

Gerardo Del Guercio

Royal Military College of Canada (St-Jean)

Collège Jean-de-Brébeuf

l'Université de Montréal

**HYBRIDITY IN MORRISON'S *THE BLUEST EYE*:
THE DIALOGIC FORMATION OF CLAUDIA'S SELF**

Abstract: Toni Morrison's stories have centered on reciting life stories, mounting new and individual ideas of the self. The present essay revisits Morrison's first book, *The Bluest Eye*, to consider her first female her, Claudia, and her hybrid growth. Hybridity is used, in *The Bluest Eye*, as a narrative approach to craft Claudia's self through the course of the novel, enabling her gallant endurance within an antagonistic cultural milieu. Yet, in *The Bluest Eye*, hybridity is not conceived as an undecided or liminal existence in Homi Bhabha's sense. For Toni Morrison, being trapped "in-between" is never an industrious space for characters that resist with inner and exterior acceptance. Consequently, this essay provides a critical reassessment of Bhabha's hybridity through the examination of Claudia's self-development. I contend that Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* confronts the conception of "liminality" for its incapability to illustrate the narrative route by which subjects form themselves productively outside the weight of peripheral primers of identification. Instead, Morrison chooses a dialogic configuration of subjectivities more similar to M.M. Bakhtin's "inner speech" and "hybridity" conjectured in his influential work, *The Dialogic Imagination*.

Keywords: Toni Morrison, *The Bluest Eye*, hybridity, Homi Bhabha, M.M. Bakhtin

Introduction

Toni Morrison's novels have centered on the narration of life stories, developing new and individual conceptions of selfhood. This paper revisits her debut novel, *The Bluest Eye*, to analyze the first of her heroines, Claudia, and her hybrid development. Hybridity is used, in *The Bluest Eye*, as a narrative strategy to create Claudia's self through the course of the novel, enabling her heroic survival within a hostile cultural environment. However, in *The Bluest Eye*, hybridity is not conceived as an ambivalent or liminal state in Homi Bhabha's sense. For Toni Morrison, being stuck "in-between" is never a productive space for characters that struggle with internal and external acceptance. Thus, this paper offers a critical reevaluation of Bhabha's hybridity through the analysis of Claudia's self-development. I argue that Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* challenges the concept of "liminality" for its inability to describe the narrative process by which subjects constitute themselves successfully outside the demands of external primers of identification. Morrison opts instead for a dialogic formation of subjectivities more

akin to M.M. Bakhtin's "inner speech" and "hybridity" theorized in his seminal work, *The Dialogic Imagination*.

Hybridity, Mimicry, and Otherness in Bhabha and Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*

Contemporary literary discourses on hybridity have adopted Homi Bhabha's work as a model to understand the power dynamics of cross-cultural contexts. Ambivalence, liminality, third space, in-betweenness are terms that have gained currency in the vocabulary of ethnic, race, and postcolonial studies due to Bhabha's extensive analysis of the discursive productions of cultural encounters. Homi Bhabha and Toni Morrison are interested in the power that language has to define cultures and individuals. However, Toni Morrison, unlike Bhabha, believes in the possibility of articulating a hybrid, but independent, voice. Thus, hybridity in *The Bluest Eye* is not characterized by indeterminacy and ambivalence, but by its ability to dialogize dominant cultural discourses. In fact, Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* exemplifies the way in which hybrid subjects are formed in dialogue and the catastrophic consequences of failing to do so. Claudia and Pecola embody these two scenarios. While Claudia acquires a voice through the process of telling the stories of others on her own words, Pecola repeats and internalizes other peoples' discourses, getting caught in the ruse of mimicry. Madness is the result of Pecola's liminality and inability to escape the master's text. In contrast, Claudia's hybrid self emerges through dialogism. Her dialogic formation is presented in the novel as the process that elucidates "how" one escapes objectification, succeeding at realizing an independent, hybrid subjectivity (Morrison, *The Bluest Eye* 6).

Bhabha maintains that the hybrid element embedded in dominant cultural discourses comes from a profound insecurity towards otherness as an object of desire and derision. As Robert Young explains, hybridity is "founded on an anxiety" (145). Insecure in its ability to assert power through the written Word, the dominant culture generates representational narratives—stereotypes—to fix the identity of the minority group. As such, the stereotype is intended to signify difference, objectifying the Other to contain the anxiety that otherness produces (Bhabha, "Difference" 204). The stereotype, according to Bhabha, turns into an image of identity, functioning similarly to the Lacanian mirror stage. It transforms the members of the minority group as they individually assume the image as a coherent representation of their selves. Mimicry results out of this process of objectification. Once the image of the stereotype has been completely adopted, the individual, Bhabha asserts, rejects that image of himself for a "better model" based on the cultural representation of the dominant counterpart. Therefore, mimicry, the complete adoption of the values, norms, and cultural practices

of the paramount group by those subjected to the stereotypes, creates "authorized versions of otherness:" subjects that are "white, but not quite" (Young 147).

Under these circumstances, establishing a counter discourse appears impossible. But Bhabha insists that mimicry itself allows for subversion, for "mimicry is like camouflage" (*The Location* 90). That is, while mimicry is a strategy to "reform" the Other in the image of the dominant group, a visible difference between the American and the Americanized, the White and the White-like appears. Hybridity, according to Bhabha, emerges with subversive qualities within this gap. The slippage intensifies the anxiety of the dominant culture and threatens its power since it is a constant reminder of its inability to completely control and fix the Other (Bhabha, *The Location* 86-89). In Bhabha's own words, "hybridity unsettles the mimetic or narcissistic demands of colonial power but reimplicates its identifications in strategies of subversion that turn the gaze of the discriminated back upon the eye of power" ("Signs" 154). Hybridity in Bhabha's theory seems to have the power to question the effectiveness of the dominant culture, but in doing so, the subject is denied the ability to escape the binary between an imposed self and other, having been relegated to inhabit the space in the middle of the two, since hybridity only works within the parameters of mimicry. Therefore, hybridity does not solve or change the condition of those who are objectified. Indeed, Bhabha concedes: "Tensions are not resolved by means of hybridity" ("Signs" 156). Hybridization only occurs as a repetition of the master text, creating a "mutation" that might challenge authority, but still depends on it for its formation (Bhabha, "Signs" 153).

Then, resisting dominant discourses by means of Bhabha's conception of hybridity means to remain invisible and difficult to apprehend, frightening, menacing for the dominant group (Bhabha, *The Location* 47). It is no surprise that Bhabha gives this empty and duplicitous "I" the sinister appellation of "Evil Eye" (*The Location* 52). Yet, as disturbing as this "evil eye" might be for the dominant culture, its constitution as a trace—an invisible, "missing person," "nothing in itself"—is utterly damaging for those individuals condemned to live in this liminal space (Bhabha, *The Location* 53). Subversion comes at the cost of any alternative representation for individual subjects, since they need to occupy and "speak" from the site of in-betweenness and non-existence (*The Location* 47). According to Julia Kristeva, this state of in-betweenness causes psychosis. Bhabha's hybrid will eventually get lost in semblances and masks, "battling for a power without any place" (Kristeva 114, 115) since for Bhabha, "the access to an image of identity is only possible in the negation of any sense of originality" (*The Location* 51). Consequently, hybridization as a way to overcome cultural alienation in Bhabha's theoretical framework entraps individuals within the parameters of the master's language. Bhabha's hybridity does not provide individuals the ability to speak

on their own terms since occupying a liminal state precludes the possibility of attaining a single, unique voice.

Bhabha's theory thus begs the question of whether the "subject" can keep his/her sanity while being an ambivalent shadow, "always the split screen of the self and its doubling" (Bhabha, "Signs" 156). Toni Morrison suggests in *The Bluest Eye* that speaking from a site of ambivalence is impossible. Those who mimic fall victim to the dominant system, losing their sanity, their coherence. In sum, their entrapment produces their psychosis because constant repetition without the possibility of creating new meaning—without originality—results in madness (Kristeva 106, 107). Ania Loomba asserts that there must be a different way of understanding hybrid subjectivities beyond Bhabha's radical indeterminism (172). In fact, there is. A reading of Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* against Bhabha's theory of hybridity serves to reconsider the usefulness of liminality to understand contemporary narratives of subject formation under conditions of asymmetrical power relations. In Toni Morrison's work, dialogism, Mikhail Bakhtin's theory about forming open and ongoing identities through the dialogue produced by encountering otherness, is central to analyze those female voices that, in Morrison's novels, dare to defy dominant discourses, creating their own subjectivity in the process of telling the stories of others.

Mikhail Bakhtin argues that truth can only be perceived in dialogue and communication since truth resides in the multiplicity of voices and points of views that concern themselves with a given issue (Morson and Emerson 266). For Morrison, as for Bakhtin, language is the site where we can negotiate meaning. That is, power is contested in words. In her "Nobel Lecture," she underscores the urgency to use language creatively to "reject, alter and expose" those other "oppressive" languages—sexist, racist, theistic—that "do not permit new knowledge or encourage the mutual exchange of ideas" ("Nobel Lecture" 2). For Morrison, as for Bakhtin, dialogism should replace monologic claims of truth. Yet, only those who engage actively in discourse can effectively negotiate meaning. Such engagement is in fact "the fundamental indicator" for Bakhtin of "ethical, legal, and political human beings" (*The Dialogic* 349-350). The "speaking person" grows as they challenge and re-establish the boundaries of other people's discourses, resulting in a narrative of his or her identity. Similarly, Toni Morrison is interested in the way that storytelling determines subject formation: the way in which the stories we tell "create us" as they are being created ("Nobel Lecture" 4).

Storytelling and subject formation is also a well-known narrative strategy in African American literature. Slave narratives, a fundamental influence in the work of Toni Morrison, developed and asserted the humanity of the slave for the white majority through the story itself. The slaves/authors used the signature, "written by himself" or

"herself," both to "authorize" and to "authenticate" their selves as human beings and thereby worthy of freedom (Morrison, "The Site of Memory" 189). In these texts, the author regains the control of defining his or her subjectivity through the act of writing the story, mixing together the oral tradition of storytelling and autobiography. Alice Deck characterizes this writing as "auto-ethnographic." It consists of an "intricate interplay of the introspective personal engagement expected of an autobiography and the self-effacement expected of cultural descriptions" (238). The polyphonic and dialogic structure of these accounts avoid, as Deck states, "a monolithic observing self in favor of one that narrates from the multiple positions of personal anecdotes, generalized descriptions, and personal irony" (238-239).

This intentional mixing of multiple languages into a single narrative is precisely what constitutes hybridity in Bakhtinian terms (*The Dialogic Imagination* 358). Therefore in Bakhtinian philosophy and Toni Morrison's oeuvre, the development of a hybrid identity depends on three main principles: Individuals are created by words as much as words are created by individuals; individuals can constitute themselves meaningfully through the incorporation of other people's narratives into their own; finally, individuals have the ability to escape objectification by the conscious creation and orchestration of external narratives into a single, unique voice in constant dialogue with others. Based on these principles, Claudia's voice in *The Bluest Eye* is hybrid and as such she is able to constitute herself as a subject while resisting the master narratives that alienate not only Pecola, but many of the characters in Morrison's fictional world.

Morrison opens *The Bluest Eye* with a story from the series of *Dick and Jane*, a very popular primer used in the United States in the 1950s. This preamble is intended to make reference to the dangerous interaction between learning, images, and personal identifications. The reader features Dick and Jane's very "happy" family, their suburban house, their dog, a cat, and a "very nice" mother and "a big and strong" father, all of whom laugh and smile while a friend comes to play with Jane (Morrison, *The Bluest Eye* 3). This simple story is meant to teach literacy skills, but it also introduces the child to the discourse that typifies the archetypal "American Family." Dick and Jane simplistic narrative solidifies a single representation of what is to be American that permeates into the consciousness and the language of social consent. As such, this is a monolithic discourse because it defines "who" is an American and excludes from the community those who are not represented in the story. For that reason, *The Bluest Eye* deconstructs the Dick-and-Jane text, exposing the power of representation and emphasizing the importance of dialogizing narratives of signification geared to privilege some and exclude others. The same Dick-and-Jane text is reproduced three times. Each time the primer is repeated, it gets distorted to the point that it loses meaning, and therefore, its

power. This linguistic manipulation emphasizes that the story is built by words within an established language system, and like words, the story itself is simply an image, an empty signifier. This basic premise—language is arbitrary—opens the space of the novel and Claudia's ability to change preconceived meanings of belonging.

In her "Nobel Lecture," Morrison clearly states that, "the vitality of language lies in its ability to limn the actual, imagined and possible lives of its speakers, readers, writers... [Language] arcs toward the place where meaning may lie" (3). In her novels, those characters that fail to realize that there is no pre-established connection between signs and meanings simply reenact existing, monologic narratives, falling victims of the Word and the stories of others. Yet, Morrison's very first heroine, Claudia, refuses to accept monologic forms of representation that not only exclude but also objectify others. Early on in the narrative, Claudia realizes that language determines people's behavior. Therefore, Claudia does not readily accept any external form of signification. Instead, she deconstructs the master text, much the way the preamble of the novel has been distorted, in order to re-make its meaning. In the process, Claudia creates an alternative discourse that validates her own perception of the world against the one externally imposed by others. This process causes monologic narratives to lose grip on her subjectivity and Claudia's singular voice appears, as a result, in the form of the novel.

From the beginning of *The Bluest Eye*, it is clear that Claudia's house is not as "nice" as Dick and Jane's. Hers is "old, cold, and green" (Morrison, *The Bluest Eye* 10). In fact, Claudia's world is described in direct opposition to the one that appears in the preamble. Roaches and mice substitute for the cat and the dog, and adults "issue orders" without smiling or taking into consideration the children in the house (10). This environment, compared with the "healthy" and "moral" life presented in the primer as a model to aspire, appears to be detrimental to Claudia's wellbeing. Economic status is paired up with a sense of moral impoverishment that, at first glance, seems to cause the depravity of Claudia's world. Sickness, then, is a fitting metaphor for this unwholesome life. When Claudia comes home after collecting coal to warm the house on a cold winter day, she gets sick and is yelled at by her mother, "Great Jesus. Get on in that bed. How many times do I have to tell you to wear something on that head? You must be the biggest fool in town" (10). Claudia's mother's reaction to her child's cold seems insensitive—it lacks the "motherly" affection and tender care that one would have expected from the "nice" white middle-class mother featured in the preface. However, Morrison's narrative strategy produces a different effect. The white middle-class decorum of the primer is replaced by an almost grotesque realism, focusing on Claudia's body and its sickness:

I am covered up with heavy quilts and ordered to sweat, which I do promptly. Later I throw up ... The puke saddles down the pillow onto the sheet-green-gray, with flecks of orange. It

moves like the insides of an uncooked egg. Stubbornly clinging to its own mass, refusing to break up and be removed. How, I wonder, can it be so neat and nasty at the same time? (11)

Bakhtin reminds us that, "[the body] offers a liberation from all that is humdrum and universally accepted" (*Rabelais* 34, 94). Dick and Jane's wholesomeness and pristine congeniality of the primer suddenly appears artificial in contrast to Claudia's puke. Thus, by focusing on the reality and materiality of body functions, Claudia's narrative gains a greater sense of personal affirmation that renders any attempt at identification with monologic narratives, such as the Dick-and-Jane story, pointless. Certainly, the more Claudia speaks about her experience, the more the preamble loses the power to exclude Claudia's life, making her story more compelling than the "eternal happiness" of Dick and Jane's happy family life. Claudia gains the ability to give universal signs a different meaning. Puke itself becomes "neat," and Claudia's "motherly love" no longer is defined by the standard presented in the middle-class white primer: "Mother is very nice ... Mother laughs. Laugh, Mother, laugh" (3). Claudia's mother loves more significantly and, perhaps, more realistically. Her love, Claudia says, is "thick, sweet and dark" (14). "Love" and "darkness," antithetic terms in the dominant discourse of the primer, join in Claudia's language to signify her experience of motherhood and the tenderness of those hands that "don't want [her] to die" (14).

Claudia's hatred for dolls is an even more poignant example of the way in which the body serves as a site of struggle with predetermined meaning in *The Bluest Eye*. While children and adults alike seem to rejoice looking at the "blue-eyed Baby Doll" as a sign of supreme beauty, Claudia cannot understand where the value of "the thing" actually lies. Her instinct leads her to deconstruct it, literally. She looks inside the plastic body of the doll with the hope of finding the source of its power, but finds nothing (20-21). There is no substance, no essential meaning in the thing itself. Nothing makes her beautiful. Thus, Claudia discovers at a tender age the arbitrariness of language. She also notices the social value of signs, which she does not accept readily "as is" or "just because." Indeed, "the word of a father, of adults, and teachers" demands an unconditional obedience that Claudia is not ready to give (Bakhtin, *Dialogic Imagination* 342). In response, Claudia starts a dialogizing process of signification. The result is Claudia's unique voice, one informed by a complex array of discourses that have been analyzed and re-organized to signify on her own terms. Claudia develops what Bakhtin calls an "internally persuasive" discourse that, while not directly opposed to the "authoritative" one, struggles with it in order to demystify its power and privilege (*The Dialogic Imagination* 342).

The same drive that leads Claudia to demystify "beauty" in white dolls forces her to grapple with the unconditional deference that everyone seems to show for white

girls. Claudia hates them for what they represent to others (22-23). Yet, Claudia had already learned by dismembering the doll that there was no essential reason to consider white girls superior in their beauty. Their bodies are indeed no less material than that of a doll. She concludes that white girls' power must be "magical," something invisible that exists independently and despite their bodies. She does realize, however, that white girls, unlike dolls, are human. Therefore, she cannot subject them to the same objectifying process by which she examined, dissected, and dismembered the white doll. Indeed, she realizes that such "disinterested violence" toward others is "shameful" (23). Claudia's inner discourse then settles for "fraudulent love" (23). Some critics like Donald B. Gibson and Cynthia A. Davis have found this to be "devastating" or at least not as "appropriate" as her first reaction, "pristine sadism" (162, 11). Yet, Claudia's response towards white girls is more sophisticated than her violence. Claudia uses the power of language, being consistent with Morrison's choice. Claudia discovers that the "magical secret," controlled by dominant culture, is the power to name, define, and create the meaning of things. Once she realizes she can do the same, she becomes an active and conscious participant in the game of making meaning. Moreover, she understands now that her emotional responses—love or hatred—are towards an image that the authoritative discourse imposes and that she has learned to break, change, and dialogize. Her "love" for "cleanliness" as much as for "whiteness" becomes a conscious and strategic positioning towards a discourse that has lost its powerful spell because she now understands that "whiteness" is created in and by language. Thus, she continues subjecting the discourse of "whiteness" to the same irreverence she shows for the dolls. This complexity in Claudia's voice is typically hybrid in Bakhtinian terms. Her hybridity is formed by and through dialogizing the discourses of others. Yet, a hybrid voice achieves independence through its intention to defy and change the master text. Thus, Claudia's consciousness is not in between or marginal, as Michael Awkward contends, echoing Bhabha's theory of liminality (183-184). On the contrary, hers is a unique but engaged voice that emerges out of the struggle to dialogize those other voices that constantly compete to define the meaning of things in her world. Incidentally, "it is not *finite*," either, because it continues creating, examining, and changing for as long her dialogue continues in the form of the novel (Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination* 345, 346).

Claudia's voice contrasts with other characters in the book. The Breedloves, for example, represent the antithesis to the Dick-and-Jane family. They are introduced as "poor and black." But, more importantly, "they believed they were ugly," Claudia reports (38). She understands what they themselves do not: blackness and beauty are not biological, essential terms, but stereotypes in the dominant discourse geared to objectify and marginalize designated groups. Claudia affirms that "[they] wore their ugliness, put it on, so to speak, although it did not belong to them" (38). The paring

of blackness and ugliness, while whiteness is associated with beauty, is the main stigmatizing element of this binary system within the dominant cultural discourse. Those individuals who, like the Breedloves, do not learn to dialogize the binaries, fully adopt the stereotype as part of their ontology. Claudia explicitly states,

The master had said, 'You are ugly people.' They had looked about themselves and saw nothing to contradict the statement; saw, in fact, support for it leaning at them from every billboard, every movie, every glance. 'Yes,' they had said. 'You are right.' And they took their ugliness in their hands, threw it as a mantle over them, and went about the world with it. (39)

Bhabha's conception of the stereotype as the source of hybridity and therefore potential subversion is thus challenged in the novel. Bhabha claims that, as a strategy to assert power and appease the master's anxiety, the stereotype assigns rigid roles to those considered "Other." Yet, as we already discussed, the individual, according to Bhabha, can look back at the master's text, reminding him of his lack of complete control over those deemed different, causing the master's paranoia. Yet, in *The Bluest Eye* no one looks back. On the contrary, those subjected and objectified by means of stereotypes suffer its devastating power.

One of the main characters affected by the power of stereotypes is Pauline Breedlove. While Polly's life is reported to have been "lovely" in the beginning, Polly's physical characteristics, a cavity in her front tooth and a crooked foot, determine her isolation from others. To compensate, she delights in taking control of the material world around her by ordering and counting things. Ironically, once she moves north with her husband, Pauline becomes an object herself. City folks classify her as unrefined, Southern, and ignorant. She tries straightening her hair, wearing high heels or putting on make-up, but nothing seems to be enough to get the "look" required to fit in (118). She still feels as "*no-count*" (117, my emphasis). Then, giving in to the pressure, she literally and figuratively disappears in the darkness of movie theaters. While her body becomes invisible in the dark auditorium, the image of the white world that emerges illuminated on the screen becomes Polly's object of desire, committing herself to its imitation as a way to escape "blackness." Polly's mimicry—the process of accepting the stereotype as an image of self and then rejecting it to adopt the values of the master—does not cause any debilitating ambivalence in the master's text itself, as Bhabha claims it does. On the contrary, in Polly's case, it fortifies the devastating power of the master's discourse (122). Having accepted a new set of "foreign" values dictated by an idealization of beauty and goodness marked by "whiteness," Polly "settled down to just being ugly" (123) and a "perfect servant" (123). Being a maid for a white middle class family gives her "second-hand" power and perpetuates the hierarchical structure of objectification that master discourses create (127-128). That is, the little power Polly may attain as "a good servant" in the value system of the master, she holds over whom

she considers her inferiors, even when those are, in the case of Polly, her own family. Moreover, Polly finds validation for her own self-aggrandizement in the language of Christianity, “holding Cholly as a model of sin and failure, [bearing] him like a crown of thorns, and her children like a cross”(126). In this sense, Polly becomes part of the discursive strategy by perpetuating the idea that “otherness” begets evil whereas “goodness” comes exclusively from the values of the master’s world. In becoming a mimic woman, Polly is an “authorized” Other. Like the “good Indian,” or the “good savage,” the “good” servant is “white but not quite” (Young 147). She becomes but a sign within the master’s discourse. Rather than questioning the stereotype in any way, she reinforces it by becoming a representative element of the system.

Geraldine, unlike Polly, does not consider herself “ugly,” but her whole life also evolves around the stereotype (81). “Brown, narrow, and tall,” she is closer to the white ideal than Polly (82). Yet, just like Polly, Geraldine has internalized the norms, culture, and values of the dominant culture in an attempt to “civilize” anything in her and around her that remotely might be associated with “otherness.” For that reason, she zealously guards her body and behavior, making sure “to get rid of the funkiness” (83). She fears any sign of “blackness,” becoming a prisoner of the system of signs that denigrate her own body (87). Both Polly and Geraldine become signs within this system of oppression since they do not imagine themselves differently, outside the realm of “whiteness.” Instead, they accept and embody the objectification of their beings, losing any ability to speak other than through the master’s language. Moreover, they play a role in the reaffirmation of the narcissistic demands of the “authoritative language,” by accepting it and modeling themselves after it to the point of invisibility. When Polly goes to give birth at a hospital and the doctor refers to her as a “horse” to “teach” his medical students the “fact” that black women deliver with “no pain.” Polly remarks, “*They never said nothing to me. Only one looked at me. Looked at my face, I mean. I looked right back at him. He dropped his eyes and turned red*” (125). Polly’s look does not disturb anyone in any significant way. Her gaze is by no means “radical” or powerful enough to challenge the doctor’s teaching. Polly cannot articulate her condition, and like in the case of animals, people dismiss her suffering because she cannot speak (125).

Therefore, hybridity in *The Bluest Eye* does not appear as a by-product of the psychological ambivalence of the master’s psyche. Nor does it contest or subvert the master’s authoritative discourse. Active subversion comes out of the process of dialogizing, not repeating, external languages. In the mere repetition of the values and the language of the dominant culture, there is no room to express oneself differently to become a subject. On the contrary, mimicry requires the objectification of others in a hierarchical structure. For Geraldine, that scale is clear. Thinking of herself in a better position as “colored,” she signifies the border between “whites” and “niggers” (87). Polly, unlike

Geraldine, cannot use her body to associate herself with those deemed superior. Yet, she adheres fiercely to their ideology to the extent that she communicates with her family using only the punitive language of the master. She thereby loses her ability to empathize and identify with anyone other than the white world. One casualty of this pervasive and sadist system is her own daughter, Pecola, the most vulnerable character in *The Bluest Eye*.

Pecola, Pauline's daughter, is born into this system that condemns her to be "ugly" from the very beginning. Her mother cannot see her otherwise (126). Pecola's response to these stereotypical codes is primal, pre-linguistic, and, for that reason, even more damaging. She obsessively drinks milk out of a Shirley Temple cup with the hope of transforming into the image everyone respects (46-47). However, Pecola seems to have possessed early in the narrative the ability to create a language of her own. For example, she cherishes the beauty of dandelions, even when everyone scorns them for being "many, strong, and soon" (47). Yet, when the white immigrant clerk "needs not waste the effort of a glance," and Pecola becomes completely conscious of her invisibility, the dandelions, that she once thought pretty, "are," emphatically, "ugly" (48). "They *are* weeds," for she no longer dares to image them otherwise in her own inner language. Pecola's incipient dialogism lacks the support and strength to look or speak back. As a result, she immediately accepts the exterior, authoritative language without question. Significantly, at that moment, she also loses her internal compass, the beginning of what could have been a personal voice, and "trips" on the "familiar" sidewalk crack on her way back home (50). Her language is replaced by the reality of anger and her downfall starts to unfold. Unlike Claudia, she fails to see the emptiness of the symbol and the futility of pursuing it. She loses, early on, the ability and strength to give a different meaning to things that already signify for others. Instead, she firmly believes that by literally consuming those meanings that are already created for her, she will finally become one of them: "To eat the candy is somehow to eat the eyes, eat Mary Jane. Love Mary Jane. Be Mary Jane" (50).

Pecola's complete objectification makes her the ultimate Other. Her community and the larger society, so dependent on exclusion to maintain the hierarchical order, send Pecola to the very bottom of the scale. She is the one who everyone despises and keeps down since to raise one's status depends on pushing others down and away from the center of society. Claudia clearly articulates society's participation in Pecola's demise: "We honed our egos on her, padded our characters with her frailty, and yawned in the fantasy of our strength" (205). Mimicry, a necessary part of the oppressive system, does not provide a realistic chance at subversion. Indeed, the gaze, which Bhabha assures hybridizes the master text, is returned by very few, if any. On the contrary, mimicry exacerbates the difficulty of attaining individuality for those who are pushed to the

bottom, since people's punitive look is not directed toward the master, but towards those who are the most vulnerable. People who, like Pecola, cannot find a way to get out of this pervasive, destructive system, disintegrate.

Understandingly, Pecola does the only thing she knows: she asks for blue eyes in a desperate and instinctual attempt to flee from her body. If she were able to change her body, she thinks, she would change her existence, her experience, her whole being along with it. Soaphead, a mimic man himself, having been subjected to the pressures of colonialism in the Caribbean, is familiar with Pecola's plight—a little back girl who wanted to rise up out of the pit of blackness and see the world with blue eyes (174). But indeed, the “evil of [its] fulfillment” is devastating (204). After the visit to Soaphead and the working of his “magic,” Pecola starts having hallucinations of a self with blue eyes, and another self who sees them. Pecola splits, entering a psychotic stage that destroys her ego, precluding any possibility of her ever becoming a “speaking subject.” She enters what Kristeva calls a “borderline” state, in which one becomes both “actor,” involved in life, and “spectator,” observer of life (106-107). Both positions are unstable and fluid within the “self” as well as disconnected from others. The subject loses its limits becoming within itself subject and object, an ambiguous entity without a stable “I” from which to speak. Significantly enough, the next time we hear from Pecola in the novel, she is looking at herself in a mirror and two indistinguishable voices speak back and forth about Pecola's blue eyes and whether they are the bluest they have ever seen (193-204). Morrison calls Pecola's ambiguity a state of “unbeing,” agreeing with Kristeva's assessment of borderline experiences (Morrison 215 and Kristeva 114). Bhabha, on the other hand, considers this ambiguity, invisibility, indeterminacy and complete instability the moment in which hybridity causes paranoia in the master's psyche. Bhabha's “evil eye/I” is for Morrison the “bluest eye/I” (Bhabha, *The Location* 52). Far from being able to return the gaze, Pecola ceases to exist, having no voice, language, and experience of a concrete body to host her subjectivity. Imitation, the basis element of mimicry, precludes the creation of new meanings with which subjects can fight back.

Morrison also explores self-imposed isolation from dominant discourses as an alternative way to fight back in *The Bluest Eye*. Miss Marie, Poland, and China are prostitutes. They rent the room above Pecola's storefront apartment, and, unlike the rest of the community, do not despise her. They tell her stories, give her clothes, and acknowledge her with “fond” epithets, unlike the rest of society (50-51). Indeed, the prostitutes are the only ones who show Pecola any kind of affection. These characters are important in the novel because they categorically reject any participation or complicity with the dominant culture. So while in the novel Miss Marie, Poland and China are the most humane of the characters, they reject all the possible ways their profession would be “acceptable” in the eyes of society (56-57). They are free from the suffocating lan-

guage of official authorization. That is also the reason why they treat Pecola differently. However, their freedom comes from a complete and conscious removal from society. Consequently, the dominant language does not have the power to define them. Yet, according to Claudia, they are limited by their hatred toward everyone who operates within the main system of signification. She explains, "these women hated men, all men, without shame, apology or discrimination ... Neither did they have respect for women ... it made no difference" (56). Despite their amiable interaction with Pecola, the prostitutes' model to resist objectification seems to remain marginal. Therefore, for Claudia, it is insufficiently engaged to have the power to change the master's discourse that the process of dialogism affords.

There is one more character in the novel described as positively "free" from language, Cholly, Pecola's dad. He is difficult to analyze. While Morrison does not justify his actions, specifically the rape of his daughter, she does not allow easy judgment. After a life characterized by abandonment, reproach, racism, and oppression, his "ugliness" stems from the abusive treatment he has received at the hands of others. Cholly "reacted to [his children,] and his reactions were based on what he felt at the moment," the narrator explains (38). A mixture of tenderness, powerlessness, and love is what Cholly feels when he is raping his own daughter. If the prostitutes and Soaphead understand and sympathize with Pecola, Cholly purportedly loves her the only way he knows, for as the narrator tells us, "love is never any better than the lover" (206). Cholly's characterization as a "free" man is even more troubling. He is free because he is completely outside a shared language system (159-160). Completely untethered to society, with nothing more to lose, he is "dangerously free." His linguistic disconnection from society allows him to manifest his "love" or "hate" for Pecola any way he feels at a given moment for the dominant cultural language does not have the power to restrain Cholly's behavior. His physical reactions are the only language he knows. Consequently, it is his actions that speak for him. In this regard, Bakhtin asserts that, "two voices is the minimum for life, the minimum for existence" (*Problems* 252). Morrison seems to agree. The characters who, like Cholly, are "free" from oppressive discourses, do not engage actively in dialogue with them. Their isolation does not allow them to change the main system of signification in any meaningful way. That is, Morrison, as Bakhtin, believes that engaged subjectivities recognize that the "I" of the other is always a subject, and therefore an active participant in the production of meaning. For Bakhtin, the way to break free from monologic discourses is not in isolation, but engaging in the construction of an "I" that serves as author and narrator of a personal identity, using, changing, discarding, and redistributing the words of others. The result is a polyphonic text of the self: a plurality of voices orchestrated into a narrative independent altogether of the dominant language and immune to its power to objectify (*Problems* 6, 10).

The Bluest Eye is then the narration of Claudia's I. Indeed, as Matus argues, Claudia becomes "indistinguishable of the novel itself" (124). Her voice is the one that makes the effort to negotiate its way through the multiple languages the novel presents. She considers "all speech a code to be broken" (191). Even when she does not understand, she is "careful to listen for truth in timbre" (15). While she shows respect and understanding for each character's subjectivity, the novel offers only the aesthetic discourse that has translated others' consciousness into Claudia's inner speech. In doing so, *The Bluest Eye* narrates the formation of a hybrid voice: a single narrative authority oriented towards someone else's discourse that goes beyond other characters' subjectivities (Bakhtin, *Problems* 199). Claudia thereby partakes from the tradition of slave narratives and their ability to authoring one's self through storytelling. The stories Claudia tells reveal her own self in a through the novel. Certainly, the eye/I of the title refers to the novel itself, narrated as the sign of Claudia's hybrid consciousness that *can see* others, particularly Pecola, but in relation to herself. *The Bluest Eye* is Claudia's meta-language. Claudia creates her own self by narrating the stories of others with the purpose of telling how one escapes objectification while still engaged in dialogue with the rest of society. Claudia's authorship, the distinctive feature of a hybrid consciousness, underscores the discursive quality of the subject. In this sense, identity is not reduced to an essential truth, stable and unchangeable. The subject imagines herself to be a sign in a given time and place. As in language, the signifier-I cannot contain its signified-the self-in its entirety and complexity. The I, understood in its narrative, discursive form, is always in the process of development, as Claudia is in *The Bluest Eye* (Bakhtin, "Notes" 357).

Similarly, the temporality of the novel is not rigid or stable. A mixture of past, present and future framed within the circular movement of seasons infuses a sense of open-endedness to the narrative and therefore to Claudia's self. While the past is revisited in the stories, it is not constituted as a source of origins. Cyclical time does not allow such reification. The novel, just like Claudia's hybrid consciousness is narrated out of a sense of unfinalizability. Claudia narrates from the future where Claudia continues her process of development as a hybrid subject. Bakhtin affirms that for the "I," "memory is memory of the future; for the other-it is memory of the past" (Bakhtin, *Art and Answerability* 125). That is, past discourses and stories from which Claudia's voice is born are finished for they are produced through her memory. Yet, for as long as she keeps dialogizing the discourses of others, her voice is never finished. It belongs to the future with no end. Claudia's narrative voice consists of past stories, dialogized in the present of the narrative, projecting her voice into a continue process of development that resembles a spiral rather than a linear trajectory.

Conclusion

In brief, hybridity, in *The Bluest Eye*, is the stabilizing element that keeps the narrator, Claudia, attached to a personal voice, while monologic languages battle to erase the subjectivity of those who mimic. Pecola, in particular, but also Polly, Geraldine and the rest of the characters in the story fall victims to monologic discourses of race, class, gender, and history. They are isolated, go mad, disappear, die, or self-destruct. These characters repeat the words of others or, by exiting completely the realm of signification, become dangerously free. Claudia, the first hybrid protagonist in Morrison's fictional universe, is followed by Violet in *Jazz*, Denver in *Beloved*, or Florens, in *A Mercy*. All Morrison's heroines are able to transcend master narratives, opting for a dialogic hybridity as a more productive form of identification and survival. They find their individual identity in the discourse and stories of others while resisting and transcending monologic languages by creating one single, yet not finished, text, called their self (Holquist 315).

Works Cited

- Awkward, Michael. "'The Evil of Fulfillment': Scapegoating and Narration in *The Bluest Eye*." *Toni Morrison. Critical Perspectives Past and Present*. Ed. Henry Louis Gates and Kwame Anthony Appiah. New York: Amistad, 1993. 175-209. Print.
- Bakhtin, M.M. *Art and Answerability. Early Philosophical Essays*. Ed. Michael Holquist. Austin: University of Texas Press, 1990. Print.
- . *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*. Ed. Michael Holquist. Austin, Tex.: University of Texas Press, 1981. Print.
- . "Notes from 1970-71." *Speech Genres and Other Late Essays*. Ed. Michael Holquist and Caryl Emerson. Austin: University of Texas Press, 1986. Print.
- . *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*. Ed. and trans. Caryl Emerson. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1963. Print.
- . *Rabelais and His World*. Cambridge: Massachusetts Institute of Technology Press, 1968. Print.
- Bhabha, Homi K. "Difference, Discrimination, and the Discourse of Colonialism." *The Politics of Theory*. Eds. Francis Baker and Peter Hulme. Essex: U. of Essex, 1983. 194-211. Print.
- . *The Location of Culture*. London and New York: Routledge, 1994. Print.
- . "Signs Taken for Wonders: Questions of Ambivalence and Authority Under a Tree Outside Delhi, May 1817." *Critical Inquiry* 12 (Autumn 1985): 144-65. Print.
- Davis, Cynthia A. "Self, Society, and Myth in Toni Morrison's Fiction." *Toni Morrison*. Ed. Harold Bloom. New York: Chelsea House Publications, 1990. 7-26. Print.
- Deck, Alice A. "Autoethnography: Zora Neale Hurston, Noni Jabavu, and Cross-Disciplinary Discourse." *Black American Literature Forum* 24.2 (Summer 1990): 237-56. Print.
- Gibson, Donald B. "Text and Countertext in the Bluest Eye." *Toni Morrison. Critical Perspectives Past and Present*. Ed. Henry Louis Gates. Kwame Appiah, Anthony. New York: Amistad, 1993. 159-72. Print.
- Holquist, Michael. "Answering as Authoring: Mikhail Bakhtin's Trans-Linguistics." *Critical Inquiry* 10.2 (Dec 1983): 307-19. Print.

- Kristeva, Julia. "Nom de Mort Ou de Vie." *Writing and Psychoanalysis: A Reader*. Ed. John Lechte. London: Arnold, 1996. Print.
- LeClair, Thomas. "The Language Must Not Sweat: A Conversation with Toni Morrison." *Conversations with Toni Morrison*. Ed. Danille Taylor-Guthrie. Jackson: The UP of Mississippi, 1994. 119-28. Print.
- Lomba, Ania. "Overworlding the 'Third World.'" *Oxford Literary Review* 13.1-2 (1991): 164-91. Print.
- Matus, Jill. *Contemporary World Writers*. Manchester and New York: Manchester UP, 1998. Print.
- Morrison, Toni. *The Bluest Eye*. Plume, 1994. Print.
- . "Nobel Lecture." Nobel Prize.org, 7 Dec.1993. Web. 10 Aug. 2012. Web. 19 July 2014.
- . "The Site of Memory." *Inventing the Truth: The Art and Craft of Memoir*. Ed. William Zinsser. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1995. 103-24. Print.
- Morson, Gary Saul and Emerson Caryl. "Extracts from Heteroglossary." *Dialogue and Critical Discourse. Language, Culture, Critical Theory*. Ed. Michael Macovski. New York: Oxford UP, 1997. 256-72. Print.
- Young, Robert. "The Ambivalence of Bhabha." *White Mythologies: Writing, History, and the West*. London and New York: Routledge, 1990. 141-57. Print.