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Article publié le 21 mai 2019.

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1 Published in 1970, *The Bluest Eye* focuses on the racial tensions in the American society in the 1940s. The novel follows the story of a little black girl, Pecola Breedlove who fails to find her place in the white American society she lives in: being by no means protected by her family and finding no support from any other member of her community, she is left to herself in a world where her very existence is rejected.

2 Using the different points of view of the characters, the writer Toni Morrison throws light on how the omnipresence of racism has led coloured, and more particularly black people, to accept their inferior status: this paper aims at explaining how the black characters' silencing is the result of the whites' constant oppression, past and present, which has led them to internalize the idea of white superiority.

3 The black characters in the novel are shown struggling, and sometimes incapable to fight against racism which has become part of

their daily lives, while desperately trying to find a way to survive in a society that systematically rejects them because of the colour of their skin. This normalized racism leads to what Toni Morrison calls "racial self-loathing" in the *Afterword* of her novel (Morrison 1970: 167), as most of them are unable to stand up to the dominant group and are left frustrated, with an extremely damaged self-esteem.

4 This article will focus on the black characters' powerlessness against racism that makes them voiceless. Silence is inherent in the black community: an analysis of its origins will first put highlight the fact that the absence of voice the characters are trapped in has been inherited from their ancestors' past condition as slaves. In a desperate attempt to find a voice in order to survive, the characters are led to re-create the oppressive system they suffer from in their own community by mistreating their weakest members, such as Pecola Breedlove. A close study of the narrative devices used in the novel, however, will show that Toni Morrison's very act of writing is a way to claim the voice(s) stolen by white domination and give it/them back to the ones who have been silenced and empower them.

1. The origins of silence

5 The "Dick and Jane" primer, with which the novel opens, portrays a typical American family of the 1940s:

> Here is the house. It is green and white. It has a red door. It is very pretty. Here is the family. Mother, Father, Dick, and Jane live in the green-and-white house. They are very happy. See Jane. She has a red dress. She wants to play. Who will play with Jane? See the cat. It goes meow-meow. Come and play. Come play with Jane. The kitten will not play. See Mother. Mother is very nice. Mother, will you play with Jane? Mother laughs. Laugh, Mother, laugh. See Father. He is big and strong. Father, will you play with Jane? Father is smiling. Smile, Father, smile. See the dog. Bowwow goes the dog. Do you want to play with Jane? See the dog run. Run, dog, run. Look, look. Here comes a friend. The friend will play with Jane. They will play a good game. Play, Jane, play. (Morrison 1970: 1)

6 Obviously, this primer corresponds to a certain type of family–more precisely, a white American family, living in a pleasant house and

leading a happy life–, and had no intention of depicting every family that could be found in America; in fact, many could not identify with this description. One must note that this primer was commonly found in the public schools in the United States of America at that time: in other words, being taught such an example from their early years, children in the United States insidiously learnt what "the norm" was for an American. Those who did not match this description felt excluded from the society as they were implicitly told that something about them did not correspond to the definition of an American, be it the size of their house, the number of pets they had, or simply their names. What is striking in this representation of a typical upper middle-class American family is the absence of acknowledgement of the existence of black life in America, or rather, the refusal to depict black people when representing the American society. It is quite clear that a text such as this has been written in such a way that black presence is erased while white presence is magnified. The primer perfectly illustrates what Morrison calls the "unspeakable things unspoken", that is: "the ways in which the presence of Afro-Americans has shaped the choices, the language, the structure–the meaning of so much American literature. A search, in other words, for the ghost in the machine." (Morrison 1988: 136) Being no more than ghosts, the black characters are neither given a place nor a voice in this idealized image of America; every element constituting the primer has been chosen in opposition to anything that may have suggested the presence of African-Americans, hence implying that their very existence was not worthy of representation.

7 Morrison uses this primer to highlight the discrepancy between what supposedly represents America, and the harsh reality that her black characters are confronted with (Klotman 1979: 123). The importance of this first confrontation between the whites' portrayal of the life of the average white American and the writer's contrasting depiction of the blacks' lives in that same American society lies in the fact that it is not direct; the blacks are thus not given the possibility to retaliate and defend themselves against this pernicious attack. Black people are exposed from an early age to a partial and subjective representation of the American society they live in and which constantly rejects them. As they grow accustomed to this excluding representation, the blacks progressively adopt the majority's point of view despite them-

selves, unable to call it into question and claim for more recognition: the oppressors' point of view is completely internalized.

8 Throughout the whole novel, Morrison highlights this internalization at every level of the society, from black men to little black girls. For instance, the recurring references to the popular American actresses of the time and the main female characters' admiration for them perfectly illustrate this process. In this passage, the narrator Claudia MacTeer plunges into her memories and relates a discussion between her sister, Frieda, and Pecola Breedlove about their admiration for white American child actress Shirley Temple:

> Frieda brought her four graham crackers on a saucer and some milk in a blue-and-white Shirley Temple cup. She [Pecola] 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. (Morrison 1970: 12-13)

9 Contrary to Claudia, it is quite obvious that Pecola deeply admires Shirley Temple, and loves contemplating her beauty as long as possible: "We knew that [Pecola] 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." (Morrison 1970: 16) More than just drinking milk (which, needless to say, is white), by holding the cup and drinking out of it, Pecola reveals her desire to become as white, and therefore as beautiful, as the young actress. By drinking out of the Shirley Temple cup, Pecola hopes to "swallow its whiteness" (Rosenberg 1987: 441), just as she hopes to become like Mary Jane by eating the Mary Jane candies:

> Each pale yellow wrapper has a picture on it. A picture of little Mary Jane, for whom the candy is named. Smiling white face. Blond hair in gentle disarray, blue eyes looking at her out of a world of clean comfort. The eyes are petulant, mischievous. To Pecola they are simply pretty. She eats the candy, and its sweetness is good. To eat the candy is somehow to eat the eyes, eat Mary Jane. Love Mary Jane. Be Mary Jane. (Morrison 1970: 38)

10 What could be qualified as a pseudo-cannibal act, through the repetition of the verb "eat", both literally and metaphorically illustrates Pecola's internalization of the white standards of beauty: she so earnestly wishes to be like them that she indulges herself in fantasizing her own physical transformation thanks to the ingestion of those candies. The ternary rhythm ("eat Mary Jane. Love Mary Jane. Be Mary Jane") conveys the gradation from the act of eating to the imagined physical transformation of Pecola into this beautiful white girl, underlining at the same time the latter's omnipresence and the disappearance of Pecola's identity. Silence is therefore linked to the notion of the disappearing body: by eating the candies, Pecola not only hopes of making her body disappear, but also of making the gaze of the Other (even Mary Jane's mischievous, blue eyes seem to look at her) through which her blackness is highlighted, disappear. Because she is completely alienated from herself, and because she cannot stand the way the Other, the white, sees her, she resorts to extreme methods to reduce this distance between her and this Other (Michlin 1996: 101), upon whom her very existence depends.

11 The little girl's self-loathing is no surprise as she is very much like her mother, on whom the white standards of beauty have a disastrous impact. Indeed, Pauline Breedlove is so fascinated by Hollywood movies that she tries (and fails) to look like the beautiful white actresses she sees on the screen by imitating their hairstyle: "There I was, five months pregnant, trying to look like Jean Harlow, and a front tooth gone." (Morrison 1970: 96) The ironic situation (a young black woman whose hair is done like Jean Harlow and who has lost her front tooth) highlights the discrepancy between her illusions and the harsh reality that Pauline is forced to face: she will never be as beautiful as the white women. She therefore shuts herself up and "settle[s] down to just being ugly." (Morrison 1970: 96)

12 One must note that Shirley Temple's, Jean Harlow's and candy Mary Jane's blue eyes are no coincidence, especially given the title of the novel. The blue eyes are the eyes through which Pecola and Pauline Breedlove, and most of the other black characters see themselves: in other words, the eyes of the dominant group, symbolized by the color blue, a color that is generally speaking more often found among the Caucasian race than the African one. Silence and the sense of sight are undeniably associated, as it is the white gaze that silences the

black characters. The white gaze does not see Pecola and her humanity, just as the masters did not see their slaves as human beings and bodies but as those domestic things that would belong to any human being (Michlin 1996: 10). When people are denied of their humanity, they are consequently deprived of the very skill that might make them human: the ability to speak. This is what literally happens to Paul D, in *Beloved*, when he could not speak to Sethe's former husband, Halle, because he had been punished by being muzzled like a dog:

> "Did you speak to him? Didn't you say anything to him? Something!"
> "I couldn't, Sethe. I just… couldn't."
> "Why!"
> "I had a bit in my mouth." […]
> He wants to tell me, she thought. He wants me to ask him about what it was like for him–about how offended the tongue is, held down by iron, how the need to spit is so deep you cry for it. […] That wildness that shot up into the eye the moment the lips were yanked back. (Morrison 1987: 69, 71)

13 This extract draws a parallel between the cruel and inhuman treatment the slaves underwent, and the trauma it caused as the slaves witnessed their own deprivation of humanity when being forced to silence.

14 In *The Bluest Eye*, the ill-treatment of the black body is a direct reference to the mistreatment of the black body during slavery. No iron bit is needed to dehumanize the characters: because of "the black community's acceptance of the standards of feminine beauty glamorized by the majority white culture" (Denard 1988: 172), the black body is given no value, thus destroying some characters' self-esteem such as Pecola's and Pauline's, who never get to learn to love themselves and who therefore believe they are truly ugly. But the Breedloves are not the only ones convinced of their own ugliness; even the whole black community is:

> [The Breedloves] lived there because they were poor and black, and they stayed there because they believed they were ugly. […] their ugliness was unique. No one could have convinced them that they were not relentlessly and aggressively ugly. […] 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.' (Morrison 1970: 28)

15 Once again, this "master", as an obvious reference to past slavery to underline the whites' domination, has complete power over the family, who does not even think of calling into question his affirmation. As they fully accept this ugliness of their own that is the result of their approval of the norms of the white-dominated society they live in, they encourage the rest of the community to feel contempt for those who cannot even love themselves. The fact that the Breedloves are incapable of acknowledging the way the dominant group treats them as the origin of their ugliness is a perfect illustration of the process of internalization that has been fully established by the oppressed. Du Bois's complex 'process of double consciousness', which consists in a Black person seeing oneself both through the eyes of the other (i.e. the White's eyes) and through one's own, cannot take place in this case: the family members exclusively see themselves through the eyes of the others. Instead of succeeding in getting rid of the Other's influence on their perception of themselves, the Breedloves are completely absorbed into the Other's gaze. As they find themselves incapable of blaming the ones who have forced them into their condition–the whites–for fear of retaliation or of not being strong enough against their enemies, they fail to face their oppressor and end up blaming themselves. Any direct conflict with the whites is avoided, and the frustration created by the whites' prevalent racism remains contained within the dominated community–the black community.

2. Perversion of the conflicts

16 *The Bluest Eye* stages open conflicts only very rarely; in fact, most of the conflicts in the text do not oppose black characters against white

ones, but rather coloured people against black ones–not to say blacks against other blacks. The following scene, for instance, well illustrates the latter case as Pecola Breedlove is being bullied after school by a group of black boys, who make fun of her and her father Cholly:

> A group of boys was circling and holding at bay a victim, Pecola Breedlove. [...] 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 danced a macabre ballet around the victim, whom, for their own sake, they were prepared to sacrifice to the flaming pit. [...] Pecola edged around the circle crying. She had dropped her notebook, and covered her eyes with her hands. (Morrison 1970: 50)

17 Instead of dealing with open conflicts with the whites, the black boys confront Pecola, another black, which points at the blacks' inability to reject white domination. Trying to resist against the white domination that has been so well established would inevitably lead to the blacks' defeat; but staying passive would lead to self-destruction. The frustration and anger contained in black people result in lashing those very same feelings out at even weaker characters, members of their own community. Black characters dump their own self-hatred on weaker ones so as not to remain the victims and in doing so, get rid of the humiliation they suffer from due to the inferior status attributed to them by the whites. In this excerpt, although the boys are in the exact same social situation as Pecola, making fun of her enables them not to be made fun of. The black boys condemn their own blackness by bullying Pecola because of her black skin ("It was their own blackness that gave the first insult its teeth"), but all the while still save themselves from self-harm. They even adopt the whites' attitude towards the blacks during (and after) slavery, as the scene is a clear reminder of scenes of lynching, when blacks were burnt after having been hanged: by acting as such, they perpetuate the long and silenced history of persecution of African-Americans. Although it is their only way of survival, they at the same time unconsciously maintain the process of self-destruction induced in them by the whites' omnipotence.

18 Throughout the whole text, Morrison portrays several black characters who go from being victims to taking up the role of torturers: this

could be applied to Pecola's parents, who both mistreat the other as well as their children (especially their daughter). The fact that this "latent force of the dominated", as Badiou calls it, is not directed against the dominators is a key element in the empowerment of the dominators (2005: 109). In other words, the perverted conflicts of the blacks fighting against their own community are a way for the majority to maintain their influence over and prevent the minority from becoming empowered. Unable to use their "latent force" against the dominators, the dominated misdirect it against their own people, which strengthens even more their enemies instead of weakening them.

19 Shifting viewpoints, the writer in turn analyzes the processes through which some of the black characters end up mistreating members of their own community. One of the most obvious examples is Cholly Breedlove's first sexual intercourse with a girl named Darlene, during which they were interrupted by two armed white men who threatened to kill them if they did not keep going… under their 'supervision':

> […] 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. […] 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.
>
> 'Get on wid it, nigger,' said the flashlight one.
>
> 'Sir?' said Cholly […].
>
> 'I said, get on wid it. An' make it good, nigger, make it good.'

> […] The flashlight man lifted his gun down from his shoulder, and Cholly heard the clop of metal. He dropped back to his knees. (Morrison 1970: 115-116)

20 Clearly, trying to resist the white men's voyeurism and perversion would have threatened Cholly's life–first, because they had their guns pointed at him, and secondly because as a young black man, he was powerless in front of two white men. Eventually, Cholly repressed his mixed feelings of fear, anger and powerlessness so as to survive: by "dropp[ing] back to his knees", he acknowledges his inferiority and his submission to white supremacy not only in front of the white men, but most of all in front of Darlene.

21 But whereas the reader would expect Cholly to hate the white men as a result of this episode, the character surprisingly enough ends up hating Darlene instead: "Sullen, irritable, he cultivated his hatred of Darlene." (Morrison 1970: 118) In fact, he blames her for being "the one who had created the situation, the one who bore witness to his failure, his impotence. The one whom he had not been able to protect, to spare, to cover from the round moon glow of the flashlight. The [white men's] hee-hee-hee's." (Morrison 1970: 118) Cholly's strength and virility as a young man were annihilated and he was reduced to a weak and vulnerable black boy by the white men, unable to protect a more vulnerable member of his community. Because he cannot hate himself, he then turns his anger towards the one who has witnessed his weakness, and whom he could not protect. His hatred for Darlene, therefore, is only the transformation of his feelings of humiliation and frustration that he cannot withhold without taking the risk of destroying himself and their transfer on to Darlene. Through his point of view, the reader understands that Cholly does not even realize how perverted his feelings are; and if he does, he accepts it so as to regain some sense of power. His disdain for Darlene is palpable in the way he behaves towards her after the white men are gone: "Cholly wanted to strangle her, but instead he touched her leg with his foot. 'We got to get, girl. Come on!'" (Morrison 1970: 117) Being as much a victim as him, she would deserve comfort too; but Cholly is unable to help her overcome this trauma, because he cannot even help himself. The aggressivity that he expresses when he talks to Darlene, the violence that arises in him against her, and his refusal to touch her and help

her get up, highlights Cholly's surrender to the whites' domination and his incapacity to deal with his own weakness: after the incident, he is "[a]fraid of running into Darlene" (Morrison 1970: 118) as seeing her again would remind him of his deep shame.

22 Toni Morrison successfully uses different narrative voices and gives some characters the possibility to narrate their own story to show how the blacks displace the racism they undergo into their own community without ever being truly aware of it. By turning into persecutors within their own group, they endorse the whites' complete control over the blacks' social status and (non-existent) self-respect.

23 Pauline Breedlove is temporarily used as a narrator. Like Cholly, Pauline is barely aware of the self-censorship that she suffers from. She does admit that after having lost her front tooth [1], she lost all hope of being pretty one day: "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." (Morrison 1970: 96) Yet, she does not understand that it is the very standards of beauty imposed on her by the whites and that she admires so much that are the source of the destruction of her self-esteem. Pauline is unable to resist white domination and protect her family from it; quite on the contrary, she chooses to incarnate the whites' values and elevates herself by making of her family her burden:

> Mrs. Breedlove considered herself an upright and Christian woman, burdened with a no-count man, whom God wanted her to punish. […] She needed Cholly's sins desperately. The lower he sank, the wilder and more irresponsible he became, the more splendid she and her task became. In the name of Jesus. (Morrison 1970: 31)

24 As Pauline's looks get sloppier and sloppier, she becomes more and more convinced she has a divine mission to accomplish: "She let another tooth fall […]. Holding Cholly as a model of sin and failure, she bore him like a crown of thorns, and her children like a cross." (Morrison 1970: 98) Just like Cholly, she is incapable of directly facing her oppressors, and thus chooses a more accessible opponent: her own family. This tragedy is even more emphasized by the irony of their surname, as the two parents become at some point incapable of breeding any kind of healthy love to each other, their children, or

even themselves. The Breedloves' inability to protect each other leads each member to progressively sink into silence, making each of them lonelier and lonelier. The failure of language during their confrontations perfectly epitomizes this isolation: indeed, whenever the characters have to deal with open conflicts, they remain silent or barely speak. This incapacity to master the language of the dominant, both literally and metaphorically speaking[2], and therefore to speak up, sheds light on their inability to defend themselves. For example, Cholly and Pauline's fights are silent: "They did not talk, groan, or curse during these beatings. There was only the muted sound of falling things, and flesh on unsurprised flesh." (Morrison 1970: 32) This scene clearly points out to the fact that the Breedloves' fights are only meant at enabling them to vent their frustration. Each becomes a tolerable opponent for the other who is unwilling to harm him/herself, yet who needs to fight against what makes them so hateful: their own blackness, that they see in each other.

25 It is important to note that the only scene where Pauline is not depicted as either violent or abusive is when she interacts with the white family she works for. In the following extract, the contrast between the way she treats Pecola, her own daughter and the little white girl she takes care of is striking:

> In one gallop she was on Pecola, and with the back of her hand knocked her to the floor. Pecola slid in the pie juice, one leg folding under her. Mrs. Breedlove yanked her up by the arm, slapped her again, and in a voice thin with anger, abused Pecola directly and Frieda and me by implication.
>
> 'Crazy fool… my floor, mess… look what you… work… get on out… now that… crazy… my floor, my floor… my floor.' Her words were hotter and darker than the smoking berries, and we backed away in dread.
>
> The little girl in pink started to cry. Mrs. Breedlove turned to her.
>
> 'Hush, baby, hush. Come here. Oh, Lord, look at your dress. Don't cry no more. Polly will change it.'" (Morrison 1970: 84-85)

26 As mentioned before, when she beats Pecola up, she barely talks to her; but her attitude radically changes when she turns to the little white girl. The incomplete sentences when scolding Pecola, as opposed to the soothing, loving words she tells the white girl to calm her down, emphasize Pauline's attempt at erasing any proof or sign of her blackness. Moreover, the fact that the white family calls her by a nickname, Polly, suggests a change of identity: she is not the same when facing those she admires so much. She does not go to the trouble of introducing her own daughter to the white girl: "'Who were they, Polly?' 'Don't worry none, baby.'" (Morrison 1970: 85) By doing so, Pauline disowns Pecola and refuses to acknowledge her as her daughter. Pauline's attitude toward both Pecola and the little white girl perfectly illustrates Monica Michlin's remark on the representation of black people in white American literature: "for the most part, the representation of black characters in white American literature ranged from a perception full of disgust to a paternalistic one, the black body thus being an almost immanent confirmation of the validity of the racial and racist system."[3] (1996: 9) Like many others, Pauline is portrayed like the typical slave who has a strong affection for her masters, is reduced to the mere role of double or adoptive parent for the white child, while being deprived of any relationship with her own children as the white child takes up all the space[4] (Michlin 1996: 10). In other words, although not a slave, Pauline typically acts like one, which reinforces her silencing as a human being and as a mother by the dominant group that gives her a role that takes away any kind of human act that would otherwise be directed toward her own family.

27 Pecola is the only character who is not given the role of the narrator. Of all the characters, she is the one who is the most mistreated and bullied by both white and black people. Unlike characters like Claudia, whose parents have "the inner strength to withstand the poverty and discrimination of a racist society and to provide an environment in which their children can grow" (Klotman 1979: 124), Pecola is left on her own as her parents do not provide her with any guidance, and fails to enter the community she should belong to: "Pecola has no specified place, and she floats on the peripheries of the community she longs to enter." (Conner 2000: 52) In order to enter the community, she needs to be Signified on: Sygnifyin being

"the verbal act of ritualized insult, in which the speaker puts down, needles, talks about (*signifies on*) someone, to make a point or sometimes just for fun", "exploit[ing] the unexpected, using quick verbal surprise and humor" (Smitherman 2004: 206), it is "an act of delineation", "didactic and inclusive" as the one who is Signified on "must acknowledge the Signification" (Atkinson 2000: 17). When it comes to children, they are Signified only to be taught a lesson or to be guided by the adults (Atkinson 2000: 17), as Claudia and Frieda have learnt: "We didn't initiate talk with grown-ups; we answered their questions" (Morrison 1970: 16). Pecola, however, cannot be Signified on and enter the community because she has not been taught the rules; in fact, she even inverts the community rules by being the first one to ask questions: "Pecola always took the initiative with Marie, who, once inspired, was difficult to stop." (Morrison 1970: 39) Such inversion signifies her "otherness" in the Black English oral tradition, because the ones she talks to, the whores, "do not acknowledge Pecola's presence and talk over and around her" (Atkinson 2000: 17). And because she cannot even be part of the community, she is denied the right to speak.

28 As "the most delicate member of a society: a child; the most vulnerable member; a female" (Morrison 1970: 168), Pecola has no chance of survival in a society that oppresses her because of the very way it is built, and where her relatives and her community are too vulnerable to protect her. Her parents' total capitulation to white domination makes her even more vulnerable and unable to defend herself. The episode at Mr. Yacobowski's store insists on this idea:

> 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.
>
> 'Them.' The word is more sigh than sense.
>
> 'What? These? These?' [...]
>
> She shakes her head, her fingertip fixed on the spot which, in her view, at any rate, identifies the Mary Janes. He cannot see her view–

> the angle of his vision, the slant of her finger, makes it incomprehensible to him. [...]
>
> 'Christ. Kantcha talk?'
>
> [...] She nods.
>
> 'Well, why'nt you say so? One? How many?'
>
> Outside, Pecola feels the inexplicable shame ebb. (Morrison 1970: 37)

29 In front of a white dominator who "does not see her, because for him there is nothing to see" (Morrison 1970: 36), Pecola cannot find the right words and is unable to ask for the candies she wants to buy: she is completely silenced and is denied the right to express herself.

30 The only passage when she is given her voice is at the end–but it is then too late:

> They are bluer, aren't they?
>
> Oh yes. Much bluer.
>
> Bluer than Joanna's?
>
> Much bluer than Joanna's.
>
> And bluer than Michelena's?
>
> Much bluer than Michelena's.
>
> I thought so. Did Michelena say anything to you about my eyes?
>
> No. Nothing.
>
> Did you say anything to her?
>
> No.

> How come?
>
> How come what?
>
> How come you don't talk to anybody?
>
> I talk to you.
>
> Besides me.
>
> *I don't like anybody besides you.* (Morrison 1970: 155-156)

31 After having been raped by her father and having subsequently become pregnant, Pecola becomes mad and is rejected by the whole community in the end. She finds herself excluded and all alone. This bit of conversation is nothing more but a conversation with herself; the replies in italics are most likely her imaginary friend's, as they are merely the repetition of what Pecola says. The mirror effect thus created underlines the fact that the other, with whom Pecola supposedly interacts, is not quite real: in other words, Pecola is never truly given her voice back, as she has no one to talk to but herself. She ultimately embodies the victim who has been permanently silenced by white racism and domination, as well as abuse and rejection within her own community.

3. Voicing what has been silenced

32 How, then, can the silenced ones ever speak up?

33 Through the novel's structure, the writer illustrates the mental mess that the characters are put into: indeed, the novel more or less follows a chronological order, but is regularly interrupted by interventions from some characters who temporarily take up the role of narrator, in addition to the main narrator, and add flashbacks to the narrative. Additionally, the use of the third-person narrative makes the reader understand how the process of self-censorship that the characters suffer from in the novel works, and why none of them is never quite fully aware of it.

34 On the other hand, by using the first-person narrative, Claudia MacTeer alternates between her childhood memories and her perception of Pecola's tragic story as a grown-up, which gives her the required distance to assess the events: "There is really nothing to say–except *why*. But since *why* is difficult to handle, one must take refuge in *how*." (Morrison 1970: 4) The incipit that ends with this sentence states the narrator's decision to take up the challenge of speaking the unspeakable, of telling what is indescribable: incest and rape, but not only. According to Scott, "Morrison [...] explore[s] ways in which a discourse of incest obscures other "tabooed" subjects that are, in fact, more "unspeakable" than incest. For Morrison that subject is racial self-loathing [...]." (2006: 84) Those taboos are a way for the whites to keep their control over the blacks, and silencing Pecola is only the result that comes out of it:

> The incest makes Pecola a taboo figure in the community, and as such, she is used to uphold a system of white dominance and black racial self-loathing that we understand to be the very cause of the rape/incest in the first place. Thus, incest (and its taboo) circulates as a form of social control. (Scott 2006: 90)

35 Interestingly enough, through Claudia's narration the writer overcomes that taboo to voice what is usually kept quiet (Morrison 1970: 4). Just as the slave narratives in which the use of the first-person narrative became a symbol of empowerment for the slaves who could take their voice back through the act of writing, Claudia's narration is empowering as it sheds light on the silence that has been imposed on the whole community. The contradiction inherent in the first sentence of the novel, "Quiet as it's kept" (Morrison 1970: 4), becomes clear: Claudia's very act of telling what has been silenced enables to break away from and put an end to this imposed secrecy. Moreover, despite the confusing effect that the fragmented narration of the novel may at first create, its aim is actually to involve the reader who is encouraged to put the pieces back together, thus breaking the whites' "social control". Through the narration of Pecola's story and by putting forward the social and racial discriminatory mechanisms that lie behind it, the writer deconstructs the ideology of the white middle class which is that "incest does not take place in the white middle class family [but] is a vice of class and racial others who lack

the rationality necessary to control their impulses", thus "justify[ing] the social and political hegemony of the white middle class" (Wilson 1995: 38)

36 Particular attention must also be paid to Morrison's manipulation of the primer: indeed, her use of it leaves no doubt as to her intention of debunking the image of the ideal average American family that it describes. The writer offers a whole new meaning to it in her novel, and affirms her refusal to use white standards to define black art: "[Morrison's] manipulation of the primer is meant to suggest, finally, the inappropriateness of the white voice's attempt to authorize or authenticate the black text or to dictate the contours of Afro-American art." (Awkward 1988: 59) Morrison uses the initial primer once, before rewriting it twice, the second and third versions enabling her to call into question its meaning and relevance. In the second version of the primer, the punctuation and capital letters are erased:

> 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 [...] (Morrison 1970: 1)

37 By using a modified version of the primer, the writer manifests her resistance to the social and artistic standards established by the whites. The third version is even worse because even the spaces have been erased, and it becomes unreadable for the reader and therefore utterly confusing:

> Hereisthehouseitisgreenandwhiteithasareddooritisveryprettyhereisthefamilymotherf
> erdickandjaneliveinthegreenandwhitehousetheyareveryhappyseejaneshehasareddress
> wantstoplaywhowillplaywithjaneseethecatitgoesmeowmeowcomeandplaycomeplaywi
> ane [...] (Morrison 1970: 2)

38 The text makes no sense at all and clearly shows Morrison's rejection of the clichéd representation of the typical American family in which every American family is supposed to see themselves. The visual effect created by the third version catches the reader's eye, who realizes that in order to understand the novel well, close attention will

have to be paid to the way the writer manipulates language. As Wilkerson states,

> A dramatist must be a good storyteller who knows precisely where to begin her tale so that the precious onstage time is used effectively. Morrison always begins her narrative with an arresting event: the presentation (casual in its tone) of a child having her father's baby […]. (1988: 180)

In other words, the discrepancy between what is said and how it is said must be closely analysed. In the case of this "casual" presentation of the event aforementioned, the idea of the narrator as a child is confirmed, because of the simplicity and innocence with which the news is announced: "We thought, at the time, that it was because Pecola was having her father's baby that the marigolds did not grow." (Morrison 1970: 4) This sentence reminds the reader of a child's incapacity to understand the consequences and implications of such event. On the other hand, the false casual tone used makes the announcement even more dreadful for the reader, who would have expected a more solemn or dramatic tone to talk about such topic. The unexpected tone used in Morrison's style is unsettling and stands as a form of resistance against the white canon. The "dramatic voice is strong in her novels. Her characters are complex and well-developed; conflict is sharply defined; dialogue is crisp, revealing, and concise; climatic scenes are often handled through dialogue." (Wilkerson 1988: 180) In brief, Morrison's style is destabilizing and derives from the traditional white standards of the American narrative. The paradox of *The Bluest Eye* lies in the inadequacy between the plot that lays before the reader, that is a tragic, though not so surprising, case of self-contempt amongst the black community in a white-dominated society, and the striking accuracy of Morrison's writing. In her own words, the stylistic devices used in the novel aimed at pointing out the wealth and worth of Afro-American culture (although some aspects of her writing do not appear satisfying enough to her): "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 (failed) attempt to shape a silence while breaking it are attempts (many unsatisfactory) to transfigure

the complexity and wealth of Afro-American culture into a language worthy of the culture." (Morrison 1988: 150) In other words, Morrison uses her writing to put at the center what had so far been pushed aside, at the margins. Her writing becomes the voice of what Gilles Deleuze calls "minor literature", to qualify Afro-American literature amongst others: a literature in which any personal matter is immediately connected to politics because of the narrow space it is given (Deleuze and Guattari 1975: 30)[5].

40 Consequently, it would be too simplistic to read *The Bluest Eye* only as a strong condemnation of the whites' racist hegemony. Toni Morrison declared during interviews that she mostly wrote for Black people[6]; however, one must wonder how such claims should be understood: are these claims reliable? Does her novel solely aim at denouncing and condemning the whites' abuse of power? Is it really written for black people only? Obviously, her writing goes much beyond such a simple black/white readers dichotomy, as Morrison herself qualifies her writing as "race-specific yet race-free prose" (Morrison 1970: 169). Yet Morrison's writing cannot and must not be reduced to a mere political act, as she believes "a novel has to be socially responsible as well as very beautiful" (Jones and Vinson 1994:183). After all, this novel is nothing but "the public exposure of a private confidence", and her writing "the disclosure of secrets, secrets "we" shared and those withheld from us by ourselves and by the world outside the community." (Morrison 1970: 169)

3. Conclusion

41 It is clear that in Toni Morrison's novel, the blacks, vastly dominated by white domination, lose their voice and their self-esteem: the self-hatred that they internalize prevents them from resisting their oppressor. To survive and avoid self-destruction, they are then led to displace the trauma they are victims of by destroying others–that is to say, the weakest members of their own community. Unable to fight against the racism they are constantly exposed to, they choose instead–often unconsciously–to acquire a sense of domination over weaker ones who, in turn, will either oppress others or on the contrary not resist at all; in short, only the fittest can survive. In a way,

the oppressive system in which they live has been fully accepted and is even reproduced at different levels.

42 Nevertheless, one must bear in mind that some characters like the narrator, Claudia, try to resist: through her narration of Pecola's tragedy, she succeeds in denouncing the oppression her community is victim of. Consequently, the act of story-telling is presented as an act of resistance. On a larger scale, Morrison's writing must also be acknowledged as an act of resistance, although I would argue that her narration goes even beyond the denouncing of a solely black experience, to offer a more universal understanding of any kind of suffering that any reader can share.

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1 See quotation above.

2 Pauline Breedlove's English remains orally based and is punctuated with grammar or pronunciation mistakes: for instance, "children" becomes "chil'ren", then "childring" (Morrison 1970: 98). But above all, speaking English does not provide any of the Breedloves with the linguistic weapons necessary to stand up to the dominant group.

3 "l'ensemble de la littérature américaine blanche représente longtemps les Noirs selon un éventail allant du dégoût au paternalisme, le corps noir confirmant alors, de manière apparemment immanente, la validité du système racial et raciste." (Michlin 1996 : 9)

4 "Souvent […], il suffit [de] souligner la force de l'affection dans les relations entre maîtres et esclaves, et réduire le Noir au rôle de parent adoptif (ou de double) de l'enfant blanc, ce qui […] sous-entend une négation de tout lien parental du Noir à ses propres enfants, l'enfant blanc occupant cette place de manière exclusive." (Michlin 1996: 10)

5 "La littérature mineure est tout à fait différente : son espace exigu fait que chaque affaire individuelle est immédiatement branchée sur la politique." (Deleuze and Guattari 1975 : 30)

6 "I have not seen and cannot think of any black female writer who is interested in being taken up by the white male power structure." (Brown and Morrison 1995: 468)

English

This paper aims at analyzing how the omnipresent racism in the United States of America in the 1940s has been internalized by the black community, through the study of Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*. By focusing on the mechanisms put in place by the dominators to exclude any minority group from any form of power, I will show how the systematic discrimination against the black community has coerced its members into a perverted reproduction of the injustices they are victims of in order to survive. A close analysis of this perverted system will be essential to explain how a whole community can be deprived of its voices.

Français

Cet article a pour objectif d'analyser la manière dont le racisme omniprésent aux Etats-Unis d'Amérique dans les années 1940 a été intériorisé par la communauté noire à travers l'étude du premier roman de Toni Morrison. En étudiant les mécanismes mis en place par la communauté dominante pour exclure toute minorité du pouvoir, il s'agira de montrer comment cette discrimination systématique de la communauté noire a installé ses membres

dans un fonctionnement de reproduction malsaine des injustices dont ils sont victimes, au point de les priver de leur voix et donc de toute chance de contestation.

Mots-clés
Toni Morrison, discrimination raciale, intériorisation, haine de soi, voix auctoriale

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