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Article:

Madden, MT (1995) *Necessary narratives: Toni Morrison and literary identities*. *Women's Studies International Forum*, 18 (5/6). 585 - 594. ISSN 0277-5395

[https://doi.org/10.1016/0277-5395\(95\)80095-7](https://doi.org/10.1016/0277-5395(95)80095-7)

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Necessary Narratives: Toni Morrison and Literary Identities

Shortened title for use with page numbers: Necessary Narratives

Mary Madden (1995). *Women's Studies International Forum* 18 (5/6) 585-594.

Abstract

This article discusses the impact and importance of Morrison's status as an acclaimed postcolonial black woman writer. Key issues of identity, essence, marginalisation and assimilation are explored with the aim of showing the significance of Morrison's writing as constitutive rather than merely reflective of the production of identities.

We cannot and should not underestimate or neglect the importance of the act of imaginative re-discovery (Hall, 1992a p26).

Since her first novel, *The Bluest Eye* was published in 1970, Toni Morrison has conducted what she terms a "literary archaeology" of the lives of African Americans (Morrison, 1987a p112). On December 10th, 1993 Morrison was the first black American and the eighth woman to receive the Nobel Prize for literature. This newly conferred status was accompanied by a backlash; "it was inevitable that the Swedish Academy would be accused of overweening political correctness" (Pringle, 1993 p18). The Academy's description of Morrison as "a literary artist of the first rank" contrasted with the view of black critic Stanley Crouch that, "she has a certain skill, but no artistic integrity" (Pringle, 1993 p18). In this article I will examine the impact and importance of Morrison's status as an acclaimed black woman writer, "being a writer she thinks of language...mostly as agency - as an act with consequences" (Morrison, 1993 p24). Morrison's texts explore key issues in post-colonial/imperialist cultural history: identity, essence, marginalisation and assimilation. I will discuss writing as a practice located at the intersection of subject and history which is constitutive rather than merely reflective of the production of identities. Morrison herself said in her address to the Nobel Foundation: "Word-work is sublime, she thinks, because it is generative; it makes meaning that secures our difference..." (Morrison, 1993 p24).

The starting-point of critical elaboration is the consciousness of what one really is, and is 'knowing thyself' as a product of the historical process to date which has deposited in you an infinity of traces, without leaving an inventory. (Gramsci, 1988 p326)

But since why is difficult to handle, one must take refuge in how. (Morrison, 1990 p3)

There is a historical determination about identity. This operates through the creation and dynamic of 'normalised', binaried classifications which include, gender, class, 'race', sexuality, disability and age. Nevertheless, identities are dynamic. There is a personal forging and reclaiming within the historical process through the politics of articulation. Identities are both a means of cutting off from and forming links with others. The 'postmodern' re-grouping and assertion of individual and collective identities

has been empowering and strengthening through the reclamation and reversal of negative, imposed identities defined in terms of the 'other'. However, part of this process has involved the development of forms of category politics which has been problematic, particularly for those subject to cumulative 'otherings'. A category politics which has seemed at times to have "assumed the undifferentiated nature of each identity" (Rutherford, 1990 p17). For example, those who are, "the Other of the Others" (Wallace, 1990 p 148) fit uncomfortably within a feminist theory so concerned with inclusiveness that difference is implicitly denied.

The assumption of shared subjectivities and the shaping of experience by common objective factors like racism and sexism has given rise to what Pratibha Parmar has described as, "a language of 'authentic subjective experience'..[and] an emphasis on accumulating a collection of oppressed identities which in turn has given rise to a hierarchy of oppression" (Parmar, 1990 p 107). This challenge of 'authenticity' and the obligation to appease their constituencies led to disproportionate demands and expectations being made of black women as producers and as signifiers of 'race' representation. The complex interaction between different experiences has been largely neglected in favour of a reductive experiential authenticity. Tempered by 'positive' images, this continues to be used as a judgement of black women's writing. The implicit focal point here is the white racist gaze on the text. It has led to criticism of many black women writers including Toni Morrison and Alice Walker for portraying 'negative images' of black men. Black women writers have been asked to exchange one form of reductionism for another- 'race' or gender in exchange for class and at the exclusion of identifying any other form of oppression. As Michelle Wallace points out, "lurking beneath the issue of black feminist 'negative images' is an essentialist notion of the truly black or the truly natural woman who would intrinsically know the 'correct' position" (Wallace, 1990 p4).

In a culture which fictionalises sexual, racial and gender identities it is important to be able to re-forge them. Identities are "necessary fictions..both artificial and essential" (Weeks, 1990 viii). They are not expressions of secret essences or inner truths. The fact, force and complexity of the fictionalisation process makes authenticity very difficult to define. The purpose of the pursuit of authenticity has been increasingly put into question. What it is necessary to 'fictionalise' changes through history. The production and reclamation of history is an act of interpretation and appropriation. The temptation to 'rediscover' an innocent past can lead to the construction of a mythic past which can be constraining rather than liberating. Instead, as Homi Bhabha says:

What is theoretically innovative, and politically crucial is the need to think beyond narratives of originary and initial subjectivities and to focus on those moments or processes that are produced in the articulation of cultural differences. These 'in-between' spaces provide the terrain for elaborating strategies of selfhood- singular or communal- that initiate new signs of identity, and innovative sites of collaboration, and contestation, in the act of defining the idea of society itself... (Bhabha, 1994 p1)

A process of continual interpretation and development rather than the production of soon fossilised 'positive images', depends on, "putting back in place the invisible discursive conditions which make new texts possible" (Bailey and Hall, 1992 p23). The notion that there is an inner, originating truth from which hierarchies of meaning arise has been de-constructed to reveal the arrogant, fully rational, western, white, male, heterosexual subject at its core. 'His' construction has monopolised the production of and the right to judge cultural products which supposedly speak for us all. Fiction can focus on the interiority of the individual, while rejecting the unified status of subjectivity, acknowledging that the illusion of a pre-given, natural quality is structured through the source of determination, language.

Black writers function within a discourse which defines them as absent, not white, or as present, the 'other'. Women writers function within a discourse which defines them as absent, not male, or as present, the 'other'. The categories of experience and self presence that exist within liberal fiction and culture can be explored and exploded in the literature of the 'other'. 'Inauthenticity' can be re-cast as a category which condemns the dominant culture/gender, not the dominated. These discourses attempt to reveal and interrogate the ruptures in the structuring principles and signifying systems which operate in all texts. Morrison does not offer simplistic 'positive images' in her novels. Crude reversals of the binary keep the binary structure itself intact. An exploration of the possibilities of self perception is an empowering act which does not benefit from denying how complex or transient any 'truth' is. As Norma Alarcon strongly asserts, "The psychic and material violence that gives shape to that [black female subjectivity] cannot be underestimated nor passed over lightly" (Alarcon, 1990 p359). Morrison's novels disrupt the narrative of history and challenge notions of fixity and presence. They produce a place where "unspeakable things and thoughts, unspoken " break through (Morrison, 1989 p284).

This soil is bad for certain kinds of flowers. Certain seeds it will not nurture, certain fruit it will not bear, and when the land kills of its own volition, we acquiesce and say the victim had no right to live (Morrison, 1990 p164).

Toni Morrison's writing examines and reveals the historical fictions and controlling myths which have formed the burden of layers of negative identities and images constructed around black women and men. Morrison weaves her characters into a web of history where they operate within the limiting constructs of class, 'race', gender and sexuality. Her writing articulates the survival and destruction of black female and male subjects within a racist and patriarchal culture. She explores constructions of femininity, maternity, masculinity and sexuality in racist discourse. She also uses the themes of belonging and order, naming and memory, myth and re-memory in an exploration of African American cultural identity. Morrison describes one of the major themes of *The Bluest Eye*, *Beloved* and *Sula* as:

How to own your own body and love someone else under historical duress where there must be agency...How to exert individual agency under the huge umbrella of determined historical life...refusal to be the victim (Morrison, 1992b).

Her first novel, *The Bluest Eye* was written in 1965 when Morrison says, " 'black is beautiful' was America's number two anthem" (Griffiths, 1992 p8). The novel shows the vulnerability of black girls to society's construction of the outsider, the pariah. The novel illustrates both the internalisation of and the fight against this process. The novel is Pecola Breedlove's story narrated through and contrasted with the character of Claudia. Racism, femininity, sexuality and poverty combine in a construction of beauty as white and unobtainable:

A little black girl yearns for the blue eyes of a little white girl, and the horror at the heart of her yearning is exceeded only by the evil of fulfilment (Morrison, 1990 p163).

Morrison uses the device of the school reading book happy family to illustrate the yawning gap between the fictional white Mother, Father, Dick and Jane and the Breedloves, a poor, black, family which reflects the most negative images of black people and the fears of the black community in which they exist. Their internalisation of ugliness is profound and constantly reinforced. They saw "support for it leaning at them from every billboard, every movie, every glance" (p 28). She illustrates the hierarchy of beauty based on paleness of skin tone and 'white' features. Pecola is on the bottom rung. The character of Geraldine exemplifies the model of femininity that is held up for black women to aspire to in a patriarchal and racist society. Geraldine is pale skinned and "did not sweat in her armpits nor between her thighs...she built her nest, ironed shirts, potted bleeding hearts, and birthed Louis Junior" (p 67). She does not like Louis Junior to play with "niggers":

She had explained to him the difference between coloured people and niggers. They were easily identifiable. Colored people were neat and quiet; niggers were dirty and loud... The line between colored and nigger was not always clear; subtle and telltale signs threatened to erode it, and the watch had to be constant (Morrison, 1990 p 68).

When confronted with the sight of Pecola in her house, Geraldine reacts as though Pecola is both verminous and contagious:

She looked at Pecola. Saw the dirty torn dress, the plaits sticking out of her head, her hair matted where the plaits came undone...she had seen this little girl all of her life...The end of the world lay in their eyes..Like flies they hovered; like flies they settled...'You nasty little black bitch. Get out of my house' (Morrison, 1990 p 72).

Pecola is repulsive but also magnetic, she is blackness erupting into Geraldine's life, threatening to unsettle her control of her 'colored' identity and draw her further away from idealised whiteness. There is a similar character to Geraldine in the later novel, *Sula* which also focuses on the lives of two girls, Nel and Sula. They are so close they "were two throats and one eye" (Morrison, 1991 p147):

Because each had discovered years before that they were neither white nor male, and that all freedom and triumph was forbidden to them, they had set about creating something else to be (Morrison, 1991 p 52).

Sula is created as a pariah in this novel because, in contrast with Pecola, she is "too free" from the conventions and expectations surrounding her. Through Sula and Nel, the novel asserts the importance of female friendships and the struggle for black women to be able to define themselves. The young Nel's desire to be 'me' is partly in response to the shame she feels at her Geraldine-like mother Helene after she smiles a foolish smile at a humiliating racist conductor under the hateful gaze of white soldiers. Nel sees her "custard skinned" mother transformed into custard and fears she is custard too. This incident helps her decide to cultivate her relationship with Sula despite Helene's opinion that Sula's mother is "sooty"(Morrison, 1991 p14).

Both novels explore the means by which black women's identities and choices are restricted and controlled through the internalisation and self policing of unachievable standards of beauty and behaviour. Morrison uses the character of Pecola to emphasise the horror that this internalisation of self-hatred should be considered routine. She is the foil for cumulative layers of hatred and the denial of desire, constructed and enforced through a disciplinary patriarchal, racist capitalism and carried by black men and women. Pecola cannot be viewed with 'masculine privilege' as a unitary subject. Feminine subjectivities are constructed within a complex dynamic of acceptance and resistance. Morrison does not mirror sociological 'reality'. She explores the processes, impact and re-production of constructed meanings within black communities:

All of our waste which we dumped on her and which she absorbed. And all of our beauty, which was hers first and which she gave to us. All of us...felt so wholesome after we cleaned ourselves on her. We were so beautiful when we stood beside her ugliness...We honed our egos on her, padded our characters with her frailty, and yawned in the fantasy of our strength (Morrison, 1990 p163).

Pecola's descent into madness exemplifies the high price that is demanded in a survival which does not challenge the construction of its imposed norms:

We were not free, merely licensed..we rearranged lies and called it truth, seeing in the new pattern of an old idea the Revelation and the word (p 163)

Pecola is mad, ironically, through acting out what all of the black women in these novels are expected to aspire to. Claudia is a survivor because she and her sister "were still in love with themselves then" (p 58). When Maureen Peal, "A high yellow dream child" taunts them by saying that they are black and ugly, Claudia realises that Maureen Peal is not the "Enemy". "The Thing to fear was the Thing that made her beautiful, and not us" (p 58). Despite the conversion of her suppressed hatred of white dolls into a "fraudulent love" of all things Shirley Temple-like, Claudia manages to retain a healthy externalised anger:

We stare at her [Rosemary], wanting her bread, but more than that wanting to poke the arrogance out of her eyes and smash the pride of ownership that curls her chewing mouth..she will cry and ask us do we want to pull her pants down. We will say no...we know she is offering us something precious and that our own pride must be asserted by refusing to accept" (p 5).

Pecola tries to substitute anger for the shame she feels at rejection but she submits to the allure of white femininity:

Anger is better. There is a sense of being in anger..An awareness of worth...The anger will not hold..The shame wells up in her again..She remembers the Mary Janes...Three pennies had bought her nine lovely orgasms with Mary Jane, for whom a candy is named" (p 38).

Black women have been subject to a political, cultural and economic process of negation in racist patriarchy. Morrison's novels address the fact that this works in a subtle and complex way within as well as upon black communities. Michele Wallace has identified Morrison as one of the artists attempting to provide "alternatives to reductionist interpretations of black community by social scientists, both black and white" (Wallace, 1990 p69).

The *Bluest Eye* has also received much criticism from black critics for the portrayal of the character Cholly Breedlove who sexually abuses his daughter Pecola. Cholly has been seen as a 'negative image' in the light of the racist construction of black man as rapist. Cholly is not offered for an easy response, as the novel says, "The pieces of Cholly's life could become coherent only in the head of a musician" (Morrison, 1990 p127). Morrison gives both male and female characters a history through which they operate. This applies to the horror of Cholly's rape of Pecola as much as to the horrific acts committed by women characters including Sethe cutting her baby's throat in *Beloved*, Eva setting fire to her son Sugar Plum in *Sula* and Violet disfiguring Dorca's corpse in *Jazz* (Morrison 1992a). Morrison says that she did not want Cholly to be simply "a villain with a moustache. He wasn't just...a rapist, a child molester. He was that, but not just that" (Morrison,1992b).

Cholly's history involves another 'negative image' in the shape of his rejecting and neglecting father. Cholly's search for him is however inspired by the 'positive image' of Blue John who has acted as a father figure. Cholly turns his hatred and humiliation at the hands of white men against black women after his shame on being interrupted by two white men when he is first making love with Darlene. They have the power to force him to perform for them and she is a witness to his humiliation. Images of masculinity and femininity in capitalist, racist, patriarchy, construct a damaging hierarchy of power relations within heterosexuality. The Breedloves are subjected to the marketing of idealised images while being excluded from all forms of social and economic power. Cholly sees Pecola's misery as an accusation that he is a failure as a provider, a father and a man. The abuse is a combination of hatred and tenderness and is combined with happy memories of when he first met his wife Pauline. Their love has deteriorated from when he made Pauline "feel purple deep inside" and view her bad foot as an asset to now when she holds Cholly as "a model of sin and failure" (Morrison, 1990 p102). Cholly

needs and hates at the same time. He sees Pecola as an object: "He poured out on her the sum of all his inarticulate fury and aborted desires." Cholly is "dangerously free" because he has nothing more to lose. Claudia explains that Cholly did love Pecola but that "Love is never any better than the lover"(p 167). Cholly is judged as an animal and a "ratty nigger" by the other characters (p 22).

Morrison's work carries powerful, sensuous, 'positive' male images in characters like Ajax in *Sula* and Paul D in *Beloved*, who has been described by Sandi Russell as, "One of the gentlest and most loving male characters in black literature" (Russell, 1990 p111). She also portrays grotesques like Soaphead Church, who gives Pecola her blue eyes, and the tragic and pathetic Cholly. As Michele Wallace says:

Although it is possible to be critical of the failure of ...work to challenge fundamentally mainstream or racist conceptions of black humanity or agency, it is important to observe that so-called 'negative images' will probably be necessary to any kind of reformulation or restructuring of prevailing conceptions of 'race' and 'ethnicity'. They seem particularly necessary to the inauguration of a public black female subjectivity" (Wallace, 1990 p4).

Agency is dependent upon the ability to name the self and forge new meanings through language. Prescriptive and elitist Marxist, black and feminist literary theories with mutually exclusive discourses have produced necessary and important critiques of the white male literary world but they have also created repressive, essentialist categories which suppress difference. The importance of the naming of the self and the complexity of the politics of articulation is emphasised in Morrison's essay on whiteness and the literary imagination, *Playing in the Dark*:

What happens to the writerly imagination of a black author who is at some level always conscious of representing one's own race to, or in spite of, a race of readers that understands itself to be 'universal' or race free?"(Morrison, 1992c pxii)

She examines the racialised imagery which permeates through and is reproduced within the literary canon:

I am a black writer struggling with and through a language that can powerfully evoke and enforce hidden signs of racial superiority, cultural hegemony and dismissive 'othering' of people and language...The kind of work which I have always wanted to do requires me to learn how to manoeuvre ways to free up the language from its...racially informed and determined chains" (Morrison, 1992c px-xi).

Morrison's novel *Beloved* with its theme of "re-memory" in the character's search for self understanding expresses most clearly how identities depend on and are constructed through history and through the personal interaction of histories between characters. The profundity of the experience of slavery cannot be escaped, its disruptive private psychic pain is made public in this novel. The "Sixty Million and more "(Morrison, 1988 dedication) who were lost in the Middle Passage being taken from Africa haunt the whole of America: "Not a house in this country ain't packed to the

rafters with some dead negro's grief" (Morrison, 1988 p5). Morrison amplifies our awareness of our notion of history by combining mythic narrative within historic narrative as a means of registering the active effectivity of the past within the present. An awareness of history is not, however, offered up as a solution or cure in itself. The construction of a slave identity is challenged through re-memory. This involves the regaining of the ability to construct meaning through language. The unspoken is spoken and so recreated.

The slave owner, Schoolteacher, conducts a 'scientific observation' of Sethe's 'animal and human characteristics'. He not only exploits slaves, he is fascinated by the intellectual arguments he constructs to rationalise this exploitation. He serves to illustrate the nineteenth century 'objective', 'scientific' classification of slaves and the construction of 'race'. James Baldwin's essay *Here Be Dragons* tells how the American Constitution incorporated the definition of a slave as three fifths of a man. This was a legal and commercial definition that meant in law, "a black man had no rights a white man was bound to respect" (Baldwin, 1985 p679). Sethe escapes but twenty eight days later, faced with re-capture and the re-enslavement of herself and the children, she cuts the throat of her baby girl and tries to kill the others.

124, Bluestone Road on the outskirts of Cincinnati, Ohio is haunted in 1873 by the "crawling already" baby who was killed before she was named. She brings that past through the present into the future. Sethe remembers 'Dearly Beloved' from the funeral ceremony. She has to pay with her body for the gravestone to be carved, "ten minutes for seven letters [so] she ..settled for..the one word that mattered" (Morrison, 1988 p5). That word becomes a name and is Beloved.

The character of Sethe is based on Margaret Garner who actually committed this taboo act which seems to break romantic notions of maternal love. Motherhood in slavery was reduced to the material level of breeding stock. Children were at the disposal of the slave owner rather than in the 'ownership' of their parents. The reclamation of lineage is an important link to the past in the face of this. Stamp Paid explains Sethe's actions to Paul D, "She ain't crazy. She loves those children. She was trying to out hurt the hurter" (Morrison, 1988 p 234). Sethe's own mother was branded and had to wear a bit, Morrison says,

[They used it because] they thought slaves were animals. And to stop you from talking - silence- having no language, not being able to express anything. Imposing this should destroy you" (Morrison, 1987b).

For the slaves in *Beloved*, leaving slavery involves giving themselves back to themselves by the process of re-claiming and naming. The naming of the self and the regaining of the ability to construct meaning through language is so important because as Morrison says, "if you come from Africa, your name is gone" (Wood, 1992 p6). Brands and slave owners' names are impositions and negations of the history of African Americans before slavery. In *The Song of Solomon*, Milkman Dead travels to

find the source of his name. He and his friends have un-named themselves from the given name which is a white imposition. Morrison describes these "Names that bore witness" as "both an outrage and a means of resistance" (Morrison, 1985 p102).

The attempts to exclude black people from entering discourse have ranged from forbidding slaves to read to attributing the root of a praised novel by a black writer to their privileged 'white education'. Morrison is unable to control the marketing and consumption of the cultural products she produces. She obviously does not stand outside of it all. She does, however, try to name herself as a writer working with African American language. She emphasises the importance of working with a language that is not editorialised for a white gaze, "I was not going to footnote the black experience for white readers" (Wood, 1992 p5). James Baldwin's essay, If Black English isn't a Language, then tell me what is? quotes Morrison as describing Black English as "sheer intelligence". He describes how black [African] people had to develop a means of communication when their own language was stolen through slavery. It therefore contains within it a means of survival:

It goes without saying then, that language is also a political instrument, means and proof of power. It is the most vivid and crucial key to identity: it reveals the private identity, and connects one with, or divorces one from, the larger, public, or communal identity" (Baldwin, 1985 p650).

The fantastical writing in Morrison's novels is based on a reclaiming of what Morrison describes as, "discredited knowledge" or folklore; "discredited only because Black people were discredited and therefore what they knew was 'discredited'" (Morrison, 1983 p342). She describes the rich resource of an equally discredited black language:

I want to merge the vernacular with the lyric, with the standard, with the biblical, because it was part of the linguistic heritage of my family [which was] an enhancement, not a restriction...It made me feel there was an enormous power in the way language could be handled [and this] operated as a rein as well as a Pandora's box. (Morrison, 1992d).

Salman Rushdie has described Morrison's highly creative use of language as "A linguistic explosion..it is what makes the books speak"(Rushdie 1992).

In an interview with James Wood, Morrison described her frustration with black novels that she felt were, "written about me, even by someone like me, but its voice is shaped for another ear, another eye - a white gaze" (Wood, 1992 p5). Wood says that although she writes "unashamedly for black readers...Toni Morrison's voice transcends colour and creed and she has become one of America's outstanding post-war writers" (Wood, 1992 p4). In a later article about the awarding of the Nobel prize, Wood asks Morrison about the influence that black writers like Baldwin and Ellison had on her, he quotes her as saying, "they were no help for me for writing. They were good for information, for data, but nothing else" (Wood, 1993 p11). Wood says that:

She may be accountable to what she calls "her people", but she is also accountable to the nineteenth century writers she devoured as an adolescent...She is accountable to an American literary tradition which has produced her even as her novels subtly reassess that tradition. In her speaks the voice of American witness; in her speaks the Whitman who wrote: "I am the man, I suffered, I was there" (Wood, 1993 p11).

Morrison's discourse is rooted in "colour and creed" and is "unashamedly" about black experience. However, critics like Wood and A.S. Byatt claim for her a transcendence of "Local descriptions like black or woman"(Byatt, 1992), because as Trinh T. Minh-ha says:

Being merely 'a writer' without doubt ensures one a status of far greater weight than being a 'woman of colour who writes' ever does. Imputing race or sex to the creative act has long been a means by which the literary establishment cheapens and discredits the achievements of non-mainstream women writers (Minh-ha, 1989 p6).

The elision of her identity so that Whitman can see and speak through her is praise indeed. The contrast between this and her comment about Ellison and Baldwin helps Wood to locate her firmly within the traditional canon. Assimilation is also exemplified in Sara Blackburn's review of *Sula* which states that:

Toni Morrison is far too talented a writer to remain only a marvellous recorder of the black side of provincial American life. If she is to maintain the large and serious audience she deserves, she is going to have to address a riskier contemporary reality...And [if so] ...she might easily transcend that early and unintentionally limiting classification 'black woman writer' and take her place among the most serious and talented American novelists...(Blackburn,1973).

The black specificity of Morrison's discourse is at the heart of her work and is the focus of critical praise, but it is this fundamental part of her work and identity that she is required to 'transcend' to be considered a 'great' novelist. 'Great' novelists are 'universal' and 'race free'. Morrison's identification of herself as an African American writer is counter-narrated by critics who paradoxically claim her as an insider while portraying her as an outsider. The dominant culture in this way attempts to maintain its boundaries while containing those who criticise those boundaries. Difference is not accepted, but is assimilated or marginalised. As Morrison herself says:

...The habit of ignoring race is understood to be a graceful, even generous, liberal gesture. To notice it is to recognize an already discredited difference. To enforce its invisibility through silence is to allow the black body a shadowless participation in the dominant cultural body (Morrison 1992c p10).

Novels are seen as important by Morrison in that they contribute historically to the "building of a nation" through the forging of culture (Morrison 1992d). Stuart Hall has described the main function of the systems of representation which form national cultures as an attempt to forge an identity of 'one people' from "what is in fact the ethnic hotch-potch of modern nationality" (Hall, 1992b p6). There has been a shift in cultural racism from what Paul Gilroy describes as, "crude ideas of biological inferiority" to the construction of a fragile, mythical unity based on whiteness (Hall, 1992b p7).

Morrison describes her own experience of being an African American as, "living in a nation of people who decided that their world view would combine agendas for individual freedom and mechanisms for devastating racial oppression" (Morrison 1992d). She has said that she has never felt American, echoing Malcolm X's claim, "I am not an American, I am a victim of Americanism" (X, 1962 p10). She describes herself as wanting to be American as a child but, "everything was designed to stop me doing that..shops I could not enter..always a marginalised person within the context of the major civilisation" (Morrison 1992d). Hall says that it is a characteristic of modernity that people simultaneously live and negotiate between several overlapping "imagined communities". He cites W.E. Du Bois' identification of the "double consciousness" of the slave and his/her descendants who as C.L.R. James says are obliged to be in "Western Civilisation, who have grown up in it, yet are not completely part of it". James goes on to ascribe a 'unique' insight to black Americans, "What [they] have to say ..will give a new vision, a deeper and stronger insight into both Western civilisation and the black people in it" (Hall, 1992b p7). Edward Said has also emphasised the importance of writers who conduct re-imaginings to help re-claim both the ownership of land and of the bodies of people within post-colonial societies. This process helps to undermine the justifications, philosophies and epistemologies which colonialism produces to sanction its ownership of land and bodies (Ree, 1992).

However, when such a commentator receives the praise of white critics, Malcolm X describes the suspicion that arises; "it has been our experience that the Americans don't praise any Black man who is really working for the Black man" (X, 1962 p14). Assimilation can work as a powerful means of control. Morrison has access to more than one discourse. Her writing draws on African American sources of language, on her knowledge of 'the novel' and her exposure to the many other discourses she encounters and employs as a black woman living in twentieth century America. The fact that her work has wide appeal does not mean that she has 'sold out'. Instead she has a valuable form of cultural capital. The literary canon contains within its imagination the history of imperialism, colonialism and the history of the 'othering' of black people, women, lesbians, gay men and others who are 'othered'. The resulting oppressions have been constructed around rigid separation. Re-imaginings can demonstrate the fluidity of these categories, how they came about and why they have been adopted and adapted. They can create images of possibility and movement.

Identity as a sense of personal coherence and intelligibility has always been threatened for those labouring under the weight of multiple 'otherings'. This is especially true for black women who as Morrison says, had nothing to fall back on, "not maleness, not whiteness, not ladyhood, not anything" (Morrison 1971 p63). There arises therefore, a temptation to replace the essentialism of the self as an autonomous entity with an essentialist cultural and political identity. Although essentialist category politics can offer some short term empowerment and security, it inevitably feeds fragmentation. Kobena Mercer has said that "there is nothing inherently revolutionary or virtuous about being a black

subject, because no one has a monopoly on progressive democratic agency" (Mercer, 1992 p38). This and the splitting of subjects between categories makes it very difficult to make judgements on cultural products on the basis of their essentialist authenticity. Canonical cultural categories can cause suffocation while seeming to offer security. Instead it is possible to encourage change and challenge through allowing the conceptualisation of and acceptance of difference using what Hall describes as a position located "inside a continuous struggle and politics around black representation [and the representation of women], but which then is able to open up a continuous critical discourse about themes...forms...subjects...above all, the regimes of representation" (Hall, 1988 p30).

Morrison's work is an example of cultural production which produces cultural capital through the power of articulation, thus contributing to a "formative, not merely an expressive" scenario of representation (Hall, 1988 p27). Bailey and Hall describe what is at stake in the question of modernity for black people; "the struggle not simply to recover ourselves in past histories but to produce ourselves as new subjects" (Bailey and Hall, 1992 p7). Kobena Mercer describes difference and diversity as "political problems of postmodernity" (Mercer, 1992 p34). Morrison's work is of key importance in showing that, "[Black people] are just as much the agents and subjects of [post] modernity as those in the west who try and colonise the modern for themselves" (Bailey and Hall, 1992, p7). As Mercer says:

The challenge is to be able to theorise more than one difference at once: to abandon the over-determined spaces in between, in which relations of identity and difference are lived (Mercer, 1992 p34).

Morrison's novels interpret and de-construct the past in order to create the possibility of being able to construct the future. They advocate not just memory but 're-memory', as "roots" are being used to find "routes out of the prison house of marginality" (Mercer, 1992 p38). As a writer, Morrison is what Trinh T. Minh-ha describes as, "The inappropriate other" who moves between the inside and the outside and:

[affirms] that 'I am like you' while persisting in her difference and that of reminding 'I am different' while unsettling every definition of otherness arrived at...Differences...are also at work within the outsider herself, or the insider herself- a single entity (Minh-ha 1990 p375).

Toni Morrison's work is 'generative', she is a writer with the ability to unsettle and to manifest ghosts which have been quietened for a very long time:

Everybody knew what she was called, but nobody, anywhere, knew her name. Disremembered and unaccounted for, she cannot be lost because no one is looking for her, and even if they were, how can they call her if they don't know her name? Although she has claim, she is not claimed. In the place where long grass opens, the girl who waited to be loved and cry shame erupts into her separate parts, to make it easy for the chewing laughter to swallow her all away.

It was not a story to pass on (Morrison, 1988 p274).

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