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| RESEARCH ARTICLE

Constructing Desire: Beauty, Love of Blackness and Black Constellations in The Bluest Eye

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| ABSTRACT
This paper examines The Bluest Eye as a critique of the ideological mechanisms that enforce white beauty standards and lead to the self-denial of Black identity. Through the experiences of Pecola Breedlove, Claudia MacTeer, and Pauline Breedlove, Morrison illustrates how dominant cultural narratives, particularly through mass media and literature, shape self-perception and enforce racialized hierarchies. The paper explores how Morrison historicizes the Black experience, analyzing the impact of Jim Crow laws, migration, and systemic exclusion on the construction of beauty and self-worth. Drawing on psychoanalytic and ideological critiques, this study argues that Morrison exposes the destructive effects of internalized racism and presents The Bluest Eye as an urgent call for Black solidarity and love of blackness. By engaging with theoretical perspectives on subject formation, ideology, and trauma, the paper discusses Morrison's work within broader literary and cultural discourses on racial representation and self-identity.

| KEYWORDS

black pride, disinterested violence, self-denial, constellations of support, standards of beauty, historicizing the black experience

| ARTICLE INFORMATION

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1. Introduction

What is very visible at first sight in *The Bluest Eye* is the erasure of cultures and values that are different from the dominant ideology of capitalism. These values are related to race and gender and the reproduction of them in the mass culture is strictly prohibited by the "white only" ideology of capitalism. According to Willis (1987), "All the models (cultural representation) are white, devoid of any cultural integrity" (p.184).

I argue that *The Bluest Eye* invites a celebration of blackness, a love of blackness and femininity, and inner beauty as opposed to a love of whiteness. *The Bluest Eye* is a successful attempt at historicizing the black experience in the United States by emphasizing the significance of memory, a predominant theme in Morrison's works. By presenting an account of racism, sexism, Jim Crow laws, the migration of Black communities from the South to the North, and the consequent rupture it creates—along with recalling how dominant white culture eradicates Black pride and beauty—Morrison urges her Black readers, especially black women, to recognize that survival in the United States requires building constellations of support among black women. Much like Alice Walker's theme in The Color Purple, Morrison asserts that because dominant culture imposes whiteness and white beauty standards upon black individuals—particularly black women—they must create constellations of love and solidarity, cherishing blackness as a source of pride and beauty. The critique of disinterested violence among Black characters and their tendency to scapegoat each other, particularly their scapegoating of Pecola, serves as Morrison's reminder to black women of the self-destructive attitudes that have emerged from centuries of erasure and oppression under the dominant white system.

Morrison's call to black women is particularly significant because white feminist and psychoanalytic theories have failed to address the issue of motherhood (Ghaderi, 2023), hence the need for black women to create chains of support instead of scapegoating each other.

2. Analysis of *The Bluest Eye*

The Dick and Jane reader in *The Bluest Eye* is a clear example of what Morrison is proposing. We see that Dick and Jane are the happy children of a white family with blue eyes and blond hair. What is hazardous about this representation is the exclusion of different races and ethnicities. The Dick and Jane primer represents the happy life of middle-class whites; it consistently ignores the values and experiences of other groups. It is represented as the only model for a happy life and blames those whose lives are not parallel. White lower-class children could at least imagine that they are included in the story. They are lured to forget about their harsh circumstances and hope for a prosperous future. For black children this required a "double reversal or negation" (Kuenz, 1993, p. 422). For they should both forget about their harsh economic situations and their black bodies. A black child should imagine herself through a white body and this means a negation of oneself.

It is possible that this representation might lead to class consciousness on the part of black people, especially women, who come to see that their identity is endangered; this might produce a feeling of resentment. But what we see in *The Bluest Eye* is different; many characters in the novel do not feel that they are being targeted by these representations. This reflects the mass culture's success in delivering the process of self-denial. It has made it "A pleasurable experience" (Kuenz, 1993, p. 422).

The only interaction that is possible with society is through self-denial in *The Bluest Eye*. This can be seen in the numerous representations of feminine beauty in the novel. Everything reeks of whiteness: dolls with their blue eyes, Mary Jane candies, Shirley Temple cups, and Maureen Peele's stylish clothes which remind Claudia of Shirley Temple. But Claudia and Frieda can see the thing that made (Maureen) beautiful and not (them). They know that they are "nicer, and brighter" but they cannot forget how "the honey voices of parents and aunts, the obedience in the eyes of peers, the slippery light in the eyes of teachers" (Morrison, 1994, p. 61-62) also pay tribute to the Shirley Temples of the world and not to them. They learn, from the reactions of other people to Maureen Peal and other girls like her, what they lack which is identified throughout the novel as unworthiness.

Claudia's body is not completely socialized yet in the novel (Kuenz, 1993). Frigga Haug calls this process of socialization "female sexualization" (1987, p. 99). This means the production of femininity through doing feminine skills (such as how to move, hold things, dress and etc) and also "the reproduction of subordination" through women's bodies. Claudia indicates that she has not yet "Arrived at the turning point in the development of my psyche which would allow me to love her (Shirley Temple)" (Morison, 1994, p.19). That is why she enjoys her body's substances and smells (Kuenz, 1993). She does not hate like Geraldine, "funk" and she is interested in Pecola's Menstrual blood which Frieda tries to wash away (Kuenz, 1993). She looks enthusiastically at her own vomit, likes the way "it (clings) to its own mass, refusing to break up and be removed"(Morrison, 1994, p.13). She hates "the dreadful and humiliating absence of dirt (and) the irritable, unimaginative cleanliness" (Morrison, 1994, p. 21) that follows it. In other words, Claudia has not learned the lessons of subordination which the white ideology tries to impose on other ethnicities. Mahmoudi (2016) highlights how female characters in Renaissance epyllions are often confined to pre-established gendered roles; in the same fashion, *The Bluest Eye* critiques similar constraints placed upon Black women through Eurocentric beauty. The difference is that Morrison ironically tries to give her black females an agency that has been deprived of them since time immemorial. This is particularly important because the female subordination was established since antiquity, stretching to the Renaissance and persisting all through the modern world. For example, Hamidizadeh, Mahmoudi and Hamidizadeh (2018) argue that Milton's Eve, written during the Renaissance, is systematically positioned as a subordinate figure within a patriarchal framework, reinforcing a hierarchical structure where women's autonomy is restricted. Morrison similarly critiques this imposition of ideological control through Pecola's submission to an external standard of beauty that excludes and erases her self-worth. Ghaderi (2021) explains how female readers in pre-revolutionary France (18th century) were constructed and reified as passive subjects who absorbed dominant ideological narratives without resistance. Similarly, Pecola in *The Bluest Eye* is subjected to a process in which mass cultural representations of beauty dictate her sense of self-worth, leaving her incapable of resisting the ideological structures that define her existence.

Of course, Claudia relates this ease with her body to her youth and she admits that she gives in to the lessons of dominant discourse. *The Bluest Eye* suggests the sexualization of Claudia's body is a result of commodities like Shirley Temple cups which define appearance and correct behavior (Kuenz, 1993).

The constant representation of figures like Jean Harlow, Ginger Rogers, Gretta Garbow, is to show "the most destructive ideas in the history of human thought" (Morrison, 1994, p.97) which are romantic love and physical beauty. They are destructive because they exclude and because they are unavailable to other racial groups. After spending a lot of time in the movies, Pauline "was never able… to look at a face and not assign it some category in the scale of absolute beauty" (Morrison, 1994, p.97). Among

these faces, is her own face that she hates, because of her Afro hair and a rotten tooth. Although she calls her daughter after a pretty character in the movie "imitation of life", she thinks like everyone else in the novel that Pecola is ugly (Kuenz, 1993).

The horror of this ideology is that it co-opts to the level of complete elimination, a historical network of communal values. This was done, partly by blacks' migration to the industrial north. This migration led to the separation of families and friends (Kuenz, 1993). It separated them from the common culture that they shared in the rural south. Barati (2022) illustrates how modernity creates a rupture in the lives of traditional communities, creating traumatic bodies, peoples and societies. In the absence of this common culture, it is very easy for the dominant ideology to co-opt and transform their identities.

When Pauline first comes to Lorain, she feels estranged and she says that white people are everywhere; these whites are different from the ones she had seen back home. In the absence of a community to belong, she resorts to the Fishers' house. Here she can exercise some power that she had in the south but taken from her when she married Cholly. As a child she liked to arrange things and to give them a nice order. According to Kuenz (1993), In Cholly's house, she misses the neatness that she had in Alabama. It is not after she found a job at the Fishers' that she can "arrange things, clean things, line things up in neat rows…(at the Fishers') she found beauty, order, cleanliness and praise… it was her pleasure to stand in her kitchen at the end of a day and survey her handiwork"(Morrison, 1994, p. 101). Moreover, her job gives her a sense of belonging to a community that she does not have in her home. It also provides her with acceptance that she lacks with Cholly. The Fishers have given her, the nickname 'Polly". Mr. Fisher says that "I would rather sell her blueberry cobblers than real estate"(Morrison, 1994, p. 101). Pauline cannot see that both the nickname and the praise are examples of her subordination and her outsider nature in the Fisher family. This can be seen when Claudia hears the little girl telling her "where is Polly" while both Claudia and Pecola refer to Pauline as Mrs. Breedlove.

The other place that she finds "power, praise and luxury" (Morrison, 1994, p. 101) is the movies. Here she thinks that "physical beauty and virtue" (Morrison, 1994, p.97) are one and where she "stripped her mind, bound it and collected self-contempt by the heap" (Morrison, 1994, p. 97). When she sees in films that white men "take good care of them women" (Morrison, 1994, p.1997) she ignores her home and her man. The films provide Pauline with an ideal life which she does not have, and which she does not have a chance of getting in real life other than the role of an ideal servant. Like the Dick and Jane primer, the movies give her an empty feeling because she has no chance of acquiring white notions of beauty or altering these notions.

Images of beauty limit freedom in other subtle ways, too. Claudia develops a hatred for white dolls not just because they do not look like her but because they impose different notions of behavior and also entertainment. Instead of sitting "on the low stool in big Mama's kitchen, with laps full of lilacs and (listening) to Big Papa play his violin for (her) alone" and instead of storytelling that is a part of black culture, she has to pretend that she is the mother of this "thing" dressed in "starched gauze or lace" (Morrison, 1994, p.20).

Claudia also hates Shirley Temple cups, not just because of her white beauty, but because her presence in the movie of Bojangles. This movie which is seemingly about the Civil War and Black lives, was produced to further eradicate memories of black experience. Instead of Uncle Bojancles, the world should see the daintiness of a little white girl with graceful moves and a delicate smile (Kuenz, 1993). According to Etedali Rezapoorian (2024), artistic productions by white artists "Center whiteness and decenter blackness" (p.129) in cases where the main protagonist must be a black person, not a white one. The result is the construction of whites as the heroes of black people either in the emancipation of blacks from slavery and in the fight against racism.

The fact that Mr. Henry calls Freida and Claudia Greta Garbo and Ginger Rogers, thereby reducing them to objectified types, shows the extent of mass culture consumption not just by women but also by men. What is also apparent in this scene is the sexism appearing silently in the novel. Henry gives small gifts of money to the girls to molest them. Immediately she calls the Maginot Line and China, two pretty "members of his Bible class" (Morrison, 1994, p.65) who are known prostitutes in the neighborhood (Kuenz, 1993). He also gives them money just like he did to Claudia and Frieda. In other words, he lowers black women to the level of prostitutes.

The mass representation of feminine beauty surfaces itself everywhere. Pauline learns in the movies that sensual pleasure comes directly with power. That is why she wishes to have power when she wants to make love with Cholly. Kuenz (1993) argues that she can only be satisfied if she feels that she has power over him. Sadly Pauline sees strength, youth and beauty in what she has learned from the films. Ironically, she can have none, because the nature of these notions is not present in her, that is whiteness.

Pauline has not wholly forgotten about sensual pleasure. She defines it in terms of white notions. For Geraldine and other "Sugar-brown girls" sensual pleasure does not exist at all (Kuenz, 1993). They have lost the "the dreadful funkiness of passion…of nature…of the wide range of human emotions" (Morrison, 1994, p.68). As a result of migration to north and away from family,

friends and also cities like Aiken and Nagadoches, whose names "make you think of love" (Morrison, 1994, p.67) they never think about love and human emotions.

3. The Nigger and the Colored

One aspect of *The Bluest Eye* is about the distinction between "the colored" and "the nigger" (Kuenz, 1993, p.427). The distinction made by middle-class African Americans in the novel draws a line between those blacks who have a lighter skin and blacks who have a darker skin. The distinction, however, is not based wholly on color. Other aspects have been taken into consideration. They believed, and they still believe, that those blacks who have preserved "primitive aspects" of black culture and who have not been assimilated into the western culture are "the niggers". The niggers have harsh economic conditions and they do not know how to "behave". This attitude existed even among notable black writers during the Harlem Renaissance. Etedali Rezapoorian and Sanchez (2024) hold that one reason Zora Neale Hurston was criticized by figures such as Langston Hughes, Alain Locke and Richard Wright was because she used a black dialect in her works that reminisce primitivism and the Old Negro: "Wright, Hughes, and Locke argued that her use of Black vernacular in her writing revived the minstrel tradition, which they believed made Black culture a target of ridicule" (p.105). Geraldine is one of these characters who believes in the distinction. She associates all sensual pleasure to the "nigger". She abhors indulging in love and she does her best to remain clean: "she stiffens when she feels one of her paper curlers coming undone from the activity of love…she hopes he will not sweat –the damp may get into her hair (Morrison, 1994, p.69).

Geraldine's preoccupation is her hair. Her hair, along with her light skin, is the aspect she has control on, and she can adapt to white notions of beauty. Kuenz (1993) illustrates that she hates Afro hair and Afro features. She has much in common with China in terms of how to appear. They have both the ability to change their appearances with whatever there is at their disposal; China is able to have "surprised eyebrows' and "cupid-bow mouth" of a star and also "oriental eyebrows" and "evilly slashed mouth" (Morrison, 1994, p.49) of a charming sorceress. Pecola does not have such qualities. She cannot alter her appearance to adapt to western standards and thus cannot change what her family deems as very ugly appearance. She is continuously reminded by her mother, friends and teachers that she is irreversibly "ugly". "Pecola is in fact all sign: to see her body is to know already everything about her or at least everything her culture deems important about her" (Kuenz, 1993, p.427). For Pecola sensual pleasure is a form of metempsychosis, of reincarnation into Mary Jane's body: "To eat the candy is somehow to eat the eyes, to eat Mary Jane. Love Mary Jane. Be Mary Jane" (Morrison, 1994, p.43). Unlike Claudia who cannot, according to Susan Willis (1987), "Imagine herself miraculously translated into the body of Shirley Temple so as to vicariously live white experience as a negation of blackness" (174), Pecola, through self-denial and reincarnation, is able to 'transcend' into a white beauty and in the process, experiences "nine lovely orgasm with Mary Jane" (Morrison, 1994, p.43). Like her mother, Pecola can experience sensual pleasure through an alienated body.

Pecola's failure to develop a positive image of herself is in keeping with Amir Barati's analysis of Žižek's notion of the subject emerging through failure. Both Pecola and Briony in Atonement attempt to construct their subjectivity through external validation, yet their efforts lead to fragmentation rather than fulfillment. As Barati (2015) argues, characters in McEwan's Atonement undergo a Žižekian process where subjectivity emerges only through the failure to actualize oneself (Barati, 123). Similarly, Pecola's desperate longing for blue eyes reflects an impossible desire to construct identity through an external gaze, a process that ultimately leads to her psychological collapse.

Even these moments of false satisfaction are very short and haphazard; she fails to, as her mother does, imagine power and glory through transforming the cause of her misfortune. She goes into deep despair and has no option but to ask God to "make me disappear" (Morrison, 1994, p.39). She tries to make all her parts of the body disappear one by one. Although some parts are difficult, she manages to make them disappear; the eyes, however, remain there. Her failure to make her eyes disappears leads her to Soaphead, a man who is believed to have magical powers. Soaphead lures her into believing that she has blue eyes. Only Pecola and her "new friend" can see the blue eyes. Kuenz (1993) explains that this breakdown is the last and the most radical scenes in which we see that the boundaries between self and other, reason and imagination are shattered. Like the Dick and Jane primer, which starts with order and ends in anarchy, with the erasure of punctuation and space, so does the disappearance of Pecola's body and desires end in her derangement and isolation.

The reader can understand Morrison's idea of "disinterested violence" at this point (Kuenz, 1993, p.428). Morriosn first mentions the idea when Claudia decides to take the dolls apart and later when she enlarges on the prostitutes and Cholly. When Claudia destroys her dolls in order to "discover the dearness, to find the beauty, the desirability that had escaped her (Morrison, 1994, p.20), she fails to understand and then she transfers the same feelings to little white girls, she figures out how "repulsive this disinterested violence was, that it was repulsive because it was disinterested"(Morrison, 1994, p.22). Michael Awkward (1989) suggests that Claudia's feeling stems from her "failure to accept without question the standards of white America" (p.72). This reading, although it is applicable throughout the novel, does not seem accurate in this passage. She feels guilty, in my opinion,

because she does not have any sympathy for her white victims. She has no scruples in taking the white dolls, and by extension real white girls, apart. Willis (1987) suggests that Claudia feels her action is disinterested because she realizes, "Violence against the whites runs the risk of being "disinterested"… suggests that white people are little more than abstractions…[that] are all reified subjects (174). Cluadia finds out that her violence cannot be anything but disinterested, because the little white girls she desires to take apart are only the manifestations of the system she abhors and wishes to annihilate. Disinterestedness is then the result of not having any sympathy for individuals and what they do in ways that influence you. The disinterestedness occurs when individuals' concerns, bodies and histories are ignored in order to serve the greater system.

According to Kuenz' (1993) analysis, although endorsed in the novel, China, Poland, and the Maginot Line are condemned for being "disinterested", for overlooking difference: "Except for Marie's fabled love for Dewey Prince, these women hated men, all men, without shame, apology or discrimination. They abused their visitors with a scorn grown mechanical from use. Black men, white men, Puerto Ricans, Mexicans, Jews, Poles, whatever- all were inadequate and weak, all came under their jaundiced eyes and were the recipients of their disinterested wrath (Morrison, 1994, p.56). They do not consider differences in race, gender, and class. Even their love for Pecola is disinterested, because they cannot see her, and her harsh circumstances clearly and as Michele Wallace (1990) states, they "fail to understand victimization or the fact that [she] is in danger" (p.65).

Morrison incriminates Claudia in order to suggest, on a much larger level, that this is the community that is the disinterestedly violent. The community has, as a group, "absorbed in full" Western notions of beauty and hierarchy without considering their influence on individuals like Pecola. Mrs. Mcteers, in her dialogue with some neighbors, pokes fun about "Aunt Julia…still trotting up and down Sixteenth Street talking to herself" (Morrison, 1994, p.15). The reader does not understand the full significance of this remark until they read about Pecola's derangement at the end of the novel who like Aunt Julia is "walking up and down, her head jerking to the beat of a drummer so distant only she could hear" (Morrison, 1994, p.158). The phrase "still trotting" suggests that she had the condition for a period of time. This implies that the town neglects to interpret Aunt Julia's and Pecola's action in the context they are, to scapegoat all their miseries on "the niggers". Kuenz (1993) argues that one of the motifs of the novel is scapegoating. Everyone tries to pin the blame on an other. Pecola is the scapegoat who is targeted not only by her parents who see her as a source of misfortune (For example Pauline blames Pecola for making the little white girl of the Fisher's family cry.) but also she is targeted by the teachers, Maureen Peale, Geraldine, and the entire community (Geraldine blames Pecola for killing her cat, not her son). Not only is Pecola targeted as a scapegoat but any nigger in the story is the source of misfortune to others. For example, Mrs. Mcteers vents her frustration on her daughters. Cholly blames Darlene for losing his pride instead of the white men who forced them to make love while they were present.

As Kuenz illustrates, a major intention of *The Bluest Eye*, is to write the story of those individuals whose story and history would be invisible otherwise. The novel's willingness to accept different points of view, tries to hold disinterestedness at bay. When the reader first reads about Pauline and Cholly's attitude about Pecola, he grows resentment and sometimes hatred against them, but when he reads their stories, they begin to understand, if not wholly exonerate, them and their actions. In other words, Morrison tries to mitigate the reader's disinterested attitude about the individuals in the novel. Like other black female authors, who "through their intimacy with the discourses of other(s)…weave into their work competing and complementing discourses- that seek to adjudicate competing claims and witness concerns (Henderson, 2000, p.23), she tries to let different people express themselves. Sometimes in the novel Morrison as a black individual among other black people addresses a white audience, and sometimes she, as a black woman among other black women, addresses women in general. This shift gives her the opportunity to "see the other, but also to see what the other cannot see, and to use this insight to enrich both our own and the other's understanding" (Henderson, 2000, p. 36). She allows the reader to understand black women's subjectivity in a way that the mass culture representation of ethnicities is seen, by the reader, as a distortion of the real image.

4. Conclusion

In *The Bluest Eye*, Toni Morrison began a process that is now a signature of her work: historizing the black experience. Through the pain of slavery, of living in the Jim Crow era, of lynching, of holding blacks to a higher standard than black and above all, of internalizing whiteness and white beauty, Morrison is urging her black female community to create constellations of black support that pivot around love of blackness and love of oneself. Through Pauline, Pecola, Claudia and other female characters in the novel, she is illustrating how black women are coopted by an ideology that asks them to scapegoat one another, to internalize whiteness and white beauty and to drift apart from one another. *The Bluest Eye* is a historical account of the black experience that underpins the significance of memory and of recalling. Because it is through recalling that the Pecolas and Claudias of the world can empower themselves.

While this study sheds light on how standards of beauty have shaped the black community, it does not discuss how these standards have affected other people of color such as Asian Americans, Latinos/as, Mexican Americans, LGBTQ communities, etc. Similarly, it does not examine these standards have either persisted in the same way or in a different way in contemporary fabric

of US society. Further study is needed to see if Western standards of beauty have been reshaped or continue to affect marginalized people in the same way.

Moreover, future research could analyze how contemporary authors of color critique beauty standards and how they urge women of color to create further constellations of support. While Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* highlights the devastating consequences of internalized white beauty standards, contemporary authors continue to engage with similar themes in evolving cultural and political contexts. Scholars might explore how writers such as Brit Bennett (*The Vanishing Half*), Jesmyn Ward (*Sing, Unburied, Sing*), or Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie (*Americanah*) interrogate Eurocentric beauty ideals and their intersections with race, class, and gender. These works often depict women of color dealing with systemic oppression while seeking communal affirmation outside of mainstream definitions of beauty.

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