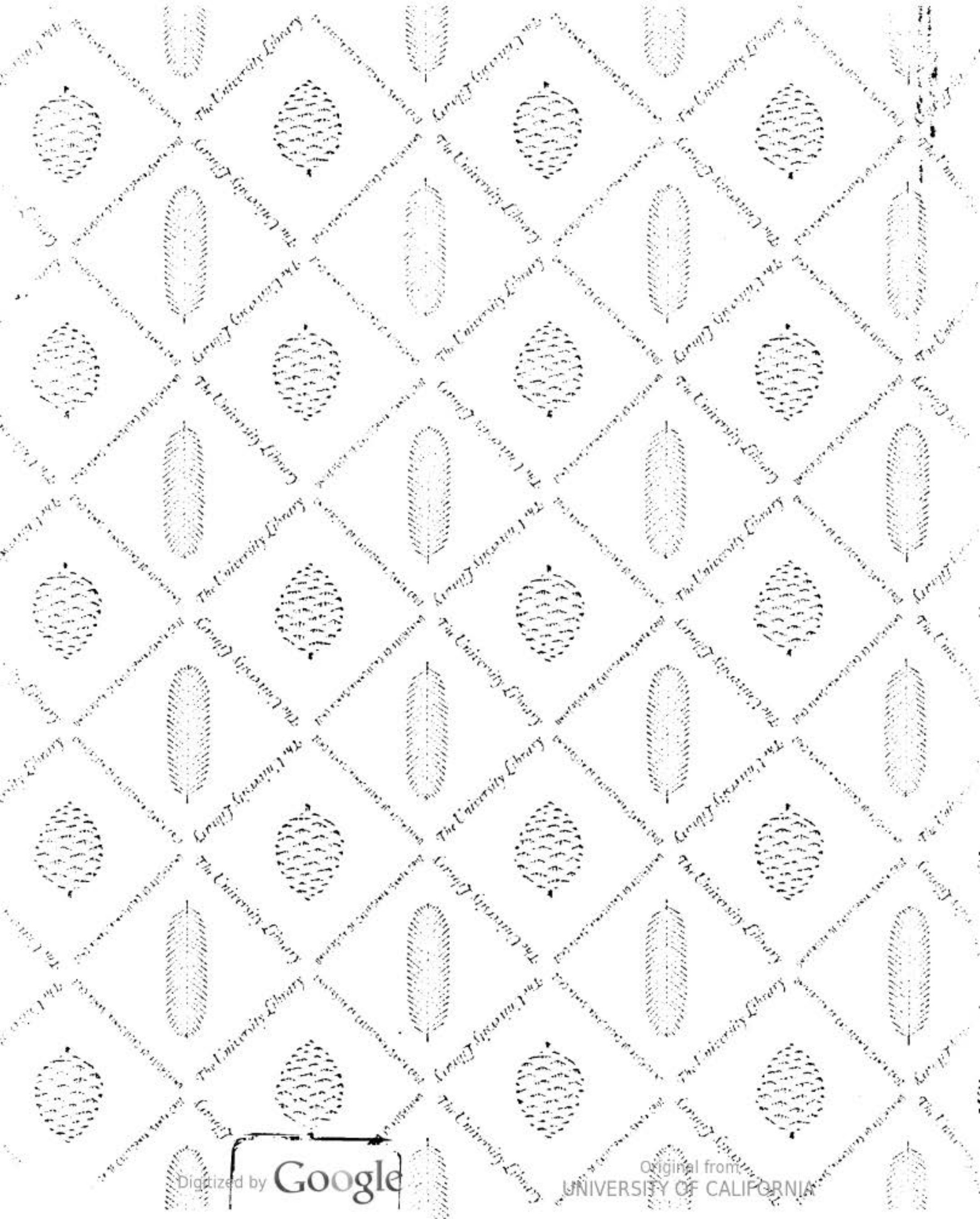
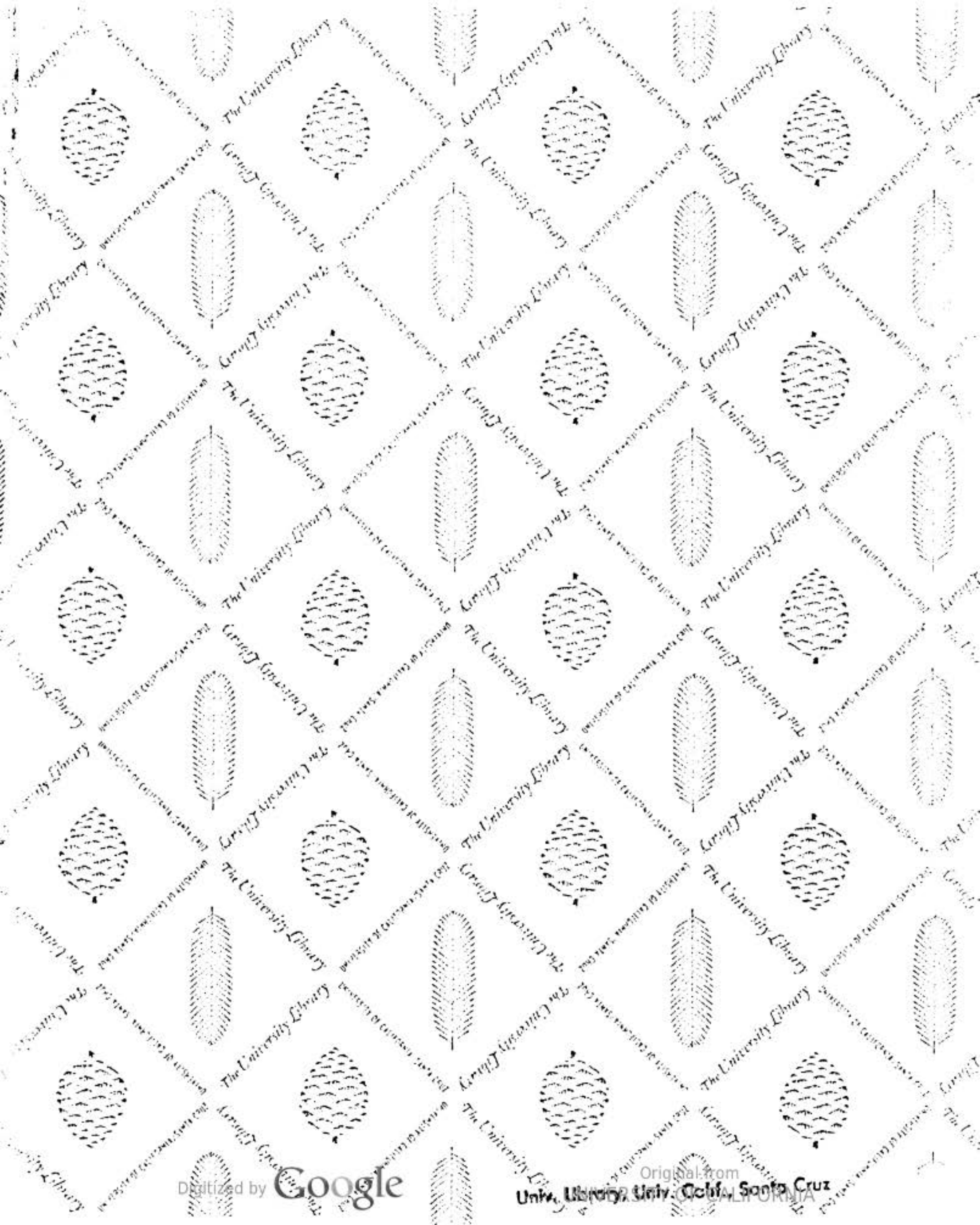


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Keeping A Hold On Life: Reading Toni Morrison's Fiction

A Dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the
requirements for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

in

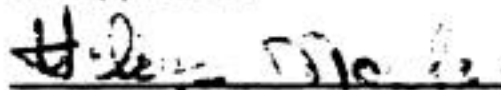
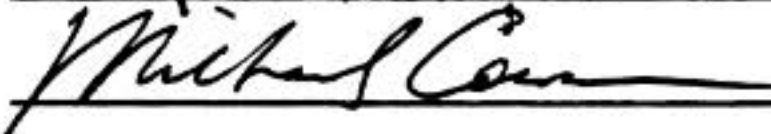
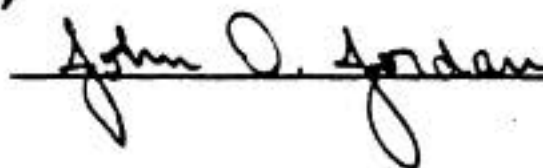
LITERATURE

by

Gloria Jean Watkins

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The dissertation of Gloria Jean Watkins
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KEEPING A HOLD ON LIFE: READING TONI MORRISON'S FICTION

Gloria Jean Watkins, Ph.D.
University of California, Santa Cruz, 1983

"Keeping A Hold On Life: Reading Toni Morrison's Fiction" is an intensive discussion of The Bluest Eye and Sula. In the Introduction the social and political forces that have enabled Morrison to escape the obscurity that has been the fate of many gifted black women writers is examined. Also discussed is the extent to which Morrison's images of black females represent oppositional alternatives to the stereotypical images that abound in American fiction in such characters as Carson McCuller's Bernice, William Faulkner's Dilsey, Gertrude Stein's Melanatha. Most American writers have used images of black women to embody their own racial myths and fantasies creating caricature-like figures. It is only in the works of black women writers, like Morrison, that readers find fully-realized, multi-dimensional black female characters. In all the above discussions Morrison is considered biographically as her public statements regarding her work have influenced critical readings.

Critical essays on The Bluest Eye and Sula comprise the main body of the dissertation. Discussion of The Bluest Eye focuses on Morrison's use of reading as a socially constructed act reinforcing systems of domination--racism, sexism, class hierarchy. The emphasis in the essay is on the novel as a chronicle of Claudia's triumphant self-realization and Pecola's radical vision of a transformed world wherein domination is not the only possible means of influence and

communication between people. Discussion of Sula focuses on the idea of a female hero, her quest for self-realization, and the community's use of her as a scapegoat. Central to this discussion is a questioning of the assumption that Sula is a feminist text celebrating the power of woman bonding.

Concluding these two essays is a discussion of the inter-relatedness of The Bluest Eye and Sula. In each novel Morrison uses community to trace various stages in the development of black social history. As communities are altered by forces outside the control of the inhabitants, their lives are radically changed. In this essay the differences between the two fictional communities are highlighted within the context of a discussion of the use of fiction as a way to reclaim positive aspects of black history that one often ignored. A discussion of Claudia and Sula as potential feminist heroines follows that examines utopia female communities in both works.

Before black life rearranged itself into elusive symbols of dashikis, pimp hats and kente-cloth bikinis, we had a hold on life, an attitude which was most dramatically expressed in one particular area. This attitude was so strong and so familiar it never seemed to need definition--or never needed it until now when its death seems right at hand. It concerned work and the way we worked. There was a press toward excellence in the execution of just about everything we tackled, I don't mean the will to "make it," although there was that, too. Nor do I mean the spine-breaking labor required by overseers. I mean the pride in work well done for its own sake. . . .

Toni Morrison
"Rediscovering Black History"

In a talk delivered March 1, 1959 at a conference convened by the American Society of African Culture, two weeks before the Broadway opening of A Raisin In The Sun Lorraine Hansberry declared the work of African-American writers to be:

. . . the vast task of cultural and historical reclamation--to reclaim the past if we would claim the future.¹

Although Toni Morrison has made no such declaration, her work, more than that of any other contemporary African-American writer, exemplifies this credo. Her fiction is rooted in the distinct folk culture of black people in the United States, a culture created in isolated, segregated communities. In marginal spaces, usually on the edges of towns or across railroad tracks, black people were able to develop unique ways of perceiving reality and construct value systems that were not like those of Anglo-American ethnics. White people did not write about these communities in their anthropological and sociological treatises on black American life nor did they write about them in fiction, drama, or poetry. The black culture they depicted was largely based on distortions, misinformation, stereotypes. It was the view from the outside. Morrison writes about black culture with the authenticity and sincerity of an insider. It is the memory of her growing-to-womanhood years within the confines of a distinct black culture that is the foundation of her imaginative process, the force that inspires her work. Her muse is history, but not history as it has been conventionally written or told. It is, as she puts it, "history as life lived."² Her central focus is on

black people, all else is peripheral, secondary.

Morrison published her first novel in 1970. She was thirty-nine years old. She began her publishing career at perhaps the most auspicious time for a black writer and particularly a black female writer to emerge. Her artistic debut occurred in the wake of militant struggle by black people to resist racial oppression and at the peak of the contemporary women's liberation movement. The combined energies of these two movements created an atmosphere in which interest in the attitudes, thoughts, and feeling of black women could be expressed without fear of ridicule or outright dismissal. Prior to the seventies black male writers who addressed in their fiction the issue of racial oppression or the specific political plight of black men received more attention than either black women writers or black male writers whose works focused on black female experience. A white reading public that could barely respond to the poetic prose and poetry of Jean Toomer (who remains one of the few black male writers to portray complex black female characters) passionately consumed the male centered writing of Richard Wright, whose fiction continually characterized blacks as a brute race made bestial by racial oppression. It does not diminish the power or significance of Wright's work that white audiences tended to read his fictional portrayals of black life as definitive documentation of black experience.

Unfortunately Wright was not able to imagine that a reading audience could absorb fiction by black writers that celebrated and affirmed positive dimensions of black experience as well as protest

fiction. Wright was particularly critical of the work of black woman writer Zora Neale Hurston claiming that she perpetuated negative stereotypes by making it appear that black life was really like a minstrel show. Wright never understood the need for a literature which showed that black people did not spend all their time focusing on racial injustice. Hurston biographer Robert Hemenway explores her reasons for refusing to allow racial injustice to be the dominant theme in her writing:

By leaving out "the problem," by emphasizing the art in the folkloric phenomenon, Hurston implicitly told whites: Contrary to your arrogant assumptions, you have not really affected us that much; we continue to practice our culture, which as a matter of fact is more alive, more aesthetically pleasing than your own; and it is not solely a product of defensive reactions to your actions. She felt that black culture manifested an independent esthetic system that could be discussed without constant reference to white oppression.³

Like Hurston, Toni Morrison has been accused of writing fiction that "romanticizes" black life. Critic Addison Gayle, long time advocate of a prescriptive criticism "the black aesthetic" denounced Morrison's work in his essay "Blueprint for Black Criticism" arguing that her fiction belonged to that "special kind of 'Negritude'" which portrayed blacks as "singing, dancing, playing, intuitive and instinctual in nature."⁴ Gayle sees Morrison as following in the path of Langston Hughes, a path mapped out in the manifesto "The Negro Writer and The Racial Mountain." Hughes celebrated the featured of black life that many black intellectuals were ashamed to embrace and urged everyone to join the celebration:

She insisted that all literature makes social statements:

I persist in the simple view that all art is ultimately social: that which agitates and that which prepares the mind for slumber. The writer is deceived who thinks that he has some other choice. The question is not whether one will make a social statement in ones' work--but only what the statement will say--for if it says anything it will be social.⁹

Like Hansberry, Morrison is concerned with the question of social responsibility. Though she began writing with the aim "to write the kind of book that I wanted to read" her awareness of the political and social ramifications of fiction by black writers caused her perspective to change:

There was also something else--I felt that nobody talked about or wrote about those Black people the way I knew those people to be. And I was aware of that fact, that it was rare. Aware that there was an enormous amount of apology going on, even in the best writing.

But more important than that, there was so much explanation . . . the Black writers always explained something to somebody else. And I didn't want to explain anything to anybody else!¹⁰

When asked for whom she writes Morrison answers:

I always wanted to read Black books in which I was enlightened. I as a black person. There are not many books like that. Even the best of them are explaining something to White people. And of course there are a lot of critics who believe that our books are there to tell them what our lives are all about.¹¹

Although Morrison feels she has a responsibility to address herself and by so doing addresses black people, she is not writing for a black audience or a white audience:

If you start out writing for some people that you're going to have in mind, it loses something, gets sort of watered down and didactic.¹²

While people who control the mechanisms of book production and distribution have often expected, and at times required, black writers to function more as spokespersons for the race on various issues rather than as artists addressing their craft or their work. Black proponents of the "Black Aesthetic" school mandate that literature by black writers should function as a political medium for the uplift of the race, raising awareness about racial oppression and teaching resistance. As a consequence of these expectations many black writers have allowed their work to be overtaken or subsumed by political concerns. Morrison does not experience conflict over her autonomy as an artist and her concern for and engagement with political issues that impact directly on the social situation of all black people. She addresses political issues in her fiction without compromising aesthetics. She writes essays on a number of political issues, that may or may not be directly related to her imaginative work. Hence she does not attempt to make her fiction function as a primary medium for the expression of her political activism.

Given the patriarchal social context in which we live, black male writers and critics have until recently been at the forefront of discussions about the nature of fiction by black writers. Many prominent black male writers continue to address primarily the impact of racial oppression on black men in their fiction. Morrison suggests that much of the fiction and non-fiction written by black males prior to and during the 1960's reflected their need to explain themselves to white men:

These books and political slogans about power were addressed to white men trying to explain or prove something to them. The fight was between men, for king of the hill.¹³

Such a statement creates polarities between black female and male writers that need not exist. Just as Ishmael Reed's assertion in 1977 that his book Flight To Canada sold only 8,000 copies because white readers are only interested in the fiction of black women writers is rather extreme:

Maybe if I was one of those young female Afro-American writers that are so hot now, I'd sell more. You know, fill my books with ghetto women who can do no wrong.¹⁴

Black women writers are not deflecting attention away from the work of black men; they are simply receiving deserved acknowledgement and recognition. Few black writers today, female or male, are directing their work solely towards a white audience. Certainly in the not so distant past all black novelists knew that the white reading public's response to a work could determine its success or failure. At that time black writers, male and female, frequently addressed their work to a white audience. Morrison can choose to write in the direction of a black audience and be confident that her work will be read by people from various ethnic groups. The xenophobia that was once so all pervasive among Anglo-Americans and other groups in this society now co-exists with expression of interest and even envy of people from different ethnic groups with unique social habits and customs.

There are some striking differences in the fiction created by black women and that created by black men which may account for the current response to writing by black females. Most important is the

Significantly black "style" has always fascinated white people. When they are threatened by it they attempt to destroy it. When they can, they appropriate or exploit it. It has only been recently in the wake of much struggle, many deaths, and great sorrow that they have been able to enjoy it, to let it be. Celebrated--praised--Morrison's fiction reclaims the African-American past, the folk tradition, the mythic, giving readers something of that life to hold onto.

Often white critics fail to recognize the far reaching significance of Morrison's work despite its specificity. While they applaud her for not using the political rhetoric they see as characterizing black fiction (many reviewers of her work seem to be ignorant of the works of Jean Toomer, Nella Larsen, Zora Hurston regarding her as the first if not the only black writer to use lyrical language) they criticize her work by saying it lacks universality. Sara Blackburn's review of Sula, written for the New York Times, exemplifies this tendency. In the concluding paragraphs Blackburn writes:

Morrison hasn't endowed her people with life beyond their place and function in the novel, and we can't imagine their surviving outside the tiny community where they carry on their separate lives. It's this particular quality that makes "Sula" a novel whose long-range impact doesn't sustain the intensity of its first reading. Reading it, in spite of its richness and its thorough originality, one continually feels its narrowness, its refusal to brim over into the world outside its provincial setting.¹⁷

Nathaniel Hawthorne's The Scarlet Letter, a work considered an example of classic American literature, complete with endless universal implications, is situated in as tiny a community, much as provincial a setting as Sula. There is one difference: the primary characters

in Hawthorne's novel are white. It is highly unlikely that Blackburn would consider it lacking sustained power for any of the above reasons. Sula may lack sustained reading power for many audiences but that may be more indicative of their narrow-mindedness, their provinciality, their inability to transcend their own experience, and less a reflection of the novel's aesthetic merit.

White critics have always attempted to undermine the importance of exceptional fiction by black writers by charging that it lacks universality. In the Western literary tradition "universal" has been a term applied to works that have far-reaching appeal and significance, works that address general human concerns that transcend the barriers of race, sex, class, language difference, and geography. Although white Western literary critics can see the universal implication in as culturally specific a work as The Great Gatsby or William Faulkner's The Sound and The Fury they tend to balk at the suggestion that any black American writers create works with universal implications. Perhaps Blackburn, like many other white critics and writers cannot imagine that a black woman's struggle for selfhood may be similar to the struggles of individuals globally. Indeed this would seem to be particularly the case in a world pre-dominately inhabited by non-white people, more than half of whom are women.

Having accused Morrison of not writing a "universal" fiction Blackburn proceeds to devalue her ancestral heritage:

As the author of frequent criticism and social commentary, Morrison has shown herself someone of considerable strength and skill in confronting current realities, and it's frustrating that the qualities

fully or identify with black characters. Teaching Toni Morrison's The Bluest Eye to a class of white students, I emphasized that Pecola's sense that to be beautiful one must have blue eyes and blond hair, is a characteristic she shared with white women in this society as well as with black women. This connection had not occurred to white female students because they were focusing on Pecola's blackness. Morrison's fiction attracts audiences from diverse backgrounds precisely because she addresses issues that have universal appeal and implication even as she maintains the cultural specificity of her text.

In the short space of twelve years Toni Morrison has written and published four novels. Her first novel The Bluest Eye was published in 1970. Although it received favorable reviews it was not widely read. Sula, her second novel, was published in 1973 and attracted the attention of many feminist women seeking to read books by and about women. It was Song of Solomon, Morrison's third book published in 1977, that won her recognition as a major American writer. As a result of the publication of her fourth novel Tar Baby Morrison's photo appeared on the March 30, 1981 cover of Newsweek magazine. Included in this issue was a feature article on her work with an interview and excerpts from all the novels.

✕ One of the most important contributions Morrison has made to American fiction has been in the area of characterization and particularly characterization of black females. Noted black male scholar C. L. R. James believes that Morrison is an extremely important contemporary black writer because of her focus on the black female experience. Coupling her with Alice Walker, he emphasizes:

removed, not because she has written more than one book, but because she has written more than one exceptional work. These critical essays on The Bluest Eye and Sula are a gesture of recognition, of appreciation, of solidarity.

"The Little-Girl-Gone-To Woman"

The Bluest Eye is a shocking book. Like Picasso's "Guernica," which startled the first onlookers by so graphically conveying the agony and violence of war, The Bluest Eye shocks because it vividly evokes the intense unbearable psychological pain that is a consequence of racial oppression. Were it a painting it would show mutilated, distorted, and crippled figures--figures similar to those portrayed in the paintings of Native American artists Fritz Scholder who, when asked by other Indians why he paints the Indian so ugly, responded, "But beauty isn't cute or pretty. Ugly can be beautiful."²⁵ One of the disturbing features of The Bluest Eye is that the ugly is beautiful. In a remarkable way Morrison depicts the dehumanizing effect of racial oppression while simultaneously showing that in the midst of such horror beauty takes shape. I am convinced that this explains why readers of the novel find it difficult to discuss the book. By presenting a worldview in which ugly is beautiful Morrison challenges the prevailing tendency in our society to see the ugly as that which must be hidden, avoided, even destroyed.

Since its publication in 1970 The Bluest Eye has been subjected to critical interpretations that fail to enhance reader awareness of its depth, complexity, and force. Generally, criticism of The Bluest Eye reflects the narrow scope of the methodological approaches employed by critical readers, approaches which do not lead to full engagement with

the novel. Critics either explicate it, relying heavily on paraphrase to substantiate their comments, or they use "projection" an approach defined by Robert Scholes in Structuralism in Literature as "a way of seeing through literary works in the direction of the author, or of society, or some other object of interest to the critic."²⁶

Projection is the approach most commonly used in discussions of The Bluest Eye. It leads critics to read the text as if it were a sociological treatise on racism. They seem to study the novel from the outside-in, bringing to it knowledge and feelings about racism, and these factors more than the text inform their reading. Such criticism, though valuable in a context wherein the primary purpose of discussion is to strengthen our understanding of racism, leaves many important dimensions of the novel unexplored.

The tendency towards oversimplification in discussions of The Bluest Eye began in early reviews of the novel. Ignoring the structural complexity of the work, reviewers described it as if it were a basic linear narrative, with a beginning, a middle, and an end. A reviewer for Newsweek wrote that the novel was a "lyrical story" about growing up black and poor in a northern Ohio town."²⁷ Stressing that The Bluest Eye had suffered from "critical neglect," a reviewer for the New Yorker labeled it "one of the most painful and acute studies of black childhood."²⁸ Unfortunately literary critics discuss the work in a similar manner. They tell readers that "it is a novel portraying in poignant terms the tragic condition of blacks in a racist America;"²⁹ that "it is a female Bildungsroman, a novel of

