essential spiritual properties of blackness.

Thus, for Morrison, *Tar Baby* appears to function as a modern-day folk story specifically highlighting her concern with cultural abandonment on the part of contemporary black women. But in my opinion, the novel also complicates this

supposition at the same time that it suggests it. While Morrison's comments in interviews have undoubtedly influenced readings of the novel, I show them to be, curiously, at odds with *Tar Baby's* complex vision of contemporary black subjectivity, and thus in need of close scrutiny. *Tar Baby* is an interesting novel in that it suggests a discrepancy between the ideals of Morrison the author and Morrison the interviewee, thus complicating her visibility and availability as an author figure. The crucial question, then, is why Morrison does this, and what effect it has on the (reading of the) novel.

(Black) Cultural Community and Identity

Evidenced from the epigraph to the novel, Morrison is concerned in *Tar Baby* with a divided black community. Taken from the first book of Corinthians 1:11, the epigraph reads:

For it hath been declared
unto me of you, my brethren, by them
which are of the house of
Chloe, that there are
contentions among you.

Like St Paul's address to the Corinthians the epigraph suggests that *Tar Baby* speaks to the importance of maintaining a unified communal identity. Indeed, in the previous verse, Paul implores the Corinthians "that ye all speak the same thing and, *that* there be no divisions among you; but *that* ye be perfectly joined together in the same mind and in the same judgement" (1 Cor. 1. 10). Furthermore, the "house of Chloe" has specific gendered connotations of African-American community, reinforced by Morrison's dedication of her novel to her maternal ancestors – "all of whom knew their true and ancient properties."⁶ Morrison here points to her position as a "black woman novelist" concerned with articulating the cultural mores of her black community (qtd. in Caldwell 243). She is aligned with the black community and points to the centrality of black American women

⁶ Notwithstanding that Chloe is Morrison's first name, in Greek mythology the name Chloe refers to the pagan goddess of fertility, thus reinforcing the idea of (female) cultural continuity.

in asserting cultural identity and continuity, an issue she addresses in the novel through the character of Jadine.

Jadine is a successful black model, educated in art history at the Sorbonne through her wealthy white patron – the “Candy King” Valerian Street (*TB* 29). She is also in a relationship with a rich white European man, Ryk. Jadine is literally an orphan, raised by her uncle and aunt, Sydney and Ondine Childs, who are the domestic servants of Street. More significantly, however, she is symbolically orphaned. Her lack of rootedness is also a consequence of their eroded cultural values. As “Philadelphia Negroes – the proudest people in the race” (*TB* 59), an industrious group “whose people owned drugstores and taught school” (*TB* 164), the Childs exhibit a social and material pride that is antithetical to Morrison’s traditional conception of blackness. They are portrayed in the novel as “white” blacks; that is, blacks whose cultural authenticity and, more significantly, racial solidarity, has been corroded by the effects of white epistemology and ideology.

The Childs family is representative of a contemporary blackness marked by assimilation into white values of material wealth and status. They are alienated from the Isle’s Haitian blacks, whom Sydney treats with “a classy silence” and whose behaviour of doing household work outside “enraged Ondine because it gave the place a nasty, common look” (*TB* 38). Son notes how they call the gardener, Gideon, “Yardman,” as though “he had not been mothered” (*TB* 161). More specifically, their attitude to Son’s presence at L’Arbe de la Croix is a telling critique of their racial and cultural treachery. They treat Son with the same neurotic suspicion and disdain as their white employer, Margaret, Valerian’s wife. A frustrated Ondine ruminates that Son, the “swamp nigger” (*TB* 100), “was black ... [t]he man upstairs wasn’t a Negro—meaning one of them” (*TB* 101-2). That Son is seen by Ondine as a proverbial “Nigger” (*TB* 129) is instructive. “Nigger,” the historically white racist epithet, is appropriated here by blacks to signal intra-racial class-based contempt. In this hierarchization of blackness Morrison suggests black acculturation to and internalization of white values.⁷

⁷ Her portrayal of the Childs draws on, and to some degree reiterates, the distinctions Malcolm X makes in his *Autobiography* between “Hill/House Negroes” and “Fild Negroes,” whom he uses as a metaphor to describe the effects of class difference within the black community. He explains that, “Hill Negroes” were “breaking their backs trying to imitate white people” (40). They “prided themselves on being incomparably ‘cultured’, ‘cultivated’, ‘dignified’, and better off than their black brethren down in the ghetto” (239).

Alfred Lopez explains that post-colonial bourgeois blacks share “an investment in whiteness to some degree or other” that is “an indispensable component of their own upward mobility within their respective societies, which each group retains as part of its own particular legacy of colonialism” (17). In fact, implicit in the Childs’ intra-racial prejudice is an internalization of racial inferiority. This is underpinned by Jadine’s obsession with her baby sealskin coat, a gift from Ryk. Made from the “hides of ninety baby seals” (*TB* 89), the coat is a symbol of white materialism and, more tellingly, imperialism. The sealskin coat is a clear example of the destruction of nature and the hierarchies of existence espoused by European culture from the middle ages onward. The fact that the coat makes Jadine “tremble” – “[s]he opened her lips and licked the fur” (*TB* 112) – signals her mental colonization by whiteness.

Morrison also suggests that the Childs are blacks in blackface, performing for their white master. A description of Sydney is instructive:

He was perfect at those dinners when his niece sat down with his employers, as perfect as he was when he served Mr. Street’s friends. The silver tray of walnuts, the equally silver bowl of peaches he brought in, and a jiffy later, the coffee – all were exactly and surreptitiously placed on the table. One hardly knew if he left the room or stood in some shadowy corner of it. (*TB* 72)

Not only does Sydney arrogantly suffer the humiliation of having to serve his own niece, but the narrator’s elaborate description of his exactness here undercuts his pretentious superiority and highlights him as nothing more than Street’s butler. Nothing more, that is, than a complacent servant of whiteness. While not quite an “Uncle Tom”, Sydney’s servility is registered in his skill at serving the glaring symbols of whiteness – the “silver tray of walnuts, the equally silver bowl of peaches” – derided by the narrator and from which he is racially excluded. Ironically, that “[o]ne hardly knew if he left the room or stood in some shadowy corner of it,” highlights his essential insignificance to white society. As Barack Obama notes in his autobiography, *Dreams from My Father*, blacks for his white grandparents in 1960s America were “there but not there, like ... shadowy, silent presences that elicit neither passion nor fear” (18). This recalls Morrison’s observation in *Playing in the Dark* of the historically shadowy presence of blackness, serviceable to and informing of whiteness. Valerian’s house L’Arbe De la Croix is itself

described as a “house of shadows” (*TB* 237) thus playing on Morrison’s critique of white American treatment of blackness and simultaneously registering the literal and ideological ‘emptiness’ that typifies whiteness.

The barrenness of white culture is seen not just in Valerian’s loveless relationship with Margaret, but in his treatment of black people generally. He welcomes Son’s presence at his house merely to frustrate his wife and servants, and his blatant disregard for the Childs’s opinions regarding the dismissal of the outside help, Therese and Gideon, undermines their years of service and highlights their insignificance in his eyes. Tellingly, Valerian’s reaction to his mugging by black youth in Miami illustrates that he doesn’t “know” black people (*TB* 91). Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man* makes interesting connections between seeing and knowing. In his novel, his narrator explains that his invisibility to whites “occurs because of a peculiar disposition of the eyes of those with whom I come in contact.” It is a “matter of the construction of their *inner* eyes, those eyes with which they look through their physical eyes upon reality” (7). White ability to know the black Other is, in a racialized society, undercut by a particular way of seeing, or in Valerian’s case, not seeing, the black Other. Valerian’s psyche is embedded in the white privilege of ignorance and his indifference to blacks is both pathological and deliberate. Sydney recognizes this when he disdainfully tells Son, “White folks play with Negroes” (*TB* 163), as does Jadine when she accuses Valerian of “[p]laying white people’s games” (*TB* 125). That they both recognize this but remain willing pawns in Valerian’s game of whiteness is Morrison’s indictment of contemporary black complicity in perpetuating the norms of whiteness.

Thus, in *Tar Baby*, as in Morrison’s other fiction, while her white characters are marginal to the central plot, whiteness has a pervasive and profound influence on the lives of black people. Valerian Street is a retired sweet-making magnate who, although he attempts an escape to the tranquil pastoral Isle des Chevaliers in the Caribbean, is unable to discard his white colonialist and capitalist mentality.⁸ L’Arbe de la Croix is concrete

⁸ That Valerian Street is a wealthy sweet-maker is significant. Sugar was one of the major products of slavery, associated with the triangular trade and with American and European fortunes. According to Elizabeth House whose essay “The Sweet Life” delineates the representation of food in Morrison’s work, characters associated with sweet foods are usually aligned with an acquisitiveness embedded in a capitalist Western culture. This usually signals their movement away from a more organic way of life. Valerian’s association with sweets, then, is an indictment of a particularly individualist capitalist way of life. The

testimony to this. As the “oldest and most impressive” house (*TB* 8), its symbolic colonial presence presides over the rest of the island. Significantly, however, Isle des Chevaliers is historically a black island. With its mythological race of blind horsemen and local inhabitants, it is a physical repository of black culture ruined, as the first chapter suggests, by the destructive and appropriating presence of white imperialism. Described as located at “[t]he end of the world,” Isle des Chevaliers “as it turned out, was nothing more than a collection of magnificent winter houses” (*TB* 7), the end product of the cultural and environmental desecration of the island by invading whites:

When it was over, and houses instead grew in the hills, those trees that had been spared dreamed of their comrades for years afterward and their nightmare mutterings annoyed the diamondbacks who left them for the new growth that came to life in spaces the sun saw for the first time. Then the rain changed and was no longer equal. Now it rained not just for an hour everyday at the same time, but in seasons, abusing the river even more. Poor insulted, brokenhearted river. Poor demented stream. Now it sat in one place like a grandmother and became a swamp the Haitians called Sein de Vieilles. And witch’s tit it was: a shrivelled fogbound oval seeping with a thick black substance that even mosquitoes could not live near. (*TB* 8)

The personification of nature here suggests blackness as aligned with the natural and whiteness with the destructive process of civilization. The destruction of the Isle’s natural resources parallels the destruction of black culture. The swamp is figured as the residue of white destruction and its description foreshadows Jadine’s later fall into it and points to her function within white culture. Sandra Pouchet Paquet notes that one of the ironies of the Street household is that “the ancestral connection is very much alive around them in the island’s myths and natives; a reality from which they are cut off by a carefully cultivated attachment to wealth and privilege” (508).

Son’s invective following Valerian’s dismissal of Therese and Gideon for stealing apples shortly after Valerian had welcomed him into his home would seem to underwrite the cynical views of white culture shared by the narrator and the novelist. Son despises the fact that Valerian

“chocolate eating” (112) Son, however, eats chocolate for sustenance, suggesting that his consumption is linked to racial/cultural survival and not indulgence. See “The ‘Sweet Life’ in Toni Morrison’s Fiction.”

dismissed them with a flutter of the fingers ... and he probably thought he was a law-abiding man, they all did, and they all always did because they had not the dignity of wild animals who did not eat where they defecated but they could defecate over a whole people and come there to live and defecate some more by tearing up the land and that is why they loved property so, because they had killed it soiled it defecated on it and they loved more than anything the places where they shit. (*TB* 204)

The semantic shift from the third-person singular to third-person plural suggests a collective rather than just personal culpability. Valerian is representative here of white culture. Son's caustic vocabulary with its concomitant lack of punctuation suggests whiteness as degraded, but also white culture as "terrorizing" in the black imagination. bell hooks explains that such a view of whites is not stereotypical but "emerges as a response to the traumatic pain and anguish that remains a consequence of white racist domination, a psychic state that informs and shapes the way black folks 'see' whiteness" ("Representing Whiteness" 341). To this extent, *Tar Baby*, and Son's narrative specifically, can be read, like *Beloved*, as a "trauma story." Keith Byerman observes of trauma narratives that "they describe the psychological and social effects of suffering. More important, perhaps, they tell of the erasure of such history and, as a consequence, its continued power to shape black life" (3).

The continued power of whiteness to "shape black life" informs Son's call for a kind of racial separatism, a position which extends Guitar Bains's belief in *Song of Solomon* that "White people are unnatural. As a race they are unnatural" (156). Son argues that "white folks and black folks should not sit down and eat together.... They should work together sometimes, but they should not eat together or live together or sleep together. Do any of those personal things in life" (*TB* 211). Interestingly, Morrison has herself expressed a similar support for black independence. In a radio interview with Rosemarie K. Lester in 1983, Morrison described the position she had taken against the desegregation of American schools in the 1960s:

But integration also meant that we would not have a fine black college or fine black education. I don't know why the assumption was that black children were going to learn better if they were in the company of white children.... I understood exactly what was important about it, but always thought that the fruits of that labor were going to carry perhaps a little poison, as well. (51)

Morrison defends her anti-integrationist position here by arguing that desegregation paradoxically diluted and undermined the potential of black education which is traditionally perceived as deficient compared to white education.

This is a view shared by many black intellectuals and activists. In *I Write What I Like* Steve Biko argues that “[t]he concept of integration, whose virtues are often extolled in white liberal circles, is full of unquestioned assumptions that embrace white values. It is a concept long defined by whites and never examined by blacks” (91). Indeed, hooks recalls the process of desegregation as being marked by a “deep sense of loss.” She explains:

It hurt to leave behind memories, schools that were ‘ours’, places we loved and cherished, places that honored us.... I mourned for that experience. I sat in classes in the integrated white high school where there was mostly contempt for us, a long tradition of hatred, and I wept ... we would be surrendering so much for so little, that we would be leaving behind a history. (*Yearning* 34)

hooks’s recollection describes the loss of a culturally distinct and nurturing black community. Her statement recalls Morrison’s on the “poison” also entailed in integration. Integration was, inadvertently, accompanied by the further erosion of black culture, achievement and pride and, as highlighted in Jadine’s character, assimilation into whiteness.

Morrison’s anti-integrationist stance, then, comes from the perspective of black autonomy because, as Barbara Smith elucidates, “[a]utonomy and separatism are fundamentally different. Whereas autonomy comes from a position of strength, separatism comes from a position of fear” (*HG* xlii). C. Vann Woodward explains of black peoples’ ambivalence toward integration with white America that “[w]hile resenting and opposing compulsory segregation, they had clung at the same time to the desire for enough racial distinctiveness and separateness to enable them to preserve a sense of cultural identity and racial pride and unity.” Even “the most complete victory over segregation would not satisfy that need, for few wished to deny racial identity and lose it in white society” (vi). It is this resistance to assimilation into whiteness – a culture that consistently denied their humanity – that, as Guy Hardt and Antonio Negri note,

transforms, for black Americans, the theoretical argument for separation — paradoxically into a theory of preservation of the race” (484).

Thus, the character of Son appears to articulate Morrison’s views. In an interview with Thomas Leclair in 1981, Morrison argues that her desire for black autonomy has also been historically necessitated. Black people traditionally suffered white abuse — because they were black... The complaint is not being seen for what one is. That is the reason why my hatred for white people is justified and their hatred for me is not” (376). But Morrison’s distinction is important. She highlights that white hatred is ideological racism, but black hatred is based on the historical fact of violence, overt oppression, degradation and deprivation. In *The White Image in the Black Mind* (from 1830-1925), which reveals persistent negative perceptions of whites by African-Americans, Mia Bay argues that anti-white sentiments cannot be understood simply as white racism reversed — since a racial ideology that arises in self-defence is necessarily quite distinct from one that serves as a rationalization for a discriminatory social order.” African-American sentiments on the racial character of white people are — centred on white morality rather than the appearance, abilities or humanity of white people” (224).

This position is, however, still vaguely ethnocentric. As Paul Gilroy notes, such talk can position a cultural group as — endowed with a special unique ethical status because of past experiences of victimage” (BC 219). This is suggested in the novel when Son argues with Jadine that Valerian’s decision to put her through school was obligation not kindness: — He was required to; he still is. His debt is big, woman. He can’t never pay it off” (TB 266).⁹ By virtue of being white, Son seems to say, Valerian’s patronage of Jadine is a necessary reparation for the historical sins of his race. Black culture here is positioned as ethically above white culture. The problem with Son’s philosophy, however warranted it may be, is that white reparation becomes invariably predicated upon guilt and blackness becomes the eternal symbol of — victimage.” Black history, then, becomes — a story of victimization” (Byerman 31) which divests blacks of agency and

⁹ Valerian’s philanthropy is admirable — he also provides for Sydney and Ondine’s futures by giving them a share of stock in his business for Christmas — but it is also suspect. His failed relationship with his absent son Michael may have much to do with his ‘investment’ in Jadine. Also, when Valerian expresses outrage that he could be — questioned by these people” (207) — the Childs — it is clear that, not only does he view his relationship with them as socially hierarchal, he does not see them as racial equals. Valerian’s white philanthropy, then, is fundamentally self-serving and thus disingenuous.

responsibility for their own history. Guilt here is exercised from a place of power. Rather than assuming ideological responsibility for historical atrocities, whites inadvertently exercise their superiority through continuous emotional or financial reparation.

Hence, Morrison's portrayal of whites in *Tar Baby* is critical. Valerian's white power is also seen as victimization of those who surround him *and* of himself. Although Ondine calls Margaret a "crazy white freak" (*TB* 209) when her abuse of their son Michael is revealed, it is Valerian's nervous breakdown that is most telling of the debilitating effects of whiteness. Valerian is apparently incredulous of Margaret's actions but Morrison's narrator defines Valerian's descent into self-pity a "crime of innocence" linked directly to white privilege:

He had not known because he had not taken the trouble to know. He was satisfied with what he did know. Knowing more was inconvenient and frightening.... [He] had chosen not to know the real message that his son had mailed to him from underneath the sink. And all he could say was that he did not know. He was guilty, therefore, of innocence. Was there anything so loathsome as a wilfully innocent man? Hardly. An innocent man is a sin before God. Inhuman and therefore unworthy. No man should live without absorbing the sins of his kind, the foul air of his innocence, even if it did wilt rows of angel trumpets and cause them to fall from their vines. (*TB* 245)

Valerian's is a deliberate, chosen ignorance, cultivated by and sustaining a privileged white worldview. Philip M. Weinstein describes this as "the appalling extent of (white, male) innocence, its artful capacity to remain unaware of its own privilege" (xxix). Valerian's innocence is thus, Weinstein elucidates, characterized by "brutality" for its "inability to imagine the otherness of others" (23).

Son: A Representative of Black Cultural Identity

In contrast to the propertied stasis in a fraught domestic setting from which Valerian studiously withdraws (into his greenhouse) until confronted in his retirement with the truth of his life, the youthful interloper, Son, is represented as antithetical to whiteness and its attendant cultural norms. Escaping prosecution in America for causing the death

of his wife and her lover,¹⁰ Son is described as —a[n]archic, wandering ... [a] man without human rites”:

unbaptized, uncircumcised, minus puberty rites or the formal rites of manhood. Unmarried and undivorced. He had attended no funeral, married in no church, raised no child. Propertyless, homeless, sought for but not after.... There was something wrong with the rites. He had wanted another way. Some other way of being in the world.... In those eight homeless years he had joined that great underclass of undocumented men.... What distinguished them from other men ... was their refusal to equate work with life and an inability to stay anywhere for long. (*TB* 166-67)

Son is seemingly characterized by negation, but in the narrator’s detailed description, it is clear that he is represented as subversive of white convention. Morrison’s fiction is often characterized by what she terms —the Ulysses theme” for men. In an interview with Robert Stepto in 1976, Morrison stated that her heroes are —travelling,” —moving” men who are —making themselves.” She explains that:

Although in sociological terms that is described as a major failing of black men—they do not stay home and take care of their children, they are not there—that has always been to me one of the most attractive features about black male life ... the fact that they would split in a minute just delights me. (391-92)

Black men are, for Morrison, characterized by a liberation to which women are not privy. It would appear, then, from her comment here, that Morrison’s perception of cultural responsibility is profoundly gendered, with women being naturally and traditionally associated with and rooted in the community.

Indeed, Morrison appears to view the aspirations of contemporary black women as distorted. In her interview with Ruas she states that —[t]he contemporary woman is eager; her femininity becomes sexuality rather than femininity” (105). Tellingly, when Jadine finally leaves Son at the novel’s end, she is described as feeling —lean and male” (*TB* 277), suggesting the falsity of her identity. Certainly Son’s scathingly sexist description of Jadine’s behaviour highlights that what she views as a masculine agency he sees as the

¹⁰ Son is betrayed by his wife, Cheyenne, whom he finds in bed with a thirteen year-old boy. In a moment of passion, Son drives his car through the house and the car explodes causing his wife to die and the boy to be seriously injured. Son is charged with —Murder Two” and flees Eloë (175-78).

appropriation and performance of white female behaviour. Recalling Jadine's indulgent behaviour with Valerian, Son muses:

He would not look at her then – refused to lock with those mink-dark eyes that looked at him with more distaste than Valerian's had. The mocking voice, the superior managerial, administrative, clerk-in-a-fucking-loan-office tone she took. Gatekeeper, advance bitch, house-bitch, welfare office torpedo, corporate cunt, tar baby side-of-the-road whore trap. (*TB* 221)

Son's repulsion is palpable. His specific reference to the Tar Baby folktale here highlights the notion that Morrison has expressed in interviews that Jadine is a construct of white culture, deliberately made to "trap" the black man.

At the same time however, Son's view of Jadine is undercut by his romantic sense of her fragile femininity:

But underneath her efficiency and know-it-all sass were wind chimes. Nine rectangles of crystal, rainbowed in the light. Fragile pieces of glass tinkling as long as the breeze was gentle. But in more vigorous weather the thread that held it together would snap. So it would be his duty to keep the climate mild for her, to hold back with his hands if need be thunder, drought and all manner of winterkill, and he would blow with his own lips a gentle enough breeze for her to tinkle in. (*TB* 221)

Jadine's feminism is, in Son's mind, unable to withstand the challenges of a "more vigorous" reality and she is unsustainable without his black male support. Certainly for Son, the conviction of her feminism is undermined in that she "kept barking at him about equality, sexual equality, as though he thought women were inferior" (*TB* 270). She is portrayed as tediously aggressive and demanding.

In an interview with Anne Koenen in 1980, Morrison laments the lack of comradeship in contemporary society but that typified past relations between black men and women: "Contemporary hostility to men is bothersome to me. Not that they are not deserving of criticism and contempt, but I don't want a freedom that depends largely on someone else being on his knees" (73). Jadine's feminism is apparently hostile but Son sees through her. Her anxious feminism is actually based on fear: "She thought this was hard, New York. She was scared of being still, of not being busy, scared to have to be quiet, scared

to have children alone” (TB 270). For Son, Jadine’s definition of female autonomy and agency pales in comparison to that of the strong and culturally-rooted rural women by whom he was raised: “It took all the grown-up strength you had to stay [in Eloë] and stay alive and keep a family together.... Anybody who thought women were inferior didn’t come out of North Florida” (TB 270-71). Like Pilate in *Song of Solomon*, these women have, as Morrison explains to Ruas, that “quality of nurturing,” a “quality of adventure and a quality of nest” (104).

In his resistance to and disdain for myopic white cultural mores and in his reverence for his black community, Son appears to be representative of (an ideal) black cultural identity. He is portrayed as a wandering loner – “he had chosen solitude and the company of other solitary people” (TB 167) – whose black authenticity lies in his rejection of the “wrong” western ideals and “rites.” He is rooted, instead, in the black community and its cultural heritage. Son is thus symbolically named. Rejecting his given name, William, “Son” registers him as the literal and figurative son of his people: It was “the name that called forth the true him. The him that he never lied to, the one he tucked in at night and the one he did not want to die” (TB 139). His name signifies, as Rigney notes, “a sense of heritage, and a context of relational identity” (41).¹¹

Like Milkman who is finally connected, ancestrally, to the “flying Africans,” Son is associated, by the visually impaired but nonetheless visionary Therese, with the mythical race of blind horsemen. Previously slaves, they “floated and trod water and ended up on that island along with the horses that had swum ashore”; and because they are blinded, “[w]hat they saw, they saw with the eye of the mind” (TB 153). Son is himself physically associated with water. He arrives on the Island via the sea and is, significantly, protected by the “water-lady”: “when he tore open the water in front of him, he felt a gentle but firm pressure along his chest.... Still the water-lady cupped him in the palm of his hand, and nudged him out to sea” (TB 2-3). His association with water – a metaphor for the

¹¹ Jadine, whose name is often shortened to “Jade,” is associated with materialism and beauty reduced to object. Indeed, when first introduced Jadine calls herself “Jade” to which “Son shook his head as though he knew better.” She responds, “Okay. Jadine. Jadine Childs” (115). Yvonne Atkinson argues that here Son is “Signifyin’” on Jadine: “Son is signalling to the reader that he knows who he is and what Jadine is: fragmented and outside of her community.” As such, Atkinson posits, “Morrison uses language to define those who are part of their community and those who are not.” See “Language That Bears Witness: The Black English Oral Tradition in the Works of Toni Morrison,” *The Aesthetics of Toni Morrison: Speaking the Unspeakable*, ed. Marc C. Conner.

female womb – suggests the regeneration of black culture. He is registered as the repository of and dedicated to the continuity of black cultural identity. Thus, Son's persistent yearning for his home, Eloë, is significant. bell hooks in *Yearning*, explains that in African-American culture the home represents a place of nurturing, “the warmth and comfort of shelter, the feeding of our bodies, the nurturing of our souls” (41). Tellingly, although Eloë is patriarchal, he perceives his home as a distinctly rural, feminine space, that “separate place that was presided over by wide black women in snowy dresses and was ever dry, green and quiet” (*TB* 168). For Son, it is an idyllic place of cultural and racial belonging and nurturing.

Son's presence in the Street house, which “had a hotel feel about it – a kind of sooner or later leaving appearance” (*TB* 10), underwrites the idea of his sense of not belonging in white culture. Although Son's presence is characterized by gentle acts such as watching Jadine sleep and eating chocolate, he is, when he is discovered, viewed stereotypically. By hiding out in Margaret Street's bedroom cupboard, he evokes, for the women in the house, the fixed and racist idea of the “black-man-as-rapist”. Margaret imagines her cupboard where Son had been: “a toilet now where something rotten had been and still was.... In her things. Actually in her things. Probably jerking off. Black sperm was sticking in clots to her French jeans or down in the toe of her Anne Klein shoes” (*TB* 85). Margaret's instinctive racialization of the biological – “Black sperm” – underwrites white racism. Her paranoia, notably aligned with her material possessions, is registered as fundamentally baseless. Thus, the stereotypical view of Son is undercut by the narrator's repeated refrain that he “had not followed the women” from the boat (*TB* 134-5).

In the women's perceptions of Son, Morrison repeatedly plays on pervasive white representations of black masculinity. Jadine describes Son's dreadlocks as: “physically overpowering, like bundles of long whips or lashes that could grab her and beat her to jelly. And would. Wild, aggressive, vicious hair that needed to be put in jail. Uncivilised, reform-school hair. Mau Mau, Attica, chain-gang hair” (*TB* 113). Her description here betrays both Jadine's arousal by and repulsion at Son, feelings which underscore white responses to the black male as a (violent) sexual, racial, and existential threat. This is underpinned by her tense attitude toward black men generally; she is “always ready to rein in the dogs” (*TB* 125). hooks notes that black men are “victimized by stereotypes that

were first articulated in the nineteenth century but hold sway over the minds and imaginations of citizens of this nation in the present day.” She concedes that “[a]t the center of the way black selfhood is constructed in white-supremacist capitalist patriarchy is the image of the brute—untamed, uncivilized, unthinking, and unfeeling” (*WRC* xii). Jadine is thus aligned with white views of blackness and that she sees black men as “either creeps or so rare and desirable they had every girl in a 150-mile radius at their feet” (*TB* 126), is indicative of her mental colonization by whiteness.

Paul C. Taylor defines this disdainful attitude as “*thick* racialism,” an ideological position in which blackness is seen as “a condition to be despised.” Here, “physical differences ... are signs of deeper, typically intellectual and moral, differences” (“Malcolm’s Conk” 16). Indeed, for Jadine, Son’s hair is not merely representative but instructive of the character of black men. Morrison’s narrator thus attempts to counteract and redress Jadine’s racism by asserting the positive values of black masculinity. Son’s dreadlocks may appear criminal and primitive, but they are also a politically subversive statement of racial pride and African heritage: “It spread like layer upon layer of wings from his head.... Black people’s hair, in any case, was definitely alive. Left alone and untended it was like a foliage and from a distance it looked like nothing less than the crown of a deciduous tree” (*TB* 132).¹² It is interesting to note here the narrator’s perspectival shift from his hair, specifically, to black people’s hair, generally. In the racialized aestheticization of his hair, Son becomes representative all black people and symbolic of a (superior) quality/essence not found in other racial groups.

As “the man with savannas in his face” (*TB* 206), Son’s association with nature and African landscapes in particular is telling. Susan Willis observes that, in Morrison’s work, natural imagery often “refers to the past ... the reservoir of culture that has been uprooted” (37). Son’s hair is represented as having a spiritual, traditional essence; it seems to convey something of the “life” of blackness. His dreadlocks thus function as “a key *ethnic signifier*” in the novel of what Mercer elsewhere calls a “neo-African

¹² The description of Son’s hair here resonates with another description of innate blackness. In *The Bluest Eye* those women who reject their (sensuous) inner blackness for (ascetic) white culture are described as having learned “how to get rid of the funkiness. The dreadful funkiness of passion, the funkiness of nature, the funkiness of the wide range of human emotions” (64). Son here is the embodiment of traditional black “funkiness” which, as Susan Willis describes, is “the intrusion of the past into the present,” the “vision of an alternative social world” (41). See “Eruptions of Funk.”

sensibility” (103, 114). For Wilfred D. Samuels and Clenora Hudson-Weems, Son’s hair is more than chic; he is Africa’s son/Son, the bearer of its culture and values, its black Messiah come to save Jadine from the streets/Streets of Babylon” (84-85). Their statement here, while hyperbolic, points to Son’s significance in *Tar Baby* as a black cultural protagonist who must work to rescue Jadine from cultural confusion. Samuels and Hudson-Weems’s analysis reiterates those of critics who unproblematically celebrate his representation – a position which has been, arguably, guided by Morrison’s comments on the novel in interviews.¹³

Son’s portrayal in the novel is, however, also complicated. He himself is not exempt from cultural confusion. That he cuts his hair problematizes notions of racial authenticity and stasis, and seems to suggest that he finds something attractive in Jadine’s position that he wishes to emulate, despite what she represents in the novel.¹⁴ Indeed, while Paquet argues that Son, like Zora Neale Hurston’s male protagonist, Vergible “Fea Cake” Woods in *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937), emerges as the “embodiment of phallic power and race consciousness” (509), Son’s black masculinity is also registered ambivalently in *Tar Baby*. Son, the “man who fucked like a star” (*TB* 294), reawakens Jadine’s sexual and, by extension, racial identity. Son “had put his finger on the very bottom of her foot. He had opened the hair on her head with his hands and drove his tongue through the part” (*TB* 278). Morrison’s narrator asserts that “[g]radually she [had come] to feel orphaned. He cherished and safeguarded her” (*TB* 231).

But this also reveals “an attitude of containment toward black women that is at the core of Jadine’s alienation in racial and sexual terms as it is defined in her relationship with Son” (Paquet 510). He continuously attempts to “insert” his dreams into Jadine. Recalling observing her asleep on one occasion, Son,

had thought hard during those times in order to manipulate her dreams, to insert his own dreams into her so that she would not wake or stir or turn on her stomach but would lie still and dream steadily the dreams he wanted her to have about yellow houses with white doors which women opened and shouted Come on in,

¹³ See, for example, Morrison’s comments on Son and critics’ responses in *Conversations with Toni Morrison*.

¹⁴ Interestingly, after Son cuts his hair he is described: “In a white shirt unbuttoned at the cuffs and throat, and with a gentle homemade haircut, he was gorgeous” (156). For the entire household, “he was so beautiful they forgot all about their plans” (130).

you honey you! and the fat black ladies in white dresses minding the pie table in the basement of the church and white wet sheets flapping on a line, and the sound of a six-string guitar plucked after supper while children scooped walnuts up off the ground and handed them to her. (*TB* 119)

Son attempts to insert into Jadine's psyche his ideology of black culture. His vision here of black female subjectivity and identity – with maternal and doting women – is rooted in the past and the images of "white dresses" and "white wet sheets flapping" highlight Son's vision as more romantic than real. Because Jadine's self-representation as a strong, independent, childless contemporary black woman is antithetical to Son's idea of traditional black womanhood, he attempts to penetrate her ideas of womanhood with his own, which are rooted in the past.

In a notable scene that underpins the physically violent nature of their relationship, Son, after accusing Jadine of pandering to whiteness, tears his shirt and tells her she is the proverbial "a baby" made by the white farmer to trap the rabbit that he represents. Afterwards, Jadine "lay in wrinkled sheets, slippery, gutted" (*TB* 273), and later, when Son returns, he stares at her: "The Cheech and Chong T-shirt was up around her waist and her nakedness below embarrassed him now. He had produced that nakedness and having soiled it, it shamed him" (*TB* 275). The silences and gaps in this scene are disturbing, and Son's embarrassment suggests his recognition of his complicity in Jadine's attitude towards black men and black culture. Paralleling Son's treatment of her with that of the male dog, Jadine resents that he is "[t]reating her like another animal" (*TB* 123) and this scene thus echoes her troubling childhood experience of witnessing a group of male dogs copulating with a bitch:

One dog sniffing at the hindquarters of another, and the female, her back to him, not moving, but letting herself be sniffed, letting him nuzzle her asshole as the man had nuzzled hers, the bitch never minding that the male never looked in her face or ran by her side or that he had just come up out of nowhere, smelled her ass and stuck his penis in, humping and jerking and grinding away while she stood there bearing, actually *bearing* his whole weight as he pummelled around inside her not even speaking, or barking, his eyes sliced and his mouth open and dripping with saliva, and the other dogs too, waiting, circling until the engaged dog was through and then they would mount her also in the street in broad daylight no less, not even under a tree or behind a bush, but right there on Morgan Street in Baltimore with cars running by and children playing and the retired

postman coming out of his house in his undershirt shouting get that bitch out of here. (*TB* 123-4)

This disturbing description, which compares their sexual relationship to that of two dogs, metaphorically enacts what Jadine sees as Son's masculine control over her. It is linked to her resolution at twelve years old, ~~never~~ "to be broken in the hands of any man" (*TB* 124). Indeed, that Jadine appears to conflate her thinking self with that of the bitch suggests not just her lack of female agency, but a deliberate divesting of that agency by Son. Jadine's view of Son here is linked to his actions earlier in the novel when he ~~shake[s]~~ "Valerian's plants and ~~kick[s]~~ the stems hard as though they were naughty students" in order to force them to bloom (*TB* 149). Plants, for Son, are like women: "you have to jack them up every once in a while. Make em act nice, like they're supposed to" (*TB* 149). The comparison of women to plants here suggests a conscious patriarchal Othering of black female subjectivity which is, like Jadine's attitude and characterization in the novel, similarly flawed.

Jadine: the Cultural Orphan

Jadine's portrait in *Tar Baby* is, for me, deeply troubling. It is not clear to what extent Son's attitude to and perception of Jadine embodies Morrison's view of contemporary black women, but certainly the fact that she is characterized so negatively needs attention. What exactly is Morrison saying in this novel about contemporary black women and their responsibility to maintaining black culture in an evolving racial society? As Son notes, Jadine is white: she ~~had~~ "been made by [whites], coached by them" (*TB* 205). While she rejects such racial categorization, her easy pandering to whiteness suggests otherwise. Son observes that even after Valerian casually dismisses Therese and Gideon, Jadine defends him. She ~~smiled~~ "when she did not have to ... basking in the cold light that came from one of the killers of the world" (*TB* 205). Jadine herself muses that:

With white people the rules were even simpler. She needed only to be stunning, and to convince them that she was not as smart as they were. Say the obvious, ask stupid questions, laugh with abandon, look interested, and light up at any display

of their humanity if they showed it. Most of it required only charm – occasionally panache. (*TB* 127)

Jadine's arrogance here highlights her self-deception. Whereas Son is characterized by his negation by white culture, she is revealed as truly negated. The words "only" and "not" as well as her deliberate performance of an identity acceptable to white values, reveal her black self to be inauthentic. Her identity as a young, culturally mobile, university educated and cosmopolitan woman is more than once presented as a form of cultural and racial betrayal.

More specifically, her behaviour points to unwitting racial self-loathing. Gideon calls Jadine, "yalla," referring to her light skin which, in the African-American community, is a typically derogatory term.¹⁵ Gideon argues that "[i]t's hard for them not to be white people.... Yallas don't come to being black natural-like. They have to choose it and most don't choose it" (*TB* 156). Gideon's statement here recalls Morrison's lament over the contemporary situation in which blacks are now able to "choose" their blackness. In her interview with Jones and Vinson in 1985, Morrison mourned the loss of a time characterized by a collective, determined black identity:

It's like you used to be born Black, and that meant something. It meant when you saw another Black person you knew all sorts of things right away.... There were some things you could count on, some language, some shared assumptions. That doesn't seem to be true now. Being Black now is something you have to choose to be.... I used to feel safe among Black people. I did. I don't anymore, just because they are Black. (186)

For Morrison here individual choice has the adverse affects of diminishing a collective, homogeneous black identity and eroding its communal values. In this way, *Tar Baby*, particularly her representation of Jadine, reflects Morrison's anxiety with a contemporary black identity and subjectivity which appears largely self-interested.

¹⁵ Alice Walker notes the divisiveness of "colorism" in the African-American community. Ironically, Walker herself seems to participate in this in order to highlight the need to revere black maternal cultural heritage. Noting that light-skinned black women are normally preferred by both white and black men, she says in her essay, "If the Present Looks Like the Past," that "[t]o me, the black black woman is our essential mother—the blacker she is the more us she is." Her position here interestingly foreshadows and echoes the image of the woman in yellow in *Tar Baby* as the essence of blackness. See *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens: Womanist Prose*.

Not unlike Nella Larsen's "mulatto" in *Quicksand* (1928), Jadine "passes" for white. Working as a fashion model in Paris, she uses the pseudonym "the copper Venus" (TB 115), and assimilates easily into white European standards of beauty. As an art student she is acculturated into a reverence for symbols of white culture that seemingly preclude African art. In a conversation with Valerian she argues that "Picasso is better than an Itumba mask. The fact that he was intrigued by it is proof of his genius not the mask-makers'" (TB 72). This statement is noticeably followed by "[l]ittle matches of embarrassment" as Jadine thinks of "all those black art shows mounted two or three times a year in the States" (TB 72). Her assertion of the natural brilliance and prominence of European art is undermined by her embarrassment at black cultural art.

Ann Rayson, who notes *Tar Baby's* parallels with *Quicksand*, argues that what is particularly disturbing about both these novels is the "seeming equating of being educated with being white." She ponders: "Are Larsen and Morrison saying that one cannot be educated and be an authentic black person? If getting an education and becoming successful are white, then a black person who aspires to or achieves these becomes white" (98). Rayson's is a valid question. Certainly both novels suggest that contemporary, independent black women, acculturated to white aesthetic and intellectual values, are guilty of racial and cultural abandon. Morrison, however, makes an important distinction. As she explains in an interview with Christina Davis in 1988, she does not condemn education generally, but she does despise a particular kind of education that marginalizes black cultural heritage, "this other knowledge or perception, always discredited but nevertheless there" (414). Jadine's embarrassment after her statement to Valerian suggests her disavowal of her black cultural heritage. To Judith Wilson in 1981, Morrison explains: "No Black woman should apologize for being educated or anything else. The problem is not paying attention to the ancient properties" (135).

Significantly, *Tar Baby* is dedicated to such women, those, unlike Jadine, who are still in touch with their "ancient properties." As Morrison sees it, suppressing or marginalizing one's cultural heritage has implications for black awareness and communal identity, that of underwriting racial and cultural oppression. As Son's scathing attack on Jadine's elitist education reveals, whatever she learned "didn't include me" and "until you know about me, you don't know anything about yourself" (TB 267). Son here speaks

as representative of an authentic, legitimate blackness, not found in white history. Son's critique of a flawed American educational system is echoed in the words of the black public school official, Asante, in Obama's autobiography. Noting that the American educational system is racist and therefore deficient, Asante states that it "is not about educating black children. Never has been." From the very start, the black child is learning "[s]omeone else's history. Someone else's culture. Not only that, this culture he's supposed to learn is the same culture that's systematically rejected him, denied his humanity" (258). This view is shared by hooks who notes that black children "have been assaulted by the cultural genocide taking place in early childhood educational institutions" (*WRC* 39), and as Gloria Anzaldúa notes, cultural "[i]gnorance splits people, creates prejudices. A misinformed people is a subjugated people" (2219).¹⁶

In *Race, Gender and Desire*, Elliot Butler-Evans argues thus that Jadine is the "embodiment of deracination" (154). Son's accusation that "[p]eople don't mix races; they abandon them or pick them" suggests this (*TB* 272). In her interview with Robert Stepto in 1976, Morrison squares cultural authenticity with black womanhood. She explained that black women are "culture-bearer[s]": black women "have held, have been given, you know, the cross. They do not walk near it. They're often on it. And they've borne that, I think, extremely well" (393, 384). This view that black women necessarily carry the burden of cultural sustenance and continuity is repeated in many of her novels. In her interview with Koenen, Morrison reiterates that she is more interested in what she calls "Gathering women" than in "the fully liberated woman" and she makes a clear distinction, preferring "the woman who understands her past, not the woman who merely has her way. Because that woman did know how to nurture, and how to survive" (81).

¹⁶ Morrison's concern with the destructive psychological and ideological effects of white cultural education and socialization on black children and community is most evident in *The Bluest Eye*. Here, Claudia MacTeer, unlike Pecola Breedlove, rejects the pervasive symbols of white culture. Claudia hates Shirley Temple – a symbol of ideal white beauty – as much as she hates the white "Baby Doll" she receives for Christmas. The desirability of whiteness escapes her and Claudia states that she "could not love it" (14). Her violent dismemberment of her doll is a self-affirming deconstruction of whiteness as ideologically and materially inapplicable to her own life. Michael Awkward notes of Morrison's manipulation of the white educational primer in *The Bluest Eye* that she "exposes each individual element of the myth as not only deceptively inaccurate in general, but also wholly inapplicable to black American life." Morrison thus "demonstrates[s] her refusal to allow white standards to arbitrate the success or failure of the black experience." See "Roadblocks and Relatives: Critical Revision in Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*," *Critical Essays on Toni Morrison* (57-68).

Contemporary black women's female subjectivity, focused as it is on (gendered) autonomy and individuality – on having her way – seems thus, in Morrison's estimation, to be superficial and inadequate. In *Tar Baby*, Jadine's lack of roots serves as an indictment against her. She is cosmopolitan, living between America, Europe, and the Caribbean, but as Son highlights, —“You're not *from* anywhere. I'm from Eloë” (TB 268). Both she and Son are presented as wanderers but Jadine's affiliation with New York simply registers her rootedlessness. Although —“New York oiled her joints” (TB 223), it is, in Son's view, a metaphysical hell characterized by chaos and loss. The city harbours black girls who were —“rying on buses,” and beautiful males who —“found the whole business of being black and men at the same time too difficult and so they'd dumped it” (TB 217). New York is a place where —“old people were in kennels and childhood was underground,” and where —“the black people in whiteface play[ed] black people in blackface” (TB 217). Son's description reiterates the novel's concern with —“blackface” and seems to suggest both the performativity of black identity required of African-Americans in a white world and simultaneously to point to some lost or deferred essence.

Jadine's lack of community, then, would seem to compromise her identity. More specifically, she is disqualified by her rejection of her own people. Barbara Christian notes that in African-American women's fiction, —“an appreciation of ethnic and racial community becomes necessary for black women in their commitment to self-development” (—“Trajectories of Self-Definition” 240). Jadine's representation is antithetical to this. She has been raised by Ondine and Sydney, but although —“they mattered a lot to her,” what —“they thought did not” (TB 46). Ondine points out to Jadine that she has failed to be a —“woman that cares about where she come from and takes care of them that took care of her” (TB 283). That she feels burdened by Sydney and Ondine, pressured to —“pay [them] back” (TB 283) for raising her, highlights the extent to which Jadine is disconnected from her cultural community and heritage. Not only is she self-involved, she is as culturally ignorant as her materialistic Christmas gifts to Ondine and

Sydney and her easy adoption of white values which compromise the norms of black familial relations imply.¹⁷

Charles Taylor notes in *Sources of the Self* that “one cannot be a self on one’s own.” One is, fundamentally, “a self among other selves. A self can never be described without reference to those who surround it” (35-36). Dorothea Drummond Mbalia observes that Morrison endorses, in all her novels, the principles of collectivism in which “individual development is conditioned by group development—the responsibility of the many for each. According to this principle, the welfare of the people, not the individual is supreme” (22). To the extent that she attempts to assert her individual self against her community, Jadine is unlike that other pariah, Sula. Indeed, although Sula is, like Jadine, an independent woman, she is a more compelling figure than Jadine. This is because Sula’s pariah status is confirmed within her community, while Jadine is alienated from hers. Jan Furman notes that “Sula is a pariah who remains within the community; Jadine is a feminist who lives outside” it (64). *Tar Baby* suggests that Jadine thus has no self because, as George Herbert Mead highlights, “one has to be a member of a community to be a self” (39).

Jadine has rejected her (female) ancestral community and, as both Morrison and Therese stress, she has “forgotten her ancient properties” concomitant with her cultural heritage (*TB* 308). That is, in asserting her independence, she has failed to assume her responsibility to her own people, and effectively enacted cultural betrayal. Certainly the predominantly cynical depiction of Jadine as a contemporary black “feminist” suggests her cultural worthlessness. Carolyn Denard explains that what is advocated in Morrison’s fiction is an ethnic cultural feminism not unlike Alice Walker’s “womanism”.¹⁸ Morrison’s is a “feminism that encourages allegiance to rather than an alienation from [the] ethnic group” (172). In this way, she argues, Morrison

¹⁷ I refer here to the fact that Jadine actually treats her aunt and uncle as servants. She sleeps in the main house with the Streets and does not seem at all embarrassed to be served by Sydney and Ondine at meals.

¹⁸ Walker suggests that white definitions of feminism are inadequate to the black female experience. She proposes a more culturally specific definition of “womanism,” defining a “womanist” as “a black feminist or feminist of color; a woman [c]ommitted to [the] survival and wholeness of entire people, male and female” (*In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens* xi).

suggests that a definition of self that excludes an ethnic cultural connection will for minority ethnic women finally be empty and meaningless.... Thus the women who assume existentialist positions are always made to come to terms with their ethnic connection in the black community. They are either forced to return to the community or they are haunted by a feeling of betrayal of its feminine cultural values. (174)

As Denard points out, for Morrison, black female identity rests on her connection with her ancestral black community. In an interview with Bessie Jones and Audrey Vinson in 1985, Morrison specifies of the black woman that —if she doesn't know how to relate to her ancestors, to her tribe, so to speak, she is not good for much" (184). The narrator in *Tar Baby* thus asks of Jadine: —Culture-bearing black woman, whose culture are you bearing?" (TB 272)

Jadine is, significantly, positioned against the woman in yellow whom she encounters only once but whose presence pervades the novel. The woman in yellow is, with her —skin like tar," the embodiment of what Morrison has previously called the —holiness' of tar. The woman in yellow is reminiscent of *Song of Solomon's* Pilate and, with her imposing stature, also demands recognition of her blackness. She is a —vision," a woman —much too tall. Under her long canary yellow dress Jadine knew there was too much hip, too much bust" (TB 42). In her apparent excessiveness the woman in yellow is subversive of white aesthetic values. The woman in yellow's —unphotographable beauty" (TB 43) contrasts to Jadine's standardized (white) beauty. So much so, that everyone else in the store is —transfixed" because, and Jadine recognizes this, the woman in yellow is a —woman's woman—that mother/sister/she" (TB 42-43). The woman is presented as an authentic and compelling presence, a powerful bearer of black culture. As Morrison herself puts it in her interview with McKay, the woman in yellow is the

original self—the self that we betray when we lie, the one that is always there. And whatever that self looks like—if one ever sees that thing, or that image—one measures one's other self against it. So that with all the good luck, and the good fortune, and the skill Jadine has—the other is the authentic self. (—An Interview with Toni Morrison" 404-5)

Morrison here posits that there is an authentic black identity that belies Jadine's superficial one. That the woman in yellow spits at her symbolizes her indictment of

Jadine's cultural and racial betrayal of a 'genuine' black self (*TB* 43). She elicits in Jadine a feeling of inadequacy. After the encounter Jadine feels "lonely in a way. Lonely and inauthentic" (*TB* 45).

This recalls Denard's point that the black woman who abandons her race is "haunted by a feeling of betrayal." When Son accuses Jadine of racial hypocrisy, she is filled with "shame," for he had "jangled something that was so repulsive, so awful, and he had managed to make her feel that the thing that repelled her was not in him, but in her" (*TB* 123). Indeed, in Eloë, she is haunted by the night women – her ancestral 'mothers' – who "each pulled out a breast and showed it to her" (*TB* 260), signalling an essential nurturing quality of black womanhood lacked by Jadine. They expose her cultural "nakedness" and make her feel "exposed" (*TB* 255). Her aversion to the mores of the rural community of Eloë suggests that Jadine is unwilling to (re)claim her innately maternal blackness. The nurturing image of the black female womb is inverted when her room in Eloë is described as a suffocation comparable to death: "She might as well have been in a cave, a grave, the dark womb of the earth, suffocating with the sound of plant life moving, but deprived of its sight" (*TB* 254). Morrison here invokes the senses of sound and sight to highlight how Jadine has lost touch with her essential blackness.

Jadine is the "runaway child" who, struggling against the swamp women of the Sein de Veilles, rejects their "value, their exceptional femaleness; knowing as they did that the first world of the world had been built with their sacred properties" (*TB* 184). In response to her feminist upward mobility, Ondine warns Jadine that a "girl has got to be a daughter first" (*TB* 283). Ondine explains: "She have to learn that. And if she never learns how to be a daughter, she can't never learn how to be a woman. I mean a real woman: a woman good enough for a child; good enough for a man – good enough even for the respect of other women" (*TB* 283). While Morrison, in her interviews, suggests that for black women their cultural femininity is innate, the novel here implies that black womanhood can be learned. Thus Duvall notes that the novel's position on the black woman's correct role in life is confusing:

What remains unclear in *Tar Baby* and Morrison's ... commentary is whether an African-American woman's right relation to 'ancient properties' is innate or learned.... Her characterization of Jadine also contradicts Therese's ... as a

woman who has *forgotten* her ancient properties; in this version, whatever properties constitute identity are not innate but rather are *learned*. And if they are not innate, can we speak of Jadine losing what she never had or forgetting what she never knew? (113)

Duvall's is a key question: Is it fair to expect Jadine to fulfil the role of culture-bearer when she has not actually been raised in a black culture? Can she, as Duvall argues, forget —*what she never knew?*” More generally, what should young black women reading *Tar Baby* take away from this novel — that their role is primarily to bear the past, their culture, and their race?

Eduardo Mendieta notes that —*identities have a lot to do with images, imaginaries, and the imagination*” (407) and certainly Jadine's representation is structured against traditional images of black womanhood. Her visions and dreams, in which she is haunted by her ancestral mothers, evoke not just her racial inauthenticity, but the extent to which such images of black women are themselves largely social constructs imposed upon and embedded in women's psyches. Samuels and Hudson-Weems claim that the night women —*can be said to be interested in healing Jadine of her inauthenticity, trying to restore the ancient properties she has lost as a result of losing touch with her culture*” (91). That these ancestral figures are also described as —*arrogant*” (*TB* 184), and trying to —*hoke*” (*TB* 264) the blackness out of her, however, indicates that they are also seen as oppressive. Terry Otten concurs that the night women are —*racial ghosts, black women who stand in judgement of Jadine's abandonment of her racial being ... [they] demand recognition of her racial consciousness*” (77). Jadine is in awe of the woman in yellow because she cannot —*recognize [herself] in the image that [is] projected*” of an ideal black (female) identity and subjectivity (Mendieta 412).

In the novel, Jadine is not the only character at fault in terms of their (limited) conception of racial identity. Werner observes that Son —*contributes to the collapse of his relationship with Jadine by constructing a romantic counter-myth of blackness that represses aspects of black women's experience*” (164). Jadine's belief that Son —*wanted her to settle for wifely competence when she could be almighty, to settle for fertility rather than originality, nurturing instead of building*” (*TB* 271), suggests an existential crisis. She is torn between cultural expectations and individual desire; she will not —*settle*

for wifely competence” or ~~–~~fertility” or ~~–~~nurturing” because she does not ~~–~~want to be that kind of woman” (*TB* 284). As Mae Henderson observes, contemporary black women experience a continuous ~~–~~dialogue between self and society and between self and psyche” (~~–~~Speaking in Tongues” 119). Jadine is uncomfortable with and resists either ~~–~~blackening up or universalling out” (*TB* 62) because she wants to be recognized as an individual: ~~–~~sometimes I want to get out of my skin and be only the person inside – not American – not black, just me” (*TB* 45). Tzvetan Todorov notes that racialism is by nature ~~–~~a doctrine of collective psychology, and is inherently hostile to the individualist ideology” (215). Jadine thus appears to want the choice to live a liminal identity in which she is not required to take absolutist positions.

But Jadine cannot escape the racialized thinking that has shaped the world and how people perceive her place in it. Susan Lydon notes that she is caught between her sex and her race: ~~–~~she is neither female enough nor black enough to make it in her culture” (qtd. in Otten 79). Indeed, Gilroy argues that ~~–~~“doubleness” is the ~~–~~constitutive force giving rise to black experience in the modern world” (*TBA* 38). He advocates what he describes as ~~–~~a pluralistic position” which ~~–~~affirms blackness as an open signifier and seeks to celebrate complex representations of a black particularity that is *internally* divided.” Thus, Gilroy argues that the ~~–~~authoritarian tendencies of those who would police black cultural expression in the name of their own particular history or priorities are rightly repudiated” (*TBA* 32).

According to Butler-Evans, *Tar Baby* addresses ~~–~~the need for Black women to construct their own identities without having to submit to a dominant myth of racial authenticity” (158). But Morrison’s ambivalence in the novel undercuts this supposition. On the one hand, *Tar Baby* allows us access to Jadine’s thoughts and views, and in that Jadine seems to make such a strong case for her position, Morrison appears aware of the complexities that attend contemporary black women’s subjectivity. But, on the other hand, Morrison’s negative representation of and statements about Jadine in interviews appear ~~–~~authoritarian” attempts to ~~–~~police” the contemporary identity of young African-American women. Jadine’s use of the word ~~–~~settle” above suggests that, for her, traditional conceptions of black womanhood, as portrayed by Ondine and Son, are not only archaic, but beneath her. We might well agree with her but Jadine’s position also

embodies an aspect of contemporary feminism with which Morrison takes issue: its derisive portrayal of traditional notions of womanhood which thus undermines centuries of achievements by those very women.¹⁹

The contemporary black feminist is thus marked as an outsider and, as Kevin Everod Quashie notes, her ~~o~~utsiderness is partly radical because it mediates the imperatives of community, yet it is also a regulation, her being cut off from resources or excluded from connections” (43). The African-American woman’s ~~o~~utsiderness” is only partially revolutionary because, as Quashie notes, ~~s~~he is subject to being controlled and policed and delimited.... [Her] apartness both makes a viable subjectivity possible and impedes it at every turn” (43). Jadine is, metaphorically, caught between a rock and a hard place. She thus exhibits the internal ambivalence that characterizes what Gloria Anzaldúa has called the ~~la~~ *mestiza*” – the ~~b~~orderland” (identity), and because she straddles cultures, Jadine is ~~p~~lagued by psychic restlessness” (2212). Thus her attempts at a viable individual subjectivity are continuously thwarted. She is characterized by self-doubt and risks isolating herself from her community at the same time that she asserts her independence.

Nonetheless, I agree with Quashie that in this process of ~~(un)becoming~~” is the definition of ~~an~~ alternative state of consciousness and subjectivity that forgoes the familiar and normative ways of identifying” (48). Contemporary black identity, as experienced by Jadine, suggests the need for a revision of traditional definitions of female (and male) subjectivity. This recalls and would seem to interrogate the Tar Baby folktale in which Rabbit is presented as the trickster figure who is seduced and trapped by the farmer’s tar baby. Although Son emerges as steadfastly aligned to the black community, he is also, debilitatingly, rooted in the past. His obsession with his ~~o~~original dime,” the first amount of money he earned and which connects him to his ancestral community and previous life in Eloë, highlights Son’s inability to live in the present or move forward into the future (*TB* 170-71). Indeed, that Son is mentally suspended in a romantic vision of blackness is seen in his reflection on the photographs Jadine takes of his people in Eloë.

¹⁹ In her interview with Koenen Morrison describes her maternal ancestors as ~~p~~owerful” and ~~i~~ncredible” and even argues of the black ~~o~~mnmy” that ~~s~~he could nurse, she could heal, she could chop wood, she could do all those things. And that’s always been a pejorative word, a bad thing, but it isn’t. That stereotype is bad only when people think it’s less” (79, 82).

Only after she has left him is Son able to see the place through her more critical eyes. When the photographs arrive by post at their former apartment in New York, Son

opened the envelope and looked at the pictures of all the places and people he had loved. Then he could be still. Gazing at the photos one by one trying to find in them what it was that used to comfort him so, used to reside with him, in him like royalty in his veins. Used to people his dreams, and anchor his floating days. When danger was most imminent and he fell asleep in spite of himself they were there – the yellow houses with white doors, the ladies at the pie table at Good Shepherd... It all looked miserable in the photographs, sad, poor and even poor-spirited. (*TB* 296-97)

His earlier recollection of Eloë is clearly registered as nostalgic. Son does not appear to have an identity apart from his community which “people[s] his dreams” and offers him a sense of security he is seemingly unable to attain on his own. Morrison notes in her interview with Ruas that Son “may identify totally and exclusively with the past, which is a kind of death, because it means you have no future, but a suspended place” (112). Son’s individual growth is thus stunted and his idea of Eloë involves a conception of black identity which works to trap him like the tar baby.

Son is thus, as Therese calls him, the “small boy” who must continue learning (*TB* 308). Indeed, the scene above suggests Son’s eventual realization as to how deluded he was in his earlier views of black subjectivity. Jadine’s photos make him see his people and their poverty differently. Here, Morrison seems to indicate the importance of acknowledging the continuously evolving nature of any identity. Carol Boyce Davies, drawing on Wilentz’s definition of Morrison as an “Afrocentric” writer, warns against

the totalizing nature of nationalist (Africa-diaspora) discourse. Pan-Africanism, Black/African nationalism and Afrocentricity are totalizing discourses which tolerate no different articulation and operate from a singularly monolithic construction of an African theoretical homeland which asks for the submergence or silencing of gender, sexuality, or any other ideological stance or identity position which is not subsumed under Black/African nationalism. (49-50)

As Cornel West argues, afrocentrism “is misguided because—out of fear of cultural hybridization ... it reinforces the narrow discussions about race” (7-8). Both critics recognize that culture and racial representations and identities are continuously evolving

and thus fallible. Morrison also recognizes that for African-Americans identity is always complex and negotiated. To assert one's gendered autonomy is to risk compromising African-American community as well as marginalizing its cultural values and achievements. Likewise, to foreground one's cultural and racial identity is to forfeit one's gendered individuality, or even one's own sense of self.

Unfortunately, there does not seem to be an easy way to resolve this predicament. *Tar Baby* ends ambiguously and Morrison's conclusion seems to emphasize Jadine and Son's incompatibility. The narrator explains that "[e]ach was pulling the other away from the maw of hell – its very ridge top. Each knew the world as it was meant or ought to be. One had a past, the other a future and each bore the culture to save the race in his hands" (*TB* 272). Son and Jadine are posited as mirror images of each other. Both are stuck, divided in their ideologies of identity, and in this way, Morrison suggests that neither experiences a healthy, balanced state of subjectivity and that issues of identity are not easily resolved.

Harried as they are by seemingly insurmountable cultural differences, their relationship inevitably "snapped like a string" (*TB* 222). Jadine returns to Paris to "begin at Go. Let loose the dogs, tangle with the woman in yellow – with her and with all the night women who had *looked* at her" (*TB* 292). It is not clear what the tangling with the woman in yellow will entail and it is hard to decipher whether this is a positive position. The aggressive undertones that belie this statement do not show whether Jadine has attained a mature female subjectivity. Still, that Morrison affords her the opportunity to "tangle with," to deconstruct as it were, her gendered and cultural identity, suggests a positive outlook on the possibilities of black (female) subjectivity. Jadine reflects that: "Perhaps that was the thing – the thing Ondine was saying. A grown woman did not need safety or its dreams. She *was* the safety she longed for" (*TB* 292). Jadine must attempt to deconstruct her self in order to realize her self.

Son, on the other hand, follows Jadine and attempts to return to L'Arbe de la Croix to find her. He is deceived by Therese who takes him to the hills of Isle des Chevaliers where she wants him to be initiated into manhood by the blind horsemen. Therese claims that he "can choose now" to be "free" of Jadine, but it is clear Son is duped into this situation by Therese. Nonetheless, the narrator's description of Son's return is troubling because the language suggests a return to his ancestral "home":

By and by he walked steadier, now steadier. The mist lifted and the trees stepped back a bit as if to make the way easier for a certain kind of man. Then he ran. Lickety-split. Lickety-split. Looking neither to the left nor to the right. Lickety-split. Lickety-split. Lickety-lickety-lickety-split. (*TB* 309)

Again, Son is aligned with nature which suggests a return to tradition and a way of being only achieved by “a certain kind of man.” This implies, as Son’s idealized notion of ‘home’ does, that his identity is exceptional and his position is exclusive. In her interview with Ruas, Morrison confirms that her use of the words “lickety-split” to describe Son’s running is “to suggest the rabbit returning [home] to the briar patch” (107). Son is thus characterized at the close of the novel by growing purposefulness and self-assurance, and his energetic movement suggests that, having tangled with the tar baby – Jadine (or perhaps even himself) – he has been freed and now returns to his community, a mythical community of ancestors, the blinded horsemen of the Island.

In contrast, Jadine’s attempt at self-realization will be conducted apart from, not within her African-American community, and this suggests that Morrison still views her attempted subjectivity as limited. Morrison appears torn. But the novel’s focus on Son’s return at the close does seem to powerfully suggest that Morrison is holding out for an essential and authentic black cultural identity and community that transcends individualism. The novel’s withdrawal from ‘the real’ to a mythic space seems to suggest Morrison’s despondency with contemporary lived racial and cultural experiences.

But the novel also locates itself at an empowering “site of resistance” within critical discussion on (black) identity (Davies 27). At the same time that Morrison resists what she sees as Jadine’s unthinking racial and cultural assimilation, *Tar Baby* shows signs of what Stuart Hall calls the “end of innocence,” or the end of the innocent notion of the essential black identity.” Hall explains that herein

is the recognition of the extraordinary diversity of subjective positions, social experiences and cultural identities which compose the category ‘black’; that is, the recognition that ‘black’ is essentially a politically and culturally *constructed* category, which cannot be grounded in a set of fixed trans-cultural or transcendental racial categories and which therefore has no guarantee in nature.... This inevitably entails a weakening or fading of the notion that ‘race’ or some composite notion of race around the term black will either guarantee the

effectivity of any cultural practice or determine any final sense of its aesthetic value. (“New Ethnicities” 91)

Thus, while still asserting the value of holding onto and passing down “ancient properties,” *Tar Baby* highlights how identity, no matter how ideal, resists static or closed definitions. The novel speaks from and to Morrison’s own complicated personal position on cultural identity. It resists closure not only to highlight the open nature of identity, but also to suggest the need for continuous, evolving discussions on the topic. Morrison’s use of the Tar Baby folktale, then, becomes more instructive than didactic. To Ruas, Morrison explains that she attempts to “enlighten without pontificating” because the novel has to provide the richness of the past as well as suggestions of what the use of it is” (108). She acknowledges, however, that:

The problem is to distinguish between those elements in ourselves as human beings, as individuals, and as a culture, that are ancient and pure or primitive—that are there because they’re valuable and ought to be there—and those that are primitive because they are ignorant and unfocused. (113)

Morrison appears aware that there are aspects of culture that, because they are “ignorant and unfocused,” should be abandoned, and because they are “valuable” deserve to be preserved. What is still problematic, however, is her insistence on “elements” within us, a black essence that continues to exist alongside, in resistance to, in spite of individual identity. What appears to be of importance to Morrison is how culture is utilized, and what role it plays, in present day constructions of identity. Son and Jadine finally make different choices, value different aspects of their pasts, and of their racial and cultural identities. In presenting us with their movement in two radically different directions, *Tar Baby* significantly resists any absolute reading, suggesting that Morrison is primarily concerned with establishing and maintaining a rigorous conversation about black identity and race. In the final chapter I explore how this conversation is continued in her later fiction, by focusing on *Paradise*.

CHAPTER FIVE

The Illusion of Isolation: Racial Purity and Oppression of the Self in *Paradise*

Paradise is Toni Morrison's seventh novel and the third book in her loose trilogy delineating the history of the African-American experience of America. *Beloved* describes the African-American experience of slavery characterized by individual and communal resilience and survival. *Jazz* examines the period in the 1920s known as the Harlem Renaissance which was characterized by black aesthetic self-assertion. *Paradise*, published in 1997, traces both periods but culminates in and is set in the decades of the 1960s and '70s, a particularly tumultuous time marked by the Civil Rights Movement which saw the attempted political assertion of racial equality and a nationalized black identity.

The novel presents an all black town, Ruby, whose very establishment and existence is based on racial exclusivity. The town, which is founded in 1949 after having attempted and failed a similar enterprise in the establishment of Haven in 1890, is a second attempt at racial exclusivity.¹ This racial utopia, however, is undercut by pervasive intra-racism and patriarchy which results in the attempted massacre of the racially-mixed community of women at the nearby Convent. Morrison's novel suggests that Ruby has an important relationship with the socio-political environment of '60s and '70s America. In its interrogation of a racialized black community, *Paradise* examines the microcosmic attempt at creating a utopian community premised on exclusively black heritage and identity. Morrison, in this novel, appears to revise and redress what I have argued to be her suspiciously and sometimes overtly essentialist assertions of a naturalized and gendered black identity. In *Paradise*, as in *Beloved*, her own somewhat idealized representations of blackness are scrutinized and eventually problematized as socially constructed and potentially destructive fictions.

Paradise is a particularly contentious novel. Peter Widdowson, writing in 2001, notes that unlike the other novels in Morrison's trilogy, *Paradise* has not received the hagiographic reception the Pulitzer-Prize-winning earlier novel was treated to. Nor, as

¹ Ruby is initially established as "New Haven" in 1949 but is renamed "Ruby" in 1954 after the death of one of its residents – the Morgan brothers' sister.

yet, has it received the critical attention devoted to both *Beloved* and *Jazz*.” Widdowson questions why:

Apart from some heavyweight early reviews, especially in the American press (not all favourable, by any means), and a few first-off scrambled essays since, a novel which strikes the present – admittedly white, male, English – critic as raising contentious historical and political issues in a most powerful and complex way has been met with relative disregard. (313)

As Widdowson notes, the novel raises controversial historical and political issues in a ~~most~~ powerful and complex way,” and perhaps this is why the novel has not yet received the critical scholarly attention it deserves. The relative dearth of intellectual criticism that attends *Paradise* is, in my opinion, indicative of a continuing discomfort in Americans with the topics of race and gender, especially when Morrison’s examination and delineation of those issues appears to hold *both* black and white accountable.

But Morrison more specifically interrogates black racialized and gendered tensions as emanating from, and subsequently rehearsing, a racialized and gendered ideology of whiteness. Morrison has called for a critical study of ~~the~~ impact of racism on those who perpetuate it” (*PD* 11), and *Paradise*, it would appear, is a self-reflexive attempt at achieving this by studying the impact of racialized white ideology on its black subjects. For in this novel, her black characters, in attempting to assert a black identity, inadvertently assume the (self-) enslaving role of the white ~~masters~~” (*PD* 12). The complexity that attends their assertion of blackness is not unlike the complicated way in which whiteness reveals itself, as Morrison argues and I have shown, in nineteenth-century American literature. Thus, in *Paradise*, she appears to suggest that by rehearsing white historical attitudes, the relationship between whiteness and blackness is dialectical. Homi K. Bhabha notes that ~~the~~ question of identification is never the affirmation of a pre-given identity, never a self-fulfilling prophesy – it is always the production of an image of identity and the transformation of the subject into assuming that image” (45). The racialized and patriarchal town of Ruby is the result of pervasive racialized and sexualized historical socialization that is itself premised on the image or idea of (racial) identity. Morrison does not thus reify blackness in *Paradise*, but attempts to show how uninterrogated and unrevised racialized, cultural, and gendered ideologies are bound to

be repeated and even disrupt well-meant intentions within the black community. As Charles Taylor observes, and Morrison seems to say, “all claims about innate cultural differences are unsustainable in the light of human history” (7).

As the novel’s title and plot suggest, the notion of paradise is presented as ambivalent and is thus interrogated. Noting that her original working title of the novel was *War*, Morrison explains in an interview with James Marcus that:

Our view of Paradise is so limited: it requires you to think of yourself as the chosen people—chosen by God, that is. Which means that your job is to isolate yourself from other people. That’s the nature of Paradise: it’s really defined by who is *not* there as well as who is. (“This Side of Paradise” par. 5)²

Morrison’s interpretation of paradise is important in that it highlights the paradoxical nature of the attempt to achieve and maintain racial, cultural, or gendered identities which are ‘pure’ as all such identities are inevitably and invariably premised on the shadowy presence of the Other in opposition to which the self is asserted. In fact, reading *Paradise* through the lens of blackface minstrelsy, Dana A. Williams argues that blackness and whiteness “are more alike than they are unlike and that they are in fact, at times, indistinguishable” (6). This is the novel’s central premise – that whiteness and blackness are intricately and intimately ideologically linked and that no representation or identity exists or can exist in isolation.

Indeed, Evelyn E. Shockley notes that *Paradise* “illustrates how densely complicated is the fabric of our desire to be set apart, and how numerous and strong are the forces tearing at our efforts to achieve such a utopia” (718). Magali Cornier Michael suggests that *Paradise* “reflects both a note of irony at the twisted notion of paradise envisioned by Ruby’s patriarchs and a note of hope as to the alternative possibilities that exist and toward which the convent community begins to work” (659). *Paradise*, Michael notes, seeks to “re-imagine agency as a function of coalition processes that are communal and

² Morrison explains of her original working title of *War* that she was “interested in the kind of violent conflict that could happen as a result of efforts to establish a Paradise” (“This Side of Paradise” par. 5). Ana Maria Fraile-Marcos notes the irony that Ruby’s defense of an idea of paradise based on “exclusion enforced by violence, and more specifically, murder, not only contradicts the very idea of paradise ... but implies the loss of innocence and the subsequent expulsion from paradise” (“Hybridizing the ‘City upon a Hill’ in Toni Morrison’s *Paradise*” 20).

caring in impulse,” contrary to processes which in the end retain ~~h~~ierarchy, [and] the notion of a centered, stable subject that was male and gained dominance through processes of othering” (643).

In this chapter I argue that by positing Ruby’s attempted assertion of pure blackness as a reflection of American whiteness, *Paradise* is a comment on the fundamental constructedness of raced and gendered identities. What Cheryl Harris notes of whiteness is applicable to the attempted assertion of blackness: ~~the~~ core of its value is its exclusivity; but exclusivity is predicated not on any intrinsic characteristic, but on the existence of the symbolic Other, which functions to create an illusion of unity” (87). Morrison, however, does not thereby trivialize or undermine the historical significance of racial, cultural, and gendered identities and communities, especially for African-Americans, but, instead, questions the ethical basis of such identities and communities that are premised on exclusion of the Other. Like *Beloved*, *Paradise* interrogates and resists rigid, totalizing racial and cultural assertions. It invites the reader to participate in examining the racialized and even racist patriarchal identity perpetuated by the nation (and rehearsed by its communities), but always with the view that answers are elusive, invariably subjective, and therefore open to further and continued critique.

Paradise is a particularly complex, ambiguous, sometimes surreal novel which attempts to present identity in the same light. Critics have tended to categorize the novel in an effort to make sense of it. Gay Wachman, for instance, suggests that the novel ~~combines~~ its modernist exploration of memory with the postmodern literary practice of magic realism” (3). Shockley similarly argues that *Paradise* identifies with magic realism’s ~~freedom~~ from linearity and representational constraints” (718). Both Wachman’s and Shockley’s reviews testify to the novel’s complexity and simultaneous openness. But Morrison has in the past expressed scepticism at such labelling, especially the frequent use of the term ~~magic realism~~” by critics of her novels. She tells Christina Davis that:

It was a way of *not* talking about the politics. It was a way of *not* talking about what was in the books. If you could apply the word magical then that *dilutes* the realism but it seemed legitimate because here were these supernatural and unrealistic things, surreal things, going on in the text. But for literary historians

and literary critics it just seemed a convenient way to skip again what was the truth in the art of certain writers. (414).

Morrison's cynicism at, and resistance to, literary categorization suggests in turn her awareness of the literary establishment's desire to mask the message of so many artists' work. For Morrison, this reflects an unwillingness to deal critically with the real, potentially political, issues that attend some literature. Thus, while *Paradise* does explore and interrogate the grand narratives of history, it does not succumb to and resists reductive literary definitions or categorizations. The novel complexly persists in perpetual ideological and representational interrogation while simultaneously challenging the desire to negate both ideology and representation. As Philip Page observes, *Paradise* is an "ambiguous and knotty text [which] requires the readers' participation by forcing them into complex acts of interpretation" (638).

Certainly *Paradise*'s opening sentence: "They shoot the white girl first" (*PS* 3), reads ambiguously and points to the novel's complex position on racial identity. The *in medias res* beginning throws us into the cacophony of representational politics and both endorses and resists representational specificity. Linda Krumholz argues that the author does not reify blackness, but "[b]y specifying the white girl, Morrison has reversed the accepted racial logic in which blackness is the exception and whiteness the norm" (28). Indeed, the Convent and its residents are presented as Morrison's inscription of multiplicity. Previously an embezzler's mansion, then a Catholic seminary for Native American Arapaho girls, the Convent is invariably in flux. Similarly, the Convent is a community comprised of the racially, culturally, behaviourally, and ideologically diverse identities of its women residents. Krumholz posits that the fluctuating relationships and community at the Convent speak of a "nomadic subjectivity" (24).³ The Convent women are presented in *Paradise* as adventurous, mobile "Ulysean" characters, contrary to Morrison's typical endorsement of the racially and culturally rooted black woman.⁴ Krumholz argues further that here, "Morrison confronts the racial imaginary in its impenetrable connection with

³ Mavis's journey, for instance, is described thus: "Oly once had she felt this kind of happiness. On the Rocket ride she took as a kid... Now, in flight to California, the memory of the Rocket ride and its rush were with her at will" (33). While hers is an adventure, a necessary act of independence, we are not to forget that it is characterized by escape which Morrison also recognizes as an avoidance of responsibility.

⁴ Examples of Morrison's racially and culturally rooted women in her fiction include Pilate in *Song of Solomon*, Therese in *Tar Baby*, and Baby Suggs in *Beloved*.

contemporary feminist, black, and postmodern theories of representation” (22). In Morrison’s refusal to racially mark the women who live in the Convent, Krumholz adds, she “opens up the bounds of the racial imaginary” (28).

Krumholz’s suggestion of the novel’s counter-hegemonic stance is not incorrect but, in my view, falls into the trap Morrison insists we avoid. In *Paradise*, she critiques the desire to read race (and gender) as significant indicators of identity. Morrison herself has explained the novel’s opening to Paul Gray as deliberate: “I wanted the readers to wonder about the race of those girls until those readers understood that their race didn’t matter. I want to dissuade people from reading literature in that way” (5). I would argue further, then, that in the Convent’s community of “nomadic” and “mobile” subjects, Morrison attempts to reveal the virtual insubstantiality of racial categories. While Krumholz’s essay is insightful, I struggle with her persistent desire to impose whiteness upon the text, even if it is to argue for its displacement or insignificance. Indeed, Morrison’s texts attempt to displace the ideological norms of whiteness. But Krumholz’s persistence on this aspect of Morrison’s work actually has, I think, the opposite and adverse effect of (re)centralizing whiteness, something Morrison interrogates and attempts to avoid in the novel by showing the dialectical nature of whiteness and blackness. This does not mean that Morrison sees racial, cultural, and gendered identities as wholly insignificant. But the approach she takes in *Paradise* highlights her evolving and more complex attitude to racialized, cultural and gendered representations in contemporary society. Race, as the novel’s opening highlights, is not always a dependable indicator of identity or, for that matter, entirely significant. Morrison has remarked that: “Race is the least reliable information you can have about someone. It’s real information, but it tells you next to nothing” (qtd. in Gray 5). Certainly her focus on the Convent women is on their lived experiences and humanity which, similarly traumatic, preclude the referential status of race and racial categorization.

In *Paradise*, both whiteness and blackness are treated suspiciously as idealized and mythologized, essentially constructed, historical narratives. That we do not, and never do, know who the “white” girl is suggests the simultaneous significance and insignificance of race in our complicit need to identify the Other and to attain meaning that complies with a racialized and gendered master narrative. Widdowson argues that in *Paradise*’s opening

sentence –the emphasis falls not, as might be expected, on the word ‘white’ – but on ‘first’. This suggests that while the men do indeed distinguish the women by colour, it is not colour which is their true animus – since ‘first’ implies that they are going to shoot other women who are not white” (329). But even this is arguable as *Paradise*’s narrator states that “[s]hooting the first woman (the white one) has clarified” their mission –like butter: the pure oil of hatred on top, its hardness stabilized below” (PS 4). This suggests that the first woman’s race is significant to these Ruby men, and, indeed, as the novel unfolds, it examines why by detailing their history of racial emasculation by whiteness. Thus, Richard L. Schur contends that “[t]he men of Ruby seek to destroy whiteness by eradicating the presence of a body onto which they have mapped whiteness. In a conventional sense, there may be no ‘white girl’ at the Convent.” Whiteness —may exist only in the imaginations of the men of Ruby, and thus her actual identity is irrelevant. In addition, the reference to whiteness may be a red herring that obfuscates the intraracial battles the novel describes, especially as racialization infects gender relations” (294).

Race, in racialized society, is necessarily written or “mapped” onto the body so that, while suggestively elusive and insignificant, it also has very real, material effects.⁵ The establishment of the black communities of Haven and then Ruby is precisely a response to a historical narrative of racialized violence. As Widdowson’s useful historical study of *Paradise* suggests, Haven, established in 1890, appears to respond to the artificial Emancipation proclamation (1863), and the failed Reconstruction period (1865-1877) in which African-Americans, instead of being racially and economically integrated into the national community, were faced with renewed and revised forms of segregation. The Disallowing, the crucial incident around which so much of Ruby’s memory and reasoning circles, explicates their racialized worldview and motivates the Ruby

⁵ The notion of race being written or “mapped” onto the body is clearly illustrated in the various and varied readings of Sethe’s whipped and scarred back in *Beloved*. For further discussion on the significance of the body in *Beloved* see, for example, April Lidinsky’s “Prophesying Bodies,” Mae G. Henderson’s “Foni Morrison’s *Beloved*: Re-Membering the Body as Historical Text,” Rafael Perez-Torres’s “Between Presence and Absence,” Avril Horner and Angela Keane’s *Body Matters: Feminism, Textuality, Corporeality*, and Carol E. Henderson’s *Scarring the Black Body: Race and Representation in African American Literature*.

community's (especially in its men) desire to found and maintain a separate and pure black community.

The Disallowing and the Founding of Ruby

On their journey to establish a home, the fifteen free founding families are rejected, first by white society, then by the lighter skinned black community of Fairly, this propelling their journey westward (from the South):

On the journey from Mississippi and two Louisiana parishes to Oklahoma, the one hundred and fifty-eight freedmen were unwelcome on each grain of soil from Yazoo to Fort Smith. Turned away by rich Choctaw and poor whites, chased by yard dogs, jeered by camp prostitutes and their children, they were nevertheless unprepared for the aggressive discouragement they received from Negro towns already being built. The headline of a feature in the *Herald*, *‘Come Prepared or Not at All’*, could not mean them could it? Smart, strong, and eager to work their own land, they believed they were more than prepared – they were destined. It stung them into confusion to learn that they did not have enough money to satisfy the restrictions the *‘self-supporting’* Negroes required. In short, they were too poor, too bedraggled-looking to enter, let alone reside in, the communities that were soliciting Negro homesteaders. (PS 13-14)

The fifteen founding families are hardened by an excess of characteristics racialized American society has persistently associated with blackness. They are *“too poor, too bedraggled-looking”* to be welcomed, and are even rejected, by their own people due to the level of pigmentation in their skins. The intra-racialism practiced here is suggestively embedded in white capitalist and materialistic values that deny black cultural heritage and community.

The Ruby community's black pride is shattered: *“they boiled at being written up as ‘people who preferred saloons and crap games to homes, churches and schools’”* (PS 14). Their belief in a universal experience of being black in America is, through their rejection, replaced by a confused questioning: *“—Us free like them; was slave like them. What for is this difference?”* (PS 14). They experience the humiliation of their daughters *“shunned as brides; their sons chosen last; that colored men would be embarrassed to be seen socially with their sisters,”* so that the *“sign of racial purity they had taken for*

granted had become a stain" (*PS* 194). Their blackness, in an officially de-racialized but increasingly racist and unethical society, becomes a symbol of contamination. Their skin colour, a stark reminder of their previous enslaved status thus acts, superficially, as a measure of their existential worth: "light-skinned against black. Oh, they knew there was a difference in the minds of whites, but it had not struck them before that it was of consequence, serious consequence, to Negroes themselves" (*PS* 194). Schur suggests how, in the *Disallowing*, Ruby's "blackness, too, became a sign. Black skin, untainted by the sexual conquest of whites, signified too much blackness, an authenticity that could not conform to the demands of whiteness idealized" (288).

Consequently, "neither the founders of Haven nor their descendants could tolerate anybody but themselves" (*PS* 13), and they establish a "pure" black community in Oklahoma based on seclusion and exclusion. Morrison suggests here that the subsequent separatism they practice is justified and even necessary. In an interview with Elizabeth Farnsworth Morrison explains that the African-American motivation in establishing separate and exclusive "paradises" rested on their distinction from all other Americans:

only African-Americans were not immigrants in this rush to find a heaven. They had left a home.... African-Americans were looking for a second one and hopefully one that would be simply up to them, their own people, their own habits, their own culture, and to contain themselves in that. So it makes the motive for paradise a little bit different. ("Conversation" par. 10)

Morrison here maintains that African-American motivation for separation was not initially based on exceptionalism but on a desire to assert a home: with the attendant security of belonging and being the word implies. Haven becomes a prosperous community that, in its economic and racial self-sufficiency, defies and undermines the racist (and economic) rejection its residents have previously encountered: "Having been refused by the world in 1890 on their journey to Oklahoma, Haven residents refused each other nothing, were vigilant to any need or shortage" (*PS* 109). In this way, racialization, that is, blackness, is seen as a positive articulation of communal identity.

Stuart Hall notes that "common historical experiences and shared cultural codes provide [blacks] with ... stable, unchanging and continuous frames of reference and meaning, beneath the shifting divisions and vicissitudes of [their] actual history." This, he

adds, can be a powerful and creative force in emergent forms of representation amongst hitherto marginalized people” (“Cultural Identity and Diaspora” 223). Marni Gauthier reiterates that Ruby’s Disallowing of others thus becomes “the paramount catalyst of the public will to nationhood” (406). Widdowson adds that “[w]hat the town of Ruby seems to represent, then, is a distillation of all the abuses and failures of the American democratic experiment in respect of its black population.” In this respect, Ruby is “the celebration of black resilience, independence and honour” (324).

But their notion of home and the concomitant racial pride that attends it also assumes negative connotations based on exceptionalism. As the “8-rocks” the inhabitants of Ruby symbolize a darkness of colour metaphorically linked to depth and authenticity: “a deep deep level in the coal mines. Blue-black people, tall and graceful, whose clear, wide eyes gave no sign of what they really felt about those who weren’t 8-rock like them” (*PS* 193). Morrison, however, highlights the complexity of racial assertion in that she skilfully portrays both Ruby’s positive ideology (its sense of black pride) alongside its negative consequences (its racial disdain for others). Indeed, Angela Harris notes the perversity of a sort of biological racism based on colourism: “to be authentically African American is to be noticeably dark-skinned”; for African Americans “ethnicity converges with the biological fiction of ‘color’” (443). Ruby’s black pride and their sense of authenticity fosters a racial exceptionalism culminating in exclusion: “What began as overheated determination became cold-blooded obsession” (*PS* 14). They become a

tight band of wayfarers bound by the enormity of what happened to them. Their horror of whites was convulsive but abstract. They saved the clarity of their hatred for the men who had insulted them in ways too confounding for language: first by excluding them, then by offering them staples to exist in that very exclusion. (*PS* 189)

The caustic undertone in this description of their motivation registers Morrison’s sense that there is something profoundly wrong with Ruby’s articulation of racial solidarity. Black pride and community, in that it is fuelled by anger and premised on racial isolation and exclusion, is read here as an inversion of white racism and a rearticulation of the hierarchic and exclusionary ideals of whiteness.

Ana Maria Fraile-Marcos observes the irony that “the community of Ruby is presented as a prototype of the American society, even when it tries to define itself away from that society” (10). That is, in Ruby’s attempt to define itself as a distinct and separate racial and cultural community is the rearticulation of the racialized premise of white American society. Frantz Fanon’s *Wretched of the Earth* elucidates that

The Negro, never so much a Negro as since he has been dominated by the whites, when he decides to prove that he has a culture and to behave like a cultural person, comes to realise that history points out a well-defined path to him: he must demonstrate that a Negro culture exists. (170)

Fanon here demonstrates how, in the assertion of a pure black identity, the African-American, much like the post-colonial subject, inevitably rehearses his/her own form of racialized culture by virtue of having been subjected to racialized domination by white culture.

In *Black Skin, White Masks* Fanon observes the irony that, “[f]or the black man there is only one destiny. And it is white” (12). The assertion of black subjectivity in post-colonial society is applicable to African-American communal identity after Emancipation: it is doomed to a repetition of whiteness. He observes that: “After having been the slave of the white man [the Negro] enslaves himself. The Negro is in every sense of the word a victim of white civilization” (*BSWM* 192). By this Fanon does not mean that blacks are inevitably and invariably helpless victims of whiteness, but that without undergoing a process of ideological and mental decolonization of what they have been educated and socialized to believe is their racial and metaphysical inferiority, the black ‘slave’ is destined to repeat and perpetuate the value systems of the white ‘master’ that are so embedded in his psyche. Fanon notes that: “For not only must the black man be black; he must be black in relation to the white man” (*BSWM* 110). The assertion of ‘blackness’ is concomitant with the ideologies of ‘whiteness’. Thus, blacks who do not interrogate the fallacy of whiteness continue to be its ideological slaves; whiteness continues to lurk underneath the assertion of blackness. Fanon highlights the danger of not interrogating racialized ideologies and identities: “at its extreme, the myth of the Negro, the idea of the Negro, can become the decisive factor of authentic alienation”

(*BSWM* 204). This is the case with Ruby whose racial insularity and exceptionalism is presented as a kind of slavery.

Ruby's brand of African-American exceptionalism mirrors the Euro-American exceptionalism upon which the nation was founded. Reverend Richard Misner muses that the citizens of Ruby "think they have outfoxed the whiteman when in fact they imitate him." Born "out of an old hatred, one that began when one kind of black man scorned another kind and that kind took the hatred to another level, their selfishness had trashed two hundred years of suffering and triumph in a moment of such pomposity and error and callousness it froze the mind" (*PS* 306). Black-on-black hatred defeats the purpose of emancipation from slavery in the first place; the suffering endured by black slaves is trivialized as intra-racism lends credence to and underwrites the racism of white society. What Kwame Anthony Appiah notes as the irony present in black philosophy is true of Ruby's racialized outlook too: "its defence depends on the essentially racist presuppositions of the white philosophy whose antithesis it is. Ethnocentrism – which is an unimaginative attitude to one's own culture – is in danger of falling into racism" (*IMFH* 147).

The attitudes pervading the community of Ruby highlight that the ideologically racialized relationship between blackness and whiteness may not be dialogical but it is certainly dialectical. Indeed, their ethnocentrism is an "unimaginative attitude" to their own culture as it reads as a rehearsal of white culture. Even their great trek westward is a simulation of the great white trek to found America. While the founding and establishment of America is typically lauded as an exceptional achievement, its underside was characterized by the dispossession and exclusion of the Native American population as well as the aggressive importation and subjugation of Africans by Euro-Americans.⁶ Morrison notes that:

The flight from the Old World to the New is generally seen to be a flight from oppression and limitation to freedom and possibility. Although, in fact, the escape was sometimes an escape from license—from a society perceived to be unacceptably permissive, ungodly, and undisciplined—for those fleeing for reasons other than religious ones, constraint and limitation impelled the

⁶ For further details of the history of the founding of the United States see, for example, Howard Zinn's *A People's History of the United States*.

journey.... In the New World there was the vision of a limitless future, made more gleaming by the constraint, dissatisfaction, and turmoil left behind. It was a promise genuinely promising. With luck and endurance one could discover freedom; find a way to make God's law manifest; or end up rich as a prince. The desire for freedom is preceded by oppression; a yearning for God's law is born of the detestation of human license and corruption; the glamor of riches is in thrall to poverty, hunger, and debt. (*PD* 34-35)

The movement to the New World was not so much movement from oppression to freedom as a movement towards a place where God's law could replace license and corruption of the flesh or appetites. But, as Morrison observes, the idea of freedom may be necessitated by oppression but it also, apparently, often necessitates oppression. Ruby similarly rehearses America's tragic narrative and in *Paradise* Morrison suggests that history, whatever its racial hue, if left uninterrogated and unrevised, is doomed to repeat itself.

Katrine Dalsgard suggests that Morrison "invites us critically to acknowledge the presence of one of the most canonical European American narratives—that of American exceptionalism, in African American discourse." She observes that rather than a perfect paradise, "Ruby ends up as a conservative, patriarchal, thoroughly racialized, and violent community" (233-34). Ruby's black exceptionalism, like white American exceptionalism, then, instead of "being a sign of cultural viability or ethical confidence," opens "a door to ultraconservative forms of political culture and social regulation" (Gilroy, *BC* 14). Evidenced from the novel's violent opening, the men of Ruby lack tolerance for anyone who threatens to destabilize their utopia. Amartya Sen notes in *Identity and Violence* that the assertion of any identity manifests in a lack of forbearance for the Other and is usually associated with some form of violence: "many of the conflicts and barbarities in the world are sustained through the illusion of a unique and choiceless identity" (xv). He adds, "[t]he reductionism of high theory can make a major contribution, often inadvertently, to the violence of low politics" (xvi). The discourse of nationalized theory infects that of Ruby's community. Pat informs Misner that being an "outsider" is synonymous with being an "enemy" in the insular and myopic community of Ruby (*PS* 212). In aping a "unique" but conservative American tradition, Ruby inadvertently inflicts "violence" on its own community. Ruby secludes its people from the

world —“*There*” (*PS* 16) and polices their sexual and social behaviour so that “the glacial wariness they once confined to strangers more and more was directed toward each other” (*PS* 161).

Thus, Morrison notes in her interview with Elizabeth Farnsworth that isolation “carries the seeds of its own destruction” (par. 8), and certainly Ruby’s black exceptionalist attitude is self-destructive. Menus Poole is prevented from marrying his light-skinned lover and sinks into alcoholic depression. Roger Best’s wife (and Pat’s mother) of “sunlight skin” (*PS* 197), Delia, is a reminder of “racial tampering” (*PS* 197) and is rejected as “the dung we left behind” (*PS* 200). She dies in childbirth as a result of the men’s unwillingness to assist in endangering their racial purity. Pat and Billie Delia’s tenuous and physically turbulent relationship is a result of Pat’s internalization of the town’s pervasive sexual and racial mores. Both mother and daughter are of mixed-race, and Pat recalls how she “missed killing her own daughter by inches” with a 1950s GE electric iron called Royal Ease due to Billie Delia’s supposed sexual misdemeanours (*PS* 203). Pat later realizes that she has unconsciously punished her daughter for failing to live up to the town’s ideals of perfection:

ever since Billie Delia was an infant, she thought of her as a liability somehow. Vulnerable to the possibility of not being quite as much of a lady as Patricia Cato would like. Was it the business of pulling down her panties in the street? Billie Delia was only three then. Pat knew that had her daughter been an 8-rock, they would not have held it against her. They would have seen it for what it was—only an innocent child would have done that, surely. Have I missed something? Was there something else? But the question for her now in the silence of this here night was whether she had defended Billie Delia or sacrificed her. And was she sacrificing her still? The Royal Ease in her hand as she ran up the stairs was there to smash the young girl that lived in the minds of the 8-rocks, not the girl her daughter was. (*PS* 203-4)

Her questioning of Ruby’s mores and the repetition of the word “sacrifice” registers not just her self-doubt, but suggests the denial of self which must occur in order to belong in this community. Pat, who herself married an 8-rock in order to belong, begrudgingly notes the way “people get chosen and ranked in this town” (*PS* 216). But in her attitude to her daughter, she too is guilty of rehearsing Ruby’s black cultural conservatism.

Similarly, the Old and New Father's customs of racial purity are characterized by the patriarchal control of women's sexuality: "The generations had to be not only racially untampered with but free of adultery too.... Unadulterated and unadularied 8-rock blood held its magic as long as it resided in Ruby. That was their recipe. That was their deal. For Immortality" (*PS* 217). The conflation of sexuality ("Unadularied") with religion ("unadulterated") suggests a fundamentally twisted ideology which, instead of offering the immortality they desire, perpetuates a sort of living death. Ruby's incestuousness and its control of women's sexuality, is reminiscent of nineteenth-century religious control of female sexuality in the achievement of whiteness, and is both testament to and indictment of its desire to maintain and perpetuate its own form of genetic racism. Tellingly, Deacon and Steward Morgan, two blood brothers and community leaders, marry Soane and Dovey, two blood sisters. Guided "by the law of continuance and multiplication" (*PS* 279), the community practises a disturbing ritual of communal "takeovers" in which a young widow might take over a single man's house. A widower might ask a friend or a distant relative if he could take over a young girl who had no prospects" (*PS* 196). Not surprisingly, Ruby is characterized by "broken" children, miscarriages, haunted mothers like Sweetie Fleetwood, and troubled men like Menus Poole.⁷

John Duvall notes that Ruby practises a "fetishized blackness" (147). For Ruby's men their exceptionalism and sense of freedom lies in their genetically pure African heritage, unsullied by any drop of white blood. The need for racial purity, of course, explains why the men pay such careful attention to the morality of their women and why a man must own his woman's sexuality" (144). The masculine and patriarchal control of their women and families by the Old Fathers is mitigated by a need to protect them from white violence: "where your children were sport, your women quarry, and where your very person could be annulled" (*PS* 16). Ruby, then, is a place of safety for women characterized by "[n]o lamp and no fear. A hiss crackle from the side of the road would never scare her because whatever it was that made the sound, it wasn't something creeping up on her. Nothing for ninety miles around thought that she was prey ... nothing at all" (*PS* 8). But the protection of the New Fathers degenerates into sexist oppression.

⁷ Although the reader is never given exact details, it is made disturbingly clear that Sweetie's invalid children are the result of years of intermarriage in a shrinking gene pool.

Cornel West notes of black nationalism that —it promotes black cultural conservatism, especially black patriarchal (and homophobic) power”:

The idea of black people closing ranks against hostile white America reinforces black male power exercised over black women (e.g., to protect, regulate, subordinate, and hence usually, though not always, to use and abuse women) in order to preserve black social order under circumstances of white literal attack and symbolic assault. (37)

Ruby is no exception. Named “after one of their own” (*PS* 17), Ruby is deliberately feminized to highlight a vision of the community premised on idealized and thus othered womanhood. Focusing on the town’s name, Krumholz notes that “_Ruby’ —describes woman as both enshrined jewel and dangerous sexuality” (24). The women are, ambiguously, “free and protected,” suggesting that what began as a striving for freedom has become imprisonment. The identities of Ruby’s women are consequently negated and the community’s insularity and possessive control of their women, is posited as a kind of living death.

Women are typically repressed, domesticated, maternalized and silenced: “[t]he women of Ruby did not powder their faces and they wore no harlot’s perfume” (*PS* 143). They are different to but also reminiscent of the idealized coquettish femininity of the nineteenth (light-skinned) “Negro” ladies Steward and Deacon try to impress as young boys. In their imagination the women are rendered “pastel colored and eternal” (*PS* 110). Apart from the fact that they are romanticized, Michael Wood notes that these women are “Negro ladies ... not black women.... It is for such ladies that men of a certain generation might want to build a world” (121). The Ruby men’s yearning for a type of womanhood conveys a sense of both their loss of, and embeddedness in, the past. As such, their own women are seen as having no subjectivity: “they were just women, and what they said was easily ignored by good brave men” (*PS* 201). Indeed, in Ruby, where women are characterized by “generalized last names,” their “identity rested on the men they married” (*PS* 187). At Arnette’s forced wedding to K.D., which finally cools a raging feud between the Morgan and Fleetwood families about Arnette’s sexuality and suspected abortion, Billie Delia aptly reads the men’s reductive patriarchal and masculine control of the situation in animalistic terms. She notes that “the real battle was not about infant life or a

bride's reputation but about disobedience, which meant, of course, the stallions were fighting about who controlled the mares and their foals" (*PS* 150). In ~~th~~is prison calling itself a town," Ruby is, for Billie Delia, a ~~ba~~ckward noplac~~e~~ ruled by men whose power to control was out of control and who had the nerve to say who could live and who not and where" (*PS* 308).

That is why the men ~~ta~~ke aim" at the women at the Convent: ~~For~~ Ruby" (*PS* 18). These women are sexually and behaviourally unrestrained, and ~~ma~~naged to call into question the value of almost every woman" the men knew (*PS* 8). Or, as Pat surmises, the Ruby men target them

(a) because the women were impure (not 8-rock); (b) because the women were unholy (fornicators at the least, abortionists at most); and (c) because they could—which was what being an 8-rock meant to them and was what the deal required. (*PS* 297)

The women here are negatively qualified, but the third reason – ~~ba~~ecause they could" – highlights the men's sense of self-righteousness. The Convent women threaten the very foundation of Ruby's existence. Paul Gilroy notes that ~~[w]~~hen national and ethnic identities are represented and projected as pure, exposure to difference threatens them with dilution and compromises their prized purities with the ever-present possibility of contamination" (*BC* 105). Their pure blackness previously seen by others as a ~~st~~ain" upon the race, the Ruby men in turn resist contamination by the women at the Convent. Steward muses that they

were now doomed to extinction by this new and obscene breed of female. He could not abide them for sully~~ng~~ his personal history ... mocking and desecrating the vision that carried him and his brother through the war, that imbued their marriages and strengthened their efforts to build a town where the vision could flourish. (*PS* 279)

The emphasis on Steward's "vision" of a pure and isolated race suggests its inauthenticity and its impracticability. Bhabha observes that ~~th~~e question of identity is always poised uncertainly, tenebrously, between shadow and substance" (49) so that while Steward's idea of racial and sexual purity is emphasized as fragile, it is precisely his obsessive

preoccupation with his vision, with its religious undertone, that justifies, for him, the death of the Convent women. That the Convent women are seen as “Bodacious black Eves unredeemed by Mary” (*PS* 18) is indicative of Ruby’s self-righteous and highly idealized racialized and gendered patriarchal identity. Theirs is the “one all-black town worth the pain” and they will do whatever they deem necessary to protect it (*PS* 5).

Michiko Kakutani, in a 1998 *New York Times* review, accused Morrison of generally (mis)representing black men in *Paradise* as “two dimensional cliché[s] ... uniformly control freaks or hot-heads, eager to dismiss independent women as sluts or witches, and determined to make everyone submit to their will” (qtd. in Read 527).⁸ But Mia Bay explains that black chauvinism “emerges in a dialectical relationship with white supremacy.” She then adds: “The lesson that the study of African American racial thought teaches about the character of racial ideology – even when applied to egalitarian ends – is that the concept of race is virtually inseparable from the idea of hierarchy among the races” (225). Indeed, the Ruby men’s desire to control their women is an extension of their emasculation by whiteness. Their control thus symbolizes an attempt to affirm their manhood. Contrary to Kakutani’s supposition that *Paradise* rehearses racialized sexist stereotypes of black men, then, the novel interrogates how images are imbued and imbibed, are not inherent but socially constructed. Morrison reveals her awareness of the ways in which race is inflected by gender and is thus not a stable but porous and complex category of identity. That is, because identity is a discursive and fragile means of establishing difference, it invariably expresses the slippages that occur in the formulation of self and Other.

Andrew Read argues that *Paradise*

exposes pervasive problems inherent in Western social ideals of masculinity, which impact upon African American men with particular force for historical reasons. [Morrison] represents black masculinity as a discursive construct, continually shaped and reshaped by the influence of hegemonic American

⁸ Kakutani’s review of *Paradise* recalls Stanley Crouch’s equally scathing review of *Beloved*. Both critics accuse Morrison of denigrating black men and thus rehearsing black gendered stereotypes. Crouch particularly condemns the way Morrison endorses black female ‘victimhood’ in her texts. Paul Gray quotes Crouch as saying that Morrison is “immensely talented. I just think she needs a new subject matter, the world she lives in, not this world of endless black victims” (2).

ideologies of manhood, the cultural heritage of African American history, and the traumatic psychological consequences of race oppression. (528)

Certainly the use of the appellation “Big Papa” and “Big Daddy” (*PS* 115-16) for the Old Fathers is indicative of how Ruby’s endemic patriarchy is used to mask the trauma and humiliation they suffer racially. Elder Morgan’s defence of a black prostitute beaten by white men in 1919 is a symbolic defence of his race. Yet Steward, years later, “hiked that story, but it unnerved him to know that it was based on the defence of and prayers for a whore. He did not sympathize with the whitemen, but he could see their point, could even feel the adrenaline, imagining the fist was his own” (*PS* 95). Steward’s is a disturbing but significant psychical and psychological transference of the shame suffered by black men onto black women. Racial emasculation is transfigured into violent sexist domination. More specifically, in Steward’s fantasy of a violent attack on a prostitute, Morrison collapses the difference between white and black men. Men may war against each other but are united in their hatred and distrust of women’s corrupted flesh.

Indeed, the men of Ruby’s guns, targeting defenceless women, are symbolically phallic, a testament to their racially impotent but violent assertion of patriarchy and masculinity: “Fondling their weapons, feeling suddenly so young and good they are reminded that guns are more than decoration, intimidation or comfort. They are meant” (*PS* 285). Read notes that “[t]he murderous power of gun violence constitutes final, irrefutable confirmation that they possess the masculine ability to impose their will on their environment.” The “massacre reasserts the authority of the concept of racially pure, authentic masculinity” (536). More significantly, he continues, “[t]heir insistence on achieving total control over women is intimately bound up with an idea of self-control crucial to their concept of masculinity” (536). The men of Ruby “aspire to a particularly severe subjugation of desire and emotion to the rational, moral will” (537). Ruby’s men ideologically and physically rehearse the white American notion of the Western frontiersmen, conquering the natural environment (inevitably associated with the female), and asserting their masculine and therefore racial prowess.

But their “concept of masculinity” is fundamentally rooted in a reductive and restrictive racialized and gendered identity, and their oppression of women is an inadvertent repression of a human self. In this way, Morrison highlights that racialized

and gendered identities are, essentially, ideologically and discursively produced. Women and men are not inherently different but, as the men of Ruby illustrate, conform to a reductive and restrictive ideology of racialized gendered norms. Furthermore, Dalsgard observes that *Paradise* pinpoints a discrepancy between African-American ideals and practices: “By insisting on the inextricable connection between the exceptionalist striving for perfection and a repressive and ultimately violent isolationism, Morrison emphasizes the process of supplementarity at work in exceptionalist discourse.” The “paradisiacal (African) American community is rendered unstable by its imperfect other” (241). Drawing on Derrida’s theory of supplementation here, Dalsgard observes how Ruby’s “exceptionalist discourse” only exposes an inherent lack in its exceptionalist identity that is in continuous need of supplementation. The Convent women (and women generally) provide that supplementation, revealing thus Ruby’s persistent state of imperfection and the essential otherness of the self.

David Theo Goldberg’s examination of racist culture is applicable on both a racial and gendered level in *Paradise*. He notes that “self-determination is a precondition for self-recognition or self-conscious identity. This assertion of self-determination may be thought to require that the other – literally the other’s otherness – be negated or concealed.” Ironically, however, “[t]his establishment of the other *as* other is promoted by the initial drive to establish self-identity by identifying *with* the other. Negating others, *denigrating* them, becomes in part, thus, also self-negation and self-effacement” (59-60). As with Julia Kristeva’s theory of abjection, the Ruby men’s rejection of the racialized and gendered Other is actually the abjection of, the repulsion at, the black male self. Morrison highlights this paradox in the Ruby men’s deluded conviction that the destruction of the Other, the women at the Convent, will enable a re-establishment of the self: “Crises that had been accumulating all along took shape as evidence ... the one thing that connected all these catastrophes was in the Convent. And in the Convent were those women” (PS 11). The Convent women are described as “*derit*: throwaway people that sometimes blow into the room after being swept out the door” (PS 4). Despite this attempt at total negation, the fact that the women so “*worry*” (PS 217) the men of Ruby is indicative of the instability of the latter’s own identities and utopia. The frailty of their racialized and gendered paradise is precisely based on ideological fiction.

The Convent

The Convent is a space where Morrison attempts, through its women, to penetrate and transcend conventional ideological and social values. Urged by Lone DuPres to “[l]et your mind grow long and use what God gives you” (PS 246), Consolata Sosa, the Convent community’s matriarch, is “ticked into raising the dead” (PS 242). Her gift of “stepping in” or “seeing in[to]” (PS 247) the minds of others, which significantly increases with her physical inability to see, is symbolic of a transcendental consciousness: “The dimmer the visible world, the more dazzling her in sight’ became.... Her colorless eyes saw nothing clearly except what took place in the minds of others” (PS 247-48). Similarly, the “template” and “loud dreaming” (PS 263-64) practices Consolata teaches the other women are rituals of ideological and spiritual transcendence.

Morrison’s recourse to mysticism and spiritualism here is not unproblematic, however, and perhaps points to one of the reasons *Paradise* has, as Widdowson notes, “been met with relative disregard.” This scene recalls the unsatisfying end of *Tar Baby* in which Morrison’s protagonist, Son, returns to a mythical community of ancestors on the Isle de Chevaliers – the blinded horsemen. Whereas in *Beloved* the mysticism whereby Beloved returns from the dead to haunt her mother Sethe and is eventually exorcised and disappears at the novel’s end works on a metaphorical level, whether one believes in ghosts or not, Morrison’s use of spiritualism in *Paradise* fails to be convincing. Here, spiritual healing takes the same kind of form as in *Beloved* but seems empty by comparison. Psychic healing in *Paradise* is achieved through a kind of ritual shrouded in mystery. We are told that in the process of healing

They tried arms at the sides, outstretched above the head, crossed over breasts or stomach. Seneca lay on her stomach at first, then changed to her back, hands clasping her shoulders. Pallas lay on her side, knees drawn up. Gigi flung her legs and arms apart, while Mavis struck a floater’s pose, arms angled, knees pointing in. When each found the position she could tolerate on the cold, uncompromising floor, Consolata walked around her and painted the body’s silhouette. Once the outlines were complete, each was instructed to remain there. Unspeaking. Naked in candlelight. (PS 263)

The detailed description here of the women's attempts at both physical and spiritual healing signals Morrison's awareness of the stereotypes that attend alternative forms of knowing or being. More significantly, the physicality of this process which also involves "loud dreaming," in which "monologue is no different from a shriek" (*PS* 264), seems to suggest the extent to which these women are trapped in their physical realities. The women notably "wriggled in acute distress but were reluctant to move outside the mold they had chosen" (*PS* 263). While Morrison seems to interrogate by reinforcing the stereotypes of spiritualism here, it is still unclear what she is saying about the possibility of real individual subjectivity for these women at the Convent. Is "healing" for black women only possible on such a psychic, spiritual level?

Morrison's recourse to spiritualism in *Paradise* is, as in her solution with Jadine at the end of *Tar Baby*, an ambivalent resolution to the problems that attend establishing identity. She seems unable to answer or take a position on a potentially divisive issue within the black community, that is, the assertion of gendered and individual subjectivities and identities by black women. Morrison seems to suggest that overcoming social mores and attaining individual subjectivity is unachievable in reality. As Dana Williams states of the Convent women's spiritual "healing" in *Paradise*: "The question, then, becomes, is self-identity that is not hegemonic achievable in the real world or only in an imagined paradise?" (8).

Perhaps Morrison's ambivalence on this issue, which both suggests her awareness of the limitations of the artist and encourages the reader's participation, highlights not just the complex nature of establishing identity but the ways in which we are all implicated and invested in ideas of identity. Indeed, Morrison appears, through Consolata's medium of healing, to suggest an alternative way of comprehending reality. Consolata prompts the women to open their minds and question societal mores that insist on rigid categorical distinctions. In sharp contrast to the characterization of the Convent women by the men of Ruby as "Eves unredeemed by Mary," Consolata insists on the indivisibility of these figures: "Never break them in two. Never put one over the other. Eve is Mary's mother. Mary is the daughter of Eve" (*PS* 263). Her advocacy of a unified vision of the self is contrary to Sarah Appleton Aguiar's supposition that *Paradise* argues for an "ultimate division of body and spirit"; for the "separation of the spirit and flesh" (517-18).

Consolata's philosophy is contrary to Ruby's racialized and gendered Manichaeism and advocates a more holistic and inclusive embrace of a diverse humanity.⁹

Philip Page notes that while they are "radically heterogeneous and cacophonous," the five women move "gradually and then rapidly toward individual and communal harmony" (645). But Morrison does not unquestioningly represent the Convent as a contrary and therefore ideal community. Hers is not a romanticization of the Convent women, but instead an interrogation of their "community" and their self-representation. The Convent, like Ruby, is isolated: "seventeen miles" from Ruby "which has ninety miles between it and any other" (*PS* 3). It also practises a form of separatism similar to that of Ruby's. Unlike Ruby, however, the Convent is a maternal, and nurturing space, and thus truly communal. It is represented as a haven for women bruised and broken by masculinity and patriarchy. The Convent is "the most peaceful place on earth" (*PS* 182) where you "can collect yourself ... think things through" (*PS* 176). For Seneca, who has wound up there after a life of physical and emotional abuse which begins with her rejection by the mother she believes to be her sister, "[t]he whole house felt permeated with a blessed malelessness, like a protected domain, free of hunters but exciting too. As though she might meet herself here—an unbridled, authentic self" (*PS* 177). At the Convent, unlike at Ruby, the attempt at attaining an authentic self appears possible because the self is unbridled, free. But the similes "like" and "[a]s though" here alert us to the chimera of what is also another utopia.

It is clear that all the women at the Convent are fundamentally "bothered" (*PS* 174) by life. Connie's kitchen is revealed as exhibiting "a woman's solitary mess" (*PS* 38). Her isolated life at the Convent in which she dedicates herself to God and her mother superior, Mary Magna, after she is abandoned by Deacon, is essentially sad and empty. Connie's "hope to the world had slid from her fingers" when Mary Magna dies, and she

⁹ Connie's gift parallels Lone DuPres's (and Fairy DuPres before her) profession as a midwife. Fairy DuPres warns Lone that "Men scared of us, always will be. To them we're death's handmaiden standing as between them and the children their wives carry." For Ruby men, the "midwife is the interference" (272). And indeed, in an ironic way, Lone and Connie, literal and metaphorical midwives able to read and see into minds as well as affect people physically and ideologically, act as bodily *and* spiritual intercessors. On another level, Philip Page suggests that "[i]n this mutual therapy and transcendent group interpretation, they pass beyond the boundaries of individual and other, life and death.... As they do so, they heal themselves, achieving individual harmony as they acquire communal harmony. They gain self and community" (642).

sinks into a deep (alcohol-induced) depression (*PS* 247). Mavis is traumatized by the accidental death of her babies, Merle and Perle, who continuously haunt her. Gigi (Grace) and Pallas are also haunted by filial, romantic and social abandonment. Seneca's ritual self-mutilation by cutting indicates a desire to feel physically the pain she harbours emotionally. As Connie describes them, they are "broken girls," but she adds that they have relinquished responsibility for their own lives, becoming "frightened girls, weak and lying.... Not only did they do nothing except the absolutely necessary, they had no plans to do anything. Instead of plans they had wishes—foolish babygirl wishes" (*PS* 222). The Convent women are thus, like Ruby, characterized by a stasis induced by a past saturated by violent physical or emotional trauma. It is telling that when told by Connie, "If you have a place that you should be in and somebody who loves you waiting there, then go," not one of the women leaves (*PS* 262). The Convent women may leave temporarily but they invariably return. Essentially, they are, like Ruby's men, "refugees from life" (Aguiar 514), fearful of change and of the unpredictable, violent, and painful world—"At There."

The "women's enunciations," then, may, as Gauthier suggests, "disrupt what the novel terms Ruby's 'official' history [by] revealing the turbulent inconsistencies of its moral code," but *Paradise* does not "collectively assert a series of female-authored counter histories that correct the patriarchs' mythic history" (407-8). In fact, the Convent, upon closer examination, reads as Ruby's mirror, its intimate and intricate Other. As such, *Paradise* is not a sexist text as suggested by Kakutani. When asked by Zia Jaffrey if she considered *Paradise* a feminist novel Morrison replied: "Not at all. I would never write any 'ist'. I don't write 'ist' novels." She explains that:

In order to be as free as I possibly can, in my own imagination, I can't take positions that are closed.... I don't subscribe to patriarchy, and I don't think it should be substituted with matriarchy. I think it's a question of equitable access, and opening doors to all sorts of things. (2)¹⁰

¹⁰ Morrison's subsequent and eighth novel, *Love*, opens doors "to all sorts of things" in its presentation of a turbulent relationship between two women Heed and Christine Cosey, whose relationship centres around Heed's husband and Christine's father, Bill "Big Papa" Cosey. Previously childhood friends, the two women's relationship is disrupted by Heed's marriage at the age of eleven to the fifty-two year old Cosey. Like the Ruby men, Cosey's ideological and material inheritance and subsequent success is premised on whiteness, and the novel is clearly an indictment of black patriarchy and its perpetuation of the loss of women's (sexual) innocence and community. But Morrison suggests that Bill Cosey is also a "victim" of

In *Paradise*, Morrison is suspicious, and in fact dismissive, of discursively produced gendered (and racialized) categories. As her comments above indicate, patriarchy and matriarchy are both reductive and restrictive forms of representation and thus suggest that they are similar in ideological motivation and objective.

Morrison, then, does not so much condemn Ruby's men as suggest that their strict puritanical mores are rooted, like the Convent women, in fear – fear of change, fear ~~lest~~ they know another realm" (*PS* 301). They are both victims and perpetrators of a particular brand of thinking that is fundamentally debilitating. Morrison's position on both communities' attempts at an Edenic idyll is sympathetic but critical; sympathetic because these two attempts at constructing a paradise are responses to systemic and traumatic oppression, one racial, the other gendered. This makes them unlike white attempts at paradise which are based on prejudice and unsubstantiated fear alone.

The Myth of Racial History

Ruby is thus presented as attempting to alleviate its psychical trauma by mythologizing its history. Morrison notes that ~~mythologizing~~ [history] can end up hurting more than helping." For the Ruby elders, ~~notions~~ of women—particularly about controlling women—left them very vulnerable, precisely because they had romanticized and mythologized their own history. It was frozen, in a sense" (qtd. in Marcus par. 9). Although the history of Ruby is originally that of fifteen families, Steward and Deacon Morgan assume the ~~twinned~~ position of the town's leaders (*PS* 275). As owners of the only bank, they run and control Ruby's financial and commercial welfare. Theirs is a possessive interest in maintaining an idealized static history (of blackness). Born in 1924, the twins ~~heard~~ for twenty years what the previous forty had been like. They listened to, imagined and remembered every single thing because each detail was a jolt of pleasure, erotic as a dream, out-thrilling and more purposeful than even the war they had fought in"

whiteness and is fundamentally human. The narrator explains: ~~You~~ could call him a good bad man, or a bad good man.... He didn't have an S stitched on his shirt and he didn't own a pitchfork. He was an ordinary man ripped, like the rest of us, by wrath and love" (200). Morrison here is critical of notions of feminine innocence and is not unsympathetic to the plight of a black man trying to make it in 1960s (white) America: ~~innocence~~ did not exist because no one had dreamed up hell" (190).

(PS 16). The most obvious way in which Ruby's history is mythologized is through the annual Nativity play in which the story of there being no room at the inn in Bethlehem is enacted so as to parallel Ruby's own history of the Disallowing and sanction their community as sacred.¹¹ Their initial journey westward into Oklahoma, also enacted in the play, mimics that of the biblical Exodus in which the Jews, rejected by the Egyptians, are led by Moses to claim their rightful place as a chosen people.¹² Ironically, the annual Nativity play which seeks to reinforce a biologically shared communal identity actually highlights the revisable, performative nature of identity, especially racialized identities. Patricia and Misner both notice the way in which the play is rewritten in terms of the racial purity of the town's genealogy.

For all its wealth of history, then, the Ruby community, as Misner observes, is characterized by lack. Their attempt to keep history static is actually self-effacement and negates their own histories: —Over and over and with the least provocation, they pulled from their stock of stories tales about the old folks.... But why were there no stories to tell of themselves? About their own lives they shut up. Had nothing to say, pass on. As though past heroism was enough of a future to live by" (PS 161). Misner's phrase, —pass on," recalls the ambiguous ending of *Beloved* which suggests that the story of Sethe, Denver and Beloved —is not a story to pass on" (324). In Misner's argument with Pat, Morrison again explores the question of how best to remember the past. A static history is not sufficient for future generations. The past should not be obsessively rehearsed, but neither should it be neglected. The community of Ruby, fixated on its proud but also

¹¹ The community also names its streets St John, Luke, Mark, Matthew, in accordance with the New Testament Gospels.

¹² This historical period, characterized by the mass movement of blacks westward and northward, is typically referred to as the —Exoduster" movement which reached its peak in the late 1870s. Herbert Gutman terms it the —Great Exodus" and notes that it was —[t]he first *voluntary* migration by southern Afro-Americans." He explains that —Migration had been and would remain a central social experience among Afro-Americans" and the —Great Exodus" recalls —[t]he forced migrations that had accompanied the transatlantic slave trade and the great expansion of the southern plantation system from the Upper to the Lower South." But Gutman also notes the white violence following emancipation that forced African-American voluntary migration. Many African-Americans fled the South in fear of their lives. And a former slave named Tandy is quoted as saying that rural southern blacks were —not drawn by the attractions of Kansas. They are driven by the terrors of Mississippi and Louisiana." See *The Black Family in Slavery and Freedom* (433-38). The —Exoduster" movement, then, is a significant period in African-American history and is also mythologized as a symbol of black resilience and agency. In *Paradise*, this is highlighted in that the community is led to establish Haven by the —man walking away from the palest part of the sky" (97). As Philip Page highlights, —[t]he walking man reinforces the Old Fathers' sense of their divine mission" (646).

narrow and insular history, is a town without a real, viable future. Sam Durrant notes an important distinction between cultural and racial memory:

Cultural memory is a healthy mode of remembrance ... of claiming one's ancestry, in order to shore up one's identity in the present. Racial memory, by contrast, is unhealthy insofar as it is melancholic identification *with* the dead, a life-threatening, other-centred mode of being claimed *by* the dead, a mode of being-for-death. (81)

Ruby's fixation on its racial past is posited as death-in-life. As Read notes, "[t]he men of Ruby actually pass on unresolved trauma, an experience of dehumanizing shame that their stories of heroic achievement deny rather than work through and overcome" (528).

Misner attempts to teach the young people of Ruby "Negro History" and regrets Ruby's neglect of its *African* past: "If you cut yourself from the roots, you'll wither" (*PS* 209). For Misner history must be open, flexible, and regenerative: "There was a whole lot of life before slavery. And we ought to know what it is. If we're going to get rid of that slave mentality, that is." But for Pat, history is monolithically commemorative: "Slavery is our past. Nothing can change that, certainly not Africa" (*PS* 210). Neither Misner's nor Pat's suppositions are incorrect, but Morrison's delineation of Ruby's myopic community implies that history, and indeed humanity, must, of necessity, extend itself.

Ruby citizens participate in what Gauthier terms "*mythic history*" which is "[f]ormulated as much from myth as from historical occurrences" (396). That is, their history is not meaningless but, contrary to their stoic defence of and reliance on it, neither is history closed. Indeed, Pat Best's history project — "a collection of family trees; the genealogies of each of the fifteen families" (*PS* 187) — necessarily interrogates Ruby's particularly oral "*mythic history*": "The town's official story, elaborated from pulpits, in Sunday school classes and ceremonial speeches, had a sturdy public life. Any footnotes, crevices or questions to be put took keen imagination and the persistence of a mind uncomfortable with oral histories." Pat "had wanted proof in documents where possible to match the stories, and where proof was not available she interpreted—freely but, she thought, insightfully because she alone had the required emotional distance" (*PS* 188).

Highlighting the slippage between memory and forgetting, Gauthier argues that Morrison here suggests "the limits of any critical position that overly celebrates the

capacities of the oral. The novel posits history and myth as diachronic realms, and employs storytelling to problematize memory and (particularly oral) narratives as legitimate acts of cultural recovery” (398). Gauthier’s suggestion does not fully take into account Morrison’s nuanced assessment of the relation of the oral and the written. In the dismissive reaction of the townspeople to Pat’s request for documentation we see how her insistence on the written over the oral actually prevents her progress in interrogating history. She alienates the very people (particularly the women) she should include in revising their history as a community. Her idea that she alone has “sufficient emotional distance” is finally questionable. Even Pat’s written history (and Gauthier concedes this) which details the gaps in Ruby’s oral history is fallible.¹³ For although it is written, it is itself based on oral history:

Stories about these fragments, which made up some fifty more, surfaced in the writing compositions of Pat’s students, the gossip and recollections at picnics, church dinners and woman talk over chores and hair preparation.... Then bits of tales emerged like sparks lighting the absences that hovered over their childhoods and the shadows that dimmed their maturity. (*PS* 188-89)

As such, Pat’s history is similarly imaginative. It is based on “bits of tales” which she garners from the community and, “where proof was not available she interpreted.” Stuart Hall warns that “we should not, for a moment, underestimate or neglect the importance of the act of imaginative rediscovery which this conception of a rediscovered, essential identity entails” (“Cultural Identity and Diaspora” 224). History, like *Beloved*’s concept of “memory,” is an imaginative, creative, and repetitive process that resists stasis. This does not negate Ruby’s history, but highlights the extent to which that history is discursively and imaginatively constructed and simultaneously participatory. Pat’s version of history is, as are all histories, subjective and not untainted by her and her

¹³ Gauthier’s assessment of Pat’s history project is complicated. While she argues that ultimately *Paradise* “stakes out nothing less than a politics of truth that rests centrally on Pat’s genealogy” (408), Gauthier concedes that “it is specifically Patricia’s authorship—or her own performative history—by which the novel emphasizes the impossibility of being outside history” (309). Furthermore, Pat’s act of burning the genealogy is in fact “the key to the novel’s sense of historiography, its most articulate pronouncement of the limits of oral and written histories, and at the same time, of the potential of counter history.... Because her genealogy is the most accurate and thorough record of Ruby, burning it relinquishes the verifiable past as a source of history and identity, and paves the way for the unbridled hazardous mythmaking that her silence and the absence of the genealogy only serve to sustain” (411).

family's personal and imagined experiences of and investment in Ruby. Thus, even her version of history is also open to interrogation.

What Henry Louis Gates, Jr. argues about race is also applicable to history. History ~~is~~ must be *read* with painstaking care and suspicion, not imbibed" (*LC* 79). Gates's emphasis on ~~read~~ highlights history as necessitating a deliberate and continuous process of interrogation. Pat's striving for written facts does not render her version of history more objective or truthful but rehearses Ruby's closed and authoritative approach to history (and the present). That Pat burns her history project significantly ~~testifies~~ to the inherent limitations of her approach to history; it signifies an understanding that the ~~families~~ families and power structures in Ruby cannot be determined in such a monologic, deterministic, and authoritative way" (Page 641). Finally, it is the ironically named Lone DuPres who, contrary to Pat, suggests the ambiguity and elusiveness but necessary continuity of communal historical life: ~~she~~ did know something more profound than Morgan memory or Pat Best's history book. She knew what neither memory nor history can say or record: the trick of life and its reason" (*PS* 272).

The Ruby community is rooted, regressively and debilitatingly, in the past. Like the characters of *Jazz* for whom the ~~past~~ past was an abused record with no choice but to repeat itself at the crack" (220), the Oven is the most pertinent sign of Ruby's stasis. The Oven, painstakingly built by the Old Fathers in Haven, is inherited by the Ruby community. It is both a utility and a central communal site and, ~~found~~ found as a head, deep as desire," the Oven, ~~nourished~~ nourished them and monumentalized what they had done" (*PS* 6-7). But with changing times and Ruby's growing commercialization and consumerism, the Oven is soon emptied of meaning. Soane reflects that ~~the~~ Oven had no real value. What was needed back in Haven's early days had never been needed in Ruby.... A utility became a shrine" (*PS* 103). Idealized, memorialized, and monumentalized, the Oven is symbolic of Ruby's static past and equally static present.

Read suggests that the Oven thus symbolizes ~~the~~ heavy burden of their collective history" (532). A dead weight, Dalsgard observes that ~~reified~~ reified and canonized, like the community's exceptionalist self-narrative, [the Oven] has become a signifier emptied of content ... the community has been emptied of identity" (239). Certainly this is why the younger generation of Ruby insists on rereading and revising the Oven's ambiguous

inscription: —... the Furrow of His Brow” (*PS* 86). Significantly lacking a qualifying verb or noun, the older generation choose to read the phrase biblically as —Beware the Furrow of His Brow” (*PS* 86). This conveniently underwrites their rigid historical vision of a sanctified community. But the younger generation, rejecting what they see as the degrading history of slavery, prefer a reading that reflects their contemporary political experience of the Civil Rights era. Destry Beauchamp argues for —Be the Furrow of His Brow” instead, and the youth’s image of a —fist, jet black with red fingernails, painted on the back wall of the Oven” (*PS* 101), is a defiant gesture which links the youth’s struggle for a voice in Ruby with a wider national struggle. As Rob Davidson notes, the —debate surrounding the Oven’s motto involves not merely a question of authority, but also one of authorship” (358). Both generations want to author a version of history that parallels their idealized racial identities. That the Oven’s motto is characterized by linguistic and therefore ideological lack significantly points to the openness of history’s text. Page notes that the Oven’s motto(s), which cannot be reliably determined or authoritatively read, symbolizes —the values Morrison places on multiplicity” (639). Neither Ruby’s nor the nation’s racialized texts of blackness or whiteness is precise or static. They exist instead as revisable discourse.

The Fortunate Fall

That is why, as Page observes, the raid on the Convent —assembles a fortunate fall, a necessary loosening of the repressive bindings of the town’s ideology” (644). I would extend this idea to argue that *both* Ruby and the Convent are subject to the (regenerative) fall that typifies most of Morrison’s novels. Terry Otten notes that in Morrison’s work, the fall —becomes a necessary gesture of freedom and a profound act of self-awareness.” It —assumes the nature of the potentially tragic action, a paradoxical victory and defeat ... each novel describes a fall wrought with destruction that is still morally superior to prolonged self-ignorance and sterile accommodation” (5). In *Paradise*, death is metaphorically and literally a necessary precursor to life. Ruby’s fragile claim to immortality is rocked by the literal death of Save-Marie which, occurring after the incident at the Convent, reveals that —for complicated reasons, the reaper was no longer

barred entry from Ruby” (PS 296). But this is not necessarily an indictment. Lone aptly reads this as regenerative: —“Gd had given Ruby a second chance” (PS 297) and Misner thinks, —mortality may be new to them but birth was not. The future panted at the gate” (PS 306). Indeed, shortly after the attempted murder of the women at the Convent, Deacon assumes full responsibility for his participation and performs an act of penitence — publicly walking barefoot — that symbolizes his psychological and spiritual rebirth.¹⁴ When he speaks to Misner, his words are described as —ingots pulled from the fire by an apprentice blacksmith—hot, misshapen, resembling themselves only in their glow” (PS 301). Morrison here suggests a pre-linguistic expression in which Deacon’s utterance lacks coherency but also transcends the limits of ordinary language.

After breaking ties with his twin brother, Deacon’s memory is, significantly, revised. Ruby’s static history of a homogeneously proud and honourable black people is pierced when Deacon reveals the ugly truth that his grandfather, Zechariah, —was an embarrassment to Negroes and both a threat and a joke to whites” (PS 302). History is no longer mythologized for the purposes of affirming and sustaining an equally mythological black communal and cultural identity. It is Deacon’s story of —his grandfather who walked barefoot for two hundred miles rather than dance” (PS 301) for a couple of white men packing a pistol as his twin brother Tea does, which signals his and Ruby’s path to reformation. Zechariah/Coffee takes a —bullet in his foot instead” (PS 302), and separates from Tea because —[h]e saw something that shamed him.... Not because he was ashamed of his twin, but because the shame was in himself” (PS 303).

Deacon’s similar separation from Steward is a significant moment because it highlights and is motivated by Deacon’s, like Zechariah’s, ability to see his (imperfect) self in the Other. Deacon is haunted by —long remorse” at having —become what the Old Father’s cursed: the kind of man who set himself up to judge, rout and even destroy the needy, the defenceless, the different” (PS 302). He achieves what the community of Ruby apparently cannot; his is a process of realization of the self and the Other (within). In his

¹⁴ Deacon’s act of walking is significant also in that it symbolizes a repudiation of a previously materialistic lifestyle highlighted by his bank business with his brother, his personal property and, most significantly, like *Song of Solomon*’s Mason Dead II, his car. Further, Deacon’s walking recalls the fact that —Only women. Never men ... dragged their sorrow up and down the road between Ruby and the Convent.... But the men never walked the road; they drove it” (270). This suggests Deacon’s re-born self and hints at a gendered equality.

separation from his brother after a lifetime of shared thoughts, Deacon experiences something —exotic to a twin—an incompleteness, a muffled solitude, which took away appetite, sleep, and sound” (*PS* 300-1). This interrogates and implies the limits of identification with a collective. Here, Morrison suggests that acknowledging one’s racialized and gendered Other and otherness is a significant process to achieving (self- and communal) identity. Schur notes that this also

illustrates the fragmentation of self by emphasizing the double bind of identity categories such as race. If blackness is an immutable part of one’s identity (Steward Morgan may exemplify this), then change is impossible. If black identity is constantly under revision, then communal life may be impossible because its foundations are constantly in flux.... Ruby never finally arrives at paradise because the foundations of communal solidarity are always shifting and contested. (294)

Paradise thus acknowledges individual difference and diversity within continuously evolving racialized, cultural, or gendered representation. Page notes that —Deacon’s need to grow on his own beyond his bond with Steward symbolizes the town’s need to grow beyond its confining bond with its own legend.” Like the town, —Deacon moves from a restrictive fusion to a liberating fragmentation” (645).

Ruby’s, the Convent’s, and Deacon’s fragmentation, then, is fundamentally a redemptive act. Paul Gray notes that before this, “[t]he form of love anatomized in *Paradise* is hunger for security, the desire to create perfection in an imperfect world” (2). Such an attempt at utopia, Morrison seems to suggest, inevitably results in exclusion of the Other, but paradoxically reveals the “imperfect” Other within the self. Ruby’s attempts at paradise stumble on the revelation of the fundamental difference *and* similarity of all people. Morrison confirms this in her reference to Piedade whose song at the end of the novel is —breaching age in the company of the other; of speech shared and divided bread smoking from the fire; the unambivalent bliss of going home to be at home—the ease of coming back to love begun” (*PS* 318). The biblical undertone of Piedade’s song suggests the sanctity of community at the same time that it recognizes the significance of human individuality. That is why, even in its ugliness, Misner is able to see the beauty of Ruby. Prompted to remain, he muses, —there was no better battle to

fight, no better place to be than among these outrageously beautiful, flawed and proud people” (PS 306). In its very strangeness and difficulty and specificity, Ruby is worth the effort.

As such, Morrison gives no illusions of a perfect end or future for the town. Save-Marie’s funeral “came as a pause but not a conclusion” (PS 298). Ruby’s residents still insist on trying to “[sanitize] out of existence” (PS 298), through “enhancing, recasting,” and “inventing” misinformation (PS 297) for the traumatic incident at the Convent. Despite Deacon’s confession and remorse, Steward Morgan remains “outrageously prideful” (PS 298). The Convent’s garden is, significantly, characterized by both “blossom and death. Shriveled tomato plants alongside crops of leafy green reseeding themselves with golden flowers ... the mix of neglect and unconquerable growth” (PS 304-5). The future’s ambiguity is illustrated in Misner and Anna Fleetwood’s differing readings of what they “see” in the Convent garden after the event: “Who saw a closed door; who saw a raised window.... Whether through a door needing to be opened or a beckoning window already raised, what would happen if you entered? What would be on the other side? What on earth would it be?” (PS 305).

The future for Ruby is open, as is that of the Convent women who, after mysteriously disappearing, strangely reappear at the novel’s end. Tellingly, the mythological *Piedade* who stands at the ocean’s shore sees “[a]nother ship, perhaps, but different, heading to port, crew and passengers, lost and saved, atremble, for they have been disconsolate for some time. Now they will rest before shouldering the endless work they were created to do down here in Paradise” (PS 318). Dalsgard notes that Morrison here “offers a less abstract version, suggesting Paradise may be also be attained and experienced in everyday terms” (244); that is, not in “heaven” but on earth. Morrison herself explains her motivation for her notion of paradise thus:

I tried to make it possible to think that Paradise was within our imagination.... The thing is, if Paradise had everybody in it, there would be no Paradise at all – that’s because we think of it in terms of seclusion. But if we understood the *planet* to be that place then this is all there is. (qtd in Marcus par. 28)

Morrison's statement recalls Misner's vision of an ideologically inclusive ~~home~~ in relation to which he asks Pat, ~~an~~ "don't you even imagine what it must feel like to have a true home? I don't mean heaven. I mean a real earthly home. Not some fortress you bought and built up and have to keep everybody locked in or out. A real home" (*PS* 213). Misner's statement here, which brings to mind his thoughts of Africa, suggests that the attainment of ~~home~~ as opposed to ~~paradise~~ is possible. But *Paradise* invites us to think of all notions of paradise – including home – and identity in more realistic ways. Home is still exclusive but it is not necessarily static as paradise/utopia is.

Morrison, in *Paradise*, envisages a raceless, genderless home on earth premised on fundamental humanity. By this I do not mean that she sees a future in which race or gender cease to exist but that race, culture, and gender might cease to have the definitive and divisive significance they have historically acquired. Morrison is not naïve about the hard imaginative work that such an idea, or indeed place, requires. The history of her literary struggle with the concepts of race, culture and gender are indicative of this. For Morrison, viewing the planet as an inclusive paradise is a difficult, complex and perpetual process which requires an individual and collective willed effort to achieve. But, because it is imaginable, it is invariably attainable.

CONCLUSION

In this thesis I have shown how race has played, and continues to play, a seminal role in American literature. I have argued, through a close examination of the texts of three eminent nineteenth-century writers, namely, Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, Walt Whitman's *Leaves of Grass*, and Mark Twain's *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, that their canonical work was concerned, through its representation of the "Africanist" African-American presence, with inadvertently or overtly disseminating whiteness as ideological and cultural norm. At the same time, however, I have demonstrated how their work was often fraught with ambivalence and tensions that conveyed a sense of white America's own racial contradictions and insecurities. As David Roediger argues and I have attempted to show, "[i]t is not merely that whiteness is oppressive and false; it is that whiteness is *nothing but* oppressive and false." Whiteness describes "not a culture but precisely the absence of culture.... It is the empty and therefore terrifying attempt to build identity on what one isn't and on whom one can hold back" (15). That is, this thesis has not been an attempt to vilify whiteness as ideology, culture, or a way of being, but to show how the perpetrators of disseminating whiteness are also its victims. In this way, this thesis has been a response to Toni Morrison's call in *Playing in the Dark* to break the silence surrounding race in nineteenth-century white canonical literature in order to reveal the impact of race on, as well as to show how the African-American presence frequently motivated and enhanced the work of these canonical writers.

Toni Morrison is indubitably America's foremost and most celebrated African-American author, and thus her work, which occupies a central place in an evolving American literary canon, is equally deserving of critical attention in its attempt to articulate an authentic black racial and cultural voice and identity within a hegemonic (white and male) literary establishment. As such, I have examined, in the second part of this thesis, Morrison's own fiction written in response to American "founding" literature's articulation of race and racial identities. What Jeanna Fuston-White observes of *Beloved* is applicable to all of Morrison's work: it "remains oppositional and liberatory work because it confronts head-on the intellectual tradition which has structured Western

thought for centuries ... it breaks down marginality ... it gives a strong, authoritative voice to black culture” (471). But while there is very much to be celebrated ideologically and artistically in her fiction, I have argued that Morrison is herself not exempt from getting caught up in the complex and knotty positions that arise from confronting and articulating issues of race and racial identity.

By examining two of her least critically studied texts, *Tar Baby* and *Paradise*, I have shown how Morrison’s position on black race and culture is not unproblematic. That is, in *Tar Baby*, Morrison appears to suggest the possibility of the retrieval of an essential racial and cultural black (communal) identity and, in this novel, this is presented as a particular responsibility of the African-American woman. But Claudia Tate, in *Psychoanalysis and Black Novels*, notes how the black text often “mediates two broad categories of experience: one is historically racialized and regulated by African American cultural performance [and experience]; the other is the individual and subjective experience of personal desire” (10). Indeed, Morrison’s work, especially her later work, also demonstrates “how the black text negotiates the tension between the public, collective protocols of race and private, individual desire, thereby forming an enigmatic surplus [which] disrupts the novel’s conscious plot about racial/social protest or affirmation” (10, 13). This can be seen to operate in *Tar Baby*. In *Paradise* Morrison appears critical of her own previous (gendered and collective) position. She interrogates instead how the attempt at articulating and asserting an authentic black communal identity is not only problematic in the light of historical attempts to assert (white) racial identity, but has potentially negative consequences for the black community itself, and the (male and female) individuals that comprise it.

This would seem to suggest, then, Morrison’s awareness, in her fiction and personal life, of the changing theories in race and cultural studies as well as the complexities that attend contemporary subjectivity in light of an evolving social and political society. But she does not in this way trivialize the materiality, the real consequences of racial and cultural representation. As Susan Spearey argues of *Beloved*, Morrison’s later fiction appears to “move beyond *contestation* to the formulation of new strategies for understanding identity, history, and agency in more open and less exclusive terms” (173).

What we are offered, then, –is less a politics of blame than a politics of assuming responsibility” (174) in the historical constructions of race.

Certainly, Morrison’s latest novel, *A Mercy* (2008), points towards her evolving position which highlights the social constructedness of race and racial identities in the process of establishing America. *A Mercy*, which is set in the late seventeenth-century and functions as a kind of prelude to *Beloved*, deals with the beginnings of the slave trade in the Americas from both a black and white perspective. While a young slave, Florens, is the novel’s central narratorial voice, *A Mercy* employs a panoply of racial voices to highlight the varied (racialized) personal experiences of the developing institution of slavery (and racism). In *A Mercy*, these voices are skilfully blended and interlinked in order to highlight how easily blurred racial distinctions can be, and to emphasize the essential humanity of all people.

At a memorial ceremony in July 2008 for the survivors and non-survivors of the Middle Passage, Morrison said that *A Mercy* was an opportunity for her to detach ideas about race from the experience of slavery. Despite recent talk of a –post-racial” society, precipitated by America’s election of its first African-American president, she expressed a need for white people to hold a conversation among themselves about slavery. Morrison highlighted that black people did not have exclusive claim to slavery; that slavery is a white heritage as well: –African-Americans don’t own slavery.... It’s not a brand because there were slave masters and there were abolitionists and there were other people who died to see to it that justice was done” (qtd. in McQuary 2). In this way, Morrison envisages a need for inter-racial conversations on how America’s legacy of slavery and, indeed, racism has shaped the country’s socio-political life (and its literature).

In this thesis I have shown how constructions of racial ideologies and identities, of blackness and whiteness, are parallel and contingent. Whiteness and blackness have existed and continue to exist in a dialectal relationship which highlights their interdependency. More significantly, because racial and cultural identities are by their very nature social constructions, albeit with material consequences, they are continuously in flux and under revision.

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