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Surviving Vulnerability, or the Perverted Empowerment of a Community in Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*

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Lorain, Ohio, 1941. After having been raped by her father Cholly Breedlove at least once—if not more—eleven-year-old Pecola Breedlove bore the child of her father before it died, leaving her insane, excluded from her own community and her own family.

Obviously, compassion would hardly be expected for the rapist, Cholly, who committed one of the most horrible crimes one could think of—be it from the black community, the narrator, or even the reader. On the contrary, the victim Pecola, a young, defenceless girl, sexually abused by her own father several times, and regularly beaten by her mother, especially after getting pregnant, can be expected to arouse the other characters' sympathy. However, it does not seem to be the case:

> "Well, they ought to take her out of school."
> "Ought to. She carry some of the blame."
> "Oh, come on. She ain't but twelve or so."
> "Yeah. But you never know. How come she didn't fight him?"
> "Maybe she did."
> "Yeah? You never know."
> "Well, it probably won't live. [...]"
> "She be lucky if it don't live. Bound to be the ugliest thing walking."
> "Can't help but be. Ought to be a law: two ugly people doubling up like that to make more ugly. Be better off in the ground." (Morrison 148-149)

Those bits of conversation, overheard by the narrator Claudia MacTeer and her sister Frieda, show the community's apparent lack of concern for the Breedlove tragedy. One, then, cannot help but wonder at the writer's motives for depicting characters lacking empathy and not feeling sorry for Pecola despite the atrocity that happened to her. The naïve idea that only very few people may have reacted so negatively against or so indifferently to her is ruled out by the narrator, who voices her confusion regarding the lack of understanding by the members of her community:

> [...] we [the narrator and her sister] were embarrassed for Pecola, hurt for her, and finally we just felt sorry for her. [...] And I believe our sorrow was the more intense because nobody else seemed to share it. They were disgusted, amused, shocked, outraged, or even excited by the story. But we listened for the one who would say, 'Poor little girl,' or, 'Poor baby,' but there was only head-wagging where those words should have been. We looked for eyes creased with concern, but saw only veils. (Morrison 149)

With regard to the narrator's attempt at explaining the causes and origins of the Breedlove tragedy, this paper aims at showing how a whole community, made vulnerable by the very

society to which it is supposed to belong, unsuccessfully attempts at turning its weakness into strength. I will first show that the black community's desperate need for empowerment results in their inflicting of the sufferings they are themselves victims of, on members of their own community. What might have been a successful process of empowerment turns out to be a failed one, as the only way for the community to survive is to commit against its weakest and most vulnerable members the same crimes as were perpetrated against it. In other words, the notion of sacrifice will then be at the heart of my analysis: is it necessary for a community to sacrifice one of its own members to fight its vulnerable state? Finally, I will focus on the narrator and the importance of telling Pecola's story, suggesting that Claudia's narration acts as an apology for the community's denial of Pecola's right to be saved. This apology, in fact, may stand as a confession of the community's irreversible state of vulnerability.

A desperate need for empowerment

Set in the 1940's in an American white-dominated society, Toni Morrison's novel *The Bluest Eye* portrays the tragic story of a black family whose members, like most blacks in the United States of America at that time, struggle to survive in a society that rejects them because of their skin colour. The historical and social context in which the novel takes place is essential to understand the characters' position in the society: the Segregation laws that are still in force act as a constant reminder of the troubled past relationship between the whites and the blacks that has not disappeared, and deeply affect the blacks' social status, making them inferior physically, culturally, socially and even financially speaking. The blacks are ugly, they do not have the same rights or jobs as good as the whites', they are poorer, and are thus not as worthy and important as the whites. The whites, on the other hand, are clearly the dominant group, as the "Dick-and-Jane" story in the introduction illustrates: in fact, "the books used in American schools were primarily by and about white, Anglo-Saxon, middle-class people" (Larrick 84-85), meaning that minority groups were absent from textbooks, and thus non-existent. The blacks then become members of the most vulnerable part of the society because of their "membership in [a] socially [and] culturally disadvantaged minorit[y]," as defined by Thomas Couser (Preface xii). But what makes it even worse is that they are not considered as inferior by the whites only; most blacks themselves see themselves as such. In other words, their vulnerability is doubled. How, then, can a whole community survive when its very presence and existence is called into question?

Right from the start, there is no doubt about the vulnerability of the main characters, be it because of their skin colour, or because of their age; for instance, young black girls in the American society are more likely to be "exposed to rape and violence," according to the sociologist Joyce A. Ladner (62), hence making them more vulnerable. Although the narrator,

Claudia MacTeer, a nine-year-old black girl, does not name it so, the distinction between blacks and whites is immediately made, highlighting the whites' domination and inevitably implying the blacks' vulnerability: "Rosemary Villanucci, our next-door friend who lives above her father's café, sits in a 1939 Buick eating bread and butter. She rolls down the window to tell my sister Frieda and me that we can't come in" (Morrison 5).

Vulnerability entails exclusion, just as much as exclusion entails more vulnerability; Toni Morrison's characters suffer from it in the novel. In this opening scene, the narrator and her sister are physically excluded by a member of the majority: by keeping them at a distance, Rosemary Villanucci asserts her dominance as a white. Showing that the dominated (the narrator and her sister) cannot get mixed up with the group of the dominant (as represented by Rosemary Villanucci) enables the latter to assert its power over the former and draw a "boundary" (Le Blanc 25, my translation) that creates "a gap between the ones *inside* and the ones *outside*" (Le Blanc 25-26, my translation).[1] Claudia and Frieda's vulnerability becomes multiple: not only are they not allowed to enter the beautiful car, but they are also deprived of the bread and butter that Rosemary is eating. The contrast is striking: the white girl is comfortably seated and feeding herself, whereas the black girls have to stand outside and watch her satisfy a basic human need—hunger.

The black girls' reaction confirms the idea that the ones *inside* are privileged, while the ones *outside* are deprived from any chance of benefiting from the same advantages, making them envious of the whites who are superior to them: "We stare at her, wanting her bread, but more than that wanting to poke the arrogance out of her eyes and smash the pride of ownership that curls her chewing mouth" (Morrison 5). The white girl's "arrogance" and her "pride of ownership" that, according to the narrator, manifests itself physically, is the reflection of the hierarchy established between the two groups. The narrator and her sister's vulnerability here lies in their impossibility to retaliate not because they have no power, but because they do not have "the power to contest the chains of power that have rejected [them]"[2] (Le Blanc 55, my translation). The narrator and her sister are helpless in front of Rosemary's disdain, and can only fantasize about taking their revenge by "beat[ing] her up [and] make red marks on her white skin" (Morrison 5)—but this remains only a failed attempt at contesting the hierarchy established and manifesting some kind of power of their own.

[1] "[…] l'exclusion apparaît toujours liée à la construction d'une frontière. Elle précipite l'exclu au-delà de la frontière et crée un fossé entre celles et ceux qui sont *dedans* et celles et ceux qui sont *dehors*."
[2] "[…] l'exclu est celle ou celui qui, apparemment, se trouve *sans* pouvoir. Il n'a pas en pratique le pouvoir de contester les circuits de pouvoir qui l'ont expulsé."

But not all the blacks have either the desire, the possibility or the strength to take their revenge, like the MacTeer sisters. More often than not, the whites' exclusion of the blacks enables the former to affirm their superiority, which leaves the latter powerless and wondering why they are not perceived as equal: their own legitimacy as human beings is taken away from them, and their self is negated (Guerrero 766). As Le Blanc writes, "the excluded are not merely human beings who lose their social traits, but also lives that lose their potentiality to be acknowledged as human lives—that is to say, lives whose human features are still considered as intact"[3] (Le Blanc 38, my translation). How, then, can a community at the same time undergo such humiliation by its own society and still live in it? What are its means of survival? What are the forms of resistance that the community develops to fight against the oppression of the whites?

Responses to one's vulnerability can take different forms, which the novel well illustrates through various characters. The narrator's opposition to white supremacy, for instance, is shown through her destruction of white baby dolls:

> I had only one desire: to dismember [the doll]. To see of what it was made, to discover the dearness, to find the beauty, the desirability that had escaped me, but apparently only me. Adults, older girls, shops, magazines, newspapers, window signs–all the world had agreed that a blue-eyed, yellow-haired, pink-skinned doll was what every girl child treasured. [...] I fingered the face, wondering at the single-stroke eyebrows; picked at the pearly teeth stuck like two piano keys between red bowline lips. Traced the turned-up nose, poked the glassy blue eyeballs, twisted the yellow hair. [...] Break off the tiny fingers, bend the flat feet, loosen the hair, twist the head around [...]. I destroyed white baby dolls. (Morrison 14-15)

Such violence is highly symbolic as it reflects the aggressiveness she feels towards the whites and their superior status. Being the result of her frustration at not having any of the criteria required to be considered as "beautiful," Claudia's violent impulses are not to be tamed, and will inevitably be directed elsewhere: as René Girard writes, "[w]hen unappeased, violence seeks and always finds a surrogate victim. The creature that excited its fury is abruptly replaced by another, chosen only because it is vulnerable and close at hand" (11). As she cannot direct it towards real white girls, destroying her dolls is her only way of externalizing her resistance and refusal of the inferior status that was imposed on her. As a child, her action remains limited and restrained as she can only take her anger out on inanimate objects, then facing no resistance; nonetheless, it is worth noting that choosing to destroy the white baby dolls is no coincidence for Claudia, as those dolls are the best example of the beauty standards imposed on the blacks and other minorities by the white society. Destroying the white baby dolls not only underlines Claudia's "ability to understand, to some degree, the

[3] "Ce ne sont pas seulement des êtres humains qui perdent leurs qualités sociales, mais des vies qui perdent leur capacité à être perçues comme des vies humaines, c'est-à-dire des vies dont le registre d'humanité est encore considéré comme intact."

repressive values pervading her black community" (Cormier-Hamilton 121), but also her rejection of the white domination.

Nevertheless, not all the characters react like her: others are too vulnerable to resist white domination. As a result, they are brutalized by the dominant community and are incapable of fighting against it. The example of the Breedloves is particularly telling: they seem to be the most vulnerable members of the black community.

> [The Breedloves] lived there because they were poor and black, and they stayed there because they believed they were ugly. Although their poverty was traditional and stultifying, it was not unique. But their ugliness was unique. No one could have convinced them that they were not relentlessly and aggressively ugly. Except for the father, Cholly, whose ugliness (the result of despair, dissipation, and violence directed toward petty things and weak people) was behavior, the rest of the family [...] wore their ugliness. [...] You looked at them and wondered why they were so ugly [...]. 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 [...]. "Yes," they had said. "You are right." (Morrison 28)

This ugliness that characterizes the Breedloves and that they do not even contest is the result of their inferior status that they have all internalized: Klotman analyses the episode at the Fishers', for example, as the moment when "Pecola learns that she is ugly, unacceptable, and especially unloved" (124). Although they do not seem much different from other blacks at first ("Although their poverty was traditional"), their own belief in their ugliness makes them more vulnerable than anybody else: they are unable to resist against any attack. But what makes it even worse is that their internalized belief in their ugliness and outward vulnerability is also perceived by the others: "You looked at them and wondered why they were so ugly." Obviously, their ugliness is not real; but their vulnerable state makes it easy for the rest of the community to make them think so, in order to forget about their belief in their own ugliness as black people. According to Guerrero, "'the look' and the ideology of its construction [in *The Bluest Eye*] hold disastrous consequences for black folks' self-esteem" (766). Therefore it comes as no surprise that Pecola Breedlove, as the weakest member of her family—because she is the youngest and a girl—somehow becomes the incarnation of the whole community's self-hatred: her desperate longing for blue eyes, for instance, epitomizes most black female characters' internalization of the standards of beauty valued by the white-dominated American society at the time. The title of the novel, *The Bluest Eye*, perfectly illustrates Pecola's desire to be different: white, blond, with blue eyes, like Shirley Temple that she so admires. Her absolute self-denial and longing for blue eyes ultimately shows a black's inability to fight against the standards of beauty imposed on the minority group, and the community resents her for that:

> All of our waste which we dumped on [Pecola] and which she absorbed. And all of our beauty, which was hers first and which she gave to us. All of us–all who knew her–felt so wholesome after we cleaned ourselves on her. We were so beautiful when we stood astride her ugliness. Her simplicity decorated us, her guilt 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 walking dreams we used–to silence our own nightmares. And she let us, and thereby deserved our contempt. (Morrison 162-163)

It is clear in this passage that Pecola's (deadly) mistake is her lack of resistance. Unlike Claudia who destroys her dolls, Pecola's acceptance of her condition triggers the community's contempt and rejection. How unfair is that? Why would Morrison create a community that might unreasonably expect what the writer herself defines as "the most delicate member of a society: a child; the most vulnerable member; a female" (Afterword 168) to have the ability to fight against her unfair condition as black in the United States in the 1940's?

A necessary sacrifice

This "contempt" of a community against one of its own members who has, in fact, committed no crime but of being the victim of others' frustration, highlights a malfunction in the society put forward by the writer's portrayal of a black community not trying to protect Pecola, but putting the blame instead on her as well as Cholly. Although Cholly's crime is inexcusable, one cannot deny that he himself has suffered from his condition as a black man and been the victim of humiliations by white people. The episode of his very first sexual intercourse, narrated through an omniscient point of view, well illustrates his trauma:

> 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. [...] Cholly jumped, trying to kneel, stand, and get his pants up all in one motion. The men had long guns.
> "Hee hee hee heeeee." The snicker was a long asthmatic cough.
> The other raced the flashlight all over Cholly and Darlene.
> "Get on wid it, nigger," said the flashlight one.
> "Sir?" said Cholly [...].
> "I said, get on wid it. An' make it good, nigger, make it good."
> [...] The flashlight man lifted his gun down from his shoulder, and Cholly heard the clop of metal. He dropped back to his knees. (Morrison 115-116)

The white men's perversity puts Cholly into a state of vulnerability that he cannot even fight, as he is threatened by the men's guns. His first experience of sex is turned into a mere voyeuristic amusement for the white men that Cholly is forced to accomplish as bargaining chip in exchange for his life. But his vulnerability also lies in the fact that the white men's threat completely dehumanizes him: he is reduced to silence, and Darlene and he hardly look

any different from animals mating. One cannot but feel compassion for him in that scene; and it is clear that, as well as being a criminal, he has also been a victim too.

Just as the narrator, feeling shamed when standing outside the Buick ends up destroying the white baby dolls she is supposed to play with, the reader would expect Cholly to be filled with anger against the white men he is forced to "entertain." Such reaction, that Le Blanc calls the "rage of the excluded," should lead to the latter fighting for their rights: "The loss of power can erase neither the desire to persevere, nor the rage that is turned against power itself. The rage of the excluded is first and foremost the rage for not being given any place, but also rage when facing shame, the anger of being set aside, of not fitting, of being detached. Such rage then acts as insubordination"[4] (Le Blanc 44-45, my translation). However, Cholly's humiliation does not lead him to hate the white men; instead, he directs his hatred towards the girl: "He hated her. [...] Cholly wanted to strangle her [...]" (Morrison 116-117). Cholly is well aware of his inferiority, whether consciously or not, and any attempt at directing his rage towards the real source of his humiliation would inevitably lead to a defeat. Hating the white men would be useless: his very identity as black does not enable him to defend himself as human being. The only way for him to deal with his frustration is to direct it towards a weaker person than him, knowing that his victim will not have the strength to fight back. And just as he perversely, although unwillingly, misdirects his anger, the whole community wrongly directs its scorn towards his family.

In other words, whether it is for the community, the narrator Claudia or even Cholly, even if their vulnerable position in the society does generate a reaction suggesting their desire for empowerment, they use it wrongly, directing it towards their own people instead of directing towards the ones who mistreat them. Because of their absolute powerlessness against their oppressor, the only way for vulnerable subjects to become empowered is by mistreating vulnerable subjects even more. By doing so, they do not take the risk of being confronted once again with their incapacity to win against those who are more empowered than them. Trying to fight the dominant group may be even more damaging; fighting weaker elements guarantees a victory. They, too, have the power to belittle others.

The confrontation with weaker elements such as Pecola Breedlove is disturbing for the community. Indeed, seeing her vulnerability reminds the other characters of their own frailty. Sympathy is impossible because of their own shame, and the community's contempt for her merely mirrors their contempt for themselves and their own weakness. Pecola's

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[4] "*La perte des pouvoirs ne peut effacer ni le désir de persévérer, ni la rage qui se retourne contre les pouvoirs. La rage de l'exclu est d'abord rage de ne pas avoir de place, mais elle est dans le même temps rage devant* la honte, colère d'être désarrimé, d'être désajusté, détaché. Elle vaut alors comme *insoumission*."

inability to fight not only her father when he rapes her, but also her mother who beats her up regularly and other characters who mistreat her, places her as the perfect victim, and the community despises her for that. According to Girard, "[A]ny community that has fallen prey to violence or has been stricken by some overwhelming catastrophe hurls itself blindly into the search for a scapegoat. Its members instinctively seek an immediate and violent cure for the onslaught of unbearable violence and strive desperately to convince themselves that all their ills are the fault of a lone individual who can be easily disposed of" (93).

And indeed, Pecola becomes the community's scapegoat: by identifying with her, they are able to put some distance with their own vulnerability, repress the frustration that results from it, and get the illusion of being empowered at the same time. The community's sense of superiority can only exist with Pecola's tragedy, because it reminds the other characters that they are not as weak as her, thus giving them the necessary strength to survive and bear their own vulnerability. Saving her would imply taking the risk of experiencing the same horror, but being merely associated with her is too great a risk that none wants to take. To put it simply, the best way not to suffer like her is to stay away from her.

This is what Mary Douglas suggests in *Purity and Danger*, stating that when an individual does not fit in a society, the society then keeps its distance with him, so as not to be contaminated: "It seems that if a person has no place in the social system and is therefore a marginal being, all precaution against danger must come from others. He cannot help his abnormal situation" (97). When a person does not fit in the system set up in a society to maintain a certain sense of order, he or she becomes a threat for the order established, as it may disappear. Difference therefore echoes danger: this person must remain isolated and kept away from the rest of the community.

The fear of becoming like him or her, of being contaminated by merely being in contact with the "marginal being," leads the members of the community to stay away from him or her: try as she might, Pecola will not find any help from her own community, who avoids any contact with her out of fear of contamination. As a child, black and female, she has no place in the social system in which she lives, and her family situation contributes to her marginalisation. When she is forced to live with the MacTeers at the beginning of the novel because her father has burnt up the house, Claudia reveals the dangers of "being put out*doors*": "if you are outdoors, there is no place to go" (Morrison 11). Being "outdoors," with "no place to go," is in total contrast with the "Dick-and-Jane" introduction of the novel that says "Here is the house" (Morrison 1). But Pecola has no house: right from the start, the Breedloves' world does not correspond to the typical one described in the "Dick-and-Jane" story that stands for the world "of the first-grade basic reader" (Klotman 123) used in America at that time. But

her stay at the MacTeers is temporary, and she eventually returns to live with her family. Her marginalisation gradually becomes complete, until she becomes mad and ends up living "on the edge of town" (Morrison 162), with her mother and her imaginary friend as sole companions. She is forever abandoned, and no one ever dares get close to her anymore: "Grown people looked away" (Morrison 162).

Not helping people in need usually generates guilt, as is the case for the narrator and her sister. Because the two sisters "fail to save the baby's life, they avoid Pecola" (Rosenberg 441): "We tried to see her without looking at her, and never, never went near. Not because she was absurd, or repulsive, or because we were frightened, but because we had failed her" (Morrison 162). But apart from those two characters, no trace of guilt from any other character emerges in the novel: does that mean this community is made of heartless people only? Obviously not, just as much as Pecola's situation moves the readers. People's rejection of Pecola is merely the result of their attempt at self-protection, as Le Blanc concludes: "Exclusion can then expand within a hostility newly founded upon the self-sufficiency of the included. But what can this self-sufficiency else be but the deferral of our own vulnerability, an attempt at putting it off definitively?"[5] (Le Blanc 211, my translation). One can assume, however, that such an attempt is only partly effective.

In addition to that fear of contamination, the black community both consciously and unconsciously sees Pecola as a way for all of them to "purify" themselves. Being the ugliest and the most vulnerable member of all, Pecola is the one who has to be sacrificed for the well-being of the group, which must stay together as one when facing hardship: as Rosenberg writes, "[w]hile Pecola retreats into delusion, those with the toughness and resiliency to defend themselves develop the inner strength needed to survive" (Rosenberg 441). The Breedlove tragedy may endanger the equilibrium of the community, as it is the result of a failed attempt at resisting the vulnerable state the group has been put into. And singling out one of its members—Pecola—by treating him or her differently from the others puts the group's pseudo-harmony in jeopardy, as Jean-Luc Nancy suggests in his book, *La Communauté désœuvrée*: "Thinking the subject defeats the idea of a community"[6] (60, my translation). The community cannot afford to take this risk: the "troublemaker" has to be taken out. In other words, Pecola's sacrifice is necessary for the survival of the community; saving her might have meant its destruction.

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[5] "L'exclusion peut alors fleurir à l'intérieur [d'une] inhospitalité nouvelle fondée sur la suffisance des vies inclues. Mais cette suffisance, d'où vient-elle si ce n'est d'un ajournement de notre propre vulnérabilité, d'une tentative pour la mettre à distance définitivement ?"

[6] "[...] une pensée du sujet met en échec une pensée de la communauté."

The term “purification” inevitably brings us to the idea of catharsis, which is not to be taken as the process through which “a representation of an action of a superior kind—grand, and complete in itself—presented in embellished language, in distinct forms in different parts, performed by actors rather than told by a narrator, effect[s], through pity and fear, the purification of such emotions” (Aristotle 23), that is usually found in tragedy according to Aristotle. Freud’s use of the term, which refers to “an energetic reaction to the event that provokes an affect” (8) and results in the abreaction of the victim’s trauma, might be more appropriate in that case. Is this the underlying meaning that is to be acknowledged in Pecola’s sacrifice? But in that case, where would the catharsis lie? One could argue that witnessing, without ever interfering in, Pecola’s tragedy could be this reaction (though not energetic as defined by Freud)[7] through which one experiences the emotions that one will not seek to feel again in real life. Cholly’s crimes against his own daughter would be the tragedy that the community watches so as not to do the same, just as Claudia destroys her white dolls so as to prevent herself from keeping on bullying real white girls. Except that Pecola’s tragedy is part of the community’s real life; its “audience” neither feels pity nor fear for the characters. Worse, they do not identify with them although they are members of the same community; and even if they do, any identification is immediately negated, so as to ward off the fear of experiencing the same trauma. The catharsis does not work then in that case, or it is a failed catharsis that the reader witnesses. But isn’t the reading of the story of a failed catharsis, a cathartic process itself?[8]

Therefore, for us readers, reading about the black community failing to support the Breedlove family makes us feel what the characters fail to feel: that is, empathy and sorrow. Just as the readers cannot portray Cholly as utterly evil, they are bound to feel sorry for Pecola, even if the community does not. Similarly, they will experience great difficulty in understanding the other characters’ cruel attitude towards the girl. But this raises one question: what makes us, readers, be so judgemental about the black community? They are also, after all, victims of the white domination and presented as vulnerable subjects too. Cholly is made human only because he is not merely presented as a rapist, but as a victim as well;[9] an easy assumption would be that each member of the community can be presented as human too. Undeniably, the readers’ opinion of the characters is intentionally oriented: a close study of the (only) apparent impartiality of the narrator is required, in order to define Claudia’s specific role in the novel.

[7] According to Freud, energetic reactions range “from tears to acts of revenge” (8).
[8] In the Aristotelian sense of the term.
[9] As Gibson says: “Had [Cholly] *simply* felt anger toward Pecola, then the case would be more easily judged” (170, emphasis added); however, it is not simply anger that makes Cholly rape his own daughter, which makes it much more difficult for the reader to judge his case.

Reversing the (irreversible) state of vulnerability?

The novel opens with the narrator, Claudia MacTeer, telling the reader about the story of the Breedloves. She alternates between her memories as a nine-year-old girl to narrate the events, and the adult she has become to comment on them. As Pecola's friend and peer, her narration as a little black girl is essential to the construction of the reader's compassion for Pecola: the discrepancy between the elements that she remembers as a child and that did not always make sense to her, and the understanding that the reader has of them puts forward the sad innocence and naivety with which the young girls experienced the events: "Little by little we began to piece a story together, a secret, terrible, awful story. And it was only after two or three such vaguely overheard conversations that we realized that the story was about Pecola" (Morrison 148).

And it is this innocence that shows the characters' vulnerability: not only the little girls', but the adults' as well. The novel alternates with other characters occasionally narrating parts of their story, such as Pauline Breedlove, Pecola's mother, and an omniscient narrator who presents episodes in some characters' lives that underline their vulnerability (such as the episode of Cholly's first sexual intercourse with Darlene). This blending of several points of view offers different aspects of the black community, and each character's personal experience and sufferings as vulnerable subjects.

Interestingly enough, Pecola is never given the role of a narrator. In *Vulnerable Subjects*, Couser indicates that the vulnerable condition in which some subjects are "often marginalizes, stigmatizes, and silences them" (75-77); and Pecola is indeed silenced. Although Claudia narrates her story, never does she give Pecola the opportunity to use her voice. As previously said, Pecola's ultimate position as perfect victim, and hence the most vulnerable subject in a society, forbids her from taking any action, be it verbal or physical. The only passages in the novel when Pecola is given her voice back are episodes in which she is humiliated by other characters. Her interaction with Mr. Yacobowski, the owner of a drugstore where Pecola goes to buy sweets, shows it well. Her shyness and Mr. Yacobowski's scorn for black people silence her, whereas his words are aggressive and humiliating: "'Christ. Kantcha talk? [...] Well, why'nt you say so? One? How many?'" (Morrison 37).

The episode with a boy named Junior again highlights Pecola's incapacity to defend herself, as their encounter results in him bullying her. Just as Cholly misdirects his anger to Darlene, Junior's lack of affection from his mother has led him to give vent to his frustration by harming weaker than him: "As he grew older, he learned how to direct his hatred of his mother to the cat, and spent some happy moments watching it suffer" (Morrison 67). And

just as he tortures the cat, after having lured Pecola into his house, Junior then takes pleasure in making her suffer by locking her up both physically and verbally:

> "You can't get out. You're my prisoner," he said. His eyes were merry but hard.
> "You let me go."
> "No!" He pushed [Pecola] down, ran out of the door that separated the rooms, and held it shut with his hands. Pecola's banging on the door increased his gasping, high-pitched laughter. (Morrison 70)

At the end of the story, however, she is given the opportunity to speak. But the reader soon realizes that even if the conversation covers ten pages, it is in fact a dialogue between her and an imaginary self, after having become mad. "So it was" (Morrison 162) is Claudia's comment at the end of Pecola's dialogue. And indeed, there is not much left to say: Pecola has been completely silenced and is left to talk to herself only, as no one else dares approach or speak to her. Likewise, the rest of her family has no right to speak either, and the end of their story is told by the narrator: "And the years folded up like pocket handkerchiefs. Sammy [Pecola's brother] left town long ago; Cholly died in the workhouse; Mrs. Breedlove still does housework" (Morrison 162).

By being silenced, the characters are made invisible, as Le Blanc suggests: "What contributes to making the individual invisible is the decision that abolishes one's voice, this social certainty that his or her voice has become inaudible"[10] (Le Blanc 121, my translation). The Breedloves are not even present anymore at the end of the novel, either physically (like Sammy or Cholly) or verbally (like Pauline). They are not even part of the other characters' lives, who do not pay attention to them anymore: "it bored us in the end" (Morrison 163). What, then, makes the narrator talk about and for those who would otherwise be forgotten? Clearly, it is not simply out of friendship; as previously said, the distance with which she recalls the events and her analysis of the various characters' actions and reactions suggests a feeling of guilt. But whose guilt is it exactly?

I would suggest that Claudia can, to a certain extent, be considered as the equivalent the Coryphaeus in Ancient Greek tragedies. Claudia puts on the role of spokesperson for the community, which should stand as the Chorus—except that it gradually loses its voice: Claudia at that point embodies the Chorus as well, who remains unexpectedly silent. Her pseudo-neutral position enables her to take up the role of the Chorus and present the events as they took place, and at the same time point out the dysfunctions of the community. Because of the blending of her memories as a little girl and her comments as an adult, and because of her frequent shift from the personal pronoun "I" to the "we," the guilt she talks

[10] "Ce qui contribue à l'invisibilité de l'exclu, c'est bien la sanction qui abolit la voix, la certitude sociale que sa voix est devenue une voix inaudible."

about appears to be not only hers, but the whole community's. In the same way, the constant contrast that she draws between the pronouns "she" and "we," and between "her" and "our,"[11] cannot be taken as a mere opposition between Pecola and her sister and her.

The evolution in the community's voice is worth noting: as mentioned before, a few characters are in turn given a voice throughout the novel. As the story reaches its end, however, the community is given less and less opportunity to speak, before eventually becoming silent (as much as the Breedloves), after Pecola has sunk into madness: the unspeakable cannot be said, and the community has been made too vulnerable by the events to find the right words to name it. From a multitude of different voices all filling the gaps of the story as a Chorus would, and contributing to the reconstitution of the Breedlove tragedy, Claudia is left with muteness.

Her role as spokesperson, therefore, differs from the one as defined in Ancient Greek tragedies: in fact, Claudia takes the responsibility of exposing the community's guilt because its members are too ashamed of their powerlessness in front of Pecola's situation. In that sense, the community is also silenced by its vulnerability, and only Claudia remains, vulnerable as well but "empowered enough" to speak up. She goes beyond the limits of her role to reveal what the community cannot disclose: their guilt; but also to find its origins: self-hatred. Indeed, it is "only by understanding and accepting the past" (Cormier-Hamilton 111) that the blacks can understand they have been forced into self-hatred by the dominant group, and as a result find their own identity as Afro-Americans, breaking away from the whites' oppression. Claudia's voice is regenerative (Dittmar 146), and her story-telling frees the community; and only then do its members have the possibility to own their (hi)story. The Breedlove tragedy, at first silenced by the community, becomes the whole community's story; the community's silence, then, becomes a choice—of not repeating such horror; of not correcting or adjusting Claudia's interpretation of their lack of involvement in the tragedy; and of not giving the whites the pleasure of using Pecola's story as evidence of the blacks' inferiority.

Conclusion

The Bluest Eye seems, at first sight, to be solely the tragic story of a family. What may be even more tragic is that despite the horror narrated, such story is after all only one example of the dreadful consequences that a state of vulnerability may involve. It is about a little black girl, Pecola, who did not know how to love herself, take care of herself, defend herself. It is also about a black man, Cholly, whose vulnerability turned his love into hatred, and his good intentions into harmful actions. Finally, it is about a community who had to witness and bear

[11] See Morrison's quote (162-163) above.

the horror of a family's downfall because no one was strong enough to acknowledge it as such, let alone stop it.

Those different levels of vulnerability are brought to light by the narrator, who voices out what has been silenced. But then again, as Le Blanc wonders: "Isn't my voice, supposedly speaking in the name of the others, actually taking away the others' own capacity to speak?"[12] (Le Blanc 89, my translation). In other words, isn't Claudia's narration a lifetime imprisonment for the other characters in *her* version of the story, and hence in the state of vulnerability that *she* puts them in? Just as much as Claudia's narration eventually empowers the community and frees it from the white domination, her interpretation of Pecola's story remains unchanged and traps both the readers and the community in her own perception of the world.

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[12] "Ma voix qui prétend parler au nom des autres n'est-elle pas en train de leur retirer leur propre capacité de parole ?"

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