



**Through the Dark Eyes of Literature:
Toni Morrison on Whiteness and (African) American Identity**

Sitting at the table doesn't make you a diner, unless you eat some of what's on that plate. Being here in America doesn't make you an American. Being born here in America doesn't make you an American.

(Malcolm X)

We allow our ignorance to prevail upon us and make us think we can survive alone, alone in patches, alone in groups, alone in races, even alone in genders.

(Maya Angelou)

In this country American means white. Everybody else has to hyphenate.

(Toni Morrison)

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Abstract
Race relations in the United States in relation to whiteness, based on literature by African American author Toni Morrison.

Introduction

The cover of the book can only be described as black, white and brown. The portrait of Toni Morrison is powerful: hair combed to the back, a determined look on her face. She is looking at something, although it is unclear what she is looking at. She is wearing a black dress, covered by a light coat and in her hand she is holding a straw hat. The cover of *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* portrays Morrison as woman with a mission.

In *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* Morrison looks closely at whiteness and American identity through classic literary works such as Mark Twain's *Huckleberry Finn* and Ernest Hemingway's *To Have and to Have Not*. Morrison argues that whiteness and American identity is a construction made possible only in opposition to an Africanist presence – an imagined identity, which forms the backdrop to it. Morrison finds evidence for this argument in the literary works she examined and states that no American literary work, not even the ones that have always been perceived free of racial issues, is free of the Africanist presence. Morrison rereads the classic American literary canon of the nineteenth and twentieth century and places it in a new context.

Playing in the Dark is a collection of essays that consists of three parts. According to Morrison, (white) American identity was formed by the common perception of being the opposite of the African slaves. Through her examination and analysis of classic works of American literature, Morrison sheds a new light on American identity. Morrison states that the American identity is based on ideals that can only be applied to whites. African Americans can, for example, hardly identify with the American ideal of freedom, because they were brought to the country as slaves. In her article “On the Backs of Blacks” Morrison explains that new immigrants could easily gain the status of Americanness by recognizing blacks as the ‘other’. “In race talk the move into mainstream America always means buying into the notion of American blacks as the real aliens”, Morrison writes. She confirms that American identity

is white, but argues that it could not have been formed without an Africanist presence.

Therefore American identity, just as the classic literary novels, is not free of race.

Besides looking at American identity, Morrison contributes to the debate in the field of Whiteness Studies. This is a quite new academic field that originated in the early 1980s and really developed in the 1990s. It is closely linked to Ethnic Studies and looks at the definition of whiteness and the white race as a separate race within the ethnic field. This thesis will include a description of whiteness and Whiteness Studies and will mostly focus on Morrison's approach and contribution to this field. Morrison describes whiteness more as an absence rather than anything else: an identity that emerges as the result of not being African or black. With numerous lectures, essays and other articles, Toni Morrison has shown her social and at times political engagement, apart from the literary novels she has written. Morrison earned her academic degrees at Howard University and Cornell University and early in her career taught at Texas Southern University and Howard University. She further developed her academic career as an instructor at the State University of New York at Purchase and also served as Visiting Professor at Yale University and Bard College. Before she was appointed as the Robert F. Gosheen Professor of the Council of Humanities at Princeton University, she was Professor at the State University of New York at Albany.¹ Thanks to her extensive academic career, Morrison has been able, via lectures, essays and other articles, to share her thoughts and ideas about subjects like the American literary canon, American identity and the construction of language. Her book *Playing in the Dark* has been well received in the academic field and has forced scholars to look at American identity, whiteness and the construction of race in America from a different perspective. Morrison brings new findings, a different opinion and revolutionary discoveries to the general debate and therefore her

¹ Information about Morrison's academic career was gathered from the introductory text in *The Heath Anthology of American Literature*.

contribution must be seen as of great importance.

Morrison has focused her research on how whiteness is defined by not being black. This thesis will aim to discover if and how Morrison has used this approach in her own literary works. Therefore this thesis will partly consist of an examination of Morrison's literary works, namely her novels *The Bluest Eye*, *Sula*, *Tar Baby* and *Beloved*, and her short story "Recitatif". All of these works in their own way touch upon whiteness and (African) American identity, which are closely linked. In each of these novels, the relationship between blacks and whites, African American history and/or the concept of beauty related to race, either is an important part of the novel, or is the main subject.

I am aware of the fact that a true comparison between Morrison's ideas about whiteness and how this is projected onto the characters in her novels is not possible. After all, the characters in her novels are African American and their identity cannot be defined by not being black. However, the characters are defined by not being 'the other' and therefore I will turn Morrison's view on whiteness around and look at how the black characters in her novels are defined by not being white and how this is expressed in her novels.

Morrison's approach to whiteness and an examination of her own literary works will hopefully give an answer to the question whether Morrison expresses as a writer, what she states as an academic. In *Playing in the Dark*, she elucidates the assumed absence of blackness, as an in fact very present and important factor in classic, white American literature. She therefore tackles the assumptions that the literary novels she examined in her book were free of race. With the research of Morrison's own literary novels, this thesis will attempt to discover how the characters in her novels are influenced and formed by what is generally defined as essentially 'American' in relation to not being white. This is accompanied by the question what the literary description of the relationship between black and white, based on her academic statement, says about (African) American identity according to Toni Morrison.

I. Whiteness and Whiteness Studies

Defining whiteness is not as simple as describing it as 'being white'. Because what does 'being white' mean? Numerous scholars from different academic fields, such as history, sociology and anthropology, have tried to find an accurate definition of whiteness. They have looked at how the 'white race' can be perceived as just another race among many races, instead of being the standard. Studying whiteness in America has proved to be a complicated and sometimes even emotional task, because it is often linked to white supremacy and/or racism. However, it appears to be almost impossible to study whiteness without looking at race, or the construction of race in America, as well.

In his article "Establishing the Fact of Whiteness", anthropologist John Hartigan Jr. describes whiteness as "a concept that reveals and explains the racial interests of whites and links them collectively to a position of racial dominance" (Hartigan, 497). Hartigan points out that the problem of linking whiteness to racial dominance is that it makes it more difficult to study whiteness as a race. In this context whiteness is opposed to blackness, as being the 'other', but therefore does not stand on its own as a race (John Hartigan). Linking whiteness to racial dominance as Hartigan does is, however, a common definition. The editors of *The Making and Unmaking of Whiteness* go even further by relating whiteness to violence and terror. This again, according to the editors, is associated with the view that "whiteness is properly understood as the historical legacy of colonialism and imperialism" (Brander Rasmussen et al. 12). Racial dominance in this case is the consequence of colonialism in America. When European settlers arrived in America, they first encountered the Native inhabitants of the country and later imported African slaves. According to the editors of *The Making and Unmaking of Whiteness* racial inferiority emerged as a way to "justify a social structure organized around subjugation and exploitation and was then elaborated on by

biologicistic theories of inherent differences in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries” (13).² In her book on the representation of race in America, bell hooks³ uses a citation of black intellectual James Cone to explain the meaning of colonialism and racial dominance or white supremacy as a consequence. Cone argues that “this country was founded for whites and everything that has happened in it has emerged from the white perspective” (qtd. in hooks: 23). hooks underlines that white supremacy is evil.

In the historical context, scholars have linked whiteness to racial dominance. Amanda Lewis argues in her article “What Group?” Studying Whites and Whiteness in the Era of “Color-Blindness” that the dominance of the white race, if whites are in fact part of a race, has to do with power. This is because according to Lewis the “racialization of whites is inherently at some level about domination because the category’s very existence is dependent on the continuation of white supremacy” (Lewis, 625). The dangerous part of defining whiteness as white supremacy is that it tends to suggest that all whites (in America) are racist. Therefore most scholars that have done research on whiteness wish not to go that far. They do, however, seem to agree on whiteness almost always involving white privilege. This can for example mean that whites are favoured compared to racial minorities when it comes to finding a job or housing. It can also mean that so-called ‘white’ neighborhoods are seen as more suitable and safe places to live for whites than so-called ‘black’ neighborhoods. The latter example has been extensively described by George Lipsitz in his article “The Possessive Investment in Whiteness: Racialized Social Democracy and the “White” Problem in American Studies”. Lipsitz, as the title of his article already suggests, speaks of a ‘possessive investment in

² There were several theories developed on the racial inferiority of blacks. For example, French diplomat, writer and ethnologist Joseph-Arthur, comte de Gobineau wrote his influential essay “Essai sur l’inegalite des races humaines” where he defines the white race as superior over other races. Theories like these were used as scientific proof that blacks were inferior and therefore to justify slavery.

³ bell hooks’ real name is Gloria Jean Watkins. She took the pen name bell hooks after the names of her mother and grandmother. Her name is intentionally written without capitals, because hooks has stated that the substance of her books was more important than she was as a person.

whiteness'⁴, which in practice means that whites are privileged in all aspects of the housing process. This ranges from receiving federal loans, finding a proper place to live, to higher fines for illegally dumping garbage in a white neighborhood than in a black neighborhood.

A less graspable definition of whiteness related to white privilege is whiteness as invisibility. This is probably also the most debated definition. It means that whites have become used to white being the standard in such a way, that they do not see whiteness as an actual race. Therefore it is challenging to do research on whiteness amongst whites, because a lot of them do not consider themselves being part of a race. This makes them a difficult case, according to Amanda Lewis. This because of “individual whites’ inability to talk coherently about their racial identity and their sometimes denial of having any identification with white as a collective reality” (Lewis, 626). AnnLousie Keating comes back to the notion of racial dominance in her article “Interrogating “Whiteness,” (De) Constructing “Race”. Keating states that the “invisible omnipresence gives “whiteness” a rarely acknowledged position of dominance and power” (Keating, 905). The consequence of this notion is that minorities become deviations of the so-called white norm (Keating).

When whiteness is described as invisible, it means that it is seen from the white perspective. The editors of *The Making and Unmaking of Whiteness* underline that whiteness is “hypervisible to people of color” (Brander Rasmussen et al. 10).⁵ This is confirmed by bell hooks, who adds that whites tend to forget that non-whites have definitions of whiteness of their own. According to hooks, the amazement of whites that black people watch white people from what she calls an ‘ethnographic’ gaze is actually an expression of racism (hooks).

⁴ George Lipsitz speaks of a literal way of possessive investment in whiteness. According to Lipsitz federal, state, and local policies have created legacies of racialization towards blacks and other ethnic minorities. A consequence of this possessive investment in whiteness is white favoritism in the housing process, as Lipsitz describes in his article.

⁵ According to the editors of the book, this assumption relates to whiteness as being the norm against which other identities are marked and racialized.

It has become clear that one true definition of whiteness does not exist. Whether whiteness is a form of racial dominance or white supremacy, caused by America's history of colonialism, whether it means white privilege or the fact that it is simply invisible. Every definition has its truth and brings up points of discussion.

Thorough research on whiteness and its position among other races has led to the establishment of the academic field of Whiteness Studies. So far it has not become an actual direction of study. It has, however, become an important aspect of academic disciplines like for example history, sociology, cultural and ethnic studies and literary criticism. The field is still developing, with literature on whiteness growing by the day.

The study of whiteness in academic fields in America started in the early 1980s, but really developed later that decade and most of all in the 1990s. The Journal of Blacks in Higher Education Foundation⁶ examined the emergence of Whiteness Studies on America's college campuses. The foundation describes Whiteness Studies "not as a celebration of values that are said to be white, but rather as an examination of how whites obtained the dominant position they now hold in American society" (JBHE Foundation, 60). Therefore whiteness cannot be seen separate from race and examining whiteness often means examining race and the construction of race in America. As mentioned earlier, this research can and has been done in different academic fields.

An important point of focus in academic research has been America and its history of colonialism, slavery and racial segregation. Opponents of the field of Whiteness Studies fear that whiteness is being demonized. Best-known critic of Whiteness Studies is conservative commentator David Horowitz. He is quoted in the article of the JBHE Foundation, saying that "Black Studies celebrates blackness, Chicano Studies celebrates Chicanos. Women's Studies celebrates women and White Studies attacks white people as evil" (qtd. in JBHE Foundation,

⁶ The Journal of Blacks in Higher Education (JBHE) Foundation provides racial statistics with the goal to racially equalize higher education in America and therefore stimulate higher employment positions for blacks.

60). Other criticism suggests that Whiteness Studies tends to promote whiteness and therefore white privilege or maybe even white supremacy. According to Peter Kolchin in his article “Whiteness Studies: The New History of Race in America” the term Whiteness Studies might at first glance “suggest works that promote white identity or constitute part of a racist backlash against multiculturalism and “political correctness”, virtually all the Whiteness Studies authors seek to confront white privilege” (Kolchin, 154). Even though this seems to be somewhat in line with what Horowitz has said, namely that the goal of Whiteness Studies is to put it in a negative perspective, Kolchin states that it is more nuanced than that. Authors of Whiteness Studies use a wide variety of approaches based on the general perception that race is socially constructed (Kolchin). Their goal is not to demonize whiteness, but to examine the position of whites in a racialized American society.

The structure of American society is also an important aspect of Whiteness Studies. This is why Whiteness Studies is often part of American Studies. To study America seems inevitably to include the study of whites. Ruth Frankenberg, who is seen as one of the pioneers of Whiteness Studies, suggests in her book *White Women, Race Matters: The Social Construction of Whiteness* that “whiteness is inflected by nationhood, such that whiteness and Americanness, though by no means coterminous, are profoundly shaped by one another” (Frankenberg, 36).

It has become clear that there are different ways of looking at whiteness and therefore of doing research. Whether Whiteness Studies criticizes whiteness, like Horowitz suggests, or rather celebrates it, the core of Whiteness Studies is to look at what it means to be white. But as is the case with the definition of “whiteness”, this often results in more questions than answers.

II. Toni Morrison and Whiteness

With her pioneering book *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*, Toni Morrison chose to study the construction of whiteness from a literary historical perspective. The collection of essays that the book consists of has brought Morrison to a conclusion that has not been mentioned in the debate on whiteness before, namely whiteness as an absence rather than anything else. Even though it appears to be closely linked, this differs from the earlier mentioned definition of whiteness as being invisible. The latter has to do with whiteness seen (or better said: not seen) from a white perspective, whereas Morrison pays more attention to the involvement of African Americans in the definition of whiteness. In her book she often speaks of ‘Otherness’ and argues that whiteness more than anything comes from not being black. Morrison explains that the whole notion of American identity is based on her definition of the construction of whiteness. She points out in *Playing in the Dark* that

Deep within the word “American” is its association with race. American means white, and Africanist⁷ people struggle to make the term applicable to themselves with ethnicity and hyphen after hyphen after hyphen (47).

What Morrison precisely does in *Playing in the Dark* is to have a close look at, and to reread the American literary canon. Her analysis of the construction of whiteness seen through important classic literary works shows that black people were used to create an American identity. This is expressed in the literature Morrison examined.

In the first part of her book, Morrison points out that there is a general assumption amongst literary historians and critics that “traditional, canonical American literature is free of, uninformed, and unshaped by the four-hundred-year-old presence of, first, African and then African Americans in the United States” (4-5). It means that black people are assumed to

⁷ In her book, Morrison explains that with Africanist people she uses the term for “the denotative and connotative blackness that African peoples have come to signify, as well as the entire range of views, assumptions, readings, and misreadings that accompany Eurocentric learning about these people” (7).

have played no significant role in the creation of American literature and therefore the establishment of what Morrison calls “Americanness”. However, Morrison argues that an American identity could not have been formed without an Africanist presence, or American Africanism. Morrison describes the meaning of these terms as “an investigation into the ways in which a nonwhite, Africanlike (or Africanist) presence or persona was constructed in the United States, and the imaginative uses this fabricated presence served” (6). Morrison states that whites believed that race was a natural phenomenon, instead of socially constructed (Morrison). It is this point of view on blackness that has made white Americans believe that blacks in classic American literature were not present, Morrison argues. Also, literature in the United States seemed to be far more concerned about the architecture of a ‘new white man’ (Morrison). But Morrison states that she cannot understand that blacks were literally not seen. Major literary works, which she examines and analyzes later in her book, could not have carried out the message they did, without the inclusion of an Africanist presence. Besides that, Morrison explains that “what became transparent were the self-evident ways that Americans choose to talk about themselves through and within a sometimes allegorical, sometimes metaphorical, but always choked representation of an Africanist presence” (17). Blackness is there even if you think you do not see it.

From a historical point of view, Morrison goes back to the beginning of what we now know as ‘America’. In the second part of *Playing in the Dark* she is trying to find out how whiteness was constructed in relation to the presence of blacks. According to Morrison, it started with the flight from the Old World to the New World. The reason why people from Europe had chosen to cross the Atlantic was to escape oppression and because they were limited in their freedom and possibilities. An escape from the Old World meant an escape from poverty and oppression, whereas the New World offered a limitless future and freedom.⁸

⁸ Morrison explains that not all immigrants had the same reasons to come to the United States. A big group had religious reasons and others were simply seeking adventure or were driven by financial reasons.

The American literature that was created in this period of time was an embodiment of this prevailing sense and of the quest for freedom. Morrison then moves to the literary Romantic Period and shows that the European aesthetic combined with the emphasis on freedom created a role for blacks. Morrison states that “the slave population, it could be and was assumed, offered itself up as surrogate selves for meditation on problems of human freedom” (37). It was the ‘otherness’ that white Americans were faced with and the notion of being different from or even the opposite of these black slaves that contributed to the establishment of an American identity. The fact that slaves were black and the settlers were white was an obvious and visible difference, but more important was the concept of slavery itself. Slaves, who were not free, reinforced the emphasis on freedom. Slavery again was justified by the belief that blacks were an inferior race, savage and uncivilized. As mentioned earlier, all of these aspects were present in American literature, but contrary to the suggestion that most of the canonical literary works were free of the racial issue, Morrison argues that the Africanist presence was inevitably a core aspect in these works. She explains that as follows:

I want to suggest that these core concerns-autonomy, authority, newness and difference, absolute power-not only become the major themes and presumptions of American literature, but that each one is made possible by, shaped by, activated by a complex awareness and employment of a constituted Africanism. It was this Africanism, deployed as rawness and savagery, that provided the staging ground and arena for the elaboration of the quintessential American identity (44).

Through her analysis of canonical, white American literature, Morrison comes to the conclusion that racial difference in America can be seen in its literature. White writers created what Morrison calls an imagined Africanist persona that was fed by stereotyping, metonymic displacement (color coding), metaphysical condensation, fetishization and a dehistoricizing allegory (67-68). Morrison argues that Africanness and Americanness are profoundly

interwoven. The general assumption is that the American identity is white and Morrison is not contradicting this. She is, however, pointing out that the white American identity could not have been formed without an Africanist presence. This brings us to Morrison's general conclusion on the construction of whiteness. When she speaks of whiteness as an absence, as has become clear from her book *Playing in the Dark*, she means a construction made possible only in opposition to an Africanist presence. Whiteness is an identity that emerges only from not being black. This means that Morrison sees the construction of whiteness not only as an absence, but as something empty as well. This is because Morrison suggests that whiteness, or better said: white, has no meaning. It only gets meaning when an Africanist presence is added. Morrison's findings are provocative and sometimes tackle the assumptions that have so far been made about whiteness.

Morrison's *Playing in the Dark* was well received in the academic world. Reviews of the book are mostly positive and point out that Morrison has challenged the general view on canonical American literature and has brought a new dimension to the debate on whiteness. Linda Krumholz states in her review that after reading *Playing in the Dark*, "it is difficult to imagine reading American literature without recognizing Africanness as the touchstone for the literary imagination of whiteness – Morrison makes the invisible structure become clear" (Krumholz, 244-245). Krumholz also points out that Morrison has focused on blackness in her literary novels, but turns her attention to the construction of whiteness in *Playing in the Dark*. According to Krumholz, "Morrison attempts to overturn pervasive critical agendas that ignore racial representations in white texts and thus impoverish literary studies by erasing the interdependent constructions of whiteness and Africanness" (Krumholz, 244). Shelley Fisher Fishkin writes in her review that Morrison poses a challenge to literary critics and forces academics to look at American identity in relation to an Africanist presence. Fishkin

concludes that “no critic of American culture can afford to ignore the challenge she poses” (Fishkin, 629).

Morrison has become an establishment both as an author of literary novels as well as an academic and intellectual. Her widely acclaimed novels have turned her into a public character and she has earned credibility as a professor. This has offered Morrison opportunities to write provocative essays like she did in *Playing in de Dark* and to be taken seriously. Whatever Morrison writes or states, it cannot be ignored. Hanna Wallinger writes in her article “Toni Morrison’s literary criticism” that Morrison draws attention not only with her findings and statements, but also with her way of writing it down. According to Wallinger, “the great value of Morrison’s literary criticism lies in its playfulness: she draws upon all registers of her writerly skills to combine persuasive argumentation with often graphic, sometimes drastic metaphors” (Wallinger, 122).

As mentioned earlier, Morrison’s view on the construction of whiteness and her definition of the term in *Playing in the Dark* has brought a new dimension to the debate on whiteness. Richard Dyer for example, refers to Morrison in his book *White* where he examines whiteness through film studies. Dyer, who published his book five years after Morrison’s *Playing in the Dark*, comes to a similar conclusion, namely that whiteness is absence rather than anything else. He comes to this statement in the context of whiteness serving as an ideal. According to Dyer “whiteness as an ideal can never be attained, not only because white skin can never be hue white, but because ideally white is absence: to be really, absolutely white is to be nothing” (Dyer, 78). Dyer refers to Morrison and her statement that non-whites have had a significant function in the forming of white identities. In line with what Morrison has formulated in *Playing in de Dark*, Dyer argues that “through the figure of the non-white person, whites can feel what being, physicality, presence, might be like, while also dissociating themselves of the non-whiteness of such things” (Dyer, 80).

Morrison's book has been referred to in numerous academic articles about whiteness and she has found support in her definition of whiteness. But Morrison most of all tackles certain assumptions about whiteness that have been mentioned earlier in this thesis. Whiteness is often linked to white privilege or white supremacy. This means that white is being seen as the superior race, or simply, and less radically, the norm. Therefore other races or ethnicities are automatically condemned to being minorities and are measured against the white norm. Morrison refers to this notion in *Playing in the Dark* and argues that the fact that whiteness was of such importance that race, or non-whites were simply not seen or ignored in canonical American literature. But as Morrison shows with her analyses of several literary works, there is no truth in this assumption. Non-whites were not only present in canonical American literature; they played a significant role in the narrator's identity or in the development of the storyline.

As pointed out earlier, whiteness seen as being empty or absent is different from whiteness seen as invisibility. The latter is a common definition of whiteness and suggests that whites do not consider themselves to be white. But Morrison points out the opposite. In literature, and this can be pulled to a broader context, non-whites have reinforced 'white feelings'. The presence of black people has made whites aware of their white skin. So whiteness is anything but invisibility.

Morrison states that whiteness, whether it is seen in relation to white supremacy or invisibility, cannot exist without a non-white, or what Morrison calls an Africanist presence. The term on its own has no meaning. It is as she concludes the chapter "Romancing the Shadow" in *Playing in the Dark*: "Whiteness, alone, is mute, meaningless, unfathomable, pointless, frozen, veiled, curtained, dreaded, senseless" (59).

III. Morrison's Literature: From *White is Beautiful* to *Black is Beautiful*

"It should be beautiful, and powerful, but it should also work. It should have something in it that enlightens; something in it that opens the door and points the way. Something in it that suggests what the conflicts are, what the problems are. But it need not solve those problems, because it is not a case study, it is not a recipe."

In her earlier discussed and analyzed book *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*; Toni Morrison shares her view on the construction of whiteness. She does so by describing whiteness as an absence, as a result of not being black. Morrison did her research on whiteness from a literary historical perspective and came to her conclusion by analyzing canonical American literature. This part of this thesis will analyze a selection of Morrison's literary novels. Morrison has expressed her academic view on whiteness in *Playing in the Dark*. A study of her literary novels will show how the black characters in her novels are defined by not being white and how Morrison has moved from this subject to more post-racial writing in later works. The literary novels that will be discussed in this thesis are *The Bluest Eye* (1970), *Sula* (1973), *Tar Baby* (1981), *Beloved* (1987) and the short story "Recitatif" (1993). The characters in these novels show an interesting development in how their (African) American identity is formed by whiteness.

The Bluest Eye describes the effect of white perceptions of beauty on a young black girl. Her impossible desire for blue eyes in order to escape her sad reality eventually drives her to insanity. In *Sula* the life of two women in a black community is the centre of the novel. Both women are influenced and formed by the community, but their lives develop in different directions. Nel lives a life according to white middle class standards. Sula breaks the rules of both the black community and the white standard of living. Neither of the women can find satisfaction in their choices. *Tar Baby* challenges the black or African American identity. A

young black woman, Jadine, has accepted white cultural standards and views and has adjusted to the white standard definition of beauty. The arrival of the black drifter Son challenges Jadine's life. He accuses her of rejecting her blackness. *Tar Baby* marks a shift from the earlier mentioned novels, where white is seen as the ideal form of beauty to a confirmation of the beauty of blackness. *Beloved* is a tale about slavery, seen from the African American perspective. White characters are hardly present in the novel, but play an important role in the lives of the main (black) characters. They are confronted with their blackness on a daily basis through their names (Paul D, a slave name) and their scars (on Sethe's back). More than any of the above-mentioned novels, the short story "Recitatif" involves the reader in Morrison's view on whiteness. In this story about two women who meet one another as little girls in children's home and keep on meeting each other in later stages of their lives, Morrison challenges the reader's prejudices about race. The intentional absence of describing which of the women is black and which one is white, forces the reader to draw his or her own conclusion. Skin color does play an important role in the story, but the reading experience in relation to race is different for every reader.

The analysis of Morrison's novels is based on her view on the construction of whiteness that she describes in her book *Playing in the Dark*. This particular examination attempts to discover how the characters in Morrison's novels are influenced and formed by what is generally defined as essentially 'American' in relation to not being black. The characters in Morrison's first novels are defined by not being white, but it appears that Morrison moves from whiteness as the standard for blacks to a focus on African American culture and ancestry where whiteness is pushed to the background as an identification for blacks.

Toni Morrison published her first novel, *The Bluest Eye*, in 1970. When it was published it did not get a great deal of attention, but was later recognized as one of Morrison's

major and most important books.⁹ The novel describes the life of the young black girl Pecola Breedlove¹⁰ and is told from Claudia's, the narrator's, perspective. Claudia looks back on her life in a black community in Lorain, Ohio, in which Pecola plays a major part. She represents the sorrow and humiliation a black person in America can experience. Pecola is either perceived as ugly (mostly by the black people in the community), or simply as invisible (often by the white people she encounters). She does not receive love from her mother. Pauline Breedlove is not treated well by her husband Cholly and instead she turns to picture shows, where white men were taking such good care of their women (95). The white family Pauline works for as a servant is the embodiment of this desire for white beauty and as a result, Pauline Breedlove is more affectionate towards the white children of the family than her own children. Pecola reminds Pauline of her own household that she hates. Pecola's father, Cholly Breedlove, is an abusive drunkard who is suffering from the consequences of a tragic childhood, based on his blackness. He rapes Pecola in an act of drunkenness, because he feels it is the only way he can show his love for his daughter. Pecola gets pregnant but loses the baby. After numerous traumatic encounters, it is this last experience that eventually drives Pecola to insanity. Throughout the book, Pecola is fascinated by a picture of child actress Shirley Temple on a cup she drinks from in Claudia's house. She relates Shirley Temple's gold blonde hair and blue eyes to her success and believes blue eyes would offer her an escape from her tragic life. Pecola's insanity is symbolized by the belief she has finally received blue eyes.

⁹ In her article "The Bluest Eye and Sula: black female experience from childhood to womanhood", Agnes Suranyi explains that after the publication of *The Bluest Eye* in 1970, the novel received little understanding from the readership. The women's movement was already well underway, but did not recognize the novel for what it was. The book was out of print for quite a long time and was only re-discovered half a decade after its first publication.

¹⁰ Morrison's choice of the name Breedlove is an interesting one. Madam C.J. Walker, born Sarah Breedlove, was the first self made millionaire in the United States. In the early twentieth century, Madam Walker developed cosmetic products for black women to whiten their skin and straighten their hair. Madam Walker was an African American woman and in 1917 she owned the biggest company ever had by a black person in the United States.

The Bluest Eye describes what effect white perceptions of beauty can have on a black community. Whiteness dominates the lives of the characters in the novel and it becomes clear how painful it can be to long for something unrealistic as whiteness for a black person. Agnes Suranyi underlines the importance of the white Hollywood movie stars in the novel in her article “The Bluest Eye and Sula: black female experience from childhood to womanhood”. According to Suranyi “the oft-mentioned film stars in the text – Shirley Temple, Jean Harlow, Ginger Rogers, etc – serve to emphasize the omnipresence of the white gaze and its pernicious influence on the identity formation of the psychologically weakest characters in the book” (Suranyi 11-25). Pecola is that “weakest character” in the book. She is constantly confronted with her blackness, and therefore perceived ugliness, through her encounters with others. The white storekeeper, Mr. Yacobowski, refuses to touch her black hand when he is selling Mary Jane’s¹¹ to Pecola, because he relates her blackness to dirtiness. It underlines Pecola’s insignificance as a black girl and the attempt of the white storekeeper not to see her. Another important encounter is Pecola’s confrontation with Geraldine. Geraldine has moved to Lorain from the South and she is pursuing whiteness in every aspect of her life. This is shown in the way she dresses, the way she dresses her son Junior and tries to hide his Afro hair, and the way she arranges her household. She forbids Junior to play with ‘niggers’ and encourages him to play with white children. When Pecola is falsely accused by Junior of killing Geraldine’s beloved cat, Geraldine calls Pecola “you nasty little black bitch” (72). The fact that another black person points to Pecola’s blackness, confuses her and it is that part that hurts her. It underlines her ugliness for being black and how a black person’s longing for white beauty can result in racism towards one’s own race. The process of Pecola’s traumatic encounters with others ends up in chaos, because of her quest for the impossible: blue eyes, eventually makes her insane. The Dick and Jane nursery rhyme at the beginning of the book

¹¹ Pecola goes to the store to buy Mary Jane’s, candy that is named after a girl with blonde hair and blue eyes. Morrison describes Pecola’s desire for the candy as her desire for blue eyes; for whiteness. For Pecola, “to eat the candy is somehow to eat the eyes, to eat Mary Jane. Love Mary Jane. Be Mary Jane” (38).

serves as a metaphor for this chaos.¹² The Dick and Jane book series was very popular with children from approximately the 1930s to the 1970s. The books were created to teach children how to read with a lot of pictures and repetitive phrases. Even though the Dick and Jane stories were popular, they, however, reinforced the idea of whiteness as the standard. It was difficult for little black children to identify with Dick and Jane; Pecola in *The Bluest Eye* is an example. She does not have loving parents and a nice house, as is reflected in the manner in which the nursery rhyme is used at the beginning of the novel. The rhyme is repeated three times and by the third time ends in a chaos of words:

Here is the house. It is green and white. It has a red door. It is very pretty.

Here is the house it is green and white it has a red door it is very pretty

Hereisthehouseitisgreenandwhiteithasareddooritisverynice

The chaos of words symbolizes the chaos of Pecola's life, but also the chaos of a black person's life in general. The rhyme shows how the pursuit of whiteness can end up in chaos.

In *The Bluest Eye* Toni Morrison questions the perception of white racial beauty and in the end condemns it. The last paragraph is maybe the most powerful one:

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. It's too late (164).

This paragraph can be seen as a metaphor for the situation of black people in America; how blacks do not stand a chance because they are not 'nurtured' by their own land. The paragraph refers not only to white hostility towards blacks, but also to black hostility towards blacks in their quest for whiteness. The perception of beauty and how beauty is related to whiteness is

¹² *The Bluest Eye* begins with an old nursery rhyme about Dick and Jane. First, it is written the way it is 'supposed' to be written, with punctuations and capitals. In the second version, the capitals and the punctuation are removed. The third version had no spaces, no capitals and no punctuation. It has become almost impossible to read the verse.

in line with what Morrison argues in *Playing in the Dark*. In this book she states how black characters were considered invisible in canonical American literature. Their insignificance was underlined by the fact that they often did not have a name (like in works of Ernest Hemingway, an author Morrison thoroughly analyzes in her book) or were positioned as inferior. The notion of white beauty becomes clear in again a work of Hemingway, where a white woman with dark hair colours it blonde, after she finds out her husband has slept with black women. Morrison claims that whiteness is empty, that it denotes absence. *The Bluest Eye* captures the essence of this emptiness and shows how it can end up in tragedy: a longing for whiteness, and thus emptiness, can result in insanity.

With her second novel Morrison moves from early female childhood experiences in *The Bluest Eye* to the development of womanhood in *Sula*. Morrison describes this development through the friendship of two very different women, Sula and Nel. The way the lives of these two women develop in different directions is significant, because their blackness and the unavoidable white gaze form them both. However, they experience it in different ways.

The opening chapter of *Sula*, which describes the black community of The Bottom, a part of the valley town of Medallion, is very important. Ironically, The Bottom is situated on the hills of Medallion. But the fact that white people had sent the blacks to the hills and also that 'bottom' could have as much meaning as 'low' or 'inferior', automatically showed in what position blacks found themselves in Medallion. But the geographical position of The Bottom is also significant because the isolated place of the blacks has formed a close and intimate community. It is in this community that Sula and Nel grow up. The women in their family influence both women: their mothers and grandmothers. Helene, Nels's mother, is striving to lead a life that is completely different from her mother's, who was a prostitute. Morrison herself has stated that for a black woman in the first half of the twentieth century, if

she did not want a husband and children, prostitution was often the only road to freedom. While Helene's mother had chosen to be free, Helene rejects this choice by the way she lives her life. She is married with children and running a tight and organized household. However, Helene feels that to reject her mother, she has to reject her blackness. Nel is therefore brought up in a family that embraces white middle class standards and rejects blackness. Helene, for example, encourages Nel to pull her nose so it will look nice when she grows up (55). Helene also combs Nel's hair with a hot comb to smoothen it (55). Nel rebels against her mother by becoming friends with Sula. Helene does not approve of this friendship because of the fact that Sula's mother was too black, or as can be read in the book: "sooty" (29). The remark is symbolic for the life Sula and her mother and grandmother live: the complete opposite of what Nel is used to. Both Sula's grandmother Eva and her mother Hannah have chosen to live freely, but have not made the drastic choice of ending up in prostitution. They live their lives by their own choices. Eva dominates the household as is described in the novel: "Eva Peace, who sat in a wagon on the third floor directing the lives of her children, friends, strays, and a constant stream of borders" (30). Hannah finds her short moments of joy in casual sex with men. She refuses to become emotionally attached and this behaviour teaches Sula that "sex was pleasant and frequent, but otherwise unremarkable" (44). Sula's path in life is the pursuit of absolute and total freedom. Just like her mother, she has casual sex with (mostly married) men and she leaves Medallion to travel around. However, she cannot find satisfaction in her life; she lacks emotional connection to another person, even to Nel, as Sula seduces Nel's husband. Sula eventually dies alone. Nel feels limited in her quest for identity by the way she was raised by her mother. As a little girl she already felt the need to find confirmation in who she was. "I'm me. I'm not their daughter. I'm not Nel. I'm me. Me" (28).

Besides her major connection to Nel, Sula is also linked to Shadrack. Shadrack suffers from his invisibility as a black man, which eventually drives him to insanity.¹³ Shadrack serves as a soldier in World War I but is completely neglected and ignored when he returns to America. Morrison describes a personal story, based on true historical facts on how African Americans were called to serve their country in the war, but were neglected by their country once they returned. Sula's first encounter with Shadrack is marked by him saying "always" (63). Based on Shadrack's life as a black outcast and Sula's rebellious life, Shadrack's remark is a confirmation that they will always be black. Agnes Suranyi writes in her article that "Sula and Shadrack share the painful experience of blackness and outlawry and are linked by their lack of the ability to feel" (Suranyi, 18).

With her novel *Sula*, Morrison is showing how the white gaze and white ignorance can have its effect on black people. She has done this in *The Bluest Eye* as well, but in *Sula* it becomes clear how this condemnation of blackness appears in different ways. The story of Nel shows that adoption of white standards cannot erase blackness. Nel needs the blackness of Sula to confirm her own identity as a black woman. Sula experiences that the American ideal of freedom is not meant for a black woman. Her choice to live freely, without a man and a stable household, is rejected by the black community and not accepted by the white community. Morrison makes clear that the identities of the characters in *Sula* experience ambivalence: how to embrace blackness in a white dominant world.

According to Malin Walter Pereira, Morrison's novel *Tar Baby* did not receive as much attention as it deserved.¹⁴ Pereira believes that *Tar Baby* marks a shift in Morrison's writing and that with this novel "Morrison finally breaks free from the need to focus primarily

¹³ The story of Shadrack in this perspective shows similarity with Pecola Breedlove's story in *The Bluest Eye*. With the story of Shadrack, Morrison is again showing that ignorance and rejection by whites can lead to mental destruction and eventually insanity.

¹⁴ Pereira writes in his article "Periodizing Toni Morrison's Work from *The Bluest Eye* to *Jazz*: The Importance of *Tar Baby*" that the novel was "the least admired, least researched, and least taught of her novels." *Tar Baby* has received "little critical attention."

on white ideas, aesthetic or otherwise” (Pereira, 74). This part of the chapter will focus on how Morrison had left the white ideas with *Tar Baby* and moved to a black aesthetic. Still, identity struggles remain an important aspect in *Tar Baby*.

In her earlier novels, like *The Bluest Eye* and *Sula*, the characters struggle with either white perceptions of beauty or white ignorance. In *Tar Baby*, one of the main characters in the novel, Jadine seems to have accepted and adapted to white European culture and values. She is educated at the Sorbonne University in Paris, works as a model in Paris and is engaged to a white man. White millionaire Valerian Street finances Jadine’s education and Jadine appears to be comfortable with being Valerian’s and his wife Margaret’s black showpiece. In the house of the family Street on a Caribbean island called Isle des Chevaliers, Jadine functions as a bridge between Valerian and Margaret, and their servants Sydney and Ondine, who are Jadine’s uncle and aunt. Jadine basically keeps the hierarchy in order by being black and white at the same time. However, certain scenes in the book reveal that Jadine is not as perfectly comfortable in her role and she appears to be. At one point Margaret and Jadine talk about their hair. Jadine remarks that she does not like her Afro hair and that she would prefer a haircut like Margaret’s. Jadine is obviously rejecting a part of her blackness here, but when Margaret says something about her Afro hair, Jadine is uncomfortable. She is uncomfortable “with the way Margaret stirred her into blackening up or universalling out, always alluding to or ferreting out what she believed were racial characteristics” (62).

The arrival of drifter Son disrupts everything and everybody in the house of the family Street and their servants. Son is black and Margaret, who discovers him in her closet where he was hiding, points out his blackness to him. When she finds him she is so scared, that the only thing she can blurt out is “Black” (77). She later also refers to him as a nigger and it becomes clear that the thing which bothers Margaret most about Son hiding in her closet, is the fact that he is black. Still, Son does not seem to mind that he is confronted with his blackness, in

opposition to Jadine. Son is comfortable with his blackness and this aspect challenges Jadine's identity as a black woman who is living according to a white lifestyle. In one of their first encounters when they are alone, Son confronts Jadine with her choice of 'being white' in the following conversation:

“Rape? Why you little white girls always think somebody's trying to rape you?”

“White?” She was startled out of fury. “I'm not...you know I'm not white!”

“No? Then why don't you settle down and stop acting like it” (121)

Son ends the fight with the meaningful words “I can smell you” (122). Son is making clear here that Jadine may act as a white woman, he as a pure black man can see through it though and will always see her blackness. Jadine basically surrenders to her blackness when she and Son develop a relationship. They move back to America, to live in New York City. But Son cannot adjust to life in the big city and Jadine's high-class friends appal him. He realizes that Jadine is still living according to white standards even now that she is with him. When he takes Jadine to his small hometown, she does not feel comfortable in the close black community and they return to New York. A big fight ends their relationship and Jadine eventually decides to go back to Paris and marry the white man. Son follows her to Isle des Chevaliers, but ends up in the so-called swamp with blind horsemen. He is determined to find Jadine, but the novel ends in the swamp, so it will never become clear if Son surrenders to the horsemen or if he goes after Jadine.

With *Tar Baby* Toni Morrison moved in a different direction than she did in her earlier novels. Instead of pursuing whiteness, Jadine has actually more or less become white in *Tar Baby*. The novel shows, however, that the identity struggle does not end by becoming white; Jadine feels that her blackness stands in her way. But the arrival of Son makes her realize she does not want to reject her blackness completely. Morrison shows that black people have got a choice. She shows this with the fact that Jadine decides to go back to Europe. She is not

condemned to her blackness, like Pecola, Sula and Nel are. She has a choice. But by ending the novel with Son in the swamp, Morrison is moving away from white ideas and she turns her attention to African American ancestry. The blind horsemen that Son encounters in the swamp relate to an African American folktale of the blind horsemen and the tar baby, hence the title of the book. By naming her novel after an African American folktale and ending the story with it, Morrison underlines the importance of black history and culture. White standards and white beauty have become less important than in her earlier novels. It seems that Morrison is trying to say that even if blacks have a choice, or more choices than they did in the past, they should never give up their black roots in exchange for whiteness. This statement is reinforced by one of the last pages of the novel, where Thérèse tells Son to forget about Jadine. “She has forgotten her ancient properties” (308).

IV. Morrison's Literature: Post-racial Writing

Her novel *Tar Baby* has marked Morrison's shift from the African American pursuit of whiteness to a confirmation of African American culture and ancestry. Morrison has moved from there to what can be described as post-racial writing. Her novel *Beloved* and most of all her short story "Recitatif" move beyond racial lines to where white and black perceptions of beauty are not relevant anymore. This does not mean that being black or white has lost its meaning in both *Beloved* and "Recitatif". The characters are, however, less formed by the other.

The publication of *Beloved* meant Morrison's definite breakthrough. The widely praised book received the Pulitzer Prize for fiction in 1988, a year after its publication in 1987. The responses to *Beloved* were very positive and the novel helped Morrison to become an establishment in mainstream American literature.¹⁵ With this novel Morrison has departed the subject of identity formation related to white and/or black beauty. Instead, she focuses on a slavery story, seen from the African American perspective. In *Beloved* white characters are marginalized, but they are, however, of great importance in the story.

The story is centred on former slave Sethe. She is traumatized by her history of being a slave. She lives in a house in the free state of Ohio, but she is still enslaved by the memories of her past. Her two sons have left her, her mother-in-law Baby Suggs has passed away and her deceased daughter haunts the house. Sethe is left alone with her daughter Denver, but one day Paul D shows up. He is a former slave as well and from the same plantation as Sethe was. Sethe and Paul D become romantically involved, but their relationship is seriously disrupted with the arrival of Beloved. The ghost of Beloved, Sethe's daughter whom she killed to

¹⁵ Claudine Raynaud states in her article "*Beloved* or the shifting shapes of memory" that *Beloved* is "one of the most important American novels in the post-war era" (43). This statement underlines that the novel, and for that matter Toni Morrison, is not put in an 'African American box' but is seen as an important literary work in general American literature.

protect her from being taken back to the plantation, eventually haunts Paul D out of the house, alienates Denver from her mother and takes all of Sethe's energy away. In the end, Beloved is removed through exorcism and Sethe and Paul D are able to try to settle down and forget about the past. It is captured in Paul D's sentence "we got more yesterday than anybody. We need some kind of tomorrow" (322).

The ghost of Beloved haunting Sethe and the other characters in the novel represents the characters being haunted by slave memories. Therefore they are not able to live life as a free person. As a result of sharing their slave memories Sethe and Paul D are never really able to live in the present; they are stuck in the past. However, Morrison makes a shift to the future through Beloved's exorcism. The novel reveals that she was forgotten "like a bad dream" (323). But apart from closing the chapter of memories, Morrison also makes a statement about slavery, about the absent presence of whiteness. The role of whites in the novel is marginalized, whites hardly appear in *Beloved*. But Morrison shows through the traumatic memories of Sethe, Paul D and Baby Suggs that an absence can be very present. The fact that Beloved was forgotten after she disappeared did not mean she was not there anymore. The same can be said about slavery and thus about whites. Morrison describes the history of slavery in America from an African American perspective. The novel can be seen as an answer to white versions of the history of slavery. According to Malin Walther Pereira *Beloved* "is not focused on correcting white versions of slavery" (Pereira, 76). Pereira states that the novel is more about focusing on black characters and keeping white characters as marginal as possible.

In *Beloved* being black automatically implies being a slave, because even when one is free, one can never escape from the ties of slavery. The misery that this causes is blamed on the whites. This is captured in Baby Suggs saying, "[...] there was no bad luck in the world but white people. They don't know when to stop." (122,123) This also shows that even though

whites are not physically present in the novel and in the “character’s” lives after they escape the plantation, their absence remains powerful.

With *Beloved* Morrison moves away from black identity struggles in relation to white perceptions of beauty. She goes back to slavery and tells the tragic story from an African American perspective. With this novel Morrison is criticizing what she discovered in *Playing in the Dark*, namely that African Americans were ignored in mainstream white American literature. Her statement that whiteness is a result of not being black is revealed in *Beloved* by turning it around. Whites are hardly present, but their presence is very much felt.

With her short story “Recitatif” Toni Morrison illustrates what she questions in the preface to her book *Playing in the Dark*, namely:

For reasons that should not need explanations here, until very recently, and regardless of the race of the author, the readers of virtually all of American fiction have been positioned as white. I am interested to know what that assumption has meant to the literary imagination.¹⁶

The short story “Recitatif” involves the reader in the literary imagination of race and racelessness and challenges the reader’s prejudices. In that preface, Morrison asks: “how is ‘literary whiteness’ and ‘literary blackness’ made, and what is the consequence of that construction” (Morrison, xii)? According to Abena P.A. Busia “Recitatif is one of Morrison’s early attempts to address this question” (Busia, 103).

The story is about two women (one black, one white) who meet each other as little girls in a shelter and become close friends in the four months they are there together. They keep running into one another in different stages of their lives. Twyla and Roberta each end up on a different part of the social ladder. Twyla works as a cashier and waitress and lives a sober life with her husband who is a fireman. Roberta on the other hand is married to a wealthy

¹⁶ This is one of the last paragraphs in the preface to Morrison’s book *Playing in the Dark*. In this paragraph Morrison mentions racial unconsciousness or awareness in literary texts and asks the question what influence this has on language.

man. The reader cannot find out which of the two women is black or white. Twyla and Roberta find out that while they have grown older they do not have anything in common apart from one important memory they still share and that is the accident of Maggie, an old woman who worked at the shelter. Roberta and Twyla each interpret the incident around Maggie differently. The case is never settled and therefore Roberta and Twyla can never settle their own differences such as their skin color and most of all their different social circumstances. The most important aspect of the story is that the reader is made aware of his own prejudices because the skin color of both women is never revealed. At the same time the women in the story have prejudices against each other because of their skin color. Neither of the women is uncomfortable with their own race, but they are constantly making themselves and each other aware of their skin color and how to act upon it. The fact that Maggie was black according to Roberta has a deep meaning for both of them. "Maybe I am different now, Twyla. But you're not. You're the same little state kid who kicked a poor old black lady when she was down on the ground. You kicked a black lady and you have the nerve to call me a bigot" (2405). In "Recitatif" it is not just their own skin color which defines both women, but also the fact that the other has a different one. As children, their mothers made Twyla and Roberta aware of the other's skin color. Twyla's mother had said people of the other race "never washed their hair and they smelled funny" (2396). And Roberta's mother refused to shake Twyla's mother's hand.

Morrison is basically taking literary whiteness and literary blackness away by not revealing the race of the women. But by making the reader aware of the fact that one of the two is white and the other is black, she is placing the literary imagination onto the reader. This results in a very uncomfortable confrontation with one's own racial or racist perceptions. It is up to the reader to decide how important race is in "Recitatif". Instead of letting the characters in her novels be formed by Morrison's definition of whiteness, the reader is forming the

characters in “Recitatif”. The short story was, as Morrison has explained, an experiment to see whether race can be taken away. By doing so, Morrison has moved the literary imagination beyond racial lines.

Conclusion

“It is time for the Obama of literature”. The conclusion of the review of Toni Morrison’s latest novel *A Mercy* in Dutch newspaper “NRC Handelsblad” calls for African American writers to cross the racial line. According to the author of the review, Auke Hulst, the election of Barack Obama as the next president of the United States symbolizes a new chapter in America’s racial history. Obama has not allowed race to become an issue and Hulst believes it is time that African American authors should do the same.

Toni Morrison can be seen as a pioneer in post-racial writing. She started her literary career in a time when African Americans were still fighting for equal rights. Her early novels like *The Bluest Eye* and *Sula* show the devastating effect of whiteness for a black person. But Morrison has moved on from there. Her novel *Tar Baby* leaves the impossible pursuit of whiteness and underlines the importance of African American culture and ancestry. With her awarded novel *Beloved*, but most of all with her short story “Recitatif” Morrison has once and for all erased the racial line. The characters in her stories being formed not being ‘the other’ is not a major topic anymore.

Her latest novel, *A Mercy*, released in the Fall of 2008, can be seen as a next step in Morrison’s process of moving beyond racial lines. The story is set in the seventeenth century. In a recent video interview with “The New York Times”, Morrison has explained that she chose this time period, because in the seventeenth century the United States was not yet a country, not even an idea. “It was just a continent where everybody was struggling; the Portuguese, the French and the Brits”, Morrison explains in conversation with New York Times’ Sam Tanenhaus. “I was looking for a time before black and slavery became married. Before racism became established.” *A Mercy* is the story about a young black girl who is ‘given’ to a Dutch Portuguese settler, Jakob Vaark. Vaark is morally against slavery, but

accepts the 'gift' because he feels the girl will be better off at his farm. He also hopes the girl can help his wife get over her sorrow of her lost daughter. *A Mercy* presents a world where, as Morrison has stated, "everybody was exotic." There is a Native American slave and a free black man. Morrison has said about this to Tanenhaus that 'dividing the world up ethnically or racially was a deliberate and sustained event that grew. I wanted to write about what the world could have been like, before that happened.'

Morrison has used a lot of ways to share her thoughts, views and concerns about literature and society with her readers. Her academic career has enabled her to do so through essays, lectures and other articles. Her literary novels have enabled her to symbolize these views and concerns and reach a bigger audience. Her book *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* expresses Morrison's views on whiteness. Through the analysis of classic American literature, Morrison has come to the conclusion that whiteness is absence. Whites are formed by not being black and therefore whiteness can not exist without an Africanist presence. The term on its own is empty. In her novels Morrison has turned this notion around. The black characters in her books are formed by not being white. With her first novels, Morrison shows a process of moving from 'white is beautiful' to 'black is beautiful'. In her article "Rediscovering Black History", that served as a review of *The Black Book*, a book that she co-edited, Morrison criticizes the slogan 'Black is Beautiful'. This slogan was created during the Civil Rights and Black Power Movement. According to Morrison, the slogan was presented as a reaction to white values, but had the opposite effect. Morrison states that "the phrase was nevertheless a full confession that white definitions were important to us (having to counteract them meant they were significant) and that the quest for physical beauty was both a good and worthwhile pursuit" (Morrison, "Rediscovering"). Morrison has paid extensive attention to this subject in her novels, most of all in *The Bluest Eye* and *Tar Baby*. In *The Bluest Eye* a little girl's life is dominated by the pursuit of blue eyes (meaning

white perceptions of beauty) and it eventually drives her insane, because as a black girl she will never reach that goal. In *Tar Baby* a young black woman has fully accepted white values and beauty standards, until a black man alerts her to the fact that she is rejecting her black ancestry. With both novels Morrison is sending a clear signal that the pursuit of (white) beauty can result in identity struggles and even insanity.

But Morrison has moved on from there. *Beloved* and “Recitatif” show a departure from the quest for physical (white) beauty and a beginning of post-racial writing. Her latest novel *A Mercy* is a continuation of this process and a confirmation of the fact that Morrison has moved in a different direction than she did with her first novels. The review in “NRC Handelsblad” calls for a ‘Obama of American literature’ and Toni Morrison might be the answer.

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