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THE CONFIGURATION OF CHILDHOOD PLACE IN TONI MORRISON'S *THE  
BLUEST EYE*

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## ABSTRACT

The present study examines Toni Morrison's subversion of Gaston Bachelard's normative representation of the childhood home in *The Poetics of Space* as a protective sphere loaded with dream values. Focusing on Morrison's first novel, *The Bluest Eye*, the characters' internalization of racism and mass produced images give way to outbursts of both psychological and physical violence within their homes that undermine their process of humanization –and more precisely that of children– in the aftermath of slavery. In a literary context where the homeplace is understood as a site of liberation, resistance and restoration of the African American dignity, Morrison explores, however, the porous limits of the home in the face of white, middle-class cultural and economic domination. Thus, Antonio Gramsci's and Henri Lefebvre's notions of hegemony are combined to analyze how the ruling class' control affects the construction of African American identity and modifies the core values of the community. The author criticizes the black community's lack of resistance to white domination, resulting on the isolation and invisibility of the society's most disadvantaged members, that is, black girls. This social tendency is transplanted within the limits of the home, whose permeable boundaries lack the protective qualities of Bachelard's (white middle class) childhood home. As a result, the young protagonists of the novel seek shelter in other places and spaces that are not tinted by self-inflicted hatred and stagnation as their homes are. This way Morrison rearticulates the domestic sphere by depicting it as invaded by Western images and racism, resisting therefore to a partial description of the concept of *home* that marginalizes and colonizes other silenced versions of the familiar dwelling.

**KEY WORDS:** African American, Childhood, Gaston Bachelard, Home, Racism, Toni Morrison, Violence, White Hegemony.

## RESUMEN

En el presente estudio examino cómo Toni Morrison subvierte la versión normativa del hogar de la infancia que Gastón Bachelard recrea en *The Poetics of Space*, donde se representa como una esfera protectora y cargada de ensoñaciones. Centrándome en la primera novela de Morrison, *The Bluest Eye*, la internalización de tendencias racistas e imágenes pre-fabricadas por parte de los personajes da lugar a estallidos de violencia, tanto física como psicológica, dentro de sus hogares, lo que debilita su proceso de humanización –sobre todo el de los niños– tras las secuelas de la esclavitud. En un contexto literario en el que el hogar se entiende como un lugar de liberación, resistencia y restauración de la dignidad del pueblo afroamericano, Morrison explora, sin embargo, la porosidad de sus límites frente a la dominación –tanto cultural como económica– de la clase media blanca. Por lo tanto, la noción de hegemonía tal y como es concebida por Antonio Gramsci y Henri Lefebvre se combina en el análisis de cómo el control de la clase en el poder afecta la construcción de la identidad afroamericana y modifica los valores base de su comunidad. La autora critica la falta de resistencia de la comunidad negra a la dominación blanca, lo que conlleva el aislamiento e invisibilidad de sus miembros más desprotegidos, las niñas negras. Dicha tendencia social se trasplanta al hogar, donde la permeabilidad de sus límites les hace carecer de las cualidades protectoras del hogar de la infancia (blanco y de clase media) descrito por Bachelard. Como resultado, las jóvenes protagonistas de la novela buscan cobijo en otros lugares y espacios lejos del estancamiento y odio auto-infligido dentro sus hogares. De esta manera Morrison re-articula la esfera doméstica al retratarla invadida por imágenes occidentales y racismo, resistiéndose de este modo a una descripción parcial del concepto de *hogar* que marginaliza y coloniza otras versiones silenciadas de éste.

**PALABRAS CLAVE:** Afroamericano, Gaston Bachelard, Hegemonía blanca, Hogar, Infancia, Racismo, Toni Morrison, Violencia.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

[T]ell us what the world has been to you in the dark places and in the light. . . . What moves at the margin. What it is to have no home in this place. To be set adrift from the one you knew. What it is to live at the edge of towns that cannot bear your company.

–Toni Morrison, *Nobel Lecture*, 1993

The house of one's childhood has traditionally been linked to personal growth and shelter, values introduced by western images and mass-culture and which crystallize in Gaston Bachelard's *The Poetics of Space* (1958). Bachelard presents an apparently normative vision of the house we are born in as a place granting protection, warmth, balance and creativity to the adult imagination (7). According to Bachelard, all of these sheltering principles are prompted by our attachment to that "first universe" (4), which is remembered as being radically isolated from the outer world. However, for Toni Morrison, who grew up in a deeply "[g]enderized, sexualized [and] wholly racialized world", as she puts it, the (white, middle-class) depiction of a shell-like childhood home in American mass culture is not only alien to the author, but alienating ("Dark" 1006). The importance of the domestic realm in the shaping of the black self-identity is made evident in the essay by bell hooks<sup>1</sup> "Homeplace (a site of resistance)" (1990). Even so, the African American homeplace does not always bear nurturing values, as Morrison's insistence on the demystification and disruption of the familial dwelling shows. As a result, the negotiation between home and community is present in most of her works, and more significantly in her first novel, *The Bluest Eye* (1970).

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<sup>1</sup> I am keeping Gloria Jean Watkin's pen name *bell hooks* in lower case according to the author's wish to write it non-capitalized. hooks' decision is based on two premises, the first is to make sure she is distinguished from her grand-mother, from whom she took her pen name, and the second is to highlight the content of her work rather than giving importance to who the author is. For further information I recommend reading her work *Talking Back: Thinking Feminist, Thinking Black* (1989).



Pecola Breedlove, the alienated protagonist of *The Bluest Eye*, fluctuates among different African American and white domestic environments that have more or less deeply internalized the colonizing images of family life and canonical beauty provided by American popular culture in the 1940s. After her father, Cholly, burns their place and she has to be momentarily relocated to the MacTeers' dwelling, Pecola's sense of inferiority and self-devaluation in the face of dominant white images is made evident to Claudia and Frieda, the daughters of the McTeer family. Even though the MacTeers' is presented as a threatening, destabilized place through the eyes of Claudia, the narrator, its members have developed methods to adjust to white hegemonic values without being obliterated by them. Such is not the case of the storefront inhabited by the Breedloves, where Cholly's destructive tendencies and his wife's absorption of white images prompt an atmosphere of neglect, self-hatred and violence that reflect the racially motivated patterns of American society. Significantly enough, Pecola's belief that she has been gifted with blue eyes and her ultimate breakdown after being raped by her father is unsympathetically observed by the disjointed and colonized black community in Lorain (Ohio).

Hence, in *The Bluest Eye* Morrison portrays a community set at the margins of society, culture and the city they inhabit, uprooted from its familiar bounds and dangerously consenting to white supremacy, which leads to the invisibility of the "underdogs of a racist social order" as Sumita Roye calls black young girls (212). In this essay I will try to show how the tendency of the black community in *The Bluest Eye* to translate racist patterns to their homes disrupts the conventional (white, middle-class) image of the childhood home portrayed in Bachelard's *The Poetics of Space*, giving way instead to a threatening place for its more vulnerable members. By blurring the dividing line between inside and outside, home and community, and loading the home space with

violent and racist outbursts Morrison resists to a partial description of the concept of home as the one presented in the work of Bachelard, which silences and colonizes other marginalized versions.

## 2. THE CONFIGURATION OF PLACE: THE CHILDHOOD PLACE, THE HEGEMONIC SPACE AND THE NON-PLACE

In this section I will briefly analyze the theoretical framework upon which I will construct my analysis of Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*. First of all, as I have advanced above, I will deal with Gaston Bachelard's philosophical understanding of the house of one's childhood as a place loaded with dream values that grant the adult imagination with protection and balance. Opposite to Bachelard's (white, middle-class) notion of the childhood home as a place isolated from the outside influence, bell hooks presents the African American dwelling as constructed by the tension between the hegemonic domination of white culture and the black families' attempt to build a nurturing place that holds their process of humanization in the face of a racist society. When mentioning white hegemony I am using the term coined by Antonio Gramsci to refer to the intellectual and moral leadership established by the ruling class and perpetuated through spontaneous consensus. In this concern, I will turn to Henri Lefebvre as well to apply the concept of hegemony to the distribution of the urban layout or space and analyze how this affects its inhabitants. Finally, I will shortly refer to those temporary sites that do not allow identification and that Marc Augé names *non-places* to examine how people who inhabit them react to their status of transience.

### 2.1 The Childhood Home: From Gaston Bachelard's Dream Home to bell hooks' Site of Resistance

There is no better way of introducing the work of Gaston Bachelard than through the words Michael Foucault dedicated to him in his well-known essay "Of Other Spaces" (1997). Foucault points to Bachelard as a pioneer in the analysis of the

transcendental geometry of space and one of the first theorists to defend the idea that the space we live in is far more than a mere background, being instead “saturated with qualities, . . . even pervaded by a spectral aura.” (332). Indeed, for Bachelard we are only able to understand ourselves as a “sequence of fixations in the spaces of the being’s stability.” (8). But whereas Foucault is interested in analyzing the configuration of external spaces and the relationships defining them (*Of Other Spaces*, 333), in *The Poetics of Space* Bachelard pays attention instead to the places of intimacy, those which determine all the realms of our existence and more particularly to the place that provides people with their first contact with the universe, that is, the house of childhood (4).

Bachelard defines the childhood home as a “*felicitous space*” loaded with “dream values” that cling to our imagination after we abandon our birthplace (17). Solitude, warmth, shelter and creativity are some of the terms used by the philosopher to describe the emotions evoked by the architecture of our first dwelling, formed of secret rooms and corridors, inviting nooks, garret and cellar. Because the childhood home fosters creativity, protection and daydreaming, the adult imagination systematically comes back to the memory of it looking for shelter (xxxv-xxxvi). Since its image persists fixated on our memory regardless of the passage of time, the house of our childhood represents “one of the greatest powers of integration for the thoughts, memories and dreams of mankind” without which people would simply be a de-centered being (6-7). Bachelard’s tendency to associate imagination, creativity and memory to the childhood home –a place that, in his own words, has been “physically inscribed in [our body] . . . [and] engraved within us”– leads him to affirm that all our memories are housed (14-15). As a result, the cozy corners and protective rooms of our first shell are precisely the parameters used to define the intricate geography of the private psychology (xxxvi).

The image of our first home as a protective site that centralizes and integrates the being permeates *The Poetics of Space*, mainly due to Bachelard's portrayal of the oneiric house of memory as a three-story space defined by the tension between cellar and garret, a polarity that gives the mankind "proofs or illusions or stability." (17) Whereas the number of floors points to balance and centrality –acknowledging all the connotations that the number three has in Western culture–, the dichotomy between attic and cellar implies not only verticality and, as a result, growth, but reflects two perspectives of the imagination and a wide range of emotional and mental nuances (17-18). Whereas the roof symbolizes rationality, primitiveness and solitude, the cellar is transformed into an irrational space of concealed madness (18). These two places of memory are connected through stairs, symbolizing a link between different levels of imagination and creativity, so while the attic stairs entail "ascension to a more tranquil solitude," those descending to the cellar are always shrouded in oneirism (25-26). Because stairs have been replaced by elevators nowadays and houses have been reduced to simple horizontality people create an artificial relationship with the place they inhabit, according to the philosopher, hence the need for a mental refuge that grants centralized solitude and intimacy to the adult imagination (27, 37).

The protective dimension that the home of our memory takes in *The Poetics of Space* is not only rooted on its architecture but also on the warm souvenir of the people who inhabited it, with whom the child creates her/his first bonding. Bachelard melancholically evokes the recollection of his family and servants as images that govern every angle of his childhood home and hence of his most treasured recollections (14). I consider worth-noting for the analysis I will carry on in the next sections, Bachelard's belief that the careful attention women pay to their homes "through their daily polishing" and devotion to their houses is crucial in appropriating the place and making

the childhood home dear to the adult memory (69). His bourgeois portrayal of the childhood home, in Karen W. Martin's terms, imposes a normative concept of the homeplace that is alien, however, to marginalized groups (54). Little reference does Bachelard make to those childhood homes subjected to class, race and gender hierarchies, where communal fragmentation and racism has been interiorized by family members. As a result, both home and community, as Toni Morrison portrays in most of her novels –and particularly in *The Bluest Eye* as I will try to demonstrate below– are transformed into a hostile environment for children.

Relevant is as well the exploration of the dynamics of outside and inside in *The Poetics of Space*, understood as the juxtaposition between the childhood home and the rest of universe, and hence my previous reference to the community. The author uses the representation of winter houses in literature as epitome of such opposition, where the exterior world is diminished and reduced to nothing whereas the qualities of the intimate place are experienced with increased intensity (40-41). Such “dialectic division,” as the author puts it, gives way to basic metaphorical dichotomies, mainly to positive/negative and being/not-being, which are associated to inside places and outside spaces respectively (211-212). Bachelard acknowledges however that the limits between inside and outside are not straightforward when experienced in our imagination since both spaces can be intimate and hold hostility (216-218). Whereas the withdrawal within oneself is, according to him, an unhealthy solution to solve the problem of unbelonging due to the lack of geometric reference, Bachelard admits the possibility of transforming the outside space into an intimate place when the house is constraining to the self and loses its clarity (218). It is the blurring of the concepts of inside and outside which represents a real danger for Bachelard, since the mind loses “its geometrical homeland and the spirit drift[s].” (218)

Whereas the childhood home takes an oneiric dimension in the work of Bachelard, feminist critic bell hooks transforms the homeplace within the African American community into a “space of care and nurturance in the face of . . . racist oppression [and] sexist domination” (42) in her essay “Homeplace (A Site of Resistance)” (1990). Although the qualities of shelter and refuge are kept in both works, it is in the latter where the author acknowledges the influence of social structures within the domestic place and the political connotations that constructing a home has for ethnic groups that have been traditionally denied of a place of their own (43). In that concern the role of women is again crucial to create a place where children “learn dignity [and] integrity of being” (41); but unlike Bachelard, hooks specifies that such role is a result of the sexist structure that “delegates to females the task of creating and sustaining a home,” and hence praiseworthy in its undermining of the system within its boundaries (42). hooks’ reading of maternal gestures of protection and tenderness as “reflective of choice and will” rather than “the perfect embodiment of a woman’s ‘natural’ role” contradicts the stance of other feminist theorists (47). The critic is aware of their importance within African American families precisely because in “post-slavery black families . . . parents were often too weary, too beaten down to make [them].” (48). Hence her celebration of the efforts women made to construct a space of liberation and healing (48).

Although inscribed within a positive view, the childhood dwelling hooks describes in “Homeplace” is the product of a conscious political and mental subversion of white supremacy and its colonization of the African American mind. During the mid Twentieth century most African American women worked as maids in white households, which represented the mainstream dream house in American culture. For these women, however, they were “space[s] of Otherness, which stripped [them] of

dignity and personal power” so their efforts to construct a space of healing and reaffirmation of their blackness was doubly difficult or even impossible (48). As a result –and in opposition to Bachelard’s white, middle class childhood home– the boundaries of the African American homeplace do not reduce the outside to nothingness, but are rather built out of the tension between the attempt of cultural domination and the black refusal of letting it reshape and control the familial dynamics (47). Thus, the limits of the home, fragile as they are, are often violated by a system that “promotes internalized self-hatred,” as I will try to illustrate in my analysis of Toni Morrison’s *The Bluest Eye* in the next chapter of this essay (46).

## 2.2 From Antonio Gramsci to Henri Lefebvre: Applying Hegemony to the Urban Space

In the previous section I have mentioned that, according to bell hooks, the boundaries of the African American homeplace work as a barrier to the western attempts of cultural domination and racial segregation. The author acknowledges, however, the porosity of such limits, which are often trespassed by colonizing images shaped according to western middle-class values but presented as normative. I am therefore interested on how such values are introduced in the African American dwelling and which methods are used by the ruling class to install its hegemony among subaltern groups. When referring to *hegemony* I am using the term coined by Marxist philosopher Antonio Gramsci, which refers to the intellectual and moral leadership established by the ruling class and perpetuated through the agreement of the lower classes (Loftus 111). As Gramsci argues, even though the bourgeoisie might turn to coercive forms to achieve power and enforce it, the domination of the ruling class is maintained through education –using the institutional apparatus as a tool–, which ensures the “spontaneous consent” of subaltern groups (673).

French Marxist philosopher Henri Lefebvre was the first theorist to apply Gramsci's notion of *hegemony* to the urban landscape in his touchstone work *The Production of Space* (1974) (Kipfer 194). His understanding of the urban space as an “interlinkage of geographic forms, built environment, symbolic meanings, and routines of life” has prompted the contemporary interest on the shaping of the urban space, influencing authors such as David Harvey, Edward Soja or Michel de Certeau (Molotch 888). Focusing on his analysis of the consolidation of bourgeois hegemony in the city landscape, Lefebvre realizes that the growing spatialization of social relations in the urban landscape (Prigge 48) entails the use of space by the ruling class to exercise control and domination through coercive and persuasive aspects (Lefebvre 17). Being deeply influenced by Marx and the historical materialist method, Lefebvre turns to the term *production* to define how space is created by humans and “shaped by interests of classes, experts, the grass-roots and other contending forces” (Molotch 887).

According to Lefebvre, two main forms of space come out of this production: the space of domination and the space of appropriation (164). Whereas the former serves abstract purposes such as power or the reproduction of capital, the latter is a fragmented space whose segments are “interchangeable as commodities” that facilitate the exchange of goods (Molotch 889). The result is a cellular disposition of the city whose arrangement responds to the interests of the ruling class. But it also responds, as I will try to demonstrate in the following chapter, to the division between races and the supremacy of one upon another, leaving the racial subject at the margins of both the cultural and the urban landscape. This segmented layout is unified and standardized, however, thanks to a series of mechanisms –education, culture and legislation, mainly– granting a “*balance of power* between classes . . . [and] between the spaces they occupy . . . [that delimits] the space of the ruling class’ hegemony” (Lefebvre 281).



Indeed, the hegemony of the ruling class is achieved through education and consolidated thanks to routine, that is, through the repetition of the daily habits that pervade every field of our life, preventing the revolution of subaltern groups (Kipfer 199). As a result, Lefebvre acknowledges the struggle that takes place in the mental space of the marginalized subject when facing the model of consumption established by the dominant class, precisely because the mental space is a site of “reductions, of force and repressions, of manipulation and co-optation” (Lefebvre 353-354). As both Lefebvre and Gramsci suggest, (white middle class) spatial supremacy and hegemony would not take place without mental dominance, an aspect I would like to emphasize as crucial in the violation of the limits of the post-slavery African American homeplace. Bourgeois hegemony over culture is effective precisely because it “incorporates the daily aspirations, desires and dreams of subaltern populations”, in Stefen Kipfer’s words (200). Kipfer refers in those terms to a series of utopian promises informed by mass-produced and marketed images of “good urban life” that clash with the actual situation of segregated communities as we repeatedly observe in *The Bluest Eye* (201).

### 2.3 The Non-Place: Marc Augé’s *Introduction to an Anthropology of Supermodernity*

So far I have focused on the analysis of space and place as milieus where the hegemony of the ruling class is enacted and individual growth either takes place or is thwarted by the introduction of colonizing images within the limits of the homeplace. In his work *Non-Places: Introduction to an Anthropology of Supermodernity* (1995), French anthropologist Marc Augé introduces a new concept to this constellation of locations, the *non-place*. If a *place* is characterized by being concerned with identity and the “relational” and “historical” networks that inform it, a *non-place* is ephemeral and does not allow the integration of the being (Augé 77). Supermarkets, gas stations and airports, but also hotels, refugee camps and shantytowns are all non-places,

transitory abodes “surrendered to solitary individuality, to the fleeting [and] to the temporary” (Augé 78). I am therefore interested on how the proliferation of non-places affects the shaping of individual identity as well as whether it is possible to appropriate a non-place and feel identified with it.

As Bachelard postulates in *The Poetics of Space*, people can only understand themselves and produce meaning in place –and in the childhood homeplace, more particularly– so that the recognition of the self can only be achieved by appropriating and exploring the space we inhabit, hence its importance. Similarly, Augé believes that the instability of traditional “reference points for collective identification” makes necessary “the individual production of meaning” within the spaces of intimacy (37). Even more significant is that Augé considers the home of our childhood as the epitome of the lived *place*, where a “gleeful [moment of] differentiation [and] of recognition” occurs (Augé 83-84). Home is therefore a site of communication, bliss and self-recognition in Augé’s theoretic system, a belief that connects and agrees with Bachelard’s discussion. However, Augé takes such notion of homeplace a step further by describing it as being “rhetorical”, since we can only call a place ours when we can understand and be understood with no difficulty by those we share it with (108).

Paradoxically enough, contemporary society encourages a movement towards de-localization where people are “born in the clinic and die in [the] hospital”, as Augé puts it, a tendency where non-places play a central role. In such context, it is interesting to consider how people adapt to these new points of transience that do not allow identification nor hold meaning (78). As Augé notes, there are people who only feel at home within the anonymous limits of the non-place where solitude and resemblance are the only products coming out of the inexistence of relations (103,106). Non-places can therefore become strangely familiar to their guests, where they can even perform

strategies of conscious or unconscious appropriation of the non-place. In this concern, and to link Auge's work with the analysis I am carrying on in the following chapter, I consider the brothel at the top of Pecola's one-story house a perfect example of how a non-place can be transformed into a place, since it allows more communication and intimacy to the child than her actual home. Similarly, the opposite process, that is, the transformation of a place into a non-place, also takes place in Toni Morrison's novel in several stances, but more significantly when the MacTeers decide to rent a room to Henry Washington. Such decision transforms the family dwelling into a hostel and hence, a site of transit and role-playing, as the changing behavior of the guest shows in the novel.

### 3. *THE BLUEST EYE* AND THE SUBVERSION OF GASPARD BACHELARD'S *THE POETICS OF SPACE*

The spatial theories I have briefly introduced above come into play in my analysis of Toni Morrison's first novel, *The Bluest Eye*. The author's focus on the African American domestic realm in the early 1940's shows how mass produced images of what is considered ideal home life and canonical white beauty colonize the mental space of the ethnic community. Thus, white hegemony is perpetuated and introduced into the homeplace not only through education, as I will try to show in the next section, but also through the selling and consuming of a repetition of "competing versions of the same white image", as Jane Kuenz puts it (422). It is worth-noting that the lack of a supportive and close-knitted community is crucial, since individual attempts to contest and subvert annihilating images are not endorsed, and abandoned as a result. Failure to match to such model gives way in the novel to internalized self-hatred and subsequent devaluation of black identity, an attitude that permeates the boundaries of the African American home. Unlike the dream-like childhood place described by Bachelard, the homes depicted in *The Bluest Eye* show different levels of self-inflicted racism that

transform the familiar dwelling into a place to teach children “fear” and shame, to use the words of Pecola’s mother, Pauline Breedlove (100). In the next section I will try to illustrate how, as a consequence of what I have mentioned, children in the novel feel less threatened outside than within the limits of their homeplace to the point that they stop short at identifying with their homes, which are often characterized by stagnation and transience.

### 3.1 The Dream Home and the Real Home: Disruption of Bachelard’s Colonizing (White, Middle Class) Image of Home

*The Bluest Eye* opens with a fragment recalling mid-century American elementary school primers, where its main characters, Dick and Jane, embodied the quintessential image of white, blonde-haired and blue-eyed American children. The scene presents a presumably representative version of domestic bliss, the children being playing in their green-and-white house under the attentive look of their smiley parents. The consequences that using these readers at school had are self evident, not only establishing a normative model of family life that alienates other forms, but also marginalizing the African American community through the absence of black characters in their pages. The lack of representation that the main girl characters in the novel suffer at school is mirrored at their homes and internalized both through the method of repetition used in these readers and by their parents’ response towards images of mass culture. Being school and home the two environments where children first develop their identity, as Marilyn M. McKenzie notes, the novel unfolds the psychic wounds caused by their invisibility in both places (222).

Morrison’s progressive disruption of the school primer text responds therefore to an attempt to deconstruct its normative version of home, giving way to an alternative textual space that challenges the fiction of the elementary reader and includes the reality

of her young black characters. As Phyllis R. Klotman suggests, the three versions of the text correspond to the different representations of home examined in *The Bluest Eye*, being the first one – “[h]ere is the house. It is green and white. It has a red door. It is very pretty” (1) – that of the alien and alienating middle class, white families where African American women are only included as servants, while the second and third correspond respectively to that of the MacTeers’, Pecola’s black foster family, and the Breedloves’ (123). Whereas the MacTeer’s poverty and self-devaluation in the face of white culture do allow Frieda and Claudia MacTeer experience paternal love, the removal of the space and punctuation that gives way to run-on and compressed sentences in the third edition of the Dick and Jane text – “[h]ere is the house it is green and white it has a red door it is very pretty” – suggests the Breedlove’s mechanic internalization of white hegemonic premises and the subsequent sense of asphyxia and threaten that Pecola experiences at her home (2).

As in the case of the school primer text, the supposedly normative vision of the childhood place presented in Bachelard’s *The Poetics of Space* is contested and rearticulated in *The Bluest Eye*. I have mentioned in the previous chapter that Bachelard considers the childhood home a place loaded with dream values, where solitude, warmth and contemplation foster creativity and shelter for the adult imagination. The fact that the author isolates the child and her/his environment from any exterior influence shows a naïve lack of awareness of social and racial problems outside the white, middle class social sphere which bell hooks takes into account, despite her positive account of the homeplace as a site of personal nurturance within the African American community. Both Morrison and hooks were raised in the same circumstances and knew how porous the physical and psychic barriers of the black community were, but whereas the latter focuses on the efforts made by women in the process of

humanization of the post-slavery community, Morrison prefers exploring instead those homes where “parents were . . . too weary, too beaten down” to transform homes into a cherished place (hooks 48). In doing so, she gives voice and visibility to “the underdogs of a racist social order”, to use Sumita Roye’s words when referring to little black girls, to whom Bachelard’s version of home is alien (212).

If verticality and growth due to the architectural layout characterizes the ideal house of memory in Bachelard’s philosophical system, then the African American one-story homes portrayed in the *The Bluest Eye*, with few dark rooms and cracked furniture, can only respond to stagnation and confusion. Claudia McTeer’s recollections of her homeplace are far from Bachelard’s cherished memories of the first dwelling which, according to him, bring balance and centrality to the adult mind (17-18). The first reference she makes to her home is striking both in her use of a tone denoting estrangement as well as in the elements she focuses on:

Our house is old, cold, and green. At night a kerosene lamp lights one large room. The others are braced in darkness, peopled by roaches and mice. Adults do not talk to us –they give us directions. They issue orders without providing information. When we trip and fall down they glance at us; if we cut or bruise ourselves, they ask us are we crazy. When we catch colds, they shake their heads in disgust at our lack of consideration. . . . Our illness is treated with contempt. (5-6).

Claudia’s use of the term “house” instead of *home* already gives a clue of her detachment of the familiar dwelling, portrayed as dark, scary and humiliating. But on top of it, it is cold, describing at length how the cold penetrates through the “window cracks” while she waits for her body to warm the unwelcoming sheets (6-7). Claudia’s depiction of her house in the cruelty of winter time contrasts with the postal-like version provided by Bachelard, where the “snow covers all tracks, blurs the roads, muffles every sound, conceals all colors . . . and because of the diminished entity of the outside

world, [the inhabitant of the house] experiences all the qualities of intimacy with increased intensity” (40-41).

The narrator, Claudia, wonders however if time has not distorted her perception of her childhood domestic life, coming to the conclusion that love, in its particular manifestation, was “everywhere in that house” (7). Indeed, the love within the MacTeer’s needs to be analysed and decoded; its memory is not warm and cherished as it is in *The Poetics of Space* (14), nor does it have integrating qualities as hooks defends (41). It is “thick and dark [instead,]. . . sweet, musty, with an edge of wintergreen in its base” (7). The adjectives Claudia resorts to are loaded with bitter-sweet notes that subvert and challenge pre-conceived notions of motherly affection. The narrator’s portrayal of her mother –and African American women in general– is that of a woman who “beat[s her] children with one hand and [steals] for them with the other” (108). As Amanda Putnam notes, these violent outbursts are a reflection of the violence experienced outside the limits of the homeplace, that nevertheless “create new patterns and refuse socialized gender and racial identities that attempt to constrain them” (26) or, as Claudia puts it, are examples of “productive and fructifying pain” (7).

The entrance of Henry Washington as a guest at the MacTeer’s place gives a twist to Claudia and Frieda’s cold relationship with their parents as well as to the configuration of the homeplace. On the one hand, the MacTeer’s quick detection of Mr. Washington intentions towards Frieda, preventing any further advance, suggests a protective behaviour that is not expressed in words, not in their daily attitude towards their daughters. But, on the other, by accepting a guest their home is transformed into a hostel, prompting individuality, temporality and role playing (Augé 78). Indeed, “the steady worker with quiet ways” that Henry Washington is thought to be at the beginning converts into a lovable roomer who gives treats to the girls once he arrives to the

MacTeer's homeplace just to inadvertently invite prostitutes to the place when it is empty (9). His attempt to make those prostitutes pass for members of the Bible class once he is discovered by the children points towards the multiplicity of identity and role playing Augé links to non-places. But far from feeling at ease with the new possibilities offered by the non-place, Claudia feels "a cold wind [blowing] somewhere in [her], lifting little leaves of terror and obscure longing" when finding out the identity of the two women seating at her living room (60). Her inexplicable and almost premonitory fear that something wrong will come out of such situation transforms her home into a threatening space that she subsequently tries to avoid.

But the MacTeer's is not the only homeplace transformed into a site of flux and transience in the novel. If the arrival of a guest makes its consequences self-evident regarding the new connotations the place holds, the Breedlove's storefront house stops short at being considered a place that holds meaning and allows identification to its inhabitants. The different business and population –even nationalities– that the Breedlove's storefront has hold along the time does not only imply its fluidity but also its temporality. Before being a pizza parlour, a Hungarian bakery and a gypsy base, it was the home of the Breedlove, but their sense of belonging was constructed out of fragments whereas their identity, as I will analyze below, depends on the deeply internalized social look. The Breedloves' impossibility to give coherence to their relationship makes impossible not only to create familiar bounds, but also to shape a site to reaffirm their black identity. As a result, every member of the family develops escaping strategies, either by drinking, working for a white family or actually fleeing from home, as Pecola's brother, Sammy, does. Paradoxically enough, Pecola fluctuates among non-places, from the hospital where Pauline decided to deliver her –instead of "[having her] at home like [she had] done with the boy" (97) – to the MacTeer's hostel-



like home, seeking for the shelter and protection that her home cannot grant her. Unable to escape from the boundaries of the home due to her gender and young age, Pecola often visits the brothel at the top of the storefront to listen to the stories that one of the three prostitutes living there, the Maginot Line, invents for her. It is among those women that Pecola creates a place out of narration and personal links, challenging again centralized and balanced versions of home and place.

It is precisely during one of those visits to the brothel upstairs the Breedlove's place that Pecola comes to the conclusion that, according to her experience, love must be "choking sounds and silence" (44). As Sumita Roye notes –and is supported by hook's essay–, family life's role in shaping the child's identity is key, but what Pecola encounters is her parents "both copulating and fighting violently" (218-219). The Breedlove's place is therefore not only made out of fragments but of violence, it is a place to learn pain and racial difference. The violent episodes pervading the storefront makes the reader uncomfortable not only because of their grim and stark routine, but also because they are motivated by the Breedloves' belief that violence is what they deserve and what they can get, as Pecola shows by directing it towards herself. Pauline Breedlove's interiorization of the two most pervasive mass culture values, that is, romantic love and beauty (Morrison, 95), is translated into a redefinition of the mother/daughter relationship, where racial disparity dictates the treatment Pecola receives, for instance, at the Fishers' house. Whereas Pauline beats her for dropping the still-burning cake on her legs and the flawless kitchen floor right, she runs to comfort the "little pink-and-yellow girl" of the Fisher's family (85). The fact that most of the violent situations Pecola is involved in as a victim are witnessed but hardly ever helped, leads to the idea of the storefront as display of their encapsulated life that, despite being at sight, cannot be altered.

Such encapsulation gives way to an isolation different from the one Bachelard proposes for the childhood place, since it is motivated by racial segregation and supported by its inhabitants' "unfulfilling dreams of possession", as Nancy Jesser puts it (325). Pauline's first attempts to make a home out of the two-room house in Lorain are thwarted by her first exposure to the canons of beauty and happiness established by the cinema, where "[w]hite men tak[e] such good care of they women, and they all dressed up in big clean houses with the bathtubs right in the same room with the toilet . . . [which] made coming home hard, and looking at Cholly hard" (95-96). When Pauline "stopped staring at the green chairs [and] at the delivery truck" (95) hoping they would be one day delivered to her home and not to the neighbour's, and preferred working so those same things looked good at "the home of a well-to-do family" the process of humanization hooks refers to is reversed (98). It is interesting that both *The Poetics of Space* and *The Bluest Eye* put an emphasis on the importance of the material elements shaping the childhood home. But whereas in the case of Bachelard's work the home and the furniture within are appropriated and explored through daily care and observation (69), in Morrison's novel the African American's impossibility to afford places with "porcelain tub[s], with silvery taps running infinite quantities of hot, clear water . . . fluffy white towels . . . [and] deep pile carpets" as the ones seen in the movies and in the white people's homes gives way to devaluation and neglect of their own houses (99). As a result, the corners of their homes –and the Breedloves' place more particularly– do not hold any memories, "the joylessness stank pervading everything" (26) with humiliation and self-hatred that is again expressed through violence.

Indeed, the narrator highlights in several instances the African American "hunger for property" as result of the community's fear of dispossession and reification (11-12). In *The Bluest Eye* the process of humanization is not believed to be achieved

by creating an atmosphere of nurturance and self-affirmation, as hooks suggests (44, 47), but by owning, which shows the invasive weight of mass culture and white hegemony (Kuenz 421) according to which happiness is matched with white definitions and life models (Davis 324). As Kuenz notes, the influence of mass culture and consumption is so pervasive that instead of receiving familiar attention for Christmas, as she longs to, Claudia gets a white doll (426). All their efforts of buying “some nice little old place” and stop being “rented blacks” seem to be prompted by their attempt to become respectable “*colored* people.” (12, 67. Emphasis added) It is Geraldine, one of the black Mobile girls, who establishes the difference between “neat and quiet . . . *colored* people . . . [and] dirty and loud . . . *niggers*.” (67. Emphasis added) Interestingly enough, as she carefully “build[s] her nest” and starts behaving according to what she considers respectable she gets rid of her black identity or “funkiness”, as Morrison puts it (67, 64). That is why Cholly’s burning of his place is understood both as threatening and *defining* of their condition of outsiders; Cholly’s decision not to possess and be left outdoors mirrors what the black community’s compulsive consumption of images try to conceal, that is, their status of marginal and outcasts.

In a nutshell, in this section I have tried to illustrate how Morrison defies the normative and idealized version of childhood homeplace provided by both mass culture and philosophers such as Bachelard in order to represent the scars of the post-slavery society and give a textual space to those most beaten by society, that is, black young girls. As well as hooks’s site of resistance, the homeplace can also be a place of self-destruction for the African American individual, becoming a site to perform and redirect the violence received in the outside. The homeplace in *The Bluest Eye* stops short at providing a meaningful milieu for personal growth, giving way instead to a diminishing atmosphere. In the next section I will analyze how the hegemonic disposition of the

urban landscape as well as the lack of a strong, self-defined African American community is responsible for the devaluation of the homeplace and the children who inhabit it.

### 3.2 The Dynamics of Outside and Inside: Negotiations of Home and Community in Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*

In *The Bluest Eye* the porous and asphyxiating limits of the homeplace give way to the characters' confusion between inside and outside and a reversal of roles between place and space. While most of the characters' initiation rites take place outside, the fact that they are often followed by violence teach them that none indoors and outdoors are safe places for self-development. Moreover, their tendency to go outdoors is not prompted by an interest to find the support of the black community, but rather by a search of solitude and escape. Unlike most of African American fiction authors in the 1960s and 1970s, Toni Morrison depicts a fragmented and hostile black community similar to that of authors from the two first parts of the Twentieth century. The difficulty that *The Bluest Eyes'* characters have to find definitions and meaning outside the pervasive influence of white images –enacted both through the hegemonic disposition of the urban landscape and the already mentioned mass culture– disables any attempt to embrace their black identity as well as to set the pillars for a stable black tradition.

#### 3.2.1 Negotiations between outside and inside in *The Bluest Eye*

In *The Poetics of Space* Gaston Bachelard warns of the danger of confusing the roles between inside and outside, or as he puts it, of “doubt(ing) as to the certainty of inside and the distinctness of outside” resulting on the shaping of an ambiguous space where the mind loses its “geometrical homeland”, that is, the house of our memory

shaping the adult imagination (218). The loss of stability, both physical and psychic, is indeed one of the main subjects in *The Bluest Eye*, where characters often feel how the constraining and threatening boundaries of the homeplace can only be replaced by an even more threatening and annihilating outside space that can evolve into dangerous freedom, as in the case of Pecola's father, Cholly. I have mentioned in the previous section how being left outdoors implies a lack of possession and mental stability or "reinforced geometrism" in Bachelard's words, provided by the boundaries of the homeplace, which mirrors the marginal situation of African Americans in the (white) American society (215). But it also points to the black community's difficulty at contextualizing events and those who take part in them (Kuenz, 429).

Paradoxically enough, most of the intimate or organic events that are traditionally conferred to the limits of the home take place outdoors in the novel, highlighting such confusion between inside and outside as well as the characters' need to find a place outside the asphyxiating borders of the homeplace. It is worth-noting that Pecola first menstruates while staying at the MacTeer's place after her father had left the family outdoors. When Frieda, Claudia and Pecola sit on the porch to be *safe* from the anger of the MacTeer girls' mother inside their home and realize Pecola is bleeding, Frieda's first reaction is to take her to the bushes where their neighbor Rosemary can easily see them. Similarly, Cholly's first sexual intercourse takes place in an open field where he and his partner, Darlene, are easily discovered by an armed couple of white men, thwarting its consummation. Both of these initiation rites are followed by a violent outburst, either physical when Mrs. MacTeer whips her daughters and Pecola because she thinks they are "playing nasty" behind the bushes (22); or psychic, when the group of white men force Cholly and Darlene to keep on their sexual intercourse in front of them, what results in him directing his hatred towards those he can successfully enact

it, that is, young girls. The fact that outdoors is equally threatening and constraining as indoors results in confusion and violence, the latter being directed either to the community and family, as is the case of Cholly, or towards the self, as Pecola does.

It is worth-noting as well that the characters' tendency to go outside searching for the safety, intimacy and stability their homeplaces do not grant them with does not mean a greater unity within the black community. In *The Bluest Eye* the links among the African American community members are tenuous, giving way to an atmosphere of hostility, as I will further explain in the following section. Going outdoors is rather a step towards individuality and solitude that often leads either to a brief comfort in nature or to exposure to the racialized look of both whites and blacks. Right before coming back home to learn about her roomer Henry Washington's attempt to abuse of her sister, Claudia describes how she lost track of time while she was sunk in the grass thinking of ants and peach pits. The easiness of this scene is disrupted however when Claudia comes back to her home, which was "bursting with an uneasy quiet" (75). Likewise, Cholly's most vivid memory of his childhood bliss was during a picnic with his old colleague Blue. On the other hand, Pecola's strolls around the black neighborhood often lead to dehumanizing interactions with white people, as in the case of the immigrant candy seller, which make her destroy the dandelions she had thought to be pretty before. A similar diminishing situation takes place at Geraldine's home, when her son Junior tricks Pecola to get inside just to bully her and mistreat his mother's cat. When Geraldine, "the pretty milk-brown [Mobile] lady" comes back home and Junior blames Pecola, she is thrown out of the house not only because she is thought to have harmed the cat, but because she is a "a nasty little *black* bitch . . . [the kind who] crowded into pews at church, taking space from the nice, neat, colored children" (72), which reveals a racist attitude within the black community itself.

### 3.2.2. Brief Trajectory of the Role of Community in the African American Literary Production

During the 1960s and thanks to the impulse of the Civil Rights Movement, artists belonging to The Black Arts Movement worked for the shaping of a unified African American community to give shelter and express the distinctive creativity of black citizens in the U.S. As a result, authors devoted themselves to portray in their works –and more particularly in novels– a “vital community with a culture which nurture[ed] its members”, who are able to find their identity by the warmth of the communal network, as Elizabeth A. Schultz puts it (170). Unlike their literary ancestors, novelists during the 60s and 70s believed that meaning could only be achieved in community by sharing a collective ethos and at the margins of the white American cult for individualism (Schultz 171). The regenerative force of community was both expressed by celebrating instances of resistance during slavery as well as in what Schultz calls “initiation” and “salvation” novels (172). I am interested in the former, since they deal with a young protagonist finding out his/her identity thanks to the support of the community. According to Schultz, the novels of initiation often follow a similar pattern, where the young protagonist has to overcome a series of social trials, being the most important that of recognizing him/herself as black (172). She also notes that sometimes it is not the whole community who supports young characters in their path to maturity, but they always count with the backing of their family or, at least, that of a friend who goes through the same passage, “foster[ing] a sense of personal security and worth” in the protagonist and helping her/him to become a proud member of the black community (173-174).

There were, of course, exceptions that challenged the celebratory tone of the 60s and 70s when addressing the black community and Toni Morrison was one of them. Schultz notices that the author’s perception of the African American community is

closer to that of the Harlem Renaissance and the mid-century fiction where the lack of a strong cultural background was the source of a fragmented community with an undefined sense of identity, forcing the protagonists to start an individual quest of self-discovery (170, 183). Indeed, Morrison's rejection to privilege and portray in depth white characters, giving centrality to the black community instead –as she stated in her interview with Bill Moyers (1990)– is not only a political stand, but a way of showing to what point a brutal racist system devaluing black life can be internalized, as Putnam puts it (32). Because black people are divided from within and unable to define themselves due to the influence of white hegemony and the lack of a faithful representation in mass culture, there is no need to introduce any white character more than vaguely to feel their presence along the whole book. Such psychological split is what, according to Kuenz, gives way to a fragmented black community in Morrison's work (429).

### 3.2.3. The Case of *The Bluest Eye*

In *The Bluest Eye* Morrison depicts several movements from the impoverished Southern States to the more industrial North –Lorain, Ohio, in this case– where they are in need of a workforce. For the Mobile girl, Geraldine, moving away from her roots both geographically and through education –or rather, indoctrination– means establishing a line between *colored people* and *niggers*, and wiping away any funkiness and manifestation of passion that can be linked to the latter as a result. This dividing line also implies her locking within the “inviolable world” of her homeplace –so frightening and hostile to her son– and avoiding any contact with those who can contaminate it so that even “children will sense instantly that they cannot come into her yard to retrieve a ball” (65). Pauline Breedlove's movement first to Kentucky with her parents and eventually to Lorain with Cholly, seeking more job opportunities is also



followed by loneliness and uprooting from the communal networks of her family in the South. What she encounters in Lorain is a hostile environment that pushes her to buy clothes and change her look and way of speaking so that “other women [would] cast favorable glances her way” (92).

Apart from the above reference to the uprooting and parting of Southern communities from Georgia or Alabama, to cite some examples, as I have pointed out in the previous paragraphs, blacks’ problems when constructing a meaningful self in the face of white hegemony is what lies at the bottom of the African American psychologically split and hostile community in *The Bluest Eye*. In this sense the parable of the marigolds, planted by Claudia and Frieda as an offering to God in the belief it would make Pecola’s baby live, also appears as an image of the possibility of growing a cultural garden for African American people that would make them emerge vigorous and psychologically healthy at the margins of white mass culture (Willis, 80). Claudia’s realization that nobody is to blame for the marigolds not springing that year but the “unyielding earth” points to the American soil as the source and reason why the black community cannot bloom (3). As long as the white look is internalized the community will need of scapegoats, as Pecola is, to displace everything that is feared in themselves for being too black and too *funky* into somebody else (Davis, 329). Pecola, as the epitome of the marginalized black young girl for whom “it’s too late” to blossom, does not count with the help of the community in her coming to age (164). Nor does anyone foster her sense of personal worth, as it happens in most of African American novels during the 1970s, being victimized and made invisible instead (Schultz 172).

Interestingly enough, the role that white supremacy and hegemony play in this fragmentation of the black community is not only enacted through the display of mass produced images of white beauty and bliss, as Willis suggests, but also performed in the

layout of the city (77). The effect that the shaping and division of the city has in power relations is, indeed, subtle, but it also “insidiously intervene[s] in the daily life of Afro-Americans” (Willis 77). During Frieda and Claudia’s walk towards the Fishers’ place by the lake the divisions and disposition of the city is clearly exposed as a tool of domination and class-consciousness. The houses facing the lake are erected as a symbol of power and perfection because every social group has agreed to accept them as a desirable sign of happiness. As in the case of the park, where black people are not allowed, they are craved because they are unreachable. Interestingly enough, Pauline achieves more acceptance within the black community being a servant of one of those houses than she did when she came from the South with her hair not straightened and a distinctive African American pronunciation, showing the dangerous influence of internalized racism and urban shaping (Kuenz, 425).

### 3.3 Spaces of Shelter in *The Bluest Eye*

In *The Bluest Eye* Morrison not only subverts the normative representation of childhood home given by Bachelard in *The Poetics of Space*, but also offers alternative spaces for shelter and nurturance that challenge strategies of self-protection and mainstream (white) definitions of aesthetic forms. As I have mentioned in the first chapter, Henri Lefebvre believed that, apart from shaping and dominating the urban landscape, bourgeois hegemony does also manipulate and sculpt the mental space, a space of reductions where it is more difficult to fight such invasion (354). As well as the individual mental space, white hegemony dominates the black community as a whole in *The Bluest Eye*, giving way to a fragmented and hostile society that is unable to protect its weaker members. However, in the case of Pecola, and being mentally colonized by western popular culture as she is, her subsequent breakdown offers her, in Marilyn M. McKenzie’s words, “freedom in her own mind” (223). Madness is therefore redefined

as a strategy of survival that, despite of not offering integration of being or inclusion within the black community it does protect Pecola from her alienating and hostile environment (Roye 222). However, as the narrator notes in the novel, the protagonist also develops “methods of endurance” other than madness to face her harsh domestic situation (32). As a result, Pecola turns to a highly distinctive African American craft as the quilt is as a shell protecting her from the disruption produced by white hegemony. By introducing the quilt the author points therefore towards the community’s need to unite and find a common meaning despite the diversity of people forming it in order to create a space that gives shelter to its most unprotected members (Brown 924).

### 3.3.1 Madness as an Individual Space of Protection

In her interview with Robert Stepto, Toni Morrison describes past black neighborhoods as communities informed and shaped by a sense of cohesion and support, which made a room within its boundaries even for those members who were mad (11). The author’s portrayal of the black community in *The Bluest Eye* contradicts however such memory of a supportive African American community, suggesting a shift of values caused by the introduction of white popular culture and ideals. In this concern, Pecola’s breakdown is foreshadowed by the image of Lorain’s madwoman, Aunt Julia, “still trotting up and down Sixteenth Street talking to herself”, to use Mrs. MacTeer’s words during a conversation with her friends (8). As Jane Kuenz notes, the reference to her as “still trotting” implies that Aunt Julia’s situation is an old one that neither the County nor the black community are willing to take care of, as it is hinted in the already mentioned conversation (429). Aunt Julia’s “trotting up and down” is mirrored by the last reference to Pecola, “walking up and down, up and down, her head jerking to the beat of a drummer so distant only she could hear” (162), a situation that is again neglected by the community by “look[ing] away . . . [or] laugh[ing] outright” (162).

Turning again to Kuenz, the repetition of patterns in both women and in the reaction of their environment suggests the community's "undiagnosed and unexamined history of producing women like Pecola, that her experience –and the extremity of it– is not an isolated instance", for whom there are no room nor support within the black neighborhood (429).

Indeed, the case of Pecola is not reduced to *The Bluest Eye* but repeated in Morrison's following novels –Shadrack in *Sula*, Paul D in *Beloved*– where madness is produced by "a loss of self-identity [and] a separation of the self from itself" that give way to their social alienation (Bryan, 732). But despite these characters' disconnection from society, their mental disruption challenges constructed notions of madness or "terminal truths", in Foucault's terms (ix). In this sense, and focusing on Morrison's first novel, madness is conceived not as a crippling condition, but rather as a strategy of survival and adjustment. Pecola's belief that her prayers have eventually worked, giving her blue eyes, grants her with the sense of self-esteem and self-appreciation that her previous and self-inflicted "cloak of ugliness" had denied (28). At the same time, madness wraps her in a shell protecting her from being the target of scorn and social humiliations, prompting instead the community's self-examination. I would not go as far as saying, however, that madness transforms Pecola into an empowered individual, as Cedric G. Bryant suggests, since the last image of Pecola "picking and plucking her way between the tire rims and the sunflowers . . . among all the waste and beauty of the world" (162) is one of "agonizing alienation" as Roye puts it (222). I do agree, nevertheless, with the critic's reading of madness as used to highlight the failure of the black people to form a nurturing community at the margins of the colonizing white values and images which, as I have mentioned in the previous section, contradicts the celebratory tone of the 1970s African American output (733).

### 3.3.2 The Quilt as Epitome of Refuge in *The Bluest Eye*

I consider quite significant that Morrison chooses the quilt to convey a space of shelter and protection for Pecola in the face of a devastating domestic and social reality. As Olga Idriss notes, the quilt has traditionally been linked to African American slavery and the slaves' attempt to carve out a place where they could break their silence and express their experiences (67). Because quilts differed from white, European aesthetics and expressed female creativeness despite the rudimentary elements slaves counted on, they became "a covert manifestation of resistance" redefining history and conceptualizing their experience (Idriss 68). It is worth-noting as well critics' unanimity when referring to the unifying power of the quilt, which creates harmony and cohesion out of variation and diversity (Idriss 67, Brown 924, Richardson 680), an image that is often extrapolated to refer to the slavery and post-slavery black community. Bearing that in mind, and within the context of the disrupted and mentally colonized society depicted in *The Bluest Eye*, it is not surprising that Morrison introduces the quilt in the narration as a call for the need of cohesion and self-determination within the black community.

As a result, in the case of *The Bluest Eye* it is not the homeplace what takes a resisting and nurturing role, as hooks postulates, but rather an element more rooted within the African American community as the quilt is. As I have mentioned above, Pecola tries to disappear under the quilt after an episode of violence at home, where she "let[s] herself breathe easy" (33). As Elaine Richardson points out, quilts emerged naturally as a craft created "to carve out free spaces in oppressive locations" (678). This way, Pecola distinctively turns to a space that symbolizes creativity, protection, self-definition and freedom to hide under. Interestingly enough quilts are mentioned twice in *The Bluest Eye* and in both cases they are related to the Breedloves. Whereas Pecola

appropriates the symbolic meaning of freedom from oppression and representation of identity associated to such craft, the narrator turns to the metaphor of the quilt to refer to the family's attempt to create a common meaning: "[e]ach member of the family [was] in his own cell of consciousness, each making his own patchwork quilt of reality – collecting fragments of experience here, pieces of information there. From the tiny impressions gleaned from one another, they created a sense of belonging" (25). In this case, however, instead of suggesting "symmetry . . . through diversity" (Brown 924), the quilt points to an attempt to cohesion that is nevertheless frustrated by the surrounding western culture that promotes individualism. This, together with the lack of a supportive atmosphere within the African American community, disables any possibility that such attempt blooms.

To wrap everything up, in this section I have shortly explored the spaces of shelter in *The Bluest Eye* which, because of their subversion of preconceived notions of individual shelter, challenge Bachelard's belief of the need of a geometrical sustenance as the home is to create a mental refuge (218). First of all, I have referred to Pecola's mental domination and subsequent breakdown which, despite causing her ultimate disconnection from society, also gives way to a shell that protects her from the community's hostility and rejection she had been subjected to. In this sense the normative notion of madness as constructed by society is disrupted, being shaped instead as a protective space or a "strategy of survival", to use Bryant's words (733). Secondly, Morrison turns as well to an element deeply rooted in the African American cultural tradition as the quilt is to convey a space of refuge. Pecola's instinctive gesture of seeking protection under her quilt points to black children's need for communal cohesion and support to shape their identity and resist violence, two values that are historically linked to the quilt. The image of the quilt is used again to hint the

Breedlove's inability to give coherence to their disconnected relationship, an attempt probably thwarted by the intrusion of white popular values. Even though both references to the quilt are short I consider them worth-noting to highlight Morrison's subtle reference to African American forms that subvert white definitions while creating an aesthetic space for black expression that grants communal support.

#### 4. CONCLUSION

Toni Morrison's harrowing first novel, *The Bluest Eye*, gives voice to a version of the African American domestic realm that has been traditionally silenced in U.S. mass culture representations of the familial dwelling. In doing so the author distorts the notion of a protective, dreamlike childhood homeplace normalized and theorized thanks to works such as Gaston Bachelard's *The Poetics of Space*. Even though bell hooks – among other critics– praises the efforts of African American people to construct a nurturing homeplace that resists western attempts of domination, Morrison chooses to depict those places that have succumbed to the pressure of mass culture and a racist system where black people are doomed to invisibility. Violence, neglect and silence are therefore the values fostered by the familiar dwellings portrayed in Morrison's novel. As a result, home is transformed into a threatening place for its young protagonists, where the adults' thwarted dreams of ownership result on houses that are isolated from the outside and constricted from the inside (Jesser 325, 337).

Because these places have no cherished memories to hold to, or cozy corners to give themselves over to creativity and daydreaming, these young black girls turn to the outside of their homes, to their community, seeking for the support and understanding they do not find at their places. However, Morrison shows that the young protagonists' strategy of appropriating non-places and relaying on the black community is unfulfilling and threatening for them as long as African American people keep being colonized by

and consenting to the hegemony of the white, ruling class. Their failure to protect Pecola and prevent her tragic breakdown is used by Morrison to denounce the domination of a pervasive white supremacy that violates their mental space. The result of such violation is a fragmented black community which denies their black identity and turns to scapegoats to displace everything its members reject in themselves (Davis 329). Whereas madness in *The Bluest Eye* appears as a tragically alienating space of protection, Morrison's use of the quilt –that due to the limited extension of this paper I could not explore in more depth– is an interesting hint to the community's need of cohesion and reliance on images that are rooted in their past and tradition to overcome white supremacy and create a true place of shelter for its members.



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