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Toni Morrison and the Evolution of American Biracial Identity

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“Toni Morrison and the Evolution of American Biracial Identity”

She enchanted the entire school. When teachers called on her, they smiled encouragingly. Black boys didn't trip her in the halls; white boys didn't stone her, white girls didn't suck their teeth when she was assigned to be their work partners; black girls stepped aside when she wanted to use the sink in the girls' toilet, and their eyes genuflected under sliding lids (Morrison 62).

This passage from Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* is describing the biracial girl named Maureen Peal. In just these few sentences the suggestion that Maureen is a mediator between both races in her school is clear, and this premise is supported by the sociologist F. James Davis, whose 1991 book, *Who is Black: One Nation's Definition* explains that biracial people may act “objectively with the black and the white communities both while not being fully a part of either, and often being a liaison person between the two” (Davis 150). Davis' observation supports what we see reflected in this particular passage, but throughout the novel we see that this premise does not continue to hold true. Maureen in reality cannot be the mediator between the two races because she is not actually accepted by either group. My analysis of Maureen Peal will portray her as the female version of Everett Stonequist's concept of the “Marginal Man.” This term comes from Everett Stonequist's 1937 book, *The Marginal Man*. Stonequist, an

American sociologist best known for his work in race relations, explains that the figure of the “Marginal Man” embodies the sense of inner conflict between the two races: “Having participated in each he is now able to look at himself from two viewpoints...the marginal Negro from that of the white man as well as the black man” (Stonequist 145). Maureen’s biracial identity gives her the position of the “Marginal Man” who, according to Stonequist, cannot belong to either race and has a “dual personality” which is forced onto him by his society. This “dual personality” prevents the “Marginal Man” from developing cohesion between the two parts of himself. It is because Maureen Peal senses a lack of cohesion in her inner self that she rejects her black would-be friends, Claudia, Frieda, and Pecola, not because she thinks of herself as superior to them.

Before using Stonequist’s theories to analyze Morrison’s text it is imperative to understand the context in and reason for which I refer to *The Marginal Man*, in comparison to Morrison’s novel. The question that may arise is why choose *The Marginal Man*, which, written in 1937, is a text which is outdated in today’s culture? Originally I chose this text because I immediately saw a connection between its theories and Morrison’s novel. Then I realized that Morrison’s novel is set in the 1940’s which is close to the time that Stonequist’s text went into publication, which explains why a correlation between the two exists. Stonequist’s negative view of biracial identity summarizes the feelings of the nation at the time and if Morrison’s novel takes place at this time then logically she is consciously recreating the sociology of the 1940’s, which is when Stonequist’s text was most influential. I believe in a more positive view of biracial identity that is able to act as a mediator between two cultures. However, Morrison’s text written in 1970 and Stonequist’s text reveals evidence to the contrary.

Stonequist believes that rather than being a connecting force between two cultures, the “Marginal Man” is estranged from both cultures. He is able to see both sides of his racial identity, but because they stand in opposition to each other it is difficult for them to assimilate into a wholly integrated entity. This is the conflict of the “Marginal Man”: to be connected to both cultures through blood and yet not be accepted by either. Stonequist tells us that this problem arises because the “Marginal Man” sees the world from two conflicting viewpoints. One view insists on the prejudiced ideas of superiority; the other demands that there be loyalty to the group that is thought of as inferior. For a biracial person, each racial identity is essentially incompatible with the other and therefore each must be regarded discreetly; thus: “the individual experiences this conflict. He has something of a dual personality, a ‘double consciousness,’ to use the words of Du Bois” (Stonequist 145). According to Stonequist, Maureen would have this “dual personality” because the novel depicts a conflict between black and white cultures. I would go so far as to change Stonequist’s “dual personality” to “dual identity” because Maureen identifies with one race or the other depending on which group is more convenient for her to be a part of, or rather, which group is more accepting of her. The so-called change in Maureen’s personality that is witnessed by Claudia, Frieda, and Pecola reflects in fact her “dual identity.”

Returning to Morrison’s text, we find an example of Maureen trying to assimilate into the black community. “Maureen, suddenly animated, put her velvet-sleeved arm through Pecola’s and began to behave as though they were the closest of friends” (Morrison 67). It is clear that Maureen is making an effort to be friendly with Pecola. Maureen’s immediate, self-consciously intimate behavior toward Pecola, which includes

walking arm and arm with her, is particularly noteworthy since she had not made contact with Pecola previously. The extreme nature of the gesture suggests that Maureen is not merely making an effort to foster friendship with Pecola but also attempting to nurture in some way her own black identity. Contact with the other girls is essential for Maureen's "black identity" because: "there is [] much ambivalence and anxiety over the question of group loyalty" (Davis 145). Davis' comment ties in with Stonequist's idea of the group that demands loyalty. In this instance it is legitimate to assume that Maureen is trying to demonstrate her loyalty to her "black identity." This suggestion is present elsewhere in the text when Maureen initially begins her contact with the other girls, Frieda and Claudia: "Which way do you go home...Oh. I can walk that way, I guess. Partly, anyway" (Morrison 64). Again we find another example of Maureen's effort to reach out to the black community by trying to befriend those who, in her eyes, represent it. She attempts to become a part of the black community by demonstrating her loyalty to it through the establishment of friendships with those individuals in the community. This assimilation attempt speaks to only one side of Maureen's "dual identity" and we will see that once she is rejected Maureen's "black identity" is placed in peril.

During Maureen's interaction with the black girls there is a point at which her acceptance is challenged. It is at this point that Maureen rejects the black community and subsequently accepts the white community. The two parts of her "dual identity" apparently cannot exist on equal terms; one part must always be stronger than the other. In the following passage we see the point at which Maureen's black identity is challenged.

“You think you cute!” I swung at her and missed, hitting Pecola in the face. Furious at my clumsiness, I threw my notebook at her, but it caught her in the small of her velvet back, for she had turned and was flying across the street against traffic. Safe on the other side, she screamed at us, “I am cute! And you ugly! Black and ugly black e mos. I am cute!”(Morrison 73).

This scene in the novel comes right after Maureen asks Pecola whether she has ever seen a man naked and Pecola responds saying that she has never seen her father naked. Pecola is very defensive and the other girls are protective of her; and so they all turn on Maureen. Meanwhile, Morrison portrays Maureen as being on the defensive as well. She feels threatened and inferior to the other girls. Consequently we see a reversal of identity at this point in the narrative. Maureen believes her attempts to join the black community have failed, which in turn fosters in her a sense of inferiority. An argument presented by Stonequist supports the idea of Maureen feeling inferior and further claims that it is her sense of inferiority that dictates how she reacts. Stonequist suggest that “the feeling of inferiority is a constant striving to find a situation in which the individual can excel. ‘We should not strive to be superior and to succeed if we did not feel a certain lack in our present condition.’ A ‘superiority complex’ may then develop as a compensation for the ‘inferiority complex’” (Stonequist 148). Maureen obviously did not excel in her attempts to become a part of the black community. Thus, her subsequent reaction against the black community, and her ultimate rejection of it, can be seen as an attempt by Maureen to assert that she is not inferior to it. She compensates by adopting and exhibiting a superior attitude, which becomes apparent in the way she teases and insults the black girls that previously rejected her. It is at this point in the novel when she

chooses her other identity. She allies herself with the white ideals rather than trying to be a part of the black community. By doing so, however, she betrays her black identity.

Morrison's biracial character displays characteristics that are not unique to the situation portrayed in the novel but which in fact reflect larger issues that biracial people as a whole in America feel and experience. Bringing in the autobiographical text *Black, White, and Jewish*, by Rebecca Walker, we understand her struggle with these issues and how they are similar to those faced by the fictional character Maureen Peal. Walker, who was born in 1969, tells the story of her life from early childhood into adulthood.

Black-on-black love is the new recipe for revolution, mulatto half-breeds are tainted with the blood of the oppressor, and being down means proving how black you are, how willing to fight, how easily you can turn your back on those who have kept black folks enslaved for so long (Walker 60).

These assertions are in line with much of the theory I have read stating that the blood of the oppressor in biracial people is what makes them unacceptable to the black community. This blood is the reason why biracial people cannot be trusted. Also the compulsion of black people to attack biracial people is reflected in Morrison's work when we are permitted a glimpse into Claudia's thoughts. "We were secretly prepared to be her friend, if she would let us, but I knew it would be a dangerous friendship, for when my eye traced the white border patterns of those Kelly-green knee socks, and felt the pull and slack of my brown stockings, I wanted to kick her" (pg 63). The white borders of Maureen's socks represent the white blood line which separates Maureen from the other black girls. The brown socks are meant to equate with Claudia and the other girls' unmixed blood. The pull and slack of the brown socks represents the pull to conform to

white society and yet not being able to fit. For a piece of clothing to “conform” to the contours of a body, it must fit tightly—not loosely. In order to conform an object or an individual cannot by definition slack, yet this is just what these brown socks do.

Maureen’s socks do not slack and in the larger sense Maureen has an easier time being a part of the white image than the other girls do. That is why this relationship is dangerous: white borders separate the two girls, whether it is in socks or in real life. It is these white borders that label Claudia, Frieda, and Pecola unfit and Maureen more fit when it comes to the acceptable image of beauty. This causes the darker skinned girls to feel violence and envy toward Maureen.

Another way in which Maureen’s identity issues are reflected in the real life situations of Rebecca Walker is the fear of rejection. Walker says that she is “a remnant, a throwaway, a painful reminder of a happier and more optimistic but ultimately unsustainable time” (pg 60). This feeling of being a remnant or a throwaway is the fear of rejection and, as we have analyzed in Morrison’s work, this is the same fear that plagues Maureen Peal. The evidence of Walker’s feelings of rejection legitimizes these feelings outside of the realm of fiction and brings them into real life situations. Therefore Toni Morrison is not just frivolously adding a biracial character in her novel without thought. She is bearing witness to biracial people in her community and commenting on how she sees them treated and how they in turn treat others.

A final example in which Morrison and Walker are in agreement can be found in the following excerpt from Walker’s autobiography in which she is attending a camp where she is only one of three black children.

I assume the appropriate air of petulant entitlement. And yet I never get it quite right, never get the voice to match up with the clothes, never can completely shake free of my blackness: my respect for my elders, my impatience with white-girl snottiness, the no-shit tough attitude (pg 179-180).

The quote is an example of Rebecca trying to fit into a white role and feeling too black to do so. We can infer from her statement that she “never gets it quite right”. She holds on to those aspects of her personality that are considered “black identity” traits so we can also assume that she is dealing with “dual identity” issues just as Maureen is. In fact, this is the exact same limbo that I suggest Maureen Peal lives in although in Morrison’s novel Maureen’s dilemma is that her white identity is too strong to reconcile comfortably with her black identity—or, more precisely, Maureen retreats to the comfort and solace of her white identity after she feels that the other girls have rejected her. Both Maureen and Walker fit the parameters of “Marginal Man.” They both feel connected to two different worlds and yet they cannot be a part of either because when they try and assimilate into one, the characteristics of the other get in the way of full acceptance. If not accepted, as in the case of Maureen, a superiority complex can emerge as a reaction to the initial inferiority complex that develops through rejection, as we learned from Stonequist.

From the mention of Stonequist’s superiority complex another question might arise: Is Maureen’s attitude toward the girls really a superiority complex that is originated from an inferiority complex, as Stonequist suggests? Or is Maureen acting in a superior manner because she believes her white blood makes her better than the other girls? My answer is that the white blood she embodies is not responsible for her ultimate feeling of superiority. To support this assertion, I return to F. James Davis’s text, which states that:

Greater enforcement of the one-drop rule by whites after 1850, and the resulting increase in the identification of lighter mulattoes with blacks rather than with whites, resulted eventually in the 'high yellow' stereotype. Light-skinned persons who have not been able to demonstrate descent from a respectable mulatto family have faced prejudice and discrimination from the black community as well as the white. Evidently one reason for this antagonism has been resentment of the traditionally high status and exclusiveness of the mulatto elites in the black community (Davis 145).

Here Davis explains that biracial people came to be grouped with blacks after the one drop rule was put into effect, and what is quite significant to take from this quotation is that both black and white communities discriminated against biracial people. Apparently the cause of this discrimination is traced to the sense of high status and exclusivity claimed by the biracial community within the black community. Although it may seem that this quotation contradicts my assertion that Maureen's white blood is not responsible for her superior attitude, it is actually relevant to my argument. It is not the fault of biracial people that because of their lighter skin color they are given a higher status than that of black people. In our country it is the definer, that is to say, the white person, who characterizes these groups and so it is the white community which labeled biracial people in this way and established a comparison to blacks. I argue that to say this is the thinking of the biracial community is not pertinent since it is not their feelings that are actually being portrayed but rather what is assumed to be their feelings as defined and articulated by the white community.

Further expanding on this idea that the biracial community is defined by the white community, I would like to focus on the word “exclusiveness.” It is important to note that there are two conflicting views represented in this quotation. Davis makes out the biracial community as something that excludes others; but he also says that it is in fact the biracial person who is excluded from both the white and black communities. Again it is my view that, rather than excluding themselves from blacks, members of the biracial community are themselves excluded automatically by not fitting the role of either black or white; therefore it is not their own view that they are superior but a view of them that is held by others—a view, however, that is without solid grounding. In fact, Davis goes on to say that:

At least for a time, many light mulattoes felt strong pressure to affect “Afro” hairstyles. Ironically, this came at a time when many such persons had arrived at a strong commitment to the black identity, in response to the civil rights protests of the 1950s and 1960s. Research has shown that the sense of self-worth of many light mulattoes has declined since the 1960s (146).

This statement reveals that biracial people actually felt inferior to black people: this is also what my analysis of Maureen Peal demonstrated. To submit to pressure to change one’s appearance as a means of forging a closer connection to a particular group—a group with which one might otherwise have no affinity—is an indirect admission of inferiority. It is also a criticism of personal responsibility as well as an acknowledgement of the superiority of the group’s values to one’s own individual values. According to Davis we can clearly infer not only that biracial people do not think of themselves as

superior to the black community; they actually feel inferior to it in some respects. A parallel to the idea we explored here can be found in the Morrison and Walker texts.

Within Davis's text there are also personal stories and experiences suggesting that biracial people view themselves as holding a lesser social position relative to blacks within the black community. In one case involving a young girl we find this sentiment clearly expressed: "Later she learned that the dark-brown people made jokes about the so-called yellow people and that many of them refused to eat with the latter. Brown parents would not let their children play with the 'low-down' yellow children" (146). This is, without question, an example from Davis supporting the perception that biracial individuals have indeed felt inferior and excluded from the black community in the past. The language alone that is used points to this suggestion. When Davis's interviewee is referred to as one of the "'low-down' yellow children" the description implicitly suggests that biracial people are, quite literally as well as socially, lower than the black people who are using this phrase. "Low-down" can also mean untrustworthy, hinting that the biracial community cannot be trusted because it collectively carries the blood of the oppressor, a point that the essay has addressed as well. "'Yellow children" is also important because it implies that the biracial community has no connection to the black community. The phrase suggests that the white blood carried by the interracial community somehow revokes rather than commingles with the black blood it carries when the two are mixed. Any time a community excludes individuals it is because those individuals do not conform to the definition that the community has of itself. If one is excluded from the community one is considered to be lesser than the community and therefore not a part of it. The fact that the community is capable of excluding these

individuals invests it with a power that results in biracial individuals feeling not simply excluded from but inferior to blacks.

Since we have analyzed the effect of white blood and the possible feelings of inferiority that can stem from it in biracial people it seems pertinent to examine the development of a more positive view of biracialism and its view in more recent years. Throughout this essay I have been describing and analyzing the texts of Everett Stonequist, Toni Morrison, and Rebecca Walker. Stonequist's text was written in 1937; where as, Morrison's text takes place in the 1940's and was written in the 1970's. Walker's text takes place from 1970's and onward and was written in 2001. This recap is to remind us that all of the texts thus mentioned are spanning a large time period that starts in 1937 and end with Walker's young adulthood in the 1990's. In these texts biracial people and their identities are being challenged and generally portrayed in a negative way. In 2008, with the election of our first black and biracial president, we find that the identity of biracial individuals has changed for the better and is now regarded in a more positive way which differs from Davis' mention of "the self-worth of many light mulattoes has declined since the 1960s". In Don Terry's article published in the *Chicago Tribune* newspaper in November, 2008, we see just how much the perceptions of biracial people have changed since Stonequist conducted and wrote his studies. "For the parents of multiracial children, the rise of Obama has been a vindication of sorts, a presidential rebuttal to a society that has not always been kind to their offspring, labeling them 'half breeds,' 'tragic mulattos,' 'mutts' and 'mixed nuts' (Terry). Although such a pronouncement is obviously not applicable to every American of biracial ancestry, Obama's election has in part served to confirm symbolically that the labels of exclusion

and inferiority that have been attached to biracial people in the past are beginning to lose their hold. Biracial people have begun to view themselves in a far more positive light, and this changing view of themselves has affected the collective view of the community in which they live.

Terry's article indicates that there have been two major societal changes in the way in which biracial people are regarded by contemporary society. The first change is that the inequities that have always defined the differences between white and black cultures have been narrowed if not entirely eliminated. The second change is there appears to be a movement afoot in society to recognize biracial or multiracial citizens as part of an ethnic group unto itself.

Obama, who is biracial but who identified himself as an African-American during his run for the presidency, has proven through his victory that the disadvantages of being black in a predominantly white society are less powerful today than they have been previously. It is no longer possible for one group to be considered inferior to another if the ethical and intellectual capabilities of the two groups are demonstrated to be the same. "I was raised to be a black woman with a white mother, like a tall person with a short mother," Melissa Harris-Lacewell, a 35 year old biracial Princeton University professor, told Terry. "I was raised in the South. Biracial was not really an option," (Terry). Thus, while Professor Harris-Lacewell fully acknowledges her biracial heritage, she continues to identify herself as black because she has always done so. And because African-Americans have attained more social parity with whites than ever before, a multiracial person with African-American ancestry can identify fully with this part of her heritage with less conflict or self-recrimination.

If guilt-free identification with their black heritage is one result of societal changes for people of biracial origins, another is the emergence of a political movement to identify biracial people as an ethnic group unto themselves. As Terry notes in his article, Susan Graham, the white mother of two multiracial children and the founder of the California-based Project Race, advocates on behalf of this organization for a multiracial classification on all school, employment, census and other forms. "Our membership has grown since the election," Graham told Terry. "We've been fighting for a long time. This is a great boost for us." (Terry)

The position of Project Race is informally endorsed by many young biracial people. "I personally feel if you're mixed you should say you're mixed," says Victoria Rodriguez, 27, who is half black and half Latino and is an individual giving coordinator at the Goodman Theatre. "Growing up, I had a lot of issues with race, people trying to define me, saying I wasn't black enough. But I decided I love my mother. I love my father. So I'm mixed." (Terry)

With the election of Obama it is clear that the American people in general, and certainly biracial Americans themselves, are changing this long held view of the biracial person as tragic and despairing and unable to connect to any group because of its "Marginal Man" status. Not only is this idea changing with Obama but it is actually reflecting the initial statement put forth by Davis that it is possible for a biracial person to use their marginal status to act as a liaison between the two worlds. I believe that this is one of the functions that Obama is serving with his ascension to the highest office in the land, with his campaign message of bringing diverse people and interest groups together

and through the strong connection with both the black and white communities that he consistently demonstrated throughout the primary and presidential campaigns.

While Obama's election victory has unquestionably called attention to the changing view of biracial people in this country, Terry's article suggests that attitudes of and toward biracial people have been changing prior to the media's focus on Obama. "I think it's interesting that Obama is biracial," says Tyler Winograd, a young, biracial man who was interviewed for the article. "But I think it's much more of a sense of pride for mixed-race people who are older or black people who are older, for people who went through the civil rights movement. . . They had to fight for their rights. My rights were essentially handed to me." (Terry). These remarks are pertinent to our study of biracial identity because they acknowledge that the past has been a difficult time for biracial people and couples, as we have seen in many of the examples used previously. They also demonstrate specifically the passages we've examined in Walker's book, which take place during the era of the civil rights movement. More important even than the historical perspective to which Winograd's statement alludes is his contention that his rights were handed to him. This leads us to conclude that not only is his identity as a biracial person strong but that its essential strength is the product of battles waged by his parents during the civil rights movement over 45 years earlier. During nearly five decades a process of attitudinal change was put in place, the results of which we recently witnessed with Obama's election to the presidency in 2008.

To relate this to Morrison and Walker we must realize that current societal views on biracialism are more positive than those put forth by either Morrison or Walker. This phenomenon however is attributable to the fact that the stories they tell in their texts take

place during periods of our recent history in which the identity of biracial people was seen as confused. Terry's newspaper article reveals that an ongoing reevaluation of biracial identity, highlighted by the election of our first black/biracial president, has led us into 2008 with a more positive view of the community as a whole. .

What is clear from this analysis is that although Maureen Peal is initially presented in Morrison's novel as a connecting force between two opposing races, this link weakens considerably as we observe her encounters throughout the novel. Upon closer examination we find that Maureen Peal actually fits perfectly into Stonequist's theory of the "Marginal Man". She is a person who is connected to both the black and white community and instead of being a bridge between the two worlds she is excluded from each, thus conferring upon her "Marginal Man" status. Deeper in the psyche of this character we find examples of her "dual identity." Maureen is forced to choose identities and allies herself with the white ideals after being rejected by the black community. It is important that we as readers understand that the issues that Maureen faces are not only fictional but occur with biracial individuals in real life as well. Comparing *The Bluest Eye* to Rebecca Walker's autobiography underscores this observation. In the latter book we find that Walker feels the same things that Maureen appears to be feeling. Morrison and Stonequist's apparently critical ideas on biracial identity can be explained by the time period that they depict or examine. Terry's article reveals the positive end to the negative road that biracial identity has followed, and charts its ultimate arrival at a reconciliation of the "dual identity" that defines a biracial person along with the possibility of a redefinition of the biracial identity as a distinct ethnic category unto itself.

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