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Pecola and the Natural World in Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*

Abstract

The Bluest Eye*, Toni Morrison's first novel published in 1970 has been widely studied from almost every perspective. Critics have explored issues such as racism, trauma, child abuse, cultural standards, class and gender relationships, mental illness, and mass media power, to name a few. This essay addresses a topic that has received little attention so far: the relationship between Pecola and Lorain's natural surroundings. The few moments when Pecola interacts with plants and animals reveal a different side of her—a Pecola who stops being a victim, a departure from the predominant portrayal in most readings of the novel. Instead, she emerges as an active and productive agent in Lorain's impoverished urban landscape, regardless of the misery where she is forced to live. This, I argue, explains the presence of flowers among the waste in the novel's final image. While the garbage that surrounds Pecola is a metaphor for her being abandoned by everybody, flowers testify to Pecola's capacity to resist and bear fruit in some way.*

Through the lens of African American environmental history, a perspective hitherto unexplored in interpreting this specific text, I show how Pecola's capacity to form profound and meaningful connections with plants and animals in a hostile environment is linked to the historical experiences of African Americans in the New World.

Keywords: *African American literature, African American environmental history, nature, Toni Morrison, The Bluest Eye*

Toni Morrison's first novel *The Bluest Eye* (1970) tells the story of eleven-year-old Pecola Breedlove, a young girl obsessed with the desire to have blue eyes, which she thinks might turn her into a beautiful girl, help her overcome her sense of ugliness, and transform constant refusal into acceptance. The novel shows the consequences of imposing white standards of beauty and life on young African American girls, focusing on the self-loathing that arises from the awareness of the impossibility of attaining such standards. No one cares about Pecola: her peers bully her, teachers do not include her, and her family is a violent, anxious, toxic environment. Raped by her father, Cholly, and beaten by her mother, Pauline, instead of being consoled, Pecola slowly slides into madness after becoming pregnant with her father's child and losing the child prematurely. The story is narrated by Claudia, a friend of Pecola's when they

were teenagers, who mentions events that happen between the fall of 1941 and the summer of 1942. In some sections, she recounts events as an adult remembering the past, while in others, she is an adolescent narrating present events.

The novel is divided into four chapters, each bearing a season's name, starting with autumn. Giving prominence to autumn, which is in part narrated by Claudia as a child, stresses the perspective of childhood when life is primarily regulated by school. "School had started" (1970, 7), Claudia states on the very first page of the chapter, and the first day of school sets the narration in motion.

"The project" (1970, x) of Morrison's novel is to examine the consequences that constant rejection has on a little black girl, for Morrison the most vulnerable creature "because of youth, gender, and age" (1970, x). To carry out her project, Morrison places Pecola amid a forlorn and wretched context concerning space, time, and human relationships. Several scholars have dealt with Pecola's barren and bleak world, sometimes even defining Lorain as a wasteland to evoke a parallelism between the desolation of the city and the atmosphere described by Eliot in *The Wasteland* (1922).[1]

The relationship between Pecola and Lorain's natural surroundings, which has received, instead, minimal attention thus far, will be the focal point of the present study, offering a novel perspective in the reading of this well-known and extensively analyzed text.[2] Furthermore, the few moments when Pecola interacts with plants and animals unveil a different side of her—a Pecola who stops being a victim, marking a departure from the predominant portrayals of the character. Instead, Pecola becomes an active and productive agent in Lorain's impoverished urban landscape, regardless of the misery in which she is forced to live.

The moments of contact between Pecola and nature are light touches and subtle suggestions scattered in the narration that weave a possible alternative meaning to the story. They are rare and gentle occasions to represent the "delicate and vulnerable" (1970, 207) Pecola, who could be smashed by "the weight of the novel's inquiry" (1970, 207), as Toni Morrison writes in the "Afterword" to the 1993 edition of *The Bluest Eye*. Despite its apparent irrelevance, Morrison highlights the meaningfulness of the connection between Pecola and nature as she comments on one of these few interactions. In an interview with Anne Koenen, Morrison explains that

[1] On this topic see Wagner-Martin 2019, 17; Surányi 2007, 11-13; Harris 1991, 12, 28-29; Dittmar 1990, 140-144. Harris's reference to a wasteland in human relations, specifically sexual, is particularly suggestive, as will be shown later.

[2] Among the few studies on nature in *The Bluest Eye*, see Battista-Sande 2021, 61-79; Morrison 2021, 229-242; Wardi 2021, 77-102; hooks 1996, 22; Christian 1980, 72-73.

Pecola's comparing herself with dandelions could be "some kind of longing or affinity for nature that exists maybe in just the women" (Morrison 1994, 80-81).

This essay will use the lens of African American environmental history, a perspective hitherto unexplored in interpreting *The Bluest Eye*. By applying this framework to a close reading of the novel, I will argue that Pecola's ability to form profound and meaningful connections with plants and animals in a hostile environment is linked to the historical experiences of African Americans in the New World. This approach reveals how pervasive and inescapable the past experience of bondage is for African American people, even in texts where slavery is not a central issue and nature is not the main protagonist. Simultaneously, it highlights the ancient, deep, and vital relationship that black people have with the natural world.[3]

I will first provide a brief overview of the critical perspective adopted, namely African American environmental history. Subsequently, I will shift my focus to the impoverished urban landscape encompassing Pecola. Given that this is a much-analyzed subject, I will engage in a dialogue with some of the scholars who have previously dealt with it, selecting the most pertinent views to support my argument. While many scholars have concentrated on Pecola's desolate surroundings, only a few—lacking a systematic approach—have shown how Toni Morrison constructs such a desolation by relying on natural elements. Consequently, I will demonstrate in detail how the natural world functions as a pivotal device in creating the dismal atmosphere of the novel. Finally, I will delve into the third section of my analysis, by discussing Pecola's connection with plants and animals within the African American environmental history framework. I contend that this perspective unveils unforeseen traits of Pecola's character and

[3] The few analyses that highlight the relevance of nature in *The Bluest Eye* adopt ecocritical perspectives. Among the most interesting and exhaustive studies of this topic is Anissa Wardi's *Toni Morrison and the Natural World: An Ecology of Color*, which devotes one chapter to *The Bluest Eye*. The entire volume adopts ecocriticism as its theoretical perspective, particularly emphasizing the "ecocritical theory that recognizes the human as embroiled with the nonhuman" (2021, 11). Wardi weaves ecocriticism with the specific concept of color theory according to which "color [...] is a primary way in which we experience the natural world" (2021, 22). Consequently, she interprets *The Bluest Eye* as "a treatise on brown, [...] a novel framed by a discourse on soil" (2021, 31) and highlights how Pecola is reduced to garbage "by a toxicity that also affects society, dirt, and seeds" (2021, 98). Considering a viewpoint that unifies nature and history, as in the present essay, helps to overcome what Wardi identifies as "the uneasy relationship between African American literature and ecocriticism" (2021, 13). Actually, Wardi herself suggests that "the fusion of history onto the natural world is the very bedrock of African American ecocritical thought" (2021, 13). This fusion brings to the foreground the ambivalent and complex relationship of African American people to the natural world in the US, not only because their experience of nature includes both refuge and horror but also because of the "terrible historical legacy of making people of color signify the natural as a prelude to exploiting both" (Outka 2008, 3, quoted in Wardi 2021, 13).

helps to understand the novel's final scene, where an insane Pecola is placed, presumably, in a landfill surrounded by garbage, as expected, but also, surprisingly, by flowers.

1. Theoretical framework

Historians Dianne Glave and Mark Stoll present African American environmental history as an area of study involving a multifaceted approach "drawn from history, ecology, economics, geography, and other disciplines" (2005, 7), and inspired by the interdisciplinarity of African American studies. Citing Toni Morrison as an example of interdisciplinary, they quote a passage from Morrison's novel *Love*, where she describes woods "in the tradition of the African American novel, couched in history, chanted in spiritual tones, and pervaded by the disarray of nature" (2005, 7), Glave and Stoll state that "Morrison shows historians how they can expand environmental history" (2005, 7). While writing, Morrison "draws on different disciplines of African American studies as she interprets the environment as a naturalist, novelist, and historian" (2005, 7). This multidisciplinary approach thus seems particularly suited for Morrison, whose fiction is interdisciplinary and inspired by African American studies, "which blends history, religious studies, and ecology" (2005, 7).

According to historian Karolyn Merchant, African American environmental history explores the "complex questions about African American access to and responses to […] nature" (2005, x). Within the relatively new, distinct field of environmental history, "little has been written about African Americans" (Allen 2007, 200). Glave and Stoll's "To Love the Wind and the Rain: African Americans and Environmental History" is one of the first studies entirely focused on this historiography, which they describe as "nascent" (2005, 5) and characterized by "fragmentary scholarship" (2005, 3). The editors of the volume state that the book "evolved from a frustrating sense that African American perceptions of the environment […] remain invisible for the most part" (2005, 1). Although dealing with different topics from agriculture, gardening, and hunting to race riots and recreational spaces from the antebellum South until the twentieth century, all contributors "interpret race and ethnicity, and their expressions in racism, as fundamental categories by which to understand the control, uses, and abuses of the environment" (Glave and Stoll 2005, 4). They also agree that African Americans' encounters with nature have taken place "in the context of the enormity of [an] oppressive history" (2005, 4). However, all the historians in the volume argue that "the experiences and memories of blacks with slavery honed their abilities to defy authority while helping to establish a measure of control over their livelihoods" (Glave and Stoll 2005, 4). Instead of being helpless victims utterly crushed by decades of enslavement and segregation, African Americans give proof of "resistance and activism"

(Merchant 2005, xii; xi; x), revealing an ability to forge a positive, autonomous, and fertile connection with the natural world they were forcibly and tightly associated with.[4]

In the complex tradition of the variegated, sometimes contradictory, and ambivalent responses of blacks to the American environment, Mart Stewart's reading of slavery in the antebellum South is helpful for the topic of this essay. I interpret Pecola's capacity to be in tune with the natural world as stemming from the positive and intimate relationship between enslaved people and the natural world described by Stewart. This connection would include the girl in an ancestral tradition rooted in the African American history of slavery. Stewart argues that enslaved people's hands and feet created the "characteristic landscape of plantations, villages, small farms, and Cowpens in Virginia, North Carolina, South Carolina, and Georgia" (2005, 10). Enslaved people's work, their days and nights in the fields, and their experience of symbiosis with the soil and crops they had to tend gave them a deep and first-hand knowledge of the southern natural world that their masters who just "rode or strolled along the borders of the fields" (Stewart 2005, 11) did not have. Historian Diane Glave also underlines the intimate relationship African Americans managed to create with the land since their forced arrival as enslaved people in America.

> Although the reality and backdrop of African American life were hard labor and inequity, African Americans found ways to take comfort in nature and make it their own. [...] They still understood nature, more than many whites, because they had their hands in the soil, their eyes on the sky, and their ears attuned to the flutter of butterflies. African Americans were immersed in nature. (2010, 104; 113)

This connection, which Stewart defines as "intimate and precise," allowed enslaved people "small portions of independence and autonomy from the master-slave relationship" (2010, 11). More recently, in her study of the African American environmental relationship to different types of green spaces (such as forests, parks, beaches), Carolyn Finney recognizes that "history […] has defined the black experience as one of struggle, exclusion, and pain, particularly in relation to place" (2014, 18). However, like Stewart, Finney underlines how the environment

[4] Mark Stewart offers several examples that reveal how black people were active agents in shaping their lots against the conditions imposed upon them by slavery and racism. He maintains that such an agency could be strengthened by more attention to the history of the relationship between African Americans and the environment. On the topic of African Americans' agency, see also: Savoy 2015, 91; Finney 2014, 18-20; 97-98; 123-125; Ruffin 2010, especially chapter 2; Smith 2007, 92-95; 116-119. Ruffin is particularly interested in the idea of "ecological agency," which she defines as "the successful negotiation of the human and nonhuman systems that determine survival" (2010, 59).

was also a "source of power" (2014, 57): hunting animals, fishing, gathering fruits, or collecting herbs and roots were "form[s] of resistance—a way for slaves to regain and maintain ownership over their bodies and how they cared for them" (2014, 58). On this point, in her interview with Anne Koenen, Morrison discusses the institution of African and African American gathering women: "gathering, I think of flowers and of trees, women who know medicine and roots, root-workers who are not hunting perhaps—maybe they are—but they have to know a poison-leaf from a non-poison leaf" (1994, 81). Although "discredited in almost every corner of the civilized, progressive world" (1994, 81), their wisdom is another instance of the strategic, empowering, and winning relationship of black people with the environment since the time of slavery. "In many ways, these slave women developed a harmonious existence with their surrounding environment, using their knowledge to support and protect their families. […] Their interactions with nature provided an avenue of power within both black and white society" (Blum 2002, 249). An intense personal connection with the environment allowed enslaved black people to become active agents in asserting their identities as human beings in the most hostile circumstances. Similarly, narrating stories about important positive green spaces for blacks "is a way to acknowledge the African American experience and a way for African Americans to acknowledge themselves" (Finney 2014, 64).

Collective memory is another conceptual tool that can be fruitfully used to interpret Pecola's understanding of nature. In their investigation of African American perception of the specific natural place of the wildlands, Cassandra Johnson and J. M. Bowker define collective memory as "the relaying or handing down of cultural history from generation to generation," using it to explore how past events "may influence a contemporary black wildland view […] even though subsequent generations have no direct memory of such events" (2004, 57-58). Morrison herself gives memory a fundamental role in her writing: "First was my effort to substitute and rely on memory rather than history because I knew I could not, should not, trust recorded history to give me the insight into the cultural specificity I wanted" (2020, 323).[5] Collective memory

[5] Among the several occasions in which Morrison declares her intention to chronicle the African American experience in the United States, her 1992 lecture in Portland is particularly enlightening on the concept of discredit:

> My compact with the reader is not to reveal an already established reality (literary or historical) that he or she and I agree upon beforehand. […] In the third-world cosmology as I perceive it, reality is not already constituted by my literary predecessors in Western culture. If my work is to confront a reality unlike that received reality of the West, it must centralize and animate information discredited by the West—discredited not because it is not true or useful or even of some racial value, but because it is information held by discredited people, information dismissed as "lore" or "gossip" or "magic" or "sentiment." (2020, 266)

becomes both a form of resistance through which African Americans tell their often-silenced environmental stories and a way out of the danger of not being "able to remember how the 'woods' were also a place of spiritual rejuvenation or other positive experiences" (Finney 2014, 64).

2. Pecola in Lorain's wasteland

The powerful and startling relationship between Pecola and nature is better understood in the background of the gloomy atmosphere of the girl's surroundings. Although several critics have already delved into such an atmosphere, African American environmental history might add a new layer of interpretation, as the wasteland that Morrison constructs around Pecola could be viewed as a parallel to the hostile world where African Americans were forced to live during slavery and the Jim Crow era. Confirming previous interpretations of *The Bluest Eye*, this perspective highlights once more how the exclusion and rejection of Pecola is not just a personal experience; it is the experience of an entire people, which roots the girl into the historical reality of African Americans in the United States. Moreover, reviewing Morrison's strategies that create a forsaken and dejected urban setting around Pecola is crucial and necessary to point out how unexpected and productive Pecola's ability to assert her personality through her relationship with nature turns out to be.

Morrison starts to weave her context of desolation from the very beginning. The second of the two introductory sections of the novel defines the space of the entire book in terms of sterility: Claudia remembers that "[t]here were no marigolds in the fall of 1941" (1970, 3). The land does not bear fruit not only in Claudia and in her sister Frieda's garden—"no green was going to spring from our seeds" (1970, 3)—but also in their poor working-class, mixed-race neighborhood. Despite the display of wealth, the land is also sterile in the all-white area of the town: "Not even the garden fronting the lake showed marigolds that year" (1970, 3). In the way she recollects events, Claudia draws a parallelism between the seeds' death and the death of Pecola's child, transforming Lorain's physical wasteland into a metaphorical one. Cholly's act of violence against his daughter breaks the laws of love and caring, and the abomination of Pecola bearing her father's child is the sickest and gloomiest evidence of the abject environment around her.

Time represents another instance of infertility because of the unnatural cycle of seasons that move towards summer as a time of death rather than a burst of life. Claudia links spring with unhappy memories. This season simply means "a change in whipping style" (1970, 95) for the girl. The blooming, tender twigs of forsythia and lilacs substitute winter straps. The "delicate, showy hopefulness" (1970, 95) of these images of natural rebirth is turned into an instrument

of brutality: "Even now spring for me is shot through with the remembered ache of switchings, and forsythia holds no cheer" (1970, 95). Similarly, summer is evoked by the violence of storms, and by a positive image, the strawberries, transformed into a negative one: "I have only to break into the tightness of a strawberry, and I see summer—its dust and lowering skies. It remains for me a season of storms" (1970, 185). The strawberries' possible association with beauty and life is undone by the verb "break into," which alludes to spoiling and ravaging.

Lorain's construction as a desolate space also rests on some specific places. Although Claudia and Frieda are loved, protected, and cared for by their parents, their poverty forces them to live in an old, freezing, rundown house with windows stuffed with rags, one room lighted with a kerosene lamp, and the rest of the house "braced in darkness, peopled by roaches and mice" (1970, 8). The bleakness of the home matches its neighborhood, an unkempt, derelict, and deeply unattractive industrial section of the city where the fumes of steel plants pollute the air and "dead grass [is] in the field" (1970, 8). Children are forced to roam the railroad tracks at night to "fill burlap sacks with the tiny pieces of coal lying about" (1970, 8).

The Breedloves' house lies at the core of this wasteland in terms of place and meaningless human relations devoid of love. A long list of details informs the reader that the house is an "unimaginative" (1970, 32) place built as a store furnished with "thoughtlessness, greed, and indifference" (1970, 33). Images of decadence and death are numerous. The Breedloves "fester among […] debris" (1970, 32), putrefy among discarded objects in "a box of peeling gray" (1970, 32), the store-coffin. The "decorated and dust-laden […] tiny artificial Christmas tree" (1970, 33) abandoned for years in the corner of the front room is a stirring detail of the mood of a house "with no memories to be cherished" (1970, 34). In it, "the only living thing […] was the coal stove, which lived independently of everything and everyone" (1970, 35).

Geraldine's house,[6] the wealthy middle-class African American family living close to the school, and the park in the all-white affluent section of the town, which includes the Fishers where Pauline Breedlove works, seem to belong to something other than gloomy Lorain. However, the material richness hides some desolation, too. Geraldine has been deeply concerned about transforming her body to conform to white beauty standards all her life. Her house, so nicely decorated, impeccably clean, and maniacally ordered, testifies to her reaching a long cherished white middle-class status. However, the house Pecola steps into, invited by vicious Junior,

[6] This character has been extensively studied for her conformity to the white culture and betrayal of her African roots and culture. On the topic see: Battista and Sande 2021, 70-71; Ortega 2018, 135-136; Long 2013, 112; Schreiber 2010, 71-72; Cormier-Hamilton 1994, 116-118.

Geraldine's son, looks dark and empty; it is a barren, sterilized place devoid of love, only apparently different from the Breedloves' store.[7]

The park shares the cleanness and perfection of Geraldine's house but also its bareness. The most attractive buildings on the lakefront display all kinds of ornaments but show "no sign of life" (1970, 103). In the park, there is only the promise of "clean, white, well-behaved children and parents who would play there" (1970, 103). "Rosebuds, fountains, bowling greens, picnic tables" (1970, 103) with no one to enjoy them must have looked like a waste of opportunity to Claudia observing the scene and not being allowed in the park, being black.

With such a background of squalor and discomfort that Morrison builds around Pecola detail after detail, it seems inevitable that the girl herself becomes waste.[8] Geraldine sets the link between Pecola and barren nature when she throws the girl out of her house in disgust. Horrified by finding in her living room one of the "nasty little black bitch[es]" (1970, 90) she has been avoiding all her life, Geraldine claims that "grass would not grow where they lived. Flowers died" (1970, 90). However, the few times Pecola's thoughts and feelings take center stage, they reveal a special bond between the girl and the natural world that nullifies the equation set by Geraldine, introducing beauty, life, and caring in the community of Lorain.

3. Pecola and nature: a connection of bonding and caring

On her way to buy candies at Mr. Yacobowsky's grocery store, Pecola pays attention to some insignificant details that she thinks deserve appreciation:

> She walks down Garden Avenue to a small grocery store which sells penny candy […]. She moves down an avenue gently buffeted by the familiar and therefore loved images. The dandelions at the base of the telephone pole. Why, she wonders, do people call them weeds? She thought they were pretty. But grown-ups say, "Miss Dunion keeps her yard so nice. Not a dandelion anywhere. […] Nobody loves the head of a dandelion. Maybe because they are so many, strong, and soon. (1970, 45)

[7] Focusing on Geraldine's relation with her husband, Trudier Harris argues that for Geraldine, sex is a mechanical act devoid of any feeling and genuine human interaction and draws a parallel between Geraldine and the Typist in Eliot's *The Waste Land*: for Geraldine,

> Sex must […] be limited, controlled, as ordered as the other features of her life. […] Such responses make Geraldine's relationship unnatural, and they make sex perverted and misdirected. Eliot's typist, who has a succession of lovers, is no more mechanical, no more methodical in sex than is Geraldine, and perhaps the typist at least derives a momentary pleasure from the encounters. (1991, 34-35)

[8] For a reflection on the interrelation between dilapidated areas and self-perception of unworthiness, see Lipsitz 2011, 51-70.

Despised by grown-ups who "call them weeds," Pecola is attracted by dandelions, which her exceptional sensitivity allows her to see as "pretty" (1970, 45).[9] Not only can she discern beauty where others see waste, but dandelions also allow her to experience a rare moment of belonging. Through the close contact with the flowers—she blows their white heads and peers into the yellow ones—Pecola and the world become one: "She owned the clumps of dandelions […] and owning them made her part of the world, and the world a part of her" (1970, 46).

The feeling of being part of the natural world may be seen as locating Pecola in the African American tradition of close relationships between human beings and nature that, according to Glave, has its roots in Africa: "When Africans came to North America, they did not lose their spiritual connection to animals, trees, and the land" (2010, 37). Even if most African Americans had no direct connection to Africa, like Pecola, through collective memory, they retained African influence and its belief "in the interconnectedness of the human, spiritual, and environmental realms" (2010, 44). Middle passage, enslavement, and segregation transformed the original Africans' experience of nature. Africans born on American soil gave birth to an African American tradition that blended two cultures and created a specific African American response to nature. Kimberley Ruffin argues that the intimacy with nature in the African American world is not only created by the long hours of work in the fields of America, as underlined by Stewart and Finney. This intimacy also has sources in African Americans' dependence on natural resources for survival. For instance, they need to know herbal medicines to heal wounded, exhausted, or ill bodies: "This closeness to and daily dependence on nature also cultivated […] the idea that human bodies are nature rather than separate from it" (Ruffin 2010, 36). If, on the one hand, understanding nature meant survival, on the other, the strong bond with the natural world under enslavement is the way for African Americans to express their agency, overcome their dehumanizing treatment, and express their belonging to the land: "Central to this belonging was the idea that African Americans were fully human. […] [T]hey often sought out nonhuman nature to co-authorize their value" (Ruffin 2010, 31).

In the wasteland surrounding Pecola, the 'owning' of the dandelions is Pecola's attempt to assert her value and full humanity with the help of nature. Gemma Ortega sees in Pecola's attention to the dandelions evidence of her possessing "an incipient ability to create a language of her own" (2018, 136), while Anissa Wardi reads the girl's praising of the flowers as a moment in

[9] It is noteworthy to underline that this flower is present in African American women's fiction tradition. See Frances Ellen Watkins Harper's poem "Dandelions" in *Poems* (1896) and Marita Bonner's sketch "Dandelion Season": "She was admitted to Charles T. Copeland's famous writing seminar and one of her sketches, 'Dandelion Season,' was selected to be read annually to Radcliffe classes" (1993, 229).

which she "does achieve connection to her local biosphere [… and] resist dominant ideology" (2021, 95). Against almost unanimous scorn of dandelions for being "many, strong and soon" (Morrison 1970, 45), Pecola "cherished the beauty of the dandelions" (Ortega 2018, 136). However, this attempt at independent thought and self-appreciation through a special bond with nature is nullified by Mr. Yacobowsky's refusal to recognize her as a human being, a replica of white masters' denial of enslaved black people's humanity. The positive feelings with which Pecola enters the grocery shop meet Mr. Yacobowsky's "total absence of human recognition—the glazed separateness" (Morrison 1970, 46). His repulsion at the touch of her hand transforms her sense of belonging into "inexplicable shame" (1970, 48). Going out of the shop, Pecola looks at the dandelions again, but their relationship seems to have changed. What is different in the relationship between Pecola and the dandelions is not that she can no longer admire them, for "[a] dart of affection leaps out from her to them" (1970, 48). She can still appreciate the flowers, but the sense of refusal experienced in the store is so pervasive that she can no longer recognize a special bond with them: "[b]ut they do not look at her and do not send love back" (1970, 48). Out of spite, her childish anger makes her impulsively think that "[t]hey are ugly. They are weeds" (1970, 48). However, Pecola cares about her relationship with the dandelions, and the revelation that they might no longer love her back worries her so much that she trips on the sidewalk.[10]

One could speculate that Pecola's possible reconciliation with nature might have occurred, linking the scene of the dandelions with the following one that sees Pecola visiting the three whores living in the apartment above hers. While looking out of the window, her gaze rests on a "tuft of grass" that "had forced its way up through the crack in the sidewalk" (1970, 55). The following comment about the grass meeting "a raw October wind" (1970, 55) expresses a concern for the grass's survival, which might be interpreted as another instance of Pecola's love for

[10] In her interpretation of the dandelions, Gemma Ortega gives a different reading of the effect of Pecola's encounter with Mr. Yacobowsky. According to Ortega, it is the indifference of Mr. Yacobowsky that "crashes the potential of [Pecola's] internal voice" (2018, 136). When going out of the shop, Pecola can no longer sustain her admiration for the dandelions and feels obliged to adhere to the common perception of dandelions as ugly: "Pecola's initial dialogism lacks the support to speak or look back. As a result, she immediately accepts the exterior, authoritative language without question. […] Pecola loses, early on, the ability and strength to give a different meaning to things that already signify for others" (2018, 137). Agreeing on the idea of accepting common perception, Wardi writes that Mr. Yacobowsky's racist treatment of Pecola breaks the girl's alignment with her ecosystem: "Pecola internalizes the store owner's unmitigated hatred and on her way home projects that hostility onto the dandelions" (2021, 96). For other insightful interpretations of the dandelions, see Long 2013, 109-114; Smith 2012, 26-27; Zauditu-Selassie 2009, 45; 72; Surányi 2007, 11-13.

nature, keeping in mind that this very image introduces Pecola's musing on the essence of love: "What did love feel like? she wondered" (1970, 55).

Pecola's ability to create a positive relationship with Geraldine's black cat and old dog Bob, with both showing pleasure at her touch, reinforces the interpretation of Pecola as an active subject able to experience genuine feelings of love in the Lorain wasteland of alienated human relations. Mart Stewart highlights that enslaved people had a "precise and detailed understanding of animal behavior" (2005, 13), which was necessary to hunt successfully with the very few means they had at their disposal. Apart from hunting, this knowledge was the source of "the accurate renderings of the idiosyncratic behaviors of characters" (Stewart 2005, 13) in their stories about animals, especially trickster tales. Moreover, he states that these tales reveal how "African Americans saw themselves as part of a unified universe of all creatures and did not make a sharp distinction between humans and other creatures" (Stewart 2005, 13). In the introduction to *Black Nature: Four Centuries of African American Nature Poetry,* a groundbreaking volume focusing for the first time on black authors writing about nature, Camille Dungy devotes the chapter "Pests, People Too" to poems with animals as protagonists. These texts confirm the African American tradition of close connection with animals "who share our spaces" and who can enforce humility in human beings "by keeping us in touch with a world beyond the human" (Dungy 2009, xxx).

In addition to the African American human/animal connection tradition, Pecola might have inherited young Pauline's ease with nature. In the chapter on Pecola's mother, the reader learns that she spent her childhood in a remote wild area "on a ridge of red Alabama clay seven miles from the nearest road" (1970, 108). Her memories of "down home" (1970, 110) are summed up in the incredible spectacle of June bugs:

> When all us left from down home and was waiting down by the depot for the truck, it was nighttime. June bugs was shooting everywhere. They lighted up a tree leaf, and I seen a streak of green every now and again. That was the last time I seen real June bugs. They's something else. Folks here call them fireflies. Down home they were different. But I recollect that streak of green. I recollect it well." (1970, 110)

bell hooks also highlights Pauline's capacity to be one with the natural world in her essay "Touching the Earth." In line with the insights of African American environmental historians, hooks argued that, like Native Americans, "black people were first and foremost a people of the land, farmers. […] [G]rowing food to sustain life and flowers to please the soul, they were able to make a connection with the earth that was ongoing and life affirming. They were witnesses to beauty" (1996, 21). hooks then reads Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* as an attempt at documenting

in fiction the effects of the great migration on the psyche of black people and sees Pauline as an example of "displaced black folks" (1996, 22).[11] Moving North, Pauline "loses her capacity to experience the sensual world around her. […] [T]he South is associated in her mind with a world of nature. Indeed, when she falls in love for the first time, she can name that experience only by evoking images from nature, from an agrarian world and near wilderness of natural splendor" (hooks 1996, 21).

> When I first seed Cholly, I want you to know it was like all the bits of color from that time down home when all us chil'ren went berry picking after a funeral and I put some in the pocket of my Sunday dress, and they mashed up and stained my hips. My whole dress was messed with purple, and it never did wash out. Not the dress nor me. I could feel that purple deep inside me. And that lemonade Mama used to make when Pap came in out of the fields. It be cool and yellowish, with seeds floating near the bottom. And that streak of green them June bugs made on the trees that night we left from down home. All of them colors was in me. Just sitting there. (Morrison 1970, 113)

References to the experiences of Pecola's parents are also significant as they indirectly make Pecola participate in the general history of African Americans. On her mother's side, Pecola has links with the Great Migration bell hooks referred to, but also with the poverty-stricken farmers of the deep south who try their fortune moving North within the South, from the fields of Alabama to urban Kentucky: "Near the beginning of World War I the Williamses discovered, from returning neighbors and kin, the possibility of living better in another place. In shift, lots, batches, mixed with other families, they migrated, in six months and four journeys, to Kentucky, where there were mines and millwork" (1970, 109).

On her father's side, Pecola's connections go further back in time through her father's experiences. Born in Georgia, Cholly's two closest figures of his childhood and adolescence are two older adults whose narrations make the past live again for him. Blue, an old man to whom some of Cholly's best memories are linked, "used to tell him old-timey stories about how it was when the Emancipation Proclamation came. How the black people hollered, cried and sang" (1970, 131). The years of bondage are instead evoked in the words of Cholly's Great Aunt Jimmy and her friends. Their memories of youth are a narration of a hard life rooted in pain and infinite toil for black women: "Their voices blended into a threnody of nostalgia about pain. Rising and falling, complex in harmony, uncertain in pitch, but constant in the recitative of pain…squatting

[11] For a further analysis of the effect of African American migration from the rural South on the characters of *The Bluest Eye*, see Christian 1980, 65-66.

in a cane field, stooping in a cotton field, kneeling by a river bank, they had carried a world on their backs" (1970, 135; 137).

The passage that most testifies to Pauline's intimacy with nature, particularly with animals, is when she gives birth to Pecola. While in the hospital, she is visited by an old doctor instructing young ones: "These here women you don't have any trouble with. They deliver right away and with no pain, just like horses" (1970, 122-123). Like Mr. Yacobowski with Pecola, the doctor does not give Pauline any sign of human recognition and dehumanizes her equating her to animals.[12] However, unlike Pecola, the woman asserts her humanity: she looks back at the only doctor who looks at her face to state, "I weren't no horse" (1970, 123). In an audacious way—"I got edgy" (1970, 123)—she exaggerates her pains to teach doctors a lesson about her being a person:

> The pains wasn't as bad as I let on, but I had to let them people know having a baby was more than a bowel movement. I hurt just like them white women. Just 'cause I wasn't hooping and hollering before didn't mean I wasn't feeling pain. What'd they think? That just 'cause I knowed how to have a baby with no fuss that my behind wasn't pulling and aching like theirs? (1970, 123)

Pauline goes even a step further in her agency, daring to define the old doctor as ignorant:

> Besides, that doctor doesn't know what he talking about. He must never seed no mare foal. Who say they don't have no pain? Just 'cause she don't cry? 'Cause she can't say it, they think it ain't there? If they looks in her eyes and see them eyeballs lolling back, see the sorrowful look, they'd know. (1970, 123)

If the doctor denies Pauline's humanity, Pauline goes in the opposite direction and gives the mare foals human dignity by recognizing their feelings through the animals' sorrowful eyes. Pauline, too, belongs to the African American cultures "that enable—in fact, encourage—human and nonhuman affinity" (Ruffin 2010, 16).

Eye contact creates a connection between humans and animals: the sorrowful eyes of the mare foals for Pauline, Geraldine's cat's "bluish green eyes" (Morrison 1970, 80) and old Bob's "liquid eye" (1970, 173) for Pecola. The chance of seeing cats and even of owning one herself is what leads doubtful Pecola into Junior's trap.

[12] The implications of relating African Americans to animals and, in general, equating them with the natural world is a widely studied topic. For an analysis of this subject in the field of environmental history, see Finney 2014, especially chapter 4, and Smith's observations on black primitivism in "What is Africa to Me" (2007).

> "Come on in my house. See, I live right there. Come on. I'll show you."
> "Show me what?"
> "Some kittens. We got some kittens. You can have one if you want."
> "Real kittens?"
> "Yeah. Come on." (1970, 80)

Once inside, malicious Junior flings the only cat in the house at Pecola's face and locks her in the living room. The cat becomes a source of consolation for the desperate girl, as she bangs on the door in tears. Initially taken aback by its touch, Pecola finds comfort in the softness of its fur and its gentle movements around her ankles, providing her with a sense of closeness she lacks in her human relationships. The interaction between animal and human brings pleasure and comfort for both: "Pecola rubbed the cat's head; he whined, his tongue flicking with pleasure. The blue eyes in the black face held her" (1970, 88). However, this magical moment for Pecola, entranced by the cat's eyes that "the light made […] shine like blue ice" (1970, 88), is abruptly broken by Junior who steps into the room and envies the perfect moment of communion between the cat and Pecola. Unable to replicate such a connection, and struck by the cat's enjoyment of the girl's touch, Junior violently swings the cat around by its hind leg. This act of cruelty marks the only instance in the novel where Pecola reacts against others' abuse. Concerned for the cat's safety, she wrestles with Junior on the floor in an attempt to protect the only living being that has shown pleasure in her presence.

From being a protector of the cat, Pecola unwittingly becomes the cause of Bob's death, another animal capable of connecting with her. Pecola's unconscious betrayal of this authentic bond leads her to insanity.[13] As John Duvall underlines, Pecola becomes mad only after Bob's death and not after her rape.[14] When Pecola visits Soaphead Church, the self-declared "Reader, Adviser, and Interpreter of Dreams" (1970, 163) in the hope he might give her blue eyes,

[13] In her anthology of African American poems about nature, Dungy devotes the section entitled Cycle Four, "Pets, People Too," to texts on animals that "address power negotiations between humans, insects, and other troublesome creatures. These poems warn us that if a connection between the human world and others is severed, our lives will be more desperate still" (2009, xxx). Wardi also connects the death of the dog with Pecola's insanity: "Morrison again aligns Pecola with nonhuman life-forms, and while the young girl recoils from the dog's agony and quickly leaves this scene of death, the dog's suffering is grafted onto her and is a precipitating cause of Pecola's emotional death" (2021, 92).

[14] Duvall, however, gives a different interpretation of this connection. He reads Bob's death as the moment Pecola unconsciously realizes her physical violation: "The death of the dog presents to Pecola something akin to a symbolic dreamscape that represents the rape through a distorted lens that blurs the clarity of victim and victimizer. Although itself a victim of a plot, dog Bob becomes a symbolic substitute for Cholly. The dog's spasmodic death symbolically repeats Cholly's orgasm" (2000, 32-33).

Soaphead declares, "We must make, ah, some offering, that is some contact with nature" (1970, 173). The sacrifice Soaphead has in mind to make her wish come true is to get rid of old lousy Bob, and he tricks the child into poisoning the dog. The sweet scene of the girl stroking the dog, which looks up at her "with soft triangle eyes" (1970, 174), reminds the reader of the initial scene of mutual love and belonging between Pecola and the dandelions:

> [Soaphead] saw the girl bending down to the sleeping dog, who, at her touch, opened one liquid eye, matted in the corners with what looked like green glue. She reached out and touched the dog's head, stroking him gently. She placed the meat on the floor of the porch, near his nose… he ate it in three or four gulps. The girl stroked his head again, and the dog looked up at her with soft triangle eyes. (1970, 173-174)

Instead of creating some unique contact with nature, as promised to the girl, the misanthrope-pedophile Soaphead breaks Pecola's special connection with nature. Powerless witnessing the agony of the dog that had previously shown her recognition, unlike Mr. Yacobowsky, Pecola feels sick and "[runs] out of the yard and down the walk" (1970, 174). The next time the reader meets her, she is a deranged person talking with an imaginary friend.

Pecola's destruction "stemmed largely from a crippled and crippling family" (1970, xii). Nevertheless, the black community has its responsibilities, too. It cannot be denied that the black community is a victim of a racist society that oppresses minorities by imposing white standards unattainable by African Americans unless they give up their culture and transform their bodies. Nevertheless, Morrison is not interested in laying the blame entirely on white society while absolving an innocent black one: "My vulnerability would lie in romanticizing blackness rather than demonizing it; vilifying whiteness rather than reifying it" (1992, xi). Morrison's primary concern is to warn black communities of the consequences of uncritical assimilation, which leads to the refusal of one's own black identity to conform to imposed white models. "*The Bluest Eye* was my effort to say something […] about why [Pecola] had not, or possibly ever would have, the experience of what she possessed and also why she prayed for so radical an alteration. Implicit in her desire was racial self-loathing" (Morrison 1970, xi).

Despite her tragic destiny, Pecola's active and positive relationship with flowers and animals can offer some hopeful readings of the epilogue.[15] Pecola's special bond with the natural world

[15] Several scholars have underlined that Pecola's descent into madness is not in vain. Her story, through Claudia's narration, forces the reader "into a self-reflective meditative state" (Peoples 2012, 179) which should lead to an overcoming of "complicity, victimization, and subjection, in order to speak of change and resistance" (Grewal 1998, 34). See also Battista and Sande 2021, 76-77; Roynon 2013, 115; Zauditu-Selassie 2009, 28; Dittmar 1990, 152.

could be seen as resistance to assimilation. Throughout the novel, Pecola's intimate connections with the natural world are the only moments when the girl feels a sense of belonging. Pecola appears to mitigate her self-loathing and establish an independent, albeit precarious, identity, by reclaiming her ancestral culture that conceived the human as part of the natural. Following the example of her people, Pecola's final descent into madness could be interpreted as an extreme act of resistance, a departure from "a land cursed by injustice" (Smith 2007, 10). While a tragic conclusion of her life, Pecola's final madness is not in vain; it serves as a fertile sacrifice on two levels: the personal for Claudia and her sister, and the collective for the entire black community. Pecola herself is regenerative for Claudia and Frieda as they reevaluate their relationship with her and mature as individuals, acknowledging their betrayal of Pecola: "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 1970, 202-203). Most importantly, this realization prompts Claudia to reflect on Pecola's life, which, transformed into a story to be shared and passed down, becomes fecund as a memento for the black community of the importance of support in future situations, so as not to repeat past mistakes.

Interpreting madness as a fruitful act of resistance could also help to explain the presence of flowers among the waste in the novel's final scene, a positive image otherwise out of context in the novel's tragic ending. While the garbage surrounding Pecola could be a metaphor for her desolate urban setting and for her being thrown away by everybody, flowers testify to Pecola's capacity to create a connection with nature, resist, and bear fruit in some way.[16] This contradictory association of waste and flowers in the novel's final image is reminiscent of the "burden-and-beauty paradox" (2010, 14) that, according to Kimberly Ruffin, characterizes the black experience of the American natural world. Black people enjoyed the beauty of nature in terrible conditions, of which enslavement was the most extreme:

[16] From her ecocritical perspective, Wardi also interprets the final scene not entirely negatively, introducing compost alongside garbage: "Where there is garbage, there can be compost. […] While the final moments of *The Bluest Eye* are devastating as readers bear witness to Pecola's madness, reading the scene ecocritically, we can see at least the potential for healing. The natural landscape, positioned against the social landscape, resists by attempting to heal and detoxify the poisons engulfing the many Pecola's who walk through this world" (2021, 100). Susan Morrison brings to the forefront the role of garbage and waste in *The Bluest Eye* in her interpretation of the novel from the perspective of "racialized ecologies and ecological justice" (2021, 235).

> People of African descent endure the burden and enjoy the beauty of being natural. They bear the burden of a historical and present era of environmental alienation. […] African Americans struggle against the burden of societal scripts that make them ecological pariahs, yet they enjoy the beauty of liberating themselves and acting outside of these scripts. Their ecological outlook is informed both by the collective experience of being placed among those at the bottom of human hierarchies and their visionary responses to nature itself. This has resulted in traditions of figurative and actual ecological care that extend not only to fellow humans but also to nonhuman nature. (Ruffin 2010, 16)

Pecola's affinity with the nonhuman, the beauty represented by flowers, takes place in a condition of estrangement and rejection, a burden symbolized by waste, which however does not "obliterate the potential for multiple, often positive associations with the natural world" (Ruffin 2010, 29).

Pecola's fertile resistance becomes visible in the flowers of the closing scene, which shows the girl "plucking her way between the tire rims and the sunflowers, between coke bottles and milkweed" (Morrison 1970, 203). Against all predictions, the cast-off Pecola is more than just waste; she is productive garbage as nature can still grow around her even in the most hostile landfill environment, being Pecola "all the waste and the beauty of the world" (1970, 203).

4. Conclusion

Examining *The Bluest Eye* through the lens of African American environmental history reveals the connection between Pecola's experiences in Lorain, Ohio, and the historical struggles of African American communities. Although *The Bluest Eye* does not focus on the era of slavery like Morrison's *Beloved* and *A Mercy*, Pecola's affinity for plants and animals reflects the black community's ability to form positive relationships with the natural world despite harsh conditions.

Pecola's delicate moments of admiration for dandelions and tufts of grass testify to her capacity to cultivate genuine feelings of love and a sense of belonging. Much like her mother, who can discern the emotions of mare foals through their sorrowful eyes, Pecola actively cares for Geraldine's cat and Bob the dog, despite the animal's unattractive appearance due to his age. This special bond with nature and nonhuman beings mitigates her self-loathing, allowing her to feel a sense of inclusion grounded in her African American heritage that views humans, animals, and plants as a unified whole.

The depiction of Pecola as an active agent, different from the common perception of a helpless victim, is an innovative aspect introduced by this essay's approach to the text. This perspective also provides a potential positive interpretation of her final madness. Her madness is an act of

resistance by a character who has affirmed her individuality through her relationships with plants and animals, even if rarely and in a precarious manner. Interpreting her madness as something harmful to Pecola's personal life but fruitful for the community is supported by the presence of flowers in the novel's concluding image—a symbol of life and regeneration amidst decay and death.

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