

UNIVERSIDADE FEDERAL DO RIO GRANDE DO SUL

INSTITUTO DE LETRAS

Rosana Ruas Machado Gomes

**Trauma and Healing in Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* and
*Home***

Porto Alegre

2019

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Dissertação de mestrado apresentada ao Programa de Pós-Graduação em Letras da Universidade Federal do Rio Grande do Sul como requisito parcial para obtenção do grau de Mestra em Letras.

Orientadora: Profa. Dra. Rita Terezinha Schmidt

Porto Alegre

2019

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Gomes, Rosana Ruas Machado
Trauma and Healing in Toni Morrison's *The Bluest
Eye and Home* / Rosana Ruas Machado Gomes. -- 2019.
120 f.
Orientadora: Rita Terezinha Schmidt.

Dissertação (Mestrado) -- Universidade Federal do
Rio Grande do Sul, Instituto de Letras, Programa de
Pós-Graduação em Letras, Porto Alegre, BR-RS, 2019.

1. Toni Morrison. 2. African American Literature.
3. Trauma. I. Schmidt, Rita Terezinha, orient. II.
Título.

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Porto Alegre, 29 de agosto de 2019

Resultado: Aprovada com louvor.

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank my family for understanding the importance of my education and supporting it throughout my life. You have made this thesis possible. I would also like to thank my incredible friends and boyfriend for giving me so much encouragement and love along the way. You have kept me strong and healthy.

Thank you to my supervisor, Professor Rita Terezinha Schmidt, for the books, the advice, and all of the vast knowledge which you have shared with me, both in our meetings and in the classes you have ministered. Thank you to Professor Marta Ramos Oliveira and Professor Sandra Sirangelo Maggio for accompanying this project and for being very important to my studies since my undergraduate course. To Professor Vera Lúcia Lenz Viana da Silva, thank you for accepting the invitation to be part of this work.

I would also like to thank the professors and staff of the Programa de Pós-Graduação em Letras (PPGLet): your guidance and classes were extremely beneficial to my studies. Finally, thank you to Coordenação de Aperfeiçoamento de Pessoal de Nível Superior (CAPES), for the fellowship that made it possible for me to dedicate myself to my graduate course.

RESUMO

O olho mais azul, publicado em 1970, traz a história de Pecola Breedlove, uma garota que passa por diferentes abusos e discriminações em função da cor de sua pele. Diante de tanto sofrimento, a menina acaba por perder sua sanidade. *Voltar para casa*, publicado em 2012, traz a história de Frank Money, um veterano de guerra que embarca em uma viagem de retorno à cidade onde cresceu para resgatar sua irmã, que está em perigo. Durante a jornada, Frank passa a se confrontar com fantasmas do passado que o assombram ainda no presente. De volta a Lotus, os dois irmãos progressivamente se conectam com a comunidade, encontrando algumas respostas que podem ajudá-los a lidar com experiências passadas enquanto forjam um novo futuro. Em ambas as obras, Toni Morrison apresenta situações traumáticas que impactam profundamente as suas personagens. No entanto, uma “cura” para o trauma parece ser possível para somente algumas delas. Diante disso, analiso as representações de trauma e de cura nos dois livros, estabelecendo relações e comparações que podem ajudar a entender por que algumas dessas personagens conseguem chegar saudáveis ao fim das narrativas, enquanto outras não. Como suporte teórico, utilizo principalmente teóricos que escrevem sobre algum aspecto de estudos do trauma, tais quais Cathy Caruth, Bessel van der Kolk e Onno van der Hart, Stef Craps, Irene Visser, Susan Brison e Joy Degruy.

Palavras-chave: Toni Morrison; literatura afro-americana; trauma.

ABSTRACT

The Bluest Eye, published in 1970, tells the story of Pecola Breedlove, a black little girl who undergoes different forms of abuse and discrimination because of the color of her skin. As result of all the suffering and pain which she experiences, the girl ends up losing her sanity. *Home*, published in 2012, brings us the story of Frank Money, a war veteran who embarks on a journey back to his hometown in order to rescue his sister, who is in danger. Along the way, Fran starts facing the ghosts from his past, who still haunt him in the present. Back in Lotus, the two siblings progressively reconnect to their community, finding some answers that may help them cope with past experiences while creating a new future. In both novels, Toni Morrison presents traumatic situations that leave her characters deeply impacted. However, healing seems possible for only some of them. Thus, I analyze the representations of trauma and healing in the two books, establishing relationships and comparisons which may help us understand the reasons why some of these characters are able to heal and become healthy by the end of the narratives, while others are not. As theoretical background, I mostly consult scholars who write about some aspect of trauma studies, such as Cathy Caruth, Bessel van der Kolk and Onno van der Hart, Stef Craps, Irene Visser, Susan Brison and Joy Degruy.

Keywords: Toni Morrison; African American literature; trauma.

ABBREVIATIONS

- T* Cathy Caruth, *Trauma: Explorations in Memory* (The Johns Hopkins university Press, 1995).
- UE* Cathy Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History* (The Johns Hopkins university Press, 1996).
- PTSS* Joy Degruy, *Post Traumatic Slave Syndrome: America's Legacy of Enduring Injury and Healing* (Uptone Press, 2005).
- PW* Stef Craps, *Postcolonial Witnessing: Trauma Out of Bounds* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2013).
- TBE* Toni Morrison, *The Bluest Eye* (Vintage Book, 1999).

APOIO DE FINANCIAMENTO CAPES

This study was financed in part by the Coordenação de Aperfeiçoamento de Pessoal de Nível Superior – Brasil (CAPES) – Código de Financiamento 001.

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Introduction

In the introduction to *The Cambridge Companion to Toni Morrison* (2007), Justine Tally comments on how Toni Morrison—who was awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1993—is one of the most widely studied contemporary American writers (2). Her works—in particular *Beloved* (1987)—have been extensively discussed by scholars all over the world. Many anthologies on her oeuvre have been published, including the aforementioned *The Cambridge Companion to Toni Morrison* and others, such as *Critical Companion to Toni Morrison: A Literary Reference to Her Life and Work* (2008), *Toni Morrison: A Literary Life* (2015), and *Contested Boundaries: New Critical Essays on the Fiction of Toni Morrison* (2013).

Regarding *The Bluest Eye* (1970), one of the most important anthologies published is *Bloom's Modern Critical Interpretations: Toni Morrison's The Bluest Eye* (2007), in which different scholars, such as Deborah T. Werrlein, discuss aspects such as text and counter-text, and notions of childhood and nation in the novel. Especially relevant to my studies are Carl D. Malmgren's and Cat Moses's works. In Malmgren's "Text, Voices and Primers in Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*", the scholar analyzes the different forms of textuality and the polyphony that compose the book. In a brilliant observation, Malmgren argues that a single narrator, Claudia MacTeer, has created the different voices, composed the texts, and organized the entire narrative of the novel (Malmgren 147—148). He also calls attention to the fact that Pecola is never given voice throughout the narrative—she never has the chance to tell her story, which is years later revisited by an adult Claudia (Malmgren 148). Meanwhile, in "The Blues Aesthetic in Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*", Moses focuses on the musicality of the novel as he analyzes the book within a blues aesthetic, considering it Claudia's

“singing” of the community’s blues. The scholar links Claudia’s physical and psychological survival to the values and knowledge transmitted to her through the blues sung by her mother, and argues that later, when she narrates the novel, she performs the poetic catharsis typical of the blues singer (Moses 133).

Meanwhile, *Home* was published in 2012. As it is a considerably recent novel, it has not been as extensively studied as *The Bluest Eye* yet. However, some articles written by scholar and Professor Irene Visser are very important to my research. The first is called “Decolonizing Trauma Theory: Retrospect and Prospects”, in which the scholar argues that postcolonial trauma narratives frequently convey that resilience and growth can be possible in the aftermath of traumatic wounding, which is a very interesting perspective from which to analyze *Home*. In “Entanglements of Trauma: Relationality and Toni Morrison’s *Home*”, Visser expresses a belief in allowing multiple perspectives, multiple discourses, and multiple disciplines to inform readings of trauma fiction, which I also believe can be very productive for studying *Home*.

Indeed, since the early 1990s, the area of trauma theory has expanded fast, and become really diversified. Scholars from disciplines such as psychology, cultural and literary studies, sociology, cognitive science and history, among others, have all contributed to discussions regarding traumatic experiences. In a scenario like this, I have decided to consider perspectives from multiple fields in my analysis of *The Bluest Eye* and *Home*. As my theoretical background, I discuss Cathy Caruth’s formulations. To her, the pathology of trauma consists in the structure of the experience or reception of the traumatic event, in which the event is not assimilated or experienced as it occurs, but belatedly, by the repeated possession of the survivor (*Trauma: Explorations in Memory* 4-5). I also rely on some studies by Bessel van der Kolk and Onno van der Hart, which present some differences between

traumatic memories and narrative memories, and the therapeutic potential of transforming traumatic experiences into words that can be related to others.

As some scholars—especially from postcolonial studies—have drawn attention to, it has also become important to expand trauma theory in order to accommodate suffering which had been previously unheard. Stef Craps states that the event-based model of trauma may not be adequate to describe and portray the experiences of certain particular groups, such as the traumatic impact of racism and other manners of ongoing oppression. Therefore, I also consider in my theoretical background formulations on insidious trauma and on the specific experience of African Americans. For the latter, I use Joy Degruy's concept of Post Traumatic Slave Syndrome.

With these distinct considerations on trauma in mind, I present the objectives of my thesis. The first is related to understanding and analyzing how trauma is portrayed in both *The Bluest Eye* and *Home*. Through close readings of the novels, I examine the different traumatic situations that the characters experience, and the ways in which these experiences impact them. I also observe the healing processes that happen (or that do not) in the books. From this observation that not all of the characters are able to heal from trauma, comes my second objective: comprehending why healing is possible for some characters, but not for others, and the reasons why *Home* seems to have a “happier” ending when compared to *The Bluest Eye*.

The structure of this thesis comprehends three chapters and a conclusion. The first chapter presents some theoretical speculations on trauma and trauma theory, consulting scholars from different fields, such as literary criticism, psychology, and sociology. Concepts related to literature, trauma and to Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) are presented, but many of the considerations regarding symptoms, behaviors, and healing processes are actually spread throughout chapters two and three. I have decided on structuring the thesis in this manner because relating aspects of trauma and of PTSD to the experiences which the

characters go through in the novels seemed to make the analysis more fluid and interesting to read.

The second chapter presents a close reading of *The Bluest Eye*, formulating an analysis that takes into consideration the context in which the novel was written, its formal structure, and the experiences that its characters undergo. In this section, I discuss insidious trauma and the set of behavior patterns that Degruy associates with Post Traumatic Slave Syndrome. The third and final chapter brings a close reading of *Home*, reflecting on the therapeutic engagement with trauma that the novel presents, and on the importance of community in healing processes. In my conclusion, I further establish and discuss the parallels that I was able to trace between the two novels, comparing and speculating on their presentations and resolutions of traumatic experiences.

1 Theoretical Speculations on Trauma, Literature, and the Decolonization of Trauma Theory

From the early 1990s, the field of trauma studies has rapidly expanded and become extremely diversified. As professor Irene Visser observes in the article “Trauma theory and postcolonial literary studies”, published in 2011, trauma has been discussed by different disciplines, such as psychology, law, cognitive science, history, and cultural and literary studies, and it is now regarded as “one of today’s signal cultural paradigms” (270). With the publishing of *Trauma: Explorations in Memory* (1995), scholar and professor Cathy Caruth has edited and organized works from different researchers and professionals: educators, writers, psychiatrists, literary critics, sociologists, and more. As she explains in the preface to the book, there is no single approach to studying or listening to traumatic experiences and histories. In her understanding, a variety of disciplines can present multiple responses of knowing and of acting in helpful ways, contributing to the continuous work on trauma:

It may be only through this variety that we can learn, in effect, not only to ease suffering but to open, in the individual and the community, new possibilities for change, a change that would acknowledge the unthinkable realities to which traumatic experience bears witness (iv)

Visser also seems to believe that the contribution of different disciplines can be very useful and enriching to trauma studies. In “Entanglements of Trauma: Relationality and Toni Morrison’s *Home*” (2014), the scholar affirms that in postcolonial studies today, there is a growing consensus to “conceptualize trauma not by theorizing hierarchical structures which

would privilege some conceptual approaches and delegitimize others, but by envisaging trauma as a complicated network of concepts and approaches, all centered around trauma” (3). Thus, I will discuss different approaches to trauma, originated from different disciplines, analyzing the distinct and multiple ways in which they can contribute to readings of *The Bluest Eye* and *Home*.

In *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative and History*, published in the year of 1996, Caruth presents the most general definition of trauma as “an overwhelming experience of sudden or catastrophic events in which the response to the event occurs in the often delayed, uncontrolled repetitive appearance of hallucination and other intrusive phenomena” (11). Visser observes that the subject of study in trauma theory is in fact more related to the traumatic aftermath than to the traumatic event itself: “Trauma thus denotes the recurrence or repetition of the stressor event through memory, dreams, narrative and/or various symptoms known under the definition of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)” (272). In relation to PTSD, psychiatrist van der Kolk states in his article “Posttraumatic stress disorder and the nature of trauma” (2000) that traumatic events present such horror and threat to people that they may affect their capacity to cope with events, their biological threat perception, and the ideas that they have of themselves. These effects may be temporary or permanent. The scholar also notes that PTSD, in which the victims’ consciousness is haunted by the memory of the traumatic event—interfering with their ability to find meaning and pleasure in life—, is frequently diagnosed in traumatized individuals.

Caruth also observes that during the first half of the twentieth century, the notion of trauma was most commonly associated with soldiers who had witnessed massive and sudden death while in a state of numbness, and who would later relieve such witnessing in recurring nightmares. However, a rising number of overwhelming war experiences and other types of catastrophic responses in the last three decades of the twentieth century led physicians and

psychiatrists to start reshaping their ideas about physical and mental experience, including as catalysts for PTSD events such as rape, child abuse, accidents, etc. (*UE* 11). Nonetheless, in *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*, Caruth explores the idea that the pathology cannot be defined by the event itself or in terms of a “*distortion*” of it (4, emphasis in the original). According to her,

The pathology consists, rather, solely in the *structure of its experience* or reception: the event is not assimilated or experienced fully at the time, but only belatedly, in its repeated *possession* of the one who experiences it. To be traumatized is precisely to be possessed by an image or event. (*T* 4-5, emphasis in the original)

Caruth’s perception of the pathology of trauma as a result of an event that is not fully assimilated at the time it occurs is also present during her discussion of Sigmund Freud’s *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920). In this particular work, Freud wonders at compulsive repetitions that do not seem to be linked to the pleasure principle: “past experiences which include no possibility of pleasure, and which can never, even long ago, have brought satisfaction even to instinctual impulses which have since been repressed” (3725). These experiences have to do with catastrophic or very painful events. As Freud notices, they cannot have ever produced pleasure in the past, and they are not any less unpleasant today, nor do they take the shape of memories or dreams. Instead, they haunt the victim in the form of fresh experiences and they are “repeated, under pressure of a compulsion” (3725). To Freud, one of the most astonishing traits of these cases is related to how the survivor has had a “*passive* experience, over which he has no influence, but in which he meets with a repetition of the same fatality” (3726, emphasis in the original). That is, the traumatized individual is subjected to a series of repeated painful events, having no control over their reoccurrence, and most

certainly not wishing for it. One of the examples that the psychiatrist gives to exemplify and discuss this series of repeated events is a literary one: Tasso's romantic epic *Gerusalemme Liberata* (1581). In the story, the hero Tancred unknowingly kills his beloved Clorinda in a duel, as she is disguised in the armor of an enemy knight. After her funeral, Tancred goes into a strange mythical forest that inspires fear and superstition in the soldiers. There, he strikes at a tall tree with his sword, but it is blood that comes out of the cut as the voice of Clorinda—whose soul is stuck in the tree—is heard complaining that Tancred has wounded his beloved once again (3726). The fact that the hero hurts his lover a second time is used by Freud to illustrate his hypothesis that “there really does exist in the mind a compulsion to repeat which overrides the pleasure principle” (3726).

When Caruth analyzes the third chapter of *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* and the story of Tancred and Clorinda, she sees the way in which the hero unwillingly wounds his beloved a second time as representative of how a traumatic experience repeats itself, literal and exact, against any will of the survivor. In her words, “the repetition at the heart of catastrophe (...) emerges as the unwitting reenactment of an event that one cannot simply leave behind” (UE 2). However, one of her most interesting insights comes from noticing the voice that cries out from the tree as it is struck. According to Caruth, it is through the repetition of his act that Tancred hears the cry that urges him to see what he has done for the first time. As Clorinda's voice addresses him, it also bears witness to the past that he has unknowingly repeated, representing “a human voice that cries out from the wound, a voice that witnesses a truth that Tancred himself cannot fully know” (UE 3). Therefore, Caruth reflects on trauma as a wound that

Is experienced too soon, too unexpectedly, to be fully known and is therefore not available to consciousness until it imposes itself again, repeatedly, in the nightmares

and repetitive actions of the survivor. Just as Tancred does not hear the voice of Clorinda until the second wounding, so trauma is not locatable in the simple violent or original event in an individual's past, but rather in the way that its very unassimilated nature—the way it was precisely *not known* in the first instance—returns to haunt the survivor later on. (UE 4)

This analysis of Tancred and Clorinda's story seems to reinforce the notion previously presented of the pathology of trauma as not being defined by the event itself, but by the structure of its experience, in which the event cannot be entirely assimilated as it occurs (T 4-5). Hence, Caruth sees trauma as an overwhelming event that cannot be fully witnessed as it takes place, and that may later return in its literal and unassimilated form to haunt and possess the victim.

In "The Intrusive Past: the Flexibility of Memory and the Engraving of Trauma" (1995), psychiatrist and psychotraumatologist van der Kolk and van der Hart revisit and discuss some concepts and ideas related to narrative memories and traumatic memories. The first are related to mental constructs that are used by people to make sense out of experiences. While familiar and expected situations can be assimilated without much conscious awareness of the particulars of the event, frightening or unforeseen experiences might possibly not fit into existing cognitive schemes. That may result in these events being remembered with a lot of vividness or even completely resisting integration. In case of a meaning scheme being unable to accommodate an overwhelming experience, the memory of such event will be stored differently and become unavailable under normal circumstances, being dissociated from voluntary control and conscious awareness. When this happens, fragments of the unassimilated and unintegrated events may manifest later through recollections or behavioral reenactments. As the victim is unable to narrate what happened, the term "traumatic memory"

can be seen as a merely convenient one, since a memory can only be considered as such when it can be narrated (160). According to van der Kolk and van der Hart, ordinary memory “should be an aspect of life and be integrated with other experiences” (163). Another particular characteristic of traumatic memories is that they occur in situations that are reminiscent of the original traumatic event, being evoked under particular conditions, which are considered triggers for the traumatic memory. In contrast, ordinary memories can be accessed and described anywhere, at any moment (163).

Van der Kolk and van der Hart also note that dissociation, nightmares, flashbacks and behavioral reenactments are frequently observed in people who have undergone traumatic events. These happen due to the fact that the survivors cannot organize the experience on a linguistic level, and the failure to arrange the event in symbols and words leaves it to be organized on a somatosensory or iconic level (172). As for the case of a complete recovery¹, van der Kolk and van der Hart describe it as the stage in which the survivors no longer suffer from behavioral reenactments, reappearance of traumatic events in flashbacks, and other intrusive phenomena. Instead, “the story can be told, the person can look back at what happened; he has given it a place in his life history, his autobiography, and thereby in the whole of his personality” (176). That is, the event can be told as a narrative memory that has its place in time, a beginning, a middle, and an end.

Even though the narrating of one’s trauma experiences is considered very helpful to recovery², there is still the question of how such overwhelming and shattering events can even be articulated into words. Furthermore, there is also the issue of how others can truly listen to traumatic stories without oversimplifying or failing to grasp their complexity. In the preface to *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*, Cathy Caruth raises the following questions:

¹Complete recovery or healing from trauma is not a consensus. However, the scholars referenced in this work believe that survivors can eventually face the traumatic events that they have experienced, find ways to transform the trauma into a narrative memory, and move on with their lives, even if never completely healed.

²See Susan Brison.

But the study and treatment of trauma continue to face a crucial problem at the heart of this unique and difficult phenomenon: the problem of how to help relieve suffering, and how to understand the nature of the suffering, without eliminating the force and truth of the reality that trauma survivors face and quite often try to transmit to us. To cure oneself—whether by drugs or the telling of one’s story or both—seems to many survivors to imply the giving-up of an important reality, or the dilution of a special truth into the reassuring terms of therapy. (vii)

As the scholar observes, it is crucial—and not easy or simple in the least—to find ways of listening and responding to traumatic retellings and stories without taking away from their impact, oversimplifying them, or reducing them to clichés or versions of a same single tale. Caruth also notes that the complexity of this task is such that it is one that therapists, literary critics, novelists, neurobiologists, filmmakers—among others—try to propose possible solutions to (vii).

In Caruth’s understanding, when Freud turns to Tancred and Clorinda’s story to illustrate trauma, he is doing so precisely because of how literature is—like psychoanalysis—“interested in the complex relation between knowing and not knowing” (*UE* 3). In *Gerusalemme Liberata*, Tasso unknowingly kills his beloved. Later, he unwillingly repeats the act of hurting her as he strikes at a tree in which her soul is stuck—and he only becomes aware that he is doing it because of the voice that cries out from the wound. As Caruth observes, it is “at the specific point at which knowing and not knowing intersect that the language of literature and the psychoanalytic theory of traumatic experience precisely meet” (*UE* 3). As novelists write stories that address trauma, voices crying out from wounds like the one in Tancred and Clorinda’s tale are likely to be heard: the knowing and not knowing of the

events that transpired are intertwined in the narratives and in the characters' voices and actions. As Caruth summarizes, art and literature can present possibilities of speaking of the overwhelming and complex experiences of trauma precisely because they do not do so in a language that is literal or straightforward, but "in a language that is always somehow literary: a language that defies, even as it claims, our understanding" (*UE* 5).

In *Trauma Fiction*, Anne Whitehead comments on the link between trauma fiction and postmodernism fiction, whose innovative techniques and forms call attention to the complexity of memory and criticize the notion of history as grand narrative. According to Whitehead, both postmodernist fiction and trauma fiction tend to challenge conventional narrative techniques: "in testing formal boundaries, trauma fiction seeks to foreground the nature and limitations of narrative and to convey the damaging and distorting impact of the traumatic event" (82). Whitehead also believes that there is a point of intersection between trauma fiction and postcolonial fiction, which brings marginalized or silenced stories and voices to public consciousness and rescues previously overlooked histories. In her understanding, the two overlap in their "concern with the recovery of memory and the acknowledgment of the denied, the repressed and the forgotten" (82). Trauma fiction is able to contribute to the rethinking of the ethics of historical representation by allowing psychologically and politically repressed events and stories to surface to consciousness.

Whitehead also observes that trauma fiction tends to register the overwhelming and unassimilable nature of its subject matter in its structural and formal terms (83). In her analysis of a number of novels that depict traumatic experiences, Whitehead notes that novelists attempt to mirror the effects of trauma at a formal level through certain literary techniques, and that there are certain key stylistic features which recur in such narratives, such

as intertextuality, repetition, and a fragmented or dispersed narrative voice³. Intertextuality can be understood as the notion that each and every text is constructed as “a tissue of quotations, absorbing and transforming material from other texts” (89). In a more specific sense, it is related to plots, images, characters or conventions that certain texts may bring to mind for the readers. Intertextuality can be used to suggest the surfacing to consciousness of memories that have been repressed or forgotten, or to allow formerly silenced voices to tell their own stories as writers revise canonical texts and offer new perspectives on well-known stories (85). According to Whitehead, repetition “mimics the effects of trauma, for it suggests the insistent return of the event and the disruption of narrative chronology or progression” (86). The repetition in a literary work can be applied to language, imagery, plot, etc. As Whitehead notes, it is inherently ambivalent, existing between trauma and catharsis. In relation to the first, repetition replays the traumatic past as if it were still in the present, leaving the survivor under trauma’s paralyzing influence. However, repetition can also be related to memory and catharsis, helping in the reformulation of the past (86-87). Finally, the fragmented or dispersive narrative voice is related to the concern of not allowing a traumatic experience to be oversimplified or lose its impact as it is being told to others. In Whitehead’s understanding, literary fiction has the flexibility and freedom that may be necessary in order to articulate the impact and resistance of trauma. She recognizes that traditional literary realism may not be ideal for portraying traumatic events, but believes that more unconventional and experimental forms—which have emerged out of postmodernist and postcolonial fiction—may offer novelists interesting vehicles for conveying the shattering, shocking, and haunting feelings related to trauma (87).

³These are not, as Whitehead emphasizes, guidelines or techniques that necessarily appear in any given work of trauma fiction. Instead, she is attempting to indicate some features that are frequent in the genre, not losing sight of “the nature of trauma itself, which refuses abstractions and remains tied to the specificity of terms, figures and conceptual movements that differ from text to text” (84).

It is also important to note that in regard to trauma fiction, some scholars have shown very relevant reservations to linking the quality of a novel to its level of experiment or reading difficulty. In *Postcolonial Witnessing: Trauma Out of Bounds* (2013), professor Stef Craps questions the notion that only experimental, modernist textual strategies can appropriately portray traumatic experiences. According to him, the construction of a prescriptive and normative trauma aesthetic ends up creating a narrow canon that consists solely of high-brow works, often written by Western authors. In relation to that, Craps stresses that he does not see modernist textual constructions as inherently Eurocentric, nor does he prescribe any specific alternative as a postcolonial perfect solution. Instead, he is confronting the quickness to dismiss works that deviate from the normative aesthetic as irrelevant or insufficient (4-5). As he explains,

Rather than positing a necessary relation between aesthetic form and political or ethical effectiveness, I argue that trauma theory should take account of the specific social and historical contexts in which trauma narratives are produced and received, and be open and attentive to the diverse strategies of representation and resistance that these contexts invite or necessitate. (5)

Craps states that, in order for trauma theory to become more culturally sensitive and inclusive, it needs to acknowledge the experiences and sufferings of non-Western and minority groups “more fully, for their own sake, and on their own terms” (*PW* 38). Furthermore, in “Decolonizing Trauma Theory: Retrospect and Prospects” (2015), Irene Visser states that “without negating the lasting, profound impact of trauma, postcolonial trauma narratives often also demonstrate that resilience and growth are possible in the

aftermath of traumatic wounding” (12). In Visser’s understanding, narrativization can empower individuals and communities, proving to be crucial to their cultural survival (14).

In *Postcolonial Witnessing: Trauma Out of Bounds*, Stef Craps presents trauma theory as “an area of cultural investigation that emerged in the early 1990s as a product of the so-called ethical turn affecting the humanities” (1). The scholar also states that the founding texts of the area have proposed to contribute to cross-cultural solidarity and the establishment of new forms of community, but that they have largely failed to live up to this promise of cross-cultural ethical engagement in at least four counts:

They marginalize or ignore traumatic experiences of non-Western or minority cultures, they tend to take for granted the universal validity of definitions of trauma and recovery that have developed out of the history of Western modernity, they often favour or even prescribe a modernist aesthetic or fragmentation and aporia as uniquely suited to the task of bearing witness to trauma, and they generally disregard the connections between metropolitan and non-Western or minority traumas. As a result of all of this, rather than promoting cross-cultural solidarity, trauma theory risks assisting in the perpetuation of the very beliefs, practices, and structures that maintain existing injustices and inequalities. (2)

Therefore, Craps claims that trauma theory “can and should be reshaped, resituated, and redirected so as to foster attunement to previously unheard suffering” (37). One of the reasons why he believes that this movement is necessary is because Craps sees the traditional event-based model of trauma as insufficient to appropriately describe and portray the experiences of certain particular groups. According to the author, the basic concepts that were

first presented by trauma theory scholars are not able to explain or convey the traumatic impact of racism and other forms of ongoing oppression (31). In his words,

Unlike structural trauma, racism is historically specific; yet, unlike historical trauma, it is not related to a particular event, with a before and an after. Understanding racism as a historical trauma, which can be worked through, would be to obscure the fact that it continues to cause damage in the present. (*PW 32*)

Craps then explains that racism is informed by a past that continues to interfere with the present, making the category of historical trauma inaccurate. Structural trauma is not a better option because it would imply “a constitutive feature of existence, something that must be lived with” (*PW 32*). The scholar also notes that, for disempowered groups, trauma is a constant presence. Therefore, a straightforward restoration to a pre-traumatized state of being is not possible, because such a state does not even exist (*PW 33*).

As he briefly discusses racism, Craps states that it can be seen as a source of what Maria Root calls insidious trauma. In “Not Outside the Range: One Feminist Perspective on Psychic Trauma”, Laura Brown explains the concept developed by her feminist therapist colleague as “traumatogenic effects left by oppression that are not necessarily overtly violent or threatening to bodily well-being at the given moment but that do violence to the soul and spirit” (107). Based on such notion, Craps comments on how overt racism has been replaced with more subtle, covert, and complex racist incidents that operate at cultural and institutional levels in most Western countries (*PW 26*). He then mentions being the target of a security guard, being denied home mortgages, business loans or promotions, seeing one’s group portrayed in a stereotypical manner in media, and being stopped in traffic as examples of daily micro-aggressions that occur nowadays. Craps assesses that one of those incidents alone

may not be traumatizing, but that cumulative micro-aggressions can insidiously result in traumatization: even if each one seems too small to be a traumatic stressor, together they may amount to an intense traumatic impact (*PW 26*).

Craps also notes that considering trauma as an exclusively individual phenomenon may distract attention and focus from the wider social situation:

In collectivist societies individualistic approaches may be at odds with the local culture. Moreover, by narrowly focusing on the level of the individual psyche, one tends to leave unquestioned the conditions that enabled the traumatic abuse, such as political oppression, racism, or economic domination. Problems that are essentially political, social, or economic are medicalized, and the people affected by them are pathologized as victims without agency, sufferers from an illness that can be cured through psychological counseling. The failure to situate these problems in their larger historical context can thus lead to psychological recovery being privileged over the transformation of a wounding political, social, or economic system. Insofar as it negates the need for taking collective action towards systemic change, the hegemonic trauma discourse can be seen to serve as a political palliative to the socially disempowered. (*PW 28*)

Making an observation about the way PTSD, which was originally restricted to the experience of war veterans, has expanded to include survivors of sexual assault and domestic violence through the advocacy of people concerned with those categories, Craps states that ethnic minorities and their allies must also push for the recognition of racist-incident-trauma as a valid, legitimate traumatic experience. This expansion would in no way threaten or erase the legitimacy of victims of other types of trauma (*PW 27*). Among the proposals for

extending the definitions of trauma beyond the current ones that revolve around death threat, serious injury threat, or the threat to physical integrity of self or others, Craps mentions a few: complex PTSD or disorders of extreme stress not otherwise specified, insidious trauma, safe-world violations, postcolonial syndrome, postcolonial traumatic stress disorder, oppression-based trauma, and post-traumatic slavery syndrome (*PW 25*).

One of the studies that expand the understanding of trauma beyond event-based models is social work researcher and professor Joy Degruy's *Post Traumatic Slave Syndrome: America's Legacy of Enduring Injury and Healing* (2005). In the book, Degruy states that African Americans have experienced a legacy of trauma that is reflected in many of their behaviors and beliefs (101). In fact, she defines Post Traumatic Slave Syndrome (PTSS) as a "condition that exists when a population has experienced multigenerational trauma resulting from centuries of slavery and continues to experience oppression and institutionalized racism today" (105). Degruy also states that, added to such condition, is a belief—which can be real or imaginary—that the benefits of the society in which those people live are not accessible to them (105). The researcher also identifies three categories as the resulting patterns of behavior which is brought by PTSS: vacant esteem, ever-present anger, and racist socialization⁴.

Furthermore, Visser highlights the importance of responding to trauma with the respectful recognition of historical, national, ethnic, and spiritual diversification ("Decolonizing" 16-18). As she summarizes the perspectives and views of postcolonial studies today, she states that

Trauma is recognized as a very complex phenomenon. It is not only understood as acute, individual, and event-based, but also as collective and chronic; trauma can weaken individuals and communities, but it can also lead to a stronger sense of

⁴These patterns of behavior will be explained and discussed together with the analysis of *The Bluest Eye* and *Home*. I believe that such a choice will make the reading of chapters two and three more interesting and fluid.

identity and a renewed social cohesion. Postcolonial literary studies reflect and reconstruct this full complexity of trauma in its specific cultural, political, and historical contexts. (20)

Therefore, taking into consideration the complexity of the subject, my analysis of traumatic experiences in *The Bluest Eye* and in *Home* in the next chapters will follow not only event-based trauma concepts, but also be attentive to the specific historical, political, and cultural context of the characters in the novels. Furthermore, African American healing processes will be observed and discussed.

2 The Bluest Eye

The Bluest Eye is Toni Morrison's first novel, written during the 1960s and published in 1970. Through several narrative techniques and different voices, it tells us the story of Pecola Breedlove, a black little girl who is greatly traumatized and who has lost her sanity due to a series of abuses that she suffers in her life. Those include emotional, psychological, physical and sexual abuse—and they come from society as a whole, from the community around her, and even (maybe especially) from her own family.

The eleven-year-old girl lives with her father, mother and brother in Lorain, Ohio. When her father, Cholly Breedlove, burns down their house, the family spreads out for a few weeks. While her older brother runs away, Pecola spends a few days in the MacTeer's house. Claudia, the youngest MacTeer, is one of the narrators of the novel, and the time Pecola spends in her house gives Claudia some insight related to the issues that the other girl faces—and possibly the desire to narrate her story, years later.

The narrative takes place in the years of 1940 and 1941. During that two-year period, Pecola is frequently and repeatedly bullied and mistreated by classmates, teachers, neighbors and family. The young Breedlove thinks of herself as ugly and attributes the abuse she suffers to such ugliness. She reckons that if she were beautiful and had blue eyes, then no one would be cruel to her.

After enduring so much abuse and mistreatment, Pecola finally descends into madness as a result of her baby being born too soon and dying. Her pregnancy is the consequence of a very traumatic episode in itself: her father had raped her. The whole event shatters Pecola's already harmed sense of self:

The damage done was total. She spent her days, her tendrils, sap-green days, walking up and down, up and down, her head jerking to the beat of a drummer so distant only she could hear. Elbows bent, hands on shoulders, she flailed her arms like a bird in an eternal, grotesquely futile effort to fly. Beating the air, a winged but grounded bird, intent on the blue void it could not reach—could not even see—but which filled the valleys of the mind. (*TBE* 202)

This passage is narrated by Claudia MacTeer, who is now an adult, reflecting on and trying to understand the terrible events that happened to Pecola and to their community. It is through the stories of the youngest Breedlove and the people that surround her that the novel brings to discussion issues related to race, gender and identity.

To discuss *The Bluest Eye*, it is also important to take into consideration that the novel was written in the United States in the 1960s, which Morrison herself describes as “a time of great social upheaval in the lives of black people” in the afterword added to the novel in 1993 (*TBE* 208). It is precisely with this period that we shall begin our discussion of the novel.

2.1 Quiet as it's Kept: Civil Rights Movement, the Black Art Movement and the Lack of Space for Black Women

As I have previously discussed in my undergraduate thesis “Identity, Race and Gender in Toni Morrison’s *The Bluest Eye*”, the inequalities and injustice that black people still face nowadays in the United States have their origin in the slavery process that Africans endured as they were taken to America. Throughout most of the 20th century, a series of mobilizations, events and protests happened in the country. They intended to question, fight and change the mistreatment and abuse that African Americans were subjugated to on a daily basis. Such

series of events would eventually culminate in what became known as the Civil Rights Movement.

Once the American Civil War of 1861-1865 was over, the Reconstruction period began. In that period, African Americans protested segregation in different spheres—such as education and public transportation—and demanded the right to vote. Nevertheless, a large number of white citizens—especially in the South—promoted violence against black people. Aware of the very recent war and wary of possible consequences such as rallies and the loss of votes, many national political leaders refrained from advocating for African Americans' rights. This led to the establishment of legalized segregation by the Supreme Court in *Plessy v. Ferguson* (1896), which determined that blacks would have “separate-but-equal” facilities (Palmer 471).

In the beginning of the 20th century, organizations were created in order to advocate for civil rights for black people. One of the most prominent amongst these organizations was the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP⁵), which claimed for racial equality and aimed at educating elite public opinion, hoping to develop in them a more accepting and respectable attitude towards African Americans. They acted primarily through courts and had some well-known members, such as the writer and scholar W.E.B. Du Bois. However, even with the NAACP winning some cases in court, institutional segregation remained strong.

Even though African American protests and actions promoting equality and respect happened throughout the 20th century, there are two events that most notoriously ignited what we often refer to as the Civil Rights Movement. The first was when NAACP secretary Rosa Parks refused to give up her seat to a white man on a segregated bus and was sent to jail for it. This fact led to the formation of The Montgomery Improvement Association, which promoted

⁵ Details on the NAACP's history, objectives and members can be found on the website for the organization.

a boycott of the bus system. The chosen leader for such boycott was a man who had arrived in Montgomery only a year before: Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., who would become one of the most prominent figures for The Civil Rights Movement. The boycott lasted for over a year and was marked as a period of hardship: King was arrested, his house was bombed, and African American citizens had to walk several miles every day in order to avoid riding segregated buses. Nevertheless, it also brought favorable results: in *Browder v. Gale* (1956), the Supreme Court ruled that racial segregation on buses was unconstitutional.

Under King's leadership, the Civil Rights Movement adopted a philosophy of nonviolent protest and resistance to injustice and discrimination. The reverend and his followers sought the end of segregation in the country, interracial brotherhood, and equality for all, sustaining integrationist ideals⁶. With a philosophy that was similar to that of Mahatma Ghandi, King advocated for the readiness to suffer instead of the willingness to cause harm in the confrontation of authorities. He also believed in exposing the cruelty and inequity of segregation through the new media, which would then prompt those in powerful positions to end it. In order to do that, black activists promoted nonviolent protests that included sit-ins that targeted Jim Crow⁷ public accommodations in the South and lunch counters that served whites only, boycotts of offending stores, and peaceful marches. The massive public support and the big number of protests pressed President Lyndon Johnson into signing the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the National Voting Rights Act of 1965. Discrimination based on race, color, religion, sex or national origin were now outlawed, segregation was considered unconstitutional and discriminatory voting practices were deemed illegal (Palmer 474-476).

⁶Dr. King's philosophies of equality can be clearly identified in his most well-known speech: *I Have a Dream*, which was delivered at the Lincoln Memorial in Washington D.C. on 28 August 1963. The following quote is an excerpt from such speech: "I have a dream that one day on the red hills of Georgia, the sons of former slaves and the sons of former slave owners will be able to sit down together at the table of brotherhood."

⁷A set of laws which enforced racial segregation in the South. They were created during the Reconstruction period and were legal until the Civil Rights Movement era. For more information, see Palmer.

Nevertheless, new divisions and differing strategies were emerging amongst the black movements for social justice and racial equality. During a march through Mississippi in 1966⁸, Kwame Ture (Stokely Carmichael⁹), then a member of the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), criticized the belief in white goodwill and nonviolence. Instead, he claimed for “black power” (Palmer 476). The emphasis of the movement shifted from judicial segregation to social-economic segregation: poverty, police brutality, and unequal access to education, housing and employment were still very real in the lives of African Americans.

This new division would become known as the Black Power Movement, whose activists advocated for black political empowerment and self-defense in order to improve the lives of African Americans and adequately satisfy their needs. The slogan “Black Power” was chosen as an alternative to “We Shall Overcome”, which had previously been unofficially adopted by the Civil Rights Movement (Rucker 662-663). In *Black Power: The Politics of Liberation in America* (1967), Kwame Ture and Charles Hamilton wrote that their book and the movement as a whole were about

Black people taking care of business—the business of and for black people. The stakes are really very simple: if we fail to do this, we face continued subjection to a white society that has no intentions of giving up willingly or easily its position of priority and authority. If we succeed, we will exercise control over our lives, politically, economically and psychically. (1)

⁸This march would become known as the James Meredith March Against Fear. Meredith was the first black student to attend the University of Mississippi in 1962. In 1966, he decided to go on a solitary march from Memphis, Tennessee, to Jackson, Mississippi, in order to encourage the black community to register to vote. On the second day of the march, he was shot by a sniper—a white salesman. Even though Meredith survived the wounds, he could not continue the march right away. Instead, other Civil Rights Movement’s leaders (such as King and Ture) took his place. For more information, see Bailey.

⁹Kwame Ture was born Stokeley Standiford Churchill Carmichael. However, when he moved to Guinea in 1969, he adopted the new name of Kwame Ture.

In Professor Walter Rucker's understanding, Ture and Hamilton essentially define black power as the mobilizing of African Americans to use their political voices in order to create semiautonomous communities in which black business provided jobs for black people, black-controlled political parties and black elected-officials represented the interests of African Americans, black police officers patrolled their communities and African Americans learned how to use self-defense in order to protect their lives. As Rucker summarizes it, "black power can be seen as a 'community-control' form of black nationalism" (663).

Meanwhile, an artistic movement that cultural critic and playwright Larry Neal defined as the "aesthetic and spiritual sister of the Black Power concept" was also emerging: the Black Arts Movement (1). In congruence with the Black Power Movement, the Black Arts Movement also advocated for the development of a black consciousness and culture separated from those of white America. In Neal's words,

It envisions an art that speaks directly to the needs and aspirations of Black America. In order to perform this task, the Black Arts Movement proposes a radical reordering of the western cultural aesthetic. It proposes a separate symbolism, mythology, critique, and iconology. The Black Arts and the Black Power concept both relate broadly to the Afro-American's desire for self-determination and nationhood. Both concepts are nationalistic. One is concerned with the relationship between art and politics; the other with the art of politics (1)

Neal also notes that the two movements began to merge, with the political values of the Black Power finding concrete expression in what Black Arts Movement poets, musicians, artists and writers were creating. Just as Black Power highlighted the necessity for African Americans to create communities of their own and define society and the world in their own

terms, the Black Arts Movement sought to create and develop aesthetics that would also be their own, not organized and evaluated by white Western standards. According to Neal, many of the African American writers of the period were reevaluating concepts such as the Western aesthetic, the social role of art and the role of the writers themselves. In his understanding, this reevaluation resulted in the necessity of developing a black aesthetic. In “Reform and Revolution, 1965-1976: the Black Aesthetic at Work” (2011), scholars Howard Rambsy II and James Smethurst explain the Black Aesthetic as “the formation of a system of aesthetic value rooted in African American traditions through which the art of the black nation and the Black Nationalist Movement could be created, evaluated and taught” (415). Therefore, we can understand that much of the art of the period was related to the affirmation of black culture and the call for racial pride.

Nonetheless, as Toni Morrison observes in an interview to *The Visionary Project*¹⁰, most of the work that was being published at the period was written by black men and felt very aggressive. In scholar bell hooks’s understanding, twentieth century black male leaders strongly supported patriarchy, deeming it necessary to relegate black women to subordinate positions in the political sphere and in home life. She calls attention, for instance, to how contradictory is the poet Amiri Baraka’s vision of a new black nation. While he claims that it will have distinctly different values from those of the white world, the social structure imagined is based on the same patriarchal foundation as white American society. In hooks’s assessment, that is a common stance among the Black Power and Black Arts Movement activists. The scholar states that

While the 60s black power movement was a reaction against racism, it was also a movement that allowed black men to overtly announce their support of patriarchy.

¹⁰“Toni Morrison Talks About Her Motivation For Writing”, available on YouTube.

Militant black men were publicly attacking the white male patriarchs for their racism but they were also establishing a bond of solidarity with them based on their shared acceptance of and commitment to patriarchy. The strongest bonding element between militant black men and white men was their shared sexism—they both believed in the inherent inferiority of woman and supported male dominance. Another bonding element was the black male's acknowledgment that he, like the white male, accepted violence as the primary way to assert power. (137)

Very possibly connected to this male-centered assertiveness of the period are Claudia's opening sentences in *The Bluest Eye*: "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" (3). In the afterword to the novel, Morrison explains that the opening phrase "quiet as it's kept" held several attractions for her. Some are connected to how familiar the words felt; as a child listening to adults, as a black woman talking to other black women about a certain story or anecdote. Others are connected to how it can immediately be linked to oral language; and others still to how it can establish a certain intimacy between the reader and the page right away. Additionally, there is also something related to how conspiratorial the words sound, in a conspiracy that is both "held and withheld, exposed and sustained" (*TBE* 208). Morrison says that writing the novel was just like that: publicly exposing a private confidence. She also reminds us that we need to remember the political climate of the period during which the book was written (1965-1969) in order to fully comprehend the duality of such position. As she explains, "the writing was the disclosure of secrets, secrets 'we' shared and those withheld from us by ourselves and by the world outside the community" (208, emphasis in the original).

In contrast to the very aggressive, assertive, racial uplifting and male-centered works of the period, Morrison decided to focus on a figure that she describes as “the most delicate member of society: a child; the most vulnerable member, a female” (206). It seems that, in order to promote healing, Morrison believed that first some wounds had to be properly addressed.

2.2 Here is the House: Structure and Voices

In *Trauma Fiction*, Anne Whitehead calls attention to the fact that several novels which address traumatic events use narrative forms that do not present or achieve coherence and closure. Instead, they show and reflect in their own structure the traces of traumatic disruption and discontinuity, creating a narrative voice that is dispersed or fragmented (84; 142).

In *The Bluest Eye*, we do not have a linear, easily pieced-together narrative. What we do have is a variety of voices and narrative techniques, all of which need to be carefully considered in order to properly understand the story presented by the book. First, for instance, we encounter a school primer:

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. (*TBE.1*)

Dick and Jane were the main characters in the popular series written by William Elson and William Gray. First published in the 1930s, these primers were frequently used to teach children to read in public American schools. Dick was a brown-haired boy and Jane was a blond girl, and they were part of a suburban white middle-class family. As Debra Werrlein observes in “Not so Fast, Dick and Jane: Reimagining Childhood and Nation in *The Bluest Eye*” (2005), families like Dick and Jane’s were meant to symbolize the triumph of capitalism and democracy in the United States. The primers were meant to teach middle-class children how to be “true American boys and girls”, inspiring in them patriotic dreams of serving the country through self-sufficiency, hard work, self-sacrifice and bravery (57). Nevertheless, Werrlein also notes that such patriotic sentiments seemed to target white children exclusively. As African Americans were not included in the government housing subsidies that prompted white citizens to leave crowded cities, the number of black families living in the suburbs was small. Therefore, if the white suburban families were a symbol of morality, prosperity and patriotism, representative of “true Americanness”, the black urban working-class families were left to be seen as “un-American” (57-58). This is a deliberate choice that we can link to one of Morrison’s analysis in *Playing in the Dark* (1993). The scholar notes that “cultural identities are formed and informed by a nation’s literature” (39). From the beginning of the colonial era, there was a conscious effort for the construction of the American as a new white man in the literature of the United States (39). With the Elson-Gray primers, we can see that this effort endured for centuries (it is even recurrent nowadays, after all).

Following the first version of the primer, we have two others—which are the same, but different. They are the same in that they present the exact same text as the first version: they introduce Dick and Jane, the rest of their family, the house where they live, and Jane’s friend. They are different in that the second version of the primer has no punctuation or capitalization. It is a little confusing and disorienting, but it can still be read and understood with only a little effort. However, the third version becomes a lot more complicated. In addition to the absence of punctuation and capitalization, it also lacks space between the letters. The image we get is one of a scramble of letters whose meaning is much harder to grasp. In fact, had we not previously known what words the primer is spelling, it is possible that we would simply not understand this version—unless we were willing to spend quite a few minutes deciphering it.

In “Text, Primers, and Voices in Toni Morrison’s *The Bluest Eye*” (2000), Carl Malmgren states that critical readings of the three versions of the primer have typically understood them to be representative of different families. The first one is commonly read as representing the life of white suburban families, “orderly and ‘readable’” (152, emphasis in the original). The second one is connected to the MacTeer family, “confused but still readable” (152). Finally, the third version is seen as a representation of the Breedlove family, “incoherent and unintelligible” (152). Snippets of this third, convoluted and unreadable version of the primer are also used to open certain sections of the novel. More specifically, they open the sections that can be linked to one of the Breedlove family members or to a harmful situation faced by Pecola, accordingly to the words that they read. For instance, the section that focuses on Pauline Breedlove (Pecola’s mother) opens with “SEEMOTHERMOTHERISVERYNICEMOTHERWILLYOUPLAYWITHJANEMOTHER

LAUGHSLAUGHMOTHERLAUGHLA¹¹” (*TBE* 109). This seems to corroborate the reading of the third version of the primer as connected to the Breedloves.

The MacTeers are clearly distinct from the white suburban families both represented and targeted as the primary audience for the Elson-Gray primers. The MacTeers are, for one, black and poor. However, even as they do not fit the fabricated image of a “true American”, their version of the primer is still readable: they are a loving family that survives through resilience and support (24).

The Breedloves are a different case. Their family is not like Dick and Jane’s, and it is not like the MacTeers’ either. As Morrison explains in the afterword, she “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” (*TBE* 206-207). The completely unintelligible and confusing situation of the Breedloves results from poverty, lack of affection and racism (both external and internalized). Their chaotic version of the primer also reflects their view of themselves as meaningless and possessing no value (Gomes 24).

In fact, this disbelief in one’s own value is one of the patterns of behavior that Joy Degruy has linked to Post Traumatic Slave Syndrome (*PTSS* 105). This vacant esteem is connected to the belief that one has little or no worth, which is usually exacerbated by the group and societal pronouncement of their inferiority. According to Degruy, vacant esteem is the net result of three spheres of influence: society, one’s community and one’s family. Society influences people through its laws, policies, institutions, and media. The communities in which we live establish norms and encourage us to conform to society. Families influence us through how we are raised and prepared to take our place, as understood by our parental figures, in our community and society. If all of these influences promote a limiting identity to

¹¹ In the first version of the primer, this reads as “See Mother. Mother is very nice. Mother, will you play with Jane? Mother laughs. Laugh, Mother, laugh” (*TBE* 1).

which we believe that we are confined, this may result in vacant esteem. According to Degruy, as a symptom of Post Traumatic Slave Syndrome, vacant esteem is transmitted from generation to generation through the family, community and society (*PTSS* 108-109). As she explains, when the parents in a family believe that they have little or no value, it is commonly reflected in behaviors that can instill in their children a similar belief. This notion is passed from generation to generation in the form of unexamined, often long-established, child upbringing practices (*PTSS* 109). This type of behavior is easily identifiable in the members of the Breedlove family and pointed out by the narrator of the novel:

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. (*TBE* 36-37).

This passage is one of the many indications present in the novel of the feelings of vacant esteem experienced by all the members of the Breedlove family. With the mentioning of a master who stated that the Breedloves were ugly and confirmation of that statement easily available in billboards and movies, it also hints at another Post Traumatic Slave Syndrome symptom: the adoption of the slave master’s value system (*PTSS* 116). As Degruy explains, “at this value system’s foundation is the belief that white and all things associated with whiteness are superior; and that black and all things associated with blackness are inferior” (*PTSS* 116). Considering that they live in a larger society that claims that only white is desirable and that shows only white people getting portrayed in movies and books as true, respectable citizens, it is no wonder that the Breedloves come to associate their blackness with inferiority. Furthermore, Morrison’s choice of words with “master” is indeed incredibly powerful. It hints precisely at how many traumatic effects of the slavery process have been transmitted from generation to generation. In addition to that, oppression and institutionalized racism have also continued to exist. We can infer that once, slave masters said that black was ugly and inferior. At the present time in the novel (1940s), billboards and movies still make the same statement.

Following the three versions of the school primer, we have an italicized short section, which introduces Claudia MacTeer, the primary narrator of the novel. The second sentence

stated by this narrator is quite interesting: “we thought, at the time, that it was because Pecola was having her father’s baby that the marigolds did not grow” (3). These words already point to some of the polyphony we will find throughout the novel: while it is obvious that time has passed and that a now adult Claudia is reminiscing about the past, there is also a childlike quality to how these events are phrased. The sentence is informing us about an incestuous relationship—which can be quite a shocking beginning for a novel. It becomes more disturbing as we quickly associate it to rape. Furthermore, the narrator’s focus on the marigolds while almost offhandedly offering the shocking information about the incest and rape makes us suspect that our narrator may be a child. After all, it is a curious way to talk about what happened, as it obscures the disturbing events in favor of focusing on something that seems a lot more trivial. Thus, we begin our story with a voice that belongs to an adult, but still manages to resemble that of a child. This will continue throughout certain sections of the novel. As Malmgren observes, even if these sections are narrated in the first person, they are still “double-voiced, aware of the difference between the experiencing ‘I’ and the narrating ‘I’” (146, emphasis in the original). He also notes that Claudia commonly shifts from speaking as the nine-year-old who is experiencing the situation to presenting an adult perspective that informs us of events in the past. Furthermore, there are times when she seems to be speaking from the moment of the enunciation itself, questioning her own memories and offering her present evaluation of past incidents (Malmgren 146).

These sections narrated in the first person by Claudia are commonly referred to as the seasonal sections in critical readings. They are named Autumn, Winter, Spring and Summer. Each of them interweaves episodes of Claudia’s life with Pecola’s, as they share a bed or go to school together. There are also seven primer sections—each of them relating to some part of the initial school primer through different voices. The end of the novel is again narrated by

Claudia in a type of coda as she reviews the outcomes of the story and reflects on the possible meaning of everything that happened.

In summary, what we have is: an epigraph with the three versions of the primer, a type of overture introducing Claudia as the main narrator, four seasonal sections narrated in the first-person by Claudia, seven primer sections that follow different characters, and a kind of coda, once again narrated by Claudia. As for narrative voices, we have those of Claudia as a child, of Claudia as an adult reminiscing about the past, of a third-person narrator who tells us stories and events related to the Breedlove family and the community around them, the focalization and point-of-view of a few characters such as Pauline, Cholly and Soaphead Church, an italicized first-person narration whose narrator is Pauline, and a dialogue (or monologue) between a Pecola who has succumbed to madness and her imaginary friend. This last one is the only moment in the novel that we get to hear Pecola's voice, and by then, she has already been raped and gotten pregnant. She is not sane anymore, and she does not get the opportunity to really narrate her story (all we have, after all, is this obsessive dialogue between the girl and her imaginary friend).

These fragmented structures and disperse voices are some of the stylistic features that Whitehead identifies as recurrent in fiction novels that deal with traumatic events (142). They demand effort and attention from the reader, who has to put together the different pieces of the story, considering the distinct perspectives presented throughout the novel, in order to better understand the events that happened in the book. This effort of piecing stories together and reading the perspectives of different characters also helps us identify and understand what the scholars who claim for the decolonization of trauma theory have been stating: that event-model theories may be insufficient to analyze the traumatic effects that stem from colonization. According to Craps, one sole racist incident may not be traumatizing, but the accumulation and repetition of racist aggressions or micro-aggressions can insidiously result

in traumatization (*PW* 26). Looking at all the stories presented in *The Bluest Eye*, we can see that many of its characters (especially the Breedloves) have been affected by repeated racist encounters that have changed or defined their perception of themselves. Therefore, even the comfort of simply blaming Cholly is denied to an attentive reader. Learning about him helps us understand that he is not only a perpetrator of violence; he has been a victim himself—one who never healed and who grew up to inflict on others the pain and humiliation that was inflicted on him. This helps avoid a totalizing view and makes us able to look at the events of the novel as connected to a wider social issue.

2.2 Here is the Family: Pauline and Cholly Breedlove

As I have previously mentioned, one of the behavioral patterns that Degruy links to the Post Traumatic Slave Syndrome is something that she calls racist socialization. According to her, through centuries of slavery and decades of institutionalized racism, many African Americans have been socialized to adopt the attitudes and views of white, racist America. As a result, several black people try to mold themselves to accommodate white prejudices, and to adopt their standards (*PTSS* 116). She also notes that this is manifested in a number of ways; one of them consisting precisely of the adoption of white standards—such as those of beauty and material success—by many African Americans.

Degruy also links the pursuit of the white ideal of beauty to the slavery period. She explains that when slave masters had children with a black slave, they would sometimes allow the child to work or even live in their houses. Born from miscegenation, these offspring would typically have lighter skin tones and straighter hair when compared to the other slaves. Therefore, light skin and straight hair quickly came to be features associated with an improved quality of life (*PTSS* 117).

As Degruy observes, the racist socialization of African Americans started with slavery and continued throughout American history. She notes that many books have commonly referred to black people as dirty, immoral, and stupid for centuries. When movies became popular in the beginning of the 20th century, the roles reserved for African Americans would constantly be those of servants or buffoons—if they had any roles at all, that is. Even as decades went by and the radio and the television were created, representation did not really improve. It was still very rare to see black characters portrayed as competent, dignified, complex, loving human beings (*PTSS* 118). All of this creates an impact on which Degruy gives us some insight:

African Americans have a unique socialization experience due to having centuries of systematic and traumatic programming of inferiority. This inferiority covered all aspects of one's being. In other words, from the beginning Africans were taught they were inferior physically, emotionally, intellectually and spiritually, thus rendering them completely ineffectual in their own eyes and the eyes of the society around them. At the end of slavery little changed in dispelling these notions. In fact, since the abolition of slavery such notions have continued to infiltrate all aspects of American life. (*PTSS* 118)

The effects of this process that Degruy calls racist socialization can be easily seen in the behavior and ideas of many of the characters in *The Bluest Eye*. In fact, Degruy gives us a piece of information that can be quite relevant to the analysis of the Breedlove family. In the mid-1800s, a black woman became the first-self made female American millionaire. She achieved this by marketing cosmetic products, among which were hair-growth solutions and a

French-made metal comb that could straighten hair. This woman became better known as Madam C. J. Walker, but she was born Sarah Breedlove (*PTSS* 117).

It is undoubtedly remarkable that Madam C. J. Walker achieved fortune and success. Nonetheless, it is also relevant to consider that some of the products which she advertised aimed to straighten African American women's hair. As mentioned before, light skin and straight hair have been commonly associated to a beauty standard that is Western and white. Therefore, the choice of the surname Breedlove can be quite meaningful for a family whose members desperately seek to fit such standard, even as it does not accommodate them.

We have, for instance, the case of Pauline Breedlove, Pecola's mother. As the third-person narrator of Pauline's primer section informs us, the woman had begun to equate physical beauty with virtue. As consequence of doing that, she started feeling more and more self-contempt. What prompted Pauline's dreams and aspirations of romantic love and physical beauty were her excursions to the movies. In relation to that, the narrator tells us that the woman "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" (*TBE* 120). As the main characters and heroines in the movies were typically white at the time, it is not difficult to understand what physical appearance Pauline learned to equate with beauty and desirability.

Nevertheless, the racist socialization to which Pauline was exposed did not start with the movies. When she and Cholly—then recently and happily married—decided to move from Kentucky to Lorain, Ohio, Pauline felt a significant shift in her life:

"[...] I don't know what all happened. Everything changed. It was hard to get to know folks up here, and I missed my people. I weren't used to so much white folks. The ones I seed before was something hateful, but they didn't come around too much. I mean,

we didn't have too much truck with them. Just now and then in the fields, or at the commissary. But they want all over us. Up north they was everywhere—next door, downstairs, all over the streets—and colored folks few and far between. Northern colored folk was different too. Dicty-like. No better than whites for meanness. They could make you feel just as no-count, 'cept I didn't expect it from them. That was the lonest time of my life [...]" (TBE 115, emphasis in the original)

We are also informed by the third-person narrator that Pauline felt uncomfortable in the presence of the other black women she met in Kentucky. For one, said women were amused by the fact that Pauline did not straighten her hair. In addition to that, they would not so discreetly snicker at her clothes and the way she pronounced some words—such as “chil'ren” (TBE 116).

In order to be accepted by the other women, Pauline decided to start buying clothes which she knew would be approved by them. However, those expenses started causing trouble for her and Cholly. To avoid having to ask him for money, she decided to have a job of her own, but that did not help—they kept fighting about purchases and money, as he spent his on alcohol and she spent hers on clothes. In relation to that, the narrator tells us that “the sad thing was that Pauline did not really care for clothes and makeup. She merely wanted other women to cast favorable glances her way” (TBE 116). This can once again be linked to the adoption of white standards of beauty and material success that Degruy mentions. Pauline does not even care about the clothes she has started wearing, but society dictates them as fashionable and proper. Therefore, she needs them in order to fit in and prove her taste and status—even if they are not genuine for her.

Pauline acquired the habit of going to the movies when she became pregnant for the first time. She says that “*the onliest time I be happy seem like when I was in the picture show*”

and that the same movies that gave her so much pleasure “*made coming home hard, and looking at Cholly hard*” (TBE 121, emphasis in the original). This happened because the films that she saw would show white men “*taking such good care of they women*”, and the women wearing fancy clothes and living in big, clean houses (TBE 121, emphasis in the original). The material wealth that the main characters tended to have in the movies was not attainable to Pauline, and her husband was not a white gentleman. Therefore, her expectations were frustrated and her reality became unbearable.

In an attempt to get closer to what she saw on the silver screen, Pauline decided to draw inspiration from a movie star. When attending the screening of a picture starred by Clark Gable and Jean Harlow, Pauline styled her hair after the way she had seen Harlow use hers in a magazine photo shoot. The woman was feeling very good about herself until she ate a piece of candy that broke her tooth: “*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*” (TBE 121). In this passage, we can see the effects of racist socialization on Pauline: society as a whole and the entertainment business have stated that the way she looks is not pretty. Movie heroines are white, have straight hair and wealth, and they are the very image of beauty (it is what the world around her says, after all). Pauline is black, does not have straight hair, and has now lost a tooth; therefore, she must be ugly.

Another moment that we can interpret as insidiously traumatizing in Pauline’s life happens when she gives birth to Pecola (her second baby). As she was determined to love and cherish her younger child, Pauline decided to have her in the hospital so she “*could be easeful*” (TBE 122, emphasis in the original). However, once there, she was treated with prejudice and disdain:

[...] *some more doctors come. One old one and some young ones. The old one was learning the young ones about babies. Showing them how to do. When he got to me he said now these here women you don't have any trouble with. They deliver right away and with no pain. Just like horses. The young ones smiled a little. They looked at my stomach and between my legs. They never said nothing to me. Only one looked at me. Looked at my face, I mean. I looked right back at him. He dropped his eyes and turned red. He knowed, I reckon, that maybe I weren't no horse foaling. But them others. They didn't know. They went on. I seed them talking to them white women: 'How you feel? Gonna have twins?' Just shucking them, of course, but nice talk. Nice friendly talk. [...] I moaned something awful. The pains wasn't as bad as I let on, but I had to let them people know having a baby was more than a bowel movement. I hurt just like them white women. (TBE 122-123, emphasis in the original)*

The dehumanization in this passage is clear: black women are seen as closer to horses than to white women. The doctors disregard Pauline's feelings completely, not talking to her and not even looking her in the eye. The only exception is the one young student Pauline mentions, but he is probably too scared or just simply not interested enough in making the woman feel more comfortable. Once again, the difference in treatment that black and white women receive is evident for Pauline to see.

When the baby is born, Pauline says that "*she looked different from what I thought*" (TBE 123, emphasis in the original). The woman had been determined to love the child during her pregnancy, willing to find in her a companion, someone to love and be loved by in return. However, as soon as the child is born, there is something that bothers Pauline. She recognizes that the baby is smart—it was much easier to breastfeed her than it had been to do the same to Sammy. Nevertheless, Pauline is not quite able to hide her frustration: "*But I knowed she was*

ugly. Head full of pretty hair, but Lord she was ugly” (TBE 124, emphasis in the original). Since we know that Pauline had learned and molded her scale of beauty in relation to what she saw in the movies, we can infer that Pecola had very dark skin. The child’s lack of beauty and desirability in Pauline’s eyes hindered the biggest intention that she had had with her new pregnancy: loving that kid unconditionally.

When the children were still young, Pauline went back to work. She decided that she was too old for dreams and movies, and that she needed to grow up. In the process of doing so, she “developed a hatred for things that mystified or obstructed her; acquired virtues that were easy to maintain; assigned herself a role in the scheme of things; and harked back to simpler times for gratification” (TBE 124). The woman went back to church and decided to hold herself to higher moral grounds than Cholly and the women who despised her. She also started saying “childring” instead of “chil’reen”, let another tooth fall, and began to act shocked and outraged by women who “thought only of clothes and men” (TBE 124). In addition to all of this, Pauline got a job in the house of a white middle-class family. There, “she became what is known as an ideal servant, for such a role filled practically all of her needs” (TBE 125). The woman became enchanted with the linen, draperies, embroidered pillows and sheets, porcelain tubs, and hot, clean water. Pauline thought of the quality of the materials and furniture in her workplace as so much better when compared to those in her home that

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 found beauty, order, cleanliness, and praise. (*TBE* 125)

The Fishers referred to Pauline as the ideal servant, and the title made her proud. She relished in how creditors, service people, and vendors were even a little intimidated by her when she was representing the Fishers. Finally, she found joy in the fact that her employers gave her a nickname for the first time in her life: Polly.

When we look at Pauline's journey, we can make a few observations. Her life was not easy when she lived in Alabama or in Kentucky, but it was not terribly lonesome either. She had her family and a community that she could connect with, even if not completely. This changed when she and Cholly, who had been so happy and in love, moved to Ohio. It seems to have been by this point in her life that Pauline became more explicitly exposed to racist socialization—through other women pointing out the ways in which she did not fit what they considered to be the beauty standard, and through the ideals which she became acquainted with in the movie pictures. As the world around her told her that material wealth and physical beauty were important, and that physical beauty was connected to light skin and straight hair, Pauline attempted to seek those as best as she could. Nevertheless, it did not really work: she could not fit the Western white standard of beauty. As she realized that this achievement was impossible for both her and her children, Pauline turned to a different role that was also present in the movies that she used to love: that of the faithful servant.

It is interesting to see the way Pauline's perceptions shift as she accepts this new role. When she lived in Kentucky, she thought of the few white folk that she saw there as hateful (*TBE* 115). As she moved to Lorain and started working for a white family, she thought of them as petty and nasty (*TBE* 118-119). In the hospital during labor, Pauline wanted the disdainful white doctors to see that she felt as much pain as any white woman (*TBE* 122-123).

However, after Pecola is born and the woman decides to go back to work, there is a significant shift in her perception of white people as she assigns herself “a role in the scheme of things” (*TBE* 124). Now, she feels proud to be called “the ideal servant”, and she relishes in the order and cleanliness that she finds in the Fishers’ household. She treats their daughter more lovingly than she does Pecola or Sammy. White people are no longer seen as hateful, petty or disdainful, but as habitants of the world that she would like to be a part of herself. If the role of servant is the only one available for Pauline in such world, then she will do it: she will play that part flawlessly.

Clearly, people are different. With the Jim Crow laws in the South, it was quite possible that the white people in Alabama and Kentucky indeed represented a more imminent physical threat to Pauline. In addition to that, it is also possible that the Fishers were simply gentler than the first family that Pauline worked for or the white doctors that assisted in her labor. However, I do believe that her perception of herself and the world around her plays an important part in this change of views. For one, the fact that the Fishers call Pauline “the ideal servant” is quite racist. Furthermore, it seems that this shift happens when the woman decides to play her part in “the scheme of things” (*TBE* 124). By this point, it seems that Pauline is experiencing vacant esteem. She is ugly and she is not desirable: the best she can wish for herself is working for this white middle-class family who represents beauty and virtue.

Another behavior pattern that Degruy associates with Post Traumatic Slave Syndrome is ever present anger. She brings the concept of anger as an emotional response to a blocked goal. If a person’s goal is continuously blocked over time, they may start considering the possibility of failure. With that, comes fear, and one of the frequent human responses to feeling fearful is lashing out in anger. Therefore, “anger can be both a response to the frustration of blocked goals and the fear of failure” (*PTSS* 113). According to Degruy, integration into the greater society with all the rights, privileges and responsibilities that come

with membership has been one of the most significant goals of the African American community that has been consistently blocked by the dominant culture. Blacks have been lied to in regards to freedom, inclusion, security and prosperity, equality and justice, civil rights, fair housing, education, and jobs. Added to that is the historical component of slavery, which Degruy reminds us was an inherently angry and violent process (*PTSS* 114). She also states that “today the African American family has continued to rear their offspring to survive in the face of a multitude of indignities, disrespects and blocked goals” (*PTSS* 114-115). Among those, Degruy mentions blocked opportunities for education through the systematic elimination of affirmative action policies and blocked opportunities for economic self-sufficiency as the result of discriminatory bank lending policies, redlining and gentrification. The scholar also concludes that much of the anger is a reaction to hopes and dreams being repeatedly undermined by government institutions and the racism that permeates American society (*PTSS* 115). As she explains,

This is the experience of too many African Americans. It’s no wonder we’re angry. Even when we’re feeling good, an ever-present anger resides just below our surface. Anger at the violence, degradation and humiliation visited upon ourselves, our ancestors and our children; anger at being relegated to the margins of the society in which we live; anger at the misrepresentation and trivialization of our history and culture; and finally, anger at living in the wealthiest nation in the world and not having equal opportunity and access to its riches. (*PTSS* 115)

Degruy also observes that sometimes, feelings of anger cannot be openly directed to the institution or people who are causing them, because it would not be safe for the person who feels angry. According to her, it is very possible that “when the true target of a person’s

feelings is deemed to be out of reach, the person will take their feelings out on safer targets” (*PTSS* 113). She notes that those safer targets are typically the people who are closest to the one who feels mistreated and angry: their family and friends. This analysis can easily be linked to Cholly Breedlove.

When Cholly was fourteen years-old, he lost the only family he had ever known: his great aunt Jimmy. The old woman had rescued him when she saw her niece abandon Cholly—then a four-year-old baby—by the railroad. Soon after that, his mother ran away—which his father had already done before Cholly was even born. Several friends and family members attended Jimmy’s funeral, including cousins who Cholly had never met. One of them, Jake, was a little older than him, probably at around fifteen or sixteen. In an attempt to impress Jake, Cholly said that he knew a few of the girls who were at the wake. As Jake successfully invited one of the girls to go walk with him, Cholly did the same—and the girl that he invited was Darlene, for whom he had feelings.

As they walked, talked, laughed and ran, the two couples got separated. Eventually, Cholly and Darlene initiated what would be his first ever sexual relation. However, before they were done, the pair was interrupted by two white men. The men snickered and urged Cholly to continue what he had been doing, calling him a “nigger” and a “coon” (*TBE* 146-147). As the boy froze, one of the hunters lifted his gun. Sensing the threat, Cholly went back to his knees and “with a violence born of total helplessness, he pulled her dress up, lowered his trousers and underwear” (*TBE* 146). As the men kept laughing and taunting, Cholly “hated her. He almost wished he could do it—hard, long, and painfully, he hated her so much” (*TBE* 146).

Even as the hunters left because of their dogs’ howling nearby, Cholly could not return to his previous tenderness. If before he had been enjoying Darlene’s company and the

intimacy between them, he now despised her. These feelings continued even after they had returned to the funeral and throughout the following days:

Sullen, irritable, he cultivated his hatred of Darlene. Never did he once consider directing his hatred toward the hunters. Such an emotion would have destroyed him. They were big, white, armed men. [...] For now, he hated 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. (*TBE* 148-149)

This event and the consequences left by it indicate the misdirection of Cholly's anger. The ones who had threatened, taunted and humiliated him had been the white hunters. Nevertheless, the boy was powerless against them: because of age, physical, and racial factors. Even so, he had needed to lash out, and he did that by targeting someone whom he could actually overpower: Darlene. Cholly was aggressive during the rest of the intercourse, cold and distant as they returned to the house, and kept despising the girl in his mind for the next several days.

After this incident and afraid of the possibility of Darlene getting pregnant, Cholly decided to look for his father in Macon. However, the man easily dismissed him, even before Cholly could explain who he was. Completely alone in the world, the boy grew up to be a "free man", able to feel and express any emotion, capable of both acts of tenderness and acts of violence (*TBE* 157).

Not long after marrying Pauline and moving with her to Ohio, Cholly started to feel restless and restrained. He "wondered at the arrogance of the female" when faced with the matrimonial expectations of always sleeping with the same woman and finding excitement in

routine (*TBE* 158). From Pauline's section, we learn that Cholly started getting irritated when the woman asked him for money to buy clothes and make-up, and that the quarrels got even worse after she got herself a job. Cholly used Pauline's money to buy alcoholic drinks, hit her, and forced himself on her as she was sleeping—again displaying actions of violence.

With his children, he did not know how to act. The only parental figure he ever had had been an old woman. Even though Jimmy raised him and cared for him, the distance between their age, gender, and interests was ever-present. In addition to that, Cholly lost her at what was still a young age. Therefore, as he did not truly know how to raise his kids, he “reacted to them, and his reactions were based on what he felt at the moment” (*TBE* 159).

On a Saturday afternoon, Cholly went home drunk and saw Pecola—who was then eleven years-old—in the kitchen, washing the dishes. As he stared at her, he felt a mixture of revulsion, guilty, pity, and love. Cholly hated the love which he knew that he would see in his daughter's eyes if she turned around. The man saw no reason for her to love him, and felt frustrated and powerless as he contemplated about everything that he would never be able to give to his daughter: “What could his heavy arms and befuddled brain accomplish that would earn him his own respect, that would in turn allow him to accept her love?” (*TBE* 159-160). However, these musings were interrupted by Pecola scratching the back of her calf with her foot. The gesture was similar to what Pauline had been doing when Cholly met her. Back then, he had taken to nibbling away the itch with his mouth, and now he repeated the same with his daughter.

As Cholly raped Pecola, he continued to be torn between emotions: “he wanted to fuck her—tenderly” (*TBE* 160-161). Nevertheless, as is the only possibility for a grown man sexually assaulting a child, violence was the predominant element of the act, and the girl fainted. Still torn between hatred and tenderness, the man did not pick his daughter up from

the floor, but covered her in a blanket. As we learn later in the novel, it was the first, but not the only time that this abusive act took place.

In the section during which the Breedlove family is introduced, the third-person narrator informs us of the traumatized impact that his first sexual experience has left on Cholly:

She [Pauline] was one of the few things abhorrent to him that he could touch and therefore hurt. He poured out on her the sum of all his inarticulate fury and aborted desires. Hating her, he could leave himself intact. When he was still very young, Cholly had been surprised in some bushes by two white men while he was newly but earnestly engaged in eliciting sexual pleasure from a little country girl. [...] For some reason Cholly had not hated the white men; he hated, despised, the girl. Even a half-remembrance of this episode, along with myriad other humiliations, defeat, and emasculations, could stir him into flights of depravity that surprised himself—but only himself. Somehow he could not astound. He could only be astounded. So he gave that up, too. (*TBE* 40-41)

Having experienced racist socialization from a young age and never finding healthy coping mechanisms, Cholly turned to anger. That anger could lead him to kill white men (we learn that he has killed at least three), to beat his wife during their quarrels, and even to rape his own daughter, who had not actually said or done anything to enrage him. This can be related to the ever present anger symptom that Degruy sees as typical of post traumatic slave syndrome. We can also identify in Cholly the symptom of vacant esteem (he does not think highly of himself and believes that he has nothing to offer to his children).

Furthermore, it is possible to link Cholly's character to the socio-historical context during which Toni Morrison wrote *The Bluest Eye*. Bell hooks remarks that

Black leaders, male and female, have been unwilling to acknowledge black male sexist oppression of black women because they do not want to acknowledge that racism is not the only oppressive force in our lives. Nor do they wish to complicate efforts to resist racism by acknowledging that black men can be victimized by racism but at the same time act as sexist oppressors of black women. [...] Exaggerated emphasis on the impact of racism on black men has evoked an image of the black male as effete, emasculated, crippled. And so intensely does this image dominate American thinking that people are absolutely unwilling to admit that the damaging effects of racism on black men neither prevents them from being sexist oppressors nor excuses or justifies their sexist oppression of black women. (hooks 122-123)

Amidst manifestos and works of fiction that focused almost exclusively on black men and on their strength, *The Bluest Eye* was written. In the novel, the most important male character can be extremely violent towards the women in his life, and the central characters are the two little girls whom will be our focus on the next subsections.

2.3: See Jane: Pecola Breedlove, the silenced voice

Pecola's own name is a very interesting element to analyze. During a conversation between the girl and a new student at school, the following exchange takes place:

“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.

“Anyway, her name was Pecola too. She was so pretty. When it comes back, I’m going to see it again. My mother has seen it four times.” (*TBE* 65-66)

The aforementioned movie was directed by John M. Stahl and released in 1934. It tells the story of a black woman named Delilah, who works for a white woman called Bea. Delilah cooks pancakes which Bea commercializes—something that gives the latter quite a lot of profit. The black character is docile and submissive in her ways, and she has a daughter whose name is actually Peola—and not Pecola, as Maureen incorrectly remembers. Peola has much lighter complexion and skin color when compared to her mother. This allows her to start passing, that is, assuming a white identity for herself and presenting herself as a white person to others.

As we know, Pauline was enchanted with picture shows and wanted to love and truly connect to her second baby. Therefore, it is very likely that she took inspiration from the movie to name her daughter. We do not know whether, like Maureen, she confused and misremembered the name of the character, or if she adapted it on purpose. Nevertheless, the fact that the names differ is quite meaningful. The Peola from *Imitation of Life* is seen as beautiful by the people around her. She can also fit the Western white standard of beauty because of her light skin and the possibility of passing. Meanwhile, Pecola has very dark skin

and is perceived by those around her as ugly—which is indeed related to her skin color. Just like the movie character, Pecola pursues the white ideal of beauty, but unlike Peola, she is not able to meet it. And since Pecola cannot be Peola—both because of their names and because of how their beauty is perceived by others—Pauline cannot fulfill her promise of loving her daughter.

Throughout the novel, we see Pecola's desire to meet the Western white ideal of beauty, and the frustration that follows each failed attempt. When we analyze a few episodes of the young girl's life, it is not difficult to understand how she came to link whiteness to beauty and care, and blackness to ugliness and mistreatment.

Maureen Peal is described by the narrator Claudia as a “high-yellow dream child with long brown hair”, who was “rich, at least by our standards, as rich as the richest of the white girls, swaddled in comfort and care” (*TBE* 60). Maureen enchanted the school; and nearly everyone that came in contact with her—from teachers to black kids to white kids—seemed to appreciate her and treat her well. The same boys who were taunting Pecola and chanting “Black e mo” in order to humiliate her stopped as soon as they saw Maureen approach the group behind Claudia and her sister Frieda (*TBE* 63). Therefore, when Pearl screamed at the three girls “I *am* cute! And you ugly! Black and ugly black e mos. I *am* cute!”, Pecola had every reason to believe her (*TBE* 71). Maureen had lighter skin and more money, and because of that, everyone treated her kindly, felt charmed by her, and considered her beautiful. With her dark skin, Pecola was seen as ugly, and in her mind, it had to be because of that ugliness that she was insulted and abused. In fact, this is a link which we know the girl has been able to recognize and articulate into thoughts:

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. [...] And it is the blackness that accounts for, that creates, the vacuum edged with distaste in white eyes. (*TBE* 46-47)

Since what Pecola sees is the people and the society around her consider white as beautiful and worthy of praise and nice treatment, she learns the same beauty scale that Pauline has learned in the movies. This means that she comes to think of her very dark skin and dark eyes as ugly—and that such ugliness is the explanation and source of her suffering: “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” (*TBE* 43). Therefore, we can see that Pecola comes to understand the violence with which Cholly and Pauline treat each other and their kids as her fault, in a sense. It is because of the way she looks that she has been designated to them; she is not white nor does she have blue eyes—therefore, she deserves to stay with the Breedloves.

The link between being black and getting treated with anger, and being white and getting treated with gentleness, is further established during an episode involving Pauline Breedlove. When Claudia and Frieda want to talk to Pecola, they go look for her at the back door of the Fischers’ house, where the girl is waiting for the laundry which she needs to deliver for her mother. As Claudia, Frieda and Pecola wait in the kitchen for Pauline to return with the clothes, the Fischer girl walks in: younger and smaller than the three, with blond hair, and in a pink dress. She asks where Polly is, which enrages Claudia, since Pecola herself is only allowed to call her mother Mrs. Breedlove. When Pecola reaches out to see if the pan

containing deep-dish berry cobbler is hot, she ends up spilling it on the floor and on her own legs, which makes her cry out in pain. It is then that Pauline walks back in, and

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. (*TBE* 107)

The commotion of the spilled pie juice and the screams of Pecola and Pauline makes the little Fischer girl start crying. Promptly, the older woman turns to her, hushing her gently and calling her “baby” (*TBE* 107). While there was “honey in her words” as Pauline talked to the Fischer girl, to the other three she continued to “spit out words to us like rotten pieces of apple” (*TBE* 107). Once more, the difference in treatment is evident for Pecola to see and wonder.

Repeatedly, we see Pecola living such encounters that lead her to associate blackness with ugliness and disgust, and whiteness with beauty, comfort and gentleness. When she goes inside Geraldine’s house, she is impressed by how beautiful it is. Later, even as the woman calls her a “nasty little black bitch” and tells her to leave her house, Pecola continues to think in terms of beauty: “Pecola backed out of the room, staring at the pretty milk-brown lady in the pretty gold-and-green house who was talking to her through the cat’s fur” (*TBE* 90). Throughout the novel, we get very few glimpses of Pecola’s thoughts and impressions. Therefore, it is very interesting that when we do experience a little of her focalization, the adjectives that we see her think of are “pretty” and “beautiful”—the ones which she has been taught to link to appreciation and affection. She does not think of the woman calling her names as cruel or mean; she is more impressed by her prettiness and by how such prettiness is

accompanied by a beautiful house. This leads us to believe that Pecola does not question the way she is treated anymore. Beauty is good and beauty deserves nice things—she is ugly, and so she gets humiliation and cruelty.

As I have previously discussed in chapter one, Stef Craps considers racism as a possible source of insidious trauma. This means that the accumulation of micro-aggressions is capable of traumatizing someone. As we have seen, Pecola has faced several racist episodes, during which she has been humiliated and verbally and physically abused. Some of the symptoms associated with post traumatic slave syndrome are indeed easily identified in the girl, such as her vacant esteem and the consequences of racist socialization. Pecola has come to think of herself as ugly and unworthy of a better life for as long as she looks the way she does. This leads her to wishing for the chance to disappear (*TBE* 43). As it cannot be done, the child comes up with another solution: the belief that she will someday be able to fit the value system that she has been made to internalize and adopt. This is precisely what leads her to start wishing for blue eyes, eyes which are “beautiful”, and in front of which her parents will not dare fight (*TBE* 44).

Those blue eyes that Pecola dreams of come only as the result of terrible traumatic events: the miscarriage of a baby who was the product of incest and rape. The whole ordeal finally becomes more than the little girl can withstand, and she descends into madness. Interestingly, it is only by then that we get to actually hear her voice during the novel, as she engages on a dialogue (or monologue) with some sort of imaginary friend. It is also how we discover that Pecola believes that she has acquired the most beautiful blue eyes, and that she thinks that they are the reason why people cannot stand to look at her anymore: “everybody’s jealous. Every time I look at somebody, they look off” (*TBE* 193). Nevertheless, even as Pecola believes that she has finally gotten the blue eyes which she has desired for so long, we can see that she still feels insecure. The girl constantly asks her imaginary friend if her eyes

are bluer than other people's, and if they are blue enough for her friend to like her. Deeply obsessed, she returns to the subject over and over:

Please. If there is somebody with bluer eyes than mine, then maybe there is somebody with the bluest eyes. The bluest eyes in the whole world.

That's just too bad, isn't it?

Please help me look.

No.

But suppose my eyes aren't blue enough?

Blue enough for what?

Blue enough for... I don't know. Blue enough for something. Blue enough... for you! (*TBE* 201)

In this passage, it becomes clear that Pecola does not even know why she needs to have the bluest eyes. She has only learned that there is a scale of beauty, and that the most beautiful you are considered, the most value you will have. In the same excerpt, we can also notice a pattern that is true for the entire exchange between Pecola and her imaginary friend: it is composed of dialogue only. This means that, once again, we are denied the chance of having a deeper look at Pecola's thoughts.

How little we get to see of Pecola's focalization is indeed very relevant as we analyze trauma and post traumatic stress disorder in *The Bluest Eye*. As I have discussed in chapter one, the field of the psychology of trauma considers the opportunity of transforming traumatic experiences into narrative accounts extremely important to recovery—even more so in the presence of an empathetic listener. In *The Bluest Eye*, Pecola is denied the chance of confiding in such a listener. In fact, the girl does not have any chance at all to narrate the

traumatic episodes which she has experienced. Even while talking to her imaginary friend, Pecola cannot turn the traumatic rape and miscarriage into a story with a beginning, a middle, and an end. It becomes clear that she is haunted as the friend poses insinuations and questions about what happened, but even then, Pecola continues to evade such inquiries. As she becomes more and more upset with the questioning, the little girl starts to contradict herself and beg for a change of topic. All throughout the exchange, she is unable to retell the events that took place in her home. She is definitely traumatized, haunted, and mentally ill. And since she does not have the opportunity to talk about the many racist experiences that she has faced, nor about the rape that has disrupted her sense of self, Pecola is not able to heal.

2.4: The friend will play with Jane: Claudia MacTeer and the promoting of healing through the revisiting of the past and the seeding of nurturing values

In “Texts, Primers, and Voices in Toni Morrison’s *The Bluest Eye*”, Malmgren argues that in spite of all the polyphony and multitextual strategies present in the novel, it is entirely organized by Claudia MacTeer. This means that all the texts and voices found in the book were composed and created by Claudia. In order to sustain such argument, Malmgren presents a number of evidences. The first is connected to the shift of perspectives in the seasonal passages, which show the adult narrator Claudia’s musings and reflections on events of her childhood. In these sections, the narrator alternates between the voice of a child and the voice of an adult looking back on the past. According to Malmgren, such passages indicate that this narrator has the insight and skill to make the type of discriminations in focalization which are present throughout the novel—and the stylistic resources which make some passages quite lyrical and poetic. Furthermore, the seasonal sections narrated by Claudia seem to be

connected to “an ideological project that is carried out in great detail elsewhere in the novel: the critique of cultural stereotypes imposed by the dominant white culture” (Malmgren 148). As Malmgren summarizes, in spite of the many voices and texts that compose it, *The Bluest Eye* is univocal and seamless in terms of theme. Finally, the scholar sees the fact that some imagery and word choices are repeated both in primer sections and in seasonal sections as an indicative that one single narrator is organizing the whole novel (Malmgren 149-151).

If we look at Claudia as the narrator organizing the entire novel, we can wonder at what presses her to tell this story. As a matter of fact, these questions start being answered at the very beginning of the book, as an adult MacTeer reminisces about Pecola’s miscarriage and the lack of marigolds in the fall of 1941. Following comments and thoughts that shift perspectives between her childhood and adult self, the narrator concludes that “*There is really nothing more to say—except why. But since why is difficult to handle, one must take refuge in how*” (*TBE* 5, emphasis in the original). This sentence seems to reveal an urge to revisit the past, to talk about what has transpired—possibly in order to try to make some sort of sense of everything that happened and to promote healing. Therefore, it seems possible and even plausible to assume that the traumatic past still haunts Claudia. Years later, she still thinks of Pecola and her baby, of their childhood days, of all of the loss that happened then. There is something that compels her to try to organize Pecola’s tale—the tale of their community. And if it is indeed Claudia organizing the entire novel, she is facing the reconstruction of traumatic events through the connecting and retelling of fragmented pieces of the story.

As I have mentioned in chapter one, Caruth highlights the importance of listening and responding to traumatic stories and retellings. It is no simple task to truly listen to those stories without oversimplifying them, underestimating their impact, or reducing them to different versions of a single tale (*T* vii). As we consider Claudia the organizer of the entire novel, we find her in a very interesting position. As we know, she is someone who has

witnessed some of the trauma Pecola faced. She is also someone who has experienced insidious traumatic episodes herself. And now, she is someone who has the task to retell all of it. It seems that Claudia believes that the best way for her to address this story without oversimplifying it or mitigating its impact is through the fragmentation of the tale, through the construction of different voices, and through the use of different narrative techniques. This can be linked to an assessment made by Caruth that I have presented in the first chapter. In *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History*, the scholar suggests that art and literature present ways of addressing the complex and overwhelming experiences of trauma precisely because of the possibility of using literary language, which both defies and claims our understanding (5). Therefore, with Morrison creating Claudia and Claudia organizing the narrative in fragments which the reader needs to connect, we face a language and a story that demand our attention and our engagement, making it less likely for us to dismiss or oversimplify the story we are reading.

The hypothesis that Claudia is organizing the narrative because she needs to revisit the traumatic past and promote healing becomes even more interesting when linked to Cat Moses's argument in "The Blues Aesthetic in Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*" (1999). In the article, Moses states that some of the themes and styles employed in *The Bluest Eye* are also central aspects to the blues, such as the catharsis and the transmission of values and cultural knowledge. According to the scholar, the narrative follows a pattern which is traditional of blues lyrics, "a movement from an initial emphasis on loss to a concluding suggestion of resolution of grief through motion" (Moses 125). Moses also presents the very interesting idea that Claudia is "singing" the community's blues: "Claudia bears witness, through the oral tradition of testifying, to the community's lack of self-love and its transference of this lack onto the abject body of Pecola" (Moses 126). Testifying is an oral tradition which is connected to African American religious practices, and which is rooted in West African

speech and song (Moses 137). In *Word from the Mother: Language and African Americans* (2006), linguist Geneva Smitherman explains that inside black church, the term is used to describe the verbal acknowledgment and affirmation of the power of God. Outside the church, testifying is connected to the act of speaking or affirming the power or significance of an experience (45). Therefore, when Claudia bears witness to Pecola's downfall, she is speaking of a traumatic experience which has impacted not only the Breedlove girl, but Claudia herself and their community. In addition to that, she is acknowledging that many have had some degree of responsibility for Pecola's tragic fate: society as a whole, the Breedlove family, and their entire community—of which Claudia herself is part. By the end of the novel, a grown-up Claudia reminisces precisely on this shared responsibility and guilty:

And Pecola is somewhere in that little brown house she and her mother moved to on the edge of town, where you can see her even now, once in a while. The birdlike gestures are worn away to a mere picking and plucking her way between the tire rims and the sunflowers, between Coke bottles and milkweed, among all the waste and beauty of the world—which is what she herself was. All of our waste which we dumped on her and which she absorbed. And all of our beauty, which was hers first and which she gave to us. All of us—all who knew her—felt so wholesome after we cleaned ourselves on her. We were so beautiful when we stood astride her ugliness. [...] And she let us, and thereby deserved our contempt. We honed our egos on her, padded out characters with her frailty, and yawned in the fantasy of our strength. (*TBE* 203)

As Moses observes, in the final pages of the novel, Claudia turns her gaze from a Pecola who is rummaging through the garbage to the reader who is bearing witness to her testimony

(137). She then tells us that “It’s too late. At least on the edge of my town, among the garbage and the sunflowers of my town, it’s much, much too late” (*TBE* 204).

Even though that last sentence is very pessimistic, I do believe that Morrison is hinting at the importance of revisiting traumatic pasts and suggesting possible healing pathways. The story narrated is undoubtedly sad—there is no recovery for Pecola, who is mostly silenced throughout the novel. Nevertheless, Claudia’s very act of narrating her tale may suggest that something can and should be done—if not for Pecola, for other black little girls. The narrator says that it is too late in her town, but the fact that she is giving her testimony may indicate that it is not necessarily too late for every town. Furthermore, as Moses argues, Claudia can be seen as the narrative’s blues subject, and her cathartic role as a storyteller is only possible because she has survived and grown up healthily through having contact with a system of folk knowledge and values (126). In fact, one of blues songs referenced in *The Bluest Eye* is “St. Louis Blues” by W. C. Handy, whose lyrics talk about the beloved man as “Blacker than midnight, teeth lak flags of truce/Blackest man in de whole St. Louis/Blacker de berry, sweeter is de juice” (Moses 127; 143). These are the last verses of the lyrics, and as we can see, they celebrate blackness: the singing subject says that her lover is the blackest man in St. Louis, which only makes him more desirable in her eyes. With the popular aphorism “blacker de berry, sweeter is de juice”, we have an inversion of the beauty scale which Pauline has learned in the movies: in “St. Louis Blues”, the highest aesthetic value is assigned to the darkest skin tone (Moses 130).

Throughout the novel, the only character who seems to question the appraisal of the Western white beauty standard is precisely Claudia. While Pecola and Frieda gush over Shirley Temple, a white child actress, Claudia despises her, since the girl has the opportunity to dance with Bojangles, an African American tap dancer and actor. In Claudia’s understanding, Bojangles was someone who should be close to her, and not to white girls. In

addition to this, during Christmas season, receiving blue-eyed dolls as gifts did not please the youngest MacTeer. In fact, the presents left her bewildered:

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. (*TBE* 18)

The repulse of white dolls which Claudia felt was also applicable to white girls, and the narrator admits to having felt impulses to hurt them. Eventually, having been taught that such violent instincts were reproachable, the girl invested in learning how to love white dolls, white girls, and 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” (*TBE* 21). Even though we are informed that Claudia would eventually assimilate the Western white standard of beauty, we seem to be confronted with narrative voices that question such standard. The first is of her as a child who did not understand why people adored white dolls and white girls. The second is of the adult Claudia who is narrating the story, and who seems to reflect critically on her own past feelings and experiences related to the topic. This resistance to the dominant standard of beauty is presented in the novel almost exclusively in Claudia’s voice; and in the omniscient narrator’s, whose identity is also possibly Claudia. It is there when Claudia and Frieda defend Pecola from Maureen Peal, when Claudia feels angry because of the difference in treatment that Pecola and the Fischer girl receive from Pauline, and when Claudia wishes for Pecola’s baby to live, picturing it in her mind with

Its head covered with great O's of wool, the black face holding, like nickels, two clean black eyes, the flared nose, kissing-thick lips, and the living, breathing silk of black skin. No synthetic yellow bangs suspended over marble-blue eyes, no pinched nose and bowline mouth. More strongly than my fondness for Pecola, I felt a need for someone to want the black baby to live—just to counteract the universal love of white baby dolls, Shirley Temples, and Maureen Peals. (*TBE* 188)

Furthermore, as Moses notes, Claudia is someone who has the knowledge and cultural values of the blues transmitted to her—which helps her develop a “black aesthetic” for her writings later on (133). This transmission and connection to African American culture can be seen when Claudia reminisces about her mother’s singing voice and the lessons contained in the lyrics which she sang: “misery colored by the greens and blues in my mother’s voice took all of the grief out of the words and left me with a conviction that pain was not only endurable, it was sweet” (*TBE* 24). Rather than receiving a white doll, Claudia informs us that she would like to have an experience for Christmas day: sitting in Big Mama’s kitchen and having Big Papa play his violin for her alone (*TBE* 20). In addition to this, I have mentioned before that she envied Shirley Temple, because she wished that she were the one dancing and laughing with Bojangles (*TBE* 17). This connection and yearning for African American music and culture indicates that Claudia is the character in the book who most closely relates to the last verses of “St. Louis Blues”. Besides helping her appreciate black aesthetics and culture, the songs which she listens to and the stories which she is told also teach Claudia several important life lessons. As Moses observes, this connection to folk knowledge and values is crucial to a little black girl’s survival in the 1930s and 1940s—which helps us understand

why Claudia is able to grow up healthily while Pecola, who does not have such knowledge transmitted to her, is not.

Moses also states that “the transformation of lack, loss, and grief into poetic catharsis is the constitutive task of the blues singer, and it is the labor that Claudia accomplishes in narrating *The Bluest Eye*” (133). This seems to indicate that the novel may be pointing at healing pathways, which I believe to be true. In fact, when writing of ways to promote healing for the traumatic effects of years of racism, Degruy suggests the substitution of racist socialization with racial socialization—a process through which African Americans come to learn of their strengths, understand the world in which they live, and ready themselves to thrive (*PTSS* 174). She believes that by teaching black children about the strengths of their family and culture, along with the reality of racism and discrimination, it becomes possible to give them tools to emotionally and psychologically filter both personal racist assaults and assaults against black people as a group, which can better prepare them to face such situations (*PTSS* 176). Degruy also advocates for the power of storytelling, stressing how important, helpful and healing it can be to learn about the histories of one’s family and community: “Telling our stories can be redemptive. Telling our stories can free us. Telling our stories can help lift others up (...) Storytelling is an important part of our education; it strengthens us and helps us build resilience. It helps us put things in the proper perspective” (*PTSS* 178). According to the researcher, telling stories and encouraging others to do so can build continuity across the generations, and the more continuity there is, the greater the understanding and confidence in the African American power to survive, overcome, and flourish is (*PTSS* 185). Flourish is indeed an interesting verb when we consider that the last seasonal section in *The Bluest Eye* is summer, which means that autumn is to come soon—just in time for new ideas to be planted. It seems that the healing and nurturing values which Claudia is hinting at are connected to the appreciation of African American history and

culture. Therefore, I maintain the conclusion that I have reached while writing “Identity, Race and Gender in Toni Morrison’s *The Bluest Eye*”:

By testifying Pecola’s story, Claudia is playing the cathartic role of a storyteller, attesting the knowledge which she has acquired through the years, promoting healing and suggesting that the community’s loss can be overcome if African American values are the seeds planted when the next Autumn comes. (Gomes 47-48)

3 Home

Home is Toni Morrison's tenth novel, published in 2012. It follows the return of character Frank Money to his hometown, and such journey is prompted by a note that he receives. The note reads "Come fast. She be dead if you tarry" (*Home* 8), and Frank immediately knows that it refers to his sister Cee. Such information is everything that he needs to know before he decides to leave behind the woman he is living with in order to embark on quite a journey—first from Seattle to Portland, then to Chicago, and finally to Georgia, where his hometown of Lotus is located.

The novel opens with an epigraph which consists of the lyrics to a song called "Whose House Is This?"¹², written by Morrison herself. Following this epigraph, there are seventeen chapters, and they present different structures and focalization. Most of them are narrated by an omniscient third-person narrator who accompanies Frank's journey and his recollections about the past. However, there are also some chapters that are focused on Cee, and two that tell us a little about the stories of Lily and Lenore—Frank's girlfriend and the siblings' step-grandmother, respectively. Finally, there are some italicized chapters which bring the first-person speech of Frank Money as he talks to some sort of scribe who is apparently writing his story. With that information, we can speculate that the omniscient third-person narrator who presents the rest of the novel is indeed this scribe who is recording Money's tale. Such hypothesis seems to be confirmed by some interesting passages in chapters two and five, in which an incident involving a couple on a train is reported. In chapter two—narrated by the omniscient third-person narrator—a waiter explains to Frank the reason why there is a woman

¹²"Whose House Is This?" is the second song in an art-song cycle called *Honey and Rue* (1992), with lyrics written by Toni Morrison and music composed by Andre Previn. The work was commissioned by Carnegie Hall and premiered in 1992, with soprano Kathleen Battle singing the cycle. *Honey and Rue* is inspired by the struggles and yearnings in the lives of African Americans—especially women. The lyrics to "Whose House Is This?" in particular show a "depiction of alienation inspired by the African American experience in American History". (Gillespie 256)

crying with a bleeding nose next to a silent, angry-looking husband. According to the waiter, during a stop at Elko, the now angry-looking man was assaulted and kicked out of a restaurant. His wife went to his rescue, and a rock was thrown at her face. The third-person narrator then tells us that

The abused couple whispered to each other, she softly, pleadingly, he with urgency. He will beat her when they get home, thought Frank. And who wouldn't? It's one thing to be publicly humiliated. A man could move on from that. What was intolerable was the witness of a woman, a wife, who not only saw it, but had dared to try to rescue—rescue!—him. He couldn't protect himself and he couldn't protect her either, as the rock in her face proved. She would have to pay for that broken nose. Over and over again. (*Home* 26)

Nevertheless, in chapter five, such thought process is denied by Frank in his direct speech. As he talks about his reasons for sharing a home with Lily, he accuses his scribe of misinterpreting and incorrectly reporting his feelings and impressions:

You are dead wrong if you think I was just scouting for a home with a bowl of sex in it. I wasn't. Something about her floored me, made me want to be good enough for her. Is that too hard for you to understand? Earlier you wrote about how sure I was that the beat-up man on the train to Chicago would turn around when they got home and whip the wife who tried to help him. Not true. I didn't think any such thing. What I thought was that he was proud of her but didn't want to show how proud he was to the other men on the train. I don't think you know much about love.

Or me. (*Home* 69, emphasis in the original)

The link between these two passages seems to clearly confirm that there is a single narrator (the scribe) organizing the entire story. However, it is much more difficult to determine whether this scribe is indeed taking quite a few liberties and embellishing the tale, or if Frank actually contradicts himself during his recollections. The first option is a possibility because we know that the telling of a story is always an adaptation, an interpretation, subjective in its essence. The second is also plausible because it is not the only passage in the narrative in which Frank changes his mind, contradicts himself, or reveals that some information which he had previously offered was untrue. In fact, Irene Visser favors this second hypothesis in her reading of *Home* precisely because of the themes and structures presented by the novel. In her understanding, the way in which trauma is represented in *Home* works as an argument that “the retrieval of memory is a recursive process, with mistakes and rectifications, since Frank’s initial remembering, even of recent events, is corrected in the course of his ongoing narrative” (“Entanglements” 11). In Visser’s interpretation, these corrections show that traumatic memories can indeed be accessed and narrated. The process might be long and imprecise as the stories may need reviewing with each retelling, but it is essential to transform them into narrative memories which can be integrated into a person’s life.

In fact, much of Frank’s contradictory musings and changes of perspective throughout the novel are connected to some of the central themes in *Home*: trauma, community, and healing. Frank is a war veteran with Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, and he presents symptoms such as intrusive flashbacks, nightmares, disassociation, and catatonic states. Meanwhile, his sister Cee is serving at a doctor’s house as the subject of dangerous medical experiments. When inquired about what inspired her to write *Home*, Morrison told her interviewer that she wanted to instigate Americans to rethink their view of the 1950s

("Google". Web.). The novelist stated that the decade was remembered by many as a prosperous, fortunate time, while she recalled events often silenced or ignored, such as the Korean War and the invasive, aggressive medical experiments that were being performed on the poor and helpless. Therefore, she considered it important to remind or inform people of such terrifying occurrences, so that they would reconsider the romanticizing of that complicated decade ("Google". Web.). Nevertheless, unlike Pecola Breedlove in *The Bluest Eye*, the two main characters in *Home* are able to heal from the trauma that they have faced. Frank's healing starts when he embarks on his journey to rescue his sister and return together to their hometown. As Frank starts to progressively confront the past, tell his tale and acknowledge truths which he had kept hidden or repressed, he grows closer and closer to recovery. Meanwhile, Cee's healing is facilitated by her connection to the female community of Lotus: nurturing women who nurse the girl back to health and inspire her to be strong.

3.1 Here Stands A Man: Frank Money's Journey to Recovery

Frank Money was born in Bandera County, Texas. When he was four years old and his mother was pregnant with his sister Ycidra—mostly referred to as Cee—, their whole family and their neighbors had to abandon their houses and their crops as they were forced to leave by Ku-Klux-Klan men. Then, they moved in with some relatives in Georgia—Frank and Cee's grandfather Salem and his wife Miss Lenore, who was cold and sometimes even cruel to the children. In Lotus, Luther and Ida—the siblings' parents—had to work two jobs each: Luther as a field-worker for two different planters, and Ida working crops during the day and sweeping lumber shacks in the evening. Luther's brother, Uncle Frank, also lived with them before he enlisted in the navy. Those years were very hard: Cee slept with her parents on a thin pallet on the floor, Uncle Frank used two chairs put together, and young Frank slept on a

wooden swing on the back porch. Furthermore, the fact that Luther and Ida worked two jobs each meant that they had very little time for their children. As consequence, the kids were frequently left to endure Miss Lenore's abuse.

Once, the two young siblings snuck past a fence into a farmland outside Lotus. Hidden in the tall grass, they watched in fascination as two horses fought each other in an improvised fighting ring put together by the farmers. After the fight was over, the children tried to go back, but lost their way. When they heard voices, they panicked, and Frank asked Cee to keep quiet by putting a finger to his lips. What they saw next would haunt them (especially Frank) for years: some men pulling a body from a wheelbarrow and throwing it into a hole. From the hole, a black foot stuck up—and the sight of it made Cee's body shake. By the time the kids finally felt safe enough to return home, it was late, and they were certain that they would get whipped or scolded, at the very least. However, Frank tells us that the adults did not even notice them, because "*some disturbance had their attention*" (*Home 5*, emphasis in the original). Considering the context of a still active Ku-Klux-Klan, the fact that the dead body belonged to a black man, and how concerned the adults in Lotus felt that evening, we can presume that a race crime took place in that afternoon. It is also the first memory that Frank tells us about repressing: "*Since you're set on telling my story, whatever you think and whatever you write down, know this: I really forgot about the burial. I only remembered the horses. They were so beautiful. So brutal. And they stood like men*" (*Home 5*, emphasis in the original).

Eventually, the Moneys managed to move to their own house. Nevertheless, Frank continued to feel suffocated by how small and quiet Lotus was. It was a feeling shared by his two best friends, Mike and Stuff, and together, they decided to enlist in the army. The three were sent to fight in the Korean War, and the experience further traumatized Frank. In Korea, he lost his childhood friends, boys with whom he had grown up as "they argued, fought,

laughed, mocked, and loved one another without ever having to say so” (*Home* 98). However, even before the deaths of Mike and Stuff, another encounter during the war had already left a haunting impact on Frank: the murder of a little girl who had started sneaking up to the edge of the American army camp in order to steal rests of food from the garbage. Frank tells his scribe that one day, as the hand of the child reached for a rotten orange, the following event took place:

My relief guard comes over, sees her hand and shakes his head smiling. As he approaches her she raises up and in what looks like a hurried, even automatic, gesture she says something in Korean. Sounds like ‘Yum-yum’.

She smiles, reaches for the soldier’s crotch, touches it. It surprises him. Yum-yum? As soon as I look away from her hand to her face, see the two missing teeth, the fall of black hair above eager eyes, he blows her away. Only the hand remains in the trash, clutching its treasure, a spotted, rotting orange. [...]

Thinking back on it now, I think the guard felt more than disgust. I think he felt tempted and that is what he had to kill.

Yum-yum. (Home 95-96, emphasis in the original)

As we can see, Frank has faced several traumatic episodes in his life. Some of them are not connected to a singular event, but to the insidious trauma that results from the many racist encounters which he has experienced. As I have previously discussed in chapter one, Craps offers some examples of daily racist micro-aggressions that may insidiously result in traumatizaion when we look at them as cumulative and repeated. One of the examples offered by the scholar is of being the target of a security guard for no other reason than being black (*PW* 26). One encounter easily relatable to that happens to Frank outside a shoe store in

Chicago, during his journey home: he and two other black men are stopped by police officers in a random search. One of the men had his switchblade confiscated, while the other one had a dollar bill taken from him. However, knowing that police officers would often stop black men and take their money (if not worse), Frank had hidden the cash he had on him inside of his work boots. In addition to this precaution, he had pinned his army medal to his breast pocket. When the youngest one amongst the officers noticed the medal and realized that Frank was a war veteran, it prompted him and his colleagues to let the men go without further complication. Then, the narrator tells us that “the police incident was not worth comment so Frank and Billy walked off in silence” (*Home* 37). This remark shows us that micro-aggressions like these were such commonplace that they did not even provoke surprise anymore. Furthermore, it is precisely how off-handedly this comment is offered that may shock and cause outrage in the reader.

Another racist episode in Chicago is reported to Frank when he is staying at Billy’s house. Noticing that Billy’s son, Thomas, could not move his right arm, Money decided to ask his host about what had happened to the boy. The answer which he receives is the following: “‘Drive-by cop,’ he said. ‘He had a cap pistol. Eight years old, running up and down the sidewalk pointing it. Some redneck rookie thought his dick was unappreciated by his brother cops’” (*Home* 31). Once again, we have an example of extreme violence committed against an African American person; this time, a little boy who was playing with his toy gun. When Frank indignantly replies that “you can’t just shoot a kid” (*Home* 31), Billy retorts that “cops shoot anything they want” (*Home* 31). Once again, police brutality and racism are shown as aspects of the daily life which are not abnormal to African American people, as wrong and revolting as they might be.

Even though Frank reacts with outrage to the story of a cop shooting a child, he is of course familiar with the violence of racism, including (maybe even especially) situations in

which it comes from an authority figure. At the very beginning of his journey back to Georgia, when he is still in Central City after having escaped the psychic ward, Frank knows that he needs to find shoes, because

Walking anywhere in winter without shoes would guarantee his being arrested and back in the ward until he could be sentenced for vagrancy. Interesting law, vagrancy, meaning standing outside or walking without clear purpose anywhere. Carrying a book would help, but being barefoot would contradict “purposefulness” and standing still could prompt a complaint of “loitering.” Better than most, he knew that being outside wasn’t necessary for legal or illegal disruption. You could be inside, living in your own house for years, and still, men with or without badges but always with guns could force you, your family, your neighbors to pack up and move—with or without shoes. (*Home* 9, emphasis in the original)

In the passage above, the episode in which Ku-Klux-Klan members forced Frank, his family and their neighbors to leave Bandera County is being referenced. As this situation happened when Frank was four years old, we can conclude that the man has known since he was a little kid that violence against black people is often unwarranted and unprovoked.

In addition to all of these episodes that could cause insidious trauma, there are also some particular events that keep haunting Frank throughout his life. One of them is the foot that he and Cee saw stuck out of an undignified hole when they were kids. The others come from the war in which he fought—especially the death of his friends and of the little Korean girl. These experiences lead Frank to develop Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. According to van der Kolk, the three major elements in the diagnosis of PTSD are the following: the repeated reliving of memories of the traumatic experience, avoidance of reminders of the

trauma, and a pattern of increased arousal. The first is related to vivid sensory and visual memories of the event, and these are commonly accompanied by great physiological and psychological distress. Sometimes there is also a feeling of emotional numbing, for the duration of which there is no physiological arousal (van der Kolk “Posttraumatic”). One of these moments of reliving the memories of the traumatic experience happens to Frank when he gets on a bus on his way to Portland and stares out the window:

So, as was often the case when he was alone and sober, whatever the surroundings, he saw a boy pushing his entrails back in, holding them in his palms like a fortune-teller’s globe shattering with bad news; or he heard a boy with only the bottom half of his face intact, the lips calling mama. And he was stepping over them, around them, to stay alive, to keep his own face from dissolving, his own colorful guts under that oh-so-thin sheet of flesh. Against the black and white of that winter landscape, blood red took center stage. They never went away, these pictures. Except with Lily. (*Home* 20)

From this passage, we can gather that in the beginning of the narrative, Frank is frequently haunted by intrusive flashbacks—he needs only to be alone and sober for them to possibly invade his mind. Furthermore, episodes of emotional numbing during which no physiological arousal could be instigated also happen to the man: “he sat on occasion for hours in the quiet—numb, unwilling to talk” (*Home* 21). Such numbness often took hold of the war veteran while he was sitting on Lily’s couch, and as we later learn during the chapter dedicated to the woman, it bothered her: “She had begun to feel annoyance rather than alarm when she came home from work and saw him sitting on the sofa staring at the floor. One sock on, the other in his hand. Neither calling his name nor leaning toward his face moved him” (*Home* 75). We are also informed that these occasions in which Frank would go into an

almost catatonic state were not rare: “The multiple times when she came home to find him idle again, just sitting on the sofa staring at the rug, were unnerving” (*Home* 78).

Van der Kolk also explains that the intrusive memories and flashbacks can occur spontaneously or be caused by a variety of real and symbolic stimuli, which are considered as triggers. We learn about one of those triggers during a passage in Lily’s chapter, as it happened during a church convention which the couple had attended:

Anyway, they were in high spirits all afternoon—chatting with people and helping children load their plates. Then, smack in the middle of all that cold sunlight and warm gaiety, Frank bolted. They had been standing at a table, piling seconds of fried chicken on their plates, when a little girl with slanty eyes reached up over the opposite edge of the table to grab a cupcake. Frank leaned over to push the platter closer to her. When she gave him a broad smile of thanks, he dropped his food and ran through the crowd. People, those he bumped into and others, parted before him—some with frowns, others simply agape. (*Home* 76-77)

As we know, one of the episodes that have deeply impacted and tormented Frank was the killing of a little girl who had smiled and touched a soldier’s crotch in an offering to exchange sexual favors for food. Thus, we can interpret that when the child at the convention smiled at him in gratitude, Frank was immediately dominated by intrusive flashbacks and memories of the murder. Triggered in such way, the man panicked and ran.

In order to escape such triggers, many people who have developed PTSD choose to avoid any possible reminders of the trauma. As consequence of that, a general withdrawal from engaging with life and an inability to feel pleasure and joy are often experienced (van der Kolk “Posttraumatic”). This withdrawal from engaging with life can be seen in several

aspects of the routine Frank developed while living with Lily. After the encounter with the little girl at the church convention triggered Frank's war memories, the couple "did less and less socializing" (*Home* 78). Their occasional going to the movies together was also suspended after one of the pictures made Frank stay awake at night, clenching his fist in silence. In addition to social activities, Frank also withdrew from daily responsibilities such as doing chores around the house: "his clothes scattered on the floor, food-encrusted dishes in the sink, ketchup bottles left open, beard hair in the drain, waterlogged towels bunched on bathroom tiles. [...] Complaints grew into one-sided arguments, since he wouldn't engage" (*Home* 78). As we can see, Frank was so deeply haunted and so often feeling numb and paralyzed that he had very little energy to focus on most aspects of his daily life. Furthermore, van der Kolk mentions attention and concentration problems and the loss of the ability to focus as typical of a pattern of increased arousal. It may result in the victims not being able to engage with their surroundings with a lot of energy, on activities such as watching television, reading or even having a conversation requiring extra effort, and on the survivors having difficulties to organize their life and take one thing at a time. All of these symptoms are manifested by Frank during the period in which he lived with Lily.

Van der Kolk also states that a pattern of increased arousal is expressed not only by memory and concentration problems, but by irritability, hyper-vigilance, sleep disturbances, and an exaggerated startle response as well (van der Kolk "Posttraumatic"). Once again, some of these responses and symptoms can be recognized in Frank Money's behavior. One example of that occurs when Reverend John Locke asks the war veteran what had caused him to be taken by the police to the psychic ward:

What indeed. Other than that B-29 roar, exactly what he was doing to attract police attention was long gone. He couldn't explain it to himself, let alone to a gentle

couple offering help. If he wasn't in a fight was he peeing on the sidewalk? Hollering curses at some passerby, some schoolchildren? Was he banging his head on a wall or hiding behind bushes in somebody's backyard?

"I must have been acting up," he said. "Something like that." He truly could not remember. Had he thrown himself on the ground at the sudden sound of backfire? Perhaps he started a fight with a stranger or started weeping before trees—apologizing to them for acts he had never committed. What he did remember was that as soon as Lily shut the door behind him, in spite of the seriousness of his mission his anxiety became unmanageable. He bought a few shots to steady himself for the long trip. When he left the bar, anxiety did leave but so did sanity. Back was the free-floating rage, the self-loathing disguised as somebody else's fault. And the memories that had ripened at Fort Lawton, from where, no sooner than discharged, he had begun to wander. (*Home* 14-15)

In addition to the concentration and memory problems (he cannot remember the moments that led to his arrest), irritability (he considers it a plausible possibility that he may have been in a fight or hollering at people on the streets), the hyper-vigilance and exaggerated startle responses (throwing himself on the ground at the sound of backfire is an action which he is aware that he would take), there is the fact that Frank decided to manage his anxiety by drinking alcohol—which can also be a consequence of PTSD. According to van der Kolk, people who have developed PTSD are constantly reexposed to the horror of the traumatic event through the visual images, emotional states and nightmares that keep bringing back the experience. This creates a timelessness to the trauma, with the intrusions interfering with dealing with the past, while also distracting from focusing and living the present. Thus, a range of avoidance maneuvers is frequently sought out, which may include alcohol and drug

abuse, emotional withdrawal from friends or activities that used to bring joy and comfort, avoidance of people or actions that serve as a reminder of the traumatic event, among others—all of which can be related to Frank Money.

As Irene Visser observes, one of the major themes in *Home* is “the nature of the therapeutic engagement with trauma” (“Entanglements” 8). This is easily recognizable in the very structure of the novel, since we have Frank orally speaking of his story and traumatic encounters to a listener, who also acts as the scribe to Money’s tale. In “Posttraumatic stress disorder and the nature of trauma”, van der Kolk mentions three critical steps in treating PTSD: safety, anxiety management, and emotional processing. The latter is related precisely to the survivors reexperiencing the traumatic event without feeling helpless. In many cases, this is done by helping or allowing the victims to talk about their entire experience: what they think happened, what led up to it, their thoughts and fantasies as the event was taking place, what the worst part of the experience was, how they reacted during the situation, how they were affected and changed by it, what changed in relation to their perceptions of others and of themselves, etc. This type of exposure therapy is believed to help reduce symptoms by allowing the survivors to realize that the trauma event had a beginning, a middle, and an end, that it now belongs to their personal history, and that remembering it is not going through it again. Even though a variety of new techniques for PTSD treatment have been developed in recent years, exposure therapy is still considered to be very helpful, if applied with care¹³. In addition to that, van der Kolk highlights how important it is for the survivors to have experiences that contradict the physical paralysis and emotional helplessness that tend to accompany traumatic events. In Susan Brison’s understanding, both the transforming of a

¹³Telling one’s trauma narrative is not always enough for healing. The conditions under which the story is told need to be conducive to recovery, and in many cases, drug treatment also becomes necessary in order to help a survivor recover. Even so, the narrating of a traumatic event does play a significant role in the recovery from trauma. In relation to that, Susan Brison remarks the following: “This is not to say that narrating one’s memories of trauma is always therapeutic, nor that it is, by itself, sufficient for recovery from trauma. But that such narratives contribute significantly to such recovery is currently accepted as uncontroversial in the field of the psychology of trauma” (40).

traumatic memory into a narrative memory and the sensation of agency instead of helplessness can be achieved through “speech acts of memory”, in which the act of talking about a traumatic event is seen as “an act on the part of the narrator, a speech act that defuses traumatic memory, giving shape and a temporal order to the events recalled, establishing more control over their recalling, and helping the survivor to remake a self” (39-40).

In “Trauma Narratives and the Remaking of the Self” (1999), Brison observes that the traumatic memory challenges the traditional distinction between body and mind that informed the Western cultural narrative of the nature of the self for years. For a survivor with PTSD, a mental state may feel physiological at the same time that the physical state embodies the cognitive and emotional paralysis characterized by shattered assumptions of safety in the world. Furthermore, the sensory flashbacks and nightmares are reminiscent of the traumatic event itself, and they immobilize one’s body and render useless one’s will (42-43). Brison also notes that trauma survivors may have their basic cognitive and emotional capacities altered or even annulled, and that their sense of self, their connections with memories of life before the traumatic event, and their capacity to envision a future may be lost (43-44). The scholar observes that recovery from trauma involves regaining control over traumatic memories and other intrusive PTSD phenomena, recovering a sense of control over the environment one inhabits (within certain reasonable limits), and reconnecting with humanity. As Brison remarks, these achievements may depend heavily on other people (45). In her words,

In order to construct self-narratives we need not only the words with which to tell our stories, but also an audience able and willing to hear us and to understand our words as we intend them. This aspect of remaking a self in the aftermath of trauma highlights the dependency of the self on others and helps to explain why it is so difficult for

survivors to recover when others are unwilling to listen to what they endured. (Brison 46)

From this passage, we can understand that not only the telling of the story of the traumatic event is important, but also the presence of an empathic other who will listen and participate in the process of bearing witness. Brison highlights this by stating that the construction and telling of a narrative of the trauma endured, aligned to the presence of understanding listeners, will help the survivor integrate the traumatic event into a life with a before and after, as well as gain control of intrusive memories, flashbacks, and nightmares (46). Brison believes that the repeated telling of a trauma helps in the recovery process because of the sense of agency and the distinguishing between traumatic and narrative memories that it helps establish. While the first feel as if they are passively endured, the latter come as a result of certain choices (such as how much to tell, whom to tell, what to tell first, etc.). The narrator will of course be constrained to the restrictions of memory, and the telling itself may be confusing and compulsively repeated. However, some aspects of the narrative can be controlled, and such control being repeatedly exercised will likely lead to greater control over the traumatic memories themselves, gradually making them less intrusive and making sense of them in a way that will allow them to be integrated into the rest of the survivors' lives (46-47).

The therapeutic impact of transforming traumatic events into narrative memories with the help of an empathic listener is definitely present in *Home*. As I have discussed, during his time living with Lily, Frank continuously showed symptoms typical of PTSD: he had nightmares and intrusive flashbacks that could be triggered by certain images, he would go into almost catatonic states, he had trouble organizing his routine, and he frequently withdrew from engaging with life. In chapter six—the one which focuses on Lily—we are informed that

the woman tried asking Frank if the incident at the church convention was related to his war experiences in Korea. Nevertheless, as Money avoids the question, we also learn from the third-person narrator that before this “Lily had never asked about the war and he had never brought it up. Good, she had thought. Better to move on” (*Home* 77). From this excerpt, we can conclude that prior to the chronological beginning of the novel, Frank had not started the therapeutic process of transforming traumatic memories into narrative ones. In addition to this, he had not found an understanding audience with whom to share his experiences, as Lily believed that some topics should not be addressed.

Meanwhile, while making his journey back home and slowly (but continuously) talking about his life and the traumatic experiences which he has endured to his scribe, Frank’s behavior and symptoms start to change. A clear contrast is observed by the character himself as he sits on a train to Atlanta, reminiscing of the deaths which he had witnessed in Korea. For a long period of time after being discharged, he would turn his head to tell a joke to friends who were not there, or see their profiles on the streets, before remembering that they were dead, as “Abrupt, unregulated memories put a watery shine in his eyes. For months only alcohol dispersed his best friends, the hovering dead he could no longer hear, talk to, or laugh with” (*Home* 99). Nevertheless, days of travelling to Georgia and orally revisiting his past start to change the way in which these memories are manifested:

Sitting on the train to Atlanta, Frank suddenly realized that those memories, powerful as they were, did not crush him anymore or throw him into paralyzing despair. He could recall every detail, every sorrow, without needing alcohol to steady him. Was this the fruit of sobriety? (*Home* 100)

As I have mentioned before, Brison notes that recovery from trauma includes the regaining of control over traumatic memories and other intrusive PTSD phenomena, and this is what Frank becomes more and more capable of doing as he progressively turns his traumatic memories into narrative ones. From the passage above, we learn that he is now able to recall the horrible events from his past without feeling paralyzed or needing alcohol. Furthermore, once he gets to Atlanta, we are informed that “he’d had lots of sad memories, but no ghosts or nightmares for two days” (*Home* 106). As the events are transformed into stories with a beginning, a middle and an end, they no longer return with the haunting, intrusive, timeless traces of trauma.

As gradual as Frank’s healing process is, there are two moments that feel particularly meaningful to his recovery. One of them happens after he and Ycidra are back in Lotus and Cee has been nursed back to health by the women in the community. When his sister cries as she tells him that she cannot have children as consequence of the medical experiments that were conducted on her, Frank tries to hush her and tell her not to cry. This is not very different from Lily’s belief that avoiding the topic of the war would be helpful. Nevertheless, we now have a character that refuses to turn to avoidance as a coping mechanism: “I can be miserable if I want to. You don’t need to try and make it go away. It shouldn’t go away. It’s just as sad as it ought to be and I’m not going to hide from what’s true just because it hurts” (*Home* 131). In addition to her refusal to avoid the traumatic memories and the sadness that they bring, Cee also gives Frank something else to think about: the haunting figure of a baby girl who is now always inside their old house in Lotus. Ycidra believes that this presence that she can feel is there because it belongs to a mother who will never be able to give birth to her. However, Frank has a different opinion regarding the identity of the child haunting the house. For a little while, he contemplates the way his sister “could know the truth, accept it, and keep on quilting” (*Home* 132). The answer to what he could do to calm his own restlessness comes

in the form of a kind of confession or acknowledgment as he tells his scribe that “*I have to say something to you right now. I have to tell the whole truth. I lied to you and I lied to me. I hid it from you because I hid it from me*” (*Home* 133). These words can be linked to Caruth’s interpretation of the story of Tancred and Clorinda.

As I have previously discussed, Caruth sees their tale as an example of how the post traumatic stress disorder is born from an event that cannot be known or witnessed at the time it occurs. In her understanding, what overwhelms the victim is not only the violent event in itself, but especially the way its violence has not yet been fully known or understood (*T* 2-6). Furthermore, as van der Kolk and van der Hart explain in “The Intrusive Past: the Flexibility of Memory and the Engraving of Trauma”, “lack of proper integration of intensely emotionally arousing experiences into the memory system results in dissociation and the formation of traumatic memories” (163). As the scholars note, many trauma survivors report that they are removed from the scene and look at it from a distance. One common description given by incest survivors is that they look down from the ceiling at a little child being molested and feel really sorry for her (van der Kolk and van der Hart 168). Similarly to how the incest survivors dissociate because they cannot integrate or fully witness what they went through, Frank Money also distances himself from the event with the Korean girl. Up until his conversation about the presence of a child in the house with Cee, Frank had described the killing of the little girl as the action of another soldier because he had not witnessed and understood that traumatic moment yet. However, after progressively and steadily revisiting his traumatic memories and turning them into narrative ones, he finally becomes able to acknowledge what happened that day:

Then Cee told me about seeing a baby girl smile all through the house, in the air, the clouds. It hit me. Maybe that little girl wasn't waiting around to be born to her. Maybe it was already dead, waiting for me to step up and say how.

I shot the Korean girl in her face.

I am the one she touched.

I am the one who saw her smile.

I am the one she said "Yum-yum" to.

I am the one she aroused. (Home 133, emphasis in the original)

As Frank admits to the murder, he confronts not only the traumatic experience, but his position as a perpetrator of violence as well. Revisiting his thoughts and feelings from the event, he acknowledges the shame which he felt for being aroused and tempted by the girl's offer, asking himself "what type of man" even considers accepting such a deal (*Home* 134). Thus, when he revisits the death of the child, he is not only confronting the fact that he killed a little girl, but also the fact that he felt aroused by her.

As I have previously mentioned, there are two moments which I consider particularly meaningful to Frank's healing. The first has just been discussed—his confessing of the murder of the Korean child. The second one happens right after that, as the man looks for "worthwhile things that needed doing" while he processes his recently acknowledged guilt and shame (*Home* 135). The answer comes easily to him, since the memories of one particular event have been haunting him even longer than the Korean War has: the secretive, unceremonious burial of a black man, witnessed by two children. When Frank asks Salem and the other men in Lotus about the place where some white farmers used to have dog and horse fights, he learns of a terrifying story. Once, a black man and his father were forced to fight each other. Only one of them could leave the improvised ring, and only when the other had

been killed. After being forced to murder his father, the son—Jerome—escaped to Lotus and cried while he told the people in the town about what had happened. Then, the women in the community collected some money for him, while the men gave him a few sets of clothes and a mule which he could ride, since they all knew that “if the sheriff had seen him dripping in blood, he’d be in prison this very day” (*Home* 139). Upon learning that this terrible event had happened around ten to fifteen years in the past, Frank reaches the conclusion that the corpse which he and Cee had seen being shoved into a hole belonged to Jerome’s father.

After returning to their house, Frank insists with Ycidra that he needs the quilt which she had just finished stitching, and that she needs to go with him to a place which he will not reveal just yet. Even though the woman feels confused and reluctant to part with the first quilt that she had ever made, she can see that Frank’s request is very important to him. Therefore, Cee accepts his invitation, and together they walk to an old farmland which they had previously visited as children. After finding the place that he was looking for, Frank starts digging a hole in the ground, recovering small bones and a human skull, which the siblings then envelop in Ycidra’s quilt. Together, they carry the bone-filled quilt to the base of a sweet bay tree, “split down the middle, beheaded, undead” (*Home* 144). There, Frank buries the bones. He also nails to the tree a wooden marker that reads “Here Stands A Man” (*Home* 145). Then, marking the very ending of the novel, we have the following thoughts (which belong to Frank):

I stood there a long while, staring at that tree.

It looked so strong

So beautiful.

Hurt right down the middle

But alive and well.

Cee touched my shoulder

Lightly.

Frank?

Yes?

Come on, brother. Let's go home. (Home 147, emphasis in the original)

Frank's decision to bury the man's bones under a tree is possibly connected to another episode of his childhood. When his family and their neighbors were forced out of Bandera County by the Ku-Klux-Klan, an elderly man named Crawford refused to leave, and waited the whole night sat on his porch steps, chewing tobacco. Once the twenty-four-hour-warning had expired, the Ku-Klux-Klan men went to his house and beat him to death with pipes and rifle butts. Then, they tied Crawford to the oldest magnolia tree in the county, which grew in his own yard. The third-person narrator wonders about the possibility that it was precisely because Crawford loved that tree—which he claimed had been planted by his great-grandmother—that he refused to vacate. Nevertheless, after the old man was murdered, “in the dark of night, some of the fleeing neighbors snuck back to untie him and bury him beneath his beloved magnolia” (*Home* 10). Thus, we can conclude that Frank is paying Jerome's father a similar last homage to the one that his neighbors (and possibly his family) paid Crawford all those years ago. Just as the Bandera County inhabitants would not leave a community member without a dignified, respectful burial, Frank would not find peace without giving a similar treatment to Jerome's father. Furthermore, he is now facing a traumatic episode of the past which had previously left him helpless with newfound agency: as a child, Frank could not do anything about the corpse being shoved into a hole in the ground. However, as an adult revisiting episodes that have haunted him for years, he is now able to

take agency (which is beneficial in the recovery from trauma) and give the bones a dignified burial.

In chapter one, I have mentioned that Whitehead lists repetition as one of the most common stylistic features to recur in trauma fiction in order to register the overwhelming and unassimilable nature of the subject in formal and structural terms (83; 86). In her understanding, repetition mimics the insistent return of the event and the disruption of time and chronology that may happen to traumatized individuals. In a literary work, this can apply to repetition of imagery, language, plot etc. In *Home*, both the killing of the Korean girl and the burial of Jerome's father are referenced and retold—with varying details—multiple times. To Whitehead, repetition exists between trauma and catharsis. In regards to the first, it leaves the survivor under trauma's paralyzing influence as it replays the traumatic past as if it were still part of the present. In relation to catharsis, it helps in the reformulation of the past. We can see this shift clear in Frank, as repetition is used several times in *Home*. At first, it serves as trauma, as it leaves Frank paralyzed on Lily's couch or wakes him up from nightmares on buses. However, as he progressively tells his story to the scribe, it becomes catharsis: Frank becomes able to revisit and review the experiences which have traumatized him. In being able to reformulate his memories and place them within his past, they stop being intrusive, and Frank becomes able to move on with his life.

Furthermore, Frank's observation of the sweet bay tree as hurt right down the middle, but still beautiful, alive and well is easily applicable to himself and to Ycidra as well. They are two people who have been traumatized both insidiously and by particular events—and in Frank's case, he has even been the perpetrator of violence. They have been hurt and they have experienced pain, guilt and shame, but they are still alive. They are trying to rebuild, they are trying to become stronger and kinder, and they are healing. As Visser notes in the article "Decolonizing Trauma Theory: Retrospect and Prospects", "postcolonial trauma narratives

often also demonstrate that resilience and growth are possible in the aftermath of traumatic wounding” (12). One of the novels that the scholar uses as an example of these healing narratives is precisely *Home*, as she briefly discusses the ending of the book:

The image of the beautiful tree symbolizes a sense of closure that is not the erasure or denial of past hurt, but which affirms growth and health to emphasize that recovery, despite traumatic wounding, is possible, and that trauma, although it stands outside precise representation, can be integrated. (Visser “Decolonizing” 12)

Another interesting observation made by Visser is connected to how relationality may be important in order to analyze novels such as *Home*, which depict trauma as one of its central themes. By allowing multiple perspectives from different disciplines (such as literary criticism, psychology and sociology) to inform one’s reading of the novel, it becomes possible to understand *Home* as a book that “draws together the political, the social, and the psychological, in a further, necessary ‘tangle’ to the intricacies of trauma” (Visser “Entanglements” 8). While the novel is structured almost as a therapeutic encounter between Frank and his scribe, it also

Fully engages African Americans’ history of enslavement, disenfranchisement, and continuing oppression and discrimination. [...] It presents this history as the search for a place of acceptance and safety, for belonging, and exposes its obstruction and disruption by laws, regulations and racial prejudice. (Visser “Entanglements” 6)

After all, Frank's narrative is not only a tale of personal trauma: it is also the story of other black soldiers like him, who have been traumatized by war events and by multiple racist encounters throughout their lives (Visser "Entanglements" 8).

3.2 Come on, Brother. Let's Go Home: Community and Healing

In chapter two, I have argued that Claudia—the narrator of *The Bluest Eye*—points at the appreciation of African American history and culture, and to the existence of a nurturing community, as connected to the possibility of healing. In *Home*, there seems to be a confirmation of such hypothesis.

The first example of the positive influence of a sense of community is actually spread out throughout the novel. As Frank makes his long journey from Seattle to Lotus, he is assisted by several African Americans. As soon as he escapes the psych ward, he is welcomed into the house of Reverend John Locke and his wife Jane, who give him food and a place to stay the night. In addition to this, the couple also hands Frank seventeen dollars in order to pay for a bus ticket to Portland, and the recommendation to look for a man called Jessie Maynard, pastor of a Baptist church. When they are parting ways the next day, Jean gives Frank a grocery bag filled with food and John offers him some advice:

"You'll be grateful for every bite since you won't be able to sit down at any bus stop counter. Listen here, you from Georgia and you been in a desegregated army and maybe you think up North is way different from down South. Don't believe it and don't count on it. Custom is just as real as law and can be just as dangerous." (*Home* 18-19)

With the food and the warning about racial prejudice, the couple is helping ensure Frank's health and safety. Later, when Money meets Reverend Maynard, he is not welcomed with the same warmth, but he does receive from him information that is useful to his journey: "From Green's travelers' book he copied out some addresses and names of rooming houses, hotels where he would not be turned away" (*Home* 23). Then, on the train to Chicago, when Money shows the list which he had obtained from Maynard to the waiter, he receives recommendations about the best places on such list. Once in Chicago and in a diner called Booker's—recommended by the waiter on the train—, Frank meets people who are "welcoming and high-spirited", and they laugh and exchange stories of hardships endured in the 1930s (*Home* 27). When he shows his list to a man called Billy Watson and asks where he should stay the night, Watson tells him to forget about the list and spend the night in his house, with his family. The man also offers to take Frank to the station the next day.

At the Watsons' household, Frank receives food and a warm bed. It is then that he meets Thomas—the boy who had been shot by a police officer while playing with his toy gun. When Frank asks the boy what he wants to be when he grows up, Thomas's answer is "a man" (*Home* 33). This can be linked to at least two other passages of the novel. The first is related to the moment when Frank acknowledges his guilt and shame for feeling aroused by a little girl and asks himself what kind of man feels that way. It can be understood that the character is reflecting on what feelings, behaviors and attitudes a respectable, kind person would have—and on what needs to be done in order to atone and become that type of person. The other passage that shows a reflection on what it means to be a man is connected to the wooden marker reading precisely "Here Stands A Man" that Frank nails to the tree under whose base he and Ycidra have buried Jerome's father (*Home* 145). By this point, it seems that Frank has reached some sort of conclusion about what kind of person that he wishes to become. It is interesting to consider that the boy who possibly inspires Frank in defining his

conception of a kind, strong man is yet another survivor of a traumatic event who has remained alive and brave. Thomas has a bad arm as consequence of having been shot, but he is presented as smart and wise. In this way, he is not different from the sweet bay tree and from what Frank and Cee also grow to become: hurt, but strong and beautiful, alive and well.

The next day, Billy takes Frank to get some more presentable clothes at a Goodwill store, and a pair of shoes. They, they return to Booker's diner and part ways with promises of visiting each other someday. When Money gets to Atlanta, he is assaulted by a gang of teenagers who beat him with a pipe and steal his money. Once again, the person who helps him is a black man, who holds out his hand to help him up and stuffs a couple of dollar bills in his jacket pocket. Once more, we see the association of authority to unfairness and fear as Frank answers with a "hell, no" when inquired by the man if he would like him to call the police or not (*Home* 107). Furthermore, the generosity brought on by shared experiences and pain is exhibited when the helper replies to Frank's statement that he does not have anything to offer him in exchange for the dollar bills by saying "Forget it, brother. Stay in the light" (*Home* 107). Then, as Money finally arrives at the house where Cee is working, he is assisted in his rescue mission by Sarah, the housekeeper who had sent him the note asking him to go there quickly. By pressing firmly on the cradle of the telephone, the woman stopped Dr. Beau from being able to call anyone while Frank took his sister back to their hometown.

Undoubtedly, Frank's journey has been facilitated—perhaps even only made possible—by the help that he has received across the different places which he has passed through. In all of the cities where he stops, Money is able to meet people who have shared similar experiences and who are able to understand his pain. These people are willing to help him get to Cee in a way that is quite similar to how the community in Lotus put together money, clothes and a mule in order to assist in Jerome's escape. Once Frank is able to take

Ycidra back to Lotus, the role of a nurturing community in a healing process is shown even more clearly.

During her childhood, Cee had been constantly mistreated by her step-grandmother, Miss Lenore. The fact that Ycidra had been born on the road as the Moneys traveled from Texas to Georgia was seen by the older woman as a very bad sign: “Being born in the street—or the gutter, as she usually put it—was prelude to a sinful, worthless life” (*Home* 44). Like Pecola, Cee was abused for circumstances which she had no control over and that should never be used as bias against a person. Also like Pecola, Ycidra was treated with contempt from a very young age as Lenore

chose to focus her resentment on the little girl born “in the street”. A frown creased her every glance when the girl entered, her lips turned down at every drop of a spoon, trip on the door saddle, a loosening braid. Most of all was the murmur of ‘gutter child’ as she walked away from a failing that was always on display from her step-granddaughter. (*Home* 45, emphasis in the original)

Since Luther and Ida worked several hours and were rarely at home, they did not learn of the abuse directed at their children (especially at Ycidra). Salem, their grandfather, would choose not to acknowledge the situation because of the relative financial comfort which was offered to him by his marriage to Lenore.

Nevertheless, differently from Pecola, Cee had access to healthy relationships while living in a nurturing community. Throughout her childhood, the girl was cherished and protected by her older brother as “like some forgotten Hansel and Gretel, the two locked hands as they navigated the silence and tried to imagine a future” (*Home* 53). In addition to this important relationship, Lotus itself provided a more welcoming environment as

Everybody in the neighborhood, except Lenore, was stern but quickly open-handed. If someone had an abundance of peppers or collards, they insisted Ida take them. There was okra, fish fresh from the creek that should not go to waste. One woman sent her husband over to shore up their slanted porch steps. They were generous to strangers. An outsider passing through was welcomed—even, or especially, if he was running from the law. Like that man, bloody and scared, the one they washed up, fed and led away on a mule. (*Home* 40)

As we know, the man referenced in the passage above is Jerome, who was assisted in his escape by the people in Lotus. In the same excerpt, we also have more examples of the community being ready to help and take care of their neighbors.

However, soon after Frank, Mike and Stuff enlisted in the army, Ycidra left town in the company of a man named Prince, who then abandoned her in Atlanta, taking Lenore's car with him. Ashamed and lonely, Cee looked for a job that would pay relatively well until she heard from an upstairs neighbor about an opportunity to work at a doctor's house in Buckhead, just outside Atlanta. The doctor was named Beauregard Scott and, at first, Ycidra admires him and cherishes the opportunity of working for him. Nevertheless, the readers are soon able to notice that there is something extremely suspicious about Scott as Cee naively studies his office: "Now she examined the medical books closely, running her finger over some of the titles: *Out of the Night*. Must be a mystery, she thought. Then *The Passing of the Great Race*, and next to it, *Heredity, Race and Society*" (*Home* 65). The first title is the autobiography of a spy who infiltrated the Gestapo. The second one presents a theory of Nordic superiority, and the last title is also connected to eugenics. Eugenics is, in fact, a word that Cee does not recognize: "How small, how useless was her schooling, she thought, and

promised herself she would find time to read about and understand ‘eugenics’” (*Home* 65, emphasis in the original). The website for the *Cambridge Dictionary* presents the definition of the term as “the idea that it is possible to improve humans by allowing only some people to produce children” (*Cambridge Dictionary*. Web). From Scott’s books and his search for an unmarried woman to be his “helper”, the readers are able to infer that something sinister will happen to Ycidra. This suspicion is only made stronger by the scene that follows Cee’s examination of Scott’s library, as Ycidra and Sarah (the housekeeper) are in the kitchen eating honeydews:

Cee lifted the third one, then stroked its lime-yellow peel, tucking her forefinger into the tiny indentation at the stem break. “Female,” she laughed. “This one’s a female.”

“Well, hallelujah.” Sarah joined Cee’s laughter with a low chuckle. “Always the sweetest.”

“Always the juiciest,” echoed Cee.

“Can’t beat the girl for flavor.”

“Can’t beat her for sugar.”

Sarah slid a long, sharp knife from a drawer and, with intense anticipation of the pleasure to come, cut the girl in two. (*Home* 66)

The image of a girl being cut in two is related to the medical experiments that Beauregard Scott starts to conduct on Cee. They make the girl so weak and sick that it prompts Sarah to risk her job and send Frank a letter asking him to go to Buckhead. When the man arrives, he finds Ycidra unconscious, thin, and cold to the touch. Nevertheless, with Sarah’s help, Frank is able to take Cee back to Lotus, where she is placed under the care of Miss Ethel Fordham

and the other women in the community, who “handled sickness as though it were an affront, an illegal, invading braggart who needed whipping. They didn’t waste their time or the patient’s with sympathy and they met the tears of the suffering with resigned contempt” (*Home* 121).

This attitude towards sickness and injury is also seen during *The Bluest Eye* as an adult Claudia reminisces about a time when she got sick during her childhood. With rough hands and in a rough voice, her mother nursed her back to health while complaining during the entire process, making the grown-up Claudia confess to the reader that, as a child, she did not know that her mother was not angry at her, but at her sickness. Thus, both the women in Lotus and Claudia’s mother seem to regard sickness and injury as an affront. Despite the rough treatment, the adult narrator of *The Bluest Eye* thinks of it as

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. [...] 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. (*TBE* 10)

Just as Claudia is nursed back to health by a mother who was stern, yet loving, Cee is cured and influenced by a similar treatment: “two months surrounded by country women who loved mean had changed her” (*Home* 121). Through the physical, emotional, and psychological support which Ycidra receives from the women in Lotus, the girl is able to become stronger and wiser.

As Degruy observes in her chapter dedicated to healing, the tenacity and resilience of the African Americans is remarkable. As she notes, black people have managed to survive and rise from much suffering and oppression (*PTSS* 157). In regard to qualities which contradict the racist view of African Americans, Degruy mentions strength, resilience, perseverance, creativity, spirituality, and the capacity to love. She notes that they have built communities under extremely challenging circumstances, and that they have been able to care for one another even with very little material wealth. They have also established a distinctive culture with its own language, customs, behaviors, games, foods, art, music, and fashions (*PTSS* 165-166). These characteristics are seen in what can be called the second stage of Ycidra's healing process under the care of the women in Lotus. After the berating phase, the neighbors started bringing their crocheting and embroidery to Cee, transforming Miss Ethel Fordham's house into a quilting center:

They practiced what they had been taught by their mothers during the period that rich people called the Depression and they called life. Surrounded by their comings and goings, listening to their talk, their songs, following their instructions, Cee had nothing to do but pay them the attention she had never given them before. They were nothing like Lenore, who'd driven Salem hard, and now, suffering a minor stroke, did nothing at all. Although each of her nurses was markedly different from the others in looks, dress, manner of speech, food and medical preferences, their similarities were glaring. There was no excess in their gardens because they shared everything. There was no trash or garbage in their homes because they had a use for everything. They took responsibility for their lives and for whatever, whoever else needed them. [...] Mourning was helpful but God was better and they did not want to meet their Maker

and have to explain a wasteful life. They knew He would ask each of them one question: “What have you done?” (*Home* 122-123)

In this passage, it is once again possible to recognize the resilience, creativity and shared knowledge and culture of the community of women in Lotus, who have their songs and their teachings to offer to Cee. It is also possible to notice the strong sense of a communal bond as they do everything that they can to take care of their own. Furthermore, spirituality and the figure of God are important. In fact, when talking about healing, Degruy suggests precisely building upon strengths that African Americans have traditionally and continuously relied upon: a sense of community, spirituality and faith (*PTSS* 186). In relation to faith, Visser calls attention to one of the central concerns that needs to be addressed by the project of decolonization of trauma theory: the possibility that an engagement with spirituality, ritual, and ceremony in postcolonial trauma narratives may be obstructed by the pervasive influence of the secular ideology of postmodern Western culture. According to the scholar, a response to trauma that comes from a respectful recognition of culturally specific religious and spirituous perspectives, aligned to the recognition of national, historical, and ethnic diversification, is essential for a decolonized theory of trauma (“Decolonizing” 16-18).

The importance of spirituality and rituals for the women in Lotus is present in more than their faith in God. Each of them has different suggestions and recipes to cure Cee, but they all agree that Frank should not be allowed in the house while she recovered, as his “maleness” could worsen her condition (*Home* 119). As for the final stage of Ycidra’s healing, “she was to be sun-smacked, which meant spending at least one hour a day with her legs spread open to the blazing sun. Each woman agreed that that embrace would rid her of any remaining womb sickness” (*Home* 124). In addition to this strong belief in their own rituals and customs, the women show contempt and dismissal for Western medicine:

Later, when the fever died and whatever it was they packed into her vagina was douched out, Cee described to them the little she knew about what had happened to her. None of them had asked. Once they knew she had been working for a doctor, the eye rolling and tooth sucking was enough to make clear their scorn. And nothing Cee remembered—how pleasant she felt upon awakening after Dr. Beau had stuck her with a needle to put her to sleep; how passionate he was about the value of the examinations; how she believed the blood and pain that followed was a menstrual problem—nothing made them change their minds about the medical industry. (*Home* 121-122)

It is interesting to note that in the passage above—which takes place during what can be called the first stage of Cee’s healing—the girl seems to still feel some sort of admiration for Scott. Nonetheless, as the other women continuously care for her, remind her of her own worth, expose her to songs and stories, and teach her that she needs to be strong on her own, Ycidra begins to change. One of the most meaningful conversations in her healing process happens after the final sun-smacking hour, which was also the first time that the girl was allowed to eat non-medicinal food since starting her treatment. It is a moment filled with “the demanding love of Ethel Fordham, which soothed and strengthened her the most” (*Home* 125):

“I knew you before you could walk. You had those big, pretty eyes. They was full of sadness, though. I seen how you tagged along with your brother. When he left you ran off with that waste of the Lord’s air and time. Now you back home. Mended finally, but you might just run off again. Don’t tell me you going to let Lenore decide

again who you are? If you thinking about it, let me tell you something first. Remember that story about the goose and the golden eggs? How the farmer took the eggs and how greed made him stupid enough to kill the goose? I always thought a dead goose could make at least one good meal. But gold? Shoot. That was always the only thing on Lenore's mind. She had it, loved it, and thought it put her above everybody else. Just like the farmer. Why didn't he plow his land, seed it, and grow something to eat?"

Cee laughed and spread jam on another biscuit.

"See what I mean? Look to yourself. You free. Nothing and nobody is obliged to save you but you. Seed your own land. You young and a woman and there's serious limitation in both, but you a person too. Don't let Lenore or some trifling boyfriend and certainly no devil doctor decide who you are. That's slavery. Somewhere inside you is that free person I'm talking about. Locate her and let her do some good in the world." (*Home* 125-126)

In this dialogue, we can see folk stories and knowledge transmitted in order to help one cope with life and with the world. Through storytelling, Ethel is offering Ycidra her valuable teachings. Furthermore, she is offering comfort and nurturing with the pie and conversation, while also instigating the young woman to believe in herself and live her own life.

Later, a healed Cee, who has learned much with the teachings of the women in Lotus, is herself able to question the notion that white Western knowledge is the only valid knowledge. Then, she becomes able to see Beauregard Scott as a man who used and abused her as she reflects on her time spent in his house and her time under the care of the women in Lotus:

As usual she blamed being dumb on her lack of schooling, but that excuse fell apart the second she thought about the skilled women who had cared for her, healed her. Some of them had to have Bible verses read to them because they could not decipher print themselves, so they had sharpened the skills of the illiterate: perfect memory, photographic minds, keen senses of smell and hearing. And they knew how to repair what an educated bandit doctor had plundered. If not schooling, then what? (*Home* 128)

These women, their knowledge, and their devotion to each other leave an impact on Ycidra, who begins to recognize her own self-worth and to see Lotus as a place where she belongs. By the time Cee and Frank move back into their old house, the woman is determined to respect herself and to never need rescue again. She believes that she can find a way to earn a living, and she wants to discover what it is that she loves in the world, and how she can dedicate herself to such a passion. Just as Frank wishes to learn how to deal with his murdering of the Korean girl and how to atone for his crime, Cee also gets to the end of the novel with a well-defined goal: discovering a passion and figuring out how to dedicate herself to it. With the help of one another and of an entire community—both in Lotus and throughout the country, in Frank’s case—, the siblings are able to face the many traumatic episodes which they have experienced in their lives, work through their trauma, and move on with their lives. Some reminders of the horrors and pain that they have endured will always be present in a way or another. Ycidra will not be able to have kids, and Frank will never see Mike and Stuff again. Nevertheless, the siblings have now integrated these experiences into their lives. These events, now narrative memories, have an ending to them, and a place in time. Furthermore, the Moneys can now share the love and knowledge of a community. Just like

the sweet bay tree, the siblings are "*Hurt down the middle/But alive and well*" (*Home* 147, emphasis in the original), beautiful and strong.

Conclusion

The Bluest Eye is Toni Morrison's first novel, published in 1970. Meanwhile, *Home* is her tenth book, published in 2012. Between the two publications, there is a gap of forty-two years. During those four decades, Morrison published eight other novels, which address different moments in African American history. The focus of her oeuvre ranges from the horrors of the Middle Passage and slavery, through relocation and segregation, to a contemporary, racist, and urban violence.

As I have discussed throughout this thesis, when it comes to trauma, there is a firm belief in the therapeutic effects of transforming traumatic memories into narrative ones. Many trauma survivors are only able to move on with their lives once they have revisited the shattering experiences which they have undergone, and transformed them into words that can be related to others. This is not an easy process—it may require revisiting, reviewing, reexamining previous accounts. Nevertheless, it can be empowering, as one is able to regain agency in face of an experience that has previously paralyzed them. When we think of trauma through a postcolonial studies perspective, this therapeutic process becomes also a movement of resistance, as it rescues erased histories and brings to public consciousness voices that had been previously silenced (Whitehead 82).

It becomes very interesting to look at Morrison's oeuvre with these observations about trauma studies in mind. During an interview, the author was asked about her motivations for writing *The Bluest Eye*. She replied that even though the works that were being published in the 1960s—mainly related to the Black Arts Movement—held a positive and uplifting message, she felt worried that “they were going to skip over something”, and that no one was going to remember that blackness had not always been considered beautiful, or “how hurtful a certain kind of internecine racism is” (“Motivation” Web). If we think of the other novels that

Morrison has written throughout her career, it becomes clear that the author holds a project of revisiting different moments in African American history, addressing the impacts of slavery through different centuries, and examining the pain experienced in different periods. It becomes possible to speculate that Morrison believes in working through trauma, and in exploring its origins and ramifications, instead of allowing traumatic experiences to be overlooked or ignored.

It is also very relevant to observe that *Home*, which presents an ending that seems a lot more peaceful or even “happier” than *The Bluest Eye*, was published only forty-two years later. Frank has traveled across the United States while progressively revisiting and narrating the traumatic experiences which he has undergone in his life. In what can be considered a similar movement, Morrison has written about different locations and different moments in history in her novels. Frank could only find healing once he had told his whole story and regained agency. We can also speculate that Morrison believed that a less bittersweet ending to a novel also had to wait for a more thorough revisiting and readdressing of African American history. Visser is one of the scholars who supports this reading as she observes that in the novels preceding *Home*, “there is no final sense of achieving that place of acceptance and belonging” (“Entanglements” 5). In contrast, she notes that “*Home* does in fact provide a sense of homecoming that [...] may be read as a form of closure to Morrison’s engagement with the trauma of slavery and colonization” (“Entanglements” 5).

Furthermore, while we reflect on the different destinies of the Money siblings, Pecola and Claudia, it is important to think of the circumstances surrounding each of them. In chapter three, I have traced a parallel between Claudia’s mother and the women in *Lotus*. They were all strict women, who fought sickness not with soothing words to the patient, but with determination and even a resemblance of anger. Nevertheless, both the scribe and the adult Claudia are able to understand that such anger was directed at the illness or injury, and not at

the sick people. Meanwhile, we do not have any scenes of Pecola being comforted by a maternal figure. On the contrary, what we do see is the girl being yelled at and hit by her mother—both when she drops the pan with cobbler juice and when Pauline finds her on the floor after she had been raped by Cholly.

In fact, Pecola completely lacks the family love or community connections that could possibly alter her fate. Across the country, Frank is helped by several black people who seem to share and understand his pain and experiences. Cee is nursed back to health by an entire community of women who care for her and who remind her of her own value. Those women tell her that she is “good enough for Jesus” (*Home* 122). When Claudia thinks of autumn, she thinks of “somebody with hands who does not want me to die” (*TBE* 10). However, Pecola does not find the same support. Instead, she is abused and mistreated by almost everyone around her, and constantly called ugly. Her self-esteem is completely shattered as she never hears the same caring and appreciative words that Ycidra gets to hear from the women in Lotus. The only “love” Pecola experiences comes from Cholly, as the adult Claudia reminisces that

He, at any rate, was the one who loved her enough to touch her, envelop her, give something of himself to her. But his touch was fatal, and the something he gave her filled the matrix of her agony with death. Love is never any better than the lover. Wicked people love wickedly, violent people love violently, [...] but the love of a free man is never safe. There is no gift for the beloved. The lover alone possesses his gift of love. The loved one is shorn, neutralized, frozen in the glare of the lover’s inward eye (*TBE* 204).

Even as Cholly tried to think of what he could give to Pecola to make her happy, we know that what he ultimately gave her was pain and horror. As the adult Claudia muses, “love” that leaves the beloved paralyzed and terrified is not good. It is abuse, an act of selfishness, cruelty and vanity that does not take into consideration the feelings or safety of the other person. The fact that one of the only times in her life that Pecola got to experience the touch of another was through rape is devastating, and it further establishes how completely lonely and disconnected the girl was.

That disconnection is also related to community and culture. In chapter two, I have presented Moses’s observation that Claudia is able to grow up healthily because she has the knowledge and cultural values of African American traditions (more specifically, the blues) transmitted to her (Moses 133). The girl listens to her mother singing blues songs, knows folk tales, and admires other black people. As she is nursed back to health by the women in Lotus, Ycidra is also exposed to their songs, stories, and teachings, as well as their healing techniques. This transmission of knowledge and cultural values is denied to Pecola, who is ostracized by her community, and whose mother has come to completely assimilate a white Western standard of beauty and values.

Furthermore, Pecola is never able to tell her story and work through her trauma. *The Bluest Eye* is never narrated by her, and only a few sentences can be read as having her focalization. The most we hear from the girl comes in the form of a dialogue or monologue with her imaginary friend, after she has been so seriously traumatized that she has lost her sanity. As I have discussed in chapter three, Brison believes that speech acts of memory may help a survivor regain control over traumatic memories and reconstruct some sense of self (39-40). She also highlights the importance of an empathetic audience during the witnessing process (46). In *The Bluest Eye*, Pecola has neither the opportunity to perform a speech act of memory nor an audience willing to carefully listen to her. In contrast, Frank revisits the

traumatic experiences which he has gone through, transforming them into narrative memories that can be integrated into his life. Additionally, he has a scribe that is attentively registering his story, and readers who accompany him throughout this process.

It is also important to remember that Pecola is a black little girl, a figure that Morrison has deemed as the most delicate member of a society, for she is a child, and the most vulnerable member, for she is a female (*TBE* 206). In “Multiple Jeopardy, Multiple Consciousness: the Context of a Black Feminist Ideology”, scholar Deborah King affirms that some theorists have analyzed the effects of different types of discrimination (originating from race, gender, social-economic class, etc.) on their own, and that such an analysis is not sufficient to understand the oppression of black women (47). She suggests the term multiple jeopardy, which does not refer to the sum or individual examination of each oppression, but also to the multiplicative relationships between them. As race, gender, and social-economic class are always part of black women’s identities, all of these factors should be taken into account (47-49). Thinking from a perspective that interprets these multiple intersectional factors as composing of an identity, we can see Pecola as someone who is in an extremely vulnerable condition: she is a girl, she is black, she is poor, she is a child, and she is ostracized by her community. Frank and Cee do not have easy lives, of course, but at the very least they are young adults as the events of *Home* take place. Furthermore, they are able to get back to a safe, loving community. And of course, Frank is a man, and that grants him more possibility of moving at least somewhat more freely than the girls. This can also be linked to how Sam, Pecola’s brother, was able to run away from home, but the girl never did.

At the end of chapter two, I have speculated on the fact that summer is the last seasonal section in *The Bluest Eye*. To me, the fact that autumn is soon to come indicates that there is hope for new seeds and ideas to be planted—connected to the healing and nurturing values that may come from the appreciation of African American history and culture. In the

very last paragraph of the novel, Claudia reminisces on how the land of the entire country was hostile to marigolds the year that Pecola lost her baby. To the MacTeer siblings, there was a belief that if they had been able to grow marigolds, then the infant would have been saved. Nevertheless, on the edge of that town, it was “much, much too late” (*TBE* 204). In a very interesting contrast, while Frank gets reacquainted with Lotus and the women in the community nurse Cee back to health, the third-person narrator tells us of something that the Money older sibling observes while walking around town: “There were no sidewalks, but every front yard and backyard sported flowers protecting vegetables from disease and predators—marigolds, nasturtiums, dahlias” (*Home* 117). It seems that in a place and in a story where the community was able to care for their own, and where African American knowledge and values were transmitted and used for teaching and healing, the marigolds were able to grow. It is also interesting to note that more than growing, the marigolds were able to protect. It is true that they were not able to protect Pecola or her baby, but they have now protected Cee and Frank. It seems as if the ideas and seeds that Claudia had hoped for the next autumn were indeed planted, and able to flourish.

It is important to say that this thesis has given me an opportunity to think more and more carefully about experiences which are not my own. I believe that I have become—or am at least more willing to learn—to listen to the stories of others with more empathy and attention. I think this is very important for a teacher, so I am immensely grateful for the opportunity of working on this project. I would like to finish my conclusion by paying homage to Toni Morrison, who has recently passed. Her work has, as I think you all have guessed by now, made a deep, meaningful impact on my life. I reckon that this is indeed one of the effects of her novels. In the afterword to *The Bluest Eye*, Morrison wrote that “many readers remain touched but not moved” (*TBE* 207). I have been wondering about this ever since I first read the book. What does it mean to be moved? Perhaps it is a little related to

what I was just talking about: trying to learn to listen. To really listen. Trying to learn to care. Trying to learn to effect some change in the world, to become better. Morrison has focused much of her literary career on transmitting history, stories, beliefs, and empathy. I know I am still learning how to be moved, but I do believe that I am at least a little better for having read Toni Morrison. A better teacher, more willing to listen and learn, and hopefully a better person as well. What I do know is that I want to keep improving, and I thank Morrison for that, too.

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