

SETTING, SIGNIFYIN'(G), AND SELF-IMAGE IN  
TONI MORRISON'S *THE BLUEST EYE*

by

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## **LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS**

<b>Abbreviation</b>	<b>Description</b>
HOLC	Home Owners' Loan Corporation

## ABSTRACT

Toni Morrison's debut novel, *The Bluest Eye*, tells the story of an African American girl named Pecola Breedlove who grows up in Lorain, Ohio, during the years following the Great Depression. Pecola is frequently regarded as ugly by her community, but most commonly by her mother, Pauline Breedlove. The hateful actions and words of Pauline consistently contribute to Pecola's self-image. Throughout the novel, her negative self-image grows as she interacts with her environment and community. Eventually, she is raped by her father and becomes pregnant, only to lose both the baby and her state of mind. As a result, Pecola wishes for blue eyes, which she equates with beauty, creating an imaginary friend as a way to cope with her trauma. Pecola and Pauline's environments—the physical setting, members of the community, and social oppression in their lives—contribute to their poor self-image.

In this thesis, I will identify the historical discrimination that created Pauline and Pecola's oppressive environment; show the effects of this setting on them; and explain how they cope with the effects. The proposed thesis will reveal how historical redlining, white beauty standards, racial discrimination, and oppression all eat away at her characters' psyches. As the narrator of the novel says, Pecola's community and environment failed to protect her and help her thrive. Her poor self-image, fostered by her setting, leads to her deterioration. Morrison uses these themes to criticize the ways in which media and historical oppression have affected African American beauty standards. Morrison rejects mainstream images of beauty and urges readers to create their own.



This analysis reveals Morrison's sense of how our environments and relationships with our communities affect self-perceptions.

## I. INTRODUCTION

Toni Morrison's debut novel, *The Bluest Eye*, tells the story of an African American girl named Pecola Breedlove who grows up in Lorain, Ohio, Morrison's hometown, during the early 1940s. Pecola's community labels her as ugly and undesirable, but her most frequent critic is her mother, Pauline Breedlove. Throughout the novel, her negative self-image grows as a result of interactions between her environment and community. A store clerk refuses to touch her hand when she pays for candy, a white girl bullies her, black boys make fun of her for being black, another black boy accuses her of killing his cat, and she is cruelly reprimanded by his mother. Eventually, she is raped by her father and becomes pregnant, only to lose the baby and her mental and emotional state. As a result, Pecola wishes for blue eyes, which she equates with beauty, and creates an imaginary friend as a way to cope with her trauma. According to Morrison, Pecola becomes victim to racial self-loathing. In her foreword, she writes that the novel "pecks away at the gaze that condemns [Pecola]" (xi). This outside gaze would create a feeling of inferiority and undesirability in anyone, especially a young girl. Morrison continues, "I focused, therefore, on how something as grotesque as the demoralization of an entire race could take root inside the most delicate member of society: a child; the most vulnerable member: a female" (xi). Like Morrison, I am interested in the way the characters' surroundings affect their self-images.

Their environments—the physical setting, members of the community, and social oppression in their lives—contribute to the poor self-image of both Pauline and Pecola. By closely reading the novel with a naturalistic approach, we see that Pauline and Pecola allow their relationship with their surroundings to define their self-worth. In her article

“Black Naturalism and Toni Morrison: The Journey Away from Self-love in *The Bluest Eye*,” Patrice Cormier-Hamilton explains that “the most well-known tenet of naturalism is its focus on the waste of an individual's potential due to ‘conditioning forces’ from the environment” (Cormier-Hamilton 113). We will analyze these effects throughout this study. I also analyze the market value of homes in Lorain, Ohio, today to trace the impact of redlining on the economic bottom line of the poor and their well-being.

Scholars have taken multi-faceted approaches to the novel through the years, but the primary focus is usually surrounding black girlhood and black female subjectivity. Both Ruth Rosenberg’s article, “Seeds in Hard Ground: Black Girlhood in *The Bluest Eye*,” and Rosenberg’s and Jane Kuenz’s “*The Bluest Eye*: Notes on History, Community, and Black Female Subjectivity” study the black experience as seen in the novel. Amanda Putman’s 2011 study of mothering violence in “Mothering Violence: Ferocious Female Resistance in Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*, *Sula*, *Beloved*, and *A Mercy*” most closely relates to my argument of Pauline’s detrimental influence over Pecola. In this piece, Putnam explains how certain female characters in Morrison’s novels use violence as an act of rebellion against oppression. However, scholarly research fails to explore the history of redlining and systemic racism in Lorain and the ways in which the characters practice Signifyin’(g) to cope with their self-loathing.

This study demonstrates how physical and social surroundings determine one’s fate. Morrison shows how her characters’ environment directly affects their sense of worth. Historical redlining, white beauty standards, racial discrimination, and oppression all eat away at the characters’ psyches. As the narrator of the novel explains, Pecola’s community and environment fails to protect her and help her thrive. Her setting fosters

her poor self-image, leading to her deterioration. Morrison uses these themes to criticize the way media and historical oppression have affected African American beauty standards. Her novel teaches to reject mainstream images of beauty and create one's own. Ultimately, *The Bluest Eye* demonstrates how our environments and relationships with our world affect the way we think about ourselves.

## II. REDLINING

Studying the historical drivers that created Pecola's oppressive, hateful surroundings informs this analysis of her character. In the early twentieth century, Lorain was a community of laborers that consisted generally of steel mill, railyard, and shipyard workers. As urbanization expanded in the early 1900s in the Midwest, people of different races began settling in residential communities. This raised a fear in white people of racial mixing and a threat of decreased property values. As a remedy, lawmakers across the country created racist systems to prevent people of color from moving into predominately white neighborhoods. Research from the Kirwan Institute for the Study of Race and Ethnicity at The Ohio State University titled "Redlined: The History of Race and Real Estate in Cleveland & Its Relationship to Health Equity Today" explains:

The United States Congress created the Home Owners' Loan Corporation (HOLC) in June 1933... In 1935, the Federal Home Loan Bank Board asked the HOLC to look at 239 cities and create 'residential security maps' to indicate various levels of security for real-estate investments. The maps were created in conjunction with 'competent local real estate brokers and mortgage lenders, believed to represent a fair and composite opinion of the best qualified local people.' (Reece 7)

The report continues, "This form of racial exclusion gained popularity throughout the United States, especially as black populations migrated from the South to the North in an effort to avoid Jim Crow laws and find work" (Reece 5). These maps were extremely influential for white decision makers at the time. Banks would not risk approving uninsured loans, so affordable, government-backed home mortgages were difficult to

secure. This color-coding determined how much federal backing a loan would receive. Red areas received little-to-no backing, which prompted the term ‘redlining.’ Figure 1 shows a residential security map of Lorain, Ohio, from 1937.

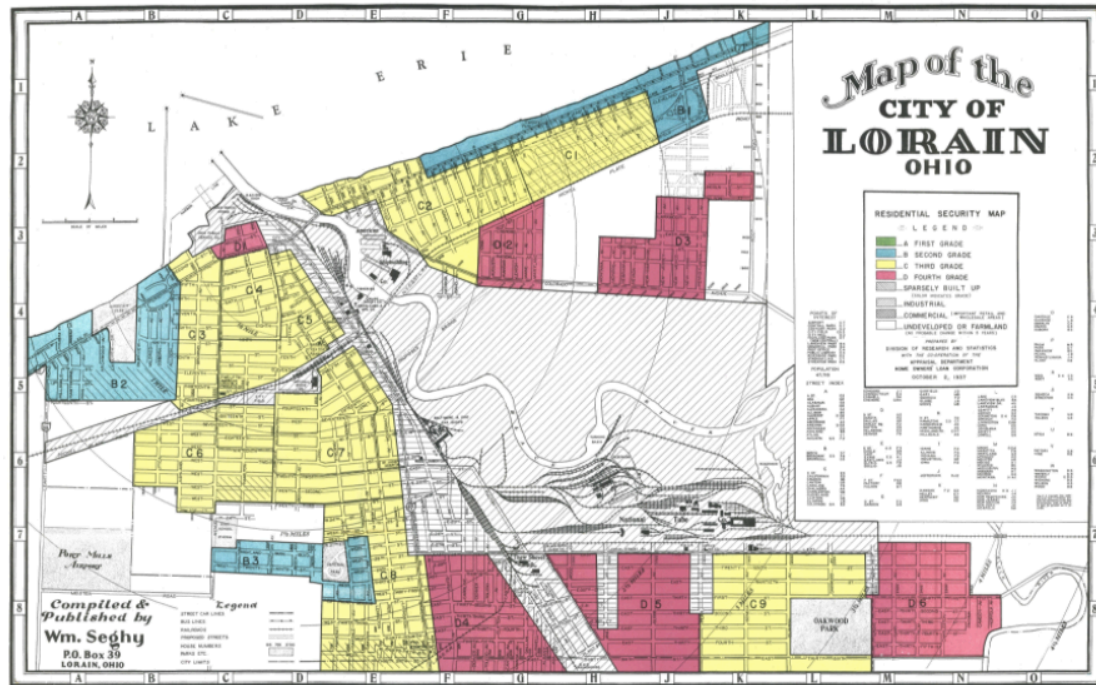


Figure 1. (The Ohio State University Libraries)

Local real estate brokers and agents also wrote descriptions of the neighborhoods’ demographics during the process of creating these color-coded zoning maps. According to a report of area descriptions of Lorain, Ohio, by HOLC representatives in 1937, “The purpose of the Residential Security Map is to graphically reflect the trend of desirability in neighborhoods from a residential viewpoint” (The Ohio State University Libraries, 1). The areas are judged on a letter scale from A to D. The introduction defines the D areas which correlate to the red sections of the map as, “Characterized by detrimental influences in a profound degree, undesirable population or an infiltration of it. Low percentage of home ownership, very poor maintenance, and often vandalism prevail...

Some mortgage lenders may refuse to make loans in these neighborhoods and others will lend only on a conservative basis” (The Ohio State University Libraries, 2).

These area descriptions noted information like the neighborhood’s inhabitants, buildings, history, occupancy, sales and rental values and demands, physical characteristics like landscaping and location, and trend of desirability in the subsequent 15 to 20 years. Many representatives describe these neighborhoods in Lorain as close in proximity to the industrial plants and railroads and inhabited by “laboring people.” The black neighborhoods in Lorain were “undesirable” according to these local real estate brokers and mortgage lenders who wrote the report (The Ohio State University Libraries). In “Redlining and Mental Health: Connecting the Dots Across Poverty, Place, and Exclusion,” Laura Choi explains it as “one of the prime examples of the systematic denial of opportunities and choice” (Choi). In short, the practice of redlining is a racially motivated form of exclusion.

In *The Color of Law: A Forgotten History of How Our Government Segregated America*, Richard Rothstein investigates how the United States government racially segregated metropolitan areas nationwide in the twentieth century. Rothstein overviews how public officials ensured that African Americans would not be allowed to reside near white families’ homes. He writes:

Zoning thus had two faces. One face, developed in part to evade a prohibition on racially explicitly zoning, attempted to keep African Americans out of white neighborhoods by making it difficult for lower-income families, large numbers of whom were African Americans, to live in expensive white neighborhoods. The other attempted to protect white neighborhoods from deterioration by ensuring

that few industrial or environmentally unsafe businesses could locate near in them. Prohibited in this fashion, polluting industry had no option but to locate near African American residences. The first contributed to creation of exclusive white suburbs, the second to creation of urban African American slums (56).

In short, redlining in Lorain widened the inequity between white families and African American families of different socioeconomic status. This racial and social oppression is the primary driver for Pauline's negative self-image which she transfers to Pecola. As she grows up in this segregated neighborhood and notices the advantages the white children have, Pecola internalizes the racism and hatred placed onto her, which leads to her demise. Pecola's obsession with Shirley Temple and desire for blue eyes suggest that she defines beauty as whiteness. She was taught to internalize her environment and view beauty this way by Pauline.

This research lays the groundwork of the setting, community, and historical context in *The Bluest Eye*. The novel takes place in 1941 at the height of this systemic racial zoning practice. The language used in this report exposes the kind of racist and oppressive language Pauline, and eventually Pecola, would have understood of themselves—undesirable. Understanding this context allows the reader to see the type of discrimination and hate that characterizes and infuses Pecola's environment. Even further, exploring the geographical location of Lorain and its housing market helps inform this study of the impact of the characters' surroundings on their self-images.



### III. A ZILLOW APPROACH TO *THE BLUEST EYE*

*Underrepresented, misrepresented, and unable to define herself in her own terms, Pecola is the sign of a colonized region still straining against national empire. And her invisibility, indeed, her perceived ugliness, is indicative of both the place of African Americans in the Midwest and the place of the modern Midwest in the larger nation. Clearly, Morrison's discussion of the Breedloves' 'ugliness' refers to the inculcation of self-hatred nurtured by slavery...*

—Lisa Long , “A New Midwesternism in Toni Morrison's ‘*The Bluest Eye*’”

(110)

Looking at the 2020 housing market in Lorain proves that there is a long-term story of redlining in the area. A Zillow approach to *The Bluest Eye* shows the legacy that the racist zoning left for future generations to face. A brief exploration of the present-day geographical setting of the novel illustrates just how encompassing and devastating the racist zoning affected not only the characters in Morrison’s novel, but the black community in Lorain to this day.

As of October 2020, there are 360 homes in the market and the median home value estimate is \$69,900 (Lorain Real Estate and Homes For Sale). Figure 2 shows a screenshot of the homes for sale on Zillow.

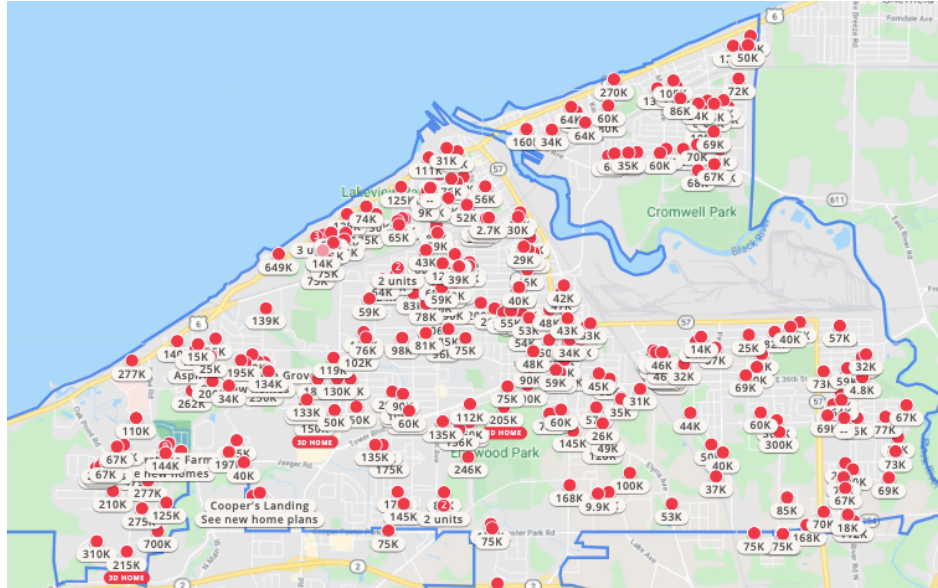


Figure 2. (Zillow)

Figure 3 shows the same map with the redlining zoning map from 1939 as an overlay on top to show the trends that the racial zoning created.

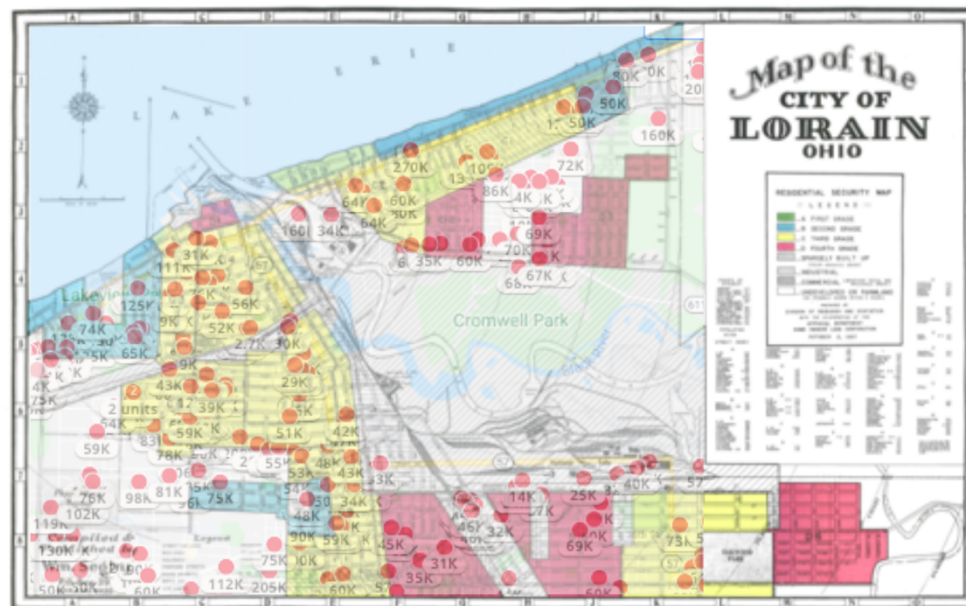


Figure 3. (Maulding)

The red dots represent a home for sale while the blocks of colored sections represent the desirability of the neighborhoods from the 1937 HOLC residential security map discussed in Chapter 1. The three red sections on the bottom part of the map include home sale prices listed as low as \$4,500 to as high as \$85,000. According to the Zillow results, most of the homes in this lower quadrant are pre-foreclosure or are being auctioned by the banks. Conversely, while there are still homes for sale on the lakefront side, there are many fewer homes pre-foreclosed or foreclosed in that area and the listing prices are much higher, ranging from \$20,000 to \$270,000 (Lorain Real Estate and Homes For Sale). There are, of course, many reasons why these properties are listed higher—the curbside appeal, proximity to the lake and city center—but much of it is results as a holdover from the racist zoning laws that the HOLC created in the 1930s. The oppressive laws prevented people of color from receiving approval for loans to move out of the ‘undesirable’ locations, thus creating these pockets of poverty and homes with lower value. According to The Lorain Historical Society:

Demographics of African Americans in Lorain typically follow the trends of the Second Great Migration movement, effectively raising the nonwhite proportion in 1940 at less than 2% to very near 5% by the 1950 census. Between the years of 1916 to 1970, more than six million African Americans relocated from the rural South to cities in the North, Midwest, and West. This has come to be known as the Great Migration. As immigration laws became stricter in the 20th century and World War I began, there was a shortage of workers in industrial jobs in the North, Midwest, and Western urban areas. Northern recruiters and black newspapers encouraged African Americans to leave their lives of the Post-

Reconstruction era South that was plagued by little economic opportunity and harsh Jim Crow laws. They soon found factory jobs that would make them three times more than a sharecropper in these new cities. The Great Migration is normally broken up into two migrations: The First Great Migration which occurred from 1910 to 1940, and The Second Great Migration, from 1940 to 1970. Lorain and Cleveland both saw large increases in their African American population during the latter. Lorain is known as “The International City” because the city is home to over 70 different nationalities. (The Lorain Historical Society)

According to The World Population Review, the population of Lorain in 2020 is 64,170. The median property value is \$85,400. The racial composition of Lorain is 72.28% white, 17.17% Black or African American, and 5.19% Two or More Races. This data shows that African Americans in this community are still the minority. The poverty rate for the white population is 17.4% while the poverty rate for the black community is 43.06% (Lorain, Ohio Population 2020).

Figure 4 shows the income growth by neighborhood in the last five years. The red section located in the bottom right portion inside the red oval indicates the same neighborhood as the homes in the figures above.

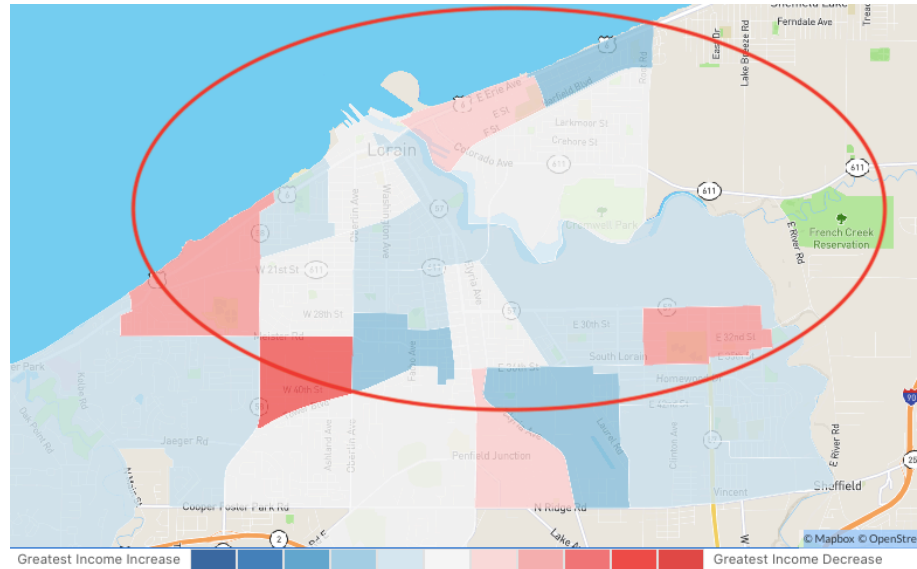
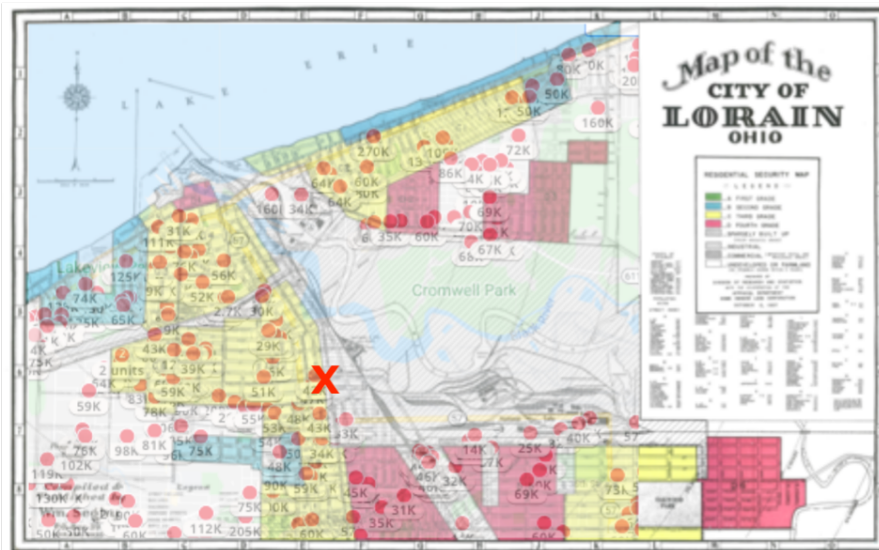


Figure 4. (Neighborhood Scout)

The income of the neighborhoods labeled red and yellow in the redlining map from 1937 coordinate with the income decreases from this report in 2015 to 2020. These numbers will ebb and flow, but it indicates that there are roots of redlining and racist zoning 80 years old still affecting citizens today.

These are the forces that drive the Pauline and Pecola to a devastating amount of racial self-loathing. Throughout the novel, both the Breedlove women learn to hate themselves because their environment hates them. Morrison writes, “They seemed to have taken all of their smoothly cultivated ignorance, their exquisitely learned self-hatred, their elaborately designed hopelessness and sucked it all up into a fiery cone of scorn that had burned for ages in the hollows of their minds—cooled—and spilled over lips of outrage, consuming whatever was in its path” (65). Morrison crafts a powerful illustration of how our surroundings shape our own self-image. In particular, Morrison’s use of her childhood town as the backdrop for the novel contributes to the story’s poignancy. The red X in Figure 5 below shows the location of one of Morrison’s childhood homes.



*America*, Thomas H. Hummel explains that her family came to Lorain to live a better life. They rented a modest home and moved eight more times during her childhood. He writes:

The city of Lorain hove into view as well, sketched with the loving but clear-eyed perspective of one who left because she felt she had to. Broadway, the main shopping street that residents thronged to on weekends, came alive. There was Isaly's the ice cream place at 1920 Broadway, to which Frieda and Claudia were sent with a quarter for ice cream. The Dreamland Theater at 1926-1934 Broadway glittered with stardust again, as the beautiful and ideal white face of Betty Grable smiled down upon the girls from a movie poster. Zipp's Coal (named Zick's Coal in the novel), formerly located on 1463 Broadway, towards the lake, made an appearance. Zipp's sold the coal that poor families could barely afford. As an alternative, Frieda and Claudia were taken to the railroad tracks as dusk fell, to fill burlap sacks with shards of coal cast off by the trains. Meanwhile, the steel mill, around the elbow of the Black River ravine, dominated the eastern side of the city, a gigantic example of the manmade sublime, a monster belching smoke and spitting fire. 'Later we walk home,' Claudia relates, 'glancing back to see the great carloads of slag being dumped, red hot and smoking, into the ravine that skirts the steel mill' (Hummel 173-176; quoting *The Bluest Eye*, page 10).

The story of redlining and discrimination in Lorain affected these characters just as they affect the housing market and community today. This is the setting that shaped Morrison's own childhood and the one she uses to create the troubled world of Pecola

and Pauline. With this understanding, we can better analyze Pecola's geographical setting and socio-cultural environment.



#### IV. PECOLA'S GEOGRAPHICAL SETTING AND SOCIO-CULTURAL ENVIRONMENT

This study shows how the practice of redlining affects both the geographical setting and the socio-cultural environment of the novel. The former encompasses the physical characteristics of Lorain, while the latter highlights the oppression that the characters of color face within their community. To fully understand the effects of these external forces on their self-image, we must understand the setting of this novel during this period of time. In her 2003 interview with Toni Morrison published in *Ohio Magazine*, Jennifer Haliburton and Morrison discuss the industrial steel mills and shipyards that characterized Lorain during her childhood. Haliburton writes:

“Lorain was in the grips of the Great Depression when Morrison was born in 1931. The town had not only offered an escape for African-Americans seeking refuge from the brutal prejudice of the South, it was also a haven for European immigrants hoping to find financial stability in the town’s many industrial plants. Once an agricultural town, Lorain found itself in the perfect location to benefit from the country’s booming production of steel in the early 20th century: the Baltimore & Ohio Railroad ran through town, conveniently connecting Lorain to coal deposits in the southern parts of the state; the Nickel Plate Railroad tied it to major hubs of commerce, including Chicago and New York City; and the town sat nicely on the spot where the Black River meets Lake Erie — prime territory for shipbuilding (Haliburton).

Figure 6 shows an image of the home Morrison was born in on Elyria Avenue, just a block away from Broadway Street, a road that centers Claudia, Frieda, and Pecola's walks in the book. In *A Journey Through Literary America*, Hummel continues, "The Wofford family once tenanted this house on Elyria Avenue, one of many they rented in Lorain" (Hummel 173). Morrison's family rented nearly a dozen houses and storefronts between the 1930s and '40s (Haliburton).



Figure 6. (Hummel 172)

Haliburton continues:

'There were so many people working in the plants and the shipyards — there was always a lot of labor here,' recalls Morrison. It was this often-gritty landscape of factories and freighters that provided the setting for Morrison's first book, 1970's *The Bluest Eye* — the only one of her works to feature her hometown... Morrison filled the book with Lorain references — alternating the names of some places as when she refers to Lorain's Zipp's Coal Company as 'Zick's' (Haliburton).

Figure 7 shows an aerial view of downtown Lorain in 1927.



Figure 7. (Special Collections, Cleveland State University Library)

The oppressive history of both the geographical setting and socio-cultural environment of Lorain is so apparent in the narrative that the very structure of the book presents the duality of whiteness and blackness through the Dick and Jane reading book references. The popularity of Dick and Jane pedagogy grew tremendously in the 1940s. The books characterize postwar prosperity and families that thrive by defying depression-era hardships. *In Not So Fast, Dick and Jane: Reimagining Childhood and Nation in the Bluest Eye*, Debra Werrlein explains, "...by associating white suburban families with prosperity, morality, and patriotism, Americans painted black urban working-class families as un-American" (Werrlein 58). The novel begins with a narrative from the primer, which Morrison uses to introduce the proceeding chapters. She uses this allusion to create the setting of the story: a community in the middle of the tension between white

culture and African American culture. When Morrison references the narrative throughout the book, she extracts fragments of the sentences and distorts the structure by running the words together. By doing so, Morrison shows the differences of the idealized, white, middle-class families in Pecola's community and the dark, troubled world of Pecola and her family. Pauline and Pecola have internalized the white Dick and Jane values which makes their self-esteem plummet.

Pecola sees her environment and the nature around her as bad. She is not allowed to thrive in her life and she is thrown into the chaos of life when she is "put outdoors" to live at another home (Morrison 17). In the beginning of the novel, Claudia explains the meaning and horror of Pecola's banishment to the outdoors. She says, "Outdoors, we knew, was the real terror of life." Throughout the beginning of the story Morrison associates the outside environment—"outdoors"—with fear and uncertainty. Claudia continues, "There is a difference between being put out and being put outdoors. If you are put out, you go somewhere else; if you are outdoors, there is no place to go. The distinction was subtle but final. Outdoors was the end of something, an irrevocable, physical fact, defining and complementing our metaphysical condition" (Morrison 17). Claudia explains that because Cholly Breedlove put his family outdoors by setting his rented house on fire, he committed a criminal act. Within this black community, owning a home provided a greater sense of security and safety, while renting a home makes it possible for tenants to be displaced.

During this time of black families fleeing the Jim Crow laws in the south, they sought stability and ownership. As Valerie Sweeney Price puts it, "The search for justice, opportunity, and liberty that characterized the twentieth century for African Americans

can be described as a quest for home” (Price 1). Claudia continues, “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). As a child, Pecola lacks this sense of stability and structure at home which contributes to her self-hatred. For Pecola, her physical surroundings are scary and bad because they have never treated her well.

Morrison forces her reader to think about homes from the very first line of the novel: “Here is the house” (5). Pecola is frequently surrounded by houses, though they are rarely her own. This is in the context of the Dick and Jane primer which promotes an image of the white nuclear family. To that end, a look at Morrison’s descriptions of the various homes in the novel helps inform the study of the story’s setting and the differences between the Breedlove family and the other characters. Morrison expertly contrasts the Breedlove and MacTeer homes; the Breedloves lived in an old, abandoned storefront in Lorain. “They lived there because they were poor and black, and they stayed there because they believed they were ugly. Although their poverty was traditional and stultifying, it was not unique. But their ugliness was unique. No one could have convinced them that they were not relentlessly and aggressively ugly...” (Morrison 38). Their lives are on display for all to see, just like their ugliness. The MacTeer house is full of the loud and big personalities of Frieda, Claudia, and their rambunctious parents. Claudia says that they cross Broadway to twenty-first street on their walk home from school which is coincidentally the same block as one of Morrison’s childhood home. The three girls sleep in the same bed and their mother rents a room to Mr. Henry. Claudia says, “Our house is old, cold, and green. At night a kerosene lamp lights one large room.

The others are braced in darkness, peopled by roaches and mice” (Morrison 10). They stuff the cracks in their windows with rags at night to prevent themselves from getting cold or sick. Though their home is not elaborate or fancy, the girls still have a family with a support system and a semblance of care: their mother can afford to take in Pecola when she is displaced. While their father may not be outstanding, he throws Mr. Henry out when he touches one of the sisters. One of the primary differences between these homes is not only the relationships between the family units, but the privacy that the MacTeers can afford verses the exposure the Breedloves face.

## V. A WASTE STUDIES APPROACH TO *THE BLUEST EYE*

*Humans feel the compulsion to point out difference. In our worse moments, we take that difference to vilify those other than ourselves. We seem to need hierarchy and the consequent inflicting of misery on someone other than ourselves. Once that othering is recognized, we set ourselves up as better than them, in a process that creates what Polish sociologist Zygmunt Bauman argues produces 'wasted lives,' those wasted humans rendered invisible as non-entities. Waste itself threatens to overpower us, so we respond by ignoring it, rendering it invisible, powerless, and non-existent. We myopically avoid that which disturbs us. One way that we make wasted humans invisible is to make them cognate to waste; waste is something we take all means to avoid. Wasted humans—disdained, ignored, and made invisible—are ontologically non-existent.*

— Susan Signe Morrison, *The Literature of Waste: Material Ecopoetics and Ethical Matter* (97)

Within the description of the geographical setting of the novel, there lies frequent imagery of waste. In this chapter, I will use the framework of redlining and the geographical setting and socio-cultural environment to analyze the types of waste Pecola faces. Claudia illustrates the city:

Grown-ups talk in tired, edgy voices about Zick's Coal Company and take us along in the evening to the railroad tracks where we fill burlap sacks with the tiny pieces of coal lying about. Later we walk home, glancing back to see the great carloads of slag being dumped, red hot and smoking, into the ravine that skirts the steel mill. The dying fire lights the sky with a dull orange glow. Frieda and I lag

behind, staring at the patch of color surrounded by the black. It is impossible not to feel a shiver when our feet leave the gravel path and sink into the dead grass in the field (Morrison 10).

The streets are dark and dirty. Jennifer Cormier-Hamilton explains that Pecola represents the naturalistic theme of the “waste of individual potential” due to environmental circumstances. She points out, “Pecola is victimized by a society that conditions her to believe that she is ugly and therefore worthless, because she doesn't epitomize white elite culture's idea of beauty” (Cormier-Hamilton 115).

Pecola is surrounded by waste. Her neighborhood consisted of “twelve-room houses that sheltered half as many families... smelling of grease and urine; tiny wooden four-room houses tucked into bushes near the railroad tracks; the up-over places—apartments over fish markets, butcher shops...” (Morrison 188). When the sisters plant their seeds, Claudia says, “...no green was going to spring from our seeds...It never occurred to either of us that the earth itself might have been unyielding” (Morrison 8). Pecola's surroundings is that of a wasteland—a deprived place. These images of waste are sprinkled throughout the novel and represent Pecola's place in the community. In *The Literature of Waste: Material Ecopoetics and Ethical Matter*, Susan Signe Morrison explains:

What constitutes waste? In the earliest usages in English, waste was whatever is not or no longer utilitarian, something squandered, empty or barren, or lacking purpose. Waste has meant desolation, pointlessness, and uselessness, but also excess and surplus; both extremes have been viewed as problematic, void of



meaning, and immoral...Waste necessarily implicates history, and implies materiality, metaphor, and emotional affect (S. Morrison 8).

Pecola's likeness to waste serves as a metaphor for the horrible discrimination and hate her community shows her. Susan Morrison continues, "Waste literature enables culture to acknowledge what it has to deny, such as, I would argue, bodily, cultural, and societal waste—material and metaphorical aspects of our world" (S. Morrison 10). In this already oppressed, forgotten neighborhood, Pecola is at the bottom of the social ladder. The narrator explains that she is the waste and beauty of their world. She says, "All of our waste which we dumped on her she absorbed... All of us—all who knew her—felt so wholesome after we cleaned ourselves on her. We were so beautiful when we stood astride her ugliness" (Morrison 205). Pecola represents a waste of intellect, psyche, and potential. She is the other, or the subaltern, in her community. As Morrison writes, "The rhetoric of othering those of a different race, religion, ethnicity, or gender constructs them as unclean or inhuman...Wasted people are seen as carriers of filth and dirt and 'are those required to perform social functions equivalent to the excretory functions of the body'" (S. Morrison 98). Since Pecola's self-image is affected, she copes with the trauma of her life by wishing for white beauty by means of blue eyes.

Even further, Pecola's everyday interactions with her community affect her self-image throughout the novel. Social and cultural waste is just as relevant as physical waste. Not only does the system discriminate against her because of her race, but her community reinforces her belief that she is ugly and undesirable. One day, she eagerly visits a store to purchase Mary Jane candies. When she approaches the counter to make her purchase, the clerk shows a complete disregard for her presence. The narrators says,

“At some fixed point in time and space he senses he need not waste the effort of a glance. He does not see her, because for him there is nothing to see” (58). As Pecola hands the clerk her pennies, he displays a “total absence of human recognition—the glazed separateness” as he hesitantly takes her coins while trying not to touch her black skin (49). Morrison writes:

How can a fifty-two-year-old white immigrant storekeeper with the taste of potatoes and beer in his mouth, his mind honed on the doe-eyed Virgin Mary, his sensibilities blunted by a permanent awareness of loss, see a little black girl? Nothing in his life even suggested that the feat was possible, not to say desirable or necessary...She does not know what keeps his glance suspended...This vacuum is not new to her. It has an edge; somewhere in the bottom lid is the distaste. She has seen it lurking in the eyes of all white people. So. The distaste must be for her, her blackness...And it is the blackness that accounts for, that creates, the vacuum edged with distaste in white eyes (48).

When she leaves the store, she forgets her excitement about the candy and acknowledges her ugliness while feeling “the inexplicable shame ebb” (50). Pecola is so obsessed with white beauty standards that it consumes her both figuratively and literally. She chooses to purchase the Mary Jane candy because it has a white girl with blonde hair and blue eyes on the wrapper. “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). The horror in this scene is that the clerk himself, Mr. Yacobowski, is an immigrant and has such a lack of compassion and empathy for Pecola. His gaze and disregard for her life adds to the abuse Pecola faces in her community.

We see another negative interaction with her community when Pecola meets the new girl at school, Maureen Peal. She is a “high-yellow dream child with long brown hair braided into two lynch ropes that hung down her back. She was rich, at least by our standards, as rich as the richest of the white girls, swaddled in comfort and care” (Morrison 63). Maureen wore nice clothes and shoes and she enchanted the entire school. One day, Maureen decided to walk home from school with Claudia and Frieda. On their walk, they discover a group of black boys surrounding Pecola at the playground. The boys chant “black e mo, black e mo. Ya daddy sleeps nakked” at Pecola (Morrison 65). These songs of self-hatred reinforce the power the oppressive environment holds over African Americans in this community. Eventually, the girls break them up and free Pecola from the harassers. As they continue their walk, Maureen introduces herself to Pecola. She likens her to a pretty character with her same name in the film *Imitation of Life*, who, in Maureen’s words, is a “mulatto girl [who] hates her mother cause she is black and ugly but then cries at the funeral. It was real sad. Everybody cries in it” (67). Though Maureen is trying to relate to Pecola in this moment, her only connection with her is a negative representation of black children in modern media. Maureen says that her mother has seen the movie four times and she wants to see it again. Maureen’s biracial middle-class experience allows for her to be entertained by this sad movie based on the fact that a black child is taught self-hatred because of the darker color of her skin.

As the girls continue walking, Maureen eventually claims that one of the boys said that Pecola has seen her father naked which prompts the girls to fight. Claudia defends Pecola and tells Maureen, “You think you so cute!” In trying to hit Maureen, Claudia accidentally hits Pecola. Maureen runs across the street and shouts, “I *am* cute!

And you ugly! Black and ugly black e mos. I *am* cute!” (73). She associates blackness with ugliness which leaves Claudia and Frieda to contemplate their own self-images.

Claudia says:

We were sinking under the wisdom, accuracy, and relevance of Maureen’s last words. 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? Why was it important? And so what? Guileless and without vanity we were still in love with ourselves then. We felt comfortable in our own skins, enjoyed the news that our senses released to us, admired our dirt, cultivated our scars, and could not comprehend this unworthiness. Jealousy we understood and thought natural—a desire to have what somebody else had; but envy was a strange, new feeling for us. 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 (Morrison 74).

Claudia and Frieda acknowledge their blackness but do not consider themselves ugly or undesirable, unlike Pecola. However, Maureen’s words cause them to consider their differences and try to understand why the Maureens of the world are treated differently than they are. Morrison shows how these small exposures contribute to not only Pecola’s poor self-esteem in her everyday life, but also to the self-images of other black girls in the novel.

In a community that praises white beauty standards, like Maureen’s lighter skin, light hair, and green eyes, Pecola never has a chance to thrive. Pecola’s struggle with

colorism runs throughout the novel. In her book *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens*, Alice Walker defines colorism as prejudicial or preferential treatment of same-race people based solely on their color. Since the publication of her book in 1983, the definition of colorism has evolved to account for the cultural and political meaning connected to different skin colors. Pecola fails to fight the colorism she faces and breaks as a result. This is the case not only for Pecola, but for the entire Breedlove family. They lean into the assumption that their dark skin is ugly. Regarding that Breedlove family, the narrator says:

You looked at them and wondered why they were so ugly; you looked closely and could not find the source. Then you realized that it came from conviction, their conviction. It was as though some mysterious all-knowing master had given each one a cloak of ugliness to wear, and they had each accepted it without question. The master had said, 'You are ugly people.' They had looked about themselves and saw nothing to contradict the statement; saw, in fact, support for it leaning at them from every billboard, every movie, every glance. 'Yes,' they had said. 'You are right.' And they took the ugliness in their hands, threw it as a mantle over them, and went about the world with it...[Pecola] hid behind hers. Concealed, veiled, eclipsed—peeping out from behind the shroud very seldom, and then only to yearn for the return of her mask (Morrison 39).

The narrator continues:

It had occurred to Pecola some time ago that if her eyes were different, that is to say, 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...Each night, without fail, she prayed for blue eyes...Thrown, in this way, into the binding conviction that only a miracle could relieve her, she would never know beauty. She would see only what there was to see: the eyes of other people (Morrison 46).

When they learn that Pecola is impregnated by her father, Claudia and her sister plant marigold seeds in the ground as a way to ceremonially protect Pecola and her baby. The flowers never grow, though, and the Claudia says, “it was the fault of the earth, the land, of our town.” She continues, “I even think now that the land of the entire country was hostile to marigolds that year. The soil is bad for certain kinds of flowers. Certain seeds it will not nurture, certain fruit it will not bear...” (Morrison 206). These seeds represent reproduction and the renewing characteristic of nature, which failed Pecola because she was raped by her father. Pecola’s environment failed her. Like the seeds that the girls planted in the ground, she never had a chance to thrive in life. While her mother certainly did not help her, her environment did not allow her to succeed. The oppressive setting—her mother’s Signifyin’(g), to be discussed in the next chapter, her peers, systemic racism, and community—fuels Pecola’s negative self-image. As a means to cope with her environment, she desires the bluest eyes in all the world. Morrison writes, “It had occurred to Pecola some time ago that if her eyes, those eyes that held the pictures, and knew the sights—if those eyes of hers were different, that is to say, beautiful, she herself would be different...Pretty eyes. Pretty blue eyes. Big blue pretty eyes” (33). She internalizes the images of beauty in her life: Shirley Temple, the Fishers’ child, magazines, and white people in her community, for example. Pecola believes that if she has blue eyes, her life will be better and she will be beautiful. She prays each night

for them because she thinks that if her eyes were different, more beautiful, she herself would be different. And if she were different, maybe Pauline or Cholly would be different. Her obsession of blue eyes like Shirley Temple stems from the white oppression of her environment. Pecola, like her mother, has been conditioned to believe that “whiteness” is the solution to her problems. Her desire for another lens to view her world shows the detrimental gaze that has been placed on her.

The practice of redlining and segregation present in Lorain shapes Pecola’s self-image because she sees the differences between her and the other children in her community. As the girls are walking one day, Claudia says, “We reached Lake Shore Park, a city park laid out with rosebuds, fountains, bowling greens, picnic tables. It was empty now, but sweetly expectant of clean, white, well-behaved children and parents who would play there above the lake in summer before half-running, half-stumbling down the slope to the welcoming water. Black people were not allowed in the park. And so it filled our dreams” (Morrison 105). Pecola sees the opportunities that are not available to her and she equates that with her lack of beauty. She internalizes these restrictions to the point that she loses her sanity and control of her life. This comes to fruition at the end of the novel. The park represents one of these places in her community that causes Pecola to belittle herself because of her race. Figure 8 shows a current-day image of Lakeview Park (Lake Shore Park in the novel).



Figure 8. (Hummel 179)

Hummel points out how:

Morrison has argued that even very poor white people have a leg up on any black to whom that adjective applies. In 1989, in an interview with *Time* magazine, Morrison explained that, in her view, immigrants in America were at one time unified by their superiority to at least one class of people: the black people...The children, black or white, could certainly notice how society treated them differently. Any white child, even on the lowest rung of the social ladder, could put on a bathing suit and carry picnic things, their pails and shovels, to the nearby lake to swim. Black children had to traipse far up the shoreline, out of sight of white eyes, to Slater's Grove, to take a dip in Lake Erie (Hummel 173).

As this passage can suggest, Pecola never had a chance to thrive in life. While her mother certainly did not help her, her environment did not allow her to succeed. The oppressive setting—redlining, systemic racism, her peers, and community—fuels Pecola negative



self-image. As a means to cope with her environment, Pecola desires the bluest eyes in all the world. To convince herself that she has achieved beauty, Pecola creates an imaginary friend who assures her that her eyes are indeed the bluest. She believes that everyone is jealous of her for her eyes, but in reality, they are aware that she carried her father's baby and it was stillborn. She says, "They're prejudiced. Just because I got blue eyes, bluer than theirs, they're prejudiced" (Morrison 197). Pecola understands the concept of prejudice because she has internalized its effects on her, but she misuses it in this moment.

Morrison shows that Pecola is just a child who is trying to navigate the oppression and trauma that she has faced. The narrator describes Pecola's life as "A little black girl yearns for the blue eyes of a little white girl, and the horror at the heart of her yearning is exceeded only by the evil of fulfillment" (Morrison 204). With the demise of Pecola, Morrison shows the long-term effects of segregation and systemic racism on the subaltern's self-image.

## VI. SIGNIFYIN'(G)

Pauline deals with a poor self-image which is deeply rooted in her past interactions with the geographical setting and socio-cultural environment, largely due to systemic racism and discrimination like the practice of redlining. She primarily copes with her racial self-loathing by Signifyin'(g). Signifyin'(g) is a type of rhetorical strategy and wordplay, which is a common practice in African American speech, literature, music, and film. Coined by Henry Louis Gates, Jr., it creates new meaning of words and is critical to consider when examining the characters in *The Bluest Eye*.

Gates establishes this black vernacular concept as a framework to read African American literature in his groundbreaking study of literary criticism, *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African-American Literary Criticism*. He says, “[This] book attempts to identify a theory of criticism that is inscribed within the black vernacular tradition and that in turn informs the shape of the Afro-American literary tradition” (339). Gates’ idea originates from Ferdinand De Saussure’s theory of Structuralism and the relationship between the signifier and the signified, or the distinction between words and their meanings. Gates writes:

Thinking about the black concept of Signifyin(g) is a bit like stumbling unaware into a hall of mirrors: the sign itself appears to be doubled, at the very least, and (re)doubled upon ever closer examination. It is not the sign itself, however, which has multiplied. If orientation prevails over madness, we soon realize that only the signifier has been doubled and (re)doubled, a signifier in this instance that is silent, a “sound-image” as Saussure defines the signifier, but a “sound-image” *sans* the sound. The difficulty that we experience when thinking about the

nature of the visual (re)doubling at work in a hall of mirrors is analogous to the difficulty we shall encounter in relating the black linguistic sign, “Signification,” to the standard English sign, “signification.” This level of conceptual difficulty stems from—indeed, seems, to have been intentionally inscribed within—the selection of the signifier, “signification.” For the standard English word is a homonym of the Afro-American vernacular word. And, to compound the dizziness and giddiness that we must experience in the vertiginous movement between these two “identical” signifiers, these two homonyms have everything to do with each other and, then again, absolutely nothing (52).

Gates writes that signifyin’(g) is “a trope, in which are subsumed several other rhetorical tropes, including metaphor, metonymy, synecdoche, and irony (the master tropes), and also hyperbole, litotes, and metalepsis” (52). Signifyin’(g) has a multitude of definitions and implications. In short, Gates argues that it is a strategic use of language to play with words and their meanings in order to communicate.

The concept of Signifyin’(g) originates from tales about a Signifying Monkey, a trickster archetype common in African mythology and folklore. In these tales, the Monkey dupes a powerful Lion by Signifyin’(g): playing tricks or disobeying societal rules. In “The Signifying Monkey and the Language of Signifyin(g),” Gates further explains the differences of the Black Vernacular and Standard English by creating a graph of intercepting x-axis and y-axis, shown below.

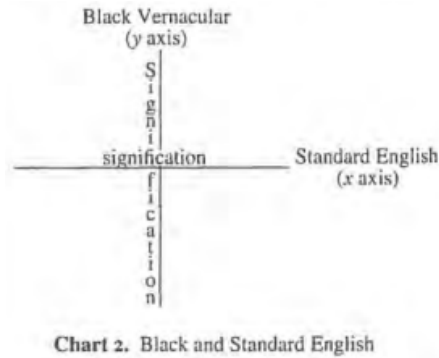


Figure 9. (Gates)

Gates claims the x-axis is what white people use for professional and educational situations. It is the literal definition of a word as represented by the masses and the term coined by Saussure. However, the y-axis labeled Black Vernacular also represents Signifyin'(g). Through this illustration, Gates explains that the most poignant level of black and white differences is *meaning* (1154).

This exploration of meaning and expression informs this reading of *The Bluest Eye* because of its insight into demystifying black literature. In the foreword of the novel, Morrison writes:

My choices of language (speakerly, aural, colloquial), my reliance for full comprehension on codes embedded in black culture, my effort to effect immediate coconspiracy and intimacy (without any distancing, explanatory fabric), as well as my attempt to shape a silence while breaking it are attempts to transfigure the complexity and wealth of Black American culture into a language worthy of the culture. (Morrison xiii)

Throughout the novel, Morrison employs Signifyin'(g) to show how signs, or words, can suggest multiple meanings at once. She shows the different levels of meaning

in language through signs, which Michael Ryan says “communicate thoughts, but they also indicate who we are” (55). Morrison applies intertextuality to signify upon other texts like the *Dick and Jane* primer books to create her own meaning by juxtaposing Pecola’s experience with that of the white nuclear family. In his piece “What Signifying Means in African American Discourse,” Richard Nordquist says:

Women, and to certain extent children, commonly use more indirect methods of signifying. These range from the most obvious kinds of indirection, like using an unexpected pronoun in discourse (‘Didn’t we come to shine today’ or ‘Who thinks his drawers don’t stink?’), to the more subtle technique, of *louding* or *loud-talking*...A person is loud-talking when he says something of someone just loud enough for that person to hear, but indirectly, so he cannot properly respond.

(Nordquist)

Morrison employs this technique when Mrs. MacTeer takes Pecola into her home and finds that she drank three quarts of their milk. Frieda, Claudia, and Pecola listen to Mrs. MacTeer complain of the empty milk jar and Claudia notes that “It was certainly not for us to ‘dispute’ her” (Morrison 23). Claudia says, “My mother’s fussing soliloquies always irritated and depressed us. They were interminable, insulting, and although indirect (Mama never named anybody—just talked about folks and *some* people), extremely painful in connecting one offense to another until all of the things that chagrined her were spewed out” (Morrison 24). By indirectly insulting Pecola by means of louding or loud-talking, Mrs. MacTeer signifies on her. In fact, Mrs. MacTeer loud-talks frequently throughout the book. The girls know not to initiate her long soliloquies

when she gets upset and fusses with them. Instead, they often avoid her and aim to sneak out of the house on weekends when she sings to herself.

Pecola's own mother duels with her through her Signifyin'(g) put downs and insults. In her article "Mother Wit from Laughing Barrel," Claudia Mitchell-Kernan explains the history and verbal artistry of Signifyin'(g). She says, "Signifyin' can be a tactic employed in game activity—verbal dueling..." (311). Pauline's abusive actions and metaphoric insults show how she copes with her negative self-image, which is tied to her identity. One example of Pauline Signifyin'(g) is when Claudia and Frieda visit Pecola at the Fishers' home when Pauline is working. The girls wait inside the house while Pauline leaves the room to fetch the laundry. They notice the spacious rooms, "white porcelain, white woodwork, polished cabinets, and brilliant copperware...odors of meat, vegetables, and something freshly baked mixed with a scent of Fels Naphtha" (Morrison 108). This presents a stark difference with their respective homes. White, shiny, fragrant. When the girl she nannies walks into the kitchen and is surprised by the visitors, Pecola accidentally pushes a fresh-baked blueberry pie off the counter which splatters over the kitchen and her leg. The little girl bursts into tears as Pauline rushes in. She promptly yanks Pecola by her arm and slaps her. In an angry voice she "...abused Pecola directly... Over her shoulder she spit out words to [them] like rotten pieces of apple." Then Pauline turns to comfort the Fishers' scared child. When the girls leave, they hear Pauline "hushing and soothing the tears of the little pink-and-yellow girl" (Morrison 109). The different manner in which Pauline treats her own child compared to the girl shows how she casts her negative self-image upon her daughter. She reacts so poorly to Pecola not only because she is upset about the pie, but because she projects her own self-

hate onto Pecola and uses this as an opportunity to release her anger. Later in the novel, Pauline reminisces on newborn Pecola and says, “I knowed she was ugly. Head full of pretty hair, but Lord she was ugly” (Morrison 126). Pauline has signified on her daughter from the first day she was born. She predetermines that Pecola is ugly. In doing so, Pauline never gives Pecola a chance to have a healthy, positive self-image. Her “verbal duel” here is with an innocent child who can’t talk back. By insulting Pecola in this way, she passes down her own self-hatred. Just as the racist and oppressive setting of Lorain affects Pauline, so too it, in turn, affects Pecola as well.

Pauline takes great pride in her work as a maid for the Fishers, a white family on the other side of town, as another means to mend her poor self-image and embrace the picture-perfect white life she always wanted to achieve. Morrison explains, “More and more she neglected her own house, her children, her man—they were like the afterthoughts one has just before sleep, the early-morning and late-evening edges of her day, the dark edges that made the daily life with the Fishers lighter, more delicate, more lovely” (127). When the Fishers nickname her “Polly,” they in effect change her identity and she buys into this false reality. Pauline embraces this persona to compensate for her childhood where she never received affection or attention because of her deformed foot. The narrator explains that in her workplace, “...she could arrange things, clean things, line things up in neat rows. Here her foot flopped around on deep pile carpets, and there was no uneven sound. Here she found beauty, order, cleanliness, and praise” (Morrison 127). Pauline feels important and needed in the Fishers’ home. As a result, she forgets her ugliness and her unworthiness while there. Working at the Fishers’ house and performing as Polly, she enjoys the order, pride, and authority of her status in the home. Like the

duty she had in her home as a child, she enjoys organizing the pantry and running their errands—basic tasks that she can control and that do not involve other people. At her own home, she is reminded of her ‘ugliness’ and ‘dirtiness’ by the presence of Pecola, her rootless son, and her abusive husband, Cholly. At the Fishers’ house, she finds, “beauty, order, cleanliness, and praise” (Morrison 127). On her daily commute to work, Pauline sees the physical differences of her neighborhood as compared to the Fishers’. The narrator describes the landscaped tree-lined streets and sturdy homes in the Fishers’ neighborhood: “The streets changed... the lakefront houses were the loveliest. Garden furniture, windows like shiny eyeglasses, and no sign of life... The orange-patched sky of the steel-mill section never reached this part of town. The sky was always blue” (Morrison 105). Compared to the black neighborhoods and storefront where the Breedloves reside, there is no sight of laboring workers as described in the HOLC report of Lorain’s red-labeled neighborhoods in 1937. Pauline internalizes these distinctions, leading to her rejection of her reality. To cope with her self-image, she embraces her role as “the ideal servant” in the white family while neglecting her own. Morrison creates a tension between what Pauline really is—a physically and mentally abusive mother who has a toxic self-image because of her racist surroundings—and what she performs as at work, Polly, the “ideal servant” who thrives in her place there.

While the white elite environment is the primary driver for her negative self-image, Pauline’s first instance of feeling unworthy and ugly occurred when she is a child. At age two, she steps on a rusty nail which “left her with a crooked, archless foot that flopped when she walked...” (Morrison 110). Morrison writes that this deformity explained:



Why she alone of all the children had no nickname; why there were no funny jokes and anecdotes about funny things she had done; why no one ever remarked on her food preferences—no saving the wing or the neck for her—no cooking of the peas in a separate pot without rice because she did not like rice; why nobody teased her; why she never felt at home anywhere, or that she belonged anywhere. Her general feeling of separateness and unworthiness she blamed on her foot.

(111)

Pauline's foot is a daily reminder of her ugliness and lack of worth. It represents the way she is different from the other women in Lorain: she has a southern accent, lack of fashion, deformity, and missing teeth. Pauline has struggled with the social and racial obstacles that define beauty in her environment since she was a child. One of the influencers of her poor self-image is her obsession with Hollywood films.

Pauline is taught to believe white beauty standards by her obsession with the movies. Her interest in picture shows essentially brainwashes her to believe that she will never attain beauty because she does not look like the Hollywood icons. The narrator explains, "Pauline Breedlove was never able, after her education in the movies, to look at a face and not assign it some category in the scale of absolute beauty, and the scale was one she absorbed in full from the silver screen" (Morrison 122). Morrison explains "her education in the movies" to suggest that Pauline has been taught this self-hate through her environment: film, magazines, and other media. She writes, "The master had said, 'You are ugly people.' They had looked about themselves and saw nothing to contradict the statement; saw, in fact, support for it leaning at them from every billboard, every movie, every glance" (27). Pauline tries to fit in with the other women in her community by

wearing makeup and straightening her hair, but she never achieves the sameness she desires and ends up fighting with Cholly and obsessing with the movies as a result. One day when Pauline is pregnant with her son, she goes to the movie theater and fixes her hair to make her look like an actress, Jean Harlow. While she watches the movie, she bites into a piece of candy and her tooth falls out. This is a defining moment for Pauline. She says, “Everything went then. Looked like I just didn’t care no more after that. I let my hair go back, plaited it up, and settled down to just being ugly” (Morrison 123). She fails at becoming the picture of white beauty and gives into the shame and self-hatred she feels. According to their website, The Palace Theater is the oldest theater in Lorain (“History”). We can assume Morrison took inspiration from the location as she did with so many other places in her hometown. For the purpose of this study, visualizing the environment that Pauline sees informs our understanding of herself. Figures 9 and 10 show images of the theater from circa 1940.



Figure 10. (The Lorain Palace Theater)



Figure 11. (The Lorain Palace Theater)

The theater opened on April 19, 1928. Christopher Pataky, the Executive Director of The Palace Theater, says, “Toni Morrison is a huge part of our town’s history and [The Palace Theater]” (Pataky). According to the Palace Theater, in 1928 the theater was the largest one floor theater in the State of Ohio. In 1928 the theater seated 2000 patrons. Because the novel is set in the 1940s, we can also assume that the theater was segregated at the time and Mrs. Breedlove would have been separated from other patrons. While she takes one moment to perform like she is beautiful like the white actress on the screen, reality hits when her rotten tooth breaks and she internalizes the separation between herself and the white woman in her gaze. In this scene, Pauline mimics the white beauty standard that she had been conditioned to accept. When reality sets in that she can never achieve this white beauty, she gives up. This moment is vital to the characterization of Pauline because we see, yet again, how she buys into the white beauty standards that

media creates. Morrison shows how the legacy of redlining and racism seeps through every aspect of Mrs. Breedlove's life.

## VII. CONCLUSION

The geographical setting and socio-cultural environment set the scene for Pauline's negative self-image which she passes down to Pecola. Historical redlining, white beauty standards, racial discrimination, and oppression all eat away at Pecola and Pauline's psyches. As Morrison states in the foreword of the novel, "The assertion of racial beauty was not a reaction to the self-mocking, humorous critique of cultural/racial foibles common in all groups, but against the damaging internalization of assumptions of immutable inferiority originating in an outside gaze" (Morrison xi). Her poor self-image is fostered by this outside gaze and her surroundings, leading to her deterioration.

As the narrator of the novel says, Pecola's community and environment fail to protect her and help her thrive. The Zillow approach to *The Bluest Eye* and present-day Lorain itself creates a clear illustration of how and why Pecola's surroundings are so detrimental to her self-image. The data is instructive for the long shadow of racism and redlining in Lorain. Understanding this context allows the reader to see the type of discrimination and hate that characterizes and infuses Pecola's environment which ultimately leads to her destruction. Morrison uses this opportunity to criticize the way media and historical oppression has affected African American beauty standards. Her novel teaches to reject mainstream images of beauty and create one's own.

This study of the physical elements of the setting informs the analysis of the novel's characters because Lorain is a character itself. In his piece "Hidden in Plain Sight: The Ghosts of Segregation" in *The New York Times*, photographer Richard

Frishman says:

All human landscapes are embedded with cultural meaning. And since we rarely consider our constructions as evidence of our priorities, beliefs and behaviors, the testimonies our landscapes offer are more honest than many of the things we intentionally present. Our built environment, in other words, is a kind of societal autobiography, writ large (Frishman).

Ultimately, *The Bluest Eye* demonstrates how our environments and relationships with our world affect the way we think about ourselves.

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