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Harriet Jacobs and Toni Morrison: A Tradition of Narrative Resistance

by

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“From the spaces of difference into which blacks and other people of color have been written have emerged powerful strategies of resistance and wellsprings of creativity that have shaped every aspect of our shared humanity” – Valerie Smith

Working in different centuries, under extremely disparate circumstances, Harriet Jacobs and Toni Morrison utilize specific narrative strategies to challenge and question institutionalized power which is evidenced through their deliberate representations of experience in their respective texts. As a mediated form, slave narratives are neither completely abolitionist propaganda nor autobiography. Influenced by both the amanuenses and the ex-slave narrator, these negotiated works demonstrate a complex interplay of motivation, purpose and strategy. Critiques of the genre range from the debate over authorial agency to the interplay between the depiction of true events or in documenting experience that further objectifies the subject. Harriet Jacobs's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* is one of those negotiated texts whose articulation of narrative authority and intent are evidenced throughout its chapters. While Jacobs is deliberate in her representation of her experiences as a slave, the pure representation of experience satisfies the requirements dictated by the abolitionists. Jacobs's true authorial agency is expressed in the specific narrative strategies she employs in order to represent her experiences. Jacobs uses rhetorical questioning, an appeal to other social constructs, intentional play between representation and silence, and paradox as narrative strategies deliberately employed not only to challenge the institution of slavery but also to question the racial and gender oppression inherent in the institution. Despite the negotiated form of the slave narrative genre, the employment of these narrative strategies allows her to transform the representation of her experiences as a slave into a space to both subvert and resist power. Nearly a century later, Toni Morrison employs her own set of narrative strategies in her novel *The Bluest Eye*, continuing the tradition of

challenging institutionalized power through narratives. While Morrison continues this aspect of the narrative tradition used by Jacobs, she utilizes a different set of narrative strategies to a similar end. Morrison manipulates syntax, articulates historical silences, alternates points-of-view, and employs an extended metaphor comparing children to flowers that is designed to directly critique hegemonic power. Both authors deliberately employ narrative strategies not only to challenge the institution of slavery or the hegemonic ideal, but also to question the racial and gender oppression systemic to those institutions of power.

The slave narrative genre emerges as a reaction to institutionalized power and as a method through which to resist it. Wielded as a tool for the abolitionist movement by white amanuenses, slave narrative criticism takes up the question of the authorial agency of these texts that arises because of the nebulous relationship an ex-slave narrator has with his/her own narrative. In his critical essay “Black Message/White Envelope: Genre, Authenticity and Authority in the Antebellum Slave Narrative,” John Sekora addresses the authorial distinction between white abolitionist sponsors and black ex-slave authors, more specifically the literary merit of the slave narrative and the extent to which the ex-slave narrators were able to make authorial choices. Sekora notes that “they indicate the institutional conditions under which many of the narratives were composed” (495). He contends that the critique of the institution of slavery is the product of another white institution of power, maintaining that slave narratives, because of the nature of their sponsorship, are “institutionally bound.” Elaborating on his title, he asserts that “white sponsors compel a black author to approve, to authorize white institutional power. The black message will be sealed within a white envelope” (Sekora 502). He outlines how the structure of the genre evolved to meet the needs of the abolitionist movement, and he articulates how the structure and content of an individual slave’s experience was molded to become

representative of a more collective “slave” identity. The role of the white sponsors and amanuenses cannot be denied however. Sekora’s analysis illuminates the possibility for narrative agency within the controlled structure of the genre but does not delve into this in his essay. He asserts that “the stated purpose of the slave narrative is far different from the creation of a self, and the overarching shape of that story is mandated by persons other than the subject” (509). Sekora’s refusal to accept slave narratives as an autobiographical form because of the directing influence of the amanuenses leaves the very real, creative authorial choices made by the ex-slave narrators an avenue of exploration proposed by his essay rather than the subject of analysis. Sekora views slave narratives as representative of the abolitionist cause, which they clearly are, but contends that “personal identities were often absorbed” into the crusade (498). Despite his focus on the structure and the negotiated aspect of these texts, Sekora hints at the direction future criticism might take in addressing the departures these texts take from their mandated form. While not engaging directly in this, he provides a blueprint enabling the future analysis of the rhetorical and literary significance those departure moments contribute to the overall criticism of the genre.

Toni Morrison rejects aspects of this analysis of the slave narrative genre, suggesting that the essence of a slave narrative is derived from personal experience and therefore a deeply personal account that is also representative of a more collective experience. In her chapter “The Site of Memory,” Morrison articulates her view on the slave narratives “One: ‘This is my historical life my singular, special example that is personal, but that also represents the race. Two: ‘I write this text to persuade other people you, the reader, who is probably not black that we are human beings worthy of God’s grace and the immediate abandonment of slavery’”(Morrison 86). The first clause of this demonstrates that the ex-slave narrator does

indeed demonstrate narrative authority in constructing his/her own personal experience. In her own work, Morrison emphasizes the importance of depicting experience citing the influence of slave narrative genres. She actually expresses that her own literary experience derives from the past. She writes, “the authenticity of my presence here [as an author] lies in the fact that a very large part of my own literary heritage is the autobiography. In this country the print origins of black literature (as distinguished from the oral origins) were slave narratives”(Morrison 85). The emphasis on experience, regardless of the motivation for the work or the silences in the narratives that preoccupy Morrison, forces us to consider the documented experience of the individual ex-slave narrator as a true literary form. In her own narrative, Harriet Jacobs echoes this idea. She asks her reader in the Preface to *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, to “be assured this narrative is no fiction. I am aware that some of my adventures may seem incredible; but they are, nevertheless, strictly true...my depictions fall far short from the facts” (Jacobs 1). Jacobs begins her narrative with an assertion of the veracity of her experiences. She lays the foundation for the reader that this will not be a narrative of fiction but of experience.

The slave narrative is truly a creative literary genre but there is no denying that ex-slave narrators were expected to strictly adhere to a specific narrative format. James Olney discusses the formulaic structure of the slave narrative, suggesting that the structure itself in most cases, prohibits the use of memory and/or creativity. Because of the very nature of the purpose of the narrative, the genre has been described as “merely episodic” (Olney 48). However, he does refer to the few narratives that defy the traditional standard. He references *The Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* specifically, outlining how Douglass manages to assert himself as the author of his story and not simply a vessel for the abolitionist cause. Olney writes that the narrative “transcends the slave narrative mode while being at the same time its fullest, most exact

representative....What is being recounted in the narratives is nearly always the realities of the institution of slavery, almost never the intellectual, moral growth of the narrator” (Olney 51).

The suggestion that Douglass defies the formula highlights the space of opportunity suggested by Sekora. While contemporary theorists encourage us to place a greater emphasis on the importance of experience, Sekora and Lindon Barrett warn against a simplistic reading of these texts that view them only as documentation of experience. By applying theory that asks us to contemplate the role experience plays in the construction of these texts we are able to acknowledge the true significance of slave narratives. Yet to limit the creative aspect of many of the slave narrative texts to an autobiographical account is also an injustice.

Lindon Barrett’s essay, “African-American Slave Narratives: Literacy, the Body, Authority,” outlines modes of institutionalized and ideological power in slave narratives. His primary concern is to deconstruct the traditional notions regarding the mind/body split and its relationship to literacy and representations of the body in slave narratives. Barrett identifies the effect this dynamic has in order to debunk traditional Western thought; at the same time, he very clearly articulates the spaces of hegemonic power that are subverted by ex-slave narrators. Considering one of his main objectives is to show the flawed thinking related to the mind/body split, to this point he demonstrates how representations of the body are equally as important as literacy and quite possibly require a more nuanced approach on the part of the narrator to represent. He writes about the contradictions that exist for the ex-slave narrator to at once acknowledge the objectification of their bodies resulting from slavery while trying to also demonstrate their humanity. Echoing this paradox, Barrett also highlights the danger of considering critical engagement only with representations of the body in slave narrative texts rather than engaging with the texts as authentic rhetorical productions. The challenge for these

narrators was that they had to combat the prevailing notion that slaves are the “objects of thought and never the subjects” (Barrett 3). Barrett’s argument illuminates the flawed logic in traditional Western discourse which links literacy and the manifestation of the mind; he also references specific moments from several narratives that subvert the power dynamic within this traditional structure. He refers specifically to Harriet Jacobs’s *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, writing that “the narrator’s achieved will or self-authority bears a direct relation to the disposition of the body” (Barrett 432). Harriet Jacobs subverts the traditional notions of the “mind” and the “body.” She is able to articulate her subjectivity through the employment of a variety of narrative strategies that transform recognizable spaces of white power into spaces of resistance despite her objectified body.

Barrett rejects traditional discourse on the mind/body split by articulating the paradoxical position in which ex-slave narrators found themselves. He states that despite the literacy of individual narrators and subsequent assertion of subjectivity (according to Western discourse) “to accomplish their project as ex-slave narrators, these writers must assuredly make their bodies appear for their readers” (423). He further argues that “their bodies are concomitantly the focus of their new literacy and agency yet emblems of an apparent disqualification from literacy and self- or social agency” (426). The narrators then were forced to navigate this highly nuanced negotiation between articulating experience by representing a view of the body but treading carefully so as not to solidify the objectifying gaze held by society. Barrett asserts that in order to accomplish their goals, “manipulations of the body are, in effect, supplanted by manipulations of language” (427). This argument precisely articulates one of the ways in which Jacobs deploys narrative strategies in order to challenge existing power structures; there are several key moments in her text that support this analysis. However, this “manipulation” expressed by

Barrett does not stop with literacy or the body for Jacobs, rather it extends throughout her narrative. Through the use of narrative strategies, Jacobs manipulates not only language but the framework of her genre as well. She employs rhetorical questions, makes appeals to social constructs beyond race, uses language to create paradoxes designed to challenge institutions, establishes a tension between silence and representation that demonstrates her authorial agency regarding what details of her experiences will be revealed. The deliberate use of these specific narrative strategies in order to represent selected experiences allows her to not only to challenge the dynamics of institutionalized power but also to question the establishment of those margins in the first place.

In her essay "The Evidence of Experience," Joan Scott articulates the problematic nature of both relying on the documentation of experience and using it as a form of critical analysis. She writes, "the evidence of experience, whether conceived through a metaphor of visibility or in any other way that takes meaning as transparent, reproduces rather than contests given ideological systems" (Scott 778). This idea echoes those expressed by Lindon Barrett. Slave narratives, already negotiated texts, complicate this interplay more. Their core purpose was to historically document the inhumanity of slavery and lift the veil hiding its evils. This is done precisely through, as Scott would suggest, the reiteration of those objectifying experiences. The representation of experience "operated within an ideological construction that not only makes individuals the starting point of knowledge, but that also naturalizes categories such as man, woman, black, white, heterosexual, and homosexual by treating them as characteristics of individuals" (Scott 781). This essentializing practice has homogenizing effects, obliterating the individual in the process of constructing a characteristic identity. Literature then can become a deconstructing force. Authors "trying to understand the operations of the identities are ascribed,

resisted, or embraced" are creating works that will challenge existing institutions and perceptions of power. Harriet Jacobs does not simply document her experiences as a slave to satisfy the abolitionist cause. The representation of her experiences as a slave would further solidify those boundaries of identity and lens of objectification. Instead, Jacobs must deliberately employ a set of narrative strategies such as rhetorical questioning, interplay between silence and representation, an appeal to social constructs beyond race, and the use of paradox, in order to represent her experiences as well as to critically engage with her own experiences.

Jacobs's incorporation of rhetorical questioning is designed to question the power dynamics and the rationale behind arbitrarily established boundaries. In one of her anecdotes, Jacobs describes witnessing two young children playing together, both girls, one white, one black. She writes, "how had those years dealt with her sister, the little playmate of her childhood?" This moment highlights Jacobs's critical engagement with the institution. Her question forces the question of why. The difference between the two young girls, illuminated by the scene, is arbitrary. It is a social construction that allows for certain members of society to maintain their power over others. Jacobs articulates this question in another way later in the text. She directly challenges the assumption of inferiority among races that provides the foundation for slavery in the United States. As part of her commentary on liberty versus death for a slave, she mentions some of the hardships slaves endured to avoid more brutalization at the hands of their masters, including uncontested access for the master to slaves' wives and daughters. She asks, "Do you think this proves the black man belongs to an inferior order of beings? What would you be, if you had been born and brought up a slave, with generations of slaves for ancestors?"(68). Jacobs confronts the notion of inferiority based on race and suggests the social rather than biological origins of that perception as well as making the connection that this

perception is a consequence not a cause of slavery. Jacobs's employment of this narrative strategy is a manifestation of Joan Scott's articulation of how important it is to critically engage with experience. These questions come after Jacobs relates either an experience or a memory. The questions provide the critical context for the documented experience and ask how these power dynamics are constructed and enacted upon slaves and society as a whole. Jacobs's line of questioning leads to the conclusion, "there was no justification for difference of treatment" (Jacobs 267).

In addition to posing rhetorical questions that challenge the existence of racial boundaries and their link to the institution of slavery, Jacobs also using another narrative strategy in conveying her experience. She constructs moments in her narrative that highlight the power and structure of social reputation over the actual physical power of slavery. These moments appeal to social constructs beyond race: reputation, motherhood, and morality. The delivery of her experience using this narrative technique engages not only the experience, but also the arrival at these judgments, boundaries and constructions. By creating an appeal beyond race to reputation or other social constructs, Jacobs is able to challenge the very existence of these power dynamics. Early in her narrative, Jacobs describes the auction of her grandmother. The auction-block, typically one of the most degrading, inhuman experiences for a slave, becomes the method of shaming Dr. Flint. Jacobs writes, "when the day of sale came, she took her place among the chattels, and at the first call she sprang upon the auction-block" (Jacobs 21). There is choice implied in the word "sprang." By using this word, Jacobs represents this experience in a way that shows how Aunt Marthy takes control over her own body, which Dr. Flint in all actuality, owns. This scene reveals how Jacobs's grandmother wields a respect built on her reputation that supersedes her position as a slave. The shamed person in this scene is Dr. Flint, a

white male. While Dr. Flint is never reduced to a body in the way that Jacobs's grandmother is objectified, the implication that a white man can be shamed at the very site of the most base, degrading moment for a slave shows Jacobs's strategy of subverting institutional power. Jacobs deliberately constructs this experience to subvert traditional notions of an objectified body and to resist power by appealing to a social construct beyond race and slavery.

Jacobs employs this strategy at other key moments in her narrative. The relation of her experiences as a slave could further solidify the objectifying gaze already applied to African Americans. Instead, Jacobs uses moments of objectification to appeal to a more powerful construct, whether it be gender/sexuality, religion, or morality. Shortly after Jacobs describes her sexual dilemma with Dr. Flint, she appeals to the reader through another social construct with the hope that it extends beyond race and the institution of slavery. She writes, "I feel that the slave woman ought not to be judged by the same standards as others" (Jacobs 86). This appeal directly addresses the physical objectification inherent in the female slave experience, but it does not reduce it to such. Instead, Jacobs attempts to construct an appeal beyond race, to womanly virtue, which consequently gets at the unjust core of slavery and how the women in its grasp are not afforded the same opportunity at virtue as others. Jacobs uses this narrative strategy again when she discusses the preacher coming to the plantations. She quotes the preacher's sermon stating, "your skin is darker than mine; but God judges men by their hearts, not by the color of their skins" (Jacobs 111). This is another example in which Jacobs is able to identify a social construct that is more powerful than slavery and race. In this case, she appeals to religion and a sense of morality. By incorporating this part of the speech into her narrative, Jacobs engages the critical question of why slavery exists and questions how it aligns with Christian morality. This allows for the representation of the experience required by the abolitionist movement, but it also is

evidence demonstrating how this text is a deliberate rhetorical production.

Jacobs's narrative is designed to represent her experience as a slave; her narrative strategies, however, are employed to challenge the power dynamics that allow for the institution in the first place. These narrative strategies are indeed modes of resistance to institutionalized power. One narrative strategy Jacobs relies on is the use of paradox. By juxtaposing spaces of institutional power with a subversion of that power, Jacobs is able to challenge the foundation of those constructions. For example, when Jacobs describes her time spent hiding in order to trick Dr. Flint and ultimately save her children, she writes, "the laws allowed him to be out in the free air, while I, guiltless of crime, was pent up here, as the only means of avoiding the cruelties the laws allowed him to inflict upon me" (Jacobs 183). By highlighting the rule of law in her narration of this experience, Jacobs is challenging the justice of the existing laws. She uses the phrase "laws allowed" twice demonstrating the paradox of how laws, meant to protect the innocent and punish the guilty, are actually working in the opposite way. Blame is cast on the institution of slavery for not only condoning but actually for creating the conditions for such unjust laws. Jacobs highlights injustice through the use of paradox at other moments in her narrative.

Jacobs manages to employ paradox to subvert the power dynamic essential to the institution of slavery itself. She shares memories of her grandmother using the skills she was forced to employ under an institution in which she was considered an object and to which she was subordinate, for her own ends. The skills she performed as a slave were the same that she employed to make money: "each year she laid by a little, which was saved for a fund to purchase her children" (Jacobs 13). This memory is shortly followed by the ironic scene of a slave lending money to her master. After lending the three hundred dollars to her master, Jacobs recounts that

her grandmother was never reimbursed stating “the reader probably knows that no promise or writing given to a slave is legally binding; for, according to Southern laws a slave, being property, can hold no property” (13). She is careful to represent the experience in a way that articulates the work her grandmother put in and how she was taken advantage of by her mistress. By directly addressing the reader, Jacobs intentionally forces the reader to contemplate the fairness in this exchange. The deliberate display of irony in the narration of this experience clearly demonstrates the rhetorical intention inherent in Jacobs’s narrative. She uses paradox to show how the same skills employed in enslavement were utilized to purchase freedom. This same technique forces the reader to recognize an indictment of the institution by establishing the more universal bond of being paid for labor.

In the chapter entitled, “The Loophole of Retreat,” Harriet Jacobs uses irony to describe the physical suffering her body endured while hiding in the garret. She writes, “for weeks I was tormented by hundreds of little red insects, fine as a needle’s point, that pierced through my skin, and produced an intolerable burning” (Jacobs 175). This detailed account of the physical pain inflicted on her body proves to be as Barrett states, “the site of her most graphically recounted bodily distress, so too it proves the site of her most effective manipulation of her adversaries”(434). Jacobs’s choice to select this moment, after she has achieved some level of escape from Dr. Flint and is successfully manipulating him, shows one of the ways in which Jacobs is able to display physical pain enacted on her body while also maintaining her subjectivity. This moment goes a step further than simply a nuanced description. Jacobs is actually able to subvert the traditional power of the objectification of her body by narrating this experience. She juxtaposes a graphic description of the harm inflicted on her body (albeit while she was forced to hide in a cramped garret), with the physical trauma suffered by slaves at the

hands of white masters. She writes, “I was never cruelly over-worked; I was never so beaten and bruised that I could not turn from one side to the other... I was never branded with hot iron, or torn by bloodhounds” (Jacobs 174). The suggestion of course is that others were. Through the use of irony, Jacobs expresses the physical atrocities of slavery without becoming an object of her narrative. The narrative choice to represent these two experiences together and to begin the first with declarative “I” statements speaks to Jacobs’s true authorial voice and her agency over the representation of her experiences. As Sekora’s framework illuminates, this is one of those moments in Jacobs’s narrative that show slave narratives are not merely documents of experience but instead deliberate rhetorical works that employ specific narrative strategies to resist power.

Jacobs’s use of paradox to express her experiences in a way that challenges institutions of power is not limited to experiences of the body. Jacobs uses this strategy again, this time underscoring the power of literacy. She cunningly uses the *New York Herald* as part of her manipulation of Dr. Flint, reading it to ascertain names of New York streets to include in her letter. While hiding in the garret, Jacobs overhears the fruition of her plans as Dr. Flint reads her letter, designed to trick him. Jacobs emphasizes the significance of this paper to both her and slave masters. She encapsulates the paradox inherent to the paper stating, “it was a piece of the *New York Herald* and, for once, the paper that systematically abuses the colored people, was made to render them a service” (Jacobs 194). This moment illustrates a convergence of the power of literacy for opposing purposes. Literacy was once clearly a space of institutional power that because of slavery also acted as a boundary separating the races. In this representation of her experience however, Jacobs highlights the irony evident in this paper. She shows how once she was able to subvert that space of power, she was able to resist the hold of institutionalized

slavery by using it against Dr. Flint.

Jacobs manages to achieve this simultaneous representation of experience and subversion of power in other moments throughout her narrative through the use of paradox. Jacobs deploys this narrative strategy in her exchange with Dr. Flint when he discovers her desire to marry another man. While this exchange could have very quickly devolved into a display of physical power forcefully exerted over Jacobs, it instead is represented as a powerful verbal exchange. Jacobs tells Dr. Flint, “you have no right to do as you like with me” (62). Dr. Flint responds angrily, “Silence! ... Do you think any other master would bear what I have borne from you this morning” (62). The subject of this exchange is a highly physical matter and one of the unique burdens of the female slave and yet the way in which Jacobs chooses to manifest this experience is through a verbal exchange. Jacobs demonstrates the unjust power inherent in slavery by highlighting the absurdity in the conversation. This exchange ends with Dr. Flint suggesting “many masters would have killed you on the spot. How would you like to be sent to jail for your insolence” (62). By reducing the display of power to pure language, Jacobs forces the reader to focus on the content of the exchange. Considering this, the reader must recognize the flawed logic of Dr. Flint and contemplate whose offense should really be punishable by law. The irony exists in not only the verbal exchange between Jacobs and Dr. Flint but also in the critique of the law itself. By highlighting the paradoxical element in the law, Jacobs is able to question the viability of the law’s existence and its function. By highlighting this irony, Jacobs’s narrative challenges existing power structures and actively resists their hold.

The slave narrative tradition asserts the idea that a black body in pain will appeal to the sympathies of a white audience and the acquisition of literacy by an ex-slave will authenticate his/her humanity. Fredric Jameson, in his book *The Hegel Variations*, suggests that the use of

language for individual expression necessitates a universality to language. The “paradox,” as Jameson states, is that in the very act of language becoming a form of individual expression, it must also become universal. Language is a systematic representation that creates a collective reality. This contradiction is what allows the individual to make the internal external. He or she cannot do so without the acknowledgement of others. In other words, recognition by others is the only way in which one can establish individuality. Jameson asserts that in the very act of using language to express individuality, one is appealing to a universal collective since linguistic expression is employed to communicate an internal thought to the external world. Understanding this seeming contradiction is essential to analyzing the narrative strategies employed by Jacobs. In terms of Jacobs’s narrative, this means that she must document her experiences as dictated by the genre and the abolitionist cause. She must also articulate the spaces of institutional power afforded to whites by a system of slavery built along racial boundaries. But it is also that within these spaces of recognized institutional power there exists an opportunity for narrative resistance. Just as she deliberately constructs ironic scenes in order to challenge systems of power, she also intentionally creates interplay between silence and representation of selected experiences. This narrative strategy works not only to challenge systems of institutionalized power, but also seeks to question how these highly racialized and gendered constructs were established at all. Her resistance emerges from the narrative strategies she utilizes to represent her experience in such a way that disrupts recognizable spaces of power.

The contested object/subject relationship in slave narratives becomes the topic of much debate because it is inextricably linked to the traditional elements of the genre’s framework. In her essay, “Splitting the ‘I.’ (Re)reading the Traumatic Narrative of Black Womanhood in the Autobiographies of Harriet Jacobs and Elizabeth Keckley,” Clarence W. Tweedy writes,

“through the very act of writing, Jacobs and Keckley not only survived and mastered traumatic experiences but also worked to redefine their individual identities and collective humanity of black women” (Tweedy 21). This statement demonstrates perfectly the undeniable relationship the black body and literacy have in attempting to construct identity and humanity for the ex-slave narrator and implicitly, the black community. While Tweedy echoes the significance of the relationship between the suffering, objectified black body and literacy, she suggests an authorial purpose to the relationship. She writes that “instead of the black body being simply ritualistically displayed as a victim, they [ex-slave narrators] used traumatic experiences to construct autobiographical sites of resistance” (Tweedy 21). According to Tweedy, the deliberate employment of traumatic experiences allows Jacobs to use her physical and psychological abuse to construct “self-identity from being an objectified slave into a self-made subject” through their narratives (Tweedy 23). While Tweedy’s assertion that Jacobs’s narrative purpose is to create some kind of self-identity through her experiences is undeniable, the suggestion that it is their psychological distancing that allows for this construction does not delve deep enough into the complexities of the slave narrative framework. The slave narrative is a document of the horrors of slavery but it is also a manifestation of selected experiences by the ex-slave narrator to create space for resistance. Tweedy’s analysis also hints at the creation of a collective identity as a result of the genre rather than focusing on the individual experiences documented and the rhetorical negotiations at play in the narrative itself. Jacobs painstakingly describes and deliberately employs narrative strategies in giving an account of her personal experiences, not to establish a collective identity, but to resist and ultimately challenge institutional power and to engage an audience, propelling them to support a cause.

Harriet Jacobs’s *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* is not only a record of experience; it

is also a deliberate rhetorical work designed to resist and question institutional forms of power. Jacobs's narrative resistance lies in the deliberate use of specific narrative strategies evidenced in her representation of selected experiences. One of the major challenges faced by an ex-slave narrator is how to document the objectifying experiences of slavery without perpetuating that oppressive gaze. Representations of the black body are significant in the structure of all slave narratives because it is the site of establishing the subjectivity of the ex-slave narrator as well as the site through which to show the dehumanization and objectification inherent in slavery. Lindon Barrett states that "in giving an account of slavery and 'themselves,' their paramount task is to reproduce the experiences and trials of a 'body'" (Barrett 6). The ex-slave narrator is tasked with presenting himself/herself as both the subject and object of the narrative. The female ex-slave narrator then has the additional burden of directly engaging with her body as the subject and object of the narrative while still trying to appeal to a predominantly white readership. She is the slave (object) and also the ex-slave narrator (subject). She is also a female body owned by a white master (object) and a woman protecting her virtue (subject). While representations of the body were a challenge for all ex-slave narrators, women also had the additional burden of sexual exploitation. Jacobs references this exact point in her narrative writing, "slavery is terrible for men; but it is far more terrible for women. Superadded to the burden common to all, they have wrongs, and sufferings, and mortifications peculiarly their own" (119). One of the goals traditionally associated with slave narratives as stated by Sally Gomaa, is the ex-slave narrator attempting to close the gap between object and subject. Gomaa suggests that ex-slave narrators accomplish this goal by intervening in scenes of the black body in pain "by making their narrators simultaneously sufferers and observers" (Gomaa 372). The idea here being "through the common bond of pain" white society will learn of the humanity intrinsic to all people. While

that analysis supports the narrative purpose as it relates to the abolitionist cause, it hinges on representations of the black body for the enlightenment of a white audience as a cornerstone of the narrative rather than on the deliberate employment of narrative strategies utilized by the author in the text. Jacobs employs a set of specific narrative strategies to challenge such an objectifying gaze emanating from the institution of slavery.

While these examples are acts of narrative resistance they do not all directly confront the issues of the oppressive, racialized and gendered hegemonic gaze. In “Black Matter(s),” an essay by Toni Morrison, she references slave narrative texts as the historical and literary foundation for future African American writing. She expresses her frustration with elements of the genre. She writes, “whatever popularity the slave narratives had and the inspired abolitionists and converted anti-abolitionists, the slaves’ own narrative, while freeing the narrator in many ways, did not destroy the master narrative” (219). Slave narratives did not and perhaps could not go far enough to disrupt the white power structures of the time. Morrison expresses her concern that in slave narratives, “silence was the order of the day. Some silences were broken and some maintained” (219). Jacobs straddles this boundary of breaking and maintaining silence that was often necessitated by the historical context of the time. Even though Jacobs is subverting spaces of white power to resist an oppressive hegemony, she does not directly address a racialized or gendered gaze in most of these examples. However, in other parts of her narrative, she does break the silence.

Jacobs explains her sexual choices as a result of Dr. Flint’s advances. She specifically addresses her unique experience as a female slave and directly addresses the audience in her account. She asks them to understand the complexity of her situation as both a woman and a slave. She is able to convert her personal experience into a demonstration of resistance. Sexuality

is related to the body and just as a slave's body was owned by a slave master, so too was a slave's sexuality and sexual choices. If we consider Foucault's definitions of the word "subject," one was "subject" to the power of another and the other is "subject" as constituted by conscience. In Jacobs's narrative, there is a very clear example of this idea. The institutionalized construction of the subject is Dr. Flint's sexual advances and power over Harriet Jacobs. In the same moment, Jacobs subverts that mode of power out of her self-constituted subject, by making her own sexual choice, which becomes an act of resistance. She explains, "It seems less degrading to give one's self, than to submit to compulsion. There is something akin to freedom in having a lover who has no control over you, except that which he gains by kindness and attachment" (Jacobs 84-5). The indictment of the reader at this moment is no less subtle. She writes that she feels "that a slave woman ought not to be judged by the same standard as others" (Jacobs 86). Her position in contrast to the audience is clear. Her indictment is clear despite its guise of appeasement. As Stephanie Li states in her essay, "Motherhood as Resistance in Harriet Jacobs's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*," "Jacobs reconfigures the experience of womanhood such that the virtues of chastity... are presented as socially constructed privileges available only to a select free white female populace" (Li 17). She directly addresses her position as dictated by an oppressive, white, male power structure and articulates that the institution eliminates her ability to participate with free will and complete agency in society.

Harriet Jacobs's deliberate use of narrative strategies employed to challenge institutional power and question the racial and gendered foundation of that power in order to generate a space for resistance becomes a characteristic of the African American literary tradition that extends beyond the slave narrative genre, transcending the change of the century. The literary format changes, the narrative strategies change, as does the narrative voice with the new century. The

racialized and gendered hegemonic gaze exacts its confining norm through different avenues, but still enacts and perpetuates a constructed ideal. No longer is the racist and sexist margin so clearly demarcated, but institutional power still reflects a racialized and gendered hierarchy.

Although the specific modes of power have changed, specifically those generated from the institution of slavery, in the twentieth century a racialized and gendered gaze still exists. This hegemonic gaze still determines the “ideal,” the marginalized, and the modes through which power operates. But society must seek to recognize these new forms of institutionalized power. Just as ex-slave narrators served an essential role in indicting the audience for their sometimes unconscious, sometimes intentional perpetuation of these power structures, African American authors adopt this role of narrative resistance in the twentieth century. The question becomes not about abolition or amanuenses or about physical enslavement, but about more nebulous forms of institutionalized power. Toni Morrison articulates the crucial role understanding the past plays in our present discourse, asking: Where can we recognize these forms of institutionalized power now? How can we deconstruct them and offer an attempt at resistance?

Unlike Harriet Jacobs who had to qualify her narrative, assuring her readers of the veracity of her experiences as a slave, Morrison has the authorial freedom to create a story that is representative of a possible, and likely truth. Morrison embraces the idea of memory in both content and structure, allowing her narrative to move between and among stories, weaving in and out of memories. In her renowned novel, *The Bluest Eye*, Toni Morrison tells the story of a young, black girl whose only wish is to be loved. In order to be loved, she feels she must be beautiful. Pecola’s story is told from multiple perspectives, each chapter illuminating a new perspective and providing a deeper understanding of the main character. Just as Morrison’s novel intricately binds the present characters to their pasts via memories, so does she suggest the

intricacy with which American society is tied to a looming, unexpressed history of trauma.

In her essay “Revisions, Rememories and Exorcisms: Toni Morrison and the Slave Narrative,” Cynthia Hamilton addresses Morrison’s narrative framework stating that “Morrison uses psychological time rather than real time, and memory rather than lived experience” (437). *The Bluest Eye* at first read might seem the antithesis of what ex-slave narrator’s sought to deliver, but with an expanded definition of experience it truly extends aspects of the slave narrative genre. She documents a representative reality. While the narrative structure and form of a fictional novel differ dramatically from slave narratives, the continuity exists in the content, strategy, and role of the author. Similar to the ex-slave narrators in their genre, Toni Morrison is combating the hegemonic gaze constituted by white men. Through her narrative process, she is able to create a story that at once demonstrates and resists the exacting gaze of institutionalized power.

Power manifests in many forms. In Judith Butler’s analysis of Foucault’s definition of power, she writes, “we are used to thinking of power as what presses on the subject” (Butler 2). This is the kind of traditional power dynamic at work in the slave narrative genre. Butler reminds us of how limited that definition of power really is. She refers to Foucault’s discussion of institutionalized power and “prison” writing, “the prison... acts on the prisoner’s body but it does so by forcing the prisoner to approximate an ideal, a norm of behavior, a model of obedience” (85). She continues, “this is how the prisoner’s individuality is rendered incoherent, totalized, made into the discursive and conceptual possession of the prison” (Butler 85). This form of power does not bind its subjects with chains or limit their freedom with manacles. This is a racialized and gendered gaze, born out of the institution of slavery that has created and interpolated a norm of power, education, success, self-worth and beauty. It enslaves its subjects

subliminally, planting within them a constant need to measure their self-worth against the societal, often unattainable, ideal.

Morrison's novel explores many different ways in which institutionalized power at the highest levels, affects even the smallest individual. Her primary concern in this novel is addressing the way in which a racialized and gendered gaze establishes ideas of beauty and ultimately self-worth. Morrison illuminates this kind of insidious mass production of an ideal in her novel. Abdellatif Khayah offers an analysis in his essay "Representation, Race and the 'Language' of the Ineffable in Toni Morrison's Narrative." He writes that "the cultural values of American consumer industry are totalized to a degree that what we are left with are various ways in which the distortion and denial of the black self are produced" (Khayah 317). Morrison includes specific moments in which the reader can observe the interpellation of this hegemonic ideal. One of the most powerful scenes in *The Bluest Eye* is the doll scene in which Claudia expresses her feelings about receiving the white baby doll. This scene illustrates the total power society has to create and control the "norm" and the "ideal." Claudia questions the gift asking what was I "expected to do with the doll: rock it, fabricate storied situations around it, even sleep with it" (Morrison 20). Claudia rejects this admitting "I had only one desire: to dismember it. To see of what it was made, to discover the dearness, to find the beauty... all the world had agreed that a blue-eyed, yellow-haired, pink-skinned doll was what every girl child treasured" (Morrison 20). This scene shows the way in which an ideal is enacted and repeated until it becomes an unconscious interpellation of a cultural value. Morrison shows us the only two possible outcomes of this gaze for people who cannot approximate this ideal. Claudia's action is rooted in an aggressive rejection; she smashes the white baby doll. Pecola's reaction is much different.

Pecola is obsessed with little Shirley Temple. She is the young, child star, the

embodiment of society's perception of beauty. She also loves the Mary Jane candy which carries an image of a pretty, young, white girl on its wrapper. Pecola loves the Mary Jane candies and eats as many as she can, internalizing this ideal with each piece. Morrison writes, "To Pecola they are simply pretty. She eats the candy, and its sweetness is good. To eat the candy is somehow to eat the eyes; eat Mary Jane. Love Mary Jane. Be Mary Jane" (Morrison 50). Both of these reactions are destructive to notions of self-worth. They create a dynamic in which the individual is constantly "othered," forced to construct an identity and a sense of self as it compares to the ideal. Khayah states that the consciousness becomes "a negating activity, because it is mediated through the mechanisms of supremacist discourse" (Khayah 315). The perilous truth of American society is that "the other" is inextricably linked to race and gender. These power structures, so visible during slavery, become more insidious but continue to oppress those at the boundaries of the perceived ideal.

Where is space to resist? *The Bluest Eye* seems the complete opposite of Harriet Jacobs's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*. Morrison is not concerned with a sequential narrative; her story relies on memory and perception as truth; and the subject of her novel fails to resist the existing power structures. Jacobs uses her narrative self to display modes of resisting institutionalized white, male power. As an author she makes choices that are reflected in the narrative itself. She adopts a mode of resistance, and her narrative exemplifies how traditional spaces of power are transformed. Morrison's novel seems antithetical at first but the resistance lies in Morrison's deliberate construction. Claudia narrates the story of Pecola, who is unable to resist the hegemonic gaze; who is actually consumed by it until she cannot separate herself from the ideal. Pecola does not achieve self-actualization or a sense of self-worth, precisely because she does not resist.

The resistance in *The Bluest Eye* is less obvious than that in the slave narrative genre. It requires work on the part of the reader to internalize Pecola's story and to reflect on how both she as a character and how we as a society have arrived at this moment. Morrison employs a unique set of narrative strategies including the manipulation of syntax, articulation of silences, alternating points-of-view and extended metaphor as critique to deconstruct hegemonic power. Her resistance is embedded into the structure of the novel itself. She begins the novel with the "Dick and Jane" stories, the hegemonic vision of the perfect American family. Morrison manipulates the story, highlighting how the interpellation of the ideal on all aspects of society distorts it. She removes punctuation and spacing to illustrate this distortion, changing "the friend will play with jane they will play a good game play jane play" to "thefriendwillplaywithjanetheywillplayagoodgameplayjaneplay" (Morrison 2). This distortion of conventional English is symbolic of how a projected standard ideal affects individuals. Khayah writes, "For Morrison, narrative is radical. The vitality of prose lies in the ability to suggest rather than to imitate, and to seduce rather than to force" (Khayah 315). Morrison's approach to resistance is to illustrate its opposite; to indict the readership for their complacency in perpetuating the power structure that allows for Pecola's experience. She echoes this linguistic manipulation at the beginning of each chapter in order to continually remind the reader of her narrative resistance to the institution. Her strategic manipulation of standard syntax challenges enforced expectations of an author, but also points out the destructive effect an imposed ideal can have on its subject.

Morrison's concern that we not forget the past is an essential consideration in the construction of her novels. In her critical essays, she refers to the foundations of the African-American literary tradition, offers both acknowledgment of contribution and critique of the

pervasive silences of the genre. She argues that because of the very nature of slave narratives, they emphasize fact and experience. She alludes to the paradoxical predicament of ex-slave narrators who found themselves trying to assert their humanity through illustrating the extreme and inhuman objectification of their bodies. In her critical essay "Only by Experience: Embodiment and the Limitations of Realism in Neo-Slave Narratives," Sheryl Vint offers her analysis of Morrison's position stating that the ex-slave narrators, particularly female narrators, were able to transcend "the cultural limitations projected onto this body"(243). The black, female slave was oppressed by institutionalized power from every angle, restricting the expression of forms of her selfhood. Morrison is concerned with this process because of her strong belief in the lasting ways in which the past informs the present: "the past has been repressed rather than acknowledged and hence continues to have effects" (Vint 245). While understanding the historical and cultural limitations placed on ex-slave narrators, Toni Morrison still critiques the silences emanating from the genre. She writes, "in shaping the experience to make it palatable to those who were in a position to alleviate it, they were silent about many things, and they 'forgot' many other things"(Morrison 91). She refers specifically to the technique ex-slave narrators employed when experiences became too graphic, citing short traditional phrases such as "'let us drop a veil over these proceedings too terrible to relate'" (Morrison 90-91). Since Morrison's mode of modern resistance begins with acknowledging the past, then the emphasis on representing experience through the use of specific narrative strategies is clearly an adopted characteristic of her writing from the slave narrative genre. Morrison suggests "that realism is not sufficient for representing the experience of slavery" (Vint 243). While Harriet Jacobs, because of the restricting factors of her time had to defend the veracity of her experience, Morrison is not bound by the same limitations. In fact, she writes, "for me - a writer in the last

quarter of the twentieth century, not much more than a hundred years after Emancipation, a writer who is black and a woman - the exercise is very different. My job becomes how to rip that veil drawn over "proceedings too terrible to relate"(Morrison 91). Morrison does not have to prove the veracity of her story; she constructs experiences from memory and from the recollections of others. She acknowledges however that "memories and recollections won't give me total access to the unwritten interior life of these people. Only the act of the imagination can help me" (Morrison 92). How can one truly convey the unimaginable horrors of slavery, particularly when you are confined to a formulaic genre? Instead, Morrison "rejects conventional distinctions between fact and fiction, arguing instead that there is a truth of the slave experience that has been left out of both traditional narratives and official discourses on slavery"(Vint 244). Morrison seeks to articulate them.

The very act of writing the slave narrative displays, as Harryette Mullen states, "the transformation from the body that is written upon by slavery to the body that writes the slave narrative"(Vint 254). This is an act of articulation, not of silence. However, because of the confines of the genre, there are experiences that are left unexpressed. I would argue with Morrison's assertion that they go unacknowledged. I do believe Jacobs acknowledges her traumatic experiences but does not always articulate them. In her narrative she does not clearly express the sexual relationship between her and Dr. Flint. Rather than recording the exact experiences, she leaves it up to the reader to infer what took place. She writes, "for years, my master had done his utmost to pollute my mind with foul images, and to destroy the pure principles inculcated by my grandmother" (Jacobs 83). The suggestion is there, but as Morrison's critique implies, the truth of the experience is repressed. This inarticulation allows society and history to repress these experiences. This becomes a cultural repression that

Morrison argues has lasting effects.

Toni Morrison handles this topic differently. Burdened by the hegemonic ideal, the protagonist, Pecola, thinks that she can achieve beauty if and only if she has blue eyes. Morrison's narration weaves together the past experiences of the protagonist Pecola and her family members in order to illustrate the destructive forces of a racialized and gendered ideal. One of the narrative strategies that Jacobs successfully employs is creating an interplay between silences and representation. There were mitigating circumstances surrounding this strategy, including an expectation to somehow represent the brutality of slavery while establishing an appeal to humanity or maintaining female virtue. Morrison's set of narrative strategies departs from Jacobs's in form but not intent. Morrison's unique set of narrative strategies include the manipulation of standard syntax, the breaking of silences, alternating points-of-view, and an extended metaphor as critique to not only challenge the existing racial dynamics of the twentieth century, but also to question how and why a young girl internalizes a destructive hegemonic ideal of beauty.

Morrison begins her novel by articulating the idea of silence. The novel opens with "quiet as it's kept..." In terms of the novel the line directly refers to the secrets surrounding Pecola Breedlove, but the line really echoes the notion that certain subjects have historically been taboo and as a result, silenced. By beginning the novel this way, Morrison rejects this silence and lays the foundation for the rest of the novel suggesting that this story will not conform to traditional representations of certain experiences. Historical silences will be expressed. One of the silences Morrison gives voice to targets the preconceived notions about blackness. With her novel, Morrison tries to get at the root, not necessarily of stereotypes or socioeconomic barriers, but really at the self-loathing related to race, emanating particularly from children. She writes,

commenting on the bullying Claudia witnesses, “it was their contempt for their own blackness that gave the first insult its teeth. They seemed to have taken all their smoothly cultivated ignorance, their exquisitely learned self-hatred, their elaborately designed hopelessness and sucked it all up into a fiery cone of scorn that had burned for ages in the hollows of their minds” (Morrison 65). This moment gives voice to an uncomfortable silence and suggests the culprit. By using the words “cultivated ignorance,” “learned self-hatred,” and “designed hopelessness,” Morrison challenges those concepts as aspects of these children's identities. Instead, she deconstructs those notions as innate and phrases them as products, consequences of a society that breeds these thoughts of inferiority until they become patterns, emerging from the lips of children. Morrison’s deliberate articulation of this unspoken issue forces the question of who and how. It asks society to consider the beginning; to question how things are learned and from whom.

Morrison’s mission to voice silences she felt were missing from slave narratives is seen clearly in her descriptions of sexual encounters. There are two moments in the novel that show children as victims of sexual abuse. Morrison constructs an exchange between Claudia and Freida about a sexual encounter with Mr. Henry. Instead of alluding to the scene of sexual abuse, Morrison allows her characters to voice their experience. She writes, “‘He touched me.’ ‘Here and here.’ She pointed to the tiny breasts that, like two fallen acorns, scattered a few faded rose leaves on her dress... ‘First he said how pretty I was. Then he grabbed my arm and touched me’”(Morrison 99). The intentional expression of explicit moments like this is one of Morrison’s narrative strategies of breaking historical silences. Morrison’s style of writing enables her to illustrate these moments as consequences inflicted upon these children rather than chosen by them. This perspective challenges the idea of the unquestioned acceptance of preconceived

notions and encourages engagement in the quest for why and how.

The other scene of sexual abuse in the novel is even more detailed and disturbing. The representation of a rape, a reality of the slave experience only alluded to in Harriet Jacobs's narrative, is clearly articulated here. Woven into Pecola's sad, painful story is also the story of her father whose own development is hindered by feelings of powerlessness and inadequacy. In the scene where Cholly rapes his daughter, Morrison is not silent. She describes the scene writing, "his soul seemed to slip down to his guts and fly out into her, and the gigantic thrust he made, into her then provoked the only sound she made - a hollow suck of air in the back of her throat" (163). Why speak this silence? Morrison explicitly documents this moment for Pecola, not only as part of her character's development, but also as a consequence of past traumas. The narrative structure of *The Bluest Eye* shows the significance of the past. The rape scene occurs at the end of the chapter about Cholly; the chapter explaining who he is and his past experiences which led him to this moment. While it does not condone, nor does he, his actions, it offers an avenue of understanding and demonstrates how the past is relevant and essential to understanding the present. An expansion on this literary plot point begs us to consider *The Bluest Eye* in its entirety and the American readership and society at large. She asserts, "American culture needs to come to terms with the past that haunts it, that is still out there, like memories" (Vint 248).

The expression of alternating points-of-view becomes a larger narrative strategy throughout Morrison's novel. She is clearly concerned with the way the past affects the present, whether it be a personal or national history. One question provoked by Morrison's detailed construction of Pecola's experiences is about the effect of the past and certain circumstances on the present. How and why does Pecola suffer from this self-loathing? I think equally if not more

significant to Morrison's novel, how does institutionalized power and a hegemonic ideal so insidiously invade the mind of a young girl and plant such a destructive seed? A narrative strategy that Morrison employs to propose answers to these questions is the use of alternating points-of-view. Morrison understands that Pecola's story is intertwined with those of others, specifically her parents. Morrison interrupts Claudia's perspective with chapters dedicated to illuminating the respective pasts of Pecola's parents, Pauline and Cholly. Their pasts, not meant to justify future actions particularly relating to their treatment of Pecola, are instead designed to show how many experiences do not happen in isolation. Personal histories, familial and national histories help to construct circumstances. Morrison reveals moments from Pauline's past which work to highlight a possible origin to some of Pecola's ideas about the importance of beauty (as she perceives it). Morrison writes of Pauline, "along with the idea of romantic love, she was introduced to another - physical beauty. Probably the most destructive ideas in the history of human thought" (122). This quotation, emphasizing a tone of bitterness and resentment when it comes to these two topics rather than of happiness, already allude to Pauline's future feelings. This moment is very closely followed by Pauline's memories of happy white women from films which becomes a direct comparison to her life, cultivating feelings of discontent. Pauline thinks, "white men taking such good care of they women, and they all dressed up in big clean houses with the bathtubs right in the same room with the toilet. Them pictures gave me a lot of pleasure, but made comin home hard, and looking at Cholly hard" (Morrison 123). This works in much the same way for Pauline as the Mary Jane candies work for Pecola. It is the hegemonic power's representation of the ideal and of happiness, but for Pauline, it is unattainable. Pauline displays her resentment in her interactions with Pecola. Later in the novel, Pecola visits her mother at work in a big clean house where Pauline favors the young white girl over her own daughter. The

juxtaposition created by Pecola, Pauline's real daughter, coming to a house similar to the one Pauline used to admire in films, causes Pecola to become the target of Pauline's resentment. The way she treats her daughter is alarming and elicits sympathy for Pecola, but as Morrison's strategy is designed to do, this moment can also be seen as the manifestation of everything Pauline always dreamed of but could not have.

Returning to the scene of the rape, Morrison includes it as part of Cholly's chapter. In the beginning of the chapter leading up to that scene, Morrison describes Cholly's abandonment, his previous humiliations at the hands of white men, all culminating in the moment immediately before he rapes his daughter. He walks into the kitchen and sees Pecola washing dishes. Morrison expresses Cholly's thoughts writing, "guilt and impotence rose in a bilious duet: What could he do for her - ever?...What could a burned-out black man say to the hunched back of his eleven-year-old daughter? (Morrison 161). Morrison is able to both articulate historical silences of rape with this scene, while simultaneously illuminating Cholly's perspective. Although his feelings of inadequacy and emasculation do not excuse his actions, they do suggest that Cholly's past experiences have had a powerful and lasting impact on him and subsequently, his daughter. This is a single moment in one individual's fictional story, but with societal critiques of race, gender and beauty intricately woven into the text, Morrison's concern extends beyond *The Bluest Eye* and questions the destructive influence of such power.

Morrison begins and ends her novel using an extended metaphor comparing the environmental factors essential to the productive growth of a flower to the influencing, and even directing, circumstances surrounding a child's upbringing. Morrison alludes to this metaphor throughout the text. The metaphor does not begin as a critique, but as Pecola's story unfolds, Morrison's critique of society and of a hegemonic ideal becomes more pervasive. The opening

lines of the novel are, “there were no marigolds in the fall of 1941...a little examination and much less melancholy would have proved to us that our seeds were not the only ones that did not sprout, nobody’s did” (Morrison 5). The comparison to flowers is essential to the overall significance of this metaphor. As Morrison alludes to several times throughout the novel, the successful growth of the flower depends on the quality of the soil. The circumstances and environment in which a flower sprouts determines its life. In telling Pecola’s story, Morrison reveals elements of Pecola’s “soil,” her family, their pasts, as well as destructive societal influences surrounding her. She ends the novel with a much more direct critique of society returning again to the metaphor. She writes, “This soil is bad for certain kinds of flowers. Certain seeds it will not nurture, certain fruit it will not bear, and when the land kills of its own volition, we acquiesce and say the victim had no right to live. We are wrong, of course, but it doesn’t matter (Morrison 206). This quotation clearly expresses Morrison’s view on what happens to malnourished children; the same that would happen to a flower. The suggestion echoes ideas that Morrison highlights elsewhere in her novel, that current experiences are consequences of past events. The child, just like the flower, is a victim of circumstance, a product of the soil in which he or she was raised. By employing this metaphor, Morrison challenges readers to question how and why we (as a society) are where we are. This in turn creates a space to resist the institutionalized powers that put us there.

Pecola wants nothing more than to be loved. She has seen, in popular culture and learned from her mother, Pauline, that in order to be loved, one must be beautiful. This is one of the modes of power Morrison directly engages with in order to indict her audience and dare them to resist the institutionalized gaze. Pecola looks at herself and cannot see beauty or self-worth. She can only see herself through the eyes of others whose gaze is also tarnished by the societal lens.

Pecola looks at herself and understands why no one loves her. Morrison conveys this heartbreaking realization writing, “long hours she sat looking in the mirror, trying to discover the secret of the ugliness, the ugliness that made her ignored or despised at school, by teachers and classmates alike” (Morrison 45). Morrison shows us how Pecola links a sense of self-worth to her appearance and her appearance to the way the outside world views and treats her. This internal desire to feel loved is what motivates her deepest wish which is to have blue eyes. She thinks, “if those eyes of hers were different, that is to say, beautiful, she herself would be different” (Morrison 46). Pecola’s idea of beauty has clearly been influenced by society. Her sense of self-worth is tied to her ability to approximate an ideal.

Toni Morrison does not show resistance through her main protagonist’s story. In fact, Pecola fails to resist institutionalized power. Morrison uses Pecola’s failure to resist to illustrate the destructive consequences of a perpetuated, hegemonic gaze. When Pecola finally meets Soaphead Church, she sees an opportunity to finally get her miracle. Soaphead’s reaction to the little black girl’s wish expresses the heart-wrenching reality of an institutionalized gaze that presents a racialized and gendered ideal. Soaphead thinks, “a little black girl who wanted to rise up out of the pit of her blackness and see the world with blue eyes” (Morrison 174). This demonstrates the devastating effects of the gaze. Trinna S. Frever writes in her essay, “Oh! You Beautiful Doll:’ Icon, Image, and Culture in Works by Alvarez, Cisneros, and Morrison,” that “the damaging internalization of assumptions of immutable inferiority originat[e] in an outside gaze” (123). This inferiority though is not only internalized, it is rearticulated by the subject itself. Thus enters Foucault’s idea of the interpellation of power; the subject herself accepts the inferiority by asking for blue eyes and by believing that they are the only way she can ever be beautiful.

Morrison's resistance occurs at the authorial level, continuing the tradition established in the slave narrative genre of employing a specific set of narrative techniques. For Morrison, these narrative techniques are the manipulation of syntax, articulation of silences, alternating points-of-view and extended metaphor as critique, all working to deconstruct hegemonic power. Departing from the tradition however, Morrison highlights the devastating consequences of institutionalized power by refusing to allow her character to resist it and instead offers an authorial resistance constructed by the employment of a specific set of narrative strategies. Morrison concludes the novel by reflecting on Claudia and Pecola's experience. After her discussion with Soaphead Church, Pecola believes that she has indeed been granted blue eyes and has therefore achieved a sense of self-worth. While normally that would be a positive ending to such a novel, the fact that the sense of self-worth rises out of the very structure that initiates and perpetuates self-loathing does not allow that closure to the story. Instead, Morrison explains, "a little black girl yearns for the blue eyes of a little white girl, and the horror at the heart of her yearning is exceeded only by the evil of fulfillment" (204). By calling the fulfillment of this notion "evil," she is creating the space for resistance. She forces her readers to see the insidious nature and destructive consequence a quest for the fulfillment of these hegemonic ideals can cause. Morrison believes that part of her role as an author is to question power and its institutions. Voicing this silence, articulating this evil, allowing its fulfillment is in fact a form of active resistance expressed through a her narrative. By allowing Pecola to internalize the destructive forces set upon her, she calls for her readership to respond.

Both Harriet Jacobs and Toni Morrison employ unique narrative strategies demonstrated in their representations of experience to challenge and question institutionalized power and ultimately generate a space for resistance. This technique of deconstructing traditional spaces of

hegemonic power through narrative resistance is a transcending characteristic of the African American literary tradition. The unique feature of both of these texts is that resistance is articulated by the author through a deliberate set of narrative strategies that combat spaces of institutionalized power as well as challenge genre limitations.

It is essential to clarify here that Jacobs's and Morrison's use of narrative strategies to represent specific experiences as a form of narrative resistance does not support an essentialist analysis of the texts. bell hooks, discusses the "authority of experience" in her essay, "Postmodern Blackness," suggesting how experience does not support an essentialist identity but distinguishes itself in that there are sets of experiences unique to a specific race or group of people in her essay, "Postmodern Blackness." Jacobs and Morrison both write narratives using narrative strategies in order to create a representative experience that illuminates and then deconstructs hegemonic power. Their stories are stories that many African American women of their respective time periods would be able to relate to. They also each in their own way, offer forms of resisting institutionalized, hegemonic power. Neither author within their respective works asserts that there is an essentially black characteristic(s) about their stories or indeed their literary style and technique. However, just as the experiences expressed in the narrative demonstrate the significance of experience and the connection between the past and present self, so do we find characteristics in the literary tradition that transcend centuries. bell hooks writes, "there is a radical difference between a repudiation of the idea that there is a black 'essence' and recognition of the way black identity has been specifically constituted in the experience of exile and struggle"(2483). This is how Harriet Jacobs's narrative and Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* should be read. First, consider the historical and cultural context in which slave narratives were written. The slave narrative genre was driven by the abolitionist movement and, as Sekora

mentions, the slave experience was packaged by white amanuenses. Regardless of this fact, the emphasis of the slave experience was the focus of the narrative. As hooks articulates, this is a characteristic that arose out of a specific, racialized experience. This literary characteristic is carried into the twentieth century and can be observed in Morrison's writing. *The Bluest Eye*, while a more abstract narrative, still focuses heavily on experience and on the role understanding the past (particularly a traumatic one) plays in constructing present identities. Both Jacobs and Morrison use narrative strategies to create rhetorical productions that articulate experience in order to resist forms of power. hooks reminds us that "many of us are struggling to find new strategies of resistance" and suggesting the importance of critical engagement with oppressive power.

Jacobs and Morrison give us a form of narrative resistance. Their resistance directly engages their readership, forcing them to participate in a reflective process. Their writing indicts the reader for his/her complacency in the perpetuation of institutionalized power. Morrison seems to address this exact notion at the end of her novel. She is speaking about the United States when she says, "when the land kills of its own volition, we acquiesce and say the victim had no right to live. We are wrong, of course, but it doesn't matter. It's too late" (Morrison 206). Morrison's indictment of America is clear suggesting that society condemns those marginalized groups without providing even a hope of a chance. Her indictment continues with the word "acquiesce," directly addressing the complacency of society in this oppressive cycle.

In her essay, hooks acknowledges that new forms of resistance to institutionalized power must emerge. She asks us to participate in the critical conversation as a way to resist. Just as Morrison asserts the importance of voicing silences in order to create a generative space out of past traumas, Valerie Smith in her essay "From 'Race' to Race Transcendence: 'Race,' Writing,

and *Difference Twenty Years Later*,” asks her readership to critically engage with the past. She questions, “what does it mean to deny the long shadow of slavery and segregation” (123). Smith acknowledges the racial past of this country and articulates the importance of keeping it, as well as the wheels of hegemonic power, at the center of progressive critical discourse. While race may be a social construction, it is also a social reality. Smith emphasizes, just like hooks, the importance of not only continuing but beginning new conversations and reflections about the politics of race and gender. She cites the emerging academic classes and fields of ethnic literature as an example of progress over the past twenty years. Smith leaves her readers with a thought that unites Jacobs, Morrison and hooks and articulates where we (modern society) may engage in this conversation. She writes, “the desire to forget, move on, or transcend only dooms us to traumatic returns. The rush to transcend race propels us into acts of forgetting or misremembering that we can ill afford” (1532-3).

The job of the writer is to articulate silences. As part of a narrative tradition founded on resisting institutionalized, racialized power, it is only fitting that twentieth century authors continue employing narrative strategies that challenge and question hegemonic power. In her narrative, Harriet Jacobs is able to subvert modes of white, male power into generative spaces of resistance. Toni Morrison creates a narrative laden with strategies to demonstrate the destructive consequences of a hegemonic ideal. These authors challenge and question the establishment of institutionalized power. Jacobs and Morrison establish a platform of resistance. hooks and Smith provide the critical language with which to engage in the discourse of resistance. We need to continue to consider this question: How can literature, both past and present, continue to provide a foundation for critical discourse through which we can attempt to resist oppressive institutions?

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