

**The Secret Life of Bees:**  
**A One-Way Entitlement to Intimacy**

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*Set in 1964 against the backdrop of the rural South and the passing of the Civil Rights Act, white author, Sue Monk Kidd's recent coming-of-age novel, *The Secret Life of Bees*, plays host to a number of extraordinarily positive African-American characters. After my reading of Toni Morrison's *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*, however, Kidd's characters no longer seem believable. Rather, these better-than-good portrayals of African-Americans, more readily become an example of the 'Africanist' presence of which Morrison speaks in her critical discussion of the ways in which the African-American presence has fashioned the American literary landscape. In *Playing in the Dark*, Morrison points out the use of the black presence in the narrative works of famed, canonized authors and exposes the metaphorical referents of race as a "division far more threatening to the body politic than biological 'race' ever was."<sup>1</sup> Morrison uses six major "linguistic strategies employed in fiction to engage the serious consequences of blacks," to guide the reader in identifying and re-examining literary characterizations of African-Americans and the contexts in which they appear.<sup>2</sup> By applying these linguistic strategies to a close reading of *The Secret Life of Bees* I will consider one of Morrison's thoughtful questions, "How do embedded assumptions of racial (not racist) language work in the literary enterprise that hopes and sometimes claims to be 'humanistic'?"<sup>3</sup>*

Originally delivered as part of Harvard's William E. Massey, Sr. Lecture Series, Toni Morrison's treatise on American literary criticism, *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* focuses on what she terms the "Africanist" presence and how it has shaped the imagination and scholarship of American literature. Ensclosed within the intellectual dominance of canonical literature, "American writers," says Morrison, "were able to employ an imagined Africanist persona to articulate and imaginatively act out the forbidden in American culture."<sup>4</sup> Using examples of narratives by authors such as Hemingway, Cather and Faulkner, to name a few, Morrison's *Playing in the Dark* examines the fabrication of this Africanist persona by shifting "the [reader's] critical gaze from the racial *object* to the racial *subject*, from the described and imagined to the describers and the imaginers; [and] from the serving to the served."<sup>5</sup> Morrison identifies six major linguistic strategies that perpetuate the displacement and disconnection of blacks, giving the reader a new lens of awareness through which to examine American literature and the ways in which it is "complicit in the fabrication of racism."<sup>6</sup> Morrison's investigation was not intended to discredit the writings of these authors but rose rather out of concerns that such a framework for analysis was absent from literary scholarship and therefore incomplete. It is with this attitude and through Morrison's lens that I offer an analysis of white author, Sue Monk Kidd's contemporary novel, *The Secret Life of Bees*.

Set in the mid-sixties, just after the Civil Rights Act has passed, *The Secret Life of Bees* unfolds in rural South Carolina. Because the author chose to locate the story in the South, and

to people it with multiple black characters to its one white protagonist (and several minor white antagonists), she provides ample evidence of the racialism that dominates American literature and has contributed to the classifying and stereotyping of individuals.

Despite what we know of the sixties as a time of intense struggle for change after a beleaguered history of racial violence, Kidd sets the novel in the distant past of softer times. The reader is tempted to luxuriate in idealizations of the white South—lazy, hot summers with an abundance of fresh food, simple comforts and picturesque settings—and dismiss the inequities that existed for black Americans. Safely segregated from the white world, African-Americans were either invisible or they were fodder for the romanticized myth of a happy-faced people, grateful and perfectly content in their place and position.

The story, narrated by a young white girl, reinforces such simplifications and uses the rising Civil Rights movement as a backdrop for the girl's personal quest for self-completeness and happiness. I am not certain whether to attribute the dismissive naiveté of the novel to the fourteen-year old narrator and protagonist, Lily Owens, or to the author. The complexities of living in the South as a black person during that time are glossed over. Though Monk sprinkles *The Secret Life of Bees* with episodic details that show some examples of racial conflict, their appearance has more to do with furthering the protagonist's journey than with deepening the dimensionality of the characters or locating the fictional landscape within an authentic period of history.

Missing from Kidd's romanticized novel are contributing factors that affect race, such as economics, class, women's issues, and differences between urban and rural settings, which leave her characters dislocated from a tangible, sociological framework. Had *The Secret Life of Bees* been written back in the sixties—the time in which it was set, rather than in 2002—it would be understandable, for at that time, public awareness of the disparity between the lives of blacks and whites in the South was suppressed. Attempts to keep racial inequities hidden from mainstream America were obvious to activists or to those connected to intellectual and socially aware communities but for the rest of white America, especially the North, the picture was that things weren't so bad. It might look that way on the news, but things just really weren't that bad, and would return to normal sooner or later. For writers who choose to take on black issues in American literature today, oversimplifying or omitting such contextual factors is untenable and presents a picture of the times in which discrimination seems to be "self-evidently valid and natural."<sup>7</sup>

Within this inauspicious landscape, Kidd predictably endows her protagonist, Lily, with unconditional entitlement to the minds and bodies of the black women characters while the black characters have neither the awareness of their objectification nor reciprocal entitlement. Morrison refers to this distancing as a way of reinforcing "a subordinate class from realms of value and esteem."<sup>8</sup> For example, in the beginning of the book, Lily impassively introduces the reader to her housekeeper and nanny, Rosaleen, with an intimacy of physical detail that renders Rosaleen more as an object than as an individual.

Rosaleen had worked for us since my mother died. My daddy...pulled her out of the peach orchard, where she'd worked as one of his pickers. She had a big round face and a body that sloped out from her neck like a pup tent, and she was so black that night seemed to seep from her skin. She lived alone in a little house tucked back in the woods, not far from us, and came everyday to cook, clean, and be my stand-in mother. Rosaleen had never had a child herself, so for the last ten years I'd been her pet guinea pig.<sup>9</sup>

Were Rosaleen a peripheral character, this physical description might suffice, but Rosaleen is a prominent character, and remains so, throughout the novel. With Lily presumptuously likening herself to Rosaleen's would-be, pet guinea pig, Kidd inadvertently

presents Rosaleen as a voiceless projection of the white narrator's fancy. Just because Rosaleen is childless doesn't necessarily mean that she would choose the accommodating, care-giving, nanny/mammy role.

Early on in the novel Lily reveals (from an eight-year-old perspective) that she doesn't know Rosaleen's age because "she didn't possess a birth certificate."<sup>10</sup> Rosaleen tells Lily that she is one of seven children and she "[doesn't] know where a one of [her siblings] is;" that in order to feed them all, her mother sold sweet-grass baskets on the roadside.<sup>11</sup> Lily immediately dismisses Rosaleen's story and, without sympathy, launches into her own daydreams of ways in which Rosaleen could become her real mother or where "*she* [Rosaleen] could adopt *me* [Lily] (emphasis added). Kidd inserts these few poignant details of Rosaleen's history but misses the opportunity of portraying Rosaleen as a character with an identity and a viewpoint of her own. Instead, Rosaleen is treated as a prop and serves the function of furthering the narrative.

Another example of Lily's one-way entitlement to intimacy is illustrated in the spaces between the conversation she is having with Rosaleen. Lily's emotionless description of Rosaleen begins, "Her lip was rolled out so far I could see the little sunrise of pink inside her mouth." While looking at Rosaleen who is shelling butter beans in preparation for Lily and her father's dinner, she continues, "Sweat glistened on the pearls of hair around her forehead. She pulled at the front of her dress, opening an airway along her bosom, big and soft as couch pillows."<sup>12</sup> Lily's privilege and easy access to Rosaleen's body is not reciprocal and reinforces a conceptual separation of human beings through what Morrison describes as "metonyms that displace rather than signify the Africanist character."<sup>13</sup> Almost immediately following this voyeuristic description of Rosaleen, Lily orders her to "Come look at this thing."<sup>14</sup> Lily orders Rosaleen; she does not ask her. And finally Rosaleen is objectified even further with Lily's projection as normative and valid: "I was the one who knew that despite her sharp ways, [Rosaleen's] heart was tenderer than a flower skin and *she* loved *me* (emphasis added) beyond reason."<sup>15</sup>

By chapter two, Kidd gives Lily the ability to leave her own space—her own body—and enter the mind of the black character altogether. Before, Lily had access only to Rosaleen's physical body; now, she is also capable of reading her thoughts and speaking for her. Overriding Rosaleen's ability to think and speak for herself, the author relays Rosaleen's feelings and thoughts through Lily's projection, as though it were Rosaleen's own voice. Rosaleen functions as a blank canvas for Lily's imagination. It is through Lily's white entitlement, not her increased intelligence, that Kidd unconsciously expands her white character's autonomy, and, in proportion, diminishes her black character. Kidd reveals her own disregard for the larger situation by neither exposing Lily's shallowness for what it is, nor ripening it into greater understanding and wisdom somewhere before the novel ends.

Kidd reinforces the inequities between the races with a heroic jailhouse/hospital break that Lily masterminds in order to save Rosaleen. "There is quite a lot of juice to be extracted from plummy reminiscences of 'individualism' and 'freedom,' says Morrison, "if the tree upon which such fruit hangs is a black population forced to serve as freedom's polar opposite."<sup>16</sup> Kidd moves the reader across the Southern landscape vacuously interrupting it from time to time with racially inspired dramas; but she does not deepen the reader's understanding of the racial complexities of the times. The main directive of the narrative remains Lily's search for the remnants of her mother's life. Although Kidd has constructed the relationship between Rosaleen and Lily based on mutual need, with Rosaleen as the escapee, she has little else to do but to assist Lily.

Eventually the two are led to the safe haven of the Boatwright sisters, a family of African American beekeepers who previously cared for Lily's mother prior to her death. From this point on, the story is tightly woven around the call-and-response theme of Lily's loss and search for her mother among these metaphorical, black mother figures. While Lily's pain at being motherless is justifiably deep and significant, the most significant attribute given the black

characters—from Rosaleen to August Boatwright and her sisters—is their wide bosom for carrying pain, so much so, that it seems irrelevant if they should have a little more. Kidd records the tiniest details of the narrator’s sentiments, from her fears to her pleasures, as poignant vicissitudes of life, pregnant with significance, while, in contrast, she blithely describes the black sisters as serenely steadfast, regardless of the greater challenges and hardships they have suffered. When Lily is finally ready to come to terms with her pain, it is August who bears it in another one-way interaction which Lily describes:

I was pressed so close to her I felt her heart like a small throbbing pressure against my chest. Her hands rubbed my back. She didn’t say, “Come on now stop your crying. Everything’s going to be okay . . .” She said, “It hurts, I know it does. Let it out. Just let it out.” So I did. With my mouth pressed against her dress, it seemed like I drew up my whole lifeload of pain and hurled it into her breast, heaved it with the force of my mouth, and she didn’t flinch. She was wet with my crying. Up around her collar the cotton of her dress was plastered to her skin. I could see her darkness shining through the wet places. She was like a sponge, absorbing what I couldn’t hold anymore.<sup>17</sup>

The Boatwright’s function in unison, as a selfless, idealized support system for Lily. As characters, they remain servile to the narrative, coming from nowhere and going nowhere on their own. For example, the particularly broad stroke Kidd uses to introduce and describe a local women’s spiritual group, the Daughters of Mary, is so generalized the reader cannot distinguish one “daughter” from another. This illustrates what Morrison refers to as “economy of stereotype,” another linguistic strategy that “serves primarily as a quick and easy image without the responsibility of specificity [or] accuracy.”<sup>18</sup> The beloved and behatted “Daughters” lend a dramatic Africanist presence to the novel’s unfolding but they remain unknowable as individual characters outside the group identity.

Sue Monk Kidd’s acknowledgments at the end of the novel, list five resource books about bees and insects. No list of resources relating to black identity or the contemporary African-American experience is mentioned. Perhaps this is why her portraits of African-Americans, though extremely likable, remain inauthentic—as imaginings not quite of this earth. Each and every one of the black characters is beyond reproach—models of integrity and moral excellence. But a fictional portrayal of an African-American character need not be better than good to be palpable, or recognizable as a positive Africanist presence.

Kidd’s use of a Black Madonna sculpture is central to the novel’s theme. Through it, a distinctly Africanist presence permeates the air, epitomizing the mysterious *fetishization* to which Morrison alludes in *Playing in the Dark*.<sup>19</sup> Kidd’s Black Madonna, veiled in allegorical mystique, functions as the centerpiece for pulling the entire story into the universal theme of the Mother, the power of the feminine, and selfless love around which imaginative ceremonies play out. The problem with this Black Madonna is that it has no grounding in reality. Part Christianity and part homegrown myth, the Black Madonna springs from the author’s imagination—a “dehistoricizing allegory [that] produces foreclosure rather than disclosure.”<sup>20</sup> For example, where authentic African folklore establishes a cultural link to the Motherland and reinforces identity and pride for African-Americans, Sue Monk Kidd’s Madonna reinforces the behaviors of slavery and oppression. In the fictionalized reenactment of “Our Lady of Chains,” proclamations of freedom and overcoming are parodied but because the ritual is inauthentic the effects ring hollow. With this colorful and disjointed Madonna figure as the black community’s symbol for hope, albeit, an empty, fabricated hope, both pride and meaning are displaced and diminished. “What is bound will be unbound. What is cast down will be lifted up. This is the promise of Our Lady;” yet the lasting image is of a black Madonna wrapped in chains.<sup>21</sup>

What makes Toni Morrison’s *Playing in the Dark* so compelling is its extended life after the

reading. After pointing out that “the readers of virtually all of American fiction have been positioned as white,” she asks “what that assumption has meant to the literary imagination...when does racial ‘unconsciousness’ or awareness of race enrich interpretative language, and when does it impoverish it?”<sup>22</sup> Because racism cannot afford to parade itself in the blatant ways that it once had, it has found more subtle ways to operate. Morrison’s careful line of questioning speaks to that subtlety causing writer and reader alike to be hyper-aware of “the sources of black imagery and the effect they have on the literary imagination and its product.”<sup>23</sup>

Applying her method of inquiry to *The Secret Life of Bees*, the novel becomes a case study of the ways in which the Africanist presence continues to survive in the contemporary literary landscape. By probing the questions about *Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* from a subjective point of view, the reader’s awareness of the limitations of a writer’s capacity to create an authentic Africanist literary presence is expanded and deepened. Where knowledge remains disconnected from experiential reality, it has the tendency to fray into allegory and myth, or worse still, into idealizations that hold no great promise for moving us beyond a personal pathos to clear-sightedness. *Playing in the Dark* is an essential primer for identifying “the ways in which the nonwhite, Africanist presence and personae has been constructed—invented—in the United States, and the literary uses this fabricated presence has served.”<sup>24</sup> Morrison’s investigations act like a restorative tonic to our consciousness from which wider applications of thought, and deeper levels of inquiry into the literary imagination become possible.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Toni Morrison. *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*. (New York: Vintage, 1993) 63.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid. 67.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid. xii.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid. 66.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid. 90.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid. 16.

<sup>7</sup> For a complete discussion of this concept, see James Snead’s quote in *Playing in the Dark*. 66-67.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid. 67.

<sup>9</sup> Sue Monk Kidd. *The Secret Life of Bees*. (New York: Penguin, 2002) 2.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid. 12.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid. 12.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid. 10.

<sup>13</sup> Morrison 66.

<sup>14</sup> Kidd 11.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid. 11.

<sup>16</sup> Morrison 64.

<sup>17</sup> Kidd 238.

<sup>18</sup> Morrison 67.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid. 68.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid. 65.

<sup>21</sup> Kidd 228.

<sup>22</sup> Morrison xii.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid. x.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid. 90.

Since graduating from UNC Asheville in the spring of 2006, **Linda Larsen** has returned to her full-time practice as a studio artist. Her interest in social and political issues and their effects on the personal psychology of the individual, determines her work as a painter, writer, sculptor and printmaker. Larsen appreciates the intersection of the literary and visual arts and chooses materials that best convey the ideas she is wrestling with. The thought process is heavily stoked with irreconcilable perspectives before the fire.

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