Chapter 1

Introductory Identifications:
Making It Up or Finding It?

I’m interested in characters who are lawless. [. . .] They make up their lives, or they find out who they are.

—Toni Morrison

Insensitive white people cannot deal with black writing, but then they cannot deal with their own literature either.

—Toni Morrison

As Kwame Anthony Appiah has noted, although contemporary scientific thinking largely disavows cultural notions of essential racial difference, race still matters because “races are like witches: however unreal witches are, belief in witches, like belief in races, has had—and in many communities continues to have profound consequences for human social life” (277). Having lived and taught for eleven years in Memphis, Tennessee, a city deeply divided by racial tensions, I am acquainted with the ways in which culturally scripted notions of racial essence still cast a palpable spell over the daily lives of individuals. So when on the first day of the semester I walked into my courses on Toni Morrison, there were immediate identifications. For a number of students, I was—because of my whiteness—the visible man.

This racial identification points to a difference between my students’ and my own expectations and desires. Although composing nearly one-fifth of the student body at the University of Memphis, African-American
students were scarce in the upper-division literature courses not specifically designated “African-American.” When I taught one of the American literature surveys (despite a syllabus with a significant representation of African-American writers), I might have no black students—and never more than three—in a class of thirty-five. But in the Toni Morrison class, close to two-thirds of the students I addressed were black. For me, the difference represented an opportunity to help build a nascent African-American concentration in the English major. But what was a welcome change for me—this racial mix—was not, at least in the initial moment of our meeting, as congenial to some of the African-American students, who hoped their professor would be black too.

I am aware that some of my study’s biographically informed observations about Morrison’s fiction will not be acceptable to all. There are those who believe that a white man is a double category mistake—as a white and as a man—and therefore can or should have nothing to say about a relationship between a black woman’s life and her art. Such readers are, of course, free (like the one or two students who dropped my Morrison course) simply to set this book aside. Yet some of the personal connections that may discomfit certain readers were in fact precisely the material that legitimized me for the African-American students to whom I taught the fictions of Toni Morrison. By representing a Morrison who herself had experienced an uncertain sense of self and who was not always the empowered figure who appears on 60 Minutes and the cover of Time, I was able to teach an author who was not a remote and unapproachable genius but someone whose youthful identity was a bit more like their own—fragile at times and definitely still under construction. Perhaps only by speaking of Morrison’s life did I have the opportunity to question students about the construction of their inner eyes and become visible to them as not just a white man but as someone who cared deeply about the texts and their understanding of them.

What I attempt to do in this study is to see Morrison not only as a novelist who has written about history, but also as a historical figure in her own right. From this perspective, I argue that it does matter to her work that she grew up in pre-civil rights America, just as it matters that she became a writer in post-civil rights America. In locating Morrison historically, I turn to her personal history that manifests itself in all of her writing—her literary and social criticism, as well as her fiction. What results is a reflexive intertextual space: between her nonfictional self-representations (both in her criticism and in her interviews) and her novels that represent identity formation, there emerge curious traces of Morrison’s own complicated becoming.

Part of that becoming resides in the names by which African Americans have been known. In the seventy years of her life, Morrison has been iden-