

## Understanding Racial Encounters in African American Literature: Trauma, Identity, and Literary Analysis in African American Narrative

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### Abstract

*This paper expands upon Anderson's (2011) concept of the "Nigger Moment," identifying it as a distinct category of trauma experienced predominantly by African American individuals and operationalizing it as a tool for literary analysis. While racism and racial socialization have long been central themes in African American literature, the specific phenomenon of the "Nigger Moment" has not been adequately theorized or critically examined. These moments consistently manifest in African American literature, resulting in significant shifts in the characters' thoughts, behaviors, and relationships. By analyzing both fictional and nonfictional works, this paper aims to uncover the manifestations, functions, and developments of these moments, drawing on the lived experiences of African Americans to center their perspectives. Critical examinations of how African American writers and analysts address "Nigger Moments" provide strategies against racism that can be communicated across generations, races, and cultures. Literature serves a dual purpose: revealing and representing reality and offering solutions for navigating these realities. This is echoed in Fatoumata Keita's (2018) reading of Toni Morrison's works, which depict characters undergoing profound struggles to ultimately achieve redemption and liberation. Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* and *Ta-Nehisi Coates Between the World and Me* are used as case studies to demonstrate the impact of "Nigger Moments" on self-perception and community relationships. These texts, familiar within African studies and African American literature, highlight the continuity of this phenomenon within the literary canon and provide a foundation for developing correctives that resonate with the lived realities of African Americans.*

**Keywords:** Toni Morrison, Ta-Nehisi Coates, Race, Identity, Trauma

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## Introduction

During Elijah P. Anderson's ethnographic work on various public spaces within Philadelphia, he observed a peculiar phenomenon he referred to as the "Nigger Moment." Anderson conceptualized this "Moment" based on the experience of an informant, pseudonymously referred to as "Shawn," and his confrontation with racial profiling in his Washington, D.C. neighborhood, where Shawn attended law school. The altercation was the result of a DC Police investigation of a shooting that occurred nearby. A bystander who apparently witnessed the shooting described Shawn as the suspect, from his brown shoes, khaki pants, and blue shirt to his black skin.

At first, Shawn was stalked by a single police cruiser which had passed by him slowly several times as Shawn waited for his bus. After the cruiser pulled over and the officer began questioning Shawn, seven more patrol cars arrived at the scene, blocking traffic from either direction. Shawn was then repeatedly frisked as the other officers spilled his groceries, schoolbooks, and laptop across the pavement. Shawn is never informed by the police why he has been detained. Ten minutes pass before the officers on the scene received word that the actual suspect had been apprehended blocks away – a white male – at which point Shawn is released. While Shawn conveyed his information to the initial officer on the scene, he noticed that a bystander – one of Shawn's white neighbors - had approached the officer offering to follow Shawn home to ensure the officers he would not get up to any "funny business." The officer declines, though Shawn is left stung with the knowledge that it was his own neighbor of three years who had called the police on him in the first place.

Retelling his story to Anderson five years later, Shawn insists that he had moved on from the embarrassment and shame of this experience, though he reveals,

Never does a day go by that I don't think about what happened back then. That incident was traumatic for me, and now I feel somewhat jaded. It has taken me a while to get over what happened. The incident was part of my education as a young black man. Now, I'm not so quick to trust [white] people, and the incident continues to color my view and my feelings of what is and is not possible for a young black man (Anderson, 2011, p. 252).

The objective of this paper is to expand upon the notion of the "Nigger Moment," as articulated by Anderson (2011), as a particular type or category of trauma, experienced predominantly by African American men, women, and children, and operationalized as a tool for African American literary analysis. While experiences with racism and the process of racial socialization in both individual and structural form have, of course, figured prominently in African American literary analysis, no study has trained its critical lens upon what is referred to here as the "Nigger Moment" nor does there exist an adequate theorization of a phenomenon like the "Nigger Moment" to be used for future studies. By developing such a framework here, this article aims to provide comparative literary analysis with a tool for understanding how African American writers use racial socialization as a narrative device and element of character development. Without a formal theory of this process, the analyst risks erroneously presuming racial identity as a sort of fact of nature, rather than a learned set of beliefs, behaviors, attitudes, and values that are reinforced by phenomena such as Nigger Moments and may evolve over time through maturation, development of new social relationships, alteration of the social context in which the subject is surrounded, and other character defining experiences through the subject's life.

Significantly, these "Nigger Moments" seem to manifest with great consistency in both how they occur, and what they mean for the trajectory of the sufferers' lives post-trauma in African American literature: e.g., fundamental shifts in thought and/or behavior patterns,

relations to self and others. Also, from both sociological and literary perspectives, these moments hold a certain degree of ubiquity in the lived experience of African Americans, which is to say that by focusing the analytical lens upon how this phenomenon manifests, functions, and develops in the lives of African Americans, brings greater salience to Thomas S. Engeman's (2004) and Ralph Ellison's (1995) understandings of art's relationship to reality. Engeman (2004) states, "Literature best reveals the possibilities of human knowledge and action; art must be a guide for 'ordinary' experience" (p. 91), while Ellison (1995) writes, "writers and poets help create or reveal hidden realities by asserting their existence" (p. 737).<sup>i</sup> My purpose in applying this concept to literary analysis and criticism lies within this relationship between art and reality.

Fiction and non-fiction literature, from this perspective, plays a dual-purpose: (1) providing the reader with representations or revelations of reality, or potential realities, that resonate; and (2) providing possible solutions or suggestions for maneuvering these realities in the readers lived experience through concrete or hypothetical means. Fatoumata Keita (2018) has echoed this point in her reading of Toni Morrison's oeuvre by arguing that Morrison placed her characters in "the most dreadful and repellent stories of blackness," to set the foundation for their redemption/restoration from racial trauma (p. 53). As will be explored later below, Morrison's first novel, *Bluest Eye*, places two young girls, particularly Pecola Breedlove, in several harrowing situations from which the girls emerge on distinct trajectories as a result, predicated, of course, on each girl's particular background. Keita (2018) argues that Morrison, in this as well as in her other novels, constructs an "aesthetic of blackness," in order to frame her celebration of blackness and its beauty in the face of negation; delivering her readers, vis-à-vis the example of her characters, to liberation, redemption, and rebirth.<sup>ii</sup> In the case of *Bluest Eye*, Pecola functions as a counterpoint to punctuate Claudia MacTeer's redemption and rebirth, as well as the elements of her life that allow her to persist on this path (e.g., confidence, strong family dynamic, etc.)

In conjunction with the examples briefly referenced above, I turn to a character study of two popular, canonical works of fiction and non-fiction to apply "Nigger Moment" to concrete examples of its occurrence, development, and impact. The analysis will be broken into two parts: (1) focusing on how "Nigger Moments" affect a person's or character's disposition towards their community and the relationships immediate to them. I will use Ta-Nehesi Coates' *Between the World and Me* to demonstrate how, as Anderson observed, "Nigger Moments" tend to "reinforce preexisting suspicions and distrust of the wider white community;" sometimes manifesting an orientation of pessimism and disillusion towards the world (Anderson, 2011, p. 253).<sup>iii</sup> And (2) I will use Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* to show how "Nigger Moments" affect the self-perceptions of those who are victimized by them. These texts were chosen and put in conversation with each other for their familiarity within Africana Studies as well as in African American literature, as well as for their clear uses of the "Nigger Moment" as literary device. Additionally, doing so provides an opportunity to demonstrate, if only microscopically, the continuity of the "Nigger Moment" within the African American literary canon.

### **Significance:**

Observing the Nigger Moment, as articulated here, serves as a vital framework for devising strategies to address and rectify such incidents, which are deeply ingrained in the experiences of African American men, women, and children. This concept illuminates the often harsh and dehumanizing encounters faced by African Americans, providing a lens through which these experiences can be better understood and addressed. Literature, in particular, plays a crucial role in this process by offering narratives that reflect these realities, allowing readers to identify with and gain insights from these stories. Through engagement with literary works, individuals can gain a deeper understanding of the systemic nature of racism and its impact on the everyday lives of African Americans.

In the present text, two specific examples are examined to illustrate the application of Nigger Moment analysis – Toni Morrison’s *The Bluest Eye* and Ta-Nehesi Coates’ *Between the World and Me*. These examples demonstrate how literary narratives, both fiction and nonfiction, can serve as powerful tools for highlighting a vital catalyst in racial socialization for African Americans and for fostering empathy and understanding among readers. However, the scope of Nigger Moment analysis extends far beyond these examples. It can be applied to a myriad of other literary works, each offering unique perspectives and lessons. By exploring a diverse range of narratives, readers can develop a more comprehensive understanding racial socialization and the pervasive role of trauma in that process, ultimately contributing to more informed and effective efforts to combat racism in society.

### **Theoretical Framework:**

The “Nigger Moment,” in Anderson’s (2011) conception of the term, is a particular experience(s) that every African American man, woman, and child will endure that reinforces their putative place within the society. It may manifest as a moment of disrespect or humiliation and is typically shocking to the subject. The Moment often occurs in trusted social spaces or in other publics where the subject may otherwise safely assume that they are protected from such disrespect or humiliation by social stricture and thereby engender a degree of comfort in those who occupy the space. In the Moment’s wake, explains Anderson (2011), “[e]motions flood over the victim as this middle-class, cosmopolitan-oriented black person is humiliated and shown that he or she is, before anything else, a racially circumscribed black person after all” (p. 253). Regardless of the subject’s social standing, income, occupation, or appearance, they are susceptible to the Moment’s confrontation and aftereffects. All pretensions to the contrary dissipate, solidifying and reinforcing the subject’s status as a second-class citizen.

Anderson (2011) notes that the Moment “turns on the issue of social place,” meaning (a) the Moment manifests within spontaneous social interactions between individuals, between groups and individuals, and between groups and groups; (b) the form and effect of the Moment is contingent upon the particularities of the situation(s) in which it emerges; (c) the catalyst for the Moment derives from one or more conventions of racial ideology and/or custom; and (d) the Moment reinforces the custom(s) salience for both the perpetrator and the perturbed (p. 256).

In their 1994 work, *Living with Racism*, Joe Feagin and Melvin Sikes made similar observations about the African American middle class. They observed that their subjects generally expected their entry into the middle-class, and their efforts to achieve it, to set them apart from the African American working-class, which has historically been believed to be lazy, puerile, and lascivious.<sup>iv</sup> For those who may be unaccustomed to explicit racial harassment and discrimination, such experiences can be disorienting, confusing, and even threatening. Feagin and Sikes (1994) note that “the frustration and pain expressed in these accounts suggest that serious instances of hostility and discrimination can indeed be life crises” (p. 76).

According to Anderson (2011), the Post-Civil Rights Era provided the context necessary for the “Nigger Moment” to emerge. The gains made during this period allowed African Americans to navigate more freely through America’s political, social, and economic spheres. Landmark Supreme Court decisions, such as *Brown v. Board of Education*, dismantled *Plessy v. Ferguson* by 1954, and the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965 removed the remaining legal barriers that had obstructed African Americans from enjoying their full rights as American citizens. However, this new environment brought with it “dilemmas and contradictions of status,” complicating social relations between whites and African Americans (Anderson, 2011, p. 256). Put simply, the newfound freedoms of African Americans, and the shifting social dynamics they entailed, incensed some whites and confounded others. In either case, a broad base of whites was unable to accept, or outright rejected, African Americans’ new, elevated social status.



Trauma for the Black man or woman is a phenomenon that has been explored deeply in the canon of Black thought since the first “slave narratives.”<sup>v</sup> It has been framed in the context of identity formation, political organization, and interpersonal relations by some of the greatest authors of fiction and non-fiction, incorporating traumatic experience as one of the most defining moments in their own or their characters’ development throughout their narratives.<sup>vi</sup> To take just one, poignant example, James Weldon Johnson, in his classic *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man*, wrote of “the Ex-Colored Man’s” coming to consciousness of the significance and implications of the color of his skin:

One day near the end of my second term at school the principal came into our room, and after talking to the teacher, for some reason said, “I wish all of the white scholars to stand for a moment.” I rose with the others. The teacher looked at me, and calling my name said, “You sit down for the present, and rise with the others.” I did not quite understand her, and questioned, “Ma’m?” (sic) She repeated with a softer tone in her voice, “You sit down now, and rise with the others.” I sat down dazed. I saw and heard nothing. When the others were asked to rise I did not know it. When school was dismissed I went out in a kind of stupor. A few of the white boys jeered me, saying, “Oh, you’re a nigger too.” I heard some black children say, “We knew he was colored.” ... How long I stood there gazing at my image I do not know. When I came out and reached the head of the stairs, I heard the lady who had been with my mother going out. I ran downstairs, and rushed to where my mother was sitting with a piece of work in her hands. I buried my head in her lap and blurted out, “Mother, mother, am I a nigger” (Johnson, 1995, pp. 7-8)?<sup>vii</sup>

The “Ex-Colored Man’s” mother then explains to the young man that, no, although she is herself black, the boy’s estranged father is indeed white, which thus leads the anonymous narrator and protagonist to begin seeking flaws within himself and his mother, intending to distance himself from his “Black side.” The proverbial nail is driven home years later when he witnesses the lynching of an African American man in Georgia, ultimately leading to his decision to “neither disclaim the black race nor claim the white race; but that I would change my name, raise a mustache, and let the world take me for what it would” (Johnson, 1995, pp. 88-90).

Similarly, Ellison (1996) wrote in “Boy on a Train” of a little boy named James on his way out of Oklahoma City to McAlester with his mother and brother, Lewis. After offering a number of observations witnessed around the train car – an overweight white butcher who had attempted to grope his mother’s breasts; a little white boy carrying a dog, whom James thought looked “like the kids you see in moving pictures,” as he wondered whether or not this boy had a bicycle of his own; and pondering “[w]hy ... did white folks stare at you that way?” as he watched a railroad porter stare James’ family down on their way to McAlester - James proclaims to himself, “Yes, I’ll kill it. I’ll make it cry. Even if it’s God, I’ll make God cry, he thought. I’ll kill Him; I’ll kill God and not be sorry” (Ellison, 1996, pp. 13-16).

The “it” James refers to, though he does not know it yet, is the trauma of failed expectations, the disappointment and utter indignity of being black in white America. “We traveled far,” his mother cries, “looking for a better world, where things wouldn’t be so hard like they were in the South... Things are hard for us colored folks, son, and it’s just us three alone and we have to stick together. Things is hard, and we have to fight.... O Lord, we have to fight” (Ellison, 1996, p. 18)! James witnesses all the familiar, even traditional, symbols of the color-line on his little trip to McAlester (i.e., objectification of the black female body, wealth disparity, racist acts of intimidation), and does not yet have the tools to articulate or interpret the experiences within a social or historical frame. A glimpse of James’ future self is revealed to us, however, in those few short words he promises at the story’s end: “Yes, I’ll kill it. I’ll make it cry” (Ellison, 1996, p. 20).

Michael Awkward (2009) writes in “Racial Violence and Collective Trauma” that “the unhealed survivor of trauma cannot construct a notion of self and a relationship to the external world that are not essentially determined by the throbbing wound” (p. 37); Molefi Asante (2008) refers to this phenomenon as “dislocation.”<sup>viii</sup> Kate Schick (2011) argues trauma is characterized as the “silenced aftermath of violence;” this may be physical, sexual, or verbal in nature (p. 1837). The effects of trauma may not be immediately felt. In fact, it is more typical to feel these effects years or even decades removed from the initial incident(s) under unspecified contingencies, wherein the pain experienced by the receiver projects this “aftermath” against a new victim, in either similar or dissimilar circumstances. Schick (2011), Cathy Caruth (1996), Dominick LaCapra (2001), and Theodor Adorno (1981) have each explained that this delay, so-to-speak, is the result of the sheer impact of the event(s) that is so overwhelming, that the subject does not feel the breadth of its total impact until much later, vis-à-vis either self-harm or negative self-perception, or through the infliction of harm (trauma) upon others. LaCapra (2001) refers to this sort of “coping mechanism” as “Acting Out:” The sufferer becomes encased by the memory of the event, causing them to live a “restricted life characterized by hypervigilance and a desire for security” (pp. 21-22, 148-150). Which is to say, an unhealthy (un)strategy of wallowing in the moment of the traumatic event, almost compulsively, until the event has encased the sufferer’s entire being.

When a society, community, or group experiences trauma, “Acting Out” may manifest in the mythologization of the event, its effects, and its meanings. In *The Little Book of Trauma Healing*, Carolyn Yoder (2005) explains that these collectives often rationalize their trauma. Along with Schick, she identifies three common forms of this rationalization and myth-making: (1) the “Heroic-Soldier” (e.g., memorialization without analyzing the event), (2) “Good v. Evil” (e.g., portraying oneself as the “innocent victim” and the other as “evil”), and (3) “Redemptive Violence” (e.g., knee-jerk reactions that amplify the harm inflicted).<sup>ix</sup>

LaCapra (2001) argues that these mechanisms arise as a response to the collective’s “disarticulation” of identity, memory, or meaning, which fragments these elements into isolated pieces. Individuals within the collective must then “rearticulate” a new identity, memory, or meaning through the process he calls “Working-Through.” This process involves active engagement through self-examination and/or struggle; first, by analyzing the problem(s) to understand their causes, machinations, and effects; second, through critical expression via creative, religious, and/or spiritual digestion of the event(s), incorporating it/them into an individual’s or collective’s “life-story” or identity (LaCapra, 2001, p. 186; Schick, 2011, p. 1847).

Ultimately, the individual’s or collective’s perception(s) of itself is/are altered by the traumatic experience and how they choose to communicate their it.<sup>x</sup> Gillian Rose (1996) bluntly states, “the impotence and suffering arising from unmourned (sic) loss do not lead to a passion for objectivity and justice. They lead to resentment, hatred, inability to trust, and then, the doubled burden of fear of those negative emotions” (p. 51). Put another way, when individuals or groups do not mourn and process their losses properly, or fail to do so entirely, the resulting powerlessness and suffering do not foster a desire for fairness and justice. Instead, these unaddressed emotions lead to resentment, hatred, and a lack of trust. This, in turn, creates an additional burden of fearing these negative emotions themselves.

Trauma can also be induced structurally through ongoing states of destitution, such as civil war, extreme poverty, or homelessness. The struggle for security and survival imposes immense pressure on individuals or collectives, leading them to view the larger society with cynicism or ambivalence. For example, Feagin and Sikes (1994) found that their informants generally did not utilize government housing enforcement protections due to a distrust in the government’s and society’s willingness to protect their interests.

Three elements shape these strained relationships: (1) some informants reported being pushed out of their neighborhoods through exclusion which induced discomfort; (2) the real estate industry was found to be generally segregated, severely limiting the social capital available to African American residents and hindering their efforts at upward mobility; and (3) many reported receiving harassment and violence upon their arrival in new neighborhoods, causing them to flee and abandon their new homes in fear (pp. 236-253).<sup>xi</sup> This racially-motivated violence and harassment had a profound effect on the African American middle-class subjects of Feagin and Sikes's (1994) study. These individuals expected their entry into the middle-class, and the efforts they made to achieve it, to dissociate them from working-class African Americans who have been traditionally believed to be lazy, puerile, and lascivious.<sup>xii</sup>

For those unaccustomed to racial harassment and discrimination, these experiences were disorienting, confusing, and indeed threatening. Feagin and Sikes (1994) write, "the frustration and pain expressed in these accounts suggest that serious instances of hostility and discrimination can indeed be life crises" (p. 76).<sup>xiii</sup> In other words, these Moments are not simply minor annoyances. They can and do have a profound and deeply troubling impact on those who endure them, some even constituting severe life crises.

As will be elaborated in the following pages, beginning first with Coates' *Between the World and Me* and following up with Morrison's *Bluest Eye*, African American literature provides poignant ground to observe these "Nigger Moments" comparatively as they contribute to character and narrative development. In Coates (2015) we witness the structural impositions and effects of the "Nigger Moment" in the life of the author as a young man and how these experiences built his understanding of the world and himself as a racialized subject living first in Baltimore, then later as a student at Howard University. Alternatively, in Morrison (1994), we bear witness to the compounding, dissociative effects "Nigger Moments" may have on the self-perception of young African American girls and the ways available to them to Act Out or Work Through these traumatic experiences in the context of fiction.

### **Part I: *Between the World and Me*, Pessimism, and the "Dream"**

One of the principal themes within Coates' (2015) work is the idea of the "[American] Dream," and the blinding power it has over white society. For Coates (2015), the "Dream" encompasses "exceptionalism," the indelibility of race, and the ignorance of all that is evil within the society, serving as a sort of "safety blanket" preventing the "dreamer" from having to deal with the problems embedded within their society. From this, he argues, the black man's or woman's behavior and life are framed by a fear of violence, humiliation, vulnerability, and fear itself. In other words, style and physical appearance, customs, attitudes, demeanor, and parenting are all predicated upon the individual black man's or woman's orientation to and experience with racism (Coates. 2015, p. 27). Furthermore, Coates (2015) frames these fears based on the symbol of the body – one's most precious possession; "our original self" – and the ever-present possibility of losing it (36, 28). "The Dream," says Coates (2015), enables one to ignore, or at least explain away, injustices, and to justify failures. This vision of America is one Coates (2015) arrives at through both his readings of history and the radical politics of his father; but also, through his adolescence living in Baltimore, MD. "The violence," says Coates (2015), "that undergirded the country so flagrantly on display during Black History Month, and the intimate violence of 'Yeah, nigger, what's up now?' were not unrelated" (p. 34). What Coates (2015) is describing here is the traumatic confrontation of a violent society, made violent by the very historical structure of race relations in America; the connection that Coates (2015) makes between the intimate and the global is itself a "Nigger Moment."

Coates (2015) says it himself as he describes the paradox of his adolescence, living in Baltimore, to his son: "Not being violent enough could cost me my body. Being too violent could cost me my body. We could not get out" (p. 28). Coates makes his worldview (at this point)<sup>xiv</sup>

and its connection to his experience living in black America quite explicit. He describes African Americans' condition in America as being "disembodied" – they can control nothing, can protect nothing, but can only live in fear of the criminals among them and the specter of police violence and surveillance hovering over black life with impunity (Coates, 2015, p. 82). In fact, this "disembodiment" serves as an analogue to Anderson's "Nigger Moment" quite nicely:

Disembodiment is a kind of terrorism, and the threat of it alters the orbit of all our lives and, like terrorism, this distortion is international... The dragon that compelled the boys I knew, way back, into extravagant theater of ownership... The demon that pushed the middle-class black survivors into aggressive passivity, our conversation restrained in public quarters, our best manners on display, our hands never out of pockets, our whole manner ordered as if to say, 'I make no sudden moves' (Coates, 2015, p. 114).

What Coates (2015) is describing is a dislocated orientation to the world, wherein the black man or woman must always be on guard, even among themselves but particularly regarding police, and must order their lives in the interest of self-preservation. The structure of the society instills within the African American man or woman a distrust of both insiders and outsiders, as well as the institutions constructed, ostensibly, to support them.<sup>xv</sup> This is the subtext underlying Coates' (2015) recollection of having a gun pulled on him by a classmate as much as it is the subtext underlying statements like, "[It only takes one person to make a change] is also a myth. Perhaps one person can make a change, but not the kind of change that would raise your body to equality with your countrymen" (pp. 30-32, 96).

Coates (2015) articulates his own individual experience of "Nigger Moment" (the killing of classmate Prince Jones by Prince George County police) and its relation to the development of his orientation to the world to his son, Samori, by drawing a parallel to the killing of Michael Brown – his son's "Nigger Moment." "In America, it is traditional to destroy the black body – it is heritage," says Coates (2015, p. 103). Yet he warns Samori not to follow the same path that Coates (2015), himself, has. Coates (2015) has taught him to distrust and fear the violent world which sought to dispossess black men and women of their bodies; that "the power of domination and exclusion is central to the belief in being white, and without it, 'white people' would cease to exist for want of reasons" (p. 42). His intention is to instill in Samori what his parents had in him: "My mother and father were always pushing me away from secondhand answers – even the answers they themselves believed" (Coates, 2015, p. 34). As he states this, Coates (2015) understands that Samori was born into a different world, a different time (a middle-class black youth, living in 2015 New York City). He understands that for his son to grow and develop his own strategies in dealing with this world, this life, he must do so by asking questions which resonate with him and his experience – though Coates (2015) does leave room for the contribution of his own wisdom and guidance along the way. Ultimately, he expresses to Samori that although the key has changed, the song remains the same:

This chasm makes itself known to us in all kinds of ways. A little girl wanders home, at age seven, after being teased in school and asks her parents, "Are we niggers and what does that mean?" Sometimes it is subtle – the simple observation of who lives where and works what jobs and who does not. Sometimes it's all of it at once. I have never asked how you became personally aware of the distance. Was it Mike Brown? I don't think I want to know. But I know that it has happened to you already, that you have deduced that you are privileged and yet still different from other privileged children, because you are the bearer of a body more fragile than any other in this country (Coates, 2015, p. 137).

Coates' (2015) solution to the problem of racism, or the lack thereof, has come under criticism most pronouncedly by Cornel West (2017). In an op-ed written for *The Guardian*, West



(2017) refers to Coates' (2015) perspective as "apolitical pessimism," making white supremacy "almighty, magical and unremovable" (West, 2017). This argument is understandable, given Coates' (2015) advice to his son that the fight cannot ultimately be won, but that "struggle," in and of itself, is to be engaged in preserving one's sanity in their confrontation with life; a "specious hope," he calls it (pp. 10-12, 97). All one can do, as a black man or woman, is attempt to "awaken" the "dreamers," but must pay mind not to orient one's life around this situation – they must ultimately awaken themselves, and you must not forget to live (Coates, 2015, pp. 149-150). If Coates (2015) focused more on the moments of racial confrontation within his life, and how to correct them, perhaps he'd have developed a stronger program of address, rather than vague calls to individuated race consciousness and "struggle." Perhaps his vision of "struggle" would be undergirded by solidarity and coalition-building, rather than individual confrontations with "the Dreamers" and their behavior.

## **Part II: *The Bluest Eye*, Disorientation, and the "Aesthetics of Blackness"**

Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* is a case study in the effects of "Nigger Moments." Pecola, after a lifetime of bullying, exclusion, and castigation on account of her "ugliness" and the elevation of the white aesthetic, succumbs to a dissociative lunacy wherein she shares in conversation with an alternative self who has blue eyes. Morrison (1994) frames the experience of Pecola through the perspective of Claudia, the daughter of Pecola's foster parents, the MacTeers. We are introduced to the disorientation of race and racism early on in the text as Claudia expresses her disapproval of her sister, Frieda's, admiration for the beauty of Shirley Temple – her "cuteness" (Morrison, 1994, p. 19). Claudia is remarkably aware, for an adolescent young woman, of the aesthetic of whiteness relentlessly projected upon black life and their perceptions: "Adults, older girls, shops, magazines, newspapers, window signs – all the world had agreed that a blue-eyed, yellow-haired, pink-skinned doll was what every girl child treasured" (Morrison, 1994, p. 20).<sup>xvi</sup> For Claudia, these dolls represent symbols of a foreign beauty, one which she, and other girls like her (e.g. Frieda), could never achieve. Therefore, she resolves to destroy the dolls every chance she can, utilizing an almost ritualistic act of resistance towards white negations of (her) blackness. From this frame, Claudia serves as an inversion of Pecola's perspective and experience which reveres the white aesthetic, praying one day to have blue eyes of her own. "Guileless and without vanity," says Claudia, as narrator, "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..." (Morrison, 1994, p. 74).

Throughout the novel, we catch glimpses of Pecola's orientation towards herself and the world around her. A consistent theme is the idea of "love" being couched in mystery – almost dissociated from reality when considered from the point of view of Pecola: "How do you do that? I mean, how do you get somebody to love you" (Morrison, 1994, p. 74)? For Pecola, love constitutes an almost completely foreign concept. By virtue of her orientation towards the world – fear, uncertainty, anxiety, shame, self-hatred – Pecola seeks out a definition of love and security through her relationships with others. From her parents, Pecola learns that one's spouse must serve as a target of one's anger and frustration, being that it is they who are vulnerable to such attacks when the outside world is unavailable (Morrison, 1994, pp. 57-59). Though the relationship between her mother and father could have signaled to Pecola that life's problems must be handled with aggression and violence, she rejects this for skittishness and evasion.<sup>xvii</sup> In a sense, Pecola retreats into her "ugliness," utilizing it as a shield against higher expectations of life, finding complacency in inferiority and subordination. Pecola's own mother, Pauline, reinforces these sentiments when Frieda and Claudia come looking for Pecola at her mother's place of work – the home of a wealthy white family. It is upon this occasion that the girls witness, not only the whipping of Pecola for having spilled the berry cobbler to the floor, but the disparity in Pauline's treatment of the white child versus of Pecola. While the child calls Pauline by the nickname, "Polly," as she receives fawning nourishment from Pauline, Pecola is whipped for a

minor offence and is expected to address her mother as “Mrs. Breedlove” (Morrison, 1994, pp. 107-109). The discrepancy is not lost on either Claudia or Frieda, and serves to entrench Pecola’s inadequacy, as an African American and a daughter, even deeper into her identity. Pauline and Pecola’s relationship as mother and daughter signals a severance of the most basic communal relation in the child’s life, thus cutting Pecola off from any opportunity at self-love or communal attachment.<sup>xviii</sup>

Pecola’s feelings of inferiority, or “shame”, as J. Brooks Bouson (2000) has argued, culminate and compound into total detachment after she has been raped and impregnated by her father, Cholly, and experiences the death of her premature baby. Although still a child by the time of her downfall, Keita’s (2018) argument regarding Lula Ann Bridewell, another of Morrison’s characters, offers an important, analogic insight into the character of Pecola: “Lula Ann Bridewell’s experience illustrates the idea that childhood trauma or sins return like lingering ghosts to visit and haunt their subjects in adult life” (p. 44). If Pauline serves to reinforce Pecola’s negative attachment to and value of herself in relation to her blackness, then her father, Cholly, is the agent of her worthlessness. Through the violent exploitation of his daughter’s sex, Cholly pushes Pecola to the peak of her tumble. Already struggling through the meaning of love, feelings of her own inadequacy, belittlement by her peers and neighbors, Pecola’s rape associates love, beauty, and belonging together within an act of inherent deprivation and malevolence. “All of our waste,” says Claudia, “which we dumped on her and which she absorbed” (Morrison, 1994, p. 205). Shortly thereafter, Pecola and Cholly’s baby passes away, and Pecola descends into absolute madness (Morrison, 1994, pp. 193-206). Believing herself to have blue eyes, and, therefore, becoming beautiful for the first time in her life, Pecola begins to talk to herself, her black alter-ego, finally dissociated from the ugly self which she had sought to abandon for so long.

In *The Bluest Eye*, the character of Pecola exemplifies the extreme effects of white racism on the psyche of young black girls, particularly through the lens of the white aesthetic. Judith Butler describes these conditions in *Bodies That Matter* as “abjection” – those “unlivable” or “uninhabitable” spaces densely populated by individuals who are denied full subjecthood (p. 3). Pecola, believing herself ugly and unworthy of love, pursues symbols of beauty and affection in what Michael Tillotson (2011) in *Invisible Jim Crow* terms a “beggar mentality.”

Toni Morrison (1994) uses this condition to construct and enforce an “aesthetic of blackness,” presenting a deeply distressing story of dislocation to ultimately restore and redeem feelings of self-worth, self-love, and liberation in young black girls (Keita, 2018, pp. 53 & 43). Morrison redefines “blackness” as a signifier of the “good,” the “beautiful,” and the “righteous” – a symbol of “victory” (Keita, 2018, pp. 43-53).

### **Conclusion:**

In the preceding pages, I have argued for a literary conceptualization of the “Nigger Moment,” as defined by Anderson (2011). By utilizing this concept in both fictional and nonfictional works, we can identify, understand, and address the manifestations, developments, and consequences of this phenomenon. Fiction and nonfiction narratives provide concrete and hypothetical representations of reality, allowing the phenomenon to be studied critically and compared across different contexts, including in the real world. This comparative approach aids in developing more effective theories for correction and change.

Moreover, by drawing examples and analyses from the fictional and lived experiences of African American men and women, we center our investigations on their perspectives and interpretations of these events, as articulated in their art. This approach respects their agency and insights within their own stories. Finally, critically examining how African American writers and have addressed “Nigger Moments” in their works enables scholars and activists alike to refine and communicate strategies against racism across generations, races, and cultures.

Through this work, I have contributed a novel theoretical framework for analyzing racial trauma and its role in identity formation and racial socialization within African American literature, providing scholars with a tool to dissect and understand the nuanced experiences of racial discrimination and its lasting impacts on African American individuals. This framework enhances our comprehension of how racial trauma shapes identity, behavior, and community relations. Furthermore, it allows for a more empathetic and nuanced reading of African American narratives, recognizing the deep-seated and often traumatic experiences that inform these stories.

In Coates (2015), we witness a successful African American man, entering middle age, struggling to find a pathway forward in the face of seemingly endless waves of racist encounters and oppression – Nigger Moments - but being able only to muster vague calls for racial reckonings and individuated moments of racial “consciousness” raising and “struggle” – the writer’s own tepid moment of Acting Out. This may assuage the individual’s conscience – if only for a moment – providing a sense of personal vindication or retribution, but as has been discussed, is this truly the most efficient, most effective use of time and resources? Is this not a misunderstanding of, say, Martin Luther King, Jr.’s or Ella Baker’s legacies, interpreting societal change through the neoliberal lens of individual achievement and “Great Man” myth? What room is there for coalition-building or structural analysis here? How can racism be addressed through public policy in such a perspective – how may it be “Worked Through” on a grander scale?

Morrison (2015) offers what seem to be alternative visions for Working Through and Acting Out trauma, while falling victim to the same neoliberal entrapments. It is easy to see how through Pecola Breedlove’s path despair and, in the extreme, dissociation may follow for the little African American child wrestling with socially reinforced feelings of inadequacy. The resolution of the tale makes this point explicit, and the reader is safe in assuming Morrison intends her character as a warning. However, Claudia MacTeer offers no useful path forward either. While Claudia’s sense of self is positively reinforced by her strong family dynamic and relatively comfortable upbringing, which ultimately allow her to reject the white aesthetics imposed upon her throughout the novel – her own Nigger Moments - the assumptions undergirding this narrative ominously mirror those proffered by the notorious Moynihan Report compiled in 1965. At bottom, the character of Claudia MacTeer directs the burden of responsibility towards the African American individual and their family. Strong family dynamics and individual responsibility are offered as putative solutions for overcoming the obstacles of structural racism and racial inequalities. No mind is paid toward forming relationships within one’s community or finding common interests to bind coalitions from without one’s community. Like *Between the World and Me*, *The Bluest Eye* eschews themes of political power and collective action for individuated confrontations with racism in one’s personal life. Rather than defending Affirmative Action and the Voting Rights Acts, or attacking mass incarceration and wealth inequalities, one presumes based on such perspectives, one must commit themselves to merely calling out individual acts of racial bias one experiences directly, or else must subject themselves to one of Robin DiAngelo’s ineffective corporate racial sensitivity trainings.

By expanding the concept of the "Nigger Moment" to include literary analysis, this paper opens new avenues for future studies to explore how such moments of racial trauma – Nigger Moments - are portrayed and can be addressed by Working Through or Acting Out this trauma. This framework can be a critical tool for scholars in Africana Studies, sociology, psychology, and literary studies, offering a deeper understanding of the pervasive impacts of racial discrimination and the varied responses it elicits. This work lays the foundation for more comprehensive and nuanced analyses of African American literature, ultimately contributing to the broader struggle against racism and for social justice.

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<sup>i</sup> It must be understood that what Ellison (1995) meant when he wrote, “create or reveal hidden realities by asserting their existence,” was not the creation of problems from whole cloth, then insisting on their reality (p. 737). Instead, art can be said to communicate an interpretation of lived reality, while the artist, “invents images to capture the world’s complex reality” (Engeman, 2004, p. 91).

<sup>ii</sup> Keita (2018) explains that it is through Morrison’s use of shared ancestral roots and the emotional strain of being black in America that she “conjures stories of racial prejudice and its impact on Black women’s maternal practices and the psychological development of their children” (p. 43).

<sup>iii</sup> See C. Stack (1997) and J. Feagin & M. Sikes (1994) for explorations of how “Nigger Moments” reinforce negative social sentiments within African American individuals and communities.

<sup>iv</sup> See W. E. B. Du Bois (2012), chapters 1, 2, and 8; Du Bois (1992), chapter 9; B. T. Washington (2010), chapter 5; and E. F. Frazier, (1997) for observations reflecting such sentiments in African American writing and early sociological research.

<sup>v</sup> See, for example, the autobiographies of Olaudah Equiano (2012), especially chapters 2 and 3; Mary Prince (2012); and Frederick Douglass (2012).

<sup>vi</sup> See, for example, T. Morrison (1994), especially Part I; R. Ellison (1952); and M. Angelou’s (2009).

<sup>vii</sup> Johnson (1995) himself nearly goes as far as to ascribe the experience a “Nigger Moment:” “In the life of every one there is a limited number of unhappy experiences which are not written upon the memory, but stamped there with a die; and in long years after they can be called up in detail, and every emotion that was stirred by them can be lived through anew; these are the tragedies of life” (p. 9).

<sup>viii</sup> For an extended explanation of the “dislocation” phenomenon, see M. K. Asante (2008), pp. 25-29.

<sup>ix</sup> Irele (2001) refers to this reactive phenomenon as “dramatization,” though he offers a more positive view: “Modern African literature, in particular the literature expressed in the European languages, can be interpreted as a dramatization of and meditation upon the problems of existence posed by this situation [dislocation]” (p. ix).

<sup>x</sup> For reference, see C. Caruth (1996), R. J. Kurtz (2014), & E. Anderson (2011).

<sup>xi</sup> Stack (1997) made similar observations in her work for *All Our Kin*.

<sup>xii</sup> See W. E. B. Du Bois (2012), particularly chapters I, II, and XIII; Du Bois (1992) chapter IX; B. T. Washington (2010), chapter V; & E. F. Frazier (1997).

<sup>xiii</sup> Asante (1998) concurs in his *Kemet, Afrocentricity and Knowledge*, although he makes this “hostility and discrimination” loud and clear: “we must see racism as transcending the color of skin and see it as a complex and interlocking psychosocial and economic system of domination... Africans are deprived of dignity, history, culture, and respect in such a system.” (p. 188).

<sup>xiv</sup> In Coates’ (2015) discussion of his college-years at Howard University, he explains how his vision of what it means to be black in America experienced a precipitous shift from Black Nationalistic to humanist. He came to realize, as he understands it, that what he had built from his time immersed in his father’s catalogue, and witnessing violence on the streets, his own “Dream” to counter those imposed upon him by white society (p. 50). To take just one example,

while prior to attending Howard, he had reflected upon the tale of Queen Nzinga with admiration and awe; “That was the kind of power I sought,” Coates (2015) proclaims as he writes of the Queen’s answer to the Dutch ambassador’s attempts to humiliate her (p. 45). However, he later comes to understand that “[Saul] Bellow was no closer to Tolstoy than I was to Nzinga” (p. 56), that is, he was more equal to the Queen’s human-bench than to the Queen by any means.

<sup>xv</sup> For reference, see E. Anderson (2011), J. Feagin & M. Sikes (1994), C. Stack (1997), and J. Baldwin (1993).

<sup>xvi</sup> L. Scott (1996), J. Bump (2010), and H. Kulkarni (1993) each concur with this observation.

<sup>xvii</sup> This is evinced in the altercation, on behalf of Pecola’s dignity, between the sisters, Frieda and Claudia, and the boys on the block. Pecola resigns herself, hangs her head, as the boys berate her for being ugly, poor, and all manner of additional insults (Morrison, 1994, pp. 64-67).

<sup>xviii</sup> For similar commentary, see F. Keita (2018), pp. 45-50.