

Black Madness: Insanity, Resistance and Re-Vision  
In African American Literature

By

James Sterling King

A dissertation submitted to the Graduate Faculty in English in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, The City University of New York

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This manuscript has been read and accepted for the  
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## Abstract

Black Madness: Insanity, Resistance and Re-Vision

In African American Literature

by

James Sterling King

Adviser: Professor Jon-Christian Suggs

This text and the scholarly project it represents will offer commentary on and analysis of characters found within African American texts who either go insane or manifest dysfunctional/asocial behavior within a larger communal structure. The project will attempt to label certain outcomes and actions carried out by these troubled characters as representing a form of resistance or tropic reaction to the overarching societal pressures that have contributed to the individual's instability. Within the texts I am considering, madness reflects an inability, social or biological, to cope with the pressures of modern life, and, a consequential capitulation to them. A substantial *re-vision* of this phenomenon of madness is necessary that will allow latitude in interpretation that may make possible re-readings of characters and circumstances as experienced by them within a specifically African American literary context.

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Black Madness: Insanity, Resistance and Re-Vision  
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## Prologue

Anxiety is indeed the price of modern life. On the eve of a second war with Iraq, people who never before would be seen together were marching together in major cities throughout the world to protest this war. People all over this country and the world are now wondering, "What is this president Bush thinking? What does he see as the positive outcome of such a horrible event?" Our anxieties and paranoia are redoubled as we gaze into the glazed eyes of a president, promising a "roadmap to peace," without ever having traveled to the region before being *selected* in Florida. More and more people all over this country are being forced to question something we sometimes take for granted: the sanity of our country's leadership. John LeCarre's January fifteenth, 2003, headline in the *London Times* proclaimed: "America has gone mad," as war-tested ties and international solidarity were stretched to the limit by maxims like "peace through war," and "bring democracy through violence to unseat tyranny." More and more, much of the American population and the world abroad is confused by aggressive American military and economic actions allegedly grounded in a quest for peace and democracy, while the broad ranging unilateral policies they execute threaten to domino throughout the world, creating a *Pax Americana*, a new world order.

The effects of this anxiety have been a boon to the pharmaceutical agencies. Prescription drugs like Zoloft, Prozac, and Valium are being advertised and prescribed in larger and larger numbers. Threats of domestic terrorism, growing casualty and wounded counts in a war our president punctuated with threats like "bring it on," and boasts like, "mission accomplished," link with economic sluggishness contributing to levels of anxiety over usually fundamental anchors of American modernity: job and retirement

security, healthy trade between friendly nations, and a self image painted large of an American people representing the most well defended and safe citizenry in the world. Trapped to an extent within our own borders, some people who feel helpless turn to drugs to mitigate or obfuscate their anxiety or depression. This should begin to sound familiar to those in touch with the conditions of the impoverished and oppressed, but it is an arresting shock to the majority of the American people, our smack on the behind, welcoming the only superpower into the 21<sup>st</sup> century, through the horrific events of September 11<sup>th</sup>. It is perhaps more than coincidence that the name of the military action against Iraq was “Shock and Awe,” considering the “shock and awe” experienced by an American public who had been domestically unmolested, now confronted with war on our soil for the first time in over sixty years. I am worried about what historians will have to say about our historical moment: will it be remembered for its technological advances and quest for universal rights or for an aggressive self-absorbed spirit that lacked conscience or depth?

Recent viewing options on satellite television among premium channels such as Cinemax and HBO2 included selections like the classic *The Caine Mutiny* and *Loose Cannons*, respectively. These are just two relatively random examples of movies that have at their core insane characters or those who are perceived to be so. The number of films, television shows, and other forms of media that discuss or in some way use insanity as part of their message or as the threat are legion. Part of the difficulty I encounter in writing this dissertation is that *everything* seems to be connected to it. Like a big magnet, insanity seems to draw elements out of all of us, all aspects of our interaction and the involvement in the making and destroying of cultures. “That should make

everything easier,” I once thought, “I’ll have no shortage of material with which to work.” But the opposite is true. There is too much stuff here; I can’t process it all; it’s making me crazy!! Yes, making *me* crazy.

Take any measurable period of time, sit down in front of the television, turn on the radio, do neither and read, or, simply reflect on this; how many times have you heard or experienced some reference to insanity? From the now cliché, “Girl, you so crazy,” to the hook in almost any love song you may have heard, somebody is “going out of their head,” or “about to lose their mind,” or “Crazy for You.” We are faced with almost minute-to-minute crises of thought; how seriously should we take *this* reference to insanity, as opposed to *that* one? When the spokesperson in the used car commercial says, “so hurry on down, these prices are insane!!” Should we go, because such good deals can’t last for long, or avoid the place to keep from meeting a lunatic running amok, writing on windshields with a shoe polish applicator? In our current world, “madness” has become so over determined and accessible that it is now more of a cliché than “love.”

On a recent fourth of July, I had a series of conversations with a Puerto Rican gentleman who had been diagnosed as suffering from schizophrenic episodes following his discharge from the military and, as a result, had to be medicated to forestall these lapses in his ability to safely navigate his own life experiences. At the core of his lament was Damage of the very sort Daryl Michael Scott<sup>1</sup> insists should be acknowledged and

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1 See Daryl Michael Scott’s, *Contempt and Pity: Social Policy and the Image of the*

*Damage Black Psyche, 1880-1996*. Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina P, 1997.

then left behind, because of the handicapped and enabling image such people leave in the minds of many in the rest of the world.

Mental health is big business. *Time*, *Newsweek*, *USA Today*, and many of the news and information broadcasts available on hundreds of channels, report on some new connection between a common stressor and physiological or psychological damage that can ensue when that stress does not abate. The problems of the few are suddenly becoming the problems of the many, changing interest group lobbying priorities and ranking as related to the disbursement of capitol for research, both social and clinical, intended to uncover causal relationships and forward viable solutions to improve life. I am always asking myself, what were people like the gentleman I mentioned above, and millions over this republic's four hundred years of growth supposed to do with the little that was being done to address not only stress and trauma induced mental illness, but the causes, before the 9/11 fire bell that brought America in to this current age? Have minority youth, victims of environmental racism in urban settings, suffered from high rates of asthma, or debilitating illness due to exposure to lead just since the reports came out, or since America woke up? The current attention to mental health within the common popular culture smacks of a hypocrisy that is centuries old. Thankfully, it is within the power of literature to unseat and expose our injustices toward one another.

Just as I was beginning to think that I was wrong in my own assumptions about the impact of racial constructs and racism on people of color, I discover that J. Brooks Bouson investigates themes integral to my interest in madness in his discussion of Toni Morrison's body of work to date, *Quiet as its Kept: Shame Trauma and Race in the Novels of Toni Morrison*. Bouson states that "Morrison has viewed part of her cultural

and literary task as a writer to bear witness to the plight of black Americans” (2). Morrison, echoing the title of Bouson’s work, is quoted within it: ““Quiet as it’s kept much of our business, our existence here, has been grotesque. It really has...my people are being devoured”” (Qtd. in Bouson 2). Morrison’s writing has as a central concern “how to survive whole in a world where we are all of us, in some measure, victims of something” and “in no position to do a thing about it” (Qtd. in Bouson 2). This absence of control, an anxiety spawned by uncertainty, is compounded by what a Baptist preacher once called “the biological accident of race,” leaving generation after generation vulnerable if not affected by mental illness, like those who have been at the focus of Holocaust studies: “Trauma affects not only the individual but also, as studies of those victimized by the Holocaust have shown, victim-survivor populations, and the effects of trauma can be transmitted intergenerationally” (Qtd in Bouson 8). This trope of collective trauma is released at the start of *The Bluest Eye*, as natural force, one capable of killing things, ranging in size from flower seeds to infants: “It was a long time before my sister and I admitted to ourselves that no green was going to spring from our seeds...we had dropped our seeds in our own little plot of black dirt just as Pecola’s father had dropped his seeds in his own plot of black dirt. Our innocence and faith were no more productive than his lust and despair” (9). The powerful image of an unyielding earth sets a somber tone for this novel about little girls and Shirley temple cups. From the novel’s beginning storybook-turned-madhouse epilogues to the “healing double language“ of the italicized ending, all of the characters contribute to the collective catastrophe that seems to miss no one; even characters not seen are implicated—what has Mr. Villanucci been doing to his daughter to convince her that she should pull her panties

down when she gets a beating—he's never seen, yet his sickness foreshadows that of Pecola's father. Pecola's schizophrenic jaunts about Lorain, showing off her blue eyes at the end of the novel, like Rosemary Villanucci's cryptic offering of herself point to the sickness, identifying it, even warning us of what is to come, but also reminding us of the very common existence of such unspeakable things.

In *The Bluest Eye*, Toni Morrison offered the literary world a glimpse at a microcosm of American culture through a narrative lens fixed on Lorain, Ohio, near the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The main characters of the novel, Pecola, Cholly and Pauline Breedlove, Frieda and Claudia MacTeer, are used by Morrison to fill an information gap that exists between what can only loosely be called the black and white worlds. The novel informs the reader of the sameness and marked difference of experience had by these characters at the hands of a larger, white world. Sameness in the sense that each character experienced more or less the same type of anxiety as any other member of their society; anxiety over growth and development, personal and sexual identity, and the means of connection and participation within a larger community. Marked difference in the obstacles faced by these characters as related to class, race and gender, specifically the degree of control afforded or accessible to them within their community. The difference in experience generated by race, gender and class and the methods by which the characters process and act on that difference will be at the core of this project.

The difference involved in the experience and expectations for life as a black person, as opposed to a white person in America is undeniable. Even when issues of class are dealt with, for instance, eliminating the differential in earnings possible for black versus white workers, access to clubs and organizations, are still difficult, because of the

unyielding nature of tradition, and the hesitancy of humans to change patterns of behavior, especially those that yield them benefit or pleasure. The story of America is fraught with chapters concerning the egregious lapses in moral constancy suffered by the dominant white culture for the sake of material gain; influence, wealth and land have been sought over and over to secure power and control for the future generations of those possessing that control and power. To be certain, this pattern has not been one experienced exclusively by people of color, as women and any other non-white-male group member can confirm. While prejudice is somewhat universal within the American context, one must admit that the unique and long lived relationship between black and white Americans has marked them for continued struggle and slow reconciliation; aware of this, I am forced to chime in with James Baldwin when he puzzles, “its taken my mother’s time, my father’s time, my sister’s time, my brother’s time...how long would you have me wait for your so-called progress?” (*The Price of the Ticket*)

Morrison’s masterful use of the trope of madness continues, now existing on the very air; palpable yet unseen, madness is masked as *outdoors* and all that such a state of affairs truly meant, “outdoors, we knew was the real terror of life. The threat of being outdoors surfaced frequently in those days. Every possibility of excess was curtailed with it...knowing that there was such a thing as outdoors bred in us a hunger for property, for ownership” (17-18). And finally focusing on Cholly, “Cholly Breedlove, then a renting black, having put his family out of doors, had catapulted himself beyond the reaches of human consideration. He had joined the animals; was, indeed an old dog, a snake, a ratty nigger” (19). These epithets are being directed at a man who had lost too much control, whose behavior had become unintelligible to the rest of the community. Cholly had done

something the people could not understand, so he was dismissed from their thoughts and consideration; he ceased to exist.

The literature of madness gives voice to those for whom speech is evasive. It provides frames, episodes and dialogue that create conditions and provide fictional states of madness with windows of realistic investigation. Madness is the tropic vehicle upon which much of black literature depends, needing it in the way that good must be counterpoised against evil in order for each to have meaning. Throughout the history of our literature, madness has been ever-present, representing at times the outermost limit beyond which a character's thoughts and behavior cannot proceed, and at others madness becomes the haven capable of shielding, either in the form of veiling true intentions or protecting the possessor from an even more deadly and menacing reality within a white world. In whatever way one is inclined to interpret madness, it is essential to the understanding and facilitating of a passage from a modern to a post modern moment within the sub genre of black American literature. Black madness links the knowable and the unknowable—allows the savvy reader to understand exactly what Du Bois is referring to when he talks of ‘two unreconciled strivings,’ what Ellison refers to when he discusses “the lower frequencies,” what Morrison means when she relates stories that were “not to be pass[ed] on.”

In an interview with Paul Gilroy, Morrison discusses the role of history and blackness within a western context in the shaping of the post-modern present:

Its not simply that human life originated in Africa in anthropological terms, but that modern life begins with slavery...from a woman's point of view, in terms of confronting the problems of where the

world is now, black women had to deal with “post-modern” problems in the nineteenth century and earlier. These things had to be addressed by black people a long time ago. Certain kinds of dissolution, the loss of and the need to reconstruct certain kinds of stability. Certain kinds of madness, deliberately going mad in order, as one of the characters says in the book [*Beloved*] “[...] not to lose your mind”. These strategies for survival made the truly modern person. They’re a response to predatory western phenomena. You can call it an ideology and an economy, what it is pathology. Slavery broke the world in half; it broke it in every way. It broke Europe. It made them into something else, it made them slave masters, it made them crazy. You can’t do that for hundreds of years and it not take a toll. They had to dehumanize, not just the slaves but themselves, they have had to reconstruct everything in order to make that system appear true. It made everything in World War I possible, it made World War I necessary. Racism is the word that we use to encompass all this. The idea of scientific racism suggests some serious pathology. (Qtd. in Plasa 37)

With the stage now set, I invite you to explore the reckonings and resistance within this re-visioning of Black Madness in African American literature.

“All Things are Ready if Our Minds Be So”

*William Shakespeare, Henry the Fifth*

## Chapter One

### Black Madness: Insanity, Resistance and Re-Vision

#### In African American Literature

This text and the scholarly project it represents will offer commentary on and analysis of characters found within African American texts who either go insane or manifest dysfunctional/asocial behavior within a larger communal structure. The project will attempt to label certain outcomes and actions carried out by these troubled characters as representing a form of resistance or tropic reaction to the overarching societal pressures that have contributed to the individual's instability. This emphasis on resistance becomes problematic when I give my interpretation of madness within modern western society. Within the texts I am considering, madness reflects an inability, social or biological, to cope with the pressures of modern life, and, a consequential capitulation to them: "Nearly always insanity involves a shift from human to animal, from culture to nature, from thought to emotion, from maturity to the infantile and the archaic" (Sass 4). These characters, no longer desiring to struggle against entrenched racism, experienced through engagement with a dominant culture that seems to invoke insanity, capitulate in the struggle for saneness in the face of capture, confinement, rape, torture, deprivation, and desolation over the past three centuries. Within the novels, short stories, plays, and other media that will be explored, the subjects of my project effectively cease to register as important or essential to any personal or communal dialogue with the outside world. Resistance, then, is an odd fit within the descriptors usually at the ready to define or concretize the insane individual's behavior. Resistance rings hollow through the halls of mental institutions, sanitariums and remote attic and basement bedrooms where the mad

are sequestered and cared for. To assert resistance as being an element within the fictional characteristics of insane people ought then to be lacking the evidence to make its claims valid—if these characteristics were resistant, how would we/they know it? If insanity does hold as one of its components resistance, shouldn't it necessarily be identifiable as such? When compared to the tropic characteristics of death, such as martyrdom, for instance, madness can be seen as *more* of a terminus in texts than death itself. Substantial *re-vision* of this phenomenon of madness is necessary that allows latitude in interpretation that may make possible re-readings of characters and circumstances as experienced by them within a specifically African American literary context.

To assert the primacy of resistance among the characteristics of madness or insanity within the characters and texts this project holds at its center, it becomes necessary to step back and begin with a larger view, one which captures the dominant society's image of madness and freezes it momentarily so we may discern elements and members within, eventually arriving at an interpretation of it which will yield answers to queries that persist about essential relationships between the white world and the representations of black madness suffered by some members within it.

Interpretations of madness within literature, myriad even as early as the classic Greek period, BCE, have never ceased to evolve and reflect the way that society as an organic entity develops and can be measured. Early, as prophetic muse, then becoming a harbinger of that deemed unholy, and finally existing as a convergence of biological, environmental and cultural forces whose locus is the self, the changing face of madness in literature reflects facets of life at times occluded, while at others, offering a lens to an

interpretation of human experience disturbingly precise and clear.

Blackness and madness converge originally in presumptions of inhumanity. Insinuations of a bestial existence at best carried with them the shadow of behavior beyond reason and sensibility, at worst all the unnerving qualities of our most dire nightmares, disqualifying darker peoples from inclusion and full participation within western European social systems. Since the first reports of the fifteenth century historian Hayklut of ape-like women, covered in hair, running about the on *dark* continent with beings whose “heads resided beneath their shoulders,” the history of racialized thought has borne the weight of diminished conception and conscience necessary to facilitate the psychic and physical oppression concomitant with chattel slavery, as needed for the purposes of Imperialism.

Draeptomania, or “rascalism,” named by Samuel Cartwright in the 18<sup>th</sup> century as a psychological disorder suffered by slaves who chose to run away or be otherwise unresponsive, signaled the codification of theories of madness in America at the intersection of race. From that historical moment, to interpretations of Stanley Elkin’s “Samboism,” to the “Damage Theory” problematized by scholars like Daryl Michael Scott, interpretations of madness, fused with black diasporic legacy, have attempted to properly locate the physical and psychic trauma within accurate assessments of the African American condition, not only through sociological terms and methods, but also through interpretation and invention, exercised (or exorcized) through literature. Beginning in the mid-nineteenth century, with Lydia Marie Child’s short story, “The Quadroon”, a vast selection of African American literature is available as evidence of the past, present and residual effects of racialized treatment of blacks at the hands of the

dominant society.

To date, the ways in which insanity has been addressed by the critique of African American literature in the academic community have been limited. Scholars have noted that characters who suffer through events that lead to their madness can be seen as representing silent or sometimes incoherent evidence of the inhumane treatment heaped upon the “other” within an American context, their “damage” being the primary argument.

In abolitionist texts, the specter of madness has figured within the overarching religious/political mandate meant to end the “peculiar institution” of slavery. *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, by Harriet Beecher Stowe, is replete in melodramatic literary examples of madness as a result of punishment for slavery; the images of the fugitive slave Eliza frantically hopping from one float of ice to another towards freedom, child clutched to her bosom, or the psychic retribution suffered by Simon Legree for his years of cruelty, represent the extent to which writers, white or black, have been able to envision insanity or madness tropically within our shared history. Postbellum African American writers, too, witnessing the gradual return to “the good ol’ days” as evidenced in the emergence of the apologist literature of the “New South,” had reason to assert the need for a positive change in the treatment of people of color as well. When issues such as simple human decency and equal treatment under the law could not be sought with success either in the streets or in the courts, writers had to create scenarios of social commentary that would place in the foreground the need for a change in the perception and experience of life for people of color in America; this is in part why I believe that realism and naturalism remained literary styles most used by African American writers well into the middle of

the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

In spite of the emergence of Modernism and High Modernism in the literature of the dominant culture, African American writers were loathe to discard these earlier literary formulations, as they still afforded them the most poignant and incisive ways to influence and persuade readers and thinkers of the basic humanity of people of color, most importantly because the record of the African American experience in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century is riddled with historical examples of that humanity being dismissed or rejected in bloody, terrible ways. The treatments of madness within black texts through the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, then, represent a single-minded purpose: try to improve the perception of blackness in America; show our humanity, our strengths and weakness; indicate to a dominant culture readership that we are essentially the same as they, and as such deserving of fair treatment. Toward that end, characters who went insane in texts through this period, Like Simon Legree, in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, and Mr. Ellis in *The Garies and Their Friends*, were usually positioned to shock and shame the culture of readers who could indirectly be held to blame; the “pillow talk” surrounding the anti-slavery texts of the antebellum and civil war period that coalesced into the burgeoning abolitionist movement, continued right through to the progressive era and into the next century, as politically conscious men and women shifted their focus, both as writers and readers to the evils of sharecropping and “Jim-Crowism” and the color line that threatened to hinder the movement of the country forward, free of racialized obstacles. At this nadir of African American life, the didacticism of realistic representations of American life for people of color, paired with the sometimes disturbing intervention of Naturalism’s “fate” in character’s lives, made anything other than madness interpreted and experienced as a

tragic terminus for the character an unlikely event; for individuals like Thoreau and Emerson, speculation on nature and walks in the woods were possible, but blacks still needed these areas for practical cover and protection from the rope and faggot.

The tradition of black texts engaging Realism and Naturalism would change inevitably. However, such change by no means took place overnight, or without some failed attempts. Take, for example, the case of Richard Wright's *Native Son*. In spite of all Bigger's internal struggle, it remains a naturalist text, as does Chester Himes' *Lonely Crusade* nearly a decade later. These novels, despite their authors' attempts at psychological realism and inclusion of modernist elements, fail in this regard, still entangled in the determinism of their Naturalist underpinnings. Their efforts fail because the material is still too "hot," too sensitive and raw to successfully undergo the type of distanced, anti-didactic subject investigation Modernism requires.

In the same way that the history of African American literature exposes a "lag" between the appearance of the various "modernisms" and their widespread adoption by black writers, according to African Americanist Jon-Christian Suggs, so too this literature is delayed in its usage of psychologically based analyses that would make more detailed and finessed character investigations possible. One of the few examples this type of psychological approach to characterization from post-reconstruction black fiction can be found in the last few lines of the fifth chapter of Charles W. Chesnutt's *The Marrow of Tradition* (1901). The end of this chapter, entitled "a Journey Southward," offers the reader a glimpse of two protean ideas within African American literature, a psychologically three-dimensional character, in the militant Josh Green, and, an interpretive opportunity concerning the protagonist, Dr. Miller. Dr. Miller, who has

earlier in the chapter been forced to re-seat himself in the “colored car” of the train, now sits and ruminates over his condition as an educated black man amongst the “common folk” who ordinarily populate these segregated cars. From inside the coach we are given a glimpse of Josh Green, clinging to the outside of the car. Josh is the militant black character who intends to murder the white man who has murdered his father and precipitated his mother’s lapse into insanity. Josh’s vendetta against Captain Mc Bane situates him as a less-than-acceptable character within the narrative, as is evidenced by his riding *outside the car*. His appearance, as it coincides with Dr. Miller’s internal monologue, suggests that Chesnutt positions Josh in this way, hanging on to the outside of the train car, to represent the angry, vengeful, and, consequently inappropriate thoughts held by blacks, even those as right-minded and law-abiding as Dr. Miller. Indeed, Josh can be seen as the potential for “insane” retribution that exists within Dr. Miller. During this period, as Chesnutt would find out himself, any depictions of blacks that were other than conciliatory and non-confrontational, or whites as anything but complacent and accepting toward their own culture, in spite of its flaws, would be criticized. This interpretation of the end of “A Journey Southward,” while mild according to contemporary standards and sensibilities would have further alienated Chesnutt’s readers because of the hostility it suggested lay right outside America’s door, or, even more menacingly, in the minds of the servants and laborers they might pass on the street each day, or have in their own homes. This interpretation is important, as it represents an early example of the initiative struggle for a just place within an American paradigm being waged *within the mind*, foreshadowing the struggle described by W.E.B. Du Bois’ “Double Consciousness”. William Dean Howells branded *Marrow* as a “bitter, bitter,

novel”, especially in its depiction and treatment of white characters. In resisting the *fin de siècle* trend in literature about life in the south, namely that of the “New South,” which attempted to re-impose the power paradigm of the antebellum period through positive depictions of the happy subordination of docile Negroes to benevolent whites, Chesnut’s fiction joins the ranks of those writers whose intention it was to de-rail this revival of “the good ol’ days”, or, as Chesnut’s Uncle Julius might have said: “de pen am uh monstrus’ powerful sword.”

Despite societal limitations on content and import that would hinder black authors well into the middle of the twentieth century, they continued to try to get their messages of struggle, both psychological and physical, through to communities of readers who slowly began to accept their efforts as genuine and, eventually, canonical. This acceptance had the effect of broadening the body of writers who would depict madness amidst black life and experience in America, and also emboldened them to portray such lives as something other than “tragic,” and one-dimensional. Consequently, the didactic message of early characters that suffer from madness modulates through the post-war period to include characters that show symptoms of neuroses and anxiety-driven behavior, within texts that allow for varied interpretations of causal relationships and contexts for their respective conditions. In a sense, while it remained an unfortunate reality that maddened characters still needed to be a part of black texts, at least the ways that these characters could be depicted and potentially understood multiplied and deepened.

In the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, concern over the loss of capital as reflected in

the numbers of slaves who had run away reached a point of critical mass. The fugitive slave act of 1850, which demanded the return of any slave who had run from his/her owner back to the same, and imposed punitive fines and other penalties on those who harbored and aided slaves in their escape, confirmed the chattel status of blacks who simply wanted to be free from bondage in the United States. So deeply entrenched in the national consciousness and imbedded in the Constitution were the ideas of white superiority and black inferiority that this further extension of the rule of law to the return of “property” to its rightful owner was accomplished despite the opposition from black and white abolitionists. With this latest sanction of subordinate status under the law for blacks came further injustices, which included the creation of psychological terminology to explain the condition which would cause the slave to behave in such an “irrational,” “diseased” manner. Dr. Samuel Cartwright, discusses the malady that came to be known as

...Draeptomania, or the disease causing Negroes to run away. It is unknown to our medical authorities, although its diagnostic symptom, the absconding from service, is well known to our planters and overseers...In noticing a disease not heretofore classed among the long list of maladies that man is subject to, it was necessary to have a new term to express it. The cause in the most of cases, that induces the Negro to run away from service, is as much a disease of the mind as any other species of mental alienation, and much more curable as a general rule. With the advantages of proper medical advice, strictly followed, this troublesome practice that many Negroes have of running away, can be almost entirely prevented,

although the slaves be located on the borders of a free state, within a stone's throw of the abolitionists. (*Africans in America: Diseases and Peculiarities of the Negro Race*)

The codification of the chattel state through law is thus reinforced by the introduction of scientific language to address one of the major “quirks” within the “peculiar institution.” “Draeptomania,” and other “maladies” will be explored within this project, as part of the investigation of treatments of madness within the black texts I have selected. Toni Morrison’s novel, *Beloved*, with its historical positioning in proximity of the 1850 Fugitive Slave Act will serve as a key text to my interpretation of the effects of dominant culture assessment and interpretation of Black behavior within the confines of slavery and beyond.

The “Madness of the Cross” as discussed by Christian theologians provides another thematic lens through which to view the characters whom I feel exist under the rubrics of black madness. Within the Christian tradition, the fact that non-believers, who deemed them insane to worship a “dead” deity, excoriated many early Christians only fueled the passion of those early believers who chose to see their exclusion from the general public as a blessing rather than a curse. Here began the belief that inasmuch as the non-Christian population saw Christians as irrational and insensible because of their beliefs, Christians should revel in their “misunderstood” state, as it made them akin to their spiritual guide, Christ who also chose to be seen as “mad” in an effort to complete his earthly tasks and pave the way for believers to follow him. Thus, within the context of the black American religious experience, from slavery to the present, the sufferings of the faithful are viewed as necessary, as they connect believers with Him in whom they

believe. The “Madness of the Cross” merges Christ with the suffering of his people—black people, who, as believers, use their faith and patience as bulwarks against racialized treatment within a national context. This religious madness becomes a form of resistance for believers, as it places them, their experiences and suffering on a higher, spiritual plane, above their oppressors; Christ-like, lifted and beyond the toils and snares of this world.

Through his ability to stand up to the physical and psychic challenges of the slave breaker Covey, Frederick Douglass inscribes his experience among those of other American heroes and that also of Christ, who “himself chose to pass in their eyes for a madman, thus experiencing, in his incarnation, all the sufferings of human misfortune. Madness thus became the ultimate form, the final degree of God in man’s image, before the fulfillment and deliverance of the Cross” (Foucault 80). Douglass invents himself within the telling of his experiences with Covey in chapter 10 of his *Narrative*; his “fight” with Covey represents a culmination of his “sufferings of human misfortune,” while his eventual success signals a rebirth for a slave who, like Christ, would submit to the cross, which for Douglass meant allowing the base, carnal man to languish, before exchanging him for an autonomous one, free of the strictures of chattel slavery made evident in physical submission: “Mr. Covey succeeded in breaking me. I was broken in body, soul, and spirit. My natural elasticity was crushed, my intellect languished...the dark night of slavery closed in upon me, and behold a man transformed into a brute” (Qtd. In Gates, ed. 423)! By experiencing this fall into a bestial form, Douglass experiences the madness necessary to overcome the insanity represented in the physical and psychic acts of subjugating one people to another that was the American system of

slavery. Through his submission to the cathartic effects of *insensibility*, he is able to *conceive himself* outside of the confines of slavery; his madness, manifest in his willingness to defend himself against the will of an overseer, becomes a type of resistance that imbues him with the needed tools with which to re-construct himself as a free man; in effect, through the crucible of madness Douglass accesses the power of self-creation:

This battle with Covey was a turning point in my career as a slave. It rekindled the few expiring embers of freedom, and revived within me a sense of my own manhood. It recalled the departed self-confidence, and inspired me again with a determination to be free. The gratification afforded by the triumph was a full compensation for what might follow, even death itself. He can only understand the deep satisfaction that I experienced, who has himself repelled by force the bloody arm of slavery. I felt as I never felt before. It was a glorious *resurrection*, from the tomb of slavery, to the heaven of freedom. (427-428) [Italics mine.]

Douglass's experience, was of a type shared by the millions of enslaved blacks in America. His experience, like those before and after him, was first and foremost *maddening*—an ongoing state of existence or circumstances capable of driving one insane. Secondly, Douglass shares a desire to mitigate and process his condition through the lens of Christianity, a practice which ensures dissonance between the voluntary act of submission to Christian doctrine in the hope of securing a life of peace in the hereafter, and the reality of involuntary servitude and subjugation such a promise is purported to require. The knowledge that suffering, within a religious context constitutes a form of

madness, and that resistance to the temptation of the secular world is a form of suffering, provides that those who resist participate in a form of madness, specifically the “Madness of the Cross,” making them joint heirs with Christ in eternity. Douglass takes this idea one step further in that, through his endurance of loss and cruelty, he can claim a position of “joint-heir” with Christ—through the catharsis of resurrection or re-birth. Douglass’ account of his confinement and brutalization is offered as testament to his having “gone through,” as older members of black churches I have visited or attended have said, when discussing a period of profound tribulation. Douglass’ signifies on the dominant representations of Christianity of his time, by presenting himself within his narrative as an individual who essentially created himself: first, out of an ambiguous set of details about his own creation and ancestry, and secondly through the transformative power of violence when used to retaliate against his captors, overcoming them by means of their own devices and language.

Within this type of madness also exists a cultural or political form of resistance, as discussed by James C. Scott,

Insofar as folk or popular culture is the property of a social class or strata whose social location generates distinctive experiences and values, we should expect those shared characteristics to appear in their ritual, dance, drama, dress, folktales, religious beliefs and so fourth. Max Weber was not the only social analyst to notice that the religious convictions of the “disprivledged” reflected an implicit protest against their worldly fate. (157)

Another way that I will approach madness as it touches the characters of the texts I have

selected concerns the deceptively simple task of reconciling dominant culture behavior with the ideologies that allegedly drive it. The cognitive dissonance that accompanies irreconcilable pairing between behavior and rationale represents the most common source of black madness that I will investigate. The fixation on a specific cognitive point, the attempt to make sense of insensible experiences, Du Bois's "Two warring ideals," represents the manifestation of this dissonance within the African American experience and, consequently, a subject of investigation within this project.

In addressing the dissonance created by the irreconcilable differences between word and deed as experienced within the American experience by people of color, Du Bois' concept of Double Consciousness will be explored as a means of understanding the cost that a "gift of second sight" actually exacts from those black characters who have it. In researching the roots of Du Bois' idea, my project will also touch upon the phenomenon of "doubling of personalities" that is at the core of Hegel's theory of madness, hoping to exploit the fertile ground of cross examination and influence that exists between these two interrelated postulates. Hegel's theory of madness will be explored in relation to double consciousness specifically because of the ironic manner in which the latter concept first appears in *The Souls of Black Folk*; Du Bois' language at the beginning of this text and the subsequent ways in which the concept is incorporated into later chapters and episodes foreshadow the ominous and insidious ways this *re-vision* plagues black characters—making some even go insane.

The madman as prophet represents another lens through which to interpret the behaviors of characters that succumb to madness within black texts. This treatment is by no means new, its roots going back to the classical period of western literature. Within

the uniquely doubled nature of the African American context I have chosen, *griot* and sage merge in blackness and speak truth to power beneath the veil of the signifying language of the insane.

Many texts within the western canon have suggested that the voice of reason within unreasonable circumstances belongs to him/her we would otherwise deem as insane. A major part of this project will be to investigate the uses of this trope within a black literary tradition. Characters like the nameless protagonist of *Invisible Man*, and the protagonist in Tananarive Due's *The Between* represent characters that are in transition, phenomenologically and psychically within their respective texts. This transitional condition offers perhaps the greatest opportunity for new work in terms of representations of insanity, specifically because of the connections that exist between this type of "transitional" context and schizophrenia. "Black madness," while not confined to any precise analysis of schizophreniform disorders or dementia praecox, will explore the unique parallels that are evident between this psychological disorder and African American characters who manifest symptoms of the disease that challenge some basic assumptions about the neurotic nature of American life, and the existence of behaviorist explanations for symptoms and effects found within individuals depicted as having the disease.

It is possible to discover new ways to interpret old problems. Over fifty years ago, Lawrence K. Frank began writing a collection of essays that would become the sociological text, *Society as the Patient* (1948). Embedded within this collection of essays is an analysis of the societal ills of that post-World War Two period in America. Frank states:

The term 'Society as Patient' is a good analogy for discussion, but we need something more than a clever phrase as a basis for reconsidering our social theory and revising our social objectives. The conception of culture and personality, emphasizing the patterned behavior of man toward his group and toward other individuals, offers some promise of help, for it indicates at once that our society is only one of numerous ways of patterning and organizing human life in response to the cultural demands and opportunities offered them. (4)

By positioning western society as simply *one* of many possible systems created in a desire to control and maintain certain ideologies and lifestyles, Frank gains the critical distance necessary to describe our western way of life in light of the other cultural/societal forces that held sway in former times and exist concurrently within our western world:

When we regard western European culture, which has emerged from an almost incredible background of conflict and confusion and mixture of peoples, and see that for centuries it has not been unified either in ideas and beliefs or in socially approved practices, we can begin to understand the etiology of the sickness of our society. (4)

Frank continues,

[O]ur culture has no unanimity of individual or social aims, no generally accepted sanctions, and no common patterns of ideas or conduct. All our basic ideas, conceptions, and beliefs have been in process of revision for the last three hundred years or more...the American scene,

moreover, has been successively invaded by representatives of widely different nationalities, who have accelerated the decay of the early American tradition that our changing industry has made inevitable...if we bear in mind this disintegration of culture, then our so-called social problems and the seeming perversity of individuals become intelligible...no one is happy, it is apparent; the successful are driven as relentlessly as the failures by their sense of guilt, their compulsions, and their frustrations. (4, 5)

From this vantage point, western European culture, at times seen as something of a monolith, is more appropriately revealed to be a pastiche, a product of centuries of disparate influences and sites of struggle. The conceptualization of western culture as one of many in a global schema that is constantly changing and re-inventing itself, fragmenting and recombining in new and varied ways, provides the theoretical space necessary to make feasible the notion of societal cycles of dysfunction.

The necessity of understanding this fragmentation as a characteristic of western society becomes evident as the next challenge in addressing the issue of society's culpability is approached: what about individual responsibility? My objective is to see how Frank's assertion that *society as the patient* can be understood in terms of collective and individual behaviors: "While we may speak figuratively of "society as the patient, it is obvious that psychiatry cannot *treat* society; there is no mysterious entity called "society" to be treated as some kind of super organism..." (151). Rather for Frank this treatment is possible for individuals, whose issues and concerns are made evident by the analysis of "institutionalized rituals," such as voting, contract, buying and selling,

litigation, courtship and marriage (Frank 152). If successful, an understanding of *collective action* will yield a view of the effects of life pressures on a western European model of existence, which can then be modified to represent specifically African American life, central to this project. *Individual action* when also critiqued can make more readily understandable the specific actions and reactions of individuals within the culture. Ironically, the fragmentation, which de-centers the concept of a monolithic western European culture, also makes it possible to recombine it in a new way that provides a broader scope of understanding. Frank chooses as subject the whole of American society, dismissing past notions of individual responsibility and guilt as being autonomously held and therefore primary in the construction of culture. The old notions of society as originating entity, of individuals as bearing the responsibility for society's weaknesses, when set aside in this way, make possible new strategies and methods for the critique of cultural problems:

Where does the cultural view help beyond providing another apt theory of social confusion, which is useful as a point of vantage from which the intellectual can contemplate, the vulgar scene? It transfers the forms of attention from the seemingly reluctant or perverse individual to the cultural patterns and societies. This revision of our thinking will modify the doctrine of individual responsibility and guilt that is not only an active factor in the growing criminality and insanity, but also a complete block to any understanding of the problem or any attempt at modification. If we accept the conception of society as the patient, absolve the individual from guilt, and regard these various social problems as

symptoms of progressive cultural change, we can at least relieve some of our anxiety since we then have a definite and possibly manageable problem. (6)

It is in the omission of details within Frank's approach that black madness can be found; words like "various social problems," would have been adequate to address racially motivated behavior in 1948. His concept of society as the patient has to look past the peculiar incidents and predispositions of individuals or even groups, forsaking these investigations in lieu of bigger challenges: the concretizing of solutions for society's psycho/social ills. I've decided to narrow my scope, namely towards recognizing overarching societal cycles of behavior in an attempt to discern the driving forces behind them as related to race. This complete, my description of those societal cycles will serve as backdrop to a primary discussion of insane characters within black literary texts. This is part of an effort to situate them within a new literary paradigm, black madness.

When white America gets a cold, black America gets pneumonia, or so the saying goes. The connections joining these two sometimes-disparate components of American society, differentiated by racial or ethnic characteristics for over three hundred years, have been a staple of sociological and literary consciousness since our country's inception. Concentric circles of anxiety and its influence, instead of decreasing in strength as they move farther away from a dominant center towards minority periphery, grow stronger and are capable of significant damage within the communities on the margins they contact. In an effort to contextualize the critique of American society and its dominant culture that will be central to my efforts to define and reify black madness, I

return to Frank's analysis from *Society as the Patient*, specifically his chapter entitled "The Cost of Competition." Within this chapter I find the most useful and applicable discussions of the forces that shape American ideology as concerns work, striving and competition. This explanation is not intended to displace a discussion of the literary treatments of madness, rather it is a necessary precursor to that writing as it sets the stage and tone for the viewing and analysis of the factors which, unchecked, contribute to the dysfunction of black characters represented within the varied literary frames of American life. A list of the more dominant themes I will discuss includes Madness as:

- A reasonable strategy for surviving an unreasonable situation.
- Representative of religious fervor unleashed; the expression of the "natural man" or prophet.
- Characters in transition between phases of existence or "journeying."
- A result of fixation on a point of focus, to the detriment of the fixated.
- Dreaming while awake, or alternatively, "soul sleeping."

The competitive nature of American life is the stuff of legend. Our tall tales about Paul Bunyan, Pecos Bill and John Henry are not-so-subtle examples of the way that competition has become coterminous with success in American life. Throughout the history of our country, competition has held a position of primacy in the American psyche, often receiving consideration before moral and ethical restraints can be employed. Exemplified in the great land grabs that helped to populate and create some of our western states, Manifest Destiny, and the expansion of the railroads, American imperialism within our own shores has often been much more concerned with "how" and "when" than with "why". By avoiding or minimizing the scrutiny of "why," a certain

slight of hand has been possible with regard to conscience and moral restraint, in favor of the acquisition of land, wealth and material resources through unbridled competition:

If we look realistically at the situation, it would appear that *Laissez Faire*, free enterprise and price competition made possible the rapid expansion of machines and natural resources, but that today the cost of continuing free competition under money prices is beginning to absorb an increasing share of the total national income and to engross our human resources. How much, in human terms, this costs in the aggregate, we cannot actually reckon...[S]o long as our society has no clear aims or purposes but to grant individuals opportunity for self-aggrandizement, there is no reasonable basis for deprecating racketeering, bankruptcy, arson, unnecessary advertising, and a growing bureaucratic government control. We not only allow but applaud and socially dignify those who ruthlessly waste and destroy our national resources, and balk our economic efficiency; hence, in fairness, we should not condemn the lesser fry who, with the same logic of calculated aggressiveness, try to “get theirs.” (Frank 30)

Frank continues his critique of competition, gradually narrowing his focus from that of the society at large back to the specific manifestations of this competitive ideology in the lives of the individual and his/her family. It is during this phase of his analysis that Frank engages a psychological apparatus, closely resembling that of psychologist Karen Horney, concerning the economic, social and psychological costs of this type of aggressive competition:

When a feeling of personal inadequacy or guilt or anxiety or hostility drives individuals, they develop such avidity for strain that it becomes indispensable. Only when that strain is removed by forced retirement, is necessitated by ill health or a sudden failure of a business, do we see the pressure under which he has been living...the competitive urge then becomes comprehensible as we see it in terms of obsessional preoccupation with personal inadequacy and anxiety that has been projected out into a society, organized primarily to meet the needs of such persons. Not all inadequate and anxious persons engage in competitive striving, and so we must recognize a further characteristic: hostility and aggressiveness, that find in the competitive scene a socially sanctioned area for its release. *The combination of obsessional thinking, anxiety over personal inadequacy, and hostility requiring an outlet provides the energy of a competitive society and indicated the etiology of the 'sickness' of a competitive society.* (34) (Emphasis added.)

What I find most important here is twofold: the identification of a sustained predisposition of disjunctive social/personal behavior within the American paradigm of free competition; that this predisposition through its sanction necessarily compounds the negative effects of the paradigm on those members of society who cannot efficiently compete:

To follow out the price we pay for this way of life into all the intricacies of social and personal life, the frustrations and wastage of temperaments and abilities that do not and cannot conform to this

competitive stereotype, the inevitable failure of the many who try to conform and fail, more often from the lack of aggressiveness rather than absence of ability—these are some of the inquiries that we should and probably will make as time goes on. (35)

This text, and its subject, Black Madness in literature represents one of the “inquiries” to which Frank alluded; namely the investigation of the effects of this competitive stereotype on those against whom it is acted out—the losers, the innocent, the defeated, the unsuccessful, the limited, the disfranchised, the poor, the underrepresented, the minority-- the black, as represented in African American Literature.

Within the details of life that are unique to western civilization in general, and North America more specifically, can be found the evidence necessary to support an argument for the existence of what Karen Horney has called “The Neurotic Personality of Our Time.” Horney’s work dovetails easily with that of Lawrence K. Frank, although Horney’s analysis is more closely dedicated to the explication and analysis of problems particular to the *individuals* within this competitive setting, who ironically pay the price of participation with neuroses and decreased quality of life. My investigation of the circumstances and conditions of these characters within African American literature must, as in the portion of this chapter dedicated to Lawrence K. Frank, dwell on the particulars of a much larger social group than that comprised by fictional black characters and texts, for the purposes of confirming the sources of the anxiety-driven behavior to which both Horney and Frank refer. Perhaps the most important initial observation made by Horney in her text, *The Neurotic Personality of Our Time*, is her assertion that it is not

simply one group within the American population that suffers with neuroses and the dysfunction they can invoke, but that life conditions are such that almost all individuals, regardless of position within the strata of American society, are faced with these issues:

My experiences in psychoanalytical practice have been confirmed by observations of persons outside the practice and of characters in current literature. If the recurring problems of neurotic persons are divested of the fantastic and abstruse character they often have, it cannot escape our attention that they differ only in quantity from the problems bothering the normal person in our culture...the fact that in general the majority of individuals in a culture have to face the same problems suggests the conclusion that these problems have been created by the specific life conditions existing in that culture. (33-34)

Where Frank looks at the society and relegates it to the status of patient based on the collective ills brought about by a system of competition that knows little or no ethical boundaries, Horney's analysis is focused on the individual who exists inside that society, and for whom neurotic manifestations are imminent as a reaction to the anxiety that competition creates. Horney's focus on culture and environment within her investigation of neuroses is essential to my project in that it shows the extensive rampant and insidious nature of anxiety within American life. In asserting that all Americans suffer with some form of anxiety, and are either capable in varying degrees of successfully navigating these within their daily lives, or actively engaged in the practice of suppressing their neuroses, Horney unwittingly confirms the foundation for Black Madness—her formulations suggest how American society can indirectly make Black Madness occur.

Within the expansive/aggressive description of American society that she presents, the specific elements of anxiety that cause black madness can be found. Unique to African American experience, as opposed to the American experience of anxiety-driven behavior that Horney sees as central to all American life, is the indeterminate nature of black/white interaction, or, the unpredictable nature of white reactions to blackness, an anxiety specific to black Americans.

America is boxed in a four-cornered room, one that is comprised of walls of hostility, anxiety, aggression and guilt. While not exclusive to American life, the aggression central to our country's conception and early years, not to mention the continuing use of violence and aggression as a means of acquiring land, influence and capital throughout its history, have proven ours to be a creation myth rife with bloodshed, injustice, retribution and confusion. This state of being is complicated by a permeating Judeo-Christian ideology that holds at its center God's grace and love for us, and our concomitant compulsion/desire to do "good works" in his name. The dissonance this dichotomy has created over time can be traced to the initial actions by which the country was constituted--the forceful usurpation of self-governance from the British, and the subsequent violent assertion of the primacy of white male patriarchal hegemony within the framework of that self-governance. Exploring the forces that have converged to create and encourage the always-already state of anxiety that is and has been the nexus of American life is essential to my study of black madness in African American literature.

It seems that the person who is likely to become neurotic is one who has experienced the culturally determined difficulties in an accentuated form, mostly through the medium of childhood experiences,

and who solved them only at great cost to his personality. We might call him a stepchild of our culture. (Horney 290)

With these words Karen Horney ends “Culture and Neuroses,” the last chapter of *The Neurotic Personality of our Time*. Her work, with its shift from psychoanalytic to behaviorist causalities, opened the door of investigation for my project. Her term, “Expansive/Aggressive,” although focused on the American personality in the period immediately following WWII, captured the essence of the context for fictional characters, situations, and events I will discuss. Horney’s “culturally determined difficulties” are, in the context of their subjectivity, racialized hatred, misogyny, poverty and dissonance as intermixed and visited on the characters found within the essays, fiction and novels of Frank J. Webb, Charles Chesnutt, James Weldon Johnson, Jean Toomer, W.E.B. Du Bois, Richard Wright, Ralph Ellison, Zora Neale Hurston, Chester Himes, James Baldwin and Toni Morrison. Horney’s “stepchildren” are the descendents of Ham, represented in texts by these authors and others as individuals without the capacity or desire to function within a dissonant American social and political paradigm. The characters, some innocent, some senseless, some caught in the act of trying to make sense of their condition or the world that has sent them there, are part of an American society that has historically always found new ways to subordinate individuals on the basis of race.

This contention is perhaps brought into the greatest relief by juxtaposing the following two statements: Many of the men who signed the Declaration of Independence owned slaves. Over 200 years later, a justice of the United States Supreme Court is quoted as saying that she believes that it would take another twenty five years before affirmative action could be phased out as a means of ensuring fairness in admission

practices in United States' institutions of higher learning. Du Bois' prophetic words, "the problem of the twentieth century will be the problem of the color line," sadly reverberate here with us in the early part of the twenty-first century as well; racism, racialized hatred and its effects on American society still exist as part of a continuum of experience and national sensibility that began over four centuries ago.

Reactions to that racism and its concomitant dissonance against the peals of liberty have forced many black people, and, consequently, a number of fictional black characters to cover their ears, to shut out the cacophony of lies, false promises and invectives in order to find peace in the rejection of active participation in this American way of life. Many of these characters capitulate to societal forces—dropping from the scene, literally, giving up, and caving in; but others find ways to combat the sometimes stifling nature of racism, by changing the venue of engagement, matching force for force, or sometimes revising the way their world works.

As reactions to entrenched racism and white privilege, the range of responses portrayed through characters found in African American texts reflects the scope of possibilities available to black characters within this paradigm.

Signal to the importance of this investigation and broadening of thought concerning the interrelatedness of madness and blackness are the unexpected but persistent parallels that exist in the language used to describe both subjects historically. Throughout recorded history, beginning in the writings of Aristotle and Hippocrates in the 4<sup>th</sup> century BCE, parallel streams of thought and belief regarding madness and the Other have developed side by side, at times crossing and informing one another:

Hippocratic medicine explained health and illness in terms of ‘humors’ (basic juices or fluids). The body was subject to rhythms of development and change, determined by the key humors constrained within the skin-envelop; health or illness resulted from their shifting balance. These crucial vitality-sustaining juices were blood, choler (or yellow bile), phlegm, and melancholy. Blood was the source of vitality. Choler or bile was the gastric juice indispensable for digestion. Phlegm a broad category comprehending all colorless secretions, was a lubricant and coolant... [t]he fourth fluid, black bile, or melancholy, seems more problematic. A dark liquid almost never found pure, it was reckoned responsible for darkening other fluids as when blood, skin or stools turned blackish. It was also the cause of dark hair eyes and skin pigmentation. (Porter 37-38)

Hippocrates’ theories of Humoral balance, then, innocently link blackness and illness, opening the door for further interpretation and extrapolation into the health of the mind, which was undertaken by way of Aristotelian philosophy through the use of his concept:

The ‘elements’ of the universe at large: air, fire, water, earth. Being warm, moist, and animated, blood was like air, while choler was like fire, being warm and dry, phlegm suggested water (cold and wet), and black bile (melancholy) resembled earth (cold and dry)...Humoral balance also explained the temperaments, or what would, in later centuries, be called personality and psychological dispositions. (Porter 40)

Key to the health and wellbeing of the individual within this paradigm was the *balance* of these humors within the individual. This system, archaic in light of today's advances in unraveling the medical and psychological mysteries that make us who we are, has nevertheless left its mark on western civilization—psychiatric medicine and pharmacology today attempt to address an informed notion of Humoral balance, through the manipulation of chemical balances within our “skin-envelope”. A more insidious remnant remains as well however, specifically the linking the fourth humor, black bile, with blackness *and* mental illness, “specifically in terms of mental disorder, excesses both of blood and of yellow bile could lead to mania, whereas a surplus of black bile—being too cold and dry—resulted in lowness, melancholy, or depression” (41). It is important to note that the only Humoral fluid that has a direct connection to segments of the world population by means not of disorder or symptom but through *phenotype* alone is black bile or Melancholia. Despite the changes that medical and psychological science would apply to the definition and parameters of this disorder, the *dye* has been cast; blackness would remain forever linked to social and psychological categories of the unwell. The advantage of hindsight notwithstanding, a syllogism lurks in the darkness:

- A. *Melancholia (Black Bile) in excess is a sign of being out of Humoric balance, unwell.*
- B. *Dark Eye, hair and skin color are signs of the presence of high levels of Melancholia.*
- C. *Therefore, being dark signals a person who is unwell.*

The ramifications of this syllogism would inform and shape race ideology unfettered for over two millennia, in part aided by the paucity of empirical experience

with darker peoples, through exploration and actual interaction, which might have helped to debunk the implicitly racialized tenor of its conclusion. Instead, beginning as early as the thirteenth century, there are reports given confirming that “monstrous races were increasingly reported to be living in Africa rather than in Asia”<sup>2</sup> (Aubrey 222). This in effect codifies the spurious assumptions concerning blackness and wellness, if for no other reason than there is nothing offered up to counter or replace such modes of thought. When black subjects (I choose the term “subjects” in light of their forthcoming servitude to Portuguese, Dutch, Belgian, and British “masters”) are actually viewed for the first time, their discovery only further debases their existence, providing ready-made labels of “monstrous” for a developing Western First World:

Social Anthropologists would say that this idea, that blacks and monsters are related, if not equated, on some level of the popular imagination, constituted part of early modern London’s “habitus,” what Pierre Bourdieu defines as “a system of lasting, transposable dispositions which, [*integrating past experiences,*] functions at every moment as a *matrix of perceptions, appreciations, and actions,*” or more simply, “a socially constituted system of cognitive and motivating structures.”<sup>3</sup> If there were in 1604-5 to regard blacks and monsters as similar manifestations of the Other...such a disposition would have affected both

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<sup>2</sup> See Rudolf Wittkower’s “Marvels of the East: A Study in the History of Monsters.” *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institute* 5 (1942): 197.

<sup>3</sup> Pierre Bourdieu, *Outline of Theory of Practice*, trans. Richard Nice, *Cambridge Studies in Social Anthropology* 16 (1972: Cambridge UP. 1977). 76, 82-83.

the generation and the reception of *Othello* at that historical moment.

Indeed, as parts of the same habitus, each text simultaneously reflected and reinforced that very mental linkage. (Aubrey 223)

During the late sixteenth century, Shakespeare utilizes new instances of racialized thought to his advantage to captivate his audiences in many of his plays, but none offer as direct a connection between blackness, madness, the Other, and western civilization as *Othello*, which I visit in this moment not to revel in its crafting, but to discuss the significance of its racialized language and intention—a watershed in the etiology of Black Madness.

Shakespeare knew how to fill the seats at the Globe Theatre: give the people something new yet still something known; something to challenge some of their basic ideas and beliefs, and finally sex it up with a beautiful woman with an exotic for a husband. *Othello's* timing couldn't have been better. The play, taken from a narrative by Cinthio about a moor in Venice, coincides with recent incursions into Africa by explorers who returned with fantastic stories about a wide range of varied species or human-types that they are reported to have encountered. These explorers, with their stories of strange headless natives and furry women running naked in the jungles blend smoothly into those stories *Othello* shares with his bride to be,

including exotic but recognizable travel lore such as the anthropophagi, which Montaigne had recently written about in his essay “of Cannibals.”

The headless monsters were formerly described by Pliny as “some people without necks, having their eyes in their shoulders,” in ancient India; but they also had been described in the more recent 1583 edition of

Mandeville's Travels, where they were illustrated, and in Hakluyt's expanded Voyages published between 1598 and 1600, where Sir Walter Raleigh was said to have been assured that headless monsters could be found just two rivers away from the place he was visiting in Guiana;<sup>4</sup> (228-9)

These stories caused her to pity him and eventually fall in love with such an animal herself—something designed to shock and awe the lucky audiences who were able to attend this spectacle. It has been well documented that Shakespeare's *Othello*, first performed in 1604, was intended to unsettle its viewers through the introduction of a black character to the boards of the Globe. Indeed, Blacks are reported to have lived in London in growing numbers since their introduction to the country in 1563<sup>5</sup>, but I agree with James Aubrey, who points to the Bard's creation of a black character who marries and is intimate with whites as existing clearly outside the parameters of good taste or even plausibility for the people and the period:

A marriage between an African black and a Venetian white would have seemed clearly beyond the bounds of acceptable exogamy to Shakespeare's audience—especially to the white, aristocratic males,

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<sup>4</sup> Pliny, *Natural History*, trans. H. Rackham (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP). 2:521; John Mandeville, *The travels of Sir John Mandeville*, trans. C. W. R. D. Moseley (1582; New York: Penguin, 1983), 137; Richard Hakluyt, *Voyages and Discoveries of the English Nation*, ed. Jack Beeching (1598-1500; New York: Penguin, 1972) 402.

<sup>5</sup> See James Walvin's *The Black Presence: A Documentary History of the Negro in England, 1555-1860* (London: Orbach and Chambers, 1971), 8, 12.

whose marital options in England have been described as “very limited” in social and geographical range and reflecting “a very high degree of social and economic endogamy.”<sup>6</sup> Even without the language depicting Othello as less than human, then, Desdemona’s unauthorized choice of husband would itself have seemed socially and politically, “monstrous.” (228)

Within the text itself, the othering of Othello is carried along from the first moment his name is seen or spoken—which, doesn’t happen until the beginning of the third scene of the first act—until that time he is only known as “the Moor.” In this labeling of Othello as African “Everyman,” making him represent all blackness, one can see the knee-jerk rejection-reaction toward him and his kind by members of the Venetian state and population, a rejection of the Moor’s humanity evident in the bestial and demonic synonyms used to introduce his character to the play’s audience. Further maligned by the father of his new bride in the first act, Othello’s blackness as it intersects with the white world in the form of Desdemona, now is imputed also to include elements of the Black arts, practices Brabantio feels were surely necessary to lure an innocent to “fall in love with that she feared to look on”(904).

From this point in the play until the end, between the continued references to Othello in terms of an othered, bestial self, and the inclusion of the theatrical detail of Othello’s susceptibility to epileptic seizures, which were at that time still understood to reflect some disturbance of Humoric balance; add a little mania to his melancholy, and

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<sup>6</sup> Lawrence Stone, *The Family, Sex and Marriage in England: 1500-1800*. New York: Harper and Row, 1979). 60.

alas, the Moor is mad, or, as he himself puts it: “when I love thee not Chaos is come again” (915).

Iago’s key advantage over Othello is the near-total belief that blacks were inferior to whites: his revenge is predicated upon notions of this kind that he himself holds but, more importantly, that he knows are held by key citizens of the Venetian state as signified by Roderigo and Brabantio, each representing the gentlemen’s and aristocratic class respectively and most importantly, Othello himself. The account of Desdemona’s return to sanity, whiteness and Roderigo, which Iago gives to Roderigo to buy more time and money, is a glimpse also into the mind of Othello, upon whom the most potent poison is not Iago’s words, but the imputation of his character, his manliness, and his humanity that cuckoldry suggests in the mind of the Moor. His Ancient would have known this information. By the play’s end Othello can be seen as a savage, senselessly taking the life of an innocent bride. His behavior is senseless, without reason, motivated by passions that have been allowed to roam unchecked, a murderer sworn to an oath to the devil, a blackamoor who now calls the Enemy his master. If you were in the audience, wouldn’t you think this black man was mad?

Immanuel Kant contributes to an etiology of Black Madness through his assertion of black inferiority during the historical period that would host the creation of the American republic:

*The Negroes of Africa do not have a feeling of nature that rises above the mediocre. Mr. Hume invites anyone to quote a single example of a Negro who has exhibited talents. He asserts that among the hundred thousands of blacks who have been seduced away from their own*

*countries, although very many of them have been set free, yet not a single one has ever been found that has performed anything great whether in art or science or in any other laudable subject; but among the whites, people constantly rise up from the lowest rabble and acquire esteem through their superior gifts.*

*Immanuel Kant, 1769*

Kant's hubris concerning the advantage and primacy of white western culture is situated within a milieu replete with great thinkers, men and women of political and ideological action, who assumed it as given that those aspirations of a people for justice and equality, for freedom to live and contribute to the development of open, free, societies; those criteria that would distinguish America from other countries philosophically, politically and ideologically, were all reserved for white males of a certain class. All others not a part of this group struggled, with varying degrees of success, to break through the barrier of privilege already being constructed to protect the wealth and primacy of white male Hegemony. During this period, marked by the American and French revolutions, the language, which would soon be used to justify the subordination of African and other non-Europeans to whites on both continents, was being codified through new scientific measures of intelligence and the treatment of the insane as they represented the Other in the midst of their developing western world.

Michel Foucault, in *Madness & Civilization*, addresses the 18<sup>th</sup> century practice of public display of the insane. Foucault's text contributes to this larger inquiry, namely, by showing those parallels of language that exist between two of the subjects at its center—blackness and madness—as they frame the third, African American literature:

It was doubtless a very old custom of the Middle Ages to display the insane...the strange fact is that this custom did not disappear once the doors of the asylums closed, but that on the contrary it then developed, assuming in Paris and London an almost institutional character...as late as 1815, if a report presented in the House of Commons is to be believed, the hospital of Bethlehem exhibited lunatics for a penny, every Sunday...and the display of the insane remained until the Revolution one of the distractions for the Left Bank bourgeoisie. Mirabeau reports in his *Observations d'un voyageur anglais* that the madmen at Bicetre were shown "like curious animals, to the first simpleton willing to pay a coin." One went to see the keeper display the madmen the way the trainer at the Fair of Saint-Germain put the monkeys through their tricks. (68)

By the beginning of the nineteenth century, "[m]adness had become a thing to look at: no longer a monster inside oneself, but an animal with strange mechanisms, a bestiality from which man had long since been suppressed. 'I can easily conceive of a man without hands, feet, head ...but I cannot conceive of a man without thought; that would be a stone or a brute'" (70). I view these terms, "monster" and "brute," as not exclusively designated for the insane; in fact, they were also used during the historical period to which Foucault refers to describe the Africans who were being brought into western culture as enslaved beings. This language parallels that which was used to describe the insane of the time, only the dark peoples to whom it referred were part not of the spectacle of insanity but of the spectacle and exchange of corporal capital that was the slave trade.

Nor was a vocabulary of monstrosity the only parallel between the experiences of the insane and those of people of color upon introduction to western culture in the eighteenth century. Take, for example the following passage which Foucault quotes as evidence of the sensibilities of the period concerning the physical constitution of the insane:

Madness, insofar as it partook of animal ferocity, preserved man from the dangers of disease; it afforded him an invulnerability, similar to that which nature, in its foresight, had provided for animals. Curiously, the disturbance of his reason restored the madman to the immediate kindness of nature by a return to animality. (75)

Analogies such as the above proved to bolster the confidence of those who dealt with the insane within eighteenth century society, to the extent that they believed that:

[u]nchained animality could be mastered only by discipline and brutalizing. The theme of the animal-madman was effectively realized in the eighteenth century, in occasional attempts to impose a certain pedagogy on the insane...thus, by a use of a curious dialectic whose movement explains all these 'inhuman' practices of confinement, the free animality of madness was tamed only by such discipline whose meaning was not to raise the bestial to the human, but to restore man to what was purely animal within him...in the reduction to animality, madness finds both its truth and its cure; when the madman has become a beast, this presence of the animal in man, a presence which constituted the scandal of

madness, is eliminated: not that the animal is silenced, but man is abolished. (Foucault 75-76)

The parallels to American assumptions and arguments about the capacities and pedagogies of the enslaved are obvious. The passage quoted above can be compared to the story of the fugitive slave, Frederick Douglass, who, in his 1845 *Narrative of the Life of an American Slave*, recounts his experiences at the hands of the slave breaker, William Covey, in similar images. Ironically, the “cure” works, but not as planned. Douglass, after being sent to Covey’s farm, is to be “broken,” or made manageable by his handlers and owners. The process of confinement and physical punishment he describes in the *Narrative* closely parallels that of the “curing” of the madness to which Foucault refers from the century before. Douglass, who emerges from the experience of being “broken” as a man rather than a brute, signifies on his particular readers by first relating the narrative from the standpoint of the victor, and then by using this incident to mark a teleological point of inception, or more accurately conception within the context of slavery as a autonomous man—no longer a brute at all. The Douglass episode to which I refer is part of the scaffolding of this study in that its trope of victorious resistance leading eventually to escape from animality into humanity shows how blacks both suffered from the associative logic of western ideas of animality, madness and humanity and yet reconfigured that logic in their resistant lives. How that real resistance reappears in African American literature through yet another reconfiguration, the appropriation of the trope of madness, is the object of my inquiry. It shows resistance offered within extreme circumstances, survival and success rather than degradation and debasement. Douglass should have been broken and, consequently, his narrative never written, but

instead, he overcomes at precisely this nadir of human experience, appropriates the tools of the oppressor, namely violence and literacy, and uses them to write his own narrative of inspiration and resilience.

## Chapter Two

“—And I Might Even Be Said to Possess a Mind:” Hibernation, Psychoanalysis  
and Schizophrenia in *Invisible Man*

As I read the words I have selected to head this chapter in the prologue of Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*, I am forced to puzzle over the *direction* of the statement; is it indeed a statement, or a question lacking proper punctuation? Is this an ironic declaration intended to signify on dominant assertions of inferiority and their inherent intimations of diminished cognitive potential possible for black people in America, or a muted interrogation of the self, carried out by a nameless protagonist who indeed must question his own capability for thought, reason and rational action? Issues of identity are central to this novel, reverberating through each episode and chapter, going out from the protagonist like shock waves from an explosion, but then returning, boomerang-like, back to their point of creation upon contact with a matching force. It is the return trip of these waves of inquiry regarding identity that I will explore here, focusing on the ways that they are changed by what they reflect against, and the effect that new reverberation has on the understanding, experience and sensibility of the sender. Our protagonist in *IM* is consistently being rocked by physical forces, which coincide with psychological stressors. The aggregate effect of these physical/psychological encounters is akin to those of the boxer who has received too many shots to the head; our protagonist is psychically punch drunk—irreparably rattled out of his senses—forced to retreat to a space where the fighting has ceased, and things are clearer; underground and inside where understanding can once again be achieved and recuperative action initiated as the protagonist himself offers: “Please, a definition: a hibernation is a covert preparation for a more overt action”

(16).

Hibernating, like the protagonist in the prologue, are the mental patients of the veteran's facility that have been sent to the local "sportin' house," for recreation in the third chapter of the novel. The Golden Day, like its patrons, has had a varied and wide-ranging existence leading up to its current incarnation. Tucked away from the Tuskegee-like campus of the college on the grounds of this former plantation, the building and its patrons are easily forgotten, each representing space and identities that have outlived their usefulness. The Golden Day, whose name hints at heaven and the promise of salvation, is ironically rather a house of ill repute. A gambling and whorehouse, it is full this day of cast-aside members of society, individuals dismissed as irrelevant because of their psychic handicaps and damaged minds. The patients who patronize the Golden Day when Mr. Norton arrives in need of attention after his encounter with the Trueblood family are participants in a bizarre psychoanalytic drama which is acted out within its walls; once a church, then a bank, later a restaurant, a fancy gambling house, a jailhouse, it is now just a place to entertain the leavings of society. The decline of the edifice can be mapped by viewing the decreasing significance of those individuals who frequent or inhabit this space over time; the Tuskegee-like College of the narrative, not far away, has no doubt experienced a reverse pattern of growth and importance within the minds of the people that populate the community these structures serve<sup>7</sup>.

As the episode suggests, like the Golden Day Ellison's novel serves as a space for metaphoric retaliation and resistance against the usual relegation to the margins of social

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<sup>7</sup> Booker T. Washington, in his Autobiography, *Up From Slavery*, notes that the Institute's first building was a chicken coop (pg. 36).

consciousness madness usually suffers. In this section, by crafting the extraordinary events that would make possible an encounter between Norton and the patrons of the Golden Day, he provides a viable space from which these patients can finally have their say. What they express is indeed chaos and madness, but in that expression exists an understandable reaction to the physical/psychic oppression they have suffered; first as veterans of a war for democracy that offered them none in return, and, later as the detritus of a dominant society, represented by Mr. Norton, that diagnoses them as insane, deems them unusable and enforces their confinement through its control of the muscle and intimidation of their attendant, Supercargo.

As Mr. Norton is being carried into the Golden Day, some of the patients engage in a ludic/signifying renaming ceremony for their new guest. Each name suggests either historical or contemporary familiarity, ranging from “Thomas Jefferson,” to “grandfather,” to finally “father,” before the connection forces one patient to “curse his father violently as we moved to the door” (73). As suggested by other scholars, the labeling of Mr. Norton represents an act of signifying or parodying the role of “father” that he, representative of white consciousness, holds within this black space. I suggest that Mr. Norton does represent a “father” figure for these men and women; he represents the “great white father” in the sense that he is old, white haired and probably senior to most if not all of the patrons and workers at the Golden Day. He is a white man, a rich white man, and therefore cloaked with the patriarchal vestments white men have within American society; dominance, authority, entitlement and control. Mr. Norton represents white consciousness within this black space. His presence stuns the patrons, who “quiet down... [after] a space was cleared in the center of the room. The men came close to look

at Mr. Norton” (73). After what was probably a long time away from the type of white consciousness Mr. Norton represents, the patients are shocked by his presence within *their* space, as their reactions suggest. After an unconscious Norton is struck in the face by the pock-marked man, the man comments, “a case of hysteria” (74). The diagnosis, however, does not refer to Mr. Norton alone, but to the pock-marked man himself, as he feels the need to justify such an offensive act. This is the first of what will be many retaliatory acts carried out against what Mr. Norton represents within the space of the Golden Day; white consciousness and its attendants are rejected and rebuked within this black space. Unprotected, this white consciousness is at risk until Supercargo arrives. Through Supercargo, ironically unprotected himself, without his white starched uniform and straitjacket ready to capture any unruly patient, Ellison has created a space where the unthinkable can occur—the de-centering of white consciousness by black madness. Inside of the Golden Day, Supercargo (Superego) is reduced to human stature again. Like Sampson without his Nazarite tresses, Supercargo (sans white uniform and straitjacket) is subject to the overwhelming force of the patients (Id) who, seeing their opportunity for retaliation, surge forward to have their day. As he is pulled symbolically down the stairs, the patients act out their collective vengeance on the *unconscious* attendant:

“Give the bastard some order!”

“Here I’m forty-five and he’s been acting like he’s my old man  
(77)!

“Sometimes I get so afraid of him I feel that he’s inside my head.  
There!”

He said, giving Supercargo another kick (78).

“With Supercargo lying helpless upon the bar, the men whirled about like maniacs”(79).

The title/rank of Supercargo is given to the merchant’s representative on board any trading vessel. As white consciousness and sanity’s defender, protecting and projecting order amongst the chaos of the patients, Supercargo can be seen as holding that place of overseer his title suggests amongst these possessions of Mr. Norton and his kind within the campus grounds—including the Golden Day. No longer property like chattel on a slave ship, the patients are now on board a ship of fools, the *Stultifera Navis* that is the Golden Day. Through the strategic removal of Supercargo as protector, Ellison makes possible the next otherwise impossible encounter for the protagonist (Ego), his first face-to-face encounter with whiteness. I position the protagonist as Ego because of the ability he has to navigate between the extremes of behavior as they exist in a white consciousness—order and chaos, represented by Supercargo--and the veterans respectively:

Then some of the milling men pushed me up against him and suddenly a mass of whiteness was looming two inches from my eyes; it was only his face but I felt a shudder of nameless horror. I had never been so close to a white person before. In a panic I struggled to get away...he was like a formless white death, suddenly appeared before me, a death which had been there all the time and which had now revealed itself in the madness of the Golden Day. (79-80)

The protagonist, panicked by his encounter, is calmed by one of the patients who offers words of sanity and clarity in the midst of the chaos, “He’s only a man. Remember

that, he only a man”(80). The patient, once a doctor, attempts to explain Norton’s role within the mindscape of the Golden Day and the world beyond to the protagonist, describing him to be

“A trustee of consciousness.”

“What was that?” I asked.”

“...Nothing” (82).

The patient/doctor has spoken the truth to the protagonist, who, despite his sanity, cannot comprehend it. Once he has spoken, however, the doctor/patient seizes the opportunity to continue to speak truth again, first to Norton, “to some you are the great white father, to others the lyncher of souls, but for all, you are confusion come even into the Golden Day” (86).

And then to both Norton and the protagonist:

‘A little child shall lead them, ‘the vet said with a smile. You can’t see or hear or smell the truth of what you see—and you, looking for destiny; it’s classic! And the boy, this automaton, he was made of the very mud of the region and sees far less than you, he is a mark on the scorecard of your achievement, a thing and not a man; a child, or even less—a black amorphous thing. And you, for all your power, are not a man to him, but a God, a force...he believes in you as he believes in the beat of his heart...he’ll do your bidding and his blindness is his chief asset. He’s your man, friend. (87-88)

The doctor/patient is engaged in more during this passage than simply pointing to the deceptive nature of the relationship he sees between the protagonist and Mr. Norton.

He is testifying to the truth that the protagonist has yet to experience, to the truth that Mr. Norton has yet to comprehend. The doctor/patient speaks from an experiential position, with clarity within his madness he has earned by surviving the trauma he describes:

Ten men in masks drove me out from the city at midnight and beat me with whips for saving a human life. And I was forced to the utmost degradation because I possessed skilled hands and the belief that my knowledge could bring me dignity—not wealth, only dignity—and offer men health! (86)

After the protagonist is confronted by Dr. Bledsoe concerning Mr. Norton and the incident at the Golden Day, white consciousness is again placed in a position of primacy, its mandates now carried out by Dr. Bledsoe. The protagonist and the doctor/patient, having viewed Norton in a compromised position, must be removed from the community. The protagonist is again blind to the intentions of Dr. Bledsoe; he is convinced that this transition will allow him to regain his stature at the college after a penance-like sabbatical of work. The doctor/patient is again less confused about the nature of his transfer than his younger traveling companion... "I'm headed for St. Elizabeth's...the ways of authority are indeed mysterious. For a year I've tried to get transferred, then this morning I'm suddenly told to pack. I can't but wonder if our little conversation with your friend Mr. Norton had something to do with it" (137). When challenged concerning the coincidence of their both being "transferred" so suddenly, the protagonist simply cannot see the connection. The doctor/patient offers him prophetic advice concerning his inevitable final position in relationship to the white consciousness they both encountered just days prior at the Golden Day:

Come out of the fog, young man. And remember you don't have to be a complete fool in order to succeed. Play the game, but don't believe in it—that much you owe yourself. Even if it lands you in a strait jacket or a padded cell. Play the game, but play it your own way—part of the time at least. Play the game but raise the ante, my boy. Learn how it operates learn how you operate—I wish I had time to tell you only a fragment...you're hidden right out in the open—that is you would be if you only realized it. They wouldn't see you because they believe they taken care of that... (137)

One can only cogently speak of a “fog” and its effects if it has been experienced. The doctor/patient knows what he is talking about because of his liminal position. Vacillating between sanity and insanity, he is able to speak on both states from a position of authority, emboldened by the opportunity he sees to spare the protagonist some of the cathartic agony of a racialized existence he as a veteran had to suffer. The doctor/patient speaks of the protagonist as being “free” to encounter the north in the “daylight,” as opposed to the nighttime encounters that were common to many migrating blacks from within his historical memory. Again, this reference to “day,” versus “night,” combined with the distinctions made between “foggy” and “clear,” and many others, establishes major thematic parameters within the novel and the tropic interplay between light and darkness, blindness and sight; north and south, slavery and freedom. Beyond the construction of these binaries, the fact that this *asylum patient* is discussing them demands a reconfiguration of the boundaries between madness and sanity, and a reexamination of to whom we should look for veracity and understanding within this

fractured American paradigm. The societal context which is framed at the end of this episode-- a post-World War, "shell-shocked" historical moment-- represents dissonance for not only characters like the doctor/ patient from *IM*, but also for our protagonist as representative of a blinded, black America, unfortunately surrounded by a dominant culture that is just as uncertain and groping as he is. Discussing this post-war phenomenon of societal confusion, David Riesman, in *The Lonely Crowd*, states:

[D]ue to the changing American character, Americans found themselves in a newly paradoxical situation: as part of a crowd of isolated, disconnected persons...the new postwar social man, he wrote, was like a cheerful robot with, 'no firm roots, no sure loyalties to sustain his life and give it a center.' Subsequently, with no set of beliefs as in the old days, Americans as individuals 'do not know where to go They hesitate, confused and vacillating in their opinions, unfocused to discontinuous in their actions...they are a chorus, too afraid to grumble, too hysterical in their applause.' (Qtd. In Lupac, 13)

These attributes, present within a post World-War I moment as well, can be readily attributed to our protagonist, and to Mr. Norton while on the campus of the college, when he encounters Trueblood, and the patrons of the Golden Day. The Golden Day episode frames the protagonist's journey within the novel, introducing us to the consciousness he will face, and revealing him to us as incomplete and unsuited initially for the tasks ahead. Eventually, he will be able to succeed within this American landscape, but not before he suffers a loss of innocence *and* sanity, which then, ironically, makes him capable of enduring the experience.

This psychoanalytically based interpretation of the incidents within the Golden Day is intended only to set the stage for an investigation of a complex psychological narrative that exists beneath the surface of the text. The patients' and protagonist's skirmishes with chaos as evidenced in the episode only encapsulate and confine for initial inspection the forces of repressed anxiety and trauma so that they can be more clearly understood by the reader as they unfold and become more complicated in their development and manifestation later on.

The protagonist of *IM* enters the landscape of the north, Harlem, in a fashion that harkens back to earlier texts whose characters undergo the transformative passage into this Mecca of the new Negro. In an arrival scene rife with bewilderment and promise reminiscent of those crafted by authors such as Paul Lawrence Dunbar, Nella Larsen, Rudolph Fisher and Claude McKay, as their protagonists entered or returned to Harlem, the protagonist of *IM* emerges into Ellison's vision of this black Mecca:

Then at the street intersection I had the shock of seeing a black policeman directing traffic—and there were white drivers in the traffic who obeyed his signals as though it was the most natural thing in the world. Sure I had heard of it, but this was real. My courage returned. This really was Harlem, and now all the stories of a city-within-a city leaped alive in my mind. (141-142)

The possibilities that the protagonist imagines, matched with the stories of Harlem he has brought with him from the South, represent Ellison's grafting of *IM* into the narrative trope of Harlem in African American literature. Ellison's rendition, however, is unique in that the first encounter the protagonist has with a black voice in Harlem is with

that of Ras—representing dissent and dissatisfaction. This foreshadowing of the protagonist’s inevitable encounter with Ras speaks to a different Harlem than that of his Renaissance counterparts. Along with the need for concern about confidence men and grifters, this character must also consider the impact of whiteness within this black space. Notice the mention of *two* white police officers present at the street meeting Ras is holding. The presence of whiteness within this Harlem landscape, while seeming uninterested (they were indifferent to what Ras was saying), is nevertheless significant, because they were there. Their presence makes possible the focus on the merging of an outer narrative ostensibly concerned with the protagonist’s experiences within this northern setting, with an interior narrative, one concerned with the interplay of those binaries mentioned earlier, but especially those of light and dark, dreaming and waking, within a psychological landscape to be found not on the Harlem streets but within the mind of the protagonist: “Walking down the streets, sitting on subways beside whites, eating with them in the same cafeterias...gave me the eerie out of focus sensation of a dream” (149). The protagonist’s “out of focus” sensation is more than just an expression of his naiveté concerning living and interacting with white people because he is from the South; I contend that it is the first step the protagonist takes in describing what will become his complete schizophrenic illness, a breakdown brought about by his troubled interaction with the varied societal elements of this northern metropolis.

In his book, *Madness and Modernism*, Louis Sass describes some of the symptoms usually reported with the onset of schizoid, schizoaffective or schizophreniform disorders, and how they will lead, over time if untreated, to complete schizophrenia, or *Dementia Praecox*. One of the first indicators of the onset of this illness

that Sass discusses is a feeling, *stimmung*—a perceptive engagement with the world that has a surreal or “unreal” quality about it. This *stimmung* or mood Sass describes as having four main aspects: “the visions of Unreality, Mere Being, Fragmentation, and Apophany” (47). According to Sass, the first three aspects of this phenomenon are interconnected, “and, if taken together, constitute the *Trema* (anticipatory stage fright) of this illness” (47).

The first aspect of *stimmung*, Unreality, I believe is evidenced in the encounter mentioned above, as the protagonist speaks of his “...eerie out of focus sensation of a dream” (Ellison 149). Compare this passage to that offered by Sass in *Madness and Modernism*, discussing Unreality:

Patients will sometimes express Unreality by stating that everything seems distant, or as if behind plate glass. Things may seem unreal to them, and they may conclude that the world before them is really some kind of second world, perhaps only a simulacrum of the true one existing elsewhere. (48)

The protagonist’s initial reaction to his new northern landscape of Harlem, is thus an example of the Unreality stage of *stimmung*. The amazement he expresses upon witnessing this integrated space comprised of known objects and circumstances, yet in this unfamiliar admixture of black and white, signals the doubled or unreal nature of his first encounters with Harlem.

The second aspect of *stimmung* discussed by psychologists, Mere Being, has been described as being “akin either to the exalting feeling of wonder, mystery, and terror inherent in what Heidegger considers to be the basic question of metaphysics—why

something rather than nothing” (48-49)? I understand this phenomenon to be present in *IM* through the protagonist’s amazement at the composite nature of the Harlem he encounters after leaving the South. On two separate occasions he puzzles over how such a metropolis can survive with such a press and crush of humanity within its buildings, on its streets and in its subway tunnels. His expectation of riots and frenzy as a nascent Harlemit is an indicator of this state of Mere Being for the protagonist, but also foreshadows the violence and unrest of the latter stages of the novel that does indeed endanger the existence of this city-within-a-city, and signals the covert resignation of the protagonist from its streets to live below.

In chapter ten of *IM*, the protagonist introduces himself to the world of work and immediately begins to encounter structural and conceptual inversions that challenge his and our conventional views of hierarchy and its development. These inversions culminate in the closing episode of his paint factory experience in chapter eleven, launching him into a new world which will be tinged with elements and signals of the further development of this *Trema*, and its subsequent schizophreniform behavior.

The first inversion within this chapter is found as the protagonist is matched with Mr. Kimbro and given instruction on the production of Liberty Paint’s most important product, their “Optic White” paint. There is a subtle irony to the necessity of the introduction of ten drops of black liquid into a batch of “Optic White” paint; perhaps Ellison here hints at a percentage, a tenth, with this specific number necessary for a good batch of white paint. The drops of black may represent the necessity of blackness within the American paradigm to set or complete the Optic White image of America that is sought after. If improperly mixed with the wrong substance, the paint will be unusable,

unstable—unable to cover anything. The protagonist's use of a concentrated remover rather than the proper "dope" initiates his next important encounter, down in the bowels of the paint factory, with Lucius Brockway (Lucius, by the way, derived from the Latin "Lucis," meaning light). With Lucius in this sub-basement of the factory, the protagonist's real education begins, again, ironically at the feet of a black man who has never set foot in an engineering classroom, yet knows all the pathways and secrets of the paint and the factory that produces it and can produce that knowledge from memory. Brockway holds the position of light giver as he holds the knowledge necessary for the smooth running of the plant, and simultaneously represents Hephaestus or Vulcan, in his role as god of the underworld, tending furnaces and gauges; essential in his ability to mix fire and blend base elements necessary for all that is produced and sold above him.

Like his experience with Mr. Kimbro above ground, in the basement the protagonist is told what to do, but not why. "You just have to do what you're told and don't try to think about it" (175). Both of the men who instruct the protagonist in this chapter are protective of the edge they hold over the intellectually superior "young Nineteen Hundred Boys" (201) by the unique nature of their ability and knowledge. But a more compelling reason I believe for their cryptic instructions is the fact that if the protagonist stopped to think about what each man is asking him to do: add drops of black to a paint or mix elements of a black base together to make "Optic White," it just wouldn't make sense.

Ellison's inclusion of these characters and these episodes foreshadow the convoluted nature of the protagonist's later experiences. He must first take away the traditional props of reason and linearity usually integral to a novel so that readers will be

able to understand things which, when usually stated, are *not* understandable. The inversions found within the narrative of *IM* represent the author's ability to "change the joke and slip the yoke." It is for this reason *IM* is essential to my description of Black Madness. Ellison's text is part of a continuum of black texts that require readers to think outside of the normal constraints of rational thought and continuity; he is part of a body of black writers who realize that they must make readers see things differently if their characters or the situations that they place them in are going to be really seen at all.

The protagonist is "born"<sup>8</sup> in the basement of Liberty Paints. Lucius, now Lucifer, offers only a sinister laugh as he exits the basement prior to the explosion that signals the protagonist's rebirth into a world of surreal and ambiguous certainty:

It was a fall into space that seemed not a fall but a suspension.

Then a great weight landed upon me and I seemed to sprawl in an interval of clarity beneath a pile of broken machinery, my head pressed back against a huge wheel, my body splattered with a stinking goo. Somewhere an engine ground in furious futility, grating loudly until a pain shot around the curve of my head and bounced me off into blackness for a distance, only to strike another pain that lobbed me back. And in that clear instant of consciousness I opened my eyes to a blinding flash. (201)

As the protagonist emerges from the convulsive mechanical and liquid space of the basement and enters the factory hospital, his Fragmentation experience begins.

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<sup>8</sup> I take it as no accident that Ellison locates this episode deep within the bowels of the Liberty paint

factory; or that the protagonist is forced to regain consciousness from within the thick slime of the base material from which the paint is constructed, where optic whiteness is created.

Fragmentation represents the third phase of *Trema*, which, collectively, comprises the initial aspects of the *stimmung* or mood signaling the onset of schizoaffective disorders. Fragmentation is a component of *Trema* where “[o]bjects normally perceived as parts of larger complexes may seem strangely isolated, disconnected from each other and devoid of encompassing context; or a single object may lose its perceptual integrity and disintegrate into a disunity of parts...where details or parts overwhelm the synthetic whole” (50).

As the protagonist is subjected to the care and scrutiny of the physicians associated with the Liberty Paint Factory after the explosion, an ordeal that includes electroshock and confinement, he describes a portion of this experience that represents Fragmentation for the character in the text. After being given a warm liquid to drink, the protagonist describes

Hear[ing] a friendly voice, uttering familiar words to which I could assign no meaning. I listened intently, aware of the form and movement of sentences and grasping the now subtle rhythmical differences between progressions of sound that questioned and those that made a statement. But still their meanings were lost in the vast whiteness in which I myself was lost. Other voices emerged. Faces hovered above me like inscrutable fish peering myopically through a glass aquarium wall. I saw them suspended motionless above me, then two floating off, first their heads, then the tips of their finlike fingers, moving drearily from the top of the case. (208-209)

The Fragmentation which psychiatrists describe and which I contend is occurring

in the above quoted passage from chapter eleven of *IM*, seems to be a necessary prerequisite to the re-ordering of consciousness that schizophrenic conditions require. According to Sass, after the preliminary stages of *Stimmung* and *Trema*, the mood and initial experience of schizophrenic psychosis respectively; Unreality, Mere Being, and Fragmentation, are experienced, Apophany, or a meta-symbolic state of consciousness occurs, wherein the patient, or in the case of *IM*, the protagonist, I contend, ascribes deep significance to each experience and event which follows Fragmentation, as if now after having everything separated and made distinct, the inclination of the schizophrenic mind is to re-assemble and assign significance to each sensory and interior encounter—preparation for the re-ordering of individual reality and identity. This phenomenon is not distinct from the past experiences of the individual, but according to psychiatrist Silvano Arieti:

The anxiety preceding psychotic breakdown (i.e., *Stimmung*, *Trema*) is a response to the resurfacing of repressed traumatic memories of very early threats to the sense of self-worth and organismic integrity, as well as to the reemergence of primitive forms of logic by which the traumatic memories are elaborated and amplified. (Qtd. In Sass, 55)

This phenomenon takes on a unique significance when considered within the context of African American experience as described through autobiographies, narratives and fictional accounts. The dissonant and sometimes traumatic nature of Black life in America has made it essential for individuals within this culture to redefine, recreate, and re-order their lived experiences to enable them to continue to live and grow. Signifying, Irony, and other forms of narrative inversion are numerous within our African American

literature; these devices and techniques represent coping mechanisms necessary to make sense of the insensible experiences of slavery and its aftermath in America.

For the protagonist of *IM*, these psychological stages are precursors to his choice to break his connection with the world above ground, choosing rather to be whole beneath it. In an essay titled “The American Negro and the Image of the Absurd,” Esther Merle Jackson calls revolt what I choose to call resistance; namely, the protagonist’s decision in regard to his position within the dominant culture as depicted within the text. Jackson identifies the protagonist’s eventual retreat below ground as a form of revolt, but sees it as unique in that it is “not primarily physical...it is, rather, the revolt of consciousness—a renunciation which leads the protagonists finally into solitude” (Qtd. in Macksey, 136). Ellison’s novel signals triumph for the protagonist through what Jackson calls “absurd freedom” (137), his ability to survive both literally and metaphorically within the text by going inside of the object—the world, the self.

In his essay, “The World and the Jug,” Ellison ignited fires of controversy by insisting that a distinction be made between those he called “relatives,” and “ancestors” in relation to his literary and creative lineage. Such a distinction seems innocuous until it is noted that in this essay “Ancestors” referred to white canonical writers within the western literary tradition, while “Relatives” referred to black writers who had preceded him; and that Ellison contends that his aesthetic lineage and obligation lay with these “Ancestors” and not his “relatives.” One interpretation of this declaration has been to impute that Ellison, buoyed by his acceptance by the white literati, chose to adopt a view of his own history and influences that is overly shaded and biased by whiteness; Ellison sees only what is valued and rewarded within white culture and therefore chooses to write

himself into their tradition. If this bias represents Double Consciousness on the part of Ellison, it is perhaps made most clear by the glaring oversight of any mention of W.E.B. Du Bois by Ellison in his assessment of his own philosophical and literary history.

Ellison's *IM* is replete with binaries that frame the fiction-world where the characters live, binaries that also exist within the realities shared by its readers. It succeeds as a novel in part because of its ability to carry the reader through a new type of experience that is *clouded* by perception. Ellison's fiction makes it possible for the reader to see through the eyes of the protagonist and experience his conundrum—tasting the maddening gall of incessant confusion and redirection that is Double Consciousness. Ellison's direct denial and dismissal of a black literary tradition's influence on his writing and vision stands glaringly in contrast to his thorough utilization of one of the tradition's founding theoretical tenets, Double Consciousness (This denial can itself be seen as an action framed and in part motivated by vestiges of DC within the author). This trope was plumbed and honed by Du Bois in *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903) through fiction, but also through prose and historic citation, recounting, synopsis, storytelling, to a point from which readers could leave the text, taking away with them a working model of Double Consciousness as a concept; complete with historical precedent, contemporary sociological analysis, and literary interpretation.

Du Bois, like Ellison, surrounded himself with the great minds and their ideas; Du Bois' Ancestors would have included Hegel, Schopenhauer, James, Emerson, Goethe and the Transcendentalists. In this earlier time, Du Bois faced the challenge and opportunity to articulate again for America what Frederick Douglass had shared in his *Narrative* of 1845, the conditions, limitations and expectations of black life in America. Du Bois

captures for his time the essence of Black feeling through Double Consciousness, making known that which had been unknown, what for Ellison would be *unseen*, what for me is *misunderstood*: the effect, the persistence.

## Chapter Three

## Defining Double Consciousness: Metaphor and Black Madness at the Nadir

*The worst feature of this double consciousness is, that the two lives, of the understanding and of the soul, which we lead, really show little relation to each other; never meet and measure each other ... with the progress of life, the two discover no greater disposition to reconcile themselves. —Emerson*

*[Thus] the insane subject is in communion with himself in the negative of himself, [and is a] subject disrupted into two different personalities.—Hegel*

*Always this doubleness, this struggle of the old self against the new discordant forms of experience, is accompanied with painful mental conflict, with passion, with violent emotional excitement. This is in great part the reason for the common experience, that the first stage in the immense majority of cases of mental diseases is an emotional alteration particularly of a melancholic sort. —Wm. James*

*...the negro is sort of seventh son, born with a veil and gifted with second-sight in this American world—a world which yields him no true self—consciousness, but only lets him see himself thorough the revelation of the other world. It is a peculiar sensation this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in*

*amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his twoness—an  
American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts two unreconciled  
strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged  
strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder—Du Bois*

I teach college Black Studies and literature in Great Barrington, Massachusetts, the hometown of W. E.B. Du Bois. Although Du Bois left the town at age sixteen, it and the college hold fast to his likeness and preface lecture series, educational committees and writing contests in his name. All of our students encounter Du Bois in a seminar that has *Souls* as one of its primary texts. I wonder at times what Great Barrington was like when Du Bois was living here and puzzle over the influence of his early life in the Berkshires on the formulation of his concept, Double Consciousness. As the only African American member of the faculty, I feel not only the isolation of the small private campus but its echoes within the smaller town that mirrors that campus—neither has a very large population of blacks, or the things that would keep blacks there. The students, almost exclusively white and privileged, however, do not have a difficult time with Double Consciousness; they adopt definitions of the term that help them process their own struggles through crises of sexual identity, pressures of a strong drug subculture, and the expectations placed upon them by academic rigors at the flagship institution of early college education. I have to bite my tongue—often—when dealing with the analogies that are offered up in response to the question “what does Double Consciousness mean to you?” In many ways, the students’ understanding of this concept is flawed, but then again, so is ours.

Double Consciousness has its conceptual roots in the transcendentalist musings of Ralph Waldo Emerson. The term appears first in the scholar’s language in the description

of its worst trait, the incompatibility of our “two lives.” Emerson’s opposites were a working life versus a life of the mind, the one our focus now, the other later. The transcendentalist’s ability to wrestle with the issues of “infinite and paradise” is to be heralded, but as I’ve told my classes many times; “Thoreau was able to walk in the woods, Douglass found it necessary to *run*.” The epigraph credited to Emerson captures the essence of Double Consciousness—or at least Du Bois thought so—as the parallels in phrases and images between the earlier text and Du Bois’ writing in *Souls* demonstrate. The core shared by both men’s concepts is the incompatibility of the two selves, the inability of either consciousness to correctly comprehend or investigate the other.

Hegel’s doubling merges with Emerson’s use of the term by focusing the tension of the concept at the point of misunderstanding between the selves. Hegel’s use of doubling augments Emerson’s by emphasizing that the misunderstanding between the selves is usually experienced by individuals who are suffering from some sort of mental disease. That the condition creates dissonance for both is accepted, but they diverge in their subjects, for Emerson it is enlightened mind, for Hegel the diseased mind.

Enter, or re-enter, Samuel Cartwright. Draeptomani or Rascalism, the inclination of slaves to run away from their masters, insisted that slaves had to be suffering from some sort of mental disorder to want to leave the secure confines of the plantation for the unknown world beyond. While I disagree with the conclusions reached by Cartwright and others within this vein of pseudo-psychological investigation, I must agree with them on one point, that there was a mental disorder in the experience of the enslaved, and that disorder did compel them to run away. However, the disorder was not in their minds, or not so at first or for all or even many, but in the capricious nature of slaveholders’

attitudes toward and actions against their chattel property. The anxiety of this type of existence has been pointed to in direct and searing ways within the literature of slavery and beyond. Frederick Douglass' 1845 *Narrative* exposes this phenomenon through his descriptions of the inclination of some masters and overseers, like Mr. Severe and Mr. Covey, to exploit their ability to move within and among the slave population, thus hindering the slave's ability to plan or undertake any sort of collective action. Charles Chesnutt, in his Conjure tales, offers equally disturbing examples of this caprice in stories like "Po' Sandy," "The Goophered Grapevine," and "Dave's Neckliss." Each of these stories has at its center the reality of the time—that masters and mistresses, not slaves decided the fate and experiences that those in bondage would suffer. The malady that Cartwright codified in his psychological terminology, which Douglass gave us the opportunity to witness through the episodes he recounts within his autobiography and that Chesnutt alludes to within his deceptively simple short fiction, would today be called *Generalized Anxiety Disorder*. This type of classification however is misleading, as it points to the possessors of the anxiety as those who should be considered as suffering with psychological dysfunction alone. Rather, I contend that those who ran, who were abused by overseers and slave breakers and subject to the irrational and indulgent pleasures of those in positions of power within the American paradigm of chattel slavery, represent only half of the equation concerning sanity and madness within their respective relationships. Consequently, it is important to properly position these victims and their maladies in relation to their oppressors and their unique forms of psychological dysfunction. That slaves and the progeny of slaves suffer from anxiety and paranoia that can be classified as dysfunctional is not at issue here; rather the concern I raise is

regarding the cause and effect dynamic of master/slave, white/black good/bad binary that such discussions seem to omit. The relatively recent horrific events of 9/11/01 have made us aware of the fact that when bad things happen to people unexpectedly, they can have unexpected and sometimes long lasting effects on the subject; effects that it may take many years to unravel and decipher from within the minds of the victim. Such latitude of time and patience has not been readily available to the black and poor of this country; instead charges of sloth and lethargy ring out, damning the black subject for his/her inability to take advantage of opportunities that are supposedly readily available to all; sounding eerily like those charges of Rascalism that were evoked over a century ago against our ancestors.

One of the primary arguments against the sentience of persons of color was the opinion that they lacked the ability to think rationally and correctly interpret irony. The history of black writing in America is riddled with examples of exactly the opposite, individuals of color possessing too much reason and rationality in the face of irrational fears and hatred at the hands of whites. Black America has never been without rational skills or the ability to apply them, rather their attempts had to be limited and curtailed by plantation law and later black codes so that the irrationality of dominant culture structures and systems would not be found out. If anything is true, it is that black people thought *too* much about issues that could not be successfully untangled via rational thought because they were not rational issues. Double Consciousness then is an example of thinking *too* much.

In secondary and college classrooms around the country, Du Boisian Double Consciousness is consistently used as a bridge to facilitate discourse between subjects

that have some distance between them, be it ideological, social, sexual, racial, or political, Double Consciousness, within its contemporary state, *reducto ad absurdum*, allows those excluded to feel some connection, to become a part of the group. Double Consciousness today makes possible the inclusion of the oppressors with the oppressed, the ones marking margins with the marginalized; blurring lines of difference and distinction by negating any uniqueness of experience through the process of legitimizing *any* opinion; *any* position, by means of one of the great tools of the postmodern era, relativism. I'll never forget the morning when in a discussion of Double Consciousness with my students in a class on black authors of the 1960's a student raised his hand and attested to his ability to understand it because of his experience with it. Intrigued, I urged the student to explain. He said that he understood Double Consciousness because as a younger child, his equestrian coach spent more time and paid more attention to the other students in the riding class than was spent tending to his needs and wants. I remember working hard to keep a professional demeanor and move forward with the discussion, despite my strongly felt urges to jump out of my skin, run, and never look back. In retrospect, I couldn't directly refute the comparison, despite its ridiculousness, because he had listened to my description of the concept and applied it to his own life. It made me think that that might be what Du Bois intended; to create a common space that allows for the inclusion of many, or any for that matter who had ever been ostracized or oppressed in thought or deed, within a single paradigm, making the process of forging ties of solidarity and community possible between heretofore disparate groups. I believe that Du Bois did intend Double Consciousness to be interpreted in this way, the concepts and theories of the philosophers and free thinkers he utilized as foundations for Double

Consciousness are in their construction neutral concerning race. I also however believe that Du Bois' concept can be interpreted in a much deeper way, one that excludes all but those "within the veil," those able to untangle its cruel "nigger joke." One of the hardest pedagogical issues I have concerning the exploration of Du Boisian Double Consciousness in my classrooms is that in spaces populated by predominately white students, I have to balance between an acceptance of their interpretation and application of Double Consciousness to their own lives, my own fixed synthesis of the same concept, and the inherent irreconcilability of the two. How do you acknowledge the salience of an interpretation, yet spare a concept, critical to your understanding, from the ravenous appetites of student "relativism," or liberal unfeeling? At the same school, a discussion took place during a faculty meeting about a teach-in concerning issues of race and diversity on our campus, with the suggestion that faculty take part in the teaching of these mini-sessions on a range of subjects that had our focus topics at their core. A faculty member spoke up, asking how reasonable it was to expect her to teach these mini-courses, since she's white, at which point the room's gaze slowly rotated towards the only African American faculty in the room— a room where I remained not much longer—before I walked out. After the meeting concluded, a colleague who had witnessed the moment that prompted my departure met me. He said that when I left, he immediately wondered why I had done so, but, that with further thought, he realized why and said to me in the stairwell, "I finally get it." He was only forty-five. Maybe there's still hope after all.

*O water, voice of my heart, crying in the sand,*

*All night long crying with a mournful cry,*

*As I lie and listen, and cannot understand  
The voice of my heart in my side or the voice of the sea,  
O water, crying for rest, is it I, is it I?  
All night long the water is crying to me.*

*Unresting water, there shall never be rest  
Till the last moon drop and the last tide fail,  
And the fire of the end begin to burn in the west;  
And the heart shall be weary and wonder and cry like the  
sea,  
All life long crying without avail,  
As the water all night long is crying to me.*

*Arthur Symons*

This epigraph introduces the text of chapter one of *Souls*, which is entitled, “Of Our Spiritual Strivings.” Existential and reverberating with the relentless and mournful imagery of weeping and a soul yearning for rest that will not come until the end of the world, the melancholic tone of this epigraph melds well with the text of a chapter that poses a rhetorical question of a similar hue: “How does it feel to be a problem” (Du Bois 43)? Even in the opening passage, which frames the question quoted above, Du Bois positions his central question as a barrier “between [himself] and the other world” (43). Usually an interrogative serves to initiate dialogue which would move participants toward some mutual understanding, but this rhetorical ploy on the part of Du Bois only

serves to confirm and maintain the distance between him and that world, the futility inherent in any answer matching that of the existential striving of the epigraph. This is the frame within which readers soon discover Double Consciousness as defined and articulated in *Souls*, a concept and experience that in its composition emanates dissonance, futility and misunderstanding, mirroring in text the lived experiences of people of color during the nadir of black life in America at the beginning of the twentieth century.

Du Bois prefaces his definition of Double Consciousness with an explanation of the manner by which he became possessed of it. The simple act of exchanging visiting cards in school as a small boy set in motion the elements of early twentieth century black life in America necessary to initiate his tutelage within the veil:

In a wee wooden schoolhouse, something put it into the boy's and girls' heads to buy gorgeous visiting cards—ten cents a package—and exchange. The exchange was merry, till one girl, a tall newcomer, refused my card,—refused it peremptorily, with a glance. Then it dawned upon me with a certain suddenness that I was different from the others; or like, mayhap, in heart and life and longing, but shut out from their world by a vast veil. (44)

Following this revelation, Du Bois distances himself from his black brethren, above the veil, if you will, by eschewing the impulses he witnesses toward obeisance, bitterness and despondency he has observed in others. Instead he becomes, perhaps for the first time, a social scientist, observing the behavior of his classmates and others, from a distance, so that he now can report to his readers his findings. His objectivity is not

limitless however, as later in the passage within this chapter he writes the now famous lines, which begin:

After the Egyptian, and Indian, the Greek and Roman, the Teuton and Mongolian, the Negro is a sort of seventh son, born with a veil, and gifted with second-sight in this American world,—a world which yields him no true self consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world. (44)

The “Gift” of second-sight that Du Bois speaks of isn’t really a gift; rather it is an impediment, one an owner would gladly give away. The irony of the passage may have been lost on the readers of his time, and perhaps on the contemporary scholars who teach and explore the essence of blackness through tomes such as this—but its not lost on me. Double Consciousness, a “peculiar sensation” by Du Bois’ subtly phrased account, is as tragically ironic as Oedipus’s gift of wisdom: both are conceived in innocence, yet doom the possessors to a life of misunderstanding and existential travail. The strength of Du Bois’ writing within this chapter of *Souls* can be found in its ability to hide in the open a truth no one was ready to accept, that blackness in this “American world” is madness if the “Gift” of Double Consciousness is allowed to flourish unabated. When one reads the oft quoted lines, “One ever feels his twoness,—an American, a negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals on one dark body whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder” (45), it is easy to gloss over the significance of this statement, to become mesmerized by the power of the phrasing and imagery it evokes, but what does that statement mean? Where within “unreconciled strivings” can one find hope? Where within “two warring ideals” is located synthesis and

closure? When we look beyond the heroic positioning of the Negro by Du Bois among the other “sons” of the world, Double Consciousness is a horrible state—one wherein an individual’s “dogged strength” is the only bulwark protecting him from being “torn asunder,” insidiously from within. Double Consciousness, within the context of *Souls* is indeed a metaphor for madness. I find it difficult to put forward any other interpretation, considering the sociological history of the concept Du Bois provides in *Souls* and the theoretical sources from which Du Bois derived elements of Double Consciousness as a student, first at Harvard studying Emerson and working under William James, and later in Berlin, where he would have been exposed to German philosophers, such as Schopenhauer, Hegel and Goethe. When the similarities in language and phrasing that exist between these thinkers and their ideas about the phenomenon of the “doubled self,” “doubling” and “doubled consciousness” are explored, it becomes evident that Du Bois was constrained by his desire to participate in endeavors of racial uplift from explicating Double Consciousness in a way that pointed clearly to the etymology of a concept grounded in earlier scholarship that had at its core issues orbiting around a central node of irreconcilable identities and psychic fracture. I believe that his work, like that of others who were ahead of their time, was destined to be best understood *after* their time, when society and the academy was better outfitted to properly interpret their theories within a different and more evolved social context. Moving forward from an interpretation of Double Consciousness that accepts it as a metaphor for madness, based on the history of the concept as Du Bois developed it, I believe that it is possible to utilize Double Consciousness in the project of explicating Black Madness within the literature of African Americans as they talk about their experiences, starting in slavery and moving

into our contemporary moment in history.

Throughout the entirety of *Souls*, there is only one chapter that is a fictional essay. Chapter thirteen, entitled, “Of the Coming of John,” represents the only component within Du Bois’ collection of essays that is not informed reportage (or) grounded in Du Bois’ own work as sociologist intent upon revealing the reality of those experiences shared by the millions like him who live within the “Veil.”

The narrative contrasts the experiences of two young men, both named John; one of whom is black, and the other white, as they grow to manhood from their beginnings within the Georgia town of Altamaha. The crucial element of this narrative is that both young men decide to depart their hometown for the challenge and promise of advancement within life as a college student. Neither young man attempts to disrupt the long held separation of the races in all things social and educational, each choosing to attend universities that adhere to the social philosophy of “separate but equal” in regards to enrollment and programs of study. In fact, this essay would appear to be easily classified as somewhat pedestrian in its early stages, except that Du Bois imbues it with an element of foreshadowing which points simultaneously to the tragic trajectory of the narrative and the most effective lens by which to properly interpret the story, psychological realism:

Thus in the far-away Southern village the world lay waiting, half consciously, the coming of two young men, and dreamed in an inarticulate way of the new things that would be done and new thoughts that all would think. And yet it was singular that few thought of two Johns,--for the black folk thought of one John, and he was black; and the white folk thought of

another John, and he was white. And neither world thought of the other world's thought, save with a vague unrest. (248)

Immediately following this passage in the chapter, John Jones, our black and primary protagonist, is faced with the reality of dismissal from college because of “repeated disorder[s] and inattention to work” (248). Upon his return, after being dismissed for a term, John has matured. He has become aware of the importance of scholarly rigor and focused attention to his studies; now he is a student. The reward earned through this reversal of attitude and behavior is a cruel lifting of a veil of ignorance to yet another veil that had been imperceptible to him, the one that separates the black and white world:

He grew slowly to feel almost for the first time the Veil that lay between him and the white world; he first noticed now the oppression that had not seemed oppression before, differences that erstwhile seemed natural, restraints and slights that in his boyhood days had gone unnoticed or been greeted with a laugh. He felt angry now when men did not call him “Mister,” he clenched his hands at the “Jim Crow” cars, and chafed at the color line that hemmed him in and his. (250)

Here begins John's true struggle—that of reconciling and pacifying the cognitive dissonance that accompanies Double Consciousness.

Singing with a quartet from the college in northern cities, he suffers another installment of the reality his blackness affords him in this white world. Swept away by a crowd of concertgoers, John buys a ticket to a performance of Wagner's “Lohengrin” and is enrapt by the beautiful music of the opera. So taken aback by the spectacle and wonder

of this new world, he doesn't recognize how unnerved those around him have become upon his arrival, and is shocked when he is escorted out of the concert hall by an usher who apologizes for having given him a seat that had already been assigned to someone else. Upon the realization of what has just occurred, John, when he reaches the outside says, "John Jones, you're a natural-born fool" (254)—foolish and crazy to think that he could just integrate this concert hall without incident, foolish and crazy to presume that he had rights that made him the equal to all those seated around him under the law.

Spurred by the rebuke he receives at the theatre, ironically offered by the white John from Altamaha, also in attendance at the performance, John Jones decides to go back home. When he returns, he discovers that he has changed in many significant ways, but sadly the town has not changed at all. Jubilant with the news of his return, many from the town come to greet him at the train station, only to discover him distant, uncommunicative and altogether a different man than the young boy they sent off burdened with all of their hopes and aspirations over seven years earlier. Once again, after less than a full page of text, Du Bois chooses to put the word "fool" into the mouth of a character, the white postmaster, as he assesses succinctly what has happened to John, he has "gone North and got plum full o' fool notions;" he concludes with a prediction that is sadly realized later in the text, "but they won't work in Altamaha" (255). This passage echoes with the pairings, "two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings, two warring ideals" (45), which initiate us to *Souls* in the first chapter. In fact, I believe Du Bois is depending on his readers to remember and re-apply those descriptors that framed Double Consciousness in the beginning of the text in the hopes that their earlier encounter will help them better interpret the concept when applied within a fictional

framework.

The remainder of this chapter's narrative tells the story of John Jones' return to Altamaha, his inability to successfully re-integrate himself into any niche within his hometown. He has become like an earlier black writer, Charles W. Chesnutt, "neither fish, flesh, nor fowl," always black, yet unable and unwilling to un-learn those things he has taken from the white world, thereby becoming unsuited for happy habitation within either. The dissonance that grows like a cancer within John is for a moment abated by his ability to teach in the Negro school. Challenged by the austere conditions and narrow license he has been granted by the white overseers of the school, nevertheless, he pushes forward, meeting the challenges with the heady zeal that Academe can draw from those with a burning desire to help others. Yet again another crushing blow is delivered to John, when the school is closed because he dared to expose his students to concepts like liberty and equality. Prophetically, John declares, "I cannot live here longer" (262), and decides to leave the town. Before he can reach the home of his mother and sister to deliver this news, John hears his sister's cry as she is accosted by the son of the judge, the white John he unknowingly encountered at the theatre, the white John he now brutally murders in retaliation for attempting to molest his sister as she walked home from work, but also for much, much more.

He said not a word, but, seizing a fallen limb, struck him with all the pent-up hatred of his great black arm; and the body lay white and still beneath the pines, all bathed in sunshine and in blood. John looked at it dreamily, then walked back to the house briskly, and said in a soft voice, 'Mammy, I'm going away—I'm going to be free.'

She gazed at him dimly and faltered,

‘No’th honey, is yo’ gwine No’th agin?’

He looked out where the North Star glistened pale above the waters and said,

‘Yes Mammy, I’m going North.

Then without a word he went out into the narrow lane, up by the straight pines, to the same winding path, and seated himself on the great black stump, looking at the blood where the body had lain. (263)

John’s “great black arm” is one and the same with the “dogged strength” of the first chapter, except this time that strength is being directed outward rather than inward. “Of the Coming of John” is a *fictional* piece amongst non-fictional essays because Du Bois could not deliver a black murderer of whites to his desired readership in any other fashion. The dialect and “conjure” elements that shielded readers from the harshest of truths about white inhumanity and cruelty being told by black authors who employed these devices, has been adapted by Du Bois, who instead now must shield his readership from the retributive rage that is at the core of race or ancestral memory for blacks in America. The times are changing. Black America is finding its voice, and Du Bois stands like John the Baptist, crying out in the wilderness on behalf of one who will come, bringing with him the solution and reckoning; answers to all of the shrieks and cries of the torturous middle passage, the horrific scenes of separation at the slave block, the merciless and capricious flesh eaters who used and discarded so many of our young and old for their selfish purposes. Du Bois’ biographer, David Levering Lewis, comments on Double Consciousness as being an evolutionary process, one that would offer future

blacks in this country the opportunity to utilize their “gift of second sight” in positive ways. I do not dispute this possibility; only insist that at the time of its conception and codification in text such a hopeful outlook was not possible. This text was published at the Nadir of black life in America; Blacks who had now been free for over one generation were faced with deprivations and institutionalized oppression that would blanch the fortitude of the most stalwart abolitionist before the war. Du Bois’ “Of the Coming of John” speaks for those who cannot; offers retribution on behalf of those who have been silenced by the grave. Frederick Douglass allows us to peer with him over the brink of madness in his 1845 *Narrative*; Du Bois takes us into the abyss, armed with a Double Consciousness that neither assuages nor mitigates, but only allows us to see the calm within the storm, the reason beneath the irrationality, the sanity within the madness of Blackness.

John’s act of murder and his own death at the hands of the lynch mob perhaps represent Du Bois’ attempt to graft his character and the story that frames him into a larger palate of ancient writings within the western tradition, as parallels within the narrative limn and cross into the spaces of earlier texts that were inscribed on clay, stone tablets, animal hides, and parchment as well as paper. Elements of Emerson’s originating “Double Consciousness,” specifically his assertion that sadly the two halves of one’s consciousness never have the opportunity to actually engage and comprehend one another resonate through the final portions of John Jones’ narrative, as violence meeting violence becomes the only method of communication between two men, nearly identical, save the imprimatur of race; brothers in significant ways according to Du Bois before the specter of blackness and what it means in a white world became known to them. Taking

the two Johns to be two halves of one fraternal entity, this narrative finds salient comparison to the Ur Text *Gilgamesh*, and the suffering encountered by the text's hero as he suffers the loss of a part of himself, through the death of Enkidu. Admonitions within the texts from the classic Greek period, warnings against infractions against one's kin seem to find their place within the final punishment that awaits John Jones as he stands on the ground he has so recently covered with the blood of one he could have called brother. Equally important are the connections that can be made between *Souls*, especially "Of the Coming of John," and later texts like Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*.

The parallels that exist between chapter thirteen of *Souls* and the beginning episodes of *Invisible Man* are uncanny; both protagonists start out on a journey of discovery through higher education, both are initially poorly equipped to accomplish their goals and must relocate themselves in the North as a form of penance and preparation for their return to the South to complete their education and serve to uplift and enlighten their people. That the narratives diverge significantly following the character's dismissal from college in their respective texts speaks to a broadening of possibilities for blacks and subsequently black narratives that became available to writers like Ellison, writing fifty years after Du Bois assembled and wrote the essays that would comprise *Souls*. John Jones, disappointed, disoriented and lacking a true sense of self is identical to the nameless protagonist of Ellison's text, as he wanders through New York City in search of some centering force that will give direction to his ambition, provide purpose to match his zeal. In regard to narrative structure, the fact that John Jones returns to college and eventually to his home in the South while Ellison's protagonist does not, I believe indicates the broadening of narrative and imaginative horizons Ellison was able to utilize

and exploit—due in great part to the pioneering work of his predecessor (and relative), Du Bois.

Du Bois' text is a brilliant, nascent attempt to define and explicate blackness to a white world. As such, he was bound by the literary and cultural constraints that held sway at the turn of the century in America for black writers of literature. For this reason, when John Jones kills a white man in this text, he must himself die; characters like Jones, and Charles Chesnutt's Josh Green, in spite of their justifications, are still "violent niggers" within their time period, not to be countenanced or understood by a white readership as being eligible after such crimes for anything but death; sin is punished, especially sins against a paternalistic white world. Ellison however, is able to envision his protagonist outside of the limiting binary of good and evil. As a result of Du Bois' early ventures into a narrow portion of this narrative field, Ellison was able to move freely within it, imagining and locating his protagonist within circumstances and situations unthinkable less than half a century earlier. Du Bois' investigation of psychological tropes such as self loathing and the murdering of the worse elements of the self, made possible the later further exploration of personal, societal and political dynamics of selfhood, within a black American context. Without Du Bois' work, specifically his codification of Double Consciousness, and its application within "Of the Coming of John," Ellison's later forays into psychological realism and modernism would lack the depth and cultural resonance for which it has become famous among texts within the western canon.

## Chapter Four

“You Must Be Out of Your Cotton-Picking Mind”:

Black Madness in *The Bluest Eye* and *Beloved*

*...Hereisthehouseitisgreenandwhiteithasareddooritis  
 veryprettyhereisthefamilymotherfatherdickandjaneliv  
 einthegreenandwhitehousetheyareveryhappyseejanesh  
 ehasareddressshewantstoplaywhowillplaywithjanethe  
 kittenwillnotplayseemothermotherisverynicemotherwil  
 lyouplaywithjanemotherlaughslaughmotherlaughseefa  
 therheisbigandstrongfatherwillyouplaywithjanefathe  
 rissmilingsmilefathersmileseethedogbowbowgoesthedo  
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 renundogrunlooklookherecomesafriendthefriendwillpl  
 aywithjanetheywillplayagoodgameplayjaneplay*

Few authors of Diaspora fiction have dealt more directly with the contexts, causalities and consequences of Black Madness than Toni Morrison. Rather than attempt to accomplish any comprehensive investigation within her entire body of writing, I will direct my attention to only the two texts in the title of this chapter. My choice is driven by the belief that these texts, her earliest novel and her most well known, represent models for the type of searching, unrepentant discourses that America is still incapable of engaging successfully, despite the fact that the fate of the Republic lies in the balance. These novels are populated with episodes that invite the reader to inhabit a different

perspective, a world view that is undoubtedly foreign for white readers and uncomfortably familiar for blacks, for the singular reason that they offer unflinching views of blackness in a white world; views that do not attempt to shield or blunt the impact of historical truths of American life. Or, as James Baldwin put it in his open letter to his nephew in *The Fire Next Time*,

I know what the world has done to my brother and how narrowly he has survived it. And I know, which is much worse, and this is the crime of which I accuse my country and my countrymen, and for which neither I nor time nor history will ever forgive them, that they have destroyed and are destroying hundreds of thousands of lives and do not know it and do not want to know it. (5)

Morrison, like Baldwin, spares no one in her creations, all are subject to the searing, cauterizing light of her truth-telling narratives, whose intent it is to illuminate and render whole fractured and incomplete American identities through the catharsis of her generative language.

From the opening of *The Bluest Eye*, readers encounter a portrait of American life that is less than ideal at best, dysfunctional at its worst. The opening Dick-and-Jane epigraph, is initially comforting and coded to take the reader back to that time of life when, for many, including me, it was the way one was introduced to the world of written and spoken language. As the epigraph slowly morphs into something less and less recognizable as a language, the once simple American Ur-narrative succumbs to a context—America—revealing in its maddening spiral incomprehensibility and meaninglessness. Morrison in this first text identifies and singles out the cause of Black

Madness—White Madness.<sup>9</sup> The epigraph signifies on the children’s reading primer and its Eurocentric assertions of homogeneity and stability, by removing the conventions of language that prop and support its exclusionary ideal. By unseating the primacy of its linguistic structure, she is able to offer this myth to her readers in its unadulterated form, unrestrained and unintelligible, a cacophony of sound without meaning, except for its verisimilitude.

Morrison foreshadows reversals and inversions of Eurocentric stability, the unsettling truths that populate her disturbing narrative, before the completion of the twelfth line of the first section, “Autumn”:

Rosemary Villanucci, our next-door friend who lives above her father’s café, sits in a 1939 Buick eating bread and butter. She rolls down the window to tell my sister Frieda and me that we can’t come in. We stare at her wanting to poke the arrogance out of her eyes and smash the pride of ownership that curls her chewing mouth. When she comes out of the car we will beat her up, make red marks on her white skin, and *she will cry and ask us do we want her to pull her pants down*. We don’t know what we should feel or do if she does, *but whenever she asks us*, we know she is offering us something precious and that our own pride must be asserted by refusing to accept. (12)[Italics mine]

In this passage, Morrison continues the unseating of Eurocentric images of free enterprise and the American ideal that she began in the Dick-and-Jane epigraph. Pointing unashamedly to the perverse nature of the dominant culture’s treatment of their own

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<sup>9</sup> Morrison invokes the term, “White Madness” in *Song of Solomon*.

children, she is able to utilize this surreal landscape of normalized prepubescent sexual submissiveness as background for the text's narrative of abuse, neglect and self-loathing within a forgotten corner of Black America.

Insanity is the ultimate insult. As a young child, when my mother asked this question, "have you lost your mind?" I knew two things for sure, she was very upset, and I was in a great amount of trouble. I'm reminded of this as I read and remember through Claudia's narration in the *Bluest Eye*, as she creates the gray landscape that is Lorain, Ohio, in the late thirties. Her initial depiction of the "great carloads of slag being dumped, red hot and smoking into the ravine that skirts the steel mill,"(12) remind me of the surreal moonscape I encountered as a child while visiting my mother's home town, Elisabeth, Pennsylvania, as I and my cousin ran up and tumbled down huge piles of cooled coke and coal slag, one of the few entertainments in a town that I remember best for leaving a fine mist of coal dust and soot on everything out of doors. The black families of Lorain in the novel, lurking about at night for bits and pieces of coal they can collect with their children, punctuate early on the austere conditions of the period, and the shame inherent in the acts of covert retrieval necessary to keep warm. Morrison offers us the invisible: black people, gathering coal--at night. This is not a part of the Dick-and-Jane story epigraph that we first encounter, and never will be; beyond the white picket fence there is another landscape, darker and more extreme in its demand on those who inhabit it. Parents should not have to roam about in search of fuel leavings under the cover of night; their "tired, edgy voices," point to a group of people who are consistently pushed to the limits of their endurance. In this state, one further thing to fret over, another something that goes wrong, threatens to push them over the edge of sanity, so it makes

sense, that questions of sanity would be a part of their common parlance:

Adults do not talk to us—they give us directions. They issue orders without providing information. When we trip and fall down they glance at us; if we cut or bruise ourselves, they ask us if we are crazy. ...when on a day after a trip to collect coal I cough once, loudly through bronchial tubes already packed with phlegm, my mother frowns ‘great Jesus. Get on in that bed. How many times do I have to tell you to wear something on your head? You must be the biggest fool in town.’ (12-13)

In the novel such invectives are hurled at children by defensive parents ashamed that they have to subject their child to such conditions. Yet it is a necessity because of the environmental racism that then and now dictates where poorer people of color can live and rear their children—it lies beneath the surface of poverty as part of the cause. My parents asked me “are you crazy?” not because they thought I was but because they wanted to stun me into a realization of the absurdity of my behavior within our current condition. The best method short of violence was shame;<sup>10</sup> the most shaming thing one could do was to be alive, but useless due to thoughtlessness in the family struggle to “get by.” This type of conditioning is intended to toughen the receiver, to help him/her buttress against an inevitable onslaught of treatment at the hands of the white world that would give no quarter; I, like Frieda and Claudia, was being prepared for the fight of my life. Claudia, after allowing the sickness to “take hold,” vomits after being forced to eat Vicks salve her mother hopes will speed her recovery, “[l]ater I throw up, and my mother

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<sup>10</sup> See *Quiet as its Kept: Shame and Trauma in the Novels of Toni Morrison* for a detailed exploration of these tropes in *The Bluest Eye*.

says' what did you puke on the bed clothes for? Don't you have sense enough to hold your head out the bed? Now, look what you did. You think I got time for nothing but washing up your puke'" (13)? Morrison softens this harsh picture of childhood by first proving the methods to be sound, through Claudia's mature voice, "by and by, I will not get sick; I will refuse to," and later in that same voice reflecting:

But was it really like that? As painful as I remember? Only mildly. Or rather, it was productive and fructifying pain. Love, thick and dark as Alaga syrup, eased up into that cracked window. I could smell it—taste it—sweet musty, with an edge of wintergreen in its base—everywhere in that house...it coated my chest along with the salve, and when the flannel came undone in my sleep, the clear sharp curves of air outlined its presence on my throat. And in the night when my coughing was dry and tough, feet padded into the room, hands repinned the flannel, readjusted the quilt, and rested a moment on my forehead. So when I think of autumn, I think of somebody with hands who does not want me to die.

(14)

Insanity permeates black life in Lorain, making its way in some form or other into the everyday speech and gossip of housewives. Morrison uses it to inoculate her readers from the full brunt of the tragedies she will later unfold. She presents it to us in the beginning of the novel also to foreshadow Pecola's ultimate end, "Remember Grinning Hattie? She wasn't never right. And their Auntie Julia is still *up and down Sixteenth Street talking to herself...Well, I hope don't nobody let me roam around like that when I get senile. It's a shame*" (15) [italics mine].

In a videotaped discussion of the novel *Beloved*, Morrison acknowledges her need to create a safe place for readers to go to when the narrative became oppressive (*Conversations*). I believe the opening pages of this novel, especially the above conversation between Mrs. MacTeer and her friends is an earlier version of that safe place to go; in this text it rather serves as a warning; these women, chorus-like in their cackling banter give in brief the argument of Morrison's first contribution to a tradition originated in Classical Greek tragedy: Betrayal, Family strife, madness, familiar parts of a tragic whole.

I believe that an integral element of this novel's success must be at its conclusion the opportunity it provides for the reader to step beyond an unfeeling and benign moral disavowal of the narrative's tragic end (which in itself is useless) toward an understanding of the conditions and causalities offered by the text *for* the realistic narrative. Only with that added component of understanding can thought become action, linking author-text-reader-world in ways that have significance and encourage growth and healthy change for a society.

Like Claudia in the opening monologue in the novel, I agree that “*why is difficult to handle;*” an effort in that direction would have to explore elements of sociology, psychology, and history of this period during the African American Diaspora as well as at the time of the novel's writing in 1969-70, a challenge best saved for another project. Instead, again like Claudia, I am resolved to explore *how*—specifically, *how did she get us to accept this?* If someone asked me if I would like to read a short novel about an ugly black girl who gets repeatedly raped and finally impregnated by her father, and who later goes insane after losing her child, I think I would quickly walk the other way.

But here I am. Over a decade after first encountering this novel I remain stuck to it, mired and admiring of the skill and talent of the author. This gift of creating unspeakable and extraordinary convergences is one she shares with Ellison; each creates narrative landscapes that contain realistic characters who are then pushed to the limits of their psychic and physical endurance, sacrificed almost for the sake of the understanding their tragedy might provide. In this effort, *Black Madness* is both a symptom and a cure: symptom of the guilt and anxiety ridden behavior of the American dominant culture, trickled down and lived out as abuse and neglect toward the invisible minorities within minorities that make up America's teeming underclass; cure in the escape and freedom it grants Pecola from the multitude of violent and dissonant voices that might otherwise populate her thoughts—a lesser of two evils. Is Morrison suggesting that being black in America means you have a greater chance of going crazy? Part of the artistry of the novel is its ability to win the reader's acceptance of episodes, which in part comprise it. Reader acceptance comes in part from the willingness to believe the situations and events depicted in the text as plausible. If plausibility has any connection to familiarity or comfortability, then Morrison's novel is guilty of getting us to see *ourselves*--that is its gift—and in doing so the black America must accept that many of us have a Pecola Breedlove somewhere in our lives, and that the conditions that (de)formed her young psyche still pose a risk to the unseen and silent marginalized poor in America. As Norris Clark says, “[h]er novels question counterfeit white ideals, social standards that warp the black family and neighborhood, and moral chaos in black America as a consequence of and reflective of the disorder in white American and international conflicts” (Qtd. In Heinze 125).

Morrison's character Pecola and I both like candy. My favorite was lemonheads. Gently chew off the outer sour lemon-sugared shell and beneath lay a sweet yellow hard candy that would yellow and burn your tongue. Heaven. Pecola's only independent investigation of the white world in the novel, a trip to the candy store, ends in a disturbing deepening of her dependence on whiteness for a reification that will never occur. Again and again, Morrison takes simple actions and circumstances—a lone black child getting candy at Mr. Jacobowski's grocery store—and transforms it into a momentary glimpse at a moment of apocryphal dissolution, a moment where the outside world shuns *black* you, easily forgotten amongst a sea of experiences within a lifetime; but in this moment, we are able to witness its destructive effect on a young psyche:

Standing before the counter, she looks at the array of candies. All Mary Janes, she decides. Three for a penny. The resistant sweetness that breaks open at last to deliver peanut butter—the oil and salt which complement the sweet pull of caramel. A peal of anticipation unsettles her stomach. (42)

Mr. Jacobowski's social status, while far from the upper echelon of social hierarchy in Lorain, easily outstrips that of the child now before him, allowing him to determine that

He need not waste the effort of a glance. He does not see her, because for him there is nothing to see. How can a fifty-two year-old white immigrant storekeeper with the taste of potatoes and beer in his mouth, his mind honed on the doe-eyed Virgin Mary, his sensibilities blunted by a permanent awareness of loss, see a little black girl? Nothing

in his life even suggested that the feat was possible, not to say desirable or necessary. (42)

Morrison crafts an initiating moment of Du Boisian Double Consciousness in the paragraph that follows, as Pecola synthesizes her experience at the candy store. The child is only Black, not stupid, so she, through the voice of the omniscient narrator describes the methodical comprehension and tragic response to the storeowner's rejection of her humanity:

As she looks up at him and sees the vacuum where curiosity ought to lodge. And something more. The total absence of human recognition—the glazed separateness. She does not know what keeps his glance suspended. Perhaps because he is grown, or a man, and she is a little girl. But she has seen interest, disgust, even anger in grown male eyes. Yet this human vacuum is not new to her. It has an edge; somewhere in the bottom lid is the distaste. She has seen it lurking in the eyes of all white people. So. The distaste must be for her blackness...her blackness is static and dread. And it is blackness that accounts for, that creates, the vacuum edged with distaste in white eyes. (42)

Morrison in this seemingly benign incident crystallizes Double Consciousness; she captures the separateness, the diminution and comprehensive dissonance of this moment in the child's mind, framing it with the equally tragic reality of Mr. Jacobowski's, Pecola's emissary from the white world. His tragically limited life far surpasses anything that Pecola can ever even dream of; furthermore, in this moment of comparison of caste and condition, the bleary-blue-eyed white man is still permanently

ahead on three counts: blue eyes, white, and male. Pecola is given no reason at all to respect, love or regard her own black self, meanwhile every register she can recognize points to the primacy and dominance of whiteness, suggesting that the only viable solution is to acquire the signal element of whiteness—blue eyes—to outstrip her flawed skin:

Each pale yellow wrapper has a picture on it. A picture of little Mary Jane, for whom the candy is named. Smiling white face. Blond hair in gentle disarray, blue eyes looking at her out of a world of clean comfort. The eyes are petulant, mischievous. To Pecola they are simply pretty. She eats the candy, and its sweetness is good. To eat the candy is to somehow to eat the eyes, eat Mary Jane, love Mary Jane. Be Mary Jane. (43)

The episode speaks to the ease with which the innocent and uninitiated experience and fall victim to the complexities that are part of the American experience of racialized difference. Denise Heinze, in *The Dilemma of Double Consciousness: Toni Morrison's Novels*, confirms the necessity to re-think and confront the racialized implications of the Western European concept of “Beauty:” “The controlling metaphor for this state of affairs is in the title, the bluest eye—the transparent eyeball gone mad—that becomes a synecdoche for western beauty, for schopenhila and objectification, appropriation and commodification, acquiescence and insanity” (25).

In his text, *The Politics of Experience*, R. D. Laing, discussing the interplay between contexts and the difference between sanity and insanity, explains that within circumstances or persistent conditions that are in themselves insane, insanity or an insane act may be the most logical and “sane” thing one can do. In relation to schizophrenia, he

states:

In over 100 cases where we studied the actual circumstances around the social event when one person comes to be regarded as schizophrenic, it seems to us that without exception the experience and behavior that gets labeled schizophrenic is a special strategy that a person invents in order to live in an unlivable situation. In his life situation the person has come to feel he is in an untenable position. He cannot make a move, or make no move, without being beset by contradictory and paradoxical pressures and demands, pushes and pulls, both internally from himself, and externally from those around him. He is, as it were, in a state of checkmate. (115)

In the world of this young black child, a world bleak and bereft of real hope, one populated with dysfunctional and disinterested parents, contemptuously ignorant whites, and a black community that embraces her only as a pariah,<sup>11</sup> praying to God incessantly for blue eyes gains some credulity, and indeed makes sense, where everything else is the reverse of what it should be. The close inspection of this innocent wish of a child at a candy store and its antecedents shows it to be far more caustic and capable of spreading the contagion of Du Bois' "gift of second sight" than the scene's brevity and mundane frame readily suggest. Morrison is showing the reader here that it is the little things that

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<sup>11</sup> The collection, *Toni Morrison, Critical Perspectives, Past and Present*, Edited by H.L. Gates and K. Anthony Appiah, holds an excellent investigation of characters like Pecola within Morrison's writing that serve as scapegoats in the biblical sense for the communities they inhabit on the margins.

accumulate and metastasize, becoming the larger cancerous behavior and conditions about which we later puzzle over regarding origins and legitimacy when fully formed and bent on destruction.

Throughout the novel, Pecola only gets angry once, at a dandelion; a weed, Morrison writes that is among the few things this black child can own, along with a crack in the sidewalk. Morrison utilizes these formative encounters with nature and the urban world to represent the accommodation required to put a “good face” on the plight of the urban poor. Sidewalk cracks indicate “bad neighborhoods,” of the sort that the Breedlove household is a part. These same sidewalks choke out all but the heartiest of plants, like the dandelion. Even a weed such as this can be seen as beautiful when there’s nothing else around. In subtle ways, Morrison is putting a painful face on the poverty that her writing confronts: locating the origins of want and unsatisfied desire in the mind of a young child where nature is comprised of broken concrete and weeds. Pecola is the “Dandelion of Lorain,” as a student of mine once described her in a paper; she represents a ruddy beauty that she tragically will never see or understand, possessing nevertheless an inner strength and resilience that belies her frail form. Some scholars like Heinze, insist that Morrison’s early novels were unable to convey truly operative alternatives for family life: “What she [Morrison] is further suggesting is that alternative formations—even those in her own novels—are not often possible because millions of people still cling to the Dick-Jane-Spot utopia, and because they cannot completely separate themselves from their social/historical/economic context” (Heinze 99).

Among the black families also affected by the flawed utopia of the novel’s epigraph are the Peals and the family of Geraldine, Louis and Junior. Maureen Peal and

her litigating parents represent the black family of the future. Actively seeking out the rights and privileges they deserve as tax paying progressive blacks, they have found a spot on the soft underbelly of New Deal America in the forties and settled in to feast. They seem to have achieved the plateau of acceptance within the white world, albeit by means of civil suits they have been allowed to file, but even these black folk share some blemish—for Maureen it is the scar from the operation that removed her sixth finger; suggesting abnormality even amongst those that seem most normal. Maureen's cutting proclamation of her own beauty and the ugliness of the other girls also stands as proof of the price paid for assimilation and acceptance; the needful distancing from all things black, familiar, accepting, in exchange for a sterile, homogenous whiteness. Critiques of this novel include concerns over revealing the truth about intra-racial racism, or "colorism" as Heinze has referred to it. Heinze states:

Morrison's bout with colorism seems a necessary purgative in her attack on ideal standards of beauty, which in her experience, it appears, have been most abused by light skinned blacks. Morrison spares no feelings; she feels no compunction, to mitigate her belief that the valorization of light skinned beauty is the most disturbing and prevalent form of colorism and thus functions as one of the greatest barriers to the spiritual and psychic health of the black community. (21)

The fact that this type of behavior permeates the black communities of this nation sadly confirms the second-level insidiousness of racism and racialized thought in America—racism gains ground in its quest to consume and destroy the "Other" from a box seat; Double Consciousness insures that we will destroy each other.

*The Bluest Eye* derides the Dick and Jane Utopist vision of America beginning with Junior and the playground. The family's victory, securing a family home adjacent to a school for Junior to attend, is pyrrhic in that he cannot even interact with the other black boys who inhabit the school playground at recess. The necessity of a little boy to fanaticize about *play* is tragic: "Junior used to long to play with the black boys. More than anything in the world he wanted to play king of the mountain and have them push him down in the mound of dirt and roll over him." (87) Morrison quickly reveals the teleology of Junior's familial dysfunction, showing him to be yet another tragic child victim of parental obsessions with whiteness (or at least their conception of it) as equivalent to wholeness, wellness, and peace. Geraldine internalizes in equal doses abhorrence for the southern culture of genteel manners she and those like her ironically sustained, and an obsessive vigilance against the ever present threat of being found out by whites. Double Consciousness claims another victim in the text, as Geraldine removes anything that might even *sound* like authentic blackness that was not her creation: "Geraldine did not allow her baby to *cry*. As long as his needs were physical, she could meet them—comfort and satiety. *He was always brushed, bathed, oiled and shod* [italics mine] (86). The subject of this passage sadly could be mistaken for a horse, but I take Morrison's meaning. Women like Geraldine and the oppressive stifling obsession with "correctness" that defines their lives never really live at all; instead they replicate what has been presented to them in the press and their world as normal, happy, healthy—white. Geraldine and her sisters are legion, Morrison seems to be suggesting, with so many towns listed, each offering up its best examples of southern womanhood for the cause of equality and advancement, that countless households contain a "Junior,"

torturing a puppy or kitten because he receives no affection from his mother, learning to loathe his own blackness to satisfy the isolation concomitant with his superiority. Junior and the many black children being molded in newly integrated neighborhoods all over the United States were being groomed for assimilation, or alternatively, they were developing into the same type of individual that Cholly became, through an entirely different route. Younger than Cholly whose spiral from security and love toward disease and cruelty were more aggressive than his, Junior is the character that frightens me the most in this novel; his privilege and cunning are used to betray the trust of those smaller and weaker, while he hides deep scars of abandonment and isolation. His pathology will not abate as he matures, there'll be no need; college educated, raising a family of his own in an exclusive yet racially balanced neighborhood, wife, children and possibly mistress will bear the brunt of his seething seemingly endless resentment, rage, and rationalization over the control his parents exerted over his life.

The cost of assimilation seems to be sanitization; Geraldine reigns over her domestic sphere like a gorgon, protecting and projecting whiteness and stability where possible. Those elements Morrison refers to as “funk,” or “funkiness,” are the remnants of a black past Geraldine and women like her strive to distance themselves from. They opt for the façade of white normality, ironically only to discover that it is a sham, and that the price they paid for entrance was too high. As a result, purportedly normal families like this vibrate just below the surface with anxiety, frustration, shame and rage. Rather than be free of a lifestyle and ideology that creates such inner turmoil and tragic expressions, Geraldine, and black families she represents, embrace it, struggling to be free of all remnants of blackness that might offend a white gaze. It is important not to

forget the context of this section of the novel; the migration to the north by southern blacks necessitates acculturation to northern codes of behavior and civility. Geraldine and her family are Anglophiles, giving over their own identity for one they believe will secure them safety against the price of blackness, but they have nested in the lion's mouth. The decisions of Geraldine and her husband not only affect them, but also their child in his development within this new and sanitized black space.

Morrison facilitates an encounter between Junior and Pecola, one that provides a horrific moment of discovery and dissolution for the youngest Breedlove—the discovery that “good” black people will lie and hurt you too. Junior, although not yet an adolescent, is already a complex pastiche of resentment, loneliness, and psychosexual repression; the creation of an unloving but overprotective mother and a present yet disinterested father. Within this environment, Junior learns all he needs to become a “man” from his parents: controlling, manipulative, insensitive, and punitive behavior are the norm, therefore he is able to mete this out to those few visitors he does encounter with draconian precision. The scene develops as Pecola wanders within range of Junior's home and is invited in under the guise of seeing some kittens. Tricked into entering the home, Pecola is quickly the brunt of a cruel joke, one that entails junior throwing the family cat, directly at Pecola, who receives a face full of fur and claws. This torture however, is insufficient, as Junior then forces Pecola and the cat into a room separate from him. Sadly, this seems to be the only way he is able to get any young people to stay with him. Junior is shocked when instead of shrieks and cries from beyond the door he holds shut he hears nothing, and upon opening he is faced with Pecola and the family cat, peacefully getting acquainted. The cat, already the recipient of his mother's only demonstrative tenderness

and affection, becomes the second victim in Junior's retaliatory tirade, as she is swung around by the leg until Pecola's attempts to free her result in the cat's being flung at full force against a window, ending crumpled and silent behind a radiator. Capstone to this horrific scene is Geraldine's return home at that very moment. Morrison's genius shines through this tragic scene, as she is able to capture the anxiety over blackness and its "funkiness" *and* the dysfunction, which becomes hereditary when a mother tries to be someone other than who she is and teaches their offspring to be just like her. Pecola and Geraldine's unexpected meeting has the effect of confirming everything negative and destructive she has learned to feel and believe about her own people; in Pecola she sees her past and again is given another opportunity to reject it:

She looked at Pecola. Saw the dirty torn dress, the plaits stickling out on her head, hair matted the plaits had come undone, the muddy shoes with the wad of gum peeping out from between the cheap soles, the soiled socks, one of which had been walked down in to the heel of the shoe. She saw the safety pin holding the hem of the dress up. Up over the hump of the cat's back she looked at her. She had seen this little girl all of her life. Hanging out of windows over saloons in Mobile, crawling over the porches of shotgun houses on the edge of town, sitting in bus stations holding paper bags and crying to mothers who kept saying "shet up!" Hair uncombed, dresses falling apart, shoes untied and caked with dirt. They had stared at her with great uncomprehending eyes. Eyes that questioned nothing and asked everything. Unblinking and unabashed, they stared up

at her. The end of the world lay in their eyes, and the beginning and all the waste in between. (92)

Despite the finality of tone and imagery the preceding passage holds, Morrison is not done with us yet, she hasn't finished showing us the depth of contempt that black madness entails within the mind of the victim. Black Madness, not unlike a virus, possesses the ability to mutate and transform itself dependent on the constitution and condition of its host. In the following passage, Morrison completes her diatribe, as Geraldine expunges all vestiges of her black past through its present propitiator, Pecola, who, she metaphorically shits it out on:

They were everywhere. They slept six in a bed, all their pee mixing together in the night as they wet their beds each in his own candy-and-potato-chip dream. In the long, hot days, they idled away, picking plaster from the walls and digging into the earth with sticks. They sat in little rows on street curbs, crowded in to pews at church, taking space from the nice neat, colored children; they clowning in the playgrounds, broke things in dime stores, ran in front of you on the street, made ice slides on the sloped sidewalks in winter. The girls grew up knowing nothing of girdles, and the boys announced their manhood by turning the bills of their caps backward. Grass wouldn't grow where they lived. They lived on cold black-eyed peas and orange pop. Like flies they hovered; like flies they steeled. And this one had settled in her house. Up over the hump of the cat's back she looked.

“Get out,” she said, her voice quiet. “You nasty little black bitch.

Get out of my house” (92)

Geraldine’s form of black madness is then in stark contrast to the version she has helped “take hold” in the young mind of Pecola. Through a common link of a self-loathing which they share as signifier, Geraldine’s inner dissonance, her madness, her blackness, is assuaged through the subjugation of all those around her, especially those black, poor, and ugly. This categorical denial of the viability and humanity of black people like her is the stigmata of an older system of subjugation that has its roots in histories annals of nascent empire. What better way to keep a people from achieving their true potential than to set them to the task of attacking and denigrating one another? Within this episode of the novel, Pecola has been outnumbered, the names and identities of those who stand in judgment of her, represented by Geraldine, are legion.

What she is unable to comprehend is the teleology of the day’s events; the fact that as Denise Heinze writes, “Pecola bears the brunt of the rage that has seeped into the tidy lives of Geraldine and Junior. In an echo chamber effect, Pecola becomes the victim of Junior who is the victim of Geraldine who is the victim of centuries of oppression”(71). In a way, families like that of Geraldine, Louis and Junior, doom themselves to a fractured and dissonant life by seeking, striving and acquiring the object of their desire. In reward for their northern migration, these folks in “Morrison’s northern communities suffer the greatest hardship and are nearer collapse and ruin because of their proximity to the white world and their susceptibility to its influence” (108). These negative effects trickle downward in this novel, moving further and further away from individuals who at least have a chance of surviving the black madness that is the effect of

this incessant drip, drip, drip of societal contempt and neglect, landing squarely on the forehead of a helpless child like Pecola. Yet her tragedy could be read on her face, in her clothes, her posture, as could be said for her mother and father. Louis, Geraldine, and Junior however, *look* every bit the part of a normal family.

The family unit, its composition, condition and possibilities are consistently critiqued and investigated in Morrison's novels, but perhaps never more critically than in *The Bluest Eye*. Morrison's depictions of the Breedlove family, from their ironic naming to the destructive events that punctuate and end their presence in the novel, point to the destructive effects of self loathing, alcoholism, and the reification of an anachronistic aesthetic on the family unit. Behind this scene however is where the real horrible things have occurred, things that Morrison is allowing us to see, some for the first time. Morrison's depictions of family life, of the MacTeers, the Peals, Junior's family, the three whores, and the Breedloves, assert the imperfection of these assemblages, through what I call Defamiliarizing Realism. The nuclear family that is signified on in the Dick and Jane epigraphs is out of date, if it in fact ever existed in America at all. Nevertheless, this image and its implicit requirements for beauty and acceptance continue to be dispersed to the population, regardless of whether or not those, like the black families mentioned above, can or wish to accept and assimilate toward these ideals. These families, modulating between health and dysfunction, serve as miner's canaries for the degree of black familial commitment to this flawed aesthetic, representing varying levels of exposure and consumption of a conception that suffocates its host. These realistic representations of black family life were unknown, unnoticed, or unspoken about in 1970; Morrison's novel defamiliarizes its readers with the

conventional family, exploding that set of myths and replacing them with visions and conditions rife with painfully truthful representations of that conventional family:

In all of her novels Morrison defamiliarizes the notion of family that still dominates the consciousness of the typical reader so inundated by history, religion, the media, advertising, and even political rhetoric, that she has been forced to see patriarchy as a natural and desirable form of familial organization, and made to feel isolated or excluded if she does not embrace it, though it is now very much the exception rather than the rule.

(Heinze 99)

In the same way early black writers such as Charles Chesnutt, W. E. B. Du Bois, and Zora Neale Hurston found it necessary to *re*-educate their readers about black life through thought, disabusing them of the spurious depictions and limiting implications of blackness being propagated by persistent southern apologists and well intentioned northern progressives through literary realism and naturalism, Morrison's *Defamiliarizing Realism* is tasked to unseat inaccurate images and connotations of blackness that have been propagated through stereotype and caricature in an attempt to silence, divide, and stifle unrest and dissent, and continue over a century later. This novel in particular cleared the path for truthful representation of blackness in the post-civil rights era. Sadly, the novel, in its truthful representations shows black life to be in many ways tragically cyclical:

For blacks time does not necessarily insure resurrection, nor is it the exclusive construction of the psychology of the interior. What is more significant to them is the external time that is the indifferent agent of

continued physical, emotional, and psychological suffering. A rather bleak notion for sure, but is one also that strikes a chord deep in the psyche, a pessimistic belief that society never really improves, just repeats itself.

(Heinze 123)

Throughout the United States the wave of compassion and capital that raced to cover and serve those who were affected by the tragic events of 9/11 and the stark difference in reaction to the victims of Hurricane Katrina implicates the nation as favoring its *white affluent* demographic far more deeply than it does its *poor black/brown* contingent. This bias was evident in *The Bluest Eye*—in fact, it is on trial—charged with the willful destruction of countless innocent, unimportant lives like that of Pecola Breedlove, a character who looks far more like the people I saw housed in the Astrodome last year than the types I saw fleeing the scene of the Twin Tower's collapse five years ago. Morrison's novel looks backward at the indifference and suffering poor blacks lived with and within during this WWII era, but she is also signifying on the Moynihan Report of 1965, forecasting doom for the emasculated black family, the permanence of permanents and skin lightening creams through the era of "Black Power." Pecola is the child Marvin Gay is singing about in 1970, on "What's Going On?" the one we should be living for and trying to save. I was six years old at the time of that album's release; I was one of the "babies" Marvin was asking all of us to save in his music. Today like Mos Def, I must ask, "What would Marvin have to say about how we are living now, what progress has been made since his time?" The persistence of poverty and the psychological trauma of abandonment within black communities, like those of the 9<sup>th</sup> Ward in Louisiana, show

Marvin to be prophetic while Morrison's thirty year old admonition to remember, love and protect the youngest and most vulnerable in our society continues to go unheeded.

“In her first three novels, Morrison uses death and insanity as a way to bring the reader back to the reality of the corrupting and destructive forces of an oppressive society,” (85) states Denise Heinze, in her text on Morrison and Double Consciousness. Defamiliarizing Realism, in its ability to “bring the reader back” through, de-centering conventional models of family and bourgeois normality, shocks the reader from a benign acceptance of the status quo to a realization of the horrific things that are occurring daily within communities, both dominant and minority, through the sacrifice of the sanity of Pecola.

Morrison's methodical investigation of the upbringing and maturation of Cholly, Pauline and their combative marriage frames their child's capitulation to madness. The close attention she pays to the maturation and migration rituals that these characters endure show them as holding the seeds of the destruction and confusion that will occur later in the novel. When Pauline Williams and her family leave Alabama for Kentucky at the beginning of WWI, Morrison explores the migration trope in a different way; not only looking at where she is coming from, where she is going and why she is leaving, but most importantly who and what she is at the time of her departure. Morrison suggests that we bring our difference and even dysfunction with us wherever we go; although it is not always readily identifiable as dysfunction in the form we first know it.

Pauline's lame foot, punctured by a rusty nail when she was two, serves as the first marker of difference for this character from the blacks in her Alabama community.

Her method of accepting and living with this injury, one Morrison herself calls “slight,” nevertheless serves to set her apart from the remainder of her community in the south:

Slight as it was, this deformity explained for her many things that would have been otherwise incomprehensible: why she alone of all the children had no nickname; why there no funny jokes and anecdotes about funny things she had done; why no one ever remarked on her food preference—no saving of the wing or neck for her—no cooking peas in a separate pot without rice because she did not like rice; why nobody teased her; why she never felt at home anywhere, or that she belonged anyplace. Her general feeling of separateness and unworthiness she blamed on her foot. (110, 111)

Neglected by her community, Pauline turns inward to entertain and amuse herself. Armed as I am with the knowledge of the novel’s outcome, the details surrounding her inclination to “arrange things” take on a different implication for me as a reader, one suggesting nascent Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder, or a similar behavioral irregularity when fully exposed and developed as she matures into adulthood in Ohio. Pauline, armed with only a fourth-grade education, her neighbors and kin migrate to Kentucky in search of jobs and a new life there, a place “where there were mines an work” (111). She and her kind represent a different type of migrating black than the sort represented by Geraldine. Pauline, a young member of a growing underclass of undereducated blacks, was still able to retain and actually gain some ground in a quest for normality and stability, sadly however, this stability required Pauline to remain the same in servile status and subordinate class as her recently emancipated relatives and ancestors. She found in

Kentucky a temporary respite from her loneliness and isolation through her ability to now “arrange” things with a purpose, helping her mother keep house and tend to the needs of her siblings. These images of home are nevertheless still punctuated by the recurring theme of loneliness and unrequited desire within Pauline; she, as her daughter will a few decades later, simply wants to be loved by someone and does not know how or when that will occur. Unlike her daughter, however, Pauline has the benefit of a healthy nuclear family and community within which she can tarry until he comes. Pauline’s first love affair is with God; through the church and especially its music, she is able to conceive of someone who will deliver her, save her, love her. While these are all things that God promises to do for his children, there is a twisting of intention and meaning that can be seen in Morrison’s depiction of Pauline’s foot—contorted and atrophied—that matches the misinterpretation of Bible promises by this young girl.

In *The Bluest Eye* there seems to be no place for Christianity, as each chapter and episode that includes any references without exception shows the character’s interpretation or use of religion or faith to be either a gross misinterpretation or an insincere misuse. Scriptures and prayers become invectives and oaths used by Pauline to have her sanctified revenge on her alcoholic, abusive husband. In these violent moments, even a child’s silent prayer to become invisible represents an escape, but not to God—she doesn’t want to go to Heaven, she just can’t stay here. Mr. Henry, the good natured boarder in the MacTeer household, finds the words and melody to “Nearer My God to Thee” only after having been run out of his shoes by an overhead shotgun blast intended to evict and threaten harm by an enraged Mr. MacTeer, who has just discovered Mr. Henry has touched Frieda’s prepubescent breasts. It is the character of Soaphead Church,

however, that best captures the author's critical assessment of Christianity in this novel. Soaphead's dysfunctions, his phobias, obsessions and pedophilia, attributed to the inbreeding amongst his ancestors, ironically position him in the community of Lorain, Ohio as a pious spiritual advisor. It is Soaphead that frees Pecola from her cares as a little ugly black girl, he provides her with that thing that she has wanted more than anything, blue eyes. Their exchange of faith and service serve as a tragic capstone to a narrative replete with damage, desolation, and self-loathing. No family structure, nuclear or unconventional, provided her with the support necessary to withstand the onslaught of her own society's disdain and indifference; the child's entrance into an agreement with this charlatan is merely the final blow suffered by Pecola's bruised and battered spirit.

Perhaps the greatest element of tragedy in the *Bluest Eye* isn't the list of terrible incidents its protagonist endures, but the fact that her family didn't want to end up the way it did, and consequently didn't want to raise their family the way they had, or fail their daughter to the extent they did; her mother and father very much wanted to have a normal family and family life, but life, black life in white America got in the way of their dreams. All these characters had to do to be cursed with the lives they had was to be black and poor. Everything else was already taken care of: Pecola found herself born an ugly little black child in a world that values physical beauty in destructive ways, to a set of parents who had already been scarred by that same world by the time she was conceived. Her life as a little girl was lived dodging the flying objects that signaled her parent's vicious devotion to one another, an existence that left her with a supreme desire to simply cease to be. Adolescence in this place, trapped with bitter and uncaring parents leaves her to seek friendship from whomever she can or who will accept her ugliness,

which she does, perhaps because she represents someone the three whores can feel sorry for. Other friendships are fleeting, punctuated by glimpses at stability short lived, each episode making me brace for the next disaster, which, the narrative can readily provide. Part of the reason *The Bluest Eye* is the powerful novel it is because to a great extent, Morrison did not have to make this stuff up; her location, as well as some details and characters suggest not personal experience per se, but personal knowledge, at least of the type of community that could allow such events to occur. Pecola's behavior at the denouement of the novel is even robbed of uniqueness—don't forget ol' crazy Hattie—Morrison has set us up; but offering a feint in a narrative about an ugly little girl, she makes possible the cathartic acknowledgement of our own complicity in the creation and sustaining of environments as damaging and seemingly innocent as that of Lorain. Too many of us know a Pecola or have helped make one in our own towns and cities, little girls and boys walking around, able to talk only with themselves. In a tragic way, such instances, Morrison seems to be suggesting, are part of the price of modernity, the by-product of an over emphasis on capital and profit and the diminished significance of caring for and about people.

Morrison's chorus of women serves to close and abbreviate the tragic scene at the novel's end:

Did you hear about that girl?

What? Pregnant?

Yas. But guess who?

Who? I don't know all these little old boys"

That's just it. Ain't no little old boy. They say it's Cholly.

Cholly? Her daddy?

Uh-huh.

Lord. Have mercy. That dirty nigger.

Member that time he tried to burn them up? I knew he was crazy for sure then.

What's she gone do? The mama?

Keep on like she been, I reckon. He been taken off.

County ain't gone let her keep that baby is they?

Don't know.

None of them Breedloves seem right anyhow.” (147)

With this final condemnation, the vestiges of the Breedlove family, Pecola and Mrs. Breedlove, are dismissed to live out their lives on the other side of the railroad tracks—they have been put *out of doors*—the designation assigned to the lowest caste and class of blacks in this novel's societal structure. She is an Untouchable citizen within a marginalized society. Does her end in the novel suggest condemnation and isolation, or salvation and freedom? Chikwenye Okonjo Ogunyeme, in her investigation of Pecola's plight as representative of black women who go mad in black literature states:

In spite of the blues, black women occasionally go mad. Unlike negatively presented white madwomen, the black madwoman in novels written by black women knows in her subconscious that she must survive because she has people without other resources depending on her; in a positive about-face she usually recovers through a superhuman effort, or somehow, aids others...In the *Bluest Eye*, the peculiar Pecola goes mad on

the surface but acquires an interior spiritual beauty symbolized by the bluest eye (an “I” that is very blue). In this mixed state she acts as the scapegoat so that “all who knew her –felt so whole some after [they] cleaned [them]selves on her. (74)

Beyond the murmurings of both this child to herself, and the black community in their hushed discussions about her and her fate, lay a more sinister and ominous vibration, one that levels a finger of blame at the white communities that fostered and facilitated the dysfunction we see fully developed in the novel’s protagonist. In *The Bluest Eye* the white world is an occasional backdrop, one that reminds black characters of their subordinate place and their relative invisibility in relation to whiteness. A more developed investigation into dominant culture culpability within the tragic and self destructive lives of the novel’s primary characters would re-direct our attention towards white culture in a way that would ironically divest the text of its ability to fully produce voices and meaning for those very black lives lived through the text.

Any meaningful investigation and discussion of Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* represents a challenge to the interpreter/experiencer/interlocutor. The text, with its circulating narrative structure serves to confound the initiate western reader, expecting it to possess the linear narrative form readers have come to expect from American literature. On first sight the work appears to be a narrative of oppression, one owning as subject the explication of experiences had by characters cast within the period of American chattel slavery. *Beloved* appears to be an historical novel, focusing its gaze on events constructed around an historical fulcrum, the second Fugitive Slave act of 1850,

legislation that served to plunge America even deeper into the abyss of social, political and economic dependence on a system that could only inevitably do the country great harm. Indeed some of the most fertile and creative minds of the recently past twentieth and current twenty first century have dedicated literally thousands of pages and innumerable hours of inquiry and analysis toward the task of understanding the myriad complexities of Morrison's genius as exhibited in this novel—but that is perhaps part of the problem—it is *not* a novel.

In a discussion of her work, Morrison describes the project of *Beloved* as an attempt to do something different from what had been done before with the historical record of American slavery. Earlier writers she asserts, when dealing with the vast history of the institution and its impact on the American landscape and psyche, were forced to settle for surface investigations of the captured African's experiences in America, for the simple reason that the scope of their investigation was so broad that constraints of time, text and audience limited the depth of their investigations of the system's history through autobiography, Realist fiction and memoir. *Beloved*, then, is offered as an investigation of not the totality of the slave experience, but rather an investigation of a narrow slice of it, by limiting her focus to one moment, literally one month of time, she is able to delve much deeper into the psychological structure that undergirds all characters from this period when truthfully represented, but with the added impact of incredible depth of investigation. By choosing to look more deeply into a narrow window of this phenomenon of chattel slavery, she is able to bring back to the surface an incredible wealth of insight and revelation that can then be extrapolated onto a larger population in the form of allegory and metaphor—not possible otherwise (*In Depth*). Northrop Frye, in

*Anatomy of Criticism* discusses some of the characteristics of the type of writing that I believe *Beloved* belongs to, namely Romance:

The essential difference between novel and romance lies in the conception of characterization. The romancer does not attempt to create “real people” so much as stylized figures, which expand into psychological archetypes. It is in the romance that we find Jung’s libido, anima, and shadow reflected in the hero, heroine and villain respectively. That is why the romance so often radiates a glow of subjective intensity that the novel lacks, and why a suggestion of allegory is constantly creeping in around its fringes. (304)

Romance has the advantage of freedom from verisimilitude in the treatment of its characters or the events and situations a reader may find them engaged in. armed with the literary license of free expression of emotions and fictional outcomes, characters and configurations become tropic, signaling meaning that far confounds literal interpretation. Morrison’s text, read as romance, finds itself within the same company as Melville’s *Moby Dick* and Nathaniel Hawthorne’s *The Scarlet Letter*. These earlier American texts, however, thrive within this genre because of the unique nature of their positioning within a nascent American paradigm; romance gains primacy following the Federalist period of American literature in part because of the indeterminate nature of the American context and identity itself. These writers were, then, either commenting on this indeterminate and protean American(ness) or, alternatively, writing against it—free to do so because the genre allowed and there was little here to offer counter-criticism. Free from the constraints of natural law, texts within the genre were able to imagine and create

representations of American life that were hyperbolic in characterization and representation with the purpose of reifying archetypal traits and representations of individual and communal identity which could then be sought after or disdained by readers. *Beloved* is a different matter. This text functions within the genre of Romance because it *has* to; the excesses of American slavery are such that no other type of writing can accurately approximate the physical and psychological juggernaut it represented on an entire population of slaves and their captors. “The slaves whose stories lie behind Toni Morrison’s novel were thought by whites at this time to be in some way animal. The case for slavery was argued on these grounds. What Toni Morrison does is present an image of a people so wholly human that they are almost superhuman. It is a magnificent achievement” (Byatt 17). Where writers before Morrison used romance to codify an unattainable ideal, *Beloved* represents an attempt to capture and translate a horror that persisted for centuries:

It is an American masterpiece, and one, which, moreover, in a curious way reassesses all the major novels of the time in which it is set. Melville, Hawthorne, Poe, wrote riddling allegories about the nature of evil, the haunting of unappeased spirits, the inverted opposition of blackness and whiteness. Toni Morrison has with plainness and grace and terror – and judgment – solved the riddle, and showed us the world, which haunted theirs. (18)

Morrison described slavery as being similar to “being at war for two hundred years” (*In Depth*). Natural law doesn’t constrain her text because it was not capable of constraining those who lived in positions of dominance and authority within the slave

system. I will offer some critical examples from within the text of this phenomenon as they relate to Black Madness in the pages that follow. *Beloved*, the Romance, is matriarchal by design. Its narrative explores the dangers of mother love that is too heavy, too thick, and too complete to yield anything but misery and disappointment for the lover and the beloved within its historical setting. As stated earlier, Morrison herself states that she chose to explore deeply *one* story, that of one woman, Margaret, now Sethe, in her attempt to bring to the surface useable fragments of a history that had been for the most part silenced and sentenced to the margins of both cultural and personal memory through the eyes of one dismissed as “mad” for having the audacity to “out hurt the hurter.” Before looking at the female characters of the novel, I must first address what has been for me a burning question: where are all the men, specifically, the black men? Critics have commented on the text’s marginalization of dominant culture intrusions into this black woman’s story, citing it as one of the authorial choices that sets *Beloved* apart from earlier works that had American chattel slavery as an subject, but there is a different absence that I would like to discuss briefly here.

In a discussion of one of her earlier novels, *Sula*, Morrison comments on the fact that she has always held in positive regard the ability black men have to just “leave.” What some would dismiss or classify as abandonment, she describes unapologetically as an appealing characteristic. Within *Sula*, this ability to leave is given to the title character, an attribute that serves to further distance her from her community in the “Bottom,” leaving her further exposed to the scorn and condemnation of “Bottom folk” when she returns home on an oracle-like, bird-shit laden day. By assigning “black masculine” characteristics such as these, including her casual inclusion of an indifferent sexuality to

both Sula and her mother in this novel, I believe she is attempting to create a space of understanding for black men who leave and cheat in the most effective way she can, by creating women who do the same thing, with understandable, if not wholly acceptable rationales for their actions. Prior to this, when a black man leaves his family or community for any reason other than to educate or make a better living for his and himself and return home, the act was deemed unconscionable; such an individual was the lowest of the low for leaving family and responsibility behind within home environments consistently cast as destitute and made significantly worse by their abdication. By creating contexts wherein black female characters could act in this type of self-interested manner as well, she makes the unspeakable something we readers can speak about—broadening the scope and range of subsequent discussions so that they can now include elements of *why* anyone would do something like that—where before all that was possible was the reporting of *what* someone did. This “training” that we, her readers undergo is necessary, so we are able to free ourselves from the limiting paradigms of textual interpretation that she herself is attempting to break down so that we can share new visions and ways of seeing blackness through the themes and tropes she visits frequently within her writing. An example of this “training” can be seen in the diminutive reaction to the departure of Howard and Buglar, Sethe’s two sons within the opening of *Beloved*.

Beyond a brief account of the culminating incident that precipitates the exit of these two characters from the narrative, nothing substantial is written about them or their lives. Their invisibility is repeated many times over, as Morrison discusses a number of characters who are not really there, but for whom life within the context of the narrative

was more real and possessing of substance than that of the Baby Ghost for whom the text is named. The Sweet Home men, Mr. Garner's prize slaves, and an object of contextualizing Rememory within the narrative for both Sethe, and Paul D, are never seen or heard from in their own voice. That task is given to the above characters or to the narrator, because by the time of the incidents that initiate the bar sinister on 124 Bluestone road, or that represent the dénouement of these narrative details, these men are all gone, save one who himself is even not completely there. They've been sold, burned, run off or made insane by the evolution of slaveholding ideology as it progressed at Sweet Home. Crainometry and phrenology as practiced by Schoolteacher, inheritor of Sweet Home and all of its property, signal the tragic dissolution of an already untenable space, a world wherein one person, however kind and benevolent, claims the right to own and control the life of another. As the science of the time attempted to understand the workings of the human mind, giving reason and heritage equal space in the quest to explain behavior and human will, these spurious notions of causality and volition represent a wrong turn along the path to enlightenment and scientific illumination of the human condition. The Sweet Home men do not begin to disappear until economic or social factors impinge upon Sweet Home following the death of Mr. Garner. Morrison's troubling details concerning the known fates of some of the Sweet Home men indicate their refusal to participate in a system that will not accept them first as men, and then as slaves. Their limited emancipation under Mr. Garner's stewardship can be seen as just another "nigger joke" among many played on a slave population; dissonance inscribed on the minds and bodies of the resident labor of Sweet Home.

Sixo can be seen as the most “sane” of the Sweet Home men. Uninterested in the approval or condemnation of masters or whites at all, he operates within a cognitive space separate from those of his fellow slaves, limited only by morning call to the fields. Sixo’s Draeptomania represents the healthiest response to the oppressive and limiting nature of slave life on the Kentucky plantation of Morrison’s text. His madness is not madness at all, rather a conscious effort to evade and misdirect his captors through silence. Sixo can at best be accused of what my mother would call, “playin’ possum,” yet in reality, what good does it do to talk and interact with those who don’t recognize your full humanity, and that only intend to use your labor or your seed to further their economic, subordinating, and dehumanizing efforts? Through his silence, he maintains his sanity, replacing the spaces usually filled with rhetoric with clear and precise action. By focusing on the objectives he chooses within his life, Sixo is able to engage in autonomous, albeit prohibited actions that can be connected directly to *his* wishes, rather than those of his possessors.

When challenged over the theft of Schoolteacher’s shoat before he decides talking is unnecessary, Sixo again represents clarity and sanity within a context muddled and convoluted by the inanity of slaveholding mentality:

“you stole that shoat didn’t you?”

“No. Sir.” Said Sixo, but he had the decency to keep his eyes on the meat.

“You telling me you didn’t steal it, and I’m looking right at you?”

“No, sir. I didn’t steal it.”

Schoolteacher smiled. “did you kill it?”

“Yes, sir. I killed it.”

“Did you Butcher it?”

“Yes. Sir.”

“Did you cook it?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Well, then. Did you eat it?”

“Yes, sir. I sure did.”

“And you telling me that’s not stealing?”

“No, sir. It ain’t.”

“What is it then?”

“Improving your property, sir”

“What?”

“Sixo plant rye to give the high piece a better chance. Sixo take and feed the soil, give you more crop. Sixo take and feed Sixo give you more work.”

Clever, but schoolteacher beat him anyway to show him that definitions belonged to the definers—not the defined. (190)

Sixo’s thievery, another example of his *insanity* within the context of chattel slavery, would have been called “Rascalism,” the colloquial term used when referencing any act of resistance or non compliance formally known as *Draeptomania*, which is seen in its most complete form during his escape attempt with Paul D and Thirty-Mile woman.

In an episode reminiscent of Harriet Jacob’s *Incidents in the life of a Slave Girl*, Sixo assumes control of his physical body and procreative activities, wresting those

choices from Schoolteacher. In the same manner that Jacob's narrative highlights the autonomy expressed by the protagonist's ability to select who she would have children by, Sixo exercises his right as a human being to locate and impregnate not the woman Schoolteacher has selected, but rather the Thirty-Mile woman, a woman he loves, as evidenced in the literal lengths he is willing to go to in order to spend the most minute amount of time with her. When his part in the escape plan is found out, he has the last laugh, literally, on schoolteacher and the other whites who have captured him and Paul D and are assembled to watch him roast alive. His cry of "seven-o!" signals the coming of another, a child his woman will keep and not kill, because in that child will reside the legacy of this one character's defiance and resistance to the constant, unremitting cycle of control and subjugation that was chattel slavery.

On the other end of the spectrum, Halle represents a true representation of Du Bois's "one dark body" being "torn asunder." Halle's story appears to be the most hopeful and healthy within the entire text in the early stages of its telling. After reaching an agreement to do extra work over a period of five years, Halle is promised the freedom of his mother by Mr. Garner in exchange for that labor. At the conclusion of the subscribed time and after putting much more work than was necessary to meet the buying price of his old, broken mother, Halle is able to deliver on his promise to her and pay for her freedom. As the Garner family recedes into the past, so does their vision of a more "humane" and therefore productive methodology of slavery, one that is replaced by the capricious and unfeeling scientific and business-like approach of the Garner's relative, known only as Schoolteacher. Schoolteacher's perverse notions, his pseudo-scientific methodology, observation and annotation represent desperate measures taken by

slaveholders to hold on not only to their property, but also to that unearned position of dominance over their slaves. The desperation characters like Schoolteacher represent, when viewed in light of the draconian details of the fugitive slave act of 1850, show the lengths to which participants in this system were willing to go to maintain the façade of legitimacy in the face of a country that was wincing at the depravity and injustice inherent within the southern slaveholding way of life. Like the animal that swims carrying either a scorpion or a snake, depending on the telling, across a swollen stream on its back, only to be bitten before they both drown, the answer of the venomous rider “what did you expect?” echoes through my head as I read again the horrific details of this good man’s capitulation into madness. Hiding in the milking barn in preparation for his escape with his wife and children, Halle is arrested by the sight of schoolteacher’s nephew’s retaliation against Sethe for having told their uncle of their perverse sexual fantasies acted out on her pregnant body. Memories of the long and arduous hours of labor *after* a complete day of work, teasing glimpses of what it might feel like to be respected and accepted as a man and not a brute, coupled with the ghastly images of his beloved wife, face down in a milking barn, her belly encased in the a hollow dug in the earth, while two spoiled and vengeful nephews flay the skin from her back within his sight—almost within reach of her and them--yet unable to do anything except watch and listen as the shrieks and cries of his wife crowd him in the rafters of the barn, buffeting his brain, mocking his impotence. The most profound irony of this narrative is not its use of the romance genre to convey such extreme scenes and reversals, but that the extremities depicted are part of a lived landscape of American slavery that was in many ways and for a very long time just this horrible. The images of Halle, sitting in butter and

rubbing clabber all over his face identify him as one of the most tragic victims of this system within the narrative, primarily because he represents the character that invested the most into a belief in it. The extremity of his psychological damage can be seen as a sort of relief in the face of the dissonance that Morrison's details suggest would have been taking place in this character's mind; clabber cooling the inner turmoil of Halle's "unreconciled strivings" for humanity and freedom.

Paul D confronts me, as an experiencer of this text with a number of questions and a few problems. Walking into Sethe and Denver's lives by walking in the gate at 124 Bluestone Road, it is as if he is coming home, but what homeward journey takes eighteen years to complete? His peripatetic sojourn, suggests elements of heroic narratives such as Homer's *Odyssey*, but it remains unclear whether 124 was his actual destination, or simply one of the number of options available to a man without a home. The details that envelop and define Paul D's character are a mixture of heroic and tragic; like Gilgamesh, Paul is able to walk thousands of miles, but unlike his fourth century BCE predecessor, he has no real destination or objective. In Paul D, a character with strength and survival instincts that can only be described as superhuman, Morrison is consistently building him up with one hand, while taking away with the other. What good are heroic qualities of character and will when contrasted against weaknesses and shortcomings of equal measure? Paul's slave past, something he consistently must beat back and keep at bay, mark him within the text as one who is damaged, representative of what Charles Chesnut referred to as "the curious psychological spectacle of a mind enslaved long after the shackles had been struck off from the limbs of its possessor" (Chesnut 90). The fact that he is walking away from his past suggests something less than heroic, inasmuch as we

expect heroes to confront their challenges head on. His insights on the delicate nature of the ex-slave condition serve as aids for Sethe as she tries to uncover the unspoken truths within the child/woman Beloved who becomes a part of life on Bluestone Road, but are earned through years of suffering and witnessing the suffering of slaves and former slaves at the hands of an equally damaged white population. It is the *effect* of this range of experiences that I believe will offer the answers I desire to the puzzle of Paul D's "tobacco tin," Morrison's metaphor for the hearts of black men who close down their emotions and retreat inward, "[so as] not to lose [their] minds."

Paul D, and the rest of the Sweet Home men have a unique type of slave experience as depicted in the text. Mr. Garner's goal, to have slaves who were as happy and productive as possible while still being enslaved, is easily accomplished by giving the men a portion of that autonomy and critical license necessary to positively effect their sense of their own worth and relative freedom. Garner realizes that men will work like men when they are treated like men. After completing the cost-reward analysis concerning his manner of rearing and creating men out of these captive inferiors, he accepts the costs incurred within the slaveholding community, their scorn and disapproval of his methods, for the reward of slaves who are more content, productive, and consequently yield Garner and his entire enterprise more work and greater financial benefit.<sup>12</sup> Mr. Garner's experiment serves him and his family well, provided he is there to maintain this unique and unorthodox balance of power he has instituted among his slaves.

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<sup>12</sup> Mr. Garner's approach in the text approximates an actual occurrence within what is modern Ghana, an experimental model of "domestic slavery;" in the latter decades of the nineteenth century, Dutch slave holders decided that it would be more advantageous to keep a slave population *in their own*

Baby Suggs, bought as a “bargain” because of her bad hip to aid Mrs. Garner in household duties, comments on the differences she senses in this slave space as compared to others she has experienced in her life of servitude:

In Lillian Garner’s house, exempted from the field work that broke her hip and the exhaustion that drugged her mind; in Lillian Garner’s house where nobody knocked her down (or up), she listened to the whitewoman humming at her work; watched her face light up when Mr. Garner came in and thought, It’s better here... The Garners, it seemed to her, ran a special kind of slavery, treating them like paid labor, listening to what they said, teaching them what they wanted known. And he didn’t stud his boys. Never brought them to her cabin with directions to “lay down with her,” like they did in Carolina, or rented their sex out on other farms. It surprised her and pleased her, but worried her too... some danger he was courting and he surely knew it. In fact his order for them not to

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country and have them farm and produce other products without the hazards of transatlantic travel and relocation. Slaves within this test model, documented by the Dutch National Museum, were allowed to farm their own plots of land and keep their crops for to sustain their own families in exchange for the major percentage of their labor, taking place on large collective farms, being used to profit their slave masters. While in theory this seemed like a plausible alternative to the traditional slave trade and methods of transcontinental commerce, records show that work slowdowns plagued the collective farms, meanwhile, skeletal remains unearthed by archeologist Dr. Bredwa Mensah discovered a significant occurrence of deformities and skeletal aberrations that can most likely be attributed to overwork and malnourishment.

leave Sweet Home, except in his company was not so much because of the law, but the danger of men-bred slaves on the loose. (140, 141)

At the moment of Mr. Garner's death, the situation and consequently the treatment of all the slaves at Sweet Home changes drastically. Frederick Douglass' master, Thomas Auld was correct, "education will spoil the best nigger." Mr. Garner, Auld's fictional contemporary, in not paying heed to this conventional wisdom, left his family and his slaves to pay the price for his hubris. Sweet Home constituted a form of stasis for its slaves, one in which they were isolated from the tragic reality of their own condition. Following a brief passage wherein Paul D's reassignment to a convict chain gang is explained, following his sale by Schoolteacher to a Mr. Brandywine, (who Paul D tried to kill) Morrison deftly utilizes the imagery of a frozen pond warming to relate the visceral reckoning experienced by Paul D as he comes in contact with the real world of the Draeptomaniac slave in America:

A flutter of a kind, in the chest, then the shoulder blades. It felt like rippling—gentle at first and then wild. As though the further south they led him the more his blood, frozen like an ice pond for twenty years, began thawing, breaking into pieces that, once melted, had no choice but to swirl and eddy. Sometimes it was in his leg. Then again it moved to the base of his spine. By the time they unhitched him from the wagon and he saw nothing but dogs and two shacks in a world of sizzling grass, the roiling blood was shaking him to and fro. But no one could tell. The wrists he held out for the bracelets that evening were steady as were the legs he stood on when chains were attached to the leg irons. But when they

shoved him into the box and dropped the cage door down his hands quit taking instruction. On their own, they traveled, nothing could stop them or get their attention. They would not hold his penis to urinate or a spoon to scoop lumps of lima beans in to his mouth. The miracle of obedience came with the hammer at dawn. (106, 107)

Morrison's focus on unruly hands and fingers in this text has been preceded by her use of similar imagery in the novel *Sula*, when Shadrack, a World War I veteran, returns home from the fighting only to be institutionalized because he cannot get his hands, which have to him become tendril-like to yield to his commands. These similarities contribute to Morrison's consistent focus on the trope of madness as experienced as a result of trauma, which, within *Beloved*, becomes Black Madness.

Shame is another important factor within the destruction of the black psyche as witnessed in *Beloved*. Paul D's experiences on the chain gang are not limited to coerced labor and physical restraint, but also include physical and psychic damage at the hands of not only an oppressor but one who at random may sexually violate any member of the gang at any time:

Chain-up completed, they knelt down. The dew, more likely than not, was mist by then. Heavy sometimes and if the dogs were quiet and just breathing you could hear doves. Kneeling in the mist they waited for the whim of a guard, or two, or three. Or maybe all of them wanted it. Wanted it from one prisoner in particular or none—or all.

“Breakfast? Want some breakfast nigger?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Hungry nigger?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Here you go.”

Occasionally a kneeling man chose gunshot in his head as the price maybe, of taking a bit of foreskin with him to Jesus. Paul D did not know that then. He was looking at his palsied hands, smelling the guard, listening to his soft grunts so like the doves’, as he stood before the man kneeling in the mist on his right. Convinced he was next, Paul D retched—vomiting up nothing at all. An observing guard smashed his shoulder with the rifle and the engaged one decided to skip the new man for the time being lest his pants and shoes got soiled by nigger puke. (107, 108)

Pamela E. Barnett, in her essay, “Figurations of Rape and the Supernatural in *Beloved*,” discusses the primacy of memories “that involve sexual abuse and exploitation” within the text, asserting that these types of memories “hold particular power: rape is the trauma that forces Paul D to lock his many painful memories in a ‘tobacco tin’ heart (113), that Sethe remembers more vividly than the beating that leaves a tree of scars on her back, that destroys Halle’s mind, and against which Ella measures all evil” (PMLA 418). While Barnett’s primary assertion within the essay, that the character *Beloved* represents a “succubus, a female demon and nightmare figure that sexually assaults male sleepers and drains them of their semen” is central to her reading of the text (418), it is her adroit observation that an overemphasis in commentary on female sexuality, violation and trauma, represented within the text has contributed to an absence of critical investigation of the damaging effects of homosexual male rape as

experienced by Paul D that is my area of focus. Barnett is correct in asserting that the retrieval of acts of sexual violation can be read as the most profound and jarring moments of “Rememory” within the text; I would only add that this type of violation and the emasculating shame it represents make it especially critical to an examination of damage to the psyche of Paul D.

In an interview following the publication of *Beloved*, Morrison discussed the usefulness of the text in viewing and understanding not only the problems of the nineteenth century black woman, but those of the twentieth century as well. I would add that for black men the narrative serves the same dual purpose, providing insights and explanations for silences and absences—within both centuries—although the reasons for the absence of black men within the landscape of American life differ only slightly despite more than a century of progress. Morrison’s *Beloved* can be read as providing commentary on the persistence of a “penal” mentality within the black community, a sensibility that suggests that opportunities and the attainment of positive life outcomes for black men continued to be constrained by factors of racial and social determinism; the work gang of the text is replaced by the work gangs of correctional facilities throughout the country, which continue to incarcerate young black men at a much higher rate than any other population within the country. Leaked images of prisoners being held in the Abu Ghirade prison complex in Iraq encouraged Gore Vidal in a televised discussion in 2005 whose topic was our involvement in Iraq to suggest that the degrading images we saw should remind the American people that the same things are going on today in prisons all over America. One important element of Morrison’s writing is the ability to contextualize themes and subjects within our present milieu. Sadly, this process as used

when looking at *Beloved* is aided by the fact that conditions have not changed nearly enough to make such comparisons more difficult.

All of the continuums that Morrison's writing investigates are not destructive or limiting. Her writing also has at its core the unflinching audacity to say that "if anyone can take it, a black woman can." Morrison has Sethe wrestle with the question of how much can a black woman take within the novel, literally; listing the range of troubles and issues she has been forced to face and accept:

She shook her head from side to side, resigned to her rebellious brain. Why was there nothing it refused? No misery, no regret, no hateful picture too rotten to accept? Like a greedy child it snatched up everything. Just once, could it say, No thank you? I just ate and can't hold another bite? I am full God damn it of two boys with mossy teeth, one sucking on my breast the other holding me down. Their book-reading teacher watching and writing it up. I am still full of that, God damn it I can't go back and add more. Add my husband to it, watching, above me in the loft—hiding close by—the one place he thought no one would look for him, looking down on what I couldn't look at at all. And not stopping them—looking and letting it happen. But my greedy brain says, oh thanks, I'd love more—so I add more and no sooner than I do, there is no stopping... Other people went crazy, why couldn't she? Other people's brains stopped, turned around and went on to something new, which is what must have happened to Halle...but her three children were under a blanket on their way to Ohio and no butter play would change that (70, 71)

Beyond the tragic and incredible nature of the list she has to ponder is the likewise incredible reality that she and many other black women in the novel do deal with these issues every single day. Morrison is aware of the implications of the slave system she describes in *Beloved*, its ability to transform everything it touches. Elements of her conversation with Paul Gilroy that are quoted in the prologue to my writing echo through the following passage, presented as thoughts of the character Stamp Paid:

Whitepeople believed that whatever the manners, under every dark skin was a jungle. Swift, unnavigible waters, swinging screaming baboons, sleeping snakes, red gums ready for their sweet white blood In a way, he thought, they were right. The more colored people spent their strength trying to convince them how gentle they were, how clever an loving, how human, the more they used themselves up to persuade whites of something Negroes believed could not be questioned, the deeper and more tangled the jungle became inside...it was the jungle whitefolks planted in them. And it grew. It spread. In, and through and afterlife it spread until it invaded the whites who had made it. Touched them every one. Changed and altered them. Made them bloody, silly, worse than even they wanted to be, so scared were they of the jungle they had made. The screaming baboon lived under their own white skin; red gums were their own (199)

Sethe's attitudes and action represent within *Beloved* rational responses to an absurd and irrational landscape of chattel slavery *enforced on other human beings*. Sethe's infanticide of the baby Beloved is not the act of an irrational woman; it is a response to the four horsemen's offer of a lifetime of degradation, abuse and servitude for another

generation of her people. Sethe's act, when taken outside of its antebellum context, resembles more closely an act of conscious, victorious resistance than an act of carnal pathology or hyper-maternity.<sup>13</sup> Her actions, in this recontextualization, not only "out hurt the hurter," as one critic has said, they enforce, brutally the primacy of human life, through an act of sacrifice that deigns to allow that life to be reduced or devalued by anyone, despite the overwhelming imbalance of autonomy and power residing with those who would enslave. Within an American context that bears the scars of its slave past, Sethe accomplishes what many cannot; she is able to, as Morrison puts it, "go a little crazy so as not to lose their mind" (Qtd. In Plasa, 36).

Ella and the other women find out about the chaos of 124 after Denver has left looking for work and Paul D had been run off:

The news that Janey got hold of she spread among the other coloredwomen. Sethe's dead daughter, the one whose throat she cut, had come back to fix her. Sethe was worn down, speckled, dying, spinning, changing shaped and generally bedeviled. That this daughter beat her, tied her to the bed and pulled out all her hair. It took them days to get the story properly blown up and themselves agitated and then to calm down and assess the situation. They fell into three groups: those that believed the

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<sup>13</sup> Sethe's infanticide in the coal shed parallels the historic account of Josephus of the final defiant acts of besieged Jews atop their plateau strong hold at Masada, in 70 AD. Faced with the prospect of defeat after much battle with the Romans, the contingent decides to end their struggle by taking their own lives. Bound by the Hebrew prohibition against suicide, each person was slain by another until only one was left, who then took his own life.

worst, those that believed none of it and those, like Ella, who thought it through.

“Ella. What’s all this I’m hearing about Sethe”

“Tell me its in there with her That’s all I know.”

“The daughter? The killed one?”

“That’s what they tell me.”

“How they know that’s her?”

“It’s stitting there. Sleeps, eats and raises hell. Whipping Sethe every day.”

“I’ll be. A baby?”

“No. Grown. The age it would have been had it lived.”

“You talking about flesh?”

“I’m talking about flesh.”

“Whipping her?”

“Like she was batter.”

“Guess she had it coming.”

“Don’t nobody got that coming.”

“But Ella—“

“But nothing. What’s fair ain’t necessarily right.”

“You can’t just up and kill your children.”

“No, and the children can’t just up and kill the mama.” (255,256)

When the decision was made that the coloredwomen of the community would help Sethe, it was Ella, the wife of Stamp Paid that convinced them to do something about Beloved.

Ella's own history embittered her and left her skeptical of the feasibility of love:

Nobody loved her and she wouldn't have liked it if they had, for she considered love a serious disability. Her puberty was spent in a house where she was shared by father and son, whom she called "the lowest yet." It was "the lowest yet" who gave her a disgust for sex and against whom she measured all atrocities...She understood Sethe's rage in the shed twenty years ago, but not her reaction to it, which Ella thought was prideful, misdirected and Sethe herself too complicated. (256)

Ella's ambivalence about Sethe is quickly overrun by her desire to inhibit the past's encroachment of the present. In helping Sethe, Ella is really helping herself, and all the other coloredwomen and men of the community, choosing to plug a hole in a levee over having that levee break that separated them from their traumatic past:

When Ella heard 124 was occupied by something-or-other beating up on Sethe, it infuriated her and gave her another opportunity to measure what could be the devil himself against "the lowest yet." There was also something personal in her fury. Whatever Sethe had done, Ella didn't like the idea of past errors taking possession of the present. Sethe's crime was staggering, and her pride outstripped even that; but she couldn't countenance the possibility of sin moving on in the house, unleashed and sassy. Daily life took as much as she had. The future was sunset; the past something to leave behind. And of it didn't stay behind, well, you might have to stomp it out. Slave life; freed life—every day was a test and a trial. Nothing could be counted on in a world where even when you were a

solution you were a problem. “Sufficient unto the day is the evil thereof,” and nobody needed a grown-up evil sitting at the table with a grudge. As long as the ghost showed out from its ghostly place—shaking stuff, crying, smashing and such—Ella respected it. But if it took flesh and came in her world, well, the shoe was on the other foot. She didn’t mind a little communication between the two worlds, but this was an invasion.

(256,257)

First as a teenager and then as a young man in my mid twenties, I attended Pentecostal or “Holiness” churches in my home state of Indiana. Holiness churches were distinguished from the Baptist church I attended with my family by their adherence to the Apostle’s Doctrine, especially the requirement that for one to be “saved,” he/she must not only repent and be baptized, but show evidence of God’s indwelling through “speaking in tongues,” an act of submission to God’s will and a relinquishment of individual control over one’s own mouth. “Out of thy belly shall flow rivers of living water,” and many passages from the second chapter of the book of Acts are among the scriptures I have heard repeated and offered as encouragement for those, like me who wanted this indwelling, this gift. On Wednesday evenings, the sisters of Christ Temple Apostolic would assemble in the main sanctuary, sometimes sitting in the pews, other times meeting at the altar, wearing casual clothes, worn shoes and greeting each other’s tired faces with “praise him sister!” and “God bless you this evening honey,” before their attention would be turned to the front of the sanctuary, to the cross hanging high there but hanging empty; because the Savior of these women was not to be found there, he resides within each one of them and in the world they inhabited. These Wednesday prayer

meetings would serve to bolster and encourage these warriors as they transitioned from a white world of work to one of peace and good conversation with their God. Sometimes these meetings would take on another tone, one of urgency and expectation, as a member or one of their children came in and requested prayer. Good grades, a better job, more peace in the home, a safer world; these prayers would be offered at the altar by women better described as prayer warriors, who would call down their Lord from above, first praising Him for just being God, then for already responding to their request before they could utter it. Soon the church would be filled with the sound of crying and shouting women, all full of God's spirit and letting it heal and address each of their needs as He best saw fit. Sometimes they would fall to the floor, speaking in tongues and writhing as if wrestling with some unseen wraith at others, they would sit and rock, moaning soulfully and just shake their heads back and forth, marveling at the wondrous nature of God, in the midst of a wicked, wicked, world. To the people on the street, and many within the community, this congregation of "Holy Rollers" as we were sometimes called, seemed to have taken their religion too far; it was felt by some that in a zeal for righteousness, this type of religion allowed its members to lapse into madness. Morrison has some knowledge of this world of faith; otherwise she could not have created the episode that describes the reclaiming of Sethe and the eviction of Beloved from 124:

Denver heard mumbling and looked to the left. She stood when she d\ saw them. They grouped, murmuring and whispering, but did not set foot in the yard. Denver waved. A few waved back but came no closer...A woman dropped to her knees. Half the others did likewise. Denver saw

lowered heads, but could not hear the led prayer—only the earnest syllables of agreement that backed it: Yes, yes, yes, oh yes. Hear me. Hear me. Do it Maker, do it. Yes. Among those not on their knees, who stood holding 124 in a fixed gaze was Ella, trying to see through walls, behind the door, to what was really in there. Was it true the dead daughter had come back? Was it whipping Sethe? Ella had been beaten every way but down...she had delivered but would not nurse a hairy white thing, fathered by “the lowest yet.” It lived five days never making a sound. The idea of that pup coming back to whip her too set her jaw working and then Ella hollered. (258, 259)

The sound of the assembled women draws the attention of Sethe and Beloved from within 124. When they come out to the doorway,

For Sethe it was as though the Clearing has come to her with all its heat and simmering leaves, where the voices of women searched for the right combination, the key, the code, the sound that broke the back of words. Building voice upon voice until they found it, and when they did it was a wave of sound wide enough to sound deep water and knock the pods off chestnut trees. It broke over Sethe and she trembled like the baptized in its wash. (261)

These women discovered the right thing to do. They decided that despite how it might look to an outsider that they knew what they were doing and would not stop until that right thing was done. Double Consciousness cannot be found within the above passages, nor in the accounts from the novel that describe Sethe’s act of infanticide. These women,

despite their shouting, praying, or even swinging a hand-saw, do not suffer from Black Madness, they utilize it to give them sight beyond sight, to achieve a better existence than that they now have and to save that which was lost.

## Chapter Five

“That Don’t Make No Damn Sense”:

Gayl Jones, Richard Wright, Chester Himes and Black Madness

*What was uppermost in my mind while I read her manuscript was that no novel about any black woman could ever be the same after this. This girl had changed the terms, the definitions of the whole enterprise.*

Toni Morrison, “Toni Morrison on a Book She Loves: Gayl Jones’ *Corregidora*”

Perhaps the most arresting detail about Gayl Jones’ novel, *Corregidora*, is the seamless way that the language and dialogue shift back and forth over a century, blending the words and thoughts of its characters and their ancestors as if they were all in the same room. Indeed, it is the novel’s language, part of what Jones attempted to capture both in the title and the prose pieces that made up her 1973 dissertation, “Toward an All Inclusive Structure,” that serve to mark this first novel as unique in its ability to fold together disparate forms of discourse that share black experience and thought as their center. The novel and its language have shown the ability to draw praise as well as criticism: some praising its innovative use of folk language and dialect in the exploration of the novel’s thematic foci; others were denigrating the text as one preoccupied with sexuality and nothing else. Of particular interest to me at the conclusion of this project are the ways in which that one subject, sexuality, dismissed by some as too base or myopic to warrant serious critical inquiry, in fact yields a vast array of avenues and points of departure for scholarly investigation, including those that aid in the development of an all-inclusive language of Black Madness.

The novel begins with an accident. In a description reminiscent of Nella Larsen's ending in *Passing*, there is some ambivalence over whether the protagonist fell or was pushed. The novel proceeds from this point, allowing the reader to assume that Ursa, the protagonist, was pushed, primarily because she says so. Her fall results in her having her womb removed, something disturbing for any woman, but of special concern for Ursa Corregidora; first, because she was one month pregnant, and second because as one of the Corregidora women she cannot "make generations." The first concern, which has to do with the present and future, has been eliminated by means of the surgery deemed necessary by the medical minds of the novel's time period. The second, a concern of the past, is now free to dominate the textual landscape and provide the reader all the understanding necessary for a comprehension of "making generations."

Ursa is the great granddaughter of Simone Corregidora, a "Portuguese seaman turned plantation owner," who was responsible not only for the slaves he began his coffee-bean plantation with, but also for the next generation(s) of Corregidora women and children—his children—whom he created by raping successive generations of women on his plantation, beginning with Ursa's great grandmother (10). This detail appears in the text, rather nonchalantly, through the remembered voice of Ursa's great grandmother, whose voice and memories are passed to us through Jones' italicized passages throughout the text. The first of these italicized sections introduces us to the means of recovery of memories and episodes Jones will use throughout the novel, one that foreshadows Morrison's "Rememory" over a decade before the publication of *Beloved*.

The text shares with *Beloved* the presence of a haunting figure, that of Corregidora himself, who is capable of popping into the memories and minds of the surviving Corregidora women seemingly anytime he chooses. The open style and insertion of these memories into the text mirrors the ease with which Corregidora was able to control and pervert his women to his wishes while living; even after being dead for many years his voice and haunting persona remain forces to be confronted and reconciled with the living members of his extended family. The deceased great grandfather is the root cause of the instability between Ursa and Mutt, her husband at the beginning of the novel, which result in the fertility-ending fall suffered by Ursa at the hands of her husband. At the beginning of the novel Mutt is upset with Ursa for continuing to sing at Happy's after they are married. Mutt wants the opportunity to support his wife and perhaps finds it emasculating for his wife to choose to sing at a nightclub when it is not financially necessary. Ursa tells Mutt that she sings, "because it's something I have to do, but he couldn't never understand that" (3). The encounter that launches the novel takes place behind Happy's, at the top of some narrow steps, after Mutt has attempted to get Ursa to come down from the stage in the nightclub and come home. Mutt is drunk, and after he grabs Ursa from behind in the dark of the stairwell, she falls, miscarrying the couple's child. This incident marks the beginning within the narrative of "making" that marches throughout the novel and its characters. Ursa is burdened with this living memory of "making generations," as it is the only remnant of this family's slave past that they have and can pass on. All records of births and deaths are burnt by Corregidora at the time of Emancipation, in an attempt to conceal the nature and range of his lust and depravity, but the story remains within the Corregidora women,

who, despite the tragic and perverse nature of their narrative, are compelled to pass it on because there is no other memory that they have between them. In this way the singular trope of slavery is developed and broadened by the inclusion of this remembered discourse and the myriad emotions and trauma that accompany such thoughts.

Miscegenation and incest, never simple or easy subjects, become even more complicated as the women of the text are compelled to hold on to a memory and a practice of procreation that is at its core corrupting and dehumanizing. Through the relating of details to one another, Ursa and her mother, the surviving Corregidora women, are able to move forward with their lives and distance themselves from their past of sexual and psychological submission. This progress is not easily attained, however, as the Corregidora women also bring forward into their respective present moments the shame of sexual slavery and unrelenting abuse, which serve to blunt their sexual appetites and retard their normal desires for intimacy. This fact combined with Ursa's insistence on singing despite her husband's wishes escalates Mutt's frustration of being unable to compete with the memory of Ursa's great grandfather, and this frustration culminates in a moment of regrettable violence against the woman he loves:

“I'm your husband. You listen to me, not them. I didn't see him at first because he was standing back in the shadows behind the door. I didn't see him till he'd grabbed me around my waist and I was struggling to get loose.”

“ I don't like those mens messing with you,” he said.

“Don't nobody mess with me.”

“Mess with they eyes.”

That was when I fell.

The doctors in the hospital said my womb would have to come out. Mutt and me didn't stay together after that. I wouldn't even let him come in the hospital to see me when I knew what was happening. They said when I was delirious I was cursing him *and* the doctors and the nurses out.  
(3,4)

Ursa's "delirium" can be understood as her response to her unfortunate and tragic recent events, but also as being representative of the outrage of all the Corregidora women over the past century, outrage and shame caused by the capricious and perverted practices of Simone Corregidora. Guilt and shame pervade the pages of this novel. Its female characters are especially susceptible to the immobilizing force of shame and trauma, based in part on the model of womanhood presented to them as an ideal that is only then to be taken away and replaced with something far more twisted and corrupt than anyone could have imagined. Morrison's comments in the epigraph are a testament to this, as is her own writing. Morrison's fiction that enabled readers to see incest within a black family for the first time and understand it, had not as of yet arrived at the level of disclosure and imaginative exploration of chattel slavery and its aftermath.

Jones' investigation of sexual exploitation of black men and women at the hands of white men and women informs my definition of Black Madness as it takes the last vestiges of personal freedom and privacy and exposes them to be false and hollow—if you are black. The extreme nature of the shame, created by Corregidora sleeping with whomever he wanted, whenever; the powerlessness felt by blacks within this structure, powerlessness against one man and the system of domination he represented; the

consistent inability to defend oneself or a loved one from the grasp and clutch of a master, or even strangers—all this should be easily identifiable as potentially “maddening.” Stranger and even more tragic is the legacy of this system, its ability to control individuals as if from the grave, leaving them incapable of experiencing something as fundamental as desire and love. Within the American system of chattel slavery, the ability of owners and overseers to control all aspects of slave life was essential. This system was so well inculcated into the minds of the slaves and their offspring, even generations later, that the reactions of characters like Ursa and her mother to the sexual advances and intimate desires of their respective lovers and husbands appear to be without proper rational explanations. Questions like “Are you mine or theirs, Ursa?” mark the point beyond which these women’s resistance can be read as unstable or somehow altered, by forces invisible to the men, but very real to the women. As a result of Corregidora’s greed and lust, multiple generations of his progeny are left to suffer confusion and violence at the hands of men who love them and only want to feel that they are one with their women. Ironically, in the absence of this sense of oneness with their partners, the men resort to physical violence out of frustration and rage at having their desires thwarted by someone whom they love. Mutt, Tadpole, and Martin all loved Ursa and her mother, respectively, but couldn’t fight the ghost of Corregidora, so they hit and abused the next best thing.

Ursa must recuperate following her accident. This process takes time and does not occur without the aid of others who can offer care and give her the proper attention. Jones allows us to witness these details of physical recuperation to model the type of psychological healing processes that must take place not only for the Corregidora

women, but for all progeny of slavery who exist under the spectre of a dark and racialized past. One of the primary methodologies for this type of psychological recovery can be found in the conversation between Ursa and her mother when Ursa visits her in Bracktown. The cathartic process of psychological mending is accomplished through the acts of retelling those events that created the shame, which overshadows our daily lives. When the terrible stories and details are released, then the healing can begin to effect change in the lives of those who have suffered. Jones shows us this process at work in the lives of the surviving Corregidora women, revealing the ability of truth-telling to outstrip lies, misinformation, and misdeeds, making possible better ways for damaged people to interact with one another and thrive despite their horrific pasts. The extremity of events and conditions for the characters in the novel are intended not to shock or offend, but to provide the proper scope for the understanding of how reconciliation and recovery are possible—no matter what has happened in the past.

The authors and texts that I will explore in this final chapter have been selected for the innovative and searching ways that they have attempted to explore the psychological complexities of black life in America within their respective time periods.

Richard Wright's *Oeuvre*, while only spanning twenty years, encompasses much of the matter critical to understanding the unique dynamics and stressors that are concomitant with black life in the United States. *Native Son* and *Black Boy*, two of his best known and most widely read texts, are not the focus of this investigation; rather I have chosen his novel *Savage Holiday*, not known for its positive reception, but for its psychologically based investigation of human nature and behavior. The depth of analysis capable within the *SH*, is made possible by Wright's use of themes and a narrative

structure that supports the use of psychoanalytic and psychological lenses. When these lenses are utilized within a narrative that has a white protagonist and secondary characters, they free readers from the expected racialized didacticism of most of Wright's work, enabling the reader to explore the motivations, influences and behavioral aberrances possible within a *dominant culture* paradigm, as experienced by characters created representing that dominant culture in America. The significance of this text rests in its ability to allow readers to look at *America*--not just black America. When we can do this, investigate those factors historical and personal which converge to create each of us, we come one step closer to removing race from the top of a list of limiting constructs that hinder our collective progress in the new millennium. Furthermore, such a raceless exploration, complete with pathology and anxiety as experienced by a white character, offers both a counterbalance to the anxiety suffered within the fictional depictions of marginalized populations in America, and shows the root cause of much of that anxiety to be the fault of Wright's contemporary Karen Horney's "neurotic personality of our time." Wright's *Savage Holiday* traces the etiology of anxiety and neuroses to its source, providing substantial support for what Morrison would later refer to as "White Madness."

It is strange how expectations can constrain what we are willing to accept as genuine, artistic, and truth-bearing in American literature. Over a period that matches the length of our nationhood, black American writers have succeeded in breaking down the barriers constructed to inhibit their participation in the sacrosanct realm of canonical literature. Working within parameters much more narrow than those of their white contemporaries, writers of color have found ways to introduce and inculcate their work within the warp and woof of the American literary tapestry—provided they toe the line: a

line of racial consciousness and emphasis on those issues that have race and the polemics of that construct at their core. From the gentle nudging of Phyllis Wheatley's poetry, a small feminine voice gently insisting that "Remember, *Christians, Negroes*, black as *Cain*, [m]ay be refin'd, and join th' angelic train," to, for instance, the didactically titled work of Richard Wright nearly a century later, *White Man, Listen!*, blacks have been granted access to the pantheon of American *belle lettres*, provided we remember our place and stick to discussions of our own race. These performative literary acts served as both liberating and constricting for writers of color, providing an increasingly broad reading audience for black concerns regarding this country's ability to live up to its own standards of liberty and freedom for all of its citizens, as long as we engaged these issues from within the paradigm of race, and through the language and accepted modes of communication of the time. Paul Lawrence Dunbar, Charles W. Chesnutt, Richard Wright, and James Baldwin are but a sampling of black authors who were considered as having "lost" something when they attempted to discuss larger issues of human dignity and self exploration within swiftly changing national and global landscapes by eliding the use of racialized language or race matters as the core methodology of their literary inquiry. Dunbar and Chesnutt, for instance, created works that suffered at the hands of white critics who had praised them previously when they chose to create literature that was not dependent upon dialect or racial themes for their content. Chesnutt found himself on the outside of the pantheon after only five years of inclusion, in part because he attempted to discuss the problems of the Reconstruction South through the lens of a white protagonist in *The Colonel's Dream* (1905). Chesnutt, like Dunbar before him, also suffered negative criticism for writing that attempted to communicate to readers by

means of a modality different from that which had secured entrance for him into the realm of dominant culture readership—namely dialect writing,—choosing instead to create texts that foreground the literary Realism that was prevalent during his historical moment and being used by authors like James, Alcott, Howells, and Clemens. Half a century later, Richard Wright’s novel, *Savage Holiday*, was subjected to dismissive criticism and the worst fate any text can encounter, silence, because he had the audacity to attempt *both* prohibited procedures, excising didactic racialized themes *and* black subjects from his work.

A recent search of literary databases and bibliographies for commentary on *Savage Holiday* yielded a peculiar result for an author of Wright’s renown and reputation: virtually no mention of the novel’s existence. With the exception of Lale Demirturk’s “Mapping the Terrain of Whiteness: Richard Wright’s *Savage Holiday*” (Melus, Spring 1999), and a chapter entitled “Race, Rage and Desire: *Savage Holiday*, by Richard Wright,” in Claudia Tate’s *Psychoanalysis in Black Novels* (1998), virtually no other mention of this novel can be found within contemporary criticism of black literature. In fact, two important and seemingly comprehensive texts, *Richard Wright, Critical Perspectives Past and Present* (ed. by K.A. Appiah and H.L. Gates) and *Richard Wright: The Critical Reception* (ed. by John M. Reilly), fail to list even the title of the novel within their respective indexes, although Reilly’s *The Critical Reception* does at least give the text two facing pages: one has the reproduction of the masthead from the original Avon Publications printing in 1954, while the opposite page, ironically, shows:

*Savage Holiday*,

(no reviews)

...as a header on an otherwise blank white page. Even Manning Marable, perhaps one of the top contemporary scholars within the discipline of Black Studies, who dedicated several pages of commentary to the work of Wright in his 1991 publication, *Race, Reform and Rebellion: The Second Reconstruction in Black America, 1945-1990*, omits any mention of *Savage Holiday*. From a vantage point of either textual scholarship or literary reception the omission of *Savage Holiday* from these texts in itself warrants investigation, which is slowly beginning to occur, thanks to the text and article mentioned earlier. The slighting reviews and commentary that followed the novel's release as well as the specific omission of this text from contemporary writing that investigates either black literature in general or Wright's work in particular, leads me to believe that scholars still do not really know what to do with this psychological thriller. It seems that critics of our time are as uncertain of how to classify and critique the text as Wright's contemporaries were half a century ago.

In his text, *Modernism and the Harlem Renaissance*, Houston A. Baker, Jr., utilizes a pair of terms, "mastery of form," and "deformation of mastery," to describe what black writers and performers were able to accomplish before and during the 1920's Renaissance period his text has as its focus. In Baker's text, "mastery of form," refers to the subtle but effective way that Renaissance forerunner Charles W. Chesnutt was able to graft himself onto the Plantation Tradition literature of his historic moment without submitting his work to the racially denigrating aspects of that literary form as it existed at the time. Chesnutt's "mastery" is manifest in the ability of his plantation fiction to illuminate the incorrectness of chattel slavery and its aftermath within a literature designed to elevate white characters at the expense of black ones in the service of an

*apologia* of the “old south”: “the fluidity of *The Conjure Woman*’s world, symbolized by such metamorphoses [“conjured” characters], is a function of the black narrator’s mastery of form” (Baker 44). Baker’s analysis posits Chesnut’s artistry as being evident in his ability to effect subtle but specific changes in the way the narrative form can be utilized and interpreted—changes initiated from within the form itself—that yield no external evidence of modification to the reader. In contrast, “deformation of mastery” represents an overt occupation of literary space, one that occurs without apology or permission and is contingent on the appropriation rather than the requisition of expressive space and narrative. Contemporary actor/rapper Mos Def, in the song, “Oh No,” captures the essence of the difference between mastery of form and the “deformation of mastery” in the line: “while y’all was askin’ permission, I just walked up and took it.” *Savage Holiday*, Richard Wright’s overlooked psychological novel, possessing elements of both of these concepts, warrants further investigation, as it holds keys to the origins of Black Madness. Towards that end, I cite passages from the text and from the criticism of the novel here more extensively than elsewhere in this project for two reasons: to redress the novel’s relative obscurity within the American canon, and because so much of Wright’s work here exposes the core elements of my writing’s initial foundation—the preexistent anxiety and subsequent antagonisms that comprise American life.

*Savage Holiday* contains crucial elements of both of Baker’s concepts of literary form discussed in *Modernism and the Harlem Renaissance*. The novel begins with a title that is deceptive, one that suggests that the reader will be given another opportunity to read one of Wright’s “race novels,” literature that has as its focus the analysis of racialized thought and black experience—like so many of his writings. In this way it is

reminiscent of Chesnutt's first publication of *The Conjure Woman*, complete with two caricatured rabbits serving as bookends for a grinning, balding "uncle" type who graces the cover of the 1899 text, although there are no rabbits in any of the stories that make up the novel. Chesnutt's rabbits, like Wright's "Savage" on the cover, beckon the reader to open themselves to more of the known and accepted styles for the respective writers; for Chesnutt, the cover suggests stories within that will follow the pattern of framed plantation stories like those of Joel Chandler Harris, whose "Uncle Remus, Brer' Rabbit" and others had already won the hearts and readership of many during Chesnutt's period; while Wright's use of the term "savage" suggests to those familiar with his writing that this will be another polemic that has race at its center. Instead of finding stories about rabbits, sticky tar, and obeisant darkies, readers of *The Conjure Woman* found adroit tales replete with accurate depictions of plantation life for slaves, moral correctives for whites, and not a rabbit in sight, while Wright's readers of *Savage Holiday* found a novel, written by a racial polemicist, that appeared to have virtually nothing to do with race, as it was populated with characters who with only one exception were white.

Beyond the title, Wright's novel settles into the exploration of its protagonist's thoughts about his life routine after it has been irreparably altered by his forced retirement at forty-three from an insurance company he has been working for for thirty years. As the narrative unfolds, the protagonist, Erskine Fowler, a white, middle-aged bachelor, wrestles with the challenge of occupying his time after retiring when his whole life revolved around his work. In the first section of the novel, readers are encouraged to commiserate with and envy Fowler at the same time; Erskine is retiring at the behest of employers who see him as "out of touch" with the most modern and sophisticated

methods available within the insurance business, but allow him to do so with a pension, a severance package, a substantial bank account and stock portfolio. This ideal scenario is complicated by the fact that his employers have decided to modernize their methods by employing the of the company president's son, a recent Harvard graduate and neophyte to the industry. We are invited to eavesdrop on Erskine's silent frustration at being pushed out by an act of nepotism of the business he has dedicated his life to.

Erskine was unalterably convinced that there was nothing that any university could instill in anybody that could remotely match his own superb, practical knowledge of insurance. Insurance was life itself; insurance was human nature in the raw trying to hide itself; insurance was instinctively and intuitively knowing that a man was essentially a venal, deluded and greedy animal... (28)

Here Wright showcases his "mastery of form," the form being the psychological novel. Erskine's thoughts and generalizations about the nature of man prove to be correct, ironically through his own actions as the novel develops. Details about his anxiety over a forced departure from the world of work deteriorate into explorations of a Damoclean guilt of obscure origin that has shadowed Fowler since childhood, a fear of something horrible happening to him or being done by him if he ever ceased to be on guard:

Work had not only given Erskine his livelihood and conferred upon him the approval of his fellowmen; but, above all it made him a stranger to a part of himself that he feared and wanted never to know. At some point in his childhood he had assumed toward himself the role of a policemen, had accused himself, had hauled himself brutally into the court of his

conscience, had arraigned himself before the bar of his fears, and had found himself guilty and had, finally and willingly, dragged himself off to serve a sentence of self-imposed labor for life, had locked himself up in a prison-cage of toil...Now, involuntarily reprieved, each week six full Sundays suddenly loomed terrifyingly before him and he had to find a way to outwit that rejected part of him that Longevity Life had helped to incarcerate so long and successfully. He was trapped in freedom. (33)

Wright's narrative in this section is full of passages separated by ellipses, signaling a stream of consciousness technique within the text that has Fowler's thoughts and anxieties as its primary focus. The "mastery of form" is further established by the incremental increase of historical detail concerning Fowler's interaction with his neighbor, Mabel, and her son, Tony, and the attraction/revulsion he feels for both the mother and the child, through language that easily fits within the lexicon of mid-fifties society's puritanical sensibilities. Concomitant with the establishment of the novel as belonging to the sub-genre of psychological fiction, Wright allows the novel to reveal elements of "deformation of mastery" through the same medium of psychoanalytic prose. "Deformation of mastery" begins to assert itself through the inclusion of dream imagery and remembrances that are rife with psychosexual energy, energy that builds and grows in intensity until its presence begins to test the margins of the narrative form, pushing and deforming them into a new configuration, one that has space for the text to be both a psychological narrative *and* a veiled indictment of the anxiety ridden American society that Fowler and the rest of the text's characters have been created to represent. Further proof of this "mastery" and "deformation" is evident within the dream imagery Wright

creates for Fowler on the evening prior to the day that will change his life forever.

Erskine Fowler goes to sleep on this night bothered by the noise of Mabel's phone, which goes unanswered because Mabel is at work as a nightclub coat-check and must leave Tony alone in the evenings. The ringing of the phone triggers his preoccupation with this "shapely, plump, brunette war widow[s]"(34) activities as a mother of a small boy.

Erskine is physically attracted to Mabel, having on more than one occasion caught glimpses of her in varying states of undress through their facing windows. Erskine is also, apparently, a virgin; a man of forty-three who on entering his apartment "entered a bedroom that had never been dishonored by the presence of a stray woman of pleasure" (34). His thoughts as he drifts off to sleep are purportedly about little Tony, a boy who has been left alone by a working mother, but the dream imagery that follows belies this innocent and paternal guise. Erskine's subconscious thoughts that are far more complex; a *mélange* of psychosexual metaphoric imagery, obsessive-compulsive preoccupation with material wealth and profit, and an encroaching anxiety over past misdeeds that has been reawakened by his recent but unplanned introduction to the world of the unemployed. Wright chooses to create the dream passage (which I am about to cite) without punctuation, allowing it to proceed unchecked like a dream should, but includes within that imagery, sounds, and foreshadowing that serve to *deform* the psychological narrative that unfolds almost as quickly as the writing codifies it:

His eyelids drooped and soon he was breathing regularly. A shifting curtain of wobbly images hovered before his consciousness; the images slowly grew in density and solidity; he was in another world, but he couldn't decide if he ought to accept the images he saw in that world as

real or not. He turned, flung off the top sheet, swallowed, and breathed rhythmically again. Yes; the images were real and he allowed them to engage his emotions...

...he was walking down a narrow path bordered by tall black weeds and then suddenly the path widened into a strange, deep dark forest with stalwart trees ranging on all sides of him and then he was aware of treading upon dried leaves and twigs and it came to him that he was tramping through a vast wooded area which he had just bought and these majestic trees looming skyward were his own and he was filled with a sense of pride as he tried to see their vaulting branches whose heights soared beyond his vision and then he paused and began intricate mental calculations as to how much profit he would make if he ordered all the trees cut down and sawn into timber and shipped for sale to the nearby city and he started counting the trees four eight sixteen trees were in a space sixteen yards by thirty-two yards and now he assumed that he had a hundred acres of trees like these how much profit would he realize but all of the trees were not of the same size there were thicker and taller trees and he pushed farther on into the forest and then he was suddenly afraid and hid himself behind a large tree and listened to the sound of *whack whack whack* somebody was in the forest chopping down one of his trees and he peered cautiously and saw a tall man swinging a huge ax chopping furiously into a v-shaped hollow of a giant tree and the chips were flying and the man's face was hard and brutish and criminal looking and he was

now resolved upon surprising the man and demanding that he get out of the forest and stop stealing the trees and he crept closer and saw that the man was about to cut straight through the tree and all at once the man stopped and whirled and saw him and yelled *run go quickly the tree's about to fall* and he looked up and saw the tall tree bending slowly and falling towards him and he heard the man yelling for him to run but he couldn't move his feet and when he looked up this time the tree was crashing down upon him and he managed to move at last trying to keep his eyes on the falling tree and he tripped on something and fell headlong and when he looked back to see where the falling tree was it too late for the tree was upon him and he could feel the leaves and branches swishing and stinging his face and eyes and ears and then the crushing weight of the tree trunk smashed against his head...

...*bang bang bang* came into Erskine's ears. He opened puffy eyes and blinked at the bright sunlight. Morning already? He was still sleepy. He turned his head and saw the towering tops of Manhattan's skyscrapers drenched in golden sunlight, but he was still staring at the strange dream images which were now fleeing from his consciousness. Again he heard that loud banging and he knew that Tony was beating his drum.

"That child," he muttered. (36,37)

The above passage shows Wright's skill as a novelist, his ability to take the reader of this psychological narrative on a trip through the subconscious of his protagonist, dropping hints here and there of the condition of his psyche beneath his erudite and

composed façade, In this way the author points out areas of weakness and vulnerability that exist within Fowler, Wright's representative of the dominant culture. The dream passage also allows the reader to see the potential links between thought and behavior that exist within Fowler's subconscious, links manifest in the imagery of a narrow path, interloping "brutish and criminal looking" men, the "v-shaped hollow of a giant tree," and his inevitable inability to escape destruction within a dark forest of his own making (37). The passage begins and ends with Fowler thinking about Tony: his focus on the boy and his life with a single mother being perhaps the most telling element of foreshadowing provided by the entire passage. Still in bed, Fowler's final moments of sleep are again disturbed by the war whoops of little Tony, who is playing cowboys and Indians by himself on the terrace. Tony and his mother, Mabel, remind Erskine of his younger self and his own mother:

The child's noise ceased and he tucked his head deeper into his pillow and drifted into a semi-dream state, thinking of Tony who, in turn, made him recall dimly his own, faraway childhood. Yes; he too had once romped and played alone, yelling war whoops and there'd been no mother to look after him either. Wasn't that maybe why he was so fond of Tony? And, too, wasn't it maybe because Mrs. Blake—alone, sensual, impulsive—was so much as he remembered his own mother that he found himself scolding her and brooding over her in his mind? (38)

Fowler's memories at this moment plunge him back into the anxiety-ridden past of his childhood, where he was subject to the scorn and ridicule of his schoolmates who singled him out because of his mother's bad reputation, causing him to be "furious with [her].

Even now he winced with a dull, inner pain as he recalled his dreadful dilemma in trying to decide who deserved more to be killed for having behaved so that the boys on the playground could taunt him: ought the men be killed or ought his mother be killed...?” (38). While some may have considered such an obvious application of images and tropes so readily associated with psychoanalysis and its practice as gratuitous<sup>14</sup>, I see it instead as a healthy, ludic application of Wright’s curiosity and insight into human psychology, made possible by a conscious, though not complete, distancing of himself and his writing from America’s crucible of race.

Wright intersperses Fowler’s ruminations over what to do with his new found and terrifying “freedom” with realistic details of urban life as an apartment dweller in a large city. The sounds of Tony playing on the tenth floor terrace that Fowler shares with him and his mother, the Sunday morning request of the paper boy to be paid for his deliveries, locate the novel thus far within the realm of psychological realism but offer no real clues beyond Fowler’s dream to the bizarre plot developments that lie just outside the door of his apartment. Fowler, still naked after showering, replies to a paperboy’s request by asking him to come back when he (Fowler) has the proper change. Fowler now must venture out into the hallway of his floor to retrieve his paper, left there just beyond his reach, from within the arc of his apartment door. Nude, and with coffee on the stove, he

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<sup>14</sup> Claudia Tate, in the chapter on *Savage Holiday* entitled “Rage, Race, and Desire: *Savage Holiday* by Richard Wright,” in *Psychoanalysis and Black Novels*, cites a series of comments from three critics who reviewed the novel when it was published: “a curiously incoherent little potboiler,” a “schoolbook Freud,” belonging “in a sleazy drugstore book stack” (McCall, *Example*, 52; Felgar, *Richard Wright*, 121; Bell, *Afro-American Novel*, 189).

sizes up the necessary movements that will allow him to swiftly get his paper from the hallway and return to his morning routine before the locked door of his apartment swings shut. After checking how long the door will stay open, Fowler launches his naked body out into the hallway, only to be greeted on his return by a swiftly slamming door, the result of an open window and a gust of wind. Stranded naked in the hallway of his tenth floor apartment, he covers himself with the paper that has put him in this predicament and begins to try to figure out how to get back into his apartment before the other tenants on his floor begin to make their way to church by way of the elevator. The level of anxiety this event creates within Fowler's mind is described thoroughly by Wright, who makes Fowler's nakedness and vulnerability palpable:

If he got into the elevator and rode down to the first floor, he could conceal himself in the elevator and call to Mr. Westerman, the building superintendent. Yes, that was his only chance...he crept on the tips of his toes to the elevator, holding the Sunday newspaper in front of him feeling that perhaps even the inert metal of the elevator machinery would scorn his nakedness and refuse to obey (46,47).

His nakedness and inability to immediately rectify his predicament trigger a series of panicked and futile efforts to re-enter his apartment from the tenth floor. From insistently trying the doorknob despite the knowledge he had recently had security upgrades installed, to failed attempts to ride the elevator unnoticed down to the first floor to get the help of the building superintendent to let him back into his apartment, Erskine, after holding the elevator too long, hears:

“Send that elevator down!” a man's voice boomed.

“Wait will you? Erskine screamed, his body shaking with rage, shame, despair and a sickness which he could not name.

The elevator came to a standstill at the eleventh floor and, through the cloudy square of glass, he saw his way clear. He opened the door and stepped out, feeling that he was escaping an enormous throng of encircling, hostile people armed with long, sharp knives, intent upon chopping off his arms, his legs, his genitals, his head... Squeezing the wet wad of newspapers close to his drenched skin he crept down the stairway, leaving dark tracks of water each time his naked feet touched the purplish carpet. (50)

I would offer the above quoted passage to those who feel that this novel is completely devoid of race or racialized themes, citing the similarities between this passage and others written by authors of the Diaspora about blacks, either escaped slaves or fugitives from lynch mobs running in fear for their lives. What follows also links this novel to the Diaspora through the tropic invocation of a monstrous Other: there is a bestial representation of Fowler when, as he attempts to climb up into his bathroom window, who is playing on the balcony: he inadvertently encounters Tony:

His momentum now carried him out upon the balcony and he was turning his naked body in the direction of the window of his bathroom even before he saw where he was going.

His right leg encountered some strange object and he went tumbling forward on his face, his long, hairy arms flaying the air rapaciously, like the paws of a huge beast clutching for something to devour, to rend to

pieces...He steadied himself partially by clawing at the brick wall and then he saw, in one swift sweeping glance, little Tony's tricycle over which he had tripped and fallen and also there flashed before his stunned eyes a quick image of...Tony, his little white face registering shock, staring at him clad in a cowboy's outfit, standing atop his electric hobbyhorse near the edge of the balcony...Tony, poised atop the electric hobbyhorse opened his mouth to scream and then, slowly—it seemed to Erskine's imagination when he thought of it afterwards that the child had been floating in air—little Tony fell backwards and uttered one word: "Naaaaaw...!"

In the final moment before Tony's fall to the pavement ten floors below, Erskine offers him his hand after realizing that the initial and accidental push that had sent the child flying backwards had left him teetering on the edge of the balcony's railing for a moment. Within this moment, Erskine can save the child, but Tony instead of grabbing Erskine's hand, reaches for the iron railing, which is already overstressed and breaking free of its anchor points because of the combined weight of Fowler, the hobbyhorse and Tony. Tony is afraid of the image Fowler has presented to him: a naked, sweaty man, with wild eyes and a body covered with a mat of thick black hair, reaching towards him.

Rather than alert the police after he regains entry into his apartment, Erskine remains silent, and lies to cover his involvement in Tony's death to the building superintendent, his wife, the police and Mabel, Tony's mother. Conversation with the wife of the building superintendent confirms for Fowler that Tony developed a phobia towards men, based on his less than precise interpretation of what men did with his

mother behind closed doors in their apartment. The sounds Tony heard emanating from beyond his mother's door sounded to a child of five years of age like someone was trying to hurt his mother, yet she never tried to get away from these men, sometimes inviting them back. As a result, Tony understood "fighting" to be the best term for what was going on, and asked to Fowler to explain to him where babies come from:

"One night I saw a big man fight mama," Tony had explained. "Mama didn't have any clothes on, and the man didn't have any clothes on either. And mama said that she was scared that she'd have a baby. Mr. Fowler"-- Tony had paused and looked hard at Erskine, "why do they have to fight like that to make babies?"..."I don't want to grow up," he had said at last. "I don't wanna be a man--"  
"Why?"  
"Cause I don't wanna fight," he said. I don't wanna fight ladies like my mother..." (99)

A further complication came to light concerning Tony's misunderstanding of adult sexuality when it is discovered that both Erskine and the building superintendent's wife have, on different occasions, given Tony toys to play with. One type of toy mentioned in the text specifically is an airplane, a bomber. Tony asks for two of the toys from Erskine so he can "make 'em fight" each other (101). The toy bombers fly into harm's way, by way of Tony's hands, and release "the baby bombers," small fighter planes that are nested beneath. But when this occurs, Tony stops playing with them and lapses into an anxiety attack, as the bombers, ready to drop their "baby bombs," remind him of his mother and her "fights" with her gentlemen friends:

There's gonna be a *fight*, a big *fight*...! Watch! The big bombers are letting the little baby bombers drop out of their stomachs! The sky's full of little baby fighter planes now...Everybody's fighting...!

In spite of his shame, Erskine had watched little Tony's face grow white with fear as he pursued his make-believe game of "fighting," and Erskine felt ill...Sweat stood out on Tony's face and his body trembled. He had looked wildly about, as though seeing something that Erskine could not see. Suddenly he dropped the planes; then, in an effort to find shelter from his self-created nightmare he grabbed and clung to him frantically...In the end Erskine too had grown frightened, for he could feel what was frightening the child. What could he do for Tony? (103)

Erskine uses this detail to inform his understanding of Tony's anxiety, and concludes that it was not his nakedness per se that startled the young boy and resulted in his death, but the fact that his nakedness reminded him of glimpses of his mother and strange men fighting that caused him to fall from the balcony. In this way, Fowler can see himself as free from blame and consequently guilt over the little boy's death. Again this deduction is possible through the interior monologue we are privy to thanks to Wright's mastery of psychological realism.

Armed with this insight into Tony's mindset, Erskine approaches Mabel, to console and provide her assistance—without telling her the truth concerning his role in Tony's accidental death. Mabel vacillates between the grieving mother and someone with no real affection for her departed son, all before he is even laid to rest. As Fowler approaches Mabel, he is prepared to step into the role of provider and sustainer to the

weakened, distraught mother--that is until the phone rings. Each time this occurs, it is invariably a young man who wants to spend time with her. As Erskine discovers Mabel's willingness to pursue some of the invitations she receives in the midst of a period he believes should be dedicated to grieving and *him*, the long suppressed rage he felt for his mother and her indiscretions surfaces and spoils his ability to freely give himself to Mabel without reservation. Mabel calls Fowler immediately after Tony's fall and anonymously tells Fowler that she knows what really happened, in hopes of getting him to confess whatever knowledge he might have of the "pair of naked white feet she saw climbing up into his bathroom window, after the loud bang that was the slamming of Erskine's front door. Erskine sticks to his story and proposes marriage to Mabel, who, in a confused state, accepts his proposal. Fowler's stability is contingent upon Mabel's subservience to and dependence on him; each time the evidence of that need for his support diminishes, usually through her communicating or meeting with people other than Fowler, he becomes enraged and repulsed by her.

Erskine eventually lives up to the anagram within his name, "Her skin Foul her," when Mabel realizes that he is responsible for her son's death. She attempts to leave his apartment to tell the police after being invited there to smooth over their hastily arranged and already dysfunctional engagement. Erskine pins her to his table and wielding a kitchen knife, stabs her repeatedly. When he finishes his savage act, watching the blood collect on the floor beneath her slain body, he calmly calls the police and reports his crime, to the amazement of the officer that gets the call and interrogates him at the station. Demirturk's "Mapping the Terrain of Whiteness: Richard Wright's *Savage Holiday*," discusses the larger socio/psychological implications of Mabel's murder:

What Fowler fails to realize is this supremacist stance condones the dehumanization of the Other. Mabel represents another doll to be destroyed, for she has to be sacrificed “to make the world safe for the “white man’s” conception of existence (White Man 42). Deprived of a viable set of values to survive in the face of social imperatives without which he is unabashedly naked, Fowler embodies “a fantasy of whiteness” (hooks, Killing 36), for which he sacrifices Tony accidentally and Mabel deliberately. He stabs her to death and leaves the corpse on the kitchen table: Fowler’s act of murder defines the white male as bestial in dominating and devouring the colonial subject. In many ways, it re-contextualized bell hook’s statement: “It is by eating the Other (in this case, death) that one asserts power and privilege” (hooks, Black Looks 36). In the scene of murder in the kitchen, Fowler becomes the victim of his rage, whose referentiality is “a sign of powerlessness” (hooks, Killing 12) in Freudian terms. After murdering Mabel he loses his supremacist stance and patriarchal power in the final scene where we see Wright’s association of “whiteness with disease.” (Gaskill 47)

Houston Baker Jr., invoked one of my heroes, Muhammad Ali’s “Float like a butterfly, sting like a bee” poetry to support his definition of “mastery of form.” I agree with that usage, and see it as evident in Wright’s introduction of a plot that easily opens itself to a psychological or psychoanalytic reading; his positioning of character choice and verisimilitude create situations that while compressed or even melodramatic, still

resonate with the troubled soundings of three characters representative of a culture that has lost its way. Wright is able to introduce characters who appear to be very normal for the milieu, but that in itself is what Wright, Ellison, Hughes, Horney, Frank, and others were talking about at that very historical moment: there was something wrong with American postwar society; it looks okay, but look closer. Competition for status and material wealth, paired with issues of repressed sexuality, feed neuroses within American free enterprise that in turn feeds upon its hosts. Each character alone and untouched is fine to the untrained eye; but look closer and you will see that each suffers a great deal within their sphere.

Greed and desire for greater profits justify the throwing away of a perfectly good man. Longevity Life capriciously terminates the long-lived relationship it has had with Fowler, forever altering his life; but hey, that's business. The world of work that has been a shield for him from his past shame and rage was now gone--without his permission. After thirty years of commitment and loyalty, Fowler is suddenly impotent, lacking any power even to negotiate his own fate after retirement. We are witness within the novel to the quickly crumbling façade of an American success story; or was the banquet at the novel's beginning, full of platitudes and fond farewells merely a ruse to spirit Erskine away from the scene of the crime (his forced retirement) and out of Longevity and Life? Fowler runs through a series of examples of how life insurance was not merely an occupation, but life itself. His realization and ours is that in the actions of his superiors and the market demands they serve, as well as within the actions of the common masses of folk his company serves, within this culture, all are based in deceit, contempt, and treachery.

The past Fowler hides from greeted him with “*bang bang bang!*” from a toy pistol the last morning of Tony’s life. With no knowledge of his own father, Erskine, who would have been born right around the time of the Armistice, may have lost his father in the same way that Tony’s father died in battle. Wright leaves *Savage Holiday* open to the identification of a cycle of violence<sup>15</sup> within the generations of young men. Tony is actually killed by the toys that surround him, inanimate members of a surrogate system in place to aid a mother who is either asleep, at work, or “fighting” with a man in the next room. The toys cause Fowler to stumble, and Tony to fall. These toys loudly extol and glorify violence on a larger scale, preparing Tony and boys like him for their opportunity to keep the world safe or protect the weak. Perhaps Wright, like Larsen in her novel *Passing*, meant for the ending of Tony’s life to be ambiguous where Fowler was concerned. Was Erskine sparing Tony a life as myopic yet unexamined as his?

Erskine lives in a world devoid of a love of anything that lasts. His ability to keep his mother’s attention and affection waned as her desire for men and sexual pleasure waxed, until he was taken away from her. He worshipped his superiors, only to watch them destroy his career and life. He boasts over the absence of any whores in his bed, but offers no reference to *anyone* else ever in that bed either. Erskine’s notion of courting entails being a voyeur of a widowed neighbor two or three times in a state of undress, then marrying her. His sexual health and well being have been compromised by an inattentive mother and an adult life preoccupied with external perceptions and constructions of “healthy” and “normal.”

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<sup>15</sup> Richard K. Slotkin’s *Regeneration through Violence* and *Gunfighter Nation* address the issues of the primacy and permanence of violence in the construction of American culture.

Mabel's notion of love is equally groundless and transient. With friends for sex partners she is able to construct a network of contacts that will satisfy her needs on all levels but an emotional one. In minimizing her risk of emotional damage, she ensures for herself a soulless and uninspired lifestyle that possesses the real potential to pervert her son's perception of love, affection, and commitment between two people.

Tony arrives at malformed conclusions about intimacy, family and love at a critical and formative age in his life. Wright has his development and dysfunction mirror that of Fowler's early childhood to point directly at the travesty of the innocent bearing the brunt of the parent's misdeeds. The didacticism inherent in this pairing of male characters is reminiscent of that used in *Native Son* to point to the injustices being heaped on another population at the margins of our view or interest. Again, Demitruk's commentary aids the establishing of a connection between the novel and the earlier "race" novels for which Wright became famous:

In many ways, *Savage Holiday* can be related to Wright's canon, for it presents some of the themes and characters consistent with his earlier work. Although Fowler and Bigger in *Native Son* can be contrasted with each other, there are certain similarities both characters share in their experiences. Both Bigger and Fowler have been emotionally abused without a solid mother figure to look up to. Much like Bigger, who killed Mary accidentally, Fowler also "kills" Tony accidentally. Similarly, Bigger kills Bessie Mears and Fowler kills Mabel Blake for the same purpose—to buy their silence. Fowler can be compared with the persona of *Black Boy* in the sense that both are in need of a nurturing mother, who

would demonstrate maternal love and yet both suffer from the fact that their drives toward love have been twisted at an early age. (5)

*Savage Holiday* is not asking the reader to look at a fictional representation of the Other and empathize; it is forcing the reader to acknowledge that the dysfunction in front of their eyes, within the white characters and *their* unfolding narrative represents the cumulative effects of *the reader's* neuroses and psychological afflictions. Wright is saying this isn't about us—directly. This is about *you*. The near total absence of black characters is neither accidental nor uncharacteristic for this novel's period and within the sub-genre; the homogeneity of the characters and setting serve to properly “set up” the reader for the larger message conveyed by the plot's conclusion. The novel is a palimpsest of Wright's earlier writing. His skill at *deformation of mastery* is in his ability to overwrite blackness with whiteness to make clear the root of the problems that plague the black community. In an interview with Raymond Barthes on *Savage Holiday* Wright states:

Having left America and having been living sometime in France, I have become concerned about the historical roots and the emotional problems of western whites which makes them aggressive toward colored peoples...I was looking for explanations of the psychological reactions of whites...in this novel I have attempted to deal with what I consider as the most important problem white people have to face: their moral dilemma.

(1)

Black Madness is unique in its representations and constructions to an American landscape. It is understood that a problem is often most difficult to see or understand

when one is in the middle of it. By removing himself from that landscape and the anxiety that it generates for each of us as Americans, both oppressor and the oppressed, Wright is able to strike out from across the ocean at the heart of America's problem insofar as its populations of color are concerned. Wright found the "root" in a "moral dilemma"; it's over in that gated neighborhood. Wright, whose ability to clearly see and process the etiology of Black Madness as contingent upon his abandoning the site of that madness, allows us through new "lenses," as Demirturk describes them, to:

Avert our attention from the Other in society (African American) to the Self in this novel (white American male) in order to transform the mindset behind the white lenses, and to re-assess our vision of the Self when it is relegated to the status of the Other.... Wright gets us to see beyond the "white lenses" of Fowler in depicting his fear of the public gaze—the very gaze through which he has always viewed the world. His insecurity emerges from stepping outside of the tenets of civilization and hence from inhabiting a location that would shift into the realm of savagery in the public mind, that is from the Self to the Other....if Fowler is the Other, where do we stand? (6)

Demirturk's passages brings to mind the fact that Wright was neither alone in his milieu, nor was there a lack of authors before Wright's cold war historical moment to explore the race problem by means of challenging standing paradigms of authorship and subject position in the name of literature that gave readers an understanding of the inter-ethnic

complexity and cultural pervasiveness of those issues that surface as “race problems” in American society.<sup>16</sup>

In *The Primitive*, the characters that Chester Himes creates live with their dysfunction in real-time. Gayl Jones, at the time of the publication of her novel *Corregidora*, insisted that her novel was in no way to be interpreted as having autobiographical elements as part of the narrative.<sup>17</sup> Wright’s *Savage Holiday*, shielded from direct correlations between its author and its plot by differences in setting and race, nevertheless has yielded connections for scholars diligent enough in their investigations of Wright to conclude that the strong mother-child antipathy that resonates within the remembrances of the relationship between Fowler and his mother is a result in part of Wright’s imprinting of personal anxieties. Wright’s anxieties, suffered through a difficult

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<sup>16</sup> I am thinking, in particular, of Charles Chesnutt’s “Mars Jeems’ Nightmare,” one of Chesnutt’s

Conjure tales that allows a white overseer to be temporarily “conjured” and suddenly appear on his own plantation as a slave, with no knowledge of how or why he is there, only that conditions are extreme at the hands of the whites there who take him for an escaped slave. When he returns to his former white state, he has very different and less severe ideas about the proper way to maintain slave populations placed in his care.

<sup>17</sup> See the article, “Toward an All Inclusive Structure” for more information concerning Jones’ work and her personal history, which includes a period of institutionalization for psychological observation following the death of her husband by suicide.

relationship with a mother when young who was while younger hypercritical of him, and later, after being incapacitated by a stroke, became excessively demanding and needy.<sup>18</sup>

*The Primitive*, published a year after *Savage Holiday*, through interviews with Himes became known to be based in part on his life experiences and those of a woman with whom he worked and had an affair, and who later committed suicide in 1955. Himes, whose personal history also included serving eight years of a twenty-five year prison sentence for armed robbery, uses his life experiences as the stuff of his fictional offerings. This is very different from Jones, who dismisses the notion that her work should be interpreted as being consciously influenced by her personal history. It also differs from Wright, who in discussing *Savage Holiday* talks about the freedom that psychological writing has, how it allows him to reveal, through the exploration and free association of experience, conscious assessments of the self, and deeply held thoughts and anxieties. In contrast to his friend and fellow expatriate Wright, who utilized psychology and psychoanalytic lenses as devices to aid his Naturalist form, Chester Himes employs his craft to explicate and problematize his own life as a black man in America. His willingness to expose and exploit his own vulnerabilities and misgivings about how to see and live life is what first attracted me to his novels. Initially unaware of the autobiographical elements of his early writing, I enjoyed *Lonely Crusade* and *If He Hollers* for their blunt realist prose, which aptly created images of the characters' lives and the complications within those lives that could or were happening to lots of black folks—sometimes even a guy like me. Himes defines his writing style in his 1976

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<sup>18</sup> Details concerning this interpretation of *SH* in light of Wright's personal history can be found in Claudia

Tate's *Psychoanalysis and Black Novels*.

autobiography *My Life of Absurdity*: “I thought I was writing realism...It never occurred to me that I was writing absurdity. Realism and absurdity are so similar in the lives of American blacks one cannot tell the difference” ([www.kirjasto.sci.fi/chimes.htm](http://www.kirjasto.sci.fi/chimes.htm)). I believe that the blurring of the line between the two is a coping device; each sensibility acts as a foil to the unchecked destructive power of the other by itself. *The Primitive* stumbles back and forth across that line, because someone on each page is either drunk or getting drunk. The level of alcoholism in the novel, which is extreme, seems to provide the proper motivation, “*en vino veritas*,” for the main characters, Jesse and Krissy, to spend the majority of the six days over which the novel takes place together, drinking, fighting and at last talking about sex. Himes’ writing style, characterized by parallel narratives, allows the reader to track what more than one character is doing at any time. An excellent example of this occurs in the novel when Krissy, a white middle class business type, reunites with Jesse, a black struggling author, for a weekend of drinking and good times. The two have agreed to meet at noon on a Sunday, to have brunch and hang out. Himes alternates between passages that describe each character’s time spent in preparation for their date. For Krissy this entails getting depressed and drunk, attempting to overdose on sleeping pills and alcohol, and knocking the phone off the hook in her stupor. When we shift back to Jesse, who is now drunk and disappointed by the unending *line-busy* sound Krissy’s phone continues to make, and who chooses to go out in the interim of trying to reach her. While out, Jesse gets even more drunk, and ends up sleeping with a woman he encounters while out on the town, but will have no recollection of it; much in the same way Krissy, not dead, just terribly well rested from the four pills she managed to not spill on the floor, wakes to Jesse’s call the next morning, after

replacing the phone on the cradle. With a darkly comic subtlety, each responds to the other's inquiries about what happened to their date yesterday with answers that are minimally informing, basically because neither remembers what they did or where they went.

In a 1964 interview with Francois Bott, within *Conversations with Chester Himes*, Himes discusses the elements and stressors within black society that lead to aberrant behavior and substance abuse: "Segregation produces a neurosis that afflicts every person of color. It makes people crazy...there's an obvious link between drug addiction and this craziness. Drugs help people to relax. Drugs are like whiskey or jazz music; they make them feel normal again" (15). *The Primitive* puts this white woman and black man together, as if the purpose is to watch and see who survives. The dialogue between them is informed, as they dated each other for a period of time before each got married to members of their own race. The novel ends with an unexplained murder, one that is presaged by a chimpanzee news reporter. The absurdity of the ending goes well with the absurdity of all Himes seems to be saying; these lovers cycle through moments wracked with desire and repulsion for one another until one of them dies. The evidence of Black Madness within this novel rests in its absurdity—each character fights elements of their racialized past by fighting each other in the present. Love for one another is not enough to overcome the damage and no amount of drink or drugs can blunt the sensation of loss that ensues.

## Conclusion

When I began this project my intention was to answer a single question: why are there so many insane or unstable people in African American novels? My question demanded that I discover how many critics and scholars had already investigated this topic. My research yielded *one essay*, dealing with madness in the plays of Derek Walcott. A more recent search has produced a dozen essays investigating of the trope of madness in black texts. That search has led me into the literature and criticism of the Classic Greeks in the fourth century B.C.E., and forward, to explore the shifting interpretations and utilizations of madness over time. Finally, *Black Madness* seems to begin when *blackness* begins, with the need for such distinctions made necessary by exploration, exploitation, and enslavement; and the rationalization of these acts in the later centuries of the first millennium C.E. By tracking the development of classifications by race, which chronologically coincides with the development of the means of classifying the insane among us, I have been able to locate the source of the dissonance that is a constant element of Black Madness: that which is suffered by persons of color when they see a world they cannot participate in fully and freely. Counterbalancing that dissonance is that suffered by dominant culture throughout this portion of world history who must reconcile barbarous and insensitive acts against men, women and children against the earnest wish they have for long, productive and healthy lives for their own offspring. Competition is the key; Black Madness is a by-product of systems of commerce and government that have found ways to rationalize and defend the diminution of some elements of their society for the good of others. Until this practice is ended, until leaders, teachers, and parents speak in uniform ways about the equality of humankind, and encourage behaviors

from the cradle to the grave that defend the sanctity of all life, not just that of certain people, this madness, as well as other forms--gendered, sexual, spiritual, and socially constructed--will continue to present themselves on the world stage. Black Madness is not a term I wish someday to become a part of the DSM-IV; its grounding is psychological, but only inasmuch as the authors I have discussed have chosen to make it so. Rather, it speaks to a social condition, one that has been artificially created and perpetuated by greed, fear, envy, and the anxiety that accompanies our quests for power and progress. For a reply to those who would claim that the extra attention such a term directs towards race and the aftermath of this construct yields only confusion, resentment, and misunderstanding, I must defer to my authors: why would they have seen fit to include the insane or unstable characters, casting and directing their lives in literature since the middle of the nineteenth century, if there were not cause for it? Black Madness as a concept is uncomfortable; it is ungainly and difficult to manage, remains a burden to be shouldered until the dissonance and difference of race has been overcome.

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