Racism within African American Communities in Toni Morrison’s
The Bluest Eye and Paradise

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*The Bluest Eye* and *Paradise*
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In *The Bluest Eye* and in *Paradise* Toni Morrison has created two thoroughly racialized communities. Both communities are crippled by racism but in different ways. In the *Bluest Eye* Morrison has created a dualistic tale of the oppressors and the oppressed. The novel illustrates how the racism which exists within the African American community can be seen as an effect of the oppression and racism its members have been subjected to by whites. The racism, oppression and marginalisation have corroded the character’s self-esteem and sense of self worth. Most of the African-Americans portrayed in the book feel contempt for their own blackness.

The character Pecola is based on a real life girl whom Morrison met when she was 11 years old. She and the other little girl discussed whether or not there is a God. Morrison thought so, but the little girl disagreed. The reason was that the little black girl wanted blue eyes. This was a deep and heartfelt wish that she had not been granted. Morrison recalls her reaction well. She had prayed for two years for blue eyes. I remember looking at her. I saw something I hadn’t seen before- an incredibly beautiful face.”¹ Morrison couldn’t understand why this young girl couldn’t see her own beauty and why she would want the most obvious feature of a Caucasian face. When Morrison imagined her friend with the blue eyes that the latter wished for she was revolted. This memory of the little black girl who wanted blue eyes would stay with Morrison for the rest of her life.

In 1965 she started writing *The Bluest Eye*. It was at the peak of the “Black is beautiful” movement. Morrison started to think about why the movement was needed. “Why,
although reviled by others, could his beauty not be taken for granted within the community? Why did it need wide public articulation?"²

The characters in *The Bluest Eye* show exactly why such a movement was needed. All of the characters value themselves according to their degree of blackness. Some of them even experience self-contempt and self-loathing because they are considered too black. Yet others, like Geraldine, live their whole lives keeping up appearances. The thought of separating the lighter skinned blacks like herself from darker skinned blacks consumes Geraldine. All of it stems from letting others determine one’s value.

Morrison is using one atypical African-American family to demonstrate what the affects could be of this phenomenon. She has deliberately created an extreme situation to prove a point. Nevertheless all the building blocks of the story exist in reality. All of the characters are affected to some degree, but Pecola succumbs to the difficulties she is facing. This was deliberate. Morrison wanted to show how the most unprotected member of society would be affected. “I focused, therefore, on how something so grotesque as the demonization of an entire race could take root inside the most delicate member of society: a child; the most vulnerable member; a female.”³

Blue Eyes are a metaphor that is easily understood. When Pecola wants blue eyes she is really saying that she wants to escape her life and herself. She has defined herself only by her degree of blackness. Pecola and her family regard being a dark skinned black as being synonymous with being ugly. At only eleven years of age the solution Pecola can find regarding the feeling of inferiority and worthlessness is acquiring the symbol of beauty in her community. Blue eyes are regarded as beautiful by all the characters, including mothers and children who unanimously admire Shirley Temple. Pecola is in a desperate situation. She is not appreciated and cared for by her family. Instead she is subjected to neglect and sexual

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¹ Oprah Winfrey *Phenomenal Women* O Magazine March 2001vol.2 Nr3 185
abuse. Furthermore Pecola has no other person or place were she is safe and valued. In the surrounding community she is subjected to considerable intra-racism both by grown ups and her peers. All this adds up and Pecola is becoming more and more obsessed with her wish for blue eyes. The wish is made because she wants to escape her life by becoming something she is not. When Pecola is raped by her father and becomes pregnant by him she goes insane and starts to imagine that she has actually got blue eyes.

Racism within the race is a major theme in *The Bluest Eye* as well as in *Paradise*, but there is a difference. There is still a high prevalence of intra-racism, but in *Paradise* the tables are turned. It is the darker skinned blacks who have formed a sort of aristocracy. They are called the 8-rock. The 8-rock are the darkest skinned blacks with an unbroken blood line. If a family member should have a child with a light-skinned or even worse, white partner, the bloodline is considered tainted. The 8-rock do everything in their power to prevent this from happening. If it does happen it has serious consequences for everyone involved.

The citizens of Ruby are connected through a historical narrative about their Founding Fathers. The story is called “The Disallowing”. It refers to all the communities the Founding Fathers tried to join and were rejected from. This historic rejection is ever present in the minds of Ruby’s citizens. The citizens of Ruby have never got over the rejection and humiliation. It has formed all of them into the proud people they are. The most hurtful part of the disallowing is that they were rejected by lighter skinned blacks as well as by whites and Native Americans. The founding fathers had never expected that the shade of their complexion would matter to another African-American. The anger grew into hatred and the determination to stick to their own was established.

The 8-rock’s sense of superiority and the way in which they feel they are more moral than others is reminiscent of exceptionalist views. Many of the events in Ruby’s history
are similar to the history of the puritans who came to America. Both seem to have a sense that they are the chosen people and that their land is the promised land. In Ruby the people regard themselves as chosen for the purpose of making an all-black town function and prosper. There is a connection between the isolationism of Ruby and exceptionalism⁴.

The first period in Ruby is a very happy one. The community is prosperous and everyone feels safe. However in the late sixties and in the seventies the community starts to crumble. Due to the strict blood rule, which says that 8-rocks should only have children with other 8-rocks many children are born “broken”. Many of the 8-rock are sterile so the price of keeping the blood pure is perhaps too steep. Like the Puritans in the 17th century, the 8-rock blame women and the younger generation for their crumbling empire. This leads to a massacre of the women at the house called the Convent.

In Paradise Morrison describes a group of people who have become exactly what they fear and are running from. Instead of creating a paradise they created a racist regime similar to the one they were leaving behind. Isolationism and narrow-mindedness further worsens the situation.

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⁴ Thomas B. Byers A City Upon a Hill "American Studies in Scandinavia 29.2" 1997 86
1 Pecola- A Life Destroyed by Hate

The protagonist of *The Bluest Eye* is a little girl called Pecola Breedlove. Pecola is a neglected, abused and even hated child. She and everyone around her think that she is ugly and useless. Both adults and children have on numerous occasions made it clear to Pecola that she does not measure up. However Pecola thinks that she has found the cure for her ugliness. If she were granted her wish for blue eyes she would in all certainty be regarded as beautiful. Pecola is a symbol of the effect a damaged self image due to racism can have. She is subjected to racism both within her own race and by whites. The racism within the race is the most damaging because Pecola rarely meets whites at all. The majority culture effects Pecola indirectly of course because there are places she is not allowed access to because of her skin colour. Furthermore she does not have access to the American Dream. The ideals of the country into which she is born do not apply to her. Moreover all the images on billboards and such are also images of white people. In the afterword to *The Bluest Eye* Toni Morrison writes about the real life girl who was the model for Pecola:

Implicit in her desire was racial self-loathing. And twenty years later I was still wondering about how one learns that. Who told her? Who made her think that it was better to be a freak than what she was? Who had looked at her and found her so wanting, so small a weight on the beauty scale?5

The belief Pecola has that she will become loveable through changing her appearance is indeed evidence of racial self-loathing. Pecola wants to become someone else by replacing her blackness with something her family and the community at large can appreciate. It is a child’s way of surviving in a world where there is no shelter and no love. Pecola thinks that only blue eyes can remedy her desperate situation. She is a very lonely and shunned girl. If she had blue eyes she would be different and hence be treated differently. The most important
reason for her desire for blue eyes is that she wants to be treated differently by her family. There is a quotation in the book that exemplifies this: “If she looked different, beautiful, maybe Cholly would be different, and Mrs Breedlove too. Maybe they’d say “Why, look at pretty-eyed Pecola. We mustn’t do bad things in front of those pretty eyes”  

This indicates that her primary concern is escape from abuse and neglect within the home. The racism which penetrates every aspect of society is an important factor in understanding the actions of Pauline and Cholly. The environment they have grown up in has shaped them into the people they are today. Many of their actions are reactions to the oppression and racism they have been subjected to.

Pecola has thought about the issue of love and appreciation for quite some time. In the beginning of the novel when the family has found themselves outdoors and Pecola has found temporary refuge with the Mac.Teers she asks Claudia “How do you do that? How do you get somebody to love you?”  

It is clear already that Pecola envisions achieving someone’s affection as something that you can do. She wants to know how she can make it happen. Embedded in the question is also a massive insecurity. She already knows that she is not loved and that she will have to change somehow to be loved. Lucille P Fultz has commented on this passage “The images of whiteness that bombard her psyche and the insults she sustains because she is black are most certainly behind the question”.  

I agree partly. I agree that Pecola’s low self-esteem is to a large extent due to other people’s negative attitudes based on racism. Yet I can also see that Pecola is reacting like any child would regardless of colour if raised in such a loveless environment. She is taking it upon herself to make her situation better, and this is a reaction seen in many children regardless of colour.

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5 TBE 167  
6 TBE 34  
7 TBE 23  
Pecola tries to get people to love her by getting blue eyes. When she has them she will be loved and admired. She has identified what it is the people around her would like her to be and she is trying to live up to that. She knows that little girls with blue eyes are admired and adored so she wants to live up to that image. If the norm for beauty had been to be exceptionally tall then that is probably what Pecola would wish to be. The choice of blue eyes is due to the racist society she has grown up in. The fact that she wishes to alter her appearance in order to be treated better is human nature.

Since Pecola has not witnessed love and affection at home she has a somewhat foggy idea of what it would be like to be loved. “What did love feel like? she wondered. How do grown ups act when they are in love? Eat fish together?” The only ones who ever talked to Pecola about love are the prostitutes who live upstairs from Pecola. One of them told Pecola about a man whom she loved in the past. They ate fish together so that is Pecola’s concept of what people do when they are in love. Pecola has no concept of what real love and affection are so she decides that they have to do with the colour of your eyes. Both the community’s view that blue eyes are synonymous with beauty, and the fact that Mrs. Breedlove is so fond of the blue eyed Fisher girl contribute to this choice. Pecola has never had her mother’s affection the way the Fisher girl has.

One of the points Morrison is making in her novel is that the self-contempt and self-loathing cannot end until African-Americans view themselves differently. As long as Pecola only achieves her value through the judgements of others she will feel like she is not beautiful and worthy:

Each night without fail, she prayed for blue eyes. Fervently, for a year she had prayed. Although somewhat discouraged, she was not without hope. To have something as wonderful as that happen would take a long, long time. Thrown in this way, into the biding conviction that only a miracle could relieve her, she
would never know her beauty. She would only see what there was to see: the
eyes of other people.  

An incident at Mrs. Breedlove’s workplace starts Pecola’s journey from being a
troubled little girl to becoming insane. While Pauline is downstairs collecting the laundry
Pecola accidentally knocks over a blueberry cobbler. Instead of comforting Pecola
Mrs. Breedlove scolds her. She hits Pecola and calls her a crazy fool before she walks over
and comforts the Fisher girl. Even the fact that the white girl can call her Polly while Pecola
has to call her Mrs. Breedlove signals the mother’s preference for the white girl. Furthermore
Pauline does not seem to want to acknowledge that Pecola is her daughter.

“Pick up that wash and get on out of here, so I can get this mess cleaned up”

… As Pecola put the laundry bag in the wagon we could hear Mrs. Breedlove
hushing and soothing the tears of the little pink-and-yellow girl….“Who were they, Polly?”

“Don’t worry none, baby.” She whispered, and the honey in her words
complemented the sundown spilling on the lake.  

An already troubled girl once again gets proof that she is not loved and not wanted. To be
rejected by the person who should love Pecola the most must have had a detrimental affect on
her already frail self-esteem.

What finally pushes Pecola over the edge is being raped by her father and
becoming pregnant by him. His rape of his daughter (twice) is linked with a situation in his
youth. Cholly was caught by two white men when having sex and he was forced to continue
as they watched. Toni Morrison writes she had no problem “connecting Cholly’s “rape” by

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9 TBE 44
10 TBE 35
11 TBE 85
the white men to his own of his daughter”\textsuperscript{12}. I do have a problem with it. The fact that the men were white ties in with the racial theme of the book. Nevertheless that does not explain why Cholly comes home and rapes his eleven-year-old daughter because she scratches her leg like her mother once did. The fact is we later learn that he has done it again. The only way to make sense of it is to regard Cholly as a symbol. Morrison shows us that racism and oppression do not only exist in the moment. The person who is subjected to them internalises the shame and resentment and when those feelings are let out other people will be hurt. They will perhaps in return continue this vicious circle. If read like this the fact that Cholly hates the girl he was with instead of the white men becomes understandable.

When Pecola has gone mad we learn that Mrs. Breedlove’s betrayal may be equal to Mr. Breedlove’s. Pecola has told her about the rape and Mrs. Breedlove did not believe her. Pecola speaks to her imaginary friend after she has gone insane:

\begin{quote}

Then why didn’t you tell Mrs. Breedlove? I did tell her! I don’t mean the first time. I mean the second time when you were sleeping on the couch.

I wasn’t sleeping! I was reading! You don’t have to shout. You don’t understand anything do you? She didn’t even believe me when I told her. So why didn’t you tell her about the second time? She wouldn’t have believed me then either.

You’re right. No use in telling her when she wouldn’t believe you.\textsuperscript{13}
\end{quote}

Pecola believes that Soaphead Church has been able to help her acquire blue eyes. She sought him out as a last resort when years of praying for blue eyes had not helped. The primer directly preceding the chapter where Pecola is talking to her imaginary friend after becoming insane mirrors how far from the perfect story book world of the dominant white culture Pecola’s world is. Even though she has got both the friend she has longed for and her

\textsuperscript{12} TBE 172
\textsuperscript{13} TBE 158
blue eyes she has not got the fairy tale world she had anticipated. Being granted her wish for blue eyes only gave her temporary happiness. In the beginning of her conversation with her imaginary friend she is quite happy and convinced that everyone is jealous of her blue eyes. That is why they all look away when they meet her. Of course the reader knows it is because Pecola is mentally ill. In a way this is the first time she has really seen herself and her own beauty even if it is only an illusion. Pecola can not see her own beauty until she is delusional, and even then it is her imaginary blue eyes. It is not long until insecurity sneaks up on Pecola again. In her deranged mind she starts to worry that her eyes might not be blue enough to make her loveable and admired. She wants her imaginary friend to tell her “if there is somebody with bluer eyes than mine, then maybe there is someone with the bluest eyes. The bluest eyes in the whole world”. Her fear is that if someone else’s eyes are bluer then hers she will slide back to her old existence. The blue eyes will have lost their power.

\[14\] TBE 161
The family Pecola Breedlove grew up in was permeated with racial self-loathing. The family’s single belief was that they were ugly. They all thought so and consequently so did Pecola. To her, the youngest in the family, it was just a fact of life:

It was as though some mysterious 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.\footnote{TBE 28}

The implication is that the billboards and movies are portraying only whites as beautiful. They are flooded with images of the dominant culture and that it is corroding the family’s self-esteem.

The most important influence on Pecola is her mother Pauline. Even though Cholly Breedlove commits horrible atrocities against his daughter and is the one who drives her to the brink of insanity, Pauline is the one who has been closest to Pecola. Pauline’s own contempt for herself and her living conditions has ‘rubbed of’ on Pecola. Furthermore a woman who reacts to her newborn child in the manner Pauline did cannot help but transfer it to her child. Pauline says of the newborn Pecola that she had a “head full of pretty hair, but Lord she was ugly.”\footnote{TBE 98} The reason for Pauline’s reaction is probably that Pecola had dark complexion and looked like Pauline. To Pauline who detests herself that would make the child ugly.

The primer preceding the section about Pauline discusses a nice mother who plays with her daughter. This is far from Pauline’s reality. Pauline has stopped taking care of
her own household a long time ago and lives for the time she spends with the Fishers. Pauline Breedlove escapes her pain and hardship when she is at work. The Fisher mansion has become a haven to her. Before Mrs. Breedlove had any children she would go to see movies starring Jean Harlow. Pauline, who loved the glamorous life on the silver screen, would imitate Jean Harlow and do her hair up like hers. In those days the little outings to the cinema were her escape from the routine and boredom of her everyday life. Now that she is older and has children, her work at the Fisher mansion fills this function.

Pauline adores the cleanliness and the bounty of the Fisher household. It is clear that she does not want her life with her family to interfere with her life at the beautiful mansion down by the lake. Pauline enjoys doing all the things that filled her with joy when she was a young girl down south. She cleans, cooks and arranges the jars in the kitchen into straight lines. She loves the linen and the draperies at the Fisher residence. She can escape into a cocoon where she is appreciated and everything is beautiful:

When she bathed the little Fisher girl, it was in a porcelain tub with silver taps running infinite quantities of hot, clear water. She dried her in fluffy white towels and put her in cuddly night clothes. Then she brushed the yellow hair, enjoying the roll and slip of it between her fingers. No zinc tub, no buckets of stove-heated water, no flaky, stiff, greyish towels washed in a kitchen sink, dried in a dusty backyard, no tangled black puffs of rough wool to comb.  

It is clear from the above quotation that she prefers not only the Fisher home with all its modern conveniences but also that she actually prefers the Fisher girl to her own little girl. Pecola and the rest of the family have become peripheral to Pauline as they are “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.”

17 TBE 98-99
18 TBE 99
The peripheral role Pecola has in her mother’s life opens up a space where a sexual predator like Cholly Breedlove can swoop in and rape his daughter. Lack of time spent with Pecola is not the reason Cholly can do this to his daughter, but rather the fact that Pauline is so indifferent to her daughter. Pecola is more or less left to fend for herself. Pauline does not believe her daughter when Pecola tells her about the rape. Another alternative is that Pauline believes her daughter but does not have the courage to do something about the situation. Cholly may not be a proper father and husband, but he is nevertheless Pauline’s partner and she did love him at one point. There is also the fact that one must always be careful not to end up outdoors. To her credit Pauline is the one that takes care of Pecola after she has become pregnant by her father (and subsequently goes insane).

The bond between Pecola and Pauline is the one that holds most significance in the Breedlove family. The connection between Cholly Breedlove and his children seems virtually non-existent. The children are affected by Cholly’s actions but they do not have a functioning relationship. At one point Sammy (Pecola’s brother) asks his mother to kill Cholly during one of their many physical fights. Sammy spends most of his time on the run so he is not there to help Pecola when she is in need.

The least common denominator in the Breedlove family seems to be that every member of the family feels ugly. For the most part it has to do with their own perception of their blackness:

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. They lived there because they were poor and black, and they stayed there because they believed they were ugly.19

19 TBE 28
The surrounding community is another cause for Pecola’s insanity. In the surrounding community intra-racism is prevalent and they have all at some point participated in the scapegoating of Pecola. The children at school would both freeze her out and tease her primarily because she was dark skinned:

*Black e mo. Black e mo. Yadaddsleepnekked Black e mo*

They had extemporized a verse made up of two insults about matters over which the victim had no control; the color of her skin and speculations on the sleeping habits of an adult, wildly fitting in it’s incoherence. That they themselves were black, or that their own father had similar relaxed habits was irrelevant. It was their contempt for their own blackness that gave the first insult its teeth. 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 mind-cooled- and spilled over lips of outrage consuming what ever was in its path. They danced a macabre ballet around the victim, whom, for their own sake they were prepared to sacrifice to the flaming pit.\(^{20}\)

The “Black e mo” part of the quotation means that Pecola was even more black than they were. Consequently even those who were not particularly light skinned themselves took the chance to ridicule and tease someone who was darker then they were. The children are carrying around bottled up resentment and rage. When they have the opportunity to lash out at someone who is lower on the pecking order they do.

In the school Pecola attends before her pregnancy it is important to have a fair complexion. The most popular girl in school is Maureen. Because she is half white she has the
lightest skin of the coloured children. Claudia, the narrator, describes her as a “high yellow dream child.” Maureen gets the best treatment from students and teachers alike. They are all enchanted with her. She has the respect of black and white pupils alike. It seems that the only reason for this treatment is the fact that Maureen is the whitest of the coloured children and the fact that she has a lot of money.

Maureen is, apart from the Mac.Teer sisters, the only child who shows Pecola any kindness. It does not last very long however. When the children get into an argument Maureen yells from across the street “I am cute! And you ugly! Black and ugly black e mos. I am cute!” It seems as if “black e mo” is the worst name you could be called. It is an insult based on the children’s degree of blackness. Being a black e mo is the most degrading thing in this community.

The only one of the children who does not agree with the doctrine that whiter is better is Claudia. When Pecola and Claudia’s sister Frieda are playing and drinking milk from the Shirley Temple cups she cannot see what is so fascinating. At Christmas the loving gift from parents was always a doll with blue eyes and blond hair. It was expected that every girl should want one. However Claudia does not. She wants to destroy the blond doll. What is worse she starts to want to kill little white girls as well. She wonders what their secret is. How come people looked at them and said “awwwww” for them but not for Claudia. “The eye slide of black women as they approached them on the street, and the possessive gentleness of their touch as they handled them.” Claudia who is younger then Pecola and Frieda have not learned the social codes yet. She does not understand what is so special about white girls and she is jealous of the attention. Claudia feels the same way about Maureen’s popularity. She can see that it is there but she does not understand why Maureen is considered beautiful and they are not.

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20 TBE 50
21 TBE 56
Geraldine, a mother of one of the boys at Pecola’s school, knows the difference between a dark complexion and a fair complexion. Geraldine is perhaps the person, aside from Pecola, who is most tormented by the colour of her skin. Geraldine is light-skinned but her fear of being black is enormous. She will do anything to make sure that no one thinks that she is anything other than an orderly, decent coloured lady. Geraldine hates darker skinned blacks. Geraldine and her peers are willing to do anything to differentiate themselves from darker skinned blacks. They need to…

get rid of the funkiness. The dreadful funkiness of passion, the funkiness of nature, the funkiness of nature, the funkiness of the wide range of human emotions. They fight this battle all the way to the grave. The laugh that is a little too laud; the enunciation a little to round; the gesture a little too generous. They hold their behind in for fear of a sway too free; when they wear lipstick, they never cover the entire mouth for fear of lips too thick, and they worry, worry, worry, about the edges of their hair.23

When Geraldine finds Pecola in her home she is disgusted. “Get out, she said, her voice quiet. You nasty little black bitch get out of my house”24. I agree with Gurleen Grewal in her statement that the reason Geraldine explodes at Pecola like this is that Geraldine’s “virtuous stability is built upon the repression of her embodied blackness”.25 Pecola represents everything Geraldine finds disgusting and degrading. “She had seen this little girl all her life…Hair uncombed, dresses falling apart, shoes untied and caked with dirt. They had stared up at her with great uncomprehending eyes. Eyes that questioned nothing and asked everything.”26 It is important to Geraldine to never be associated with what she calls

22 TBE 15
23 TBE 64
24 TBE 72
26 TBE 72
“niggers”. This may have to do with class as well as race. Geraldine has a comfortable middle class life and does not want to slip down the social ladder.

Geraldine has taught her son how to be a coloured person that she can respect. Since it is so important to Geraldine to not be a “nigger” she does not want her son to risk both of their positions as respectable coloured folk:

She has taught him to only play with white children because his mother did not like him to play with niggers. She had explained the difference between colored people and niggers. They were easily identifiable. Colored people were neat and quiet; niggers were dirty and loud. He belonged to the former group: he wore white shirts and blue trousers; his hair was cut as close to his scalp as possible to avoid any suggestion of wool, the part was etched into his hair by the barber. In winter his mother put Jergens lotion on his skin to keep his face from becoming ashen. Even though he was light-skinned it was still possible to ash. The line between colored and nigger was not always clear: subtle and tell tale signs threatened to erode it, and the watch had to be constant.

Lucille P. Fultz claims that Soaphead Church together with Geraldine bears the largest responsibility besides Cholly Breedlove for Pecola’s insanity. She says that “Soaphead, like Geraldine, is struggling with blackness and finds Pecola an easy target for his self-loathing.” They are indeed both struggling with their blackness. Nevertheless I don’t agree that the two share equal responsibility for Pecola’s insanity. Geraldine took the opportunity to release all her bottled up anger. She lashed out at Pecola because she hates darker skinned blacks. She did not take into consideration in any way that Pecola was just a little girl. Soaphead Church made an attempt to help. He was misguided in believing that the

\[27\text{TBE 67-68} \\
girl would be helped by living with the delusion that she has blue eyes. The real reasons for Soaphead Church’s actions can be found in his own background. He comes from a family of people who have tried their best for generations to marry someone whiter to thin out the family features and become whiter with each generation. Soaphead Church thought that it was perfectly natural to strive for being whiter. In Soaphead Church’s family every achievement is credited to the white strain of blood. He is a con artist indeed, but when the little girl comes to him with her wish for blue eyes Soaphead church really wishes that he could help her:

It was at once the most fantastic and the most logical petition he had ever received. Here was an ugly little girl asking for beauty. A surge of love and understanding swept through him, but was quickly replaced by anger. Anger that he was powerless to help her. Of all the wishes people had brought him—money, love, revenge—this seemed to him the most poignant and the one most deserving fulfilment. A little girl who wanted to rise up out of the pit of her own blackness and see the world with blue eyes.”
4 Paradise Lost

There are both differences and similarities between Lorrain, Ohio and Ruby, Oklahoma. Both communities are burdened with the effects of racism, both from inside and outside the community. In both communities the citizens are living in reaction to past rejection and humiliation. There is however a major difference. In Ruby the darkest skinned have the upper hand. Ruby is founded on an idea of isolation and superiority. The Citizens feel that they alone have been able to create an all black town, which has been able to survive for decades. Furthermore they seem to feel that they are better and morally superior to the surrounding communities.

Ruby, Oklahoma is according to the Founding Fathers the “one all black town worth the pain”\(^\text{30}\). The citizens of the original city, Haven, were freed slaves. The story of the Founding Fathers difficulties when establishing Haven became a philosophical foundation of the community. Homesteaders of all colours rejected them because they were “too poor and too bedraggled looking\(^\text{31}\)”. This rejection called the disallowing became an important historical narrative for both the citizens of Haven and of Ruby. The fact that the Old Fathers could face so much rejection and hostility and still prevail and be triumphant in the end has made them hailed heroes. Especially those who are directly related to the Old Fathers revel in how their relatives managed to create a functioning town with their own bare hands.

Hatred of the ethnic group who rejected them has also lived on. In particular the hatred of lighter-skinned blacks has lingered on. From poor whites and other groups the rejection was almost expected. They had not however, expected the rejection of fellow blacks.

For ten generations they had believed the division they fought to close was, free against slave and rich against poor. Usually, but not always white against black.

\(^\text{29} \) TBE 138
\(^\text{30} \) Toni Morrison Paradise (London: Vintage: 1997) 5 from now on refered to as P
Now they saw a new separation: light-skinned against black. Oh, they knew there was a difference in the minds of whites, but it had not struck them before that it was of consequence, serious consequence, to Negroes themselves.\textsuperscript{32}

It was not just the rejection in and of itself that scared the original settlers. Their view of the world was shaken. They had thought that they could count on African-Americans to stick together. That was the idea that both Haven and later Ruby was founded on. They knew that being left alone could mean possible death. They could never have imagined that they would be turned away in their time of need. The humiliation of not being able to take care of their families hurt the most. They felt shame and despair. The feeling would never quite leave those who lived through this rejection.

It was the shame of seeing one’s pregnant wife or sister or daughter refused shelter that had rocked them, and changed them for all time. The humiliation did more than rankle; it threatened to crack open their bones.\textsuperscript{33}

There are several biblical images in \textit{Paradise} especially in the parts where the founders are on the journey to find a new home. At one point the group is hopelessly lost. They are angry, frightened and starting to give up hope of being found again. Then they see a man holding a satchel. He seems to be waiting for them. The man leads the way. Sometimes they cannot see him, but in difficult terrain or where roads cross he reappears to show them the way. The followers are peaceful and no one complains about aches and pains any longer. “He is with us” said Zechariah. “He is leading the way”\textsuperscript{34}It seems that they are the Chosen People and they are being led to the Promised Land. This is a revolutionary thought presented by Morrison. It is a way for African-Americans to take their place in the exceptionalist narrative.

\textsuperscript{31} P 14
\textsuperscript{32} P 194
\textsuperscript{33} P 95
\textsuperscript{34} P 97
After World War II the situation in Haven deteriorated dramatically. The black soldiers who returned from the war were treated exceptionally badly by the surrounding communities. Due to the fear of racially motivated attacks fifteen families from Haven left and founded Ruby where most of the events take place. This became a form of second “disallowing”. Once again the attacks had been carried out because the citizens of Haven were dark skinned.

In Ruby they aimed to create a paradise were they could stay forever. In the early days everyone knew each other. No one went to sleep hungry in Ruby. They shared whatever little they had. They brought their team spirit with them from Haven. They knew that staying together was their only means of surviving. Through this spirit of teamwork they managed to create a functioning little community. In Ruby they started up a store and its own bank. They build the streets and the houses. The four streets in Ruby are named after the gospels. When there was a fifth street they named it St. Peter.

In Ruby they all felt safe. Women could walk around in the middle of the night and “nothing for 90 miles thought she was prey”\(^{35}\). Ninety miles is also the distance to the nearest town. That is also the nearest population of people who are not 8-rock. Weariness of others is something that flourished in Ruby. They all thought it was best if they kept to themselves. No buses have Ruby as a destination so whenever an outsider comes to town he or she is noticed.

Ruby was a quiet little town. There was no need for policemen or jails for that matter because there were no criminals in Ruby:

Unique and isolated, his was a town justifiably pleased with itself. It neither had nor needed a jail. No criminals had ever come from his town. And the one or two people who acted up, humiliated their families or threatened the town’s view of itself were taken good care of.
The above quotation stresses the importance of family and sticking by the unwritten rules of the community. The men who decided who should be taken care (of and how) in Ruby were the heads of the 8-rock families. They controlled virtually everything that went on in the little town.

The 8-rock gains more and more influence in Ruby. This becomes apparent when Roger Best (an 8 rock) breaks the unwritten blood rule. He and all of his family are shunned because Roger Best’s wife is very light-skinned. As long as there were only dark skinned blacks there was consequently no intra-racism in the community. Roger Best realises that if he tells someone in advance that his bride to be and their baby are coming the 8-rock will put a stop to it. Therefore he just writes a letter and asks her to come. “He’s bringing along the dung we leaving behind” are the welcoming words from the 8-rock. Pat Best says that she and her mother was “the first visible glitch, but there was an invisible one that had nothing to do with skin color”

Pat has realised why her whole family is shunned in Ruby. It is only because of the fact that their bloodline is tainted. Only pure 8-rock blood is wanted in Ruby. Pat does not seem particularly sad for her own sake. She seems to be more saddened by the way her parents have been treated and later on her own daughter:

They hate us because she looked like a cracker and was bound to have cracker-looking children like me, and although I married Billy Cato, who was an 8-rock like you[her father], like them, I passed the skin on to my daughter, as you and everybody knew I would.

Pat thinks that even the fact that no one dies in Ruby could be attributed to the fact that the people of Ruby do not want her father to have any kind of success. Roger is an undertaker.
Pat sometimes speaks to her mother even though she is dead. It is clear that Pat is hurt by the mean spirited treatment of her mother. The citizens of Ruby gladly used Pat’s mother when they wanted to shop in stores were they themselves were not allowed. “Otherwise it bothered them. Reminded them of why Haven existed, of why a new town had to take its place.”

The situation is even worse for Roger’s granddaughter Billie Delia. She has been treated like pariah ever since she was a little girl. She has been doomed because of an incident when Billie Delia was only three. Billie Delia pulled her underwear down in public and has since then been considered a loose women in Ruby. The fact that Billie Delia was three at the time does not seem to matter. Arnette, an 8-rock, is treated very differently. She has sex at fourteen and gets pregnant out of wedlock, but she is not subjected to this treatment because she has the right blood running through her veins. Billie Delia on the other hand is infamous for being a loose women while she in fact is still a virgin.

With the arrival of the 60ies and 70ies the unity in Ruby is crackling. The 8-rock are ruling Ruby with a heavy hand. In the play they perform every year about the Founding fathers the families who have broken the blood rule are edited out. The young people are starting to rebel. They start to question the inscription on the Oven (the place were everyone gathers). The young people have a whole new interpretation and the 8-rock feel threatened. Moreover they feel that the young people are not living up to the ideals of the founding fathers. Some of them are starting to show an interest in their African roots. Some even start to give themselves African names which is not liked by the elders. This is a paradox in Ruby. Even though it is ruled by a midnight skinned aristocracy many feel that slavery is in the past and they have no relationship to Africa or its cultural heritage.
Furthermore the results of inbreeding are becoming visible. Because the blood rule says that 8-rocks can only have children with other 8-rocks the possibilities for fresh genes to enter the mix are extremely limited. Many children are born “broken” in Ruby. The broken children are not talked about publicly, but they have increased in number and so has the number of eight-rocks who are infertile.

The new minister in town stands on the young people’s side in a sense. At least he wants his parishioners to keep an open mind. However this seems a foreign concept to the 8-rock. He feels that he was “herding a flock which believed not only that it had created the pasture it grazed but that the grass from any other meadow was toxic”. The eight-rock think that he is leading the young ones astray. They fear that he will show them new ways and encourage them to go beyond the city limits and perhaps even move away.

The 8-rock want to blame the young people in the community for the deterioration of Ruby. They feel that the young people (men in particular) have neither embraced the Founding Fathers values, nor lived up to their ideals. The blame for Ruby’s deterioration is quickly removed from the young and put on the women of the convent. It does not coincide with their self image that one of their own may be to blame.

Together the people of Ruby become more and more convinced that everything that has gone wrong has done so because of the women in the convent. More and more people chip in and throw their accusations at the women. They blame the women for everything from trying to grow marijuana to beating up other women. The women had little to do with any of this. The woman whom they supposedly assaulted for instance came in fact to look for shelter because she was already beaten by a man.

The men start to think that the women in the convent have special powers. “Bitches. More like witches” After talking a while the accusations get worse and worse.

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40 P 212
41 P 276
“Everybody who goes near them is maimed somehow and the mess is seeping back into our homes and our families. We can’t have it.”\textsuperscript{42} Now everybody jumps on the bandwagon and blames them for anything. Some of the eight-rock “well they’d been wanting to blame somebody for Sweetie’s children for a long time.”\textsuperscript{43} “God at their side, the men take aim. For Ruby.”\textsuperscript{44} So the men then massacre the women at the Convent. Pat Best’s account of this is “8-rocks murdered five harmless women (a) because the women were impure (not 8-rock); (b) because the women were unholy (fornicators at the least, abortionist at the most; and (c) because they could—which was what being an 8-rock meant”\textsuperscript{45}

The massacre at the convent has strong similarities with the Salem witch-hunt. The women were held responsible for everything that had gone wrong in the society. In Salem as well as in the fictional Ruby, people showed a not very flattering side of human nature. If a strong leader shows the way many are perfectly willing to blame other people for unspeakable things without legitimate reason. This is not the only similarity to the history of the Puritans. Almost the whole history of the people of Haven/Ruby shows parallels to the history of the Puritans. The long journey, the feeling of superiority, the isolation and the fear of the surrounding people. The parallel is most evident in the series of events leading up to the massacre of the women in the convent.

Morrison has made the parallel to the Salem witch-hunts plainly obvious. The way the citizens come up with worse and worse accusations including poisoning people, abduction and beatings are clearly reminiscent of the witch-hunt. The men even call the women of the convent witches.

Morrison is using exceptionalism, a very familiar concept to every American, to examine how those ideas would function in an African American community. It may seem a
foreign concept to the African American community, but here Morrison shows that perhaps it is not. The ideas of some of the more hard core African American isolationists are clearly reminiscent of exceptionalism. Furthermore it would be nearly impossible to be raised in America and not have a relationship of some sort to exceptionalist ideas. The reason that Morrison chose this particular narrative style is to make the reader aware of the possible (albeit exaggerated) implications of the idea of African-American isolationism. It seems that she is saying that counter racism is not an option. Even though the blackest African-Americans ruled in Ruby the outcome of their reign was the same as when the Puritans reigned in the 17th century. The 8-rock created the same type of systematic oppression as they were trying to escape. It could happen because they isolated themselves from the outside world and closed their minds to new ideas.

The definition of the term “exceptionalism” that I have used is that of Thomas B. Byers taken from his article A city upon A hill: American Literature and the Ideology of Exceptionalism: American Exceptionism…is the claim that America is…unique, one of a (superior) kind and generally that that kind carries with it a unique moral value and responsibility46 This idea may not have been associated with African-American literature very often. In fact the opposite can be said. In “Beloved” for instance Morrison created a new history of America. Her history describes parts of history which had been edited out in exceptionalist history writing. However if one looks at speeches and text of icons like Malcom X and Martin Luther King they at least have a relation to the exceptionalist idea. Malcolm X said:

If George Washington didn’t get independence for this country nonviolently, and Patrick Henry didn’t come up with a nonviolent statement, and you taught

me to look up to them as patriots and heroes, then it’s time for you to realize that I have studied your books as well.”

When Martin Luther King gave his famous “I have a dream” speech he was standing in front of the Lincoln Memorial. Even though a century had passed since Lincoln had abolished slavery, African Americans were still living in poverty and they were still subjected to institutionalised racism. In his speech he spoke of how America had failed the African-Americans. They had not been given access to the American Dream, and America had not lived up to its (exceptionalist) promises.

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Conclusion

Rejection is the common denominator between Lorain, Ohio where Pecola grows up and Ruby, Oklahoma where the 8-rock rule. The characters live their lives in the shadow of the rejection and racism they have been subjected to. Neither communities have been able to free themselves from the judgement of others. Both historical persecution and present day rejection and racism limit the lives of the characters. It seems that they are all living in reaction to a historic wrong carried out both by whites and fellow blacks.

In Lorain the citizens are suffering from self-loathing because of their marginalisation and because their self worth has been so corroded by the lack of affirmation and appreciation. Even though the people are technically free they still live in a very segregated world. There is a division between black and white, but also between dark-skinned African-Americans and light-skinned African-Americans.

The lighter skinned African-Americans like Maureen and Geraldine are generally better treated. They are also in a better financial situation then those who are darker skinned. Though they live a comfortable life materially the anguish that people like Geraldine feel is hard to bear. Geraldine and other light-skinned African Americans (women in particular) seem to live their lives scared of losing the position in society they have. The slightest indication that you are a nigger and the same misery other African-Americans have to endure could be waiting.

For the dark skinned African-Americans like the Breedloves, the division between different colours means they are practically in the gutter. Though they have a roof over their heads (most of the time) they live under horrible conditions. They live in the same neighbourhood as the local prostitutes and have a very low income. The impression they have got from the media and the surrounding community is that they are not wanted. No one has
shown them their own beauty and because they view themselves through other people’s eyes they consequently believe that they are horrendously ugly.

Through the characters Morrison shows how the oppression that one person is subjected to can destroy not only that person’s life, but the life of generations. This is especially true for Pecola. Her mother’s self-contempt and self-loathing has been transferred over to her so that she feels that she is ugly and unlovable. What her father “transfers” to her is even worse. He has internalised the humiliation and pain he suffered in his youth. When he lets his demons out he destroys Pecola in the process. *The Bluest Eye* is a novel that shows how the African-American community has been denied the “American dream”. They have been closed out and rejected by the very country into which they were born. 
The feeling of rejection in both Lorain and Ruby goes all the way back to the days of slavery. What has had more significance to the citizens of Ruby however is the rejection by fellow black men. This rejection shook the Founding Fathers to the core of their being. The dark skinned Founding Fathers were rejected because of their shade of skin colour. This was something that the Founding Fathers could never have imagined possible. In their view all African-Americans regardless of colour had to stick together. This was a matter of life and death, but when they came looking for shelter they were turned away.

The people of Ruby tried to create their own separate community to shelter them from the racism they had been subjected to. They tried to give value to those who has been shunned the most. They succeeded in giving a better life to the 8-rock. Sadly they failed in creating the paradise they intended to create. The 8-rock became what they were running from. Through the rejection of the light skinned blacks inside the community (and the whites outside) they created a racist regime which inevitably crumbled in the end.

Regardless of who rules there is still oppression in these two societies. What can be seen when comparing these two texts is that racism and oppression poisons the lives for
generations to come. Furthermore what the people seem to have in common is that they suffer because they see and value themselves through the eyes of other people.
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