

**Deviancy and Disorder – The Visual Legacy of the Hottentot Venus in the Novels
of Toni Morrison**

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ABSTRACT

Sarah Bartmann came to Europe in 1808 as one of the thousands of people exhibited and transformed into medical spectacles during the course of the nineteenth century. My thesis explores the historical roots and intersecting perspectives surrounding this charged icon and her transformation into the Hottentot Venus through the works of Toni Morrison. Forming a living, breathing embodiment of ultimate difference, establishing nationalistic boundaries through the dissection and reconstruction of her bodily image, Bartmann highlights the way that science and popular culture work to mutually inform and regulate cultural behaviour.

Utilising an exploration of Toni Morrison's 'aesthetics of resistance' – at once 'highly political and passionately aesthetic,' Fred Moten's consideration of the black radical tradition, and Roland Barthes' contemplation on the function of photography, this research suggests that a difference needs to be drawn between the image of 'race' and that of the 'racial image' within cultural production and re-presentation of iconography. Evident in the association of historic and timeless stereotype, traced from early engravings of the Hottentot Venus to her life-size silhouettes produced by artist Kara Walker, aligned with Morrison's uncanny depiction of the Africanist presence and lynching spectacle, Bartmann is no longer an image in which black female sexuality is present as an intelligibly visual object. Instead, she becomes a racial

icon with a charged political presence in which race is derived as an articulation of the visual. Bartmann's iconography reveals how cultural memory binds the past to the present and to the future, in a continual process of subversion, displacement and resurrection. An interdisciplinary thesis that juxtaposes the historic with the postmodern, the literary with the political, the aesthetic with the ideological, revealing the socio-political realities that have influenced the emergence of race and the transformation of the black female body.

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I would like to acknowledge the importance of Toni Morrison’s writing and the impact it has had on my studies, for her visionary force and poetic craft, for her subtleties and for her emphasis on the importance of language, for the import she gives to womanhood, gender, race and humankind.

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PREFACE

In this thesis I discuss Toni Morrison's eleven novels, as well as 'Recitatif,' one of Morrison's short stories.

Toni Morrison died on the 5th August 2019, just before the completion of this project and after the majority of the writing was finished. I have decided to sustain references to Toni Morrison in the present tense in favour of consistency.

When referring to Sarah Bartmann, she is named differently across many sources that refer to her, including: Ssehura (thought to be the closest to her given name); Sartjee, Saartie, Saat-je, Saartji Saat-Jee, and Saartjie, all deriving from the Afrikaans pronunciations and diminutive forms of Sara, as well as the Anglicised Sara or Sarah. The Afrikaans diminutive ending, '-tjie', is considered patronising by some sources. Her surname, given to her upon her baptism in Manchester in England, 1811, has been cited as Baartman, Bartman, Baartmann, or Bartmann.

In this thesis, I have decided to use 'Sarah Bartmann,' the name given on her memorial plaque in the South Eastern Cape of Africa in 2002.

INTRODUCTION

THE HISTORICAL LEGACY OF THE HOTTENTOT VENUS

I am moved by fancies that are curled
 Around these images, and cling:
 The notion of some infinitely gentle
 Infinitely suffering thing.

T. S. Eliot
From Preludes, IV

The haunting imagery of Eliot's Prelude presides over the opening chapter of *Playing in the Dark* (1992), Toni Morrison's foremost manifesto, which outlines her hopes to 'extend the study of American literature...into a wider landscape' – one that would incorporate the 'non-white, Africanlike (or Africanist) presence.'¹ In a later conversation with Gloria Naylor, Morrison recapitulated this premise by identifying the root project which dominates her own creative landscape: bringing to life the "dead girl," the black girl that society has willed out of existence.'² I would argue that this socio-literary reconstruction of black, though more specifically, black *female* presence, draws discernible parallels with the legacy of Sarah Bartmann, whose sylleptical recreation and repatriation has charted a campaign lasting for more than

¹ Toni Morrison, *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992), 3, 6.

² Carole Boyce-Davies, *Black Women, Writing and Identity: Migrations of the Subject* (Oxon and New York: Routledge, 1994), 136.

two centuries - a complex attempt to rescue her, in the same sense of Morrison's locus, 'from the grave of time and inattention.'³

With the exception of Sander Gilman's seminal work, *Difference and Pathology*, little is known about either Bartmann's exhibition or about the public and popular responses to her spectacle in France.⁴ For the scientific community she provided the missing link, the crucial step between European humanity and animals. Born in Kaffraria in the interior of the Cape Colony of South Africa in approximately 1788 and named 'Saartjie Bartmann' when the region came under Dutch colonial rule, Bartmann was one of six siblings. Her father was a drover of cattle who was killed by the neighbouring San, and her mother died when she was two years old. Her husband was a drummer, and she had one child, who died shortly after birth.⁵ She became a domestic worker in the service of a Boer farmer, Peter Cezar, at the Cape of Good Hope. Around the age of twenty-one, Bartmann entered into a contractual agreement with Alexander Dunlop of St. James, Middlesex, England, a surgeon on an African Ship, and Hendrik Cezar, the brother of Peter Cezar. In her contract, it stipulated that in addition to performing domestic duties, she was to be exhibited in England and Ireland, and that she would be paid a portion of the profits from her exhibition and repatriated in five years.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Sander L. Gilman, *Difference and Pathology* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985).

⁵ Recounted by Bartmann at the Chancery Court in England and published in the 'Law Report,' *Times* (London), 29 November 1810.

Dunlop soon attempted to sell his share to William Bullock, the director of the Liverpool Museum in London, describing Bartmann as having ‘a very singular appearance’ and predicted that ‘[Bartmann] would make a fortune for anyone who [showed] her in London.’⁶ Though Bullock passed on this proposition, in September 1810, Bartmann was exhibited at 225 Piccadilly. The advertising bill read: ‘Parties of Twelve and upwards, may be accommodated with Private Exhibition of the Hottentot, at No. 225 Piccadilly, between Seven and Eight O’clock in the evening, by giving notice to the Door-keeper the day previous.’⁷ Standing at a mere four feet six inches, Bartmann’s small frame was weighed down by her abundant buttocks, the key stimulus behind her attraction, described as being ‘as large as a cauldron pot’ in one bawdy English penny ballad:

But you may ask, and well, I ween,
 For why she tarries there;
 And what, in her is to be seen,
 Than other folks more rare.
 A rump she has (though strange it be),
 Large as a cauldron pot,
 And this is why men go to see
 This lovely Hottentot.⁸

⁶ Robyn Mitchell, ‘Another Means of Understanding the Gaze: Sarah Bartmann in the Development of the Nineteenth-Century French National Identity,’ in *Black Venus 2010*, ed. Deborah Willis (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2010), 35.

⁷ Reproduced in Paul Edwards and James Walvin, *Black Personalities in the Era of the Slave Trade* (London, Macmillan, 1983), 171.

⁸ ‘“The Hottentot Venus”: a ballad,’ reproduced in Raymond Scott-Toole, *Circus and Allied Arts* (Derby: Harpur and Sons Ltd., 1953), 333-36.

Following her fame and fortune in London, Bartmann was taken to Paris, where she and Cezar parted ways, and was transferred to her new guardian, a wild animal entertainer named Reaux. According to the widely read *Journal des dames et des modes*: 'The doors of the salon open, and the Hottentot Venus could be seen entering. She is a Callipygian Venus. Candies are given to her in order to entice her to leap about and sing; she is told that she is the prettiest woman in all society.'⁹ Bartmann's body inspired a collective French obsession, a cultural marker illuminating the changing perception of black women's bodies, demonstrating how deeply rooted representations of black women are in European culture. Robyn Mitchell argues that the 'production and the viewing of black women's bodies – by men and women' complicated the already unstable ideas of 'race, class, gender and sexuality.' French social, cultural and political upheavals in this era resulted in an emerging need for a more 'concrete national identity,' exacerbated by 'oppositional and specific definitions of blackness.'¹⁰

In the medical community, the desire to achieve a clearer definition of a 'national identity' emerged through the works of Georges Cuvier, France's renowned naturalist. Cuvier was a prominent man who held the acclaimed title of Surgeon General to Napoléon Bonaparte, the political leader who had reinstated the Code Noir, before

⁹ *Journal des dames et des modes*, 12 February 1815. See also Bernth Lindfors, "'The Hottentot Venus' and Other African Attractions in Nineteenth Century England,' *Australasian Drama Studies* I (1983), 88.

¹⁰ Mitchell, 32.

Bartmann's arrival in Paris in 1802. The Code Noir of 1685 defined the conditions of slavery in the French colonial empire, restricting the movements of free Negroes, as well as forbidding any religious worship beyond Roman Catholicism, and expelling the Jewish race from the colonies. Tyler Stovall has described the code as 'one of the most extensive official documents on race, slavery and freedom ever drawn up in Europe' - a narrative furthered by Cuvier's endeavours.¹¹

For three days in March 1815 at the Jardin du Roi, at the request of Cuvier and with the permission of her guardian Réaux, a team of zoologists, anatomists and physiologists examined Bartmann, the findings of which were published in 1824, in Frederic Cuvier and Geoffroy's St.-Hillaire's *Histoire naturelle des mammiferes*. From his initial observations, Georges Cuvier writes:

When we met her for the first time, she believed herself to be about 26 years old...Everyone who had been able to see her over the course of eighteen months in our capital could verify the enormous protuberance of her buttocks and the brutal appearance of her face...Her movements had something of a brusqueness and unexpectedness, reminiscent of those of a monkey. She had a way of pushing out her lips in the same manner we have observed in the orangutan. Her personality was happy, her memory good, after several weeks she recognised a person that she had only seen one time...she spoke tolerably good Dutch, which she learned at the Cape...also knew a little English...was beginning to say a few words of French; she danced in the fashion of her country and played with a fairly good ear upon a little instrument she called a Jew's Harp. Necklaces, beads, pieces of colored glass, and other savage trumperies

¹¹ Tyler Stovall, 'Race and the Making of the Nation: Blacks in Modern France' in *Diasporic Africa: A Reader*, ed. Michael A. Gomez (New York: New York University Press, 2006), 205.

seemed very much to please her; but that which flattered her taste above all else was brandy.¹²

Cuvier's description associated black femaleness with bestiality and primitivism. By comparing Bartmann with a learned, domesticated animal, he reduced her facility with languages, memory and musical inclinations to a mimicry of the European race, imposing the master text on the black female body. Cuvier's gaze read Bartmann's face according to perceived physiognomy:

In part after the Negro by the jutting out of the jaw, the obliquity of the incisor teeth, the thickness of lips, the shortness of chin...and in part after the Mongol by the enormity of the cheek bones, the flatness of the base of the nose...her eyes were dark and lively; her lips, a bit blackish, and monstrously swelled... her ears much like those found in many monkeys, small and weakly formed at the tragus.¹³

In this classificatory discourse, formed from the scientific gaze, Bartmann is determined as a racial admixture, both Negro, Mongol and animal, with appearances that insult Cuvier's culturally biased aesthetic sensibilities.

In negotiating Bartmann's tenuous place within the strata of The Great Chain of Being, Cuvier defined her characteristics as reminiscent of monkeys (*des singes*). Beyond her protuberant buttocks which were not at all 'muscular, but a mass of shaking and elastic consistency, vibrating with the woman's every move,' Cuvier described at

¹² The text on Bartmann by George Cuvier, besides appearing in *Histoire naturelle*, can also be found under the title, 'Extrait d'observations Faites sur le cadavre d'une femme connue à Paris et à Londres sous le nom de Venue Hottentote' (Observation Extracts Made on the Cadaver of a Young Female Known in Both Paris and London by the Name of Hottentot Venus) in *Notes of Museum d'Histoire Naturelle* (Paris, 1817), 211-12.

¹³ *Ibid*, 214-5.

length Bartmann's hanging breasts: 'a large mass which terminated obliquely in a blackish aureole of more than four inches in diameter pitted with radiating wrinkles, near the centre of which was a nipple so flattened and obliterated that it was barely visible.'¹⁴ Bartmann's breasts, like her buttocks, represented an overdevelopment of female sexuality, a gross exaggeration of normalcy, a figure of excess, forming a text on black female sexuality that merely replicated earlier ethnographic works on Africans that fixated on the terms 'savage' and 'primitive.'

Crucial to Cuvier's project were Bartmann's organs of reproduction. In the nineteenth century, it was only through dissection that the hidden secrets of the body could be revealed to the medical gaze – an opportunity that later presented itself on the 29 December 1815, when Bartmann was mistakenly treated for catarrh and pleurisy while dying of small pox, aggravated by alcohol poisoning. Her remains were sold to Cuvier who took great pains in dissecting Bartmann's body, unveiling the 'great mysteries of her genital organs' which he had 'the honor of presenting to the Académie, prepared in a manner so as not to leave any doubt about the nature of her apron.'¹⁵ Being the first to dissect a black female cadaver of Bartmann's stature, Cuvier initiated the unearthing of the mystery of the Hottentot apron:

The apron... is a development of the nymphaea... The outer lips, scarcely pronounced, were intercepted by an oval of four inches; from the upper

¹⁴ Ibid, 215.

¹⁵ George Cuvier, 1817, 214. This translation in English is by Sander Gilman in *Difference and Pathology* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985).

angle descended between them a quasi-cylindrical protuberance of around eighteen lines long and over six lines thick, whose lower extremity enlarges, splits and protrudes like two fleshy, rippled petals of two and a half inches in length and roughly one inch in width. Each one is rounded at the tip; their base enlarges and descends along the internal border of the outer lip of its side and changes into a fleshy crest...together they form a heart-shaped figure.¹⁶

Bartmann's body became legible as Cuvier read and simultaneously inscribed a text onto her flesh, unfolding the mystery of 'the dark continent.'¹⁷ Driven by a desire to highlight the distinct racial and sexual differences between African and European races, Cuvier literally penetrated the 'secrets of nature,' charting a medical discourse that would continue throughout the nineteenth century, marking the shift from exterior to an interior focus on foreign bodies. This scientific permutation can be traced through to later examples, such as W. H. Flower's polygenetic argument in *The Journal of Anatomy and Physiology*, which included an 'Account of the Dissection of a Bushwoman.' The ideological intent was emphatically clear, with data 'relating to the unity or plurality of mankind,' the text beginning with a detailed presentation of the size and form of the buttocks of the bushwomen, as well as the 'remarkable development of labia minora, or nymphae.' Black female sexuality, concentrated in the deformities and physical anomalies of sexual organs, became the concentrated

¹⁶ Ibid, 216-218.

¹⁷ Sigmund Freud argues that we 'need not feel ashamed' about our lack of knowledge of female sexuality, metaphorising women as the 'dark continent,' a fetishised metaphor of the unknown defined as a lack of a sexual organ: 'The Question of Lay Analysis' (1926) in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, Volume XX (1925-1926): An Autobiographical Study, Inhibitions, Symptoms and Anxiety, The Question of Lay Analysis and Other Works*, trans. James Strachey (London: Norton, 1969), 219.

political tool of the oppressor to signal the 'European' as different from the African race, their descendants as disparate as the 'proverbial orangutan.'¹⁸ From her disembodied, dissected genitalia, to the extracted brain, preserved in formaldehyde fluid, the remains of Bartmann present a complex and fabricated tale of African inferiority - a legacy which comes to life in Morrison's Cold War creation Cee, who innocently wonders over the 'eugenics' titles in her employer's office, before he mercilessly desecrates her womb in the name of scientific experimentation.¹⁹ Cuvier sought to 'order' the natural world in the midst of a tumultuous ideological landscape, assigning a hierarchical position that supported European supremacy, achieved by transposing disorder onto black female sexuality as a site of monstrosity, freakery and instability during an era of social and political destabilisation.

Bartmann's exhibition and public spectacle continued posthumously: a display containing her skeleton, a plaster cast of her body next to her bottled genitalia and brain remained in the Musée d'Homme in Paris until her repatriation in 2002. Ironically, through this physical desecration, the immortality of Bartmann's iconography was ensured, preserving her as a politically charged and aesthetically prolific figure in cultural memory. Because of her physical desecration, Bartmann's transfiguration as 'the martyr of all Black Female Martyrs' energised a nation to

¹⁸ W. H. Flower, 'Account of the Dissection of a Bushwoman' in *The Journal of Anatomy and Physiology*. I [1867], ed. J. W. Clark et al (London and Cambridge: Forgotten Books, 2003), 189-208.

¹⁹ Toni Morrison, *Home* (London: Chatto and Windus, 2012), 65.

reclaim her as an ultimate symbol of past trauma.²⁰ After the victory of the African National Congress in the South African general election, 1994, President Nelson Mandela made formal requests to Francois Mitterrand, and subsequently to Jacques Chirac, for the return of Bartmann's physical remains to her ancestral homeland, the Gamtoos Valley, for a humane burial. Bartmann's death had denied her any reprieve from the cultural and scientific gaze suffered during her short lifetime, defining her as an anomaly and a freak show, oversexed and subhuman. Her remains, buried on National Women's Day in August 2002, represent a gesture of atonement against a history of slavery that charted the traumatic misuse of the African race. Once a public spectacle and the focus of a stereotypically charged body politic, Bartmann has become the re-figured and re-presented image of the long called for requirement for postcolonial deconstruction of the black female body.

Concern has been raised, notably by Janell Hobson in her consideration of blackness and beauty in the media, that the subversive, animalistic associations founded in 'pseudo-scientific studies of human anatomy' do not rematerialize in a new form through 'popular culture.'²¹ Just as Morrison re-addresses the literary image of the 'black girl,' willed out of existence due to signifiers that cling, so too is it important that Bartmann is not further entrenched as a socio-political commodification through

²⁰ Janell Hobson, *Venus in the Dark: Blackness and Beauty in Popular Culture* (New York and London: Routledge, 2005), 57.

²¹ *Ibid*, 46.

the atonement of her remains. Throughout this thesis, I refer to several literary and artistic accounts of Bartmann's image, calling attention to the casualness of circulation and the consequences of display. I suggest that Morrison, rather than immuring the reader to the brutality of slavery and the spectacle of suffering, illuminates the terror and mundanity of the culturally entrenched spectacle of the black female body. Found in the folds of Sethe's clothing in *Beloved* (1987), the countenance of a model in *God Help the Child* (2015), the exoticness of Wild in *Jazz* (1992), or the nurturing of a black mammy in *Tar Baby* (1981), *Song of Solomon* (1977) and *Love* (2003), I will consider how Morrison gives expression and voice to the 'dead' black girl without reinforcing the spectacular character of black suffering. Though I address the image of the lynched black female body in my final chapter, and other acts of violence against the black bodies, I attempt, in the same light as Fred Moten and his questioning of subjectivity in Frederick Douglass's account of the beating of his Aunt Hester, to 'give expression to these outrages without exacerbating the indifference to suffering that is the consequence of the benumbing spectacle.'²² I suggest that Morrison gives space, in her literary re-articulation of African American history, for the ongoing performance of black female sexuality, simultaneously presenting and disrupting the subjugation and the spectacle of race.

²² Fred Moten, *In the Break. The Aesthetics of the Black Racial Tradition* (London, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 2003), 3.

CONFRONTING VISUAL EVIDENCE AND SURFACE READINGS

Foucault argues that 'our society is one not of spectacle, but of surveillance...the hierarchical, permanent exercise of indefinite discipline.' Foucault locates visual culture as a 'space for regulation and instalment of a disciplinary regime,' and the body as a site for contested power.²³ The 'visual,' based on spectacle and surveillance, is thus assigned a social and cultural value, mapped onto the body, and given political meaning. The black body exists as a 'deviation' in comparison with the 'normative' white body, expressed by Morrison in *Playing in the Dark* (1992) as the 'dramatic polarity created by skin color, the projection of the not me...an Africanism – a fabricated view of darkness, otherness, alarm' (*Playing in the Dark*, 38). Blackness is a mark of an absent personhood, to be instantly recognisable as the abject. Such 'fabricated' Otherness extends to a racialised sense of aesthetics that positions blackness in terms of the grotesque, a carnivalesque subversion that enhances the status quo.

In the early 1980s, Fredric Jameson asserted that only 'ideologically complicit readers' attended to the 'surface of the text,' insisting that the 'strong' critic must require narrative in terms of 'master codes,' disclosing its status as 'ideology, as an imaginary

²³ Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punishment: the birth of the prison* (London: Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group, 1977), 217.

resolution of real contradictions.’²⁴ Like Louis Althusser, Jameson saw the text as shaped by absence, yet Jameson defined only one absent cause – that of history itself, insisting that interpretation should seek a ‘repressed, mystified, latent meaning behind a manifest one.’²⁵ Interpretation involves a series of ‘unmaskings,’ finding the allegorical difference between surface and depth, restoring to the surface the history that the text represses.²⁶ An influence of Jameson’s version of symptomatic reading can be felt in Morrison’s *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*, which sets forth an agenda for studying the structuring role of race in American literature. Morrison suggests that race is like the structure of a fishbowl, that ‘transparently (and invisibly) permit[s] the ordered life it contains to exist in the larger world’ (*Playing in the Dark*, 17). By juxtaposing the historic and postmodern, the literary with the political, the aesthetic with the ideological representations of black female bodies, I suggest that it is possible to read the silences of race absented from the pages.

In this thesis, I argue that a difference needs to be drawn between the image of *race* and that of the *racial image* within cultural production and re-presentation of

²⁴ Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (New York: Cornell University Press, 1982), 13.

²⁵ Ibid, 60. Louis Althusser argues that history is not a necessary process, in the same sense that Marxism has claimed, but is, instead, the result of a series of accidental encounters in ‘Le courant souterrain du matérialisme de la rencontre’ (‘The Underground Current of Materialism of the Encounter’) published posthumously in Paris in 1994: *Philosophy of the Encounter: Later Writings, 1978-87*, trans. G. M. Goshgarian (London and New York: Verso, 2006).

²⁶ Jameson, 20.

iconography. Through the simultaneous association of historic and timeless stereotype, aligned with Morrison's uncanny depiction of the Africanist presence, Bartmann is no longer an image in which black female sexuality is present as an intelligibly visual object. Instead, she has become a racial icon, in which race is derived as an articulation of the visual. Unlike the image *of* race, as per Jameson's textual surface, the racial image, I would propose, is not one in which race is present as an intelligibly visual object. Instead, the racial image occurs where race acts as a form of the articulation of the visual - a template, an epistemology, a map, an affect, a gestalt, or a medium, as W.J.T Mitchell has most recently argued. Mitchell proposes that race is something 'we see through, like a frame, a window, a screen, or a lens, rather than something we *look at*.'²⁷ I will consider race as a costume, a mask, or a masquerade that can be put on, played upon and disavowed.

I am interested in exploring the way in which the 'medium being' of race provides an ontology of the image, a new formulation beyond the 'cul-de-sac of the post racial era.'²⁸ I will consider how the visual codes of race, how 'black' and 'white' continue to secure their referent, or more problematically, continue to be read as portrayals. By exploring the notion of race hidden in plain sight, using racial structures such as Morrison's fishbowl, or W.E.B. Du Bois's veil, I would argue that it is possible to reveal

²⁷ W. T. J. Mitchell, *Seeing Through Race* (London: Harvard University Press, 2012), xii.

²⁸ *Ibid*.

the racial structures and conceptual filters through which forms of human Otherness are mediated.

I also consider the imbrication between race and the photochemical imagination, critiquing Roland Barthes and his investment in the photographic connection as an embodied experience. Barthes' troubled and troubling relationship with race is evident in *Camera Lucida*, a text that still passes as a definitive statement on the ontology of the photograph. Barthes makes a case for the metasemiotic of the photograph and the dramatic eruption of the real, setting out to determine 'the essence of the photography,' resolving that a photograph's *noeme*, its unique quality, is precisely its chemically mediated indexical transmission of a moment of 'reality' – what he calls the photograph's 'that has been aspect.'²⁹

For Barthes, the reality effect of the photograph causes a twofold cost: first, there is a sense of personal loss. *Camera Lucida* is a book of mourning for Barthes' mother, the person with whom he was most closely and intensely bonded. The photograph becomes a way back to her, a way to activate and register the loss of a pre-verbal, para-psychoanalytical, extra semiotic bond of unspeakable import. The second cost, in the rejection of semiotic and psychoanalytic mediations on the desire to reconnect with

²⁹ Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 1982), 34.

the maternal, is an intellectual cost, an admission that the realm of the semiotic, which Barthes spent a considerable part of his academic life exploring, is not adequate for the deepest questions of human existence. In the concluding pages of the *Camera Lucida*, which define the indexical character of the photograph – its relation to reality - Barthes suggests that photography simultaneously delimits and surpasses the realm of semiotics. Barthes argues that there is a degree of tautology regarding a photograph, an intractable connection which ‘carries its referent with itself,’ glued together like a ‘condemned man and the corpse’ with a tireless repetition of contingency.

Barthes provides a detailed description of his own experience of being photographed, during which he undergoes a physical transformation:

Now once I feel myself observed by the lens, everything changes: I constitute myself in the process of posing, I instantaneously make another body for myself, I transform myself in advance into an image. [And then] I don’t know how to work upon my skin from within.³⁰

It is difficult to ignore the connection, albeit unconsciously rendered on the part of Barthes, that this personal account of becoming an object before the lens, of being separated from society by the play of photochemical factors on his skin, has with Frantz Fanon’s autobiographical references in *The Fact of Blackness*. During his experiences in France, Fanon recorded the impact of the coloniser’s gaze:

An unfamiliar weight burdened me. The real world challenged my claims. In the white world the man of colour encounters difficulties in the development of his bodily schema... On that day, completely dislocated,

³⁰ Barthes, 1982, 10-11.

unable to be abroad with the other, the white man, who unmercifully imprisoned me, I took myself far off from my own presence, far indeed, and made myself an object. What else could it be for me but an amputation, an excision, a hemorrhage that spattered my whole body with black blood.³¹

Barthes' account of becoming an object before the lens, of being separated from the world by the play of the photochemical imagination, reveals the proprietary alienation and mortification of the racial Other under the gaze. For Barthes, the wounding impact of the *punctum* is generated by certain photographs, many of which are racialised Others: 'this prick, this mark made by a pointed instrument, because the photographs...are in effect punctuated, sometimes even speckled with these sensitive points [of my sovereign consciousness] for *punctum* is also: sting, speck, cut, little hole.'³² Blackness marks the location of a private, intimate, and familial encounter, except when it 'belongs' to the body that Barthes faces in these photographs.

Jonathan Beller asserts that 'textual analysis of *Camera Lucida* [shows how] slavery, race and ethnicity became the privileged tropes,' the apparatus with which to figure 'the essence of photography.'³³ Carol Mayor similarly summarises that 'Barthes' novel(esque) *Camera Lucida* is a story of a desire for the maternal that is nurtured by photography, whose very texture tells the story of the nourishment of race.'³⁴

³¹ Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, trans. Richard Philcox (New York: Grove, 2008), 113.

³² Barthes, 1982, 27.

³³ Jonathan Beller, "'Camera Obscura:' after All: The Racist Writing with Light,' *Bernard Edu* 10.3 (Summer 2012), 1.

³⁴ Carol Mayor, *Black and Blue. The Bruising Passion of Camera Lucida, La Jetee, Sans Soleil, and Hiroshima Mon Amour* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2012), 39.

Considered, then, in response to the image of race and the racialised image, Barthesian theory can be applied to the social and racial functions of photography, the invisible structures that turn the epidermis into a writing pad. Moten notes a paradox, that 'the reduction phenomenology desires seems to require a regression to a prescientific state.' Blackness is refigured as a return and a reduction, a 'that-has-been,' which Moten argues is the 'staging area for the performance of that violent and ruptural collision that is both the dramatic life of blackness and the opening of what is called modernity.'³⁵ This thesis furthers a discussion of the cultural investment of the photochemical imagination. I am interested in how blackness is marked as the 'ideal object' by the 'ideal spectator,' a 'naivete,' according to Moten, that would move Barthes 'back before culture to some pure and unalloyed looking.' I am interested in how this movement, a 'europallic journey to the interior, to the place of the other, the dark continent, the motherland' is paradoxically figured as an imperial descent into the self.³⁶

Mary Ann Doane has presented the 'photographic' as a desired 'logic' of indexicality, which has intensified with, and has been incorporated with the digital. Following Doane's argument, while the indexical exudes a fantasy of referentiality, the digital exudes a fantasy of immateriality. In a journal dedicated to the contemporary

³⁵ Moten, 2003, 203.

³⁶ Ibid.

discourse on photographic indexicality, Mary Ann Doane highlights the enduring mythology of the index as trace:

As photographic trace or impression, the index seems to harbour a fullness, an excessiveness of detail that is always supplemental to meaning or intention. Yet the index as deixis implies an emptiness, a hollowness that can only be filled in specific, contingent, always mutating situations. It is this dialectic of the empty and the full that lends the index an eeriness and uncanniness not associated with the realms of the icon or symbol. At times, the disconcerting closeness of the index to object raises doubts as to whether it is indeed a sign, suggesting instead that the index is perched precariously on the edge of semiotics.³⁷

Though Bartmann pre-dated the photochemical age, I suggest that it is pertinent to explore her history through the racial structures and iconography that imbricate photography with regimes of racial violence. While the index functions as a 'hollowed-out sign,' or a trace, it also implies the possibility to reproduce a past moment, a 'witness to an anteriority,' whilst signifying the remaining gap between a sign and object. Doane argues that the mythology of the index, beyond the trace and the shifter, is fraught with a tension between the iconic and the symbolic.³⁸ On one hand, the trace, such as Bartmann's remains, partakes of the iconic, because the sign so often resembles the object. On the other hand, the shifter partakes of the symbolic in that its content might be conventional and arbitrary.

³⁷ Mary Ann Doane, 'Indexicality: Trade and sign: Introduction,' *differences* 18.1 (2002), 2.

³⁸ Doane, 136.

A young Khoisan woman, brought to England as one of the many thousands of people exhibited and transformed into medical spectacles throughout the course of the nineteenth century, Bartmann is now regarded amongst the most famous human-ethnological exhibits in cultural memory. Bartmann's contemporary iconography has become the image of the 'quintessential black woman' that, according to Zine Magubane, espouses the intersection of 'racial and sexual alterity.'³⁹ The Hottentot Venus forms a convenient historical analogy for understanding contemporary representations of 'blackness.' Her history maps onto the body, stemming from the way in which Cuvier influenced science and scientists who would project similar reductive arguments about the black female body, to the way that present-day visual culture perpetually signifies on images from the past, reinforcing or confounding their referent.

Mireille Miller-Young argues that the legacy of white supremacy requires our confrontation with history and its racialised construction of black sexuality, even when such legacies 'inform our fantasies, which means that sometimes our fantasies are ugly and include our own subjection.'⁴⁰ In view of this legacy, Bartmann has become a consistent source for black women's sexuality, with contemporary rhetoric often inserting Bartmann's body into historical narratives or into contemporary

³⁹ Quoted in Hobson, 2005, 55.

⁴⁰ Mireille Miller-Young, *A Taste for Brown Sugar. Black Women in Pornography* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2014), 12.

scenarios. Though Morrison would work to displace the trope of Africanist disability onto the Eurocentric ideal that would render the black female invisible, popular culture continues to secure their referent as erotic, sensual, consensual and Other; more problematically, but frequently, with racial image as a portrayal of the actual and tangible.

By the time that Bartmann reached London, she was already foreshadowed by several centuries of ethnic representation. Deborah Willis argues that the Hottentots were the most 'ethnographically represented African group' at this historical juncture, standing in a metonymical relationship to 'Africa.'⁴¹ Africa, a site that Hegel claimed had no history, has long existed in the Western imagination as a netherworld and a counterpoint to Europe's self-image of advancement, science and technology.⁴² From the vast savannahs and dense jungles that were labelled by European explorers as *terra nullius*, vacant land, ripe for conquest and development, to the diverse animals and peoples, whose dark skins created an 'Africanist presence,' as Morrison argues, or 'the dramatic polarity of...otherness [and] alarm' (*Playing in the Dark*, 38), the continent forms a mythical concept in the cultural imagination. Such landscape forms part of a racialised binary between the 'blackness' of nature and the primitivism and the 'whiteness' of development and civilisation.

⁴¹ Willis, 2010, 99.

⁴² Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Philosophy of History* [1770-1831], trans. J. Sibree (New York: Cosimo Classics, 2007).

Signifying a foundational element in the discourse of deviance, the body of the Hottentot, later characterised by Bartmann herself, became ‘iconic evidence,’ representing sexual excess with her evident steatopygic posterior and her imagined ‘Hottentot apron.’⁴³ In a flyer advertising the first of Bartmann’s displays, members of the public were invited, for the price of two shillings, to see that ‘most wonderful phenomenon of nature,’ ‘a perfect specimen...just arrived from the Interior of Africa.’⁴⁴ *The Times* newspaper later described her appearance as possessing the ‘kind of shape which is most admired among her countrymen,’ wearing a skin-tight dress ‘resembling her complexion,’ revealing ‘shapes above and the enormous size of her posterior parts’ that gave the impression of her ‘being undressed.’ The show took place on a ‘stage two feet high, along which she was led by her keeper, and exhibited like a wild beast; being obliged to walk, stand, or sit as he ordered.’⁴⁵

⁴³ Clifton Crais and Pamela Scully note that Bartmann’s ‘movement through empire and different commercial contexts helped create her racialization within Europe...[her] steatopygia as a trait of ethnicity and race and science,’ in *Sara Baartman and the Hottentot Venus: A Ghost Story and a Biography* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2009), 12. Gilman, 1985, discusses in detail how the medical application of the term ‘steatopygia’ became associated with the Hottentot’s apron and a subtext of black female sexuality, illicit sexuality and criminality in *Difference and Pathology: Stereotypes of Sexuality, Race, and Madness* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1985), 76-127.

⁴⁴ From Lysons, *Collectanea* (ref.1), by permission of the British Library (shelf mark C. 191. C. 16.), reproduced in Sadiah Qureshi, ‘Displaying Sara Baartman, the ‘Hottentot Venus,’ *History of Science* 42 (2004), 237.

⁴⁵ Robert Chambers, ed., *The book of days: A miscellany of popular antiquities, in connection with the calendar* (London and Edinburgh: Chambers, 1863), ii, 621.

Playing with the notion of surface readings, and reinventing Bartmann's spectacle, Grace Jones 1978 stage performance, photographed by John-Paul Goude for *Paper* magazine, reveals the power and politics of history, and how such histories are intrinsic to transnational systems of oppression. Depicting a sleek, glistening, black nude body in a small cage, with a sign that says 'do not feed the animals,' Grace Jones activates a fetishised surface, an image of caged bestiality chewing on a piece of meat. Jones' dominating presence and appearance does not comply with the oppressive imagery of passive bodies marked as primitive.⁴⁶ Like Wild in *Jazz*, Pilate in *Song of Solomon* (1977), Grace Jones highlights perceived differences of speechlessness whilst commanding space and vision within the void. A figure exploited and abused in the past and the present, a reverberation of global domination of black women's bodies, Jones' highlights the marketability of Bartmann that extends into the modern day.

Nearly four decades later, in a recent publicity campaign, John-Paul Goude photographed Kim Kardashian, who sought to 'break the internet,' displaying her oiled, nude buttocks in a brazen display of ethnic sexuality.⁴⁷ In a scathing review appearing in the *Detroit Free Press*, Rochelle Riley made a direct connection with Bartmann, citing the foolishness of Kardashian's complicity that works only to

⁴⁶ Jean-Paul Goude, *Jungle Fever* (New York: Xavier Moreau, 1981).

⁴⁷ Amanda Fortini, 'No Filter: An Afternoon with Kim Kardashian,' *PaperMag* (12 November 2014), <<http://www.papermag.com/no-filter-an-afternoon-with-kim-kardashian-1427450475.html>> (accessed 14/12/2015).

legitimise the freak show culture.⁴⁸ Clearly a painful period of cultural genocide against the Khoisan people, fuelling a lingering legacy of racially charged scrutiny, objectification and ridicule, postmodern art, including the Kardashian branding that would commercially benefit from the era of the 'booty' shot, has sought to form a deliberate revival and re-presentation of the Hottentot's exemplary body, displacing focus onto the racial image.

In Morrison's exploration of the Africanist presence in America, she suggests that there is the potential for agency if we read beyond the perplexity and shame of the historical archetype. Morrison argues that we should reject a scholarship founded on the objectification of people of colour, and instead carefully scrutinise the dominant:

The fabrication of the Africanist persona is reflexive; an extraordinary meditation on the self; a powerful exploration of the fears and desires that reside in the writerly consciousness...It was this Africanism, deployed as rawness and savagery, that provided the staging ground and arena for the elaboration of the quintessential American identity (*Playing in the Dark*, 17, 44).

In Morrison's terms, a critical blindness has caused a weak objectivity in the study of American literature and culture. I would argue that such an agentic possibility can be found in the paradoxical and potentially disruptive nature of Bartmann's antithetical appellation. Taking the terms 'Hottentot' and 'Venus' in isolation, 'Hottentot' forms

⁴⁸ Rochelle Riley, 'Kim Kardashian exploits herself as the new Hottentot Venus,' *Detroit Free Press* (17 November 2014), <<http://www.freep.com/story/news/columnists/rochelle-riley/2014/11/16/kim-kardashian-exploits-hottentot-venus/19104511/>> (accessed 14/3/13).

the representation of ethnic savagery; uncivilised, bestial, with freakish physiognomy and sexual anatomy – an ‘intensely ugly figure, distorted beyond all European notions of beauty,’ according to one contemporary.⁴⁹ The image of the black ‘Venus’, on the other hand, worshipped as the goddess of love, can be traced back as far as circa. 100 A.D, when the Greco-Egyptian astronomer, Claudius Ptolemy, categorised the hot climate of Africa as evidence of its rule by the planet Venus. Winthrop Jordan argues that this established a perpetual link between African women and sensuality, constituting ‘anybody that emerges from the continent...as an oversexed body.’⁵⁰ Whereas the Black Venus forms an enticing representation of exotic femininity, the ‘Savage Hottentot’ forms a repulsive icon of unbridled monstrosity. Conjoined, this paradoxical appellation dramatises the difference between race, gender and sexuality, forming an uncanny depiction of simultaneous fear and attraction, reflected in the grotesque parodies of Bartmann’s image.

Figure 1 is one such example: a nineteenth century satirical caricature, published in London in 1811 by Christopher Crupper following Bartmann’s initial exhibition in Piccadilly.⁵¹ The piece, entitled ‘Love and Beauty - - Sartjee the Hottentot Venus,’

⁴⁹ Edwards and Walvin, 172.

⁵⁰ Winthrop Jordan, *White over Black: American Attitudes toward the Negro, 1550-1812* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1968), 34.

⁵¹ Figure 1, Christopher Crupper, *Love and Beauty - - Sartjee the Hottentot Venus* (London: Rumford, 1811), reproduced by Repository: Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division, Washington D.C. 20540.

forms a full-length parody of Bartmann's profile - a confident pose, hand on hip, she stands with her waist slightly twisted, exaggerating the size and angle of her posterior as a central focus. She is naked, except for an elaborate headdress, encrusted girdle, and tasselled garters at her knees. She wears a cape across her hidden shoulder, sweeping behind her to the floor in a cascade of spurious elegance. A crude antithesis of classical femininity, this Venus carries her Cupid on her ample buttocks, his bow drawn towards the viewer with the caption: 'take care of your hearts.' Z. S. Strother argues that Bartmann forms the 'anti-Venus,' comfortingly anti-erotic, desexualising and rejecting that Bartmann's image, an image of racial difference, as a source of desire.⁵²

Considering Rosemarie Thomson's argument, Bartmann formed a 'frightening paradox,' at once an irredeemable physiological subordinate and an apotheosis of classical femininity.⁵³ Even in Cuvier's own writings on Bartmann's post-mortem, there is evidence of an innate struggle with this eroticised perspective. Juxtaposed with her face which he found 'hideous' and the formal, medical lexis employed when comparing her genitalia with primates, Cuvier continued to find the 'top of her chest graceful, *sa main charmante* (her hand charming) and her foot 'alluring'. Despite a

⁵² Z. S. Strother, 'Display of the Body Hottentot,' in *Africans on Stage*, ed. Bernth Lindfors (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999), 40.

⁵³ Rosemarie Garland Thomson, *Extraordinary Bodies: Figuring Physical disability in American Culture and Literature* (New York, Chichester: Columbia University Press, 1997), 71.

motivation to further establish the distinction between African and European bodies, simultaneously removing the mystery of the exotic Other and rendering her body incongruous, the interracial sexual tendencies are evident. By reconsidering the subversion of Bartmann's anti-erotic nature, the gaze is displaced onto the imperialist dichotomy that would render her deviant - simultaneously desirable and repulsive, available and untouchable, productive and reproductive, beautiful yet black.

I aim to examine how Morrison's novels, read in conjunction with interdisciplinary contemporaries, attempt to reconfigure Bartmann, the black woman behind the image, highlighting the complex historical and socio-political reduction of black female sexuality to racial stereotype. By readdressing the surface, I would argue that it is possible to remove the layers of social, cultural and political reality that have influenced the emergence and transformation of stereotypes that cling, echoing Eliot's 'fancies' that are curled around the image of black womanhood, from the nineteenth century to the present. Examining prevalent stereotypes at the source, through an aesthetic and socio-political lens, can arguably promote a deeper understanding of the ideologies of race, gender and sexuality, utilised by Morrison in her aesthetics of resistance – at once 'highly political *and* passionately aesthetic.'⁵⁴ Morrison moves

⁵⁴ The term 'aesthetic of resistance' is used in Ella Shohat and Robert Stam, *Unthinking Eurocentrism: Multiculturalism and the Media* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 292, and coined by Mikhail Bakhtin in *Rabelais and His World*, trans. Helene Iswolsky (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984). Toni Morrison states that her writing is both 'highly political *and* passionately aesthetic' in *Sula* (London: Vintage, 2005), x.

beyond a simple counter-rhetoric celebrating racial or gendered difference that would impose a 'fabricated Africanist' manifestation onto the mercurial psyche of American literature.

Positing the African, and subsequently African-American presence as a 'disabling virus within literary discourse,' an 'unsettled and unsettling' presence, Morrison finds potential agency behind this uncanny disturbance within the canon, making it possible to 'say and not say, to inscribe and erase, to escape and engage...to historicise and render timeless' (*Playing in the Dark*, 6). Morrison highlights the importance of not divorcing art from the political realm, committed to creating literature that is both, according to Marc Conner, 'aesthetically powerful and politically effective.'⁵⁵ By subsuming the aesthetic within the political, or creating an absolute divide between the two disciplines, fails to recognise Morrison's immersion in what she terms 'black style,' a style that enables 'Africanist personae, narrative, and idiom...in self-conscious ways' (*Playing in the Dark*, 16).

In finding the 'dead' black girl, the Africanist personae, Morrison is willing to find the traces and testify to the loss of a beloved body, however mutilated: 'A writer in the last quarter of the twentieth century, not much more than a hundred years after the

⁵⁵ Marc Connor, ed., *The Aesthetics of Toni Morrison: Speaking the Unspeakable* (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 2000), ix.

Emancipation, a writer who is black and a woman...my job becomes how to rip that veil drawn over "proceedings too terrible to relate" (*Playing in the Dark*, 10). For Morrison, removing the veil, breaking the fishbowl, moving past the invisible surface, does not reinstate the difference between the powerful and the Other, but rather, it shows their interrelation, that which is 'within.' Morrison argues that 'the unwritten interior life' of African Americans cannot be separated from what is 'without,' what she calls the 'subsoil of my work' (*Playing in the Dark*, 111). Speaking out against the undeniably exigent agency of stereotype formed on imperial ideals, or a limited critical reception due to autonomous ideological lenses, Morrison shares her concern against literature that is 'universal' and 'race free,' carrying the risk of being equally dangerous; 'lobotomizing that literature' and 'diminishing both the art and the artist.'⁵⁶ In a similar vein to Barthes' theory, 'universal language' only adds a 'new strength to the psychology of the masters: it allows it always to take other men as objects, to describe and condemn at one stroke. It is an adjectival psychology, it knows only how to endow its victims with epithets, it is ignorant of everything about the actions themselves, save the guilty category into which they are forcibly made to fit.'⁵⁷

Expanding the Africanist presence into a wider landscape, when the landscape is dominated by Eurocentric ideals, it would seem, is not without challenge. Morrison

⁵⁶ Ibid, 12.

⁵⁷ Roland Barthes, *Mythologies* (London: Vintage, 2000), 45.

must not create, in the Carthusian sense, the Dominici trial, where the 'spectacle of a terror...threatens us all, that of being judged by a power which wants to hear only the language it lends us.'⁵⁸ Rather than removing the signifiers of race, the process of unveiling discloses the intensity of the connection that binds them. Morrison assumes the responsibility for encountering and trying to find words for 'proceedings too terrible to relate,' using narratives of trauma to provide further insight, suggesting how an activity occurring in the present, in which the past is continuously modified and re-described, continues to shape the future. Moving beyond a national nostalgia, or a politically charged gesture of atonement, readdressing cultural memory, binds the past to the present and to the future in a continual process of subversion, displacement and resurrection. Morrison's texts are an act of witnessing, in which language undertakes the work of mourning, properly and artistically burying the 'unburied, or at least unceremoniously buried' to which *Beloved* attests, reclaiming the history of the many through the death of Sethe's daughter.⁵⁹ In an interview with Taylor-Guthrie, Morrison has emphasised the historical uncertainty of the Middle Passage:

Some historians told me 200 million died. The smallest number I got from anybody was 60 million. There were travel accounts of people who were in the Congo – that's a wide river – saying 'we could not get the boat through the river; it was choked with bodies.' That's like a logjam. A lot of people died. Half of them died in those ships... I thought this has got to be the least read of all the books I'd written because it is about

⁵⁸ Ibid, 46

⁵⁹ Toni Morrison, *Beloved* (London: Vintage, 2007).

something that the characters don't want to remember, I don't want to remember, black people don't want to remember, white people don't want to remember. I mean its national amnesia.⁶⁰

Morrison's literature is dedicated to 'more,' to an unquantifiable surplus, an ahistorical uncertainty. Committed to the unnamed death, Morrison commemorates the incalculability of black suffering and loss, through events that exceed frames of reference, described by Barbara Freeman as an 'aesthetics of the incalculable.'⁶¹ *Playing in the Dark* centres Morrison's desire at work by exposing knowledge from the chasm, the void, existing beyond the transparency of a structure that 'permits the ordered life it contains to exist in the larger world.' Forming a contestation of stereotype requires an extraordinary meditation, a revelation of 'longing, of terror' and of 'shame' (*Playing in the Dark*, 43) in the reflexive exposure of the fabricated Africanist persona. In order to prevent visual codes of beauty, race and difference being read as deviant, disfigured or disordered, Morrison argues that we must remove the contemporary ideological framework in which aesthetic agency is subsumed, displacing the disability from the subject to the gaze: the 'cataracts of people's eyes,' which, when removed, will render the figure of the Hottentot Venus beyond the discourse of racial alterity.⁶²

⁶⁰ Danille Taylor-Guthrie, ed., *Conversations with Toni Morrison* (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 1994), 257.

⁶¹ Barbara Freeman, *The Feminine Sublime: Gender and Excess in Women's Fiction* (Berkeley, Los Angeles and London: University of California Press, 1995), 123.

⁶² Taylor-Guthrie, 183.

INTERROGATING THE FISHBOWL

My research is neither a biography on Bartmann nor a historical investigation into the events surrounding this dehumanising spectacle. Instead, I intend to explore how the Hottentot Venus has shared representations of blackness in Morrison's writing, a connection yet to be made the breadth of scholarship on the author. My reading of the Hottentot Venus begins with the observation that if her *legacy* is based in the epidermal signifier merely as a signifier of difference, this is because this coding has been fully naturalised. My thesis considers why this is the case, and what kind of visual culture, logic of seeing, scopic regime, and archival structure is needed, what are the epistemological, but also, disciplinary, formations that sustain this mapping of the visual field? What can Morrison's use of 'black' and 'white' teach us about what we think images are?

By considering the history of Bartmann, and her visual legacy, I would argue that it is possible to form a new critical appreciation of Morrison's novels, readdressing race that resides on the 'surface,' highlighting the reductive stereotypes of 'black' and 'white,' but also reconfiguring the ways in which we continue to connect skin to value in a social, sexual and commercial sense. My thesis questions what would happen if we separated 'face' and 'value,' what would happen if the black body was no longer

overdetermined from the outside, a structure that pertains to transparency, such as a fishbowl, a veil, or a windowpane, like Eliot's fancies that cling.

In this thesis, I consider the cultural and political discourse on the black body, and black female sexuality which, despite its changing manifestations across history, has always been positioned between the realms of the social and scientific. Deployed in both colonial oppression and anticolonial resistance, blackness presents a site of deviance, structured by an irreducible exteriority. Informed by a reading of Fred Moten's consideration of the tangled relationship between black avant-garde literature and music, namely Jazz, and the emergence of a distinct form of black cultural nationalism, I consider blackness as a form of resistance, an interruption, that places pressure on the assumption of the equivalence of personhood and subjectivity.⁶³ Moten argues that while subjectivity is defined by the 'subject's possession of itself and its objects,' it is troubled by a 'dispossessive force,' and it is this troubling presence, infused and deforming, that is a testament to the resistance of the racial Other.⁶⁴

I am interested in this act of resistance, the deviancy and disorder presented by blackness. I consider the tension created between the spectacle of race and its

⁶³ See Fred Moten, *In the Break. The Aesthetics of the Black Racial Tradition* (London, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 2003).

⁶⁴ *Ibid*, 1.

spectatorship, the visual economy of 'enjoyment and being enjoyed' which Saidiya Hartman has termed 'hypervisibility.'⁶⁵ Bartmann is a provocative starting point, parsing the interrelationship with blackness and ontology, tacitly interrogating the legacy of Frantz Fanon's claim that 'ontology – once it is finally admitted as leaving existence by the wayside – does not permit us to understand the being of [blackness].'⁶⁶ I ask whether blackness is thereby assigned a position of alienation, or whether, as Moten has wondered, it is possible that Fanon's insight has a productive function, highlighting the 'artificially, officially assumed position' it strives to rebuke.⁶⁷ I ask whether it is possible to depose a framework where blackness and antiblackness remain in a form of antisocial structural support. What does it mean, as Moten asks, 'to desire the something other than transcendental subjectivity that is called nothing?'⁶⁸

Chapter one considers how black racialised images carry a series of promises, fantasies, and assumptions about the black female body. Beginning with a reading of Morrison's short story, 'Recitatif' (1983), I consider how a group of orphans are shaped by the complexity of identification as much as they are determined by the force of

⁶⁵ Saidiya V. Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997).

⁶⁶ Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, trans. Richard Philcox (New York: Grove, 2008), 110.

⁶⁷ Fred Moten, 'Blackness and Nothingness (Mysticism in the Flesh),' *The South Atlantic Quarterly* 112.4 (Fall 2013), 741.

⁶⁸ *Ibid*, 778.

representation. Addressing Cuvier's treatment of Bartmann's image, I consider how a disparity is raised between the 'face' of blackness and its 'value,' an alternating signification that suggests not only sheer surface, but how that surface should be understood. I suggest that Morrison disrupts the coloniser's gaze with figures that reject a racial determination, revealing the racially imbued structures that inform and regulate behaviour.

Chapter one also considers the historical implications of the Hottentot Venus' spectacle, discussing the tropes of black female sexuality through artistic and literary representations of the Black Venus and her Sable counterpart, the fictitious creation from Bryan Edwards's account of the West Indies.⁶⁹ Set against the backdrop of the transatlantic slave trade, European colonial expansion, the abolitionist movement and social revolutions, I suggest that the Sable Venus, a constructed figure of racial beauty, a recreation of the Hottentot Venus, has influenced Morrison's literary creations, including the characters of *A Mercy* (2008) in a return to the experience of the Middle Passage and New World slavery. I argue that the Sable Venus is a forceful, yet complicated trope for expressing the perverse relationship between the coloniser and the Other, enabling an exploration of the intersection between Bartmann and Morrison's disruption of the colonisers' gaze.

⁶⁹ Bryan Edwards, *The History, Civil and Commerce, of the British Colonies of the West Indies, II* (London: John Stockdale, 1794).

Through a reading of the fabricated history of the Sable Venus, I argue that slavery causes an epistemological revolution, underwriting the black body as commodity. Morrison constructs characters that form a reflective mirror, where social, material, and discursive racial relations become visible. I suggest, through the enslavement of an unlikely grouping of women in *A Mercy*, ranging from an Angolan slave to a bought British housewife, that black personhood is rendered indistinguishable from black performance and materialism. I consider Morrison's use of the historical echoes of blackface, demonstrating the tensions between black bodies and performative blackness, paralleling the experiences of black women in the Middle Passage with their modern counterpart, Bride, the protagonist of *Gold Help the Child* (2015). Though Bride is born into a world long after the abolition of slavery, value is still racialised in her skin, carrying Morrison's continued struggle with colourism, a value that has become embodied, sensorially and aesthetically tangible, as visible on the surface. Bride's relationship with her mother demonstrates how the act of motherhood, tainted by the legacy of slavery, conditions maternalism with materialism, driving a conflict between the commercial value of a slave labourer and their lack of personhood.

While chapter 1 focuses more directly on the visualisation of the myth that conflates 'race' with the 'racial image,' chapter 2 considers the phenomenological and aesthetic implications which show how the process of racialisation functions. I map

photography onto race, exploring the way in which the photographic medium exchanges with race because they share the same hermeneutics of surface, of face value. I consider the deep-seated dialectic between racism and photography, tracing the social and racial structures of the coloniser's gaze. Beginning with *Beloved* and the reanimation of Margaret Garner, I suggest that Morrison is simultaneously dependent on and critical of a racialised map of the visual. Morrison plays with the politics of reproductive black performance, reconfiguring the animalistic nature of black female sexuality. I suggest that *Beloved* contains the historical traces of the Hottentot Venus, and that these traces can be read through the lens of a camera, contained within the vectors of colonialism, political economy and race. Morrison creates a disturbance of black performance as Sethe watches her children through the keyhole of their home, presenting both the observer and abject object, pointing towards the pre-photographic endemic of slavery. I argue that Sethe's image contains a double denial – a shift from the body of evidence, evidence of the history of racial indexicality, to the body *as* evidence, providing a disavowal of what is visually available to the spectator.

Sethe is denied personhood, reduced to a primal image, comparable to *Jazz* (1992), which presents the carnality of the photographic medium, an experience which Barthes describes paradoxically as alienation and connection. While the photographic image undeniably indexes race, I ask whether photography can also present a mode of resistance, enabling what Moten has termed 'unalloyed looking,' a detached

autonomy that questions spectatorship and renders photography a political agent for black personhood.⁷⁰ I suggest that Morrison utilises the photographic form to enable a cultural re-memory, giving figurative substance to the Barthesian theory which describes photography as a body that functions as a vehicle for a necrophilic encounter, a 'corpse through which we touch other corpses.'⁷¹ While Barthes represses and denigrates race, I argue that Morrison's treatment of the photographic image highlights the ontological concern with *stadium* and *punctum* and the phenomenological privileging of history. I am particularly interested in the act of metaphorical castration that takes place in both *Beloved* and *Jazz*, a wounding, catastrophic break caused by the maternal presences. Considering the photographic image as a racial image, I suggest that the surface of meaning is altered and ruptured through an encounter with the epideictic Other.

The concluding sections present a reading of *Tar Baby* (1981), suggesting that Morrison plays with the notion of masks and masking, questioning the predetermined nature of the 'essence' of slavery and the Barthesian intent to be in the presence of and in contact with a 'pure' history. Tracing illustrations of the Sable Venus in the construction of Jadine, the Copper Venus, I argue that, through the mythology of tar, Morrison transforms the radical aspects of black performance and aestheticism,

⁷⁰ Moten, 2003, 198.

⁷¹ Barthes, 1982, 91.

proposing ways in which back art can reveal and transform. Morrison repossesses the derogatory slur, 'tar baby,' presenting it as an emblem for the black writer's relationship with black matter, culture and history. I suggest that Morrison reverses the function of *Camera Lucida*, asserting that it is impossible to disentangle the discourse of slavery from the facts of photography. Via the epistemic disappearance of historical, material, and maternal vectors that facilitate both slavery and photography, I argue that Morrison undermines the negrophilic constructions on which racial ideology depends.

I close the second chapter with an examination of the silhouette form and the art of Kara Walker to reflect further on the black surface in *The Bluest Eye* (1970). Through the pre-photographic art form of the silhouette, I further an exploration for what Morrison has termed 'the ghost in the machine,' the 'unspeakable things unspoken' within the contemporary 'white' cultural apparatus.⁷² Like photography, the silhouette artform presents blackness as an unstable ontological mark, playing with the notion of the 'hole' and 'wholeness,' the 'hole' presenting collateral damage incurred in the assault on the illusive totality of a synecdochally derived identity.⁷³ I suggest that the silhouette presents a site of critical intervention, countering the racial mark of invisibility. If the photochemical imagination is a racial manifestation that has

⁷² Toni Morrison, *Unspeakable Things Unspoken: The Afro-American Presence in American Literature* (The Tanner Lectures on Human Values: The University of Michigan, October 7, 1988), 136.

⁷³ Moten, 2003, 173.

the possibility to exchange on its surface, I would argue that the silhouette holds the possibility to render the body as if 'blackness' were wholly detachable. I argue that Pecola's blackness, in *The Bluest Eye*, is that of the silhouette, living on the 'surface,' the outline of 'darkies' and 'pickaninnies' becoming not only the sign of the silhouette's likeness to the body that it indexes, but also the 'face' of that blackness as well. Pecola demonstrates how blackness becomes more than an iconic signifier, but also a resemblance, a signifier of likeness. I suggest that to be invisible is to be recognisable as the abject, a 'transparent vessel of meanings wholly independent of any influence of the vessel itself.'⁷⁴

Chapter three considers the literary function of deviant bodies, particularly that of the lynched body, an oxymoronic image, a structure of deferral. I seek to readdress the limited scholarship on Morrison's treatment of the lynched body, demonstrating how black performance presents competing visions of the black body that invariably alter the anticipated balance of display, reversing and conflating the power dynamic of the objectifying gaze. Through the lynched spectacle, I suggest that it is possible to further consider the regime of visibility and racially imbued structures. I am interested in the theatricality of the lynching spectacle, the pageantry of black performance and the spatial politics of display, echoing the treatment of the Hottentot Venus and the subjugating nature of the freak show. Lynching is synonymous with consumption and

⁷⁴ Moten, 2003, 68.

white privilege, a market for the spectacle of black Otherness. Through a reading of the lynching shadow in *Home* (2012), I argue that Morrison provides a new way for her readers to consider the racial image, focusing not only on the collective memories of the trauma of slavery, but also on the horrors of the postbellum years. Cee Money, the modern-day counterpart of the Hottentot Venus, and Frank, the forgotten war veteran, expose the dirty business of racism, bringing to light the collective violence of the white mob.

I draw connections between the lynching phenomenon and the photographically imagined scene, as the lynched victim is staged and performs for the benefit of the audience, a position fulfilled by the mob. What is significant, however, is the effect of the *punctum*, in that lynching photographs wound with the formality of their performance. The photograph is personified and demands attention, not because of the viewers' interest in the subject, but because the structure of the image is so powerful that it can stand on its own. The tableau of lynching in *Home* holds a direct view of the lynched body where indexicality performs as a pointed finger, gesturing towards the promise of a suture between the image and its referent. I suggest that Morrison provides a provocative commentary on the caustic nature of black performance through a highly potent figure of avisibility in her use of ghosts. Contrasting the figurative evocations of blackness in *The Bluest Eye*, or the familial presence of the spectre in *Beloved*, I am interested in the ways in which the ghost in

Home demands visibility through his distinct silhouette and iconic dress, providing a contemporary meditation on structures of historical memory related to masculinity and the body. I suggest that Morrison uses the function of the ghost, a fantasy that clings, and the downtrodden war veteran, to complicate national memory and suggest new ways to render the body visible.

I close the chapter with a consideration of the spatial politics of the lynched body in *Paradise* (1997), touching on *Sula* (1973), providing a new appreciation of the lynched figure in Morrison's writing in regards to the spectacle of blackness and the American landscape, the dynamic of the landed to the landless. All of Morrison's novels invoke displacement, where modernity and migration present the possibility for personhood, yet *Paradise* provides a forceful interrogation, reconstructing space for 'outdoored' people by calling into question the utopian visions upon which the black spaces are founded. In *Paradise*, personhood, through a reclamation of space, becomes a highly sexualised endeavour, displaced onto the transgressive impurity of the Convent women that pose a dangerous threat to the black exclusivity of Ruby. I am interested the diametrical relationship in terms of spatial hierarchy, created by the black spectacle and the lynching spectacle, where white bodies are firmly grounded, while black bodies are sardonically elevated, literally or figuratively hanging from trees. For Shadrack in *Sula*, or the women of the Convent, personhood is always accompanied

by the threat of violence and the noose. *Sula* and *Paradise* both render the black body 'out of place'.

Chapter four connects black performance and the consumption of the black body, suggesting the fatal implications of spectacle. I consider the trope of minstrelsy and its symbiosis with lynching: in minstrelsy, the black body is physically assumed and then dispossessed, rendered an object, whereas the lynched body is eradicated. I argue that the history of lynching and the history of racial spectacle are connected through a cannibalistic, consumptive gaze which the Hottentot Venus suffers. I also consider the ritual violence of burning a lynched victim, a grotesquery which Morrison addresses in *Sula* and *Love* (2003). Morrison recalls Margaret Garner with acts of maternal monstrosity, giving L and Eva a lighted torch. I suggest that, because enslavement and motherhood are indistinguishable, African American children become objects of consumption, the 'Strange Fruit' of Billy Holiday's blues that render the black body a commodity. I consider the lynched body as a fetishised form of entertainment, explored through Morrison's characterisation of Sula, the little girl that watches her own mother burn.

I return to *Beloved* to consider the visual legacy of the lynched female image, incorporating Moten's reading of Frederick Douglass' recollection of the beating of his Aunt Hester. I explore the exchange between the spectacle and the spectator and the

economy of hypervisibility. Through Sethe's mutilation, I consider Morrison's presentation of performative humanity, suggesting that there is a disruption of the primal scene with experiences of rememory. I question how race, when rendered as an art form, enacts difference, an inscription of the visual order onto the body. I suggest that Morrison attempts a rewriting of the master text through the chokecherry tree carved into Sethe's back, presenting a site of pleasure, pain and a queer connection to the body, a receptacle of historical affliction. When Morrison recalls or mimics commercial entities, such as the lynching photograph, the icon of the Hottentot Venus, and other racially imbued art forms, she challenges the corporealising effects that renders the black body a commodity.

I suggest that Moten's connection between materialism and maternalism is highly relevant to *Beloved*, exploring the resistance of the 'cut' which resides in the slave commodity's aurality 'outside the confines of meaning.'⁷⁵ While Moten focuses his consideration on aural disruptions, I am particularly interested in his reading of black performance and its agentic emergence, the potential for the black body to achieve personhood in non-figural terms, in ways that do not make it exchangeable, useable for a purpose to instil horror or extend pleasure. I argue that Morrison demonstrates the importance of unpacking race through a cut in order to divide the body from the violent implications of the gaze. The cut, previously unaddressed in Morrison's

⁷⁵ Moten, 2003, 12.

literature, beyond its objectifying limitations of prevailing models of subjectivity and enslavement, reverses the racialised map of the visual field and the violent nature of the gaze. Sethe's scars present a unifying tissue that suggests growth beyond the commercial body, enabling a reflexive site where the audience can witness the haptic nature of history.

Each chapter considers various kinds of connections between the Hottentot Venus and Morrison's works, exploring the rhetorically rendered bodies like Maggie in 'Recitatif' or the photographically rendered bodies in *Jazz* and *Tar Baby*. I explore Morrison's characters as figures that perform and pivot in the visual field, as phenomenologically fleshed out bodies, bodies that matter purely as surface, bodies that suture and bodies that sever. By considering the history of Bartmann and the visual legacy that ensued, it is possible to see how the black body is both the cause and product of a visual fold, connecting face to value, turned into mere surface, a product of fantasy, a signifier, a physical property and a paradigmatic visual sign that corporealises the way in which visual relations are understood. By tracing the visual legacy of the Hottentot Venus through Morrison's literature, I argue that it is possible to trace the 'blackness' of race, which both renders and fleshes out cultural anxieties, criminal expectations, exoticism and fear, rendering the black body as a visual field rather than a surface, an affect instead of a sign.

CHAPTER 1

THE LEGACY OF SARAH BARTMANN: CULTURAL RE-MEMORY AND RE-PRESENTATION OF THE BLACK FEMALE BODY

'RECITATIF' - FACE VALUE AND THE RACIAL IMAGE

Forming a living, breathing embodiment of ultimate difference, establishing nationalistic boundaries through the dissection and reconstruction of her bodily image, the Hottentot Venus highlights the way that science and popular culture work to mutually inform and regulate cultural behaviour. Postmodern artists and academics have found agency in reworking these contemporary images, displacing the deviance associated with the Venus' body in an attempt to escape from racially inflected iconography.¹ Nearing the end of her life, in the spring of 1815, Sarah Bartmann posed nude for three days at the Jardin des Plantes, observed by the professors of the Musée d'Histoire Naturelle. Figure 2 shows the resulting iconic images that appeared in the first volume of Étienne Geoffroy Saint-Hilaire's and Frédéric Cuvier's *Histoire naturelle des mammifères*.² Bartmann presents the only human portrait in this lavishly illustrated work, followed by an array of mammalian specimens, including the provincial orangutan and numerous species of apes and

¹ See Okwui Enwezor, Chika Okeke-Agulu, eds., *Contemporary African Art Since 1980* (Bologna: Damiani, 2009).

² Figure 2, Étienne Geoffroy Saint-Hilaire, *Femme de race Bochimanne* in Étienne Geoffroy Saint-Hilaire and Frédéric Cuvier, *Histoire naturelle des mammifères* (4 vols., Paris, 1827-47), i.

monkeys.³ Expounding a visual continuation of her objectification, Bartmann appears rigid, particularly in the depiction of her lateral profile, framed in a similar method to the consecutive zoological illustrations. The acute detail of the colouring - the curved shadow of her abdomen, the veining of the areola, the creasing above her left breast, her hair and nails, apparent in the anterior image, cultivate a sense of clinical precision, with minimal setting maintaining scholarly focus on the specimen. In contrast to Crupper's amplified satirical caricature, Saint-Hilaire includes a scale to cite the intention of anatomical accuracy. Significant also is the titular '*femme de race Boschimanne*,' heralding Cuvier's anatomical investigation that concluded Bartmann's origins as that of the San race: a *Boschimanne*, rather than a *Hottentote*. Such a distinction differentiated Bartmann as the lowest possible example of humanity, erasing her individuality whilst implicitly legitimising a racially distinguishable politics of anatomy.

Though initially intended to present an indication of evolutionary inferiority, Sadiya Qureshi has found affirmation beyond the spectacle, suggesting an alternative, thought-provoking and even confrontational submission in the striking nature of Bartmann's pose and exposition. Beyond a clinical detachment, Qureshi asserts that the detail of Bartmann's expression demands a 'sense of humanity,' poignantly

³ Étienne Geoffroy Saint-Hilaire and Frédéric Cuvier, *Histoire naturelle des mammifères* (4 vols, Paris, 1827-47), i. The actual examination at the Jardin des Plantes was conducted by Georges Cuvier, amongst others, but was reprinted by his brother in the *Histoire naturelle*.

'addressing the viewer directly, as it draws away from her physical form.'⁴ Her right eyebrow slightly raised - pensive and inquiring, the illustration returns the gaze of those who would later turn to Cuvier's texts to collaborate in the degradation of her form. Through a reversal of the subjectified gaze, Qureshi creates a space for Bartmann's unwritten history, her body voided by signifiers of racial difference, simultaneously rendering the suggestion of an unwritten and unspoken voice emanating from a series of disaggregated cultural parts.

In 'Myth Today,' Barthes argues that myth contains a 'double system...a sort of ubiquity' where 'its point of departure is constituted by the arrival of a meaning.' Signification forms a 'sort of constantly moving turnstile which presents alternately the meaning of the signifier and its form, a language-object and a metalanguage, a purely signifying and a purely imagining consciousness.'⁵ Following this assertion, Bartmann's facial expression presents the form, while her countenance presents a value in conjunction with the myth signified by that form. Barthes asserts that the 'meaning is always there to *present* the form; the form is always there to *outdistance* the meaning. And there is never any contradiction, conflict, or split between the meaning and the form: they are never at the same place.'⁶ Beyond Qureshi's focus on the gaze, I would suggest that Barthes' theory can further a consideration of Bartmann's

⁴ Sadiah Qureshi, 'Displaying Sara Baartman, the "Hottentot Venus,"' *History of Science* 42 (2004), 242.

⁵ Roland Barthes, *Mythologies* (London: Vintage, 2000), 123.

⁶ *Ibid*, 92.

illustrated expression. Cuvier's treatment of Bartmann raises a disparity between the 'face' and 'value' - an inner tension that causes an alternating signification, conjuring both the representation of a sheer surface and the body for which it provides the visage. The aesthetics of 'face value' question the absolute nature of how the surface should be understood, obscuring a judgment as to whether the spectator should consider the phenomenologies of skin and tissue, the skin as a semiotic signifier, or alternatively, should Bartmann's countenance be read as a facade, or an interface, or, as Janell Hobson has suggested, as a locus of desire?⁷ Qureshi follows a trajectory that yokes the phenomenology of racial embodiment with a reconciliation of the racialised art of the Hottentot to demand a 'sense of humanity' in the enquirer's gaze. However, this reading is in danger of simplifying the correlation of 'value' with a socio-political climate that refuses to bend and accommodate an agentic reading of black art.

In his contemplation on 'The Face of Garbo,' Barthes noted the ability for the face-as-object to plunge 'audiences into the deepest ecstasy [where] one literally lost oneself...as one would in a philtre,' representing 'a kind of absolute state of the flesh, which could be neither reached nor renounced.' Garbo's face – at once archetypal, and

⁷ Janell Hobson argues that 'desire' for the Hottentot Venus indicated a 'national fervour' in France, and that French men 'actually desired such women [the Hottentot Venus]; civilization kept the European woman under control, decreasing the danger of rebellion, but thwarting male desire,' when discussing the vaudeville play, *The Hottentot Venus, or Hatred of Frenchwomen*, performed at the Theater of Vaudeville on November 20, 1814, the same year that Bartmann debuted in Paris. See *Venus in the Dark: Blackness and Beauty in Popular Culture* (New York and London: Routledge, 2005), 43.

yet containing 'something sharper...a rare, individual function,' dependent on the observer, suggests that 'face value' synergises two trajectories: the first pursues a physiological expression of racial embodiment - an 'absolute state of flesh,' while the second inscribes the cultural implications of that corporeal signifier - archetypal, unreachable and un-renounced.⁸ Bartmann's iconography can, ironically, be considered in a similar vein to Barthes' evaluation at the polarity of the racial spectrum in his mediation on the quintessential European beauty, Audrey Hepburn. Barthes asserts that the iconic face of Audrey Hepburn is individualised, 'not only because of its peculiar thematics (woman as child, woman as kitten) but also because of her person, of an almost unique specification of the face.' Despite this sense of individual agency, the iconic face is left with 'nothing of the essence left in it,' constituted instead by 'an infinite complexity of morphological substance.'⁹

In Cuvier's *Histoire naturelle des mammifères*, tension is apparent between understanding the 'face' as a visage and the 'face' as a condition of blackness, morphing into thematic complexities of the Hottentot Venus that deprive the body of interiority - evacuated, divided and eviscerated. The iconic visage of Bartmann is thereby both the cause and product of a visual fold where the interior substance is

⁸ Barthes, 2000, 56-7.

⁹ Ibid, 123, 57.

turned into surface, placed in full view - and it is in this metaphorical fold that 'face' is connected to 'value', conflated and sutured as a paradigmatic visual sign.

Where Qureshi attempts to reverse the impetus of the gaze, Morrison notes the deep-seated iconographic entrenchment that functions as a slowly asphyxiating disability within the African American consciousness, 'sometimes allegorical, sometimes metaphorical, but always [forming a] choked representation of an Africanist presence.'¹⁰ Morrison redirects the gaze, but not, as Qureshi suggests, at the subject of the dream, but toward Barthes' objectified 'dreamer' - the producer of the icon, placing equal importance on the concept, the process, as well as the substance. Morrison displaces this disability by exposing the ache from within, attacking the structures of the fishbowl that 'transparently (and invisibly) permit the ordered life it contains to exist in the larger world' (*Playing in the Dark*, 17). Rather than dismissing the constructs that Barthes argues can neither be 'reached or renounced,' Morrison speaks of a need to free language from the 'sometimes sinister, frequently lazy' chains of 'racially informed and determined' signifiers (*Playing in the Dark*, xi). In exposing the fishbowl, Morrison questions the very visual fold that conflates 'face' with 'value'.

¹⁰ Toni Morrison, *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992), 17.

Through a consideration of Morrison's short story, 'Recitatif' (1983), such an experiment in racial structures is apparent. Termed a 'tour de force of racial readings and misreading – a work exposing society's unspoken racialized codes' by Sandra Stanley, critics have highlighted the inconsistency in Morrison's claim to remove 'all racial codes from a narrative about two characters of different races for whom racial identity is crucial' (*Playing in the Dark*, xi).¹¹ I would argue that Morrison utilises a highly post-modern approach in 'Recitatif', rather than voiding a series of racial signifiers, leaving the reader to determine which character is 'salt' and which is 'pepper,' which is the 'white girl' and which is 'black'.¹²

The title 'Recitatif' – an adaptation of *recitative* (a French form of opera which mediates between song and ordinary speech), charts the tones and rhythms of the lives of the two young characters for the five short moments that they share together as they move from girlhood to adulthood. On entering St. Bonaventure, a New York orphanage, Twyla is 'sick to her stomach' that she will be made to share a room with Roberta – a girl of a 'whole different race.' Despite the racially charged language such as 'my mother said...that they never wash' and 'they smelled funny' ('Recitatif,' 386), racial identity is left wholly unattributed, asserting instead the conflation of racial codes

¹¹Sandra Kumamoto Stanley, 'Maggie in Toni Morrison's "Recitatif": The Africanist Presence and Disability Studies.' *MELUS* 36.2 (Summer 2011), 72.

¹² Toni Morrison, 'Recitatif,' in *African American Literature beyond Race: An Alternative Reader*, ed. Gene Andrew Jarrett, (New York and London: New York University Press, 2006), 386, 395.

with class, cultural behaviour and ambiguous physical traits. Subverting an attempt at a universally race-free text, Morrison leaves the reader to determine which racial inflections apply to which characters, and, perhaps more provocatively, which codes are inherently racial in the first place. The reversal of the gaze is taken to a provocative level of critical reception, emphasising how the observer searches for signs of race and, on finding them unassigned, is left considering both the legibility and legitimacy of 'literary whiteness' and 'literary blackness' (*Playing in the Dark*, xii).

According to Alessandra Raengo, the critical reception surrounding 'Recitatif' accurately side steps Morrison's critical demitting of the removal of 'racial codes,' centring on 'the desire it mobilizes; more profoundly, the desire to continue to think of race as a form of representation of difference.'¹³ Despite, or perhaps because of Morrison's provocative premise, 'Recitatif' has inspired little critical discussion beyond meta-discursive investigations of race, class or social mobility focussing on the two central characters.¹⁴ I would argue that the ambiguity of Morrison's narrative

¹³ Alessandra Raengo, *Interfaces: Studies in Visual Culture: On the Sleeve of the Visual: Race as Face Value* (Hanover: University Press of New England, 2013), 9.

¹⁴ See Elizabeth Abel's argument, in that 'Recitatif' demonstrates that the interpretation of the reader is influenced by the reader's race and experience: 'Black Writing, White Reading: Race and the Politics of Feminist Interpretation,' *Critical Inquiry* 19.3 (1993), 470-98. David Goldstein-Shirley presents an analysis of Morrison's ambiguous meta-narrative through multiple ideological, linguistic, physical and historical clues: 'Race and Response: Toni Morrison's 'Recitatif'' in *Literature Resource Centre* (Spring 1997), 77-86. Kathryn Nicol explores racial ambiguities and the implication of ideology: *Visible Differences: Viewing Racial Identity in Toni Morrison's Paradise and 'Recitatif'* in *Literature and Racial Ambiguity*, ed. Teresa Hubel and Neil Brooks (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2002), 209-31. Ann Rayson suggests a class-based reading is pertinent: 'Decoding for Race: Toni Morrison's 'Recitatif' and Being White, Teaching Black' in *Changing Representations of Minorities East and West*, ed. Larry E. Smith and John Rieder (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1996), 41-46.

encourages a reading that attempts to understand race beyond the construct of any single character, but rather in the area of contact, what Fred Moten has described as the 'break,' the connecting tissue between, the 'strange[ness]' that Twyla describes in her first meeting with Roberta which connects the void to the whole, the value to identity.¹⁵

Homi Bhabha states that literary blackness is not the 'colonialist Self nor the colonized Other,' but an inscription of 'artifice' on the black body, the 'disturbing distance in-between.'¹⁶ Such a disturbance is apparent in the third character inhabiting the fictional recesses of Morrison's work, haunting Twyla and Roberta's disjointed memories and the unresolved closing frame of the narrative as Roberta cries: 'Oh shit, Twyla. Shit, shit, shit. What the hell happened to Maggie?' ('Recitatif,' 403). Maggie acts as the visual fold, the Barthesian 'turnstile,' simultaneously enveloping and projecting racial signifiers as she forms the embodiment of the social bond that unites Twyla and Roberta, as well as dividing them along unattributed racial lines. Vulnerable and childlike, mute and possibly deaf, with a 'stupid little hat – a kid's hat with ear flaps,' Maggie is assaulted by the 'gar girls' - the older girls at the orphanage – their names forming an ironical play on 'gargoyles,' given to them by Roberta after she mishears the term at a civics class.

¹⁵ Fred Moten, *In the Break. The Aesthetics of the Black Racial Tradition* (London, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 2003).

¹⁶ Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 45.

Morrison echoes the 'Three merry gargoyles. Three merry harridans' in her first novel, *The Bluest Eye* (1970), inciting the connection between the black female body and the prostitute.¹⁷ Yet Morrison plays with this stereotype, describing Maggie as 'sandy-colored' ('Recitatif,' 387), mixed race, she is constructed as a racially unknowable subject, mediating black and white, old and young, just like the recitative structure which mediates between colloquial rhythm and song. Recalling little of her character, Twyla only remembers Maggie's 'legs like parentheses and how she rocked as she walked,' body parts reflecting the 'empty' arms of the branches in the apple orchard through which she awkwardly hurries home, empty spaces waiting for the next lynched victim, 'crooked' like 'beggar women' from a fairy tale – a sliding signifier into visual objects that is fundamentally representational.

Critics such as Elizabeth Abel foreground the metaphorical significance of Maggie's bowed legs, signifying a 'parenthetical absence.'¹⁸ The void between Maggie's legs becomes a framing silence as we follow Twyla and Roberta, persistent in the hope that the narrator will provide some clue to their racial identity as Maggie mediates and frames the memories of their absent mothers: 'Remember Maggie? The day she fell down? Your mother...Did she ever stop dancing? ... And yours? Did she ever get well?'

¹⁷ Toni Morrison, *The Bluest Eye* (London: Vintage, 1999), 47.

¹⁸ Elizabeth Abel, 'Black Writing, White Reading: Race and the Politics of Feminist Interpretation,' *Critical Inquiry* 19.3 (1993), 472.

(‘Recitatif,’ 396, 397). Helene Adams Androne also follows a symbolic connection between Maggie and the mothers of the girls, noting Twyla and Roberta’s recurring need to expose the memories of the ‘absent/ present paradigm of mothering’ while transcending the traumatic memory of Maggie, who represents the ‘archetype of their fears.’¹⁹ I would suggest that Maggie represents performative blackness, what Fred Moten has termed the ‘cut,’ bearing ‘groundedness of an uncontainable outside,’ a broken ‘improvisation’ that is ‘blurred’ and ‘liberatory.’²⁰ She is reduced by the racist synecdoche that takes genital part for whole, her legs forming an ominous doubling of her sexuality. Despite her muteness, Maggie is beyond categorisation, a surplus lyricism with an animated swing to her rocking movement that suggests improvisation, a graphic reproduction that encourages the reader to listen.

Every time the girls rediscover each other, they repeat the same futile questions, but also assimilate themselves into their fears concerning Maggie: the ‘black-white’ (‘Recitatif,’ 396) tensions at the picket line protest transform the image of Maggie from ‘sandy-colored’ into a ‘poor old black lady’ (‘Recitatif,’ 399), just as the memory of Twyla’s mother who never stopped dancing amalgamates into Roberta’s hypothetical vision of her own self, ‘dancing in that orchard,’ a ghost of a hanging body twitching in the trees (‘Recitatif,’ 396). The reader also experiences a cyclical anticipation for

¹⁹ Helene Adams Androne, ‘Revised Memories and Colliding Identities: Absence and Presence in Morrison’s “Recitatif” and Viramontes’s “Tears on My Pillow,”’ *MELUS* 32.2 (Summer 2007), 142.

²⁰ Moten, 2003, 26.

Twyla to slip up and fall, providing some indication of racial confirmation, paralleling Twyla's heart-breaking confession that she wanted Maggie to fall: 'I didn't kick her; I didn't join in with the gar girls...but I sure did want to' ('Recitatif,' 401).

As Twyla hopes that Maggie will trip up, Raengo notes how ultimately, by extension, the reader wants Morrison to blunder, to 'relieve us from our not knowing and attach the racial codes she so liberally employs, to the body, the mind, and the social circumstances to which they belong.'²¹ In the final moments of the text, as Roberta 'covers her face with her palms' ('Recitatif,' 403), we are left with a metaphorical blindness – the characters themselves, whom we do not 'see,' and who fail to 'see' each other, experience the temporary blindness to which the reader is also defiantly exposed. For Morrison's experiment in the 'removal of all racial codes' to be a success, the characters must become subjected to the same unease experienced by the reader, highly apparent as Twyla tries to 'reassure [herself] about the race thing': 'I was puzzled by her telling me Maggie was black. When I thought about it, I actually couldn't be certain. She wasn't pitch-black, I knew, or I would have remembered that' ('Recitatif,' 401). Twyla's narrative memory fails her as she attempts to repress and dismiss the truth, following Mieke Bal's argument that, in 'narratological terms, repression results in ellipsis – the omission of important elements in the narrative,' whereas 'dissociation doubles the strand of the narrative series of events by splitting

²¹ Raengo, 8.

off a sideline.’²² While Twyla represses the traumatic relations and abandonment of her mother, forming an ellipsis, like the series of asterisks in her spray-painted protest sign: ‘AND SO DO CHILDREN ****,’ the memory of Maggie is side-lined, forming the paralepsis of the narrative. Visually unscripted in racial terms, Maggie forms the typographic sign that both unites and divides – the dissociation that refuses to be reincorporated into the narrative, whilst framing the repression that shapes the girls’ memory.

By attempting to solve the riddle of ‘Recitatif’ and locate the polarities of the racial spectrum, critics have inadvertently fallen into the ‘fallacy’ traps outlined by Henry Louis Gates Jr. These pitfalls are twofold: the ‘sociology fallacy’ – ‘that blacks create literature primarily to demonstrate their intellectual equality with whites’ and the ‘anthropology fallacy’ – that ‘all African art is collective and functional.’²³ In their attempt to locate Maggie’s blackness, critics read racial codes as representations of identity, reproducing the same ‘choked’ presence that conflates ‘face’ with ‘value,’ however simulacral. Even when the body remains unseen or voided, there is an overpowering desire to fix the value onto a signifier that is implicitly corporeal. Alternatively, I believe Morrison’s intention is that we challenge the notion of race as a bodily attribute, rather than refining the text for the possibility of racial attribution

²² Mieke Bal, Introduction, in *Acts of Memory: Cultural Recall in the Present*, ed. Mieke Bal, Jonathan Crewe and Leo Spitzer (Hanover: University Press of New England, 1999), ix.

²³ Henry Louis Gates Jr., *Black Literature and Literary Theory Today* (London: Methuen, 1984), 5.

where 'black' and 'white' are conciliated. Returning to Barthes' exploration of cultural space that states that meaning and form are never at the same place:

In the same way, if I am in a car and I look at the scenery through the window, I can at will focus on the scenery or on the window-pane. At one moment I grasp the presence of the glass and the distance of the landscape; at another, on the contrary, the transparency of the glass and the depth of the landscape, but the result of this alternation is constant: the glass is at once present and empty to me and the landscape unreal and full.²⁴

Morrison creates such a structure through a complex interplay of racial signifiers so that we never have an unobstructed view of the characters. Her fishbowl, like the window-pane, is exposed, so that the glass-like form is invisible yet present, its meaning absent yet clear. The depth of the racialised cultural landscape is simultaneously manifest and unreal, connecting readers and characters in a narrative that exposes how we invest the space in-between with a corporeal presence. While Maggie's textual blackness renders her the colonised Other, Morrison declines to make her, what Abel has termed, a 'figure of racial undecidability.'²⁵ Instead, she has used this undecidability to create a figure – a figure with a substantial presence that occupies the space in between, that interrupts and reconciles the turnstile of form and meaning. Maggie is a figure of substantial presence, a body contained by her semi-circular legs which cannot compare to anybody around her. She is not only a mute woman, but she also mutes terms, failing to assimilate and failing to yield. She

²⁴ Barthes, 2000, 123-124.

²⁵ Abel, 472.

becomes the space between song and ordinary speech, the *recitative* opera, a hole that speaks of 'lack, division and incompleteness' that, in turn, highlights the 'fictive, problematically restrictive completeness [of] wholeness'.²⁶ I would argue that, through the character of Maggie, Morrison exposes the connection between interiority and surface, in a narrative that articulates a different kind of lyricism, a collision of signifiers that improvises and augments the performative nature of blackness.

²⁶ Moten, 2003, 173.

**SORROW AND THE SABLE VENUS – THE BLACK WOMAN IN THE WHITE,
MASCULINIST IMAGINATION**

How can you confuse
finesse with obedience,
discretion with ignorance,
tenderness with submission,
seductiveness with prostitution,
woman with weakness?²⁷

In all of Morrison's literature, there is a move to interrupt the culturally entrenched imagery sutured onto the black female body. In the white, masculinist imagination, responses to black sexuality have remained linear, established long before Bartmann set foot on European soil. During the Middle Ages, between 1119 and 1142, religious scholar Peter Abelard wrote to his beloved of the *Song of Songs*: 'The bride of Canticles, an Ethiopian, rejoices: "I am black but comely" ...she did well to say that because she is black and lovely therefore chosen and taken to the king's bed chamber...to that secret place...such a wife prefers hidden pleasures.' Abelard continues: 'Besides, it so happens that the skin of black women, less agreeable to the gaze, is softer to touch and the pleasures one derives from their love are more delicious and delightful.'²⁸ The sexualised narrative projected onto black women, from medieval descriptions of

²⁷ Toni Morrison's *Desdemona* is a dramatic work created in collaboration with director Peter Sellars and musician Rokia Traore. In Morrison's play, she recreates the tragic figure of Desdemona from Shakespeare's *Othello*, focussing not on her death, but on her afterlife, as she speaks from beyond the grave. Her main relationship is with her African nurse, *Desdemona* (London: Oberon Books, 2011), 16.

²⁸ Abelard, *Les Lettres completes*, fifth letter, 87, 89-90, in T. Denean Sharpley-Whiting, *Sexualized Savages, Primal Fears, and Primitive Narratives in French* (Durham, US: Duke University Press, 1999), 1.

Africa, to the sixteenth century reflections such as that of Jonathan Swift, create a historical legacy of lubricious, venal black female muses.²⁹ Charles Darwin appraised black female bodies as comic signs of inferiority,³⁰ while Freud notably presented an analogy between female sexuality in general and the 'dark continent.'³¹

If blackness and its myriad explications consumed men from the Middle Ages through to the Renaissance, the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries preceding Bartmann's exhibition developed the narrative of African women as 'hot constitutioned ladies' with 'lascivious' appetites, naturalising racial difference and sexual proclivities.³² Black female sexuality shaped the commerce and trade of African bodies through constructions of their ample, fertile and agile bodies, 'fitted... for both productive and reproductive labour.'³³ Paula Giddings notes that 'a master could save the cost of

²⁹ See, for example, Jonathan Swift's verse: 'Geographers in Afric-Maps/ With Savage-Pictures fill their Gaps/ And o'er inhabitable Downs/ Place Elephants for want of towns,' quoted in Philip D. Curtin, *The Image of Africa. British ideas and Action 1780-1850, I* (London: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1964), 198.

³⁰ See Charles Darwin's argument, titled 'Attention paid by savages to ornaments – Their ideas of beauty in women.' Darwin notes that while a woman's face, to a European, is 'chiefly admired for its beauty, so with savages it is the chief seat of mutilation,' the women of Central Africa, for example, 'perforate the lower lip and wear a crystal, which, from the movement of the tongue, has 'a wriggling motion, indescribably ludicrous during conversation': Charles Darwin, 'Chapter XIX: Part III. Sexual Selection,' *The Descent of Man, and Selection in relation to Sex*, 556-585 (New York: D Appleton and Company, 1878), 576.

³¹ Sigmund Freud argues that we 'need not feel ashamed' about our lack of knowledge of female sexuality, metaphorizing women as the 'dark continent', a fetishised metaphor of the unknown defined as a lack of a sexual organ: 'The Question of Lay Analysis' (1926) *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, Volume XX (1925-1926): An Autobiographical Study, Inhibitions, Symptoms and Anxiety, The Question of Lay Analysis and Other Works*, trans. James Strachey (London: Norton, 1969), 219.

³² Hobson, 2005, 25.

³³ Jennifer L. Morgan, "'Some could suckle over their Shoulder': Male Travelers, Female Bodies and the Gendering of Racial Ideology, 1500-1700,' *William and Mary Quarterly* 54 (1997), 185.

buying a new slave by impregnating his own slave, or, for that matter, having anyone impregnate her.’³⁴ Thus, black female hypersexuality ensured a steady flow of supply and demand, procreating a diverse class of *gens du couleur*, often characterised in such scientific terms as ‘mulattos,’ ‘quadroons’ or ‘octoroons,’ reflecting the degree of blackness with each future ‘whitened’ generation. Colonial writers fundamentally perceived the black woman as a contradiction in terms - traditional thought associated blackness with monstrosity, savagery, and lasciviousness, while womanhood stood for beauty, civilization, and chastity. Therefore, African woman always embodies uncomfortable oppositions - the conflicting repulsion and attraction for the racial Other.³⁵

Bryan Edwards’s 1794 history of the West Indies conveys the paradox of black female sexuality, fetishising the black body in a pseudo-scientific naturalism. Edwards’s narrative considers the case of mulatto bodies, characterising a mixed race Jamaican woman as the ‘Sable Venus.’ By labelling her poetically as ‘Venus,’ Edwards conveys the possibility of European beauty within black epidermis, a degree of whiteness in

³⁴ Paula Giddings, *When and Where I Enter. The Impact of Black Women on Race and Sex in America* (New York: Quill William Morrow, 1984), 37.

³⁵ Sander Gilman explains how blackness is simultaneously desirable and pathologised in *Difference and Pathology: Stereotypes of Sexuality, Race, and Madness* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1985), 76-127. Robert J. C. Young argues that a polarity of attraction and repulsion seems integral to racism and that Africans especially evoke this reaction in *Colonial Desire: Hybridity in Theory, Culture, and Race* (London and New York: Routledge, 1995), 90-117. T. Sharpley-Whiting has produced an in-depth study of the primal fear and attraction evoked by black women in *Black Venus: Sexualized Savages, Primal Fears, and Primitive Narratives in French* (Durham NC: Duke University Press, 1999), 1-15.

her mixed heritage that allows for the possibility of worship. The first edition of Edwards' text includes a poem by Isaac Teale, an Anglican clergyman whom Edwards's uncle had employed to tutor his nephew, drawing implicit analogies between the Sable Venus and the portrait by Botticelli:

The loveliest limbs her form compose
Such as her sister Venus chose,
In Florence where she's seen;
Both just alike, except the white,
No difference, no – none at night
The beauteous dames between
(Edwards, 1801, 34-5).

'The Sable Venus. An Ode' requires in-depth analysis because it is only beginning to receive critical attention, initially published anonymously before utilised by Edwards.³⁶ The text opens with a poetic persona recounting a trip to Mount Helicon, where, in addition to Apollo and the nine muses, the male speaker finds the 'sable queen of love,' and asks for a song in her honour.³⁷ The narrative that follows conveys the Venus' fantastical voyage from Angola to Jamaica in a chariot, adorned with precious materials, drawn by flying fish and accompanied by a host of sea creatures. Significantly, the poet recounts how the goddess incites passion in all who see her, including the god Neptune, by whom she bears a child resembling Cupid.

³⁶ Barbara Bush discusses the poem and the stereotype of the black woman as erotic fantasy; she places this representation alongside two other pervasive stereotypes: the violent rebel and the passive, asexual labourer; see "'Sable Venus," "She Devil," or "Drudge?" British Slavery and the "Fabulous Fiction" of Black Women's Identities, c. 1650-1838,' *Women's History Review* 9.4 (December 2000).

³⁷ Edwards, 1794, stanza 2 line 4.

The Ode's reversal of racial strata, celebrating African beauty, has received varying responses, dependent on whether the reader views the text as sincere or facetious. Regulus Allen has compared the introductions of two recent anthologies of slave poetry to highlight this point: in James G. Basker's *Amazing Grace: An Anthology of Poems about Slavery, 1660-1810*, the introductory notes state: 'If the poem is to be believed' it forms 'an ardent admir[ation] of black beauty' comparing 'black women favourably with white beauties.'³⁸ On the other hand, Marcus Wood prefaces the poem with the overt statement: 'this is a nasty piece of work.'³⁹ Wood reads the ode as a parody, asserting that it 'ironically celebrates the delights of interracial sex between sailors and black women on the middle passage (slave rape) and then of slave owners and black women within the Caribbean (slave rape, and slave prostitution).' In a similar vein to the literature surrounding the Hottentot Venus, the text presents the dual potential to simultaneously celebrate and disparage, shaping black female sexuality by the complexity of identification as much as it is determined by the force of representation.

³⁸ James G. Basker, headnote to 'From The Sable Venus: An Ode (c. 1760 1763),' in *Amazing Grace: An Anthology of Poems about Slavery, 1660-1810* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2002), 146.

³⁹ Marcus Wood, headnote to Isaac Teale, *The Voyage of the Sable Venus, from Angola to the West Indies* (1765), first printed in Bryan Edwards, *The History, Civil and Commercial, of the British Colonies in the West Indies* [1793], in *The Poetry of Slavery: An Anglo-American Anthology* [1764-1865] (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 30-31.

The second volume of the third edition of Edward's history, published in 1801, also includes an image by Thomas Stothard, Esquire, of the Royal Academy, titled 'The Voyage of the Sable Venus from Angola to the West Indies.'⁴⁰ Problematizing blood discourses, the portrait is a complicated manifestation of a cultural narrative. Perhaps a warning against white men who might be enslaved by their conquering Venuses, Jenny Sharpe suggests that the portrait is, instead, a narrative of anti-conquest that 'eliminates the violence of slavery from the picture,' a triumphant Sable Venus holding the reins to her own voyage across the Atlantic, instead of journeying in the cargo hold of a slave ship.⁴¹ Hugh Honour, in a similar stance, states: 'No more preposterous misinterpretation was ever perpetrated of the Middle Passage,' the main premise being the 'physical charm of the black woman.'⁴² An interracial encounter, whether to warn against the destabilisation of white supremacy, or to indulge the fantasy of racial mixing, continued to mask the exploitative act of slavery and other systems of servitude and sexual assault whilst reinforcing a sexualised representation.

In Stothard's image, there is a wealth of classical detail, void of African gods and goddesses. The figure of the black Venus stands in contrast to the eleven white figures,

⁴⁰ Figure 3, Thomas Stothard, *The Voyage of the Sable Venus, from Angola to the West Indies*, in Bryan Edwards, *The History, Civil and Commerce, of the British Colonies of the West Indies II* (London, 1794), facing 27.

⁴¹ Jenny Sharpe, *Ghosts of Slavery: A Literary Archaeology of Black Women's Lives* (Minneapolis: University of Missouri Press, 2003), 49.

⁴² Hugh Honour and Jean Vercoutter, *The Image of the Black in Western Art* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989), 33.

riding in a scallop shell and sitting on a velvet throne. Six cherubs adorn the sky while two fan the Sable Venus with ostrich plumes and peacock feathers. In the sea, two dolphins pull the scallop shell, while to the right, Triton blows on a horn. On the left, Cupid draws a bow and aims an arrow at Neptune, who holds a flag of the Union Jack in place of his trident. The Shakespearean influence is clear, recalling Enobarbus' recollection of Cleopatra and the dangers of the exotic Other:

The barge she sat in, like a burnish'd throne,
 Burned on the water: the poop was beaten gold;
 Purple the sails, and so perfumed that
 The winds were lovesick with them...
 It beggar'd all description: she did lie
 In her pavilion, cloth-of-gold of tissue,
 O'erpicturing that Venus where we see
 The fancy outwork nature: on each side of her
 Stood pretty dimpled boys, like smiling Cupids,
 With divers-colour'd fans, whose wind did seem
 To glow the delicate cheeks which they did cool,
 And what they undid did.

Her gentlewomen, like the Nereides,
 So many mermaids, tended her i' th' eyes,
 And made their bends adornings. At the helm
 A seeming mermaid steers: the silken tackle
 Swell with the touches of those flower-soft hands
 That yarely frame the office. From the barge
 A strange invisible perfume hits the sense
 Of the adjacent wharfs. The city cast
 Her people out upon her; and Antony,
 Enthroned i' th' marketplace, did sit alone,
 Whistling to th' air; which, but for vacancy,
 Had gone to gaze on Cleopatra too,
 And made a gap in nature.⁴³

⁴³ William Shakespeare, *Antony and Cleopatra*, ed. Ania Loomba (London: Norton Critical Editions, 2013), Act 2.2.233-262.

An image of mythological amplification, Enobarbus elevates the 'strumpet' to a goddess, as Stothard glorifies and simultaneously represses the enormity of the slave trade, revealing as it conceals, what Henry Louis Jr. Gates calls 'the projection of fantasies from its collective unconscious.'⁴⁴ Britain is left waving the flag just as Neptune rules the waves and Rome quells the threat of Egypt. The chains become pearl bracelets and the slavers whip a set of reins, normalising and idealising the slave trade. Forming a crude contrast to William Blake's 1799 engraving, *Flagellation of a Female Samboe Slave*,⁴⁵ or George Cruikshank's 1792 ironical engraving, whereby a fifteen year old slave girl is hung upside down by a hook and punished for maintaining her modesty, nudity and illicit sexuality cling to the victimised slave in the same way that they cling to the Black Venus.⁴⁶ The images bear, in Moten's words, 'the lineaments not only of the most abhorrent and horrific deprivations and violations but also of the most glorious modes of freedom and justice.'⁴⁷ It presents an entry into subjecthood which, reconfigured as a 'loss,' also presents an 'augmentation' against the backdrop of racial-historical that determines language and subjectivity.

⁴⁴ Henry Louis Jr. Gates, *Wonders of the African World* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1999), 16-17.

⁴⁵ Figure 4, William Blake, *Flagellation of A Female Samboe Slave*, after J. G. Stedman, for J. G. Stedman, *Narrative of a Five Years Expedition, Against the Revolted Negroes of Surinam*, 1796.

⁴⁶ Figure 5, George Cruikshank, 'The abolition of the slave trade, or the inhumanity of dealers in human flesh exemplified in Captain Kimber's treatment of a young Negro girl of 15 for her virjen (sic) modesty' (London: S.W. Fores, 1792), Courtesy of the Library of Congress.

⁴⁷ Moten, 2003, 178.

Associated with Venus, the goddess of carnality, I would argue that the black female body is rendered a sexual commodity that inspires destructive carnality and lust. Whether presented as the beautiful or the bizarre, the figure of the Black Venus is a racialised subject measured against European standards of beauty, equating the fairest with the whitest.⁴⁸ A black figure can therefore never fully embody the ideal, as 'blackness' and 'beauty' form a paradox. If the Sable Venus presents subjectivity, formed, and endowed with the double encounter (discovery and expulsion, desire and revolution), it is a subjectivity that is determined to be false, where 'fairness' is absent, a 'gap in nature' according to Shakespeare's Enobarbus, 'strange' and 'invisible'. With such representations amid revolutionary changes, it is little wonder that the Hottentot Venus emerged in 1810, only three years after the international slave trade was banned and six years after Haiti formed as the first independent black nation, calming the anxieties of the white supremacist nation. Placing her on a sideshow pedestal, Bartmann's body justified colonial expansion into Africa, dependent on the reproductive abilities of enslaved women, and on the theoretical presentations of real and imagined Venuses.

⁴⁸ Kim F. Hall locates the earliest usages of 'fair' as a term of complexion and hair colour in the late sixteenth century, which coincides with England's entry into the Atlantic slave trade; she argues that it was constructed in opposition to the 'dark' appearance and morality that Europeans associated with the colonial Other, in *Things of Darkness: Economies of Race and Gender in Early Modern England* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1995).

IMAGES THAT CLING

A Mercy (2008) is Morrison's first novel after *Beloved* (1987) that deals explicitly with the experience of the Middle Passage and the history of slavery in the New World. Set between 1682 and 1690, *A Mercy* narrates a period that was chaotic and untamed, resembling the haunting and persistent presence of racial slavery that troubles the inhabitants of 124 in *Beloved*. Morrison's characters relate a reality in which different types of human bondage, such as slavery and white indentureship, co-existed. Morrison exemplifies the power of early American studies to 'correct the powerfully idealising image of colonial encounter.'⁴⁹ In contrast to the culturally familiar fiction of early America as an uninhabited New World ripe for the taking, as fictitious as the Sable Venus dancing across the Atlantic, *A Mercy* presents the disordered world created by European colonisation in a dystopian register. Through the genre of neo-slave narratives in their original form, Morrison uses the unlikely grouping of a bought British wife, a Native American housekeeper, an Angolan slave and a slow-witted and shipwrecked orphan to provide defiant ways to challenge and subvert the prevailing supremacy of chattel slavery and the traumatising and debilitating effects of racial subjugation. Morrison reflects experiences of displacement, sexual abuse and

⁴⁹ Sandra M. Gustafson and Gordon Hutner, 'Projecting Early American Literary Studies,' *American Literary History* 22.2 (2010), 249.

spectacle, questioning whether human deviance can become human difference, using the echo of Bartmann and the Sable Venus to reshape and redirect the gaze.

Just as Sethe mourns the loss of Beloved, *A Mercy* begins with the hardships of slave motherhood and the suffering caused by the separation of slave families. Florens watches as her mother begs Sir: 'Take the girl, she says, my daughter,' her eyes worrying at 'mothers nursing greedy babies' sired by white masters, eyes that see 'people look closely,' yet with no 'connection...across distances without recognition.'⁵⁰ Beyond the commercial incentive of slave reproduction, Moten argues that the enslaved labourer, within the 'field of exchange,' is a commodity, and that act of commodification is the 'effect of reproduction, a trace of maternity.' Moten argues that 'personhood' can be located within the 'commodity's animation by the material trace of the maternal – a palpable hit or touch, a bodily and visible phonographic inscription.'⁵¹ Like Moten, I am interested in the act of transference at the point where the maternal figure is lost, where 'bondage and freedom are joined,' rendering black performance a productive force.⁵²

In *A Mercy*, Morrison animates the slave commodity, narrating the act of transference from the maternal to the material, echoing Bartmann's spectacle as she directs the

⁵⁰ Toni Morrison, *A Mercy* (London: Chatto and Windus, 2008), 110.

⁵¹ Moten, 2003, 17-18.

⁵² *Ibid*, 18.

reader towards the inscriptive nature of black performance. Florens suffers perverse exploratory examinations and religious persecution at the hands of the Reverend and Daughter Jane - 'Jane' forming a subtle echo of the white idealism of the stories of Dick and Jane running through *The Bluest Eye*:

He retries his stick, points it at me saying who be this?...She is Afric. Afric and much more...they tell me to take off my clothes. Without touching they tell me what to do. To show them my teeth, my tongue. They frown at the candle burn on my palm the one you kissed to cool. They look under my arms, between my legs. They circle me, lean down to inspect my feet. Naked under their examination I watch for what is in their eyes...but they are looking at me my body across distances without recognition (*A Mercy*, 100).

Florens' objectifying and dehumanising encounter reveals her as the socially constructed body, suffering the implications of the gaze, and the natural, phenomenological body with skin that burns and wounds that bleed, her flesh 'torn to ribbons' to check that she is not a devil. Igor Kopytoff has argued that the slave is a commodity form that needs to perfect its structure of embodiment, in so far as the slave is the commodity with a biography, a composite construct where the human and the commodity coexist in an irresolvable tension.⁵³ Florens' treatment reverberates in the absolute disconnection between her persecutors and her sense of self. Effaced and nullified due to her blackness, her captors fail to see her personhood, confused by the burn on her palm, a burn that carries the memories of skin. Her body represents the

⁵³ Igor Kopytoff, 'The Cultural Biography of Things: Commoditization as Process,' in *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective*, ed. Arjun Appadurai (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 12-16.

material animated, what Moten has termed ‘animateriality,’ her burnt skin forming a passionate utterance, despite her silence, that resides in the ‘traces of black performance.’⁵⁴

In the exposition, Florens’ recollections reveal structures of embodiment, framed by the figures of Willard and Scully, the white indentured servants, distinguished from the black slaves on the plantation. They are presented as a unit, as both ‘were Europes, after all’ (*A Mercy*, 55). Willard is distinguished by age, ‘getting on in years and was still working off his passage’ even though the ‘original seven stretched to twenty some.’ Scully is described as ‘young, fine-boned, with light scars tracing his back,’ boasting that his enslavement would ‘end before death’ (*A Mercy*, 55), scars that connect with Florens’ ribboned flesh. Juxtaposing the light-skinned men with the mulatto Sorrow, the syrup-coloured Lina and the dark skin of Florens, mobilises multiple and competing forms of racial indexicality.⁵⁵ Paralleling the flag held by the Sable Venus, or the apron of the Hottentot, the ‘wildness’ of Florens performs as an indexical trace of the property structure of slavery. Her slave hands and feet in borrowed shoes, ‘throwaway’ from Senhora’s house, ‘pointing-toe, one raised heel broken, the other worn and a buckle on top’ indicate a fundamentally social semiotic

⁵⁴ Moten, 2003, 18.

⁵⁵ In this context, I am using Roland Barthes concept of the ‘reality effect,’ describing the collision of a referent and a signifier at the expense of the signified from the sign. Barthes, 1982, 34. Alessandro Raengo argues that Barthes’ notions of ‘indexicality, materiality, and embodiment, as well as movement and stillness, life and death’ can also extend to ‘race and blackness’ as well. 2013, 13.

process. Feet that would always be 'useless' (*A Mercy*, 4), too tender for the life of a slave and too weak to carry her from her captivity duplicate and compound the indexicality of her blackness.

The whiteness of the 'Europes,' however, does not bear the trace of their racial indexicality. Instead, their whiteness is indexed as an asset, a colour capital and a property, which grounds a claim to something other than captivity. They are afforded privileges that are denied to most of the women, gleaning a form of family from the members of the plantation 'because they had carved companionship out of isolation' (*A Mercy*, 156). They are given a presence and a voice, as well as the penetrating objectification of the white gaze. Scully, watching Lina cook, boiling apples in water, 'their skin near to breaking...cooling before mashed into sauce' (*A Mercy*, 143), testifies to the intrinsic violence of capitalist exchange, a fragile materiality that Morrison would explode. The black slaves cannot exchange, circulate and move the way that the light-skinned servants can, reflecting on the notion of face value from the point of view of the political economy of the racial sign.

Consumed like the commodity of the apples, Scully reminisces over the hours he spent 'secretly watching [Lina's] river baths. Unfettered glimpses of her buttocks, that waist, those syrup-coloured breasts...uncovered female hair, aggressive, seductive, black as witchcraft. Seeing its wet cling and sway on her back was a quiet joy' (*A Mercy*, 143).

Lina's body, like the Sable Venus, becomes both the vehicle and signifier of exchange, the same dynamic as that highlighted by the emancipated Sojourner Truth: 'I sell the shadow to support the substance.'⁵⁶ Lina's image is rendered the object of financial exchange, in place of the substance, the fantasy instead of the real, which, in Lina's case, is still for sale. Lina's face commands reality, conveyed through the voice of Rebekka when considering faces that blur, sometimes hover and then leave: 'her daughter; the sailor who helped carry her boxes and tighten their straps; a man on the gallows. No, this face was real. She recognised he dark anxious eyes, the tawny skin' (*A Mercy*, 71). Like the imbrication of race, the way that 'blood is sticky,' Scully's fantasy stages the scenarios of both desired and failed exchange. Just as Lina's body is a commodity, so too is Scully's as an indentured worker, rendered a worth in terms of years of labour. Morrison warns of the punishment for overreaching and attempting to participate in the capitalist exchange would render Scully the victim of the gallows, like the apples that Lina boils, their skins about to 'burst'.

Lina represents the instability of national history, the multiple and intersecting axes of identity 'without a clan and under Europe's rule' (*A Mercy*, 102). Her voice carries the legacy of the Sable Venus, 'Something old,' yet 'cutting' illuminated by the 'brightness of the stars [and] moon glow,' yet despite the poeticism, Lina suffers the

⁵⁶ Sojourner Truth, *The Narrative of Sojourner Truth, Including "Ain't I a Woman?" Momentous Speech* (London: Musaicum Books, 2018), 1.

real and brutal consequences of being 'subject to purchase, hire, assault, abduction, exile' (*A Mercy*, 56). Beaten with the 'flat of [a] hand,' 'a fist and then a whip,' Lina knows what it is 'to walk town lanes wiping blood from her nose with her fingers, that because her eyes are closing she stumbles and people believe she is in liquor like so many natives and tell her so...like a dog' (*A Mercy*, 102-3). Blame is projected onto Lina as victim, debased to an animal like status, echoing the recollection of Sorrow in the earlier lines: 'I am in truth a lamb' (*A Mercy*, 100). Starving and alone, Sorrow is given water by Native Americans: 'I hear hoofbeats...All male, all native all young...They rein in close. They circle. They smile. I am shaking...He steps closer and pours the water as I gulp it. One of the others say baa baa baa like a goat kid and they all laugh and slap their legs' (*A Mercy*, 100-101).

Despite the communal act, the parody of transubstantiation, Sorrow is an outsider. Like the fallen son, she is exiled. A perverse form of the Sable Venus, Sorrow is 'mongrelized' (*A Mercy*, 116), victimised for her racial trace, her children further whitened by the 'housewife's husband,' traumatising and exiling her further: 'Sir made the girl sleep by the fireplace all seasons. A comfort Lina was suspicious of' (*A Mercy*, 52). A mulatto herself, born of the 'Captain' of the ship who died when his ship foundered, Sorrow keeps her real name secret, a slave's duality: 'Twin couldn't be seen by anyone else...she would quit any chore and follow her identical self' (*A Mercy*, 115). Stothard's image of cherubim and dolphins give way to Sorrow's own memory

of the ship: The only home she knew...bales of cloth, chests of opium, crates of ammunition horses and barrels of molasses...After searching for survivors and food... nights listening to the cold wind and the lapping sea, Twin joined her under the hammock and they have been together ever since (*A Mercy*, 115). After telling the miller's wife that she came to land by 'mermaids,' echoing the classical allusions of the 'Ode to the Sable Venus,' Sorrow is set to work, though her 'feet fought with the distressing gravity of the land,' stumbling and tripping, flailing like those who drowned and sank to the bottom of the ocean. While Mistress's lost children are delivered to the 'bottom of the rise behind the house,' grounded, representing her status as unindentured, Sorrow's unnamed baby is wrapped 'in a piece of sacking and set a-sail in the widest part of the stream and far below the beavers' dam' (*A Mercy*, 121).

Three years later, Morrison gives Sorrow's voice further credence, uttered through her version of Desdemona in her revisioning of Shakespeare's *Othello*:

Did you imagine me as a wisp of a girl?
 A coddled doll who fell in love with a
 handsome warrior who rode off with her under his arm?
 ...Is it true my earth life held sorrow. Yet
 none of it, not one moment was 'misery.'
 Difficulty, yes. Confusion, yes. Error in
 judgement, yet. Murder, yes. But it was my
 life...shaped by my own choices and it was mine
 (*Desdemona*, 2011, 16).

Complicating the myth of the Sable Venus and her Cupidlike son, sired by a God, Morrison recovers and reimagines the lost, marginalised and hidden histories, stories of rape and oppression, complicating the discourses of slave oppression with a baby that Sorrow would never forget: 'breathing water every day, every night, down all the streams of the world' (*A Mercy*, 122). Beyond a 'wisp of a girl', a life that 'held sorrow,' Sorrow reclaims agency, her own 'life,' shaped by her 'own choices' (*Desdemona*, 16). Unlike Shakespeare's Egyptian Queen, a theatrical mask hiding the face of a young boy, we are not simply left with tragedy, as Sorrow, through Des-demon-a, confronts her 'demons,' reconciling the past with the present.

SECRET BODIES, SECRET COMMERCE, IN GOD HELP THE CHILD

When considering indentured and commodified bodies like those of Sorrow, Lina and Florens, Ian Baucom claims, in *Spectators of the Atlantic: Finance Capital, Slavery and the Philosophy of History*, that the money form of the social sphere was licensed and generalised by the transatlantic slave trade. Baucom argues that we have to regard the moment of finance capital of the British cycle of capital accumulation concomitant with the slave trade (1750-1825), not only as central to Black Atlantic history, but also to the 'history of modern capital, ethics, and time consciousness' and continuous with our highly financial present.⁵⁷ Considering the fabricated nature of the literature circulating the *Sable Venus*, it is possible to see the commercialisation of the social sphere demonstrated through the stark and adverse reality, such as in the events and discourses surrounding the 1781 *Zong* massacre, where the ship's captain threw overboard one hundred and thirty three slaves, supposedly to save the ship and cargo. Because the judge solely determined Captain Collingwood's compliance with the jettison clause in the insurance contract covering the ship and its cargo - a property dispute, rather than a murder case - the *Zong* Massacre formed a monumental part of abolitionist efforts.

⁵⁷ Ian Baucom, *Specters of the Atlantic: Finance Capital, Slavery and the Philosophy of History* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005), 31.

As an insurance pay out, the deaths of the slaves hurried their conversion into money, an epistemological revolution underwriting the black body as an insurable commodity whose value was the product of an agreement preceding the moment of exchange. Reducing the classical allusions of the Sable Venus to an extension of the logic of paper money, Baucom argues that slavery encompassed 'commodity capitalism into the domain of the human' and also 'the colonisation of human subjectivity by finance capital.'⁵⁸ Ultimately, the slave occupied the body that mirrored a socially agreed value, thus bolting the history of visuality onto the history of capital. In this milieu, the slave's blackness came to function not only, and quite intuitively, as a signifier of difference, but also as a means of exchange.

In 2015, Morrison published what would be her last novel, *God Help the Child*, about a girl rejected and abused due to the colour of her skin. Bride's character has distant connections with the women in *A Mercy*, forming a modern depiction of a young African American woman who still experiences the struggles of race and the implications of bondage that Florens and Sorrow suffer. Written at the end of her literary career, *God Help the Child* demonstrates how Morrison was still grappling with colourism,⁵⁹ the premise of her first novel, *The Bluest Eye* (1970), the book she has said

⁵⁸ Baucom, 31.

⁵⁹ Colorism relates to the dominance of Eurocentric beauty myths attributed to white supremacy, and the rigid notions gender pertaining to race and complexion. Alice Walker defined colorism as 'prejudicial or preferential treatment of same-race people based solely on their color.' *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens: Womanist Prose* (New York: Harcourt Inc., 1983), 290.

she 'wanted to read and that did not exist.'⁶⁰ Morrison gives voice to the story of Pecola Breedlove, a young black girl who prays for blue eyes, noting in the afterword that she wanted to focus 'on how something as grotesque as the demonization of an entire race could take root inside the most delicate member of society: a child; the most vulnerable member: a female.'⁶¹ In an interview with Terry Gross, Morrison defined 'colourism' as a 'substitute for racism,' a type of 'social construct' that gives privileges to some over and above others:

Distinguishing color – light, black, in between – as the marker for race is really an error: It's socially constructed, it's culturally enforced and it has some advantages for certain people...But this is really skin privilege – the ranking of color in terms of its closeness to white people or white-skinned people and its devaluation according to how dark one is and the impact that has on people who are dedicated to the privileges of certain levels of skin color.⁶²

Criticising the same institution that would render the Sable Venus the sentimentalised Other, the erotic in contrast to the savage, Morrison has often responded to the political and ethical consequences of the reification of beauty, evident in her essay, 'Beyond the Making of *The Black Book*:'

I remember a white man saying to me that the killing of so many Vietnamese people was 'of course wrong, but worse was the fact that they are so beautiful.' I don't know if there is a white mind; if there is – this is it. *Too bad such beautiful people had to die.* A mere question of aesthetics!... Physical beauty has nothing to do with our past, present, or

⁶⁰ David Remnick, 'Toni Morrison talks with Hilton Als, 2015,' *The New Yorker Radio Hour* (6 August 2019), <<https://www.wnycstudios.org/podcasts/tnyradiohour/articles/toni-morrison-talks-hilton-als-pod>> (accessed 9/9/19).

⁶¹ Toni Morrison, *The Bluest Eye* (London: Vintage, 1999), 206.

⁶² Terry Gross, "'I regret Everything:" Toni Morrison looks back on her personal life,' *NPR* (April 2015), <<https://www.npr.org/2015/04/20/400394947/i-regret-everything-toni-morrison-looks-back-on-her-personal-life>> (accessed 8/9/2018).

future. Its absences or presence was only important to them, the white people who used it for anything they wanted – but it never stopped them from annihilating anybody.⁶³

God Help the Child, published at a time when the world was still reeling from the deaths of Michael Brown and Eric Garner at the hands of police officers, represents a figure of difference through the character of Bride, grappling with a society that Morrison argues was still feeling the consequences of ‘the vile and violent, the bestial treatment of slaves.’⁶⁴ Morrison continues to debate the notion of ‘privilege’ attached to skin colour, depicting Bride as the very image of professional and personal success. However, her existence is determined as ‘real’ only by the series of mishaps that cause her to question her self-constructed identity and to address her past. Like *A Mercy* and *Beloved*, Morrison utilises a revelatory structure, beginning at a later moment in the diegetic chronology, following a lineal timeline whilst simultaneously making excursions into the past that illuminate the character’s tragedy. Her ‘real’ existence is revealed as being determined by a constructed series of social rules and interactions, particularly her troubling relationship with her mother and her boyfriend Booker. Though Bride is born into a world long after the abolition of slavery, value is still racialised in her skin, a value that has become embodied, sensorially and aesthetically tangible, as visible on the surface.

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ Remnick, 2015.

From the exposition, Bride's value is established by her racial indexicality, the form of her blackness, as Sweetness, Bride's mother, reflects that '[s]he was so black she scared me. Midnight black, Sudanese black.'⁶⁵ Much of what made New World slavery exceptional was the highly identifiable racial signs of its population. Racialised epidermis, primarily but not exclusively, impeded the ability of subsequent generations to merge into the non-slave population. As Morrison argues in her essay, 'The Slavebody and the Blackbody':

For them there was virtually no chance to hide, disguise or elude former slave status, for a marked visibility enforced the division between former slave and nonslave (although history defies the distinction) and supported racial hierarchy. The ease, therefore, of moving from the dishonour associated with the slavebody to the contempt in which the freed black body was held became almost seamless because the intervening years of the Enlightenment saw a marriage of aesthetics and science and a move toward transcendent whiteness.⁶⁶

As the slavebody disappeared, the blackbody remained, forming a synonym for the criminal, the bestial and the Other. Bride's mother reveals the cultural anxieties surrounding the signification of her blackness: 'you might think she is a throwback,' 'blue-black' (*God Help the Child*, 3, 5). Sweetness' 'light-[skin], with good hair, what [is] called light yellow' (*God Help the Child*, 3) has improved her cultural reception and social standing, losing the racial 'cross' that her daughter must carry. Bride, Sweetness

⁶⁵ Toni Morrison, *God Help the Child* (London: Chatto and Windus, 2015), 3.

⁶⁶ Toni Morrison, 'The Slavebody and the Blackbody' (2000) in *The Source of Self-Regard: Selected Essays, Speeches, and Meditations* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2019), 75.

and their relationship are codified in strictly racial terms, determining value by a mode of visibility – a socially agreed maternal value. For Moten, the reduction of difference and the reduction of the maternal coincide, arguing that the ‘trace’ of the commodity is ‘inseparable from its fetish-character.’ To cut through the trace, a ‘violently imposed transparency,’ requires ‘another rationality, another enlightenment.’ Moten suggests that such vision would enable us to see through to the ‘origins,’ the ‘delusional – maternal appearance of money,’ the ‘anti-maternal.’⁶⁷ Sweetness interanimates the maternal and material: ‘It didn’t take more than an hour after they pulled her out from between my legs to realise something was wrong’ (*God Help the Child*, 3), contemplating abandoning Bride ‘on the church steps’ or ‘giving her away to an orphanage someplace’ (*God Help the Child*, 5), reducing the product of her labour to a non-value, an irrationality connected to the value of skin.

Unlike Florens’ mother, Sweetness does not give up her child, though she maintains a relationship formed on detachment. The visual, rather than the tactile, continues as the dominant form of their contact as Sweetness recalls the act of nursing Bride as ‘having a pickaninny sucking at my teat. I went to bottle-feeding soon as I got home’ (*God Help the Child*, 5). Disrupting the mythical, ephemeral nature of the Sable Venus, Bride’s father furthers this adverse detachment: ‘he never touched her,’ looking at her ‘like she was from the planet Jupiter.’ ‘Jupiter,’ rather than ‘Venus, ironically connects

⁶⁷ Moten, 2003, 214.

Bride to the god of light and victory in Roman mythology, causing her father to treat her 'like a stranger – more than that, an enemy' (*God Help the Child*, 5).

From birth, Bride's body is inscribed with cultural meaning, a dramatisation of the formality of blackness, a medium for interracial contact and a message of racial hierarchy. Through these early textual references, Morrison sets the terms for the establishment of a narrative pattern in which Bride's identity, inscribed in her body from birth, comes to be revealed and reinterpreted in connection to this inaugural passage. The following chapter, narrated by Bride, constitutes a narrative shift from childhood to adulthood, from Lula Ann, the name given to her by her mother, to Bride. The 'sixteen-year-old-me who dropped that dumb countrified name' becomes 'Ann Bride for two years until I interviewed for a sales job at Sylvia Inc.' before Lula Ann completely reinvents herself as 'Bride...one memorable syllable' (*God Help the Child*, 11). From an emblem of abjection, to an identity 'hidden' (*God Help the Child*, 35) and internalised, Bride grows to reveal a 'sort of pretty under all that black' (*God Help the Child*, 35). Her skin is presented as a source of depravity that must be removed with 'warm soapy water...brushing and then the razor,' recalling a 'glazed separateness' (*The Bluest Eye*, 42) between the spectator and the object of spectacle noted by Pecola in *The Bluest Eye*. Despite her troubled childhood, rejected by her parents and her community, she emerges woman of colour with a reconstructed identity.

Bride's narrative presents her blackness as a highly unstable signifier, a model of subjectivity-as-subjection that knows, in Moten's words, the 'subject by way of the severity of its...limits.'⁶⁸ Through her cosmetics company, 'You Girl,' offering 'Cosmetics for your Personal Millennium...for girls and women of all complexions from ebony to lemonade to milk' (*God Help the Child*, 10), Bride recalls the historical commodity form of blackface, skin colour turned into a tangible sensorial object but also into a regime of representation that reflexively comments upon itself. Eric Lott has argued that blackface is a reflecting mirror where a complex web of social, material and discursive relations becomes visible: 'the blackface mask [is] less a *repetition* of power relations than a *signifier for them* – a distorted mirror, reflecting displacements and condensations and discontinuities between which and the social field there exist lags, unevenness, multiple determinations.'⁶⁹ Just as Bride leaves her lipstick on her wine glass, a projection of her former self, the cipher of Lula Ann, smiling back at her, so too does her makeup company represent a phantasmic index of racial identity, a social currency, elevating racial colour to the function of monetary commodity.

Like the commodity and the slave, Bride's constructed, painted self has a dual nature and two bodies. One nature of this body is the product of a process of reification of

⁶⁸ Moten, 2003, 242.

⁶⁹ Eric Lott, 'Love and Theft: The Racial Unconscious of Blackface Minstrelsy,' *Representations* 39 (1992), 8. Minstrelsy, Lott argues, is born from an act of fascination with what is perceived to be black culture and gesture at the same time as it effects an expropriation of the markers and cultural trappings of blackness itself.

the subjective nature of a slave, given the sensorial and aesthetic presence of her makeup, and the other is an extension of the property relations in the cultural sphere. It is a form of economic return that collapses the distinction between personhood and objectification. Morrison conveys Bride's physical regression through the loss of her womanhood, symbolised by her pubic hair: 'Not gone as in shaved or waxed, but gone as in erased, as in never having been there in the first place. It scared me' (*God Help the Child*, 13), revealing her 'apron' like the Hottentot and the source of her mysteries.

God Help the Child has been referred to by Kara Walker as a 'a brisk modern-day fairy tale with shades of the Brothers Grimm' with 'imaginative cruelties visited on children; a journey into the woods; a handsome, vanished lover; witchy older women and a blunt moral.'⁷⁰ I would argue that the novel is far more complicated, with Morrison claiming in defense of the text that: 'The language is manipulated and strangled in such a way that you get the message...I know there is a difference between the received story...and what is actually going on.'⁷¹ Beyond the stock characters of the Brothers Grimm, I would suggest that the textual construction of Bride's body becomes a site for the semantic inscription of cultural notions about black femininity. Bride stitches together the pieces of her Bildungsroman, projecting her 'personal glamour,' a form of 'control in an exciting even creative profession, sexual freedom,

⁷⁰ Kara Walker, 'Review of *God Help the Child*,' *The New York Times* (13 Apr. 2015), <<https://nyti.ms/2kgqT1n>> (accessed 20 Apr. 2018).

⁷¹ Remnick, 2015.

and most of all a shield that protected her from any overly intense feeling, be it rage, embarrassment or love' (*God Help the Child*, 79). Like Cinderella and her counterparts, Bride radically reverses her initial position, from the margins of society to a centre of social normativity. She self-fashions, deliberately reconstructing her outward projection so that she could 'just forget how black she really was because she was using it to her advantage in beautiful white clothes' (*God Help the Child*, 43). She 'began to move differently—not a strut, not that pelvis-out rush of the runway—but a stride, slow and focused' (*God Help the Child*, 36), the antithesis of Maggie's awkward, liling waddle, choosing her clothes and accessories 'carefully,' cautiously contemplating the colour and the materials.

It is possible to interpret a state of liberation for Bride through her beauty, following a consideration by Janell Hobson: 'beauty becomes a significant site for political resistance and aesthetic transformation in which black women, whose beauty has been contested in dominant culture, strive to redefine their bodies by means of reasserting their womanhood and, possibly, their humanity.'⁷² Bride is a woman re-enacted, endlessly reshaped through a 'repeated stylization of [her] body,' codified by consumerism and the dangers of colorism.⁷³ I would suggest that Bride's self-fashioning is problematic in terms of its positioning within the realm of white culture's

⁷² Hobson, 2005, 7.

⁷³ See Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (London: Routledge, 2002).

commodification of Otherness. Though it could be argued that her assimilation is part of a logics of re-appropriating the black female body from a realm of white cultural inscription, Bride also assumes the cultural imperatives on the perception of the black female body as a site of Otherness, pleasure and danger.

As Lott argues, when considering the structural and emotional pressures that aided the production of the cultural commodity 'blackness':

Black performance itself, first of all, was precisely 'performative,' a cultural invention, not some precious essence installed in black bodies; and for better or worse it was often a product of self-commodification, a way of getting along in a constricted world. Black...not only exercised a certain amount of control over such practices but perforce sometimes developed them in tandem with white spectators. Moreover, practices taken as black were occasionally interracial creations whose commodification on white stages attested only to whites' greater access to public distribution (and profit) ...appropriated and circulated as stand-ins for a supposedly national folk tradition.⁷⁴

Bride's self-commodification renders her desirable, an edible delicacy evoking a sort of 'consumer cannibalism:' 'your licorice skin...you're more Hershey's syrup than licorice. Makes people think of whipped cream and chocolate soufflé every time they see you...Or Oreos? Never. Something classy. Bonbons. Hand dipped' (*God Help the Child*, 33).⁷⁵ A crude reference to the whiteness within her, a link to her slave past, the food references are synonymous to both the African and Western influences in her

⁷⁴ Lott, 31.

⁷⁵ The logics of Jeri's discourse are considered further in 'The commodification of Otherness' in Bell hooks, *Black Looks. Race and Representation* (London: Routledge, 1992), 21.

race and culture. Her advisor Jeri's premise is that 'black sells. It's the hottest commodity in the civilized world,' yet Lott argues that 'even the purest white "interest" in black cultural practices literalized the financial metaphor: it was always implicitly structured by an economics of slavery.'⁷⁶ Like the Sable Venus, Bride becomes a paradox, a figure of dangerous beauty, her white clothes contrasting her epidermis like a black 'panther in snow,' bestialised with 'wolverine eyes,' all 'sable and ice' (*God Help the Child*, 34). Embodying Grace Jones' photographic art, *Jungle Fever*, Bride renders herself spectacle, 'always public, always exposed.'⁷⁷ Her clothes become a symbolic barrier, a perverse imbrication of the aesthetics of her skin, untouched and unsullied, in contrast with the implications of her 'elegant blackness' which she 'sells' in an act of prostitution to 'all those childhood ghosts...those tormentors – the real ones and others like them.' The function of the gaze becomes a momentary one, the figures from her past 'droo[ling] with envy' as a form of 'payback' (*God Help the Child*, 57).

When Bride is abandoned by her boyfriend, Booker, she experiences a pivotal moment in the narrative, responding to his statement: 'you not the woman I want,' with 'Neither am I' (*God Help the Child*, 8). A sardonic bride dressed in white, it is at this

⁷⁶ Lott, 41.

⁷⁷ Carol E. Henderson, *Imagining the Black Female Body: Reconciling Image in Print and Visual Culture* (London: Palgrave, 2010), 3. Jean-Paul Goude photographed Grace Jones for *Paper* magazine in 1981 in a shoot which arguably highlights and rejects the passive display of the blackbody. *Jungle Fever* (New York: Xavier Moreau, 1981).

moment that Bride reveals herself as a subject-made-object that suddenly sees. Her syntactically awkward response implies her own dis-identification with her self-fashioned identity. To find her reconstructed self, Bride's body regresses into prepubescence, from the loss of her pubic hair to the holes in her earlobes which she had pierced after the trial in which she had falsely testified against Sofia Huxley:

I peer at my lobes closely and discover the tiny holes are gone. Ridiculous. I've had pierced my ears since I was eight years old. Sweetness gave me little circles of fake gold as a present after I testified against the Monster...After all these years, I've got virgin earlobes, untouched by a needle, smooth as a baby's thumb (*God Help the Child*, 51).

Bride's reflection in the mirror forms a chilling connection to Sethe and the earrings that Mrs. Garner, the wife of her master, gives her as a wedding gift: 'I want you to have them and want you and Halle to be happy.'⁷⁸ Sethe's act of marking her ears to wear a symbol of material culture, like the mark of her owned body, 'the circle and cross burnt right in the skin' under her 'breast' reveals her slave status (*Beloved*, 61). Both characters share the suffering of slave history reflected in the phallic aggression of the needle piercing skin, reversing an active state of identity and adulthood, as Bride regresses to infancy.

Bride physically diminishes, losing weight: 'The top of the dress sagged as if instead of a size 2 she had purchased a 4 and just now noticed the difference. But the dress had fit her perfectly when she started this trip' (*God Help the Child*, 81). She then loses

⁷⁸ Toni Morrison, *Beloved* (London: Vintage, 2007), 71.

her 'spectacular breasts': 'It was when she stood to dry herself that she discovered that her chest was flat. Completely flat, with only the nipples to prove it was not her back' (*God Help the Child*, 92). Only Queen, Booker's aunt, enforces the realisation that her adult beauty has disappeared: 'For the past three years she'd only been told how exotic, how gorgeous she was—everywhere, from almost everybody—stunning, dreamy, hot, wow! Now this old woman... had deleted an entire vocabulary of compliments in one stroke!' In so doing, Queen effectively invokes the image of her past self, which her physical regression has conjured up: 'Once again she was the ugly, too-black little girl in her mother's house' (*God Help the Child*, 144). Her loss of sexuality results in her loss of desirability and the taint of exoticism, a form of magical realism which fails to complete Bride's journey to personhood, a personhood including her sexuality.

Bride's mature rupture shapes the narrative as a quest for her true identity, a reclamation of the lost girl which Morrison repossess in *Playing in the Dark* (1992): 'she would have run, rocketed away from the scary suspicion that she was changing back into a little black girl' (*God Help the Child*, 97), 'flat-chested and without underarm or pubic hair, pierced ears and stable weight, she tried and failed to forget what she believed was her crazed transformation back into a scared little girl' (*God Help the Child*, 142). She is a signifier of signifiers, whether an ugly black girl or a panther in the snow. In Lacanian terms, as with *Beloved*, her physical suspension and regression are a sign

of her failed entrance into the symbolic order, caused by her early severance from her mother's body, symbolised by the loss of her breasts: 'without [her] the world was more than confusing... like the atmosphere in her mother's house' (*God Help the Child*, 78). Once her relationship with Booker is repaired, her regression to childhood is reversed. She becomes a reformed sexual attribute and her pregnancy is revealed, signifying her reversal into 'female maturity,' a potentially concerning transformation in the black mammy stereotype.

The resolution of the novel is problematic, in that it lends itself to convention, to the fairy tale, calling forth the view of Bride as someone who has become dispossessed rather than focusing on her 'self love' (*God help the Child*, 133). Bride conforms and projects the romanticised view of African American women as 'inherently life-affirming nurturers.'⁷⁹ Her restoration aligns with an emblem of fecundity, a naturalised maternal image. The final words of the novel belong to Sweetness: 'Listen to me. You are about to find out what it takes, how the world is, how it works and how it changes when you are a parent' (*God Help the Child*, 178). A prophetic projection, Sweetness establishes an intergenerational connection, carrying Morrison's warnings concerning the slavebody and the blackbody.

⁷⁹ bell hooks, *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center* (London and New York: Routledge, 2014), 135.

I would suggest that *Bride* reveals the limits of subjectivity, a flatness sardonically conveyed by her breasts, marking the limit of significance, the boundary between real objectivity and aesthetic consideration. The women of *A Mercy* and *God Help the Child* demonstrate that the black body continues to be an object of performance, commodified and commercialised, suggesting that a new state of rationality is needed to 'peel away the layers of scar tissue that the black body [grows] in order to obscure, if not annihilate, the slave body underneath.'⁸⁰ Morrison deepens our emotional understanding of marginalised African American women who appear in history only incidentally, whether in a magazine photograph, a line in a ship's log, or a slaveholder's inventory. Blackness is presented as a trace, transitioning from the mark of human commodity in New World slavery to a modern attachment to material cultural objects. Race is established as an aesthetic form within consumer culture that ties personhood to the material and the maternal, a speculative entity, regardless of the imperceptible movement of time, produced by finance capital. Rather than eradicating racial signifiers, or rendering the black body ephemeral, Morrison reveals and undermines the practices of domination, both racist and sexist, devising characters who continue to strive for agency in the most unlikely circumstances.

⁸⁰ Toni Morrison, *The Source of Self-Regard: Selected Essays, Speeches, and Meditations* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2019), 76.

CHAPTER 2

MALADIES OF POWER - VISUALISING MYTH

THE MODERN MEDEA AND THE FACE OF BLACKNESS

Photography and the racial image

In his theoretical consideration of emerging racial identities, Stuart Hall reflected that he heard the categoriser 'Black' for the first time in the wake of the 'Civil Rights movement...in the wake of de-colonisation and nationalistic struggles.' Hall believes that 'Black' was created as 'a political category in a certain historical moment,' a 'consequence of certain symbolic and ideological struggles,'¹ in contrast to Frederik Jameson's assertion that meaning should be defined by the absence of history.² Hall gives a conjectural voice to the collective struggle against racial oppression:

You have spent five, six, seven hundred years elaborating the symbolism through which Black is a negative one. Now I don't want another term. I want that term, that negative one, that's the one I want. I want a piece of that action. I want to take it out of the way in which it has been articulated in religious discourse, in ethnographic discourse, in literary discourse, in visual discourse. I want to pluck it out of its articulation and rearticulate it in a new way.³

¹ Stuart Hall, 'Old and New Identities, Old and New Ethnicities,' in *Culture, Globalisation, and the World-System: Contemporary Conditions for the Representation of Identity*, ed. Antony D. King (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 41.

² Ibid, 60. Louis Althusser argues that history is not a necessary process, in the same sense that Marxism has claimed, but is, instead, the result of a series of accidental encounters: 'Le courant souterrain du materialisme de la rencontre' ('The Underground Current of Materialism of the Encounter'), published posthumously in Paris in 1994: *Philosophy of the Encounter: Later Writings, 1978-87*, trans. G. M. Goshgarian (New York: Verso, 2006).

³ Hall, 1997, 149.

Hall found, through the struggle against articulated discourses, a change of consciousness, a change of self-recognition and the possibilities of a new process of identification and subject-hood, a subject that was 'always there, but emerging, historically.' I would argue that such an emergence, traced through the recurrence of Sarah Bartmann's image, embodied in Frédéric Cuvier's *Boschimanne*, Bryan Edwards' *Sable Venus*, Toni Morrison's *Maggie*, indicates that the visual is not only, or necessarily, the realm of representation. More precisely, it is the realm where bodies, whether they be individual or collective, natural or that of the body politic, 'interface and inter-skin,' with racial blackness forming an epidermal signifier and an indexical trace of genetic, biological as well as cultural understanding.⁴ Skin is understood in a phenomenological sense, forming the sensate border of the body in the world. It is the hinge between the phantasmatic and the material, the physiological and the psychic, the present and the absent in Morrison's exploration of 'human' and 'social landscapes.'⁵ Following Sara Ahmed's semiological reading, skin can be read as a surface that is produced in the act of reading it, with bodies taking the 'shape of the very contact they have with objects and others' – a visually rendered social contract, a

⁴ The definitions 'interskin' and 'interface' are used by Jill Scott in her research considering the artistic and theoretical function of the body as interface in interactive media and telematics: 'Interskin, one of the three components of the Digital Body Automata, explores the idea that...genetic memories are also affected by cultural memory,' *Reframing Consciousness*, ed. Roy Ascott (Bristol: Intellect Books, 1999), 86.

⁵ Toni Morrison, *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992), 11.

meta-image, a world picture.⁶ Race becomes defined by a surface, a skin, an image of race that becomes the 'racial image' imbued with myth and stereotype, manipulated to shape the contact they have with objects and others within a visual field, curling and clinging to the notion of the indefinitely suffering figure of the black female.

Like Bartmann, the colonial photographic and aesthetic subject had little control over the trajectory or use of their images and bodies. After Bartmann's death, in the early nineteenth century, European encounters with Otherness were repackaged as 'primitivisms'; a 'new way to consume the Other under the cover of Art and the intellectualised discourse.'⁷ Early photography and institutions of slavery are closely linked, with colonial postcards perpetuating the discourse surrounding the exotic and sexual currency of the black female body. Forming a subsection of the visual archive of colonialism, the camera became a tool to construct the body as an object of curiosity in a theatre of gazes through exhibition, dissection, and display. The nineteenth-century invention of photography, *cartes des vistes*, and postcards – with their promise of cheap reproduction and dissemination – provided 'evidence' of the African racial inferiority defined by these pseudo-sciences, which served both the popular and

⁶ Sara Ahmed, *Cultural politics of motion* (London and Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2014), 3.

⁷ Barbara Thompson, *Black Womanhood: Images, Icons and Ideologies of the African Body* (Hanover, New Hampshire: Hood Museum of Art, Dartmouth College, 2008), 260.

scientific worlds, further solidifying European racist perceptions of Africa's 'primitive' and 'promiscuous' women.⁸

Such an example of constructed evidence can be seen in the daguerreotypes of African American slaves from a South Carolina plantation,⁹ taken in the mid nineteenth century by Joseph T. Zealy for 'the purposes of illustrating theories of black inferiority,' a validation provided in the *Types of Mankind* research by Swiss anatomist Louis Agassiz.¹⁰ Developing the racial indexicality perpetuated by Cuvier in his dissection of Bartmann, and later working with him on the phrenology of the Hottentot race, Agassiz hoped to use the photographs as evidence to prove his theory of 'separate creation'- the idea that the various races of mankind were, in fact, separate species.¹¹ Though strictly scientific in purpose and premise, the daguerreotypes took on a very particular meaning in the context of the prevailing political, economic, social and aesthetic climate concerning race. As Lisa Gail Collins further argues, this early use of photography in documenting race science and anatomical study establishes a visual reading, devoid of aesthetics, of nude black bodies in this peculiar context of

⁸ Ibid, 28.

⁹ Figure 6, J. T. Zealy, *Renty, Congo, Plantation of B. F. Taylor, Esqu.*, Columbia, S. C., March 1850, Daguerreotype (Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology, Harvard University).

¹⁰ Referenced in Janell Hobson, *Venus in the Dark: Blackness and Beauty in Popular Culture* (New York and London: Routledge, 2005), 117.

¹¹ An idea furthered by Brian Wallis, 'Black Bodies, White Science: Louis Agassiz's Slave Daguerreotypes,' *American Art* 9.2 (Summer 1995), 38-61.

education.¹² These anthropometric images, consisting of a series of fifteen highly detailed stills, single out the individual as a physical 'type' representational of the subject's race, presented in the prescribed frontal and profile views, with ethnographic signifiers often adorning the posterior backdrop.

With respect to the practices of the 'gaze' in American modernity, there is a deep-seated dialectic between racism and photography – Jonathan Crary, for example, reminding us in the *Techniques of the Observer* that 'the optical devices used in the nineteenth century were not invented in cultural vacuums.' Rather, they were premised on 'conceptual structures,' reflecting the points of intersection where 'philosophical, scientific and aesthetic discourses overlap with mechanical techniques, institutional requirements and socio-economic forces' and that it is possible to infer, and consequently, confer, the 'ways in which a camera makes the world visible to human perception.'¹³ In the colonial, antebellum and Reconstruction periods, Henry Louis Gates Jr. explains that the 'black person was rarely dignified with individuality in works of art, by dominant-culture artists...because a depiction of individuals would attest to the full range and variety of human characteristics and abilities.'¹⁴

¹² Lisa Gail Collins, *The Art of History: African American Women Artists Engage the Past* (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 2002), 19.

¹³ Jonathan Crary, *Techniques of the Observer*, cited in Jacqueline Goldsby, *A Spectacular Secret: Lynching in American Life and Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006), 237.

¹⁴ Henry Louis, Gates Jr., 'Introduction: The Face and Voice of Blackness' in Guy C. McElroy, *Facing History: The Black Image in American Art, 1710-1940* (Washington DC: The Corcoran Gallery of Art with Bedford Arts Publishers, 1990), xxix.

Furthering Gates' premise, Gwendolyn DuBois Shaw argues that in the eighteenth and early nineteenth century, print culture - particularly early broadsides, and other popular print media, almost exclusively provided physiological descriptions or ideographic images of African Americans that depicted them in reductive, proscribed ways. In the regularised and stereotyped forms of printers' block, the prevalent representations of African Americans were visually controlled by the press and other ideological apparatuses of the dominant culture. Images of caricatured runaways and derisive stereotypes, monstrous creatures advertised for sale or accentuated to draw contempt for criminal acts, reduced the black body to a rote visual sign. DuBois Shaw contends that where African Americans were depicted in an 'individual' sense - one stylised body could 'function metonymically for a varied multitude in the newly abundant printed media of the British colonies and the succeeding American states.'¹⁵ These images were sustained by a vicious cycle of supply and demand - images that denied the inherent humanity of black people by reinforcing their limited, inferior and subservient role in American society.

¹⁵ Gwendolyn DuBois Shaw, *Portraits of a People: Picturing African Americans in the Nineteenth Century* (Andover, MA: Addison Gallery of American Art, Phillips Academy, 2006), 16.

***Beloved* and the photochemical imagination**

Although there is no reference to the photograph in Morrison's seminal novel, *Beloved* (1987), it is possible to read, within the narrative, a mechanism that shares some aspects of the abstract machine which precedes photographic technology and the photochemical century before the digital turn. I would argue that Morrison is simultaneously both dependent on and critical of a racialised map of the visual, playing with a history of blackness that concomitantly mobilises resemblance and dissemblance. In *Beloved*, as Sethe recalls her bedding dress, the symbolic cast of the Hottentot Venus is present, an essence of blackness that appears as a phantasmatic interruption:

'Maybe it was my bedding dress. Describe it to me.'
 'Had a high neck. Whole mess of buttons coming down the back.'
 'Buttons. Well, that lets out my bedding dress. I never had a button on nothing.'
 'Did Grandma Baby?'
 Sethe shook her head. 'She couldn't handle them. Even on her shoes. What else?'
 'A bunch at the back. On the sit-down part.'
 'A bustle? It had a bustle?'
 'I don't know what it's called'
 'Sort of gathered-like? Below the waist in the back?'
 'Um hm.'
 'A rich lady's dress. Silk?'
 'Cotton, look like.'
 'Lisle probably. White cotton lisle. You say it as holding on to me. How?'¹⁶

¹⁶ Toni Morrison, *Beloved* (London: Vintage, 2007), 42-3.

The reference to the bustle presents a sexual dynamic, often referred to as the Hottentot bustle, an item of clothing that was commonly worn by middle class Victorian women to make their body replicate a desirable shape.¹⁷ Thus, the use of the bustle clinging onto Sethe forms a spectral manifestation of the oppression of Bartmann, her sexuality colonised and appropriated, furthered by the reference to cotton with its intrinsic links to plantation slavery.¹⁸ The spectral, ghostly dress represents the traces of national memory, a 'thought picture' (*Beloved*, 45), what Fred Moten calls a primal scene, elevating the importance of the visual.¹⁹

Set after the American Civil War and the abolition of slavery, Morrison reanimates Margaret Garner – a slave who escaped from Kentucky to Cincinnati, Ohio, who infamously murdered her own children. The Garner case became a *cause celebre* for the abolitionist movement, who publicly pronounced Garner's act to be nothing less than noble, constructing her as the heroic mother. The *Cincinnati Press*, dated 29 January

¹⁷ Hobson, 2005, 60.

¹⁸ Such a connection is made explicit in Deborah Willis' *Tribute to the Hottentot Venus*, a tripartite quilt, each panel showing a different headless, nude, black silhouetted figure. A bustle dress, composed of a mosaic of different nineteenth century French fabric patterns, frames lithographs depicting Bartmann, rendering her headless. The third panel combines Vivienne Westwood's mini skirt bustle and Sir Mix-A-Lot's 1992 rap song, *Baby Got Back*, forming a commentary on the continuation of objectification of black women in popular culture, while a final multi-coloured silhouette portends to the predicament of all women, regardless of colour. Figure 7, Deborah Willis, *Tribute to the Hottentot Venus*, 1992, Fabric, photo linen, printed in Deborah Willis ed., *Black Venus 2010: They called her 'Hottentot'* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2010).

¹⁹ Fred Moten considers the primal scene of the beating of Frederick Douglass' Aunt Hester. He sees the primal scene as connected with 'desire, identification, and castration' where 'pain is alloyed with pleasure.' It is a recitation of repression as it causes a 'subjection that one wants to guard against and linger in.' Fred Moten, *In the Break. The Aesthetics of the Black Racial Tradition* (London, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 2003), 4-5.

1856, under the anti-slavery bugle: 'A Slave Mother murders her child rather than see it returned to slavery,' relayed how 'great excitement existed throughout the city the whole of yesterday, in consequence of the arrest of a party of slaves, and the murder of her child by a slave mother, while the officers were in the act of making the arrest.'²⁰ The harrowing account of the run-away slave who 'hacked at her child's throat' and wounded her remaining three children, rather than see them return into the hands of their white slave owners, provided pro-slavery forces with a reprehensible example of African savagery.

Garner's aesthetic legacy was brought to the fore a decade after the act in Thomas Satterwhite Noble's painting, 'The Modern Medea,' intensely illustrating the moments after the slave masters uncover the fugitive Margaret and her family.²¹ Garner is transformed into the colonial counterpart, the Medea of Greek Mythology, granddaughter of Helios, and wife of Jason. In Euripides' account (circa 430 BC), Medea embodies the monstrous maternal, her act of infanticide lingering in the abolitionist rhetoric that immortalised Garner: 'What I intend to do is wrong, but the rage of my heart is stronger than my reason...Deprived of [my children] / I shall drag

²⁰ Cynthia Griffin Wolff, "'Margaret Garner': A Cincinnati Story," in *Discovering Difference: Contemporary Essays in American Culture*, ed. Christoph Lohmann (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1993), 421.

²¹ Figure 8, Thomas Satterwhite Noble, *The Modern Medea* (London, 1867), available at the Underground Railroad Museum, Cincinnati, Ohio.

out a grievous and painful life.²² Moten would describe this exchange as a 'cut,' a 'shrieking commodity' that interrupts the distinction between 'what is intrinsic and what is given by or of the outside,' a 'spirit manifest in its maternal expense or aspiration.'²³ When the dialogue is given over to Garner, value is reconstructed, disrupting the oppositions of 'speech and writing' and 'spirit and matter' with a sound that cuts and amplifies the primal. Garner's cry becomes an augmented form of the fantasy of the maternal voice in black politics and art, at once political and economic. She is significant in that the conditions of motherhood and enslavement are indistinguishable, and that her enslavement becomes the performative essence of her blackness. The issue of her reproduction, her natural children, are reconfigured by their experience of bondage.

Noble's black Medea stands above her dying child, her right hand outstretched, palms turned towards the four white men before her, while her two sons cling to her left arm, wounded by their mother in a similar act of rage, a 'love too thick' (*Beloved*, 193). One man stands over the child, looking to his companion, searching for mutual abhorrence, while a second looks down at the mangled body, the child for whom Garner chose death over slavery. The foremost, standing in the shadows, searches the eyes of the murderer before him, while the blood on the floor seeps towards his feet. The viewer's

²² Alistair Elliot, trans., *Medea* (London: Oberon Books, 1993), line 1036-1038.

²³ Moten, 2003, 14.

gaze is compelled towards the inside, the outside, the skin, the blood, mocking the counterfactual logic and its inability to fully bear upon a racialised distribution of the universally proscribed and perpetuated order. Despite the flesh, the icon of savagery and the monstrous maternal, the 'us' of the men and the Other presented by the Garners, the painting enacts a perpetual 'turnstile' of gazes as we look at the depiction of rebellion, searching for logic behind an act so inhumane, so brutal, while Garner's eyes search the faces of the men for similar answers.²⁴

In *Beloved*, Morrison plays with the politics of reproducible and reproductive performance, exposing the shameful treatment of African-American slave mothers who, according to the racist constructions of nineteenth century apologists for slavery, were 'more primitive' than their white counterparts, and were 'not civilised' – not really 'attached' to their children.²⁵ 'What struck me,' Morrison recalls, 'was that when Margaret Garner was interviewed after killing one of her children,' she 'was not a mad-dog killer. She was very calm. All she said was: "They will not live like that" ...[S]he decided to kill them and kill herself. That was noble. She was saying, "I'm a human being. These are my children."'"²⁶ As Morrison reworks and recreates

²⁴ Roland Barthes stated that signification forms a 'sort of constantly moving turnstile which presents alternately the meaning of the signifier and its form, a language-object and a metalanguage, a purely signifying and a purely imagining consciousness.' *Mythologies* (London: Vintage, 2000), 123.

²⁵ Wolff, 107.

²⁶ Danille Taylor-Guthrie, ed., *Conversations with Toni Morrison* (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 1994), 272.

Garner's story through the slave mother, Sethe, *Beloved* presents a prison house of epidermal inferiority, reconfiguring and reinvestigating the animalistic icon of black female sexuality and the concept of degeneracy. Confined, as it were, in camera, by the conjunction of vectors of colonialism, political economy, racism, slavery and the law that granted white slave owners the legal right to hold black people as chattel, Sethe watches her own children grow through the key hole of house number 124. She sees a 'shameless beauty' of Sweet Home, a 'rememory' (*Beloved*, 9). In this social and technical construction of a camera lens, Sethe observes her children, her stream-of-consciousness converted into a recording device, her physical presence hidden from view. On one side, Sethe forms a physical observer, and on the other, an abject object, an inscription and re-inscription of black and white and colour that points towards the pre-photographic endemic of slavery.

Morrison demands a multiplicity of readings for Garner's narrative, producing an intense dialogue that confronts the ontology of the image and its mode of production. Primarily, we read the scene in relation to the printer's block tableaux, offering comparable crime scenes to the generic stereotype of degeneration. As Paul D glances at the newspaper clipping that recount the act of Sethe's infanticide, he reflects on the 'Negro's face,' a face only present because of 'something out of the ordinary,' something accusatory, not because 'the person had been killed or maimed or caught or burned or jailed or whipped or evicted or stomped or raped or cheated' (*Beloved*,

183). His seemingly fleeting, yet chilling statement, radically reflects on the visually rendered social contract, that the abnormal, subhuman and degenerate treatment of the African race is the entrenched norm, denying the full range of human characteristics and abilities. The face, in this sense, becomes archetypal – a condition of blackness, a universally representational ‘Negro’, presenting similar iconographic tensions to those concerning the illustrations of the Hottentot Venus in Cuvier’s *Histoire naturelle des mammifères*.²⁷

The tension between ‘face’ and ‘value’ is present, with a fixation on the abject presence of Sethe’s mouth – ‘this woman with a mouth that was not Sethe’s’ becoming ‘more and more strange’ the ‘more that is spoken’ (*Beloved*, 183) by Stamp Paid. All figures are connected through their orality which, like Sethe’s rememory, becomes a visual scene: the ‘white citizens of Cincinnati’ through their ‘breath’; Stamp Paid by what he ‘didn’t say,’ instead only taking a ‘breath and lean[ing] toward the mouth that was not hers,’ and Paul D by the words he is ‘unable’ to ‘speak’ because of the mouth he continues to deny. It is her mouth, or the uncanny familiarity of it in the image before the men, that creates a turnstile between the ‘Negro’s face,’ the ‘black face’ and the face of the woman Paul D ‘loved so well it watered his eye to see’ (*Beloved*, 183). Paul D is silenced as Sethe breaks in upon his imagination, a forcefulness marking both a

²⁷ Étienne Geoffroy Saint-Hilaire and Frédéric Cuvier, *Histoire naturelle des mammifères* (4 vols, Paris, 1827-47).

denial and an illegitimacy in a climate where motherhood does not legitimise the cultural inheritance of black children.

For Barthes, photographs found in news reports are often unary. The photograph lacks a 'punctum,' it 'shouts' rather than 'wounds': 'I glance through them, I don't recall them; no detail (in some corner) ever interrupts my reading: I am interested in them (as I am interested in the world), I do not love them.'²⁸ Moten notes the irony of such a statement, a 'prescriptive assumption' regarding the sensuality of the photograph, an irony that Morrison seems to address in the news report of Sethe.²⁹ For Paul D, the image is absolutely visual and absolutely wounding. Despite his initial negation of Sethe's liability: 'That ain't her mouth...No...Nothing like it' (*Beloved*, 180-183), her crime inevitably becomes undeniable. The encounter is appositional, shaped by a narrative that calls the position of master and slave radically into question.

Paul D fails to draw a distinction between the expected actions of the monstrous and malevolent black mother and the breeding hogs which the Northerners could not live without: 'you got two feet, Sethe, not four.' A chilling reminder of a history unspeakable and unspoken, Sethe's physiological embodiment becomes conflated with the cultural value of her as a corporeal signifier, just as Lina and Scully in *A Mercy*

²⁸ Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 1982), 26.

²⁹ Moten, 2003, 205.

(2008) become the apples that Lina boils. Morrison draws attention to the performative nature of blackness and its voiding affect as Sethe's body loses the 'integrity' of its form – the reader does not 'see' her body, but only the implications of her bestiality. A change from the anticipated viewer, from the 'white people' and their derogatory 'teeth sucking' (*Beloved*, 183) in response to the 'Negro's' mass-produced form, Paul D becomes a 'stand-in' audience. The reader 'looks' at Sethe's image through Paul D's series of unveilings, though the face we see forms the condition of blackness, rather than a pathognomonic visage, failing to transform the static reading of the face in the illustration.³⁰

For Moten, the question of the maternal leads to the issue of castration and doubling, which I would argue is apparent in Paul D and Sethe's exchange. Black castration, as Moten's suggests, is ante-hermeneutic: 'a kind of anticipation...before the natal occasion, namely castration, out of which the psychoanalytic understanding of identification and desire emerge.' Castration of the black male, beyond the

³⁰ Physiognomy refers to the static features of the face, opposed to pathognomy (the science and the signs of passions) in which Johann Caspar Lavater made analyses of people in the flesh. His research was an international success, translated, revised, expanded, contracted, and regularly reprinted throughout the nineteenth century. See Miriam Claude Meijer, *Race and Aesthetics in the Anthropology of Petrus Camper [1722-1789]* (London: Rodopi, 31 Oct. 2014). Johann Caspar Lavater desired to promote the knowledge and the love of mankind, to which are added, one hundred physiognomical rules, a posthumous work by Mr. Lavater; and memoirs of the life of the author, in *Essays on Physiognomy*, trans. Thomas Holcroft (London, W. Tegg, 1860), 492. The connection between physiognomy and the silhouette art is discussed later in Chapter 2 with a reading of Toni Morrison's novel, *The Bluest Eye* (London: Vintage, 1999). John B. Lyon, "'The Science of Sciences': Replication and Reproduction in Lavater's Physiognomics," *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 40.2 (2007), 257-77.

psychoanalytic 'chain of disavowal and fetishization,' operates in a complex relation with 'loss or lack or incompleteness or static hole.'³¹ Blackness cannot escape the residual traces of the maternal, so Paul D is silenced by the 'static hole' of Sethe's mouth, a maternal lesion that erupts its own refusal. Sethe's image becomes part of a larger visual culture, delimited by what Nicholas Mirzoeff has called the 'hooded archive' of race – a return to the slave block by re-inscribing the black body as a commodity.³² The newspaper clippings, in this sense, become the bill of sale, the receipt of ownership, adhering the index of race to its status as object. The slave master's whip transforms into a 'whip of fear' (*Beloved*, 183), a psychological manifestation of the slavers' bonds through the cultural impetus of the print media, which cuts through to the 'chambers of the heart.'

Paul D's indentured, castrated nature is furthered by his inability to read the print, which 'meant nothing to him' (*Beloved*, 183), drawing attention to the closeted signs of racial superiority, cultural hegemony and dismissive Othering of the African American race. Mirzoeff argues that the 'hooded archive' of print culture indexed race epidermally, as well as socially and politically, providing an unambiguous colour line, presenting the African races as something abnormal in the fictional backdrop of the

³¹ Moten, 2003, 177.

³² Nicholas Mirzoeff, 'The Shadow and the Substance: Race, Photography, and the Index,' in *Only Skin Deep: Changing Visions of the American Self*, 111-28, ed. Coco Fusco and Brian Wallis (New York: International Center of Photography, 2003), 123.

'illusory white world' (*Playing in the Dark*, 16). Surrounded by excrement, 'the stench of offal' and 'pigs crying in the chute' in Cincinnati, Sethe's narrative draws analogy between the slaughterhouse and the sixty millions or more slaves brought across the Atlantic to which Morrison dedicates *Beloved* - a 'craving for pork' forming the new commercialised mania, with animals raised and distributed farther and farther away to satisfy the capitalising compulsion for supply and demand. Sethe's body, the maternal body, the 'static hole,' becomes a retrograde national symbol of the markable and marketable.

While Noble plays with the conception of 'reality' concerning the reproduced black female body through the painted form, Morrison denies us the voyeurism that the Modern Medea provides - an affirmed negation 'at whatever it was those black scratches said' (*Beloved*, 183). Sethe becomes the voided lines on the newspaper, the shaded sections of the printer's block, a 'choked representation of an Africanist presence' (*Playing in the Dark*, 17) with her 'head turned on her neck' like the grotesque echo of a lynched and violated corpse. The cynical actuality of the price of emancipation circles throughout the narrative, a hangman's noose in the shadows, just as the 'unmistakably caressing fingers' of Grandma Baby's spectral presence become 'bold stokes,' hard fingers that move 'slowly around her windpipe' (*Beloved*, 112). It is because the crime is rendered in this way, offsetting and reversing the conventional relations of looking, that this image becomes analogous with Morrison's fishbowl -

'the structure that transparently (and invisibly) permits the ordered life it contains to exist in the larger world' (*Playing in the Dark*, 17). The reader is not provided with a direct view of the body, transposing the image through the eyes of a black male character who is denied a voice, depriving the reader of the ultimate site/ sight and signifier of race, yet race still inhabits the visual field. Literality becomes the realm of performance, revealing the rhetorical process whereby a figural blackness is sutured onto Sethe's body – she is the outcome of being seen 'as' a Negro, allowing a metaphorical impulse, a figure of substitution, to become fully naturalised.

Though Morrison installs a similar metaphorical blindness in the foundations of 'Recitatif' (1983), Sethe's image is still inhabited by the signifiers of race by confirming what the image is not, instituting a theatre of gazes that expose a regime of surveillance perpetuated by the nineteenth century print culture. Morrison historicises looking and surveillance, embodied in the figure of the oppressor and its genocidal implications for black people. Noting the elemental power of this 'Look', Morrison tells of slave catchers crossing the Ohio River to recapture the runaway Sethe and her children. On their way to Sethe's house, 124 Bluestone Road, they are instantly spotted by the black community, who discern their diabolic intentions, recognising the hypocrisy of their 'righteous' intent enforced by 'the whip, the fist, the lie' (*Beloved*, 157). Recreating the historical tableau of the slavers, Morrison indicates the 'hierarchical, permanent exercise of indefinite discipline' hiding behind the thin layer

of 'righteousness,' the arrogant and rationalised domination lashing out under the thin pretence of racial superiority.³³

Critics such as Susan Bowers have argued that *Beloved* signifies the most ambitious attempt in Morrison's fiction to give representation to the un-representable, stressing the critical significance of Beloved's spectral status, her inability to 'say things that are pictures' (*Beloved*, 210), demolishing the boundaries between earthly and spiritual realms, connecting the textual, visual and mythological as found with Sethe's dress.³⁴ I would suggest that Morrison negates 'race' through the undecidable designation of the black/white racial image: *Beloved* provides sight of the black body within the visual field, both from the narrative of the oppressor and the oppressed, while simultaneously questioning and withholding the 'reality' of the black body that we see. Perhaps shattering the sense of safety which separation might offer to detach and identifying with the all-too-visible perpetrators and the white noise of their absent 'breath', Morrison instead leverages a body that is intractably present yet representationally absent.

³³ Following Foucault's assertion that 'our society is one not of spectacle, but of surveillance...the hierarchical, permanent exercise of indefinite discipline,' visual culture can then be read as a space for regulation and instalment of the 'disciplinary regime,' with the body a site for contested power. Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punishment: The Birth of the Prison* (London: Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group, 1977), 217.

³⁴ Susan Bowers, 'Beloved and the New Apocalypse,' *The Journal of Ethnic Studies* 18.1 (1990), 60.

Sethe's image contains a double denial – social (in)visibility of the perpetrators that would never be able to 'list her daughter's characteristics on the animal side of the paper' (*Beloved*, 251) and a shift of investment from the body *of* evidence – the visual history of racial indexicality, to the black body *as* evidence, through the disavowal of what is visually available. Such a semiological reading enables us to enter the printer's block tableau from a different angle – one that emphasises how media prints are a paradoxical type of social visibility – as race a-visually structures our visual field, and visual culture, through the black body, revealing how race corporealises the ontology of the image. As a constant threat, or in Richard Wright's words, as a 'conditionally commuted death sentence,' Sethe's body, the image of a body that has lost the 'integrity' of form, intentionally signifies the fantasy of the successfully expelled, a melancholic abject object, a 'specular assurance that the racial threat has not simply been averted, but rendered incapable of return'.³⁵

³⁵ Discussed in Abdul R. Mohammed, *The Death Bound Subject: Richard Wright's Archaeology of Death* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2005), 77.

BELOVED TO WILD – PHOTOGRAPHY AND THE EPIDERMAL SCHEMA

The Photographic trace of the real in *Jazz*

Whereas painting and illustration, such as that of William Blake, Edwards, and Noble, ventured into the realm of the suggestive and symbolic, the rise of photographic technologies towards the end of the nineteenth century invariably became associated with a sense of 'realism.'³⁶ Within the body of scholarship that has considered the correlation between photographic and racial indexicality, Barthes argues that a photograph is a condensation of an 'ineffable social whole,'³⁷ unique in its nature, untransformable and 'wholly ballasted by the contingency of which it is the weightless, transparent envelope'- the windowpane between the viewer and the landscape, the invisible structure that is never 'distinguished from its referent.'³⁸ Taking, for example, Louis Agassiz's series of daguerreotypes, marshalled to document the actuality of racial difference, the image of race, in the process, produces the racialised image as a verifiable, visualised fact. Not only do race and photography share a tautological semiotic grid, but they simultaneously provide the other with substance. Photography lends materiality to race because it has provided a visual technology that has further sutured race to the body. The photograph in turn provides a transitive surface that

³⁶ Hobson, 2005, 117.

³⁷ Barthes, 2000, 92.

³⁸ Ibid, 1982, 5.

points towards interiority, while the image of the black body offers sustenance to the ontological claim that, in David Rodowick's repetition of Stanley Cavell's formulation, 'unlike painting, photography is not a world, but is rather *of the world*'³⁹ - a literal emanation of the referent.

I would argue that photography as a racial manifestation requires further consideration, in that it bears not only a sense of loss, but also an augmentation, a history of abhorrent deprivation, but also a mode of freedom. I am interested in the relationship between the photography and black performance, and whether the medium can challenge ontological questioning. Does the photographic image index race, carrying a regression to the primal image, or can the photograph, with its phenomenological privileging, actually enable what Moten has termed 'unalloyed looking,' creating a kind of 'detachment, independence, autonomy, that holds open the question of what looking might mean in general?'⁴⁰ I want to consider what the aesthetics of the photograph means for black performance, black personhood, black politics.

For Morrison, photography represents a similar corporal medium to that outlined by Barthes, revealing the connections between photography, racism and the bourgeois

³⁹ Stanley Cavell, *The World Viewed: Reflections on the Ontology of Film* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1979), 23.

⁴⁰ Moten, 2003, 198.

economy that exploited the body and iconicity of Bartmann. Barthes argued that, ultimately, the process of being photographed was one of proprietary alienation: ‘the disturbance is ultimately one of ownership,’ he says, and ‘I invariably suffer from a sensation of inauthenticity. I am neither subject nor object but a subject who feels he is becoming an object.’⁴¹ Yet Barthes also likens the medium to one of carnality, ‘a skin I share with anyone who has been photographed,’ a simultaneous experience of alienation and a connection that Morrison utilises by inextricably linking *Beloved* to her later novel, *Jazz* (1992). During an interview discussing the alternative historiography for Sethe, Morrison stated:

[T]hat decision was a piece, a tail of something that was always around, and it didn’t get clear for me until I was thinking of another story that I had read in a book that Camille Billops published, a collection of [photographs] by Van der Zee, called *The Harlem Book of the Dead*.⁴²

Morrison was struck by Van der Zee’s lucidity, his ability to remember everybody he had photographed. Amongst his collection, following the fashion of capturing beloved, departed people in full dress in coffins, or children in beautiful dresses held affectionately in their parents’ arms, Morrison encountered one image of ‘a young girl lying in a coffin...eighteen years old [who had] gone to a party.’ Though the connection between these two stories, these two referents, remained unexplainable to Morrison, what she did correlate was the ‘generous, wide spirited love’ – love of a

⁴¹ Barthes, 1982, 34.

⁴² Doreatha Drummond Mbalia, ed., *Toni Morrison’s Developing Class Consciousness. Second Edition* (Selinsgrove: Susquehanna University Press, 1991), 207.

mother for her children that 'would not see them sullied' - and love for a man that meant she would rather 'die to give him time to get away, more valuable than her life, was not just his life, but something else connected with his life.'⁴³ The emotional disfigurement that slave society imposes in *Beloved* leads Morrison to consider 'a parallel one [within the] racial landscape,' a cultural re-memory brought to the surface by the visual archives of 'Colored newspapers,' 'advertisements' and 'columns' from 1926.⁴⁴ Such a connection in the photochemical imagination suggests the ability of the photographic trace to brand the 'real' with a regime of 'image-ness' that lays claim to an ontological connection between its surface as existence as a visual object and the historical depth – the 'reality' from which it was seized.

The photograph of the eighteen-year-old girl who Morrison revisits spectrally in the preface to *Beloved* haunts the opening pages of *Jazz* (1992), underscored by a narrative voice which exploits cultural anxieties, the interlocking forces of racism, sexism and maternal detachment, embodied in the imaginary space of 'a picture of the girl's face' (*Jazz*, 6). Myth is visualised through a layering of voices – 'Voice' being the subject of the last chapter of the novel, bleeding through the former pages to inform the exposition as Violet and Joe look in 'bewilderment' at the photograph of the dangerous embodiment of the hypersexual black female, the subject of the illicit affair

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Toni Morrison, *Jazz* (London: Vintage, 2005), xi.

that has cut through the lives of the protagonists. One of Cavell's main ontological claims concerning the realism of photography was that 'the reality in a photograph is present to me while I am not present to it.'⁴⁵ Similar to the suture of race in *The Bluest Eye* (1970), the words of the Master who had said to the Breedloves: 'You are ugly people' and they 'had believed it,' seeing evidence of their visually inscribed inferiority in 'every billboard, every movie, every glance,' Violet experiences a similar sense of helplessness in the presence of the image defiantly placed in the centre of her home, on the heart of her fireplace, for all to see.⁴⁶ She is present, but not at something happening, which her existence needs to confirm, but at something that has happened, which she must absorb and defeat, like a 'sickness.' The girl's memory is tantamount to a disease, 'everywhere and nowhere,' a presence that assures Violet of her absence from what the photograph represents, an invisible threat she is unable to fight: 'nothing for Violet to beat or hit and when she has to, just has to strike to somehow, there is nothing left but straw or a sepia print' (*Jazz*, 28).

Violet's desire for physical integrity manifests itself in the queer, grotesque act at the funeral, the violent act of 'cutting the face' of the dead girl, her knife 'making a little dent under her earlobe, like a fold in the skin that was hardly a disfigurement at all' (*Jazz*, 91). An image that Morrison uses in her later novel, *God Help the Child* (2015),

⁴⁵ Cavell, 18.

⁴⁶ Toni Morrison, *The Bluest Eye* (London: Vintage, 1999), 37.

where Bride recalls how she pierces her ears after the trial, Violet moves beyond the corporeal medium of the photograph. She gives figurative substance to the transcendent sense of Barthesian theory which describes photography as a body that functions as a vehicle for a necrophilic encounter. The photograph becomes a source of violence and conflict, not because it shows violent things, but because on each occasion 'it fills the sight by force, and because in it nothing can be refused or transformed.'⁴⁷

The dead girl represents what Moten has termed the 'Dark Lady,' a seductive muse, a 'violent,' resisting, 'muting, mutating force,' Violet's actions forming a 'sexual cut' in an attempt to disrupt the narrative of the hypersexed black female.⁴⁸ There is a pressing sense of over-determination from the outside from which Violet chillingly tries to escape, searching for interiority as she attempts to peel back the layers of the lifeless face at the funeral. The photograph reveals her substituted experience and her overbearing desire to move beyond her existence as a fixed referent like Sethe in *Beloved*. Violet describes this experience as a 'somebody walking round town, up and down the streets wearing my skin and using my eyes' (*Jazz*, 95) - a fixed reality in the

⁴⁷ Barthes, 1982, 91.

⁴⁸ Moten reads black radicalism as a noisy interruption, a cut, an unruly and ongoing reemergence of sound: 'In such space-time (separation), in such a cut, lies certain chances. The encounter is in the cut that tone instantiates and rhythm holds. If we linger in that cut, that music, that spatio-temporal organization, we might commit an action.' 2003, 105, 223.

gaze, the attitudes and the gestures of the Other, in the same way that you fix the preparation of a photograph with a dye.

Jazz is often remarked upon for its musicality that shapes the written text, symbolising, in Morrison's words, 'an incredible kind of improvisation, a freedom in which a great deal of risk is involved,' with its key shifts, changes and fluctuating intonation that resists repetition and stability.⁴⁹ The narrator's voice in *Jazz* is intriguing, powerful, giving way to a choral layering of voices that begin to assert themselves to the extent that even the narrator questions his/her own omniscience, commenting on what it means to '[invent] stories about them,' to 'fill in their lives' (*Jazz*, 220). *Jazz* often points to the shaping hand of the narrator, with metatextual statements such as the scene becoming 'an anecdote' (*Jazz*, 145), and 'I like to think of him that way' (*Jazz*, 150), interchangeably moving from narrator to spectator with Violet, Dorcas, and in a metaliterary sense, with the reader. The novel forms an abstract reaching, what Moten terms 'another register of desire,' exceeding and undermining any coercive anticipatory idea as the analytic positions of voice and audience are exchanged.⁵⁰

I would suggest that *Jazz* reveals itself to be a novel of photochemical traces, embodied in the epithetical appellation of its protagonist, Joe Trace, and his

⁴⁹ Taylor-Guthrie, 1994, 275.

⁵⁰ Moten, 2003, 104.

relationship with Violet, as they search for a way back to the seminal stories that shape their lives. The novel depicts two separate mythical figures: Golden Gray and Wild. The former is the son of a young white woman, Vera Louis Gray, and the black hunter, Henry LesTroy – a stereotypical representation of the black male aggressor and the miscegenistic threat he carries. Golden Gray haunts Violet's meditations on her own relationship with Joe – 'What did he [see]? A young me with high-yellow skin instead of black,' 'Or a not me at all...Somebody golden, like my own golden boy, who I never ever saw but who tore up my girlhood as surely as if we'd been the best of lovers' (*Jazz*, 97). Imbued with the sentiment of the Sable Venus, and echoing Dorcas, the young adulteress, with her 'milky complexion' and sugar marked skin that suggests the privileged and aesthetic appeal of whiteness, Golden Gray exposes an investment in indexicality facilitated by its analogy with the black body.

An echo of Garner haunts the stories of the second mythological presence, Wild, registering as Joe's myth of primal loss – the debilitating absence of a mother and a disconnection from his fundamental 'blackness.' The narrator envisions this mythic loss as a deep wound that frames the novel's principal action – Joe's murder of his mistress, Dorcas, and the face of the girl who Violet disfigures to shed the myths of blackness, punctuating the photographic image. Violet enters into the contract of the *studium*, an enthusiastic contract created between the creator and the consumer and fraternises with the myths presented – the *Spectator* who responds to the photograph's

dangerous functions – ‘to inform, to represent, to surprise, to cause, to signify, to provoke desire.’⁵¹ It is the feeling Violet experiences, of horror and bewilderment, that imbues the corpse in the photograph with life. Moreover, it is the complex, dissonant effect of the ghost, the living image of a dead thing, the spectral presence, that connects death with the visual and looking with retribution, rupturing the performance of blackness in its terrifying, terrible beauty. Barthes represses and denigrates race, but Morrison’s treatment of the photograph suggests that there is something remiss in *Camera Lucida*. Race is presented as a trace, an invocation of myth that reifies the ontological concern with *studium* and *punctum* and the phenomenological privileging of history, interrupting ontological repression by altering and rupturing the surface of meaning.

Wild and the photographic connection

While Barthes invokes the notion of the skin primarily to describe the photographic connection with tactile language ‘which touches what it indicates,’ it is less noted how the pigmentation of the skin we supposedly share with the photographed subject can, in fact, undo such a connection. Arguably, while Barthes invests in the continuity that photography affords us with the physical world, he instead divests and retracts, like Joe, when looking at bodies that are black. Importantly, in terms of black performance

⁵¹ Roland Barthes defines the ‘*Studium*’ as ‘application to a thing, taste for someone a kind of general, enthusiastic commitment’ in *Camera Lucida*, 1982, 24.

and spectacle, this retraction is ironic, as Moten observes, because blackness marks the spectatorial position in *Camera Lucida*, particularly Barthes' refusal to show his mother's photograph, as well as the place of death.⁵² Barthes protects his 'ontological desire' to inquire into the essence of photography, clouding both its addressee (the Mother) and its representation (the Winter Garden photograph) in blackness. Thus, blackness is the sign of the maternal, which Barthes considers as the only fundamental and universal metonymical connection we can claim: the umbilical, the carnal. It is the sign of a temporal structure that connects the origin (the womb) with the destination (the mother's death), and thus institutes a complex dynamic between interiority and exteriority – blackness as skin versus blackness as space, blackness as a physical attribute versus blackness as the mode of an interaction.

In *Jazz*, Wild becomes the photographic paradox present in *Camera Lucida*, the experience defined by Barthes as a 'micro version of death' in his own experience of being photographed – a 'corpse' and a necrophilic encounter, a source of extreme physical alienation. And yet she represents the vitality of the maternal impulse of photography, a 'womb,' a return to the inside of the mother's body, the only place where we know we have been before. It is a space of habitation – a place where he wants to live, a dirt road that he remembers his body having travelled a long time ago.

⁵² Fred Moten, *In the Break. The Aesthetics of the Black Racial Tradition* (London, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 2003).

In *Jazz*, this becomes Joe's 'solitary journeys to find [Wild],' crawling through 'rocks shut away by greenery grown ruthless in the sun and air' (*Jazz*, 177). I am interested in such a regression, particularly as Joe's blackness renders motherhood an illegitimate procedure of cultural inheritance. According to Hortense Spiller: 'The African-American male has been touched...by the *mother*, handled by her in ways that he cannot escape...Therefore, the female, in this order of things, breaks in upon the imagination with a forcefulness that marks both a denial and an "illegitimacy."' ⁵³ The conditions of motherhood and enslavement are indistinct, and therefore, as Moten argues, childhood is a vexed concept in a 'black context,' filtered through the 'conceptual apparatus constructed out of terms like "primitivity," "prehistory" and "phylogenetic heritage."' ⁵⁴ For Barthes, photography forms an elegiac meditation on the loss of his mother. Yet a regression to the maternal figure is problematic when such a decent is coded as imperial.

Wild is connected to the complex image of motherhood represented by Margaret Garner, the primitive, apparent in the song which the white indentured servant, Amy Denver, sings to Sethe after she has given birth to Beloved:

Through the muck and mist and gloam
To our quiet cozy home,

⁵³ Hortense J. Spillers, 'Mama's Bay Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book,' *Diacritics* (Summer 1987), 80.

⁵⁴ Moten, 2003, 176.

Where to singing sweet and low

Rocks a cradle to and fro...

Where my weary wee one lies

Cometh Lady Button Eyes

(Beloved, 85-6).

The song presents both a loss and resistance, recalling Sethe's wedding dress and the material fixings that transform into Lady Button Eyes, 'buttons' that Grandma Baby 'cannot stand' (*Beloved*, 43). The song represents extremity, the 'muck and gloam' forming the setting for Joe's descent, the visual emerging through the aural in a disruptive and augmentative pattern of manual labour, maternal labour and material tensions. Connecting symbolic journeys that reminisce over lost maternal presences, Morrison echoes the didactics of Montaigne's *des Cannibales*, mythologizing Wild and her heritage as a product of the 'great and powerful mother nature,' the noble savage, whose 'beauty shines in her own purity and proper lustre, she marvellously baffles and disgraces all our vain and frivolous attempts' to bring her to a 'common order.'⁵⁵ The landscape in *Jazz* becomes phantasmagoric, a world with 'no words' (*Jazz*, 177), gliding into a utopia – a return to a place of certainty. Joe's interest in Wild's habitation is not so much to 'see,' but rather to 'be there,' the essence of the landscape being a

⁵⁵ Michel de Montaigne, *The Essays of Montaigne (Complete)*, by Michel de Montaigne [1877], Charles Cotton and William Carew Hazlitt. Reeves and Turner, trans. (Project Gutenberg. E-book), produced by David Widger. Released 17 Sept. 2006, updated 5 Sept. 2012 <www.gutenberg.org/files/3600/3600-h/3600-h.html> (Originally *Essais*, published by Simon Millanges and Jean Richer Simon, March 1580.)

'return to the maternal,' *Heimlich*, simultaneously familiar and unfamiliar, a paradoxical return to the past and an uncovering of the potential for a future.

Wild registers as Joe's myth of 'primal loss,' a berry black woman with whom Joe wants nothing to do, a spectral memory caused by the vision of a 'naked black woman lying in the weeds' (*Jazz*, 177). The narrator assigns Golden Gray the crudest of thought processes – he cannot see this black woman as a woman because of her race, which Juda Bennett asserts is 'inextricably associated with her wildness,' subsequently making her subhuman.⁵⁶ Similar to Paul D's treatment of Sethe, she is a source of ignominy as Gray grows 'a touch ashamed,' therefore deciding 'to make sure it was a vision' (*Jazz*, 144). Wild presents a superimposition of reality and the past, converging these two extremes, the epitome of the uncanny: Joe's 'scare was the sharpest,' a 'home comfortable enough to wallow in,' yet with 'unfathomable skin' (*Jazz*, 150), her stomach still yet presenting a 'rippling movement,' stasis imbued with life. Wild is an image of race that Joe cannot or will not penetrate or return to, the *noeme*.⁵⁷ He is simultaneously drawn and repelled by the notion of absence. The more that Joe tries

⁵⁶ Juda Bennett, *Toni Morrison and the Queer Pleasure of Ghosts* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2012), 61.

⁵⁷ Barthes referred to the *noeme* as the 'that-has-been,' the *interfruit*, in 'this place which extends between infinity and the subject (*operator or spectator*); it has been here, and yet separated; it has been absolutely, irrefutably present, and yet already deferred.' Barthes, 1982, 77.

to redefine himself and constitute the new, to 'kick over traces, the more assertive the past becomes in his present.'⁵⁸

Wild's body becomes a form of inter-embodiment, a source of disgust, a wounding kinship. Natality forms a catastrophic break that leads, as Moten suggest, to the 'issue of castration and doubling.'⁵⁹ Joe's symbolic inability catalyses around Wild's unfathomable epidermal schema and the threatening presence of his fundamental blackness. It is out of this psychoanalytic anticipation that his identity and desire emerge, creating, as Moten suggests, a 'condition of possibility of engagement that calls castration radically and...irrevocably into an abounding or improvisational question.'⁶⁰ Joe experiences the meditation on the black female body as a repressed and resistant sound, an 'improvisational question' that pierces with 'words that ache' (*Jazz*, 210). Morrison recalls a 'primal scene,' a childlike regression confessed 'through a kind of sweettooth,' an extension of the title 'sweetheart' in the previous chapter, a craving, an insatiable longing for Wild and her untameable nature embodied in 'storms,' starving animals, trees 'split' by lightning, reflecting Joe's phantom castration (*Jazz*, 195). Although the exact nature of Wild's 'sweettooth' and insatiable hunger is never clear, *Hunters Hunter* implies that it is desire for her son, and her

⁵⁸ Jill Matus, *Toni Morrison* (London and New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 130.

⁵⁹ Moten, 2003, 177.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*

refusal to fulfil motherhood that bequeaths only desperation and desire.⁶¹ The same mannerism forms a character flaw in the detached maternal figure Sweetness in *God Help the Child*, a mother that fantasises over abandoning her child.

Beloved and *Jazz* present African American males that have suffered symbolic castration, yet they are distinct at the climactic confrontation between father and son in *Jazz*, the narration revealing sympathies for the racially indeterminate man, the myths of blackness, the 'Golden' and the 'Gray': 'How could I have imagined him so poorly? Not noticed the hurt that was not linked to the colour of his skin, or the blood that beat beneath it. But to some other thing that longed for authenticity, for a right to be in this place' (*Jazz*, 140). Wild becomes the living death that creates a phantom limb, a catastrophic break, 'a missing part' (*Jazz*, 159), a castrated element. The narrator appeals for the white-black man who, because of the entrenched racism of his world, must struggle to reclaim his black father. The skin colour and the 'blood...beneath' reveal the interiority of the image, how race is sutured to the skin. It is through the sharing of absence, the void of blackness, that the characters find a sense of wholeness. Just as Violet asks: 'What's the world for if you can't make it up the way you want it?' (*Jazz*, 208), so Morrison uses the history of the Jazz age to express and assimilate the pain of the past, whilst acknowledging the agency and power of its inheritors to remake it.

⁶¹ Cited in Matus, 167.

TAR BABY, THE PHOTOGRAPHIC MEDIUM AND THE VISUALISATION OF THE MASK

The first photograph of a black subject in *Camera Lucida* is Richard Avedon's image, *William Casby, born a Slave*, which Barthes discusses in relation to the capacity of photography to visualise a mask. Barthes uses the definition of Italo Calvino, that the mask is used to 'designate what makes a face into the product of society and of its history,' forming the perfect intelligibility of a socially constructed meaning. In Avedon's image, Barthes sees the 'essence of slavery...laid bare,' a perfectly intelligible image: 'the mask is the meaning, so far as it is absolutely pure.'⁶² It is questionable, however, as to why this 'essence' is read in Casby's face, as the inscription of a specific economical structure, bearing what Bill Brown has termed the 'historical ontology of slavery.'⁶³

Through a reading of *Tar Baby* (1981), I suggest that Morrison plays with notions of 'masks' and masking, questioning the predetermined nature of the 'essence' of slavery – the Barthesian intent to be in the presence of, and in contact with, a 'pure' history. Published in 1981, *Tar Baby* appeared after a turbulent decade when African Americans were not only creating new and increasingly powerful self-images, but also

⁶² Barthes, 1982, 34

⁶³ Bill Brown, 'Reification, Reanimation, and the American Uncanny,' *Critical Inquiry* 32.2 (Winter 2006), 176.

contesting any depiction that did not conform to their sense of how the world appeared and felt to be. What mattered was to foreground race, not to expunge or sanitise its presence in social and political representation. The title of Morrison's fourth novel, *Tar Baby*, aligns her fiction with a folkloric, primarily oral tradition, creating a metaliterary platform, as with *Jazz*, of gregarious and credulous storytellers. Arguably her most generically mixed work, Morrison has determined *Tar Baby's* premise as that of masks; not 'masks as covering what is to be hidden,' but, in Morrison's words, how 'masks come to life, take life over, exercise the tensions between themselves and what they cover' – revealing the 'socially constructed' and the 'essence' of stereotype that foregrounds meaning in *Camera Lucida*. The masks extend to the 'texture of the novel,' which Morrison asserts needed 'leanness, architecture that was worn and ancient like a piece of mask sculpture, exaggerated, breathing just athwart the representational life it displaced.'⁶⁴ Morrison writes that she 'wanted to write literature that was irrevocably, indisputably Black, not because its characters were, or because [she] was, but because it took as its creative task and sought as its credentials those recognised and verifiable principles of Black Art.'⁶⁵ Like

⁶⁴ Toni Morrison, *Unspeakable Things Unspoken: The Afro-American Presence in American Literature* (The Tanner Lectures on Human Values: The University of Michigan, October 7, 1988), 30.

⁶⁵ In 'Memory, Creation and Writing' Morrison argues that the characteristics of the 'aesthetic tradition of Afro-American culture' is an 'antiphony the group nature of art, its functionality, its improvisational nature, its relationship to audience performance, the critical voice which upholds tradition and communal values and which also provides occasion for an individual to transcend and/or defy group restrictions.' These characteristics are meant to be descriptive rather than prescriptive; she writes: 'Nothing would be more hateful to me than a monolithic prescription for what Black literature is or ought to be,' in 'Memory, Creation, and Writing,' published in *Thought: Fordham University Quarterly* 59.4 (1984), 389.

Avedon's image, for some of Morrison's characters, the most effective mask is the absence of one, and it is this 'masked and unmasked; enchanted, dis-enchanted; wounded and wounding world' that is played out through the varieties of interpretation.

In *Tar Baby*, Morrison explores the construction of blackness, the double fold, suggesting how black art can transform those constructions, alluding to the 'change of consciousness, a change of self-recognition, a new process of identification, the emergence into visibility of a 'new subject' that Stuart Hall expounds in 'Old and New Identities.'⁶⁶ Many critics have discussed Morrison's engagement with concepts of 'blackness,' 'masks' and masking in *Tar Baby*, with most scholarship centring on Jadine and Son as representations of beliefs about blackness. Critics tend to conclude that Morrison favours either Son or Jadine and his or her respective manifestation of blackness, with Son analogous to Black Nationalist beliefs and Jadine the postcolonial concepts of cosmopolitanism and the diluting of African culture. However, beyond this binary reading, an increasing minority of critics, including Yogita Goyal, emphasise the ambiguity of the novel - an ambiguity described as 'multiplicity', a new construction of 'double consciousness' and an embrace of a breadth of philosophies.⁶⁷ Madelyn Jabolon, for example, suggests that Morrison 'does not ask the audience to

⁶⁶ Hall, 1997, 41.

⁶⁷ Yogita Goyal, 'The Gender of Diaspora in Toni Morrison's *Tar Baby*,' *Modern Fiction Studies* 52 (2006), 406.

choose between assimilationism [Jadine] and nationalism [Son]' but that she 'illuminates the strengths and weaknesses of each and recommends neither.'⁶⁸

Morrison's fishbowl becomes a reflective 'mirror in which readers can see their own beliefs,' demanding a shift from an either/or orientation to one that is both – a turnstile of shifts and contradictions. In a reading of *Paradise* (1997), Michael Wood similarly argues that readers' interpretations of Morrison's novels often reveal more about the readership than the authorial intent, that the shifting and indeterminate narrative perspectives create a 'removed realm of the truth,' where characters articulate the thoughts, viewpoints, and perspectives of the readership – an 'ironic' paradise, which is, in itself, 'part of Morrison's art.'⁶⁹ Son and Jadine embody concepts of blackness, but also can be viewed as constructs that exemplify the investment in definitions of blackness. Each character struggles to 'rescue' the other, but, as Morrison asserts, 'each was pulling the other away from the maw of hell – its very ridge top. Each knew the world as it was meant or ought to be.'⁷⁰

Morrison considers the power of stereotype in the literary imagination as both a 'visible and invisible mediating force...a dark and abiding presence' (*Playing in the*

⁶⁸ Madelyn Jabolon, *Black Metafiction: Self-Consciousness in African American Literature* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1997), 76.

⁶⁹ Michael Wood, 'Sensations of Loss,' in *The Aesthetics of Toni Morrison: Speaking the Unspeakable*, ed. Marc E. Connor (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 2000), 117.

⁷⁰ Toni Morrison, *Tar Baby* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1981), 269.

Dark, 46) of black Africanism in American literature. Given this attestation, it can be questioned as to why Morrison selected the tar baby as her black presence – mute, intractable, maddening and simultaneously mesmerising, conjured within the text to serve as a ‘visible emblem’ and a mediating force for her own literary imagination.⁷¹ Furthered in *Unspeakable Things*, Morrison claims that the tar baby myth mediates through both the ‘vices and expulsions of history,’ where creativity meets historical ‘truth’: ‘Nothing in those encounters, is safe, or should be. Safety is the foetus of power as well as protection from it, as the uses to which masks and myths are put in Afro-American culture remind us.’⁷²

Perhaps, in this renunciation of safety, there is nothing at all remarkable in her having named one of her narratives after one of the most enduring, if also one of the most discomfiting, figures in African American folklore. In eliciting the contemporary resonance of the tale, Morrison knew she would be resuscitating its foreboding elements as well. Morrison confides that she did not ‘retell that story,’ that she did not ‘improve it,’ but rather ‘scratched it and pressed it with [her] fingertips as one does the head and spine of a favourite cat – to get the secret of its structure without disturbing the mystery.’⁷³ Noted by Maria di Battista, Morrison suggests that the enigma of the tale must be deciphered, but not demystified, ‘a rather neat,

⁷¹ Maria di Battista, ‘Contentions in the House of Chloe: Morrison’s *Tar Baby*’ in Connor, 2000, 97.

⁷² Morrison, 1988, 30.

⁷³ Di Battista in Connor, 2000, 100.

but...essential distinction, removing the temptation of a singular and correct process of definition.'⁷⁴ I would suggest that, through the mythology of tar, Morrison explores blackness to show implicitness in those constructions, whilst proposing ways that black art can reveal and transform.

Though there are several possible origins, the tar baby myth can be traced back to Africa, pre-colonial expansion, and associated with the trickster spider, Anaanu, who fakes his death in order to disenfranchise others at night. Privileging material wealth, Anaanu becomes a mythological figure translatable to the mechanisms of slavery, extending to the Valerian household in *Tar Baby*, and to Jadine, the Copper Venus and modern counterpart of the Hottentot Venus. The myth re-emerges in nineteenth century America, initially as an African American response to indentureship, developed by Joel Chandler Harris' reshaping of African American folklore in his Uncle Remus plantation tales. A major force in shaping racial imagery in American literature, Harris' tar baby presents a unique combination of African American folklore and European stereotype, articulating anger concerning separatist philosophy during slavery and the Reconstruction era.

Contradicting the abolitionist emphasis on the brutality of slavery, later depicted in *Beloved*, the image of the loving Uncle Remus and his white young charge supported

⁷⁴ Ibid.

reconciliation philosophies following the Civil War, with Uncle Remus described as a 'type' of the black race: 'an old negro who appears to be venerable enough to have lived during the period which he describes – who has nothing but pleasant memories of the discipline of slavery' forming a correction of the 'intolerable misrepresentations of the minstrel stage,' a 'happy darky' or a 'kindly uncle.'⁷⁵ Yet within the same introduction, an anticipation of the revisionist understanding of the tales as a racial allegory is apparent, with Harris sensing the symbolic desire for vengeance, with the unapologetic images of violent death in 'The Awful Fate of Mr. Wolf' and 'The End of Mr. Bear' suggesting no need for 'scientific investigation' into why '[the Negro storyteller] selects his hero as the weakest and most harmless of animals,' and brings him out victorious in contests with the more powerful but less intelligent Brer Fox and Brer Bear. Conversely, revisionist treatments such Morrison's *Tar Baby* move beyond the separatist stance and a harmonising of racial tensions, emphasising the characterisation of Brer Rabbit rather than that of the affected Uncle Remus.⁷⁶

In the version of the tar narrative that Son tells to Jadine, the tar baby is placed in the road by the white farmers to entrap Brer Rabbit who they believe is eating their cabbages. On finding the inanimate tar baby, Brer Rabbit offers his greetings, but is

⁷⁵ Joel Chandler Harris, *The Complete Tales of Uncle Remus* [1895] (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1955), xxvii.

⁷⁶ *Ibid*, xxv.

offended by the apparent arrogance of the trap before him, failing to answer his pleasantries. During their encounter, the rabbit becomes entangled in the tar and completely immobilised. However, in Morrison's version, narrated through Son in his attack on Jadine, Brer Rabbit escapes the mortal altercation due to the predisposed cruelty and vindictiveness of the white masters. He is thrown by the slaver into a briar bush with the intention of impaling him on the thorns, forming an ironic analogy to the crown of thorns worn by Christ as he was taunted by those that would oppose him on the way to the cross. In a parody of Easter Rising, the cover of the briar bush enables Brer Rabbit's escape, fuelled by the 'budding repentance decomposed into a steaming compost' (*Tar Baby*, 274), nimbly finding an exit past under the cover of the briar's defences.

According to Morrison, the 'tar baby' myth originates not only in African trickster tales of Ananui, and the reworking of slave narratives, but also in the ancient African 'tar lady,' considered a powerful symbol of black womanhood because of her ability and creativity in binding things together.⁷⁷ Morrison recalls that the tar baby myth haunted her childhood, eventually becoming a 'point of departure to history and prophecy' – revealing tensions between the mythological and the haptic properties of black surfaces:

⁷⁷ Elizabeth Ann Beaulieu, *Toni Morrison Encyclopaedia* (London, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 2003), 234.

Tar seemed to me to be an odd thing to be in a Western story, and I found that there is a tar lady in African mythology. I started thinking about tar. At one time, a tar pit was a holy place, at least an important place, because tar was used to build things...For me, the tar baby came to mean the black woman who can hold things together.⁷⁸

Like *Jazz*, *Tar Baby* fully addresses the myths of blackness by examining them at their core, through their refashioning, and their retelling against cultural anxieties. Voices and images are layered, masks revered and rejected, radically reinventing myth while respecting the origins, not as 'stagnant and sacrosanct' but as 'a living vehicle for discussion and edification.'⁷⁹ It is through the interplay between narrative voice and myth that the invisible structures are highlighted, the machinery behind the construction of the racial image revealed, and the generative possibilities elevated. In defence of the use of such a derogatory term, used, in Morrison's memory, to insult black children, namely 'black girls,'⁸⁰ it is pertinent to return to the rational in *Playing in the Dark*:

[T]he act of enforcing racelessness in literary discourses is itself a racial act. Pouring rhetorical acid on the fingers of a black hand may indeed destroy the prints, but not the hand. Besides what happens in that violent, self-serving act of erasure of the hands, the fingers, the fingerprints of those who do the pouring? Do they remain acid-free? The literature itself suggests otherwise (*Playing in the Dark*, 46).

⁷⁸ Taylor-Guthrie, 122.

⁷⁹ Juda Bennett, *Toni Morrison and the Queer Pleasure of Ghosts* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2012), 137.

⁸⁰ Taylor-Guthrie, 122.

Myth becomes like a fingerprint, like the photochemical traces, the invisible structures surrounding an image, embodied through Jadine's repeated incantation of Son's 'forefinger [which] stayed where his finger had been in the valley of her naked foot,' the print that finds her skin despite how hard she tries to 'fold them under her white cotton skirt' (*Tar Baby*, 177-178) - a white fabric imbued with connotations of slavery. Battista suggests that Morrison, rather than causing an unnatural whiteness, a grotesque, bleached, human and social reality, 'suspends them in a racial emulsion' like a photographic plate.⁸¹ The writer's hand becomes, as in Morrison's Nobel Prize speech, the hand that holds the bird – a wise woman, whose legend is the 'source of amusement,' her blindness questioned by young sceptics who ask: 'Old Women, I hold in my hand a bird. Tell me whether it is living or dead.' She does not answer at first, bringing her interlocutors to the brink of laughter, but at last delivers her Solomonic judgement: 'I don't know whether the bird you are holding is dead or alive, but what I do know is that it is in your hands.'⁸² The hand becomes symbolic of the writer's relationship with language and its ability to cherish and protect cultural law, determining the verifiable principles of 'Black Art' that Morrison defines in her essay, 'Memory, Creation and Writing' (1984):

If my work is faithfully to reflect the aesthetic tradition of Afro-American culture, it must make conscious use of the characteristics of its art forms and translate them into print: antiphony, the group nature of art, its functionality, its improvisational nature, its relationship to audience

⁸¹ Maria Di Battista in Connor, 101.

⁸² Carolyn C Denard, ed., *Toni Morrison: What Moves at the Margin. Selected Nonfiction* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2008), xi.

performance, the critical voice which upholds tradition and communal values and which also provides occasion for an individual to transcend and/or defy group restrictions.⁸³

Morrison warns against the polarity of race, the unnatural human and social reality, manipulating and asserting its own power, and in so doing suffocating the living language within its deadly grasp. Interpreted in the light of this recurrent imagery of manipulation, the tar baby suddenly reveals itself as a race-specific emblem for the black artist's ambiguous relation to black matter – black culture, black history and black story, especially the unspeakable and unspoken story that will not be told until *Beloved*, a story that possibly could not be told until Morrison herself had survived her own encounter with the tar baby put in her authorial path.

At the close of *Tar Baby*, when Son takes metaphorical flight into the sea, the embodiment of a 'certain kind of man. Likety-split. Likety-split' (*Tar Baby*, 309), the return to folkloric vernacular still raises questions as to whether the title is meant to be read as eponymous or symbolic, whether it designates a character, or a stereotypical myth to be repudiated. Critics such as Mbalia have argued that the tar baby is Jadine: 'She represents that which is unhuman, built by the European as a trap for other Africans, an artificial lure to tempt them to a Europeanised lifestyle.'⁸⁴ Walking through the supermarket, she is the embodiment of excess: 'too tall...too

⁸³ Toni Morrison, 'Memory, Creation, and Writing,' published in *Thought: Fordham University Quarterly* 59.4 (1984), 388-389.

⁸⁴ Mbalia, 75.

much hip, too much bust,' the uncanny depiction of 'transcendent beauty,' the exotic Other, marked with 'two upside-down V's' scored into 'each of her cheeks' (*Tar Baby*, 42). Like Bride, Jadine has also succeeded in the fashion industry – Jadine as a model, and Bride as a designer. Both women 'struggle to construct an authentic identity as an African American woman' and are united in their quest for racial self-discovery.⁸⁵

Jadine is the Europeanised version of black aestheticism, replacing the white model on the cover of *Elle*, ironically compounded by the way that Ondine, the servant in the Valerian Household, a pseudo-maternal and subjugated 'black mammy' figure, stirs milk into the chocolate paste dessert for the Valerian family as she gloats over Jadine's triumph. Associated with tar throughout the novel, Jadine provides tension between a natural identity and her commodified and malleable 'soft flesh' (*Tar Baby*, 274), once stating a desire to 'get out of [her] skin and be the only person inside' (*Tar Baby*, 45), to remove the mask of blackness or render it invisible. Yet signifiers cling to her like tar, rendering her a by-product of the diaspora, a 'closed-away orphan in a Cheech and Chong T-shirt' (*Tar Baby*, 274). *Tar Baby* is a novel deeply perceptive of the desire to create a black mythology, a 'Black Art,' reconstructing stereotypes.

⁸⁵ John N Duvall, "'Descent in the "House of Chloe:" Race, Rape, and Identity in Toni Morrison's *Tar Baby*,' *Contemporary Literature* 38.2 (1997), 326.

On a drive out to the Island with Son, the mythical Arcadia, Jadine moves under 'young trees [that] sighed and swayed,' forming an echo of the 'children' of African descent that Son desperately tries to locate later in his journey and a jarring reminder of Jadine's parentless status. The impossible couple – the Europhiliac and the black activist of class consciousness – momentarily find a utopian harmony. They embody the pastoral, at one with the natural antiquity of their environment, forming a visual connection between the Golden Age and the Harlem Renaissance. Yet the scene at the Island also recalls Guercino's *Et in Arcadia Ego*, a *memento mori*, for even within this quixotic setting, a depiction of virtue and rectitude, the taint of Death still lingers.⁸⁶ On reaching the water's edge, Jadine slips under the murky surface, emerging with her 'white skirt [showing] a deep dark and sticky hem,' 'mud' like 'jelly' (*Tar Baby*, 195) drying onto her skin. She becomes a grotesque parody of the 'swamp women,' the Wild within her, cloven within the folds of a tree as she desperately tries to ease her body out of the analogous tar pit.

Jadine's encounter with nature becomes eroticised, as the trees whisper of the depth of her desires for Son: 'sway when he sways and shiver with him too. Whisper your numbers from one to fifty into the parts that have been lifted away and left tender

⁸⁶ *Et in Arcadia Ego* (also known as *The Arcadian Shepherds*) is a painting by the Italian Baroque artist Giovanni Francesco Barbieri (Guercino), from c. 1618–1622. The painting shows two young shepherds staring at a skull, with a mouse and a blowfly, placed onto a cippus with the words *Et in Arcadia ego* ("I too was in Arcadia").

under the skin' (*Tar Baby*, 184). Her movement with the tree becomes a courtship, parodying her betrayal of her heritage through her complicities with the unspoken atrocities of the modern world. Ancestral women look down on her, at first 'delighted...thinking that a runaway child had been restored to them,' yet soon realising that Jadine is desperately struggling to be 'free' from her history, retaining her diasporic, orphaned status (*Tar Baby*, 184). Later, her legs burned 'with the memory of tar' (*Tar Baby*, 278), extending beyond her own encounter to the skin memory of tar applied to slaves to mask their injuries at the slave auction, or the lynched bodies that would hang from the trees by the swamp. Jadine feels humiliation, compounded by Son's teasing, and she can 'no longer identify the tree that had danced with her' (*Tar Baby*, 185) following her grotesque birthing from the pool, twisting, shimmying, with a 'final giant effort around to the road side of the tree,' the other side of the road, a side of civilised modernity that she so desperately wants to be reborn into. Tar becomes the medium to connect the past with the present - this mute, inglorious image of blackness which makes the surface visible, as 'unpassable' as the tar baby itself.

Later called a 'tar baby-side-of-the road whore trap' (*Tar Baby*, 222) by Son, Jadine can grapple with the myth of blackness used to define her, but her weakness lies in her inability to subdue or destroy the negative implications of the stereotype, signified by her rejection of the ancient tar women in the swamp. Though Jadine is a

black woman, she is, as James Coleman suggests, 'an antithesis of the black fold and community values.'⁸⁷ Son becomes the embodiment of black nationalist beliefs, the polarity of Jadine's promotion of cosmopolitanism and African diaspora, who desperately struggles to free herself from the sacred properties of the 'African tar lady' with her 'permanent embrace' that created the 'first world of the world' (*Tar Baby*, 184). She loses her identity as a black woman and internalises what Son perceives to be 'white' values, a tar baby, a creation of capitalist America, compounded by the parallel image depicted by Son of the United States as a deformed, bleeding, disabled nation:

Loud, red, and sticky. Its fields spongy, its pavements slick with the blood of all the best people. As soon as a man or woman did something generous or said something bold, pictures of their funeral lines appeared in the foreign press. It repelled him and made him suspicious of all knowledge he could not witness or feel in his bones. When he thought of America, he thought of the tongue that the Mexican drew in Uncle Sam's mouth: a map of the U.S as an ill-shaped tongue ringed by teeth and crammed with the corpses of children (*Tar Baby*, 167).

In an interview discussing the creation of *Tar Baby*, Morrison visualised the restraining devices used by white slavers, the bit in the mouth that clamped the tongue to the jaw, or the face mask worn while cutting cane to ensure that the slaves would not eat their harvest. Morrison comments that 'humiliation was key to what the experience was like,' apparent in the historical humiliation that Jadine feels

⁸⁷ James Coleman, 'The Quest for Wholeness in Toni Morrison's *Tar Baby*,' *Black American Literature Forum* 20.1-2 (Spring/Summer 1986), 64.

following her encounter in the swamp, the implications of which she refuses to acknowledge.⁸⁸ In Son's mindscape, the tar becomes a 'mouth full of blood,' conferring the difference between the visible and the visual image in the series of Morrison's mythic tableaux.⁸⁹ Whiteness becomes the grotesque vision of teeth overflowing with the 'sixty million and more bodies' of slaves that Morrison cites in the dedication pages of *Beloved*. These men, women and children that died on the passage to the Americas present a paradoxically still-born society incongruent with Jadine's desire for a rebirthing into a supremacist culture.

In Son's depiction of the Mexican, the tongue is liberated from the bit, subtending beyond the body and racial consciousness and the represented body, creating a new 'reality' as aesthetic and culturally driven senses merge in flesh. I would argue that, in this instance, Morrison's visual tableau of the conflicted vision of America can be considered by departing from the photographic image to the subject of cinema and moving film. Vivian Sobchack's description of the cinesthetic subject has similarities with Barthes' experience of the photographic connection. As Sobchack explains, the term 'cinesthetic' is meant to comprise of the way in which the cinematic experience triggers and relies on both synaesthesia, or intersensoriality, and coenaesthesia, the perception of a person's whole sensorial being. Sobchack suggests that the cinesthetic

⁸⁸ Matus, 1989, 257-8.

⁸⁹ 'Mouth full of blood' is the name given to the last published collection of Toni Morrison's essays: *Mouth Full of Blood: Essays, Speeches, and Meditations* (London: Penguin Random House, 2019).

subject is one that 'feels his or her literal body as only one side of an irreducible and dynamic relationship structure of reversibility and reciprocity' that has, as its other side, 'the figural objects of bodily provocation on the screen.'⁹⁰ The articulation of the sensual experience of the lived body is both a 'real' (or literal) sensual experience and an 'as-if-real' (or as-if-real) sensual experience.

I would suggest that Morrison's visual of Uncle Sam's mouth presents an ambivalent vacillation or an ambiguous conflation of the 'real,' such as Son's experience of America, or Jadine's magazine cover. The 'as-if real' is presented by Uncle Sam engulfing a map of the U.S, or Jadine's mythical absorption into nature. It is at this point that Sobchack asserts the 'ambivalence' of having both a 'real' or 'as-if-real' experience is constituted as both a 'carnal matter and a conscious meaning,' a 'precise phenomenological structure' grounded in the 'living body.' Sobchack argues that it is at this at point which the viewer's movement up the 'entropic slope of language encounters the movement by which we come back down this side of the distinction between actuality, action, production and motion.'⁹¹ For Sobchack, the relationship between the film and subject is fluid and chiasmatic.

⁹⁰ Vivian Sobchack, *Carnal Thoughts. Embodiment and Moving Image Culture* (London: University of California Press, 2004), 67, 76.

⁹¹ *Ibid*, 73, 79.

Conversely, Sobchack argues that the visual experience for Barthes is fundamentally one sided, claiming that only the cinema can produce this reversibility, that the photograph cannot be inhabited – it cannot ‘entertain, in the abstraction of its visible space, its single and static point of view, the presence of a live and living body – so it does not really invite the spectator into the scene so much as it invites contemplation of the scene.’⁹² Theorising the connection between the visual and the subject, Barthes is distinct in that the photographic connection occurs with a dead rather than a living body, with a ‘corpse,’ a ‘dead mother’. I would suggest, however, that Barthes was committed to demonstrating just the opposite of Sobchack, that the essence of photography for him lies in the way in which it appeals to the living body. What Sobchack does not note is that the *punctum* registers a bodily response and a process of habitation, but it also restores movement to the stillness of the photograph, giving life to its mortality effect. The *punctum* emerges not only from the temporal dimension of the gaze, but also changes due to memory: ‘In this glum desert, suddenly a specific photograph reaches me: it animates me, and I animate it.’⁹³

⁹² Sobchack argues that ‘we need to alter the binary and bifurcated structures of the film experience suggested by [Barthes] formulations and, instead, posit the viewer’s living body as a carnal ‘third term’ that grounds and mediates experience and language, subjective vision and objective image – both differentiating and unifying them in reversible (or chiasmatic) process of perception and expression. Indeed, it is the lived body that provides both the site and genesis of the ‘third’ or ‘obtuse’ meaning that Roland Barthes suggests escapes language yet resides within it.’ In *Carnal Thoughts. Embodiment and Moving Image Culture* (London: University of California Press, 2004), 60, 144.

⁹³ Barthes, 1982, 20.

What Sobchack describes as the 'figure-ground reversibility between 'having sense' and 'making sense' in relation to the cinematic image, this experience in *Camera Lucida* – the prick of the *punctum* that awakens for Barthes – only occurs when he is in the photographic presence of certain photographs and of certain bodies. When facing Casby, Avedon's portrait of Philip Randolph, and the newspaper cuttings of the slave market, Barthes rejects and disavows the catachrestic process, a response that Morrison challenges. For Barthes, the black body 'makes the skin crawl,' a sensation opposed by Morrison through Son, who demonstrates a palpable repulsion at the abhorrent treatment of black bodies – 'suspicious of all knowledge he could not witness' (*Tar Baby*, 168), like the invisible mask. Barthes' rejection of the black image thus interrupts the chiasmatic structure of reversibility with an obtuse materiality – to remain on his own side of his body – to avoid, rather than seek, tactile contact. The image of slavery, ironically, and uncannily is an absent image of slavery in purely phenomenological terms.

Slavery appears in *Camera Lucida* as supplementary to the photograph, with slavery appearing only to disappear again, 'hence the photograph whose meaning is too impressive is quickly deflected; we consume it aesthetically, not politically.'⁹⁴ In order to lay bare the essence of slavery, meaning must be conveniently dispensed with: the political logistics of perception, the history of slavery that produced the image in the

⁹⁴ Barthes, 1982, 36.

first place. In the first chronological instance in *Camera Lucida*, the Casby photo, slavery appears as an essence that is visibly communicated, but aestheticised and of reduced significance, since Barthes pursues the photograph as an event beyond meaning. In the second evidentiary example, the newspaper clippings, an absent image of slavery appears as the cynosure of photography itself – slavery and its absence exist, as it were, principally to establish the that-has-been-ness of the photograph.

I would argue that Morrison allows her readers to question Barthes' response to the photographic image, which emerges as a structure of deferral rather than referral, most apparently when Jadine stares down the lens of her camera at Eloë. In stark contrast to the cosmopolitanism and capitalism of New York, Eloë is figuratively the 'blackest thing' Jadine has ever seen: 'She might as well have been in a cave, a grave, a dark womb of earth, suffocating' (*Tar Baby*, 217). The punctum is conveyed when Son is looking at the photographs and he sees Beatrice standing in the middle of the road: 'Beatrice, pretty Beatrice, Soldier's daughter. She looked stupid. Ellen, sweet cookie-faced Ellen, that he always thought so pretty. She looked stupid. They all looked stupid, backwoods, dumb, dead' (*Tar Baby*, 234-5). Eloë – a largely illiterate and economically underdeveloped community – after experiencing the exploitative system of slavery, colonialism, neo-colonialism and domestic colonialism, and after being exposed to the ideologies associated with the teachings of Islam and Christianity,

is a nostalgic past erased by the pressing ideologies embodied by New York. Like Golden Gray and his attempt to reconnect with Wild, neither Son, Jadine nor the African people can return to this past Arcady, this idyllic and highly romanticised way of life.

In opposition to the 'blackness' of Eloë, Jadine repositions herself as the lighter-skinned, the mythological Copper Venus, 'abandoning' her Africanness and 'picking' (*Tar Baby*, 272) the white race through a classical Europeanised frame. She loses her identity as a black woman and internalises white values. She is a tar baby, a trap for Son, a creation of capitalist America, fit only to 'feed, love and care for white people's children' (*Tar Baby*, 272), 'lonely and inauthentic,' 'straightening her hair' and 'wearing hoop earrings' (*Tar Baby*, 45), conforming for her European, Parisian fiancé who will bring her wealth and unquestioned status despite his adulterous nature. Not surprisingly, her allegiance is to the Caucasian Streets who have grown rich on the heritage of slave labour, rather than to Ondine and Sydney, the black domestic labourers, who are employed in her service. It is her realisation of her shared heritage with this woman – 'pretty Beatrice' – and the historicism that she represents - that compounds with the Barthesian 'disturb[ance]' at the mask, the horror at the photograph, the realisation that the image places slavery in the same historical continuum as the viewer, that the referent has, so to speak, stuck to it, like the burning tar on her legs in the swamp.

Following Susan Sontag's argument, images of atrocities are intractable, and it is those images that put those with privilege on the 'same map' as the suffering seen by the viewer – 'in ways we might prefer not to imagine to be linked to their suffering, as the wealth of some may imply the destitution of others, is a task for which the painful, stirring images supply only an initial spark.'⁹⁵ Considering Barthes' carnal theory of photography, the photographs of the atrocities of slavery put him into the same body of the suffering he sees, and that body – the body he touches, the skin he inhabits, is paradigmatically black. The black body, as with the images of Eloe, 'makes the skin crawl,' and thus interrupts the chiasmatic structure of reversibility with an obtuse materiality, a tactile desire to remain on his own side of his body.

Morrison plays with the relationship between the referent and 'blackness' through the commodified fondling of the 'hides of ninety baby seals' (*Tar Baby*, 89) turned into a coat for the Copper Venus. As Jadine lays on top of the furs, she 'presses her thighs into its dark luxury...then she lifted herself up a little and let her nipples brush the black hairs, back and forth, back and forth' (*Tar Baby*, 91), threatening to assume the fabric in the same way that her body momentarily cleaves with the trees in the swamp. The coat becomes a second skin, a mask, a seductiveness which she can control, to take up and put on when she chooses, flesh turned into commodity, echoing Cuvier's handling of the iconographic flesh of the Hottentot Venus. A source of fear for Ondine,

⁹⁵ Susan Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others* (New York: Picador, 2003), 80.

the coat becomes analogous with the onion that she peels in the next scene, compounded by her role as a domestic labour. She fears the 'natural state' that the coat embodies, the commercialisation and commodification of the body, the legacy of slavery within which both she and Jadine remain complicit. Like the onion, with its 'layer of slippery skin...beneath her thumb' (*Tar Baby*, 95), hiding the soft spots, the sites of weakness, and the decay beneath, so the coat becomes the mask that comes to life, highlighted by Morrison in *Unspeakable Things Unspoken*, where masks exercise 'the tensions between themselves and what they cover.'⁹⁶

After her first rift with Son, it is interesting to note that Jadine returns only to the Valerian Household to fetch the coat, an embodiment of her seductiveness, something she can control, to take up and put on when she chooses, like a second skin. It is a skin that she wants to consume, as she 'opened her lips and licked the fur,' and a mask that she wants to consume and that she wants to consume her, as she 'closed her eyes and imagined the blackness she was sinking into' (*Tar Baby*, 112), blinding herself to the darkness behind the mask, a skin entrenched with a history of stereotype, atrocity, and suffering, turning the 'fear' into a 'seductive' (*Tar Baby*, 112) and eroticised layer of blackness.

⁹⁶ Toni Morrison, *Unspeakable Things Unspoken: The Afro-American Presence in American Literature* (The Tanner Lectures on Human Values: The University of Michigan, October 7, 1988), 4.

In the prologue to the novel, Son is described as the Tar Baby, an imaginative production of author and reader, born into imaginations already saturated with a history of culture meanings. His character compounds a history of representations of blackness and the struggle for black self-representations within white culture, revealing structural and economic inequalities, whilst suggesting the ways in which constructions of blackness can reinforce or potentially transform relations of power. It is Son's presence in the Valerian household that forces to the surface the hidden stories, the deception behind the masks, replacing the abjured projections of the 'essence of slavery' with a lucid realness. He is the embodiment of wildness, uncivilised, with 'aggressive, vicious hair that needed to be put in jail...Mau Mau, Attica, chain-gang hair' (*Tar Baby*, 113), the narrator enforcing later that 'there was no way to hide his helpless, naked face' (*Tar Baby*, 178).

In contrast to Jadine and her physical, sensual excess, Son presents the legacy of Casby, a face of blackness absented by the mask, which is as stubborn as the photograph's link to the reference. Throughout *Tar Baby*, Son is also imbued with the tainted, yet simultaneously liberating associations of tar. In the exposition, he is a 'tar,' a sailor, who dives into the 'pitch-black sea,' his skin blending with the 'dark waters' (*Tar Baby*, 4). He is a child of the diaspora, with no identity, no possessions, 'no things to gather – no book of postage stamps, no razor blade or key to any door' with the 'overwhelming hunger of a new born' (*Tar Baby*, 3, 7). He embodies the metaphorical

birth of 'Black Art,' jumping from the HMS *Stor Konigsgaarten*, a name connecting monarchy, European power and Edenic myth – 'King's Garden' conflating God-like omniscience with the oppression of colonial conquest and slavery. He wants to 'breathe into [Jadine] the smell of tar and its shiny consistency' (*Tar Baby*, 120) and he brings Valerian's 'mauve' petaled hydrangea back to life with its 'black magic' (*Tar Baby*, 113). When he showers, the 'water that [runs] into the drain [is] a dark-charcoal grey' (*Tar Baby*, 187) using 'placenta protein shampoo'. His blackness becomes a 'piece of mask sculpture,' a creative force, a magical notion, a skin colour, a flower. He presents the spiritual power of language – language as material, active and creative, connecting tar and writing through his hair: 'it was like foliage and from a distance it looked like nothing less than the crown of a deciduous tree' and when cut, 'great clouds of glittering graphite hair fell to the floor' (*Tar Baby*, 132). Inciting imagery of hands, eyes, breasts, feet and black bodies, his evocation of blackness anticipates Baby Suggs' words in the clearing in *Beloved*: 'in this here place, we flesh; flesh that weeps, laughs; flesh that dances on bare feet in grass. Love it. Love it hard' (*Beloved*, 119). Tar becomes the photochemical trace, the fingerprint on his hands, born out of the 'womb of the sea' accompanied by the 'ammonia odours of birth,' connecting the birth of 'Black Art,' the tar baby, and the photochemical traces of the mask, the sea of literary and historical contexts of the unconscious mind.

Son embodies the trickster figure, reclaiming and adapting myth through an Africanist frame, entering the novel and causing the Valerian household to question their ideals. He assumes different identities – William Green, Herbert Robinson, Louis Stover, the spiritual ‘Son’ of Valerian and the ‘Son’ of the African people - his true name never revealed to the reader. He is the skeleton in the closet, literally emerging from a wardrobe, black and bearded, and he brings the skeleton out of the closet figuratively by revealing Margaret’s abuse of her natural son, Michael. He also symbolically carries the skeletons of Africa’s past through his embodiment of the tar myth and his construction as a modern-day revolutionary, naively fighting to return to a nostalgic, Arcadian Africa, in an increasingly capitalist world. His naivety, his love for Jadine, causes him to become the rabbit trapped in the fur, the ‘African’ in the ‘American’ arena, embodied by the tensions between the poor black community of Eloë and his petit bourgeois lover: ‘Each knew the world as it was meant or ought to be. One had a past, the other a future and each one bore the culture to save the race in his hands’ (*Tar Baby*, 269).

Two characters, so extreme in culture and ideology, Jadine and Son’s relationship becomes, in the words of Denise Heinze, ‘the violent manifestation of the psychic fragmentation of culture as a whole,’ a cultural illness.⁹⁷ Morrison moves beyond a

⁹⁷ Denise Heinze, *The Dilemma of “Double Consciousness: Toni Morrison’s Novels* (London: University of Georgia Press, 1993), 93.

polarised reading of her characters, and of the tar baby myth, suggesting that 'neither can be upheld as a reliable authority on race and gender, as Morrison uses the two to displace other's certainties and reveal their limitations' – an entanglement visually manifested through the first meeting of Jadine and Son in her bedroom: 'She struggled to pull herself away from his image in the mirror and to yank her tongue from the roof of her mouth' (*Tar Baby*, 112), caught in a slaver's mask by the power of his image.⁹⁸ Where Jadine has represented the tar trap, 'the sticky mediator between master and peasant, plantation owner and slave...constructed by the farmer to foil and entrap,' here Son demands to be freed from the 'difficult, unresponsive, but seducing woman' (*Tar Baby*, xii-xiii), the black Venus. The cultural illness is rhetorically conveyed through rape, as Son plays the role of the violating black male, a 'Mama-spoiled black man' who leaves Jadine in 'wrinkled sheets, slippery, gutted' and paralysed, unable to use her hands to remove a piece of hair from her mouth (*Tar Baby*, 271). The act, 'rhetorically constructed to deny the reader's awareness of the violence,' leaves Jadine in a position where her mask is violently removed, left with a 'nakedness' that 'embarrassed [Son]...He had produced that nakedness and having soiled it, it shamed him' (*Tar Baby*, 272).⁹⁹

⁹⁸ Goyal, 2006, 406.

⁹⁹ Duvall, 104.

It is through Son, with his unobscured race and class consciousness, that the reader is presented with the primary enemy of the African people being an economical factor – that of land and labour, not skin colour, that results in the exploitation of all of the Sons and daughters of Africa. As Jadine drapes herself in a sealskin coat, Son is homeless, without possession, standing in front of her with borrowed pyjamas that are too small – ‘the sleeves end[ing] somewhere between the wrist and the elbow and the pants leg came to just above his shins. As he stood looking at the coat she could not tell whether he or it was the blacker or the shinier, but she knew she did not want him to touch it’ (*Tar Baby*, 113). Son’s absence becomes an excessive blackness, the void representing slavery, the history that she does not want him to touch, and thereby connect her with. Jadine desperately tries to replace the seal skin with her image on a magazine cover, her commercialised, constructed self, with her hair ‘pressed flat to her head, pulled away from her brow revealing a neat hair line,’ and her eyes the ‘colour of mink’ (*Tar Baby*, 116), yet Son sees past the commodity, past the appellation of the ‘Copper Venus’ to her core, a violent penetration of her sense of self, ‘physically overpowering, like bundles of long whips or lashes that could grab her and beat her to jelly.’ He sees past the mimicry, the replication, with eyes that never seem ‘to close,’ to her lips, echoing Sethe’s mouth, her source of universal femininity, always ‘wet and open...always the same wet and open lips.’ It is Son that destroys the mask, embodied by the seal skin coat, when he pleads with Jadine: ‘Tell him anything but don’t tell him I smelled you...he would understand that there was something in you to smell and

that I smelled it and if Valerian understands that then he will understanding everything' (*Tar Baby*, 125). It is Son that reveals the common identity, a common history, a truth behind a stereotype embodied by Jadine's scent, a lingering trace. A raw, carnal and innate truth that 'no sealskin coat' or 'million dollar earrings' can disguise. A blackness, a black art that is revealed and simultaneously transformed from the connotations of primal, savage, Other.

I would suggest that Morrison constructs blackness, not as a form of judgement or standard, but as a history, a rhetoric, an ethics, a way of seeing and knowing the world, and as an aesthetic that encompasses all of these things. Tar signifies blackness well beyond the traditional connotations of evil negation, absence and death, a blackness that takes on a new, metaphysical, mythical, spiritual meaning. It is the graphite lead that leaves the pencil traces on the page, on the canvas, at once evoking racial denigration, physical punishment, an oppressive mask, but also language, art, life, creativity, nature, beauty and colour. It forms an excess of meaning, with a slipperiness that allows the reader to escape the oppositional logic of blackness, whiteness, and the sable and copper shades between, undermining the negrophilic constructions on which racial ideology depends.

In Morrison's novel there is no safety underneath the briar patch, no place outside of white ideology for the characters, but instead of condemning the subjugated image,

Morrison investigates and transforms its construction. The inanimate and silent tar trap is given voice, breathing life into black art, and answers the oppressive constructions of blackness with a narrative of linguistic finesse and trickery that celebrates the trickster who simultaneously questions and illuminates. The title therefore acts as a warning, rather than a premise – the tar baby, uncannily silent, at once both familiar and estranged. Its obstinate silence presents an illusion of reality, frustrating both transparency of being and transparency of meaning, causing conflict between the inner and outer self, between the self and community. The reader can grapple with the tar baby, outwardly unresponsive and inactive, attempt to silence, rectify, or reshape it, but cannot expect to subdue it.

SILHOUETTES – TRANSFORMING THE VOID IN *THE BLUEST EYE*

I call them cracks because that is what they were. Not openings or breaks, but dark fissures in the globe light of the day...a string of small, well-lit scenes... but she does not see herself doing these things. She sees them being done. The globe light holds and bathes each scene, and it can be assumed that at the curve where the light stops is a solid foundation (*Jazz*, 23).

In *Tar Baby*, and through challenging the mythologies associated with tar, Morrison questions the use of an epidermal signifier to qualify difference – a coding that, without the contestation of stereotype, remains naturalised. Morrison confronts the visualisation of difference through a series of masks and masking, highlighting the misleading confusion between the sign and what is signified, where meaning relies on the surface of the body as the most effective location to read difference. A similar, though ironically comparable need for such a contestation can be found in Barthes' *Mythologies*, reflecting on the polarity of the epidermal spectrum. While deliberating on a production of *Julius Caesar*, Barthes delineates the faces of the 'Roman' actors, 'their austere and tense features streaming,' noting the frequent close shots intended to attribute the film of perspiration with a purpose – that of moral feeling, the 'locus of a horribly tormented virtue' and, by extension, 'the very locus of tragedy' conveyed merely through the sweat of a hot actor. Barthes recognises the spectacle behind the 'conspicuously uncombed hair' of Portia and Calpurnia and the faces acquainted with a 'thousand-bit parts in thrillers and comedies.' He concludes that, although it can be

beneficial to create 'spectacle' in order 'to make the world more explicit,' it is both 'reprehensible and deceitful' to leave this confusion unchallenged – a 'duplicity' peculiar to bourgeois art, at once 'elliptical and pretentious,' hybridising the intellectual and the visceral in a pompously christened 'nature'.¹⁰⁰

Such contentions concerning the hidden nature and deep-rootedness of signs have caused some contemporary African American artists and writers, including Morrison, to question what kind of visual culture, what kind of scopic regime, logic of seeing, or archival tool is needed to counter the silencing of the black body. What are the epistemological, but also disciplinary formations sustaining the mapping of the visual field that disassociates consciousness from identity? How can race be transformed from a materially lodged and recognisable difference to an active participant in the dominant cultural body?

The history of the silhouette art form and physiognomy

To reflect further on the black surface, I turn to the pre-photographic art form of the silhouette, in a search for what Morrison has termed 'the ghost in the machine,' the spectral presence of *Beloved*, the 'unspeakable things unspoken' within the contemporary 'white' cultural apparatus.¹⁰¹ Silhouettes originated with the rise of

¹⁰⁰ Barthes, 2000, 28.

¹⁰¹ Morrison, 1988, 136.

racial anthropology, and as early as the seventeenth century, slave traders have exploited this cheap yet accurate form of reproduction synonymously with bills of sale, providing a coding of identification between the slaver, slave and master, as well as a profile that would facilitate in the capture and detection of escaped slaves if the need arose. The name most readily linked to anthropological scientists such as Petrus Camper is that of Johann Casper Lavater, whose physiognomic pseudoscience suggested that God had created a correspondence between the inner state and the face and, through the external form of the individual, that state could be revealed to humanity.¹⁰² Lavater's theory states that the facial features, notably the lines of the forehead, nose, and chin, not only reveal a natural and 'national' character, but also provide 'scientific' evidence pertaining to an individual's moral disposition - the echoes of which are apparent later in Cuvier's treatment of Bartmann and her reading at 'face' value, and also in the Breedloves in *The Bluest Eye*:

The eyes, the small eyes set closely together under narrow foreheads. The low, irregular hairlines, which seemed even more irregular in contrast to the straight, heavy eyebrows which nearly met. Keen but crooked noses, with insolent nostrils. They had high cheekbones, and their ears turned forward. Shapely lips which called attention not to themselves but to the rest of the face (*The Bluest Eye*, 36-7).

¹⁰² Petrus Camper (11 May 1722 – 7 April 1789), was a Dutch physician, anatomist, physiologist, zoologist, anthropologist, paleontologist and a naturalist in the Age of Enlightenment. He was interested in comparative anatomy, paleontology, and the facial angle. He was among the first to mark out an 'anthropology' which he distinguished from natural history. Alan J. Barnard, Review Essay: 'Anthropology, Race, and Englishness: Changing Notions of Complexion and Character,' *Eighteenth Century Life* 25 (2002), 94-102.

Within bourgeois portraiture, the silhouette was animated by the desire to transform a hole into the possibility of wholeness, yet the blackness of the silhouette posed a very different valence in the context of the social sciences, and specifically, physiognomy. For Lavater, the silhouette provided an abstract map of the body onto which it was possible to seemingly read, but also project an imagined relationship between the inside and outside of the image, its outward characteristics and its interior essence. Morrison emphatically questions such coding later in the narrative voices of *The Bluest Eye*, asserting that physiognomic quantifying comes not from any pertinent 'source' but from 'conviction' (*The Bluest Eye*, 37) traced back through a history of slavery.

Based in Lorain, Ohio, the *The Bluest Eye* fluctuates between the various perspectives of Claudia MacTeer, who lives with her older sister Frieda and her parents, and Pecola Breedlove, temporarily under their care after an act of arson by her father. Notions of 'outside' and 'inside' are conveyed through the spatial motif of the Breedloves' living quarters, or lack thereof. Following Pecola's stream of consciousness, the result of ontological fractures and fissures deeply rooted in racial oppression, Claudia MacTeer develops the exposition of *The Bluest Eye* with an economical consideration of space: 'inside' forms the realm of the privileged, the 'Dick and Jane' existence popularised by the Elson Gray short stories of the 1930s with iconic 'green and white' houses, with a 'red door,' a 'laughing' mother and a 'smiling' father, while 'outside' forms the

synecdochal representation of the Other, the void, 'the end of something, an irrevocable, physical fact, defining and complementing [the Breedloves'] metaphysical condition' (*The Bluest Eye*, 15).

The Breedloves are a minority, both economically and in terms of their epidermal index, existing on the periphery of society. It is Cholly, Pecola's father, 'a renting black, having put his family outdoors' that 'catapults' his family beyond the 'reaches of human consideration,' reduced to the strata of 'animals': 'an old dog, a snake, a ratty nigger' (*The Bluest Eye*, 16). He is a father that projects 'despair' rather than smiles, not only passing on his 'ugliness' to his daughter Pecola psychologically, but also violating her body physically, reducing her voice, her presence, to a 'hollow suck of air in the back of her throat,' a perforated 'circus balloon' (*The Bluest Eye*, 161). Pecola represents a paradox, giving a noise to invisibility, what Moten has termed 'the blackness of blackness, the doubleness of blackness, the fucked-up whiteness of the essence of blackness,' providing a dialogue between 'knowledge of in/visibility and the absence of that knowledge.'¹⁰³ Pecola's voided voice, 'hollow,' is a rendition of her isolation, playing out a geographic, racial and class dynamic. To be outside constitutes the 'real terror of life' in *The Bluest Eye*, the pinnacle of ostracisation, a concrete fact, like the concept of 'death and being,' and like death, for the Breedloves, 'being

¹⁰³ Moten, 2003, 70.

outdoors [was] here to stay,' an ontological stasis connected to the spatial placement, the roots of which can be seen in early social science.

For Lavater, appearance was reality, for there was 'no deception in the cosmic scheme,' asserting that 'beauty and ugliness were the result of virtue and vice respectively,' with 'morally beautiful states of mind' imparting 'beautiful impressions.'¹⁰⁴ The veracity of the silhouette for Lavater relied on its indexicality, while its legibility was provided by its iconicity: the silhouette, he wrote, is 'the emptiest but simultaneously...the truest and most faithful image that one can give of a person...because it is an immediate imprint of nature.'¹⁰⁵ Though Lavater did not actually indicate what was meant by 'beauty' or 'virtue,' and his science lacked systematic criteria, guiding principles, conclusions, and methods for reading physiognomy, the widespread practice of diagnosing personality from facial features reached fashionable heights throughout the eighteenth century. An inexpensive, yet accurate art form, the silhouette became a key interest for forerunning anthropological

¹⁰⁴ Johann Kaspar Lavater, *Physiognomische Fragmente, zur Beforderung der Menscherkenntnis und Menschenliebe*, herausgegeben von Johann Michael Armbuster (Leipzig: Weidmanns Erben and Reich, 1775-1778). The English translation of Thomas Holcroft is based on the second edition (Winter: H. Steiner, 1783-1787, ed. By Johann Michael Armbuster), which appeared in French in 1783-1803. Johann Caspar Lavater, *Essays on Physiognomy*, desired to promote the knowledge and the love of mankind, to which are added, one hundred physiognomical rules, a posthumous work by Mr. Lavater; and memoirs of the life of the author, trans. Thomas Holcroft (London: W. Tegg, 1860), 492.

¹⁰⁵ In this context, I am using Roland Barthes concept of the 'reality effect', describing the collision of a referent and a signifier at the expense of the signified from the sign. Barthes, 1982, 34. Alessandro Raengo argues that Barthes' notions of 'indexicality, materiality, and embodiment, as well as movement and stillness, life and death' can also extend to 'race and blackness' as well. 2013, 13. John B. Lyon, "'The Science of Sciences": Replication and Reproduction in Lavater's Physiognomics,' *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 40.2 (2007), 257-77.

scholars, including the prominent German writer and statesman Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, who helped Lavater design a special profiler's chair intended to keep the sitter in a rigid position.¹⁰⁶ The art form's 'modesty' and its 'weakness,' that is, its lack of texture and detail, made it the most suitable form of representation for physiognomic analysis. It provided an abstract map of the body onto which it was possible to seemingly read, but in reality, project, an imagined relationship between its inside and its outside, its outward characteristics and its interior essence. Thus, within the paradigm of the social sciences, the blackness of the silhouette can be seen to indicate the writing of nature in two ways: as that which provides the body with a shadow, from which the silhouette is then derived as its reified, durable and transportable version, and as that which provides race with its epidermal signifier, the blackness of the skin, which draws attention not to the character it pertains to but, as cited by Morrison, to 'the rest of the face.'

In a counter-exploration of race, representation and the origins of racism furthered by pseudo-scientists like Lavater, Gwendoline DuBois Shaw, in her commentary on the exhibition titled 'Facing History: The Black Image in American Art 1710-1940' by curator Guy C. McElroy, considers approximately one hundred and twenty paintings, sculptures, drawings, and prints, exhibited with the intention of deconstructing the social and economic structures undergirding the images of peoples of African descent

¹⁰⁶ Peggy Hickman, *Silhouettes: A Living Art* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1975), 18.

within westernised art and the silhouette form. Like the newspaper clippings and echoes of Margaret Garner in *Beloved*, or the monstrous, exotic other of Wild in *Jazz*, 'Facing History' provides a panorama to illuminate the 'shifting, surprisingly cyclical' pictorial images of the marginalised black body that gave them the 'powerful immediacy of symbols.' Black bodies presented as 'grotesque buffoons, servile menials, comic entertainers or threatening subhuman' circulated in a vicious cycle of supply and demand to reinforce the limited role of those of African descent within American society.¹⁰⁷

DuBois Shaw narrows her focus to the genre of the portrait as a valuable 'window on the past,' revealing not only an impression of the original subject, but the aesthetic, cultural and technological world in which it was created. She is particularly interested in a highly controversial, early nineteenth century silhouette portrait of an African American, created around 1803, titled *Moses Williams, Cutter of Profiles*, attributed in the 1990s by the curators of the Library Company of Philadelphia to Raphaele Peale.¹⁰⁸

DuBois Shaw argues that the existence of the portrait and its 'physical characteristics, its inscription, even this recent attribution, raise compelling questions about identity, race and authorship' for a modern audience.¹⁰⁹ The small, finely detailed silhouette

¹⁰⁷ DuBois Shaw, 5.

¹⁰⁸ Figure 9, Raphaele Peale, *Moses Williams, Cutter of Profiles*, cut paper to form silhouette profile, 'Facing History: The Black Image in American Art 1710-1940 Exhibition' (Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington, 1990), curator Guy C. McElroy.

¹⁰⁹ Dubois Shaw, 5.

was originally created by layering two pieces of paper – one white sheet out of which a profile form was cut, then laid over a black sheet to create the sitter's profile. DuBois Shaw notes the 'meticulously cut edge' which defines the high-raised brow of the subject's forehead, a fine and carefully shaped nose and lips lightly pressed together, above a high-collared jacket. Between the lapels protrudes a scarf, one end jutting into the negative space. While the white paper deftly creates 'physiological characteristics and costume details,' DuBois Shaw emphasises that the 'black stock on which it rests seems to create a veil of darkness' rather than encouraging a 'truth' about the 'identity' of the sitter.¹¹⁰

Morrison creates a similar series of shadows to the 'veil of darkness' in Moses Williams' silhouette, despite the 'light that stops' at a 'solid foundation' in *Jazz*. The light, in fact, reveals no foundation at all, 'but alleyways, crevices one step across all the time.' Life is conveyed as a series of silhouettes that are imperfectly glued together, the weak places barely masked, beyond which is 'anything' rather than 'nothing,' a void of blackness imbued with possibilities that carry a sense of danger, the void of 'nothing' synonymous with death, but also the possibility for agency. Fulfilling the challenge outlined by Barthes, both DuBois Shaw and Morrison recognise the importance of viewing the cracks that form at weak places. For DuBois Shaw, this is apparent in the handwritten name below the silhouette of Moses Williams,

¹¹⁰ Ibid, 48.

accompanied by his occupation and date – a crude afterthought in contrast with the sharpness of the profile above, a ‘duplicity’ which creates an enigma through an art form historically used for oppression rather than for agency.

For Morrison, such cracks, shadows, and veils appear throughout many of her texts, echoed in the name ‘written in lipstick’ following the mass shootings in *Paradise*, the labels under the image of the Copper Venus on the cover of *Elle* in *Jazz* and the slogans on billboards in *The Bluest Eye*. It is important to consider how the silhouette form might recreate race, gender and class using such a minimalist mode, and how might this art form be reinstated by an artist to assert a self-fashioned identity that might stand in opposition to a dominant culture’s social prescriptions, giving life to the shadows, imbuing the hole of the silhouette form with the possibility of wholeness.

Modern artists, reclaiming the silhouette form

In a similar revisionist stance, several innovative and controversial African American artists have returned to the medium of the silhouette, celebrating their pre-photographic, figurative form, exploring the resonances, what Morrison terms the ‘structural gearshifts’ of African American ‘narratives, persona and idiom’ in contemporary white literature, with visual artist Kara Walker being one of the forerunners of this subject.¹¹¹ As the age of digital culture was dawning, Walker

¹¹¹ Morrison, 1988, 36.

positioned an overhead projector – an outdated piece of late-twentieth century classroom equipment - as a counterpoint to the tools available to the high-tech artist. Her installations, which use paper silhouettes depicting antebellum stereotype and caricatures of the Southern Landscape, form black shadows on white walls, creating a post-modern sensibility through images of slaves engaging in historic nineteenth-century rebellion. It was in 1997, when Walker received the John D and Catherine T. Foundation's 'genius' grant, that an anti-Walker campaign was initiated by black senior artists – many of those in Morrison's literary circles – such as Betye Saar, who wrote a letter to more than two hundred artists and politicians warning about the 'negative images produced by the young African American artist.'¹¹² Howardena Pindell also accused Walker's art of 'betraying the slaves of the antebellum South, recycling stereotypes of African Americans that were born in the post-Reconstruction days of lynching.'¹¹³ In answer to the sweeping criticism, Kara Walker created one of her most controversial installations to date, entitled *Camptown Ladies*.¹¹⁴

Camptown Ladies confronted the viewer with a series of caricatures of African American women, including the steatopygic excesses of the Hottentot Venus – a

¹¹² Arlene R Keizer, 'Gone Astray in the Flesh: Kara Walker, Black Women Writers, and African American Postmemory,' *Modern Language Association* 123.5 (Special Topic: Comparative Racialization, October 2008), 1668.

¹¹³ Ibid.

¹¹⁴ Figure 10, Kara Walker, *Camptown Ladies*, cut paper and adhesive on wall (New York City, 1998), courtesy of Brent Sikkema.

repeated exaggeration intended to redirect the gaze of the viewer to the original images manufactured by Cuvier and Crupper, an attempt to reconfigure the silhouette as a site of critical intervention.¹¹⁵ Placed in a distinct and unavoidable position, the outline of Bartmann stands lateral to the viewer, arms raised above her head and lactating breasts, a child held out of reach of the southern woman in front of her that issues a stream of urine into the woman's awaiting mouth, while young black and white girls point accusatory fingers or catapult insults at this exotic icon. Walker's modified Venus, who she often refers to as 'Missus K. E. B. Walker' the 'nouveau pickaninny,' recalls a history of violence, degradation and slavery, employing visual and rhetorical strategies to convey how the Venus figure remains relevant, legible and reconstitutable.¹¹⁶

Despite being the target of several attacks by fellow artists, scholars and the general public for the obscenity of her imagery and the alleged revising of deep-seated racial stereotypes, Walker's work seems at the same time to be an indispensable discursive and didactic pivot for scholarship on race and visual culture. In contrast to the critics that would term Walker's work an 'ideological failure' and 'intellectually inadequate,'

¹¹⁵ Clifton Crais and Pamela Scully note in *Sara Baartman and the Hottentot Venus: A Ghost Story and a Biography* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2009), 12, that Bartmann's 'movement through empire and different commercial contexts helped create her racialisation within Europe...[her] steatopygia as a trait of ethnicity and race and science.' Sandra Gilman, 1985, discusses in detail how the medical application of the term 'steatopygia' became associated with the Hottentot's apron and a subtext of black female sexuality, illicit sexuality and criminality in *Difference and Pathology: Stereotypes off Sexuality, Race, and Madness* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1985), 76-127.

¹¹⁶ Keizer, 1663.

I would agree with many oppositional critics that her art revives the 'lost' black girl that Morrison so desperately searches for in *Playing in the Dark* (1992), forming an ironic and conscious intervention in racial iconography.¹¹⁷ Kara Walker arguably succeeds where no other contemporary artist has in initiating a conversation about the resilience of the historical ontology of slavery and the privileged position it still holds at the core of the American Uncanny, with Henry Louis Gates Jr. praising Walker's art as 'the postmodern, signifying, anti-racist parody' and 'a profound act of artistic exorcism.'¹¹⁸ Walker produces the first widely disseminated body of imaginary artwork that forms the visual counterpart to black feminism's literary manoeuvres, an attempt to contend with those confounded identities that often prescribe black womanhood, addressing what Michele Wallace has called 'the problem of the visual in Afro-American culture.'¹¹⁹ Indeed, as Hilton Als notes, Walker's silhouettes were the result of 'an intense period of looking' at the work of black feminist writers such

¹¹⁷ Donald Kuspit, 'Kara Walker's Cakewalk,'

<<http://www.artnet.com/Magazine/features/kuspit/kuspit11-4-03.asp>> (accessed 10/11/2018). Donald Kuspit is a professor of art history and philosophy at SUNY Stony Brook and professor at Cornell University.

¹¹⁸ Walker has been criticised by the artists Howardene Pindell and Betye Saar for her portrayal of 'sado-masochism, bestiality, the sexual abuse of children, infanticide and bizarre acts of procreation' ('Extreme Times,' *International Review of African American Art*, 7), and her frequent portrayal of 'pickaninnies, sambos, mammies, mandingos, and mulatto slave mistresses' has been much commented upon (see H. Walker, 'Kara Walker,' 1110; Reinhardt, 'Art of Racial Profiling,' 119). Saar even called for a boycott of Walker's work, which she saw as pandering to white audiences (Thomas McEvelley, 'Primitivism,' 53). Other critics, however, view Walker's work as a 'profound act of artistic exorcism' (Henry Louis Gates Jr., quoted in *International Review of African American Art*, 'Extreme Times,' 5) and a 'courageous foray into dark spaces of the unconscious, made in hopes of illuminating the darkness, and thus, in a manner similar to psychoanalytic theory, straightening out the underlying mental problem' (McEvelley, 'Primitivism,' 54).

¹¹⁹ Michele Wallace, *Dark Designs and Visual Culture* (New York: Duke University Press, 2004), 43.

as bell hooks, Michelle Wallace, and Morrison in particular, with Walker citing Morrison as a key influence on her artistic development.

Sympathetic with Morrison's literary creations, until her bewilderment with *God Help the Child* in 2015, which Walker labelled as a 'cult fable' with an 'abundance of first-person confessionals' that fail to 'invite actual intimacy,'¹²⁰ Walker collaborated with Morrison in 2002 in the publication of *Five Poems: The Gospel According to Toni Morrison* and stated in an interview in 1999 that 'Morrison has had an obvious influence on my work from the beginning.'¹²¹ But while Walker's silhouettes are frequently referred to in response to Morrison's *Beloved*, I would suggest that the interaction of their imaginations has not been fully explored.¹²² I would argue that a great part of the radical impetus behind the reworking of the silhouette form for both Morrison and Walker, and also the difficulty in the reception of Kara Walker's work, stems from the reflection on the ontology of the image that her use of the archaic, pre-photographic form of the silhouette in the digital world affords.

¹²⁰ Kara Walker, 'Review of *God Help the Child*,' *The New York Times* (13 Apr. 2015), <<https://nyti.ms/2kgqT1n>> (accessed 20/4/17).

¹²¹ Hans Ulrich Obrist, 'All Cut from Black Paper by the Able Hand of Kara Elizabeth Walker,' *Artorbit* (Feb. 1999), <http://www.artnode.se/artorbit/issue4/i_walker/i_walker.htm> (accessed May 11, 2017).

¹²² DuBois Shaw, for example, finds in Walker's silhouettes 'a shadowy fantasy of Morrisonian memories' and Dinah Holtzman referring to the artist and her work as 'the art world's *Beloved*.' Dinah Holtzman, "'Save the Trauma for Your Mama: Kara Walker, The Art World's *Beloved*,' *Neo-Slave Narratives II, Les Carnets du Cerpape* (2007), 377-404.

Like Morrison, Walker's ontological enquiry is only possible if considered against the backdrop of the history of the visual conveyed by the long photographic century. I would argue that it is Walker's medium of choice - the silhouette form, depicting life-size black cut paper figures glued onto the walls of a gallery in a rudimentary fashion - beyond the iconography that they procure, which is responsible for the more profound discomfort and negative criticism incited in her audience. The 360-degree tableaux create a panorama and diorama, confronting the spectator with an absolute presence. From a distance, they expound a composed elegance, but upon closer scrutiny, they reveal not only decisive racial characterisations, but also a commingling of bodies engaged in unspeakable acts. Her bodies are 'living' in their acts of defecation and copulation, sucking and ejaculating, ecstatic and grotesque, often extending beyond their own boundaries. It is this substance of her silhouettes - their materiality, their ontological thickness, their phenomenological properties, that intervene between two different traditions of representation - bourgeois portraiture furthered by men such as Lavater, and the physiognomic sciences heralded by Cuvier.

Walker's silhouettes are thus more radical for what they *are* rather than what they depict. In response to her critics, I would argue that Walker does not bring those images to life, but that they were always there, maintaining a tension between imagery and reality, mimesis and mimicry, the mirror and the show. Developed alongside Morrison's literature, from *Tar Baby* in 1981, to her most recent *God Help the Child* in

2015, both Walker and Morrison recapitulate the long photographic century. They synthesise a history of the photochemical imagination that a contemporary audience is still coming to terms with – one that recognises how the stabilisation of a specific relationship between the surface and depth has occurred through the mediation of the black body.

Silhouette, surface readings and *The Bluest Eye*

If the photochemical imagination is a racial manifestation that has the possibility to exchange on its surface, I would argue that the silhouette holds the possibility to render the body as if 'blackness' were wholly detachable, forming a mechanically mediated visual representation formed between the sitter, the cutter and the machine. Both Walker's silhouettes and Morrison's texts work on the surface in similar ways, primarily by detaching it from the expected body behind it. Thus, they invite what Stephen Best and Sharon Marcus recently theorised as 'surface readings' – not surfaces in terms of the literary surface of texts: paper, binding, typography, portraits or photographs. Nor is surface construed as a layer that conceals, 'as clothing does skin, or encloses, as a building's façade does its interior.' Rather, Best and Marcus suggest that the surface stands on its own, no longer as something which we look *through* but rather that which we look *at*. They do so by deploying the possibility for blackness to

perform at the cost of the real, to 'live on its surface.'¹²³ Just as Morrison would render the 'Afro American presence on modernity visible' (*Playing in the Dark*, 136), a secret no longer kept, so Best and Marcus not only traffic in blackness, but render blackness the entirety of the surface, that which is neither hidden nor hiding. Marcus and Best's theory does not imply that bodies are no longer important or have no stake in the matter. By putting the visual signification of race at a position removed from the bodies it is supposed to differentiate and administer, they succeed in showing how the language of black and white remains seemingly intact, even when it is supported by nothing behind it. Said otherwise, they employ blackness and whiteness as simultaneously flickering and floating signifiers, so that they bring to the fore that seeing is always seeing *as* and 'floating in the way in which they render the surface intransitive, distant, detached.'¹²⁴

The Bluest Eye is such a text that renders 'whiteness' and 'blackness' as detached and indeterminate signifiers through a tragic exploration of the black girl, characterised by Pecola Breedlove, and her desire to fix whiteness and master the concepts of physical beauty. Berated by Morrison in an essay on the aesthetic project of *The Making of the Black Book*, she defines the concept of 'physical beauty' as one of the 'dumbest, most

¹²³ Stephen Best and Sharon Marcus, 'Surface Reading: An Introduction,' *Representations* 108.1 (Fall 2009), 9.

¹²⁴ Raengo, 132.

pernicious and destructive ideas of the western world.¹²⁵ Morrison avoids any such slippage into destructive 'white' display through an unforgettable and penetrating description of the racial deformation of Pecola Breedlove's mind and body under the aesthetic regime of whiteness. Through her narratively complex and existentially rich description of the young and delicate child, Morrison transcends textual boundaries, rendering blackness and whiteness as 'intransitive' and 'distant' as the reader perceives the body and mind of a young black girl destroyed by the forces of the idea of physical beauty.

Set in Morrison's native Lorain, Ohio, between autumn 1940 and 1941, the Bildungsroman of *The Bluest Eye* charts a desire for the bluest eyes, a symbol of beauty and worth in society. Her story examines how ideological stereotyping, perpetuated by the dominant photochemical heritage, influences the constructed self-images of black women, thereby exposing the devastation caused by the victimisation of 'blackness' within the context of racist social order, supported by 'every billboard, every movie, every glance' (*The Bluest Eye*, 37). The epidermal schema is abstracted into colours of extreme value, with blackness representing evil, separation, loneliness, sin, dirt and excrement, a 'cloak of ugliness' which Pecola hides behind, 'concealed, veiled, eclipsed – peeping out from behind the shroud very seldom,' only then to yearn for a 'return of her mask' (*The Bluest Eye*, 37). Whiteness diametrically represents

¹²⁵ Toni Morrison, 'Behind the making of The Black Book,' *Black World*, (1974), 89.

innocence, purity, cleanliness, spirituality, and hope, conveyed through the masks of 'Mary Jane' on sweet wrappers and 'Shirley Temple' on billboards. Indeed, Morrison does not allow the reader to forget that whiteness, as a specifically historical formation, has somatic implications that exist, despite the views of many antirealist deconstructionists, beyond the text.

As the text 'pecks away' at the 'gaze' that condemns Pecola, the reader is forced to uncover the secret of 'ugliness' (*The Bluest Eye*, 210), the hidden etiological forces behind her psychopathology. Following Antonio Gramsci's criticism, I am interested in Pecola as 'the product of the historical process to date which has deposited...an infinity of traces, without leaving an inventory,' read alongside the later framework of Walker's aesthetic legacy to explore the heteronomous nature of Pecola's psychologically fissured identity.¹²⁶ Like the Breedloves in *The Bluest Eye*, blackness in Walker's installations is not the portrayal of a figure's phenotype, but rather the reified version of blackness as performance – a blackness which marks simultaneously the performance of both the object and humanity.¹²⁷ This blackness is the ontological mark of a series of highly unstable images, imbued with myth and stereotype, of an image

¹²⁶ Antonio Gramsci, in Ruth Frankenberg, *The Social Construction of Whiteness* (Minneapolis, Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), 240.

¹²⁷ Fred Moten raises this argument in his revisioning of Saidiya Hartman's reading of race and hypervisibility, asking 'what have objectification and humanization, both of which we can think in relation to a certain notion of subjection, to do with the essential historicity, the quintessential modernity, of black performance...This double ambivalence that requires analyses of looking and being looked at; such game requires, above all, some thinking about the opposition of spectacle and routine, violence and pleasure. This thinking is Hartman's domain.' 2003, 2.

state that shares the indexical and iconic grid of the photochemical history. Yet the silhouette does not share the same ability to always put us on the same side of what we see. Blackness functions both as a conjuring tool, because of the capacity of the silhouette to summon a past that is still contemporaneous, and as a receptacle of a viewer's affective responses and investments. Just as Morrison stated that she wanted her readers to be not only 'touched' but 'moved' by rendering the 'invisible' and 'lost' child (*The Bluest Eye*, x) so Walker creates forms that maximize viewer interaction, seemingly 'prodding their own existence from a state of individual and collective slumber.'¹²⁸

For there to exist a character like Pecola pre-supposes the theorisation of the self as dynamically constituted and shaped by an already existing racist narrative, one that constructs her at the lowest strata of the social and epidermal index. Pecola, after all, is factually thrown into a pre-narrated, racist, societal space, within a dialectical matrix that presupposes Otherness. The 'self,' as represented by Pecola, is not a stable entity struggling to get out of its 'skin' as it were, to establish a sense of relatedness, but socially linked and connected to a broader nexus of social and stereotypically imbued relationships. Following the argument of the feminist philosopher Drucilla Cornell: 'The subject cannot be foundational in the sense of fully established through autogenesis because of the inevitable intersection with the otherness of a field of signs

¹²⁸ Raengo, 143.

in which the self is constituted.’¹²⁹ Pecola’s identity, therefore, emerges within a context of ‘white’ racial discourses, mythic constructions, communicative practices, signs, and symbols that fundamentally shape how she comes to understand herself. It is Pecola’s dark body, objectified by the white gaze, that is the indelible and indubitable mark of her existential and ontological contemptibility, apparent when she visits Mr Yacobowki’s store to buy some candy:

He urges his eyes out of his thoughts to encounter her. Blue eyes. Blear-dropped...Somewhere between the retina and object, between vision and view, his eyes draw back, hesitate and hover. At some fixed point in time and space he senses that he need not waste the effort of a glance. He does not see her, because for him there is nothing to see (*The Bluest Eye*, 46).

Morrison reveals the structure of racial objectification through the glazed separation, the ‘glance suspended’ with a mind honed on the ‘doe-eyed Virgin Mary’ (*The Bluest Eye*, 46) rather than the presence of blackness before him. Despite Pecola’s attempts at agency, entering a commercial exchange, the ‘three pennies’ substituted for ‘three yellow rectangles’ of Mary Jane candy, Pecola can never escape the distaste projected onto her blackness and her relegation to ‘outside’ spaces. Although Morrison creates a state of ‘flux and anticipation’ on the interior, her ‘blackness’ will always be ‘static and dread’ (*The Bluest Eye*, 47), a vacuum, an indirect presence under the form of a shadow. She carries the weight of internalised racism, a burden that forms a parody of the crucifixion, the ‘nails’ on the cross instead becoming the ‘nails’ of the shop

¹²⁹ Drucilla Cornell, *Transformations: Recollective Imagination and Sexual Difference* (New York and London: Routledge, 1993), 19.

keeper that 'graze her damp palms' (*The Bluest Eye*, 48). Pecola comes to know herself as a limited, racial object, somatically ugly, unable to own anything but the 'cracks' that 'make her stumble' (*The Bluest Eye*, 45), the same 'ill-glued cracks' and 'weak places' in *Jazz* on which Violet falters (*Jazz*, 23).

As Thomas F. Slaughter argues, under the duress of racial domination, the black body undergoes the 'familiar two-pronged process of externally imposed interiorisation and subsequent internalisation of that inferiority,' therefore making it likely that the oppressed carry 'white hatred...within [them as their] own property.'¹³⁰ Pecola's wish for blue eyes is therefore fundamentally antithetical to the very being that she is to the world through her body – a body which is held captive, predetermined, contextualised, situated, historicised and temporalised by the white gaze. Furthered by Frantz Fanon, he argues that the 'Negro' is 'overdetermined from the outside,' proceeding 'slowly through the world, accustomed to aspiring no longer to appear...already the white looks, the only true looks, are dissecting me. I am fixed.'¹³¹ The framework of whiteness creates this stilted, dissected and aborted existence - Pecola becomes a void, a silhouette, a severed 'black shaft of finger' forming the

¹³⁰Thomas F. Slaughter, Jr., 'Epidermalizing the World: A Basic Mode of Being Black,' in *Philosophy Born of Struggle: Afro-American Philosophy from 1917*, ed. Leonard Harris (Dubuque, IA: Kendall/Hunt, 2000), 19.

¹³¹ Frantz Fanon, *Peau Noire*, in *Black Skin, White Masks*, ed. Max Silverman (Manchester, London: Manchester University Press, 2005), 93.

poignant image of a 'black child's attempt to communicate with a white adult' (*The Bluest Eye*, 47).

The act of dissection is recalled earlier in the novel in Claudia's narrative, recalling the time when 'Pecola was to stay with us' – a simple childlike statement equalised with the following phrase: 'Cholly was in jail' (*The Bluest Eye*, 16). While Pecola becomes a severed and dissected, Claudia attempts to reverse the frame of race through the 'dismembering' of 'white baby dolls' (*The Bluest Eye*, 20). The dolls come to embody a Christ-like parody, morphing into Pecola, as their voice boxes 'bleat' like grotesque lambs, a hollow source of faith with their 'metal roundness,' disks with 'holes' and 'cold and stupid' eyes (*The Bluest Eye*, 19). Claudia demonstrates how behaviour is entrenched, describing how her mother washed her in the bathtub before trussing her into 'loathsome new dresses,' with no time to 'enjoy [her own] nakedness.' In an eradication of nurture, Claudia is forced to smell the acrid tin plates of her tea set and the galvanised zinc tub, while scratchy towels reduce her to an unnatural state of bareness, 'goose pimples,' suffering an 'unimaginative cleanliness' (*The Bluest Eye*, 20). The mesmerising power of whiteness becomes cyclical, a subconscious learning, a psychological decay, corroding the psyche in the same way in which Pauline's tooth is corroded from the excessive consumption and neglect, 'a brown speck' that 'cut into the surface and then to the brown putty underneath, finally eating away to the root' (*The Bluest Eye*, 114) with a presence that was unnoticed.

The cyclical nature of such corruption is further apparent when the MacTeer sisters bring Pecola four graham crackers on a saucer and some milk in a blue-and-white Shirley Temple cup – a transition that takes her from ‘pristine sadism to fabricated hatred, to fraudulent love’ (*The Bluest Eye*, 21). It is the silhouette of Shirley Temple that teaches Pecola what she is not, elaborated by Ann duCille in her play on the title of Alice Walker’s womanist novel, *The Temple of My Familiar*:

This, then, is what pained me about the Shirley Temple films that filled my girlhood: her adorable perfection - her snow whiteness - was constructed against my blackness, my racial difference made ridiculous by the stammering and shuffling of the "little black rascals," "darkies," and "pickaninnies" who populated her film.¹³²

Through the sweetness of this white face, the perfection of snow-white skin, Pecola learns to worship and delight in her own artificial ‘perfection.’ It is not just the image of Shirley Temple that holds Pecola’s attention, but also the white substance of the cup, the milk that becomes the symbol of whiteness, a greedy desire to become the white image that she consumes, foretelling the character of Milkman dead in *Song of Solomon* (1997), suckled for too long on a dead heritage.¹³³ It is the power of transubstantiation in the whiteness of the milk that Pecola seeks, a desire for metamorphosis, changing her from black to white, from absence to presence, from ‘outside’ to ‘inside.’ The image becomes not only indexical and categorical, but also

¹³² Ann du Cille, ‘The Shirley Temple of My Familiar,’ *Transition* 7.1 (1998), 21.

¹³³ Toni Morrison, *Song of Solomon* (London: Vintage, 1977).

carnal. At a meeting point between mimesis and continuity, in the context of physiognomic analysis, the blackness of the silhouette becomes a signifier of the Other of the body – its indirect presence under the form of the shadow, but also a racially overdetermined index through mimicry of the chromatic attributes of certain bodies' skin – a skin that becomes so detachable that Pecola is able to lift it away and hide 'behind hers', conceal, veil, and eclipse her true self, her nakedness in opposition to her 'unimaginative cleanliness'.

Pecola's blackness is the sign of the silhouette, that of the 'darkies' and 'pickaninnies,' living on the 'surface,' becoming not only the sign of the silhouette's likeness to the body that it indexes, but also the 'face' of that blackness as well. Pecola demonstrates how blackness becomes more than an iconic signifier, but also a resemblance, a signifier of likeness. Kara Walker recreates this grotesque interplay in *Untitled*, 1995, a paper cut-out which presents the profile of a white gentleman, yet on the right-hand side, a female 'primitive' stands back to back with him.¹³⁴ The lapels reminiscent of the silhouette of William Moses become the outline of a breast, the coat tails a hessian skirt, the plaits of a gentleman's wig the nose and lips of a slave woman. Walker demonstrates how the silhouette and social sciences exist in a relationship of continuity with bourgeois portraiture, as the portrait becomes both materially

¹³⁴ Figure 11, Kara Walker, *Untitled*, 1995, cut paper on paper, 38 x 24.5" (New York City, 1995) courtesy of Sikkema and Jenkins and Co.

inseparable and visually indistinguishable from its indexical Other, the literal presentation of the metaphorical shadow. The silhouette becomes simultaneously carnal and categorical – carnal because in the social sciences the silhouette is used to map those bodies that do not have access to the disembodied notion of personhood underlying bourgeois subjectivity, and categorical because of its function as a criterion of classification of a subject's position within the Great Chain of Being. The silhouette of the social sciences, in other words, is burdened with the 'spectral' presence of the white male normative body, while being filled with the carnality of the racial Other. Morrison demonstrates this carnality in the cannibalistic process of Pecola and the essence of Shirley Temple, and the Mary Janes, with each candy wrapper functioning as a site of white semiosis:

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 somehow to eat the eyes, eat Mary Jane. Love Mary Jane. Be Mary Jane (*The Bluest Eye*, 48).

Morrison produces a pictorial image of Homi Bhabha's claim that, in the colonial framework, the representative figure of the 'Manichean delirium of black and white' is the Enlightenment man tethered to the shadow of the colonised, a self-representation which, argues Bhabha, depends upon a staged division between body

and soul that underlies the artifice of identity.¹³⁵ Like the whiteness of the milk, which Pauline erroneously believes Pecola consumes out of greed, the candy is consumed with a false belief in its powers of ontological alteration, seen previously in Pauline's blurring of reality and fiction.

Caught within a world of filmic hyper-reality, Pauline also tries to hide from her blackness, becoming a prisoner of whiteness as she tries to emulate the features of Jean Harlow: 'I fixed my hair up like I'd seen hers on a magazine. A part on the side, with one little curl on my forehead. It looked just like her. Well, almost just like' (*The Bluest Eye*, 121). Like Pecola, Pauline has internalised the destructive codings of indexical beauty, 'equating physical beauty with virtue,' a practice that originates in 'envy,' thrives in 'insecurity' and ends in 'disillusion' (*The Bluest Eye*, 120). While at the picture show, she fictionalises an erasure of her blackness, imaginatively inhabiting the filmic space of whiteness, where the 'flawed became whole, the blind sighted and the lame...threw away their crutches' (*The Bluest Eye*, 120). Through a process of supplantation, she becomes the luminescent white figure on the screen before her, given agency from her disabled and static position, where 'the black-and-white images came together, making a magnificent whole – all projected through the ray of light from above and behind' (*The Bluest Eye*, 122). Pauline becomes a copy of a copy,

¹³⁵ Homi Bhabha, 'Remembering Fanon: Self, Psyche, and the Colonial Condition,' in *Rethinking Fanon: The Continuing Dialogue*, ed. Nigel Gibson (New York: Humanity Books, 1999), 186.

an embodiment of projected ugliness, the text presenting a perverse *Künstlerroman*, which in turn imitates the desired images of whiteness on the screen before her. She slips between the origin, the 'dead' and voided, to the iconographic, raising questions regarding the history and theory of visual culture, namely those regarding the substance of cinematic shadows and the dialectic between presence and absence within imaginary signifiers, recasting them as inseparable from the racialisation of the visual.

It is the shadow of the silhouette form in *The Bluest Eye*, the presence of the archaic, in contrast to the digital realms of the post-cinematic movement, which offers provocative insights into the questions of presence and absence that have become raised by both Morrison and Walker. Against their seemingly clear location, firmly glued onto the gallery wall, Walker's silhouettes are fundamentally phantasmagoric: they refuse to land, questioning how an image absent in time can be present in space, how a figure so fleshy can be so abstract and so iconic, and more radically, how can the images presented by Pecola, Pauline, and 'Missus K. E. B. Walker' be both 'us' and 'Other.'¹³⁶ Morrison and Walker raise questions concerning the willingness to

¹³⁶ Taken from the title of Kara Walker's art exhibition, 'Presenting Negro Scenes Drawn Upon My Passage Through the South and Reconfigured for the Benefit of Enlightened Audiences Wherever Such May Be Found, By Myself, Missus K.E.B. Walker, Colored,' *The Renaissance Society* (Illinois: The University of Chicago, January 12-February 23, 1997). The Contemporary Arts Center. Cincinnati, OH, June 21 – August 31; The Henry Art Gallery, University of Washington. Seattle, WA, September 12-November 30, 1997.

recognise or deny a certain presence – the presence of race in the image. By asking the viewer to determine where the truth of the image lies, whether in the seen or in the said, in its depth or its surface, it demands that the viewer ponders whether, and in what circumstances, might the image wear its truth on its sleeve.

CHAPTER 3

GONE ASTRAY IN THE FLESH – THE DEVIANT BODY

THE CULTURAL SIGNIFICANCE OF THE LYNCHED IMAGE

The Hottentot Venus presents us with a comparatively rare historical object in the form of a black female individual, a predecessor of the long photochemical century, occupying a special position in the genealogy of the visualisation of race. The documentation of Sarah Bartmann's life, through drawings, watercolours, writings, charts an individual turned into an icon, providing a somewhat rare opportunity to follow the specular examination of the history of art into the dawn of photography, revealing the bourgeois implications of the structure of the gaze and the power dynamic of the photochemical imagination. From her body parts preserved in formaldehyde, to the skulls of her San and Khoikhoi kinsmen housed in the British Museum, to the African and 'primitive' sculptures that populate the galleries of Western museums and transformed the vision of Western avant-gardes, Bartmann's iconography reveals how the presence of competing visions of the black body invariably alters the anticipated balance of display, reversing and conflating the power dynamic of the objectifying gaze. Through the lynched black body, it is possible to consider further the regime of visibility and racially imbued structures, what Nicholas Mirzoeff has called the 'hooded archive' of race; that is, the covert and

secretive circulation of images that mythologises and inscribes deviancy onto the black body.¹

Since lynching has been essential to the construction of racial difference, it has become entwined with ideas of African American identity. Jonathan Markowitz argues that lynching has long served as a primary 'lens' through which Americans have conceptualised or seen 'contemporary race relations and racial spectacles,' providing a visceral metonym for the 'most easily recognisable symbol' of racism and racial injustice.² Lynching permeates public understanding of race and racial violence, but its history, as with the mythology of the Hottentot Venus, is riddled with misconceptions and mythologies. The definition and social significance of lynching has never been constant. Christopher Waldrep has demonstrated, in *The Many Faces of Judge Lynch*, what constituted a lynching changed with social movement, political contestation and debate, inseparable from its history of rhetoric and representation.³ In contemporary conversations, racism has become a linguistic pose. Consider, for example, Michael Richards, referred to by *The New York Post* as a 'n-word comic,' associating him with discursive, rather than physical violence. His comment to an

¹ Nicholas Mirzoeff, 'The Shadow and the Substance: Race, Photography, and the Index,' in *Only Skin Deep: Changing Visions of the American Self*, 111-28, ed. Coco Fusco and Brian Wallis (New York: International Center of Photography, 2003), 123.

² Jonathan Markowitz, *Legacies of Lynching: Racial Violence and Memory* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004), 7.

³ Christopher Waldrep, *The Many Faces of Judge Lynch: Extra-legal Violence and Punishment in America* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002).

African American audience member that 'fifty years ago, we would have you upside down with a fucking fork up your ass' went unmentioned by the *Post*.⁴ What is a constant, however, throughout the historical sources of lynching, is that most Americans at the turn of the last century understood lynching as a form of white supremacist violence, perpetrated largely in the South, where 'white' communities punished the Other, accused of crimes against white people.

Climaxing at the end of the Reconstruction period, where over four thousand racially motivated lynchings in America took place between 1877 and 1950, an estimated ninety percent of lynchings took place in former slave states, and about ninety percent

⁴ Richard Seltzer and Nicole E. Johnson, *Experiencing Racism: Exploring Discrimination Through the Eyes of College Students* (London: Lexington Books, 2007), 12. Andrew Gumbell, reporting for the *Independent*, wrote: 'Richards was evidently told by two black hecklers that he wasn't funny. He turned on them almost immediately, telling them he was rich and could have them arrested and escorted out of the place if he felt like it. That didn't go down too well, and the hecklers let him know they didn't appreciate him lording it over them. That was when he seemingly lost control. "Shut up!" he screamed. "Fifty years ago we'd have had you upside down with a fucking fork up your ass!" Some audience members chuckled at the sheer excess - in the age of Borat, people are becoming accustomed to hearing expressions of gobsmacking racial animus in the service of some higher satirical purpose. But Richards took it to another level. "You can talk, you can talk, you're brave now motherfucker!" he shouted. "Throw his ass out! He's a nigger!" He then repeated the word "nigger" four times before mumbling: "They're going to arrest me for calling a black man a nigger." People in the audience could be heard gasping in disbelief. Someone, apparently one of the original hecklers, shouted: "It's not funny. That's why you're a reject, never had no shows, never had no movies. Seinfeld, that's it." To which Richards retorted: "You interrupted me, pal. That's what you get for interrupting the white man." At that point, the audience got up en masse and started filing out as Richards dropped the mike and walked off stage.' In "Racism in Comedy: Kramer's sense of humour failure," *Independent* (22 November 2006), <<https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/americas/racism-in-comedy-kramers-sense-of-humour-failure-425291.html>> (accessed 25/11/2015).

of those lynchings were committed by white mobs against African American men.⁵ Mass spectacle lynchings, where spectators watched men being hanged, tortured and mutilated, sometimes riddled with bullets or burned alive, received the most public attention.⁶ Historians largely agree that this surge in mob violence, particularly in the 1890s, was a reaction to the racial and social upheaval wrought by the Emancipation and Reconstruction, a form of terror that asserted the subjugation of African Americans against the threat of black enfranchisement and economic autonomy.

Amid this new social landscape, Southerners believed that their moral and physical integrity was at stake. The image of the black brute rapist seized the white Southern imagination, a national phenomenon that became the primary justification for lynching. A popular name for the post-Reconstruction period was the 'Redemption,' ultimately standing for white supremacy in the form of Jim Crow.⁷ According to James Allen, the 'closer the black man got to the ballot box...the more he looked like a rapist.'⁸ Though an accusation of rape preceded fewer than a quarter of all lynchings, the white mobs posited themselves as the defenders of morality, of virtue, with the rape of a white woman's body forming a synecdochal representation of the nation.

⁵ Data supplied by the Equal Justice Initiative in *Lynching in America: Confronting the Legacy of Racial Terror*, 2nd Edition (Alabama: EJI, 2015), <www.eji.org/node/503> (accessed 15/7/12).

⁶ Amy Louise Wood and Susan V. Donaldson, 'Lynching's Legacy in American Culture,' *The Mississippi Quarterly* 61.1-2 (Winter-Spring 2008), 11.

⁷ Phillip Dray, *At the Hands of Persons Unknown: The Lynching of Black America* (London: Modern Library Books, 2000), 80.

⁸ James Allen, et al, *Without Sanctuary: Lynching Photography in America* (Santa Fe, NM: Twin Palms, 2000), 30.

The fear that black political or social equality would diminish white male agency united communities and posited lynching as a just and necessary retribution.

According to Amy Louise Wood in her research, *Lynching and Spectacle*, as lynchings became less public and less frequent in the mid-twentieth century, so too did their most striking expressions and exhibitions.⁹ Communities that had previously celebrated lynchings, commemorating the events in media and public sites, in photographs, stories and songs, began to retain an embarrassed silence, largely in response to the success of anti-lynching activists such as Ida B. Wells-Barnett and the NAACP. People destroyed or hid their photographs and local newspapers stopped their reports. Omitted from local histories, museums, and social memory, the NAACP exposed the horror of the lynching crimes to otherwise disbelieving and sceptical audiences. The virtuous knights of the Ku Klux Klan, their domestic terrorism and dominant lynching narratives, were replaced with representations of savagery and depravity, an anathema to American ideals, a blight on the image of a just and democratic nation, particularly in contrast to European fascism and totalitarianism.

Writers such as Jean Toomer in 'Portrait in Georgia,' George Schuyler's *Black No More*, Toni Morrison's *Sula* (1973) and *Home* (2012), break the chain of displacement and

⁹ Amy Louise Wood, *Lynching and Spectacle: Witnessing Racial Violence in America, 1890-1940* (North Carolina: North Carolina University Press, 2011), 261.

denial that James Allen warns of in his epilogue to *Without Sanctuary: Lynching*

Photography in America:

Studying [lynching] photographs has engendered in me a caution of whites, of the majority, of the young, of religion, of the accepted...I believe the photographer was more than a perceptive spectator at lynchings...the photographic art played as significant a role in the ritual as torture or souvenir grabbing...a sort of two-dimensional biblical swine, a receptacle for a collective sinful self. Lust propelled the commercial reproduction and distribution of the images, facilitating the endless replay of anguish. Even dead, the victims were without sanctuary.¹⁰

Largely due to James Allen's extraordinary collection of lynching photographs, obtained in flea markets and from private sellers over the course of many years, the discussion of the topic of lynching has intensified. Five years after his exhibition at Roth Horowitz Gallery, the U.S Senate, with the support of eighty senators, approved a resolution that apologised to lynching victims, survivors and descendants, for the failure of anti-lynching bills in the early twentieth century.¹¹ Congressman John Lewis writes in his foreword to *Without Sanctuary*, that the images 'make real the hideous crimes that were committed against humanity...these photographs bear witness especially since many Americans will not (don't want to) believe that such atrocities happened in America.'¹² The photographs in the collection are unmediated and undeniable, providing visual corroboration, rendering the incomprehensible tangible

¹⁰ Allen, ii.

¹¹ Andrew Roth (Organiser), *Witness: Photographs of Lynchings from the Collection of James Allen and John Littlefield*, Exhibition at Roth Horowitz Gallery, New York (Jan. 13 to Feb 12, 2000).

¹² *Ibid*, 7.

and immediate. Allen's admonition speaks to the necessity of remembering the collective, the public spectacle, the widespread cultural collusion, and the perpetrators.

There is little scholarship on Morrison's treatment of the lynched body, and lynched female bodies, addressed in Hilton Als' interview with Morrison in 2015, where she discussed her latest novel, *God Help the Child*.¹³ Hilton Als began the interview with what he termed 'a ditty,' discussing the position of the black male in America:

The pictures named a world he knew, even as he struggled to understand it more...And, even though the pictures hadn't been shot in Ferguson, Staten Island, or Cincinnati, they shimmered with lies – black male lives. Generally, the language around that familiar and unfamiliar form has little to do with his humanity and more to do with the pressure points – guilt, remorse, and so on – his dead or living self aggravates. And, because he's less interesting in the context of joy, the violence of his body [is extended] to his community, which includes mothers and brothers and all the people who never considered him invisible or trivial or tragic or extinguishable to begin with.¹⁴

Morrison and Als note the 'invisibility' of the African American male, and the uncanny interaction between the black community and their visual representation, a 'familiar and unfamiliar form' that 'aggravates' identity, through 'guilt and remorse.' Responding to the deaths of Eric Garner and Michael Brown in her discussion with Als, Morrison stated her desire and intent: to erase absence, to create a consideration

¹³ Hilton Als, 'Toni Morrison talks with Hilton Als,' interview at 'The New Yorker Festival,' New York (October 2015).

¹⁴ Ibid. This reflection also forms part of an introduction to a photograph titled 'A young black body looks at a photograph of a young black boy' in a collection of Dawoud Bey's photography: Dawoud Bey, *Dawoud Bey: Seeing Deeply* (Austin, Texas: University of Texas Press, 2018).

of the violence afflicted on the black body and its consequences for the African American community, connecting the invisibility of the lynched male form, 'dead or alive,' with 'all people' in the wider community.¹⁵ Morrison claimed that the stories she cared about were the stories that were absent from the news, those that were present, but distorted: 'The language is manipulated and strangled in such a way that you get the message...I know there is a difference between the received story...and what is actually going on.' In an exploration of Morrison's novels, *Home*, *Sula* and *Paradise* (1997), I would argue that it is possible to recollect the victim without sanitising public memory, revealing discursive violence that supplants the mortification of the flesh, where racism acts as more than a linguistic pose, or a singular utterance. Through her characters' search for community, under the ever-present threat of lynching, or its historical resonances, I would suggest that Morrison presents a portrait of a common humanity, collapsing categories of race and identity, providing new ways for us to consider the racial image.

¹⁵ Michael Brown was shot on 9 August 2014 by a police officer in Ferguson, Missouri. Eric Garner died on 17 July 2014, after a New York City Police officer put him in a chokehold when restraining him. He was reported to have said 'I can't breathe' at least 11 times before his death, which became a slogan for the Black Lives Matter movement and prompted national questioning and examination of law enforcement methods. Matt Taibbi mentions Brown and documents Garner's life, the police practices that contributed to his death and the rise of the Black Lives Matter in Matt Taibbi, *I Can't Breathe: A Killing on Bay Street* (New York: Spiegel and Grau, 2017).

LYNCHING SPECTACLE AND THE PERFORMANCE OF RACE IN *HOME*

Scenes of lynching haunt Morrison's tenth novel, *Home*, recounting the story of Frank Money, a broken war veteran, revealing the oppression of black subjects denied personhood in the American public sphere.¹⁶ Morrison's narrative forms a disquieting echo of W.E.B. Du Bois' *The Souls of Black Folk*, traveling southward to reveal the privileges of white nationalism, a dispensation preserved by extending the power to touch, with both curiosity and violence, the body of Otherness. The novel's title offers the trope of resolution, the possibility to return home, yet for Frank Money this means a return to the black body as evidence, the body of a lynched victim. For such a body, the only hope of home is that of a grave - the only place for the African American within a larger broken culture. Despite some criticism from reviewers that Morrison seems to be 'stuck' in the 1950s for her emphasis on structure, I would suggest that *Home* represents an imaginative and creative parallel history, exposing the cold political unity behind the fable of an America born anew.¹⁷

In an interview with Claudia Brodsky in 2013, Morrison stated that: '[W]hen I heard these people for the first election of Barack Obama they were saying we want to take our country back and I was wondering, "Back to where?" and it was really the '50s. I

¹⁶ Toni Morrison, *Home* (London: Chatto and Windus, 2012).

¹⁷ Boris Kachka, 'Who Is the Author of Toni Morrison?' *New York Magazine* (29 Apr. 2012, Web. 15 Nov. 2012), <<https://nymag.com/news/features/toni-morrison-2012-5/>> (accessed 17/7/20).

mean, I think that's what the "back" meant.'¹⁸ In recent interviews, Morrison is overtly critical of the popular perception of the fifties, yet her concerns regarding the nostalgic reimagining of the period can be traced back over twenty years, explicit in her lecture in the Humanities in Jefferson, 1996:¹⁹

Political language is dominated by glorifications of some past decade, summoning strength from the pasted-on glamour of the twenties – a decade rife with war and the mutilation of third world countries; from attaching simplicity and rural calm to the thirties – a decade of economic depression, worldwide strikes and want so universal it hardly bears coherent thought; from the righteous forties when the 'good war' was won and millions upon millions of innocent died wondering, perhaps what that word, good, could possibly mean. The fifties, the current favourite, has acquired a gloss of voluntary orderliness, of ethnic harmony, although it was a decade of outrageous political and ethnic persecution. And here one realises that the dexterity of political language is stunning, stunning and shameless. It enshrines the fifties as a model decade peopled by model patriots while at the same time abandoning the patriots who lived through them to reduced, inferior or expensive healthcare; to gutted pensions; to choosing suicide or homelessness.²⁰

Writing in *The New Yorker* in 1962, James Baldwin asked readers to empathise with a black American soldier fighting in segregated units during World War II – a man 'who watches German prisoners of war being treated by Americans with more human dignity than he has ever received at their hands' – a soldier who is 'far freer in a strange land than he has ever been at home.' For Baldwin, the very word itself – home

¹⁸ Claudia Brodsky, 'Reading the Writing: A Conversation between Toni Morrison and Claudia Brodsky,' *Cornell University Africana Studies* (7 March 2013).

¹⁹ In 1996, the National Endowment for the Humanities selected Toni Morrison for the Jefferson Lecture, the highest honour for achievement in the humanities which can be awarded by the US Government. Also that year, she was honoured with the National Book Foundation's Medal of Distinguished Contribution to American Letters.

²⁰ Toni Morrison, in *What Moves at the Margin: Selected Nonfiction*, ed. Carolyn C. Denard (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2008), 175.

– began to have a ‘despairing and diabolical ring’ when considering a citizen that, ‘after all he has endured, when he returns – home: search, in his shoes, for a job, for a place to live; ride, in his skin, on segregated buses; see, with his eyes, the signs saying “White” and “Colored.”’²¹

Home is historically placed nearly five decades after *The Fire Next Time*, ironically following the 1948 Executive Order 9981 that desegregated the armed forces. President Harry Truman declared that: ‘there shall be equality of treatment and opportunity for all persons in the armed services without regard to race, color, religion or national origin.’²² When North Korea invaded South Korea two years later, many senior American military commanders simply ignored the policy, with inequalities and discrimination against African American soldiers still rife throughout the U.S armed forces.²³ In *Home*, Morrison satirises the social ills of a community that reject their black patriots, the only choice for African American veterans being that of ‘suicide or homelessness,’ serving a cultural critique born of the past, but written to address the problems of the present. Frank Money becomes the controversial embodiment of Morrison’s ‘model patriot,’ revealing how the ‘gloss’ of the fifties

²¹ James Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time* [1963] (New York: Library of America, 1998), 318.

²² Christine Compston and Rachel Filene Seidman, eds., *Our Documents: 100 Milestone Documents from the National Archives* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 202.

²³ See, for example, William T. Bowers, William M. Hammond and George L. MacGarrigle, *Black Soldier, White Army: The 24th Infantry Regiment in Korea* (Washington: Center of Military History United States Army Washington D. C., 1996).

inhibited political and social progress, leaving young black men like Frank the choice of either 'suicide or homelessness.' For Morrison, romanticising the era severs the link between contemporary inequality and slave history that disregards the brokenness of servicemen who return from war only to find America impatient to characterise itself as a forward-thinking society of peace and progress. Instead, Morrison comments in two separate interviews on the need to 'rip the scab off' of the fifties, an authorial effort to excavate the obscure moments in America's national history, reviving and rewriting them from the vantage point of the marginalised who witnessed and experienced these events first hand and that testify to America's short memory.²⁴

Much like *Beloved* (1987), Morrison's tenth novel incorporates omissions, hesitation, silence and revision as an essential part of the story framework, and it does so in ways that grant undisputed authority to the first-person perspective, providing a space to address the forgotten while waiting for America to look more boldly at its history. Like Frank Money, Morrison attempts to be one who would 'not look away' or 'be the terrified child who could not bear to look directly at the slaughter that went on in the world, however ungodly' (*Home*, 143), autobiographically returning to a time before

²⁴ In an interview in 2012 with Emma Brockes: 'I was trying to take the scab off the '50s, the general idea of it as very comfortable, happy, nostalgic. Mad Men. Oh, please. There was a horrible war you didn't call a war where 58,000 people died. There was McCarthy,' and with Claudia Brodsky, 2013: 'I wanted to pull that scab off. You know, we sort of think of the 50s, you know, oh, those Leave it to the Beavers and Doris Day, and, it was after the war, everybody was making money, and Levittown, and so on.' Emma Brockes, 'Toni Morrison: "I want to feel what I feel. Even if it's not happiness,"' *The Guardian* (13 April 2012), <<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2012/apr/13/toni-morrison-home-son-love>> (accessed 15/1/2019).

her own career as a novelist when she was a literature student, questioning the 'glorifications' of 'political language' that gloss over reality. Resembling the perspective of the soldiers of the Korean War who had an opportunity to step outside of the American structure and, upon their return home, see the world anew, Morrison forces her public narrative to include accounts of racism, political surveillance and neglect, 'The Forgotten War' forming a metonym for hidden genocide of lynched African Americans, equating the battles of the home front with a foreign front line. In her novel Morrison does not return them home so much as offer them an alternative, as Frank Money looks beyond 'suicide or homelessness,' escaping institutionalised oppression, wrestling with psychological scars.

COMPLICATING THE VISUAL TABLEAU OF LYNCHING

Many scholars have referred to the visibility of lynching in terms of a tableau to emphasise its *mise-en-scène*, its theatricality, a pageantry of racial supremacy that depends on repeated performance to maintain its social footing.²⁵ James Snead notably considers this tableau as ‘metaphysical stasis’ – the exhibition of the black figure and his/her social position as an unchanging essence,²⁶ retooled by Morrison in *Playing in the Dark* (1992) to convey the linguistic strategies used to impose racial division:

Metaphysical condensation – this allows the writer to transform social and historical differences into universal differences. Collapsing persons into animals prevents human contact and exchange; equating speech with grunts or other animal sounds closes off the possibility of communication.²⁷

Morrison asserts that linguistic responses to Africanism are employed to ‘articulate and imaginatively act out the forbidden in American culture,’ forming ‘allegorical fodder for the contemplation of Eden, expulsion, and the availability of grace,’ providing ‘paradox, ambiguity; they strategize omissions, repetitions, disruptions, polarities, reifications, violence’ (*Playing in the Dark*, 67). Lynching narratives convey the desire to use race as a separating strategy to mark difference, what James Snead has termed a ‘normative recipe for domination’ whereby the ‘fear of merging, or loss

²⁵ See, for instance, Robyn Wiegman, *American Anatomies: Theorizing Race and Gender* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1995); Dora Apel, *Imagery of Lynching: Black Men, White Women, and the Mob* (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 2004).

²⁶ James Snead, *White Screens, Black Images: Hollywood from the Dark Side* (New York and London: Routledge, 1994).

²⁷ Toni Morrison, *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992), 68.

of identity through synergistic union with the other, leads to the wish to use racial purification.'²⁸

Among the many horrific accounts of lynching and violent atrocities displayed in Allen's *Without Sanctuary*, there is one such report that particularly evinces the importance of spectacle and the rhetorical tactics highlighted by Snead. The Livermore lynching is at once anomalous for its location within a local opera house, yet paradigmatic for the pattern it produces of the lynching ritual. On the 20 April, 1911, *The New York Times* described how Will Potter was arrested in Livermore, Kentucky, for shooting a white man, before being taken to a local opera house, his body then 'riddled with bullets from the guns of an audience of half a hundred determined avengers.' Not only was there a tiered admission charge - gallery seats permitting only 'one shot,' while those with 'orchestra seats' enjoyed the benefit of 'empty[ing] their guns into the hanging figure,' *The New York Times* report went as far as titling the event a 'melodrama,' with an ironical stage fitted with a 'woodland' backdrop far better suited for a 'much milder' genre.²⁹

Wendy Harding notes that the Livermore lynching is unusual for the implicit nature of its setting, exacerbating the public and performative nature of the event. However,

²⁸ James A. Snead, *Figures of Division: William Faulkner's Major Novels* (New York: Methuen, 1986), x-xi.

²⁹ Philip Dray, *At the Hands of Persons Unknown: The Lynching of Black America* (New York: Random House, 2002), 177-8.

many features remain generic of lynching spectacle, notably the gathering of the local community in a ritual that affirms racial divisions, as well as staging scenes of extreme racially motivated violence, ironically indicating a space typical of lynching with a pictorial hanging tree in the background. The nature of the exhibition, not wholly dissimilar to the treatment of the Hottentot Venus and the subjugating nature of the freak show, entrenched and commodified black Otherness, whilst affirming white superiority. Harding asserts that 'the violence of racially motivated lynching goes hand in hand with the aim to make a spectacle out of the victim and to make that spectacle available to public consumption.'³⁰ Participation became a way to confirm the racial strata of American society, with the distribution of players' roles sardonically reflected on by the same journalist in a later report: 'In the residents of Livermore, the dramatic sense is strongly developed and it is quite certain that the Negro who made in the Livermore opera house his first and last appearance on any stage will never again offend the delicate and tender sensibilities of his fellow townsmen.'³¹

By glibly noting Potter's race as 'Negro,' *The New York Times* unambiguously defines the audience as white, asserting their racial prerogative and dominance by lynching the black man assigned one of the only roles available. What is particularly ironic is

³⁰ Wendy Harding, 'Spectacle Lynching and Textual Responses,' *Miranda* 15 (2017), 1.

³¹ Quoted in Dray, 178.

the reference to his 'fellow' townsmen, paradoxical in light of the lynched victim's reduction to an 'animal like status,' afforded the position, in the words of bell hooks, of subordinate 'animals, brutes, natural born rapists, and murderers.'³² As with the iconography surrounding the Hottentot Venus, consumer culture developed as the market for spectacles of black Otherness grew, the literal strategised into repetitions of 'allegorical fodder.' Spectacle lynchings became, as Grace Hale has evidenced, a 'southern way of enabling the spread of consumption as white privilege.'³³ Despite the decline of first-hand accounts of lynching, dwindling by the 1920s, Hale asserts that the persistence of textual and visual representations became even more powerful, because 'the rapidly multiplying stories of these public tortures' became 'virtually interchangeable' with the tangible event.³⁴ The perpetuation of stereotype became interchangeable with the real.

Traces of the performance of the lynching ritual persist in many images and writings produced in response to them, whether they formed part of the NAACP anti-lynching campaign that became prominent during the 1920s and 1940s, or souvenir pictures, postcards and textual accounts that formed attendance by their procurement. In fact, capturing a visual record was an integral part of the lynching's ritual violence. Horst

³² bell hooks, *We Real Cool: Black Men and Masculinity* (New York: Routledge, 2004), xi.

³³ Grace Elizabeth Hale, *Making Whiteness: The Culture of Segregation in the South, 1890-1940* (New York: Vintage, 1998), 205.

³⁴ *Ibid*, 206.

Bredekamp insists that a 'form of feedback has...always existed between acts of violence like lynchings and their photographic diffusion, to the extent that photographs were considered as part of the execution and the fact of looking at them as equivalent to participating in that execution.'³⁵ Lynching acts as a national phenomenon, which I would argue can be read as operating as a photographically imagined scene: a mob of onlookers, or 'avengers' in the case of the Livermore lynching, are staged and perform for the benefit of the audience of the photograph, making the deictic quality, its dependence on the context of the racial index, visible through their direct address to the camera.³⁶ Typically, their gaze on the mutilated corpse, a pointed gun, or a pointed finger, such as in Lawrence Beitler's photograph of the double lynching of Thomas Shipp and Abram Smith in the North American state of Indiana, provides a highly implicit *punctum*.³⁷ There, as Shawn Michelle Smith observes, the proud, laughing and self-righteous crowd who point the finger 'invites viewers to read the photograph as an object lesson.'³⁸

³⁵ Horst Bredekamp, *Théorie de l'acte d'image*, trans. Frédéric Joly and Yves Sintomer (Paris: La Découverte, 2015), 212.

³⁶ Mary Ann Doane argues that: 'As photographic trace or impression, the index seems to harbour a fullness, an excessiveness of detail that is always supplemental to meaning or intention. Yet the index as deixis implies an emptiness, a hollowness that can only be filled in specific, contingent, always mutating situations. It is this dialectic of the empty and the full that lends the index an eeriness and uncanniness not associated with the realms of the icon or symbol.' In 'Indexicality: Trade and Sign: Introduction,' *differences* 18.1 (2002), 2.

³⁷ Figure 12, Lawrence Beitler's photograph of the double lynching of Thomas Shipp and Abram Smith in Marion, Indiana, 1930 (Indiana Historical Society).

³⁸ Shawn Michelle Smith, 'The Evidence of Lynching Photographs' in *Lynching Photographs*, ed. Dora Apel and Shawn Michelle Smith (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2008), 20.

What I would suggest is important, however, is that the photograph is personified and demands attention, not because of the viewers' interest in the subject, but because the structure of the image is so powerful that it can stand on its own. It is, as Alessandra Raengo argues, the 'form' of the lynching photograph that causes a strong response, 'forcing a corporeal alignment on either side of the colour line.'³⁹ The lynching ritual fashions the mythology of race, as those members of the public who saw themselves as white could find their claim to superiority confirmed in the representation of lynching, while the reverse was imposed on the black victim.

Recognising how representation engenders the replication of racial divisions, Morrison evokes the lynching spectacle in the opening of her tenth novel, *Home*, yet highlights the stages of suffering rather than preserving a relic existent for the curiosity and conservation of white nationalism. Morrison counters the 'social figures' of racial division with literary devices of her own, revealing images of mutilated black corpses hanging from southern trees that continue to haunt the nation's collective memory, while simultaneously displacing attention from the black male body to complicate national memory and suggest new configurations of power, rather than facilitating an endless replay of anguish. Instead of an opera theatre, the reader is met with the more typical setting of farmland outside of Lotus in Georgia that becomes

³⁹ Alessandra Raengo, *Interfaces: Studies in Visual Culture: On the Sleeve of the Visual: Race as Face Value* (Hanover: University Press of New England, 2013), 34.

the site of the lynching spectacle: 'threats [hanging] from wire mesh fences with wooden stakes' become the unspoken signs of segregated violence, 'the worst place in the world, worse than any battlefield' (*Home*, 3, 4, 83). Two young children – the protagonist, Frank Money, and his little sister Cee, become the first witnesses, atypical because of their race, they are relegated as intruders into the public space, compelled to crawl through long grass on their bellies like the snakes they avoid, attracted by horses that 'rose up like men.' The horses convey the brutality of the lynching scene: 'raised hooves crashing and striking, their manes tossing back from wild white eyes, [biting] each other like dogs but when they stood, reared up on their hind legs, their forelegs around the withers of the other... One was rust-coloured, the other deep black, both sunny with sweat' (*Home*, 3-4).

In a parody of dramatic form, challenging narratives of the South that would often relate lynchings as theatrical entertainment, Morrison echoes Renaissance tragedy with allusions to *Macbeth* – the Old Man and Ross relating how King Duncan's horses, 'Beauteous and swift, the minions of their race, / Turn'd wild in nature, broke their stalls...as they would make/ War with mankind./ 'Tis said they eat each other.'⁴⁰ Horses wild with fury, fighting like dogs, breaking free of their tethers and exhibiting cannibalistic tendencies reflect the unnaturalness of human interaction in both texts. Yet the apocalyptic imagery and natural disorder found in the exposition of *Home* is

⁴⁰ William Shakespeare, *The Tragedy of Macbeth*, ed. Robert S. Miola (London: Norton Critical Editions, 2013), 2.4.15-20.

not a consequence of an act of regicide and there is no noble thane set on a course of treachery due to misplaced ambition. Instead, the reader is faced with the tragedy of an unnamed slave father and son, forced to fight to the death for the entertainment of their white audience, young children are cleansed from their Texan homestead while another boy is shot and permanently disabled by 'cops' who 'shoot anything they want' (*Home*, 31), a war-scarred veteran searches desperately for his lost sister, and this lost sister, the 'lost black girl' Cee, an embodiment of Bartmann, becomes the victim of eugenicist research.

A novel of migration, displacement and fragmentation, the text defies a colourless landscape, 'a black-and-white movie screen' (*Home*, 23) that cannot see past the signs of segregation and the shades of black and white to achieve a sense of 'home.' Avoiding graphic sensationalism, Morrison exposes the history of lynching through a novel of excavation, revealing the hastily buried body, pulled from a wheelbarrow and thrown into a 'hole already waiting,' a 'black foot' with a 'creamy pink trace' of humanity and a dirtying 'mud-streaked sole...whacked into a grave' (*Home*, 4). In *Home*, Morrison focuses not only on the collective memories of the trauma of slavery, but also on the horrors of the postbellum years and of racist and urban violence, charting the prolonged exposure to trauma felt by Cee and Frank as they experience the damaging impact of white racist practices and the learned cultural shame of the African American experience. Morrison brings to light the public and collective secrets,

dealing with the 'dirty' business of racism, a history that refuses to be buried, recounted through the journey of the Moneys as they attempt to recuperate selfhood beyond the demarcations of the white mob.

Unlike much of the visual tableau of lynching, in the first account of brutality in *Home* there is no pointed finger, no avenger's gaze. The reader is left, instead, with a psychosomatic shadow, the first of a series of experimental vignettes that painfully unearth the secrets that forestall Frank's emergence from adolescence into manhood, 'pale but waiting...behind a screen in his brain' (*Home*, 21). Instead of a direct view of the lynched body in the exposition of the spectacle, the reader experiences a series of pictorial images – wire mesh fences, wooden stakes, horses that stand like men, before lingering on a quivering body part, overdetermined first by its Achillean posture in the grave, and, secondly, by a heroic brother pulling his sister so close he could feel her 'trembling' right through to his 'bones' (*Home*, 4). The visual field Morrison establishes is unique within the lynching tableau in that Frank Money's dual-voiced narrative becomes the audience to the killing. It is Frank's mindscape which becomes the lens, an unusual angle that institutes a theatre of gazes by which the reader becomes the witness. Whereas in most lynching photographs the white mob is spectator to the lynching and takes on the dual function of consciously addressing the photograph's anticipated viewers, thus acting as a stand in for its own audience, here, the duo that the reader sees looking at the lynching does not look back at the authorial

audience. Frank's 'I' – his pointed finger - occupies little of the multi-layered narrative, competing with a third person rendering of his consciousness that looks forward to the immediate and distant future. His 'I' looks to the past, while the other forms a proleptical narrative, and it is not until the final scene where the children, now grown, return to the first site of lynching, that the novel moves towards integrating this bifurcated vision with a reconciliation of competing narratives.

Frank's view becomes that of the audience and the lynching photographer, apparent in the associated omniscient account when he later boards a bus near Fort Lawton. Cee is replaced with a 'brightly dressed woman,' her clothing representing a 'world's worth of colour' as Frank 'watched the flowers at the hem of her skirt blackening and her red blouse draining of color until it was as white as milk... everybody, everything. Outside the window – trees, sky, a boy on a scooter, grass, hedges. All color disappeared and the world became a black-and-white movie screen' (*Home*, 23). Frank's psychosomatic daydreams reverse the traditional direction of sight towards the corpse in the traditional exchange of gazes surrounding the image of the lynched victim. The shadow of his psyche as pointed finger instead creates a counter *gestalt*, presenting the lynched body as a 'hole' that speaks of lack, division and incompleteness, indicating the relationship between blackness and the visual image. Standing in for the finger that clicks, Frank's sight sees only a world devoid of life, of colour, except that of the purity of being as 'white as milk' and the damaging

limitations of blackness tied to the colour of his skin. His race is a 'disease' that ironically prevents him from entering the washroom at the Chevron Station because of the 'sign on the door' that stops him, a micro-journey in which he hoped to cleanse his sight from an 'eye infection,' a synecdoche for the infectious implications of segregation.

In the eulogy read at James Baldwin's funeral, Amiri Baraka cried: 'Let our black hearts grow big world absorbing eyes like his, never closed.'⁴¹ For Moten this reading provides an example of the 'sound of that gaze' as the manifestation of '[Baldwin's] very substance,' the 'gaze's sound and content, which carries with it all of the negative weight of our history, also holds a blessing.'⁴² Morrison paid service at Baldwin's funeral, a man who was known for bearing witness to the truth, so perhaps it is telling that Frank Money's sight presents a curse rather than a 'blessing,' exposing him to his own series of psychological lynchings. Frank feels the disabling nature of literary representation, as 'black flames [shoot] out from the V' in the logo hanging above the services, assimilating him with the body that he tries to forget in the opening scenes. The 'V' connects Frank's relationship with Lily, his sister Cee and a young girl he voyeuristically pursues in Korea, women who recall the Copper Venus, the embodiment of ethnicity and exotic excess with 'two upside-down V's' scored into

⁴¹ Amiri Baraka, *Eulogies* (New York: Marsilio Publishers, 1996), 98.

⁴² Fred Moten, *In the Break. The Aesthetics of the Black Racial Tradition* (London, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 2003), 174.

'each of her cheeks.'⁴³ The *V*'s, marking characters who seek racial self-discovery, become a site of weakness inside the women Frank loves, the 'something soft' that lay inside each one: 'A little *V*, thinner than bone and lightly hinged, that I could break with a forefinger if I wanted to but never did. Want, to, I mean' (*Home*, 68).

In Frank's mindscape, the forefinger that clicks becomes the forefinger that threatens violence. He stages, within the photographic field, the social function performed by the finger that clicks: the photographer's action on the camera shutter fetishised as the ground for photography's claim to share the same historical space with the event it purportedly records. The formality of the lynching tableau arguably indexes in two directions – the finger that points towards its own connection to the lynching scene, and towards its own connection to the photochemical reproduction and secret circulation of that image. Morrison ironically refigures the young African male as the 'umbilical cord' at the heart of photography's essence, reversing the traditional power dynamic where whiteness is constructed and reaffirmed. Instead of an umbilical cord, a 'little wishbone *V*' takes residence in Frank's own chest, next to the image of 'horses, a man's foot' and his sister 'trembling under [his] arm' (*Home*, 69), both the victimiser and simultaneously vulnerable to that same force.

⁴³ Toni Morrison, *Tar Baby* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1981), 42.

In the place of a lynching photograph, Frank delivers a shadow of his psyche that, uniquely, points towards himself as both the crowd that witnesses, the victim and the potential perpetrator that identifies the weak spots in others. The shattering of the black male soldier's identity as a hero is even more frightful in his role as perpetrator, inciting the memory of the innocent girl in Korea whom he shoots because she tempted him, taking him 'down to a place I didn't know was in me' (*Home*, 134). His actions form a 'shadow,' a 'presence marking its own absence,' or perhaps the absence of his own 'self' (*Home*, 103). Frank's narrative does not deliver a corporeal body, but rather, a signifier of one, produced by a landscape of lightness and blackness where only 'blood red' can take centre stage, pictures of brutality that 'never went away' (*Home*, 20). The reader sees the bodily attribute of the foot, but, more importantly, sees a viewing position, a placeholder for the viewer within the lynching scene. Hence, by implication, the viewing position and not the lynched body is framed as object – a position that importantly undermines its typical colour index as autonomously white. Frank's psychological trauma brings the corporeality of race and death to bear upon the white mob, but it is, in itself, a disembodied form. In this sense, his psychosomatic shadow performs as a deictic figure, as a shifter, a pointed finger, a function that introduces another form of embodiment - a space where the viewer and the victim finally touch, collapsing the universal differences of racial purification highlighted by Snead.

Photographs, as Barthes so memorably insists, differ from other images in that their viewers 'can never deny that *the thing has been there*.'⁴⁴ In every photograph there is always the 'stupefying evidence of this is how it was, giving us, by a precious miracle, a reality from which we are sheltered.'⁴⁵ Some of the lynching images reveal that it was precisely the indexical nature of photography - its indisputable connection to the real - that encouraged the lynchers to pose with their victims. By deviating from the conventional presentation of the gaze within the form of the lynching tableau, Frank's mindscape allows the viewer to enter from a different angle - one that emphasises how the typical lynching record is also a celebration of a paradoxical type of social visibility. The avengers in the opening scene remain anonymous, invisible behind the signifiers of their clothing, their actions and the tools that they wield: 'We could not see the faces of the men doing the burying, only their trousers; but we saw the edge of a spade drive the jerking foot down to join the rest of itself' (*Home*, 4). As Moten enforces, 'the interstitial space between The Photograph and Photography is also the silencing dismissal of a performance.'⁴⁶ The perpetrator's visibility is obscenely detached from their accountability, ironically juxtaposed with the accountability for all crimes that is placed onto the black male and the hypersexual fantasy of the black

⁴⁴ Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 1982), 76.

⁴⁵ Roland Barthes, *S/Z*, trans. Richard Miller (London: Jonathan Cape, 1975), 44.

⁴⁶ Moten, 2003, 204.

male rapist, a theological veiling of the original in the interest of photographic signification.

Writing about the historical legacy of racism that stereotyped black men as a group who are 'out of control, wild, uncivilised, natural born predators,'⁴⁷ Orlando Patterson states: 'In all these stereotypes we find the idea of the slave as a dishonourable brute whose maniacal desires must be kept in check by the master's discipline... Seeing the victim as the aggressor and as the "white man's burden" is a classic instance of projection: at once a denial of one's own moral perversity and violence and a perfect excuse for them.'⁴⁸ Such a power dynamic is typified between Frank Money and Dr. Beauregard Scott who, on seeing Frank enter his surgery to claim his sister, expects to see 'flaring nostrils, foaming lips, and the red eyes of a savage' (*Home*, 111). Instead, he is met with the 'quiet, even serene, face of a man not to be fooled with.' Frank identifies patriarchal masculinity and the will to assert violent authority, yet rejects the nihilistic sentiment in *Native Son*, voiced by Bigger in his first conversation with Max: 'They after you so hot and hard you can only feel what they doing to you. They kill you before you die.'⁴⁹ Rather than mirroring the white, eugenicist violence of Dr. Scott, or the 'kill or be killed' attitude of black power militants, Frank is able to subvert

⁴⁷ hooks, 2004, 47.

⁴⁸ Orlando Patterson, 'Rituals of Blood: Sacrificial Murders in the Postbellum South, *The Journal of Blacks in Higher Education* 23 (Spring 1999), 125.

⁴⁹ Richard Wright, *Native Son* (New York: Harper and Row, 1996), 382.

the social expectations of the young African male, reclaiming his sister in the course of a page without violence, or assault.

In a novel entrenched with violence, the scene in the doctor's house is notable precisely for what does not take place. Erin Penner notes that in Frank's recognition of 'the other man's fear and his decision to reject the picture of himself that the other man offered,' Frank makes the first of 'two major turns away from literary and cultural expectation, refusing to let the violence of the war front become his home reality even if American culture at large fails to distinguish between the two.'⁵⁰ Yet the scene is haunted by the troubling presence of lynching iconography, as 'dogwood blossoms' droop in the heat and Frank passes the time waiting for the bus by counting fruit trees – 'pear, cherry, apple, and fig' (*Home*, 113). Trees that form the site of lynching also suggest the iconic imagery of Cee's former fertility, the Hottentot apron, analogous with the erotic connotations of the fig, destroyed by the curiosity of the doctor, the fictional Frédéric Cuvier, sliced like the melon that Cee caresses, 'tucking her forefinger into the tiny indentation at the stem break' before the housekeeper prepared the fruit, sliding a 'long, sharp knife from a drawer and, with intense anticipation of the pleasure to come, cut the girl in two' (*Home*, 66). The same fruit trees connect the quiet neighbourhood in Buckhead with the Korean warscape, complicating Frank's

⁵⁰ Erin Penner, 'For those "Who Could Not Bear to Look Directly at the Slaughter": Morrison's *Home* and the Novels of Faulkner and Woolf,' *African American Review* 49.4 (Winter 2016), 346.

heroism with his paedophilic tendencies towards a young Korean girl scavenging for oranges, 'soft now and blackened with rot' (*Home*, 95). Like the quivering foot in the Lotus grave, the young girl is reduced to a single hand, 'clutching its treasure' after Frank 'blows her away,' shoots her for the lust she arouses in him.

Blurring the role of aggressor, perpetrator and victim, Frank Money becomes the fictional manifestation of many responses that occurred at the start of the twenty-first century to the photographs collected in *Without Sanctuary*. Hinton Als writes: 'I looked at these pictures, and what I saw in them, in addition to the obvious, was the way in which I'm regarded, by any number of people: as a nigger. And it is as one that I felt my neck snap and my heart break, while looking at these pictures.'⁵¹ Als feels that the photographs address him personally, and his response is physical, felt in both the heart and the neck, the lynched image thus conveying the experience of the ultimate form of racial marking. Lynching defines its immediate victims as subalterns, even sub-humans, a metaphysical condensation that extends the stigma of race to those who resemble them in any way. Als continues: 'I don't know how many people who wouldn't feel like a nigger looking at those pictures, all fucked up and hurt, killed by eyes and hands that can't stand yours.'⁵² His comment on Allen's collection suggests that the violence of racism resides in the eyes that see those with darker skin as abject

⁵¹ Hilton Als, 'GWTW [referring to *Gone with the Wind*]' in James Allen et al., *Sanctuary: Lynching Photography in America* (Santa Fe: Twin Palms, 2000), 38-9.

⁵² James Allen, 2000, 40.

and yet do not look away, as well as in the hands that act on that stigmatisation either by taking part in the lynching, by taking the pictures, or by circulating them afterwards. There is a sense of systemic inevitability behind the stereotypical criminality, recalling Richard Wright's assertion: 'I had never in my life been abused by whites, but I had already been conditioned to their existence as if I had been victim of a thousand lynchings' (*Native Son*, 84).

There are traces of Bigger Thomas, Wright's protagonist in *Native Son*, in the construction of Frank Money, in that both men are the product of the society that formed them, told since birth exactly who they were supposed to be. James Baldwin wrote that no 'American Negro exists' who 'does not have his private Bigger Thomas living in his skull,' the fact of blackness that Bigger Thomas voices: 'The thing that influenced my conduct as Negro did not have to happen to me directly; I needed but to hear of them to feel their full effects in the deepest layers of my consciousness' (*Native Son*, 72-3).⁵³ Frank Money becomes, then, the allegorical fodder of the American tradition, the 'story of an unremarkable youth in battle with the force of circumstance; that force of circumstance which plays and which has played so important a part in the national fables of success or failure.'⁵⁴ Yet Frank's success is intrinsically tied to his colour, a circumstance which cannot be overcome, a

⁵³ James Baldwin, *Notes of a Native Son* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1955), 34.

⁵⁴ Baldwin, 1955, 31.

constructed shadow with which he will helplessly battle even when removed from the front line, with the eyes of his sister Cee, and the Korean girl that he abuses, 'waiting, always waiting' (*Home*, 103) for him to commit the crimes that are stereotypically assigned to his race.

By complicating Frank's position as both victim, perpetrator and witness, Morrison challenges the imbrication of race and the typical allocation of roles within the photochemical imagination. The mobs in *Home* fail to acknowledge the presence of the 'crowd' on the other side of the anticipated photographic repetition. Frank and Cee, acting as an atypical crowd, also fail to identify the mob, preserving their anonymity. The clarity of the racialised positions of each player – avenger or perpetrator, victim, witness, assailant, are therefore complicated. Yet for the reader, Frank's mental record twice bypasses the ethical dilemma facing contemporary viewers: the dilemma of looking without seeing the violated corpse and the need to unidentify with the invisible perpetrators and to disavow the interpellation to participate in the construction of whiteness fostered by gazing through the lens. Dora Apel noted such an effect in response to the *Without Sanctuary* exhibition, placing the lynching photographs on a continuum with other pictures of torture, comparing them to the recent and extraordinarily controversial pictures of Rodney King and the prisoners at Abu Ghraib. Apel asserts that the protocols of power are evident in lynching photography, and that these same protocols 'structure the making of these images,'

while 'the shaming effects of their wide distribution' continue to be reinforced by 'memory and photography' as well as structuring how 'we[the viewer] see them,' raising important questions concerning the status of the spectator.⁵⁵

Lynching reveals itself to be sustained by a double denial – firstly, the social invisibility of the perpetrators whose faces are never identifiable or made accountable and, secondly, the shift of investment from the body *of* evidence to the black body *as* evidence. Robyn Wiegman has noted that 'operating according to a logic of borders – racial, sexual, national, psychological, and biological, as well as gendered – lynching *figures* its victims as the culturally *abject*' which is visualised in the identifiable aesthetics of the lynching tableau: 'monstrosities of excess whose limp and hanging bodies function as the specular assurance that the racial threat has not simply been averted but rendered incapable of return.'⁵⁶ The image of a body that has lost the 'integrity' of form, signifying the fantasy of a successfully expelled abject object, is apparent in the second account of lynching in *Home*, this time in a third person conscious account of Frank's experiences, where 'men without badges but always with guns could force you, your family, your neighbours to pack up and move – with or without shoes' (*Home*, 9). The bare, mud streaked foot of the first corpse contrasts

⁵⁵ Dora Apel, 'On Looking: Lynching Photographs and Legacies of Lynching after 9/11,' *American Quarterly* 55.3 (2003), 457.

⁵⁶ Robyn Wiegman, *American Anatomies: Theorizing Race and Gender* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1995), 81.

with Frank's shoed feet, though 'the sole of one flapped with every step,' connecting his memory to the image of the boy's face in Korea with only 'the bottom half intact,' 'the lips calling mama' while holding his entrails 'in his palms like a fortune teller' (*Home*, 20). His 'little neighbourhood' as a child becomes a Korean battleground, the same 'confusion, anger' and 'threats' from undefinable men. The same unenthusiastic heroism as one elderly man named Crawford 'sat on his porch steps and refused to vacate,' an active passivity, waiting the whole night for death. Instead of a spade, this time with 'pipes and rifle butts,' the old man that has grown tired of 'homelessness' is tied to the 'oldest magnolia tree in the country – the one that grew in his own yard.' To enforce the invisibility of the perpetrators further, the neighbours that return to bury Crawford beneath his beloved magnolia report that his 'eyes had been carved out' (*Home*, 10) – eyes that were denied the possibility to witness any stain in the 'white as milk' aggressors.

We do not see Crawford's dismembered body, but the reader is repulsed by it, not because of the violated body, but because it brings to the forefront the image of whiteness as terror and terrorising. Crawford's lynching affirms a white supremacist order while its synecdochal structure reifies the idea that one black man is as good as any other to signify the entire race, and by extension, the entire social order. It is the negation of what is visually available – that is, the impossibility of recognising the 'avengers' – that establishes the divide between the visual and the social field that

sustained white accountability. It is this very same divide that sutures the central position of the black body as evidence, a metaphysical presence that spectacularly and panoptically organises a visual field within the social ritual of lynching.

VISIBILITY OF THE CULTURALLY ABJECT BODY

The lynching of Crawford in *Home* forces the reader to question what visual field is being drawn by the paradox of the lynchers' impunity versus the hyperpresence of the black body before the law. Morrison highlights the caustic nature of black visibility before 'a citizens' group, or a 'mob or the police' (*Home*, 11), and the ironic impossibility to be represented by it, their skewed anonymity, and their casual interchangeability in the South where 'custom is just as real as law and can be just as dangerous' (*Home*, 19). Frank Money experiences what Henry Giroux calls 'the biopolitics of disposability' in that African Americans are made present before the law but are not presented by the law, bearers of obligations but not of rights.⁵⁷ Lynching, therefore, creates a visual field that, as Jacqueline Goldsby puts it, figures victims as invisible by virtue of their very appearance in the field of vision.⁵⁸

The lynching tableau inhabits this paradox through a specific figure-ground relation that, in *Home*, is made abstract by blurring the identification of the victim and the crowd, as well as made concrete through a sharply drawn formal relationship between the lynched body and the mob. Frank's psychosomatic shadow is suspended between projection and conception in that the shadow is the projection of a black body, but it

⁵⁷ Henry Giroux, 'Violence, Katrina, and the Biopolitics of Disposability,' *Theory, Culture and Society* 24.7-8 (2007).

⁵⁸ Jacqueline Goldsby, *A Spectacular Secret: Lynching in American Life and Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006), 133.

does not branch from the diegetic situation typical of the lynching tableau. Between fixation and duration, Frank's mindscape is captured by the movie reel of his memory, but it is a fleeting picture between presence and absence, then and now. Through the effects of suspension, the shadow also destabilises the notion of blackness, which can no longer be seen as an attribute of the body, but rather as a visual effect. The image not only literalises Wiegman's thesis that the spectacle of black murder has organised early mass-produced and mass-circulated visual culture, that it has 'secreted...American modern visual culture,' but also 'that race theorises more generally the visual field.'⁵⁹ The black subject is disciplined in two powerful ways - the threat of always 'being seen and by the spectacular scene,' a constant threat, or in Richard Wright's words, a 'conditionally commuted death sentence,' lynching enacts a regime of surveillance by 'inscribing visibility everywhere.'⁶⁰

Beyond the image of the lynched body, Morrison has found her own potent metaphor with which to address the performance of race, contemporary questions of presence, racial identity and the body. Returning to one of the most productive figures of visibility - the ghost - Morrison refashions the classic African American themes of

⁵⁹ Wiegman describes this suturing process when she claims that the disciplinary function of lynching was exerted through a 'panoptic mode of surveillance and its materialisation of violence in public displays of torture and castration [so that] the black subject is disciplined in two powerful ways: by the threat of always being seen and by the spectacular scene.' 13.

⁶⁰ Discussed in Abdul R. Jan Mohamed, *The Death-Bound-Subject: Richard Wright's Archaeology of Death* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005).

presence and absence, individuality and invisibility, through contemporary mediations on structures of historical memory related to masculinity and the body. In contrast to the figurative evocations by Pecola in *The Bluest Eye* (1970), or the familial presence of the spectre in *Beloved*, the ghost of *Home* demands visibility through his distinct silhouette and iconic dress. In his blue zoot suit, the incantation of the corpse in the opening scene provides the thematic exploration of visibility and invisibility with new power, inviting the emphasis of surface over depth, and fashion over a body where the body is already marked by absence. Like Lily, Frank's temporary lover, in her occupation as seamstress, Morrison continues the performative motif throughout *Home*, marked by her own metaliterary reference to exploring a culturally important history: 'It must have been the play. The one that caused the problem, the picketing, then the visit from two government men in snap-brim hats...*The Morrison Case*, it was called, by somebody named Albert Maltz, if her memory was right' (*Home*, 72).⁶¹

⁶¹ In 1952, two dramatic responses hostile to the HUAC and McCarthy hearings were written and probably never performed. One of these was by one of the first so-called Communists named by HUAC, the 1930s playwright and screenwriter Albert Maltz. In 1952 Maltz tried to strike back at HUAC by writing a hard-hitting, agitprop play called *The Morrison Case* based on an official transcript of a hearing held at the Brooklyn Navy Yard. In Maltz's play, Pete Morrison finds himself blacklisted and out of a job because of his supposed interest in Communist organisations and the reading matter they print. Morrison's only crime is having a curious mind, but with the abandonment of a fair trial and the right to face one's accusers, which the publication of the Attorney General's List permitted, Morrison finds himself out of work at the close of his hearing. With rhetoric reminiscent of Clifford Odets' 1935 play, *Waiting for Lefty*, Morrison shouts: '...this whole business is rotten from the beginning, it's rotten fish. It don't make no difference I'm not a Communist. I think your job is to get rid of anybody who thinks different from you do...I read a newspaper you don't like, I own some books you don't like-that's it!...I think my job was gone the minute I was charged, before I walked in here.' Albert Wertheim, 'The McCarthy Era and the American Theatre,' *Theatre Journal* 34.2 (May, 1982), 211-217.

Like Lily, Morrison stitches together narratives of disenfranchisement, of continuing oppression and discrimination. In dressing her ghost in the zoot suit, Morrison alludes to a 'heroic figure of popular resistance,' a figure that Kathy Peiss argues has been 'assimilated into the historical mythologies and political imagination of Chicano activists and artists, black nationalists, scholars of cultural studies, and radical historians.'⁶² The zoot suit is metonymical for the various valences attached to black masculinity, from the unpatriotic to the hip, the powerful to the criminal to the musical. Whereas the added scrap of clothing or hair in the conventional lynching image would reproduce the visual in corporeal form, the zoot suit became a costume for the black male, one that reveals his body as a culturally contested site, invested with extreme visibility even as it is threatened with violent erasure.

Frank is first reintroduced to the lynched body he sees in the opening pages on a train journey to Chicago:

[Frank] turned and, more amused than startled, examined his seat partner – a small man wearing a wide-brimmed hat. His pale blue suit sported a long jacket and balloon trousers. His shoes were white with unnaturally pointed toes. The man stared ahead. Ignored, Frank leaned back to the window to pick up his nap. As soon as he did, the zoot-suited man got up and disappeared down the aisle. No indentation was left in the leather seat (*Home*, 27).

⁶² Kathy Peiss, *Zoot Suit: The Enigmatic Career of an Extreme Style* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011), 14.

If the ghost's body is ephemeral, failing to leave an imprint in the leather seat on the train, his costume has the adverse effect, demanding visibility. His presence exposes the cultural fascination with the material, the embodied as the site of debates over masculinity. Even Frank himself had 'heard about those suits, but never saw anybody wearing one. If they were the signals of manhood, he would have preferred a loincloth and some white paint artfully smeared on forehead and cheek. Holding a spear, of course' (*Home*, 34). The irony is that Frank has been tainted by the brush of race, evident in his confrontation with Dr. Beauregard Scott, blurring the notions of the civilised and the savage. Frank suffers the same vulnerability at the performance of black masculinity when he first escapes from the 'crazy ward' and receives sanctuary from the Lockes, the 'gentle couple offering help' (*Home*, 17). It is his lack of clothing that connects him with the bare foot in the grave in the opening scene, his lack of shoes that contradicts 'purposefulness' and provides an excuse to the authorities of Central City to, at best, 'arrest him' (*Home*, 9), at worse, leave him susceptible to the same punishment as Crawford. The Lockes, in their attempt to help Frank and provide him with the means to travel southward to save his sister, charitably donate him a pair of socks, socks that bring his immediate past into focus, 'folded neatly on the rug like broken feet' (*Home*, 17). Visibility becomes displaced from the body to an icon of clothing – an icon that, in turn, exaggerates the presence of the body. When Frank next sees the ghost after a 'few hours of dreamlessness...the outline of the small man, the one from the train, his wide-brimmed hat unmistakable in the frame of light at the

window' (*Home*, 33), the 'white' shoes with 'unnaturally pointed toes' haunt Frank's dreams, indicating the mutability of bodies with 'fingered feet – or was it toe-tipped hands' (*Home*, 33).

It is significant that the first sighting of the ghost follows a racially motivated assault on a black man at a restaurant on a stop to Chicago. After trying to buy some coffee, the 'owner or customers or both kicked him out...Put their feet in his butt and knocked him down, kicked some more.' His wife, who then attempts to help her husband, is assaulted, 'a rock thrown in her face.' Frank interprets 'the riot' through a war-hardened lens of machismo, that the husband would 'beat her' when they got home for the 'public' humiliation: 'What was intolerable was the witness of a woman, a wife, who not only saw it, but had dared to try to rescue – rescue! – him' (*Home*, 26). On one hand, Frank dismisses the 'signals of manhood' presented by the zoot suit, yet misinterprets the overt masculinity in the conflict between the husband and wife – a memory later rectified following Frank's reframing of the incident:

Earlier you wrote about how sure I was that the beat-up man on the train to Chicago would turn around when they got home and whip the wife who tried to help him. Not true. I didn't think any such thing. What I thought was that he was proud of her but didn't want to show how proud he was to the other men on the train. I don't think you know much about love. Or me (*Home*, 69).

It is Frank's act of love, his calm, heroic and selfless rescue of his sister that reveals how he has recoloured the western landscape, the 'landscape that agitated him,'

changing the V's at the Chevron station, the site of lynching, into 'mind-painting giant slashes of purple and X's of gold on hills, dripping yellow and green on barren wheat fields' (*Home*, 27). The X's recall Malcolm X and his own iconic blue suit, described in his autobiography:

I was measured, and the young salesman picked off a rack a zoot suit that was just wild: sky-blue pants thirty inches in the knee and angle narrowed down to twelve inches at the bottom, and a long coat that pinched my waist and flared out below my knees. As a gift, the salesman said, the store would give me a narrow leather belt with my initial 'L' on it. Then he said I ought to also buy a hat, and I did – blue, with a feather in the four-inch brim. Then the store gave me another present: a long, thick-lined, gold plated chain that swung down lower than my coat hem...I took three of those twenty-five cent sepia-toned, while you wait pictures of myself, posed the way 'hipsters' wearing their zoots would 'cool it' – hat angled, knees drawn close together, feet wide apart, both index fingers jabbed toward the floor. The long coat and swinging chain and the Punjab pants were much more dramatic if you stood that way.⁶³

Beyond a fashion statement, beyond exaggerated gentility, the complex history of the zoot suit connects the lynched body, racially imbued violence and the construction of masculinity, an icon that 'had been enough of a fashion statement to interest riot cops on each coast' (*Home*, 34).⁶⁴ As Stuart Cosgrove notes: 'These youths were not simply

⁶³ Malcolm X, *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* (London: Penguin Classics, 2001), 52.

⁶⁴ Victor Hugo Viesca states that: 'The Zoot Suit Riots were a series of conflicts on June 3–8, 1943 in Los Angeles, California, United States, which pitted American servicemen stationed in Southern California against Mexican-American youths and other minorities who were residents of the city. It was one of the dozen wartime industrial cities that suffered racially-related riots in the summer of 1943, along with Mobile, Alabama; Beaumont, Texas; Detroit, Michigan; and New York City. American servicemen and white civilians attacked and stripped children, teenagers, and youths who wore zoot suits, ostensibly because they considered the outfits, which were made from a lot of fabric, to be unpatriotic during World War II. Rationing of fabric was required at the time for the war effort. The conflicts were presumably rooted in racism against Mexicans and Mexican-Americans. While most of the violence was directed toward Mexican-American youth, young African-American and

grotesque dandies parading the city's secret underworld, they were the stewards of something uncomfortable, a spectacular reminder that the social order had failed to contain their energy and difference...a refusal; a subcultural gesture that refused to concede to the manners of subservience.'⁶⁵ A symbol of ethnic pride and a way of negotiating identity, the zoot suit was more than a colourful stage prop like those that Lily customised for the unambiguous actors and actresses that 'called her by her name and didn't mind if their costume didn't quite fit or was stained from old makeup' (*Home*, 71). The suit literalises the role of the black body in arranging the scope of the visual field and, in outlining its boundaries, acts as the pivot to reflect on the inescapable racialisation of the visual, condensing history to its most volatile moments. Even though the costume is overlaid on the surface, the connection forms a manifestation of a cultural consciousness, just like racial blackness is deposited on the epidermal signifier as it is understood as an indexical trace of the body's genetic and biological 'inside'.

Moten argues that in 'the blackness of blackness, the doubleness of blackness, the fucked-up whiteness of the essence of blackness, there is an instantiation of a kind of dialog between knowledge of in/visibility and the absence of that knowledge.' There

Filipino-Americans who were wearing zoot suits were also attacked.' Victor Hugo Viesca 'With Style: Filipino Americans, and the Making of American Urban Culture,' in Victor Hugo Viesca *Our Own Voice* (2003), <<http://www.oovrag.com/essays/essay 2003-1.shtml>> (accessed January 28, 2013).

⁶⁵ Stuart Cosgrove, 'The Zoot-Suit and Style Warfare' in *Cultural Resistance Reader*, ed. Stephen Duncombe (New York: Verso, 2002), 157.

is a kind of revolutionary enlightenment in ‘unconcealment,’ between ‘the emergence, submergence, and reemergence of the individual subject in and from out of the depths,’ from in/visibility to knowledge of that state.⁶⁶ In developing the iconicity of the zoot suit, Morrison connects the metaphorical ‘scab’ she wanted to lift from the fifties with ‘that veil,’ an attempt to allow the individual subject to emerge, alluding to the politics of visibility found in the work of W.E.B DuBois. Though preceding the historical manifestation of the zoot suit, DuBois offers an important examination of blackness, that ‘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,’ a concept developed by Ralph Ellison in *Invisible Man*.⁶⁷

In 1981, in an introduction to his novel, Ellison explains that he had written a narrative that grew out of ‘an archetypal American dilemma: How could you treat a Negro as equal in war and then deny him equality during times of peace,’ a dilemma conceptualised through the irony that ‘high visibility’ actually rendered one ‘invisible.’⁶⁸ As with Ellison, Morrison writes against the illusion that we have entered a period that is post-racial, and that African Americans have been freed from the social forces that constrain and subdue black bodies. Yet Morrison does not reimagine black

⁶⁶ Moten, 2003, 72.

⁶⁷ W. E. Burghardt DuBois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (Greenwich, CT: A Fawcett Premier Book, 1967), 16.

⁶⁸ Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man* (London: Penguin, 2001), xiii, xv.

invisibility in the same vein, counterpointing her decoupling of black masculinity from the body, using the ghost to question performative masculinity. Morrison reworks a scene reminiscent of the famous Battle Royal in Ellison's novel, where white founding fathers of the town pit young black men against one another for sport, blindfolded as they fight. Ellison conveys the workings of the regime of visibility enabled by whiteness, constructing and enacting an intersection of masculinity and white authority. The narrator, the black bodies and the women present are objectified, forced to fulfil the performative demands of the white male gaze. Staging black male 'animality,' the 'men on the other side were waiting, red faces swollen as though from apoplexy as they bent forward in their chairs' (*Invisible Man*, 25), a cathartic release of covert fascination and fear. White provocations betray their fixation on black male sexuality: 'Let me at that big n----!', 'Get going black boy!', 'Kill that big boy!' (*Invisible Man*, 21-3). Racial visibility, signified in relation to whiteness, renders the black body the phobic object, giving consistency to the signifier – to castrate before the Ego is castrated, instating the apparent wholeness of whiteness under the threat of imminent fragmentation of the racial body.

While it is possible to consider Frank Money as an inheritor of Ellison's *Invisible Man*, Morrison uses the function of the ghost and the downtrodden war veteran to complicate national memory and suggest new configurations of power. In the parallel Battle Royal scene in *Home*, Morrison's unidentifiable white mob abduct a father and

son, requiring them to fight to the death. Details of the conflict are withheld, retold by Salem and his friends who have reclaimed the space of the lynching, where 'fishing poles leaned against the railing, vegetable baskets waited to be taken home, empty soda pop bottles, newspapers – all the gatherings that made men comfortable' (*Home*, 138). In a grotesque, choral response, the men create an oral testimony, reporting how 'they brought him and his daddy from Alabama. Roped up. Made them fight each other. With knives.' Declining to provide a depiction of violence, Morrison instead focuses on the scarring impact of the violence on the witnesses, on Frank's throat which he felt closing with an invisible noose, and the conversation between father and son – specifically, the father's unimaginable order to commit patricide:

Then, when he kept on saying no, his daddy told him, 'Obey me, son, this one last time. Do it.' Said he told his daddy, 'I can't take your life.' And his daddy told him 'This ain't life.' Meantime the crowd, drunk and all fired up, was going crazier and crazier, shouting, 'Stop yapping. Fight! God damn it! Fight!' (*Home*, 139)

If Frank Money provides a figure that complicates heroism, the lynched body of the father provides a comparable scene of unquestionable courage, transformed from a state of passivity to the agent of his destiny, recalling Sethe's choice for her daughter Beloved. Yet this agency has its price, beyond that of his life, as Sethe faces the ghost of her infanticide, so the father in *Home* appears to the generation of the fifties, a ghost to be reckoned with, a scab to be lifted. Race, as this memory suggests, is not the exception that needs to be explained, but rather the foundation of the social bond that

continually renews itself across the visual terrain, a memory that corporealises the way that we still understand visual and racial relations.

Putting the lynched victim to rest

The tableau of lynching in *Home* holds a direct view of the lynched body which functions in a similar vein to Kara Walker's silhouettes, or the controversial critique of human zoos created by Brett Bailey in 2014, in that indexicality performs as a pointed finger, gesturing towards the promise of a suture between the image and its referent that will occur elsewhere. Brett Bailey's exhibition, termed an 'outrageous act of complicit racism,' used live actors to recreate ethnographic displays, racially motivated homicides and eugenicists' tableaux, including an installation featuring Bartmann, standing unclothed on a pedestal, waiting to be examined. The exhibit was closed following the condemnation of protestors who collected over twenty thousand signatures and incited violent protests outside of the Barbican Theatre in London. In a later interview, Bailey stated that he aimed to confront the 'abhorrent historical attitudes to race during the colonial era, and to question how far society has moved on.' One of the actors commented:

The exhibit does not allow for any member of the audience – white, black or otherwise – to disassociate themselves from a system that contains racism within it. We are proud to be black performers in this piece; to represent our history, our present and ourselves by playing the various characters taken from the record books.⁶⁹

⁶⁹ Daisy Wyatt, 'Exhibit B "human zoo" show cancelled by the Barbican following campaigner protest,' *The Independent* (24 September 2014) <<https://www.independent.co.uk/arts->

Morrison, like Bailey and Walker, recreates the affective investment of the viewer, the emphatic identification trigger by what Saidiya Hartman has described as a 'scene of subject.' Considering this specific notion of empathy in abolitionist literature, particularly that of John Rankin, Hartman discovered that 'in order to convince the reader of the horrors of slavery, Rankin must volunteer himself and his family for abasement' - an imaged scene of whipping.⁷⁰ In an abstract sense, the 'scene of subject' becomes a witnessed or imaged scene in which the emphatic substitution of the suffering makes that suffering comprehensible only to the extent that it can be identified as one's own.⁷¹

In the closing pages of *Home*, Morrison creates a 'scene of subject' in a ritualistic burial carried out by Cee and Frank, arranging the bones of the lynched victim inside a quilt made by Cee. Rather than compounding the subjection outlined by Hartman, making the 'other's suffering one's own,' resulting in the 'other's obliteration,' Morrison denies the object of identification through a spectral emanation. The direct view of the lynched body is simultaneously provided and withheld through the conflicting

entertainment/art/news/exhibit-b-human-zoo-show-cancelled-by-the-barbican-following-protest-9753519.html> (accessed 25/10/2015).

⁷⁰ John Rankin (February 5, 1793 – March 18, 1886) was an American Presbyterian minister, educator and abolitionist.

⁷¹ Saidiya Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth Century America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 19.

testimonies of the Moneys. While Frank sees only bones and estranged remains: 'small bones...few pieces of clothing' and a 'skull' that was 'clean and smiling' (*Home*, 143), it is Cee that sees a composite body, 'a small man in a funny suit swinging a watch chain. And grinning' (*Home*, 144). Forming a metonym for her own abused and fragmented body, Cee accepts the haunting, telling Frank: 'You don't need to try and make it go away. It shouldn't go away. It's just as sad as it ought to be and I'm not going to hide from what's true just because it hurts' (*Home*, 131). The objectified, fetishised parts of the body - the grinning skull, the stopped watch, the fragments of clothing - make up the installation of a lynching image due to the referential affect it triggers, yet the body is figured as a lingering shadow, a cipher, a spectral presence.

Through a fantasy of a past contact, the traces of past uses, the paradoxical absence-presence of the body, Morrison foregrounds the role of the viewer to connect the indexical trace to its source. Cee suffers, yet her suffering does not obliterate that of the body which exists simultaneously as a symbol of excess, a performative link to a larger social history. Cee's acceptance of the ghost represents Morrison's intended cultural response to the history of lynching, and the black spectacle, a narrative that is 'somewhere close by,' the simple assertion nailed to the grave marker: 'Here stands a Man,' removing the oppressive rhetoric surrounding the lynched victim. If the first burial, with its visceral fragmentation emphasises the disregard with which the black body is treated, the closing scenes represent a provocative inversion, a basic claim

with surprising potency, enforcing the humanity of the African American presence in the South.

THE SPATIAL POLITICS OF THE LYNCHED BODY IN PARADISE

The closing pages of *Home*, the simple assertion: 'Here Stands a Man,' conveys a complex sense of space and place in the American South. At a time when black property ownership was on the rise and white ownership was decreasing, lynching photographs posed scenes of literal and figurative dispossession for the white polis fearful of black economic competition. Images of black bodies hanging from great heights formed a rhetoric of black displacement and removal, rendering the black body racially antithetical to Southern spaces. The exposure and homelessness evoked in those images signalled the exclusion of African Americans from a white-defined sense of place, underscoring their vulnerability in a space defined as hostile. The narrative of formerly indentured African Americans losing their property, or being economically thwarted by their white counterparts, is abundant. When assembling lynching photographs for *Without Sanctuary*, Allen seems to suggest that the images make a fragmented statement about the fractured relationship between African Americans and the American landscape. Much scholarship has attested to the ritualistic and spectacular aspects of lynching, yet the dynamic of the landed to the landless, the ironic elevation of a black figure before a crowd, similar to the spectacle of Bartmann, or Florens in *A Mercy*, has, in the main, been overlooked.

All of Morrison's novels are connected by their historical resonances, of place and time, as displaced characters configure their relations to space through nostalgic claims.

However, *Paradise* is notable for its dangerous yet compelling compulsion to create a series of utopias, taking the form of a single-family house, a planned community, the American frontier, or the idea of paradise itself. As the final work in Morrison's 'love trilogy' that includes *Beloved* (1987) and *Jazz* (1992), *Paradise* (1997) is set in the mid-twentieth century, narrated through the lens of the late years of the Civil Rights Movement. The title of Morrison's seventh novel extends earlier examples of historical revision, forming a space for a metahistorical argument about national history and the politics of truth. From the residuals of slavery, to the Harlem Renaissance and the mass migration of African Americans, *Paradise* is temporally arranged to explore the post-Reconstruction community, questioning the connection between personhood and mythic history. The founding of Haven takes place during the westward movement of African Americans in the 1870s, the founding of Ruby, replacing Haven, follows World War I, and thirdly, where the novel begins and ends, in July 1976, the final juncture shares the period of bicentennial celebrations of the U.S and also the exhaustion of the Civil Rights and Black Power movements, following the violent deaths of their leaders. Each of these moments echo the ones that come before, a spatial and historical shift with the promise of personal agency, carved through a path of violence and death, underscored by lynching.

The novel follows a group of former slaves moving to Oklahoma during the land rush, and their impulse to find a 'home,' structured around the internal migratory desires

of escape and resistance. This utopic vision is mapped onto architecture or community to codify and practise the ideal. In the exposition, Morrison relates the history of the Convent, now a safe house for wayward women, built many years ago, to be a hiding place for an embezzler who was captured shortly after the completion of the building, a failed screen for a fraudulent past. After the embezzler, the building took on a new use - a religious school for Native American girls, where nuns were 'sickened' by the 'ornate bathroom fixtures' and 'stilled Arapaho girls' sat in the 'stilled dining room' and 'learned to forget' (*Paradise*, 4) their own past filled with oppression. It is the third group of residents, a gathering of unrelated women, which define the final structure, a place of sanctuary, what Morrison has described as 'the safe place, the place full of bounty, where no one can harm you,' a paradise 'based on the notion of exclusivity...[a utopia] designed by who is not there, by the people who are not allowed.'⁷²

The reader's first view of the Convent is through the eyes of invaders, the people 'who are not allowed,' but enter anyway, the lens of the lynch mob whose only intent is massacring its occupants: 'They reached the Convent just seconds before the sun did to see and register for all time how the mansion floated dark and malevolently

⁷² Elizabeth Farnsworth, *Conversation: Toni Morrison*, from *The NewsHour with Jim Lehrer* (March 9, 1998), in *Toni Morrison: Conversations*, ed. Carolyn C. Denard (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2008), 156.

disconnected from God's earth.'⁷³ The men that enter the structure with the lyncher's 'rope,' 'handcuffs' and 'Mace,' contrast with the ritualistic 'palm leaf cross,' and 'clean, handsome guns' (*Paradise*, 3), met with the barrier of 'hiding places,' as Morrison creates a voided space that resists and responds to heteronormativity. An expression of social structure and ritual is apparent, as the narrative laconically relays the first murder: 'They shoot the white girl first' (*Paradise*, 3), focussing on the spatial violation of the structure without lingering on the violent act. The space becomes antipathetic to the plight to the victims, terrible violence contrasted with the 'muteness' of the landscape.

The Convent space is racialised by the circumscribing aura of lynching violence. Potatoes that are 'peeled and whole' become 'bone white,' a child's boots that once were ribboned transmute into a 'series of infants...hanging from a crib' by a cord, a gothic grotesquery compounding the lyncher's rope. A teething ring manifests as a broken mouth, 'cracked and stiff' (*Paradise*, 7). Worse than a violent death, the women are dispossessed from their space, the shelter shifting from safety to threat, and paradise to a 'devil's bedroom,' 'a nasty playpen' (*Paradise*, 17). Through a setting that immediately conveys two very specific and antithetical histories, charged with denial, erasure and judgement, Morrison presents architectural space as a battle between sexual indulgence and spiritual workshop, earthly desire and wealthy excess,

⁷³ Toni Morrison, *Paradise* (London: Vintage, 1999), 18.

maintained by stern practices. Layered upon this antithetical construction are the silhouettes of the lynched victims that now inhabit this odd structure.

In *Paradise*, memory and space can be read as a 'symbolic geography,' as Robert Stepto suggests: 'a landscape becomes symbolic in literature when [it offers] spatial expression of social structures and ritual grounds on the one hand, and of communities and genius loci [spirit of place] on the other.'⁷⁴ The experience of time as a grid of spatial configuration is apparent in *Beloved*, termed and denied as a 'rememory' by Sethe:

I was talking about time...Some things go. Pass on. Some things just stay. I used to think it was my rememory. You know. Some things you forget. Other things you never do. But it's not. Places, places are still there. If a house burns down, it's gone, but the place - the picture of it - stays, not just in rememory, but out there, in the world.⁷⁵

Morrison argues that space and memory are merged into a 'site of memory,' a mental 'picture' that reflects the external space. The act of remembering becomes an excavation site, from which the remnants of past experiences should be recovered with a particular 'act of archeology,' rather than memory imagined with nostalgia.⁷⁶ Such an archaeological endeavour, spaces imbued with memory, become sites of power. In April 2015, several monuments were defaced in South Africa, as colonial

⁷⁴ Robert Stepto, *From Behind the Veil: A study of Afro-American Narrative* (Champaign, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1991), 62.

⁷⁵ Morrison, *Beloved* (London: Vintage, 2007), 35-6.

⁷⁶ Ibid, 'The Site of Memory,' in *What Moves at the Margin: Selection Nonfiction* (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 2008), 71.

and apartheid tensions resurfaced. A plaque at Bartmann's burial site was splattered with white paint, a racially charged protest that rejected the gesture of atonement against the misuse of the Hottentot Venus' remains. A highly symbolic act of violence, an attempt to reassert colonial power over the remains of this charged icon, *Paradise* narrates a similar violation. White paint is exchanged with a pitcher of milk and lynchers' weapons as the men descend, travelling 'deep in the Convent...The chill intensifies as the men spread deeper into the mansion, taking their time, looking, listening, alert to the female malice that hides here and the yeast-and-butter smell of rising dough' (*Paradise* 3, 4).

The descent is highly sensuous, if not sexual, the youngest man self-consciously observing 'how the dream he is in might go,' the mission making them 'giddy.' The building becomes violated, detailing the opening of doors, entrances into strange rooms, and the movement down into the cellar. Anxieties culminate in the kitchen, the 'table fourteen feet long if an inch' (*Paradise*, 5) holding objects of familiarity. One of the twins, a patriarchal figure of the town, 'moves to the long table and lifts the pitcher of milk' (*Paradise*, 7). In a highly symbolic scene, Morgan 'sniffs [the milk first and then, the pistol in his right hand, he uses his left to raise the pitcher to his mouth, taking such long, measured swallows the milk is half gone by the time he smells the wintergreen.' Juda Bennett argues that this action places Morgan at risk from

'communing with the women, albeit in absentia.'⁷⁷ The wintergreen, both medicinal and fatal if consumed in excess, conveys the paradoxical position of the women, both as healers and witches, a lesson missed by Morgan as they descend deeper and deeper into the Convent, a postlapsarian journey into a diseased womb. A quest for personhood starkly comes into focus against the backdrop of the maternal, black performance and the paradoxical presentation of black female sexuality and spectacle.

Public and Private Violence

The opening of *Paradise* asserts that the constitutive feature of lynching is not only violence, but the collapse of the boundary between private prejudice and public punishment. As Jennie Lightweis-Goff explores, 'lynching practice derived from the changing value of black life at the end of the Reconstruction, as slaves became the degraded "Fourth World" population.' Beyond the spectacle of lynching, Lightweis-Goff argues that the lynching image also had the function of 'vernacular pedagogy...delineating a form of citizenship that neither manumission nor legislation could racially "corrupt" in the metaphoric miscegenation of integration.'⁷⁸ The replacement of the crime of lynching with the juridical model of the hate crime enables the forgetting of its collective, public face, substituting the crowded public square of

⁷⁷ Bennett, 61.

⁷⁸ Jennie Lightweis-Goff, *Blood at the Root: Lynching as American Cultural Nucleus* (Albany, New York: State University Press of New York, 2011), 4.

the lynching with the murderer's lair. To the men of Ruby, the Convent, as a 'place of all places,' not twenty miles from their 'orderly community,' demonstrates the public/private dichotomy through the narrative of women's bodies. In Ruby, where there is not a 'slack or sloven[ly] woman' (*Paradise*, 8), women hold the key to a rhetoric of racial purity, in a town where authentic blackness plays a critical role in determining how each citizen is ranked. The paradoxical nature of black female sexuality is clear, with the women of the Convent rendered savage, bestial, intensely ugly and 'dangerous' like the Hottentots, while the women of Ruby are 'pure,' Venuses to be worshipped.

Reversing the typical lynching narrative that would seek to remove African American male virility, the women of Ruby function as guardians of the town's morality. As the Reverend Misner suggests, the youth of the town have 'not yet fully recovered from the blow to their esteem upon learning that adults would not regard them as humans until they mated' (*Paradise*, 145) – the town 'prevailing not about infant life or a bride's reputation but about who controlled the mares and their foals' (*Paradise*, 150). Jennet Kirkpatrick argues that the 'uncivil disobedience' of American lynch mobs disregarded 'power-conferring rules' of multiracial citizenship for a form that was 'participatory and public.'⁷⁹ Once the codifications of citizenship were no longer exclusively white, the lynching mob offered a vision of mob citizenship to replace

⁷⁹ Jennet Kirkpatrick, *Uncivil Disobedience* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008), 14.

them, a vision that staged a drama of intrusion by and protection from external enemies. In *Paradise*, racial impurity is analogous to sexual impurity, because the men see the women as 'bitches. More like witches...sluts out there by themselves...who never step foot in church' and who 'don't need men and they don't need God' (*Paradise*, 276). The Convent women present the oversexed, the overly sensual, the dangerous unbridled exoticism that tainted the reception of the Hottentot Venus.

Ruby reveals how Morrison is keenly attuned to the contested conceptual territory of America, creating an atypical history to critique it. The black skin of Ruby's citizens, termed '8-rock' for a 'deep deep level in the coal mines,' inverts the historical landmark of Plymouth Rock. As Marni Gauthier argues, 'Ruby's Old Fathers are avatars of none other than the founding fathers of the United States.'⁸⁰ In an ironic parody, the 8-rocks creates a harbour from persecution that is maintained by a geographic and cultural isolation, an inversion of the one drop rule, which forbids members to marry light skinned people. The insidious practice of maintaining racial purity both reproduces the nineteenth century fixation of lynchers in America and critiques it through the violent annihilation of a community of dispossessed women who inhabit the Convent. As Moten argues, 'the movement against segregation is seen

⁸⁰ Marni Gauthier, 'The Other Side of "Paradise": Toni Morrison's (un)Making of Mythic History,' *African American Review* 39.3 (Fall 2005), 397.

as a movement for miscegenation.’ Such a movement causes panic, a panic that has ‘already led to the deaths of so many.’⁸¹

The Convent women represent a threat which must be quelled, a ‘mess’ that must be prevented from ‘seeping back into [their] homes, [their] families’ (*Paradise*, 276). Despite the notions of fertility that surround the house, the men see only death: Arnette loses her baby after residing there, Deek suspects that his wife has obtained an abortifacient from the women, and Sweetie hears crying children among the ‘demons.’ The women bear the responsibility for the ‘evil’ occurrences of Ruby:

Outrages that had been accumulating all along took shape as evidence. A mother was knocked down the stairs by her cold-eyed daughter. Four damaged infants were born in one family. Daughters refused to get out of bed. Brides disappeared on their honeymoons. Two brothers shot each other on New Year’s Day. Trips to Demby for VD shots common...The proof they had been collecting since the terrible discovery in the spring could not be denied: the one thing that connected all these catastrophes was in the Convent. And in the Convent were those women (*Paradise*, 11).

The need for the expulsion of ‘those women’ forms a biblical exodus, apparent when Steward relates the most detailed version of the Disallowing at Fairly: the families ‘on foot and completely lost’ parallel the Israelites wandering the desert, while the ‘shame of seeing one’s own pregnant wife or sister refused shelter’ evokes the rejection of the holy family at the inn. Steward’s version of founding Haven casts Zechariah as Moses, leading his people to the Promised Land. When they reach the ‘piney wood,’ his son

⁸¹ Moten, 2003, 196.

Rector speaks 'My Father,' to which he receives the reply 'Zechariah here.' The piney wood symbolises the Garden of Gethsemane, yet is also complicit with the lynching narrative, recalls the practice of 'treeing the slave,' where dead black bodies hung from branches. Rector fulfils the roles of Abraham, Moses, Samuel and Isaiah, each of whom respond to the Lord with 'Here I am' (Genesis 22:1; Exodus 3:1; Samuel 3:4; Isaiah 6:8). Morrison illuminates how the trappings of this sacred text transform individual racism into the punitive violence of the lynching mob.

The men of Ruby become the organisational structure enabled by the violence of Reconstruction-era domestic terrorism, a Ku Klux Klan parody, placing the blame for the internal frictions within their community on the Convent women. Though many causes derive from an insular obsession with racial purity, they seek to find something 'out there,' a reason behind the impending collapse of their town. Patterson argues that the 'brutally sacrificed Negro' was the 'scapegoat – spat upon, mocked, spiked, tortured and accursed. In expelling the Negro, all that was most evil and sinful and black and iniquitous and transgressing would be sent away.'⁸² The women of the Convent become the scapegoats for the many real and fabricated problems forming a significant tension between the colliding visions of 'home' and 'out there.' The Convent, as a place for the public, outdoored women to find both a shelter and freedom, it stands in stark contrast to the 'backward no place ruled by men' who have

⁸² Patterson, 222.

'the nerve to say who could live and who not and where' (*Paradise*, 308). Elizabeth Schneider has argued that there is 'violence' inherent in figurations of privacy: 'There is no realm of personal and family life that exists totally separate from the reach of the state... "Private" and "public" exist on a continuum.' Therefore, she argues, 'in the so-called private sphere... which is purportedly immune from law, there is always the selective application of law [which] invokes "privacy" as a rationale for immunity in order to protect male domination.'⁸³ Domestic life is the woman's sphere and the public world of the marketplace belongs to men. The public sites of American democracy – the courthouse, church yard, streets and schools, were militarised for racial supremacy, and though the private spheres, the private nature of the alternative theology embodied by the Convent, is also permeable to this violence.

The public/ private dichotomy is made tangible by Morrison as she equivocates the images of doors and women. The men's obsession is rendered explicit through the boundaries of the setting - there 'are no windows' in the kitchen and the doors are 'locked' or 'closed'. The doors and windows form a subaltern threat that the men believe should be 'blown open,' 'smashed' with the butts of their 'handsome rifles,' the boundary between their supremacy and their prey. Seongho Yoon suggests that as 'the doors and windows physically and figuratively exist on the border-line surface when outside and inside are both intimate and ready to intermingle, the very way in

⁸³ Elizabeth Schneider, 'The Violence of Privacy,' *Connecticut Law Review* 23 (1992), 974.

which the men picture the Convent as a windowless and impenetrable space provides a clue to why they have to murder the women.⁸⁴ The women blur the inside/ outside, the public/ private, the binaries which are at the core value of the town, and that is why the men attack the Convent, 'to make sure it never happens again. That nothing inside or out rots the one all-black town worth the pain' (*Paradise*, 5).

Later in the novel, the women paint the outlines of bodies on the floor and piece together their fragmented stories of the past. These fugitive women begin to come to terms with their festering physical and psychological wounds by learning to relate to the 'copies of their bodies,' at first 'reluctant to move outside the mould they had chosen' (*Paradise*, 263). They locate their abused and exploited forms that were labelled culturally 'unintelligible' by the public gaze, reminded of their 'moving bodies below' (*Paradise*, 265). The lynchers' noose becomes part of the fabric of their life, symbolised by Gigi as she draws a heart locket around her body's throat, exorcising the haunting image of a boy killed in the Oakland riots. Seneca, who was sexually assaulted, chooses to 'mark the open body lying on the cellar floor' instead of self-harming; Pallas accepts a life growing inside her body by painting a foetus on the silhouette on the floor, and Mavis overcomes her guilt over the death of her twins. This healing ceremony, a mnemonic ritual that enables the dislodging of trauma, creates a home

⁸⁴ Seongho Yoon, 'Home for the Outdoored: Geographies of Exclusion, Gendered Space and Postethnicity in Toni Morrison's *Paradise*,' *CEA Critic* 67.3 (Spring and Summer 2005), 74.

away from home, a carved private sanctuary within the wider, violent and destructive narrative.

Such a ritual recalls Shadrack from *Sula*, and his annual public performance with a rope. Chuck Jackson has argued most convincingly that this narrative brings together Shadrack's private experience with the war, with the public violence experienced by African Americans at home. Shadrack's body becomes a product of a national identity, filling his 'once empty head with nightmares and hallucinations about his own body, which he imagines is inside out, exceeding its own limits and moving against his brain's commands.'⁸⁵ As Shadrack parades through the town of Bottom, instigating 'National Suicide' day, 'with a cowbell and a hangman's rope calling the people together,' Shadrack, like Frank Money, presents the image of a U.S soldier, a body that will be kept in check if it dares to seek a privileged identity.⁸⁶ As Joseph Roach explains, a public ritual has the potential to recreate and restore collective social and cultural memory, producing a bodily understanding, a skin memory, that differs from and often critiques archival history.⁸⁷ National Suicide Day, an imaginative event that becomes 'a part of the fabric of life up in the Bottom' (*Sula*, 16), serves as a live critique of national history as it commemorates the result of international conflict for soldiers

⁸⁵ Chuck Jackson, 'A "Headless Display": "*Sula*," soldiers and lynching,' *Modern Fiction Studies* 52.2 (Summer 2006), 377.

⁸⁶ Toni Morrison, *Sula* (London: Vintage, 2005), 14.

⁸⁷ Joseph Roach, 'Culture and Performance in the Circum-Atlantic World,' *Performativity and Performance*, ed. Andrew Parker and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick (New York: Routledge, 1995), 45-9.

like Shadrack, as well as the unspoken international racial traumas of 1919 - a year in which the number of lynchings and race riots reached its zenith. Like the women of the Convent, Shadrack serves as a metonym for the black body out of place, carving a space in public discourse only when accompanied by the threat of the noose.

OUTSIDERS, HOMELESSNESS AND GEOGRAPHIC REVERSAL

In 1998, Diana Ferrus created a tribute to Bartmann, the Hottentot Venus, writing a poem that would form part of the active movement to bring Bartmann's remains home to the Gamtoos Valley. Titled 'A Poem for Sarah Bartmann,' Ferrus employed the refrain 'I have come to take you home,' recalling the 'grass,' the space 'beneath the big oak trees,' and a 'veld' to construct a nostalgic past. Ferrus designs a scene of 'ancient mountains' that 'shout' Bartmann's name, 'devoid of her exhibition pedestal, where the "poking eyes of the man-mad monster..." dissect[ed her] body bit by bit.'⁸⁸

In Morrison's narratives, the life or death of the black community has, at many moments, depended on spatial placement. Such an account exists in *Paradise*, following the slaughter of the convent:

Ten generations had known what lay Out There: space, one beckoning and free, became unmonitored and seething; became a void where random and organised evil erupted when and where it chose – behind any standing tree, behind the door of any house, humble or grand. Out There where your children were sport, your women quarry, and where your very person could be annulled; where congregation carried arms to church and ropes coiled in every saddle. Out There where every cluster of white men looked like a posse, being alone was being dead (*Paradise*, 16).

In *Paradise*, Morrison provides a keen portrait of the importance of location - indoors or outdoors, yet such a distinction of 'being put out and being put out doors' appears

⁸⁸ Diana Ferrus, 'I've Come to Take you Home' (Tribute to Sarah Bartmann Written in Holland, June 1998) in Willis, 213-4.

earlier in Morrison's first novel, *The Bluest Eye* (1970). The crucial distinction of being 'outdoors' captures the American sense of possibility and mobility dependent on the subjugation and coerced mobility of others. Lynched bodies set outdoors helped to consolidate a clear definition of race in spatial terms, linked to a discourse of difference, of social exclusion. Usually undressed and elevated, black bodies were aired and publicly humiliated during the lynching spectacles of the nineteenth and twentieth century. An acute national awareness of exclusion prevails, conveying a historically conditioned plight. The willed amnesia concerning the 'taming' and appropriating of American space has given rise to the tragic reconsideration of such a history. It is within this context that the ensuring symbology of 'back home' serves as an empowering rhetoric, finding authenticity aligned with geographies. By unravelling the realities of 'home,' *Paradise* interrogates the meaning of reconstructing a space for 'outdoored' people by calling into question the utopian visions upon which the black spaces are founded. Tracing divergences between social realities of paradise provides a keen portrait of the importance of space and spatial placement, either indoors or outdoors, during the Reconstruction.

When considering the lynched image, I would suggest that the visual sign of landlessness is imposed onto black bodies hanging from trees. The inferior social place, the 'outsideness' that African Americans were supposed to occupy, compounded by the struggles this community faced in acquiring their own land, is reified through the

lynched image with the flagrant inability for the victim to touch the ground. Black bodies are spatially displaced, a few feet above the ground, prevented from occupying the land beneath them. The symbolic power which inheres in the image of a dead black body, whether literally hanging from a limb, in the air or on his/her knees, depends on our understanding of the very positive power implied in the obverse image of a virile black body staking a claim on land by virtue of its standing firmly on it. To be suspended in mid-air is to be denied a place on that ground, to foretell the ultimate expulsion of that body from society. Such a diametrical relationship concerning the spatial hierarchy, of black bodies elevated and white bodies firmly grounded, is sardonically conveyed in *Sula* – a text in which displacement is integral.

Before *Sula's* narrative fully begins, there is a brief remembrance of a place that has now disappeared, a frame that describes trees before they have been uprooted, buildings used by local merchants before each has been destroyed by a wrecker, and the laughter of a people before it has faded into silence. The narrator describes this place, a neighbourhood called the Bottom in an Ohio valley town called Medallion, as 'hot and dusty with progress' before it was cleared for a gentrifying project, a proverbial conversation between a master and slave conveying the displacement:

A good white farmer promised freedom and a piece of bottom land to his slave if he would perform some very difficult chores. When the slave completed the work, he asked the farmer to keep his end of the bargain. Freedom was easy – the farmer had no objection to that. But he didn't want to give up any land. So he told the slave that he was very sorry that

he had to give him valley land. He had hoped to give him a piece of the Bottom. The slave blinked and said he thought valley land was bottom land. The Master said, 'Oh no! See those hills? That's bottom land, rich and fertile...when God looks down, it's the bottom. That's why we call it so. It's the bottom of heaven – best land there is.'⁸⁹

The paradoxical 'Bottom' articulates the anxieties concerning racial mixing, the traces of the former slave community 'huddled by the river bend' or living in 'undemolished houses' (*Sula*, 166). The black race is either figured as an example of a nominal and geographic reversal of hierarchy, or creatures of an outdoor locality, revealing the parallels between racial fears and border crossing – the outside coming inside. Despite *Sula's* reactionary facets, the text also breathes life into and subversively reconstructs a lynching narrative, one of black modernity's most nightmarish elements. Being outside meant that you were proverbially 'in the dark' and that you *were* dark – racialised or othered in some way. It is at this junction, the tension between 'them' and 'Out There' as opposed to 'us,' that raises a number of questions about the all-Black utopian vision of Ruby, succinctly and poignantly capturing this racial-spatial divide as it specifically pertains to lynching.

The town of Ruby reverses and reiterates race valuations, apparent in the act of the 'Disallowing' and its narrative, where 158 individuals were denied admission to the all-black town Fairly, controlled by the Morgans. A similar inverted hierarchy is

⁸⁹Morrison, *Sula* (London: Vintage Books, 2005), 5.

apparent, as the darkest-skinned members of the community are figuratively placed on top, outlawing or marginalising any variance. This master narrative is then taught to children, repeated to newcomers and used as a source of propaganda for the Nativity. Through the disruptions to the town, the impossibility of either locating a new space or demolishing pre-existent structures is impossible. The narrative reveals that Haven was built on land 'from the old Creek Nation which once upon a time a witty government called "unassigned land"' (*Paradise*, 6). A reference to the nineteenth century narrative of the frontier, in which the western region of North America was envisioned, bartered over and sold as a blank, unclaimed space, provides evidence of modernity and progress, a land waiting to be inhabited. Yet there is no way to erase the history – there is no truly unwritten land recognised even by the founders of Haven as they complete their 'purchase' before laying the foundations.

The struggle for spatial power is visible in the clash over the meaning of the Oven, which Morrison uses to link the narrative to public space, making overt the violence that enforces both homelessness and boundaries. The Oven is the key public space in town where the 'lazy young' (*Paradise*, 111) of Ruby gather. A diasporic African and African American community beyond the town limits, the young retaliate against the narrative of the Founding Fathers with their inactivity and their questioning of the plaque. The remaining words inscribed on it, 'The Furrow of his Brow,' suggest a cautionary face value, misread as 'her' brow as Reverend Pulliam's wife resents the

Convent women's dancing. At the end of the novel, after the lynching of the Convent women, the elderly midwife and healer observe a new slogan graffitied on the Oven's side: 'We are the Furrow of his Brow' (*Paradise*, 298) - a statement which Shari Evans suggests means that the 'work of paradise is endless.'⁹⁰ Tying lynching to groundlessness, the Oven becomes a site of collapse and destruction at the end of the novel: 'The Oven sits, just slightly, on one side. The impacted ground on which it's rests is undermined' (*Paradise*, 287). A monument that has gained 'chinks' and 'cracks,' the trace of racial markings, becomes an empty monument, no longer necessary for either 'material or spiritual substance' (*Paradise*, 103).

Utopic at its best, Ruby's inherent flaws are revealed as the structures of race, like Morrison's fish bowl, making the whole system fragile, like glass that always threatens to crack. The epilogue undercuts the murderous invasion of the Ruby men, ending with an idea of paradise that challenges such structures that precede it: 'Another ship perhaps, but different, heading to port, crew and passengers, lost and saved, a tremble, for they have been disconsolate for some time. Now they will rest before shouldering the endless work they were created to do down here in paradise' (*Paradise*, 318). The paradise, 'down here,' requires 'endless work' as well as memory, both the lost and saved, the inside and outside, the heteroglossic memories and definitions that make it

⁹⁰ Shari Evans, 'Programmed Space, Themed Space, and the Ethics of Home in Toni Morrison's *Paradise*,' *African American Review* 46.2-3 (Summer/ Fall 2013), 387.

possible. The home we are left with is active, racially conscious, inclusive, a place of flux and multiple narratives.

CHAPTER 4

SACRIFICIAL MURDERS, RITUALISTIC CANNIBALISM AND THE SEXUAL CUT

Ridicule, minstrelsy and the lynched body

In nineteenth century America, minstrelsy implicitly defined the link between the black body and its consumption in public visual spectacle. In his research on minstrelsy in the antebellum period, Eric Lott argues that: 'minstrel performers began their careers in the circus, perhaps even developing American blackface out of clowning (whose present mask in any case is clearly indebted to blackface), and continually found under the big top a vital arena of minstrelsy performance.'¹ Minstrel performers created a visual image of a grotesque Otherness, a doubled body that is neither black nor white, a body that presents a political dimension. As Toni Morrison explores through the character of Jadine, the Tar Baby, the Copper Venus, minstrelsy defines who can wear a mask, and under what circumstances, determining who laughs and who is ridiculed.

Barbara Lewis suggests that minstrelsy also ritualised how white males considered themselves, self-informed as 'in command, sovereign over blacks...[an] absolute power [that] was regularly reinforced by white males who claimed the look and

¹ Eric Lott, 'Love and Theft: The Racial Unconscious of Blackface Minstrelsy,' *Representations* 39 (1992), 12.

motion of the black body as within their prerogative to create.² By participating in the lynching ritual, the white community inscribed the sign of subordination onto the bodies of their victims, in order to impress white rule. The mutilated corpse emblematised racial difference, often displayed in a public place following the vigilante act. Ultimately, lynching rituals and the subsequent burning of the body that often followed functioned to sustain a belief in racial, economic, intellectual and moral superiority. The violence acted as a cleansing ritual, a means to expiate the impurity of the African American race from the white community.

When considering the appearance of torture as a form of public spectacle, Foucault argues that:

[T]orture forms part of a ritual. It is an element in the liturgy of punishment and meets two demands. It must mark the victim: it is intended, either by the scar it leaves on the body, or by the spectacle that accompanies it, to brand the victim with infamy...men will remember public exhibition, the pillory, torture and pain duly observed. And, from the point of view of the law that imposes it, public torture and execution must be spectacular, it must be seen by all almost as its triumph. The very excess of the violence employed is one of the elements of its glory: the fact that the guilty man should moan and cry out under the blows is not a shameful side-effect, it is the very ceremonial of justice being expressed in all its force...Justice pursues the body beyond all possible pain.³

² Barbara Lewis in *Clowns, Fools and Picaros: Popular Forms in Theatre, Fiction and Film*, ed. David Robb (London: Rodopi, 2007), 92.

³ Foucault, Michel, *Discipline and Punishment: The Birth of the Prison* (New York: Vintage Books, 1975), 34-5.

Following Foucault's reading, the lynching ritual established a set of rules, through spectacle, to control and define the 'space' permitted for the black race. Deviation from these rules resulted in triumphant punishment, the body branded with infamy in a public exhibition. The lynching ritual served a cultural need, explained by Clyde Kluckhohn: 'ritual is an obsessive repetitive activity – often a symbolic dramatisation of the fundamental "needs" of the society...Mythology is the rationalisation of these same needs, whether they are all expressed in overt ceremonial or not.'⁴ Simultaneously, by establishing black repression, lynchings celebrated, renewed and fixed southern social values and traditions, establishing solidarity and dominance.

One way to abase the African American body was to render it a form of ridicule, a position assumed by Pecola in *The Bluest Eye* (1970) and Bride in *God Help the Child*, but chiefly by Shadrack in *Sula* (1973) with his annual, public performance. An autonomous parade by the 'local madman,' 'drunk, loud, obscene, funny and outrageous,' Shadrack assumes the 'obsessive' nature of lynching, a clownish figure with a body he is unable to control.⁵ Just like the clown, he occupies an extreme location, either too 'funny' or too 'frightening.' As Barbara Lewis has argued: 'The lynch victim and the clown have more in common than generally assumed. Each stands apart from the norm...differentiated through dress and/or some physical

⁴ Clyde Kluckhohn, *Myths and Rituals: A General Theory*, in *Harvard Theological Review* 35 (1942), 78-9.

⁵ Toni Morrison, *Sula* (London: Vintage Books, 2005), 15.

marking.⁶ Shadrack is marked psychologically by his experiences of war, and also physically by his skin. His blackness is acts as a trace, staring back at him from his reflection in the toilet bowl: 'A black so definite, so unequivocal, it astonished him. He had been harbouring a skittish apprehension that he was not real – that he did not exist' (*Sula*, 13). Morrison appears to recreate this scene from James Baldwin's childhood experiences, when, on a rainy day in 1940, he was encouraged to look at the water flowing past the curb. He 'just saw water,' but on looking again, 'he noticed the oil on the surface of the water and the way it transformed the buildings it reflected...it had to do with the fact that what one can and cannot see "says something about you."⁷ I am interested in Shadrack's experience, in that blackness is presented as a surplus, erupting out of its own categorisation. Shadrack's blackness is 'indisputable,' a presence that must either be laughed at and ridiculed, or exorcised and dispelled. The disruptive presence of each is diminished through derision, a form of social distancing, the latter truncating a corporeal exemplification, while the former pinpoints it.

Appearing prominently on the title pages of *Without Sanctuary*, there is an image that connects the history of minstrelsy, the black body and the lynched victim.⁸ The photographed body is seated and supported; his neck broken yet suspended. His

⁶ Barbara Lewis in David Robb, 2007, 95.

⁷ David Leeming, *James Baldwin: A Biography* (New York: Henry Holt, 1994), 34.

⁸ Figure 13, *Without Sanctuary* Plate 1, The bludgeoned body of an African American male, circa 1900, location unknown. In the Allen/ Littlefield Collection.

corpse is fully clothed, and his face has been painted with the markings of a clown.

James Allen notes, of all his lynching photographs:

This is perhaps the most extreme photographic example extant capturing the costuming of a victim of extra-legal violence. What white racists were unable to accomplish through intimidation, repressive laws, and social codes – namely, to mould the African American male into the myth of the emasculated ‘good ole darkey’ – they have here accomplished by violence and costuming.⁹

The connection between the lynched body, the clown and the face of blackness is implicitly minstrelsy, born in the circus, a form of spectacle contained within the cultural construction of white demand. In this photograph, the violence is unconventional. The body is not stripped to the skin, the back and legs are not slashed and disfigured. The figure is not hanging from a tree or a bridge, his skin is not charred, and he does not appear to be dismembered. The violence inflicted on him is reductive. White cotton is applied to his sides, a malicious allusion to plantation slavery, just as Shadrack’s ‘cowbell’ yokes him to agricultural labour. The black body is rendered art, which reflects black life, and its inevitable death, as the ongoing production of performance.

Morrison’s eighth novel, *Love* (2003), also renders the image of the lynched body clownlike. Placed in the 1990s, the plot recalls the tangled family history of the Cosey family, headed by Bill Cosey, whose hotel resort flourished in the years following the

⁹ James Allen, et al, *Without Sanctuary: Lynching Photography in America* (Santa Fe, NM: Twin Palms, 2000), 165.

Depression, before suffering the consequences of upward mobility, brought about by the Civil Rights movement. Morrison notes in an interview that: 'There were these fabulous black schools, high schools, insurance companies, resorts, and the business class was very much involved. They had worked very hard to have their own resorts outside Detroit and New Jersey where they were all black and very upscale. Those stores are gone; those hotels are gone.'¹⁰ Without denying the importance of integration, the Cosey family present one casualty of the necessary gains of progress. It is the mammy figure L who presents a choral commentary on the decline of the family, an elegy for black society, referring to the 'clown of love' in her stream of consciousness, contrasted to a 'real' kind of love that carries a 'certain intelligence,' loving softly, 'without props.'¹¹ The reference to the iconography of blackface is implicit, as L continues to contemplate the universal position of the black body:

But the world is a showpiece, maybe that's why folks try to outdo it, put everything they feel onstage just to prove they can think up things too: handsome scary things like fights to the death, adultery, setting sheets afire. They fail, of course. The world outdoes them every time. While they are busy showing off, digging other people's graves, hanging themselves on a cross, running wild in the streets, cherries are quietly turning from green to red (*Love*, 63).

Just as Bride and her cosmetics company render the black body a material figure, in *Love* this edification is ironically given to the black mammy figure, a body constructed to facilitate racial strata.

¹⁰ Adam Langer, 'The Nature of Love: An Interview with Toni Morrison (2003)' in *Toni Morrison: Conversations*, ed. Carolyn C. Denard (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2008), 213.

¹¹ Toni Morrison, *Love* (Toronto: Alfred A. Knopf, 2003), 63.

In Allen's exposition, the face of the photographed figure is redefined with white paint, outlandish, freakish and uncanny, as Morrison's female characters are defined by the legacy of 'slavery,' 'searching for a new language to make [themselves] understood' (*Love*, 93). The back body is declared Other, commercial, exemplified by the vilification of the white-faced clown that renders the black body a dual stereotype. In Allen's first photograph, the primary referent is not to the black body, but to the stereotype of minstrelsy, reanimating a reified black body. The face is painted white, yet the lynched victim entrenches blackness. The pose, attitude, and position, despite its suggestion of life, embraces all that is black, shifting the location of blackness from the sphere of the body to the sphere of exhibition. Blackness is not invisible, the voided existence that troubles Shadrack, but rather 'hypervisible.'¹²

In minstrelsy, the black body is physically assumed and then dispossessed, rendered an object. In lynching, the black body is eradicated. In Allen's photograph, the victim is passive in the hands of his captors, connecting the symbolic banishment of the black body with a form of entertainment. Just as minstrelsy is a white face with a black mask, deploying blackface as hermeneutics of the surface, this photograph marks whiteness

¹² I refer to the visual economy of enjoyment, termed 'hypervisibility' by Saidiya Hartman, the space between looking and being looked at, the spectacle and the spectator, which forms an economy where blackness marks simultaneously both the performance of the object and the performance of humanity. *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997).

onto a blackness, oppressive and constricting, just as Shadrack assumes the polar position of the lynchers, holding the noose that is his bondage. Conveying black degradation and the festive entertainment of the lynching ritual, Shadrack, like Allen's photo, demonstrates the extreme response against racial crimes, a carnivalesque transgression that is brought in line by the end of the novel as he leads the townspeople to their deaths, 'the pillory, torture and pain duly observed.'¹³

¹³ Foucault, 35.

SULA AND L, BURNING THE BODY

In other cases of lynching, burning the body reduced it to an even more grotesque aberration of the human form. Orlando Patterson, in his research on the violent, sacrificial nature of lynching, considers the cases of three African American men: Henry Smith, who purportedly killed the daughter of a violent Texas policeman after he assaulted him; Sam Holt, a farm labourer who was charged with killing his Euro-American employer after a wage dispute, and Dan Davis, who was charged with the attempted rape of a white American woman.¹⁴

The account of Henry Smith is particularly visceral, one eyewitness account stating:

Arriving here (Paris, Texas) at 12 o'clock, the train was met by a surging mass of humanity 10,000 strong. The Negro was placed upon a carnival float in mockery of a king upon his throne, and, followed by an immense crowd, was escorted through the city so that all might see the most inhuman monster known in current history...His clothes were torn off piecemeal and scattered in the crowd, people catching the shreds and putting them away as mementos. The child's father, her brother, and two uncles that gathered about the Negro as he lay fastened to the torture platform and thrust hot irons into his quivering flesh. It was horrible – the man dying in slow torture in the midst of smoke from his own burning flesh. Every groan from the fiend, every contortion of his body was cheered by the thickly packed crowd of 10,000 persons, the mass of beings 600 yards in diameter, the scaffold being the center. After burning the feet and legs, the hot irons – plenty of fresh ones being at hand – were

¹⁴ Henry Smith was lynched in Paris, Texas in 1893, after allegedly confessing to the murder of the three-year-old daughter of a law enforcement officer. Smith fled but was recaptured after a nationwide chase and was returned to Paris, where he was burned at the stake. Orlando Patterson, 'Rituals of Blood: Sacrificial Murders in the Postbellum South,' *The Journal of Blacks in Higher Education* 23 (Spring 1999), 123-127.

rolled up and down Smith's stomach, back and arms. Then the eyes were burned out and irons were thrust down his throat.

The men of the [child's] family having wreaked vengeance, the crowd piled all kinds of combustible stuff around the scaffold, poured oil on it and set it afire. The Negro rolled and tossed out of the mass, only to be pushed back by the people nearest him. He tossed out again and was roped and pulled back.¹⁵

In attempting to defile the purity of a young, white, American girl, Smith commits a wilful subversion of the status quo, a contravention of hierarchy that results in a carnivalesque inversion placing him as a 'king,' a Christ-like figure, a satirical elevation which is quickly reversed through the lynching act. The sacrifice shores up the utility of the image for the black spectator, as Gwendolyn Brooks has argued, 'the loveliest lynchee was our Lord.'¹⁶ Patterson remarks on the relevance of Henri Hubert and Marcel Mauss' model of sacrifice, in that an 'essential part of the sacrificial rite is that some profound change occurs in the sacrificed object, and there is awe in actually witnessing the transition from a state of life to a state of death.'¹⁷ Smith's destruction restores an adverse form of social 'harmony,' the icon of a sacrificed son.

Such a sacrifice is echoed in *Sula* and *Tar Baby* (1981): Shadrack is connected to Christ through the nail that 'pierces the ball of his foot' (*Sula*, 8), or his avocation of fishing due to his name 'Shad,' an aptronymic connection to the popular game fish and a

¹⁵ Referenced in Patterson, 124.

¹⁶ Gwendolyn Brooks, *Selected Poems* (New York: Harper Collins, 2006), 70.

¹⁷ Henri Hubert and Marcel Mauss, *Sacrifice: Its Nature and Functions* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981), in Patterson, 6-7.

satirical connection to Christ as the fisherman, or Son in *Tar Baby*, with his allusions to the Saviour, his homeland 'Eloe' one of the final words allegedly spoken by Jesus on the cross and translated as 'godly.'¹⁸ Like Son, or Shadrack, Smith presents the body transgressed, a sacrifice to shore up the integrity of white America. His victimised body is King turned to dust, a figure with hot irons marking his flesh rather than a cross on his forehead, the crowd witnessing his execution worked into a frenzy following an 'instant of hush.'

Morrison uses several instances of ritual violence in *Sula*, shifting beyond Shadrack to the other characters in the town of Bottom. Through Eva, her daughter Hannah, her granddaughter Sula, and Sula's childhood friend Nel, Morrison presents the tensions of physical sacrifice and economic freedom, describing the women in the foreword as 'points on a cross...bound by gender and race,' the figures in *Love* that L describes as hanging themselves on their own signs. Beyond the cross, 'wrapped around the arms...were wires of other kinds of battles – the veterans, the orphans, the husband, the labourers, confined to a village by the same forces that mandated the struggle' (*Sula*, xii). Like Eloe, or Ruby, Bottom is a simpleminded town, projecting moral

¹⁸ The word 'Eloe' presents the rigid moral beliefs of the rural town in *Tar Baby*, used interchangeable with 'God.' Toni Morrison, *Tar Baby* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1981), 173, 346, and 263. The word 'Eloe' presents a remarkable orthographic and phonetic resemblance to the Aramaic/ Hebrew term 'Eloi.' According to the gospels of Matthew and Mark, Jesus cried 'Eloi, Eloi, Lama sabachthani?' (Matthew 27:46; Mark 15:34; Psalms 22:1), which translates to 'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?' Jadine's suffering at the hands of the Eloe peoples parallels the suffering of Christ at the hands of the Romans.

uncertainty onto its female inhabitants. Comparable to Jadine, the Copper Venus, or the women of the Convent in *Paradise* (1997), Hannah is sacrificed. As she bends 'to light the yard fire,' she burns, the flames 'licking [her] blue cotton dress, making her dance' (*Sula*, 75), visually connecting to the 'Bodacious black Eves' of Ruby, 'unredeemed by Mary, they are like panicked does leaping towards a sun that has finished burning off the mist and now pours its holy oil over the hides of game.'¹⁹ Eva throws herself out of the window, covering her daughter's body with her own in an attempt to suffocate the flames. Yet Hannah's 'beautiful body' becomes the burst apple threatened in *A Mercy* (2008), dehumanised into a clownish 'jack-in-the-box,' 'twitching lightly among the smashed tomatoes, her face a mask of agony' (*Sula*, 76). Despite Eva's efforts, she dies on the way to the hospital, the woman who washed her body mourning her 'burnt hair and wrinkled breasts as though they had been lovers' (*Sula*, 78).

The tenderness with which Eva attempts to rescue Hannah contrasts with the brutality of her actions as she immolates her only son. Lighting his body with kerosene, she tries, oxymoronically, to restore the manhood which Plum lost during the war. Plum is a figure with clear connections to Shadrack and Frank Money - all three men are casualties in a war which denies African American men justice, personhood or agency. Eva remembers how she rocked Plum, her eyes 'wandering around his room' which

¹⁹ Toni Morrison, *Paradise* (London: Vintage, 1999), 18.

linger on 'half-eaten store-bought cherry pie. Balled-up candy wrappers and empty pop bottles peered from under the dresser. On the floor by her foot was a glass of strawberry crush and a *Liberty* magazine' (*Sula*, 46). The scene, a proleptic contrast to Plum's childhood, where he was a 'Tar Baby,' a thing of myth, living off 'air and music,' causes Eva to recollect the 'ice man' and the 'winter night in the outhouse' and the time when she was forced to relieve Plum of his stools because he was so malnourished: 'Her fingernail snagged what felt like a pebble; she pulled it out and others followed. Plum stopped crying as the black hard stools ricocheted onto the frozen ground' (*Sula*, 34). Plum is stunned into silence, following the Hubert and Mauss model, 'suddenly quiet' as Eva nurses him.²⁰ A scene that visually connects to *Beloved* (1987) and the matricide in the woodshed, the dead baby in Sethe's hands forming an ice pick, like the handsaw, all grown into 'an emptiness,' so too does Plum become a void, a 'hole' that Eva fills and prevents in her own self: 'he wanted to crawl back in my womb and well... I ain't got the room no more...there wasn't space for him' (*Sula*, 71).

Unusually, however, Plum is both the victim and the audience, recalling the spectatorial position of Frank Money in *Home* (2012). He is persecuted, yet also

²⁰ Orlando Patterson remarks on the relevance of Henri Hubert and Marcel Mauss' model of sacrifice, in that an 'essential part of the sacrificial rite is that some profound change occurs in the sacrificed object, and there is awe in actually witnessing the transition from a state of life to a state of death.' Henri Hubert and Marcel Mauss, *Sacrifice: Its Nature and Functions* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981), in Patterson, 6-7.

stunned as he perceives the deathlike suffering of Eva, battling tuberculosis, 'shivering from the biting cold' and suffocating in the 'stench' of the outhouse (*Sula*, 71). Childlike, infantile, devouring food in his adulthood that reflects the consumerist society he lives in, a metonymical representation of the instability and lack of fulfilment in his life, whilst sardonically representing the production of sugar by plantation slaves, Eva burns her son out of love. Like a hanged body, Eva allows her memory to 'spin, loop and fall,' the 'strawberry crush' turning into 'blood-tainted water' as she splashes him in a 'wet light,' a perverse 'baptism, some kind of blessing' as the '*whoosh* of flames engulf' him (*Sula*, 47). The '*whoosh*', a breath, is interesting, in that it presents the destruction of the fire as well as an interruption, an invisible performance that cuts through Eva's actions. As Fred Moten argues, black performance is improvisation, a break which can be indicated by a breath, a 'rupture in which rapturous sounds (words) remain, disseminate, mark, and stain even in declarations of their necessary disappearance.'²¹ The burning scene, in this sense, presents the troubled depths of black improvisational performance.

As Plum's body burns, he becomes the 'Strange Fruit' of Billy Holiday's blues, compounding the subject of lynching, a sweet pulp without its core, a voided hollow space. Analogous to the image of Shadrack with a rope, the murder of Plum inverts

²¹ Fred Moten, *In the Break. The Aesthetics of the Black Racial Tradition* (London, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 2003), 83.

the logic of lynching, a form of spectacle that renders violence as compassion and destruction as salvation as Eva saves her son from his existence. The love of a black mother is presented as a tragic flaw, a 'madwoman in the attic' scenario that is closely replicated in *Love* (2003), when Heed, the rival for Bill Cosey's affections, sets her childhood friend Christine's bed on fire, 'willing to burn [the house] down just to keep her out.'²² Diverging from Eva in *Sula*, where the candy wrappers cause Eva to realise that Plum was beyond hope, the Eve of Genesis which has allowed Adam to succumb to the harsh knowledge of the world, L smothers the 'blackened sheets with a twenty-pound sack of sugar, caramelising evil' (*Love*, 134). In *Love*, a violent death is no more than a fantasy, Christine hoping that his 'cheap little bitch-wife...might succeed one day...then too would he look finally at the charred flesh of his own flesh and settle that also as though it were a guest's bounced check' (*Love*, 135), while in *Sula*, Eva ignores the 'voices of alarm and the cries of [Plum],' climbing the stairs in the same fashion as Bertha.²³ Both the wanderer Shadrack and the characters of *Love* subvert the figure of 'Christ,' the saviour represented by the appellation of *Christine*, while the black body is equated with a 'Bill' of sale. Rendering the black body a commodity, the lynching iconography re-inscribes the blackness as an item of material culture.

²² Toni Morrison, *Love* (Toronto: Alfred A. Knopf, 2003), 86.

²³ Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2000). The title of this text alludes to *Jane Eyre* and the character Bertha, demonstrating a paradigm of distinctly female anxieties and abilities. Bertha is considered insane and sets the bedchamber of her husband, Mr. Rochester, alight. The parallels with Bertha are interesting when considering her ethnic heritage. 'She came of a mad family; - idiots and maniacs through three generations! Her mother, the Creole, as both a mad woman and a drunkard!' (369).

THE LYNCHED BODY TURNED RELIC

Leigh Raiford has contended that, as a Foucauldian ritual that connects race to the body, lynching evokes the connection between black skin and the auction block. The panic to secure body parts, scraps of clothing and strands of hair, the fetishes and mementos of lynching, further sanctioned the metonymical relationship between the white owner and the slave: 'If lynching was a return to the slave block, a re-inscribing of the black body as commodity, then lynching photographs functioned as the bill of sale and the receipt of ownership.'²⁴ Though Sarah Bartmann's remains were displayed publicly, unlike the secretive coveting of lynched remains, the echoes of Frédéric Cuvier's scientific exploration and desecration of the black body are difficult to deny.

Patterson asserts that in 'all human sacrifices, relics are taken by the participants,' including the case of Sam Holt in 1899. After being burned at the stake in a public road, 'before the torch was applied to the fire, [Holt] was deprived of his ears, fingers, and other portions of his body with surprising fortitude. Before the body was cool, it was cut to pieces, the bones were crushed into small bits and even the tree upon which the wretch met his fate was torn up and disposed of as souvenirs.'²⁵ It is no accident that

²⁴ Leigh Raiford, 'The Consumption of Lynching Images,' in *Only Skin Deep: Changing Visions of the American Self*, ed. Coco Fusco and Brian Wallis (New York International Center of Photography, 2003), 270.

²⁵ Referenced in Patterson, 126.

such actions revealed to W.E.B DuBois the necessity for more aggressive political activism on the part of the 'Talented Tenth.'²⁶ A fetishised form of entertainment, comparable to the plaster cast remains of the Hottentot Venus, lynching and spectacle renders the black body a commodity, preserved in jars, immortalised in the hooded archives of photography.

In *Sula*, Morrison creates a relic out of the bodies of her protagonists yet seeks to readdress the lack of agency of the black victim. Both Nel and Sula had 'discovered years before' their schoolyard meetings that they were neither 'white nor male,' a 'triumph...forbidden to them,' yet they 'set about creating something else to be' (*Sula*, 52). They are lusted after, with 'stalklike legs' that evoke memories in old men, 'pig meat,' recalling the breeding hogs which Sethe is equated with in *Beloved*. When attacked by four white boys, 'sons of the newly arrived Irish people,' pushing Nel from 'hand to hand until they grew tired of the frightened, helpless face,' Sula responds with an explicit connection to the lynching ritual:

Holding the knife in her right hand, she pulled the slat toward her and pressed her left forefinger down hard on its edge. Her aim was determined but inaccurate. She slashed off only the tip of her finger. The four boys stared open-mouthed at the wound and the scrap of flesh,

²⁶ The Talented Tenth is a term used when referring to a leadership class of African American men in the early 20th century. The term was coined by W. E. B. Du Bois in an influential essay of the same name, which appeared in *The Negro Problem*. Du Bois used the term to describe the likelihood of black men becoming leaders of their race: 'Men we shall have only as we make manhood the object of the work of schools – intelligence, broad sympathy, knowledge of the world that was and is.' W. E. B. Du Bois 'The Talented Tenth,' Ashland University (September 1903), <TeachingAmericanHistory.org> (accessed 3/9/2010).

like a button mushroom, curling in the cherry blood that ran into the corners of the slate (*Sula*, 54-5).

Reversing the typical associations of the entertained audience and the strung-up body, Sula reclaims agency by enacting her own act of castration, while the white boys are assigned inertia. The 'cherry blood,' evoking rape, recalls the relationship between Son and Jadine, a 'Tar Baby,' like Plum, or the girl with 'plum polish' on her 'bitten nails' (*Love*, 46) in *Love*, tied to a headboard and raped by Romen's friends. Yet Sula is the one to draw blood, a subtle reminder by Morrison that there was no punishment for rape or the attempted rape of a black woman. Sula innovates the rituals entrenched in the lynching narrative, challenging the scopic privilege of her white counterparts, encouraging the black female gaze outwards.

The cut becomes an improvisational question, a resistant scene, anticipating a Freudian-phallic as well as an anti-phallic reading. By slashing her finger, Sula's body presents a paradoxical combination of sexuality and death, the mythological emasculation of the black male fulfilled in her childhood by her grandmother and the verbal image later voiced in her relationship with Jude:

Sula was smiling. 'I mean, I don't know what the fuss is about. I mean, everything in the world loves you. White men love you. They spend so much time worrying about your penis they forget their own. The only thing they want to do is cut off a nigger's privates. And if that ain't love and respect I don't know what is. And white women? They chase you all to every corner of the earth, feel for you under every bed. I knew a white woman wouldn't leave the house after 6 o' clock for fear one of you would snatch her. Now ain't that love? They think rape soon as they see

you, and if they don't get the rape they looking for, their scream anyway just so the search won't be in vain' (*Sula*, 104).

Sula rejects the behaviour inherited from the maternal line that states black women must 'worry themselves into bad health just trying to hang on to [black men's] cuffs.' A perverse form of love, the black male body is mythologised, rendered an icon, a relic, marked with objectification. Sula's flesh turned vegetal, a 'mushroom' with 'cherry red' blood, a perverse yet sacramental quality in mutilating herself, Sula evades the threat posed by the white crowd. Like Eva, who loses her leg by placing it on the train tracks for a 'pay off' (*Sula*, 3), the women of *Sula* form a sardonic reminder of the price that the black female must play to negotiate in the finance driven world.

Following the encounter with the white boys, Sula and Nel are able to reclaim a degree of agency, Nel rejecting the attempts of her mother to alter her physiognomy, to shape her nose with a clothespin in a desperate attempt to mask her African heritage: 'Nel slid the clothespin under the blanket as soon as she got in the bed. And although there was still the hateful hot comb to suffer through each Saturday evening, its consequences - smooth hair - no longer interested her' (*Sula*, 55). The friends carve out a space for themselves within their community, near 'the wide part of the river where the trees grouped themselves in families darkening the earth below.' They create a series of 'technicoloured visions' that flood the binaries of white and black. In a 'four cornered shade' where the trees interlock, an echo of the cross, the girls 'taste their lip sweat' and contemplate their 'wildness,' stripping the phallic twigs under

their bodies back to their 'creamy innocence.' They take part in a ritualistic consummation, rejecting the need for a male counterpart, Nel growing 'impatient' and poking 'her twig rhythmically and intensely into the earth, making a small neat hole that grew deeper and wider with the least manipulation of the twig,' a hole that they then fill with debris: 'paper, bits of glass, butts of cigarettes, until all of the small defiling things they could find were collected there' (*Sula*, 59). The ground, metonymical for a body, parallels the analeptical memory of Eva with Plum. Like her grandmother, in their adolescent naivety, Sula and Nel refuse to find 'space' for the black men in their community, denying the men that would crawl back up inside them.

Despite burying any sign of debris, and manipulating phallic symbols, the Arcadia constructed by Sula and Nel is tainted with the iconography of lynching, as Sula holds a noose like Shadrack, her 'braid coiled around her wrist.' The holes that the girls fill with waste, a baptismal font that they perversify with uprooted nature, connects to the body of Plum and his distended bowels, and to Hannah's head, which would have been 'two holes full of maggots' if Eva hadn't loved her, the only kind of love a black mother can give her child when 'things was bad. Niggers dying like flies' (*Sula*, 70). A sterile form of mother love, like the barren 'floating eggs in a crock of vinegar,' prevents Plum from suffocating inside the maternal space, his seeds becoming the 'tight knots of Kentucky Wonders [that] float to the top of the bowl' causing Hannah to feel elation, willing them with the 'finger' that Eva used to nurse her son (*Sula*, 72.)

Weaving together the motifs of love, baptism, water and death, after the girls play down by the river, a child appears, called 'Chicken Little.' Sula helps him to climb a tall tree, the lynched victim's cross, before swinging him laughing in an exuberant arc. His hands slip, sending him flying over the water and into the river, but unlike Son in *Tar Baby* (1981) and his ascent from the HMS *Stor Konigsgaarten*, Chicken Little never emerges from the 'darkened' space. Leaving a skin memory, 'the pressure of his hard and tight little fingers [remains] in Sula's palms as she stood looking at the water' (*Sula*, 61.) The baptismal water is touched with a curious, ritualistic calm, foreshadowing Sula's own death, floating in darkness, knees drawn up in an infantile, foetal position, thumb in mouth, giving way to the heavy softness of the water:

...here by this blind window high above the elm tree, that she might draw her legs up to her chest, close her eyes, put her thumb in her mouth and float over and down the tunnels, just missing the dark walls, down, down until she met a rain scent and would know the water was near, and she would curl into its heavy softness and it would envelop her, carry her, and wash her tired flesh away...Her body did not need oxygen. She was dead (*Sula*, 149).

The death of Chicken Little causes the separation of the childhood friends, sitting apart from each other at the funeral: 'a space, a separateness between them,' their hands 'unfolded like pairs of raven's wings and flew high above their hats in the air' (*Sula*, 65). Echoing the writer's hand of Morrisons Nobel Prize Speech, the girls assume the symbolic act of the hand that holds the bird, emblematic of language,

writing and creation. It is the preacher's words that make them realise the victimised status people of African descent that they within them, the 'innocent child hiding in the corner of their hearts, holding a sugar and butter sandwich. That one. The one who lodged deep within their fat, thin, old, young skin and was the one the world had hurt' (*Sula*, 65). It is this death that reveals the punishment for their agency, and the implications of spectacle, Sula herself becoming the body turned relic, the Christlike sign of the fish on her eye: 'the tadpole...the mark of the fish [Shadrack] loved' (*Sula*, 156).

Later in the novel, Eva accuses Nel of the crimes of the gaze, as Nel denies killing Chicken Little, though Eva reminds her: 'You. Sula. What's the difference? You was there. You watched, didn't you? Me, I never would've watched' (*Sula*, 168). It is only then that Nel recalls 'the good feeling she had had when Chicken's hands slipped... "How come it felt so good to see him fall?"' (*Sula*, 170). The maturity and compassion that she thought she had displayed was only 'the tranquillity that follows a joyful stimulation,' the moment of quiet and calm. Just as the dark waters consume the child's body, contentment 'washed over her enjoyment.' Yet the most shocking example of voyeurism is attributed to Sula, given precedent over the gaze as she stares back at the white bodies of the bodies, but also the passive observation of her mother's death. Revealing the corrupt, sinister nature of the audience that watches a lynching

take place, Sula denies the passivity that Eva had assumed of her as she stood by, watching her mother burn:

That's the same sun I looked at when I was twelve, the same pear tree. If I live a hundred years my urine will flow the same way, my armpits and breath will smell the same. My hair will grow from the same holes. I didn't mean anything. I never meant anything. I stood there watching her burn and was thrilled. I wanted her to keep on jerking like that, to keep on dancing (*Sula*, 147).

Sula desires a seemingly endless chronology, a denial of time past as she wishes her mother 'to keep on dancing' while the natural world remains seemingly unchanging, burying any signs of debris and decay. Sula's childish desires, that her mother keep on 'jerking,' despite the unprecedented pain of being burnt alive, reveals a recognition of her marginalised status, and by extension, the African race. By taking the lost black girl and her desire to suspend time, to disconnect the event from the history of slavery, forges a new narrative, rejecting a legacy of marginalisation. As the hands of the girls become ravens, like 'the great wings of an eagle pouring a wet lightness' over Plum, or Heed's grasping hands in *Love* that 'turned slowly into wings' (*Love*, 98), Sula attempts to create her own narrative space, her own presence within the literary canon, like the symbolic bird in the hand, recording a broader cultural sensibility of marginalisation that has led Sula to monstrosity. Sula watches her mother burn, sends away her grandmother with 'two men that came with a stretcher,' throws her life away, just as Eva 'sold [her] life for twenty-three dollars a month' (*Sula*, 93).

Because Sula has no active presence in history, no 'version of herself which she sought to reach out and to touch with an ungloved hand,' an 'artist with no artform, she [becomes] dangerous' (*Sula*, 94, 100). Because she lacks the tools to show her creativity, forced to strip down the tools of others, like the sticks by the river, she embodies 'Hellfire,' yet that hellfire 'burning' in her is the only thing that she owns: 'Had she paints, or clay, or knew the discipline of the dance, or strings; had she anything to engage her tremendous curiosity and her gift for metaphor, she might have exchanged the restlessness and reoccupation with whim for an activity that provided her with all she yearned for' (*Sula*, 100). Sula, Bottom and its inhabitants are rendered a myth, occupying a rhetorical location in a narrative of history. Because Sula is defined by her historical placement, Morrison narrates her rejection of it and the sacrifices on which it is dependent. In the perverse logic of a world where lynching violence is considered to restore a social balance, rituals of black violence against other black bodies is the paradoxical means of protection in a racially divided society. It is after Chicken Little drowns that Sula is connected to Eva by their scenes of sacrifice, connected by their cross to Shadrack, the living man with the hangman's noose, and Sula, the girl with her finger turned relic.

INCREDIBLE, EDIBLE BODIES

According to Patterson, the act of lynching was highly sacrificial, highly ritualistic, yet he has also noted that the act of lynching, a form of consecration, also achieved a 'divine devouring of the victim's soul.'²⁷ Many cases of lynching, either figuratively or literally, became cases of ritual cannibalism. Patterson notes how, on the 7 October 1934, Claude Neal was sacrificed in a 'bacchanalian' ceremony, where over two thousand attendees were present by formal invitation, akin to a dinner party, or a social occasion. The event was later described by James McGovern in *Anatomy of Lynching*:

After taking the nigger to the woods about four miles from Greenwood, they cut off his penis. He was made to eat it. Then they cut off his testicles and made him eat them and say he liked it. Then they sliced his sides and stomach with knives and every now and then somebody would cut off a finger or toe. Red hot irons were used on the nigger to burn him from top to bottom.²⁸

Waldrep notes that after Neal's body was tied to a rope and dragged down the highway, 'little children, some of them mere tots, who lived in the Greenwood neighbourhood, waited with sharpened sticks for the return of Neal's body and that when it rolled in the dust on the road that awful night these little children drove their weapons deep into the flesh of the dead man.'²⁹ A horrifying account of torture and

²⁷ Patterson, 127.

²⁸ Referenced in Christopher Waldrep, *Lynching in America: A History in Documents* (New York and London: New York University Press, 2006), 231.

²⁹ *Ibid.*

mutilation, the burning, and consuming of the African American body branded itself on the psyche of all who participated. Patterson notes that after a lynching episode, many of the spectators felt voraciously hungry, eating and drinking immediately afterwards. A reporter for the *Memphis News-Scimitar* noted that, as the mob walked away from the scene of Neal's violation, a woman was noticeable amongst the crowd: 'She seemed to be rather young, yet it is hard to tell among women of her type...She walked with a firm even stride. She was beautiful in a way...“I'm hungry,” someone complained, “Let's get something to eat.”’³⁰ These sources would suggest that the excessive violence that accompanied lynching was followed by an excessive desire of consumption as the crowd savoured the billows of smoke from the burning body.

I would argue that the history of lynching and the spectacle of the black female body, embodied by Bartmann, are connected through a cannibalistic, consumptive gaze. In a French caricature dated 1815, titled *The Curious in Ecstasy or the Laces of Shoes*, the nature of gazing on the Hottentot Venus' body by the nineteenth century British is highly satirised. The figure of a soldier exclaims: 'Ah, how amusing nature is!' while a second male character, peering through lorgnettes, cries: 'What strange beauty!' The presence of a dog compounds the animality of the exchange in the face of 'unbridled sexuality,' the mutt's face pointed at the rear of a kilt-clad soldier. A woman bending down to tie her shoelaces, averting her gaze, rejoices: 'From some points of view

³⁰ Referenced in Patterson, 127.

misfortune can be good,' as she observes a kilted man, reaching to touch Bartmann's buttocks, while he exclaims: 'Oh, goddam what roast beef!'³¹ Beyond her physicality, Bartmann is presented as the commodity that built the British Empire, the commercial successes of its world trade, such as the quality of its beef, an empire built on the attainments of the commercial entity of slavery.³²

What connects Bartmann with the paradigm of the lynched body is the total reduction of subjecthood to corporeality, the imagery of the body of the Hottentot Venus and the body hanging from a tree forming a site of exploration and agentic discovery for a white spectatorship, underscored by revulsion. Forming a cultural legacy indebted to the slave trade, black female bodies became subject to unnatural acts of public consumption. Kara Walker compounds the perverse act of ingestion in her silhouette, 'The Keys to the Coop,' a cut paper installation that reverses the agentic act of consumption.³³ A young, black, plantation slave, dressed in rags, is caught mid-run, following a decapitated chicken that frantically moves its wings in the throes of death. In her right hand, the girl clutches the head of the chicken, eagerly brought to her

³¹ Figure 14, Louis François Charon, *Les Curieux en extase, ou les cordons de souliers*, 1815 (Paris: The British Museum).

³² In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, as the Colonial British Empire began to be influenced by India's elaborate food tradition of strong, penetrating spices and herbs, the United Kingdom developed a worldwide reputation for the quality of British beef and pedigree bulls.

³³ Figure 15, Kara Walker, 'The Keys to the Coop' (1997), Linocut on Paper, 1175 x 1540mm. Hosted at the Tate: <<https://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/walker-the-keys-to-the-coop-p78211>> (accessed 17.6.2017).

mouth, her tongue protruding from her open lips. Dragging behind, her left hand carries a set of keys - a provocative image that would satirically place the control of black agency in the hands of a young female slave - the embodiment of commercial objectification. The violence and lust of the movement correlates with Sula's 'mushroom' fingertip, 'the fingernail prints' in *Beloved's* 'forehead' following Sethe's act of matricide (*Beloved*, 39), or perhaps the pointed finger conveying the violence of the gaze in Laurence Beitler's photograph.³⁴ Forming a second distant echo of *Beloved*, 'The Keys to the Coop' connect with Paul D's fingers, remembering the way that he 'chain-danced over the fields, through the woods' as his 'hands disobeyed the furious rippling of his blood.' He sings slave songs, of 'sisters long gone. Of pork in the woods; meal in the pan; fish on the line; cane, rain and rocking chairs' (*Beloved*, 128). Yet, in Paul D's slave narrative, the 'women,' not livestock, are victims, as the men displace the oppressive acts they receive from their masters, leaving their female kin punished, 'maimed, mutilated' or 'even buried' (*Beloved*, 128).

The climactic moment of violence comes in the guise of the 'sexual whim of a guard or two or three,' forcing the chain gang slaves to engage in fellatio to earn their breakfast:

'Breakfast? Want some breakfast, nigger?'
 'Yes, sir.'
 'Hungry, nigger?'

³⁴ Figure 12, Lawrence Beitler's photograph of the double lynching of Thomas Shipp and Abram Smith in Marion, Indiana, 1930 (Indiana Historical Society).

'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 short grunts so like the doves', as he stood before the man kneeling in the mist on his right (*Beloved*, 125.)

In both Walker's artwork and Morrison's narrative, perverse allusions to food and eating are apparent, conflating consumption with demeaning and dehumanising images of blackness that have become part of the American imagination. This, in turn, leads to the question of the relation between castration and alienation. The bird, whether the incantation of the 'dove' in *Beloved* - a perverse echo of Morrison's Nobel Prize speech, the bird in the hand representing knowledge - or the chicken in Walker's silhouette, presents an indictment of the position of plantations, crops and materiality in America's national past, forming a challenge to both the past and the present. Significantly, Walker displaces the agency of violence and lust, a subject which she readdresses in her more recent installation, the *Marvellous Sugar Baby, or A Subtlety*, where a sugar-coated sphinx gazes down on its audience with a blank, incurable stare.³⁵ The sphinx, a mythological hybrid of lion and woman, evokes undecipherable mystery, bathetically combined with the iconography of a mammy figure, created from refined sugar. As with Morrison and the figure of L, dousing fire with a bag of

³⁵ Kara Walker, 'A Subtlety, or the Marvellous Sugar Baby, an Homage to the unpaid and overworked Artisans who have refined our Sweet tastes from the cane fields to the Kitchens of the New World on the Occasion of the demolition of the Domino Sugar Refining Plant,' Sugar, polystyrene, plastic and molasses (New York: 2014).

sugar, Walker recalls Aunt Jemima, adorning her sphinx with a headkerchief and physiognomic features associated with African descent. Critiquing those who delight in the taste, and benefit from the commercial success of sugar, Walker creates a monument to the dead, surrounded by thirteen statues of children, moulded from resin and molasses, their toted sugar forming a brown contrast to the illuminate whiteness of the sphinx. Through the construction of the Sugar Baby, Walker suggests how images of the Mammy forms part of the lexicon of consumption, towering over cultural imagination to such an extent that the actuality of black womanhood, the growth of black children, the reclamation of the 'lost girl' of *Playing in the Dark*, withers in her shadow.

The terms 'Mammy,' 'Auntie,' 'Negro Nurse' and 'Colored Nurse' form part of the nineteenth century lexicon of antebellum plantation literature and folklore that Walker incites in 'The Keys to the Coop.' A stock character with excessive bodily attributes, an ever-expanding lap and a round face with a fixed smile, point to the long lasting and troubling relationship between racial essentialism and the productivity of the black female body, bolstering the romantic nostalgia that masked the oppressive violence of the slave plantations. The terms 'Mammy' and 'Aunt Jemima' are often used interchangeably, but it is important to note that the Mammy figure predated Aunt Jemima by almost a century. Aunt Jemima is the visual and literary legacy of the Mammy figure, forming a symbolic trademark conveying the relationships that over-

embodied subjects occupy in relation to their cultural positioning. Aunt Jemima operates as a central hieroglyph within the social text of the legacy of slavery, a figure that began her public career as a spectacle in minstrelsy. Her prominence was furthered in the 1893 Columbian World's Exposition in Chicago, played, this time, by a black woman, rather than a white man in blackface. Michael Harris has argued that, in many ways, 'Aunt Jemima was the mirrored counterpart for the sexualised black woman in Europe, emblematised by Saartjie Bartmann roughly eighty years earlier and characterised as a wanton Jezebel in the United States.'³⁶ For Harris, both the iconographic construction of the Hottentot Venus and the performative spectacle of Aunt Jemima came to symbolise the paradoxical nature of black female sexuality. Shifting beyond the connection between Bartmann and the 'Black Mammy' figure, I would suggest that consumptive responses to the Hottentot Venus, to the lynched body and to cultural figures such as Aunt Jemima, reveal the tenacious hold of the black female body on the American psyche, a figure to be consumed by a white supremacist gaze.

Walker enforces the fleshiness of her display in her Sugar Baby, an objectification that cannot be undone, even when the body is no longer a body, but a consumable treat. The hunger of her audience drives them into the gallery space, the sugar consumed

³⁶ Michael D. Harris, 'Mirror Sisters: Aunt Jemima as the Antonym/ Extension of Saartjie Bartmann,' in Willis, 163.

through the gaze, returning us to the scene of the minstrel theatre where the figure of Aunt Jemima originated. Like the photonegative of blackface makeup, Walker's white artwork is marred by the dark sugar children around her, a theatrical slave body in both its presentation and in its consumption. Kyla Wazana Tompkins notes how frequently nineteenth century literature and culture depicted black bodies as an edible commodity. Beyond an insight into racial images, Tompkins argues that the relationship between eating and racial identity reveals something significant about the black subject, between bodies 'inscribed with the marks of race and food.'³⁷ Tompkins argues that the mouth is presented as a space with a cultural and erotic history, a legacy connecting the desire of Walker's plantation girl with Paul D's abject disgust, what Tompkins has termed the 'presexological mapping of desire, appetite, and vice.'³⁸

Tompkins develops an earlier argument of Doris Witt, that the connection between the black body and food is due to the 'dialectic between commodity capitalism and popular culture...created to suture contradictions of racial, ethnic, gender and class difference.'³⁹ Morrison renders this contradiction in *Bride*, described as 'whipped cream' with 'chocolate,' the blackface outer of an 'Oreo' biscuit, sandwiching a white

³⁷ Kyla Wazana Tompkins, *Racial Indigestion: Eating Bodies in the 19th Century* (New York: New York University Press, 2010), 1.

³⁸ *Ibid*, 2.

³⁹ Doris Witt, *Black Hunger: Food and the Politics of U.S Identity, Race and American Culture* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 39.

cream centre, or 'Bonbons' dipped by hand.⁴⁰ Analogous to Jadine, Bride forms the antithesis of Therese, a recreation of the physical wonder of the Mammy figure in *Tar Baby*. A fragmented body, reduced to her phantasmal 'magical breasts,' Therese is a figure that spends her entire life labouring for white people, serving as a wet nurse to countless white children. An uncanny embodiment of the maternal, into her sixties, Therese declares: 'I got milk to this day' (*Tar Baby*, 154). The Copper Venus, Jadine, considers her to be one of those 'diaspora mothers with pumping breasts' who want to 'impugn [her] character' (*Tar Baby*, 288), women who have learnt that nurturing is central to their survival. Such a diametrical relationship is constructed by Maria Magdalena Campos-Pons, a Cuban artist of Nigerian ancestry, in her installation, *When I am Not Here/ Estoy Alla*, combining the slave history of black breasts, milk and transportation ships.⁴¹ Two milk bottles are strung around a black female neck with plastic tubing, dripping down into a boat-shaped wooden bowl, over breasts painted blue, with white waves from neck to waist. Campos-Pons' constructed body highlights the preciousness of milk, distinct from the black body, for children dispersed across the water and the continent. Significantly, the milk forms the offering, rather than the breast. Campos-Pons thus highlights a powerful distinction, retrieving

⁴⁰ Toni Morrison, *God Help the Child* (London: Chatto and Windus, 2015), 33.

⁴¹ Maria Magdalena Campos-Pons, *When I am Not Here/ Estoy Alla*, 1994. Photograph in Lisa D. Freiman, *María Magdalena Campos-Pons: Everything is Separated by Water* (Indianapolis Museum of Art, New Haven: Indianapolis Ind., in association with Yale University Press, 2007).

the Mammy figure from stereotype, re-establishing the black woman who has disappeared behind her erotic body parts.

In *Tar Baby*, Morrison achieves a similar trait to Campos-Pons, moving beyond a fixation with the body, to a focus on Therese's spiritual worth. Therese establishes a new sense of rootedness, a figure abundant with milk, but also of knowledge. Connected to the mother of Christ by Jadine, who refuses to call Therese by her name, but instead calls her 'Mary,' ironically because none of the Streets know the African names of their workers, Therese is aware of her value. Essentially blind, she also forms a connection to the mythical beings on the Isle Des Chevaliers, the three-hundred-year-old descendants of African slaves who go mysteriously blind the moment they see domination awaiting them on Dominique. Therese sees her spiritual self, an active and versatile carrier of tales, presenting a unique layering of artistic images and myth, merging the cultural disputes concerning race, motherhood and Southern nostalgia in American culture. Campos-Pons' artwork and Morrison's narrative therefore readdress the Mammy figure - a reading which can also be applied to Walker's *Sugar Baby*, presenting a new form of black subjectivity, an agentic body that does not submit so easily. Walker furnishes her *Sugar Baby* with a prominent vulva, signalling her sweetness, her sexual availability for her master. However, the submissive supremacy of the white master is given an elusive veneer, flimsy and fragile, like the Styrofoam blocks supporting the *Sugar Baby*'s construction. Walker encourages her

audience to see beyond the deception of the surface, to the interiority, comparable to Therese's blindness, her ability to move past the visual, imbuing the interior with credibility.

Like Walker's Sugar Baby and Morrison's Paul D, unnatural consumption also forms a pervasive subject in the construction of the character Sethe, the female protagonist in *Beloved*. She provides a critical juncture in the novel when she is attacked by Schoolteacher's nephews, engaging in an act of sexual, racial and maternal defilement. Her body becomes a terrain upon which white supremacy is enacted and assimilated. Sethe gives voice to the history of the comingling of blood and milk, flowing together when nursing slave mothers were whipped. She gives visibility to the act of trenches dug to accommodate the bellies of pregnant women in order to protect their unborn children during a flogging, graves for the living - the masters' valuable assets.⁴² In *Beloved*, a hole is dug to protect the foetus of Denver, as Sethe is whipped into silence, biting a piece of her tongue off in a highly symbolic act of autocannibalism. An image that forms a paradoxical comingling of life, death and motherhood, Sethe's blood-and-milk-soaked dress becomes stiff, like rigor mortis, the same dress that fuses into the image of the Hottentot Bustle, into a scarlet emblem that recalls Baby Suggs' branding. Domestic whiteness is presented as cannibalistically dependent on the

⁴² Jacqueline Jones, *Labor of Love, Labor of Sorrow: Black Women, Work and the Family from Slavery to the Present* (New York: Basic Books, 1985), 35.

consumption of the racial Other, what Morrison has called 'the process of organising American coherence through a distancing Africanism,' the 'parasitical nature of white freedom.'⁴³ White supremacy is affirmed through the metaphor of digression, rendering blackness the precondition on which whiteness is made material, both as a body and as a political agent.

Later in *Beloved*, in Sethe's stream of consciousness, which recalls her experiences on a slave ship, Sethe refrains from a cannibalistic consumption of the dead black bodies that overwhelm her, choosing starvation over ingestion:

I am always crouching the man on my face is dead his face is not mine his mouth smells sweet but his eyes are locked some who eat nasty themselves I do not eat the men without skin bring us their morning water to drink we have none at night I cannot see the dead man on my face daylight comes through the cracks and I can see his locked eyes (*Beloved*, 48).

Sethe rejects the bit, the bite of her tongue, mirroring the mask that clamped the faces of slaves to stop them from eating the crop they were harvesting, forcing Sethe's mouth into a permanent smile: 'When she wasn't smiling, she smiled' (*Beloved*, 12). Through Sethe, Morrison suggests that the black female body, beyond a surface inscribed with the traces of food, becomes far more than a complex metaphoric association. The black body becomes a figure of literal consumption, an image with roots in the violent intimacies of the slave economy.

⁴³ Toni Morrison, *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992), 6,8.

By examining the visual representations of the black female body, Morrison, Walker and contemporary artists carve out new ways to consider the embodiment of the mythic Mammy figure, its concepts and misconceptions that extend far beyond the stereotype. Morrison points to a persistent and troubling marriage of racial and gendered essentialism, reclaiming the cannibalistic tendencies embodied in the image of a small white child and the breast of a large black mother - a metaphor for the South growing fat on slave labour. Iconography, established in the minstrel show and the figures of the Mammy, Aunt Jemima, Jezebel and Black Venus, has survived to the present day as archetypal texts, with various historical manifestations and records that reveal their dominating power in the cultural imagination. Addressing the cannibalistic tendencies of the gaze, the interrelationship between the consumption of lynching paraphernalia and iconography connected to the Mammy and the Hottentot Venus, Morrison magnifies the interdependence of the gaze and consumption in *Beloved*. Expounded through the character of Sethe, Morrison evokes the history of the lynched female body, often lost in national memory behind the presence of the violated African American male, demonstrating the curious staging of the black female body in its most violent, unspeakable, fetishised form.

BELOVED AND THE LYNCHED FEMALE BODY

The pour soul sat sighing by a sycamore tree,
 Sing all a green willow;
 Her hand on her bosom, her head on her knee.
 Sing willow, willow, willow.
 The fresh streams ran by her, and murmur'd her moans;
 Sing willow, willow, willow;
 Her salt tears fell from her and soften'd the stones;
 Sing willow, willow, willow- (*Desdemona*, 47).

While Allen began to uncover the hidden archives of lynching, Elsa Barkley Brown raised the question: 'Why is it that lynching (and the notion of it as a masculine experience) is not just remembered, but is in fact central to how we understand the history of African American men and indeed the African American experience in general. But violence against women - lynching, rape, and other forms of violence – is not?'⁴⁴ Brown frankly added her own rejoinder, that 'Black women have no image, no symbol that they can call up so readily, so graphically in just a word as Black men do with lynching.'⁴⁵ Conversely, I would argue that the iconography of the Hottentot Venus and a re-examination of the history of lynching forms a compelling, transatlantic and universal presentation of 'negro' victimage that is both male and female. Through *Beloved*, Morrison presents a history of slavery that draws on a lynching narrative, but also stages the emblematic experiences of the Middle Passage as a thought picture, rather than masculine gendered experience, a 'rememory that

⁴⁴ Elsa Barkley Brown, *Mapping the terrain of Black Richmond* (London: Sage Publications, 1995), 102.

⁴⁵ *Ibid*, 101-2.

belongs to someone else...Even if the whole farm – every tree and grass blade of it that dies. The picture is still there...it will be there for you, waiting for you' (*Beloved*, 35). As with Cee and her journey in *Home* (2012), a body rendered a site of sexuality, consumption, commerce, *Beloved* draws upon the legacy of lynching, the iconography and the allure of such compelling images, to provide a more inclusive picture of black victimisation.

Laura Nelson and the lynched female photograph

In *Without Sanctuary*, Allen has included the photograph of Laura Nelson and her son Lawrence who hangs beside her, adjacent to the images of Frank Embree. Embree's lynching unfolds over three images: the first showing his shackled hands and gaze into the camera, while the second focusses on his mortified buttocks. In the final image, centring on his hanging body, men gather to touch the tree bark as though it is an extension of Embree, forming a narrative that re-inscribes the association of blackness with criminality, rendering the only potential identity for the marginal subject under the discriminatory gaze a 'criminal.' What strikes me, however, is the defiance in Embree's stance. An unsigned editorial in *The New York Times* forcefully asserted that the exhibition fosters a 'sanctioned' gaze, differentiated from the white mob, in part because of the gaze of Embree, that 'looks back at us, beyond us too, challenging our moral imagination across the years.'⁴⁶ Both Apel and Goldsby have remarked on the

⁴⁶ Cited in Lightweiss Goff, 'Death by Lynching,' *The New York Times*, 2000. 123.

image, considering the contemporary spectatorship that the photographs receive: Goldsby suggests that Embree 'rebuffs' his audience with 'an indignant grimace,' his 'courage call[ing] to mind the mob's readiness to exploit his vulnerability,'⁴⁷ while Apel argues that Embree 'faces the camera with calm defiance, as if challenging our historical imagination a hundred years later to look and see.'⁴⁸ For David Marriot, Embree presents the distinction between 'appreciating and destroying, loving and hating.'⁴⁹ Lightweis Goff argues that it is possible for an image to 'resist and bypass interpretation,' to examine the space between the intention of the mob against black criminality and the contemporary critic that could imbue the subject with a vulnerability, yet later in her research, *Blood at the Root*, Lightweiss Goff surmises that Embree, as he 'grasps his penis, he seizes white masculinity, a condition determined by bodily concealment; his eyes dare and challenge the spectator.'⁵⁰ Critical responses to Embree's image, I would suggest, are glyphs in search of a translator, demanding an endless contemplation in order to demand a degree of agency, and imbue these images with meaning.

Despite the conflicting responses to the photograph of Embree, critics differ further still when comparing his imagery to Nelson. Their photographs, placed side by side

⁴⁷ Goldsby, 237.

⁴⁸ Apel, 2004, 467.

⁴⁹ David Marriott, *On Black Men* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000), 27.

⁵⁰ Lightweiss Goff, 122.

in Allen's collection, reveal the significantly different presentations of agency dependent on the gender of the lynched victim. When considering the privileged gaze in a gallery space filled with images of lynchings, the racially marked body, which is almost always male, often features visual cues that tease at the potential for more complete exposure of the male body. For Lightweiss Goff, it is 'pornography – the hidden text of popular culture – that reveals the male,' with no space for soft male flesh in the patriarchal space.⁵¹

As Embree's eyes are described as challenging his spectators, it is in a very different stance that artists and writers have responded to the lynching images of Laura Nelson.⁵² When reimagining Nelson, Allen renders her ephemeral and passive: 'Caught so pitiful and tattered and beyond retrieving – like a child's paper kite snagged on a utility wire.' Comparable to Ferrus' constructed vision of the Hottentot Venus returning home, Allen provides a subjectivity, a somatic reminder of a narrative of life and death replayed in the image of her 'deep set eyes.' Nelson retains an indissoluble femininity despite the horror inflicted upon her body. She is spectre-

⁵¹ Ibid, 117.

⁵² See Jonathan Markovitz who asserts Nelson's innocence: 'Laura Nelson was lynched in Okemah, Oklahoma, in 1911. She was accused of murdering a deputy sheriff who was in her cabin as part of a posse searching for stolen meat. Weeks before she was lynched, it had been determined that she was innocent...she had claimed to have shot the deputy in order to protect her fourteen-year-old son.' *Legacies of Lynching: Racial Violence and Memory* (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2004), 81. Evelyn M. Simien asserts that Laura Nelson's body forms part of the 'representational void that that silencing of lynched black women has created,' in *Gender and Lynching: The politics of Memory* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 84. Arnold P. Powers details the personal details of Nelson's life in *Devour Us Not* (New York: Xlibris, 2011), 45.

like, floating, light and implausibly still. Comparable to William Blake's illustration, there is a lack of clarity in the description of torture, a 'fanciful element,' in Marcus Wood's words, which masks the historical violence.⁵³ Blake's lynching depicts a woman, tied to an insubstantial branch, a dancelike delicacy given to both the woman's posture and the tools of brutality.⁵⁴ Notably, the woman's back, the site of violence, is obscured, concealing the barbarism. Wood has noted a confusing commingling of suffering and desirability, 'an almost naked and physically magnificent young woman, who is pushed right up against the viewer, it is hard not to become compromised... [an image that] teeters on the verge of pornography in order to confront us with our own corruptibility.'⁵⁵ Beyond Lightweiss Goff's reading that would render the spectacle of the lynched male body as 'pornographic,' Wood's impression of Blake's engraving would suggest that all lynched bodies, whether male or female, suffer the gaze, a perverse image of delightful suffering.

Her 'chokecherry back'

Reclaiming the lost narratives of a voiceless people, Morrison, like Allen, writes of the 'unspeakable and the unspoken' through the image of the violated, black and female body. Morrison gives voice to those peoples whose deaths were 'disremembered and

⁵³ Marcus Wood, *Blind Memory: Visual Representations of Slavery in England and America, 1780-1865* (New York: Routledge, 2003), 236.

⁵⁴ Figure 4, William Blake, 'Flagellation of A Female Samboe Slave, after J. G. Stedman, for J. G. Stedman, Narrative of a Five Years Expedition, Against the Revolted Negroes of Surinam,' 1796.

⁵⁵ Wood, 237.

unaccounted for,' enforcing the traceless histories in her interview titled 'The Realm of Responsibility':

Nobody knows their names, and nobody thinks about them. In addition to that, they never survived in the lore; there are no songs or dances or talks of these people. The people who arrived – there is lore about them. But nothing survives about [the Middle Passage].⁵⁶

Sethe's house, number 124, is consumed by an unspoken history that it cannot physically contain, a house 'so full of strong feeling' and 'spite' that 'there was no room for any other thing or body' (*Beloved*, 37). Sethe becomes the centre of that silenced narrative, her main concern to keep 'the past at bay' and protect her living daughter, Denver, from 'the past that was still waiting for her' (*Beloved*, 42). Sethe is haunted by ghosts, the memories of her matricide, so agonising that 'every mention of her past life hurt. Everything in it was painful or lost. She and Baby Suggs had agreed without saying so that it was unspeakable' (*Beloved*, 59). The past is a violent force, shattering narrative and chronology, Freeman describing how 'it bursts into the present and plunges protagonist and reader backwards, preventing a straightforward, chronological sequence of events.'⁵⁷

Unlike Blake and his desire to conceal the resulting images of racial barbarism, Sethe's back forms the embodiment of 'rememory,' a 'thought picture' present in a salient

⁵⁶ Danille Taylor-Guthrie, ed., *Conversations with Toni Morrison* (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 1994), 247.

⁵⁷ Freeman, 126.

example of overexposed female flesh. Incorporating a similar degree of poeticism as Allen, which Morrison later responds to in her recreation of Desdemona, *Beloved* readdresses the scale of the physical suffering of black women through the 'tree' raised on Sethe's back by schoolteacher's whip. It belongs to 'somebody else' like the history of the 'nobodies':

It is never going away. Even if the whole farm – every tree and grass blade of it dies. The picture is still there and what's more, if you go there – you who never was there – if you go there and stand in the place where it was, it will happen again: it will be there for you, waiting for you (*Beloved*, 33).

Like the marks on Sethe's back, the past is permanently inscribed in the present, a thought picture, impeding the future due to the magnitude of the trauma, a past so horrific that the present and the future can never forget its scars. Triggered by water, connecting Sethe to Morrison's Desdemona by the 'fresh stream' (*Desdemona*, 47), and to the backstory of Sorrow in *A Mercy* (2008), Sethe's ghosts are reanimated by a 'splash of water, the sight of her shoes and stockings awry on the path where she had flung them; or Here Boy lapping in the puddle near her feet, and suddenly there was Sweet Home rolling, rolling, rolling out before her eyes' (*Beloved*, 6). Drowning in her trauma, like the sacrificial body of Chicken Little in *Sula* (1973), Sethe demonstrates the inaccessibility of the stories of the slaves who died in the middle passage, the crisis

of representation, confronting the past and, in Morrison's words, 'making it possible to remember.'⁵⁸

Sethe's scarring is interesting in that it references the widely distributed image of the male slave Gordon, whose back, mutilated by a whip, suffered the medical gaze, before forming part of the demand for corporeal evidence of slavery used by the abolition movement.⁵⁹ Like the image of Gordon, or the iconographic images of the Hottentot Venus, Sethe's back does not belong so much to Sethe herself as it does to others who gaze upon it. Amy Denver, the white indentured servant that helps Sethe to birth her child by the river, concludes that the maze of welts and scars forms the likeness of a 'chokecherry tree':

It's a tree, Lu, A chokecherry tree. See, here's the trunk – it's red and split wide open, full of sap, and this here's the parting for the branches. You got a mighty lot of branches. Leaves, too, look like, and dern if these ain't blossoms. Tiny little cherry blossoms, just as white. Your back got a whole tree on it. In bloom (*Beloved*, 83).

The flogged back presents a spectacle of suffering, a public manifestation of the private crime of rape. Like Hinton Als, who surreally felt his own 'neck snap and [his] heart break' when looking at Allen's collection of lynching photography, Sethe's slave husband, Halle, feels a similar pain in response to his wife's violation: 'He saw? He

⁵⁸ Taylor-Guthrie, 247.

⁵⁹ Figure 16, McPherson and Oliver, *The Scourged Back* of 'Gordon' an escaped slave from Louisiana, Albumen in silver (Louisiana, 1863).

Saw?' - a vision which breaks him 'like a twig' (*Beloved*, 81).⁶⁰ Such an interrelationship is recalled by Frederick Douglass and the memory of his Aunt Hester, whose treatment at the hands of an overseer offers a carnal spectacle of private impulses, birthing him into the consciousness of a slave:

I have often been awakened at the dawn of the day by the most heart-rending shrieks of an own aunt of mine, whom he used to tie up to a joist, and whip upon her naked back till she was literally covered with blood. No words, no tears, no prayers from his gory victim, seemed to move his iron heart from its bloody purpose. The louder she screamed, the harder he whipped; and when the blood ran fastest, there he whipped longest. He would whip her to make her scream and whip her to make her hush; and not until overcome by fatigue, would he cease to swing the blood-clotted cowskin.⁶¹

An aesthetic vision that causes one man pain, while the other gains pleasure, demonstrates how the memory of slave brutality exists in the form of traumatic events - events that are, in a Freudian sense, 'persistently re-experienced' in the form of 'recurrent distressing dreams of the event.'⁶² Moten argues that Douglass' memory of the 'blood-stained gate' over which his Aunt's body bleeds is an inaugural moment in the formation of the enslaved, a primal scene, dramatising the origin of the subject and demonstrating what it is to be a slave under the brutal power and authority of another.⁶³ Coining the term 'hypervisibility' from Saidiya Hartman, Moten asserts that

⁶⁰ Allen, 20.

⁶¹ Frederick Douglass, *Autobiographies. Narrative of the Life. My Bondage and My Freedom. Life and Times* (New York: Literary Classics of the United States, 1994), 18.

⁶² Sigmund Freud, *The Interpretations of Dreams* [1913], trans. A. A. Brill (Mineola, New York: Dover Publications, 2015), 135.

⁶³ Douglass, 19.

the space between looking and being looked at, the spectacle and the spectator, formed the economy where blackness marks simultaneously both the performance of the object and the performance of humanity. Moten takes this to task, with *In the Break* giving expression to this ritual performance without numbing the spectacle. Moten asserts that Douglass 'confronts us with the fact that the *conjunction* of reproduction and disappearance is performance's condition of possibility, its ontology and mode of production' and 'repression' is embedded in his 'recitation.'⁶⁴

I would suggest that the scenes of subjection that Moten reads in the beating of Aunt Hester are recreated in *Beloved* and that Morrison presents a disruption of the primal scene, the disturbance that Douglass feels. Morrison creates a series of painful experiences of 'rememory' in the novel's exposition, causing a flashback to 'Sweet Home,' triggered by Sethe's shoes and stockings. Her feet are connected to the lifeless limbs in *Home*, Frank Money's broken socks and Floren's shoes in *A Mercy*, her thought picture rendering the 'unspeakable' a form of beauty tainted in shame. Morrison moves beyond the realms of the aesthetic in the description of Sethe's back to the politically silenced, a 'clump of scars' that 'had been dead for years' following her savage beating (*Beloved*, 11). Sethe's body is rendered incapable of feeling, 'lifeless as the nerves in her back where the skin buckled like a washboard' lacking the 'faintest scent of ink or the cherry gum and oak bark from which it was made' (*Beloved*, 6), the

⁶⁴ Moten, 2003, 4, 6.

'unspeakable' void coded in her skin which bears the traces of her physical and psychological ownership.

Morrison calls for a reading of trauma that moves beyond the voyeuristic, beyond the pornographic. Sethe's back presents an alternative aesthetic for the reader, cemented through the heteroglossic voices of Paul D, Amy Denver and Baby Suggs. Barbara Freeman argues that the contrasting narrative 'rewrites the master's "text,"' a powerful response to the original violation that would render Sethe's body a bloody mess.⁶⁵ Her scars, inflicted in the past, yet made present through their inscription, mark the traces of history – a history that announces its own unreadability. Following Amy Denver's reference to the 'chokecherry tree,' Baby Suggs reads the wounds as 'flowering,' a 'pattern of roses' (*Beloved*, 10) extending into the first of Paul D's fluctuating readings. When making love for the first time:

[Paul D moves] his cheek on her back and learned that way her sorrow, the roots of it; its wide trunk and intricate branches...And when the top of her dress was around her hips and he saw the sculpture her back had become, like the decorative work of an ironsmith too passionate for display, he could think but not say, "Aw, Lord, girl'" (*Beloved*, 17).

The following day, pre-empting the disconcerting nature of Sethe's history with the echoes of Margaret Garner, Paul D does not see the tree as he meditates on the marks that he kissed and touched the night before. Instead, it dawns on him that:

⁶⁵ Barbara Freeman, *The Feminine Sublime: Gender and Excess in Women's Fiction* (Berkeley, Los Angeles and London: University of California Press, 1995), 130.

The wrought-iron maze he had explored in the kitchen like a gold miner pawing through the dirt was in fact a revolting clump of scars. Not a tree, as she said. Maybe shaped like one, but nothing like any tree he knew because trees were inviting; things you could trust and be near; talk to if you wanted to as he frequently did since way back when he took the midday meal in the fields of Sweet Home (*Beloved*, 25).

Paul D assumes the position of the oppressor, the 'gold miner,' emphasising the commercial quality of Sethe's body. He fulfils Baby Suggs' prophesy: 'But maybe a man was nothing but a man...They encouraged you to put some of your weight in their hands and soon as you felt how light and lovely that was, they studied your scars and tribulations, after which they...ran her children out and tore up the house' (*Beloved*, 26). Sethe's back becomes the site of cultural anxiety, her 'tree' connecting her body to the symbolic mourning of Desdemona under the willow, the final image of Embree as his murderers touch the tree he is tied to and the swinging body of Laura Nelson. Her scars take the places of stories, of photographs, as Valerie Smith observes: 'their symbolic power is evident in the number of times that others attempt to read them.'⁶⁶ Sethe's body, her blackness, and the icon of the tree carved into her skin, connects the history of black spectacle and oppression in a literary figure dressed in the traces of the Hottentot Venus.

⁶⁶ Valerie Smith, "'Circling the Subject": History and Narrative in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*,' in *Toni Morrison: Critical Perspectives Past and Present*, ed. Henry Louis Gates and K. A. Appiah (New York: Amistad Press, 1993), 345.

Sethe's reciprocity in her relationship with Paul D, the 'gold miner', is controversial, particularly considering the history of the master-slave dynamic. Hartman argues that the reciprocity of women of colour 'effaced the violence of property relations,' obscuring 'violence and conflating it with pleasure.'⁶⁷ A simulation of consent, Hartman argues, is fundamental to the spectacle of enslavement, an ocular logic that informed the practice of lynching as well.⁶⁸ Treading dangerously close to voyeurism, Morrison replicates the complicit desire between the 'master' and the 'slave' by contrasting Paul D's first reading of Sethe's back with the Sweet Home men, who fantasise about rape:

The five Sweet Home men looked at the new girl and decided to let her be. They were young and so sick with the absence of women they had taken to calves. Yet they let the iron-eyed girl be, so she could choose in spite of the fact that each one would have beaten the others to mush to have her. It took her a year to choose – a long, tough year of thrashing on pallets eaten up with dreams of her. A year of yearning, when rape seemed the solitary gift of life (*Beloved*, 12).

While Morrison provides Sethe with a degree of agency, elevating her above the calves and cattle that quell the desire of the Sweet Home boys, her body a 'prize,' Sethe's thought pictures connect her to the boys 'hanging from the most beautiful sycamores in the world' and the Sweet Home 'men coming to nurse her' (*Beloved*, 7, 6). In this pictorial tableau, lynching is conveyed as a complex interrelationship, breaking down

⁶⁷ Saidiya V. Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 25.

⁶⁸ *Ibid*, 38.

what Goldsby has identified as lynching's linguistic, imperious and exclusive nature, of 'constitution and operations,' and the need to discover alternative semiotics in which lynching operates as a connector (rather than a divider) between the sexes.⁶⁹

Lynching creates an agentic turnstile between master and slave, between desirability and objectivity. Gwendolyn DuBois Shaw has identified such a relationship in Walker's silhouette, *The End of Uncle Tom and the Grand Allegorical Tableau of Eva in Heaven* (1995). DuBois Shaw describes the artwork as exploitative of a traumatic history:

An adolescent slave girl ending at the waist raising her buttocks in the air and grasping a corn stalk with both hands for support. Resting on her back is the enormous belly of a legless master characters that stands with the aid of a wooden leg and a saber that is thrust into the body of the small child on the ground behind him. The two larger characters merge, and the slave girl's legs become a substitute for the man's missing limbs. They are further connected by his abdomen, which is physically and metaphorically supported by the labour of her back...She is complicit in the act of domination; she is taking in the body of her oppressor; she is becoming one with him.⁷⁰

An image of the uncanny, like the detached leg of the lynched victim in *Home*, Eva's leg, or Sula's finger, Walker's characters present a commingling of bodies and a blurring of strata. For DuBois Shaw, the agencies of the master and slave become coterminous in the act of sexual intercourse, a relationship implicit in *Beloved* as Paul

⁶⁹ Goldsby, 11.

⁷⁰ Gwendolyn DuBois Shaw, *Portraits of a People: Picturing African Americans in the Nineteenth Century* (Andover, MA: Addison Gallery of American Art, Phillips Academy, 2006), 54-55.

D takes ownership of Sethe's body, 'her breasts...in somebody else's hands,' mirroring the 'boys that...took [her] milk' (*Beloved*, 21, 19). For the men in *Beloved*, Sethe's body is a site of pleasure and punishment, a position inflicted upon, rather than created by, the enslaved. Yet unlike the lynched image, Walker's art does not determine the victim and the victimiser. Grace Elizabeth Hale suggests that Walker does not make it clear whom the viewer is 'supposed to love and...supposed to hate. In Walker's art, all these complicated layers of the oppressed and the repressed, old and new historical narratives, and the dreams, desires and nightmares these histories express and deny come together.'⁷¹

Just as Walker complicates layers, merging the past and the present, so too does Morrison complicate the question of agency. Warning against the narrative of power when such a voice has been silenced, Morrison instead suggests that if a slave lived both for her master's pleasure, and also at his pleasure, few other options were available to her. Morrison neither raises nor lowers the shadow, the veil attesting to the racial image, but instead creates an uncanny border between memory and forgetfulness. *Beloved* is forgotten 'like an unpleasant dream during a troubling sleep,' every trace of her is 'disremembered and unaccounted for.' Soon, all 'trace [of her] is gone, and what is forgotten is not only the footprints but the water too and what is

⁷¹ Grace Elizabeth Hale, 'A Horrible, Beautiful Beast,' *Southern Spaces: An Interdisciplinary Journal About the Regions, Places, and Cultures of the American South* (March 6, 2008), <<https://southernspaces.org/2008/horrible-beautiful-beast>>, (accessed 6/6/19).

down there. The rest is weather. Not the breath of the disremembered and unaccounted for, but wind in the eaves.' (*Beloved*, 324).

Rather than transporting subjectivity across boundaries, from the master to the slave, Morrison suggests the importance of rewriting the master's text. Sethe represents what Moten has termed a slippage, 'from question to assertion: question concerning absence, nothing, the hope or trace of what is not there that would stand against... light and breath...revelation, spirit, song, and the vast and paradoxical network of liberatory and oppressive political implications they contain.'⁷² Neither the silence of the slave or the authority of the master should be forgotten. Sethe's back bridges a chronological distance, the 'forgotten,' bringing back to life her child that she killed, stories that cannot be spoken, existing as a wordless 'breath.' The novel suggests a new form of selfhood, an ensemble of parts, generating personhood in the space between absence and death. The reader is connected to the forgotten past, transforming perception and the nature of the gaze, alluding to the inscription on *Beloved's* headstone: 'I will call them my people, / Which were not my people; / And her beloved: / Which was not beloved' (*Beloved*, ii). *Beloved* insists that we must remember without violating, and we must never forget – a powerful statement that moves beyond the poeticism of subjecthood endowed on Nelson by Allen. The thought picture of the tree becomes the point at which both male and female slaves

⁷² Moten, 2003, 95.

suffered, a site of pleasure, pain and a queer connection to the body through the scar, a filter through which we read and misread a historical affliction.

Sethe's back, like the paper trail of the Zong trial, contains nothing that can bring the legacy of traded men, women and their children to visibility.⁷³ Only a financial movement can be traced, the conversion of the slave body into money. Just as the chokecherry tree borrows from the displaced signifier of Gordon, Walker demonstrates how race, when rendered as an art form, enacts difference, an inscription of the visual order onto the body. Sethe's back conveys the dialectic between the visual and material culture of the archives of slavery, effecting the corporealisation between the black body and commodity.

Such an interrelationship is visually empathic in Willis Thomas' *UNBRANDED* series.⁷⁴ Thomas compounds racial indexicality through the surface of advertising, superimposing and layering branding over the images of race. A slave ship becomes reused as an Absolut Vodka bottle, a reflection of a socioeconomic condition, a chest is scarred with the Nike tick and a 'branded head' literalises the physical intimacy

⁷³ See discussion in Chapter 1, 'Secret Bodies, Secret Commerce' and the discussion in Ian Baucom, *Specters of the Atlantic: Finance Capital, Slavery and the Philosophy of History* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005), 31.

⁷⁴ Figure 17, Hank Willis Thomas, *Branded Head, Scarred Chest, Absolute Power*, Lambda photograph 60x40, 40 x 30" inkjet print on canvas, HWT05.001, HWT05.008, HWT05.002 (Jack Shainman Gallery, New York).

between a mark of ownership and blackness. In all three of Thomas' images, the subject's race appears constructed by the branding of the cuts just as violently as race is imbued into skin. Connecting the cultural trajectories of desire, the spectacle of the colour capital and the body as commerce, Morrison, Walker and Thomas convey how it is increasingly difficult to discuss the black body in non-figural terms, in ways that do not make it exchangeable, useable for a purpose, whether to instil horror or extend pleasure. Sethe's body, as with the iconography of the Hottentot Venus, or the lynching collectables in photographic form, presents the black body as commodity form. The black body conveys the principle of visibility of commodity status, pivoting between material commodity and personhood.

THE SEXUAL CUT

When Morrison recalls, mimics or signifies highly recognisable commercial entities such as the lynching photograph, the legacy of the Hottentot Venus, art forms imbuing race such as portraiture, paintings and the silhouette, she explodes them into scenes of subjection, hybridity and racial violence. Sometimes, as with Sethe, Morrison reanimates the image, returning the cuts on her back to its supposed naturalistic origin as the sign of the corporeality of the Other. Comparable to Frank Money in *Home*, who becomes the ontology of the lynchers' photograph, embodying the desire to circulate, Sethe's back engages more directly with the place of blackness and the corporealising effects that the black body shares with the commodity.

Sethe's back is surrounded by traces of the transaction that her type of body initiates – slavers' marks, 'cotton dresses,' 'sugar' and 'corn' (*Beloved*, 33, 117), but also raises the question as to what happens when race is interfaced, rendered surface and then deferred, missing, just like the racial unfixing Maggie in 'Recitatif.' By plunging into the archives of slavery in order to recirculate its early mass-culture artefacts, Morrison creates implosive visual fields that take the reader back to the matter of race, to the moment when race acquired a socially material substance, to question and destabilise the suturing of race at the root. Moten's interest in the connection between materialism and maternalism is highly relevant in this sense - despite the intense dialogue reproduced in Douglass' memory of the beating of Aunt Hester, the original recitation

of the beating is missing. Moten argues that resistance can be found in the slave commodity's aurality 'outside the confines of meaning,' the 'heart-rending shrieks' that represent a sound 'figured as external both to music and to speech in black music and speech.' Such sound disrupts and resists an imposed identity formation, a 'broken claim to connection,' that ruptures, wounds and 'cuts.' Black performance emerges as agentic through its graphic reproduction, an excessive 'generative force of a venerable phonic propulsion, the ontological and historical priority of resistance to power and objection to subjection.'⁷⁵ The urge of such a sound, such a reconfiguration, is a sexual cut which Moten envisions as a Dark Lady that mutes, distorts, augments and abounds, divides or adds to the sound.⁷⁶ Sound carries visibility, identity, sexuality that is political and overt.

I am particularly interested in Moten's exploration of the cut. Recalling Sethe's back, Bride's skin, Jadine's mask, Morrison demonstrates the importance of unpacking race through a cut in order to divide the body from the violent implications of the gaze. The cut can be conceived as a form of creation, a severing of bonds and enabling of signification, imbuing the logic of finance capital with the social imaginary of the human, breathing life into speculative entities. Roland Barthes theorises the cut as the

⁷⁵ Moten, 2003, 12.

⁷⁶ Moten states that, 'race cuts race and frame cuts frame. In order to understand how such cuts are sexual cuts, we'll need to deal with what marks and forms that place, a sensuality represented by textured Satin, the Dark Lady Day [Billie Holiday].' Moten, 2003, 103, 109.

origin of signification and as atavistic fear of castration. Considering Sarrasine's recreation of La Zambinella's castrato body into that of a woman, Barthes argues:

[He] knows the female body only as a division and dissemination of partial objects: leg, breast, shoulder, neck, hands. Fragmented woman is the object offered to Sarrasine's love. Divided, anatomised, she is merely a kind of dictionary of fetish objects. This sundered, dissected body...is reassembled by the artist (and this is the meaning of his vocation) into a whole body, the body of a love descended from heaven of art, in which fetishism is abolished and by which Sarrasine is cured...Undressing La Zambinella (by drawing) and ultimately breaking the hollow statue, the sculpture will continue to whittle the woman.⁷⁷

Through dissection, through fragmentation and deconstruction, a body is signified, broken up into pieces in order to be determined. The female body comes to exist in language only through a process of suture, folded together. As DalMolin observes: 'once brought to signification, once represented through language... the body is cut again, fetishised by language...it is the dissecting and signifying action of language on the body that defines the existence of the body in language.'⁷⁸ The body is undone, only to be recreated in its own terms:

Once reassembled, in order to utter itself, the total body must revert to the dust of words, to the listings of details, to a monotonous inventory of parts, to crumbling: a language undoes the body, returns to its fetish...under the term blazon...As a genre, the blazon expresses the belief that a complete inventory can reproduce a total body, as if the extremity of enumeration could devise a new category, that of totality: description is then subject to a kind of enumerative erethism: it

⁷⁷ Roland Barthes, *S/Z*, trans. Richard Miller (London: Jonathan Cape, 1975), 136.

⁷⁸ Elaine Françoise DalMolin, *Cutting the Body: Representing Women in Baudelaire's Poetry, Truffaut's Cinema and Freud's Psychoanalysis* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2000), 77.

accumulates in order to totalise, multiplies fetishes in order to obtain a total, defetishised body.⁷⁹

Black women, beyond the iconography of lynching that would render Embree a pornographic image, are fetishised as a void, a cut, recalling the derogatory term used by Enobarbus to describe Cleopatra: 'If there were / no more women but Fulvia, then had you indeed a cut, / and the case to be lamented...your old smock brings forth a new / petticoat.'⁸⁰ Cleopatra is reduced to the symbol of her genitalia, a bawdy 'petticoat,' a series of fractions and measures passed between Rome and Egypt, with obvious metatheatrical implications. In *Beloved*, Sethe's body bypasses tragi-comedy - when recalling the memory of Baby Suggs' hands bathing her, her totality is similarly reduced to an 'inventory of parts': 'They had bathed her in sections, wrapped her womb, combed her hair, oiled her nipples, stitched her clothes, cleaned her feet, greased her back' (*Beloved*, 115). Sethe's body, and by extension, the visual product of her rape, must be figuratively divided in order to be reformed. The reader receives her body, her thought pictures, in pieces, the product of her fragmented memory, disconnected from her sense of self and her community. *Beloved's* characters are subjected to the disempowering force of slavery – their bodies a commercial 'thing' owned by another.

⁷⁹ Ibid, 137.

⁸⁰ William Shakespeare, *Antony and Cleopatra*, ed. Ania Loomba (London: Norton Critical Editions, 2013), Act 1.2.180-185.

The gaze as a cutting force is projected by Paul D, looking at Sethe as she lies on her bed, focussing on sections of her body, parts of her physique: 'Lying under a quilt of merry colors. Her hair, like the dark delicate roots of good plants, spread and curves on the pillow. Her eyes, fixed on the window, are so expressionless he is not sure she will know who he is.' As Paul D examines the quilt, 'he is thinking about the wrought iron back, the delicious mouth still puffy at the corner from Ella's fist. The mean black eyes' (*Beloved*, 119). The quilt forms a second skin, an echo of Jadine's seal skin coat, highlighting the connection between minstrelsy and lynching though the 'carnival colors,' the 'technicoloured visions' of Nel and Sula as she coils her braid around her wrist. The dismembering is connected to the stitches of the quilt, but also to the thought memory that the quilt triggers of Sethe's fragments – her back, her eyes, her mouth. Slavery inverts the norm, denying unity to the subject, rendering Sethe a series of 'parts' that she hopes will 'hold,' 'bath[ing] her in sections' while she suffers the 'danger of looking' (*Beloved*, 321).

Beloved presents a narrative that pieces together fragments of memory, of stories, of forgotten truths, metonymical of the physical and social dismembering of the colonial subject. Yet eventually the narrative crisis reaches a point at which the heteroglossia loses its distinction. Reflecting on the creation of *The Bluest Eye*, Morrison explains that she began 'developing parts out of pieces, found that [she] preferred them unconnected – to be related but not to touch, to circle, not line up – because the story

of this prayer was the story of a shattered, fractured perception resulting from a shattered, splintered life.⁸¹ Sethe's monologue forms a subsection of a larger narrative and historical discourse, focalised in the concluding pages, suggesting a move towards connectivity: 'I AM BELOVED and she is mine,' and the subsequent stream of consciousness: 'I am not separate from her there is no place where I stop her face is my own and I want to be there in the place where her face is and to be looking at it too a hot thing' (*Beloved*, 49-50).

The cut, in this sense, indicates an act of carving a 'face' from the canvas of invisibility. Sethe produces a *Kunstwollen*, a will to form, the desire to cut through the surface, the 'pictures' and the 'clouds,' in order to gain a visage, an outline of personhood, a silhouetted crack like a streak across the sky. Perhaps influenced by Sethe, Kara Walker, in her own self portrait, 'Cut,' presents the ambiguous subject-position of the black body and artist, challenging the limitations of prevailing models of subjectivity and enslavement.⁸² Suggesting her position between the black literary tradition and white heritage, Walker asserts:

Narrative is very important to my work. I appropriate from many sources...frontispieces for slave narratives, authentic documents, as well as a novel or a great sort of artistic spectacle...I love historical paintings, and I also love the cyclorama and these kinds of touring versions of art or non-art entertainment, and I love the language that goes with them.

⁸¹ Toni Morrison, 'Memory, Creation, and Writing' in *Thought: Fordham University Quarterly* 59.4, 1984, 388.

⁸² Figure 18, Kara Walker, *Cut*, Art 21 (2011), <<http://www.art21.org/images/kara-walker/cut-1998>> (accessed 15/10/12).

It's a little bit over blown, a little bit pompous, and I've been trying to acquire that sense of confidence.⁸³

Her artistic tensions, however, were explicit in the invitations to a 1998 exhibition:

Missus K. Walker
 returns her thanks
 to the
 Ladies and Gentleman
 of New York
 for the great *Encouragement*
 she has received
 from them,
 in the profession
 in which she has practiced
 in New England.⁸⁴

The invitation featured a woodcut in which a white slaver cracks a whip at two black slave women, capturing the moment that Sethe runs across the corn fields to create an ironic, combative stance.

'Cut' is imagined as an ambiguous construction of agency, a corrective to the representations of the black female body in historical iconography, and an indebtedness to artistic freedom. Walker revels in her status as 'the other of the "other"'⁸⁵ through the silhouette of a self-mutilated woman, blood from her slashed wrists gathering in piles beneath her. There is no narrative agent, a facelessness and

⁸³ Kara Walker, *Pictures from Another Time* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Museum of Art, 2002), 47.

⁸⁴ Gwendolyn DuBois Shaw, *Portraits of a People: Picturing African Americans in the Nineteenth Century* (Andover, MA: Addison Gallery of American Art, Phillips Academy, 2006), 138.

⁸⁵ *Ibid*, 8.

absent differentiation undermining any attempt by Walker's critics to locate an African American agent under the apron, petticoats, and dimity frock.

Following the arguments of Powell – cutting a figure opens the performative aspects of portraiture to reveal 'the whys and how of a modern and composite human desire.' By removing facial identification, Walker explores the relationship between the notion of identity, embodied in the value of the face, and the cut found on her wrists, what sits on the surface of the visual and exposes the interiority of the visual as surface. The composite human desire is the simultaneous position to be the black artist that performs both as the 'self' and the force that can destroy that subjecthood. I would argue that Walker achieves what Hartman has called the 'willed self-immolation' of the slave agent, tempting her audience to imagine agency in the suicidal hands, yet critiquing it by positing that the actions share the desire of the oppressors. Thus, the two-dimensional silhouette writes the politics of identity behind 'the self,' a world of inanimate bodies which are no longer silent.

Walker's art connects to the collages and watercolours created by Wangechi Mutu, her signature work forming a series of female figures created through a combination of collage and watercolour. In her short film, 'Cutting' (2004), in which Mutu hacks at a carcass as if to mould it into something, she creates a simultaneous process of defacement and portraiture. The female body, she argues, is already mutilated, a

strategy of survival: 'As a woman, that deep and wonderful churning connection and disconnection with your body is very real and often extreme. It is for this reason that I turn the body inside out, extending and reconfiguring it.'⁸⁶ The female body as mutant, severed, leaking, contorted, connects Sethe as a mother to her child state on the ship. The narrative remembers 'tears,' 'men without skin,' a 'mouth [that] smells sweet' with 'eyes [that] are locked,' the weight of a dead body upon her that refracts the light around her silhouette, 'through the cracks' (*Beloved*, 248). Paratactic, her memory is both ruptured and connected, memories separated by concrete spaces in the text. Slave bodies are turned into faces, into a void of 'nothing in her ears,' a 'circle around her neck,' Sethe's face transposed onto a 'woman with [her] face' (*Beloved*, 249). It is then that the body is turned inside out, 'light shining in her ears' as she 'empties her eyes' (*Beloved*, 250).

The language of the women of 124 are pushed into spaces, articulating the extremity and the depth of attachment. Narratives of longing, death, sorrow, rape, murder and escape are articulated through a cut, a voided space which the reader must translate and order. Walker, Morrison and Mutu pose the ontological question about their figures. The cut, like the scar, disfigures and mutilates, tracing the act of violence. Yet scars also mark the act of healing. The cut, like the photograph, conveys the

⁸⁶ Wangechi Mutu, Deutsche Guggenheim Berlin, and Deutsche Bank, *Wangechi Mutu, Artist of the Year 2010: My Dirty Little Heaven* (Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz, 2010).

irresolvable tension between the ability to connect and the capacity to sever, but also the ability to recreate, to write and to speak. The cracks in the light, the shadows, the negative space around the silhouette, suggest that blackness can be 'detached' from bodies, and with it the historical legacy of stereotype, constructed as natural, ontological visibility by the legacy of race.

By recalling the legacy of the Hottentot Venus, the entrenched oppression of the minstrel form or the hanging body, Morrison indicates a new phase of development, an increasingly simulacral status of the visual that develops its own, an independent social materiality. From spaces of visibility connected to transactional, commercial exchange, Morrison demonstrates how loss, absence, the void and the cut can reveal a new message: '[because] that's the only way I can say, that's the only message...because it's more important to make a reader long for something to work and to watch it fall apart, so that he will know what, why and how the dangers are, more important than to show him how they all solved all their problems. That's not the only way, but that's the way I perceive it.'⁸⁷

By rendering the black body as a visual field rather than a surface, an affect instead of a sign function, Morrison allows her characters to cut through and reverse the racialised mapping of the visual field, the violent nature of the gaze that Bartmann,

⁸⁷ Taylor-Guthrie, 74.

Nelson and Embree suffered. Morrison's characters are enfolded and unfolded so that they no longer exist under the pretence of an umbilical cord, the carnal connection that grounds the meaning, the face value of images. Instead, Morrison projects a social tissue, a connecting material that she establishes and renews with each image. The trace of the scar, the growth beyond the lingering presence of the commercial body, forms the reflexive site where the audience and the witness can discover the way in which history is haptically drawn towards a socially material, rather than a natural object. Through Morrison's literature and a revisioning of the iconography of the Hottentot Venus, it is possible to trace the 'blackness' of race, which both renders and fleshes out cultural anxieties, criminal expectations, exoticism and fear.

CONCLUSION

I began this thesis by considering the 'dead girl,' reclaiming the lost black girl of Toni Morrison's novels, considering Morrison's fishbowl in conjunction with Roland Barthes' contemplations on the photographic image and Fred Moten's exploration of black performance and the racial trace. Studying race as a medium, through the iconography of Sarah Bartmann, and through visual culture, solidifies the mandate that Morrison founded in her very first novel, *The Bluest Eye*, that a figurative blindness is needed in order to reconfigure our approach to the image of race. My research suggests that, beyond race as a medium, 'blackness' functions as a photochemically fixated body, both a cause and project of the visual fold of value, a Barthesian turnstile, that sutures race on the surface.

Using a semiological umbrella to consider art, photography, silhouettes and the earliest engravings of the Hottentot Venus imbued with the image of race, it is possible to argue that visual 'blackness' takes form on the exterior of bodies, but also forms a template for an interior meaning. Morrison's writing provides a challenge to that suture, with characters that reflect their own meaning, returning the gaze and redefining the mask of race. Morrison forces a dilemma between the surface and the depth of her protagonists, encouraging the reader to look beyond the fishbowl and the entrenched signifiers of race. Her characters interrupt racial classification,

eliminating the polarities of blackness and whiteness, turning the visual field back on itself.

In over five decades of writing, Morrison encourages us to look, and to look again, scrutinising images of race, enabling the reader to read her thought pictures without assuming the position of the Master, or the lyncher, creating a space to inspect, examine and consider. Morrison presents the bodies of her characters as their disarming effect, readdressing the scientific gaze and questioning the spectacle of the black form as a voyeuristic subject. Blackness is revealed to be a shadow, a cut, a veil, a mirror that reflects race as something criminal and dangerous, that needs to be contained or eradicated. Yet Morrison, through her literature, enables the reader to contemplate the entrenchment of dominant stereotypes, reversing and reworking the gaze to carve out a new space in the canon and American nationhood. The ontological issue considered in this thesis is about blackness in the field of vision, the performative quality of the black body and the anxieties surrounding blackness – the supremacist fears of where it might lead and on what intelligible surface it secures.

Morrison explains the delicate balance that needs to be reached so that blackness can be unhinged from the body and the image, while still claiming its ontological resistance. Such a balance is found through Morrison's reading of the American literary canon as concerned with 'tremors,' ripples that pervade literary utterance in

order to accommodate, reify and sometimes deny the Africanist presence. Morrison writes: 'In matters of race, silence and evasion have historically ruled literary discourse. Evasion has fostered another, substitute language in which the issues are encoded, foreclosing open debate... To notice is to recognise an already discredited difference. To enforce its invisibility through silence is to allow the black body a shadowless participation in the dominant cultural body' (*Playing in the Dark*, 10). Morrison's message is clear – to ignore the seminal presence of race in literary whiteness is equivalent to robbing the body of its shadow. The shadow, like the legacy of the Hottentot Venus, operates as a figure of resistance of race that must be pursued, as well as making available alternative readings of the body.

Beyond its ethical value, the iconography of the Hottentot Venus reveals a text so hidden, yet so foundational, evinced by continued fixation on the black female body in media and culture. Only recently, the *Herald Sun* featured a cartoon of Serena Williams by Mark Knight, responding to the 2018 U.S Open. Rendered an 'angry black woman,' an aggressive 'black bitch,' Williams' body was bestialised in the shape of a turkey, a consumable object, her skirt flared to liken the contour of Sarah Bartmann's physicality. A textual configuration, elevated without a noose, her physiognomy is exaggerated to recall the degrading heritage of blackface.¹ William's treatment forms

¹ Amanda Meade, 'Serena Williams,' *The Guardian* (24/2/2019), <<https://www.theguardian.com/sport/2019/feb/25/serena-williams-cartoon-not-racist-australian-media-watchdog-rules>> (accessed 7/7/2019).

one of the continuous images circulated by the press and in popular media that demonstrates the lingering traces of chattel slavery, the shadow and the trace of racial stigma that must not be ignored. Claudia Rankine discussed the treatment of Serena Williams at length in *Citizen*, published four years earlier, when the Black Lives Matter movement began to gain international recognition. Rankine argues that the discrimination suffered by Williams during the 2004 and 2009 U.S Opens, because of her supposed lack of civility, is a source of cultural frustration:

...her disappointments, exist within a system you understand, not try to understand in any fair-minded way because to do so is to understand the erasure of the self as systemic, as ordinary. For Serena, the daily diminishment is a low flame, a constant drip. Every look, every comment, every bad call blossoms out of history, through her, onto you...To understand is to see Serena as hemmed in as any other black body thrown against our American background.²

Rankine's analysis is still clearly relevant. Bartmann's narrative, image, sexuality and physique question what would happen if we strip the 'self' from a portrait, the 'low flame,' the 'constant drip' of oppression? What would happen if we removed the figure of Bartmann from the image of the Hottentot on a pedestal, Laura Nelson from the body swinging in the wind or Kara Walker from the 'Cut?' What would happen if we challenged the notions of blackness as spectacle, shifting a critical focus from slavery to modern depictions of the black female body? By reworking the figures of the mammy, the mulatto, the jezebel and the lynched body, Morrison's literature

² Claudia Rankine, *Citizen: An American Lyric* (London: Penguin, 2015), 29-32.

forms a complication that troubles and challenges contemporary witness, debating the nature of agency in the visual field.

To close, I turn to Morrison's recreation of Shakespeare's *Othello*, reworked under the title *Desdemona* (2011). Morrison's play is a text that accomplishes the goal of reworking the portrait of silence that is complicit within an oppressive history, giving voice to the mysterious, missing and stifled women of the original. In her dramatic version, Morrison creates a safe space in which the dead are given a voice, a wholeness absented in the traces on Sethe's back. The women in the shadows, at the margins, find their voices as hidden histories are shared and flow. Unlike Shakespeare's *Desdemona*, Morrison's protagonist is not silent. She speaks and sings of secrets, hopes and dreams. Recalling the Hottentot Venus, the dead are very present, reconciling the past, and preparing a future:

I exist in between, now: between being killed and being un-dead; between life on earth and life beyond it; between all time, which has no beginning and no end, and all space which is both a seedling as well as the sun it yearns for. All that is available to me. I join the underwater women; stroll with them in dark light, listen to their music in the spangled deep. Colors down there are more violent than any produced by the sun. I live in the roots and heads of trees. I rise in art, in masks, in figures, in drumbeat, in fire. I exist in places where I can speak, at last, words that in earth life were sealed or twisted into the language of obedience.³

³ Toni Morrison, *Desdemona* (London: Oberon Books, 2011), 14.

Othello, rather than Desdemona, becomes the tragic sacrifice, as Desdemona calls from beyond the grave: 'You were not killing me. You were killing Othello. The man I believed you to be was lost to me' (*Desdemona*, 50). Desdemona swings in the wind, dying unbound by the noose that killed Laura Nelson, Othello 'smell[ing her] on the tree,' a lingering shadow of her former self that becomes free from her rope, 'free from a vine of thorn' (*Desdemona*, 28). Desdemona exists in the 'in-between,' the spiritual realm where Beloved and the zoot-suited ghost of *Home* resides. She is Sorrow of the 'underwater women,' Son that dances to the 'drumbeat' and Jadine that immerses herself in the 'roots and heads of trees.' She is the 'Tar Baby' mask and the silhouette 'art' forms that exist in the cracks of *Jazz* and *The Bluest Eye*. She is the 'ghost in the machine,' prying 'loose' the sacrificial nails, the words of the oppressor, the 'screws twisting in [his] tongue' (*Desdemona*, 38). She is not the 'meaning of a name [she] did not choose' (*Desdemona*, 13) as with the Copper, Sable and Hottentot Venus. She is the incarnation of Hannah that dances in 'fire,' with 'no choice/ but to burn/ then finish/ one way/ or another' (*Desdemona*, 57).

POSTFACE

Forming part of Toni Morrison's eulogy, commemorating her life, Walker created a portrait of Morrison for *The New Yorker*.⁴ The artwork, in Walker's distinctive high contrast, cut paper silhouette style, depicts Morrison's unique profile. Her hair curls towards her mouth, seamlessly interchanging with her words, her breath, her voice. Unlike Walker's own self portrait, 'Cut,' Morrison does not hang from an invisible rope. Instead, she floats on the coils of her own voice. Walker has immortalised Morrison in her version of the long photochemical century, her portrait both positive and negative, light and dark, inside and outside, presence and absence. A marker of the void, the cut, Morrison has been rendered an uncanny lightness of the shadow of blackness, a reflected image of the spectacular image of race, pivoting around the black body in the ontological ground of the visual, rendered timeless.

Since the completion of this thesis, Morrison has passed away. The Black Lives Matter movement has also gained significant momentum, after George Floyd, a 46-year-old African American man, was suffocated in Minneapolis, Minnesota, 25 May 2020, killed by a police officer after he knelt on Floyd's neck for almost eight minutes, despite Floyd repeatedly crying out, 'I can't breathe.'⁵ Local protests were broadcast,

⁴ Kara Walker, 'Quiet as it's Kept,' front cover of *The New Yorker*, ed. David Remnick (19 August 2019).

⁵ Audra D. S. Burch et al, eds., 'How Black Lives Matter Reached Every Corner of America,' *The New York Times* (June 13, 2020), <<https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2020/06/13/us/george-floyd-protests-cities-photos.html>> (accessed 1/8/2020).

with rallies taking place in over sixty countries. Over two thousand cities in the U.S have seen demonstrations since 13 June 2020. Globally, memorials have been removed or destroyed due to the force of the protests, jettisoning figures involved in the Atlantic slave trade, British colonialism and eugenics research. The legacy of racially charged icons and stereotype is now, more than ever, a topic of discussion. There is pressure for race, the connection between skin and value in a social, sexual and commercial sense, to be reconfigured, as black performance and spectacle are resisting in a radical sense.

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ILLUSTRATIONS



Figure 1. *Love and Beauty - - Sartjee the Hottentot Venus*. Published by Christopher Crupper (London: Rumford, 1811), reproduced by Repository: Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division, Washington D.C. 20540, USA.

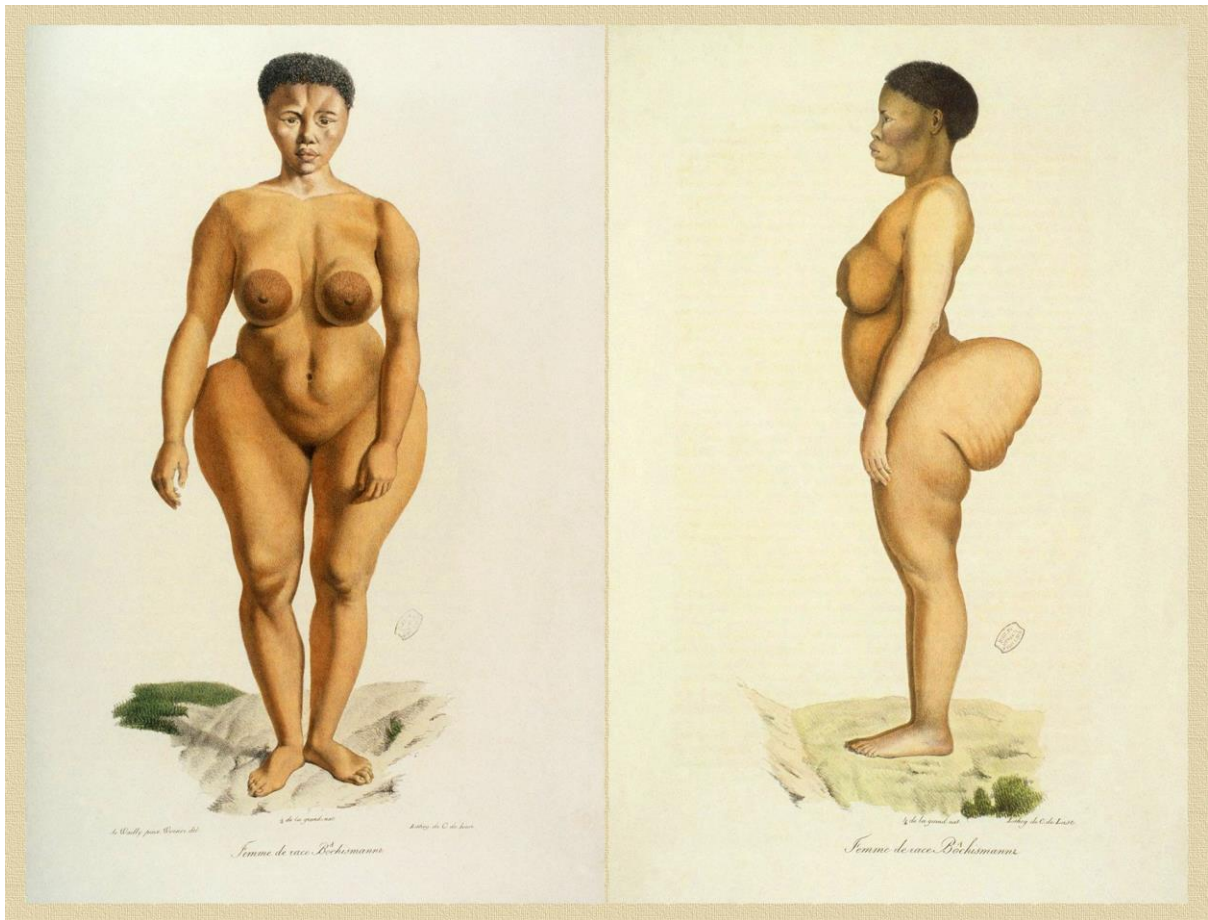


Figure 2. Étienne Geoffroy Saint-Hilaire. *Femme de race Bochismanne* in Étienne Geoffroy Saint-Hilaire and Frédéric Cuvier, *Histoire naturelle des mammifères* (4 vols., Paris, 1827-47), i.

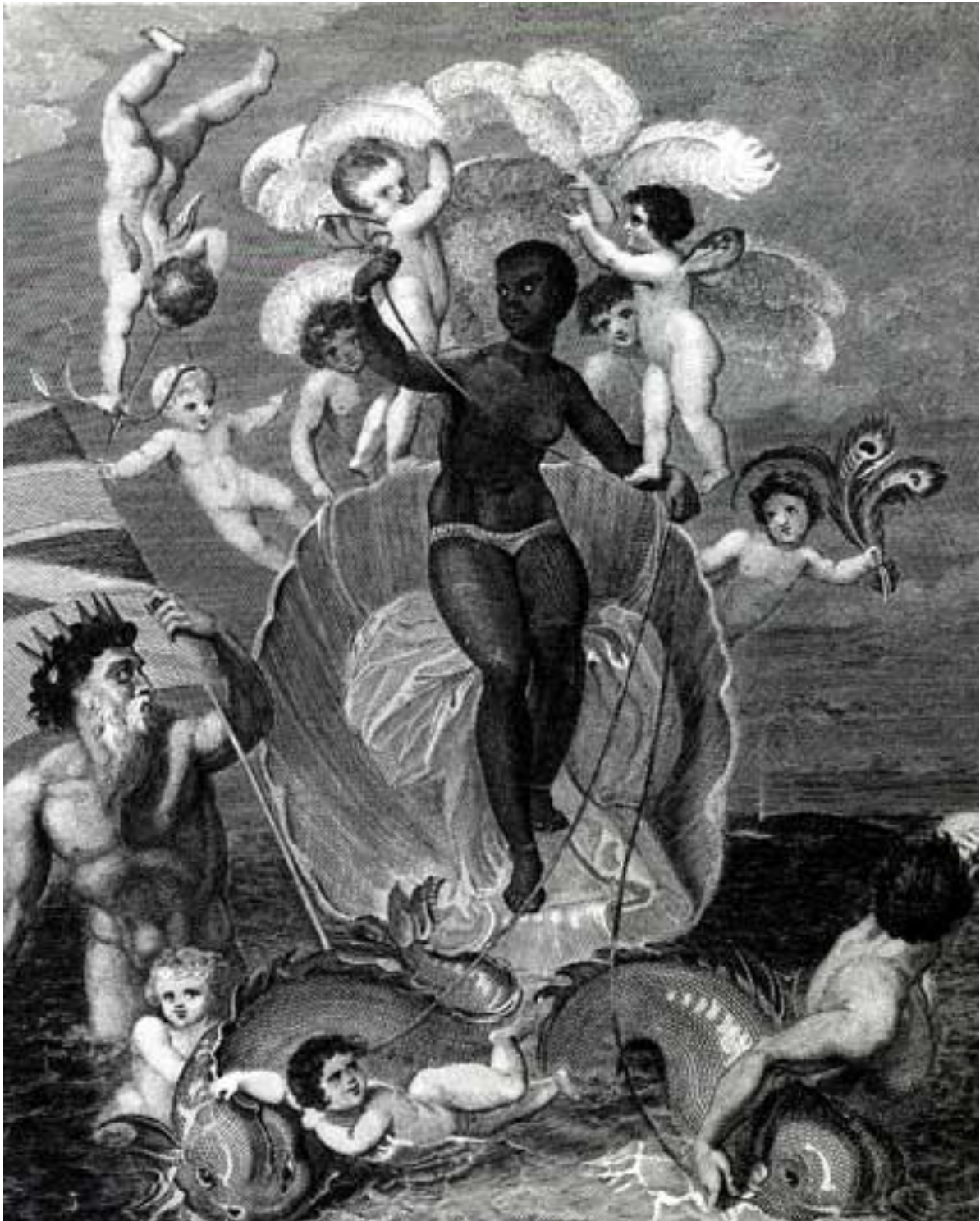


Figure 3. Stothard, Thomas. *The Voyage of the Sable Venus, from Angola to the West Indies*, in Bryan Edwards, *The History, Civil and Commerce, of the British Colonies of the West Indies, Volume 2* (London, 1794), facing 27.



Figure 4. Blake, William. Flagellation of A Female Samboe Slave. After J. G. Stedman, for J. G. Stedman, *Narrative of a Five Years Expedition, Against the Revolted Negroes of Surinam*, 1796.



Figure 5. 'The abolition of the slave trade, or the inhumanity of dealers in human flesh exemplified in Captain Kimber's treatment of a young Negro girl of 15 for her virjen (sic) modesty.' (London: S.W. Fores, 1792). Courtesy of the Library of Congress.

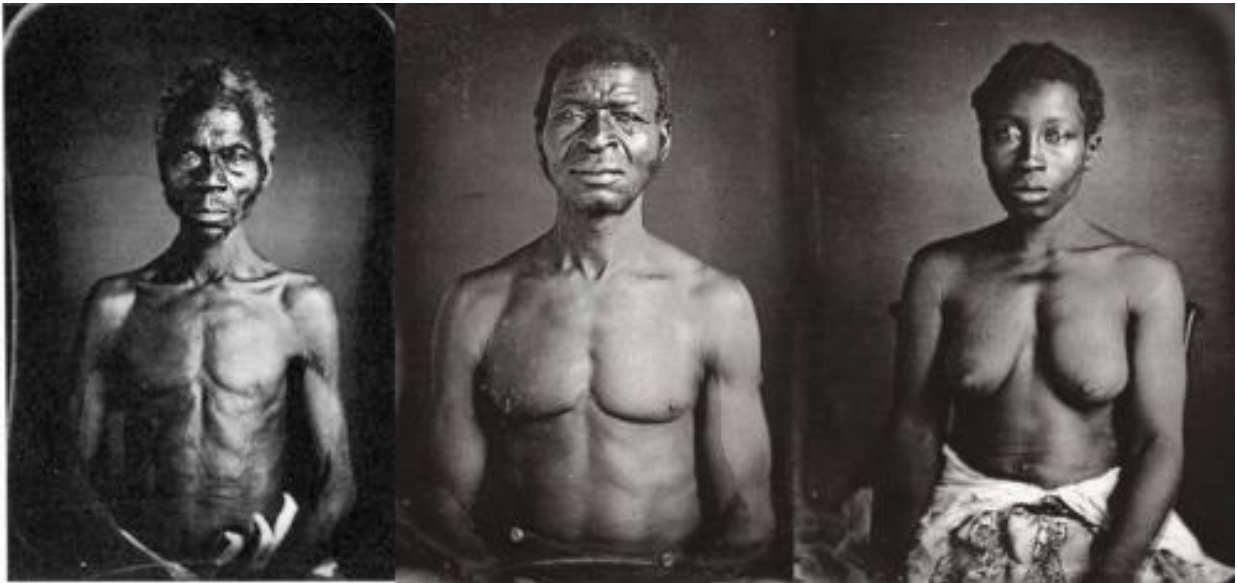


Figure 6. Zealy, J. T. *Renty, Congo, Plantation of B. F. Taylor, Esqu.* Columbia, S. C., March 1850. Daguerreotype. Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology, Harvard University.

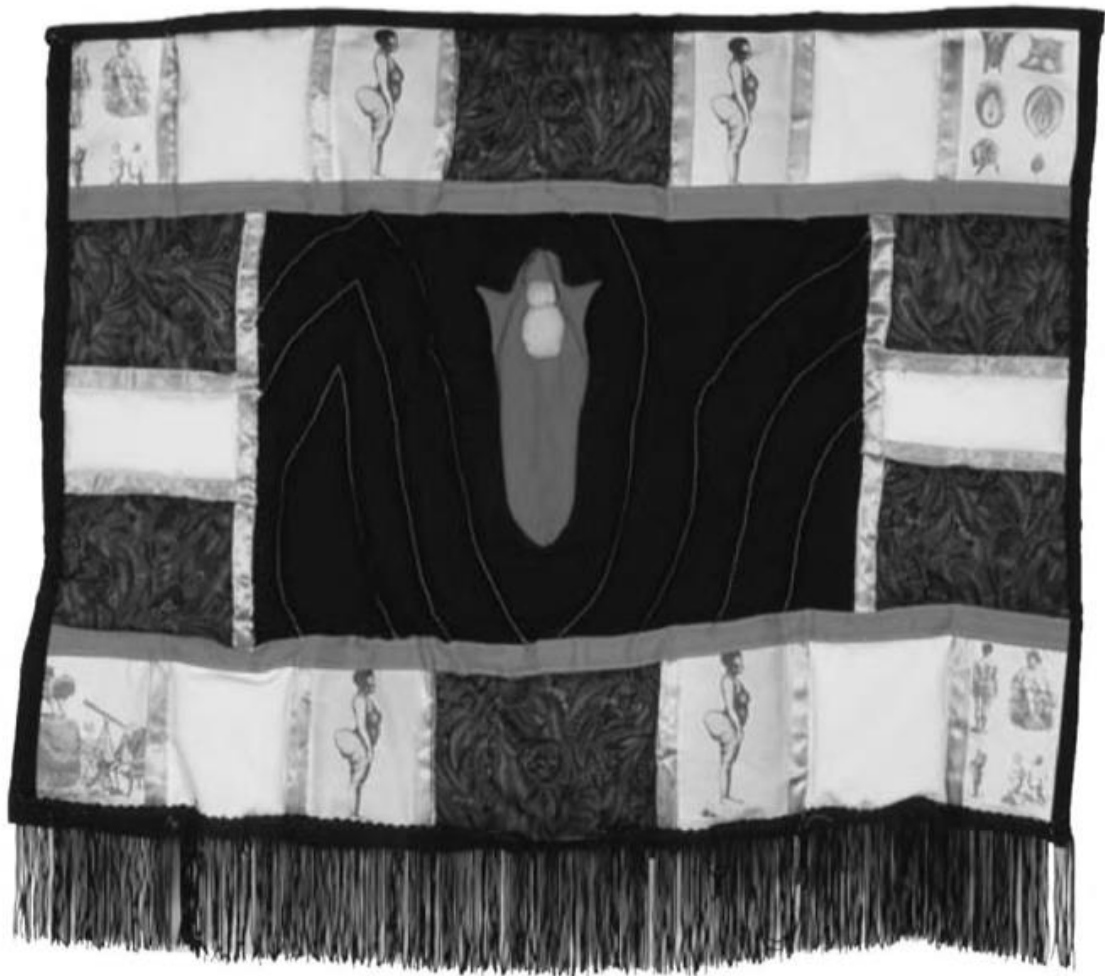


Figure 7. Willis, Deborah. *Tribute to the Hottentot Venus*, 1992. Fabric, photo linen. Printed in Deborah Willis, ed. *Black Venus 2010: They called her 'Hottentot'*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2010.



Figure 8. Noble, Thomas Satterwhite. *The Modern Medea*. London, 1867 (The Underground Railroad Museum, Cincinnati, Ohio).

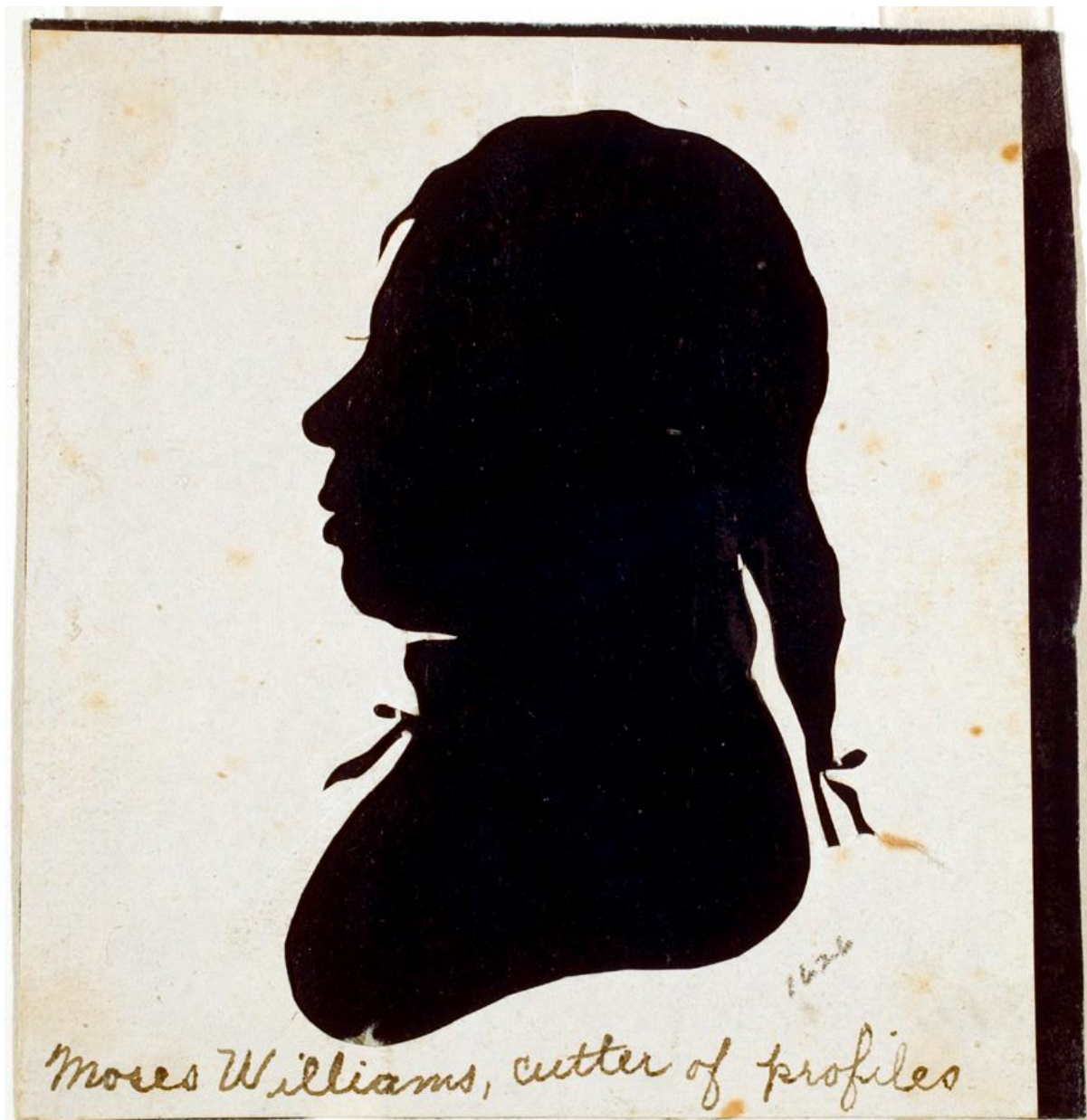


Figure 9. Peale, Raphealle. *Moses Williams, Cutter of Profiles*. Cut Paper to form silhouette profile. 'Facing History: The Black Image in American Art 1710-1940 Exhibition' (Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington, 1990). Curator Guy C. McElroy.



Figure 10. Walker, Kara. *Camptown Ladies*. Cut paper and adhesive on wall (New York City, 1998) courtesy of Brent Sikkema.



Figure 11. Walker, Kara. *Untitled*, 1995. Cut paper on paper, 38 x 24.5" (New York City, 1995) courtesy of Sikkema and Jenkins and Co.



Figure 12. Beitler, Lawrence. Photograph of the double lynching of Thomas Shipp and Abram Smith in Marion, Indiana, 1930 (Indiana Historical Society).



Figure 13. *Without Sanctuary*, Plate 1. The bludgeoned body of an African American male. Circa 1900, location unknown (Allen/ Littlefield Collection).

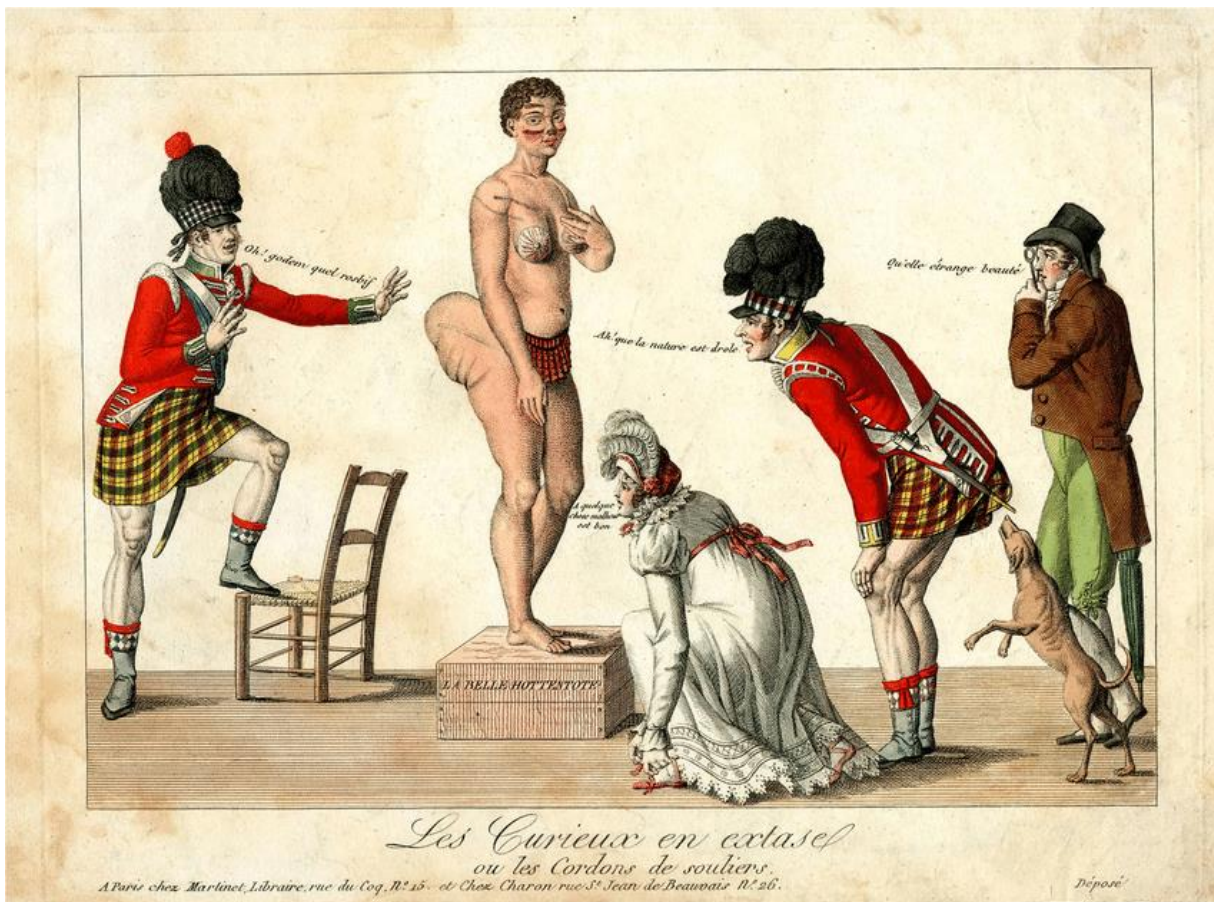


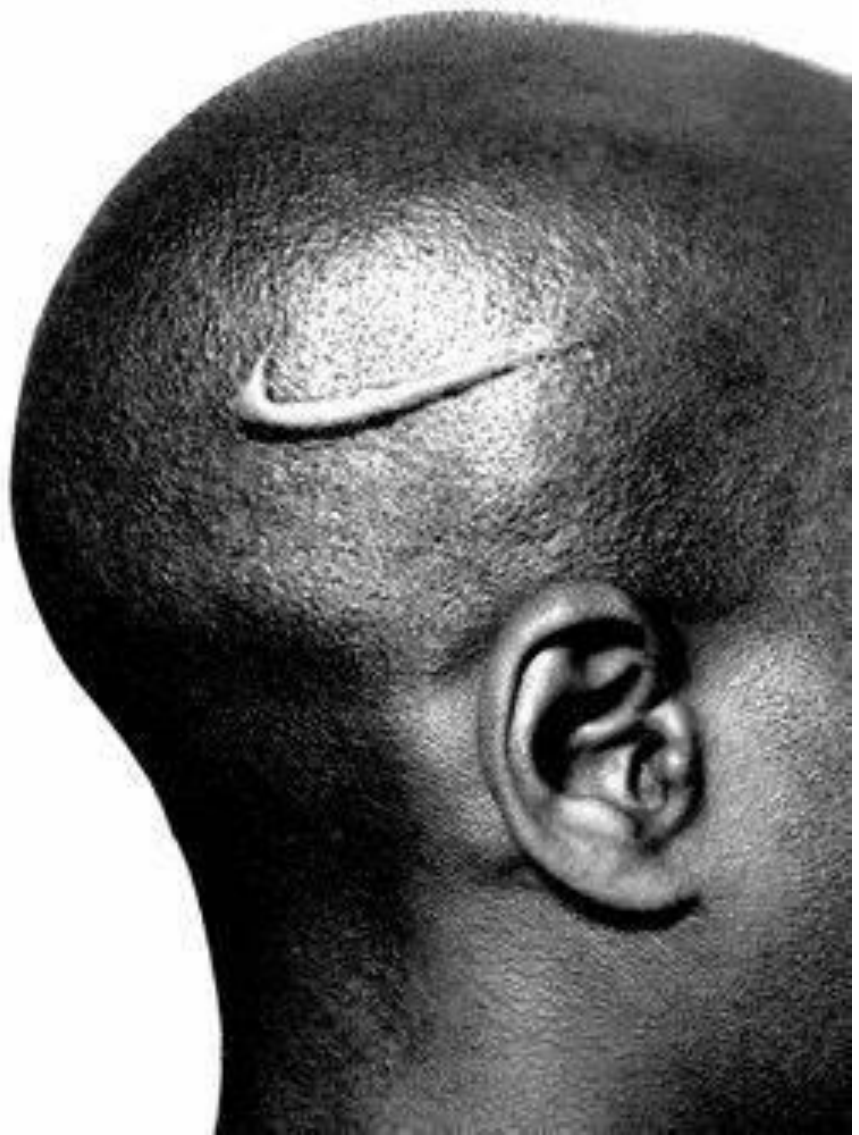
Figure 14. Charon, Louis François. *Les Curieux en extase, ou les cordons de souliers*. 1815. Paris (The British Museum).



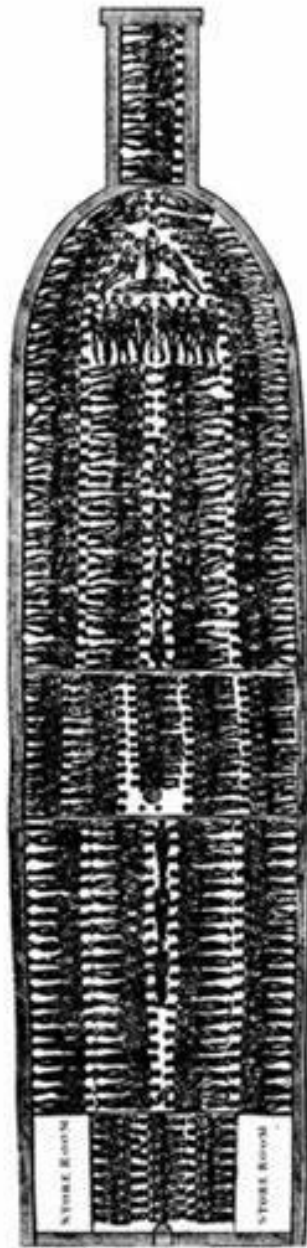
Figure 15. Walker. Kara. 'The Keys to the Coop' (1997). Linocut on Paper, 1175 x 1540mm. Hosted at the Tate: <<https://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/walker-the-keys-to-the-coop-p78211>> (accessed 17.6.2017).



Figure 16. McPherson and Oliver. *The Scourged Back of "Gordon" an escaped slave from Louisiana*. Albumen silver print. Louisiana, 1863.







ABSOLUT POWER.

Figure 17. Thomas, Hank Willis. *Branded Head, Scarred Chest, Absolute Power*. Lambda photograph 60x40, 40 x 30 in. Inkjet print on canvas, 60 x 40" HWT05.001, HWT05.008, HWT05.002 (Jack Shainman Gallery, New York).

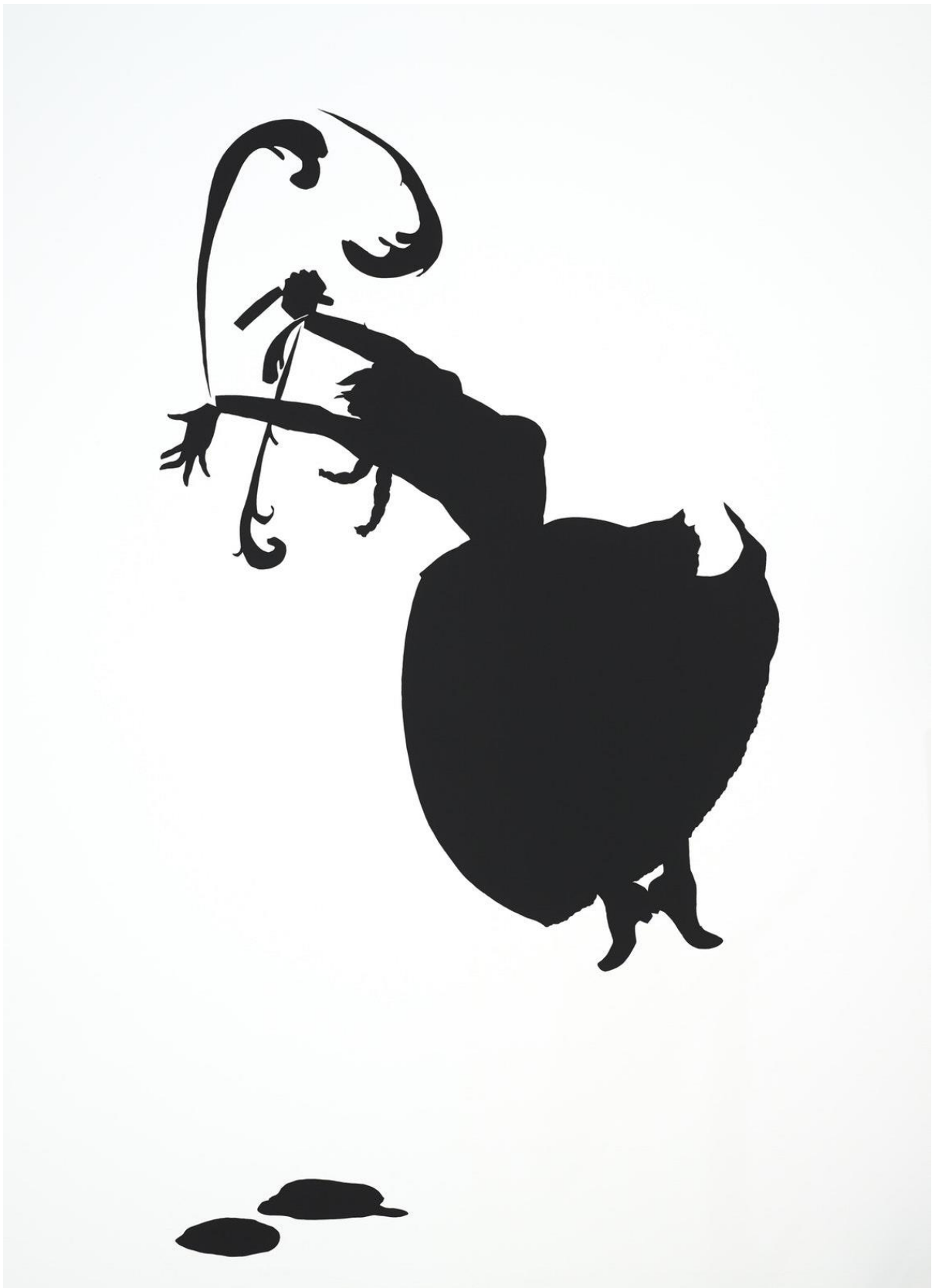


Figure 18. Walker, Kara. *Cut*. Art 21 (2011). <998' <http://www.art21.org/images/kara-walker/cut-1998>> (accessed 15/10/12).