CHAPTER – V

NOTE OF AFFIRMATION

With the publication *Tar Baby*, Morrison lays to rest much of her concern about her identity as an African-American woman novelist. She has in the course of her preceding fictions largely assorted herself, encapsulating a powerful position from which to write and speak. If this contributes anything to an understanding of Morrison, it is the way her identifying fictions – her first four novels - do not simply thematize identity formation, they perform it. As Morrison writes, she narrates the identity she was not certain she belongs, thereby constituting that very identity. The Morrison who writes *Beloved, Jazz* and *Paradise* is more confident that the funk can rise economically; in other words, she feels less inclined to celebrate a black identity exclusively linked to poverty.

No longer requiring to allegorize her struggle to become an veracious African-American woman, Morrison nevertheless, at various moments in her alter histographic triology, continues to mediate on authorship and the social role the artist may play in relation to the community.
Although no longer as significant a feature as it was in her earlier novels, the deep contemplation Morrison begins on authorship with Soaphead Church in *The Bluest Eye* continues through such characters in her historiographic triology as Baby Suggs, Sethe’s mother-in-law in *Beloved*; the unnamed, disembodied narrator of *Jazz*, who is strong enough to question her own productive powers; and a final marginal figure from *Paradise*, Patricia Best, the light-complexioned black woman whose historical writing interprets the hidden meaning of genealogy in the all-black town of Ruby, Oklahoma.

In *Beloved*, Morrison begins to make a clearer turn to a fiction that is historiographic in the sense Linda Hutcheon has identified as postmodern. Novels such as *Beloved* juxtapose what we think we know of the past from official archival source and personal memory with alternative representations that emphasize the postmodern epistemological questioning of the nature of historical knowledge; such an emphasis allows the reader to ask, which facts make it into history, And whose facts? Morrison’s turn toward alternative history is signaled by *Beloved*’s most immediate intertext, the archive of slave narratives in general and more particularly the story of Margaret Garner.
While working at Random House, Morrison served as the unacknowledged editor for an alternative history of everyday African Americans, *The Black Book* (1974), a portion of which included excerpts from slave narratives. Later Morrison came across Garner’s story. While working on *Beloved* in 1985, Morrison claims to have known about Garner only through a newspaper clipping. However, as the novelist continues discussing Garner’s escape from Kentucky, Morrison reveals a familiarity that seems to exceed a single newspaper clipping:

*Garner* lived in a little neighbourhood just outside of Cincinnati and she had killed her children. She succeed in killing one; she tried to kill two others. She hit them in the head with a shovel and they were wounded but they didn’t die. And there was a smaller one that she had at her breast. The interesting thing, in addition to that, was the interviews that she gave. She was a young woman. In the inked pictures of her she seemed a very quiet, very serene-looking woman and everyone who interviewed her remarked about her serenity and tranquility. She said, “I will not let those children live how I have lived.”

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A significant feature to note about the story of *Jazz*, particularly the one in the novel's present (1926), is that the possibilities of black identity are played out in a different economic environment than Morrison uses in her earlier fiction. Harlem in the 1920s with its black-owned business represents a prosperous African-American community. Whether she intends it or not, Morrison's sixth novel seems to comment on her first. Like Cholly and Pauline Breedlove, Joe and Violet Trace leave the racism of the rural South for the economic promise of the North. From the time they arrive in New York City in 1906 through the 1920s, the Traces unlike the Breedloves are upwardly mobile. Joe finds progressively better paying jobs that afford the Traces a number of life's small comforts. And though both the Breedloves and the Traces experience tragedy in their new homes, the Traces transcend the tragic denouement that the plot wishes to impose. In *The Bluest Eye*, the Breedloves' move to Lorain, Ohio, encodes the loss of one form of authenticity - that of the rural black community. But for the Traces, whatever African-American identity they forge by the end of *Jazz* does not depend exclusively on their embracing rural black poverty.
Despite the undisputed importance of Joe and Violet's reunion, the larger reconciliation of this novel happens not at the level of the story but of the discourse - the narration itself and the narrator, Morrison's figuration once again of the artist. Morrison's representation of authorship participates in the profoundly metafictional orientation of Jazz. Almost from the beginning the novel poses as its hermeneutic problem the identity of its disembodied narrator. When the narrator announces that she hasn't got any muscles, so he can't really be expected to defend herself, the reader's hunt for an elusive identity begins. Although there is no definitive evidence that the narrator is either black or female, Eusebio Rodrigues thoughtfully explores the issue of who speaks by looking closely at the novel's epigraph from the gnostic text The Nag Hammadi.

Since this first-person voice in the epigraph is the goddess Thunder, the first-person narrator's reference to her narration as my storm suggests that the narrator is a female immanence of the divine. The epigraph represents not only a form of heresy against or revision of Christianity but also a feminist resistance to the masculine domination of Christian spirituality. There seems to be a clear link from the representation of an alternative spirituality in
Beloved to the narrative consciousness of Jazz. Baby Sugg's project, in effect, is continued by the narrator of Jazz, yet the latter artist figure has a much more dialogical conception of her authority, one that allows her to transcend the isolation of artistic production. In Beloved, Baby Suggs heals the community, but who or what can heal Baby Sugg?

The unanimous view sees the narrator of Jazz as female, and certainly follow that convention, but remains to be discussed another sense of the narrator's sexual identity. For Henry Lewis Gates, Jr., the narrator's indeterminacy extends to the matter of a determinate sex, it is neither male not female. It is both and neither. Gates is right to emphasize indeterminacy, and given the novel's conclusion, this can be said that the narrator is both male and female, if not always simultaneously so, then alternately. As the narrator's pleasure is delineated, it seems as though this speaker represents the emotional bisexuality of artistic production. Whatever the exact identity of the narrator, as the teller of the story, she certainly figures the author function. Early in her representation of herself she says, "I lived a long time, may be too much, in my own mind. People say I should come out more. Mix. I agree that I close off in places, but if you have been left standing,
as I have, while your partner overstays at another appointment, or promises to give you exclusive attention after supper, but a falling asleep just as you have begun to speak - well, it can make you inhospitable if you aren't careful, the last thing I want to be".2

If Baby Suggs substantiates Morrison's development of the empowered artist figure, *Jazz* works to question that authority. This questioning occurs in the narration and the progressive loss of authority experienced by the first-person narrator who is not a character in the story she tells of both parental and sexual love lost and found. The narrator's confident predictions at the beginning which outline the story and intimate a denouement of violent repetition when Felice gain triangulates the relationship between Joe and Violet Trace turn to uncertain speculation about Golden Gray and finally to a frank admission of error and limitation. But for all the acknowledgement of fallibility, the narrator remains remarkably free from anxiety, a sign of Morrison's fuller comfort with her authorial role.

What distinguishes Morrison from other writers is the affirmative approach of her characters towards life. The same note of alienation and affirmation has featured her first novel *The Bluest Eye*.
The Bluest Eye (1970) narrates the story of two black families, the family of Breedloves- Cholly, his wife Pauline and their two children, Pecola and Sammy - and that of Claudia who is the narrator of the novel. The novel is about the tragedy of Breedloves, specifically the tragedy of Pecola Breedlove who hates her black self and yearns for blue eyes. She believes that blue eyes will make her white and extinguish her position as a pariah and give her the love and security that are desperately missing from her life. She takes blue eyes as panacea for all her problems caused by racial discriminations. The plot culminates with Cholly's rape of his daughter Pecola. The resulting pregnancy further aggravates the condition of Pecola as Pariah. The girl's need to be loved takes the doomed form of yearning for blue eyes. The insanity of this flight from reality comes to fruition after the death of the baby when she actually believes herself to have acquired them.

Morrison's aim of being honest to oneself exists for two of its characters, Claudia and Frieda Macteer who offer sharp contrast to the family of Breedloves. They live in harmony with people or nature while remaining true to their own heritage. They were born to a family that, though black and austere, did not how to breed love.
The title of the novel, "The Bluest Eye," points to the very theme of the novel: domination of blacks by the American standard of beauty that is blue eyes, blond hair and white skin. Morrison describes "the concept of physical beauty as virtue as the most destructive idea in the history of human thought". It is because of being dominated by the ideals of romantic love and physical beauty of white society that makes the life of Breedloves tragic.

The novel examines the experience of nine year old black Pecola as she copes with the idea of beauty and reality of violence within the black community. American society teaches that beauty makes people lovable or, in other words, being attractive gives them the power of commanding love. Because of being black, Breedloves do not receive recognition or acceptance from whites. Cholly, Pauline, Pecola all suffer humiliation at the hands of the white society. Unable to meet the required standard of beauty they just reconciled to being ugly: "It was as though some mysterious all knowing master had given each one a cloak ugliness to wear, and they had each accepted it without questions". The ruined external structure of the storefront in which Breedloves live corresponds directly to their disintegrated individual lives. Contrary to their
names, the lives of Breedloves are nurtured by depravity, fear, hate and oppression.

*The Bluest Eye* is primarily the tragedy of Pecola Breedlove. Pecola in her first year of womanhood is black, ugly and poor, sharing a bedroom with her brother, her crippled mother and drunken father. She suffers from an identity crisis as she falls victim to the American standard of beauty. This standard denies Pecola a positive sense of self. This standard values Maureen Peal whose sense of superiority is associated with her colour. Pecola's most damaging confrontation related to colour is with Geraldine who belongs to that class of blacks who have adopted the values of white society.

Another damaging confrontation is with Mr. Yacobowski, a white shopkeeper who feels not "to waste the effort of a glance" for a little black girl. However, what Morrison wants to indicate is that for her tragic state, Pecola herself is responsible to some extent. At each insult which others heap on her, Pecola finds refuge in shame. She acquiesces; she never glances back or speaks out but instead points with finger at what she wishes, that is, to become acceptable like the little white girl on the candy wrapper. Pecola's shame implies that she allows to be defined by others.
Equally important is the role played by Pecola's parents in bringing about her disintegration. They fail to provide the child the socialization, identity, love and security that are essential for her sense of belongingness. Contrary to their names, they breed hatred for each other. Their life is devoid of love and respect for each other. Pauline, the mother of Pecola, lavishes that love on her employer's white girl rather than on Pecola. Through "her mother's blurred vision of the pink, white and golden world of Fisher, Pecola learns that she is ugly, unacceptable and especially unloved". Pauline's own family becomes a secondary thought before the white Fishers: she bore him (Cholly) like a crown of thorns, and her children like a cross. Pecola's rape by her own father is a manifestation of the social, psychological and personal violence that Cholly, together with his wife, has put upon Pecola. Even for this rape Pauline blames Pecola and puts her out.

Morrison's discourse strongly suggests that Pecola's alienation and isolation emerge solely from the others' definition but from her self rejection too. The same is true with Cholly and Pauline. Their self-imposed ugliness makes them victims of every billboard, every movie, every glance that offers only external definition. Cholly and Pauline Breedlove, the mother and the father,
are themselves confused about their identity as both of them hail from fractured families. Cholly suffered the rejection of his father. He develops hatred for his black self when he is found by two white hunters in the midst of his sexual act and is forced by them to complete the act with them as audience. Finally he takes refuge in alcohol. The ultimate manifestation of his confused state is his vicious and tragic raping of his daughter during a confused moment of tenderness and hatred.

Pauline's effort to look like the white actress Jean Harlow eventually leads to "collect self contempt by the head". Harlow's penetrating glance from the silver screen confronts the unpolished, unsophisticated Pauline, reminding her of her unfinished self. Finally she finds refuge in the household of a white family as a domestic. The level of in authenticity that she reaches from her deferred life manifests itself in the hatred she shows towards Pecola who accidentally spills a berry Cobbler on the Fisher's clean white kitchen floor. Instead of caring for Pecola, Pauline scolds her, showing more concern for the little white girl and the clean floor. Pecola's life of illusions is again mirrored and measured against several communities of women. The life of three prostitutes, China, Poland and Miss Marry to represent models of authenticity. These
middle-aged women are social pariahs, yet they are not without self-confidence. What is significant about them is not the question of mortality associated with them. It is their self-independence which matters. In spite of the unconventionality of their life, they seem to be more fulfilled than Geraldine and the Breedloves. At an early age they discovered that men could seek physical pleasure from them and decided to be compensated for this. But they do so almost "with a vengeance". Thus they make choices which lead to self-ownership and make them affirmative in their life. Pecola suffocates in a home of displaced and fragmented lives but with these three prostitutes, who live upstairs, she finds a sanctuary. Paradoxically, it is the only place where Pecola gets love and security because their lives seem to be more authentic and complete. One can see that Claudia, the prostitutes, and the community of women at the death of aunt Jimmy succeed in achieving integrated personalities as they remain true to their heritage and colour. Their personalities do not disintegrate under the burden of their skin colour.

*The Bluest Eye* expresses Morrison's argument that authentic existence emerges from self-affirmation, from making choices which lead to self-ownership rather than from a life bordering on imitation.
of others. She believes that it is one's approach towards life that makes one alienated or affirmative. In reference to racial discrimination against blacks, Morrison contends that though white society is undoubtedly the oppressor, the blacks too share the burden of responsibility for their predicament. Their unconscious desire to be white implies self-hatred which makes them vulnerable to the attacks of racial discrimination.

From the deep agony and dissimulation narrated in *The Bluest Eye* (1970), to the grief and sadness of *Sula* (1974), Toni Morrison embarks on a journey which ends with the soaring affirmation of black selfhood in the same lines of *Song of Solomon* (1977). It is a quest not only to de-center the white logos, but finally to rebuild the center, to discover the powers which lie hidden in the black logos. In the course of discussing these three novels, I will attempt to show how Morrison rises out of what Houston Baker calls the black whole to create what I will call, in a signifying riff on Baker's term, a wholly black text.

In *Song of Solomon*, Toni Morrison continues her relentless quest to liberate herself and her characters from the imperialism of the white logos. Like *Sula*, the novel begins in a black community in which blackness is still judged by the standards of the white
logos, which is to say as absence, negation, and evil. The protagonist's subservience to the white logos is symbolized by his name. Milkman has been marked with the brand of white logos at birth - given the name Macon Dead II. It is a familial scar inherited from his grandfather who, upon emancipation from slavery, was mischristened by a drunken Yankee soldier who grossly reinterpreted his grandfather's statement that he was born in Macon, Georgia, and that his father was dead. The black community attempts to signify away the brand by renaming the boy Milkman, although this name too is stultifying in that it originates out of an incident in which his mother is caught nursing her only son well past the age when city blacks consider a child sufficiently grown to feed himself. Both names arrest Milkman's maturation. Incarcerated within this linguistic prison, he drams despondently of some ancestor, some lithe young man with onyx skin and legs as straight as came stalks, who had a name that was real. A name given to him at birth with love and seriousness. A name that was not a joke, nor a disguise, nor a brand name. But who this lithe young man was, and where his came-stalk legs carried him from or to, could never be known. No, Nor his name.
As in Toni Morrison's first two novels the central story of *Song of Solomon* is a quest for black identity. In Milkman's case it is a metaphorical struggle for life, for in order to become up-Dead he must somehow regain "the name that was real." Like Morrison's own project, Milkman's quest is to discover the original black logos and the mythical powers in holds.

Whereas Pecola Breedlove and Sula Peace seem sentenced from birth to a life of despair, Milkman seems fated from the first to achieve a greater destiny. He is the first black to be born in Mercy Hospital, and his entrance into the world is harkened by the ill-fated flight of Robert Smith, Southside's seemingly innocuous insurance salesman, who fashions himself a pair of blue silk wings and leaps to his death in an aborted attempt to fly, as the townspeople watch from below and Milkman's aunt, Pilate, sings:

> **O Sugarman done fly away**

> **Sugarman done gone**

> **Sugarman cut across the sky**

> **Sugarman gone home ...**

With Mr. Smith's failed though spirited attempt to conquer logic and gravity, Milkman is welcomed somewhat auspiciously into the world, fated it would seem from birth to carry on this vision,
this dream of flying back home. Before he can fulfill his destiny, however, he must first recover his original name. To do so requires his first unlearning the white logos in order to recover the power inbued in a truly black identity.

His quest is an interpretive one, the fragment of the blues song which Pilate signs at the birth/death being the essential text which will lead him to his goal. But before he can learn to read this truly black text, he must first free himself from the linguistic bondage into which he was born. It is Pilate who becomes the boy's tutor in unlearning the white logos, who, even if she cannot free him, at least teaches him to love to be free. For Pilate is a figure who defies white logic and thereby challenges Milkman to drop the precepts of the white logos. Pilate's conjuring powers can be seen in the police station where, before Milkman's very eyes, she is able to transform herself into a withered hag, old and shrunken beyond her years. Furthermore, she possesses the power to communicate with the ghost of her dead father, although she continually misinterprets the spectral text which her father reveals in his visits from the other side of the grave, believing his only words, Song, sing, to be a command rather than an attempt to communicate to his daughter the now-forgotten name of his bride.
There is a degree of authenticity to their use of language, to this inherently oral text, which Milkman had never previously imaged. And when the men in the mountains of Virginia finally shoot the bobcat from his perch atop the tree, Milkman is given his final initiation into the rites/rights/writes of his race which will enable him to interpret faithfully the semantic nuances of the truly black text. The men cajole him to reach into the carcass saying, don't get the lungs, now, get the heart.

It is only by grasping the heart of the black idiom that Milkman is able to complete his interpretive quest. Only after this ritual has been performed does he realize that the song which he has heard the children of Shalimar singing over and over again, in what he takes to be an incessant, senseless children's game, is not, as he had initially thought, merely a meaningless rhyme but rather a fuller version of the essential text which Pilate misinterpreted as her father's telling her to Sing, sing. Here, in the oral text passed on from generation to generation through children, Milkman learns that the interpretive trail which had led him from Sugarman to Charlemagne to Shalimar and finally to Solomon holds the secret true ancestry and revives a long subsumed desire in Milkman for flight. He returns to Southside to collect Pilate and the sack
containing his grandfather's bones, whereupon they return together
to the place in the mountains of Virginia where his great-
grandfather leapt from the bonds of slavery into the arm of
freedom.

With Milkman's leap Toni Morrison raises Afro-American
fiction out of the black whole, giving us instead a wholly black text.
It is whole in the sense that Milkman has escaped the linguistic
prison into which the drunken Yankee soldier wantonly threw his
grandfather and all subsequent generations of his family. He has
recovered that name that was real and with it an identity based on
blackness as an affirmation, a source of wondrous power and
heartfelt pride. Morrison has been able to draw upon the soul of the
spirituals, to bring out of the semantic shadows the true meaning
of home in the blues passage. Sugarman done fly away Sugarman
gone home, and with it the true feelings of strength and joy which
have always resided in the black logos and yet which have for too
long remained confined to black wholes. Toni Morrison has been
successful in raising folktales like the South Sea Islands' myth of
the flying Africans on which the story of Milkman is based and
blues passages which provide Milkman with the oral history of his
ancestor to a level worthy of being called sacred texts of the Afro-American tradition.

With the writing of *Song of Solomon*, Toni Morrison thus successfully achieves her quest to overthrow the white logos, to escape the "glare of glazed separateness" that Pecola finds "lurking in the eyes of all white people", making her feel small and ashamed of her blackness, and to free herself and her characters of the duplicity and power that the white landowner wielded over the ancestors of the Bottom. Morrison is effectively able to draw upon the power of the black logos to inscribe a black figure, a black reality upon the white page. It is a reality defined not by the mythos of white Western culture, the phenomenological things-in-themselves of Hegel or Heidegger or the naturalistic realism of Zola or Balzac but instead a reality governed by the black logos - magical realism. "Black people believe in magic," Toni Morrison has said, "it is part of our heritage". It is this heritage which Toni Morrison has drawn strength from in order to depict blackness as affirmation, presence, and good in the creation of a wholly black text.
REFERENCES


4. Ibid., p. 28.

5. Ibid., p. 86.

6. Ibid., p. 27.

7. Ibid., p. 95.

8. Ibid., p. 43.


10. Ibid., p. 9.
