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"Possessive gentleness": Insecure Attachments in American Literature

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An Honors Paper for the Department of English

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Introduction

I. Defining attachment theory

Though parent-child attachment began as a psychoanalytic concept utilized by research psychologists and clinicians, it has recently become a discussion topic popular among young people. In the midst of working on this project, in fact, many friends of mine—without knowing of my particular interest—have approached me with their results on an online attachment style quiz, wishing to share their thoughts on the topic. These pop-psychology quizzes do not fully capture how a psychoanalyst might conceive of attachment, and the results they produce are likely shoddy and inaccurate. However, the popularity of these quizzes demonstrates a surge in interest in parental and environmental influences; people are concerned with the way the care they received as children informs who they are today.

Attachment theory is a construct which describes how our relationships with our caregivers inform our psychological adjustment for the duration of our lives. It was originally conceived by John Bowlby in the mid-twentieth century. Bowlby described the theory simply in a 1976 speech before the Royal College of Psychiatrists, entitled "The Making and Breaking of Affectional Bonds":

> What for convenience I am terming attachment theory is a way of conceptualizing the propensity of human beings to make strong affectional bonds to particular others and of explaining the many forms of emotional distress and personality disturbance, including anxiety, anger, depression, and emotional detachment, to which unwilling separation and loss give rise. (201)

Typically, attachment theory describes the relationship between a parent and child, or rather a *caregiver* and child; many of the attachment relationships described in this study of American

literature occur between child characters and caregivers who are not their parents. Due to their "strong affectional bond", children desire closeness with their caregivers, and caregivers desire closeness with their children (*A Secure Base*). The primary variable to consider in observing an attachment relationship is "the extent to which a child's [caregiver] (a) provide[s] him with a secure base and (b) encourage[s] him to explore from it" (*The Making and Breaking of Affectional Bonds* 206).

A child's attachment relationship to their caregiver is related to the parenting that a child receives. "Through repeated interactions with the same adults over time, infants begin to recognize their caregivers and to anticipate the behavior of primary caregivers" (Weinfeld 79); through observing their caregivers and learning to anticipate their responses, children gain an understanding of their environment, and whether or not they will be parented warmly, supportively, affectionately, consistently, sensitively, etc. 'Sensitivity' is the parental quality most often associated with attachment. A meta-analysis on the antecedents of attachment found that "maternal sensitivity, defined as the ability to respond appropriately and promptly to the signals of the infant, indeed appears to be an important condition for the development of attachment security" (DeWolff 584). Other parental factors associated with attachment security include (but are not limited to) stimulation, positive attitude, and emotional support (DeWolff 585). Essentially, "the extent to which a caregiver is able to meet [an infant's] needs, both physically and emotionally, with the right sensitivity, intensity, immediacy, and consistency, will dictate whether a secure attachment is formed (Sherry et al. 2).

Broadly, a child's attachment to their caregiver might be secure or insecure. Secure attachment is related to sensitive, responsive, and consistent parenting. As for insecure attachment, it has been observed that "mothers of infants who would later be classified as

insecure[ly attached] were less sensitive in interactions, more interfering with the children's behavior, and less responsive to the children's bids than mothers of infants who would later be classified as secure" (Weinstein 83).

There are three different categories of insecure attachments which more specifically describe the nature of the parent-child relationship and the antecedent parenting behavior. These categories are as follows: (1) children with insecure-avoidant attachment styles tend to be less empathetic and more prone to anger and aggression, and have typically received unresponsive, unaffectionate parenting, (2) children with insecure-resistant attachment styles tend to be more fearful and less confident, and have typically received intrusive or inconsistent parenting, and (3) children with disorganized attachment styles tend to have internalizing and/or externalizing behaviors, are at higher risk of dissociation, and have typically received neglectful or abusive treatment.[1]

When attachments between caregivers and children are thwarted, both parties experience deprivation and loss, and may suffer harmful psychological effects (Marrone 15). One's attachment relationship with their caregiver —and which attachment style they develop in infancy-- is important beyond childhood; attachment is believed to influence one's internal working models of relationships generally, impacting the nature and stability of one's future romantic and platonic relationships, as well as one's relationship with their own children. The

[1] Psychologists often assess infant attachment styles using the Strange Situation test (Ainsworth 1970), which allows researchers to distinguish each of the 4 attachment styles: secure, insecure-avoidant, insecure-resistant, and disorganized. In this test, infants are observed while they explore a room in the presence of their caregiver, and then their response to the caregiver's absence and reintroduction is observed. Securely attached children use their caregiver as a secure base from whom to explore and to whom to return when they need comfort. They are stressed upon separation and joyed and soothed when their parents return. Insecure-avoidant children may not be distressed when separated from their parent and may avoid or ignore them upon return. Insecure-resistant children may be extremely distressed upon separation, and though they seek their caregiver upon return, will not be soothed. Children with disorganized attachment styles may behave oddly during the strange situation test, stilling or engaging in repetitive movement. Their apprehension upon the caregiver's return is often clear.

theoretical predictions of attachment theory "relate to feelings of self-worth, expectations regarding others, and capacities for close relationships" (Weinstein 95). Decades of research support the idea that early parenting has lifelong implications for children's health and development (Kim, Sin-Hyang, et al. 58).

II. Applying attachment Theory to American Literature

In this project, I borrow the construct of attachment from the field of psychology and apply it to characters in American literature. More specifically, I study three authors whose fiction concerns black children's experiences of attachment at different moments in American history: Harriet Beecher Stowe, who wrote in the late-nineteenth century and describes attachments in the context of institutionalized slavery; Chester Himes, who wrote in the mid-twentieth century and describes one family's struggle to form and preserve secure attachments with their children during institutionalized segregation; and Toni Morrison, who wrote in the late-twentieth century, and describes insecure attachments in a partially integrated but deeply prejudiced environment.

Each novel I have chosen to examine— *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1851), *Dred: A Tale of the Dismal Swamp* (1856) and *The Minister's Wooing* (1859) by Harriet Beecher Stowe, *The Third Generation* (1954) by Chester Himes, and *The Bluest Eye* (1970) by Toni Morrison— chronicles insecure attachments formed in the context of poor or insufficient caregiving. Beyond their generally domestic subject matter and focus on parent-child relationships, parallels abound between the novels selected: both Stowe and Morrison demonstrate the hazards of interracial attachment between black caregivers and white children, as these attachments take attention away from those caregivers' own (black) children, and they both suggest (Stowe quite explicitly, Morrison subtly) commitment to Christian selflessness and sympathy as a potential way forward;

Himes references Stowe in his depiction of a modern "Uncle Tom"; both Himes and Morrison demonstrate the lingering effects of slavery on the black family, and both closely follow *children* as the protagonists of their stories. These parallels elucidate common threads in depictions of attachment and family, even across time and genre, in American literature.

Because attachment theory was conceived in the mid-late twentieth century, Stowe and Himes were certainly not cognizant of it as they wrote their fiction. Because the theory has primarily been used within the field of psychology, it is doubtful that Morrison would have considered it as she wrote her novels. However, attachment theory is nonetheless highly useful to apply to these texts, as it provides common terminology with which to describe parenting and mothering not as a biological relationship, but a functional one, a simple "desire [for] closeness" between a caregiver and a child. Furthermore, it offers a way to categorize, and more systematically 'judge' caregiver-child relationships as secure or insecure, and healthy or unhealthy.[2]

Psychology is the scientific study of human behavior and mental processes. The nature of the discipline is to focus on these processes and behavior within the individual human mind. However, when applied to American literature, attachment theory takes on broader significance. As these novels suggest, slavery and its legacies of segregation, racial discrimination, and the notion of black inferiority (each of which are broad, societal, "macro" concerns), impact

[2] Though secure attachments are typically conceived of as healthy, or beneficial, and insecure attachments are conceived of as unhealthy, this perspective is admittedly simplistic. As psychology researcher Jay Belsky notes in his paper "The Development of Human Reproductive Strategies: Progress and Prospects", "what many conceptualize as manifestations of 'nonoptimal' development (e.g. insecure attachment, aggression, risk taking, early sexual debut), evolutionary-minded thinkers regard as potential alternative tactics for dispersing genes across generations and thereby enhancing reproductive fitness under the ecological conditions that give rise to them" (Belsky 310). With specific regard to attachment, attachment security "convey[s] information about risk and uncertainty from the extrafamilial world through the parent-child relationship to the child" (313). Throughout this project, I will characterize insecure attachments negatively, but it is important to note that they are not purely 'bad' – they have the evolutionary purpose of preparing children for potentially hostile environments.

families, and attachment relationships, on the "micro" level. Conversely, these works also suggest that changing beliefs and cultural values at the "micro" individual, familial level can influence communities at the "macro" level. Taken together, Stowe, Himes, and Morrison each view the family as a portal to understand societal issues, as well as a vehicle through which to fix them. With view to this exchange between family and broader communities, an exchange emphasized by the literature I examine here, attachment takes on societal importance.

It is also fruitful to study child attachment through literature because fiction offers a distinctive window to the personal and the unspeakable. Though another discipline might capture, say, that black mothers took nannying jobs with white families out of economic need in the late-twentieth century, fiction (written in first or close third person, as these novels are) offers an intimate perspective reflecting the feelings and thoughts of its characters. For example, Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* captures Claudia's understanding of her family, and Pecola's horrific assault, in a highly personal way. I would argue that where the voices and perspectives of children, perspectives which are of utmost importance to understanding attachment relationships, are often obscured or overlooked in the historical record, they are recorded and preserved through fiction.

Moreover, fiction does more than describe— it is often intended to *move* the reader. In Stowe's conclusion to *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, she begs readers, particularly the white mothers who comprise her audience, to "pity" the enslaved characters depicted in the story (*Uncle Tom's Cabin* 631). As works of sentimental fiction, Stowe's novels overtly seek to harness the sympathies of the reader to encourage them to think or behave in a new (in Stowe's case, more Christian, more selfless) manner in the future. Though Himes and Morrison's novels do not belong to the sentimental genre, their work similarly requests sympathy and engagement from

their audience. In Morrison's retrospective foreword to *The Bluest Eye* (which is written in 1993, 13 years after the novel's original release date), she laments that "many readers remain touched but not moved" (Morrison xxi).

That literature seeks to move us is perhaps obvious, but determining *what* exactly we should be moved to believe or do is one task of the close reader. In the following chapters, I will analyze Stowe, Himes, and Morrison's depictions of attachment with this venture in mind. I ask: What relationship do the child characters' in these narratives have with their attachment figures? Why, in each of these stories, do young black characters appear to experience less secure attachments than their white counterparts? What social critique— and specifically, *parental* critique— do these depictions of families offer us? And what do these novels suggest *we*, as readers, do once we are "moved" by such accounts?

Chapter 1

Interracial Attachments and Christianity in Harriet Beecher Stowe's Anti-Slavery Fiction

An early introduction of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* details Stowe's original conception of the novel—Stowe claimed that sitting in a pew in the First Parish church in Brunswick, Maine, the scene of Tom's death came to her as a "tangible vision" (*Uncle Tom's Cabin,* 1878 Introduction). After she wrote this original scene, the rest of the "book insisted upon getting itself into being" (1878 Introduction); Stowe attributes the novel's authorship — 'writing itself' — to God. Stowe's insistence on divine intervention, as well as the overtly religious conflict within the novel, suggests that *Uncle Tom's Cabin* is not only a political or literary work as many critics assert but also a religious, even evangelical, project.[3] In fact, beyond *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and throughout her writing career, Stowe's faith proves central to her role as a literary author; though the subject matter of her work changes, her faith— the bedrock of her anti-slavery perspective— remains steady. In Stowe's novels, particularly faithful characters' commitment to family and selflessness manifests in interracial attachments. It is through these interracial attachments that Stowe produces her most compelling arguments that slavery is a corrupt, unholy institution.

[3] Lisa Logan argues that the novel's purpose is to demonstrate how "slavery undermines domestic ideology, and, therefore, threatens the foundation of American society" (Logan 46). This is a fundamentally political argument; it locates the source of conflict and change in secular ideology. Other scholars, such as Stephen R. Yarbrough and Sylvan Allen, have argued that Stowe's motives for writing were clearly "religious" (Yarbrough & Allen 58). Jane Tompkins' famous essay, "Sentimental Power: *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and the Politics of Literary History", emphasizes Stowe's insistence upon "religious conversion as the necessary precondition for sweeping social change" (Tompkins 132). However, despite her acknowledgement of religious purpose, she still frames Stowe's goal as a primarily "political" one: "to bring in the day when the meek— which is to say, women— will inherit the earth" (Tompkins 139). This theory acknowledges the complex relationship between religion and politics, aptly noting that Stowe's purpose is not necessarily confined to one or the other. As Tompkins identifies, though Stowe believes religion is the appropriate vehicle of change, she expects that that change will manifest politically, both in credit to women's unique sentimental power, and in the end of slavery.

Here I will examine three of Stowe's novels that engage most critically with faith, attachment, and their relationship to the institution of slavery: *Uncle Tom's Cabin,* published serially in *The National Era* starting in June 1851; *Dred: Tale of the Dismal Swamp*, published in 1856; and *The Minister's Wooing,* published in 1859. Each of these novels is imbued with a Christian doctrine focused on the virtues of selflessness and family life, which were central to the cultural values of mid-nineteenth century America. In Stowe's world, selflessness and family orientation (which both result from piousness) are paramount. Disinterested benevolence, a Christian doctrine advocating for radically selfless love (Post 356) is an important component of Stowe's religious philosophy, particularly in her later works. Uncle Tom, Tiff, and Candace (the central black characters of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, *Dred*, and *The Minister's Wooing*, respectively) are the true heroes of Stowe's fiction, because they embody selflessness, family orientation, and disinterested benevolence. Their superior embodiment of these values and exemplary religiosity make them remarkably sympathetic to the strife of other characters. This sympathy manifests in interracial attachments between these black characters and white children.

Though the presence of interracial attachment is consistent throughout Stowe's work, each of these antislavery novels represents these attachments in a different light. In *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, interracial attachment works as a paradoxical indictment of slavery; slavery creates these attachments by requiring integrated households, and subsequently destroys them through economic transactions (i.e., selling enslaved caregivers) and cruelty (e.g., Tom's death). Thus, narratives of interracial attachments expose the impossibility that Christian faith and the institution of slavery can coexist. In *Dred*, Stowe introduces interracial attachment as a component of post-slavery families. These attachments persist because black caregivers continue to sympathize with white children and families, perhaps to their own detriment. *Minister's*,

which is distinct from the other two novels in both its setting—New England—and its genre—historical fiction-- complicates the idea of interracial attachment as a fixture of post-slavery families. Though emancipated, Candace's attachment to white children, particularly her attachment to James Marvyn, keeps her functionally enslaved to the very family that freed her. That Candace's enduring faith results in her continued enslavement suggests a potential drawback of interracial attachment and the religious doctrine which underlies it: where interracial attachments exist, black caregivers cannot fully attend to their own lives, or to those of their own children. Consider the absence of black children throughout Stowe's work. Tiff and Candace can devote themselves to white children only because they do not have children of their own; Tom can devote himself to white children only when he is forced to leave his own behind. Thus, disinterested benevolence comes at a price: the attachments of black children to their black parents.

I. "Feel for me"

Motherhood is central to *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. The novel includes various anecdotes of mother-child relationships thwarted by slavery: Cassy, Hagar, Susan each lose their children to various misfortunes. Eliza, one protagonist of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, only evades separation from her child by escaping slavery entirely. But despite these many examples of enslaved children passing, Stowe emphasizes the *shared* experiences of black and white women, rather than distinguishing enslavement as the sole underlying condition of such tragedies. On Eliza's journey North, she requires the assistance of various white families— to obtain help, she uses the condition of motherhood as common ground with her potential aids. When she arrives at Senator Bird's doorstep, she asks his wife, Mrs. Bird, if she has lost a child, which Mrs. Bird has. "Then you will feel for me" (*Uncle Tom's Cabin* 120), Eliza says. Confident that the universally

understood tragedy of losing one's child will resonate with Mrs. Bird, Eliza finds refuge in the Birds' home. Later, in the Quaker household, Ruth claims that "if [she] didn't love John and the baby, [she] should not know how to feel for [Eliza]" (197). Here, Ruth specifies her experiences with children and family as the root of her ability to empathize with others. The helping hands of Mrs. Bird, Ruth, and other white women — resulting from their empathy and shared experience of motherhood— are indispensable to Eliza's path to freedom. In the novel, the rhetoric of motherhood is Eliza's most important persuasive tool and makes mothers the most sympathetic supporters of the anti-slavery cause.

Stowe harnesses the supposed sympathetic nature of mothers to appeal to her audience, who are made up of mostly Northern, white women (who are *also* likely mothers). At the close of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, when Stowe makes her explicit anti-slavery statement, she appeals to this audience specifically:

> And you, mothers of America, — you, who have learned, by the cradles of your own children, to love and feel for all mankind, — by the sacred love you bear your child! … I beseech you, pity the mother who has all your affections, and not one legal right to protect, guide, or educate, the child of her bosom. (631)

Here, she claims that motherhood not only helps women care for their own children and families, but for "mankind" more generally. For Stowe, children inspire "sacred love" and empathy, and motherhood constitutes a uniquely selfless, Christian state of being. She asks that mothers harness their exceptional power to *sympathize with* others, particularly enslaved mothers. Though sympathy originates as a feeling, in Stowe's novels, it manifests as action— Ruth and Mrs. Bird's sympathy lead them to risk their own safety by taking in Eliza. Mothers, then, in their unique capacity to sympathize with others, are also uniquely capable of taking

antislavery action. They are consequently the heroes of Stowe's antislavery fiction and the best models of Stowe's Christian faith.

However, white mothers are not the most motherly characters in Stowe's work. If motherliness is defined by sympathy for others, as Stowe believes, it is in fact black, enslaved characters who make the best mothers, and form the strongest attachments with white children. For example, Tom, with his sympathetic and gentle nature and consequent attachments to various children, constitutes a mother figure in the novel. He demonstrates more selflessness, sympathy, and religiosity than Stowe's white female characters. As such, he forms more (and more secure) attachments with children. These attachments exist not only between Tom and his own children, but with George Shelby, and Eva (each of whom is a white child) too.

In *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, Tom and Eva have a unique attachment, one characterized by desire for closeness as well as mutual admiration. St. Clare orders Tom to attend to Eva "whenever she want[s] him" (255). Eva's desire for Tom's company is evidence of her attachment to Tom. St. Clare notes that "Tom… is a hero to Eva" (254), indicating that Eva not only desires Tom's company, but admires him. The two spend ample time together, which is "far from disagreeable to [Tom]" (255). His voluntary engagement with Eva is evidence of a mutual attachment. Their relationship is close both physically and emotionally; they are attached voluntarily to one another in that they each desire maintenance of that closeness and express affection toward the other.

Though much has been written on Eva and Tom's relationship,[4] Eva's connection with Mammy has largely been ignored. Like Tom, Mammy is an enslaved character with whom Eva

[4] Robin Bernstein's *Racial Innocence*, for example, describes Tom and Eva's relationship. However, instead of construing it as a positive attachment, she echoes Saidiya V. Hartman, Ann Laura Stoler, and Laura Wexler in arguing that "physical tenderness can function as a necessary component of racial domination and violence. Intimacy does not mitigate subjugation, but constructs it at the deepest levels" (Bernstein 94). Rather than viewing

shares an intimate attachment. When Eva returns home from her voyage with St. Clare, she is overjoyed to see Mammy; "she [flies] across the room, throwing herself into [Mammy's] arms, and kiss[es] her repeatedly" (235). Mammy returns her affections, hugging Eva back, laughing, and crying (235). This brief scene conveys Eva and Mammy's physical and emotional closeness. In contrast, when Eva attempts to embrace her mother Marie, Marie complains that Eva will make her head ache, and ends the affectionate exchange with a disengaged "that'll do" (235). Stowe sets the scene explicitly to compare the two women, writing that Mammy "did not tell [Eva] that she made her head ache" (235). Mammy is superior to Marie in her acceptance of and affection toward Eva. In terms of attachment theory, Mammy's sensitivity and overt affection for Eva are likely to result in a secure attachment style, where Marie's insensitive behavior and expressions of negativity are likely to result in an insecure-avoidant attachment style. Marie's exclamation — "as if Mammy could love her dirty little babies as much as I love Eva!" (249) is then clearly ironic; not only could Mammy love her own children more than Marie could, she loves *Marie's* child more than Marie could.

Throughout the story, irony is one of Stowe's most powerful tools in elucidating the difference between white mothers and black slaves' attachments to the same children. In Chapter 16, entitled "Tom's Mistress and her Opinion" — a title which invites the reader to engage with Marie's opinions next to Tom's character— Stowe emphasizes the difference between Tom's motherly qualities and Marie's lack of them. While Marie claims that slaves "don't understand a word of the sermon" (252), Tom is, ironically, filling her role as Eva's caregiver: "There sat Tom, on a little mossy seat in the court, every one of his button-holes stuck full of cape jessamines, and Eva, gayly laughing, was hanging a wreath of roses round his neck; and then she

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Tom's Christian goodness as an internal trait, she describes it as a quality borrowed from Eva, writing that "the white child's innocence [is] transferable to surrounding people and things" (Bernstein 6).

sat down on his knee, like a chip-sparrow, still laughing" (253).Whereas Tom spends time with Eva, providing stimulation and sensitivity—two antecedents of secure attachment-- Marie does not "possess much capability of affection" and is characterized by "a most intense and unconscious selfishness" (221). The juxtaposition of Mammy and Tom's physical and emotional closeness with Eva, against Marie's lack of closeness serves to emphasize both extremes; Stowe paints Marie as an anti-Christian villain of the novel, and Tom not just as Eva's hero, but a hero of the Christian values of motherhood and family more broadly.

Eva and her mother have a disagreement regarding the appropriateness of Eva's attachments to the family's "servants":

> 'You see, Evangeline,' said her mother, 'it's always right and proper to be kind to our servants, but it isn't proper to treat them *just* as we would our relations, or people in our own class of life. Now, if Mammy was sick, you wouldn't want to put her in your own bed.'
>
> 'I should feel just like it, mamma,' said Eva. (260)

Marie's qualm with Eva's relationships are precisely that they are familial, that Eva treats slaves as if they are her "relations". As a good Christian in Stowe's conception, such sympathy and selflessness come naturally to her. Similarly, when Tom describes his feelings toward Mr. Shelby, he points to *natural feelings* of empathy and love. He says, "wan't [Mr. Shelby] put in my arms a baby? — it's natur I should think a heap of him" (136). Here, Stowe preempts modern attachment theory, which locates these natural feelings of attachment in scientific understandings of evolution and the human brain with faith: like Jesus, Christians should love their neighbors, and adults should love children (and vice versa). The heroes of Stowe's novel, Tom and Eva, naturally understand and embrace this Christian love, and these interracial attachments. To

impede these naturally occurring feelings of sympathy, and naturally occurring attachments, as Marie does, is to impede Christian faith itself.

Stowe's recognition of Tom, Mammy, and other enslaved characters' sympathy for and attachments to children is unsurprising given her stated views on the subject of race and domestic attachment. In a letter to her brother, in 1851, she writes, "I have seen the strength of their instinctive and domestic attachments in which *as a race* they excel the anglo saxon. The poor slave on whom the burden of domestic bereavement falls heaviest is precisely the creature of all God's creatures that feels it deepest" (HBS to Henry Ward Beecher, February 1, 1851). Not only does Stowe think that black slaves are capable, or even charged with, care of white children, she actually believes that "domestic attachment," and feeling deeply (sympathy) is a particular strength of black slaves. Stowe's understanding of race is then essentialized, as she believes that different racial groups have different inherent biological, and in this case even *spiritual* and *emotional* characteristic in common.

Though her attribution of strength in "domestic attachment" to blackness was doubtless meant positively, even "positive" racially essentialized views have the adverse effect of entrenching racial difference, and often leading to— if not overt racial hostility— condescension or dismissiveness toward marginalized racial groups. Stowe's stance on race constitutes an instance of romantic racialism, a philosophy which posits permanent, inherent differences between people of different races, often attributing allegedly positive characteristics, particularly innocence and religiosity, to black people (Frederickson 102). The doctrine, though perhaps flattering on the surface, comes "dangerously close to justifying a genuinely paternalistic system of slavery," (Frederickson 128) as faithful innocence often results in childlike characteristics.

For nineteenth century black male characters, romantic racialism often means feminization. Tom's role as a mother in the novel is consistent with a more general feminization of his character. Elizabeth Ammons, author of "Heroines in Uncle Tom's Cabin" notes that the novel "deliberate[ly] feminiz[es] Tom" (153). She writes, "[Tom] reacts to the horror of slavery as Stowe's heroines do: from the heart. Empathy, compassion, comfort, practical assistance, psychological support— these dispositions describe Stowe's Uncle Tom just as they do most of her admirable women" (Ammons 159). Tom, after all, is just like Mammy—both are mother figures to Eva where her own (white) mother falls short.[5] Therefore, consistent with romantic racialism, in the course of advocating for the humanity of the enslaved, Stowe attributes particular, in this case *feminine* qualities to black men.

However well-intentioned this may have been, consistent with modern criticisms of romantic racialism, Stowe's depiction of feminine black men forming positive interracial attachments under slavery may to have the unintended effect of celebrating certain aspects of the institution. When St. Clare asks Eva if she would prefer to live in a free state, she declines. "'Of course, our way is pleasantest,'" (*Uncle Tom's Cabin* 264) she says. When asked why, she responds: "'it makes so many more round you to love, you know'" (264). However, even Eva, a nearly morally faultless character, is ultimately proven incorrect in this case; the institution of slavery, even with all the additional people "round you to love," is not at all "pleasant." Stowe

[5] While to a modern reader, this racially-based feminization reads as obviously 'racist', analysis of the novel's stance on femininity may prove Tom's feminine characteristics to be less insulting, and more *desirable*. Ammons locates "maternal experience" as the "generative principle" and "ethical center" of the story (Ammons 152). According to Ammons, "feminine attributes are in Stowe's opinion the only worthwhile human ones because they place the welfare of the group, of the whole human family, before that of the self" (153). Other critics of Stowe's have similarly argued that under her religious system, women, and mothers more particularly, are the ideal Christians. Jane Tompkins' "Sentimental Power: *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and the Politics of Literary History" specifies women, and femininity, as the novel's greatest endorsement (Tompkins 139). Thus, Stowe's depiction of black male femininity is not intentionally disempowering; rather, she in fact advocates for black men's *increased* political power.

elucidates Eva's error through tragedies occurring at the end of the novel. Though St. Clare plans to free Tom after Eva's death (just as Mr. Shelby once planned), the tragic coincidence of St. Clare's own death leads to Tom being sold down river to a much harsher plantation. There, he dies a hero and a martyr. Legree kills him as a punishment for keeping his word to protect the secret location of two escaped slaves, Cassy and Emmeline. Through Tom's ill-fated end, Stowe subjects Eva's comments to a scathing challenge, demonstrating that whatever positive attachments slavery may allow, no positive effects of the institution can justify its cruelty.

Jane Tompkins understands Tom's death as a retelling of the death of Jesus Christ. She writes, "*Uncle Tom's Cabin* retells the culture's central religious myth— the story of the crucifixion— in terms of the nation's greatest political conflict— slavery— and of its most cherished social beliefs— the sanctity of motherhood and family" (Tompkins 134).[6] However, what Tompkins does not address is George Shelby's return and presence during Tom's death. In a dramatic coincidence characteristic of sentimental fiction, George returns just in time to witness Tom's death, but "too late" (*Uncle Tom's Cabin* 594) to save him. Aside from the obvious dramatic impact of the scene of the grown child watching his caregiver suffer, George's presence invites the reader to recall the novel's opening, where George and Tom read the Bible together. In this scene the white child and black caregiver are attached, sharing Christian values with one another. In Tom's final scene, refusing to give up those same Christian values in the face of slavery gets Tom killed. In essence, slavery leads to interracial attachments, and necessarily destroys them as well. Through this progression Stowe makes her position clear: slavery is incompatible with Christianity, and thus the institution must end. But what follows?

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[6] Ammons also sees Tom's death as a commentary on the death of a motherly figure, and views his death, as the story's heroine— as the novel's central anti-slavery appeal. "Implicitly," she writes, "the novel asks who, without forsaking reverence for Mother and the sanctity of the Home, could fail to champion Tom's right to liberty for himself and his family and, by extension, the same right for all slaves?" (Ammons 159).

Can the interracial attachments established in *Uncle Tom's Cabin* persist if slavery does not?

II. Beyond slavery

To answer this question, we turn to *Dred: A Tale of the Great Dismal Swamp* (1856), published five years after *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. Though it differs in plot from *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, *Dred* contains many of the same themes and character archetypes. Tiff is an enslaved man in a rural, poor white family. He cares for the children in this family with exaggerated selflessness and kindness, traits emphasized in light of the children's white parents' ineptitude. Tiff is an archetypal continuation of Tom's motherly, domestic qualities. In Tiff's first appearance in the novel, he is "gently" holding a baby "passing his arm under the pillow" (*Dred* loc. 1517). When the children's mother dies, Tiff takes on all of the domestic duties of the household, including cooking, gardening, keeping house, and caring for Teddy, Fanny, and 'the baby'. As Harry explains**,** Uncle Tiff "hasn't one particle of selfishness in him" (loc. 1911). Thus, through his feminine graces and commitment to family and home, Tiff, like Tom, is the heroine of his novel. Also reminiscent of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, the attachment between Tiff and his children is strong and mutual. Tiff "identifies himself with… [the] children" (loc. 1911). In return, the children are attached to him as well. When the family is caught in a shipwreck, the children "stretch[] their hands after their old friend" (loc. 9450), begging for him to be saved. When Tiff seems to be lost in the disaster, "nothing [can] comfort them for the loss of their old friend… they [sit] with their arms around each other, quietly weeping" (*Dred* loc. 9461). Only when Tiff returns alive are Teddy and Fanny cheered (loc. 9474).[7] In these emotional reactions, Stowe demonstrates Tiff's

[7] Fascinatingly, the children's' reactions to the loss of Tiff are reminiscent of the scientifically observed reactions of securely attached children to their caregivers. In a modern psychological test of attachment (called the Strange Situation Test), a researcher observes the reaction of a child to the loss and return of their parental figure. Children who are *upset* by the loss of their caregivers and *comforted* by their return are considered securely and healthily

importance to the children and their wellbeing and reinforces his position as a positive motherly figure. She also establishes interracial attachment as a fixture of her vision of family, a vision which values affection, sentiment, and natural sympathy (as Eva and Tom both demonstrated in their attachment) over race.

As in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, Tiff's parenting is made to look ideal, or perfect, in comparison to the children's legal, white parents. When the children's father marries another woman, his children suffer from her drunkenness and exaggeratedly bad parenting; their eyes are "shocked with language and scenes too bad for repetition" (loc. 7087). Fanny struggles to sleep because of the noise of her new stepmother's "bacchanalaian revels" (loc. 7149). In this scene, Stowe casts the children's white parents as an un-Christian influence, as "bacchanalian" connotes Roman pagan celebrations. The antithesis to such antics, Tiff's singular goal is the salvation of his children: "I wants fur to get dese yer chil'en in the kingdom, some way or oder" (loc. 4467). He prays to God for them, saying "look down on dese yer por chil'en, for I's sure dat ar woman is as bad as Herod, any day. Good Lord, you's seen how she's been treating on 'em" (loc. 7164). Concern for the salvation of children is the epitome of Christian virtue, which Stowe emphasizes by quoting the Bible, and referencing Jesus' relationship with children, in the text itself. After the death of one of the children, Tiff is "inconsolable", and Nina turns to the Bible to comfort him:

> And they brought little children unto him, that he should touch them; and his disciples rebuked those that brought them. But Jesus said, Suffer little children to come unto me, and forbid them not, for such is the kingdom of heaven (loc. 6521).

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attached. Modern psychologists, then, would categorize Tiff and his children's' relationship as a secure caregiver-child relationship.

Concern for another's salvation is the pinnacle of Christian virtue. Tiff cares about the children's salvation more than he cares about himself. The inclusion of this Bible verse, which describes Jesus' care for children, emphasizes Tiff's exemplary motherliness and Christian selflessness, and highlights the moral virtue of attachments between enslaved caregivers like Tiff and white children.

Where *Uncle Tom's Cabin* is a tragedy, and lacks a vision of post-slavery interracial attachments, the *happy* ending of *Dred* (wherein the protagonists escape slavery, go North, and find happiness and success) succeeds in presenting a vision of interracial attachment beyond slavery. In the final chapter of *Dred*, Tiff and Milly, another enslaved caregiver with selfless and motherly qualities, have escaped north. Once there, they continue to live together, and Tiff continues to raise the children (loc. 9495). Milly, who throughout the novel has cared consistently and without complaint for her troubled grandson, takes on an even greater maternal load once she moves north: she raises children of all races. "I don't make no distinctions of color— I don't believe in them" (loc 9552), she says. Guided by this color-blind conception of caregiving and motherhood, Milly successfully raises "forty destitute children" (*Dred* loc. 9560). In this hyperbolic level of achievement, Milly represents the most ideal possible mother. This chapter is entitled "Clear Shining After Rain" -- a label which explicitly defines the novel's favorable position towards Milly's occupation raising children of all races. Milly's commitment to color-blindness, to not believing in "distinctions of color," is key to her heroism, as this is what allows her to have such wide influence. In this plotline, the politics of Stowe's fiction are more egalitarian than her own. While Stowe herself clings to racially essentialized views, Milly does not believe in distinctions of color, and is a better mother, and more selfless Christian, for it.

Though *Uncle Tom's Cabin* successfully critiques slavery through its representation of ideal enslaved mother figures and their interracial attachments, it falls short of a vision of what an interracial family might look like beyond slavery. With Stowe's introduction of Milly and Dred in her second anti-slavery novel, *Dred* expands on the limits of her first novel, and advertises a future in which happy interracial families prevail into a post-slavery America. The novel presents familial love as a potential way to erase racial difference, to see one another in the absence of "distinctions of color". While *Dred* does not problematize Tiff and Milly's exaggerated sympathy for (and attachment to) white children, giving its characters an idyllic ending, Tiff's excessive interdependence with his white family raises a few questions. What are the limits of this sympathy? If there are none, and the black slave is forever tied to their white loved ones, even after emancipation, what effect does this have? Stowe's third and last anti-slavery novel, *The Minister's Wooing,* pulls these questions into the narrative, adding nuance to the rosy portrait of post-slavery interracial attachment which was painted in *Dred.*

III. Disinterested Benevolence

The Minister's Wooing appears three years after *Dred*, in 1859. Though it is the third of Stowe's antislavery novels, it describes events taking place in the eighteenth century, before the events of *Dred* and *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. A historical fiction set in eighteenth century New England, *The Minister's Wooing* explores the antislavery cause, not through depictions of Southern chattel slavery, but through Calvinist theology. *Minister's* depicts a family called the Scudders, and introduces Samuel Hopkins, a theologian living under their roof and serving their small New England town. Hopkins gives voice to Stowe's own Christian views; he primarily preaches about selflessness. He "consider[s] sacrifice the foundation of all existence" (*The Minister's Wooing* 278), and lectures throughout the novel on the concept of *disinterested*

benevolence, which refers to doing good "without considering one's own needs or the outcome" (336). This doctrine is consistent with Stowe's own religion. Across all three of Stowe's antislavery novels, her protagonists and heroes distinguish themselves by putting others before themselves; Tom dies a hero refusing to give up the location of two escaped enslaved women, Eva offers material gifts and unbounded kindness to all, Nina's growth as a Christian involves taking Dred and his children under her wing, Clayton loans money to Nina to save Harry's wife, Lisette, while Dred helps his fellow slaves escape slavery at the risk of his own life. Stowe's heroes are selfless regardless of the social status of the beneficiary, helping the weakest and most vulnerable populations, particularly women, slaves, and children.

Consistent with *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and *Dred*, *The Minister's Wooing* locates sympathy and ideal motherhood not in white women, (even Mary, who is near perfect in her faith!) but rather in an enslaved character, in this case, Candace, who is enslaved by the Marvyns. In her perfect cooking and housekeeping, as well as her position as the only adult who "seem[s] to know at all what to make of James" (65), Candace distinguishes herself as the heroine of *The Minister's Wooing*. She, like Tiff and Tom, demonstrates more skill, more selflessness, more kindness, and better motherly instincts than the child's "real," white parents.[8] When James misbehaves, and Mr. Marvyn claims that "'He went out from us because he [is] not of us" (69), Candace defends him, expressing her conviction that "the angels who had their hooks in Massa James's jacket were already beginning to shorten the line" (69). Candace never loses faith in James, and she helps maintain the faith of the household more broadly— when Mrs. Marvyn turns her back on Christianity while grieving, Candace reorients her. She explicitly attributes her

[8] In her paper, "Whimsical Contracts: Love and Marriage in 'The Minister's Wooing' and 'Our Nig'", Tess Chakkalakal argues that Candace is also wiser than her white counterparts where romance is concerned. She writes that in *The Minister's Wooing*, Candace and Cato's relationship suggests that marriage is an institution within which black women can experience true freedom.

reinvigorated religion to Candace: "So, Mary," she says, "I try Candace's way, — I look at Christ, — I pray to Him" (207). Throughout the story, Candace inspires others to keep faith— in James, making her an ideal mother, and in Jesus, making her an ideal Christian.

In each of her anti-slavery novels, Stowe connects the motherliness and goodness of her enslaved characters to their Christianity. However, in *The Minister's Wooing* she is more explicit, linking Candace's exceptionalism to her embodiment of Hopkins' *specific doctrine* of disinterested benevolence. When Dino casts doubt on the existence of disinterested benevolence, Candace is quick to defend the doctor and the theory: "Candace, [draws] herself up with superb disdain. '*Our* Doctor knows dere *is*,—and why? 'cause he's got it IN HERE,' [says] she, giving her ample chest a knock which resounded like the boom from a barrel" (163). Here, Stowe demonstrates Candace's faith in Hopkins' (and Stowe's) Christian ideology of disinterested benevolence. It is her faith in this specific doctrine that makes her the novel's maternal hero.

Over the course of the novel, Doctor Hopkins develops a religious conviction that slavery is wrong and attempts to convince slaveholding families to adopt the same beliefs and free their slaves accordingly.[9] After being convinced by Hopkins, Mr. Marvyn offers Candace her freedom, which she gratefully accepts. "'I want to *feel free*,'" (104) she says. However, freedom brings negligible change to Candace's condition. She stays with the Marvyns and *increases* her workload (150). In the end of the novel, she "transfer[s] her allegiance to the growing family of her young master and mistress [James and Mary]; and predominant[es] proudly… over a rising race of young Marvyns" (326-327). Here, Stowe's narrative includes nuance absent from her

[9] According to Stephen Post's "Disinterested Benevolence: An American Debate Over the Nature of Christian Love", this plotline is consistent with actions taken by the *real* Samuel Hopkins, who "articulated his [concept of radically self-denying love] against the backdrop of Newport culture with its dependence on the slave trade and its ethos of possessive individualism" (Post 362). For Hopkinsians of the time, including Stowe herself, the doctrine of disinterested benevolence indeed "provided a spur toward antislavery activism" (Post 356).

previous narratives of freedom from slavery. Where in *Dred* her vision is practically utopian, as everyone lives happily ever after, and destitute children of all races live in harmony with Milly, in *The Minister's Wooing*, Candace's commitment to interracial attachments comes at a significant price: her freedom. James and Mary continue to be her "master and mistress" both in name and in practice. After being freed, she follows them where they choose to go, and devotes her entire being to the raising of their children. Her legal designation may have changed, but her reality is stagnant; The pull of her attachments to the Marvyn children, and commitment to raising them, keeps her functionally enslaved. In light of Candace's continued enslavement, Tiff's sympathy for his children in *Dred* takes on a different tenor. Is this sympathy, though it may arise from Christian selflessness and disinterested benevolence, actually beneficial for these characters, or does it negatively impact their lives? The question becomes whether interracial attachments, which have their roots in slavery, disadvantage black characters.

IV. Interracial attachment and the Enslaved Black Family

When Tom is sold away from the Shelby's home, he must leave his children behind. While the novel abounds with images of him raising Eva, there is but one of himself and Chloe's own baby: in the cabin, he sits the baby on his lap, then sets the baby on his shoulder, and "caper[s] and dance[s] with her" (*Uncle Tom's Cabin* 38). After this scene, his attachment to his own children goes unmentioned until his death, when he exclaims "the poor chil'en, and the baby!-- my old heart's been most broke for 'em, time and time agin!" (*Uncle Tom's Cabin* 594). He then quickly transitions to talking about the Shelbys, asking George to send his love to them, too (594). Essentially, Tom's children are an afterthought in the novel. While Stowe celebrates Tom's mothering of Eva, and celebrates his Christian virtues, the reader might imagine his children, back in Kentucky, fatherless. Eva and Tom's death prevent Stowe from answering the

question— what if George tried to repurchase Tom while he lived under the St. Clare's? Who would have prevailed, if Eva wanted Tom— recall her plea to her St. Clare, "I want him" (215) — but his own children wanted him too?

And what if Tiff had children of his own? Could he have run away so confidently and freely if he had enslaved family in the South? Would he have devoted his life to his ex-mistress' children? Would he have "identified" with his white family over his black family? What if Candace had children of her own? Would she have spent the whole of her energy, and her *freedom*, on James and Mary's kids? Would she have been content to remain in functional servitude? Stowe endorses interracial attachments, representing Tom, Tiff, Candace, Milly, and Mammy as Jesus-like figures, and depicting secure attachment relationships between black caregivers and white children (which contrast the insecure attachment relationships depicted between white children and their own parents). But Stowe work does not address the needs of these caregivers' own children; she writes them out of the narrative by making them childless or excluding their stories. Stowe's notion of interracial attachment is predicated on black characters not having— or caring about— children of their own.

With this repeated trend, as well as Stowe's racially essentialized views in mind, one might assume that Stowe's understanding of interracial attachment would be one-sided, including only black caregiver-white child dyads and not the converse arrangement. However, there is one notable exception in the story of Ophelia and Topsy, where Stowe presents a white caregiver-black child dyad in her vision of Christian family. At the beginning of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, Ophelia and Topsy are like a cruel parody of Eva and Tom. Ophelia is aghast at the sight of Eva perched in Tom's lap, asking St. Clare, "'How can you let her?'" (*Uncle Tom's Cabin* 254). Unlike Tom, Ophelia will not touch Topsy and aims to maintain distance, and thus prevent

attachment between them. However, after Eva's declaration of love for Topsy, Ophelia experiences a change of heart. She admits that she "wish[es she] were like [Eva]" and that Eva "might teach [her] a lesson" (402). Following Eva's death, Ophelia follows through, attempting to truly love Topsy and "help [her] grow up a good Christian girl" (425). Eva's evangelism makes her into a more selfless parental figure with a focus on Christian values. With Ophelia's help, Topsy is baptized, joins a church, and becomes a missionary (618). Through Topsy and Ophelia's evolution, Stowe presents a challenge to her own stated opinion that black people are most skilled in the realm of "domestic attachment," and offers the possibility of interracial attachments not defined by typical archetypes of race, like the black "mammy" and "innocent white child" archetypes.

Beyond being an allegory for the Northerners coming to the South to educate previously enslaved blacks, Ophelia's development is a lesson for all white mother figures. Domestic attachment comes naturally to black caregivers in Stowe's novels, who, in Stowe's romantically racial descriptions, are childlike and excessively feminine. In order to be a good parent for a child lacking an attachment figure, Ophelia has to be *taught* by a child. Frederickson writes that there was "a general acknowledgement among romantic racialists that women and Negroes were alike in the gifts they brought to the world" (Frederickson 114). However, Stowe's work demonstrates that where black characters have stayed in touch with their supposedly innate gift for sympathy and domesticity, white women have lost these qualities. When she addresses the "mothers of America", she asks them to recall their "love" and "feeling" for all mankind and pity enslaved people. Thus, Stowe uses the superior attachments between black caregivers and white children to *teach* white women to be more sympathetic and more faithful, qualities which both make them better mothers and more resolutely against slavery.

In *Rethinking Sympathy and Human Contact in Nineteenth-Century American Literature* (2019), Marianne Noble writes about sympathy, particularly the sympathy which white women show to black characters throughout Stowe's novels. In *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, Noble contends that the sympathy portrayed is simplistic, as it assumes sameness and potentially erases the true black experience, and that her portrayal of sympathy becomes more nuanced over the course of the novels, coming to include "both difference and sameness" (Noble 167). However, if Ophelia's sympathy for Topsy (and subsequent attachment to her) was overly simplistic, at least it *existed*. Never again, after *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, does Stowe feature a white caregiver and a black child. In neglecting to do so, she gives up on white women sympathizing with and attaching to black children all together. What, then, is the fate of the black child? Black parents are expected to be disinterestedly benevolent, to do good "without considering [their] needs or the outcome" (*The Minister's Wooing* 336). However, this is not without cost. When perfectly disinterestedly benevolent black caregivers abandon consideration of their own needs, it results in their own families, and their own children, being left behind. As Stephen Post aptly points out, "to define Christian love strictly in terms of self-denial so that all self-regard is prohibited is problematic because it gives the neighbor a blank check with which to wield power over the selfless" (Post 363). White women are not expected to be selfless, sympathetic, and motherly toward all children, but this is the continued expectation of black characters. Thus, though slavery ends, Stowe's continued perception of black characters as more innocent, more selfless, and more sympathetic to others, results in destruction of the enslaved black family, and insecurely attached, neglected black children.

After slavery was abolished, the meaning of black family changed significantly. Though African Americans were no longer subject to the physical reality of slavery, according to Herbert

Gutman's *The Black Family in Slavery and Freedom* (1976), pathologies arising out of slavery lived on. Gutman does not connect the changing structures of black families, and the pathologies underlying them, to attachment outcomes for black (or white) children. However, examination of twentieth century literature demonstrates that later pathologies arising from slavery have detrimental impacts on black children. To examine these detrimental impacts, I will turn to *The Third Generation*. Its Author, Chester Himes (1909-1984) was a highly successful black novelist who chronicled difficulties within the black family, including his own upbringing, in his novels. Exploration of his work will reveal connections to Stowe's descriptions of attachment, and aptly show that three generations after slavery, in the shadow of the institution, black children are still not mothered (or fathered) lovingly and completely.

Chapter 2

"The Battle of Color" in Chester Himes' *The Third Generation*

In Stowe's nineteenth century fiction there is a clear legal distinction between black slaves and free white people. In this context, where the institution of slavery controls family structures, the selflessness and motherliness of black caretakers benefits white children, while black children are left behind. Moving into the twentieth century, after the abolition of slavery, there arose a new legal distinction between "white" and "black" people: segregation, both *de jure* and *de facto*. Born in Jefferson City, Missouri, Chester Himes was a mid-twentieth century African American author who wrote prolifically about the legacy of slavery but is best known for his crime fiction. His fifth novel *The Third Generation*, published in 1954, demonstrates the lingering effects of slavery and the color line on the black family. Here I read this novel as a response to, or even a continuation of, Stowe's work. Establishing a connection between the two authors is fruitful, as Himes and Stowe both focus on family structure, attachment between caretakers and children, and the impacts these attachments have on children's lives and psyches.

The Third Generation was published the same year as *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954), the monumental Supreme Court case which ruled segregation in public schools to be unconstitutional. *Brown* overturned *Plessy v. Ferguson* (1896), the case from which the separate but equal doctrine arose. In *Plessy*, the court ruled that the "two races" could legally be given separate accommodations (in train cars, schools, etc.), and this separation did not necessarily interfere with "equality". In *Brown,* the court stated that legal segregation between white and black children in schools had an adverse effect on the wellbeing of black children. Though overturning *Plessy* in its effect, *Brown* sustained much of *Plessy*'s reasoning. The court, now accepting that separation of the "two races" had an effect on equality, continued to rely on the

presumption of "two" distinct "races" to begin with. Justice Warren stated that segregation "generates a feeling of inferiority as to their status in the community that may affect their hearts and minds in a way unlikely to ever be undone" (*Brown v. Board of Education*). This decision ended the separate but equal doctrine but preserved the legal fiction of race as a valuable social categorization.

Though it is unlikely that Himes wrote *The Third Generation* aware of the particulars of the *Brown* ruling, the novel reflects the same cultural context as the *Brown* opinion and provides a counter to the case's emphasis on racial categorization. Rather than centering or validating any sort of racial distinction or "color line" in his work, as the court does in *Brown*, he suggests that any excessive focus on race, however benevolently intended, has an adverse effect on black children. He focuses not on *de jure* segregation, but the color line drawn within the black community.

Himes makes this racial commentary by portraying one family, the Taylors, in the 1930s. Set three generations after the abolition of slavery, the Taylors' marriage is rife with conflict, bordering on abuse, as they each disagree on racial issues, and particularly how to raise their children, who are legally defined as "colored" but phenotypically light-skinned. Mrs. Taylor is obsessed with her own white ancestry, and wishes her sons were whiter, both culturally and physically. Her inability to see past color makes her an ineffective mother and cruel partner to Mr. Taylor, who is noticeably black. Mr. Taylor allows his wife's obsession with color to define him and becomes an ineffective father as he loses his sense of self-worth. Charles, William, and Thomas, their three children, suffer as a result of their parents' racial attitudes and marital strife.

Setting it apart from his other works, Himes admits that *The Third Generation* is "semi-autobiographical" (*The Quality of Hurt,* 121), and the novel's plot echoes the events of his

autobiography, *The Quality of Hurt* (1972). The resulting work is a curious mix of domestic fiction and autobiography. Perhaps in part given its singularity, *The Third Generation* was never particularly popular. It is contemporarily out of print. As such, there is very little criticism discussing the novel. However, there are two criticisms relevant to my analysis of the novel. Firstly, Sandra Wilson Smith's "Chester Himes's The Third Generation: A Dystopic Domestic Novel" describes Himes' "explosion" of domestic ideals (Smith 2009). Smith's analysis of the novel is consistent with my own in that she views the story as a critique of the Taylor's home. However, where her critique is of cultural norms of the setting, mine will concern the Taylors' parenting and attitudes toward race. Secondly, Ralph Reckley's "The Oedipal Complex and Intraracial Conflict in Chester Himes' "The Third Generation" (1977) focuses on the Oedipus complex present between Charles and his mother. Reckley suggests that Mrs. Taylor's obsession with her own white father prevents her from having a healthy marriage and creates an inappropriately close (and somewhat sexual) dynamic between herself and Charles.

Where these analyses present the relationship between Charles and his mother through the lenses of domesticity and Freud's psychosexual theory respectively, mine will continue to focus on Bowlby and his successors' conceptions of attachment theory. Here I consider *The Third Generation* as fiction, drawing parallels to his autobiography only where the connection is explicit. Though Himes explores race in his autobiography, the form of fiction allows him to make clearer arguments about the role of race in children's development. The novel is not a direct representation of Himes' life (he says that the end of the novel particularly has been dramatized to please his editor (*The Quality of Hurt* 235)) but a dramatized reflection of the psychological impact of racial division on black children. The central conflict in the novel is that the Taylors' differing views on race lead them to different perspectives on how to raise their

children in a segregated America. Mrs. Taylor "want[s] to rear them in the belief that they [are], in large part, white; that their best traits [come] from this white inheritance. [Whereas Mr. Taylor] want[s] to prepare them for the reality of being black" (*The Third Generation*, 36). "Between them," Himes writes, "the battle of color raged continuously" (36). Though divorce might seem the obvious solution to intense and continual marital strife, the Taylors' attachments to the children keep them tethered to one another. Mrs. Taylor threatens divorce throughout the novel, but the presence of the children keeps her in the marriage; "she wouldn't let him have the children," Himes writes. "Where the children went, she would go" (43). Thus, the two are stuck in a cycle of animosity, with their children caught in the crossfire. Following the boys' unfortunate outcomes, with a particular focus on Charles' attachments to each parent, Himes effectively criticizes the "battle of color" which raged within (and outside) the black community in the early twentieth century.

I. "The battle of color" and attachment outcomes

Lillian Taylor, Charles' mother, is only "one thirty-second part negro" (*The Third Generation,* 14), meaning "she posses[es] the very maximum of white blood a Negro can possess and remain a negro" (18). Thus, Mrs. Taylor exists *just* on the black side of the color line as prescribed by law. Throughout the novel, Himes emphasizes her phenotypic whiteness (i.e. describing her "white ivory arms" (87)), as well as her strong resentment of the fact that she is legally black. She looks down on other black people, most notably her husband, and insists on her whiteness when confronted with questions of race. When she tries to see a white dentist who only serves white clients and is confronted by a law enforcement officer, she resists: "I'm just as white as you are" (97). For all intents and purposes— putting aside legal segregation, for which the one-thirty-second blood rule reigns, and the *de facto* segregation of the social world – Mrs.

Taylor is right. She physically appears white, believes herself to be white, and desires to live a life surrounded by whiteness. She is, in fact, racist by any common definition of the term; she believes black people are inferior and wishes to distance herself from those she considers black.

Despite her negative attitude toward black people, and the indisputable fact that under United States law in the 1930s, her sons are *black*, Lillian loves her children and attempts to cultivate her attachment to them throughout the text. She keeps a close eye on the children and worries when she does not know where they are (54). In turn, the children are attached to her as well. When she seems in danger, "the children dash[] from behind the house to aid her" (*The* 91). Their concern for her wellbeing indicates a preoccupation with her safety, as well as a desire for closeness with her. Thus, it is clear that in early childhood, there exists a strong and mutual attachment between Mrs. Taylor and her children.

However, Charles and Mrs. Taylor's relationship is soon clouded by Mrs. Taylor's obsession with race. She desperately "want[s her sons] to grow up to love and respect fine white people as she [does] (10). When Charles expresses disinterest in his white ancestors, Mrs. Taylor is "saddened by his attitude" and asks herself, "Why [can't he] be proud of himself" (226). Mrs. Taylor's insistence on viewing herself (and, by extension, her sons) as white, drives a wedge between them. When the boys are children, Mrs. Taylor attempts to explain the significance of their white ancestry, the children are confused: "The[y] didn't understand her. She seemed strange. They felt that she was slipping away from them. A vague insecurity threatened them. They became closer to each other" (117). It makes sense that the children experience "vague insecurity" in response to their mothers' racial prejudice, because Mrs. Taylor's worldview *is* inherently threatening to them. Her notion of white superiority is premised on the idea that black and white people are different at a biological level, or *in the blood*. Her ideas recall *Plessy*'s

insistence upon the existence of "two" unassailably distinct "races." When Charles lacks taste for "the refined and aesthetic offerings of city life… she attribute[s] it to his father's blood" (195). Conversely, she attributes Charles' potential and better qualities to her own blood. "With your blood," she tells him, "you should be able to do anything" (325). At the very inception of attachment theory, Bowlby understood persistent threats from parents not to love their children as antecedent to insecure attachment relationships (*The Making and Breaking of Affectional Bonds* 206). Mrs. Taylor's overt dislike for her son's blackness constitutes a subtle, persistent threat to her love for them. Mrs. Taylor loves Charles, but only as long as his supposedly "white" characteristics predominate over his "black" ones. As her affection for him is conditional, her parenting style is characterized by inconsistency and mixed signaling. In attachment terms, this type of parenting is likely to lead to an insecure-resistant attachment style, one form of insecure attachment. It is thus unsurprising that after Mrs. Taylor focuses excessively on Charles' white heritage, "he [finds] it very hard to visit her" (*The Third Generation* 325). Unbeknownst to her, her prejudice has weakened her relationship with her son.

When discussing Stowe's caregiving characters, I referred to Tom and Tiff as "motherly" figures; Stowe intentionally imbued these men with stereotypically feminine qualities and compared them to the children's inadequate white mothers. Moreover, there was no characteristic distinction between male "motherly" figures like Tom and Tiff, and female "motherly" figures, like Milly and Mammy. In *The Third Generation*, though, fatherhood deserves individual attention. Mrs. Taylor describes her husband as an "Uncle Tom" (41) in an attempt to emasculate him and reminds him of his diminished social standing in comparison to white men. However, despite his wife's insults, Mr. Taylor remains characteristically masculine; he supports his family by acquiring money through work outside the home, and engages in

physical labor, only rarely engaging in homemaking tasks like cooking and cleaning. Thus, he inhabits a new category—fatherhood—which I suggest is characterized by parenthood without the expectation of the physical nurturing (e.g. Tom holding Eva on his lap) and domesticity (e.g. Tiff gardening for his white family) "motherhood" demands.

As Charles' other primary caregiver, Mr. Taylor exists in stark contrast with his wife. He has physically black features, including dark skin and kinky hair, and identifies with cultural markers of blackness as well. When, early in Charles and Williams' childhood, Charles' hair, made "straight" (12) by Mrs. Taylor, regains its kinkiness after accidentally being covered in paint, Mr. Taylor is pleased in spite of his wife. "I'm happy it's turning nappy…" (40) he says, "the boy has to be what he is" (40). When asked what he means by that, Mr. Taylor says, "just a Negro, that's all; just a Negro" (40). He also views blackness as connecting him to his children: "I want my children to look like me," (40) he admits. Against Mrs. Taylor's desire to be white, Mr. Taylor identifies with both the physical features related to blackness, and the explicit label of his children, and himself, as black.

Mrs. Taylor, of course, dislikes her husband's blackness. Having been "reared in the tradition that Negroes with straight hair and light complexions were superior to dark-complexioned Negroes with kinky hair" (12), Mrs. Taylor represents an ideology which we now call colorism: the view that within a particular race, light-skinned individuals are better (i.e. more beautiful, intelligent, etc.) than dark-skinned individuals. As such, she negatively appraises Mr. Taylor's phenotypically black features, "looking upon him with photographic detachment," and ultimately seeing him as a "short, black man with a wiry, simian body, [with] the bowed legs and pigeon-toed stance of great Negro athletes" (10). She resents her relationship with Mr. Taylor; she "regret[s] having married a black man. She [thinks she] should have known better. Had she

married a man her own color at least she would not have to worry about her children being black" (30).[10] In spite of her children's fixed legal status as "colored," Mrs. Taylor wishes they were whiter, both phenotypically and with regard to the positive attributes she associates with phenotypic whiteness. Mr. Taylor, however, does not "worry" about the boys looking, or being, black; he wants them to take after him. When he admits he wants the boys to resemble him, Mrs. Taylor cruelly responds "so they can grow up handicapped and despised?" (40). It is clear that she associates "looking like" Mr. Taylor – being black – with social ruin and embarrassment.

In the same tirade about Mr. Taylor's being "handicapped" and "despised," Mrs. Taylor levels racial slurs at her husband. Before this point, Charles and William "knew their father was a Negro… But they had never thought of the rest of them as Negroes. Tom was yellow, William was brown, Charles was tan, and their mother was white. Only she wasn't like other white people, because she lived with Negroes" (95). Their view of race in this passage is defined only by skin color. They are unaware of legal categorization (they view their mother as white, not black, as she is legally defined), and seem not to have any semantic associations between skin color and positive, or negative, attributes.

However, soon Charles and William quickly outgrow this unprejudiced naïveté. Once they are old enough to apprehend societal racial categories and become "concerned with racial differences" (95), they confront their mother about her racist attitudes toward their father, and by extension, themselves. "We heard you call Papa a shanty n***** once," (98) they recall, and ask the question weighting on their hearts: "Are we bad because we're colored?" (99). Instead of

[10] Writing with Freud's Oedipus complex concept in mind, Reckley writes, "Lillian is in love with her father… in love with her white father… [she] never outgrows her father-fixation, and she never really accepts Professor Taylor as her husband" (Reckley 278). In Reckley's view, Mrs. Taylor's subconscious sexual and romantic attraction to her white father prevent her from forming a healthy attachment with a black man. Instead, she forges an unhealthily close relationship with another (whiter) figure in her life: her son Charles. Charles is then directly in the middle of his parents' conflict, as he subconsciously competes with his father and allies himself with his mother.

answering the question, Mrs. Taylor challenges the premise that they are "colored": "You mustn't think of yourself as colored," she says. "Your mother is as white as anyone. You both have white blood—fine white blood—in your veins" (99). She does nothing to justify her behavior toward the boys' father,[11] nor help them understand the externally enforced racial identity, 'colored', with which they will have to live. Once again, she praises their white blood, offering no reassurance that she loves them regardless of race.

After this conversation, as Mrs. Taylor reflects on her response, she fails to comprehend the potential impact of her conditional affection and mixed signaling on the boys' development:

> She realized she hadn't answered them. She could tell by the questioning looks she caught sometimes in their eyes. She hoped it would never come to the point where she had to explain the difference between them and white people. It came from their living in Mississippi, she concluded. And in the end she blamed it all on Professor Taylor for bringing them there. (99)

Throughout this instance of interior reflection, Mrs. Taylor's thoughts go from somewhat self-aware— "she realized she hadn't answered them" -- to dismissive of any personal responsibility: "in the end she blamed it all on Mr. Taylor…". She worries about the boys' race-consciousness but does not want to be held accountable for their discomfort. Rather, she blames everything on her husband, and his choice to raise the boys in the South. While bearing witness to racism, segregation, and bigotry in Mississippi might very well have an adverse effect on the boys, what they struggle with as they become race-conscious is not their physical environment nor the racist white people that surround them—it is the racism and colorism they perceive from their own

[11] Beyond the Taylors' treatment of the children, their treatment of each other in and of itself is concerning through the lens of attachment theory. Marital strife has long been understood as harmful to child attachment—Bowlby himself recognized "threats to desert or kill the other parent" as an antecedent of insecure attachment in children.

mother. As noted above, her inconsistent affection, and alternation between worshipping Charles and rejecting him and his blackness, are likely, with view to attachment theory, to produce an insecure-resistant attachment style. Mrs. Taylor then misplaces the blame when she scapegoats her black husband and the surrounding racist society, evading acknowledgment of the role of her own colorism in her sons' dysfunction.

Mrs. Taylor's attitudes towards race and color are not only harmful to her own relationship with the boys. They additionally impact Mr. Taylor's ability to be a good father, and potentially corrective or alternative secure attachment figure. Continual degradation from his wife wears on Mr. Taylor, and he becomes meek and ingratiating in spite of his aspirations:

> Deep in his heart he wanted to be a rebel. Had he ever become a hero in the eyes of his wife he might have been a leader. He had the physical courage… But his wife and the circumstances of his life had put out much of his fire. For the most part he was disarmingly ingratiating, not only toward his superiors but toward most persons. (11)

His "disarmingly ingratiating" nature, as a result of his wife's bullying, leads him to be an excessively ingratiating father as well. When Charles engages in immoral and criminal activity as an older adolescent, Mr. Taylor still supports him unconditionally. For example, when he escorts Charles to his court case after Charles forges a signature to write checks, "there [is] something infinitely tender in his attitude" (287). Mr. Taylor's parenting is characterized entirely by affection and absent of discipline; Charles' "father never question[s] him, never scold[s] him" (332). Though sensitivity is an important dimension of attachment—and Mr. Taylor is certainly sensitive, attempting at each turn to respond to his children's emotional needs—some non-sensitivity is actually essential to parenting a child whose attachment style is already insecure (Dozier). The reasoning for this caveat is as follows: if a caregiver is entirely sensitive to a

violent child, or a child who avoids affection and care, then that caregiver will simply avoid the child, and the relationship will dissolve completely. Consider Charles and Mr. Taylor. Charles seeks to spend less and less time with his family, leaving home to indulge in drinking and criminal activity. Mr. Taylor, whose ability to be authoritative has been ruined by his racial conflict with Mrs. Taylor, "sensitively" responds, and lets Charles go from him completely. His ability to be a strong attachment figure has thus been inhibited by the "battle of color," and resultantly hostile dynamic between himself and his wife.

II. "Their appearance meant nothing"

The end of the novel is where Himes exercises the most artistic license in changing his autobiographical story. As mentioned above, he does so because his editor requests a more "dramatic" ending of the story than was originally written. Where Himes ultimately leaves the United States entirely, moving permanently to Europe in an effort to escape legal segregation and the battle of color raging among black Americans, Charles' upbringing culminates in tragedy within the United States. He becomes less and less responsible throughout the novel, aging from an ambitious schoolboy into a college dropout who sleeps with prostitutes, steals, and gambles. When he leaves jail, he thinks he will have a choice of where to live, and elects to stay with his mom (315). However, he is ultimately placed in the custody of his father, against his wishes. Charles has been the "bone of [the Taylors'] contention" in their divorce, and his placement causes an emotional reaction from Mrs. Taylor. When she learns he will live with his father, it is "as if her blood had frozen. It [is] the bitterest disappointment she had ever suffered" (321). However, instead of fighting for additional time with her son, or requesting that he visit more often, she pushes him away entirely. "I suppose you'd rather be with your father," (322) she accuses him. Wanting any confidence in him, she assumes without question that his criminal

behavior will continue: “now you can walk to all the dives,” (322). As Mrs. Taylor pushes Charles away once and for all as a punishment for his association with his father (even though that association is largely involuntary), Charles is left without the support of his mother.

So too is he left without meaningful support from his father. Mr. Taylor, “defeated” completely by Mrs. Taylor (despite his custody of Charles) is more ineffectual than ever. In fact, Mr. Taylor is so ineffectual that Charles, ironically, begins to functionally care for him. He takes on characteristically parental tasks, such as prompting his father to go to bed: “Why don’t you put out your cigarette and go to sleep, Dad?” (323). This role-reversal causes Charles to “hate[] his father with… a violence” (326).

One morning, after a night of debauchery, Charles wakes up next to a prostitute with a sudden and intense desire to see his family. This constitutes his final reach for his parents’ support, a final return to the “secure base” which a caregiver would ideally provide. But when he gets to his father’s house, Mr. Taylor is once again unresponsive, and Charles reverts to parenting him: “Is there anything I can do for you, Dad?” he asks. When he goes to see his mother, she is gone. The aftermath of his parents’ “battle of color” has left him without a secure base at all.

Up until the very end of the novel, Mr. and Mrs. Taylor’s relationship is characterized by pure animosity. In fact, right after they get married, after Mr. Taylor rapes Mrs. Taylor, Himes notes that their marriage is completely destroyed (27). After that, there is little affection between them as racially motivated arguments consume their relationship. Ironically, it is after the divorce that Mr. and Mrs. Taylor actually begin to collaborate as caregivers. When Mr. Taylor asks Mrs. Taylor to remarry him and move back to the South, Mrs. Taylor declines. However, later that day, when Mrs. Taylor decides to search for Charles, she turns back to Mr. Taylor: “she

had to have help. So she returned to the man who'd been her husband and was the father of her children" (342). In this moment, for the first time, the two are able to put aside their racial differences:

> They resembled derelicts. But for a brief moment their appearance meant nothing. They looked into one another's eyes, all of the regret and pity welling from their tortured souls, their twenty-six years of marriage come to this, knowing in that instant that neither could go it alone. (343)

In the context of a relationship which has so far been characterized by contempt, this tender moment catches the reader off guard. For the first time, there is mutual "regret" and "pity" between the Taylors. Interestingly, these tender feelings coincide with their appearances "mean[ing] nothing" for the first time. When appearances are irrelevant, so is race, and when race is irrelevant, the "battle of color" comes to an end.

When the Taylors arrive at the scene of chaos, where Charles is endangered, Mrs. Taylor enrages Dave—one of Charles' 'friends' – which causes Dave to hit her. When Mr. Taylor retaliates in her defense, Dave stabs him. He goes to the hospital and dies with his son and his wife by his side. His final request is that Charles look out for Mrs. Taylor: "'take care of your mother, Son'" (348). In Mr. Taylor's dying words, he reflects on the familial unrest that brought them to this consequential point. "We all made mistakes…'" he whispers. "Don't—don't let them—" (348). He never finishes this final sentence, leaving the reader to wonder what mistakes Mr. Taylor refers to, and what Charles should not "let them" result in. However, it is reasonable to assume that, in the context of asking Charles to care for Mrs. Taylor, Mr. Taylor is asking for forgiveness for their bad parenting. In contrast with Mrs. Taylor's early rejections of her own

responsibility, Mr. Taylor is willing to share the blame for the consequences of their actions have had on his sons.

Regrettably, it is too late, not only for Mr. Taylor, but for Charles and Mrs. Taylor too. After Mr. Taylor dies, Charles knows that "she had gone back to his father; that she would belong to his father now forever" and that "it was his mother and father in the end" (349). Charles, then, is left alone. He recognizes that "his mother was not there now to shield him. She'd never be there again. He was alone within the horror and he knew he'd never get out. He'd always see the world through his veil of horror" (349). The very final words of the novel are "'goodbye, mama,'" as Charles parts with the idea that his mother will "shield" or "be there" for him. In this dramatic conclusion, Charles entirely dismisses his attachment to his mother. *The Third Generation*, viewed through Charles' status as the protagonist, is a tragedy of poor parenting. By the time the Taylors are able to recognize that "appearance mean[s] nothing," and disregard the "battle of color" for Charles' benefit, Charles' attachments to his parents are beyond intervention.

III. (Color) blindness

Charles is the protagonist of *The Third Generation*; the novel follows his story from beginning to end, and most of the narrative is written in close third person to reflect his inner-most thoughts and feelings. However, the Taylors two other sons are also necessarily impacted by their parents' racial conflict, and it is fruitful to examine their stories as well. Tom, like Charles, is negatively affected by the Taylor's conflict. However, instead of remaining in the presence of his parents, he leaves them entirely, choosing to seek an education elsewhere. Because the narrative focuses on Charles, and Charles and Tom do not have a close relationship, his path is not well examined in the novel. However, his choice to leave his parents behind

permanently demonstrates that the "desire for closeness" which a secure attachment typically fosters is absent; Tom, like Charles, is insecurely attached.

William, who is close in age with Charles, is a more interesting comparison. He and Charles grow up together. William is there when the paint incident causes a fight between the Taylors about the boys' hair, and when Charles "becomes concerned with racial differences," he and William attempt navigation of their new identities as "colored" together. From youth, the two are inseparable. However, William escapes Charles' fate, remaining relatively unscathed and well-adjusted.

What saves William from an adolescence marred by racial tension is, ironically, what should be a tragic accident—when Charles gets in trouble, and Mrs. Taylor refuses to allow him to perform a chemistry experiment in their school talent show, William must go on stage alone. A mistaken experiment leads to an explosion, and William is left blind in both eyes. He then has to attend a school for the blind and is separated from Charles and his peer group more broadly. William's new environment is much less race-conscious than the colorist home where he has grown up. In fact, "unlike the city schools, [in the state school for the blind] Negroes weren't segregated" (*The Third Generation* 161). Charles connects this lack of segregation to the students' disabilities— he "wondered if it was because the students couldn't see" (161). William's colorblind upbringing does wonders for his adjustment, especially as compared to Charles's dysfunction. Mrs. Taylor notices a marked difference between them: "Of the two, William was far better off [living with other people], she had long since realized. Perhaps his being blind had something to do with it. He could mix with people and make friends, whereas Charles was always self-conscious and aloof" (181). William is socially well-adjusted, making friends and "mixing" with others, (a word which has racial connotations as well as denoting the

simple idea of mingling). Mrs. Taylor connects this to his blindness, though cannot seem to locate a reason for this connection.

As time passes, it becomes unassailably clear that despite his disability, William is far better off than Charles. Where Charles' relationship with his mother is fraught and strife with conflict, William has a steady connection with her. She continuously notes his achievements and social adjustments, and continues to connect them to his blindness:

> Now William was his mother's only consolation. He'd graduated from high school that January and had received a gold medal from the school board in honor of his high school record. There had been a glowing tribute in the press. He had many nice friends; everyone loved him. She wondered at the fate that had taken his sight and yet left him so much more ambitious and nobler than his brother. (273)

Academically, William outperforms Charles; his reputation exceeds Charles'; he is happier and more sociable than Charles. According to his mother, he is "more ambitious and nobler" too! Even at the end of the novel, when Mrs. Taylor has been extremely distressed by Mr. Taylor and Charles' behavior, her relationship with William is unaffected. They have a pleasant outing together right before the story's tragic ending, wherein William is "very cheerful" and Mrs. Taylor is "immensely cheered" (340). It is clear from these passage that William and Mrs. Taylor's attachment relationship remains secure into adulthood.

One might be tempted to view William as a foil character for Charles. They are of similar age, and share the same family and same racial identity, but follow different paths because of William's blindness. But if a 'foil' is a character through whom another characters' advantages are shown, then it is actually Charles who becomes a foil for William. Even Charles recognizes that William's life has taken a more successful path. He thinks "about his mother saying God

was going to punish him for acting ugly, and how he'd thought about God afterwards when it had been Will who'd been blinded. Now he knew: *God didn't make a mistake, after all*." (350). William's blindness becomes a gift from God which allows him to avoid being consumed by his parents' racial conflict. Even Mrs. Taylor identifies William's blindness as the factor which protects him. What she does not realize that what that blindness protects him from is her own attitudes about race, and the impact of those attitudes on her parenting.

IV. Decentering race in the black family

Through the juxtaposition between William and Charles, Himes suggests that being (color)blind—placing *no emphasis on race at all*— is better for black children than succumbing to the worldviews of either Mrs. and Mr. Taylor. Both of the Taylors' worldviews are characterized by colorism. Mrs. Taylors' colorist views give her a a sense of superiority over her husband and children. Her perceived superiority leads her to treat her children with intermittent affection and callousness, a parenting approach predictive of insecure-resistant attachment styles. Mr. Taylors' internalization of Mrs. Taylor's colorism conversely give him an inferiority complex, which causes him to be overly ingratiating and sensitive, an approach which is detrimental to children like Charles, who is already insecurely attached.

William, unlike Charles, is able to avoid his parents' racial obsession through his (color)blindness. Blindness in the narrative should not be taken literally, or entirely earnestly. Himes rather uses it as a mechanism to poke fun at the Taylors' obsession with race. William's secure attachment style, and academic and personal success suggest that deemphasizing race in the family would be prudent. Such a suggestion is reminiscent of Milly, one of Stowe' motherly heroines, and her rejection of "distinctions of color" (*Dred* loc. 9552). Though the analysis in my previous chapter proved this philosophy to be somewhat problematic for black children, Himes

takes color-blindness into the twentieth century family, and employs it to ironically suggest that color-blindness is preferable to any particular focus on color. Here, it has the potential to prevent conflict within the black family.

Color-blindness is, of course, a controversial idea. However, Himes' notion of color-blindness is historically precedented. Albion Tourgée, a lawyer, politician, and activist of the Reconstruction period, introduced the idea of "color-blind justice" to the legal profession. In *Color-Blind Justice: Albion Tourgée and the Quest for Racial Equality from the Civil War to* Plessy v. Ferguson, Mark Elliot describes Tourgée's conception of the term. Simply put, in the legal sphere, color-blindness is the idea that Americans should enjoy equality under the law "regardless of race or color" (Elliot 2). Tourgée's concept of color-blindness is *not* a suggestion that race be ignored entirely; he "was not afraid to propose racial distinctions in the law where they served as enabling descriptions" (Elliot 6). Rather Tourgée simply "denie[s] the utility of the concept of race as a meaningful category of social distinction" (Elliot 3). In his argument *against* the separate but equal doctrine in *Plessy v. Ferguson*, Tourgée argued that it was not blackness, or "color" which people viewed as evil, but the relation the colored person sustains to whiteness; he used nannies and nurses, and their being allowed in white train cars as evidence for this proposition. He also argued that one's race is often "impossible of ascertainment" (Elliot 287), challenging the construct of race at its root. William's blindness symbolizes color-blindness like Tourgée's; Himes does not necessarily suggest a color-blindness where race is altogether ignored, but rather one where race is decentered as a meaningful category.

At the time of *The Third Generation's* publication, legal activists preferred the race-conscious rhetoric of *Brown v. Board of Education* to Tourgée's notion of color-blindness. "Nowhere in the *Brown* case does one find the kind of ringing egalitarian language and probing

racial logic found in Tourgée's *Plessy* brief" (Elliot 314). In a sense, the Taylors' parenting is reminiscent of the logic of *Brown v. Board*—they see "two races," and both understand blackness, when separated from whiteness, as the inferior category. William, conversely, represents Tourgée's colorblind logic—for him, race is quite literally "impossible of ascertainment," and as such, a social category without meaning.

Given that a critique of parenting is at the center of *The Third Generation*, it is fitting that Charles' final impulse in the novel is to find *his* child. Early in the novel, Charles gets a woman named Peggy pregnant, but does not make himself available to her or the incoming child. Once he loses both of his own parents, though, he changes his mind: "He'd look up Peggy too. She had his child somewhere. He'd find out where she was and write to her. He'd tell her everything. Maybe she'd understand. If she would have him after that he would marry her. If she wouldn't, maybe she'd let him help the child" (*The Third Generation* 350). The reader, at this point, has lost trust in Charles' judgment. Thus, it is difficult to tell if this return to domesticity is hopeful or ominous. After all, the novel has thus far suggested that attachment styles are intergenerationally transmissible.[12] This suggestion is consistent with attachment theory, as research supports a connection between supportive parenting in adulthood and the maternal sensitivity one receives early in infancy (Raby et al. 115). Attachment styles *tend*, with some variation, to be stable across generations (Benoit & Parker). If Charles, consistent with this research, is as harsh as his mother, as ineffective as his father, or as caught up in color and race as either of them, he is likely to be a poor secure base for his own children. However, if Charles is able to look to William's success, and let go of the colorist attitudes imbued in him by his

[12] The thread from Mrs. Taylor's own insecure attachment to her poor parenting suggests the intergenerational transmission of attachment styles in the novel.

parents, his choice to become involved with the *fourth* generation of children could actually be quite hopeful.

Himes is not the only author who explored discrimination, segregation, and the legacy of slavery's impacts on child attachment in the twentieth-century black family—Toni Morrison offers a similarly child-centered narrative in *The Bluest Eye* (1970). Where Himes villainizes the Taylors, and *The Third Generation* implicitly blames them for their sons' insecure attachment and maladjustment, Morrison writes with more sympathy for ineffective caregivers. She also proposes a different solution to the represented familial strife, forgoing Himes' ideal of color-blindness for a suggestion far more akin to Stowe's notion of selflessness and sympathy as keys to social change.

Chapter 3

"Adults do not talk to us": Attachment and Self-esteem in Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*

The Bluest Eye is the first of Toni Morrison's novels, and the one which focuses most closely on parenting, child attachment, and the home. Set more than a century apart from Stowe's anti-slavery fiction, the novel explores many of the same themes, including featuring interracial attachments between black caregivers and white children at the expense of black children. Like Himes' fiction, it focuses on the state of the black family, and the issues underlying poor attachment outcomes for (particularly black) children. Published in 1970, the novel arrived 16 years after *The Third Generation*. They describe similar time periods—Himes describes an upbringing in the 1930s, Morrison in the 1940s. However, the novels are quite different in their historical postures; Himes routinely references the Taylors' ancestral roots as slaves, where Morrison refuses this explicit reference, allowing the legacy of slavery to emerge not from any declaration, but from her characters' experiences.

The novel's focus on dolls, particularly the contrast between the (adored) white doll and the (neglected) black child, is an opaque reference to what is commonly called "The Doll Study," a psychological experiment conducted by Kenneth and Mamie Clark in the 1940s. In the study, the Clarks asked children, both white and black, to choose their favorite doll among a group of dolls who were identical with the exception of their skin color. They did so to discover whether or not race-consciousness had negative psychological impacts on black children, particularly in the area of self-esteem; they found that both white and black children generally preferred lighter-skinned dolls, and determined that from a young age, black children are aware of and self-conscious of their race (naacpldf.org).

The findings from the Doll Study were later employed in the Supreme Court's *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954) decision, wherein the plaintiffs argued that segregation was detrimental to black children's self-esteem. The Clark's testimony, though not explicitly cited, is present in the following passage: "To separate [black children] from others of similar age and qualifications solely because of their race generates a feeling of inferiority as to their status in the community that may affect their hearts and minds in a way unlikely ever to be undone" (*Brown v. Board of Education*, 1954). Both Himes and Morrison appear to respond to this notion in their work— as described in my previous chapter, Himes demonstrates that the more pressing harm done to black children stems from the focus on race *within* their own families, not their segregation from white students (though integration is positively portrayed in Himes' representation of William). Morrison's main characters are three black girls: Claudia and Frieda, who are sisters, and their classmate Pecola. These characters live in an at least somewhat integrated environment. They attend an integrated school and have white neighbors. However, despite Justice Warren's suggestion in *Brown* that segregation is culpable for a feeling of inferiority within black children, Morrison's child characters, even in their integrated environment, continue to exhibit damaged self-esteem.

In her foreword to the novel, Morrison frames the loss of black children's self-esteem as the central issue of the text: "The death of self-esteem can occur quickly, easily, in children, before their ego has 'legs', so to speak" (Morrison ix) she writes. Thus, like Himes, Morrison rejects legal segregation as the primary source of black children's maladjustment. Rather, social comparison between black and white children in the context of integrated schools, particularly comparing who receives more care (and more attachment attention) from adults, is the source of the 'death' of children's self-esteem in the novel.

The parallels between *The Third Generation* and *The Bluest Eye* lie not just in their similar responses to the social and legal context of the day (*Brown v. Board*), but also in their way of setting an idyllic domestic scene, then, as Sandra Wilson Smith noted, "exploding" it (Smith 39). *The Bluest Eye* begins by describing an ideal domestic scene. "Here is the house," Morrison writes. "It is green and white. It has a red door. It is very pretty. Here is the family. Mother, Father, Dick and Jane live in the green-and-white house." (Morrison 3).[13] Like Himes, this perfect domestic scene falls apart. But where Himes does so slowly, over the course of the novel (and, as a chronological narrative, over the course of Charles's life), Morrison "explodes" her domestic scene immediately. She writes out of chronological order, in her words "break[ing] the narrative into parts that ha[ve] to be reassembled by the reader" (Morrison xxi). This style allows her to spoil the ending of the story— Pecola will be pregnant with her father's baby, and the baby will die— without spoiling the mystery; the reader knows that the story they are reading is a far cry from Dick and Jane but remains unsure how such atrocities could come to be. Morrison promises to explain not why, but how, the tragedy occurs. In her final words before the bulk of the text, she writes, "There is really nothing more to say— except why. But since why is difficult to handle, one must take refuge in how" (7). Though Morrison brushes off the question of why, it lingers in the reader's mind, unresolved. Why was Pecola neglected by her mother, and assaulted by her father? Why did her (and her other black peers) feel under-nurtured by their attachment figures? Here, I propose that two different misunderstandings of the Bible—Mrs. Breedlove's and Elihue Whitcomb's—explain why black children are under-supported in Morrison's fictional world. Further, I will argue that Morrison makes a return to Stowe's

[13] This beginning passage refers to a collection of basal readers which describe a happy, stereotypical, suburban, white American family.

insistence upon selflessness and sympathy, presenting Claudia's undying concern for black children like herself as a hopeful omen for the future of attachment in the black family.

My analysis of biblical readings in *The Bluest Eye* is supported by Matthew Smalley's criticism, particularly his article "The Anxieties of Literary Preaching in *The Bluest Eye*". Smalley defines literary preaching as "a portable and variable form in U.S. fiction and poetry wherein U.S. authors evoke sermons and sermonic language at narrative junctures or cultural crisis" (Smalley 777). Like myself, he identifies Elihue as a bad Christian who repurposes religion to justify immorality, and characterizes Claudia as a potentially transformative figure, who despite not being overtly religious, embodies a reading of the Bible to correct Elihue's misreading. Smalley comments generally on Christianity's function in the novel. He writes, "Christianity functions…as either a thin religious veneer beneath which people recklessly pursue their various material or sexual desires, or as a form of ideological mystification" (Smalley 788). Only in Claudia do the true principles of Christianity run deep. Here, I will extend Smalley's analysis to touch upon child attachment, addressing how biblical misunderstandings impact caregiver-child relationships in the text.

I. Intraracial and interracial attachments

Claudia and Frieda feel overlooked and under-cared for by the adults in their life. "Adults do not talk to us," Claudia's narrative voice laments, "they give us directions. They issue orders without providing information. When we trip and fall down they glance at us; if we cut or bruise ourselves, they ask us if we are crazy" (Morrison 10). She feels most particularly a lack of sympathy for the *hurt* of black children. The quality of a black child's hurt, to recall the evocative title of Himes's autobiography, is the focus of Morrison's fiction. Their physical injuries are disregarded and mocked by adults. This is indicative of parenting which is

insensitive to children's needs, and suggests that Claudia's attachments to the adults in her life are insecure.

However, Claudia and Frieda are ultimately loved and protected. Though perhaps brusquely, Claudia's mother nurses her back to health in sickness. They are also protected from sexual violence. When Mr. Henry, a boarder in their house, touches Frieda's breasts inappropriately, Frieda recounts to Claudia what happens: "I told Mama, and she told Daddy, and we all come home, and he was gone, so we waited for him, and when Daddy saw him come up on the porch, he threw our old tricycle at his head and knocked him off the porch" (100). In this anecdote it is clear that while Claudia and Frieda have parental figures who care for them and are willing to fight for their safety in the face of danger.

Claudia and Frieda's classmate and neighbor, Pecola, represents the dramatized extreme of under-nurtured, insecurely attached black children. Her domestic life is characterized by marital conflict and lack of warmth. Everyone in their house, including Pecola, her brother, and her father, call her mother "Mrs. Breedlove". This distant address indicates a lack of warmth and closeness between Pecola and her mother. Mrs. Breedlove is miserable in her own home, "holding Cholly as a model of sin and failure, she bore him like a crown of thorns, and her children like a cross" (127). Employing a biblical metaphor, which Mrs. Breedlove as a character has consciously constructed, Morrison demonstrates that Mrs. Breedlove views herself as a martyr— even perhaps a messiah, like Jesus— in her own home. In the Judeo-Christian tradition, the crown of thorns symbolizes humiliation and suffering, it is placed on the head of Jesus when he is given the title "King of the Jews" in John 19:20. Mrs. Breedlove feels humiliated by her husband's lack of industriousness and want of moral principles. The cross is a sign of the crucifixion and connotes Jesus' ultimate sacrifice. As a once devout Roman Catholic, (later a

self-described lapsed Catholic), Morrison is a reader of the Bible. In the novel, she suggests that Mrs. Breedlove *misreads the crucifixion*: Mrs. Breedlove is not "interested in Christ the redeemer, but rather Christ the Judge" (42). Thus, her self-conception as a martyr does not imply redemption, but rather judgment on those around her, those who fail to live up to her idea of what it means to be good.

There is a stark contrast between Mrs. Breedlove's self-ascribed martyrdom in her own home, and the joy with which she works for a white family called the Fishers as a nanny and housekeeper. Where she distinguishes herself and her identity from her own children, house, and family, she feels a sense of ownership in the Fishers' home. She dedicates herself completely to their domestic bliss:

> She became what is known as an ideal servant, for such a role filled practically all of her needs. When she bathed the little Fisher girl, it was in a porcelain tub with silvery taps running infinite quantities of hot, clear water. She dried her in fluffy white towels and put her in cuddly night clothes… No zinc tub, no buckets of stove-heated water, no flaky, stiff, grayish towels in the kitchen sink, dried in a dusty backyard… Soon she stopped trying to keep her own house. The things she could afford to buy did not last, had no beauty of style, and were absorbed by the dingy storefront. More and more she neglected her house, her children, her man— they were like the afterthoughts one has just before sleep, the early-morning and late-evening edges of her day, the dark edges that made the daily life with the Fishers lighter, more delicate, more lovely…Here she found beauty, order, cleanliness, and praise…Power, praise, and luxury were hers in this household. (127)

In the Fishers' home, Mrs. Breedlove has everything she needs materially, and revels in her

proximity to good, expensive things, such as the "porcelain tub" and "fluffy white towels." She also revels in the validation she receives with the Fishers— Mr. Fisher "praises" her— where her own husband takes her for granted. Her place of servitude, then, becomes an ironic place of power. When compared with her martyrdom and despair in her own home, "power, praise, and luxury" are irresistibly seductive. Mrs. Breedlove begins to "neglect" her own children.

From an attachment perspective, Pecola's father's abuse, in combination with her mother's neglect, would likely result in a disorganized attachment style. Disorganized children, unlike insecure-avoidant or insecure-resistant children, have no coherent attachment strategy. They are at risk of both externalizing and internalizing problems, and often exhibit a strange combination of resistant and avoidant traits. In placing Pecola in an environment suggestive of disorganized attachment, Morrison represents the *very extreme* of insecure attachment and insufficient parenting.

In just one scene in the novel, Mrs. Breedlove's two worlds come into contact: Pecola, Claudia, and Frieda are in the Fishers' house, watching her work, which necessarily involves watching her care for the young white child. The Fishers' little girl calls Mrs. Breedlove "Polly," as a nickname and term of endearment. Pecola, her daughter, only addresses her formally and distantly, as "Mrs. Breedlove." Mrs. Breedlove's differential treatment of Pecola and "the little pink-and yellow girl" (109) becomes even more pronounced when Pecola accidentally drops a pan of warming blueberries. Mrs. Breedlove briefly yells at Pecola for ruining "[her] floor", calling her a "crazy fool" (109). She then turns to the Fishers' child, and comforts her. "Hush, baby, hush. Come here" (109), she says. As is evident in Mrs. Breedlove's offering of physical and emotional comfort to the white child (while offering Pecola only scrutiny), all of her parental energy is reserved for the Fishers. In fact, she refuses to even acknowledge the existence of her

own children in the Fishers' household. When the white child asks who Pecola, Claudia and Frieda are, she says "Don't worry none, baby," (109). It is clear from her sensitive responses, undivided attention, physical affection, emotional closeness, and exchanged terms of endearment, that Mrs. Breedlove has formed a strong attachment to this child, one clearly demonstrably stronger and more secure than the one she has formed with her own daughter.

Morrison's representation of interracial attachment at the expense of black children is reminiscent of Stowe's work. Here, as in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, *Dred*, and *The Minister's Wooing*, a black caregiver forms a strong attachment with a white child, which on its face is positive and loving. However, these attachments, in both Stowe and Morrison's fiction, cause black caregivers to neglect their own children. Of course, the contexts of these relationships are vastly different; in Stowe's work, set in the nineteenth century, the black caregivers are enslaved, and thus *bound* to their white charges, and *forced* to leave their own homes and children behind. Wishing to represent positive interracial familial relationships, Stowe often made her black caregivers childless so as to avoid representing the downsides of interracial attachment. In *The Bluest Eye*, Mrs. Breedlove is not bound to the Fishers by a system so rigid as slavery, her engagement with their family is voluntary—and paid. However, the novel does not necessarily *blame* her for her choice to dedicate herself to the Fishers' home; though Claudia's narration views this choice through a lens of jealousy and violence, the broader text understands, and perhaps even sympathizes with, Mrs. Breedlove's choice. The Fishers' home is the only place where she experiences personal empowerment and fulfillment. Morrison writes of black women that "the only people they need not take orders from were black children and each other" (138). Mrs. Breedlove is no exception, though she attempts to resist Cholly's commands, her words carry little weight in her household, and despite her status as the breadwinner, is subjected to

verbal, physical, and sexual abuse from her husband. Though she might exert power over her own children, she is frustrated by her limited and inadequate resources with which to do so. Disempowered in and disillusioned by her own community and her family's economic struggle, "luxury" and "praise," even in the context of a service job, lead her to prefer the company and house of the Fishers.

Mrs. Breedlove's insufficient investment in her attachment to her own daughter, as noted above, is partially to do with her feelings of helplessness around their socioeconomic status. Though it is difficult to ascertain the relationship between socioeconomic status and attachment security, psychology researchers have found that "poverty and insecure attachment are related" (Sherry et al. 3) but that "they are only related insofar as the poverty creates opportunities for attachment slights through things like substance abuse, abuse, or neglect" (Sherry et al. 3). Potential mechanisms for the relationship between poverty and insecure attachment include employment demands and mental health of parents (among other factors). Note that both of these potential mechanisms underlie Mrs. Breedlove's neglect of Pecola in *The Bluest Eye*. The connection between socioeconomic status and attachment, and Morrison's clear (if not entirely conscious) awareness of that connection, is further evidence that Mrs. Breedlove, as an individual agent, is not to be "blamed" for Pecola's neglect.

II. "The death of self-esteem"

Similar to Himes' portrayal of William and Charles' upbringing and their growing consciousness of race, Morrison demonstrates a shift in Claudia and Frieda, from childishly ignorant to fully conscious of racial difference. One day, the sisters walk home from school with Pecola and Maureen Peal, a light-skinned girl in the children's class whom Claudia's narrative voice describes as "a high-yellow dream child" (Morrison 62). When Maureen begins picking on

Pecola, and Claudia and Frieda lash out in her defense, Maureen exclaims that she is "cute" and they are "ugly" (73). The sisters, though they are jealous of Maureen's treatment by teachers and peers (62), are baffled:

> What was the secret? What did we lack? Why was it so important? And so what? Guileless and without vanity, we were still in love with ourselves then. We felt comfortable in our own skins, enjoyed the news that our senses released to us, admired our dirt, cultivated our scars, and could not comprehend this unworthiness. (74)

This passage indicates that the sisters' innocent, race-unconscious feelings of intrinsic self-worth have begun to fade; they internalize the societally enforced difference between themselves and Maureen Peel, as they question what they lack which she possesses. Morrison's past-tense here— "we *were* still in love with ourselves then" — implies that in the end, they no longer love themselves, and someday, someday soon, they *will* "comprehend [their] unworthiness".

This consciousness of race, and the sisters' internalized inferiority is also clear in a scene showcasing Claudia's relationship to white baby dolls. Unlike the participants in Clark's famous Doll study, who tended to admire white dolls, Claudia prefers to "destroy[]" and "dismember[]" them (22).[14] She makes an explicit connection between her feelings toward white dolls, and her feelings toward her white peers: she experiences a "transference of the same impulses to little white girls" (22). The dolls— and the girls— inspire violence in Claudia, not because she feels a hostility toward any of their traits, but because of the adoration bestowed on them by others. Claudia "examine[s the doll] to see what it was that all the world said was lovable" (21). She examines the doll almost scientifically, trying to discern the essential difference between herself and white girls her age. She wants to "discover what eluded her: the secret magic they weaved on

[14] Claudia later shifts from hatred for the dolls to admiration of them, though deems this "adjustment without improvement" (23).

others. What made people look at them and say 'Awwwww,' but not for me? The eye slide of black women as they approached them on the street, and the possessive gentleness of their touch as they handled them" (22-23). Here, she wonders about society largely, addressing "the world" and "people". However, the one specific group which she addresses directly is "black women," and the attention which she covets from them is the attention they give to white children, the "possessive gentleness". As such, when Claudia watches Mrs. Breedlove dote on the Fishers' child, providing her with a "possessive gentleness" which she denies Pecola, and allowing the child to call her "Polly," Claudia is infuriated. She feels "the familiar violence [rise] in her" (108), as the white child reminds her of the "lovable" doll.

Pecola, whose self-esteem also flags, believes she can answer Claudia's question ("What was the secret? What did we lack?") She resolves that the essential attribute she lacks is blue eyes, equating having blue eyes to being "beautiful". "If she looked different," she muses, "beautiful, maybe Cholly would be different, and Mrs. Breedlove too. Maybe they'd say, 'Why, look at pretty-eyed Pecola. We mustn't do bad things in front of those pretty eyes'" (46). She connects white children's beauty (as subjectively assessed through white beauty standards, through proximity to Shirley Temple's pale skin, blue eyes, and blonde curls), to the attention and care they receive from adults. As a child, she cannot understand the economic insecurity, abuse, and subjugation that leads Mrs. Breedlove to neglect her. Desperate for parental protection from "bad things," she arrives at the delusion that her eye color, her phenotypic blackness, are the reason she has been treated with continued disregard.

Throughout *The Bluest Eye*, black children pine for parental attention and "possessive gentleness". Pecola, having been abused at home and bullied at school, internalizes a sense of unworthiness and comes to believe that having blue eyes is the only thing which could make

adults care to shield her from "bad things." Junior, another black boy in town, acts out because he sees his mother love and care for a cat more deeply than himself. Claudia and Frieda, though their parents do make efforts to keep them safe, cannot help but internalize the lack of care they see afforded to other children like them. This want of parental attention, and lack of attachment security, is the condition underlying the *death of their self-esteem.*

III. "Suffer the Children…"

Where does this leave black children? If society does not care for them, and their own mothers (or fathers) do not care for them, who will? Morrison gives the reader a horrifying answer: pedophiles— people who are sexually attracted to children, and who may act on this attraction, resulting in horrific acts of sexual assault— will be the only adults left to care about children who are worst off, those who have been neglected, abused, or entirely forsaken by their intended caregivers.

As Morrison reveals at the very beginning of the novel, Pecola is raped by her father. In a drunken stupor, he sees her, and experiences a string of varied emotion: "revulsion, guilt, pity, and then love" (Morrison 161). He struggles with the sense that Pecola must love him, wondering "What was he supposed to do with that? Return it? How?" (161) and in attempting to return it, feeling "tenderness and protectiveness" (162) toward her, his physical affections escalate into sexual assault.

This is not Pecola's only encounter with pedophilia. At the very end of the novel, she visits a "Reader, Advisor, and Interpreter of Dreams" named Elihue Whitcomb, to ask him to help turn her eyes blue. He concocts a spell with which to help her (though in actuality just forces her to poison his landlord's dog). Elihue is a pedophile; over the years "his [sexual] attentions… gradually settled on… children" (166). As such, when he meets Pecola and falsely

grants her request, “his flesh crawl[s]” (173) as he talks to her and touches her, marking her with the sign of a cross. However, in a sense, he treats her with great care and sensitivity; rather than belittling or disregarding her pain, he feels for her “waves of compassion” (174). The reader can clearly see that his behavior is contemptible, and they can also clearly see that Elihue loves, and cares for Pecola in a way no one else has (aside from perhaps Cholly, similarly) until this point in the narrative.

Following his interaction with Pecola, Elihue sits down and writes a letter to God. He describes his previous sexual experiences with young girls, and blames God, challenging particularly the portion of the Bible in which Jesus blesses the children:

> You have to understand that, Lord. You said ‘Suffer little children to come unto me, and harm them not,’ Did you forget? Did you forget about the children? Yes. You forgot. You let them go wanting, sit on road shoulders, crying next to their dead mothers. I’ve seen them charred, lame, halt. You forgot, Lord. You forgot how and when to be God. (181)

Later in the letter, he deems himself better at loving children than God and His other creations:

> I did what You did not, could not, would not do: I looked at that ugly little black girl, and I loved her. I played You. And it was a very good show! (183)

The “suffer little children…” verse is typically construed to mean that Jesus valued, and cared for children, and so good Christians should as well. As I describe in my first chapter, “Suffer little Children” is also employed in Stowe’s *Dred*. However, where it is there used earnestly to demonstrate that Tiff and other black caregivers are ideal, Jesus-like Christians, here Morrison employs it ironically, as an obviously areligious and immoral character implies that he is above God Himself. Elihue accuses God of forgetting about his promise, blithely allowing children to suffer. In Elihue’s eyes, God’s allowing girls (particularly black girls) to grow up without care,

makes *him*, a generally contemptible *child molester*, a more loving, more helpful, and therefore more Jesus-like, figure. Here, he offers another *misreading* of the Bible to rival Mrs. Breedlove's; he does not fear God, envisioning himself as superior to God, and thus believing he has the license to do what he pleases with the children he "loves". Smalley views Elihue's letter as an instance of literary preaching, and like myself, describes his "us[ing] the sermon to defend his sexual predation" (Smalley 780).[15] Though Elihue (and Cholly's) behavior is obviously deplorable, and Elihue's "use of the sermon", and vision of himself as Christian (or moral) man is obviously delusional, his societal critique lingers in the reader's mind. After all, who in the story has loved Pecola more than these two pedophiles?

IV. Selflessness, sympathy, and the black family

In Stowe's fiction, the target of the social critique is clear: unfaithfulness. Once Christians harness their sympathy to abolish slavery as a sinful institution, children will be better cared for. Stowe's fiction suggests that beyond slavery, secure and healthy attachments will form between caregivers and children regardless of race. Her vision, though, is unrealistic and sentimental: Stowe's idealization of the relationships between motherly black caregivers and white children neglects the needs of black children to be cared for, too. In Himes' fiction, the target of the social critique is similarly clear: racism, particularly as internalized in the black community. *The Third Generation* suggests that if black parents can recognize that "appearances mean nothing", or in other words, resist internalized racism and reject colorism, more secure attachments for black children will result. However, Himes' social critique is also somewhat simplistic. Though he acknowledges the generational forces which lead the Taylors to be poor

[15] Smalley's suggestion that Christianity is used to "defend… sexual predation" in the novel is further supported by another anecdote: when Henry, the man who sexually harasses Frieda while staying in the MacTeer home, is driven from their property, he sings "Nearer my God to Thee" (Smalley 788), like Elihue, suggesting that he has some grounds for religious superiority.

attachment figures, he nevertheless paints them as uncomplicated villains.

Morrison's societal critique is distinct from those of her predecessors because the blame is difficult to locate. Children, of course, cannot be blamed for the lack of care and attachment attention bestowed on them by others. Mrs. Breedlove, and other such black mothers who prefer to devote their care and attention to white children and households, feel disempowered and subjugated in their own homes. The economic conditions which they find themselves in are crushing, and those conditions, in combination with marital strife, make caring for white children far more satisfying and fulfilling, and far less tragic, than caring for their own. Black mothers who redirect their attachment attentions toward white children, then, also cannot be truly blamed.

Even Cholly, the *abuser* of the black child, cannot be uncomplicatedly blamed. He himself had a tragic upbringing— he is deserted as a baby, and when he seeks in adolescence to find his living parent, his father, he is yelled at and sent away. Neglected in childhood, he also experiences sexual harassment at the hands of a group of white men at a young age. Directly before describing his assault of Pecola, Morrison gives the reader reason to sympathize with, or at the very least, better understand Cholly: she explains that "having no idea how to raise children, and having never watched any parent raise himself, he could not even comprehend what such a relationship should be" (160). Having not received enough attachment attention himself, Cholly is unable to give it, and when he attempts to, he is so clueless as to cross the boundaries of society's most universal taboo in the name of returning Pecola's love. Morrison offers the possibility that had Cholly been raised with more care, he might have a better idea of how to father. She reflects upon a hypothetical, wondering that "had [Cholly] not been alone in the world since he was thirteen, knowing only a dying old woman who felt responsible for him, but whose age, sex, and interests were so remote from his own, he might have felt a stable

connection between himself and his children" (160-161). Essentially, in the novel's view, even the most despicable behavior does not occur in a vacuum; poor parenting and insecure attachment is a generational concern for which individuals cannot be culpable.

I devote myself to locating blame in *The Bluest Eye*, because the novel comes five years after "The Negro Family: The Case for National Action" by Daniel Moynihan, a governmental report for the black family commonly called "The Moynihan Report." This document blamed black culture for the dysfunction of black families, claiming that a matriarchal structure which descended from slavery has undermined the authority of black men. The Moynihan report suggests employment for black men as a solution to this problem. As Clay Starr notes in his "The Public Exposure of a Private Confidence: The Origins of 'Black Inferiority' in Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye,*" the Moynihan report "portrays the typical white American family as a cultural ideal, and the black family as the image of brokenness and inferiority" (Starr 5). The report perpetuates stereotypes of black men as lazy and irresponsible, and wrongfully scapegoats' black families as the cause of their own misfortune.

In "Morrison's *Beloved* and the Moynihan Report", James Berger argues that in *Beloved*, another of Morrison's novels, "by emphasizing African American and feminist perspectives, [Morrison] corrects the most damaging liberal errors—the denial of African American culture and agency and the slighting of African American women that characterized liberal thought [in Moynihan's report]" (Berger 408). I would extend this analysis to argue that *The Bluest Eye* functions similarly—by emphasizing, from a point of view *within the black family*, the perspectives of black children, Morrison rejects the Moynihan Report's conception of the supposed 'matriarchy', by demonstrating that such a matriarchy is pure myth. In refusing to blame any of her characters particularly, she also refuses the harmful logic of the Moynihan

report and its blame of the black family.

But if the remedy to concerns within the black family is not so simple as employing black men like Cholly (as the Moynihan report suggests), where does the solution lie? What is the ideal point of intervention? *The Bluest Eye* ultimately suggests that its narrator, Claudia, and her unique sympathy for other black children, represents a way forward. Though her narration is not overtly religious, Claudia embodies a reading of the Bible which, in its faithfulness to well-acknowledged Christian principles, trumps both Elihue and Mrs. Breedlove's misreadings; she *sympathizes* with black children. She has an innate skepticism for her peers' worship of white features, only hesitantly giving into a "fraudulent love" for Shirley Temple (23). However, even as Morrison suggests that she will someday "comprehend her unworthiness," Claudia's concern for *other* black girls, her innate love and selflessness, never allow her to fully internalize the belief that black children are unworthy of love and care. When Pecola is pregnant, and the whole town appears indifferent, Claudia's concern is insistent: she feels 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" (191). The only thing she fails to realize is that she herself, and Freda, are that *someone*; in planting their marigolds, and praying over them, they radically resist the rest of the world's mishandling of black children.[16]

Never in the text does Claudia identify herself as religious. However, I am not the first to identify her pronouncements of sympathy and concern for Pecola as religiously significant. Smalley similarly understands Claudia to have a religious purpose in the novel. He identifies her

[16] Starr similarly identifies Claudia as a hopeful figure in the novel, though he locates her power not in her sympathy and affection for other black children, but in her resistance of the notion of black superiority, and even racial classification more broadly (Starr 13). Jasmine Griffin, in "On the Ethical Dimensions of Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*" views Claudia *and her family* as the source of ethical goodness in the novel, as they "take [Pecola] in, feed her, give her shelter, a place to sleep, [and] maternal and sisterly care" (Griffin 675). According to Griffin, the importance of welcoming and embracing of the stranger as the MacTeers do is the key message of the novel.

final pronouncement as a sermon, seeing that it "mirrors the syntactical parallelism of black preaching… [and also] signifies on the language and themes of Isaiah 53" (Smalley 799). Through Claudia, Smalley argues, we are able to "see that Jesus's knowing, mournful glance simultaneously serves as a unique moment of recognition, a moment in which violence against the black child neither goes unnoticed or unmourned" (Smalley 803). I would echo Smalley's analysis, adding that Claudia's biblical understanding is corrective of Mrs. Breedlove and Elihue's misreadings. Unlike Mrs. Breedlove's, her understanding of religion does not center around punitive judgement of others. Unlike Elihue, she makes no pronouncement of her superiority to God. Instead, she humbly, without even a hint of self-righteousness, extends sympathy to her neighbor. In doing so, she embodies Jesus' teachings with more effectiveness than those who claim to be religious.

As I noted in my discussion of *The Third Generation,* attachment styles are often stable over generations. However, the intergenerational cycle of insecure attachments can be broken; "intergenerational association in parenting [is] mediated by later competence in relationships with peers and romantic partners" (Raby et. al. 115). Even beyond childhood, it is possible to have corrective attachment experiences with peers and romantic partners. These corrective experiences can make those who were insecurely attached in childhood more likely to be sensitive, warm parents who cultivate security for their own children. In *The Bluest Eye,* Claudia represents this seed of hope. If only more people would mourn for Pecola in a world which refuses to, demonstrating genuine Christian sympathy, the black children of the future might be fully loved and cared for, and more securely attached.

Conclusion

I was lucky enough to be well-parented and well-nurtured in my childhood. When I attempt to position myself in the foregoing literature, as someone who is blonde-ish, blue-eyed, and was blessed with nurturance and protection as a child, I recognize that I am far more like the "pink-and-yellow girl" in the Fisher family, whom Claudia so detests, than any of the children of color whom I have chosen primarily to focus on in the preceding thesis.

Recalling Morrison's lament that many of her readers "remain touched by not moved" after reading her fiction, it has been my mission, as I conduct this study, to determine what being "moved" might look like for a reader like myself. It is not without trepidation that I engaged this mission and attempted to sympathize with characters with whom I have little in common. After all, it is well-acknowledged that privilege can be blinding, that those of us with certain advantages are unable to see, or to fully comprehend, the condition of those without such advantages. Perhaps I am not the person best suited to understand the unattached child.

Nonetheless, it is impossible not to sympathize with these characters. In sharing their stories and offering a window to the personal and unspeakable, these texts have affected me (as fiction is apt to do). As I conducted this research, I was inspired by Marianne Noble's description of sympathy in its most helpful and least patronizing form: "sweet, skeptical sympathy." Such sympathy does not assume or require sameness. Noble writes, "sympathy of the sweet skeptical variety is a path to human contact… that accepts the heart's unknowing knowing, that approaches the other with wonder, care, and imagination" (3). I can only hope, in reflecting on this project, that I have approached this subject matter with such wonder, care, and imagination.

To close, I would like to reflect on some of the conclusions I have drawn from applying attachment theory to Harriet Beecher Stowe, Chester Himes, and Toni Morrison's novels. I have learned so much in conducting this research which I hope my readers may also take away.

First, I would like to note that attachment, *long* before it was actually conceived of as a psychological theory in the late-twentieth century, has always been intuitively understood by those who closely examine human behavior in the context of the family. While reading Stowe, Himes and Morrison's work, I have been shocked by the descriptions of the characteristics of (what we would now deem) secure and insecure attachments, present in the work of authors who would not have been familiar with the 'official' developmental concept. Though fiction obviously cannot be compared to psychological research, which can support theories using the scientific method, the presence of these ideas in writing as early as the mid-nineteenth century (and perhaps earlier) lend credence to the universality and coherent logic of attachment theory.

The most significant commonality between Stowe, Himes, and Morrison's depictions of attachment is that each of them suggest that black children disproportionately experience insecure attachment relationships with their caregivers. In these texts, slavery and its many legacies, including racial discrimination and economic inequality, intrude upon the intimate sphere of the family, negatively impacting parent-child attachment.

However, where there exists a common thread between the *issues* presented by Stowe, Himes, and Morrison, they each propose a different solution to the insufficient attachment security afforded to black children.

Stowe advocates for Christianity, and its related virtues of selflessness (or disinterested benevolence) and sympathy. It is these qualities that make characters good caregivers, or mothers. In combination, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, *Dred*, and *The Minister's Wooing* suggest that the

institution of slavery is in conflict with Christianity, in part because it impedes secure attachments.

Himes describes with excruciating rawness, and auto-biographical accuracy, the connection between colorism within the black community (as a legacy of the institution of slavery) and insecure/unhealthy attachments between the Taylor children and their parents. His pitch for deemphasizing race as a meaningful social category, though perhaps contemporarily unpopular, is immensely thought provoking.

Morrison writes from the perspective of the child herself, giving voice to the party whose attachment security, and consequently, self-esteem, is at risk. In *The Bluest Eye,* she suggests that exercising Christian sympathy and concern for black children is of utmost importance to the future of those children's attachment security. Her work, though differing significantly in setting, genre, and tone, recalls Stowe's original plea for readers to exercise "pity".

The problems underlying insecure attachments which Stowe, Himes, and Morrison elucidate— impiousness, racism, and unsympathetic indifference to black children's pain, respectively -- may seem massive, and practically impossible to correct. However, just as societal forces intrude upon the family in these texts, the family has the potential to impact society. These narratives also suggest that change *within* the parent-child dynamic, or *within the domestic home*, might be a powerful agent of broader change. Stowe believed that Christian sympathy, and subsequent secure attachment, experienced on the individual level could manifest in global change. When Ophelia learns to be a secure attachment figure and kind caregiver, the impacts of this individual shift span continents, as Topsy's behavior improves, she attains an education, and becomes a missionary abroad.

Studying attachment, and particularly insecure attachments, can at times feel bleak. However, potential for the actions of individuals, within their own family systems, to provoke broad social change represents a glimmer of hope in this field of study.

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