



Panopticism and the Deconstruction of the Institutionalized Discourse of Racialized Beauty in Toni Morrison's The Bluest Eye

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Abstract

The impact of the notion of beauty on individuals is at the heart of The Bluest Eye. The characters' admittance of their ugliness is a potentially fatal form of self-loathing and a means of confirming the normative beauty standards that the Whites have established against them and that result in the protagonist's development of a scapegoat identity. Pecola's yearning for blue eyes reveals her self-loathing as she condones the normative racialized representations of beauty. Her final descent into madness is the result of the White supremacist myth of beauty. Thus, this paper is mainly concerned with Toni Morrison's The Bluest Eye as a counter-discursive strategy to dismantle the already institutionalized racialized standards of beauty. This research is qualitatively carried out on Michel Foucault's disciplinary concept of the panopticon to show how America built a massive panoptic system around the Hollywood industry. It further draws upon Morrison's (1971) "What the Black Woman Thinks About Women's Lib" to reveal how she succeeds in revolutionizing the notion of beauty by building consensual empathy towards a little black girl who goes insane because of this panoptic mechanism.

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1. Introduction

Published in the aftermath of the Civil Rights movement in 1970, *The Bluest Eye* portrays the psychological damages of a little girl; named Pecola, who, because of self-loathing, yearns for blue eyes. Pecola believes that people cannot see her because of her opaque ugliness. Pecola believes that if her eyes were blue, this would procure her love and acceptance among others. Pecola's yearning for blue eyes; that epitomize the white racialized standards of normative feminine beauty, leads to her final descent into madness. In the Afterword to the 2016 Vintage edition, Morrison informs us that the character of Pecola is inspired from a real-life person i.e., her primary school classmate who confessed to Morrison her desire for blue eyes. Morrison describes her reaction as follows, "I looked around to picture her with them and was violently repelled by what I imagined she would look like if she had her wish" (p.205). Horrified by this demonstration of internalized self-loathing, Morrison further explains that although the sorrow in her interlocutor's voice called for sympathy, "astonished by the desecration she proposed, I "got mad" at her instead" (p. 205). Thus, as Morrison goes on to explain, the novel was written "against the damaging internalization of assumptions of immutable inferiority originating in an outside gaze" (p. 206).

According to the white discourse on aesthetics, external beauty always reflects inward beauty and vice versa. The notion that no one can picture angels being ugly, just as no one can imagine Lucifer being lovely, serves as an example of this belief. As pointed out by a number of cultural theoreticians, "the discourse and practices of beauty are [first and foremost] integral both to the production and regulation of femininity, and to asymmetrical relations of power between [men and women] and among women" (Davis, 2003, p. 54). In the West, beauty routines were intended as a disciplinary practice to create femininity out of femaleness. Thus, to be feminine, is to be idle, weak and socially inactive. In *The Bluest Eye*, Morrison contrasts the negativity absorbed by the blacks, due the white beauty standards, with white feminine passivity.

The parallelism between physical beauty and virtue is represented in many fairy tales as well as religious texts. Assuming that Pecola is a mash-up of many fairy tale heroines, Bessie Jones (1985) notes that Pecola is:

[An] ironical caricature. . . . She is the ugly duckling, but, unfortunately, she does not change into a swan. She is the abused and ill-treated step-child, but [she is not beautiful like Cinderella and] the abusive step-parents are ironically her own mother and father.

Themirror into which she stares does not reassure her that she is the 'fairest of them all'.(p. 27)

Similarly, holding the belief that virtue is not compatible with ugliness, Pecola's brother Sammy "adjusted his behavior to [his ugliness], chose his friends on the basis of it" (p.29). Like Job in the Old Testament, the Breedloves seem exceptionally chosen to wear the cloak of divine retribution, or as the narrator of *The Bluest Eye* maintains, "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" (p. 28). Accepting "ugliness" as a form of divine retribution, the Breedloves found no reason to contradict the master's statement and become self-punitive as the narrator puts it, "They took the ugliness in their hands, threw it as a mantle over them, and went about the world with it" (p. 28).

Therefore, the main question addressed in this paper is the following: How does Toni Morrison reconfigure the notion of beauty throughout an "ugly" character? Throughout Pecola, Morrison tries to show that this yearning for a racially imposed self leads not only to self-loathing, but also to the dysfunctional and passive self that emerges therefrom. In her discussion of the psychological tumult resulting from this damaging desire for a racialized version of beauty, Morrison dismantles this institutionalized beauty myth by

dehumanizing it. Her counter-discursive strategy could be based on the disciplinary concept of panopticism which Foucault (1975) criticizes in his seminal work *Discipline and Punish* as a mechanism that seeks to maintain the automatic functioning of power through the panoptic system. As a result, before delving into Morrison's counter-discursive strategy for deconstructing this harmful standardized beauty myth while unveiling the panoptic mechanism, this paper will first consider the novel's origins of self-loathing and how black people internalized negativity.

2. Atavistic Rejection and Self-Loathing

The metaphors used by the author in *The Bluest Eye* depict a cycle of rejection. Toni Morrison depicts various pariahs who deal with their rejection in various ways. Pecola, the protagonist of *The Bluest Eye*, is traumatized by this cyclical rejection and becomes an accomplice of the perpetrators of her trauma by rejecting her blackness. In the forward to the Vintage edition of *The Bluest Eye* (2016), Morrison explains that the phenomenon of self-denial was an important theme she wanted to highlight throughout the novel, "When I began writing *The Bluest Eye*, I was interested in something else. Not resistance to the contempt of others, ways to deflect it, but the far more tragic and disabling consequences of accepting rejection as legitimate, as self-evident.

The indelible ugliness of Pecola is described in terms of biological heredity over which Pecola has no control. Ugliness is a common trait among the Breedlove family whose members believe their fate is determined by their physical crippling appearance. For instance, the narrator tells us that the Breedlove family lived in a storefront “because they were poor and black, and they stayed there because they believed they were ugly” (p. 28). Although Toni Morrison uses multiple narrative viewpoints, there is unanimity among the characters, including the Breedloves, that Pecola is ugly because she is black.

The matrilineal relationship between Pecola and her mother is where the theme of rejection is most prominent. The daughter – mother dyad has a sense of estrangement which is exacerbated by the fact that Pecola never refers to Mrs. Breedlove as mom, and only addresses her, or speaks about her, as Mrs. Breedlove. In a similar vein, Pecola’s mother does not act motherly, she too rejects the ugliness of Pecola shortly after her birth when she explains, “When I had the second one, a girl [Pecola], I ‘member I said I’d love it no matter what it looked like. She looked like a black ball of hair ... But I knowed she was ugly. Head full of pretty hair, but lord she was ugly” (p. 96-98). Mrs. Breedlove is partly amnesic of her real motherhood and acts as a surrogate mother for the Fishers’ children.

Claudia describes a heartbreaking scene in

which Pecola loses control and spills a pan full of hot blueberries after hearing her mother being called Polly by the Fisher girl:

It may have been nervousness, awkwardness, but the pan tilted under Pecola’s fingers and fell to the floor, splattering blackish blueberries everywhere. Most of the juice splashed on Pecola’s legs, and the burn must have been painful, for she cried and began hopping about just as Mrs. Breedlove entered with a tightly packed laundry bag. In one gallop she was on Pecola, and with the back of her hand knocked her to the floor. Pecola slid in the pie juice, one leg folding under her. Mrs. Breedlove yanked her by the arm, slapped her again, and in a voice thin with anger, abused Pecola . . . (p. 84)

Instead of being preoccupied with her daughter’s scald, Mrs. Breedlove consoles the Fisher girl by soothing her tears. Mrs. Breedlove’s preoccupation with cleaning the kitchen floor and the dirty dress of the Fisher girl rather than treating burned Pecola completely “demotherizes”; if not dehumanizes, her. Her obsession with the cleanliness of the floor and the Fisher girl’s dress as well as her neglect of Pecola’s aching body is the “monstrous” form of rejection Toni Morrison might have referred to in the Afterword when

she stated, "In exploring the social and domestic aggression that could cause a child to fall apart, I mounted a series of rejections, some routine, some exceptional, some monstrous, all the while trying hard to avoid complicity in the demonization process Pecola was subjected to" (p. 168).

All the characters who meet Pecola believe that she is ugly. It follows, then, that Pecola is rejected because of her "unworthiness" to live among pretty people. *The Bluest Eye* shows how forces beyond human control such as nature and particularly the legacy of rejection have been compiled to establish the heritage of desolation that has been transmitted to Pecola. For instance, the cyclical segmentation of the novel into seasons – Fall, Winter, Spring, Summer – is specifically telling since these are constants in nature that are not subjected to human control. In the same way that the seasonal ordering of the year is unchanged, Pecola's ugliness rooted in her blackness is described in the novel as "static and dread" (p. 37).

Pecola is crippled by her blackness as well as her parents' one. By emphasizing biological heredity as the factor that determines how people look at Pecola and how she looks at herself, Toni Morrison shows that rejection is circumambiently atavistic. Moreover, it can hardly disappear given the impossibility to

biologically have control over black genes, eradicate them or even whiten them. Therefore, in order to understand how Pecola's rejection is grounded in the rejection of her parents, Toni Morrison devotes two separate segments in the novel to the historic past of Pecola's parents, Pauline and Cholly Breedlove respectively. By so doing, Morrison invites the reader to better understand the generational mechanism of rejection as well as the development of Pecola's parents' respective identities, and the way they affect the construction of Pecola's one. For the Breedloves, ugliness seemingly becomes a kind of "stigma that can be transmitted through lineages and equally contaminate all members of a family" (Goffman, 1963, p. 4). Even as a child, Pecola is cognizant of the biological hereditary fact that her ugliness and her parents' one are interrelated, holding the belief that "if she looked different, beautiful, maybe Cholly would be different, and Mrs. Breedlove too" (p. 34).

In the section devoted to Cholly, Toni Morrison sets out to make us sympathize with Cholly because "his mother wrapped him in two blankets and one newspaper and placed him on a junk heap by the railroad" (p. 103) only four days after his birth. Cholly is rescued by Aunt Jimmy who acts as his surrogate mother, but dies when he is 13 years old. Morrison begins with these small details to elicit sympathy for Cholly, which grows stronger when

Cholly meets his father following Aunt Jimmy's death. Cholly's father assumed, much to Cholly's chagrin, that Cholly had come at the request of a woman he had slept with in order to extort money from him. Cholly's deviant rapist character is shaped in part by this sequence in his life, as well as the scene in which he is forced by two white men to make love to Darlene under the flashlight. Cholly is unable to handle his own family as a father because he is aware of his illegitimate conception and lacks even the smallest consoling souvenir of his parents. These stultifying experiences have shaped a man who is described in the novel as "dangerously free":

Only a musician would sense, know, without even knowing that he knew, that Cholly was free. Dangerously free. Free to feel whatever he felt - fear, guilt, shame, love, grief, pity. Free to be tender or violent, to whistle or weep. . . . He could go to jail and not feel imprisoned, for he had already seen the furtiveness in the eyes of his jailer, free to say, "No suh," and smile, for he had already killed three white men. Free to take a woman's insults, for his body had already conquered hers. Free even to know her in the head, for he had already cradled that head in his arms. Free to be gentle when she was sick, or mop her floor, for she knew what and where his maleness was. . . . He

was free to live his fantasies, and free even to die, the how and the when of which held no interest for him. In those days, Cholly was truly free. Abandoned in a junk heap by his mother, rejected for a crap game by his father, there was nothing more to lose. He was alone with his own perceptions and appetites. And they alone interested him. (pp. 125-26)

Cholly is free and, in Morrison's words, "godlike". Cholly meets Pauline, marries her, and fathers two children: Sammy and Pecola, while in this "godlike" state of mind. Having never known a healthy parent-child relationship or the intrinsic security of parental affection, Cholly reacts to all family problems in an anarchic manner with the utmost disregard to his family's emotional needs. Thus, Toni Morrison emphasizes the iterative process of parental rejection whereby Cholly is not the only one to indict for family abandonment. Cholly's freedom is actually a relinquishment of his personal will and denotes his complete resignation and despondency over the fact that "there was nothing more to lose". Rejected and deprived of any form of human attachment Cholly's freedom reveals a seriously deranged self. These series of rejections have serious repercussions on the construction of Pecola's identity.

Cholly's ugliness combined with Pauline's has given birth to hideousness in triplicate

in the person of Pecola, who bears three generations of atavistic ugliness within her. Atavism is a determining force in the formation of identities to the point where not only ugliness but also madness is cyclical in the Breedlove family. By the end of the novel, Pecola goes insane as she comes to believe that she has blue eyes and that no one wants to look at her because they are envious. In fact, Pecola's insanity may have been passed down from Cholly's mother. Cholly's mother, according to the only story we have about her, abandoned Cholly when he was a newborn baby and then went insane. This story is not intertwined with other stories in order for the reader to remember it so that when Pecola begins to hallucinate, the reader will be able to connect it to her grandmother's insanity.

In fact, these chronic rejections are grounded in an older Western rejection of a "demonic" "cursed" blackness. Spencer (2006) draws the genealogy of this rejected species, "There was the notion that black-skinned people were the descendants of Ham, the son that Noah cursed and banished to the land of Nod – East of Eden. And there were also notions that there were pre-Adamic beings that were outside of the regular Christian remit" (pp. 34-35). According to this logic, black people are doomed to suffer the same exile and curse as their forefathers. This belief is significant because it marks the start of a Western

tradition of telling stories about black people. This is how the myth of "demonic blackness" was born: by repeatedly portraying black people as one thing and only one thing, which is exactly what they have become.

Toni Morrison implicitly criticizes the characters' internalization of racialized beauty standards and presents them as "docile bodies," to use Michel Foucault's terms, by demonstrating the danger of this single negative story in which Blacks identify. Indeed, the novel's black characters never question the social practices that surround them. Instead, they completely submit to the already established norms that they deem to be correct and virtuous. "A body is docile that may be subjected, used, transformed and improved," Foucault (1995) says of docile bodies (p.136). Eventually, all black characters, to varying degrees, have developed a form of docility. Pecola is the main character who goes through Foucault's four processes. She is judged on the basis of white beauty standards. She is then used to legitimize the standards that define whiteness as opposed to blackness. Soaphead Church transforms her by convincing her that her eyes have turned blue. Finally, Pecola's condition improves as her insanity forces others to empathize with her.

3. *Panopticism and Counter-discursive Strategies to Deconstruct the racialized notion of Beauty*

Many African American writers devoted their work to the scientific racial theories that institutionalized the superiority/inferiority dichotomy as corroborated by the hegemonic linguistic codes that culminated in such objectifications of race. In the preface to her collection of essays *Playing in the Dark* (1993), Toni Morrison presents herself as a black writer who is “struggling with and through a language that can powerfully evoke and enforce hidden signs of superiority, cultural hegemony, and dismissive “othering” of people ...” (p. x). Therefore, *The Bluest Eye* might be regarded as a counter hegemonic discourse that seeks to elucidate how white beauty standards, which are impossible to meet, serve as a tool of control.

In his seminal work *The Archeology of Knowledge*, Foucault (1971) defines discourse as “constituted by a group of sequences of signs” which refer to “particular modalities of existence” (p. 106). As a result, the purpose of this research is to examine Morrison's novel as an imaginative depiction of the process by which the “sequences of signs” of the white-dominated discourse of beauty compel African Americans to see themselves through those signs. The protagonist's obsession with the concept of

beauty is a direct result of the Hollywood industry, which is a stronghold of the panoptic system, which presents a vision of beauty that Pecola is unable to access. *The Bluest Eye* corresponds exactly to Foucault's investigation of modern disciplinary techniques in *Discipline and Punish*, particularly what he refers to as the “panoptic mechanism.” The novel depicts the white panoptic mechanism as established through various media that controls African Americans' state of mind and instills in them a sense of inferiority that maintains and preserves the superiority of the Whites. The main purpose of the panopticon is to “induce in the inmate a state of conscious and permanent visibility that assures the automatic functioning of power” (Foucault, 1995: p.201).

In *The Bluest Eye*, the white normative standards of feminine beauty are embedded in three patriarchal representations i.e., the industrialized white blue-eyed yellow-haired dolls that white and black children alike crave, the Hollywood movie icons, and what many critics call the “white text” of the Dick and Jane “happy” white family. The ubiquitous billboards, beauty icons in commercial products (the Mary Jane candy and the Shirley Temple mug), and the Dick and Jane primer text all stand for the American “modalities of existence” and function in the same way as the Benthamian central tower that Foucault describes as

... an architectural figure ... [whose] periphery [is] an annular building; at the center, a tower; this tower is pierced with wide windows that open onto the inner side of the ring; the peripheric building is divided into cells, each of which extends the whole width of the building; they have two windows, one on the inside, corresponding to the windows of the tower; the other, on the outside, allows the light to cross the cell from one end to the other. All that is needed, then, is to place a supervisor in a central tower and to shut up in each cell a madman, a patient, a condemned man, a worker or a schoolboy. By the effect of backlighting, one can observe from the tower, standing out precisely against the light, the small captive shadows in the cells of the periphery (Discipline and Punish, 200)

The Panopticon in *The Bluest Eye* is primarily built by Hollywood's eye-catching industry whose beauty icons act as supervisors by soaking onlookers in its fantastic world and thus controlling their mindset and behavior. The character who most accurately represents how Euro-American beauty standards maintain power through this panoptic scheme is Pauline. In the section on Pauline, Toni Morrison explores what she describes in the postscript as, "The damaging internalization of assumptions of

immutable inferiority originating in an outside gaze" (p. 168). In fact, Pauline fully absorbs the white aesthetic through the movies and projects it on to her daughter. Pregnant with her first child Sammy:

[Mrs Breedlove] stopped staring at the green chairs, at the delivery truck; she went to the movies instead. There in the dark of her memory was refreshed, and she succumbed to her earlier dreams. Along with the idea of romantic love, she was introduced to another – physical beauty. Probably the most destructive ideas in the history of human thought. Both originated in envy, thrived in insecurity, and ended in disillusion. (p. 95)

The various mentions of iconic beautiful stars¹ in the novel are not a random selection but reflect the American society's judgment and validation of white feminine beauty as sublime. This is particularly true of *The Bluest Eye* that shows how the standards of female beauty in 1940's America were set by the Hollywood industry. These standards politically excluded black women and deprived them of a feeling of belonging into this monopolized beauty industry. The internalization of these stereotypes is incrementally manifested as self-loathing, self-denial, and ultimately self-effacement. Pauline fully inhabits the white aesthetic and starts mimicking the

white model as she narrates to the reader one of her adventures, “I ‘member,” she says, “one time I went to see Clark Gable and Jean Harlow. I fixed my hair up like I’d seen hers on a magazine . . . it looked just like her. Well almost like her” (p. 96). Explaining the mechanisms of the motion picture projector, Gary Schwartz (1996) describes Mrs. Breedlove in these terms:

Pauline, as the viewer and learner, has absorbed the visions of light and darkness and becomes the engine of their reproduction – a projector, as she projects *Imitation* onto the screen of her black vs. white life experience. Wittingly or otherwise, Pauline not only becomes the *Imitation* but, in turn imitates it. She is an imitation of an imitation. (pp. 122-23; emphasis in original)

By inhabiting the white aesthetic, Pauline’s first frame of mind was self-loathing and contempt for the blackness surrounding her as she states, “Them pictures gave me a lot of pleasure, but it made coming home hard, and looking at Cholly hard” (95-6). Afterward, her self-loathing exacerbates into a penchant for self-effacement represented by her claim for visibility through embellishment that parallels an actress’ claim for stardom. A star actress does not gain stardom because of what she is but rather because of the roles she performs and the cathartic

identities she inhabits. Thus, fake identities slowly pick up steam at the detriment of authentic ones. In the same way an actress performs a role in a movie and ought to fully inhabit it in order to be successful; Pauline inhabits a role in the Fishers’ house that completely detaches her from her real identity as the Breedlove matriarch. Pauline fully abdicates her responsibility as Pecola’s and Sammy’s mother in favor of her housekeeping at the Fishers. Conveniently, as a devout housekeeper in the Fisher house, Pauline inhabits the role of Delilah Johnson that Louise Beavers performs in *Imitation of life*². By performing the role of an “ideal servant”, Pauline is “willing to abandon her own identity, sacrifice her family, and bask in second-hand glory all to keep her position” (Russell, 2006, p. 105). As a result, Pauline confuses self with role-performing. Like an actress, Pauline lives illusive moments during daytime in the Fisher house that are shattered by reality once she is back home³. In this sense, O’Reilly (2004) assumes that, “The lived, however, does frequently interrupt and disrupt the assumed subjectivity; as with Pauline’s tooth; the lived/actual often shatters the illusion” (p.49).

One significant point that Morrison makes is that white-defined beauty detaches women from reality. Morrison “recognizes the fundamental objectification within the specular system of beauty, in which the image becomes separated from the real

thing” (Walther, 1990, p. 776). In this sense, working on the assumption that the notion of beauty in 1940’s United States is grounded on iconic Hollywoodian figures assumes, to use Jean Beaudrillard’s terms, that “the construction of the real as film is said to mark the destruction of reality” (Qtd. in Constable, 2004, p. 44). This is represented through Pauline’s ipseity as being subjected to change by the celluloid world of transcendent beauty. On the one hand, Pauline’s high self-esteem depends on how much useful she is as an active member in her micro-society. On the other hand, her self-loathing and detachment from reality is produced by images from the movie industry that “convulse” her stable sense of identity. Thomas Fick (2007) assumes that Morrison’s use of cinema in *The Bluest Eye*, “serves to recall an older and more intellectually distinguished precursor . . . the famous cave in Plato’s *The Republic*” (p.24). Summarizing the Allegory of the Cave, Fick (2007) writes:

Socrates asks us to imagine people living from childhood in a cave, chained by leg and neck with their backs to the only entrance. Behind them is a fire with a parapet in front of it “like the screen at a puppet-show, which hides the performers while they show their puppets over the top.” Objects are carried by men behind the parapet so that the fire projects the objects’ shadows on the wall of the

cave in front of the chained viewers. Obviously, Socrates says, the captives would think the shadows are the sole reality, and if one of the people crossing behind them spoke, the echo would make the sound seem to come from the projected shadow. He concludes, “In every way, then, such prisoners would recognize as reality nothing but the shadows of those artificial objects.” But the shadows are still shadows; the “real” lies outside the cave, in the immutable Archetypes represented by the objects carried between the fire and the cave wall. (p. 24)

Following this Platonic conception, Morrison argues that the characters who identify against the advertisement of the celluloid world are victims and captives of their imagination. Morrison highlights how the character of Pauline appropriates this shadowy reality after she absorbs “the most destructive ideas in the history of human thought”: romantic love and physical beauty (p. 95). Pauline cannot even look at Cholly after watching a romantic movie where the white actor treats the woman extraordinarily. The narrator tells us that 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 form from the silver screen” (p. 95). The silver screen cultivates a white scale of visual beauty.

The notion of absolute beauty forces Pauline to perceive of her world as a shadow, a projection of the perfect world where “white men [take] such good care of they women, and they all dressed up in big clean houses” (p. 95). In fact, these movies convey a commercialized version of the Dick and Jane textual utopian world. Claudia’s reflection on the significance of the dolls and the way they represent the white aesthetic is very insightful. She does not understand why “adults, older girls, shops, magazines, newspapers, window signs – all the world agreed that a blue-eyed, yellow-haired, pink-skinned doll was what every girl child treasured” (p. 14). Claudia believes that beauty brings pleasure, and her inability to derive pleasure from the sight or possession of a white baby doll leads her to believe that the doll is unattractive. Claudia relates beauty to pleasure in a Kantian sense, but she reflects Morrison’s view of white beauty as dysfunctional.

Claudia seems bemused as she questions the functionality of the doll when she asks, “What was I supposed to do with it? Pretend I was its mother? I had no interest in babies or the concept of motherhood” (p. 13). Mothering a white doll, the product of the racist other, implies here nurturing and cultivating the white aesthetic within the black community.

Claudia is cognizant of the mechanisms of racism and that self-loathing is the bedrock

of blacks’ low self-esteem. This is why she takes a firm stand against the doll metaphorically depicted as the white beauty crusader. In her attempt to make sense of the loveliness of the white baby doll, Claudia anatomizes her Christmas gift of a white doll with the eagerness to discover what it is made of and what makes it so special:

I fingered the face, wondering at the single-stroke eyebrows; picked at the pearly teeth stuck like two piano keys between red bowline lips. Traced the turned-up nose, poked the glassy blue eyeballs, twisted the yellow hair. I could not love it. But I could examine it to see what it was that all the world said lovable. Break off the tiny fingers, bend the flat feet, loosen the hair, twist the head around, and the thing made one sound – a sound they said was the sweet and plaintive cry “Mama”... Remove the cold and stupid eyeball, it would bleat still, “Ahhhhhh,” take off the head, shake out the sawdust, crack the back against the brass bed rail, it would bleat still. The gauze back would split, and I could see the disk with six holes, the secret of the sound. A mere metal roundness. (p. 14)

In this sense, Toni Morrison dismantles the white standards of beauty through the philosophical character of Claudia. Claudia’s dismembering of the doll

displays her vengeful character. Bearing in mind the fact that the black persona was fragmented and distorted because of corporeal otherness, Claudia fragments the doll into pieces in such a way that the “beautiful” doll loses its persona i.e., beauty. Young Claudia is seen as “an empiricist among metaphysicians” and “is rational and resolutely empirical in her quest for understanding” (Fick, 2007, p. 23). Claudia discovers nothing in her anatomical dissection of the doll that satisfies her thirst for knowledge about people's fascination with it. The only thing she discovered was related to the doll's bleating, it was a “mere metal roundness” inserted in the back of the doll. This discovery makes Claudia “unable to believe there is value above and beyond what can be found in the immediate world” (Fick, 2007, p.23). Claudia rummages through the physical countenance of the doll, curious as to the reasons for the affirmation that beautiful dolls are white and blue-eyed, but finds no reason for the doll's desirable beauty. Claudia's deconstruction of the doll is significant because it allows for the creation of a new self that is unaffected by the deep-seated racialized norms that Claudia has dismantled.

Claudia explains how commercial racialized products; such as white dolls, cannot fill in the emotional gap left by the internalized negativity. Claudia, for instance, explains that she did not want

anything for Christmas and instead “wanted rather to feel something” (p. 15). She tells the reader about her wishes for Christmas, “I want to sit on the low stool in BigMamma's kitchen with my lap full of lilacs and listen to Big papa play his violin for me alone” (p. 15). Instead of catering for their children's emotional needs, the MacTeer family distorts their daughter's emotional equilibrium by offering her something that would feed her envy and possibly detach her from reality. When Claudia considers the beautiful Maureen Peal, she realizes the politicized dimension of beauty. “Maureen Peal was not the Enemy,” Claudia realizes, and “the Thing to fear was the Thing that made her beautiful, and not us” (p. 58). This statement reveals a thoughtful Claudia who recognizes the panoptic mechanism hidden within the institutionalized discourse of beauty as embodied by the silver screen. Like Claudia, the omniscient narrator sees the Breedloves' ugliness as divine matter (the Thing). According to Michael Wood, Morrison implies that the “master”, the “Thing”, is the western historical version of beauty which not only excludes but also “uglifies” blacks:

Each member of the family interprets and acts out of his or her ugliness, but none of them [sic] understands that the all-knowing master is not God but only history and habit; the projection of their own numbed collusion with the mythology of beauty and ugliness

that oppresses them beyond their already grim social oppression. (Qtd. in Bloom, 2007, p. 1)

Following this line of reasoning, Claudia is aware of the panoptic system that conceals surveillance through the commercialization of white beauty that promotes the political goal of perpetuating the White superiority/black inferiority divide. The narrator describes how these ads are constantly "leaning at them from every billboard, every movie, every glance" (28) and how each gaze at these hoardings further distorts the Breedloves' self-image. Although there are infinite definitions of "beauty," this instance supports Naomi Wolf's (2002) definition of beauty as "a currency system like the gold standard. Like any economy, it is determined by politics" (p. 12). Roberts Samuels (2001) suggests that the beauty industry is the backbone of the white aesthetics:

The beauty industry is the prime example of the way that global capitalism has linked itself to a cycle of prejudices. . . . Morrison shows that all modes of representation (books, toys, movies, billboards, stores, magazines, newspaper, etc) in our current culture tend to idealize whiteness and devalue blackness. (p. 105)

It follows, then, that the white beauty

standard has become a politicized tool to enforce the deep-seated racist doctrine by commercializing the capitalist product of white beauty. To pinpoint the danger of this indoctrination, Morrison quotes Joseph de Gobineau in the novel to show how the Whitcomb family has come to condone the racist assertions of the latter who claimed, "all civilizations derive from the white race, that none can exist without its help and that a society is great and brilliant so far as it preserves the blood of the noble group that created it" (Morrison, 1999, p. 133). Pecola is a typical example of this subaltern category de Gobineau refers to. With the belief that she catapulted to inexistence because of her invisibility, Pecola cannot exist without the final help of Soaphead Church i.e., the symbol of white civilization.

Claudia's criticism of the popular established beliefs regarding the notion of beauty represent Morrison's own belief, an iconoclast herself. In "What the Black Woman Thinks About Women's Lib", Morrison examines figures of black feminine beauty, such as Nefertiti⁴, that black women should appropriate to counter the hegemonic white images of feminine beauty. Morrison underpins the difference between the functional black feminine beauty and the idle aspect of white feminine beauty when she argues that it "seems a needless cul-de-sac, an opiate that appears to make life livable if not serene but eventually must separate us

from reality. I maintain that black women are already O.K. O.K. with our short necks. O.K. with our calloused hands. O.K. with our tired feet and paper bags O.K. O.K. O.K.” (Morrison, 1971, p. 15)

Although *The Bluest Eye* emphasizes the white aesthetic as the primary source of Pecola's plight, Morrison does not limit the novel to a focalization on the theme of victimization, but provides a counter-narrative of beauty. Throughout this statement, Morrison redefines the notion of beauty by rejecting its orthodox conception. Her implicit comparison of the aspects of white consumer beauty with the “O.K O.K” characteristics of black female beauty yields two contrastive points, according to Malin LaVon Walther. In his analytical reading of this passage, Walther notes that Morrison's “suggestion that black women should “remain useful” implicitly contrasts the uselessness inherent in white culture's images of female beauty with the utility of black women” (Walther, 1990, p. 776). These contrastive images are abundant in *The Bluest Eye*. For instance, when the Fisher girl's dress is stained, the latter depends on Pauline to clean it. Although, in *The Bluest Eye*, cleanliness matches with beauty, and thus whiteness, and dirtiness corresponds with blackness, it is Pauline Breedlove who whitens the stains on the girl's dress. This particular instance shows that the Fisher girl cannot preserve the whiteness of her dress, her beauty in this case, because of

her idleness and it is the useful “calloused hands” of Pauline that are going to embellish her dress. In this particular scene, the white beauty myth is presented as haunting blacks with its passive materiality and its inability to sustain its standards: cleanliness and order. Walther (1990) explains that such images remind the reader that “a hidden criterion of female beauty is idleness: to be beautiful one must have soft hands and dainty feet” (p.776).

Morrison also reveals how the white aesthetic plagues the Breedlove family through a narrative technique that convokes the Dick and Jane primer as a continual reminder of the Breedloves' ugliness. In an interview, Morrison explains that she had employed the primer with its portrayal of a happy white family “as a frame acknowledging the outer civilization”. She further notes that, “The primer with white children was the way life was presented to black people” (LeClair, 1981, pp. 28-29). Morrison triples the novel's epigraph in different versions, the first variant of the primer is linguistically regular, the second one omits capitals and punctuation, while the third one is free from capitals, punctuation, and spacing. The classic critical reading of these versions is that the first stands for the happy life of white families “orderly and “readable”; the second represents the MacTeer family, “confused but still readable”; and the final run-on version symbolizes the Breedlove family,

“incoherent and unintelligible” (Malmgren, 2007, p. 152). Hong Zeng (2010) argues in this concern that, “The violence and madness of language is found in the typographically contracted text of the primer, hinting at an atmosphere of urgency in the symbol of cultural rape (the invasion of space), as well as Pecola’s mind spinning into madness” (pp. 126-27). Zeng’s analysis is in line with Morrison’s concern about the oppressive and violent aspects of language. The third dissonant version of the primer, difficult to read, and violent in form; because of the lack of harmony that punctuation and spacing provide, represents the violence with which Pecola’s sanity is shattered. At yet another level, the third version of the primer might stand for the disordered lives of the passivized whites when abandoned by the active blacks. Pauline’s cleaning of the Fisher house and the Fisher girl come to mind. In other words, can the Fisher family maintain order and cleanliness without Pauline? In this sense, punctuation and spacing are to the text what Pauline is for the Fisher family. The main standards of their white beauty are preserved by black Pauline. It follows that the invasion of space in the third version is a prolepsis of the invasion of Pecola’s body by her father and the invasion of her mind by the white colonizer. The *Bluest Eye* includes two interspersed texts: four seasonal sections narrated by Claudia MacTeer and seven primer sections prefaced by the “master”

primer and narrated by various narrators. Brooks Bouson (2009) explains the relationship between the different fragments of the primer and the texts of the sections they introduce as follows:

The chapters of the novel that are headed with the primer descriptions of Jane’s idealized green-and-white house and her happy family introduce readers to the decaying storefront dwelling where the ugly Breedloves live; the chapters that begin with primer accounts of the dog and cat tell pointed stories of animal abuse; the chapters headed with primer descriptions of the very nice mother and big and strong father who smiles at his daughter report on the mother’s physical and the father’s sexual abuse of Pecola; and the chapter headed with the primer passage mentioning Jane’s playful friend relates Pecola’s conversation with her only “friend,” her dissociated alter self. (p. 56)

The redundant use of different snippets from the Dick and Jane primer at the outset of many fragments of the novel aims at reminding the reader about the typical white family engulfed in happiness. However, the emotional estrangement affecting the seemingly perfect white primer family; represented through the family’s inability to answer Jane’s desire for play, is duplicated through the character of Pecola whose family fails to cater for her emotional needs. The master primer

further alienates Pecola as it is used to ideologically indoctrinate and validate white values. The primer implies the stealthiest ways that the dominant culture exerts its supremacy through the educational system. It communicates to readers "the role of education in both oppressing the victim – and more to the point – teaching the victim how to oppress her own black self by internalizing the values that dictate standards of beauty" (Gibson, 2007, p. 37).

Morrison does not counter the hegemonic definition of whiteness only through her critique of the idleness and uselessness of white feminine beauty, but depends on the prefatory master primer to reinforce her counter hegemonic discourse. While the primer served for decades to teach children to read by offering them simple sentences, Morrison's third edition of the primer challenges the reader to make sense of the text as it echoes the Breedloves' descent into chaos. Morrison's choice of the typographically disordered pieces to introduce the Breedloves' sections reveals that the primer's efficiency is no more applicable to the black community that, by then, had to produce its own primer. Moreover, by rejecting the imposed ready-made ideals on blacks, Morrison deconstructs the primer and engages the reader in constructing meaning out of this senseless world. By so doing, the author manifests her refusal to define the African American experience following the white

standards.

Another scene demonstrating Morrison's critique of the white aesthetic is Cholly's second time rape of Pecola while she is reading. Choosing the moment of "reading" implies that Cholly is violating the very act of reading. "Reading" here metaphorically stands for reading the Black African American history through the Dick and Jane Primer. Raping Pecola at the very moment of reading is Cholly's attempt to interrupt the educational tradition that has shattered Pecola's psyche. Thus, he is abusing Pecola's body while attempting to protect her psyche from the colonization of the white aesthetic.

4. CONCLUSION

To conclude, Toni Morrison does not only narrate the plight of a child affected by racism, but also seeks to understand how racist doctrines are internalized to finally dismantle them through the character of Claudia. While the character of Pecola highlights the psychological frailty caused by the internalization of negativity, the character of Claudia, Morrison's voice in this case, shows how we can draw lessons from Pecola's experience. In order to dismantle this racialized version of beauty, Morrison first explains how the white racialized standards result in self-loathing for blacks. Morrison offers a dehumanized aspect of White beauty throughout white characters that are careless and devoid of human values. From a Foucauldian perspective, Morrison deplores the

heinous effects of Hollywood's movies and stars on the lives of African Americans. This research demonstrated how the silver screen is the parallel of the Benthamian panopticon that supervises blacks throughout the movie stars. As institutionalized through the Dick and Jane primer, white beauty becomes the standard beauty that Morrison deconstructs by establishing a clear link between white beauty and passivity, which she uses to devalue this white version of beauty. Moreover, Morrison implies that the lacks' plight was made easy and possible for the Whites because the Black self is damaged through low self-esteem. Finally, throughout the character of Claudia, Morrison artistically revolutionizes the notion of beauty by proposing to measure beauty according to the value of usefulness.

5. Endnotes:

1. Some of Hollywood stars that are mentioned in the novel are Shirley Temple, Greta Garbo, Ginger Rogers, and Jean Harlow among others.
2. *Imitation of life* (1934) is a movie about Peola, a light skinned girl and the daughter of Delilah Johnson. Her mother is the maid at Beatrice Pullman's house who helps the widow Beatrice in her pancake business. Peola runs away from home because she cannot accept the blackness of her mother. After being found by her mother working at a restaurant that prohibits black customers, Peola denies her kinship with Delilah. This causes Delilah much agony and she dies before Peola is back home. After learning about her mother's death, Peola comes to attend the funeral with an overwhelming sense of selfishness and loss.
3. While mimicking Jean Harlow and trying to identify with her, for instance, Pauline took a big bite of a candy that cost her one tooth right out of her mouth. Pauline narrates this scene as follows, "I was sitting back in my seat, and I taken a big bite of that candy, and it pulled a tooth right out of my mouth. I could of cried . . . I don't believe I ever did get over that. There I was, five months pregnant, trying to look like Jean Harlow, and a front tooth gone. Everything went then" (p. 96).

4. Nefertiti (1370 BC, 1330 BC) was the royal wife of Egyptian Pharaoh Akhenaton; her name means “the beautiful or the perfect one has come.” Nefertiti is considered a beauty legend although she is not white. She was in Ama Ata Aidoo’s words “a black beauty whose complexion was far superior to the alabaster with which she is not willfully painted”. Ama Ata Aidoo. “The African Woman Today”. Obioma Nnaemeka, ed. *Sisterhood, Feminism and Power: From Africa to the Diaspora*. Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 1998, pp. 39-40.

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