Toni Morrison's The Bluest Eye (1970) and Sula (1973)
Acts of Narrative as Propagation of Culture

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Abstract in Norwegian

I den hensikt å problematisere fraværet av gjennomsiktighet i Toni Morrisons diktning, utforsker denne oppgaven hvordan fremstillingen av de strukturalistiske kategoriene stemme og fokalisering, samt dobbelthet og billedbruk knytter seg til romanene, *The Bluest Eye* (1970) og *Sula* (1973). Disse blir lest ut fra premisset om at stemme og fokalisering byr på en givende måte for å undersøke en felles tematikk om overtredelse i de to bøkene.

Jeg argumentere for at den flerstemmige komposisjonen i *The Bluest Eye* er avgjørende for romanens uttrykk ettersom den sentrale karakteren, Pecola Breedlove, ikke makter å fortelle. Pecola er et barn og fordi hun er tynget av insestuøs voldtekt og et urettmessig stempel som syndebukk fra nær sagt alle kanter, fordres det at historien som omslutter henne blir fortalt av andre stemmer.

I *Sula* fremholder jeg at fortellingen betoner fravær og hvordan fokaliseringen blir et vitnesbyrd om den utsatte posisjonen Afroamerikanske kultur innehar. Videre blir det argumentert for hvordan det ufullendte uttrykket i romanens slutt understøtter betydningen av vedvarende fortellinger. Avslutningsvis fremhever jeg hvordan enkelte dobbeltheter og billedbruk i romanene utviser opasitet og dermed motsetter seg ideen om uttømmende verdensanskuelser.

Preface

A warm thank you is due to my supervisor, Željka Švrljuga, whose patience, goodwill and generosity has been of invaluable help. Thank you for your bounteous feedback and precise input. Without your steady hand guiding me throughout this period, the realisation of this thesis would not have come about.

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Introduction

Play between theme and style in a culturally and politically inflected subject matter conjures attention to Toni Morrison's writing. In her text *Will the Circle Be Unbroken?: The Politics of Form in The Bluest Eye*, Linda Dittmar suggests that "emphasis on the ineffable" is what haunts and agitates in Morrison's subject matter (2007, 69). Although Morrison's body of work has grown considerably since the publication of Dittmar's text, its assertion that Morrison's work enables the ineffable invites further examination, and reflects the metaphorical inception of this thesis. The interest it sprung from was a wish to examine the the opaque in Morrison's novels. Something near adherence to or refutation of Dittmar's claim through a comparison between Morrison's first two novels has thus become the entry point of this thesis. Consequently, I propose to problematize and demonstrate how narrative voice, focalization, dualities and imagery in Toni Morrison's selected novels encode hesitation. The approach of this inquiry will consider theme and style as pegs for narrative voice, focalization, dualities and imagery. Although this thesis will not veer away from political aspects resonating in Morrison's fiction, the focus will be on the aesthetic achievement in the respective narratives. On this note, a comment on the critical landscape this thesis reflects and joins seems in order. The politics in Morrison's fiction is indubitable, partly as she herself has commented extensively on her writing (LeClair 1981; Morrison 2005; 1993), but more so because her work endeavours to witness and utter a language of and for the people her work depicts. As such, a reading that attempts to exempt itself from contextualizing her writing seems too reductive in an unfortunate sense. The aim here remains to trust the tale, not the teller and to do so through the out-of-style approach that highlights narrator and focalization. Morrison's highlighting of the imperative that "a mode to do what music did for blacks" (LeClair 1981, 26) exists, makes any absolute downplay of political resonance problematic. Morrison remained ardent in resisting critical characterizations she deemed inaccurate for her fealties to the cause of her people. Her wish not to have her work contained in a strictly literary frame, but to write "village literature" (26) in a rich language, a kind of language that in no way obscures its subject matter, is key here because narrators *how* and *why* are the axes that this thesis explores. However consequential the extraliterary concerns of these two novels, this approach aims to abstain from either reducing or equating Morrison's work with cultural politics alone. The in-vogue tendency of poststructuralist readings in the last four decades or so is, in other words, absent in what follows.

In order to understand narrative voice and focalization aptly in the context of this thesis, a few words to delimit the reach of terms linked with narrative is due. In *The Cambridge Introduction to Narrative* H. Porter Abbott defines narrative as "the representation of an event or a series of events," that is to say that which binds together, on the one hand, an action or event, be it real or imagined, and on the other, a specific representation of this real or imagined (2002, 12). This definition only partly suffices in the context of this thesis as it leaves a vagueness concerning representation. It enables, for instance, dramatic performance on a stage where representation occurs directly, and although there are obvious strengths to leaving the possibility of communicating and representing events by instruments such as actors, cameras and even fixed ones as paintings, the focus here will be on the recounted events that presuppose a narrator. This limitation is particular but serves to clarify which parts of narrative theory remain relevant for the ensuing text. Another integral distinction is that between the sequence of actions and events, as independent from their representation or narration. Typically, the former is referred to as *story* and entails the events and their presumed sequence, order and duration. The latter, here called *narrative discourse* or simply *narrative* leaves indefinite possibilities and malleability and is closely linked with the representational aspects in terms of what it conveys. Unlike story, narrative discourse is not subject to its own length of time, sequence, order or duration; so the time and order of events in narrative discourse, might be and often are, quite different from that of story (Abbott 2002, 15; Baldick 2001, 244). The concern of who does the narrating, or that of narrative voice, has a few distinctions worth mentioning. The forms of narrative voices in the two novels are complex as they give way to experimentation that tends to be removed from easily discernible categorization of either *first-person* or *third-person* narration. First-person narration is the "I" that recounts a narrative she herself is part of, in third-person narration there is a narrator who is often situated outside the world of the story, and who has some degree of knowledge and insight about the occurring events who does the narrating (Abbott 2002, 65). Focalization is similar yet different from narrative voice as it refers to the lens through which events and characters are depicted in the narrative (66). The narrator may or may not be the *focalizer*, and just as the thoughts and feelings of whose voice we 'hear' matter, so does the eyes we see through.

Morrison's debut novel *The Bluest Eye* (1970) grapples with self-loathing, shame and loss of identity in the eleven-year-old girl, Pecola Breedlove. The neglect and degradation of Pecola leaves her as scapegoat in a community that adheres to majority culture and largely succumbs to internalized racism. Depicting a society where whiteness is metric, and violence,

madness and incest are its preconditioned outcome, Morrison conjures a query into flawed interpersonal relationships in the largely white Anglo-Saxon community of a fictionalized Lorain, Ohio. The story narrated in *The Bluest Eye* is a decidedly bleak one. It renders an unwavering tale about the difficult subject matter of child molestation, and the violence that permeates adherence to a racist cultural ideology.

Morrison's ensuing novel, *Sula* (1973), resumes focus on black female experience from *The Bluest Eye*, but this time the story circles the relationship between the two girls-becoming-women, Nel Wright and Sula Peace. The novel's protagonist, Sula, a young, black woman, neatly eschews the apparent expectations this time would favour of her, as a character lacking feelings of responsibility or apparent devotions. She is introduced against the background of a household of "throbbing disorder" (2005, 52), against her friend's neat and strict home. The contrast to Nel, a dutiful daughter and later, nurturing mother, offers resonance to the radical protagonist. When asked by her grandmother, Eva about the possibility of marriage and parenthood, Sula retorts "I don't want to make somebody else. I want to make myself." (92). As different as they are in the stories they render, both novels were released in a time when the "Black Aesthetic movement called for positive representations and role models" (Matus 1998, 38).

The concern of defining a distinctive voice through narrative point of view is Morrison's to define as successor in the tradition of black fiction. Readers of Morrison can therefore not entirely overlook the sources of black images and their effects on literary imagination, since language pertaining to blackness runs the risk of evoking signs of racial superiority and dismissive "othering". To the attentive reader such a caveat may seem overly alert to political and ideological sensitivities, yet the point remains a firm one because of the pitfalls of romanticizing, demonizing, vilifying or rectifying blackness and whiteness. More so, this consideration is important because of conventionally accepted assumptions about canonical American literature that rests on dated, yet present notions of said literature as uninformed by the presence of Africans and then African Americans in the United States (Morrison 1993). American literature as evidently the exertion of white male genius and power can however not be exempt from the overwhelming presence of black people. The purpose of this thesis is not to problematize this looming and complex matter; however, a lack of some deliberation noting this concern would appear as an absence too big.

Her now emblematic mixture of concerns – particularly sexual and racial – conjoins experimental inclinations with musical, oral and narrative traditions. Allusions to her work as an amalgam sprung from inspiration of her precursors such as Faulkner and Woolf (Dittmar

2007; Bloom 1999), as well as that of lore, music and language particular to African Americans, only partly provide a sense of her literary vibrancy.

Seductiveness and elusiveness in language juxtaposed abhorrent and thematically unsavoury stories are, as will be argued for later, the makeup of Morrison's convoluted narratives, where cyclical narrative lines, flashbacks and prolepsis abstain from easily discernible content for its readers. *The Bluest Eye* offers complexities in a multi-formed narrative structure where the primary narrator, Claudia MacTeer, provides nuance as a modulating and retrospective narrator. Her narrative consciousness comprises a tangled voice of the ambivalent impressions of her childhood and her reminiscing rendering as adult.

Sula distinguishes more clearly between character and narrator than *The Bluest Eye* and underscores this distinction by a narrator with extensive historical knowledge, distance to the characters as well as a purported understanding of the collective sensibility of the people of the Bottom. This assumed understanding of the people of the Bottom is of interest since the Bottom not only presents the place and scenery for the people in the novel, but also represents the confined axis of the novel's chronologically presented and episodic events.

Sula's demeanour instils ambiguity throughout the novel. The narrator asserts that she has "no ego" and thus lacks "compulsion to verify herself—be consistent with herself." (119). This assertion on the part of the narrator seems either ironic or incorrect, as Sula appears as a refuting spectator in and of her community, accordingly consistent with her retorting ways. After witnessing her mother accidentally catch the fire that causes her death, and in opposition to her grandmother's friends' belief, that she was probably struck dumb by this horrid event; Sula is not absolved from Eva's quiet conviction that she "had watched Hannah burn not because she was paralyzed, but because she was interested." (78). The rendering of moods and feelings through the narrative seems predominantly to leave Sula as the radical amoral, distinctly different from the aforementioned rendering of the Bottom people, whose voices the narrator reduces from manifold to one.

Chapter One:

Transgression as Narrative Act

To claim that Toni Morrison's early novels contend with imposing cultural norms, violence and violations is an understatement but still one that needs some further refinement. For most of the brief American history, the role of black people has been assigned to the fringes of society. Morrison's work probes this downplayed presence through the intricacies that are limned in *The Bluest Eye* and *Sula*. The two novels were written in a literary landscape that was yet to thoroughly rid itself from its detrimental and racialized culture. In this American literary tradition, the voiced and portrayed assume an agency that for almost four hundred years was reserved for a white majority culture. The frequency in which claims like this are disputed have abated over the years yet the unique role pertaining to black peoples' presence in America persists. In the following attempt to render a precise examination of *The Bluest Eye* and *Sula* the term 'Africanism', as Morrison uses it in her *Playing in the dark*, offers an apposite delineation for this undertaking. For Morrison, Africanism entails the "denotative and connotative blackness that African peoples have come to signify, as well as the entire range of views, assumptions, readings and misreadings that accompany Eurocentric learning about these people" (1993, 6–7). This relates to an inquiry in which the author rereads American literary canon as neglectful of, yet inextricably entwined with the presence of black peoples. The impact of this endeavour is far grander than this thesis can account for. Still, it contributes to underscore the centrality of meditations on Africanism in America, especially in the instances where black presence remains muted or unnamed.

The act of presuming an American literary canon that exempts itself from acknowledging the racialized society is too great of a disregard, but crucially one that was commonplace. Whether white majority culture veiled black presence or not, the broad and historically prevalent practice of doing so in American society and literature informs the nascence of Morrison's work. The point of intersection between this brief recall of Africanism and black presence lies in transgression. More precisely, how the act of narration coheres with the theme of transgression in *The Bluest Eye* and *Sula*. I propose that the different narrators and focalizers are crucial for their representations of transgressions in Morrison's respective works. In her first two novels, Morrison fine-tunes her scope and addresses the far-flung transgression of American Africanism. The anonymous blackness is made specific. Voices and witnesses limn the fictional, yet historically founded experiences. The stories in Morrison's two early novels are violent and transgressive in their subject matter and require

the distance of the observer. They need to become narratives because the experienced violations are too difficult, ineffable or magnanimous without the aid of an observer or narrator. In brief, Morrison renders narratives that underscore the difficulty of writing about transgression.

The theoretical approach for this chapter leans on part of the vast vocabulary pertaining to narratology. The term "omniscience" may be an exaggerated one but is central in the following argument. It connotes a third-person narrator who is positioned above the represented events and who wields the ability to know at least some cognitive and emotive facets of a character or characters (Rimmon-Kenan 2003, 98). Subsequently, the terms omniscient and all-knowing will be applied interchangeably. The criteria associated with the different narrators are not mutually exclusive. Rather they relate to the different narrators' degree of participation, role, and reliability to the story, and have impact on the reader's understanding of the narrative. The above implication of the omniscient narrator looking down on the presented events is helpful in the following explanation of the different narrative levels to which 'diegesis' refers. The narration, which is on a higher level than the story it narrates is termed extradiegetic. The events themselves are on the diegetic level and immediately subordinate to the extradiegetic level (Rimmon-Kenan 2003, 94). Below the diegetic level is the hypodiegetic level. This narrative level refers to narration made by a character within the events of the diegetic level. The protagonist's mother, Pauline exemplifies hypodiegetic narration in her italicized recounts. The closely linked yet distinct term focalization serves mainly to highlight a difference in narrative technique in the subsequent reading of *Sula*.

The Bluest Eye

To have the innocuous and incestuously raped character, Pecola Breedlove, at the heart of her debut novel illustrates my suggestion about how the rendering of *The Bluest Eye* is crucial for its fruition. Pecola's story needs the array of narrative situations the novel depicts. For one reason, her age and lack of eloquence leaves her wanting in portraying a narrative for herself. Similarly, the act of narration that recounts of Pecola's deterioration and eventual mental disintegration require renderings that enunciate not only the horror of her story but also the context in which it unfolds. To put it differently, the act of recounting can be neither Pecola's, nor that of any single narrator because of her traumatized and young disposition and due to the collective and racialized trauma that premeditates her destruction.

The title of *The Bluest Eye* brings attention to itself in its unusual superlative use that points to the singular noun. A singular object of desire that epitomizes the conceived uniqueness of the beauty standard it purports. The title also enables a play on the homophonic eye/I. Ironically, Pecola remains void of the I/eye, both in the needed identity the narrator, Claudia recognises for her, and the impossible trait of beauty she yearns after. Thus, the title hints to the standards of beauty in which the novel unfolds. Subsequent to the title is an epigraphical introduction consisting of three different versions of lines from an elementary school primer about the lives of Dick and Jane.

This primer depicts the idyllic lives of Dick and Jane, and functions as both a backdrop to and as epigraph for the succeeding narrative since the excerpt is borrowed from a series of children's books. The primer rendered in *The Bluest Eye* comes in three different versions: one without any typographical divergence; the next omitting punctuation and capitalization; and a third without punctuation, capitalization and space between words and sentences, leaving the reader with two increasingly agitated forms of the epigraphical introduction:

> Here is the house. It is green and white. It has a red door. It is very pretty. Here is the family. Mother, Father, Dick, and Jane live in the green-and-white house. They are very happy. See Jane. She has a red dress. She wants to play. Who will play with Jane? See the cat. It goes meow-meow. Come and play. Come play with Jane. The kitten will not play. See Mother. Mother is very nice. Mother, will you play with Jane? Mother laughs. Laugh, Mother, laugh. See Father. He is big and strong. Father will you play with Jane? Father is smiling. Smile, Father, smile. See the dog. Bowwow goes the dog. Do you want to play with Jane? See the dog run. Run, dog, run. Look, look. Here comes a friend. The friend will play with Jane. They will play a good game. Play, Jane, play. (1)

A reoccurring reading of the three versions, for instance that of Chikwenye Ogunyemi, is that they represent the different family situations central in the novel (1977, 112). First represented is the close-to-ideal, wealthy and white family life of Pauline Breedlove's employer, the Fishers. The second and increasingly collapsed primer aligns with the MacTeers, a family living under conditions that remain bearable and loving to some extent. The third primer version alludes to the impoverished and violent lives of the Breedlove family. The ensuing reading will rather highlight that the primer complies with majority culture that presents a potent notion of value. By omitting representation that differs from white majority culture the primer simultaneously assumes dominion and a notion of homogeneity. In literal terms, the third rendition even closes the spaces for other than the

white character to potentially fill. Here, both the typography of the collapsed primer as well as its depiction of white majority culture affirm hegemonic values.

A few lines from the frenzied version of the primer preface seven sections focusing on the Breedloves and a specific figure in Pecola's life. This repeatedly maintains the contrast between the mythical white middle-class and Pecola. The primer segments are also key to the different narrative situations in the parts they introduce. They preface sections that are largely recounted by an omniscient narrator. What is more, the collapsed forms of the primer and the primer excerpts that precede the seven sections represent overstepped bounds, both in a figural and in a literal sense.

In its repeated and enclosing presence in the novel, the primer underlines the ideological background that is inextricably linked with *The Bluest Eye*. The different iterations of Dick and Jane were present as curricula in American schools in the 1940s (Kuenz 2007, 98). As such, their portrayals of domestic life make a convincing model for contentment and success. Furthermore, as texts for teaching young schoolchildren to read, they communicate cultural values at a time and in a context that is integral to those it teaches, since the acquisition of reading and writing is close to the norms and values the learning material posits. Through its longevity and depiction of the American nuclear family, the narratives about Dick and Jane imply a homogenous and excluding American life. By extension of this ubiquity in a North American context, the primer accuses those whose lives deviate from what it depicts of deficiency. In the case of Pecola Breedlove, she is subjected to "whole schemes of value, political, religious, moral, aesthetic" that have little or nothing to do with her (Gibson 2007, 38). The metric she is measured by and the standards she is expected to strive for are beyond her reach, which renders her wanting both in terms of social status and in the complexion of her skin. In the primer's omission of struggle akin to that in the novel, it recounts a reality that is both far removed from and unattainable to the novel's main characters. This enunciates the discrepancy between the reoccurring primer and the text it precedes.

In particular, the primer sections regard characters in immediate contact with Pecola and highlight their internalized values as point of reference for their shared oppression. In the primer section introducing the Breedlove family, the omniscient narrator remarks that Mrs. Breedlove, Sammy and Pecola are ugly from "their [own] conviction" (1999, 37), even though the ugliness "did not belong to them" (36). The assertion of black ugliness and its assumed lack of value is repeated through the novel. The white playmate of Claudia and Frieda, Maureen Peal, deems herself "cute!" and by extension, Claudia, Frieda and Pecola as

"Black and ugly" (71). Geraldine equates her own racial identity and blackness with "The dreadful funkiness of passion, […] nature, [and] of the wide range of human emotions" (81), and attempts to erase it from her household. Pauline Breedlove, whose "education in the movies", leaves her with an unshakeable perception of beauty as that which the silver screens portray (120), and who consequently "*knowed*" a newborn Pecola was ugly (124). Soaphead Church, whose forbearers' cross-generational transference of anglophilia and its concurrent racism, underscores his deeming of Pecola as "pitifully unattractive", and her wish for blue eyes as the most "fantastic" and "logical" he ever beheld since it proved a plea for beauty (171-72).

The different sections in *The Bluest Eye* employ different narrators. The narrator in the sections alluding to the aforementioned primer shows familiarity with the characters' innermost thoughts and feelings. "You looked at them and wondered why they were so ugly; you looked closely and could not find the source. Then you realized that it came from conviction, their conviction." (37). The supposition that their conviction can be detected announces a more knowledgeable narrator than the retrospective narrator Claudia, since it presumes to know the Breedloves' conviction by looking closely at them. This primer section depicts a violent morning confrontation between Pecola's parents, Pauline and Cholly, with the narrator moving successively through the minds of the family. In the detailing of the fight, Cholly's episodes of violent depravity are partly explained as results of "humiliations", "defeats" and "emasculations" (40). Interestingly, his transgressions are surprising to him but no one else. This indicates the narrator's knowledge about the Breedloves' feelings that in turn implies that the omniscient narrator recounts these events.

Another example attesting to the narrator's knowledge about the characters' inner lives is found in the presentation of Pecola enduring her parents' recurring fights as a struggle between an "overwhelming desire that one would kill the other, and a profound wish that she herself could die" (41). Nouns such as "desire" and "wish" point to Pecola's emotions and longing that cannot be verified with certainty but that warrant the narrator's intimate knowledge about her. In addition to the depiction of Pecola's private desires, the "profound" feature of her wish is one instance amongst many indicating the severity of her troubles as well as the imperative for a more eloquent telling of her story than she is able to provide herself (41).

In the aftermath of the familiar fight between her parents, she attempts to conjure her own disappearance but, in spite of her repeated efforts, she "could never get her eyes to disappear" as they contained and were "everything" (43). This leaves her convinced that no

place, with “new pictures” and new “faces” could mend her hurt, as long as her “ugliness” persists (43). She believes that blue and “beautiful” eyes would make her beautiful, and shield her from “bad things in front of those pretty eyes” (44). The notion of the beautiful as deserving of kindness as opposed to the postulated ugly pervades the novel. The narrator opposes this by recounting that Pecola wears her ugliness as a mask. (37). The repeated indications that Pecola’s ugliness is something she cloaks herself with underline the ugliness as something qualitatively different from her. This differentiating between the little girl and her embraced ugliness expresses the narrator’s intervention. Pecola is depicted as “Concealed, veiled” and “eclipsed” behind the ugliness that is coerced upon her by some “mysterious all-knowing master” (37). The narrator recognises the influence of this “master” and retorts the assumption of its omniscience by asserting its own all-knowing contention: that the Breedloves’ ugliness “did not belong to them” (36). The “master” is abstract but its influence is expressed through “every billboard, every movie, every glance” (37). The Breedloves ingest its contention thereby concretizing it in themselves. The extradiegetic narrator wields its authority in opposition to this contention, and counterbalances some of the primer’s overarching presence. In part, this explains the necessity of omniscient narrator as the values that claim the Breedloves’ ugliness proves a hulking force in the story, and interestingly one that, on the diegetic level, is only challenged by the character Claudia. As both an abstract force and as incarnated expressions through the characters, the assertion of ugliness posited by the “master” is not easily confined to one narrative level. It is narrated and accordingly positioned on the diegetic level, yet its connection to the primer alludes to the white majority culture of the 1940s. As interwoven ideas and dogma this assertion is more forcefully contested when its refusal comes from different contesters with varying degrees of involvement and authority. The retrospective yet personally involved narrator Claudia would in this sense not suffice as the only third-person narrator in the novel. The omniscient narrator’s intrusion elucidates this point since it exerts a different agency than Claudia. As mentioned, the omniscient narrator states that the ugliness is not the Breedloves’. Beyond this prosaic formulation is the more subtle depiction that alludes to light as she is “eclipsed” behind her mask. This is the narrator’s deliberation of her beauty rather than ugliness. This intervention is significant because of the clarity with which it is done, and because it suggests what is integral for the narrator to moderate.

The junction between Pecola’s juvenile understanding and shame, and the narrator’s translation of her feelings and misbeliefs into words is necessary as her faltering support and deterioration to the point of derangement is portrayed throughout. Besides two exceptions,

Pecola's relationships to adults are – although different in manner – persistently of the kind that leaves her neglected or alone. Above the Breedloves' storefront home reside three whores, China, Poland and the Maginot Line, women whom Pecola loved and who in turn "did not despise her" (49). The section that introduces the three is narrated by the omniscient narrator who represents their feelings and notions as a cohesive entity. Their physical proximity to the Breedlove home make them likely bystanders to at least parts of their neighbours' lives such as the repeated altercations between Pauline and Cholly. As such, their relationship to Pecola make them prone to perceive her struggles. However, their lacking intervention is unfit for judgement in part because the three had "never been young and had no word for innocence" (55).

The contrast between their lives and postulated lack of childhoods, in addition to their inability to name innocence, indicate the distance between the whores and Pecola as she more than anything *is* young and innocent. The three are thus unable to see, but are not disinterested in Pecola. They are active rather than reactive to their lives and circumstances, violent towards and scornful of their clients, disillusioned and without regrets – besides that of a youthful ignorance. An ignorance that kept them from having "made more of" a bygone time, before they knew that that 'to sell tail' could sustain them economically (54-55). Moreover, they foster a lack of respect for anyone but 'good Christian colored women', who had their "undying, if covert affection" (54). Nevertheless, they would sleep with the husbands of these spotless women and take their money as retribution. The source of the whores' cynicism comes across as clearer in light of the "vengeance" they direct at the unblemished women, no matter how active, delightful and unapologetic they appear to consider their cheating and abuse as "whores in whores' clothing" (55). This supposition about relentless prostitutes is however, not as clear as it first seems. They are, and remain, whores but not solely out of their own volition it seems.

The aforementioned notion that the three had never been young and thus lacked the understanding of youthful innocence, falters in the implication of vengeance. As does the sentiment of their youthful regret as regarding their ignorance of how to monetize their bodies. They exact their "disinterested wrath" out of spite towards what they could not achieve themselves, but which proved manageable for the spotless women (54). Claudia's disinterested violence towards white girls echoes theirs as they all strike with lack of precision. The prostitutes' retribution is in other words not meant for the men, nor the women whose men they take as customers but for that which ascribed them to lives beyond a choice other than being whores. Their vengeful ways suggest that they are not exempt from the

experience of their youths, unlike what the narrator initially indicates. This is worth noting because the narrator tells on their behalf while abstaining from refashioning their convictions. The narrator recounts the whores' contention without imposing its own, or adjusting their impressions. The flaw of logic in their purported lack of youth, their cynical understanding of youthful ignorance, and their intent on retribution suggest that the acts and dispositions are theirs and not the narrator's. Because the three are adults their youths have undeniably transpired. The closeness in which they are depicted attest to, not only the shared references of long time housemates, or figural sisters, but also to their shared cultural understanding. The primer is a backdrop for the prostitutes too and for their notion of themselves. As such, the three present two distinctly different understandings of transgression as both abusers and abused.

Their shortcoming is evident in their inability to offer solace and help to Pecola. Like her they are affected by violence but, unlike the frail girl, they are part of a company they have chosen to stay with rather than the one they believe they belong with. They offer friendliness and are "as free as they were with each other", around Pecola (55). However, their freedom is limited since they prove unable to rid themselves of their faltering conviction of past and present. The implication of letting their collective voice ring through without the revising interference of the narrator is one that advocates agency of the historically vulnerable group. This narrative situation refrains from perpetuating a condescending gaze so readily available in the depiction of black female prostitutes. To infer this point is to enunciate the presence of the black woman, and in doing so, rehabilitate the inextricable link between her dismissal and the willed expression of power that for so long has made it so. The depiction of the whores and their relation to Pecola is an instance that presents how the ramifications of their shared culture affects them differently but notably.

An example that goes even further in underlining the potency of many-voiced narrative is found in the primer section concerning Pauline Breedlove. Her italicised reminiscences are interspersed with the omniscient narrator's commentary. The narrator even valorises its role by affirming that "to find out the truth about how dreams die, one should never take the word of the dreamer" (108). Pauline sporadically visits film-screenings and is exposed to the purported measures between white and black, beautiful and ugly as depicted on the big screen. The metric of the "master", who in the family primer section cloaks the Breedloves in their assumed ugliness is more easily perceptible on the expanded canvases of the film screenings. Consequently, the cinema is the sphere in which Pauline is taught what opposes her ugliness as "[s]he was never able, after her education in the movies, to look at a

face and not assign it some category in the scale of absolute beauty, and the scale was one she absorbed in full from the silver screen." (120). Additionally, the films provide her with a template of the perfect families with "*White men taking such good care of they women, and they all dressed up in big clean houses*" (1999, 121). Her inability to connect her situation to powers beyond her own self-blaming and proclaimed lack of ability, style and beauty calls out parts of her manifold struggles. Pauline's self-blame and loathing obscure from her the effects of her economic hardships. In part, these struggles barricade her from adopting the domestic lives she sees pictured on the screen and in the household of her employer but, crucially, this is only partially so. The link between the films' conception of beauty and the deliberate efforts behind its excluding expressions is unavailable to Pauline. The narrator suggests that this idea of physical beauty materialized from "envy, thrived in insecurity, and ended in disillusion" (120). This involvement is similar to the narrator's aforementioned involvement where it declares that the ugliness did not belong to the the Breedloves. Crucially, this involvement of the narrator opposes Pauline since she embodies the erroneous convictions pertaining to her inherent faults.

Exemplifying her self-belief, Pauline responds to one of her front-teeth breaking with resignation due to her assumed loss of the ability ever to resemble the women on the screen. She is burdened by her inability to recognize that her efforts to erase the unfavourable physical traits are related to her economic hardships, and that these are systematic. When "the things she could afford to buy did not last, had no beauty or style, and were absorbed by the dingy storefront" (125), she resorts to disinterest and neglect, both of her household and children. While rather directing her affections and efforts towards the Fisher household, she compares and disfavours her own. There was no "zinc tub" in the house of her employer but one of porcelain; "no flaky, stiff, grayish towels", but "fluffy white" ones. Nor were there her daughter's "tangled black puffs of rough wool", but the Fisher girl's soft yellow hair (125). Jennifer Gillan points out the disenfranchisement represented by the Breedlove's home décor (2002, 169). Their furnishings lack positive confirmation and are connected to their inability to participate successfully in a consumer-focused culture. Upon buying a new sofa where the fabric in the back had split before it arrives, and after learning that "The store would not take the responsibility" (34), the debasement it represents is made clear. "If you had to pay $4.80 a month for a sofa that started off split, no good, and humiliating—you couldn't take any joy in owning it. And the joylessness stank, pervading everything." (34). The rendering of the sofa elucidates the effect it has in the home, as both a malaise connected to the inanimate objects of the household, but more crucially, one that limits the delight of "things not related to it"

(35). As such, the narrator goes far in presenting the sofa's negative connotations for the Breedloves' economic and social status. It connects their material possessions to their domestic struggles, as well as to their assumed position as ugly and lacking. A description of their home and failure to leave it behind for something better state that "They lived there because they were poor and black, and they stayed there because they believed they were ugly" (36).

Read against this background, Pauline's life and preference for the appeal she finds in the cleanly lives of the Fishers appear as obstacles but also as beyond her reach. Her partial solution becomes a search for solace in her role as servant. As the Fishers' employee, "Polly", she resembles the life of an unmarked citizen, that is, one not deemed by her appearance but who remains unrecognized if she so chooses (Phelan 1993, 6). What Pauline searches for on one hand as "Polly" and abstains from caring for on the other is a more substantial self that the confines of her situation deny her as Pauline, but which she sees glimpses of as "Polly". Her acceptance of the role as "Polly" is her way of maintaining a fragmental sense of positive self. In equating possessions in general and objects of home-décor in particular with that of identity, Pauline comes short in recognizing that the squalid state of her apartment home and the clean house of the Fishers are neither direct representations of their owners' traits, nor an arbitrary outcome far-removed from the exploited labour-force of black employees as herself.

The passages about Pauline juxtapose her voice and her rendering with the omniscient narrator. Furthermore, the commentary of the extradiegetic voice contributes to the fullness of the narrative by underscoring the link between Pauline's convictions and the forces that inform them. These forces transcend the narrative levels. They are not confined to history, story, or narrative and this is contended with in the shifts between the diegetic level of the all-knowing narrator and Pauline's hypodiegetic narration. That is, the demeaning cultural forces are recognized to different degrees and out of different positions relative to the story; they are coped with across the levels of narration. The novel encompasses the omniscient narrator's removed, yet informed rendering, and Pauline's afflicted retelling. These two acts of narration underscore both the agency of her voice, and its limits if not elaborated on. Neither the one nor the other are alone enough to address the primer's assumed narrative of beauty and value.

The shifts between the self-loathing notions of the Breedloves, and the very different ones urged by the narrator come to its perhaps most lucid fruition in the section dedicated to Pauline. As apparent as the notions of debasing cultural forces appear in this section, the main point to extract from it appears to be steeped in the involuntary – and furthermore – female mode of expression. Morrison's afterword to the *The Bluest Eye* comments on the two voices

as “extremely unsatisfactory” to her (1999, 211), as she considers them expressions of a female expressiveness eluding her. Morrison’s inference might be interesting yet seems to be contested by the section’s two narrators. The two modes they present remain integral to the novel’s tapestry. Pauline’s narrative proposes that the mosaic it contributes to is weighty and not to be overlooked in the telling of *how* Pecola’s ‘unbeing’ transpires (211). The difficulty in handling the narrative wherein Pauline in part is complicit to her daughter’s deterioration, or at least insufficient in their relation, would prove wanting if her voice, story and personal rendering of these where excluded from the novel. As failing caregiver for Pecola, a dismissal of Pauline’s voice could run the risk of dehumanizing her rather than rendering a narrative that contextualizes her deficiencies towards Pecola. The impetus of these shifts of narrative are its manifold voices since the novel’s transgressions, in particular those befalling Pecola, are and remain too difficult to handle, especially if it had concluded on an audacious and monologic retelling. The Dick and Jane primer looms in the background and reiterates that the ones unfit to comply with its unison values are inclined to become instrument of their own oppression.

As undeniably horrid as Cholly’s rape of Pecola is, it is arguably one of only two instances in the novel where adult affection, and not indifference or scorn, is pointed in her direction. This section examines Cholly’s story in detail, how it is rendered, and in what ways the exemplified narrative style underlines his rich yet tragic life. A life that ultimately lets way to his tragically misplaced and illicit instance of tenderness towards his daughter. The story of Cholly Breedlove is, like that of Pauline Breedlove, marked and marred by his history. It is one of familial abandonment, sexual humiliation and powerlessness. When first introduced, the reader learns of Cholly as a drunkard, failed breadwinner, and lacking patriarch. Nevertheless, this depiction is detailed as he later is portrayed as failed in two disagreeing ways. Narrator Claudia describes Cholly as “indeed, an old dog, a snake, a ratty nigger”, having put his family “outdoors” (16). The omniscient narrator of the primer sections nuances this by asserting that Cholly’s ugliness, unlike that of his family, sprang from “despair, dissipation and violence directed toward petty things and weak people” (36). In their ways, both assertions hold true. Claudia renders him reproachfully as he is the one who failed to provide her friend with the frames of a steady environment. Moreover, this portrayal is likely coloured by the retrospective narrator since she would have greater reason to suggest that he was a “ratty nigger” (16), knowing as she does of his rape of Pecola. On the other hand, and crucially, the omniscient narrator enables an understanding of Cholly as a complex character. He is more than a simple perpetrator or antagonist. The “despair” is his but, as the

narrative unfolds, it becomes clearer that the violence inflicted upon "petty things and weak people" concerns Cholly as both perpetrator and victim.

Abandoned four days into his life by a mother who in her turn was left by Cholly's father, the life of Cholly Breedlove is depicted as fragmented and discernible only by the sense of a musician:

> The pieces of Cholly's life could become coherent only in the head of a musician. Only those who talk their talk through the gold of curved metal, or in the touch of black-and-white rectangles and taut skins and strings echoing from wooden corridors, could give true form to his life. Only they would know how to connect […] and come up with what all of that meant in joy, in pain, in anger, in love, and give it its final and pervading ache of freedom. Only a musician would sense, know, without even knowing that he knew, that Cholly was free. Dangerously free. (157)

His assumed freedom is one unbound by responsibility to anyone but himself in a life repeatedly distinguished by neglect, leaving him to and with his own appetites, because to him "there was nothing more to lose." (158). The intricacies of his life can be ascribed to a doubleness. One part concerning the magnitude of his lack of a dependable relation to others, and the other of stifling rigidity, "The constantness, varietyless-ness, [and] the sheer weight of sameness" (158), as he experiences after his marriage to Pauline when a mundane repetitiveness takes its hold.

Beyond his life of parental neglect, the novel depicts a scene where Cholly in his first sexual encounter is interrupted, belittled and ridiculed by two white hunters. Upon discovering him, the hunters force Cholly to continue the sexual act before their watching eyes and under the focus of their flashlight. Rather than blaming them, he projects his hatred onto the girl, cultivates it without ever considering directing it towards the hunters. He is "small, black, helpless", as opposed to the "big, white, armed men", and the violent imbalance of power is more than he can bear to recognize in his instance of impotent ridicule. Their intrusion adds to the stunted disposition of his experiences, bereft of belonging on the account of other than himself. Cholly's reaction also evinces his adoption of their perspective. Before their arrival his sexual awakening is depicted in organic terms "His mouth full of the taste of muscadine […] The smell of promised rain, pine, and muscadine made him giddy" (144). After the hunters leave, these impressions rot. Only Cholly's "subconcious" is aware of what his conscious mind is not (148); that his powerlessness in the instance of his failed sexual encounter proves too heavy for him.

Cholly's lack of recognition concerning his own behaviour is recurring in his portrayal. As mentioned above, he is the only one of the Breedloves who is surprised by his violence in the fights between him and Pauline. His "inarticulate fury and aborted desires" (40), render him estranged and unable to spot and moderate himself. Cholly's narrative is in part similar to Pecola since he, like his daughter, is incapable of putting words to his dispositions. However, and unlike hers, his takes form of violence as he has some agency in his life, but only through the force of his body. Accordingly, his lacking eloquence is expressed in his mute acceptance of what it means to be man. His physical compulsion and the implication of music in the excerpt above resonate two forces entwined with black American history. The palpable way of asserting one's will through physical transgression, to assume some agency where power is mostly absent. The other concerns jazz as a way to exert hurt and powerlessness that does not transgress but in some sense rather enables and rids of stifled routinization. The first one is discernible in Cholly's violence and shortcomings as father and patriarch. It is a simple yet noteworthy point that echoes a void of power as a transgression with genealogical implications—particularly slave-owners' bereavement of autonomy and breaking of familial bonds. His meeting and learning of lynching from a local man named Blue Jack highlight Cholly's adherence to a destructive form of patriarchal standard and its false premise. The mild mannered Blue becomes Cholly's father-figure, and tells him tales among which one is about "how he talked his way out of getting lynched once, and how others hadn't" (132). Blue forefronts the facade on which lynching was licenced since he represents the antithesis of the black brute. As such he effectively presents a silenced point opposite the one on which lynching relied (Gillan 2002, 292). Yet, the impact of Blue mitigates and ends up playing a minuscule point. Rather, the hunters' brutality dwarfs Cholly's belief in and reliance upon mutually nurturing relationships and replaces them with their hierarchical power relations. After the ridicule of his sexual encounter, Cholly locates his biological father in Macon but is abandoned once again and forsakes his reliance on everyone but himself.

Cholly's abandonment, mute fury, and aborted desires impregnate his character. "Only in drink was there some break" from the relentless routine of his married life (158). He is rendered free in his lack of relatedness to others but he also lacks the agency to apply his freedom. The allusion to the musician's impalpable understanding of Cholly's life reads as the fizzle of his life, and as incompletion of expression. Rather, his life of repetition with Pauline stunts him, assigns him to "despair" and rids him of imagination (158). The potential of artistic expression recurs as motif sorrounding Morrison's characters. Pauline finds joy in

organizing things and "missed—without knowing what she missed—paints and crayons" (109). In *Sula*, the protagonist is deemed an "artist with no art form", "dangerous" as a result of her missing vocation and clear place within her community (2005, 121). Cholly's associative connection with art is different but highlights a notion that the fruition of art is weighty as a potential tool to make sense of the insensible. A strong case could be made for how Cholly, more so than any other character, foregrounds vagueness. His intrusions and violence towards his physical inferiors are repugnant, yet the particularity in which the omniscient narrator depicts the events circling Cholly acknowledges his shortcomings as circumstantial and fixes them in a cross-generational web where violation begets violation. His status as a struggling black man pervades his life as it did with his ancestors. His depiction deems him conditioned by history, but more so it renders him as unable to do anything but profess his incapacitated role as father and husband through violence and rape. Cholly Breedlove lacks language and know-how to assess and tune his behaviour as he was never taught how to. This is perhaps most apparent in the preamble to the event depicting his rape of Pecola. The stifling disposition of his marriage poses no bigger challenge to him than in the "appearance of children" (148).

The novel's opening query to "*take refuge in* how" (4) rings clear in the events leading up Pecola's rape. In his arrested, quotidian ways, Cholly is left only with his reactions "based on what he felt at the moment" (159). Paradoxically this leaves him with a lucid look for Pecola, whose deigned frame evokes in him "revulsion, guilt, pity, then love" (159). He sees "her young, helpless, hopeless presence" (159), and "loved her enough to touch her, envelop her, give something of himself to her" (204). Cholly's incestuous rape is decidedly difficult, yet the rendering of the horrid event, as well as Cholly's story that directly precedes it, largely emphasises the complexity of judgement. His purported freedom is transgressive as it leaves him boundless and without anything to hold on to besides his caprices. The source of his freedom runs back to his loss of mother, father, and community. These inform his inaptitude and derogation. The language and voice in which Pecola's rape is recounted stand out since they underline his feelings. In this sense, the "SEEFATHER" primer section depicts Cholly's inability to reach and understand his feelings as it highlights his revulsion, guilt, pity, and love (159). The language that renders his rape is removed from the brutish and masculine act it delineates. Rather, it recounts these in the inflection of a narrator more susceptible to the subtleties of the horrendous and historically routinized and male transgression.

By juxtaposing the lives of the Breedloves with the Dick and Jane primer the devastation of the former is attributed to the latter. The hegemonic culture that informs the

primer is paradoxical in its portrayal of idyllic childhood innocence because of its close proximity to the portrayal of Pecola's expandability. Ultimately, it propagates the primer's monologue with itself, and the cultural markers it instructs. In his distinct way from the previously mentioned characters, Cholly is informed by the ideas circling the primer. The univocal ideology of the primer takes form as his speechless sense of violent masculinity, and as his expression of destructive love. The primer posits a single assuredness that excludes heterogeneity. Moreover, its repeated excerpt-openings highlights the afflictions found in the events of the novel.

The proclaimed verity of Cholly's essence as only apprehensible to a jazz musician is echoed in the novel's closing part. In the primer section the reader is told that only a musician can hope to discern that Cholly was "dangerously free" to feel whatever he might feel, and to act accordingly (157). Claudia reiterates a similar notion. She holds as true that Cholly loved his daughter when she in the coda reframes his transgression, and proclaims that "love is never any better than the lover", and that "the love of a free man is never safe" (204). Malmgren points out Claudia's repetition of a similar argument to the primer section since she retells of Cholly's freedom (2007, 150). In turn, this might suggest that the novel's narrative is entirely her composition. Although his point is lucid, it is not of particular importance to this reading. As mentioned, the omniscient narrator resists the univocality inflected by the Dick and Jane primer. Nevertheless, the implication of Claudia as the de facto narrator of the whole novel brings into question the assumed reliability of the primer sections' omniscient narrator. The point of representing the events with the broad and knowledgeable strokes of an omniscient narrator rests on the almost objective depiction it supposes. If the narrator of the primer sections is Claudia, who thereby becomes a homodiegetic narrator, her role as narrator would prove more fallible because of the greater personal involvement as narrator and participant in her own narrative. This ambiguous narrative gesture proposes unreliability in the rendering at one hand, but can also be read as a hesitant stance from the part of the narrator. *The Bluest Eye* is, as proposed and exemplified above, complex in its different narrative situations. A narrator both present in the main intradiegetic narrative and assuming the role of an all-knowing telling entity between the diegetic and intradiegetic levels could impair the weight of the latter. A different possibility is that the obscure narrative situation emphasizes the portrayed events in a way that is meant to be understood in terms of its fictionality. That is, a narrative that highlights its own creation. The disparate modes of narration are then art and artifice that play up complexity not complicity of the characters. Linda Dittmar suggests that these are among the devices in *The Bluest Eye* that "insist on the

reader's self-conscious participation in the reconstitution of the text" (2007, 73). These instances of reconstitutions assume to teach a reading that opposes the reading taught by the primer. The argument inferred above about the narrative rendering that presents Cholly's incestuous rape in a female language is an instance of this teaching to read because it connects horrid theme with untypical language for its time and place of conception.

In the introductory paragraph of the first seasonal chapter named Autumn, the first-person narrator Claudia recounts how she and her sister Frieda are left outside the car of their friend's father for no apparent reason for their denied entrance. The girl's immediate reaction is violent retaliation "to poke the arrogance out of her eyes", and to "smash" her "pride of ownership" (7). The narrator proposes to beat up their entitled friend, who on her part returns their physical violence with tears and the inquiry "do [they] want her to pull her pants down" (7). The sisters of nine and ten years know that the assertion of their pride rests on refusal of this request. The scene is of interest, not only because of its introductory placement within the narrative, but also because of the immediacy in which it brings up violence and rape. The reactive offer of their friend invites scrutiny since its presupposition concerning the young, black girls regards the permeating effects of violence and transgression. Her fears and assumptions concerning Claudia and Frieda, as well as the sisters' mute understanding of what her offer entails, point to awareness of the child; ineffable due to their inexperience yet present through their conditioned and to some extent shared understanding of their racialized world. The mitigating properties of the child only carries so far, as the narrator and her retrospective presence is made clear early in the primary narrative. After reciting their domestic life in an old and cold house where adults give directions, "issue orders without providing information." (8), the mediation between the young Claudia and her older reminiscing self becomes evident as she wonders, "But was it really like that?" (10). This indicates a clear line between the experiencing child and the connection to the retrospective narrator of her grown self. The mediation of the adult who recounts the past through the prism of her child self is interesting since it proposes some importance in this manner rendering the story.

The narrator's reflexive question concerning the credibility of her recollection is of interest in this context because it addresses the problem with representing the world in the novel. This holds true in a general sense due to the dynamic properties implied by memory as well as in the indefiniteness of representation as such. More specifically, the narrator calls attention to her role as narrator. She highlight the act of her recount and the fallacy in assuming certainty in any narrative. By making the presence of the dual narrative rendering

explicit, the novel focuses in other words on its own narration and fallibility. Claudia's ambivalent account of her own past and that of her family and friends, presumes the limit to which the novel can be read before it expands its potential by her unconvinced reminiscence. Concerning how the novel employs different focalizers and narrators is worth noting since the *how* of transgressions, especially those inflicting Pecola, is the novel's underlining inquiry as the *why* remains too difficult to explain, perhaps even ineffable. The voice of the adult narrating Claudia accentuates the focus on the child both central to the narrative about Pecola Breedlove, and in raising a query into how the dual narrator renders her narrative. Transgressions towards children carries a particular poignancy due to their exposed state. This account, however banal, remains true in *The Bluest Eye*, in particular due to the Dick and Jane primer's formal and thematic junction with Pecola Breedlove. Claudia's memory of the adults' lack of explanation in what they communicate echoes the sisters' aforementioned inclinations to violent retaliation. When the same peer who denied them entrance to her father's car later accuses the sisters of "playing nasty!" (28), and calls their mother, Mrs. MacTeer's response is one of immediacy and assuredness of her daughters wrongdoing. Without question, she believes their accuser and ignores Claudia and Frieda's pleas of innocence. Although this example can be read as one in which Mrs. MacTeer makes the more temperate choice in disbelieving her own daughters rather than another. The young sisters' affinity towards violence and the mute understanding that lets them decline the sexual offer of their friend is left unchallenged by adults. The novel appears to hold back judgment of this absence of parental scaffolding and presumes to (re)present it descriptively. However, this inference is an instance to read the complex narrator Claudia as necessary due to the inexperience and inarticulateness of the child, and as narrator who adds the adult clarifications she missed as a child. Claudia's aptitude for the task are for instance made apparent when a bored Frieda suggests the two of them "do something" (1999, 24). Unable to conjure any idea herself, Frieda leaves the task to her younger sister who comes up with six ideas for activities for the two. This example of imagination is also one of self-reflection in the novel as well as one raising a possible reason for her narration.

The violence depicted in the opening paragraph of *The Bluest Eye* reoccurs throughout the novel and can be considered as a discernible theme. A different assertion is that Claudia's violence alludes to a more general sense of transgression since the visceral understanding of her child self is toned up by its several reiterations in the narrative. The notion is that the adult narrating Claudia could soften the violence experienced by the child but instead amplifies it by the numerous returns to it. Violent inclinations, similar to those depicted in the opening,

are elaborated on in Claudia's handling of a doll. Upon receiving a blue-eyed Baby Doll for Christmas – a gift she erroneously is assumed to adore – Claudia proceeds to dismember the doll in an attempt to deconstruct it, "To discover what eluded me: the secret of the magic they weaved on others." (20). Her inkling and physical response to it is not only addressing the arbitrary standard of beauty the doll purports but also her violence. Not separate from her tendency of violence towards her white girl peers, Claudia's handling of the doll instigates an examination of violence towards little white girls. The interplay between the child and the adult narrator becomes evident where the events portrayed are of the child but in a language different from that of a nine-year-old. As an elongation of her dismantling of the doll, she later exercises her will on living girls only to discover that her violence was "repulsive because it was disinterested" (21). Jane Kuenz' suggestion that Claudia's blame of own actions comes from her incapability to feel enough for her victim seems a convincing one (2007, 106). Her failure to feel enough is not of her own making or volition, but her violence remains disinterested because the victims she finds in little white girls are only representations of the system her violence is intended for. Claudia's violence is, to put it differently, disinterested because it excludes the specificity of the people whose bodies she harms. Yet, her violent ways are reactive to the attributes the assumed allure of the white doll conveys; namely fair skin, blue eyes and blond hair. The narrator suggests that her later accommodation, where she learned to worship the doll, would prove to be "adjustment without improvement" (21), thus reaffirming the weight of the experiencing child narrator. The young Claudia is affected by majority culture to a lesser degree than the remaining characters, making her role as narrator and focalizer interesting since she maintains a greater proximity to the events than her retrospective self. The mediation between the two posits that both are of importance to the narrative. The experiencing, young Claudia as she is not too far removed from the events as to risk desensitization, and the older as she is the more knowledgeable with the distance and tempered outlook needed to assume a more reliable representation. Her personal involvement and the seasoned understanding intertwine and enable a rendering more reliable than an account lacking the duality could ever hope to.

Kuenz' reading coincides with this reading's suggestion of a general transgression due to the commentating aspect by the adult narrating Claudia. The assumption endorsed here is that the narrator Claudia's remarks of violence affirm the centrality of violence in the novel; both in specific and general terms. The specificity in the "familiar violence" (106) Claudia experiences in and around herself and due to her violence being reactive to white prescriptiveness. Even though this thesis argues that the narrator of the primer section is

distinctly different from narrator Claudia, both echo the ideological indoctrination represented in the Dick and Jane primer. In its depiction of adversity the novel claims a countering role opposed to the ideas pervading the primer. Claudia's deconstruction of the doll emphasizes this point and her urge to "counteract the universal love of white baby dolls, Shirley Temples, and Maureen Peals" (188). Similarly to her discovery of the doll's sawdust innards is the way in which the novel demystifies the ideological backdrop that provides potency to "the *Thing* that made *her* [Maureen Peel] beautiful" (72).

Sula

On the surface, Morrison's second novel, *Sula*, is about the friendship between two girls. The one, Nel Wright adheres to a pattern of life laid out for her; the other, Sula Peace attempts to make her own way and achieve her own self. A recurring notion in some of the critical readings of *Sula* suggests that a noteworthy feat in the novel is its ambiguity and indeterminacy as in the form of opposition. Philip Page posits that the vagueness ultimately cultivates rebellion, as form of an "attack on traditional, white-imposed conceptions" (1999, 186). Similarly, Barbara Rigney infers that *Sula*, like all of Morrison's work, "subverts concepts of textual unity and defies totalized interpretation" (1991, 32). Both allude to Morrison's novel as simultaneously elaborating and unravelling a number of binary opposition (Novak 1999, 190). This ensuing reading of *Sula* will rather borrow from Philip Novak's proposal that the indeterminacies raised in the novel frequently come short to generate meaning and rather underscore absence and negation (1999, 190). That is, I contend with the Novak's notion that not all of the indeterminacies or gaps in *Sula* can be filled in by the reader.

Considering some formal traits regarding narrator and narration, *Sula* draws a clearer boundary between the represented events and its omniscient narrator than *The Bluest Eye*. In Morrison's second novel the third-person narrator is and remains an extradiegetic-homodiegetic narrator, one that assumes a large degree of knowledge about the cognitive and emotive facets of the characters in focus (Rimmon-Kenan 2003, 98). As this remains so throughout the novel, the ensuing section center on focalizer as narrative trait. Unlike *The Bluest Eye*, *Sula* employs a narrative strategy more concerned with focalizers than narrators. Consequently, the following section adheres to emphasize the focalizers, especially in relation to focalized death. Moreover, I treat the term focalizer and the object of its view in close proximity to the act of witnessing, so much so that subsequently, focalizer and witness are used interchangeably. A brief note on how the two novels share the theme of transgression is

appropriate. Bounds overstepped and transgression are exemplified in certain instances in *Sula*. Violence is a recurring topic in the novel and a prominent feature is death. This is instigated in the death of the young boy Chicken Little, and later exemplified by Sula's death. On the surface, Sula represents a transgressive figure since she arguably expresses traits and behaviours that render the members of her community both intrigued and disgusted. She conjures certain shared feelings in her community as a black woman who refuses her expected role.

The novel's prologue forefronts the community of the Bottom as the place of events, as well as its temporal placement within the narrative. As such, the opening lines project the gradual destruction of the black community and retrospectively reconstructs the events enveloped by the town:

> In that place, where they tore the nightshade and blackberry patches from their roots to make room for the Medallion City Golf Course, there was once a neighborhood. It stood in the hills above the valley town of Medallion and spread all the way to the river. It is called the suburbs now, but when black people lived there it was called the Bottom (3)

Beyond situating the Bottom as the site of interest in the novel, the opening lines underscore a paradigmatic point in *Sula*. One that pertains to loss and absence, of time passed and the evanescence of the once black community. The immediacy in which the Bottom is presented envelops the narrative by way of inversion since the condensed story is presented in the prologue and, this highlights a general and encompassing transgression in the novel. A transgression that invokes historical experience of loss and that extends beyond any monolithic manner of suffering. Simply put, the ensuing part of this thesis will adhere to the notion that *Sula* records and laments transgressions in the form of violence, destruction and self-destruction, and that the particularity in the focalizing characters render a kaleidoscopic tale of loss, death, presence and absence. The opening section evinces the Bottom as place where events have unfolded and where a story has taken place. The elegiac inflection of the prologue highlights the inevitable and irrevocable, and laments both bearings on the community and on the subjective experiences depicted. The above implied notion of a general transgression is that the melancholy language of what used to be a black neighbourhood evokes a theme of loss that comes to fruition through the willed evisceration of the black neighbourhood. The specificity of the golf course built at the expense of the black neighbourhood similarly highlights a general conviction that alludes to destruction or appropriation of sites of living as enforced by majority capitalist interests. Beyond this

exterior inference, the prologue begets a sentiment concerning the specificity in lost African American places and neighbourhoods. The geographical and socioeconomic relevance for the subjective lives therein is acute for the reading of *Sula* since they highlight the Bottom as metaphor for sites with a cultural past and the potential irrevocability of their destruction.

In brief, the prologue portrays the foreshadowed effects of the golf course that eventually replaces the Bottom, the violence done to it, and the subsequent effects of this violence. Like *The Bluest Eye* before it, *Sula* employs inversion by presenting the end of the charted events before the narrative ensues. The Bottom's destruction and its "nigger joke" origin succeeds the immediacy of the community's foreshadowed disappearance, elaborating on the thematic canvas of the novel (4). The "joke" unfolds after a slave owner deceives his former slave by rewarding his arduous efforts with poor land upon a hill, where living conditions will always be hard.

> See those hills? That's bottom land, rich and fertile."
> "But it's high up in the hills," said the slave. "High up from us," said the master, "but when God looks down, it's the bottom. That's why we call it so. It's the bottom of heaven—best land there is." (5)

The "joke" is both a thematic and structural thread in *Sula* as it forefronts the effects on the Bottom peoples' acquisition of land as shaped by slave owners' deceitful language. The falsehood and the owner's sense of superiority at the expense of the slave isolates the latter and prolongs his economic collapse to his descendants. The prologue also asserts that if a "valley man" would happen to find himself up in the Bottom and hear the laughter of the Bottom people, he would easily miss the "adult pain that rested somewhere under [their] eyelids" (4). Beyond the characters in focus is the often shared and collective sensibility of the Bottom inhabitants. Their ascribed beliefs in evil and nature as well as society's view on women encapsulate the rendered events and characters, and forefront a dynamic between conformity and experiment throughout the novel. The former typified in the generalized Bottom people, and the latter in the detailed characters.

Morrison would later express ambivalence towards the prologue in *Sula*, characterizing it as a "welcoming lobby" for the "valley man", and a way of introduction she would refuse for the remainder of her work (2005, xiii). Contrary to her dissatisfaction, the reckoning of the introductory technique as worn out and lacking can rather be thought of as an imaginative entry point to the time. It adopts the position of the "valley man" as outsider before it delves into the ravaging effects of time and circumstance on a black community. As

such, it eases the reader into recognizing whom to pay attention to while also acknowledging that the choice of addressing her essentially white readership was required. Notwithstanding Morrison's dissatisfaction, the approach expressed in the prologue does not appear to leave a lacking entry to the novel. There is much for the reader to discern in the chapters following it. The introduction of Sula is, for instance, postponed until the latter part of the second chapter, her characterization; even longer, leaving a vague impression of what the title references. The Bottom as location is absolute and even when characters leave, the reader never learns of the events that take place elsewhere. Even more disjointing for any coherent impression of the narrative is Sula's death since it occurs at a place in the novel where a large portion of it remains. In an interview with Robert Stepto, Morrison tells that she wanted "Sula to be missed by the reader. That's why she dies early. There's a lot of book after she dies, you know. I wanted them to miss her presence in that book as that town missed her presence" (2021, 478). Notwithstanding the anecdotal weight of Morrison's words, Sula's death brings forth a feasible absence. Her absence marks the succeeding events of the novel as the Bottom inhabitants lose the one whom they contrast themselves from; thus, Sula's death leaves a mark on the text as the void left by her impregnates the succeeding narrative.

Following the prologue is a chapter titled "1919" about Shadrack, a World War I veteran. Ágnes Surányi infers that the adjacency to the prologue in which Shadrack's traumatic experiences are recounted attests to "a scar on the body of the text" (2007, 18). His biblical namesake, Shadrach, was "thrown into the fiery furnace by command of Nebuchadnezzar" (Calvocoressi 1990, 217). His punishment came of his refusal to worship the king's god. Astonishingly, Shadrach escapes the flames unscathed. Shadrack in *Sula* is, on the other hand, "blasted" and "permanently astonished" by the toll of war (7). His paradoxical feat is mere survival having taken the toll of his role as soldier. In an attempt to remedy his fear of death's unexpectedness, he institutionalises National Suicide Day, a day devoted to fear and recognition of death, leaving the rest of the year "safe" and "free" (14). The "1919" chapter's allusion to the end of the First World War points to the historical circumstances of neglected black war veterans who returned from the European fronts. Over 400,000 black men were drafted, and "The black 369th Infantry were under continuous fire for a record of 191 days, for which they won the Croix de Guerre and the honor of leading the victorious Allied armies to the Rhine in 1918" (Hunt 1993, 448). Notwithstanding this "honor", the returning black men remained subjected to Jim Crow laws and humiliations. The geopolitical history of black troops serving in the First World War is hinted to in the novel when Nel's mother Helene sees a couple of veterans in a train carriage for black people (21).

The broader scope in which the immediacy of the 1919 chapter depicts the traumatized Shadrack and his war experiences also governs the starting point for the novel as well as its historical backdrop. The devastating effects of the First World War and the cataclysmic impact it had on history serves to forefront the shattered societies and communities left in its wake. Shadrack is the modernist trope of a shell-shocked war veteran within this referential frame, but more so his somatic and psychological harm parallels that done to the imagined African American microcosm of the Bottom. In a broader scope, the highlighting of the war serves as a script for the impact of Western history on African American culture. As the army was the first of modern capitalist industrial machines to incorporate black men, Susan Willis suggests that Shadrack's believed physical deformities from trauma function as a figure for the inflictions slavery, the military, and wage labour had on black people (2017, 688). Shadrack accordingly presents a disjointed and fragmented understanding of history for the novel's narrative and the temporal landscape it depicts. In the course of the novel, communities disappear, friendships and families break down, and people die. *Sula* spans the years from the close of the First World War, through the Depression and the end of US involvement in the Second World War in 1941, and ends in 1965 around the dawn of the civil rights movement. The historical setting in the novel beckons a number of markers regarding not only the global impact of two world wars, but also the domestic impact of the events spanning the period in the narrative. As such, the novel invokes the sentiment of an elegy for the victims of war, racial violence, and poverty.

In a particularly graphic section, the first chapter records Shadrack and his fellow troops and their fearful flight from the enemy, underlining the visceral violence as done to his fellow soldier. In crude terms, the episode depicts Shadrack's first and only encounter with enemy troops as he witnesses the violence befalling his comrade:

> Wincing at the pain in his foot, he turned his head a little to the right and saw the face of a soldier near him fly off. Before he could register shock, the rest of the soldier's head disappeared under the inverted soup bowl of his helmet. But stubbornly, taking no direction from the brain, the body of the headless soldier ran on, with energy and grace, ignoring altogether the drip and slide of brain tissue down its back (8)

The language in which the scene unfolds aestheticizes the horrors of the man losing his head but, crucially, it does not obscure the brutal violence. The soldier is rendered faceless, nameless, and anonymous. His undetailed face flies off, a delineation that if lacking the circumstance of war could risk concealing the brutality. The metaphoric depiction of the

inverted soup bowl is lucid in its implication of liquid content in the form of runny brain. The violence of this event is inescapable in the confronting imagery of the "drip and slide" of the anonymous soldier's brutalized corpse. Novak infers that the passage is of interest because it forefronts the novel's "most prominent preoccupation": its stress on violence, violation, destruction and self-destruction (1999, 185). In turn, these underline the lamenting preoccupation of the novel centring the mechanized, headless body in this brutal depiction of senseless violence. The ironic invocation of juxtaposing the "grace" of the violated and dynamic body with runny brain tissue highlights the brutal and the mundane, the violent and the aesthetically pleasing. Notwithstanding the discernible clarity in which this twofold portrayal is there on the page, the formal ambiguity of the excerpt also extends to the subject matter of the novel. Novak convincingly suggests that the depiction of the brutalized soldier marks the text through "living death" (1999, 185). His inference points out the centrality of death in a general sense and interlinks death and the living in the novel. Death culls not only the events depicted in *Sula* but it also structures the narrative. The novel's "ten major chapters includes [sic] a death, sometimes metaphoric but more usually actual" (Reddy 1988, 29). The deaths of Chicken Little, Plum, Hannah, Sula, Tar Baby, Mrs. Jackson, and the three Deweys are all played out in the course of the relatively short novel. Like the unknown soldier's death, many of these deaths are presented by way of someone bearing witness. The young boy Chicken Little exhausts his role by dying, and like most other deaths in *Sula*, his is witnessed. The young Nel and Sula "expected him to come back up, laughing. Both girls stared at the water" (61). Here, play shifts abruptly to death by drowning and the mundane and knee-jerk caprice of children suddenly turns into a deadly calamity. Similar to the girls' bearing witness, and thus being focalizers, is the segment where Sula's mother, Hannah, burns. She is seen first by Sula's grandmother, Eva, then by Mr. and Mrs. Suggs, as well as the captivated Sula:

> Eva looked out the window and saw Hannah bending to light the yard fire […] She rolled up to the window and it was then she saw Hannah burning. […] Mr. and Mrs. Suggs, who had set up their canning apparatus in their front yard, saw her running, dancing toward them (75-76)

The witnessed deaths share a similar feature as prosaic portrayals adorned with artistic imagery and linked with the content of anguish and hurt. In the omitted parts to the last excerpt the reader learns of both the colour and material of Hannah's burning dress and of the "licking" fire that brings forth her agonizing "dance". Like in the rendering of the unnamed soldier's death, the brutality and violence does not subside, but the ostensible banality of

presenting the colour of Hanna's attire amplifies an invocation that regards the represented lives and events in *Sula*. Between the unremarkable and the brutishness of sudden tragedy emerges a subject of rigour. The language that depicts the death of Sula's mother is barefaced and matter-of-factly like the one concerning the demise of the soldier and Chicken Little. In an attempt to save Hannah, or at least lessen her injury, the Suggs pour water over her burning body. Their effort proves futile and brings about steam "which seared to sealing" what was left of the once "beautiful" woman (76). Sula too is present to see her mother burning. She beholds the horrid event with calm detachment as her grandmother thinks to herself that Sula "had watched Hannah burn not because she was paralyzed, but because she was interested" (78). Sula's aloofness in the spectacle of death even extends to her own experience of dying:

> While in this state of weary anticipation, [Sula] noticed that she was not breathing, that her heart had stopped completely. A crease of fear touched her breast, for any second there was sure to be a violent explosion in her brain, a gasping for breath. Then she realized, or rather she sensed, that there was not going to be any pain. She was not breathing because she didn't have to. Her body did not need oxygen. She was dead.
> Sula felt her face smiling. "Well, I'll be damned," she thought, "it didn't even hurt. Wait'll I tell Nel." (149)

Besides attesting to the intimate friendship between Sula and Nel, this contemplation notes the extent to which observation of death is close to its representation in the novel. Even in her final moments, Sula calmly and bemusedly observes. Anticipation and a fear of struggle in spite, Sula's post-mortem perception of her ceasing life epitomizes both the passing of time and the void left by it. Her anticipatory dread does not happen and her familiarity with violence lingers without realization. Similar transitory and fleeting features of experience and witnessing constitute part of the setting in which *Sula* presents violence and violation. The present is foregrounded as ephemeral and therein beckons the centrality of time and life passing as in the above excerpt.

The immediately established communal focus in the prologue underscores the integrity of time in the novel. "In that place […] there was once a neighborhood" (3). The reoccurring instances of loss defines, as Houston A. Baker, jr. points out, the narrative by "negation" (1993, 237). The prologue displays a formal exercise in presenting the overarching narrative by an inversion of events, and it portrays the story through absences. These are later rendered in the mythologized, ostensibly chronological narrative starting with the "1919" chapter where the events leading to the Bottom's eventual disappearance are recounted. Patricia McKee notes that the underscoring of "unoccupied spaces" is the basis of two preoccupations

in the novel: one of the people that are missing in some way and the other of unfulfilled actions and occupations that never occurred (1996, 2–3). Her inference is of interest because its contention is similar to the one raised in this thesis, enunciating the negatives, and by extension absences, that the Bottom (re)presents. The former way of absence is the missing that once was. The latter, the void made by that which never came to be. The chapter named "1941" points to the perhaps most evident example of what never was as many of the Bottom people perish at the construction site of a proposed tunnel after the unfinished structure is flooded by the adjacent river. "Their hooded eyes swept over the place where their hope had lain since 1927" and where "[t]here was the promise" concerning what their employment could have remedied or made better (161). There at the construction site they "smashed the bricks they would never fire in yawning kilns, split the sacks of limestone they had not mixed or even been allowed to haul; tore the wire mesh, tipped over wheelbarrows and rolled forepoles down the bank" (161). Again, the novel applies its narrative by depicting absence. The people at the tunnel site foster a shared sensibility through what they were promised, then denied. Their hope is the first absence, denied them by the "childish malevolence" of their imaginable employers; second was promise. The void left is their missing relations to the bricks, limestones, wire mesh and wheelbarrows, not the objects themselves. Thus, the tunnel site is marked by these absences seeing as the people finally proceed to interact with the objects formerly denied them. Eventually, their frustration guides their collective demise as they act out violent inclinations on the place and objects "in their need to kill it all" (161).

The rendering of their communal death is similar to the previously mentioned deaths in that they all commemorate life passed through the echoing sentiment the reoccurring depictions underline. Recursive elements such as the recounted and often witnessed deaths attest not only to the deaths, their instigations and violent backdrops, but also to the act of bearing witness as impetus for the work's inception. In an interview with Bill Moyers, Morrison infers that "you have to bear witness to what *is*. The fear of collapse, of meaninglessness, of disorder, of anarchy—there's a certain protection that art can provide in the guise, not even of truth, but just a kind of linguistic shape of a life or a group of lives" (1994, 273). The comment appears to suggest that artistic expression can provide resistance to impermanence and that the act of bearing witness engages with the present while in the same instance recognizing this ephemerality. In this light, *Sula* appears to play with what "*is*" since a considerable part of the novel situates itself as absences. The link between being on the one side and impermanence and death on the other is inextricable, a point frequently highlighted in the novel, and one that, as Novak stresses, is a preoccupation in *Sula* (1999, 188–89).

Similar to the deconstructionist conviction that spacing produces potential for meaning, *Sula* both renders and highlights a narrative that identifies these voids not only as empty but emptied (McKee 1996, 4). Notwithstanding this notion of potentiality, the novel positions and reiterates absences in a manner that might suggest these voids as devoid of meaning rather than as object for the poststructuralist to satiate with potential. If one champions a deconstruction of *Sula*, the fissures of meaning alluded to appear to be, as Novak suggests, "not so much inappropriate as inadequate" (1999, 190). His inference is convincing because it underscores that to read meaning into the novel's reiterated absences risks overreaching. For instance, upon returning from the war the novel limns Shadrack in terms of his voids:

> Twenty-two years old, weak, hot, frightened, not daring to acknowledge the fact that he didn't even know who or what he was . . . with no past, no language, no tribe, no source, no address book, no comb, no pencil, no clock, no pocket handkerchief, no rug, no bed, no can opener, no faded postcard, no soap, no key, no tobacco pouch, no soiled underwear and nothing nothing nothing to do (12)

His post-war life is different to Surányi's referenced proposal above, leaving not simply a scar on the novel but also a preliminary formulation of its reprised absences. To assume that the borderline incessant emphasis on what, for instance, Shadrack is void of being or having appears too bold. Neither this previous excerpt nor the story framed in the narrative suggest much in the way of adopting a view on the narrative as saturated with potential meaning for the reader to derive. The exemplified figuration becomes surrogate of the meaning typically taken by narrative presences. The absences suffuse the narrative by pertaining to a sense of narrative impulsion that lends itself to the rigours of loss and death. In addition, the reiterated voids become a paradoxical outlet as expression of narrated absence. Paradoxical because of the narration's literal presence opposite the underscored voids that represent the characters and events in the novel. The narrative impulse or drive position the voids as prerequisite to the subject matter that enclose the narrated adversities generally while the latter concerns the formal but not formulaic endeavours of the novel.

Sula is arguably endowed with an agency that refuses absolutes and rather highlights her transitory gestures of personality. She excises any fixed sentiment about what a black young woman ought to be. Simultaneously, Sula exercises qualities that are removed from cultural references. Even though the culture that interlaces her with the other characters is one they share, she is defined in terms that are different to the mystical convictions of her community. For instance, she is juxtaposed with the existent possibility of artistic vocation.

> In a way, her strangeness, her naïveté, her craving for the other half of her equation was the consequence of an idle imagination. Had she paints, or clay, or knew the discipline of the dance, or strings; had she anything to engage her tremendous curiosity and her gift for metaphor, she might have exchanged the restlessness and preoccupation with whim for an activity that provided her with all she yearned for. And like any artist with no art form, she became dangerous (121)

The passage underscores a hypothetical inclination in Sula and defines her through an absence of specific imagination or aesthetic work. The possibility of art does not overshadow the aforementioned brutal conditions that pervade the events of the novel. Rather, it underscores both that art cannot be detached from conditions, and Sula's conditional lack of coherent subject-object relationship. Accordingly, it is possible to trace part of Sula's inclinations to the absence of a consistent project of expression – of something to do. She is presented as an embodiment of indeterminacy that is neither circumscribed by tradition nor by any relation beyond her own whims. In different terms, Sula does not appear to use art or any other form to attach experience and definition of herself to one another. Instead, her definition occurs through absence. The "dangerous" Sula emerges from her detachment from the meaning that other people assume since she alone recognizes the agency of absence.

Hortense J. Spillers is among those who have suggested the limitations of reading Sula in dualistic terms as she infers that "[n]o Manichean analysis demanding a polarity of interest—black/white, male/female, good/bad—will work" to acquire meaning from Sula's story (1999, 54). In light of the forces that impinge on women's liberty, particularly that of black women, Sula's candour about experience models resistance. Spillers' idea about subversion of black female potential lends well to establish Sula's complexity. At the closing of her essay, she suggests that if Sula is read as a "countermythology" and "*potential being*", she enunciates a deliberate resistance that "*is* the stunning idea" of the character (1999, 75). Interestingly, Spillers posits what Sula fights against, but as Novak notes, she omits a reading that attests to "the particular possibilities that Sula opens up" (1999, 192). Inadvertently or not, Spillers' reading thus substantiates the pertinence of negation in Sula's depiction since it appears to underscore yet another openness and emptiness represented by Sula.

In spite of Sula's lack of all "compulsion to verify herself—be consistent with herself" (119), the Bottom people mark her as "pariah" (122). They contrive ways to appoint her as scapegoat; cohere her return accompanied by a "plague of robins" with the presence of an ineffable evil. An evil that is "first recognized, then dealt with, survived, outwitted, triumphed over" (118). To them, Sula amasses a form of consistent presence through her acts of

seduction of married men, and for sleeping with white men: “the unforgivable thing” for which there was no “understanding”, “excuse”, or “compassion”. Their moralism towards Sula’s conduct or to them, lack of consistency that accords with theirs is informed across the void in which they observe or imagine her. However, she is not placed outside the Bottom and its other residents but rather as a benchmark that distinguishes right from wrong. That is to say, that the Bottom identify themselves by contrast to Sula. Her ascribed role is that of a presence in which they can reiterate their disgust, and, as Patricia McKee notes “contain evil” and “distance themselves” from what she represents to them (1996, 22). For instance, Teapot’s Mamma, called this “because being his mamma was precisely her major failure” becomes a good and devoted mother when she can blame Sula for having hurt her son (113–114). Even though it was an accident when Teapot fell down the steps in front of Sula’s door, his mother “told everybody that Sula had pushed him”. She then “immersed herself in a role she had shown no inclination for: motherhood. The very idea of a grown woman hurting her boy kept her teeth on edge. She became the most devoted mother: sober, clean and industrious” (114). In short, Teapot’s Mamma displaces her own shortcomings on to Sula.

The Bottom people’s conviction of Sula’s evil relieves them and leaves her as “the devil in their midst”, one whom they can band together against (117–118). In her ascribed state as evil, Sula is the metric to which the Bottom people acquire relative value. She remains an absence incarnate because she is identified in terms of negation: as what others are not, and as one without a place there; and as the one whose absence contains evils so that they can be avoided elsewhere. Furthermore, Patricia McKee suggests that Sula encases the particular evil “of racism practiced by white people” (1996, 23). This points to the complexity of Sula’s role as scapegoat. The transgression of racism hovers over the novel’s characters but Sula is the one who holds the Bottom people’s anger, hurt and powerlessness. That is, with her as the “witch” in their midst, they do not need to address their anger at the wrongs they are incapable to remedy since her absence serves as a figurative container for their hurt (150).

After Sula’s death, the people of the Bottom fail to acknowledge her role. Rather, they believe that “either *because* Sula was dead or just *after* she was dead a brighter day was dawning” (150–151). What in fact coincides with her death is the Bottom’s gradual disintegration:

> [M]others who had defended their children from Sula’s malevolence (or who had defended their positions as mothers from Sula’s scorn for the role) now had nothing to rub up against. The tension was gone and so was the reason for the effort they had made. Without her mockery, affection for others sank into flaccid disrepair (153)

Sula's placement and role that opposed the Bottom harkens back to the aforementioned mass death at the tunnel construction site. Her absence is distinct and empty but also saturated with the Bottom people's losses. Losses that Sula kept from them that they do not recognize but experience after her death. Sula's death and absence from the Bottom might then foster endurance in its wake, which the open-ended conclusion of *Sula* can suggest:

> "All that time, all that time, I thought I was missing Jude." And the loss pressed down on her chest and came up into her throat. "We was girls together," she said as though explaining something. "O Lord, Sula," she cried,
> "girl, girl, girlgirlgirl."
> It was a fine cry—loud and long—but it had no bottom
> and it had no top, just circles and circles of sorrow. (174)

In a sense, Nel's circling grieving puts words to the distinctiveness that Sula symbolizes for the Bottom. The disappearance of the neighbourhood and Sula's role in it point to a sustained grieving process as neither can be fully worked through by those left behind. The quote laments the loss of the Bottom, both in regards to its specificity, and as an allusion to the irretrievable loss of African American culture. The historical awareness of the latter directs attention to the expression of the novel since the aforementioned representations of death and absence do not only, as Novak posits, "represent [a] limitless sense of loss" but also strive "to effect it" (1999, 191). *Sula* represents acts of bearing witness and exercises a role as testimony. A role that entails the act of witnessing for the sake of the remembering African American culture of passed times. Nel's ceaseless cry and boundless sorrow omits a closure for the novel. It belies despondence by sustaining its perpetual expression over bygone culture. Finally, in its depictions of transitory events, both historical and fictional Nel's cry at the close of *Sula* announces an attention to and appreciation for what has been.

Unlike *The Bluest Eye* which forefronts the deliberate and malevolent exertion of cultural power, *Sula* underscores more subtly both interpersonal misdeeds and arbitrary hurt, the latter often being something unpredictable or inevitable coming to fruition as for instance Chicken Little's sudden death. In its perhaps most evident formulation, the absences in *Sula* reference the neglected events, works, and lives of the fictional Bottom inhabitants. In turn, they become figures for the often-unrecognized mark African American culture has left and continues to leave in its wake. Both of Morrison's early novels frame their subject matter in a cultural landscape where racialized norms disproportionally govern the lives of the characters. In *The Bluest Eye*, this figures as the underlying and ever-present notion of beauty the Dick

and Jane primer imposes. In *Sula*, the more subtle murmur of the Bottom's story, its origin and eventual dissipation function similarly when underscoring the historical references to which the narrative alludes. Both novels present these as ideological presuppositions that in their ubiquity and violent outlets remain transgressive. The thematic transgressions are thus evident in an overarching sense in the two novels. In addition, they echo the historically neglected presence tenanted by Africans, and eventually African Americans, in the literary tradition Morrison's work coalesces with.

This chapter commenced by positing that narrators and focalizers play a critical role in the thematic fruition of transgression. *The Bluest Eye* warrants its two prominent narrators and focalized subject matter since the story about Pecola Breedlove is convoluted in spite of the discernible wrongs and violations she is subjected to. Additionally, I have proposed that it is integral for the narrative to detail the different stories adjacent to her unbeing. *Sula,* on the other hand, details the broader outline of violence and violations pertaining to an African American community. The novel renders both deliberate transgression and its cross-generational longevity, and the aimless hurt and short distance between life and the void left by death. The permeating implications of racism echoes throughout both novels as canvases for much of the portrayed violence and hurt. Even so, both novels alleviate some of their despondence by foregrounding acts of retelling, witnessing, remembrance and repossession.

Chapter Two:

Dualities and Imagery in *The Bluest Eye* and *Sula*

Morrison's work allures and revolts. This intuitively evident inference is the guiding claim of this chapter. The previous chapter details how violation, violence and death are prevalent in the two novels, and that the different voices and witnesses reconcile in the wake of these transgressions. What has not yet been elaborated on is how dualities and imagery in the two novels champion diversity of expression. I remain convinced that a reading that elides stylistic considerations of Morrison's writing misses more than it achieves. Consequently, this chapter proposes that double and occasionally opposing qualities in *The Bluest Eye* and *Sula* underscore how the two novels promote opacity. In short, I infer that although the examined examples below come across as hesitant, they ultimately promote expressions that refrain from postulating exhaustiveness.

In his work, *Poetics of Relation,* the Martinican writer Édouard Glissant elaborates on the concept of opacity. He insists that we must "clamor for the right to opacity for everyone" (1997, 194). Opacity is an unknowability that makes up the world. It exposes the limits of assertions that prevent understanding of multiple perspectives of the world and its peoples. In other words, it opposes the imperial exertion of power that does not want to acknowledge the "opacity of a world in which one exists, or agrees to exist, with and among others" (Glissant 1997, 114). Consequently, opacity must be protected in order for any democratic endeavour to succeed (Blas 2016, 149). In relation to Morrison, opacity is the amalgam that disrupts the Dick and Jane primer's concept of understanding. The primer purports an understanding but only in light of its ethnocentric notion that professes itself as the metric. What Morrison's novels champion is the fact that things neither are nor need to be transparent.

In the opening paragraph to the above section on *Sula,* I both mention and veer from the suggestion that *Sula* parodies binary thinking. This notion stands, but for the sake of precision, a short delimitation is due. The dualities I infer are not binary oppositions; rather, they refer to a twofold reading of meaning for the ensuing inquiries. Harking back to Linda Dittmar's preliminary inference that "it is Morrison's emphasis on the ineffable that beckons readers towards enthusiasm, conflict, and avoidance of conflict" and the suggestion that her two novels encode hesitation, the ensuing chapter reads these complexities in Morrison's prose through doubleness (2007, 69).

Cholly's story of abandonment and emotional neglect predispose his rape of Pecola, and that these partway recount how his victimisation leads him to victimise further. The

repeated depiction of him as a "free man" does little to appease the reader of his difficult background (204). Nor does it undermine that Cholly transgresses the bounds, both of Pecola and of society. Nevertheless, Cholly's transgression is entwined with his misplaced attempt of affection. While Pecola's "ugliness" serves as an affront to Pauline's meticulous albeit covert creation of beauty in the Fisher household, it also serves as a reminder to Cholly of both his and Pecola's anguish. He errs beyond any doubt, yet one can trace a wish to preserve Pecola even though he contributes to her destruction. Morrison's depiction of the character steers away from the orthodox view of black maleness that would see him as no more than a violent and absent stereotype. In his freedom and reaching for the limits of his outlines, Morrison envisions a "tremendous possibility for masculinity among black men", which extends to Cholly's exercise of freedom (Morrison and Stepto 2021, 481). Morrison's compassion for Cholly emerges as his act is enclosed within a twofold knot of love and regret, "guilt" and "impotence", and tenderness and hate (159). He is unable to relieve his daughter's hopelessness, and to him "[the] clear statement of her misery was an accusation", so much so that his "[g]uilt and impotence rose in a bilious duet. What could he do for her—ever? What give her? What say to her? What could a burned-out black man say to the hunched back of his eleven-year-old daughter?" (159). His answer is a misguided attempt for closeness that becomes rape. Morrison captures the gruelling mixture that consumes Cholly. Even after his violation, the twofold forces remain his prominent features as his "hatred would not let him pick her up" even though his "tenderness forced him to cover her" (161). In the end, Cholly's lacking restraint dominates him. Even so, his act is not recounted in moderating language that absolves him of the heinous transgression. Shortly after his crime, he dies in a workhouse. Moreover, the silence of Pecola's "stunned throat", "the tightness of her vagina", the hurt of Cholly's "gigantic thrust", her "shocked body" and eventual unconsciousness attest to an attempt to represent Pecola's perspective (160–161) – to limn her hurt through unflinching imagery.

About the rape, Morrison writes that "[t]his most masculine act of aggression becomes feminized in my language, "passive," and, I think, more accurately repellent when deprived of the male "glamour of shame" rape is (or once was) routinely given" (212). The shame and remorse in Cholly are missing and their absence are amplified through a "feminized" and "passive" mode. Still, the lack of shame in him does not purport a total absence of shame as his shame is projected onto Pecola. As Claudia laments in the novel's closing section, "[a]ll of our waste which we dumped on her and which she absorbed" and Cholly's transgression are difficult since Pecola assumes the feelings his act invites but that he lacks (203). Moreover,

she sustains the responsive inclination of the child who adopts her parent's wrongs and attributes them to herself.

The feminized language neither appeases the gravity of Cholly's rape nor ascribes it to a readiness of binary oppositions of good and evil, masculine and feminine. Rather, it treats the emotions that predispose his act as complex, supposing no easy perpetrator to abhor or behaviour to predict. Notwithstanding Morrison's commentary, the language in her fiction is what predominantly evokes the supple dynamic between Cholly's acts and how they are recounted. Similar to how he is not only fixed to his reprehensible acts, Pauline is not simply the stereotypical sympathetic and abused wife. In her way, she is responsible for Pecola's suffering too. Her emotional detachment from her daughter is even alluded to in the immediate aftermath of Cholly's rape, "[s]o when the child regained consciousness, she was lying on the kitchen floor under a heavy quilt, trying to connect the pain between her legs with the face of her mother looming over her" (161). The violation was not Pauline's doing, but her negligence and failed concern for Pecola makes her a culprit. To juxtapose Pecola's physical pain with the looming presence of her mother is, it seems, to bring to mind the association between the two since Pauline shares the responsibility for the lack of self-worth that leaves her daughter susceptible to harm. What Pauline instils in Pecola is a "fear of life", and while Pauline perseveres, Pecola seeks refuge in her eroded mind.

Thus, the portrayals of Pecola's parents highlight their inner struggles that avoid stereotypical and mutually exclusive renderings. Pauline does not embody the traits one typically associates with motherhood but gives way to a single-minded determination that fixes her care where she is paid, away from her home and family; she "kept this order, this beauty, for herself, a private world, and never introduced it into her storefront, or to her children" (126). In this, she veers towards a solipsistic candour and away from a role as nurturer and caregiver for her own family. Even so, Pauline's role as breadwinner, "when she worked twelve to sixteen hours a day to support" the Breedloves appears as her desire to preserve her family (127). Similarly, Cholly's uncompromising freedom leaves him closest to his own inclinations while he still harbours an affinity that seeks to alleviate Pecola's suffering. As such, Cholly and Pauline are capricious characters who repeatedly underline fluctuations of wants and inclinations.

The shifting sentiments in Pecola's parents are preconditioned by their untypical roles in the family. Initially, they both find a compassionate and loving companionship in marriage, but their contentment is fleeting. He turns away from her emotional dependence, is humiliated by his inability to provide them with a steady income, and turns to drink and violence to

appease his frustrations. Cholly's failed role as the stereotypical paternal figurehead is not offered as much attention as his backstory and trauma. However, his condemnation as an "old dog", a "snake" and "ratty nigger" is attributed to his economic struggles since his lack of income puts them "outdoors" (16). The pejorative labelling denounces Cholly in the stereotyped environment his freedom ostensibly frees him from. That is, Cholly's inclination as a dangerously free man does not release him from what is expected of him. He is free in his mind but, in spite of his freedom, he is not allowed to disclaim responsibility for his ego. In this, the rendering of Cholly is twofold as he is represented in terms of the emasculated man who is reprehensible due to his failed position as father in the family, and as the transcendent – and ultimately – transgressive man whose freedom equals latent possibility. This latter inference is in itself complex since his inclination to roam freely is presented in an ambiguous fashion. That is, Morrison bestows upon him a "godlike" freedom, yet proceeds to imply that the bereavement that leaves him in this state is too great of a loss for him to handle (158).

The pendulum between a masculine breadwinner on the one hand and a feminine and economically dependent individual on the other is transmuted into a more malleable understanding of gender roles as neither Cholly nor Pauline fulfil their role to distinction. Pauline is, for instance, not solely on the receiving end of Cholly's violent outbursts but also the one who initiates their fights. "There was direction and purpose in Mrs. Breedlove's movements that had nothing to do with the preparation of breakfast" and "[t]he tiny, undistinguished days that Mrs. Breedlove lived were identified, grouped, and classed by these quarrels" (38–39). Her violence grows out of despair but the familiarity of their quarrels relieves her from the "tiresomeness of poverty" and offers her the "zest" and "reasonableness of life" available to her (39). Pauline's role as a pious breadwinner provides her with the agency to adopt the active role of a physical violator. Her plea with Jesus to help her "strike the bastard [Cholly] down from his pea-knuckle of pride" posits her means as premised by a male authority (40). That is, her lacking role as an emotional caretaker of their family is substituted by her role as the Lord's caretaker so that she is justified in her violence. Because of this, the source for Pauline to incite their fights is that she deems herself as "an upright and Christian woman, burdened with a no-count man, whom God wanted her to punish" (40). In this, Cholly's shortcomings provide Pauline with a purpose that is invested in her by Jesus. Moreover, Pauline's intent strikes and the divine authority from which it comes is inseparable from her role as righteous woman. She is the responsible wage earner but also a martyr; she is active in the church and does not carouse or smoke but is also a vengeful figure. Thus, Pauline is not exempt from her social context and her role is complicated by the socially accepted

mode of expression her religiousness instils in her. Even as this portrays her as the strong and virtuous character, as opposed to Cholly's drunken weakness, their violence and reliance in each other are reciprocal. Pauline "needed Cholly's sins desperately (…) No less did Cholly need her. She was one of the few things abhorrent to him that he could touch and therefore hurt" (40). Pauline's position as provider emphasises Cholly's failure to fill this capacity and, despite his "orneriness", he is depicted as the more reactive and passive in their relation (40).

Morrison offers a play on Cholly and Pauline's roles as fixed in patriarchy. They are both to some extent conditioned by a cultural context but are portrayed as more refined in their relations to gendered roles than their cultural environment suggests. As such, the dynamic between the pair presents an inconsistency their otherwise routinized lives lack, but even so, the "violent breaks in routine that were themselves routine" offer little relief (39). Cholly remains alone in his drunken freedom, and Pauline's absence inflicts harm on Pecola albeit not primarily by means of physical violence. In this, Pauline and Cholly's violations of Pecola are more conventional as she knocks her daughter down by neglect. However, this too is nuanced as for instance when Pauline "with the back of her hand knocked [Pecola] to the floor" for having spilt berry cobbler on the white family's floor (107). Pauline calls it "my floor", abuses Pecola verbally, and will not admit to the "little pink-and-yellow girl" who the black and ragged child is (107). Rather, she sends Pecola out the door, consoles the white child, affectionately calls her "baby" and tells her "[d]on't worry none" (107). The physical violence Pauline inflicts on Pecola weighs on the victimized girl but the moment of violence in which she denies the identity of her daughter flags a different and perhaps more profound assault. Mrs. Breedlove has fallen victim to racial prejudice and poverty as well as her assigned othering as an "ideal servant", a role that leads her to disown her daughter (126).

In this, Pauline adopts the comfort of the white home and child as she disapproves her own home and children. Her role as the ideal servant is thus a surrogate for her unavailing effort to be the ideal mistress of her own house. Moreover, she figuratively adopts the white child as the girl, to Pauline, signifies the white family's way of life. Mark Ledbetter suggests that Pauline's desperation, like that of other victims, comes from the "discovery that choosing another life is not an option for" her (1996, 29). This plays into two ironies that concern Pauline, the one, that she dismisses her family while she values the white child. The other, that what she wishes for is that which she cannot have. Pauline shifts her efforts to the white family as her hope to be part of their world is defining for her character. Ledbetter's inference is worth noting also because Pauline acquiesces the notion that what pertains to her life is unfavourable in comparison to her employers' lives. In this, her characterization is lucid since

she shows reverence for the rich and white rather than the poor and black. Even so, Pauline's beliefs and her depiction do not coalesce altogether. Her character underscores the space between the gendered stereotypes of male and female and therein subverts the assumption of binary opposites. For instance, Pauline's physical and emotional absence alludes to a generalization of the absentee black male who leaves his family in search of fulfilment elsewhere. Pauline's absence indicates a similar lacking presence of a parent since her absence is the one that proves to be problematic in comparison to Cholly who harms with his physical presence. She causes hurt as she swaps recipients of her affection, and her absence informs both a feminine and a masculine mode. Her emotional neglect pertains to the former while her physical distance from and violence against Pecola suggests the latter.

The depictions of Pauline and Cholly Breedlove situate them across dichotomies regarding race, gender and class. The Breedloves' portrayals are clearer in relation to race and class since their thematic proximity to the Dick and Jane primer reiterates their expulsion from society due to their blackness and poverty. Even so, to highlight Pauline and Cholly Breedlove's gendered roles counterbalances some of their despondence. On the one hand, the subversion of gendered norms in Pauline and Cholly attests to their agency as it is the only one among the three referred dichotomies that they are able to do something about. Their portrayals do not veer from limning them as nuanced and this steers some accountability for Pecola's destruction away from the powerlessness Cholly and Pauline represent. They are marked by despair and inadequacies but these do not exhaustively illustrate their wrongs. Rather, Pecola's parents are characters that illustrate the difficult circumstances of her downfall. Circumstances that are linked with the gaze that condemns them all, and difficult because Pauline and Cholly present more than the condition of these. In short, their characterisations avoids the route of demonizing the characters who are complicit in the destruction of Pecola's identity. In this, Morrison appears to succeed in her desire not to "dehumanize the characters who thrashed Pecola and contributed to her collapse" (Morrison 1999, xii).

Neither Pecola nor the other characters in the novel exemplify the norms of the Dick and Jane primer. Rather, Pecola is assigned to the margins within a community of marginalized characters. She is presented as different to both the majority culture and the microcosm she ostensibly is part of. Her deterioration into insanity sets her apart from everyone yet her difference is not simply attributed to her eventual condition. Nor is it fully demonstrated by the events that precede her derangement but Pecola's debilitation is also

inextricable from the imagery that pertains to her destruction. That is, the language sporadically creates friction regarding the events it recounts.

The Bluest Eye was written during the middle to the late 1960s, a time of social upheaval in the lives of black people. The novel uncovers such secrets that were sustained in and from the black community. Secrets that conduct how the thrashing of a little girl transpires and that the forces that precede her deterioration are traceable to more than majority culture's ascendancy. In the afterword to *The Bluest Eye*, Morrison notes that the opening phrase of the first sentence that succeeds the Dick and Jane Primer: "*Quiet as it's kept*" ushers the reader to the story's particularity (4). In her words, the phrase elicits "the public disclosure of a private confidence" (208). Morrison proceeds to suggest that the phrasing evokes a secret that is both held and withheld by those who are privy to its content. In a lucid sense this is the novel's undertaking: to expose what some knew but that "one would rather not know anything about" (209).

The second sentence reveals the secret: "*Pecola was having her father's baby*" but notwithstanding the immediacy in which the novel makes clear this misdeed, the opening raises a paradoxical articulation. The phrase introduces the story about the rape of, and subsequent mental breakdown of, a child but the wish to account for the fact that "*there were no marigolds in the fall of 1941*" veils, however briefly, the story of Pecola's undoing. Claudia's italicized introduction analogises the barren earth where marigolds wouldn't grow to Pecola's miscarriage. She enunciates the former and backgrounds the latter as she laments that Frieda and she were "*so deeply concerned* […] *with the health and safe delivery of Pecola's baby we could think of nothing but our own magic*" (4). Their act of planting seeds is double. It is a reaction to what they perceive as the mystical volition of the land so they administer their own magic in hope of betterment for Pecola. Additionally, their act is a futile attempt to appease their friend's hurt. It is a surrogate for intervention not out of indifference but even so, an act in the stead of any other. In the end, their planting of seeds offers them, not her, solace. Claudia's opening narration appears to be recounted through the voice of her child persona who thought "*it was because Pecola was having her father's baby that the marigolds did not grow*" (4). The incident of marigolds that do not grow in the autumn implies that something is awry. That the "fall" harbours a fall beyond the presumed order of things, and so the childlike assumption of a connection between the earth and Pecola is comprehensible.

At the end of her short introduction, Claudia notes that "[t]*here is really nothing more to say—except why. But since why is difficult to handle, one must take refuge in* how" (5). This presents a caveat for the novel where the focus is "*to handle*" rather than answer "*why*",

to describe the repeated violations of a young, black girl rather than explain it. Linda Dittmar infers that this, in addition to the introduction's turn from addressing the personal "*I*" to the impersonal "*one*", diverts responsibility. Furthermore, She suggests that a "pleasure in voicing and the desire for its products, more than meaning, that takes over" (2007, 73). Dittmar's inference is not univocal as she also notes that Morrison's writing elicits a "message of resilience and regeneration" (2007, 83). Dittmar's argument points to a shift of balance that is apposite in more instances. The introduction makes sense as a prelude to the story as it invites curiosity through a mix of apprehension, attraction and disgust. Claudia's introduction compresses this push-and-pull-sentiment into the passage. On the one hand it offers a reasoning that is discerned through magic as Claudia concedes that "*no green was going to spring from our seeds*", and on the other Claudia's acknowledgement of the prosaic actuality; "*Once* [they] *knew*, [their] *guilt was relieved only by fights and mutual accusations about who was to blame*" (5). In brief, her initial view as a child enables magic and whatever it may cultivate but this belief has mellowed in the older Claudia who no longer harbours the same reliance in magic. In this, the excerpts present a hesitant look on the novel's events. Similarly to the preceding primer, it too subverts exhaustiveness in any one direction. Neither the aforementioned foregrounding of marigolds nor the sisters' accusations of blame underline a clear vision of what the novel purports. The passage acknowledges their collective shortcomings while it also steers clear of a blank absolution for the culprit. Thus, the passage offers not simply to attribute blame but also to champion regeneration.

This shift between acknowledgment and accusations does not endorse ambivalence for the sake of ornamentation. Rather, the child's outlook proposes a reasoning in order to contend with what is too difficult to address. Here, the child persona assigns the information about the aftermath of an illicit sexual act something different than the retrospective adult does directly after. While the child struggles to fathom the events due to her age and inexperience, the adult provides a look that aligns more with the presumably adult reader. Both pose endeavours to fathom horrible events, but the view of the child opens up one that is more distanced from these transgressions. In this, the child's analogy between a disruption of nature and Pecola's outcome is a less conventional apprehension than the one the adult Claudia provides.

Claudia's introduction assumes *not* to address the "why" of Pecola's shattering but even so, her younger persona seeks to make sense of its reasons by way of magic. She draws a connection between the destabilized state of the earth and Pecola, and herein supplies the adult view with a distinct understanding. In short, the young Claudia attempts to resolve why

but this proves to be too large of an endeavour for her as well as for the older narrator. The younger Claudia's view is closer to the outside world's disinterested look for Pecola. The novel situates Claudia as the one who attempts to fathom the harm that strikes Pecola. Initially, her concern is aimed at the flowers' stunted growth and this decentred focus and its accompanying ambivalence are partially symptomatic for the novel as a whole. Even so, the passage presents a double starting point with a clearer focus than the more multi-layered orchestration in the subsequent parts of the novel.

Inasmuch as Claudia's introduction has a clear evocation, it is the response of the two sisters who, instead of their victim friend, apply their voices. Like Pecola, they too are in a vulnerable position of conceivable victimhood due to their age and gender. However, unlike her, they live on and are able to reflect on the events through the prisms of both childhood and adulthood. In this, Claudia's introduction breaks a silence and puts Pecola's destruction into words. It opens up the historically trivialized narrative her destruction represents and transfers its contents to a wider constituency. Their narration responds to the outsiders' view on the destruction of a black girl and implicates it. The implication of "*Quiet as it's kept*" is a hushed incident but also an indication that the secret it harbours is of r concern to more than what is conceded if the story had remained untold. The shift to and from the child's attempt to fathom the unspeakable thing underlines the efficacy of storytelling. The evasiveness Dittmar reads in Claudia's exposition is apprehensible but the later underscoring of the communal responsibility offers a counterweight to the former ambivalence.

At the novel's close Claudia affirms the collective role of the community and underlines their wrongs. Interestingly, her lamentation echoes Soaphead Church's paradoxical letter to God where he displays a modicum of self-awareness. As the community's "Reader, Adviser, and Interpreter of Dreams" Church is the one Pecola seeks for counsel but rather than to offer his help, he tricks her into killing his landlady's dog, thus sending her further into insanity (163). As a molester of little girls, a charlatan and one who loathes blackness Church is painted in striking colours. Even so, the chapter ends with his letter to God in which he evinces his conflicting character. John N. Duvall proposes that the dawning of Soaphead Church's self-consciousness coincides with Pecola's wish for blue eyes (2000, 33). He posits that Church experiences Pecola's wish for blue eyes as revelatory. Church's self-professed life as a witness to "human stupidity without sharing it or being compromised by it" (163) implies his notion of not being implicated but, as Duvall notes, his meeting with Pecola lets him recognize his participating role (2000, 33). Church thus reads as a conflicted character who on the one hand molests children but on the other, he aims a strong critique at God for

permitting the hurt of Pecola and girls like her. His aforementioned kinship to Claudia reveals itself as they arrive at similar views on the conduct of their respective communities.

> We in this colony took as our own the most dramatic, and the most obvious, of our white masters' characteristics, which were, of course, their worst. In retaining the identity of our race, we held fast to those characteristics most gratifying to sustain and least troublesome to maintain. Consequently we were not royal but snobbish, not aristocratic but class-conscious; we believed authority was cruelty to our inferiors, and education was being at school. We mistook violence for passion, indolence for leisure, and thought recklessness was freedom (175)

Claudia reprises a similar view when she describes a communal "we" in relation to Pecola:

> And fantasy it was, for we were not strong, only aggressive; we were not free, merely licensed; we were not compassionate, we were polite; not good, but well behaved. We courted death in order to call ourselves brave, and hid like thieves from life. We substituted good grammar for intellect; we switched habits to simulate maturity; we rearranged lies and called it truth, seeing in the new pattern of an old idea the Revelation and the Word (203–4)

Soaphead Church's letter promulgates that even the most lucid character holds more to him than what is apparent at first. The part of his portrayal that is found in the excerpt belies the notion of a barefaced antagonist, and his critique of God and the white characteristics he otherwise adheres to establishes the opposing sides in his character. Moreover, Church's sympathetic notes are missing prior to his writing and only coincide with the act that becomes his letter. In this respect his portrayal foregrounds the centrality of writing and reading. His self-awareness co-occurs with his writing and, in part, affirms the novel's adhesion to the insufficiency of any single-minded portrayal. As Morrison's novel allows for few assertive answers so is the case with Church. His portrayal joins the novel's leaps in narrative viewpoints and modalities, and as an example of conflicting forces. In the above excerpt he compiles dualities along a racialized axis where the white master is depicted unfavourably and as a source of the worst of traits. Church's short tirade is notable in its contradicting tendencies since he partakes in a long lineage of people who refute their black heritage. In his opposing dispositions, he eclipses many of the assumptions one would typically hold towards his behaviour since he appears to favour the "master's characteristics" before he suddenly criticizes them (175).

Similarly to Church's assertions, Claudia enunciates wrongs but unlike him, she carries out the assumption that implicates her and the community. That is, Church's sympathetic sentiments are singular as he only briefly veers away from his inconsiderate ways, while Claudia highlights their scapegoating and thus sets up her final affirmations. A few paragraphs after her echo of Church and at the book's close, she ends on a note that lacks both answers and redemptive aspirations:

> And now when I see her searching the garbage—for what? The thing we assassinated? I talk about how I did not plant the seeds too deeply, how it was the fault of the earth, the land, of our town. I even think now that the land of the entire country was hostile to marigolds that year. 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. We are wrong, of course, but it doesn't matter. It's too late. At least on the edge of my town, among the garbage and the sunflowers of my town, it's much, much, much too late. (204)

Claudia's coda mirrors her opening as she again veers between the accountability of people and the inscrutable earth that here kills "of its own volition". The stylised language evokes a sense of a wish for Pecola'ss betterment that unfortunately never comes to pass. The earthy and floral imagery fails to mitigate Claudia's sense of despair and rather ends up miring her redemptive qualities. For all the ambivalence the novel highlights, the hurt, wrongs and betrayals Pecola is subjected to take centre stage at the novel's end. Joined with the assumption of the earth's intention is the passivity that is implied in the people's acquiescence. The latter is followed by a recognition of their mistake, but this is immediately negated as Claudia asserts that "it doesn't matter. It's too late". Ostensibly, the ending's sense of defeatism is notable since much of the novel plays on a more hesitant approach.

Seen in reference to Morrison's aforementioned aspiration to evoke a sense of openness akin to jazz music, a sense that "there is more – that you can't have it all right now" (Morrison and McKay 1983, 429), there is at least one suggestion that elaborates on her dynamic between the lucid and the evasive modes of expression. For Morrison's novels invite a sense of openness. Linda Dittmar suggests that beyond the aesthetic experimentation, in which Morrison seeks to conjoin her work with a tradition of black forms of expression, there are also "questions of address as a personal and political, not just literary, practice" (2007, 76). That is, she presents the possibility that this evasion of closure relates to her assumed white and educated readership and that it consequently is about more than a uniquely black mode of aesthetic. Dittmar elaborates on this suggestion by relating it to Raymond Hedin's

work, *The Structuring of Emotion in Black American Fiction*. Here Hedin proposes a historical tendency among black writers to mute their anger and rather focus their efforts on structure (1982, 35). In commenting on *The Bluest Eye*, he proposes that "The coherence of Morrison's vision and the structure which parses out its logic into repeating patterns offer the reader no solace, no refuge from Morrison's anger" (1982, 50). Hedin draws attention to the primer sections' relentless events of violation as well as to how the novel is contained within its four primary seasonal chapters. Dittmar challenges Hedin's indication about inescapability in Morrison's narrative. She infers that Morrison's "style and predictive backward loopings with which she mediates the plot work quite deliberately to provide solace" (2007, 76). One can conclude that Morrison provides some solace through her mediations. Her words champion the possibility to utter and imagine. Not in order to mellow the pessimism of *The Bluest Eye* but as a means to repossess some agency through language.

On occasion Morrison's writing is ambiguous but within her tendency to promote opacity, there are instances that both play with and subvert questions of absolutes. This lack of transparency prevails in Morrison's work and two examples of metaphors that posit opacity are the seasonal cyclicality on which the novel's structure rests, and the multi-voiced narrative as examined in the previous chapter. As mentioned earlier, each of the four main chapters in *The Bluest Eye* is named after a season. Unconnected from the novel's events, the seasons' recurring course could impart a reassuring predictability. However, because the seasonal chapters encompass episodes of violation, the predictable traits in nature's going set an unrelenting annual design for the novel. Even spring and summer's typical promises of renewal and growth are not straightforward in Morrison's rendition. *Spring* presents both Cholly and Soaphead Church's violations of Pecola while the brief, final chapter, *Summer*, avoids reassurances too as it is here that Pecola hallucinates a friend after her mental breakdown has come to fruition.

Part of the ambiguity of the seasons appears as the chapters' introductions temper their own prospect for healing. The four chapter openings render particular sections that lack a clear connection to the narration that precedes it as well as to the subsequent narrative. Both the *Spring* and the *Summer* chapters come directly after episodes of death. Before spring, Pecola is wrongly accused of killing Geraldine's cat and before summer, Soaphead Church tricks her into killing his neighbour's dog. The two episodes depict events that directly contribute to Pecola's deterioration and eventual descent into madness. Moreover, the discord between death and destruction and the subsequent chapter openings' are arresting. The opening of *Spring* reads: "The first twigs are thin, green, and supple. They bend into a

complete circle, but will not break" (95). Like Claudia's introduction in the beginning of the novel, the opening alludes to organic imagery. In turn, the opening of *Summer* presents the unnerving resemblance between the thought of eating a strawberry and violent sexual intercourse: "I have only to break into the tightness of a strawberry, and I see summer—its dust and lowering skies" (185). Here, its expression of sexual violation subsides. Nevertheless, like both Claudia's introduction in the book's opening part, and the opening of *Spring*, *Summer* too proceeds to leave a more agitated impression than its initial organic imagery. The language in the three introductions all present imagery that affirms growth, renewal and life: marigolds "*in the fall*" (3), newly sprung twigs in their "green, and supple" unfolding (95), and a firm strawberry (185) all evoke similar connotations.

Beyond their similarities of organic imagery, the three openings proceed to unveil stories of violence. In Claudia's introduction the reader learns of the fruition of a sexual transgression since "*Pecola was having her father's baby*" (3). In spring, the distinguishing detail of the "green, and supple" twigs is not their lush bearings but rather that Claudia dreads their pliable property as instruments of punishment. And summer, "a season of storms", preludes the result of Pecola's trauma. Accordingly, *The Bluest Eye* avoids a singularly positive reference to its nature imagery and to spring and summer. Instead, the ceaseless feature in *Spring* and *Summer*'s cyclical design protrudes more than the seasons' affinity with growth and renewal.

To highlight some of the ambivalent expression of *The Bluest Eye*, the opening to the section that precedes the *Spring* chapter serves well. Here Morrison introduces a kind of middle class women, "brown girls", of which Geraldine, whose defining feature is her disapproval of black racial identity, is one (79). The depiction of Geraldine is twofold. She is simultaneously indicated in terms of adorned traits and through a subtler distaste for the way in which she meticulously nurtures her racial prejudice. The following excerpt is the first indication of the "They" that is particularized in her. They are women whose aim above all is to rid themselves of any indication of their racial heritage: to learn "how to get rid of the funkiness" (81). Although the subsequent narration makes its disapproval of Geraldine clearer, the opening embellishes the speech and gestures of her peers:

> They come from Mobile. Aiken. From Newport News. From Marietta. From Meridian. And the sound of these places in their mouths make you think of love. When you ask them where they are from, they tilt their heads and say "Mobile" and you think you've been kissed. They say "Aiken" and you see a white butterfly glance off a fence with a torn wing. They say "Nagadoches" and you want to say "Yes, I will." You don't know what these

> towns are like, but you love what happens to the air when they open their lips and let the names ease out (79)

The passage does not foreshadow the eventual condemnation of Geraldine. Rather, it presents the sensations the women inspire. It foregrounds the notion that "in their mouths" or, rather, through their voices even incoherent utterings of where these women come from can inspire an agreeing "Yes, I will". Beneath the point of their outwardly endearing traits lies an indication of a beautified language that seduces. The seductive aspect of it emerges as the sound in her mouth that "make[s] you think of love" later proves to be deceptive. In spite of the favouring depiction of her at first, Geraldine is not "as sweet as butter-cake" (80). The novel denounces Geraldine particularly in her endeavour to explain and distinguish to her son the difference "between colored people and niggers" (85). Disconnected from the realisation of her racism, the section above foregrounds the sways and caresses of her and her kind women. However, if it is viewed in relation to Geraldine's later portrayal it presents as the one side of a correspondence that purports something distinct from the other. Accordingly, the potency of language to depict and colour understanding is exemplified in Geraldine's portrayal since she is first typified by the surface attributes of her voice and appearance, and then through the way in which she teaches her son internalized racism. The challenge the latter poses to the former functions similarly to other instances in the novel that read as hesitant. That is, what initially appeals, such as the foregrounding of organic imagery, is promptly followed by episodes of violence and transgression that leaves ample room for an ambiguous final impression.

A passage that distils part of the above referenced claim about black music's regenerative attributes is ascribed to the friends of Cholly's caring aunt, Jimmy, who briefly depicts a multivocal orchestration of struggle: "Their voices blended into a threnody of nostalgia about pain. Rising and falling, complex in harmony, uncertain in pitch, but constant in the recitative of pain" (135). Aunt Jimmy's representation of experience in musical terms shares a similarity with Cholly's "[d]angerously free" disposition, as his story too is associated with music; his life is comprehensible "only in the head of a [jazz] musician" (157). Morrison's aim is clear; what remains less evident is how not only music's expressive but also its explicative features translate to the page. Moreover, how these function opposite the violence and hurt her stories recount is an apt, if not new inquiry. In its entirety, the section about these women is a story where sinuous repetition of certain words and plush vocabulary capture their lives, and purport that they in old age "were, in fact and at last, free"

(137). This assertion is dubious, for like that of Cholly's "godlike" freedom, their freedom too is assumed to come from bereavement, hurt and loss. It proves a challenge to ascertain that their struggles in turn foster their freedom. As the assumed correlation between their hurt and freedom is questionable, the language in its close relation with trauma and death appears as a remedy instead. The centrality of Morrison's language suggests that this may be the case as the passages that suppose their freedom beguile in greater measure than they retrieve and explain. In this, the novel turns from the claim in Claudia's introduction, for more than the novel supposes to explain it presents and represents. It puts naming and saying at the centre of its undertaking and lets the words in inextricable interaction with musicality belie the social despondence in Morrison's depictions. In a passage Claudia listens to the blues song of her mother at which point the act of renaming and reshaping surfaces:

> If my mother was in a singing mood, it wasn't so bad. She would sing about hard times, bad times, and somebody-done-gone-and-left-me times. But her voice was so sweet and her singing-eyes so melty I found myself longing for those hard times, yearning to be grown without "a thin di-i-ime to my name." I looked forward to the delicious time when "my man" would leave me, when I would "hate to see that evening sun go down . . . " 'cause then I would know "my man has left this town." Misery colored by the greens and blues in my mother's voice took all of the grief out of the words and left me with a conviction that pain was not only endurable, it was sweet (23–24)

The alleviating trait of song and its colours retrieve a conviction of hurt, but moreover one of regeneration. As such, the lesson of enduring abandonment is hardly the matter here. Rather, the tradition of the griot or the blues singer where singing proves an act of resistance is the focus. For in renaming through music or, in the case of *The Bluest Eye,* through a fecundity of words, sequences and passages, lies a historically informed defiance to oppression. Mrs. MacTeer's voice expresses a mode that is informed by the custom of singing the blues and therein, as Dittmar suggests, reclaim one's experience (2007, 82). What appears simultaneously arresting and exciting in Morrison's prose is how her work invites some degree of openness. For more than *The Bluest Eye* posits opacity, it foregrounds conflicted sentiments that swerve to and from in incompleteness. The above sections illustrate instances of such dynamic and these conflicts function beyond their own formulation since the beautiful and horrid continuously contradict or complement each other. In this, tension emerges as an impetus that articulates but never assumes to exhaust its subject matter.

Morrison's equivocations are arguably manifold, and *Sula* too brings to the front a play with doubles. Like *The Bluest Eye, Sula* too presents some clear dualities, especially in

the dynamic between Sula and Nel. Even so, the intimation they leave is so disparate and occasionally contradictory that it renders an absurd endpoint in the sense that its final impression lacks meaning and, thus, underscores absence. Absences like the eventual disappearance of the Bottom, Sula's decade long absence of travel and the void after Chicken Little's death that left "nothing but the baking sun and something newly missing" (61). Already at the outset *Sula* confounds most attempts to think of it in strict terms of either/or. Here The Bottom is spatially situated at the top, and the "joke" about "how [the Bottom people] came to be where they were" (4) elucidates this notion in when "the good white farmer" asserts to his credulous slave that the unyielding hilly terrain is the fertile "bottom of heaven" (5). At first the farmer's deceiving ways and their implications seem apparent, but soon thereafter this notion is questioned as the white hunters "wondered in private if maybe the white farmer was right after all. Maybe it was the bottom of heaven" (6). Even later, the white people change their minds, move to the Bottom and rename it as suburbs.

The context that surrounds the "joke" alludes to several binary opposition such as black/white, good/evil and free/enslaved. However, the white characters occupy only a miniscule part in the novel. Thus, *Sula* highlights the black and white opposition yet promptly proceeds to turn away from white characters for the larger part of the book. Moreover, notions of antithetical marks of black and white are repeatedly highlighted, as in the instance when the Bottom people's condemnation of Sula's potential sexual relations with white men are elaborated on: "They insisted that all unions between white men and black women be rape; for a black woman to be willing was literally unthinkable. In that way, they regarded integration with precisely the same venom that white people did" (113). Here, the novel posits moral reservations, but these are in turn subsumed and undermined through the paradox that the black women maintained their "straightened hair" and pulled their noses to incorporate white standards of beauty (173). In other words, underscoring of the blurred distinction of opposites, if there even can be one, are prevalent in *Sula*.

An example of such contrasting in the novel is found in the relationship and differences between Nel and Sula. In a crude sense, the central opposition that relates to the two women circles good and evil as exemplified in them. Nel as an incarnation of good, since she illustrates monogamy and innocence, and Sula as evil through her promiscuity and experience. Moreover, Nel accommodates to life's expectations, particularly to the prospect of marriage, while Sula resists sacrifice and accommodation altogether. She presents as decidedly free to make herself, and her "idle imagination" contrasts Nel's enthusiasms that "were calmed by [her] mother until she drove her daughter's imagination underground" (18).

In some instances, as when Sula passively observes her mother burning to death, the novel preps a particular understanding of her actions. Thus, a facile way to read Sula's actions is by equating her characterisation with some moral depravity or, as the Bottom people do, with evil. Through their collective formulation, Sula is the witch, but this surmise is not free of its own complications. With binary thinking as the baseline, Sula's passive observation of her mother's death paints her unfavourably and akin to how she is viewed in the Bottom. Compared to Nel she is the evil but this contention is murkier than it appears. In plain sense, Nel Wright is depicted as the impeccably correct friend, daughter, wife and mother. In the event of Chicken Little's drowning however, Nel's ostensibly flawless character faulters. Her reaction after she and Sula understand what has transpired is to exclaim that "[s]omebody saw" (61). Sula's "interested" gaze upon her mother burning to death colours her negatively. Nel's concern with the risk of being caught triumphs her concern for young Chicken Little's life, and leaves a similar unfavourable impression of her. Moreover, years after both Sula's and Chicken Little's deaths, and upon a visit to see Sula's grandmother, Eva Peace, at a nursing home, Nel is confronted with the episode by the old lady. Old Eva inquires, "[y]ou watched, didn't you?" (168), and the reader is soon made privy to Nel's admission of her "good feeling […] when Chicken's hands slipped" (170). Rita A. Bergenholtz' observation that "[t]he "Wright" approach to morality judges an action evil only if it is witnessed by others" suggests what the novel reiterates: that the differences between the two girls, and eventually women, are fewer than they appear to be at first (1999, 8).

Reading *Sula* as a tale of moral imperatives, however, is to miss what the novel intimates. Rather than to purport that either Nel or Sula are good or bad, the novel limns the complexity of identity, particularly regarding, self and other. The juxtaposition of characters in *Sula* appears most clearly through Nel and Sula's bond. Occasionally their narrative pairing is paradoxical since the two are depicted in terms of their distinction and individuality, sometimes simultaneously. After an incident where young Sula protects Nel from the harassment of some white boys, the two come close together: "In the safe harbor of each other's company they could afford to abandon the ways of other people and concentrate on their own perceptions of things" (55). This articulation is eye-catching since they appear to align in opposition to other people's ways and be "[j]oined in mutual admiration." (55).

The range in which Nel and Sula are portrayed in the course of the novel veers from underscoring their distinction as opposites, to that of a position where their immaterial merging has come to fruition and they have "difficulty distinguishing one's thoughts from the other's" (83). Their conscious aspirations differ. In an episode Nel reflects on something Sula

once proclaimed: that "doing anything forever and ever was hell" (108). On her part, Nel retorts the claim of her friend out loud: "Sula was wrong. Hell ain't things lasting forever. Hell is change" (108). What is worth noting is that Sula eventually experiences the possessiveness commonly associated with heterosexual romantic love. This newfound discovery of possession eventually drives the man she wants, Ajax, away. Moreover, Sula loses her freedom as she experiences that she, like Nel, is not immune from the need for permanence.

Moreover, Nel and Sula's convictions about change are less disparate than their statements let on since both women experience the years of separation as a loss. Sula has by this point slept with Nel's husband, Jude but even, after Sula makes a cuckquean of Nel, their bond sustains. In Sula's case, a clear acknowledgement of this bond eludes her. Only retrospectively, in her deathbed, does she experience the profundity of their union as her final inclination is to share her experience of death with Nel: "Well, I'll be damned," she thought, "it didn't even hurt. Wait'll I tell Nel." (149). At the novel's close, Nel articulates the epiphany Sula's absence begets. To her, the death of her friend signifies the most absolute and unwelcome change.

> Suddenly Nel stopped. Her eye twitched and burned a little.
> "Sula?" she whispered, gazing at the tops of trees.
> "Sula?" […]
> "All that time, all that time, I thought I was missing Jude." And the loss pressed down on her chest and came up into her throat. "We was girls together," she said as though explaining something. "O Lord, Sula," she cried, "girl, girl, girlgirlgirl."
> It was a fine cry—loud and long—but it had no bottom
> and it had no top, just circles and circles of sorrow. (174)

At the closing of the novel, Nel's bottomless cry for her absent friend cements the centrality of their relation. When facing death, the two women experience the stature of their shared connection as both show up as the central presence in the mind of the other. Sula experiences this while Nel also realises their unity's profundity. Consequently, her belated realisation that Sula occupies this place in her, amplifies the loss Sula's death brings about.

Philip Page suggests that the ambivalent relationship between Nel and Sula is experimentation with "alternative conceptions of selfhood and friendship" and that their closeness questions "the traditional notion of the unitary self" (1999, 190). I concur, for in their shifting sentiments, Nel and Sula presents a whole that escapes clear characterisation. The traits of their relationship appear as deliberate play on concepts that unravel a typically

Western fashion of perceiving unity and separateness. Even so, the experimentation in which Nel and Sula's relationship is presented specifies an inference of permanence. For finally, both women experience a pain of absence and a want for presence in another. It is complex to infer that Sula epitomises an iconoclast and rebel, and Nel the ardent adherer to societies' norms since neither are limned exclusively along an axis of binary thinking. In relation to opacity Nel's and Sula's identities are not cornered in any mutual essence. That is, their confluence does not happen and they are ultimately rendered with opacities both for each other and themselves. In other words, they do not exhaustively understand themselves or the other in spite of their bond.

In their repeatedly shifting sentiments towards each other, Nel and Sula's union and the eventual breakdown of their relation linger on the dynamic between presence and absence. Eventually though, the novel ends with Sula's absence. Like the ending of *The Bluest Eye* where Claudia laments that it is "much, much too late" (204), Nel's "circles and circles of sorrow" assumes an ending for *Sula* free of closure. Nel's ceaseless cry effects both her sustained yet opaque bond with Sula and the grief that is left in the wake of her death. Her personal loss and endless grieving mirror the cultural loss the novel presents in its numerous deaths and in the Bottom's disintegration. In the vein of this, Philip Novak makes an apt observation that "Convention has it that grieving must be sacrificed in the interest of getting on with living", and that this proves an inadequate model of grieving due to the vulnerable position African American culture still holds (1999, 191). It is indeed easier to ascertain what *Sula* opposes than to assume what it champions. However, the lack of closure in Nel's cry begets mourning, not as resignation but as the prospect for cultivating memory and therein vitalise and revitalise cultural heritage through a ceaseless motion of articulations.

Conclusion

This thesis has examined how *The Bluest Eye* and *Sula* champion plurality of expression. It opens on the assumption that the two novels encode opacity and ends on an assertion that they advocate propagation of culture. The novels' subject matter of violations, hurt and death both entice and anger. An aim has been to elucidate how the multiple voices in *The Blues Eye* and the act of witnessing in *Sula* function. In *The Bluest Eye* I contend that the many voices are integral for the narrative's fruition. For one, the character at the novel's core, Pecola Breedlove, is a young survivor of rape who can neither assert her voice nor fend for herself. Another reason is that the novel criticizes hegemonic values that affect everyone and therefore implicates everyone. Consequently, the novel requires the telling of multiple narrators including that of an omniscient narrator. Crucially, the plurality of narrators are not just present to oppose the effects of majority culture. They are also present in order to promote understanding for the characters who are simultaneously abusers and abused. Abused by the hegemonic culture that excludes them and abusers out of the powerlessness and despondence this culture spawns in them. The omniscient narrator mediates the convictions of the other narrators but neither are enough on their own. The omniscient narrator is above the events it recounts and the other narrators partake in the same events. In brief, neither narrative standpoint are alone enough to address the cultural forces that prerequisite the destruction of Pecola.

For Morrison's second novel, *Sula*, I infer how the novel foregrounds absences that are left in the wake of violence, destruction and death. The act of witnessing in *Sula* foregrounds transitory events of time and life passing. The repeated instances of observed disappearance and death attest to *Sula* as a testimony of African American culture that has passed. The narrative spans the period from the end of the First World War and ends in 1965, around the beginning of the civil rights movement in the US. The act of witnessing in *Sula* leaves an elegiac impression due to its closeness to events, both historical and fictional, of war, racial violence and poverty. Moreover, it ends on an unending and sorrowful cry that directs attention to loss and the exposed position African American culture holds.

Subsequently, I claim how certain dualities and imagery display some of the novels' complexities in terms of what appears clear but seldom is. The two novels intersect on the intimation that reiteration harbours potential for regeneration and both present an intent to sustain the stories they recount. Finally, I contend that they present unflinching narratives of

repossession of stories and resistance against univocal expressions and the powers that assert the existence of an easily discernible world.

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