



“They Lived There because They Were Poor and Black”: Spatial Injustice in Toni Morrison’s *The Bluest Eye*

Paola A. Nardi¹

Accepted: 30 September 2022 / Published online: 4 November 2022
© The Author(s) 2022

Abstract

This essay aims to investigate the function of urban space in Toni Morrison’s *The Bluest Eye* through the approach proposed by cultural geographers, such as Edward Soja, David Harvey, and Don Mitchell, who link space with questions of justice/injustice. At the same time, the essay considers some valuable insights of Black Geographies scholars like George Lipsitz, who argues that an analysis of the relations between power and place always needs to consider the factor of race. For their political implications and their focus on justice, power, and race, these two approaches might be particularly suitable for reading Toni Morrison, whose oeuvre is openly involved in the denunciation of injustices and social/racial tensions in the US contemporary scenario with a specific focus on African American communities. Framing a reading of her novels from the vantage of cultural geography reveals insights into characters’ geographies.

In *The Bluest Eye*, specific spatial elements like neighborhoods, streets, and houses are fundamental in building social relations as both places of contact or conflicts. In these places, injustices in terms of access to resources, job opportunities, and the (im)possibility of shaping one’s surroundings are created and become strikingly evident.

Keywords Toni Morrison · *The Bluest Eye* · Urban space · Spatial injustice · American city · Black geographies

The Bluest Eye, Toni Morrison’s first novel published in 1970, narrates the descent into madness of Pecola Breedlove, a young girl “yearn[ing] for the blue eyes of a little white girl” (Morrison, 2019), rejected by her mother, raped by her father, isolated, and finally abandoned by her community, “a total and complete victim of whatever was around her” (Morrison, 1979). The story takes place in 1941, the

✉ Paola A. Nardi
paola.nardi@unige.it

¹ Department of Modern Languages and Cultures, University of Genoa, Genoa, Italy

“momentous” (Morrison, 2019) year of the beginning of World War II for the USA,¹ while the book is set in Lorain, OH, the town Morrison grew up in, and that inspires her novel “in terms of the details, the feeling, the mood of the community, of the town” (Morrison, 1979) more than for the intention “to create that town” (Morrison, 1979). In the novel that she wrote because she “wanted to read that book and [she] could not find it anywhere” (Morrison, 1988), Morrison chose as main characters “the most vulnerable in the world” (Morrison, 2008), female black children who had appeared in American literature only as jokes, backgrounds, or scenery.

Race issues are the main focus of the novel in the particular declination of “racial self-loathing [...] and how one learns that” (Morrison, 2019). Morrison reflects on the concept of beauty amid “the reclamation of racial beauty” (Morrison, 2019) of the sixties, and she takes the cue from a conversation she had had with a friend at the elementary school who, just like the fictional Pecola, dreamt of having blue eyes, a stereotype of classic white beauty. Morrison wonders why “she should pray for so radical an alteration” (Morrison, 2019) that would make her appear like a “freak” (Morrison, 2019), rather than accept “what she was” (Morrison, 2019).

In his essay “Culture, Race, and Identity in *The Bluest Eye*,” Christopher Douglas reads Morrison’s reflections on the social construction of beauty in the historical and social background of the novel’s composition. In tune with the Black Arts Movement of the period, he affirms that *The Bluest Eye* opposes the “model of cultural assimilation of racial minorities” (Douglas, 2006) proposed by the case “*Brown v. Board of Education* in its overturning of *Plessy v. Ferguson*’s ‘separate but equal’ segregationist logic” (Douglas, 2006). Expressly, Morrison refuses the too simplistic idea that the pathology of self-loathing produced by a racialized society could be solved by desegregation and integrating African American children into the white norm. Without denying the pressure of “the social construction of white beauty [...] on girls of any race” (Douglas, 2006), Morrison complicates matters. In her novel, Pecola attends an integrated school and lives in an integrated neighborhood, which shows how the social constructions depicted by studies like that of Clark can have “bumpy, incomplete, complicated, and resisted” (Douglas, 2006) consequences. “In these instances, being at school with or living next to white people is not imagined as the answer that *Brown*’s social science seemed to promise” (Douglas, 2006).

Introducing the notions of segregation and desegregation, Douglas refers to an interview of Rosemarie Lester with Morrison in 1983 and reveals Morrison’s perplexities about the integrational vision: “I was not in favor of integration. But I couldn’t officially say that because I knew the terror and the abuses of segregation. But integration also meant that we would not have a fine black college or fine black education.” (Morrison, 1983). Morrison proceeds, clarifying her somewhat surprising declaration. First of all, Morrison questions the assumption at the base of integration that “black children were going to learn better if they were in the company of white children” (Morrison, 1983). Second, she explains her connection between integration

¹ Gillan describes the subtle allusions to the war in the novel. She argues that “Morrison recounts the history of the significant year from the vantage point of those who have been marked as peripheral in the accounts of this era of American history” (Gillan, 2002).

and the end of high standards in black education in terms of losing one's tradition by assimilation and redistribution of resources, a problem she still sees as afflicting present-day public schools: "The public schools in black neighborhoods are awful because there is no tax base there [...] Put the money into black neighborhoods, get it there, and we will produce our own excellent faculty, curricula, etc. It wasn't the mixing of human people that was going to solve the problem" (Morrison, 1983). That is not simply a question of "mixing people" to give African Americans better opportunities denied to them since their forced removal to America is made even more explicit by Morrison when referring to the mixed neighborhood of her childhood in Lorain, OH: "That was a poor steel town and there were many people from all over, first generation Europeans and Mexicans, and everybody worked in the steel mill. I never lived in a black neighborhood. What distinguished our neighborhoods was poverty, the same economic level" (Morrison, 1983). Her focus on the economic level while recollecting the Lorain she grew up in links urban space with class issues, as in the case of the fictional Lorain of *The Bluest Eye*, inspired by the real one. Although segregation based on racial identities is not portrayed in the narration—that mentions only a park forbidden to black people—and is not Morrison's childhood experience, the novel shows the reappearance of segregation under the form of economic inequality, which keeps African Americans, together with other minorities, locked up in the most underdeveloped, neglected, unhealthy areas of the city. As Morrison knowingly shows in her novel: "The Breedloves did not live in a storefront because they were having temporary difficulty adjusting to the cutbacks at the plant. They lived there because they were poor and black" (Morrison, 2019).

Keeping in mind the Lorain portrayed in the novel, this essay aims to investigate the function of urban space in *The Bluest Eye* through the approach proposed by cultural geographers, Edward Soja, David Harvey, and Don Mitchell, who link space with questions of justice/injustice. At the same time, I will refer to some valuable insights of Black Geographies scholar George Lipsitz, who argues that an analysis of the relations between power and place always needs to take into consideration the factor of race: "race remains the most important single variable determining opportunities and life chances in the United States. Nowhere is this more evident than in the racialization of space" (Lipsitz, 2011).²

For their political implications and their focus on justice, power, and race, these two approaches might be particularly suitable for the reading of Toni Morrison, whose oeuvre is openly involved in the denunciation of injustices and social/racial tensions in the US contemporary scenario with a specific focus on African American communities. Framing a reading of her novels from the vantage of cultural geography reveals how the places in which her characters live "can intensify and sustain [their] exploitation as workers, support oppressive forms of cultural and political domination

² In their "The Spatial Turn and Critical Race Studies," Sophia Bamert and Hsuan L. Hsu offer an enlightening overview of the relationship between cultural geographers and critical race theorists "put[ting] key concepts from cultural geography in conversation – and at times in productive tension – with scholarly and literary accounts of black, Chicanx, and indigenous geographies" (Bamert & Hsuan, 2021).

based on race, gender, and nationality, and aggravate all forms of discrimination and injustice” (Soja, 2010). Applying Soja’s analysis to Morrison’s novel brings to the foreground how space is at the same time a product of (un)equal social relations and a process that reproduces those relations; it reveals how the impossibility for characters of shaping their surroundings and improving their standard of life is caused by the lack of opportunities and resources (jobs, health facilities, unpolluted surroundings, pleasant landscapes, comfortable housing, etc.) of the place they live in, specifically their neighborhood.

In an interview aimed at clarifying the concept of spatial justice through a reflection on its practice, Don Mitchell states: “I can never decide if the fact that everything has to take place somewhere is so obvious as to be banal or quite profound. It’s probably both, which is part of the reason why thinking deeply about it seems always to open up new avenues of analysis and politics” (Mitchell, 2007). In Mitchell’s words, space takes center stage, an approach in tune with what has been defined as “the spatial turn in literary and cultural studies” (Tally, 2012). This spatial turn saw an increasing number of critical texts, scholarly studies, and conferences dealing with issues of space/place and using a great variety of geographical and spatial vocabulary.

Edward Soja has extensively worked on the concept of spatial justice, the subject of his book *Seeking Spatial Justice*, published in 2010 and constructed around three main principles: “We are all spatial as well as social and temporal beings, [...] space is socially produced and can therefore be socially changed, [...] the spatial shapes the social as much as the social shapes the spatial” (Soja, 2009). Spatial justice focuses on the social dimension of space, and in doing so, it highlights the role of space in producing justice or injustice and its political implications. Soja refuses the idea of space as a “dead background or a neutral physical stage for the human drama” (Soja, 2010) because space “is always filled with politics, ideology, and other forces shaping our lives” (Soja, 2010). Conceiving space as “an empty void” (Soja, 2010) leads to “depoliticize the realm of the spatial” (Massey, 1993), which can instead be thought of in “a highly active politically enabling manner” (Massey, 1993). According to Soja, thinking spatially about justice is not only an academic exercise. It can help uncover the dynamics and processes that have produced specific organizations of space and consequently sustain or try to change such dynamics and processes. “An assertive and explanatory spatial perspective helps us make better theoretical and practical sense of how social justice is created, maintained, and brought into question as a target for democratic social action” (Soja, 2010).

In a revealing essay entitled “City Limits, Village Values: Concepts of the Neighborhood in Black Fiction,” Morrison connects urban space with social and racial relations of power and indirectly with issues of justice/injustice by investigating the difference between what the city and the village represent for mainstream white writers and black writers. In the essay, she brings up the question of how African American people “as a dispossessed people, a disenfranchised people, a people without orthodox power, view the cities that [they] inhabit but [do] not have a claim to” (Morrison, 1981). When writing about the city, black writers’ emotions have their sources in the awareness of not “having contributed to the major decisions in founding or shaping the city [...]. For black people are generally viewed as

patients, victims, wards, and pathologies in urban settings, not as participants. And they could not share what even the poorest white factory worker or white welfare recipient could feel: that in some way the city belonged to him” (Morrison, 1981). Black writers, and black people in general, do not experience a sense of belonging as they do not actively shape the urban space they occupy.

Consequently, they cannot defend their rights by participating in processes that might organize space along redistributions of resources and costs that would favor justice and not injustice among the city’s inhabitants. Morrison underlines another negative consequence of the lack of control over the social production of the urbanized area on a more relational and immaterial level. This lack of participation has prevented black people from creating an urban space where “community values” (Morrison, 1981), which she calls “village values” (Morrison, 1981), might thrive and secure with the time the so-much-sought-for presence by Blacks of the ancestor, “the advisor with a strong connection with the past” (Morrison, 1981), “a social and secret outlaw” (Morrison, 1981) who would ensure “neighborhood links” (Morrison, 1981) and “provide alternate wisdom, and establish and maintain and sustain generations in a land” (Morrison, 1981).

Building a community and developing relations over time is among the rights to the city that Lefebvre defines as rights to freedom, to socialization, and to inhabit, meaning “to take part in a social life, a community” (Lefebvre, 1996), in sum the right to “participation and *appropriation*” (Lefebvre, 1996) which is not property but use-value. Interestingly, this notion of use-value is echoed in the definition of the black spatial imaginary developed by George Lipsitz. In *How Racism Takes Place*, Lipsitz describes the black spatial imaginary “as based on privileging use value over exchange value, sociality over selfishness, and inclusion over exclusion” (Lipsitz, 2011). He opposed such imaginary space to “a white spatial imaginary based on exclusivity and augmented exchange value [that] forms the foundational logic behind prevailing spatial and social policies in cities and suburbs today” (Lipsitz, 2011).

The Bluest Eye does not dedicate much discussion to space in terms of quantity, and the reader will not find extensive urban descriptions if compared with other books by Morrison, like *Jazz*, to mention one. However, details and moods, together with Morrison’s choice of language—at the same time politically charged and poetically evocative, “able to suggest rather than imitate, and to seduce rather than to force” (Khayati, 1999)—make the town vividly present in the mind of the reader as a space that shapes its inhabitants’ lives.

As with all of Morrison’s urban landscapes, neighborhoods play a central role in the construction of the story: “My tendency,” Morrison admits, “is to focus on neighborhoods and communities” (Morrison, 1979). The central neighborhood she presents in this fiction is an integrated working-class neighborhood of the forties, with a mixed population of white European immigrants and black migrants from the rural South. There is a “Greek hotel” (Morrison, 2019) in town where the nine-year-old Claudia, one of the narrators of the story, and her sister Frieda go and “listen to [the Greek] cuss” (Morrison, 2019); the Italian Rosemary Villanucci is the next-door friend of the two sisters, and the store on the southeast corner of Broadway and thirty-fifth Street (shortly the house of the Breedloves), has a complicated succession of tenants that include a Hungarian Baker “modestly famous for the brioche

and poppy-seed rolls” (Morrison, 2019) and some gypsies, which testifies to the “fluid[ity]” (Morrison, 2019) of Lorain population and its ethnic variety.

Pauline and Cholly Breedlove are instead representatives of the internal movement of black people towards the urban centers of the industrialized North and Midwest in the 1920s³: “We come up north supposed to be more jobs and all: we moved into two rooms up over a furniture store, and I set about housekeeping. Cholly was working at the steel plant, and everything was looking good” (Morrison, 2019). To the in love and enthusiast Pauline, the “young and growing” (Morrison, 2019) Ohio town embodies her idea of the American Dream, a town with streets paved with concrete, even the side ones, close “to a calm blue lake” (Morrison, 2019), with an underground railroad station close by and where the melting pot is finally realized. With these premises, “what could go wrong?” (Morrison, 2019). Pecola’s walk down Garden Avenue to a small grocery to buy candies erases her mother’s first illusion of a neat and orderly town paved all over. In this section of the city, a tuft of grass and dirt floor emerges from the cracks of sidewalks, making Pecola stumble with her “sloughing step” (Morrison, 2019). At the same time, the dandelions that grow “at the base of the telephone pole” (Morrison, 2019) depict an unkempt neighborhood in disarray.

In the introductory chapter entitled “Autumn,” the first-person narration of the nine-year-old Claudia offers the readers some revealing details about the neighborhood: an industrial, disheveled, rundown, and unhealthy area, crossed by railroad tracks, without a clear distinction between places of residence and commerce, and with a few owned houses that “loomed like hothouse sunflowers among the rows of weeds that were the rented houses” (Morrison, 2019). The neighborhood is far from the idyllic place first imagined by Pauline. It is certainly not among the areas that benefit from the opportunities brought about by industrial, commercial, and economic development.

In the evening, kids and adults together move around the premises of the Zick’s Coal Company in search of “tiny pieces of coal lying about” (Morrison, 2019) along unsafe railroad tracks causing cuts and bruises and breathing the “red hot and smoking air [...] of the ravine that skirts the steel mill” (Morrison, 2019). Poor urban dwellers surviving on the waste of industrial production that in return pollutes the landscape around—the two girls sink their feet “into the dead grass in the field” (Morrison, 2019)—causes illnesses—“on a day after a trip to collect coal, I cough once, loudly, with bronchial tubes already packed tight with phlegm” (Morrison, 2019)—and is not even enough to provide their house with warmth and light: “our house is old, cold” (Morrison, 2019), says Claudia, with just a room lighted at nights by a kerosene lamp while “the others are braced in darkness, peopled by roaches and mice” (Morrison, 2019). The three girls, Claudia, Frieda, and Pecola, consider “going up to the alley and see what’s in the trash-cans” (Morrison, 2019) as a pastime to survive “lonesome” (Morrison, 2019) and miserable Saturdays, which suggests a further connection between waste and this

³ For reading *The Bluest Eye* as belonging to Midwestern literature, see Long (2013).

neighborhood. Here, kids have access only to what the dawning consumer society gets rid of with not many other possible alternatives.

It is this poverty that bonded black and immigrants together, as Morrison mentions in Lester's interview:

What made our town or our neighborhoods and our schools coherent and free from any kind of conflict was the fact that the class was coherent. We were all in one economic class and therefore mutually dependent upon one another. There was a great deal of sharing of food and services, and caring. If someone was ill, people might come in and take care of him or her regardless of race. (Morrison, 1983).

While in a place like that racism had to be taught, and immigrants “did not necessarily arrive there with it” (Morrison, 2019), poverty was an experience common to all workers independent of their ethnic identities. Their interpersonal relations and the way they occupy space fit into Lipsitz's concept of black spatial imaginary mentioned before that favors affiliations and alliances over “hostile privatism and defensive localism” (Lipsitz, 2011). The ethnically diverse city dwellers of *The Bluest Eye*, with newly arrived immigrants still untaught of racial power relations in the USA, turn into a homogenous group where communal class functions like communal ethnicity: “ghetto residents have learned how to turn segregation into congregation. They have augmented the use value of their neighborhoods by relying on each other for bartered services and goods” (Lipsitz, 2011).

Although Lipsitz focuses his analysis on the relations between power, race, and place and affirms that racism is “not incidental, aberrant, or individual, but rather collective, cumulative, and continuing” (Lipsitz, 2011) in the USA, he also points out that “condemning whiteness is not the same as condemning white people. Whiteness is a structured advantage subsidized by segregation. It is not so much a color as a condition” (Lipsitz, 2011). It cannot be denied that segregation has been, and still is, imposed almost exclusively on African Americans and minorities; however, conceiving whiteness as a condition rather than a color avoids commonplace racial oppositional behaviors and allows original insights into the “conditions” of both Whiteness and Blackness as when he expands on the notion of Blackness linking it with sharing versus owning typical of whiteness:

Blackness in U.S. national culture has become the master sign of fear of the social aggregate, of the phobia of being engulfed and overrun by some monstrous collectivity. In fearing a linked fate with other people, the white spatial imaginary is innately antidemocratic. The lack of democracy in our society is both cause and consequence of the possessive investment in whiteness (Lipsitz, 2011).

It is probably the edifice where the Breedloves live that sums up best all the characteristics of the neighborhood, a house that is not a house but a store, a “box of peeling gray” (Morrison, 2019) where the family “nestled [...] festering together in the debris of a realtor's whim” (Morrison, 2019). The real estate agent

earns money letting people rot among his discarded eccentricities, in a building that should be turned down, divided into rooms by “beaverboard planks that did not reach to the ceiling” (Morrison, 2019), “with no bath facilities. Only a toilet bowl” (Morrison, 2019), and with furniture aged “without having become familiar” (Morrison, 2019). The behavior of the real estate agent is representative of a housing market whose priority is not citizens’ right to the city that includes access to decent living quarters. Even the attempt to enliven the house with a new sofa turns into a humiliating experience; Cholly Breedlove is forced to accept the just delivered sofa with a split across the back having no bargaining power: “Tough shit, buddy, *Your* tough shit” (Morrison, 2019). The product of unjust decisions and power imbalance, this hellish space embodied by the sofa becomes an active force that runs down its inhabitants through its joylessness that deprives them of any energy: the “hated piece of furniture produc[ed] a fretful malaise that asserted itself throughout the house and limit[ed] the delight of things not related to it” (Morrison, 2019).

In the Breedloves’ household, there is no room for the idyllic narration of the Dick and Jane primers that opens the novel staging the happy white middle-class family living in the suburbs in elegant white houses with immaculate front gardens. This American success story, promoted by the Dick and Jane primers, was adopted in public schools all over the country: “Dick and Jane primers [...] as textbooks in America’s public schools, [...] posit a national master plot that defines Americanness within the parameters of innocent white middle-class childhood” (Werrlein, 2005). Exposed to this mythical narration, black children, who for the great majority experienced a completely different life in urban-working class neighborhoods, might enter a process of refusal of their heritage and culture in the pursuit of an ideal that required the giving up of their identity, which is what happens to Pecola, obsessed with blue eyes as a mythical standard of beauty at odds with her ethnicity: “implicit in her desire was racial self-loathing”⁴ (Morrison, 2019).

Along with the experience of not belonging in the city, in her “City Limits, Village Values,” Morrison acknowledges some positive responses to urban surroundings among black writers. She clarifies that “the Black writer’s pro-urbanism, his eagerness for acceptance in the city, his anxiety to be individually free there [...] is clearly a statement against segregation rather than a respect for the intrinsic institution itself. The rewards the city can bestow on him are rewards for proving the stereotype to be wrong” (Morrison, 1981). A positive response to the city is a way out of segregation and racist stereotypes that condemn African Americans to a constant state of submission. Black writers’ “eagerness for acceptance in the city” (Morrison, 1981) is embodied in *The Bluest Eye* by black people’s “hunger for property, for ownership,” (Morrison, 2019) as they are eager themselves to prove their worth. “Spend[ing] all their energies, all their love, on their nests [...] propertied black people” (Morrison, 2019) apply for citizenship and hope to be included in that market-based economy of capitalism that causes their condition of poverty and subjugation but at the same

⁴ On Morrison’s concept of self-loathing and beauty in *The Bluest Eye*, one of the most studied aspects of the novel, see the following: Somerville (1986), Tail (2013), Walther (1990), Waxman (2003).

time plants in them the craving for private property. The process of dispossession continues in the capitalist desire to own that reproduces the conditions of dispossession of the dispossessed. According to Soja, “the inalienable right to own property [is] the central principle in defining the capitalist nation-state, its system of laws, and its revised definition of citizenship” (Soja, 2010). However, Soja underlines that “the naturalized sanctification of property rights and privileges” (Soja, 2010) is at the root of spatial injustice. Not only does it mark a sharp division between black owners and “renting blacks who cast fugitive glances at those yards and porches” (Morrison, 2019), it is also responsible for the disappearing of shared spaces. Similarly, Lipsitz underlines the negative consequences of an extreme interpretation of private property typical of the white spatial imaginary that “makes the augmentation and concentration of private wealth the central purpose of public association. It promotes policies that produce sprawl, waste resources, and generate enormous social costs in order to enable some property owners to become wealthier than others” (Lipsitz, 2011). It is just a question of time before the area around the steel plant is privatized, precluding poor urban black and poor immigrants even the possibility of surviving on capitalism’s waste products.

The Mobile girls, of whom Geraldine is a telling representative, show a different declination of “the eagerness of acceptance” mentioned before. To be eligible to live in “quiet black neighborhoods where everybody is gratefully employed. Where there are porch swings hanging from chains. Where the grass is cut with a scythe” (Morrison, 2019)—in sum, the idyllic home of the Dick and Jane primers—these black girls “adopt dominant white cultural practices and values” (Douglas, 2006). They transform their bodies to conform to standard norms of white beauty—“they straight their hair with dixie Pitch, and part it on the side” (Morrison, 2019)—and deny their culture through the erasure of their past: “Few people can say the names of their home towns with such sly affection. Perhaps because they don’t have hometowns, just places where they were born” (Morrison, 2019). The lack of acceptance of one’s body and culture and attempting to modify nature and heritage result in Geraldine’s vicious son Junior. Junior has grown up absorbing his mother’s white upper-middle-class values, including the sanctified, to use Soja’s term, “private property,” which persuades him that he owns the schoolyard: “Nobody can come through the yard ‘less I say so” (Morrison, 2019). Another common space disappears.

Losing contact with one’s roots and its consequences in terms of space and justice is what also happens to Pauline Breedlove. The happiness of her first months as a young bride in Lorain soon fades away, and she finds herself trapped in the loneliness of her two-room apartment. Not used to so many whites around - “colored folks [are] few and far between” (Morrison, 2019) to create a community - what mostly hurts her is black people’s behavior. They are “not better than whites for meanness” (Morrison, 2019), which catches her by surprise: “they could make you feel as no-count, ‘kept I did not expect it from them” (Morrison, 2019). Missing her people and unable to recreate in her new apartment “the stillness and isolation [that] calmed and energized her” (Morrison, 2019) in the “five-room frame house” (Morrison, 2019) in Kentucky, Pauline Breedlove survives finding refuge in the illusion of the movies and her new identity as Polly, the servant of the “affectionate, appreciative, and generous” (Morrison, 2019) well-to-do white Fisher family.

Not so close, but not even too far for Claudia and her sister to walk there, there are the suburbs where white people, including the Fisher family, live; the city transforms under the focused glance of the nine-year-old narrator: streets start to be tree-lined, houses look stronger, freshly painted with straight porch posts and larger yards. The closer they get to the place where Mrs. Breedlove works, the more the city improves in elegance and luxury. Brick houses replace wooden ones, “set well back from the street” (Morrison, 2019), with front gardens decorated with perfectly trimmed shrubs of “velvet green” (Morrison, 2019). Top of the line is lakefront houses where spacious gardens with gentle slopes reach the blue Lake Erie under a sky always blue and never run by “the orange-patchy sky of the steel mill” (Morrison, 2019). Rosebuds and fountains adorn Lake Shore Park, where “bowling greens, picnic tables” (Morrison, 2019) and shores offer a variety of activities for “clean, white, well-behaved children” (Morrison, 2019). Claudia informs the reader that the park is a forbidden space for black people, “and so it filled our dreams” (Morrison, 2019). These two radically different geographies of the city, the urban working-class neighborhood and the upper-class suburbs, are unjust geographies that “arise endogenously or internally from the distributional inequalities created through discriminatory decision making by individuals, firms, and institutions” (Soja, 2010) of which segregation, in all its forms, is the most evident example.

At the end of the long walk, the two sisters arrive at the “pride house” (Morrison, 2019) of the Fishers with the wheelbarrow full of flowers they had admired more than once. For the first time, they see Mrs. Breedlove’s other identity in this house. It comes as a shock to Claudia when she hears the little white girl repeatedly calling her Polly in anxiety: “The familiar violence rose in me. Her calling Mrs. Breedlove Polly when even Pecola called her mother Mrs. Breedlove, seemed reason enough to scratch her” (Morrison, 2019). The voice reveals the duplicity of this Mrs. Breedlove/Polly, a sort of Doctor Jekyll and Mr. Hyde. Abusing and insulting when addressing her daughter spitting out “words hotter and darker than the smoking berries” (Morrison, 2019) of the just crashed blueberry pie, she hushes and soothes “the tears of the little pink-and-yellow girl” (Morrison, 2019) with a mother-like tenderness promising her to bake a second pie and denying the identity of her real daughter. The three girls leave the house, in the background, Polly is comforting the little Fisher “the honey in her words complemented the sundown spilling on the lake” (Morrison, 2019).

It is Mrs. Breedlove/Polly experience with the Fishers that makes her realize the misery, plainness, poverty even of the new apartment she had moved into after the birth of her children: “soon she stopped trying to keep her own house. The things she could afford to buy did not last, had no beauty or style and were absorbed by the dingy front store” (Morrison, 2019). The white house by the lakefront transforms Mrs. Breedlove into Polly. Its smells, the abundance of food, soaps, running hot water, the glittering of the upholstery, the softness of the linen, the compliments of the landlords become the reign that turns her into a queen. With the Fisher, she experiences for the first time the pleasure and the self-assuring of the ruling: “Power, praise, and luxury were hers in this household. They even gave her what she had never had – a nickname – Polly” (Morrison, 2019). However, the spaces she lives in, one by day the other at night, remain firmly separated – the white house “a private world, [...] never introduced [...] into her storefront” (Morrison, 2019). The same happens to the two identities these two spaces host: Mrs. Breedlove, who

“didn’t care no more” (Morrison, 2019) after losing her front tooth and decides to “settle down just to be ugly” (Morrison, 2019), and Polly, whose “skin glowed like taffeta in the reflection of white porcelain, white woodwork, polished cabinets, and brilliant copperware” (Morrison, 2019). When she opens the door, Claudia testifies to her metamorphosis: “she looked nicer than I had ever seen before, in her white uniform and her hair in the small pompadour” (Morrison, 2019). Ugliness is not an “inherent fault” (Gillan, 2002) of hers, as Mrs. Breedlove thought, but a product of spatial injustice.

Polly, however, is a queen who turns back to being a servant when she moves out of the borders of white suburbs and who ends up living in a little brown house on the edge of Lorain still with her real daughter Pecola, gone mad at the end of the novel. Being “on the edge” (Morrison, 2019) is not only the final position of the Breedlove women; it is the place urban black people occupy from the beginning. In the first section of her first-person narration, Claudia affirms, “being a minority in both caste and class, we moved about anyway on the hem of life” (Morrison, 2019). The position of urban black people is peripheral as they were not protagonists in the building of the city; they were not involved in the significant decisions, which might have helped create more equal spaces.

The final image of Pecola moving around among “the tire rims and the sunflowers, between coke bottles and milkweed” (Morrison, 2019), searching trash cans, is a touching scene of urban decay and human degradation that is still very contemporary, but, unfortunately, there is no chance for an alternative narration in *The Bluest Eye*: “At least on the edge of my town, among the garbage and the sunflowers of my town, It’s much, much too late” (Morrison, 2019).

Funding Open access funding provided by Università degli Studi di Genova within the CRUI-CARE Agreement.

Declarations

Human and Animal Rights and Informed Consent No research involving human participants and/or animals has been carried out for the essay submitted. I was the only person involved in this study, so it was not necessary to collect any informed consent from other individual participants.

Conflict of Interest The author declares no competing interests.

Open Access This article is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License, which permits use, sharing, adaptation, distribution and reproduction in any medium or format, as long as you give appropriate credit to the original author(s) and the source, provide a link to the Creative Commons licence, and indicate if changes were made. The images or other third party material in this article are included in the article’s Creative Commons licence, unless indicated otherwise in a credit line to the material. If material is not included in the article’s Creative Commons licence and your intended use is not permitted by statutory regulation or exceeds the permitted use, you will need to obtain permission directly from the copyright holder. To view a copy of this licence, visit <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>.

References

- Bamert, S., & Hsu, H. L. (2021). The spatial turn and critical race studies. Pp. 261–275 in *The City in American Literature and Culture*, edited by Kevin R. McNamara. Cambridge, UK.: Cambridge University Press.
- Douglas, C. (2006). What *The Bluest Eye* knows about them: Culture, race, identity. *American Literature*, 78(1), 141–168.
- Gillan, J. (2002). Focusing on the wrong front: Historical displacement, the Maginot Lines, and *The Bluest Eye*. *African American Review*, 46(2), 283–298.
- Khayati, A. (1999). Representation, race, and the ‘Language’ of the ineffable in Toni Morrison’s narrative. *African American Review*, 33(2), 313–324.
- Lefebvre, H. (1996). The right to the city. Pp. 69–182 in *Writings on Cities*, edited by E. Kofman and E. Lebas. Oxford, UK: Blackwell Publishers Ltd.
- Lipsitz, G. (2011). How racism takes place. Philadelphia PA: Temple UP.
- Long, L. A. (2013). A new Midwesternism in Toni Morrison’s *The Bluest Eye*. *Twentieth-Century Literature*, 59(1), 104–125.
- Massey, D. (1993). Politics and space/time. Pp. 139–159 in *Place and Politics of Identity*, edited by M. Keith and S. Pike. New York: Routledge.
- Mitchell, D. (2007). What makes justice spatial? What makes spaces just? Three interviews on the concept of spatial justice. *Critical Planning* Summer 7–28.
- Morrison, T. (1979). ‘Intimate Things In Place.’ A conversation with Toni Morrison.” Pp. 213–229 in *Chant of Saints. A Gathering of Afro-American Literature, Art, and Scholarship*, edited by M.S. Harper and R.B. Stepto. Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press.
- Morrison, T. (1981). City limits and village values: Concepts of the neighborhood in Black fiction. Pp. 35–43 in *Literature & the American Urban Experience: Essays on the City and Literature*, edited by M.C. Jaye and A.C. Watts. Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press.
- Morrison, T. (1983). An Interview with Toni Morrison, Hessian Radio Network, Frankfurt, West Germany. by Rosemarie K. Lester. Pp. 47–54 in *Critical Essays on Toni Morrison*, edited by Nellie McKay. Boston MA: G. K. Hall.
- Morrison, T. (1988). Interview with Mavis Nicholson. Thames Television. You-Tube Web site. Retrieved January 4, 2021, from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UAqB1SgVaC4&t=283s>
- Morrison, T. (2008). Toni Morrison talks about her motivation for writing.” National Visionary Leadership Project: You-Tube Web site. Retrieved January 4, 2021, from https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_8Zgu2hrs2k
- Morrison, T. (Ed.). (2019). *The Bluest Eye*. Vintage.
- Soja, E. (2009). The city and spatial justice. *Espace e Justice/ Space and Justice*, 1, 1–5.
- Soja, E. (2010). Seeking spatial justice. University of Minnesota Press.
- Somerville, J. (1986). Idealized beauty and the denial of love in Toni Morrison’s *The Bluest Eye*. *The Bulletin of the West Virginia Association of College English Teachers*, 9(1), 18–23.
- Tail, A. (2013). The harm in beauty: Toni Morrison’s revisions of racialized traditional theories of aesthetics in *The Bluest Eye*. Pp. 75–89 in *Globalizing Beauty: Consumerism and Body Aesthetics in the Twentieth Century*, edited by Harmut Berghoff and Thomas. New York: Palgrave Macmillan (London).
- Tally, R. T. (2012). Spatiality. Routledge.
- Walther, M. L. (1990). Out of sight: Toni Morrison’s revision of beauty. *Black American Literature Forum*, 24(4), 775–789.
- Waxman, B. F. (2003). Girls into women: Culture, nature, and self-loathing in Toni Morrison’s *The Bluest Eye* (1970). Pp. 47–49 in *Women in Literature: Reading through the Lens of Gender*, edited by Jerilyn Fisher, Ellen Silber and David Sadker. Westport, CT: Greenwood Publishing Group.
- Werrlein, D. T. (2005). Not so fast, Dick and Jane: Reimagining childhood and nation in *The Bluest Eye*. *Melus*, 30(4), 53–72.

Publisher’s Note Springer Nature remains neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.