

“Through A Glass Darkly”: The Mirror Trope and Female Subjectivity in the Novels of Toni

Morrison and Gloria Naylor

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Abstract

Throughout their respective bodies of work, both Toni Morrison and Gloria Naylor invoke recurring images of the mirror and the mirror-gazing act. Because of the preponderance of these images and because of how they inform our deeper understanding of character, theme, and genre, I argue that these images constitute an important trope in Morrison and Naylor’s fiction. Although the mirror trope pervades both writers’ bodies of work, it has not garnered significant scholarly attention, particularly with respect to the ways in which the trope highlights an intertextual dialogue between two essential writers of the 20th century American narrative. In this project, then, I conduct an in-depth but by no means exhaustive exploration into the mirror trope. I am specifically concerned with how each writer brings this trope to bear on issues of representation, the politics of recognition, and the dilemma of black female subjectivity and agency in a racist and misogynistic American society. I argue, then, that because the mirror trope is where patriarchal and racist structures of power collide, it signifies a critical point of intersectionality between race and gender. For that reason, the mirror emerges as a space of contestation within these narratives.

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Introduction:

In 1988 an artist named Carrie Mae Weems completed her *Ain't Jokin* series, a collection of black and white photographs that “exposes racist humor and probes the stereotypes and attitudes that undergird it” (Myers 131). One of the photographs, titled *Mirror, Mirror*, features a black woman “holding up a mirror that does not reflect her image” (Lam 103). Instead, the image in the mirror is an older white woman wearing a sheer white veil that makes her look ethereal, almost ghost-like. Beneath the photograph, the caption reads in all caps, “LOOKING INTO THE MIRROR, THE BLACK WOMAN ASKED, ‘MIRROR, MIRROR ON THE WALL, WHO’S THE FINEST OF THEM ALL?’ THE MIRROR SAYS, ‘SNOW WHITE, YOU BLACK BITCH, AND DON’T YOU FORGET IT!’” (Myers 131). Although this particular photograph has been analyzed from various theoretical and critical perspectives, scholars seem to agree that the piece is a commentary on rigid western notions of beauty and that for the black female subject, “the spectral ideal image in their mirrors blocks their ability to see their own beauty” (Myers 133). Of course, implicit in that commentary on race, beauty, and gender in America is a larger discussion of the notions of selfhood and black female subjectivity.

Like Weems, both Toni Morrison and Gloria Naylor recognize and represent the mirror as a fraught object. As important voices in contemporary American letters, Morrison and Naylor explore issues of black female subjectivity, the dilemmas of self-definition and self-making, and the specific struggles of being both black and female in America. In these explorations, both Morrison and Naylor employ the reoccurring image of a character gazing into a mirror. Thus, because the mirror is where patriarchal and racist structures of power collide to undermine, psychologically fracture, and even kill the mirror-gazing subject, it is both a dangerous object and a space of contestation within these narratives. More often than not, the mirror-gazing act

precipitates an existential crisis that has dangerous, lasting impacts on the character and on how the novel unfolds to reveal important truths about the characters as agents struggling for subjectivity in a racist American society. Given that the trope of the mirror seems to be both gendered and raced, I argue that it emerges in these works as a political space that broadens our understanding of the female subjects and by extension the narratives themselves. That the mirror-gazing act is also a political act reflects the ways in which western notions of beauty reify internalized racism and impinge on the characters' abilities to arrive at self-definition and maintain a unified subjectivity. How, then, do Toni Morrison and Gloria Naylor use this mirror trope to explore issues of self, identity, and representation?

As an author, Naylor has established herself as an essential voice within the larger tradition of the American narrative—a distinction she owes, in large part, to Morrison. Naylor often cites Morrison as an important influence not only on her writing but also on how she identifies as a black woman artist in America. In “A Conversation: Gloria Naylor and Toni Morrison,” for example, Naylor describes what Morrison’s *The Bluest Eye* meant to her: “it said to a young black woman, struggling to find a mirror of her worth in this society, not only is your story worth telling but it can be told in words so painstakingly eloquent that it becomes a song” (189). As a comparative study, then, this project aims to articulate the trope of the mirror as a significant point of convergence in the dialogue between Morrison and Naylor’s respective bodies of work.

While the mirror-gazing act transcends simple vanity, it is, more often than not, inextricably linked with hegemonic western ideals of beauty and power. For this reason, part of this study will involve parsing out the ways in which the trope of the mirror is both gendered and raced. By and large, it is the black women in Morrison and Naylor’s novels who undergo some

sort of intimate and ultimately traumatic confrontation with a mirror. For example, *The Bluest Eye* ends with the image of Pecola gazing into the mirror, finally content with what she sees but psychologically fractured; Sula gazes into the mirror immediately before her death, after she falls in love with Ajax to see whether she is beautiful or not; and Hagar looks into Pilate's cracked mirror and is driven insane by her reflection. And in *Tar Baby*, Jadine's magazine covers manifest as a kind of mirroring rich with implications about the self in relation to authenticity. Finally, in *A Mercy*, Florens has a nightmare in which she cannot find her reflection in the placid surface of a river. As I note in chapter one, men like Ajax, Shadrack, and Milkman represent a general exception within this trope because they often seem to find affirmation rather than trauma in their reflections.

In Naylor's *Bailey's Café*, the most striking example of the trope of the mirror occurs in the chapter entitled "Mary." Referring to her overly protective father, Mary admits, "But he shouldn't have been worried about the boys. He should have worried about the mirrors" (103). Comparing the eyes of others to mirrors, Mary says, "Yes, they all looked at me and knew, just knew, what *she* was. You have to believe what you see in the mirror, don't you? Isn't that what mirrors are for?" (104, emphasis mine). The fact that Mary refers to her reflection using the third-person pronoun "she" illustrates a fracturing of self similar to what we see in many of Morrison's novels. In the final chapter, I analyze the mirror trope as it manifests through Naylor's representation of home and the ancestral presence in *Linden Hills* and *Mama Day*.

While this study is by no means, exhaustive I have tried to choose novels that work in dialogue with one another, each adding to an important conversation surrounding the mirror trope and black female subjectivity. To be sure, the mirror trope abounds in other novels by these authors. For example, although I don't discuss *Beloved* here, Toni Morrison has said in an

interview with Gloria Naylor that she envisions the character Beloved as a twin or double of other women in the novel: “She will be the mirror, so to speak” (*A Conversation* 209). And the mirror trope might also be analyzed in *Jazz*, where the picture of Dorcas Manfred’s face haunts Violet throughout the novel.

Lastly, it’s important to note that although I do not explicate them here, connections can certainly be drawn between Pecola in *The Bluest Eye* and Sadie in *Bailey’s Cafe*, between Cocoa in *Mama Day* and Jadine in *Tar Baby*, and to some extent, between Florens in *A Mercy* and the Nedeed wives in *Linden Hills*. And in that way, I posit that the novels can, themselves, be thought of as subversive mirrors, each reflecting and affirming unique and shared expressions of black womanhood, each providing an image of black women as writers and artists—an image for which Morrison undeniably paved the way, allowing Naylor to look in her own mirror and see an artist. Recalling the first time Naylor saw Morrison in person, Naylor says, “She looked like [my cousin] Jessie. I knew without a doubt that Jessie and I shared the same blood. And so that meant, somehow, the writer who could create a *Bluest Eye* was just like me. I went home one night after one of her readings, stared into mirror, and I began to cry...”(11-12).

Chapter 1

Mirror, Mirror: Mirrors and the Problem of Self-Making in the Novels of Toni Morrison

Feminist critic Naomi Wolf, in her 1991 monograph, “The Beauty Myth,” deconstructs the problematic notion of physical beauty by illustrating how it manifests as a cultural and social construction that has been used against women to maintain patriarchal and misogynistic structures. Wolf compares this idea of beauty to a “currency system” that is “determined by politics”(12). In modern western society, Wolf argues, the myth that beauty exists as an objective, universal ideal “is the last, best belief system that keeps male dominance intact” (12). Moreover, Wolf describes this myth as an “expression of power relations” that “assigns values to women in a vertical hierarchy according to a culturally imposed physical standard” (12). Throughout her first four novels, Toni Morrison uses images of mirrors and metaphors of reflection to address the pernicious effects of the beauty myth. In an interview with Nellie McKay, Morrison explains, “My stories come to me as clichés. A cliché is a cliché because it’s worthwhile. Otherwise, it would have been discredited. A good cliché can never be overwritten; it’s still mysterious. The concepts of beauty and ugliness are mysterious to me” (*Conversations* 160). For Morrison, the construction of female beauty is not just a product of patriarchy, but also an extension of hegemonic western ideals that arbitrarily define beauty according to a white, blond-haired, blue-eyed standard. The mirror, then, underscores these racist and patriarchal definitions of beauty and thus precludes the possibility for the black women in Morrison’s novels to define and create themselves.

Admittedly, the mirror-gazing subject is not always female. Neither is the mirror-gazing act always motivated by a desire for the affirmation of beauty. Two such variations on Morrison’s mirror motif occur in *Sula*, with Shadrack and Ajax. In *Sula*, Shadrack struggles

psychologically to adjust back into civilian life after being released from a veteran's hospital but is eventually comforted by a reflection he sees of himself in a nearby toilet bowl: "He had been harboring a skittish apprehension that he was not real—that he didn't exist at all. But when the blackness greeted him with its indisputable presence, he wanted nothing more" (13). Shadrack confirms his existence and rediscovers himself in the image of his own watery reflection. In the context of this paper's examination, this is an important scene to keep in mind because, prior to Shadrack's reflection in the toilet bowl, Morrison emphasizes the fact that Shadrack "looked for a mirror; there was none" (13). While Shadrack's self-affirming reflection in the toilet bowl is indicative of what scholars have often argued to be his symbolic affinity with and connection to water throughout the novel, Morrison's subtle, yet critical detail about the mirror suggests that its absence is perhaps what saves Shadrack from total psychological breakdown. It is important to note, however, as Aoi Mori explains in her essay "Shattering the Mirror and Patriarchal Language," that "black men are less subjugated by the mirrors than woman, because at least they are not so severely objectified by racism and are free from the feminized standard of white aesthetics that the mirror represents" (62). The difference is most notable when the narrator describes Ajax's departing ritual: "The mirror by the door was not a mirror by the door, it was an alter where he stood for only a moment to put on his cap before going out"(134). By describing the mirror as an "alter," Morrison suggests that the mirror is a space of affirmation for Ajax. Thus, as Mori illustrates¹, the black men in Morrison's novels are often reconstituted in the mirror rather than destroyed by it.

But for the women in Morrison's fiction beauty is less about the character's relationship with or in society than it is about the inward struggle for selfhood. As such, images of mirrors and scenes of mirroring manifest throughout the texts as part of a larger discourse on the

(de)construction of black female subjectivity. In both her fiction and nonfiction, Morrison herself is abundantly clear about her thoughts on the harmful effects of western definitions of beauty. In her first novel, *The Bluest Eye*, for example, Morrison editorializes those sensibilities, speaking through her narrator to call beauty “one of the most destructive ideas in the history of human thought” (122). It is interesting to note that as much as Morrison successfully exposes the absurdity of the white standard of beauty in a novel like *The Bluest Eye*, Morrison’s fiction is always more complex than the obvious “black is beautiful” model of racial pride. In her essay “Rediscovering Black History” Morrison problematizes that model, arguing that the “black is beautiful” mantra, while accurate and comforting, was created within and responded to an inherently oppressive white aesthetic paradigm: “regardless of those questionable comforts, the phrase was nevertheless a full confession that white definitions were important to us” (40). In other words, the continued focus on physical beauty did not altogether transcend, and perhaps even played into, western vanity.

Within the expansive body of criticism devoted to Morrison’s work, much has been written about the concepts of beauty and subjectivity. While there seems to be a general consensus among scholars that each of Morrison’s first four novels in some way speaks to or comments on the concept of “the self,” scholars approach the topic through varying historical, sociological and sometimes psychoanalytic lenses². The dubious and threatening role of the mirror in Morrison’s work has not gone critically unnoticed in such diverse analyses. By and large, scholars agree with Barbara Rigney that “mirrors are dangerous objects in Morrison’s fictions” (35). In her essay “Hagar’s Mirror: Self and Identity,” Rigney frames her larger examination of mirrors and selfhood with the scene at the end of *Song of Solomon* when Hagar’s reflection in the cracked mirror drives her to insanity and eventually death. According to

Rigney, “what destroys Hagar is not merely Pilate’s oppressive love (her gift of the mirror being evidence of this) nor Milkman’s failure to love, but the vision of herself as *self* that the mirror reflects”(35). For Rigney, the mirror can never reflect Hagar’s reality as a black woman because it can only represent white standards of beauty. But the “greater lie,” according to Rigney, “is that illusion of unified selfhood which mirrors also perpetuate, for the ‘self’ in Morrison’s fiction...is always multiple, contradictory, and ambiguous—if, in fact, a self can be said to exist at all” (35). Rigney’s claim here follows a kind of postmodern logic that rejects notions of the unitary self. In placing *Song of Solomon* firmly in a postmodernist paradigm, Rigney attempts to subvert traditional phallogentric philosophies and theories of the self in favor of a more evolved and, Rigney would argue, feminist aesthetic that acknowledges feminine plurality and fragmentation. But by applying Lacanian theory to the mirrors in Morrison’s novels Rigney actually recapitulates the phallogentric ideas she is writing against. Moreover, Rigney falls into a common scholarly trap by failing to account for the essential whiteness of Lacan’s theory in her application of that theory to a text written by a black woman and foregrounding black female characters. I say “whiteness” here not merely because Lacan was European, but more importantly, because Lacan himself “fails to race the subject of his discourse” and thus “ignores the impact that social institutions have on the condition of people’s lives” (Quashie 29). Lacan can do that because he’s theorizing about the self from a point of cultural and political privilege whereby he can afford to ignore how race (and gender) might complicate the Mirror Stage. Within African American intellectual history, then, the notion of a divided self is at least as old as DuBois’s foundational theory of double consciousness—the idea that the black self is divided or fragmented because blackness is not easily or unproblematically reconciled with American-ness.

Nowhere is this idea of fragmentation more apparent than in *The Bluest Eye*, Morrison's first novel, and the one that deals most directly with internalized racist definitions of beauty. As many scholars note, Morrison underscores the relationship between beauty and subjectivity before the reader even opens the book. The title, "The Bluest Eye," is a double entendre, which first signifies the thematic and symbolic significance of blue eyes throughout the novel. However, Morrison also cleverly invites the reader to read the title as "the bluest I." While it is Pecola who tragically desires and prays for blue eyes, Claudia, the narrator for much of the novel, represents the "I" of the blues figure as she lays bare her own sins and sorrows and those of her community³. Carefully delineating this blues aesthetic, Cat Moses contrasts Claudia's strong narrative voice with Pecola's silence, noting how scholarship on *The Bluest Eye* often emphasizes "the problematics of a narrative that silences its dispossessed protagonist while seeking to empower the dispossessed and to critique power relations" (623). Such a contradiction raises questions about narration and subjectivity. Why doesn't Pecola narrate her own story, voice her own blues?

Throughout the novel, Morrison suggests that Pecola lacks an "I" with which to tell her story. In other words, though Morrison places Pecola and her struggles at the center of the plot, Pecola's inability to subvert western notions of beauty and arrive at self-definition precludes her capacity to recognize and construct herself as a subject. Pecola's particularly fragile self-conception manifests from the beginning of the novel as an obsession with her reflection. As the third person narrator recounts, "Long hours [Pecola] sat looking in the mirror, trying to discover the secret of the ugliness that made her ignored or despised at school, by teachers and classmates alike" (45). Here Morrison represents Pecola's psychological predicament as a kind of inversion of the Narcissus myth. Rather than expressing a compulsive self-love, Pecola's "long" gazes in

the mirror convey her self-loathing. By representing the mirror-gazing act as an attempt to “discover the secret of [her] ugliness” Morrison illustrates Pecola’s blind faith in the mirror to reveal some reality, some inherent truth to which she is not privy. It is important to note that Pecola is not trying to discover *if* she is ugly, but *why* she is ugly—knowledge Pecola needs in order to understand her own unbearable invisibility. That she has already accepted her ugliness as fact before the mirror-gazing act illustrates both her internalization of western definitions of beauty, and, more importantly, her desire to see herself as others see (or don’t see) her. The mirror-gazing act, then, is another example of what Cynthia Davis calls the “reductive gaze of the white other” (325). In her article “Self, Society and Myth in Toni Morrison’s Fiction,” Davis explores the ways in which “many Morrison characters try to define themselves through the eyes of others” (325). Davis essentially approaches the “self” in Morrison’s work through an existentialist lens, citing Sartre’s concept of the “Look” in order to illustrate the idea that “the Other’s look makes [Pecola see herself] as an object in another’s perception” (324). In other words, Pecola’s reflection in the mirror represents her objectification because she is essentially viewing her image from the vantage point of the Other. Again, this idea of seeing oneself through the eyes of others echoes DuBois’s notion of double-consciousness, which he describes as the “sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others, of measuring one’s soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity” (9).

To reiterate, Pecola desires that vantage point in order to solve the mystery of her invisibility. Not only is Pecola virtually abandoned by her family and ignored by her teachers and classmates, but she is incomprehensible to the people with whom she interacts on a day-to-day basis¹. Thus, precipitated by the mirror-gazing act, Pecola’s prayer to God to “make [her]

disappear” represents her attempts to match her external reality with her internal feelings of invisibility (45). During the prayer, Pecola,

Squeezed her eyes shut. Little parts of her body faded away. Now slowly, now with a rush. Slowly again. Her fingers went, one by one; then her arms disappeared all the way to the elbow. Her feet now... The legs all at once. It was hardest above the thighs. She had to be real still and pull... Only her tight, tight eyes were left. They were always left. (45)

Body part by body part, Pecola enacts a ritual of self-annihilation. The fact that she “had to be real still and pull” illustrates the deliberate, visceral quality of her ritual. Thus, form functions as meaning in *The Bluest Eye*: the absence of Pecola’s narrative voice underscores the ways in which her ugliness, confirmed for her by the mirror, “forces her into a position of invisibility and absence, which in turn becomes her only mode of presence” (Walther 777).

In sharp contrast to Pecola’s lack of subjectivity, the first person narrator, Claudia, has a very strong, if somewhat naïve sense of self. While Claudia never explicitly partakes in the mirror-gazing act, her white dolls function as a kind of mirroring, reflecting back white definitions of beauty. As a child, Claudia actively rejects these definitions, expressing her rejection by ritualistically dismembering the white dolls. According to Claudia, “I had only one desire: to dismember it. To see of what it was made, to discover the dearness, to find the beauty, the desirability that had escaped me, but apparently only me” (20). Claudia’s careful, deliberate dismemberment of the doll recalls Pecola’s self-dismemberment during her disappearing ritual. Rather than trying to discover her own ugliness in the mirror as Pecola does, Claudia destroys the dolls to “find the beauty.” Claudia’s utter bewilderment is indicative of her exceptionally

stubborn self-conception—a conception which enables her to inhabit her “I” definitively and without much contest. Through these parallel scenes of dismemberment, Morrison underscores the dynamics between subject and object, particularly in the context of the self and beauty. In searching the mirror for “the secret of the ugliness,” Pecola projects the image she sees in the mirror of the external world (that is, her own ugliness and invisibility) onto a literal mirror succumbing to objectification and dismemberment. But as a subject, Claudia wields power over the images that threaten her self. Beauty, Morrison implies, is a social construct, an unstable invention rather than a monolithic truth. By dismembering the dolls, Claudia symbolically deconstructs those oppressive structures, shattering the tyrannical mirror that would prevent her from cultivating a self. Admittedly, Claudia eventually assimilates into western culture, ascribing to conceptions of beauty she once rejected. But the “fraudulent love” she learns to develop for white images, cannot corrupt her as completely as Pecola because she has already defended herself from objectification (23). Thus, despite the sadistic nature of Claudia’s “disinterested violence,” Morrison suggests that it is primarily an act of self-preservation (23). For Claudia, unlike Pecola, remains whole unto herself. Morrison implies, then, that to remain whole, Claudia must actively scrutinize western definitions of beauty by physically destroying the oppressive images⁴ those definitions perpetuate.

Because Pecola’s sense of self is based on what her eyes see and how other people treat her, Pecola’s own eyes function as the mirrors that reify her invisibility and fragmentation. By the end of the novel Pecola is so hypnotized by her new blue eyes that she cannot stop gazing at herself in the mirror. For example, one of Pecola’s psychologically fractured selves proclaims, “*I’d just like to do something else beside watch you stare in that mirror*” (194). By framing *The Bluest Eye* with two scenes of Pecola’s mirror-gazing act, Morrison constructs her novel like

mirrors in a fun house. Unable to tell glass from reality, Pecola becomes trapped, bound by the mirror where she will inevitably perish.

Pecola is not, of course, the only character in Morrison's novels to perish in the mirror. Although, at its core, *Sula* has very little to do with internalization of western ideals of beauty, the novel can be read as a meditation on female freedom and self-creation—projects eventually stultified by social conformity and a misguided desire for beauty. In the forward to *Sula*, Morrison describes Sula's sexual freedom and departure from the Bottom as manifestations of her "anarchy" (xvi). Sula is the first of many "outlaw women" characters in Morrison's novels, and her proud, courageous, and free demeanor differs from Pecola in every way (xvi). Such disparity is partly due to the progression in age of the female protagonists from *The Bluest Eye* to *Sula*. In writing primarily about young women instead of children in *Sula*, Morrison is able to explore more fully the inner workings of independence and individuality required for identity formation and self-definition.

Despite the remarkable difference between Morrison's first two novels, as in *The Bluest Eye*, Morrison frames *Sula* with mirror-gazing scenes that function to emphasize the larger thematic implications of selfhood and subjectivity. The first instance of mirroring occurs in the beginning of the novel when young Nel returns from her great-grandmother's funeral in New Orleans. After venturing outside of the Bottom, Nel feels transformed:

She had gone on a real trip, and now she was different. She got out of bed and lit the lamp to look in the mirror. There was her face, plain brown eyes, three braids and the nose her mother hated. She looked for a long time and suddenly a shiver ran through her... 'I'm me. I'm not their daughter. I'm not Nel. I'm me. Me.'

Each time she said the word *me* there was a gathering in her like power, like joy, like fear. (28)

While not explicitly motivated by affirmation of beauty, Nel's mirror-gazing act manifests as an act of "discovery" (28). But what exactly is it that Nel discovers? Like most children, Nel has, up until this point, been first and foremost, defined and created by her parents. Nel's statement, "I'm not their daughter. I'm not Nel" illustrates how traveling outside the Bottom provides Nel with other referents for her being and existence and endows her with the self-consciousness she needs to see and understand herself as an independent entity—a self she can mold and create *and name* as she desires; a self that belongs to her, not to her parents. In the mirror, then, Nel does, in fact, find a sense of "me-ness" that both allows her to transcend her mother's oppressive commands to pull her nose (thereby refusing to internalize western definitions of beauty), and gives her "the strength to cultivate a friend in spite of her mother" (29). But despite Nel's transformation, her subsequent plea, "Oh, Jesus, *make me* wonderful" illustrates the limitations of her newfound me-ness, suggesting that she still has no working concept of self-making or self-creation (29 emphasis mine).

It is important to note that even in adulthood Nel never develops such concepts. Instead, Nel subsumes herself in the domestic responsibilities of respectable housewife and mother. As Philip Page argues in "Shocked into Separateness: Unresolved Oppositions in *Sula*," Nel "becomes the supportive, conforming, self-denying woman her mother tried to construct. Her attempts to fuse herself and Jude are specious, based on assimilated values, and instead of a healthy unity, she only becomes locked in a fragmentary existence" (193). The fact that Nel takes up the mantle of respectability and never leaves the Bottom suggests that she remains trapped in the mirror, ensnared in a static, nascent me-ness—a kind of stalled ego that precludes

actual self-definition. Rather than creating a self, Nel allows herself to be created and defined by the Bottom's rigid notions of womanhood.

In contrast to Nel, Sula chooses self-invention over convention. Sula first expresses this choice by leaving the Bottom for a college education. After a ten-year absence, Sula returns to a chorus of taunts by her grandmother to "have some babies" and "get married" to which Sula responds, "I don't want to make somebody else. I want to make myself" (92). Here Sula's defiant refusal to "make somebody else" refers directly back to the narrator's meditation on Jude and Nel's marriage: "The two of them together would make one Jude" (83). Through this juxtaposition, Morrison illustrates Sula's reasons for rejecting a life of domesticity, and emphasizes how Sula and Nel have grown up to be fundamentally different women despite their girlhood bond⁵. Through the second half of the novel Nel never questions her role as wife, mother, and maker of "one Jude," and therefore loses that "me-ness" that she discovered as a child. Sula, on the other hand, wants to "make" herself. Here Morrison's use of the verb "make" connotes creation, and by extension, creativity. Sula, then, is motivated by a kind of creative process of self-making that defies the social convention that a woman is only complete if she has a husband and children to complete (make) her. Sula is whole unto herself and therefore refuses to be used in such a way as to make others whole.

As many scholars have noted, Sula facilitates her self-making through her sexual freedom. According to Carolyn Jones, "sexuality is, for Sula, a place where she recovers the self that her mother took away, the self on which she can depend. It is the way to experience and to mourn the death of her dislocated self that Shadrack promised she would never experience" (143). Sula's self, then, is not some two dimensional image in a piece of glass, but a body and a consciousness, real and feeling. Thus, as Page says, "given the confining conditions of life in the

Bottom and given the paralyzing conventions for identity in both the mainstream society and the black community, making oneself is a positive and promising choice” (193). But for Sula, as for most of Morrison’s outlaw woman, that choice goes awry.

Foreshadowed and symbolized by the dead birds that accompany her return to the Bottom, Sula’s defiant project of self-making ends with her gaze in the mirror, which ultimately prevents her from sustaining a truly liberating flight from convention. Towards the end of the novel, Sula’s relationship with Ajax begins as a strictly sexual affair, but as Sula begins to develop actual feelings, she discovers “not love, perhaps, but possession or at least the desire for it” (131). Sula’s energies thus turn from a strong sense of self-possession to a desire to both possess and be possessed by another, Ajax. More importantly, this “new and alien” feeling compels her to gaze at her reflection in the mirror: “then there was an afternoon when she stood before the mirror finger-tracing the laugh lines around her mouth and trying to decide whether she was good-looking or not. She ended this deep perusal by tying a green ribbon in her hair” (131). Only seven pages later, Sula lies on her deathbed, barely able to move. Thus, this mirror-gazing act marks the beginning of the end for Sula. The image of Sula frantically tying a ribbon in her hair represents a remarkable transformation from the woman whose proclamations of self-belonging and self-creation actively threaten the discreet, respectable women of her community. When Ajax visits that evening, “not only was the green ribbon still in her hair, but the bathroom was gleaming, the bed was made, and the table was set for two” (132). Donning a mask of domesticity, Sula essentially allows the mirror to create a tamed version of her formerly free self. Up until this point, Sula has had a need for neither masks nor mirrors because she refused to define herself based on the perceptions of others. Morrison also suggests that, until their falling-out, Sula and Nel were able to be mirrors for each other, “each providing what the other lacks in

herself” (Nigro 727). But because Sula loses the self-affirming mirror of Nel’s friendship, she must turn to the literal mirror to see herself as Ajax sees her, a desire to know whether she is worthy of his love. Morrison thus uses the image of Sula’s looking in the mirror and subsequent death to illustrate the dangers of placing one’s self-worth in something other than the self. After leaving the Bottom and rejecting the community’s conventions, Sula establishes herself as a liberated woman and decolonized subject. But Sula’s capitulation to pressures of domesticity and her untimely death after looking in the mirror suggest that the mirror is a site of recolonization with the insidious power to objectify, and therefore un-make, a self-made woman.

In *Tar Baby*, as in both *Sula* and *The Bluest Eye*, Jadine struggles to construct a self. In “‘Out of Sight’: Toni Morrison’s Revision of Beauty,” Malin Walther explores Morrison’s use of images and representation and argues that the novel critiques “the representational aspect of beauty within the specular system because it objectifies the self and is detached from reality” (785). In her specific discussion of the “many devices in *Tar Baby* that reflect the horrors of the representational act,” Walther identifies the ways in which Morrison uses both mirrors and photography as “emblem[s] of objectification” (785). Thus while literal mirrors⁶ do indeed recur throughout the novel, Morrison uses Jadine’s magazine covers as a springboard for her larger thematic examination of selfhood and subjectivity. According to Morrison, *Tar Baby* is “about masks. Not masks as covering what is to be hidden but how masks come to life, take life over, exercise tensions between themselves and what they cover” (*Unspeakable Things* 159). Thus, the face reflected on the cover of *Elle* magazine is a mask of commodified and westernized beauty.

But when Jadine spots the woman in yellow while shopping in the grocery store, she “gasp[s]. Just a little. Just a sudden intake of air. Just a quick snatch of breath before that woman’s woman—that mother/sister/she; that unphotographable beauty—took it all away” (46).

By describing the woman in yellow as a “woman’s woman...mother/sister/she,” Morrison establishes her role in the novel as a kind of paragon of both womanhood and blackness. Thus, the fact that the woman in yellow fills Jadine with both terror and awe illustrates Jadine’s overarching ambivalence not just about her cultural heritage but also about her own femininity. For example, the three eggs symbolize fertility and nurturance, two aspects of womanhood Jadine has neither experienced nor desired. Moreover, the phrase “unphotographable beauty” not only forces the reader to question his or her understanding of “beauty” but also what it means for something to be “unphotographable.” As a super model Jadine’s beauty is photographable because fashion magazines like *Vogue* and *Elle* are cultural artifacts that reflect the kind of beauty western society values. In other words, Jadine’s beauty is a construction and product of western aesthetics. By describing the woman in yellow as “unphotographable,” then, Morrison suggests that she is not made beautiful by arbitrary constructions, she just *is*. In an interview with Nellie McKay, Morrison describes the woman in yellow as someone who “does not have to become anybody. Someone who already ‘is’” (422). Morrison suggests, then, that her beauty is her essence, an authentic sense of self, which cannot be photographed in the way that Jadine can wearing her mask of makeup on the covers of fashion magazines. It is therefore this authenticity from which Jadine feels estranged and thus envies. By juxtaposing Jadine’s westernized beauty and the beauty of the “original self” symbolized by the woman in yellow, Morrison underscores the ways in which Jadine’s magazine covers function as mirrors or masks, grotesquely reflecting an image of Jadine which has been manipulated and fetishized to fit western standards of beauty—an image so far removed from Jadine’s “ancient properties” that the woman in yellow makes her feel “lonely and inauthentic” (305, 48).

Throughout the novel, Jadine is confronted by similar symbols of culture that scholars often equate with ancestral knowledge. According to Marilyn Mobley in her essay “Narrative Dilemma: Jadine as Cultural Orphan in *Tar Baby*,” the women in Eloë, the woman in yellow, and the night women all “symbolize Jadine’s refusal to define herself in terms of familial past, historical tradition and cultural heritage” (289). For Mobley, then, the novel serves as a “cautionary tale for those like Jadine, who define themselves against themselves and their cultural past in the interest of self-fulfillment” (286). But while it may be the case that Jadine remains estranged from her cultural heritage, Jadine’s steadfast opposition to becoming the kind of black woman others tell her to be illustrates her commitment to a process of self-making and independence. Thus, Mobley seems to miss the larger implications of Jadine’s refusal to conform to a certain ready-made conception of black womanhood. By the end of the novel, Jadine rejects dreaming the dreams Son “wanted her to have about yellow houses with white doors which women opened and shouted, Come on in, you honey you! And the fat black ladies in white dresses minding the pie table in the basement of the church...” (119). Not only does she refuse to allow Son to possess her in this way, she escapes his brutality by flying back to Paris. Before leaving she tells her aunt Nanadine, ““there are other ways to be a woman...Your way is one, I guess it is, but it’s not my way...I don’t want to learn how to be the kind of woman you’re talking about because I don’t want to be that kind of woman”” (282). Thus, Morrison suggests that, unlike Pecola, Nel, and even Sula, Jadine resists the potentially dangerous inclination to define herself based on her mirror images; nor does she define herself based on essentialized notions of black womanhood. Despite Jadine’s assimilation into western cultural norms, she affirms the plurality and complexity of black female identity, insisting instead on a mode of self-creation. By the end of the novel, Morrison is clear that Jadine’s project is incomplete. But by

flying away from the island and from Son, she asserts her agency and subjectivity and learns an important lesson: “she *was* the safety she longed for” (291). In other words, Jadine locates worth and power within herself rather than through the perceptions of others. Although flying in the context of a truly authentic black self has yet to be attained by any of the women in Morrison’s novels, Jadine’s flight “aboard the 707” at the end of the novel is an optimistic indication that she is free to make herself into her own kind of woman in Paris and beyond (290).

Beginning with *The Bluest Eye* and *Sula* in the early 1970s and ending with *Tar Baby* in 1981, this decade-long period marks not only an obvious maturation in Morrison’s writing but a remarkably positive progression in her female characters’ subjectivity and agency: First there is young Pecola, who, paralyzed in her internalization of western definitions of beauty, never has so much as a chance at self-creation; then Sula who, with her self-defining proclamation and sexual freedom, tries but fails; and finally Jadine, who, although still hypnotized by western culture, nevertheless leaves the reader with an optimistic image of her soaring through the sky on an airplane, ready to continue her life in Paris on her own terms and by her own definitions. All are fragmentary women whose mirror images threaten them with the illusion of wholeness and who each respond to and cope with those images in different ways. As Morrison’s first three novels collectively illustrate, the mirror-gazing act is, after all, not about physical beauty, but selfhood. Beauty is merely the construct Morrison uses to explore the complex problems of constructing a black female self in the face of a patriarchal and racist society. Thus, beauty in Morrison’s novels is not, as western cultural idioms dictate, *in the eye of the beholder*. Instead, beauty *is* the “I” of the beheld, the revolutionary “self” that neither prostrates under the weight of useless vanities nor allows herself to be defined and domesticated by convention. Ultimately, Morrison suggests that mirrors interrupt and corrupt the subversive project of self-making

necessary for a truly liberated subject. As James Baldwin writes and as Morrison's characters and readers eventually discover, "All of us know, whether or not we are able to admit it, that mirrors can only lie, that death by drowning is all that awaits one there. It is for this reason that love is so desperately sought and so cunningly avoided. Love takes off the masks that we fear we cannot live without and know we cannot live within" (Fire Next Time 95). The mirror, then, holding neither knowledge nor reality, is a kind of mask that must be avoided, or at least removed, before the women in Morrison's novels can create themselves, and in creating themselves, cultivate a radical self-love that defies the twin barriers of racism and patriarchy.

¹ See Mori's article for an analysis and discussion of male characters and the mirror-gazing act in Morrison's novels.

² Rigney offers such an approach in her article, "Shattering Hagar's Mirror."

³ For a comprehensive discussion of Claudia's role as the blues figure see Cat Moses's article "The Blues Aesthetic in Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*."

⁴ According to the third person narrator, Mr. Yacobowski, the white store owner from whom Pecola buys the Mary Jane candies, "does not see her, because for him there is nothing to see" (48).

⁴ See Grewal's article "The Decolonizing Vision: *The Bluest Eye*" in *Circles of Sorrow, Lines of Struggle: The Novels of Toni Morrison* for an interesting examination Pauline's fascination with Jean Harlow. Grewal essentially analyzes instances of "mimeracy" in the text, which sheds more light on other kinds of mirroring.

⁵ Morrison makes it clear on numerous occasions that, as children Sula and Nel help define one another, and thus function as positive mirrors for each other. See particularly, page 119.

⁶ In particular, Son tells Valerian that mirrors will keep ants away from the greenhouse. For more on how Morrison uses the soldier ants as an allegory for Jadine's search for identity, see Malin Pereira's article "Be(e)ing and 'Truth': Tar Baby's Signifying on Sylvia Plath's Bee Poems."

Chapter 2

“Lest the Reflection Drink your Soul”: The Mirror Trope and The Politics of Recognition in Toni Morrison’s *A Mercy*

In many ways, the connection between slavery and racism defines the economic, social, and political dynamics that formed the foundation of American civilization. But as Toni Morrison illustrates in her ninth novel, while the connection between slavery and racism is certainly intimate, it is not inextricable. In *A Mercy*, Morrison reaches back to a little known past before slavery was an explicitly racialized concept. Morrison reconstructs that history through the unique narratives of four women, each representing a different form of 17th century servitude. Whether a Native-American indentured servant, an English mail-order bride, an African slave, or black child born into slavery, Morrison emphasizes each woman’s individual struggle for selfhood while also highlighting a collective struggle for belonging as “outlaw” women. As Morrison illustrates in all of her novels that feature the outlaw woman figure, belonging and community are not only key to self-definition and self-creation, but also, and more importantly, necessary for survival in a fiercely misogynistic and racist society. It’s important to note that although Morrison describes *A Mercy* as her attempt to “remove race from slavery,” race does end up playing an unavoidably significant role in the novel. Morrison articulates why race plays so heavily in a novel set before race was a construction in an NPR interview with Michele Norris: “The only difference between African slaves and European or British slaves was that the latter could run away and melt into the population. But if you were black, you were noticeable.” Thus, African slaves and European slaves, are different in an important, because very visual, way. Nevertheless, each female protagonist in *A Mercy*, regardless of race, must contend with the gaze of an oppressor. To be “noticeable,” then, and at the same time to be *unrecognizable*, to be

gazed upon and not *seen*—these are the central tensions in the novel and the themes through which Morrison explores a larger politics of recognition, or the extent to which people are misrecognized as inhuman (and treated as such) because of culturally and politically sanctioned racism and misogyny.

Throughout *A Mercy*, Morrison delineates those themes using recurring images of mirroring, doubling, and reflection. For example, despite being born on opposite sides of the Atlantic, Lina, a Native American indentured servant, and Rebekka, a mail order bride from England, form an almost sister-like bond. While Morrison foregrounds the fragility and ultimate breakdown of that bond, she also highlights their uncanny resemblances and, for much of the novel, depicts them as doubles. Notwithstanding Lina's fervent warnings, Rebekka often stares obsessively into an ornately crafted mirror given to her by her late husband, Jacob Vaark. Arguably, it is this mirror that drives the final wedge between them, representing a disintegration not just of the self but also of the nourishing companionship forged in adolescence. Another servant on Vaark's estate, Sorrow, also has a double—an imaginary friend she calls Twin, so named because she's identical to Sorrow. Presumably, Sorrow creates Twin to cope with the unspeakable horrors of the Middle Passage, but why does she need to create a *mirror* image of herself? Morrison's representation of Sorrow's split psyche in *A Mercy* calls to mind Pecola Breedlove at the end of *The Bluest Eye* and illustrates how Morrison foregrounds issues of identity, self and recognition. These issues coalesce most poignantly, however, in the character of Florens, who narrates part of the novel using what at first appear to be first person monologues. Florens is obsessively in love with the blacksmith, whose eyes serve as grotesque mirrors for Florens, reflecting her illusory and elusive sense of self. Florens rouses from her waking nightmare of obsessive love after a sleeping nightmare of invisibility wherein she gazes

into the placid water of a river and sees no face or shadow. Throughout the novel, Florens is unrecognized by others, and more importantly, by herself. In *A Mercy*, then, Morrison puts all of these women under the same roof where the potential for home and belonging never quite come to fruition. Although remarkably different, these women share in a collective struggle for subjectivity—not just to see and be seen, but also to *know* a self and an identity beyond “slave.” Thus, Morrison uses the mirror trope to explore the issues of self and subjectivity inherent in a larger politics of recognition.

In the novel, the relationship between Lina and Rebekka takes on a kind of mirroring or doubling whereby the two women form an almost sister-like bond despite the vastly different circumstances of their lives. After disease and fire decimate Lina’s village and family, she’s taken in by a group of “kindly Presbyterians” whose zealotry eventually prompts them to abandon her (55). Lina goes to work as a servant on Jacob Vaark’s newly purchased land at 16 and, not long after, Rebekka arrives on the estate after Jacob purchases her from her parents in England. The initial antipathy between Lina and Jacob’s new wife eventually dissolves as the two young women “discovered something much more interesting than status” (62). As Lina and Rebekka spend time with one another, sharing household chores and farm duties, they discover a likeness in one another, a kind of kinship:

Rebekka laughed out loud at her own mistakes; was unembarrassed to ask for help. Lina slapped her own forehead when she forgot the berries rotting in the straw. They became friends. Not only because somebody had to pull the wasp sting from the other’s arm. Not only because it took two to push the cow away from the fence. Not only because one had to hold the head while the other one

... tied the trotters. Mostly because neither knew precisely what they were doing or how. (62).

By emphasizing their similar dispositions and effortless ability to work together, Morrison portrays Lina and Rebekka as kindred spirits, rather than just two women brought together by circumstance. Both “alone [and] without family,” Lina and Rebekka share in the common struggle of orphanhood (77). They are thus unmoored women in need of kinship and belonging. This shared orphan status allows each woman to transcend barriers of race and class and *see* herself in the other. Morrison suggests, then, that Lina and Rebekka complete each other through friendship, and after illness renders Rebekka senile, she recognizes Lina’s face almost more acutely than she recognizes her own: “I know you,” said Rebekka. “This face was real. She recognized the dark anxious eyes, the tawny skin. How could she not know the single friend she had?” (119).

Despite the doubling between Lina and Rebekka, the women differ in an important way. Where Rebekka’s illness leaves her mentally and physically unstable for much of the novel, Lina seems to defy the unspeakable horrors of her past as well as the inevitably dehumanizing traumas of colonization and servitude, which both threaten, all the time, to undo, to destroy, to deconstruct and destruct the self. To preserve that selfhood, Lina relies on a mixture of memory and forgetting. Throughout the novel, Morrison suggests that Lina possesses a kind of indigenous wisdom that keeps her rooted to a useful and spiritual sense of the past. For example, when the weather turns suddenly, “Lina [tries] to learn what the sky, the breezes, had in store” (77). In other words, Lina, although perhaps illiterate and destitute of her native language, develops a keen connection with the natural world, learning to protect and worry for those she loves based on her reading of nature. Lina also has an extensive knowledge of natural remedies

and potions, which she uses to care for Rebekka in the early stages of her illness. In one scene, Lina places “magic pebbles under Mistress’ pillow; kept the room fresh with mint, and forces angelica root in her patient’s festering mouth to pull bad spirits form her body”(59). Here, Morrison illustrates how Lina still has access to a kind of in-group or folk knowledge that keeps her connected, if only partially, to an ancestral past.

But for all of Lina’s remembering, she seems just as sustained by forgetting. Through a kind of selective amnesia, Lina destroys any memories from her past that threaten her project of self-making, a project that distinguishes her from the rest of the women in the novel: “Memories of her village peopled by the dead turned slowly to ash and in their place a single image arose. Fire. How quick. How purposefully it ate what had been built, what had been life. Cleansing somehow and scandalous in beauty” (57). Many scholars have noted Morrison’s preoccupation with images of fire, both in *A Mercy* and throughout her literary canon. Here, Morrison uses the fire motif as a metaphor for the self. Like a controlled fire in swailing season, set to revive the landscape, Lina figuratively burns away any “memories of her village peopled by the dead” (57). For Lina, these memories preclude any chance for growth, annihilate any hope for self-definition. In the wake of the un-self these stultifying memories represent, Lina can essentially plant the seeds of a new self. Like the fire that demolished her village and stopped the disease from spreading, this new self is both “scandalous” and “cleansing”—it destroys (language and memory) and it creates (life and subjectivity). This mode of “sort[ing] and [storing] what she dared to recall and eliminat[ing] the rest, ... shaped her inside and out. By the time Mistress came, her self-invention was almost perfected. Soon it was irresistible”(59). Morrison suggests, then, that the self isn’t just a reservoir to be filled with any and all memories of past traumas. For Lina, a liberating mode of self-invention and self-creation relies on an active dissociation from

the past and is the only way to have an identity in such a misogynistic and racist society.

Ultimately, Morrison suggests that when forgetting means surviving and agency, it can be just as integral to identity formation as remembering. By constructing a self in the face of destruction, and by insisting on life, Lina resists the “patriarchal [and racist] outlook of the world personified by Vaark”—an outlook that could have certainly disrupted her own “self-invention” (Gallego-Duran 108).

Unlike Lina, however, Rebekka blindly accepts this outlook and stares obsessively and vainly into the mirror of the past. For much of the novel, Rebekka suffers from a serious case of smallpox and although her illness renders her disoriented, it illuminates the abiding psychological consequences of her traumatizing journey across the Atlantic as a young woman. Throughout the novel, Rebekka compulsively dwells on painful memories from that journey, particularly on the image of herself going to the bathroom in public. For example, she repeatedly tells Lina, “I shat among strangers for six weeks to get to this land...Among strangers...There was no other way packed like cod between decks”(85). By repeating the phrase “among strangers,” and comparing herself to “cod” Rebekka emphasizes the dehumanizing gaze of the other. But the fact that the only clear corollary to being packed “like cod between decks” on a ship traveling across the Atlantic Ocean is an image of African slaves suffering and surviving the Middle Passage, Rebekka’s level of humiliation also seems to indicate a kind of misplaced vanity and foreshadow her narcissistic obsession with the framed silver mirror.

This mirror, one of many useless treasures Vaark gives Rebecca after his rum trade windfall, mesmerizes Rebecca and, in many ways, precipitates a kind of fragmentation of the self. As Rebekka struggles through the pain of her illness and the death of Jacob Vaark, the mirror becomes her only source of comfort and placation. Towards the beginning of the novel,

for example, Rebekka pleads to Lina for the mirror despite her “unworkable tongue” and “mouth lined with sores”:

“On top of a few lengths of silk lay a small mirror set in an elaborate frame, its silver tarnished to soot.

‘Gi’me,’ said Mistress.

Lina picked up the mirror thinking, No, please. Don’t look. Never seek out your own face even when well, lest the reflection drink your soul.

‘Hur-ee,’ moaned Mistress, her tone pleading like a child’s.

Helpless to disobey, Lina brought it to the lady. She placed it between the mittened hands, certain now that her mistress will die.” (70)

Here, Rebekka’s child-like insistence signifies a new level of desperation and senility. Although it’s still unclear, at this point in the novel, why exactly Rebekka needs to see her reflection in the mirror’s surface, Lina’s warnings to “never seek out your own face even when well, lest the reflection drink your soul” and her worry that “her mistress will die” connects the mirror with devilish implications of evil and loss of agency. It is important to note that Lina’s pattern of wisdom and precise instincts compel the reader to pay closer attention to her admonitions—to take them seriously rather than dismiss them as mere superstition. By distinguishing between the “reflection” and the “soul,” Lina dismantles the traditional myth that the reflection *is* the image of the soul, suggesting instead, that the reflection terrorizes the soul, i.e. the self.

While Lina attributes Rebekka’s desire to gaze into the mirror to “self-pity,” Morrison suggests that Rebekka’s motivations are more complex (104). Towards the middle of the novel, for example, Rebekka contemplates the biblical story of Job, who, according to Rebekka, wanted more than anything, “the Lord’s attention” (107). According to Rebekka’s interpretation, “He

wanted simply to catch His eye. *To be recognized* not as worthy or worthless, but to be noticed as a life-form by the One who made and unmade it” (107; emphasis mine). By placing the notion of human recognition into a biblical context, Morrison suggests that rather than being rooted in vanity or self-pity, the need or desire to be seen and to be recognized is an inextricable and enduring part of what it means to be human. But Rebekka’s meditation takes a particularly interesting turn when she contemplates a female Job:

But then Job was a man. Invisibility was intolerable to men. What complaint would a female Job dare to put forth? And if, having done so, and He deigned to remind her of how weak and ignorant she was, where was the news in that? What shocked Job into humility and renewed fidelity was the message a female Job would have known and heard every minute of her life. No. (107)

As Shirley Ann Stave argues in “Across Distances Without Recognition”: Misrecognition in Toni Morrison’s *A Mercy*,” “the invisibility, effectively the non-existence of Woman, becomes clear to the widowed Rebekka when she reflects on the biblical figure of Job” (144). Thus, in contemplating the impossibility of a female Job, Rebekka brings to light the ways in which the patriarchy has rendered women not just unrecognizable as human, but also and more importantly, *invisible*. The irony, however, is that women are only real in the eyes of the law, that is, they are only “legal” if they are married to or work for a man on his land, since inheritance laws follow the male line. As Stave aptly notes, “Rebekka takes her identity from Jacob” (144). Morrison implies, then, that Jacob’s death renders Rebekka “illegal” and without an identity (Morrison 68). His death means her final erasure, and ultimately compels her to search for a recognizable self in the silver framed mirror.

But when Rebekka looks into the mirror and doesn't find a reflection that she recognizes, she loses every sense of the self she was able to cultivate through her bond with Lina. As Rebekka reflects back on memories of her mother, she wonders briefly what her mother looks like now, but she redirects her question to her own image:

“‘And me? How do I look? What lies in my eyes now? Skull and crossbones? Rage? Surrender?’” All at once she wanted it—the mirror Jacob had given her which she had silently rewrapped and tucked in her press. It took a while to convince her, but when Lina finally understood and fixed it between her palms, Rebekka winced.

‘Sorry,’ she murmured. ‘I’m so sorry.’ Her eyebrows were a memory, the pale rose of her cheeks collected now into buds of flame red. She traveled her face slowly, gently apologizing. ‘Eyes, dear eyes, forgive me. Nose, poor mouth. Poor sweet mouth, I’m sorry. Believe me, skin, I do apologize. Please. Forgive me’”
(112).

Despite Lina's repeated pleas to let go, Rebekka continues to cling desperately to the mirror. For Rebekka, the face she sees in the silver-framed mirror is a poor substitute for the face she remembers before age and illness wreaked their havoc. It is important to note that, like Rebekka's previous demand for the mirror, just after she was dwelling on the image of herself sitting in front of strangers, this mirror gazing scene is also precipitated by Rebekka's recollection of a past trauma (her mother hitting her). That memory precipitates the mirror-gazing act for Rebekka, signifying Rebekka's relationship with history and distinguishing her from her double, Lina. Again, while Lina is a self-invented woman, remembering only what is useful for subjectivity, Rebekka keeps allowing the figurative mirror of the past *and* the real silver-framed mirror to un-invent her. In this passage, for example, Rebekka's apologies,

inflected with a tone of shame, suggest a kind of psychic break from the body and from reality. As Rebekka lies in supplication before the mirror, her appeals to her nose, eyes, mouth and skin to “Please. Forgive me” give the mirror, and by extension, her reflection, a kind of power and agency. There’s a sense, then, that the reflection has begun to “drink [her] soul” as Lina warned earlier in the novel (70). Rebekka’s slow, careful deconstruction of her face reduces her to a disembodied pair of eyes, nose and mouth, almost grotesquely construed onto the surface of the mirror like the fragmented portraits of Picasso. Morrison linguistically reifies Rebekka’s fragmented self at the end of the chapter, when Rebekka contemplates her certain death if Florens does not return with the blacksmith: “How long will it take will he be there will she get lost will someone assault her will she return will he and is it already too late? For Salvation.” (118). Here, the breakdown of language and grammar signifies Rebekka’s psychological breakdown and foreshadows Rebecca’s newfound zealotry.

Rebekka’s catalog of apologies in the mirror represents a significant point in the novel because it sets in motion a pattern of self-destructive decisions that ultimately erode the “nurturing female-headed community” that once sustained her (Gallego-Duran 107). After the blacksmith cures Rebekka, she heals in body, but not in mind, which seems forever corrupted by the mirror. Everyone on the Vaark estate, including Skully, a white indentured servant, notices Rebecca’s change: “When she beat Sorrow, had Lina’s hammock taken down, advertised the sale of Florens, he cringed but said nothing” (183). Even Florens, Lina’s surrogate daughter, observes, “Mistress has cure but she is not well. Her heart is infidel...her eyes are nowhere and have no inside. Like the eyes of the women who examine me behind the closet door, Mistress’ eyes only look out and what she is seeing is not to her liking” (186). By comparing Rebekka’s gaze to the colonizing, oppressive gaze of the white missionaries, Florens illustrates the extent of

Rebekka's dissolution. Rebekka's final betrayal of Lina underscores her inability to construct, or rather *reconstruct* a self following the death of Jacob Vaark. Thus, as Mar Gallego-Duran argues in "'Nobody Teaches You To Be A Woman': Female Identity, Community and Motherhood in Toni Morrison's *A Mercy*," "the climactic turn that deeply upsets and manages to overturn the female community is instigated not by Vaark's death, but by Rebekka's subsequent act of betrayal of Lina and, therefore, of the whole community" (Gallego-Druan 106).

Aside from Rebekka's confrontation with her reflection in a literal mirror, Sorrow also has an interesting and similarly destructive relationship with her reflection that takes the form of an imaginary friend. Sorrow's imaginary friend, aptly named "Twin," is an identical image of herself—an embodied reflection. Given Sorrow's past, scholars like Anissa Wardi argue that "Sorrow is symbolic of the trans-Atlantic journey. She nominally embodies the Middle Passage and thus marks the 'sorrow' of the Africans' displacement and forced habitation of the slaveships" (27). For Wardi, Sorrow is a "fractured and splintered character, connecting not only continents, but the living and the dead" (28). Mar Gallego Duran has a similar interpretation: "Obviously, her dual personality is used as a defense mechanism against the loneliness and abandonment of her childhood. The imaginary friend helps her cope with her estrangement from social interaction and her complete alienation" (109). But why does Twin need to be Sorrow's twin? In other words, scholars seem to agree that Twin is a coping or survival mechanism for Sorrow, who endured the unspeakable horrors of the Middle Passage, but what does Morrison imply thematically by making Twin Sorrow's identical other—her mirror image?

In the novel, Sorrow first sees Twin after she spends many nights alone and lonely as the sole survivor on a foundered slave ship. Sorrow abandons the ship with Twin and is eventually rescued by a sawyer's wife. When Sorrow wakes up at the sawyer's house, she "thought she was

[dead] until Twin appeared at the foot of the pallet grinning, holding her face in her hands” (139). Later in the novel, after Sorrow faints from painful boils, she again wakes up to the sight of Twin: “When she came to, eyes, the shape and color of her own, greeted her. The puffy clouds, mere threads now, drifted away. ‘I’m here,’ said the girl with a face matching her own exactly. ‘I’m always here’” (149). The fact that Sorrow needs Twin to confirm her existence suggests that Sorrow’s only sense of self resides in Twin. By emphasizing that Twin’s eyes were “the shape and color of her own” and that Twin’s face “match[ed] her own exactly,” Morrison suggests that Sorrow only feels *alive* in Twin’s gaze—only feels her own existence through her reflection, embodied by Twin. This moment of recognition—of Twin’s eyes, of Twin’s face—signifies that Sorrow’s sense of self and identity are just as imaginary as Twin.

It’s interesting to note, then, that Twin is the only one who knows and uses Sorrow’s real name: “She did not mind when they called her Sorrow so long as Twin kept using her real name...Having two names was convenient since Twin couldn’t be seen by anybody else. Preferable, of course, was when Twin called from the mill door or whispered up close into her ear. Then she would quit any chore and follow her identical self” (137). As is common throughout Morrison’s literary corpus, Morrison associates names and naming with notions of the self and identity. In *A Mercy*, Morrison associates the naming motif with these tropes, but she also uses naming to underscore the larger notion and power of recognition in constructing or sustaining subjectivity. For Sorrow, then, hearing her real name “whispered up close into her ear” keeps her, in some sense, moored to a sense of identity and recognition not encompassed by the name “Sorrow” conferred to her by the sawyer’s wife “because she was abandoned” (142). But given that the name “Sorrow” can only mirror or reflect her tragic past, why does Twin prevent her from speaking her real name—claiming her identity? “When they asked her name,

Twin whispered NO, so she shrugged her shoulders and found that a convenient gesture for the other information she could not or pretended not to remember” (140). Here, Morrison highlights a dialectic between body and image, self and reflection. By obeying Twin, Sorrow relinquishes her power as an agent, allowing the object (the mirror image) to become the subject. Like Rebekka, Sorrow’s reflection becomes the symbol of her fragmentation, ultimately preventing self-discovery and self-invention.

Sorrow does, however, become a self-invented woman by the end of the novel, with the birth of her baby girl. Sorrow’s baby convinces her “that this time she had done something important, by herself. Twin’s absence was hardly noticed as she concentrated on her daughter. Instantly she knew what to name her. Knew also what to name herself... She had looked into her daughter’s eyes; saw in them the gray glisten of a winter sea while a ship sailed by-the-lee. ‘I am your mother,’ she said. ‘My name is Complete’” (157-158). As many scholars note, “Sorrow’s determination to begin a new phase with a new and meaningful name, Complete, is thus the result of her motherhood, which finally enables her to confirm her sense of self, to settle down, to achieve wholeness” (Gallego-Duran 109). But there’s also a sense here that Sorrow can see a more authentic vision of her self in her child, than in Twin, who was after all, only a poor, imaginary facsimile. Because Sorrow’s child represents her future as a “complete” subject and agent, Sorrow can no longer accept a name that defines her by her traumatic past. The new name itself—“Complete”—not only signifies her claiming a sense of identity and a new unity of self, but Morrison also implies that the act of naming oneself is ultimately a liberating act of self-invention, only possible absent her embodied reflection.

But of all the women in *A Mercy*, Florens’s struggle for self-definition and self-creation is arguably the most acute. By narrating her own story, Florens provides the reader with

important insights into the full extent of her personal growth. Born on a plantation in Virginia, Florens is traumatized by the memory of her mother's pleas to "Take her. Take my Daughter" (30). Throughout the majority of the novel, however, Florens battles most painfully with the absence of the blacksmith with whom she has fallen into a heart-wrenching, hyper-obsessive love. Indeed, her love for Smithy extends so far beyond the realm of obsession that it precludes any hope for self-creation or identity. In Florens' first monologue, she says, "There is only you. Nothing outside of you. My eyes not my stomach are the hungry parts of me... And when at last our eyes hit I am not dead. For the first time I am alive"(44). Although ambiguous at first, it becomes increasingly clear that Florens is addressing these first person narratives to the blacksmith who forges the ornate wrought iron gate in front of the Vaark estate. Florens' proclamation that "my eyes not my stomach are the hungry parts of me" illustrates that on a bodily level, she does not hunger for food, for sustenance; rather she hungers for the image of the blacksmith in her own gaze and feels "alive...for the first time" when he stares back at her. Thus, Florens only exists as long as the blacksmith's eyes are looking at her, reflecting back her image. She feels, in other words, like this is the first time someone has actually *seen* her, which endows in her a sense not of affirmation, but confirmation of her existence in the world. And her need for that kind of confirmation is not surprising given her status as a slave voluntarily orphaned by her mother. According to Stave, "one might argue that, having lost her reflection in her mother's eyes, Florens finds herself again in the blacksmith's eyes"(145). It is important to note also that Morrison juxtaposes the blacksmith's reputedly *seeing* eyes with the eyes of the villagers on the way into town: "Some people go by and look but do not speak. We are female so they have no fright. They know who is Lina yet look as if we are strange to them" (45). Early in the novel, then, Morrison establishes Florens' yearning, very much similar to Pecola's, to be seen, loved,

and recognized, as well as the resulting ways in which she is trapped almost irrevocably in the mirrors of the blacksmith's eyes. It's important to note, however, that this yearning to be seen is so deep, so all-encompassing, that it actually blinds Florens to reality. Lina, for example, is "the only one alert to the breakdown the disruption, the shattering a free black man would cause. He had already ruined Florens, since she refused to see that she hankered after a man that had not troubled to tell her goodbye" (71). As the wise voice of reason, then, Lina can see that the blacksmith is just as blind to Florens as the villagers.

While on her journey to find the blacksmith, Florens comes across many more pairs of eyes that notice but do not see or recognize her as human. For example, according to Florens, when she knocks on the door of Mrs. Ealing, a green-eyed, white-skinned, evangelical woman, Mrs. Ealing "narrows her eyes and asks if I am of this earth or elsewhere?"(125). While Mrs. Ealing initially mistakes Florens for a demon, she eventually agrees to give her shelter for the night. However, Florens is again mistaken for evil when Mrs. Ealing's visitors are frightened so much by Florens' blackness that "one of the women covers her eyes saying God help us. The little girl wails and rocks back and forth...One woman speaks saying I have never seen a human this black...It is true says another. The Black Man is among us" (131). Because of her black skin, Florens is misrecognized over and over again as an evil demon that needs to be hunted and killed. Not even Rebekka Vaark's letter of permission to travel fully convinces them that she is human. Instead, they appraise her body like a farmer appraises cattle:

Without touching they tell me to what to do. To show them my teeth, my tongue... 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. No hate is there or scare or disgust but they are looking at me my body across distances without recognition.

Swine look at me with more connection when they raise their heads from the trough.

(133)

As she continues on her journey, Florens must contend with more “eyes that do not recognize [her]” (135). Like the witch hunters at Widow Ealing’s house, these eyes *notice* Florens because of her black skin, but do not see or understand her as human. As Shirley Ann Stave argues, this refusal to “acknowledge their commonality” and to “see Florens’ ability to speak their language, even to read, as evidence of a shared humanity, the witch hunters must render Florens invisible and alien to maintain their own delusion of superiority” (146). Thus, this racist white gaze reduces Florens’s black female body to little more than a thing to be ciphered—ironically deconstructing each part of her, examining every fine detail, but never actually seeing or recognizing.

By the time Florens finds the blacksmith, then, she is eager to reconstruct the self-delusional vision of his love. At the blacksmith’s house, for example, Florens feels both seen and loved: “here I am not the one to throw out...No one screams at the sight of me. With you my body is pleasure is safe is belonging. I can never not have you have me”(161). Florens’ feelings of belonging are, however, disrupted by the blacksmith’s newly adopted son who strikes in Florens’ a sense of fear and jealousy. Heralded in part by those fears, Florens dreams that she has no reflection: “I make me go nearer, lean over, clutching the grass for balance. Grass that is glossy, long and wet. Right away I take fright when I see my face is not there. Where my face should be is nothing. I put a finger in and watch the water circle. I put my mouth close enough to drink or kiss but I am not even a shadow there. Where is it hiding? Why is it?” (162). Much has been written about this particular scene in *A Mercy* and scholars have interpreted it many different ways. For Wardi, Florens clutches “the grass for balance” because she longs for a sense

of home and belonging. As Wardi argues, however, Florens is “destabilized by her nonappearance” because she “cannot be at home in seventeenth century America” (26). “While Florens may inhabit the colonies,” says Wardi, “she is haunted by her erasure, not even casting a shadow on the terrain” (26). Wardi concludes that Florens’s dream “reinforces her perpetual state of displacement, foreshadowing her expulsion from the blacksmith’s home” (26). Perhaps the simplest interpretation is that the absence of her reflection symbolizes her “lack of self and identity” (Vega-Gonzalez 126). While both these scholars offer salient analyses, Florens’ nightmare of erasure in the surface of the water seems also to speak to the ways in which she has internalized her repeated failure to be recognized and seen through the eyes of others. Morrison suggests here that looking into the mirror for self-affirmation is no better than looking into the eyes of others.

Florens’ internalized invisibility makes it difficult for Florens to recognize and distinguish herself from Malik’s doll: “His fingers cling to the doll. I think that must be where his power is. I take it away and place it on a shelf too high for him to reach...The doll is not on the shelf. It is abandon in a corner like a precious child no person wants. Or no. Maybe the doll is sitting there hiding. Hiding from me. Afraid” (164). As in the dream, Florens fails to recognize herself and, as Gallego-Duran notes, Florens essentially *becomes* Malik’s doll (111). At first, Florens sees the self that was abandoned by her mother, but then she sees the doll as the reflection that previously hid from her in her nightmare (“Why is it hiding?”). This psychological break with reality causes Florens to lose her temper with Malik, who gets severely injured at her hand just as the blacksmith returns from curing Rebekka. Furious, the blacksmith tells Florens to leave “because you are a slave...you have become one...Your head is empty and your body is wild...Own yourself, woman, and leave us be” (166). In this dialogue between Florens and the

blacksmith, Florens is forced, for the first time, to face a definition of her that does not include him. Instead, the blacksmith defines her as a “slave,” “wild,” and “empty” (166). Florens, however, resolves to never again “[live] the dying inside. No not again. Not ever. Feathers lifting. I unfold. The claws scratch and scratch until the hammer is in my hand” (167). In this significant shift in the narrative, Florens essentially rejects the version of herself defined by the blacksmith, whom he hates and rebukes. Since Florens no longer relies upon the mirror of his eyes or the reflective surface of the water, Morrison suggests that she’s ready to begin her project of self-making. Here, Florens figuratively unfolds her wings and grasps the hammer, claiming both her freedom and agency.

Florens immortalizes her newfound agency by carving it into the walls of a room in Vaark’s gratuitously built mansion: “There is no more room in this room. These words cover the floor...I am holding light in one hand and carving letter with the other. My arms ache but I have need to tell you this...Maybe one day you will [learn to read], if so, come to this farm again...and come inside this talking room in daylight” (188). According to Wardi, Florens’ act of inscription “can be read as an awareness of the power of dominant imperial discourse to shape reality, and she maps her own narrative onto the piece of power. Realizing that she has no legitimate claim to place, she not only inserts herself onto the home by occupying it but she marks it has her own. She writes herself and her belonging into being” (34). By inscribing her story on the wall, Florens not only claims a home, but she also establishes her black female subjectivity through the most purely self-referential act of autobiography. The words on the wall reflect the self better than the bluest of eyes, better than any mirror or body of water or imaginary twin. Long since analyzed as a space and act of liberation, particularly for women and people of color, autobiography gives “voice and words to personal history and maps the intersection of

personal and public spheres of meaning”(Smith and Watson 28). In her final act of self-definition, Florens’ refuses to claim a single identity: “See? You are correct. A minha mae too. I am become wilderness but I am also Florens. In full. Unforgiven. Unforgiving. No ruth, my love. None. Here me? Slave. Free. I last” (189). In this evocative and subversive proclamation, Florens embraces her multitudes. In doing so, she embraces her complexity as a black female subject no longer shaped and fashioned by some poor facsimile of herself in another’s eyes.

Ultimately Florens’ journey to find the blacksmith ends up as a journey to find herself. Admittedly, by the end of the novel, Rebekka remains trapped not only in the tableau of the silver framed mirror, but also in the single identity of herself as Jacob Vaark's wife. Ironically, despite Rebekka’s zealotry, it is Sorrow, Florens, and Lina who successfully “make a way out of no way.” Like Lina, both Sorrow and Florens learn that mirrors, much like many of the eyes in the novel, cannot see, cannot recognize the reality of their revolutionary inner selves, only the object of their bodies. And whether or not Florens understands her mother’s motivations by the end of the novel, her words echo the themes and issues at play throughout *A Mercy*. Minha Mae gave Florens away, “because I saw the tall man *see you as a human child*, not pieces of either. I knelt before him. Hoping for a miracle. He said yes” (195; emphasis mine). Thus “the mercy” is, in the end, human recognition—the mercy of sight and seeing, which was the only hope for black female subjectivity and agency in an 18th century America that rendered black women invisible.

Chapter 3

Three Ways of Looking at a Whore: Mirrors, Eyes and Misrecognition in Gloria Naylor's *Bailey's Café*

Much has been written about the biblical underpinnings of Gloria Naylor's *Bailey's Café*, and Naylor herself has indicated that the novel grew, at least in part, from an attempt to re-imagine the stories of all the major women in the Bible¹. In a 2005 interview, scholar Tomeiko Ashford asks, "Why juxtapose the stories of fractured women with those Biblical stories unless you see those Biblical women as being fractured themselves?" (83). Naylor's response not only helps ground the novel thematically, but also provides an important framework for this particular discussion of female subjectivity, identity and self-definition. "No," counters Naylor, "I saw them as being *silent*, not fractured. For the most part the women in the Bible don't have a whole lot to say [...] They never speak out for themselves or for their needs. They're always seen through the mechanisms of either God or through the mechanisms of man" (83; my emphasis). In *Bailey's Café*, the most threatening "mechanisms of man" are his eyes—his gaze—and Naylor illustrates the ways in which women have been trapped indefinitely in the prism of that gaze, noticed and used, but never truly heard or *seen*—never truly recognized as subjects, as self, as human. This dilemma of recognition is, of course, complicated further for the black women in *Bailey's Café* who must struggle against not just the "mechanisms of man," but also the mechanisms of racism and white supremacy that pervade American history and society. It is important to note, then, that at the center of Naylor's Biblical conceit is Bailey's Café itself, which many scholars observe signifies a kind of limbo at "the edge of the world" (Naylor 28). Indeed, Bailey's Café is, in many ways, the liminal space between subject and object, the self and the un-self.

In her retelling of these Biblical women's stories, Naylor uses motifs and tropes that underscore the struggle for black female self-definition and self-creation. Naylor's use of these tropes, while nuanced, nevertheless represents a key point of convergence between herself and Toni Morrison. Like Morrison, Naylor emphasizes these themes using the trope of the mirror to shed light on the gaze motif and the twin dilemmas of invisibility and recognition. By tracing the reoccurring instance of eyes that notice but do not recognize or see in *Bailey's Café*, we gain insight into the ways in which Naylor's fifth novel adds to the intertextual dialogue on black female subjectivity begun by Morrison in the early 1970s with *The Bluest Eye*.

Implicit in that dialogue for both writers is also the topic of female sexuality. As Naylor explains, "I used Judeo-Christian women in the Bible because I wanted to also address [...] female sexuality. And if we look at the whore/Madonna matrix that informs our mind when we think of women—they're either good or bad. The worst thing a woman wanted to be called is a whore" (Ashford 83). In the novel, Naylor lays the foundation for her discussion of the black female body and the annihilating gaze of the Other in the opening pages, as Bailey reflects back on his early relationship with Nadine: "But Nadine was still leaning against the boardwalk railing—on her third cherry ice—patiently waiting for me to answer. Like I was the dimwit. —I'm more than my body, she finally said" (18). Remembering these words, Bailey concludes, "Sure, she taught me a lesson, and a whole different way of looking at her—and women"(19). Nadine's words are particularly salient because they speak to the ways in which all the women in the novel are reduced, sometimes irrevocably, to their bodies. Ultimately then, Naylor calls not only for men to learn (as Bailey does) "a whole different way of looking at women" but also, and perhaps more importantly, for women to learn a different way of looking at themselves—that is, not through the objectifying tableau of the mirror or through the eyes of others, but as a subject

and a self that transcends the body and claims an identity beyond “whore,” “Nigger,” “dyke,” “Jezebel.”

The novel’s first vignette establishes the blue note that smolders and spreads throughout each individual narrative, and sets the tempo of the novel as a whole. Like many of the women in the novel, Sadie has to fight to be seen. As the unwanted offspring of a deadbeat daddy and an alcoholic mama, Sadie’s struggles for identity begin very early in her childhood: “Sadie heard it so much from her mama that she thought it was her name when she was little: The One the Coat Hanger Missed. Not that the woman ever spoke to her, or hardly ever looked at her, unless she was drinking—and then only to curse her for the daddy’s face she wore” (41). Naylor’s emphasis here on naming and misnaming, on seeing and unseeing, all point to the larger problems of invisibility and misrecognition that preclude, or at least trouble, each woman’s ability to construct a self. As a young girl, Sadie hears her mother call her “The One the Coat Hanger Missed” so often that she has to ask her mother, at four years old, “Mama, do I have a name?” (42). For the first four years of her life, then, she is not just nameless, but erased over and over again as she hears the moniker that is a reminder of her near annihilation. In the rare moments when Sadie’s mother does look at her, she doesn’t see her daughter, she doesn’t see Sadie; she sees only “the daddy’s face she wore” (41). This instance of misrecognition is particularly striking because this gaze is neither white nor male. In this way, Sadie’s mother calls to mind Pauline from Morrison’s *The Bluest Eye* who never sees Pecola except to castigate her for spilling the berry cobbler. Like the black community in *The Bluest Eye*, then, Sadie’s parents are very much complicit in, if not wholly responsible for, Sadie’s inability to construct an identity.

As is often the case in works by both Morrison and Naylor where the mirror trope figures heavily, images of the face become significant since the face is commonly associated with both

identity and recognition. As Sadie gets older, her relationship and identification with her mama “started to get confusing, because then she could compare her bruises to the unmarked face of the blacksmith’s daughter...there was a difference”(43). So while the mirror can reflect the bruises inflicted by her mother, it still can’t show Sadie her mother’s cruelty. In fact, seeing her bruises in the mirror only shows Sadie that the “difference had to be her fault. So she became very good” (43). After Sadie misrecognizes herself in the mirror, she compensates by donning the figurative mask of “very very good”—a mask she wears in the hopes that her mother might one day recognize her and love her (44). This mask puts her in “a world of May I, Please, and Thank You; speaking quietly, walking softly” (43). Sadie believes that she essentially has to disappear to be seen—that is, to be loved—by her mother, and throughout the vignette, Naylor continually emphasizes Sadie’s attempts to quiet herself. Indeed, it is Sadie’s “stately and quiet” demeanor that leads men to misrecognize her 13 year-old body for a 20 year-old body after she obediently begins prostituting herself when her mother demands that she “kick in too” (44).

Sadie agrees to “kick in,” then, because she believes that she’ll be able to gain her mother’s love and recognition by mirroring her mother and prostituting herself. In pursuit of being seen by her mother, Sadie dreams of a life in which she sells her body endlessly and tirelessly with the sole intention of buying her mother flowers and an elegant lunch: “One by one she took them, all day and all night, never resting, one by one. Two by two. Three by three. And she left [the brothel] able to stop at the flower shop for a bunch of orchids [and] the fishmonger’s for oysters”(46). In this grotesque, distorted version of the American dream, Sadie becomes almost machine-like in her ability to take johns by the twos and threes. The irony here, of course, is that Sadie believes she must dehumanize and debase herself in order to be seen:

And she would say, Mama, I did so well there. The things that used to make me gag, I tried real hard and didn't gag this time. I made them think I like it. I even took it in the behind, Mama. And I didn't feel dirty with any of it, really I didn't. And Mama would take one of the orchids and pin it on her collar and say, I knew you could to it. I'm so proud of you. You're a good girl, Sadie. (46)

Sadie's ability to "make them think [she] like[s] it" illustrates yet another instance of masking and misrecognition. The fact that Sadie didn't allow herself to "feel dirty with any of it" suggests that Sadie's relentless self-debasement manifests as a disassociation of self from body, which is only real to her in her mother's loving, proud gaze. It is interesting to note that "Sadie" is a common variation of the name "Sarah" from the bible, meaning "princess." By juxtaposing figures of the princess and the prostitute in one adolescent body, Naylor doesn't so much blur the line between innocence and sin, clean and "dirty," as emphasize Sadie's dual identities.

The psychological effects of these dueling identities become apparent as Sadie gets older. After her mother dies, Sadie relocates her desire for love and recognition to a man named Daniel who delivers the wood to the whore house where Sadie works as a housekeeper. For years, Sadie struggles for his attention, but Daniel "never seem[ed] curious about why she was always out there" waiting for his wagon (49). He avoided her, in part, because he thought, "that gal has strange eyes"(49). Once Sadie finally finds the courage to "look him full in the face" she drops her face "which relived him because he'd never liked her eyes. He took in the rest of her, though"(50). Here, Daniel's sexualized gaze figuratively blinds Sadie and reduces her to her body. It is interesting to note that Naylor places striking emphasis on Sadie's eyes, which Daniel continues to mistrust even after she moves in with him: "His drinking also let Sadie know what he thought of her. And she found out it wasn't very much. *He mistrusted her eyes.* There

was something, something, just hanging on the edge of them he couldn't quite put his finger on" (53; emphasis added). Naylor makes it clear, then, that Sadie's eyes are significant but we don't learn exactly how and why until she meets Iceman Jones in Bailey's Café:

He stooped to pick [the teaspoon] up for her, and as she reached for it with her quivering hand, he looked her full in the face. He met the eyes of a four year-old dreaming to survive. She gave him a soft Thank you... Jones couldn't imagine, didn't *want* to imagine, the type of life it must have taken to freeze that look in a grown woman's eyes. (70)

Thus, Sadie's eyes become mirrors, reflecting a past and a self shaped by trauma, abuse and lovelessness. The competing princess/prostitute identities ultimately manifest as a split and silenced self. Sadie's eyes, perched almost grotesquely in the face of a grown woman, hold a four year-old's longings for love and recognition. Because they reflect the ways in which society has silenced and rendered Sadie invisible, they come to signify an uncomfortable mirror for all who dare to look into them and see their own complicity in that travesty.

Like Sadie, Esther also has eyes that frighten and rebuke. Both her gaze and the male gaze figure heavily in "Sweet Esther," the shortest vignette in *Bailey's Café*. Betrayed by the only man she ever trusted, Esther tells the haunting story of what transpires after her older brother essentially sells her to his boss as a sex slave in exchange for a higher wage and benefits at work. Throughout the vignette, Naylor illustrates Esther's silencing with this haunting refrain: "*We won't speak about this, Esther*" (95). Spoken by Esther's abuser, this phrase punctuates Esther's first person account of her abuse, reminding the reader again and again of Esther's physical silencing as a 12 year-old sex slave by *textually* silencing her for those brief intervals. Such silence reflects her "preference for invisibility, self-annihilation, and erasure during and

due to her ‘unspeakable’ captivity to a man her brother claimed was her husband” (Bender and Hoefel 188). Naylor establishes this invisibility in the beginning of the narrative when Esther explains that she likes “the white roses because they show up in the dark. I don’t. The black gal. Monkey face. Tar. Coal. Ugly. Soot. Unspeakable. Pitch. Coal. Ugly. Soot. Unspeakable” (95). By equating her blackness with images of darkness, and ugliness, Esther illustrates that, even before her captivity, she has internalized western notions of beauty. She “rejoice[s] that it is dark,” then, not because she doesn’t want to be seen, but because she doesn’t believe she *should* be seen. In other words, Esther doesn’t merely blend into the dark, she ceases to exist entirely. Esther’s equation of beauty with *being* illustrates her distorted ontology and highlights her inability to construct a self. Like Sadie, Esther adopts a “princess” identity that contrasts sharply with the “ugly...black gal” that she feels is the essence of her being.

When Esther first moves in with her unnamed captor, for example, he gives her a few nights of luxury in her own room with a mattress that is so comfortable that she must create an identity that would deserve a mattress “so deep and soft”: “I can pretend I am a princess. Only princesses would have a bed like this. Deep pink and trimmed with lace. The black gals. The monkey faces. They can only sleep on the old smelly mattress the fat wife throws away” (96). Here, the goose down mattress belies what she’s come to expect her “black gal” body deserves. The idea that a black girl could also be a princess is unimaginable to Esther, so she has to disassociate herself from her blackness in order to not be “afraid of [sleeping] in such a room alone” (96). It is important to note that Esther can only keep up this princess fantasy by staying out of her captor’s gaze:

I am so glad he does not look at me, or he would not give me a bed like this. The pitcher and basin would not be china with tiny pink roses; the mirror would not be

that big. The mirror would not show my face. I lie there the first night and pray to God very hard that he will never look at me. (96)

There's a sense here that Esther simply believes that her ugliness is only a matter of revelation—that if her “husband” sees her, he will see the “black gal” rather than the “princess” and force her to leave the room. But by invoking the mirror—drawing attention to it as a marker of loss, Naylor suggests something far more complicated. The idea that “the mirror would not show [Esther's] face” if her abuser looked at her, emphasizes the ironic relationship between seeing one's self and being seen by an(other). Why wouldn't Esther be able to see her face in the mirror after being caught in her captor's gaze? Naylor ultimately suggests that rather than reflecting back the reality of Esther's existence, the mirror would only be able to reflect the absence that her ugliness and blackness represent to her and to the male gaze. In this way, Naylor not only draws a connection between the mirror and the gaze of the other, but she also intimates why mirrors represent a contested space in *Bailey's Café* and throughout her literary canon.

By the time Esther arrives at Eve's, she has endured so many traumas and lived in so much darkness that Eve doesn't have to ask before she sees both trauma and darkness in her eyes and offers her the basement room with light bulbs removed. “What they'll need from you,” Eve tells her, “they'll need in the dark if they know it or not...Even that type could not bring themselves to return if they saw your eyes. You have the most honest face of any woman I know, sweet Esther...So they don't see my face. And I never see theirs. But I do like the way the white roses show up in the dark. I can see them clearly, very clearly, as they wither and die...Men must only visit in the dark. And they must bring me the white roses” (99). For a woman who lives in the dark, then, the white roses represent her only touchstone to reality. In many ways, Esther finds a way to make a home in the dark, but as Naylor carefully emphasizes, Esther can never

create a self there, only a fractured shadow of a self. The fact that she only comes if she's called "little sister" seems to suggest that despite her hatred and rage toward her older brother, she can never truly escape the version of her self reflected in his eyes (99).

Throughout *Bailey's Café*, then, Naylor illustrates the ways in which eyes function as mirrors that interrupt and corrupt the possibility for self-creation by *refracting* rather than *reflecting* the female body. In other words, the mirror, whether it is a literal mirror or an eye, can only distort and deconstruct the self. Nowhere are the ramifications of the mirror trope more apparent than in Mary's vignette². In "Mary (Take One)," Mary, known affectionately as "Peaches," struggles to escape the beauty that makes her susceptible to the male gaze, but also, and perhaps more importantly, to her own reflection. As the seventh child of an over protective and smothering father, Mary struggles to negotiate this vision of herself as "Daddy's beautiful baby" with her own growing awareness of her extraordinary beauty and the attention she attracts from men, both wanted and unwanted (102). In the beginning of the vignette, Mary intimates that her father's obsessive love and constant over-protection ultimately back fires: "But he shouldn't have worried about the boys. He should have worried about the mirrors. I had a bedroom full of them" (103). It is clear early on why Mary's mirrors torment her. As she explains, adult men, including her father's friends and the choirmaster, began sexually molesting her before she was ten years old. As Mary begins to internalize this physical abuse, her reflection in her mirrors grows increasingly menacing: "Everywhere I turned, I could see her. But what was she doing in my room? She was a whore and I was Daddy's baby"(104). Convinced she's to blame, then, Mary smashes "the swan-shaped mirror" and asks her reflection, "What have you promised them?" Her reflection responds "You. You. You" (104). Thus, Mary emphasizes her fractured self by drawing a distinction between the "I" of her body and the "You" and "She" of her

reflection. Similar to the Sadie and Esther vignettes, Naylor illustrates Mary's split identity through the "whore"/"Daddy's baby" dichotomy.

This dichotomy signifies the "disparity between [Mary's] external and internal images" (Wood 389). In other words, the visual image of her beauty—what can be seen in the mirror and through men's eyes is her sexualized female body, a body that has not yet even reached puberty. The dilemma of recognition for Peaches, then, is that she can no longer see the young girl, the "daddy's baby" in the mirror, which can only show her a body that has been used by men for sexual pleasure:

Every mirror outside had told me what she was: the brown mirrors, hazel mirrors, blue mirrors, oval, round and lashed mirrors of all their eyes when they looked at me. Old eyes, young eyes, it didn't make any difference if the mirrors belong to men: I saw her standing there unclothed with the whispered talk among my brothers, their smudged laughter about the sofa down the block on which they were always welcome... Yes, they all looked at me and knew, just knew, what she was. You have to believe what you see in the mirror don't you? Isn't that what mirrors are for? (104).

Again, Naylor underscores the ways in which the mirror is inextricably connected to the gaze of the other. By conflating men's eyes with mirrors, Naylor suggests that mirrors are just as dangerous to self-creation as the objectifying or annihilating gaze of men. Mary's question at the end of this passage also helps illuminate the twin dangers of the gaze and the mirror. Because mirrors are ostensibly supposed to reflect an accurate image, Mary, and all the women in *Bailey's Café* internalize that two dimensional image as a reflection of self—they have, in other words, relied on the mirror as a means of self-construction or, more accurately, self-division.

As Virginia Fowler argues in “Delta Dust Blues: Bailey’s Café,” that self-division intensifies as Peaches grows older: “her inner self struggled to differentiate itself from her outer beauty and to establish its value through good deeds and high achievements” (131). As Fowler notes, Peaches tries, much like Esther and Sadie, to find a way to be whole by assuming the “good girl,” “Daddy’s Baby,” or “princess” masks. But as Peaches finds, the only thing that “had the power to drive away the demons from the mirror” is freely giving the men who strip Mary naked with their gaze, exactly what she sees reflected in their eyes—a whore (105). In matching her actions with the version of herself she sees in the mirror, Mary feels saved—she feels, if only temporarily, whole. It’s important to note, however, that once Mary is “forced to admit that [she] actually enjoyed being held and touched by some of the men [she] lived with,” she feels an overwhelming sense of shame (107). This shame of her own body and sexuality renders her unable to distinguish her own eyes from the eyes of the men who objectify her: “For as long as I could remember, I could see her in their eyes. But now as I looked in the mirror—thinking of how my own body had betrayed me with him—I could see her in mine”(107). As Fowler argues, “her self-hatred and her *desire* for self-hatred—her belief that her inner self deserves to be hated as well as her outer self—can be arrested only through literal self-mutilation” (132).

Towards the end of the vignette, Mary looks in the mirror and intentionally gouges her cheek with the sharp end of a beer bottle opener. According to Rebecca Wood, Mary’s act of self-mutilation is her “attempt not only to take control of that image, but also to reconcile her appearance with her damaged self-concept”(389). In her article, Wood delineates the nationalist underpinnings of Bailey’s Café by emphasizing the ways in which Naylor’s novel negotiates internalized negative self-image and the “black is beautiful” creed. In doing so, Wood draws an

apt comparison between the Breedlove family in Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* and Mary: "Like the Breedloves, Mary becomes the ugly image that she sees reflected, her maiming epitomizing their externalization of self-image" (389). Whether or not Mary is actually freed or somehow redeemed through her act of self-mutilation is, at best, ambiguous. Although many scholars read Mary's self-slashed face and resulting scar as a liberatory and subversive act,³ Naylor leaves that very much open to interpretation and conjecture. All we're left with at the end of the chapter is Eve's promise to Mary's father that she'll "return her to you whole" (114). The problem, as Mary has already articulated, is that mirrors preclude the possibility of home because she can never fully trust what she sees in the eyes of men or in the mirror: "if, indeed, I had been born into a world without mirrors, there might have been a chance for a real home" (108). As both Morrison and Naylor have illustrated in their respective novels, it is very hard, if not altogether impossible to construct a self without a sense or knowledge of home because the two are so inextricably connected. Even if the scar can be said to empower Mary in a certain grotesque way, it still signifies her reduction of self to wound. At the end of the vignette, for example, Mary "only saw the scar reflected in [Eve's] rimless glasses as she felt each jagged curve, each section of twisted flesh. And it was only the scar that was reflected in her eyes when she murmured, Beautiful" (112). But what kind of beauty could Mary possibly see? As one of the only redemptive figures in the novel, Eve should be able to reflect back that promised image of wholeness. But even in the reflection of Eve's glasses, even in Eve's all-knowing gaze, Mary is little more than a disembodied scar. Rather than misrecognizing her self as ugly or shameful or complicitous, Mary instead misrecognizes the scar as a symbol of beauty instead of an act of mutilation, dismemberment, and self-destruction.

Ultimately, Sadie, Esther and Mary grow up seeing their distorted images in the eyes of men, like mirrors in a funhouse, gazing endlessly from eye to eye, eye to mirror, mirror to eye and ending finally in a series of misrecognitions that leave them lonely, powerless, and destitute. Their only mercy is the mercy of recognition granted by both Bailey and Eve, who lead them into the spaces of their potential redemption. It's important to note that Jesse Bell's lamentation that she was "a woman before she was a girl" applies, in many ways, to each of the women in Bailey's Café. In other words, because they were continually defined by their bodies, they were used and objectified. Repeatedly misrecognized, repeatedly noticed but not seen, each of these women believe in the image they see reflected back at them, whether in eyes or in a literal mirror. And their own eyes always bore their trapped girlhood selves. For Sadie, that self was the "good-girl" with the orchid pinned to her blouse, for Esther, that self was the "princess" and "little sister" who had a whole bed to herself, and for Mary, that self is "Peaches," "daddy's baby" who goes to church and sings in the choir. Each woman tries to use this mask of innocence to belie what the mirror and male gaze tell them, but fail over and over and over again. That is, until they get to Eve's or Bailey's Café, where they can give voice and language to their own individual blues. While every vignette ends somewhat ambiguously, the birth of George at the end of the novel symbolizes hope for the future. Naylor suggests, then, that the blues, much like Florens autobiography carved on the walls of the mansion room, is a self-referential act that can reflect back a truer, more complex self than a mirror or the eyes of others ever can.

¹ Ashford, Tomeiko. "Gloria Naylor on Black Spirituality: An Interview." *MELUS*, 30.4. (2005) Published by Oxford University Press, pg. 73-87

² In "Delta Dust Blues: Bailey's Café," Virginia Fowler offers interesting insight into why Naylor associates Mary's character so closely with mirrors. Fowler interprets Naylor's Mary as an "extended critique of the biblical Mary Magdalene" and points to a painting by Georges de la Tour as a possible influence for Naylor's portrayal of Mary. The painting "depicts Mary Magdalene at the turning point of her life, looking at herself in a mirror" (Fowler 130).

³ See, for example, Carol Bender and Roseanne Hoefel's article "Towards a Literacy of Empathy," where they argue, somewhat problematically, that Mary's scar is the "blueprint for freedom in her self-imposed scarification ritual" (188). See also Maxine Montgomery's essay "Rewriting the Virgin-Whore Dichotomy": A Tale of Two Marys." In it, she argues that Mary's act of self-mutilation "signals [her] rejection of the image patriarchal society ascribes and her willingness to embrace the redemptive circle of female sisters at Eve's place" (68).

Chapter 4

“Living Mirrors” and Written Mirrors: Home, Autobiography and the Mirror Trope in Gloria Naylor’s *Linden Hills* and *Mama Day*

In her 1982 Nobel Prize speech, Toni Morrison says that art and language help us to understand “what moves at the margin. What it is to have no home...to be set adrift from the one you knew.” For obvious reasons, questions of home abound in artistic and literary productions of the African Diaspora and recur throughout the African American literary canon. In Morrison’s own writing, themes surrounding notions and definitions of home weave in and out of each of her novels, as far back as *The Bluest Eye* and *Tar Baby* and spanning all the way to her latest novel, *Home*. As scholars have noted, Gloria Naylor shares Morrison’s fascination with the concept of home, and in many ways their respective canons represent an intertextual dialogue on the meanings of home and the importance of home spaces to notions of identity, belonging, and ownership in the lives of black women as they struggle through two layers of oppression for self-definition. While the limbo of homelessness figures heavily in *Bailey’s Café*, in *Linden Hills*, Naylor illustrates the paternal and patriarchal underpinnings of houses as symbols of domesticity and, in the case of the Nedeed women, out-right imprisonment. In *Mama Day*, Naylor tells her story through the lens of a maternally reclaimed, but no less troubled, idea of home. In both of these novels, Naylor employs the mirror trope not just to explore issues of history, female subjectivity and self-creation, but also to question the extent to which home can itself function as a mirror of sorts, reflecting back a reliable image of the self and an affirmation of subjectivity for the women who live or used to live in them.

In her essay “Burning Down The Master’s House: *Linden Hills*,” Maxine Montgomery explores the differences between “home” and “house” and discusses the ways in which enclosed

spaces have figured heavily in writing by women as a manifestation of oppression. In *Linden Hills*, asserts Montgomery, “Naylor’s concern is not so much with the public spaces defining a contemporary suburban landscape as with domestic space and its potential as either an extension of white, patriarchal authority or a locus of self-definition” (22). Naylor establishes the racist and patriarchal underpinnings of the Linden Hills suburb by explaining its origins as the brainchild of the very first Luther Nedeed who bought and envisioned the land as a vengeful “blister to the [white] community,” that would one day “fester and pus over” as a formidable symbol of Black power and success (9). Many generations of Nedeed men (all named Luther) work to make this dream a reality, shining and polishing the “ebony jewel” of Linden Hills until it became a place in which every Black family in and around Wayne County wanted to live (9). In the narrative’s present time, Luther, no less tyrannical than his father and grandfathers before him, looks back on all that “his dead fathers had wanted to do with this land and the people who lived on it. These people were to reflect the Nedeeds in a hundred facets and then the Nedeeds could take those splintered *mirrors* and form a mirage of power to torment a world that dared think them stupid—or worse, totally *impotent*” (16; emphasis mine). In the beginning of the novel, then, Naylor uses this metaphor of the mirror to articulate the ways in which Linden Hills stands not merely as a foil to white power, but also as a mirror into which the Nedeed men must vainly gaze to confirm their manhood.

Lingering fears of impotency and powerlessness on the part of the Nedeed men manifests not only in the way they treat the residents of Linden Hills, but more notably in the way they treat their own wives. For it is the Nedeed women who truly “move at the margins” of Linden Hills’ expansive and terrifying history. For much of the novel a woman, known (until the very end) only as Mrs. Luther Nedeed, is trapped in the basement with the dead body of her only

son—imprisoned there by her husband Luther, the present-day patriarch of the Nedeed family. While circumstances surrounding her imprisonment aren't immediately clear, Naylor emphasizes the symbolic significance of her place in the basement and her journey of self-discovery as she finds and decodes artifacts belonging to and created by past Nedeed wives. Throughout the novel, then, Naylor poses an important question: how can women, particularly the wives of the Nedeed men, construct a self in a "home" that has been designed and built to reflect a misogynistic idea of black manhood? The answer lies in these artifacts. Thus the most intriguing sites of reflection in *Linden Hills* aren't eyes or even literal mirrors but rather the sundry documents left behind by past Nedeed women. As self-referential documents, then, the journal entries, cookbooks, and photo albums all testify to the potential for a "proactive subjectivity on the part of the subaltern," reflecting back a self that was both intentionally and subversively created in spite of repression, namelessness, and objectification (Montgomery 21).

In the novel, Mrs. Nedeed's discovery of Luwana Packerville's Bible represents the first major turning point in her life, not just as a prisoner in the basement of her own house, but also as Luther's abused wife. Starving, thirsty, and heartbroken after the death of her son, Mrs. Nedeed seems, until this point, to have resigned herself to death. After she finds Luwana's Bible from 1837, however, Mrs. Nedeed is reawakened, in a sense, by the almost daily diary entries Luwana scrawled on the thin pages of her Bible. Mrs. Nedeed immediately identifies with Luwana after seeing the words "There can be no God" written on the inside cover of the Bible: "Yes, whoever you were, Luwana Packerville, you were right about that. This house couldn't still be standing if there were a God" (93). Realizing that Luwana is the wife of the very first Luther Nedeed, Mrs. Nedeed recognizes the shared pain of being married to a Nedeed man and is

inspired to read further. In one important entry, Luwana articulates the extent of her oppression and compares her writings to a slave diary:

Luther told me today that I have no rights to my son. He owns the child as he owns me. He grew terribly enraged when I ventured a mild protest, and showed me the papers that were signed over to his agent in Tupelo...Foolish creature that I am, I thought my sale to him was only a formality...O Blessed Savior, can it be that I have only exchanged one master for another? Can it be that the innocent scribblings I sought only to hide from a husband's amused contempt are now the diary of a slave? (117)

Just as writers like Harriet Jacobs and Fredrick Douglas wrote slave narratives to testify to and insist upon their own humanity in a country that refused to acknowledge them as human, so, too does Luwana make a space between the pages of her Bible for self-creation and testimony amidst bondage. Luwana's choice to write in her Bible is also significant, for as Mrs. Nedeed observes, "there seemed to be nothing that Luwana Packerville could find to guide her in almost four hundred years of proclamations by these iron men of God"(119). Although Luwana's early entries invoke the "O Blessed Savior," it is important to note that, as Luwana works her way through the pages of Gospels, the diary entries eventually become letters Luwana writes to herself. In responding to these self-addressed letters, Luwana not only establishes her agency and subjectivity but also physically inscribes her own reflection into a text dominated by men and misogyny. Ultimately, after reading Luwana Packerville's diary entries, Mrs. Nedeed "now had the key to [her] buried memories. Using these ancient records as signposts, the woman had found at least one place that could offer an anchor of validity to the inner flow of her life" (118). The Bible, then, functions not just as a self-affirming mirror² for Luwana, but also as a mirror into

which Mrs. Nedeed can gaze and recognize herself through the tragedy and crisis of identity and selfhood that she shares with Luwana.

Next, Evelyn Creton Nedeed's cookbooks serve a similarly subversive and autobiographical purpose. In "Reconstructing History in *Linden Hills*," Teresa Goddu writes, "not only does Evelyn write her own personalized versions next to the codified recipes in *The Joy of Cooking*... Evelyn also rewrites these same recipes with a signifying difference—now adding shameweed and pubic hair. Beneath her meticulous writing, then lies a subversive message" (224). Just as Luwana inscribes herself into her Bible, so too does Evelyn revise her cookbooks to reflect back a self that is uniquely her. In one such recipe for face cream, Mrs. Nedeed sees ingredients such as henna and umber: "Inside she threw her head back toward the ceiling and howled... for all those nights she went to sleep, her face coated with bleaching cream while she dreamed of being Evelyn Creton in the same canopied bed that Evelyn Creton dreamed of being her" (150). Mrs. Nedeed's past desire to lighten her skin with cream mirrors Evelyn's desire to darken her skin with henna and umber. In a sense, then, Evelyn and Mrs. Nedeed are negative reflections of one another, and again, Mrs. Nedeed sees *herself* in a text written by her grandmother-in-law. It is also important to note that it is through these cookbooks that Mrs. Nedeed constructs an image of "the real Evelyn Creton" walking to and from the grocery store pulling "her veil tightly around her face... careful to conceal every inch of exposed flesh as she heads for one of those dingy back rooms filled with incense and evil-smelling oils" (188). As self-referential works, then, both Luwana's Bible and Evelyn's cookbooks serve to reflect their unique and complex selves, but they also remove the masks or "veils" that they had to wear to be a Nedeed wife. As Mrs. Nedeed reads through the Bible and the cookbook she experiences a growing awareness not just of her namelessness but also of the fact that her own identity as Mrs.

Nedeed is itself a mask. What was once silent laughter at her uncanny similarities with Evelyn and Luwana becomes anger and disavowal. As Mrs. Nedeed's fury grows more and more overwhelming, she begins tearing away any trace of Luwana or Evelyn, calling them "Goddamed insane—all of them" (204).

Mrs. Nedeed ends her tirade when she finds the photo album of the last mother-in-law, Priscilla McGuire. As the album falls open, "she found her frustration met by a pair of soft, compassionate eyes," and begins perusing the album with the same meticulousness with which she read Luwana's Bible and Evelyn's cookbook (205). In these eyes, she again "see the reflection of her own being: a modern, independent woman imprisoned in marriage" (Goddu 225). Beginning with Priscilla's marriage to Luther, the album is composed of yearly portraits of Priscilla, Luther, and their son. These photographs disturb Mrs. Nedeed because of the way young Luther's shadow subsumes more and more of Priscilla as he gets older and taller: "She was no longer recording the growth of a child; the only thing growing in these pictures was her absence" (209). By the final photograph, Priscilla is faceless. Where Priscilla's face is supposed to be, however, she has scrawled the word "me." By inscribing the word "me" on her own face, Priscilla McGuire reclaims her agency and affirms a self despite her pictorial erasure. In other words, Priscilla has escaped her reflection in the camera lens, where, for years, she was "caught permanently...between two grown men" (209). Seeing herself reflected in Priscilla's faceless "me," compels Mrs. Nedeed to

touch her own face...She brought her fingers back again and again with a new shape and form to place in the air before her...she now closed her eyes and used both hands, trying to form a mirror between her fingers, the darkness, and memory. What formed in her mind might be it but she had to be sure. (268)

After she sees her reflection in a shallow pot of water, she remembers her name for the first time: “Her name was Willa Prescott Nedeed” (277). As Goddu argues, “only by recovering and identifying with her past can Willa reconstruct the fragments of her own face and claim a future for herself” (223). For Willa, this means realizing that “upstairs, she had left an identity that was rightfully hers, that she had worked hard to achieve” (280). Ultimately, Willa comes to a powerful conclusion: “she was sitting there now, filthy, cold, and hungry, because she, Willa Prescott Nedeed, had walked down twelve concrete steps. And since that was the truth—the pure irreducible truth—whenever she was good and ready, she could walk back up” (280). Even though the tragedy of a burning death is all that awaits her upstairs, her ascension is act of self-assertion. In walking up the stairs, Willa defines herself as a woman with agency, unafraid, and unwilling to disappear between the pages of history only for history to repeat itself with the next Nedeed wife. Naylor makes it clear that what unites all of these women is that they’ve “[sold] the mirror in [their] soul,” as Willie’s grandmother would say, in order to become the wife of a Nedeed. Their deaths and disappearances notwithstanding, Luwana, Evelyn, and Priscilla each reclaim that mirror through the subversive act of autobiography. As these autobiographies become metonyms for each of the women in Willa’s maternal past, Willa is gradually awakened to herself by looking into their eyes. Seeing in them a reflection of herself as a self with a shared history and a shared trauma, Willa is able to restore the shattered mirror in her soul and “know peace” for the first time in her life as Willa Prescott Nedeed (268). Ultimately, because the Nedeed mansion is not a “home” per se, but merely a reflection of “a masculinist order, it cannot be reconfigured; instead, the master’s house must be dismantled” (Montgomery 36). So, while Willa and all the other Nedeed women burn along with the house at the end of the novel, they

have each had a hand in breaking a cycle of power and abuse, no longer moving at the margins of history, but writing their own.

Much like the women in *Linden Hills*, the women in *Mama Day* also seem to be searching for peace and coping with history. In particular, Cocoa struggles to find peace as she negotiates between her professional adult life in the city and her southern roots in Willow Springs. Although Cocoa lives in New York City, she travels home at least once every year to visit her grandmother and great aunt, Mama Day. In the novel, the city and the country represent not just different terrains but also, and more importantly, different identities for Cocoa, whose given name is actually “Ophelia.” Naming is an important, if subtle, theme that Naylor uses in *Mama Day* to map Cocoa’s changing sense of identity, which goes in and out of focus after she falls in love and marries a native New Yorker named George and brings him home to meet her grandmother and great aunt. But what is “home”? For Cocoa, home is “being around living mirrors with the power to show a woman that she’s still carrying scarred knees, a runny nose, and socks that get walked down into the heels of her shoes” (48). By describing that ancestral presence as “living mirrors,” Naylor suggests that because Abigail and Mama Day can attest to some essential, innocent, pre-adolescent self, they have the power to reflect that back to Cocoa in her adulthood, both confirming and affirming a self anchored to a shared past. Thus, as in *Linden Hills*, Naylor uses the mirror trope in *Mama Day* to explore notions of identity, self, and home.

As markers of identity, names figure heavily in *Mama Day*. In the novel, for example, Cocoa has three names: a “proper crib name,” Ophelia, a “pet name,” Cocoa, and a nickname, Baby Girl. Now a grown woman looking for a job in New York City, Cocoa tells George the first time she meets him at a job interview that she “answer[s] to Cocoa”(63). But it’s important to note that George nevertheless continues to call her Ophelia because “it was a lyrical name,

pleasant to say because my tongue had to caress the roof of my mouth to get it out” (63).

George’s initial reluctance to use the name Cocoa answers to foreshadows his role in her own identity crisis later in the novel. As the relationship between George and Cocoa gradually blossoms into romance and eventually marriage, Cocoa’s identity becomes increasingly entwined with George’s and she transforms into Ophelia because, as Virginia Fowler notes, “her love for him entails her willingness to be Ophelia” (117). But Cocoa’s transformation is most noticeable when she visits Willow Springs for the first time since marrying George. One afternoon, Mama Day surprises Cocoa by calling her Ophelia: “...in my entire life you’ve never used that name” (150). Even though Mama Day downplays this name-change, it nonetheless marks a significant turning point in the novel—particularly when we remember that Mama Day is supposed to be a “living mirror” for Cocoa. Not coincidentally, that night Mama Day and Cocoa get into a fight. After Mama Day chastises Cocoa for being “selfish” and going out with bad company, Cocoa furiously sends a vase crashing into her mirror, where a “jagged crack webs out from the corner” (156). As a symbol of Cocoa’s defiance of an ancestral figure, this crack foreshadows Cocoa’s intense psychological battle with her reflection in the same mirror a few years later, when George visits Willow Springs for the first time.

George’s first visit to Willow Springs signifies the first time that Cocoa has had to directly juggle her identities as both Cocoa and Ophelia. Although she seems to try to convince herself that “Ophelia and Cocoa could both live in that house with [George],” she also seems convinced that her “presence together [with George] transformed it into a world where only Ophelia and George belonged” and she cannot help but watch “Ophelia’s husband...through the cracked mirror” (177). Here, Naylor emphasizes the broken mirror’s inability to reflect Cocoa or Baby Girl, or anyone other than George’s wife, Ophelia. Thus, George’s presence, the broken

mirror, and Cocoa's defiance of Mama Day all point to the ways in which Cocoa has stopped relying on the "living mirrors" of her grandmother and great aunt that make Willow Springs home, and has instead turned to physical mirrors that merely confirm her position or identity in relation to George.

Perhaps this is why Cocoa's grandmother isn't surprised when Cocoa begins seeing horrific "hallucinations" of her face in the cracked mirror (273). At first glance, these hallucinations seem to be connected to Cocoa's illness—merely the result of a hex by a jealous, amateur root doctor, Ruby. It seems more likely, however, that Naylor is using the mirror trope to probe issues of identity and how it is shaped by an ancestral past. For example, as Cocoa applies her makeup looking in the mirror, she thinks she sees "flesh gummed on the brush bristles": she "brought the brush back down and the image frowning at me had a gouged cheek with the extra flesh pushed up and dangling under the right ear" (275). The grotesque image that Cocoa sees of her face in the mirror represents a dying or disintegrating Cocoa who cannot reconcile the "baby girl," a symbol of the future of the Day family, with Ophelia Andrews, who has now known true love, but forgotten how to see her reflection in her "living mirrors"—that one true runny-nosed, scarred-self. It's quite significant, then, that when Cocoa asks her grandmother, "Is there anything wrong with my face?" she comforts Cocoa by assuring her that it's "all in [her] mind" (276). It isn't until she concludes once and for all that the "mirror was never to be trusted," that she truly looks into her grandmother's eyes: "Reflected off the clear brown of her irises, I finally saw my face in a mirror that could never lie—the sunken cheeks, the deep black circles under my eyes—flooded with a pity so intense it would have been cheapened by tears" (281, 287). For the first time, Cocoa is able to see her real, gravely serious, illness rather than the hallucinations of blood and gouged cheeks.

If, as Julie Tharp argues, Mama Day and Abigail “embody the historical legacy of the island, a legacy of black female power to survive and thrive in adverse conditions” then it seems necessary that Cocoa must carry-on that legacy, originating with the mythical Sapphira Wade in the 18th century, alone—that is, without George (123). George’s death towards the end of the novel, then, allows Cocoa to discover and rediscover a self indelibly connected to the rich, complex, and powerful history sutured into the air and trees and mud of Willow Springs, freed “from George’s attempts to define and control her” (Fowler 117).

In Toni Morrison’s foundational essay “Rootedness: The Ancestor as Foundation,” she argues, that “if we don’t keep in touch with the ancestor...we are, in fact, lost...When you kill the ancestor you kill yourself” (Ervin 202). For both Willa in *Linden Hills* and Cocoa in *Mama Day* the ancestor is not just a touchstone to the past, but also integral to their projects of self-discovery. Having lost that connection to the ancestor, whether in body or in mind, both Willa and Cocoa struggle for a time on the brink of death. For Willa, the self-referential documents subversively created by her predecessors save her from the invisibility heralded by her basement-hell by allowing her to recognize her self as an agent in their eyes, thus restoring the “mirror in her soul” that gives her the courage to ascend the basement stairs as the woman she is, Willa Prescott Nedeed, and no one else. For Cocoa, returning home and believing in the “living mirrors” who reside there helps her see past her rotting mirror reflection and reclaim or re-create an identity independent of George, now ready to decode her history and assume the formidable legacy of Sapphirra Wade. In a country whose distorted mirrors can only tell Willa and Cocoa what they’re not, the ancestor must show them defiantly who and what they *are*. Ultimately, then, *Mama Day and Linden Hills* reinforce the ancestor, and by extension memory and history, as an important because self-affirming means of reflection, recognition and identity.

Conclusion

In a 2002 interview, Gloria Naylor observes, “we all, I think, live in mirrors in a strange kind of way, don’t we? Because you don’t see your face. I see your face, you see my face, but I can’t see my face unless I look in a mirror...” (Drieling 260). To “live in mirrors,” then, is to live in and through the eyes of others—an idea previously articulated by W.E.B. Du Bois in *The Souls of Black Folk* as “double-consciousness”: “this sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others, of measuring one’s soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his two-ness--an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body” (9). Not coincidentally, black feminist critic Paula Giddings uses the metaphor of the mirror to help illustrate the connection between Du Boisian double consciousness and the dilemma of black subjectivity in American society. In *When and Where I Enter*, Giddings describes postwar America as “a hall of mirrors” for Black Americans who “saw their reflection first from one angle, then from another” (184). As Giddings argues, that reflection is refracted through two layers of oppression, and is thus particularly fraught for black women.

If we understand America as “a hall of mirrors,” then, what can it accurately reflect beyond its own engrained western ideals of beauty, exoticized stereotypes, and misogynistic and racist caricatures? These mirrors exist above bathroom sinks, in pocket books and purses, in foyers, in literature, in paintings and photographs, on posters, and in movies. Like mirrors in a funhouse, different modes of representation and reflection are everywhere and always informing our ideas about the self in relation to others. That the metaphor of the mirror has entered into our

theoretical and cultural critiques of race and gender in American society speaks volumes about the mirror as an enduring though imperfect symbol of self-reflection.

In their respective bodies of work, both Gloria Naylor and Toni Morrison explore the nature of that imperfection particularly as it relates to black women. As we've seen, for the women and girls in their novels, to trust the image in the mirror, whether that be a literal mirror, a different kind of reflective surface, or the white/male gaze, is to be shaped and defined by a society that continually fails to acknowledge or recognize their human worth and complexity. That lack of recognition drives some, like Sula, Pecola, and many of the women in *Bailey's Café*, to psychological ruin and even death. Nevertheless, both Morrison and Naylor subvert the status quo by insisting upon a vision of black womanhood that is complex, powerful, and committed to a liberating mode of self-creation through self-referencing. Crucial to these acts of self-referencing is a sense or knowledge of the past and for this reason, the ancestor also becomes crucial to black female subjectivity and agency in these novels.

Ultimately, these women must finally shatter the American "hall of mirrors" and look elsewhere to survive and to find self-affirming reflections of their humanity and worth in society. For Florens, that means physically inscribing her story on the wall. The women of *Bailey's Café* lay bare their tragedies and break free of the male gaze by voicing their own blues. In *Linden Hills*, Willa finds and redefines herself in and through the subversive personal histories of past Nedeed wives, which gives her the courage to take part in her own subversive act of ascending the basement staircase. And finally, Cocoa relearns what it means to be at home amongst "living mirrors" by seeing in her grandmother's eyes a complete and complex self connected indelibly to the powerful legacy of Sapphira Wade. Thus, the only mirrors worth trusting are the ones, as Willie's grandmother would say, that are *in your soul* or the "living mirrors" who *know your*

soul—a sentiment echoed by Dr. Ysaye Barnwell of Sweet Honey in the Rock: “there were no mirrors in my Nana’s house, no mirrors in my Nana’s house. And the beauty that I saw in everything was in her eyes.” In music, literature, cinema, and in the visual arts, the trope of the mirror endures to reveal insights into the self in relation to its cultural contexts, both social and political. Ultimately, then, when Morrison and Naylor’s female characters look into the mirror and see something ugly or wicked, it is not their own face or body they are seeing. What is instead reflected, time and again, in the tropological mirror is the cruelty of a depraved American culture rooted in racism and more than willing to see and gaze and notice while simultaneously turning a blind eye—refusing to recognize their own ugliness.

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