

RESEARCH

Toni Morrison's Experimental Novel, *The Bluest Eye*: Tempering 'Disinterested Violence' Through the 'Narrative Project'

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In "Toni Morrison's Experimental Novel, *The Bluest Eye*: Tempering 'Disinterested Violence' through the 'Narrative Project,'" I claim that Morrison critiques the intellectual practice known as modernist purification. This essay complicates earlier studies which simplify *The Bluest Eye* as a text solely concerned with racism inflicted on African Americans by whites. Rather, modernist purification and mediation shed light on the underlying mechanisms by which characters in the text (blacks and whites) are reduced into ideological abstractions devoid of subjective experiences and worth. This practice allows for the "disinterested violence" to be inflicted on all races seem more permissible. I then assert that the notion of the "narrative project" (coined by Morrison) provides the proper medium by which a critique of purification may be made. However, in order for Morrison to critique purification as afflicted on characters, such as the protagonist, Pecola Breedlove, Morrison must engage in a type of scientific inquiry which necessitates the enactment of purification, echoing Émile Zola's notion of the "experimental novel." In Morrison's "scientific inquiry," however, there arises a paradox: she must enact and reify that which she also critiques. In a fashion that recalls Robert Musil's juxtaposed discursive modes in *The Man without Qualities*, Morrison attempts to alleviate the aforementioned conundrum (her own potential for "disinterested violence" in the writing of her novel) by establishing a pair of paradigmatic shifts in the novel's narrative structure and its ethical/moral aims.

Keywords: Toni Morrison; Modernism; Modernist Purification; Narrative; Émile Zola; Robert Musil; *The Bluest Eye*

Name? Age? Occupation? Address? Ulrich was being questioned. He felt as though he had been sucked into a machine that was dismembering him into impersonal, general components before the question of his guilt or innocence came up at all. His name, the most intellectually meaningless yet most emotionally charged words in the language for him, meant nothing here ... His face counted only as an aggregate of officially describable features – it seemed to him that he had never before pondered the fact that his eyes were gray eyes, one of four officially recognized kinds of eyes, one pair among millions; his hair was blond, his build tall, his face oval, and his distinguishing marks none, although he had his own opinion on that point.

–Robert Musil, *The Man Without Qualities*, Volume I

They were everything. Everything was there, in them. All of those pictures, all of those faces.

–Toni Morrison, *The Bluest Eye*

I. Introduction

Despite its status as a debut novel, Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* (1970) is at once intricate, complicated, and ambitious in its scope and implications. The novel's protagonist, Pecola Breedlove, desperately wishes to attain blue eyes despite (and arguably because of) "the unyielding earth" of her status as a black girl (Morrison 3). Her predicament, marked by the unbridgeable chasm between how she wishes to see the world and how she finds it reminds us of Cervantes's Don Quixote, Flaubert's Madame Bovary, and even Yukio Mishima's Kiyooki Matsugae, who dies in pursuit of an unrequited love, an unfulfilled ideal, prompting a grieving friend to lament, "it would unquestionably be wonderful if a man could really make

the substance of the world truly conform to that of his innermost heart" (Mishima 387). *The Bluest Eye* channels universal themes and in so doing joins a rich literary tradition (broadly speaking, that of Europe but also of world literature) which predates (and informs) American and African American literature. The inclusion of Morrison into a type of conversation between her novels and works of European and/or world literature does not diminish Morrison's contributions to American and African American literature despite critics' fears. Nor does it lessen Morrison's status as an accomplished novelist in her own right. As with any novelist or artist, Morrison inherits from a set of precursors and responds to them, in part, by adapting and applying universal themes to a milieu that has been perhaps until now underrepresented. Valerie Smith notes that despite the "universal" nature of Morrison's work, "Morrison's writing is famously steeped in the nuances of African-American language, music, everyday life, and cultural history" (270). Similarly, Timothy Parrish asserts that though Morrison's novels undoubtedly serve as testaments to "her complex understanding of modernist prose aesthetics ... the true achievement of her fiction has been to give voice to an African-American point of view previously unrepresented in American literature" (xxxii). These two points intersect in Smith's claim: "Morrison uses her fiction to mine the unexplored depths of American culture" (270).

Morrison's work, and specifically, *The Bluest Eye*, in all its complexity, has generated a number of compelling and diverse readings over the past few decades. Debra T. Werrlein, for example, examines the interplay between childhood innocence in American culture, a national ideology of innocence, and popular culture in *The Bluest Eye*. Donald B. Gibson reframes *The Bluest Eye* as a "countertextual" novel that, unlike most works of social critique, engages in a conversation with itself to clarify by complication (rather than by simplification) the social conundrums present in the text. Arguably, Werrlein approaches the novel with an amalgamation of cultural, social, and historical frameworks in mind. On the other hand, Gibson encapsulates his various readings of the novel within the framework of a narrative structure (the "countertext"). Inevitably, a study which emphasizes the cultural, social, and/or historical facets of a novel often sacrifices much-needed commentary on a work's narrative structure. The inverse is often true as well. I argue, though, that in *The Bluest Eye*, the narrative form and structure is inextricably linked to the novel's examination of the cultural phenomenon known as Modernity (which will be used loosely henceforth, for obvious reasons).

Narrative structure and notions of Modernity, as critiqued by Austrian philosophical writer Robert Musil, are centered around a notion I would like to term, not unlike Gibson's "countertext," counter-paradigms. Though scholars and readers have offered differing suggestions as to who or what exactly "centers" the novel – Pecola, Claudia (Pecola's friend and part-time narrator), or the titular "bluest eye" that is the white gaze – I suggest that the novel intentionally eludes such "disinterested" classification (which Morrison implicitly criticizes) by making and unmaking paradigms by which a systematic act of disinterested classification is made possible in the first place (Morrison 23). *The Bluest Eye*, then, is not only a novel about white on black racism or a hegemonic white culture and its effect on black individuals (though these are salient issues the text undoubtedly raises). It is also a novel which, by its very structure, attempts to enact what its characters cannot do – to escape or elude a systematic act of ordering/classification that is not limited to the white gaze ("the bluest eye") but is rather symptomatic of Modernity's reach which, with its "disinterested violence," compartmentalizes individuals (black and white) into abstracted ideological containers ("the bluest I"). Morrison's novel, then, is also a novel concerned with its own construction and form. (Morrison, after all, tentatively terms *The Bluest Eye* as a "narrative project" in a foreword to a later edition of the work).

II. Morrison's Experimental Novel: In the Company of Musil and Zola

If we reconfigure *The Bluest Eye* into a "narrative project," a novel which by the logic of its construction, form, and discursive mode attempts to temper or counteract a problematic cultural phenomenon it must also portray to eventually criticize, Morrison's work most recalls Robert Musil's modernist masterpiece *The Man Without Qualities*. Musil's work is a sprawling "novel" (critic J.P. Stern once remarked, "it is great, but it is not a novel"), spanning approximately 1800 pages, its conclusion forever "to be determined" since Musil's sudden death in 1942 well before the novel's completion (quoted in Bernstein 124). The novel's cohesion as a narrative "whole" is as elusive as its resolution, as the novel tracks its central protagonist Ulrich, his sabbatical from "life," his dealings with Austrian high society, and his philosophical musings (or digressions) on the nature of, say, modes of thinking, history, mathematics, or economics. The work's grand scope and aim, not only in terms of its page count but also the numerous lines of inquiry it pursues, may be explained by Allen Thiher's assertion that *The Man Without Qualities* is a "very modernist project" in that Musil "believed his novel to be a form of total cultural criticism" which targeted "the entire spectrum of culture, from its intellectual and moral dimension to what Emerson called the manners of everyday life" (230).

In *Robert Musil and the NonModern*, Mark Freed goes a step further. He first claims that Musil engages in some form of cultural critique, that is, on the philosophical discourse on Modernity. Freed then elaborates on Musil's providing an alternative to perceived shortcomings of the aforementioned discourse by way of juxtaposed discursive modes in *The Man without Qualities*. According to Freed, Musil effects a critique of what Bruno Latour calls modernist "purification," one of two sets of intellectual practices that "characterize the modern intellectual constitution" (5). Freed defines purification as

the practice of dividing “an otherwise undifferentiated world into smaller and smaller entities (humans and gods, all the way down to atoms ...)” (5). Furthermore, he explains, “[m]ore generally, purification carves up the world into distinct ontological zones: a human world of Culture on the one hand and a nonhuman world of Nature on the other” (5). Thomas Harrison problematizes Freed's analysis and states the potential implications of modernist purification or, to use his phrase, “all systematizations of existence” which allow for “ideological reduction” ultimately mobilized for “formulaic control” (27). This leads to the second of what Freed terms “intellectual practices” that “characterize the modern intellectual practices”: “mediation” or “translation” (5). Mediation or translation “creates mixtures of purified entities, hybrids of nature and culture that are neither entirely human nor nonhuman,” the success of which indicates the integrating of nonhumans into a human world” (Freed 5). In my opinion, Harrison's “diagnosis” of modernist purification's potential ills and Freed's summarization of Latour's claims intersect when one asks: what if “ideological reduction” itself is a form of “mediation” or “translation” not by which nonhumans are integrated into a human world of culture but by which humans are conflated with hybridized “nonhuman” objects (say, white dolls mediated by an ideology) and are thus rendered into “hybrids” (as ideological abstractions)? Morrison, I believe, raises this question in *The Bluest Eye*. By extension, both Morrison and Musil, respectively, offer discursive alternatives to the intellectual practice of modernist purification.

Musil's efforts to critique modernist purification revolve around what he termed, in German, the “Essayismus.” Of course, this critique is only possible, according to Freed, if one de-privileges “the practices of purification that have historically been the center of modern science” (6). *The Man Without Qualities* opens with the famous “weather passage” which has attracted many interpretations by Musil scholars. This passage is essentially a juxtaposing of “two discursive modes” (Freed 8). The first discursive mode exemplifies modernist purification in that the weather is described in meteorological, scientific terms (the denotative description), which precludes a relationship to subjective human experience and interest. (For example, how is one to interpret and relate to “[t]he isotherms and isotheres were functioning as they should”?) (*MWQ* 3). The second discursive mode introduces human concerns “that have been occluded from the scientific description” (Freed 8). (The lengthy “weather passage” concludes, “[i]t was a fine day in August 1913.”) (Musil 3). What this juxtaposition of discursive modes ultimately offers is an alternative to modernist purification by which denotative discourse is destabilized. As Freed states, “Essayismus draws into question the very possibility of an accurate description of the world, and, hence, the possibility of Truth as the single correct one” (9).

Morrison enacts her own version of Musil's Essayismus in *The Bluest Eye*, what she calls “my narrative project,” to both portray and confront the cultural conundrums that necessitated a novel — much like Musil's — fraught with cultural, ethical, and literary implications (xiii). Ágnes Surányi reframes *The Bluest Eye* as a response to the “Black is Beautiful” movement of the 1960s (11). She notes, however, that Morrison “worried that this slogan of racial pride would be unable to dispel the long-term psychic effects of the prejudices rooted in racialism and sexism” (Surányi 11). Morrison herself mentions in the foreword what served as the impetus for the writing of *The Bluest Eye*. She recalls a conversation with a childhood friend who desired blue eyes. Morrison then goes on to say, “*The Bluest Eye* was my effort to say something about that ... Implicit in her [friend's] desire was racial self-loathing. And twenty years later I was still wondering about *how* one learns that” (xi emphasis added). The key word in Morrison's foreword seems to be “how,” for we see it again in the “preface” just prior to the story's beginning proper: “[t]here is really nothing more to say — except why. But since why is difficult to handle, one must take refuge in the how” (6). This is the statement on which the novel's “inquiry” (as Morrison put it) and thus the novel as a whole is dependent; it authenticates, authorizes, and necessitates the rest of the novel. And indeed, the novel in a way reads like a scientific “inquiry,” which recalls Émile Zola's “The Experimental Novel.” In his essay, Zola proposes “the application of the experimental method to the novel and to the drama” in response to Claude Bernard's attempts to apply the experimental method to medicine and physiology (“the physical life”) (645). Zola argues that the experimental method be extended to “the knowledge of the passionate and intellectual life” and concludes this line of argument with the following: “The experimental novel is the goal” (645).

Morrison enacts her own “experimental novel,” synonymous with her “narrative project,” not so much as an end but rather as a means to investigate “the how” of Pecola's eventual madness. The passage cited above, which authenticates and authorizes the “inquiry” constitutive of *The Bluest Eye*, nearly echoes verbatim Zola's explanation of the mechanism behind how the experimental novel functions. Zola too explains, the “[e]xperimental science has no necessity to worry itself about the ‘why’ of things; it simply explains the ‘how’” (645). Here, discussions concerning Musil, modernist purification, Morrison's “narrative project,” and Zola's notion of the experimental novel intertwine. As I argue, modernist purification is the “how” behind the “disinterested” violence (racial or otherwise) inflicted on the novel's characters. The only way in which Morrison can depict, with objective and scientific precision, the mechanism behind “disinterested” violence (the how) is by structuring the novel into an experimental novel which legitimizes all observations made for the purposes of investigation. Morrison then, not unlike Musil, employs narrative structure to first portray that which she criticizes and, second, to critique that which she portrays without falling into the trap of ultimately reifying in the minds of readers the objective, “disinterested” violence she must enact to make a “scientific inquiry” possible in the first place. Put more simply, there is a paradox. Morrison has to conduct her own version of modernist purification to accurately explain the “how.” Purification,

however, is also what she must criticize. First, we will consider how modernist purification is enacted and critiqued in the fictional world of *The Bluest Eye*. Secondly, we will discuss how Morrison ultimately reconciles and overcomes the paradox of enacting what is also the subject of her criticism.

III. 'Disinterested Violence' in *The Bluest Eye*

The Bluest Eye is undoubtedly concerned with how people and objects are ordered, classified, or schematized into a larger framework of understanding and being. The description of the Breedlove household is one such example. We are told, "[e]ach member of the [Breedlove] family in his own cell of consciousness, each making his own patchwork quilt of reality – collecting fragments of experience here, pieces of information there" (Morrison 34). The description of the Breedloves' sofa, "split straight across the back by the time it was delivered," offers a look into how the "patchwork quilt of reality" is perpetually being made and remade while the Breedloves are presumably unaware of this pervasive, "fretful malaise that asserts itself throughout the house and limits the delight of things not related to it" (Morrison 36–37). The coal stove – interestingly in the *center* of the bedroom much like the novel itself, which acts as a "center," as I propose, with no center – the narrator claims, "is the only living thing in the Breedloves' house," for "the fire seemed to live, go down, or die according to *its own schemata*" (Morrison 37 emphasis added). This is, however, a subtle point in the text often missed by critics and general readers, not unlike the characters in the novel who seem unaware of this hidden constitution of the world in which they live and to which they contribute. In other words, for readers and the novel's characters alike, the world of Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* is woven quietly, almost surreptitiously, and this is arguably the height of the text as a work which follows in the footsteps of a realist tradition, its mimetic qualities and aims being employed to portray the ways in which the novel's characters, unawares, are constantly and quietly being worked upon and, ultimately, compartmentalized by some form of external classification and organization, a white hegemonic ideology, for instance, being one example.

Interestingly, Morrison mobilizes a narrative strategy which makes the constitution of the world (as relayed to us by the narrator) difficult to repeal and ignore. Simply put, yes, the "making" of the character's worlds is subtle in that the characters are seemingly unaware of it. However, its subtlety does not necessarily translate to a type of transiency. Excluding the Dick and Jane primer at the outset, the novel is primarily narrated by two narrators: an older Claudia who reflects on her childhood (these chapters have no headers) and an all-knowing or omniscient narrator who seems to hover about in the text, observing and, most importantly, objectively relaying to readers "how" (not "why," as we are told in the prologue) the world, or some semblance of a reality, misshaped for, and then subsequently works upon, say, the Breedlove family (Morrison 6). An instance in which we find this objective narrator at work reads:

These and other inanimate things she [Pecola] saw and experienced. They were real to her. She knew them. They were the codes and touchstones of the world, capable of translation and possession. She owned the crack that made her stumble; she owned the clumps of dandelions whose white heads, last fall, she had blown away; whose yellow heads, this fall, she peered into. And owning them made her part of the world, and a world a part of her. (Morrison 49)

At least three things are of significance here. First, this objective narrator with his precise observations echoes Bernard's and Zola's "observer" and his role in the experimental novel. Zola cites Bernard, who claims, "[t]he observer relates purely and simply the phenomena which he has under his eyes ... He should be the photographer of the phenomena, his observation should be an exact representation of nature ... He listens to nature and he writes under its dictation" (quoted in Zola 646). Here, we have the objective narrator, authorized by the novel's "inquiry" into the "how," dictating how Pecola's notion of reality is being made and remade. This leads to the second important point which harkens back to Latour's theories on purification and mediation. The dandelions (nonhuman objects) are integrated or "hybridized" into the human world via "translation" or "mediation" and only after this process, it seems, do they become Pecola's "possessions" (Morrison 49). These dandelions and the process they undergo under Pecola's eyes, however, as the observer-narrator notes, are the "codes and touchstones of the world," implying, if the traditional definition of "touchstone" (the fundamental or quintessential feature) is applied, that in this fictional world of the novel, all characters and even nonhuman objects are perpetually enmeshed in a never-ending web of purification, translation, mediation, and possession by each other (Morrison 49 emphasis added). The observer-narrator lays bare and exposes the underlying seams and rivets of this reality to which all, more or less, contribute, as he notes, "[a]nd owning them [the dandelions] made her [Pecola] part of the world, and a world a part of her" (Morrison 49). Lastly, what is important here is the heading of chapters observed by our objective narrator. The chapter headings are a "deconstructed" version of the Dick and Jane primer (an example reads, "HEREISTHEHOUSEITISGREENANDWHITE ...") (Morrison 33). This deconstructed version of the Dick and Jane primer points to the fact that the construction (or deconstruction) of any discourse affects or even contributes to its reading and meaning. This seems to be an authenticating nod to the observer-narrator whose observations are not merely sentences to be read but are more a depiction of reality rendered immutable by the strategic use of the observer-narrator on which the novel's scientific inquiry depends. Moreover, this intimate or insular scene between Pecola and the dandelions presents a microcosm of what occurs in the world at-large at an institutionalized level, as we see depicted in the passage between Claudia and her white, blue-eyed doll.

Regarding *The Bluest Eye*, Morrison once stated in an interview with the *Paris Review* that she “put the whole plot on the first page” (82). Presumably, she was speaking of the prologue in which an older Claudia recounts “the fall of 1941” when “Pecola was having her father’s baby” (Morrison 5). If the plot, the literal story, is contained in the prologue, as Morrison has suggested, the novel’s thematic concerns and what the novel as a “narrative project” first enacts, then must reject, are concentrated in the passage with the younger Claudia and the “blue-eyed Baby Doll,” which she receives as a Christmas gift (Morrison 20). The older Claudia remembers how her younger self felt when she first encountered the doll: “I was bemused with the thing itself, and the way it looked. What was I supposed to do with it?” (Morrison 20). This passage, in a sense, is a retelling or a version of what the novel itself attempts to do as an investigative narrative project; there is bemusement and subsequently an inquiry, by literal dismemberment, which takes place in order to understand something not previously known. The older Claudia, perhaps somewhat begrudgingly, reflects that she “could not love it [the doll]. But [she] could examine it to see what it was that all the world said was lovable. Break off the tiny fingers, bend the flat feet ...” (Morrison 21). The author, the reader, and the novel’s other characters (such as Pecola) are reflected in Claudia’s inquiring eyes. There is also, however, a duality present here: a critique and, eventually, a proposed solution in the form of the narrative structure of the novel. Morrison not only critiques the dominant ideology of white beauty forced onto young black girls (“all the world had agreed that a blue-eyed, yellow-haired girl, pink-skinned doll was what every girl child treasured”), she arguably more so criticizes the “disinterested violence” of which both whites and blacks are capable – not only by physical violence but also by a violence of mass categorization on which an ideology thrives and by which physical violence is made to seem more permissible (hence the “disinterested” adjective which signals a disregard for subjective experiences and worth) (Morrison 20–23).

What occurs in the passage above is a conflation of a coming-of-age with a coming-into-ideology, and this may be Morrison’s point. Just prior to Claudia’s dismembering of the white doll, we learn that she is aware of some sort of “desirability that had escaped [her], but apparently only [her]” (Morrison 20). This desirability, of course, concerns notions of white beauty or the white ideal, facets of an ideology into which “adults, older girls” have already been initiated (Morrison 20). Claudia, being “younger than both Frieda and Pecola,” (i.e. a young, pre-adolescent child), arguably encounters this ideology for the first time, the ideology being in the form of the “big, blue-eyed Baby Doll” (Morrison 19–20). This is where the trajectory from Claudia’s pre-adolescent self to Claudia’s coming-of-age/“coming-into-ideology” (an ideology of “disinterested violence”) first takes flight. Claudia’s interaction with the doll is, to say the least, one of hostility, resistance, and tension:

When I took it to bed, its hard unyielding limbs resisted my flesh – the tapered fingertips on those dimpled hands *scratched*. If, in sleep, I turned, the *bone-cold* head collided with my own. It was a most uncomfortable, *patently aggressive* sleeping companion. To hold it was no more rewarding. The starched gauze or lace on the cotton dress *irritated* any embrace (Morrison 20 emphasis added).

The tension alluded to earlier is not simply an illustration of white against black racism; it is more complicated than that. Rather, this passage constitutes a struggle between Claudia as an independent, subjective self (precisely because of her young age) and a “less-than-human” ideology being imposed on her by her parents and, by extension, “all the world” (Morrison 21). The doll, of course, is a perfect symbol of what a “disinterested” ideology comes to represent; after all, what is a doll but a diminished, manufactured, and an artificial version (or abstraction), with “those round moronic eyes,” of a human being? (Morrison 20) On a deeper level, then, Claudia resists that symbol of self-effacement lest she herself, in a sense, comes to resemble a “doll.” Claudia’s “flesh” resists those “hard unyielding limbs and “ the “bone-cold head” [of the doll] “collid[es] with [her] own” (Morrison 20). The mention of Claudia’s “own head” is significant here in that it conveys a sense of resistance in the head against an external or alien mode of thinking (if the head is understood here to be a universal symbol in which is housed thoughts and memories that ultimately constitute a unique and subjective self). The doll is described as “patently aggressive,” which is open to interpretation with its double meaning (Morrison 20). If we consider the traditional meaning of “patently,” that is, “clearly” or “obviously,” we can interpret the doll to be a clearly “aggressive sleeping companion.” However, the doll (and what it comes to represent) is also “patent-ly” aggressive in that, even as Claudia is sleeping, she (her “rights” to and as herself) is being patented over to this mode of thinking which reduces young children (such as herself) into “dolls.” She is, after all, “scratched” by this doll in that she has been marked by the first scratch of a long process of effacement that has just begun (Morrison 20).

This “scratch” inflicted on Claudia too has a double meaning. Though thus far my reading has emphasized the “disinterested violence” between Claudia and her doll, the scratch on Claudia reminds us that she too has been a victim of “disinterested violence,” in an emotionally vapid transaction between her parents (“the grown people” of “all the world”) and herself (Morrison 23). When the adults in her life scold Claudia for dismembering her doll, she reminds us that “that nobody ever asked [her] what [she] wanted for Christmas” and that “had any adult with the power to fulfill my desires taken me seriously” she would not have asked for something “to own, or to possess” (Morrison 21). Rather, she tells us, she “wanted ... to feel something on Christmas day. The real question would have been: “Dear Claudia, what experience would you like on Christmas?” (Morrison 22). Here again is the tension between Claudia’s yearning for a self-realizing or self-fulfilling

experience (in the most literal sense) rather than essentially being worked upon by her parents who reduce her into a version of themselves (expecting Claudia to dote on, say, white dolls or Shirley Temple), thus inscribing Claudia into their mode of thinking (a "collision" of "heads") while conflating simultaneously white dolls with white girls. (This preempts any attempts by readers to moralize on behalf of one race or the other as, again, this "disinterested" abstraction is inflicted upon both blacks and whites). In this manner, then, the lines demarcating notions of coming-of-age and "coming-into-ideology" or the white "doll" and real-life white girls are ultimately blurred, becoming synonyms or different versions that come together to create the same thing: "all the world" (Morrison 21). Claudia's "little impulses" to violence against "little white girls," however "truly horrifying," should come as no surprise then; it is the parents who first enact this conflation between white dolls and real-life white girls. Claudia only follows suit as a child only could, emulating and reenacting the "disinterested violence" first inflicted on her (Morrison 22–23). Though for some this may seem a leap of logic, this logic is arguably justified by the logic of the narrative structure itself.

Here, we arrive at an examination of possibly the two most violent and disturbing characters in the novel, Cholly Breedlove, who rapes his daughter, and Junior, who tortures and kills the family cat with "the blue eyes in the black face" (Morrison 90). Though both characters commit heinous acts, the "disinterested violence" they inflict on Pecola and the cat, respectively, cannot be reenacted by readers by way of a narrative which prefaces these universally condemnable acts with the histories of these characters that somehow make their actions, if not justifiable or permissible, more understandable. As Gibson notes, "[i]t would on the whole be easier to judge Cholly if we knew less about him and if we could isolate the kitchen floor episode [of Pecola's rape] from the social context in which it occurs and from Cholly's past. But we cannot . . ." (47). Our omniscient observer-narrator also notes, regarding Cholly, "[h]aving no idea of how to raise children, and having never watched any parent raise himself, he could not even comprehend what such a relationship should be" (Morrison 160). If we draw a link between Cholly and Claudia, one sanctioned by the narrative's logic which suggests that one's past upbringing is perpetually shaping (and even contributing to) one's conduct in the present, we are forced to ask the obvious: if Cholly's actions in the present are made understandable by his past and his upbringing, why does this not apply to Claudia's own upbringing and her subsequent coming-of-age/coming-into-ideology marked by her interaction with the white, blue-eyed doll? The novel's narrative structure seemingly responds to this query, suggesting that Claudia, not unlike Cholly, follows suit and enacts in the present what has already been sanctioned as permissible or allowable by the past. In this way, two seemingly disparate story arcs of the novel, that of Claudia and that of Cholly, are brought together, while what is forebodingly presented to us is the role of the household as a mediating "middle ground" between society-at-large and the child for instilling in youth a conflation between objects of ideological abstraction and real-life human beings with their respective subjective experiences and worth.

We see this take place, for instance, in Geraldine's and Junior's home. Geraldine's "pretty gold-and-green" house (as perceived by Pecola) echoes the "green and white" house in the Dick and Jane primer; it too is described as "pretty" (Morrison 92, 3). However, the Dick and Jane primer, not as a learning tool/exercise for reading but as an exercise in modernist purification or classification, comes to the fore in the form of Geraldine's action within her household. She "educates" Junior (whose name indicates a type of passing down from one generation to the next) on the difference between "[w]hite kids," "colored people," and "niggers" (Morrison 87). Furthermore, Geraldine organizes the world in the following manner: "[t]he line between colored and nigger was not always clear; subtle and telltale signs threatened to erode it . . ." (Morrison 87). The entirety of Geraldine's role as Junior's mother consists of "constructing" him into a "colored" person. Junior, like Claudia's dismemberment of her white, blue-eyed doll, is "dismembered" (in an eerie, almost pseudo-scientific manner) into qualities that establish his presence within the "colored people" paradigm. Junior is only Junior (in the eyes of Geraldine) to the extent to which he proves "he belong[s] to the former group" (Morrison 87). He must only wear, for example, "white shirts and blue trousers," his hair must be cut "as close to his scalp as possible," and "Jergens Lotion" is applied to his face almost as a cosmetic to cover up any chances of his face "becoming ashen" (Morrison 87). Perhaps most devastatingly, however, for Junior is the lack of any motherly affection from Geraldine. Lest we forget, the name Junior also suggests that, put simply, Junior, though violent and troubled, is still a child in need of his mother's love. However, the observer-narrator informs us that "Geraldine did not allow her baby, Junior to cry. As long as his needs were physical, she could meet them" (Morrison 86). Interestingly, Junior does not retaliate directly against his mother for this lack of affection. Rather, he tortures and eventually kills Geraldine's cat which, I argue, is the abstract notion of mediation by ideology (like Claudia's doll) made manifest as a household pet that can be "loved" and with which one may be infatuated (in Geraldine's case). When Geraldine is alone in the house with her cat, she engages in a type of sexual act with it, a type of intercourse between Geraldine and the image of herself as a black woman with blue eyes (the cat, we are reminded more than once, has "blue eyes" with a "black face") (Morrison 90). Our observer-narrator informs us that "the cat will jump into her lap. She [Geraldine] will fondle that soft hill of hair and let the warmth of the animal's body seep over and into the deeply private areas of her lap" (Morrison 85). Junior's retaliation against Geraldine's cat and not Geraldine directly suggests that the real issue in their household, to say the least, is not limited simply to the actions of an unaffectionate mother. The larger concern here is the ideological reduction of people into "colored people" or "niggers" that puts to the wayside some semblance of a unique, subjective relationship between people and, more specifically, between Geraldine and Junior, between mother and child. Geraldine and Junior's

relationship, it seems, has devolved into a parody of a "relationship" simply between a "colored" woman and a "colored" boy. (Junior's less-generalized first name, Louis, is rarely mentioned). And looking down on this tumult (from Pecola's point of view) is "Jesus looking down ... with sad and unsurprised eyes," perhaps in a nod to Junior's tacit recognition that something much larger than simply an unaffectionate mother – the violent ideological reduction/abstraction which Geraldine's actions only perpetuate – is at work in the world at-large (Morrison 92).

As mentioned earlier, Claudia is indeed "scratched" (or marked), irreparably changed by her encounter with the doll. Prior to her receiving the white doll for Christmas, Claudia, in an honest, heartfelt monologue, tells us how "[she] did not want to have anything to own, or to possess any object" (Morrison 21). However, after this experience, Claudia exhibits possessive and objectifying tendencies when she detests Shirley Temple not because she is, for example, a white symbol of beauty to which Claudia has no access, but because "she danced with Bojangles, who was *my* friend, *my* uncle, *my* daddy who ought to have been soft-shoeing it and chuckling with me" (Morrison 19 emphasis original). More problematic here than the potential undertones of "reverse racism" is the fact that Bojangles, arguably the most famous African American tap dancer of the 20th century, is first defined by his race and because of his status as a black man, is reduced to an object to be possessed (by a black girl), while ascribed to a "correct" way of being (not dancing with white girls) solely on the basis of his race. In short, Claudia is enacting the same "disinterested violence" inflicted on her the Christmas prior and only imagining Bojangles in a manner similar to critics who saw Bojangles as a cultural figure who served as a type of "template" for, or a sweeping representation (by way of racial stereotypes) of, African Americans at-large (Morrison 23). Claudia has indeed come of age, however problematically this development may manifest itself.

The fictional world of *The Bluest Eye* (or in other words, the "adult" world into which Claudia is eventually initiated) is one governed by modernist purification. Literally, the novel's beginning proper (following the Dick and Jane primer and the "preface") is a performance of violence made more permissible by the objective classification of Rosemary Villanucci, (ironically termed a "next-door friend"), as an abstraction of "white skin" on which "red marks" may be made" (Morrison 9). This passage opens the section entitled "Autumn" and, as one may have presumed, the section entitled "Winter" follows. Interestingly, however, the passage cited above in which Claudia first encounters the white, blue-eyed doll and is "marked" by a coming-into-ideology is said to have taken place in Christmas ("It had begun with Christmas and the gift of dolls") (Morrison 19). This is, however, remarked upon in the "Autumn" (not the "Winter" section) and the narrative itself seems to digress into a flashback, presumably to the Christmas of the year prior. What this suggests is that Claudia's experience with the doll and its consequences, namely the conflation of human beings and dolls/objects by way of ideological mediation and modernist purification, is a type of "pre-history," or a past that undergirds the occurrences that mark the narrative's beginning. More simply, the passage with Claudia and the doll authorizes, permits, and explains (like the way in which Claudia's or Cholly's pasts authorize the present) the actions of violence inflicted upon Rosemary. The fictional reality introduced to readers (and as it is formed in the minds of readers) then, seems inseparable from the modernist purification both displayed and implicitly critiqued. The inception of the novel in the reader's mind is accompanied by the inception of modernist purification; the two, it seems, are inseparable. The Dick and Jane primer also hints at this notion at play in the narrative's beginning, for the primer, as employed by Morrison, is really an exercise in which readers are made aware of how, "between retina and object," we first observe an object (in this case, "the house"), then classify and deconstruct it in an act of modernist purification ("It is green and white. It has a red door."), and ultimately qualify it with an adjective that then places the house, in this case, on a scale of physical and aesthetic beauty/value ("It is very pretty.") (Morrison 48, 3). This "exercise" in modernist purification to which readers are introduced is indeed an instructional template for how the rest of the fictional world must be organized in accordance with the inquiry (suggestive of Zola's experimental novel) that Morrison pursues.

IV. Paradox Reconciled

This returns readers to the paradox inherent in Morrison's narrative project. As mentioned earlier, readers are forced to ask themselves: How can Morrison overcome the paradox of enacting that which she criticizes? The deconstruction of the Dick and Jane primer, enacted by Toni Morrison herself, responds to this conundrum. Morrison removes punctuation marks when the primer is repeated for the second time. In its third iteration, all spaces have been removed from between individual letters. In this way, as alluded to by Gibson, Morrison asserts her authority as the author of the text (i.e. *The Bluest Eye*) that will follow the primer while foreshadowing the dismantling of her countering, by way of her novel's narrative structure, the purification she must critique. In this way, Morrison "owns" and authorizes the enactment of modernist purification as an instrument necessary for her inquiry that undergirds the substance of her novel. In other words, Morrison overcomes the paradox mentioned above and reconciles the problematic enactment of modernist purification to the fact that it is employed, by her authority as the text's author, to portray to readers the whole canvas or landscape of Pecola's mental collapse and the larger societal/institutional contributors to her collapse.

Simultaneously, Morrison foreshadows the novel's precarious state as a work which does not conform to any given paradigm and thus eludes the "disinterested violence" of classification. What occurs here for this to happen is a series of paradigmatic shifts. The first paradigmatic shift is foreshadowed by the Dick and Jane primer itself, for readers can track

the trajectory of the primer as an established, conventional, and state/ideologically sanctioned paradigm (as interpreted by Werrlein) to a primer whose structure/form is manipulated by Morrison to foreshadow and convey, at the very least, her intentions of a subversive counter-message. More significantly, however, are the two paradigmatic shifts that constitute *The Bluest Eye* itself.

The first shift occurs in the narrative mode. Understandably, Morrison must employ strategies that bring to mind Zola's experimental novel. This is achieved, as noted before, through Zola's observer-narrator who, with scientific precision, demarcates the fictional world into schemata and categories so that some form of inquiry may be mapped within it. However, this creates the risk of enacting the same "disinterested violence" to which, for example, Pecola and Claudia fall victim, for by this mode of narration, characters cannot avoid being rendered into abstract, scientific "case studies." (In this case, how would Morrison be any different from her character, Geraldine?). However, through a discursive strategy that echoes Musil's Essayismus, Morrison counters the necessary but potentially problematic observer-narrator through the subjective recounting of the past by the older Claudia. For example, in the chapters narrated by Claudia, Pecola is not a subject of inquiry but is a friend for whom any potential rescue from insanity is, as Claudia sorrowfully reflects, "much, much, much too late" (Morrison 206). For those, though, who paid attention to the "preface," this intentional destabilization of discursive modes is perhaps not so surprising. The preface, which I reconfigured earlier into a type of authenticating/authorizing act on the part of Morrison, hints at such a discourse, for though it concludes with an authorizing act for an inquiry ("But since why is difficult to handle, one must take refuge in the how"), it commences with the intimate phrase "[q]uiet as it's kept," indicating a secret perhaps passed down orally and made available to only those to whom one is close (Morrison 5). The "[q]uiet as it's kept" phrase, however, carries with it a second meaning that links it to the second paradigmatic shift in *The Bluest Eye*.

The second shift marks the novel's trajectory from simply being a narrative/literary project to a work with cultural/ethical implications. Though the preface opens with such a phrase that indicates a personal story or testament set in the somewhat insular town of Lorain, Ohio, the novel ends with a sweeping moral statement from which "the earth, the land, [the] town," and "the land of the entire country" cannot escape (Morrison 206). (This brings to mind Thiher's notion of the "very modernist project" in part defined by its commitment to "total cultural criticism.") (230). In the older Claudia's moral statement, the pronoun "we" comes to the fore as she reflects that, for instance, "[w]e [the community] honed our egos on her [Pecola], padded our characters with her frailty, and yawned in the fantasy of our strength" (Morrison 205). However, the fatalistic conclusion often attributed to *The Bluest Eye* (perhaps brought upon by Pecola's irreversible madness) is a misnomer, for a sense of hope in redemption is subtly woven into the novel's concluding sentence: "[a]t least on the edge of my town, among the garbage and sunflowers of my town, it's much, much, much too late" (Morrison 206 emphasis added). Though Pecola's madness is indeed final, Claudia's use of "[a]t least" and "my town" implies that Pecola's plight need not repeat itself in the future elsewhere, perhaps somewhere "[o]n the earth, the land, [the] town," and "the land of the entire country" towards which Claudia's moral/ethical statement is directed (Morrison 206). Put another way, Pecola, with "her head jerking to the beat of a drummer so distant only she could hear," is in her own world, so to speak, either in her solipsistic world of madness or, in another reading, within the confines of the novel as a fixed, immutable text (Morrison 204). However, Claudia's final statement implies a moving beyond Lorain, Ohio and the novel itself, into a larger world of which readers too are a part. Though *The Bluest Eye* does not command readers to take certain actions (perhaps in the way the assertive book-narrator does at the conclusion of Morrison's *Jazz*), readers cannot escape the gaze of the poignant scene between Pecola and the white immigrant storekeeper Mr. Yacobowski. Pecola is "invisible" and erased by Mr. Yacobowski "between retina and object, between vision and view" (in a marked allusion to Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*) (Morrison 48). Though Mr. Yacobowski's oversight is, unfortunately, justified by Pecola ("How can a fifty-two-year-old white immigrant storekeeper ... see a little black girl?"), it seems the reader cannot escape from being implicated into this scene, for the novel (as any work of literature) shapes and influences what is "between" the reader's "retina" and the object, or, in this case, the novel he/she is, at the most rudimentary level, seeing and, by extension, reading (Morrison 48).

In these various ways, Morrison's novel, much like Musil's, becomes a literary, cultural, and ethical project. This is perhaps what justifies to the fullest extent Morrison's enactment of modernist purification, for it ultimately becomes a key component of Morrison's larger project. Morrison, in a "Musil-ian" manner, employs scientific precision (the "how") precisely for some form of ethical betterment or progress in the future (to which Claudia's concluding statement alludes). The conclusion's interplay of Pecola's impossible recovery from insanity but Claudia's implicit faith in the possibility of redemption elsewhere brings to mind the words of German aesthetician Martin Seel, who has mused about "impossible possibilities that make possible possibilities visible" so that we ourselves may see "possibilities graspable in the here and now" (quoted in Harrington 182). Though Pecola, as Manuela López Ramirez mentions, "is one of Morrison's irreversible lunatics," the older Claudia is in her own right a contributor to what Tessa Roynon terms "the Morrisonian project" (89, 604). Claudia, as friend and narrator, preserves "[a]ll of those pictures, all of those faces" (i.e. Pecola's history and experiences that make her a unique, subjective individual) (Morrison 45). Simultaneously, she offers her own story as a cultural/ethical messenger to counter the observer-narrator who must pursue, by Morrison's authorization, the scientific inquiry into Pecola's madness.

By way of Claudia's narrative contribution, the novel (as the primary mediating medium in which all lines of inquiry were made possible) comes powerfully alive as it eludes the "disinterested violence" it must both enact and critique (Morrison 23). In ways both comical and serious, Claudia's vomit, perhaps as an opposing symbol to the barrenness and sterility of ideological reduction inflicted on individuals, serves as a fitting metaphor for the novel itself – its intricate structure, its aims and aspirations, and what it has come to stand for in our reading: "The puke swaddled down ... green gray, with flecks of orange. It moves like the insides of an uncooked egg. Stubbornly clinging to its own mass, refusing to break up and be removed. How, I wonder, can it be so neat and nasty at the same time?" (Morrison 11).

Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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