

Black Identity Formation in Frederick Douglass's Autobiography and Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*

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ABSTRACT

Frederick Douglass and Toni Morrison both dealt extensively with problems of black identity within their works. In Douglass's *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave, Written by Himself* and Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*, we find that black identity is strongly affected and by outside forces that seek to limit the ways in which black identity can develop in order for powerful forces such as institutional slavery to maintain their control over black people. This essay reads Frederick Douglass's self-fashioning in his *Narrative* in comparison with characters from Morrison's novel, particularly Pecola, and explores the ways in which black identity may be constructed against prevailing norms (as in Douglass's case), or may end up being lost through extreme conformity with norms (as in Pecola's case). An exploration of black identity in these works is important not only for an understanding of historically significant literature, but for present day problems around black identity.

Introduction

Frederick Douglass's *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave, Written by Himself* and Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* both focus on the formation of black identities in worlds where external forces seek to limit those identities into something that does not upset the status quo of white hegemony. Black identity formation is limited in a variety of ways in both works, such as notions of whiteness being innately superior to blackness in regards to beauty and of white people possessing a greater degree of intelligence or creativity or other valued qualities than black people, both of which are used to mentally contain black identities. Physical force is also used by the dominant culture to stifle black identities, especially in Douglass's *Narrative*, and both works demonstrate that the prevailing white culture seeks to make itself the sole voice that black people hear in order to present them with only a single, mostly powerless way of living that fits within the confines established by the dominant white culture. *The Bluest Eye*'s Pecola and Douglass's portrayal of himself in his *Autobiography* engage with the external forces that seek to limit their identities, and they provide a useful contrast of success and failure: Douglass succeeds in fashioning an identity of his own through education which provides him with a plurality of voices in which to fashion himself, as opposed to the sole voice of slavery informing his identity formation; Pecola fails to create an authentic identity for herself due to internalizing the single way of being that she has been presented with.

Historical Contexts

Because both works are strongly situated within their historical contexts, it is prudent to outline those contexts. Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* originated as a story in 1962 and became a book in 1965, and was first published in 1970, but the events of the novel itself occur in 1941, predating the Civil Rights Movement that would strive for black equality in the United States (xi). In the foreword to her novel, Morrison notes that the novel originated in a conversation with a childhood friend in elementary school where the friend said she wanted blue eyes. Morrison "looked around to

picture her with them and was violently repelled by what I imagined she would look like if she had her wish,” and that her shock came from this being the first time she “knew the beautiful” which was “not simply something to behold; it was something one could do” (x-xi). Morrison goes on to explain that *The Bluest Eye* is in part a way of trying to explain the way in which a young girl like her friend could fail to see herself as beautiful and instead wish to appropriate impossible-to-achieve white standards of beauty, and she asserts that “Implicit in her desire was racial self-loathing” (xi). Morrison explores the culturally imposed racial self-loathing of black individuals throughout the novel, and the impetus for the writing of the work was the “reclamation of racial beauty in the sixties,” that is, during the Civil Rights Movement. The novel is therefore situated in two historical contexts: 1941 in which it takes place, prior to the Civil Rights Movement where questions of “who decides who or what is beautiful” were being asked and analyzed, and in the midst of the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s which sought equality for black people in the United States.

Douglass’s *Narrative*, as an autobiography, makes a claim for its own historical context. The *Autobiography* is situated within the Antebellum South of the 1820s to 1845 when the book was first published. The institution of slavery is strong in the South, though there is a struggle between abolitionists (mostly in the North) and slaveholders that anticipates the Civil War of the 1860s. Richard Gray points out that, in Douglass’s day, an enslaved person “was not truly a self, an individual” but that [(s)he] “was property” (127). Douglass’s existence as legal property under the slave system is the most important part of placing him within his historical context as far as his 1845 *Narrative* is concerned—it is because of his being legal property that the external white forces act in ways that seek to keep him under their control. Furthermore, Douglass is in a historical context that is reacting to the Enlightenment which, Elizabeth J. West argues, helped provide many of the arguments used by slaveholders to defend slavery: “Many Enlightenment thinkers deemed black enslavement a natural course of development, maintaining that superior human minds (or races) will eventually thrive while those inferior groups fall off and eventually perish” (16-17). Scholar Lisa Margaret Zeitz reinforces this idea of natural black inferiority in Douglass’s historical context through examining the religious language used both by Douglass and the slaveholders in his narrative. Zeitz points out that Douglass makes use of copious amounts of religious language in his text “primarily to refute the claim that Christianity sanctions slavery,” (57) a pro-slavery argument commonly used throughout the work, and a line of argumentation that Douglass is particularly scornful towards throughout.

What their respective historical contexts help show are some of the external forces at work in affecting black identity formation. For Morrison, these forces are found largely in cultural norms; they are the attitudes, biases, and portrayals of black and white people shown repeatedly by the dominant culture. The young black girl Pecola is the primary focus of these forces in the novel, but we are shown the development and finished states of many black characters’ identities, all very strongly affected by the external forces around them. We are shown, for example, Pecola’s fascination with a cup that has an image of Shirley Temple on it, both staring at the image and drinking milk out of the cup, imbibing the idea of whiteness being equated with beauty (19), and contributing to Pecola’s internalization of this idea and her unfulfillable desire to have blue eyes herself. The scholar Md. Minhazul Islam is entirely right in pointing out that “Pecola denies her own identity” based upon this passage and similar passages that deal with Pecola’s internalization of white beauty standards and her desire for blue eyes (194). Indeed, we are told that for Pecola, her eyes “were everything. Everything was there, in them” and that “It had occurred to Pecola some time ago that if her eyes . . . were different, that is to say, beautiful, she herself would be different,” and that by looking different she believes her family would treat her better (Morrison 45-46). It is not only Pecola who identifies beauty with whiteness in the novel, but other black characters such as Pauline do as well: “Pauline was never able, after her education in the movies, to look at a face and not assign it some category in the scale of absolute beauty, and the scale was one she absorbed in full from the silver screen” (122). Given the historical context of the story, it is reasonable to assume that the faces she has been exposed to in films are white faces, and thus she, like Pecola, associates whiteness with beauty; it is surely no mistake that Pecola makes this identification with Shirley Temple, a famous white actress.

Tool of Anti-Blackness: Limiting Discourses

Douglass, like the characters of *The Bluest Eye*, must contend with cultural norms that affect the formation of his own identity. In many ways, Douglass's *Narrative* is a more extreme version of *The Bluest Eye*—certainly the forces that affect him are stronger and more overtly entrenched in the culture depicted in the work, made clear enough by not only anti-black attitudes deeply embedded in characters' imaginations, but by the copious laws of the South that enforce black subordination as well. For Douglass, the primary force of keeping enslaved people subservient is through enforced ignorance: "I have found that, to make a contented slave, it is necessary to make a thoughtless one. It is necessary to darken his moral and mental vision, and, as far as possible, to annihilate the power of reason" (64-65). We see the way enforced ignorance is utilized by slaveholders throughout the *Narrative*, as for example when Douglass tells the reader that enslaved people are made ignorant of their exact ages, or even of their exact parents, with many enslaved people being sons or daughters of white slaveholders (12). Enslaved people may also be made ignorant of their family member's deaths, such as when Douglass "was not allowed to be present during [his mother's] illness, at her death, or burial. She was gone long before I knew any thing about it" (13). This ignorance is used not only to keep enslaved people in line by slaveholders, but is also adopted as a strategy for avoiding punishment by enslaved people. Douglass writes that "slaves, when inquired as to their condition and the character of their masters, almost universally say they are contented, and that their masters are kind," and they "suppress the truth rather than take the consequences of telling it" because they could be informed on if they were to say anything negative about their masters (21-22). The tool of enforced ignorance by the slaveholder becomes a tool used by enslaved people to disseminate ignorance of their true state in order to avoid pain. But this tool appropriated by enslaved people must ultimately strengthen pro-slavery arguments: if the enslaved people themselves do not claim to be unhappy, then surely there is little problem.

A major way in which slavery maintains its control over enslaved people through enforced ignorance is through placing a monopoly upon literacy, preventing enslaved people from learning how to read or write. James Thomas Mullane even argues that "The primary tool - other than the threat of physical punishment - by which most of the slaves were kept from freedom was illiteracy" (27). Indeed, literacy is so powerful in the narrative that it becomes a major means through which Douglass is ultimately able to create an identity for himself that subverts the limits placed upon him by slavery, and he is emphatic about its utility as a means toward freedom—both mental and physical—throughout the *Narrative*. Douglass is at first, for a short time, taught how to read by Mrs. Auld, wife of his master Mr. Auld, but when Mr. Auld discovers what is happening he forbids any further instruction, "telling her, among other things, that it was unlawful, as well as unsafe, to teach a slave to read" and that if Douglass were to learn how to read "It would forever unfit him to be a slave. He would at once become unmanageable, and of no value to his master. As to himself, it could do him no good, but a great deal of harm. It would make him discontented and unhappy" (29). Significantly, Auld not only proves correct in his prediction that Douglass would be tormented from learning how to read, but he touches on the major argument in favor of literacy and education generally within the *Narrative*. Through Auld's vehemence against literacy, Douglas realizes the use it may have in freeing himself from mental (and later physical) bondage and only encourages him to pursue literacy with greater zeal: "The very decided manner with which he [Mr. Auld] spoke, and strove to impress his wife with the evil consequences of giving me instruction, served to convince me that he was deeply sensible of the truths he was uttering. It was the best assurance that I might rely with the utmost confidence on the results which, he said, would flow from teaching me to read" (29). And once Douglass has learned to read after resorting to "various stratagems," (31) he is able to read works like "The Columbian Orator," filled with antislavery propaganda, including a dialogue between an enslaved person and his master, where the enslaved person deftly counters every argument made by his master, resulting in voluntary emancipation (32). What literacy provided for Douglass was an expansion of his world—no longer was his vision strictly confined within the limits that slavery has set for him; with the ability to read, he is able to see that there is a world beyond slavery, and a world that can even be against slavery. Douglass's literacy proves beneficial not only for his mental release from slavery, but his physical release as well, as he becomes able to forge passes for himself and his fellow runaways that would permit them to go to Baltimore (58). But literacy itself is not a direct means to freedom. Rather, it is a tool that

can be used to work towards one's freedom. Elizabeth J. West insightfully points out that, contrary to Douglass's emphases on the need for literacy, there were well-known examples of successful runaways who were themselves likely illiterate such as Sojourner Truth and Harriet Tubman (23-24). West stresses this point by arguing that "Literacy might have bolted Douglass into a level of intellectual consciousness. However, it is action—and not action prompted from intellect, but rather his innate humanity—that rekindles his spirit of defiance and desire for freedom" (24). Literacy is not to be identified with freedom, but to be thought of as only a tool that can broaden one's horizons—a useful tool indeed, but still requiring action to be taken in order to create an identity for oneself.

Whereas Douglass uses education to expand his vision of the world, Pecola and Pauline in *The Bluest Eye* readily appropriate ideas of white superiority by only being exposed to a minimal number of viewpoints that preach white superiority. That is, the characters appropriate the dominant anti-black narrative present in their culture without searching for alternative forms of discourse that may speak against the dominant anti-black narrative that Douglass was able to find in literature such as "The Columbian Orator." Pecola appropriates the anti-black discourse by identifying Shirley Temple, whiteness, blue eyes, and beauty all together, failing to recognize the alternative discourse that exists even right beside her in the form of Claudia who rejects white hegemony which has been embraced by her parents and others around her: "It had begun with Christmas and the gift of dolls," she says, pointing out that the most "special," the most "loving gift was always a big, blue-eyed Baby Doll" which the adults "represented what they thought was [her] fondest wish," but which Claudia absolutely detests. Claudia "had only one desire: to dismember it. To see of what it was made, to discover the dearness, to find the beauty, the desirability that had escaped me, but apparently only me. Adults, older girls, shops, magazines, newspaper, window signs—all the world had agreed that a blue-eyed, yellow-haired, pink-skinned doll was what every girl treasured" (20-21). Claudia is largely alone in rejecting white hegemony, though she is aware that even those around her have embraced it; as Wen-hsiang Su argues, "Claudia detested the white doll that her parents gave her as a birthday gift and, in fact, she was completely aware of the white ideology imposed upon black people. Her refusal of the white doll also implies her unwillingness to yield to the white ideology. However, even if she hated the doll, Claudia knew that black people, like her own parents, had no choice but to follow the discipline set up for them by white society" (48). White society has placed itself in such a dominant position that it becomes in one's own interest to conform, as nonconformists will become outcasts or otherwise harmed, as Pecola is at the end of the novel when she loses all sense of unique personal identity by identifying herself with a blue-eyed girl that everyone will of necessity love by virtue of her white qualities.

Douglass's *Narrative* is no different in arguing that white society encourages conformity. Throughout the *Narrative* and beyond, Douglass appropriates those things that white society has deemed extremely valuable, especially literacy. As already shown, Douglass views literacy as a means of freeing himself both intellectually and physically, but he is operating within white-imposed paradigms that privileges literacy to a very high degree. West points out that "While there is clearly a pragmatic need for blacks to become literate, . . . Douglass suggest[s] a pretext for black literacy that is not grounded in pragmatics, but rather in a white hegemonic worldview that maintains whiteness as center, as universal, as authority" (22). Furthermore, because Douglass is initially made aware of his condition as an enslaved person through literacy, he proves Mr. Auld's prophecy of a slave becoming discontented as a result of literacy true. Douglass is tormented by knowledge that he cannot act on

I would at times feel that learning to read had been a curse rather than a blessing. It had given me a view of my wretched condition, without the remedy. It opened my eyes to the horrible pit, but to no ladder upon which to get out. In moments of agony, I envied my fellow-slaves for their stupidity. I have often wished myself a beast. I preferred the condition of the meanest reptile to my own. Any thing, no matter what, to get rid of thinking! It was this everlasting thinking of my condition that tormented me. There was no getting rid of it. It was pressed upon me by every object within sight or hearing, animate or inanimate. The silver trump of freedom had roused my soul to eternal wakefulness. Freedom now appeared, to disappear no more forever. It was heard in every sound, and seen in every thing. (33)

Not only does Douglass play into some white-imposed cultural norms like privileging literacy and a classical education to a large degree, but subsequent revisions of the *Narrative* in the form of autobiography demonstrate a self-awareness and a desire to be viewed (and accepted) as an intelligent self-made man, qualities enormously valued and

emphasized by early (white) American culture, exemplified in figures like Benjamin Franklin. David Leverenz makes this point when he writes that

Throughout his three autobiographies, as carefully revised as Whitman would revise his own song of himself, he fashions an idealized self-image of the heroic, upwardly mobile man of dignity and power. Later in his political career, he held to his sense of himself as a model of manly aspiration long after it had become clear to many others that the Republican Party was flagrantly using him for token positions while abandoning its commitment to black people. Much as Emerson strives to represent an emerging cultural elite in his notion of manhood, Douglass presents his own self-made manhood as the epitome of his race's potential. He did it; so can every black man. (363)

What Douglass's subsequent revisions show us is that while Douglass indeed broke free from slavery, he had still internalized a great deal of white thought and norms. He comes to view literacy and education as the means to liberation by exposing him to alternative discourses about slavery, while, West insightfully points out, implying that those enslaved people that are ignorant of letters "somehow lack the profound understanding of slavery that he now possesses. He would have readers believe that only through book learning are humans capable of deep introspection and reasoning," falling in line with Enlightenment thought that privileged reason, education, and literacy so highly (16-17, 23).

In both the *Narrative* and *The Bluest Eye*, portrayals and stereotypes play a major role in identity formation for black characters. In the *Narrative*, Douglass is exposed to enforced ignorance and must take the great risk of becoming literate on his own through "various stratagems" (31); he is also steeped in a culture that believes in black inferiority on racial grounds, supported both with Biblical and (pseudo-) rational arguments. But whereas the *Narrative* focuses on how white culture directly looks down on black individuals, *The Bluest Eye* does so indirectly by glorifying whiteness, specifically through identifying it with beauty, which causes inferiority complexes to develop in many of the black characters who internalize those ideas. In both works, as Daina Miniotaite argues, "The aim of the numerous literary portrayals and treatment of black-skinned people as the 'Other', as failing to live up to the standards of 'normalcy' of white people by imposing negative meanings and stereotypes on them was to legalize hierarchical racialised system and justify oppression in a white hegemonic American society" (51-52). Black people are portrayed as Others in the *Narrative* by arguing from religious or natural grounds that blacks ought to be separated from whites into slavery, and blacks are likewise made Others in *The Bluest Eye* through associations of whiteness with beauty, that is, something that they can never possess themselves by virtue of their natural physical features.

Common negative stereotypes of black people abound in both works, including "their natural, inborn depravity, laziness, carelessness, irresponsibility, aggressiveness, illiteracy, docility, physical ugliness, and the like" (Miniotaite 52). In Pecola's case, internalization of these stereotypes of black people stems from her own (black) mother who had internalized ideas of white superiority and adopted self-hatred as a result of never being able to live up to white beauty standards (53). Douglass, however, is largely able to overcome internalizing these harmful stereotypes through, in his view, literacy and education which provide him with exposure to alternative discourses (i.e., discourses that do not constantly re-affirm his natural inferiority). Douglass is in fact able to prove arguments of natural black inferiority incorrect through the *Narrative* itself, with its exemplary prose and astute psychology and by frequently pointing out the hypocrisy of those slaveholders who make use of religious arguments in order to keep black people subservient. Douglass's scorn is perhaps at its peak when he is pointing towards these ostensibly religious slaveholders, even going so far as to flatly state that "For of all slaveholders with whom I have ever met, religious slaveholders are the worst. I have ever found them the meanest and basest, the most cruel and cowardly, of all others" (53). Religion is a tool used not only by slaveholders in Douglass's antebellum South, but as part of the white-dominant discourse in *The Bluest Eye*, though certainly to a lesser degree. God is "a nice old white man, with long white hair, flowing white beard, and little blue eyes that looked sad when people died and mean when they were bad" (134). Not only is whiteness associated with beauty in the novel, but it is associated with God himself, and therefore, as Su notes, "no matter how hard the MacTeer sisters pray for their flower to grow, or how desperately Pecola desires a pair of blue eyes, they would never have their wishes granted" (50). God becomes a symbol of the domination of white

culture in the novel, and a way in which white-derived notions of whiteness and blackness affect the characters' views of themselves and of others.

Conclusion

Comparisons of black identity formation in Douglass's *Narrative* and Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* prove fruitful in showing the ways in which black identity formation can be strongly affected by external forces, and the ways in which a dominant culture may seek to maintain its dominance by harming those who do not fit in with the prevailing norms. Frederick Douglass is able to craft an identity for himself that is, though not entirely, outside of the cultural norms in which he lived for a time (enslaved in the South prior to his freedom); through literacy and education he gained exposure to abolitionist rhetoric that argued that blacks were not naturally inferior to whites on either natural or religious grounds. Douglass himself was able to prove pro-slavery arguments untrue by virtue of his own accomplishments. Pecola, on the other hand, as well as many other black characters in *The Bluest Eye*, fully internalize the discourse of white superiority that they had witnessed so often in the forms of Shirley Temple cups or (white-led) films, leading to self-hatred at their inability to fit within the norms that have been established around them. Where Pecola fails in breaking free of internalizing these norms, Claudia succeeds, as does Douglass. That both works were written over a hundred years apart helps show the lengthy time in which black identities have been stifled by a white-dominant American culture, and that, even after the Civil Rights Movement, may in similar ways seek to exclude and subjugate those who fail to conform to white standards.

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