BLUE EYES OR BLACK GIRL MAGIC: AN ANALYSIS OF TONI MORRISON'S APPROACH TO WHITENESS IN *THE BLUEST EYE*

by

Shantese R. Wilkinson
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Abstract

My primary goal in this thesis is to question poverty and ignorance as symptoms of the disease of racial, systemic injustice through the writing of Toni Morrison in *The Bluest Eye*. Using the lens of the above novel, I will interrogate the ways that people of color respond to the image and sustainability of whiteness in the United States of America. The methodology I have chosen for my thesis is a close reading. During the literature review, I will include citations to other works by Morrison as well as criticism towards the totality of her work. Additionally, I will investigate standpoint theory as it pertains to criticism of Toni Morrison’s approach to writing *The Bluest Eye*. By using Toni Morrison’s *The Bluest Eye*, I question how she sees raced figures, like the black (African American) father in the early 20th century or the overworked black women and mothers of the same era. Morrison depicts some women in *The Bluest Eye* to be self-taught, but in the lens of whiteness – often internalized – does the product of this experiment benefit or hurt members of the black family? In addition to addressing this question, I will analyze the ways that the black girl characters of *The Bluest Eye* internalize their parental figures’ notions of good and bad behavior in the pre-Civil Rights era. For most of the characters, maintaining so-called good behavior is an impossible feat as factors such as poverty, mis-education, and interactions with family that are already bad deter their plans. I will also question the conclusions made by the narrator – the adult version of the main character – as well as her expressions of internalized racism. While Morrison is not an historian as an author, she does utilize the paths of racialized structures for the sake of exploring and introducing her characters in the *The Bluest Eye*.

*Keywords*: black girl, black woman, bluest eye, Breedlove, heterosexism, internalized, Pecola, standpoint theory, Toni Morrison, white privilege
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After undergraduate school, I landed a great paying job with a prominent company in my area. Yet, I can remember a conversation that my Pop had with a friend of his in which he tells his friend about my success in landing the job and sneaks in at the end, “Yeah, but she’s going back to get her master’s once she is settled.” I had already held reservations about not going back right away but after his passing, I kept the promise he had for himself and finished my degree for the both of us. You see, my grandfather had to work more than educate himself so he made it a point to read as often as possible in his lifetime. I like to think that is why I love education so much. Well Pop, it looks like we did it.

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Introduction

From an early age, my grandfather taught me that the education system in the United States only offered a skewed reality, one that denies the history, power, and existence of people of color. Determined to persevere past this ideology, I found pride in pushing through the ridged barriers set up by society for young, black girls.

Historically speaking, America has provided a path to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness to citizens derived mostly from European countries. This is starting from the reparations fight, post-civil war, to the private prison debate currently striking fear into the hearts of black youth in urban communities (Davary 2017). According to Davary, “in the year 2015 alone, approximately 1200 people in the United States were killed by police officers, of that two thirds of these people were black … For every ten of these individuals, one would suffer from a mental disorder” (Davary 2017 par. 7). As Ronald Regan’s trickle-down effect of prosperity has gained, lost, and gained traction again, black girls have remained at the bottom of the list for help or improvement. In the areas of education, mental and physical health, as well as general opportunities to rise above the fray, black females have consistently fallen through the cracks. Black communities hold just as a complicit part in the stereotyped beliefs when faced with adversity. In fact, they should respond with knowledge, maturity, and an even-temper or face strong consequences.

Toni Morrison writes of the lack of minority voices in so-called American literature. “There is something called American Literature … it is certainly not Chicano literature, or Afro-American literature, or Asian-American, or Native American … It is somehow separate from them and they from it” (Morrison 1989 p. 1). She explains that these inherent biases reach outside of curriculum toward the biases of “the whitemale” (Morrison 1989 p. 1). Annual celebrations like the “Essence Music Festival” and “Black Girls Rock” arose as a path to overcoming the above challenges. Not ironically, these celebrations formed outside of the majority’s (lacking) desire to inquire about the minority: Black
Entertainment Television network and the afro-centric magazine dedicated to issues relating to black women, known as Essence magazine, were instead at the forefront.

My predicted shortcomings fueled my dive into African American literature. With the backing of authors known to me, such as Anthony Browder¹, Ernest J Gaines², and Frederick Douglas³, I offered points of views not posed by my teachers. Though in hindsight, the politics of teaching could have limited their communication. The issue of who gets to say what has also seen improvement due to a change in politics. There was a correlation between the influx of African American culture and the influence that permeated my home life. The lack of honest representation of people of color in my schooling powered a need for me to see the faces of the black (often male) heroes that my grandfather told stories about reflected in academia.

During my childhood, my grandfather would sit and reminisce about the days of smoky, feverish, jazz clubs that he was too young as a boy to frequent. He saw Miles Davis, Charlie Parker, and Thelonious Monk; he marched with Martin Luther King Jr. in Washington. At times, I would sit by myself and make up characters, stories, and process life. I found that those stories and characters spoke truer to me than any adult I had yet come across, aside from my loving grandparents. Conversely, I soaked in the stories printed in my schoolbooks, and my skin, my culture, my life was not present. Where were the black children? Where was the black girl who had lived through and survived traumas like me? Often, I recall my grandparents’ amazement at my success as an honor student in one school, work on this council in another, and participation in that school club leading up to graduation. As I grew older, I searched canonized works, and found that my white friends saw their lives reflected and analyzed in literary works about

³ Douglass.
experiences that were so unique to my black exploits of police harassment and poverty, I never did find a story so exceptionally *me*.

Due to society, culture, and academia, for over a decade, this seemed normal. Society holds rules of etiquette and propriety regarding what is acceptable enough to gain one access. For example, business casual wear and relaxed hair is a standard and expected presentation of one’s self in a work setting. Conversely, form fitting clothing, braids and/or other deemed ethnic presentations of one’s self has historically and legally aroused a debate of what is universal and what is simply a Eurocentric dominance in the working world.

Simultaneously, students receive lessons on the basics of philosophical teachers like Freud, Socrates, and Aristotle without hesitation. Meanwhile, what becomes overlooked are the black feminist theorists like Audre Lorde, Patricia Hill Collins and bell hooks who consistently have taught that a woman problem is a family problem. Today, this very ideology holds acceptance among many because women are increasing their profiles as self-sustaining individuals.

Author and Professor with the University of San Diego – Bahar Davary – comments, “The number of prisons in the country is more than the number of universities. Even more sobering is that--according to the FBI statistics--two innocent black men, women, or children are killed each week by police." This leaves little to the imagination when discussing the psychological effects of the remaining men, women, and children in the neighborhoods most directly affected by the filling of these prisons. Additionally, cops are relegated to communities of color, urban communities, more than they are to white spaces. This makes the pipeline from

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high school to prison is so easily travelled because blacks will encounter them more – they will encounter white faces that historically do not empathize with the black experience, often because they are part of the problem. Thus making the recidivism\(^5\) rate higher because of the constant push back to the same neighborhoods with the same problems that brought on a prison sentence in the first place. Black communities watch as these facts move through the affluent communities without consequence or outrage, Black Lives Matter faces backlash to this day because of their supposed lack of inclusivity toward the white race. Still, they tell us that our so-called lack of enthusiasm and commitment holds our progress by the throat.

In the application process for college, access to sports, advantageous curriculum, and a knack for stem topics is preferred, expected by the colleges and admissions department. These assumptions put children like my cohorts and me at a disadvantage due to the lack of access. To clarify: There are students with the drive to leave areas whose design is to prevent growth. Much like Pecola Breedlove in The Bluest Eye, being shown all of the things one must be but knowing that most or all of those attributes (in this case, for college) that one needs in order to succeed is wholly unattainable. The canonization of Eurocentric-only values causes a wide crack in the ladder that primarily and negatively affects marginalized communities (women, people of color, impaired individuals, for instance).

It did not occur to me to push back on the insistence of my teachers to educate me within the white canon of information. I graduated high school a year ahead of schedule in 2007 and attended college at sixteen years old. Notwithstanding the years I could not attend college due to a lack of affordability, when I walked across the stage to rejoice in my graduation from college

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\(^5\) Recidivism is “The tendency of a convicted criminal to reoffend” ("Recidivism").
in 2013, I knew I had succeeded. Honestly, I was unsure in what I succeeded. Upon reading My Face Is Black Is True: Callie House and the Struggle for Ex-Slave Reparations\(^6\) by Mary Frances Berry\(^7\) as a first-year graduate student, I wanted to leave my classes immediately and tell every young African American with whom I was raised and all the others that there was good news, my grandfather was right. He spoke to all of the children that he raised (there were plenty), about the conspiracy to keep black and brown people under a Eurocentric thumb. The plot twist? They were not conspiracy theories meant to scare little black boys and girls. They were requests, pleas if you will, to be prepared, to protect ourselves from misinformation campaigns, and to protect each other from becoming statistics.

I wanted to explain that many things my community had experienced was a direct product of the institutional systems in place to allow only a certain amount of minorities through the holy gates of financial security, educational awareness, and overall happiness (as defined by the so-called American Dream). No longer was my grandfather a raving (well-respected) extremist. People knew he was on to something but his thoughts typically carried an air of illegitimacy. Not that day – when I read Callie House I realized that we were, and are, struggling together.

Mary Frances Berry writes of a woman by the name of Callie House. House was a first generation freewoman who fought to secure the promised reparations by the government to its newly added citizens – former slaves. Unfortunately, House’s work was an uphill battle as institutions such as the United States Postal Office as well as the federal government sought to deter House’s efforts. The reparations were for the infamous forty acres and a mule. These resources would have provided African American families the

ability to provide for themselves without going into debt by way of requesting a loan of land and tools in order to farm and provide for oneself or family. The practice of loaning out materials to people without means, particularly newly freed slaves, is sharecropping. When the promises collapsed and the land that African Americans tilled themselves as slaves was given back to slave masters, Berry’s work was ever more important. Sadly, after travelling from state to state in order to gain support from the community (which she accomplished), House faced accusations of defrauding the government and propaganda trails of impropriety on House’s part followed her to the grave. Berry’s work on Callie House is a compilation of House’s own writing, historical documents, and Berry’s original research.

As I read Callie House, I realized that we were searching for a future in a world hell-bent on erasing our pasts. African Americans are currently trying to live in peace in the 21st century, post-Barack Obama; yet our governments remind us that their worldview does not include peace for us. According to the fact checkers at APNews.com, today’s Environmental Protection Agency has severely affected its own progress with rule and regulation changes as a means allegedly to make under-the-table deals with lobbyists. As minorities are less likely to afford better protections, outside of the government’s purview (at-home water filters, property owners with scruples and up-to-code buildings, etc.), this environmental racism is dangerous for each of those communities. According to environmental theorist Frederica Perera, “Children, and especially the poor, bear a disproportionate burden of disease and developmental impairment from both environmental pollution and climate change due to the combustion of coal, oil, gasoline, diesel and natural gas.” In other words, when there are dangerous or very little regulations, minorities and marginal communities suffer greatly.

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Blacks respond to the overbearing whiteness by telling themselves that they have to stay focused. Blacks respond to whiteness by accepting the lie: it is the one, the individual, who is dealing with this turmoil. Blacks respond to whiteness by believing that their actions would stop its incessant gaze on their bodies – hair, buttocks, and wrists among others. Black women must dress their follicles to match the mainstream ideals of white America; facing unemployment as the threat to their escalation to equality. Black women are either Jezebels for having curves or obese because the food available in their neighborhoods pushes hormones into them that they should not eat. Black people look like threatening gorilla beasts in those neighborhoods, which justify increased police presence; a pipeline from the sidewalk to sentencing. So says many campaigns rallying African American support for a better future. Like the life of Callie House, they are delegitimized and labeled criminals for their work on progress in America (see “Black Lives Matter”⁹). What blacks sometimes fall short on doing in response to the whiteness is establishing that it is a white problem.

Upon finishing Callie House, I undertook the responsibility of opening a publishing company. My dream dictated that I write unapologetically to the blacks overlooked by their local leaders and ignored by the academy where there is regular discourse on the systemic oppressions although most citizens will never know it exists. As a black, twentiesomething, disabled lesbian the endeavor was costly, in both time and money. My time was limited because of how much I had rather put into comfort despite the pain of my disability. My money? Well, I was a

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⁹ Patrisse Cullors, Opal Tometi, and Alicia Garza founded Black Lives Matter in 2013. The movement resists the endemic racism in our society, highlights the continuing oppression of black people, and affirms the dignity and resilience of black people (Black Lives Matter, 2016). Because of its genesis in response to the murder of Trayvon Martin, as well as police killings of Michael Brown, Philando Castile, and Eric Garner, BLM is often viewed as a resistance movement to police brutality (Cole, 2017, p. 737).
twentysomething, disabled lesbian with little resources – and I did not have much to start. This meant that my ability to work full-time was virtually nonexistent.

I began to write about the feelings of helplessness in a town such as Buffalo, NY so severely rooted in racist attributes\textsuperscript{10}. There was, however, a hesitation. I learned to feel that as a company, we should not talk about racially divisive things. Much like adult Claudia learned to police her own self-awareness in exchange for integration to white society, I felt that I might endanger sales or push people away. I created a system of self-policing without realizing. In those moments, I decided that I needed clarity such that could reach further than my own anger and fear. Then I met Toni Morrison’s work.

Morrison seemed just as concerned with how the black girl lives in racially divisive times while considering the mounting poverty. She also focused on the powerful people who are rejoicing in its overwhelming criminality. Morrison introduced me to many other black women whose work I recognized (albeit at an insufficient level) for their transformative literature. Women such as bell books, Audre Lorde, and Zora Neal-Hurston were not readily available or offered to me as a black child in America – as a budding, black, female writer and academic, their efforts have provided me with better context in which to frame my own work. Zora Neal-Hurston provided me with \textit{Their Eyes Were Watching God}\textsuperscript{11}, a novel that told me a Black woman with no place to go can care for herself and can be unashamed of telling her story. Audre Lorde lived as a black lesbian who delivered speeches and papers to the audience of young,

\textsuperscript{10} Buffalo, NY was a mish mosh of organizations rooted in black communities that were intent on truly integrating resources as opposed to the so-called laws that had already done so (Alfonso 2017 p. 141). With the help of deindustrialization, moves by people in power revealed the concealing of black families from obtaining proper employment, good schools, or livable housing – thus de facto segregation (Alfonso 2017 p. 140).

\textsuperscript{11} \textit{Their Eyes were Watching God} is “a novel about black Americans in Florida that centers on the life of Janie and her three marriages” (“Holdings: Their eyes were watching God”).
black girls instructing them that to use the master’s tools is to live in his house and only know what he should want us to know. Author and theorist, bell hooks (lowercase by their choice), spoke of the importance of youth’s expansion of knowledge, to talk back and teach ourselves. Writer hooks, is also the reason I am a writer; as Edwidge Danticat might say, I learned from her to Create Dangerously. They were there, these black women. They were just not in our formal primary and secondary education.

The Bluest Eye by Toni Morrison raises the topic of what a young, black girl is to do with uncertainty about her life and future within an indifferent society. Even the conclusion presented by Morrison leaves the reader wondering what answers there may be. How are abandonment, insanity, and abuse what we can produce for these black children? Morrison creates a not-so-far-fetched universe where the answer to break from the chains of -isms within as well as without their community is complete mental detachment.

Using The Bluest Eye by Toni Morrison, I will have insight to her perception of the minds of black folks on the other side of white privilege in the early 20th century. I chose the title Bluest Eye or Black Girl Magic because the answers to tough situations within Blue seem to exist between the two. When I read the novel, the above identities (Blue or Black) stood out as the lead competing ideologies in the minds of Pecola Breedlove, Claudia MacTeer and the adult women living within the pages. Some other identities that stood out were the entitled nature of mothers

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Geraldine and Pauline along with the isolating traits of Maureen, Louis Junior, and Cholly. I will explore all of the above.

Black girl magic rescues Pecola for a while from her loneliness by pairing her with Frieda and Claudia MacTeer\textsuperscript{15}. It also gives a sister to Claudia who doubles as a best friend, rescuer and brave heart\textsuperscript{16}. The homemakers of the novel face their insecurities with the blankets of their own blue-eyed obsessions like stability, financial independence, and privilege. Meanwhile, the prostitute characters have black girl magic to keep them going, trusting only in one another to stay afloat\textsuperscript{17}. Finally, it is Pecola who inevitably does find her peace within her blue eyes\textsuperscript{18}. Adult Claudia learned that black girl magic was the only one listening to the mistakes of the parents and gossip-spillers in town when word of Pecola’s pregnancy spread\textsuperscript{19}.

Although they are friends, Claudia does not pity Pecola. Instead, she aims her thoughts of failure and rage at the ignorance of the country that she and Pecola inhabit. In the \textit{The Bluest Eye}, Claudia (as narrator) says:

And fantasy it was, for we were not strong, only aggressive; we were not free, merely licensed; we were not compassionate, we were polite; not good, but well behaved. We courted death in order to call ourselves brave, and hid like thieves from life. We substituted good grammar for intellect; we switched habits to simulate maturity; we rearranged lies and called it truth, seeing in the new pattern of an old idea the Revelation

\textsuperscript{15} Ibid., 15.
\textsuperscript{16} Ibid., 56.
\textsuperscript{17} Ibid., 49.
\textsuperscript{18} Ibid., 159.
\textsuperscript{19} Ibid., 148.
and the Word. She, however, stepped over into madness, a madness that protected her from us simply because it bored us in the end\textsuperscript{20}.

Claudia uses the pronoun, “we,” to illustrate that she and the whole of the town did more than fail Pecola; they succumbed to the oppressive nature of the dominant society. Here, Claudia also comments on the faking out of growth for other, easier actions. Above, she comments that maturity was really switching habits. This is important because Claudia remarks earlier in the story that it was her maturity which allowed her to love white-favored things. Those things include a Shirley Temple doll that Claudia hates as a child for its white features and coveting by adults. I will analyze this further on in my thesis.

\textit{The Bluest Eye} is a historical-fiction novel, loosely based on pieces of Morrison’s past. Do we interpret these stories as the result of selfish deeds by a slew of black women? Do we contend that black female strength kept what little sanity remained for these females? Take for instance, the fact that the girls are the same age that Morrison would have been in 1941. Moreover, the setting of Lorain, Ohio is the location of Morrison’s hometown\textsuperscript{21}. While I will not make it a habit of using Morrison’s own self-analysis on \textit{The Bluest Eye} so as not to taint the perspective, Morrison’s inclusion of these details is a common first novel decision and a way to incorporate real-life inquiries into her writing. Morrison has commented a number of times over the years that, while black boys were getting some coverage through the likes of Ralph Ellison and James Baldwin, she failed to witness black girl stories in her pre-novel lifetime; \textit{The Bluest Eye} was her way of highlighting such a story.

\textsuperscript{20} Ibid., 159.
I will use Morrison’s novel and foreknowledge of her from other books, along with current scholarship, to analyze the overarching worldviews of poor, black Americans, as they are desperate to keep from losing themselves to poverty\textsuperscript{22}, racial injustice, and ignorance. In many of the passages, I have also observed the functionality of minor characters; they aid in my journey to understand the ways that Morrison views society’s rules, which have created ignorant minefields for poor people of color to determine their lives’ paths. I will focus this subtopic on Cholly’s broken mind after the forced rape of his friend and first sex partner, Darlene\textsuperscript{23}. Additionally, Geraldine and her belief in the proper Negro versus the unsophisticated “nigger” is a subject that I will cover. I will use The Bluest Eye to give my reader the chance to see the product of a time in American history when the struggle to live better than chattel was at its toughest.

\textsuperscript{22} Morrison.
\textsuperscript{23} Ibid., 127.
Chapter 1: Literature reviews

Standpoint theory

Standpoint theory is a critical tool utilized in Toni Morrison’s *The Bluest Eye*. It is the living belief that standpoints of the marginalized requires more than debate; marginalized people need their images seen, voices heard on a platform. According to Avieson McDonald, there is a moral requirement to understanding and utilizing standpoint theory. While his subjects pertained to journalists, the same ethical compass is applicable to theorists in such sociological fields that help to determine what, if any, resources can and should include allotments for marginalized communities. In other words, studying the underprivileged “is an ethical approach to uncover the lived realities of the disadvantaged.”

By erasing our stories, our needs see erasure as well. Take for instance, a government agency wants to investigate what kinds of foods should be in a certain town, as opposed to the foods that are already present. If that agency writes a report only depicting the areas with predominantly white people and ignores the black populations, only the white population may see an improvement in the kinds of foods with regulations placed. Meanwhile, the black populations receive whatever remains because the report ignores the plight of the black population. Their concerns are undocumented, and their health is not a factor. Now take this example and highlight it over the course of multiple platforms: healthcare, infrastructure, income, etc. The result is a negligence by the institutions of the country.

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25 Ibid.
Standpoint, however, lacks a universal understanding of the principals involved in determining eligible standpoint theorist. This uncertainty cumulates in a fundamental rejection of standpoint theory in the field of theory. The wide acceptance that standpoint theory currently has no merit results in many feminist theorists believing that standpoint peaked in the 1980s and that it still “…had an uneasy reception among feminist theorists” during that time and surrounding its current revival. This opinion opposes the very existence of many rising feminists who experienced an advantageous reading into the opportunity and potential of utilizing standpoint theory. In “Why Standpoint Matters,” Alison Wylie highlights both sides of this debate and offers her own conclusions in the role of guide for the two sides of the aisle.

According to Wylie, there are requirements to standpoint – rules within the theory that ought to be adhered to in order to claim explanatory power. Epistemologically speaking, theorists (while they do not agree on all things) can agree that epistemic knowledge must be qualified – so, too, does the theorist making the knowledge claims. Rejection of the aforementioned requirements is common by theorists elevating other theories as more qualified than standpoint; thereby justifying said rejection. Wylie uses this premise of thought to interrogate the arguments from standpoint theorists. She also does a thorough job of examining the theory of standpoint, walking her research backwards to see where and how it has been accepted and rejected in the realm of theory as a road map to standpoint theory’s qualification.

Wylie explains the ways that the canonized theories have filled their own studies with accepted criteria; this criterion has a higher threshold and often requires a privileged background.

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27 Ibid., 341, 44.
28 Ibid., 341.
of the theorist for any such overcoming to occur. This makes it harder for standpoint to plant itself in the garden of theoretical study because standpoint theory is rooted in qualifying insider-outsiders of a frequently underprivileged, multi-ethnic, low socioeconomic status as standpoint theorists. An insider-outsider is someone who can “approach inquiry from the perspective of an insider” whilst maintaining theory as the driving factor in conclusive knowledge claims; as opposed to the misread interpretations of standpoint critics, which supposes that “those who occupy particular standpoints … automatically know more, or know better, by virtue of their social, political location.”29 By taking this stand regarding standpoint theory and its theorist, critics are disqualifying standpoint due to its fictional claims in existentialism. I take this to mean that the dominant culture’s ability to make and change the rules as they feel is either rational only for their theories or rationalized in order to keep their standing as knowledge producers; this also keeps out people with drastically lesser privilege, on purpose.

When discussing black authors such as Toni Morrison, it is of the utmost importance to take into consideration standpoint theory. While her education has informed on her the ways that black America is negatively affected by the sociopolitical sphere, that is not the only knowledge-producing element within her background. If that were true, Morrison’s work would have developed and existed closer along the lines of the theorists she studied in college30, Virginia Woolf and William Faulkner.

Morrison has lamented that she was ill-read and ill-taught within the sphere of black authorship and agency31. Without having the knowledge of standpoint theory, many people have

29 Ibid., 340.
praised Morrison’s work, and not so many have written whole dissertations on the origins of such powerful writing. It is within this population that has taken decades to evolve and embrace standpoint theory to digest fully the writing put forth by Morrison. She is a knowledge-producer and that epistemic knowledge coupled with her professional knowledge brought us *The Bluest Eye* using standpoint theory\(^3\).

It would be impossible to separate the woman who attended Howard and Cornell Universities with the girl that grew to a woman in Lorain, Ohio. However, without the knowledge of standpoint theory, it proves difficult to ask and understand *Why this girl, why this story*. As analysts underscore the importance of Morrison’s experiences, they can also apply the understanding that this is not a singularly unique event in history. Morrison was able to utilize standpoint theory for novels and books about literature for over forty years.

Wylie objects to the notion that standpoint theory is in trouble of losing its epistemic claims. She states,

> The systematic and, in this sense, the perverse nature of the misreadings to which Hartstock responds reflect exactly the thesis her critics deny; their social location … seems to impose the limitations of categories derived from a dominant individualist ideology. Hartsock, Collins, Harding, Smith all object to a recurrent tendency to reduce the notion of standpoint to the social location of individuals, a move that is inevitable, I suggest, if it is incomprehensible (to critics) that social structures, institutions, or systemically

\(^3\) Morrison utilizes Claudia as a knowledge-producer for the sake of the novel. Claudia is the adult narrator toward the chilling story of three girls in 1941 Lorain, Ohio. They live among raced structures and a belief that the white race is not just dominant, they are the universal goal for any inhabitant.
structured roles and relations could be robust enough to shape what epistemic agents can know.\(^{33}\)

I find this viewpoint a bit naïve as the people in power have disqualified standpoint for the sake of keeping the knowledge production pool elitist. Wylie is lacking in her observation. As she writes of the disproportionate advantages among minority communities, she stops short of explaining that race exists as a factor in how feminists of the second wave determined standpoint’s usefulness. On the other hand, Wylie’s decision to keep race as a factor out of her analysis could be a purposeful decision. There is nothing to cite that would prove or disprove the analysis that race is a definitive factor. This sad fact opens her critique to unanswered questions. Most of those questions center on whether she has found that theorists are experiencing bias. While her answer could be an apparent yes to any number of readers, I find the lack of an affirmative on race at all to be troubling. Does Wylie find theorists to be experiencing bias? Is the prestige of current and previous theorists more important to Wylie than the acknowledgement of covert and overt racism among academics arguing against the benefits of feminist standpoint theory? Wylie clearly witnesses the class and racial disparities experienced in the communities she is observing, however, she seems compelled to find reasons outside of racial prejudice to place the blame.

While I find it reassuring that Wylie is not so readily using the race card – I find it harder to digest her seeming unwillingness to juxtapose it with some of the more aggressive stances that theorists have utilized in order to block standpoint theory’s prominence in the field. Above the heavier weight of race lies hypocrisy. To an extent, Wylie is forcing her observations to blunder key points in order to avoid the subject of race and its place among class discussions regarding
standpoint. Should Wylie have been less forthcoming, it would be easy for me to see the incompleteness in her work. As that is not true, it seems more logical that the author knowingly overlooked race/minority ability as a factor in rejecting standpoint – and theorists like Hartstock, et al.

According to Hekman in Wylie’s piece, standpoint theory was a fad. Not only was standpoint a fad in Hekman’s view, it was an unsophisticated fad that could not hold itself in high esteem for more than a decade. This assessment is problematic for many reasons. First, while Hekman was unbothered by it and assessed that many others were as well, she tried to acknowledge that she possibly read this class of theory too quickly. She later admits that it was “ripe for resuscitation by the late 1990s...” which speaks volumes to what she saw proceeding.

Second, the 1990s saw third wave feminism but it also saw the response by black feminists to second wave feminism. The book, Black Feminist Thought, by Patricia Hill Collins (a theorist in black feminism and staunch supporter of standpoint theory), released in 1990. Thought delivers a stinging rebuke of mainstream feminism; it claims that mainstream feminism was, in practice, solely a title for white feminists catering to white communities. The voices that spoke progress to power on their struggles and their beliefs regarding feminism were voices of marginalized people, often from the less dominant race and class. They are the voices that argued standpoint theory to mainstream theorists like Hekman.

34 Wylie, 341.
35 Ibid.
Collins explains that she explicitly neglected to frame the voices and experiences of black women within the existing framework of mainstream feminist theory (save for a few feminist theories, like socialist feminism37)38. She tells the reader that this is due in part to white feminists’ lack of inclusion for black, female voices. As a result, relevant scholarship would be less informative than her work with its reliance on the black women’s experiences, spoken by them and for them. This is important, because black, females have the opportunity to amplify black, female voices rarely. Hence, Morrison’s backlash to the usage of such strong characters within *The Bluest Eye*. According to the Public Broadcasting Service,

Since its publication, the book has consistently landed on the American Library Association’s list of most challenged books. Reasons cited have included, “sexually explicit material,” “lots of graphic descriptions and lots of disturbing language,” and “an underlying socialist-communist agenda.” One complaint simply called it a “bad book.”

PBS 2017

This sort of decision does not just prevent students from interacting with complex characters, it also silences the experiences of black culture and the students who might relate or learn from such racialized institutions.

Finally, Hekman “rejects out of hand’ Hartsock’s references to standpoints that put Blacks in a position to grasp underlying realities obscured by ideological distortion,” even though objectivity is a definition by most theorists open to interpretation and change39. For

37 Socialist Feminism, “in the USA, like older socialist feminisms, anticipated much of today's ‘intersectionality’ by recognizing multiple forms of domination and refusing to rank them in importance” (Gordon 2016 p. 340). According to Linda Gordon, socialist feminism’s core premise of two centuries of socialist feminism [is] that multiple forms of domination interact and fuse” (Gordon 2016 p. 340).
38 Collins, vii.
39 Wylie, 343.
instance, empirical adequacy may not necessarily be at a maximum if empirical depth or empirical breadth are driving factors in forming a theory. What this says is that while objection is the key to the door of accepted forms of theory, objection is arguable by theorists that are already inside. Thus, according to feminist theorists like Hekman, standpoint can only sustain itself if objectivity is the goal, but objectivity is debated and changed depending on who is theorizing. If this is the case, standpoint has bought the deed to a bridge in “Never, Never Land.”

Standpoint theory has both apathetic enemies and friends. This apathy is problematic because standpoint theory’s friends are so few and largely consist of minority women. Hekman brutalizes the theory but does so in a way that discards the potential knowledge-producers and then decides that standpoint theory cannot be a reliable theory because it is only a fad. The issue with that is of course the closing off of millions of women because some may not contribute properly; as though that is not a situation that could happen in many a class of theory.

While the topic of race is not in Wylie’s paper in an in-depth way, the majority of the no votes are women from the majority race and class. While standpoint is an adequate theory when properly applied, questions about its legitimacy still linger; Hartsock reminds us, “standpoint theories must be recognized as essentially contested”40. This means that indifferent theorists may still see standpoint as a damning way to open the floodgates on who can deliver epistemic knowledge and worse, decrease the quality of knowledge production. The issue becomes a loop of existential questions obsessed with: (1) who can and cannot flood the realm of theory, (2) who decides such things, (3) when does the world of feminist theories decide that it is flooded, (4) how do we judge legitimate and accurate versions of standpoint theories? While Wylie does a

40 Ibid., 341.
tremendous job of bringing all points into her piece – analyzing what most of these theorists agree on, and where they stray – her analysis remains incomplete.

The above thoughts on legitimizing standpoint are true, however, the above issues are (1) with the multitude of theorists who have hypothesized standpoint incorrectly, (2) how to determine who to consider standpoint theorists, and (3) the erroneous information that theorists use to form conclusions regarding the demise of theory at the introduction of standpoint. The error is in the bad judgment that marginalized people could not be knowledge-producers based on “social structures, institutions, or systemically structured roles and relations”41. That error precipitates the ideology rooted in the previously stated prejudicial misperceptions regarding epistemic ability and its owners.

One does not simply come from the social location belonging to the subjects in question and immediately qualify as a standpoint theorist. That person could easily be a helpful, informative subject, nothing more. A starting principle requires that the standpoint theorist be from the social location, but a full assessment of standpoint cannot exist solely with that information. Some of the write-offs concerning standpoint and its theorists contain ideology that cannot conceive of the notion that epistemic agents could develop an awareness of their (and their peers’) socioeconomic and regional placements in society. In addition, they find it hard to believe that subjects could produce objective results. This includes the debates amongst one another as to what objectivity truly is and how to change its definition as it suits one’s situation. This debate regarding the legitimacy of standpoint theory exists in the shadow of results in a shroud of socioeconomic prejudice on the part of the opposing feminist theorists mentioned by

41 Ibid.
Wylie. Wylie and I agree that the above assessment is closer to the truth more than the theorists’ defense, which is: Standpoint theorists lack a readiness to contribute adequately in theoretical study.

There is a correlation between privilege and permission. Without American privilege, it is difficult to get the permission because there is a lack of access among the underprivileged. When one lacks access, knowing and thinking independently are difficult commodities to obtain. How does one know to ask for something if they do not have access to knowledge that it exists? Toni Morrison had to win a Pulitzer Prize to find the ear of enough theorists in gaining validity. Morrison is a unique subject because she wrote unapologetically for blacks about blacks. She started her career on the inside yet never took advantage of the access gained by writing toward white audiences. In fact, she has explained that to differ in opinion of her work is less important to her than to properly explain such a difference in views⁴². This criticism by Morrison, for me, explains why she has such a fervor for standpoint theory: she takes the fight for legitimacy away when she requires that those who write about her as an epistemic also write about the work as a knowledge production. She forces those privileged people to complain accurately, legitimizing the work itself. What a trick.

In *Unspeakable Things Unspoken*, Toni Morrison comments on the “ways of addressing the Afro-American presence in American literature that require neither slaughter nor reification – views that may spring the whole literature of an entire nation from the solitude to which has been locked”⁴³. Morrison appears to understand the revolution that comes with including the rest of

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⁴² Sgueglia 1998, 17:54:01
the nation in the dialogue of what is American. She discusses not just the importance of African American literature; she includes Asian-American, Native American, and Chicano-American literature as well44. This is an effort to explain and celebrate the Renaissance of literature that began to engulf the literary sphere in the 1980s and 1990s (not coincidentally, Patricia Hill Collins’s theorized *Black Feminist Thought* will hit bookshelves in the year following Morrison’s piece). Many of these peoples of color have stories that the white, male canon delegitimizes. Morrison’s other works reflect this delegitimized status. In particular, she discusses with Gloria Naylor in, *A Conversation*, just four years earlier this same concept regarding the overthrowing of the only valued epistemologists. She writes, “You see, if all women behaved like those two [Sula and Nel], or if the Sula point of view operated and women really did not care about sharing these things, everything would just crumble – hard. *If it is not about fidelity and possession and my pain versus yours, then how can you manipulate, how can you threaten, how can you assert power?*”45 Although Morrison and Naylor are discussing the case toward all men and the power they assert over women, her ideology still lingers throughout the statement: if marginalized people retrieved their power this (white) man’s world would “crumble – hard.”46

*Mentioning a world ignorant*

Morrison and I agree that standpoint theory should be an acceptable epistemology. She falls short of using the term. Morrison lays bare the problems with objectivity by analyzing the ways that various theorists have disagreed with one another on what is objective and others have

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44 Ibid.
45 Morrison, 578.
46 Ibid.
expressly made up their own definitions to suit their needs for an acceptable outcome. Although Morrison is worldly, her life’s work is a testament to the false nature of epistemic right claims. Morrison’s most critically acclaimed work is arguably Beloved with The Bluest Eye at a close second place. Both of these works are creations out of the mind of the girl Morrison used to be. This is true regarding many minute details, down to the town’s setting. Morrison, Ralph Ellison and James Baldwin wrote their struggling, conflicted by race, characters authentically. In truth, these authors have the ability to “throw away assumptions that most practitioners do not even recognize they hold.”47 Justification for the counterargument revolves around the white male definitions of values and the ability to access large parts of our society and reify those values. Morrison, however, is convinced that the type of politic in literature during the civil-rights movement will never again face the same trials of white male centralism48. Her writing reflects that of someone who is determined to educate the reader on the problematic dogma in existence in 1965 literary engagement as a way to assist in its demise49.

Before Morrison dives into the topics of whiteness and race50, she takes on the usage of the word “quality.” It is her claim that “quality” is coded language, used by a white men equated to the idea that only white men can be knowledge producers51. Only white men can bring valuable analysis to the literary sphere. Even with the racist language, this ideology is the same or similar to the critics of standpoint theory. She challenges the reader to see how the Western

47 Wylie, 578.
49 Ibid., 1, 2.
50 Ibid., 2.
51 Ibid.
culture could produce its literature with a variety of identities, philosophies, and the learned ways of living within the scope of American life in order to become masterly.\footnote{Ibid., 3.}

Morrison appreciates Greek mythology for this very reason – she writes about it, admires it for including (stealing) images of art and ideas from the African diaspora.\footnote{Ibid., 2-3.} She is able to go to Greece, to see all the inclusivity that exists there. She is, however, from both the marginalized culture and part of only a fraction of people who see art and knowledge production in this way. This leaves me concerned for how Morrison can come to these conclusions about raced literature politic and the white men that are responsible while breaking through to the minds of her white, male, beneficiary-type readers.\footnote{Ibid., 3.} Of course, one can see the Greecian work as impressive, while understanding its history of appropriation.\footnote{Ibid., 7-8.} Morrison has made it clear that she does not write to give a message, but she is writing a message. What I mean to say is I have met many people who have read the same books as I have (typically on the subject of standpoint theory, marginalization, and inclusivity) yet they still justify the wrongdoings of the white men in books and in real life.

Theorists who see the potential that standpoint theory can provide to an entire subset of the population yet subvert those results with politics tend to find themselves on the wrong side of history. While dominance by mainstream, feminist theorists impacts the minds of non-canonical artists, their hypotheses regarding said artists have been proven wrong. Black authors, minority authors can write about their own struggles and the work can legitimately find success in a theoretical framework, much like Morrison. Morrison’s work is tantamount to a movement; she

\footnotesize{\begin{itemize}
  \item \footnote{Ibid., 3.}
  \item \footnote{Ibid., 2-3.}
  \item \footnote{Ibid., 3.}
  \item \footnote{Ibid., 7.}
  \item \footnote{Ibid., 7-8.}
\end{itemize}}
uplifts the voices of communities deemed worthless. She chooses to engage not her critic counterparts or other theorists in the field; she freely speaks to and for the black community. Outside of her authorship, she exposes the painful truths and narrative of her own experiences in order to explain that these are not just words on paper. Wylie taps into a level of prejudice from which it professes freedom – with just the truth as a goal – however, Morrison and her peers have experienced something different. Outside of racism, their experiences speak to a large population silenced because they are too insignificant, too uninformed for epistemology, and too incapable to learn. Morrison does her best to steer the conversation away from what and how white people think and back to what we understand as a black people: black culture. This is evident in the following paper. The leading authors find camaraderie – “Mutual trust and friendship among people who spend a lot of time together” – and voices for some of their untold truths.

A Black Woman’s Perspective

I originally decided on this piece because of Toni Morrison’s name in the credits. That, alone, bought the paper a front row seat in my attaché case. However, upon further examination of the content, it seemed like it would be too abstract for me; it later received a demotion. I decided that after an oversized allotment of technical jargon from my previous choice of reading that I would choose “A Conversation.”

“A Conversation,” featuring a preface by Gloria Naylor and an epilogue by Toni Morrison, is a discussion about the artistic process, doubt, fear, standard, and black female loyalty to name a few topics. These two women seemingly flow into one another as the topics

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stretch across the world – with themes eclipsing the importance of specific moments in the
dialogue. For example, the ability to be a black woman, alone, in a foreign country and all that it
says about the state of racial and gender affairs versus Gloria Naylor having gone to Paris like
James Baldwin and Ralph Ellison\textsuperscript{58}. In another example, Morrison and Naylor discuss their
feelings on marriage spanning the 1950s to their present and the overarching theme of
subordination and codependence is ever-present. Lines like “I remember the transformation I
went through almost immediately after I was married. Unconsciously, I felt as if I needed to ask
permission to do something, and I started to get scared when I really listened to myself”\textsuperscript{59}. These
moments iterate a theme of what it means to be a black woman in 1985.

Naylor opens her conversation with Morrison on the topic of travel; she planned to travel
like other great African American novelists before her. What she found was that travelling like a
novelist, being a single, black, female novelist is not the same as travelling like one of the male
persuasion. Morrison was quick to agree (noting, “It is such an incredible thing to know that in a
very strong way, geographically, it is their world because they alone can walk up and down
certain places.”) and thus began their talk\textsuperscript{60}. The bulk of the beginning pages center on the self,
the question of me and where do I find me in the pages of the books that I read. It is not until the
last few pages of the chapter that Morrison admits she was unfamiliar with other Black female
authors in her beginning years. Naylor is quick to defend her soul sister and corrects with “ill-
taught” as opposed to Morrison’s description of being “ill-read”\textsuperscript{61}. Morrison repeats after Naylor,
“Ill-taught”\textsuperscript{62}. It is a moment worth reading because of the sheer power that is between two

\textsuperscript{58} Morrison, 570.
\textsuperscript{59} Ibid., 578.
\textsuperscript{60} Ibid., 570.
\textsuperscript{61} Ibid., 589.
\textsuperscript{62} Ibid.
authors who sound/look like me, having a frank discussion on their troubles of being in this field. Meanwhile, they show great care for one another’s perceptions of themselves in an industry that largely ignores our voices. Morrison initially states that not having been acquainted with black female authors beforehand legitimizes the claim to the black and female knowability. The fact that all of these writers have shared experiences yet do not know each other is not surprising. As I was reading, I noticed on more than one occasion a similar feeling and a profound understanding of the fear they remember: The fear that they will not do their characters justice. The fear that their portrayal will signal a judgement against other black community members, particular men. The fear that their mulling over the face of black men is problematic. This is just one section. However, I can see, think, and hear all of it as if I were somehow part of that conversation.

This piece seems written for black girls wondering how two women can interact without competition or envy. The writing is for me. Morrison and Naylor go into the characters that they wrote to discuss further fears, process, and how the story calls to them. Naylor juxtaposes her experiences as a woman approaching her thirties – without a clear path forward and with a fear of engaging in the world of writing in permanent ink – with being a divorced woman who now calls herself a writer. She explains the ease of conforming but, with agreement from Morrison, has used her own main characters to see that conforming is not living in refute of the homemaker life or the CEO life but living in refute of life as someone else. This is important because it truly ties the conversation together. These two Black women came together and explained to whomever is reading that being a black female author is about owning the self-doubt that many

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63 Ibid.
64 Ibid., 573-75.
65 Ibid., 575.
black females feel. The two women relinquish control only to their characters as a way for those characters to breathe when they need it, experience as they have it, and rest peacefully if they find it.

There is an authenticity to this piece, one in which I cannot match. It poses the challenge of fully analyzing it. I hope to capture the raw honesty about being a black woman that these two women discuss at length. Every topic discussed is rooted in the complex nature of being a black woman in the company of a handful of others. What I recognized is the gleeful attitude towards the future of black women writers. Morrison brings them up in topic many times. They are brought up (1), to state the fact there will be more, (2) as a hope that there will be more around to poke the bear of swallowed children who the world has no care, and (3) to see the women join in the puzzle of black female authorship, adding their experiences and being allowed to legitimize themselves.

There is very little critique from me, I experienced mostly amazement for these two women and the ways that their bonding inspires the reader to write (if they are a writer), weld (if they are a welder), or clean house (if they are a housekeeper). The authors discuss the class conflict that feminism does not appreciate. The idea that self-sufficient, independence is not always the elected goal; that should not discount, however, her ability or right to choose her responsibilities and freedom. If a woman should decide to be, say a homemaker, that is okay – as long as it is what she elects to do.

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66 Ibid., 580-81.
67 Ibid., 577.
68 Ibid., 573.
They also discuss the vulnerability that men do not share – either not ever or not often enough. With Morrison commenting, “I have heard them when they talk among themselves, and they do not talk about the vulnerable ‘me.’”\textsuperscript{69} They go on to affirm while boys ask, \textit{Who am I?} They get answers that conform to manhood. Black girls receive answers that conform to familyhood. This lack of knowledge of the female self seems to be the break in the chain link. The piece is black female author to black female author, agreeing on the identity crisis stemming from a disinterested public and a demanding personal life. This is the black female view. How to be a woman, how to conform between discussing the black female and giving justice to the black male. Morrison says that is why she wrote about Pecola, Claudia, and Frieda. Because “look at what happens when society makes a little girl invisible”\textsuperscript{70}. She felt like that girl, dead to the world. She is learning how to revive her, one piece at a time.

My question, if I were to ever find myself in a room with them now, would be ‘\textit{How do we explain the millennial age? How is it possible that we are still facing these identity issues? Did not Hurston already fix this for us? Have we not already tackled this? Are we as far as we claim to be?’ I understand the last one is a definite ‘\textit{No,}’ as the world turns to another tragedy, another hate crime, and another untaught class of students coming out of high school and maybe college without knowing most of Morrison or Naylor’s works by name. However, I struggle with the former two questions. What I take away from this conversation piece is that it is okay not to have an answer but just to know the question. I will use scholarship to answer best the rest of the questions.

\textsuperscript{69} Ibid., 571.
\textsuperscript{70} Ibid., 578.
I think my opinions might change if I spoke with them, but I also think that just thinking of speaking with them is because of how many times I have found myself in such intimate conversations with other black women. We have the right to talk about our secrets: what kind of love makes the most sense and what we give away for those loves, or what kinds of black female friendship transcend love with an intimate partner (Sula\textsuperscript{71}).

There is no clear way to analyze this piece, but if there were, it would include Morrison and Naylor’s chemistry at the top of the list. With that chemistry, Morrison drives to a level of honesty that even she is happy she could display. Naylor allows herself to sound like a kind of novice, hoping she experiences similar things to the women who have come before her. Morrison explains how many ways that this was not an interview but a discussion between two women. If they were in someone’s kitchen, willing to get to the next thing on their list, “in a minute, in a minute” and only when they finished this one, final topic\textsuperscript{72}.

This bond, if not evident in the writing by Morrison is, in spirit, the same sort of bond found in *The Bluest Eye* among three young girls who are drawn less to one another by age but by neglect. Frieda, Claudia, and Pecola have black mothers who, too, face their own figurative blue eyes. Pauline Breedlove, Pecola’s mother, motivates herself with the idea that she is deserving of all good future gifts while plagued by a family who brings her only grief and punishment. Mrs. MacTeer, Claudia and Frieda’s mother, represents a strong, black mother, intent on raising a respectable and hard-working family with the expectation that they will not

\textsuperscript{71} Sula is about “to girls who grow up to become women. Two friends who become something worse than enemies. In this novel, Toni Morrison tells the story of Nel Wright and Sula Peace, who meet as children in the small town of Medallion, Ohio. Their devotion is fierce enough to withstand bullies and the burden of a dreadful secret. It endures even after Nel has grown up to be a pillar of the black community and Sula has become a pariah” (“Holdings: Sula”).

\textsuperscript{72} 591.
disappoint her by any means. With these intentions – and sometimes distractions – plaguing the two women, the girls often find themselves in attempts to solve gut-wrenching problems on their own. This, in no way, is to take away from the women who face their own sets of exclusion, judgment, and hatred. In fact, it is to state the sometimes ignored fact that Mrs. MacTeer and Pauline are women still struggling with the themes that Claudia, Frieda, and Pecola are introduced to at the start of the novel. With Mrs. MacTeer, purposefully without a name, representing the most focused and strongest among the group. She represents the black women across Morrison’s America, an America that pushes them to their limits yet they rise anyway; rarely are these women paid the acknowledgement and gratitude they deserve. Concisely, Morrison illustrates many black women and their stories of struggle in her novel – this includes the state of mind of the narrator, adult Claudia, and the journey she took after Pecola’s insanity.

The following analysis is a characterization of misinterpretation, historical inaccuracy, and misfires. It is included because many people can miss some of the themes that Morrison tucked into *The Bluest Eye* and, unlike *A Conversation*, a few of those missed opportunities are pure products of not living the lives of black women today and yesterday. Some stories have meanings missed by those outside of such a large subset of Americans. Certain bonds are unspoken among black females and certain lessons hold a separate understanding among black females. In *A Conversation*, Morrison and Naylor can interpret hardships and solutions differently from a theorist like the one below, Marco Portales; whereas he believes the sole survivor is Claudia MacTeer who learned to love the enemy that told her she is valueless. Rafael Perez-Torres disagrees, citing a different section of writing, “I learned much later to worship

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73 Morrison, *The Bluest Eye*, 9, 158.
[Shirley Temple], just as I learned to delight in cleanliness, knowing even as I learned, and the change was adjustment without improvement.”\textsuperscript{74} Portales tries to illustrate that Claudia understood the sacrifice she was making to integrate with the dominant culture. While I find her hindsight to be above par, her transformation into an adult changes her dynamic as the readers switches from narration to dialogue by young Claudia. I understand how Portales arrived at his conclusion. I also understand that he had to have taken out a large portion of historical reference in order to find such an inference regarding Pecola (and by extension, adult Claudia).

\textit{Historical inaccuracies}

Marco Portales is the author of “Toni Morrison’s \textit{The Bluest Eye}: Shirley Temple and Cholly” and he makes the case for Pecola’s immaturity and Claudia’s mature understanding of how the world works. Portales’s article acts as a prelude (published in 1986) to the piece by Ramona L. Hyman, “Pecola Breedlove: The Sacrificial Iconoclast in \textit{The Bluest Eye}” (published in 2009). While Portales insists on elevating the character of Claudia at the expense of Pecola, Hyman later seeks to understand Pecola’s decision and the ways that two decades may help inform on the strange decisions of Pecola Breedlove, a possible hero character. Portales neglects Pecola’s journey and renders her ideology useless in the face of “accept[ing] the reality of the world around us”\textsuperscript{75}. Portales’s focus for his part is on the survival of Claudia, who he refers to as the memoirist within Morrison’s novel. He compares the two girls in their responses to rampant


racism, colorism\textsuperscript{76}, and invisibility with the odds and outcome in Claudia’s favor. His remarks tend to blame Pecola, namely her immaturity\textsuperscript{77}.

Based on Claudia’s adult persona accepting the injustices she witnessed as a child, namely of loving the Shirley Temple doll (although it represented white beauty and black body rejection) Portales missed his mark in assessing her sanity against Pecola’s sanity\textsuperscript{78}. He should have said that Claudia’s adult persona accepted harsh realities at the expense of her own sanity. To believe that the master’s tools will save one from the master or his torture for being the slave is the very thing that Audre Lorde said would not work\textsuperscript{79}.

Portales opens with an accurate depiction of the girls in the MacTeer household. Claudia and Frieda enjoy watching and learning from their observations. The ways that the adults move and sometimes think when faced with various situations. They engage in their minds how the women friends of Mrs. MacTeer feel in response to local gossip. They are able to listen along while doing their chores with little repercussion. Portales takes it a step further and surmises that, “All adults, including their parents, see them as two little black girls, as two little objects.”\textsuperscript{80} Claudia has a separate understanding, seeing their behavior in hindsight to be protectionist in nature; Mrs. and Mr. MacTeer not wanting too much attention on their girls – they felt that decency had become an added feature of a person, instead of a standard feature.

\textsuperscript{76} Colorism is the “prejudice or discrimination against individuals with a dark skin tone, typically among people of the same ethnic or racial group” (“Colorism”).
\textsuperscript{77} Portales, 497.
\textsuperscript{78} Claudia hated the Shirley Temple doll and girls like Maureen Peal because they were favored simply for lack of melanin (Morrison, 1970, p. 53, 54). Their features were a thing coveted while girls like Frieda, Claudia, and Pecola faced ridicule (Morrison, 1970, p. 55).
\textsuperscript{79} Lorde.
\textsuperscript{80} Portales, 496.
Then, however, the analysis shifts. Portales tosses his background knowledge about the culture and times in favor of a skirt-the-surface view of the two main girls in *The Bluest Eye*. It appears that Claudia’s ultimate reaction to a Shirley Temple doll versus Pecola’s reaction is the catalyst for Portales’s assertion that Claudia displays a level of maturity that Pecola does not display; nor does she possess, for Portales. In his mind, Pecola is left longing for the adoration received by girls who look like Shirley Temple, while Claudia has eventually matured enough to love her and move forward.

Portales references a quote by Claudia that informs the reader, in her adult mind, that she had not reached a point in her psyche that would allow her to love the doll. Portales uses this reference to conclude that, “This juncture, to be sure, is the point when we mature, when we accept the reality of the world around us and so learn to adjust to our physical and mental surroundings.”\(^{81}\) There is a lot to pick apart here so I will dive in piece-by-piece. The two girls differ on Shirley Temple at the onset of her introduction. What Portales leaves out is Claudia’s own interpretation of maturity as “switch[ing] habits to simulate maturity”\(^{82}\). By Claudia’s own analysis, she may have read maturity but she simply went from hating white faces, trying to love white faces, then blaming the community. Albeit, there is a middle ground that could have seen observation from both Claudia and Portales. Portales, for his part, also leaves out the ways that the girls differ.

Claudia does not simply hate Shirley Temple as a young girl, she is not even jealous of the doll. Claudia is angry because of the universal adoration received by a Shirley Temple doll, while someone who looks like *her* is not so much as deserving of playground respect, where

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\(^{81}\) Ibid., 497.

\(^{82}\) Morrison, *The Bluest Eye*, 159.
children taunt because girls have cooties, not because the girl has a darker skin tone. Shirley Temple, to her, is the reason that the three girls feel so worthless. On the other hand, Pecola admires Shirley Temple for the same reasons that Claudia hates the thought of her: she wants freedom from the worthless feelings taken on by the contrasts of white and black girls. Pecola’s difference is that she plans to do this by taking on aspects of the so-called worthier. Showcased is the initial reactions of both females, a level of maturity and awareness of the injustices of the world, and attempts by each to circumvent the discrimination.

Despite this, Portales appears to favor Claudia83. Portales writes, “[Pecola’s] unnatural longing … eventually leads Pecola to begin believing that her eyes have turned blue”84. This analysis, paired with his own differences of Claudia as a child and Claudia as a narrating adult, leads the reader to believe that Pecola’s insanity ties to believing in the ideology that whiteness will save her. Meanwhile, Claudia giving in to the ideology that whiteness is dominant so she should conform as needed is not an issue for Portales. There is a double standard extant in his theory.

Claudia, as narrator and adult, believes that her maturation has helped her learn to love Shirley Temple. She says that it was not until “the turning point in … [her] psyche” that she could learn to have such an affection for the doll85. For clarity, Portales agrees with this statement; he explains that Claudia began to see the world around her for what it is and “adjust.” This assessment is quite shortsighted and without context. While Claudia is the narrator, she is a distrustful one; Claudia’s initial statement of understanding the ways that the Shirley Temple doll demeaned her were the feelings of a young girl, so was reflected in the ways that this

83 Portales, 497, 99.
84 Ibid., 499.
85 Ibid., as qtd on 497.
demeaning drove her to wish violence against the doll. While her immaturity led her to wish violence on white females as well as the doll, her innocence and feelings of incomprehension of such a love for a doll (white) over love of a little girl (black) are sobering thoughts. Even in 1971 Lorain, Ohio, just after the Civil Rights era the idea that a doll is more precious than a living, breathing girl speaks volumes to the effects of racism and the Jim Crow era. The Jim Crow era was a time in American society starting in the 1950s that saw the cultural, political, educational, and legal segregation of blacks from whites86. The Jim Crow era was in place in order to keep blacks and whites in lockstep with knowing their roles and places in society87. Jim Crow made whiteness a new tool to use against the most vulnerable citizens, minorities. In Lorain, Ohio within the pages of *The Bluest Eye*, the beginning stages of its onset worked and served as a backdrop for how young black girls saw themselves through society’s lens. This is double consciousness88.

Young Claudia, though, is not the narrator. Adult Claudia has given into societal pressures; driven to feel love for the doll as a response to her psyche’s development. Considering this, adult Claudia is an unreliable narrator – which serves as a purpose. As stated, *The Bluest Eye* is a book of its time, highlighting the lives of the females of its time. The effects of gender norms and racial inequalities presents itself within the girls, the women, and the narrator of the novel. I believe this to be a key: Morrison wrote Claudia as the narrator in order to discuss another girl’s family. Perhaps for an outsider’s view or in an effort to show that even in a healthy

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87 Ibid.
family, when women grow older and “adjust” to the world’s intersectionality\textsuperscript{89} of oppression and race the outcome is dim. Claudia is subject to the events and lessons of that time as much as Pauline was affected. I am disappointed that Portales did not weigh these factors when assessing Pecola and Claudia’s “maturity” as either under-, over-, or fallibly developed. Pecola is not immature for wanting blue eyes, in fact, her desire to escape the madness that is racism and poverty is smart. While she, as a child, made a premature decision to transform her world Pecola also found a way to succeed in her mission. Unlike Claudia who, as narrator, still suffers internalized racism and a fear or not assimilating, much like her mother imposed on her as a child.

Portales’s assumption that Claudia definitively learned to adjust while Pecola fought maturity also undermines the ways that black females have had to respond creatively to oppression in a world that offers very few options. Pecola understood that she would never stop being black with brown eyes. She made a decision to free herself from the bonds of black community in an effort to find her own peace, happiness. Claudia has left that day with regret for herself and her community – evident in the tone of the last few pages of her so-called memoir are words of a woman who has lost faith in her community. This was due to their lack of empathy and action for Pecola. The book is still a narration and while it leaves many with the very sullen feelings portrayed by Claudia; it is Claudia’s final thought that Pecola Breedlove suffered and the town paid the price (“…our seeds were not the only ones that did not sprout; nobody’s did. Not even the gardens fronting the lake showed marigolds that year”\textsuperscript{90}). While it is tragic, it is a fallacy to trust the adult Claudia’s word on the events and outcomes regarding the culture in the

\textsuperscript{89} Intersectionality is “the interconnected nature of social categorizations such as race, class, and gender as they apply to a given individual or group, regarded as creating overlapping and interdependent systems of discrimination or disadvantage” (“Intersectionality”).

\textsuperscript{90} Morrison, \textit{The Bluest Eye}, 9.
novel about 1941 Lorain, Ohio. Claudia has internalized her fears. She learned to adjust instead of improve. The child Claudia is still in there, she is just silenced for the sake of good behavior. That behavior being akin to assimilation into white (the universal) society.

Claudia believed that she could save Pecola from the evils of the community after Pecola’s father raped and impregnated her. She learned that was just not the case and attributed the dead baby and the dead marigolds to a sort of curse of sin that her community brought on itself. However, Claudia’s growth pulled away from the horrors that Pecola endured and she self-admittedly learned to love her white counterparts. Instead of taking what happened and teaching herself how to help communities that are undereducated and disregarded, Claudia consumed the white lie of assimilation for the better. I believe it was Claudia’s failure to deliver a promise she wanted God to make that drove her away from the instinct of black girl magic and toward the submissive role of loving the master’s tools and his house. Using historical context, Portales had a number of references that he could utilize. Rather, what Portales could have said is that Claudia came out of the events of *The Bluest Eye* alive but she learned 1) black girls are sacrificial in the eyes of others – even amongst their own people; 2) black girls are the only ones willing to help other black girls under duress; or 3) a combination of both. Portales should display caution in writing off Claudia’s lessons because they are so central to the close of the novel. Morrison is discussing all of the women’s lives that have been broken or unrealized by the era in which she writes. This list of women includes Claudia’s adult self.

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91 Ibid.
92 Ibid., 9, 159.
93 Ibid., 22.
94 Ibid., 149.
I relate this constant decision in theory to write off certain pieces to Morrison’s puzzle a major problem with analyzing African Americans writing about African America. For theorists studying her work through the lens of heteropatriarchy, to thrive is to live as a Eurocentric figure and to survive is to live as an African American. Portales analyzes Claudia’s reaction to white beauty and says where she witnesses the pleasure in playing with dolls, Claudia, “encounter[s] nothing but pain and mortification, [and] is understandably moved to rebel”95 It is the usage of the word “rebel,” as the antithesis to adjustment and maturity. She could have used that rebellious mood to drive her to healthier ways of realizing love for herself and not love for a doll that seems more valuable than Claudia does.

I do not doubt that Portales attempted to see the light in *The Bluest Eye* while also addressing the tragedy that is Pecola Breedlove, forced into insanity by her own community. What troubles me is the shallow level of interrogation on the situation as a whole; by leaving out the larger theme of Morrison’s piece, Portales misses a major point about Pecola Breedlove: she chose to find those blue eyes and achieve what her mother, Mrs. MacTeer, and Geraldine, struggled to and subsequently placed pressure on their families for that failure.

*The Significance of Pecola*

Ramona L. Hyman, author of “Pecola Breedlove: The Sacrificial Iconoclast in *The Bluest Eye*, lays out an interesting and alternative argument for Pecola’s tragedy, which centers on Pecola’s self-awareness. As *The Bluest Eye* is over forty years old, Toni Morrison has written and made a number of statements on her first novel. However, Hyman’s piece takes some of the criticisms on the character of Pecola Breedlove to task. Hyman argues that Pecola, like many

95 Ibid., 498.
children of color in America, grow up with the sense that people of color are not favored among the general population. Even further, they grow as witnesses to the preferential treatment received by white populations. From authority figures in the classroom, on the streets, and in the doctor’s offices, children observe and retain the wherewithal that white is right.

Among those children stands Pecola, Frieda, and Claudia. They are three black girls who attempt to fight against teasing in school and face their own realities as unwanted black girls. Frieda is slightly older than the other two and more conservative, but very protective and willing to fight. Claudia runs hotter when confronted by despicable children who use colorism to their advantage; she also displays a level of insecurity regarding her hair and hue. Then there is Pecola, a young girl who – by critics’ and Morrison’s accounts – uses her ugliness as a shield.

Critics may have gotten the above assessment directly from Morrison; however, it is shallow and not the whole of Morrison’s layers to Pecola. Pecola’s reasoning for wanting blue eyes, for example, is in relation to the want for her parents and others to disallow their horrendous natures to be on display where she can bear witness. The shield, as Hyman suggests, is an opportunity to bar the racism and colorism from her mind. As a child 1) from a home of chaos and abuse 2) in a school with little attention paid to black kids 3) particularly those with mental instability, dark skin, and thick hair, Pecola’s desire is warranted. Hyman writes, “The revelation for Pecola is that girls who look at the world through a brown lens are disenfranchised; they are not seen because for people like Mr. Yacobowski, the store keeper “she is essentially not worth seeing”97. Pecola is not fond of whiteness, just the benefits that whiteness has to offer. She finds those benefits more appealing but not innately; Pecola is fond of the

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90 Bois, 36, par. 8.
benefits bestowed upon white people; she feels they will make her more appealing to the people she encounters daily. They will no longer see an ugly, quiet, Black girl.

It is important to note that before she seeks to try on blue eyes and live amongst the benefactors of privilege, she tries to hold onto her brown eyes. One by one, however, Pecola witnesses betrayal. Louis Junior, son of the uppity Geraldine, invites her to his house and assaults her. To make matters worse, when Geraldine finds them and the dead cat – killed at her son’s hand – she kicks out Pecola after accosting her as a “nasty little black bitch.”98 Frieda and Claudia interact with her when she temporarily moves in; while they take to her in different ways, she is more like a pet to whom they show on and off affection. Maureen Peal, another young child (of a lighter hue with easier managed hair) also interacts with Pecola on a pet/child basis although less obvious initially. However, when Maureen faces confrontation, she too moves on from Pecola, treating her like an uninteresting pastime. By the time we get to Pauline Breedlove, her mother – who outwardly favors her white child charge with the family for whom she keeps house – it is painstakingly clear that Pecola’s current life will not grant her the mental stability she desires.

Pecola is seeking blue eyes for stability. It is easy to cast her off as wishing to be white, which many a black person can say they have pondered once upon a time. However, Pecola is not seeking a lighter hue, white parents, or even white friends – Pecola is seeking the blue eyes that allow her the privilege of avoiding bad experiences and being protected by her parents from seeing bad things. Of Pecola’s request for blue eyes, Hyman says, “this shield of ugliness helps her to endure oppression as she attempts to find a vision not shackled by disenfranchisement.”99

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99 Hyman, 257.
That word *vision* brings on new layers to Pecola’s struggle and proposed fix for that struggle. She accepts the systems that have been in place since before she was born and searches for a way that she can live within that system. Her vision, like wanting blue eyes, is a calculation that a sacrifice of the eyes she already has will provide a valuable turnaround. Pecola sees the deficiencies in being meek and un-provoking as valueless because the world she currently responds to will not give her anything for having brown eyes but will continue to take from her.

As Pecola begins to lose her mind, it opens itself to a voice that plays up to the confidence she has wished she could possess. Pecola experienced torture and trauma from the point of entering her household, as depicted in Pauline’s portion of the novel; school failed her, friends failed her, (with the exception of the three whores in town) local women failed her. By failing her they made her sink further into the purposeful impression that she was ugly and therefore unworthy of care and compassion. Hyman argues that her mental stability at the end of the novel was intact instead of the opposite – she found a voice and she escaped their selfish hatred.

Claudia felt that she had failed Pecola and thus, Pecola’s life has been damned. I would argue that Claudia, the narrator, has not given the reader enough knowledge of her adult life to determine if she is the survivor. In actuality, we do not know how much more survived or thrived Claudia is than Pecola – what can be ascertained is the fact that Claudia, like Pecola, lost faith in the justices of the world when she heard her own community members throw out Pecola like a piece of trash. Claudia also placed guilt of not being able to save Pecola into her own heart; thereby allowing for the inference that pieces of Pecola are within Claudia, whose own fears of

100 Morrison, *The Bluest Eye*, 158.
101 Ibid., 148-49.
the failure of black girl magic are evident by the close of the story\textsuperscript{102}. Neither black girl has won in this epic novel regarding the black children who witness the effects of ignorance, colorism, and racism in the systems that many of us have already grown to mistrust.

\textsuperscript{102} Ibid., 160.
Chapter 2: Introducing Toni Morrison

In *Toni Morrison*, Jennifer Dunn writes about the struggles some critics have had with analyzing works by Morrison – she attributes it to an overflow of information from the author. In “The critical reception of Toni Morrison’s work,” Dunn writes, “Indeed some critics even caution the reader against relying too much on Morrison’s biography and public statements in analyzing her fiction.” For some, Morrison having 25+ publications on her resume makes theorizing about her but excluding Morrison’s own insights almost impossible. Dunn explains that she is critically aware that to remove such an established author’s own statements directly centered on her texts would be a crucial slash at any analysis on intersections of race, gender, class, and identity. I posit that the disheartening issue in the lack of insight by critics to her work is because of a failure to see through the lens of intersectionality. Morrison’s defense of her own work comes as a response to the belittling of Morrison’s mostly black, marginalized characters and events. If there were more works putting emphasis on these societal critiques, there would be more to pull from by critiques and future theorists studying Morrison. Dunn, too, warns that the author should not be the only source for knowledge on said works. To make Morrison the only background research one does is to fall short of analyzing the reasoning behind decisions Morrison of which may not be cognizant. For instance, Morrison wrote of her disinterest with fully engaging Maureen Peal’s character. In hindsight, she understands that Maureen Peal – the light-skinned black girl that lies somewhere in the center of Claudia’s

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104 Ibid., 63.
105 Ibid.
106 Ibid., 63.
107 Morrison, 581.
awareness of colorism – was too much a reminder of her own issues with colorism\textsuperscript{108}. Thus, Morrison fell short of truly analyzing Maureen because of her own struggles at the time. Some, however, only reading her work may see Morrison’s approach to Maureen as well deserved for how nasty Maureen acts in the novel; never once questioning why Maureen had to be such a way toward the social outcasts among the children.

There appears to be a struggle with how to analyze a work by an African American woman who wrote in a literary world that greatly ignored African American voices for centuries – especially the voices of African American women. Her perspective is necessary because there are still so few women of color writing with what should be an immense amount of attention paid to them. Widening the lens of study warrants an analysis of the what\textsuperscript{s} and why\textsuperscript{s} of outside work by Morrison in order to understand the lens with which to write on Toni Morrison’s fiction. Strictly speaking, a comparative analysis of just another black woman is insufficient. Particularly for analyzers not familiar with intersectionality, a greater hurdle lies ahead. For example, the existence of eurocentrism\textsuperscript{109} – the dominant focus on European-related culture, needs, and wants over all others – has produced an insufficient amount of knowledge in and surrounding marginalized, minority voices. That is, eurocentrism has largely left African American women from the debate around theory and implementation in the arts until the 1980s and 1990s. Therefore, to study the whole of Morrison’s work is to study it through the lens of psychoanalytic theory, critical race theory, feminist and feminist standpoint theory while assessing how Morrison’s fiction stacks against the great African American writers that have published in and around her time. The full picture of Morrison is missing from the many critics

\textsuperscript{108} Ibid.

who either regurgitate what Morrison has already said about her books or almost wholly dismisses what her characters represent.

Morrison has not written an autobiography, I think it is because her writing refuses to focus on a sole need to expel and interpret her life. Rather, Philip Page in “Critical Readings,” says, “The style and structure of the novels engage readers as active participants in making sense of the “fusion and fragmentation” that the characters experience as they struggle to “rework the tensions between bipolar oppositions”¹¹⁰. I take this to mean that the writing is not for her or from her; it is for and from the public (particularly African Americans) to see the hierarchy of inequality and to process the lives they lead as its product. Morrison writes unapologetically to her community as a therapeutic and uplifting process; one that highlights for them and us, her critics, the wealth of black culture extant even within the flagrant inequality. There is (1) the storytelling that goes on between the family, (2) the blues songs permeating the house by Mrs. MacTeer, (3) the usage of the lord’s name and outward prayer in times of strife and trouble, and (4) vernacular like “Quiet as it’s kept,” all speak to the same culture that cannot teach or break themselves out of poverty. Morrison sets up a dichotomy only to provide no answers, just a troubling ending to a troubled community.

Further, her writing acts as an illustration of the true demeanor and spirits of the community; the liveliness; Black culture¹¹¹. Black culture consists of “the creative forms of expression as one reflects on history, endures pain, and experiences joy”¹¹². Misunderstandings regarding this point center more on an inability of critics to accept that an African American

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female writer could master the written word without the full usage of the autobiographical genre. For context, autobiographical, slave narratives – the first recorded penmanship of African Americans in their new home – were the primary avenues for African Americans to land their names on the covers of books, when they received credit\textsuperscript{113}. One of the most famous among them being Frederick Douglass with the *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave* in 1845\textsuperscript{114}. Instead, Morrison’s life story plugs into her accomplishments as a means to her credibility as a vessel of American creativity, authorship, poetic reasoning, and film-worthy credit.

Take for instance, the consistent references to William Faulkner and Virginia Woolf when searching for ways to analyze Morrison due to her study of them in college\textsuperscript{115}. While most English majors study these authors, the theorists who refer solely to the above writers when referencing Morrison fall short of a full examination. This implication of “a white, patriarchal, and/or Eurocentric norm” causes an oversight of key points by the reader\textsuperscript{116}. It renders useless the historical references and psychological trauma of being black in America (which Morrison paints in broad strokes), if it is not ignored altogether. A two-way street is required in understanding Morrison within a literary sphere. Critics can open themselves up to how Morrison (more directly, the folk traditions and black cultural style she implements) is an influence in her own right. In doing so, they can see the various ways that Morrison has shifted the discussion away from the normalized Eurocentric, white male canon that is absorbing literature. She writes of the macabre in Black communities with *Tar Baby*, the ways we as

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{enumerate}
\item\textsuperscript{113} Gardner, 500.
\item\textsuperscript{114} \textsuperscript{113} Gardner, 500.
\item Weiss, 8.
\item Dunn, "The Critical Reception of Toni Morrison's Work," ibid., ed. Solomon Ogbede and Iyasere Iyasere, Marla W (Pasadena, CA), 64.
\end{enumerate}
\end{footnotesize}
women undoubtedly share men in *Sula*, and the little black girls made invisible during a portion of time when *Black is (supposed to be) beautiful*\(^{117}\) in *The Bluest Eye*.

There seemed to be an early consensus that writing off Morrison would be more appropriate if not accurate to disregard her experiences with the literary world and the ever-mounting odds against her. After many accolades and awards, recognition and progress through it all, it can still amount to doubt even on the most obvious of levels. Charlie Rose was a high rated interview television show in the late 20\(^{th}\) century. An interview between Morrison and Rose puts on display the difficulty for the dominant culture to recognize raced-language and criticism. When the two participants reach the topic of reviews of Morrison’s books, the agreeable nature of the interview changes to slight contention. Morrison first explains, “I have to tell you that the reviews about *Paradise* and much African American literature are infinitely superior than they were 20 years ago … as though there was only one Black narrative when there are thousands of them…” to which the conversation turns to race\(^{118}\). The interview goes (filler words redacted):

> Rose: The idea of writing about race, or the absence of race. Bill Moyers, I think, once asked you the question “Can you imagine writing a novel that’s not centered about race?” And you said, “Absolutely!”
> Morrison: Yes.
> Rose: Will you?
> Morrison: That’s what he asked me. [Laughter] I think, see I answered the question he didn’t pose. Tolstoy writes about race.
> Rose: Yeah.
> Morrison: All the time. So does Zola, so does James Joyce. Now if anybody can go up to an imaginary James Joyce and say, ‘You write about race all the time, it’s central in your novels. When are you gonna write about…’ What? Because the person who asks that question doesn’t understand that he or she is also raced. So to ask me when am I gonna stop or when or if I can, is to ask a question that, in a sense is its own answer. Yes, I can write about white people. White people can write about black people. Anything can

\(^{117}\) According to Andrew King in “Black is beautiful’, and Indigenous: Aboriginality and authorship in Australian popular music,” *Black is beautiful* was a campaign in the 1960s meant to inspire confidence and appreciation for the black body. It began in the United States and later spread across the world (533-534).

happen in art. There are no boundaries there. Having to do it, or having to prove that I can do it is what was embarrassing. Or insulting. In this book, I did.

Rose: It was insulting that people – help me understand. What was insulting? The idea that you felt like you had to prove that you could write about...

Morrison: Yeah, the question was posed as though it were an desirable thing to do.

Rose: Right.

Morrison: To write about white people or to write not about race. That’s what that means to me.

Rose: Right.

Morrison: And that it was a difficult thing to do. A higher level of artistic endeavor. Or it was more important. That I was still writing about marginal people and Why don’t I come into the mainstream?

Rose: Aren’t you importing too much into the question?

It is here that I stop to analyze the exchange in its entirety. For what it is worth, Morrison admits, “Maybe,” as an answer to his last question, however, she further argues that its meaning could signal but a small number of other things. She even asks Rose what else he thinks it could mean, to which Rose admits, he does not know. Rose then gives the olive branch back to Moyers by saying that he doubts it was to marginalize her abilities or content (African American lives and the significance of those experiences).

To start, Morrison is posed with the question of race; a topic she discusses in many of her publications both fiction and nonfiction. Rose embarks on the conversation with a heavy tone – gratefully, seemingly aware of the gravity of the subject. He also indicates in his tone a respect for Moyers or at the very least a familiarity with him / his work (Bill Moyers was an interviewee by Charlie Rose over five times in his career, at least three times before this interview). Morrison attempts to explain the long held history of such normalizing marginalization but Rose does not see it. He listens but the connections are distant to him, as if she switched dialects midsentence. Raced language is a nuanced language; the way Mr. Yacobowski, the storekeeper, fails to see Pecola because of her raced body119, Rose fails to hear Morrison’s words because of the raced...

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language. She is accusing a prominent member in the dominant culture of being prejudice in the assertion that she ought to start writing about the dominant society now that she has success and recognition. For Rose, that is importing too much.

Morrison then lays out the case for any artist to write about whatever topics appease them, in the video he nods well aware of that right and in agreement. She slows her pace and explains that the insult was in indicating whether she is up to the implied challenge of stepping up from the African American stone to reach the goal of writing on white culture (particularly when that stepping-stone is centered on marginalized lives and the latter is the dominant race). Rose, while hanging on to her words and clearly listening through his raced, white mind cannot fathom that a white man could be so blatantly ignorant. Especially a respected, white man such as Bill Moyers. He presses her, asking, (paraphrasing) What of this prejudice you speak? She patiently explains that his inclination was white people were a more desirable topic – he follows her thinking and does not cut her off or disagree. When she again routes it back to prejudice he cannot connect the dots. In fact, when she takes his hand to finally walk down the rabbit hole of racism, he cannot do it and cuts her off to ask if she (we are still addressing Toni Morrison) is imagining things.

Epistemology

Standpoint Theory\textsuperscript{120} is still a much-contested path of theory with the consensus holding to the idea that the ability to possess value or substance in scholarship lies in the one who does

\textsuperscript{120} Standpoint Theory suggests that “those who can bring the most insight to the workings of society are those on its edges and its margins. People living in circumstances of disempowerment are better placed because of their standpoint to perceive what is really occurring across the social and cultural domain; it is their standpoint, which is the most revealing” (McDonald, 2017, 137).
not originate from the group that one is observing. I do not agree. Empiricism has stated that objective data is the only data that can accurately depict the truth\textsuperscript{121}. Empiricism has long-held its definitions of accurate data within the scope of ability in outwardly cis-gendered\textsuperscript{122}, White males. This becomes problematic as any ethnographer can attest to for the first of many reasons: what one observes and proceeds to explain away using background data is not always what is actually happening. In a study, researchers found that children as young as thirty months old exhibited racial bias\textsuperscript{123}. While this is due to the normalization of whiteness by a white-dominated society, different conclusions may arise. A white-centered ethnographer ignoring self-experience reports from authors and experts may ignore the fact that whiteness, as the center, is a problem that pushes other races and ethnicities to the margins in education, legal, and employment. When that happens, the marginalized learn of whiteness and its privilege and act in various ways not always in accordance with their true desires or motives due to the dominant culture’s grasp of power. In the case of the above experiment, the empirical data no longer shows the babies prefer whiteness innately. It shows that babies face exposure to society’s preference for whiteness as early as thirty months old. In other words, “experience-oriented texts… play a key role in publicizing the contradictions of contemporary capitalist democracies”\textsuperscript{124}. I believe self-experience writing and study is as much for the author as it is for the reader and it has its place in scholarship. For this reason, Toni Morrison’s \textit{The Bluest Eye}, as historical fiction, is a legitimate source of information on the ways minorities respond to – and live around – whiteness.

\textsuperscript{122} Cis-gender: Denoting or relating to a person whose sense of personal identity and gender corresponds with their birth sex (“Cis-gender”).
\textsuperscript{124} SHARI STONE-MEDIATORE, "Chandra Mohanty and the Revaluing of “Experience”," \textit{Hypatia} 13, no. 2 (1998).
My questions serve as a blueprint for analyzing *The Bluest Eye* and supporting scholarship on this subject. The education system, the legal system, and the employment market are institutions that have historically marginalized the black community. Each one built by a society that favors white ideas, white advances in the job industry, and white people to be in those industries. In fact, the Black community has a history of using its right to organize and protest in order to correct wrongs committed by racially unjust institutions. Martin Luther King’s most recent objective as an activist before his murder was to unite poor blacks and poor whites under the Poor People’s Party in order to rise against the machine of unfair capitalist practices.

Despite the abundant writings in periodicals and academic scholarship on the black community’s effectiveness, usefulness, and advancement there is a wealth of societal norms that have existed to the disadvantage of blacks. This means that in addition to the institutions that either ignored the colorism in the girls’ school there were also adults and other children who were inflicting racially charged pain toward Frieda, Pecola, and Claudia. In the following passages, I will explore how this affects a black girl’s self-esteem in 1941 Lorain, Ohio.

*Meeting three black girls*

Several people, since my adventures in higher learning, have told me that Morrison’s writing includes pieces of herself. They have said that she understands and depicts the African American lifestyle so beautifully and poetically. I never read her work. When I finally sat down and read *The Bluest Eye* I tried to see how this accomplished, self-made, woman could ever see herself in the body of Claudia – a young girl jealous of a doll, angry about the teasing of her skin color. I wondered if this character was a whole person living in her head or if she was the girl. In,

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125 Bois, 68.
“A conversation,” Morrison admits that the former is true. Still, I could almost hear Morrison in the voice of big sister, and protector, Frieda. I closed my eyes and imagined how a Pecola was borne out of Morrison – Pecola was meek, timid, and afraid of her own shadow. Her silent demeanor is awakened, if only slightly, by the attention from her new friends but that is short-lived as she shuts down permanently upon the molestation and impregnation at the hands of her father. What lies within the pages of Morrison’s *The Bluest Eye* is not her soul for bearing but more her worldview. Why should there be a Lorain, Ohio for white girls and boys and not for black girls and boys? The above is a question the existence of this book asks.

Morrison wrote about the kinship family because she came from a kinship household. As both her parents’ families piled into Lorain, Ohio, she could observe and identify familial structures. While the stories grew and she could take part, she also had to wonder where her story belonged. *The Bluest Eye* began to answer the question.

While my firm belief is that white supremacy is at the heart of minority oppression, I also believe that once the disease has entered the community, a purge within the body of that community is necessary. The system of racial injustice is not automatically debunked in the mind because someone reaches monetary success, debunking is a separate action; without such action, there is no reason to assume that successful, former poverty-stricken community members will reach down and proactively re-experience such oppression in order to pull up others. In short, monetary success is not the solution to racial oppression. Racial oppression is systemic because citizens must believe, in some form, that the oppression is either undefeated, indisputable, or

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127 Ibid., 9.
deserved\(^{129}\). I will use the novel *The Bluest Eye* by Toni Morrison to investigate my questions regarding Morrison’s view of whiteness and its impact on the Black community.

*Black girl magic*

The answer to the above question is that it greatly affects Black girls growing up in racially segregated towns. When Morrison writes of Claudia, Frieda, and Pecola, as she knew them in her mind, admittedly, she paid very little attention to the other Black girls, like Maureen Peal. In *A Conversation* with Gloria Naylor she says, “I was not good with her. She was too easy a shot … I mean we all know who she is. And everybody has one of those in his or her life, but I was unfair to her\(^{130}\)” To which Naylor responds, “Because a Maureen Peal suffered as much as a Pecola Breedlove did in this society” and Morrison agrees\(^{131}\). Morrison’s coloring of her work with Maureen Peal is closer to failing to try rather than effortless work. She says she “never did [try]” with Maureen because she “did not want to go there” and “did not like her”\(^{132}\). When remarking on how fast she took down Maureen, Morrison utilizes the action verb *execute*. Almost as a Freudian slip, Morrison explains that she did not do the character of Maureen Peal justice by whizzing past all of the messy details. Morrison truly executed her character without the bother of explaining or understanding why a girl like Maureen may exist *and* be a good person. To do that, Morrison would have had to address her own biases against favorable, sought


\(^{130}\) Morrison, 581.

\(^{131}\) Ibid.

\(^{132}\) Ibid.
after, black girls like Maureen. She lacked growth that she later acquired. She admits, “If I were doing that book now, I would write her section or talk about her that way plus from inside.”

LaKisha Simmons, in *Crescent City Girls: The Lives of Young Black Women in Segregated New Orleans* writes of the antebellum south and the ways that black girls cope and rescue one another. Her interview with one girl in particular, Louise Bouise, covered the ways that a mixed community of white and black girls intermingled. For Bouise, there were many interracial friendships, yet those friendships involved mostly light-skinned, Black girls. Thus making it easier for relations between the races to exist without many scuffles. On the other side of her neighborhood (i.e. the crossing of Canal Street), nice relations were not on the menu.

She writes,

Niceness, then, had a geography. This is not to say that “nice” girls were not located on both sides of Canal Street—they were. Instead, I want to suggest that in each neighborhood, there were particular geographies of respectability. These geographies of niceness were also aligned with geographies of fear. Respectable girls were often afraid and anxious of what might turn them from “nice” to “bad.” They always worried, as Beverly Carter did, about their potential “downfall.” In Jim Crow New Orleans, there were many experiences that might challenge a girl’s respectability: racial violence and street harassment, police harassment, poverty, or pleasurable sexual experiences. (Simmons, 2015, p. 112)

While Simmons does not directly bring up colorism, she does bring up the results of colorism. Relating back to *The Bluest Eye*, Claudia and Frieda are pushed to defend themselves from schoolyard bullies by harassing back until the boys leave the girls alone. They are no longer nice girls. Later Maureen Peal is the villain when, after helping to defend Pecola and the girls, she yells the same slur (“Black e mo”) at them and runs away. As previously stated, Morrison

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133 Ibid.
135 Ibid., 112.
admittedly did not break down the character of Maureen Peal the way she would like today; however, she left enough detail to analyze the altercation. As Peal is with the girls, the conversation turns taboo, whether Pecola witnessed her father, Cholly, naked\textsuperscript{137}. As Maureen continues to push the subject, Claudia attempts a punch and misses, tensions rise, and Maureen runs off screaming at them\textsuperscript{138}. So far Maureen has gone against niceness twice, once with harassing the boys on the playground back for their insults and now a conversation about incest. Maureen running off and choosing to scream at Pecola, Frieda, and Claudia the pejorative, “Black e mos,” through the lens of Simmons’s writing, is her way of staying within the respectability zone\textsuperscript{139}. In fact, by chastising and demonizing the blackest girls both in her vicinity and in public, she is essentially taking a stand backward, toward her niceness and away from the “bad” elements. She is making up for associating with them completely\textsuperscript{140}.

John N. Duvall writes about Morrison’s still configuring self-image in \textit{The Identifying Fictions of Toni Morrison}. He comments, her identity is “fragile at times and definitely still under construction\textsuperscript{141}.” I take this to mean that Morrison could see a Claudia and Pecola yet she could not see a Maureen Peal. The goal of many in that era was to illuminate the little black kids and black families left behind in the movement toward socioeconomic freedoms – Peal was an easy target. Although Morrison admits this in \textit{A Conversation} with Gloria Naylor, Peal’s character exists with two sides: mean when threatened and sneaky-nice. Like the artist she is, she needed a villain. Writing Pecola’s story \textit{was} the justice. Maureen was an easy trick for the reader

\textsuperscript{137} Ibid., 60-61.  
\textsuperscript{138} Ibid.  
\textsuperscript{139} Ibid., 61.  
\textsuperscript{140} Simmons, 112.  
to see the ruin that Pecola, Claudia, and Frieda underwent. Morrison unwittingly sacrificed this black child for another.

The colorism that Pecola and the girls experience within the pages of *The Bluest Eye* feels like a scratch-the-surface similarity to Morrison’s colorism against Maureen. While she writes what she knows about the pain of being an invisible, Black girl, she takes the only power that she possesses (that of a pen) and erases Maureen’s story. Morrison turns Maureen into nothing more than a prop for the girls to stand near. Morrison says her method of writing does not involve directing the reader to a message. She says she does not have one, which brings me to the conclusion that some of Morrison’s own biases about the ways society blends black girls into the background sits center stage when observing the levels of importance shown to the girls of 1941 Lorain, Ohio.

There is an art to knowing as a Black girl. The art is actually in the learning to know; Claudia and Frieda do not listen but eavesdrop on their mother when she is in discussion with adults. Like many Black girls before and after them, there are unconventional ways of learning how their predecessors feel about the goings on in and around their mother’s circle. Morrison writes, “Frieda and I are washing Mason jars. We do not hear their words, but with grown-ups we listen to and watch out for their voices”\(^{142}\). Writing this exchange, Morrison is able to breach both worlds of Black girl wonder and Black woman ritual. Communal gatherings, bonds over principles and priorities, carving out a space just for the sanctity of Black women is a tradition coupled with that of storytelling. Yet it is missing from the Breedlove household.

Pecola goes to the three whores upstairs to exist, without problem or bother. She visits them often even though she gets the most talk out of just one, Marie\textsuperscript{143}. Pecola does not feel impregnated with a sense of shame for the intrigue she feels with Marie’s stories about her ex-lovers, kids, or money\textsuperscript{144}. Instead, her interests shine through and she ponders, “What did love feel like? . . . How do grown-ups act when they love each other?”\textsuperscript{145} The questions jogged for Pecola, while she sat in the house above hers, elucidate a feeling of woe for the young character. In fact, Morrison leaves little doubt within Pecola’s response to Marie’s openness about her past lovers that the girl feels isolated. She is missing something central at home – a place or person with whom to feel emotionally secure. Pecola faces a mother who wondered similar things in her past. That is, until she exchanged them for a different life, for a man\textsuperscript{146}. This mistake is rectified in a sense by Pauline when she realizes there are supposed better opportunities for her ahead. With those better opportunities, comes a wider platform from which to speak.

\textsuperscript{143} Ibid., 44.
\textsuperscript{144} Ibid., 48.
\textsuperscript{145} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{146} Ibid., 91.
Chapter 3: Black women

What is important about Morrison’s input on the black women in *The Bluest Eye* are the values set forth. When money, resources, and good men are scarce, the women take their words as the sole product over which they can control. They take pride in the stances shared; “some men just dogs,” and, “get up at five thirty in the morning like I do,” are akin to phrases that many Black women have said. Likewise, the above phrases are familiar to the Black men and children in those living spaces. As black feminist theorist Patricia Hill Collins writes, “The theme of how hard Black women work is often overlooked.” Essentially, the roles that these particular women of color fulfill is assumed and undervalued. Within the community, some black women even view this underappreciated commitment to family care as a resistance to oppression, opposed to an underlying factor. As an example, Morrison opens the novel with a grumpy Mrs. MacTeer learning that her youngest daughter is sick. Unfortunately, the most she can do about it is gripe and treat the symptoms. However, Mrs. MacTeer lives for this responsibility; Mrs. MacTeer does not run from her family toward a so-called better life, this is her better life.

Six women

Morrison illustrates the females in 1941 Lorain, Ohio using six different paintbrushes. She delivers an honest and uncomfortable look into their lives as the para-plot to Pecola Breedlove’s incestuous rape and subsequent insanity toward her search for blue eyes. Morrison shows us that China, Poland, Marie, Mrs. MacTeer, Pauline, and Geraldine each support their

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147 Ibid., 15.
148 Collins, 46.
149 Ibid.
own blue-eyed habit. The former three have given up their claims to respect and stability – as defined within the realms of societal norms – for the sake of independence. The latter three have given up their claims to absolute independence and selfish acts for social stability and a higher ranking on the social ladder.

_The whores upstairs_

Pecola Breedlove’s favorite people – Miss China, Miss Poland, and Miss Marie – live above her home\(^1\). These women provide Pecola with a place of acceptance. Pecola can enter their home absent a comment on her ugliness or joke against her; be it precipitated from boredom, insecurity, or some unknown hatred. She can ask questions of the women that make the rest of their town uncomfortable; they simply and lovingly entertain the conversations with equally (socially) unacceptable responses. Within the pages of *The Bluest Eye*, Pecola only truly has one place to go to help her forget the most urgent issues. That place is the home of the town’s three whores.

Morrison describes the local prostitutes as being free from the tyrannical laws of heterosexism\(^2\). As Patrick D. Hopkins states in, “Heterosexism,” the title term is defined as,

> An attitude in which the separation of sex, anatomy, gender, and gender roles into two discrete categories of male and female is assumed to be natural and required for coherent personal identity and social stability, and is influential in analyzing gendered social roles and identities. (Perez-Torres, 1997, p. 346)

Take, for instance, Marie. Morrison portrays her as the closest of the three to Pecola\(^3\). Marie listens to Pecola’s questions and answers them truthfully, if not also extravagantly. Equally, regarding the men in her life, she spares no details for the girl. This is also true of her choice to

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\(^1\) Ibid., 43.
\(^2\) Ibid., 47-48.
\(^3\) Ibid., 44.
entice Pecola and herself with tangents and oversexed food descriptions from her past meals are not in an effort to spoil a fictionalized virtue. Social etiquette would have Marie spare young Pecola from exposure to such things but Marie has rid herself of the rules and men who seek to define her. Like Marie, China does not self-police. She is not a storyteller, but China laughs along and pokes fun at Marie for her lying about her many bucks from the FBI or the men in her life with whom she says she has children\textsuperscript{154}. Neither China, Marie, nor Poland believe in preserving purity because they do not believe it exists\textsuperscript{155}.

On the other hand, the whores do display insecurity when interacting with Frieda and Claudia. The former telling the women that she will not associate with them because according to her mother, the women are ruined\textsuperscript{156}. While the whores laughed a raucous laugh at the sentiment, Marie did throw a root beer bottle toward them in response\textsuperscript{157}. This reaction is either the spirit of the same context that girls are no more innocent than women are; by this logic, they can face exposure to societal norm’s definition of mature topics (sex, relationships, etc.) and a root beer bottle for being mouthy\textsuperscript{158}. A different vantage point may say that Marie (she threw the bottle) felt insecure by the idea that a put together woman like Mrs. MacTeer looks down on her.

In Joyce Ladner’s \textit{Tomorrow’s Tomorrow: The Black Woman}, Ladner speaks with varying degrees of women on the concept of black womanhood, girlhood, and the states of their lives. One young woman states, “When I get clean [i.e. fashionably dressed] I can tell those uppity girls that go to the Do-Drop-In Dance Hall that I am as good as they are. I might live in

\begin{itemize}
  \item\textsuperscript{154} Ibid.
  \item\textsuperscript{155} Ibid., 44, 47.
  \item\textsuperscript{156} Ibid., 83.
  \item\textsuperscript{157} Ibid.
  \item\textsuperscript{158} Ibid., 48.
\end{itemize}
the housing project but they sure can’t out dress me even though they might live out in the West End in a nice house”\textsuperscript{159}. Relating to Marie, her frustration and decision to throw a glass bottle at two young girls for their insult may stem from a need to prove that her life’s condition does not make her lesser of a person. Additionally, China out dresses herself on most occasions, opting to try different looks throughout the day\textsuperscript{160}. The inclusion of her character, with little more than a few lines, strikes me as a way of exercising the frustrations and insecurities of the whores without losing subtlety. If China dresses for herself that is perfectly fine. However, in the context of pre-Civil Rights era, and abounding colorism and classism throughout the novel, it seems more likely that the women, while confident, share in insecurities regarding their class status within the neighborhood in Lorain, Ohio.

\textit{The wives}

Pauline is, perhaps, the most in-depth written woman of the novel. Morrison takes time and detail to explain that we need to understand Pauline before – or, if at all – we judge her. She chose Cholly out of a love for his dreams and promises\textsuperscript{161}. Morrison describes their life together via metaphor: the tooth that slowly decayed in Pauline’s mouth after a considerable neglecting of red flags\textsuperscript{162}. The tooth that, before it had fallen must have shown signs before its final disintegration to nothingness. “There must have been a speck. . . .There must have been the conditions.”\textsuperscript{163} As Cholly’s interest in their life together waned with the jobs, there was very

\textsuperscript{159} Joyce A. Ladner, \textit{Tomorrow’s Tomorrow: The Black Woman}, 2nd ed. (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1971), 118.
\textsuperscript{160} Morrison, \textit{The Bluest Eye}, 44, 47, 49.
\textsuperscript{161} Ibid., 92.
\textsuperscript{162} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{163} Ibid., 92, 93.
little to appreciate. Pauline spent her days repairing what Cholly, the flurry of white people, and churchgoing, black women of Lorain were stealing from her\textsuperscript{164}: dignity.

Morrison demonstrates a woman in Pauline who believed she deserved admiration and happiness\textsuperscript{165}. The move from Alabama to an unforgiving city like Lorain, Ohio with a man too loose to tie down led her to reshape what happiness should mirror\textsuperscript{166}. It was not shame that led to Pauline’s freedom from the shackles of assimilation for others. It was pride. Pauline believed she was choosing a better life for herself. This was regardless of the implications – a fact that echoed similar reasons for China, Marie, and Poland’s choice of prostitution.

During the labor of her second child, Pauline recollects white doctors and white doctors-in-training approaching her bedside and discussing how easy it is for black women to give birth\textsuperscript{167}. Paraphrasing, as the black beasts they are, unable to feel any real pain because they’re accustomed to childbirth the requests for pain medication is infrequent and they hardly make a sound\textsuperscript{168}. On the other side of the room, the same doctors cater to the white mothers’ every need. They speak in gentle tones and take time to discuss the baby soon-to-be delivered\textsuperscript{169}. During what is supposed to be a powerful experience, the institution in charge of overseeing the encounter replaces their goal with devaluation.

Every woman in the hospital room is creating and delivering a life for the world to utilize but through standardized teachings, the black ones are little more than delivery-persons in a pizza shop. Pauline’s thoughts interject, “I hurt just like white women. Just ‘cause I wasn’t

\textsuperscript{164} Ibid., 93, 94.
\textsuperscript{165} Ibid., 97.
\textsuperscript{166} Ibid., 97, 98.
\textsuperscript{167} Ibid., 99.
\textsuperscript{168} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{169} Ibid.
hooping and hollering before didn’t mean I wasn’t feeling pain. What’d they think?”170 What did they think? Morrison asks the reader.

In Pecola’s life, the teasing by other children is on a colorist level, left unchecked by the adults on school grounds171. The girls learn early that they must defend themselves or be defenseless172. Her desire for blue eyes is born from these permissible acts. In Pauline’s life, the intensity of her need for metaphorical blue eyes is born from the same institutional powers that opened the door to heterosexism. The best way to be a good black woman is to conform, be a good wife, and support her family. Nevertheless, one must complete those tasks. Meanwhile, the children still do not matter; the pain is nonexistent173.

Pauline witnessed the decline of her family and the pain she settled in with Cholly by being each other’s punching bags and went in the opposite direction174. Pauline worked as the maid for white families while living in Lorain175 and the final one mentioned is the Fisher family176. The Fishers treat Pauline with the utmost respect a colored woman can hope to receive. They trust her with finances (shopping trips), they allow her to use their name for purchases and agreements on their behalf177 and they give her the responsibility of caring for their white daughter178. She even has the nickname “Polly” when addressed in the household179.

170 Ibid.
171 Ibid., 55.
172 Ibid., 55-56.
173 Ibid., 99.
174 Ibid., 100.
175 Ibid., 94, 100.
176 Ibid., 100-01.
177 Ibid., 101.
178 Ibid., 86-87.
179 Ibid.
Pauline chose the Fisher family over her own because she was knee-deep in oppression and needed a loophole toward happiness\textsuperscript{180}. They provided her with such a shortcut.

Pauline learns to wish for community respect, an erasure of her simpleton past, and a husband who wants to give her all of the above without philandering\textsuperscript{181}. There are all of the things that she does not receive at home. With her newest assignment at the Fishers – affluent, pretentious, and acknowledging Pauline as a hot commodity – the transition is not difficult. Her price for the promise of it all includes how and when she decides to interact with her family. Unfortunately, as Pauline’s desires grow, Pecola is too much of the girl that Pauline once represented. Pecola is struggling to like or love herself and wondering on the existence of love – an insinuation that love is in high demand and low supply in the Breedlove household.

Joyce Ladner speaks with a girl much like Pecola, her name is Liz Marshall and she has no hope for anything\textsuperscript{182}. Ladner uses categories for the females in womanhood and Marshall has no reason to try and has only given up once, the one time she tried. Ladner speaks to the existence of this young female with great sadness and says that very little about the Black community has changed or affected the young girls in this category\textsuperscript{183}. Like Pecola, Marshall faces “economic, social, and political oppression”\textsuperscript{184}. Pecola’s own life is the personification for this category, with no previous generations of family uplift and “little progress … made … to elevate [the family’s] socioeconomic statuses and life-styles beyond those which they experienced in the South”\textsuperscript{185}. While Pecola and Sammy, her brother, were not alive when the

\textsuperscript{180} Ibid., 101.
\textsuperscript{181} Ibid., 100.
\textsuperscript{182} Ladner, 167.
\textsuperscript{183} Ibid., 168.
\textsuperscript{184} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{185} Ibid.
family lived in the South, the effects of poverty and degradation, colorism and racism were abundantly clear for them as they grew into their Ohio home.

Pauline stays as a mother but regrets the decision as a woman. Eventually, she comes face-to-face with a daunting task: 1) stand by a misogynist, with an ugly family to boot\textsuperscript{186}, for the remainder of time with the promise of deserved rewards or 2) take a chance at life independently, without any guarantee of success. Pauline chooses the former, and receives nothing. Like they say, though, no backsies. In a marriage that she despises with children she barely wants or knows, Pauline now rejects her nuclear family and accepts the position of \textit{mammy}. The Fishers’ arrival represents one more trade that Pauline is willing to make: respect by association in exchange for her dignity. Although Pauline has experienced what life is like when she trades her dignity for love, she decides that she can live without it if she can have its cousin: ego.

\textit{The stern woman}

The first mother introduced is Mrs. MacTeer. She has a good husband; he is a good father for her kids – they help manage the household as needed. She still complains in much the same fashion as the next woman introduced in \textit{The Bluest Eye}: Pauline. Mrs. MacTeer uses Jesus’s name often in order to defend her actions or her reasons for distaste to something done by others in her household much like Pauline\textsuperscript{187}. When the milk is gone in an untimely manner, Mrs. MacTeer goes on a rant about how impossible it is to help so many others when one is struggling\textsuperscript{188}. Pauline uses the lord’s name in prayer and to smite down on Cholly for not

\textsuperscript{186} Morrison, \textit{The Bluest Eye}, 34-36.
\textsuperscript{187} Ibid., 23, 25, 27.
\textsuperscript{188} Ibid., 22.
contributing to the family as a man\textsuperscript{189}. The one caveat to this is, of course, Henry Washington\textsuperscript{190}, the man who used to live in the MacTeer’s household (as an added source of income), before his sexual assault\textsuperscript{191} toward Frieda. While she treats her husband with quite a lot of respect, Jesus is not always her savior; sometimes he serves as an obedient warrior or her complicit, forgiving right-hand man\textsuperscript{192}. She plays the martyrdom instrument until she is tired. There is not a clear denomination amongst any of the families but Mrs. MacTeer rarely sees a day go by without calling out the lord’s name. Mrs. MacTeer’s usage of the lord’s name can be a sign that neither blues nor gospel can reach in and fix her. Surely, both serve a purpose to keep her going from day to day, but her desire to call out for the lord shows the upset and turmoil that Mrs. MacTeer faces each day in a world unapologetically apathetic to her troubles.

Mrs. MacTeer has a small platform for which to flourish within \textit{The Bluest Eye} but her stance on decency, taking care of house, and respectability are blaringly important. At first glance, she represents the kind of black woman spoken of in Collins’ \textit{Black Feminist Thought}. Collins speaks of the activist but then brings up the woman who works too much to help the cause because she is the cause. Collins also speaks about the homemaker who has too many responsibilities to participate\textsuperscript{193}. These women represent the group of black females that the activism and opportunities for upward mobility serves\textsuperscript{194}. She is hardworking, lives in a varied existence of impatience. Mrs. MacTeer creates blues songs to pass her day. Mrs. MacTeer is unlike Pauline whose rebellion against the nuclear family comes from an enjoyment of the

\textsuperscript{189} Ibid., 36-38.  
\textsuperscript{190} Ibid., 16.  
\textsuperscript{191} Ibid., 80.  
\textsuperscript{192} Ibid., 22-23.  
\textsuperscript{194} Ibid., 60-61.
prestige by association with the Fisher family. Mrs. MacTeer also does not have the patience to un-feel as well as Geraldine can. Geraldine is the third wife in my analysis and the fair-skinned mother of spoiled brat, Louis Junior; Geraldine’s obvious rebellion being the unfeeling\textsuperscript{195} for her family but warm intimacy she has for her pet cat\textsuperscript{196}. Mrs. MacTeer does not readily display any rebellions like Geraldine.

Keeping in line with Collins’s writing – the idea that some black women feel their care for community \textit{is} a rebellion to oppression – Mrs. MacTeer’s rebellion may be her family through this lens. She cares for them and raises them above the ignorance. That is, until she starts singing the blues. When she sings the blues, she rebels against all of the attributes that make her “mom.” She can be wild and sing of a man that has done her wrong, even though Morrison gave no indication that her marriage or husband is unstable. In fact, he is quite the opposite\textsuperscript{197}. She can let out all of the aggression she keeps bottled in for being black and poor. When she sings the blues, she can be as happy as she can be bitter because of the power of Blues music.

The history of Blues gives an indication to what Mrs. MacTeer may have had on her mind when she would sing it. After receiving their freedom, former slaves faced little financial gain and just as few opportunities to acquire land\textsuperscript{198}. When the freedoms began to roll in, one of the most notable was that of relational freedom\textsuperscript{199}; for the first time in America, African Americans could openly choose whom they wanted, Blues helped them to celebrate this. This secular activity was renamed “the Devil’s music.”\textsuperscript{200} It was flirty, sexual, and daring but wholly

\textsuperscript{195} Morrison, \textit{The Bluest Eye}, 69.
\textsuperscript{196} Ibid., 70.
\textsuperscript{197} Ibid., 52.
\textsuperscript{199} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{200} Ibid.
rooted in a shared history with gospel. Blues singers like Bessie Smith saw religion in this music but there did not exist a widespread “Welcome” mat by members of the gospel for this suggestive genre. Black women were controversially taking the reins on this music and many singers were toying with the escape from gendered roles pre-arranged for them by Christian whites at the time of colonization.

The forewarnings, first by slaveholders, that nonbelievers would try to deter them from their faith erupted in a long-held tradition by families in Black America to reject the Blues. Before the acceptance of Blues as an avenue for blacks to heal, there was a struggle for many to acknowledge their faith as well as the power of Blues music. Gospel and the Blues has since led a tumultuous relationship of will-they or won’t-they; one propping up the other and vice versa. Nonetheless, Blues songs were interspersed with slave culture, being responsible for the storytelling of bible stories and communicating the pains and grueling days of the unending labor. When freed men and women had their own homes, there seemed to be a struggle to choose one or the other: Blues or gospel. According to James Cone in *A Black Theology of Liberation*, the Black experience is unique because it represents the whole of what blacks have undergone in surroundings that say, “You do not belong.” He comments on the strength of both the gospel and Blues music by explaining that they both exist in their own lanes. Blues, for example is the call and response to Black existence. “The unrestrained exhibitions [in secular music and dance] gave the slave some escape, some temporary relaxation from toil, and refreshed [the

201 Ibid.  
202 Ibid.  
203 Ibid.  
204 Ibid.  
205 Ibid.  
206 Cone, 25.  
207 Ibid.
slave’s] spirit”208 Later, Blues singers like B.B. King and soul singers like James Brown wrote music for the Blacks stuck in the ghetto209, going to work in positions that underpaid with bills that overpriced. As stated by author John Blassingame in *The Slave Community*, “Religious beliefs gave [the slave] some hours of joy and a degree of hope amid his sufferings”210. Religion showed the slaves that slavery was a tool rather than” a so-called right handed down by God to the white nationals. In fact, “Religious and recreational activities and the differences between the slave’s and the master’s customs prevents his total identification with the slaveholder’s interests and gave him some respite from constant toil”211. Notice the “and” between religion and recreation, in a statement that says both served their purpose in making and keeping traditions for the slave to stay sane. Recreational activities, remarked by Blassingame in this passage (such as contests, musical dances, and relationships), became the aim of the day outside of its counterpart, religious practices. While the two are not similar, they are connected, one refreshing the other. When slavery ended, these practices cemented into Black life and existence because they remained untied from the existence of white-black relations212. They became something separate for blacks.

Blassingame comments that not many witnesses paid any real attention to the blues songs that erected during slavery. One of the obstacles of his own writing was due to “many of the profane tales and secular songs [being] ignored by most witnesses”213. Although slaves are

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209 *Ghetto*, in the vernacular, is the reference to slums neighborhoods, often inhabited by minority communities. Here, there is less regulation to keep the neighborhood upstanding and more regulation to keep minorities in their place as the marginalized people that the dominant culture exploits (Oxford Dictionaries). CITE
210 Blassingame, 106.
211 Ibid.
212 Ibid.
213 Ibid., 115.
responsible for many blues dances such as “Double Shuffle, Heel and Toe, Buck and Wing, Juba”\(^{214}\), etc\(^{215}\). Blassingame remarks that “a traveler from Rhode Island observed that … the slaves were patting juba” which is the equivalent to drumming the body instead of an instrument, it is often seen performed today by Blues singers\(^{216}\),

Many of the themes and motifs later incorporated into the blues appeared in the tunes slaves sang at cakewalks, dances, and parties … In their love songs the slaves referred by indirection to sex. Like the blues singers of a later era, the slaves used such metaphors as pushing, rocking, blowing, cooking, shaking riding, beating, and rolling o refer to sexual intercourse. Often the singers interspersed sexual allusions with nonsense rhymes. (Blassingame, 1979, p. 123-24)

Jazz musicians like Ida Goodson recall the divide in her house: her parents had a strict no Blues policy, so she had a strict no Blues policy\(^{217}\). That is, until her parents went on errands\(^{218}\).

In 1941, theologians had yet to seize on the observations of Blues’ intricate relationship with the holy word and its backstory with black life. Therefore, Mrs. MacTeer’s decision to sing her pain out in Blues-speak is the largest rebellion within the novel. Mrs. MacTeer wholly believes in the lord and savior, Jesus Christ. Rarely does she receive a speaking section without a prayer to him for strength, patience, or to vent her frustrations. Sometimes Morrison writes Him as a crutch for which she can lean when an event or the whole of the day is heavy for Mrs. MacTeer.

\(^{214}\) Patting juba is “when slaves had no musical instruments they achieved a high degree of rhythmic complexity by clapping their hands … The clapping involved ’striking the hands on the knees, then striking the hands together, then striking the right shoulder with one hand, the left with the other—all the while keeping time with the feet and singing’” (Blassingame, 1979, p. 125).

\(^{215}\) Blassingame, 109.

\(^{216}\) Ibid., 125.

\(^{217}\) Davis.

\(^{218}\) Ibid.
At the introduction of Pecola to the family home, Mrs. MacTeer delivers a rant on her misgivings regarding life\textsuperscript{219}. Sandwiched between her complaints is a reference to the bible – from either the book of Matthew or Luke (both reference the line she uses) – that one watch in addition to pray for their blessings\textsuperscript{220}. Her concern being that Cholly, the father of Pecola, has not bothered to check on his daughter to ensure that she is okay and needs nothing from him. This proud, Christian woman, taps into the very problem with the requests of westernized religion: it does not work for marginalized communities in the west. People of color have a harder time giving abundantly to those in need because, systemically, they are the ones in need\textsuperscript{221}. Cone writes, “The true prophet of the gospel of God must become both anti-Christian and unpatriotic”\textsuperscript{222}. This symbolizes the struggle between the righteous God dictated in the bible and the God that is addressed within the sphere of racism and marginalization. Cone explains the dilemma presented to Blacks in the post-Civil War era, defining what God is to them against a backdrop of what God’s portrayal is in everyday life (how he is righteous for all but sanctions racist behavior by his congregants)\textsuperscript{223}. Cone goes further, explaining that a church that “endorse[s] ‘law and order’ is a church that endorses the suffering of God’s people\textsuperscript{224}. Therefore, the weight is lifted from black individuals as the new decree of the New Testament brings love, which means “societal values are no longer important”\textsuperscript{225}.

Like the slaves singing in their leisure\textsuperscript{226}, Mrs. MacTeer’s blues songs are not wholly about financial misery, some ring of love and general sadness. Her rebellion exists on two levels.

\textsuperscript{219} Morrison, \textit{The Bluest Eye}, 22.
\textsuperscript{220} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{221} Cone, 55-56.
\textsuperscript{222} Ibid., 55.
\textsuperscript{223} Ibid., 55-57.
\textsuperscript{224} Ibid., 130.
\textsuperscript{225} Ibid., 131.
\textsuperscript{226} Blassingame.
The first level is within the admission that her pain cannot heal solely via the religious prayers in her bible or fellowship. She needs the quiet isolation and meditation power of the blues songs that allow her to cry out her angers and anxieties as calmly or painfully as possible. In fact, Claudia remarks on the Saturdays without singing\textsuperscript{227}. She cannot stomach how those days drag on, as they are the hardest to suffer through because replacing the songs are irritation.

On the second level, Mrs. MacTeer takes all that she does not understand about her Christian faith, what she is supposed to do with it under the circumstances she finds herself, and speaks back at it with Blues. Rather than openly oppose Christianity, Mrs. MacTeer grants its opposition a space in her life\textsuperscript{228} her household. Her daughter misses it when it is absent\textsuperscript{229}. Her mind reels without its sounds. Blues sounds, if not its gestures, are an open secret for mother MacTeer.

In short, Mrs. MacTeer’s price is her own peace. She envelopes herself in an equation that Christianity would have her believe is solvable. The medication that eases the problem also tells her that hers is more comparable to the math problem, $\pi$, times infinity. Her Blues exists for as long as she is willing to fight.

\textit{Geraldine}

Geraldine has one passage. She is a minor character with a story understood by many in the black community. Her unofficial title ranges from Missy Prissy to Miss Uppity to High Sadiddy to Bougie, among others that have transcended time. They all land on the same premise: a woman who sees herself above the fray, typically the fray is a mix of less cultured black

\textsuperscript{227} Morrison, \textit{The Bluest Eye}, 24.
\textsuperscript{228} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{229} Ibid., 24.
people. Sometimes these names are attributable to African Americans who believe they offer more to the world based on the rules of colorism. Geraldine is one such person.

Morrison and Claudia do not spare Geraldine the full assault of judgment when engaging with her character; rather, instead of inflicting maximum hatred they allow the character to do it on her own. Geraldine comes from a “Mobile, Meridian, or Aiken” sort of town. It sounds even more pleasant when she lets the name roll off her tongue. Geraldine is a mom of one, living in a nice house. A point that may intentionally come from Claudia and not Morrison. She has a husband who is content with her quiet contentedness and, ultimately, her skills at homemaking. She is an on-paper good mother and refuses to complain or verbally acknowledge any feelings toward her son or spouse. In short, she is a Stepford Wife. However, like the film, the rebellion is not far from the surface of her story.

Geraldine gives one hundred percent of her effort but much less of a percentage of her interest. In fact, Morrison writes, “What they do not know is that this plain brown girl will build her nest stick by stick, make it her own inviolable world, and stand guard over its every plant, weed, and doily, even against [her husband].” Geraldine has an appreciation for the life that she leads. Those aspects she will cling to before she allows the natures of her family to poison the work in which she has invested. Her life contains almost every version of details from the other two homemakers. Yet and still, Geraldine does not share their interests.

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230 Ibid., 70.
231 Ibid., 67.
232 Ibid., 73.
233 Ibid., 71.
234 Stepford Wives is a film from 1975 (“Stepford Wives”) with the premise of a neighborhood constructed by men. In it, the homemakers transform into obedient, self-less, robot-like partners solely alive for their husbands’ amusement.
I reckoned earlier in this piece that Geraldine must be attracted to the comfortability of her life. While I still think that to be true, it appears closer to the truth that Geraldine fears discomfort more willingly than she is attracted to comfort. Shame and pain that she witnesses among “nigger” people keep her on the straight and narrow. She calls Pecola a “nasty little black bitch.”236 This is in line with the bit of opinion we can gather from Geraldine’s mindset. However, the nature of her flashback is not in relation to the two children, sex as a minor, Pecola having sex with her son, or young whores. Geraldine never even checks in with her son regarding his well-being when she arrives to find Pecola in her house.

Geraldine’s flashback is about messy black parents infecting the neighborhoods with their messy kids who infect other households – her household. It is the reason that she regulates her son’s choices for what kind of black child can be in his life237. Additionally, Geraldine’s perspective on the circumstances surrounding why she may be forced to leave her husband revolve around his doing the opposite of her building their lives piece by piece. One could safely assume that the opposite of such would be tearing their lives down. Geraldine’s true motive for her life’s dance is to avoid a lifestyle that shadows Pauline or Mrs. MacTeer: Spent, emotionally, and retention of little to no capital.

If Marie is a ten out of ten on a scale rated on being obscenely outside of societal norms then Geraldine is a negative 73, putting it mildly. Geraldine has a drastic aversion to mess, disorder, and embarrassment. As attractive as she is in practical terms to the man who eventually

236 Ibid., 75.
237 Ibid., 72.
chooses her\textsuperscript{238}, she remains perpetually unattainable. Geraldine never gives fully of herself but the price for such a closed nature is the unfulfilled life that she leads.

She seeks (and holds shortly) moments of intimate pleasure with her cat that she cannot fathom receiving from her husband\textsuperscript{239}. While she is nursing, she defines mothering with the legal definitions of parenting and fails to form any intimate bonds\textsuperscript{240}. After Junior’s birth, Geraldine continues to search for something that gives her great pleasure. My assertion is that while it mostly manifests as sexual, Geraldine displays little emotion at all in this passage. She refuses her son any intimate contact and is content with her husband’s intimate-less sexual intercourse\textsuperscript{241}.

Morrison approaches Geraldine like a new species that invades the earth. Geraldine is from one of those towns that sounds exotic when they say it and all of the inhabitants understand tax law, but not this alien. Nevertheless, she can iron a shirt well. My impression is that Geraldine is not a Maureen. Instead of being half-present when writing Maureen\textsuperscript{242}, Morrison writes Geraldine purposely as a half-present woman. This woman truly hates her own bodily functions and thinks almost robotically in terms of interacting with other people in her life. She feels for the things that have not benefitted or influenced her into this android transformation, the way the pet cat does. In exchange for her silence, the husband does not complain, the son obeys her in her presence, and the house remains intact. That is, until Pecola Breedlove enters.

\textsuperscript{238} Ibid., 68-69.  
\textsuperscript{239} Ibid., 69.  
\textsuperscript{240} Ibid., 71.  
\textsuperscript{241} Ibid., 69.  
\textsuperscript{242} Morrison, 581.
When Junior witnesses Pecola receiving the same love and affection from the cat that his mother trades his love for, it only makes sense that either Pecola or the pet would take a hit from the spoiled boy. It also makes sense that Geraldine would seek to banish Pecola for the demise of the only living thing that brought her joy. Beneath that, Pecola is the “nigger” that Geraldine has already decided is everything that is wrong with the world (the outside world, away from her home). Now, however, Pecola’s presence is shining the light on all of the things wrong with Geraldine’s world. Gerladine has a spoiled son who is jealous of her cat. She also has an unnatural connection to it and experiences intimate pleasure from the cat. Pecola’s presence has infiltrated and soaked into her quiet existence to tell her that she is still a black woman. This reality is she lives and experiences events with other black people that she has tried very hard to ignore and life away from; like her newly added experience with Pecola in her house.

The choices that Geraldine has made thus far, inexplicably have led to a young, “nigger” girl in tears and tatters on her floor while the cat lies helplessly in her own arms. Geraldine’s price is humanity. A price she is happy to pay if it means solitude and comfortability. When Pecola threatens it, she eagerly seeks its restoration. Geraldine’s response is – with the effort to regain control of her normal – “Get out. . . You nasty little black bitch. Get out of my house.” With that, the cat is alive again, the nigger girl is back in her place and Geraldine can go on.

243 Morrison, The Bluest Eye, 74.
244 Ibid., 75.
245 Ibid.
246 Ibid.
pretending. Meanwhile, Pecola looks up to see the face of Jesus Christ\textsuperscript{247}. He is looking down at her\textsuperscript{248} and forgetting again that little, black girls have dreams and tears, too.

\textit{Here come the pros}

Escorting was a genius use of their bodily resources. As Marie explains to Pecola, her joy did not come with the sex – the detail of the act itself is a passage overlooked by the women\textsuperscript{249}. The joy came to her when she learned that something men asked to have free of charge was actually a commodity. Marie exclaims, “You could have knocked me over with a feather”\textsuperscript{250}. To these women, as unseemly as they are to the wives and illegal as their practice may be, they will gladly own it for the benefits in which they hold: independence.

At the start of their youthful ignorance and forward, the prostitutes learned what was made of women who sacrificed for men: emotional robbery, youth, and financial sacrifice. Morrison instead uses “Autumn” to write in defense of the choice to prostitute – as honestly as she writes from the perspectives of the women who choose to be wives and mothers. She sets herself apart from the remaining auteurs that quell the fears of readers when they meet norm-changing, street-running characters. “They did not belong to those generations of prostitutes created in novels”\textsuperscript{251}. They are not yours to be domesticated.

Morrison gives little history on Marie and her compatriots in \textit{The Bluest Eye} but greatly emphasizes their personalities. For example, she dedicates a maximum of eleven pages to the

\begin{footnotesize}
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\item \textsuperscript{247} Ibid.
\item \textsuperscript{248} \textit{The Bluest Eye}, 76.
\item \textsuperscript{249} Ibid., 47.
\item \textsuperscript{250} Ibid.
\item \textsuperscript{251} Ibid.
\end{itemize}
\end{footnotesize}
women within the whole of a 160-page book. Yet, Morrison is intent on using each page to
describe a different aspect of the women. In their introduction, the women meet the reader as
loosely regarded guardians for Pecola Breedlove. In their second entrance, their prostitution
game is on full display. The final time the reader sees the women in their most comfortable
forms – at home, doing their own things, relaxing under the sun – they are brushing off the
judgmental cries of Frieda who is with Claudia looking for Pecola. Morrison pointedly
expresses that the women are not victims of lives gone wrong but opportunists who witness the
shams perpetuated between genders. They see the ways that black women have to fight and work
hard all to be number two in their households and live with men who clearly sleep with other
women. Marie, China, and Poland, witness the hypocrisy of women that marry and take their
husband’s money for their own needs but do not call it prostitution. Their existence in The Bluest
Eye: 1) helps to shed light on some of the other kinds of black women working day-to-day, 2) is
not central to the fictional broken childhoods that stereotypically lead to prostitution and 3)
explains the life decision the three women feel will keep them in the farthest proximity from the
nuclear family.

Marie cared for at least one man yet as fast as he is a subject in her story he is gone. China would rather care for her hair than reminisce on any one man that she has encountered. Poland sings more than she speaks. Marie seems to appreciate human closeness most amongst the three, the main characters in her stories often being men and food. Albeit, her stories of romance run long but are appreciated by the peanut gallery of one – China – and the curious

252 Ibid., 43.
253 Ibid., 65.
254 Ibid., 83.
255 Ibid., 46.
256 Ibid., 44.
257 Ibid., 45.
Pecola. Nevertheless, even she could not bring herself to give away independence for the so-called benefits of shacking up or marrying in 1941 Ohio.

_The complexities of hustler_

The prostitutes are not products of circumstance—poverty, self-hatred, heartbreak, and/or ignorance did not lead them down the path of whoredom. In fact, when looking back on their youth they find regret in a time underspent on seeking out other ways to exploit their adult career paths. When they see Pecola, they do not envy her for her innocence. They are “as free as they were with each other” when it comes to speaking and being around Pecola. They often elicit a high level of confidence in the choice to follow the path of the prostitute.

The narration best and most directly explains the prostitutes’ disdain for societal norms. Morrison does not bother with details on their biographies. She speaks directly to the reader and tells us that the prostitutes are not typecasts; they are real women who have decided that the working girl’s life is the choice. Marie, Poland, and China hate men. Their unabashed, unapologetic, and unrelenting hatred represents a shared ideology among the women. This would make sense as it lives up to the disregard the women show for the liars within heterosexism, claiming that their path does not include regret. China, Poland, and Marie are the mirrors in which no one in town wishes to look.

It is possible that Morrison uses the introduction of the prostitutes to separate the popular image of hate and malice from that of streetwalkers. In an effort to soften the reader’s ideology

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258 Ibid., 47.
259 Ibid.
on prostitution, Morrison can focus her narrative on the positive influence that these three women effortlessly give to Pecola. She has a safe haven.

By the time the reader receives a proper introduction to Marie, China, and Poland they are not just prostitutes who enjoy deceiving men—taken or single—they are autonomous women. These women represent a *something else* with which black women today are still struggling: How to reject social norms for the good of a community that, at times, has fallen short of their needs? Forced on the reader are two loaded questions: What is it about a nuclear family that makes it as coveted as it is? Why do we sacrifice black women to achieve this?

The upstairs neighbors do not include children—although Morrison allows the reader small insight to Marie’s maternity during a conversation with Pecola. Neither China, Marie, nor Poland bother to keep a man around their house because they share similar apathies toward upholding a family structure. None of the three females holds a conventional job. The requirement to share wants and resources with another person is unattractive to all three of them.

The women’s payment for their definitions of freedom vary in importance of cost. Marie is morbidly overweight but maintains relationships with men at will. China can spend half of her day working on hairstyles and the other half enjoying a nightcap without fuss from a husband or child. Poland sings the blues to herself and Morrison has not written her as caring for much more than that.

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260 Ibid., 48.
261 Ibid.
262 Ibid., 47.
263 Ibid., 44.
264 Ibid., 49.
265 Ibid., 43-44.
Pauline can demand products and service from white storeowners who would otherwise balk at her because the well-heeled Fisher husband employs her\textsuperscript{266}. Geraldine holds respectability in her neighborhood, separate from who she calls the “niggers.”\textsuperscript{267} She does not engage with happiness per se, but she enjoys the comfortability of what many think happiness represents. A house, a husband with a job, a child, and fair skin\textsuperscript{268}. Mrs. MacTeer appears to have one goal in mind, to use the system she has found herself in as a way to keep her family above water. Mrs. MacTeer’s marriage is not speculated much by Morrison but they are written as not \textit{un}happy; her life is absent of tales of infidelity or aging grumpy anger constructed from unpaid bills or broken down furniture.

Still, Morrison decides to write these six women in strictly dichotomous terms. China, Marie, and Poland live outside of societal norms. Their money remains dependent on the men in and out of town\textsuperscript{269}. When they do not have the care for prostitution, they steal from their clients\textsuperscript{270}. The whores continue to consume themselves with looks but they stand unbound by society’s standards of those looks or how often to care or not care about their looks. The wives, on other hand, are fatigued all day but never consider leaving the comfort of the homemaker lifestyle. Children who know no better bog them down; husbands wrapped in their own problems of being black in America ignore them. Yet, the wives and whores refuse to swim across the gulfs they have imagined between each other.

\begin{flushleft}
\textsuperscript{266} Ibid., 101. \\
\textsuperscript{267} Ibid., 71. \\
\textsuperscript{268} Ibid., 70. \\
\textsuperscript{269} Ibid., 48. \\
\textsuperscript{270} Ibid.
\end{flushleft}
While many publications during Morrison’s early authorial years stuck to just four “controlling images of black womanhood”, Morrison does a deep dive into the real experiences of the black women that existed within and outside of these categories. Patricia Hill Collins, author and black feminist theorist defines these categories as follows:

1) **Mammy**: work is the exploitation of black women in lower-tier, often-domesticated work related to the “emotional nurturing and cleaning up after people, often for lower pay”. Her image is attributable to the likeable Aunt Jemima on syrup bottles because she is the docile, happy-to-please black woman. The long-lasting effect of this image is the belief that black women are born to serve and happy about their place. The Mammy does not want for a better life because fixing others is her life’s goal.

2) **Jezebel**: “represents a deviant black female sexuality” in order to rationalize the widespread rape and assaults against black women perpetrated by white men. What has developed along the years has been the cross-racial lines belief that no black female is too young to be seductive. White men believe they can never face guilt for misbehaving with a female of color because of her wily and sexual ways. Jezebels are dubious and their emotional and physical care should still come second to others because she has brought problems on herself. Insert faulty healthcare approaches here.

3) **The Black Lady**: is the “class-specific” image of a strong, overassertive, black woman that receives more than she deserves. She is educated, she has achieved a great deal but the excuse for the white community and some black men is that this makes her

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272 Ibid., 40.
273 Ibid., 81.
274 Ibid.
275 Ibid., 81.
controlling. During the years following the Civil Rights movement, the establishment of affirmative action was a means of providing racial balance in employment against Jim Crow era politics. Naturally, the ensuing belief is that The Black Lady only has a seat at the table because of “reverse racism,” not because of skill. She is unable to keep a black man in her home or raise children because she does not know how to provide a loving atmosphere for a family. She, essentially, is what kills the black community.

4) **Welfare Queen**: a “class-specific” problem child, hell-bent on stealing as much from taxpayers as possible without cause or care to earn her own living. The Welfare Queen was born out of the **Welfare Mother**: a woman who could birth children but could not afford them. The Welfare Mother depends on the state’s funds to assist her and her family throughout life. The Welfare Queen is a component of the demonization of public assistance. For the spokespeople – black women – it means a demonizing of their existence. Eventually, the public began to assume that black women were lazy and apathetic to caring for themselves.

There is a hypocrisy to the above definitions; black women cannot be too busy for a family because of their worldwide successes while birthing several children with little money to afford their care, performing demeaning laborious tasks while sleeping with many men in town. However, the system used to explain the existence of these women (meant to control white communities as much as black communities) built its ideals atop racism, a nonsensical idea to

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276 Ibid.
277 Ibid., 80.
278 Ibid., 79.
279 Ibid.
start. Morrison’s novel takes these identities and establishes how much fiction need be entertained for just one of these identities to exist on their own.
Chapter 4: Conclusion

Without casting shame on any particular female in *The Bluest Eye*, the reader views a sense of pride within every female presented. Morrison forces the reader to take conventional norms, reject the disdain, and disregard the regret for the paths that they deliberately chose. I do not attempt to victimize these women (while my stance is that they were victimized at birth), I merely state that they chose their lives and their circumstances created the mold within which they were to either break or acquiesce.

A deep analysis of these six women is important because Morrison included them for many reasons having to do with the ways in which a Pecola Breedlove or Claudia MacTeer grows up to inherit the prejudices against her own people and the self-hatred within. Whether as prostitutes or homemakers, the black woman in America has but two sticks and faces a scolding each time she is unable to build a home.

What Mrs. MacTeer teaches her girls is still Eurocentric in nature. For example, Mrs. MacTeer scrutinizes the influence of sex in her daughters’ lives. Never mind that black women have access to a fraction of the jobs in existence. Christianity is not just difficult for it is near impossible, as her blues songs indicate. When the prostitutes invite Frieda and Claudia upstairs to wait for Pecola, they cannot accept. As we learn, Frieda tells Marie (Claudia addressed her as The Maginot Line to the reader) her mother has informed the girls of the virtues of virginity, specifically, that Marie’s lot are ruined. Mrs. MacTeer reinforces this when she beats Frieda after believing her to be fraternizing sexually. Marie’s receipt of their judgment as well as an oral

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280 Morrison, *The Bluest Eye*, 82.
281 Ibid.
delivery of Mrs. MacTeer’s judgment was sour but firm; Marie did not care what they thought about her or sought not to care.

This distinction is important as many can attest to the generations of women punishing young, sassy children with the threat of treating them in the adult fashion for which they wished to be treated. Frieda knew only that Marie had been with Mr. Henry (two consensual adults) and that her mother did not favor the woman. Yet, she treated this stranger with such cold, harsh words. Meanwhile, Claudia held a silent appreciation for the free woman who dared to be different from those her mother knew; women that she, too, admired. The narrator did not offer an adult Claudia translation for this interpretation – as she did with the Shirley Temple cup – which tells me that her feelings on this did not stray through to adulthood. Her mother influenced her mindset but the other women she met piqued feelings in her, too.

Morrison’s writing on the powerful institutions that curated the outlooks of Pecola, Claudia, Frieda, Mrs. MacTeer, Pauline, Geraldine, Marie, China, and Poland are necessary because it will provide the reader with a larger context surrounding the above images. Authorities took pieces of what black women honestly endure and give their own reasoning (excuses) for why black women are how they are – with the threat that the world will crumble if it continues. The reader can better understand the many ways that all of the women tried wholeheartedly to live in an America that made no place for them. One can also see a clearer image of how each one’s approach did not go as successfully as one would hope.

282 Ibid., 63.
283 Ibid., 82.
284 Ibid., 82-83.
285 Ibid., 22.
My assertion is not that the prostitutes were the true winners. Marie is so overweight it scares the kids. China is obsessed with her hair, an element that is relentlessly unhidden. Poland, like Mrs. MacTeer, sings her blues instead of speaking through her troubles and coping. She knows pain, but without more from Morrison within the novel, the reader can only wonder about her; which is more than speculators did for black women when these images first circulated the minds of Americans.

These six women represent the many and varied ways that Morrison illustrates to the reader how black women can exist in the same time, approach the struggle differently and face problems still. Mrs. MacTeer is probably the best of all three mothers, by the accounts written by Morrison. Yet, her pain is so real that only Blues songs can alleviate some of the burden. In fact, without it Claudia remarks that there are only dark days. Poland is the least spoken of the hookers with very little written of her negatively or positively by Morrison yet she lives in her Blues songs, “of which she knew many,” almost exclusively.

*The Bluest Eye* is a window into the struggles of black women, with the influence of white supremacy turning pages on their livelihoods without a care that they have not read it through yet. Pauline has to guess her way through her story until she finds the Fishers. China knows what she wants but her stories keep her in the past. Geraldine does not live for wants as her belief is that fulfillment does not exist. Mrs. MacTeer’s focus on her family sets her apart, but her choice of blues songs is a rebellious one that keeps her at ease. Each of these women lives outside the norm of heterosexism and the above-prescribed identities. They are not problem children, although like Pecola, they long for those blue eyes.

286 Ibid., 43.
287 Ibid., 45.
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