

TRAUMA AND POSSIBLE PATHWAYS TO HEALING IN *THE BLUEST EYE*: PECOLA'S STORY AND CLAUDIA'S NARRATION

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ABSTRACT: *The Bluest Eye* tells the story of Pecola, a black little girl who undergoes different forms of discrimination and abuse because of the color of her skin. As result of all the pain and suffering—including an incestuous rape—which she is subjected to, the girl loses her sanity. Therefore, one of the objectives of this article is to analyze how trauma is portrayed in the novel, considering the many micro-aggressions which Pecola is exposed to and which result in insidious traumatization. As her tale is years later revisited by childhood friend Claudia, this work also aims to examine some of the healing pathways which the narrator seems to present. In order to meet these objectives, some concepts related to trauma are presented and analyzed in relation to their portrayal in the novel. Furthermore, the crucial role of African American knowledge and culture in Claudia's survival is also discussed. The result of this analysis shows that storytelling is presented as a possible healing for the traumatization of a community and that the connection to African American values can further help with such process.

KEYWORDS: American Literature; African American Literature; Trauma; Toni Morrison; *The Bluest Eye*.

TRAUMA E POSSÍVEIS CAMINHOS PARA A CURA EM O OLHO MAIS AZUL: A HISTÓRIA DE PECOLA E A NARRAÇÃO DE CLÁUDIA

RESUMO: *O Olho Mais Azul* traz a história de Pecola, uma menina negra que sofre diferentes formas de discriminação e abuso devido à cor de sua pele. Como resultado de toda a dor e sofrimento (incluindo um estupro incestuoso) a que a garota é subjugada, ela acaba por perder sua sanidade. Portanto, um dos objetivos deste artigo é o de analisar como o trauma é representado no livro, considerando as muitas microagressões às quais Pecola é exposta e que resultam em traumatização insidiosa. Considerando que a história da jovem é revisitada anos depois por Cláudia, sua amiga de infância, este trabalho também busca examinar alguns caminhos para a cura que a narradora parece sugerir. A fim de cumprir esses objetivos, alguns conceitos relacionados a trauma são apresentados e analisados em relação à sua representação no livro. Além disso, o papel crucial do conhecimento e cultura afroamericanas para a sobrevivência de Cláudia também é discutido. O resultado desta análise mostra que a narrativização é apresentada como possível cura para a traumatização de uma comunidade e que a conexão com valores afro-americanos pode auxiliar ainda mais nesse processo.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Literatura Norte-americana; Literatura Afro-americana; Trauma; Toni Morrison; *O Olho Mais Azul*.

The Bluest Eye, Toni Morrison's first novel, was written during the 1960s and published in 1970. Through the use of different layers of voices and several narrative

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techniques, the writer creates the shocking story of Pecola Breedlove, a black little girl who faces a series of abuses throughout her life. Those include physical, psychological, emotional and sexual abuse—perpetrated by the American society as a whole, by the community which she is a part of, and even (perhaps especially) by her own family members. The constant mistreatment and humiliation leave Pecola traumatized and, ultimately, end up costing the girl her sanity.

The narrative takes place in Lorain, Ohio, between the years of 1940 and 1941. During that period, Pecola is constantly bullied and mistreated by neighbors, classmates, teachers and family members. The girl has come to believe that she is ugly and that such ugliness is precisely the reason why others are so cruel to her. She reckons that if she looked beautiful and had very blue eyes, then no one would be mean to her. Pecola is presented to the reader as very shy, insecure and unsure of herself. With an emotional and psychological state severely compromised due to years of abuse and prejudice, the child's sense of self shatters completely once the baby which she is carrying is born too soon and dies—a baby who is a result of rape and incest, as Pecola's own father has sexually abused the girl.

In terms of formal organization, *The Bluest Eye* can be summarized as follows: first, there is an epigraph composed by three distinct versions of a school primer. Then, we have some type of overture which introduces Claudia—Pecola's childhood friend, now an adult woman—as the main narrator. Then, there are four seasonal sections narrated in the first-person by Claudia, and these are intercalated with seven primer sections that follow different characters. Finally, we find a kind of coda, once again narrated by Claudia. In relation to narrative voices, we have those of Claudia as a child, of Claudia as an adult reflecting on the past, of a third-person narrator that tells us events and stories connected to the Breedlove family and the community around them, the point-of-view and focalization of a few characters such as Cholly (Pecola's father), Pauline (Pecola's mother) and Soaphead Church, an italicized first-person text whose narrator is Pauline, and a dialogue (or monologue) between a Pecola who has lost her sanity and an imaginary friend. This last one is the only moment in the novel during which we actually get to hear Pecola's voice, but by then, she has already been raped, gotten pregnant, and suffered from an abortion. Therefore, we only get to witness an obsessive dialogue with an imaginary friend—Pecola is in no state to truly narrate her story.

It is very interesting to notice that we hear so little from Pecola herself throughout *The Bluest Eye*. In the article "Text, Voices and Primers in Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*", scholar Carl D. Malmgren (2007) calls attention to the fact that Pecola never has the chance to tell her own story: it has to be revisited, years later, by her now adult friend Claudia MacTeer. In fact, Malmgren (2007) argues that Claudia is indeed the single narrator of the novel, the one responsible for creating the different voices, composing the texts, and organizing the whole narrative of the book. In *Trauma Fiction*, Anne Whitehead (2004) highlights the fact that many novels which address traumatic events make use of narrative forms that do not present or achieve coherence and closure. Instead, they attempt to show and reflect in their own structure the traces of traumatic disruption and

discontinuity, thus creating a narrative voice that is fragmented or dispersed—as is the case of *The Bluest Eye*.

It is also very important to consider that even though Pecola undergoes the very traumatic event of getting raped by her father, this is not her only experience with pain or violence. Therefore, it becomes necessary to bring to the discussion the notion of insidious trauma, in which the accumulation of micro-aggressions reveals its potential for leaving individuals traumatized.

The aim of this article is to understand and analyze how trauma is portrayed in *The Bluest Eye*: what traumatic experiences the characters (especially Pecola) undergo and the ways in which those events impact them. I also argue that even though the youngest Breedlove meets a terrible destiny, the narrator Claudia seems to be promoting alternatives for healing through her narrating of the story. Methodological procedures include two steps: firstly, a brief discussion of trauma is conducted, considering the notions of post-colonial trauma, insidious trauma and the specifics of racism. Then, excerpts from *The Bluest Eye* are presented and discussed in relation to how they can be connected to trauma and, in some instances, to healing.

1. Cultural trauma, post-colonial trauma and racism

From the early 1990s, the field of trauma studies has quickly expanded and become quite diversified. In the article “Trauma theory and postcolonial literary studies”, Irene Visser (2011) notes that trauma has been studied by different areas and disciplines such as psychology, cognitive science, law, history, and cultural and literary studies. One of the prominent 1990s studies regarding trauma is the book *Trauma: Explorations in Memory* (1995), edited and organized by Cathy Caruth. The publication contains works from several researchers and professionals from a variety of fields: psychiatrists, sociologists, educators, writers, literary critics, and more. In the preface to the book, Caruth (1995) argues precisely that

There is no single approach to listening to the many different traumatic experiences and histories we encounter, and that the irreducible specificity of traumatic stories requires in its turn the varied responses—responses of knowing and of acting—of literature, film, psychiatry, neurobiology, sociology, and political and social activism [...] It may be only through this variety that we can learn, in effect, not only to ease suffering but to open, in the individual and the community, new possibilities for change, a change that would acknowledge the unthinkable realities to which traumatic experience bears witness (CARUTH, 1995, p. ix)

In a similar understanding that different areas of expertise can contribute in very enriching and meaningful ways to the field of trauma studies, Visser (2014) observes a growing consensus to “conceptualize trauma not by theorizing hierarchical structures which would privilege some conceptual approaches and delegitimize others, but by

envisaging trauma as a complicated network of concepts and approaches, all centered around trauma” (p. 3). Considering these observations, different approaches to trauma, from a number of disciplines, are discussed and analyzed in the following paragraphs, as their concepts can contribute to readings of *The Bluest Eye*.

In “Cultural Trauma: Slavery and the Formation of African American Identity”, Ron Eyerman (2004) differentiates psychological and physical trauma from cultural trauma. According to the scholar, “cultural trauma refers to a dramatic loss of identity and meaning, a tear in the social fabric, affecting a group of people that has achieved some degree of cohesion” (EYERMAN, 2004, p. 61). This means that the trauma is not necessarily experienced directly by everyone in a community. Thus, Eyerman (2004) explains that slavery was certainly not a part of contemporary reality for many African American writers and artists who speak about it, but became central to the forging of a collective identity strongly affected and marked by it. He also notes that the articulation of discourse surrounding cultural trauma is a process of mediation which involves alternative voices and alternative strategies. According to Eyerman (2004), this process seeks to reconstitute or reconfigure a collective identity, since a traumatic tear in the social fabric claims for the narration of new foundations. Such narration involves the reinterpretation of the past as a means toward reconciling present and/or future needs. The scholar affirms that “there may be several or many possible responses to cultural trauma that emerge in a specific historical context, but all of them in some way or another involve identity and memory” (EYERMAN, 2004, p. 63).

As she examines Morrison’s novels in *Race, Trauma, and Home in the Novels of Toni Morrison*, Evelyn Jaffe Schreiber (2010) highlights the author’s impressive ability to portray a “range of trauma associated with the black experience” (p. 2) in the American society, where “whiteness is the norm” and the “black identity is marginalized” (p. 2). Schreiber (2012) suggests that Morrison’s novels show how black Americans suffer from “specific historical, contextual, and inherited trauma” (p. 3), with her focus ranging from the traumatic memories of different periods—from the horrors of the Middle Passage and slavery, through relocation and segregation, to a contemporary, racist and urban violence. When asked about her motivations for writing *The Bluest Eye* during an interview, Morrison (2008) declared that she was a little worried that something was going to be skipped amidst the enthusiastic and racially uplifting tone of most of the works that were being published at the time—mainly related to the Black Arts Movement. Even though the novelist found the Movement’s message stimulating, she also felt concerned about the possibility of the fact that black had not always been considered beautiful getting overlooked, and that it might be harmful if no one remembered how hurtful a certain kind of internecine racism can be. In declarations such as the one above, we can see how Morrison pays attention to traumatic events and the consequences that they have on people, on both individual and collective levels. In her novels, the author seems intent on exploring the origins of trauma and working through their ramifications, instead of just allowing them to be ignored or overlooked.

In *Ghosts of the African Diaspora: Re-Visioning History, Memory, & Identity*, Joanne Chasshot (2018) observes that this re-visionary approach sought and offered by

black studies in the latter half of the twentieth century is itself situated within a broader questioning of master narratives by those who were long silenced or absent from them:

Whether they manifested explicitly colonialist, racist, sexist, or heterosexist ideologies or whether they were a more organic part of the western, white, patriarchal philosophical and scientific tradition, these master narratives came under particularly heavy attack from the 1960s onward by not only women [...] but also sexual and racial minorities, (de)colonized people, and otherwise oppressed and disenfranchised groups worldwide. More than a demand for marginalized people and histories to be recognized and integrated, what these various groups voiced was a radical critique of the ideological and epistemological underpinnings of the narratives that marginalized them. This assault on master narratives conversed with the poststructuralist and postmodernist challenge to conventional ways of thinking about such notions as truth, reality, meaning, power, or identity. (CHASSHOT, 2018, p. 14)

Chasshot (2018) also notes that writing in the postcolonial and post-civil rights era, Morrison and other black authors tended to emphasize the persistent legacy of the systems of oppression questioned by movements such as The Civil Rights and postcolonialism.

According to Chasshot (2018), the “tension between a compulsive return to and return of historical traumas and a productive engagement with the past is what Morrison captures in her concept of rememory, in which the prefix suggests both repetition and re-vision” (p. 27). In her analysis of *Beloved*, the scholar remarks that *Beloved*’s numerous questions enable Sethe to revisit her past, engaging with it in a (re)constructive way, thus seeing some things from a new perspective and remembering others that had been occluded. As Chasshot (2018) observes, the haunting is painful, but “more than a source of suffering that binds negatively to the past, it can also be a way of poetically and politically re-visioning a traumatic history and reflecting on how it impacts diasporic identity” (p. 27).

As Vivian Nickel (2017) explains in her thesis, in which she studies trauma, memory, and history in Toni Morrison’s *A Mercy*, these concerns can be related to the postcolonial studies. Nickel (2017) states that trying to rethink and retell history from the point of view of groups that were often silenced by the official discourse demands a careful examination and elaboration of the experiences from their past. As she notices, literature assumes a great importance on rethinking history and facing its traumatic events, since its fictional quality allows writers to reenact and work through such traumas in a way that historical discourse cannot. This is not to say that *The Bluest Eye* is itself a postcolonialist novel, nor that Toni Morrison is a postcolonial writer. Nevertheless, as indicated by Chasshot (2018), Morrison wrote her first book in the postcolonial and post-civil rights era—which influenced her work, as she responded to concerns of the period. Therefore, some of the concepts linked to postcolonial studies—especially those connected to postcolonial trauma—prove themselves useful for the present analysis.

The possibilities of looking at trauma in *The Bluest Eye* from a social and postcolonial perspective also seem to be corroborated by scholar Kirsti Bohata. To her, the use of terminology such as Third World and the geopolitical binaries of East and West and North and South seem dated. Bohata (2004) believes it is important to consider the network of thematic concerns commonly addressed by postcolonial writers, which are often connected to “specific anti-colonial struggles, the articulation of structures of domination (internal and external), the decolonization of the mind [...], and so on” (p. 2). Through its engagement with geographical, cultural, political, temporal, sexual and gendered specificities, postcolonial writing may be understood as forming complex discourses that deconstruct and reimagine personal, cultural and national identities (BOHATA, 2004). Therefore, this concern with shifting identities and the remembering the self may prove useful to nations and cultures which were not those originally observed in the founding postcolonial texts (BOHATA, 2004).

Homi Bhabha (2011) claims that narratives centered on historical reconstruction can help rewrite the past, reactive it, relocate it, and resignify it. It can also submit our understanding of the past and our reinterpretation of the future to an ethics of survival, which allows us to work in and through the present. According to Bhabha (2011), this work can free us from the determinism of historical inevitability—from repetition without difference. Furthermore, in “Decolonizing Trauma Theory: Retrospect and Prospects”, Irene Visser (2016) states that “post-colonial literature provides many examples that support the claim that trauma itself instigates a strong need for narrative in order to come to terms with the aftermath of colonial wounding” (14). The scholar brings to discussion sociologist Jeffrey C. Alexander’s (2004) formulation of the trauma process, which gives narrative shape and meaning to overwhelming phenomena that have deeply harmed collective identity. In the chapter “Toward a Theory of Cultural Trauma”, Alexander (2004) explains that “cultural trauma occurs when members of a collectivity feel they have been subjected to a horrendous event that leaves indelible marks upon their group consciousness, marking their memories forever and changing their future identity in fundamental and irrevocable ways” (p. 1). Alexander (2004) also remarks that through the construction of cultural traumas, social groups, national societies and even entire civilizations cognitively identify the existence and source of human suffering and feel compelled to take responsibility for it. In explaining the social process of cultural trauma, the scholar writes that social crises must become cultural crises in order for traumas to emerge at the level of the collectivity. Thus, the focus is placed on the representation of events, not on the events themselves. In his understanding, “Trauma is not the result of a group experiencing pain. It is the result of this acute discomfort entering into the core of the collectivity’s sense of its own identity”. As the scholar explains,

“Experiencing trauma” can be understood as a sociological process that defines a painful injury to the collectivity, establishes the victim, attributes responsibility, and distributes the ideal and material consequences. Insofar as traumas are so experienced, and thus imagined and represented, the collective identity will become significantly revised. This identity revision means that there will be a searching re-remembering of the collective past,

for memory is not only social and fluid but deeply connected to the contemporary sense of the self. Identities are continuously constructed and secured not only by facing the present and future but also by reconstructing the collectivity's earlier life (ALEXANDER, 2004, p. 10).

According to Visser (2016), from the perspective of postcolonial theory, such process involves “the construction and interrogation of the history of colonialism and decolonization through narratives” (p. 15). She also observes that the traumatic aftermath of colonialism continues until the present day, and that postcolonial fiction reinforces the notion that the trauma of colonialism can and needs to be addressed.

Whitehead (2004) also observes a link between trauma fiction and postmodernist fiction, whose innovative forms and techniques address the complexity of memory and criticize the notion of history as a grand narrative. To the scholar, “in testing formal boundaries, trauma fiction seeks to foreground the nature and limitations of narrative and to convey the damaging and distorting impact of the traumatic event” (WHITEHEAD, 2004, p. 82). Whitehead also comments on a point of intersection between trauma fiction and postcolonial fiction, which presents silenced or marginalized stories and voices to public consciousness and rescues former overlooked histories. In her understanding, there is an overlap of the two literary schools in their “concern with the recovery of memory and the acknowledgment of the denied, the repressed and the forgotten” (WHITEHEAD, 2004, p. 82). Therefore, we can conclude that by allowing politically and psychologically repressed events and stories to surface to consciousness, trauma fiction is able to contribute to the rethinking of the ethics of historical representation. Whitehead (2004) also affirms that there is a tendency in trauma fiction to register the unassimilable and overwhelming nature of its subject in its formal and structural terms.

In *Postcolonial Witnessing: Trauma Out of Bounds*, Stef Craps (2013) introduces trauma theory as “an area of cultural investigation that emerged in the early 1990s as a product of the so-called ethical turn affecting the humanities” (p. 1). In his understanding, the founding texts of the area have largely failed to live up to their premise of contributing to cross-cultural solidarity and the establishment of new forms of community due to the fact that

They marginalize or ignore traumatic experiences of non-Western or minority cultures, they tend to take for granted the universal validity of definitions of trauma and recovery that have developed out of the history of Western modernity, they often favour or even prescribe a modernist aesthetic of fragmentation and aporia as uniquely suited to the task of bearing witness to trauma, and they generally disregard the connections between metropolitan and non-Western or minority traumas. As a result of all of this, rather than promoting cross-cultural solidarity, trauma theory risks assisting in the perpetuation of the very beliefs, practices, and structures that maintain existing injustices and inequalities. (CRAPS, 2013, p. 2)

Considering these issues, Craps (2013) argues that trauma theory “can and should be reshaped, resituated, and redirected so as to foster attunement to previously

unheard suffering” (p. 37). One of the reasons which the scholar presents for this belief is the fact that he sees the traditional event-based model of trauma as insufficient to accurately and appropriately address and portray the experiences of certain particular groups. In his understanding, the basic concepts that were originally presented by trauma theory scholars are not adequate to explain or convey the traumatic impact of racism and other forms of ongoing oppression. Craps (2013) claims that while racism is historically specific, it is unlike historical trauma because it cannot be related to a particular event with a before and an after, as it continues to cause damage in the present. Chasshot (2018) also remarks on the limits and inadequacy of the foundational theories that connected trauma exclusively to events. In her understanding, “such definitions fail to account for experiences like slavery or ordinary racism, forms of trauma that are neither event-based nor exceptional but continuous and part of the usual, everyday life of the victims” (CHASSHOT, 2018, p. 25). Unfortunately, these observations can be easily verified as we look into recent events and numbers. 2015 statistics from the Center for Disease Control and Prevention show homicide as the fifth leading cause of death in black male Americans. Homicide does not figure in the top ten leading causes of death in white male Americans. CDC’s statistics also show that homicide is the number one cause of death in black males from ages 15 to 34, and the second leading cause of death in black females from ages 15 to 24. In the months of March and May of 2020, 26-year-old Breonna Taylor and 46-year-old George Floyd were murdered by police officers in the United States, igniting a series of protests for the Black Lives Matter movement².

Craps (2013) also observes that racism can be considered one of the sources of what Maria Root calls insidious trauma. In “Not Outside the Range: One Feminist Perspective on Psychic Trauma”, Laura Brown (1995) explains the term coined by her feminist therapist colleague as “traumatogenic effects left by oppression that are not necessarily overtly violent or threatening to bodily well-being at the given moment but that do violence to the soul and spirit” (p. 107). Considering such concept, Craps (2013) observes that overt racism has been often replaced with more covert, subtle and complex racist incidents that operate at institutional and cultural levels in most Western countries. As examples of daily micro-aggressions that occur nowadays, Craps (2013) mentions being stopped in traffic, being the target of a security guard, seeing one’s group portrayed in a stereotypical manner in media, and being denied home mortgages, business loans or promotions. The scholar also explains that while one of those incidents alone may not be traumatizing, the reoccurrence of cumulative micro-aggressions may insidiously result in traumatization; that is, even if one of those experiences may seem too small to be a traumatic stressor, together they are capable of amounting to an intense traumatic impact. Craps also observes that considering trauma as an exclusively individual phenomenon may distract focus and attention from the wider social situation:

In collectivist societies individualistic approaches may be at odds with the local culture. Moreover, by narrowly focusing on the level of the individual psyche, one tends to leave unquestioned the conditions that enabled the

² More about the Movement, its causes and actions can be seen on their official website.

traumatic abuse, such as political oppression, racism, or economic domination. Problems that are essentially political, social, or economic are medicalized, and the people affected by them are pathologized as victims without agency, sufferers from an illness that can be cured through psychological counseling. The failure to situate these problems in their larger historical context can thus lead to psychological recovery being privileged over the transformation of a wounding political, social, or economic system. Insofar as it negates the need for taking collective action towards systemic change, the hegemonic trauma discourse can be seen to serve as a political palliative to the socially disempowered. (CRAPS, 2013, p. 28)

Craps (2013) observes that movements whose aim is to expand the scope of our understanding of trauma are valid and necessary. He notes how trauma was originally focused almost solely on the experience of war veterans, but has since then expanded to include survivors of domestic violence and sexual assault through the advocacy of people concerned with those issues. In similar ways, the recognition of racist-incident-trauma as a valid, legitimate traumatic experience can and must be pushed for. The scholar also observes that such expansion would in no way threaten or erase the legitimacy of victims of other types of trauma. One of the studies that expand the comprehension of trauma beyond event-based models is social work researcher and professor Joy Degruy's *Post Traumatic Slave Syndrome: America's Legacy of Enduring Injury and Healing* (2005). In the book, Degruy (2005) explains that African Americans have experienced a legacy of trauma that is reflected in many of their beliefs and behavior. She defines Post Traumatic Slave Syndrome (PTSS) as a "condition that exists when a population has experienced multigenerational trauma resulting from centuries of slavery and continues to experience oppression and institutionalized racism today" (DEGRUY, 2005, p. 105). Degruy (2005) also suggests that there are three categories which work as the resulting patterns of behavior which is brought by PTSS: vacant esteem, ever-present anger and racist socialization³.

Visser (2016) also highlights how important it is to respond to trauma with respectful recognition of national, historical, spiritual and ethnic diversification. When summarizing the perspectives and understanding of postcolonial studies today, the scholar writes that

Trauma is recognized as a very complex phenomenon. It is not only understood as acute, individual, and event-based, but also as collective and chronic; trauma can weaken individuals and communities, but it can also lead to a stronger sense of identity and a renewed social cohesion. Postcolonial literary studies reflect and reconstruct this full complexity of trauma in its specific cultural, political, and historical contexts. (VISSER, 2016, p. 20)

Furthermore, Visser (2016) observes that postcolonial trauma narratives do not negate the profound, lasting impact of trauma, but they also focus and portray resilience and growth as possibilities in the aftermath of traumatic wounding. According to the

³ Two of these patterns of behavior will be explained and discussed together with the analysis of *The Bluest Eye* in order to make the reading of this work more interesting and fluid.

scholar, narrativization is capable of empowering individuals and communities, proving to be crucial to their cultural survival.

Considering the complexity of the subject, the following analysis of traumatic experiences in *The Bluest Eye* is referenced not only on event-based trauma concepts, but also informed by and attentive to the contribution of other models and to the specific cultural, historical and political context of the characters in the novel. The particulars of African American culture and healing are also observed and discussed.

2. *The Bluest Eye*

The Bluest Eye was written in the United States during the 1960s, a period that Morrison (1999) herself describes as “a time of great social upheaval in the lives of black people” (p. 208) in the afterword added to the novel in 1993. Throughout the 20th century, a series of events, mobilizations and protests took place in America. Their goal was to question, fight and change the injustice, abuse and mistreatment which African Americans were faced with on a daily basis. This series of events would eventually culminate in what became known as the Civil Rights Movement.

Although the actions and protests which advocated for equality and respect were numerous during the 20th century, there are two events which are considered as ignitions for what is often referred to as the Civil Right Movements. The first happened when Rosa Parks, the secretary for the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), refused to give up her seat to a white man on a segregated bus—a refusal for which Parks was sent to jail. This event led to the formation of The Montgomery Improvement Association, which promoted a boycott of the bus system. The chosen leader for his boycott was Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., a man who would eventually become one of the very symbols of The Civil Rights Movement.

Under King’s leadership, the movement adopted a philosophy of nonviolent resistance and protest to discrimination and injustice. The reverend and his followers believed that integrationist ideals could promote equality for all, interracial brotherhood and the end of segregation in the country (PALMER, 2006). Meanwhile, different strategies and new divisions were emerging amongst the black movements for racial equality and social justice. One of them was the Black Power Movement, whose activists advocated for black political empowerment and self-defense in order to adequately satisfy the needs of African Americans and improve their lives. According to Rucker (2010), the leaders of The Black Power Movement believed in mobilizing African Americans to use their political voice in order to create semiautonomous communities in which black elected-officials and black-controlled political parties would represent the interests of African Americans, black business would provide jobs for black people, and African Americans would learn how to use self-defense in order to protect their lives. In summary, “black power can be seen as a ‘community-control’ form of black nationalism” (RUCKER, 2010, p. 663, emphasis in the original).

At around the same time, an artistic movement defined by Larry Neal (1968) as the “aesthetic and spiritual sister of the Black Power concept” (p. 28) was also emerging: the Black Arts Movement, which advocated for the development of a black culture and consciousness separated from those of white America. In the words of the playwright, the Black Arts Movement

envisions an art that speaks directly to the needs and aspirations of Black America. In order to perform this task, the Black Arts Movement proposes a radical reordering of the western cultural aesthetic. It proposes a separate symbolism, mythology, critique, and iconology. The Black Arts and the Black Power concept both relate broadly to the Afro-American’s desire for self-determination and nationhood. Both concepts are nationalistic. One is concerned with the relationship between art and politics; the other with the art of politics. (NEAL, 1968, p.28)

Neal (1968) also believed that the political values of the Black Power found concrete expression in the creations of the Black Arts Movement musicians, poets, writers and artists. As many African American writers were then reevaluating concepts such as the Western aesthetic, the social role of art and of the writers themselves, they sought to create and develop a Black Aesthetic, that is, “the formation of a system of aesthetic value rooted in African American traditions through which the art of the black notion and the Black Nationalist Movement could be created, evaluated and taught” (RAMBSY II; SMETHURST, 2011, p. 415). Thus, we can conclude that much of the art of the 1960s was related to the call for racial pride and the affirmation of black culture.

Nevertheless, Morrison (2008) observes in an interview to The Visionary Project that most of the work published at the period was written by black men and focused on black men. In Bell Hooks’s (2015) analysis, twentieth century black male leaders tended to support patriarchy, relegating black women to subordinate positions in home life and in the political sphere. She comments on the contradiction of the vision of a new black nation of poet Amiri Baraka. In Hooks’s (2015) understanding, his claim of the new black nation having distinctly different values from those of the white world is quickly contradicted by the fact that its imagined social structure is based on the same patriarchal foundation as that of white American society. In her understanding,

While the 60s black power movement was a reaction against racism, it was also a movement that allowed black men to overtly announce their support of patriarchy. Militant black men were publicly attacking the white male patriarchs for their racism but they were also establishing a bond of solidarity with them based on their shared acceptance of and commitment to patriarchy. The strongest bonding element between militant black men and white men was their shared sexism—they both believed in the inherent inferiority of woman and supported male dominance. Another bonding element was the black male’s acknowledgment that he, like the white male, accepted violence as the primary way to assert power. (HOOKS, 2015, p. 137)

Possibly connected and contradicting this male-centered assertiveness of the period are the opening sentences of narrator Claudia in *The Bluest Eye*: “Quiet as it’s kept, there were no marigolds in the fall of 1941. We thought, at the time, that it was because Pecola was having her father’s baby that the marigolds did not grow” (MORRISON, 1999, p. 3). The writer explains in the afterword to the novel that using “quiet as it’s kept” as an opening phrase held several attractions to her. Some of those are connected to how conspiratorial the words sound, in a conspiracy that is both “held and withheld, exposed and sustained” (MORRISON, 1999, p. 208). The author says that writing *The Bluest Eye* was much like exposing a private confidence, and that in order to understand the duality of such position, we need to remember the political climate of the moment when the book was written (1965-1969). In contrast to the very aggressive, assertive, racial uplifting and male-centered works of the period, Morrison decided to focus on a figure described by her as “the most delicate member of society: a child; the most vulnerable, a female” (MORRISON, 1999, p. 206). We can speculate that Morrison believed that some wounds needed to be properly addressed before healing could be promoted.

2.1. School primers and formal structure

In the very first pages of *The Bluest Eye*, we encounter a school 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, 1999, p.1)

Dick and Jane were the main characters in a popular series which was first published in the 1930s and which was often used to teach children to read in American public schools. The siblings were part of a suburban white middle-class family. As Werrlein (2005) observes, families like Dick and Jane’s were intended to symbolize the triumph of capitalism and democracy in the United States, teach middle-class children how to be true American boys and girls, and inspire in them patriotic dreams of serving the country through hard work, self-sufficiency, self-sacrifice and bravery. Werrlein (2005) also notes that these patriotic sentiments seemed to target white children only. The government housing subsidies that prompted white citizens to leave crowded cities did not include African Americans. As consequence of that, the number of black families living in the suburbs was small. As Werrlein (2005) indicates, if the white suburban families were representative of true Americanness as a symbol for patriotism, morality and prosperity,

the black urban working-class families were left to be seen as un-American. This deliberate choice can be linked to an analysis that Morrison (1993) makes in *Playing in the Dark*, noting how “cultural identities are formed and informed by a nation’s literature” (p. 39). The conscious effort in the construction of the American as a new white man in the literature of the United States was present from the beginning of the colonial era. As we can see in the Dick and Jane school primers, such effort has endured for centuries.

The primer is then reproduced twice in *The Bluest Eye*, with some variations to the form, but not to the content. The second version of the primer has no capitalization or punctuation. It is a little disorienting and confusing, but it can be read and understood with just a little effort. Nevertheless, the third version becomes more complicated. In addition to not presenting punctuation or capitalization, it also lacks any space between the letters. The presentation on the page looks a lot like a scramble of letters whose meaning becomes harder to grasp. Malmgren (2000) observes that critical readings have frequently understood these three versions of the primer as representative of different families. The first one tends to be associated with the life of white suburban families, “orderly and ‘readable’” (MALMGREN, 2000, p. 152, emphasis in the original). The second one represents Claudia’s family—the MacTeers—, “confused but still readable” (MALMGREN, 2000, p. 152). Finally, the third version is typically linked to Pecola’s family, the Breedloves, “incoherent and unintelligible” (MALMGREN, 2000, p. 152). This interpretation is corroborated by the fact that snippets from the third version of the primer are used to open sections of the novel (often referred to as primer sections) that focus on members of the Breedlove family or that present a harmful situation faced by Pecola.

While the MacTeers are black and poor and, therefore, distinct from the white suburban families represented and targeted as the primary audience for the Dick and Jane primers, their version of the primer is still readable. This is possibly explained by the fact that they are a loving family that survives and thrives through support and resilience. Nevertheless, the situation of the Breedloves is different. Their family is unlike that of Dick and Jane and also unlike that of the MacTeers. In the afterword to *The Bluest Eye*, Morrison (1999) explains that she “chose a unique situation, not a representative one. The extremity of Pecola’s case stemmed largely from a crippled and crippling family - unlike the average black family and unlike the narrator’s” (p. 206-207). The confusing and unintelligible situation of the Breedloves result from lack of affection, poverty and racism (both external and internalized). The chaotic third version of the primer also reflects the view that the Breedloves have of themselves as meaningless and possessing no value.

Degruy (2005) sees the disbelief in one’s own value as one of the patterns of behavior that can be observed in people with Post Traumatic Slave Syndrome: vacant esteem. This vacant esteem is connected to the belief that one has little or no worth—a feeling which is frequently exacerbated by group and societal pronouncements of their inferiority. According to Degruy (2005), vacant esteem is the net result of three spheres of influence: one’s family, one’s community and society. The last can influence people through policies, laws, institutions and media. The communities of which we are a part establish certain norms and encourage us to conform to society. Families are capable of influencing us through the way we are raised and prepared to take our places in or

community and society, as understood by our parental figures. If this net of influences promotes a limiting identity and we feel that we are confined to it, vacant esteem may become one of its consequences. According to Degruy (2005), it can be transmitted from generation to generation through the family, community and society. She explains that when the parents in a family believe that they have little or no worth, the behaviors that they develop can instill similar beliefs in their children. This concept can be linked to what Marianne Hirsch (2012) calls postmemory, a form of memory experienced by the offspring of survivors of collective or cultural traumas who did not experience the traumatic events firsthand, but grew up with images and stories so powerful that they constitute memories in their own right. Vacant esteem and a set of behaviors that show a negative self-image can be seen in the members of the Breedlove family and is commented on by the narrator of *The Bluest Eye*:

The Breedloves did not live in a storefront because they were having temporary difficulty adjusting to the cutbacks at the plant. They lived there because they were poor and black, and they stayed there because they believed they were ugly. Although their poverty was traditional and stultifying, it was not unique. But their ugliness was unique. No one could have convinced them that they were not relentlessly and aggressively ugly. Except for the father, Cholly, whose ugliness (the result of despair, dissipation, and violence directed toward petty things and weak people) was behavior, the rest of the family—Mrs. Breedlove, Sammy Breedlove, and Pecola Breedlove—wore their ugliness, put it on, so to speak, although it did not belong to them. The eyes, the small eyes set closely together under narrow foreheads. The low, irregular hairlines, which seemed even more irregular in contrast to the straight, heavy eyebrows which nearly met. Keen but crooked noses, with insolent nostrils. They had high cheekbones, and their ears turned forward. Shapely lips which called attention not to themselves but to the rest of the face. You looked at them and wondered why they were so ugly; you looked closely and could not find the source. Then you realized that it came from conviction, their conviction. It was as though some mysterious all-knowing master had given each one a cloak of ugliness to wear, and they had each accepted it without question. The master had said, “You are ugly people.” They had looked about themselves and saw nothing to contradict the statement; saw, in fact, support for it leaning at them from every billboard, every movie, every glance. “Yes,” they had said. “You are right.” And they took the ugliness in their hands, threw it as a mantle over them, and went about the world with it. (MORRISON, 1999, p. 36-37)

This passage illustrates the feelings of vacant esteem experienced and exhibited by the members of the Breedlove family throughout the novel. Furthermore, the mentioning of a master who stated that the Breedloves were ugly and the affirmation of such statement easily available in movies and billboards hints at another behavior which Degruy (2005) links to Post Traumatic Slave Syndrome: the adoption of the slave master’s value system. As she explains, “at this value system’s foundation is the belief that white

and all things associated with whiteness are superior; and that black and all things associated with blackness are inferior” (DEGRUY, 2005, p. 116). It is not surprising that the Breedloves come to associate their blackness with inferiority when we consider that they live in a society which claims that white is the desirable norm, and which only portrays white people as successful, moral, respectable citizens in movies and books. Additionally, Morrison’s choice of word with “master” is quite meaningful, as it hints at the many traumatic effects of the slavery process that have been transmitted from generation to generation. Furthermore, institutionalized racism and oppression have continued to exist. Thus, where once slave masters would make the statement that black was inferior and ugly, billboards and movies would still make that same pronouncement at the period in which the novel takes place (the 1940s).

Following the three versions of the school primer, we have some type of overture which introduces Claudia MacTeer as the primary narrator of the novel. The sections which are later narrated by her in the first person are commonly referred to as the seasonal sections, and they are named Autumn, Winter, Spring and Summer. Each of them interweaves episodes of Claudia’s and Pecola’s lives as the two girls go to school together or share a bed. We also find seven primer sections—each one related to a different sentence of the third version of the Dick and Jane school primer. The end of novel is narrated by Claudia in some kind of coda as she reminisces and reflects on possible meanings of the events of her and Pecola’s childhoods. Whitehead (2004) identifies these fragmented structures and disperse voices as recurrent stylistic features in fiction novels that portray traumatic events. They demand attention and effort from the reader, who is required to put together the different pieces of the story. This movement of piecing together distinct circumstances and situations seems to corroborate the claims of those scholars who advocate for the decolonization of trauma theory. In *The Bluest Eye*, we are not looking at a single event, but at a multitude of traumatic situations that compromise Pecola’s health more and more. As Craps (2013) observes, one sole racist incident may not be traumatizing, but the accumulation and reoccurrence or racist aggressions or micro-aggressions can insidiously result in traumatization. Therefore, the next subsection analyzes different occurrences that contribute to the shattering of Pecola’s self.

2.2. The shattering of Pecola’s self

One of the behavioral patterns that Degruy (2005) links to the Post Traumatic Slave Syndrome is something that she calls racist socialization. The scholar explains that through centuries of slavery and institutionalized racism, many African Americans have been socialized to adopt the views and attitudes of white, racist America. As consequence, several black people try to adopt white standards and mold themselves to accommodate white prejudices. Degruy (2005) observes that this is manifested in a number of ways; one of them consisting of the adoption of white standards—such as those of material success and beauty—by African Americans. The researcher links the pursuit of the white ideal of

beauty to the slavery period. She explains that slave masters would sometimes allow the children whom they had had with slaves to work or even live inside their houses. These offspring would frequently have straighter hair and lighter tone when compared to the other slaves, as they were born from miscegenation. As a result, light skin and straight hair came to be associated with an improved quality of life.

Degruy (2005) notes that the racist socialization of African Americans began with slavery and continued throughout American history. For centuries, books would often refer to black people as immoral, stupid or dirty. In the beginning of the 20th century, as movies became popular, African Americans rarely had any roles in them. If they did, it was typically as buffoons or servants. Through the next decades—and even to this day—representation is often minimal or negative.

The effects of racist socialization can be seen in the ideas and behavior of a number of characters in *The Bluest Eye*—including in Pecola Breedlove. In fact, the discussion on the little girl may very well start on her first and last names. In a conversation between the character and a new girl at school—Maureen Peal—the following exchange takes place:

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

“Pecola.”

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

“I don’t know. What is that?”

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

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

“Anyway, her name was Pecola too. She was so pretty. When it comes back, I’m going to see it again. My mother has seen it four times.”
(MORRISON, 1999, p. 65-66)

Imitation of Life is a movie directed by John M. Stahl and released in 1934. It tells the story of Delilah, a black woman who works for a white woman named Bea. Delilah cooks pancakes which are commercialized by Bea—giving the latter considerable profit. The black character is submissive and docile, and she has a daughter name Peola—not Pecola, as Maureen incorrectly remembers. Peola has lighter skin color and complexion than her mother, and she starts passing—that is, assuming a white identity and presenting herself as a white girl to the people around her.

Pauline—Pecola’s mother—was enamored with picture shows and the lives portrayed in them. Therefore, it is quite likely that she took inspiration from the movie to name her daughter. However, we cannot know whether she confused or misremembered the name of the character—like Maureen did—or if she decided to adapt it. Nonetheless, the fact that the names do differ is very meaningful. The Peola from *Imitation of Life* is perceived as beautiful by the people around her, and she is able to satisfy the Western white standard of beauty because of her lighter skin. Meanwhile, the Pecola from *The Bluest Eye* has very dark skin color and, much because of that, is perceived as ugly by the

community that surrounds her. Additionally, as much as Pecola wants to, she cannot be successful in her pursuit of the white ideal of beauty.

Degruy (2005) also gives us information that can be useful when we look at the surname Breedlove. In the mid-1800s, a black woman became the first self-made American millionaire. She marketed cosmetic products, including a French-made metal comb that could straighten hair and hair-growth solutions. This woman became famous as Madam C.J. Walker, but her birth name was Sarah Breedlove. It is definitely remarkable that Walker was able to achieve success and make a fortune. Nevertheless, it can also be relevant to consider that some of the products that she advertised were aimed at straightening the hair of African American women. Light skin and straight hair have been commonly associated to a white, Western beauty standard. Therefore, the choice of Breedlove as the surname for a character who desperately tries, but cannot fit such standard, can be quite meaningful. Throughout *The Bluest Eye*, we see Pecola's desire of meeting the Western white standard of beauty being repeatedly frustrated. As we look at a few episodes of her life, it is not hard to understand how the girl came to associate whiteness to tenderness and beauty, and blackness to mistreatment and ugliness.

The narrator Claudia describes Maureen Peal as a “high-yellow dream child with long brown hair”, who was “rich, at least by our standards, as rich as the richest of the white girls, swaddled in comfort and care” (MORRISON, 1999, p. 60). Maureen charmed the whole school, from students to teachers, and nearly every person who came in contact with her treated her with kindness and admiration. The same boys who taunted Pecola by chanting “Black e mo” in an attempt to humiliate her would immediately stop and become much more polite as soon as they saw Maureen approach. Therefore, when Pearl yelled ““I *am* cute! And you ugly! Black and ugly black e mos. I *am* cute!” (MORRISON, 1999, p. 71) at Pecola, Claudia and Frieda, Claudia's sister, Pecola had enough reasons to believe her. Maureen had more money and lighter skin, and seemingly because of that, everyone seemed to treat her kindly and consider her beautiful. With much darker skin, Pecola was called ugly, and came to believe that it was because of such ugliness that people abused and insulted her. This link is even articulated into thought in one of the focalizations of the character:

She looks up at him and sees the vacuum where curiosity ought to lodge. And something more. The total absence of human recognition—the glazed separateness. She does not know what keeps his glance suspended. Perhaps because he is grown, or a man, and she a little girl. But she has seen interest, disgust, even anger in grown male eyes. Yet this vacuum is not new to her. It has an edge; somewhere in the bottom lid is the distaste. She has seen it lurking in the eyes of all white people. So. The distaste must be for her, her blackness. [...] And it is the blackness that accounts for, that creates, the vacuum edged with distaste in white eyes. (MORRISON, 1999, p. 46-47)

Because Pecola sees the people around her consider white as beautiful and worthy of praise and nice treatment, she learns the same beauty scale which her mother has learned from picture shows, as Pauline “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, 1999, p. 120). Since she is constantly mistreated while girls with lighter skin are praised, Pecola comes to think as her dark eyes and very dark skin as ugly, and to understand this ugliness as the very source and explanation for her suffering: “As long as she looked the way she did, as long as she was ugly, she would have to stay with these people. Somehow she belonged to them” (MORRISON, 1999, p; 43). Thus, Pecola sees the violence between her parents and the hostile environment of their house as punishment for her ugliness.

Another episode that further establishes to Pecola that whiteness is treated with gentleness while blackness is met with violence happens in the house of the Fischers, a white family for whom Pauline works. Claudia and Frieda go look for their friend at the back door of the Fischers’ house, where Pecola is waiting for the laundry that she needs to deliver for her mother. As the three of them wait for Pauline in the kitchen, the Fischer child walks in: a blond girl in a pink dress. As the kid asks where Polly is, Claudia feels enraged, for she knows that Pecola is only allowed to call her mother “Mrs. Breedlove”. When Pecola reaches out for the pan on the stove and spills it, Pauline slaps her and yells at the girl. Nevertheless, when the little Fischer girl starts crying because of the screams, the older woman hushes her gently and calls her “baby” (MORRISON, 1999, p. 107). As Pauline talked to the Fischer girl, there was “honey in her words”, but at the other three children she “spit out words [...] like rotten pieces of apple” (MORRISON, 1999, p. 107). Once again, Pecola encounters the difference in treatment directed at black and at white girls.

When Pecola goes into Geraldine’s (a lighter-skinned black woman) house, she is impressed by how beautiful the place is. Even as the older woman arrives home and calls Pecola a “nasty little bitch” and orders her to leave the house, the little girl continues to think in terms of beauty: “Pecola backed out of the room, staring at the pretty milk-brown lady in the pretty gold-and-green house who was talking to her through the cat’s fur” (MORRISON, 1999, p. 90). Throughout the novel, we see very little of Pecola’s impressions and thoughts. Thus, it is interesting to note that when we do get access to some of her focalization, the adjectives which she links to positive concepts are “beautiful” and “pretty”. She does not think of the woman throwing her out and calling her names as mean or cruel; she is more impressed by her prettiness and by how such prettiness seems to be rewarded with a beautiful house. This further establishes the connections that Pecola has been making throughout her life: beauty is good and deserves nice things, while she is ugly and, because of that, deserving of punishment.

The encounters aforementioned are examples of the micro-aggressions that Pecola has suffered throughout her life, being verbally and physically abused. Seeing herself as ugly and unworthy of a good life for as long as she looks the way she does, the girl comes up with a solution: if she can someday fit the value system which she has been made to internalize and adopt, then she can be treated well and be happy. It is this belief that leads her to wish for blue eyes that will be considered beautiful and that will earn her respect and love. Nevertheless, the girl is only able to acquire those blue eyes after terrible events: the miscarriage of a baby who was the product of rape and incest—an event that

we can only access through the third-person narrator who presents us only Cholly's (Pecola's father) thoughts. The ordeal shatters her sense of self, and Pecola descends into madness. It is only then, as the girl has lost her sanity, that we get to actually hear Pecola's voice in the novel, as she has a dialogue (or monologue) with some type of imaginary friend. This conversation is also how we learn that the girl now believes that she has acquired the most beautiful blue eyes, and that she believes that people now refuse to look at her out of jealousy. Nonetheless, even as her wish for blue eyes has been fulfilled, Pecola continues to exhibit signs of insecurity:

Please. If there is somebody with bluer eyes than mine, then maybe there is somebody with the bluest eyes. The bluest eyes in the whole world.
That's just too bad, isn't it?
Please help me look.
No.
But suppose my eyes aren't blue enough?
Blue enough for what?
Blue enough for... I don't know. Blue enough for something. Blue enough... for you! (MORRISON, 1999, p. 201)

From this passage, we can see that Pecola has not been able to let go of the scale of beauty which has been taught to her throughout her life. She is still scared that she will not be seen as beautiful enough—and as previously discussed, the girl has come to associate beauty with love and appreciation. Therefore, we can conclude that what she fears is that she is not beautiful enough to be loved.

The fact that we see very little of Pecola's focalization—and barely anyone willing to listen to her—is quite relevant when we think of trauma. According to Brison,

In order to construct self-narratives we need not only the words with which to tell our stories, but also an audience able and willing to hear us and to understand our words as we intend them. This aspect of remaking a self in the aftermath of trauma highlights the dependency of the self on others and helps to explain why it is so difficult for survivors to recover when others are unwilling to listen to what they endured. (BRISON, 1999, p. 46)

In *The Bluest Eye*, Pecola does not have the chance to create an account of the traumatic experiences which she has been exposed to. In fact, as her imaginary friend asks questions about what happened with her father and poses insinuations, Pecola evades the questions, starts to contradict herself, asks for a change of topic, and grows increasingly distressed. Throughout the exchange, the girl is unable to retell the events that took place in her kitchen. Haunted, traumatized, mentally ill and abandoned by everyone around her, Pecola does not have the chance to talk about the many racist experiences and about the incestuous rape which have disrupted her sense of self. Therefore, the girl is not able to heal⁴.

⁴ Complete recovery or healing from trauma is not a consensus. Nevertheless, the scholars referenced in this work believe that survivors can become able to eventually face the traumatic events that they have experienced, transform trauma into narrative memories, and move on with their lives, even if they can never heal completely.

2.3. Narrative and alternatives for healing: the narrator Claudia

Malmgren (2007) argues that Claudia is, in fact, responsible for organizing the entire narrative of *The Bluest Eye*. The scholar observes that in the seasonal sections, Claudia shows enough insight and skill to make her able to use the distinct focalizations and stylistic resources that we encounter throughout the novel. Additionally, her seasonal sections seem to be connected to “an ideological project that is carried out in great detail elsewhere in the novel: the critique of cultural stereotypes imposed by the dominant white culture” (MALMGREN, 2007, p. 148). This means that in spite of presenting a variety of formal structures and voices, *The Bluest Eye* is seamless and univocal in terms of theme. Finally, Malmgren (2007) takes as evidence for the existence of a single narrator the fact that some word choices and imagery are repeated both in primer sections and in seasonal sections.

The questions related to the reasons why Claudia would feel pressed to tell this tale start being answered at the beginning of the book, as a now adult MacTeer reminisces about Pecola’s story, saying that “*There is really nothing more to say—except why. But since why is difficult to handle, one must take refuge in how*” (MORRISON, 1999, p. 5, emphasis in the original). This sentence seems to present an urge to revisit the past and talk about the events that happened—quite possibly in order to try to make some sense of everything and hopefully promote some healing. It is very likely that the traumatic past still haunts Claudia.

Moses (1999) argues that some of the themes and styles presented in *The Bluest Eye* are also central aspects to the blues, such as the transmission of values and cultural knowledge and the promoting of catharsis. In his understanding, the novel portrays “a movement from an initial emphasis on loss to a concluding suggestion of resolution of grief through motion” (MOSES, 1999, p. 125), a pattern which is typical of blues lyrics. The scholar also presents the very interesting hypothesis that Claudia is “singing” the blues of her community: “Claudia bears witness, through the oral tradition of testifying, to the community’s lack of self-love and its transference of this lack onto the abject body of Pecola” (MOSES, 1999, p. 126). Thus, as Claudia bears witness to Pecola’s downfall, she is speaking of a traumatic experience that has impacted not only the Breedlove girl, but their entire community. Additionally, she is acknowledging that many have had some degree of responsibility and accountability for Pecola’s tragic fate: society as a whole, the members of the Breedlove family, and the entire community of their neighborhood in Lorain—of which Claudia herself is part. At the end of the novel, an adult Claudia reminisces precisely on this shared guilt and responsibility:

And Pecola is somewhere in that little brown house she and her mother moved to on the edge of town, where you can see her even now, once in a while. The birdlike gestures are worn away to a mere picking and plucking her way between the tire rims and the sunflowers, between Coke bottles and milkweed, among all the waste and beauty of the world—which is what she herself was. 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. [...] And she let us, and thereby deserved our contempt. We honed our egos on her, padded out characters with her frailty, and yawned in the fantasy of our strength. (MORRISON, 1999, p. 203)

The narrator also tells us that “It’s too late. At least on the edge of my town, among the garbage and the sunflowers of my town, it’s much, much too late” (MORRISON, 1999, p. 204). It is a pessimistic sentence, but the fact that Claudia decided to tell this tale also seems to hint at the importance of revisiting traumatic pasts and presenting possible healing pathways. The story narrated is very sad and desolating, but Claudia’s very act of telling Pecola’s tale seems to suggest that something can and should be done—if not for Pecola, then for other black little girls. Moses (1999) argues that Claudia can be considered the narrative’s blues subject, and that her cathartic role as a storyteller is only possible because she has survived and grown up healthily due to having contact with a system of folk knowledge and values. It is precisely some of these values and knowledge that will be examined now.

In *The Bluest Eye*, we learn that Claudia admired the singing voice of her mother. The older woman would sing blues songs, including “St. Louis Blues” by W. C. Handy, whose lyrics reinforce the popular aphorism of “blacker de berry, sweeter is de juice”. By marking darker skin color as desirable and admirable, the song—and therefore, the lessons taught to Claudia—subvert the scale of beauty that Pecola had learned. In fact, the youngest MacTeer is the only character who seems to question the appraisal of the Western white beauty standard throughout the novel. Frieda and Pecola adore Shirley Temple, a white child actress, but Claudia despises her. Part of her anger comes from the fact that Temple has the opportunity to dance with Bojangles, an African American actor and tap dancer who the MacTeer girl believes ought to be dancing with her, not with white children. Her questioning can also be seen in how displeased Claudia is at receiving blue-eyed dolls as Christmas gifts:

I had only one desire: to dismember it. To see of what it was made, to discover the dearness, to find the beauty, the desirability that had escaped me, but apparently only me. Adults, older girls, shops, magazines, newspapers, window signs—all the world had agreed that a blue-eyed, yellow-haired, pink-skinned doll was what every girl child treasured. (MORRISON, 1999, p. 18)

We also learn that the repulse felt by the narrator is directed at white girls as well, as Claudia admits to impulses to hurt them. Eventually, the girl is taught that such violent instincts are reproachable and starts investing on learning how to love white dolls, white girls and even Shirley Temple: “I learned much later to worship her, just as I learned to delight in cleanliness, knowing, even as I learned, that the change was adjustment without improvement” (MORRISON, 1999, p. 21). It is true that we are informed that Claudia would eventually assimilate the Western white beauty standard, but we also seem to be confronted with narrative voices that question this standard. The first is that of a young

Claudia who could not comprehend why white girls—and apparently only white girls—were worshipped. The second is that of the adult narrator Claudia who seems to reflect critically on her own past experiences and feelings related to the topic.

Claudia's resistance to the dominant standard of beauty can also be seen when she feels angry because of the difference in treatment that Pecola and the Fischer girl receive from Pauline, when she defends Pecola from Maureen Peal, and when she wishes for Pecola's baby to live, seeing the child in her mind with

Its head covered with great O's of wool, the black face holding, like nickels, two clean black eyes, the flared nose, kissing-thick lips, and the living, breathing silk of black skin. No synthetic yellow bangs suspended over marble-blue eyes, no pinched nose and bowline mouth. More strongly than my fondness for Pecola, I felt a need for someone to want the black baby to live—just to counteract the universal love of white baby dolls, Shirley Temples, and Maureen Peals. (MORRISON, 1999, p. 188)

Claudia's connection and yearning for the system of folk knowledge and values can also be seen on multiple passages of the novel. When the narrator reflects on her mother's singing voice, she says that "misery colored by the greens and blues in my mother's voice took all of the grief out of the words and left me with a conviction that pain was not only endurable, it was sweet" (MORRISON, 1999, p. 24). This means that the girl has learned about resilience. We are informed that, for a Christmas present, she would rather sit in Big Mama's kitchen listening to Big Papa play the violin for her only than getting a white doll. As I have previously mentioned, she also wished she could be the one laughing and dancing with Bojangles. Therefore, we can conclude that Claudia yearns for African American music and culture, giving it great value in her mind. In addition to helping the girl appreciate black culture and aesthetic, the songs to which she listens and the stories which she is told teach Claudia many important life lessons. To Moses (1999), this connection to folk knowledge and values is crucial to the survival of a little black girl in the 1930s and 1940s. This observation may help us understand why Claudia was able to grow up healthily while Pecola, who did not have such knowledge transmitted to her, could not.

Moses (1999) observes that "the transformation of lack, loss, and grief into poetic catharsis is the constitutive task of the blues singer, and it is the labor that Claudia accomplishes in narrating *The Bluest Eye*" (p. 133). Thus, the book may be pointing at healing pathways. Degruy (2005) highlights precisely the power of storytelling, stressing how helpful, relevant and healing it can be to learn about the histories of one's community and family: "Telling our stories can be redemptive. Telling our stories can free us. Telling our stories can help lift others up (...) Storytelling is an important part of our education; it strengthens us and helps us build resilience. It helps us put things in the proper perspective" (p. 178). To the researcher, telling stories and encouraging others to do the same can build continuity across the generations, and the more continuity there is, the greater the understanding and confidence in the African American power to survive, overcome, and flourish becomes. Flourish also becomes an interesting word when we consider that the novel ends in the Summer seasonal section. Autumn is soon to come,

and Claudia seems to be suggesting that some different seeds be planted this time. Therefore, it is possible to conclude that by testifying Pecola's story, Claudia plays the cathartic role of a storyteller and promotes possible pathways to healing for herself and her community through the connection to African American knowledge and values.

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