

## Chapter 2

# Signifying Incest African-American Revisions

As we have already seen, the dominant nineteenth-century incest story worked to construct the virtues of the white middle class, embodied in the strong patriarch, in opposition to those whose narratives about incest only confirmed their immorality: young girls, the poor, and racialized others who are understood to be sexually deviant. The culturally dominant story, then, made it easy for the prosperous and white to understand incest as a problem of the poor and black. This way of understanding incest is related to another similarly powerful and deeply wounding narrative that has also found sexual “aberration” in black families, which are themselves described as aberrant. Maxine Baca Zinn describes this narrative about the dysfunctional black family as based on a “cultural-deficiency” model, which, among other things, “assigns the cause of the growing underclass to the structure of the family” (72). So, to use the most infamous example, the 1965 Moynihan report focuses on the poor black family as at the “center of the tangle of pathology” with a “weak family structure [a female-headed family]” now the principal source of “most of the aberrant, inadequate, or antisocial behavior” (*Negro Family*, 30).<sup>1</sup> When family structure becomes the cause of the economic and social marginality of poor black families, the more distant cause of slavery (and its aftermath) almost completely disappears. As a result of this occluding of the past, the African-American family can be constructed as a place where the victims of slavery and racism are portrayed as their own victimizers.

The idea that poor black families are “doing it to themselves,” so to speak, is incorporated into the metaphor of the incestuous black family, an inbred breeding ground of deviant black men, too strong yet easily preyed-upon women, and illegitimate children. In telling the incest story, an African-American novelist always risks making the structure of the family rather than other racialized structures in transition—such as patterns of employment, educational opportunities, provision of housing—an isolated origin for the impoverishment and violence in poor black communities, communities that are often imagined in opposition to a fantasized white norm.<sup>2</sup> In fact, illegitimacy

rates among white youths were, in 1965, rising very rapidly, a fact masked by the Moynihan report's emphasis on black family "deviance" (D'Emilio and Freedman, 300).

African-Americans, aware of the way the "cultural deficiency" model blames the black family for what Hortense Spillers calls slavery's "*prescribed* internecine degradation," have sometimes felt that incest in the black family cannot be discussed without confirming myths of black deviance. It may be better not to tell. This form of silence, silence as social discretion, is one that tacitly supports racialized, patriarchal prerogatives. (Ann duCille has recently called this silencing the "discourse of deference," female deference to the cause of a "masculinist ideology of uplift" [65].) The "cultural deficiency" model insists that the forms of patriarchal dominance historically enjoyed by white men (and described by feminists as a *cause* of abuse) would, when claimed by black fathers, *cure* aberrant, because female-headed, African-American families. In other words, "not telling" ultimately functions to legitimize forms of gendered inequality within the family that have been linked not only with incestuous abuse but with slavery, a white, paternalistic system in which dependents were "cared for" and also sexually and economically exploited.<sup>3</sup> Indeed it was precisely the discourse of paternalism, of caring, that allowed slave owners to understand their harsh abuse of slaves to be a form of benevolent, parental diligence.

Of course, given especially high rates of black male unemployment and incarceration, it may seem particularly difficult for black women to criticize patterns of patriarchal dominance in the black community, no matter what their social and historical contexts. As Melba Wilson, a black incest survivor puts it, by talking about incest, "some may feel that I have breached an even greater taboo, crossed a bigger boundary . . . than incest" (1). For African-American novelists, "telling" similarly involves a complex racial and gendered politics that threatens to exact a real and familiar price: the further marginalization of African-American life and the exacerbation of tensions caused by the different ways in which black men and women have experienced economic and social disenfranchisement. This chapter will attempt to show how the African-American incest novel negotiates the risk of saying the wrong thing, or saying "the thing" the wrong way.

Despite anxiety about the representation of blackness and concerns about how an incest story will be understood by black as well as white audiences, African-American writers, perhaps because of a long tradition of resisting discursive unfreedom by signifying on dominant and excruciatingly painful cultural myths, have artfully told and revised the incest story. Indeed, they were among the first writers courageous enough to substantially explore this topic. Their revisions have eventually made the incest narrative available to many other writers, such as white feminists, who use accounts of incest to articulate

a history of subjugation. African-American incest narratives thus affirm “Ellison’s law”: “First something happens to us; and then, just wait, it happens to every other group in America” (Fabre and O’Meally, 4).<sup>4</sup> Through African-American novels, the story of incest begins to signify, in racial and gender-specific ways, a once culturally unspeakable and horrific collective past that might, as Barbara Christian puts it, “terrify” readers by exposing the vicious predations of a patriarchal, white culture (331). In other words, these texts shift the site of what is “unspeakable” from the marginal to the dominant culture.

The contradictions and pain that are central to the African-American incest novel are narrated from different perspectives as they become thinkable and sayable. This chapter will describe the changing contours of the silences integral to this narrative by examining the “mistakes” (telling the wrong story of incest or telling the story of incest the wrong way) made in two well-known novels: Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man*, Toni Morrison’s *The Bluest Eye*.<sup>5</sup> These novels, which have been visibly woven into the text of public culture, usefully highlight the dangers and possibilities of narratives that offer to reveal secrets about incest in the African-American family. The African-American incest story, precisely because of the way it explicitly operates as a narrative that undoes boundaries and violates taboos, is a useful discursive strategy for opening up and reconceptualizing the dynamics of public power and private speechlessness. In African-American novels, this process of undoing crucially involves a blurring of the culturally sanctioned place given to a speaking subject, usually a paternal figure, with the place of a devalued and objectified person: for example, Trueblood (Ellison’s black male shareholder) and Pecola (Morrison’s violated daughter). Through the reconfiguration of the incest story, what emerges is the formerly hidden perspective of a violated, objectified person into whom something unwanted has been put. This unwanted substance—a residue from a violent past and the seed of the future—becomes the basis of a new social subjectivity. The formerly dehumanized person, most dramatically the incest victim but to some extent the emasculated perpetrator as well, becomes increasingly vocal as shifting social and political relations transform the constraints on what can be said and who can be heard. Indeed, the incest novel functions as a polemical and pedagogical device, one specifically concerned to understand how past histories are effaced and how these silenced narratives are recovered. This process is represented as having the power to transform the future, often figured in the possibility of new life, children resulting from incest.

An early instance of this kind of destabilizing telling of incest occurs in Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man*, an immediately acclaimed best-seller that was published in 1952 as the civil rights movement was about to begin.<sup>6</sup> The novel explores and violates the rules governing who can claim the position of an authoritative speaking subject in a segregated America. For example, early in

the book, the narrator describes a traumatic memory of a “battle royal,” in which the town’s leading white men sadistically entertain themselves by watching blindfolded black schoolboys, including the narrator, fight each other. Yet even while blinded and bombarded with punches, the narrator cannot stop worrying about whether or not he will be allowed to give the valedictory oration that a school administrator has asked him to present to the same town dignitaries who are now terrorizing him. What is really important is the chance to speak and be heard, even if the topic, “social responsibility,” is one sanctioned by hostile and culturally dominant whites who want to hear “that humility was the secret, indeed, the very essence of progress” (20). When, bleeding and fearful, the narrator finally gets to speak, his audience alternately taunts and ignores him.

As the narrator explains his understanding of “social responsibility,” it becomes clear that “responsibility” falls mainly upon blacks to understand that they live in the midst of plenitude and have but to “cast their bucket” into this well of possibilities to better themselves. This safe message succeeds in placating, though just barely, his white audience, and the narrator must swallow his own blood to go on speaking. Taunted to repeat the phrase “social responsibility” one too many times, the narrator slips and substitutes the phrase “social equality.” This verbal slip makes the white audience dangerously uncomfortable and even more hostile. As Eric Sundquist points out, the phrase “social equality” meant desegregation, which would seem to lead to “racial mixing—the right of blacks and whites to date, intermarry, and to have children” (66).<sup>7</sup> The narrator’s “mistake” violates a taboo by suggesting an invitation to miscegenation, the prohibited sexual relations that secured the Jim Crow logic of racial segregation.

Sexuality is an important register of the history of American race relations. The taboo on miscegenation, situated in proximity to incest (another form of prohibited sexual relations), functions to obscure the fact that it was primarily white men, who, by raping objectified “dependents,” were responsible for racial mixing. This inability to acknowledge that the sexual rule-makers are the primary rule-breakers emerges in the language of a nineteenth-century Southern sociologist, Henry Hughes:

Impurity of races is against the law of nature. Mulattoes are monsters. The law of nature is the law of God. The same law which forbids consanguinous amalgamation forbids ethnical amalgamation. Both are incestuous. Amalgamation is incest. (qtd. in Rogers, 166)

This passage is extremely incoherent, but the gist of it, as David Rogers points out, is that the mulatto becomes the consequence of mixing qualities that are at once too different, an “ethnical amalgamation,” and at the same time too much

alike and “consanguinous.” Here even the notion of mixture becomes mixed. The idea of “making monsters” has been appropriated in the recent memory wars to describe how therapists have led daughters to turn their fathers into monsters. Hughes’s language demonstrates that the metaphor for creating incestuous mixtures—“making monsters”—has historically had a cultural function: to mark places where dominant groups discover that the other is within. Rather than black families “doing it to themselves,” this incest metaphor points to something else: the mixings caused by slavery in which the culturally dominant white patriarch is deeply implicated as a source of violent sexual abuse.

In Ellison’s novel, a verbal “amalgamation” takes place through the simultaneous blurring and separation of dominant and tabooed stories, both involving the masked culpability of white men for the plight of troublesome “charges” who are encouraged to take “responsibility.” Once again, the image of blood is crucial to this process of conjoining, marking a linkage occasioned by a verbal lapse on the narrator’s part. In the first story, Ellison’s narrator struggles to get a hearing at the cost of swallowing his own blood and ignoring his bleeding body, metaphors symbolizing the legacy of slavery’s savage wounding that is repressed in the discourse of “social responsibility.” This invisible story of a social wounding is available to the reader but the hostile white audience hears a social violation only in what the narrator might say about “social equality,” desegregation, and the threatened purity of racial bloodlines. Without the narrator’s “mistake,” the two stories would stay separate rather than bleeding into one another, linking “social responsibility” and “social equality,” creating a form of a discursive impropriety that anticipates social change. In a later episode, another speaker, sharecropper Jim Trueblood (whose name plays on the yearning for an essentialized racial bloodline and for discursive purity) makes an even more dramatic “mistake.” This time the discursive “mistake,” telling an incest story, seems irresponsible to the narrator because of its appeal to a white audience at the expense of a black one: “How can he tell this to white men . . . when he knows they’ll just say that all Negroes do such things?” (57).

Trueblood seems to confirm the dominant story about incest. By including the Trueblood story, Ellison, then, runs even more risks than does the young narrator when he gives his valedictory speech. While the narrator makes a significant verbal slip, it is protected by the phrases of a coded language. And although that language carries dangerous sexual and social connotations, it establishes the narrator’s resistance to his white audience and his alliance with a black one. Trueblood’s story, on the other hand, is sought after by white men, an audience presumably soothed by Trueblood’s assumption of responsibility for acting upon their own forbidden desires. Giving the white men what they seem to want, his story also runs the risk of alienating a certain black audience,

who, like the blacks at the college, demand stories of racial uplift featuring positive images of African-Americans. Yet despite all of these problems, Trueblood's incest story, like the young narrator's valedictory, shows that discursive "mistakes" can be a useful abdication of social "responsibility," already shown to be a loaded word. Indeed, Trueblood's incest story is a way of claiming "social equality."

Freud interpreted linguistic mistakes or slips as moments when a censored past slips into the present. What he considered a personal and psychic process has a social dimension. Under conditions of political repression such as those operating in the segregated south, the moralized rules of the "proper" social order incite forms of subversion that may look like acts of iniquity and deviance but that may have another function as social critique. Incest, for example, is usually understood as a universal violation of a foundational taboo, but given the way this rule is racialized, a violation cannily narrated by a black man has a more local, historical significance. Certainly Mr. Norton sees Trueblood's incest as an experience of "chaos," a violation of fundamental social laws by a sexually deviant "other." This sense of incest as out-of-the-ordinary usefully protects Norton from acknowledging his own incestuous desires for the daughter whose "purity" and "beauty" are at the center of his own story.<sup>8</sup> Indeed, his investment in a black college—a "living memorial to my daughter"—is, as Peter Hays suggests, an act of propitiation for those desires. But it is also yet another form of guilty paternalism in which the white father acknowledges and covers over a history of exploitative relationships with racial "dependents."

Because he assumes incest is a sacrilege, Norton shouts to Trueblood with a mixture of "envy and indignation," "You did and are unharmed!" (51). Sacrilege is supposed to be punished, but Trueblood does not even feel guilty, perhaps because his desires are not, like Norton's, defined as sexual. He is, then, not precisely reproducing the incest story about sexual desire that Norton wants to hear. He is also actively composing a tale that defies some of the expectations of its audience. Indeed, according to Trueblood, his act of incest is committed while he is sleeping with his wife and daughter to stay warm (this phrase recalls Stein's discussion of men's desire for warmth in *The Making of Americans*)—and while he is dreaming of something else. Both his feelings of powerlessness and his desire to become powerful are evoked by his dream of entering a white man's, Mr. Broadnax's, house. In this dream, as Hortense Spillers vividly describes it, "Ellison's narrator has so loaded the dream sequence—the major portion of the tale—with an invaginated symbolic plan that we seem justified in reading the breach of the incest taboo, as it is elaborated in this scene, as a symptom of an inverted castration complex" (134). Entering the house, Trueblood violates a now feminized white space where he

experiences—and repudiates—the white man’s attempts to emasculate him. As a result, Trueblood’s incestuous act can be interpreted as a heroic moment of resistance to and escape from what Houston Baker calls the “castrating effects of white philanthropy” (179). Understood this way, by committing incest and telling his dream tale, Trueblood momentarily rights an imbalance of power, much as the narrator does in his valedictory when he mistakenly says “social equality.”

Of course, while Trueblood attempts to right one imbalance of power, an enabling condition of Trueblood’s telling is that both he and Norton find in the incest story, and the daughter’s subjugation, a fantasy of freedom from restraint. This is not a generic fantasy that transcends gender. Invisible, and essential to this shared male story, is the ordinariness of patriarchal prerogatives that both men assume. Of course, though Trueblood shares these prerogatives with Norton, the millionaire enjoys the privileges of patriarchal power to a far greater extent. But in Freudian fashion—and Ellison plays with psychoanalytic theories of social evolution—Norton’s achievements carry him further from his ability to act upon his instinctual desires.<sup>9</sup> These disavowed desires, systematically embodied in the black man, provide the ground for Trueblood’s powerful—and lucrative—narrative authority. But the story should not, for this reason, be read simply as a parody or a white scapegoat ritual. Trueblood does tell Norton some of the story he wants to hear, but he also discursively breaks through restraining racial and sexual codes that would forbid his dream-tale of miscegenation and incest. When Trueblood’s story is finished, Norton is clearly weakened rather than strengthened by what he has heard. Furthermore, the money Trueblood gets from the tale enhances his paternal authority by enabling him to be a better provider; his wife gets a pair of eye-glasses and a dress. Only from the position of an audience of violated women, one largely excluded as Trueblood tells his tale, is Trueblood’s assertion, “I’m a man and a man don’t leave his family,” a scary rather than responsible claim to power (64).

Trueblood’s is a perpetrator’s story that demonstrates how rural impoverishment, a legacy of slavery, has undermined a father’s ability to be a powerful provider without extinguishing his aspirations to fulfill that role. In other words, Trueblood’s telling at once repudiates Norton’s patriarchal power and also works to claim it. So strongly does Trueblood speak from the moralized position of the perpetrator that he makes the act of incest and its effects on his daughter and wife seem much less important than his dreams of finding “fat meat,” dreams that are fulfilled by telling a story that white men think they want to hear. Even when, in the margins of the story, Trueblood’s wife Kate is allowed to voice and act on her outrage, she is a character created by Trueblood and one who ultimately joins her daughter Matty Lou in silence.

In Trueblood's story, women are not just spoken for, they are metaphors for larger, dangerous forces that the women themselves do not understand. (When his wife attacks him, Trueblood thinks to himself, "You ain't guilty, but she thinks you is" [60].) For example, Trueblood's struggle with the power plant, a dream figuration of his rape of his daughter as a castrating assault on *him*, recalls the narrator's fight with Monopolated Light, the novel's symbol of white visibility and power. No wonder, then, that Trueblood will not give up the fruits of this battle. He refuses to let Aunt Chloe interrupt his daughter's pregnancy, reasserting in this way his paternal ownership of his womenfolks and progeny. Indeed, as Houston Baker puts it in an analysis whose male-bias has been noted elsewhere, "the Trueblood encounter reveals the [black] phallus as producing Afro-American generations rather than wasting its seed upon the water" (183).<sup>10</sup> In this reading, Trueblood's family becomes the "entire clan . . . of Afro-America," while incest is made a figure for "a type of royal pater-nity" (183) that is linked to Ellison himself as an "untrammled creator" (197). Incest, here, is a way of signifying the black man's claim to an originary and potent symbolic authority.<sup>11</sup> But as Ann duCille sharply observes, though the "phallus may not be a material object, its action, its 'phallic energy' is not immaterial—certainly not to Matty Lou Trueblood or to Pecola Breedlove [the incest victim in *The Bluest Eye*], and other objects of its power" (68). At the same time, remembering the power of the black father may also lead to forgetting that he might inhabit the vulnerability of a daughter in relationship to the white man's authority.<sup>12</sup>

Trueblood tells an incest story that gives him a certain phallic power, but this empowerment requires that his daughter be objectified and that he must experience a form of self-violation by performing as the mythically barbaric black man. In moving women to the center of incest narratives, African-American women writers challenge the African-American male's precarious and tainted narrative and paternal achievement by bearing witness to his compromised symbolic authority. As a result, black women's rescriptions would, in the 1980s, produce a backlash within the black community. Deborah McDowell has noted that it is "for narrating, for representing male abuses 'within the family' that contemporary black women are most roundly criticized" (78). As she also argues, this criticism of black women's narratives minimizes the complexity of their reception within a political structure in which black and white men fight over "the bodies/texts of black women" in a manner that "reproduces an older meta-narrative written in the history of the slave master's hand" (96).

Although Toni Morrison has not escaped criticism for writing novels whose gender politics are said to undercut black male authority, *The Bluest Eye*, published in 1970, is often praised for its thoughtful understanding of the incestuous father's point of view and motivation.<sup>13</sup> For example, Madelon Sprengnether writes:



Among Morrison's many achievements as a writer, one of her bravest, to my mind, is her characterization of Cholly Breedlove, who rapes and impregnates his eleven-year-old daughter Pecola. While a lesser writer might have concentrated solely on Pecola's plight, which is achingly grim, Morrison chooses to enter into Cholly's mentality in such a way that we cannot help perceiving this father-daughter tragedy as mutual. (533)

Far from attacking black men for horrifically abusive behavior, the narrator of *The Bluest Eye* notifies us within the first few pages that "mutual accusations about who was to blame" are the stuff of childish quarrels and that the question the novel will raise has more to do with "how" such horrifying abuse happens.

Given the present celebrity of African-American women writers, it is easy to forget how recently this visibility was attained and how fragile it may be. Toni Morrison's experience with *The Bluest Eye* provides one example of the complex task of claiming symbolic capital, of moving from the margins to the center of that province known as "serious literature." In order to establish her credibility with a white literary and critical audience, Morrison contended with the aesthetic criterion to present reality as the repository of complicated yet timeless truths, for to do otherwise would appear limited and sociological, those labels often placed upon African-American literature. At the same time, Morrison explicitly hoped to challenge the timelessness of American notions of beauty in order to explain how Pecola has been subjected to symbolic murder in the American culture of the early 1940s. Circulating in the reviews of *The Bluest Eye*, which was Morrison's first novel, are these competing demands for aesthetic universality and historical realism. In one review her book is said to contain too much "poetic imagery," though Morrison is said to be worth encouraging because she conveys "beauty and hope" (Frankel, 47); another review claims that the novel "embodies a reality" and is recommended for "social caseworkers" (Marvin, 3806); and in the most favorable review, one by John Leonard, *The Bluest Eye* is shown to have achieved timelessness as "poetry, history, sociology, folklore, nightmare and music" (35).

Morrison's juggling act is complicated by her desire both to represent and to speak to her black audience without losing the white audience of reviewers and readers that are crucial to a novel's success. For her black audience, Morrison uses the language and, as she has put it, "codes embedded in black culture" (215), while also remaining attentive to codes of white readers. In praising the *Bluest Eye*, one white reviewer applauded Morrison for writing "a novel instead of a harangue," explicitly noting that other "black writing," presumably not sensitive enough to white readers, has a "forensic" tone (Solokov, 95). This kind of praise, of course, reveals the operation of ideological filters, shaped by white fears of black power movements of the 1960s, and most likely directed at

African-American male authors, such as Eldridge Cleaver and Richard Wright, who might be seen to have made “black writing” an irritating polemic. Morrison not only must anticipate the expectations of such reviewers but also speak to a black audience that is not a homogeneous entity. *The Bluest Eye* figures the black community as split within itself: class and skin color, for example, create forms of segregation that exacerbate those imposed from outside. And gender considerations complicate the matter further: to represent and speak to women, Morrison was “pressing for female expressiveness” (215), a perspective supported by the emerging women’s movement. But this emerging possibility contains its own danger, alienating her black male audience by defying its notion of the “right” perspective on the black father’s role, a perspective illuminated in Ellison’s novel.

Making matters more difficult, while also symbolizing constrictions on speaking, Morrison chose to write about incest, a topic still very much tabooed in the 1960s, the period in which she wrote the novel. Maya Angelou’s autobiography *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, which includes an account of her rape as a child, was published the same year as *The Bluest Eye* (1970) but Louise Armstrong’s *Kiss Daddy Goodnight*, an early mass-market book featuring the stories of incest victims, was not published until 1978. And though Toni Morrison may have been engaged in a deliberate regendering of Ellison’s Trueblood story, written much earlier, such a revision was especially difficult because it required sympathy with a black, female victim. How was that sympathy to be voiced?<sup>14</sup> The narrative problems facing Morrison may have drawn her to empathize with the incest victim’s experience of silence and pain. Trying to tell the victim’s story before it was popular, Morrison had many cultural and internal restrictions to overcome. As Morrison puts it in her new afterword to the novel, “In some sense it [overcoming the conspiracy of secrecy around incest] was precisely what the act of writing the book was: the public exposure of a private confidence” (212). She goes on to say that the political climate in which the writing took place made the publication of her book feel almost like a betrayal of her community: it “involved the exposure . . . the disclosure of secrets, secrets ‘we’ shared and those withheld from us by ourselves and by the world outside the community” (212).

So, rather than seeing Morrison’s sympathetic representation of the incestuous father only as a sign of her bravery and greater artistic achievement (because it represents more than a *woman’s* point of view), we might see it as a sign of the greater difficulty, if not the near impossibility of representing the experience of incest and the incest victim’s story at the time when *The Bluest Eye* was written. For Sprenghether and others writing in the 1990s, a “lesser writer” might have “concentrated on Pecola’s plight” as if this were easier than representing the father’s point of view. Yet to call such a task easier is to skate over a history of obstacles to speaking that we have discussed in the previous

chapter and that affected Morrison as she composed *The Bluest Eye*. In her afterword, she writes that the novel “does not in its present form handle effectively the silence at its center: the void that is Pecola’s ‘unbeing’” (215). Morrison attempted “the novelty” of telling “this story of female violation . . . from the vantage point of the victims or could-be victims of rape—the persons no one inquired of (certainly not in 1965): the girls themselves” (214). But she herself believes that the task was so difficult that she failed at this “attempt to shape a silence while breaking it” (216). Whether or not we think that she “failed” in any way, focusing upon Morrison’s difficulties and perceived “mistakes” is illuminating.

As one initial difficulty with adopting the “vantage point of the victims . . . of rape,” Morrison notes that Pecola “does not have the vocabulary to understand the violence” (214). Like Matty Lou, Trueblood’s silent daughter, Pecola cannot tell the story of incest and her own violation. To mediate this unspeakable point of view, Morrison invents a number of narrative voices: Claudia McTeer, a young girl who is subjected to many of the same outrages of racism, sexism, and poverty as Pecola but who is from a more financially stable and loving family; an omniscient third-person narrator who has an intimate knowledge about the history and thoughts of both Cholly and Pauline, Pecola’s parents. Pauline and Pecola get a voice toward the end of the novel. Pauline’s recollections about her own past interrupt the omniscient narrator’s account and Pecola’s hallucinatory dialogue concludes the story. Morrison constructs other narrative frames as a way to give shape to the silence of the victim’s “unbeing”: the Dick and Jane reader provides a prefatory frame and chapter titles—and suggests the oppressive expectations represented by the institutionalized ideal of white family life; the seasons—autumn, winter, spring, summer—provide titles for each of the book’s four parts and link the story’s theme, in ways that are problematic, to nature. All of these narrative voices and frames provide the reader with a broad cubist-like canvas that encourages understanding of the problem of incest from a variety of perspectives. Yet, at the same time, the multiple perspectives also tend to keep the reader at a distance from “the *Thing*” itself.

The voice of the omniscient narrator is at odds with a narrative strategy that elsewhere uses separate narrative voices to undercut the expectation that a unified truth is available. Of course, this voice, if it is to tell “how” Pecola is annihilated, must claim authority, sometimes explicitly conjuring up other, embedded individual voices to support the omniscient narrator’s larger social critique. For example, when the omniscient narrator has taken over in the chapter describing Pecola’s mother Pauline, Pauline’s disembodied voice, marked by italics, suddenly emerges as if beamed down from a distant place, beckoned, perhaps, by a longing for the kind of testimony that would compel commitment to the narrator’s embattled, because culturally marginal, vision of

the truth. Another strategy for supporting the truth of her critique is provided by the school primer that locates a historically specific and recognizable way in which the dominant white American culture was internalized by black children. In *The Bluest Eye*, this process of socialization is experienced as an assault that leaves behind a legacy of self-loathing. Pecola is the novel's dominant figure of this ideological rape that gives birth to her desire for blue eyes. These "offspring," the phantasmic traces of the white father's molestations, mark her as a scapegoat for her community's feelings of self-hatred and rage.

Pauline's black and female voice and the Dick and Jane primer, because they suggest the importance of specific contexts in the construction of meaning, are in tension with the seasonal frame, which lends a timelessness to the events that both unifies and distances them. In classic fashion, macrocosmic nature is meant to be a metaphor for a microcosmic social order: the marigold seeds that do not bloom in Lorain, Ohio are figures for the beliefs planted in African-Americans that inhibit the production of healthy self-images. Through incest, what is left behind in Pecola is her father's seed that fails to thrive. Through white patriarchal ideology, what is left in her is a desire for bluest eyes that devalues as it eradicates her racial identity. Yet naturalized metaphors always function to universalize political structures as well as to politicize natural ones. As a result, metaphors of seasonal change, growth, flowering, and deflowering provide a perspective that can leave the reader contemplating events at a great distance as inevitable moments in a wheel of change: "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" (206).

These sentences, among the last words of the narrator, now a Claudia McTeer with powers of omniscience, do not just distance us from the intimate tragedy of Pecola's rape and madness. More significantly, they seem to keep distant a deep fury at the seemingly implacable social and economic forces that have destroyed Pecola. Measured tones and natural metaphors are also a gesture to appease an audience that might not accept a story that directly communicated rage, which would make the novel sound like a harangue. Morrison herself has talked about her desire not to participate in the processes of dehumanization that "trashed Pecola," hence her efforts to forgive and understand how victims become victimizers. But there is more than forgiveness and understanding motivating this novel. Morrison distances the enemy—"All the time we knew that Maureen Peal was not the Enemy and not worthy of such intense hatred. The *Thing* to fear was the *Thing* that made her beautiful and not us" (74). But intense hatred is felt even if, for safety's sake, it must be displaced and muted in elegiac, aestheticized language that was described by reviewers at the time of the novel's publication as "angry sadness" (Leonard) and "acid prose pungent with metaphor" (Marvin).

Toni Morrison has written that her effort to solve the problem of Pecola's voicelessness by breaking the narrative into parts was only partially successful, though we are suggesting that this "problem" helps us to understand Morrison's complex sense of the possible audience for her first novel. And she has discussed the problems of a language that is meant to both hold and sabotage "the despising glance" (211), the task partially accomplished by Trueblood's story. She also notes that "it is interesting to me now that where I thought I would have the most difficulty subverting the language to a feminine mode, I had the least: connecting Cholly's 'rape' by the whitemen to his own of his daughter" (215). Her "feminine mode" depends on a loosening of the boundaries between masculine and feminine: "This most masculine act of aggression becomes feminized in my language, 'passive'" (215). The white men who force Cholly to have sex in the glare of their flashlights effectively castrate him, stripping him of his manhood by rendering him helpless and small, and with a "vacancy in his head . . . like the space left by a newly pulled tooth" (150). Left a life of passive, "free" movement, he acts on instinct, finally raping his daughter out of a sequence of emotions, "revulsion, guilt, pity, then love" (161) in which Pecola is confused with his memories of his wife Pauline. Cholly's "rape" of Darlene, and later Pecola, is then indirectly linked to his "rape" by white men, symbolically connecting the black father's acts to a history of racial subjugation by whites.

Morrison writes that she had the least trouble feminizing Cholly, and perhaps this ease of representation is explained by the existence of Trueblood as a model. Trueblood, too, is feminized, but Morrison makes Cholly's feminization more explicit, blurring past and present and blending feminine passivity and masculine aggression so that her narration of the perpetrator's story is easier than Ellison's to understand—and to listen to. Morrison's use of the omniscient narrator also expands the frame within which the perpetrator's action is placed. The success of this vision depends on accepting Cholly's actions as a socially created form of what might seem to be an instinctive action. The novel's narration of the white men's voyeuristic pleasure at compelling Cholly's sexual performance makes it clear that Cholly is not rewarded for providing this entertainment, but rather disabled and disempowered. In this way, Morrison makes the black perpetrator's story less assimilable to white pleasure and even more linked to the abused victim than is Trueblood's. "The saddest reality in the novel," writes one critic, "is the naked father like Cholly" (Dickerson, 123). This critical judgment involves an identification with the perpetrator that demonstrates again how hard it is both to tell and to hear the daughter's story.

If the omniscient narrator is thus capable of making Cholly's point of view coherent, without completely embracing it, Morrison faces a greater difficulty when she tries at the end of the novel to give Pecola the words to represent her

own perspective. By the time that Pecola speaks she has received her blue eyes and is totally mad. Drawing upon Du Bois's model of double consciousness and doubling the psychic weight of that split identity by adding the experience of incest to the molestations wrought by racism, Toni Morrison brilliantly attempts to narrate Pecola's fragmentation of self through what Michael Awkward calls "a schizophrenic double voicedness" (176). This split self anticipates the model of dissociation later used to describe the psychic trauma of incest victims, while it also forcefully rewrites Du Boisian double consciousness to show its potentially psychotic possibilities. Whiteness, "blue eyes," enters Pecola as a hallucinatory false consciousness. *The Bluest Eye* is implicitly a novel sympathetic with the black nationalist movement, yet it also registers a shift toward locating social injustice in individual psychological states.

Charged and inventive as this chapter is, Morrison herself describes it as a "problem": "the fact of [Pecola's] hallucination becomes a kind of outside-the-book conversation" (215). The problem is not just that the story is over before she begins to speak but that Pecola, because deep in madness, is absent from the scene of this narrative experiment in which one voice badgers another for information about her mistreatment, including the possibility of a second, less violent, sexual encounter with her father. Of course, Pecola's madness and disintegration allow readers to understand how thoroughly she has been "assassinated," annihilated by her experience. There is no grounding self and hence no "voice" is possible. This is the darkest view imaginable and it is also a vivid demonstration of the extent to which the incest victim's perspective remained discursively attenuated—almost unsayable—even as late as 1970.

In a recent review written for *Harper's* magazine, Katie Roiphe directly links the current trendiness of the incest novel to the "excessive" writing of African-American women:

The graphic sexual abuse in Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* (1970) and Maya Angelou's *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* (1971) offered the prototypes for the modern incest scene. After that came Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* (1982). . . . By the early Nineties incest had swept across the literary map of America . . . (68)

This language implicitly endorses the view that women's incest novels are unusually "graphic" and that this quality of the genre is a legacy of African-American women's writing, beginning with Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*. Here Roiphe employs a familiar model of associating black writers with deviant sexuality, which is useful to her larger effort to discredit women's incest novels as opportunistically pornographic. She also makes a clear association of incest narratives with "otherness" and with a degrading process of undoing aesthetic values. From Roiphe's point of view, "Ellison's law" works to make the incest

story a sensationalist literary fad that is very marketable but also censored as superficial and pornographic.

As we turn to an examination of other incest stories, it is useful to challenge Roiphe's comfortable condemnation of incest "tellings." Women writers have now achieved acclaim for incest novels, spoken from the victim's point of view, that give shape and visibility to forms of "unbeing" that are gendered, racial, economic, and social. Toni Morrison writes at the end of her afterword: "With very few exceptions, the initial publication of *The Bluest Eye* was like Pecola's life: dismissed, trivialized, misread" (216). Of course, in the decades since then, her novel has gained respectful attention. But we should not forget how hard it was for Morrison to tell Pecola's story or how hard it may still be to recognize the complexity of Morrison's effort to break a culturally enforced silence. Roiphe worries that there are too many women who tell, but we might find in this phenomenon some reason to hope. Largely thanks to the work of African-American writers, the persons "no one inquired of (certainly not in 1965): the girls themselves" have finally found a voice and an audience.