“Pretty-eyed Shirley Temple”: The Wish of Being Perceived in Toni Morrison’s *The Bluest Eye*

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Abstract

The present essay explores the race, power and identity dynamics present in Toni Morrison’s *The Bluest Eye*, under the scope of Post-colonialist Studies, specifically using Frantz Fanon’s *Black Skin, White Masks,* and sociologist Zygmunt Bauman’s *Liquid Love: On the Frailty of Human Bonds* as conceptual references, and questioning if, considering the white-dominated hierarchic system in which the characters of the novel (and non-white people in non-fictional existence) are inserted and the lack of reference and of a stable, loving environment that pervades Pecola Breedlove’s existence as a young black girl, she can be considered to have developed an identity of her own, through the analysis of the processes and mechanisms she undertook inside these same dynamics she was been born into.

Keywords: Post-colonialist Studies; Identity; Perception; Intersectionality; White gaze

Resumo

O presente ensaio explora as dinâmicas de raça, poder e identidade presentes em *The Bluest Eye* de Toni Morrison, através da lente dos Estudos Pós-colonialistas, usando especificamente *Black Skin, White Masks* de Frantz Fanon, e *Liquid Love: On the Frailty of Human Bonds* do sociólogo Zygmunt Bauman enquanto ferramentas conceptuais, e questionar se, considerando o sistema hierárquico dominantemente branco no qual as personagens do romance (e pessoas não-brancas em existência não-ficcional) estão inseridas e a falta de referência de um ambiente estável e amável que permeia a existência de Pecola Breedlove enquanto rapariga jovem e negra, é possível considerar que a mesma desenvolveu uma identidade própria, através da análise de processos e mecanismos empreendidos por si dentro destas mesmas dinâmicas nas quais nasceu.

Palavras-chave: Estudos Pós-colonialistas; Identidade; Perceção; Interseccionalidade; *White Gaze*

> The project, then, for this, my first book, was to enter the life of the one least likely to withstand such damaging forces [rejection, invisibility, neglect] because of youth, gender, and race. Begun as a bleak narrative of psychological murder, the main character could not stand alone since her passivity made her a narrative void. So I invented friends, classmates, who understood, even sympathized, with her plight, but had the benefit of supportive parents and a feistiness all their own. Yet they were helpless as well. They could not save their friend from the world. She broke.
>
> - Toni Morrison, "Foreword" to *The Bluest Eye* (ix-x)

Invisible to whom?

- Toni Morrison, in *Toni Morrison: The Pieces I Am* (10:36)

Upon re-reading Toni Morrison's "Foreword" to her 1970 novel *The Bluest Eye*, the notion that Pecola, despite being alive and having gone through extensive negative experience, might never have been more than a mere existence, void of identity, stuck with me. Toni Morrison herself, in that same "Foreword", called her a "narrative void" (x) due to Pecola's inability to establish herself as a figure to be considered inside the dynamics of power and identity of the racist society she has been born into, as well as her lack of a stable support system upon which she could develop an identity to call her own. Still, she was only a "void" in her narrative capacity, in her power over herself; she existed and interacted with other characters, despite her powerlessness. But in what ways, if any, is Pecola different from the inanimate "plot of black dirt" (Morrison 6) that Claudia, the novel's narrator, calls her, in reflection about the protagonist's life?

Throughout the novel, the questions recurrently posed by Pecola – "How do you . . . get somebody to love you?"; "What did love feel like?" (Morrison 32; 57) – continually remain unanswered, although their recurrence explicit her feeling of invisibility and, consequently, her need of being seen. Taking into account Schmidt-Burkhardt's consideration that, in the French language, "*voir* (vision), *savoir* (knowledge) and *pouvoir* (power) have the same stem" (18), vision can be understood in its semantic relation to power and knowledge. *Percevoir* – meaning *to perceive* – is another constituent of that same relation, and, through crossing languages to achieve a wider conception of the recurrence of this relation, both in Portuguese as in English, a constant overlapping and interchangeability of vision with understanding can be

recognized – in the former, *ver* and *perceber* are often used as means through which one grasps an object (both concrete and/or abstract) and possesses understanding over said object, implying a deep acknowledging, such as one of identity; in the latter, *see* implies the same process. *Look*, however, is related to a surface-level understanding that is to quickly fade into oblivion.

Lack of deep recognition and understanding appears, in Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*, as a condition exclusively to be dealt with by African Americans. Frantz Fanon, in his work entitled *Black Skin, White Masks*, explored the manner in which the racist system of power and identity dynamics in society is a result of imposition of white values through slavery and colonialization.[1] Considering that slavery, as a practice, involved the removal of identity of its victims for their forced assimilation into a new environment, its relevance in America as a presence and conflict that erupted in the Civil War of 1861, and taking into consideration segregation as an adapted continuation of abuse in white power and distancing between black and white existence in the Post-Civil War, until being theoretically eradicated through the Civil Rights Act of 1964, black struggle and existence in America can be understood as a quest for identity inside this environment that is destructive in its capacity of denial of recognition for African Americans. This environment, however, becomes imbued in its victims, their self-perception and forging of identity in its hierarchical order, dictating black existence as inferior and dependent on white validation in its self-examination – the "loss of [the African] basic structure" (Fanon 72) through slavery meant its replacing by an American basic structure – a predominantly white one. Through this replacement, the entirety of black existence in America became confined to white politics of perception - *the white gaze* - out of which African Americans are never to escape, both in reality and in the narrative fiction of the considered novel.

In this projection of white ideals and conventions – including beauty, worth, monetary gains and, chiefly, visibility and love – into black existence as a standard of success or lack thereof, there is a perpetuation of division by ethnicity and the creation of the barrier between "colored people" and "niggers" (Morrison 87), the former representing black existence that complies to those same white ideals, reinforcing ideals of cleanliness and worthiness, as opposed to the latter, associated with dirtiness, poverty and invisibility. In the light of this arbitrary distinction, characters such as Geraldine - a respectable colored lady - and Pauline – Pecola's mother seen as truly black – arise, as figures who enforce and reinforce this distinction onto other African American characters as a response to their own feeling of inferiority. Fanon argues that "When it encounters resistance from the other, self-

consciousness undergoes the experience of *desire*" (169) – the white Other is respected, understood and seen, and, if one is not white, it is demanded of them to become, at least, "colored" – to adopt the white standards of beauty, virtue and worth of all kinds in detriment of a black heritage of suffering at the hand of white masters that arches back to European colonization so as to be deemed visible. To be "colored" means to be white on every level but that of skin colour as a means to "save the race" – "It is always essential to avoid falling back into the pit of niggerhood" (33), if one wishes to be seen.

Pauline felt constantly rejected by the family she was born into, even if not directly, and only when in contact with Cholly Breedlove did she love and feel loved as a contrast to her perceived invisibility; she felt seen as a consequence of another figure understanding and having perception over her. When moving to Lorrain, Ohio, in their marriage, and being confronted with the distinctions of space and racial place of her new environment, especially enforced by "colored people", she took refuge in cinema. The influence that the white ideals of beauty and virtue through routine exposure to white cinematic creations, along with her previous enjoyment of control and organization converted Pauline into a conductor of white standards not only of physical beauty, but, implicitly, of worthiness of love and understanding, and a white Western notion of good and evil. The text demonstrates through equating Pauline's missing tooth that, having started as a brown spot, it was permitted to evolve into complete rot and loss, and the conditions for such an evolution were already present in the form of lack of love and understanding (Alexander 294). Thus, Pauline's loneliness generated in her psyche a need for acknowledging herself as human through the virtues inculcated by the dominant white gaze. Pauline, therefore, entered Fanon's conception of "the individual who *climbs up* [symbolically, in Pauline's case, as she works for a white family whose children she cares for as superior than her own] into society – white and civilized – [and] tends to reject [her] family – black and savage – on the plane of imagination" (115). Imaginatively and unconsciously (and taking into consideration that Fanon's work uses Sigmund Freud's work as a conceptual tool), Pauline leads a double life: one white, one black; white perspectives become imbued in her *superego*, as she attempts to repress her own blackness into her *id* – "She was never able, after her education in the movies, to look at a face and not assign it some category in the scale of absolute beauty, and the scale was one she absorbed in full from the silver screen" (Morrison 122). She applies this even to her daughter, Pecola, whom she perceived as "ugly" from the moment that she was born, and, therefore, evil (Fanon 139), unlovable and unseen in the color of her skin.

Her daughter and victim, Pecola, also recognizes these dynamics of value in the behaviour of those surrounding her but never truly has any referential source of love and understanding nor of recognition of herself as an individual. Zygmunt Bauman, on his work "Liquid Love: On the Frailty of Human Bonds", explores, inside the realm of sociology, the meaning of "(self-)love": "what we love in our self-love is the selves fit to be loved. What we love is the state, or the hope, of being loved. Of being *objects worthy of love*, being recognized as such, and given the proof of that recognition (80, emphasis added). Pecola has no self-love, and, therefore, no true perception of herself because she never experienced being worthy of love. She possesses self-consciousness, but, in her condition of mistreated child, this self-consciousness is incomplete and unfulfilled; she is not aware of her own heritage and identity as a consequence of not being acknowledged by exterior self-consciousness (Fanon 168).

As Toni Morrison expressed in her "Foreword" to *The Bluest Eye*, Pecola is both "the most delicate member of society: a child [and] the most vulnerable member: a female" (xi), as well as African American. The already-referred lack of recognition's consequence of desire and need for imposition of the Self as important and relevant becomes prevalent in Pecola, and, according to Frantz Fanon, the sole manner in which this recognition can be obtained after its – racial – denial is through conflict: that is, only by undergoing the risk of conflict and its possible consequences, good or bad, the Self will become *seen* as a recognizable force and identity in interpersonal connections. The problem, however, consists in the fact that Fanon recurrently fails to recognize the imposed fragility of black women inside the same racial dynamics that he presents and defends conflict against, especially youthful black femininity. In his argument, there is no room for black women and girls, due to its foundation on male conflict and imposition of "virility" (Fanon 164). Implicitly, Fanon relegates femininity to a place of subalternity and submissiveness, in a manner that reflects white society's wish for black invisibility.

Pecola does, however, understand that other figures, specifically those inside the realm of white value, are visible and, therefore, worthy of recognition, leading her to attempt to replicate those figures' characteristics or make them part of her own in a recurrent attempt at sparking identitary conflict as counter-force to her racial invisibility, only to be constantly rebuked by both her environment – the most relevant constituents of which being her own family – and by her vulnerability as the weakest link inside the black-white dynamics. In the first pages of the narrative, for example, Pecola drinks three quarts of milk from the beloved Shirley Temple cup. The milk is white, but, most importantly, Shirley Temple is white and possesses (the

eventually much desired) blue eyes. By drinking out of this specific cup – and considering her admiration for it and the figure represented in it, in an elevation of typical child-like behaviour regarding preference of specific objects to a state of obsession – Pecola is desperately trying to pour into herself the love and visibility associated with Shirley Temple. Taking into consideration the act of drinking and eating as vehicles through which harnessing power and establishing identity is possible, Pecola attempts to *drink herself into* white beauty and worth – into the blue eyes that come to represent what she, and, unconsciously, black existence, due to the forced white imprint created through centuries of slavery and enforced inferiority, long for. Pecola is trying to drink her way out of her passivity into becoming an "[object] of love" and possessing an identity that would be characteristically white, relying on the support system that she recognizes as existent for white figures. The white and blue colors of the Shirley Temple cup are relevant insomuch as they are a continuation of Pecola's wish and of white influence, with the milk inside being equally as white as the portrayed and symbolic figure of Shirley Temple.[2] Upon obsessively drinking the milk from the Shirley Temple cup, however, Pecola is reprimanded by Mrs. MacTeer, Claudia and Frieda's mother, as a consequence of her excess; Pecola, in her vulnerability, becomes frustrated, implicitly, at the failure of her absorption of white love. She drank the available milk in its totality through the preferred white vehicle, the cup, but she remained unloved, contrary to her expectations. This same process of association of white worth, visibility and reference to ingestion are present in Pecola's purchase of Mary Janes, only for Pecola to have her invisibility reasserted by the set of blue eyes in the white shopkeeper, Mr. Yacobowski.

An instance that bears resemblance in the projection of white recognition onto specific objects[3] to the aforementioned ones is the defence by Pecola of the black cat and its murder by Junior, Geraldine's son – the moment in which Pecola fully associates blue eyes to her wish for recognition, besides her praying. By observing the abuse of the black cat by Junior and being powerless to bring it to an end, despite her intervention, Pecola projects into the black cat an interpretation of her interior life and her constant mistreatment. In this traumatic experience, Pecola is surrounded, materially, by the ideals of what white values require: a pretty house, similar to that of the *Dick and Jane* stories – stories which inflict on black youth the same effect white cinematic creation achieves in Pauline, her mother – a pretty lady, whom she wishes to be like, but, most importantly, by an "object" that is both black and deeply loved. Immersed in her youth, and despite knowing that, physically, the color of her skin is different from those the white world reveres, Pecola fails to perceive the racial

tensions that surround her existence. As a woman who Pecola perceives as beautiful and who is "milk-brown" (Morrison 92) – implying the whiteness of the milk she voraciously drank from the Shirley Temple cup – insults her using the adjective "black" while she, herself, was holding a black cat that she loved dearly in her arms, Pecola, having no full conception of the racial implications in Geraldine's speech, and because she shares the insult regarding the color of her skin with the color of the fur of the loved cat, is only capable of grasping the difference between her state of constant suffering and the cat's receiving of love and recognition through, even if erroneously, the difference in the color of their eyes. Adding this idea to Pecola's obsession with eyes as capturers of visual trauma in the world – in trying to "disappear" (Morrison 45) in times of despair but failing to do so only regarding these organs – she comes to see having blue eyes as the only solution to her lack of love, to her suffering, and, ultimately, to her invisibility. Shirley Temple, Mary Jane – implicitly – and the black cat all share possession of blue eyes, making them loved and visible, and their blue eyes must never be the witness of suffering as Pecola's eyes are. As Thomas H. Fick argues: "to look with eyes other than one's own is to falsify both self and world. Pecola's wish for blue eyes is not only a wish to match the ideal of the white child, it is also a rejection of right seeing, of the premises of realism for those of romance" (21).

Blue eyes, to Pecola, are the only way of escaping her "ugliness", her sadness, her lack of love and her invisibility, and of being transported into a blue-colored world. A world where she is loved and seen by all, especially if her eyes are the bluest. However, as Fick argues, Pecola, in her wish for blue eyes, is abandoning the realm of reality in favour of the realm of the fantastic and of "the ideal nature of reality" (29), and, therefore, becoming compliant and participative with and in "the damaging internalization of assumptions of immutable inferiority originating in an outside [white] gaze" (Morrison xi); Pecola has absorbed the racist white "collective unconscious" (Fanon 145) – Fanon utilizes this expression under influence of Carl Jung's theories – therefore being unable to identify herself as a component of the black existence that she was born into, in the same process that Geraldine uses when insulting Pecola in reference to the color of her own skin, as the desire for denied recognition is converted into inability to recognize oneself as part of the forcibly inferiorized community, instead identifying oneself with the dominant community, forcing the subaltern existence (that one belongs to) into victimhood of scapegoating that translates internalized racial self-loathing. Pecola, being a child, does not produce hate actively, as Geraldine does, but, through her subsequent wish for "the

bluest eyes" – and considering the color blue in its possibility of double-significance with "sadness", as well as the blues that are sang by Mrs. MacTeer as an expiation and liberation of racial pain – demonstrates that Pecola has, indeed, fully internalized white conceptions of black inferiority.

This process of internalization can be perceived in every black character of the novel, including in those who do not actively carry out acts of black hatred, as white ideas permeate and define black existence inside that same inferiority. Claudia, the narrator of the majority of the novel and also a child like Pecola, not yet having internalized this inferiority, but perceiving it, signals the existence of this same hatred in the consideration adults have for dolls, which she destroys as a means through which she can physically search for the differentiation between the love the white dolls receive and the ignoring she, a living child, experiences: "Grown people frowned and fussed: 'You-don't-know-how-to-take-care-of-nothing. I-never-had-a-baby-doll-in-my-whole-life-and-used-to-cry-my-eyes-out-for-them. Now-you-got-one-a-beautiful-one-and-you-tear-it-up-what's-the-matter-with-you?'" (Morrison 21).

Just like Pecola, most of the black community quasi-venerates and would willingly trade their own eyes for white-baby-doll blue ones – they would be willing to lose their own identity in order to become a part of the privileged white existence. Adults are capable of recognizing the patterns of racism and value allocated to white existence as "lovable" (Morrison 21) and attempt to transmit these hierarchic values imposed by white dominance onto the vulnerable mental capacity of children, situating their own African American existence as lower by comparison. The truncated recalled speech of this segment presents a textual translation and adaptation of the process of interference and similar truncation of black existence by white valoration; black existence becomes interrupted and confined, especially in adulthood, as recognition of identity and worth becomes solely possible by the aforementioned white approval or stable structure of support and recognition – none of which Pecola possesses. Claudia and her sister, Frieda, contrarily to Pecola, are born into an environment that grants them unwavering love and recognition for their own development of identity. Nevertheless, they are also victims of this process, because to neglect and defy the "beautiful-[white-baby-doll]" (Morrison 21) system is negatively received as being problematic – they must both, in their growth, become submissive to white domination.

Cholly Breedlove, Pecola's father, is yet another direct victim of white value over black lives, as he became involved in a traumatic experience of black submission carried out by white men, as he was forced into having sexual intercourse with a black

girl, Darlene, as the white figures watched. This moment became, for him, a form of sexual abuse in which the white dominance, by being seen as superior, and, therefore, untouchable, forced Cholly to direct his anger to the most vulnerable figure involved: the black young girl – in its essence, the same redirecting of racial self-loathing that afflicted Geraldine, Pauline and Pecola in denial of recognition, now moved into the realm of violence, as Cholly, in his virility (Fanon 164) as a male figure, is capable of creating identitary conflict – he is, however, incapable of fully realizing it, as he turns his defiance to the vulnerable black female figure instead of towards the white dominant ones. In her vulnerability, the black girl became the scapegoat of Cholly's anger and frustration, and this situation echoed his sexual abuse of his own daughter.

Cholly, in frustration with his life and having had a similar lack of love structure as his daughter, as he felt little connection to his great aunt Jimmy up until her death, struggles with relating to Pecola's vulnerability and love, as he, similarly to his daughter, possesses no self-love; consequently, in his virility, Cholly sexually abused Pecola in a manner which can be perceived as especially unsettling due to its familiar note. In his sexual abuse and advancement towards Pecola, there is a recognition through the longed-for love that Pecola continuously seeks removed of every positive reinforcement of identity. As Bauman expresses that "Self-love is built out of the love offered to us by others. If substitutes are used for its construction, they must be likenesses, however fraudulent, of such love" (80), the eerie love that Cholly offers to Pecola paralyzes her as an inverted and fragmented structure of identity overtakes her existence, and makes her a *negative whole*.

In the order proclaimed by Bauman of love into self-love, Pecola, by receiving an unnatural version of what she wished for, develops destruction and fragmentation into self-destruction and self-fragmentation that becomes fully realized in the sacrifice of the dog ordered to Pecola, even if unwittingly, by Elihue Micah Whitcomb – Soaphead Church – in exchange for blue eyes. Through this sacrifice, Pecola also became a sacrificial victim, now to the white gaze. She had her entire attempt at identity removed from her grasp (Alexander 299) and replaced with a white anti-identity based on trauma and lack of visibility. By the end of the novel, as Pecola comprises in her fragmentation two seemingly opposite entities, Fanon's argument applies:

> Moral consciousness implies a kind of scission, a fracture of consciousness into a bright part and an opposing black part. In order to achieve morality, it is essential that the black, the dark, the Negro vanish from consciousness. Hence a Negro is forever in combat with his own image. (150)

This scission of Pecola's consciousness in her psychosis and wish for blue eyes displays how she is attempting to erase everything that is negative – meaning everything that is black – in her existence and replace it with a white reference that is deemed worthy of love and attention. Conflict in morality, in Fanon's argument, appears as a consequence of the absorption of a white collective unconscious becoming conflicted against the blackness of one's skin. As Pecola does not understand the implications and racial politics of the color of her skin, she associates all the negativity as belonging to her eyes and their capitation of trauma, as previously mentioned. In her psychosis, Pecola displays a complete fragmentation and open "combat" with herself, because the two factors become "personified" in her mind. She forcefully identifies as the entity with blue eyes – the dominant white entity personified – but she is constantly terrified of the abandonment of her own black image, because, ultimately, even in conflict with herself, Pecola recognizes that she cannot fully belong to white existence – she needs constant reaffirmation of the blueness of her eyes, even in her own mind, because she understands that no one perceives them nor Pecola herself, in her continued invisibility and loneliness. Pecola understands and exists inside this division, but she doesn't perceive it – she chooses to live, falsely, in the artificial blue-eyed world of romance (Fick 21).

Remembering once more Toni Morrison's "Foreword" to *The Bluest Eye*, we can understand, ultimately, that Pecola was invisible. The dominant white world, made up of white standards and white lovability, of the white gaze, may be damaging to all those who are non-white: all the black characters have a characteristic need for love, visibility and understanding in some way, but they have all possessed a set of experiences that made them understand themselves as perceived, even if temporarily – all except Pecola. *The Bluest Eye* appears, then, as a sequence of traumatic experiences in which Pecola urged to find an identity of her own, never being capable of doing so, as she became completely nullified in the face of the imposed standards of the white hierarchy of worth. Pecola is the ultimate victim of the white-dominated society to which it is impossible not to succumb, because she is a concretization of the racist white wish of black inferiority – she was forced into shifting from a state of possibility of identity into nothingness, into a state of complete invisibility, of no hope for perception nor self-perception. Pecola is the ultimate example of invisibility in her vulnerability against the white-dominated racist and patriarchal society – invisible to the white gaze.

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[1] Although Fanon focuses the majority of the referenced work on the French impact of colonization in the Antilles, he also denotes that it would be unwise to try to accurately discern differences in distinct shapes of racism – "for a Jew the differences between the anti-Semitism of Maurras and that of Goebbels are imperceptible" (63). Fanon does, however, praise African Americans for their active role in the struggle for recognition, as opposed to the supposed European black attitude of passivity.

[2] Furthermore, it is important to denote that, even though Claudia and Frieda don't enjoy milk and only Frieda admires Shirley Temple (although it is implied that, with time, Claudia would also fall prey to this white structure of worth), they still possess that same cup and milk inside their home environment, as a voluntary invasion of the black space by white presence, and that same invading milk and cup are the sole objects of Pecola's attention.

[3] The "objects" referred by Bauman are of characteristic human existence, of the individual as the target of recognition and support. Pecola, however, as a result of her unstable and traumatizing upbringing, as well as her youthful mind, fails to understand this on a conscious level; instead, the objects she locates, as she is incapable of perceiving and understanding human love and its limitations as a consequence of racial tension, are of a material nature – even the "blue eyes" she desires become understood by Pecola as a concrete object that can be acquired, if not physically, at least, symbolically.