Toni Morrison’s The Bluest Eye: A Dismal Haven of Harlots

“[W]hat’s the use of putting on something you got to keep taking off all the time (55)?” Toni Morrison’s The Bluest Eye tackles the ignominy of a post-slavery America by highlighting the scar on its history that fails to heal. It cannot heal without an empirical understanding of its origin and present function, how the effect of slavery continues to be felt posthumously, or rather after its dismantlement as an “institution”. In the text, the prostitutes are erected as a satirical apparatus in exposing the capitalistic agenda disfavoring black society. Marie, China, and Poland dutifully play their role as a cesspool of iniquity, meant to re-affirm the coveted mores of the time, but the trio assert their own identity by latching on to an authenticity of self. This re-claiming of self-hood posits an alternative to the white-centric capitalistic set up of society by asserting the traditionally disenfranchised to revolt, a revolution that is undetected because of its guise of “disgrace”. This can be found by analyzing the aesthetic practice of language, which delineates the symbolism connoted of money and female-body commodification, and why/how the trio’s values of authenticity, regardless of a well-intended premise, will ultimately be ineffective, as illustrated when Pecola as test subject inevitably fails as a possible rendition.

The whores in the text’s Lorain, Ohio told stories that were “breezy and rough”, a characterization that also encapsulates the way they exist: careless and crudely explicit (57). They flaunt themselves, speaking without censor and without any tribute to propriety. Their haphazard use of slang and colloquialisms further strengthens the divide between them and self-asserted morally righteous society. The names “China” and “Poland” are evocative of countries, ones that have historically played roles on an international scale. Naming the prostitutes “China” and “Poland” draws a telling parallel between the disenfranchisement of women and the vulnerability of pillaged states, usually characterized in feminine terms as helpless and in need of a (masculine) savior, a nostalgic appropriation of chivalric customs. A primary examples of this is the precarious status of Poland during (and before) World War I and World War II, notably being susceptible to invasion by Germany and undergoing more than a century of partitions by Austro-Hungry Empire, Russia, and Germany. This continuous overcoming of defenses can be perceived as a weakness, a term traditionally equated and gendered as female.

In The Bluest Eye, the prostitutes avow an aggressive tactic of subversion against males, proclaimed as their antagonists. In other words, they are waging an open war with men, to seek what they are “owed” (55). According to the Oxford English Dictionary, “vengeance” is “retributive infliction of injury or punishment” (1a), it is an agentic behavior that justifies one’s claim to counter-action. Historically, women have been placed in a self-contradictory position, bearing the burden of being prone to sin, thus inciting the corruption of their male counterparts. Prostitutes are notoriously stigmatized for this, and even though their business is a transaction between two parties, the male clientele is largely overlooked as an equal participant. “[T]hese women hated men, all men without shame, apology or discrimination (56),” utilizing the connotatively negative identity of “whore” as a means toward reclaiming what they have been denied: power. Here, language is packaged as a derivative of that power. Found in the text’s distinct linguistic dialect of the minority is a conveyance of this dynamic. It works to further assert an authenticity that simultaneously attempts to reconcile the “problem of the color line”, as proposed by W.E.B. Du Bois in *Souls of Black Folk*.

The “color line” is not a physical boundary that separates privileged white people from the other denigrated racial groups, in this case black Americans. It is an active process, informed by the parties’ imbalanced circumstances of times past and propagated via language and the *cooperative* induction of meaning. The “problem of the color line” is the problem of both the white community and the black community, as the former’s introduction of the “racial superiority” ideology cannot be successfully actualized without the latter’s complacency by passivity and/or active adoption of this mindset. Meaning is generated through an ongoing “performativity”. In The Bluest Eye, the narrator’s indirect commentary concerning Marie, Poland, and China is intriguing when one notes how singular this instances is, placing the whores in high esteem for their lack of pretention, compared to the ‘hypocrites’ of the rest of the black female community.

“They were whores in whores’ clothing, whores who had never been young and had no word for innocence (57).” The narrator’s description of the prostitutes in these terms can be interpreted as being in an advantageous position, having “no word for innocence” (57). “Innocence”, as cited by the OED is defined as “[f]reedom from cunning or artifice; guilelessness, artlessness, simplicity; hence, want of knowledge or sense, ignorance (def 3).” Marie, Poland, and China have ‘knowledge’ of things unvirtuous, they are shrewd and observant when it comes to the “sugar-coated whores” of the community that ‘beguile’ each other, their husbands, and themselves (56). Freed from innocence, they are cursed with this “double consciousness of being,” knowing how they are perceived but not letting social stigmas cripple them. Morrison’s “whores” are characterized by their unwillingness to cede this affirmation of self and conflate their identity to the compulsory prescription of white society. When the prostitutes speak, they do so in unflinchingly sexual terms, brazen and decisively ‘owning’ their livelihood and the way they want it expressed.

China’s rhetorical question to Marie, “Then why he left you to sell tail? (55)” is unrefined in its delivery, but almost deliberately so in its resistance to the proper grammar and phraseology of white society, maintaining its gritty flavor of alterity attributed to non-white minority-hood. Also, the question posed by China embodies the lack of alternatives available to not just whores but all the disenfranchised groups, “left to sell tail (55)”, re-inventing the human body as a lucrative good and a service, as a means of getting by. Taking this one step further, “vengeance” sought by the prostitutes’ inconspicuously works to re-claim an elevated position of self, re-claiming what is owed to them.

Prostitution can be understood as an exemplar of capitalistic ideals, paralleled with institution of slaver in a sense, both are cogs in their respective larger schemes of industrialization. Also, white people are the private sector that own the means of production. Similarly, prostitution is not controlled by the workers but is held by the wielders of the shame and stigma, society at large. Whips, chains, and lynches are replaced by derision, “fallen woman” campaigns, and scapegoating tactics meant to absolve society of its critical role in such atrocities. The effect, however, is much the same in that power has remained in the hands of the oppressed. In “The History of Sexuality”, Michel Foucault cites prostitution as the outlet for society’s “illegitimate sexualities”, redirected to “a place where they could be reintegrated, if not in the circuits of production, at least in those of profit (Foucault 4).” While slavery and prostitution differ, prima facie, the underlying component that conjoins them are the social conditions of body commodification and the subversion of the initial power dynamics as proposed by the China, Poland, and Marie in the text.

Foucault posits a way to eradicate systems of repression, consider his following call to action:

We are informed that if repression has indeed been the fundamental link between power, knowledge, and sexuality since the classical age, it stands to reason that we will not be able to free ourselves from it except at a considerable cost: nothing less than a transgression of laws, a lifting of prohibitions, an irruption of speech, a reinstating of pleasure within reality, and a whole new economy in the mechanisms of power will be required. (Foucault 5)

In Morrison’s piece, the whores hold the reins of the operation, asserting that the worker controls the means of production in a power shift analogous to a coup d’état, albeit a carefully latent one. Prostitution as a social institution is a commodification of the body, placing a monetary value on human beings, much like the dehumanizing enterprise of slavery. It is only in this space that untrammeled sex have a right to (safely insularized) forms of reality, and only to clandestine, circumscribed, and coded types of discourse (Foucault 4).” Here, self-actualization is not found by dismantling the system, but by re-interpreting that system and one’s place in it. It is a renegotiation of meaning that legitimizes the oppressed by re-charging them with a sense of individualistic entitlement.

Although the prostitutes are now free to create a space outside the rigid stipulations of society, to form a counteractive sub-culture that exists as a foil to the pretentious blacks, this alternative proves counter-productive and will be short-lived or will not be politically manifested except in small circles, such as the one that encompasses Poland, China, and Marie. This “progressive ideology” fails to “move” Pecola, instead merely “touching” her on a surface level. The whores present an ambitious metaphysical model, but not applicable. To undertake the whores’ philosophy would be naïve in its assumption that the circumstances are conducive to the desired result. Furthermore, an effective subversion, or an alternative to the presently proposed alternative, would require an overturning of a value system on a more ubiquitous scale. A campaign that requires a joint effort with the rest of the populace, to dismantle not only the “color line” that works against all participants, but a “gender line” that underscores the labeling theory at play, orchestrating how individuals ultimately define themselves by how they are outwardly defined in a self-fulfilling prophecy. Idealistic in their efforts, the prostitutes are not thinking in such macroscopic terms and will eventually be toppled by larger forces of society.

“If Pecola had announced her intention to live the life they did, they would not have tried to dissuade her or voice any alarm (57).” Conclusively, Pecola had expressed desire to “live the life they did”, not in a literal sense, but an ideological, though that desire was not brought to fruition. She wanted to travel, break free from the image of perfection society has positioned in opposition to her, but circumstance and the historical baggage of that have since patented the rights on “beauty” are an uphill battle an impressionable child is bound to fall victim to. Self-actualization, the desire of one to fulfill his/her potentials, cannot be attained due several antagonizing factors. First, Pecola’s age is not yet mature enough to process the complexity of the politics surrounding identity and to “find” herself amidst/against this war of representation. Also, prostitution or whore-dom is a doomed space/headquarters to perpetuate this attitude self-assertion because of its socially counter-productive label.

In “Cruel Optimism”, Lauren Berlant demonstrates the detrimental capacity of engaging in “attachments” to fantasies that may or may not be actualized, a “continuity” of this attachment to “the object of desire” persists as a means of crafting a semblance of hope. In short, “Cruel optimism” is “a relation of attachment to compromised conditions of possibility”, these conditions are the “objects of our desire” which are problematic because of the objects’ potential to harm the individual and the captivating feature of that attachment that is tenaciously enthralling (Berlant 21). Morrison’s The Bluest Eye is saturated with unfulfilled desire: the desire to be respected, to be adored, to be successful, all of which are derived from the desire to be white. Pecola symbolizes this desire, the devastation that sequentially results, and the devotion of Pecola, and other characters, to this optimism, maintained “in advance of its loss (Berlant 21)”. Pecola is ignored, ridiculed, and bombarded with images of the unattainable “white ideal”, yet this repulsion to the “object” of white-ness and simultaneous aspiration to *become* “blue-eyed, therefore beautiful and white, endures even in realm of madness. The dissociated state she falls into allows for Pecola to personify her desire in an “imaginary friend” Berlant would dub an “apostrophe”, “an indirect, unstable, and physically impossible but vitalizing movement of rhetorical animation that permits subjects to suspend themselves in the optimism (Berlant 22).” This introspective “intersubjectivity” enables to the “desire” to persist and successfully consume the subject, locking in an indefinite distortion between the “desire” and its actualization. By unyieldingly grasping on to the “desire of whiteness”, Pecola and the other black characters live vicariously through a proximity to the object that holds a “cluster of promises”, however realistically insatiable. The possibility that the whores propose of redirecting this attachment to an acceptance of self-identity is inoperative. This is due to its underestimation of the power of socially alluring emblems and the deep-seated, nearly impenetrable possession it has on an individual’s, and the community’s, psyche. This repression’s fortitude is owed to “[a] solemn historical and political guarantee protects it (Foucault 7).”

Poland, China, and Marie represent a proposed authenticity of self. Although not constructed via ingenuity or in a vacuum, they attempt to use the tools of their masters (“higher society”), so to speak, as a means of underscoring what is most at stake in the text: the dangerous potential of performing oneself as a cheap simulacra of an identity that had not been given ample opportunity to be first recognized, then manifested. Although this subversion is demonstrated with good intentions, the misdiagnosis of the social atmosphere is a counter-intuitive supposition that devastates the whores’ efficacy. The possibility of the socially demarcated “color-line’s” erasure lies in society’s self-conscious comprehension of” influence”. Individually, we must decide is the “exchange value” of opting to engage in hazardous attachments to certain desires is worth the cost.

Work Cited

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