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Toni Morrison, Oprah Winfrey, and Postmodern Popular Audiences

Thomas Pynchon. Now there was someone you never saw on "Oprah Winfrey."
(Gates, *Loose Canons* 15)

Throughout the twentieth century, African-American writers have faced what James Weldon Johnson called "a special problem which the plain American author knows nothing about—the problem of the double audience" (247). The mainstream, or white, publishing industry has either ignored black literature altogether or promoted it cautiously during brief periods of perceived public, or white, interest. During the New Negro Renaissance of the late 1920s and early '30s, and again during the "Second Renaissance" of the late 1960s and early '70s, major publishing houses considered black authors sufficiently marketable to offer in significant numbers, but even within these moments of visibility the production of black texts for white profit has led to questions about how much artistic authenticity African-American authors can preserve. Over the past five years, however, an extraordinary movement away from this racialized hierarchy has developed, as Oprah Winfrey's television book club has dramatically shifted the publishing world's balance of power. As a *New York Times* profile concludes, "Winfrey has taken considerable cultural authority away from publishers" (Max 40). In this essay I examine the "Oprah Effect" on the career of Toni Morrison, who after three appearances on "Oprah's Book Club" has become the most dramatic example of postmodernism's merger between canonicity and commercialism. I argue that the alliance between Morrison's canonical status and Winfrey's commercial power has superseded the publishing industry's field of normative whiteness, enabling Morrison to reach a broad, popular audience while being marketed as artistically important. By embracing "Oprah's Book Club," Morrison replaces separate white and black readerships with a single, popular audience.

Before her first *Oprah* appearance in December, 1996, Morrison was a Nobel and Pulitzer Prize winner, an endowed professor at Princeton University, and one of the most respected voices in contemporary American literature. While Pierre Bourdieu's inverse equation between cultural and commercial capitals would make this aesthetic success dependent on a consequent lack of marketability, since aligning herself with Winfrey Morrison has become the best-selling author of *Song of Solomon*, nineteen years after its first publication; of *Paradise*, her latest novel and probably the least accessible book she has yet written; and of *The Bluest Eye*, Morrison's first novel and the most recent

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Oprah selection.¹ In each case Morrison has appeared on *Oprah* to discuss her novels with Winfrey and selected viewers, while stores have sold the books with special "Oprah's Book Club" stickers and often in displays based more on Winfrey's appeal than Morrison's. While Morrison's books had long sold well, the *Oprah* connection has propelled her into an altogether higher order of marketability.² Morrison's embrace of popular markets extends as well to the audiobook versions of her novels, which constitute another important merger of "high" art with "low" media.

I will argue that this connection between high cultural forms and popular audiences is a crucial stage in African-American women writers' adaptation of authorship's public space. These writers, who have only very recently established themselves commercially, let alone canonically, engage in a complex interaction with the market and the canon. Television and audiobook audiences commodify Morrison's texts while also crediting her with a new kind of social authority. By constructing an audience built through popular, ostensibly low, culture for her serious novels, Morrison explodes the high-low divide that still holds for much of postmodern art. Morrison sells herself and her novels, like jazz, through popular media and thus constructs herself as a self-consciously commodified textual authority.

No doubt it is tempting to conclude that Morrison simply sells herself out by appearing on *Oprah*, reducing her sophisticated texts to the lowest common denominator of daytime TV discourse. To a certain extent, this expectation comes true. Winfrey's discussion of *Song of Solomon*, for example, reads the characters entirely within the rubric of talk-show topics. "It's about 10 OPRAH shows rolled into one book," Winfrey told her audience when announcing the selection ("Newborn" 23).³ Within this framework *Song of Solomon* loses its vital

political subtext, as the book club's discussion ignores the critique of American racial history. But to read Morrison's novel *only* as a high-cultural text stained by a low-cultural medium risks identifying Winfrey's viewers *only* as the same kinds of women who have been traditionally figured as the target of popular culture. Citing the "positioning of women as avid consumers of pulp" as a "paradigmatic" conception of the modernist high-low divide, Andreas Huyssen concludes that for postmodernism "it is primarily the visible and public presence of women artists in *high* art, as well as the emergence of new kinds of women performers and producers in mass culture, which makes the old gendering device obsolete" ("Mass Culture" 190, 205). Through her association with Winfrey, Morrison occupies *both* spheres, remaining visibly public as a producer of high art yet simultaneously discussing and marketing it through a mass cultural medium. Rather than writing off Winfrey's viewers as nothing more than dull housewives, Morrison builds her distinct form of textual authority precisely through this popular audience.

Morrison's appearances on *Oprah* and her taped readings of her abridged novels constitute important changes in the textual horizon because they reconfigure the implied author-reader (or author-consumer) dynamic around a new construction of the popular audience's relation to textual authority.⁴ What George Bornstein terms the "textual aura"—a text's material signifiers which "plac[e] the work in time and space" (224)—changes significantly for "Oprah's Book Club" reprints, as these books' readers find the original textual auras written over by the new incarnations. The "Oprah" editions are thus less "authentic," in Walter Benjamin's terms, than the first editions, but also more expressive of the postmodern turn toward reproductions or copies as the constitutive forms of popular culture.⁵ The postmodern cultural market, Fredric Jameson contends, has centered

on "consumption of the very process of consumption itself, above and beyond its content and the immediate commercial products" (276). As I suggest below, a significant portion of the consumer response to "Oprah's Book Club" seems to be part of the larger phenomenon Jameson describes; that is, the experience of participating in this TV event accounts for the club's popularity at least as much as the books themselves. But it is also vital to recognize that Morrison's interaction with *Oprah* produces more than just another example of contemporary society's obsession with media events, as the actual experience of reading *Song of Solomon*, *Paradise*, or *The Bluest Eye* intersects with these texts' transformations into objects of TV discourse. In the end, Winfrey and Morrison both emphasize the experience of reading these books, not simply consuming them.

Before exploring Morrison's case at greater length, I begin with brief excursions into two earlier historical moments, looking briefly at the relationship between white publishers and black authors in the 1920s-'30s and 1960s-'70s. In order to focus special attention on publishing's reification of Johnson's "double audience" from the 1920s to the present, I take a materialist stance toward interpretation and read in terms of bibliographic codes, a term developed by Jerome McGann to account for non-linguistic systems of textual meaning. McGann defines bibliographic codes as "typesets, bindings, book prices, page format, and all those textual phenomena usually regarded as (at best) peripheral to the text as such" (13). Attention to bibliographic codes can be especially important and illuminating for historically marginalized writers, as material evidence of their tenuous position in mainstream culture. Indeed, the significant differences in Morrison's authorial image become clear *only* through comparing the bibliographic codes in *The Bluest Eye* and *Song of Solomon* before and after their "Oprah" selections. (*Paradise* was an

"Oprah" selection while its first edition was still in print.) Investigating the triangular relationship among publisher, author, and reader can also clarify a text's linguistic content. Morrison has written recently, for example, of an editor's recommendation at a late stage of publication that she change a crucial word in the last sentence of *Beloved*.⁶ And *War*, Morrison's original title for *Paradise*, was rejected by Knopf, for fear it "might turn off Morrison fans" (Mulrine 22), a decision that obviously has a significant impact on the novel's reception and interpretation. More broadly and significantly, such attention to the publisher-author dynamic produces a richer relation between the text, conceived of in a "purely" literary sense, and its social and historical contexts, which manifest themselves through the market and cultural forces at work in publishing decisions. My primary bibliographic examples will be the new cover design for the "Oprah's Book Club" edition of *Song of Solomon*, the original and "Oprah" covers for *The Bluest Eye*, and *Song of Solomon* and *Jazz* as audiobooks.

A senior editor at Random House when her own authorial career began, Morrison has always displayed a special awareness for her texts' material messages, beginning with the original dust jacket for *The Bluest Eye*, which consisted entirely of the novel's opening three paragraphs below a small line for title and author.⁷ *The Black Book* (1974), which Morrison edited after publishing her second novel, *Sula*, enacts a striking disruption of the conventions of print and publishing, offering some excerpted material in fragments and cutting abruptly from one topic and one medium to another. While this project was "confined by a cover and limited to type," Morrison writes, it still became a "book with a difference" ("Rediscovering" 16).⁸ Morrison also displayed an early interest in popular markets with the appearance of *Song of Solomon* as the "Redbook novel" in the magazine's September 1977 issue. Well-known for

its fiction offerings until being sold to Hearst Publications in 1982, *Redbook* presented a recognizably literate and feminist audience for Morrison's novel.⁹ By focusing on the material traces of the author-publisher relation in the discussion to follow, I hope to demonstrate the special importance of reading African-American texts as often competing expressions of both their authors' and publishers' social systems because of the white cultural field through which they must pass. Implicitly, this paper also argues for the importance of expanding the field of inquiry for editorial theory to encompass both contemporary and African-American literature.¹⁰

Morrison encourages a serious readerly reaction to her writing within a popular discourse.

the Winfrey-Morrison alliance, that is, the publisher-author relationship in the 1920s and '30s allowed black writers to tell only those stories that would appeal, according to white publishers, to both black and, especially, white audiences.

At the same time, the advent of the New Negro Renaissance marked a unique event in American literary history: the opportunity for black writers to enter both the canon and the market. While white modernists often figured themselves as uninterested in or opposed to market acceptance, there was no such choice to make on the other side of the racial divide. As Houston A. Baker, Jr., explains, "Any behavior that is designated 'modernist' for Afro-America is also, and by

What White Publishers Have Printed

While commentators on the "Oprah effect" tend to focus on Winfrey as a prime example of the immense power television celebrities wield in contemporary culture, I would contend, first, that it is equally important to understand her book club—and especially Morrison's appearances on it—within the historical spectrum of twentieth-century African-American authorship and, second, that we can fully appreciate Morrison's contemporary situation only in contrast to that of her precursors. Zora Neale Hurston, reviewing her career in the 1950 essay "What White Publishers Won't Print," lamented that, as "the accredited representatives of the American people," publishers would only accept novels which perpetuate the unspoken premise that "all non[-]Anglo-Saxons are uncomplicated stereotypes" (86). The New Negro Renaissance as a movement struggled against this tendency even as its authors embraced their newfound marketability. Unlike

dint of adequate historical accounts, always, coextensively labeled popular, economic, and liberating" (*Modernism* 101). Within this period, Chidi Ikonné distinguishes between a few early years characterized by an "essentially Negro self-possessing and Negro self-expressing" literature, and the period after the 1926 appearance of the sensational *Nigger Heaven*, by white novelist Carl Van Vechten, when New Negro literature became "publisher / audience-controlled, even if essentially Negro self-expressing" (xi).¹¹ At a broader level, white publishers' dissemination of modernist, "New Negro" literature reframed the historical problem of slavery's bodily commodification. "There is, perhaps, something obscenely—though profitably—gut-wrenching about Afro-Americans delivering up carefully modified versions of their essential expressive selves for the entertainment of their Anglo-American oppressors," Baker observes. So "the question of integrity looms large. But the most appropriate inquiry . . . is, Integrity as *what*?" (*Blues* 194). Morrison takes up this question in her own work as a novelist

and editor, producing a brand of integrity that was culturally and materially impossible for her literary ancestors.

In addition to her responses to the historical problems of race and authorship, Morrison's public authorial status reflects and reacts against the twentieth-century history of women writers' relations to the market and the canon. While such male modernists as Joyce and Eliot could circulate stories of their disdain for consumers which masked their true desire for commercial success, such female modernists as Woolf more openly courted the economic power of sales.¹² Woolf wrote articles for *Vogue* editor Dorothy Todd in the 1920s, but worried that this work would mark her as commercially corrupt, asking Vita Sackville-West, "What[']s the objection to whoring after Todd? Better whore, I think, than honestly and timidly and coolly and respectably copulate with the Times Lit. Sup." (*Letters* 200). For Morrison, there is not the same question of "whoring after" Winfrey, because African-American women writers have historically been excluded from both the market and the canon. Just as Woolf helped produce commercial success for such popular women writers as Vita Sackville-West through the Hogarth Press, Morrison at Random House ushered into print a new generation of African-American women, including Gayl Jones and Toni Cade Bambara.

When *The Bluest Eye* appeared in 1970, what C. W. E. Bigsby terms the "Second Black Renaissance" was well under way. Sparked by such predecessors as Richard Wright and Richard Ellison, a new generation of African-American authors attained a brief but important period of both academic and mainstream attention. As Bigsby notes, the late 1960s and early '70s also witnessed a rise in black publishing, although "the costs involved meant that these concerns could never offer a genuine alternative to white publishers" (50). Just as this period of main-

stream academic and market attention was beginning to wane in the mid-'70s, Gates observes, "the burgeoning sales of books by black women, for many of whom Morrison served as editor, began to reverse the trends that by 1975 had jeopardized the survival of black studies. Morrison's own novels, especially *Tar Baby* (1981), which led to a cover story in *Newsweek*, were pivotal in redefining the market for books in black studies" (*Loose Canons* 92-93). *Tar Baby*, in turn, capitalized on the success four years earlier of *Song of Solomon*, which won the National Book Critics Circle award and was the first African-American novel since *Native Son* in 1940 to become a Book-of-the-Month Club main selection.

Morrison's gradual entry into the public sphere of authorship occurred in part through her career as an editor, which she says "lessened my awe of the publishing industry" (Schappell 91). But during her eighteen years at Random House, Morrison never called herself an author, even though she published her first three novels during that time. "I think, at bottom, I simply was not prepared to do the adult thing, which in those days would be associated with the male thing, which was to say 'I'm a writer,'" Morrison explains. "I said, 'I'm a mother who writes' or 'I am an editor who writes.' The word 'writer' was hard for me to say because that's what you put on your income-tax form" (Dreifus 73).¹³ This equation of professionalization with male authorship signifies an important continuity between the modern and post-modern periods for female authors: Publishing, even as more women have been employed within its ranks, remains a male cultural field, assigning authorship's economic and cultural status as a "male thing." While African-American men made some inroads into the market and canon during the 1950s and '60s, women of color remained on the outside. At the start of her career, authorship was for Morrison "an intervention into terrain that you are not familiar with—where you have no

provenance. At the time I certainly didn't personally know any other women writers who were successful; it looked very much like a male preserve" (Schappell 96-97). By the time Morrison left Random House in 1983, little had changed; she had become the first black woman to rise to senior editor in company history, but in 1986 there were no black women holding that position in any major house (Taylor-Guthrie 223; Berry 44). Morrison was also essentially alone among African-American women writers in terms of market success at the time. As she noted in a 1981 interview, "When I publish Toni Cade Bambara, when I publish Gayl Jones, if they would do what my own books have done [in sales], then I would feel really fantastic about it. But the market can only receive one or two [Black women writers]. Dealing with five Toni Morrisons would be problematic" (Taylor-Guthrie 133).

Morrison on Oprah

It is against this historical background that we should consider Morrison's appearances on "Oprah's Book Club" as a register for the new cultural avenues Winfrey has created for Morrison and other women writers of color. While the publishing industry has maintained a normative whiteness, Winfrey's book club has created an enormous market for the kinds of books Winfrey wants to read (just as Morrison wrote *The Bluest Eye* because she could not find books like it to read).¹⁴ More than anything else, "Oprah's Book Club" has coalesced a national audience of women readers, highlighting the often hidden gender and racial dynamics of popular literary culture.¹⁵ Gates's satiric point in my epigraph is that Pynchon, because of his famous reclusiveness and his established canonical status, would never betray his side in the culture wars by

appearing on a daytime talk show. Indeed, when Winfrey launched her television book club, *Time* assured "purists, that dying literary breed": "Don't expect *Ulysses* or *Gravity's Rainbow* to show up anytime soon" (Gray, "Winfrey's Winners" 84). This remark reflects the extent to which high culture remains a white-male preserve in the popular press, with Joyce and Pynchon too "pure" to be marketable on TV. Pynchon's refusal to wear the trappings of literary celebrity creates a Romantic aura for him: By distancing himself from all public discourse about himself or his work, Pynchon becomes an even greater, albeit more mysterious, celebrity than most authors manage in all their interviews and memoirs.¹⁶ The result, as a literary agent noted in a *New York* profile, is "very big business" (Sales 63). Indeed, the very idea of Pynchon making a media appearance would negate his commercial image as a recluse. Farrar, Straus & Giroux's publicity director told *New York*: "I'm not interested in his high-school photo or if he shops at Zabar's. . . . It doesn't matter whether he's sexy or gives good sound bites, or can tell Oprah about his pain. There's such integrity to him and his work" (64).

This opposition between "integrity" and *Oprah* holds especially, I contend, for white-male canonical authors. First, *Oprah*, like all daytime programs, is designed and marketed for a predominantly female audience. Second, the tradition of identifying authorship with isolated genius reflects a history of male authorship. The anonymity nineteenth-century women writers often found in pseudonyms, usually male, marks their anxiety about entering this public space. There is no sense of physical presence to connect with Pynchon, while for women writers, the question of body remains a significant one. For African-American women writers in particular, cultural anonymity is the default position; rather than choosing Pynchon's seclusion they must attain public identities in order to

be recognized as authors. Interviews with Morrison frequently begin with a physical description,¹⁷ and her television appearances and audiobook readings further embody her as an author. Morrison's consistent representations as an embodied author depict her in direct, social contact with her readers, trading on her celebrity in a fashion that would be deemed unseemly for Pynchon's audience.¹⁸ *New York's* 1996 profile of Pynchon, which established that he was living in a fashionable New York City neighborhood with his wife and son, included only a photograph of Pynchon and child shot from behind; even this rupture of Pynchon's seclusion could not produce a frontal view of the author as isolated genius.¹⁹

In contrast, as I note below, the new Plume editions of Morrison's novels feature a back-cover photograph in which she looks directly at the reader/consumer. Morrison's visibility and accessibility extend also, of course, to her appearances on *Oprah*, first at Winfrey's Chicago apartment for a dinner party held to discuss *Song of Solomon* with a few selected viewers, and then in her Princeton office to discuss *Paradise* with Winfrey and a larger audience.²⁰ Morrison's physical presence changes accordingly in each program; for *Song* she sits at Winfrey's dinner table with guests, while for *Paradise* she stands near her desk, in front of Winfrey and the rest of the audience, fielding questions and directing discussion as in a seminar.

The *Paradise* discussion on *Oprah* thus performs a striking reversal of the "death of the Author," which, as Nancy Miller argues, maintains a critical indifference to the differences of female authorship even as it should work in concert with feminist aims of decentering cultural traditions. "It is, after all, the Author anthologized and institutionalized who by his (canonical) presence excludes the less-known works of women and minority writers and who by his authority justifies the exclusion," Miller writes (104). While

Barthes and Foucault declare the Author dead, this move "prematurely forecloses the question of agency for" women (106). A similar disjunction operates for male authors and the market: With access to the canon assumed, dismissals of the market as a site for cultural authority are easier to make. Morrison's efforts to construct herself as an author who participates equally in both high and popular cultures—"I would like my work to do two things," she has remarked, "be as demanding and sophisticated as I want it to be, and at the same time be accessible in a sort of emotional way to lots of people, like jazz" (Dreifus 75)—develops from a tradition of mutual exclusion out of which a commercial and canonical text appears a double dream deferred.

Morrison's open desire for the market—for there to be "such a thing as popular black women's literature . . . Popular!" (Schappell 74)—stands in direct opposition to Pynchon's carefully guarded seclusion. By circulating her authorial image and her texts via Winfrey's book club, and by reading her abridged novels on tape, Morrison aims for the most popular audience for serious works of fiction. Through these kinds of promotional activities, Morrison does not so much reify the high-low cultural gap while seeking to bridge both sides of it as she denies the terms on which the dichotomy is grounded, finding no principled incongruence among *Oprah* viewers, audiobook consumers, and readers of "demanding and sophisticated" fiction. Previewing her book club dinner, Winfrey recalls: "I called up Toni Morrison and I said, 'Do people tell you they have to keep going over the words sometimes?' and she said, 'That, my dear, is called reading' " ("Newborn" 24). Morrison's response encourages a serious readerly reaction to her writing within a popular discourse. Since Winfrey plays the role of Morrison's reader for the *Oprah* viewer, Morrison speaks by extension to Winfrey's audience, embracing them as readers beyond a television format

which does not allow time "to keep going over the words." This level of discourse is much more prominent for the *Oprah* discussion of *Paradise*. By teaching Winfrey's viewers her most difficult novel, Morrison continues her emphasis on reading as a sustained engagement with the text. "If it's worth writing, it's worth going back to," Morrison responds to the audience's pleas of confusion (qtd. in Max 39). *Paradise* is Morrison's least accessible novel, a fact which several of Winfrey's viewers bemoaned on the show, but with Winfrey's help it became a number one bestseller. (And this despite the fact that the *Paradise* discussion drew some of the lowest ratings for any book club show [Max 39].) Winfrey was thus able to commercialize Morrison's most "serious" novel, but to do so within a rubric of reading, rather than simply buying, the text.

The level of Winfrey's commercial success is, of course, the most astonishing feature of her "Book Club." Winfrey's first selection, Jacquelyn Mitchard's *The Deep End of the Ocean*, went from a modest initial run of 68,000 copies to 750,000 copies in print by the time of the *Oprah* broadcast, with another 100,000 copies rushed to stores after *Deep End* rose to the top of the bestseller list (Feldman 31). Within a week of Winfrey's announcement that *Song of Solomon* would be the club's next selection, Morrison's nineteen-year-old novel had reached the top spot on *Publishers Weekly's* trade paperback bestseller list. Even in hardcover, *Song* sold more than 40,000 copies in less than a week, ten times the sales it had accumulated during the previous year (Maryles 22), and sales for Morrison's other books increased as well (Gray, "Paradise Found" 68). As Gayle Feldman commented in *The New York Times Book Review*: "The club has also made manifest that Ms. Winfrey is the most powerful book marketer in the United States. On a really good day, she sends more people to bookstores than the morning news programs, the other daytime shows,

the evening magazines, radio shows, print reviews and feature articles rolled into one" (31).

Morrison's commercial alliance with Winfrey complicates what might otherwise be a straightforward commodification, for here Morrison sells herself through a television medium that is already inscribed with Winfrey's ownership of her own cultural product. "Oprah's Book Club" does not simply sell African-American expressiveness to an oppressive white audience, as in Baker's model, but sells and controls the images of Winfrey herself, and of her club's authors, for both black and white consumers. Her surprising influence on book buyers, including consumers outside the established literary market, has produced what *Publishers Weekly* calls the "Oprah Effect." The massive sales generated by Winfrey's selections have led publishers to court her as never before, and even to reprice their books following complaints from Winfrey's viewers. The hardcover *Song*, for example, went from \$26 to \$18.95 (Feldman 31), and the hardcover *Bluest Eye* from \$25 to \$15, with additional discounts available at many chain bookstores.²¹ Morrison, through her connection with Winfrey, was thus able to remake her audiences for *Song's* and *Bluest Eye's* revivals, transmitting through the price reductions a bibliographical message of financial and social accessibility. Winfrey enjoys an indirect power over publishers' prices Morrison could never hold. This level of influence changes the terms of the cultural exchange for the books selected for Winfrey's club; rather than selling "black" texts through white publishers, Morrison on *Oprah* benefits from Winfrey's market power, and thus they both redraw the lines among art, commodity, publisher, and reader.²²

"In our brand-name culture, 'Oprah' is a brand name, something that publishing houses in America no longer are—if they ever were," Feldman writes. "Random House, Doubleday or Viking on a book's spine

doesn't signify much. But Oprah signifies a lot" (31). Aside from the obvious distinction here between roughly similar publishing houses and a television entertainer's seal of approval, what exactly does "Oprah" signify? In Gloria-Jean Masciarotte's analysis, Winfrey crosses multiple cultural boundaries, including race, class, and body image (109n42). Since Masciarotte's 1991 essay, Winfrey has increasingly constructed herself as a media celebrity, frequently devoting programs to new Hollywood films and popular television sitcoms, and in the process moving out of the conventional talk show format to emphasize an equalizing conversation among guests, audience members, and callers.²³ Jameson's contention that postmodern "'culture' has become a product in its own right[, that] the market has become a substitute for itself and fully as much a commodity as any of the items it includes within itself" (x), applies usefully to Winfrey's current status (and to this essay's analysis of it). As Feldman wryly notes of the "Oprah Effect" on book sales, "Perhaps the phenomenon is more about Ms. Winfrey than about books" (31). But whereas in Jameson's account the textualization of the market erases the work of art that would ordinarily lie beneath its commodity form, for Morrison's novels in "Oprah's Book Club" the conflation of culture and commerce marks a necessary step in claiming both public spaces of authorship for African-American women.²⁴

The question remains, however, whether we should read Morrison's novels in this context as more about Winfrey than about Morrison. "You have to buy the book—not from me, on your own," Winfrey told her audience when announcing the *Song* selection. "Don't send me a check, please don't send me your credit card numbers. The book is available in hardcover and as well as in paperback. We called the bookstores early so they'd all be stocked up for you" ("Newborn" 24). Winfrey's clarification that she is not

selling the book is true only in the narrowest sense; her announcement is structured to create an immediate consumer desire for a book she figures as already in such demand that Winfrey's staff has alerted the bookstores in advance.²⁵ The greatest desire in buying membership in "Oprah's Book Club" is thus to feel a personal connection to Winfrey. Winfrey has now reached the level of celebrity where she no longer needs to market herself specifically as a talk show host conscious of race and gender issues, as an interviewer of movie and television stars, as a fitness spokesperson, as a new-age guru, or in any other single capacity; she sells herself simply as "Oprah," with the brand name recognition achieved by the most famous commodities and celebrities. For such writers as Mitchard, appearing on *Oprah* confers celebrity status because Winfrey has deemed a novel worthy of discussion on her show. The same exchange is in effect for Morrison, but her appearance on *Oprah* adds her own cultural capital to Winfrey's book club, elevating it to a more serious level while also marketing *Song of Solomon*, *Paradise*, and *The Bluest Eye* to previously untapped and unimaginable audiences.²⁶

Judging a Book by Its Cover

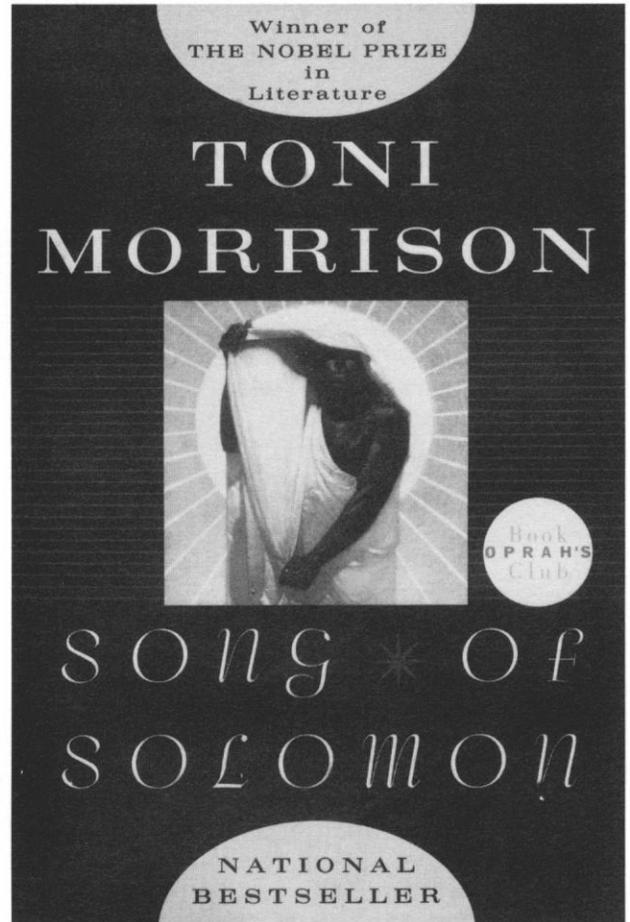
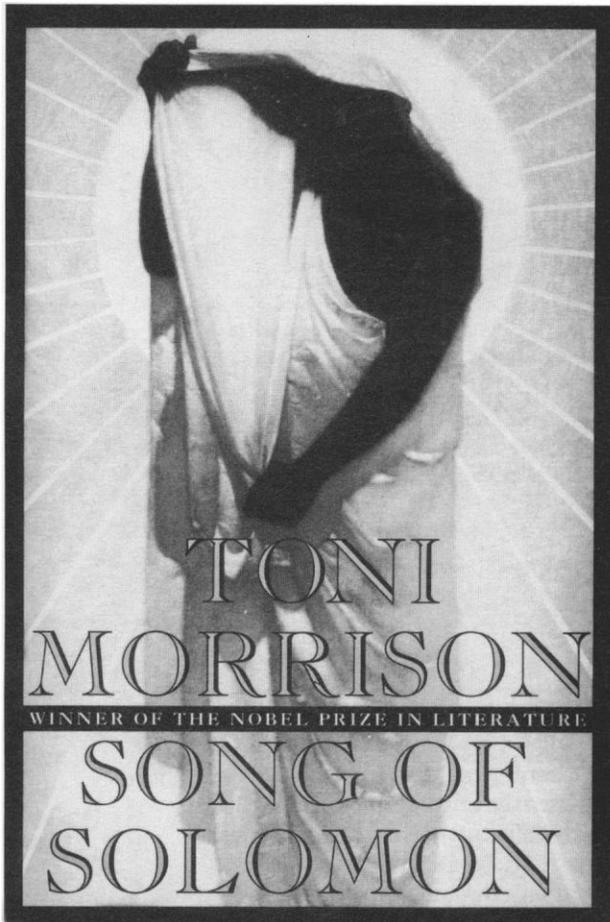
As "Oprah's Book Club" returns its members to Morrison's early career through discussions of *Song of Solomon* and *The Bluest Eye*, it also highlights the significant differences between contemporary African-American writers and their precursors from the late 1960s and early '70s. While the answers have changed, the fundamental question, then as now, is how to represent black culture to different racial audiences, or, in Baker's terms, how to preserve some measure of integrity for black authors working by necessity within a white commodity

structure. At the metaphorical level, Timothy B. Powell defines this situation as "the dilemma of how to inscribe the black self on the white page" (748). In this section, I illustrate the material evidence of this problem by comparing the bibliographic codes for *Song* and *Bluest Eye* in their earlier and "Oprah" editions.

For *Song of Solomon*, the most significant bibliographic differences develop between two nearly simultaneous editions: *Song* in Plume's paperback reprint series and in its "Oprah" edition (both are listed as the thirtieth printing of Plume's 1987 edition). The *Song* cover already had been redesigned before its selection for *Oprah*. According to Melissa Jacoby, Plume's art director and the cover designer for both editions of *Song*, Plume had planned new covers for all the Morrison titles on its backlist "so that they would look sort of like a series" and "to reassure the author that her contribution to the imprint is considered valuable and worth the extra attention of repackaging and reissuing."²⁷ Apart from its special significance as an *Oprah* book, then, this edition of *Song* also marks itself as part of a series of Morrison titles, commodifying *Song* in relation to Morrison's general popularity and reputation.²⁸ By redesigning its Morrison backlist to appear as a set, Plume encourages its consumers to purchase the entire "Morrison collection."

The bibliographic codes emanating from the "Oprah" cover, in contrast to the earlier Plume reprint, emit an even stronger image of Morrison as a celebrity commodity that calls for careful analysis.²⁹ On the earlier Plume paperback, the cover art—a drawing of an African-American man before a blazing sun—dominates. Morrison's name and the title appear in equal-sized gold type, above and below a small band reading "WINNER OF THE NOBEL PRIZE IN LITERATURE." The "Oprah" edition reduces the drawing to a small square in the center of the cover, again with Morrison's name

above and the title below, but now with "TONI MORRISON" in plain type and the title italicized. Yellow semicircles hang from the black cover at the top and bottom, reading "Winner of / THE NOBEL PRIZE / in / Literature" and "NATIONAL / BESTSELLER." To the right of the illustration is the book club stamp, superimposed over the symbol for Winfrey's show, an "O" bordering the inside of a circle (see Fig. 1 on p. 191). This cover is designed to draw the eye's attention immediately to the center: Both semicircles point toward the illustration in the middle of the cover, with the author's name and title also in balancing positions. In a highly accessible position as the only object not in symmetry with the rest of the design is the book club seal, guaranteeing this text's commodity status. *Song of Solomon* already exists as a book by the Nobel Prize winner and as a bestseller (although in this incarnation the tag may refer to the sales of the reprint itself), but this edition's most significant textual message is Morrison's alignment with Winfrey. By reducing the size of the original cover art, the "Oprah" cover sends the message that the book itself is less important (or marketable) than its selection for the book club. Rather than reflecting the narrative inside the book, the "Oprah" cover advertises the success of the book itself—again, a shift from a commodity *in* the market to the market *as* commodity. The title's new font further reflects this dynamic: Whereas on the earlier Plume edition the author's name and title in gold type blend into the yellow background and receive equal weight, the title's serified type on the "Oprah" edition makes "TONI MORRISON" a more heavily grounded element, and the white lettering pushes the words out from the black background. When you are buying Toni Morrison, Nobel Prize winner and *Oprah* guest, the reprint cover suggests, which particular book you select is less important than your purchase of Morrison's new cultural status. The



"Oprah" logo acts as a kind of seal of approval.³⁰

The back covers continue this shift from Morrison as writer to Morrison as commodity. Both have black fields, with blurbs, Morrison's name, and a colored band bearing the legend "Winner of the Nobel Prize in Literature," along with the usual publishing and ISBN information (see Fig. 2 on p. 193). The earlier Plume cover prints this band in lavender and Morrison's name in outlined capital type, allowing the text to blend easily into the black background. A small black-and-white photograph of Morrison adorns the center left, situated so that Morrison looks away from the rest of the cover. The "Oprah" edition includes a color photograph of Morrison at the top and center, with Morrison looking straight ahead. This angle circumscribes the consumer in her gaze, in contrast to the profile shot.

Yellow bands run across the top and bottom of the second photo, reading "Winner of THE NOBEL PRIZE in Literature" and "TONI MORRISON." The capitalization reduces the top inscription to its barest signification, equating Morrison's name directly with her prize. With Morrison's name beneath her face and the black background, this photo looks strikingly like a television image. As Alexander Nehamas notes, television's frequent use of close-ups, coupled with the small size of the screen, creates an important feeling of physical closeness between television viewer and object (173). By recalling this physical connection, the "Oprah" author photo engages the consumer/reader in another purchase of Morrison herself as commodity, repeating the experience of individual familiarity on which Winfrey's talk-show empire depends.

Fig. 1. Plume front covers of *Song of Solomon*, Oprah's Book Club cover on right.

While *Song of Solomon* in its "Oprah" edition thus comments on Morrison's multi-layered commodification, the "Oprah" cover for *The Bluest Eye* demonstrates how far removed Morrison was from such cultural centrality when the novel first appeared in 1970. The first edition's front jacket simply lists title and author in type the same size as the rest of the jacket copy (see Fig. 3 on p. 195). As an unknown author in 1970, Morrison herself was not marketable. So her first novel transfers its strongest selling point, a haunting story, onto the front jacket, where it advertises the novel's narrative power by quoting the book itself. There is no difference between the book's inside and outside, in other words, because Morrison in this edition exists as an author only through this book's words.

But this conflation of textual inside and outside also carries a political significance, which Morrison describes in "Unspeaking Things Unspoken," her Tanner Lecture on Human Values, as an attempt to produce a novel that "would not theatricalize itself, would not erect a proscenium" between book and reader. As the gossipy tone of the opening sentence suggests, this story represents "the public exposure of a private confidence" (20), and making the story public becomes a political as well as literary act. This tension between private and public slides easily into the tension James Weldon Johnson describes between black and white audiences, especially in the back jacket's description: "This is a love story — / except there isn't much love in it. //It's also a fairy tale — / except only the fondest nightmares come true. //It's a murder story — / except the victim lives. //It's not only a black story, / it's a very very dark one." This self-conscious play between a "black story" and a "dark one," within the jacket copy's broader subversion of expected narrative categories, implicitly addresses the question of what it meant to read a "black story" in 1970.³¹ During the New Negro Renaissance, a "black story" was by definition a "dark

one," bearing in mind Hurston's analysis of the white publishing industry, but for the Second Renaissance a "black story" was no longer necessarily "dark." Morrison explains:

... one needs to think of the immediate political climate in which the writing took place, 1965-1969, during great social upheaval in the life of black people. The publication (as opposed to the writing) involved the exposure; the writing was the disclosure of secrets, secrets "we" shared and those withheld from us by ourselves and by the world outside the community. ("Unspeaking" 20-21)

Just as the Civil Rights Movement made possible the disclosure of such secrets, *The Bluest Eye's* jacket remarks on the double audience for this first novel, those readers who are either inside or outside Morrison's community. Inside the novel, the "Dick and Jane" sentences, run together as one long, nearly unreadable string, remind Morrison's audience (especially her white readers) of the unspoken but universalizing assumptions attached to this elementary school image.

As an "Oprah's Book Club" selection by a now world-famous author, *The Bluest Eye* transmits an entirely different set of bibliographic messages. The front jacket for Knopf's hardcover "Oprah" edition features Consuelo Kanaga's black-and-white photograph of a black Caribbean girl alongside the "Oprah's Book Club" logo,³² while the back jacket carries a photograph of Morrison above a *New York Times* blurb (see Fig. 4 on p. 197). The "Oprah's Book Club" logo adds one more reason to buy this novel by a Nobel Prize winner. In contrast to the original edition, where only the story's power motivates its consumers and readers, this edition capitalizes on Morrison's celebrity and achievement to remarket her first novel to the millions of readers who have discovered her, through *Oprah* or independently, since 1970.

Similarly, the politics of reading *The Bluest Eye* shift dramatically from the jacket description in the original

"A RICH, FULL NOVEL..."

...LIFTS US UP...

IMPRESSES ITSELF UPON US

LIKE A LOVE AFFAIR."

—New York Times Book Review



"Morrison is a terrific storyteller...Her writing evokes the joyful richness of life." —Newsday

"Exuberant...a rich novel...an artistic vision that encompasses both a private and national heritage." —Time

—Time

"A rhapsodic work...intricate and inventive...it billows!" —The New Yorker

TONI MORRISON

WINNER OF THE NOBEL PRIZE IN LITERATURE

A PLUME/PENGUIN BOOK
Fiction
Z6011

Cover design by Melissa Jacoby
Cover illustration by Thomas Blackshear
Author photo by Brian Lanker

U.S.A. \$11.95
CAN. \$15.99



Winner of THE NOBEL PRIZE in Literature



TONI MORRISON

"A rich, full novel... it lifts us up...
impresses itself upon us like a love affair."

—New York Times Book Review

"Morrison is a terrific storyteller...
Her writing evokes the joyful richness of life."
—Newsday

"Exuberant... a rich novel... an artistic vision
that encompasses both a private and national heritage."
—Time

"A rhapsodic work... intricate and inventive... it billows!"
—The New Yorker

A PLUME BOOK
Fiction
Z6011
<http://www.penguin.com>

U.S.A. \$12.95
CAN. \$16.99

Cover design by Melissa Jacoby
Cover illustration by
Thomas Blackshear
Author photo by Brian Lanker



and "Oprah" editions. What was a "black" and "dark" story in the first edition becomes, in the *Times* blurb, "an inquiry into the reasons why beauty gets wasted in this country. The beauty in this case is black." Here the same descriptive structure shifts from the original description of *The Bluest Eye* as a "black" story which is also "dark" to a mainstream review focusing on "beauty," which "in this case is black." Johnson's double audience still pertains to the 1970 *Bluest Eye*, as black and white readers approach differently the matter of reading a "black story," but the Knopf and "Oprah" readers are figured in the *Times* blurb as a single audience interested in beauty, no matter its color. What the inside jacket calls a "new" afterword (though dated 1993) also speaks to the significant bibliographic changes, as Morrison concludes: "With very few exceptions, the initial publication of

The Bluest Eye was like Pecola's life: dismissed, trivialized, misread. And it has taken twenty-five years to gain for her the respectful publication this is" (216). Transferred from one hardcover reprint to another, Morrison's reference to "the respectful publication this is" speaks implicitly to the difficulty of such publication for African-American authors in 1970, or indeed for much of Morrison's career. While the original *Bluest Eye* cover represents Morrison's entry into the public space of authorship as both an exposure of secret knowledge and an expression of the progress made since Hurston's career, when such exposure would have been impossible, the "Oprah's Book Club" jacket design and afterword remark on Morrison's self-conscious journey to a mainstream presence within both the market and the canon.³³

In announcing her selection of *The Bluest Eye* for the book club, Winfrey

Fig. 2. Plume rear covers of *Song of Solomon*, Oprah's Book Club cover on right.

also aimed at a single audience—only now a singularly white audience. “I’m telling you, I took this book on vacation with me just a—about a month ago,” Winfrey recalls. “I had all of my girlfriends—who happen to be white because Gayle couldn’t make it—sitting around the pool—sitting around the pool. I had all these white girls crying over ‘The Bluest Eye,’ asking me if this is what life was really like as a colored child” (“Ashley Judd” 25). Without Gayle King, Winfrey’s best friend and a frequent guest for *Oprah* discussions (including the *Paradise* program), Winfrey becomes the point of entry for white readers into the experiences of a “colored child.” Promoting *The Bluest Eye* in these terms represents a striking departure from the effect of *Paradise*, Winfrey’s previous Morrison selection. *Paradise*’s now famous opening line, “They shoot the white girl first,” launches a textual mystery that, never resolved in any identification of the single white character, reverses the tradition of establishing a character’s whiteness by not remarking on it at all. (Of Hemingway’s *To Have and Have Not*, Morrison notes in *Playing in the Dark*, “Eddy is white, and we know he is because nobody says so” [72].) Published by Knopf and made a number one bestseller by “Oprah’s Book Club,” *Paradise* compels all its readers to reconsider the social dynamics that have defined how we read whiteness and blackness. Not knowing which of the main characters is white, readers cannot approach *Paradise* with the usual, though often unconscious, racial associations.

While the epitome of a “single audience,” in these terms, *Paradise* generated some of the lowest ratings for any “Oprah” book, and for *The Bluest Eye* Winfrey made sure to emphasize the text’s accessibility. Recognizing that “a lot of people” found *Paradise* “difficult,” Winfrey reassures her audience that *The Bluest Eye* is the “shortest” and “the simplest of [Morrison’s] books” (“Ashley Judd”

25, 26). This description sounds exactly like what one would expect of a televised book promotion, but it still leaves room to reconfigure audience expectations once *Oprah* viewers become Morrison readers. Winfrey’s rhetoric plays into the novel’s own subversion of “easy” and “difficult” narratives, what Morrison has called a “simplicity [that] was not simple-minded, but devious, even loaded” (“Unspeakable” 20). The experience of reading *The Bluest Eye* rests on reacting against its *seeming* simplicity, as in the text’s opening jumble of the “Dick and Jane” sentence. In promoting Morrison’s first novel as her “simplest,” then, Winfrey uses a marketing rhetoric that transfers the novel’s internal guise of accessibility onto a television audience who will presumably find the book emotionally and intellectually powerful despite their initial expectations. (Winfrey exults after announcing the selection, “If you don’t like this book, then I don’t have nothing else to say to you. You will like this book. OK? I love this book” [“Ashley Judd” 25].) Winfrey previews a more thoughtful reaction as well, noting that *The Bluest Eye* frequently appears on literature curricula and engenders strong responses from English classes. “You cannot read ‘The Bluest Eye’ without having it touch your soul,” Winfrey concludes. “If it doesn’t, then I don’t know who you are” (26). The balance between audience accessibility and cultural significance, or between selling and reading, is never easy to maintain for Morrison on “Oprah’s Book Club.” If the “Oprah” *Bluest Eye* risks sacrificing the intellectual engagement required by *Paradise* for the sales promised by Morrison’s shortest and simplest novel, it also encourages Winfrey’s vast audience to continue reading Morrison, for and beyond *Oprah*.³⁴



Photograph: Bert Andri

The Bluest Eye, a novel by Toni Morrison

The Bluest Eye, a novel by Toni Morrison

Quiet as it's kept, there were no marigolds in the fall of 1941. We thought, at the time, that it was because Pecola was having her father's baby that the marigolds did not grow. A little examination and much less melancholy would have proved to us that our seeds were not the only ones that did not sprout; nobody's did. Not even the gardens fronting the lake showed marigolds that year. But so deeply concerned were we with the health and safe delivery of Pecola's baby we could think of nothing but our own magic: if we planted the seeds, and said the right words over them, they would blossom, and everything would be all right.

It was a long time before my sister and I admitted to ourselves that no green was going to spring from our seeds. Once we knew, our guilt was relieved only by fights and mutual accusations about who was to blame. For years I thought my sister was right: it was my fault. I had planted them too far down in the earth. It never occurred to either of us that the earth itself might have been unyielding. We had dropped our seeds in our own little plot of black dirt, just as Pecola's father had dropped his seeds in his own plot of black dirt. Our innocence and faith were no more productive than his lust or despair. What is clear now is that of all of that hope, fear, lust, love, and grief, nothing remains but Pecola and the unyielding earth. Cholly Breedlove is dead; our innocence too. The seeds shriveled and died; her baby too.

Holt Rinehart Winston There is really nothing more to say—except why. But since *why* is difficult to handle, one must take refuge in *how*.

How to Read (?) a Book-on-Tape

If you ever want to hear something powerful," Winfrey tells her viewers during the *Song of Solomon* dinner, "it's [Morrison] reading the book. She had us crying for mercy" ("Behind" 11). Shifting from "Oprah" editions to books-on-tape, we find related but distinct ways of merging high and popular cultural audiences. Morrison's audiobooks, I will argue, complete her response to the problem of the double audience by commodifying an African-American authorial voice within texts which themselves place a black oral tradition alongside their narrative representations of race in America.

Hearing Morrison read her work aloud activates the same commodified desire that operates for Winfrey's book club: Consumers buy a sense of con-

nection to Winfrey just as they purchase Morrison's voice, a much more direct representation of the author, it would seem, than the printed novel. Sarah Kozloff finds that "'envoicing' the narrator creates a sense of connection stronger than reading impersonal printed pages: the communicative paradigm—storyteller to listener—that underlies printed texts has again become flesh" (92).³⁵ Not quite flesh, of course, and in fact it seems more accurate to consider the book-on-tape's mechanical reproduction of the voice as recalling an oral culture while also displacing that culture's aura, in Benjamin's terms. While in Kozloff's analysis audiobooks function as part of what Walter J. Ong calls secondary orality, in which oral texts derive from written origins or forms (as with television and radio programs), I would argue that Morrison's audiobooks, at least, are not just derivative versions

Fig. 3. Dust-jacket copy for *The Bluest Eye*, first edition.

but are in fact importantly *new* textual forms. Morrison "authors" these texts by reading them aloud, rather than letting someone else perform this task for her, and in so doing she constitutes *Song of Solomon* or *Jazz* on tape as a new version of the existing work. The textual aura, in Bornstein's terms, withers here, as the audiobook displaces the original edition's historical context, but this loss becomes less important than the textual auras created by the books-on-tape as "new" authorial productions. In this section I focus on the audiobook versions of *Song of Solomon* and *Jazz*, for in these novels we see Morrison's most powerful incorporation of the African-American oral tradition. The popular audience engaged by these audiobooks includes consumers who might not ordinarily read or purchase Morrison's novels, as well as those listeners already familiar with the print versions but interested in hearing Morrison reading.

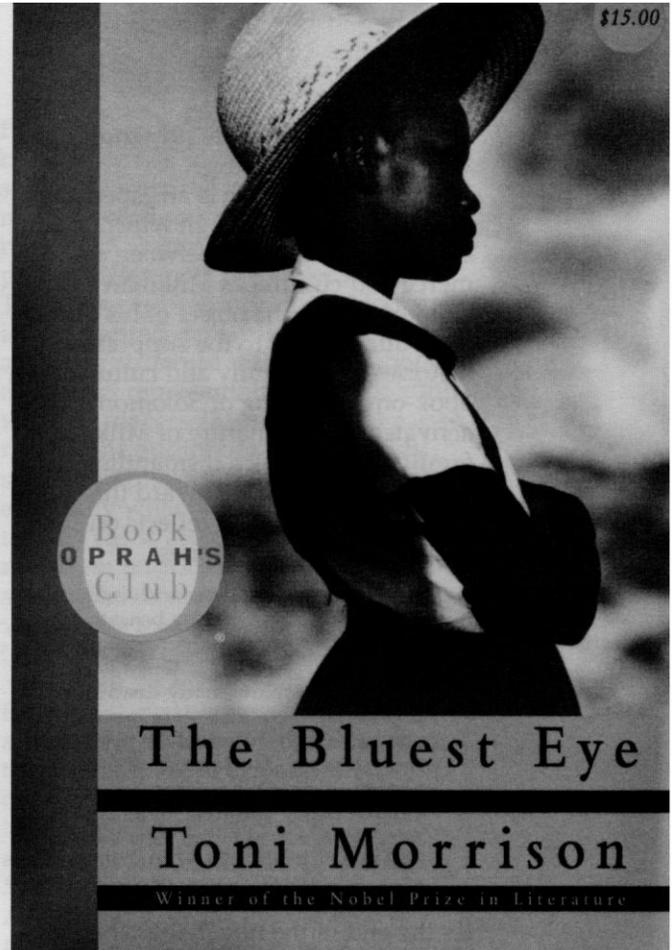
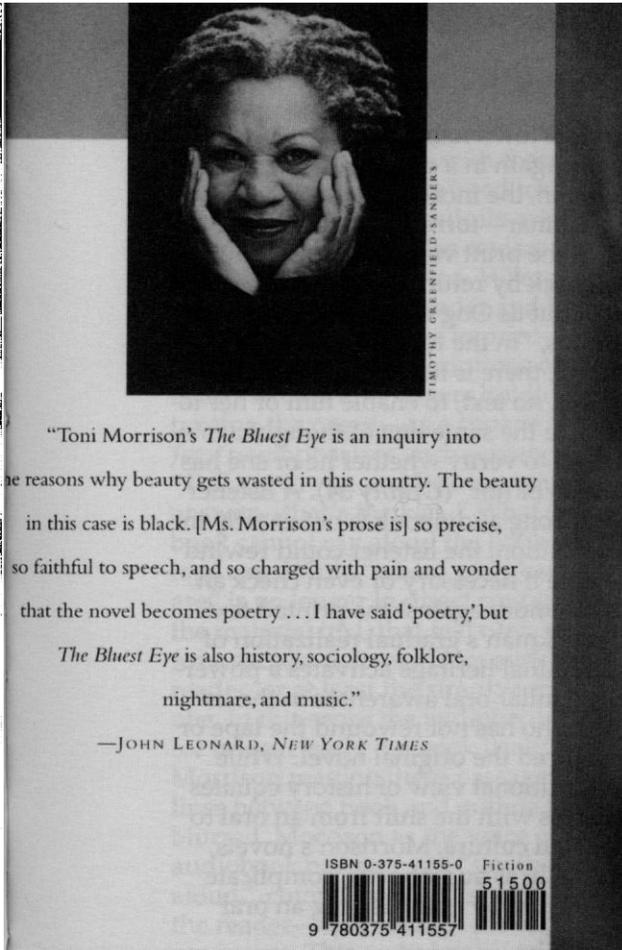
Before turning to specific examples, I will first address the general question of how to locate the book-on-tape within the field of textual interpretation. Ong's prediction in 1977 that "in the foreseeable future there will be more books than ever before but . . . books will no longer be what books used to be" (*Interfaces* 83) certainly did not foresee the audiobook specifically, but it did anticipate the kinds of radical changes the book has undergone in the last decade. Audiobooks are now an established part of the contemporary publishing industry, alongside movie novelizations, corporately owned publishing houses, hypertext fiction, and, most recently, books "published" electronically by such successful writers as Stephen King and Tom Wolfe, and they thus represent a distinct medium that changes the public nature and reception of the text.

Books-on-tape look like books, not tapes. Most packages contain two tapes within a box about the size of a book,³⁶ arranged on bookstore shelves with the spine displaying the author and title. The cassettes themselves come in clear

plastic and black cases, with plain black type on white tapes, recalling older music cassettes. Priced on average at \$17, Morrison's audiobooks cost as much as their print cousins.³⁷ These products thus imagine a consumer desire for a product of technological convenience packaged to recall its high cultural sources, yielding the image of a customer who is not too *lazy* to read important literature but too *busy* to read print texts.

The audiobook's reconfiguration of author/reader to reader (aloud)/listener creates a complex series of revisions for the ways we normally understand "authors." The voice of the author shifts from an internalized, imagined voice in the reader's mind to an actual, or at least recorded, presence delivering an oral text. "Read by the author," a Morrison audiobook presents a disembodied author: Toni Morrison, Nobel Prize winner, reads her novel to you as you drive to work or sweep around the house.³⁸ Paradoxically, the audiobook establishes a greater sense of intimacy between audience and author, even while the experience of the text is in some ways less immediate.³⁹

Authors like Morrison who read their own works on tape are relatively rare; more often actors, both famous and unknown, deliver these performances. Morrison's audiobooks thus literalize the African-American trope of the "talking book," enlivening a narrative metaphor through direct contact with the author, or at least with the author's recorded voice.⁴⁰ This tradition began, Gates speculates in *The Signifying Monkey*, because "Black people . . . had to represent themselves as 'speaking subjects' before they could even begin to destroy their status as objects, as commodities, within Western culture" (129). In the post-modern era, African-American literature has now developed enough of a heritage for authors to adapt their commodified status as speaking and selling subjects. While an initial response might judge audiobooks a diluted,



popular version of the novels on which they are based, for African-American books-on-tape the terms of commodification work differently. In representing and selling herself as a "speaking subject," Morrison avoids the usual cultural positions of authorship: Neither a genius recluse nor a producer of stereotypical black stories, Morrison adapts the African-American oral tradition in her narratives and extrapolates that heritage onto her audiobooks.

Morrison's audiobooks commodify her voice in a way that recalls yet departs from the complete commodification of the slave's body, while also invoking a storyteller figure, in accordance with Morrison's desire for her reader "to respond on the same plane as an illiterate or preliterate" audience (qtd. in Middleton 24). The power to sell oneself, either through books, television, or on tape, represents a unique opportunity in the history of African-

American women's writing. In her analysis of the "female authorial voice" in cinema, Kaja Silverman insists: "Once the author-as-individual-person has given way to the author-as-body-of-the-text, the crucial project with respect to the female voice is to find a place from which it can speak and be heard, not to strip it of discursive rights" (192). Morrison's voice on tape becomes an even more literal body of the text than many of Silverman's examples: In this medium, Morrison no longer disseminates just her words but also her performance of her writing, representing herself directly to the audience as a physical (if recorded) presence. The book-on-tape thus addresses the feminist problem of what to do with real writers and readers in the wake of poststructuralism's dissipation of author and subject⁴¹: Hearing Morrison read her novels returns us to

Fig. 4
Rear (l.) and
front (r.)
jacket for
the Oprah's
Book Club
edition of
The Bluest Eye.

a version of immediate presence in the author-reader exchange.

Song of Solomon is an especially appropriate text through which to consider the relationship between commerce and culture, as Milkman Dead similarly shifts the object of his quest from buried gold to the suppressed histories of his family and culture. As a book-on-tape, *Song of Solomon* also activates the oral nature of Milkman's family narrative as a dismantling of written traditions.⁴² Toward the end of his journey, Milkman reflects on such hidden American histories:

He read the road signs with interest now, wondering what lay beneath the names. The Algonquins had named the territory he lived in Great Water, *michi ganni*. How many dead lives and fading memories were buried in and beneath the names of the places in this country. Under the recorded names were other names, just as "Macon Dead," recorded for all time in some dusty file, hid from view the real names of people, places, and things. Names that had meaning. (329)

By the end of the novel, the white erasure of names and meaning from Indian and African history supersedes Milkman's naïve search for Pilate's mysterious cache of gold. In its secondary textual forms as talk show topic and audiobook, *Song of Solomon* becomes a more "postmodern" text by expressing the narrative's debates between profit and purity within media that are themselves designed to create auxiliary profits for the publishing industry.⁴³ That is, even as the novel's linguistic text supplants gold with history, its new bibliographical codes mark its significant commercial existence.

Oral history organizes the narrative quest, as the family and cultural history Milkman traces consists of remembered stories, children's songs, and misheard names.⁴⁴ Performed orally, *Song* asks its listeners to pursue narrative memories as in an oral culture. The different versions of the word *Solomon*, for instance—first it appears in a song as *Sugarman*, then as a

Virginia town named *Shalimar*, and finally again in a children's song as *Solomon*, the most common surname in Shalimar—form a developing memory in the print version that a reader can check by returning to an earlier page. But as Ong notes of primary oral cultures, "In the total absence of any writing, there is nothing outside the thinker, no text, to enable him or her to produce the same line of thought again or even to verify whether he or she has done so or not" (*Orality* 34). A listener to the *Song* audiobook is not exactly in this position; the listener could rewind the tape if necessary or even check an oral memory against the printed text. But Milkman's gradual realization of his nominal heritage activates a powerfully similar oral awareness in the listener who has not rewound the tape or referenced the original novel. While the traditional view of history equates progress with the shift from an oral to a written culture, Morrison's novels, especially as audiobooks, complicate this picture by emphasizing an oral heritage.

Jazz takes the talking book a step further through an unnamed first-person narrator. In the closing paragraphs, this anonymous speaker finally becomes the book itself⁴⁵:

I envy them their public love. I myself have only known it in secret, shared it in secret and longed, aw longed to show it—to be able to say out loud what they have no need to say at all. *That I have loved only you, surrendered my whole self reckless to you and nobody else. That I want you to love me back and show it to me. That I love the way you hold me, how close you let me be to you. I like your fingers on and on, lifting, turning. I have watched your face for a long time now, and missed your eyes when you went away from me. Talking to you and hearing you answer—that's the kick.*

But I can't say that aloud; I can't tell anyone that I have been waiting for this all my life and that being chosen to wait is the reason I can. If I were able I'd say it. Say make me, remake me. You are free to do it and I am free to let you because look, look. Look where your hands are. Now. (229)

Where “your hands are. Now” is holding the book that ends with these words, at least in the printed text. As a book-on-tape, *Jazz* recalls its original scene of writing but also revises the impact of this conclusion. Whereas the tactile interaction of reader and book dominates this passage in print—especially through the descriptions of the reader’s hand and fingers holding and turning the pages—as a spoken text *Jazz* re-emphasizes such sentences as “Talking to you and hearing you answer—that’s the kick.” What the book cannot say aloud the book-on-tape can: While “where your hands are” is no longer in direct contact with the material text, that text now allows for a spoken delivery from author to reader, or at least the simulation of one. In this sense the audiobook narrator is less clearly the book itself; with Morrison reading these passages, the lines between book and author are re-blurred. Morrison as the voice of the audiobook narrator *can* “say that aloud,” compelling the listener—not the reader—to “remake” the text in new ways. This audiobook’s textual aura thus recalls its original context while also creating its own aura, in which Morrison’s auditor hears the author/narrator/book self-consciously speaking aloud to him/her in ways that original versions of the “talking book” never could.

This new form of the “talking book” also has significant feminist implications for Morrison’s authorial status. In keeping with the American feminist goal of retaining some form of the authorial self, Morrison re-emphasizes her presence in the text while constructing an essential element of her authority through audiences that would ordinarily be dismissed as too low on the cultural scale to make an interpretive difference. The difference they do make for Morrison is in her image of cultural authority, which grounds itself, like jazz, as a sophisticated discourse aimed at both a specialized and popular audience. In contrast, it is almost impossible to imagine

Pynchon reading his books on tape because he has so deliberately set himself apart from the mechanics of the market—and could afford to do so, I have been arguing, due in no small part to differences of gender and race. The book-on-tape is packaged to recall its print antecedent, but its new author-audience structure sells the audiobook as a direct representation of authorship which is inaccessible to the print experience. The audiobook’s commodity status complicates this theoretical shift, especially when we note that Morrison usually reads abridged versions of her novels, in response to the marketing assumption that not enough consumers would buy a longer, more expensive, but complete edition. Morrison may seem again to sacrifice artistic integrity for commercial success, but even in an abridged form the audiobook performs the arguably more important function of actualizing the oral backgrounds of Morrison’s novels, which most critics agree are vital to any interpretation of *Song of Solomon*, for example. Additionally, as the appearance of a much more abridged *Song of Solomon* in *Redbook* indicates, Morrison has long privileged access to a broader audience over textual “integrity.” In these ways, the commodification of Morrison’s novels as audiobooks is a commercialization of the African-American oral tradition and cultural history they recall.

Morrison’s immersion in popular culture, coupled with her insistence that her books be *read*—by her on tape, by *Oprah* viewers, and in all the usual sites of reading as well—creates, finally, an importantly different version of textual authority from that available to her thirty years ago. Whereas the original edition of *The Bluest Eye* bespeaks bibliographically a conflicted presence within the mainstream, white publishing structure, Morrison’s “Oprah” editions and audiobooks present a voice of authentically black experience that demands attention, for its words and through its sales, from black and white readers.

Notes

1. Bourdieu distinguishes between “bourgeois art, which has an honoured place in society, and industrial art, which is doubly suspect, being both mercantile and ‘popular’ ” (50). As of this writing, Morrison is the first author with three “Oprah’s Book Club” selections (although Bill Cosby appeared on one show to discuss three of his children’s books). Winfrey has twice selected books by Jane Hamilton and Wally Lamb. For a broader discussion of the kinds of books selected, see Max.

2. Winfrey also included *Beloved* on the list of “Oprah’s Favorite Books” on the show’s web site, Oprah.com, below the question “Which of the following have you read?” Winfrey devoted an *Oprah* episode to a discussion of the film, which she produced while playing Sethe. *Publishers Weekly* reports “some sniping” at the selection of *Song of Solomon* while the film version of *Beloved* was in production (Kinsella 277). Winfrey also owns the movie rights for *Their Eyes Were Watching God* with Quincy Jones (Wallace 245).

3. In explaining one excerpt from the dinner with Morrison, Winfrey begins: “Many times, on this stage, we’ve talked to women on how low would you go for love, and what would you do to keep a man. Well, the character named Hagar needed to be on one of those shows” (“Behind the Scenes” 16). About the first fifth of the show focuses on Winfrey’s dinner preparations; as she tells her TV audience, “If you’re more into party planning than life lessons, you can get some great tips on planning a dinner party, too” (1-2). John Brenkman observes that the novel’s political subtext develops through the narrative’s conclusion in 1963, just before the national rise of black consciousness and the assassinations of Martin Luther King and Malcolm X. Despite Winfrey’s efforts to promote African-American writers and “to make even the most innocuous talk show programs racially conscious” (Mascliarotte 109n42), Milkman’s extensive genealogical investigation does not enter the dinner discussion, and so the novel’s analysis of black and white cultural heritages drops away.

4. *Song of Solomon* on tape or on TV, for example, is a kind of “textual event,” as described (if not imagined in this form) by Joseph Grigely. “By changing the extralinguistic component—e.g., the publication,” Grigely writes, “we change the extratextual community, and hence the interpretive strategies that are brought to bear upon that text. The audience changes; assumptions about it change” (183).

5. “Although Benjamin himself saw the aura as ‘withering’ in the age of mechanical reproduction,” Bornstein explains, “we may revise Benjamin by emphasizing that, for literary works, original mechanical reproductions can create their own aura and that it is the earlier auras that wither under successive reproductions of the work, particularly if the ‘work’ is thought of as identical merely to its words” (224). On postmodernism and the loss of “authenticity,” see also Lury ch. 3.

6. See Morrison, “Home.” She does not include the sentence’s original version.

7. I refer to the paragraphs beginning “Quiet as it’s kept . . .” in *The Bluest Eye*, rather than the “Dick and Jane” section preceding them. Morrison also refers to these sentences as the book’s beginning in her discussion of that sentence in “Unspeakable Things Unspoken” (20-23).

8. As Morrison explains in “Behind the Making of *The Black Book*,” it “has no ‘order,’ no chapters, no major themes. But it does have coherence and sinew. It can be read or browsed through from the back forwards or from the middle out, either way” (88-89).

9. *Song* excerpts comprise twenty-four uninterrupted pages. The magazine’s table of contents demonstrates fiction’s special place by beginning always with the “Redbook novel.” As an indication of the magazine’s shift away from feminist articles, consider the following examples from the September 1977 issue—“Farrah Fawcett Majors Makes Me Want to Scream!”, “Is His Money Your Money Too?”; “How Do You Really Feel About Having Children?”—and from a recent issue (June 2000): “4 Things You Should Never Tell Your Guy”; “5 Sexy Things He’s Dying for You to Try in Bed”; “How I Quit Dieting—And Lost Weight.” On *Redbook* and similar publications, see McCracken; Zuckerman.

10. For discussions of editorial theory and earlier periods of African-American literature, see Andrews.

11. For more sustained accounts of Van Vechten’s role in the Harlem Renaissance, see Flora; Coleman; Kellner.

12. On Joyce and Eliot, see Rainey, “Consuming” and “Price.”

13. “First of all they didn’t hire me to do that,” Morrison adds in another interview. “They didn’t hire me to be one of *them*. Secondly, I think they would have fired me” (Schappell 98).

14. In one version of this often-quoted remark, Morrison explains, “I am not being facetious when I say I wrote *The Bluest Eye* in order to read it” (Taylor-Guthrie 89).

15. Noting the book club’s preponderance of women writers and female protagonists, D. T. Max concludes that “the implication is this: we are women, and we are going to read about women” (37).

16. But, like Morrison, Pynchon has published in popular magazines: His story “The Secret Integration” appeared in *The Saturday Evening Post*, and two excerpts from *The Crying of Lot 49* appeared in *Esquire* and *Cavalier*. I discuss these submissions in “Pynchon in Popular Magazines,”

an unpublished paper. As Michael Bérubé notes of Pynchon's general abstention from popular culture, "Pynchon's nonparticipation in his cultural transmission is a cultural position utterly inaccessible to minority writers, alien to their literary culture" (311).

17. A 1994 *New York Times Sunday Magazine* profile, for example, begins: "The woman breezing into a Princeton, N.J., restaurant in a brilliant silk caftan and with salt-and-pepper dreadlocks is Toni Morrison, 63, the Robert F. Goheen Professor in the Council of the Humanities at Princeton University and the 1993 Nobel Prize winner for literature. Heads turn as she moves to a table. Princetonians in khaki stare" (Dreifus 73).

18. The paperback cover for *Playing in the Dark*, for example, consists primarily of a photograph of Morrison holding a straw hat and gazing into the horizon to the left of the cover, a striking embodiment for a work of literary criticism.

19. An earlier, similar article in the London *Sunday Times Magazine* did include a blurry photograph of Pynchon's face, prompting Pynchon's publisher, Henry Holt, to threaten a lawsuit against the newspaper (see Traub 13).

20. As of this writing, the book club episode on *The Bluest Eye* had not aired.

21. "I go, 'This book should be \$15, I be—do believe,'" Winfrey said in announcing the selection. "So it's \$15 if you want the hardback—really cute, fits in the hand—just to make it more affordable for everybody" ("Ashley Judd" 26). Winfrey also asks publishers to donate 500 copies of each book for the show's studio audience, as well as 10,000 to libraries (Max 40).

22. While Winfrey does not profit (directly) from the sales of her book club selections, authors and publishers certainly do. Every selection so far has become a bestseller, with total sales of more than 20 million books and \$175 million in revenue as of December 1999 (Max 37).

23. For a useful discussion of this format's construction of gender roles, see Masciarotte 84-99. See also Shattuc.

24. On race and consumerism, see Willis.

25. "'Even before the Book Club, people would come in and say Oprah had this author or that author on her show,'" a bookseller told *Publishers Weekly*. "'It is as if they mean, 'My friend Oprah recommended this' '" (Kinsella 278). The terms of Winfrey's marketing changed significantly for *Paradise*, which unlike *Song of Solomon* was a new novel at the time of its selection for the show. While the "Oprah Effect" had previously boosted sales for novels already in circulation, Winfrey was now in the position of advertising a new literary product, attesting anew to her commercial influence within the publishing world, and also, of course, continuing the indirect promotion of *Beloved*, the movie.

26. While "Oprah's Book Club" has included such "high-cultural" writers as Isabel Allende, Maya Angelou, Edwidge Danticat, Ernest J. Gaines, and Bernard Schlink, Morrison's selection is clearly unique.

27. All references to Jacoby are taken from electronic mail correspondence in Sep. 1999. Jacoby describes the "Oprah" logo's placement as having the "greatest impact," and notes that the back cover photo of Morrison was the author's choice, as the "favorite photo of herself." *Oprah* producers approve the placement of the show's logo on book covers (Max 40).

28. This series design thus fulfills Morrison's marketing goal of "eminence." In contrast to "demonstrable public success," she expressed the desire in a 1981 interview for a level of success achieved "when you don't have to be on the cover of *Newsweek* and you don't have to go on a lecture tour" (Taylor-Guthrie 133).

29. The Knopf hardcover jacket for *Song of Solomon* presents the title in red lettering on a yellow field, with black wings sprouting from the two capital Ss. An earlier Plume paperback echoes this design somewhat, depicting a black bird on a yellow field with a blue frame, and a larger white field for the entire cover. Neither cover conveys the sense of celebrity created by the later covers.

30. Publishers remove the "Oprah" seal from book club selections once the month allotted for viewers to read the book has passed, meaning that subsequent publications by "Oprah" authors often return to their previous sales levels. As Jacquelyn Mitchard puts it, "You learn quickly Oprah's the brand name, not you" (Max 41).

31. For another striking example of this period's tension between African-American self-expression and white publication, which contrasts importantly with *The Bluest Eye*'s original edition, consider Ishmael Reed's *Mumbo Jumbo* (1972). In the first edition, the book's copyright information appears in white type on a black page, a startling visual inversion of the white-black structure of most printed books. I discuss this example further in my unpublished paper "The Politics of Print in Ishmael Reed's *Mumbo Jumbo*"; for a comparison of *Mumbo Jumbo* and *Song of Solomon* as detective novels, see Weixlmann.

32. Kanaga shot "School Girl" while visiting St. Croix in 1962 (Millstein and Lowe 47).

33. The use of "School Girl" on the cover also reconfigures *Bluest Eye's* new audience. A white photographer whose nearly seventy-year career was largely forgotten until a 1992 Brooklyn Museum retrospective, Kanaga "painted with light to portray African Americans as people of beauty, inner strength, and unassailable dignity" (Millstein and Lowe 35). By appropriating Kanaga's photograph, the new *Bluest Eye* cover comments on Morrison's ascendancy to a position of cultural power, as she uses her greater fame and marketability to recover an obscure photographer for her broad audience.

34. In response to an audience member's naïve query, "Has Toni Morrison written anymore [sic] books?" Winfrey responds, "Yes, won a Nobel Prize for literature" ("Ashley Judd" 26).

35. Kozloff's "Audio Books in a Visual Culture" is so far the only scholarly attempt to define this experience of textuality. For a more general discussion, see Birkerts.

36. The package for *Song* on tape, for example, is one inch shorter and one inch narrower than the Plume reprint for "Oprah's Book Club."

37. *Song of Solomon* and *The Bluest Eye* are priced at \$18, with *Jazz* at \$16, all abridged, from Random House Audiobooks; an unabridged *Sula* lists for \$26. An abridged *Beloved*, read by Lynn Whitfield, lists at \$18, while Morrison reading the complete version sells for \$40. The abridged *Paradise* audiobook, read by Morrison, is listed at \$26, and originally bore an "Oprah's Book Club" sticker. Inside the package is a display of Morrison's other audio titles, encouraging consumer desire for the series.

38. On the experience of listening to an audiobook in the car, Kozloff notes that "the movement through the narrative is mirrored and amplified by the car's physical movement through space, creating a sensation of *driving through the story* that may be unique in the history of narrative" (89).

39. "These rectangles of magnetic tape have a quaint, old-fashionedness about them," Kozloff argues; "they hark back to reading aloud in the family parlor, to Dickens performing *A Christmas Carol*, or to gathering around the wireless for the latest episode" (92). At the same time, Kozloff finds audiobooks to be "part and parcel of the interconnecting web of high technology, marketing manipulation, and celebrity fetishism that drive the visual media" (93).

40. On the talking book, see Gates, *Signifying Monkey* chs. 4-7.

41. On this question see, for example, Huyssen, "Mapping" 44; and Miller ch. 5.

42. See Joyce Irene Middleton, who concludes that "Morrison privileges orality so that her readers can hear and feel the unique oral character of African American language use and see how the survival of cultural consciousness, or *nomos*, is preserved in a highly literate culture" (29). Similarly, Gay Wilentz concludes that "Morrison's role as an Afrocentric storyteller is unmistakable, and the orature of her foremothers as well as the oral traditions of the black community is evident both in the language and the structure of the novel" (112).

43. I have in mind here Huyssen's description of postmodernism: "It operates in a field of tension between tradition and innovation, conservation and renewal, mass culture and high art, in which the second terms are no longer automatically privileged over the first" ("Mapping" 48).

44. See also Brenkman 68; Middleton; Wilentz. The original "Song of Solomon" itself consists of alternating male and female poetic voices, a device recalled in the tape's use of a male narrator's voice to signal an abridgment (the male voice delivers the first sentence or two of the next passage before Morrison resumes reading).

45. "To put it simply," Veronique Lesoinne notes, "Morrison has personified the book in a most radical way" (162). Martha J. Cutter also concludes, in a brilliant reading of *Beloved* and *Jazz*, that "the narrator is not a character within the text, although at times s/he plays that role, but rather the voice of the narrative itself" (70). See also Leonard; Page; O'Keefe; Peterson, "'Say'" esp. 210-17; Rodrigues.

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