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BEAUTY MATTERS, FAMILY MATTERS

The Experience of Growing Up an African-American Girl

Belo Horizonte
Faculdade de Letras - UFMG

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The Experience of Growing Up an African-American Girl

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To

Isabela de Carvalho Silveira

Not my reason to begin this work,

But most certainly my reason to conclude it.

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ABSTRACT

The present work focuses on the experience of the African-American girl as she grows up in Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* and Maya Angelou's *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*. The books, both published in 1970, portray the lives of young girls as they learn what it is to be black under a solid racist regime that dictates white western society as the norm. The norm includes, necessarily, physical traits that are established as the standards for beauty. African-American girls need to deal with these standards in their self-perception and identities. The study intends to demonstrate that families play a significant role in this process of self-perception and may encourage either the acceptance of these standards or their rejection.

RESUMO

Este trabalho focaliza a experiência da menina afro-americana nos livros *The Bluest Eye,* de Toni Morrison, e *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, de Maya Angelou. As duas obras, publicadas em 1970, retratam a vida de meninas aprendendo o que é ser negro sob um regime racista que determina a sociedade ocidental branca como norma. A norma inclui, necessariamente, traços físicos que são definidos como padrões de beleza. As meninas afro-americanas devem lidar com esses padrões no desenvolvimento de sua auto-imagem e identidade. O estudo tem a intenção de demonstrar que as famílias têm um papel fundamental neste processo e podem tanto reforçar a aceitação destes padrões como incentivar sua rejeição.

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You may shoot me with your words,
You may cut me with your eyes,
You may kill me with your hatefulness,
But still, like air, I'll rise.

Maya Angelou, “Still I Rise”

1. INTRODUCTION

"If growing up is painful for the Southern Black girl,
being aware of her displacement is the rust
on the razor that threatens the throat."
Maya Angelou, *I Know Why The Caged Bird Sings.*

African-American literature has left a decisive impact on me ever since I first came in contact with it about ten years ago. What impressed me the most was African-American people's ability to create a body of literary texts that is, to say the least, bulky despite the oppression they have always been under.

Certainly, African slaves in Brazil have struggled too to keep their culture and their tradition, but the lines that delineate Africans and, especially, individuals of African descent in Brazil are so unstable and so blurred that it is difficult to determine who is an Afro-Brazilian (if not every Brazilian) and what is to be their correspondent literary, cultural and artistic manifestations.

My feeling is shared by African-American critics such as Carole Boyce Davies who also notice the absence of groups such as "Afro-Brazilians" or Brazilians who claim their African ancestry in the understanding of African-American literature (chiefly, that written by women):

> Because Black women consistently have been perceived as synonyms with US African-Americans, a major limitation in contemporary Black feminist scholarship is that the narrow construction of Black women's writing locates much of the discussion within the terms of what constitutes American (specifically US) literature. Work done by Black women from other parts of the world continues to be marginalized,

> although we know that many of the writers read and refer to each other across geographical boundaries. (33)

This was precisely the impression I had concerning an Afro-Brazilian literary tradition. However, Davies ascertains that this picture has been changing:

> In Brazil, there is a developing body of Black women writing in collections and producing single-authored texts. Some of it arises out of a Quilhomboje in São Paulo, a creative collective of men and women, but some from a variety of women's/writings groups in Rio de Janeiro, individual writer/critics like Leda Martins in Belo Horizonte, women like Fatima Fontes in Salvador da Bahia, Miriam Alves and Esmeralda Ribeiro and others in São Paulo. (34)

Nonetheless, I still cannot help but ask how much of it we, readers, actually have access to. I still wonder if these works do reach the population in general: do we learn about these works at all?

It saddens me that such great talents such as the ones mentioned by Carole B. Davies are under the oppression of a canon dictated by European-based ideals and values. This is also so in the US. No one argues that African-Americans' cultural manifestations are under the oppression of mainstream culture and that their literature is still not accounted for as anywhere near that canon. Nevertheless, one should not overlook the accomplishments and recognition of authors such as Toni Morrison, the Literature Noble Prize winner in 1993, whose works reach a more significant number of readers.

As a Third World woman, it fascinated me, and it still does, that a group – oppressed, discriminated against, inferiorized – could join up and struggle to be able to freely express itself and put together such a vast production.

African-American literature has its own peculiar characteristics. The first and maybe the most remarkable is the fact that it dates back to the slavery period when fugitives started denouncing their condition through the stories they told. However, long before the written text, Africans/African-Americans were singing Spiritual and Work songs and telling stories orally (folktales). These were the foundation for the very singular way that Africans in America and African-Americans expressed themselves and do up to this day. What followed was a solid tradition that not only included the letters but also music in the form of blues, jazz, and more recently, rap and hip hop.

One of the most amazing phenomena in the period of slavery – which should not be a shock, though, given the richness of their culture and their taken-for-granted capacity to learn the means (the English language) to produce literature – was how slaves learned the language of the masters and were able to express their sorrows, fears, angers, as well as to denounce their condition as they were violently abused.

Slave narratives such as those of Frederick Douglass's *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave, Written by Himself* (1845) and Harriet Jacob's *Incidents on the Life of a Slave Girl* (1860) usually narrated the adventures of fugitive slaves who reached the North in search of freedom and equal opportunities. At times, these slaves would meet abolitionist groups who would take them in as part of a movement where they found encouragement to write their stories, typically full of pain and adventure. Nevertheless, their texts would only be published under the recommendation of a white man who authorized their production. No freedom, no authority, no credibility, but still writing.

Another period of fruitful creation in African-American literature and arts is the Harlem Renaissance. As the name itself makes allusion to, the Harlem Renaissance was the period in which a new literature and criticism started gaining room. The early 20th

century was a period of many great conflicts, such as World War I. For African-Americans, it was also "an artistic, cultural, and social journey of self-discovery… a crucial time…" (Mitchell 2). As the crisis in the economy and the heated racial relations in the South take place, African-Americans move North seeking better conditions. New York becomes, then, the preferred destination and, according to Mitchell, "a central location for African-Americans" and hence, "the center of African-American culture and society" (3).

African-Americans start becoming more conscious of their position as a race and begin theorizing about the necessity for a Black criticism able to probe the artistic and literary manifestations of the group from the perspective of blacks, that is, a look that was shifted from the standards of European male criticism/theories. The aim was the improvement of their own self-assertiveness, which supposedly would grant them more respect. Many times, a defiant stand was taken in assuring this self-assertiveness, which is the case of Langston Hughes, who declared his disregard towards the evaluative judgment of black texts by white critics:

> We younger Negro artists who create now intend to express our individual dark-skinned selves without fear or shame. If white people are pleased we are glad. If they are not, it doesn't matter. We know we are beautiful. And ugly too. (qtd. in Mitchell 3)

Needless to say, one period may host different tendencies in thought, and the effort of gaining recognition led to the adoption, by some authors, of "the critical standards of Euro-American culture"(Mitchell 4). On the other hand, the Harlem Renaissance gives birth to a "type of criticism…which recognizes the specific racial, sociocultural character, and historical determination of African-American literature and culture and which takes the form of a preoccupation with cultural anthropology" (5).

Zora Neale Hurston, actively participates in this context by committing herself to the collection and documentation of African-American traditions (folklore, mythology, customs, values, oral tradition) and the definition of characteristics and styles particular to that tradition.

In "Characteristics of Negro Expression," Zora Neale Hurston lists some of these features and styles in the creative process of the Black writer. The first one she points out is drama. For her, drama permeates the whole culture. Another element is the "will to adorn," which she does not describe as an attempt to meet any convention to "satisf[y] the soul of its [the ornament's] creator." She states that African-American adapted the English language by adorning it so as to make it sound more beautiful and closer to their experience as a group: they have "made over a great part of the tongue to his liking" (80). African-Americans often adorn language by means of metaphor and similes, "the use of double-description" and the use of verbal nouns (80). She exemplifies by stating that "[w]hatever the Negro does of his own volition he embellishes. His religious service is for the greater part excellent prose poetry" (82). Other aspects of African-American expression are, according to Hurston, angularity (e.g. in sculpture); asymmetry (present in literature both in prose and verse); dancing, African-American folklore, culture heroes (Peter, the Apostle, the rabbit, the bear, the lion, the fox); originality; imitation (mimicry); absence of the concept of privacy; the Jook ('the word for a Negro pleasure house") and their dialect (79-93).

Almost ten years before, in 1925, Alain Locke was advocating "The New Negro" for a new attitude in society. He contrasts the Old Negro – who was more of a stock figure, a formula, than a human being – with the renewed version: instead of social mimicry, "self-respect and self-dependence":

> In this new group psychology we note the lapse of sentimental appeal, then the development of a more positive self-respect and self-reliance; the repudiation of social dependence, and then the gradual recovery from hypersensitiveness and "touchy" nerves, the repudiation of the double standard of judgment with its special philanthropic allowances and then the sturdier desire for objective and scientific appraisal; and finally the rise from social disillusionment to race pride, from the sense of social debt to the responsibilities of social contribution, and offsetting the necessary working and commonsense acceptance of restricted conditions, the belief in ultimate esteem and recognition. (27)

The Great Depression – as Mitchell states – ended the aspirations of the Harlem Renaissance and the anxieties already blatant in this period gave way to a tradition in African-American thought known as the Protest Tradition. As the crisis in the United States came about, African-Americans "were always among the first not to be hired and the first to be fired" (Mitchell 5). These hardships generated in African-Americans a sense of society, an "idea of the individual adjusting himself to and becoming a part of society and the masses" (6).

This new perspective reflected on the literary text, which thus far had not been disconnected from political practices at all but had different proposals. According to Richard Wright, "[e]very short story, novel, poem, and play should carry within its lines, implied or explicit, a sense of the oppression of the Negro people, the danger of war, of fascism, and, too, the faith and necessity to build a new world" (qtd. in Mitchell 6). Similar to W.E.B. DuBois's criticism in the Harlem Renaissance, Wright as well as other critics of the Protest Tradition (e.g. Ralph Ellison and James Baldwin) believed art should be propagandistic.

As the hope for a change in scenario increases in the 1960's, two movements gain expression: the Civil Rights Movement, in the political arena, and the Black Arts Movement, in the arts and literary criticism. Larry Neal, in "The Black Arts Movement," an essay first published in 1968, summarizes unerringly the connection between the two movements as well as what they proposed:

> The Black Arts Movement is radically opposed to any concept of the artist that alienates him from his community. Black Art is the aesthetic and spiritual sister of the Black Power concept. As such, 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 African-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. (184)

As the Black Power Movement was concerned with the changes for the race in the US, the Black Arts Movement also recognized "the social function of art" (185) and argued that a "Black aesthetic" be adopted. The promise of a better life offered by the Civil Rights movement started to seem fallacious and frustration was one of the consequences. To this was added a wave of assassinations included those of icons such as Malcolm X and Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

After a phase of Protest literature, which soon was understood to be ineffective, since it did not bring about any sympathy from American society to "recognize Black aesthetic values" (Mitchell 11), the project was dismissed. Instead, the focus now was

on the collection of a “set of rules by which Black literature and art is to be judged and evaluated” (Mitchell 11). Some of these rules concerned the Black Aesthetic critic’s effort to construct an idiom, symbolism, imagery, mythology and iconology that reflect the uniqueness of the African-American experience. They are listed as follows:

1. polyrhythmic, uneven, short, and explosive lines;
2. intensity, depth, yet simplicity; spirituality, yet flexibility;
3. irony; humor; signifying;
4. sarcasm – a new comedy;
5. direction; positive movement; teaching; nation building;
6. subject matter – concrete; reflects a collective and personal lifestyle; and
7. music: the unique use of vowels and consonants with the developed rap demands that the poetry be read, and read aloud. (Mitchell 11)

The intention was to define themselves as a group that produced culture, art and literature characteristic of that group, with features that revealed their experience.

In contrast with the radicalism of the 60’s, the next decade starts bringing about African-Americans whose main concern was to integrate “within mainstream American society” and to obtain “financial success” (13). One way to do that (at least the former) was for academicians and critics to abandon politics and engage in purely literary criticism. This posture coincides with the Structuralism, which influenced not only African-American literature and literary theory but also American literature and theory in general. One of the main premises of Structuralism was that a literary text was a linguistic manifestation and should be treated as such. African-American critics such as Henry Louis Gates, Jr. moved away from the propagandistic criticism of previous periods towards a theory that focused on the text and on its structure. Gates advocated

that the African-American literary text had a structure characteristic of the group. According to him, African-American texts were double-voiced – just as much as the African-American subject was double-conscious. Gates named *signifying* the practice of writing double-voiced texts. Alluding to "The Signifying Monkey" – a trickster figure that is very important in African-American folklore – he believed that African-American texts had one literal meaning possible to be grasped by any (white) reader and another implicit meaning floating above the text and accessible to those who were members of the African-American community. This second meaning was often sarcastic, ironic and satiric of whites.

Stuart Hall illustrates this practice in *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices*:

> Whites took inordinate amusement from the slaves' efforts to imitate the manners and customs of the so-called "civilized" white folks. (In fact, slaves often deliberately parodied their masters' behaviour by their exaggerated imitations laughing at white folks behind their backs and "sending them up"). (244)

Stuart Hall also adds that this practice has become a "well established part of the black vernacular literary tradition" (244).

Post-Structuralism, according to Angelyn Mitchell, in the introduction to her collection of African-American texts, *Within the Circle: An Anthology of African American Literary Criticism from the Harlem Renaissance to the Present*, will continue to raise questions on the nature of criticism and its role on the discussion of African-American literature. One of the questioning voices of this period is Barbara Christian, who challenges theory as a whole. She claims that there is a "race for theory" (in her

essay by the same expression: "A Race for Theory") which fixes concepts and denies the works of specific writers:

> The race for theory, with its linguistic jargon, its emphasis on quoting its prophets, Its tendency towards "Biblical" exegesis, its refusal even to mention specific works of creative writers, far less contemporary ones, its preoccupations with mechanical analyses of language, graphs, algebraic equations, its gross generalizations about culture, has silenced many of us to the extent that some of us feel we can no longer discuss our own literature, while others have developed intense writing blocks and are puzzled by the incomprehensibility of the language set adrift in literary circles. (350)

Christian says that texts have been disregarded, and works by "minority groups" have been discredited to the point that these critics, while theorizing upon culture and literature, refer to older texts rather than contemporary ones in order to illustrate their theories, which are precisely about these contemporary texts (they more often than not refer to other critics' texts rather than literary ones). For her, the very fact that theoreticians now are not creative writers themselves, but rather academics, speaks poorly of the tendency to theorize, since they themselves do not experience the creative process of producing literature. Another point she makes in her critique is that works have become texts – an exchange that dismisses all the labor that the former term implies (348-49).

As it is characteristic of Post-Structuralism, many possible readings of the world can surface. Furthermore, like previous periods, diverging perspectives on the production of criticism will appear. Hence, opposed to Barbara Christian's contentions is Michael Awkward who, according to Mitchell, believes "theoretical criticism offers

entrances into the text that may otherwise be closed" (16). Awkward has declared that Post-Structuralism opens venues in the text that may not be possible otherwise. One of these venues is what many have called Black Feminism.

It has been discussed so far that African-Americans not only have had a dense body of literary texts, but they also have produced criticism as well. African-American literary criticism – as it was possible to notice – has been strongly shaped by political activism. Thus, in African-American criticism, the practice of literary criticism is usually connected to the practice of political activism.

From the beginning of the African-American production of literary criticism, Black women have been questioning their position in this tradition. The main concern is that there has never been a serious interest in the needs of this particular group. Their awareness of being both black and female – i.e. being part of two groups thoroughly oppressed by white patriarchal society – led them to many attempts at theorizing their condition. The central conclusion to be drawn is that these features of their identities cannot be dissociated – they are part of one another; they are complementary. This conclusion was not, however, in accordance with the interests of Feminists (who considered their cause that of the white female) nor with those of Black male writers and critics. The question of inclusion into feminist criticism dates back to the time when Sojourner Truth, an ex-slave, delivers her famous speech "Ain't I a Woman?" in which she, an active member of both the Civil Rights and Women's Rights Movements, challenges the universality of the term "woman" as she denounced the abuses black women slaves suffered.

In 1851, at a Women's Rights Conference in Akron, Ohio, she stated that she was also a woman – though with different experiences to tell of: she had been a slave, she had borne thirteen children, had never been helped up into carriages or lifted over ditches or

mud puddles; she had never been given the best places, but she was still a woman. She ploughed the earth, ate twice as much and was twice as strong as any man and, still, she was a woman. One who had different experiences: one who was African-American, an African-American woman (Truth 200).

The same issues stretch through time and Black women are still debating their position in Feminism. Deborah E. McDowell, in her 1980 essay "New Directions for Black Feminist Criticism," discusses the posture of white feminists who still considered their experiences as the norm and, therefore, excluded "the work of Black women writers from literary anthologies and critical studies" (428). McDowell continues by presenting an argument Patricia Meyer Spacks (a white feminist) makes to justify her position as a theorizer of white females' experiences only by quoting from Phyllis Chesler (a white female psychologist) who said: "I have no theory to offer of Third World female psychology in America. As a white woman, I'm reluctant and unable to construct theories about experiences I haven't had" (quoted in McDowell, 428-29). While this sounds like a plausible argument, McDowell contests it by putting forward Alice Walker's ironic observation on Spacks's arguments: "Spacks never lived in nineteenth-century Yorkshire, so why theorize the Brontës?" (429).

According to Angelyn Mitchell, in *Within the Circle*, white feminists "wittingly or not, perpetuate against the black woman writer the same exclusive practices they so vehemently decried in white male scholars" (17). On the other side of the issue, lies the black male criticism which, customarily, does not acknowledge the presence of the black female text. Mitchell mentions Deborah E. McDowell, who criticizes African-American male theorists who exclude "Black women writers from the African-American literary canon" (17) and who write extremely biased (masculinist) criticism on the works by African-American women. Their viewpoint in reading and writing

about their female counterparts is completely influenced by their "psychological and social formations of gendered subjects," says Barbara Smith (qtd. in Mitchell 17). Race and gender go hand-in-hand for African-American women and it is inconceivable that one be perceived, studied, approached without the other. She is always black and always female. There can be no lines to define where one part of the self ends and where the other begins, and if these lines, by chance, do exist, they are merged and difficult to be determined.

This complex scenario of double perception affects the literary production of African-American women and gives rise to a need for a criticism of their own. Deborah K. King claims that it is not only race and gender that impinge on the literature by black women. She views the term "double-jeopardy," coined by Francis Beale in 1972 as limiting, for it asserts that black women are subjected to racism and sexism only. Class, according to King, is also a factor that shapes the lives of African-American women; as King states, "a preponderant majority of black women have endured the very lowest of wages and very poorest conditions of rural and urban poverty" (297). Moreover, the ways African-American women are excluded and/or discriminated against are not additive – that is, they are not independent factors that, added, equal multiple jeopardy. They are, however, "interactive" and "intersecting" (297), for the relation between any two of them will have different effects:

> The importance of any one factor in explaining black women's circumstances thus varies depending on the particular aspect of our lives under consideration and the reference groups to whom we are compared. In some cases, race may be the more significant predictor of black women's status, in others, gender or class may be more influential. (297-98)

In addition, King states that,

> In the interactive model, the relative significance of race, sex, or class in determining the conditions of black women's lives is neither fixed nor absolute but, rather, is dependent on the socio-historical context and the social phenomenon under consideration. (298)

Thus, it is easy to notice that the experience of African-American women is complex, as they have been equaled to black men in their causes and also to white women for the same reason. Nonetheless, other oppressive forces besides racism and sexism do inflict upon and influence their experience. They cannot be aligned with white feminism, nor are they fully part of the Black criticism tradition. In the face of this, African-American women start theorizing their position recognizing the need for a Black Feminist Criticism since, in black women's experience, the causes of feminism cannot be dissonant from those of African-American people and vice-versa.

Apparently, all periods of African-American literature and literary criticism were engaged with politics and social change. Even when this was not the focus, like the case of Henry Louis Gates, Jr. and the Structuralist tradition (whose primary concern was with the text itself), African-American texts revealed a political stand through practices such as *signifying*, which mocked, ironized and satirized European/western patterns. African-American theoreticians and critics – as well as creative writers – have always been concerned with their position as a people and as creators of literature, arts and criticism. This concern is still demonstrated in works such as those of bell hooks's who has shown great preoccupation with issues of the race such as that of resistance.

bell hooks, one of the most prominent African-American theorists of our times, aims at the discussion of ways in which blacks (women, in a great number of her essays,

but also the black population in general) can resist oppression. Resistance, according to bell hooks, should be exercised from a marginal position:

> In an essay on counter-hegemonic cultural practice, I named marginality as a site of transformation where liberatory black subjectivity can fully emerge, emphasizing that there is a "definite distinction between that marginality which is imposed by oppressive structure and that marginality which one chooses as site of resistance, as location of radical openness and possibility." (22)

bell hooks is constantly referring to her classes at the university and her students' responses and reactions to her proposed debates, which she uses as a laboratory for her criticism. From them she has accurately come to the conclusion that African-American women have different experiences and (hi)stories.

No one dares to deny that many – a great number indeed – African-American women have struggled and do fit the image and the role of "mules of the world", who carry all the burdens of everyone else. It is also true that many of them have been physically and verbally abused-- not to mention that the standards of physical appearance do not even resemble anything they can relate to, generating a feeling of exclusion, inferiority and, consequently, self-loath. Nonetheless, it would be a mistake not to consider that one part of these women is in the rural South, another one is in the North, working outside of their homes, others still have had access to education.

The focus of my study, then, is on one of these elements that make the experience of African-American women ***seem*** similar as they are portrayed in literature: gender and race (and other factors such as class) cannot be dissociated and the resulting experience of being both black, female, and most of the times, poor does affect all African-American women as they grow up. In the face of a society that dictates as the

norm aesthetic standards of physical appearance that favor the mainstream "race" with its white complexion (blue eyes, blond hair), African-American women are confronted with their double-conscious self (or, in King's terms, their multiple self) in perceiving themselves and constructing their identity and self-image (an on-going process unquestionably). This is a common experience to the group.

Notwithstanding, however similar this experience may be – and in fact there is a great chance that it is – one major influence in these black women's lives is crucial to the determination of who they will turn out to be (i.e. if they will be able to free themselves from these pre-fixed beauty patterns or not): their families. The way families relate to their members, especially to their young African-American daughters, is essential to the way they will see, understand and make sense of themselves as they grow up.

The books I selected to investigate the influence of families in the lives of young African-American girls as they grow up experiencing the double-jeopardy of race and gender represented by beauty standards (or even the multiple-jeopardy of race, gender, class, etc) are Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* and Maya Angelou's *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*. The two works were published in 1970 by African-American women writers; both retell the childhood years of young girls as they grow up under an intense racist regime.

Toni Morrison's book tells the story of Pecola Breedlove, the protagonist, in a crucial year of her childhood as seen by a friend one year younger, Claudia McTeer (also a character in the story). The voice is that of an adult who assumes the perspective of her younger self. Some parts of the story are also narrated by an omniscient narrator who traces back into the lives of the characters to provide the readers with enough information to understand their psychological traits and the influence these traits have

on their present behavior. The narrator also has the job of explaining what Claudia as a child does not know or cannot see, making it clear that a child can only be left baffled and confused by the condition she is imposed upon.

The story is divided into four major sections, which are titled with the names of the four seasons of the year – “Autumn”, “Winter”, “Spring” and “Summer.” Each of these sections is divided by a parody of the all-American “Dick and Jane” primers. The choice of names of the sections of the book works as a timeline of the story (it starts in the autumn of 1939); the “Dick and Jane” primers not only split these sections but also separate the parts narrated by Claudia from the ones about Pecola and her family. The primers – as will be seen later on in this work – portray the ideal white-American family; therefore, they work as one of the ironic elements in Morrison’s narrative as they establish the great discrepancy between the protagonist’s reality and her idealized world. Though the story is set in the North (Lorrain, Ohio), the harshness of racism inflicts heavily upon Pecola, who comes from a completely broken home. She questions her physical appearance and associates it with the rejection the community, school teachers and classmates, and her own family treat her with.

Meanwhile, Maya Angelou writes an autobiographical account of her childhood and teenage years. In common with Pecola, she has the same dissatisfaction with her looks as she relates them with abandonment and lack of love. As an autobiography, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* is the story of Maya Angelou herself, who was born Marguerite Johnson in 1928, told in the first person (narrated by Marguerite Johnson/Maya Angelou), from a perspective that alternates between her voice as a child and as an adult. The events are recounted in chronological order as she grows up. Marguerite is an awkward black girl who is raised by her grandmother and lives in the black section of Stamps, Arkansas, with her grandmother, Annie Henderson, her

crippled uncle Willie and her brother Bailey (whom she idolizes). A great part of her time she spends wondering whether her mother would come for them, where her father is and if her looks were different would she be loved.

The focus of both stories can be said to be the same: the African-American experience of growing up a girl under the socio-historical conditions of the time and place where the stories are set (segregated America).

2. BEAUTY MATTERS

The title of this chapter is a direct reference to one of the sources for my discussion of beauty, the collection of critical essays *Beauty Matters*. I chose to use it (and this is also one of the reasons Peg Zeglin Brand had for naming it so) because, as a statement, it has an extremely powerful significance. Does beauty really matter? And how does it matter?

Apparently it has mattered for as long as humanity has been able to express itself and, although the parameters for judging a beautiful object or person have varied throughout history, beauty has definitely been an element in the perception of humanity and its cultural production.

As a noun, "matters" refers to a set of issues concerning that topic which has a series of implications. In an attempt to describe the dynamics of the ascription of beauty to an object, a work of art, a piece of literature, a building or a temple, the human body – to name a few – philosophers, critics, theorists have used different approaches to the discussion.

2.1 Beauty: An overview

Many are the attempts and the theories to define beauty and what characterizes it. Certainly, the perception of the beautiful has changed or been reinterpreted in different periods, constructing a number of concepts of beauty. Seemingly, though, the diverse ideas of the beautiful have been and still are closely associated with the visual experience of the one who sees. The viewer, in this case, is a crucial point for the definition of beauty patterns in a society, determining the norm and what should be

excluded from it. Moreover, the attraction drawn by the beautiful object or being and the consequent desire to contemplate it may well be an indication of its beauty (though not necessarily). Besides triggering one's desire to contemplate, another relevant characteristic in the object considered beautiful is the ability to cause the viewer to take pleasure in it.

In all periods, beauty seems to be a vital element in the understanding of areas such as the arts, literature and human relations. It has always been accounted for in ascribing value to an object or person (in the arts or in reality). Some conflicting ideas of what is considered beautiful have always troubled those who have attempted (and still attempt) to fix one single definition of beauty. At many times, these conflicts surfaced because of an alternative to the mainstream concept of beauty. This alternative usually found beauty disturbing – an object was, then, disturbingly beautiful. Another conflict, present in different points in time, concerns the attempts to rationalize beauty in form, for instance, as opposed to the subjective views on it. As this attempt to draft an overview (though superficially) on the ideal of beauty throughout the history of Western civilization unfolds, some of the issues mentioned above will be touched upon.

For Plato, the qualities that deemed an object, a person, a work of art beautiful were the ones that were able to instigate pleasure with its proportions. Harmonious proportions – the symmetry of its parts – conferred an object great value of beauty (Eco 49). In his book *History of Beauty*, Umberto Eco illustrates the notion of proportion with the example of Greek sculptures by saying that the specific canon related to the human forms did not idealize the abstract form. Instead, it favored a realistic representation of the human body, since, according to Eco, organic forms were preferred over inorganic ones. In these sculptures, the artist who best represented ancient ideals of human beauty was the one able to grasp something Eco calls

"psychophysical beauty" (45), that is, the harmony between soul (the goodness of the soul) and body (the beauty of the forms). Besides form and goodness, these sculptures, according to Johann J. Winckelmann (qtd. in Eco 47) conveyed the impression of a placid soul, which one could tell by their expressions. It is possible to notice, thus, that moral values related to how good a soul is were already part of the judgment of what the beautiful was. The beautiful object delights the senses (especially the sight) not only because of its form (harmonious, proportionate, and symmetric) but also because it resembles moral goodness and virtue.

In addition to the ideas of the beauty of the forms and of the soul, Socrates, years before, had thought of a third element of parameter. According to Eco (48), in *Memorabilia*, Socrates understands and describes beauty in terms of three conceptual categories. The first category – Ideal Beauty – is the one that gathers what is most beautiful and perfect in nature based on form, proportion and symmetry. Common knowledge had it that nature was the perfect synchronization and organization of its elements. Hence, in order to represent a beautiful human being, one had to be in accordance with nature – that is, with harmony in form. The second category of beauty, according to Socrates, was the spiritual beauty, once again connected to the concept of morality. In representation, that meant that the soul could be seen through the eyes; different moods, attitudes and feelings could be expressed in the eyes.

In addition to these two categories – very much in tune with the notions discussed by Plato – Socrates proposes a new one, as he brings into the conceptualization of beauty the idea of utility or function. An object should be considered beautiful in relation to that which it is useful for. He mentions a trash can as beautiful if it serves its end and a golden shield as ugly if it is not used for what its purpose is (Eco 48).

Another philosopher to consider issues related to beauty was Pythagoras. He added to the concepts of beauty as proportion of form in his reflections its connections to the number, i.e., to the series of mathematical laws that govern the order of the world. According to him, these laws are not only a condition for existing; being orderly is a condition for beauty. Umberto Eco also states that Pythagoras, when defining the beauty of the human body, also considered this order, this harmony of form. Interestingly, for Pythagoras, harmony meant the simultaneous and blatant oppositions that coexist in an object: odd and even numbers (in this case, a direct reference to numbers, which is his focus of study), unity and multiplicity. Further, these opposites are established in a relation of good and bad – they are binary oppositions. In other words, only one represents perfection – and therefore beauty. The counterparts represent error and evil, that is, disharmony. This relation of dependency reinforces the many theories (including contemporary ones) that study the presence of the Other in constructing the mainstream norm. An individual, a people, an artistic element, need the Other to exist and to be defined, to understand him/herself, to be understood as such in contrast with that which he/she is not (64).

Thomas Aquinas, according to Eco's study, is yet another theorist to reflect upon the idea of proportion and form as related to beauty in medieval times. For beauty to exist, the object/person needed not only proportion but also totality; for the object/person to be beautiful it/he/she needed to possess all the physical parts that constitute it/him/her. In addition to that, he considered that proportion, as just disposition of matter, ought to adapt perfectly to form. In that case, the human body and its proportions must adapt to that which is considered the ideal conditions of humanity: the right proportions can only be so if they are adequate to a specific form (the one deemed ideal), which is the norm. Eco emphasizes that proportion (and

symmetry for that matter) has always been a crucial element in understanding beauty (94), even though the way proportion is apprehended has changed. He exemplifies with Burke who, in 1576, ponders that the rigorous perception of proportion as a rule leads to the conclusion that – contrary to what Socrates believed – this kind of proportion does not exist in nature. For Burke, there had to be some sort of torsion and some tension that took beauty beyond mathematical rules (qtd. in Eco 95).

Another important point to consider is subjectivity when accounting for the beautiful. Besides the "Great Theory," which correlates beauty to proportion, Eco draws attention to the many different moments in which beauty was viewed as the consequence of forces that pictured it as something unrestrained, disturbed and disturbing, malformed, surprising, amazing. This was the case, for instance, of the Renaissance period. At that time, another concept was introduced – Grace. The theme was directly linked to that of beauty, according to Bembo (qtd. in Eco 216). He notes that beauty was expressed by the grace found in proportion associated with convenience, which, as Eco suggests, indicates subjective and particular venues for the understanding of the beautiful.

The subjective concessions of the concept of beauty are what David Hume (c. 1745) called taste. According to him, the critic can only determine if an object is beautiful if he is free from habits and exterior pre-judgments. His basic thesis supports that beauty is not inherent to things but is actualized in the mind of the critic as an individual who is free from outside influences (quoted in Eco: 244, 247). Unlike Bembo, Hume does not see the subjective character of beauty as presupposing convenience. In assent with Hume, however, is Immanuel Kant, who proposed a disinterested pleasure in the contemplation of beauty. Marcia M. Eaton, in "Kantian and Contextual Beauty," states that one of the ways to think of beauty and to assign it to

objects and events is unmediated. The first direct, personal response is what enables one to experience, according to Kant, the disinterested "pleasure required for the judgment that something is beautiful" (Eaton 33). Kant defended that beautiful was that which delighted the senses without any moral values attached. Thus, for him, taste had a solid relationship to how one was able to judge, disinterestedly, an object as beautiful, provided that he takes pleasure or not in it.

Eco affirms that, beginning chiefly in the 18th century, beauty stopped being considered only in terms of the form (proportion, harmony, unity) of the object. Concepts such as taste, imagination and feelings start to give shape to a new conception of beauty (275). In that sense, the subject starts to take active part in regarding objects as beautiful: instead of limiting the perception of beauty to rules of forms, at this point, it becomes interesting to consider the effects a beautiful object produces (276). In *History of Beauty*, Eco quotes Edmund Burke, who establishes a difference between the beautiful and the sublime as a response to these two different views: beauty by form and beauty by taste. He calls beautiful that which is related to objective qualities that trigger pleasure in the individual contemplating it (290). Beautiful is the faculty inherent to an object that – due to perfect proportion, harmony – affects the senses and has no moral value in its judgment. Conversely, the sublime relates to that which produces the strongest emotion that the spirit is able to feel (Burke, quoted in Eco: 290). In one of his considerations in *History of Beauty*, Umberto Eco ponders that, in Greek Thought, Beauty and Truth were coincident. This means that Truth was what produced Beauty – Beautiful was that which was true. Eco opposes this to Romanticism, when the opposite idea began to take shape: Beauty was what produced Truth and Reality

White supremacist Western society has relied on that belief in order to reinforce its power: a specific concept of physical beauty – fair complexion and preferably blond

hair and blue eyes – construct the norm attributing to this group the impression of superiority. Now, the beautiful was what conferred truth on events. There was an impression that it was true and real that white people were superior because they were considered more beautiful. The African-American individual faces the condition of being assigned to a position of otherness, of difference. This difference is constructed by a series of ideological (discursive, political, cultural) practices that are internalized by this individual, by the group to which he/she belongs and by society at large, conveying the impression that they are inferior for not conforming to a norm.

Clearly the physical appearance is a great argument for the purposes of the imperialistic agenda of attesting that this difference implies an opposition of positive and negative, superior and inferior. Being so, beauty standards are set in order to enforce this binary.

2.2 Beauty Matters, White Matters

As it has been discussed so far, many philosophers in the history of mankind have attempted to verbalize concepts which appeared to them as genuinely evolved insights on the nature of beauty. In her introduction to the book *Beauty Matters*, Peg Zeglin Brand remembers Plato's considerations on the topic of beauty and calls them to mind by mentioning his postulations on beauty as something "once deemed timeless, unchanging, and universal" (6). Plato's and many others' proposition was rooted in the common assumption that the beautiful was considered so because it was capable of provoking in the viewer a sense of pleasure that never changed.

Some of these philosophers described this pleasure as a disinterested reaction towards that which is beautiful. That is the case of Immanuel Kant who, in *Critique of*

Reason (1781), favored the belief that the beautiful was the object that instigated a personal response, free of moral values and judgments.

In her essay "Kantian and Contextual Beauty," Marcia M. Eaton contends that there are two "conflicting intuitions" (27) about beauty. The first, which she calls Kantian beauty, refers to the disinterested – a-moral, free of pre-judgments – pleasure taken in the contemplation of a given object. The other intuition related to how beauty is thought of is what Eaton calls "contextual beauty". She states that "[t]he pleasure required for the judgment that something is beautiful diminishes, disappears, or is even replaced by displeasure as one's beliefs or values change" (33). What she means is that the perception of beauty cannot be detached from the values of a society. She admits that, at times, some "'pure', conceptless, valueless uses of 'beauty'" may occur, but she believes them to be very rare instances. Eaton maintains that pleasure taken in the form of an object will occur only if the focus is its form; in that case, knowledge of what in the form is to be looked for or at should be clear. Aside from these rare instantiations, beauty can only be construed in terms of a socio-cultural agreement that, through the particular mores of a culture, dictates what the norms and standards are for an object to be perceived as beautiful. In addition to that, society (mainly western society) will often associate these values and mores to concepts of virtue and goodness as well as the non-observance of these same values to vice and evil. In that case, beauty is, indubitably, loaded with judgmental value and evaluation. To deem an object as beautiful is to associate it with goodness and to deem it non-beautiful (or ugly) is to correlate it to evil.

Indeed, the West has constructed a colonial, imperialistic discourse that based its notions of beauty along racial parameters in order to establish and reinforce their position of superiority and power. The power of the White race has been enacted

discursively and through actions in a number of ways. One of them is certainly through the creation of a set of standards (e.g., beauty standards) that enable white people to find subsidies for their so-called superiority.

First of all, although I have just mentioned "the white race", Richard Dyer, in his thorough analysis of the representation of white – *White* – states that races are often discussed in reference to groups that are not white. Hence, since "white people are not racially seen and named, they function as a *human norm*" [my emphasis]. He means that "other people are raced, *we [whites] are just people* [my emphasis]" (1). According to Noël Carrol, in "Ethnicity, Race, and Monstrosity: the Rhetorics of Horror and Humor," Kant, similarly to other philosophers such as Thomas Aquinas[1], considered a human beautiful as long as the person fell into the adequate form of what should be ideal for humanity. If whites are "just the human race" because they are not of a particular race (Dyer 3), they are the norm and, as such, the adequate form of a human being. Consequently, they are beautiful.

In fact, the imperialistic agenda bases itself on this premise in order to determine racial difference or racial otherness as an equivalent of inferiority (and therefore, ugliness). Richard Dyer affirms that, "the equation of being white with being human secures a position of power" (9). Still, whiteness needs otherness to sustain its status as the norm, and one of the means to do so is by actualizing an illusion that, as the norm, it is also the beautiful.

There are numerous strategies white supremacy has used to emphasize white beauty as the standard and, thus, white superiority. One of the most exceptional explanations the imperialistic project produced relied on a "scientific" discourse based on biological differences that accounted for the "fact" that different physical traits were

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[1] Thomas Aquinas believed that proportion was not only the perfect symmetry of a body, but the perfect adaptation of the matter to the form (Eco 88)

the sign of characteristics (psychological, intellectual, physical abilities) supposedly unique of a certain race.

The main contention of such theories tried to prove that the biologically inherited traits of a certain group were directly connected to other characteristics, such as intelligence and vigor. Kwame Anthony Appiah quotes Martin Tupper's "The Anglo-Saxon Race" in the epigraph to his essay "Race":

> "Stretch forth! stretch forth! from the south to the north,
>
> From the east to the west, – stretch forth! stretch forth!
>
> Strengthen thy stakes and lengthen thy cords, –
>
> The world is a tent for the world's true lords!
>
> Break forth and spread over every place
>
> The world is a world for the Saxon race! (qtd. in Appiah 274)

In this idea of the world as the world for the Anglo-Saxon race, Tupper conveys an ideal that could be well explained and accepted because the "biologically heritable, moral and intellectual characteristics" (276) gave the impression of what Appiah calls "the *essence* of [a] race [my emphasis]" (276). If, according to this belief, every race had an essence based on which to judge their abilities and attributes, the white race had to be, certainly, the one made to be connected to "literary 'genius', intelligence and honesty" (276) as well as beauty. What is left for the other races, then, is otherness – that is, the difference that makes them not the norm and therefore not fitting these essential qualities (physical, intellectual, moral), which presuppose superiority. These essentialist beliefs led to the creation of stereotypes such as the example Richard Dyer raises in *White*. He mentions that one of the ways whites have benefited from stereotypical essentialisms in establishing their superiority is by justifying the successes of imperialism/colonialism on the natural tendency white men have for enterprise.

White men were men of enterprise and as such were able to conduct imperialism (and the domination of other peoples) effectively (31).

Dyer says that this entrepreneurial "essence" of the Anglo-Saxon race (a race directly descending from the Aryan race) has to do with will and that will is, in turn, linked to self-control and control of others (Dyer 31). Moreover, he explains that, "the very existence of Empire" indicates an "outcome of the struggle between superior and inferior 'races'" (32).

Conversely, this essentialization or, as Stuart Halls puts it, "Naturalization" (a term he uses in chapter 4 of the book he edited *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices*), which is a practice to "fix 'difference' and thus *secure it forever* [his emphasis]" (Hall: 245), did the opposite to African-Americans. This group was led to be viewed as bearing particular to their race, traits of "[l]aziness, simple fidelity, mindless 'cooning', trickery, childishness…" (245).

Also in *White*, it is possible to find yet another biological explanation. This one was very common in the 18th century and was named "The Great Chain of Being." It consisted in classifying different races in a hierarchical ladder whose parameters were closeness or distance from God (and therefore goodness and virtue, the beauties of the soul). Not surprisingly, whites were placed right next to God and blacks were the closest to animals. Dyer explains:

> all creation was connected in a hierarchy that proceeded from the lowest to the highest, the latter being God. Black people were placed only just above the apes (a notion taken over into corruptions of Darwinism and often surviving in the quest for the "missing link" between humans and apes). White men (sic) were placed at the highest point of earthly creation, linked via the angels to God. (22)

The author also quotes the "Treatise on Race" (1799) to support his statements:

> Ascending in the line of gradation, we come at the last to the white European; who being most removed from the brute creation, may, on that account, be considered the most beautiful of the human race… Where shall we find, unless in the European, that nobly arched head ... those rosy cheeks and coral lips? Where that erect posture and noble gait? In what other quarter of the globe shall we find the blush that overspreads the soft features of the beautiful women of Europe, that emblem of modesty, of delicate feelings, and of sense? Where that nice expression of the amiable and softer passions in the countenance; and that general elegance of features and complexion? Where, except on the bosom of the European woman, two such plump and snowy white hemispheres, tipt with vermilion? (quoted in Dyer 71)

For Dyer, racialist theories, which claimed to be scientific but also concerned aesthetics, regarded Caucasians (the Aryan race, Anglo-Saxons) as the "pinnacle of the human race in every respect" (71). This, evidently, included beauty.

In the valuation of races along a hierarchical line, Paul C. Taylor remarks in "Malcolm's Conk and Danto's Colors; or Four Logical Petitions Concerning Race, Beauty and Aesthetics" that,

> The most prominent type of racialized ranking represents blackness as a condition to be despised, and most tokens of this type extend this attitude to cover the physical features that are central to the ascription of black identity. So a central assumption has been that black folks – with our kinky hair, flat noses, thick lips, dark skin, prognathism, and steatopygia – are *ugly*. (I call to your attention the evaluative overtones of this

> standard descriptive language: imagine the difference if I had said *broad* noses, *full* lips, *curly* hair, and so on.) [his emphasis] (58)

So, not only did these racialist theorists grade blacks and whites in opposite locations along a racial line, which implied a hierarchical evaluation/valuation that classified whites as having the best qualities (including physical ones) and, consequently, blacks as having the opposite; but they also carefully did so by using characteristics in the black cultures that were crucial for the construction of their identity, i.e., physical traits. This has been central to the construction of a norm for beauty, since blacks (actually, people in general, blacks and whites alike) have internalized this as the truth.

Another strategy in the representation of whiteness as the norm that worked its way into the psyche of a western society was the use of religion. Jesus Christ, a Jewish man, was according to convenience (to use Bembo's term, which is very suitable in this discussion) represented as a blond, blue-eyed man. So was the Virgin Mary. According to Dyer, that has to do with the Crusades. For him,

> Christianity brought a tradition of black:white moral dualism to bear on an enemy that could itself be perceived as black. The Crusades were thus part of a heightening awareness of skin colour difference which they further inflected in terms of moral attributes. (67)

Because of that, Jesus Christ and the Virgin Mary needed to be represented differently from the characteristic traits of their people in order to resemble not only purity but also conformance to the norm. If Jesus and Mary were the supreme connection to God, they should be represented as white so as to create a strong connection between goodness and whiteness.

Africans were also referred to as primitive in opposition to the civilized cultures of the West. Their non-Christian religions and their "underdeveloped" habits, besides their strong and direct connection with nature, were considered primitive. Stuart Hall quotes McClintock to describe the despicable image Europeans had constructed of Africa:

> By the nineteenth century, when the European exploration and colonization of the African interior began in earnest, Africa was regarded as "marooned and historically abandoned…a fetish land, inhabited by cannibals, dervishes and witch doctors…" (qtd. in Hall 238)

This naturalization of the African people was another one of the many ways whites justified their superiority. Because Africans were viewed as primitive and closer to Nature and did not develop great technologies for the conquest of different lands, for instance (e.g. the great development of navigation centuries before), they were deemed inferior in their intellectual capacity.

Richard Dyer also mentions fairy-tales as a significant, not to mention remarkable, source of support for the argument that whites were superior through beauty standards. Dyer notes that all the princesses and heroines in fairy-tales are fair-skinned and have long straight blond hair. Their character is, unquestionably, impeccable concerning goodness, virtue and morals. They are, moreover, the impersonation of purity and innocence. The characters depicted in darker shades (dark/black hair, for instance) are associated with wickedness and sensuousness (59). Snow White is exempted from this pattern because her own name makes up for her hair – she is as white as snow; the hue of her whiteness is snow-like. As a result, her position as pure and good at heart is reestablished.

Literature has also been a strong instrument for the white race project. In *Playing in the Dark*, Toni Morrison discusses Western literature in order to probe the matter of how it has been used to portray the greatness of America or the Americanness of its white people:

> It was not simply that this slave population had a distinctive color; it was that this color "meant" something… The point for this discussion is the alliance between visually rendered ideas and linguistic utterances. And this leads into the social and political nature of received knowledge as it is revealed in American literature. (Morrison 49)

Toni Morrison argues that the visible difference between Africans and whites was not only endorsed by social and political discourses but also by literature, which, in turn was an instrument for these same social and political discourses, as literature was supposedly the reflex of a people. Furthermore, these visual differences were registered in literature with the convenient significance ascribed to them.

Several studies have shown that white supremacy has counted on a variety of methods so as to stress its racial superiority. Beauty standards are not only one of the elements that construct the image of whites as superior but also the exact reason why they exist (as a model of what is considered the ideal form for mankind). They function as both the cause (one of them, at least) and the consequence of the representation of white as a "better" and superior race.

In the face of this, the most immediate of senses – sight – identifies in the physical features of a person not disinterested beauty or ugliness but one (beauty/ugliness) that is charged with moral values of what is considered the norm. African people and people of African descent are then confronted with a dual perception

of the self. Beauty does matter. And for these people, the fact that they cannot fulfill the "requirements" can be a crushing experience.

2.3 Beauty Matters, Race Matters

Beauty, for the African-American individual, is a complex, yet crucial issue. Western beauty standards – characterized mainly by blond (straight) hair and blue eyes – play a major role in the lives of people who belong to this group, above all in the lives of black girls as they grow up, for they refer to white ideals while constructing their identity and self-perception.

In 1903, W.E.B. DuBois described, in his newly published book *The Souls of Black Folk*, the feeling of African-Americans in the United States as "double-consciousness." This feeling, which concerned the African-American's identity, was one of dualities and conflicts in his self-perception. DuBois believed that,

> the Negro is a sort of seventh son, born with a veil, and gifted with second-sight in this American world, – a world which yields him no true self-consciousness, but only lets him see through the revelation of the other world. It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity … this two-ness – an American, a Negro… to warring ideals in one dark body… (45)

The term coined by DuBois has been widely used to think about and understand the experience of African-Americans in the United States. Their identity is shaped by

the perception they have of themselves as individuals and as a group through a veil that distorts and blurs the image. They are not Americans, if by Americans one considers the WASP (White Anglo-Saxon Protestant) tradition. They are not Africans, for they were not born there or have any experience in the culture. Actually, it is of great importance that it be clear that Africa is a continent made up of a countless number of nations, and therefore, people of African descent in the United States do not have only one African background, but numerous (in fact, one person alone may descend from more than one ethnic group). Thus, when using the term "double-consciousness," the multiplicity of the two parts of the two-ness it presupposes should be considered. At any rate, they are African-Americans. In America, though, the standards by which they are judged and judge themselves are the whites'.

As a result of these dualities, African-Americans feel displaced for living on a land that acknowledges their presence as intruding and unwanted. Still, their experience is necessarily shaped by this and, if they are African-American, it is because they are also American and occupy a place in that culture (which does not mean a position of power). It is in this convoluted context of their perception that beauty and its American standards surface as one of the main elements that trouble the double-sighted African-American. African-American girls (specifically in the case of this study) judge themselves and their physical appearance through the eyes of the white.

In Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*, Pecola Breedlove is the extreme impersonation of the yearning for ideal of feminine beauty. Unlike her surname – Breedlove – she does not seem to be able to attract love from anyone and she accounts that on her physical appearance. She, an eleven-year-old black girl, longs for blue eyes as the ultimate hope for being loved and cared for the way Shirley Temple is. Pecola thinks that having pretty blue eyes would avoid all the pain she suffers, all the fighting

at home and all the hassles at school. She is assaulted from all sides by a society that despises her presence. In the way she perceives this reality, the solution would be to have good looks. Pecola is not completely wrong to believe that. What else was she supposed to believe if not that she was ugly? Shirley Temple was cherished and loved by everyone. She was not.

Unlike Pecola, Maya Angelou – Marguerite Johnson (Ritie) at the time –, in *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*[2], does not even know what white people look like: "I remember never believing that whites were really real." (20) She lives in the segregated town of Stamps, Arkansas, in the South of the United States in a period when segregation was still sanctioned by law. Believing that she has probably never seen a white person at that age, she still felt the burdens of being an "ugly" black girl. Notwithstanding, she undergoes the same predicaments Pecola does. No different from her counterpart, she associates being beautiful with the set standards of the "blond-blue-eyed-angel-like" girl. In addition, she also connects this standard to social acceptance.

The first time we learn this in her story is at the very beginning, when she is describing an occasion when she needed to recite a poem in front of the church assembly. She thinks of her taffeta dress (altered from some white woman's throwaway) and how beautiful it would be. When she actually wears it, it does not look as stunning as she expected. She then wishes she were "one of those little white girls who were everybody's dream of what was right with the world" (1). She had dreamed that when people saw her wearing the dress they would "run up to me and say, 'Marguerite [sometimes it was 'dear Marguerite'] forgive us, please, we didn't know how you were,' and I would answer gently, 'No, you couldn't have known. Of course I forgive you'" (2). When she woke up from her daydreaming she would realize that the

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[2] Henceforth called *Caged Bird*

age-faded color of the fabric made her skin look "dirty like mud" (2) and exposed her skinny legs.

This fear of being viewed as "unattractive" and "of losing people's approval and regard" (106) entails issues of desirability and of being loved (107). It is pertinent to mention this at this point since not only Pecola but also Marguerite Johnson (in *Caged Bird*) plunge into a quest for love, which they believe can only be actualized through beauty.

In *The Bluest Eye*, Pecola wonders, one day at the MacTeers' house, how one gets someone to love her. The logical answer seems to be, according to her, that one gets to be loved if she is beautiful. She learns, from a tender age that to inspire love in her family, schoolmates and teachers, and in the community members, she needs to be beautiful. Otherwise, as an ugly girl, she will only incite hate or pity. In fact, Pecola thinks that if she were beautiful and had blue eyes, her parents would not fight they way they do. Pecola even prays for them. Everything would be different in their household because her presence would be regarded and acknowledged:

> – if those eyes of hers were different, that is to say, beautiful, she herself would be different… If she looked different, beautiful, maybe Cholly would be different, and Mrs. Breedlove too. Maybe they'd say, "Why, look at pretty-eyed Pecola. We mustn't do bad things in front of those pretty eyes." (46)

Pecola thinks that if she had blue eyes, her parents would be so busy appreciating her presence and relishing her eyes that they would not have time for big fights over petty reasons; her presence would be so important that these fights could not upset her. Moreover, she would be so virtuous and good with her pretty blue eyes that she could not be abused.

Another very important incident that causes Pecola to conclude she will only be loved if she is beautiful (blue-eyed) is the devotion her mother pledges to the daughter of her employers, the Fishers. The little Fisher girl is a cute little blond, blue-eyed girl – "Her hair was corn yellow" (108) – who receives all the dedication from Pauline Breedlove[3]. When Pecola sees the little girl, she feels so awkward of her own contrasting features that she accidentally makes the cobbler her mother made tilt from the counter. Mrs. Breedlove is infuriated by the scene and starts to mistreat her daughter as she fondles and pampers the white girl.

> "Crazy fool … my floor, mess … look what you … work … get on out … now that … crazy … my floor, my floor … my floor." … The little girl in pink started to cry. Mrs. Breedlove turned to her. "Hush, baby, hush. Come here. Oh, Lord, look at your dress. Don't cry no more. Polly will change it." (109)

Not only was Pecola scorned by her own mother, but she also sees the unconcealed demonstration of love her mother had for the little white girl.

Besides that, the Breedloves all internalized racism and the politics of white representation that dictates white as the standard for beauty. The narrator explains that they believe so much in their ugliness that they wear it.

> No one could have convinced them that they were not relentlessly and aggressively ugly…. Mrs. Breedlove, Sammy Breedlove and Pecola Breedlove – wore their ugliness, put it on, so to speak, although it did not belong to them… You looked at them and wondered why they were so ugly; you looked close and you could not find the source. Then you

[3] Pauline Breedlove is called Polly in the Fishers' home. Even the little girl calls her that, making it explicit that Polly is no more than a servant who does not even deserve to be called by her full name and is disenfranchised to such an extent that it is unconceivable that she be called by her last name and the title Mrs. Claudia is outraged because not even Pecola dares to call her that.

> realized that it came from conviction, their conviction… They 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. (38, 39)

Pecola is also despised by her schoolmates. They harass and humiliate her constantly. They offend her by making comments on her father's behavior, which is probably not even based on real knowledge of the dynamics and house habits in Pecola's family.

> A group of boys was circling and holding at bay a victim, Pecola Breedlove. … Heady with the smell of their own musk, thrilled by the easy power of a majority, they gaily harassed her. "Black e mo. Black e mo. Yadaddsleepsnekked. Black e mo black e mo ya dadd sleeps nekked. Black e mo…" (65)

bell hooks identifies this kind of behavior, in "Back to Black: Ending Internalized Racism," as the feeling most African-Americans have about themselves. She, who calls it self-loathing, accounts that black people (and she is specific about young ones) need to find a scapegoat for their own self-hate and internalized racism. Moreover, she uses the term "Color-Caste System" to describe a condition in which "black children learn early to devalue dark skin." They learn that "white is better" and to "negate the blackness" in themselves (180). This mechanism of negation works outside of the self and towards another peer – one that is apparently more fragile and delicate and who is easier to abuse. Pecola is the perfect target because she strongly believes she must carry the burden of being insulted by her own people due to her internalized conviction that she is ugly and unworthy. Hence, she does not react.

It is not only Pecola's classmates who abuse her. Her teachers at school also contribute to this conduct as they never assign Pecola to sit with any other student. Plus, they avoid speaking directly to her. This makes Pecola reflect about herself:

> Long hours she sat looking in the mirror, trying to discover the secret of the ugliness, the ugliness that made her ignored or despised at school, by teacher and classmates alike. She was the only member of her class who sat alone at a double desk… Her teachers had always treated her this way. They tried not to glance at her, and called on her only when everyone was required to respond. (46, 47)

Pecola also finds this sort of internalized racism once she goes into Geraldine's home. Junior, her son, attracts her there and is cruel to Pecola who ends up killing the family's cat by throwing it at the fan. Geraldine despises black people and treats Pecola very badly. Pecola stares at the cat's face and sees a black face with blue eyes (realizing that a black face with blue eyes can be possible). This scene, though, while bringing Pecola some sort of hope, also foreshadows the real disgraceful fate of the combination of black face and blue eyes: the cat dies, what of Pecola?

Consumption goods also reinforce Pecola's belief that being blond and blue-eyed are synonyms of being loved. She drinks milk from Shirley Temple cups and can never get enough of it – "We knew she [Pecola] was fond of the Shirley Temple cup and took every opportunity to drink milk out of it just to handle and see sweet Shirley's face" (23). It seems as if the more she drinks from the mug, the more of Shirley Temple's looks she will absorb. Pecola and Frieda (Claudia's sister) agree that Shirley Temple is the cutest thing: "Frieda and she had a loving conversation about how cu-ute Shirley Temple was." (19)

The same process of deluded and fantasized incorporation of these looks happen when Pecola counts her money to buy Mary Jane candy. Trudier Harris states that "[t]he Shirley Temple cup and the Mary Jane candies allow Pecola to carry the image through her very being, to become one with it for short periods of time." (42) By drinking from the mug or by eating the candy she may experience for seconds becoming white, though harsh reality soon falls into place:

> Each pale yellow wrapper has a picture on it. A picture of little Mary Jane for whom the candy is named. Smiling white face. Blond hair in gentle disarray, blue eyes looking at her out of a world of clean comfort. The eyes are petulant, mischievous. To Pecola they are simply pretty. She eats the candy, and its sweetness is good. To eat the candy is somehow to eat the eyes, eat Mary Jane. Love Mary Jane. Be Mary Jane. (50)

Likewise, Marguerite, in her early years, is constantly told that she is ugly. Neighbors and visitors to her house in Stamps continuously remark on her awkwardness in contrast with her brother Bailey due to her kinky hair and darker skin. bell hooks describes the Color-Caste system mentioned above as a practice that values lighter shades of blackness as better and more beautiful: "the lighter one's skin, the greater one's value" (174).

> I was big, elbowy and grating, he was small, graceful and smooth. When I was described by our playmates as being shit color, he was lauded for his velvet-black skin. His hair fell down in black curls, and my head was covered with black steel wool. (17)

She also has the same feeling Pecola had concerning her looks. She thinks that one day (very similar to Pecola's wish and prayer for blue eyes as a way of making

people acknowledge her existence) she will wake out of her "black ugly dream" and her hair, which in reality was long and blond "would take the place of the kinky mass that Momma wouldn't let me straighten." She also thought that her eyes, which were actually blue (in her insane musing), would be able to hypnotize the people who had previously shown contempt towards her (2).

In her 1993 afterword to her book, *The Bluest Eye*, Toni Morrison avers that, "[b]eauty was not something to behold; it was something one could do" (209). In fact, bell hooks tries to clarify this assertion by explaining that "the obsession with straight hair [a metonym for white features in general] reflects the psychology of oppression and the impact of racist colonization" ("Straightening Our Hair", 109). This psychology of oppression works in the construction of beauty norms based on the European type in order to reinforce, sustain and perpetuate, while legitimizing this very oppression. bell hooks describes the dynamics of this process:

> Straightened hair is linked historically and currently to a system of racial domination that impresses upon black people, and especially black women, that we are not acceptable as we are, that we are not beautiful. (109)

bell hooks goes on to say that, "Racism and sexism reinforce to black women that they will not be considered beautiful or desirable if they don't change their looks" (109). What these girls (Pecola and Marguerite) learn in their early years is precisely that. Through a series of methods, they come to have the impression (and even the certainty) that they can only be accepted and loved if they are beautiful, meaning, blond and blue-eyed.

In "Straightening Our Hair", bell hooks beautifully describes the change in significance of hair pressing. She recalls her childhood, her longing to participate in

that "ritual of black women's culture", that moment of "intimacy" and creativity that enabled these black women to "make each other feel good inside" (102). That was, bell hooks says, "a time for laughter and outrageous talk." In other words, that was a time for "bonding" (103). Nonetheless, bell hooks grew to realize that hair pressing acquired a completely different connotation. The context of bonding no longer applies. She firmly asserts that hair pressing is a practice that "indicates internalized racism, self-hatred, and/or low self-esteem". Furthermore, it is an attempt to imitate the physical traits of a dominant group (103). By trying to imitate the ideals of the dominant group, blacks, according to hooks in yet another essay – "Back to Black: Ending Internalized Racism" –, reaffirm the "equation of whiteness with beauty" (179). bell hooks discusses in this essay the powerful influence of white beauty over black women. She argues that straightening hair was a way of overcoming their "insecurity… about their value in this white supremacist society" (105).

There are external encouragements that may rescue these girls from the margins of society's oppression by teaching values and attitudes that stimulate that sort of resistance. Families contribute a great deal for the African-American girl to overcome these racist parameters of beauty (as an equivalent of love and acceptance) and to grow out of the restrictions society imposes upon them based on gender and race. They are central in this process, for they may serve as the impulsion for these girls to cope with their double-sighted self-perception. That will depend, among other factors, on the family and on the relations performed within the familial context as they affect the girl's self-perception while growing up. Ideally, they will reach the pleasant celebration of their bodies, which hooks considers a "liberatory struggle that frees the mind and heart" ("Straightening Our Hair", 109).

3. FAMILY MATTERS

Some of the definitions that the *Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary* presents for the word **family** are related to the associations two people make (husband and wife) in order to constitute a unit living within a household under the care of these two people:

> Etymology: Middle English *familie,* from Latin *familia* household (including servants as well as kin of the householder), from *famulus* servant
>
> **1 :** a group of individuals living under one roof and usually under one head **:** HOUSEHOLD
>
> **2 a :** a group of persons of common ancestry **:** CLAN **b :** a people or group of peoples regarded as deriving from a common stock **:** RACE
>
> …
>
> **5 a :** the basic unit in society traditionally consisting of two parents rearing their own or adopted children; *also* **:** any of various social units differing from but regarded as equivalent to the traditional family <a single-parent *family*> **b :** spouse and children <want to spend more time with my *family*>

Henry A. Rhodes, in "The African-American Family in Crisis," also finds such definitions in the *HBJ School Dictionary*. The definitions he believes to be useful for his study and that will also be of help for this present thesis are: "1. a unit consisting of parents and their children 2. a group of persons forming a household 3. one's entire group relatives 4. a group of people descended from the same ancestor." (qtd. in Rhodes)

Whichever definition one chooses to construe the family experience of an individual, it is unquestionable that it does play a crucial role in the construction of one's sense of self. Rhodes quotes from John Scanzoni's *The Black Family in Modern Society* the author's reflections on the contribution of families to the personality of an individual: "It is in the family where personality is developed, where identity is formed, where status is assigned and where values and norms are learned" (quoted in Rhodes).

This assertion is of extreme importance if one is to understand the influence families have on an individual. Families are the first social group a person comes in contact with and, thus, the one which presents some of the attitudes and beliefs he/she will learn that will affect their self-perception as well as their perception of the world. According to Scanzoni's statement, the values and norms an individual learns within the family unit will shape the way he/she understands his position in the world. From that perspective, the African-American family does not differ from any other group association called "family" since it is vital for the African-American child to perceive its position in a sexist and racist society.

The study of the African-American family has been approached from many angles. One of the most well-known, and yet one of the most controversial studies on the theme was "The Negro Family: The Case for National Action." This report – which became known as "The Moynihan Report" because of the attributions of authorship to Daniel Patrick Moynihan, then, Assistant Secretary of Labor – was released inside the Department of Labor in 1965 as an attempt to describe the hindrances that the African-American community faced in its developments.

According to the report, the family was the main problem of the African-American community. Based chiefly on the works of Edward Franklin Frazier about blacks in the US, it contended that the African-American family – with its many

variations to the traditional organization – was "[a]t the heart of the deterioration of the fabric of Negro society" (51).

In *The Negro in the United States*, Frazier describes the family among rural Negroes as "the basic unit and most important social group." He distinguishes, however, the Negro family from families in any other peasant society as he states that, "it lacks the definite organization which is found in peasant communities in some parts of the world" (215). This "lack of organization", as indicated by Frazier, is due, mainly, to the little control that could be employed over sex relations in slave and ex-slave communities, a factor that led to illegitimacy. Illegitimacy, in turn, was the main cause of matriarchal families (215). Another one of Frazier's considerations indicated that families, in African-American society, were based on "individual wishes". Sexual pleasure and "economic cooperation" were what made two people associate with one another. This association was "long enough so as to have (many) children" (215).

In summary, Frazier proposed that the way African-American families were arranged affected a whole system of relations within the African-American population. He believed that their arrangement, which was characterized by no organization whatsoever, generated a great instability, which in turn impeded these people from having a tradition. A section of Frazier's line of reasoning should be quoted here in order to understand the substance of his thoughts:

> The widespread disorganization of family life among Negroes has affected practically every phase of their community life and adjustments to the larger white world. Because of the absence of stability in family life, there is a lack of traditions. Life among a large portion of the urban Negro population is casual, precarious, and fragmentary. It lacks continuity and its roots do not go deeper than the contingencies of daily

> living. This affects the socialization of the Negro child. With a fourth to a third of Negro families in cities without a male head, many Negro children suffer the initial handicap of not having the discipline and authority of the father in the home. Negro mothers who have the responsibility for the support of the family are forced to neglect their children who pick up all forms of socially disapproved behavior in the disorganized areas in which these families are concentrated. (quoted in Rainwater and Yancey 312)

Daniel P. Moynihan draws from these findings (Frazier presents some narrow statistics such as the number of families headed by women in specific locations) to shape and justify his argument around the afflictions of the African-American people. According to the report, these afflictions only exist because the family in African-American communities is not well (or traditionally) structured. The report avows that this family breakdown, which is caused by many factors, contribute for a weak construction of the children's character and self-perception leading to a cycle where the community is held back from developing.

The first of these causes mentioned in the report is slavery. The argument begins with a comparison between the Brazilian and the American regime of slavery, favoring the former as more benevolent on its slaves. The Catholic society of Brazil considered slaves human beings, even though they were less fortunate ones (for being born African). They were, thus, part of society: hierarchically, the lowest, but still human. On the other hand, the English Protestant tradition, so deep-rooted in American society, did not "accommodate to the fact of human bondage" (61) and, therefore, dismissed slaves altogether reducing them to the status of "chattels" (61).

The North-American ideal of self-reliance could not hold true for slaves, whose wish for achievement was repressed. This, according to the report, "vitiated family life" and the most evident consequence of this was a matriarchal system of family: "Since many slaveowners neither fostered Christian marriage among their slave couples nor hesitated to separate them on the auction block, the slave household often developed a fatherless matrifocal (mother-centered) pattern" (62).

Another factor that contributes to the way African-American families are organized has its origins in the Reconstruction Era. The report suggests that Jim Crow was more inflicting upon Negro males who used public spaces more frequently. The Negro female was not threatened as much since she was more likely to stay in the domestic sphere. The report quotes from Margaret Mead who says that, "[i]n every known human society, everywhere in the world, the young male learns that when he grows up one of the things which he must do in order to be a free member of society is to provide food for some female and her young" (qtd. in Moynihan 16). In the case of the African-American family, the Negro boy learns that he cannot fulfill this pattern and the position of men in the family organization is "violated and distorted" (63).

Urbanization is yet another cause for the Negro family breakdown. The report contends that since country life and city life are extremely distinct, many strains arise when there is a shift from one lifestyle to the other. This shift, according to Moynihan, is "immensely disruptive of traditional social patterns" (63).

Other factors mentioned in the report are unemployment and poverty, which Moynihan remarks as "the least understood of all the developments that have contributed to the present crisis" (65), and the wage system, which clearly privileged white people and, above all, "provides high incomes for individuals, but is rarely adjusted to insure that family, as well as individual needs are met" (67).

What made the report controversial was that it held the African-American family responsible for all the hassles met by this community. The fact that there were high rates of illegitimacy and matrifocal households within Negro communities seemed to be enough to account for their state of poverty and the social position they were relegated to. For William Ryan, the report had "serious shortcomings" and,

> draws dangerously inexact conclusions from weak and insufficient data; … encourages (no doubt unintentionally) a new form of subtle racism, … and seduces the reader into believing it is not racism and discrimination by the weakness and defects of the Negro himself that account for inequality". (qtd. in Rainwater and Yancey 221)

One of the many reactions triggered by the report was expressed by Elizabeth Herzog [4] in the article "Is There a 'Breakdown' of the Negro Family", originally published in *Social Work,* in the January, 1966 edition. She contested the idea that slavery, illegitimacy and fatherless homes were the actual causes for the burdens of the African-American people. Herzog rejected the common assumption that African-American family structure was influenced more by their "legacy of slavery than by postslavery discriminations and deprivations" (350). These discriminations and deprivations, she says, affect "every facet of life: occupation, education, income, housing, nutrition, health and mortality, social status, self-respect – the documented list is long and the documenting references myriad" (351).

Still, she recognizes the role of family in the construction of a society as much as Civil Rights leader Benjamin F. Payton[5], who also agrees that families do have a part in shaping the Negro community and its member's self-perception:

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[4] From the Chief, Child Life Studies Branch, Division of Research, Children's Bureau, Welfare Administration, Department of Health, Education, and Welfare.

[5] In the essay "New Trends in Civil Rights" originally published in *Christianity and Crisis*.

> More important, careful analysis would show that however pathological or disorganized the Negro community might be, the student movement, the continued power of the Negro church and *the tremendous "coping skills" generated by the Negro family itself* are but a few of the factors that demonstrate the community's great reserves of untapped power and health [my emphasis]" (400).

The main criticism towards "The Moynihan Report", then, was towards his interpretation of statistics, which did not appear to be very solid. Another issue raised was towards the actual responsibility of the family for the shortcomings of the African-American people. Some intellectuals and critics argued that a fatherless family, for instance, did not necessarily represent a pathological feature. Riessman concludes that,

> The basic defect in the Moynihan thesis is a *one-sided presentation of the consequences of segregation and discrimination*. That damage has been done to the Negro as a result of discrimination cannot and should not be denied. But the Negro has responded to his oppressive conditions by many powerful coping endeavors. He has developed many ways of fighting the system, protecting himself, providing self-help and even joy. One of the most significant forms of his adaptation has been the extended, female-based family. (475)

Moynihan believed that,

> [t]he role of the family in shaping character and ability is so pervasive as to be easily overlooked. The family is the basic social unit of American life; it is the basic socializing unit. By and large, adult conduct in society is learned as a child (quoted in Rainwater and Yancey: 51).

However, his account that, "the family structure of lower class Negroes is highly unstable, and in many urban centers is approaching complete breakdown" (51) is little accepted as the explanation for the condition of African-Americans in the US.

In "The African-American Family in Crisis," Henry A. Rhodes refers to Jualynne Dodson's "Conceptualizations of Black Families," in order to draw attention to two different approaches to the study of the African-American family. One of these schools is associated with the works of Edward Franklin Frazier and Daniel P. Moynihan. As it has been previously mentioned, these critics understand that the Negro family is "unstable, disorganized unable to provide its members with the social and psychological support and development they needed" (Rhodes).

Moreover, this approach, based on Frazier's *The Negro Family in the United States*, advocated that the African culture inherited by Negroes in the US had not affected their family structure. According to Rhodes, Frazier did believe there had been some cultural traits which prevailed for longer, such as names and folklore, but they "either became lost or distorted with time." Rhodes states that this approach is mainly characterized by the argument that black families are "unstable and dysfunctional." "The Moynihan Report" explains that this is so because of the black community's "broken families, illegitimacy, matriarchy, and economic dependency."

The other approach is called "Cultural Relativity School." Scholars[6] of this school agree that the black family is indeed a "functional entity" (Rhodes) influenced by its African cultural heritage. Melville Herskovits was one of the first scholars to recognize that there were elements in African-American communities that contained authentic "African-American patterns" such as "language, music, art, house structure, dance, traditional religion, and healing practices" (qtd. in Rhodes). In traditional

[6] Andrew Billingsly, Virginia Young, Robert Hill and Wade Nobles, for instance.

societies, families were characterized by "unity, stability and security" (Rhodes). Rhodes mentions the work of Robert Hill (*The Strengths of Black Families*), who describes five characteristics of African-American families: "1. strong kinship bonds 2. strong work orientation 3. adaptability of family roles 4. strong achievement orientation 5. strong religious orientation."

African-American families are also characterized by their frequent extended feature. Extended families are very common in African societies and this is another one of the aspects preserved in black communities in the US. It is often possible to notice a family who lives under the head of a woman or a family who takes in a relative like an uncle, for instance.

Niara Sudarkasa's "Interpreting the African Heritage in Afro-American Family Organization" maintains that extended families among slaves in America kept many features of African extended families. She describes African-American families as "built around consaguinial kin whose spouses were incorporated into the extended family networks in different degrees" (quoted in Rhodes). This kind of kin association can be found in much that has been said about black families, not only in slavery but also in the postslavery period. Rhodes claims that "consanguinial kin assisted each other with child rearing, in life crisis events such as birth and death, in work groups, in efforts to obtain freedom [in the case of slaves], and so on." Families and family associations may and will live in kin association with other members in an extended context. However, it is risky to assert that all Negro families are headed by the female in a matrifocal organization (whether the father is absent or not) or that they bear illegitimate children. Likewise, not all black families are broken and, when they are, they are not necessarily problematic or pathological, to use Moynihan's term:

> Families can break up for many reasons, among them cultural and personality differences among the parents, economic difficulties, or mental illness on the part of one or both spouses. Each of these reasons produces different effects on the children, and not all are likely to be pathological. (Rainwater and Yancey 451)

In short, it is unquestionable that family does play a central role in the formation of character of a human being regardless of affiliations or backgrounds (religions, ethnic or racial). According to Luther King,

> [t]he family, that is, the group consisting of mother, father and child, still remains the main educational agency of mankind. Modern psychologists agree that parenthood as the dominant influence of infancy forms the character of the individual and at the same time shapes his social attitudes and thus places its imprint upon the constitution of the whole society" (403).

This same point, yet emphasizing the negative aspect of the African-American experience, is made by Moynihan when he uses E. F. Frazier's 1950 claim to describe the present scene of the family in this group:

> As the result of family disorganization a large proportion of Negro children and youth have not undergone the socialization which only the family can provide. The disorganized families have failed to provide for their emotional needs and have not provided the discipline and habits which are necessary for personality development. Because the disorganized family has failed in its function as a socializing agency, it has handicapped the children in their relations to the institutions in the community… Since the widespread family disorganization among

> Negroes has resulted from the failure of the father to play the role in family life required by American society, the mitigation of this problem must await those changes in the Negro and American society which will enable the Negro father to play the role required of him. (qtd. in Moynihan 48)

The focus of the matter is distorted, though. The condition of the African-American people is not caused by their family structure. If family is involved in this issue, it is as a consequence of the system of discriminatory practices. Besides, what needs to be probed are the mechanisms that African-American families have in order to overcome the harsh conditions imposed upon them in the American context, and the ways these mechanisms affect coming generations in their construction of their identity and self-perception as well as their position in the African-American community and in society in general.

What can be observed in literary texts is the most diverse range of possibilities concerning family and family relations. Like in any other group, the family in black communities is bound to break up, to be headed by women, to be extended, and so on. The focus, though, should be, as previously mentioned, on the way these families deal with the everyday burdens they are subjugated into due to their status as African-Americans. *The Bluest Eye* and *Caged Bird* present to the reader some – only some – of the variety of means a family can be structured. All in all, they contradict the ideas proposed by Moynihan as they depict family organizations that do not follow traditional western patterns and nonetheless succeed in providing care and love for their children. They also portray "full" families that function well or that break up in the course of the story thus demonstrating that no one fixed structure is always and necessarily functional.

What is functional, though, is the capability of these families to work together in order to resist discrimination and deprivations. bell hooks sees the homeplace (the place of family life) as a site of resistance – as the title of her essay "Homeplace: a site of Resistance" makes explicit: "Throughout our history, African-Americans have recognized the subversive value of homeplace, of having access to private space where we do not directly encounter white racist aggression" (47).

The homeplace, characterized and constituted mainly by family life, can either be a chance of resistance or the place where new generations of African-Americans will internalize racism and self-loathing. In *The Bluest Eye* and *Caged Bird*, these different possibilities are revealed through the ways families and family members relate. Different members of the family contribute differently in the process of growing up of young black girls. Family members reflect their beliefs onto these girls who, for Toni Morrison, are "the most delicate" and "the most vulnerable" members of society (Morrison 210).

The next section will focus on the position of different members of a family and the roles they play: the female figures, namely the big momma – who may be the mother or another female member, such as the grandmother who takes up that role; and the male figures (the fathers, stepfather, brothers, uncles). Before a discussion of the influence and involvement of family members in the lives of young girls as they grow up and start constructing their identity and self-perception begin to unfold, it is of great relevance that these girls be considered as members of a group (social and family groups).

In *The Bluest Eye*, the girls who are involved in most of the story are Pecola – the protagonist – with her longing for love, which, for her, can only be actualized through beauty – and the sisters, Claudia and Frieda. The two families (Pecola's and

Claudia's) are curiously contrasted by their names: the Breedloves (Pecola's family) and the MacTeers (Claudia's family). Ironically, breed and love are a combination that alludes directly to animalistic behavior as well as to a moralistic feeling:

> "Breed" and "love" clearly exist oppositionally, in countertextual relation: "breed" is the biological phenomenon, a physiological occurrence having no affective source or consequence; "love" is a social, religious or spiritual phenomenon, implying meaning beyond the simply phenomenal. (Gibson 168)

Furthermore, the tension between "breed" and "love" as one word is the tension where Pecola stands: a struggle between the wish for love and scenes where savage behavior of fights and sex take place.

Pecola is the center of this convoluted scenario. She is lost, afraid and abused psychologically – and later physically too. She is a little girl who wonders if she is not loved because of her eyes – which are not blue – and wishes sometimes she could disappear not to attend the horrible scenes at home.

On the other hand, the name MacTeer is also markedly used in the story. Teer, in MacTeer, sounds like the word "tear." This shows their family's compassionate behavior revealed in their attitude of taking Pecola in when she was "outdoors" (when her father burned up their house) and their care for their children. Claudia and Frieda MacTeer learn this conduct as children and grow into strong-willed girls who stand up for their friend (Pecola) against their classmates when they try to harass her with insults about her father's sleeping habits:

> Pecola edged around the circle crying. She had dropped her notebook, and covered her eyes with her hands… Then Frieda, with set lips and Mama's eyes, snatched her coat from her head and threw it on the

> ground. She ran toward them and brought her books down on Woodrow Cain's head. The circle broke… "You cut that out, you hear?" I had never heard Frieda's voice so loud and clear… "Leave her 'lone, or I'm gone tell everybody what you did!" … You shut up, Bullet Head". I had found my tongue (66).

They also show compassion when they try to "help" Pecola's baby to survive by planting marigold seeds and by giving up something in order to convince God their intention is good:

> "Let's asks Him to let Pecola's baby live and promise to be good for a whole month."
>
> "O.K. But we better give up something so He'll know we really mean it this time."
>
> "Give up what? We ain't got nothing. Nothing but the seed money, two dollars."
>
> "We could give that. Or, you know what? We could give up the bicycle. Buy the money and… plant the seeds."

The contrast between the two families is described by Roberta Rubenstein in "Pariahs and Community": "Mrs. MacTeer's grudging love for her daughters exposes the absence of such affection in Pauline Breedlove's attitude toward Pecola" (138).

In the *Caged Bird*, Marguerite Johnson (later in the book called Maya) relates her experience of displacement as she moves from one place to another with her brother Bailey to be raised by different family members. At the age of 3 she is sent to live with her grandmother Annie Henderson (her father's mother). During the years of her childhood she goes to live with her mother, back with her grandmother and then, with her mother again. Even though she felt she was displaced and did not belong anywhere,

she was made sure to know of the love and affection her relatives had towards her: each in a different manner. This made Maya grow from being a scared, insecure girl, who wanted to be blond and have blue eyes to be loved, into a brave and confident young woman, capable even of getting a job as a conductor on the streetcars of San Francisco as the first African-American to ever hold that position:

> "I WOULD HAVE THE JOB. I WOULD BE A CONDUCTORETTE AND SLING A FULL MONEY CHANGER FROM MY BELT. I WOULD… I was given blood tests, aptitude tests, physical coordination tests, and Rorschachs, then on a blissful day I was hired as the first Negro on the San Francisco streetcars" (227-29).

3.1 Female Figures

In many of what is studied or written about the African-American family (including in Literature) an imperative presence cannot go unnoticed. Such presence is that of the Big Momma. The Big Momma is usually a strong-minded, rough, yet affectionate, caring while strict figure who, in many cases, runs the household firmly and rigidly as she provides love and care. She is also in some cases the breadwinner who will leave the house and her children in order to provide for her family. This character is sometimes the mother or the grandmother of an extended family. Whatever the case, her status as the provider (of love and/or of money) grants her the position of head of the family and of authority to whom all go for wisdom as well as for care.

Some critics and scholars, such as Phillip Brian Harper and bell hooks, believe that this reversal of roles of husband and wife is critical since the African-American male still has to deal with a larger context in which patriarchy is the norm. However, many

will claim that the problem does not lie solely on the man – as a husband and/or as a son – being subjected to matriarchy. These critics will contend that what may be pathological in this organization is not the absence of the father (physically or emotionally) but the skills the matriarch has to head her family:

> the matriarchal family structure and the absence of a father has not yet been proven to be pathological, even for the boys who grow up in it. Sociological studies of the Negro family have demonstrated the existence of an extended kinship system of mothers, grandmothers, aunts, and other female relatives that is surprisingly stable, at least on the female side… The immediate cause of pathology may be the absence of a set of emotional strengths and cultural skills in the mothers, rather than the instability or departure of the fathers. A family headed by a capable if unmarried mother may thus be healthier than a two-parent family in which the father is a marginal appendage. (Gans 451)

African-American and Womanist critics claim that the black mother (sometimes under the typical figure of the Big Momma) is a sacred character who bears the burdens of the race at the same time as she performs her role of "nurturing" the "body and soul" (hooks, 41). They assert that black mothers have a very hard life as they serve white folks and still have to reserve enough of themselves for their own.

As a powerful and determinant influence in the life of the family, this figure – the big Momma – plays an unmistakable role in the lives of the young girls in *The Bluest Eye* and *Caged Bird* as it is fundamental for their self-perception.

In *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, Maya's first mother figure is her grandmother Annie Henderson. At the age of 3, she is sent with her brother Bailey to live with her in the segregated South (in Stamps, Arkansas) when their parents decide to

get divorced. Maya is raised in a strict but loving household under the head of her grandmother who also takes care of Uncle Willie – a handicapped man who helps in the Store which Momma Henderson owns. She herself had the Store (capitalized by the narrator who explains it was referred to with a capital S by everyone to symbolize its significance to the whole community) built after having sold lunch over mobile counters and stands she had set up to supply workers with their needs. In the heart of the black section of town, it provides food and all sorts of articles (besides protection once in a while) for the cotton pickers who are in the surrounding fields as well as the rest of the community in the "Negro area" of Stamps:

> Over the years it became the lay center of activities in town. On Saturdays, barbers sat their customers in the shade on the porch of the Store, and troubadours on their ceaseless crawlings through the South leaned across its benches and sang their sad songs of The Brazos while they played juice harps and cigar-box guitars.
>
> …
>
> The formal name of the Store was the Wm. Johnson General Merchandise Store. Customers could find food staples, a good variety of colored thread, mash of hogs, corn for chickens, coal oil for lamps, light bulbs for the wealthy, shoestrings, hair dressing, balloons, and flower seeds. Anything not visible had only to be ordered. (5)

Momma Henderson is the typical Big Momma with a very strong faith, which she thinks appropriate to impart upon her grandchildren. She brings them up in the strictly religious principles she believes in. She is an active member of the community church, the Episcopal Methodist Church, and makes sure her grandchildren participate too. She is always chanting and praying:

> During the picking season, my grandmother would get out of bed at four o'clock (she never used an alarm clock) and creak down to her knees and chant in a sleep-filled voice, "Our Father, thank you for letting me see this New Day. Thank you that you didn't allow the bed that I lay on last night to be my cooling board, nor my blanket my winding sheet. Guide my feet this day along the straight and narrow, and help me to put bridle on my tongue. Bless this house, and everybody in it. Thank you, in the name of your Son, Jesus Christ, Amen" (5).

Momma Henderson (they soon stopped calling her grandmother) also had a very rigid perception of how to educate her grandchildren. This perception was based not only on religion but also on discipline and good manners:

> Crossing the Black area of Stamps which in childhood's narrow measure seemed a whole world, we were obliged by custom to stop and speak to every person we met… "Thou shall not be dirty" and "thou shall not be impudent" were the two commandments of Grandmother Henderson upon which hung our total salvation.
>
> Each night in the bitterest winter we were forced to wash faces, arms, necks, legs and feet before going to bed (20, 21).

Annie Henderson is a respectful woman whom Maya remembers as powerful and strong (38). Being the only Negro woman in the town to be referred to as Mrs. (in one specific incident) she still went through many hassles in her life that instilled in her character some instantly recognizable harshness. Nonetheless, this harshness often gives way to some softness Maya herself acknowledges as a choice. Her tallness and her large hands that "could span my [Maya's] head from ear to ear" are combined with her voice, which "was soft only because she chose to keep it so" (38). Likewise, she

does not pamper or cuddle or treat Maya or her brother Bailey with great demonstrations of affection, but her love is disclosed in her rearing the children with discipline and religion as well as in attitudes she believes will do good to them: "at least twice yearly Momma would feel that as children we should have fresh meat included in our diets" (19).

She is also ready to defend her children. She does that to her son – Uncle Willie – at the prospect of his being unjustly attacked and lynched by the Klan[7]:

> "Annie, tell Willie he better lay low tonight. A crazy nigger messed with a white lady today. Some of the boys'll be coming over here later"…Immediately, while his horse's hoofs were still loudly thudding the ground, Momma blew out the coal-oil lamps. She had a quiet, hard talk with Uncle Willie and called Bailey and me into the Store.
>
> …
>
> We were told to take the potatoes and onions out of their bins and knock out the dividing walls that kept them apart… It took forever before he lay down flat, and then we covered him with potatoes and onions, layer upon layer, like a casserole. Grandmother knelt praying in the darkened Store (14 - 15).

Momma Henderson believes that black folks should behave humbly and be ready to serve white people without talking back, not to mention talking to or about them at all. Her fear was that they would react badly relying on their position of superiority: "she didn't cotton to the idea that white folks could be talked to at all without risking one's life" (39). In spite of this, to protect Maya from being humiliated she leaves these beliefs behind and stands up for what she thinks is right. Although she

[7] Ku Klux Klan: an organization said to be founded originally in 1865 with the purpose to advocate for white supremacist ideals in which included the hate for Africans and African-American people in the United States.

is not much for affection, she is very protective. Maya relates the occasion when she had a decayed tooth that had to be pulled right out for it was causing her great pain. Momma took her to the white section of town to a white doctor who owed her a favor (she had loaned him money during the Great Depression). When he refused to see Marguerite because she was black saying he would rather put his hands in a dog's mouth than in a nigger's she pleaded. Seeing that this would not work, she charged the interest of the money loan after asking her granddaughter to wait outside for her to do that: "'If you paid me my money I could afford to take her.' I tole him everything but the interest had been paid. He said ''Twasn't no interest,' I said, ''Tis now, I'll take ten dollars as payment in full'" (164). While Maya fantasized about what was taking place in the room, Momma achieved her goal and the money helped her get to Texarkana (the next town) where a black doctor was able to assist Maya:

> Momma looked tired when she came down the stairs, but who wouldn't be tired if they had gone through what she had. She came close to me and adjusted the towel under my jaw (I had forgotten the toothache; I only knew that she made her hands gentle in order not to awaken the pain). She took my hand. Her voice never changed. "Come on, Sister". (162)

Similar to Momma Henderson is Claudia's and Frieda's mother, Mrs. MacTeer, in *The Bluest Eye.* Like Maya's grandmother, she is very severe in her treatment to the girls, that is, she is not overtly affectionate. Claudia, the narrator, remembers an episode when she was very young and became sick and her mother kept complaining:

> Great Jesus. Get on in that bed. How many times do I have to tell you to wear something on your head? You must be the biggest fool in this town… Her hands are large and rough, and when she rubs the Vicks

> salve on my chest, I am rigid with pain… Later I throw up, and my mother says, "What did you puke on the bed clothes for? Don't you have sense enough to hold your head out the bed? Now, look what you did. You think I got time for nothing but washing up your puke?" (10 -11)

Years later, Claudia concludes, though, that the anger Mrs. MacTeer felt was not exactly towards her – it was towards that cold that was keeping her daughter sick: "I do not know that she is not angry at me, but at my sickness" (11). Her anger converted into protectiveness when,

> 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 (12).

Not any different from Momma Henderson, Mrs. MacTeer is also protective and defensive about her daughters. This is the case when a neighbor suggests that Frieda might have been ruined by Mr. Henry – whom they take in as a "roomer" in order to make ends meet in the family budget. Mrs. and Mr. MacTeer react fiercely and drive him out: "I told Mama, and she told Daddy, and we all come home, and he was gone, so we waited for him, and when Daddy saw him come up on the porch, he threw our old tricycle at his head and knocked him off the porch" (100).

Mrs. MacTeer can be a nagging woman complaining about her daughter's sickness or about Pecola's excessive milk-drinking (from the Shirley Temple cups). Then again, her voice can turn sweet and soft as she sings: "She would sing about hard times, bad times, and somebody-done-gone-and-left-me times. But her voice was so sweet and her singing-eye so melty I found myself longing for those hard times…" (25). One occasion when these changes in mood happen in the story is the time when she is

ready to give the girls a whipping for "playing nasty" but winds up being understanding and good-hearted. When she realizes they are trying to deal with Pecola's first menstrual period, she feels the need to comfort and help her children:

> Mama released and stood looking at her. Then she pulled both of them toward her, their heads against her stomach. Her eyes were sorry. "All right, all right. Now, stop crying. I didn't know"… Mama led us to the bathroom. She prodded Pecola inside, and taking the underwear from me, told us to stay out…The water gushed, and over its gushing we could hear the music of my mother's laughter (31-32).

Extremely contrasting with this Big Momma pattern is Pecola's mother, Pauline Breedlove. Polly, who is lame of one foot, channels all her affection towards the white family she works for. All her care is dedicated to the Fishers: "It was her pleasure to stand in her kitchen at the end of a day and survey her handiwork… Hearing, 'We'll never let her go. We could never find anybody like Polly. She will *not* leave the house until everything is in order…'" (128). Pauline Breedlove is very proud to be able to do what she likes most: organize, line up objects in a logical order, clean up. She is appreciated for that and even deserves a nickname – Polly –something she has never had and that disturbs Claudia since Polly's own children respectfully call her Mrs. Breedlove while a young white girl has the license to call her by her nickname. In fact, the little Fisher girl seems to deserve more protection and attention than Pecola. In the episode when Pecola knocks the blueberry cobbler down at the Fisher's residence, Polly curses her daughter and is concerned with the little girl, whom she comforts and assures she will take care of the situation: something she has never done to Pecola.

At home, on the other hand, she is bitter. Cholly, her husband, and she are constantly engaged in a physical and emotional battle. Her religious trait, then, is

different from that of Mrs. MacTeer and Momma Henderson since it serves only as a salvation from her condition in this family. She turns to church life when her marriage is dissolved into these physical struggles and animalistic sex. She is an active member of church community only because she considers herself a martyr: "Mrs. Breedlove considered herself an upright and Christian woman, burdened with a no-count man, whom God wanted her to punish" (42).

If Cholly is her "crown of thorns", her children are her cross. Pecola and Sammy do not match what she believes to be ideal. The movies ingrained very deeply in Pauline the idea of ugliness. She learned from them that physical beauty and romantic love was directly related to virtue, so when Pecola was born and looked something out of her model, "a cross between a puppy and a dying man", she rejected her daughter, who, together with her brother Sammy, was a cross, "She looked different from what I thought… I knowed she was ugly. Head full of pretty hair, but Lord she was ugly" (126).

Not only does Pauline Breedlove deviate from the pattern of the Big Momma, but she does so in a negative mode. She is religious without demanding from her children to learn the premises of the African-American church tradition; she provides financial support for the family, but never emotional.

Another mother who does not conform to the "Big Momma" model is Vivian Baxter – Maya's real mother. Nevertheless, she is a very positive and imperative presence (even when she is absent) in Maya's life. She – unlike Momma Henderson – is modern (e.g. she drives a car) and is open and strong-minded. She refuses to be subservient to men or white people and makes sure she supports her children with "humor and imagination" (175). When asked about what she did for a living, she did not hesitate to answer frankly:

> When we asked her what she did, what her job was, she walked us to Oakland's Seventh Street, where dusty bars and smoke shops sat in the laps of storefront churches. She pointed out Raincoat's Pinochle Parlor and Slim Jenkin's pretentious saloon. She told us that she had never cheated anybody and wasn't making any preparations to do so. Her work was as honest as the job held by fat Mrs. Walker (a maid) who lived next door to us, and "a damn sight better paid" (174-75).

Vivian Baxter is very supportive of Marguerite. An example is the time when her daughter decides to get a job as a streetcar conductor. She not only encourages her daughter to give her best – "Life is going to give you just what you put in it. Put your whole heart in everything you do, and pray, then you can wait… God helps those who help themselves" (228) – but also helps her get through the difficulties created by her superiors: "'Don't worry about it. You ask for what you want, and you pay for what you get'… She stayed awake to drive me out to the car barn at four in the mornings, or to pick me up when I was relieved just before dawn" (229-30).

Another demonstration of her support is her welcoming reaction and her patience towards Marguerite's questions and doubts about her body and about lesbianism (something she had just been introduced to in the book *The Well of Loneliness*):

> "Sit down, baby. Read this." Her fingers guided my eyes to VULVA. I began to read. She said, "Read it out loud."… She drank the beer as I read, and when I had finished she explained it in every-day terms. … Mother shot up and put her arms around me. "There is nothing to worry about, baby. It's just human nature" (236).

In addition, Marguerite's mother takes her pregnancy very easily and rather unsurprisingly:

> Mother asked: "Who is the boy?" I told her. She recalled him faintly.
>
> "Do you want to marry him?"
>
> "No."
>
> "Does he want to marry you?" The father had stopped speaking to me during my fourth month.
>
> "No."
>
> "Well, that's that. No use ruining three lives."
>
> There was no overt or subtle condemnation. She was Vivian Baxter Jackson (244).

According to bell hooks, a sexist society expects from women to be the ones who create and maintain the home space for the family. In a sexist and racist society, black women not only engage in that role but also in that of transforming the homeplace in a place of resistance.

Pauline Breedlove is more interested in receiving acknowledgement for being a good housekeeper to the Fishers than in worrying about her children's conditions as they grow up. These distinct patterns of behavior affect the girls' perception of themselves as girls and as African-Americans. Their relationship with their mothers is so important as to reinforce or destabilize the notions they have of themselves in light of the beauty standards that have been set for them. If being blonde and blue-eyed is synonymous with being beautiful and, at an ultimate instance, loved (or worthy of love because of qualities inherent to the beautiful person such as virtue and goodness), Pecola has learned that she can never be loved and her mother endorses that persistently.

On the contrary, Maya, as well as Claudia and Frieda MacTeer in *The Bluest Eye*, find in their homes a mother (or a mother figure, in the case of Momma Henderson) who provides them with nurturance and care. These mothers nurture the body and the spirit as they love and take care of their children worrying about their physical and mental health, discipline, character and religion. They learn to overcome or, at least, to cope with this imposition from Western society because their mothers (as well as other family members) teach them about resilience and resistance attesting that love is dissociated from beauty and the beauty standards they have as parameters to judge their own physical appearance.

3.2 Male Figures

Mothers are definitely not the only influence on the girl's experience of growing up. Other family members also play a fundamental role in their development. Fathers and brothers, uncles and stepfathers play major or minor parts in their lives depending on the organization of the family.

Claudia and Frieda live in a household composed of their parents – Mr. and Mrs. MacTeer – and themselves. Like the model Daniel P. Moynihan suggests, their family is not broken and the father is active in contributing to the family budget as well as the children's education. Even though the family is not middle-class, which is presupposed in the model Moynihan assumes to be the stable Negro family, they struggle together to raise their girls and to educate them. The home environment is peaceful and Mr. MacTeer's treatment of the girls is similar to their mother's. He is harsh and not indulgent, but is caring and protective. One instance of this is the episode of Frieda and

Mr. Henry (that has already been mentioned) when he violently expels the boarder from his house after the latter's advances towards the girl.

Like many parents, he usually addresses his daughters merely to issue orders and directions – although he seldom has conversations with the girls, he demonstrates tenderness and care when talking to them about any given subject: "he gives us instructions about which doors to keep closed or opened for proper distribution of heat, … and teaches us how to rake, feed and bank the fire" (61).

Conversely, the Breedloves' home slowly and gradually falls apart, giving the impression that Daniel Moynihan may have been right in his assertion. The product of broken homes are children who have low self-esteem and who do not progress much in life. That is the case with Pecola and her brother Sammy. The family eventually breaks down (physically, as Cholly leaves town), but his presence at home is reason enough for constant fights with Pauline Breedlove:

> Cholly had come home drunk. Unfortunately he had been too drunk to quarrel, so the whole business would have to erupt this morning… Mrs. Breedlove came swiftly into the room and stood at the foot of the bed where Cholly lay.
>
> "I need some coal in this house."
>
> Cholly did not move.
>
> "Hear me?" Mrs. Breedlove jabbed Cholly's foot….
>
> With no exception, Cholly had the meanest eyes in town.
>
> "Awwwwww, woman!"…
>
> "You going to get your drunk self out of that bed and get me some coal or not?"
>
> "All right. All right. But if I sneeze once, just one, God help your butt!"

> …
>
> By the grace, no doubt, of God, Mrs. Breedlove sneezed. Just once.
>
> She ran into the bedroom with a dishpan full of cold water and threw it in Cholly's face…. Cholly picked her up and knocked her down with the back of his hand (40-44).

Cholly – as the reader comes to understand as the story unfolds – is a drunkard who has never known what it is to have a family. Having had no model of parenting – "Having no idea of how to raise children, and having never watched any parent raise himself, he could not even comprehend what such a relationship should be" (160) – he perpetuates the rejection he has always suffered at different moments in his life. First, he was abandoned by his mother in a dump and was, thus, raised by a great-aunt too old to even resemble the image of a mother. Secondly, he never knew paternal love. The only contact he had with his father was disastrous for he was not acknowledged as a son. Rather, he was humiliated:

> "You Melba's boy?"… The man was impatient. "Something wrong with your head? Who told you to come after me?" "Nobody." Cholly's hands were sweating. The man's eyes frightened him. "I just thought… I mean, I was just wandering around and, uh, my name is Cholly…" But Fuller had turned back to the game… he stood up and in a vexed and whiny voice shouted at Cholly, "Tell that bitch she get her money. Now, get the fuck outta my face!" (155-6)

Another episode in Cholly's life that is vital for the definition of his present character is the one of his first sex experience and in which he is once again humiliated:

> Their bodies began to make sense to him, and it was not as difficult as he had thought it would be… She moaned a little, but the excitement

> collecting inside him made him close his eyes and regard her moans as no more than pine sighs over his head. Just as he felt an explosion threaten, Darlene froze and cried out. He thought he had hurt her, but when he looked at her face, she was staring wildly at something over his shoulder. He jerked around. There stood two white men. One with a spirit lamp, the other with a flashlight… The men had long guns… "Get on wid it, nigger," said the flashlight one... "I said, get on wid it. An' make it good, nigger, make it good."
>
> …
>
> There was no place for Cholly's eyes to go. They slid about furtively searching for shelter, while his body was paralyzed… "Come on coon. Faster. You ain't doing nothing for her."… Cholly, moving faster looked at Darlene. He hated her… Cholly raised himself and in silence buttoned his trousers… "We got to get, girl. Come on." (147-49)

Professor Bill Harris, form Wayne University, claimed, in a course taught at UFMG in September, 2004, to be interested in the condition of African-American men who, he thinks, are the least considered. He asserted that much has been said and written about African-American women and their plight in America. Black men, in contrast, have been relegated to a position of almost non-existence. His concern is on how black men deal with that in a sexist patriarchal society that values men (white men) as superior and on how these black men are voiced and legitimated in literature. bell hooks explains, in "Seduced by Violence no More", that, "Black males, utterly disenfranchised in almost every arena of life in the US often find assertion of sexist domination is their only expressive access to patriarchal power" (110).

Since black men are disenfranchised and disembodied in a culture that expects men to dominate, their only opportunity of obtaining power is by abusing the female body. Cholly becomes an abusive father and husband. It is from the circumstances of his life as a disenfranchised individual (undeniably, in **every** arena of his life) that he – in a desperate reaction of a father (who, again, has no parenting model) in the condition of many black males – rapes his daughter, Pecola, leaving her pregnant – and insane:

> She was washing dishes. Her small back hunched over the sink. Cholly saw her dimly and could not tell what he saw or what he felt. Then he became aware that he was uncomfortable; next he felt the discomfort dissolve into pleasure. The sequence of his emotions was revulsion, pity, then love. His revulsion was a reaction to her young, helpless, hopeless presence… Why did she have to look so whipped? She was a child – unburdened – why wasn't she happy? … What could he do for her – ever?... If he looked into her face, he would see those haunted, loving eyes… The tenderness welled up in him,… The rigidness of her shocked body, the silence of her stunned throat, was better than Pauline's laughter had been. The confused mixture of his memories of Pauline and the doing of a wild and forbidden thing excited him, and a bolt of desire ran down his genitals, … His soul seemed to slip down to his guts and fly out into her, and the gigantic thrust he made into her then provoked the only sound she made – a hollow suck of air in the back of her throat... Again, the hatred mixed with tenderness (161-63).

The father, then, reinforces physically what Pauline – the mother – does psychologically. He stresses what Pecola believes to be absolute: she is not worthy of

love because she is not beautiful enough or good enough (i.e., her eyes are not blue enough).

Sammy Breedlove – Pecola's brother and the only other male figure she knows – does not cause much of an impact on her. He is also oppressed by the family hassles but, as the narrator remarks; he is not "restricted by youth and sex." He has, at the age of 14, run away from home "no less than twenty-seven times" (43). His condition as a boy allows him to escape (even if temporarily) that environment. His own suffering makes him indifferent to his sister's suffering and existence.

Contrary to Moynihan's contentions, however, is the experience Maya Angelou recounts in her autobiography. Along the years of her childhood and early adolescence, she does not for once live in a full home comprised of mother, father and siblings. Although she also undergoes painful episodes, she eventually succeeds in coping with them. She has, throughout the years, a number of significant male characters that have an effect on her life in some way.

Uncle Willie, whom she lives with in Stamps (together with Momma Henderson and her brother Bailey), is the first father-like figure she relates to. She is so young when she is sent away from home to her grandmother's home that she does not recall her own father's presence. Still, she is glad to have Uncle Willie and is thankful for their relationship: "Not only did I not feel any loyalty to my own father, I figured that if I had been Uncle Willie's child I would have received much better treatment" (10).

This lack of loyalty towards her father is clearly uncovered a few years later, when Daddy Bailey comes to Stamps to visit:

> His bigness shocked me. His shoulders were so wide I thought he'd have trouble getting in the door… And he was blindingly handsome… His

> voice rang like a metal dipper hitting a bucket and he spoke English. Proper English… He was the first cynic I had met”. (44, 45)

His negligence and lack of respect for his daughter are exposed at an older age, when Maya decides to spend summer with him and his girlfriend Dolores in southern California. She reports the day she and her father rode down to Mexico with the excuse of buying spices for his cooking. He takes her to a *cantina* where she has fun for a while drinking Coca-Cola. He soon leaves her at the counter and disappears while she begins to feel abandoned. The situation is aggravated when he comes back drunk and lies in the car asleep.

Another incident that shows his carelessness towards his daughter is when she and his girlfriend Dolores have an argument that turns into a physical struggle. Maya slaps Dolores after she calls her mother a “whore.” Even though Daddy Bailey admits Dolores’s share of guilt, he decides to take Maya to a friend’s house to avoid conflicts – something Maya finds completely disregarding of her presence as a guest.

Yet, these are far from being the only male family influences Maya comes across. The other very important one is that of her first stepfather, Mr. Freeman. It is with him that Maya first experiences what it is to be affectionately held (and therefore loved and cared for). It is also with him that her young body is sexually assaulted. This happens when Maya goes to St. Louis to live with her mother’s family. She starts to spend time with her stepfather, whom she pities for sitting around all day waiting for her mother to come home from work. His condition was similar to that of Cholly, disenfranchised and disempowered. As such, Marguerite not only pitied him, but also identified with him for the longing she also felt for love and affection.

In this longing for love and warmth, Maya starts going to their bed (her mother’s and Mr. Freeman’s) at night – something that becomes a natural habit. In one of these

occurrences, Mr. Freeman holds her against his body (after her mother leaves in the morning for work) and, though he is molesting her, she wishes that he never lets go of her:

> He held me softly and I wished he wouldn't ever let me go. I felt at home. From the way he was holding me I knew he'd never let me go or let anything bad ever happen to me. This was probably my real father and we had found each other at last (61).

Her idea of what a father is supposed to be is so faint that she fantasizes that this is what it must feel like to have one. Plus, she does not realize the implications of this act until the next incident, when she is abused. The episode repeats itself, only this time she is raped:

> "Ritie, come here." I didn't think about the holding time until I got close to him. His pants were open and his "thing" was standing out of his britches by itself. "No, sir, Mr. Freeman." I started to back away. I didn't want to touch that mushy-hard thing again, and I didn't need him to hold me any more. He grabbed my arm and pulled me between his legs…he said, "Now this ain't gonna hurt you much. You liked it before, didn't you?"… "If you scream, I'm gonna kill you. And if you tell, I'm gonna kill Bailey."… Then there was the pain. A breaking and entering when even the senses are torn apart… I thought I had died – I woke up in white-walled world, and it had to be heaven. But Mr. Freeman was there and he was washing me (65).

Under the threat of killing her brother, Ritie retreats into silence, which lasts long enough for people to resent her and send her back to Stamps.

Maya, later in the story, comes to meet another stepfather, Daddy Clidell, with whom she has an entirely different relationship. He is, as she sees it, "[t]he first father I [Maya] would know" (177). He is a successful businessman and earns a living by deceiving white people who, in turn, believe they can always win over blacks: "… they [Daddy Clidell and his partners] used their intelligence to pry open the door of rejection and not only became wealthy but got some revenge in the bargain" (190). For him that, "just goes to show you how white folks can be deceived by their own deception" (188).

Maya slowly comes to trust and respect him because she learned valuable lessons from him. He considered himself her father, took care of her as such (even in the absence of her mother), told her stories about the blacks who were able to overcome their condition. Besides, she never regarded him as a criminal (for how he earned his money) for he had ethics to be followed – only different ones from those set by western/white society.

Vivian Baxter's brothers were also an influence for Maya for, with them, she learned what protection was. They were supportive and did all it took to maintain the members of their family happy. Maya's brother, Bailey, is also central to her life. He is, above all, her role model throughout her childhood. He – in her eyes – is handsome and very bright. He introduces Marguerite into the pleasure of reading and is always protective of her feelings: "When our elders said unkind things about my features… Bailey would wink at me from across the room, and I knew it was a matter of time before he would take revenge" (17). He is also an all-time partner and companion to her.

Nevertheless, he, as Sammy in *The Bluest Eye*, is more free than Maya because of his condition as a boy. Maya remarks that at two points in her narrative: when they are in Stamps she states that, "Bailey could count on very few punishments for his

consistently outrageous behavior…" (18); at sixteen he decides to leave home and does so with the consent of his mother.

The African-American individual carries with him/her the aftermaths of centuries of oppression. One of the "lessons" this people has learned is that their physical features do not conform to a standard of beauty society imposes upon its members. Families will certainly perpetuate this feeling that is well described as double-consciousness. Some families will be able to deal with their double-conscious experience in America and will help their relatives to re-shape and re-signify this experience by resisting these oppressive practices. Other families, though, will not learn how to resist. Rather, they will learn from previous generations that whites are indeed superior; that they are, indeed, the model of physical beauty to aspire.

Evidently, different family members influence in distinct ways the lives of these girls and their on-going (and recognizably everlasting) process of identity construction. From Moynihan's perspective, the organization of the African-American family is complex and knotty because the absence of the father (a consequence of illegitimacy) and the matrifocal head destabilize the structure, leading to problematic children who will not be able to improve their lot due to a series of hindrances (poor or no education, low-paying jobs/unemployment).

Notwithstanding, it is not the organization of the families that is problematic, for there are numerous family structures within the African-American context that do not conform to the Western ideal. What is important to consider is the way they function rather than the way they are organized. In that sense, a family in which the father is present may not (and shows not to be in the texts studied in this paper) be the most operative instance whereas a family organized in an extended fashion may prove to be

more effective for the well-being of the children – more specifically for the girl's construction of her self-image.

The functionality of a family will be uncovered in their capacity to love their family, their community, their race, their culture. This family – though many times broken – will show, as Robert Hill suggests, "strong kinship bonds" (quoted in Rhodes), present at times when one member sides with another and supports him/her¸ for example. They will demonstrate "strong work orientation" and "adaptability of family roles" as a solution for oppression. They will have strong achievement and religious orientation because they live in an environment where they believe in each other's capacity to progress and honor their tradition.

Family organization itself matters little, then, if compared to its functionality. For instance, matriarchy is not the issue – the way a mother conducts the family is. The relations established by the members of these families regardless of the way they are organized are far more significant for their self-perception. If beauty is a crucial element in this process of perceiving themselves, the way their families deal with it and with them is essential for the girls' understanding of these beauty standards, of how to relate to them and of how to overcome their difference.

Revisiting Scanzoni's formulations (quoted in Rhodes), the family contributes for the personality, the identity and for their learning of the values and norms important for their living in society. It also determines the person's interpretation of his/her status within that society. The families in the two stories – *The Bluest Eye* and *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* – are undoubtedly distinct and have raised distinct girls. Their perception of their position in society depends much on their family relations, which will, among other things, define whether beauty is a limiting element, if it can be

standardized, and if the restraints of a fixed standard are enough to make a girl see herself as able to confront and transpose these issues or not.

4. THE OUTCOME

> 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 (3).

The Bluest Eye, the tragic story of Pecola Breedlove, starts with a parody of the Dick-and-Jane primers, which from the 1930s until around the 1960s were spread around the entire country as a method for teaching reading in American elementary schools. These primers were published as a series and portrayed an idealized picture of the all-American lifestyle. The primers not only resembled the happy American family but also taught strong moral values that were typical of white-America.

Needless to say, the ideology embedded in these primers denoted a very precise model of a happy family: the blissful episodes in the books described the everyday life of a white (blonde, blue-eyed) middle-class family consisting of a father, a mother, daughters and son, and a dog. The perfect family. The utmost example of love and care.

The Bluest Eye also brings these same lines of the primer arranged differently. This first block is repeated subsequently, though missing any punctuation or capital letters. The next version of the primer, following the previous, presents a text that is almost impossible to read: no punctuation, no capital letters, no spaces between the words:

> Hereisthehouseitisgreenandwhiteithasareddooritisveryprettyhereisthefami
> lymotherfatherdickandjaneliveinthegreenandwhitehousetheyareveryhapp
> yseejaneshehasareddresshewantstoplaywhowillplaywithjaneseethecatitgo
> esmeowmeowcomeandplaycomeplaywithjanethekittenwillnotplayseemot
> hermotherisverynicemotherwillyouplaywithjanemotherlaughslaughmothe
> rlaughseefatherheisbigandstrongfatherwillyouplaywithjanefatherissmilin
> gsmilefathersmileseethedogbowwowgoesthedogdoyouwanttoplaydoyou
> wanttoplaywithjaneseethedogrunrundogrunlooklookherecomesafriendthe
> friendwillplaywithjanetheywillplayagoodgameplayjaneplay (4).

This is a significant indication that the narrator is aware of the complexity of the African-American family. As the first arrangement of the primers establishes a great discrepancy between the protagonist's reality and her idealized world, it also shows the convolution of African-American family life. Life in white families is supposedly perfect and arranged in a logical manner so as to cause no internal or external conflict. The easiness to read the primers as they conform to punctuation reflects the harmonious disposition of the white family in society. If compared to the ideal of Western society, African-American families may be construed by some as pathological due to their organizations, at times fatherless and matrifocal, at times, extended. Similar is the reading of the primers, which, without punctuation or spaces between the words, become distorted and destabilizing, the African-American family array causes some

rupture with the mainstream ideal. However, Morrison opens up the possibility that this may not be necessarily defective; rather it can be a subversive stand.

The African-American girl's wish to fit into this pattern is definitely endorsed by a society that relishes the American dream. Pecola and Maya are no different in their stories as they demonstrate feelings of displacement at home – the longing for a loving and affectionate home. They come to understand in their communities and at home that their physical appearance does not correspond to the American ideal, and therefore, they assume that they are undeserving and unworthy of the ideal family. Their yearning for love confounds with their desire for white looks, making it seem like it is their lack of white features that makes them be rejected: "How do you do that, I mean, how do you get somebody to love you?", Pecola asks (32). How could Shirley Temple be so loved and cherished if not because she had blue eyes and was blond? How could Maya not want to become blond if those girls were "everybody's dream of what was right with the world" (1)?

There is, though, a chance for resistance. Suggested by bell hooks in "Homeplace: a Site of Resistance," and portrayed in the stories is the possibility of resisting in the homeplace, where this space is created. Families (in spite of not conforming to the model established by whites) and the relations performed among their members are a site where beauty standards (the epitomized aspect of white domination and construction of superiority) can be transposed. Instead of being valued as a major element in their perception, families (and the way they function) are able to ascribe beauty standards a lesser role as they celebrate their own traits (as well as their culture, their traditions) and struggle for better conditions as a people who suffer from deprivations and discrimination.

Readers do not learn much about how Claudia develops and how her self-perception changes (or not) in the course of her years, but they can infer she has grown to be a strong woman able to reflect upon her experience provided that she is the narrator of Pecola's story. Pecola is so passive that she has Claudia take on the job of re-membering, re-shaping and reflecting upon the past-- a past to which Pecola and Claudia herself belonged.

A few episodes are evidence that Claudia learned to resist beauty standards and white supremacy as a girl. The most revealing is the one when she got baby dolls for Christmas – dolls that made her question how come they did not look like her. While some people thought she was being rude and unappreciative, she only wanted to know how she was supposed to pretend a blue-eyed doll was her daughter when she was playing. So, she took them to pieces in order to investigate what it was that made people adore these dolls so much:

> 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… "Here," they said, "this is beautiful, and if you are on this day 'worthy' you may have it." … I could not love it. But I could examine it to see what it was that all the world said was lovable" (20-21).

Claudia also remembers her childhood years when she was disgusted by the love her sister and Pecola devoted to Shirley Temple, the cutest thing they had ever seen. She was also baffled by how Maureen Peal, the new girl at school, was able to attract so much love and admiration because of her physical traits (Maureen was not even white, she was of mixed race and therefore lighter-skinned). Looking back at the years of her

childhood, Claudia McTeer worries about the over-value given to beauty (white standardized concepts of beauty):

> If she was cute – and if anything could be believed, she *was* – then we were not. And what did that mean? We were lesser. Nicer, brighter, but still lesser… What was the secret? What did we lack? … And all the time we knew that Maureen Peal was not the Enemy and not worthy of such intense hatred. The *Thing* to fear was the *Thing* that made *her* beautiful, and not us (74).

Likewise, Maya also learns to resist. The homeplaces where she is raised are places where her mother and Momma Henderson created spaces of resistance. Among the people Maya declares to have owed allegiances to are her family: "Momma with her solemn determination,… Bailey with his love, my mother and her gaiety,..." (185). These people help her overcome her awkwardness and the belief that she is not good enough because of her looks. One of the first episodes the reader is made to see that is when she refuses to be called a different name by her new employer who decides to call her a shorter name:

> Then one evening Miss Glory told me to serve the ladies on the porch. After I set the tray down and turned toward the kitchen, one the women asked, "What's your name, girl?" It was the speckled-faced one. Mrs. Cullinan [her employer] said, "She doesn't talk much. Her name's Margaret."
>
> "Is she dumb?"
>
> "No. As I understand it, she can talk when she wants to but she's usually quiet as a little mouse. Aren't you Margaret?" … "She is sweet little thing, though."

> "Well, that may be, but the name's too long. I'd never bother myself. I'd call her Mary if I was you." … The next day, she called me by the wrong name (91).

Maya could not stand going to work anymore and decided to start coming in late and leaving early and doing her chores carelessly. To this insult and lack of consideration, Bailey, her brother, thought of a solution. He instructed Maya to choose Mrs. Cullinan's favorite china and drop it, and so she did. While Mrs. Viola Cullinan was raging about her "Momma's china from Virginia," Maya and Bailey were bursting out laughing (92) at the memory of the scene, Maya's first act of rebellion and resistance.

Marguerite also takes sweet revenge on white people when she goes to the movies with Bailey to see "Mother dear." Bailey, who goes to the movies regularly to see Kay Francis because she looks like his mother, takes Maya with him at one occasion. She relates that white folks watching the movie were laughing "every few minutes." She says she laughed too but for a different reason:

> I laughed too, but not at the hateful jokes made on my people. I laughed because, except that she was white, the big movie star looked just like my mother. Except that she lived in a big mansion with a thousand servants, she lived just like my mother. And it was funny to think of the whitefolks' not knowing that the woman they were adoring could be my mother's twin, except that she was white and my mother was prettier. Much prettier (99-100).

Furthermore, Marguerite is encouraged by her mother and brother to overcome her discomfiture in the world. At fourteen she got a scholarship to California Labor School. She took drama and dance class: drama because she learned with Bailey to

love reading and had fallen in love with Hamlet's soliloquy, "To be, or not to be;" dance because "Bailey and Mother encouraged me to take dance, and he privately told me that the exercise would make my legs big and widen my hips" (184).

If on the one hand she "needed no greater inducement," on the other she felt her shyness would prevent her from going forward – which did not:

> My shyness at moving clad in black tights around a large empty room did not last long. Of course, at first, I thought everyone would be staring at my cucumber-shaped body with its knobs for knees, knobs for elbows and, alas, knobs for breasts. But they really did not notice me, and when the teacher floated across the floor and finished in an arabesque my fancy was taken. I would learn to move like that. I would learn to, in her words, "occupy space" (185-86).

Not only Bailey's and Mother's encouragement influence her taking the classes, but also Momma Henderson's determination, without which she might have given up. Once in dance class, she was determined to conquer her fears, her awkwardness, her displacement and her lack of confidence. At first she is suspicious that all that will prevail are her clumsiness and her looks. Still and all, she notices dance is a freeing exercise of the soul and surmounts the external appearance. She notices that no one is there to pay attention to looks and, thus, becomes more confident.

Her self-reliance is such that she does not hesitate in making decisions any longer. When she is invited to spend the summer with her father and his girlfriend in southern California and she is delighted to accept. After the incident of the fight between her and Dolores, her father takes her to a friend's house, where she refuses to stay. Because she could not go home to Mother, for she would notice the wound resulting for the fight, she wanders "aimlessly" (213) trying to fathom what to do. She

walks by a junkyard and decides to occupy a carcass of a car for the night. The night becomes a month, time when she makes friends with "a collage of Negro, Mexican and white faces" (214), the other "inhabitants" of the junkyard. They are organized in a community-like system in which all should contribute.

This experience, bolstered by the confidence she already had developed in herself, was an opportunity for thinking about herself, whom she considered to have changed so much that she could hardly recognize. If she had already begun constructing some self-esteem, "the unquestioning acceptance by [her] peers had dislodged the familiar insecurity" (216).

From then on, Maya becomes a young woman who has been working on the construction of her self-image in a positive way. She is able to see her talents and her gifts while she disregards her worries about her physical appearance as secondary. She becomes a determined girl who will not let discrimination get in the way of her goals. Obviously, her mother's unconditional encouragement and support strengthens her convictions:

> "That's what you want to do? Then nothing beats a trial but a failure. Give it everything you've got. I've told you many times, 'Can't do is like Don't Care.' Neither of them have a home."
>
> Translated, that meant there was nothing a person can't do, and there should be nothing a human being didn't care about. It was the most positive encouragement I could have hoped for (225).

Her acts of resistance, learned in the homeplace, are disclosed ultimately at two points. She becomes the first *African-American* (not to mention African-American woman) to be hired on the San Francisco streetcars. To accomplish that, she was persistent in asking to be interviewed. She would come back several times until the

secretary gave in and arranged the interview. All the paperwork did not intimidate her either.

Another instance of her act of resistance is her getting pregnant. Long after the trauma of having been raped, Marguerite is curious about sexuality and the changes in her body. To solve her doubts she decides “to take matters into [her] own hands” (239), and ventures into sex only to find out, three weeks later, she is pregnant. Once again, her mother is supportive: “There was no overt or subtle condemnation. She was Vivian Baxter Jackson. Hoping for the best, prepared for the worst, and unsurprised by anything in between” (244). Daddy Clidell also made sure she understood this was not a catastrophe and that Maya had “nothing to worry about” (244).

As for Pecola, no encouragement or support has ever been familiar to her. As a consequence, she becomes a lost soul wandering on the edge of town, where she now lives with her mother. Contrary to Maya, Pecola’s rape is a decisive event in her life and the ultimate evidence that she is not worthy of any love. After the abuse, Pecola understands that her only chance of escaping this harsh reality is if she has blue eyes. She has not learned otherwise. Her house – or the Breedlove’s storefront – can never be considered a place of resistance for all she learns there is that being white is much more advantageous.

Pauline Breedlove – the mother who supposedly creates the homeplace – directs her love towards the movies, where she dresses up to go to. She fixes her hair just like the movie stars she watches and dreams on about a life she will never have. She is discontent with her children, whom she considers her cross, and her husband (her crown of thorns). She turns to church for martyrdom. Whatever love is not directed to the movies is directed to the blue-eyed Fisher girl, whom she pampers and tends.

Her father, Cholly Breedlove, transfer to her young body the assault he suffered by whites when he was young and experimenting with sex. He also transfers the rejection his father showed towards him.

Pecola had no choice. All that was loved by her family was blond and blue-eyed. She assumed she would only be loved if she had those features. After the rape, Pecola retreats into silence and creates an imaginary friend. Unlike Maya's silence, which was an act of resistance (resisting not ruining any more lives, for instance), her silence was an act of despair, fear, madness.

5. CONCLUSION

In 1903, W.E.B. DuBois coined the term "double-consciousness" to define the feeling every African-American in the United States had – that of the dualities and conflict in their self-perception. The African-American person, then, struggles with this feeling of not belonging anywhere in the country: though it is much known that identities are multiple, he or she strains with the fact that they are neither Africans nor Americans (more specifically a part of the WASP tradition). The fact that African-Americans belong to two cultural, social, historical tradition, accounts for these differences.

Kwame Anthony Appiah explains that in defining races, societies in general put an emphasis on the physical appearance of the other as a marker of difference. This difference in physical traits (skin color as the most evident feature) is used to justify differences in "attitudes and aptitudes" (274). Since mainstream culture in America is constituted by Anglo-Saxon practices and customs, whites become the norm and blacks, the different other.

This domination of the white culture in America creates in the African-Americans the impression that they should be judged through the eyes of whites. In that sense, blacks see themselves as a group mediated by the other world. The "two warring ideals" of being both African and American, or rather, neither African nor American in "one dark body" is what DuBois calls "double-consciousness."

Beauty ideals are a solid instantiation of the feeling of "double-consciousness" as black people, and girls specifically in this study, often look at themselves and judge their appearance through whites' standards. This turns out to be a complex issue since the construction of the idea of race in relation to whites (who are not a race in

themselves for they are the norm) shows that dark bodies will never fit the beauty standards set by the dominant group. The norms for a beautiful human being are met by the blond-hair-blue-eyed-angel-like model who impersonates ideas of purity and goodness. For a woman to be beautiful, and therefore, to “occupy the space of sacred femininity,” bell hooks says she should be white and blond. Based on Richard Dyer’s criticism, she says that this image relies on the “rhetoric of popular Chrisitianity,” for which white-skinned females meant innocence, virtue and transcendence (19).

Young black girls come to take the racism they undergo as a result of their looks. If they are not loved as much as the Shirley Temples they come across in life, it is for sure because they are not as pretty, that is, not as white, or as blond, or as blue-eyed, and thus, undeserving of such adoration.

The experience of double-consciousness, that is, of relating their physical appearance to that of mainstream culture (white) and of finding out they do not fit the pattern may be common to many women. Nevertheless, the results may vary. Some women learn self-loath. Others learn to resist. This variation of the so-called black women’s plight is not the only possible version for the lives of African-American women.

Because they are not the norm – if the norm is based on western values – throughout their history in America, African-Americans have struggled to establish means to evaluate themselves as well as their art and literature by their own standards. This is a demonstration of resistance.

bell hooks favors these attitudes and says that blacks learn as children to “devalue dark skin” (179). As a way to take their own self-hate out on others, these children (and also adults) start harassing other peers who seem more fragile, and who are darker. It is no different with Pecola Breedlove who is insulted by her classmates

whose own contempt is concealed in the act of pestering Pecola. bell hooks believes that "[b]lack children, especially darker-skinned black girls, must resist the socialization that would have them see themselves as ugly if they are to construct self-esteem"(179).

One alternative black girls have is suggested by hooks in yet another essay. The critic sees the homeplace as a site of possible resistance. Contrary to what has been stated by many scholars, it is not the organization of the family that stabilizes the lives of young girls as they grow up, it is the relations the members of these families establish between one another and the way they engage in these relations. As bell hooks declares:

> Black people have created a variety of meaningful and productive lifestyles that do not conform to white societal norms. Failure to document healthy productive households that do not conform to prevailing notions of the nuclear family helps further the erroneous assumption that any household that deviates from the accepted pattern is destructive (76-77).

The homeplace, according to hooks, has a "subversive value" because it is the

> private space where we [African-Americans] do not directly encounter white racist aggression… domestic space has been a crucial site for organizing, for forming political solidarity. Its structure was defined less by whether or not black women and men were conforming to sexist behavior norms and more by our struggle to uplift ourselves as a people, our struggle to resist racist domination and oppression (47).

This was the case of the McTeers' household in *The Bluest Eye* and also of Marguerite Johnson's in *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* as the narrators of both

stories describe many familial contexts. Conversely, Pecola Breedlove in *The Bluest Eye* is the product of a family who fails to create a site of resistance for her.

In the three family organizations that are presented in the two works (the Breedloves and the McTeers in *The Bluest Eye* and the Hendersons/Baxters – Maya's mother's and father's families with whom she lives in different moments of her life – in the *Caged Bird*), three different arrangements can be noticed. The McTeers are a complete family made up of father, mother and children (Claudia and Frieda). Even though they seem harsh when treating their children they are caring and loving. They demonstrate their affection by creating a safe environment for their girls in which they are cared for. Hence, the apparent harshness is, in fact, a strict system to which the children must conform as a consequence of the callousness of life itself. In spite of this, they are never mistreated.

The site of resistance that bell hooks talks about is clearly perceptible as Claudia McTeer develops a critical posture towards the condition imposed on her for being black. The episodes when she dismantled the baby dolls she got for Christmas questioning why she did not resemble her looks, and the revulsion she feels when girls like Shirley Temple and Maureen Peal (the new girl at school who is not white but has a far lighter skin complexion) are worshipped by black people like Pecola, her schoolmates and teachers and even at some points by her own sister Frieda show her resisting position.

Claudia also shows she has had a stable upbringing when she feels compassionate about her peer Pecola. When she and her sister Frieda pick up what is happening in town as they visit the neighbors to sell seeds and overhear what they say about Pecola's misfortune, they try to ease her pain by praying and planting the seeds so that Pecola's baby lives.

Pecola Breedlove, on the other hand, struggles to survive in a family who is falling apart. The family is also constituted by mother, father and children (Pecola and her older brother Sammy), but the relations established by them are totally pathological and it is a confirmation that it is not the family structure that is responsible for who the girls happen to become and for how they construct their identity and self-perception.

Pecola learns from her mother, who loves the movies and her white employer's family, that white is beautiful. Seeing that Pauline Breedlove cares much more for the Fishers' girl than for her own, she concludes that it must be because of her looks; just like Shirley Temple is cherished and she is avoided by the whole community.

Besides, her father Cholly Breedlove is a drunkard who has no model of parental love. He comes home drunk, has set the storefront where they live on fire (the narrator does not even refer to their house as a home – it is just the storefront where they live) and is constantly involved in battles with Pecola's mother. When these fights happen, Pecola prays: she prays that she could disappear and wonders if she had different looks would they recognize that her blue eyes did not deserve to see such scenes of physical and verbal abuse.

Cholly Breedlove is also the source of the most extreme pain she has been under and the one that makes her deduce once and for all that she is not loved because she is ugly. While he skips town after the sexual abuse, her mother, Pauline Breedlove, reinforces this rejection as she does not believe her daughter: "*Then why didn't you tell Mrs. Breedlove?* I did tell her! … You don't understand, do you? She didn't even believe me when I told her" (200). She beats the girl up leaving the neighbors wondering if her baby will even grow: "'Well, it probably won't live. They say the way her mama beat her she lucky to be alive herself'" (189).

The episodes she goes through at home make it clear for Pecola that the rejection and discrimination she suffers out in the community are justifiable and acceptable. Her family and the relations they engage in are so unstable that she does not learn how to resist – ever. Instead, she looks for Soaphead Church who supposedly gives her the blue eyes she so much yearns for. As Soaphead Church grants her wish, her tormented mind creates an invisible friend and speculates with her if her "blue eyes" are blue enough:

> Are they really nice?
>
> *Yes, very nice.*
>
> Just "very nice"?
>
> *Really, truly, very nice.*
>
> Really, truly, bluely nice?
>
> …
>
> They are bluer, aren't they?
>
> *Oh yes. Much bluer.*
>
> Bluer than Joanna's?
>
> *Much bluer that Joanna's.*
>
> And bluer than Michelena's?
>
> *Much bluer than Michelena's* (194-97).

The belief that only a miracle could save her prevented her from seeing her beauty. She, a double-conscious girl, seeks Soaphead Church because she learned from her family that she could only see herself through the eyes of other people: through the eyes of the teacher and other white people who avoided glancing at her – like the Polish store owner who did not think he needed to waste "the effort of a glance," who did not see her because for him there was nothing to see (47) – through the eyes of boys and

girls who took their own self-hatred out on her: "when one of the girls wanted to be particularly insulting to a boy, or wanted to get an immediate response from him, she could say, 'Bobby loves Pecola Breedlove! Bobby loves Pecola Breedlove!'" (46).

Marguerite Johnson, in the *Caged Bird*, also wanted to look like "one of those little white girls who were everybody's dream of what was right with the world" (1). Like Pecola, her sense of reality was distorted and she wishfully thought of the day she would wake up from her "black ugly dream." She also constantly compared herself to her brother Bailey who had beautiful skin and hair. Nonetheless, Marguerite did not dwell on the fact that she felt ugly because she had a family who, in spite of not fitting the Western conventions of the structure of a family, was very supportive and always encouraged her to move on. Because she was regarded as capable and was shown appreciation and love by most of her relatives, she embraced the experience of growing up courageously and confidently.

Momma Henderson, who raises Maya and her brother in their early years, is the embodiment of the Big Momma in African-American tradition. She is severe but very protective and loving of her grandchildren. She inflicts a lot of discipline upon them and teaches them the precepts of a religious life. With her, Maya learns to resist by enduring the sorrows of life.

The other imperative figure in Marguerite's life is her own mother, Vivian Baxter (and her extended family – her uncles and her influential light-skinned grandmother) with whom she goes to live when she is a bit older. She shows support and love above all things. She teaches resistance to her daughter by refusing to be subservient to men and to white people. She also teaches her children to be free but to be responsible for their choices. This is shown at the time when Maya decides to get a

job on the streetcars of San Francisco but has to face the difficulties caused by her superiors. Vivian Baxter also shows support when Maya gets pregnant.

Bailey, Jr., her brother, also supports Maya at all times. Besides being her companion throughout her childhood, he is also the one who defends her at any cost and is her role model and the one who introduces her into the pleasures of reading.

The experience she has with her real father, Bailey, Sr., is not a very gratifying one. However, at this point, she is brave enough to refuse being humiliated and leaves his house and his life during the summer visit she pays him in southern California. Still, she is not deeply affected by her father's behavior since she has had many different fatherly figures who fulfilled his absence and lack of care. Uncle Willie and her mother's brothers are instances of these figures. The former provided care and the latter protection. One of her uncles even tells Marguerite to get over her looks for she was extremely intelligent and capable.

Another indication that Vivian's brothers provided protection for her children is the episode of Maya's rape. She is raped and is afraid to tell about the incident. The day after Mr. Freeman's trial he appears dead. Nobody comments on the fact but the impression is that the brothers took care of the matter (showing a different ethics from the Western rules and laws).

Finally, Daddy Clidell becomes an important father-like presence in Maya's life as she slowly comes to trust and respect him. From him she learns the "Principle of Reverse" with which he resists oppression: he is able to triumph over white people by deceiving them.

The reader is able to apprehend from the three family models presented in the two works that families are a great influence in the life of the African-American girl as she grows up under a solid system of racism that dictates the beauty standards as those

of the white "race." The homeplace, however unconventional it may be, should be the place where,

> we [African-Americans] could be affirmed in our minds and hearts despite poverty, hardship, and deprivation, where we could restore to ourselves the dignity denied us on the outside in the public world… it was about the construction of a safe place where black people could affirm one another and by so doing heal many of the wounds inflicted by racist domination. We could not learn outside; it was there on the inside, that "homeplace," most often created and kept by black women, that we had the opportunity to grow and develop, to nurture our spirits (hooks, 42).

In *The Caged Bird* and in *The Bluest Eye* respectively, Marguerite and Claudia learn to resist. We learn that about Claudia because she, as the narrator of the story, shows she has become a critical woman able to reflect on her condition and that of her friend Pecola, as well as on the position of her people. Marguerite grows up and, encouraged by family and teachers who recognize her talent, freely expresses herself through drama and dance developing a sense of black aesthetic and arts that bell hooks describes as "a way to escape one's plight" (106).

In contrast, Pecola cannot resist the oppression she suffers and is trapped in this same oppression by conforming to it. Her family is not ready to provide a safe homeplace where resistance can take place because they themselves are convinced of their ugliness and, therefore, of their position as victims. Consequently, she becomes a lunatic, roaming around town: "She was so sad to see [because] the damage done was total" (204). She "stepped into madness, a madness which protected her from us…"

(206). Her insane belief that she had finally got the blue eyes she had longed so much for protected her from what people did to her:

> All of us – all who knew her – felt wholesome after we cleaned ourselves on her. We were so beautiful when we stood astride her ugliness. Her simplicity decorated us, her guile sanctified us, her pain made us glow with health, her awkwardness made us think we had a sense of humor. Her inarticulateness made us believe we were eloquent. Her poverty kept us generous. Even her waking dreams we used – to silence our nightmares. (205)

In "In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens," Alice Walker says that the poet Jean Toomer found in the South of the early twenties "black women whose spirituality was so intense, so deep, so *unconscious*, that they were themselves unaware of the richness they held. They stumbled blindly through their lives: creatures so abused and mutilated in body, so dimmed and confused by pain, that they considered themselves unworthy even of hope" (401). These women, according to the Toomer, became "Saints", because they were the ones to carry the burdens of everyone else – they were the "*mule* of the world" (404). Alice Walker states that these women were African-American mothers and grandmothers who were not Saints but actually Artists filled with spirituality and creativity.

This creativity sprang from different sources and was revealed in different artistic manifestations. Sometimes this creativity was not externalized but was still there, in the spirit of these women. Walker proposes that African-American women "fearlessly pull out of [themselves] and look at and identify with [their] lives the living creativity some of [their] great-grandmothers were not allowed to know" (405). The

example she has is her mother's, who took care of feeding her spirit by tending the garden (the reason why Walker titled the essay "In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens").

Walker's mother's artistic urge was fulfilled by tending and working with her garden. Her touch was like magic for whatever she set her hands on and grew miraculously because of her creativity. Alice Walker concludes by saying that "[g]uided by my heritage of a love of beauty and a respect for strength – in search of my mother's garden, I found my own" (409).

Claudia McTeer and Maya Angelou have definitely found their own gardens too. Inspired by a family (in particular their mothers and big mommas) who is caring and loving enough and who encourages them to search for their gardens, Claudia becomes the bearer of a tradition of story-telling through which her creativity and penmanship is revealed as she beautifully tells the story of her childhood and the story of her community. Angelou also finds her garden in telling her story and in the performative arts: drama and dance.

As for Pecola, her family teaches her that she deserves to continue being the "*mule* of the world", that she is fit for being "handed the burdens that everyone else – *everyone* else – refused to carry" (Walker 405) offering her no chance for resisting or subverting her position.

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