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Chapter 9

Resisting the White Gaze: Critical Literacy and Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*

Laraine Wallowitz

Background

In September 2006, I was hired by the Bard College Access and Preparedness Program to teach a literature course in a public high school in Harlem, New York. The program offers at-risk youth in New York City a four-credit college-level Humanities course taught by university faculty. The module includes six weeks in each of the following subjects: literature, writing, art history, history, philosophy, and math. Participants from my first school included high school seniors, juniors, and one sophomore, all of whom voluntarily applied to be part of the program for the intellectual stimulation and college experience. For six Fridays, I traveled to Harlem to be with the fifteen students, all of whom were African American, except for one Latino student.

We read Toni Morrison's novel *The Bluest Eye* (1994) and examined how literature is often crafted to challenge commonly held ideas about language, culture, and society. Her novel lends itself to critical inquiry due to its critique of racism, sexism, poverty, materialism, standards of beauty, and the cinema. Not only is the novel beautifully written, Morrison's prose is so vivid, she is able to implicate the reader in the destruction of one little girl and her dream to be "beautiful" as defined by white culture. It was Morrison's intent to involve the community in and outside the text in their own interrogation for the "smashing" of Pecola and for contributing "to her collapse" (p. 211). No reader can participate in the text without experiencing the devastating effects of racism on an innocent girl.

In preparing for the class, I was conscious of my positionality as a white woman and hoped that the students and I could have open and honest conversations about issues of race and gender; I was concerned that my race would silence the students. I was also worried that as the teacher—or in this case, as the visiting professor—students might assume I am the authority on the novel and the issues the book raises. How can a white teacher possibly understand the effects of the white media on identity to the same degree or in the same way as the black and Latino students? At the same time, as a critical pedagogue, I believe that educators should not avoid teaching texts by authors of different races, cultures, genders, religions, or sexualities; in essence, they should be willing to be *both* teacher and learner.

It is important to raise or confront sociopolitical issues in texts and not ignore controversial topics out of fear or discomfort. In fact, critical pedagogues argue that curriculum should be designed to move students out of their comfort zones; a pedagogy built on comfort and students' limited experiences privileges those already at home in the classroom and privileged in society. The same goes for teachers. In this case, I was the one moving out of my comfort zone. As the class progressed, the students began to feel secure enough to call me out on my whiteness. A couple of times I was asked, "I want to ask you something, but I don't want to offend you..." **On another occasion, in the beginning, when students expressed anger, others tried to assuage his anger and change the topic.** And on a couple of occasions, students stayed after class to talk how I personally felt about the racism pervasive in our culture. Instead of ignoring my race and theirs, we acknowledged our differences in a respectful way reminding ourselves that it is not "safer" to pretend we are all alike and that teachers should not "see" color.

Below I provide a small window into my attempt at applying the principles and practices of critical literacy using Toni Morrison's novel *The Bluest Eye* and other print and nonprint texts in order to problematize representations of "beauty" constructed by literature, advertising, music, and the media. What follows is by no means a faultless example. Upon reflection, there are many changes I would make; however, reflection and change are essential ingredients in any critical classroom and so is sharing our struggles and triumphs.

The White Gaze

How can a fifty-two-year-old white immigrant storekeeper with the taste of potatoes and beer in his mouth, his mind honed on the doe-eyed Virgin Mary, his sensibilities

blunted by a permanent awareness of loss, see a little black girl? (Morrison, 1994, p. 48) There is power in looking. (hooks, 1992, p. 115)

In order to understand the insidious effects of the white aesthetic on my students' self-image, I turned to the work of bell hooks and her critique of the "white gaze." hooks addresses the white gaze in her book *Black Looks: Race and Representation* (1992) showing how television and mainstream cinema have been used as a vehicle for white colonization and oppression. For black men, whose gaze was carefully controlled by white society, spectatorship in the white cinema was an act of rebellion. In the dark of the theater, black men "could 'look' at white womanhood without a structure of domination overseeing the gaze, interpreting, and punishing." Black women's experiences as spectators, however, were a practice in negation: "[B]lack female spectators have had to develop looking relations within a cinematic context that constructs [their] presence as absence, that denies the 'body' of the black female so as to perpetuate white supremacy and with it a phallogocentric spectatorship where the woman to be looked at and desired is 'white'" (p. 118). And although hooks maintains that today's films do not necessarily conform to this paradigm of black negation, I argue that many black entertainers today still embody the white aesthetic.

Despite the increasing presence of black celebrities, the white aesthetic still strongly defines beauty and worth in today's racist culture. Many of the contemporary black celebrities, such as Halle Berry, Mariah Carey, Beyonce, Vanessa Williams, are whitewashed to appeal to white audiences, thereby denying the black body. Famous black women are often anglicized on covers of magazines: their hair and skin lightened and curls straightened. A young girl's desire to attain whiter features resonates today. The novel is an appropriate springboard for examining whether the internalized surveyor in black youth is white as it was for Pecola Breedlove. If so, how does one resist the hegemonic white aesthetic ubiquitous in the media?

Morrison's novel, in which she investigates what happens to a young, black girl living under the white gaze of 1940s American society, was inspired by one of her black classmates who wished for blue eyes. Morrison wrote the novel to explore the roots and effects of racial self-loathing. She wondered, "Who told her [classmate]? Who made her feel that it was better to be a freak than what she was? Who looked at her and found her so wanting, so small a weight on the beauty scale?" Morrison's novel is an attempt to "peck away at the gaze that condemned her" (1994, p. 210). Like Morrison, I wondered how the

white-controlled media affects the identity formation of adolescent black youth.

Similar to Mr. Yacobowski, the white storekeeper who cannot *see* Pecola, many of us cannot see what is directly in front of us, nor do we recognize the extent to which the white gaze affects our perceptions. Critical literacy helps make the invisible, visible, particularly the ways in which we are positioned by our gender, race, class, and sexuality. This kind of critical examination is never easy for anyone, especially students who have been schooled to passively receive knowledge and are not in the habit of questioning reality. Therefore, I find it helpful to begin any novel or discussion with the students' own experiences to make connections to whatever we will be examining by journaling at the beginning of each class. Journaling is an effective way to build writing stamina and fluency and to provide time for students to think through their ideas. In the first class, I asked students to free-write for five minutes about anything that they would want to change about their physical appearance. I was curious how a young group of African American youth would measure their own beauty against the white aesthetic of the media. Beginning a new class with such a personal writing assignment was risky, so I prefaced the task by explaining that they do not have to share if they are uncomfortable. This gave them permission to be honest with themselves without fear of embarrassment or judgment from classmates.

After about five minutes, I asked for volunteers. The first boy to participate wanted smaller lips; the second girl, "less nappy hair" (which she described as looking more "Hispanic"); the third, as did many others after her, wished for lighter skin. One black girl went as far as saying she plans to marry a Puerto Rican man so her children's skin will be lighter and hair straighter. A young Muslim girl confessed that she was planning on purchasing blue contacts to change the color of her brown eyes. Lighter or "better" skin dominated the discussion, as did smaller features (noses, behinds, lips, and feet). One student went as far as mumbling under her breath, "Sometimes I wish I was white." It is important in a critical literacy class to be honest in communicating one's observations. So, after the students shared their thoughts, I challenged them with a very controversial question, "So, you want to become whiter?"

There was silence. Then the room erupted with denials and justifications. They explained to me that they "just like straight hair" or they simply needed to "lose more weight" or have smaller feet to feel comfortable in their shoes. I was not surprised, as most students do not want to accept that they are

influenced by cultural or societal forces. Resistance is often the first reaction from students when their worlds are called into question. It is important to continue the inquiry; I then asked students who they thought was beautiful. They listed Beyonce, Halle Berry, and Gabrielle Union. Seizing this opportunity to make a point, I pointed out how Beyonce's image in the media changed as she became more famous: Her hair became straighter, her skin lightened for magazine covers, and her body thinner, as it happens with many black stars under the white gaze of the media. How can they explain this phenomenon?

As students continued to debate, I introduced the questions "what is beauty?" and "Is beauty universal or culturally defined?" The class was split. Many students brought up in their arguments cultures in Africa that valorized larger women, while others thought that was "unhealthy." And still others quoted the adage, "beauty is in the eyes of the beholder." I then introduced pictures from various cultures around the world and throughout history of "beautiful" women. I included a picture of a bound foot in China, a Karen woman from Myanmar with her neck elongated by rings, and Renaissance women wearing grandiose wigs. I asked them, are these women beautiful? How has our concept of "beauty" changed over time and place? Is there a black aesthetic in American culture? How does it differ from a white aesthetic? And if beauty is a social and cultural construct, who defines what it means to be beautiful?

We spent a good remainder of our first class debating the answers to these questions before moving to the text of the novel. Our problematizing of beauty was an appropriate entry into discussion about Morrison's use of "Dick and Jane" to begin her story. After showing them an original primer, I introduced the concept of ideological indoctrination by comparing their responses to the journal prompt to the whitewashed world of Dick and Jane. I asked them to compare the world described in the primer to their lived realities in Harlem and the Bronx: Why would Morrison begin her novel with a children's primer? Why do you think primers were used to teach literacy at the beginning of the twentieth century? What effect might primers have on students of color, on urban students, on poor students? Why does Morrison play with the language of the primer? Can manipulating language be empowering, or perhaps an act of resistance? Here I took a moment to compare Morrison's choice with rap artists' stylistic preference for playing with language. I then quoted Adrienne Rich, "This is the oppressor's language, yet I need it to talk

to you" (1971), and suggested that the language of rap is a form of resistance against the oppressor's language. Manipulating the English language was, in essence, a way of decolonizing the mind.

To end the first session, I read a familiar children's story, *Egyptian Cinderella*, so as to tie together our conversation about ideological indoctrination, hegemony, and the white aesthetic. Fairy tales act as primers for many American youth who grow up reading about beautiful, white princesses passively awaiting their prince charming. This supposedly multicultural text was particularly appropriate as all of the Egyptian characters have dark eyes and dark hair except for the blonde haired, green-eyed, "beautiful" Cinderella, sending the message that to be beautiful is to be blonde and white. I did not say anything to preface the reading; I was curious how the students would react. Angered by the blatant racism of the author and her obvious use of the "white gaze," the students (and I) were ready to understand and deconstruct Pecola's yearning for blue eyes.

Internalizing the "White Gaze"

Wherever it erupts, this Funk, they wipe it away; where it crusts, they dissolve it; wherever it drips, flowers, clings, they find it and fight it until it dies. They fight this battle all the way to the grave. The laugh that is a little too loud; the enunciation a little too round; the gesture a little too generous. They hold their behind in for fear of a sway too free; when they wear lipstick, they never cover the entire mouth for fear of lips too thick, and they worry, worry, worry about the edges of their hair. (Morrison, 1994, p. 83)

We are not as white as we want to be. (hooks, 1991, p. 119)

Introduced in "Winter," the characters of Maureen Peale and Geraldine represent Morrison's critique of internalized racism. Both characters recognize the privileges that come with looking and acting "white" and, as a result, learned to hate all that was "black," all of the "Funk" that associated them with their culture: "That laugh that is a little too loud; the enunciation a little too round; the gesture a little too generous" (p. 83). Maureen Peale—with her yellow skin, her "[p]atent-leather shoes with buckles," "[f]luffy sweaters the color of lemon drops tucked into skirts with pleats so orderly," and "[b]rightly colored knee socks with white borders, a brown velvet coat trimmed in white rabbit fur, and a matching muff"—is granted the privileges that come with being white in a racist culture:

Black boys didn't trip her in the halls; white boys didn't stone her, white girls didn't suck their teeth when she was assigned to be their work partners; black girls stepped aside when she wanted to use the sink in the girls toilet, and their eyes genuflected under sliding lids. She never had to search for anybody to eat with in the cafeteria—they flocked to the table of her choice, where she opened fastidious lunches, shaming our jelly-stained bread with egg-salad sandwiches cut into four dainty squares, pink-frosted cupcakes, stocks of celery and carrots, proud, dark apples. She even bought and liked white milk. (pp. 62–63)

Like Maureen Peale, Geraldine learned self-contempt for her blackness and raised her son, Louis Junior, to distance himself from his culture and people. Allowed to play only with white children and not “niggers,” Louis took out his anger and self-hate on those whom he perceived as weaker than himself—girls. He terrorized Pecola Breedlove and the dark, blue-eyed cat that received all of his mother's affections.

My students and I were intrigued by the difference between “colored” and “nigger” and understood Morrison when she wrote that the “line between colored and nigger was not always clear” (p. 87). The students felt pressure to “talk white” and “act white” in public to separate themselves from members of their community who identified with gang or “ghetto” culture. While many did not want to end up in a gang, they also did not want to be called out on “acting white.” When I asked them what it meant to “act white,” they defined it as talking “proper English” and doing well in school. “Niggers,” they informed me, were loud on the subway and talked slang, making them look bad. One student aptly explained that he felt “damned if he did, and damned if he didn't” act like society expected him to. The students recognized the ways they were being positioned by the artificial constructs of race and class, feeling like their own oppressors, policing their behavior according to white standards. I brought up the current debate between Bill Cosby and other leaders in the black community who represented two sides of the assimilate or accommodate/separate debate. Is “acting white” (as they put it) the best way to succeed today or is it selling out to the “oppressor”? Is Cosby correct when he argues there is no place for black English in current society? Or should students recognize black vernacular as an organic outgrowth of American colonization of Africans, a resistant act of taking back the language that was once stolen from them?

Their opinions varied. Some felt that certain compromises had to be made in order to be successful as per the definitions of American society. Others felt they should not have to deny who they are, no matter what the

cost. One student brought up “code switching,” a phrase he had learned in his English class, and argued that there is a time and place for black vernacular English and all students should learn to switch their style of language depending on the situation. For example, in an interview for a job, the students should speak the language of those in power, but at home, they can speak how they wanted to. The students felt that they need to shift between identities and discourses in order to navigate their way through American society successfully. They recognized and identified with the tension within the African American community captured so powerfully by Morrison.

Resisting the White Gaze

She was never able, after her education in the movies, to look at a face and not assign it some category in the scale of absolute beauty, and the scale was one she had absorbed in full from the silver screen ... It was a really simple pleasure, but she learned all there was to love and all there was to hate. (Morrison, 1994, p. 122)

Then there were those spectators whose gaze was that of desire and complicity. Assuming a posture of subordination, they submitted to cinema’s capacity to seduce and betray. (hooks, 1991, p. 120)

In the third section of the novel, “Spring,” the reader learns more about the life of Mrs. Breedlove, Pecola’s mother, through the use of interior monologue. Altering between third person and first person narration, Morrison traces Mrs. Breedlove’s life from the beginning in Mobile, Alabama; her courtship with Cholly Breedlove; and her relocation to Lorrain, Ohio, which led to loneliness and her escape to the movies. It is through Mrs. Breedlove’s “education in the movies” that Morrison offers a critique of the media—a critique that is both profound and relevant today:

Along with the idea of romantic love, she was introduced to another—physical beauty. Probably the most destructive ideas in the history of human thought. Both originated in envy, thrived in insecurity, and ended in disillusion. In equating physical beauty with virtue, she stripped her mind, bound it, and collected self-contempt by the heap. (p. 122)

It was there “in the dark” that Mrs. Breedlove learned to compare her reality to the sterilized, fictional world of Hollywood where “the flawed became whole, the blind sighted, and the lame and halt threw away their crutches” (p. 122). However, that “made coming home hard” (p. 123) for Mrs. Breedlove for, like her daughter Pecola, she learned to value white beauty and

values. Thus, the movies create a false reality and her life becomes a constant disappointment.

Like Mrs. Breedlove, today's youth receive much of their "education in the movies" (p. 122). Therefore, I felt it was important to examine critically the effects of the media on our sense of reality. I began by asking students to journal about a time when they were disappointed. I needed to provide a few examples, as some students feel uncomfortable with such an open-ended assignment. The examples were meant to be generative and included the first day of high school; their first kiss; first boyfriend or girlfriend; first trip; or first party. After students shared their myriad disappointments, including first concert, first day of high school, first relationship, and first college visit, I asked them to what were they comparing their experiences? In other words, what was their initial expectation and from where did they get it. The students struggled at first, but soon we were swapping stories about a movie we saw, an episode of one of our favorite TV shows, or quoting from our favorite lyrics. We noticed the seminal role Hollywood plays in our conception of reality. We agreed that love is not like in the movies, and yet we expect it to be and are continually disappointed when a man does not send flowers or woo us with romantic gestures. High school was not one big party like it is on TV. With these unrealistic expectations in mind, how many more times will we be disappointed by life?

Inspired by a fascinating article by Thomas H. Fick (2000) entitled "Toni Morrison's 'Allegory of the Cave': Movies, Consumption, and Platonic Realism in *The Bluest Eye*," I introduced two pages from Plato's "Allegory of the Cave." The parable teaches how easily reality is manipulated and how quickly we are to accept that reality. I asked students to think about what connections they can make between the allegory and modern theatergoing. As Fick argues in this article, "Movies are the centrally destructive force in [*The Bluest Eye*] not only because of the values they present—but because of the way they present them: as flawless Archetypes above and outside the shadowy world of everyday life." The theater "reproduces the structure of Plato's allegory in terms appropriate of a technological and capitalist society" (p. 11); bound and shackled to a screen that is a reflection of a perfect world, reality is being manipulated by the media conglomerates that create an unrealistic ideal in the name of profit.

Using both Morrison and Plato as a springboard for reading the word and the world, I passed out advertisements and explained that it can be argued that

the primary goal of advertising, like that of the movies, is to create a reality that objectifies women and promotes the white aesthetic. Advertisers are adept at exploiting the insecurities of women and men, thereby creating more uncertainty, anxiety, and disappointment. And since most products do not deliver on what they advertise, nor do they fill any emotional or psychological need, consumers continually search for new and improved ways to fill a void that was constructed by the advertising world in the first place. Mrs. Breedlove's initiation into the middle-class, consumer culture of the north led to increased insecurity and discomfort. Here she was introduced to high heels that only "aggravated her shuffle into a pronounced limp" and to a culture that told her that "her way of talking" (p. 118) was colloquial. To fit in, she tried to straighten her hair and make up her face. Instead of improving her quality of life, "her meanness got worse" (p. 123), she started to fight with Cholly over money and ultimately spent most of her days escaping into movies.

With this in mind, the students read their advertisements with a critical eye, looking for the ways in which the companies capitalized on the insecurities of men and women and employed the "white gaze." Students shared advertisements for antiwrinkle creams for the eyes, neck, arms, and legs; creams for the daytime with SPF; creams for nighttime without SPF; and creams that will create the look of having been in the sun all day without the damage. Others included teeth-whitening kits, diet programs, powders to help a woman look natural (natural defined in most cases as white), and even Botox (ironically), to express oneself. In order for a woman to look "naturally" beautiful, she must now buy six creams, toothpaste for killing germs, and a teeth-whitening kit. The students and I agreed that being "natural" meant looking white, something that is not only racist but also time consuming and expensive. More insidious, however, was the cycle of disappointment created by products that can never deliver on their promises, leaving consumers unsatisfied and ready to purchase the next miracle cream or diet guaranteeing "absolute" and "physical beauty" (Morrison, p. 122). In this sense, as Fick argued, we have become slaves to a consumer culture.

The students were outraged by the ways in which they were positioned and manipulated by the media. At the same time, they also felt confident that the media could be an avenue for social change, citing TV personalities such as Queen Latifah, Oprah, and Mo'Nique, all of whom resist the white aesthetic by publicly celebrating their curves. I mentioned the Dove commercials using "real" women as models in their advertisements. Together, we agreed that the media both reflected and fashioned a homogenized aesthetic, but we

remained hopeful that resistant actors, singers, and producers (Beyond Beats and Rhymes; BET—Black Entertainment Television) can and will rewrite the cultural landscape.

Disrupting the “White Gaze”

I had only one desire: to dismember [white baby dolls]. To see of what it was made, to discover the dearness, to find the beauty, the desirability that had escaped me, but apparently only me...I fingered the face, wondering at the single-stroke eyebrows; picked at the pearly teeth stuck like two piano keys between red bowline lips. Traced the turned-up nose, poked the glassy blue eyeballs, twisted the yellow hair. I could not love it. But I could examine it to see what it was all the world said was lovable. (Morrison, 1994, pp. 20–21)

Near the end of our time together, we decided to “look among the garbage” and see “sunflowers” (Morrison, p. 206). Since students are not passive victims of racism, nor are they cultural dupes, we decided to challenge the ways in which we are all positioned by our cultures. I also discovered that my students were passionate about reading, writing, and performing poetry, so we decided to read poems by African Americans who resisted the white gaze through their craft. The students recommended Maya Angelou’s “Phenomenal Woman,” and then I searched the internet and found poems by African American poets. We devoted one class session to analyzing, reading, and performing the poems. First we used the poems as a lens through which to understand the novel, assigning the voices of the poems’ speakers to empower characters in the novels. Then students got into groups and interpreted the poems through voice inflection and bodily movement, something at which they excelled as future performers and singers. Each student got up in front of the class and staged their own reading of the works, embodying the words of the strong black women who challenged society’s attempts at circumscribing their power and beauty.

Next, we crafted our own pieces and I introduced poems with two voices (Romano, 2000). Poems with two voices are two stanzas of poetry written side by side, juxtaposing two voices or points of view written to highlight differences, tensions, or similarities between two ideas, peoples, books, etc. The poems are meant to be read aloud, as the voices are heard separately to emphasize differences and heard together at points of similarity. After providing my students examples from Tom Romano’s book *Blending Genre, Altering Style*, the students went to work in pairs, using the novel as a vehicle

for challenging society's construction of beauty. Their poems were powerful acts of resistance, talking back to the novel and society, often in Pecola's voice, rewriting the white aesthetic to include all people, all cultures. Even more moving was the performance of their pieces. As they stood in front of their classmates proud and empowered, the students' words transformed the class from one of passive transmission "to one of critical thinking, democratic resistance, and emancipation" (Kraver, 2007, p. 67).

Our act of resistance, subversion, and reconstruction was limited due to the nature of the course; however, in the six weeks' time we were together, we began to develop the "critical habits of mind" (Shor, 1992) that are necessary for resisting the word and the world. In the time we read the novel, we also discussed the craft of writing and Morrison's use of symbolism, character development, and setting as it arose from student observation and classroom discussion. On the very last day, I introduced the students, all of whom were singers, to ways in which *The Bluest Eye* celebrated blues music as a form of redemption for the characters in the novel and for the black community as a whole. The narrator, Claudia MacTeer, testified to the community's pain and complicity in the destruction of Pecola, lessons she learned from her mother who, herself, sang the blues to resist oppression. The students could relate to the ways in which music helps the singer transcend the pain of reality, "the hard times, and somebody-done-gone-and-left-me times," taking all of the "grief out of the words [leaving the singer] with a conviction that pain was not only endurable, it was sweet" (Morrison, 1994, p. 26). If I had had more time with the students, we would have written our own blues songs and performed them, using words as our weapon against oppression and rewriting our reality to celebrate all forms of beauty.

Conclusion

As any teacher can attest, we never know how our teaching truly affects our students. We only hope that the conversations and habits of thinking transfer to their lives outside the classroom. On the last day of class, the young girl who, earlier in the semester, wanted blue eyes told me that she had decided against purchasing the blue contacts. Her small—or not so small—act of resistance illustrates the impact critical pedagogy can have on teachers' and students' lives. In my experience as a high school teacher, teaching critical literacy always led to the most fulfilling and enlightening teaching moments. Students stop their doodling and daydreaming, participate with passion and

insight, stay after class to share thoughts unexpressed, and transfer their learning to their own lives outside the classroom in powerful ways.

The word most repeated by my students when I teach with critical literacy is “respect.” The students feel “respected” when teachers do not “dumb-down” or decontextualize their teaching. Despite current thinking, today’s students are not apathetic or indifferent—they are bored. The packaged curriculum does not challenge the students’ thinking or prepare them for a successful life in the twenty-first century. And it is the students who benefit the most from critical literacy practices and hurt by “drill and kill,” “chalk and talk,” and “banking methods” so ubiquitous in poorer schools that do not receive high-quality instruction. It is not a teacher’s job to use his/her classroom as a medium for maintaining traditional hierarchies and reifying stereotypes. However, when we mindlessly transmit standardized curriculum or teach to a state-mandated test that is exactly what we do.

Note

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