



Corporeality and Racial Dehumanization: Body Narratives in Toni Morrison’s *The Bluest Eye*

Kai Liu

Beijing Foreign Studies University, Beijing, China.

Abstract

This paper applies Daniel Punday’s theory of corporeal narratology to the interpretation of Toni Morrison’s *The Bluest Eye* in order to explore how corporeality functions within narrative discourse as a component of the story. Drawing on two core narratological categories, characterization and thematic construction, the paper distinguishes between sorted bodies and general bodies to examine how embodiment operates in the text, and further integrates Punday’s concept of differential embodiment with the notion of racist dehumanization, arguing that the novel depicts a structural interplay between the process of disembodiment and narrative representation. Through the tragic representational disembodiment of Pecola’s mental disorder at the end of the novel, Morrison not only criticizes racist dehumanization but also demonstrates how the denial of embodied subjectivity serves as a narrative expression of systemic oppression. The paper contends that Morrison’s emphasis on corporeality constitutes both an anti-racist narrative strategy and a psychological resistance to the ideological violence of dehumanization.

Keywords: Characterization, Corporeal narratology, Embodiment, Racist dehumanization.

1. Introduction

Toni Morrison’s *The Bluest Eye* tells a story about the tragic destiny of a black little girl Pecola who suffered from racism and domestic violence. In this novel, as we shall see, language, “an act with consequences” (Morrison 1993), manifests conspicuously as a dynamic and living force, within which character bodies function as a foregrounding medium between the author and the reader, and serve as the platforms of racist repression internalized within the text and the society. In this context, this paper explores two central questions: How does narrative language confer meaning upon bodies? And in turn, how do these embodied characters shape, disrupt, or promote narrative progress? Those two questions guide the inquiry into how Morrison’s language constructs corporeality which refers to the attributes of human flesh and is opposite to the spirituality of human beings, not as a passive object, but as an agent that inspires characterization and thematic construction.

Now that bodies serve as an inevitable element in the discussion of *The Bluest Eye*, the research related to bodies, especially female bodies, should be listed as follows. Jane Kuenz in *The Bluest Eye: Notes on History, Community, and Black Female Subjectivity* focuses on the loss of black female subjectivity by analyzing “black female bodies as the sites of fascist invasions of one kind or another” (421), arguing that through the project of representing African-American focuses on the histories and bodies of black women, Toni Morrison “enables the reader to witness structurally the complexity of black female subjectivity (430). Another scholar, comparing Claudia’s cognitive health and Pecola’s cognitive loss, argues that, under the lens of theory of mirror neurons, the construction of embodied receptiveness in the novel constitutes “a powerful epistemological tool that is facilitated by the biological architecture of all human beings who are not disabled by neurological impairment” (Rokotnitz 385). And, for Werrlein, Lauren Berlant’s “surplus corporeality”, which refers to “the body’s visible qualities” that resist abstraction, is utilized to showcase that Pecola, “burdened with such ‘surplus’”, has to be seen and consumed because of the over-visible, over-materialized condition of the black female body in a white visual regime (66-67). Despite these scholarship on corporeality and identity, however, few studies have explored how the body functions as a narrative agent through the lens of corporeal narratology and how the degree of embodiment of characters reflects the concern about racist dehumanization in the novel.

This essay, therefore, contends that corporeality, a pivotal concern in modern philosophy and other humanities, is placed at the core of *The Bluest Eye*, foregrounding the function of body not merely as an object needed to be depicted in details, but rather as a narrative medium between the author and the reader, the agency in characterization and plot, and the catalyst in thematic construction, leading to a more profound representation of racist dehumanization in American society. The paper will draw on Daniel Punday’s corporeal narratology to examine how Morrison constructs both sorted and general narrative bodies, and how these bodies function as instruments of narrative logic and thematic critique. Through analyzing Morrison’s attention to the body, the

essay demonstrates how black bodies are sorted, symbolized, and eventually disembodied within the racialized social order, so as to expose the dehumanizing logic of white supremacy.

2. Body as a Foregrounded Agent: Daniel Punday's Body Narrative

In *Narrative Bodies: Toward a Corporeal Narratology*, Punday declares that "[t]oo often the body is taken to be a simple object of narrative, a thing to be represented like a town or a table, with little thought given to how it participates in the construction of narrative plot, location, agency, and so on" (2003: 7), which means that characters' appearance, physical condition, and all those material attributes that can be literally touched are merely described as an object or a background. Against this backdrop, several types of post-classical narratology emerge as the supplement to the neglect of textual content and socio-historical context. The body, therefore, has initiated its transformative stage not only throughout the modern thinking world, but also in the field of narratology.

Punday's corporeal narratology shows us how the conception of human corporeality has been reflected in the narrative since the emergence of scientific culture and changes in our thinking about the body based on the 'somatic turn' in philosophy (ix). Since Plato, Western intellectual traditions have predominantly defined the relationship between the soul and the body as one of fundamental opposition—a dichotomy that underlies the rationalist dualism articulated by René Descartes. But as Nietzsche's anti-Enlightenment stance laid the foundation for the return of the body in modern thought, many scholars advanced this philosophical shift by building upon Nietzsche's focus on corporeality. For instance, Michel Foucault's conceptualization of the body as a site where political, historical, and discursive forces converge has profoundly influenced Daniel Punday's construction of corporeal narratology. Drawing on Foucault's body-site trope, Punday declares that we must bear in mind that "the body-site trope participates in the tradition of the body politic", and that "it always serves to create an image of the whole society" (2000: 525). Beyond Foucault, Punday also borrows the idea from Merleau-Ponty that embodiment is not simply an object of perception but the very condition of being-in-the-world. In narrative terms, this means characters' bodies are not inanimate signs but sites of lived experience, which shape their temporal and spatial orientation in the text. As such, the narrative body, not merely as an aesthetic object, becomes a perceptual medium.

Body narrative emphasizes the materiality and the touchable attribute of human bodies, embodying a way of expressing feelings, constructing identity, and reflecting interpersonal relationships. In short, Punday's corporeal narratology redirects our attention from what the narrative says about the body to how narrative itself is shaped through the body and how the body in turn affects the performance of narrative. In the case of *The Bluest Eye*, such a framework allows us to see how black female bodies are not just thematically present but narratively functional, structuring character distinction, driving plot development, and foregrounding Morrison's critique of racialized embodiment.

3. Blue Eyes and Black Body: Corporeality and Characterization

By focusing on how the body of the character is shaped "by the specifically narrative terms in which the writer is representing the body" (2003: 57), Punday initiates his study of "the role of the human body in characterization" (2003: 53). Here, Punday divides bodies into sorted one and general one.

In sorted bodies, Punday defines four types of relations that narrative shapes the body: the relationship between body and object, body and body, body and outer world, and the embodiment of different degree. Every narrative may define what counts as a body, and then implicitly or explicitly determine "a certain range of body types" (Punday, 2003: 61), which exemplifies that in *The Bluest Eye*, a typical anti-racist narrative, bodies have to be sorted into types in terms of skin color and gender upon which Pecola's racialized body is distinguished from other objects and characters. As Peter Brooks said, "bodies are with us, though we always have trouble in saying exactly how" (1). In Pecola's racialized body, skin and face are the first two features that are directly related to her tragic fate. Pecola and her family cannot adjust to the neighborhood exactly because of their ugly appearances. Morrison deploys detailed description to stress the important role of their body in their characterization:

The eyes, the small eyes set closely together under narrow foreheads. The low, irregular hairlines, which seemed even more irregular in contrast to the straight, heavy eyebrows which nearly met. Keen but crooked noses, with insolent nostrils. They had high cheekbones, and their ears turned forward. Shapely lips which called attention not to themselves but to the rest of the face (38).

This example encapsulates the corporeality of Pecola's image throughout the novel. From the perspective of Claudia, Pecola is characterized as a marginalized Other and her otherness is corporeal primarily. Her dark skin and facial features serve as signs of this embodied marginality. Within the dominant social aesthetic ideology, ugliness becomes an original sin imposed upon her, predestining Pecola to become a tragic figure symbolic of the anti-racist narrative, as a woman whose downfall is written into the structure of racialized beauty and exclusion. This structure also exemplifies the contrast between Pecola and Maureen Peal. When Maureen Peal appeared, black girls including Pecola stepped aside and their eyes "genuflected under sliding lids" (59). Only in this contrast can Pecola complete her duty as a typical character of anti-racist narrative.

As Punday puts it, bodies should as well be scrutinized under "the surrounding environment — narrative space, objects, and natural forces" (63). This environment is usually invisible, "taken for granted by readers and critics as part of the cultural background for the story" (63). From this perspective, Pecola's body serves not only as a thematically functional distinction from other objects and characters, but also as an agent that participates in different social spaces. For Pecola, her narrative body as an agent is also different from others and even excluded from the broader social space. In other words, she is not "accepted" by many structures of social space, which means her embodied presence is isolated with the surrounding environment where her body is continuously subjected to gaze, humiliation, and denial. This constitutes what Morrison constructs as a narrative of disconnection between body and social space. In *The Bluest Eye*, for Claudia, pain is "productive and fructifying", because love is tangible in her house that she could "smell" and "taste", which is why when she think of autumn, she thinks of "somebody with hands" who does not want her to die (14). Claudia's feeling towards love is an embodied experience which can be considered as a positive interaction between the body and her household space. As for Pecola, however, the

household space is totally opposite. In her house, there are few living things except “the coal stove” (37). The furnishings contain few bodily memories, and even they “occasionally provoked a physical reaction” (36), those feelings are only “an increase of acid irritation in the upper intestinal tract, a light flush of perspiration at the back of the neck as circumstances surrounding the piece of furniture were recalled” (36). The sofa that “started off split” (37), which is used as a bodily metaphor by Morrison, is “like a sore tooth that is not content to throb in isolation, but must diffuse its own pain to other parts of the body—making breathing difficult, vision limited, nerves unsettled” (37). All these bodily interactions between Pecola’s body and her household space and the differences between Claudia’s home and that of Pecola reflect that the body-world relationship, foregrounded by Morrison with her imagined link between inanimate things and the body, has a great impact on the characterization in the novel.

Meanwhile, Morrison also positions Claudia’s body as part of the general body, extending its significance beyond the personal one to reflect collective memory and resistance as a child, and to embody a broader narrative and social consciousness. The general body is not an individual character’s body, but a field that promotes “hermeneutic atmosphere” to lead readers to have a better understanding of the novel through the body. Claudia, the first-person narrator, represents the childhood narrative and shares a child’s perspective. When Claudia meets the talk between her mother and her friends, Claudia’s bodily feelings show the reader a sort of shared experience as a child:

Their conversation is like a gently wicked dance: sound meets sound, curtsies, shimmies, and retires. Another sound enters but is upstaged by still another: the two circle each other and stop. Sometimes their words move in lofty spirals; other times they take strident leaps, and all of it is punctuated with warm-pulsed laughter — like the throb of a heart made of jelly (17).

This description bears phenomenological significance, demonstrating that narrative meaning is not conveyed solely through abstract language or logical structure, but is deeply rooted in embodied perception. The bodily rhythms, sounds, and emotional textures that Claudia perceives become shared sensations for the reader, generating a corporeal atmosphere that exceeds personal experience. In this moment, Claudia’s body functions as a medium through which the narrative establishes affective resonance, inviting the reader to participate in the embodied reality of the interaction between characters. Through such passages, Morrison inscribes Claudia’s body into the general body of the text—one that connects personal memory with collective emotional truth.

As a child, Claudia says she does not want any object as Christmas gifts (22), especially when her parents send her a doll which is white and seems so cute; rather, she would like to “feel” on Christmas day (22). Here, what Claudia desires the most is the corporeal participation. All she wanted was “[t]he lowness of the stool made for the body, the security and warmth of Big Mama’s kitchen, the smell of the lilacs, the sound of the music”, all of which would have all of her senses engaged (23). But in reality, the physical memory for her is horrible. She “tasted and smelled the acridness of tin plates and cups designed for tea parties” that bored her, looking with loathing on new dresses “that required a hateful bath in a galvanized zinc tub before wearing” (23). There is “no time to play or soak, for the water chilled too fast, no time to enjoy one’s nakedness, only time to make curtains of soapy water careen down between the legs” (23). Here, compared with people’s tender touch to white dolls, Claudia’s physical feelings are much more dreadful and humiliating because the bath on Christmas for Claudia seems like cleaning the dirt on her body and requires a kind of “irritable, unimaginative cleanliness”, symbolizing a black little girl’s corporeal reaction towards the discipline of mainstream ideology from the society based on white supremacy. Here, Claudia acts not as a typical child at that age, but as a sort of general body that embodies Morrison’s thematic concerns not only about childhood education but also about anti-racism narrative in order to construct a hermeneutic atmosphere and arouse reader’s resonance.

Indeed, different from Pecola’s general body, Claudia’s body plays an important role in the anti-racist narrative the other way around. Unlike Pecola and other black girls, Claudia refuses the aesthetic ideology of white people. Even though “all the world had agreed that a blue-eyed, yellow-haired, pink-skinned doll was what every girl child treasured”, She still thought of that blue-eyed baby doll as “a most uncomfortable, patently aggressive sleeping companion” (21-22). Claudia’s critique of black women’s “possessive gentleness of their touch” as they handled little white girls (23) is firstly related to physicality, reflecting Claudia’s general body as a symbol of potential resistance to racism in the level of corporeality. And once Maureen Peal appears as a lovable creature in the eyes of teachers and peers, Claudia becomes a fighter. Her words represent the powerful counteraction with the inferiority that blacks have to maintain in the society: “We felt comfortable in our skins, enjoyed the news that our senses released to us, admired our dirt, cultivated our scars, and could not comprehend this unworthiness” (70).

After Pecola was raped by her father and finally gave birth to the baby, everyone around her has anything but adoration towards the new-born baby. But Claudia shows different attitudes. She “felt a need for someone to want the black baby to live—just to counteract the universal love of white baby dolls, Shirley Temples, and Maureen Peals” (Morrison 169). Claudia sees the black baby as a symbol that serves as the embodiment of the anti-racist narrative. Her resistance to the dominant white beauty ideals, such as her abhorrence of Shirley Temple, her destruction of white baby dolls, her confrontation with Maureen Peal, and eventually her hope for the black baby, is consistently expressed through bodily actions rather than abstract discourse. These acts of physical defiance reveal her corporeal consciousness and her early awareness of racialized aesthetics. As Rokotnitz says, therefore, “Claudia’s attunement to the physicality of human bodies also intensifies her sense of the baby’s reality” (401), foregrounding the corporeal atmosphere shaped by Claudia’s general body to expose Morrison’s resistance narrative.

4. Between Embodiment and Disembodiment: Racist Dehumanization

Inspired by Foucault’s theory of the body, Punday in an essay declares that it should be inscribed into our mind that “the body-site trope participates in the tradition of the body politic”, and “it always serves to create an image of the whole society” (Punday, 2000: 525). Indeed, the novel’s emphasis on corporeality functions not merely as a key narrative strategy in Morrison’s characterization, but also as a traditional site where modern anti-racist discourse operates on. It reflects Morrison’s desire to break away from the tradition that privileges the mind over the body,

while simultaneously asserting that the black body is a valid bearer of racial identity—one that should not be a source of shame, but rather a physical being equal to the white body. However, it is of great significance to notice that beyond this affirmation of embodiment of black people, the novel's narrative progress highlights, even more prominently, the disembodiment of Pecola's body. That is, Morrison's anti-racist narrative is closely related to the degree of embodiment of the character's body, and more specifically, the process of disembodiment of Pecola's body is precisely the process of racist dehumanization. The novel's most profound and brutal critique is how it reveals how the core of racism, racial dehumanization, is accomplished through a disembodied narrative process.

Racist dehumanization is a political concept about the conscious basis of racism in modern society. According to a contemporary philosopher, David Smith, this concept is deeply rooted in Western history, referring to an attitude to conceive of others "not merely as inferior human beings, but as subhuman creatures" (22). Primarily, the conception of dehumanization operates on the psychological and ideological level. As an institutional violence in America with deep historical roots, it points to "a bundle of processes that have unfolded over centuries and involved a wide range of actors", inventing and maintaining race "by coding some people as white, and therefore fully human, and others as nonwhite, and therefore less than fully human" (Jordina & Piston 370). In modern political societies, it no longer manifests merely as overt acts of violence or extermination against other races, but rather as a subtle form of psychological degradation and ignorance, reflecting the domination and disciplining power of prevailing social ideologies over marginalized groups.

Noting that racist dehumanization acts on human consciousness, it needs to identify the degree of embodiment with dehumanization, for human consciousness of objects and people around cannot transcend the limits of sensory experience, and the perceptive world is always tangible and rooted in the body. Bodily perception is a fundamental means through which individuals establish connections with the external world (Ouyang 148). Since the body is a means of perception, from the perspective of corporeal narratology, therefore, racist dehumanization is reflected in the narrative through the characters' degree of embodiment and disembodiment. In *Narrative Bodies*, Punday proposes the concept of differential embodiment, arguing that central characters, usually serving as narrators, are often abstracted and disembodied, while marginalized characters tend to be highly embodied. "The embodied characters are often the object of scorn—although at times the scorn can be mild and even sympathetic—while the disembodied character represents moral superiority by virtue of self-control" (Punday 164). These disembodied characters function as an access for readers to better understanding the text, so as to ensure narrative authority.

In this novel, characters subjected to racism are initially highly embodied — as objects of observation, their bodies are concrete, exposed, and scrutinized in detail. However, as the process of dehumanization unfolds, they are gradually stripped of their human bodily presence: they lose the capacity to perceive, to act, and to be touched. Their bodies, like Pecola's in *The Bluest Eye*, retreat into absence and disintegration. As we shall see, Pecola's body thus becomes simultaneously embodied and disembodied, and in the violent tension between these two states, they fall into psychological collapse, ultimately becoming victims of racist dehumanization.

Racist dehumanization in the narrative of embodiment and disembodiment is reflected in two dimensions. The first dimension is the dehumanization from white people to blacks. In the novel, as the keeper of that store, Yacobowski, proves his own whiteness through exclusion and dehumanization; through this store keeper, "Morrison suggests that Americans stir the nation's melting pot over flames fed by silenced black bodies" (Werrlein 67). When Pecola goes shopping and meets his eyes in his store, she finds in his glance "the total absence of human recognition" and "the glazed separateness" (47). And when she gives the money to him, she feels that he does not want to "touch her hand". Pecola has no idea "how to move the finger of her right hand from the display counter or how to get the coins out of her left hand" (48). Here, Yacobowski's psychological contempt and ignorance for Pecola, representing the first dimension of racist dehumanization in the novel, are displayed through the embodiment as marginalized characters and reflects the superiority of white supremacy. Another example is the dehumanization towards Pecola's father, Cholly Breedlove. In the novel, Cholly and Darlene are caught having sex in the woods by two white policemen, who shine a flashlight on their naked bodies while throwing insults at them, treating Cholly as a creature driven purely by animalistic instinct. The officers repeatedly refer to Cholly as a "coon"—a derogatory slur for Black people that is also a shortened form of raccoon. This choice of language exemplifies how racial dehumanization is applied to Cholly, reducing him to a subhuman creature in the white gaze. This psychological framing of blackness as savage not only reflects a dehumanizing mindset but also foreshadows Cholly's later eruption of violence and internalized savagery. As Wang declares in the preface of *Eroticism, Expenditure, and General Economy: Selected Writings of Georges Bataille*, in the realm of the body, especially in the domain of sexuality, taboos exert their greatest power, for sex is the defining feature of animality, and it is the quintessential form of beastliness, a wild and instinctual force of nature that governs the actions of animals and compels them to submit to its brute dominance at any moment (11). As a subhuman creature, Cholly breaks the taboos of sex, revealing a dehumanized and embodied black character's tragedy. This feature of animality shaped by the traumatic experience of dehumanization from white people takes the upper hand in the fight between his reason and his animalistic body, leading to Cholly's sexual interference to his daughter.

Meanwhile, racist dehumanization also derives from blacks' self-contempt and self-dehumanization. This sort of dehumanization exemplifies Pecola's process of disembodiment, labeling Pecola as unworthy of recognition, beauty, or even humanity. To disembody in the level of narrative, as we shall see, is not merely to erase the body, but to separate characters from their body's capacity to feel, act, and mean through it. So in the novel's narrative form, we may find that Pecola is gradually disembodied—her physical presence fades, her voice disappears, and ultimately, her mind fragments. In *The Bluest Eye*, eyes serve as a disembodied metaphor in the process of her disembodiment, showing Pecola's self-dehumanization. In chapter 3, Morrison depicts a detailed picture of the quarrel between Pecola's parents, Cholly and Pauline, where Pecola feels hard to find peaceful moments. In her extreme despair, Pecola initiates her praying: "Please, God. Please make me disappear." Gradually, "little parts of her body faded away", and eventually "[o]nly her tight, tight eyes were left. They were always left" (44). Pecola's eyes never disappear because "[a]s long as she looked the way she did, as long as she was ugly, she would have to stay with these people" (44). Even though she yearns for complete disappearance, her eyes that define what she is and distinguish herself from others would not be entirely disembodied. As a scholar asserts, "identity may be

conceptualised as body image, the yearning to escape it could equate to the desire to evade one's embodiment" (Grogan 1). For Pecola, her eyes are the only thing in her own body she thought should be improved because eyes, are not just a part of the body, but as the symbol of identity to distinguish blackness and whiteness. Here, Pecola's runaway from her own body image is equal to her avoidance to her identity as an ugly, black little girl and her self-contempt for her body. Pecola always has desire for blue eyes, for she believes that blue eyes, like those in Mr. Yacobowski, represent the nature of beauty, thinking that if "she looked different, beautiful, maybe Cholly would be different, and Mrs. Breedlove too" (45). This desire for changing one part of the body to be visible and beautiful, appreciated is the driving force of Pecola's disembodiment, leading to her final schizophrenia.

Eventually, Pecola's disembodiment ends up in her transformation from the embodied character depicted by other narrators to the disembodied narrator herself. In other words, Pecola's self-dehumanization emerges on the level of narrative at the end of the process of her disembodiment. In the final chapter, Morrison constructs Pecola's own interior monologue, in which Pecola talks to herself and acts like a viewer who participates in the inspection of her own mind. Here, Pecola's body is scarcely described, signaling a complete separation between her body and mind. After wearing her imaginative blue eyes, her body just disappears. She is no longer the object being observed or narrated; instead, with the help of her blue eyes, she becomes a narrator who observes herself, shifting from an embodied character to a disembodied one. This transformation, however, does not lead Pecola to regain her "moral superiority" like other disembodied white narrators, but causes her greater destruction through scrutinizing her mind and ignoring her body. As we shall see, the process of Pecola's disembodiment becomes a narrative strategy by which Morrison employs to intensify the novel's tension, arouse readers' sympathy, and underscore the devastating consequences of Pecola's disembodiment: once the body as a bearer is lost, the soul is left without places to dwell in. The individual then retreats into a purely mental realm, cut off from the material world, and ultimately becomes a symbol of madness.

To sum up, the combination between differential embodiment and dehumanization reveals a mass atrocity towards marginalized blacks in *The Bluest Eye*. As Claudia says, it is the thing that made Maureen beautiful that is worth fearing, not black women's bodies (Morrison 70). For Claudia and Morrison, the real fearful thing is the aesthetic ideology based on white supremacy, the conscious basis of dehumanization. Blacks' bodies are not fearful just because theirs are simultaneously embodied and disembodied, serving as the subhuman signs that are abhorred by racists on the level of consciousness.

5. Conclusion

Daniel Punday's corporeal narratology integrates classical narratology with theories of the body, opening up new avenues for exploring how corporeality functions within narrative discourse. This paper draws on two core narratological categories, characterization and thematic construction, and distinguishes between sorted bodies and general bodies to examine how embodiment operates in the text, and further integrates Punday's concept of differential embodiment with the notion of racist dehumanization, arguing that the novel depicts a structural interplay between the process of disembodiment and narrative representation. In particular, it investigates the narrative representation of Pecola's disembodiment at the end of the novel, arguing that Morrison's emphasis on corporeality constitutes both an anti-racist narrative strategy and a psychological resistance to racist dehumanization. The paper shows that Morrison not only criticizes racist dehumanization but also demonstrates how the denial of embodied subjectivity serves as a narrative expression of systemic oppression.

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