

UNIVERSIDADE FEDERAL DO RIO GRANDE DO SUL  
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**Identity, Race and Gender in Toni Morrison's *The  
Bluest Eye***

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Bluest Eye***

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So when they met, first in those chocolate halls and next through the ropes of the swing, they felt the ease and comfort of old friends. Because each had discovered years before that they were neither white nor male, and that all freedom and triumph was forbidden to them, they had set about creating something else to be. Their meeting was fortunate, for it let them use each other to grow on. Daughters of distant mothers and incomprehensible fathers (Sula's because he was dead; Nel's because he wasn't), they found in each other's eyes the intimacy they were looking for.

-Toni Morrison, *Sula*

One day, when the light was yellow, I turned to Bush and I said, "Something wonderful lives inside me."

She looked at me. "Yes," she said. "The early people knew this, that's why they painted animals on the inside of caves."

-Linda Hogan, *Solar Storms*

## RESUMO

*O Olho Mais Azul*, escrito por Toni Morrison e publicado em 1970, conta a história de uma garota negra destruída por sentimentos de rejeição vindos dela própria e das pessoas ao seu redor. O objetivo deste trabalho é analisar como conceitos de identidade, etnia e gênero são trabalhados na obra e a maneira como eles se relacionam a questões acerca de padrões de beleza brancos, autodesprezo e orgulho étnico-racial. Proponho que a obra seja lida como um protesto de Morrison contra o uso da beleza como um valor positivo e universal e que a autora sugere que a construção de uma identidade saudável e completa dê-se pela conexão à cultura e às tradições de uma comunidade. Para tanto, começo realizando uma revisão do momento histórico e sociopolítico durante o qual o livro foi escrito. Em seguida, examino os objetivos e ideais dos movimentos literários negros e feministas negros do período. Por fim, realizo minha análise da obra, suas estruturas formais e suas personagens. Concluo que, ao invés de promover o slogan “Black is Beautiful” do *Black Arts Movement*, Toni Morrison sugere que o próprio conceito de beleza é perigoso e excludente por natureza. Ao invés de promover apenas a ideia de que a cor negra seja considerada bonita, a autora propõe que o reconhecimento de afro-americanos se dê por meio da valorização de suas culturas, tradições e ligação à comunidade.

**Palavras-chave:** Toni Morrison–Crítica e Interpretação. *O Olho Mais Azul*. Gênero. Etnia. Identidade.

## ABSTRACT

Published in 1970, Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* tells the story of a black little girl who is destroyed by feelings of self-loathing and rejection from those around her. The intention of this work is to analyze how the concepts of identity, race and gender are portrayed in the novel, and how they relate to issues of white beauty standards, self-loathing and racial pride. I propose that *The Bluest Eye* is a protest against the adoption of beauty as a positive and universal value, and that the novelist is suggesting the building of wholesome, healthy identities through the connection to the culture and tradition of a community. In order to do that, I start by revisiting the historical and sociopolitical moment in which the novel was written. Then, I examine the goals and ideals of the African American literary movements and black feminist movements of the period. Finally, I make my analysis of the book, its formal structures and its characters. In the conclusion, I affirm that instead of supporting the Black Arts Movement's slogan "Black is Beautiful", Toni Morrison suggests that the very concept of beauty is harmful and exclusionary. Instead of promoting just the idea that blackness be considered beautiful, the writer proposes that the valorization of African Americans should originate from placing importance on their culture, traditions and connection to the community.

**Keywords:** Toni Morrison–Criticism and Interpretation. *The Bluest Eye*. Gender. Race. Identity.

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## INTRODUCTION<sup>1</sup>

Toni Morrison's first novel, *The Bluest Eye*, was written during the 1960s and published in 1970<sup>2</sup>. Through several layers of voices and different narrative techniques, the book tells us the shocking story of a black little girl named Pecola Breedlove, who descends into madness after being emotionally and physically abused on several occasions by the entire community around her, even—and especially—by her family.

Eleven-year Pecola lives with her family in Lorain, Ohio. When her father, Cholly, burns down their house, she spends some days with the MacTeer family. Claudia, the youngest MacTeer, is one of the narrators who tells us Pecola's story. In the years covered by the narrative, 1940 and 1941, the Breedlove girl is constantly bullied and mistreated by teachers, classmates, neighbors and family. Because she thinks of herself as ugly, she attributes their mistreatment of her to her physical appearance, as she believes that no one would behave badly in front of her if she were beautiful. One of the most traumatizing events in Pecola's life is the moment when she is raped by her father, gets pregnant and loses her sanity. By telling her story, Claudia is trying to make sense of everything that happened to the youngest Breedlove and to their community.

Through the stories of Pecola and the people who surround her, the novel brings to discussion matters such as gender, race and identity, and raises questions on racial self-loathing, the menace of white beauty standards, and the loss of one's self. My intention with this work is to analyze how concepts of identity in relation to race and gender are manifested in the novel, how the book can be read as a claim for racial pride, and what Morrison's suggestion for a healthy, healed identity is.

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<sup>1</sup> Since this is a work on North American literature, the MLA format will be used instead of the ABNT one.

<sup>2</sup> For further details on the author's biography and literary production, see Gillespie's *Critical*, Tally's *Cambridge* and Wagner-Martin's *Literary*.



When I first read *The Bluest Eye*, two questions intrigued me, and I suspected the answers to both of them might be related. The first one was raised by Toni Morrison herself. In the foreword section of the book, she comments on the challenge of centering the novel's main inquiry on the vulnerable character of Pecola Breedlove—a poor, black, lonely little girl. Morrison mentions that she desired to avoid giving the readers the comfort of simply pitying the young child instead of reflecting and questioning themselves on their participation in her smashing. After presenting her strategy for overcoming such obstacle, Morrison confesses that the result did not satisfy her, and did not work either, for “many readers remain touched but not moved” (Morrison *The Bluest Eye* VIII<sup>3</sup>).

Before I develop my thoughts and impressions and explain exactly what the first question meant for me, I would like to present the second source of inquiry, this time brought by the narrator<sup>4</sup> of *The Bluest Eye*, Claudia MacTeer. In the very beginning of the novel, after revealing shocking news about Pecola and her father, the narrator tells us that “there is really nothing more to say—except why. But since why is difficult to handle, one must take refuge in how” (*TBE* 4).

Those two passages produced a considerable impact on me. First, I did not want to be a reader who would avoid getting out of her comfort zone and questioning herself—I wanted to be moved as well, for I was sure I would be touched. Therefore, the question came, “how can I be attentive enough, responsible enough, to truly reflect and challenge my comfortable position?” And since Claudia had let me know that the “why” would be difficult to handle, I knew I had to look for it alongside the “how”, and that the search would perhaps help me become the reader I wished to be.

In order to achieve a better understanding of the story brought by the novel, it seems essential to learn about African American culture and life. Racism is a central subject of the book, so the themes of black identity, racial

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<sup>3</sup> For future references to the book, the initials *TBE* will be used.

<sup>4</sup> There is a debate about the narrative voices in *The Bluest Eye*. I am assuming Claudia is the one organizing all of the stories—even the ones presented by a third-person narrator—, an idea which I will discuss in section 3.5, chapter 3.

pride and self-loathing caused by the dominant white culture need to be addressed. In *Playing in the Dark*, Morrison laments the lack of literary criticism around the subjects of blackness and whiteness in American literature. According to her,

[This lack of literary criticism] is further complicated by the fact that the habit of ignoring race is understood to be a graceful, even generous, liberal gesture. To notice is to recognize an already discredited difference. To enforce its invisibility through silence is to allow the black body a shadowless participation in the dominant cultural body. (*Playing* 9–10)

Therefore, in order to avoid the trap of feeling touched, but not moved—which Morrison has warned us about—, it seems not only advisable, but also necessary to address matters of race. Reading and watching Morrison's interviews, reading African American women texts on black feminism and reading what literary critics have to say about *The Bluest Eye* can definitely help expand our understanding of racism, so those are some of the sources brought into this work.

As the author points out in the afterword of the novel, the political climate of the United States was one of agitation, turmoil and great upheaval in the lives of African Americans when she wrote *The Bluest Eye*. Since she is dialoguing with concepts of identity and pride that were prominent in the American scene in the 1960s, both in the political and the artistic fields, this period will be discussed in this work. Furthermore, it is important to bring significant advancements generated by the African American political action at the time and its concomitant analysis to contribute to the Brazilian reception of *The Bluest Eye*, since a considerable number of readers from Brazil might not be familiar enough with African American history, and could thus fail to notice how Morrison is responding to many declarations made in the 1960s with her novel. In subtle ways, the author establishes very relevant links to events and concepts like the Civil Rights Movement, Black Power, Black Nationalism and The Black Arts Movement. Therefore, the first chapter of this work focuses on briefly exploring the historical and political background of the 1960s, as it will become quite important in the novel's analysis in chapter three.

As previously mentioned, the issues of race and gender are at the center of *The Bluest Eye*. These topics are frequently explored in Toni Morrison's fiction. In a number of interviews, the author has affirmed that she always makes sure to identify herself as a black woman novelist, who writes primarily for a black audience and is concerned about speaking of African American people and culture in an African American language<sup>5</sup>. In an interview to *The Paris Review*, Morrison has declared that it is very important to her that her work is African American, and that she finds it more relevant that her production fits into the black culture tradition than in the literary canon tradition (Morrison "Art". Web).

Being no exception to Morrison's fictional tendency, *The Bluest Eye* has it as absolutely relevant information that Pecola is black. However, as the writer highlights in the foreword section of the book, it is also extremely important to the narrative that she is a young child: "I focused, therefore, on how something as grotesque as the demonization of an entire race could take root inside the most delicate member of society: a child; the most vulnerable member: a female" (*TBE IX-X*).

Hence, as they are essential to the construction of Pecola's character and of the novel as a whole, identity, race and gender are all examined in the second chapter of this work. The discussion of black identity is analyzed in the contexts of the New Negro Movement, the Black Arts Movement and black feminism. What those artistic and political movements were saying at the time is examined, since Morrison establishes dialogues with ideas which emerged in these contexts. These will also serve as tools for the analysis of the novel.

In the third chapter of the work, I analyze the structure of the novel and some of its characters in relation to the concepts of identity, race and gender previously presented. Through careful examination, I argue that Morrison sees beauty as a rather harmful concept to the lives of African American people, and show passages of the novel and theoretical works that corroborate that point.

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<sup>5</sup> See the interviews: Morrison's "Writing", "Want", "Art", *Books and Remembers*.

Finally, in the conclusion, I argue that Morrison seems to believe that assimilating the white concept of beauty may be quite harmful to African Americans, and perhaps not the best solution to promote their healing. Therefore, I examine which strategies the novelist may be proposing for the construction of wholesome identities instead.

## 1. HISTORICAL AND POLITICAL BACKGROUND: THE AGITATED 1960S

As Morrison points out in the afterword to *The Bluest Eye*, which was added to the novel in 1993, the book was written during the years of 1965-69, “a time of great social upheaval in the lives of black people” (*TBE* 208). The author stresses the importance of remembering the political charged climate of the 1960s to understand some of the novel’s central themes, so a few of the events that took place in that decade, as well as some that led to them, will be discussed now.

What became known as the Civil Rights Movement actually refers to a series of events and mobilizations that happened in the United States throughout most of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and are rooted not only on the American Civil War of 1861–1865, but on the entire slavery process that blacks underwent while in North American ground and its aftermath.<sup>6</sup>

During the Reconstruction period after the end of the Civil War, African Americans vehemently claimed for their rights to vote and protested segregation in spheres such as public transportation and education. Nonetheless, a large number of white citizens, especially in the South, engaged in racial violent acts against black people, and feelings of war-weariness prevented many national political leaders from advocating African Americans’ rights, in fear that they might lose votes and support, and cause even more rallies. That led to the consolidation of legalized segregation by the Supreme Court in *Plessy v. Ferguson* (1896), which stated that blacks would have “separate-but-equal” facilities (Palmer 471).

In the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, some organizations were created in order to demand civil rights for black people. One of the most important was the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP)<sup>7</sup>, which claimed

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<sup>6</sup> See Alexander and Rucker’s *Encyclopedia*, Hornsby Jr.’s *Companion* and Palmer’s *Encyclopedia*.

<sup>7</sup> More on the NAACP’S history, objectives and notorious members can be found on the organization’s website.

for racial equality and hoped to educate elite public opinion into a more respectable and accepting attitude towards African Americans, regarding them as fellow citizens. The organization acted primarily through courts and had the writer and scholar W.E.B. Du Bois as one of its most prominent members and editor of its journal, *The Crisis* (Palmer 472). While it was true that the NAACP had a few victories in court, institutional segregation still remained strong and prevented African Americans from having the same rights, opportunities and rewards as whites in the first three or four decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Nevertheless, a few key-events made it hard to ignore and deny the black presence in political and economical affairs. Some of those events were the great migrations of blacks from South to North, the Great Depression of 1929, the rising number of African Americans in industrial unions and on the federal payroll, and World War II. As Palmer points out, during the early 1940's,

Black activists and liberal intellectuals called for a "Double Victory" against fascism abroad and racism at home, sharply illuminating the contradiction between fighting a war against the vicious racial policies of Nazi Germany while sustaining a legalized racist order at home. (Palmer 473)

In 1944, a significant victory was achieved by the NAACP, when the formal exclusion of blacks from party primary elections in the South was overturned by the Supreme Court in *Smith v. Allwright*. Another triumph came in 1954. After continuously arguing in numerous cases in front of the Supreme Court that segregation denied blacks "equal protection of the laws", as it was stated on the 14<sup>th</sup> Amendment of the U.S. Constitution<sup>8</sup> that all persons born or naturalized in the United States must have, the NAACP'S chief legal counsel, Thurgood Marshall, achieved satisfactory results. In *Brown v. Board of Education* of Topeka, Kansas, Chief Justice Earl Warren wrote that "the

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<sup>8</sup> U.S. Constitution, Amendment XIV, section 1: "All persons born or naturalized in the United States, and subject to the jurisdiction thereof, are citizens of the United States and of the state wherein they reside. No state shall make or enforce any law which shall abridge the privileges or immunities of citizens of the United States; nor shall any state deprive any person of life, liberty, or property, without due process of law; nor deny to any person within its jurisdiction the equal protection of the laws".

doctrine of 'separate but equal' has no place in the field of public education."<sup>9</sup> However, the victory was not as positive and complete as it originally seemed to be. The resistance to the civil rights agenda increased, and hate groups such as the Ku Klux Klan were revived. In face of the rallies promoted by white supremacists, in 1955 the Supreme Court declared that no timetable for school desegregation was required. Therefore, many educational institutions showed no hurry in the process of adapting their rules. This standstill, allied to the fact that some black students who had started attending previously all-white schools ended up needing federal troops' protection against white supremacists, further discouraged intervention for desegregation (Palmer 473–474).

Nevertheless, many black activists did feel inspired by *Brown*. In December 1955, NAACP secretary Rosa Parks refused to give her seat to a white man on a segregated bus and was sent to jail. The Montgomery Improvement Association was then formed, and led a boycott of the bus system. Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, who had arrived in Montgomery just a year before, was chosen as the boycott's leader (NAACP), becoming one of the most prominent public figures for The Civil Rights Movement. In fact, this incident with Rosa Parks and the protest led by King are the events which ignited what we often refer to as the Civil Rights Movement. The boycott lasted for over a year. It was a period of hardship, as King was arrested, his house was bombed and black citizens had to walk miles every day not to ride in segregated buses. However, it brought a significant victory: in December 1956, the Supreme Court ruled in *Browder v. Gale* that racial segregation on buses was unconstitutional (NAACP. Web).

Under King's leadership, the Civil Rights Movement assumed a philosophy of nonviolent resistance to discrimination and injustice. What the reverend and his followers sought was the end of segregation, interracial brotherhood and equality for all<sup>10</sup>. They sustained integrationist ideals. In a set

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<sup>9</sup> The transcript of the documents can be accessed on multiple online web sites, such as "National Archives" and "Our Documents".

<sup>10</sup> Dr. King's philosophies of equality can be clearly seen in his most famous speech, *I Have a Dream*, delivered on 28 August 1963 at the Lincoln Memorial in Washington D.C.: "I have a dream that one day on the red hills of Georgia, the sons of former slaves and the sons of former slave owners will be able to sit down together at the table of brotherhood."

of ideas similar to those of Gandhi, King defended the confrontation of authorities with a readiness to suffer instead of causing harm, thus exposing through the new media the inequity and cruelty of segregation and prompting those who held the power to end it (Palmer 474–475). For the next decade, then, that was the attitude adopted by most of the black activists: nonviolent protests that included marches, sit-ins at lunch counters that served whites only, sit-ins at theaters and swimming pools, and boycotts of offending stores. The protests were so numerous and had such a large support that President Lyndon Johnson signed into law the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and, one year later, the National Voting Rights Act of 1965 (Palmer 475). These two acts combined outlawed discrimination against blacks, making all segregation unconstitutional and deeming discriminatory voting practices illegal.

Around that time, new black movements for social justice emerged. One of them was the Black Power Movement, and its activists argued that black political empowerment and self-defense were necessary to improve African American's lives and satisfy their needs (Rucker 662–663). The Movement's name probably originated during the James Meredith March Against Fear in June 1966 (Shay. Web). Meredith, who had successfully integrated the University of Mississippi in 1962, decided to go on a solitary march from Memphis, Tennessee, to Jackson, Mississippi, in order to encourage the black community to register to vote, thus challenging the fear spread by white supremacists for so many years (Bailey; Meredith. Web). Even though the march had been planned as a one-man event, Meredith was escorted by a few friends and supporters, and followed by the police. However, on the second day of the march, Meredith was shot by a white salesman. He survived his injuries, but was not able to continue right away. Some Civil Rights Movement's leaders, such as Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and Stokely Carmichael (Kwame Ture), went in his place. The latter soon began criticizing the nonviolent attitude the Movement had taken so far and the faith in white benevolence, and started using "Black Power" as an alternative slogan to the previous "We Shall Overcome" unofficially adopted by the Civil Rights Movement until that point (Rucker 663).



According to Rucker, Black Power was defined by Ture and Charles V. Hamilton's 1967 *Black Power: The Politics of Liberation* as

mobilizing African Americans to use their newfound political voice—as a result of the passage of the 1965 Voting Rights Act—to create semiautonomous communities in which black police officers patrolled black people, black businesses provided jobs, black elected officials and black-controlled political parties articulated the aspirations of African Americans, and African Americans used armed self-defense to protect their lives. (Rucker 663)

Therefore, it can be said that Black Power is part of the Black Nationalism political and social movement. In fact, together with “Black is Beautiful”, the phrase “Black Power” became one of the Black Nationalism’s slogans. Most of its activists called for a separate black identity instead of assimilation by whites, and defended the creation of separate black communities, the development of economical self-sufficiency for those communities, and the use of self-defense. It also instigated the claim for racial pride (Rucker 663).

King’s tactics consisted of nonviolence and willingness to suffer so those in power would witness their pain and feel ashamed for causing it and decide to end it, and he held hopes for equality and a brotherhood of all. Meanwhile, Black Power and Black Nationalism argued for separation from white Americans, the creation of exclusively black communities and the use of self-defense in case of need.

It was amid those ideological conflicts that Toni Morrison wrote *The Bluest Eye*, and the second chapter focuses on what both Morrison and other black women novelists and critics had to say about the concepts of identity that the artistic movement contemporary to Black Power—The Black Arts Movement—brought.

## 2. IDENTITY, RACE AND GENDER: WHAT BLACK LITERATURE AND BLACK SOCIAL MOVEMENTS HAVE TO SAY ABOUT IT

Quite frequently when talking about *The Bluest Eye*, Toni Morrison mentions the story that served as a source of inspiration for the book. As the author explains in the *Toni Morrison Remembers: BBC Imagine Documentary 2015* and in the afterword of the novel, she was starting elementary school when she was first made consciously aware of the self-loathing feelings that beauty standards could cause. Morrison and a friend had been arguing over the existence of God, and the other little girl told her that she was sure that He wasn't real: she had been praying for blue eyes for two years. Had God existed, he would have certainly granted her wish by then. Morrison says that, at the time, she had an epiphany, because she looked at her friend and thought it would have been awful if God had given her blue eyes. Right then, Morrison realized her friend was absolutely beautiful. As she tells Alan Yentob, her interviewer in the BBC documentary,

And at ten, you don't think in those terms. Somebody is cute, or, you know, whatever, but not beauty. And that was the first time I saw it. She was very dark, she had these wonderful almond eyes, high cheekbones, (...) I mean, you could go on. And she wanted something other. (Morrison *Remembers*)

The author then proceeds to explain how they got little white dolls as toys in their childhood, and those were the images black little girls were supposed to admire. In the afterword to *The Bluest Eye*, Morrison dwells a little more on how shocking the experience of that conversation with her friend was. According to the writer, she was flabbergasted by how no one else recognized beauty (which was what her friend possessed in her eyes), even, and especially, the girl who held it (*TBE* 206).

When linking the book to that childhood memory, Morrison says

*The Bluest Eye* was my effort to say something about that; to say something about why she had not, or possibly ever would have, the

experience of what she possessed and also why she prayed for so radical an alteration. Implicit in her desire was racial self-loathing. And twenty years later I was still wondering about how one learns that. Who told her? Who made her feel that it was better to be a freak than what she was? Who had looked at her and found her so wanting, so small a weight on the beauty scale? The novel pecks away at the gaze that condemned her. (*TBE* 206)

In the same section, the author proceeds to explain how the reclamation of racial beauty in the 1960s had ignited that reflection. Even though she now does not believe that it was an intelligent question, Morrison mentions how she was back then wondering why that wide public articulation needed to exist (*TBE* 206). It seems that part of the answer to that has to do with what African Americans of the period were establishing in terms of identity, and that identity is also very related to the reasons why Morrison's friend wanted to look a little more like a white blue-eyed girl. A brief analysis of the historical and political events happening in the 1960s has been done in the previous chapter. In the present one, an examination of how artistic and social movements were dialoguing with and articulating the concept of identity in the 1960s will be presented. Some early ideas that might have had a direct impact on the Black Arts Movement will also be analyzed.

In the beginning of the twentieth century, many African Americans were moving from the rural South to the urban North, afraid of the increasing violence in southern states and holding hopes for a better life and prosperity. That became known as the Great Migration (Buck 926). As a consequence of this migration, in Harlem, New York, a black middle class emerged. According to Marks "at the end of the 1920s there were 164,566 black people living in Harlem, making it the most densely populated black area in the world" (Marks 121). In conjunction with other different social forces, this large African American population would soon make the place the headquarters for an important cultural and artistic movement, which would become known as The New Negro Movement or the Harlem Renaissance (Buck 926).

As Bernard suggests in her analysis of the Harlem Renaissance, "The New Negro Movement and the politics of art", the production of the period is marked by contradictions and a struggle to understand identity. According to the

author, The New Negro Movement “was as much concerned with the creation of a fresh African American identity as it was with the demise of the old” (Bernard 268). Such contradiction and duality can be seen, for example, when author and founder of the magazine *The Messenger* A. Phillip Randolph declared writers like Du Bois and James Weldon Johnson “Old Negros” because they “depended on white benefactors” and were involved with the “Old Crowd of White Americans”, whereas the two men criticized by him were also revered as “leaders of a new generation of black male leadership” (Bernard 273). As Bernard points out,

The fact that Du Bois and Johnson could be Old and New Negro at once – points to one of the key contradictions within the movement, that the terms have no true and constant meaning. The New Negro Movement, as a phenomenon, was fueled by a revisionist imperative that required internal dissent and fragmentation; this imperative was the New Negro Movement itself. The compulsion to define New Negro against Old Negro was common (...) It was a compulsion that necessitated, and effectively created, its own antagonists. In other words, the Old Negro—a creature forever beholden to white expectations—and the New Negro—a being forever liberated from white expectations—needed each other to exist. (Bernard 273)

Different artists of the moment held different beliefs regarding identity and what should be the subject of black art. In tune with the NAACP’S goal of educating public opinion into a more favorable view of African Americans, Du Bois, who was also a NAACP member, fashioned the organization’s journal *The Crisis* in a manner such as to teach readers about the positive side of black life (Bernard 275). In doing so, he hoped to break with the Old Negro stereotypes and build a more positive image of African Americans. His view seemed to be shared by James Weldon Johnson, who in the preface to his *The Book of American Negro Poetry* anthology stated that “nothing will do more to change that mental attitude [towards race] and raise his status than a demonstration of intellectual parity by the Negro through the production of literature and art” (Johnson 6). It can be understood that the attitude towards race that black artists wanted to have changed is that of white people, and as Bernard points out, “it is this audience whose sympathies the black writer of the 1920s had to solicit in order to have a public existence” (Bernard 276).

Nonetheless, Bernard continues her examination of the production of the New Negro Movement to show that Johnson's view was far from consensual. Some writers like Countee Cullen, Jean Toomer and George Schuyler were opposed to embracing a separate black identity (Bernard 276–278). For them Africa was an abstraction, and they believed that African American art would be no different than white mainstream art<sup>11</sup>.

Langston Hughes, one of the best well-known names of The New Negro Movement, saw the denial of black identity as a sign of racial self-hatred (Bernard 278). The author also announced that he and other young black artists did not plan to keep writing to please the audiences—black or white. What Hughes intended to do in his work was to celebrate the Negro—the good *and* the bad about it, negative stereotypes and positive views (Bernard 278; 283–284). Carl Van Vechten, a white African American art enthusiast, also defended that black life should be explored in literary works, but in a different way: he believed that if white audiences wanted to see the exotic in black life, then African Americans should profit from that (Bernard 278–279).

If views concerning how black identity should be approached—and whether it should be approached at all—was such an intense and contradictory debate in the 1920s and 1930s, the assertiveness over the importance of claiming a black identity was much more prominent the second half of the 1960s, when the Black Arts Movement emerged. Larry Neal, a well-known poet and scholar of the time, wrote that the movement “is the aesthetic and spiritual sister of the Black Power concept” (Neal 1). As stated by the poet, the BAM<sup>12</sup> shared a lot of ideas with the Black Power Movement, including those that preached for the development of a black consciousness completely separated from white. As Neal writes in his 1968 essay “The Black Arts Movement”, both Black Power and the BAM believed that “there are in fact two Americas—one black, one white. The Black artist takes this to mean that his primary duty is to speak to the spiritual and cultural needs of Black people” (Neal 1). In the same essay, Neal continues to stress the importance of detaching African American

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<sup>11</sup> See also Bernard's “New” and Thompson's “Identity”.

<sup>12</sup> BAM: initials that will be used from this point on to refer to the Black Arts Movement.

art from white standards and focusing on African American ideologies and needs:

[BAM] envisions an art that speaks directly to the needs and aspirations of Black America. In order to perform this task, the Black Arts Movement proposes a radical reordering of the Western cultural aesthetic. It proposes a separate symbolism, mythology, critique, and iconology. The Black Arts and the Black Power concept both relate broadly to the Afro-American's desire for self-determination and nationhood. Both concepts are nationalistic. One is concerned with the relationship between art and politics; the other with the art of politics. (Neal 1)

The artists of the time emphasized that the means to achieve this art of politics that spoke of self-determination and nationhood was through a common, although diversified, Black Aesthetic. Ramsby II and Smethurst define the concept as “the formation of a system of aesthetic value rooted in African American traditions through which the art of the black nation and the Black Nationalist Movement could be created, evaluated and taught” (Ramsby II and Smethurst 415). As Ryan affirms, such Black Aesthetic is the goal and unifying force of all BAM artists—it could be used both to raise people’s awareness of social injustice and to value African American culture and traditions (Ryan 62). Also part of the movement’s idea was the “Black is Beautiful” slogan, which urged black poets to subvert traditional forms and accepted values, and black people to stop seeing themselves through white eyes (Trodd 645).

This call for racial pride and for the formation of autonomous self-empowered black communities can be seen in these lines of Amiri Baraka’s *Black Art*, published in 1966<sup>13</sup>:

Let Black people understand  
that they are the lovers and the sons  
of warriors and sons  
of warriors Are poems & poets &

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<sup>13</sup>On Amiri Baraka (also known as LeRoi Jones), see “Poetry Foundation” and “Modern American Poetry”.

all the loveliness here in the world

We want a black poem. And a

Black World.

Let the world be a Black Poem

And Let All Black People Speak This Poem

Silently

or LOUD (Baraka. Web)

During the 1960s—especially in the second half of the decade -, this spirit of racial pride and assertiveness was shared by a lot of African American writers. When questioned about her reasons for writing *The Bluest Eye*, though, Morrison declares that she was not exactly in tune with all of the movement’s ideals. As she tells her interviewer in “Toni Morrison Talks About Her Motivation For Writing”, most of what was being published by black people were fictional and nonfictional works by men, and it was all “very powerful, aggressive, revolutionary” (Morrison “Motivation”. Web). According to the novelist, those pieces of art had a very positive racially uplifting message, and while she found it stimulating, she was also a little wary about it. First, she was unsure about the reasons for “Black is Beautiful” being screamed so loudly. Besides, Morrison worried that something was going to get skipped. She was concerned about the possibility of people overlooking the fact that black had not always been beautiful, and that no one was going to remember “how hurtful a certain kind of internecine racism is” (Morrison “Motivation”. Web).

Part of Morrison’s concern seems to be related to what Ghansah sees as the historical project that permeates her novels, across time and geography, to tell a story that is not chronological, but is definitely thematically chained (Morrison “Radical”. Web). This theme is, of course, the African American history and experience. From the horrors of the Middle passage, through the slavery period, passing through World War II struggles up to nowadays, Morrison dedicates her writing to register the often ignored or shadowed black

presence in the United States<sup>14</sup>, and she rewrites history in doing so<sup>15</sup>. Therefore, considering its pervasiveness, she found it important to bring to attention how self-loathing has been part of the African American experience, in order to raise awareness and avoid losing a painful, but meaningful memory of their lives in the United States.

The novelist's wariness is also related to the use of the "Black is Beautiful" slogan and the volume in which it was being yelled. In relation to that, Morrison writes in the afterword to *The Bluest Eye*:

The reclamation of racial beauty in the sixties stirred these thoughts, made me think of the necessity for the claim. Why, although reviled by others, could this beauty not be taken for granted within the community? Why did it need wide public articulation to exist? (*TBE* 206).

Her reluctance towards the message came in part from the way Morrison perceived it as directed at white people. As she tells Emma Brockes in an interview for *The Guardian*,

All the books that were being published by African-American guys were saying 'screw whitey', or some variation of that (...). And the other thing they said was, 'You have to confront the oppressor.' I understand that. But you don't have to look at the world through his eyes. I'm not a stereotype; I'm not somebody else's version of who I am. And so when people said at that time "Black is Beautiful" – yeah? Of course. Who said it wasn't? So I was trying to say, in *The Bluest Eye*: "wait a minute, guys. There was a time when black wasn't beautiful. And you hurt." (Morrison "Writing". Web)

Something that seemed to trouble the novelist then was how most of the works written by artists connected in some way to the Black Arts Movement did not seem to be directed at a black audience, even if their ideals would make it seem like it was. Morrison seems to have felt that a lot of the self-affirmation

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<sup>14</sup> Morrison argues that, even when white writers ignored African American in their books, this forged absence created a shadow, making blacks ever present in American narratives. See Morrison's *Playing*.

<sup>15</sup> See also Gillespie's *Critical*, Tally's *Cambridge* and Wagner-Martin's *Literary*.



message of the period was stated for white people, in order to explain who African Americans were and how they took pride in that. As it seems, Morrison deemed it at least as important to take time to write directly for black people. Neither explaining their lives for the benefit of white folks, nor challenging white people to recognize them, nor confronting or even considering a white audience at all, but instead focusing on the African American experience, their pain and how the book could empathize with what they might have felt and help them heal.

Another aspect of her concern with the slogan seems to be not with whether black is beautiful or not, but with the need for it to be. Williams affirms that some contemporary African American writers started criticizing black communities' acceptance and perpetuation of white notions and values. According to her, when the community adopted the concept of physical beauty without adapting it to encompass blackness, integration and assimilation became possible dangerous outcomes, as it happens in *The Bluest Eye* (Williams 72). Therefore, it seems that the idea of adopting beauty as a desirable virtue without critically evaluating it troubled Morrison. Perhaps the novelist might have also thought that the deconstruction of the notion of beauty could not be done so quickly and simply, and found it essential to stress and make explicit in the novel the answer she found to her own questions: that "the assertion of racial beauty was (...) [a reaction] against the damaging internalization of assumptions of immutable inferiority originating in an outside gaze" (*TBE* 206). Even having understood the motives that led to the "Black is Beautiful" slogan, she seems to have deemed it necessary to show both how the concept of beauty that people were familiar with came from Western white culture, and how, before mobilizations were made to change it to accommodate blackness, it had the power to immerse people in self-loathing and hurt them immensely.

A further dimension of her weariness seems to be related not only to race, but also to gender issues. When the author comments on how loud the claim "Black is Beautiful" was and how most of the fiction and nonfiction of the period was being written by black men (Morrison "Motivation". Web), it seems that she might be referring to how male-centered the Black Arts Movement was.

Feminist theorist bell hooks, for instance, suggests that the BAM men were supporters of patriarchy and delegated women to subordinate positions both at home and in politics (hooks 131–132). By analyzing some of BAM artist Amiri Baraka’s essays, hooks shows how the movement held ideals of women playing secondary roles in the background, supporting the black “bread warriors for the revolution” (hooks 132–138). However engaged in promoting black self-assertiveness, the Black Arts Movement was most definitely dedicated to male self-assertiveness.

If the Black Arts Movement then failed black women by not taking their gender into their agenda, the feminist movements of the period failed them by not taking race into theirs. As hooks points out, a black woman looking for a theory that would encompass both gender and race would be pretty isolated:

No other group in America has so had their identity socialized out of existence as have black women. We are rarely recognized as a group separate and distinct from black men, or as a present part of the larger group “women” in this culture. When black people are talked about, sexism militates against the acknowledgement of the interests of black women; when women are talked about racism militates against a recognition of black female interests. When black people are talked about the focus tends to be on black men; and when women are talked about the focus tends to be on white women. (hooks 21)

One can argue that groups such as Native American or Latina women do get as ignored as African American women, and as Barbara Smith points out in her “Toward a Black Feminist Criticism”, lesbian black women are even more oppressed than heterosexual black women. However, hooks’ words are true in stating how black movements tend to ignore the female gender and how feminism tends to ignore blackness. As the theorist affirms throughout her book *Ain’t I a Woman: Black Women and Feminism*, black women identity can only be seriously thought of when race, gender and class are all considered together. Black women cannot—and would not—benefit from taking a moment to think only of being black, then another to think only of being women. They are all of it at once, and the oppression they have faced is singular to them—neither black men nor white women have experienced exactly the same (hooks 28–29). The notion is reinforced by Deborah King in “Multiple Jeopardy, Multiple

Consciousness: The Context of a Black Feminist Ideology". King talks about how the concepts of the double or triple jeopardy (race, gender and social-economic class) have been used too simply. She says that some theorists have analyzed the effects of each kind of discrimination on its own, and that such an analysis does not reflect the truth of the oppression of black women (King 47). Instead, the critic suggests that the term multiple jeopardy be used, referring not only to the sum or individual consideration of each oppression, but to the multiplicative relationships between them as well (King 47). She explains that all factors must always be taken into account, since they are always part of black women's identity. What actually happens is that their relative importance may vary, depending on what particular aspect of a black woman's life is being explored, and that the most influential facet will change according to the situation being analyzed. As she puts it,

the relative significance of race, sex, or class in determining the conditions of black women's lives is neither fixed nor absolute but, rather, is dependent on the socio-historical context and the social phenomenon under consideration. (King 49)

It is important, then, to evaluate which factor influences more on a situation without forgetting that all of them will be present in some way.

These considerations of multiple intersectional factors composing the identity of a black woman seem like a good perspective under which to analyze *The Bluest Eye*. As Morrison says in the afterword of the novel, she chose a poor black little girl as the focus of her story because she was looking for the most vulnerable member of society (*TBE* 207). Pecola's tragic fate does not come only because she is black, but also because she is a girl, extremely poor and a member of a broken family, and all of this needs to be considered in an analysis of her character and of her story.

### 3. IDENTITY, RACE AND GENDER IN *THE BLUEST EYE*

*The Bluest Eye* is a novel that brings to discussion themes such as identity, gender and race—establishing a dialogue with the 1960s debates over such subjects. These topics are analysed by Morrison through the novel's plot, formal devices and characters. Therefore, all of those elements are examined in the present chapter, in order to understand what the novelist may be suggesting about identity, gender and race.

In the first section of this chapter, I discuss the novel's formal devices. Its structure and narrative voice are quite meaningful and give us an insight into what Morrison's trouble with the "Black is Beautiful" slogan may be. The formal devices seem to suggest that African American traditions are the key to achieving wholesome and healthy identities.

Also central to Morrison's possible project of questioning beauty standards and the concept of beauty itself, are the characters who are oppressed by them and who also use them to oppress others. Therefore, they are divided into groups and examined in the other sections. Some figures like Pauline, Maureen Peal and Geraldine assimilate and try to imitate white concepts of a good lifestyle. The way in which they separate themselves from other African Americans and the harm they do to themselves and to other blacks by deeming them unworthy are some of the points discussed in detail in section 3.2. In 3.3, Cholly Breedlove is the character carefully examined. Having suffered abuse during his teenage years, the boy turned into an abuser himself. The anger caused by the humiliation Cholly suffered from white men when he was thirteen was misdirected at those in an even more vulnerable position than his own: women and, eventually, his daughter. Pecola Breedlove, the girl whose tragic story is narrated in the book, is analyzed in section 3.4. The girl is referred to as "ugly" by at least five characters—herself included. The fact that she does not fit white beauty standards seems to stop people from showing or even feeling affection towards her. Therefore, the connection between physical appearance and a sense of worthiness is discussed in 3.4. In the last section of the chapter, 3.5, Claudia MacTeer is analyzed. Since she represents some resistance to the worship of white beauty standards, her possible position as the persona narrating the entire novel is considered. Finally, there is a discussion

concerning her intentions of contrasting African American traditions and values to assimilation of white life models.

### 3.1 The novel's structure: what its form tells us about identity, race and gender

Morrison's concerns about identity, race and gender are not transmitted exclusively through plot and characters. Formal devices such as structure and narrative voice are also very relevant to understand the meanings discussed in *The Bluest Eye*, and so they will be examined here.

At the very opening of the novel, for instance we encounter the meaningful following text:

Here is the house. It is green and white. It has a red door. It is very pretty. Here is the family. Mother, Father, Dick, and Jane live in the green-and-white house. They are very happy. See Jane. She has a red dress. She wants to play. Who will play with Jane? See the cat. It goes meow-meow. Come and play. Come play with Jane. The kitten will not play. See Mother. Mother is very nice. Mother, will you play with Jane? Mother laughs. Laugh, Mother, laugh. See Father. He is big and strong. Father, will you play with Jane? Father is smiling. Smile, Father, smile. See the dog. Bowwow goes the dog. Do you want to play with Jane? See the dog run. Run, dog, run. Look, look. Here comes a friend. The friend will play with Jane. They will play a good game. Play, Jane, play. (*TBE*.1)

This is based on a primer created by William Elson and William Gray in the 1930s and widely used for teaching children to read in American public schools. Portraying white middle-class families, the texts intended to show children the everyday lives of “true and brave American boys and girls” and teach them how they could also “become a helpful American citizen” (Werrlein 2007). Promoted as moral and heroic kids, Dick and Jane were role models to be looked up to and imitated.

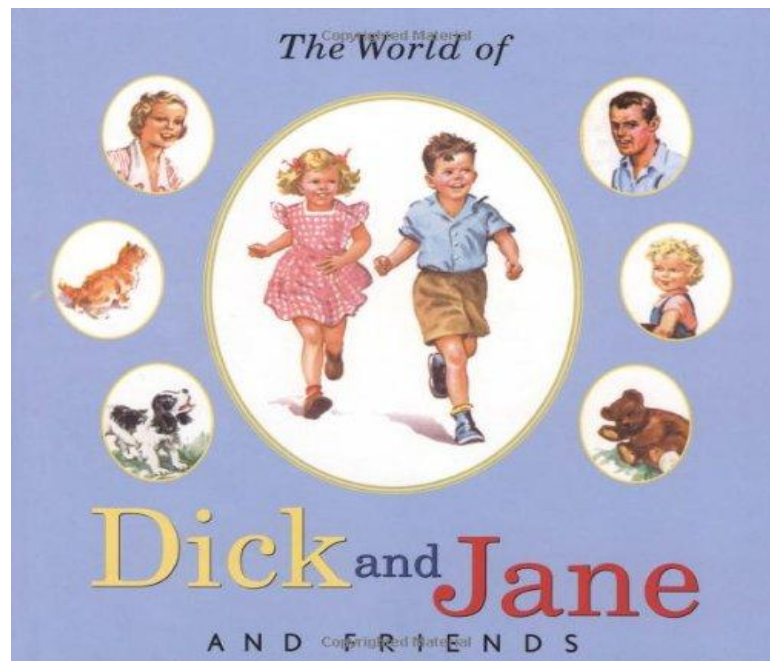
As shown in the picture presented on the next page, Dick is a brown-haired boy and Jane is a blond girl. Their father, mother and little sister also

have fair complexion. They represent a self-fabricated American image, one that embraced the dominant society's values and fit exactly the portrait they wished to promote to its citizens and, through movies and books, to the whole world as well. Anything other than this white image was ignored. As noted by Morrison herself in *Playing in the Dark*, the country's literature was interested in forming a national cultural identity, and "American means white" (Morrison *Playing* 39; 47).

Immediately following the first prime section, we have the same text, but this time without any punctuation or capitalization. It looks a little confusing, but it is still readable. The third paragraph, however, presents the exact same text, but with no punctuation, capitalization or space between the letters. With everything smashed together, it looks chaotic and close to unintelligible.

As stated by critics such as Malmgren, the first paragraph is supposed to represent the "ideal", and therefore white, American family of Dick and Jane. The second can be related to the MacTeers, and the third to the Breedloves (Malmgren 152).

Picture 1 – Dick and Jane Primer



Picture 1 – Dick and Jane Primer

Source: Gray, William S., at Amazon Webstore

The MacTeers are different from Dick and Jane in that they are black and poor. However, even though they do not fit the American self-portrait presented by Elson and Gray, their primer is still readable, because they clearly love and protect one another.

The Breedloves, however, are different from both Dick and Jane and from the MacTeers. They are not a representative African American family, as Morrison makes sure to state in the afterword section and to demonstrate by including the MacTeers in the story. Theirs is a unique situation resulting from the combined effects of racism (both external and internal), poverty and lack of affection. Their paragraph is chaotic and unintelligible because their life is troubled and because they feel like they too, as people, have no meaning or value.

The distribution in schools of those Dick and Jane primers, which claimed to show desirable qualities for American children, was damaging in multiple ways. First of all, if black kids were not represented in the texts, should they consider themselves undesirable, much like the Breedloves felt? And then, if Dick and Jane were the role models, were African Americans supposed to try to imitate and act like them? As the novel shows, that kind of assimilation can be fatal to the psyche of a child, and so it might be that the chaotic Breedlove version of the prime foreshadows Pecola's descend into madness: a consequence of desperately trying to fit into that unattainable Dick and Jane model and inevitably failing to do so.

Following the primers, the next section of the book is opened by the following sentence: "Quiet as it's kept, there were no marigolds in the fall of 1941. We thought, at the time, that it was because Pecola was having her father's baby that the marigolds did not grow" (*TBE* 3). It is quite a shocking sentence, and as it will soon be clear, it contains a lot to be analyzed.

The first word in this opening line is "quiet", which can be related to Morrison's wariness in regards to the Black Arts Movement. "Why so loud?" is a question the author actually presents to her interviewer in "Toni Morrison Talks About Her Motivation For Writing", so "quiet" is the obvious opposite for that. This may be the first demonstration that the book is not going to actually fit with the rest of the movement's production. The second is the fact that the voice belongs to a woman. It is not in line with most of the BAM's tendency of

focusing on male strength. Instead, the novel will delve into a black community, especially into a little girl's story, and the narrator who will guide us is herself female.

It is important to the story that most of the characters and especially the narrator are African American women. As Morrison herself says,

The opening phrase of the first sentence, 'Quiet as it's kept,' had several attractions for me. First, it was a familiar phrase, familiar to me as a child listening to adults; to black women conversing with one another, telling a story, an anecdote, gossip about someone or event within the circle, the family, the neighborhood. (*TBE* 208)

The author seeks to create a voice that is both female and black. In several interviews, Morrison stresses how she writes in a way that incorporates African American oral traditions and general culture in her writing. As she tells Nellie McKay,

Black people have a story, and that story has to be heard. There was an articulate literature before there was print. There were griots. They memorized it. People heard it. It is important that there is sound in my books—that you can hear it, that I can hear it. So I am inclined not to use adverbs, not because I am trying to write a play, but because I want to try to give the dialogue a certain sound. (Morrison "Interview" 427)

What Morrison is reminding us here is that white and black traditions have survived time in different ways. The dominant white culture has emphasized a place on the written page. In a way, writing has distanced itself from the spoken word. African and Native American literatures, which are still nurtured by the oral traditions, do not work exactly like that. Mostly, such books need not to be only read, but also heard, for they rely on a strong oral and storytelling tradition. As the novelist declares that she is interested in her work being primarily African American, she makes sure to insert the oral tradition of storytelling and other African American oral qualities—such as rhythm, inflections and musicality—into her books.

Both orality and storytelling can be easily found, for instance, in the passage in *The Bluest Eye* in which a group of black women are talking while attending Aunt Jimmy's funeral.



"What'd she die from?"

"Essie's pie."

"Don't say?"

"Uh-huh. She was doing fine, I saw her the very day before. Said she wanted me to bring her some black thread to patch some things for the boy. I should of known just from her wanting black thread that was a sign."

"Sure was."

"Just like Emma. 'Member? She kept asking for thread. Dropped dead that very evening."

"Yeah. Well, she was determined to have it. Kept on reminding me. I told her I had some to home, but naw, she wanted it new. So I sent Li'l June to get some that very morning when she was laying dead. I was just fixing to bring it over, 'long with a piece of sweet bread. You know how she craved my sweet bread."

"Sure did. Always bragged on it. She was a good friend to you."

"I believe it. Well, I had no more got my clothes on when Sally bust in the door hollering about how Cholly here had been over to Miss Alice saying she was dead. You could have knocked me over, I tell you."

"Guess Essie feels mighty bad."

"Oh, Lord, yes. But I told her the Lord giveth and the Lord taketh away. Wasn't her fault none. She makes good peach pies. But she bound to believe it was the pie did it, and I 'spect she right."

"Well, she shouldn't worry herself none 'bout that. She was just doing what we all would of done."

"Yeah. 'Cause I was sure wrapping up that sweet bread, and that could of done it too."

"I doubts that. Sweet bread is pure. But a pie is the worse thing to give anybody ailing. I'm surprised Jimmy didn't know better."

"If she did, she wouldn't let on. She would have tried to please. You know how she was. So good."

"I'll say (...)" (*TBE* 138–140)

This dialogue is rich in many ways. First, storytelling is clearly present in it. As Morrison tells McKay, she wants the imagination of black people to be captured in her work. According to the author, African Americans can navigate easily through the practical, logical side of everyday life, while at the same time maintaining a supernatural view of things. In her opinion, this ability makes the world larger for black people (Morrison "Interview" 428). This duality can be seen in the scene taking place at Aunt Jimmy's funeral. The women discussing her death are the same ones that cleaned her house, notified everyone of her passing, knitted her a white wedding dress, for she was a maiden lady, and looked after the young Cholly (*TBE* 138). All of these are very practical actions, and none of them prevents the women from firmly believing that Essie's pie had caused Aunt Jimmy's death, and that her desire for black thread was a sign of

her impending doom. This is not silly superstition, as exclusively-science-oriented people may see it, but knowledge transmitted through generations, which can guide and save African Americans' lives. As the women suggest, knowing how dangerous a pie could be for someone ailing, Aunt Jimmy might have turned it down and survived. She was too nice to do it, as they tell us, but she did possess that knowledge, which has proven to be vital inside their community.

Visible in this passage too is the oral quality of black speech. Not exclusively in the accent, intonation and diction Morrison portrays, but in patterns which are traditionally African American. The first of them is call-and-response, in which the speaker's statement (call) is always commented on (response) by the listener<sup>16</sup> (Wu; Yang 1143–1145; Moses 135–137). When one of Aunt Jimmy's friends replies "Don't say?" to the information that Essie's pie killed the elderly woman, and "Sure was" to the black thread omen, call-and-response is being used. Instead of just listening to the story, the women reply to it, participate, engaging in a sort of conversation that is typically African American.

As Moses argues, the blues is another typically oral – or more specifically in this case, musical–tradition that permeates *The Bluest Eye* (Moses 125–126). At first, it is most evident in scenes such as the one where Claudia is reminiscing about her mother's singing voice<sup>17</sup>. As the narrator tells us, her voice was so sweet that she made angst even desirable, and left a young Claudia with "a conviction that pain was not only endurable, it was sweet" (*TBE* 23–24). As Morrison tells LeClair in an interview, she is looking for a way to portray African Americans and their values in her work, to nourish them, to help preserve what was there before white dominance intervened:

There has to be a mode to do what the music did for blacks, what we used to be able to do with each other in private and in that civilization that existed underneath the white civilization. I think this accounts for the address of my books. (...) All that is in the fabric of the story in order

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<sup>16</sup> For a good example of the call-and-response dynamics, see Dr. Rev. Martin Luther King's speech *I Have a Dream*.

<sup>17</sup> As we learn from the verses Claudia reproduces, "I hate to see that evening sun go down" and "my man has left this town", one of the songs her mother used to sing was W.C. Handy's "St. Louis Blues".

to do what the music used to do. The music kept us alive, but it's not enough anymore. My people are being devoured. (...) I wanted to restore the language that black people spoke to its original power. (Morrison "Language". Web.)

Perhaps, this sense of being kept alive by music is what differentiates Claudia from Pecola. While the latter does not have a strong familiar hold to support her and does not gather her strength from shared stories or music, Claudia has community knowledge transmitted to her through lyrics that come through a beloved voice and that shows her that pain is endurable and can even be bittersweet. If we connect this to Aunt Jimmy's funeral scene, we could say that Claudia is someone who would have heard from her mother and other women that pies are not good for someone ailing and would know not to take them. Pecola, however, being an outcast and not belonging to the community, would never be aware of the dangers of having a pie.

Moses also connects the aesthetics of blues to the narrative structure of *The Bluest Eye*. According to the author, blues lyrics start in loss and move on to a possible resolution of grief through motion (Moses 125), and this is essentially what Claudia does. She starts with the terrible tragedy of Pecola, and by the end of the novel, she seems to have found new answers. In testifying—another African American oral tradition (Moses 126; 137)—the black little girl's story, Claudia does not allow her to be forgotten. By remembering and retelling what happened to Pecola, she finds ways for the community to move on. Thus, Morrison suggests new alternatives for healing.

The novel is structured in the following way: it opens with the three different versions of the Dick and Jane prime. Then, Claudia MacTeer introduces herself as a narrator and warns us about the tragic story she is about to tell. After that, there are four seasonal sections, also narrated in the first person by Claudia, recalling episodes she experienced with Frieda and Pecola during her childhood. These seasonal sections are intersected by seven primer sections that use lines from the Breedlove version of the Dick and Jane prime, and which are narrated by a multiplicity of voices. At the end of the novel, there is a kind of coda, in which Claudia muses over the outcome of the story and reflects on what can be learned from it (Moses 145–146).

*The Bluest Eye* is fragmented not only in its structure; but also in its narrative voices. We have the voices of Claudia as a little girl, Claudia's adult insights, a third-person narrator who tells stories of the Breedlove family and the community around them, the point of view of characters like Soaphead Church, Cholly and Pauline, the presence of Pauline's first-person narration and, by the end, a dialogue (or monologue) of a descended-into-madness Pecola and her imaginary friend.

These fragmented structure and voices ask the reader to carefully put together the pieces of the story, reflecting on the different perspectives presented in order to understand what happened. This avoids the comfort of simply blaming Cholly, for instance. In fact, seeing his memories shows him from a different point of view: he is not merely a perpetrator of violence, but a victim himself. The multiplicity of voices and stories also work to avoid a totalizing view, which Morrison considers important, given the diversity of African American people and their culture (Morrison "Art". Web).

The division of the novel's sections in seasons serve, in a first glance, to situate Pecola's tragedy in the space of a year. It also hints at the cycle being repeated in their town: the novel opened at the Autumn of the year Pecola would be raped. The MacTeer sisters probably planted the marigolds on the next Fall—and both Pecola's baby and the flowers could not survive. This reoccurrence of tragedies may have happened because their community was still in awe of the white beauty standard. The harmful circle of self-loathing had not been broken.

However, the very telling of Pecola's story by Claudia seems to suggest some radical changes. Since the last season section we see in the novel is Summer, Autumn is to come next. It is known as renewal, and I believe Morrison argues in *The Bluest Eye* that it is time for some concepts to fall to the ground so others can bloom. The closing of the novel in Summer suggests that Claudia is ready to let go of harmful ideologies and is prepared to seed nurturing ideas when Autumn comes again.

### 3.2 Maureen Peal, Geraldine and Pauline Breedlove: racial passing, self-loathing and the white standards of beauty

One of the important references Morrison makes in the novel is to the movie *Imitation of life* (1934) by John M. Stahl:

“I just moved here. My name is Maureen Peal. What’s yours?”

“Pecola.”

“Pecola? Wasn’t that the name of the girl in *Imitation of Life*?”

“I don’t know. What is that?”

“The picture show, you know. Where this mulatto girl hates her mother cause she is black and ugly but then cries at the funeral. It was real sad. Everybody cries in it. Claudette Colbert too.”

“Oh.” Pecola’s voice was no more than a sigh.

“Anyway, her name was Pecola too. She was so pretty. When it comes back, I’m going to see it again. My mother has seen it four times.” (*TBE* 65)

In the film, a black woman named Delilah works for a white woman named Bea, and helps her get rich by cooking delicious pancakes that the latter commercializes. Delilah is quite submissive in her ways, and she has a daughter named Peola, who has a much lighter complexion than her mother. In fact, from a very young age, Peola starts passing—assuming a white identity for herself and presenting herself to others in that way.

As Werrlein suggests, Morrison is doing more than establishing a broken link between Peola and Pecola by giving the girl a name that is inspired by, but not quite the same as the movie’s main character’s. She is also signifying (Werrlein 203). In his essay, Moses presents signifying as a black tradition in which the listener makes fun or insults the speaker (Moses 135–136). In a way, then, this is one abuse more that the girl takes—her own name can be read as an attack and a cruel irony. It shows how Pecola can never be Peola, even though both girls share a great desire for possessing white standards of beauty. However, that is where the similarities between them end. While the film’s character can be seen as white by others, the novel’s girl has very dark skin—a

fact the world around her notices and makes her remember. Therefore, her wish can never be fulfilled. The fact that her name implies she will never be able to get the blue eyes she desperately wants may also be another indication of Morrison's criticism of the oppression Pecola is a victim of. Her name is something external to her; it was given to her by someone else. In the same way, the conception that she is not worthy also comes from the values of a society that prioritizes those who are white—that is, it also has its origin in something external.

The fact that Pauline Breedlove chose to name her daughter after a character in a Hollywood movie is not surprising. After all, at some point in her life, she only ever felt happy when she was in the picture show (*TBE* 121). However, it is also telling of the feelings Pauline held in relation to blackness and whiteness. *Imitation of Life's* Peola is described as a beautiful girl—she can even pass for white. What the film tells us in a clear message is that the closer to being white, the more beautiful one will be. Pauline, who had learned to “equate physical beauty with virtue” (*TBE* 120), seems to have as her main desire that her daughter is beautiful. Peola may seem a little ungrateful and vain to a white audience. She denies and deserts her mother, so it might seem strange that one would want their daughter to be just like her. However, Pauline understood where Peola was coming from, and understood the position she was in: in order to be accepted by the dominant society, one needed to be beautiful. Therefore, it was what she desired for her child.

During her second pregnancy, Pauline felt excited about the baby she was going to have: she talked to it and formed an emotional bond with it (*TBE* 122–124). Nonetheless, she could not help creating a mental image of what her kid would look like—and when she was born, Pecola looked different from what Pauline had imagined (*TBE* 123). The woman recognized her baby was smart, but declared that “Lord she was ugly” (*TBE* 124). As beauty was assimilated by Pauline as virtue—and the most important one to possess—, it did not matter that Pecola seemed to be smart. She was ugly, and so she was not good enough.

If Pecola can be associated to Peola in her desire to meet white standards of beauty in *The Bluest Eye*, she is not the only one. Maureen Peal, Geraldine and Pauline are also women who nurture wishes of escaping blackness and associating with the white dominant culture.

Maureen Peal is the new girl at school, and she is described by Claudia as a “high-yellow dream child”, who was rich by the standards of their community (*TBE* 60). Then, in a way, she is also like Pecola: her skin color allows her to pass if she wishes to do so, and she is considered beautiful by those around her. Maureen’s family also has money, like the *Imitation of Life*’s character did. Even though Delilah did not get as rich as Bea, she had enough to guarantee that she and Pecola could live well, and that the girl would have nice things. Claudia informs us that Maureen had nice clothes and took plentiful snacks as her school lunch (*TBE* 60–61). As Gravett affirms, “the dominant culture achieves and maintains its prominence because of its wealth; hence, the values it promotes tend to be monetary ones” (Gravett 92). The author also writes that “those unable to afford the material lifestyle society values are ruthlessly pushed aside”, and that this is what happened to the Breedloves (Gravett 92).

In the first Breedlove section of the Dick and Jane prime, for instance, the reader is informed about the family’s household. When the Breedloves had just moved there, they had purchased a sofa that was new, but whose fabric had split by the time it was delivered, and the store took no responsibility for it (*TBE* 34). As the narrator suggests, the dissatisfaction of owning a ruined sofa and still having to pay for it made the Breedloves extremely unhappy, and that feeling of unhappiness invaded the entire house and their lives (*TBE* 34–35). Therefore, the impossibility of affording good material possessions is part of what makes the Breedloves outcasts.

This difference in wealth is one more aspect that separates Maureen and Pecola. The two of them are little girls, but the first can come much closer to the dominant society’s beauty standards—both because of her skin color and because of her socioeconomic conditions. King’s concept of multiple jeopardy, as explained in chapter two, seems to help us understand a bit better this difference between them: there are more factors contributing to Pecola’s oppression than to Maureen’s, and all of them seem to be affecting the former girl at once. She is female, she is black and she is poor. Added to that are the facts that the youngest Breedlove does not receive affection from her family, and is just a little child. All of those factors intersected by the others seem to contribute to allow Maureen Peal to say that she is “cute”, while Pecola is “black and ugly” (*TBE* 71).

Coming closer to the dominant standards of beauty because she can pass for white and has money is what makes people so fond of Maureen Peel:

She enchanted the entire school. When teachers called on her, they smiled encouragingly. Black boys didn't trip her in the halls; white boys didn't stone her, white girls didn't suck their teeth when she was assigned to be their work partners; black girls stepped aside when she wanted to use the sink in the girls' toilet, and their eyes genuflected under sliding lids. She never had to search for anybody to eat with in the cafeteria—they flocked to the table of her choice (...) (*TBE* 60–61)

Seeing how much nicer someone who comes closer to the white dominant beauty standard is treated makes it possible to understand why Maureen is not the only character in the novel who is interested in following behaviors such as those taught in the Dick and Jane primers and in the movies. Geraldine also does it.

As the third-person narrator tells us, Geraldine is “one of those girls who are interested in getting rid of the funkiness” (*TBE* 79–84). This funkiness is said to involve passion, nature and a wide range of emotions. It can be seen when women laugh loudly, enunciate roundly, gesture generously, sway while walking, have thick lips and curly hair (*TBE* 81). As can be inferred, funkiness is closely related to traditional African American images or characteristics. This type of women—such as Geraldine—who reject their black identity and desire to fit into white standards try hard to erase all the funkiness in their appearances and behavior. The narrator that tells us about these girls seems to disapprove of their attitude. As Douglas notices, “Geraldine can't change her race, but she can try to change her culture, and this process is described as loss rather than a gain or transformation” (Douglas 212). Yet, even though the narrator seems to condemn Geraldine and the women who are like her, she also beautifies them (Dittmar 79). In the beginning, when this type of girls is described, it seems like the narrator is praising them. As Dittmar points out, “mostly it is the information which emerges later that challenges this seduction” (Dittmar 79).

The fact that both Maureen and Geraldine are described as beautiful, but are involved in episodes of cruelty, is meaningful. Pauline had learned to associate physical beauty with virtue, and the narrator seems to be challenging



that concept with Maureen and Geraldine. The beautiful little girl bullies Pecola, and the beautiful woman abuses the youngest Breedlove—two actions that most definitely do not sound virtuous. Besides, the process of trying to move towards the white society's notion of beauty involves refusing and denying typical African American traits. Therefore, the narrator seems to oppose black values to the white concept of beauty.

Pauline's relationship with the white standard of beauty is different from the ones experienced by Maureen and Geraldine. While the latter two have sought it throughout their entire lives, Pauline only truly faced them after moving to Ohio (*TBE* 114). Her childhood had been spent in Alabama, and her teenage years in Kentucky. Even though her life had not been perfect in any of those places, she had had her family, listened to African American songs, and happily dated Cholly (*TBE* 108–114). However, as she tells us, everything changed when she and Cholly moved to Ohio. There, it was hard to get to know people, and she missed her community and felt terribly lonely. Pauline also says that there were many more whites around than in the South, and less colored people (*TBE* 115). In her words, "Northern folks was different too (...) No better than white for their meanness. They could make you feel just as no-count, except I didn't expect it from them" (*TBE* 115). The other black women made fun of how she did not straighten her hair and of the way she talked. In order to impress them, Pauline started working to buy new clothes, and she and Cholly started fighting more and more—about money and because they were losing their connection to each other (*TBE* 116). Eventually, she started going to the movies, where white concepts further disconnected her from her African American roots:

Along with the idea of romantic love, she was introduced to another—physical beauty. Probably the most destructive ideas in the history of human thought. Both originated in envy, thrived in insecurity, and ended in disillusion. In equating physical beauty with virtue, she stripped her mind, bound it, and collected self-contempt by the heap (*TBE* 120)

At the movies, Pauline also started aspiring for the models of life she saw portrayed on the screen. One of the images she saw in the films was

White men taking such good care of they women, and they all dressed up in big clean houses with the bathtubs right in the same room with the toilet. Them pictures gave me a lot of pleasure, but it made coming home hard, and looking at Cholly hard. (*TBE* 121)

At that point, Pauline and Cholly's marriage was not a happy one anymore. They were fighting a lot, since the man had started spending his money on alcohol and asking his wife for hers (*TBE* 118). When she compared her life to those of the women who got presents from their husbands, and Cholly to those movie white men who were able to solely provide for their families, Pauline felt disappointed with her own life and with Cholly. According to bell hooks, some black women of the time "have equated manhood with the ability of men to be sole economic providers in the family, and (...) feel cheated and betrayed by black men who refuse to assume this role", and this is a sign of acceptance and support of patriarchy (hooks 129). The author argues that African American men who were not the breadwinner of the family were seen as irresponsible, lazy and weak by their wives. According to her, this perception was not a suggestion that the women despised male dominance, but that they were actually embracing patriarchy and repudiated the husbands if they did not assume their part in its system (hooks 129–130). Pauline, by observing white families in the motion pictures, learns to see patriarchy as desirable, and feels disappointed that her life does not fit it.

After losing one of her front teeth, Pauline realized that she would never be able to fit in the white standard of beauty. She had very dark skin, had been raised in the country and did not have enough money. If unlike Maureen and Geraldine, who could successfully imitate white lifestyle and be considered beautiful, she could never live according to Western white standards, she decided that her own life and family were not priorities. Pauline started dedicating herself almost exclusively to her job at the Fischers'—a white family:

More and more she neglected her house, her children, her man—they were like the afterthoughts one has just before sleep, the early-morning and late-evening edges of her day, the dark edges that made the daily life with the Fishers lighter, more delicate, more lovely (*TBE* 125)

In their house, Pauline believed she was happy and dutiful. She thought the beauty, order and cleanliness in their place was right, an example of a good and correct life. When her employers commented that “really, she is the ideal servant” (*TBE* 126), she was grateful and felt rewarded. This sensation of happiness in servitude is another direct link to *Imitation of Life*: much like Delilah is glad to dedicate her life to attending Bea, Pauline finds meaning in serving the Fishers. If she and her daughter cannot be Peola and have a white-like life, at least she can serve a white family and inhabit their world.

In opposing the reasonably nice existence Pauline used to have while being in touch with her community in Alabama and Kentucky to the self-loathing she shows when despising her own family and trying to pursue white values, Morrison is showing how dangerous assimilation is. Beauty is “one of the most destructive ideas in the history of human thought” (*TBE* 120), and it is one of the reasons Pauline disconnects herself from her roots. Removed from her community and longing for white concepts of living, Pauline harms herself and others—especially her family—in her self-loathing.

Maureen, Geraldine and Pauline are three women who attempt to avoid and escape the funkiness that would connect them to blackness. In refusing their community and their culture, they do not participate in healing. Instead, they hurt themselves and others.

### 3.3 Cholly Breedlove: the oppressed turn into oppressor

In *Ain't I a Woman: Black Women and Feminism*, bell hooks argues that “in patriarchal society, men are encouraged to channel frustrated aggression in the direction of those without power—women and children” (hooks 145). This misguided ire can be seen in the thoughts of Cholly Breedlove.

The character's background chapter shows very clearly how he redirects the hatred from his oppressors to someone he can himself oppress. At the age of

fourteen, when he was attending the funeral of Aunt Jimmy—his only maternal figure—, he went to take a walk with Darlene, a girl he liked (*TBE* 140–143). Alone in an open field, the two of them soon found themselves attracted to one another and having their first sexual experience. However, they were interrupted by two white men holding a lamp and a flashlight. Those men called Cholly a “nigger” and told him to “get on wid it” when he motioned to stop what he and Darlene had been doing (*TBE* 145–146). Afraid of them, the young Breedlove obeyed—but all his tenderness and joy from before were gone: “with a violence born from helplessness, he pulled her dress up, lowered his trousers and underwear” (*TBE* 146). At that moment, Cholly hated Darlene, and he wished he could be comfortable enough in their sexual act to make it painful for her (*TBE* 146). When the two men were gone, Cholly unceremoniously called her “girl” and touched her leg with his foot to alert her that they should get going, not hiding how repulsed he was by her at that point. The boy was frustrated because he had not been able to stop the white men from having fun at their expense, but since he was powerless against them, he redirected his anger at the girl. As the narrator tells us,

Sullen, irritable, he cultivated his hatred of Darlene. Never did he once consider directing his hatred toward the hunters. Such an emotion would have destroyed him. They were big, white, armed men. He was small, black, helpless. His subconscious knew what his conscious mind did not guess—that hating them would have consumed him, burned him up like a piece of soft coal, leaving only flakes of ash and a question mark of smoke. (*TBE* 148–149)

It is absolutely clear that Cholly is an oppressor in the situation narrated above. However, he is also a victim of oppression. As hooks reminds us, “men too are victimized”, and “to be an oppressor is dehumanizing and anti-human in nature” (hooks 158). The author believes patriarchy leads men to believe they should be superior to women, and makes fathers act like monsters, husbands and lovers rape, brothers feel ashamed for caring for their sisters, and “denies all men the emotional life that would act as a humanizing, self-affirming force in their lives” (hooks 158).

At age fourteen, Cholly seemed to lose a great part of his connection to his community—much like what would happen to Pauline later on. Aunt Jimmy, who had loved him dearly, passed away. His care for Darlene was taken away by those men who exposed and humiliated them. Afraid of having gotten the girl pregnant and unwilling to move to his distant uncle's house, Cholly left Georgia and his only friend—an old man named Blue Jack (*TBE* 130–150). He went after his father, but the man turned him down and showed no interest in learning who he was (*TBE* 153–154). After all of these experiences of abandonment and loneliness, Cholly turned out to be “a free man”, who did whatever he wanted and was capable of acts of tenderness and violence (*TBE* 157–158). The narrator tells us that “the pieces of Cholly's life could become coherent only in the head of a musician” (*TBE* 157).

At first, it is possible to conclude from this passage that musicians would be able to understand Cholly Breedlove. However, there might be more to him being a “free man” and the narrator's pointing out music as a way of finding coherence. Perhaps, being free means that Cholly is disconnected from his community—in that way, more loose than free. If Claudia has gained insight on communal knowledge and learned that pain could be endurable through listening to her mother singing Blues songs, and Morrison believes in the healing music could promote for African Americans, what this narrator is suggesting is that coming in touch with black traditions and values could help Cholly. Instead, he moves further North and becomes frustrated when he cannot follow the Western white patriarchal model, be the head of his family and provide for them. In misdirecting his anger at his wife and children, Cholly is denied the emotional life hooks talks about: the one that could act as a humanizing force in his existence. Therefore, not knowing how to experience this emotional life, Cholly had no idea how to be a father (*TBE* 158). Feeling a mixture of repulsion and affection, the Breedlove man rapes his eleven-year-old daughter. He wanted to “break her neck—but tenderly”; “to fuck her—but tenderly” (*TBE* 159; 160–161). One of the questions he asks himself is what he should do in regards to Pecola's love for him:

What was he supposed to do about that? Return it? How? What could his calloused hands produce to make her smile? What of his

knowledge of the world and of life could be useful to her? What could his heavy arms and befuddled brain accomplish that would earn him his own respect, that would in turn allow him to accept her love? (*TBE* 159–160)

As Claudia states by the end of the novel, “love is never any better than the lover”, and “the love of a free man is never safe” (*TBE* 204). Perhaps, Cholly did not know what knowledge of the world to transmit to his daughter because he was not in touch with the African American community anymore. Perhaps, he did not know what to make with his hands because he did not have the traditions transmitted to him. Perhaps, he could not do something that would allow him to respect himself because he was living through others people’s model of life. Perhaps, the love of a free man is not safe because not feeling like part of a community himself, he cannot help someone else connect to those around them. Therefore, Cholly is a victim of oppression who perpetuates the violence, practicing it against those who are in more fragile positions than his own.

### 3.4 Pecola: the destroyed black little girl

In her article “Not So Fast, Dick and Jane” Werrlein notices that one of the differences between Pecola and Peola is the spelling of their names. Pecola’s has a “C”, which can be read as “see” (Werrlein 204). The author brings this issue of visibility into discussion, explaining how the white male body is the abstract body imagined in laws and in the Constitution. Therefore, it is the body that has access to rights and privileges (Werrlein 197). She argues that the more distant one is from that abstract corporality, the more visible their bodies are—and not in a positive way. The author explains that the more visible the body, the less visible the subject—which can be explained by subject visibility being associated with the white male body previously mentioned, which is the one supported by the law (Werrlein 203–204). As a poor black little girl, Pecola could not be more distant from that imagined abstraction.

Pecola's struggles with her visible body can be seen in the passage in which she wishes she could make it disappear:

“Please, God,” she whispered into the palm of her hand. “Please make me disappear.” She squeezed her eyes shut. Little parts of her body faded away. Now slowly, now with a rush. Slowly again. Her fingers went, one by one; then her arms disappeared all the way to the elbow. Her feet now. Yes, that was good. The legs all at once. It was hardest above the thighs. She had to be real still and pull. Her stomach would not go. But finally it, too, went away. Then her chest, her neck. The face was hard, too. Almost done, almost. Only her tight, tight eyes were left. They were always left. (*TBE* 43)

The only part of her body that Pecola cannot make disappear are her eyes. The “C” (“see”) can never go away, so the girl can never be Peola. She can never be recognized as beautiful the way the *Imitation of Life*'s character is, or be considered as a subject. In fact, her visibility and undesirability are remarked on by almost all the people who directly abuse her—thoughts of her being ugly are displayed by a variety of characters.

For instance, Mr. Yacobowski, a white immigrant storekeeper, looks at Pecola with vacuum in his gaze and “the total absence of human recognition”, with an edge of distaste (*TBE* 46–47). The little girl assumes that his dislike comes from her blackness. Yacobowski is very rude to her, and hesitates to touch Pecola to get the money she is paying for the candy (*TBE* 46–48 ). When the little girl leaves the store, feeling ashamed, she sees dandelions. Before, she had thought they were pretty and could not understand why people called them weeds. Now, though, after being rejected and judged by Mr. Yacobowski's gaze, she herself deems the flowers ugly (*TBE* 45; 48). In other words, Pecola internalizes the opinions and views others have.

The word “ugly” appears again when Maureen Peal bullies Pecola. The light-skinned girl had acted nice towards the youngest Breedlove in order to get her to talk. After buying Pecola ice cream, Maureen starts an interrogation. Its purpose is to find out whether what the boys at school had been yelling about Pecola having seen her father naked was true or not (*TBE* 68–71). Sensing Maureen's intentions and Pecola's discomfort, the MacTeers sisters come to her aid and an argument takes place. “Black” is used by Peal as an offense, and her

final attack is “I *am* cute! And you ugly! Black and ugly black e mos. I *am* cute!” (*TBE* 69–71). Once again, Pecola is made aware of what others think of her, and that it is all related to appearances. She is not white and she is not considered beautiful; therefore, others believe they can mock her.

Junior is Geraldine’s son. He hates his mother because she denies him affection, preferring her cat instead. Knowing he is powerless to face the woman, he transfers his anger to the animal and others who are weaker than him—like Pecola (*TBE* 84–86). One afternoon, when he sees the youngest Breedlove passing in front of his house, he muses that “nobody ever played with her. Probably, he thought, because she was ugly” (*TBE* 86). Junior then proceeds to lure the girl in, only to throw the cat at her face in order to scare and hurt the girl. Instead, when the two seem to be getting along, the boy gets mad and kills the cat. Then, he blames Pecola for it when his mother arrives. Geraldine angrily orders her to leave and calls her a “nasty little black bitch” (*TBE* 86–90). The words “ugly” and “black” are once again used as reasons and offenses to attack the youngest Breedlove.

When Pecola was born, Pauline declares that she “knowed she was ugly” (*TBE* 124). The woman was not proud of her daughter, and when the MacTeer sisters visited the Fischer’s house to talk to Pecola, Claudia was angered by the fact that the little white Fischer girl called Pauline “Polly”, when Pecola was only allowed to call her mother “Mrs. Breedlove” (*TBE* 104–106). When an accident takes place and Pecola knocks over a pan full of deep-dish berry cobbler, Pauline gets extremely furious. She does not care that her daughter has burned herself; she launches and slaps the girl, yelling at her (*TBE* 106–107). In a similarly aggressive manner, when Pecola is raped by her father and gets pregnant, a woman comments that “they say the way her mama beat her she lucky to be alive herself” (*TBE* 187). Since one of the first thoughts Pauline had when Pecola was born was that the girl was ugly, it seems that that might be one of the reasons for her not displaying or even feeling affection towards her daughter. Instead, she prefers to dote on the little white Fischer girl, who matches the dominant society’s ideal of beauty. Pauline also beats Pecola when she is raped by Cholly, so we can assume that the woman blames the girl for what happened—as women are quiet frequently blamed when they are



victims of sexual aggression. One more time, Pecola is abused because she is black, “ugly” and female.

Near the end of the novel, when Pecola goes to beg Soaphead Church to give her blue eyes, the man’s thoughts are that “here was an ugly little girl asking for beauty” (*TBE* 172). He laments the fact that he could never help her, which shows how he does not believe blackness could ever be beautiful. Despite his apparent desire to aid her, the old man only uses Pecola to kill a dog that was bothering him. Innocently, the girl feeds the dog the poison Soaphead Church had given her, and believes its convulsion is a sign that the magic has taken place and that she now possesses her so desired blue eyes.

Soaphead Church is the fourth person to think or call Pecola ugly using that exact word. Although Yacobowski and Geraldine do not use the word themselves, it is clear that they also find the girl undesirable based solely on her appearance.

However, there is at least one more person who believes Pecola is ugly—the girl herself. When upset by Cholly and Pauline’s turbulent fights, Pecola thinks that she cannot escape her misery because “as long as she looked the way she did, as long as she was ugly, she would have to stay with these people” (*TBE* 43). Constantly exposed to the worship of white idols and icons such as Shirley Temple and Mary Jane, and seeing how everyone seems to adore them, Pecola prays for blue eyes in order to be more like Temple, Jane or the Fischer girl. In that way, maybe, the girl hopes she may come to be loved.

After visiting Soaphead Church, Pecola believes she has acquired blue eyes. The girl is broken, and that is shown by the way she now has two selves: one she perceives as her true self—with blue eyes—, and one who is her imaginary friend. Even though she does believe to possess blue eyes now, that still does not seem to be enough:

Please. If there is somebody with bluer eyes than mine, then maybe there is somebody with the bluest eyes. The bluest eyes in the whole world.

That’s just too bad, isn’t it?

Please help me look.

No.

But suppose my eyes aren't blue enough?

Blue enough for what? Blue enough for...I don't know. Blue enough for something. Blue enough...for you!

I'm not going to play with you anymore.

Oh. Don't leave me.

Yes. I am.

Why? Are you mad at me?

Yes.

Because my eyes aren't blue enough? Because I don't have the bluest eyes?

No. Because you're acting silly.

Don't go. Don't leave me. Will you come back if I get them?

Get what?

The bluest eyes. Will you come back then?

Of course I will. I'm just going away for a little while.

You promise?

Sure. I'll be back. Right before your very eyes. (*TBE* 201–202)

As can be seen, what Pecola is truly looking for is affection and someone who will stay with her. The girl fears she will be left alone again if she does not have the bluest eyes. This passage shows how trying to achieve white beauty standards will never truly work for Pecola: she will be forever chasing them. If blue eyes—that is, the white concept of beauty,—cannot work for her and make her loved, it seems not to be the correct answer for the healing of an African American identity.

### 3.5 Claudia and a new alternative for the “Black is Beautiful” slogan

Author Carl Malmgren argues that, even though *The Bluest Eye* is a multitextual and polyphonic novel, it is entirely organized by Claudia MacTeer

(Malmgren 146–151). One of the evidences he proposes for that claim is that Cholly is referred to as a “free man” in two very distinct passages: the first is in Cholly’s section of the Breedlove version of the Dick and Jane primer, narrated in the third-person. The second is in Claudia’s coda, narrated in the first-person by an adult MacTeer woman. Claudia can only know to connect the coda to Cholly’s primer section if she is the persona organizing the story (Malmgren 150).

That analysis seems to align with a declaration Morrison has given about her books:

“I want very much to have every book I write end with knowledge (...) You begin at a certain place, a literary journey, and at the very end there has to be the acquisition of knowledge which is virtue, which is good, which is helpful—somebody knows something at the end that they did not know before.” (Morrison “Goodness”. Web)

Somebody, in this case, does not seem to apply solely to the reader. Claudia MacTeer seems to have learned something throughout the narrative of *The Bluest Eye* too. At the very beginning of the novel, she affirms that nothing else can be said about Pecola’s story, except for the reasons for it to have happened. Even though the narrator says the focus will stay on how the events unfolded, since “why is difficult to handle” (*TBE* 4), both how and why seem to be analyzed throughout the book.

Claudia is the character who fights the imposition of white beauty standards the most in the novel. While Pecola and Frieda adored Shirley Temple, Claudia hated her. Her reason for it is definitely very interesting: the girl did not hate Shirley Temple because she was cute, but because she danced with Bojangles, an African American tap dancer and actor. According to Claudia, he was her friend, her uncle, her daddy, and he should have been dancing and laughing with her (*TBE* 17). Claudia did not hate Shirley Temple because she could not imitate the girl’s appearance like Pecola wanted to do, but because she felt Temple was taking something—or someone in this case—she felt belonged to her, to her culture. It is interesting because while Pecola and most of the characters in the novel seem intent on holding on to the Shirley Temples, Mary

Janes and other white models, Claudia focuses her admiration on an African American figure.

The youngest MacTeer's resistance to white beauty standards is also shown in her repulse for blond blue-eyed dolls. She muses about how every other kid seemed to want them, and how adults thought they would be the perfect gift. Nevertheless, Claudia's only interest towards the toys was in dismembering them to see if she could find the reason why everyone seemed to love them so much (*TBE* 17–19). As Douglas suggests, the mention of dolls in *The Bluest Eye* might be a reference to a test formulated by Kenneth and Mamie Clark. They interviewed sixteen black children in segregated schools, asking them to compare white and black dolls. Ten said they preferred the white dolls, eleven referred to the black ones as “bad”, nine described the white toys as “nice”, and seven chose the white dolls as the one most like themselves (Douglas 216). Mentioning the dolls is a way for Morrison to say that black had not always been considered beautiful, and to alert how assimilation without criticism might be harmful. By dismembering the dolls, Morrison makes Claudia also deconstruct the notion that white is superior, but not only that. By reducing the dolls to pieces in order to find the source of the beauty without discovering it, Claudia is deconstructing the very notion of beauty too. As Malmgren writes,

the text composed by the adult Claudia, *The Bluest Eye*, carries on the same discovery procedure on a grander scale; it undertakes the deconstruction and demystification of the ideology that makes those dolls beautiful. (Malmgren 154)

Once again, African American tradition is presented as a possibly healthier alternative to the pursuit of beauty standards. Claudia declares that she did not want white dolls for Christmas, and if any adult had asked what she truly desired, she would have said that

I wanted rather to feel something on Christmas day. The real question would have been, “Dear Claudia, what experience would you like on Christmas?” I could have spoken up, “I want to sit on the low stool in Big Mama's kitchen with my lap full of lilacs and listen to Big Papa play his violin for me alone.” The lowness of the stool made for my body, the security and warmth of Big Mama's kitchen, the smell of the

lilacs, the sound of the music, and, since it would be good to have all of my senses engaged, the taste of a peach, perhaps, afterward. (*TBE* 19–20)

Rather than admiring or imitating white aspirations, Claudia desired to feel connected to her community and their traditions. She longed for the warmth and familiarity of Big Mama’s kitchen and wanted to listen to African American music. As Moses argues, this connection to ancestral knowledge transmitted through songs, habits and storytelling is essential to the survival of the MacTeer sisters, and its absence is one of the reasons for the downfall of the Breedloves (Moses 131–132).

The narrator Claudia confesses to her readers that, in time, she would transform her despising of white girls in fraudulent love, and would learn to worship Shirley Temple and delight in cleanliness. However, she also says that she knew, even as she learned, that “the change was adjustment without improvement” (*TBE* 20–21). Therefore, the Claudia who organizes *The Bluest Eye* is aware of the dangers of assimilation, and protesting against assuming white values. Her resistance is quite clear in her fondness of Pecola. While at least five characters explicitly refer to the girl as ugly, Claudia says that “she was smiling, and since it was a rare thing to see on her, I was surprised at the pleasure it gave me” (*TBE* 104). Even as a child, hearing from almost everyone that Pecola was ugly, Claudia felt pleasure upon looking at her. She was able to find the girl delightful. The fact that the adult narrator chooses to tell her readers that is a proof that there are points of view different from the dominant one.

Another indication of Claudia’s resistance is seen by the time Pecola is already pregnant with Cholly’s baby. She remembers how she and her sister were very concerned for Pecola and her child, but seemed to be the only ones. In her words,

I thought about the baby that everybody wanted dead, and saw it very clearly. It was in a dark, wet place, its head covered with great O’s of wool, the black face holding, like nickels, two clean black eyes, the flared nose, kissing-thick lips, and the living, breathing silk of black skin. No synthetic yellow bangs suspended over marble-blue eyes, no pinched nose and bowline mouth. More strongly than my fondness for

Pecola, I felt a need for someone to want the black baby to live—just to counteract the universal love of white baby dolls, Shirley Temples, and Maureen Peals. (*TBE* 188)

The baby imagined by Claudia is very black, has thick lips, curly hair and silky skin. It is loved by her. The narrator says she wanted someone to wish for the baby's life in order to counteract the universal love for white beauty standards—and that is what she does with her narrative, *The Bluest Eye*. In opposing the harm and pain the very concept of beauty does to Pecola to the strength and knowledge African Americans values transmit to Claudia herself, the author is suggesting that healing can be achieved through a connection to the community.

While the novel seems to end in a negative note, the very fact that Pecola's story is being told suggests otherwise. In the last paragraph, Claudia states rather darkly that

This soil is bad for certain kinds of flowers. Certain seeds it will not nurture, certain fruit it will not bear, and when the land kills of its own volition, we acquiesce and say the victim had no right to live. We are wrong, of course, but it doesn't matter. It's too late. At least on the edge of my town, among the garbage and the sunflowers of my town, it's much, much, much too late. (*TBE* 204)

However, the reference to marigolds, flowers and seeds is not gratuitous. The novel ends in Summer, so Autumn is soon to come. It is the seeding season, so new ideas and values can be planted. As the narrator affirms when she is talking about girls like Pecola, "the end of the world lay in their eyes, and the beginning, and all the waste in between" (*TBE* 90). The end of the world can be read as Pecola's tragic fate. The waste is all the evil those around her have done to the little girl. The beginning of the world may come in Autumn, if the seeds of connection to their roots and African American values are planted. In that way, the community can heal. Again, as Moses suggests, the novel is Claudia's blues for Pecola and her community, and the traditional blues lyrics involve "a movement from an initial emphasis on loss to a concluding suggestion of resolution of grief through motion" (Moses 140; 125). By testifying Pecola's

story, Claudia is playing the cathartic role of a storyteller, attesting the knowledge she has acquired through the years, promoting healing and suggesting that the community's loss can be overcome if African American values are the seeds planted when the next Autumn comes.

## CONCLUSION

In “Wounded Beauty: An Exploratory Essay on Race, Feminism, and the Aesthetic Question”, Cheng seems to have an inquiry similar to that of Morrison’s in *The Bluest Eye*. Both writers seem bothered not only about those excluded by the white concept of beauty, but about the concept itself. As Cheng says,

the insurgence of strategies to combat the history of aesthetic denigration through revaluing notions of difference or alternative beauty offers only short term cures since the fundamental logic of aesthetic and moral judgment remains intact. A revaluation of "bad looks" as something positive inadvertently reconfirms the existence of "good looks." Similarly, efforts at racial reclamation through slogans such as "Black Is Beautiful" seem to announce injury more than remedy. Both strategies replace the object of aesthetic value without questioning the primacy of that value. We continually run into a double bind wherein liberal discourse wants to rehabilitate beauty without having to assent to its seductions. (Cheng 193)

Morrison’s wariness towards the “Black is Beautiful” slogan and the necessity for the claim seem to align her with Cheng’s view. The existence of something beautiful will require the existence of something ugly—always excluding and harming someone. Both Morrison and Cheng seem to think that the fact that whiteness is considered the most important or only kind of beauty is not the only problem, but also that the whole importance attached to this particular value is misguided.

There are signs in the novel that point to Morrison’s concerns towards the “Black is Beautiful” slogan, and not all of them are subtle. Perhaps, the most explicit one is when the narrator refers to the notion of physical beauty Pauline learns at the picture show as one of the most “destructive ideas in the history of human thought” –the other being romantic love (*TBE* 120). Therefore, the novelist does not seem to feel that associating blackness to beauty is the best way to value African American traditions, as BAM artists wished to do. To her, valuing beauty is actually another way of assimilating white values as the most important.

As an alternative, Morrison proposes that racial pride and connection to African American roots can be more successfully achieved through traditions that



come from the community, such as music (blues and jazz, for instance) and storytelling (seen in oral traditions such as call-and-response and in acts as signifying and testifying). It is not an accident that Claudia, who learns about Black traditions through listening to her mother's blues, and who receives support in her self-confidence from her sister Frieda manages to survive and grow up healthily in the story. However, Pecola, who is only exposed to aspirations of white values and does not learn to connect to African American traditions, cannot find peace or love.

Morrison reaffirms her idea of healing coming from a strong community in her novel *Home* (2012). In the story, a man named Frank Money has to rescue his sister Cee, who is extremely sick because a white doctor for whom she had been working had been performing dangerous medical experiments on her. When Frank takes Cee back to their hometown, the women in the community take responsibility for the girl's recovery. They abhor knowing the girl had been at the hands of a white doctor, and use their ancestral knowledge and intuition to cure her (Morrison *Home* 121–126). The women in the community are responsible not only for Cee's physical healing, but also for her emotional recovery and empowerment. As Ethel tells her,

Look to yourself. You free. Nothing and nobody is obliged to save you but you. Seed your own land. You young and a woman and there's serious limitation in both, but you are a person too. Don't let Lenore or some trifling boyfriend and certainly no devil doctor decide who you are. That's slavery. Somewhere inside you is that free person I'm talking about. Locate her and let her do some good in the world. (Morrison *Home* 126)

Cee is able to heal and become stronger because she has received love and knowledge from the women in her community. It is what connects her to Claudia and separates her from Pecola. Therefore, it can be understood that Morrison believes that a strong sense of belonging is part of the female African American identity, and it is essential to their survival.

After reading and writing this work, I believe that the “remaining touched but not moved” (*TBE* VIII) Morrison refers to is related to an inquiry of our society's values. Should beauty be as important as it is? Do African Americans

gain from being considered beautiful, or is it still harmful and drives them further away from their traditions? Pecola does believe she has gotten her blue eyes by the end of the novel, but she still wants more: she needs the bluest eyes. After all, beauty standards are always going to be unachievable, even for white people. We will always be too fat or too tall, and the pursuit of beauty as one of the most desirable values in life will always create self-loathing.

We all take part in Pecola's downfall, and that may be the reason the "why" of her story is so difficult to handle (*TBE* 4). While we cultivate beauty as our strongest wish, we may be generating and spreading self-contempt.

As a solution, Morrison brings love, stories, connection to the community. In *The Bluest Eye*, that community is the African American one, since that is the position of the main characters. After all, the bluest eye does not refer exclusively to Pecola's wish. The "eye" can be read as "I": self, subject (Moses 126). The bluest may be understood as a reference to blues: a strong African American tradition. If Pecola imagined her healing would come from possessing the bluest of eyes, Morrison seems to think that a truly healed identity will more probably come from connection to community and to others, and that is the message her novel gives.

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