THE GRIOT PROJECT

Series Editor: Carmen Gillespie
Bucknell University

This book series, associated with the Griot Project at Bucknell University, publishes monographs, collections of essays, poetry, and prose exploring the aesthetics, art, history, and culture of African America and the African diaspora.

The Griot is a central figure in many West African cultures. Historically, the Griot had many functions, including as a community historian, cultural critic, indigenous artist, and collective spokesperson. Borrowing from this rich tradition, the Griot Project book series defines the Griot as a metaphor for the academic and creative interdisciplinary exploration of the arts, literatures, and cultures of African America, Africa, and the African diaspora.

Expansive and inclusive in its appeal and significance, works in the Griot Project book series will appeal to academics, artists, and lay readers and thinkers alike.

Titles in the Series

Carmen Gillespie, ed., *Toni Morrison: Forty Years in the Clearing*

Myronn Hardy, *Catastrophic Bliss*

Angèlé Kingue, *Venus of Khalakanti,*
translated by Christine Schwartz-Hartley

TONI MORRISON
FORTY YEARS IN THE CLEARING

EDITED AND WITH AN INTRODUCTION BY
CARMEN R. GILLESPIE

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To Chloe Wofford

Step by Step

Step by step the longest march can be won, can be won
Many stones can form an arch, singly none, singly none
And by union what we will can be accomplished still
Drops of water turn a mill, singly none, singly none

—TRADITIONAL

The Gathering

Acknowledgments

I offer my most sincere gratitude to each of the contributors to *Toni Morrison: Forty Years in The Clearing*. I was overwhelmed at the response we received to the initial invitation to gather in this space to reflect upon Toni Morrison's forty and more years of artful expression, and I remain awed by the generosity, grace, and gift of each contributor.

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Harry, you are my sanctuary.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Koritha Mitchell

Koritha Mitchell is Assistant Professor of English at the Ohio State University, where she teaches and writes on African American literature of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, racial violence throughout American literature and culture, and black drama and performance. Her first book is *Living with Lynching: African American Drama, Performance, and Citizenship, 1830-1930* (2011); she has also published articles in scholarly journals, and edited volumes. Her research has been supported by the David Driskell Center for the Study of the African Diaspora, the Ford Foundation, and the American Association of University Women. Her essay for this volume traces her own upbringing and professional development alongside the narratives of race and gender in Toni Morrison's novels. In reading Morrison, who sketches and develops the tensions of gender alongside those of race, Mitchell recognizes the complexities of having to negotiate two separate and yet profoundly-intertwined identities. These questions inform and infuse her own scholarship as fiercely and as hauntingly as they do Morrison's novels.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Belief and Performance, Morrison and Me

KORITHA MITCHELL

The black won't rub off! It really isn't dirt!
—CHILDHOOD PLAYMATE

Accused of rape? That's what he gets for messin' with them white girls.
—COLLEGE FRIEND

That's right, class: Toni Morrison won this year's Nobel prize. You know, it's a good time to be black and a woman.
—GUEST LECTURER

Girl, you better act like you know.
—MY MAMA, LAVERNE MITCHELL

Reading Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* at age eighteen ultimately led me to pursue a Ph.D. in Literature, so Morrison's work literally shaped the life I now lead as a college professor. The insights I gleaned from that novel have proven valuable throughout my journey as a black woman living in the United States. When I encountered Morrison's first novel during my freshman year of college, I had reached that point in my life admitting, quite reluctantly, that race would shape my experiences. Try as I might, I could not make racial difference go away. And this surprised me as much as not being able to rub my color off had surprised my friend on that unforgettable afternoon.

By the time that I entered college, I was still resisting the idea that color could shape my life, but I could not deny the significance of events that told me otherwise. Still, nothing had prepared me to consider the relevance of gender, not just race. Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* did precisely that, and once it did, I began to recognize the many moments when people would try to make me choose whether I would prioritize race or gender when things got tough. And it seemed that issues of sexuality made times get tough more quickly than anything else! We were college students — away from our parents — dealing with sexual freedom, but that was not the only reason for the tension around gender and race. Anxiety attended these issues even in class, when seemingly staid matters were up for discussion, such as merit or intellectual rigor.

Now, as I look back, I recognize the wisdom of something that I had heard growing up but whose enduring value I would have to learn over time, and over and over again. As a black woman in the United States, I had better *act like I know.* Sometimes the most important thing to know is that this is a racist, sexist, heterosexist, classist society. Operating as if I don't know that is foolish, I believe; but I also think that recognizing these truths about my environment keeps me from believing some of the nation's lies.

My first encounter with Morrison showed me that American culture is structured to ensure that my race and gender will matter in all situations. Then, the experiences that I had after reading *The Bluest Eye* showed me that I would be expected to perform in accordance with accepted notions of gender and race. Recognizing those pressures made me realize that belief and performance are always intertwined. They sometimes work in concert, sometimes not, but they are never distinct from each other.

I. Discovering Gender

Growing up on the outskirts of Houston, Texas, I was familiar with racist behavior, but I was fairly committed to interpreting it as anything but racism. I was determined to live in a world in which only the triumphs I associated with

Martin Luther King, Jr. really mattered. I insisted that race would not shape my life. But there were a few incidents that I could not explain away. My best friend's attempt to wipe my "dirt" off was one of them, but it mostly made me angry with myself. Why had that incident hurt my feelings? I knew that her grandfather was a mean old man, and that's the only reason she would say something like that. She was a true friend; in fact, she liked me more than she liked her grandpa. Because I could always reassure myself with these reminders, I was most upset by the fact that I seemed unable to forget that day.

Years later, a similarly unforgettable incident occurred during my senior year of high school. It was the first time I remember actually being called a *nigger.* Class was being held in the library so that we could conduct research. Two classmates were talking while locating books for the assignment. The library shelves towered high above our heads, so as we searched for our books on opposite sides of the same shelf, I could hear them but not see them. One of the boys complained that I had taken the topic that he would have chosen if it had been available by the time the teacher called on him. John responded: "What a shame. She's a nigger; you would've done a better job with it." The complainer was silent, apparently stunned. I heard John pipe up again, chuckling: "What? It's just the truth."

By the time I arrived at a small liberal arts college in Ohio, I was beginning to accept that race would in fact shape many of my experiences; however, I was not prepared for the notion that gender would help determine the experiences I would have. In my freshman year, I enrolled in a Women's Literature class. Early on, I was taken with the feminist arguments made in *How to Suppress Women's Writing.* This study lists the various ways in which women's literary contributions have been denigrated: "*She didn't write it.* But if it's clear she did the deed . . . *She wrote it, but she shouldn't have.* (It's political, sexual, masculine, feminist.) *She wrote it, but look what she wrote about.* (The bedroom, the kitchen, her family. Other women!) *She wrote it, but she wrote only one of it.* ("Jane Eyre. Poor dear, that's all she ever. . . .") *She wrote it, but she isn't really an artist, and it isn't really art.* (It's a thriller, a romance, a children's book. . . .) *She wrote it, but she had help.* (Robert Browning. Branwell Brontë. Her own "masculine side.") *She wrote it, but she's an anomaly.* (Woolf. With Leonard's help. . . .) *She wrote it, BUT. . . .*" I found the entire book engrossing, and I kept scribbling in the margins, "Why can't you see that this applies to black-authored works?"[1]

I began to wonder if the silence around this obvious parallel was deliberate, but I was far from prepared to ask the question. I may have been wrong, but I assumed that I would be considered a troublemaker for offering the observation. I liked the class and the professor, and I didn't want to bring negative attention to myself. I never said anything about the silence that

accompanied our discussions of *How To Suppress Women's Writing,* which served as our touchstone throughout the course, but it suddenly did not matter. We read *The Bluest Eye* toward the end of the semester, and I was no longer interested in naming what I believed to be the hypocrisy of our discussions of "women's literature." Because my professor introduced me to that novel, I gained an understanding of my surroundings that I doubt could have come from her or my classmates.

The novel felt like it had been written for me! I am dark-skinned and was called "fat, black, and ugly" nearly every day of my teenage years. Claudia MacTeer, who narrates much of the action, is also dark, but I was struck by her ability to question assessments of beauty and worth. For example, when her peers have "a loving conversation about how cu-ute Shirley Temple was," Claudia could not join them "because I hated Shirley."[2] Likewise, other children love blue-eyed baby dolls, but she revels in dismembering them. To my mind, these were unthinkable displays of strength. And it became clear that this was a strength particularly valuable for black *girls.* It was not simply being black or being dark-skinned that mattered; it was being those things while also being female. When I was called "fat, black, and ugly" at the bus stop every morning, I was not the only black child, nor was I the only dark-skinned child in the group. We were all black, but I was the only girl . . . and I was dark. As a girl, though I did not realize it at the time, it was my duty to look a certain way so that I would be pleasing or at least acceptable. Not doing so came with a price.[3]

Besides questioning beauty standards, Claudia gives voice to feelings with which I was quite familiar. At one point, Claudia and her sister Frieda have an argument with Maureen Peal, a middle-class girl with a fair complexion. The disagreement ends with Maureen's declaration: "I *am* cute! And you ugly! Black and ugly black e mos. I *am* cute!"[4] Claudia explains her and her sister's response in these terms:

> We were sinking under the wisdom, accuracy, and relevance of Maureen's last words. If she was cute—and if anything could be believed, she *was*—then we were not. And what did that mean? We were lesser. Nicer, brighter, but still lesser. Dolls we could destroy, but we could not destroy the honey voices of parents and aunts, the obedience in the eyes of our peers, the slippery light in the eyes of our teachers when they encountered the Maureen Peals of the world. What was the secret? What did we lack? Why was it important?[5]

These were questions that I had never asked, but I was familiar with the feelings that I suddenly believed should have inspired them.

Surely, if I had had the confidence Claudia possessed, I would have asked these questions, but before I could become preoccupied with criticizing my younger self, the novel gave me reason to show mercy. Morrison has Claudia

continue, "And so what? Guileless and without vanity, we were still in love with ourselves then. We felt comfortable in our skins, enjoyed the news that our senses released to us, admired our dirt, cultivated our scars, and could not comprehend this unworthiness."[6]

Gender also came into stark relief when I encountered Cholly Breedlove's back-story. A teenaged Cholly goes into the woods with a girl named Darlene during a church picnic. They are having sex when two white men happen upon them and force them to continue at gunpoint. Morrison's handling of that scene made clear for me that both characters endured a racist assault, but Darlene experienced the violence and its implications in ways that differed from Cholly's experience of it. Neither was more or less traumatic, but there was a difference. Therefore, there was reason to believe that being a man or a woman factors into all experiences. I was not sure that I wanted to understand all that this could mean, but I was intrigued. Certainly, I was not interested in ignoring the truth that I had gleaned.

During my sophomore year, scandal overtook our small liberal arts college: a white woman had accused her black boyfriend of rape. As small liberal arts schools are wont to do, the university scheduled an arbitration hearing, which would determine disciplinary action without involving the police.[7] At the time, what most shaped my experience of the controversy was the fact that student leaders encouraged "all members of the black community" to support "our brother" by gathering outside of the arbitration room. The intended result: the complainant, defendant, and school officials would have to walk through a silent crowd of African and African American students. The black defendant would feel supported, and the others would know that he was supported. A friend and I decided that we would not be a part of such a display because we did not know enough about what had happened to take sides. We were disappointed that so many of our peers had planned to do exactly that without any more information than we had.

My not having stood in (black) "solidarity" led to some debates, but more than I recall explaining my decision, I remember a comment made when only black women were present. We gathered at the beginning of the controversy, when all we knew was that our classmate had been accused and would have to defend himself. Someone said, "Well, that's what he gets for messin' with them white girls." Several women agreed, some of us said nothing, but no one disagreed. I didn't disagree either. I sensed a kind of truth in this declaration but would not have been able to explain why it felt accurate. The remark haunted me. Why would the accused have avoided problems by dating a black woman? Because we don't believe rape happens between lovers? Or, because we won't air the race's dirty laundry even if it does? The implications were many, and all of

them were frightening, yet none seemed to be out of step with what I had come to believe. For that reason, the comment would remain with me as I continued on a journey now shaped by the knowledge *The Bluest Eye* had given me.

Determined to raise awareness, including my own, I became interested in living in the Women's House where residents sponsored campus programming on women's issues, including sexual harassment, rape survival and prevention, and negotiating society's beauty standards. Soon, it was all settled; at the beginning of my junior year, I would move out of the dorm and into the Women's House. At the same time, the House of Black Culture was slated to become co-ed for the first time in its history. I was active in black student organizations, so some asked me why I would opt for the Women's House rather than the House of Black Culture. And, of course, some were bold enough to declare that I should have chosen the latter. Their criticism was frustrating, but over time, I had reason to be frustrated with my peers in the Women's House, too. My white housemates would sometimes suggest that healthy body image or domestic violence, for example, were clearly "women's issues" that had nothing to do with race. In other words, like so many other black women before and since, I was pressured to prioritize either race or gender.

Having read *The Bluest Eye* made me see that gender, not just race, factored into the experiences that I would have. That fact came into even starker relief with the interracial rape case. I could not avoid the way that sexuality, power, vulnerability, and allegiance were staring me down, demanding attention and urging me to at least attempt to find answers. How would I negotiate these forces?

That question was already a constant companion when my favorite magazine, *Essence*, published an article about the tensions between white and black women. The piece vividly captured the frustrations that I had regarding both black men and white women; clearly, what I felt was nothing new. I therefore became intensely interested in whether black and white women had ever successfully worked together for political change. I had some inkling that, in making their case for voting rights, white women had insisted that it was wrong for former slaves to enjoy suffrage while white men's own wives and mothers did not have the privilege. Yet, I also knew that black men had made their case for suffrage partly based on the fact that they were men who were no longer slaves; they deserved the "manhood rights" of citizenship. It seemed that both black men and white women made arguments that did not necessarily include black women. So, in addition to being curious about when black and white women worked together, I was also interested in what black women were saying during the decades when no one else seemed eager to claim allegiance to them. In short, I became fascinated with what black women had written between 1870, when black men won the vote, and 1920, when women did.

Graduate school seemed to be a way to pursue these interests, but I was not ready to give up on my life-long dream of becoming editor-in-chief of *Essence* magazine. I enrolled in a study abroad program that arranged an unpaid internship at a magazine in New York. However, I wanted to move to the city in the summer, rather than wait for the fall, and I landed a paid internship with *Travel Holiday*. Based on my work there throughout the summer, the editor allowed me to keep the job through the fall, so I did not have to take the unpaid internship. I lived and worked in New York for six glorious months. Because the entire experience was so positive and educational, when I ultimately decided to pursue graduate school, I did so without regret. I chose an academic path out of desire, not because a magazine career was unattractive.

When I returned for the Spring semester of my senior year, I was fairly certain that I would apply to Master's programs, but I enrolled in a class that changed my life as much as *The Bluest Eye* did. Ohio Wesleyan had hired the only woman-of-color professor that I had seen during my college education. Dr. Anu Aneja offered a seminar on Women of Color authors. Morrison entered our discussions not as a novelist, but as a critic ("Unspeakable Things Unspoken: The Afro-American Presence in American Literature"). Still, I was mesmerized; my other classes had simply not prepared me to believe that women of color had created such rich literary traditions. Our readings included *I, Tituba, Black Witch of Salem, Like Water for Chocolate, The Mother of Dreams*, and *Meatless Days*. In Dr. Aneja's class, it was clear that the literature was significant, not because it was important to represent "minority" voices or even because I related to its characters, but because it was part of a literary tradition worthy of serious study. I had read African American authors before, but because the curriculum seldom incorporated them, my doing so seemed more like a hobby than intellectual endeavor. Dr. Aneja changed that, thereby sparking my desire to teach at the graduate and undergraduate levels. The implicit but powerful message that I received was that you don't have to love Shakespeare to study serious literature.

It was settled, then: I would pursue the Ph.D., and the questions that Morrison had raised for me would be my guiding light. I was determined to face issues that continued to disturb me regarding the rape case.[8] I was also eager to better understand the claims that most annoyed me: "X is clearly about race," and "Y is clearly about gender." Why had Dr. Aneja been the first woman-of-color professor I had encountered?[9] That seemed like a question worth pursuing, and I suspected that the answer was related to the other issues that claimed my attention. After all, the silence around that question reminded me of the silence that accompanied discussions of *How To Suppress Women's Writing*.

II. Tripping and Trippin' on Hierarchies

The same year I encountered *The Bluest Eye* in a Women's Literature course, a guest speaker visited my other English class, which was taught by a professor who had quickly become my favorite. Our visitor was a creative writer, introduced as a real talent to be respected. Because he was invited by my favorite professor, it never occurred to me to think of this guest as anything less than awe-inspiring. He dazzled us with readings from his own work and a discussion of his understanding of literary traditions more generally. Toward the end of the class period, he asked whether we could name the latest winner of the Nobel prize for literature. Someone offered, "Toni Morrison." The guest confirmed the answer and asked if we could list past winners. A string of men's names followed. I had heard of most of them, but not all. Soon, familiarity with these authors' work proved to be irrelevant because the purpose of the exercise became crystal clear. The guest declared, "Toni Morrison won this year's Nobel Prize. You know, it's a good time to be black and a woman."

Suddenly, I felt several sets of eyes on me. Students' eyes. The guest speaker was too caught up in himself to look in my direction. I was uncomfortable and avoiding the glances that came my way, but I remember looking at my favorite professor; he was watching his guest with pride. He sat atop a student desk to the side of the lectern from which the guest spoke. As he let his leg hang off the desk, he was the picture of relaxed reassurance; the speaker's presentation delighted him.

Somehow, I was vaguely aware that I was in the middle of an age-old scenario. This educational experience was shaped by the easy confidence of the white men at the front of the classroom, the racial affirmation that my white classmates had not requested but nevertheless received, and the amorphous cloud of unearned shame that affected the posture and facial expression of the one black student in the room. And I could see that a strong belief was operating, though I was far from having the language to name it. The speaker believed that race and sex did not factor into the success of any of the Nobel Prize winners . . . except Morrison. Being white and male somehow had nothing to do with the prize being bestowed upon most winners. However, being black and a woman had everything to do with the committee recognizing Morrison and her work. I was silently being encouraged to believe this too, and I wasn't sure that I didn't because I had no tools to resist the assumptions. Still, I suspected that if I accepted those beliefs, I would be paralyzed and doomed to a life of mediocrity.

This incident stayed with me for the rest of my college career, and though it did not keep me from applying to graduate school, it certainly haunted me while I did so. I spent several months developing a writing sample for my application;

it examined *The Bluest Eye* with more sophistication than was possible when I wrote about the novel in my freshman year. As proud as I was to have discovered many more critical essays on Morrison's work than I would have dreamed existed, I wondered whether I was making the right life choice. If Morrison's achievement could be so easily diminished, what would happen to me?

III. Acting and Knowing

Because I knew how easily Morrison's work could be dismissed, fear and anxiety were constant companions as I pursued my Ph.D., but the lessons that I learned from *The Bluest Eye* sustained me and helped to shape my work now that I am a professor and scholar. I have come to understand the insights that the novel inspired in terms of belief and performance, and that understanding has fueled my interest in Performance Studies. Belief and performance are always intertwined. In fact, "every performance enacts a theory, and every theory performs in the public sphere."[10] For example, believing that whites naturally belong in places of honor (and blacks don't), the guest speaker publicly questioned the Nobel Prize committee's decision to recognize Morrison. Viewing that fateful day in terms of belief and performance also sheds light on why it seemed like an age-old scenario; its power arose from the fact that it was routine. Because this scene has been repeated so often in American schools, my encounter with it was "at once a reenactment and re-experiencing of a set of meanings already socially established."[11] Looking back, I now recognize a powerful element that I had not been able to identify at the time: when that guest speaker cast himself as an arbiter of merit, his whiteness lent credibility to his performance.[12]

Because it revealed how much being black and a woman factors into my experiences, *The Bluest Eye* eventually helped me to see a simple truth: to recognize the role of whiteness in others' lives is to attend to the semiotics of everyday existence. In this country, "white" skin is not neutral; it carries meaning in all interactions. Those meanings translate into the person with white skin being granted basic respect and the benefit of the doubt, because he is assumed to have intelligence and integrity. Whiteness is privileged and advantaged, and part of the privilege is being able to pretend that skin color has nothing to do with one's achievements. Whites are encouraged to believe that the respect granted to them is based on actual "qualifications" or "merit." However, white professors (for example) are not "just" professors or "just" scholars. They are professors whose racial markers lead most of their students to assume that they are smart and lead most of their colleagues to assume that they deserve their position—unless they routinely prove unproductive. (Several examples of

ineptitude won't be enough to undo the assumption of competence. Lackluster performance must be continual and impossible to ignore in order for there to be even a hint of a question about whether they are qualified.) Therefore, it is not an accident that American English departments, for example, are full of certain kinds of people and represent certain kinds of knowledge. These conditions are not the result of a benign tradition; they are evidence of how refusing to admit how whiteness matters *only further advantages those who are already heavily represented.* To put it plainly, United States universities do not look like they do because whites are so brilliant, but because these institutions are set up to ensure that whites are viewed that way.

It is one thing to know that racism and white privilege exist; it is another to understand this fact in theatrical terms that account for semiotics. Recognizing how whiteness is interpreted allows me to gain perspective in countless situations, which in turn helps me to identify what is driving belief. For instance, when I realize that a colleague's being white and male shapes interpretations of his every move, then I understand that even if I duplicated his demeanor in the classroom, students would read me differently. Because a white person's behavior is interpreted generously, they are affirmed nearly everywhere they turn; that makes a difference for them, and it is important to note, rather than ignore, that fact. It puts whites at an advantage so that their experience is not the norm of what American universities feel like or of how these institutions treat faculty members. Theirs is an advantaged, privileged experience. Because I remember this, I am less likely to absorb the beliefs that are promoted, including the myth that *my* success is a direct result of the social and political climate: you know, the United States has gotten to be so liberal (and charitable) that it's a good time to be black and a woman.[13]

The emphasis that Performance Studies places on semiotics has made it a particularly inviting field for me. It enriches my work as a literary critic because it encourages critical readings of the written word as well as spoken words, props, gestures, movement. I have also found that scholars committed to Performance Studies refuse to pretend that they can float above the implications of how their bodies are read.[14] This kind of awareness would do our nation's classrooms a lot of good. However, it is too often only scholars of color who are attentive to how their bodies are read in the classroom, and white professors' refusal to do the same only exacerbates the problems scholars of color face. Research shows how routinely professors who are not white, male, and heterosexual receive student evaluations whose content and tone reflect reactions to much more than instruction.[15] While my teaching experiences have often corroborated these findings, I will not recount them here. I will simply say that an awareness of semiotics has helped me to deal with some of the disturbing ways in which

I have been interpreted by students and colleagues. However, the emphasis on semiotics is just one of the reasons that I find the field empowering; it has also kept me cognizant of the dynamic interplay of belief and performance.

The Bluest Eye helped lead me to Performance Studies because it equipped me to see that assumptions around race and gender animate interaction in everyday life. Beliefs about race and gender create an environment in which people are expected to perform in certain ways. Approaching my research with this awareness has been invaluable, but it has also helped me to navigate the treacherous terrain of American life and culture. After all, one must interpret much more than words to recognize the dynamic ways in which gender and race, power and vulnerability, alienation and allegiance write the scripts that are enacted in everyday life.

I conclude this essay by sharing a recent experience that reiterated the enduring value of the insights I first gleaned from *The Bluest Eye*, especially because I now see them through a performance lens. As I share what follows, I understand that while it is a personal experience, widespread, institutionalized conditions made it possible, so it is also quite common. In this way, it is not specific to me, the senior colleague involved, or even to the institution that employed us. As a scenario in which white privilege is in play, it is "an act that has been going on before one arrived on the scene."[16] In order to survive the "white bourgeois elite intellectual traditions codified as 'the academy,'"[17] scholars of color must negotiate incidents like this all the time, so this story is not unique (though it is not often told in public).

As a tenure-track professor, I needed several classroom observation reports from senior members of the faculty. I asked a senior colleague to observe one of my upper-level undergraduate classes. The colleague is a white woman whose research and overall demeanor I greatly admire. While in attendance, she noticed that students were in the habit of saying "N" whenever they came across "nigger" while reading passages aloud. When she and I debriefed afterward, she acknowledged that the students seemed comfortable with the practice, but she wondered why I had actually made it a policy in the syllabus.[18] We discussed it a bit, and I shared some of my personal reasons. She shared that the issue arises only when she teaches Mark Twain, but she does not shy away from the word. In fact, she used it during this meeting with me. She was not at all self-conscious about it, despite the fact that this was a conversation about my attempts to avoid hearing that word in the workplace. Wanting to enlighten me by sharing her teaching methods, she explained that she makes clear to her students that when the word is used in class discussions, it is "in quotation marks."

So, here I am: a young, untenured professor talking to a senior colleague whom I not only respect but also admire, and she is using the N-word, knowing

that I don't appreciate hearing it. My beliefs have been articulated, but her beliefs are also being articulated and performed. Immediately, I must launch into a performance of my own. I strive to control the tone and volume of my voice, my body language, and my facial expressions. I work to convey appreciation and understanding while concealing the many thoughts and feelings that it would not have been "professional" to express. As we have learned from political theorist James Scott, "a convincing performance may require both the suppression or control of feelings that would spoil the performance and the simulation of emotions that are necessary to the performance."[19]

The situation demonstrated how thoroughly conceptions of professionalism privilege whiteness. How many white professors would find themselves in this position, so how much easier might it be for them to be interpreted as professional? Indeed, her cool demeanor was, as always, the epitome of "professionalism." She was being rational and intellectual, wasn't she? Furthermore, she was being generous, not only sharing her wisdom with a junior colleague, but also preparing to take the time to write an observation report.

As I suppressed feelings in order to perform "appropriately," I simultaneously grappled with conceptions of professionalism and collegiality. As others have observed, given the power of white privilege, "the term 'collegiality' becomes a particularly loaded one, offering very little potential for dissent."[20] As I labored to be read as professional and collegial, my task was made more difficult because anger was not the only feeling I had supressed. As cultural theorist Anne Cheng observes, anyone who has been in a racially painful situation knows the "vexing web of feelings that ensues: shock mixed with expectation, anger with shame, and yet again shame for feeling shame."[21] I performed well enough to leave the meeting on a pleasant note. After all, ". . . the prudent subordinate will ordinarily conform by speech and gesture to what he knows is expected of him — even if that conformity masks a quite different off-stage opinion."[22] It was not wise to say everything that I was thinking and feeling. I could not forget that this colleague would soon write a report that would go into my permanent file, to be revisited when I am reviewed for tenure. By that time, my file already contained reports noting "red flags" in my teaching evaluations, including student testimony that I walk into the classroom "like Darth Vader."[23] I was careful about what I said and did, despite how fiercely I disagreed with what was taking place in this conversation. To use the vernacular, my mama didn't raise no fool.

Nevertheless, I could not remain silent for long. I could not sleep that night — partly out of the shame of having performed well enough that I was the only one who left upset. So, I wrote her a letter, focusing on the notion that her students understand that, in her class, "nigger" is always "in quotation

marks." Among other things, I said that her rationale fails to "account for the fact that the word refers to me and mine, not my white counterparts."

Speaking from the perspective of a black student in her class, I explained that her practice does not even acknowledge that "I'm the one who feels the sting of that word." Instead, the student receives a powerful message: "If you get the nuances and complexity and subversiveness, then you wouldn't be offended and you wouldn't feel a sting." I continued:

In our racist society, a black student is constantly faced with the knowledge that everyone assumes she's intellectually inferior. So, when she comes into a class and this *quotation mark* scenario is set up, she must find a way to deal, because she sees herself as capable and she wants to prove that she can do as well as anyone else. So, she might say to herself, "If I'm really smart enough, I'll get the distinction, the nuance, the subtlety."

One of the many results: When a class is set up this way, a black student has invisible labor. The word applies to/stings her in ways that it doesn't sting the teacher and other students using/reading it. So, she has to find a way to *work around* what she feels about that word being spoken (in this room in which she is the only or one of few that this word has historically applied to). She has to *work around* the mountain of feeling that it creates for her in order to engage the material and/or engage in discussion and/or enjoy and learn from you. She has to do something with her feelings about what you're doing in order to continue to see you as a teacher who cares about her learning. And the thing about it is this—she'll likely do that work. I certainly did. There will be other evidences that you're a good teacher and that you care about the learning atmosphere you're creating, etc. so the student will do lots of work to ignore that pain and accept that it's just her own sensitivity. (And society is constantly telling her that her feelings are not justified and don't matter anyway.) So, she'll do that work and not feel exactly right about it but never have the words to articulate to herself or to you why it caused unnecessary injury.

Let's also note that this scenario puts white students at a distinct advantage. They aren't just in the majority; they are at an advantage. They don't have to do that extra emotional work in order to engage the class and shine as a student. The course has been structured in ways that don't assault them with racial epithets. This is to say nothing about the fact that they're in an educational system that constantly affirms them by showing that almost all that is worthy of study is white — and the vast majority of people worthy of teaching them are white. Yes, white students are at a distinct advantage.

After writing that letter, I could sleep. If it accomplished nothing more, that was a victory. But it was also a way of reassuring myself that my beliefs were intact, despite my necessary performance.

My mother was right when she said, "Girl, you better act like you know." This advice is powerful in at least two senses. On the one hand, I need to *act* according to what I know is expected of me in situations where power — the power of whiteness — is unmistakable. I did that by acting like a grateful junior colleague who had never considered the brilliant utility of quotation marks. On the other hand, "acting like I know" means operating in this society aware of its history and tendencies. One way I do that is to recognize that white privilege is real, so little in the academy or the nation gives this colleague reason to hear me or to care about what I tried to share about my experiences or the potential experience of her students. Knowing that, I also know that her confidence in disregarding what I said does not mean that her beliefs are more valid; they are just endorsed by a society that routinely accommodates and affirms whites. I say that she disregarded my input because, even after the private meeting in which I shared some personal reasons for the policy and even after the email from which I quote here, she joined the other senior colleagues in my annual review meeting as they criticized my N-word policy. As I had learned from *The Bluest Eye*, gender matters, not just race, but just as surely, race matters. The fact that we are both women did not magically create common ground.

So, "acting like I know" involves recognizing that whites often have the leeway to disregard others. I must be prepared to have them behave in ways designed to convince me that I am crazy or overly sensitive or somehow dreaming up professional disadvantage, lack of support, etc. But being prepared for this also keeps me from believing that race has nothing to do with their success. They may take on the unearned arrogance of believing that their whiteness does not help them, but I don't have to believe the hype.

In a hostile society, survival sometimes requires performing out of sync with one's beliefs. In fact, doing so can often be the best way to preserve those beliefs. I must sometimes behave as if I accept American myths. By doing so, I can claim the psychic space needed to maintain and nurture my own views in the midst of a society that wants to convince me that my perspective is skewed.

When we first met, I did not have the strength that Claudia MacTeer exhibited in resisting assessments of her beauty and worth, but she and Toni Morrison remain with me as I continue to gather the tools to do precisely that.

NOTES

1. Looking back at the book now, I see the opening pages evince some awareness on the author's part of black authors, but I remain confident that I had been right at age 18 to observe that this awareness was not woven throughout the logic of the study.
2. Toni Morrison, *The Bluest Eye* (New York: Random House-Knopf, 1970 and 1994; repr. New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1993), 19.

3. A similar distinction is made throughout Wallace Thurman's novel *The Blacker the Berry* (New York: Macaulay Company, 1929). The protagonist has gotten a clear message that a dark-skinned man will find success and happiness, but his female counterpart will encounter many more roadblocks.
4. Morrison, *The Bluest Eye*, 73.
5. Ibid., 74.
6. Ibid.
7. It is possible that the victim did not want the police involved, but the fact that this criminal matter was not treated as such is symptomatic of our society's tendency to diminish the crime and injury of rape.
8. Once I began graduate study, I soon realized that the black rapist myth emerged after black men gained voting rights, so it was a powerful political tool. White men labeled black men rapists and insisted that lynching was the best way to avenge the rape of white women and prevent future attacks. Rape can certainly occur between lovers, and the only thing that I know for sure about the campus case is that I don't know what happened between my peers. However, because these issues stayed with me, and I looked for historical alliances between white and black women, I began studying lynching — initially believing that the movement to end it had been truly interracial. Instead, I found that the black rapist myth had been invented for political reasons, and I found black women activists calling on white women to join them in the fight against the mob *for decades* before white women responded in force in 1930.
9. Attending an HBCU was not within my reach. Having that experience has always seemed like a privilege to me, because I needed financial assistance that I was not able to secure from majority-black institutions.
10. Diana Taylor, *The Archive and the Repertoire: Performing Cultural Memory in the Americas* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003), 27.
11. Judith Butler, "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory," in *The Performance Studies Reader*, 2nd ed., ed. Henry Bial (New York: Routledge, 2004), 193.
12. Scholars (more brilliant and experienced than I am) have explained why "white" and "whiteness" are accurate and appropriate terms for dealing with the discourses and practices that I am addressing. George Lipsitz offers a seminal discussion of (among other things) how maintaining the whiteness of institutions often hinges on an investment in pretending that whiteness has nothing to do with how the institution works. See Lipsitz's *The Possessive Investment in Whiteness: How White People Profit from Identity Politics* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1998).
13. To the extent that conditions are better in this country, the debt I owe is to African and African American forerunners who struggled to make a path for me. For more on this, see my article "Generative Challenges: Notes on Artist/Critic Interaction," *Callaloo* 32, no. 2 (2009): 605-15.
14. Of course, I would never claim that Performance Studies approaches prevent obliviousness around race, gender, class, and sexuality. That is perhaps one reason that Black Performance Studies has begun emerging as a vibrant field.
15. The research is extensive. A few citations include, (1) Michael A. Messner, "White Guy Habitus in the Classroom: Challenging the Reproduction of Privilege," *Men and Masculinities* 2, no. 4 (2000): 457-69; (2) Susan A. Basow, "Student Evaluations: The Role of Gender Bias and Teaching Styles," in *Career strategies for Women in Academe: Arming Athena*, eds. L. H. Collins, J. C. Chrisler, and K. Quina (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 1998), 135-56; (3) Nicole Buchanan, "The Nexus of Race and Gender Domination: The Racialized Sexual Harassment of African American Women," in *In the Company of Men: Re-discovering the Links between Sexual Harassment and Male Domination*, eds. by James Gruber and Phoebe Morgan (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 2005), 294-320; (4) Eros DeSouza, and A. Gigi Fansler, "Contrapower Sexual Harassment: A Survey of Students and Faculty Members," *Sex Roles* 48 (2003): 519-42.
16. Butler, "Performative Acts," 193.
17. E. Patrick Johnson, "Black Performance Studies: Genealogies, Politics, Futures," in *The Sage Handbook of Performance Studies*, eds. D. Soyini Madison and Judith Hamera (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2006), 461.

18. I express my views on this issue as part of a classroom covenant which is placed at the end of my syllabus and course policies. The statement that has inspired comment from people reviewing my teaching is the second to the last of 5 statements. It reads: The "N" word won't be used in this class by a person of any race, even though it consistently appears in our texts.
19. James Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1990), 28-29.
20. Anu Aneja, "Of Masks and Masquerades: Performing the Collegial Dance," *symploké* 13, no. 1-2 (2005): 145.
21. Anne Anlin Cheng, *The Melancholy of Race: Psychoanalysis, Assimilation, and Hidden Grief* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), x.
22. James Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance*, 36.
23. Students' ability to see me as Darth Vader is particularly telling given that I am only 5'2", wear size 2-4, and dress in a very feminine and conservative manner when teaching.