

# "My Mother's Fussing Soliloquies": Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* and Shakespeare

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## Abstract

While Toni Morrison famously rejects the idea that Western authors have influenced her work, *The Bluest Eye* mentions Ophelia in a way that suggests parallels between Shakespeare's victim and Pecola Breedlove. Opposing song, as a form of collective sharing of information that heals the individual, to what this essay identifies as an isolating "soliloquy sense of self," Morrison uses *Hamlet* as a foil in order to critique Western tragedy. In the process, however, she raises questions about the limitations of Shakespearean drama and of the novel as her own artistic medium. The essay also considers, by extension, Morrison's indictment of readers as selectively appropriating African American culture when they pursue traces of *Hamlet* in *The Bluest Eye*. Vernacular African American culture, in particular the blues, emerges as a powerful alternative to the alienation imposed by Hamlet's "soliloquy sense" of the self.

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*And I, at least, do not intend to live without Aeschylus or William Shakespeare, or James, or Twain or Hawthorne, or Melville . . . — Toni Morrison, "Unspeakable Things Unspoken"*

Toni Morrison, describing Sethe, Beloved, and Denver from *Beloved*, remarks, "But when they say it, and hear it, and look at it, and share it, they are not only one, they're two and three, and four, you know? The collective sharing of information heals the individual — and the collective" (Taylor-Guthrie 1994, 248).<sup>1</sup> Morrison's writing examines this collective sharing as well as the repeated motif in African American folklore and literature that traces a movement from isolation to community. In this light, the following essay will argue that *The Bluest Eye* enacts a complex journey from soliloquy to song, from an isolation that characterizes the modern and postmodern subject and narrative voice to song, especially jazz and the blues.<sup>2</sup> I will also suggest that, while Morrison's writing avoids overt literary references, there are significant connections between *The Bluest Eye* and Shakespearean tragedy, especially *Hamlet*.<sup>3</sup> Morrison alludes to

Shakespeare twice in her novels. One of those instances is in *The Bluest Eye*, where Ophelia is mentioned, suggesting parallels between her and Pecola Breedlove. Examining parallels between characters in *The Bluest Eye* and Shakespeare's characters who share similar traits, especially as we focus also on differences between these characters and Shakespeare's, is a useful way to consider how Morrison's novels offer a critique of Western tragedy. Morrison writes against what I will term a "soliloquy sense of self."<sup>4</sup> In doing so, she raises questions about the limitations of Shakespeare's work and the limits of her own medium.

It is not new to say that Toni Morrison's novels overtly challenge racism and that her works question Western concepts of reality. Like the music of John Coltrane, Morrison's corpus sets out to debunk certain Western assumptions while striving for more complex, in-depth, and useful insights into the plural human condition. It is another question, though, to ask how far her work goes toward critiquing Western aesthetics and in what ways Morrison is revising certain dominant images, techniques, and values of the novel. I will argue that *The Bluest Eye* attacks hierarchal structures associated with Western aesthetics and challenges the concept of the isolated hero/artist, as epitomized by Hamlet, while at the same time wrestling with just how valid this critique might be. More important, I will also suggest that by thinking about the Shakespearean aspects of Morrison's work, we see in sharper relief the African American, or better, vernacular-based, aspects of her writing, "the specific culture that interests [Morrison]," as well as how her work is both part of yet distinct from the Western tradition (Morrison 1984a, 387).

Morrison has expressed her difficulties with critics who evaluate her work based on Western assumptions that can obscure a novel's "anchors" in the African American community:<sup>5</sup>

If someone says I write like Joyce, that's giving me a kind of credibility I find offensive. It has nothing to do with my liking Joyce. I do, but the comparison has to do with nothing out of which I write. I find such criticism dishonest because it never goes into the work on its own terms. It comes from some other place and finds content outside of the work and wholly irrelevant to it to support the work. (Taylor-Guthrie 1994, 160-61)

Yet sensitivity to how Morrison's work mediates between what can be called Western culture — for our purposes, Shakespeare — and African American culture can help us understand more thoroughly the assumptions behind both. I submit, in other words, that this is one way to go "into a work on its own terms." Not only does Ophelia's presence in the *The Bluest Eye* suggest parallels between her and Pecola Breedlove, but in the same passage we also learn that Shakespeare's *Hamlet* has been a part of Soaphead Church's education (Morrison 1994a, 169). Soaphead Church will be examined too, since his Western education has, in part, trapped him in soliloquy. An analysis of

Pecola and Soaphead demonstrates that from the start of Morrison's career she has been concerned with developing a more plural sense of what it means to be human, an alternative to Western aesthetics that eventually leads to "the key, the code, the sound that broke the back of words" in *Beloved*, that moment when Sethe is rescued from her isolation by communal song (Morrison 1987, 261).

There are now many varied and thought-provoking studies that help us understand how intertextuality expands and complicates the relationship between texts. Novy's study of women writers who "engage" with Shakespeare stresses the transformative nature of these appropriations, and also of feminist rereadings of Shakespeare. Similarly, for Whitney *Hamlet* can accommodate "a range of desires, needs, and purposes of its audience, and supplies equipment for living"; thus the play encourages a pluralist agenda with significant ethical implications (Whitney 2006, 7). Likewise, as Juvan writes, intertextuality helps us question the assumption that someone or something owns meaning, and that meaning flows in one direction: "in place of . . . unidirectional streams [we now have] multidirectional interweavings of threads . . . plurality and anarchy, but especially interaction — not only connection of the text with authorial masterpieces of the past but also with contemporary and anonymous discourses" (Juvan 2008, 3).<sup>6</sup> For my purposes, just as Morrison's novels argue that significant meaning exists primarily between characters and is not possessed by any one character (hence the resistance to soliloquy and the focus on music's potentially communal nature in *The Bluest Eye*), so plural meaning also exists between texts, authors, and cultures in ever-shifting relationships to each other, as Bakhtin argues.<sup>7</sup> Morrison's novels are many-voiced, hybrid products of hybrid culture. Morrison's relationship to Shakespeare, as I will present it, is a dialogue; part of her text is "talking back to Shakespeare," as Christy Desmet describes the process of appropriation (Desmet 1999, 11). Part of this talking back is a critique of the solipsistic and hierarchal elements of Western tragedy from the perspective of vernacular culture, which is perhaps a semi-anonymous discourse. Thinking about *Hamlet* and *The Bluest Eye* together helps us see from a different perspective the power of African American vernacular culture as it appears in references to music in the novel.<sup>8</sup> *Hamlet* is not central to understanding *The Bluest Eye*, but instead emerges as a kind of foil to help us think about elements of *The Bluest Eye* that emerge primarily from African American culture.

Following the notion that this essay is itself an appropriation, I also want to keep in mind the baggage I bring to this process. I prefer reading multiple works by one author against each other and quoting copiously from the texts in question. On one level, I assume that Morrison's novels are about the process of their own creation, and also about the author's relationship to her reading

audience. In a kind of call and response between me and *The Bluest Eye*, my aim is to stay open to what that text may be saying even as I, as all interpreters do, also impose various meanings on the novel. I will return to this problem later, and suggest that in this respect *The Bluest Eye* anticipates problems with its audience, an audience that includes its interpreters.

### Losing Voice in Shakespeare and Morrison

A number of Shakespeare's tragic heroines, including Lavinia, Portia, Ophelia, Desdemona, and finally Cordelia, are victims. Most of these women are tortured or die in ways that suggest suppression of their voices. Lavinia's tongue is cut out, Ophelia drowns, Desdemona is strangled, and Cordelia is hanged. Lavinia's and Portia's deaths, earlier figures in Shakespeare's development, are treated almost as afterthoughts by the male characters, while Desdemona's and Cordelia's deaths force Othello and Lear into various levels of insight or recognition. Likewise, Lady Macbeth's death, arguably, leads to Macbeth's final soliloquy. Feminist criticism has helped us examine this pattern, and, indeed, Guita Baines in *Song of Solomon* offers a definition of tragedy that describes such works reflecting something "unnatural" in Western culture: "They know they are unnatural. Their writers and artists have been saying it for years. Telling them they are unnatural, telling them they are depraved. They call it tragedy. In the movies they call it adventure. It's just depravity they try to make glorious, natural" (Morrison 1977, 157). Later, I will discuss what might be "unnatural" about Shakespearean tragedy. For now, I will note a similar pattern in Toni Morrison's novels, which examine the deaths of a number of young women while also showing how that loss provokes recognition by the characters and insight into themselves and their pasts.<sup>9</sup> This is one result of Hagar's death in *Song of Solomon*, the death of Beloved, and the death of Dorcas in *Jazz*. Sula's death, partially caused by Ajax's rejection, and Jadine's flight back to Europe in *Tar Baby* are more complex examples of this pattern. Sula's death leads to Nel's recognition of their bond in the book's last passage, apparently long after Sula has died.<sup>10</sup> Jadine does not die, but does leave, and Son ends pursuing his "ancient properties" (Morrison 1977, 308). *Paradise* begins with another variation — "They shot the white girl first" (Morrison 1998a, 3) — and ends with a profound recognition on the part of one brother, Deacon, and an equally profound denial on the part of the other, Steward. The first and perhaps most direct example of this pattern is Pecola in *The Bluest Eye*. Though she does not die, Pecola, like Ophelia, goes mad, overwhelmed by forces beyond her control, including sexual assault.<sup>11</sup> Ophelia's precursor in Shakespeare is the raped, mutilated, and silenced Lavinia in Shakespeare's early and perhaps first tragedy, *Titus Andronicus*; in Morrison's work, similarly, the most sustained violence is done to a young girl in her first novel.

Pecola does not complete the journey from isolated soliloquy to communal song, as Milkman Dead will in *Song of Solomon*, but *The Bluest Eye* points the way for such transcendence, albeit complicated and qualified by conflicting forces, in Morrison's later novels. In *The Bluest Eye* Morrison also examines her role as a novelist writing from a position both inside and outside of the Western tradition, working with what Richard Wright, and more recently Henry Louis Gates and John Edgar Wideman, define as an empowering rather than debilitating double-consciousness.<sup>12</sup> Morrison's creative process necessarily involves self-examination, especially of the values inherent in narrative strategies that situate the reader in a character's isolated thoughts, and how these moments might reflect the writer's and narrator's isolation and resulting attempts to connect to others when creating a story. On the one hand, Morrison strives to make a space so that the reader can be a cocreator with the writer, as she remarks:

. . . two people are busy making the story. One is me and one is you and together we do that, we invent it together and I just hold your hand while you're in the process of going there and hearing it and sharing it. . . . An artist, for me, a black artist for me, is not a solitary person who has no responsibility to the community. It's a totally communal experience. (Taylor-Guthrie 1994, 231)

On the other hand, Morrison's work often explores the discrete consciousness and thoughts of characters outside of their contact with others. Again, Morrison is not concerned with drawing phrases, images, or details from Shakespeare's plays. Rather, in *The Bluest Eye* we find elements of *Hamlet* that function as a necessary step towards developing her version of African American song, a musical understanding of the self that resists skepticism and seeks to redefine love.

In *The Bluest Eye*, Western literature is part of the life and problems of Soaphead Church. His development is described in terms that offer a range of references unique in Morrison's work:

Little Elihue learned everything he needed to know well, particularly the fine art of self-deception. He read greedily but understood selectively, choosing bits and pieces of other men's ideas that supported whatever predilection he had at that moment. Thus he chose to remember Hamlet's abuse of Ophelia, but not Christ's love of Mary Magdalene; Hamlet's frivolous politics but not Christ's serious anarchy. He noticed Gibbon's acidity, but not his tolerance, Othello's love for the fair Desdemona, but not Iago's perverted love for Othello. The works he admired the most were Dante's; those he despised the most were Dostoyevsky's. For all his exposure to the best minds of the Western world, he allowed only the narrowest interpretations to touch him. He responded to his father's controlled violence

by developing hard habits and a soft imagination. A hatred of, and fascination with, any hint of decay. (Morrison 1994a, 169)

Ophelia, Hamlet, Iago, Othello, Desdemona, and Caliban are the only Shakespearean characters mentioned in Morrison's novels published thus far. All but Caliban (*Tar Baby*, Morrison 1982b, 106) are mentioned in this passage, where Soaphead's education emerges as one source of the madness and decay that shape him. The "fine art of self-deception" is cultivated by his family's distrust of their lineal African blood, and a need to think superiorly comes from Western culture. Soaphead (a name that literally describes his tight pomaded curls but also suggests a whitewashed brain) sees himself as better than other blacks because he is derived from "a Sir Whitcomb, some decaying British nobleman" (167), a name that also links whiteness ("whit" as white) and Western culture to decay. The name "Soaphead," understood from a folk perspective, also suggests someone who has rubbed his head against too many books and lost common sense. The emphasis here is on those attitudes that establish false hierarchies and pernicious differences; from Soaphead's perspective Hamlet can abuse Ophelia because men are better than women, and Othello is made better by loving a white woman. But Soaphead misses how Christ's anarchy, Iago's love for Othello, or Dostoyevsky's work complicates or breaks down fallacious racial and gender distinctions.

In Soaphead's mind, Dante's levels of hell uphold the distinctions between good and ill that he craves, providing his madness with a rigorous order: "But his neatness, the neatness of Dante, was the orderly sectioning and segregating of all levels of evil and decay" (Morrison 1994a, 172-73). Soaphead's life is described in terms that suggest baroque music: "his personality was an arabesque: intricate, symmetrical, balanced, tightly constructed — except for one flaw. The careful design was marred occasionally by a rare but keen sexual craving" (166). This tight pattern has damaged Soaphead because it separates him from others and prevents self-confrontation, but also provides an order in which he can survive. Western culture is presented as a way to arrange his decay, or rather, as offering an order for Soaphead's life that covers the decay that occasionally peeks out. Soaphead's education sees beauty associated with Western culture as the primary value, but paradoxically these ideas also lead to an unhealthy fascination with filth. Here Morrison engages a question that will be taken up in her later works: apart from the fear and self-loathing that contribute to racism, is there something in the hierarchal nature of Western aesthetics itself that, directly and indirectly, seeks to justify racist behavior? If Western culture is disturbed by an Africanist presence, does it compensate by a need for overt symmetry in artistic forms that, depending upon the interpretation, can support false racial distinctions?<sup>13</sup> As in Morrison's later works, *The Bluest Eye* attacks ordering systems that are based on a need to assert superiority and suggests

that these systems lead to isolation and decay, both significant problems in the world of *Hamlet*. Could the soliloquy itself, if it helps us to romanticize a character thinking and struggling alone, signal a need to try to make beautiful and "natural" attitudes that increase our sense of isolation and alienation, paralleling Guitar Baines's suggestions about Western tragedy? To the degree that Morrison's novels try to capture the workings of individual consciousness outside of interaction with others, could her medium also risk solipsism, decay, and a tendency toward problematic hierarchal thinking? Since the novel developed in Western culture and springs from the isolated consciousness suggested by soliloquy, to what degree does Shakespearean soliloquy set in motion and make "natural" the kind of isolation that Morrison simultaneously deploys and questions with a character like Soaphead Church?<sup>14</sup> Are Soaphead's struggles, on one level, an allegory that suggests problems with Morrison's own medium?

These questions are raised but not answered by *The Bluest Eye*. We can, however, be more certain about the specifics of Soaphead's problems and his links to Western culture. A combination of Western aesthetics, racism as unconscious self-hatred, and a father who enforced such ideas and impulses help make Soaphead Church into an isolated Prospero figure, trading in magic based upon his self-created superiority. Thus, Soaphead becomes a suitable figure to grant Pecola blue eyes; he believes in the beauty, order, and superiority of Western culture, while remaining, for the most part, blinded by what might be described as a Western hubris regarding what is awry in his own life.<sup>15</sup> His criticism of God's inability to sympathize with Pecola and give her blue eyes is another example of Soaphead Church's hubris (Morrison 1994a, 180), and also plays on our own desire to avoid any implication in her abuse by placing blame elsewhere. Soaphead is a self-named "misanthrope" (164), repulsed by signs of bodily decay but equally fascinated with worn objects. Such objects serve as his substitute for human relationships, "as though his disdain of human contact had converted itself into a craving for things humans had touched" (165). His occasional sexual energy is channeled toward fondling small girls, since they remind him least of his possible homosexuality and have few hints of decay. The activity is "associated in his mind with cleanliness. Soaphead was what one might call a very clean old man" (167).

But such a harsh reading of Soaphead Church is only one side of the story. As is typical of Morrison's work, the temptation to judge a character harshly is complicated by that character's past. It is also complicated by this paradox: judging Soaphead means applying hierarchal values or thinking that resembles, through the need to establish differences that oversimplify and thus misunderstand a figure, his own racism. Instead of simply leaning on dichotomies that pit

Western culture starkly against non-Western or vernacular cultures, Morrison's writing complicates dichotomies and thus our position as interpreters.<sup>16</sup> Morrison writes:

In exploring the social and domestic aggression that could cause a child to literally fall apart, I mounted a series of rejections, some routine, some exceptional, some monstrous, all the while trying hard to avoid the complicity in the demonization process Pecola was subjected to. That is, I did not want to dehumanize the characters who trashed Pecola and contributed to her collapse. ("Afterword," *The Bluest Eye*, Morrison 1994a, 211)

On the one hand, as the earlier passage notes, Soaphead "chose" problematic aspects of Western culture that support racist hierarchies; on the other hand, he had been trained to believe these things from an early age, been victimized himself by a violent, partially crazed, disciplinarian father, and endured the absence of a mother who died at his birth.<sup>17</sup> Cholly's mother is also absent, and Pecola's rape at his hands is partly the result of what is in effect Cholly's rape by white men (Morrison 1994a, 147-48). For Soaphead, a combination of conditioning and choice lead to the hubris, isolation, and madness that hold his life together.

In other words, while Soaphead Church's character invites a critique of Western aesthetics, his complex character makes it hard to tell how far that critique extends. Is it Western culture itself that is rotting and the source of the disease that contributes to Pecola's destruction, as the description of Sir Whitcomb, Soaphead's ancestor and a "decaying British nobleman," argues? Or is the problem more how Soaphead, as well as the black and white communities, choose to deploy and order their lives through these influences? The question is not easy to answer, nor is it easy to tell the degree of choice a character such as Soaphead has for his actions. For our purposes, we can also ask if it is Shakespeare's works themselves, rather, that are a problem, or is it more how that work is reinterpreted, appropriated, and used by subsequent cultures?<sup>18</sup> Who can tell the dancer from the dance? Soaphead's harsh judgment of God for failing to give Pecola blue eyes (Morrison 1994a, 178-82) exposes the baseless fabric of judgments that grow from fear and abuse, showing that judgment can be a mask for creating false hierarchies and shifting blame. This is Lear's painful insight as he speaks to the blind Gloucester (*King Lear*, 4.6.148-170; Shakespeare 1997). In plain terms, our attempts to judge Soaphead and Western culture are complicated by a counter-attitude in *The Bluest Eye* that makes us constantly question the grounds upon which we try to make such distinctions.

### Judging in *The Bluest Eye*

Judgment is a preeminent issue in *The Bluest Eye*, especially if we consider where Shakespeare's work might fit in this process of creating or supporting an aesthetics partially based on hierarchies that can exclude or demonize others. The accepted contemporary argument, made with Caliban in *The Tempest*, is that Shakespeare, through Prospero, betrays anxiety about racial distinctions, but finally, accepts such differences (Baker 1986; Nixon 1987). There is a parallel anxiety in *The Bluest Eye*. In the paragraph quoted above, the narrative voice is uncertain about how to judge Soaphead. When the narrator notes that Soaphead chose to remember Hamlet's "abuse" of Ophelia and his "frivolous" politics, do these two words refer to Soaphead's judgment of Hamlet's behavior or to the narrator's judgment of Soaphead's misconstrued view of white culture? Syntactically, the narrator's attitude toward Soaphead seems to be mixed with Soaphead's own misconstrued choices. Thus, judging Soaphead's behavior is no easy task. We cannot tell how far the narrator goes toward subjecting Soaphead to a version of what Soaphead inflicts on others.

The act of judging in *The Bluest Eye* is complicated further by the idea that the narrator here is not, or does not seem to be, Claudia MacTeer. We can also ask if the ambiguity regarding the narrator's judgment of Soaphead is related to the book's conclusion. As Duvall points out, Soaphead's harsh judgment against God for not noticing Pecola connects to the now mature Claudia MacTeer's indictment of all for Pecola's destruction (Duvall 1997, 250): "All of us — all who knew her — felt so wholesome after we cleaned ourselves on her . . . Her inarticulateness made us believe we were eloquent" (Morrison 1994a, 205). The cleaning relates both audience and narrator back to Soaphead's own mad obsessions with cleanliness and decay. Does this also mean that the narrator and the reader might, like Soaphead, embrace a version of Western aesthetics that depends on damaging hierarchal thinking? The phrase "all who knew her" implicates Claudia, the novel's black and white communities, the eloquent writer of the story ("Her inarticulateness made us believe we were eloquent"), and readers of *The Bluest Eye* in Pecola's destruction. How much is this destructive behavior toward others based on Western aesthetics that can contribute to self-deception by imposing a false order on the world?

In a similar sense, is Shakespeare the "all-knowing master" of Western culture "who had given each one a cloak of ugliness to wear" (Morrison 1994a, 39), a master that Morrison must refuse or at least question? Or, again, is the problem more that Shakespeare has been constructed by others to serve racist ends? Like Hamlet in his soliloquies, the narrative voice of *The Bluest Eye* moves by turns between self-indictment and the indictment of others. We see an attack on those who create racial and cultural hierarchies, but an attack that itself risks setting up its own set of problematic distinctions.<sup>19</sup> Just as Soaphead is full of casual and quick judgments based on

prejudice, the narrative voice that locates us in his mind thinks similarly. It is an articulate voice that, like Soaphead himself, relies upon judgments that are too neat and clean. There are similar problems with the isolated narrator's perceptions and judgments of others in *Jazz*.

In general terms, "Hamlet's abuse of Ophelia" (Morrison 1994a, 169) plots a relationship to, rather than shows a direct or clean identification with, Pecola who, like Ophelia, is abused by those who love her. Similar to Ophelia, Pecola is rejected for reasons she cannot understand. Ophelia's mad songs and Polonius' cryptic remarks suggest incest and possible pregnancy as a cause for her madness and death, a death that the gravedigger, and apparently others, see as a suicide (*Hamlet*, 5.1.1-29).<sup>20</sup> There is little doubt that her madness is caused partially by sexual abuse, though who might have inflicted it remains unclear, leaving the sense that many figures are directly and indirectly implicated in Ophelia's death. Similarly, in *The Bluest Eye* Morrison, as her comment in the "Afterword" noted above suggests, is careful to distribute responsibility for Pecola's madness and destruction among Cholly, Pauline, Yacobowski the storekeeper, and Geraldine, as well as the entire community and the readers of her book: "All of our waste which we dumped on her and which she absorbed" (Morrison 1994a, 205).<sup>21</sup>

The depictions of Ophelia and Pecola center upon natural and seasonal images, especially flowers, which reflect, among other things, the cycles of nature unnaturally interrupted. Pecola's demise is connected to flower imagery by Claudia MacTeer:

Quiet as it's kept, there were no marigolds in the fall of 1941. We thought, at the time, that it was because Pecola was having her father's baby that the marigolds did not grow. A little examination and much less melancholy would have proved to us that our seeds were not the only ones that did not sprout; nobody's did. Not even the gardens fronting the lake showed marigolds that year. (Morrison 1994a, 5)

And also:

For years I thought my sister was right; it was my fault. I had planted them too far down in the earth. It never occurred to either of us that the earth itself might have been unyielding. We had dropped our seeds in our own little plot of black dirt just as Pecola's father had dropped his seeds in his own plot of black dirt. Our innocence and faith were no more productive than his lust or despair. What is clear now is that of all of that hope, fear, lust, love, and grief, nothing remains but Pecola and the unyielding earth. Cholly Breedlove is dead; our innocence too. The seeds shriveled and died; her baby too. (5-6)

Claudia's narration places blame first upon herself and then upon the whole community, the soil in which Pecola's life could not grow. Though it stretches the limits of interpretation, might Pecola be, among other things, a figure for oral culture, where meaning might reside between herself and others in an oral exchange, and thus she, like oral culture, is a seed that cannot grow in a form like the novel? Female characters were rarely the central figure in a tragedy in 1600 (though this soon changed), and *Hamlet* follows this pattern to the extent that Gertrude and Ophelia are marginalized. In a literal sense Pecola grows into a mad and abused figure, but could she stand for Morrison's novel in the sense that a written narrative culture built on soliloquy is not the soil in which a character like Pecola, and a novel as Morrison imagined *The Bluest Eye* could be, can take root and grow?

### Trapped in Soliloquy

I think that through her struggle to depict Pecola, Morrison begins to discover the limitations of "soliloquy narrative." In its initial publication, *The Bluest Eye* was "dismissed, trivialized, and misread" ("Afterword," *The Bluest Eye*, Morrison 1994a, 216) not just because it treated a subject matter that others did not want to recognize (as those in the book dismiss and refuse to recognize Pecola), but also because the book was Morrison's first attempt to "break the back of words," to turn written narrative that values soliloquy and interiority into written narrative that captures the unstable location of meaning between characters. Indeed, Pecola ends the book trapped in her own tortured consciousness, but this is figured as a mad conversation with a "friend" about her blue eyes (194-204). Similarly, Claudia does not end the book delivering a soliloquy, but rather by offering a sermon in the "we" voice. Morrison's choice to have two young girls, Claudia and Frieda, as a counterpoint to Pecola also speaks to her desire to locate meaning between figures. Of course, in Morrison's later works, primarily *Sula*, *Beloved*, and *Love*, working out the precarious meaning that exists between two female figures is, arguably, the central aim.

In madness, Ophelia indirectly scatters blame for her abuse toward others, suggesting that the diseased community of Denmark is at fault: "There's fennel for you, and columbines. There's rue for you, and here's some for me. We may call it herb of grace o' Sundays. O, you must wear your rue with a difference. There's a daisy. I would give you some violets, but they withered all when my father died. They say 'a made a good end'" (*Hamlet*, 4.5.179-84). Here, fennel suggests flattery, columbines thanklessness, rue repentance, and daisies dissembling.<sup>22</sup> Ophelia's imagery repeatedly mixes together four notions: her father's buried body, her own deflowering, accusations toward others, and (for Ophelia as for Morrison's Claudia) self-accusation. As Pecola is infected with self-hatred, expressed through flower imagery when she identifies with and rejects dandelions

(Morrison 1994a, 47, 51), so Ophelia is identified with natural images to suggest her own misplaced culpability in her demise: "There's rue for you and here's some for me." Natural images also suggest memory's confused role in this process and, ironically, unnatural/incestuous relationships for Ophelia and Pecola. The narrative choice of an older Claudia interpreting Pecola's madness at the close of *The Bluest Eye* parallels Laertes' interpretations of Ophelia's remarks. Claudia documents Pecola's madness, fitting thought and remembrance to the abuse she has suffered, as Laertes and others do for Ophelia (*Hamlet*, 4.5.176-77). Pecola's final dialogue about her blue eyes with an imagined other attempts to turn "thoughts and affliction, passion, hell itself" to "favor and prettiness," as Laertes describes Ophelia's madness (4.5.186-87).

The irony is that Pecola, desperate and isolated, admires that which destroys her, and like Ophelia, gains an assertive voice only when she is trapped in her own madness. For Morrison and Shakespeare, the initial silencing of both characters is crucial to their destruction. Both figures break their silence with a madness that exposes their suffering to others (though Pecola is exposed to readers only), while at the same moment the madness closes them off from a human exchange that could help them to heal. In this respect, both characters are trapped in soliloquy. Ophelia resorts to songs, and Pecola to an imagined other. In both cases, their "nothing is more than matter" (*Hamlet*, 4.5.173): meaning is placed between Ophelia and others, and again, between the character of Pecola and the reader. Yet this meaning cannot effect healing or much understanding, as it primarily transmits grief and confusion. Pecola's madness, presented as a conversation, suggests both the possibilities in oral culture for a healing exchange and the impossibility of such an exchange taking place in this instance, in explicit contrast with the healing that seems to take place among Beloved, Sethe, and Denver (Morrison 1994a, 214-17).

Ophelia literally drowns, as witnessed by Gertrude. In *The Bluest Eye*, Mrs. MacTeer symbolically stabs Pecola with a "fussing soliloquy" (Morrison 1994a, 24) for drinking too much milk, which presumably is Pecola's way of making herself white. As Mrs. MacTeer takes Pecola into the bathroom following her first menstruation, Claudia asks, "You think she is going to drown her?" (31). Pauline, Pecola's mother, is also connected to drowning through her club foot. She has "a way of lifting the bad foot as though she were extracting it from little whirlpools that threatened to pull it under" (110). Pecola's part as a seed suffocating in bad soil reinforces the novel's drowning imagery. Gertrude reports in detail Ophelia's drowning, yet strangely takes no action as she watches her die (*Hamlet*, 4.7.165-82), and her position as passive witness to Ophelia's death connects Gertrude to the audience, implicating us in the drowning. Similarly, Morrison, discussing *The Bluest Eye*'s opening passage, writes: "If the conspiracy that the opening words announce is entered into by the reader, then the book can be seen to open with its close: a speculation on the disruption

of 'nature' as being a social disruption with tragic individual consequences in which the reader, as part of the population of the text, is implicated" ("Afterword," *The Bluest Eye*, Morrison 1994a, 214). Shakespeare, of course, sometimes marks tragic destruction with disruptions in nature, and relates those in madness to nature; thus Ophelia (like Lear in madness) is draped in nature, "fantastic garlands" that signal her desperation. Ophelia's drowning death is also marked by song:

She chanted snatches of old lauds,  
As one incapable of her own distress,  
Or like a creature native and indued  
Unto that element.

We do not hear these songs because the scene is, again, narrated through Gertrude (4.7.176-79). Likewise, our last look at Pecola is mediated through the now-mature voice of Claudia, who now understands her own implication in Pecola's destruction.

Both Morrison and Shakespeare foreground a passive audience's perspective toward death so that we, like Gertrude, are as fascinated by the details of these two drownings. It is clear here and in Morrison's later works, especially *Jazz*, that she is acutely aware of what it means to write what might be termed a "killing novel," as Shakespeare, arguably, was aware of his implication in writing a "killing play." As Sigurd Burkhardt writes about Shakespeare, "A tragedy — to define it very simply — is a *killing poem*; it is designed toward the end of bringing a man to some sort of destruction. And the killer is, quite literally, the poet; it is he, and no one else, who devises the deadly plot; it is he, and no one else, who must in some sense accept responsibility for it" (1968, 15). Burkhardt suggests further that a writer of such works asks, "What am I doing when I invent, or reinvent, a mechanism designed to bring about a man's destruction. In the name of what, for the sake of what, do I do this? And even assuming the necessity of doing it, how well do I do it?" (16). Morrison's works repeatedly engage similar questions, and in *The Bluest Eye*, the narrator is the focal figure for wrestling with these issues. In this sense, the writer does not just present death but also accepts responsibility for it, while still questioning its larger meaning, the "why" of Pecola's destruction that must follow an analysis of the "how" (Morrison 1994a, 7). So while *The Bluest Eye* questions the hierarchal, individualistic, and male hero-centered thrust of Shakespearean tragedy, at the same time, like those plays, the novel also interrogates the causes of the main character's destruction.

A crucial difference is that while Shakespeare's play implicates the audience by indirection, Claudia directly indicts the audience. In this sense, *The Bluest Eye* comments upon Shakespearean tragedy, and Morrison's novel offers a more powerful critique than *Hamlet* does of a society that

destroys women. Indeed, in some respects *The Bluest Eye* is less about the character destroyed and more about the society and culture that permits and encourages such violence, especially as others erect their identity upon such vulnerable figures, as Claudia's final indictment makes clear. Similarly, though any answer is highly speculative, critics have asked whether or not Shakespeare created Ophelia to make Hamlet look stronger (Showalter 1994, 220).<sup>23</sup> Reconsidering *Hamlet* from the perspective of *The Bluest Eye*, we can ask to what degree Hamlet's identity, in part, is built upon Ophelia's demise. Hamlet declares his name, "This is I, Hamlet, the Dane" (*Hamlet*, 5.1.244-245), at her funeral, as though from that point on, when he has no more soliloquies, he knows who he is and what he must do. Morrison points the finger more directly at both herself as a writer and at the reader: "We honed our egos on her, padded our characters with her frailty, and yawned in the fantasy of our strength" (Morrison 1994a, 205). Hamlet's powerful remark in his first soliloquy — "frailty thy name is woman" — is, in part, a projection of his own frailty and insecurity. Morrison makes it clear that our strength reveals itself as weakness to the extent that it participates in abusing Pecola and invites us to consider how writing about Pecola may itself be a problematic appropriation. Both Ophelia and Pecola offer others the possibility of a "comfortable evil to prevent [our] knowing what we could not bear to know" (180). Morrison's novel shows what Shakespeare's play hints: we hide from our limitations and mask our insecurities by abusing others. This is a concern that will receive more attention when in *Beloved*, Morrison examines racism in the context of antebellum slavery.

### From Soliloquy to Song

While some of Morrison's female characters, especially Pecola, resemble Shakespeare's heroines as they struggle with forces beyond their control, *The Bluest Eye* also suggests a possible solution to Pecola's madness, a solution that gestures toward Morrison's development as a writer and that helps us begin to understand how song and the influence of African American culture substantially differentiate her work from Shakespearean tragedy. In *The Bluest Eye*, we see the search for an as yet unrealized idiom that will transform a character's isolation and unexpressed suffering into a song that might make life coherent by reconnecting that character to others. Claudia describes her mother thus:

My mother's fussing soliloquies always irritated and depressed us. They were interminable, insulting, and although indirect (Mama never named anybody, just talked about folks and *some* people) extremely painful in their thrust. She would go on like that for hours, connecting one offense to another until all of the things that chagrined her were spewed out. Then, having told everybody and everything off, she would burst into song and sing the

rest of the day. But it was such a long time before the singing part came. In the meantime, our stomachs jellying and our necks burning, we listened, avoided each other's eyes, and picked toe jam or whatever. (Morrison 1994a, 24)

In this passage, an evolution that begins with soliloquy, perfected as a form of private complaint by Shakespeare in *Hamlet*, and ends in song is analogous to both Morrison's own development as a writer and the possible salvation of her characters in some of her later works. *The Bluest Eye* is, on one level, a private complaint with an extremely painful thrust, a soliloquy that, similar to Hamlet's own vacillation between self-attack and his attacks on others, by turns indicts both the audience and the writer.<sup>24</sup> Like Shakespearean soliloquy delivered to an audience in the theater, these private complaints are also public utterances; they are concerned with moving away from isolation and locating meaning between an individual and an audience.

The novel ends with Claudia MacTeer's final accusation, in which she, like her mother, "told everybody and everything off." But *The Bluest Eye* is also searching for a song that heals the anger expressed through and the damage resulting from acts of violent, frustrated, or misdirected love: "Misery colored by the greens and blues in my mother's voice took all the grief out of the words and left me with the conviction that pain was not only endurable, it was sweet" (Morrison 1994a, 24).<sup>25</sup> Indeed, Pecola drowns in madness at the end of the novel, but in the first chapter, after Claudia's mother discovers that Pecola has had her first menstruation and fills a tub to wash both her and her stained clothes, the tension is relieved when "The water gushed, and over its gushing we could here the music of my mother's laughter" (32). The shock of Pecola's first period and the isolation and pain that it brings her is perhaps cured by musical laughter, even while Claudia's description suggests the drowning and emotional death Pecola will eventually experience.

Later in the novel, when describing Cholly, Pecola's father, Morrison writes:

The pieces of Cholly's life could become coherent only in the head of a musician. Only those who talk their talk through the gold curved metal, or in the touch of black and white rectangles and taut skins and strings echoing from wooden corridors, could give true form to his life. Only they would know how to connect the heart of a red watermelon to the asafetida bag to the muscadine to the flashlight on his behind to the fists of money to the lemonade in a Mason jar to a man called Blue and come up with what all of that meant in joy, in pain, in anger, in love, and give it its final and pervading ache of freedom. (Morrison 1994a, 159)

The pieces of Cholly's life are best understood in a song that connects his joy and his pain. But in the overt acknowledgment that his life "could *only* become coherent in the head of a musician" and the implicit recognition that a novel cannot describe Cholly's life, Morrison paradoxically does make that life more coherent to readers. It is as though by recognizing what a novel cannot do, one can begin to do it. Morrison describes the writing of *The Bluest Eye* with a similar paradox, saying it was the effort to "shape a silence while breaking it" ("Afterword," *The Bluest Eye*, Morrison 1994a, 215). Pecola, like Ophelia, is left trapped in a madness in which she speaks only to herself — trapped, if you will, in a mad soliloquy that nonetheless attempts to establish meaning between herself and another. If characters can be saved in Morrison's works, however, perhaps their private anger and pain must be shaped into the prose equivalent of music, a personal song that leads to an exchange with others without diminishment of a character's private complaint. Meaning that was trapped within is remade between characters as Morrison explores that complex, fragile, intersubjective space that, often enough, we encounter as we experience music.

Just as Cholly's life "could only become coherent in the head of a musician," Pauline listens in church to "a woman named Ivy who seemed to hold in her mouth all the sounds of Pauline's soul. Standing apart from the choir, Ivy sang the dark sweetness that Pauline could not name, she sang the death-defying death Pauline yearned for" (Morrison 1994a, 115). Here song functions according to the paradox familiar from soliloquy. At the same moment that it connects Pauline to Ivy, putting meaning between them, that connection in Pauline's mind reinforces her self-absorption; indeed, she becomes something like an isolated, self-absorbed tragic hero: "the death defying death Pauline yearned for." The song that Cholly sings to Pauline when they first meet is different. It is described as "a kind of city-street music where laughter belies anxiety, and joy is short and straight as the blade of a pocketknife" (114-15). Cholly's blues break through Pauline's soliloquy-like isolation and become the basis for their attraction to one another. In these different senses of song, Morrison's works are not like those of Joyce or Shakespeare, but "like something that has probably only been fully expressed perhaps in music, or in some other culture-gen that survives almost in isolation because the community manages to hold onto it" (Taylor-Guthrie 1994, 152). The blues are as complex as one of Morrison's novels; this music inspires her project because the blues, like her novels, self-consciously mediates between Western and African aesthetics.<sup>26</sup> Morrison's novels explore the communal, collective aspects of human experience that come from the blues and other forms of African American music, and that grow from Africa, where music is crucial to developing a plural sense of what it means to be human. As Christopher Smalls writes, "the reciprocal relationship between individual and community [in African culture] finds

expression in a system of rites and passage; nature may bring a child into the world but only the community can make him fully human" (1987, 20). Smalls, Thompson, and others have shown how music and art connect an individual to both family and community in many African cultures, and how these values are retained in African American culture.<sup>27</sup> Here, the lack of music and art in Pecola's experience speaks to her lack of connection to others, though Morrison's writing also reaches toward these communal African undercurrents even while it examines the cost of their loss.

As I noted previously, *The Bluest Eye* is Morrison's first step in her efforts to transform soliloquy into song, to make private consciousness public in a realm where understanding and resolution reside between characters rather than within a character. This is a movement similarly characterized by a jazz solo, in which an individual musician partially separates from the other musicians and in some instances works through a private vision, a vision that can grow from a dialogue with the other musicians, before rejoining the others. Indeed, like Morrison's novels, in some of its manifestations jazz engages with but also breaks from Western forms as it seeks to reconstitute a new communal idiom, an idiom that, again, has African roots. Morrison more fully realizes what both Zora Neale Hurston and Ralph Ellison also sought. This communal idiom insists that substantial meaning must lie between individuals instead of within a single figure, and must be musical, in many senses of the word. All three writers are skilled at rendering particular versions of the highly interior modern or postmodern voice. But they are not satisfied with what is, in effect, the novel as an heir to Shakespearean soliloquy that risks solipsism.

Of course, in a live musical performance Monk and Coltrane, for example, could play with both a private sense of self (to the extent a solo can engage this) and a communal or a plural sense of the self in terms of playing *with* others, and at the same time mix these things, opening up new spaces in the transitions between them. Morrison's narratives are also concerned with meaning as it shifts between private and communal spaces, in how these realms mix and how we move between them. As she writes of *The Bluest Eye*, "It is a secret between us and a secret that is being kept from us. The conspiracy is both held and withheld, exposed and sustained. In some sense it was precisely what the act of writing the book was: the public exposure of a private confidence" ("Afterword," *The Bluest Eye*, Morrison 1994a, 213). This, in effect, describes the paradox of a stage soliloquy, which similarly invites the audience into a conspiracy with the speaker as a private confidence is offered but at the same time withheld from the other characters.<sup>28</sup> In both, there is great concern with how expression that requires a degree of detachment from others must also be located between actor and audience, or between a figure in a novel and a reader.

James Baldwin's remark, "Love takes off the masks we fear we cannot live without, and know we cannot live within" (Baldwin 1962, 128), describes the confessional and conflicted nature of American culture, but alludes to similar problems that occur when African American culture (or folk cultures in general) are transferred to print. A similar powerfully confessional urge, layered with the paradox that the confession also desires to remain private, is a consistent quality of Shakespeare's soliloquies. The introductory primer material on the first pages of *The Bluest Eye* mocks the Western master narrative. It makes sense that the italicized first words of *The Bluest Eye* present a counter-narrative that, as Morrison describes, introduces an "intimacy" between reader and the subject matter that her future work will construct, over and over again in a variety of ways.

Similar to the music of John Coltrane, revising the high modern interior voice of the novel toward a more plural sense for what it means to be human involves offering a critique of Western culture.<sup>29</sup> A jazz solo can be a response to, among other things, the isolation that has increasingly characterized some forms of Western art and culture. This isolation exists in one strain of the development of the novel from the Renaissance onward. Hamlet's soliloquies via Montaigne's essays and the growing skepticism inherent in these types of expression signal one beginning of Cartesian separation, while the jazz solo offers an attempt to engage and heal this separation, the chance for an individual's reconciliation to community by locating meaning squarely between the two.<sup>30</sup> Mrs. MacTeer's "blues and greens" may be the "only" way to grasp Cholly's life and struggle (Morrison 1994a, 159), though by playing with images and ideas from jazz *The Bluest Eye* offers a fuller version of Cholly's life than could be realized otherwise. Yet no soliloquy in *The Bluest Eye* is transformed into song in a manner that allows the character to rejoin a community or reconnect to others and be healed. Thus Claudia, to the extent that she is related to the narrative voice that knows Cholly's life needs song, feels culpable for Pecola's destruction at the book's close, though she does have a plural sense of this destruction, accusing us all. But Claudia also has the example of her mother's ability to move from soliloquy to song.

An interpreter of *The Bluest Eye* is trapped in a culpability similar to that of the book's narrator and resembling Soaphead's dilemma: I read greedily and understand selectively (Morrison 1994a, 169), developing what eloquence I might have upon the ruined subject of the work, Pecola, or upon the misunderstood work itself, as Morrison suggests ("Afterword," *The Bluest Eye*, Morrison 1994a, 169, 209). Like Soaphead, who misses his implication in her destruction, my writing about (and Morrison's writing of) Pecola implicates the writer and the reading audience regardless of how we came to those attitudes and behaviors, regardless of whether the ideas and attitudes that insist on racist hierarchies are a product of Western culture. Perhaps reading Pecola partially as

Ophelia and seeing *The Bluest Eye* as an attempt to modify the novel tradition that grows from Hamlet's soliloquies risks obliterating the cultural differences that Morrison herself remarks are the key to the novel ("Afterword," *The Bluest Eye*, Morrison 1994a, 215). Yet in the process of reading the novel in terms of various images and ideas from Shakespeare, appropriating it in this respect, we can see more clearly how elements of African American music and vernacular culture might change the novel, powering Morrison's critique of Western culture.<sup>31</sup>

## Conclusion

Soaphead's judgmental order, linked as it is to Dante, exposes the madness of an order that privileges white, Western society. But the narrator's indictment of all reveals the paradox Morrison works within: in the process of critiquing racist judgment, the writer works with a form, the novel, that evolved primarily in Western society, as she herself has acknowledged in "Rootedness" (Morrison 1984b, 340). In this sense, Morrison's task is either to set up a new order upon which to base judgment, a new kind of "fussing soliloquy" (to the extent that the novel insists on echoing soliloquy) that moves us toward more objective judgment, or have the novel evolve into something that supersedes judgment, attempting to break down hierarchies without erecting pernicious new distinctions in their place. This new order is based on song that at once displays the particularities of a specific culture while making gestures that locate meaning between different cultures, where such meaning must reside in any art that can speak to our current need to understand and work through, or better, work with cultural differences that divide us.

If *The Bluest Eye* is implicated in the destruction of the character it presents, Morrison's novel also suggests a way out through soliloquies that evolve into spontaneous music, a song that does not so much judge as present the "greens and blues" of experience, making a character's pain "sweet" so that he or she might refrain from inflicting that pain on others. Yet this is only suggested in *The Bluest Eye*, a book in which isolation and soliloquy defeat song. In *Song of Solomon* the evolution from soliloquy and tragedy to song and community is more completely, though not entirely, achieved. In the meantime, Pecola remains, perhaps like the singing Ophelia, trapped with imaginary blue eyes but no blues, no music, or a written approximation of music, to express her predicament in a manner where such writing breaks the back of her mad soliloquy, Pecola's final conversation with an imagined other (Morrison 1994a, 193-204).<sup>32</sup> This conversation shows Pecola's need to locate meaning between herself and another, but also highlights that she has no medium with which to do so. This moment in the novel, I suggest, is Morrison's admission that someone who has suffered like Pecola cannot be healed in this story because the book itself cannot

express her madness in terms that can be shared with others in a manner that allows her to be heard, responded to, and loved.

Curiously, Soaphead Church is the only character in the novel who writes, yet he is also the least likely to remember Pecola, as though his writing is a way of forgetting, an evasion and rationalization of his pain and responsibility as surely as the letter he writes to God helps him to evade his part in her pain. *The Bluest Eye* turns on paradoxes about Morrison's position as a writer and her relationship to literary influences that are a form of "dominion and surrender," of confrontation in the effort to conquer problems and the admission that some problems cannot, at this point, be resolved (Taylor-Guthrie 1994, 74-76). *The Bluest Eye* is Morrison's first step in her effort to transform soliloquy into song, beginning as a critique of Western aesthetics that points to not only the inherent destructiveness of certain hierarchies and the problems with isolation, but also Morrison's growing sense that elements of African American music may offer a way out of such destruction. The need for an individual to find and speak to a larger communal element, and, just as important, to hear how that community responds, links Morrison's novels to Shakespearean drama, to the interchange between performer and audience, and to jazz and the blues, even as the novel explores the damaging isolation that may be one legacy of Hamlet's soliloquies.

As expressions founded in the isolation of soliloquy move toward the community of song, healing may be possible. Working through this process, Morrison has the rare ability to study how her own writing may be as much an evasion of what is needed as it could be a potential source of healing. A significant connection between Morrison and Shakespeare is that they share a similar awareness regarding the limits of their respective mediums, a similar sense that words might be both a source of healing and a destructive evasion. This essay also offers as many opportunities for evasion as it does for what I hope may be significant understanding; it is an attempt to respond to the call of the novel in a manner that tries to be aware of the problematic dynamics of appropriation as interpretation. Morrison retains a sense of unease about the limits of her medium that critics of her work, regarding their own medium, would do well to imitate. As she remarks in an interview, for her this disturbance is connected to African American music and jazz:

We can tell it the way it is. We have come through the worst, and we are still here. I think about what black writers do as having a quality of hunger and disturbance that never ends. Classical music satisfies and closes. Black music does not do that. Jazz always keeps you on the edge. There is no final chord. There may be a long chord, but no final chord. And it agitates you. Spirituals agitate you, no matter what they are saying about how it is all going to be. There is something underneath them that is incomplete. There is always something else that you want from the music. I want my books to be like that — because I want that

feeling of something held in reserve and the sense that there is more — that you can't have it all right now. (Taylor-Guthrie 1994, 55)

What may be held in reserve in *The Bluest Eye* is a more developed sense of how the musical influences of African American culture can help us to reimagine the novel, of how healing and coherence based on music that agitates enables us to call forth our plural selves.

### Notes

1. See also Lester (Lester 2000, 125-26).
2. One aspect of this journey frequently mentioned in interviews are Morrison's attempts to make the novel, much like African American music, a participatory medium between her and the reader: "I want to break away from certain assumptions that are inherent in the conception of the novel form to make a truly aural novel, in which there are so many places and spaces for the reader to participate . . . I try to provide every opportunity for that kind of stimulation, so that the narrative is only one part of what happens, in the same way as what happens when you're listening to music, what happens when you look at a painting" (Taylor-Guthrie 1994, 108-109). Terms such as "jazz" and "blues" need to be approached with some care, since they resist classification. Smalls writes of African American music: "it is this persistently anarchistic resistance to classification of both the musicians and their music that is one of the enduring delights of Afro-American music; I have therefore no wish to tidy it up, but rather hope I can convey something of the anarchistic delight, which is, I am sure, part of the profoundly pluralistic inheritance that black people carry around with them still, not as a set of beliefs but as a style of thinking, feeling, perceiving — and of playing, listening, dancing" (Smalls 1987, 5). This pluralistic sense that resists classification could also describe Morrison's novels, their heteroglossic strength of centrifugal over centripetal forces.
3. Morrison writes, "This deliberate avoidance of literary references has become a firm if boring habit with me, not only because they lead to poses, not only because I refuse the credentials they bestow, but also because they are inappropriate to the kind of literature I wish to write, the aims of that literature, and the discipline of the specific culture that interests me" (Morrison 1984a, 387). She also remarks, in an interview, that "I may be influenced by what I read, but I am not aware of it" (Taylor-Guthrie 1994, 47). It is difficult to say the degree to which Morrison's novel consciously appropriates Shakespeare. Ophelia is mentioned in *The Bluest Eye* in a context that recalls Pecola, and I will argue there are significant connections between these two figures. C. L. Barber writes this of Shakespeare's relationship to social custom and his analysis of that relationship: "He did not need to discriminate consciously, in our way,

underlying configurations which came to him with his themes and materials" (Barber 1959, 194-95). Morrison's "dead girl" (see note 9) certainly connects to an Ophelia archetype, but Morrison is not directly appropriating or rewriting Shakespeare, as, for example, Naylor does in *Mama Day*. In contrast, Walters argues that Morrison "appropriates the Persephone and Demeter myth to discuss the sexual and psychological victimization of women" (Walters 2007, 112-32) in *The Bluest Eye*.

4. In this sense, Morrison's relationship to Shakespeare is similar to Marianne Novy's description of women writers of the last forty or so years who engage Shakespeare: "all these novels engage with Shakespeare in a way that questions dominant cultural traditions' use of him" (Novy 1994, 164). Novy's focus here, though, is on contemporary women writers (Carter, Naylor, Gordimer, Smiley, Drabble) who more overtly allude to and rewrite Shakespeare.
5. "Critics of my work have often left something to be desired, in my mind, because they don't always evolve out of the culture, the world, the given quality out of which I write. Other kinds of structures are imposed on my works, and therefore they are either praised or dismissed on the basis of something I have no interest in whatever, which is writing a novel according to some structure that comes out of a different culture" (Taylor-Guthrie 1994, 151).
6. Juvan also writes, "Beside this, no text is primary and original because it is always a mosaic of citations" (Juvan 2008, 3). As Zora Neale Hurston remarked in *Sanctified Church*, "The most ardent admirer of the great Shakespeare cannot claim first source even for him. It is his treatment of the borrowed material" (Hurston 1981, 58).
7. Desmet usefully sums up Bakhtin's relationship to the other pioneering writers regarding intertextuality: "Bakhtin's concept of dialogism contains within it the paradoxical intersection between conflict and community that was implicit in Rich's reworking of Bloom's 'anxiety of influence' and in Burke's rhetoric of identification." In *The Dialogic Imagination*, Bakhtin writes that "The word is born in a dialogue as a living rejoinder within it; the word is shaped in dialogic interaction with an alien word that is already in the object" (Bakhtin 1981, 279). The larger political import of this dialogic interaction for an African American text like *The Bluest Eye* is nicely summarized by Dyson: "The cultures of white and black America are intimately joined, forged into a sometimes reluctant symbiosis that mocks the rigid lines of language and identity that set them apart. But the complexity at the heart of the many cultures that make up the black diaspora is often ignored in favor of a narrow vision of racial identity . . . In truth, the hybrid textures of the American grain are the most powerful argument for relinquishing belief in American orthodoxies and celebrating the edifying impurity behind democratic experiments in culture and identity" (1996, 124).

8. Juvan quotes Baxandall, who describes the rich variety of this relationship as it focuses more on the receiving work's actions: "If we think of Y rather than X as the agent, the vocabulary is much richer and more attractively diversified: draw on, resort to, avail oneself of, appropriate from, have recourse too, adapt, misunderstand . . . differentiate oneself from, assimilate oneself to . . . copy, address, paraphrase, absorb, make a variation on, revive, continue, remodel, ape, emulate, travesty, parody . . . subvert, perpetuate, reduce, promote, respond to, transform, tackle . . . Most of these relations cannot be stated the other way around — in terms of X acting on Y rather than Y acting on X" (Baxandall 1985, 83 as quoted in Juvan 2008, 5).
9. Of course, if we suggest that these women must die in order for some characters to grow, we can also say that Morrison's project has been to rescue "the dead girl." This subject comes up a number of times in her conversation with Gloria Naylor (Taylor-Guthrie 1994, 198-199, 208), and Morrison concludes with this remark that reinforces the necessity of locating meaning between herself and Naylor: "It was a conversation. I can tell, because I said something I didn't know I knew. About the 'dead girl.' That bit by bit I had been rescuing her from the grave of time and inattention. Her fingernails may be in the first book; face and legs, perhaps, the second time. Little by little bringing her back into living life" (217). Based on this description, *Beloved* is also such a figure.
10. One could argue that Nel has this recognition not after she meets Eva years later, but after Sula's funeral. Most assume the book ends in the present (1965), but it is difficult to tell when the last moment of the book takes place; whether, after the flashback to Sula's funeral in 1940 after Nel leaves Eva, the narrative returns to the present with the paragraph that begins "Sadly, heavily . . ." (Morrison 1982a, 173).
11. It is not clear that Ophelia is sexually assaulted, but evidence from her songs suggests her loss of virginity and possible victimization by assault: "By Gis and by Saint Charity, / Alack, and fie for shame! / Young men will do't if they come to't. / By cock, they are to blame. / Quoth she, 'Before you tumbled me, / You promised me to wed'" (*Hamlet*, 4.5.58-63).
12. See Gates ("Both Sides Now," Gates 2003, 31), Richard Wright ("The Outsider," Wright 1953, 119), and John Wideman ("Architechtonics," Wideman 1990, 43). Stephen Greenblatt writes that "Shakespeare was a master of double consciousness. He was a man who spent much of his money on a coat of arms but who mocked the pretentiousness of such a claim; a man who invested in real estate but who ridiculed in *Hamlet* precisely such an entrepreneur as he himself was; a man who spent his life and his deepest energies on the theater but who laughed at the theater and regretted making himself a show. Though Shakespeare seems to have recycled every word he ever encountered, every person he ever met, every experience he ever had — it is

difficult otherwise to explain the enormous richness of his work — he contrived at the same time to hide himself from view, to ward off vulnerability, to forswear intimacy" (Greenblatt 2004, 155).

13. Morrison discusses how an Africanist presence functions in works by white authors in *Playing in the Dark*, especially in the third chapter (Morrison, 1993b).
14. Benjamin writes: "What differentiates the novel from all other forms of literature — the fairy tale, the legend, even the novella — is that it neither comes from oral tradition nor goes into it. The storyteller takes what he tells from experience — his own and that reported by others. And he in turn makes it the experience of those who are listening to his tale. The novelist has isolated himself. The birthplace of the novel is the solitary individual, who is no longer able to express himself by giving examples of his most important concerns, is himself uncounselled, and cannot counsel others" (Benjamin 1999, 87). Part of Morrison's project is to refute Benjamin's view.
15. Duvall argues that Soaphead Church has the ability to be self-critical of his relationship to Western culture, quoting a section of the letter to God in which Soaphead states that those of African descent took on the worst qualities of whites (Duvall 1997, 245). But this seems to be more a form of self-hatred manifested as praise of white culture by Soaphead, since he is implicitly arguing that blacks failed to imitate what he would see as the positive aspects of Western culture.
16. See Fuston for a discussion of how hierarchy is broken down in *Beloved* (Fuston 2002, 471). Sanders, in her extensive study of contemporary appropriations of Shakespeare by female novelists, writes, "A linking theme in all the chapters in this study is the refusal and positive deconstruction of moral and literary absolutes by these woman writers" (Sanders 2001, 11).
17. It is no surprise that in Morrison's works, figures who lack mothers or strong mother figures nearly always struggle. Pilate in *Song of Solomon* is an exception, but perhaps the short story "Recitatif" best sums up the difficulties such characters can experience. Of course, the potential damage that living mothers can cause is also one of Morrison's chief subjects.
18. See Erickson's discussion of various contemporary writers and visual artists who interpret *Othello* as a racist text (Erickson 2007, 103-49).
19. See Tirrell's argument that at the end of *The Bluest Eye*, Claudia is a "first person justified" narrator who "would make self-conscious use of these methods of justification without giving up responsibility for the tale and without giving up the 'truth in timber' of the unjustified vision" (Tirrell 1997, 19). In other words, Tirrell is more certain than I am of the narrator's ability to render judgment at the close of the novel.

20. Any case for incest in *Hamlet* remains tenuous. Polonius concedes his "jealousy" toward Hamlet's sexual desire ("I feared he did but trifle / And meant to wrack thee; but bestrew my jealousy" [2.1.112-13]), and Ophelia's references in madness to Polonius' dead body are tinged with phallic images: "He never will come again. His beard was as white as snow, / All flaxen was his poll" [4.5.193-94]). Her most direct references to sexuality, though, seem to be aimed at Hamlet (see note 11).
21. See Gillian 2002 for how *The Bluest Eye* also indicts American culture through a number of subtle, historically specific references and images.
22. See Lyons 1977 for an examination of the iconography associated with Ophelia, and Neely 2004 for a discussion of Ophelia's madness in the context of early modern understandings of such behavior.
23. Showalter studies how Ophelia has been appropriated post Hamlet; she writes that "(w)hile all these approaches have much to recommend them, each also presents critical problems. To liberate Ophelia from the text, or to make her its tragic center, is to reappropriate her for our own ends; to dissolve her into female symbolism of absence is to endorse our own marginality; to make her Hamlet's *anima* is to reduce her to a metaphor of male experience" (Showalter 1994, 223). Yet by self-consciously studying the history of her representation, the problematic ideologies behind those representations can begin to be understood, even as Showalter strives to understand the limits of her perspective. Her comments make me think about the problem of this essay — in what ways I appropriate Ophelia and Pecola for ideological purposes. Yet one hopes, when writing about Morrison's work, that a "degree of critical humility in an age of critical hubris can be our greatest strength" (238).
24. For another view of *The Bluest Eye* as a form of self-critique, see Duvall 1997. Morrison describes the isolation she felt when writing *The Bluest Eye* (Taylor-Guthrie 1984, 44-45), suggesting aspects of a soliloquy in the creative process.
25. "Sweet" is a loaded term in the *The Bluest Eye* and in many of Morrison's novels, since it connects to a pattern of references to sugar and also allusions to its production by slaves.
26. Houston Baker writes that "the task of adequately describing the blues is equivalent to the labor of describing a world class athlete's awesome gymnastics" (Baker 1986, 4).
27. As Webber writes, "[a]s it [African music] flowed and deepened through its new land it both adapted to the contours of the American landscape and reshaped each bank it touched. It never lost its African undercurrents" (Webber 1978, 60).
28. In the introduction to *Conversations with Toni Morrison*, Taylor-Guthrie writes that one aspect of African American writing consistently identified by Morrison is "a participatory quality

between a book and reader" (Taylor-Guthrie 1994, x). As noted, Morrison frequently refers to this in interviews; much has been written, furthermore, about African American literature in terms of call and response. See especially *Reading Black, Reading Feminist* (Gates, 1990). Morrison's most thorough comments on the contrast between private and communal locations of meaning are in "Rootedness: The Ancestor as Foundation," where she writes: "If anything I do, in the way of writing novels (or whatever I write) isn't about the village or community or about you, then it is not about anything. I am not interested in indulging myself in some private, closed exercise of my imagination that fulfills only the obligation of my personal dreams" (Morrison 1984b, 344).

29. For one view of how Coltrane's music can function as a critique of received ideas, see MacDonald 1995.
30. For a description of flexible meanings located between Morrison and her readers, see Martha Cutter's analysis of how the intertextuality of *Beloved* and *Jazz* effects a bridge between the novels that encourages our readings to remain open-ended (Cutter 2000).
31. The power of the vernacular culture is summed up by Wideman: "In spite of and because of its marginal status, a powerful, indigenous vernacular tradition has survived, not unbroken, but unbowed, a magnet, a focused energy, something with its own logic, rules, integrity connecting current developments to the past. An articulate, syncretizing force our best artists have drawn upon, a force sustaining both individual talent and tradition" (Wideman 1990, 43).
32. Holloway writes, "If language and speech do offer retribution and salvation, then Pecola's silence indicates the hopelessness of the child" (Holloway 1994, 210).

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