

**CHAPTER FIVE**

**PICTURING THE CHILD: TONI MORRISON AND MNEMONIC**

**VISUALITY**

Mama may have,

Papa may have,

But God bless the child that got his own!

—Billie Holiday and Arthur Herzog, Jr., “God Bless the Child.”

Black children, as already noted through Baldwin’s interest in the issue, have historically grown up with a crippling sense of identity and lack of confidence. In this chapter, these challenges and instances of children overcoming these in important historical periods as well as their everyday lives are focused through the works of Morrison.

The aims of the chapter are

- (i) to show how education needs to be redefined in new ways when confronted with the changing demands of modernity;
- (ii) to show how autonomy in children centre-stages the child’s own thought process and enables self-expression;
- (iii) to show how Morrison’s visual projects help the African American community retain the past;
- (iv) to show how remembering is embedded in the politics of African American history-making; and
- (v) to show how re-telling, re-inserting the invisibilized/silenced is a way of modernizing the mind through photos that re-store, remember.

When Richard Wright documents the Great Migration, it is not just a record of the terrestrial movement of one population. The implications of this shift/ migration were manifold, including a new way of life for African American population. There were new groups and formations within the larger African American population determined by economic status, means of livelihood, gender and age. What followed is that each group experienced a brand of modernity—and its consequences like racism—that did not match the experience of the other. In this experience of modernity children remain an overwhelming presence but often ignored population in these moments of history, barring instances of how they suffered. It becomes necessary to recognize how they survived through silent battles and resilience. In “‘Indisputably Available’: The

Texture— Gendered, Sexual, Violent—of James Baldwin’s Southern Silences,” Ed Pavlić talks about “lattice of silences” with reference to the obscurity which surrounds black women. We can here extend this ‘lattice of silences’ to the consideration and acknowledgement of the role of children, “silences left in the creases between the histories in fiction and fictions in history” (Pavlić 18).

A line that develops in this thesis is of the visual being used by each writer differently to suit their works. In the case of Morrison and here, specifically *Remember: The Journey to School Integration* (2004) and *Please, Louise* (2014), the visuals are a part of ‘fictional’ narrative. Away from furnishing evidence, these visuals—in photographs and sketches—first, offer a narrative thread through which a historical period of segregated schools is recounted and second, narrate a single day in the life of a black child.

bell hooks’ engagement with the visual, as will be seen in the next chapter, built up on the aesthetic of a plea for ‘switching’ between the indigenous and institutional. In taking up Morrison, the focus is on her aesthetic of mnemonic revisioning. This aesthetic draws on the possibilities of the photograph/ visual—the “moment of its making” as well as the “many possible moments of its viewing” (Smith 4). It can be suggested that Morrison is experimenting with forms of expression for a new kind of self-expression. In exploring these possibilities of the photograph, she renders it a new meaning and context. Her photography books and books for children can help link black art to modernity, one, by creating a platform for re-visioning and, two, for associating education with empathy and originality. In first taking up the photographs for *Remember*, actual events of history and real people are brought within the spectrum of a fictional narrative. It can be said that Morrison’s experiment poses questions about the manifold interpretations that photographs might be exposed to. Of course, those dialogues were not running in the subjects’ mind when the photographs were clicked. However, the author invents these utterances as an accompaniment to the pictures and gives the photographs a context. The author here produces a story, building up from historical material. Since the material chosen here is the photograph, the politics of seeing here encompasses the ‘possibilities of viewing’ embedded in photography.

In the light of these texts, education as a hallmark of modernity needs to be redefined in new ways according to changing circumstances in history. Toni Morrison

has included in her body of work a number of children characters as victims of racism. The texts that this chapter deal with though, show children in general as active agents of change. For the purpose, the insistence is on an education that teaches children empathy and understanding along with a knowledge of the subjects designed for school curricula. Morrison argues for lending autonomy to the child's thoughts, so that she grows up as an individual of her own merit, rather than being taught 'who/what to be.' She collaborates with her son Slade Morrison and illustrator Shadra Strickland for a colourful rendition of a day in the life of a girl in *Please, Louise* (2014). Similarly, *Remember: The Journey to School Integration* (2004) is a photo-book concerning the involvement of children in the years that elicited contrasting views regarding the necessity/abolition of segregated schools. In selecting these texts, the intention is to centre-stage the child as an interpreter and co-producer of modernity. The chapter argues for a visual experiment where interpretation is open to the author, in that she 'puts' words in the mouth of the photographic subjects. That way, photographs which cannot themselves explain anything, are open to "deduction, speculation, fantasy" (Sontag 24). The visuality of this experiment differs from earlier ventures like in Du Bois' and Wright's engagements with the medium precisely because of the incorporation of fictional dialogues and monologues.

### **Toni Morrison and the African American Child**

In Toni Morrison and the concerns of the chapter thereof, her forays (a few of the corpus) into children's literature are dealt with. Children, as we see in her works suffer the trauma of racial prejudices and sustain it into their adulthood. In her most celebrated works, the child becomes the representation of the individual's past and the course of events that entail in the novels. In the works discussed here, namely *Please, Louise* and *Remember Me*, children are an overwhelming presence. The child becomes the most powerful presence as well as subtle indicators of a group (here, children) who are glossed over in major literary successes on racial studies. The thesis itself suggests the African American children's roles as both as subjects and intended audience right since Du Bois' role as an editor of a children's magazine called *The Brownies' Book*.

The African American writers' concern to let the children be tethered to their history is meant to create thinking as well as empathetic children. Baldwin's influence on Morrison and her admiration for him has been subject of enough research. Baldwin's

venture into children's literature in *Little Man, Little Man: A Story of Childhood* (1976) is preceded by his occasional references on the need for self-esteem in African American children, their education and the need for a vision. The introduction to the 2018 edition of *Little Man, Little Man* by Nicholas Boggs and Jennifer DeVere Brody quotes Baldwin's essay "If Black English Isn't a Language, Then Tell Me What Is?":

It is not the black child's language that is despised. It is his experience. A child cannot be taught by anyone who despises him, and a child cannot afford to be fooled. A child cannot be taught by anyone whose demand, essentially, is that the child repudiate his experience, and all that gives him sustenance, and enter a limbo in which he will no longer be black, and in which he knows he can never become white. Black people have lost too many children that way. (Baldwin, *Essays* 783)

Morrison edited Baldwin's collection of essays in 1998 and it becomes important here to see, how they place the role of education in shaping a critical vision in children. In his essay titled "A Talk to Teachers," Baldwin contrasts bland acceptance of ideas forced on a child versus her ability to decide on the same:

The purpose of education, finally, is to create in a person the ability to look at the world for himself, to make his own decisions, to say to himself this is black or this is white, to decide for himself whether there is a God in heaven or not. To ask questions of the universe, and then learn to live with those questions, is the way he achieves his own identity. (678-79)

This is reiterated in Baldwin's *Little Man, Little Man* too: "TJ's father read Muhammad Speaks sometime, but then he say, 'Don't believe everything you read. You got to *think* about what you read'" (70). Morrison steps in this line of tradition because her views on education and children in general were very much in sync with Baldwin's, a writer she admired. In an interview to Robert Capriccioso in 2003, she voices her concern for a generation of young children who "don't have their own lives and their own experiences" (qtd. in Ropero 47). In other words, children—especially black children—live their lives according to some determined standards. Her experiences in Princeton in her capacity as a Professor alert her to the consequences of this life which has been 'thrust' upon young people: "You keep wondering and you want to scratch them a little

bit to see what's really underneath that enormous burden and commitment" (47). Like Baldwin, the emphasis here is on enabling children to think and decide: "trust the children to figure it out...give them the opportunity to figure it out and applaud them not because they are beautiful or because they ate their food but when they figure something out on their own" (47). Interestingly, only one of her works written for children, *Remember* (2004) foregrounds racism and an episode in African American history. The rest, that is to say, her repertoire of children's books concern children in general, or say, even the education system. Again, all of these are picture-books, making the visual experience as important a factor as the fable it narrates. These books, like *The Big Box* (1999), *The Book of Mean People* (2002), *Who's Got Game? Three Fables* (2007), *Please, Louise* (2014) reworks popular fables, inserts oral tradition and most importantly, illustrates. It would appear that her aim is to change the focus from African American enlightenment to 're-visioning'. The key is to create a platform for the black community to 'see' and 'show' and 'tell' how children's stories—innocent, simple, ordinary stories of everyday life as well as universally read and followed fables—are implicated in politics. The idea is to find a device that allows or forces a point of view that is not admitted or acknowledged. The design is the inclusion of a focus on growing children, their education, experiences with bullying or even re-inventing stories that the young people are already aware of. Other than a few tales where the characters speak like black youngsters, as in "The Grasshopper and the Ant," her children's books concern children's issues in general and do not restrict to their racial identities. These issues—the issues pertaining to children and race—are dealt with in her works such as *Sula* (1982) where Sula and Nel are bullied by a few Irish immigrant boys just to fit in the white community and "echo" the way they despise blacks.

### **Children Out There: Colours, Illustrations and Louise**

In a picture book with colourful pictures and very few words, *Please, Louise* can be read as Morrison's attempt to divest the child's mind of ideological loads. In presenting a rainy day in the life of a small girl who sets out with her umbrella and raincoat rather than sitting inside, the child explores possibilities because "Things are not always what they seem" (Morrison, *Please* n.p.). In the first instance, the sky that now looks grey promises that "After the rain, birds break into song". In a rather dismal setting that is far from green, Louise is assured that "There's nothing hiding in those trees". In the next

picture, there is a musician and Louise is entertained with the idea to not “scurry too fast and miss the music of the street”. The emphasis is on the little joys of life even on a rainy day. Louise on her walk next chances upon a house that looks haunted; but the other possibility is that it might “just need care” (Fig. 13). One could choose to be scared of it, or “imagine the joy that used to be there”. Making imposed thoughts versus self-discovery more pronounced is the picture of a junkyard which is deemed “a dangerous trap where ghosts live and monsters nap”. This is only to be ruled out by the assurance that “Scary thoughts are your creation when you have no information”. Louise finds shelter in a place where “you are never alone”—in this case, a library (Fig. 14). A single illustration with Louise absorbed in reading, that covers two pages associates reading with imagination, and hence a door to “let it soar” (n.p.). The next illustration, again, a single picture covering two pages has Louise reading and the reader gets a glimpse of everything her imagination is being fed with: ranging from information to fables to fairy-tales (Fig. 15). The book ends with Louise all happy, in the company of a book and a dog she was initially scared of, for “She can understand what she feels, since books can teach and please Louise” (n.p.).

Though not populated with many events or even a gripping storyline *Please, Louise* accentuates Morrison’s basic insistence on trusting children to figure things out on their own. She is concerned about children who do not have their own experiences. Often, their reactions are already determined, and their experiences set, rather than explored. *Please, Louise*, in all its limitations, gives the reader a visual experience of a young child in a little adventure on her own, reading books and discovering things, and most of all, stopping by to notice little things and not taking anything at face-value.

The illustrations by Shadra Strickland for Morrison’s book employ a variety of colours to describe the occasional greys and storms as well as the happy colours of imagination. Each of these illustrations emphasize Berger’s dissection of ‘seeing’, in that “Seeing comes before words. The child looks and recognizes before it can speak” (Berger 7). The child ‘sees’ the extraordinariness of ordinary events for herself, and ‘responds’ accordingly. The reader ‘sees’ the child’s reactions to the little events around her: apprehension, fright, curiosity or happiness as the case may be. The words reaffirm the reader’s ‘seeing’ or even informs of the child’s alternative reactions to the situations. The words as well as the pictures conjure up the child’s dive into a world of learning—

say, in a library—and then exploring on her own and privileging her own experiences rather than hearsay. In each of these cases than, the child’s autonomy is under emphasis. In acknowledging these experiences, the African American writer also acknowledges the spirit of children who can figure things on their own.

### **African American Children and Modern Liberal Education**

In line with the attribution of autonomy to children, it is important to consider how and why it is denied to them. Martha Nussbaum explains this lack of independence in children’s thoughts and articulation by pointing out what shapes these: “the voice of tradition or convention, the voice of the parent, of friends, of fashion” (180). It can be suggested, through Morrison’s investment in the issue of children’s autonomy and freedom, that education needs to be cognizant of the child’s ability to think for herself. María Lordes López Ropero (2008) associates Morrison’s emphasis on children’s autonomy of thought with a “liberal philosophy of education”: “Both Baldwin and Morrison argue for self-reliance and critical thinking as liberating life skills. Their own work and struggles rest on this vision” (47). Ropero establishes this view (on Toni Morrison) by aligning the importance of a child’s interests being shaped by her choice rather than being determined for her.

The idea of modern liberal education has found its advocates in John Dewey, Martha Nussbaum, etc. Dewey, for instance, insists on the child to ‘act’ rather than passively listen for her to become a distinct individual (Dewey 33-34). If this is denied, the child ends up “having to say something” instead of “having something to say” (56). The result is, as the slight rearrangement of words denote, saying something out of compulsion, in that way, an already determined response rather than an articulation shaped by the child’s own thoughts. She also mentions ‘empathy’ as an intended aim of liberal education: “the ability to think what it might be like to be in the shoes of a person different from oneself, to be an intelligent reader of a person’s story, and to understand the emotions and wishes and desires that someone so placed might have” (10-11). In listing these functions of liberal education through Nussbaum, Ropero identifies the tone of *Remember: The Journey to School Integration*. The tone, as its title suggests, is the idea of remembrance. The book is a collection of photographs aimed at intimation of the present generation regarding the struggles of the past. The period of history that finds place here is the time following the desegregation of schools on May 17, 1954 with

reference to the case of *Brown v. Board of Education*. In inventing this historical period with children's words and thoughts, along with their photographs, Morrison places these young people at the centre of the civil rights movement. What becomes apparent here is the child's experience as well as the child's voice.

### **Echoing their Silences: Presenting/Absenting**

In the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision, Toni Morrison, in a discussion with Cornel West, says that what interests her about this historical event is that children were in the "frontline," and were made participants in something that was "bigger than they were" (qtd. in Ropero 53). Yet what is surprising is the conspicuous silence on these children as a 'frontline' member. In Morrison's works like *God Help the Child* (2015), the child becomes the victim without having any say. In other words, 'things happen' to the child, the child does not make things happen. The story starts with the reader anticipating some misfortune, with a woman repeating that it isn't her mistake that something 'wrong' has happened. This leads the reader only to discover that a child is born: "She was so black she scared me. Midnight black, Sudanese black" (3). The child, Luna Ann, later renaming herself into Bride is codified in racial terms right from the beginning. Luna Ann's mulatto mother hates her for being black, "Ain't nobody in my family anywhere near that color" (3). The story is a reworking of the ugly duckling tale. Luna Ann, despised from her childhood by both parents transforms into a professional success by the very codes through which she was racialized in her childhood.

The Luna Ann-Bride journey consists of painful excursions to childhood trauma; yet it is the adult Bride who sets out on a journey of self-fashioning. The child, deprived love and touch alike, is talked of in terms of a crime that is born. Her mother is persistent in uttering: "Her color is a cross she will always carry. But it's not my fault. It's not my fault. It's not my fault. It's not" (7). Luna Ann is a 'fault', an accident; her 'crime' being born with a colour that made loving or even touching her an uncomfortable experience for her mother who has internalized the racial codes which are thrust on an African American child: "for me, nursing her was like having a pickaninny sucking my teat. I went to bottle-feeding soon as I got home" (5).

It is interesting to notice here how racism pervades otherwise instinctual performances associated with motherhood. I bring in *God Help the Child* not to show how Bride emerges triumphant over a racist upbringing but to highlight the ‘silences’ that are characteristic of her childhood. The reactions of people around her are circumscribed in visual terms (here, colour). In her adulthood, the appreciation of her beauty hinges on the “commodification of Otherness” and “getting a bit of the Other”, as described by bell hooks and which has been discussed in detail in the last chapter. For now, it is enough to suggest that when Luna Ann transforms into a desirable woman in *Bride*, her appearance, earlier codified in racial terms, mutates into figures of ‘otherness’ which everyone wants a taste of. No wonder then, that her identity and appearance are codified in food metaphors. Jeri, her designer friend advises her to “always wear white, *Bride*. Only white and white all the time” (33). The description that follows this, on zeroing down to white to accentuate her blackness are all suggestive of a fetish and appetite for the Other: “licorice skin”, “more Hershey’s syrup than licorice”, “whipped cream and chocolate soufflé” (33). Later, difference is both sexualised and exoticized, the result is what bell hooks associates the desire for the Other and the exploitation of the same, leading to maintenance and the reinscription of the status quo (hooks, “Eating” 367). The descriptions, for instance, attributed to *Bride* by Jeri: “All sable and ice”, “A panther in snow”, “those wolverine eyes” (Morrison, *God* 34). The admiration she garners also borders on a fetishization of the exotic: “Everywhere I went I got double takes but not like the faintly disgusted ones I used to get as a kid. These were adoring looks, stunned but hungry” (34).

It is pertinent that the event of being ‘seen’ is persistent in the mutation from the ugly and despised Luna Ann to the beautiful and successful *Bride*. The ‘visual’ is the dominant form of relation in the stages of her life. However, the child is just acted upon and the adult acts. This is the difference between the two primary illustrated and picture books chosen for this chapter and works like *God Help the Child*, which again has its predecessor in say *The Bluest Eye*, *Tar Baby* etc. Particularly in *Remember*, the emphasis is on how the major decisions of the State propel changes in the lives of children and how they cope as well as fight the changing circumstances. Silences are addressed, blank stares in photographs are given words so that the reader can understand the inner workings of the child’s mind and the conflicting thoughts and questions which surround her in this period of transition.

## Remembering in Photographs: Words as *Punctum*

In an introductory note to the intended audience in *Remember*—i.e., American children—Morrison’s plea to the reader to ‘remember’ is in consonance with Nussbaum’s “empathy” as a desired aim of education. The ability to think by being in someone else’s place and to understand their emotions and responses to a particular situation is dealt with in this project through the use of photographs. Remembering entails a generation of empathy:

None of that happened to you. Why offer memories you do not have? Remembering can be painful, even frightening. But it can also swell your heart and open your mind. (Morrison, *Remember* 5)

In *Remember*, thus, photographs, or in the context of the thesis, visuality is appropriated to ‘stir up’ memories because “you are a part of it” (5). Terming the act of ‘remembering’ as the first step to ‘understanding’, children are made the subjects of photographs as well as a picture of what segregated schools entailed, with respect to the emotional responses of both races to it.

It is necessary to note that the whites/ white children are not made villainous in any way. There are photographs of whites leading protests, teaching black children or even sharing, in what seems, friendship in common classrooms. The book tells a story about a few years of history, and the writer’s role comes into play when she, to “enliven the trip” down memory lane, “imagined the thoughts and feelings of some of the people in the photographs chosen to help tell this story” (3). The word ‘imagined’ conjures up the presence of fictional elements in the words that accompany the text. That is to say, the pictures are real, the people are real too, and the point of time through which they traversed is genuine, and in conformity with the writer’s depiction of the story.

It is clear that the dialogues are contextualized in the sense that these might not have been the thoughts and utterances of the people photographed. The writer puts these words to accentuate inequality and racism that defined segregation and the aftermath of the Brown decision and how the two races coped with it. The photograph, that is to say, has many “lives” and “afterlives” as Ariella Aïsha Azoulay states in a 2021 article, “The Captive Photograph.” She says this in relation to daguerreotypes; and to how these are

used to record instances of slavery and identify the enslaved as nothing else but slaves. It has its roots in Eurocentric methodology and Azoulay calls up for a line that needs to be drawn between scholarship and the perpetuation of violence. Morrison averts this imperialistic turn of photography, one that denies African Americans who are photographed (here, more children) any agency. As suggested by Berger, the photographs now become “material” for the writer’s “argument” (Berger 26). That way, it leads the reader, through the photographs and the accompanying words to the writer’s “own conclusions” (26). John Berger touches upon the use of words with painting reproductions. It can be extended to a reading of *Remember* too, in its use of photographs and words running side by side: “It is hard to define exactly how the words have changed the image but undoubtedly they have. The image now illustrates the sentence” (28). The mention of ‘imagining’ what these photographs speak is evidence enough of the change that has been imposed through a careful selection of utterances that the writer endows in the photographs. Suffice is to say that the photographs had an “original independent meaning” (28) and their use in this photo-book make these a part of an argument which has little to do with it. Children constitute a bulk of these photographs, in conformity with Morrison’s belief that they were confronted and hence involved in circumstances bigger than themselves.

Roland Barthes in *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography* names two elements of a photograph that establishes his interest in it. The first, a feeling he names as ‘studium’ is his use of the term to connote an “average affect, almost from a certain training”. This feeling of familiarity with these being received as say, “political testimony” or “good historical scenes” determines his interest in so many photographs. His participation in this form of the visual is ‘cultural’, and he emphasizes this aspect by paranthesizing it: “it is culturally (this connotation is present in *studium*) that I participate in the figures, the faces, the gestures, the settings, the actions” (Barthes 26). The second element performs the function of punctuating the stadium, hence named punctum. While the first element arises from the viewer, her/his cultural situation, the second arises from the photograph itself and “rises from a scene, shoots out of it like an arrow, and pierces me” (26). Barthes refers to these as sensitive points that punctuate the photographs. Further, the studium as a standalone, deprived of a punctum receives as much attention in Barthes’s analysis as the one co-existing with it. This is because majority of the photographs are of this sort: “the studium, insofar as it is not traversed, lashed, striped by

a detail (*punctum*) which attracts or distresses me, engenders a very widespread type of photograph (the most widespread in the world), which we might call the *unary photograph*” (40).

Following up on Barthes three aspects to be taken care of here are: that not all photographs incite attraction or distress, that is to say, not all photographs invite strong emotional investment; two, these ones constitute the larger chunk of the visual (here, photograph) that we witness in our everyday life; third, Barthes uses the term ‘unary’ to describe the banality of it, since unity of composition is its only adhering principle. The subjects of these, as Barthes quotes from a handbook for amateur photographers, “must be simple, free of useless accessories; this is called the Search for Unity” (41). The punctum is a detail that attracts; the punctum and the studium are connected by co-presence. That is not to suggest in any way that all photographs consist of a punctum. Barthes mentions the exhaustive photographs he sees in newspapers every day: “journalistic photographs are received (all at once), perceived...no detail (in some corner) ever interrupts my reading” (41). The difference here is being interested in certain photographs (the unary), and the ones which prick (those that consist of punctum).

In *Remember*, the inclusion of photographs is an attempt to ‘prick’ the viewer/reader— something characteristic of the punctum. It refers to a period which the current reader has not experienced, geographically, temporally and otherwise. Since ‘remembering’ as an act builds upon memory, and here the memory is aptly represented by photographs, it can be suggested that the accompanying (fictional) words perform a function like the punctum does in a photograph. These pictures, unary at best, are picked up to aid imagination and empathy. The larger purpose is to bring to the centre the emotional struggles of children in segregated schools and what ensued when integration came forth. For the uninitiated reader, a photograph with a child staring blankly would just be the same, achieving the unity of composition. With words infused into these images as supplementary material, it tends to shift into a narrative where every stare and blank are attributed to a reason. It is as if the function of pricking the viewer, in otherwise banal photographs is taken up by the author’s intervention with fictional dialogues.

In her experiments with “picturing,” *Remember* is both a visual record of the injustices of segregation as well as an underlying dialogue and monologues/ reflections (which serve as punctum) in apparently innocent pictures. Perhaps a discussion of a few pictures will make things clear of how the writer presents her story through the use of photographs and dialogues that are reminiscent of words inserted into thought bubbles (this, because most of these photographs seem to record ‘thoughts’ rather than utterances). The first set of photographs show children in Colored Schools. The very first photograph is focused on a girl child in her school with black classmates. This could be a very common photograph that, on surface, would look like a classroom. In the words attributed to her though, she is wondering why the law denies her to go to school with white children. At seven years of age, she is wondering what they are afraid of: her socks or her braids (Morrison, *Remember* 8). In another, a child plays with a doll she names Jasmine (Fig. 16) and what seems like her only white friend, for she has “yellow hair and green eyes” but “She doesn’t stick out her tongue and call me names. And she doesn’t hide behind her mother’s dress, pointing at me, when I go into town. She’s a good friend, my Jasmine” (12).

By attributing these words to the photograph Morrison gives an understanding of an African American child and the images that form in her mind regarding white children. Quite clearly, the child hasn’t met a white friend barring her doll Jasmine who has been kind and friendly to her. The infrastructure and equipment at colored schools or rather, its sorry state of affairs is shown to the reader by a depiction of what actually furnished these schools. The photographs chosen for the purpose are ones depicting classrooms in rural segregated schools and children in there without the basic facilities of desks and benches (Fig. 17). The children seem to contrast the worlds outside and inside:

Outside the grass is tall and full of bees and butterflies. The peaches that fall off the trees split sometimes and the juice is sweeter than cake... But it’s dark in here. Outside the sky is blue and the peaches are sweeter than cake. (14)

The pictures as well as the words chosen show the denial of any colours or delight to the children who have to, out of the compulsions of segregation, remain confined to the colored schools. What they are provided with are gloom and dismal surroundings. In these photographs which would ordinarily, with one’s training, facilitate in locating the studium of children in classrooms, the writer predetermines the punctum that can give

the reader/viewer a perspective through which to delve deep into the minds of the children. These unary photographs, through the inclusion of words, emphatically transforms the narrative by 'doubling' it, to follow up on Barthes (41), and to an extent even disturbing the simplicity and unity of composition.

The next set of photographs show the repercussions of the May 17, 1954 decision. African American children attend integrated schools with white children. Two girls from the two races sit face to face, with the African American girl wondering if her white classmate likes or hates her (Fig. 18). Then there is the photograph of a white teacher teaching an integrated classroom, and both black and white students running out gleefully during recess. After these comparatively happy pictures comes the other side of the May 17 decision. An angry mob tries to overturn a car with black passengers and the following pages show whites with placards opposing integration. Toni Morrison here attributes through her words the violence towards the decision to the ways the whites have been conditioned to think about Africans. A white solidarity (that harbours anti-black sentiments) seems to be more important even when it means that one is aware of who is in the wrong (Fig. 19): "friends are more important than strangers. Even if they're wrong. Aren't they?" (Morrison, *Remember* 28). A series of photographs follow which show the racism meted out to young children in schools: parents not sending their white children to the integrated schools, an African American child eating alone and away from a group because nobody wants to even 'look' at her and fierce protests against desegregation.

The last section of the book is characterized by hope. There are photographs of the diverse ways in which protests were carried out. For instance, there is a photograph of two women, an African American, the other white, sitting at a lunch counter to protest segregation. Then there is one of a peaceful civil rights protests of 1963 where both black and white citizens participate to constitute a crowd of 2,50,000. A group of protestors again kneel in front of a segregated restaurant, singing freedom songs and the owner breaking raw eggs and throwing water on their heads. Another photograph which shows the reactions invited by such protests is that of a boy looking through the fences of a jail where he was arrested with many young activists who had marched for equal rights. Such obstacles to peaceful protests often would make anyone despair. However, in this narration, Morrison comes as a narrative voice to address to her reader how small

acts of courage by people lent such grit to the whole movement. There is a photograph of Rosa Parks from December 1956 (Fig. 20). She is seated in a bus which also shows a white passenger. This is exactly a year after the remarkable incident of Parks refusing to give up her seat to a white passenger and which sparked the Montgomery bus boycott. The result: African Americans protested against segregation in public buses until the Supreme Court too banned it. Efforts at individual level also figure Martin Luther King Jr. who inspired a whole generation for peaceful protests. The featured photograph is from 1963, of his famous “I Have a Dream” speech in Washington (Fig. 21).

The final series of photographs, or perhaps a particular one, makes the writer’s appropriation and fictionalization of the visual for her narrative. There is the picture of an African American drawing a certain ‘Magic Man’ (Fig. 22) on the blackboard. Morrison infuses a thought into this picture, i.e., into the subject of the photograph. The boy utters in Morrison’s story, “I am drawing a Magic Man. He can make anything happen. Anything at all. Just wait and see” (69). Following this, ‘anything’ is visualised in a few photographs where children irrespective of race are sharing a laugh, a friendship or a meal together (Fig. 23). This is emblematic of Roland Barthes’s “temporal hallucination” which “catapults a past moment into the viewer’s present” (Smith 5). The past delivered is not fixed in its ability to be read in new ways but “mutable and multiple” delivered to a “varied and shifting present” (5). In spite of these variations and multiplicities of meanings, there is no denying the fact that a photograph is a trace, a clear indication that something ‘happened’ at a particular point of time in the past. Within the discretion of the writer or the artist, the discursive contexts may vary over time.

A brief outline of the narrative, as well as the writer’s own photo-notes at the end of the book show that these are photographs of the transition phase of segregation-desegregation. By curating these photographs together and engaging in the visual medium, Toni Morrison looks back at a historical moment in order to “negotiate the present, an impulse that is activated by photography’s temporal dynamic” (Smith 2). The photograph is as much a paradigm to understand visibility as it is to understand temporality. A photograph captures a detail at one point of time that will never come back. However, this does not apply to the temporality of the photograph itself, but to the photographed instant.

History is conceived in new ways through photography, in that the past is apprehended in felt fragments. In the context of this chapter, the selection of images can be considered as ‘facts’, for these are actual photographs of the time the writer intends to narrate. However, endowing new meaning into it becomes the task of the writer, and this is where Morrison differs from the earlier experiments in photography and visual politics highlighted in this thesis. Wright, for instance, takes documentary photography as a medium to record the movement of the African Americans to the north. Morrison records images but is also clear about the pervasion of history into the present, as well as of historical amnesia and blind spots.

The entire project has the underlying motive to stir up fragments of the past and use photography as a medium to unsettle “a narrative of social progress, using the photograph to bring to light the unfinished work of racial justice” (8). While segregation of schools officially ended with the Supreme Court verdict in 1951, racism pervades the present too. Hence, protests and marches lead to the present, i.e., a supposed equality of races as well as gives a picture of the present too, in how racism still permeates the social fabric of the United States till date. The photograph then becomes a potent force in its characteristic of being fixed and continuous at the same time to be used to represent a certain history of struggle. The photograph is fixed in the sense that it freezes one moment of time that cannot be relived. Again, continuous by virtue of being a visual medium which continues to be read in new and meaningful ways across time.

In other words, Morrison brings the “visibility” of the photograph to “legibility” (5) by incorporating it in a photo- book that narrates the plight of African American children in the wake of segregation-desegregation. These tiny fragments of the past are a need for a people whose present relies heavily on the sacrifices of these photographed people in little and big ways. Morrison’s “None of this happened to you” is at once indicative of the intended reader’s distance from these actual events and an acknowledgement of their present being rested on the struggles of the past by others. She dedicates the book to four children: Denise Mc Nair, Carole Robertson, Addie Mae Collins and Cynthia Wesley, who died in a racist bombing in the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church on September 15, 1963 when they attended Sunday school.

The photo-notes in the end provide a better picture of how photographs are used to refer to the “moment of its making” as well as to the “many possible moments of its

viewing” (Smith 4) when read side by side with the words inscribed to these by the writer herself. Smith contrasts the notions of time that photographs constitute in the processes of making and viewing. Of course, in *Remember*, the viewing is informed by the writer’s vision of these photographs which sync with her narrative plan. A few iconic images, like Rosa Parks and Martin Luther King Jr. are included. These images too have meant different things for different generations and “significations that are not fully effaced as they are transformed and passed on” (5). When placed in the book, it stands for what Morrison imbues these with: acts of courage at different levels. Across generations, these people have retained these as the markers of their personalities in African American history. In the book hence, it makes more pronounced how the present one lives in owes so much to people who fought for their rights through small and great acts of courage all those years.

## **Conclusion**

In these apparently simple acts of illustrating and remembering in the two books, Morrison paints a bigger picture of where children stand both in terms of social injustice as well as overwhelming and often crippling expectations of traditional system of education. Whereas her novels incorporate children as the victims of social injustice, her ventures into children’s literature depict them as agents of change in their autonomy. While modernity concerns itself with self-fashioning, this is also how children have learned to embrace their changing role at crucial moments of history. In her use of photography and fictionalizing a narrative, Morrison’s thesis is of the photograph as a trace, in spite of many reworkings any reinventions. Particularly telling is the way the African American past has been made an integral part of the present by different writers at different points of time. While Du Bois’ sense of an African past that may foster an African American modernity is a ‘going back and knowing your tradition,’ Morrison’s idea of black modernity is grounded in the acknowledgement of silent battles suffered and overcome by the socially silenced and marginalized.