Unspeakable Voice: Toni Morrison's Postmodern Authority

Toni Morrison is far too talented to remain only a marvelous recorder of the black side of provincial American life. If she is to maintain the large and serious audience she deserves, she is going to have to address a riskier contemporary reality.

—SARA BLACKBURN, Review of Sula, in the New York Times

Critic generally don't associate black people with ideas. They see marginal people; they just see another story about black folks. They regard the whole thing as sociologically interesting perhaps but very parochial.

—TONI MORRISON, Interview, in Black Women Writers at Work

I begin with these passages in order to suggest the struggle for authority faced by black women writing publicly in white/male-supremacist North America. As African-American feminist critics of the past two decades have made amply clear, devaluation, neglect, and misreading of black women's writings are pervasive practices in which white men, white women, and black men have taken part.1 In

a society where “All the Women are White, [and] All the Blacks are Men,”
fiction by and about African-American women has been marginalized not only as insufficiently “universal” but as insufficiently “female” and insufficiently “black”: African-American female voice becomes officially “unspeakable.”

Yet in this negating environment Toni Morrison has forged what is by any standard a brilliant career as a novelist whose “verbal authority,” as Margaret Atwood said, seems widely to “compel belief.”
Morrison has testified that constructing such authoritative fiction has meant the complicated negotiation of a narrative quandary. On the one hand, she has been “forced to resort” to certain “strategies” in order to “accommodate the mere fact of writing about, for and out of black culture while accommodating and responding to mainstream ‘white’ culture” so that potentially hostile readers have no time “to wonder ‘What do I have to do, to give up, in order to read this? What defense do I need, what distance maintain?’” On the other hand, she must sustain “a deliberate posture of vulnerability to those aspects of Afro-American culture that can inform and position [her] work,” a vulnerability that relies “for full comprehension on codes embedded in black culture” and thus “effect[s] immediate co-conspiracy” with black readers.
Morrison is describing the construction of a double-voiced text, like the bride’s letter of my first chapter, that African-American readers can decode while white readers think they have done the same. If we rewrite Dale Spender’s distinction between private and public discourse in racial terms, Morrison’s primary narratee is a “private” one—she once described her writing as “village literature”—which must be filtered through a potentially resistant “public” audience. The consequences for such filtering are evident, for example, in the suppression of anger that Mary Helen Washington identifies in The Bluest Eye and which she explains “as a complicated
response to the dilemma of being a black writer whose audience is primarily white. Is it possible,” she asks, “to tell a ‘black’ story without taking the sensitivities of the white audience into account and somehow trying to assuage their fears and anxieties?" Nor are white people Morrison’s only “potentially hostile” audience; few reviews are as unforgiving as Stanley Crouch’s castigation of Beloved as a novel “designed to placate sentimental feminist ideology” in which the narrative is “perpetually interrupt[ed]” with “maudlin ideological commercials.” And the narrative project becomes even more complicated when the work seeks not only to be published and recognized but to challenge the foundations of fictional and social authority.

It is Morrison’s engagement within a literary culture that is not only predominantly white and androcentric but philosophically “postmodern” with which this chapter is concerned. A number of African-American critics have explored the oral and communal qualities of Morrison’s narrators, their use of a black cultural idiom, and their racial politics. My focus here, in keeping not only with the emphasis of this study but with my limited perspective as a white reader of works coded to speak as much around me as to me, is upon this question: Through what narrative strategies does Morrison authorize, in ways that seem to have been persuasive for most of her “private” and “public” readers, narrators who are not only implicitly black and female but overtly authorial, at a historical moment when narrative authority has been radically compromised? I will suggest that Morrison “accommodat[es] and respond[s] to mainstream ‘white’ culture” not only politically but formally by constructing a narrative stance that reconfigures authority in “postmodern” terms. In suggesting that Morrison seizes a particular literary-historical moment in which her vision of narrative authority converges with and transforms “mainstream” possibilities, I am also speculating that what I will describe below as a certain kind of postmodern novel—a novel that recognizes the radical contingency of all authority and the limits of a positivist

world view—may offer possibilities for authorizing hitherto “unspeakable” voices that realism (and even modernism) did not provide.

Morrison is by no means the first African-American woman to write novels in an authorial voice or to use it for ideological purposes openly concerned with race and sex. The narrative difficulties Morrison describes in directing African-American authorial voice toward “potentially hostile” white readers are already evident in the first known novel published by an African-American woman: Harriet Wilson’s *Our Nig: or, Sketches from the Life of a free Black in a Two-story White House, North. Showing that Slavery’s Shadows Fall Even There* (1859). At a time when, as I suggested in Chapter 5, other narrators were making wide use of authorial strategies, Wilson’s narrator evokes the “gentle reader” only rarely and cautiously, and she reserves her strongest ideological statements for the discourse of characters rather than for the narrator’s own voice. Through such strategies the novel is able, for example, to use free indirect discourse to condemn its own implied readers, the “professed abolitionists who didn’t want slaves at the South, nor niggers in their own houses, North. Faugh! to lodge [a black]; to eat with one; to admit one through the front door; to sit next to one; awful!” Rather than defending her heroine openly, the narrator usually lets Frado authorize herself; she tells us, for instance, that Frado “felt herself capable of elevation” rather saying Frado was capable (124, my italics). In short, read alongside other antislavery novels of the period such as Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* and William Wells Brown’s *Clotel, or the President’s Daughter* (1853), *Our Nig* is markedly cautious in its use of authorial voice.

In the 1890s the intersection of African-American and feminist movements fostered an extensive social and literary activism among African-American women, some of whom also pioneered in turning American fiction toward openly political and intellectual purposes. Like Wilson directing their works explicitly to an audience that included whites, Frances E. W. Harper hoped in *Iola Leroy, or Shadows Uplifted* (1892) to “awaken in the hearts of our countrymen a strong sense of justice,” and Pauline Hopkins sought through *Contending Forces* (1899) to “cement the bonds of brotherhood among all classes and all complexions” by portraying “the inmost thoughts and feelings

of the Negro” that were “as yet, unrecognized by writers of the Anglo-Saxon race.” Yet both novels carefully contain their representations of female authority. While Iola Leroy is a passionate advocate for her race and sex, she is usually the lone female voice in a dialogue among men, an exceptional figure with a white father, a white education, and the option to “pass.” In Contending Forces the sexual division is even more conservative: in a chapter called “The Sewing Circle,” women discuss “the place which the virtuous woman occupies in upbuilding a race,” while such chapters as “The American Colored League,” “Will Smith’s Defense of His Race,” and “The Canterbury Club Dinner” engage men in questions of public politics. Hopkins’s unsigned preface to Contending Forces similarly qualifies her own narrative as a “humble” effort to create a “simple, homely tale, unassumingly told,” and implicitly contrasts its author to “men of brilliant intellects” who serve as “historians, lecturers, ministers, poets, judges and lawyers.” Scholar William Still’s patronizing introduction to Iola Leroy, which “confess[es]” his “doubts” that Harper could write a novel “of merit and lasting worth to the race” (11) and circumscribes the audience for this “interesting, moral story-book” to “the thousands of colored Sunday-schools in the South” (13), similarly undermines Harper’s authority.

Nonetheless, these novels represent the first moment when African American women are engaged in the ambitious intellectual project I described in Chapter 5: the construction of diverse fictional “worlds” whose narrative voices mediate the imperatives of knowing and judging associated with the realist enterprise. They aim, in other words, to re-present African-American people and experiences “as they are”—in their diversity—and at the same time guide the reader’s judgment toward what “should be.” Insofar as they are addressed to a white readership in a virulently racist Jim Crow society, however, such novels face the narrative dilemma of authorizing a discursive community that is identifiably African-American within the frame of a realist ethic dependent on the construction of a superior narrator for whom the “King’s English” is a master sign. It is therefore not surprising that in both Iola Leroy and Contending Forces the narrator and the most authoritative characters are educated African-Americans

whose voices are indistinguishable formally from those of educated whites: in this historical moment, the sign of narrative authority is a language without traces of social or culture difference. The equality/difference dilemma of which I spoke in relation to Eliot is enacted here in racial terms.

At the same time, however, *Contending Forces* and (especially) *Iola Leroy* work against this association of authority with privileged-class English culture through techniques of polyphony that mitigate the realist conventions by which the narrator is the highest authority and the characters’ positions are contingent upon their relationship to that authority. The novels rely heavily on dialogue, and both extend ideological authority to unlettered former slaves. This polyvocal dialogue among characters and their “contending” ideologies, which can be contrasted to those realist novels like Eliot’s in which the narrator occupies a more solitary ideological position, presents textual authority much less as an individual construction than as the collectively created consensus (or nonconsensus) of a community.

Yet within the hierarchical structures of the realist novel, any project to authorize characters outside the social hegemony is already undermined by the conventions of narrative form. As Judy Grahn observes, “an outside and all-knowing narrator . . . speaks standard English while quoting characters who speak what is called ‘dialect’ or slang, or people’s English. . . . [as if to say] that the occupation of writer belongs only to the upper class and those who can pass by using its standards; no one else need apply—except as a character, an object to be quoted and described, and in effect, looked down upon from a class distance.”

The containment of black vernacular in *Iola Leroy* and *Contending Forces* to orthographically marked and framed “dialect” is an emblem of a larger containment of folk cultures in novelistic worlds where social and textual success is measured by educated white standards. Such a practice leaves formally unchallenged the implied race and class of realism’s “generic” voice, the overarching consciousness that adopts an authorized language in order to forge a collusion between narrator and narratee.

When modernism and feminism began in the early twentieth century to deconstruct the divine right of such a narrator, African-American women writers faced challenges more complicated than

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those facing such novelists as Woolf and Richardson. The call by Harlem Renaissance writers for a specifically African-American literary vernacular allowed a writer like Zora Neale Hurston to transform narration itself into a black medium—to use words and images that would identify her narrative voice as African-American and perhaps also as female. As I shall discuss in chapter 11, however, Hurston’s narrators are still distinguished from her characters, whose discourse is rendered in a vernacular that contrasts visibly to the narrator’s grammatically and orthographically standard text. And while the Harlem Renaissance did give Hurston and other African-American women writers a validation for new representations of both narrators and characters, the movement remained predominantly masculinist. A writer such as Hurston with a woman-centered vision thus faced reactions both within and outside the Renaissance similar to those Woolf faced inside and outside Bloomsbury, while the novels of Jessie Fauset, which like those of Dorothy Richardson usually represent a single female consciousness, have according to Deborah McDowell been wrongly consigned to a genteel and conservative “narrow groove.”

The decades of Morrison’s career coincide with another convergence of African-American and feminist movements that intersect with a very different moment in the history of narrative voice: the moment I am calling “postmodern.” The postmodern aesthetic, as it is associated with hegemonic literature in the United States especially after 1960, presses modernist skepticism to an extreme: while modernism understood narrative authority as conditional, postmodernism finds it a sham. Meaning is now not merely contingent but indeterminate, and the notion of a narrator as a textual “higher” authority—or of any textual figure as privileged knower—becomes not merely hollow but absurd. Yet the “postmodern” decades have also been a time of new discursive activity by previously suppressed communities who might be less enthusiastic than hegemonic writers about dispensing with narrative authority. Attempting to explain the paucity of experimentalist, antimimetic fiction by contemporary feminists, Bonnie Zimmerman argues persuasively that such groups understandably seek “to create an authoritative voice, not to undermine an already existing one.”

all narrative authority is of questionable value for creating "art forms" that, as Morrison hopes, still "have much work to do."\(^\text{14}\)

Yet the very shift in discursive relations of power that enables the emergence of hitherto marginalized voices exposes the constructed and conditional status of all authority, just as the "demise" of white male narrative voice stand as a cautionary tale against reproducing realism's fiction of godly authority in the name of a different god. I am speculating that the success of once disauthorized voices engaged in political transformation within a "postmodern" literary environment has depended on their ability to reconstitute the grounds of knowledge and judgment in terms compatible with, if not transformative of, late-twentieth-century Western consciousness. Mark Edmundson calls this a "positive postmodernism" in which the recognition "that we live in a world without stable truths or the possibility of transcendency" becomes an "opportunity...for people to invent themselves anew."\(^\text{15}\) Alan Wilde gives the name "midfiction" to forms that avoid the extremes of "naive" realism and antimimetic experimentalism by attempting to create from "a world that is itself, as 'text,' ontologically contingent and problematic," with provisional "enclaves of value in the face of—but not in place of—a meaningless universe."\(^\text{16}\) For Wilde, whereas contemporary realism "illustrates, somewhat meagerly, the arts of coping and survival," a resigned and "resentfully cynical acquiescence to things 'as they are' and, so it is implied, must be," and whereas the "boisterous deconstructions" of "experimentalism" have "left us with emblems of a world hardly less narrow and restricted," midfiction "responds, with a greater sense of risk, by acts of redefinition and creation, by an imaginative reinterpretation of the place human beings hold, or may hold, in the world."\(^\text{17}\) Both Edmundson's and Wilde's formulations thus understand "postmodernism" to be capable of generating not only hedonistic reflexivity or unqualified despair but determined reinvention and qualified hope. Challenging the Eurocentrism of conventional constructions of


\(^{\text{17}}\) Wilde, \textit{Middle Grounds}, 4, 108.
the postmodern, Cornel West also calls for “possible critical positions” through which African-American culture “can be viewed as sites of a potentially enabling yet resisting postmodernism.”

All three of these critics, from different vantage points, lay an implicit theoretical ground for redefining postmodernism—or distinguishing one of its main tributaries—in terms of the politically and culturally oppositional. Although Alan Wilde names Toni Morrison along with Max Apple, Grace Paley, Jerome Charyn, Stanley Elkin, Don DeLillo, Russell Banks, and Robert Coover, he does not suggest that “midfiction” might have a particular relevance or urgency for silenced or dominated communities. Edmundson associates his “positive postmodernism” primarily with “bicultural” writers like Salman Rushdie, Gabriel García Márquez, and Milan Kundera though he does not mention the bicultural position of African-American writers like Morrison. West remains skeptical about whether the “parochially” white term “postmodern” can be usefully reclaimed, and I share his uncertainty even though I will use the term in this chapter to designate a generalized literary vision with permutations that may be rooted in the experiences of specific communities. I want to speculate that certain groups of writers are especially drawn to “midfictional,” “enabling yet resisting” forms of the postmodern because several ironies associated with postmodern consciousness—that subjectivity is not coherent and singular, that “freedom” may not always liberate nor “choice” provide alternatives, that not everyone (or anyone) is the “master of [her] fate,” that events may not have rational explanations—are also philosophical implications of the historical experience of African-Americans, Holocaust survivors, colonized peoples, and other displaced and dominated groups. This, I believe, is one reason why the philosophical positions of some people of color parallel (and predate) those of some white poststructuralists despite obvious divergences in political commitment and theoretical terminology.

It is the compatibility of “midfictional” postmodern values with a major impulse in contemporary political consciousness that I want to posit as an enabling basis for Toni Morrison’s bicultural narrative authority. Just as the realism of Harper and Hopkins suited a moment in which many African-Americans saw education and “uplift” as viable paths to racial equality, so postmodernism may recognize realism’s—

and with it Western humanism's—failed promises for rational reform. Morrison's novels change the terms of narrative authority by deconstructing the rationalist humanism that grounds the realist novel and reconstructing authoriality in ways that seem to me to exploit the space where a hegemonic postmodern sensibility converges with an African-American politics. Through shifts from the double narrative structure of *The Bluest Eye* to the complex "fluidity" of *Beloved*, authoriality remains a powerful practice in Morrison's novels, but the white narratee's position becomes increasingly marginalized and ironized and the use of Western culture as a source of authority virtually disappears.

The narrative choices Morrison has faced as a bicultural United States novelist begin, as my discussion of Hopkins and Harper might suggest, at the level of orthography. Instead of opposing "dialect" and "white English," Morrison's narrators adopt a vernacular that is neither dialect nor white; "black language," Morrison has said, means for her "not so much the use of non-standard grammar" as "the manipulation of metaphor." While some of Morrison's characters do use vernacular grammatical and lexical forms that the narrator herself does not employ, the novels do not translate the inflections of spoken Black English into a deviant typography, eliminating a visual class distinction between narrator and characters. This egalitarian narrative surface is also enabled by the narrator's register: all of Morrison's narrators speak a colloquial, conversational discourse that makes each one a persona(lity) among personalities: "Corinthians was naive, but she was not a complete fool"; "Women who drink champagne when there is nothing to celebrate can look like that: their straw hats with broken brims are often askew; they nod in public places; their shoes are undone"; "A joke. A nigger joke. That was the way it got started... Still, it was lovely up in the Bottom"; "Yet there was this heavy spice-sweet smell that made you think of the East and striped tents and the *sha-sha-sha* of leg bracelets."

This choice of register for her narrators supports Morrison's insistence in several interviews that her own voice is authorized in and

through African-American community. I propose that Morrison's first novel, *The Bluest Eye* (1970), constitutes an authorizing preface for that voice by acknowledging the necessity, for a readership that has suffered from centuries of external misrepresentation, of establishing a narrator’s social identity. I read this novel, the only one that will have a place in all three sections of this book, as Morrison’s self-locating entry into literature (as *Northanger Abbey* was for Austen) at a time when, as Morrison says, no one was authorizing or even authoring African-American female experience. By constructing both the personal voice of Claudia MacTeer looking back on her childhood and the omniscient voice of an authorial narrator, Morrison creates in *The Bluest Eye* a double and alternating structure—two voices, two sets of titles, even two different typographies (one narrative has right-justified margins; the other does not). But in the novel’s last section these narrators seem to converge: the typography reserved previously for the authorial narrator is adopted by a voice that appears to be Claudia’s but speaks as “we.” The convergence of the two narrators at the end of *The Bluest Eye*, which had been suggested all along by the strong similarities in their diction and imagery, legitimates personal experience as the basis for authorial voice. Such a project deconstructs the conventional opposition between “first” and “third” person, mimetic and diegetic voice, at once authorializing the personal and personalizing the authorial. In this humanizing of the authorial narrator that is reminiscent of Eliot’s early novels, the distance of a century is profoundly measurable: while *Clerical Life*’s witness is an elderly white gentleman, Morrison’s is a young black girl.

None of Morrison’s subsequent novels has used a personal narrator; except for a brief middle section of *Beloved*, Morrison has turned since *The Bluest Eye* to the authorial mode favored by Austen, Eliot, and Woolf. Read as Morrison’s prefatory novel, however, *The Bluest Eye* authorizes subsequent “Morrison” narrators as African-American women and also undermines the conventions of narrative omniscience in a manner Eliot’s early novels only suggest—for if Claudia is also the “omniscient” narrator, how can she, a character, know the other characters’ private stories and intimate thoughts? Claudia’s knowledge of the Breedloves and Soaphead Church must rest on a different foundation: her “omniscience” must come not from superhuman understanding but from social experience. Austen’s and Woolf’s nar-

rators play from time to time with conventions of omniscience, pretending to lack the knowledge narrators are supposed to possess. While these strategies mock assumptions of narrative godliness, Morrison’s more radical gesture undermines conventional narrative possibility: if “omniscience” is redefined as imagination grounded in collective experience, it is also limited by the human inability to make sense of the nonsensical and explain the inexplicable.

For it is not simply narration but Western realist epistemology that Morrison’s narrators undermine. Using authorial structures to make clear that certain kinds of authority may be futile or impossible, the narrators of the first two novels deconstruct realism, while the later narrators reconstruct the “real” on different ground. The Bluest Eye and Sula embody the (postmodern) recognition that realism cannot finally explain human actions or prescribe solutions in the way that postbellum novels like Iola Leroy sought to do. At the beginning of The Bluest Eye (1970), Claudia questions the very foundation of realist ideology—the presumption that one can know and therefore judge: “There is really nothing more to say—except why. But since why is difficult to handle, one must take refuge in how” (9). The novel tells the outcome of the story before it begins, leaving a series of questions: why did Cholly rape his daughter Pecola, why did Pecola want blue eyes, why didn’t marigolds blossom in the fall of 1941? In “answering” these questions, however, the authorial narrator piles up explanations that replicate the chaos of life rather than the clarity of art. Thus we learn about Pauline’s lame foot, her lonely childhood, her need for crayons, her rotten tooth, her fascination with movie stars, her experiences of racism in the North, her marital unhappiness, her longing for the order she finds only in the white house with its pink and yellow child. All of this information overdetermines her role in Pecola’s tragedy and makes it impossible to assign causes to effects or to delineate clear boundaries of responsibility. What Valerie Smith calls the “hard questions—why Black Americans aspire to an unattainable standard of beauty; why they displace their self-hatred onto a communal scapegoat; how Pecola’s fate might have been averted”—the narrator does

22. Austen’s narrators claim as early as Lady Susan to lack certain kinds of information about their characters, and Woolf’s narrators are often so unwilling to own conventional narrative knowledge that Erich Auerbach mock-laments that Woolf “does not seem to bear in mind that she is the author and hence ought to know how matters stand with her characters” but acts “as though the truth about her characters were not better known to her than it is to them or to the reader.” In Mimesis (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1953). 469, 472.
not even try to explain. As she describes the impossibility of making order of Cholly's life, Morrison's narrator could be speaking as well of her own refusal of causalities:

The pieces of Cholly's life could become coherent only in the head of a musician. Only those who talk their talk through the gold of curved metal, or in the touch of black-and-white rectangles and taut skins and strings echoing from wooden corridors, could give true form to his life. Only they would know how to connect the heart of a red watermelon to the asafetida bag to the muscadine to the flashlight on his behind to the fists of money to the lemonade in a Mason jar to a man called Blue and come up with what all of that meant in joy, in pain, in anger, in love, and give it its final and pervading ache of freedom. Only a musician would sense, know, without even knowing that he knew, that Cholly was free. (125)

This acknowledgment is compatible with the creation of a narrative voice like the eyewitness Claudia's, which can imagine but never really know her characters with certainty, but it also suggests the unrepresentability of African-American subjectivity or perhaps any subjectivity in a linear, verbal form.

*Sula* (1973) takes the opposite strategy: rather than overloading the novel with causes, the narrator underexplains and leaves the most important narrative events to the realm of mystery. The narrator never tells us the truth about Eva's amputated leg; about whether and why Sula "watched her mother burn"; about what Shadrack did and did not understand; just as she tells us that it is "for no earthly reason, at least no reason that anybody could understand," that Helene Wright "smiled dazzlingly and coquettishly at the salmon-colored face of the conductor" (21) in the white railroad car. And even where race, sex, or class can explain characters' reactions (for example, the workers' disillusionment with the tunnel), Sula herself remains the figure of unknowability and the narratee remains dislodged from any comfortable complicity with a "superior" narrative voice. In a delicate balancing of political conviction and postmodern skepticism, the narrator suggests that although racism and sexism are certainties, human behavior remains only partially amenable to explanatory forms. I do not mean to suggest that realist novelists such as Eliot supply causalities, even complex ones, for every narrated act—I think, for example,

of Gwendolen Harleth’s inexplicable terrors—but Morrison uses authorial voice as the explicit mechanism for questioning and rejecting the explanations that authorial voices are supposed to provide. Since it is the narrator whose voice announces these inexplicabilities, however, her own authority is not diminished but merely altered in the shift to assert the unknowable. Like Eliot, Morrison creates a syntax of authority in tension with a semantics of abdication; narrative stance in *Sula* entails knowing—and proclaiming—what it is that cannot be known. If (in keeping with their different moments) the authoritative syntax is more pronounced in Eliot, the refusal of explanation is more pronounced in Morrison.

The over- and underexplanation represented respectively in the narrative practices of *The Bluest Eye* and *Sula* provide the initiating extremes that lead Morrison’s next novels from a refusal of rational explanation to the assertion of what realism has designated nonexistent or impossible. The events of *The Bluest Eye* are firmly grounded in empirical verisimilitude; everything that happens in the novel is plausible, and “magic” is only a desperate girl’s delusion perpetrated by a misguided and embittered old man. Nothing that breaches realist convention occurs in *Sula* either, but the magical is suggested, for example, in the “plague of robins” that accompanies Sula’s return to Medallion and in Shadrack’s preternatural consciousness. And although in *The Bluest Eye* tragedies are determined by social circumstance, the inexplicable haunts *Sula* as it haunts Sula herself: Chicken Little’s and Hannah’s deaths remain pointless postmodern accidents that are horrifying precisely because they frustrate and thus expose conventional novelistic rationality.

But Morrison’s next three novels selectively reject empirical or even “psychological” realism in favor of the “magical” modes represented in such works as García Márquez’s *One Hundred Years of Solitude*. *Song of Solomon* (1977) creates a “magical” character in Pilate as part of a project to expose the inadequacy of white European ways of knowing and the wisdom available only through folkloric and mystical sources associated especially with women and Africa and never fully articulable: “I don’t know who and I don’t know why. I just know what I’m telling you: what, when, and where” (42), Pilate says. *Tar Baby* (1981) does not transgress verisimilitude on the level of plot, but its narrator pushes authorial omniscience beyond the divine posture of white realism by representing the thoughts not only of characters but of animals and plants: she insists that “the clouds looked at each other,
then broke apart in confusion” (10), discusses the feelings and behavior of bees and sky (82), and comments archly, after Jadine has said “horseshit,” that “the avocado tree standing by the side of the road heard her and, having really seen a horse’s shit, thought she had probably misused the word” (127). Such uses of narrative authority either elaborately mock realist omniscience, or they establish this narrator as even more godlike than the narrators of the white West. *Beloved* goes further still, incorporating the spirit world as the cornerstone of its plot and hence as the narrator’s most direct responsibility: Beloved’s return from the dead must be accepted or the entire story fails. Since white racism is responsible for this ghost and perhaps all the ghosts in which white folks are unlikely to believe—“not a house in the country ain’t packed to its rafters with some dead Negro’s grief” (5)—the inadequacy of Western epistemology is here exposed through the consequences of its cruelest practices of dominance.

These various movements into the rationally unknowable place a particularly strenuous demand on narrative authority. In realist fiction, characters may imagine the “magical,” but the narrator’s superiority lies precisely in refraining to corroborate such imaginings as truth. But in the last three novels and most dramatically in *Beloved*, Morrison’s narrators must authorize the supernatural or “magical” if the narrative is to exist at all. In *Song of Solomon* the narrator takes some care not to assert directly what an audience schooled in European empiricism would find incredible. While the narrator uses authorial voice for speculation—for example, telling us that “it must have been Mr. Smith’s leap from the roof over their heads that made them admit” Ruth to the white hospital (5)—when there is “magic” to report, she usually takes refuge in free indirect discourse, locating herself on one side or the other of a fine line of accountability. The narrative makes sense only if Pilate actually has no navel, but the narrator represents this information as Macon Dead’s indirect perception in which her own participation is indefinite: “After their mother died, [Pilate] had come struggling out of the womb without help from throbbing muscles or the pressure of swift womb water. As a result, for all the years he knew her, her stomach was as smooth and sturdy as her back, at no place interrupted by a navel. It was the absence of a navel that convinced people that she had not come into this world through normal channels…” (27–28). The narrator’s stance toward Pilate’s alleged supernatural gifts is even more equiv-
ocal: Pilate, she says, “was believed to have the power to step out of her skin, set a bush afire from fifty yards, and turn a man into a ripe rutabaga—all on account of the fact that she had no navel” (94, my italics). In *Beloved* the narrator also hedges: she tells us that “a fully dressed woman walked out of the water,” but does not tell us who that woman is; tells us she had “new skin, lineless and smooth,” but does not tell us why (50). She does not participate in the characters’ attempts to explain Beloved empirically, but neither does she assert in her own voice, as the community does, that “baby ghost came back evil” (267). And after the climactic confrontation at 124, the narrator restricts herself only to other people’s perceptions: “Paul D knows Beloved is truly gone. Disappeared, some say, exploded right before their eyes. Ella is not so sure” (263). Yet the very telling of this story requires the narrator’s belief, which is finally signified in the novel’s last word, “Beloved,” uttered unambiguously in the authorial voice. African in its cosmology, the novel’s deconstruction of empiricism is also compatible with what Hans Bertens calls a “mystical attunement” in Western postmodern consciousness.  

There is a similar convergence of African-American consciousness with European postmodern sensibility in the ways in which Morrison “maximizes” this deconstruction and transformation of realist authority. All of Morrison’s narrators generalize at least occasionally in their own voices and more frequently through the indefinite free indirect discourse of characters. But while modernist constraints on Woolf’s narrative practices could be circumvented, for example, by dispersing abstract generalizations among her characters, Morrison writes at a moment when the problem is not simply which voice is allowed to generalize, but whether any generalizations can claim validity. Morrison uses two particularly important strategies for instituting the “maxims” that are crucial to her political aims. The first is locating such commentary in a concrete instance, which is narrated in the past tense and rendered it specific to a particular group, rather than resting such comment upon a superior narrator’s claim to know the way things universally “are.” For example, the openness of the pronoun “they” in this passage in *The Bluest Eye*, purportedly about Aunt Jimmy’s friends, evokes the experience of African-American women generally: “Everybody in the world was in a position to give

them orders. White women said, 'Do this.' White children said, 'Give me that.' White men said, 'Come here.' Black men said, 'Lay down.' The only people they need not take orders from were black children and each other. But they took all of that and re-created it in their own image . . . (109). Even brief and aphoristic comments are often historicized—"as always the Black people looked at evil stony-eyed and let it run" (Sula, 113)—to give the narrator a didactic latitude that postmodern fiction disavows. At the end of The Bluest Eye, for example, the narrator takes several paragraphs to identify the community's complicity in tragedies like Pecola's; the past-tense discourse transforms the general to the apparently specific: "we were not free, merely licensed; we were not compassionate, we were polite; not good, but well behaved" (159). Morrison has insisted, in language reminiscent of Eliot's, that she tries "to avoid editorializing emotional abstractions" in favor of letting her readers "see the person experiencing the thing."25 These passages do editorialize emotional abstractions, but they operate simultaneously in narrative contexts that let us "see the person experiencing the thing."

Second, Morrison synthesizes postmodern consciousness with African-American politics when she uses a generalizing discourse of negation to "Signify" upon racism in America.26 While the generalizations of Woolf's and Eliot's narrators are almost always positive assertions, Morrison's narrators exercise a kind of negative omniscience by asserting a knowledge of what is not there and what is not possible. In a discursive gesture something like the young bride's, Morrison uses a double-voiced syntax to juxtapose African-American deprivations to white American opportunities. The Bluest Eye, for example, opens with a typographical deconstruction of the Dick-and-Jane myth, moving from "Here is the house. It is green and white. It has a red door" to the irregular but still readable "Here is the house it is green and white it has a red door" to the chaotic and bitterly ironic "Hereisthehouseitisgreenandwhiteithasareddoor." Morrison's narrators thus represent white privilege as the shadowy presence against which their black characters must struggle both materially and psychically. The discourse of negation that Northanger Abbey's narrator

performs as lighthearted literary parody—for example, in distinguishing the ordinary Morelands from the heroic families of fictional fantasy, Morrison’s narrator turns to tragedy as she describes the Breedloves’ lodgings in terms of the life they cannot sustain:

There is nothing more to say about the furnishings. They were anything but describable, having been conceived, manufactured, shipped and sold in various states of thoughtlessness, greed, and indifference. . . .

No one had lost a penny or a brooch under the cushions of either sofa and remembered the place and time of the loss or the finding. . . . No one had given birth in one of the beds. . . . No thrifty child had tucked a wad of gum under the table. . . .

There were no memories among those pieces. Certainly no memories to be cherished. (31–32)

Such narrative acts, disrupting the conventions of novelistic description, expose the legacy of material absence that racism has forced on the African-American community so that it becomes visible to the text’s readers even when it remains unrecognized by the characters. Thus in Song of Solomon, we learn that “Bryn Mawr had done what a four-year dose of liberal education was designed to do: unfit [Corinthians] for eighty percent of the useful work of the world. . . . After graduation she returned to a work world in which colored girls, regardless of their background, were in demand for one and only one kind of work,” and so Corinthians “never let her mistress know she had ever been to college or Europe or could recognize one word of French that Miss Graham had not taught her” (190–91). Similarly, The Bluest Eye’s narrator tells us that Pauline “missed—without knowing what she missed—paints and crayons” (89) and that the men who marry girls like Geraldine who aspire to white ideals “do not know . . . that this plain brown girl will build her nest stick by stick, make it her own inviolable world, and stand guard over its every plant, weed, and doily, even against him” (69). In this way, the narrator is asking her (white?) readers to know through negativity and gaps the horrors of deprivation and suffering. Beloved goes further still, inverting the ideology of slavery so fully that it becomes quite clear who are the “animals” and who are human beings: the “jungle” that became the

27. Such a practice is present in at least one novel by a black female predecessor, Jessie Fauset’s Plum Bun: A Novel without a Moral (1928; reprint, London: Routledge/Pandora, 1985), whose very title announces the ironic definition-by-negation practiced earlier by Austen and later by Morrison. See, for example, the description of Opal Street that opens the book.
racial trope for Africa gets exposed as a construction by which white people have dehumanized themselves: “The screaming baboon lived under their own white skin” (199).

In the movement from *The Bluest Eye* to *Beloved*, which is also a movement away from the fictions of Western epistemology that exposes the racist foundations of the culture in which those fictions have flourished, Morrison makes another critical move: her narrators increasingly refuse to accommodate a white audience. In “Unspeakable Things, Unspoken,” Morrison accounts for the differences in attitude that, she says, led her from the carefully explanatory practices that begin *The Bluest Eye* to the refusal of *Beloved’s* opening sentence to explain anything. One sees this refusal as well in a gradual decrease in her novels of the kind of Western intertext I have associated with writers such as Sarah Fielding and George Eliot, as allusions to Roman and Christian characters and rituals give way to African names and cosmologies. In this change Morrison is in effect making her work less bicultural, giving white readers less and less familiar material on which to ground readings that would assimilate her novels to a white tradition and “universalize” what is historically particular. If it is possible to read *Sula* (though not *The Bluest Eye*) as a novel about “evil” in ways that the narrator does not insist are wholly attachable to race, the evils represented in *Beloved* are unquestionably linked to the pan-Evil of slavery. If *Sula* provides the white narratee a space in which race is not central, *Beloved’s* narrator denies its narratee any such racially unmarked space, any location outside the anguished memories of slavery; the multiplicity of perspectives filtered as free indirect discourse through the narrative voice disallows the safety of distance, while narrative comments make clear who is responsible for the horrors the novel represents. Perhaps *Beloved* is finally the novel without those separate private and public narratees, as if the American bride has forced her husband to read the letter in the “right” way without handing him the key. Perhaps this, finally, is what it means to speak the unspeakable: to return narrative to the site of a black woman’s silencing by naming at once the crimes and the criminals who have wrought that silencing, and from the fragments of “rememory” to make voice whole, not falsely coherent but free from narrative servitude.