

“Speaking the Unspeakable”

SHAME, TRAUMA, AND MORRISON’S FICTION

Ann duCille, in her analysis of what she calls “the occult of true black womanhood,” expresses concern about the “critical stampede” that has been attracted to black women. “Today there is so much interest in black women that I have begun to think of myself as a kind of sacred text. Not me personally, of course, but me as black woman, the other. Within the modern academy, racial and gender alterity has become a hot commodity that has claimed black women as its principal signifier” (83, 81). “[P]olitically correct, intellectually popular, and commercially precious,” the black woman writer is constructed as the exotic, idealized Other, according to duCille (84). Toni Morrison, who published her first novel in 1970 and was awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature a scant twenty-three years later in 1993, has attracted the kind of critical stampede duCille describes. If Morrison was sometimes chastised by early reviewers for not transcending the “limiting classification ‘black woman writer,’” among contemporary commentators “it has become almost unimaginable or unspeakable to mention the struggles that marked” Morrison’s early career as a novelist (Peterson 462, 461). Now something of a sacred text herself, Morrison has “entered superstardom,” becoming known as “*the* American and African American (woman) writer to reckon with” (Peterson 464). And just as Morrison’s seven novels—*The Bluest Eye*, *Sula*, *Song of Solomon*, *Tar Baby*, *Beloved*, *Jazz*, and *Paradise*—have attracted intense critical scrutiny, so Morrison, herself, has been subjected to the scrutinizing gaze of her many interviewers.

“I see them select or make up details to add to the fixed idea of me they came in the door with—the thing or person they want me to be,” Morrison has remarked of the people who have interviewed her over the years (Naylor 215). Portrayed variously by her interviewers, Morrison has been constructed

as a romanticized exotic—if not mythic—black artist figure. She has been described as having a magnetic personality and a rich, compelling voice; as a moody and prickly person; and as a warm and amusing individual. One interviewer, who describes Morrison as a "larger than life" woman who has a "powerful way" of fixing people in her gaze and transfixing them with her voice, comments that Morrison "does not so much give an interview as perform one, in a silken voice that can purr like a saxophone or erupt like brass" (Fussell 280). "Morrison's voice recalls the rich sound of our best preachers," writes another. "She is, by turns, warm or wry as she reflects on the wonder of it all. . . . She is sister, teacher, aunt. She speaks with wisdom" (Washington 234). Another interviewer describes how in her conversation Morrison can rapidly "switch from raging about violence in the United States to joyfully skewering the hosts of the trash TV talk shows through which she confesses to channel-surfing late in the afternoon, assuming her work is done" (Schappell 86). Yet another interviewer remarks that Morrison is an enjoyable luncheon companion—"a woman of subversive jokes, gossip and surprising bits of self-revelation (the laureate unwinds to Court TV and soap operas)" (Dreifus 73).

If Morrison often plays to—or skillfully plays—her interviewers, she is, as her descriptions of her writing reveal, a driven woman, a woman who lives intensely within the private world of her writer's imagination and often finds her characters better company than the people who surround her. Writing to her is a "compulsion"; it is like "talking deep" within herself; it is an "extraordinary way of thinking and feeling" (Stepito 24, Tate 169, Watkins 45). An author who writes under a kind of necessity and who has insisted from the beginning of her writing career that art is political (*Black Creation* 3–4), Morrison has viewed part of her cultural and literary task as a writer to bear witness to the plight of black Americans. "[Q]uiet as it's kept much of our business, our existence here, has been grotesque. It really has," she has commented (Jones and Vinson 181). "My people are being devoured" (LeClair 121). One of her central concerns is "how to survive *whole* in a world where we are all of us, in some measure, *victims of something*" and "in no position to do a thing about it" (Bakerman 40). Indeed, she deliberately puts her characters "in situations of great duress and pain," and even in "grotesque" situations, in order to "know who they are." Through her "push towards the abyss," as Morrison remarks, she can discover why some people survive and some do not (Jones and Vinson 180–81). Writing provides Morrison with a "safe" place in which she can "think the unthinkable" (Bakerman 39) as she confronts the effects of shame and trauma on the lives of African Americans.

Despite Morrison's unrelenting and unflinching presentation of painful and shameful race matters in her novels, commentators have repeatedly focused on what some have called the magic realism of her novels, or they

have placed her fiction in the context of a black feminist aesthetic or black oral tradition, or they have uncovered the black folk or communal values embodied in her work. Just as race matters, according to Morrison, remain unspeakable in American culture—and this despite the unending talk and academic theorizing about race—so race matters remain largely unspoken in the critical conversation that surrounds Morrison’s works. Even those critics who have focused their attention on the social-psychological and historical-political concerns voiced in Morrison’s fiction have tended to minimize—or even ignore—the sensitive, and at times painful, race matters that pervade and drive Morrison’s novelistic narratives.

Insistently, Morrison focuses on inter- and intraracial violence in her fiction, even at the potential cost of alienating, or even unsettling or hurting, some of her readers. But because Morrison’s novels are carefully designed and make self-conscious use of folklore and myths, critics have tended to avoid or downplay the violent, even perverse, subject matter of Morrison’s novels. Dramatizing the physical and psychological abuse visited on African Americans in white America, Morrison shows that, as some trauma theorists have argued, trauma can result not only from a “single assault” or “discrete event,” but also from a “constellation of life’s experiences,” a “prolonged exposure to danger,” or a “continuing pattern of abuse” (Erikson 457). Morrison focuses not only on the collective memories of the trauma of slavery in works like *Beloved*, but also on the horrors of the postbellum years and of racist and urban violence in works like *Song of Solomon* and *Jazz*. She is also intent on portraying the trauma of defective or abusive parenting or relationships and also the black-on-black violence that exists within the African-American community. In Cholly’s rape of his daughter, Pecola, in *The Bluest Eye*; in Eva Peace’s setting fire to her son, Plum, in *Sula*; in Sethe’s slitting her infant daughter’s throat in *Beloved*; in Guitar’s attempted murder of his friend, Milkman Dead, in *Song of Solomon*; in Joe Trace’s hunting down and shooting his young lover, Dorcas, in *Jazz*; and in the Ruby men’s massacre of the Convent women in *Paradise*, Morrison dramatizes what one commentator has aptly described as the “oppressor in the next room, or in the same bed, or no farther away than across the street” (D. Johnson 6). Morrison represents the speechless terror of trauma in recurring scenes of dissociated violence—vivid and highly visual scenes in which her characters experience violence from a detached perspective. And she also conveys the haunting and driven quality of traumatic and humiliated memory as she depicts the “rememories”—that is, spontaneous recurrences of the past—that plague her characters. Presenting jarring depictions of child and spousal abuse, incest and infanticide, self-mutilation and self-immolation, suicide and murder, Morrison’s novels serve an important cultural function as they reflect and reflect on the incomprehensible violence that pervades the lives of

many African Americans in our "catastrophic age," an age in which, it has been argued, trauma may "provide the very link between cultures" (Caruth 11).

Describing herself as living in "a present that wishes both to exploit and deny the pervasiveness of racism" and in a society in which African Americans have had to "bear the brunt of everybody else's contempt" ("Introduction" xiv, Angelo 256), Morrison also focuses attention on the ubiquity and complexity of shame in the African-American experience. Repeatedly, if not obsessively, Morrison stages scenes of shame in her fiction: scenes in which her characters, when they are looked at or treated with contempt by the shaming other, experience the inarticulateness and emotional paralysis of intense shame. Morrison dramatizes the painful sense of exposure that accompanies the single shame event and also the devastating effect of chronic shame on her characters' sense of individual and social identity, describing their self-loathing and self-contempt, their feelings that they are, in some essential way, inferior, flawed, and/or dirty. In *Beloved*, for example, Morrison depicts how Sethe is "dirtied" by slavery and schoolteacher's pseudoscientific racism; in *The Bluest Eye*, how Pecola's parentally transmitted shame is intensified by her inability to meet white standards of beauty in a culture that views black as "ugly"; in *Song of Solomon*, how Milkman Dead is weighed down by the "shit" of inherited family and racial shame; in *Jazz*, how Joe Trace is shamed by the "dirty" and "sloven" Wild, whom he believes to be his "secret mother"; in *Sula*, how Sula, who claims that she likes her "own dirt," hides her abiding sense of shame under a defiant display of shamelessness; and in *Paradise*, how the people of Ruby are shaped by their collective, and humiliating, memory of the Disallowing: the "contemptuous dismissal" of their dark-skinned forebears by light-skinned blacks. Mired in shame, Morrison's novels deal not only with the affects of shame, contempt, and disgust, but also with the feeling traps of shame-shame (being ashamed about shame in an endless, and paralyzing, spiral of feelings) and shame-rage (the inevitable and self-perpetuating sequence of emotions from shame to humiliated fury back to shame).

In novel after novel, as Morrison draws attention to the damaging impact of white racist practices and learned cultural shame on the collective African-American experience, she points to the shaping and shaming power of corrosive racist stereotypes and discursive repertoires in the construction of African-American identities as racially inferior and stigmatized. Investigating the class tensions and divisions within the African-American community, Morrison deals with the sensitive issues of internalized racism and the color-caste hierarchy as she repeatedly brings together dark-skinned, lower-class and light-skinned, middle-class characters, such as Pecola and Geraldine in *The Bluest Eye*, Son and Jadine in *Tar Baby*, and Pilate and

Ruth in *Song of Solomon*, or as she in *Paradise* focuses on the color prejudice of the dark-skinned people of Ruby toward light-skinned blacks. If as a black writer dealing with race matters Morrison sometimes has found herself struggling with internalized racism as she works with and through a language that promotes, as she has described it, the “dismissive ‘othering’ of people” (*Playing in the Dark* x), she also deliberately, and with dialogic intent, invokes the shaming race- and class-inflected discourse of dirt and defilement, or the shaming language of the racial insult and slur, or shaming racist stereotypes, like that of the sexually promiscuous black woman and the lawless and potentially violent black underclass male. Just as hegemonic discourse has constructed blackness as a sign of a fundamental and stigmatizing difference, so Morrison, in a classic countershaming strategy, repeatedly constructs whiteness as a sign of pathological difference in her novels. While Morrison is also intent on representing black pride in her novels—such as Milkman’s discovery of his “golden” racial heritage in the folk tale of the flying African in *Song of Solomon*, or Violet and Joe Trace’s sense of expansive black pride and self-ownership as they train-dance their way to black Harlem in *Jazz*, or the pride of the people of Ruby in their utopian all-black town in *Paradise*—she also shows how the humiliated memories and experiences that result from living in a racist society reverberate in the lives of her characters.

While in Morrison’s novels we find evidence of the desire to bear witness to the shame and trauma that exist in the lives of African Americans, in Morrison’s insistent aestheticizing of shame and violence, we also find evidence of the reactive desire to cover up or repair the racial wounds she has exposed. Countering the depictions of the white oppressor and the black oppressor in the next room, Morrison’s novels also enact a reparative urge in their dramatizations of the potentially healing power of the sense of safety and connection offered by the African-American community and in their antishaming and restitutive fantasies of what Morrison calls the African-American ancestors: that is, “timeless” elder figures who are “benevolent, instructive, and protective” (Morrison, “Rootedness” 343). Morrison, then, seems bent on effecting a cultural cure both through the artistic rendering and narrative reconstruction of the shame and trauma story and also through the fictional invocation of the protective power of the black folk community and the timeless ancestor figures. But the precariousness of that cure is revealed not only by her repeated depictions of the intergenerational transmission of victimization and shame but also by her constant restagings of familial and cultural scenes of shame and trauma in each successive novel as she confronts in her fiction the historical legacy of slavery and the persisting conflicts and challenges that continue to haunt African Americans in the race-divided American society where race still matters.

The Impact of Trauma and Shame on the Individual

As Morrison shows that race matters not only in the collective cultural experience of African Americans and in the construction of group identity but also in the experience of the individual, she represents, with almost clinical precision, what has, in recent years, become of interest to psychiatry and psychoanalysis: the impact of shame and trauma on the individual psyche and the family structure. Unlike traditional psychoanalytic inquiries which have tended to ignore the importance of social forces on the construction of group and personal identity,¹ recent investigations of the impact of trauma and shame on the individual as well as sociological inquiries into the ubiquity of shame and pride in daily social interactions can help bring into bold relief the effect of racist practices on African-American identity. A race-cognizant application of shame and trauma theory—which has mainly studied the painful effects of shame and trauma on individuals and families within the dominant white culture—shows that African Americans have been forced to deal not only with individual and/or family shame and trauma but also with cultural shame and racial trauma as they are designated as the racially inferior and stigmatized Other and thus become the targets of white discrimination and violence. An indispensable addition to the analysis of sensitive race matters, psychoanalytic and psychiatric accounts of the impact of shame and trauma on the individual provide an invaluable and necessary starting point for an analysis of Morrison's representations of shame and trauma in her fiction.

Trauma and the Individual

"The ordinary response to atrocities," writes psychiatrist Judith Herman, "is to banish them from consciousness. Certain violations of the social compact are too terrible to utter aloud: this is the meaning of the word *unspeakable*" (*Trauma* 1). Although awareness of horrible events intermittently penetrates public consciousness, it is seldom for very long. Not only do "[d]enial, repression, and dissociation operate on a social as well as an individual level," but the study of trauma itself "has a curious history—one of episodic amnesia" (*Trauma* 2, 7).²

Freud—by establishing within psychoanalysis the theory that sexual trauma is a product of fantasy—effectively denied the historical reality of traumatic occurrences, and psychoanalysts who followed the classical Freudian model "sought the determinants of the unconscious meaning" of trauma "in pathogenic fantasies rather than in shattering facts" (Ulman 62). But the shortcomings of the classical psychoanalytic model of trauma have become apparent to recent psychiatric and psychoanalytic investigators like Judith Herman, Bessel van der Kolk, Dori Laub, and Elizabeth Waites who find the

source of the dissociated memories that haunt the trauma survivor not in repressed feelings and fantasies but in actual events.

Involving “threats to life or bodily integrity, or a close personal encounter with violence and death,” traumatic events confront individuals “with the extremities of helplessness and terror” (Herman, *Trauma* 33). In such threatening situations, the sympathetic nervous system is aroused, causing the endangered person to feel a rush of adrenaline and enter a state of alertness. Traumatic responses occur when both resistance and escape are impossible, overwhelming the individual’s self-defense system. Because traumatic events produce “profound and lasting changes in physiological arousal, emotion, cognition, and memory,” the traumatized individual “may experience intense emotion but without clear memory of the event, or may remember everything in detail but without emotion” (Herman, *Trauma* 34).

When actual experiences are so overwhelming that they “cannot be integrated into existing mental frameworks,” they are “dissociated, later to return intrusively as fragmented sensory or motoric experiences” (van der Kolk and van der Hart 447). Dissociation, rather than repression, is common to the trauma experience. Indeed, “Many trauma survivors report that they automatically are removed from the scene; they look at it from a distance or disappear altogether, leaving other parts of their personality to suffer and store the overwhelming experience” (van der Kolk and van der Hart 437). Paradoxically, situations of extreme and inescapable danger may evoke a state of “detached calm” in which events are still registered in awareness but seem “disconnected from their ordinary meanings.” These altered states of consciousness can be viewed as “one of nature’s small mercies, a protection against unbearable pain.” Not unlike hypnotic trance states, these detached states of consciousness “share the same features of surrender of voluntary action, suspension of initiative and critical judgment, subjective detachment or calm, enhanced perception of imagery, altered sensation, including numbness and analgesia, and distortion of reality, including depersonalization, derealization, and change in the sense of time” (Herman, *Trauma* 42–43).

In the aftermath of traumatic occurrences, explains Herman, individuals find themselves “caught between the extremes of amnesia or of reliving the trauma, between floods of intense, overwhelming feeling and arid states of no feeling at all” (*Trauma* 47). As the intrusive symptoms of reliving the trauma lessen, numbing or constrictive symptoms—feelings of alienation, disconnection, inner deadness—come to predominate (*Trauma* 48–49). Because traumatic experiences become encoded in an abnormal type of memory that spontaneously erupts into consciousness in the form of flashbacks and nightmares, and because even apparently insignificant reminders can provoke these memories, what would otherwise seem a safe environment can end up feeling dangerous to survivors (*Trauma* 37).

While the “social context into which human babies are born relies on the family as a primary buffer against trauma,” writes Elizabeth Waites, the “often correct assumption that families protect the best interests of children is so expedient that it often becomes a barrier against recognizing the traumatic potential of families themselves” (69). In abusive families—in which parent-child interactions may mingle protective with brutal behavior or in which punishment may predictably follow indulgence, or in which the sole predictable thing about the abuse is that it is inevitable—traumas that are dangerous, if not life-threatening, are repeatedly inflicted and rarely acknowledged as mistakes (68–69). The disruptive symptoms of post-traumatic stress in children can have a significant impact not only on developing competencies but also on character development, and thus, the attempt to recover from childhood trauma can be made more difficult by the complex ways in which responses to trauma become woven into the structure of the personality (64–65). Because victimization is often vigorously denied by both the perpetrator and the victim, and because victim-blaming is a common individual and even socially institutionalized response, the childhood victim can develop a scapegoat identity or incorporate self-punitive behavior into his or her self-concept (68). Even adult victims who are psychologically healthy prior to an assault commonly suffer disturbances not only in self-regulation but also in self-esteem and self-representation as a result of trauma (104–05).

Survivors of childhood and adult trauma—who feel not only “unsafe in their bodies” but also that their emotions and thinking are “out of control”—are “condemned to a diminished life, tormented by memory and bounded by helplessness and fear” (Herman, *Trauma* 160, 49). Confronting individuals with “the futility of putting up resistance, the impossibility of being able to affect the outcome of events,” trauma shatters “assumptions about predictability and mastery” and thus “inflicts a ‘narcissistic wound to the fabric of the self’” (van der Kolk, “Foreword” ix). Because a “secure sense of connection with caring people is the foundation of personality development,” traumatic events, in calling fundamental human relationships into question, can “shatter the construction of the self that is formed and sustained in relation to others” (Herman, *Trauma* 52, 51). Moreover, trauma can affect autobiographical memory: that is, “the integration of particular events into a coherent, temporally organized, and self-referential pattern.” The distortion of autobiographical memory caused by trauma can have subtle or profound effects not only on “self-presentation and self-representation” but also on the “integration of self-experience” into the coherent pattern that is phenomenologically experienced as a “stable personal identity” (Waites 29, 31). Trauma affects not only the individual but also, as studies of those victimized by the Holocaust have shown, victim-survivor populations, and the effects of trauma can be transmitted intergenerationally (see, e.g., Danieli).

Shame and the Individual

Like the study of trauma, the study of shame has, until recent times, been largely neglected. Indeed, it is suggestive that shame, which induces secrecy and a hiding response, is an “only recently rediscovered feeling state” (S. Miller xi). Since 1971, “there has been a rapid increase in the literature on the psychology of shame, thus redressing a long-standing neglect of the subject,” writes shame theorist Helen Block Lewis. “Once clinicians’ attention is called to shame, it becomes apparent that, although it is easily ignored, shame is ubiquitous” (“Preface” xi).³

This neglect of shame, in part, can be attributed to “a prevailing sexist attitude in science, which pays less attention to nurturance than to aggression” and thus “depreciates the shame that inheres in ‘loss of love’” (Helen Lewis, “Preface” xi). Because of the Freudian view that attachment is regressive and that women are shame-prone as a result of their need to conceal their “genital deficiency,” there is an implicit hierarchy in classical psychoanalytic discourse, which views shame as preoedipal and guilt as oedipal (Helen Lewis, “Role of Shame” 31). To Freudians, guilt was the “more *worthy* affective experience” compared to shame, which was viewed as “the developmentally more primitive affect” (Andrew Morrison, *Shame* 5). Shame, then, until recently, has had a “stigma” attached to it so that “there has been a shame about studying shame in the psychoanalytic and psychotherapeutic fields” (Goldberg x). But with the movement away from the classical Freudian oedipal conflict-guilt model of personality and the intensifying focus on the narcissistically wounded and shame-ridden self—beginning in the 1970s and with increased interest in the 1980s and 1990s—shame has become the subject of psychoanalytic scrutiny, most notably in the work of affect and shame theorists like Silvan Tomkins, Helen Block Lewis, Donald Nathanson, Andrew Morrison, Gershen Kaufman, and Léon Wurmser.

Contrary to Freud, as recent psychoanalytic investigators have shown, “there is no concrete evidence that shame precedes guilt in development”; moreover, shame “exists equally strongly in men and women” (Helen Lewis, “Role of Shame” 31, Andrew Morrison, *Shame* 13). An inherited, physiological response, shame is an innate affect, hardwired in the brain, and there also appears to be a biological, genetic disposition to experience *extreme* forms of shame, which may begin with “a *constitutional* predisposition to overstimulation” (Goldberg 41). Pointing to the biological sources of this painful emotion, shame investigators argue that one can observe a proto or primitive form of shame behavior in infant-parent interactions—manifested in such infant behaviors as shyness, gaze aversion, hiding the face, and stranger anxiety (see, e.g., Nathanson, “Timetable”). One likely reason for the “inarticulateness” of shame is that the “brain is arranged so that key aspects

of emotional life . . . can operate largely independent of thought" and thus "emotional input is experienced before cognition" (Goldberg 41). Moreover, the "special affinity" of shame for autonomic reactions, such as blushing, sweating, and increased heart rate, "suggests that it is an emergency response to threatened affectional ties" (Helen Lewis, "Introduction" 16–17).

An intensely painful experience, shame "follows a moment of *exposure*," an uncovering that "reveals aspects of the self of a peculiarly sensitive, intimate, and vulnerable nature" (Nathanson, "Timetable" 4). Shame sufferers feel in some profound way inferior to others—they perceive themselves as deeply flawed and defective or as bad individuals or as failures—and this internalized shame script grows out of early shaming interactions with parents or significant others. Shamed individuals may experience "a brief moment of painful feeling"—a jolt or jab of pain—followed by a compulsive and often repetitive "replaying" of the shaming scene, often in scenarios in which shamed individuals imagine themselves responding to the shaming incident in a more satisfactory way; or they may experience "painful confusion and unwanted physical manifestations," such as blushing and rapid heartbeat, and feel "at a loss for words and also at a loss for thoughts" (Scheff, "Shame-Rage Spiral" 110–11). Shame, then, is a disorganizing experience, and it can leave individuals feeling "overwhelmed" and "small, helpless, and childish." In describing their feelings, shamed individuals often voice common shame fantasies: that they could "'crawl through a hole' or 'sink through the floor' or 'die' with shame" (Helen Lewis, "Introduction" 19). Shame is not only a "quickly spreading and flooding affect," but it also can induce feelings of "shame about shame" (Wurmser, *Mask* 55).

At once an interpersonal and intrapsychic experience, shame derives from the shame sufferer's "vicarious experience of the other's scorn," and, indeed, central to the shame experience is the "self-in-the-eyes-of-the-other" (Helen Lewis, "Introduction" 15). At the core of shame, writes Léon Wurmser, is the "conviction of one's *unlovability*" because of an inherent sense that the self is "weak, dirty, and defective" (*Mask* 92, 93). In the classic shame scenario, in which the "eye is the organ of shame par excellence," the individual feels exposed and humiliated—*looked at* with contempt for being inferior, flawed, or dirty—and thus wants to hide or disappear (Wurmser, "Shame" 67). Fear of visual exposure, as Wurmser explains, leads to the wish to disappear as the person one has shown oneself to be, or to be viewed as different than one is (*Mask* 232). Shame-imbued people may suffer shame vulnerability—that is, "a sensitivity to, and readiness for, shame"—and shame anxiety, which is "evoked by the imminent danger of unexpected exposure, humiliation, and rejection" (Andrew Morrison, *Shame* 14, Wurmser, *Mask* 49).

Experiencing a heightened sense of self-consciousness, shame sufferers may feel inhibited, inferior, incompetent, dirty, defective, scorned and ridi-

culed by others. Shame, and its related feeling states—chagrin, embarrassment, mortification, lowered self-esteem, disgrace, and humiliation—can lead to withdrawal or avoidant behaviors, which reflect the desire of shamed individuals to conceal or hide themselves in an attempt to protect against feelings of exposure. Other classic defenses against shame function to help shamed individuals recover from painful feelings of exposure and helplessness. For example, “feeling weak may be ‘repaired’ by arrogance, self-glorification, aggressiveness,” and the “powerful, surging” feeling of anger may work to temporarily overcome the “helpless feelings of being disregarded and insignificant” that often accompany shame (Goldberg 69). Many expressions of rage can be understood as attempts “to rid the self of shame,” while contempt represents “an attempt to ‘relocate’ the shame experience from within the self into another person” (Andrew Morrison, *Shame* 14). Other defenses against shame include the defiance of shamelessness—that is, the deliberate flaunting of one’s shame—and turning the tables in the attack—other script, in which the shamed individual actively shames and humiliates others (see Wurmser, *Mask* 257–64, Nathanson, *Shame and Pride* 360–73).

Describing the “natural, inevitable sequence from shame into humiliated fury and retaliation and thence into guilt for ‘unjust’ or ‘irrational’ rage,” Helen Block Lewis has called shame a “feeling trap” (“Introduction” 2). Drawing on Lewis’s work, Thomas Scheff and Suzanne Retzinger point to the potentially lethal consequences of the shame-shame or shame-rage feeling traps. A feeling trap, as they explain, “involves a series of loops of shame (being ashamed of being ashamed), which causes further shame, which can continue indefinitely,” or it involves a self-perpetuating chain of emotions in which unacknowledged shame leads to anger which, in turn, results in further shame (104–05). Moreover, when an individual has emotional reactions to his or her own emotions and to those of another person, both individuals can become mired in a feeling trap—“a *triple spiral* of shame and rage *between* and *within* interactants,” which, in turn, can lead to the emotional impasse of an interminable conflict (126). “Shame-rage spirals may be brief, lasting a matter of minutes, or they can last for hours, days, or a lifetime, as bitter hatred or resentment” (127). Moreover, shame-anger chains, according to Scheff and Retzinger, can endure “longer than a lifetime, since hatred can be transmitted from generation to generation in the form of racial, religious, and national prejudice” (105).

Cultural Shame and the Deference-Emotion System

“Shame is a multidimensional, multilayered experience,” observes Gershen Kaufman. “While first of all an *individual* phenomenon experienced in some form and to some degree by every person, shame is equally a *family*

phenomenon and a *cultural* phenomenon. It is reproduced within families, and each culture has its own distinct sources as well as targets of shame" (*Shame* 191). While American society "is a shame-based culture . . . shame is *hidden*. There is shame about shame and so it remains under strict taboo" (*Shame* 32).

Shame, which is often called the "master emotion" (see, e.g., Scheff, *Bloody Revenge* 53–54), has profound consequences for individuals in their daily interactions with others. Indeed, "Shame and pride seem to be an almost continuous part of human existence not only in crises but also in the slightest of social contacts," according to Thomas Scheff. Cross-cultural investigations of politeness behavior suggest "the universality of shame" in revealing how cultures "provide elaborate means for protecting *face*, that is, protecting against embarrassment and humiliation" (*Bloody Revenge* 51). In daily social interactions, states of shame and pride "almost always depend on the level of deference accorded a person: pride arises from deferential treatment by others ("respect"), and shame from lack of deference ("disrespect"). Gestures that imply respect or disrespect, together with the emotional response they generate, make up the *deference/emotion system*, which exerts a powerful influence on human behavior" (Scheff, Retzinger, Ryan 184–85). Stuart Schneiderman's observation that the "closest approximation" in American history to having "'no face' is being black in America" points to the significance of issues surrounding pride and shame and the deference-emotion system in the social formation of African-American identity (124). In a similar way, shame theorist Andrew Morrison, in his discussion of what he calls "learned cultural shame" over feelings of being different, remarks, "The African American people, often judged by white American society as inferior, have endured the stigma of being different since their history on this continent began. The sense of difference and inferiority imposed by the dominant culture leads to internalization of that judgment by the affected group" (*Culture of Shame* 35).

Race Matters:

Shame, Trauma, and the African-American Experience

Just as individuals who suffer from shame may struggle with the conflicting need to "confess" and "retain" the shameful secret and just as trauma survivors seem driven by "the twin imperatives of truth-telling and secrecy" (Goldberg 169, Herman, *Trauma* 1), so there has been a corresponding cultural impulse to publicly reveal and conceal the humiliations and traumas endured by oppressed groups like African Americans. Even as the process of recovering the silenced black voices in American history and culture goes forward and even as racism and the social construction of African-American

identities have become the subject of intense scholarly scrutiny, so there is a corresponding countermovement in the American culture to deny or minimize the continuing significance of race and the historical legacy of racism and racist oppression on the cultural memory and collective experience of contemporary black Americans.

Describing the historical traumas suffered by African Americans, black psychiatrist James Comer argues that the trauma of slavery was compounded by the fact that children born into slavery were “socialized and developed in ways that defined them as inferior” (154). “Snatch a free man from his own culture, enslave, exclude, degrade and abuse him; and his sense of worth, value and adequacy will be destroyed, reduced or under constant and severe challenge,” writes Comer (165).⁴ After slavery was abolished, the dominant white culture continued its tactics of physically terrorizing and psychically shaming black Americans. African Americans “found themselves controlled by a government and an economy run by openly racist whites. . . . [U]ntil 1915, more than 90 per cent of the black population lived in the most restrictive and oppressive section of the country, and over 50 per cent of all blacks lived as serfs.” And until the 1940s, “[f]raud, theft, economic reprisal and open violence against blacks existed.” Between 1882 and 1935, more than 3,000 blacks were lynched and between 1882 and 1955, over 4,700 blacks died in mob action. While the “motives for violence were mixed,” the underlying purpose was to maintain white privilege (165–66). In Comer’s account, African Americans carry with them collective memories not only of white antagonism and abuse but also of the sound of “contemptuous white laughter” in the sight of the tragedy of black life (170).

In a similar way, Cornel West describes the impact of racist violence and racial contempt on the collective historical experience of African Americans. “One of the best ways to instill fear in people is to terrorize them,” comments West. “Yet this fear is best sustained by convincing them that their bodies are ugly, their intellect is inherently underdeveloped, their culture is less civilized, and their future warrants less concern than that of other peoples. Two hundred and forty-four years of slavery and nearly a century of institutionalized terrorism in the form of segregation, lynchings, and second-class citizenship in America were aimed at precisely this devaluation of black people.” Although ultimately this “white supremacist venture was . . . a relative failure,” the white endeavor to dehumanize blacks “has left its toll in the psychic scars and personal wounds now inscribed in the souls of black folk” (122–23). Also remarking on the pain of racial wounding, bell hooks discusses the association in the black imagination of whiteness with terror. “All black people in the United States, irrespective of their class status or politics,” she writes, “live with the possibility that they will be terrorized by whiteness” (*Killing Rage* 46).

The comments of hooks and West point to the psychic scars and personal wounds suffered by African Americans in the race-divided American society. Historically treated with disrespect—indeed, viewed by the dominant white culture as shamed objects of contempt—African Americans bear the wounds of the intergenerationally transmitted racial shame described in Comer's account of how blacks carry with them the sound of "contemptuous white laughter" and also in W. E. B. DuBois's well-known turn-of-the-century description of the "double-consciousness" of African Americans, "this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity" (9). DuBois's account of the double-consciousness of African Americans derived from viewing the self through the eyes of contemptuous others recalls Helen Block Lewis's description of the accentuated sense of self-consciousness experienced by the shamed individual. Explaining that the shame experience is "directly about the self, which is the focus of a negative evaluation," Lewis writes, "Because the self is the focus of awareness in shame, 'identity' imagery is usually evoked. At the same time that this identity imagery is registering as one's own experience, there is also vivid imagery of the self in the other's eyes. This creates a 'doubleness of experience,' which is characteristic of shame" ("Shame" 107).

The black Antillean psychiatrist Frantz Fanon provides a vivid account of the shame sufferer's doubleness of experience in his remarks on the black feeling of inferiority that "comes into being through the other" and in his description of the experience of being seen as an object of contempt—as a "Dirty nigger!"—in the eyes of whites (110, 109). Viewed through the shaming gaze of whites, "Negroes are savages, brutes, illiterates" (117). Fanon describes his feeling of being "dissected under white eyes, the only real eyes," and of having his body "given back" to him "sprawled out, distorted" (116, 113). The fact that he wants to hide from the gaze of whites—"I slip into corners, I remain silent, I strive for anonymity, for invisibility"—reveals his reactive desire to defend against feelings of shameful exposure. "Shame. Shame and self-contempt. Nausea. When people like me, they tell me it is in spite of my color. When they dislike me, they point out that it is not because of my color. Either way, I am locked into the infernal circle," writes Fanon as he, in recounting the racist myths that undergird the cultural construction of blackness, reports not only on the experience of being treated as the racially inferior and stigmatized Other but also on the process of the "internalization—or, better, the epidermalization"—of a sense of inferiority (116, 11).

Describing the black shame that arises out of internalized racism—that is, the absorption by African Americans of "negative feelings and attitudes about blackness held by white people"—bell hooks similarly observes that many blacks see themselves as inferior, as "lacking" in comparison to whites

and that they overvalue whiteness and “negate the value of blackness” (*Killing Rage* 186, 148, 158). The accounts of Fanon and hooks reveal not only that the “deliberate shaming” of an individual can be used as a “severe punishment” (Helen Lewis, “Introduction” 1–2), but also that shame sufferers, in internalizing the disgust and contempt of the shaming other, can develop a deep sense of self-hatred and self-contempt. Wurmser’s description of how basic shame—the inherent sense that the self is weak, defective, and dirty—leads to a deep sense of “pain, hurt, woundedness” (*Mask* 93) provides a compelling description of racial shame: the profound hurt felt by those treated as the racial Other, as shamed objects of contempt. While shamed individuals, as Silvan Tomkins observes, are governed by the “wish not to hear the rasping, tongue-lashing voice of the internalized shamer and condemner,” they also may identify with “that not so small voice” (265).

In a white male American culture that is “shame phobic”—for it places value on “achievement, competition, power, and dominance” (Goldberg 78)—African Americans not only have been viewed as objects of contempt, they also have served as containers for white shame.⁵ Because white Americans have historically projected their own shame onto blacks, African Americans have been forced to carry a crippling heavy burden of shame: their own shame and the projected shame of white America. Gershen Kaufman, in his analysis of the complex interplay of identity, culture, and ideology in intergroup hostilities, such as the historical hostility between whites and blacks in American society, explains how the ideology of group hatred and prejudice is fueled by affects such as shame, disgust, contempt, and rage. Not only is violence targeted at particular groups “shaped by distinct ideologies of superiority and hate,” writes Kaufman, but each group enacts its scripted role in the “actions and reactions” played out between various groups. In a culture that devalues those who are different, people belonging to minority groups are viewed with contempt. Indeed, “it is the affect of contempt which partitions the inferior from the superior in any culture or nation. As such, contempt is the principal dynamic fueling prejudice and discrimination” (*Shame* 240–41).

That scholars investigating race have described the study of racism as a “dirty business” or have remarked that it is “virtually impossible to write or say anything on the topic of race that is not in some way objectionable or embarrassing” (Gordon ix, LaCapra 2) points to the profound shame attached to the vexed issues surrounding antiblack racial prejudice and the racial caste system. Commenting on how the “much-heralded stability and continuity of American democracy was predicated upon black oppression and degradation,” Cornel West observes that “[w]ithout the presence of black people in America, European-Americans would not be ‘white’—they would be only Irish, Italians, Poles, Welsh, and others engaged in class, ethnic, and gender

struggles over resources and identity. What made America distinctly American for them was not simply the presence of unprecedented opportunities, but the struggle for seizing these opportunities in a new land in which black slavery and racial caste served as the floor upon which white class, ethnic, and gender struggles could be diffused and diverted. In other words, white poverty could be ignored and whites' paranoia of each other could be overlooked primarily owing to the distinctive American feature: the basic racial divide of black and white peoples" (156–57). Toni Morrison makes a related observation on the experience of immigrants in her analysis of what she calls "race talk," a discursive repertoire that places emphasis on so-called essential racial differences, and that, in constructing African Americans as the deviant and racially inferior Other, is used to provide an ideological rationale for the continuing economic and social oppression of blacks. "[R]ace talk," as Morrison describes it, is an "explicit insertion into everyday life of racial signs and symbols that have no meaning other than pressing African Americans to the lowest level of the racial hierarchy. Popular culture, shaped by film, theater, advertising, the press, television, and literature, is heavily engaged in race talk. It participates freely in this most enduring and efficient rite of passage into American culture: negative appraisals of the native-born black population. Only when the lesson of racial estrangement is learned is assimilation complete. Whatever the lived experience of immigrants with African Americans—pleasant, beneficial, or bruising—the rhetorical experience renders blacks as noncitizens, already discredited outlaws" ("On the Backs of Blacks" 97–98). Describing how race functions as "a metaphor . . . necessary to the construction of Americanness," Morrison writes, "Deep within the word 'American' is its association with race. . . . American means white, and Africanist people struggle to make the term applicable to themselves with ethnicity and hyphen after hyphen after hyphen" (*Playing in the Dark* 47).⁶

Until the black revolution of the 1960s, "To be called 'black' in America meant to live in a state of shame . . .," remarks shame theorist Donald Nathanson, who views the 1960s expression of the "cultural need to 'shove it to whiteness'" as a "shame-reversing" attack-other script (*Shame and Pride* 465). Although the Civil Rights Movement also provided a healthy reversal of black shame by "transforming shame into pride and a sense of relative well-being for many blacks in this country (e.g., 'Black is Beautiful' as a new rallying cry)" (Andrew Morrison, *Shame* 187), racial prejudice and discrimination continue to be significant facts of black American life. "[I]t is time to 'get real' about race and the persistence of racism in America," writes Derrick Bell (5).⁷ In the United States where racism is "an integral, permanent, and indestructible component" of American society, African Americans "remain" what they "were in the beginning: a dark and foreign presence, always the

designated 'other'" (ix, 10). The "racism that made slavery feasible," in Bell's view, "is far from dead in the last decade of twentieth-century America; and the civil rights gains, so hard won, are being steadily eroded" (ix, 3). For bell hooks, "Confronting the great resurgence of white supremacist organizations and seeing the rhetoric and beliefs of these groups surface as part of accepted discourse in every aspect of daily life in the United States startles, frightens, and is enough to throw one back into silence." hooks describes how "painful" it is to "think long and hard about race and racism in the United States" or to read the information found in Andrew Hacker's 1992 book, *Two Nations*, which reports that many white Americans believe that Africans and African Americans languish "at a lower evolutionary level than members of other races." To hooks, "The anti-black backlash is so fierce it astounds" (*Killing Rage* 3, *Two Nations* 27).

Like bell hooks and Derrick Bell, Morrison has commented on the continuing significance of race in American society. To Morrison, "declarations that racism is irrelevant, over or confined to the past are premature fantasies" ("Official Story" xx). America remains "Star-spangled. Race-strangled" ("On the Backs" 100).⁸ Yet while antiblack racism continues to plague African Americans, postmodern theorists have put "race" under erasure.⁹ Remarking on the erasure of race in contemporary theory, Morrison observes that "race" remains "a virtually unspeakable thing, as can be seen in the apologies, notes of 'special use' and circumscribed definitions that accompany it—not least of which is my own deference in surrounding it with quotation marks. Suddenly . . . 'race' does not exist." African Americans insisted, for three hundred years, that "'race' was no usefully distinguishing factor in human relationships" only to have "every academic discipline, including theology, history, and natural science" assert that "'race' was *the* determining factor in human development." Then, when black Americans "discovered they had shaped or become a culturally formed race, and that it had specific and revered difference, suddenly they were told there is no such thing as 'race,' biological or cultural, that matters and that genuinely intellectual exchange cannot accommodate it." Morrison counters the theoretical erasure of race by insisting that "there *is* culture and both gender and 'race' inform and are informed by it. Afro-American culture exists. . ." ("Unspeakable Things" 3). Blackness, to Morrison, is a socially constructed category and a social fact in our racialized and race-conscious society. Responding to the description of race as "both an empty category and one of the most destructive and powerful forms of social categorization," Morrison describes "race" as a "powerfully destructive emptiness" ("Introduction" ix).¹⁰

Anthony Walton, describing his experience as an African American in the 1990s, writes, "I have, for most of my adult life, wondered what, exactly, is the stain we black Americans carry, what is it about our mere presence,

our mere existence that can inflame such passion, embroil the nation in such histrionics for so long a time?" (255). In a society in which racial shame remains a social fact and a shaping force in the construction of black identities and in which, in Morrison's words, "blackness is itself a stain, and therefore unstainable" ("Introduction" xviii), it is telling that Morrison, herself, was subjected to a form of public shaming when she received the Nobel prize in literature. Not only did journalists from the United States, Britain, and Europe capitalize on Morrison's race and gender in their stories, as they made use of the opportunity "to 'spice up' their headlines with a variety of eye-catching combinations" of the words "'winner,' 'black,' 'Nobel prize,' 'woman,'" but also "[w]ith amazing cross-cultural consistency, reviewers adopted an apologetic and defensive tone that seemed intended to 'account for' the literary significance of Morrison's fiction by dispelling doubts about its worth, rather than by celebrating its uniqueness" (Fabi 253–54). And Morrison was also dismissed and belittled by some aspiring laureates, who referred to her as an "affirmative action" laureate. "White America demonized black America in the days of Jim Crow. Still true today, though cosmetic changes have disguised some of the uglier aspects of the arrangement," remarks Adam Begley. "Need proof? Think of the way some people try to shrink a rival with the phrase *affirmative action*" (54; see also Reilly).

Trauma, Shame, and Storytelling in Morrison's Novels

Intent on representing painful race matters in her novels, Morrison repeatedly, if not obsessively, stages scenes of inter- and intraracial violence and shaming in her novels. She also uses her fiction to aestheticize—and thus to gain narrative mastery over and artistically repair—the racial shame and trauma she describes. In her commentary on the opening of her first novel, *The Bluest Eye*, Morrison provides insight into her narrative method. She explains that the opening sentence spoken by her child narrator—"Quiet as it's kept, there were no marigolds in the fall of 1941"—attracted her because the phrase "Quiet as it's kept" is "conspiratorial" and implies that there is a "secret between us and a secret that is being kept from us." Although the next sentence divulges the shameful secret—"We thought . . . it was because Pecola was having her father's baby that the marigolds did not grow"—it also, by foregrounding the flowers, "backgrounds illicit, traumatic, incomprehensible sex coming to its dreaded fruition." The novel's opening, thus, "provides the stroke that announces something more than a secret shared, but a silence broken, a void filled, an unspeakable thing spoken at last" ("Afterword" 212–14).

Morrison seems driven to speak the unspeakable in her fiction. But in foregrounding the flowers and backgrounding the illicit and traumatic, she

also defensively aestheticizes the shame and trauma she represents in her novels, and she reminds her readers that violence in fiction is “always verbally mediated” and thus it appears “as something *styled*” (Kowalewski 4). In her constant exposure of shameful and traumatic secrets, Morrison, at times, deliberately evokes the oral quality of gossip through her meandering narrative style and her use of narrative fragments in the progressive and repeated, but constantly interrupted, telling of her characters’ stories. But even while Morrison *consciously* affects an improvisational or oral style in her fiction, she also is an author who is caught up in the desire to reveal and conceal, to tell and not tell, which typifies our culture’s approach to shame and trauma. Thus readers of Morrison’s fiction may come away with the sense of narrative withholding or hesitancy as they follow and piece together a novelistic narrative that circles redundantly around the illicit, traumatic, incomprehensible secret or secrets it represents. If through her use of aesthetic design and fragmented narrative structure Morrison partly defends against the shameful secrets and physical horrors she depicts in her fiction, her description of her imagined reader as a co-conspirator and confidant also reveals that she is intent on involving her readers emotionally in her work.

“Writing and reading,” remarks Morrison, “mean being aware of the writer’s notions of risk and safety, the serene achievement of, or sweaty fight for, meaning and response-ability” (*Playing in the Dark* xi). An author who makes readers aware of the “response-ability” of her fiction and who demands reader involvement with her texts, Morrison compares the African-American artist to the black preacher who “requires his congregation to speak, to join him in the sermon, to behave in a certain way, to stand up and to weep and to cry and to accede or to change and to modify—to expand on the sermon that is being delivered” (Morrison, “Rootedness” 341). Likening herself to the black preacher and also to the jazz musician, Morrison must, as she describes it, “provide places and spaces so that the reader can participate” (Russell 44). Morrison wants from her readers “a very strong visceral and emotional response as well as a very clear intellectual response” (McKay 147). While Morrison attempts to put her readers “into the position of being naked and quite vulnerable” and to rid them of all “literary” and “social experiences” so she can “engage” them in the novel, she also wants her readers to trust her, for she is “never going to do anything so bad” that her readers “can’t handle it” (Ruas 109, Moyers 274). “My writing expects, demands participatory reading,” Morrison remarks. “The reader supplies the emotions. . . . He or she can feel something visceral, see something striking. Then we [you, the reader, and I, the author] come together to make this book, to feel this experience.” Morrison risks hurting her readers, but she also holds them “in a comfortable place,” as she puts it, so they won’t be “shattered” (Tate 164).

Demanding participatory reading and having both a cognitive and emotional impact on readers, Morrison's novels exert interactional pressures on readers, who may be held in a comfortable place—through what one commentator calls Morrison's "rational telling of extreme events" (Byerman, "Beyond Realism" 55)—and yet also feel compelled and unsettled, if not emotionally distressed, by what they read.¹¹ In dramatizing shame, Morrison openly appeals to her readers' active curiosity by positioning them as eavesdroppers and voyeurs—as observers of family or communal secrets—and as receivers of shameful gossip. In her strategic public disclosure of shameful secrets, Morrison also risks shaming her readers, for just as exposed individuals feel shame, so the observers can experience shame if they have "seen too much" or "intruded too deeply into the hidden" (Nathanson, *Many Faces* 65). And if the literary container provides a potentially safe space from which to experience reconstructed stories of shame-laden traumas, Morrison's novels are also powerful forms of emotional communication, works, as we shall see in our investigations of critic-reader reactions to Morrison's fiction, that are capable of invoking in readers a range of intensely uncomfortable feelings and that can also induce readers to respond in affective and collusive ways as they participate in the text's drama. Critic-readers, for example, sometimes report feeling not only afraid or ashamed but also guilty, disgusted, anxious, angry, or even numbed as they read Morrison's novels. In their critical responses to Morrison's works, many commentators also become unwitting participants in the classic shame drama of blame assessment as they attempt to discover who or what is to blame for the plight of Morrison's characters, or they are induced to enact shame- and trauma-specific roles—including those of the advocate or rescuer or the contemptuous shamer or hostile judge—as they respond to Morrison's troubled, and troubling, characters.

If the forceful emotional tug and pull of Morrison's novels, with their repeated enactments of shame-shame and shame-rage feeling traps, can unsettle or even vicariously shame and traumatize readers, who become enmeshed in narratives that focus on human brutality and the dis-ease of contemporary culture, readers, as we shall see, often are induced to assume a more comforting role dramatized in Morrison's novels: that of the understanding witnesses or the supportive community of listeners who help begin the process of healing shame and trauma by responding empathically to the painful stories of Morrison's shame- and trauma-haunted characters.

"Even as intellectuals and politicians posit the declining significance of race, 'racial difference' remains America's preeminent national narrative," writes Ann duCille. Thus, while race may be "an empty category, a slippery concept, a social construction, a trope," it still matters (1). We need to theorize

race "not as meaningless but as meaningful"—as a site of difference "filled with constructed meanings that are in need of constant decoding and interrogation" (58). Morrison, in her own critical writings—most notably in *Playing in the Dark*—is intent on making visible the racist mythologies that "render blacks publicly serviceable instruments of private dread and longing" ("Introduction" xviii). But she also is aware that "for both black and white American writers, in a wholly racialized society, there is no escape from racially inflected language" (*Playing in the Dark* 12–13). As Morrison remarks, "I am a black writer struggling with and through a language that can powerfully evoke and enforce hidden signs of racial superiority, cultural hegemony, and dismissive 'othering' of people and language which are by no means marginal or already and completely known and knowable in my work" (*Playing in the Dark* x–xi). Although Morrison herself sometimes finds it difficult to maneuver around racially inflected language and discursive repertoires, she also is intent on depicting the rich complexities and complicating differences—such as differences in gender, class, education, and culture—that shape African-American identities.

If, quiet as it's kept, much of African-American existence has been grotesque, Morrison is intent on speaking the unspeakable in her novels as she exposes to public view the painful collective and private shame and trauma suffered by black Americans in our race-conscious and wholly racialized American society. Although those who have investigated shame and trauma often report on the tendency of people to turn away from the shameful and traumatic, Morrison has an uncanny power not only to fascinate but also to draw readers into the fictional worlds she creates. Quiet as it's kept, Morrison's fiction is shame- and trauma-driven, as we shall see in the following pages. Yet despite the painful and shameful subject matter of her novels, Morrison, by creating verbally rich and complexly designed fiction, has earned the pride of place among contemporary American novelists as she explores the woundedness of African-American life in an idealized art-form that conveys, but also aesthetically contains and controls, intense feelings of anger, shame, and pain.