

Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* (1970)

The Violence of
Representation



Morrison's bio

Born **Chloe Anthony Wofford**, in 1931 in Lorain (Ohio), the second of four children in a black working-class family, Toni Morrison is a writer, critic and teacher. She studied humanities at Howard and Cornell Universities, writing her Master's thesis on Virginia Woolf and William Faulkner. She worked as a professor at Texas Southern University, Howard University, Yale, and Princeton University. She also worked as an editor for Random House. She made her debut as a novelist in 1970, soon gaining the attention of both critics and a wider audience for her epic power, unerring ear for dialogue, and her poetically-charged and richly-expressive depictions of Black America. She has been awarded a number of literary distinctions, among them the Pulitzer Prize in 1988 and the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1993.

The Bluest Eye

The Bluest Eye is Morrison's first novel, published in 1970, when she was 39. It tells the story of Pecola Breedlove, a young black girl who believes nobody loves her because she is ugly and thinks her life would change if she had blue eyes, and is set in Morrison's hometown of Lorain, Ohio, after the Great Depression, in 1941. Because of its bleak portrayal of black life in the 1940s, including incest, prostitution and violence, *The Bluest Eye* was criticized by many black critics and has been frequently challenged or banned from classrooms. One of the most recent challenges occurred in 2013, when the novel appeared on a Common Core Standards reading list for 11th grade students in Ohio. The president of the board of education deemed it inappropriate for high school students. Morrison said that she wrote the novel because she wanted to remind the young blacks who were celebrating the beauty of blackness in the 1960s that this kind of confidence, pride and self-reliance was not available to all black subjects and self-loathing was real in the community.

Toni Morrison on *The Bluest Eye*

Black male writers write about what's important to them or their lives, and what is important to them is the oppressor, the white man, because he's the one making life complicated. Then I noticed that black women never do that. In the '20s, they did, but I mean contemporary—and I wasn't interested in it. Suddenly if you took the gaze of the white male—or even the white female, but certainly the male—out of the world, it was freedom! You could think anything, go anywhere, imagine anything... There was no longer the problem of looking through the master's gaze. With that gaze, you're always reacting, proving something. So not having to do that...

But this was back in the day of the “screw whitey” books. One of the aggressive themes of the “screw whitey” movement was “black is beautiful.” I just thought, “What is that about? Who are they talking to? Me? You're going to tell me I'm beautiful?” And I thought, “Wait a minute. Before the guys get on the my-beautiful-black-queen wagon, let me tell you what it used to be like before you started that!” [laughs] You know, what racism does is create self-loathing, and it hurts. It can ruin you. ...

The nicest thing I ever heard wasn't from a critic, it was from a student who said, “I liked *The Bluest Eye*, but I was really mad at you for writing it.” And I said, “Why?” And she said, “Because now they will know.” But most of them were dismissive. I thought that in that milieu, nobody was going to read this. Twelve-hundred copies they printed, 1,500. I thought it would be 400. Bantam bought the paperback. It was a throw-away book. And then something extraordinary happened. I think it was City College. The book was published in '70, and City College decided that the curriculum for every entering freshman would have to include books by women and books by African Americans, and I was on that list.

“Toni Morrison's Haunting Resonance”, interview by Christopher Bollen, 2012

“Most writers claim to abhor labels but Morrison has always welcomed the term “black writer”. “I’m writing for black people,” she says, “in the same way that Tolstoy was not writing for me, a 14-year-old coloured girl from Lorain, Ohio. I don’t have to apologise or consider myself limited because I don’t [write about white people] – which is not absolutely true, there are lots of white people in my books. The point is not having the white critic sit on your shoulder and approve it” – she refers to the writer James Baldwin talking about “a little white man deep inside of all of us”. Did she exorcise hers? “Well I never really had it. I just never did.” (*The Guardian*, interview by Hermion Hoby, 2015)

The Bluest Eye: An exploration of the black divided self

The (white) gaze

Representation / lack of representation

Visual culture as site of the construction of white supremacy

Invisibility / hypervisibility

Resistance to the gaze / freeing oneself from the gaze

Double consciousness

Internalized racism

Mimicking / mimicry: imitation with difference

The Forethought

Double Consciousness, the color line, the shadow, the veil

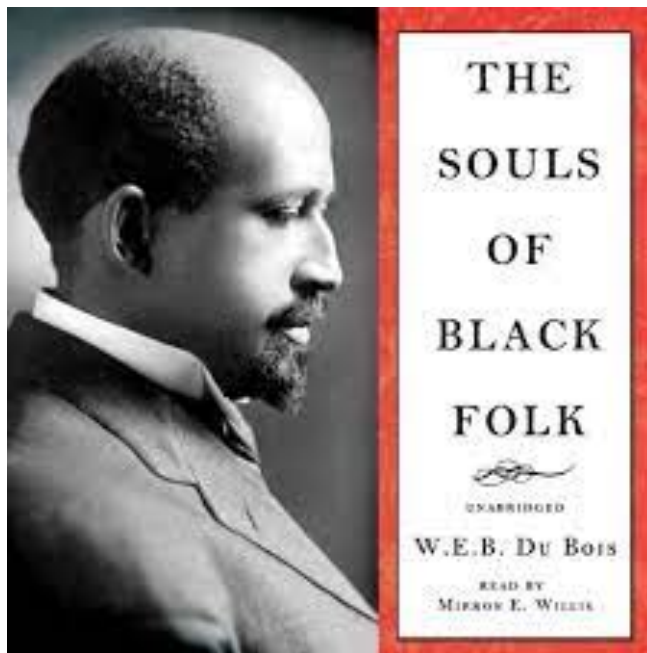
Herein lie buried many things which if read with patience may show the strange meaning of being black here in the dawning of the Twentieth Century. This meaning is not without interest to you, Gentle Reader; for the problem of the Twentieth Century is the problem of the color-line.¹

Between me and the other world there is ever an unasked question unasked by some through feelings of delicacy; by others through the difficulty of rightly framing it. All, nevertheless, flutter round it. They approach me in a half-hesitant sort of way, eye me curiously or compassionately, and then, instead of saying directly, How does it feel to be a problem? they say, I know an excellent colored man in my town; or, I fought at Mechanicsville;² or, Do not these Southern outrages make your blood boil? At these I smile, or am interested, or reduce the

boiling to a simmer, as the occasion may require. To the real question, How does it feel to be a problem? I answer seldom a word.

And yet, being a problem is a strange experience,—peculiar even for one who has never been anything else, save perhaps in babyhood and in Europe. It is in the early days of rollicking boyhood that the revelation first bursts upon one, all in a day, as it were. I remember well when the shadow swept across me. I was a little thing, away up in the hills of New England, where the dark Housatonic³ winds between Hoo-sac and Taghkanic to the sea. In a wee wooden schoolhouse, something put it into the boys' and girls' heads to buy gorgeous visiting-cards—ten cents a package—and exchange. The exchange was merry, till one girl, a tall newcomer, refused my card,—refused it peremptorily, with a glance.⁴ Then it dawned upon me with a certain suddenness that I was different from the others; or like, mayhap, in heart and life and longing, but shut out from their world by a vast veil. I had thereafter no desire to tear down that veil, to creep through; I held all beyond it in common contempt, and lived above it in a region of blue sky and great wandering shadows. That sky was bluest when I could beat my mates at examination-time, or beat them at a foot-race, or even beat their stringy heads. Alas, with the years all this fine contempt began to fade; for the worlds I longed for, and all their dazzling opportunities, were theirs, not mine. But they should not keep these prizes, I said; some, all, I would wrest from them. Just how I would do it I could never decide: by reading law, by healing the sick, by telling the wonderful tales that swam in my head,—some way. With other black boys the strife was not so fiercely

1. Revised from "Strivings of the Negro People," *Atlantic Monthly*, 1903.



Double Consciousness, the color line, the veil

After the Egyptian and Indian, the Greek and Roman, the Teuton and Mongolian, the Negro is a sort of seventh son, born with a veil, and gifted with second-sight in this American world,⁷—a world which

yields him no true self-consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world. It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness,⁸ this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his two-ness,—an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder.

The history of the American Negro is the history of this strife,—this longing to attain self-conscious manhood, to merge his double self into a better and truer self. In this merging he wishes neither of the older selves to be lost. He would not Africanize America, for America has too much to teach the world and Africa. He would not bleach his Negro soul in a flood of white Americanism, for he knows that Negro blood has a message for the world. He simply wishes to make it possible for a man to be both a Negro and an American, without being cursed and spit upon by his fellows, without having the doors of Opportunity closed roughly in his face.

Practices of Looking

An Introduction
to Visual Culture

Marita Sturken
and
Lisa Cartwright

Encoding and decoding

Images present to viewers clues about their dominant meaning. A dominant meaning can be the interpretation that an image's producers intended viewers to make. More often, though, it can be the meaning that most viewers within a given cultural setting will arrive at, regardless of the producers' intentions. All images are both *encoded* and *decoded*. An image or object is encoded with meaning in its creation or production; it is further encoded when it is placed in a given setting or context. It is then decoded by viewers when it is consumed by them. These processes work in tandem. So, for instance, a television show is encoded with meaning by the writers, producers, and the production apparatus that allows it to be made, and it is then decoded by television viewers according to their particular set of cultural assumptions and their viewing context.

Stuart Hall has written that there are three positions that viewers can take as decoders of cultural images and artifacts:

- (1) *Dominant-hegemonic reading*. They can identify with the hegemonic position and receive the dominant message of an image or text (such as a television show) in an unquestioning manner.
- (2) *Negotiated reading*. They can negotiate an interpretation from the image and its dominant meanings.
- (3) *Oppositional reading*. Finally, they can take an oppositional position, either by completely disagreeing with the ideological position embodied in an image or rejecting it altogether (for example, by ignoring it).²

Viewers who take the dominant-hegemonic position can be said to decode images in a relatively passive manner. But it can be argued that few viewers actually consume images in this manner, because there is no mass culture that can satisfy all viewers' culturally specific experiences, memories, and desires. The second and third positions, negotiation and opposition, are more useful to us and deserve further explanation.

The term "negotiation" invokes the process of trade. We can think of it as a kind of bargaining over meaning that takes place among viewer, image, and context. We use the term "negotiation" in a metaphorical sense to say that we often "haggle" with the dominant meanings of an image when we interpret it. The process of deciphering an image always takes place at both the conscious and unconscious levels. It brings into play our own memories, knowledge, and cultural frameworks as well as the image itself and the dominant meanings that cling to it. Interpretation is thus a mental process of acceptance and rejection of the meanings and associations that adhere to a given image through the force of dominant ideologies. In this process, viewers actively struggle with dominant meanings, allowing culturally and personally specific meanings to transform and even override the meanings imposed by producers and broader social forces. The term "negotiation" allows us to see how cultural interpretation is a struggle in which consumers are active meaning-makers and not merely passive recipients in the process of decoding images.

Appropriation and oppositional readings

Of the three different modes of engagement with popular culture defined by Stuart Hall (dominant-hegemonic, negotiated, and oppositional), the category of oppositional readings raises perhaps the most complicated set of questions. What does it mean to read a television show in an oppositional way? Why does this matter? Does it make any difference that viewers may often read against the intended meaning of an image? The lone oppositional reading of a single viewer may mean nothing compared to the popularity of a particular cultural product. This consideration raises the important issue of power: Whose readings matter? Who ultimately controls the meanings of a given image or text? There are many ways that oppositional readings of popular culture demonstrate the complicated dance of power relations in contemporary societies, the tension of hegemonic and counter-hegemonic forces. The constant dynamic of culture comes in part from the ongoing exchange among dominant, negotiated, and oppositional practices.

While the advent of a broad array of computer technologies, the Internet,

Homi Bhabha, «Of Mimicry and Men,» in *The Location of Culture*

colonial power and knowledge.

Within that conflictual economy of colonial discourse which Edward Said³ describes as the tension between the synchronic panoptical vision of domination – the demand for identity, stasis – and the counter-pressure of the diachrony of history – change, difference – mimicry represents an ironic compromise. If I may adapt Samuel Weber's formulation of the marginalizing vision of castration,⁴ then colonial mimicry is the desire for a reformed, recognizable Other, as a subject of a difference that is almost the same, but not quite. Which is to say, that the discourse of mimicry is constructed around an ambivalence; in order to be effective, mimicry must continually produce its slippage, its excess, its difference. The authority of that mode of colonial discourse that I have called mimicry is therefore stricken by an indeterminacy: mimicry emerges as the representation of a difference that is itself a process of disavowal. Mimicry is, thus the sign of a double articulation; a complex strategy of reform, regulation and discipline, which 'appropriates' the Other as it visualizes power. Mimicry is also the sign of the inappropriate, however, a differ-

MIMICRY

An increasingly important term in post-colonial theory, because it has come to describe the **ambivalent** relationship between colonizer and colonized. When colonial discourse encourages the colonized

subject to ‘mimic’ the colonizer, by adopting the colonizer’s cultural habits, assumptions, institutions and values, the result is never a simple reproduction of those traits. Rather, the result is a ‘blurred copy’ of the colonizer that can be quite threatening. This is because mimicry is never very far from mockery, since it can appear to parody whatever it mimics. Mimicry therefore locates a crack in the certainty of colonial dominance, an uncertainty in its control of the behaviour of the colonized.

Mimicry has often been an overt goal of imperial policy. For instance, Lord Macaulay’s 1835 *Minute to Parliament* derided Oriental learning, and advocated the reproduction of English art and learning in India (most strategically through the teaching of English literature). However, the method by which this mimicry was to be achieved indicated the underlying weakness of imperialism. For Macaulay suggested that the riches of European learning should be imparted by ‘a class of interpreters between us and the millions whom we govern – a class of persons Indian in blood and colour, but English in tastes, opinions, in morals, and in intellect’ (Macaulay 1835). In other words, not only was the mimicry of European learning to be **hybridized** and therefore ambivalent, but Macaulay seems to suggest that imperial discourse is compelled to make it so in order for it to work.

Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin,
*POST-COLONIAL STUDIES:
The Key Concepts*

The panopticon remains a powerful metaphor for the surveillance of inmates in all 'total institutions' such as mental asylums, whatever their physical architecture. One consequence of such surveillance is termed 'conversion' by Erving Goffman. This is the process whereby 'the inmate appears to take over the official or staff view of himself and tries to act out the role of the perfect inmate . . . presenting himself as someone whose institutional enthusiasm is always at the disposal of the staff' (1961:63). In this case the 'official view' is directly connected to the power exerted by the institution over the inmate's actions. The process of conversion in colonization is far more subtle but just as potent. Whereas imperial power over the colonized subject may not be necessarily as direct and physical as it is in a 'total' institution, power over the subject may be exerted in myriad ways, enforced by the threat of subtle kinds of cultural and moral disapproval and exclusion. The colonized subject may accept the imperial view, including the array of values, assumptions and cultural expectations on which this is based, and order his or her behaviour accordingly. This will produce colonial subjects who are 'more English than the English', those whom V.S. Naipaul called 'The Mimic Men' in the novel of that name. More often, such conversion will be ambivalent, attenuated, intermittent and diffused by feelings of resistance to imperial power, leading to what Homi Bhabha calls 'mimicry', a 'conversion' that always teeters on the edge of menace.

David Huddard, Homi Bhabha, 2006

This chapter will demonstrate how anxiety is matched by mimicry, with the colonized adopting and adapting to the colonizer's culture. Importantly, this mimicry is not slavish imitation, and the colonized is not being assimilated into the supposedly dominant or even superior culture. In fact, mimicry as Bhabha understands it is an exaggerated copying of language, culture, manners, and ideas. This exaggeration means that mimicry is repetition with difference, and so it is not evidence of the colonized's servitude. In fact, this mimicry is also a form of mockery, and Bhabha's post-colonial theory is a comic approach to colonial discourse, because it mocks and undermines the ongoing pretensions of colonialism and empire. As one example, Bhabha makes connections between the

Essentially, colonial discourse wants the colonized to be extremely like the colonizer, but by no means identical. If there were an absolute equivalence between the two, then the ideologies justifying colonial rule would be unable to operate. This is because these ideologies assume that there is structural non-equivalence, a split between superior and inferior which explains why any one group of people can dominate another at all. However, having introduced this slight difference, colonial discourse is unable to control the consequences brought about by that difference—particularly the colonized's agency that is implied by the slippages of meaning.

Amazed the first time I read in history classes that white slave-owners (men, women, and children) punished enslaved black people for looking, I wondered how this traumatic relationship to the gaze had informed black parenting and black spectatorship. The politics of slavery, of racialized power relations, were such that the slaves were denied their right to gaze. Connecting this strategy of domination to that used by grown folks in southern black rural communities where I grew up, I was pained to think that there was no absolute difference between whites who had oppressed black people and ourselves. Years later, reading Michel Foucault, I thought again about these connections, about the ways power as domination reproduces itself in different locations employing similar apparatuses, strategies, and mechanisms of control. Since I knew as a child that the dominating power adults exercised over me and over my gaze was never so absolute that I did not dare to look, to sneak a peep, to stare dangerously, I knew that the slaves had looked. That all attempts to repress our/black peoples' right to gaze had produced in us an overwhelming longing to look, a rebellious desire, an oppositional gaze. By courageously looking, we defiantly declared: "Not only will I stare. I want my look to change reality." Even in the worse circumstances of domination, the ability to manipulate one's gaze in the face of structures of domination that would contain it, opens up the possibility of agency. In much of his work,

bell hooks,
"The
Oppositional Gaze -
Black
Female
Spectators"
*Black
Looks,*
Boston,
South End
Press,
1992, pp.
115-131

Stuart Hall calls for recognition of our agency as black spectators in his essay "Cultural Identity and Cinematic Representation." Speaking against the construction of white representations of blackness as totalizing, Hall says of white presence: "The error is not to conceptualize this 'presence' in terms of power, but to locate that power as wholly external to us—as extrinsic force, whose influence can be thrown off like the serpent sheds its skin. What Franz Fanon reminds us, in *Black Skin, White Masks*, is how power is inside as well as outside:

...the movements, the attitudes, the glances of the Other fixed me there, in the sense in which a chemical solution is fixed by a dye. I was indignant; I demanded an explanation. Nothing happened. I burst apart. Now the fragments have been put together again by another self. This "look," from—so to speak—the place of the Other, fixes us, not only in its violence, hostility and aggression, but in the ambivalence of its desire.

Spaces of agency exist for black people, wherein we can both interrogate the gaze of the Other but also look back, and at one another, naming what we see. The "gaze" has been and is a site of resistance for colonized black people globally. Subordinates in relations of power learn experientially that there is a critical gaze, one that "looks" to document, one that is oppositional. In resistance struggle, the power

Themes

Whiteness as standard of beauty

The white gaze

Influence of popular culture on identity

Race and class

Internalized racism

Colorism

Adoption of politics of respectability and distancing from blackness as strategy for survival

Sexuality

Children's innocence vs adult deception

Toni Morrison



The Bluest Eye

“Foreword” to *The Bluest Eye*

When I began writing *The Bluest Eye*, I was interested in something else. Not resistance to the contempt of others, ways to deflect it, but the far more tragic and disabling consequences of accepting rejection as legitimate, as self-evident. I knew that some victims of powerful self-loathing turn out to be dangerous, violent, reproducing the enemy who has humiliated them over and over. Others surrender their identity; melt into a structure that delivers the strong persona they lack. Most others, however, grow beyond it. But there are some who collapse, silently, anonymously, with no voice to express or acknowledge it. They are invisible. The death of self-esteem can occur quickly, easily in children, before their ego has “legs,” so to speak. Couple the vulnerability of youth with indifferent parents, dismissive adults, and a world, which, in its language, laws, and images, re-enforces despair, and the journey to destruction is sealed.

The project, then, for this, my first book, was to enter the life of the one least likely to withstand such damaging forces 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.

The origin of the novel lay in a conversation I had with a childhood friend. We had just started elementary school. She said she wanted blue eyes. I looked around to picture her with them and was violently repelled by what I imagined she would look like if she had her wish. The sorrow in her voice seemed to call for sympathy, and I faked it for her, but, astonished by the desecration she proposed, I “got mad” at her instead.

The reclamation of racial beauty in the sixties stirred these thoughts, made me think about the necessity for the claim. Why, although reviled by others, could this beauty not be taken for granted within the community? Why did it need wide public articulation to exist? These are not clever questions. But in 1962 when I began this story, and in 1965 when it began to be a book, the answers were not as obvious to me as they quickly became and are now. The assertion of racial beauty was not a reaction to the self-mocking, humorous critique of cultural/racial foibles common in all groups, but against the damaging internalization of assumptions of immutable inferiority originating in an outside gaze. I focused, therefore, on how something as grotesque as the demonization of an entire race could take root inside the most delicate member of society: a child; the most vulnerable member: a female.

In trying to dramatize the devastation that even casual racial contempt can cause, I chose a unique situation, not a representative one. The extremity of Pecola's case stemmed largely from a crippled and crippling family—unlike the average black family and unlike the narrator's. But singular as Pecola's life was, I believed some aspects of her woundability were lodged in all young girls. In exploring the social and domestic aggression that could cause a child to literally fall apart, I mounted a series of rejections, some routine, some exceptional, some monstrous, all the while trying hard to avoid complicity in the demonization process Pecola was subjected to. That is, I did not want to dehumanize the characters who trashed Pecola and contributed to her collapse.

My choices of language (speakerly, aural, colloquial), my reliance for full comprehension on codes embedded in black culture, my effort to effect immediate coconspiracy and intimacy (without any distancing, explanatory fabric), as well as my attempt to shape a silence while breaking it are attempts to transfigure the complexity and wealth of Black American culture into a language worthy of the culture.

Thinking back now on the problems expressive language presented to me, I am amazed by their currency, their tenacity. Hearing “civilized” languages debase humans, watching cultural exorcisms debase literature, seeing oneself preserved in the amber of disqualifying metaphors—I can say that my narrative project is as difficult today as it was then.

Structure of the novel

Multiple Narrators: Non-descript narrator (Dick and Jane primer), first person retrospective narrator (adult Claudia), first person contemporary narrator (Young Claudia), Omniscient narrator (focalized Narrator, external narrator), Pauline (passages in italics).

Double Prologue: Primer, repeated three times, the second without punctuation, the third without spaces separating the words; Adult Claudia's internal monologue about what happened in 1941

Four sections, each starting with Claudia's voice and continuing with the primer: Autumn (Claudia, house, family); Winter (Claudia, cat); Spring (Claudia, mother, father, dog); Summer (Claudia, friend, Adult Claudia)

Symbols and motifs

The Bluest Eye: vision (seeing and being seen); notice the singular in the title. Why? Blue means sad, eye could be a pun on I

Primer: Dick and Jane as models to imitate

Marigold Seeds: nature, seasons

White Dolls: notice how Claudia's attitude differs from the rest

House: the white family house vs the Breedloves' house and the McTeers

The Movies: popular culture as powerful tool for naturalizing white supremacy

Funk: A state of undesirable emotions or feeling out-of-sorts. These feelings may include but are not limited to: sadness, boredom that is unusually difficult to curb, laziness, unworthiness, and an overall feeling of malaise. (Urban dictionary). Also, a music genre which developed in the sixties

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

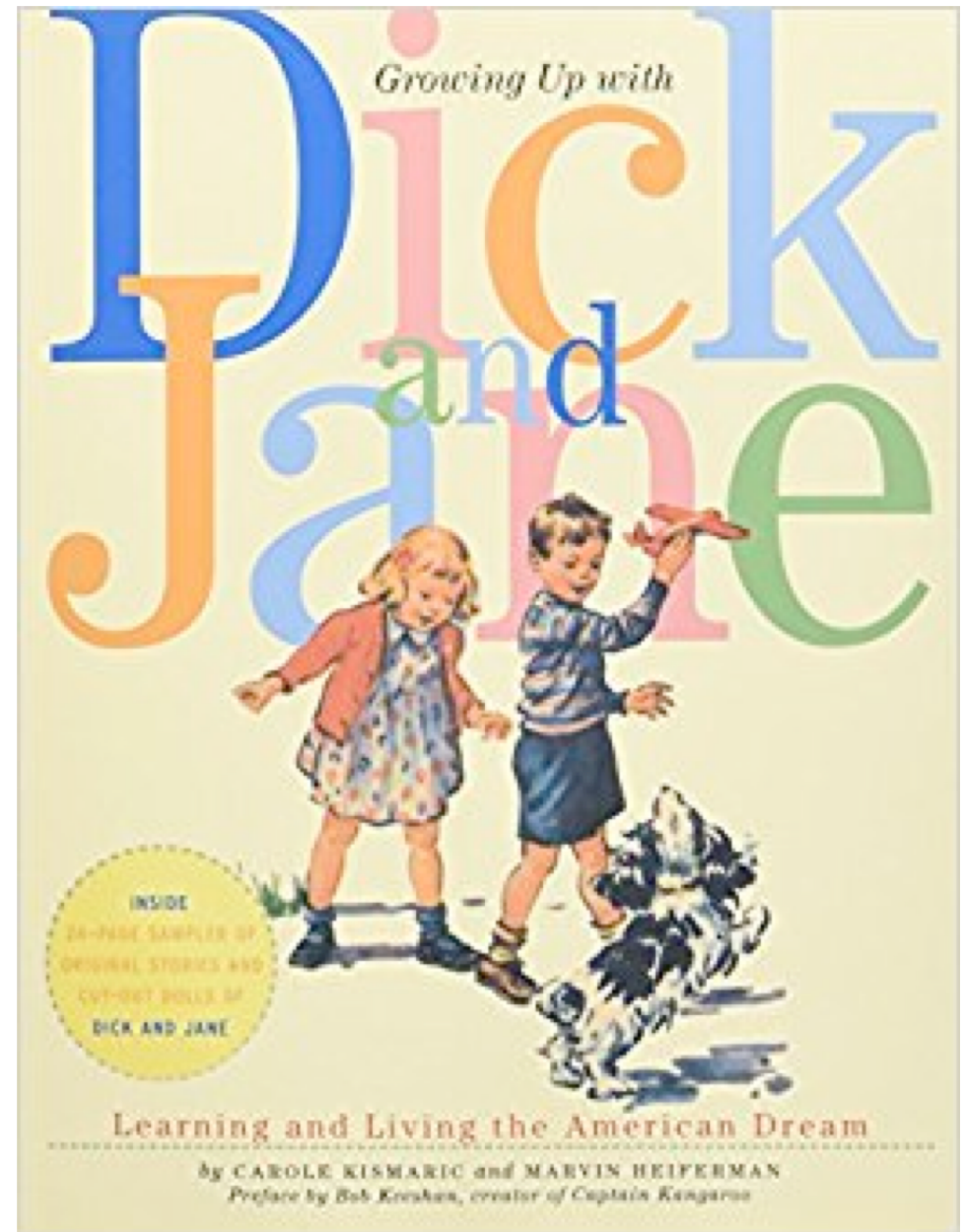
Here is the house it is green and white it has a red door it is very pretty here is the family mother father dick and jane live in the green-and-white house they are very happy see jane she has a red dress she wants to play who will play with jane see the cat it goes meow-meow come and play come play with jane the kitten will not play see mother mother is very nice mother will you play with jane mother laughs laugh mother laugh see father he is big and strong father will you play with jane father is smiling smile father smile see the dog bowwow goes the dog do you want to play do you want to play with jane see the dog run run dog run look look here comes a friend the friend will play with jane they will play a good game play jane play

The lies of the American Dream: different houses and families

Hereisthehouseitisgreenandwhiteithasareddooritisverypretty hereisthefamilymotherfatherdickandjaneliveinthegreenandwhitehousetheyareveryhappyseejaneshehasareddressshewantstoplaywhowillplaywithjanesethecatitgoesmeowmeowcomeandplaycomeplaywithjanethekittenwillnotplayseemothermotherisverynicemotherwillyouplaywithjanemotherlaughslaughmotherlaughsee fatherheisbigandstrongfatherwillyouplaywithjanefatherissmilingsmilefathersmileseethedogbowwowgoesthedogdoyouwanttoplaydoyouwanttoplaywithjanesethe dogrunrundogrunlooklookherecomesafriendthefriendwillplaywithjanetheywillplayagoodgameplayjaneplay

Growing Up With Dick and Jane: Learning and Living the American Dream

Growing Up with Dick and Jane, by Carole Kismaric and Marvin Heiferman, traces the Dick and Jane phenomenon from their birth during the Depression to their retirement in the stormy 1960s. It explores the influence these little books had on education and the evolving American Dream.



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. 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. Not even the gardens fronting the lake showed marigolds that year. But so deeply concerned were we with the health and safe delivery of Pecola's baby we could think of nothing but our own magic: if we planted the seeds, and said the right words over them, they would blossom, and everything would be all right.

It was a long time before my sister and I admitted to ourselves that no green was going to spring from our seeds. Once we knew, our guilt was relieved only by fights and mutual accusations about who was to blame. For years I thought my sister was right: it was my fault. I had planted them too far down in the earth. It never occurred to either of us that the earth itself might have been unyielding. We had dropped our seeds in our own little plot of black dirt just as Pecola's father had dropped his seeds in his own plot of black dirt. Our innocence and faith were no more productive than his lust or despair. What is clear now is that of all of that hope, fear, lust, love, and grief, nothing remains but Pecola and the unyielding earth. Cholly Breedlove is dead; our innocence too. The seeds shriveled and died; her baby too.

There is really nothing more to say—except why. But since why is difficult to handle, one must take refuge in how.

Morrison on her narrative technique in a 1983 interview with Claudia

Tate:

I tell you at the beginning of *The Bluest Eye* on the very first page what happened, but now I want you to go with me and look at this, so when you get to the scene where the father rapes the daughter, which is as awful a thing, I suppose, as can be imagined, by the time you get there, it's almost irrelevant because I want you to *look* at him and see his love for his daughter and his powerlessness to help her pain. By that time, his embrace, the rape, is all the gift he has left. (Tate 164).

Our house is old, cold, and green. At night a kerosene lamp lights one large room. The others are braced in darkness, peopled by roaches and mice. Adults do not talk to us—they give us directions. They issue orders without providing information. When we trip and fall down they glance at us; if we cut or bruise ourselves, they ask us are we crazy. When we catch colds, they shake their heads in disgust at our lack of consideration. How, they ask us, do you expect anybody to get anything done if you all are sick? We cannot answer them. Our illness is treated with contempt, foul Black Draught, and castor oil that blunts our minds.

When, on a day after a trip to collect coal, I cough once, loudly, through bronchial tubes already packed tight with phlegm, my mother frowns. “Great Jesus. Get on in that bed. How many times do I have to tell you to wear something on your head? You must be the biggest fool in this town. Frieda? Get some rags and stuff that window.”

Beyond the lies
of the American
Dream: tough
love and
alternative
families

place in the bed. Once I have generated a silhouette of warmth, I dare not move, for there is a cold place one-half inch in any direction. No one speaks to me or asks how I feel. In an hour or two my mother comes. Her hands are large and rough, and when she rubs the Vicks salve on my chest, I am rigid with pain. She takes two fingers' full of it at a time, and massages my chest until I am faint. Just when I think I will tip over into a scream, she scoops out a little of the salve on her forefinger and puts it in my mouth, telling me to swallow. A hot flannel is wrapped about my neck and chest. I am covered up with heavy quilts and ordered to sweat, which I do—promptly.

Later I throw up, and my mother says, “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?”

Black mothers

Mrs McTeer's

My mother's voice drones on. She is not talking to me. She is talking to the puke, but she is calling it my name: Claudia. She wipes it up as best she can and puts a scratchy towel over the large wet place. I lie down again. The rags have fallen from the window crack, and the air is cold. I dare not call her back and am reluctant to leave my warmth. My mother's anger humiliates me; her words chafe my cheeks, and I am crying. I do not know that she is not angry at me, but at my sickness. I believe she despises my weakness for letting the sickness "take holt." By and by I will not get sick; I will refuse to. But for now I am crying. I know I am making more snot, but I can't stop.

But was it really like that? As painful as I remember? Only mildly. Or rather, it was a productive and fructifying pain. Love, thick and dark as Alaga syrup, eased up into that cracked window. I could smell it—taste it—sweet, musty, with an edge of wintergreen in its base—everywhere in that house. It stuck, along with my tongue, to the frosted windowpanes. It coated my chest, along with the salve, and when the flannel came undone in my sleep, the clear, sharp curves of air outlined its presence on my throat. And in the night, when my coughing was dry and tough, feet padded into the room, hands repinned the flannel, readjusted the quilt, and rested a moment on my forehead. So when I think of autumn, I think of somebody with hands who does not want me to die.

It was her good fortune to find a permanent job in the home of a well-to-do family whose members were affectionate, appreciative, and generous. She looked at their houses, smelled their linen, touched their silk draperies, and loved all of it. The child's pink nightie, the stacks of white pillow slips edged with embroidery, the sheets with top hems picked out with blue cornflowers. She became what is known as an ideal servant, for such a role filled practically all of her needs. When she bathed the little Fisher girl, it was in a porcelain tub with silvery taps running infinite quantities of hot, clear water. She dried her in fluffy white towels and put her in cuddly night clothes. Then she brushed the yellow hair, enjoying the roll and slip of it between her fingers. No zinc tub, no buckets of stove-heated water, no flaky, stiff, grayish towels washed in a kitchen sink, dried in a dusty backyard, no tangled black puffs of rough wool to comb. Soon she stopped trying to keep her own house. The things she could afford to buy did not last, had no beauty or style, and were absorbed by the dingy storefront. More and more she neglected her house, her children, her man—they were like the afterthoughts one has just before sleep, the early-morning and late-evening edges of her day, the dark edges that made the daily life with the Fishers lighter, more delicate, more lovely. Here she could arrange things, clean things, line things up in neat rows. Here her foot flopped around on deep pile carpets, and there was no uneven sound. Here she found beauty, order, cleanliness, and praise. Mr. Fisher said, "I would rather sell her blueberry cobbler than real estate." She reigned over cupboards stacked high with food that would not be eaten for weeks, even months; she was queen of canned vegetables bought by the case, special fondants and ribbon candy curled up in tiny silver dishes. The creditors and service people who humiliated her

Black mothers

Pauline Breedlove as the perfect mammy

They go to land-grant colleges, normal schools, and learn how to do the white man's work with refinement: home economics to prepare his food; teacher education to instruct black children in obedience; music to soothe the weary master and entertain his blunted soul. Here they learn the rest of the lesson begun in those soft houses with porch swings and pots of bleeding heart: how to behave. The careful development of thrift, patience, high morals, and good manners. In short, how to get rid of the funkiness. The dreadful funkiness of passion, the funkiness of nature, the funkiness of the wide range of human emotions.

Black mothers

Geraldine: blackness as funk

The cat will always know that he is first in her affections. Even after she bears a child. For she does bear a child—easily, and painlessly. But only one. A son. Named Junior.

One such girl from Mobile, or Meridian, or Aiken who did not sweat in her armpits nor between her thighs, who smelled of wood and vanilla, who had made soufflés in the Home Economics Department, moved with her husband, Louis, to Lorain, Ohio. Her name was Geraldine. There she built her nest, ironed shirts, potted bleeding hearts, played with her cat, and birthed Louis Junior.

Geraldine did not allow her baby, Junior, to cry. As long as his needs were physical, she could meet them—comfort and satiety. He was always brushed, bathed, oiled, and shod. Geraldine did not talk to him, coo to him, or indulge him in kissing bouts, but she saw that every other desire was fulfilled. It was not long before the child discovered the difference in his mother's behavior to himself and the cat. As he grew older, he learned how to direct his hatred of his mother to the cat, and spent some happy moments watching it suffer. The cat survived, because Geraldine was seldom away from home, and could effectively soothe the animal when Junior abused him.

they are dissolved in laughter.

Three merry gargoyles. Three merry harridans. Amused by a long-ago time of ignorance. They did not belong to those generations of prostitutes created in novels, with great and generous hearts, dedicated, because of the horror of circumstance, to ameliorating the luckless, barren life of men, taking money incidentally and humbly for their “understanding.” Nor were they from that sensitive breed of young girl, gone wrong at the hands of fate, forced to cultivate an outward brittleness in order to protect her springtime from further shock, but knowing full well she was cut out for better things, and could make the right man happy. Neither were they the sloppy, inadequate whores who, unable to make a living at it alone, turn to drug consumption and traffic or pimps to help complete their scheme of self-destruction, avoiding suicide only to punish the memory of some absent father or to sustain the misery of some silent mother. Except for Marie’s fabled love for Dewey Prince, these women hated men, all men, without shame, apology, or discrimination. They abused their visitors with a scorn grown mechanical from use. Black men, white men, Puerto Ricans, Mexicans, Jews, Poles, whatever—all were inadequate and weak, all came under their jaundiced eyes and were the recipients of their disinterested wrath. They took delight in cheating them. On one occasion the town well knew, they lured a Jew up the stairs, pounced on him, all three, held him up by the heels, shook everything out of his pants pockets, and threw him out of the window.

Black mothers

China, Poland, and
the Maginot Line

They were not young girls in whores’ clothing, or whores regretting their loss of innocence. They were whores in whores’ clothing, whores who had never been young and had no word for innocence. With Pecola they were as free as they were with each other. Marie concocted stories for her because she was a child, but the stories were breezy and rough. If Pecola had announced her intention to live the life they did, they would not have tried to dissuade her or voiced any alarm.

The Breedloves' house
not a home
Ignored by the
community

*HEREISTHEHOUSEITISGREENANDWH
ITEITHASAREDDOORITISVERYPRETT
YITISVERYPRETTYPRETTYPRETTY*

There is an abandoned store on the southeast corner of Broadway and Thirty-fifth Street in Lorain, Ohio. It does not recede into its background of leaden sky, nor harmonize with the gray frame houses and black telephone poles around it. Rather, it foists itself on the eye of the passerby in a manner that is both irritating and melancholy. Visitors who drive to this tiny town wonder why it has not been torn down, while pedestrians, who are residents of the neighborhood, simply look away when they pass it.

HEREISTHEFAMILYMOTHERFATHER
DICKANDJANETHEYLIVEINTHEGREE
NANDWHITEHOUSHEYAREVERYH

The Breedloves did not live in a storefront because they were having temporary difficulty adjusting to the cutbacks at the plant. They lived there because they were poor and black, and they stayed there because they believed they were ugly. Although their poverty was traditional and stultifying, it was not unique. But their ugliness was unique. No one could have convinced them that they were not relentlessly and aggressively ugly. Except for the father, Cholly, whose ugliness (the result of despair, dissipation, and violence directed toward petty things and weak people) was behavior, the rest of the family—Mrs. Breedlove, Sammy Breedlove, and Pecola Breedlove—wore their ugliness, put it on, so to speak, although it did not belong to them. The eyes, the small eyes set closely together under narrow foreheads. The low, irregular hairlines, which seemed even more irregular in contrast to the straight, heavy eyebrows which nearly met. Keen but crooked noses, with insolent nostrils. They

had high cheekbones, and their ears turned forward. Shapely lips which called attention not to themselves but to the rest of the face. You looked at them and wondered why they were so ugly; you looked closely and could not find the source. Then you realized that it came from conviction, their conviction. It was as though some mysterious all-knowing master had given each one a cloak of ugliness to wear, and they had each accepted it without question. The master had said, "You are ugly people." They had looked about themselves and saw nothing to contradict the statement; saw, in fact, support for it leaning at them from every billboard, every movie, every glance. "Yes," they had said. "You are right." And they took the ugliness in their hands, threw it as a mantle over them, and went about the world with it. Dealing with it each according to his way. Mrs. Breedlove handled hers as an actor does a prop: for the articulation of character, for support of a role she frequently imagined was hers—martyrdom. Sammy used his as a weapon to cause others pain. He adjusted his behavior to it, chose his companions on the basis of it: people who could be fascinated, even intimidated by it. And Pecola. 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.

The Power of Whiteness

Frieda brought her four graham crackers on a saucer and some milk in a blue-and-white Shirley Temple cup. She was a long time with the milk, and gazed fondly at the silhouette of Shirley Temple's dimpled face. Frieda and she had a loving conversation about how cu-ute Shirley Temple was. I couldn't join them in their adoration because I hated Shirley. Not because she was cute, but because she danced with Bojangles, who was *my* friend, *my* uncle, *my* daddy, and who ought to have been soft-shoeing it and

chuckling with me. Instead he was enjoying, sharing, giving a lovely dance thing with one of those little white girls whose socks never slid down under their heels. So I said, "I like Jane Withers."

They gave me a puzzled look, decided I was incomprehensible, and continued their reminiscing about old squint-eyed Shirley.

Younger than both Frieda and Pecola, I had not yet arrived at the turning point in the development of my psyche which would allow me to love her. What I felt at that time was unsullied hatred. But before that I had felt a stranger, more frightening thing than hatred for all the Shirley Temples of the world.



Born on April 23, 1928, in Santa Monica, California, Shirley Temple was a leading child film actress during the Great Depression. President Franklin D. Roosevelt called Temple "Little Miss Miracle" for raising the public's morale during times of economic hardship, even going so far as to say, "As long as our country has Shirley Temple, we will be all right."

Shirley Temple performed with Bill "Bojangles" Robinson in the 1935 movie *The Little Colonel*. They were the first interracial couple to dance onscreen.







<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3X4A9ml5bxw&t=31s>

Eating Whiteness/Internalizing Whiteness

“Three quarts of milk. That’s what was *in* that icebox yesterday. Three whole quarts. Now they ain’t none. Not a drop. I don’t mind folks coming in and getting what they want, but three

The “folks” my mother was referring to was Pecola. The three of us, Pecola, Frieda, and I, listened to her downstairs in the kitchen fussing about the amount of milk Pecola had drunk. We knew she was fond of the Shirley Temple cup and took every opportunity to drink milk out of it just to handle and see sweet Shirley’s face. My mother knew that Frieda and I hated milk and assumed Pecola drank it out of greediness. It was certainly not for us to “dispute” her. We didn’t initiate talk with grown-ups; we answered their questions.

Ashamed of the insults that were being heaped on our friend, we just sat there: I picked toe jam, Frieda cleaned her fingernails with her teeth, and Pecola finger-traced some scars on her knee—her head cocked to one side. My mother’s fussing soliloquies

After a long while she spoke very softly. “Is it true that I can have a baby now?”

“Sure,” said Frieda drowsily. “Sure you can.”

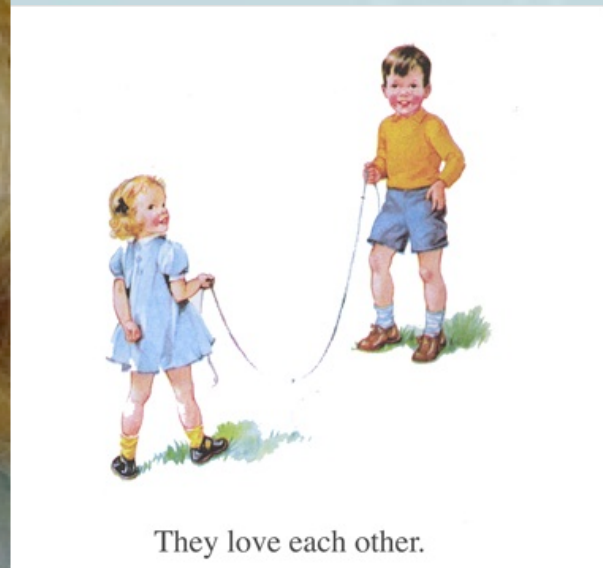
“But...how?” Her voice was hollow with wonder.

“Oh,” said Frieda, “somebody has to love you.”

“Oh.”

There was a long pause in which Pecola and I thought this over. It would involve, I supposed, “my man,” who, before leaving me, would love me. But there weren’t any babies in the songs my mother sang. Maybe that’s why the women were sad: the men left before they could make a baby.

Then Pecola asked a question that had never entered my mind. “How do you do that? I mean, how do you get somebody to love you?” But Frieda was asleep. And I didn’t know.



It had begun with Christmas and the gift of dolls. The big, the special, the loving gift was always a big, blue-eyed Baby Doll. From the clucking sounds of adults I knew that the doll represented what they thought was my fondest wish. I was bemused with the thing itself, and the way it looked. What was I supposed to do with it? Pretend I was its mother? I had no interest in babies or the concept of motherhood. I was interested only in humans my own age and size, and could not generate any enthusiasm at the prospect of being a mother. Motherhood was old age, and other remote possibilities. I learned quickly, however, what I was expected to do with the doll: rock it, fabricate storied situations around it, even sleep with it. Picture books were full of little girls sleeping with their dolls. Raggedy Ann dolls usually, but they were out of the question. I was physically revolted by and secretly frightened of those round moronic eyes, the pancake face, and orangeworms hair.

The other dolls, which were supposed to bring me great pleasure, succeeded in doing quite the opposite. When I took it to bed, its hard unyielding limbs resisted my flesh—the tapered fingertips on those dimpled hands scratched. If, in sleep, I turned, the bone-cold head collided with my own. It was a most uncomfortable, patently aggressive sleeping companion. To hold it was no more rewarding. The starched gauze or lace on the cotton dress irritated

Dolls and the lack of representation

any embrace. I had only one desire: to dismember it. To see of what it was made, to discover the dearness, to find the beauty, the desirability that had escaped me, but apparently only me. Adults, older girls, shops, magazines, newspapers, window signs—all the world had agreed that a blue-eyed, yellow-haired, pink-skinned doll was what every girl child treasured. “Here,” they said, “this is beautiful, and if you are on this day ‘worthy’ you may have it.” I fingered the face, wondering at the single-stroke eyebrows; picked at the pearly teeth stuck like two piano keys between red bowline lips. Traced the turned-up nose, poked the glassy blue eyeballs, twisted the yellow hair. I could not love it. But I could examine it to see what it was that all the world said was lovable. Break off the tiny fingers, bend the flat feet, loosen the hair, twist the head around, and the thing made one sound—a sound they said was the sweet and plaintive cry “Mama,” but which sounded to me like the bleat of a dying lamb, or, more precisely, our icebox door opening on rusty hinges in July. Remove the cold and stupid eyeball, it would bleat still, “Ahhhhhh,” take off the head, shake out the sawdust, crack the back against the brass bed rail, it would bleat still. The gauze back would split, and I could see the disk with six holes, the secret of the sound. A mere metal roundness.

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?”

How strong was their outrage. Tears threatened to erase the aloofness of their authority. The emotion of years of unfulfilled longing preened in their voices. I did not know why I destroyed those dolls. But I did know that nobody ever asked me what I wanted for Christmas. 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, or to possess any object. I wanted rather to feel something on Christmas day. The real question would have been, “Dear Claudia,

what experience would you like on Christmas?” I could have spoken up, “I want to sit on the low stool in Big Mama’s kitchen with my lap full of lilacs and listen to Big Papa play his violin for me alone.” The lowness of the stool made for my body, the security and warmth of Big Mama’s kitchen, the smell of the lilacs, the sound of the music, and, since it would be good to have all of my senses engaged, the taste of a peach, perhaps, afterward.

I destroyed white baby dolls.

But the dismembering of dolls was not the true horror. The truly horrifying thing was the transference of the same impulses to little white girls. The indifference with which I could have axed them was shaken only by my desire to do so. To discover what eluded me: the secret of the magic they weaved on others. What made people look at them and say, “Awwwww,” but not for me? The eye slide of black women as they approached them on the street, and the possessive gentleness of their touch as they handled them.

If I pinched them, their eyes—unlike the crazed glint of the baby doll’s eyes—would fold in pain, and their cry would not be the sound of an icebox door, but a fascinating cry of pain. When I learned how repulsive this disinterested violence was, that it was repulsive because it was disinterested, my shame floundered about for refuge. The best hiding place was love. Thus the conversion from pristine sadism to fabricated hatred, to fraudulent love. It was a small step to Shirley Temple. I learned much later to worship her, just as I learned to delight in cleanliness, knowing, even as I learned, that the change was adjustment without improvement.

Denaturalizing white standards:
Worshipping whiteness as a learned practice

The Clarks' Doll Test (1940s)



In the 1940s, psychologists Kenneth and Mamie Clark conducted a series of experiments known colloquially as “the doll tests” to study the psychological effects of segregation on African-American children. They used four dolls, identical except for color, to test children’s racial perceptions. Their subjects, children between the ages of three to seven, were asked to identify both the race of the dolls and which color doll they prefer. A majority of the children preferred the white doll and assigned positive characteristics to it. The Clarks concluded that “prejudice, discrimination, and segregation” created a feeling of inferiority among African-American children and damaged their self-esteem. Dr. K. Clark recalled: "The Doll Test was an attempt on the part of my wife and me to study the development of the sense of self-esteem in children. We worked with Negro children—I'll call black children—to see the extent to which their color, their sense of their own race and status, influenced their judgment about themselves, self-esteem. We've now—this research, by the way, was done long before we had any notion that the NAACP or that the public officials would be concerned with our results. In fact, we did the study fourteen years before *Brown* (vs Board of Education), and the lawyers of the NAACP learned about it and came and asked us if we thought it was relevant to what they were planning to do in terms of the *Brown* decision cases."

The Clark doll tests, a series of experiments regarded since the 1940s as evidence that black children were taught to ascribe negative attributes to their own race, actually reflect media portrayals of black dolls rather than psychological damage, a Harvard professor argued Wednesday.

Robin Bernstein, a professor of African and African American studies and women, gender, and sexuality, presented a critique of the historic study at a W.E.B. DuBois Institute Colloquium.

<https://www.thecrimson.com/article/2011/12/1/clar-k-dolls-research-media/>

The Clark doll tests were a series of experiments conducted by black psychologists Kenneth B. and Mamie P. Clark to study children's attitudes about race. Black children in the study were given white and black dolls and then asked which dolls were "good," "bad," "nice," and "mean." The majority of children associated positive qualities with the white dolls and negative qualities with the black ones.

Bernstein said Wednesday that the Clarks' tests were scientifically flawed. But she said that the tests did reflect a negative portrayal of black dolls in American theater and media that dates back to the Civil War era.

Bernstein studied the history of black dolls and found that they were often featured in theatrical scenes of servitude and comic violence. Black bodies, often the subject of this violence, were portrayed as unfeeling to pain.

These representations sent the message to children that they should play with white and black dolls very differently, Bernstein said.

White children in the 19th and 20th century commonly beat, hanged, dismembered, and buried their black dolls, but they were punished for committing the same atrocities against white dolls, which their elders expected them to cherish rather than abuse.

Thus, Bernstein said, the choices made by the subjects of the Clark doll tests was not necessarily an indication of black self-hatred. Instead, it was a cultural choice between two different toys—one that was to be loved and one that was to be physically harassed, as exemplified in performance and popular media.

According to Bernstein, this argument “redeems the Clarks’ child subjects by offering a new understanding of them not as psychologically damaged dupes, but instead as agential experts in children’s culture.”

Attendees said they were impressed by Bernstein’s ability to shift the evaluation of the Clarks’ experiment from a scientific perspective to a cultural one.

Try as she might, she could never get her eyes to disappear. So what was the point? They were everything. Everything was there, in them. All of those pictures, all of those faces. She had long ago given up the idea of running away to see new pictures, new faces, as Sammy had so often done. He never took her, and he never thought about his going ahead of time, so it was never planned. It wouldn't have worked anyway. As long as she looked the way she did, as long as she was ugly, she would have to stay with these people. Somehow she belonged to them. 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. She was the only member of her class who sat alone at a double desk. The first letter of her last name forced her to sit in the front of the room always. But what about Marie Appolonaire? Marie was in front of her, but she shared a desk with Luke Angelino. Her teachers had always treated her this way. They tried never to glance at her, and called on her only when everyone was required to respond. She also knew that when one of the girls at school wanted to be particularly insulting to a boy, or wanted to get an immediate response from him, she could say, "Bobby loves Pecola Breedlove! Bobby loves Pecola Breedlove!" and never fail to get peals of laughter from those in earshot, and mock anger from the accused.

Microaggressions as a major vehicle for racism

Blear-dropped. Slowly, like Indian summer moving imperceptibly toward fall, he looks toward her. Somewhere between retina and object, between vision and view, his eyes draw back, hesitate, and hover. At some fixed point in time and space he senses that he need not waste the effort of a glance. He does not see her, because for him there is nothing to see. How

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

She points her finger at the Mary Janes—a little black shaft of finger, its tip pressed on the display window. The quietly inoffensive assertion of a black child's attempt to communicate with a white adult.

by the familiar and therefore loved images. The dandelions at the base of the telephone pole. Why, she wonders, do people call them weeds? She thought they were pretty. But grown-ups say, “Miss Dunion keeps her yard so nice. Not a dandelion anywhere.”

Pecola unfolds her fist, showing the three pennies. He scoots three Mary Janes toward her—three yellow rectangles in each packet. She holds the money toward him. He hesitates, not wanting to touch her hand. She does not know how to move the finger of her right hand from the display counter or how to get the coins out of her left hand. Finally he reaches over and takes the pennies from her hand. His nails graze her damp palm.

Outside, Pecola feels the inexplicable shame ebb.

Dandelions. A dart of affection leaps out from her to them. But they do not look at her and do not send love back. She thinks, “They *are* ugly. They *are* weeds.” Preoccupied with that revelation, she trips on the sidewalk crack. Anger stirs and wakes in her; it opens its mouth, and like a hot-mouthed puppy, laps up the dredges of her shame.

Dandelions:

beauty is not something inherent in the object, but rather a matter of individual perception. Yet individual perception is influenced by dominant views. Pecola, after the racist episode at the grocery store, internalizes the general view that they are ugly and worthless

Examples of Racial Microaggressions

Theme	Microaggression	Message
<i>Alien in own land</i> When Asian Americans and Latino Americans are assumed to be foreign-born	"Where are you from?" "Where were you born?" "You speak good English." A person asking an Asian American to teach them words in their native language.	You are not American You are a foreigner
<i>Ascription of Intelligence</i> Assigning intelligence to a person of color on the basis of their race.	"You are a credit to your race." "You are so articulate." Asking an Asian person to help with a Math or Science problem.	People of color are generally not as intelligent as Whites. It is unusual for someone of your race to be intelligent. All Asians are intelligent and good in Math / Sciences.
<i>Color Blindness</i> Statements that indicate that a White person does not want to acknowledge race	"When I look at you, I don't see color." "America is a melting pot." "There is only one race, the human race."	Denying a person of color's racial / ethnic experiences. Assimilate / acculturate to the dominant culture. Denying the individual as a racial / cultural being.
<i>Criminality – assumption of criminal status</i> A person of color is presumed to be dangerous, criminal, or deviant on the basis of their race.	A White man or woman clutching their purse or checking their wallet as a Black or Latino approaches or passes. A store owner following a customer of color around the store. A White person waits to ride the next elevator when a person of color is on it.	You are a criminal. You are going to steal / You are poor / You do not belong / You are dangerous.
<i>Denial of individual racism</i> A statement made when Whites deny their racial biases	"I'm not a racist. I have several Black friends." "As a woman, I know what you go through as a racial minority."	I am immune to races because I have friends of color. Your racial oppression is no different than my gender oppression. I can't be a racist. I'm like you.
<i>Myth of meritocracy</i> Statements which assert that race does not play a role in life successes	"I believe the most qualified person should get the job." "Everyone can succeed in this society, if they work hard enough."	People of color are given extra unfair benefits because of their race. People of color are lazy and / or incompetent and need to work harder.
<i>Pathologizing cultural values / communication styles</i> The notion that the values and communication styles of the dominant / White culture are ideal	Asking a Black person: "Why do you have to be so loud / animated? Just calm down." To an Asian or Latino person: Why are you so quiet? We want to know what you think. Be more verbal." Speak up more." Dismissing an individual who brings up race / culture in work / school setting.	Assimilate to dominant culture. Leave your cultural baggage outside.

Microaggressions are more than just insults, insensitive comments, or generalized jerky behavior. They're something very specific: the kinds of remarks, questions, or actions that are painful because they have to do with a person's membership in a group that's discriminated against or subject to stereotypes. And a key part of what makes them so disconcerting is that they happen casually, frequently, and often without any harm intended, in everyday life.

<https://www.vox.com/2015/2/16/8031073/what-are-microaggressions>

Wing, Capodilupo, Torino, Bucceri, Holder, Nadal, Esquilin (2007). «Racial Microaggressions in Everyday Life: Implications for Clinical Practice.» *American Psychologist*, 62, 4, 271-286

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. Her teeth were good, and at least her nose was not big and flat like some of those who were thought so cute. 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 mustn't do bad things in front of those pretty eyes."

Getting blue eyes is for Pecola a way to change the world around her, to erase ugliness from her family

Pretty eyes. Pretty blue eyes. Big blue pretty eyes.

Run, Jip, run. Jip runs, Alice runs. Alice has blue eyes.

Jerry has blue eyes. Jerry runs. Alice runs. They run

with their blue eyes. Four blue eyes. Four pretty

blue eyes. Blue-sky eyes. Blue-like Mrs. Forrest's

blue blouse eyes. Morning-glory-blue-eyes.

Alice-and-Jerry-blue-storybook-eyes.

Each night, without fail, she prayed for blue eyes. Fervently, for a year she had prayed. Although somewhat discouraged, she was not without hope. To have something as wonderful as that happen would take a long, long time.

Thrown, in this way, into the binding conviction that only a miracle could relieve her, she would never know her beauty. She would see only what there was to see: the eyes of other people.

While Frieda and I clucked on about the near fight, Maureen, suddenly animated, put her velvet-sleeved arm through Pecola's and began to behave as though they were the closest of friends.

"I just moved here. My name is Maureen Peal. What's yours?"

"Pecola."

"Pecola? Wasn't that the name of the girl in *Imitation of Life*?"

"I don't know. What is that?"

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

"Oh." Pecola's voice was no more than a sigh.

Pecola's name: The power of movies in *The Bluest Eye*

Pauline's position as a spectator / decoder: regressive identification (bell hooks); acceptance

loneliness was different. Then she stopped staring at the green chairs, at the delivery truck; she went to the movies instead. There in the dark her memory was refreshed, and she succumbed to her earlier dreams. Along with the idea of romantic love, she was introduced to another—physical beauty. Probably the most destructive ideas in the history of human thought. Both originated in envy, thrived in insecurity, and ended in disillusion. In equating physical beauty with virtue, she stripped her mind, bound it, and collected self-contempt by the heap. She forgot lust and simple caring for. She regarded love as possessive mating, and romance as the goal of the spirit. It would be for her a well-spring from which she would draw the most destructive emotions, deceiving the lover and seeking to imprison the beloved, curtailing freedom in every way.

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. There at last were the darkened woods, the lonely roads,

'I WANT TO BE WHITE LIKE I LOOK —

Live a white
girl's life!"



CLAUDETTE

Colbert

in

Fannie Hurst's
GREAT NOVEL

IMITATION *of* LIFE

with LOUISE BEAVERS

FREDI WASHINGTON · WARREN WILLIAM · NED SPARKS
ROCHELLE HUDSON · FRANKLYN PANGBORN

A JOHN W. STARR production



GO AWAY,
YOU'RE NOT MY MOTHER.

I'm White!

CLAUDETTE

Colbert
Jennie Hodulf's
GREAT NOVEL

IMITATION
of LIFE

LOUISE BEAVERS

FRED WASHINGTON · WARREN WILLIAM · NED SPARKS
ROCHELLE HUDSON · FRANKLYN PANGBORN



A JOHN H. ELLIOTT production

“The onliest time I be happy seem like was when I was in the picture show. Every time I got, I went. I’d go early, before the show started. They’d cut off the lights, and everything be black. Then the screen would light up, and I’d move right on in them pictures. White men taking such good care of they women, and they all dressed up in big clean houses with the bathtubs right in the same room with the toilet. Them pictures gave me a lot of pleasure, but it made coming home hard, and looking at Cholly hard. I don’t know. I ’member one time I went to see Clark Gable and Jean Harlow. I fixed my hair up like I’d seen hers on a magazine. A part on the side, with one little curl on my forehead. It looked just like her. Well, almost just like. Anyway, I sat in that show with my hair done up that way and had a good time. I thought I’d see it through to the end again, and I got up to get me some candy. I was sitting back in my seat, and I taken a big bite of that candy, and it pulled a tooth right out of my mouth. I could of cried. I had good teeth, not a rotten one in my head. I don’t believe I ever did get over that. There I was, five months pregnant, trying to look like Jean Harlow, and a front tooth gone. Everything went then. Look like I just didn’t care no more after that. I let my hair go back, plaited it up, and settled down to just being ugly. I still went to the pictures, though, but the meanness got worse. I wanted

bowel movement. I hurt just like them white women. Just 'cause I wasn't hooping and hollering before didn't mean I wasn't feeling pain. What'd they think? That just 'cause I knowed how to have a baby with no fuss that my behind wasn't pulling and aching like theirs? Besides, that doctor don't know what he talking about. He must never seed no mare foal. Who say they don't have no pain? Just 'cause she don't cry? 'Cause she can't say it, they think it ain't there? If they looks in her eyes and see them eyeballs lolling back, see the sorrowful look, they'd know. Anyways, the baby come. Big old healthy thing. She looked different from what I thought. Reckon I talked to it so much before I conjured up a mind's eye view of it. So when I seed it, it was like looking at a picture of your mama when she was a girl. You knows who she is, but she don't look the same. They give her to me for a nursing, and she liked to pull my nipple off right away. She caught on fast. Not like Sammy, he was

the hardest child to feed. But Pecola look like she knowed right off what to do. A right smart baby she was. I used to like to watch her. You know they makes them greedy sounds. Eyes all soft and wet. A cross between a puppy and a dying man. But I knowed she was ugly. Head full of pretty hair, but Lord she was ugly."

wrist so he couldn't move it. He examined her then with his fingers, and she kissed his face and mouth. Cholly found her muscadine-lipped mouth distracting. Darlene released his head, shifted her body, and pulled down her pants. After some trouble with the buttons, Cholly dropped his pants down to his knees. Their bodies began to make sense to him, and it was not as difficult as he had thought it would be. She moaned a little, but the excitement collecting inside him made him close his eyes and regard her moans as no more than pine sighs over his head. Just as he felt an explosion threaten, Darlene froze and cried out. He thought he had hurt her, but when he looked at her face, she was staring wildly at something over his shoulder. He jerked around.

There stood two white men. One with a spirit lamp, the other with a flashlight. There was no mistake about their being white; he could smell it. Cholly jumped, trying to kneel, stand, and get his pants up all in one motion. The men had long guns.

“Hee hee hee heeeee.” The snicker was a long asthmatic cough.

The other raced the flashlight all over Cholly and Darlene.

Cholly's fall into
abjection

“Get on wid it, nigger,” said the flashlight one.

“Sir?” said Cholly, trying to find a buttonhole.

“I said, get on wid it. An’ make it good, nigger, make it good.”

There was no place for Cholly’s eyes to go. They slid about furtively searching for shelter, while his body remained paralyzed. The flashlight man lifted his gun down from his shoulder, and Cholly heard the clop of metal. He dropped back to his knees. Darlene had her head averted, her eyes staring out of the lamplight into the surrounding darkness and looking almost unconcerned, as though they had no part in the drama taking place around them. With a violence born of total helplessness, he pulled her dress up, lowered his trousers and underwear.

“Hee hee hee hee heeeeee.”

Darlene put her hands over her face as Cholly began to simulate what had gone on before. He could do no more than make-believe. The flashlight made a moon on his behind.

“Hee hee hee hee heeee.”

“Come on, coon. Faster. You ain’t doing nothing for her.”

“Hee hee hee hee heeee.”

Cholly, moving faster, looked at Darlene. He hated her.

Bay Boy, Woodrow Cain, Buddy Wilson, Junie Bug—like a necklace of semiprecious stones they surrounded her. Heady with the smell of their own musk, thrilled by the easy power of a majority, they gaily harassed her.

“Black e mo. Black e mo. Yadaddsleeksnekked. Black e mo black e mo ya dadd sleeps nekked. Black e mo...”

They had extemporized a verse made up of two insults about matters over which the victim had no control: the color of her skin and speculations on the sleeping habits of an adult, wildly fitting in its incoherence. That they themselves were black, or that their own father had similarly relaxed habits was irrelevant. It was their contempt for their own blackness that gave the first insult its teeth. They seemed to have taken all of their smoothly cultivated ignorance, their exquisitely learned self-hatred, their elaborately designed hopelessness and sucked it all up into a fiery cone of scorn that had burned for ages in the hollows of their minds—cooled—and spilled over lips of outrage, consuming whatever was in its path. They danced a macabre ballet around the victim, whom, for their own sake, they were prepared to sacrifice to the flaming pit.

We walked quickly at first, and then slower, pausing every now and then to fasten garters, tie shoelaces, scratch, or examine old scars. We were sinking under the wisdom, accuracy, and relevance of Maureen's last words. 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. Dolls we could destroy, but we could not destroy the honey voices of parents and aunts, the obedience in the eyes of our peers, the slippery light in the eyes of our teachers when they encountered the Maureen Peals of the world. 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. We felt comfortable in our skins, enjoyed the news that our senses released to us, admired our dirt, cultivated our scars, and could not comprehend this unworthiness. Jealousy we understood and thought natural—a desire to have what somebody else had; but envy was a strange, new feeling for us. And all the time we knew that Maureen Peal was not the Enemy and not worthy of such intense hatred. The *Thing* to fear was the *Thing* that made *her* beautiful, and not us.

Geraldine, Louis, Junior, and the cat lived next to the playground of Washington Irving School. Junior considered the playground his own, and the schoolchildren coveted his freedom to sleep late, go home for lunch, and dominate the playground after school. He hated to see the swings, slides, monkey bars, and seesaws empty and tried to get kids to stick around as long as possible. White kids; his mother did not like him to play with niggers. She had explained to him the difference between colored people and niggers. They were easily identifiable. Colored people were neat and quiet; niggers were dirty and loud. He belonged to the former group: he wore white shirts and blue trousers; his hair was cut as close to his scalp as possible to avoid any suggestion of wool, the part was etched into his hair by the barber. In winter his mother put Jergens Lotion on his face to keep the skin from becoming ashen. Even though he was light-skinned, it was possible to ash. The line between colored and nigger was not always clear; subtle and telltale signs threatened to erode it, and the watch had to be constant.

In *The Bluest Eye*, Toni Morrison challenges America's complacent belief in its benevolent self-image through representations of children who experience race, class, and gender oppressions. She is not the first African American author to use images of childhood to undermine cherished conceptions of national identity. In his 1845 slave narrative, Frederick Douglass condemns American democracy and Christianity through detailed accounts of his own childhood as a slave. Similarly, Pauline Hopkins confronts the ideal of an all-white American nation by placing the image of a black baby next to an American flag on the cover of her October 1900 issue of *The Colored American Magazine*. Morrison, however, centralizes childhood more deeply than her predecessors. Anticipating the currently emerging field in childhood studies, Morrison puts the concept of childhood itself under scrutiny. In *The Bluest Eye*, a child provides the primary voice through which the reader hears, the primary lens through which the reader sees, and the object of the reader's gaze.

Claudia's consciousness. Throughout these analyses, I argue that Morrison shows us the counterhegemonic potential of reimagining childhood in the context of history. She portrays children as victims, activists, recorders, and even oppressors—all as a way of demythologizing the "innocent" past.

Debra T. Werrlein, "Not so Fast, Dick and Jane: Reimagining Childhood and Nation in *The Bluest Eye*," MELUS, Winter, 2005

The Bluest Eye explores the contrast between oppressed local culture and innocent national ideal through the friction that erupts between Pecola's life and 1940s models of childhood. Morrison first locates such models in pedagogy by subversively appropriating William Elson and William Gray's nationally recognized Dick and Jane stories. Many of Morrison's critics have commented on her reference to the Elson-Gray primers. Mark Ledbetter explains their importance in literary terms, arguing that they establish a victimless "masterplot" for the novel (28). Nancy Backes points out that the primers offer an ideal that does not exist for anyone (even white middle-class children) (47), while Andrea O'Reilly argues that the books instruct pupils in the ideology of the family (87). According to Gurleen Grewal, primers prime, or make ready, and Morrison shows how they prime black subjects (125). The thread that connects these observations: they all point to ways that the primers contribute to a national ideology of innocence. According to some educators, schools teach more than math, science, and literacy. They reproduce existing class structures, reinforce dominant ideologies, and bolster the political power of the state in capitalism (Aronowitz and Giroux 65). Similarly, Dick and Jane primers not only posit the literary "masterplot" in *The Bluest Eye*; as textbooks in America's public schools, Morrison suggests they posit a *national* masterplot that defines Americanness within the parameters of innocent white middle-class childhood.

The American Bildungsroman

Sarah Graham

An adolescent on the journey to maturity is a perfect metaphor for the United States: young, adventurous and optimistic.¹ This accounts for the enormous popularity of the Bildungsroman, with its central motif of personal transformation, amongst American writers and readers.² Cherished examples of the genre, such as Horatio Alger's *Ragged Dick* (1868) and Louisa May Alcott's *Little Women* (1868/69), affirm the nation's founding promises through the achievements of their protagonists. The emphasis on 'life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness' established by the Declaration of Independence (1776) and the image of the USA as the 'land of the free and the home of the brave', enshrined in its national anthem, 'The Star-Spangled Banner' (1814), are embodied in protagonists who overcome obstacles to achieve triumphant self-realisation.³ Their victories affirm the validity of the 'American Dream', which holds that all citizens can improve their circumstances, however deprived their origin, and a sense of connection to the nation is reinforced by the Pledge of Allegiance (1892).⁴ Frequently reiterated by politicians – in 2009, President Barack Obama asserted, 'We remain a young nation ... Our capacity remains undiminished' – entrenched beliefs such as these inform many classic American Bildungsromane.⁵

America has a particularly resilient cultural attachment to the idea of youth, viewing itself as a mythic nation of youthfulness formed out of the rejection of the Old World 'parent' culture and creating itself anew. Ponce de Leon's search for the Fountain of Youth brought him from Europe to Florida to attain immortality, just as, later, George Washington's youthful energy would 'cut down' his father's English cherry tree in a symbolic myth of honest, destructive severance of the fresh New World from the stale Old (parental) World (see Chapters 5 and 6). Amid such embedded cultural creation myths, America has remained fascinated by constantly reinventing representative narratives of youth and recasting them in the form demanded by the dominant discourse or cultural mood of the age. In turn, however, other 'excluded' groups, such as women, Chicano/as or African-Americans, intervene to produce and circulate their own stories of youth which might run counter to the mainstream, but which utilize certain patterns in youth representation to promote particular notions of community or serve other political purposes. Thus youth signifies desire, hope and promise as well as fear and suspicion as it is constructed in the discourses of the adult world.

Neil Campbell ,
"Introduction,"
in Campbell,
ed., *American
Youth Cultures*,
2000

YOUTH/HISTORY/REPRESENTATION

America's historical formation has always drawn special connections between itself as a nation and the concept of newness and youthfulness (see [Chapter 1](#)):

We are young, vigorous, unique; 'on the cutting edge of history'. Since we are new, what is young, or vigorous, or unique is good to use *prima facie*... All people, everywhere, value youth...but America is the 'fountain of youth'.

(Robertson 1980:348)

This metaphorical language emphasises a perception of the New World as a place of renewal, literally a rebirth in which the energy of childhood and of youthfulness represents the chance to begin again and undo the corruptions of the Old World. 'Americans sought their lost innocence increasingly in their children. A psychic primitivism of youth replaced an accompanied geographical and cultural primitivism' (Sanford 1961:112). The idea of 'psychic primitivism' means that adult-America endowed its children with the hopes of a new future, for they were untarnished and could develop society from the struggles of their parents who had been touched by the corruptions of the Old World. The investment and the vision were thrust upon the youthful future. This paradigm relates to the view of the Old World as a 'parent culture' which had grown authoritarian in its power, persecuting and alienating certain groups within it and the rebellious 'children' had to oppose them in a classical confrontation between the past and the energetic, new future. To follow blindly the footsteps of past

Likewise, despite their emphasis on historical figures and events, the primers in general never allude to events such as conquest, slavery, immigration, or exclusion. In fact, beyond the occasional appearance of a “savage” Indian, they never feature nonwhite Americans. The Dick and Jane books in particular exist almost entirely outside of history—as if no thing and no time exists beyond the suburban present. They therefore treat American childhood as an abstraction that excludes all but white middle-class children. Given the emphasis on citizenship and Americanness, Dick and Jane inhabit what Lauren Berlant would call the national bodies of “abstract citizenship.” Through the abstraction of citizenship, she argues, Americans assume all citizens have access to the Rights of Man, regardless of race, class, and gender differences. In reality, only white male citizens possess these Rights; thus, she explains, the white male body *is* the abstract body (113). Since Jane never complains about her forced domesticity or her subordination to Dick, she lets the privileges of Dick’s innocent world stand for the experience of *all* American childhoods. Reinforcing the abstraction, primers before 1965 deport color, gender, and poverty to “other lands,” implicitly defining such variations as culturally un-American or politically irrelevant. Significantly, Morrison’s allusion to actual pedagogical texts artistically engages the real, concretely marking the centrality of such disavowal in the lives of America’s children while also asking us to consider the ways in which images of “innocent” children are themselves hardly innocuous.

Debra T. Werrlein, “Not so Fast, Dick and Jane: Reimagining Childhood and Nation in *The Bluest Eye*,” MELUS , Winter, 2005

In *The Bluest Eye*, multiple narratives of childhood encompass a broad spectrum of school systems and families that cooperatively perpetuate racial hierarchies. In addition to Pecola's family and school, Morrison offers Geraldine, an upper-class, light-skinned girl whose wealthy family and private education teach her to value lightness over darkness. Furthermore, in Soaphead Church, a "cinnamon-eyed West Indian" who learned young that his family's white supremacy earned them consistent recommendations for study abroad, Morrison evokes a colonial geography that posits global implications for racist education systems. In *The Bluest Eye*, such families and schools produce ideologies of innocence, not innocent children. Surrounded by them, Pecola learns the paradoxical necessity of erasing herself if she hopes to mature into a politically visible subject.