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White Noise: The Relationship Between Culture and Color in *The Bluest Eye*

In the foreword to *The Bluest Eye*, Toni Morrison declares her goal to describe the repercussions of accepting abuse as justified to question the seemingly self-evident beliefs and practices that compose culture. Morrison adeptly portrays the differences in white American and African American culture throughout the novel, and one element of those cultures is the different associations of colors with specific traits. In *The Bluest Eye*, Toni Morrison associates color with opposing qualities for whites and blacks to dramatize the harm of white American culture imposed on African Americans.

Toni Morrison associates the colors blue and purple with the sweet taste of fruit, and then depicts negative consequences for the Breedloves trying to access them as an allusion to the consequences of black people accepting white culture without question. Pauline remembers fondly that her “whole dress was messed with purple” (Morrison 115), and she associates the color positively with her first, intimate encounter with Cholly. After her move to the North, she laments, the “only thing I miss sometimes is that rainbow. But like I say, I don’t recollect it much anymore” (131). After her absorption of white culture from film, she loses her positive association with the color purple and loses intimacy with him. At the Fisher household, the Fishers’s pie consumes Claudia, Frieda, and Pecola in temptation, with its “purple juice bursting here and there through crust” (109). However, for Pecola reaching for and dropping the pie,

Pecola, Claudia, and Frieda suffer a punishment while the white Fisher child receives a reward in the form of another pie. The purple and blue pie represents white culture, which tempts black people with the wealth and respect of white characters like the Fishers. Then, black people suffer self-hatred and loss of identity for striving to achieve the same success and respect just like the black girls suffer abuse for dropping the pie, Claudia and Frieda simply for associating with Pecola. For Cholly, Morrison initially associates muscadine's purple hue positively with Darlene and her sexuality: "He examined her then with his fingers, and she kissed his face and mouth. Cholly found her muscadine-lipped mouth distracting" (147). However, "the flashlight wormed its way into his guts and turned the sweet taste of muscadine into rotten fetid bile" (148). For attempting to take pleasure in Darlene's sexuality, which the two white men relish in, the men take the positive association with muscadine away from his culture, tainting it for him; he abhors the taste of them and welcomes the rain to cleanse him of it. For each of the Breedloves, Morrison uses blue and purple to tempt them, punish them, and pilfer positive associations from their culture, alluding to the repercussions of black people in general for trying to benefit from an aspect of white culture.

Especially in the context of the Breedloves, Morrison juxtaposes a positive association for black people and a negative association for white people for the colors black, gray, and brown to dramatize the psychological damage of whites imposing their culture onto blacks. The Breedlove household is gray, but "it does not recede into its background of leaden sky, nor harmonize with the gray frame houses and black telephone poles around it" (33). The abandoned store composes the same black and gray as its setting, but its colors take on a uniquely negative connotation similar to the Breedloves's ugliness, which stems from their self-deprecation.

Morrison amplifies the negative effects of the Breedloves's internalized colorism by depicting a reversal in the tone of the association of otherwise similar colors of their household. Morrison also associates black and brown with warmth and security for the MacTeers and Breedloves. Both families depend on black coal for warmth, and Claudia wears "black garters" and "brown stockings," noting that "it is too cold to lie stockingless" (9-10). By associating black and brown with the remedy to a common negative theme, the cold, Morrison gives them an objectively positive quality for black people. Morrison then depicts the subjectively negative quality they undertake and the trauma it causes with the bullying of Pecola: "Black e mo" (65). The boys use the color black itself to isolate Pecola as a result of their exposure to white American culture's associations with color. They use the positively-associated color itself as a proxy for the negative traits associated with black people by whites, turning it into a weapon for harming other black people. By portraying the colors black, brown, and gray used positively by blacks and negatively by blacks indoctrinated by white culture, Morrison highlights the danger of white culture transforming black people's associations of black, brown, and gray to negative qualities, which assists in the self-deprecation and internalized colorism of black people.

Morrison uses the colors yellow and black as marigolds and soil to foreshadow Pecola's descent into insanity to decry white Americans forcing their culture onto African Americans. Morrison highlights the futility of planting marigolds to save Pecola's baby:

It never occurred to either of us that the earth itself might have been unyielding. We had dropped our seeds in our own little plot of black dirt just as Pecola's father had dropped his seeds in his own plot of black dirt. Our innocence and faith were no more productive

than his lust or despair. What is clear now is that of all of that hope, fear, lust, love, and grief, nothing remains but Pecola and the unyielding earth. (5)

The black dirt represents Pecola and African Americans in general, and the seeds of the marigolds represent the white culture that they imbibe, as Morrison frequently associates the color yellow with white people and their culture because of their blonde hair. In previous years, marigolds have grown out of the black dirt, just as black people like Maureen Peele and Geraldine have consumed the culture of white people and taken on an identity defined by white culture. However, the failure of marigolds to grow in their plot of dirt alludes to the failure of a white identity to grow in Pecola and the loss of her identity altogether. Pecola's faith in absorbing white culture for security and acceptance is a false hope like Claudia's faith in the seeds. The final sentence refers to Claudia's emotions, but it alludes to Pecola's loss of identity. After all the grief and fear Pecola suffers as a result of colorism and all the hope Pecola adheres to, nothing remains but her body with no coherent personality. Morrison uses the failure of the growth of the marigolds to foreshadow the loss of the personality of Pecola in general after she tries to take on a white identity, a warning to black people in general.

To illustrate the devastation of white Americans imposing their culture onto African Americans, Toni Morrison connects color to opposing elements for whites and blacks in *The Bluest Eye*. She uses blue and purple as symbols for the temptation of white culture and demonstrates the consequences of pursuing it. She associates black, brown, and gray with warmth for black people, but depicts how the Breedloves and the bullies contort them to hold negative associations, even though they themselves are black. To foreshadow Pecola's loss of identity and culture in her pursuit of white culture, she uses the failure of marigolds to grow in

the black dirt. The association of color with abstract qualities is just one aspect of a culture, but when one group of people internalizes another group's culture without question, it harms them and others.

Works Cited

Morrison, Toni. *The Bluest Eye*. Vintage Books, 2007.