“The Thing that made her beautiful and not us”: Visible Identity and Postmodern Emotion in Contemporary American Fiction

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submitted by
Madeleine Kim 2016

In Partial Fulfillment of Requirements for
the Degree of Bachelor of Arts
2016

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Acknowledgements

Thank you to the Trinity College English Department for providing truly the best education I could have asked for. It has been an incredible privilege to learn from professors who inspire me every day, and this project would never have occurred without your four years of support. In particular, thank you to my advisor, Katherine Bergren, and to my readers, Sarah Bilston and Prakash Younger.

Thank you (again) to Sarah Bilston, whose invaluable advice and support saw this project from start to finish, and to my fellow colloquium members, for your empathy, honesty, and friendship.

Finally, thank you to Dan Mrozowski, whose patience, enthusiasm, and infectious love for literature made this thesis the most rewarding undertaking of my academic career. This project exists because you believed it could.
Introduction

In her book *Visible Identities* (2006), Linda Alcoff critiques the relationship between appearance and identity in our modern American society. As a result of an inherently materialistic capitalist model, our culture equates the visible with the true. Born out of this equation is the unspoken yet widespread belief that physical appearance invariably indicates identity, and that, in turn, all aspects of identity can be uncovered with sufficiently close observation of one's physical appearance. Alcoff notes that this belief is particularly problematic when it comes to race and gender, as these factors are seen as both intrinsic to identity and visibly discernible based on physical features of the body.

This notion is made viscerally, horrifyingly literal in Toni Morrison’s first novel, *The Bluest Eye*, which, since its original publication in 1970, has become a seminal work in the arena of modern American literature. *The Bluest Eye* initiates a tradition of critiquing not only the racist and sexist undercurrents of society's ideals, but also the notion that appearance defines identity, and that certain bodies--and therefore people--are inherently better than others. Morrison portrays modern society's ingrained mythologies concerning the visible manifestation of race, class, and gender, which result in the desire to hide one's identity by changing one's appearance. Our culture’s insistence on these mythologies ultimately triggers persistent anxiety for those whose appearances clash with their societies' ideals. *The Bluest Eye* grapples with this problematic notion of identity as both transformative and intrinsically linked to appearance--which often results in the profound, all-encompassing impulse to change one's appearance--to portray the inevitable fallout that occurs once that fantasy of transformation is realized.
In this thesis, I will situate *Look at Me* (2001) by Jennifer Egan and *Your Face in Mine* (2014) by Jess Row within a canon of postmodern works in dialogue with *The Bluest Eye* and the way it constructs the emotional stakes of developing a sense of selfhood in a society that equates physical appearance and essentialized identity. Each of these novels constructs a different framework through which it grapples with the problems of visible identity. In *The Bluest Eye*, Morrison enacts a sharp critique of the racism inherent in capitalist culture to forge a space in her society for black identity to thrive. *Look at Me* explores the relationship between aesthetic, surface-level and interior fragmentation in a rapidly digitizing economy, ultimately suggesting that a return to genuine emotion can engender a stable sense of identity. In *Your Face in Mine*, Row engages in academically-obsessed, extremely self-reflexive storytelling to find a means of accessing authenticity in an artificially constructed world. My analysis will include frequent references to the intertextual relationships between these three novels, which, as I will demonstrate, add to the self-reflexive irony of their commentaries on the question of visible identity.

My argument will presuppose the unifying features of postmodern fiction presented by scholar Bran Nicol—whose criticism takes into account the broad spectrum of major scholarship on postmodernism—as the following:

1. a self-reflexive acknowledgement of a text’s own status as a constructed, aesthetic artifact
2. an implicit (or sometimes explicit) critique of realist approaches both to narrative and to representing a fictional ‘world’
3. a tendency to draw the reader’s attention to his or her own process of interpretation as s/he reads the text (*The Cambridge Introduction to Postmodern Fiction* xvi)
Nicol also offers useful explanations of what postmodern fiction can do, and how it should be read. He poses its metafictional nature as a means by which it forces active engagement from its readers and invites a reevaluation of the real world:

A postmodern text is one which--at some level at least--is aware of its own status as something we read, an aesthetic object. It doesn’t pretend its world is the real world or its narrative is natural, and ensures that we cannot do the same, inviting us, indeed at times requiring us, to reconsider our relationship with the world of fiction and the story it tells.

The imperative, then, with which self-conscious readers of postmodern texts are faced, is “to ‘read in a new way’” (40). In this thesis, I will read The Bluest Eye, Look at Me, and Your Face in Mine in a new way by arguing that they not only embody a postmodern aesthetic, but they also do so in direct response to the problem of visible identity in their postmodern milieus. Thus, I will pay specific attention to the ways in which these self-conscious narratives exhibit an acute sensitivity to postmodern capitalism in approaching questions of representation. I argue that the postmodern tools these novels adopt ultimately serve to register representations of pure emotionality that connect them into a rich literary conversation concerned with how visible identity as a cultural problem creates impact on an individual level.¹

¹These novels are literary responses to the problems of visible identity, but the issues they discuss also have tremendous contemporary social and cultural relevance. In recent years, the popular media have been continuously engaged in conversations surrounding the pervasive emphasis on physical appearance, with a particular focus on an increasingly international obsession with idealized images of white feminine beauty. For two examples amidst this rich and complex discussion, see “Kerry Washington Calls Out AdWeek for Photoshopping Her Cover” (2016) on Jezebel and “The Many Stories Behind Double-Eyelid Surgery” (2014) on NPR. The Jezebel article responds to the most recent of several instances in which a major publication has photoshopped African American actress Kerry Washington’s image to appear more white. The NPR story delves into the complicated motivations behind the “double-eyelid surgery” popular among East Asian women.
The Bluest Eye embodies Nicol’s definition of postmodern fiction by taking a holistic approach in depicting the factors that lead to its own tragic conclusion. Morrison presents Pecola’s eventual fall into madness as directly related to a materialistic capitalist society that tells her she is ugly and, therefore, worthless. Pecola’s pleasure in self-effacement, which surrounds the novel’s primary tragedy, results largely from the lack of representation of girls who look like her in mass-reproduced images. In the “Winter” section of The Bluest Eye, Claudia, Frieda, and Pecola have a short friendship with “high-yellow dream child” Maureen Peal, which soon ends in a fight in which Maureen flees, screaming, “I am cute! And you ugly! Black and ugly black e mos. I am cute!” (62, 73). Afterward, Claudia reflects on the “wisdom, accuracy, and relevance” of Maureen’s stinging last line. She knows that she, Frieda, and Pecola are “nicer, brighter,” but she cannot ignore the “honey voices of parents and aunts, the obedience in the eyes of [her] peers” that Maureen’s presence seems to generate. Claudia and Frieda, “still in love with [themselves] then,” recognize Maureen’s beauty only through the effect she has on others. What they do not yet understand is that “the Thing that made her beautiful, and not [them]” is her resemblance to the endlessly reproduced images of feminine beauty that saturate their materialistic society (74). Her stylish, expensive outfits, the “hint of spring in her sloe green eyes,” and the “something summery in her complexion” signify beauty and cuteness precisely because they evoke images of whiteness like those reproduced as material objects and sold as valuable commodities, such as the Shirley Temple cup and the Mary Jane candies. In the world Morrison portrays, beauty is defined by how closely one embodies images used to sell material goods, and can, therefore, be purchased.
Pecola's obsession with mass-reproduced images of white beauty and desire to resemble them, coupled with severe physical and emotional abuse, eventually result in her loss of sanity. It is clear that she has slipped into a delusional state when she believes that her burning desire for blue eyes—the quintessential symbol of white beauty—has been realized. The novel explores thoroughly the historical, social, and psychological backdrop of a society that could inflict such damage upon one of its most vulnerable members, a young, poor black girl, because, as Claudia says in the prologue, “since why is difficult to handle, one must take refuge in how” (6). Morrison constructs her novel in the same way that each of the Breedloves makes “his own patchwork quilt of reality—collecting fragments of experience here, pieces of information there,” ultimately concentrating the primary responsibility of the story’s tragedy on society itself (34). By taking on multiple perspectives, including one of third-person omniscience, Morrison is able to provide background and history on the conditions that shape Pecola’s psychology. The history of the Breedloves’ storefront home, which “foists itself on the eye of the passerby in a manner that is both irritating and melancholy,” resembles the Breedlove family’s history of despair. The description of the home’s interior is one of an environment whose history has left a “joylessness [that] stank, pervading everything” (36). This stink, which, “like a sore tooth that is not content to throb in isolation, but must diffuse its own pain to other parts of the body,” is presented as a poisonous environmental factor, attributable not to a single offender, but rather to a long, persistent history of apathetic lovelessness. Just as the building’s furnishings have accumulated through “various states of thoughtlessness, greed, and indifference,” so has the accumulation of harmful experiences and lack of love made Cholly and Pauline into abusive parents. This naturalistic treatment of Pecola’s home life as
a product of environmental forces reflects Claudia’s (and Morrison’s) need to “take refuge in the how” (6).

Pecola’s toxic environment is ultimately what causes her to convert interior emotional trauma into a belief in her own exterior ugliness. This harmful redirection of painful emotions is reflected, for instance, in her response to the “inexplicable shame” she experiences after Mr. Yacobowski refuses to touch her hand when he sells her Mary Jane candies (50). She attempts to feel anger toward Mr. Yacobowski, to console herself with the “awareness of worth” that anger engenders, but “the anger will not hold,” and she instead directs her hate toward the dandelions that, before, had been “the codes and touchstones of the world, capable of translation and possession” (50, 47). Once her vision has been tinted with shame, she thinks “They are ugly. They are weeds” (50). Her transition from feelings of love and kinship to those of disgust signifies her ever-deepening internalization of her society’s view of her own body as profoundly ugly.

It is this harmful view of herself as starkly, definitively ugly (and, therefore, unlovable) that forces Pecola to develop her subjectivity by consuming and, in her mind, embodying whiteness. This tendency is first portrayed when Pecola comes to stay with the MacTeer family following Cholly’s arrest. During her stay, she becomes obsessed with drinking milk from a blue and white Shirley Temple cup. To the fury of Mrs. MacTeer, she drinks a whole three quarts of milk because “she was fond of the Shirley Temple cup and took every opportunity to drink milk out of it just to handle and see sweet Shirley’s face” (23). She consumes whiteness both literally (milk) and figuratively (Shirley Temple) as a means of escaping her physical appearance and its consequences. Morrison takes this notion a step further in the scene directly following Pecola’s painful interaction with Mr.
Yacobowski. After her humiliating experience in the store, she seeks comfort in the Mary Janes, whose wrappers display a white child with “Blond hair in gentle disarray, blue eyes looking at her out of a world of clean comfort.” As she eats the candy, her experience transforms quickly from the simple enjoyment of taste to a disturbingly sexualized pleasure that foreshadows her impending madness: “She eats the candy, and its sweetness is good. To eat the candy is somehow to eat the eyes, eat Mary Jane. Love Mary Jane. Be Mary Jane. Three pennies bought her nine lovely orgasms with Mary Jane. Lovely Mary Jane, for whom a candy is named” (50). Here, she escapes the pain of shame by literally consuming representations of beauty and whiteness, in order to embody those qualities. The “nine lovely orgasms” that come with her embodiment of Mary Jane reflect the fact that Pecola can only enjoy her own body by stepping into that of someone else.

Claudia’s earliest reactions to images of so-called beauty differ drastically from Pecola’s. The older Claudia, narrating the incident with the Shirley Temple cup, recalls, “Younger than both Frieda and Pecola, I had not yet arrived at the turning point in the development of my psyche which would allow me to love [Shirley Temple]” (19). Here, Morrison seems to suggest that the adoration that young black girls feel for figures like Shirley Temple or Mary Jane, in whom they will find little resemblance, is neither natural nor innate, but learned. What Frieda and Pecola adore is not Shirley Temple, the living, breathing human being, but rather the flat, mass-reproduced representations of her image. They believe that their own real, evolving human faces are less enduring, less alive, and less valuable than the eternally preserved, invariably perfect images of white feminine beauty to which they aspire.
This sentiment manifests, too, in Claudia’s recollection of the white, blue-eyed baby
doll she had received for Christmas. While she understands that the doll embodies what
adults assume is her “fondest wish,” she finds herself disgusted by its appearance and
“secretly frightened of those round moronic eyes, the pancake face, and orangeworms hair”
(20). Yet unconditioned by her society’s ideals of feminine beauty (or, as it relates more
directly to Claudia, “cuteness”), she sees the doll’s features for what they are, rather than
what they collectively represent. Unable to love the doll, she examines and, eventually,
dismembers it “To see of what it was made, to discover the dearness, to find the beauty, the
desirability that escaped [her], but apparently only [her]” (20). Whereas Pecola loves the
images of white beauty with which she is presented automatically, Claudia, who still
delights in her own body, who sees the dirt and ink marks on her skin as her “creations and
accumulations of the day,” is far less conditioned to accept the notion that her appearance
makes her somehow less valuable, less loveable than “cute,” white girls like Shirley Temple
(22). Although she eventually learns to develop a “fraudulent love” for little white girls that
“was just a small step to Shirley Temple,” she recalls “knowing, even as [she] learned, that
the change was adjustment without improvement” (23). Through the highly self-aware
character of grown-up Claudia who narrates the story, Morrison provides an example of a
strong, successfully-developed black female subjectivity.

Morrison’s novel is a seminal text in a canon of works that address the problem of
visibility in the postmodern period, embodying Nicol’s conception of the postmodern
aesthetic. *The Bluest Eye* is by no means the first novel to address the question of visible
identity as it relates to race, class, and gender, nor is it the only text to do so through the
direct embrace of postmodern aesthetics. Yet, its centrality in initiating a larger
conversation about the relationship between appearance and identity is undeniable. One reason for the novel’s fundamentality is the extent to which it engages with the specific topic of visible identity; even its title suggests that it is primarily concerned with the way we see the world and the way the world sees us in return. Beyond this, the central and enduring position it has earned in the American literary sphere suggests that its message continues to resonate in our current time period. While *The Bluest Eye* has been recognized as holding an important position in several literary canons, notably, here, in that of the postmodern, it has not yet been sufficiently interpreted alongside other texts that deal directly with the relationship between physical appearance and identity. In my thesis, I present *The Bluest Eye* as a key text that initiates a larger conversation on visible identity within the postmodern canon. By analyzing Morrison’s novel alongside *Look at Me* and *Your Face in Mine*, I hope to introduce a new canon of postmodern works that respond to one of the most pressing issues of postmodernity: how to establish a secure, comfortable sense of self in a society that likens intrinsic identity—and, thus, intrinsic value—to malleable, subjectively-ranked, visible signifiers.

In his essay “Beginning with Postmodernism,” Adam Kelly notes that Egan’s work has been relatively disregarded in criticism and scholarship, particularly in comparison to other post-boomer novels engaged in the conversation surrounding the postmodern. He suggests that, “ironically, it may be that the very directness of her engagement has contributed to the overlooking of her work: at first glance, it can be difficult to identify exactly what it is that Egan’s fiction brings to the postmodern table that we haven’t seen before” (393). The irony that is at play here stems from Brian McHale’s method of distinguishing postmodern texts, which relies a concept of ‘the dominant’ adopted from
Roman Jakobson. Jakobson explains, “The dominant may be defined as the focusing component of a work of art: it rules, determines, and transforms the remaining components” (Postmodernist Fiction 6). The prevailing features of postmodern texts are not unique to postmodern fiction; what differentiates postmodernism from other forms of fiction is, as Nicol notes, “how these dominant features correspond to the specific historical context of postmodernism--in other words, how certain social and cultural factors have caused them to be more dominant than they are in, say, modernism” (xvi). If the classification of a text as postmodern is, as McHale and Nicol suggest, a question of the degree to which the text is dominated by its engagement with its social and cultural milieus, then Look at Me and Your Face in Mine truly embody a postmodern aesthetic.

The aesthetic similarities among these two novels, as well as The Bluest Eye, are no coincidence; these authors are invested in literary postmodernism because they are responding directly to postmodernity as a time period. In Morrison’s novel, postmodernity’s despairing aspect manifests in the toxic environment of the Breedloves’ storefront home. The portrait of this harmful environment that the novel constructs is contextualized by the rise of the mass-reproduction of images, namely in the forms of photography and film. Indeed, for all three of these novels, capitalism and, in turn, the culture industry and the rise of the digital age, are essential conditions of postmodernity. Each writer constructs his or her own specific Adorno-esque vision of postmodernity, of an age imprisoned by its own new forms of technology; thus, with each consecutive novel arises a new host of themes surrounding new forms of digitization. Look at Me, like The Bluest Eye, views photography and the mass-reproduction of images as an epidemic specific to postmodernity; yet, writing thirty years after Morrison, Egan is also positioned to
anticipate how the profusion of these images will collide with the rise of the Internet and social media. Her novel begins by portraying how models are made into commodities through the reproduction of their images, then ultimately culminates in the literal branding of an individual's identity. *Your Face in Mine*, written a little over a decade after *Look at Me*, reflects the current century's vast upsurge not only in the capacity of social media to project carefully constructed representations of the self, but also in the technology behind cosmetic treatments, allowing individuals to literally alter their physical appearances in ways that Morrison's characters could only imagine. For Row, postmodernity represents an age governed by socially constructed binaries such as race and gender, in which the construction of the self is a literal consumer choice.

Through this framework of postmodernity, all three novels actively grapple with the ideology that Alcoff outlines in *Visible Identities*. Although Alcoff's discourse is predated by both Morrison's and Egan's novels, her argument resonates poignantly with the emotional portraits they create for their characters. In *The Bluest Eye*, Morrison engages directly with Alcoff's discussion of the notion that “(a) there exists a fact of the matter about one's racial identity, usually determined by ancestry, and (b) that identity is discernible if one observes carefully the person's physical features and practiced mannerisms” (7). Because Alcoff specifically notes that her argument “restricts its focus to raced and gendered identities,” it may seem that Egan, as a white woman, and, even more so, Row, as a white male, are inadequately positioned to engage in this discussion (10). However, I argue that the way these writers dramatize the notion of visible identity as a problem in postmodern society--even when applied to people in positions of privilege--indicates a trend more pervasive than what Alcoff imagines. Through their literary representations of the emotional stakes
of visible identity, Morrison, Egan, and Row all enact a resistance to the ubiquitous and
destructive role that visibility has assumed in postmodern society.
Chapter One
“It dies the instant it is touched by light”: Searching for a Visible Identity in Jennifer Egan’s *Look at Me*

Introduction

In *Look at Me*, Jennifer Egan\(^2\) explores the intersection between physical appearance and identity in contemporary American society. The novel’s main narrative is told from the first-person perspective of Charlotte Swenson, a 35-year-old (although posing as a 28-year-old) Manhattan model, whose career is on a steady decline. The story opens in Charlotte’s hometown of Rockford, Illinois, where she is recovering from reconstructive surgeries following a devastating car crash that left her with a face held together by 80 titanium screws. Miraculously, her face heals so thoroughly that she is left without scars, without any detectable trace of the accident. Yet, she has been irrevocably changed both inside and out; not only does she begin to question her own identity, but she also discovers, upon her return to New York, that her new face is unrecognizable to those she once knew. After a period of heavy drinking, one night stands, and an utterly disastrous attempt at reviving her modeling career, her luck seems as though it may be changing when her agent informs her that a reporter from the *New York Post* is writing “a feature on models, but with a twist: they wanted a model whose appearance had changed radically in the very recent past” (92).

\(^2\) American writer Jennifer Egan was born in 1962, in Chicago, and raised in San Francisco. She has been widely praised for her four novels as well as her numerous short stories and nonfiction articles, and in 2011 won the Pulitzer Prize for her most recent and most well-known novel, *A Visit From the Goon Squad*. Her novel *Look at Me*, a finalist for the National Book Award in fiction in 2001, will be the primary focus of this chapter.
The reporter is Irene Maitlock, a Cultural Studies professor posing as a journalist, through whom Charlotte eventually becomes involved in an Internet service—a website called Ordinary People that offers a voyeuristic look into people’s everyday lives through video blogging and journal entries—that anticipates our most recent decade’s upsurge in widespread reality television and social media obsessions. Irene becomes Charlotte’s ghostwriter for the site, essentially creating a new version of Charlotte for public consumption and forcing the real Charlotte to look deeper into her own identity.

Charlotte’s journey is juxtaposed throughout the novel with intervening chapters, told from third-person omniscience and set in Rockford, that follow her estranged childhood best friend’s teenage daughter—also named Charlotte. This younger Charlotte, Charlotte Hauser, comes of age while maintaining the distinct sense that she is not beautiful. When she begins an affair with a mysterious man who goes by the name of Michael West, it is only a matter of time until her world—like Charlotte Swenson’s—comes crashing down. These two narrative threads ultimately reconvene near the end of the novel, when Charlotte Swenson and the Ordinary People crew arrive in Rockford to film a reenactment of the car crash. Charlotte Swenson recognizes Charlotte Hauser from an encounter early in the novel, during her brief stay in Rockford, and insists that this younger Charlotte be cast as the “Good Samaritan” who pulls her from the fiery wreckage.

By featuring characters whose physical appearances have been drastically altered through surgery, Egan dramatizes a pervasive myth rooted deep in our national history, that how we look is intimately connected to who we are. She grapples head-on with this myth in the context of a rapidly technologizing society in which literal transformation seems increasingly possible. If physical appearance does not equal identity, as the novel
suggests, how do we search for an identity that both feels true and affords us freedom in our daily lives? In confronting this question, Egan unveils a host of mechanisms by which identity can be concealed, confused, and eventually destroyed by a society that believes unequivocally in its visible manifestation. *Look at Me* seems to conclude that there is a ‘true identity,’ but that “It cannot be seen, much as one might wish to show it. It dies the instant it is touched by light.” The novel suggests a paradox in the way its social world understands identity: the belief that ‘true identity’ is visibly discernible is precisely what prevents it from becoming such. That is, by searching for our own and others’ identities by scrutinizing physical appearance, we will find what Charlotte Swenson finds in a mirrored room: “chimeras... the hard, beautiful seashells left behind long after the living creatures within have struggled free and swum away” (528).

In this chapter, I present *Look at Me* as a postmodern text whose aesthetic stakes are the social, cultural, and historical impacts of the equation of physical appearance and ‘true identity.’ I will read *Look at Me* “in a new way,” as Nicol suggests, by presenting the focus on physical appearance—the leveling of interior and exterior planes of selfhood—as the mechanism by which ‘true’ identity is hidden, distorted, and destroyed (40). I argue that the stakes of living in a society that links human value with exterior appearance transcend ideology, linguistics, and the other academic abstractions that permeate postmodern fiction; Egan’s complex novel ultimately functions to capture the primal emotional trauma faced by people whose identities are particularly marked and visible in their societies.

Egan’s direct, candid engagement with the question of ‘true identity’ strongly evokes versions of the postmodern aesthetic. Indeed, scholars who have written extensively on
Looking at Me have done so by discussing its relationship to the complex, diversely defined notion of the postmodern. One such scholar is Pankaj Mishra, who, in his article “Modernity’s Undoing,” posits that America’s transition into postmodernity began long ago, with the shift from industrial to consumer capitalism. He suggests that “The brisk destruction of old ways and the foreclosing of possibilities have become such an accepted fact – not least in the social sciences, from Daniel Bell to Fredric Jameson – that it is easy to forget what a large-scale re-engineering of human lives they have led to,” praising Egan as “rare for still being able to register incredulity at the weirdness of this process” (27). Adam Kelly’s essay builds on Mishra’s work by identifying Look at Me as perhaps the most important among an influential group of post-boomer novels that are thinking through “how the historical past can be accessed and related to the present by the writer and his/her characters” (“Beginning with Postmodernism” 393). The postmodern is an aesthetic category, but one that is necessarily in dialogue with its cultural and historical contexts.

Indeed, for Kelly, the novel’s postmodern essence lies in its highly self-reflexive approach to providing an aesthetic representation of cultural changes:

in order to depict our present era as offering historical and political possibilities, one has to understand the world depicted by postmodern fiction… as itself historical, as the outcome of a historical process, and capable of historical understanding. And one must do so while taking on board the forms and theoretical insights of postmodern fiction, and of the theory that grew up alongside it in the post-1960s academy… this complex undertaking is one of the main projects of Jennifer Egan’s Look at Me. (399)
This explanation of the specific importance of Look at Me also resonates with Nicol’s explanation as to why the “obviously problematic” term ‘postmodernism’ continues to be used; he posits that “significant alterations in society as a result of technology, economics and the media” have caused “significant shifts in cultural and aesthetic production as a result, perhaps even... changes in the way people who exist in these changed conditions live, think, and feel.” Postmodernism is an attempt “to capture this sense of change, vague and multi-faceted though it may be” (The Cambridge Introduction to Postmodern Fiction 1-2). In Look at Me, Egan addresses these cultural changes through the transformation narrative of Charlotte Swenson— who serves as an object correlative for the emotional fallout of a society obsessed with visibility—as well as through Charlotte Hauser’s narrative set in Rockford, a literal example of a social world experiencing the effects of industrialization. The novel sets up a framework of base and superstructure in order to portray its specific cultural milieu, wherein Charlotte Hauser’s coming-of-age story and the other tangential narratives set in Rockford function to deepen our understanding of Charlotte Swenson’s personal development.

I will present Look at Me as a self-reflexive postmodern text that creates a useful framework for understanding the relationship between appearance and identity in an increasingly industrial, rapidly digitizing society. On one hand, the very foundations of postmodern thought seem to deny the possibility of identity as anything but constructed, as well as the notion that the true self is capable of finding a concrete manifestation. Yet, Egan’s novel suggests that, through the aesthetic fragmentation characteristic of the postmodern, it is possible to access a collection of genuine emotions that result in a secure sense of identity. As Kelly shows, “Beginning with postmodernism enjoins writers, readers,
and critics not to forget the lessons of postmodernism, however liberating such forgetting may sometimes feel” (415). My argument is that even within the largely despairing aesthetic that characterizes the postmodern, literature can provide something useful for our culture: it is not through the evaluation of physical appearance, of exterior aesthetics, but rather through the aesthetic portrayal of interior fragmentation, that art can help us come to grips with our sense of identity. The novel concludes on a highly satirical note, suggesting that the only way to attain an authentic identity is to fragment the self, to wrench the interior free from the exterior. By depicting the various forms of fragmentation experienced by the postmodern identity, Egan creates an aesthetic object with a whole, stable identity; like Charlotte Swenson, who accesses truth only by embracing the fact that she is “the biggest liar of them all,” Look at Me provides a beacon of authenticity in an artificial world, if only for its candid, metafictional presentation of itself as constructed (98). Under my analysis, Egan is able to convey genuine emotions within a self-reflexively inauthentic fiction that measures the impact of the destructive ways in which we, as a culture, look at ourselves and one another.

In this chapter, I explore how Egan depicts the consequences of visible identity for Charlotte Swenson, Charlotte Hauser, and Irene Maitlock, each of whom views her own physical appearance through a different lens. My first section analyzes how Charlotte Swenson, over the course of the novel, transitions from a place of relative two-dimensionality to eventually develop a sense of identity that is stable in its self-consciousness of its own fragmentation. In my second section, I explore the character of Charlotte Hauser, whose coming-of-age tale functions both as a narrative about Rockford, a community struggling to live up to the commands of capitalism, and as a poignant insight
into the blossoming selfhood of a teenage girl living in the increasingly digital age Egan describes. The conclusion of this chapter discusses the climactic reenactment of the car crash and the epilogue that immediately follows, in which Irene's identity finally subsumes that of Charlotte Swenson, transforming her simultaneously into Charlotte's simulacrum and a celebrity in her own right.

**Charlotte Swenson**

One form in which the relationship between physical appearance and identity manifests for characters in *Look at Me* is the psychological insistence on visibility. As self-conscious postmodern subjects, characters such as Charlotte Swenson are aware of the perversity of a society that defines individual identity based on visible signifiers. This awareness, however, does not save them from feeling as though they need to be seen in order to be someone. Egan portrays Charlotte's need to be observed with envy, admiration, and desire as a product of her American capitalist society. The novel begins in Charlotte's hometown of Rockford, Illinois, following a devastating car accident and the subsequent plastic surgery required to repair her damaged face. During her recovery period, boredom leads her to “make her way to the attic and upend a few boxes,” initiating recollections of her “early childhood impressions of Rockford” (11). Her earliest memories of her hometown are characterized by the disappointment of its failed industrialization. She recalls a formative experience of reading about Rockford's recent economic history during her youth:

> I remembered reading in a state of keen anticipation, awaiting the moment when Rockford would burst forth in triumph, the envy of the industrial world. I sensed this glory approaching with the invention of cars, for eleven
Rockford companies had designed them, and one, the Tarkington Motor Company, build a prototype that was warmly received at an auto show in Chicago in the twenties. But no--the investors backed out, the car was never produced, and with this failure, my excitement began to congeal into something heavier. There was to be no limelight; Rockford remained a city known for its drills, transmissions, joints, saws, watertight seals, adjustable door bumpers, spark plugs, gaskets--“automobile sundries,” as such products are known--and for its agricultural tools; in short, for dull, invisible things that no one in the world would ever know or care about. (12)

Here, Charlotte equates economic failure with invisibility; capitalism is seductive precisely because it implies the possibility of reaching the “limelight,” the possibility of being seen. It is through this association of success and visibility that Charlotte develops her subjectivity: “This was clear to me at age twelve: my first clear notion of myself. I was not Rockford--I was its opposite, whatever that might be” (12-13). Even from early adolescence, she learns to define herself and her worth according to the way she is viewed by others. Through Charlotte’s recollection of this aspect of her self-discovery, Egan suggests a direct link between the psychological insistence on visibility and the underlying framework of our capitalist society.

This link between success and visibility is made deeper by Egan’s portrayal of Charlotte’s disappointing modeling career. Just as Rockford once came close to its chance at becoming “the envy of the industrial world,” Charlotte’s early career included a promising “rise to almost-stardom” that was never fully realized. Just as Rockford misses its chance at capitalist glory, to become the darling of its material-driven society,
Charlotte’s fleeting shot at fame is followed by a “slow minuet down a gauntlet of catalogue jobs.” In the fashion world, models are literally commodities whose physical appearance determines their value. Thus, for Charlotte, being observed becomes a conscious act; she is highly accustomed to “the appraising survey particular to [her] line of work, when someone takes in your face, your bones, your eyes, and calculates their worth.” Here, Charlotte demonstrates a profound understanding of both the fashion world and her role in it; she articulates one of its most glaring perversities, that the overt commodification of human beings is intrinsic to the way it operates. Yet, despite her critical awareness of this destructive framework, she is unable to ignore the all-encompassing desire not only to partake in it, but also to succeed within it. Even when she understands that she is being objectified, dehumanized by this evaluative look, she knows that to ascend the hierarchy of the fashion world, “You hold very still for that look” (44). Through Charlotte’s simultaneous denunciation and embrace of the fashion world, Egan reveals a tension that underscores her critique of American capitalism, that even those who recognize its destructive effects are vulnerable to its powerful allure.

Yet, despite her demonstration of self-awareness and seeming skepticism of society in moments such as this, Charlotte’s outlook is also, at times, characterized by a glaring inability to acknowledge difference. In the passage where she dismisses the fruits of Rockford’s industrial production as “automobile sundries” and “dull invisible things that no one in the world would ever know or care about,” she, by default, assumes that everyone else in the world shares her disdain for these items (12). Her intense desire to efface her own roots has afforded her a narrow-minded perspective that prevents her even from conceiving of a person who would take interest in the items she scorns. Similarly, she also
(incorrectly) presupposes that others, like her and those in her industry, revere fashion and models and aspire to the same standards of appearance that she deems beautiful.

This bias is apparent in her first interaction with Irene Maitlock, who visits Charlotte’s apartment to conduct the interview for her article in the *New York Post*. From the moment the two women meet, Charlotte automatically focuses on Irene’s physical appearance, judging, criticizing, and disparaging what she sees:

Irene Maitlock was one of those women I found difficult to look at without imagining how much they would profit by dropping just a few pounds, wearing a less pointy bra, a minimum of makeup, and clothing that had, if not personality, at least some semblance of an identity. Because the raw material was there! She had thick light brown hair that begged for highlights, a decent figure, lovely blue eyes.” (93-4)

Charlotte, here, defines beauty using capitalistic, industrial terms. She believes that Irene has the “raw material” to construct a physical appearance from which she could “profit,” if only she would take steps to more closely embody the standards that both Charlotte and the fashion industry consider desirable and, therefore, valuable. She reduces Irene to her superficial visible signifiers and suggests that “personality” and “identity” are traits acquired through the purchase of clothing, rather than fundamental elements of humanity.

It is important to note, however, that Egan is portraying, through Charlotte, a complex set of psychological tensions that go far deeper than mere self-absorption and shallowness.

Right after her initial, seemingly instinctive judgement of Irene’s appearance, she adds, “But I was less troubled by Irene’s physical shortcomings than the annihilating side of my own personality that raged in the presence of women who invited the descriptive “mousy”
(94). As Alcoff states, “it is the refusal to acknowledge the importance of the differences in our identities that has led to distrust, miscommunication, and thus disunity” (6). Here, Charlotte is at least somewhat cognizant of the extent to which she is isolating herself by prejudging Irene against her own standards, rather than acknowledging and accepting her as different. Yet, although she recognizes the perversity of her own tendencies, she is either unable or unwilling to take productive steps toward altering them.

Through this same interaction between Charlotte and Irene, Egan also portrays a tension intrinsic to the investigation of visible identity in the postmodern context. When Irene first arrives at Charlotte’s apartment, she begins to lay out the premise of her article—which could also serve as a simplified explanation for the premise of Egan’s book—until Charlotte cuts her off:

“[Irene] said, “how the world’s perceptions of women affect our perceptions of ourselves. A model whose appearance has changed drastically is a perfect vehicle, I think, for examining the relationship among image, perception and identity, because a model’s position as a purely physical object—a media object, if you will”—she’d risen out of her slouch and was sitting up straight, a spot of red on both cheeks, discharging words in a cannonade—“is in a sense just a more exaggerated version of everyone’s position in a visually-based media-driven culture, and so watching a model renegotiate a drastic change in her image could provide a perfect lens for looking at some of these larger—”

“Beep!” I said loudly, cutting her off.
“Excuse me?”

“That was my boredom meter,” I said, although in truth it was my utter bewilderment, rather than boredom, that had caused her speech to grate on me. “You were nearing a danger point.” (94-5)

Irene’s articulation of postmodern self-consciousness illustrates Kelly’s assertion that post-boomer writers “begin with the academic construction of American literature and society specifically as “postmodern”—in other words, they begin with the phenomenon of “theory” (“Beginning with Postmodernism” 396). Irene, who later reveals herself to be a Cultural Studies professor, is one of several academically-inclined characters through whom Egan evinces an attachment to theory that is arguably inescapable for writers born into the postmodern context. When Irene, frustrated with Charlotte’s evasive answers during their interview, finally asks her why she dislikes talking about herself, Charlotte responds:

“Because everyone is a liar. Including me.”

“I beg your pardon?”

“We lie,” I said. “That’s what we do. You’re selling me a line of bullshit and you want me to sell you a line of bullshit back so you can write a major line of bullshit and be paid for it.” I said this with utmost collegiality.

“What makes you such a purist?”

“I’m not!” I cried. “That’s the irony—I’m the biggest liar of them all!

But I don’t pretend to be anything else.” (98)

Here, Charlotte exposes the falsehood that underlies Irene’s distinctly postmodern sense of self-awareness. Egan self-satirically casts doubt on her generation’s reliance on theory, which many post-boomer writers have denigrated “as exacerbating rather than mitigating
the felt crisis in political agency which postmodernism heralded and Jameson described” (Kelly 397). Through this self-satire, she brings to light a troubling paradox of postmodernity, that only by embracing our culture of lies do we achieve some semblance of truth. For Charlotte, acknowledging the pervasiveness of these lies by understanding herself as a simulacrum eventually becomes a mode of authenticity.

After learning that she has landed a shoot at Vogue, her first major job since the accident, Charlotte recalls events from her youth that led to her career as a model and foreshadowed how just constructed her identity would eventually become. Childhood games in which she and her sister would imagine their life as a movie eventually evolved, “gradually, mysteriously,” into a fantasy delineated “not in terms of anything I might do or accomplish, but the notoriety that would follow” (168). This fantasy, in Charlotte’s mind, takes on a concrete, architectural form in an imagined “mirrored room”--which she describes as “a place I had never seen and knew little about”--to which she hopes to ascend. Although she never seems to fully articulate what the mirrored room is, or what she hopes to find within it, it is clear that to enter the mirrored room is to achieve some version of superior status; she explains, “the famous people who lived there were not the sort you saw, or could talk to” (169). For Charlotte, then, to succeed is not to be seen, but to be represented and reproduced.

As a model whose body is a commodity and whose job it is to be visible, Charlotte has been made hyper-aware of the difference between the visible and the true. Yet, ironically, she also believes in the notion of an ultimate truth, that each person has a ‘true identity,’ discernible through keen observation. Charlotte first develops the habit of
searching for others' hidden identities, which she terms “shadow selves,” through the act of being, herself, observed:

   It was Hansen who first made me aware of shadow selves. He would lie in bed watching me for whole minutes, and I would look back into his eyes and wonder, what does he see? How can he not see the truth? Where is it hidden? It made me ask, when I looked at other people, what possible selves they were hiding behind the strange rubber masks of their faces. I could nearly always find one, if I watched for long enough. It became the only one I was interested in seeing. (106)

Here, Egan introduces a subtle tension that underlies Charlotte’s complex relationship with appearance and identity: she believes that physical appearance can be used to hide true identity, that beauty is “the best disguise of all,” but also that one’s true self always manifests visibly in some form on the body (44). For Charlotte, it is the tension between these conflicting beliefs that creates anxiety about her appearance after her surgery. Although she is, by society's standards, beautiful, she cannot escape the paranoia of being somehow ‘found out,’ discovered as someone other than what her physical appearance suggests, as though caught in a lie.

**Charlotte Hauser**

Charlotte Swenson’s relationships with her own personal history and her hometown are characterized by self-effacement and denial. She spurns her small-town roots, lies about her age, and finds pleasure in anonymous interactions with complete strangers. For her, Rockford represents squandered potential, a failure to become visible. The sixteen-year-old Charlotte Hauser, on the other hand, still believes that Rockford is rife with
potential. She faces life with anticipation; when her Uncle Moose asks her how she is doing, she responds, “I’m waiting for something to happen” (112). In spite of the correlative relationship between her story and Charlotte Swenson’s, her narrative functions, too, as its own independent tale; as a postmodern novel, Look at Me is able to patch together stories of multiple disparate genres that ultimately present a coherent narrative. Charlotte Hauser’s subplot, then, can be seen as a coming-of-age tale that depicts a vulnerable stage of life which Charlotte Swenson has already passed.

From the beginning of her story, it is clear that Charlotte Hauser is distinctly attuned to the way her physical appearance resonates with others and, thus, defines her world. The novel represents her appearance as plain-looking; during their brief and anonymous encounter early in the story, Charlotte Swenson thinks of her as “a sadly average-looking girl with thin, drab hair and insect-like glasses” (31). Later, Charlotte Hauser recalls rumors that she was a “mad slut” that had run rampant through her school a year earlier, after her first sexual encounter, making her both extremely visible and intensely repellent, as though she had suddenly become “abruptly radioactive, or the locus of a reverse magnetic force field” (62). At first, she approaches her situation with legitimate confusion; she implores her friends, “what had she done wrong? Two of them were sleeping with their boyfriends--how was this different?” yet “No one seemed to know.” In the year that follows, she “regularly heard girls talk of jumping the bones of boys they liked with no mention of love,” yet is still “seen as odd, perverse.” As Charlotte reflects in the present, she thinks, “Of course, had she been pretty--had she looked like her mother, for instance--the situation would have been different. Charlotte understood this with a deep, angry ache: There were two worlds, and in one of them, everything was harder” (63). Like Pecola, she
understands her own lack of beauty as a stable and essential condition of her identity. In a society that defines beauty according to still, flat, and invariably perfect mass-reproduced images, girls such as Charlotte and Pecola can only understand their own appearances as part of a firm binary of beauty versus ugliness.

However, whereas Pecola copes with her feelings of ugliness by immersing herself in images of white beauty and imagining her physical body away into oblivion, Charlotte Hauser seeks validation through sex in order to feel desired and loved. It is through the rise and fall of the teenaged Charlotte’s illicit affair with the enigmatic and older Michael West that Egan most poignantly captures the emotions that surround a young girl’s desire to be beautiful. The pair’s first meeting occurs when Charlotte stops by Rock River on her bike ride home. She notices Michael and knows “Even without her glasses” that “she had never seen him before.” Their conversation is brief, yet impactful:

“You’re pretty.”

She narrowed her eyes. “I’m not.”

“Unusual.”

“That’s not the same.”

“It lasts longer.”

Liar, Charlotte thought, but she was flattered...

“Boys don’t like me,” she told the man, emboldened by the very fact that he was a stranger.

“They’ll grow up,” he said, “and admire your eyes.”

“I wear glasses.” She was holding them in her hand. (57-58)
Because she sees herself through the eyes of a “stranger” who exists outside the network of high school gossip and small town life, she feels suddenly “emboldened” enough to believe that, perhaps, she could, in fact, be beautiful. For a moment, she becomes valuable because she is being admired. Yet, there is still a level of distance between what she feels and what she will allow herself to think or say; both in her own head and out loud, she denies his compliments. Later, however, she tells him, “I want you to seduce me… I think you’re the right person… You said I had pretty eyes. By the river” (131). Her feelings of sexual attraction come not from the desire for Michael himself, but instead from the desire to be desired by him, to see herself through his eyes. Just as Pecola has “nine lovely orgasms with Mary Jane” by consuming--and, thus, somehow embodying--representations of white beauty, Charlotte experiences pleasure by feeling as though her physical body is desirable to someone else and, thus, beautiful (Morrison 50).

Like Morrison, Egan identifies the eyes as the locus from which beauty seems to originate. In this passage and throughout the novel, Charlotte’s glasses function as a form of disguise that makes her feel less beautiful and less visible, yet also less exposed. Just as Pecola is caught between her desires to become invisible and to become beautiful, so does Charlotte’s insecurity both conflict and conflate with her need to feel admired, to inspire attraction. When she removes her glasses, she not only alters how her face appears to others, but also literally changes the lens through which she sees the world, as though stepping into the body of someone else. At one point, she has a strange experience--that echoes Charlotte Swenson’s post-surgery return to New York City--in which by removing her glasses she is able become someone new. Before attending a party, her friend applies makeup to her face, then stops her from replacing her glasses, because “That’ll wreck it...
There’s nothing to see in there anyway” (391). At the party, she runs into Scott Hess, the boy to whom she lost her virginity a year earlier, and discovers that he does not recognize her: “She felt the old excitement of talking to strangers, except that Scott Hess was the opposite of a stranger... But Charlotte wasn’t that girl anymore. She’d cut ties with that humiliation... She was the stranger. Scott Hess had nothing on her” (399). For Charlotte, here, anonymity serves as a form of protection. Although her “eyes felt so exposed without her glasses,” she ultimately escapes the extreme visibility of recognition both by shedding the visible signifiers of Charlotte Hauser and by blurring her own view of reality. Later, after her affair with Michael has ended, she craves the clouded vision that comes with this altered perspective; Egan describes how “She had taken to riding without glasses, blurring the emptiness around her into something almost lovely, and now her helpless eyes fumbled at the waving shapes, searching for the outline of Michael West” (449).

The younger Charlotte’s small-town, coming-of-age tale is also inflected by her interactions with Moose Metcalf, whose interior thoughts and feelings contribute additional subtleties to how the novel as a whole grapples with visible identity. Moose makes his first appearance in the novel through the recollections of Charlotte Swenson, as the older brother of her now-estranged childhood best friend, Ellen--who is also Charlotte Hauser’s mother. Charlotte Swenson recalls his appearance as “a winning amalgam of beauty, thuggishness and faint embarrassment. And something else: an awareness on the part of Moose and everyone else, a crowd of admirers thronging the room for a glimpse of his folly, that he was special. Famous” (23). Yet, the Uncle Moose whom Charlotte Hauser knows would be unrecognizable to the boy in this description; two years after his college graduation, Moose transforms suddenly and inexplicably from “the boy whom everyone
loved,” a “consummate host” of wild parties, into an academic tortured by a sense that “a terrible reversal was in progress, a technological disaster whereby the genius of the Industrial Revolution would be turned on people themselves” (27, 68). Through Moose, Egan articulates explicitly the fears that define postmodernity in the milieu she portrays—and attributes them directly to “all manner of visual discovery”; Moose believes that “now the world’s blindness exceeded that of medieval times before clear glass, except that the present blindness came from too much sight” (68, 139). For Moose, as well as for the novel in general, extreme visibility both defines and condemns postmodern industrial society.

Charlotte Hauser gets a glimpse into this perspective when Moose agrees to give her private after-school tutoring sessions, during which she submits and discusses short essays on various events from her hometown’s history. Moose believes his own greatest discovery thus far has been the realization that Rockford’s history is a microcosm of American industrialization, that “the Industrial Revolution had happened right here in a form that was exquisitely compressed”; he attempts, obsessively, “to discover what had gone wrong between its founding in 1834 and the present day—what, precisely, had been lost in the ineluctable transformation from industry to information” (73). Although he initially sees in his niece “the apathy most people felt toward the pursuits he held most dear,” he eventually comes to believe that she possesses his vision, his same capacity to see the apocalyptic effects of visibility (110). Yet, ironically, his own view of the world is so skewed by theory and academia that he is blind to the reality of Charlotte’s emotions, and instead projects his own desires and insecurities onto her. When he senses a hint of despair in her voice over the phone, and she begins skipping their sessions, he believes that, at last, “he had managed to impart the essence of his vision to another human being!”
In his delusion, he fails to discover that her behavior is, in fact, the fallout of the end of her affair with Michael West, which left her broken and in need of comfort, yet not in the way Moose believes.

At the beginning of the scene in which Charlotte finally goes to see her uncle after an absence of several weeks, this disconnect between them produces an ironically poignant, if brief moment of mutual connection. Charlotte says, “I--I have to tell you something,” to which he responds, “I know... you mustn't be afraid” (463). At this point in the novel, Moose believes that Charlotte is reaching out to him because she has finally seen through his eyes, received the “gift” of his enlightened perspective on this vast movement of history (465). Charlotte, however, is wholly consumed by the loss of her lover. She is overwhelmed not only by her first major heartbreak, but also by the underlying fear that she will never again be desired, and thus made beautiful, in the same way--and has come to tell Moose that she wants to stop attending their lessons together. Yet, amidst this moment of misunderstanding, it seems as though Moose will be able to provide the love, the human connection that she craves:

Moose came to Charlotte and embraced her, something he’d never done before... She breathed this smell of her uncle, who was all around her, blocking out the world so nothing could touch her and at the same time hoarding her, saving her for himself alone--all this Charlotte sensed, and understood that it was love: this, more than anything else she had known.

This was what love felt like. (463)

In her uncle’s embrace, Charlotte escapes the acute awareness of her physical body, which defined her relationship with Michael, and returns to a state of pure sensation and
emotionality. Love, she realizes, cannot be registered or quantified on visible surfaces; it can only be felt. Yet, the moment cannot last; Charlotte quickly realizes that Moose does not understand her, as he continually insists that she has acquired some change, a “gift” he has given her that he refuses to explicitly articulate. When she asks “What kind of a gift?” he responds, “I think you know... Or have a sense” (465). She finally explodes, “I don’t want to be like you! ... I want to be like everybody else” (466).

Through young Charlotte’s relationship with her uncle, Egan illustrates a fundamental issue of postmodernity that the novel ultimately resists: Moose is deeply invested in the problem of visibility that plagues girls like his niece, but only as an academic projection of history, a representation of the combined energies of capitalism and industrialization, compressed into the small town of Rockford. Charlotte, however, is actually coming of age and developing her sense of self beneath the weight of these forces. For her, Moose’s so-called “gift” of a removed, academic perspective is meaningless. Charlotte is not interested in ascending to some enlightened position of superior vision; for her, the fallout of visibility is the pure emotion of heartbreak. Ultimately, it is this emotional fallout—rather than the academic, theoretical stakes—of visible identity in which the novel is truly interested. Charlotte wants “to be like everybody else” in Rockford because she craves a stable, comfortable identity that is, above all else, lovable (466).

**Conclusion**

The climactic event just before the epilogue of the novel occurs when Charlotte Swenson returns to Rockford where her story began, only this time with Irene, the Ordinary People team, and an entire production crew. In an almost satirically meta sequence of events, they have come in order to film a reenactment of Charlotte’s car crash
that prompted her reconstructive surgery and ultimately led to her rapidly escalating fame. Charlotte fell unconscious during the actual accident and does not know how or by whom her inert body was discovered in the cornfield where she crashed; yet, in Irene’s version of the script, she limps from the wreckage bloodied and screaming, and aided by “The Good Samaritan,” who has yet to be cast (491). When she protests, telling Thomas (the founder of Ordinary People), “I don’t care what [the script] says… I’m telling you. I was unconscious,” he replies, “if I could rewrite history… I’d have us all set up in that field with cameras and lights and sound all ready to go when you landed there the first time. That would have been a thousand percent better, no question, because it would have been real” (492). Eventually, Charlotte agrees to participate in this new and improved version of her trauma, on the condition that Charlotte Hauser—whom she recognizes from their brief meeting at the beginning of the novel—be cast as the Good Samaritan.

Finally, covered in fake gore made of peanut butter and soaked by the thunderstorm overhead, Charlotte Swenson prepares for the shot; Thomas tells her, “Scream like you’ve never screamed in your life. Scream like the naked girl running in that picture. Mouth wide open--wide, wide, got it? Three… two… one… Action!” (513).3 The camera rolls, and the two Charlottes begin the trek out of the cornfield:

We crashed through the corn, little Charlotte and I, my useless eyes squeezed shut, my mouth a gigantic O that dredged up from within me a sound unlike any I had ever made before, or even heard… The journey felt endless, blind,

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3 Here, Thomas references Nick Ut’s now-iconic Pulitzer-winning photograph of 9-year-old Kim Phuc, taken on June 8, 1972, in Vietnam. In the photo, Phuc runs toward the camera after an aerial napalm attack, naked and screaming. Interestingly, after coming to the U.S. in 2015 to receive laser treatments that removed her painful scars, Phuc, now in her fifties, became the subject of numerous articles discussing her reconstructive treatments, as well as her feelings on the power of her image as a symbol of the Vietnam war. For examples, see “Famous ‘Napalm Girl’ From Vietnam War Undergoes Treatment in U.S.” (2015) in The World Post and “Napalm Girl, Then and Now” (2015) in Esquire.
doomed, but the girl kept me going... We'll never arrive, I thought each time I paused to yank in breath. It will never end. (516)

Charlotte is emotionally immersed in the scene because she lives in a society where appearance both creates and reflects reality; despite Thomas's earlier comment, the reenactment itself is real. In this moment of literally reliving trauma, Charlotte's eyes become “useless,” her journey “blind.” The primal, visceral emotion that she feels can only be expressed by a scream—a scream that is pre-language, invisible, and unrepresentable. After the shot has ended, she realizes that “something was still wrong”—because of the “panicky flicker of voices, in the fact that so many hands were touching me, soothing me”—but does not know what until she hears “A voice I hadn’t heard in many, many years... now, familiar as my own” (516). The voice belongs to Ellen Metcalf—her old friend, Charlotte Hauser’s mother—who says, “Charlotte can’t stop screaming” (517). Charlotte Swenson’s unceasing scream serves as a cathartic release that allows her to let go of the need to be represented, at last severing her inner self from the visible simulacrum into which her body has transformed. Up until this point in her story, Charlotte has believed that what she truly wants is to regain a visibly represented self that offers her access to the fantastical mirrored room. In this climactic moment of pure and indescribable feeling, she is finally freed from that desire. Despite all its postmodern self-referentiality and candid obsession with representation, the novel always seems to return to unrepresentable emotion. The mirrored room functions in the same manner as Moose’s academese; both are edifices characters create around themselves in order to make life meaningful, but that actually only imprison real emotions.
From the beginning of the novel’s Part Two, entitled “The Mirrored Room,” it is clear that Charlotte Swenson’s ticket into the enigmatic mirrored room would be her participation in Ordinary People, an Internet service designed to give subscribers “access to every aspect of this person, all the things you wonder” (254). After she agrees to become one of the organization’s “Extraordinary People”—part of an offshoot likened to Premium Pay cable—her identity is put on display for millions, her face made into a marketable entity in its own right; ultimately, to enter the mirrored room is to be transformed into pure representation and reproduced into oblivion. By the novel’s final section, entitled “Afterlife,” Charlotte realizes that the images in the mirrored room are just that: flat images, reflections that perhaps originated in a real source of beauty but are themselves nothing more than representation. She says, “And when I think of the mirrored room, as of course I still do, I understand now that it’s empty, filled with Chimeras like Charlotte Swenson—the hard, beautiful seashells left behind long after the living creatures within have struggled free and swum away” (528). Egan concludes that to be observed, which Charlotte previously saw as “the central action—the only one worth taking,” is ultimately an empty pursuit (171). An identity constructed based solely on physical appearance, on what is visible, is superficial and devoid of any sensation of truth.

As Charlotte’s interior self becomes increasingly estranged from the position of extreme visibility her public identity has assumed, Irene becomes more visible through her calculated ascent to celebrity. Through her unusual position as Charlotte’s “voice” for Ordinary People, a ghostwriter of sorts, she becomes increasingly entwined in the competitive fashion world with the ultimate goal of financial success. In response to the failure of her husband, a musician “exhausted by fear,” to provide economic stability, she
begins "forcing herself to see [the ruthless nature of the fashion world] coldly, dispassionately, because one of them had to; otherwise they would be trampled underfoot by everyone else" (311, 310). With this decisive embrace of capitalism’s cold competition, Irene makes her talents marketable by fabricating, for Charlotte’s online persona, “a voice that wasn’t her own or Charlotte’s but a hybrid, an unholy creature that was Irene’s creation, too, fed by the cheap detective novels she still gulped down when she had time” (311). Irene, like Charlotte, ultimately becomes fragmented; she is split between her identity as Irene Maitlock--which, through her increasing celebrity, becomes itself comprised of disparate pieces--and her role as Charlotte’s ghostwriter. By the “Afterlife” section, the Charlotte Swenson known to the public is more Irene than Charlotte. In fact, at the end of the novel, Charlotte literally sells the rights to her identity, then dyes her hair, changes her name, and simply “[walks] out the door of [her] twenty-fifth-floor apartment for the very last time” (527).

By the end of the novel, Irene has used Charlotte’s simulacrum to advance her own status, ultimately occupying the limelight that the real Charlotte was never able to reach. This exploitation of identity, the transformation of selfhood into a commodity, epitomizes success in the postmodern capitalist America Egan portrays. After leaving her former identity behind, Charlotte comments on Irene’s transformation:

As the first “new new journalist,” Irene Maitlock is something of a legend, though by now scores of others have followed her example. Her company, miglior/fabbro.com, has prospered unfathomably, and she’s a celebrity in her own right. I saw a picture of her recently on the arm of Richard Gere, which I guess means that her marriage didn’t last. She looks so different, thanks to
her much chronicled makeover; without the name, I wouldn’t have recognized her. (528)

Here, Egan suggests that those who seek older forms of truth or authenticity will not be rewarded in American society as it currently exists. Irene’s conscious choice to embrace representation over reality grants her the highest status our society can imagine, that of American celebrity. Yet, the novel’s main character and overall narrator has reached a far different truth. By selling the rights to her identity and, thus, her visible representations, Charlotte makes her actual life—the life she leads after the novel has ended—unrepresented. Once she has left her old life and identity behind, she says, “As for myself, I’d rather not say very much. When I breathe, the air feels good in my chest” (528). Freed from the confines of representation, she communicates her humanity not in terms of how she looks, but in terms of how she feels. After a lifetime of striving for access to the mirrored room, she ultimately rejects the notion of mass reproducibility, of having “scores of others” follow in her wake, and becomes truly anonymous.
Chapter Two
“My words. My world”: Visible Identity and Authenticity in Jess Row’s Your Face in Mine

Introduction

In Your Face in Mine, Jess Row⁴ imagines a not-so-far-off future in which technological advancements allow people to literally transform their identities and become someone else by drastically altering their physical appearances. The story is presented through the first-person narration of its protagonist Kelly Thorndike, who has returned to his hometown of Baltimore after a car crash kills his wife, a Chinese woman named Wendy, and their young daughter, Meimei. In the novel’s first scene, Kelly walks down the street and spots a black man who strikes him as uncannily familiar. It is only when the man addresses him by name that Kelly recognizes him as his close childhood friend, Martin, who, the last time the narrator saw him, was 19 years old and white. Martin explains that he has become involved in pioneering an up-and-coming cosmetic procedure called racial reassignment surgery. He attempts to hire Kelly as a ghostwriter to tell his transformation story or, in Martin’s own words, “To spring it on the world, the way it needs to be done” (33). Kelly is skeptical, but agrees to review some materials on the procedure and soon becomes intertwined in a strange enterprise attempting to commodify and sell racial identity.

⁴ American writer Jess Row was born in 1974 in Washington, DC. After teaching English for two years as a Yale-China fellow at the Chinese University of Hong Kong, he published two collections of short stories, one in 2005 and the other in 2011. He has received numerous awards for his stories, including a Guggenheim fellowship, an NEA fellowship in fiction, and a Whiting Writers Award. Your Face in Mine, published in 2014, is his first novel and will be the focus of this chapter.
Although the entirety of the story is told from Kelly’s first-person perspective, the novel as a whole is comprised of a variety of narrative sources that create fragmentation and add to its postmodern character. For instance, a large portion of Martin’s backstory and explanations of racial reassignment are told through the beginnings of a book describing his self-diagnosed condition, the psychological reports that he and Silpa (the surgeon behind racial reassignment surgery) produce, and the tape recordings in which he reflects on his journey to his new identity. In some ways, Kelly’s story functions as a framing device for Martin’s narrative, which, in fact, is precisely Martin’s goal in involving Kelly in his business venture. The novel also reflects the postmodern aesthetic in its extreme self-reflexivity, which often manifests in metafictional references to theory, academia, and the nature of narrative itself.

The novel’s ending, which culminates in Kelly’s racial reassignment and assumption of a new Chinese identity, arises abruptly in the wake of his skepticism of the procedure throughout the story. During the course of the novel, he is shaped by his interactions with self-aware postmodern characters who double as discursive devices for contending ideologies; late in the story, he encounters a Korean-turned-white academic named Julie-nah, who discourages him from undergoing the procedure. Martin and Julie-nah in particular represent—not only symbolically, but also literally through their straightforward dialogue—opposing ends of a spectrum of theoretical discourse surrounding questions of appearance, identity, and truth. The first section of this chapter discusses how Martin, at one end of that spectrum, represents a move away from authenticity. Although he begins at what seems to be a place of sincere emotion, likening the feeling of belonging among the family of a black friend during his childhood to feeling like “part of the human world,” his
entire identity eventually becomes a commodity, designed to be reproduced and sold (114). In the second section of this chapter, I show how Julie-nah, at the other end of the spectrum, symbolizes movement on an opposite trajectory. Her desire to change her race originates in her early exposure to idealized representations of white beauty in the movies; she begins with the desire for de-individualization, to more closely resemble the culture industry's mass-reproduced images of feminine beauty. Unlike Martin, however, she regrets her transformation. By the time Kelly encounters her in the novel, she has become an adamantine critic of racial reassignment, presenting it as a barrier to truth. The third and final section of this chapter, then, analyzes how Kelly, who engages in profound ideological conversations with both these characters, must sculpt his own beliefs in order to make a life-altering decision.

Martin

Martin's involvement in racial reassignment eventually stems from capitalist motivations. For Martin, questions of whether or not 'true identity' exists--and, if it does, what it means--are irrelevant; his 'true identity' as a black man named Martin Lipkin is the product he is selling. As the novel's best capitalist, he knows that the key to successful marketing is not in the product itself, but in the packaging, the external signifiers that give social meaning to the contents within. The variety of different media through which Kelly and readers encounter Martin's story will ultimately be used for financial ends, to market and sell racial reassignment. More so than any other character in the novel, Martin understands precisely how to manipulate the tools of the culture industry for personal gain. His multi-media narrative is a marketing device that Kelly eventually realizes has been consciously calculated and constructed, a “customized memoir” designed “to tell
people what they want to hear”; as Kelly explains, “The body is raw material; the story is raw material” (270, 271). Martin, by inventing a narrative that depicts his transformation as an expression of his ‘true identity,’ paves the way for others to do the same. His narrative is the means by which the masses will be instilled with artificial desires that can be fulfilled only through the purchase of his product, racial reconstruction surgery.

In designing the convincing tale that paints his transformation as a journey to finding his ‘true identity,’ Martin adopts highly loaded cultural and historical references that exploit a tendency for self-evaluation endemic in postmodern society. For instance, in his paper describing his self-diagnosis of what he terms “Racial Identity Dysphoria Syndrome,” he likens his own condition to the Gender Dysphoria experienced by transsexuals. The paper anticipates skeptics who “will surely believe that this is nothing more than a publicity stunt, or perhaps a perverse expression of “white guilt,”” insisting that “Guilt just did not enter into it” (41). Here, Martin provides a preemptive response to the public’s--and his potential consumers'--probable reactions and exploits the established legitimacy of transsexuality to further his own capitalist ends. This powerful use of allusion can be seen, too, in his attempts to involve Kelly in the business as a ghostwriter. Kelly recalls: “What did he say to me, back when he handed over the tapes? You’re the Alex Haley to my Malcolm X. A black man, I’m thinking, is the perfect vehicle, the vessel for every American desire, the vector for every narrative” (271). By invoking the well-known, historically significant Autobiography of Malcolm X, Martin not only lends his narrative--and, thus, his identity and product--the premise of legitimacy, but he also imbues them with a ready-made set of recognizable cultural implications. The Autobiography of Malcolm X is itself a transformation narrative about individuals coming to embody certain versions
of black identity. Thus, the identity Martin adopts can function as the framework for his marketing scheme—"the vector for every narrative"—because of the cultural meanings already attached to versions of black identity like those in Malcolm X’s pivotal autobiography.  

In some ways, this use of black identity as a tool for capitalist advancement can be read as a new, perverse method by which black bodies are exploited for the benefit of powerful white men. Yet, Martin’s vision is far more nuanced than this interpretation may suggest. In Martin’s eyes, “Success is more than money... Connectedness... To be intractable. Undismissable. Visible” (51). Much like Charlotte Swenson in her youth, Martin understands success as a particular type of visibility, a specific way of being seen. Charlotte eventually rejects this notion once she realizes that the visibility she craves comes at the cost of losing interiority, of becoming a simulacrum. Martin, however, understands this strange relationship between visibility and authenticity from the very beginning of his journey. He recognizes that, in a society obsessed with appearances and materials, representation determines and often takes precedence over reality. Thus, for Martin, the simulacrum—the epitome of representation itself—is the most visible, and therefore the most powerful form of identity. His use of his own body as a vehicle, a vessel, is an undeniable commodification of black identity. Yet, in his eyes, to become commodified—to transform the body into a form of pure representation—is to attain success under capitalism. Martin uses black identity as a vector for narrative, but he also understands narrative as a form of power.

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5 In Playing in the Dark (1992), Toni Morrison conducts “an investigation into the ways in which a nonwhite, Africanlike (or Africanist) presence or persona was constructed in the United States, and the imaginative uses this fabricated presence served” (6). In Row's post-Morrison novel, Martin evinces how this construction of an Africanist presence is now being used by a white character to simulate black identity.
In this way, Row also plays with the complex relationships between appearance, reality, and authenticity. Regardless of whether or not the constructed nature of Martin’s racial identity makes it his ‘true identity,’ Kelly is unable to deny that Martin Lipkin, the black man born by way of racial reconstruction surgery, is real—in that he has a tangible presence that impacts the surrounding world. At one point, Kelly notes that “Martin’s decision—that Martin’s real existence, the real fake black man that he is—has, subtly, indefinably, already seeped into the world around us” (199). Here, Row alludes to an important distinction embedded in the theory of socially constructed race: although race stems from man-made social constructions rather than from natural, biological roots, it is, nonetheless, real, a tangible fact of our everyday world. In Martin’s case, ‘real’ becomes synonymous with ‘visible.’ By altering the elements of his physical appearance that act as social signifiers for his race, Martin changes not only his own identity, but also the society he inhabits; because his identity as a black man is visibly manifest and, thus, socially accepted as genuine, it becomes real. However, in Row’s novel, reality does not necessarily imply authenticity. In fact, Martin is able to attain increased visibility—and, thus, an increased impact on reality—because his exterior has been consciously constructed to reflect the desires of others. The version of ‘true identity’ that he sells to the public—as a natural force innate to his being—is inauthentic and constructed. Yet, by adopting visual signifiers that make his chosen race perceptible to others, he makes his new identity real.

6 In “The Social Construction of Race” (1994), Ian F. Haney López rejects the long-standing notion that race is an innate, immutable biological fact, rather than a socially-created myth. Yet, he still asserts that “race mediates every aspect of our lives,” and that “social meanings connect our faces to our souls” (López).
In the society Row depicts, appearance creates reality; thus, Martin Lipkin becomes a real black identity.⁷

Although Martin’s actions are ultimately economically-motivated, hegemonically-driven manipulations of the association between race and capitalist success, the question of whether his new identity is his ‘true identity’ is far more ambiguous. Even if the explicit desire for racial reassignment is constructed, implanted in the minds of consumers by Martin’s successful marketing scheme, it also has roots in some more fundamental form of desire, specifically, as Kelly says, “every American desire” (271). By allowing people to create new identities, racial reassignment makes the American notion of the self-made individual—a notion inextricably linked to the founding fathers, the fantasies of the American dream, and American capitalism—newly tangible and attainable. Whereas in Look at Me success in capitalist society is linked to visibility, Your Face in Mine portrays characters who assert their economic power by literally becoming self-made—by drastically changing their physical appearances in order to adopt entirely new identities. Yet, from the disillusioned postmodern perspective that Row unambiguously adopts, the idea of a democratizing, universalizing ability to form one’s own identity can only be presented ironically. Readers of Your Face in Mine are left unsure of the extent to which Martin’s stories and justifications are true; however, by openly acknowledging his own identity as

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⁷ In his novel, Row imagines a world in which the notion of racial appropriation becomes satirically literal. Yet, the futuristic scenario he portrays is actually not so dissimilar from our own contemporary American society. For instance, in June of 2015, Rachel Dolezal, then president of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), became the center of a highly-publicized controversy when her estranged parents claimed she was being “dishonest and deceptive with her identity.” Dolezal’s parents and birth certificate claim that she is genetically white, but Dolezal herself insists that she identifies as black. The story also sparked a fierce social media debate in which Dolezal’s supporters cited her activism and pointed to the widespread support for Caitlyn Jenner’s public transition from male to female, while critics claimed that her actions were self-serving and disrespectful to black culture. Most recently, she has announced that she is in the process of writing a book. For some examples of the Internet’s diverse responses to this issue, see “Ex-NAACP leader Rachel Dolezal: I identify as black” on CNN, “The Life & Times of Rachel Dolezal, Notable African American” on Jezebel, and “Rachel Dolezal’s True Lies” on Vanity Fair.
consciously constructed for the purpose of financial gain, Martin does access some form of authenticity under capitalism. His identity is a simulacrum designed for mercenary ends, yet he willingly embraces it as such; perhaps in a postmodern world, where all realities and identities are constructed, truth can emerge from the open recognition of the lies that govern our own lives and those of others.

**Julie-nah**

Row presents a counter-argument to Martin’s vision through the character of Julie-nah, an academic and theorist who has transitioned from Korean to white. Julie-nah explains to Kelly her desire for transformation as a direct result of exposure to the movies. She recalls a formative event from her days at an all-girls high school in Korea, in which her class watched the movie *Love Story*. After being affected by Ali MacGraw’s emotional performance, she saw her own face in a new way: “I tried, when I was at home, looking at the mirror, to make all those expressions. And I couldn’t. I had no range of feeling. My face was hollow. It was a mask. By comparison, it wasn’t even human” (292). She develops her understanding about the visual signifiers of humanity based on something that is non-human—a mass-reproduced, two-dimensional representation of a constructed moment. Later, when discussing trends in plastic surgery with Kelly and Silpa, she describes the elusive quality that delineates the “classical ideal” as “Stillness... Something frozen in time... Not actual beauty, more like the tomb of beauty... It’s the death glow. The corpse pose. It’s been in the literature for thirty years. It’s not news” (333). For Julie-nah, society’s conception of ideal beauty is directly linked to the separation of interiority and surface, minimizing the invisible substance of a human being until all that remains are lifeless and, therefore, beautiful exterior signifiers. By the point in her story at which Kelly encounters
her, she has learned that images such as the depiction of Ali MacGraw’s face in *Love Story* do not represent real beauty, or even beautiful human beings; rather, it is the reproduced image itself that is beautiful. What Julie-nah, in her youth, desired, then, was not to become Ali MacGraw, but to be reproduced, to be represented in a still image. The allure she felt came not from the subject of the image, but from the image itself as an object.

Julie-nah’s notion of “the tomb of beauty,” of beauty as created and defined by lack of movement, change, or degeneration, speaks directly to descriptions of beauty in *Look at Me* and *The Bluest Eye* (333). By the end of Egan’s novel, Charlotte Swenson learns that the images in which her society identifies beauty are “the hard, beautiful seashells left behind long after the living creatures within have struggled free and swum away. Or died” (528). Here, Egan shows that the representations of beauty to which young girls compare themselves are just that: pure representation. When girls such as the younger Julie-nah believe so profoundly that these beautiful vessels contain and signify life, they, in turn, come to see their own faces as empty by comparison. This power of the still image, then, proves particularly pernicious for young girls of color such as Julie-nah and Pecola, who are never represented in the same way as are women who embody society’s ideal versions of white feminine beauty. Their own faces feel less human, less alive, because they are compared to images of perfect white beauty that have been stilled in time, and will therefore never deteriorate or die.

Yet, as Egan’s novel shows, the harmful impacts of the stilled image are not limited to girls of color who lack representation in cultural images. For instance, for Charlotte Hauser, “The image of herself and her mother together--in a mirror, a window, a photograph--[flattens] her with a blunt hopelessness, a sense that she might as well be
dead” because “Her mother was beautiful and Charlotte was not” (115). Like Julie-nah, Charlotte feels that the face she sees in the mirror lacks humanity when she compares it not to those of other flesh-and-blood human beings, but rather to flat, artificial images that seem to signify beauty. She is unable to develop a sustaining sense of individual subjectivity because she attempts to do so by comparing herself—a real human being who moves, changes, and develops—to a still, invariably perfect image. Both Charlotte Hauser and Julie-nah, in her teenage years, believe that their faces are less real, less alive, and less valuable than the flat representations to which they compare themselves. Yet, whereas Charlotte’s reaction to this feeling of emptiness manifests primarily in various forms of sexual desire, Julie-nah’s response is to reject her Korean face in favor of whitewashed images of feminine beauty, enabled by racial reassignment. In Your Face in Mine, Row posits a world in which characters such as Julie-nah can open the tomb of beauty and become the object of their own desires.

Charlotte’s and Julie-nah’s differing reactions may have arisen from any number of sources, ranging from their racial and cultural disparities to the different levels of technology to which they have access. Their perspectives also differ, however, in the extent to which they are self-reflexively aware of the tides of ideology that govern their feelings. Unlike Charlotte, who, while intelligent and observant, is not schooled in postmodern theoretical discourse, Julie-nah thinks through her own decisions and identity in self-consciously theoretical frameworks; she is highly attuned to the notion that movies are constructed deliberately, designed to reinstate the hegemonic order and, ultimately, to turn the wheels of capitalism. Her perspectival edge over Charlotte exists, in part, because she analyzes the roots of her desire for transformation from a retrospective position; Kelly and
readers learn her story--like Martin’s--through the lens of the narrative she presents.

However, she also says of her early education, “This was a top girls’ school; our teachers were very savvy, very postmodern”; even as a child, she understood the ideological forces that were governing her choices, but was nonetheless unable to resist their powerful allure (292). She overtly portrays her desire for physical transformation as a result of the culture industry, literally referring to it as a “Consumer choice” (292). As Horkheimer and Adorno state in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, “Movies and radio need no longer pretend to be art. The truth that they are just business is made into an ideology in order to justify the rubbish they deliberately produce” (1111). Yet, the privileged, self-aware perspective from which Julie-nah sees the culture industry and her position within it does not lessen its impact on her, and perhaps even amplifies it; her awareness of and, therefore, her tacit compliance with her own oppression only strengthen the ideological forces that bear down upon her.

Eventually, the psychological toll of not just her physical transformation, but also her understanding of its origins and symbolic significance, culminate in her assassination of Silpa. In the final scene in which she appears, Julie-nah asks Silpa to explain to Kelly the science behind the racial reassignment she so despises; perhaps ironically, she says, “I love it when you talk about the science” (329). Silpa goes on to explain:

> What do we know about plastic surgery? he asks, rhetorically, looking around at us. What’s the consensus of the field? It’s all about taking away. Subtract, subtract, subtract... What is this neoclassical beauty all the doctors talk about? The least possible extrusion. Slenderness. A level plane. A level playing field. (331)
This explanation evinces an irony embedded within the logic of hegemonic capitalism as it relates to the ideals of beauty created and sold by the culture industry: our society promotes acquisition and consumption as the path to beauty and therefore a dominant, desirable identity, yet simultaneously teaches us that physical beauty consists of a body characterized by absence, by lack of substance. Silpa’s sense of ideal beauty as “Slenderness” echoes Julie-nah’s notion of the power of still images; however, whereas Julie-nah recognizes the allure of representation as ultimately oppressive and dehumanizing, Silpa sees it as a democratizing impulse, the path to “A level playing field” (331). Although Silpa and Martin claim that racial reassignment will ignite, as Martin says, “a fundamental reordering of the field,” Julie-nah understands that “There’s a healthy point-five percent of the world’s population that has really good reasons for RRS” (333, 335). In her eyes, the “fundamental reordering of the field” will not create a “level playing field” or a more unified society; rather, the rise of racial reassignment will only lead to more fragmentation on both individual and cultural levels (333, 331).

Row, here, also makes reference to the fact that flat, reproduced, photographic images are seen as more beautiful, more valuable, and more real than actual human beings. Whereas Martin sees Silpa as a creator of originality, a catalyst for self-invention, Julie-nah sees him as a manufacturer of simulacrams and a thief of individual humanity. For her, racial reassignment is not a means of expressing individuality, but rather an extinguishing of the interior self that transforms the body into a form of representation. Whereas Martin believes that to become objective representation is a form of empowerment, Julie-nah feels paradoxically oppressed and dehumanized by her willing commodification of her own body. Her motivations for assassinating Silpa, then, can be seen as twofold: on one hand,
she believes that she is performing a service for society by preventing others from being reduced into reproductions of other images. Yet, on the other hand, by killing what is essentially her creator, she in some ways attains the authenticity that Martin and Silpa promote as a benefit of racial reassignment. As the only Korean-turned-white woman Silpa ever has--and now, ever will have been able to--create, she becomes an original, a one-of-a-kind. Whereas Martin journeys from a place of individuality to a state of mass reproducibility, literally transforming himself into a commodity, Julie-nah ultimately finds a way to escape her culture industry roots; she breaks from her original desire to embody representation as an object and becomes a true individual subject. Her final act in the novel is both a violent revolt against capitalist commodity culture and a preventative measure that allows her to avoid becoming, as Charlotte Swenson does, the raw material for countlessly reproduced representations.

**Kelly/Curtis**

The opposing discourses that Row presents through Martin and Julie-nah ultimately culminate in the main character’s decision to abandon his identity as the white man Kelly Thorndike to become a Chinese man named Curtis Wang. As the novel is told through the filter of Kelly’s first-person narration, his story can be seen as a consciously constructed representation. Like Martin’s commodified tale and Julie-nah’s discourse-laden recollections, *Your Face in Mine* should be read suspiciously, as a narrative subjectively designed to rationalize the dramatic choices of its characters. Kelly does, in his story, provide detailed descriptions of his interior thoughts and feelings; yet, his decision to undergo racial reassignment surgery arises abruptly and in opposition to the majority of his sentiments throughout the novel. Readers, then, are left to analyze how the interactions
he has with other characters culminate in his drastic change of heart. Martin and Julie-nah serve as Kelly’s primary models for understanding the motivations behind racial reassignment, as well as the psychological consequences that follow it. By engaging with the personal narratives of these characters, he is exposed to both extremes of a spectrum, ranging from Martin’s embrace of his own mass-reproducibility to Julie-nah’s desire to be represented as an original. Yet Kelly’s own eventual choice to transition seems to have underlying motivations that resemble neither Martin’s nor Julie-nah’s.

Kelly’s decision to transform is distinctive in that it has primarily emotional roots. Amidst the thick layers of academic discourse and social critique that pervade the novel, his attempts to grapple with his own grief over the deaths of his wife and daughter constitute the most coherent and most accessible version of his narrative. Undergoing racial reassignment to become Curtis Wang allows Kelly to cope with his grief by becoming more akin to Wendy and Meimei in the social meanings his body conveys to the world. Unlike Julie-nah, who ultimately wants to escape the stillness of mass-reproducibility, to become a one-of-a-kind, Kelly finds satisfaction in a transformation that seems to leave him less visible and, thus, somehow more connected to others. Indeed, the very title of the novel--*Your Face in Mine*--indicates a desire to bridge the gap between self and other.

Kelly’s belief that he can recreate his wife’s and daughter’s faces in his own reflects the structuralist notion of the relationship between sign, signifier, and signified; he believes that within the framework of a society that insists on the visible manifestation of ethnicity, he can commemorate his Chinese family by altering his signifying features to match theirs.

Kelly’s desire to transcend the barrier between self and other is foreshadowed by his interest in the Chinese concept of *miao*. Coined by poet Wu Kaiqin in the early twelfth
century, the term *miao* indicates a complex, diversely defined concept that deals with the way binaries are embedded in Chinese culture. In his dissertation, Kelly cites a description in a letter from Wu to his adopted son, Meng Faru, as his most clear articulation of the concept:

> Have you ever heard a young student playing the lute strike a wrong note that causes your ears to shrink back in displeasure? Listen closely to the sound [*zhì yìn*] of the wrong note and you will hear the harmonic principle [*lì*] of the universe. *Miao* is the wrong note that harmonizes all human appearances and allows us to forget “near” and “far,” “dark” and “light,” “Chinese” and “barbarian.” (306)

Kelly’s deep engagement with this topic, which is concerned with overcoming the binaries of signification that guide human interaction, anticipates his eventual decision to adopt a new race. His interest in Chinese culture has roots even more profound than his connection to Wendy and Meimei; for Kelly, Chinese identity represents a true leveling of the playing field, a collapse of the hierarchies engendered by myths of racial difference.

Two years after writing his dissertation, he is still tortured by the desire to be Chinese, to be on the other side of a racial binary: “What does it mean, I thought, to hate yourself, not for what you are but for what you aren’t? To hate yourself as a kind of double negative, a self-canceling equation?” (308). Here, Kelly defines his own identity only in terms of its differences from his notion of a ‘Chinese identity.’ Later, after he has transformed, he asks, “Should I grieve for them, for my lost girl, for the woman who could finish my sentences in two languages?... I’ve become them. I didn’t make the world. Should I give up on it?” (368).

He believes that because he is empirically Chinese, he is no longer Kelly Thorndike, the
white man from Baltimore with a deceased wife and daughter. By transcending a racial
binary, he attempts to embody the ‘otherness’ of Wendy and Meimei, to fill their absence by
donning their racial signifiers. Yet, as Row suggests, he ultimately only adds another layer
of meaning to the chain of signification that constitutes his identity.

This fluid relationship between revival and repression of the past is evident in a
scene that contains one of the novel’s most poignant portrayals of grief. At a party, Kelly
speaks to a Chinese woman named Shen, who has a young, half-Chinese daughter:

I turn to the woman, Shen, and say, almost in a whisper, a conspiratorial
sotto voce, wo nu'er jiao Meimei. Conjugating verbs in Chinese is much looser
than in English, and depends much more on context. In English you would
have to say my daughter’s name was. Or my daughter’s name is. In Chinese
the verb by itself seldom has so much power. To be technically correct I
should have said, wo nu'er jiao Meimei le, the le indicating a finished action.

(215)

Here, the nature of the Chinese language allows Kelly simultaneously to reveal and to
conceal the traces of his loss. The fact that Meimei’s life has ended is embedded within the
linguistic framework he uses; the phrase he articulates to Shen functions as a means of
signifying his loss, of making his grief legible and, thus, of coping with it. Yet, at the same
time, he knows that his loss will be imperceptible to Shen due to the context in which he
reveals it. This moment echoes the way Kelly’s racial reassignment later in the novel
functions as a coping mechanism for his mourning. By becoming Chinese, he reveals, in
plain sight, the visible signifiers of his loss; yet, by replacing Kelly Thorndike with Curtis
Wang, he erases the history he shared with his wife and daughter.
Kelly’s new body, coded as Chinese, ultimately functions not only as a recreation of his racial identity, but also as a signifying strategy that feels more accurate, more real, than other modes of expressing grief. His narrative is largely centered around his struggle to grapple with emotions of loss and grief in an authentic way, in a society that describes them using an endless supply of clichéd language, repeated until all meaning is lost. Early in the novel, he describes his initial reactions to his loss:

Grief makes you temporarily invisible: a fugitive in your own place, in your own time. That’s not news. What frightened me, when I gained just enough traction to begin to think about it, was that I didn’t mind so much. In fact, it seemed like a confirmation of who I already was. Snuggled inside my nearly middle-aged soul, wombed inside my happy fatherhood, was a creature who would use the excuse of mourning just to buy time, until no one expected me to heal or move on. (16)

Kelly’s desperate attempt to revive his loved ones, to bring back the past using visible signifiers that imply its presence, also reflects the postmodern impulse to renew historical memory. In his article “Haunted by Place: Moral Obligation and the Postmodern Novel,” John J. Su explains that “Postmodern ethics asks us to remember what we no longer have, perhaps what we never had, engaging us as a result with the pain of our losses” (590). Kelly’s choice to undergo racial reassignment indicates an unwillingness, or perhaps an inability, to face a painful history. Although he believes that he is reviving Wendy and Meimei by donning their racial signifiers, Row seems to suggest that he is, in actuality, doing the opposite; by becoming Curtis Wang, he is erasing his identity as Kelly Thorndike,
whose identity was defined by his relationships with, and his memories of, his wife and daughter.

Although Kelly’s transformation into Curtis Wang is undeniably problematic within the novel, it does seem as though he attains a level of comfort as a result of his new identity. The novel’s scenes featuring Julie-nah that lead up to Kelly’s surgery foreshadow the possibility of his emerging more confused, more fragmented than ever before. Yet, his inner monologue that concludes the novel conveys profound unity and contentment; the first time he is addressed in Chinese as he boards a plane to China, he thinks, “Is this happening? Can this be? My words. My world. I’ve been addressed; I’ve been seen. The knot of fear at the back of my neck—how long has it been there, I’m wondering, has it been there my entire waking life?—dissolves” (370). He is not, as Julie-nah predicted, “the same ball of questions as always” (335). Nor does he seem to resemble Martin, who, by the end of the novel, has almost entirely dropped his charade of authenticity—of having found his sincere identity—and revealed his capitalist motives. Instead, Kelly experiences a type of delayed Lacanian satisfaction, as though he has been waiting to be hailed as Curtis Wang since birth. Unlike Martin, who develops his interior narrative to match his physical appearance, or Julie-nah, whose transformation was self-consciously academic, Kelly seems to truly feel that he has become who he was meant to be. Rather than adopting the analytical, removed, postmodern perspective from which Martin and Julie-nah view their identities, he describes his new self by explaining how it feels to be Curtis Wang. The “knot of fear” that dissolves is not a financial victory or an academic breakthrough, but the physical manifestation of a visceral emotional response to having, at last, acquired a secure sense of selfhood.
Kelly chooses racial reassignment in reaction to an understanding of visibility that sets his transformation apart from those of Martin and Julie-nah. Whereas Martin links visibility directly to success, to the attainment of the American dream, Kelly feels imprisoned by what he understands as his extreme and privileged visibility as a white man. In the final scene before the epilogue, he breaks the fourth wall and speaks directly to the reader:

Why would I step out of the circle of belonging, where I've always been? The gilded prison house of whiteness, with its electric fences, its transparent walls? Being the most visible, therefore the most hated of all? The one who can always condescend, not the one condescended to?

Reader, doesn't the question answer itself? (358)

Like Egan's Charlotte, for whom extreme visibility is ultimately destructive, Kelly sees the visibility of his whiteness as a confining, restrictive condition. By letting go of the white identity of Kelly Thorndike, his interior self becomes free from the “prison house of whiteness” (358). Martin, Julie-nah, and Kelly all believe that becoming visible necessarily includes the separation of interior and exterior planes, the transformation of the physical body into a simulacrum. Yet, each has a different interpretation of what visibility means for identity. Martin, who sees representation as the ultimate form of power, embraces his status as a simulacrum. Julie-nah, on the other hand, believes that to become a reproduction is to sacrifice agency and individuality. Kelly, too, condemns extreme visibility, but does so in response to purely physical and emotional factors; his choice seems more authentic because it resists Martin's financial motivations and Julie-nah's academic rationalizations.
This return to pure emotion seems to be a common theme that underlies all of these stories about identity and transformation. Martin, for instance, sees his own racial reassignment--his transformation into a black identity--as the transformation of his body into a manifestation of personal contentment produced by consumer choice. In his view, the need for personal contentment, the need to feel secure in one’s own body, is the most pressing need of humans in his social world. For Martin, then, the command of capitalism is to fulfill that desire, to transform identity into a tangible commodity that can be bought and sold. Kelly ultimately buys into what Martin presents as the path to personal contentment, to becoming who you were meant to be; yet, ironically, self-fulfillment for Kelly means escaping the very system that treats individual identity as a commodity. Kelly's final sense of peace, the dissipation of “the knot of fear” whose presence he only detected once it was gone, comes during his move from capitalist America--a culture of celebrity, of extreme visibility--into communist China, a culture of relative collectivity and anonymity (370).

Through Kelly's eventual decision to undergo racial reassignment, Row presents an alternative to the self-centered conceptions of identity that Martin and Julie-nah represent. In the end, Kelly makes the drastic choice to transform as a means of coping with grief and finding a version of the self that feels secure and sufficient in the moment. He resists the purported visibility of whiteness and takes refuge in his newfound anonymity in part as a reaction against the institutionalization of mourning and grief in contemporary American society. To become anonymous is, in some ways, to become an anti-cliché, to escape the burden of over-representation. Charlotte Hauser’s desire “to be like everyone else” finds new refinement in Kelly’s narrative; Kelly rejects extreme visibility in favor of anonymity,
yet does so not to see his appearance reflected in the media, but to escape the inauthenticity of overused, now meaningless forms of self-expression. By becoming anonymous, Kelly becomes free to confront his emotions genuinely, without relying on clichés, and thus to grapple with the loss of his loved ones. Like Pecola and the younger Charlotte, Kelly ultimately desires an identity that will afford the space and liberty to express authentic emotion and to be loved in return.
Conclusion

In these chapters, I have presented *The Bluest Eye, Look at Me, and Your Face in Mine* as seminal texts in a new canon of works that respond directly to the notion of visible identity in postmodern society. Through my analysis, I have peeled back these novels’ thick layers of narrative fragmentation, metafictionality, and academic and theoretical discourse that characterize the postmodern aesthetic in order to reveal a thread of deeply human emotionality that powerfully connects them all. Each of these postmodern writers presents a different conception of the role visibility plays in his or her specific milieu, which is closely tied to rapidly evolving changes in technology. Morrison writes about African American women’s experience in the early 1970s context of the mass-reproduction of images and a burgeoning film culture. For her characters, the emotional fallout of visibility comes from a lack of representation in the media and the inability to embody the culture industry’s idealized images of white feminine beauty. Of the three novels, *The Bluest Eye* most plainly portrays the direct effects of postmodern society’s conflation of appearance and identity on emotion and interiority; Pecola’s extremely marginalized social status and physical appearance—both of which are linked to her race, class, and gender—make her particularly vulnerable to the fallouts of visibility. Indeed, Alcoff argues that because race and gender are believed to be visibly manifest, the notion of visible identity is often used as a means of oppressive social control (*Visible Identities* 6-7).

*Look at Me* joins the conversation that Morrison initiates in *The Bluest Eye* not only by responding to the issues of visible identity over three decades later, but also by examining how these problems manifest for characters who come from the privileged
position of white identity. For instance, whereas Pecola’s struggles originate from her extremely marginalized social position and loveless, abusive upbringing, Charlotte Hauser actually comes from a position of relative privilege and a stable, nurturing family. Yet, at the end of their coming-of-age tales, Charlotte and Pecola both conclude that they do not want to be visible; instead, they want to be loved. This notion of privileged visible identity is even further amplified through the character of Charlotte Swenson. As a famous white model in a world obsessed with images of white feminine beauty, she occupies the precise position that Pecola craves; she represents the other side of the Shirley Temple cup and the Mary Jane candies. Yet, even Charlotte Swenson bears the burden of visibility when her reconstructed face—the visible evidence of her trauma—is transformed into a literal commodity. Alcoff argues that “the Other is internal to the self’s substantive content, a part of its own horizon, and thus a part of its own identity” (82). In turn, Charlotte ultimately finds refuge from her visible social identity by breaking free from the “Other” that has become embedded within her interiority. She eventually chooses to escape the blinding light of extreme visibility, to divorce herself from the celebrity and simulacrum that “Charlotte Swenson” ultimately becomes; she sheds her visible identity because she realizes that the vulnerable interior “cannot be seen, much as one might wish to show it. It dies the instant it is touched by light” (528).

*Your Face in Mine* also plays with themes of privilege by dramatizing Alcoff’s notion that race and gender “are fundamental rather than peripheral to the self... and they operate through visual markers on the body” (6). Although the society Row describes initially reads as a departure from the whitewashed nature of today’s dominant class, its structure is governed by the same hegemonic framework; as Julie-nah says, “One of these days we’ll
wake up and there’ll be two kinds of human beings, the mods and the plains... Frankly, it’s the last barrier to a world run purely on money. The future of whiteness is colors” (297). She understands the economic mechanisms at work behind the overwhelming dominance of whiteness and even sees vulnerabilities in its seemingly stable existence--the potential for it to be overthrown--if only to be replaced by an equally pernicious hegemonic identity. Ultimately, however, the stakes of this potential cannot be measured by academic or financial discourse; as Julie-nah’s and Kelly’s journeys reflect, Row’s novel is ultimately about the emotional impact of not wanting to look the way you do.

Julie-nah, as a self-conscious, postmodern thinker, has access to a critical perspective on her own social position; yet, she still cannot resist the allure of white, heteronormative ideals of feminine beauty. For her, the strange yet inextricable attachment to this standard of attractiveness--which she knows to be constructed, misguided, and ultimately oppressive--seems to be linked to the notion of love and the desire to be loved. As she explains, her obsession with white feminine beauty arose out of a profound belief that her own Korean face was incapable of communicating to others the level of emotion that Ali MacGraw’s face conveyed to her and her classmates in the movie Love Story. She associates the ability to emote with the ability to appear--and, thus, to be--human and, therefore, lovable. Like Claudia MacTeer in The Bluest Eye, she does not question her own appearance until she is exposed to a represented version of someone whose physical attributes (“the Thing that made her beautiful, and not us”) seem to make them somehow more valuable, more lovable to others (Morrison 74). For both Morrison’s characters and Julie-nah, that thing that leaves them lacking seems to be their non-white racial identities.
Like Claudia, whom Morrison portrays as a self-conscious character who sees her childhood from a retrospective point of view, Julie-nah is a highly self-aware individual who made her decision even with the privilege of what she describes as a “very savvy, very postmodern” perspective (Row 292). Interestingly, however, it is Pecola to whom Julie-nah is more similar. Both Pecola and Julie-nah, obsessed with the culture industry’s whitewashed images of feminine beauty, fall tragically into the belief that their own non-white identities are inherently unlovable, and must therefore be altered. In the rapidly technologizing society that Row portrays, characters such as Julie-nah can attain literally, through plastic surgery, what Pecola could only achieve mentally and at the great cost of her sanity: a new identity predicated upon embodying the features that signify whiteness and, therefore, beauty. Even for a postmodern theorist such as Julie-nah, the emotional toll of feeling inferior due to physical appearance is unavoidable and all-consuming. Beneath the layers of discourse that comprise postmodern novels such as Your Face in Mine lies the same primal, human need that Morrison portrays in The Bluest Eye: the need to be loved.
Works Cited


