Black Trauma is Not White Property: Examining Black Girl Trauma in Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* Against the Eurocentrism of Modern Trauma Theory

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Senior Capstone Experience

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Submitted 6 April 2026

I pledge my word of honor that I have abided by the Washington College Honor Code while completing this assignment.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank my mom for answering my many verbal-processing phone calls and listening to me talk through random strokes of genius or monologues of complete nonsense. Her understanding of my mind as my mom and also a highly intellectual creature allowed me to synthesize my thoughts but also rest well after my writing-energy was depleted. I'd also like to thank Dr. Martha Pitts, whose kindness, thorough feedback, and attention to my specific argument gave me confidence in my argumentative instincts and in myself as a writer.

Finally, all the credit and glory goes to God, who created the ability to learn, think, and write.

Abstract

As a condition that affects both everyday life and an individual's self-understanding, the study of trauma becomes imperative because it has personal and linguistic urgency. A method of literary study that has arisen from the critical conversation of trauma is the development of trauma theory, which was designed by literary theorist Cathy Caruth in the 90s with the purpose of analyzing the way trauma is experienced psychologically and how its disruptiveness is narrated in literature. The foundations of Caruth's trauma theory are deeply concerned with matters of psychology and individual pain, and the implications of this concern have received a substantial amount of criticism because of its exclusion of non-Western and systemic traumas that minority cultures experience. The application of trauma theory to Black narratives and its consequences is thus the primary intention of this paper. The process of its accomplishment stems from an analysis of the particular traumas of Morrison's black girl characters in *The Bluest Eye*, and how she handles them narratively, as well as an exploration of how Black people think about their own trauma and how they write it.

The most disrespected person in America is the Black woman. The most unprotected person in America is the Black woman. The most neglected person in America is the Black woman.

—Malcom X, "Who Taught You to Hate Yourself?" (1962)

The White man's eyes break up the Black man's body and in that act of epistemic violence its own frame of reference is transgressed, its field of vision disturbed.

—Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952)

Certain kinds of trauma visited on peoples are so deep, so cruel, that ...only writers can translate such trauma and turn sorrow into meaning.

—Toni Morrison, "Peril" (2009)

Introduction

Black art took on a unique political function in the Black Arts Movement of the 1960s and 70s. The intention of the movement was for Black writers and artists to individuate their cultural existence from the oppressive systems that sought to erase, exoticize, or reduce them, and the execution of this objective resulted in Black art that was produced on Black terms. The intensity of the politics lies in the fact of its dual purpose: Black art is tasked with the representation of its culture but also its preservation amidst White America's glazed eye and revolted sneer. What hinges on the success and life of the movement is the upkeep of black life, thought, and identity, each of which is illustrated in art. Black literature became foundational to this movement because of its capacity to narrate the transition of the black body from ornamental to the American literary canon to invaluable, as well as essential to the dissection and reordering of its racial and cultural exclusions. The process of this transition required Black writers to balance their challenging of oppressive systems with their creation of Black characters that are true to the culture without perpetuating the tools of their oppressor.

However, this literary task took on a new layer of complication for Black women writers, whose experience in their Black bodies was one of systematic oppression, and in their female bodies was one of an insignificance that came from both White and Black society. Black women fell through the cracks of both their racial and literary movements. A key question then arises: how does literature help Black women live their lives? This is Nobel Prize-winning Black author Toni Morrison's question. She answers this inquiry of Black women's lives by exploring how they are destroyed, and this "how" becomes a narrative examination of the trauma that afflicts little black girls in her debut novel, *The Bluest Eye.* Morrison illustrates this black girl trauma with so much detail and so little shame that the novel has been subject to an onslaught of both

literary criticism and study, solidifying *The Bluest Eye*'s position as a trauma narrative, and thus participating in the literature of trauma studies, an area of literary study that asks how trauma is felt in a body and applies it to how its written in a text.

I. The Origins of Trauma: The Condition, the Theory, and the Narrative

Just as literature covers an array of human experiences and uses a diverse set of genres, forms, devices, and artistic methods to do so, literary studies include a vast array of literary theories that assist in the understanding of texts, how and when they were written, and what the author's intentions were upon their creation. Among these literary theories is trauma theory, a literary framework developed in the 1990s that directly concerns itself with the more painful acuities of the human experience and how these afflictions are translated into literary works. Literature has the unique ability to approach mental lacerations resulting from traumatic experiences as an expressive mechanism. In other words, literature deals with how we narrate suffering and gives language to its unspeakability.

In the introduction of the essay collection *Trauma and Literature*, J. Roger Kurtz claims that "Fundamentally, trauma is a wound" and that "these wounds, like words, require interpretation" (Kurtz 1-2). However, the "wound" of trauma was not fully realized nor understood alongside the development of trauma theory; the origins of the understanding of trauma began as purely psychoanalytic before its contribution to literary studies. Kurtz provides a psychoanalytic definition of trauma and its consequences, describing it as "an event so overwhelming that it cannot be processed normally at the time of its occurrence, so that its memory is effectively blocked but returns to haunt the victim until it is appropriately confronted and dealt with" (Kurtz 3). The overwhelming nature of trauma and its affliction on memory stand

at the center of psychoanalytic trauma studies, beginning with Sigmund Freud's observations in the 19th century, primarily appearing in several of his works, including *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* and *Inhibitions, Symptoms, and Anxiety* (1925). He writes in the latter, "in the experiences which lead to a traumatic neurosis the protective shield against stimuli is broken through, and excessive amounts of excitation impinge on the mental apparatus" (Freud 130). Freud underscores a protective system that the "mental apparatus" equips as a preventative mechanism to shield itself from traumatic encounters. His use of the terms "traumatic neurosis" and "excitation" can be directed back to similar language used in his book *Studies on Hysteria (1865),* co-written with Austrian physician and psychologist, Josef Breuer. Freud and Breuer write "We must presume rather that the psychical trauma—or more precisely the memory of the trauma—acts like a foreign body which long after its entry must continue to be regarded as an agent that is still at work" (Freud and Bruer 9). In both texts, Freud proposes that trauma is encountered externally as a "foreign body" and yet severely wounds internal operations in the mind through "excessive amounts of excitation." Additionally, Freud and Breuer's explorations on the "memory of the trauma" as a primary assailant to the mind have informed more modern understandings of it.

Perhaps the most prominent moment in the development of trauma understandings is the official establishment of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) in the Diagnostic Statistics Manual-II (DSM) in the 1980s. Up until this key establishment, symptoms associated with today's PTSD were primarily assigned to the soldiers of World War I and II, as well as the Vietnam War; these symptoms were coined as "Soldier's Heart," "shell shock," or "War Neurosis." The establishment of PTSD legitimized the effects of trauma as an official condition in Western medicine, a recognition that had an explosive cultural impact on trauma studies,

contributing to the study of the connections between trauma and literature. Research scholar Narullah Mambrol, in a *Literariness* blog post titled "Trauma Studies," describes these connections, stating how trauma "profoundly impacts the self's emotional organization and perception of the external world." Mambrol's emphasis on the self is a key component of today's trauma studies, especially regarding literature and literary trauma theory, the leading theorist of which is Cathy Caruth.

Caruth's understanding of trauma is primarily outlined in her book *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma Narrative and History* (1996). The foundations of Caruth's trauma theory are rooted in Freud's psychoanalytic works, primarily in his assertions that trauma is a repetitive, damaging experience that fragments the psyche and consciousness. Caruth adds to these assertions by drawing on the specific language that literature provides to the fragmenting nature of trauma. She writes in *Unclaimed Experience,* "literature, like psychoanalysis, is interested in the complex relation between knowing and not knowing. And it is, indeed, at the specific point at which knowing and not knowing intersect that the language of literature and the psychoanalytic theory of traumatic experience precisely meet" (Caruth 3). Caruth's intention with the words "knowing" and "not knowing" is to define the characteristics and effects of trauma she critically explores in her work. The "not knowing" illustrates the traumatized subject's inability to fully register the traumatic event upon its occurrence, while the "knowing" illustrates that the traumatic event can be registered in the psyche but reappears through symptoms such as flashbacks, nightmares, or intrusive images.

Caruth explains how these symptoms of trauma arise because the traumatic event itself is experienced by the mind "too soon, too unexpectedly, to be fully known and is therefore not available to consciousness until it imposes itself again, repeatedly" (Caruth 4). In other words,

the speed at which trauma is experienced and the crushing weight of the event itself are too overwhelming for the mind to process and even remember, and thus is re-experienced in fragments. Trauma, Caruth states, has a decidedly "unassimilated nature," meaning it cannot be processed normally in conscious memory. However, the quality of trauma that Caruth connects with the capacities of literature is its unspeakability. Due to its exceeding incomprehensibility and damaging nature to the mind, trauma is an experience that resists language and is thus "unspeakable." It is these characteristics that make literature and its foundations in language, expression, and narrative incredibly valuable not only to the mental management of trauma, but to the traumatized subject's movement towards understanding their own pain. Kurtz, in his essay collection *Trauma and Literature,* captures this imperative intersection between trauma and literature in his statement that "psychic woundedness has always been a feature of human stories, and literature is nothing if not a relating of humanity's responses to life's calamities" (Kurtz 8).

This "response" to the calamity of trauma then takes on an artistic form when applied to the practice of literature, seen in the development of trauma narratives. The value of this genre of literature is that it is a site for the comprehension of trauma, rooted in narrative devices, that directly engage with and interpret its nature that resists cohesion. In her article, "Trends in Literary Trauma Theory," Michelle Balaev provides a key understanding of the unique abilities of the trauma narrative: it "conveys a diversity of extreme emotional states through an assortment of narrative innovations, such as landscape imagery, temporal fissures, silence, or narrative omission" (Balaev 8). Balaev claims that the nature of the trauma narrative, which is founded on the employment of "narrative innovations," allows it to give an observable structure to the incomprehensibility of trauma. Its concern with expression, likewise, offers a resolution to

the inexpressibility of it; suffering, therefore, becomes accessible where it was otherwise elusive to understanding.

From the understanding of trauma not only as a fragmented experience that wounds the psyche and resists language, but also a condition that cripples the trauma subject's quality of life and personhood, stands both trauma theory and trauma narrative as a crucial method of representation. What is meant by representation, in the context of narratives, is the ways in which the historical, political, and social realities are illustrated within a written piece; representation within a narrative that is conducted with integrity and accuracy to a group of people should, by extension, always include an illustration of their pain, a commonality in every human experience, whether cultural, social, or racial. The exploration of the genre of trauma narrative, then, calls into question how specific narrative elements, such as flashback, repetition, and character-isolation, accomplish the feat of representing suffering with truth, and which trauma narratives execute it well.

Straddling the line between these elements of representing a culture's pain and its narrative representation, stands Toni Morrison's first literary work, *The Bluest Eye*, a complex trauma narrative whose fragmented form, intricate characterization, and explicit, graphic content address the experience of Black trauma. The methods Morrison uses to construct it, which is placed in the lives of three Black girls, additionally construct the foundations of a commentary on trauma theory itself; the complete body of *The Bluest Eye* and Morrison's intention with its content complicate the existing trauma theory by presenting a layer of trauma that is inextricably tied to blackness.

II. Toni Morrison's Take

Toni Morrison does not approach the work of the trauma narrative and its language as a theorist, nor as an author existing as an external figure applying a fictional, creative framework to the interiority of a people's lives. Morrison approaches this work with an urgent, personal intensity, inspired by the purpose of *The Bluest Eye*, which she states in a 1988 interview[1]: "it was a book I wanted to read, and I couldn't find it anywhere. So I began to write it." Morrison wanted to give language to a life that was excluded from the literary world: the experience of the Black girl, which is just as complex as it is unacknowledged. In connection to representation, an additional intention Morrison had with *The Bluest Eye*, and many other projects, was "to transfigure the complexity and wealth of the Afro-American culture into a language worthy of the culture," (Morrison 186) as she claims in *The Source of Self Regard*. Through her literary work, Morrison sought to exalt "the complexity and wealth" of a culture that was otherwise buried, abused, and abhorred. The standard she designed for the language that accomplished this was that its quality should recreate the richness of the culture it describes. This richness, to clarify, is not solely tied to the beauty and ingenuity of Black culture—it also includes its complete truth, a deep root of which is positioned in its pain. In the first paragraph of her novel, Morrison begins with a symptom representative of this:

> 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.

[1] ThamesTv. "Toni Morrison Interview | American Author | Award Winning | Mavis on Four | 1988." *YouTube*, 6 Aug. 2019, www.youtube.com/watch?v=UAqB1SgVaC4. Accegraphicelicitssed 17 Mar. 2026.

> A little examination and much less melancholy would have proved to us that our seeds were not the only ones that did not sprout; nobody's did. (Morrison 3)

The pain point is inescapable: "Pecola was having her father's baby." The fact of Pecola's rape, and especially its placement within the first thirty words of the novel, is appalling. Its explicit images elicit an immediate reaction from the readers that circulates among astonishment, horror, and a sour intrigue. The knowledge of this incestuous rape inserts the reader between the teeth of the reality of Black girls through the violence of Pecola's condition. Morrison speaks to this in her essay, "Black Matters," from *The Source of Self-Regard:* the novelty of *The Bluest Eye*'s opening "would be in having this story of female violation revealed from the vantage point of the victims or could-be victims of rape: the girls themselves" (Morrison 184). By constructing her narrative around the "vantage point" of Black girls from within their own trauma, Morrison is able to approach their traumatic realities intimately rather than externally. In other words, by situating the Black girls as the narrators of their own pain, Morrison invites readers to live their suffering alongside them rather than simply reading its description as an external observer. As a result, the unspeakability of trauma is spoken, and the namelessness of trauma has a word. This traumatic word lingers because it is written but also felt. Morrison's intention with the opening, and by extension, the entire novel, was to have the condition of trauma narrated by the traumatized, contributing to her credibility in the conversation of trauma theory and narratives. Morrison testifies trauma rather than imagines it.

The novel offers both literary innovation to the trauma narrative because the trauma Morrison writes is intimate, interior, and invasive, and prioritizes a specific distinction of trauma that is indisputably Black. *The Bluest Eye*, then, occupies a unique position within the trauma narrative genre, as Morrison reframes trauma not as a psychic rupture but as a socially produced

and racially structured condition. These qualities that Morrison presents add layers to trauma theory that are unaccounted for in its existing frameworks. Beneath the generalized trauma that the theory centers lies a form of trauma specific to Black people, and beneath that still, a deeper specificity: the distinct trauma experienced by Black girls. Morrison articulates the trauma of Black girlhood narratively through its most critical symptoms: a complete invisibility, the condemnation of ugliness, and the consequence of blackness.

III. Reading Trauma in *The Bluest Eye*

Black Girl Trauma as Invisibility

One of the first descriptive images we get from *The Bluest Eye* is vomit. Claudia, one of the three main characters in Morrison's narrative, is sick, and her mother treats her with "large and rough" hands, thick Vicks Salve[2] that is rubbed on her chest and put in her mouth, a "hot flannel," and "heavy quilts" (Morrison 11). In other words, Claudia is suffocated by her own sickness and by the methods of her care, which are hot, heavy, and smothering. After she vomits, her mother snaps, "What did you puke on the bed clothes for? Don't you have sense enough to hold your head out the bed? Now, look what you did. You think I got time for nothing but washing up your puke?" (Morrison 11) The expectation of maternal attention is absent here; Claudia's mother condemns, insults, and invalidates Claudia because the mess of her vomit is an inconvenience.

As a result, Claudia is both humiliated and confused by her mother's anger, which she attributes to her own weakness rather than to her illness. She observes, while her mother's complaints continue, that "She is not talking to me. She is talking to the puke, but she is calling it my name: Claudia" (Morrison 11). Here, a manifestation of suffering becomes indistinguishable

[2] Also known as Vicks VapoRub, is a thick, medicated topical ointment used to relieve coughs and congestion.

from its host. The effect is that Claudia and her pain become considered under the same name, and therefore identity, reducing Claudia from a daughter in physical need to a gross mass that must endure itself. Claudia internalizes her sickness as despicable and weak while still stating the terms of her invisibility. She thinks to herself, “no one speaks to me or asks how I feel” (Morrison 11). Claudia’s invisibility is identified by emotional and physical disregard: she is silenced because her voice is deemed unimportant, and her pain is treated aggressively where it should have been cared for affectionately. A fact of this scene is that it exists at the beginning of the novel, setting up the tone for its remaining content and giving the reader an understanding of how suffering is processed in the body of a Black girl, an example of which is their invisibility within their social realities, which are primarily formed within their own households.

Claudia’s trauma, as well as the other girls’, Pecola and Frieda, is manifested and grown largely because it is unseen and endured quietly. This pervasive invisibility withholds their suffering from acknowledgement and therefore healing, especially by the adults in their lives, who they observe as authoritative figures rather than sources of compassion and provision. Morrison offers additional moments in the building of this invisibility in the pages following Claudia’s illness. When a visitor comes to their home, Claudia and Frieda, who are sisters, are not introduced by their mother, but “merely pointed out. Like, here is the bathroom; the clothes closet is here; and these are my kids, Frieda and Claudia; watch out for this window; it don’t open all the way” (Morrison 15). Here, the girls become adjacent to pieces of furniture, reducing their significance to that of the bathroom, closet, or window. Just as an object is regarded momentarily for its unfamiliarity to a guest, Frieda and Claudia are “pointed out” by their mother simply because they are a temporary novelty. Once this intrigue passes, they are quickly swallowed by the inanimacy of the house in which they are indistinguishable. This is connected

to Morrison's opening line, "Quiet as it's kept": the girls' existence is a secret between knowing parties, such as their mother, that only acknowledge it when it is an inconvenience or a decoration. The girls experience the trauma of their hidden state internally, just as they themselves are hidden.

Morrison adds complexity to this invisibility in an interaction between the girls and Mrs. Breedlove (Pecola's mother), as well as a little White girl, who is "smaller and younger" than them and calls Mrs. Breedlove by her first name, Polly. Upon seeing Claudia, Frieda, and Pecola, "fear danced across her face for a second," and "she looked anxiously around the kitchen" (Morrison 108). The fear is developed the instant the White girl lays eyes on the girls, suggesting that the threat they seemingly pose is witnessed and felt before it is even interacted with. Morrison leaves the name of this threat ambiguous; it may be a matter of race, age, or size, as Pecola, Frieda, and Claudia are older and bigger than the White girl. However, a truth of the threat and the fear that is very much obvious is that it is observed. What is frightening about the girls exists on their external bodies, and it is frightening enough that the White girl looks "anxiously around the kitchen" for a source of safety, which is interestingly found in Mrs. Breedlove.

What Morrison exhibits here, and where Frieda, Claudia, and Pecola's invisibility becomes complicated, is that the girls' existence is only explicitly acknowledged when it disturbs or disrupts. Their existence alone then becomes insufficient for attention unless it stirs up conflict, and even then, it is punished. In the moments following the White girl's fear, Pecola accidentally knocks over a dish of hot berry cobbler and is burned by the spilled filling, which causes her to scream. Mrs. Breedlove immediately "knocked her to the floor" with the back of her hand, "yanked her up by the arm, slapped her again," and called her a "crazy fool" in a voice

that “abused Pecola directly” and Claudia and Frieda “by implication” (Morrison 109). This is a moment that is felt (through the burn of the cobbler's filling on Pecola’s skin), heard (through her scream and Mrs. Breedlove's fury), and seen (through Claudia and Frieda’s witnessing of the abuse). The speed and intensity of this scene contribute to the sudden amplification of the girl’s presence because it has become an irritant, resulting in physical and verbal abuse. By being abruptly cast from her invisibility by the circumstance, the consequences of Pecola’s now hyper-visibility become realized: she is “knocked,” “yanked,” “slapped,” and “abused.” The trauma lies in this transition from being unseen to seen, and the immediate punishment it provokes. The choice that the girls are constantly faced with is to be seen and beaten, or to be invisible and unharmed. What this says about Black girl invisibility, then, is that erasing the self is akin to safety, a reality that is traumatizing just as much as it is unjust.

This injustice continues in the aftermath of Pecola’s abuse when it is compared with Mrs. Breedlove’s response to the White girl, who begins to cry at all the commotion. She coos to her, “Hush, baby, hush. Come here. Oh, Lord, look at your dress. Don’t cry no more. Polly will change it.” Morrison writes how “the honey in her words complemented the sundown spilling on the lake” (Morrison 109). The tenderness of Mrs. Breedlove’s words, her sympathy, and affection are placed on the weeping White girl rather than her own daughter, who was beaten and burned for a mere accident. Morrison makes the irony here explicit: both the affection and affliction are misplaced on undeserving subjects. In the intentional action of Mrs. Breedlove’s tenderness toward the White girl, Pecola’s suffering is made invisible.

The wound of Black girl invisibility lies in its establishment as a condition that produces trauma. When the consequences of Frieda, Claudia, and Pecola’s invisibility are paired with the punishments of the rare moments where they are visible, invisibility becomes traumatic because

it is unsafe in every form. Another trauma of this condition, especially seen in Pecola's abuse, is that it denies the girls' of existence and creates objects out of their highly sensitive, feeling, thinking beings; when a Black girl is stripped of her substance because she is feared, overlooked, or treated as bothersome, she becomes traumatized, and these wounds are internalized within her value systems, convictions, and understandings of herself, especially in girlhood, when these aspects are still developing. The invisibility Morrison expresses through her characters is additionally a commentary on the standards of value that impose themselves on the Black girl; the values that invisibility promotes to Pecola, Frieda, and Claudia are the disposing of their emotions and experiences and the expendability of their presence. In this sense, Morrison offers an expansion to the definition of trauma from what is done to what is unacknowledged. This idea can be applied to the girls' unrecognized needs and pain, but also to their growing misunderstanding of what and who is valuable, and what makes them so. A resounding variable in this skewed standard of value is the distinction between beauty and ugliness.

Black Girl Trauma as Ugliness

Morrison provides her readers with her own definition of beauty that draws upon its capacity as a ruinous criterion of Black women and girls rather than simply defining it as a standard of appearance. Within blackness, beauty becomes complicated as "probably the most destructive ideas in the history of human thought. Both originated in envy, thrived in insecurity, and ended in disillusionment" (Morrison 122). The destructiveness of this beauty standard to the Black female body is exemplified in Claudia's growing understanding of beauty and her eventual desire to destroy the more rewarded and valued beauty of White girls. This desire is developed from a baby doll she receives as a Christmas gift, of which she was "physically revolted by and

secretly frightened of those round moronic eyes, the pancake face, and orangeworms hair" (Morrison 20). Claudia's ultimate desire is "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…all the world had agreed that a blue-eyed, yellow-haired, pink-skinned doll was what every girl child treasured" (Morrison 20). Claudia's dismemberment of the doll reveals that her desire to know reflects her desire to be known. She rips to the inside of the doll to find where the true "beauty," "desirability," and "dearness" of this blue-eyed coveted beauty lies. Claudia conducts this search with an "unsullied hatred" (Morrison 19) that lingers even after the doll's destruction.

The reason for this lingering is that Claudia's intent to destroy the body of the white doll exists alongside her intent to dissect its significance; she seeks to "examine it to see what it was that all the world said was lovable" (Morrison 21). By examining the insides of the doll, Claudia hopes to understand its qualities that are deemed as "lovable" and, by comparison, how she herself is unlovable; she is hoping to find answers to her own shortcomings as a Black girl who has a profoundly different appearance than that of a "blue-eyed, yellow-haired, pink-skinned doll." A factor that fuels Claudia's rage and confusion surrounding it is the coveting "eye slide of Black women" (Morrison 22) who see the displayed dolls in shop windows.

Claudia is perplexed at their admiration, a confusion strengthened by its proximity to her desire to have her personal wants acknowledged. Claudia despises the fact that her girlish desires are either voyeurized or assumed: she is given what grown Black women were denied at the same time as the assumed universal pleasure of a baby doll is applied to Claudia but not truly felt by her. She reflects, "had any adult with the power to fulfill my desires taken me seriously and asked me what I wanted, they would have known that I did not want to have anything to own…I

wanted rather to feel something on Christmas day" (Morrison 22). Claudia desires the experience of joy that is crafted for her rather than ownership of an object that is desired by others. She wants "to sit on the low stool in Big Mama's kitchen" with a "lap full of lilacs and listen to Big Papa play his violin for me alone" (Morrison 22). However, what Morrison describes as the "truly horrifying" fact of Claudia's desire to dismember the white baby dolls is her urge to inflict the same destruction on White girls. This violent intent is rooted in the contradiction Claudia observes between the reward of "magic" and "possessive gentleness" that White girls received, which Claudia, as a Black girl, is denied. This, too, confuses her. She wonders, "What made people look at them and say, "'Awwwww,' but not for me?" (Morrison 22). This question is an inquiry of value that is based on appearance. Claudia wonders what qualities, both external and internal, exist within a White girl that are more deserving of affection than those that exist in her own Black body. The tension that arises from this unknowing is what energizes Claudia's animosity: her desire for violence against the White girls is one of hurt, rather than a girlish envy, identifying it as an expression of pain and a reaction to an injustice that embodies itself in the beauty of the baby doll and the adjacent shortcomings of a Black girl.

This layered narration of Black beauty is complicated by Morrison's placement of a blackness that is lighter and privileged in the company of the girl's growing understanding of their own color and its significance. This is exemplified by Maureen Peal, a new student in Claudia and Frieda's class, whom Morrison describes as a "high-yellow dream child" (Morrison 62), identifying her lighter skin tone on the surface while connecting its color to the inherent, dreamlike value she embodies. Maureen's lighter skin, as well as the items that accessorize her character, establish her as an idol. The details of Maureen's appearance and wealth are frequently situated among Claudia and Frieda's own shortcomings. Maureen's "patent leather shoes with

buckles" call attention to the "cheaper version" they had received "at Easter and which had disintegrated by the end of May." Maureen's "fastidious lunches" of "egg-salad sandwiches cut into four dainty squares, pink-frosted cupcakes, stocks of celery and carrots, proud, dark apples" shamed their "jelly-stained bread" (Morrison 63), and "the quality of her clothes" threatened to "derange" Claudia and Frieda. Maureen's existence exposes their own imperfections, resulting in a "besmused, irritated, and fascinated" attitude towards her, causing them to look hard "for flaws to restore our equilibrium" (Morrison 63).

This search for Maureen's flaws is key: the restoration to Claudia and Frieda's "equilibrium," is tied to the existence of physical defects. They invent faults in Maureen's name by "uglying" it, calling her "Meringue Pie," and synthesize her dog tooth and deformity into the title, "Six-finger-dog-tooth-meringue-pie" (63). These flaws become a source of stability for Claudia and Frieda, allowing their own imperfections to escape the acute noticeability that Maureen produces. This behavior introduces beauty as a standard but also a system: what is seen as attractive and admirable, such as what is worn, eaten, and bought, creates a hierarchical structure that, after Frieda and Claudia's insecurities are exposed, lowers them into a habit of what they describe as "my jealousy" or "our hostility" (Morrison 63). This system, then, introduces beauty as a competition, and when it is apparent in another body (such as Maureen's), it becomes an amplifier of insecurity, a ridiculer of blackness, lower status, and poverty, and a discouragement, especially to Claudia and Frieda, of the realization of their individual value. After an argument amongst the girls and Maureen, Claudia and Frieda voice a series of negative ultimatums in alignment with these systemic qualities:

> If she was cute—and if anything could be believed, she *was*—then we were not. And what did that mean? We were lesser. Nicer, brighter, but still lesser…What was the

> secret? What did we lack? Why was it important? And so what? Guileless and without vanity, we were still in love with ourselves then. (Morrison 74)

The standard of beauty enters the system in the transition from Claudia and Frieda's observation of Maureen's attractiveness to their consideration of its significance for their personhood. The consecutive questions of "what did that mean?...What did we lack? Why was it important?" capture a growing sense of confusion as their understanding of attractiveness expands beyond how one is seen and what they own to what these attributes determine about individual value. Claudia and Frieda are disturbed by this expansion and why it deems them as "lesser." Although they wonder at the terms, their ultimate conclusion of themselves is that a lack of beauty means a lack of esteem, and they themselves fall below its requirements. The severity of this transition of beauty from standard to system is made even more urgent in Morrison's change in tense in the final sentence. Claudia's narration is suddenly informed by a version of the girls that exists in the future and their reflections on the past.

These future figures carry crucial information that acts as comparison points for the current Claudia and Frieda: their self-love will disintegrate, and its preservation, which failed, relied on the state of being "guileless" (meaning innocent) and "without vanity." This development is an ominous one, introducing the stakes of the way Black beauty and ugliness are measured within its system, which Morrison captures in the line, "The *Thing* to fear was the *Thing* that made *her* beautiful, and not us" (Morrison 74). The "*Thing*" is colorism, or racism, or the name of a value Claudia and Frieda lack; what is crucial is that this "*Thing*" introduces beauty as tied to fear, and something that measures their individual value. Although Claudia and Frieda's growing understanding of this measurement familiarizes the reader with Morrison's

theme of beauty, its meaning to the identity of a Black girl and how she sees and carries herself becomes deepened in Morrison's descriptions of the Breedlove family, of which Pecola belongs.

In the span of two pages, Morrison uses the words "ugly" and "ugliness" to describe the Breedloves eleven times. By doing so, she is identifying their defining characteristic and one that makes an anomaly out of their family unit, which includes Pecola, Sammy, Cholly (their father), and Mrs. Breedlove. Morrison states, "Their ugliness was unique. No one could have convinced them that they were not relentlessly and aggressively ugly" (Morrison 38). By calling their ugliness "unique," Morrison presents their hideousness as distinctive and alarming, but also unparalleled, especially given her inclusion of an external opinion; the appearance of "no one," implies the presence of witnesses who confirm the severity of their ugliness and diagnose it as relentless and aggressive. This exterior viewpoint marks the first layer of the Breedloves' ugliness and identifies it as a state of being that is obvious to spectators and the Breedloves themselves.

The second layer is the methodology they apply to it, aligning with Claudia and Frieda's experience of beauty (and the lack thereof) as a system. Morrison writes, "Except for the father, Cholly, whose ugliness 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" (Morrison 38). Here, Morrison introduces ugliness as an adornment that is shouldered voluntarily. There is an intention in Mrs. Breedlove, Sammy, and Pecola's employment of their ugliness: they decide to "put it on," using their ugliness for individual purposes but not claiming it as their own, meaning it is not suitable or indicative of their personhood. The evidence of this separation of ugliness between belonging and adorning is seen in Morrison's distinction from Cholly's ugliness, which is complete because it determines his

"behavior," an ugliness of more consequence because it is active, able to afflict those around him, rather than an exclusivity to appearance as the rest of the Breedloves' ugliness is.

Even so, the employment of ugliness varies according to the individual. Mrs. Breedlove uses hers as "an actor does a prop," and Sammy uses his as "a weapon to cause others pain" (Morrison 39), both descriptions of which are given to the reader quickly and matter-of-factly. However, Morrison lingers on Pecola's ugliness. She slows the pace of the previous descriptions with the brief phrase, "And Pecola." There is an attentiveness and a familiarity here, separating the case of Pecola's ugliness from that of her family. Pecola does not employ her ugliness to act, accomplish, or acquire anything as her family does. Instead, "she hid behind hers. Concealed, veiled, eclipsed—peeping out from behind the shroud very seldom, and then only to yearn for the return of her mask" (Morrison 39). Rather than employing her ugliness, which requires distance and understanding of it, Pecola is emotionally attached to it. Her habit is to "yearn" for her ugliness, and her reason is that it "hid" her. In this sense, Pecola's self and her ugliness have separate presences: she hides behind the "shroud"[3] and "mask" of her ugliness (which implies it buries and obscures) to diminish her sense of self into a "concealed, veiled, eclipsed" state. Yet, this diminishment is not comfortable for Pecola, even if it is voluntary; despite her yearning for "the return of the mask" and her infrequent "peeping out" from its concealment, the fact of her ugliness leaves her in anguish.

Morrison writes, "Long hours she sat looking in the mirror, trying to discover the secret of the ugliness, the ugliness that made her ignored or despised at school, by teachers and classmates alike" (Morrison 45). Pecola does not view her ugliness as negotiable; it is a deeply seated, fixed flaw that she seeks to "discover the secret" of, and the stamina she finds to sit for

[3] a cloth used to wrap a body for burial

"long hours" to do so is derived from the fact that her ugliness is not only indicative of her worth, but also her treatment. She attributes how her "teachers and classmates" "ignored or despised her" to the severity of her ugliness. This is why, when pondering its secret, Pecola does not inquire as to why she receives cruelty from those around her, but what attribute she possesses that explains their cruelty. In this sense, her ugliness is a trap in which she willingly confines herself: Pecola's only position within it is one of fault. It is always an irredeemable, internal issue, and the animosity she experiences because of it is internalized, a process that narrows the possibility of her confidence and value to "the binding conviction that only a miracle could relieve her" and that "she would never know her beauty" (Morrison 46). As a result, Pecola can "only see what there was to see: the eyes of other people" (Morrison 47), leaving her own opinion of herself irrelevant. The accumulation of Pecola's attributions to her own ugliness amounts to her trauma, and this trauma has a fixation, which gives *The Bluest Eye* its title.

What Pecola believes is the resolution to her ugliness and its social and internal consequences is the attainment of blue eyes. Morrison writes how "it had occurred to Pecola some time ago that if her eyes, those eyes that held the pictures, and knew the sights—if those eyes of hers were different, that is to say, beautiful, she herself would be different" (Morrison 46). Pecola believes that a change in the appearance of her eyes will guarantee a change in their function; if her eyes "were different…beautiful," they would transform and beautify her existence, which includes her appearance to others and to herself. Her evaluation of eyes as entities that "held the pictures, and knew the sights" reveals that Pecola processes her experience of life and people through what she witnesses. Her eyes "hold" the cruelty and rejection she has experienced just as they "know" it; for Pecola, eyes are places where experience is stored, as well as interpreted. Her desire to change them reveals her desire to change her circumstances,

which are ones of poverty, neglect, and hostility. She believes, “if she looked different, beautiful, maybe Cholly would be different, and Mrs. Breedlove too. Maybe they’d say, ‘Why, look at pretty-eyed Pecola. We musn’t do bad things in front of those pretty eyes’” (Morrison 46). Beauty for Pecola, then, becomes preventative of suffering. From this, a traumatic fact is realized: Pecola believes that changing her eyes will erase what they have seen and what they have learned.

These coveted eyes also have a color: blue, not coincidental to those of the White babydoll that Claudia desires to destroy. Pecola handles the meaning of blue eyes, a feature that Morrison uses to represent White beauty standards in addition to Pecola’s insecurities and anguish, differently from Claudia (and Frieda). Pecola has no rage or destructive intent towards the praise of White features and instead craves their significance as articles of deliverance from her ugliness. Her conviction of this is so deep, and her yearning is so extreme that she even consults a (fake) spiritualist called Soaphead Church and asks him to give her blue eyes. Within this scene, Pecola’s character is distinguished in two images: “an ugly girl asking for beauty” and “a little Black girl who wanted to rise up out of the pit of her blackness and see the world with blue eyes” (Morrison 174). The latter marks an additional, traumatizing layer of beauty for Black girls: it is only achieved when blackness is discarded, an action that identifies it as an unfortunate condition that one must “rise up” from. Blackness becomes a “pit” that binds and blinds the Black girl, and the relief of this blindness is only resolved by proximity to Whiteness. Thus, an essential, traumatic layer of Morrison’s novel is introduced: the trauma that is exclusive to blackness and Black girls.

Black Girl Trauma is Black

The origin of *The Bluest Eye* and its racial themes came from a conversation Morrison had with a childhood friend. In the foreword of the novel, Morrison writes, "She said she wanted blue eyes…The sorrow in her voice seemed to call for sympathy" (Morrison x). The resulting emotions from Morrison, despite the despair of her friend, were a violent repulsion and an astonished anger, and the consequent product that came out of it was a novel that explored the relationship between an impossible physical alteration and the reasoning behind the desire for it. To the latter, Morrison states that "implicit in her desire was racial self-loathing" (Morrison xi). This "loathing" became a focus of *The Bluest Eye*, which consequently became a focus of Pecola's character, on which "the demonization of an entire race could take root inside" (Morrison xi). The weight of this "demonization," of course, is a prominent variable in the weight of her trauma, and one that ultimately crushes her. Morrison employs Pecola as an embodiment of the relationship between blackness and trauma, and her intention with the character (and the novel) was to "hit the raw nerve of racial self-contempt, expose it, then soothe it not with narcotics but with language" (Morrison xii). Thus, Pecola's character is imperative to understanding the specific trauma Morrison narratively constructs; on Pecola hinges a trauma that is inextricably tied to race and one that, as a result, uniquely represents the suffering of Black people and Black girls.

A complete understanding of Pecola's trauma begins with an understanding of her domestic circumstance, which includes her environment and the abusive dynamics it contains. The Breedlove home is a dilapidated storefront which has "joylessness" that "stank, pervading everything" (Morrison 36), as well as an unreliable stove, aged furniture, and no bath facilities. Pecola and her family live in a poverty that is "traditional and stultifying[4]" but "not unique"

[4] tending to stifle enthusiasm, initiative, or freedom of action

(Morrison 38). Morrison connects the reasoning of the Breedloves' residence in the storefront to blackness in her line, "they lived there because they were poor and Black" (Morrison 38), situating their blackness on equal footing with the miserableness of poverty; as a consequence, blackness becomes linked to deprivation and a condition that produces it. This fact stands as a breeding place for the abusive dynamics that occur in the Breedlove home, which wound Pecola especially. Morrison writes, when illustrating the complexities of the abuse between Pecola's parents, "Cholly and Mrs. Breedlove fought each other with a darkly brutal formalism" (Morrison 43). The brutality of these fights is derived from their painful destructiveness, and the formality is derived from the "substance" it gave to "the minutes and hours otherwise dim and unrecalled" and how "they relieved the tiresomeness of poverty, gave grandeur to the dead rooms" (Morrison 41). The witnessing of these fights is traumatizing to Pecola, who does not perceive this complexity. To her, the violence is purely, deeply upsetting, and her response is an experimentation with "methods of endurance" (Morrison 43).

One of these methods is a common trauma response known as dissociation[5], the symptoms of which (a physical and emotional numbness and detachment) Pecola displays on page 45:

> Little parts of her body faded away. Now slowly, now with a rush. Slowly again. Her fingers went, one by one; then her arms disappeared all the way to the elbow. Her feet now. Yes, that was good. The legs all at once. It was hardest above the thighs. She had to be real still and pull. Her stomach would not go. But finally it, too, went away.

To cope with the trauma of the abuse she witnesses, Pecola reduces her sense of self. She seeks to make herself insubstantial to endure the wounding, confining substance of her environment.

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[5] From *Psychology Today*: a mental process involving a disconnection between a person's thoughts, memories, feelings, actions, or sense of identity

Pecola attributes the inescapability of her household to both her ugliness and her blackness: "as long as she looked the way she did, as long as she was ugly, she would have to stay with these people" (Morrison 45), exemplifying the trauma of existing in a body that is female (and therefore burdened by the requirement of beauty), and Black (which, in the context of the novel, reduces the body to its social and economic disadvantages).

The traumatic reality of Pecola's Black, female body becomes more explicit in a key interaction. When Pecola approaches a male store vendor to buy some Mary Janes[6], "he does not see her, because for him there is nothing to see. How can a fifty-two-year-old White immigrant storekeeper…*see* a little Black girl? Nothing in his life even suggested that the feat was possible, not to say desirable or necessary" (Morrison 48). The storekeeper's blindness to Pecola is not intentional, but instinctual and unprovoked. The simple tone and structure of the first sentence illustrate the naturalness of the storekeeper's inability to recognize Pecola's presence. There is no animosity in this admission; there is simply the cause, Pecola's nothingness, and an effect, his blindness, becoming racialized in the second sentence. Morrison's decision to include the age and race of the storekeeper introduces the nature of blackness (and girlhood) that is defined by erasure.

The storekeeper's identity as a "fifty-two-year-old White immigrant storekeeper," in contrast, has a substance, both on the page and in the social space of this scene. The inherent size of his identity makes the significance and visibility of the "little Black girl" before him ridiculous. Additionally, the fact that "nothing in his life suggested the feat was possible" reveals that his identity, as well as his ignorance of blackness, is complete and unchallenged. Morrison's use of the word "feat" is essential to this truth: the action of seeing Pecola is an extraordinary

[6] a classic, old-fashioned chewy candy made from peanut butter and molasses

undertaking, an accomplishment that requires a moral exertion and a surrendering of both old narratives of blackness and the White pride that preserves them. The impossibility of this "feat" is further soured by its lack of desirability and necessity for the shopkeeper. The resulting fact is that his blindness is not a matter of will, but ability, of which he has none.

The trauma of this interaction is revealed in Pecola's response. She witnesses the shopkeepers' ignorance of her and recognizes "the total absence of human recognition—the glazed separateness" and that this complete disregard has an edge and distaste that lurks in the eyes of all White people (Morrison 49). She concludes, from these expressions, that "the distaste must be for her, her blackness." Pecola's recognition of the shopkeeper's behavior and her attentiveness to their microexpressions suggest that this is a frequent, patterned occurrence; her erasure because of her blackness is routine and expected, malforming her perception of it. She describes her blackness as "static and dread," creating the "vacuum edged with distaste in White eyes" (Morrison 49), revealing that Pecola sees its "distaste" as fixed and frightening. In this way, Pecola sees and thinks about her blackness in the same way as the eyes of White people do; this is traumatic because it reveals that Pecola, at age eleven, has seen and studied the disgust for her blackness to the point of conviction in its revulsion.

This trauma of blackness is not only internally felt. It is also witnessed by other Black girls. Claudia and Frieda (and Maureen), while walking home, see Pecola being bullied by a group of Black boys. They sneer at her, tauntingly, "Black e mo. Black e mo. Yadaddsleespnekked. Black e mo. Black e mo," mocking her blackness and Cholly's sleeping habits, neither of which she has control over. Morrison indicates the irony of this situation: "that they themselves were Black, or that their own father had similarly relaxed habits was irrelevant" (Morrison 65). In this scene, Morrison offers readers an expanded perspective of blackness; the

internalized self-hatred that Pecola has displayed suddenly becomes a collective experience, outlined through the boys' "contempt for their own blackness," which has caused their "smoothly cultivated ignorance, their exquisitely learned self-hatred, their elaborately designed hopelessness" (Morrison 65). Through these phrasings, hatred of blackness becomes strategic for the cultivation of false confidence. By ridiculing Pecola's blackness, the Black boys side-step the fault they find in their own. The elaborate language that Morrison uses to describe this avoidance captures its complexity. The boys, who are Pecola's age, don't realize the depth and wound of their internalized contempt. The reward of ridiculing blackness (a brief power and confidence) still energizes them, which is why Morrison pairs the positive adjective with a negative subject: their "smoothly cultivated," "exquisitely learned," and "elaborately designed" hatred still entertains them because it is adolescent and its significance is not fully realized. What lies underneath this mirth is the "ignorance," "self-hatred," and "hopelessness."

The "pit" of blackness, soon after, appears here again, functioning as a social depository in which Pecola is sacrificed "for their [the boys'] own sake." The cost of avoiding the imposed inferiority of blackness is displacing its wounds on a powerless subject. A variable of Pecola's trauma, as a result, is her entrapment between a racial hatred that is both internally felt and externally inflicted. Pecola's suffering reveals that Black trauma is Black because it disturbs, damages, and disadvantages Black lives. It is evidence of racial privilege. The title itself highlights a pain that is owned by Black people and its narration is imperative to exposing how the Black life is significant and yet made hidden.

IV. The Problem with Trauma Theory

The most disquieting wound of *The Bluest Eye* is this:

> The doing of a wild and forbidden thing excited him, and a bolt of desire ran down his genitals, giving it length, and softening the lips of his anus. Surrounding all of this lust was a border of politeness. He wanted to fuck her—tenderly. But the tenderness would not hold. The tightness of her vagina was more than he could bear…Removing himself from her was so painful to him he cut it short and snatched his genitals out of the dry harbor of her vagina. She appeared to have fainted. Cholly stood up and could see only her grayish panties, so sad and limp around her ankles. Again, the hatred mixed with tenderness. The hatred would not let him pick her up, the tenderness forced him to cover her (Morrison 162-163)

The "her" is Pecola. Her rapist is her father. It happens in the kitchen while Pecola is washing dishes. It's painful because she is dry, tight, and small, and it happens until she faints. It ends with a sudden influx of "hatred" and "tenderness" that inform her father's reasoning for raping his eleven-year-old daughter, which surpasses a simple moment of lust and falls into a contorted mass of his past trauma, the understandings of love and power it confused, and the self-hatred and moral sickness this confusion breeded. Morrison writes with no trepidation; she deliberately illustrates the physicality of Cholly's arousal, the snatching motion of the rape, and the details of Pecola's body, down to the color of her undergarments.

The imagining of the rape, which Morrison demands of the reader, assumes a distinct layer of trauma because it takes place in the mind of the rapist. The readers know what Cholly is thinking and feeling before, during, and after the rape, a proximity with the assault that the reader cannot escape. In this way, Morrison writes layers of truth into Pecola's rape identified by the unrest of the perspective, the fact of the incest, and the graphic detail of its narration. In other words, this scene, and the complete body of *The Bluest Eye,* is deeply concerned with truth (the

pain of Black girls that is explicit and near-indigestible) because Morrison does not recoil from narrating its trauma. And yet, this unabashed, representative truth has received criticism and outrage from readers and literary scholars alike. Morrison remarks upon this response in *The Source of Self-Regard*: "truth is trouble…The alarm, the disquiet, writers raise is instructive because it is open and vulnerable, because if unpoliced it is threatening" (Morrison viii). The "trouble" of *The Bluest Eye,* which is the narration of the most nuanced and unthinkable traumas that are inflicted on the innocent bodies of Black girls, becomes "threatening" because it is difficult and distressing, conveniently side-stepping the fact that it is true and lived.

The consequence of ignoring (and thus misunderstanding) the importance of the novel's Black girl trauma narration is its sustained positioning under the gaze of literary criticism for decades since its publishing in 1970. It was banned twenty-nine times in 2022 alone. It was challenged sixty-two times in the same year. It was the 34th most banned book from 1990-1999, the 15th most banned book from 2000-2009, and the 10th most banned book from 2010 to 2019[7]. The reason the American Library Association (ALA) provided for this challenging is that novel's "depiction of sexual assault, depiction of incest, claimed to be sexually explicit, [and] EDI[8] content" ultimately removed it from shelves and curriculums across the U.S. What is obvious from these facts is that the literary world has had trouble swallowing the contents of *The Bluest Eye.* Yet, the quality of its writing and the esteem of its writer have remained lodged in the throat of literary study, solidifying its analysis under trauma theory.

Cathy Caruth, in her critical text *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History* defines trauma as: "an overwhelming experience of sudden or catastrophic events in which the response to the event occurs in the often delayed, uncontrolled, repetitive appearance of

[7] This data is drawn from the American Library Association's "Most Challenged Book List" across the years.
[8] This is an acronym for equity, diversity, and inclusion

hallucinations and other intrusive phenomena" (Caruth 11). This definition highlights two elements of trauma: the "experience" and the "response," both of which create the traumatic "event." The "experience" of trauma stands, under Caruth, as occurring with a quickness and acuity that creates its catastrophe. This definition privileges singular, dramatic events and assumes that trauma has a clear origin point. The response following this dramatic event is processed purely psychologically in "hallucinations" and "intrusive phenomena," which are "delayed," tying trauma primarily to the mind's struggle to process it. In this way, Caruth assumes that trauma is a sudden, abnormal break from everyday life; trauma becomes a rare and extraordinary occurrence and an unfortunate exception from normal experiences.

This definition of trauma informs the structure of *Unclaimed Experience,* in which Caruth dissects these origins and symptoms of trauma, including her understanding of it as a belated experience, resistant to normal memory and language, and realized through repetitions of flashbacks and intrusive thoughts. Trauma theory critic Irene Visser offers insights into how Caruth handles trauma in the writing of her theory. In her article, "Decolonizing Trauma Theory: Retrospect and Prospect," Visser writes how "the metaphor of trauma often used in trauma theory is that of a sudden, sharp piercing of a membrane, as, for instance, by a sharp object implanted in the psyche, where it remains in its original form, hidden behind the screen of consciousness, but making itself known through a series of symptoms" (Visser 252). This "metaphor of trauma" that Caruth leans on to capture its effects limits it to sudden, "sharp" singularity. Among these contentions, a weakness of trauma theory is introduced: its heavy reliance on an event-based trauma that leaves no space for it to exist as an extended, cumulative process of pain. The privilege of immediacy risks undermining the thoroughness of its harm, whether psychological or otherwise.

This marks a secondary shortcoming of trauma theory (and a consequence of its narrowed focus on the traumatic event), which is its centering of a particular traumatized body. The qualities of this specific body are realized in Caruth's frequent use of Freud's psychoanalytic approach to trauma. In a chapter about Freud and his book *Moses and Monotheism*[9], Caruth states that "the experience of the soldier faced with sudden and massive death around him, for example, who suffers this sight in a numbed state, only to relive it later on in repeated nightmares, is a central and recurring image of trauma in our century" (Caruth 11). The experience of a soldier that Caruth describes as "central" and "recurring" to current understandings of trauma suggests that it possesses an elite and imperative importance in the progression of its study. The soldiers Caruth refers to are of World War I and II, which were the primary contexts and sources of Freud's psychoanalysis. Caruth's later assertion in *Unclaimed Experience*—"It is only by reading the theory of individual trauma in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* in the context of the notion of historical trauma in *Moses and Monotheism* that we can understand the full complexity of the problem of survival at the heart of human experience" (Caruth 58)—identifies her leanings on Freud's work as inextricably tied to how trauma theory engages with the "human experience" and its pain. The dominant traumatized body that both Freud and Caruth center in their work is that of the shell-shocked soldier, as well as those victimized by the holocaust[10]. By centering these particular traumatized bodies in trauma theory, a question of which bodies become peripheral to its frameworks becomes critical.

Referring back to Caruth's claim on page 11 of her book, the language of an event-based trauma reappears: the "sudden and massive" event of world-war is what traumatizes the soldier's

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[9] This is Freud's controversial psychoanalytic study proposing that Moses was an Egyptian noble rather than a Hebrew, and who introduced monotheism to the Israelites, thus increasing the intellect of the Jews.

[10] J. Roger Kurtz, in his critical book *Trauma and Literature*, states that "for many, the Holocaust is the quintessential trauma of recent human history" (Kurtz 6).

body, and this terminology retains its singularity to describe the event. What this suggests about the traumatized subject is that their body and consciousness must be living outside of consistent violence to be traumatized. The suddenness and size of the trauma are only realized when it disrupts a preexisting stability. In other words, Caruth suggests that in order for the body to be traumatized, it must first exist untraumatized; trauma is only valid when it disrupts an equilibrium. The pain of the trauma, rooted in how the body and mind struggle to process it, is what Caruth refers to as "the problem of survival at the heart of human experience" (Caruth 58).

What makes the issue of trauma and survival "human," of course, is the value of the body and mind behind it. Within this fact stands another suggestion Caruth makes: there must be a body recognized as valuable for her framework to apply. Visser addresses this ethical issue, stating, "if trauma studies are to have any hope of redeeming its promise of ethical effectiveness, the social and historic relations must be taken into account, and that traumatic histories of subordinate groups should be situated against the histories of socially dominant groups" (Visser 253). Caruth's lack of account for traumatized bodies that are not militant, Western, or previously untraumatized limits both the "promise of ethical effectiveness" in trauma studies and the inter-cultural healing and narration of systemic traumas. The cumulation of these limitations is titled under eurocentrism; its consequence is the disregard of deeply seated, structural traumas, the exclusion of minority cultures and trauma narratives, and the dismissal of suffering as communal. Postcolonial theorist J. Roger Kurtz speaks to these consequences in his book, *Trauma and Transformation in African Literature*: "in non-Western settings trauma theory is probably ineffective and maybe even injurious…The danger with this European bias is its indifference to cultural specificity, to the ways that the experience, meaning, representation of and responses to trauma will vary across place and time" (Kurtz 4). The leading critical work of

trauma theory is a foreign tongue to the variety of cross-cultural trauma, and a theory that removes these cultural fundamentals risks the removal of the people of which it affects.

Black culture and trauma is not excluded from this consequence. Trauma theory's eurocentrism is not concerned with the preservation or representation of the historical, political, social, or traumatic scenes that serve as a foundation of Black cultures and people. There is no space for blackness under trauma theory because its pain persists into the present; it lingers beyond the time of the event in which it was conceived, and thus its length and depth are reduced. Despite this fact, the literary and theoretical expression of Black culture and its people have a position in the literary scene because Black people have carved it themselves. Black writers, such as Toni Morrison, as well as Black theorists, scholars, and activists have contributed to the Black literary tradition, which exploded the year *The Bluest Eye* was published. The importance of this tradition and its place in the wider literary scene is its core inquiry: how do Black people define their own trauma? And more specifically, how do they write it?

V. Black Trauma, Black Told

The former inquiry is approached by three outstanding Black female writers and thinkers, bell hooks, Zora Neale Hurston, and Audre Lorde. hooks outlines the task of Black thinking: the reevaluation of Black trauma as separate from White influences; Hurston represents a necessary attitude: a confident claim that Black trauma is not tragic; Lorde calls for expanded thinking: Black trauma is a place of learning, whether about the Black individual themself or the layers of

their pain that seek to control and terrify them. Their collective thinking around Black suffering is that it must be considered outside the moment of pain from which it was conceived. It is deeply personal and meaningful, but it does and should not doom, define, or deject the Black individual.

bell hooks, a renowned author and social critic, outlines the groundwork of defining Black trauma in her essay collection *Black Looks: Race and Representation* (1992): the task of the Black individual to think critically and truthfully about their trauma is to first acknowledge their social reality from which it is derived, which is proximate to Whiteness and therefore influenced by it. hooks claims this social reality widely emerges in literature and other media forms:

> We are most likely to see images of Black people that reinforce and reinscribe White supremacy. Those images may be constructed by White people who have not divested of racism, or by people of color/Black people who may see the world through the lens of White supremacy—internalized racism. Clearly, those of us committed to Black liberation struggle, to the freedom and self-determination of all Black people, must face daily the tragic reality that we have collectively made few, if any, revolutionary interventions in the area of race and representation. (hooks 1-2)

hooks addresses the skewed image of Black people and diagnoses its sources: its construction by White society that has not "divested" its racism and Black people, who have been blinded by internalized racism and thus limited their representation. hooks' term "interventions" is key here: Black people must involve themselves in their own liberation, representation, and reality and this involvement must be disruptive. Yet, hooks describes the process of this intervention as a "tragic reality," and offers further explanation in *Black Looks.* She writes, "Black people are convinced

that our lives are not complex and are therefore unworthy of sophisticated critical analysis and reflection. Even those of us righteously committed to Black liberation struggle, who feel we have decolonized our minds, often find it hard to "speak" our experience" (hooks 2). hooks addresses the socialization of Black people here; the society that has criminalized, hated, hurt, and dehumanized them has resulted in a simplified self-regard and a perspective of Black life that is so unsophisticated and insignificant its speakability is meaningless. The task of Black self-definition, then, becomes a matter of understanding (its circumstance and influences) but also a matter of volume. The speaking of Black life by Black people resists the burial of both.

This speaking, additionally, is urgent, but it is not dire. In her essay "How It Feels to Be Colored Me" (1928), Hurston, a writer and anthropologist, declares, "I am not tragically colored. There is no great sorrow dammed up in my soul, nor lurking behind my eyes…I do not belong to the sobbing school of Negrohood who hold that nature somehow has given them a lowdown dirty deal and whose feelings are all but about it" (Hurston 2). Hurston's statement is constructive just as it is declarative: the fact of her color is not attached to her suffering. Hurston's admission identifies an element of Black thought about trauma that states Black expression does not only center its pain. In this way, Black trauma departs from "the sobbing school of Negrohood" into a facet of Black culture that informs its history but does not consume it.

Within Hurston's declarations, the tension between Morrison's direct centering of Black pain in *The Bluest Eye* and Hurston's implication that it should not take center-stage in Black self-regard cannot be ignored. Hurston and Morrison do not diverge in their thinking about Black trauma. In *Black Looks*, Hurston disowns an unproductive pain that makes a tragedy out of the Black body; Morrison participates in this disowning by narrating a productive Black pain, seen

in her writing of it that does not center the White gaze, that is "indisputably Black" and that exposes and hits "the raw nerve of racial self-contempt."[11] The sobbing, self-pitying pain that Hurston refuses to claim does not appear in *The Bluest Eye*. It is instead replaced by a sorrow that is interrogative of the system that perpetuates it. Both Hurston and Morrison refuse to think about Black trauma as pitiful and instead call for an examination of its narratives, whether through a change in attitude as Hurston requires or a deepened narration as Morrison conducts.

This process of Black self-examination then becomes preventative of internalized hatred, an idea Audre Lorde, a writer and civil rights activist, supports in her essay, "Poetry Is Not a Luxury" (1984). She writes, "As we learn to bear the intimacy of scrutiny, and to flourish within it, as we learn to use the products of that scrutiny for power within our living, those fears which rule our lives and form our silences begin to lose their control over us" (Lorde 1). The process of "scrutiny" and its "products" introduce Black trauma as a wound to be confronted and then turned into power that eradicates fear. Through a process of "intimate scrutiny," the violent origins and skewed meanings of blackness and Black trauma are stripped of their perilousness and totality. Lorde claims that a new perspective of Black trauma returns the control and voice to the bodies it burdened. Black trauma, under Lorde, then becomes instructive for the Black individual to build the ability to "flourish," a new thinking that introduces Black trauma not as inhibitory of personal growth, but a vital step of the process.

The collective, central claim that hooks, Hurston, and Lorde make about Black trauma is that it is living just as much as the body it burdens. It has a function and a purpose. It is persistent but transformative if engaged with in the ways hooks, Hurston, and Lorde outline. Black trauma, additionally, is legible; literature plays a foundational role in the preservation of its

[11] From the foreword of *The Bluest Eye*

understanding. Within its writing, the methods of its construction are just as imperative as its content. This preservation and process is known as the Black literary tradition, which begins with the crafting of slave narratives in the 18th and 19th century and persists into the Black Arts Movement from the 60s and 70s. Literary researcher and lecturer Daina Miniotaitė offers a synthesis of this literary evolution in her teaching aid, *The African-American Literary Tradition.*

The slave narrative can be considered a historical document but also a deeply intimate, personal account of Black life, told through a Black author that chooses to narratively remember the physical, psychological, moral, and spiritual damages of slavery they experienced.[12] Miniotaitė describes its narrative progression as an "evolution of consciousness within the slave—from an identity as property and object to a sublime identity as human being and subject" (Miniotaitė 10). She also outlines its most prevalent narrative structure: the detailed writing of the harsh conditions of their life, the turning point that inspires their escape, the escape (or attempt) itself, and the opportunity of freedom and the process of achieving it (Miniotaitė 9-10). This "turning point" within the slave narrative structure is among the most prolific sources of its literary value: within these key moments, the Black self transforms, through a shift in self-regard, from property to person.

A key example of this is in Frederick Douglass' narrative, where Douglass physically retaliates against one of his cruelest slave owners, Mr. Covey, who sought to tie his legs and beat him. Before describing the altercation (which he wins), Douglass famously claims, "You have seen how a man was made a slave; you shall see how a slave was made a man" (Douglass 57). This moment, as well as those in other slave narratives, marks the instant the sense of self

[12] Notable slave narratives include Harriet Jacob's (Linda Brent's) *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861), Frederick Douglass's *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* (1845), and Oloudah Equiano's *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Oloudah Equiano* (1789).

reenters the Black body upon the realization of their personal value, inspired by an acute moment of desperation or pain. Miniotaitė, in reference to Douglass, outlines its stakes: the prioritization of "his sense of his own worth and dignity" came "at the expense of his life if necessary" (Miniotaitė 12). The slave narrative, through the narration of these turning points, introduces Black trauma writing beyond a report of pain. During the time of its writing, it was a necessary site for processing the greatest trauma against the human race.[13] These narratives outline the origins and resilience of Black self-regard as constructed through resistance and a reclamation of selfhood, and its narrative structure around the "turning point" supports it.[14]

Literature became a way for Black writers to narrate their suffering, and this has persisted into the Black Arts Movement from the 60s and 70s, in which *The Bluest Eye* was written, and whose structure is perhaps the most quintessential narrative expression of Black trauma because it directly mirrors its symptoms. Morrison's use of fragmentation and repetition mirrors trauma's rupture and compulsive return, presenting Black trauma as direct, unavoidable, and interrogative. The fragmentation is the first strategy to appear: Morrison opens her novel with: "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" (Morrison 5). These excerpts, recurring at each chapter's opening and during Pecola's moments of pain or insecurity, reinforce imposed ideals of beauty and family while fragmenting her narration through their disruption. This fragmentation additionally appears within Pecola's sense of self, which becomes split in two following her rape. The last chapter from her perspective includes a

[13] On March 25, 2026, the United Nations General Assembly declared the transatlantic trafficking and racialized chattel enslavement of Africans as the "gravest crime against humanity".

[14] The Harlem Renaissance is another turning point shaped by the Great Migration, advanced Black art and self-definition through the New Negro Movement (Alain Locke), but as Nella Larsen's Quicksand shows, this redefinition often produced fractured identities and alienation within an increasingly diverse Black community.

dialogue that she has with herself, the fragmentation emerging in the italicized lines that individuate Pecola's actual self with her other, deeply traumatized half:

You are my very best friend. Why didn't I know you before?

You didn't need me before.

Didn't need you?

I mean…you were so unhappy before. I guess you didn't notice me before (Morrison 198).

Pecola's character is split literally on the page because her sense of self has suffered the same fragmentation. Her body has experienced such an atrocity that her mind cannot endure it and thus survives by breaking. Returning to hooks' *Black Looks*, she evaluates the ending Morrison gives her through Black trauma thinking: "Many Black folks refuse to look at our present condition because they do not want to see images that might compel them to militance. But militancy is an alternative to madness…Like Pecola, in Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*, Black folks tum away from reality because the pain of awareness is so great. Yet it is only by becoming more fully aware that we begin to see clearly" (hooks 6). Pecola's refusal of her reality, paired with its trauma, forces her sense of self into "madness." Morrison displays a fragmenting of self, but also the consequences of refusing to be militant about the "present condition" of blackness. Just as the thinking about the reality of Black people is fragmented, so is the narration that Morrison writes to express it.

Black trauma also appears in Morrison's novel through repetition. The behavior of the traumatized mind's constant return to the moment of its suffering is mirrored in the consistency with which Morrison portrays the pain of her characters. The image of the marigolds is among the most symbolic, blooming in moments of a character's shame, insecurity, jealousy, or pain. The brightness of their symbolism represents Claudia and Frieda's hope that goodness will grow

out of their circumstance, despite the trauma of the fact that it never does in the novel; the fact that their hope and trauma (whether witnessed or experienced) struggle to coexist appears in the failed growth of the marigolds: “We thought, at the time, that it was because Pecola was having her father’s baby that the marigolds did not grow” (Morrison 7). The coupling of Pecola’s condition with the failed marigolds reveals how the fact of Pecola’s trauma crushes Claudia and Frieda’s hope because it is such an insurmountable atrocity.

The marigolds then return in the last lines of the novel, with Claudia’s claim that “the land of the entire country was hostile to marigolds that year. This soil is bad for certain kinds of flowers…when the land kills of its own volition, we acquiesce and say the victim had no right to live” (Morrison 206). Morrison expands the image of the marigolds into representing both the girl’s hope and the girls themselves; the soil, then, becomes “the entire country” of American society that is “hostile” to them and “kills of its own volition.” The girls, who possess the youth and fragility of a marigold, are then forced to “acquiesce” or comply under their agreement with the system of oppression that denies their “right to live.” By returning to the image of the Marigolds, Morrison directs the reader to frequently return to the trauma and wilted hope that the girls, within their Black bodies, are forced to reckon with. *The Bluest Eye*, then, becomes one of the truest trauma narratives in the Black and wider literary tradition because trauma symptoms are the backbone of its structure; the novel loses its bite without the teeth of Black pain.

Given *The Bluest Eye*’s position among the texts and theories of the literary scene, a crucial question must be asked of its content and intention: can a eurocentric theory such as trauma theory be ethically applied to a text that critiques eurocentrism itself? While Caruth’s trauma theory can offer an explanation for how *The Bluest Eye* works formally, its thorough application to the novel's centering of Black girl trauma risks universalizing its cultural

specificity and reducing its racial and systemic scars to an unfortunate symptom of a wounded psyche. The Black trauma that Morrison writes into her novel introduces a Black identity that is so tied to pain that it becomes it. Morrison's characters are landlocked in their oppression, often unable to venture outside of their pain-ridden experience and live without the panicked rage and hostility of someone consistently and systemically threatened and trapped.

This is the trauma that Morrison's characters face. Black trauma is Black owned, told, understood, and written, and eurocentric trauma theory risks flattening its racial complexity. Morrison diagnoses this in *The Source of Self-Regard*, claiming that judging Black literature "solely in terms of its referents to Eurocentric criteria…cripple the literature and infantilize the serious work of imaginative writing" (Morrison 171). Using trauma theory to analyze the cultural and racial nuance of Morrison's novel, which is its foundation, risks subjecting the rawness and richness of its trauma to the Westernized influences that "cripple" and "infantilize" its content. If the wider purpose of literary theory is to analyze the value of a piece of literature, ethical boundaries are an urgent requirement; the primary function of literary theories such as trauma theory must be to examine the value within a creative piece and not determine it. In this way, just as Black trauma has been written and understood with intention and honesty, the evaluation of the people within Black narratives must be conducted with a similar respect.

VI. Conclusion

The pouted lip and the downturned gaze have no place among Black trauma narratives. Racial trauma cannot be engaged with in literature from a place of pity. Morrison predicted this readerly habit and handled it watchfully, but she was not satisfied with her novel's effect. She claims readers remained "touched but not moved" (Morrison xii). Morrison's intention with *The*

Bluest Eye was to ignite an interrogation of the self and its convictions about Black pain and people. Readers were meant to conduct themselves in their journey through her centering of Black girls, their trauma, and systematic racism by looking inward and looking critically; by facing the undeniable fact of Pecola, Claudia, and Frieda's trauma, readers are faced with the fact of any existing prejudiced thought that disrupts their understanding and acknowledgement of it. In this way, Morrison seeks to represent Black trauma to her readers but also uncover its truth and existence from beneath the rubble of its dismissal and dismantling.

Another method of this uncovering is the application of literary theories to better understand Black narrative topics and structure. Trauma theory is ill-fitted to *The Bluest Eye*'s centering of Black girl trauma because its frameworks are unconcerned with its detail: the trauma of their invisibility, the threat of ugliness, and the consequences of their blackness. Instead, trauma theory focuses on the psychological injuries of trauma, the ones that are placed particularly in the psyche of a world-war soldier or from other Western atrocities, which are not invalid, but do not seek to validate a trauma that is prolonged rather than immediate, communal rather than individual, chronic rather than transitory. The method of studying trauma symptoms in literature must shift when racial elements are present because the honest and accurate representation of a people and culture hang precariously between them. Morrison approaches this task by writing *The Bluest Eye* for trauma and for blackness, participating in the Black literary tradition but also the larger canon.

Morrison understands the responsibility of Black literature within the general tradition but makes a declarative ultimatum about its engagement in *The Source of Self-Regard*: "it is no longer acceptable merely to imagine us and imagine for us. We have always been imagining ourselves…We are the subjects of our own narrative, witnesses to and participants in our own

experience" (Morrison 170). Imagining Black lives through eurocentric lenses such as trauma theory is ill-fitting to their depth but also unnecessary—Black trauma is not White property and Black writers are willing and capable of witnessing, participating, and imagining their own realities with mastery, whether in narratives or otherwise. These Black realities extend (but are not exclusive) to Black pain, which does not resist comprehension as trauma theory claims. The debate of application between the two is not outrageous, but to recognize its limits is to arrive at a moral distinction: trauma theory is concerned with the wound; Black trauma is concerned with the wounded.

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