The Identifying Fictions of Toni Morrison

Modernist Authenticity and Postmodern Blackness

John N. Duvall



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#### Chapter 1

# Introductory Identifications: Making It Up or Finding It?

I'm interested in characters who are lawless. [...] They make up their lives, or they find out who they are.

-Toni Morrison

Insensitive white people cannot deal with black writing, but then they cannot deal with their own literature either.

-Toni Morrison

s Kwame Anthony Appiah has noted, although contemporary scientific thinking largely disavows cultural notions of essential racial difference, race still matters because "races are like witches: however unreal witches are, belief in witches, like belief in races, has had—and in many communities continues to have profound consequences for human social life" (277). Having lived and taught for eleven years in Memphis, Tennessee, a city deeply divided by racial tensions, I am acquainted with the ways in which culturally scripted notions of racial essence still cast a palpable spell over the daily lives of individuals. So when on the first day of the semester I walked into my courses on Toni Morrison, there were immediate identifications. For a number of students, I was—because of my whiteness—the visible man.

This racial identification points to a difference between my students' and my own expectations and desires. Although composing nearly one-fifth of the student body at the University of Memphis, African-American

students were scarce in the upper-division literature courses not specifically designated "African-American." When I taught one of the American literature surveys (despite a syllabus with a significant representation of African-American writers), I might have no black students—and never more than three—in a class of thirty-five. But in the Toni Morrison class, close to two-thirds of the students I addressed were black. For me, the difference represented an opportunity to help build a nascent African-American concentration in the English major. But what was a welcome change for me—this racial mix—was not, at least in the initial moment of our meeting, as congenial to some of the African-American students, who hoped their professor would be black too.

I am aware that some of my study's biographically informed observations about Morrison's fiction will not be acceptable to all. There are those who believe that a white man is a double category mistake—as a white and as a man-and therefore can or should have nothing to say about a relationship between a black woman's life and her art. Such readers are, of course, free (like the one or two students who dropped my Morrison course) simply to set this book aside. Yet some of the personal connections that may discomfit certain readers were in fact precisely the material that legitimized me for the African-American students to whom I taught the fictions of Toni Morrison. By representing a Morrison who herself had experienced an uncertain sense of self and who was not always the empowered figure who appears on 60 Minutes and the cover of Time, I was able to teach an author who was not a remote and unapproachable genius but someone whose youthful identity was a bit more like their own-fragile at times and definitely still under construction. Perhaps only by speaking of Morrison's life did I have the opportunity to question students about the construction of their inner eyes and become visible to them as not just a white man but as someone who cared deeply about the texts and their understanding of them.

What I attempt to do in this study is to see Morrison not only as a novelist who has written about history, but also as a historical figure in her own right. From this perspective, I argue that it does matter to her work that she grew up in pre-civil rights America, just as it matters that she became a writer in post-civil rights America. In locating Morrison historically, I turn to her personal history that manifests itself in all of her writing—her literary and social criticism, as well as her fiction. What results is a reflexive intertextual space: between her nonfictional self-representations (both in her criticism and in her interviews) and her novels that represent identity formation, there emerge curious traces of Morrison's own complicated becoming.

Part of that becoming resides in the names by which African Americans have been known. In the seventy years of her life, Morrison has been iden-

tified—whether by legal document or social custom—as "Negro," "colored," "Black," "Afro-American," and "African American." If public black identity has been fashioned and refashioned in each of the decades in which Morrison has written, it is hardly surprising that this phenomenon would manifest itself privately in an author intensely concerned with individual identity formation. Morrison's self-making manifests itself in a variety of forms: as a light-complexioned former black beauty pageant contestant who critiques hegemonic formulations of beauty; as a young woman who changed her name, yet whose fiction repeatedly explores the relation between naming and authenticity in the African-American community; as an avowed Catholic whose fiction questions the Word and posits the legitimacy of a variety of female (West African, Gnostic) spiritual possibilities; as an author who urges critics to read her work only within the context of the African-American aesthetic past, but whose thinking about the role of the novelist ranges over such white writers as Herman Melville, Mark Twain, Willa Cather, Virginia Woolf, Ernest Hemingway, and William Faulkner. By noting these things, I am not simplemindedly claiming that Morrison at times falls short of the ideals espoused in her writing or that her words are sometimes contradictory.<sup>2</sup> Rather, in all these areas of identity, one can trace Morrison's personal and professional implication in the things she critiques. Examining this implicated critique helps bring into focus the very cultural scripts of identity. A just and ethical critique of Morrison, I believe, should do no less than attempt to read these scripts, for it is what both her fiction and her literary and social criticism urge us to do by constantly reminding us that there is never a position outside of implication—including, of course, my own.

Although race neither can nor should disappear from my reflections on personal implication, my perceived need to explain my motives in these opening remarks at times may have less to do with race than with another delicate matter—reading for links between life and art in the work of a living author. I vividly recall a moment during a discussion session at the 1996 American Literature Association Conference titled "New Directions in Morrison Studies." A woman from the audience asked if anyone knew whether any biographically informed criticism was being done on Morrison. The response from the discussion leader was immediate and unequivocal—that, no, this was not the time for work that attempted to look for Morrison in her fiction. The reason given was simple and final: Toni Morrison is a private person and would not want such work published.

Yet this position leads to an odd situation vis-à-vis the quick and the dead. With an author conveniently dead, certain ethical considerations apparently drop out. For example, if one wishes to identify Herman Melville as, say, a wife beater, such analysis is welcomed by the best journals.<sup>3</sup> Certainly, being

dead, Melville cannot be personally embarrassed or angered by such identifications. Yet neither can Melville answer to these representations. This makes me wonder if it is not perhaps at least as ethical to make certain speculative readings while the author is alive as it is to perform such speculation when the author will never have another (let alone the final) word on the matter. Taking the former tack at least allows the author—should she or he wish—the opportunity to intervene and tell a different story.

There are boundaries, I believe, to a biographically informed criticism of a living writer. For example, it would be inappropriate at present to posit the source of Morrison's depictions of black male-female relations as her failed marriage to Harold Morrison. Such speculation would likely produce reductive readings of Morrison's texts and would undoubtedly be personally hurtful to the author. And yet it is surely possible to imagine a critical landscape fifty years hence—when Morrison, I, and perhaps you also, gentle reader, are all dead—in which such analyses will proceed unabated.

The conference session on the future of Morrison studies noted above is just one of many instances in which I have experienced an uncanny sense of simultaneous similarity and difference—of being at home and not at home in Morrison studies. To explain what I mean, I would like to draw upon my earlier thinking about Faulkner and his emergence as a canonical figure. For me, then, the uncanny resides in certain resemblances between the study of Morrison in the 1990s and the study of Faulkner in the late 1950s and early 1960s, the historical instances when these two writers experienced their respective moments of canonization. Because this resemblance hinges on the issue of disciplinary boundaries within American literature, I believe the comparison to Faulkner studies will prove illuminating. What happened to Faulkner earlier is oddly mirrored in what is happening to Morrison now.

During the crucial period of Faulkner's canonization, roughly from his receiving the Nobel prize in 1950 through the early 1960s, certain borders were felt to be under siege by those working in the subdiscipline of Southern literature. Without gainsaying the work of the New York critics on Faulkner, many of the practices of academic Faulkner studies originated in a specifically Southern context, such as the work of Cleanth Brooks, an intellectual descendant of Southern Agrarianism. Another Southern critic who certainly was involved in the institutional mechanisms of disciplining Faulkner is James B. Meriwether. His essay, "Faulkner and the South," serves as an instance of what today we might call identity politics. This piece is particularly relevant to developing a parallel between Faulkner and Morrison studies, since it appeared in 1961 when Faulkner was still alive. Meriwether could argue against certain kinds of thinking about Faulkner on the grounds of "propriety"; Faulkner was a private person and critics

should respect that privacy. But the reason this essay functions as an instance of identity politics is Meriwether's argument that Northern critics are not really capable of understanding Faulkner. The essay concludes by directing us to the aesthetic as the "proper perspective" to view Faulkner, which certainly relegates to marginality sociological, political, and psychological readings of Faulkner (160–61). All cultural contexts for examining Faulkner would drop out, all save the context of the South and Southern literature, which Meriwether, as a Southerner, was in the authoritative position to adjudicate. Essentially Brooks and Meriwether (as well as others like them) wanted to have their cake and eat it too; that is, they wanted Faulkner to be a fully canonical figure of American literature, but they also wanted to retain disciplinary control over what could be said about his fiction, using their position within Southern literature as a strategy of containment. In the long run, this strategy failed, and the Faulkner taught today bears fewer traces of such identity politics.

The current status of Morrison studies echoes that of Faulkner studies in the 1960s. It has been several years since she won the Nobel prize, and criticism on her work currently outpaces that of the Faulkner industry. Morrison's fiction appears not only in the Norton Anthology of African American Literature but also in the Norton Anthology of American Literature, surely a clear institutional sign of her work's canonical status. Once again, disciplinary boundaries are becoming unstable. Certainly much good work has been done placing Morrison in African-American contexts, emphasizing her fiction's relation to African-American folk tales or tracing her novel's refiguration of a black novelistic tradition. But when such work becomes prescriptive and argues that these are the only appropriate contexts for thinking about Morrison's work, then the situation recalls certain rhetorical gestures of Southern literary critics of the 1960s who wanted to retain exclusive possession of the meaning of William Faulkner's texts. But while I could feel virtuous in my Faulkner criticism (after all, I was trying to eradicate all traces of reactionary, segregationist Southern identity politics from my writing), when I try to take what I learned in Faulkner studies to the study of Morrison, something happens—the homey side of the uncanny suddenly turns unhomey and puts me outdoors, much as Cholly Breedlove puts his family outdoors.

Let me carry the parallel just a bit further. Faulkner made some appalling statements about race during the 1950s, statements that seem to run counter to his complex fictional representations of race from the 1930s. I in no way feel the need to be an apologist for Faulkner or to reproduce his racism in my criticism. In fact, I assume that my cultural function is to use Faulkner's racialized statements as an opportunity to think the issue of race further. But what can my stance be when Morrison says things about

gender politics in the 1990s that seem at odds with her portrayal of gender issues in her fiction of the 1970s? For example, when she suggests in 1997 that women who appear publicly in sexually revealing ways are guilty of contributory negligence if they are raped ("Official" xxiii), am I permitted to note any disjunction between criticism and fiction? To be a (white male) Morrison scholar, do I need to turn off my critical faculties? Must I embrace Morrison's implication that all young women should be impregnated by age sixteen so that they will have "no chance of getting any cancer of any of [their] reproductive organs" (Morales) in order to validate my membership in the Toni Morrison Society? As a white man, my choice seems to be either to fully celebrate her words or to politely not mention them when they seem problematic. It's a dilemma because there is so very much I want to celebrate in her texts, but there are moments when celebration needs to give way to critical engagement, and that's when things get mighty uncomfortable.

Michael Awkward, whose book on intertextuality in African-American texts has been valuable to my study, has pointed out elsewhere that the investment white critics have in writing about black literature can never be the same as that of African-American critics. And so I attempt to interrogate my subject position as one not the object of racial oppression, yet this move itself turns out to be highly suspect: "Even in self-reflective white critical acts, racial privilege may create interpretive obstacles or, more importantly, points of resistance that color, in racially motivated ways-perhaps even hegemony-maintaining ways—the effects of an exploration of blackness. In other words, white reading can mean the adoption of a posture antithetical to Afro-Americanist interests" ("Negotiations" 583). I admit Awkward's point about the irreducible difference of my reading of Morrison but wonder whether he can ever imagine, with his implied distinction here, a discourse in which "different" does not equate with "antithetical." Am I doomed merely to ventriloquize the voice of the hegemony? Certainly the only authority to adjudicate the meaning of my difference—at least within the language game thus constituted—is Awkward or another African-American critic. But perhaps there may not be consensus on what constitutes reading that is antithetical to "Afro-Americanist interests."

In Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination, Morrison has pointed out the unfortunate consequences for literary criticism when critics, through "scholarly moeurs" and a mistaken "liberal gesture," fail to notice race, and so I ask to be allowed to risk the "adult discourse" she calls for (10). When I write about Morrison, I am unlikely to seek my own truest self reflected back to me from the pages of her text, which is in fact what many African-American Morrison critics do. Yet when Morrison

critics seek to discover their own identity within the name "Toni Morrison," far from discovering personal authenticity, they occlude the very possibility for understanding the cultural authority that the novelist has constructed for herself.

The problem with identity politics as it emerges in Morrison studies (or the study of any writer for that matter, as I hope my comments on Faulkner studies have suggested) is that it creates an absolute hierarchy that determines the authority of a critic's interpretation in advance of the actual interpretation. A woman critic can tell me that she is better prepared to understand Morrison's oppression by patriarchal culture. An African-American man can say I know nothing of what it means to experience racism. But then the black woman can trump either of the previous two to claim that her experience more closely parallels that of the author and so she is better able to give voice to the meaning of Morrison's text. However, a black woman born into the working class can overtrump the African-American woman raised in the middle class and so on. To push such thinking might lead one to say that the best critic of Morrison would be an African-American woman born some time in the early 1930s in a working-class industrial town located somewhere on the Great Lakes. In fact, the absolute horizon of such a perspective must posit that the only critic who can truly understand Toni Morrison is Toni Morrison. Whatever is political in identity politics would dissolve into the literalized and tautological moment of identity. But we live too much in the age informed by Freud and Marx (not to mention their poststructuralist interpreters) to think that the author has an absolute understanding of her work. We admit that there are inevitably social and psychological blind spots that make the author an unreliable arbiter of the meaning of her texts. Moving back outward from the author to a larger set of readers, it is equally possible to say that there are also blind spots in other kinds of interpreters, no matter how many elements of their subject position that they share with the author. In other words, identity politics runs into a kind of can't-see-the-forest-forthe-trees folk logic. Being an African-American woman critic of Morrison may create obstacles as well as advantages to a reading of Morrison and does not ensure correct interpretation. One's ability to adequately unpack the ideological baggage of a text may be limited if the contexts allowed by one's subject position fail to recognize problematic aspects of that text.

The irony, then, is that while Morrison herself in her criticism has written of the dangers of fetishizing blackness, the critical commentary on her fiction frequently becomes complicit with that very fetishization. That such criticism does so, however, is not entirely without warrant, since there is a current in Morrison's work that encourages such reading. Early in her career, Morrison herself articulated this element when speaking about her

characters, a description I use as the first epigraph of the chapter. In describing her focus on lawless characters she calls them the ones who "make up their lives" or "find out who they are" (Stepto 20). In this characterization, Morrison points to the productive tension that drives her work. In short, the latter notion—finding out who you are—suggests modernist authenticity, while the former—making up your identity—points us toward postmodern constructed blackness. Critics have been better at hearing the "finding out" strain than heeding the "making it up" side of the Morrison equation.<sup>6</sup>

Morrison's fiction can be read in two distinct phases. Phase one runs from her first novel, The Bluest Eye, through Sula and Song of Solomon, and culminates in Tar Baby; the second phase to date consists of her historical trilogy consisting of Beloved, Jazz, and Paradise. What characterizes the former is Morrison's construction of a useable identity as an African-American woman novelist; what characterizes the latter is the author's working out the implications that follow from the recognition that identity may be more a construction than a biological essence. I am not sure that the Morrison who wrote the first four novels would have used the phrase "construction of a useable identity" to describe her fictional project; in fact, if I were to substitute language more appropriate to that first phase, I might have written instead "discovery of an authentic identity." But her work in the second phase suggests a more postmodern articulation of identity as a process plural and fluid. With the trilogy, she turns from the transfiguration of biographical material toward a new African-American historiography. While this formulation seems to chart a shift in Morrison's fiction from modern to postmodern representations of identity, the early novels' crucial self-reflexive work—the creation of a subject position from which Morrison can confidently speak—means that these fictions, even as they thematize authenticity, also can be read through the lens of postmodern identity formation.

Identifying Fictions focuses largely on the earlier phase of Morrison's fiction, though I will draw upon the later novels when they may be related to the earlier, self-reflexive stage of her writing. Because I see Morrison's early fiction involved in the process, at times conscious and at times perhaps unconscious, of creating useable identity, I will turn frequently to interviews she has given and to various published biographical sketches of the author for evidence. In some instances, this material allows me to speculate about links between her fiction and the characterizations she has made of herself; however, it is not my intention to privilege any particular assertion that she has made in these "nonfictional" moments. My quotation marks around the word "nonfictional" are purposeful. With Morri-

son's celebrity has come ever-increasing requests for self-representations, and she has been generous over the years with many interviewers. Although from interview to interview one can recognize certain familiar riffs, when Morrison is asked once again the same question that she has been asked numerous times before, the answers are not always identical. Invariably the subtext of an interviewer's question is "Who are you?" And so Morrison is asked five, and then fifteen, and then twenty-five years after the moment of her production, "What were you driving at in this character or this relationship or that novel's ending?" The process inevitably creates revision that cannot always be fully conscious. How could it be, given the spontaneous flow occasioned by the nature of interviews? How could there be an absolute identity between all her responses? And given this inevitable space of difference, how could the interviews, taken collectively, not in some sense be both autobiographical and fictional, a fiction of selfrepresentation? To say this is not to single out Morrison for contradicting herself, since any famous person subjected to seemingly endless interviews will similarly produce such fictions of self. It's what the interviewer calls for. It's what the reader wants.

Philip Page recently has urged us to take deconstruction as an important context for reading Morrison's fiction.8 Calling specifically on Jacques Derrida's concept of différance, Page sees an apt vocabulary for describing the work Morrison's fiction performs in deconstruction's inversions of hierarchies that are unstably based on the supposed temporal privilege of one term of an opposition over the other (4-6). Page further justifies his reading practice by noting the improvisational nature of Morrison's fiction. which allows him to draw parallels between jazz as a specifically African-American cultural expression and deconstructive strategies: "Like deconstruction, African-American musical forms challenge traditional notions of transcendent universals and bipolar oppositions" (16). I would only add that we might also take Page's deconstructive perspective to what Morrison says in interviews and in her literary and cultural criticism. Doing so may point us to Morrison's more complex relation to notions of transcendence. While her writing at times most definitely challenges certain "bipolar oppositions," those same oppositions may return to drive her fictional engines. As I have already suggested, the tension between identity as a biological essence and identity as a social construction is perhaps the central motivating opposition in her work. Following Roland Barthes's handwritten epigraph prefacing his autobiographical Roland Barthes that we should read what follows "as if spoken by a character in a novel," I suggest that Morrison's comments, both on herself and on her own and others' fictions, may be read as a series of suggestive pieces of character delineation that work intertextually to enable one to ask certain kinds of questions.9

My title, Identifying Fictions, resonates then with Barthes's directions to the reader. On the one hand, I mean that Morrison's first four novels, which overtly represent identity formation, serve as the writer's reflections on the fictions of identity. On the other hand, if we take the term "fiction" in its broader sense, there is also the critic's work of identifying the impersonal social fictions regarding race, gender, and class that produce subjectivity, even that of a brilliant and internationally famous novelist. This second order of fiction, what Louis Althusser termed ideology, may provide contexts for a better understanding of Morrison's novels as her own various acts of writerly self-creation. In this doubled space of fiction, there are numerous hints about the author's personal and private battle to move from consciousness to self-consciousness in order to get some purchase on culture's profoundly unconscious systems of representation that mediate the individual's existence. Through interviews, Morrison has provided a valuable record in the stories she has told about herself, including her memories of the processes of composition and the struggle she experienced in order to feel legitimate in claiming the designation "writer." To see Morrison's early fiction participating in her fashioning of a useable identity as an African-American woman novelist allows one to emphasize any one of the terms—"African-American," "woman," or "novelist"—so that one may think of this construction along racial, gendered, or aesthetic lines. But even this three-term formulation falls short of identifying the coordinates of Morrison's subjectivity inasmuch as the less visible dialectic of class almost always serves as a strong undercurrent informing her characters what they should think about the authenticity (or inauthenticity) of their racial identity.10

Even the most cursory outlines of Morrison biography suggest that class identity was at least as important as racial identity in the first quartercentury of her life. But noting this perhaps only draws attention to another kind of invisibility, since middle-class white America tends to conflate race and class, equating blackness, poverty, and crime. Morrison's characters frequently struggle in this space of collapsed race-class thinking, and her novels tell, in coded form, something about her simultaneous interrogation and construction of such multiple identities. In the opening chapter of The Souls of Black Folk, W. E. B. Du Bois early in the last century argued the case of African-American double-consciousness; black Americans, rather than experiencing themselves and the world as an "identity" (with its implications of wholeness, unity, and oneness), could only view the world in a doubled fashion since their sense of themselves as Americans was constantly undermined by the fact of being black. What I hope to suggest is that Morrison's dilemma, a very productive one, may be a tripled or quadrupled consciousness in which class and gender also significantly figure.

Morrison comes of age as a writer drafting The Bluest Eye from 1965 to 1969. In terms of racial identity, this means that she is squarely in the period of the "black is beautiful" movement (as Morrison herself has noted in the afterword of the Plume paperback edition of The Bluest Eye) that called on African Americans to rethink their relation to white culture. In terms of gendered identity, Morrison is clearly aware of the feminist challenge to masculinist culture, even though some of that awareness is expressed as a disavowal. And in terms of aesthetic identity, she comes of age during a period when high modernist fiction had become fully canonical and the 1960s' Black Aesthetic movement called for a distinctively black voice and a black nationalist identity. Whether acknowledged or not, these historical conditions necessarily must have marked an aspiring black woman novelist. Morrison in fact does at times acknowledge some of these conditions regarding her fictional foregrounding of the processes of identity formation. In order to examine these processes, I draw explicitly on Stephen Greenblatt's term from Renaissance Self-Fashioning: From More to Shakespeare. Greenblatt uses the term "self-fashioning" to describe "the power to impose a shape upon oneself" as "an aspect of the more general power to control identity" (1). He speaks of the homologous ways literature functions as a concrete historical embodiment—"as a manifestation of the concrete behavior of its particular author, as itself the expression of the codes by which behavior is shaped, and as a reflection upon those codes" (4). Self-fashioning, then, helps describe the development of Morrison's identity as she attempts to wrest a portion of freedom from necessity through her self-reflexive fictions of racialized thinking.

In certain instances I will speculate about the extent of self-portraiture one might see in Morrison's characters. To suggest that characters in an author's fiction represent aspects of that author is not to say anything new or startling. To write is to write the self. When one writes, one always tells, consciously or unconsciously, one's intellectual autobiography, and in novels, autobiography emerges most clearly through character, though certainly writers play themselves out through several characters. For a long time critics have acknowledged that in F. Scott Fitzgerald's The Great Gatsby, the portraits of James Gatz/Jay Gatsby and Nick Carraway depict different aspects of the author. Similarly, William Faulkner's art can be read as the transfiguration of biography. As Judith Wittenberg has argued: "Faulkner knew that his fiction was all about Faulkner. Like so many other writers, he 'was,' in one way or another, many of his characters, from Julian Lowe to Bayard Sartoris, Quentin Compson, and Lucius Priest. Their narratives told the continuing story of his life providing, as it were. a sounding board for his official biography, and even a kind of supplement to it" (5). And just as Wittenberg is able to point to statements Faulkner

made that show his awareness of the autobiographical element in his fiction, one can find evidence from Morrison herself that supports a similar line of inquiry.

Morrison has commented explicitly on the role of African-American autobiography and the role it once played in constructing community. In "Rootedness: The Ancestor as Foundation," she is critical of the emphasis on the individual in contemporary African-American autobiography, but notes that "[t]he autobiographical form is classic in Black American or Afro-American literature because it provided an instance in which a writer could be representative, could say 'My single solitary and individual life is like the lives of the tribe; it differs in these specific ways, but it is a balanced life because it is both solitary and representative" (339). She goes on to explain her decision to write novels in terms of what this expressive form does "for the class or group that wrote it" (340). Emphasizing the didactic and the informational role of the novel, Morrison argues that now is a crucial moment of need for the African-American novel, an expressive form that can do the cultural work of constituting the tribe previously done by African-American oral tales, music, and autobiography. Emphasizing the political purpose of the novel, Morrison concludes by saying, "I am not interested in indulging myself in some private closed exercise of my imagination that fulfills only the obligation of my personal dreams [...]" (344). The point again is that Morrison's novel writing does what good African-American autobiography previously did. In 1983 however, a year prior to the publication of "Rootedness," Morrison seems to foreclose any possibility of considering her life as a context for reading her work when she says flatly, "I don't use much autobiography in my writing. My life is uneventful. Writing has to do with the imagination" (Tate 166). Strikingly, in order to deny autobiography, Morrison valorizes the very exercise of imagination that she condemns in "Rootedness."

A third instance provides another perspective, one less extreme in what it avows and disavows. In 1981, Bessie W. Jones opens an interview by asking Morrison if her novels have "autobiographical elements." Morrison responds:

It is difficult always for me and probably any writer to select those qualities that are genuinely autobiographical because part of what you are doing is re-doing the past as well as throwing it into relief, and what makes one write anyway is something in the past that is haunting, that is not explained or wasn't clear so that you are almost constantly rediscovering the past. (Jones and Vinson 171)

Morrison continues at some length to consider specific instances in The Bluest Eye and Sula that might be "genuinely autobiographical," but the

implied distinction here is what I am interested in. Beyond the genuinely autobiographical—what she says about a specific detail, such as having heard of a woman named Hannah Peace as a child-seems to lie a broader category of how the author addresses those things from the past that haunt. This is, of course, an interesting characterization of writing from the author who would go on to write so compellingly about Sethe's haunting in Beloved, but here the comment linking the motivation for writing to being haunted by one's past points in another direction. Morrison appears to limit the autobiographical to exact correspondences of specific details, yet at the same time the author's obsession with revisiting the past suggests another realm of the writing of self. Supplementing the genuinely autobiographical is the symbolically autobiographical, since "what makes one write anyway" is the need to confront self. But here the supplement dwarfs that which is supplemented. Since Morrison casts this haunting past as the central rationale for writing, it would be difficult to mark anything in a fictional world that is not inflected in some way by this autobiographical reclamation.

Still, to read Morrison's work with an eye toward its autobiographical gestures may raise some objections because of the implied relation such interpretation has to a psychological approach and the notion of the unconscious. Traditionally, there has been reluctance among African-American critics to work with psychoanalytic frames of reference. Arnold Rampersad's essay, as well as the responses that follow it, in Afro-American Literary Study in the 1990s, rehearses some of the issues with which I am concerned. Rampersad, himself the author of a psychoanalytically informed biography of Langston Hughes, in a carefully worded piece acknowledges the dangers of deploying a eurocentric model for examining African-American texts. Still he calls for more psychoanalytically inflected biographical work on African-American authors. In an important sense, Claudia Tate in her recent study, Psychoanalysis and Black Novels: Desire and the Protocols of Race, has begun to answer Rampersad's call. Her psychoanalytically informed work, although focusing on African-American novelists who are less acknowledged in the canon of American literature than Morrison, points the way toward the work this study attempts.

Morrison grew up in Lorain, Ohio, during the 1930s and 40s. In these years, the primary coordinates of her identity were working class. Her father, George Wofford, was a blue-collar worker in the shipyards of this steel town. If we credit Morrison's 1992 account, the Lorain of her youth did not have a cohesive African-American community; growing up in this working-class town, Morrison experienced a youth and adolescence largely free of race consciousness. "I never absorbed racism," Morrison says, "I never took it in. That's why I wrote *The Bluest Eye*, to find out how it

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felt" (Bigsby 28). Morrison's account of her relation to The Bluest Eye invites speculation on how not only her first novel but also her subsequent fiction figures in a project of racial self-fashioning.<sup>11</sup>

Douglas Century's brief biography, although aimed at adolescent readers, is nevertheless interesting because of the photographs he reproduces from Morrison's high school yearbook. One repeatedly finds-among the white girls in plaid skirts and bobby socks-an attractive, light-skinned young woman, the only non-Caucasian involved in such activities as the yearbook staff and the student council. These images seem to underscore the characterization of Lorain quoted above and to reveal a youthful Morrison who was much closer in appearance to Maurine Peal than Pecola Breedlove. At the same time, in terms of class position, Morrison was closer to Pecola than Maureen.

When Morrison leaves Lorain for Washington, D.C., to attend Howard University, the working-class coordinates of her identity are confronted by the very different possibilities represented by an institution of the black middle class. Morrison has indicated that she did not like much of Howard's social life, which turned on skin color, and recalls a friend who was not asked out because of her dark coloration:

She was the straight man to the pretty girls. I liked her a lot, but she had no dates, and wasn't popular. She didn't care, she had a boy back home whom she liked and eventually married. But during her senior year, her parents came to visit her. They turned out to be very wealthy, and, good God, she was overwhelmed. Suddenly all the dudes on campus, in their white jackets with their stethoscopes dangling out of their pockets, started coming around. They had a rush on that poor girl for the last six months. (De Witt C3)

This critique of Howard's colorism and classism is striking inasmuch as it underscores the examination of such prejudices within the black community that one repeatedly finds in Morrison's work. Yet her mature reflection on this situation in college elides the possible contradictions Morrison's younger self may have experienced. Whatever sense of injustice she might have felt (and clearly feels now), she was one of the light-complexioned "pretty girls," belonged to Alpha Kappa Alpha sorority, and at one time participated in a beauty pageant (Strouse 52). I do not wish to be mistaken here as criticizing Morrison, since people during their young adulthood often participate in activities that they later find suspect. What my discussion points to is that whatever cultural authority Morrison has achieved is not some discovered essence but rather a discursive production linked to her acts of writing.

As my subtitle, Modernist Authenticity and Postmodern Blackness, suggests, I am interested in identifying how critics might categorize Morrison's contemporary fiction, especially given the variety of ways that postmodernism has been defined. For me, Morrison's treatment of an individual's identity formation, especially as it occurs within a community, points to what is both modernist and postmodernist about her work. In terms of content, what she writes about, Morrison has a modernist concern for authenticity, similar to the concern for authenticity we see, for example, in Ernest Hemingway's The Sun Also Rises. Hemingway seeks a community that would authentically enact masculine identity for his wounded Jake Barnes; for Hemingway, Pamplona, Spain, is that site of authenticity. Similarly, Morrison's recurring explorations of alienated and wounded characters (such as Milkman Dead, Jadine Childs, and Sethe Garner) take place in the context of their search for a community that enacts authentic black identity. So that Morrison, like the modernists, holds out hope that somewhere out there, there's still a place where the alienated individual might discover authenticity.

In her critical work, such as "Unspeakable Things Unspoken" and Playing in the Dark, Morrison is committed to a thorough exploration of the construction of white identity. In particular, she takes canonical white writers' figuration of black otherness as crucial evidence for seeing whiteness as culturally constructed. In other words, there is no biological essence that makes an individual white. The message of Morrison's cultural constructionist position on whiteness is clear. When it comes to white identity, the very notion of authenticity is inauthentic. But although she demystifies whiteness, her relation to blackness is more complex and seems at times to hold out hope for both authenticity and essence, as her comments on the difference between white evil and African-American evil in a 1974 interview indicate: "I know instinctively that we [African-Americans] do not regard evil the same way as white people do. We have never done that. White people's reaction to something that is alien to them is to destroy it." ("Conversation" 8). Morrison's "instinctive knowledge" (or a knowledge unmediated by culture) fairly directly essentializes race, and says, in effect, that by nature, white people's evil is worse—more evil—than that of blacks. My reader might object that it is unfair to look at something Morrison said fifteen years prior to her fully worked-through position on the construction of whiteness, so that it might be helpful to look also at what her 1985 comments on African-American irony suggest:

I can't really explain what makes the irony of Black people different from anybody else's, and maybe there isn't any, but in trying to write what I call Black literature which is not merely having Black people in or being Black myself, there seems to be something distinctive and I can't put it into critical terms. I can simply recognize it as authentic. (Jones and Vinson 175)

But in claiming a distinctive black difference, essence in this instance once again creeps into Morrison's thinking about race. And it does so in a particularly modernist fashion. African-American authenticity is something, this comment maintains, that exceeds the medium of language, and to attempt to speak of it in critical terms is to register the epistemological limit of thinking race; one simply intuits authentic African-American irony and literature, overleaping the epistemological wall. In short, whiteness may be a construction, but blackness is at least possibly an essence. This tension in thinking the category of race seems almost to reintroduce an inverted version of "the fatal drop of black blood," a concept long used in the United States (and particularly the South) to enforce notions of white racial purity and to designate the impurity of black blood. But while black blood may have been viewed as impure, it certainly was powerful, since any trace of it could overwhelm all other genetic material. Morrison's comments on evil and irony seem to play on (and perhaps reverse) the implications of the fatal drop by suggesting that access to black authenticity is potentially available to the individual no matter how much or how little African genetic material a particular African American has. In effect, the fatal drop of black blood becomes the sacred drop. This notion of the sacred drop of black blood is something Morrison's fiction does not thoroughly overturn until her most recent novel, Paradise, where black racial purity becomes as problem-ridden as dreams of white racial purity.

Conservative critics of identity politics tend to overlook that much of white culture itself is already a powerful form of identity politics, so that for someone, such as Morrison, to assert a black essence as something positive serves as a useful moment of reversal that disrupts the way white culture positively marks its sense of its whiteness while stigmatizing black difference. 12 But this kind of epistemological affirmative action has its limits. 13 Statements that postulate the essential difference between white and black evil or white and black irony still privilege nature over culture; such statements therefore exist in a continuum with essentializing racist statements that say that "blacks naturally have rhythm," which is a metonymy for the racist notion that African-Americans have body but not intellect. I do not think that Morrison's work ultimately confirms a racial essentialism, but such essentialism at times comes into play, particularly in her earlier novels. It is perhaps Morrison's enactment of a dialogue between identity as essence and identity as construction that makes her fiction as powerful and poignant as it is.

If Morrison's content recalls modernist concern with authenticity, her techniques, particularly in her more recent novels, suggest certain postmodern fictional practices. To invoke the postmodern, however, is problematic because of the various ways it is defined. Through the 1980s, a standard view on postmodern fiction saw it as the work of white, male experimental writers, primarily from the 1960s and 70s, a definition that confined the category "postmodern fiction" to a set of highly aestheticized novels that produced very limited political engagement. A broader and potentially more political view of postmodern fiction, and one closer to what I mean by Morrison's postmodernism, can be found in Linda Hutcheon's work. In Hutcheon's poetics, the postmodern novel is "historiographic metafiction" (Poetics 5). This term blends the reflexivity of metafiction fiction that calls attention to its own production as fiction—with a poststucturalist historiography that recognizes that all attempts to construe the past are interpretive. For Hutcheon, the techniques of historiographic metafiction function in the service of a poststructuralist critique of hierarchy, which in turn drives poststructuralism's questioning of unified subjectivity and identity.

Thus, in Hutcheon's scheme, Morrison is a postmodernist. 14 The novelist's use of history, however, does not unambiguously embrace a postmodern questioning of subjectivity. That is to say, her fiction does not detail the disintegration of identity and subjectivity that occurs in characters such as Todd Andrews in John Barth's The Floating Opera, or Oedipa Maas in Thomas Pyncheon's The Crying of Lot 49, or Jack Gladney in Don DeLillo's White Noise. Rather, Morrison's modernist concern for authenticity complicates Hutcheon's postmodern poetics of fiction. So that despite the formal experimentation in her work (indeed a number of these experiments resonate more fully with a modernist poetics), Morrison is hard to classify as a mainstream postmodernist. If, however, we modify Hutcheon's postmodern poetics with bell hooks's thinking on the problematic relation between African-American writing and postmodernism from her 1990 essay, "Postmodern Blackness," we may begin to articulate what is postmodern about Morrison's fiction. Although hooks acknowledges a value in engaging the anti-essentialist impulse of postmodernism on matters of subjectivity and identity, she nevertheless takes seriously the African-American wariness toward postmodernism. Writing from a marginalized position means that it is more difficult to embrace the denial of hierarchies that is the basis of the postmodern critique of subjectivity and identity. There is something disturbing, hooks notes, for African Americans to work from premises that seem to deny the validity of identity politics: "Yeah," her imaginary black critic says to the white one: "it's easy to give up identity when you got one" (28).

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What hooks finally advocates is a cautious deployment of postmodern suspicion. In Morrison, then, we have a modernism partially postmodernized in terms very similar to the cautious engagement that hooks has mapped as the way for African-American writers to think about the postmodern challenge to essence. Morrison works in the space between a modernist desire for authentic identity and a postmodern understanding of the constructedness of all identity. My sense of Morrison's work is that, precisely because her project of establishing a useable identity in her first four novels is so successful, in her more recent work she is able to entertain the possibility of, if not exactly giving up that identity, at least interrogating it more thoroughly. And the way she does this is through a writing practice that may have as much to do with postcolonialism as it does with postmodernism. This is another reason why, whatever questions one may have about Hutcheon's insistence upon an identity between postmodern aesthetics and politics, her multicultural and gender-balanced version of postmodern fiction allows for a bridge between the "posts" of postmodernism and postcolonialism, and certainly helps describe a trend in Morrison's work from Beloved to the present.15

Morrison herself signals that postcolonialism may be one lens through which to view her work. In her 1988 lecture "Unspeakable Things Unspoken," she refers to a foundational text of postcolonial studies, Edward Said's Orientalism. Her reading of Herman Melville's Moby-Dick, which sees Melville—through Ahab—as a traitor to the cultural construction of whiteness, clearly points the way to her thinking in Playing in the Dark. Following Said, who sees the British construction of "oriental" colonial identity as revealing more about British conceptions of self and nation than about colonial identity, Morrison reads for the Africanist presence in canonical American literature to argue that the figuration of blackness is really about the construction of white identity. <sup>16</sup>

A major impetus for what this study attempts in fact derives from the criticial project Morrison articulates in *Playing in the Dark*, a project that lends support to an autobiographically informed criticism. The central authorizing claim she makes for her critical voice is that, from the perspective of "a writer reading,"

the subject of the dream is the dreamer. The fabrication of an Africanist persona is reflexive; an extraordinary meditation on the self; a powerful exploration of the fears and desires that reside in the writerly conscious. It is an astonishing revelation of longing, or terror, of perplexity, of shame, of magnanimity. It requires hard work *not* to see this" (*Playing* 17).

Morrison figures the relation between novelist and novel in decidedly psychoanalytic terms—"the subject of the dream [the narrative] is the dreamer [the narrative's producer]." If Morrison's own protocol for interpretation rests in the belief that novel writing is inevitably a record of the novelist's "fears and desires," how does Morrison's fiction look if we use her insight reflexively as a way to think about her own novelistic dreaming? Might not her fiction also record these figuratively coded moments of longing and terror, perplexity and shame? The reason that reading Morrison the novelist through Morrison the critic is a compelling strategy is suggested by her own fictional representation of difference within the African-American community. In this representational space, colorism prejudice within the black community that is based on skin color-mirrors the destructive power of white racism. In The Bluest Eye, the light-complexioned Geraldine teaches her son this difference within difference: "his mother did not like him to play with niggers. She had explained to him the difference between colored people and niggers. They were easily identifiable. Colored people were neat and quiet; niggers were loud and dirty" (87). And by the end of her son's encounter with Pecola. Geraldine on the basis of her racial thinking has identified the child as a "nasty little black bitch" (92). To be an American for Morrison is to talk and write about oneself "through and within a sometime allegorical, sometimes metaphorical, but always choked representation of an Africanist presence" (Playing 17). As her fiction repeatedly demonstrates, African-American subjectivity is shaped by the dominant American ideology. If Morrison powerfully reads the figuration of blackness in the work of canonical American novelists, how might this canonical African-American novelist use blackness in the construction of her own identity? I argue in the following chapters that blackness is as much a figurative space in Morrison's writing as it is in Cather's, Hemingway's, or Poe's. This does not mean that the ends of their uses of blackness is identical, since Morrison struggles always to move from consciousness to self-consciousness, while white writers in their representations of race largely remain innocent of this motivation.

If we read reflexively Morrison's understanding of the way the dominant culture colonizes African-American identity, then a striking instance of such discursively produced identity becomes Morrison's decision to change her name from "Chloe" to "Toni." Although Morrison has said that she made the change because people at Howard University found "Chloe" too difficult to pronounce, the question of motive, as I scrutinize in my discussion of *The Bluest Eye*, seems more fraught than this explanation admits. Whatever the exact motivation for Morrison's decision to become Toni.

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one thing is clear: the question of identity is not a given for Morrison because she rejects her given name. Moreover, she repeatedly refers to this act of self-naming in coded, yet fairly overt ways, creating the paradox of the thing that wants simultaneously to be concealed and revealed.

Chapter 2 reads Morrison's self-naming through the connections she herself makes in her first novel to Ralph Ellison. In addition to coded references to Invisible Man, The Bluest Eye activates Ellison's 1964 essay, "Hidden Name and Complex Fate," as a more covert intertext, suggesting the complex relation Morrison has to Ellison's literary project. This link between Morrison and Ellison suggests a bridge between the autobiographical impulse and intertextuality. If to write is to write the self, then another aspect of fiction as intellectual autobiography may be found in the explicit intertexts that a novel engages. Although intertextuality in its broadest, poststructuralist form makes it legitimate to hold any cultural text against another, I am particularly interested in the intertexts that Morrison seems consciously to deploy for deliberate effect. If, for example, there are unmistakable allusions in her titles Song of Solomon and Tar Baby, then her novels in other more coded ways always direct the reader to the fictions of previous novelists. To say that other writers obliquely speak through Morrison's novels is not simply to seek sources or to privilege the model of influence; rather, what I hope to suggest is the way Morrison's novels engage in a critical dialogue with modernism that participates in her fashioning of an artistic identity.

The subject of Morrison's aesthetic self-creation continues in chapter 3, where I take up Sula and its title character as an exploration of the artist manqué. Although not signaled as directly as Ellison is in Morrison's first novel (where Invisible Man is at one moment quoted without quotation marks), Virginia Woolf functions as the textual unconscious of Sula. The same-sex friendship of Sula and Nel, as well as the relation between two pariahs—Sula, the artist who lacks a form, and Shadrack, who substitutes ritual for art—serves as a variation on the relation between Pecola, Soaphead, and Claudia, one that points to the collapsing space of textual and sexual desire.

Contextualizing the Claudia-Chloe-Church matrix through the self-fashioning represented by the masculine-feminine poles of the artists manqué, Shadrack and Sula allows us to see the twinned relationship between the protagonists of Morrison's next two novels, *Song of Solomon* and *Tar Baby.* Milkman Dead and Jadine Childs, although operating in these two different novels, are similarly twinned and mirroring figurations of authorial self-fashioning.

In chapter 4, I examine Song of Solomon as Morrison's further meditation on both the racial and the artistic self. On the one hand, the novel

fairly directly draws on Morrison's maternal family history of their migration from the South, so that Milkman's quest for authentic identity points to the author's. This is heavily underscored by Morrison's beginning Song of Solomon on her date of birth, February 18, 1931. On the other hand, Morrison's third novel also suggests her engagement with another modernist figure. In The Bluest Eye, Morrison reclaims Ellison's modernism; in Song of Solomon, she begins a sustained fictive critique of William Faulkner's major fiction. Against the overtly signaled biblical intertext, Faulkner's Go Down, Moses serves as the more coded intertext, providing a different purchase on her portrait of the artist as a young man. Indeed, Milkman Dead continues a kind of masculine figuration of artistic potential previously embodied by Soaphead Church and Shadrack. The two artist figures from Morrison's earlier novels have already made minimal gestures toward a writing of self, but Milkman's act of interpretation—his ability to read correctly his family's genealogy in the song the children of Shalimar sing—also prepares the ground for self-knowledge.

Chapter 5 turns to Tar Baby, a novel that largely completes even as it begins to problematize Morrison's construction of a useable identity. Had her career ended in 1977 with Song of Solomon and Milkman Dead's triumphant discovery of an all-black agrarian community, Shalimar, Virginia, then the existentialist implications of "authentic" identity would be correct. That novel suggests that Milkman is able to slough off his inauthentic self—urban (or perhaps "suburban") and identified with the white middle class-for an authentic enactment of self with the men of Shalimar. It is as if the black community, lost in Sula, has been recovered in Song of Solomon. But Tar Baby, even as it completes the first phase, already points the way to the second phase in one important regard; namely, it shows that Morrison's fiction dialectically overturns the syntheses of her previous fiction. One way the novel does so is by rethinking the relation between race and class to entertain the notion that black identity need not be linked to black poverty. In her first three novels, the possibilities of black authenticity lie squarely in economically distressed African-American communities. In The Bluest Eye, the light-skinned, middle-class Maureen and Geraldine are demonized, and if the Breedloves fall victim to a culturally scripted racial self-loathing, the working-class MacTeer family nevertheless embodies the African-American ideal. In Sula, once again the middle-class pretensions of Helene Wright are marked as inauthentic; moreover the novel concludes on a decidedly nostalgic note, suggesting that what has been lost in the pre-civil rights community of the Bottom cannot be compensated for by new economic opportunities available to African-Americans in 1965. And Song of Solomon unwaveringly locates black authenticity in the racially pure, impoverished rural community of Shalimar, Virginia. In this regard, Tar Baby's Eloe,

Florida, comments critically on Shalimar as the site of authentic identity. By doing so, Eloe points the way toward Morrison's consideration of black communities in post—Civil War Cincinnati, in 1920s Harlem, and in Ruby, Oklahoma, of the 1950s through the 1970s. In addition to its critique of agrarian community, *Tar Baby* also may be thought of as participating in Morrison's intertextual engagements with both black and white modernism, which I stress in the earlier chapters. If her earlier fiction refigures Ellison, Woolf, and Faulkner, then Morrison in *Tar Baby* refashions her earlier self, the modernist Morrison of *Song of Solomon*. <sup>17</sup>

In her more recent trilogy, Morrison has attempted a kind of revisionist African-American historiography, and so seems not to be as interested in allegorizing her struggle to become an author. A reason for this is that by the time she has written *Tar Baby*, Morrison has authorized herself. But even though such coded self-representation no longer dominates her later fiction, my final chapter examines various moments in *Beloved*, *Jazz*, and *Paradise* that nevertheless revisit the metafictional, reflexive, and autobiographical turn. Morrison's work of self-fashioning, though more of a background matter, continues in her delineation of Baby Suggs, the narrator of *Jazz*, and Patricia Best, characters that figure the possibilities of artistic production—both its joys and its discontents.

My introductory identifications are largely done, now that the chapters that follow have been mapped. Yet I spoke earlier of my own personal and professional implication and feel compelled to move, however awkwardly, toward the personal, at least as I know it. If you are the kind of reader—black or white—with little patience for a white male critic's attempt to finesse his subject position in order to constitute some authority to speak about the work of an African-American writer, you may jump ahead now to my reading of Morrison's fiction that begins in chapter 2. I promise to be brief, but Morrison's assertion, which I used as the second epigraph to this chapter, "[i]nsensitive white people cannot deal with black writing" (Tate 160), seems to call for some comment from the white critic. Although sensitivity itself may be simply a necessary but insufficient quality for the white reader of African-American writing, what might constitute my potential to listen to Morrison's texts?

If I speculate, as I have done in previous work, on the gender trouble figured forth by Faulkner's interest in the aesthetics of homosexual artists such as Oscar Wilde and Aubrey Beardsley, or wonder whether Faulkner's fictional representations of masculine identity (such as his fictional claim to have been an RAF pilot shot down in France during WWI) serve as a cover for what he feared might be perceived as the feminine vocation of writing, don't these very topics immediately work reflexively? If I wonder

about Faulkner's fascination with Wilde, is not my identity in part shaped by my fascination with Faulkner's fascination? I recall a time that my mother drove several hundred miles to visit me while I was writing my dissertation. One morning she emerged from my combination study/bedroom holding a picture of William Faulkner. "What," she demanded, "is this picture of a man doing in your bedroom?" I assured her that she had not discovered a new aspect of my identity and that, at any rate, the man was dead. Despite the humor of the misunderstanding, her question perhaps gets at a certain kind of truth regarding textual pleasure: (my interest in) Faulkner, as well as (in) Morrison, speaks my difference. Spending countless hours reading and rereading the texts of these authors is simply not what "normal" people do. And I admit that my very act of noting the implicating reflexivity in Morrison's writing (that her criticism's examination of figurative blackness provides a context for reading her fiction) inevitability implicates me. I too am playing in the dark, using figurations of Morrison's relation to blackness to construct my identity as a writer of literary criticism. How could I not be? But does this admission mean simply that I am inauthentic to the task of examining Morrison?

One generation removed from the farm, the first in my family to graduate from college, I'd have to say that I seldom experienced identity as a given. Although we lived in an upper-middle-class suburb of Columbus, Ohio, we did not exactly dovetail in terms of class. We had the "economic" but not the "socio" to fit the socioeconomic profile. For the 40-some years that she lived in that neighborhood, my mother held a grudge against our next-door neighbor for a statement that came to her in the gossip chain: "The Duvalls don't have the education to live on this street." You may imagine that I have heard my mother recall the statement more than once. And what's in a name? I know I didn't like mine very much as a child, being a Duvall in an age long before anyone had ever heard of the actors Robert or Shelley. It didn't seem like a name anyone else-other than family—had. What is for me the primal scene of the name occurred when I entered first grade. The teacher went through the roster, reading names and asking the children to say something about themselves. When she got to me, she asked me how to pronounce "Duvall." I paused . . . and had to admit that I wasn't sure. And for a reason that I could not have articulated then, but that seems clear now. My relatives from the country all pronounced the name with the accent very decidedly on the first syllable, but those living in town had shifted the accent to the second syllable. I can still hear my country-bred father, a car insurance salesman, answering the phone, "DU-vall talking," but my mother identified us as "Du-VALL." And what of the child left unable to identify the correct pronunciation of his name? Let's just say that humiliating laughter is not the ideal way to enter

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the scene of instruction. In case you're wondering, I now accent the second syllable. So if I turn in this study to the fragility of identity that resides in names, wonder ye then at the fiery hunt?

Let me hasten to add that invoking my own sense of difference arising from my name does not mean I am trying to essentialize all forms of difference in order to claim some universal and transcendent access to Morrison's representation of black difference. I don't for a minute think that my personal sense or memories of ex-centricity are equal to the oppression of African Americans who struggle under the representational weight of a massive ideological apparatus that continues to relegate them to second-class status. But just as Morrison has commented that she could read Tolstoy and Joyce even though they were not written for "a little colored girl in Lorain, Ohio" (LeClair 124), I want to ask the reader to imagine that, even though I know that I am not a member of the audience for whom she writes, the fictions of Toni Morrison might nevertheless speak to a big white guy from Columbus, Ohio.

#### Chapter 2

# Invisible Name and Complex Authority in *The Bluest Eye:*Morrison's Covert Letter to Ralph Ellison

Well, as you must suspect, all of this speculation on the matter of names has a purpose, and now, because it is tied up so ironically with my own experiences as a writer, I must turn to my own name.

-Ralph Ellison, "Hidden Name and Complex Fate"

I am really Chloe Anthony Wofford. That's who I am. I have been writing under this other person's name.

-Toni Morrison

n a 1981 interview, Charles Ruas, in questioning Toni Morrison about *The Bluest Eye*, asked her to comment on her relation to "the great black novelists of the past." She responded:

I was preoccupied with books by black people that approached the subject [the African-American girl], but I always missed some intimacy, some direction, some voice. Ralph Ellison and Richard Wright—all of whose books I admire enormously—I didn't feel were telling me something. I thought they were saying something about it or us that revealed something about us to you, to others, to white people, to men. (96)

Although Morrison downplays the impact of Wright and Ellison on her conception of *The Bluest Eye*, I wish to excavate the hidden and complex