

## RESISTANCE AND DEFLECTION TO THE CONTEMPT OF OTHERS: TONI MORRISON'S *THE BLUEST EYES*

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### Abstract

*The United States of America is a race-conscious society that those who are colored (as opposed to white) have generally been put in inferior positions and treated accordingly. Apparently, Whites has been inherently put as the dominant group whereas the African American is consciously placed as one of the subordinate ones. This phenomenon is thoughtfully depicted by Toni Morrison in The Bluest Eye. Therefore, this writing aims at describing the phenomena when beauty turns out to be the hegemonic practice of White beauty standard in African American society as it is depicted in this novel. The study is anchored on the theory of hegemony proposed by Antonio Francesco Gramsci which describes how the state and ruling capitalist class use cultural institutions to maintain power in capitalist societies. Meanwhile, the concept of beauty is an example of cultural institution; hence, the standard of beauty is based on the dominant group e.g. White people, so there is the White beauty standard as a means of hegemonic practice in the American society. It is the fact that White beauty standard hegemony has led to the emergence of intra-racial discrimination happening within the African American society as it is reflected in the literary work due to the characters' efforts to seek for White's approval that transcends in the emergence of the self-loathing upon the characters in the novel, and its attendant self identity degrading. The study after revisiting the historical and socio-political moments in which the novel was written, finally makes the analysis of the book, its formal structures and its characters. In the conclusion, the researcher affirms 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:** Hegemony, Culture, Blue Eyes, Contempt and Self-Loathing

### Introduction

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 this book, so the themes of black identity, resistance, deflection and contempt 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. (9–10)

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, it is crucial this period is touched for clarity. 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. 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 20th 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.

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 in the words of Colin Palmer, that blacks would have “separate-but-equal facilities” (471). In the early 20th 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 Coloured People (NAACP), which claimed 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. 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 20th 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 (473).

Series of matters were ongoing, hate groups like Ku Klux Klan were revived, and nevertheless, many black activists did feel inspired by *Brown V. Board of education of Topeka, Kansas*. 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. 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. 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 according to Walter Rucker, “that black political empowerment and self-defense were necessary to improve African American's lives and satisfy their needs” (662–663). The nonviolent attitude of the previous Movements were criticised, they started using “Black Power” as an alternative slogan to the previous in the words of Rucker, “We Shall Overcome” unofficially adopted by the Civil Rights Movement until that point. 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 (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. It was amid those ideological conflicts that Toni Morrison wrote *The Bluest Eye*.

### **Deflection and Contempt of Others: What Black Literature says about It**

In the foreword section of *The Bluest Eyes*, Toni Morrison comments on the challenge of centering the novel's main inquiry on the vulnerable character of Pecola Breedlove—a poor, black, lonely little girl. She 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” (VIII). 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. 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” (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 (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” (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 further dimension of her weariness seems to be related not only to race, but also to woman 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”, 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 Black Arts Movement men were supporters of patriarchy and delegated women to subordinate positions both at home and in politics” (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” (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 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 (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 (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 (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 (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” (49). 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” (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.

### **Racial Passing, Self-Loathing and the White Standards of Beauty**

Toni Morrison, the first black woman Nobel Prize winner, in her first novel, *The Bluest Eye* depicts the tragic condition of the blacks in racist America. It examines how the ideologies perpetuated by the dominant groups and adopted by the marginal groups influence the identity of the blacks, especially women. Through the depictions of white beauty icons, Morrison's black characters lose themselves to self-hatred. The novel, *The Bluest Eye* indicates a black girl's quest to attain white standards. Being the most sensitive black woman writer, Toni Morrison has tried to highlight this kind of a dilemma of black woman in *The Bluest Eye*. She tells the story of a young black girl, Pecola Breedlove who wants to have blue eyes, a symbol of white beauty. Pecola believes that such eyes would make her beautiful, acceptable and admirable. However, her eyes cannot be changed into blue eyes in reality. She wants them desperately; as a result, her quest for blue eyes culminates in madness. The novel opens with an anecdote of Dick and Jane to show how racism destroys the mental stability of black people. It equates whites with success and happiness while blacks with poverty and unhappiness. This traumatises the minds of Blacks and they begin to dislike their own heritage and skin colour in the white world of Dick and Jane. 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, neighbours 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 resistance, contempt, gender and raises questions on racial self-loathing, the menace of white beauty standards, and the loss of one's self. One of the important references Morrison makes in the novel is to the movie *Imitation of life* 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” (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 Debra 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” (203). In his essay, Cat Moses presents signifying as, “a black tradition in which the listener makes fun or insults the speaker” (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” (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” (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 (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 (123). The woman recognized her baby was smart, but declared that “Lord she was ugly” (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. As Sharon Gravett affirms, “the dominant culture achieves and maintains its prominence because of its wealth; hence, the values it promotes tend to be monetary ones” (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. 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 the introduction, 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 she 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” (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 Peal:

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 (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 behaviours such as those taught in the Dick and

Jane primes 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” (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” (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 behaviours. The narrator that tells us about these girls seems to disapprove of their attitude. As Christopher 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” (212).

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 (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 (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 coloured people (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” (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 (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 (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 (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 (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” (129). 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. 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” (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.

### **Claudia and an Alternative for the “Black is Beautiful” Slogan**

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” (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 (17–19). 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 Carl 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” (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 (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”(131–132). Claudia's 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” (104). 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 (188).

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.

### Conclusion

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. 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” (IX–X).

Pecola's struggles with her black appearance 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 (43).

The only part of her body that Pecola cannot make disappear are her eyes. The “C” that is omitted in Peola 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. She is not white and she is not considered beautiful; therefore, others believe they can mock her. When Pecola was born, Pauline declares that she “knewed she was ugly” (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” (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 (106–107). 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.

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” (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. 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. (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. 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 (204).

The novel ends in Summer, so Autumn is soon to come. It is the seeding season, so new ideas and values can be planted. 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. 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.

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