

The Contagion of Trauma

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During the height of the 1970s “Black is Beautiful” campaign, Toni Morrison published *The Bluest Eye*, forcing Black people to confront beauty standards that reject the “ugly” black person. For Morrison, the Breedloves embodied everything that made Black people ugly, and she used them as a statement on the contradictions of beauty within the Black community. Throughout *The Bluest Eye*, Morrison uses abjection and the contagion of trauma to illustrate the harmful effects of poverty and ugliness in Black people’s climb to social mobility.

The Breedlove family's existence as “the others” is necessary for the survival and perceived betterment of the community. In Lorain, Ohio’s Black community, there needs to be an “other” to subjugate. Cholly’s actions, which put the family outdoors, are one of the many encounters with poverty the family faces. As a result of their poverty-stricken life, the community hates the family, pushing them further into isolation. Claudia observes the phenomenon and desires not to be like the Breedlove family when she says, “Knowing that there was such a thing as outdoors bred in us a hunger for property, for ownership. The firm possession of a yard, a porch, a grape arbor. Propertied black people spent all their energies, all their love, on their nests” (Morrison 18). The Breedlove’s inability to maintain their housing meant they would descend on the climb to social mobility. Their failure contrasts with the MacTeer family, who owned their home despite it being an eyesore of a place. The continued social exclusion of the Breedloves leaves them complacent in their struggles. Claudia’s omniscient eye reminds the reader that “[The Breedloves] lived there because they were poor and black, and they stayed because they believed they were ugly” (38). The Breedloves have accepted their position as the “others”; they have learned to accept their situations, each developing a coping mechanism to escape the

realities of their lives. Pecola's coping mechanism is imagining herself with the bluest eyes (her standard of beauty), Mrs. Breedlove imagines social mobility through servitude, Samuel copes by running away, and Cholly becomes an alcoholic. As the social rejects on the wealth and beauty continuum, the family exacerbates their abjection and descension on the social ladder.

Despite the attempts to isolate Pecola and the ugliness of her life, members of society, specifically Claudia and Frieda, are made subjects of the contagion of trauma. The most prevalent example of Pecola's contagious trauma comes from the death of her baby, violently conceived through incest. Initially, Claudia faults Cholly for the death of the baby because she believes that the incestual nature of the child's conception is the reason the marigolds do not sprout. Because of the traumatic event, Claudia states, "Cholly Breedlove is dead; our innocence too" (6). To be around Pecola meant that one would be subject to her trauma. When faced with their own Blackness being called ugly, Frieda and Claudia were stunned to be put in the same category of ugliness as Pecola. Maureen rudely tells the girls, "I *am* cute! And you ugly! Black and ugly black e mos. I *am* cute! (73). The "ugly black e mos" comment was heard moments before, but they were initially directed towards Pecola. These comments, now transferred to the girls, are how Pecola's traumatic harassment follows them.

The rejection and shame of Pecola's existence and trauma *must* occur for the community to absolve themselves of blame for their failures to protect the Black child. Throughout the text, Morrison shows how the community's adults have continually neglected and ignored the child. For the community, there is an understanding that "Folks started gettin' born old" (52). There is no childhood, at least in the modern sense. Once a girl starts "ministration," she becomes a woman. So, when Pecola begins "ministration," she, too, becomes a woman. However, her womanhood and ugliness push her down the ladder of social mobility because she is not worthy of love. Pecola questions how to get love when she asks, "How do you do that? I mean how do

you get someone to love you?" (32). Society has conditioned Pecola to believe that she is unlovable and rejects her. Rather than uplift her, the community continues tearing her down to build up girls like Maureen, the loveable light-skin. As Pecola descends the ladder of social mobility, she dives deeper into madness. Her madness is a result of the social banishment. Claudia confirms this by saying, "All of us-all who knew her-felt so wholesome after we cleaned ourselves of her" (205). Society abused and conditioned Pecola to take their faults, make them her own, and give them the luxury of being free from blame. Her madness was necessary for their feelings of contentment.

The subjugation of Pecola and her family proved Morrison's point that until society accepts its "rejects," movements like "Black is Beautiful " will never thrive. Pecola faced the cruel treatment that society metes out to those who fall short of their standards. Morrison uses the Breedloves to demonstrate how Black people's desires for social mobility will remain unattainable until structural changes are made to create an inclusive society.