

“There were no marigolds”: Africana Philosophy and Freedom as Mutual Responsibility

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Abstract

Individual freedom appears within Western liberal thinking as the supreme value of civic, social, and political life. This intellectual tradition tends to frame freedom as the right to unrestrained action and non-commitment enjoyed by the central subject of the Euromodern world, the individual. Here, we examine Toni Morrison’s novel, *The Bluest Eye*, and its rich discussion on freedom as a value and practice. The character of Cholly Breedlove, specifically, provides an entry point into a dynamic critique of liberal notions of freedom and individuality. Rather than center the individual subject, Morrison articulates a vision of freedom rooted in a collective and participatory process of community, calling our attention to the interplay between freedom and mutual responsibility. As she stated in a 1979 speech at Barnard College, “the function of freedom is to free someone else.” This aphorism precedes a broader and more substantial philosophical formulation: freedom as mutual responsibility.

Keywords: Toni Morrison, Freedom, Individualism, Philosophy.

“Was my freedom not given to me then in order to build the world of the You?”

[Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, p. 181]

“Any theory of freedom with regard to black people must bring along with it more than the unshackling of material chains or the fostering of civil liberties. It must also address the profound alienation of non-belonging in the only world to which such people could possibly belong”

[Lewis R. Gordon,
“Africana Philosophy and Philosophy in Black,” p. 48]

“Quiet as it’s kept, there were no marigolds in the fall of 1941”

[Toni Morrison, *The Bluest Eye*, p. 1]

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Resumen

La libertad (freedom) individual se aparece dentro del pensamiento liberal Occidental como valor supremo de la vida cívica, social y política. En esta corriente intelectual, la libertad se entiende como derecho de actuar desenfrenado y como no-compromiso por la parte del sujeto central del mundo Euromoderno, el individuo. Aquí, examinamos la novela *Ojos azules* por Toni Morrison, y sus reflexiones profundas sobre la libertad como valor y como práctica. El personaje Cholly Breedlove, específicamente, nos proporciona un punto de entrada en una crítica dinámica de las nociones liberales de la libertad y la individualidad. En vez de centralizar el sujeto individuo, Morrison articula una visión de la libertad que radica en el proceso colectivo y participativo de comunidad, llamando nuestra atención a la interacción entre la libertad y la responsabilidad mutua. Como declaró en un discurso de 1979 en Barnard College, "la función de la libertad es librar a otra persona." Este aforismo precede una formulación filosófica más amplia y sustantiva: la libertad como la responsabilidad mutua.

Palabras clave: Toni Morrison, Libertad, Individualismo, Filosofía

Resumo

A liberdade individual (freedom) aparece no pensamento liberal Ocidental como o valor supremo da vida cívica, social e política. Nessa corrente intelectual, a liberdade é entendida como o direito de agir desenfreadamente e como o descompromisso do sujeito central do mundo Euromoderno, o indivíduo. Aqui, examinamos o romance *Olhos Azuis* de Toni Morrison e suas reflexões perspicazes sobre a liberdade como valor e como prática. O personagem Cholly Breedlove, especificamente, nos fornece um ponto de entrada para uma crítica dinâmica das noções liberais de liberdade e individualidade. Em vez de centralizar o sujeito individual, Morrison articula uma visão de liberdade que reside no processo coletivo e participativo da comunidade, chamando nossa atenção para a interação entre liberdade e responsabilidade mútua. Como ela declarou em um discurso de 1979 no Barnard College, "a função da liberdade é libertar outra pessoa". Esse aforismo precede uma formulação filosófica mais ampla e substantiva: a liberdade como responsabilidade mútua.

Palavras chave: Toni Morrison, Liberdade, Individualismo, Filosofia

Introduction

Freedom, within the tradition of Western political and social philosophy, can be approximated as *the* supreme value of civic life. With the contemporaneous emergence of (Euro)modernity, Western humanism, and liberalism, the idea of man as "the rational political subject of the state" took form (Wynter, 2003, p. 277). This liberal socio-political entity takes



freedom/liberty to be the normative and *a priori* state of being, which must be preserved at all costs.

Within the Western⁴ tradition, freedom is typically configured as either 'freedom from' or 'freedom to.' The former is articulated famously by Thomas Hobbes (1994/1651) in *Leviathan*. Hobbes puts forth two distinct ideas of freedom, each understood as "the absence of opposition": first, Hobbes describes freedom as a state of non-obligation— that is, freedom from contract, covenant, and commitment; second, Hobbes articulates freedom as "non-obstruction," or freedom from external impediments which inhibit the actualization of will (Pettit, 2005).

The condition of possibility for the emergence of Euromodernity, however, was and is the colonial exploitation of land and labor across the globe. As Domenico Losurdo (2011) observes, much of the liberal discourse on liberty and the 'free' subject disavows the violence of colonialism or reifies its necessity. The liberal idea of freedom thus cannot account for the violence of colonization and slavery fundamental to its articulation, nor can it explain human life beyond the political and economic constraints of Western Man.

The challenge, then, of conceptualizing freedom beyond Western liberalism begins with recognizing the fundamental limits imposed by temporality, geography, and positionality rather than presupposing the West as universal. Freedom, in contrast to liberal discourses of 'obstruction' and 'property rights', takes on a different urgency in the context of colonized and enslaved people. Yet, colonized and enslaved people are only rarely regarded as theorists of freedom in and of themselves; consistently, Africana thinkers are disavowed or disregarded as serious thinkers on metaphysical questions. Understanding freedom beyond the solipsism of 'Man' requires a methodology that looks past prescriptive disciplinary limits imposed by Euromodernity (L. Gordon, 2006; J. Gordon, 2014). In order to highlight the limits of Western conceptions of 'freedom' and the 'free individual,' we at times refer to the liberal/individualist philosophical tradition as articulating a kind of liberal-freedom; this is meant not only to decenter hegemonic theoretical frameworks, but allow Morrison and other Africana thinkers to enter as legitimate theorists of freedom (unhyphenated).

⁴ As Édouard Glissant (1989) writes, "The West is not in the West. It is a project, not a place" (p. 2).



Part of this methodological practice means embracing complications, contradictions, and messy in-between spaces. Neil Roberts (2016), for instance, writes of “the liminal and transitional spaces of slave escape between poles of political imagination” as an instantiation of freedom. For Roberts (2016), “Freedom is not *from-to* but rather *as*.” While Roberts (2015; 2016) is primarily concerned with the literal spatial and hermeneutic in-between generated by the flight from slavery, we take up his provocation of *freedom-as* in a different but related context. Here, we discuss the complex, contradictory, and relational articulations of freedom in Toni Morrison’s (2007/1970) masterpiece, *The Bluest Eye*.

In Morrison’s work, freedom functions as more than just non-obstruction, ‘freedom to’, or ‘freedom from.’ Rather, she articulates a vision of freedom rooted in a collective and participatory process of community. Writing on and from the epicenter of the unfolding catastrophe of racialization and colonization, Morrison calls our attention to the interplay between freedom and mutual responsibility. As she stated in a 1979 speech at Barnard College, “the function of freedom is to free someone else.” Morrison’s aphorism offers an entry point into a rich articulation of freedom *as* mutual responsibility, as well as a dynamic critique of Euromodern notions of individual liberal freedom.

Freedom and *The Bluest Eye*

Toni Morrison (1988) stated in an interview that “*The Bluest Eye* [...] was a book that I wanted to read, and I couldn’t find it anywhere.” Morrison’s first novel centers on a subject that is almost impossible to locate in the American literary canon: a young black girl. *The Bluest Eye* focuses on Pecola Breedlove, a child living in Morrison’s hometown of Lorain, Ohio, and chronicles her persistent and seemingly pre-ordained mental implosion. This psychic annihilation occurs through acts of both spectacular and quotidian violence; almost every point in the novel in some way contributes to or expedites this collapse. Everything from a trip to the candy store, a visit to a fortune teller, a walk home with a new classmate, contributes to the destruction of Pecola. *The Bluest Eye*, it can be said, illustrates Frantz Fanon’s (2008/1967) thesis in *Black Skin, White Masks*, that “a normal Negro child, having grown up within a normal family, will become abnormal on the slightest contact with the white world” (p. 111).



The challenge Morrison issues the reader is not to pity Pecola or to disregard her story as spectacular, but quite the opposite. Readers must witness the absolute extent of the damages rendered by internalized racism and colonialism on a community's most vulnerable member, and know her fate at every step. They must experience a narrative of the entire world that bears itself on the psyche of a little girl. While Morrison, as she mentioned in her forward, stated she was unsatisfied by the results of structuring a novel in such a way ("readers remain touched but not moved" [p. xii]), we are given a framework for intimately understanding the ways in which social structures manifest at the individual level.

Part of the way that Morrison is able to keep the reader accountable, so to speak, for the destruction of Pecola, is by situating each instance of violence in a much broader context — every quick remark, absent glance, or abusive interaction is given a lifetime of explanatory circumstances. Consequently, the violence visited upon Pecola is rational, justified, almost necessary. Consider Geraldine, who calls Pecola a "nasty little black bitch" (p. 92). Morrison does not leave Geraldine as a blank and one-dimensional 'villain,' but instead articulates the social structure that produced the terms of such an encounter: this begins with a kaleidoscopic account of assimilated, Black middle-class womanhood and the limitations, restrictions, and foreclosures such a lifestyle imposes; such a repressed but austere existence also inhibits the capacity to feel authentic affection for others, since every encounter is filtered through social pretense — marriages are loveless and pleasureless, births are perfunctory; the only place to find authentic affection is with something that is not human — thus Geraldine, we are told, cares for a cat in a way that she could not and would not care for her own child. Her child, then, is duly alienated: first, he recognizes that he is not as loved by his mother as a cat (though his material needs are met); second, he is restrained by the same assimilated, middle-class social hierarchy as his mother, and is not allowed to play with Black children that have not been vetted and approved. Thus, his dysphoria manifests in a double hatred of the cat (the true object of his mother's affection) and his lower-class Black peers. So when Junior invites the poor, dark-skinned Pecola into his house, traps her, sees that she too cares for the cat, throws the cat against the radiator, and blames the girl, it is logical. And when a poor, dark-skinned girl — who has not *worked* to assimilate and build a home and lovelessly please a husband — enters Geraldine's home and is blamed for



hurting her cat, the words “nasty little black bitch” (p. 92) seem rational, though profoundly devastating nevertheless.

Morrison does not allow readers to divorce violence from its social context, nor write off perpetrators as ‘villains.’ This is true even for Cholly Breedlove, Pecola’s father. Not only does Cholly burn down the house, abuse his spouse and children, and drink himself into a stupor, the climactic act of violence in the novel occurs when he rapes Pecola. Yet Morrison does not allow us to divorce Cholly’s violence from the broader social context.

Cholly’s story begins with his mother abandoning him on railroad tracks. Though his great aunt Jimmy finds him, Cholly is nevertheless marked by a dual alienation: his father had already left town and his mother, who we are told “wasn’t right in the head” (p. 132), leaves without a trace. Like Frederick Douglass, who was raised primarily by his grandmother and only met his mother a handful of times (Douglass, 2014/1855), Cholly develops a strong attachment to the elder Jimmy, who cares for him like no one else would. When Cholly is fourteen, however, Jimmy dies after eating a piece of peach cobbler against the recommendation of the town healer.

At Jimmy’s wake, Cholly faces another traumatic, but formative, incident. Having “not yet fully realized his aunt was dead” (p. 143), Cholly was moved by the attention and care of strangers, as well as cousins and extended family whom he had not met. Following the lead of an elder cousin, Cholly asks a girl, Darlene, to walk out beyond the house; Cholly and Darlene, who are both adolescents, experience sexual and romantic intimacy together for the first time. This is not only meaningful insofar as it is connected with the death of the maternal, nurturing Jimmy (“Suddenly he realized that Aunt Jimmy was dead” [p. 146]), but made all the worse by the sudden appearance of two white men. What begins as a consensual (if bereaved) romantic encounter is quickly transformed into a dramatic act of racialized sexual violence; the two white men, at gunpoint, force Cholly to rape Darlene “with a violence born of total helplessness” (p. 148). Unable to resist this racial-sexual violence, the young Cholly directs his rage and helplessness at Darlene: “He hated her. He almost wished he could do it—hard, long, and painfully, he hated her so much” (148). What’s more, “Never did he once consider directing his hatred toward the hunters. Such an emotion would have destroyed him” (150).

Cholly’s experience, here, is significant in a number of ways. His early upbringing is an echo of Frederick Douglass’ and many other antebellum slave narratives; he experiences, immediately, what Orlando Patterson (1982)



describes as “natal alienation” (p. 7)— that is, a severing or abortion from kinship, cultural memory, and (importantly) the maternal. Like Douglass and his grandmother, Cholly experiences the love and care of an older family member (his great aunt Jimmy); yet both connections are severed violently. For Douglass (2014/1855), this means being relocated to the plantation and the full realization that he is *enslaved* (p. 39); for Cholly, this is the inextricably linked death of his maternal protector and the formative act of psycho-sexual terror. In both cases, the alienation is produced and conditioned by a social, economic, and political context of white supremacy; the result, in both cases, is a sense of what Elizabeth Bohls (2014) calls “existential homelessness” (p. 165).

Following this, Cholly is ambulatory. Fearing that Darlene may be pregnant, Cholly recognizes an existential closeness with his father, who had also abandoned a pregnant woman; consequently, he decides to seek out and find him, knowing only that he had gone to Macon, Georgia. When Cholly does encounter his father, he is not warmly received— speechless and unable to introduce himself fully, his father tells him “get the fuck outta my face!” (p. 156). Cholly then runs away and, “pulling every nerve and muscle into service to stop the fall of water from his eyes” (p. 156-157), he unwittingly defecates in his pants, christening his ultimate humiliation and his complete alienation. At this point, Cholly is completely alone and collapses upon this realization:

...he thought of his Aunt Jimmy, her asafetida bag, her four gold teeth, and the purple rag she wore around her head. With a longing that almost split him open, he thought of her handing him a bit of smoked hock out of her dish. He remembered just how she held it—clumsy-like, in three fingers, but with so much affection. No words, just picking up a bit of meat and holding it out to him. And then the tears rushed down his cheeks, to make a bouquet under his chin (p. 158).

Cholly, here, exists outside of kinship or care. He is fully and completely alienated from his family, community, and his own body (seen both in the act of racialized rape and his inability to control his own bowels). Insofar as Cholly is eradicated from social relations, he thus exemplifies natal alienation, existential homeless— “social death” (Patterson, 1982).

It is at this point that Morrison introduces a discussion of freedom (*to* and *from*) connected with Cholly:



Only a musician would sense, know, without even knowing that he knew, that Cholly was free. Dangerously free. Free to feel whatever he felt—fear, guilt, shame, love, grief, pity. Free to be tender or violent, to whistle or weep. Free to sleep in doorways or between the white sheets of a singing woman. Free to take a job, free to leave it. He could go to jail and not feel imprisoned, for he had already seen the furtiveness in the eyes of his jailer, free to say, “No, suh,” and smile, for he had already killed three white men. Free to take a woman’s insults, for his body had already conquered hers. Free even to knock her in the head, for he had already cradled that head in his arms. Free to be gentle when she was sick, or mop her floor, for she knew what and where his maleness was. He was free to drink himself into a silly helplessness, for he had already been a gandy dancer, done thirty days on a chain gang, and picked a woman’s bullet out of the calf of his leg. He was free to live his fantasies, and free even to die, the how and the when of which held no interest for him. In those days, Cholly was truly free. Abandoned in a junk heap by his mother, rejected for a crap game by his father, there was nothing more to lose. He was alone with his own perceptions and appetites, and they alone interested him (p. 159-160).

Morrison takes the supreme Western value of individual liberal-freedom and turns it on its head; not only is Cholly free to do whatever pleases him, he is free to inflict grievous harm on others. Existing outside of the social world, Cholly is ‘freed’ through an abdication of all responsibility, be it to others or himself.

It is Cholly’s ‘freedom’, then, that enables him to rape his own daughter, Pecola. The idea of marriage and parenthood is inconceivable to him: “To be required to sleep with the same woman forever was...[an] unnatural idea to him” (pg. 160) and “Having no idea of how to raise children, and having never watched any parent raise himself, he could not even comprehend what such a relationship should be” (p. 160). In a mimetic scene echoing his forced rape of Darlene, Cholly finds himself in the kitchen with Pecola harboring a “hatred of her” which “slimed in his stomach and threatened to become vomit” (p. 162) as well as a perverse “tenderness” (p. 163) — both of these emotions emerge out of the recognition that Pecola, young and innocent, loves him. He at once hates himself that he is unable to possibly provide anything “that would in turn allow him to accept her love”



(p. 162), hates her that her love could threaten his dangerous 'freedom' with responsibility, closeness, and trust, while he also yearns to be able to be protective, tender, and caring, without any understanding as to how (besides sexuality). After recognizing the situation with sobriety, "Again the hatred mixed with tenderness. The hatred would not let him pick her up, the tenderness forced him to cover her" (p. 163).

Cholly's actions indicate the fundamental limits with a liberalist/individualist notion of freedom as unrestrained action. As Lewis Gordon (2021) points out, the language of liberty (as an absence of responsibility) is more akin to 'license' than *being free* or *living well* in any meaningful sense. Morrison writes of the community which oversaw Pecola's destruction: "we were not free, merely licensed" (p. 205). Here, a significant difference is introduced between the completely unrestrained freedom of Cholly and the aspirational value which the narrator describes was lacking—it is this difference that brings Morrison's critique of (liberal) freedom and articulation of freedom as a meaningful and worthwhile endeavor.

Individual/liberal-freedom, as enshrined in Euromodern philosophy, is predicated on a fundamental misanthropy. That is to say, that Locke and Hobbes found something inherently compromising about responsibility/obligation/commitment highlights a resentment of other humans endemic to Western thought. This anti-human misanthropy, what Jesús 'Chucho' García (2018) aptly calls a "filosofía del desprecio" ('philosophy of contempt'), manifests in liberal thought as anxiety around the Other (in the existentialist sense of the word): to be close, proximate, and *responsible* for the Other, is then always to foreclose one's own individual liberty.

What Morrison highlights is that to be without responsibility to Others is to experience a kind of slavery. Sylvia Wynter (1990) argues, to this end, that in the Congolese "socio-symbolic system" (p. 88), slavery was understood first and foremost as a kind of kinlessness; it was lineagelessness, existing without responsibility to or by others, that provided the foundation for human captivity. Just as Jean-Paul Sartre (2007/1945) deconstructed the idea of a universal morality through an ethical paradox for which there was no clear answer — a student who bore dual and mutually-exclusive responsibilities to fight for his country and care for his mother — Morrison highlights a paradox in the liberal idea of 'freedom from': to be totally *free from* the other is to be enslaved by one's own kinlessness. Put another way, to be under the control of another (as in the case of chattel slavery) is to



exist with diminished liberty, an issue to which Morrison is clearly attentive; on the other hand, to be outside of responsibility by and for others is to exist in this kind of liminal, kinless slavery — an existential homelessness. What Cholly's story tells us is that responsibility to others is not a counterpoint that must be balanced with freedom, but that *responsibility in fact brings about the conditions necessary to realize freedom*.

The idea of responsibility *as* freedom pervades Morrison's work. This is clear in Sethe's haunted relationship with her children (Morrison, 1987), Milkman's reciprocal intimacy with Sweet (Morrison, 1977), Pilate, Eva, Baby Suggs, and Maginot Line, each of whom embody an ethic of responsibility and care which defines their freedom (Morrison, 1973; 1977; 1987). The fundamental tension between freedom and responsibility expounded upon endlessly in Western philosophy is exposed, here, as a false dilemma. Freedom, then, can only be realized in proximity with others; without reciprocal responsibility—the pure libertarian ideal—the very being itself is compromised. As Morrison (1979) explained, “the function of freedom is to free someone else”; it is the enactment and elation of Others that provides the necessary condition through which one can endeavor toward *freedom*, in a meaningful way.

Conclusion: Mutual Responsibility and Africana Philosophy

After Pecola is impregnated by Cholly, the nine-year old narrator, Claudia, and her sister Frieda bury marigold seeds in a straining and silent attempt to protect Pecola. Yet the children's magic is not enough to prevent Pecola's collapse: “The damage done was total” (p. 204). Claudia and her sister take full accountability for Pecola's destruction—they had simply and stupidly buried the seeds too deep, and thus Pecola's child and sanity “shriveled and died” (p. 6). Ironically, the only ones who attempt to take responsibility for Pecola—the child narrator and her sister—are the only ones who are not capable of protecting and nurturing a child. That is to say, while Frieda and Claudia recognize their own role in Pecola's destruction, it is the family, community, and *world* that is responsible. Claudia declares:

I did *not* plant the seeds too deeply, how it was the fault of the earth, the land, of our town. I even think now that the land of the entire country was hostile to marigolds that year. This soil is bad for certain kinds of flowers. Certain seeds it will not nurture, certain fruit it will not bear, and when the land kills of



its own volition, we acquiesce and say the victim had no right to live. We are wrong, of course, but it doesn't matter. It's too late (p. 206).

Thus the opening line of the book comes into focus: "*Quiet as it's kept, there were no marigolds in the fall of 1941*" (p. 5). The botanical anomaly is kept quiet precisely because it marks the inherent environmental hostility that dehumanizes Pecola, or someone *like* Pecola; it is also hushed because it stands in for the *failure* of a community to transcend genocidal colonial impulses. As Morrison makes clear, they, too, relied on Pecola's dejection for their own self-worth (p. 205).

That there were no marigolds in this instance speaks to the importance Morrison places on mutual responsibility as a precondition of freedom; in this way, Morrison is tapping into a much broader legacy of Black thought on community, responsibility, and mutuality. Morrison's work relates, for instance, to Douglass's commitment to "human brotherhood" (Buccola, 2012, p. 80) or Wynter's (1995) articulation of "interaltruistic conspecifics" (p. 20). This commitment to mutual responsibility is especially pronounced in the work of Frantz Fanon (2008/1967), who explains:

Colonial racism is no different from any other racism. Anti-Semitism hits me head-on: I am enraged, I am bled white by an appalling battle, I am deprived of the possibility of being a man. I cannot disassociate myself from the future that is proposed for my brother. Every one of my acts commits me as a man. Every one of my silences, every one of my cowardices reveals me as a man (p. 65-66).

Fanon explains in a footnote that this passage is written in reference to the concept of "metaphysical guilt," a term introduced by Karl Jaspers, the German-Swiss psychiatrist and philosopher (p. 66n9). Fanon responds to and rejects Jaspers' theological basis of metaphysical guilt:

Jaspers declares that this obligation stems from God. It is easy to see that God has no business here. Unless one chooses not to state the obligation as the explicit human reality of feeling oneself responsible for one's fellow man. Responsible in the sense that the least of my actions involves all mankind. Every action is an answer or a question. Perhaps both. When I express a specific manner in which my being can rise above itself, I am affirming the worth of my action for others. Conversely, the



passivity that is to be seen in troubled periods of history is to be interpreted as a default on that obligation (p. 66n9).

Fanon, here, is articulating a crucial interconnectedness that demands a mutual responsibility— by defaulting on this responsibility, Fanon argues, he is literally deprived of his humanity.

We hope to demonstrate, here, that the seeming antagonism between freedom and responsibility is, like many other concepts taken to be essential and inherent facts of the world, a fiction or “invention” of Euromodernity (Mudimbe, 1988; Oyěwùmi, 1997). Looking at the work of Toni Morrison, this much becomes clear. *The Bluest Eye* provides a searching inquiry, vivid illustration, and very necessary explication of the idea and function of freedom: that is, “to build the world of the *You*” (Fanon, 2008/1967, p. 181), “to free someone else” (Morrison, 1979).

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