



UNIVERSITAT DE  
BARCELONA

---

Facultat de Filologia i Comunicació

**Treball de Fi de Grau**

**Curs 2022-2023**

**WHY CAN'T I BE LIKE YOU? POLITICS OF (WHITE) REPRESENTATION  
AND ITS DAMAGING EFFECTS FOR THE BLACK COMMUNITY IN TONI  
MORRISON'S *THE BLUEST EYE***

Esther Ramírez Galán

Tutor: Rodrigo Andrés





Barcelona, 19 de Juny 2023

### Declaració d'autoria

Amb aquest escrit declaro que soc l'autor/autora original d'aquest treball i que no he emprat per a la seva elaboració cap altra font, incloses fonts d'Internet i altres mitjans electrònics, a part de les indicades. En el treball he assenyalat com a tals totes les citacions, literals o de contingut, que procedeixen d'altres obres. Tinc coneixement que d'altra manera, i segons el que s'indica a l'article 18 del capítol 5 de les Normes reguladores de l'avaluació i de la qualificació dels aprenentatges de la UB, l'avaluació comporta la qualificació de "Suspens".

Barcelona, a 19 Juny 2023

Signatura:

*I refuse the prison of “I” and choose the open spaces of “we”*

*We can be careful to avoid the imprisonment of the mind, the spirit, and the will of ourselves and those among whom we live. We can be careful of tolerating second-rate goals and second hand ideas.*

(Toni Morrison, 2020, p. 47)

*For*

*Rodrigo, thank you for your generosity in class, your invaluable guidance in this project and, above all, for so many touching readings. The world needs more people like you.*

*My husband, who always gave me wings to follow my dreams and supported me unconditionally during all these years.*

*And my children and mum, always so proud of my success.*

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

Abstract	4
Introduction	5
1: Power and the Discipline of the Body	7
2: American Family Values	11
3: Dick and Jane or Indoctrination from the Cradle	13
4: Dislocated dwellings: When the House is not a Home	16
5: Dislocated Identities: The Source of Self-Regard	25
Conclusions	33
Works cited	35

## **ABSTRACT**

Toni Morrison's first novel, *The Bluest Eye* (1970), tells the story of Pecola, an Afro-American little girl, in the United States of the 1940s. She and her family are in a vulnerable situation due to the way in which the concept of Americanness has been culturally constructed around discourses which are spread by institutions such as schools or by mass media, like cinema. This rhetoric, based on the superiority of the white "race", was devised to exclude the black community who, lacking representation, eventually internalize and validate their own inferiority. This end-of-degree paper aims to analyze the way in which such imposed exclusion affects some of the characters in two specific areas: on the one hand, how the concept of "home" becomes a space of violent cohabitation; on the other hand, the construction of self-identity when it is based on an alien cultural model.

**Keywords:** discourse, representation, home, violence, identity

## **RESUMEN**

*The Bluest Eye* (1970), la primera novela de Toni Morrison, narra la historia de Pecola, una niña afroamericana, en los Estados Unidos de la década de los cuarenta. Tanto ella como su familia se hallan en una posición de vulnerabilidad marcada por la manera en la que el concepto de americanidad ha sido construido culturalmente en torno a discursos propagados por instituciones reconocidas como la escuela o por medios de difusión masiva como el cine. Esa retórica, basada en la superioridad de la "raza" blanca, está diseñada para excluir a la comunidad afroamericana, quien, carente de representación, acaba interiorizando y validando su propia inferioridad. El presente trabajo de fin de grado intenta analizar de qué manera esa exclusión forzada afecta a los personajes en dos áreas concretas: por un lado, cómo el concepto de "hogar" entendido como un espacio de cohabitación se torna violento y por otro, la construcción de la propia identidad cuando se basa en un modelo cultural ajeno.

**Palabras clave:** discurso, representación, hogar, violencia, identidad

## INTRODUCTION:

*Our very lives depend on the ethics of strangers, and most of us are always strangers to other people*

Bill D. Moyers, American Journalist

Seldom does one come across a writer like Toni Morrison, whose work is so socially committed and, at the same time, so full of poetry. So much so, that the act of reading becomes sometimes painful and enjoyable at the same time. Morrison's novels revolve around the Black American experience, the struggle of African Americans to find themselves and their cultural identity in a hostile environment where blacks seems to be not represented. Her first novel, *The Bluest Eye*, was published in 1970 and tells the story of a young black girl named Pecola Breedlove, growing up in Lorain, Ohio during the 1940s. This is a kaleidoscopic work that allows for multiple readings; among others, the novel explores themes of racism, beauty, and self-esteem and examines the way in which they affect the lives of African-American men, women and children. It also foregrounds the harsh realities of growing up as a minority in America, and the lasting impact of societal and cultural pressure on individuals who are deemed "other."

When I first read the novel I found myself thinking that, if we are "homo empathicus", that is, if we are naturally endowed with the capacity to show empathy to our fellowmen, what are the circumstances that foster hate to human beings who are considered different? As Morrison puts it, "how do individuals resist or become complicit in the process of alienizing others' demonization?" (2020, p.18). Even more, how do environmental factors, childhood experiences, social relationships and the surrounding culture affect self-perception? How liveable is a life when you are a foreigner in your own home? At that stage of meditation, I remembered Michel Foucault's theories about power and how it is not centralized in a particular person or group, but diffused throughout society and embedded in social structures, institutions and practises. I thought that Foucault's ideas were especially relevant for the analysis of *The Bluest Eye* on the grounds that Morrison denounces how the concept of Americanness, artificially constructed to extol white cultural and aesthetic models, is ingrained in the population from early childhood. This construction of whiteness as the normative identity not only is perpetuated by the media, but also by institutions like schools. However, from the very

first page of the novel, it becomes apparent that this model of identity is unattainable for the black community.

The novel presents a world where whiteness is associated with privilege, beauty, and success, while blackness is associated with inferiority, ugliness and failure. I wanted to explore the way in which such dichotomy was portrayed in relation to two specific aspects of the novel: firstly, houses as spaces that constitute a blurred line between public and private violence and how they become a reflection of their inhabitants. Secondly, the source of self-regard for Pecola, Pauline and Claudia, that is, how female identities are constructed when they need to confront white beauty standards which are oppressive and exclusionary for them. The process of writing the following pages helped me to avoid what Toni Morrison called the “comfort of pitying her (Pecola)” (2019, p. XII); instead, I have tried to analyze and process how the circulating discourses to which we are exposed jeopardize our ethical response towards other human beings neutralizing thus our natural empathy. Morrison is also particularly critical with the black community, which, instead of acting as a cohesive element for its members, interiorizes white standards and behaviours as their own. However harsh her criticism towards the black community, it is also apparent that Morrison believes in the power of collective thought and exhorts us readers to question and break prevailing discourses. Only if we are able to establish a relationship with our neighbour in terms of humanity, acknowledging that their needs, dreams and desires are as legitimate as our own, will we be able to counteract discriminating gazes. Perhaps this is still a utopia, yet certainly writers like Morrison contribute to dismantle social, cultural, gender and racial barriers.

## 1: POWER AND THE DISCIPLINE OF THE BODY

*There are forms of oppression and domination which become invisible - the new normal.*

Michel Foucault

In the Foreword section of the 2019 edition of *The Bluest Eye*, Toni Morrison relates how the genesis of her novel dated back from a conversation with one of her childhood friends when they started elementary school. That girl – an Afro-American child – yearned for blue eyes lest other people (inherently white individuals) would see her as ugly and grotesque. As the author comments, “implicit in her desire was racial self-loathing” (2019, p. XI). This seemingly innocent craving for a different facial trait led Morrison to explore the consequences of internalizing certain assumptions that circulate at various levels in society and that permeate the individual by means of continuous – be it explicit or subliminal– repetition. Even more relevant, Morrison wants to foreground how those assumptions affect the individual in terms of self-regard and self-esteem.

Yet, what are those Manichean social forces that operate in the undermining, homogenization and dehumanizing of the black “race” as a whole? In order to understand how particular discourses are spread within a given society, I would like to introduce Michel Foucault’s theories with regard to power and how it is exercised. Foucault traced the manner in which the systems of power had evolved over the years: from the total power of medieval absolutist kings (which emanated directly from God) to a more recent and insidious forms of domination based on the self-discipline of the individual. He also explored what were the social contexts that allowed for those gradual changes to occur. One of the regulatory mechanisms of power and knowledge that the philosopher mentions in his work *Discipline and Punishment: The Birth of the Prison* (1977) is the Panopticon, an architectural design envisaged for the construction of penitentiary buildings. It was a system based on the isolation of prisoners from other inmates. Convicts were aware of being under continuous surveillance by unseen guards placed in a high central tower. Unable to know whether security wards were or not in the tower and afraid of being



punished if they did not comply with internal regulations, prisoners eventually internalized continual surveillance and disciplined their bodies behaving accordingly.

Power, as reported by Foucault, “reaches into the very grain of individuals, touches their bodies and inserts itself into their actions and attitudes, their discourses learning processes and everyday lives” (1980, p.39). In essence, power – in Foucauldian terms– consists in a relationship between individuals whereby personal actions have an impact on the collective. Yet, unlike former physical forms of violence, power operates not at the level of the body but of the psyche, pushing individuals to perform socially in a manner they would never do were the circumstances different.

Power is supported by another pivotal element in Foucault’s theories, namely knowledge. The relationship between both is crucial, for

Power is strong because [...] far from preventing knowledge, power produces it. If it has been possible to constitute a knowledge of the body, this has been by way of an ensemble of military and educational disciplines. It was on the basis of power over the body that a physiological, organic knowledge of it became possible. (Foucault, 1980, p. 59)

To understand how power and knowledge interact as coercive forces, as disciplinary elements within society, we also need to introduce the concept of discourse. As Foucault defines it, discourse is a system which determines what is true or false in a particular field. This is key to understand the following sections of this work, because

‘Truth’ is centred on the form of scientific discourse and the institutions which produce it; it is subject to constant economic and political incitement (the demand for truth, as much for economic production as for political power); it is the object, under diverse forms, of immense diffusion and consumption (circulating through apparatuses of education and information whose extent is relatively broad in the social body, notwithstanding certain strict limitations); it is produced and transmitted under the control, dominant if not exclusive, of Power/ Knowledge a few great political and economic apparatuses (university, army, writing, media); lastly, it is the issue of a whole political debate and social confrontation ( 'ideological' struggles).

(Foucault, 1980, pp.131-132)

‘Truth’, therefore, is a carefully, purposely constructed discourse articulated within the different social apparatuses and whatever or whoever is outside its threshold would be, consequently, considered to be false and menacing. By way of illustration, the binomial power/knowledge is found in human sciences, acknowledged source of axiomatic truths that become circulating discourses. Let us think, for example, of the alleged scientific racism; in order to provide “objective” arguments to justify the subjugation and enslavement of black people, scientists of the 17<sup>th</sup> century devised a theory known as polygenism which claimed that human races belonged to different species. Needless to say, dubious techniques such as craniometry, or the measure of cranial proportions, were contrived to prove the white racial superiority. Those pseudo-scientist went as far as to claim that the black “race” was prone to disease and, therefore, condemned to extinction. The scientific discourse, accordingly, made black people disposable.

One could think that such rhetoric is no longer valid, though nothing could be further from the truth. Recent accounts of crime offences in the United States <sup>1</sup> have given ground to assumptions of intrinsic criminality among the black “race”, which justifies a higher rate of incarceration among Black-Americans. What those manipulated studies intentionally do not reveal is the fact that violent behaviours – although not justifiable – may obey to social, political or racial oppression. Therefore, such biased statistics provide “objective” evidence and justification for racist doctrines even in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Returning to structures of power, Foucault points out how the role of the family is also manipulated with specific purposes:

The family is no longer to be just a system of relations inscribed in a social status, a kinship system, a mechanism for the transmission of property. It is to become a dense, saturated, permanent, continuous physical environment which envelops, maintains and develops the child's body [...] the conjugal

---

<sup>1-</sup> For more accurate figures and statistics regarding crime in the United States visit the Office of Justice Programs, U.S. Department of Justice: <https://www.ojjdp.gov/ojstatbb/>

bond no longer serves only, nor even perhaps primarily, to establish the junction of two lines of descent, but to organise the matrix of the new adult individual. (Foucault, 1980, pp.172-173)

In the following section I intend to analyze how the concept of family, specifically of the traditional American family, has permeated the political discourse and how this is directly linked with Toni Morrison's novel.

## 2: AMERICAN FAMILY VALUES

*The family has always been the cornerstone of American society. Our families nurture, preserve, and pass on to each succeeding generation the values we share and cherish, values that are the foundation of our freedom*

Ronald Reagan (Proclamation 4999 - National Family Week, 1982)

Over the past half century, candidates to the White House – no matter their political allegiance – shared a similar outlook with regard to family values and the necessity to bring their ethics to the public arena. Because the way in which children are brought up by parents will determine in great measure their future metamorphosis into adults (according to Foucauldian theories previously presented), the principles that must regulate the family as a nuclear structure are perceived as one of the foundations of democracy, insofar as they may play an essential role in the solution of social problems such as crime or poverty.

However, two important questions arise: what are family values and who defines them? Also, what is the definition of family? Elaine Tyler May claims that the concept “family values” is charged with political implications since

Under the banner of ‘family values’ we find opposition to legal abortion; support for prayer in schools; opposition to civil rights for gays and lesbians; support for censorship of the arts, movies and popular culture; welfare reform; [...] ‘family values’ is a term often used as a code and a marker of race and class. (2003, pp.8-9)

Those political implications reveal two main facts: on the one hand, that family values are constructed by the powers-that-be and, even more important, that they are not static, but adapted to social needs. Tayler also points out that “anxieties about the family emerge at times when national identity, as defined and understood by the American middle class, appears to be threatened by immigrants, [...] racial or sexual minorities” (2003, p.10)

*The Bluest Eye* covers two historical periods of major social turmoil: the first one being the moment in which the novel was written, coinciding with the Civil Rights Movement during the 1950s and 1960s. Black Americans fought to achieve equal rights under the law of the United States. Even though enslavement had been officially abolished for almost a century by then, discrimination and apartheid still prevailed. Furthermore, the plot of the novel occurs in 1941, the pre-war period, characterized by a massive exodus of rural dwellers to the cities hunting for a steady job in the emerging factories. Afro-American workers found themselves immersed in the capitalist wheel, as wartime jobs paid well. Consumerism, therefore, was a threat to social order inasmuch as black people could aspire to a social status similar to that of white citizens.

The concept of traditional American family, especially in the 1950s and 1960s, was specifically devised to become ingrained in the population and remain unchanged and unchallenged. The prototypical nuclear household followed a heteronormative model: the heterosexual couple that matched the white, Anglo-Saxon, Protestant paradigm. Analogous to family values, therefore, family is also a construct whereby each member has a very well defined and circumscribed role: while men are the source of income, women must take care of the household and safeguard moral values. Children, on the other hand, are “moral containers” that will become the responsible and exemplar citizens of the future who, in turn, will also initiate a new familiar cycle of the same type.

This mythic traditional American family model, however, was not available to all American peoples, and definitely did not represent the experience of African-Americans. Very few of the characters of Toni Morrison’s novel are part of a structured family; we know that Pauline Breedlove’s mother, Mrs. Williams, “got a job cleaning and cooking for a white minister on the other side of town” (2019, p.110) or that Pauline herself found “a permanent job in the home of a well-to-do family whose members were affectionate, appreciative and generous” (2019, p, 125). This suggests that, more often than not, roles were reversed with severe consequences for the characters’ self-regard, as they cannot find representation in a discourse made by and for white middle class citizens.

### 3: DICK AND JANE OR INDOCTRINATION FROM THE CRADDLE

*Education is indoctrination if you're white - subjugation if you're black.*

James A. Baldwin

It is no coincidence that Toni Morrison's opening lines in *The Bluest Eye* are a fragment which imitates the style of the Dick and Jane series, books published between 1930 and 1965 devised to teach children how to read based on a "look-say" method of reading. The school, as an institution, constitutes an authoritative organization that settles down certain principles; in essence, schools are the source of canonical precepts. The word *canon*, as Adelaide Morris defines it, "is a mighty word, a word that decrees, regulates, codifies and constitutes [...] the canon we shoot at those who are unlucky enough to live outside or disobey our rules" (1985, p.468). Disguised as an innocent reading, the Dick and Jane booklets were sowing the seeds of gender roles, class consciousness and racism. In other words, a large number of generations of American children were indoctrinated into a white, heteronormative and patriarchal way of thinking. Consequently, those who did not conform to the canon were tagged as second-class Americans.

The characters of Dick and Jane are flat, mere archetypes or abstractions of the "ideal" American citizen. Father is at the center of the family, a dutiful husband and a loving father; Mother, on the other hand, is second in the hierarchical structure: a domestic housewife subordinated to her husband, willingly devoted to the care of the house and the nurturing of her offspring. Dick and Jane, in turn, are small versions of their parents who mimic their performance. This paradigmatic family most surely projected the idea among Americans that everybody could live the pastel-coloured life of Dick and Jane. Morrison, though, wants to debunk such assumption and depict how those canons prove detrimental for the characters of her novel. Using Debra T. Werrlein words,

While offering a sharply different version of 1940s family and childhood, Morrison suggests that familial "pathologies" do not simply spring from

individual shortcomings. Just as the Dick and Jane stories equate white privilege with a historyless version of Americanness, the poverty and suffering of Morrison's Breedlove family symbolizes America's brutal history of racial persecution in the United States. The Breedloves emerge from a history of a race-based class structure of American society that generates its own pathologies (2005, p.59)

Because Pecola is black and poor, her life could never mirror Dick and Jane's world. Actually, the most Pecola can aspire to is only a crude imitation of a lifestyle which is far from her reach. When Maureen Peal first meets her for the first time, she claims: "Pecola? Wasn't that the name of the girl in *Imitation of Life*? (Morrison, 2019, p.65), in reference to the 1934 drama. In the film, a light-brown-skinned girl called Peola rebels against her family and ethnicity, going so far as to repudiate her mother, whom she blames for her blackness. Peola rejects her black body to pass for white and adopt the empowered white social position that she associates with success and beauty. Intertextuality between *The Bluest Eye* and *Imitation of Life* serves Morrison to establish certain parallelism between the two characters: just as Peola repudiates her body, Pecola prays every night "Please God", she whispered into the palm of her hand, 'Please make me disappear' [...] Try as she might, she could never get her eyes to disappear. So what was the point? They were everything. Everything was there, in them" (Morrison, 2019, p. 43). What she fails to understand is that the problem does not lie in *her* eyes, but in the racialized gaze of those who make her invisible because she does not conform to the standard of American identity.

Toni Morrison explores in her novel the cruel dichotomy between the white-bread world that fosters Dick and Jane booklets and the brutal circumstances that the Breedloves must endure. Morrison begins by describing a beautiful green and white house with a red door inhabited by a happy family who owns lovely pets and who is visited by dear friends. The paragraph is repeated again, this time disposing of punctuation and capital letters, and even a third time, in which spaces and punctuation have been eliminated. This repetition, similar to a litany, has a double agenda: on the one hand to highlight the pointlessness of reproducing a discourse which is interiorized without being questioned or problematized. On the other hand, just as the seasonal structure of *The Bluest Eye*, repetition also evokes how these ideas are passed through generations over the years.

Yet what happens when the mirror in which you have to look at does not turn the image that you expect because you are different? How do those hegemonic standards imposed from early childhood affect adults and impressionable children in terms of self-doubt and self-esteem? Although the answers to these questions can be analysed from different perspectives, I want to explore how the house in *The Bluest Eye*, understood both as dwelling and community, becomes a hostile environment when it cannot comply with the circulating discourses imposed by the powers that be. Or, in other words, the way dwellings contribute to create an adverse milieu that forges the negative self-perception of the individual and determines (although does not justify) their behaviour. Because, borrowing Dana Teach's words, "the Dick and Jane series illustrate a crucial point: representation matters" (2021, p.7)



#### **4: DISLOCATED DWELLINGS: WHEN THE HOUSE IS NOT A HOME**

*...it is precisely in these banalities that the unhomely stirs, as the violence of a racialized society falls most enduringly on the details of life: where you can sit, or not; how you can live, or not; what you can learn, or not; who you can love, or not.*

Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*

*A house is made of walls and beams; a home is built of love and dreams*

Ralph Waldo Emerson

It is not by chance that houses are omnipresent elements in Toni Morrison's novels. Most of her stories originate, are set in, or revolve around some form of house. According to Mar Gallego, "Toni Morrison investigates the complex relationship between African American houses and housing [...] Morrison materializes her characters' frustrations and preoccupations by means of the love-hate relationship they have with their surroundings" (2022, p.115). To do so, she endows dwellings with interrelated dimensions which confer them a distinct personality, similar to any other character in the novel. In other words, houses are not mere containers, but the psychological and symbolic representation of their dwellers. In *The Bluest Eye*, Morrison uses houses – whose meaning is stretched to refer not only to buildings but also to the community as a space of cohabitation – as spatial elements that embed social criticism to the economic conditions of blacks. Such conditions are also determined by whether the colour of their skin has a darker or lighter shade. Otherwise stated, how the black community of Lorraine, Ohio, has internalized white racist discourses as their own, so they can condemn to ostracism one of their most vulnerable members, namely Pecola. Ultimately, racist rhetoric is the reason why the soil of Lorraine "is bad for certain kind of flowers. Certain seeds will not bear" (Morrison, 2019, p.204), a beautiful metaphor to denounce that the stereotype of America as the land of opportunity where everyone can go and do as they please, be what they want to be, and make their dreams come true is nothing but a constructed white fallacy.

It is also through houses that we can witness the struggle of the inhabitants of Lorraine to fit in a society whose rules are made by and for white Americans and where they cannot find representation. Claudia sadly recognizes that “being a minority in both *caste* and class, we moved about anyway on the hem of life, struggling to consolidate our weaknesses and hang on [...] Our peripheral existence, however, was something we had learned to deal with - probably because it was abstract” (Morrison, 2019, p.15, my italics). The deliberate use of the word *caste* suggests an American society divided on the basis of wealth and race, and those like the McTeers or the Breedloves experience, in Morrison’s words, “what it is to have no home in this place. To be set adrift from the one you knew. What it is to live at the edge of towns that cannot bear your company” (2020, p.109).

Marjorie Garber analyses what houses represent for most Americans, namely

As a space of and for fantasy, a space both inside and outside the psyche, a house can function as if it were capable of being the original lost object capable of giving us what we want – the space of wholeness and completeness, of perfectibility, of fulfilled desire. Home is more than a place, and more even than an ideology in these uses: it is the ground of possibility, a place of beginning and ending. But more and more it is also a *conscious fiction* (2000, p.69 my italics)

I find this last statement especially relevant to *The Bluest Eye*, for houses are deeply interwoven with their inhabitants and the fictional Dick and Jane spaces they cannot recreate. Houses, therefore, become representations of the self, yet where security and stability should be found, we encounter trouble, disorder and violence. According to Claire Cooper Marcus, “the house as a symbol of the self is deeply engrained in the American ethos” (1974, p.132) to the point that those who cannot build or buy their own housing cannot be equated to the American self-made man. Mar Gallego also notices that “property ownership is also acknowledged as the only way to access both citizenship and equal rights in the United States” (2012, p. 117). The importance of having a place to dwell is, therefore, of utmost importance in *The Bluest Eye*. When Cholly Breedlove burns up his house leaving the family outdoors and without shelter, Pecola goes to live

temporarily with the MacTeers. The narrator, Claudia, then states “Outdoors, we knew, was the real terror of life [...] to be slack enough to put oneself outdoors, or heartless enough to put one’s own kin outdoors - that was criminal” (Morrison, 2019, p.15), and she goes on, “knowing that there was such a thing as outdoors bred in us a hunger for property, for ownership [...]. Renting blacks cast furtive glances at these owned yards and porches” (Morrison, 2019, p.16).

This craving for a property, for rooting in a place to call one’s own, is closely related to the concept of home understood as a safe haven. A place to live with a loving family, to welcome friends, to build memories, to find a sense of peace. In spite of the fact that, as Alcina Pereira and Alda Maria Correia point out, in *The Bluest Eye* “poverty and ethnics establish much of the difference between a house and a home” (2018, p.20), the MacTeers’ is the household closer to a safe place. The house may be “old, cold and green” (Morrison, 2019, p.8), but it is of their property and holds a nuclear and stable family: Mr. MacTeer is a hard-working man, cold as winter in Claudia’s view, but supportive and caring of his offspring, “a Vulcan guarding the flames” (Morrison, 2019, p.59). Mrs. MacTeer, on the other hand, is depicted as a stern and harsh mother who is always complaining with “fussy soliloquies” (Morrison, 2019, p.22). Due to the fact that Claudia is still a young girl and she is not aware of all the circumstances that her family must endure, she thinks her mother is angry at Frieda and her even when they are sick. However burdened by their circumstances, though, the MacTeers give shelter to Pecola and theirs is the only house, together with the prostitutes’, where she is welcomed and accepted. The MacTeers reveal themselves as loving and highly protective parents to their daughters. Mrs. MacTeer acknowledges her wrong behaviour when Pecola has her first period, showing affection to her and Frieda: “then she pulled both of them toward her, their heads against her stomach. Her eyes were sorry. ‘All right, all right. Now stop crying. I didn’t know’” (Morrison, 2019, p.29). Similarly, when Frieda told her parents that Mr. Henry abused her, they react violently against the intruder: “He (Mr. MacTeer) threw our old tricycle at his head and knocked him off the porch [...] then Mama hit him with a broom [...] and Daddy shot at him” (Morrison, 2019, p.98). It is precisely this sense of home and family which acts as a redemptive force for Claudia and Frieda. Because they have been raised wrapped by the love of their parents they are capable of showing empathy towards Pecola, unlike other characters in the novel.

Yet if there is a house in the story that portrays the characters' sense of self and self-worth (or rather, self-unworthiness) that is the Breedlove's. As referred earlier in this paper, Morrison introduces the paradigmatic American house in the opening lines through the Dick and Jane primer:

Here is the house. It is green and white. It has a red door. It is very pretty. Here is the family. Mother, Father, Dick, and Jane live in the green-and-white house. They are very happy. See Jane. She has a red dress. She wants to play. Who will play with Jane? See the cat. It goes meow-meow. Come and play. Come play with Jane. The kitten will not play. See Mother. Mother is very nice. Mother, will you play with Jane? Mother laughs. Laugh, Mother, laugh. See Father. He is big and strong. Father, will you play with Jane? Father is smiling. Smile, Father, smile. See the dog. Bowwow goes the dog. Do you want to play with Jane? See the dog run. Run, dog, run. Look, look. Here comes a friend. The friend will play with Jane. They will play a good game. Play, Jane, play. (Morrison, 2019, p.1)

This is the model to which the Breedloves compare themselves, a house described in bright colours where life flows happily and harmonically. A scene which is “described in such perfection that the irony in it is undeniable” (Eliza de Sousa, 2019, p.505). Morrison deconstructs this idyllic settlement when she introduces Pecola's house:

There is an abandoned store on the southeast corner of Broadway and Thirty-Fifth Street in Lorain, Ohio. It does not recede into its background of leaden sky, nor harmonize with the gray frame houses and black telephone poles around it. Rather, it foists itself on the eye of the passerby in a manner that is both irritating and melancholy [...] the Breedloves lived there, nestled together in the storefront. Festering together in the debris of a realtor's whim. They slipped in and out of the box of peeling gray, making no stir in the neighborhood, no sound in the labor force, and no wave in the mayor's office. Each member of the family in his own cell of consciousness, each making his own patchwork quilt of reality—collecting fragments of experience here, pieces of information there. From the tiny impressions gleaned from one

another, they created a sense of belonging and tried to make do with the way they found each other. (Morrison, 2019, pp.31-32)

The Breedloves live in such a dreary house not for a temporary lack of income, but because “they were poor and black” (Morrison 2019, p.36) underlining even more forcefully the impression of a hostile dwelling: this is not the house they would have chosen, but the only available for a wretched black family. The house is *ugly*, an epithet that will be constantly associated to Pecola and her family. It is dull and anodyne to the extent that it does not match even with the grey sky and constitutes an aggressive view for the passengers. Additionally, despite being located in a place with a constant flow of people, the Breedloves are invisible, their existence a fragmented quilt made of negative experiences which nobody acknowledges because they have become outcasts within their own community. Inside the house, the sense of fragmentation is further enhanced: there is only a living room, a bedroom and a kitchen. The bedroom, which is shared by Cholly, Pauline and their offspring, is a space of shared violence where they “fought each other with a darkly brutal formalism” (Morrison, 2019, p.41). Any object which fills the house contributes to produce a sense of disintegration, of soullessness as they do not possess any memory – be it positive or negative – attached:

There is nothing more to say about the furnishings. They were anything but describable, having been conceived, manufactured, shipped, and sold in various states of thoughtlessness, greed, and indifference. The furniture had aged without ever having become familiar. People had owned it, but never known it. [...] There were no memories among those pieces. Certainly no memories to be cherished. Occasionally an item provoked a physical reaction: an increase of acid irritation in the upper intestinal tract, a light flush of perspiration at the back of the neck as circumstances surrounding the piece of furniture were recalled. The sofa, for example. It had been purchased new, but the fabric had split straight across the back by the time it was delivered. (Morrison, 2019, pp.33-34)

Morrison recreates an environment which radiates sadness and frustration, feelings that impregnate their inhabitants. Much of the Breedloves’ despise for themselves stems from

the fact that they have interiorized ugliness (a hideousness imposed by the white beauty stereotypes) as inherent to them. Cholly and Sammy cope with ugliness through violence, whereas Pauline wears hers as a martyrdom, using Cholly's sins as a means of personal redemption. Pecola, the most vulnerable member of the family, hides behind her ugliness believing it to be the cause that everybody ignores or despises her:

It had occurred to Pecola some time ago that if her eyes (...) were different, that is to say, beautiful, she herself would be different (...). If she looked different, beautiful, maybe Cholly would be different, and Mrs. Breedlove too. (...) Each night, without fail, she prayed for blue eyes (Morrison, 2019, p.44)

Pecola is raised in a violent environment where she witnesses daily fights between her alcoholic father and her embittered mother, where she is abused repeatedly by the former and where she feels ignored and despised by the community.

Because in the community of Lorrain, Ohio, there are racial differences among its members: the lighter their skin, the whiter their gaze. Morrison describes a homogeneous class of women that discipline their bodies to "conform the needs of a white-dominated society" (Julia Eichelberger, 1999, p. 15). They come from places with beautiful names, live in prosperous and quiet neighbourhoods without unemployment. Their demeanour is strictly controlled, they straighten their hair and learn how to behave. In short, they learn "how to get rid of the funkiness. The dreadful funkiness of passion, the funkiness of nature, the funkiness of the wide range of human emotions" (Morrison, 2019, p. 81). One of such girls is Geraldine, who instils in her son Junior a sense of superiority because their skin is sugar brown: "she had explained to him the difference between colored people and niggers [...] Colored people were neat and quiet; niggers were dirty and loud. He belonged to the former group" (Morrison, 2019, p.85). Junior, perhaps in an act of defiance towards her mother, invites Pecola (who belongs to the group of niggers according to Geraldine's standards) to his house, not out of friendliness but of cruelty.

The description of Geraldine's house clearly harmonizes with the Dick and Jane's model. Pecola is in awe when she contemplates a place so radically different from hers:

How beautiful, she thought. What a beautiful house. There was a big red-and-gold Bible on the dining-room table. Little lace doilies were everywhere—on arms and backs of chairs, in the center of a large dining table, on little tables. Potted plants were on all the windowsills. A color picture of Jesus Christ hung on a wall with the prettiest paper flowers fastened on the frame. She wanted to see everything slowly, slowly. [...] another room, even more beautiful than the first. More doilies, a big lamp with green-and-gold base and white shade. There was even a rug on the floor, with enormous dark-red flowers (Morrison, 2019, p. 87)

Yet she is not welcomed in that cosy environment either. Junior throws her mother's black cat at Pecola's face. In my opinion, Morrison uses the black cat (which happens to have bluish green eyes) as a metaphorical element to foretell the failure of basing one's self-esteem, worth and acceptance merely on (white) aesthetics. The cat's bluish eyes do not save it from Junior's mistreatment, just as Pecola's blue eyes will be possible only after her mental breakdown. When Geraldine arrives and looks at Pecola she remembers the mass of wild, dirty, uneducated, pack-like black girls she has come across and expels the frightened girl from the house calling her "nasty little black bitch" (Morrison, 2019, p.90). Girls like Pecola menace Geraldine's safe environment because "grass would grow where they live" (Morrison, 2019, p.90).

This is not the only house Pecola is expelled from. A similar episode takes place when Frieda and Claudia go in search of Pecola to the house where her mother works. As they approach the area inhabited by wealthy whites, the landscape changes drastically:

The streets changed; houses looked more sturdy, their paint was newer, porch posts straighter, yards deeper. (...). The lakefront houses were the loveliest. Garden furniture, ornaments, windows like shiny eyeglasses, and no sign of life. The backyards of these houses fell away in green slopes down to a strip of sand, and then the blue Lake Erie, lapping all the way to Canada. The orange-patched sky of the steel-mill section never reached this part of town. This sky was always blue. We reached Lake Shore Park, a city park laid out with rosebuds, fountains, bowling greens, picnic tables. It was empty now,

but sweetly expectant of clean, white, well-behaved children and parents who would play there above the lake in summer before half-running, half-stumbling down the slope to the welcoming water. Black people were not allowed in the park, and so it filled our dreams. (Morrison, 2019, p.103)

The pastel-colour, Dick and Jane-like description of the environment is in marked contrast with the outskirts where Pecola and the rest of the black community live. All that is tidy, clean, in contact with non-human nature is associated to whiteness and forbidden for black people, who are denied access to these neighbourhoods. The house where Mrs. Breedlove works is also in tune with others in the vicinity; in its pristine kitchen, Pecola accidentally drops a pan on the floor her mother had just cleaned. Even though she might have burnt her leg with the hot liquid, far from receiving some kind of comfort, she undergoes violence and abuse from her mother, who asks her to leave the house. The humiliation Pecola must endure is even aggravated when her mother repudiates her: “‘who were they, Polly?’ . ‘Don’t worry *none*, baby’” (Morrison, 2019, p.107, my italics).

It is not only Pecola’s nuclear family who is unable to show her love and protection. Morrison is especially critical with the whole community for their failure to show any kind of empathy or care towards her because they are helplessly attached to the circulating ideas of family and beauty imposed by the mainstream culture. There is an apparent lack of sorority among women, as observed by Eliza de Sousa in her statement “the older women in Pecola’s life and in her community also failed to help her cope with her loneliness, which proves that, even having experienced tough times growing up, women were not ready to act in favour of one of them who is still aging and changing” (2019, p.513). Claudia, at the end of the novel, admits that they all took part in Pecola’s insanity and contributed to her isolation: “(we) never, never went near [...] because we had failed her. [...] So we avoided Pecola Breedlove forever [...] we rearranged lies and called it truth” (Morrison, 2019, pp.203-204). Men, too, are victims of the neglecting community; I daresay that Morrison builds carefully the circumstances that led Cholly to commit the most abhorrent of the offences. We know that he was abandoned by his mother and was raised by his Aunt Jimmy. Due to her early death, Cholly has to leave his birth town in search of a father that despises him. Alone in the world,



Cholly was free. Dangerously free. Free to feel whatever he felt – fear, guilt, guilt, shame, love, grief, pity [...] Abandoned in a junk heap by his mother, rejected by a crap game by his father, there was nothing more to lose. He was alone with his own perceptions and appetites. [...] Having no idea how to raise children, he could not even comprehend what such a relationship should be [...] He reacted to them, and his reactions were based on what he felt at the moment (Morrison, 2019, pp.157-159)

Even though the incestuous raping of his daughter cannot be justified by any means, Morrison wants the reader to understand that Cholly did not grow up in an environment where he was successfully nurtured, and therefore, as Rebecca Andrews exposes, “with so little to guide him, it is no surprise that this lack of nurturing love would catch up with him in a devastating way” (2010, p.141). In his coming of age, nobody taught him how to relate to others or how to express love. As such, the only way he finds to deal with women is through sex and violence.

Houses and communities, as has been expounded in this section, fail to provide a sense of belonging or security to the characters. On the contrary, they constitute spaces of physical and psychological upheaval. The Breedloves, and more specifically Pecola, are epitomes of Homi Bhabha’s concept of the “unhomely”, “the shock of recognition of the world-in-the-home, the home-in-the-world” (1992, p. 141), the blurred line between domestic and public violence and discrimination. Because the community is broken, it fails to act as a cohesive force for its members, since many of the characters who embrace the rhetoric of the middle-class white culture feel the need to separate themselves from lower-class blacks, whom they associate with criminality and laziness.

## 5: DISLOCATED IDENTITIES: THE SOURCE OF SELF-REGARD

*Then they had grown. Edging into life from the back door. Becoming. Everybody in the world was in a position to give them orders. White women said, "Do this." White children said, "Give me that." White men said, "Come here." Black men said, "Lay down."*

Toni Morrison, *The Bluest Eye*

*I need to see my own beauty and to continue to be reminded that **I am enough**, that I am worthy of love without effort, that I am beautiful, that the texture of my hair and that the shape of my curves, the size of my lips, the color of my skin, and the feelings that I have are all worthy and okay.*

Tracee Ellis Ross

Central to Toni Morrison's agenda in her first novel is to problematize the concept of identity for the black American community, that is to say, what is the source of their self-regard, what their self-perception is made of. Judith Butler affirms that "when the 'I' seeks to give an account of itself, it can start with itself, but it will find that this self is already implicated in a social temporality [...] The reason for this is that the 'I' has no story of its own that is not also the story of a relation – or set of relations – to a set of norms" (2005, pp. 7-8). I find Butler's statement particularly relevant to this novel, since every "I" of the Afro-American community of Lorraine begins its construction through the lens of white supremacy – metaphorically represented by the blue eyes Pecola wants so desperately –, which leads to an internalized and acquiescent racism. Certainly, the Dick and Jane primers contribute actively to the continuity of racial domination from early childhood: not only do they idealize the model of family as presented in previous sections, but they also define canonical beauty as having white skin, fair hair and blue eyes. The prevailing Caucasian model reinforces self-loath within the characters of *The Bluest Eye* and it results especially suffocating for women since hegemonic models, as bell hooks claims, "block our capacity to see ourselves oppositionally, to imagine,

describe and invent ourselves in ways that are liberatory“ ( 1992, p.2). In order to maintain the American white supremacy, certain images become institutionalized in a manner that allows the perpetuation of racial domination. In line with Foucault’s theories about power, bell hooks notices how “white supremacist logic is thus advanced. Rather than using coercive tactics of domination to colonize, it seduces black folks with the promise of mainstream success if only we are willing to negate the value of blackness” (1992, p. 17). Even though by the time Morrison wrote her novel the Civil Rights Movement struggled to reclaim racial beauty with slogans such as “black is beautiful”, the truth is that black people “continue to be socialized via mass media and non-progressive educational systems to internalize white supremacist thoughts and values” (hooks, 1992, p.18). The American concept of beauty, being socially constructed on the basis of white prototypes, results especially harmful in the construction of black female subjectivity. Morrison foregrounds another pivotal element in her novel, one that contributes actively to spread the idea that success is based on beauty: mainstream cinema. None of the female characters can escape its influence and throughout the novel we find constant references to white Hollywood stars.

Perhaps the character that better depicts the risks of education in the movies is Pauline Breedlove. Her self-esteem downfall is foretold through the metaphor of a rotten front tooth: it begins with a small, quasi imperceptible black speck which begins to grow until the tooth is damaged beyond repair and falls from her mouth. Pauline’s first black speck happened when she was but a toddler and a rusty nailed that punched her foot left her “with a crooked, archless foot that flopped when she walked” (Morrison, 2019, p.108). This early lameness made Pauline different in a negative way; perhaps thinking that no men would be willing to spend his days with a crippled woman, she dreamt of “a simple Presence, an all-embracing tenderness with a strength and a promise of rest [...] she had only to lay her head on his chest and he would lead her away to the sea, to the city, to the woods...forever” (Morrison, 2019, p.111). Even though Cholly seems to be the answer to her prayers, Pauline remembers her early married life in Lorrain as the loneliest time of her life. She was not prepared for the changes that her new life would bring:

Everything changed. It was hard to get to know folks up here, and I missed my people. I weren’t used to so much white folks. The ones I seed before was

something hateful, but they didn't come around too much. I mean, we didn't have too much truck with them. Just now and then in the fields, or at the commissary. But they want all over us. Up north they was everywhere—next door, downstairs, all over the streets—and colored folks few and far between. Northern colored folk was different too. Dicty-like. No better than whites for meanness. They could make you feel just as no-count, 'cept I didn't expect it from them. (Morrison, 2019, p.114).

Since Cholly does not provide the affection and reassurance that Pauline needs in such a hostile environment, she finds in movies an outlet for her frustration. In a dark cinema room, drilling images of romantic love and physical beauty filled Pauline's eyes; as Morrison says, "the most destructive ideas in the history of human thought. Both originated in envy, thrived in insecurity, and ended in disillusion" (2019, p. 120). Pauline's gradation of beauty becomes distorted by Hollywood actresses such as Jean Harlow to the point that "she was never able, after her education in the movies, to look at a face and not assign it some category in the scale of absolute beauty, and the scale was one she absorbed in full from the silver screen" (Morrison, 2019, p.120). Pauline, who associates beauty with power and success, tries to mimic the appearance and the manners of white middle class women just like other black sisters in her community do. However, high-heeled shoes in Pauline looked grotesque and made her limp more pronounced. She endeavours with little success to fix her hair the way Jean Harlow did and "when she tried to make up her face [...] it came off rather badly" (Morrison, 2019. p. 116). Cholly is also a source of disappointment for Pauline; he is radically opposed to Clark Gable or other "white men taking such good care of they women" (Morrison, 2019, p. 121). She is married to a drunkard and the only way they find to communicate with each other is through violence and abuse.

Jane Kuenz affirms that "interaction with mass culture for anyone not represented therein, and especially for African-Americans, frequently requires abdication of the self or the ability to see oneself in the body of another (1993, p.422). Pauline disciplines her body to look like Jean Harlow, yet her rotten tooth reminds her that she does not fit in the standardized model of American beauty. Pauline is defeated and unable to claim her own beauty. Consequently, she escapes from reality and tries to find her ideal life not in her own house and with her own family, but as the servant of a white family. At the Fisher's

Pauline lives vicariously a life that does not belong to her. This well-to-do family gives her a nickname she never had before, Polly, which for Pauline becomes a second identity more real and desirable than her status as Mrs. Breedlove. At the Fisher's,

She could arrange things, clean things, line things up in neat rows. Here her foot flopped around on deep pile carpets, and there was no uneven sound. Here she found beauty, order, cleanliness, and praise. [...] She reigned over cupboards stacked high with food that would not be eaten for weeks, even months; she was queen of canned vegetables bought by the case, special fondants and ribbon candy curled up in tiny silver dishes. The creditors and service people who humiliated her when she went to them on her own behalf respected her, were even intimidated by her, when she spoke for the Fishers (Morrison, 20109, pp.125-126)

In short, she becomes the “ideal servant” and not only because this role “filled practically all her needs” (Morrison, 2019, p.125), but because it is the only socially accepted for Afro-American women.

Pecola, the main protagonist of the novel, cannot escape the beauty canon either. Her small eleven-year-old body is, like other female characters’ “the site of multiple discourses circling around and ultimately comprising what we call ‘femininity’” ( Kuenz, 1993, p.423). Named by her mother after a character of the film *Imitation of Life*, she becomes stigmatized from birth when her mother acknowledges, “I knowed she was ugly. Head full of pretty hair, but Lord she was ugly” (Morrison, 2019, p. 124). Pecola is only allowed to be “the sum of the color of her skin and the textures of her hair, the shade of her knees and elbows, and those things were clearly not accepted as human” (Audre Lorde, 2007, p.174). Because of her physical appearance, she is regarded as inferior; at school Pecola must endure continuous oppression, both physical and psychological from her peers and also from her teachers, who “tried never to glance at her, and called her only when everyone was required to respond” (Morrison, 2019, p.44). Such oppression is faced by the little girl in terms of appearance, so she becomes obsessed with white beauty because, in her innocent understanding, fair skin equates to having the right to be loved by others. Pecola yearns for blue eyes, which results paradoxical if we consider that

they represent the gaze of the oppressor that positions her as inferior in the scale of ethnicity.

Throughout the novel, Pecola tries to interiorize whiteness in ways that remind catholic transubstantiation. At the McTeer's Pecola drinks milk (whose whiteness surely it is no coincidence) cuasy compulsively just to absorb some of Shirley Temple's beauty. Claudia asserts, "we knew she (Pecola) was fond of the Shirley Temple cup and took every opportunity to drink milk out of it just to handle and see sweet Shirley's face" (Morrison, 2019, p.21). Similarly, when Pecola buys some sweets, she chooses the Mary Janes and the way she eats the candies reminds very much of heretical reception of Mary Jane in Holy Communion which culminates in profane ecstasy:

Each pale yellow wrapper has a picture on it. A picture of little Mary Jane, for whom he candy is named. Smiling white face. Blond hair in gentle disarray, blue eyes looking at her out of a world of clean comfort. The eyes are petulant, mischievous. To Pecola they are simply pretty. She eats the candy, and its sweetness is good. To eat the candy is somehow to eat the eyes, eat Mary Jane. Love Mary Jane. Be Mary Jane. Three pennies had bought her nine lovely orgasms with Mary Jane. Lovely Mary Jane, for whom a candy is named. (Morrison, 2019, p.48)

The Mary Janes, Shirley Temples, Ginger Rogers and other actresses and models epitomize all that is desirable in American culture, perfect archetypes "leaning [...] from every billboard, every movie, every glance" (Morrison, 2019, p. 37). The real world, thus, becomes an imitation of such idyllic representation, yet it has devastating consequences for Pecola. As Thomas H. Fick mentions, "to look with eyes other than one's own is to falsify both self and world. Pecola's wish for blue eyes is not only a wish to match the ideal of the white child, it is also a rejection of the right seeing" (1989, p.12). Having been raped by her father at least on two occasions, and utterly broken, Pecola visits Soaphead Church – who turns out to be a paedophile like Cholly Breedlove – to "raise up out of the pit of her blackness and see the world with blue eyes" (Morrison, 2019, p.172). To get the long desired blue eyes, Pecola has to descend into madness, her mind split in two selves; one who is an imaginary friend and another she hallucinates as her true self with blue eyes. However, those blue eyes are a mechanism of self-defence against the

complete isolation she suffers from the whole community when rumour has it that she carries her father's baby. Pecola says to her imaginary friend that "they're just prejudiced, that's all [...] just because I got blue eyes, bluer than theirs, they're prejudiced" (Morrison, 2019, p.195). And even though she now has blue eyes, it seems not to be enough, as this conversation between Pecola and her imaginary friend reveals:

But suppose my eyes aren't blue enough?

*Blue enough for what?*

Blue enough for . . . I don't know. Blue enough for something.

Blue enough . . . for you!

*I'm not going to play with you anymore.*

Oh. Don't leave me.

*Yes. I am.*

Why? Are you mad at me?

*Yes.*

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

*No. Because you're acting silly.*

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

*Get what?*

The bluest eyes. Will you come back then?

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

You promise?

*Sure. I'll be back. Right before your very eyes.* (Morrison, 2019. pp.201- 202)

Blue eyes cannot guarantee what Pecola really needs: love and affection. She dreads that her friend may find another person with bluer eyes and leave her alone as she has been throughout her short life. Therefore, white beauty standards, as Rosana Ruas states, "seems not to be the correct answer for the healing of an African-American identity" (2016, p.43).

Among this atmosphere of self-imposed inferiority, there is just one dissident voice that perceives whiteness as an external enforced element: Claudia MacTeer. Due to the fact that she narrates the story from adulthood, in retrospective, Claudia is able to express with words the feelings of anger and frustration that accompanied her during her

childhood. Unlike other characters in the novel, she is at ease with her body and embraces the so dreaded funkiness:

I looked with loathing on new dresses that required a hateful bath in a galvanized zinc tub before wearing. [...] Then the scratchy towels and the dreadful and humiliating absence of dirt. The irritable, unimaginative cleanliness. Gone the ink marks from legs and face, all my creations and accumulations of the day gone, and replaced by goose pimples. (Morrison, 2019, p.20)

Even as a child, Claudia realizes that the adults' gaze harbours a concept of beauty rooted in cultural standards which they apply to what they see. Cultural standards which, certainly, do not belong to the Afro-American community, but have been insidiously imposed on them. Out of feelings of rejection, frustration, incomprehension and hurt, Claudia destroys white dolls in an attempt to understand the source of dearness, beauty and desirability, the reason why "adults, older girls, shops, magazines, newspapers, window signs – all the world had agreed that a blue-eyes, yellow-haired, pink-skinned doll was what every child treasured" (Morrison, 2019, p.18). In addition, the preferential treatment given to fair-skin girls at school – like Maureen – reinforces all the more racial differences. Claudia wonders "what did we lack? [...] we felt comfortable in our skins [...] and all the time we knew that Maureen Peal was not the Enemy and not worthy of such intense hatred. The *Thing* to fear was the *Thing* that made *her* beautiful and not us" (Morrison, 2019, p.73). Claudia not only repudiates the values of her culture but, as Julia Eichelberger notices, "in Claudia's contact with Pecola and her suffering she also develops an alternative vision, an outlook not based on hierarchy, aggression and conformity, but on tolerance, compassion and creativity" (1999, p. 90). It is precisely her ability to empathize, her clear gaze that triggers her indictment of the community towards the end of her narration.

All of our waste which we dumped on her and which she absorbed. And all of our beauty, which was hers first and which she gave to us. All of us—all who knew her—felt so wholesome after we cleaned ourselves on her. We were so beautiful when we stood astride her ugliness. Her simplicity decorated us, her guilt sanctified us, her pain made us glow with health, her



awkwardness made us think we had a sense of humor. Her inarticulateness made us believe we were eloquent. Her poverty kept us generous. Even her waking dreams we used—to silence our own nightmares. And she let us, and thereby deserved our contempt. We honed our egos on her, padded our characters with her frailty, and yawned in the fantasy of our strength. (Morrison, 2019, p.203)

The pervasive influence of a debased concept of Americanness and its values has shaped the community of Lorraine to the extent that they “rearranged the lies and called it truth” (Morrison, 2019, pp.203-204) so they were able to signal Pecola as a “deserving outcast” (Eichelberger, 1999, p.92). Claudia’s recognition, thus, represents an act of resistance against the hegemonic white aesthetic and a call for readers to defy the status quo so that every human being can be recognized and nurtured regardless their ethnicity.

## CONCLUSIONS:

*Definitions belong to the definer, not the defined*

Toni Morrison, *Beloved*

*Ideas are more powerful than guns. We would not let our enemies have guns, why should we let them have ideas*

Joseph Stalin

“This soil is bad for certain kind of flowers. Certain seeds will not nurture, certain fruit will not bear, and when the land kills of its own volition, we *acquiesce* and say the victim had no right to live. We are wrong, of course, but it doesn’t matter. It’s too late” (Morrison, 2019, p.204, my italics). Morrison’s closing lines of the novel reveal a pessimistic mood which has accompanied me throughout the reading of the novel and the process of writing these pages. I have tried to give an account of how nurture, or the external circumstances that surround some of the characters of *The Bluest Eye* are pivotal in the forging of their identities and the way in which those conditions determine to a great extent their actions and self-destructive behaviour.

Reading Morrison’s novel made me think in depth about the source of discrimination on the grounds of ethnicity and its effects over those who have to endure being signalled as different, as “the other”. Michel Foucault’s theories about power were particularly engaging for me as they prove the way in which people are manipulated to think in a particular way that prevents the disruption of the status quo. *The Bluest Eye* largely exemplifies how Americanness is a concept artificially constructed to explicitly exclude Afro-American people. Since early childhood, generations of American children learnt to read with the Dick and Jane primers, texts that revolve around the idyllic life of a white, blue-eyed perfect family. However, this model did not represent in the least the black experience. On the contrary, many Afro-Americans absorbed the white model and disciplined their bodies and behaviour accordingly. Unfortunately, rejecting the black body to embrace whiteness as the source of success and acceptance has detrimental consequences for the characters: homes become extraordinarily violent environments unable to provide shelter and comfort to their dwellers. Women, moreover, have to deal with the burden of physical appearance only to conclude that they deserve to be called

ugly. In other words, former physical forms of slavery have been replaced by alternative (and self-imposed) forms of mastery.

Despite the pessimistic atmosphere that dominates the novel, I want to claim that there is room for hope. However, the change must be brought collectively. Judith Butler comments about events “empathically local, since it is precisely the people there whose bodies are on the line. But if those bodies on the line are not registered elsewhere, there is no global response, and also, no global form of ethical recognition and connection, and so something of the reality of the event is lost” (2012, p.138). Indeed, Morrison introduces Claudia as the voice that calls for meaningful resistance against imposed structures of domination, racism and exploitation, the voice that wants readers not to pity Pecola, but “interrogate themselves for the smashing” (Morrison, 2019, p.207).

In eliciting an ethical response from us, Morrison sends a clear message: we all share responsibility in the fact that discrimination is still prevailing. *The Bluest Eye* deals with racial prejudices, but we need to stretch this concept to any inequality between individuals on the basis of disability, religion, sexual orientation or other measures of diversity. Only if we understand the importance of practising empathy and respect towards the other all the Pecolas, Paulines or Chollies will be redeemed.

## WORKS CITED:

Andrews, Rebecca (2010). Taking Refuge in “How:” Dissecting the Motives Behind Cholly’s Rape in *The Bluest Eye*. *Undergraduate Review*, 6, 140-143. Available at: [http://vc.bridgew.edu/undergrad\\_rev/vol6/iss1/25](http://vc.bridgew.edu/undergrad_rev/vol6/iss1/25)

Araújo, E. D. S. S., & de Luna, D. (2019). “Here is the house”: A reading of the house (s) in *The Bluest Eye*, by Toni Morrison. *Matraga-Revistado Programa de Pós-Graduação em Letras da UERJ*, 26(48), 496-515. <https://doi.org/10.12957/matraga.2019.41284>

Bhabha, H. (1992). The World and the Home. *Social Text*, 31/32, (pp.141–153). <https://doi.org/10.2307/466222>

Butler, J. (2005). *Giving an Account of Oneself*. Fordham University Press

Butler, J. (2012). Precarious Life, Vulnerability, and the Ethics of Cohabitation. *The Journal of Speculative Philosophy*, 26(2), (pp. 134–151). <https://doi.org/10.5325/jspecphil.26.2.0134>

Eichelberger, J. (1999). *Prophets of recognition ideology and the individual in novels by Ralph Ellison, Toni Morrison, Saul Bellow, and Eudora Welty*. Louisiana State University Press.

Fick, T. H. (1989). Toni Morrison’s “Allegory of the Cave”: Movies, Consumption, and Platonic Realism in “*The Bluest Eye*.” *The Journal of the Midwest Modern Language Association*, 22(1), 10–22. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1315270>

Foucault, M. (1980). *Power/knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings, 1972-1977*. New York : Pantheon Books.

Gallego, M. (2022). A House is a House is a House: Toni Morrison’s Politics of Domesticity, Redemption and Healing in *Beloved* and *Home*. In Andrés, R. and Alsina,

C.(Eds.), *American Houses: Literary Spaces of Resistance and Desire* . Leiden, The Netherlands

Garber, M. (2001). *Sex and Real Estate: Why We Love Houses*. National Geographic Books.

Gomes, R. R. (2016). Identity, Race, and Gender in Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*. Retrieved from:

<https://www.lume.ufrgs.br/bitstream/handle/10183/156973/001017358.pdf?sequence=1>

hooks, b. (1992). *Black Looks. Race and Representation*. South End Press.

Kuenz, J. (1993). The Bluest Eye: Notes on History, Community, and Black Female Subjectivity. *African American Review*, (Vol. 27, N° 3), pp.421–431.  
<https://doi.org/10.2307/3041932>

Lorde, A. (2007). *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches*. Berkeley

Marcus, C.C, (1974). The House as the Symbol of the Self. Retrieved from [https://arch3711.files.wordpress.com/2014/09/cooper\\_hseassymofself.pdf](https://arch3711.files.wordpress.com/2014/09/cooper_hseassymofself.pdf)

May, E. T. (2003). "Family Values": The Uses and Abuses of American Family History. *Revue Francaise d'Etudes Americaines*, (97), (pp.7-22).

Morris, A. (1985). Dick, Jane, and American Literature: Fighting with Canons. *College English*, 47(5), (pp.467–481). <https://doi.org/10.2307/376878>

Morrison, T. (2019). *The Bluest Eye*. Vintage.

Morrison, T. (2020). *The Source of Self-Regard: Selected Essays, Speeches, and Meditations*. Vintage.

Pereira de Sousa, A., & Correia, A. M. (2020). Living in between a house and a home: Where's the comfort zone anyway? Dislocated identities in Morrison's "The Bluest Eye"

and Cisneros' "The House on Mango Street"; *Océánide*, 12, 18-27.  
<https://doi.org/10.37668/oceanide.v12i.21>

Teach, Dana. "*Dick and Jane and nothing in between: Representation and the American Family*". Toni Morrison: A Teaching and Learning Resource Collection. Retrieved from <https://scalar.lehigh.edu/toni-morrison/dick-and-jane-and-nothing-in-between-representation-and-the-american-family-dana-teach?path=the-bluest-eye-1970-home-page>

Werrlein, D. T. (2005). Not so Fast, Dick and Jane: Reimagining Childhood and Nation in the Bluest Eye. *MELUS*, 30(4), (pp.53–72). <http://www.jstor.org/stable/30029634>