

Université de Montréal

The Trauma of Menarche in African American Literature

Par

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Résumé

Mon mémoire de recherche considère comment l'héritage historique de l'esclavage continue d'affecter l'expérience de passage à l'âge adulte des jeunes filles afro-américaines. L'impact profond de l'esclavage sur leurs ancêtres est transmis aux générations suivantes, influençant la manière dont ces filles perçoivent et gèrent leurs identités. En lisant « Corregidora » de Gayl Jones et « The Bluest Eye » de Toni Morrison, je présente les défis auxquels les filles afro-américaines sont confrontées lorsqu'elles passent de l'enfance à la vie d'une femme. Le premier chapitre de mon mémoire aborde l'impact des traumatismes intergénérationnels aux niveaux individuel et collectif. Ce chapitre explore comment les traumatismes émotionnels et psychologiques hérités peuvent influencer profondément la manière dont une personne comprend son identité sexuelle. Le deuxième chapitre étudie l'impact du racisme, de la pauvreté et des faibles conditions socioéconomiques sur le développement des filles afro-américaines pendant la période de transition de la puberté. Ce chapitre offre un aperçu de la terreur et de la sexualisation associées à la ménarche.

Cette thèse s'appuie principalement sur les travaux de Saidiya Hartman sur la théorie de « the afterlife of slavery » et sur le concept de « living in the wake » de Christina Sharpe. De plus, je m'inspire des travaux des psychiatres Bessel Van der Kolk et Judith Herman pour examiner le traumatisme lié au processus de passage à l'âge adulte et plus précisément l'expérience de la ménarche.

Mots-clés : ménarche, puberté, pauvreté, traumatisme, traumatisme intergénérationnel, esclavage, identité sexuelle, sexualité.

Abstract

My thesis examines how the historical legacy of slavery continues to affect the coming-of-age experience for young African American girls. The profound impact of slavery on their ancestors is passed down through succeeding generations, shaping the way these girls perceive and manage their identities. Through reading Gayl Jones's *Corregidora* (1975) and Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* (1970), I present the challenges African American girls face when transitioning from girlhood into womanhood. The first chapter of my thesis addresses the impact of intergenerational trauma on both individual and collective levels. This chapter explores how inherited emotional and psychological trauma can profoundly influence the way a person understands their sexual identity. The second chapter studies the impact of racism, poverty, and low socioeconomic conditions on the development of black girls during the transitional period of puberty. This chapter offers insight into the terror and sexualization associated with menarche.

This thesis primarily draws on the works of Saidiya Hartman's theory of "the afterlife of slavery" and Christina Sharpe's concept of "living in the wake". Additionally, I rely on the works of psychiatrists Bessel Van der Kolk and Judith Herman to examine the trauma linked to the coming-of-age process, specifically the menarche experience.

Keywords: menarche, puberty, poverty, trauma, intergenerational trauma, slavery, sexual identity, sexuality.

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Introduction

Around the world, menarche represents a symbolic event that marks the transition from girlhood to womanhood (Marván et al. 323). The word menarche originates from ancient Greek through the blending of *mēn* meaning “month” and *arkhē* meaning “beginning.” The Merriam-Webster dictionary defines menarche as the beginning of the menstrual function, precisely the first menstrual period of an individual. Menarche represents a period of hormonal, physical, and psychological development for young girls. It typically occurs between the ages of 10 and 15, indicating the development of the adolescent female body as it goes through the different stages of maturation. The breasts begin to develop, and the hips widen, revealing the body’s ability to carry and birth a child. Although enlarging breasts and hips are essentially symbols of femininity and motherhood, they also have social and cultural significance. These traits are heavily sexualized by men who view them as objects of male desire created for the man’s visual pleasure (Lee 351-352). In this sense, the pubescent body takes on a sexual significance, and menarche signals the beginning of both womanhood and female sexuality. Thus, menarche shifts from a biological event into a symbolic one demonstrating the girls’ sexual maturation and their ability to reproduce.

The personal and cultural significance of menarche makes the transition into womanhood a potentially traumatizing experience (Koff et al. 156). While menarche itself is a universal event, Lacroix et al. argue in their article “Physiology, menarche” that the way in which each girl experiences menarche varies as it depends on genetic and environmental factors, such as ethnicity, culture, and social class. The association of menarche and procreation affects girls’ sense of themselves and the way they deal with their own bodies, which can increase the

difficulty of the transition. Research has proven that the move from childhood to womanhood can be more critical for girls and young women belonging to lower social classes or having non-white origins. Indeed, Lisandra Rodriguez White highlights the ways in which ethnicity and income level shape adolescents' understanding of menarche and menstruation. In her article "The Function of Ethnicity, Income Level, and Menstrual Taboos in Postmenarcheal Adolescents' Understanding of Menarche and Menstruation," she conducts a study on black and white girls to examine the different ways they experience menarche. In her study, lower-income African American girls claimed feeling more unprepared for menarche in comparison to higher-income African American girls and European American girls. Her research suggests that the differing experiences lie in the lack of resources and scant efforts to educate working-class girls about menarche.

Another study, conducted by Huang et al. in 2009, reveals that African American girls menstruate earlier than their white counterparts. A result found in several surveys indicates that menarche occurs around four to seven months sooner for black girls than white girls, demonstrating that race influences the onset of the menstrual cycle.¹ Since only a few studies have been conducted to specifically investigate the reasons behind the difference in menarche age between black and white girls, the results are still inconclusive; however, the explanation behind this difference includes size at birth, weight, early childhood, and exposure to poverty.

¹ These findings are based on the research conducted by the Bogalusa Heart Study, National Health and Nutrition Examination Survey, and the Pediatric Research in Office Settings data. The results provided reveal that the difference in the age of menarche between African American girls and white girls was 12.1 years/ 12.5 years, 12.1 years/ 12.7 years, and 12.2 years/ 12.9 years.

For more, see: Patricia B. Reagan, et al. "African-American/White Differences in the Age of Menarche: Accounting for the Difference," in *Social Science & Medicine*, (2012), 1263–1270.

Hence, the age of menarche can vary depending on both genetic and environmental factors including social and economic status, family history, race, physical activity, and nutrition.

In order to have a better understanding of the differing experiences of menarche among black and white communities, we must first comprehend the origin of these differences. Hence, the primary purpose of this thesis is to uncover the basis of this disparity in the experience of menarche. The impact of the slave industry on the experience of menarche and the adjustment to the menstrual cycle has received little attention despite it being at the center of the sexual exploitation of enslaved girls and young women. In thinking about the system of slavery, one often gravitates towards economic, social, and political dimensions. The issue with such a way of thinking is that it obscures the sexual exploitation at the core of the institution of slavery. Indeed, the slave system accomplished much more than the abuse of enslaved blacks to ensure white masters' economic prosperity. This institution granted slaveholders absolute control over the black body, both socially and sexually, further imposing and strengthening white male power. The black body was thus turned into a commodity, an object whose fundamental needs and desires were placed below those of the master.

The experience of slavery was equally devastating for enslaved men and women. They were both denied their freedom, made to perform rigorous labor, and subjected to physical and emotional abuse. However, despite these shared elements, black men and women experienced slavery under different circumstances. In *Laboring Women: Reproduction and Gender in New World Slavery* (2004), Jennifer L. Morgan argues that "Gender furnished one of the crucial axes around which the organization of enslavement and slave labor in the Americas took place" (69). In this patriarchal and racist society, black girls and women had to bear intersecting axes of discrimination based on race, gender, and caste status. While I do not seek to suggest that the

experience of enslaved women should only be studied from a sexual angle, it is essential to note that it represents a crucial element to better understand their experience. Hence, enslaved women's gender and sexuality significantly influenced both the violence they had to endure and the means through which they were able to survive it.

Sexual exploitation has always represented a significant part of enslaved women's experiences. However, it was with the prohibition of the transatlantic slave trade that the white masters took an intensified interest in the black body. In 1807, the US Congress passed the Act Prohibiting the Importation of Slaves, officially banning the importation of slaves into any port or location under US jurisdiction. Thus, it became imperative for slave masters to rely on other methods, such as slave breeding, to maintain slave numbers. With the fate of slavery at stake, enslaved women's reproductive capacity became politically and economically crucial to the survival of the institution. With the passage of the act, the achievement of slavery's primary objectives depended on the exploitation of the reproductive capacity of black women. Thus, the practice of slave breeding intensified in order to maintain the financial gains of the plantation elites.

While this does not suggest that menstruation and reproduction are always intertwined, the focus on procreation leads unavoidably to the discussion of both. Considering that the labor force relied on female slaves' fertility, one can argue that the system of slavery depended on women's ability to menstruate. The beginning of the menses signals a woman's fertility, indicating her ability to bear children—or, in the case of the slave industry, to produce free labor. Due to the profits gained from slave breeding, child molestation was allowed with little or no regard for the morality of the activity. In *When Rape was Legal* (2018), the sociologist Rachel A. Feinstein includes the account of Hilliard Yellerday, a slave in North Carolina, who “observed

that enslaved young girls approaching the age of twelve or thirteen were expected to begin bearing children for the master” (22). In this sense, menarche is associated with the girls’ emerging sexuality, rendering them vulnerable to sexual exploitation. The event intensifies the sexual objectification of the young slaves’ bodies, which were used to both satisfy the desires of their masters and ensure their financial stability.² Accordingly, the menstrual cycle is transformed from a natural process of growth into a space of sexualization, objectification, and abjection of the black girl’s body.

The cessation of the slave industry did not halt the perpetuation of its aftermaths among the black community. The political and racial system that was established centuries ago still endangers and devalues black lives today (Hartman 6). The American writer Saidiya Hartman coins this phenomenon “the afterlife of slavery” (6). By using slavery as the grounding form to study the present situation of African Americans, Hartman does not limit the history and condition of black people solely to that time frame. Instead, she presents slavery as an atemporal event whose repercussions continue to shadow the present lives of black people. Hartman does not offer a mere comparative study between the past and the present to highlight the similarities between the two; rather she explores the enduring vestiges of chattel slavery and how they continue to both define and limit black people today. She thus argues that the modes of slavery might have changed, but the structure of the system has endured even after its abolition.

In recent years, the study of the continuing effects of Atlantic chattel slavery has interested numerous scholars, including Christina Sharpe. In her book, *In the Wake* (2016), Sharpe builds on Hartman’s claims, affirming that slavery is not a singular event as it continues

² I do not mean to proclaim that sexual abuse and coercion was limited to those who officially reached puberty, rather I explore how reaching menarche renders post-menarchal girls more vulnerable to sexual exploitation.

to hold black people in “the ongoing disaster of the ruptures of chattel slavery” (5). Sharpe explains this concept as “living in the wake” that is “living the history and present of terror, from slavery to the present, as the ground of our everyday Black existence” (15). Through her book, she focuses on “plotting, mapping, and collecting the archives” (13) of slavery to depict the ways in which the past still plagues the present. Sharpe defines “wakes” as processes through which “we think about the dead and about our relations to them; they are rituals through which to enact grief and memory” (60). She argues that African Americans today are still chained under slavery’s law of “partus sequitur ven-trem,” (15) which declared that children born to an enslaved woman would inherit her status and condition. Hence, Sharpe examines how the contemporary lives of black people echo those of the enslaved.

The enduring effects of slavery represent a profoundly complex subject that can be approached and studied from various perspectives. Both Gayl Jones’s *Corregidora* (1975) and Toni Morrison’s *The Bluest Eye* (1970) explore how the aftermaths of slavery shape the coming-of-age experience for young black girls. The two novels intersect by capitalizing on the issues black girls encounter while transitioning from girlhood into womanhood. The novels differ from one another with their distinct writing style and choice of narrators. *Corregidora* draws upon the historical context of slavery to investigate the ways in which intergenerational trauma shapes the identity of both the enslaved and their descendants. On the other hand, *The Bluest Eye* explores the effects of socioeconomic status and conventional beauty standards on the development of children and adolescents. Yet, concurrently, *Corregidora* and *The Bluest Eye* speak to one another on numerous levels. The fact that Toni Morrison edited Gayl Jones’s novel creates a direct link between the two works. Additionally, the two books share a temporal connection as they are both published around the same time and are set in the same time frame, exploring the

experiences of African Americans during the 1940s, a period characterized by racial tension and social change. Moreover, both works investigate the complex process of identity formation, addressing the enduring consequences of slavery on individual and collective levels. Through their exploration of trauma, race, and self-discovery, *Corregidora* and *The Bluest Eye* shed light on the intricacies of the African American experience.

The first chapter of my thesis focuses on Jones's *Corregidora*, highlighting how the inherited silence around the topics of menstruation and sexuality affects the ways in which girls perceive and manage their own sexuality. The novel follows Ursa, the last Corregidora woman, who was raised by her previously enslaved ancestors and forced to bear witness to these women's memories and sufferings at the hands of the Portuguese slave master, Corregidora. Throughout the novel, Ursa is tormented by the traumatizing history of her foremothers. With these haunting tales of Ursa's ancestors, the novel offers glimpses of the sexual exploitation and objectification of enslaved girls and women while examining how the legacy of slavery is passed down from generation to generation. Even though Ursa's great-grandmother and grandmother are portrayed as hypersexual,³ Ursa herself still struggles with her own sexuality. By the end of the novel, Ursa learns that a part of her ancestors' history was hidden from her. Ursa's ignorance and her lack of understanding are, thus, evident through her unfamiliarity with menarche during her childhood and her struggle with her sexuality during her adulthood.

³ In the novel, Ursa's grandmother and great-grandmother are regarded as hypersexual by certain characters, specifically Corregidora, their former owner, and Martin, Ursa's father, who view their behavior as lascivious and oversexed. However, their way of behaving is also related to their experiences of trauma. It can be read as both the internalization and resistance of the ideologies of patriarchal racism and predatory capitalism. Through these behaviors, these women reclaim control over their bodies, choosing how to showcase their sexuality. This will be further explored in the first chapter of my thesis.

The second chapter focuses on how Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* captures the transition from girlhood into womanhood, offering glimpses of the terror of the initial bleeding and the difficulties associated with it. *The Bluest Eye* recounts the tragic story of Pecola Breedlove, a young African American girl who grows up in a community that rejects and undermines her, leading to her descent into madness. By the end of the book, young Pecola is raped by her father—which results in an unwanted pregnancy, fully accentuating the reproductive potential and the sexual maturity attained with menarche. The story of young Pecola highlights the profound impact of socioeconomic conditions and the role of the community in the coming-of-age process. In *The Bluest Eye*, Pecola's experience is shaped by racism, poverty, and low social capital. The lack of resources and guidance makes her experience more challenging. Through Pecola's story, this chapter accentuates the impacts of socioeconomic conditions in shaping young black girls' experience with menarche, highlighting the importance of the community's support during this transitional phase.

Through the reading of Jones's *Corregidora* and Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*, my thesis, entitled *The Trauma of Menarche in African American Literature*, connects the experiences of young black girls across boundaries of time and space. The lives of African American girls today are entangled with the lives of their ancestors, those women who were born directly into slavery. Indeed, studying the history and condition of black girls and women today is inextricable from the study of chattel slavery itself. With my thesis, I do not strive to map the massive movement of slavery. I am interested in examining the ways in which this institution affects young black girls, shaping their experience with menarche and puberty. Drawing from Hartman's theory of the "afterlife of slavery" and Sharpe's concept of "living in the wake," this study aims to explore how different characters experience the transition from girlhood into womanhood in a context

shaped by the institution of slavery. It also relies on the works of Bessel Van der Kolk and Judith Herman to study the trauma associated with the coming-of-age experience. Through the experiences of Ursa and Pecola in the two novels, this thesis aims to explore the ways in which slavery, race, and socioeconomic status shape the process of identity formation among adolescents.

Chapter One: The Significance of Adolescent Sexuality in Gayl Jones's *Corregidora*

1.1. Introduction

Gayl Jones's powerful debut novel, *Corregidora*, investigates the aftermath of slavery and its enduring impact on successive generations of black women. The book follows the story of Ursa, the last Corregidora woman, who was raised in part by her enslaved ancestors and forced to bear witness to the memories and the sufferings of these women at the hands of Corregidora, an abusive Portuguese slave master. The novel begins right after Ursa undergoes a hysterectomy⁴, a significant event that thoroughly destabilizes her and sets her on a journey towards self-discovery. Throughout the novel, Ursa is haunted by the traumatizing history of her ancestors. Their stories continuously emerge under the form of fragmented memories and nightmares, disrupting the stability of both Ursa's life and Jones's fictional narrative. Through these tales, the novel offers glimpses of the sexual exploitation and objectification of enslaved girls and women, while examining how the legacy of slavery is passed down from generation to generation. Even though Ursa's great-grandmother and grandmother are portrayed as lascivious and lustful, Ursa herself still struggles with her own sexuality even as an adult. In *Corregidora*, Jones showcases how the inherited silence around the topics of menstruation and sexuality affects how girls perceive and manage their own sexual identities. Through Ursa's journey, the novel addresses the complexities of womanhood, sexuality, and trauma. This chapter offers an examination of the ways in which *Corregidora* presents the emergence and development of

⁴ The Oxford English Dictionary defines hysterectomy as a surgical excision of the uterus (or upper part of the uterus); an instance of this.

sexual identity.⁵ The first part closely looks at the experiences of Ursa's ancestors during enslavement, investigating the roots behind the inherited tradition of silence and secrecy among the Corregidora women. The second part offers an overview of the intergenerational transmission of trauma as is presented in the novel's narrative structure. In doing so, it explores how the memories of Ursa's foremothers shape Ursa's psychological struggles due to their active reanimation of spaces of enslavement and sexual assault. Finally, the third part studies the connection between adolescent and adult sexuality, highlighting the significance of the role of puberty in shaping sexual identities.

1.2. The Sexual Exploitation of Women During Slavery and the Culture of Dissemblance

While Gayl Jones's *Corregidora* offers a testament to the horrors of slavery, it does not conform to the traditional definition of a slave narrative.⁶ The novel essentially deals with the psychological consequences of the institution of slavery. The depiction of chattel slavery in *Corregidora* is incorporated within Ursa's story and is limited by her fragmented memories and nightmares, which are stimulated by Great Gram's narratives. Placing Ursa at the center of the story does not diminish the importance of Ursa's foremothers in the development of the novel. *Corregidora* features several complex female characters whose stories and experiences contribute to and influence Ursa's narrative. Indeed, Ursa's great-grandmother, Great Gram, plays a significant role as the primary provider of stories that serve as a connecting bridge

⁵ With the term sexual identity, I do not refer to sexual orientation. I use the term to describe sexual behaviour. – Stacey Joanna and Veronica Lozano assert that the term “sexuality encompasses sexual knowledge, beliefs, attitudes, values, and behaviors of individuals” (26).

For further reading see: Joanna Stacey and Veronica Lozano. “Adolescent Sexual Development and Sexuality Education,” (2020), 26-32.

⁶ The *Encyclopaedia Britannica* defines a slave narrative as an account of the life, or a major portion of the life, of a fugitive or former slave, either written or orally related by the slave personally.

between past and present. Through her narrative, she conveys the suffering and resilience of Ursa's ancestors while also transmitting the traumatic experiences they have endured.

To understand the history of Ursa's ancestors, it is crucial to understand the history of slavery itself. In the late eighteenth century, with the rise of abolitionism, slave masters turned to more efficient methods to manipulate and take advantage of the bodies of enslaved females. To ensure their profits, they created an environment where the exploitation of women's sexual and reproductive abilities was deemed legal and moral. Jones exposes the historical reality of sexual abuse, highlighting how it dehumanizes enslaved women by reducing them to their sexual organs. In the second section of the novel, Ursa has a conversation with her mother, where the latter repeats Great Gram's words disclosing the horrendous conditions enslaved women faced on Corregidora's plantations:

...that's all they do to you, was feel up on you down between your legs see what kind of genitals you had, either so you could breed well or make a good whore. Fuck each other or fuck them. That's the first thing they would think about, cause if you had somebody who was a good fucker you had plenty to send out in the field, and then you could also make you plenty money on the side, or inside. (Jones 120)

According to the historian Jennifer L. Morgan, "Women's lives under slavery in the Americas always included the possibilities of their wombs" (3). She maintains that the slave owners' wealth depended on enslaved women's sexual and reproductive potential. Her perspective aligns with the experiences of Ursa's foremothers during slavery who were subjected to forced reproduction to increase Corregidora's wealth and profits. During their conversation, Ursa's mother recounts how Corregidora systemically exploited these women, whom he regarded as commodities to be collected and used for his financial prosperity. She relates how Great Gram

told her that Corregidora was “cultivating” (118) women and forcing them into a cycle of prostitution. Great Gram declares that “he wasn’t the first that did it. There was plenty that did it. Make the women fuck and then take their money” (Jones 20). Corregidora’s actions were not isolated; Great Gram’s statement reveals the reality of this exploitative cycle favored among plantation owners seeking to increase their wealth.

These women become instruments in Corregidora’s quest for power and prosperity, their bodies are treated as objects to ensure both his pleasure and wealth. Through his use of these women as commodities, Corregidora “paid attention only to [their] genitals,” (50) disregarding their entirety as individuals. As a result, their sense of being becomes limited to their sexual and reproductive organs, erasing their individuality and collective humanity. As Terri Kapsalis accurately states in her book, *Public Privates* (1997), these women were “viewed as the ‘breeding’ property of their masters. The slave’s ‘duties’ may refer not only to her labor as a slave in terms of work in the fields or house, but also to her sexual and reproductive duties” (35).⁷ In this sense, the sexual and reproductive organs of these women become their defining features. Great Gram, in particular, was Corregidora’s favorite, objectified as “a good little piece” whose “pussy bring gold” (Jones 8, 119). The status of Great Gram further highlights the dehumanizing nature of Corregidora’s actions, as he only ties her worth and value to the financial gains she provides for him. In a sleep sequence, Ursa contemplates the impacts of this exploitation on “the generations [of women who] had to bow to his genital fantasies” (56). Indeed, this objectification reverberates across generations and is made more evident when Ursa herself gets described as a “little gold piece” (56) by her first husband.

⁷ She references this in the context of the pelvic exams. Before (and even after their purchase), enslaved women and girls were subjected to pelvic exams where their genitals were scrutinized and studied to assess both the health and sexual maturity of the slaves to determine if they were fit to do their *duties*. Pelvic exams were also used to ensure the progress of the medical field by experimenting on enslaved women.

Glimpses of the time of slavery occur early in the novel's opening chapters. In a conversation with Tadpole, the owner of the café Ursa used to sing in and her second husband, Ursa is asked about her last name. Instead of providing a simple answer, Ursa reflects on the stories her foremothers told her about their experiences as slaves. Her answer comes across as robotic and appears to have been prepared in advance and learned by heart:

Corregidora. Old Man Corregidora, the Portuguese slave breeder and whoremonger. (Is that what they call them?) He fucked his own whores and fathered his own breed. They did the fucking and had to bring him the money they made. My grandmama was his daughter, but he was fucking her too. (6)

Her response offers insights into the economic exploitation and sexual abuse her ancestors endured on Corregidora's plantations. After Tadpole's departure, it is evident that Ursa continues to mull over these stories. The narrative is disrupted by a fragmented memory that details Great Gram's experience as an enslaved girl who was made to leave field work and forced into prostitution by the Portuguese slave owner when she was still a child. Great Gram recounts that the master "would take [her] hisself first and said he was breaking [her] in. Then he started bringing other men and they would give [her] money and [she] had to give it over to him" (9). In another fragmented memory, she relates how Corregidora refused to engage in sexual relations with his wife, which led Great Gram to be sexually exploited by both her master and his wife. She claims that "for five years [she] was sleeping with her and him. That was when [she] was from about thirteen to eighteen" (11). Great Gram's sexual exploitation begins during her childhood and continues throughout her adolescence, a critical period in a young girl's life. In another memory passage, Great Gram contemplates this time in her life, reflecting on how

Corregidora “raised [her] and when [she] got big enough he started fucking [her]. Seem like he raised [her] fucking [her]” (165).

The sexual exploitation of Great Gram during slavery is a significant element in the novel’s narrative which heavily impacts her identity and relationship dynamics. Through the exploration of Great Gram’s sexual abuse as a child and an adolescent, the novel sheds light on the suppressed experiences of enslaved black girls. The story unravels the reality of the brutal slave system in which child sexual abuse was allowed with little or no regard for the harm of the activity. This depiction further highlights how traumatic experiences impact the relationship dynamic between Great Gram and Ursa, which is evident in the way Great Gram chooses to transmit her stories. While Great Gram shares a significant amount of their family’s history, she also chooses to withhold some information from Ursa. Her memories, in this sense, become “a potent means of silencing the past and the very guise of preserving it” (Hartman 164). Through her narrative, Great Gram effectively ensures the continuation of her family’s history while she simultaneously conceals parts of that history, creating gaps within the linear trajectory of events.

Great Gram’s selective storytelling reflects the complexities of memory and oral narration, highlighting how certain individuals choose to tailor their stories to protect themselves or those around them. In 1989, Darlene Clark Hine, an American historian, was the first to investigate the concept of selective storytelling among black women. She introduced this notion as “the culture of dissemblance,” arguing that it was the threat of sexual abuse that led to the development of this code of silence and secrecy. By dissemblance, Clark Hine demonstrates how black women might appear brazen and indiscreet while in fact they remain “an enigma,” consistently protecting “the truth of their inner lives and selves” (912). In *Corregidora*, secrecy shapes relationship dynamics between the characters influencing their own understanding of

their identities and family history. Indeed, Ursa believes that the survival of her ancestors “depended on suppressed hysteria” (Jones 56). This withholding of information becomes a self-protective mechanism to ensure the survival and protection of these women.

For the Corregidora women, the act of hiding the truth is not limited to a specific time or place. Rather this veil of secrecy prevails from one generation to another, becoming an inherited trait in the family. The hidden truths in the novel are essentially related to matters of sexuality and sexual identity. A major driving point is the fact that, despite her obsessive recitation of Corregidora’s abuse, Great Gram conceals a significant aspect of her relationship with him. Great Gram chooses not to disclose the emotional particularities of her relations with her former master, further complicating Ursa’s understanding of her family history. In addition, Ursa is denied access to her mother’s own life narrative. Ursa claims that her mother “*passed the other ones down, the monstrous ones, but she wouldn’t give me her own terrible memories*” (95). The limited access to her mother’s story denies Ursa a complete comprehension of her lineage, as her father’s identity remains an enigma that only gets disclosed by the end of the novel. Ursa’s ancestors hide these crucial aspects of her heritage, impacting the ways in which Ursa constructs her own identity.

Ironically, while these women choose to keep certain secrets from Ursa, she is expected to listen to and accept their stories without question. Ursa is taught to honor the history of her ancestors by accepting their stories without challenging their accuracy or addressing their painful impact on her own psyche. In a fragmented memory, Ursa recalls a conversation she had with her Great Gram as a child, in which she questioned the legitimacy of her narrative:

“You telling the truth, Great Gram?”

She slapped me.

“When I’m telling you something don’t you ever ask if I’m lying. (11)

In response to her questions, Ursa is either met with violence or “hateful look[s]” (57) from Great Gram. Her mother even encourages Ursa not to ask questions or seek answers from these women. These reactions instill fear within Ursa, stifling her curiosity and hindering her search for truth. Great Gram’s attitude towards Ursa’s curiosity reflects the broader notion of the culture of silence inherited in the family. Great Gram as the main provider of stories, exerts control over the narratives, choosing what to relay to Ursa and what to hide from her. By limiting Ursa’s questions, Great Gram ensures that her great-granddaughter is unable to uncover the painful parts that she has avoided or concealed.

Another dimension of the culture of dissemblance presented in the novel lies in the fact that the women’s narratives reveal little related to the sexual exploitation of Great Gram as either a child or an adolescent. Indeed, while *Corregidora* sheds light on the sexual abuse of Ursa’s foremothers during slavery, the novel focuses primarily on the exploitation of adult women, obscuring their childhood experiences. While the sexualization of pubescent girls is not adequately acknowledged in the novel, the topic still contributes to Ursa’s psychosocial development. Jones’s choice not to linger over child sexual abuse sheds light on the broader societal tendency to evade the brutal realities of the time of slavery. The author’s intention also reflects Great Gram’s choice not to acknowledge and address the impact of child sexual abuse on her identity, revealing Great Gram’s struggles with her own past.

Through their experiences, Ursa’s foremothers have become aware of the vulnerability and sexualization of adolescent girls. To protect Ursa, these women monitored her interactions with boys and withheld information regarding sexuality from her. While the narrative revolves around the preparation of Ursa to bear generations, it should be noted that Ursa would not have

been told about menarche and menstruation if she did not find her mother's bloody sheets by accident when she was nine. These protective measures eventually intensify Ursa's struggles as she grows older.

1.3. Intergenerational Trauma and the Trauma of Ursa

Through these depictions of slavery, the novel explores the notion of intergenerational trauma, highlighting how these stories are preserved and transmitted through oral narration. Jones moves slavery beyond a specific time and location, highlighting its significant repercussions across borders and along centuries. The novel investigates the aftermaths of slavery on succeeding generations, delving into how past traumatic experiences influence the characters' identities and relationships. Through these narratives, the story transgresses the boundaries of time and space, weaving connections between the American South and Brazil, reflected in the relationship between Ursa and her foremothers.

While the novel is primarily set in Kentucky in the late 1940s, it also unravels scenes from nineteenth-century slave life in Brazil through Ursa's memories and dream sequences. Throughout the novel, Jones makes sure that these two timelines are responding to each other to highlight how slavery continues to shadow Ursa's present life, and the black community, both psychologically and physically. Ursa believes that "we're all consequences of something. Stained with another's past as well as our own. Their past in my blood" (Jones 42). Indeed, the persistent rupture in continuity between past and present in the structure of the text highlights the way Ursa is still haunted by the memories of her ancestors. The scenes from her foremothers' past continue to interrupt and plague Ursa's present life. The shift between the two timelines feels unintentional; rather the memories emerge in a sudden manner, breaking the continuous progress of Ursa's narrative. This highlights Ursa's inability to control and suppress these

memories. While she does not experience enslavement firsthand, the traumatizing memories of her foremothers hold Ursa captive from childhood to adulthood and thus define the way she perceives and understands the world around her.

Ursa's exposure to the stories of her ancestors begins at age five when she gets integrated into the Corregidora women's circle of trauma sharing. These women are expected to share their family history and "to pass it down like that from generation to generation so [they]'d never forget" (7). Following the abolition of slavery, Corregidora burned all the official records proving that he owned and enslaved these women. Ursa's grandmother continuously stresses the importance of these burned documents, claiming that "they burned all the papers, so there wouldn't be no evidence to hold up against them" (11). In one of her earliest dream sequences, Ursa remembers her grandmother telling her that:

...they didn't want to leave no evidence of what they done –so it couldn't be held against them. And I'm leaving evidence. And you got to leave evidence too. And your children got to leave evidence. And when it comes time to hold up the evidence, we got to have evidence to hold up. That's why they burned all the papers, so there wouldn't be no evidence to hold up against them. (11)

Indeed, these women represent the literal proof of the experiences they have endured. Great Gram believes in the power of oral narration in forging a sense of continuity and leaving evidence of her family's experience and resilience. She instills in Ursa "the importance of passing things down" (122) and foregrounds her role and obligation to continue this process of trauma sharing across future generations. To keep their memories alive, these women make it their pursuit to make generations of women to whom they will pass down the family history of sexual and psychological abuse and who in turn will pass it down to their descendants.

This repetitive recitation, while steeped in trauma, serves as an ethical stance to their victimization. It can be seen as a response to the injustices inflicted by the exploitative system of slavery. The passing down of memories spans four generations beginning with Ursa's great-grandmother until it reaches Ursa herself. Each woman is expected to repeat the stories to her descendant over and over again until all their memories are merged together. Through this act of sharing, Ursa's foremothers exhibit their refusal to be silenced and to have their stories buried. The power of these words in the process of healing and resilience is evident when Ursa asserts that "the words were helping [Great Gram], as if the words repeated again and again could be a substitute for memory, were somehow more than the memory. As if it were only the words that kept her anger" (9). The repetition of these stories, helps Great Gram to cope with her trauma, heal, and reclaim control over her own experiences. In this sense, storytelling not only serves as a counternarrative against erasure and injustice but also becomes an act of healing and empowerment.

The American psychiatrist Judith Herman explores the difficulties associated with bearing witness to traumatic events. She discusses how in the case of psychological trauma, the victim asks the witness "to share the burden of pain" (7). The victims do not simply relate their traumatic memories, instead they "demand action, engagement, and remembering" (8) from their audience. Indeed, when relating her traumatic experiences, Great Gram does not expect Ursa to merely listen; rather, she demands of her to both witness and actively engage with her trauma. Great Gram's transmission of her experiences moves beyond simple storytelling, she urges Ursa to share the weight of the burden of her ancestors. Ursa is repeatedly reminded from a young age that she "got to make generations" (Jones 8). By asking her to bear generations, Ursa's ancestors expect her to internalize the trauma that has enmeshed previous generations. In thinking about

this concept of procreation as evidence, Tadpole believes that this tactic reflects “a slave-breeder’s way of thinking” (20). Indeed, the intention behind the act of bearing generations carries an element of resistance; however, it can also be regarded as a re-enactment of the time of slavery.

Through their quest for justice, Ursa’s ancestors recreate Corregidora’s violence and misogyny, unconsciously ensuring a continuation of the institution of slavery. These women are unable to separate themselves from the ideologies of their previous owner. While the Corregidora women believe they are defying the system and asserting their agency, they “continue to carry out their [former] captors’ destructive purposes with their own hands” (Herman 95). By relentlessly urging Ursa to bear generations, they inadvertently create a striking parallel between the treatment they have endured, and the treatment Ursa succumbs to. Ursa is caught in the aftermath of her ancestors’ enslavement, living in what Sharpe defines as “the afterlife of property” (15).⁸ In this vein of thought, Sharpe explores how modern-day African Americans are still “living the afterlife of *partus sequitur ventrem*,” a law passed in 1662, entailing that children of enslaved mothers would automatically inherit “the non/status, the non/being of the mother” (15). By continuously affirming that Ursa’s sole duty lies in bearing future generations, Ursa’s foremothers define her as a breeder, reducing her worth to her reproductive capabilities, further reinforcing the objectification they were subjected to. Consequently, Ursa’s fate mirrors that of her foremothers, weaving present, past, and future together.

⁸ Sharpe here is inspired by Hartman’s concept of the afterlife of slavery.

Through the transmission of their stories, experiences, and memories, these women ensure that the past is no longer confined to the burned documents. The struggles and triumphs of her ancestors are kept alive and contained within Ursa herself. The psychiatrist Bessel Van der Kolk explores how trauma affects not only the individuals who are directly exposed to it but also those around them. He underscores the impacts of these traumatic experiences on micro and macro levels, highlighting how they shape histories and cultures. The psychiatrist discusses how the effects of trauma are not confined to the realm of the mind and emotions alone, exposing the ways in which “trauma is held in people’s bodies,” (26) accentuating the interconnectedness between mind and body. Ursa claims that “her veins are centuries meeting” (Jones 42), suggesting that she is no longer a mere witness to their stories; Ursa herself carries within her the memories and legacies of her ancestors. As a result, the protagonist’s very existence becomes evidence and a testament to the legacy of slavery. In line with Van der Kolk’s ideas, by carrying her ancestors’ stories, Ursa also becomes the carrier of their terror, fears, and trauma. Instead of helping them cope with their trauma, this cycle of sharing becomes trauma-inducing for Ursa.

Trapped in the aftermath of her foremothers’ enslavement, Ursa’s very existence is shaped by “the history and present of terror, from slavery to the present” (Sharpe 15). Instead of simply bearing witness to the trauma of her ancestors, Ursa exhibits the behavior of a traumatized person. Years have passed since Ursa’s exposure to her family’s history and yet she cannot move beyond their traumatic memories. While Ursa may appear to be living in the present moment, she is psychologically bound by the timelessness of the enslavement of her

ancestors.⁹ In a dream sequence, Ursa reflects on a conversation she had with Mutt in which he insistently urged her to move beyond her ancestors' memories:

"Forget what they went through."

"I can't forget."

"Forget what you been through."

"I can't forget."

[...]

"Forget the past"

"I can't." (Jones 94)

The repeated refrain of Mutt's demands, followed by Ursa's unwavering response, illustrate Ursa's inability to sever the ties that bind her to the traumatic legacies of her foremothers. The past acts as an ever-present force, continuously interrupting her normal life course in the form of "flashbacks during waking states and as traumatic nightmares during sleep" (Herman 37). The weight of ancestral trauma, inherited through generations, makes it impossible for Ursa to simply move on with her life. The remnants of the past persistently haunt her, influencing her sense of herself and her perception of the world around her.

1.4. Relations between Adolescent and Adult Sexuality

Corregidora offers glimpses of the emergence and the development of sexual identities. Ursa's childhood as a captive audience to the sexual terror of Corregidora—the Brazilian plantation owner who raped her great-grandmother and grandmother, his biological child—has shaped her sexuality. Ursa's exposure to the history of her ancestors and the burden of carrying

⁹ Sharpe uses this notion to describe prisoners who were held in captivity and remained trapped in the timelessness of the prison.

their memories constitute pivotal factors behind her struggle with her sexual identity and womanhood. Throughout the novel, Ursa chooses to investigate the meaning behind the traumatized body she has inherited from her ancestors. Instead of absorbing and transmitting the stories she inherited, Ursa decides to uncover the elements that were hidden from her and to construct her own narrative.

The novel begins with a tragic loss as Ursa undergoes a hysterectomy and loses the ability to bear children. Ironically, this surgery represents the catalyst behind her journey towards self-discovery. This event sets Ursa on a journey to confront her maternal history and reclaim control over her own sexuality and reproductive capacity. The most pronounced site for Ursa to negotiate her sexuality is within the framework of bearing generations. This concept of “making generations” rests at the heart of *Corregidora* and raises questions about the interrelation between sexual and reproductive identities. After the hysterectomy, Ursa relates “feeling as if something more than the womb had been taken out,” initiating a new part in her life, “the barren part” (Jones 4). While this can be read as a painful experience, signifying Ursa’s loss and her failure to perform her duty to her ancestors, it also liberates her from the cycle of intergenerational trauma and helps her evade the burden of her family’s history.

Corregidora is divided into five sections, each one detailing a different part of Ursa’s journey towards identity formation. The novel's third section reflects the most vivid site to interrogate the impact puberty has on Ursa. After a transformative conversation with her mother, in which the latter discloses her own struggles with sexuality, Ursa decides to dig deeper into her own past, moving back in time to her own adolescence. This can be regarded as the final part of Ursa’s journey, as it is the last section before the novel moves into the present time narrated by adult Ursa in 1969. Ursa’s decision to revisit her adolescent year highlights the pivotal role

puberty played in her life, signifying her transition into womanhood, an experience that continues to heavily influence her during adulthood. In this vein of thought, J. Dennis Fortenberry, writes that “each adult – over a sexual lifetime spanning 50 years or more – extends the sexual adolescent that emerged with puberty” (280). He argues that sexual identity during adulthood can be regarded as an extension of the one formed during the adolescent period.¹⁰ While sexuality is commonly considered as a realm belonging to adults and necessitating adult maturity, Fortenberry asserts that the formation of said sexual identity occurs during early adolescence and specifically with the beginning of menarche. Indeed, menarche signals the entrance into womanhood for adolescent girls as they begin to both regard themselves and be regarded as maturing women. As a significant indicator of reproductive capacity, menarche becomes intertwined with sexuality and can be perceived as the stimulator behind the development of sexual maturity for adolescent girls (Lee 346).

From her childhood, Ursa is taught that her primary responsibility is to bear generations to continue the legacy of her ancestors. Indeed, in a conversation with Tadpole, he asks her what she wants in life, and Ursa mechanically responds “What all us Corregidora women want. *Have been taught to want*. To make generations” (Jones 19; emphasis added). For Ursa, who is desperate to honor her ancestors, the act of making generations reflects a long-standing bond between her and her mother, grandmother, and great-grandmother. Defining Ursa through her reproductive potential contours her relationship with her sexuality and the development of her sexual identity. In her identity formation, Ursa does not follow a progressive sexual trajectory. Rather, she is automatically thrust into the realm of adulthood and taught to want to have

¹⁰ In his essay, Fortenberry does not claim that adolescent sexuality mirrors the adult one, he argues that the sexual maturity attained during the adolescent period can represent a defining moment for the adult. That being said, he still acknowledges that not all the elements of adult sexuality can be connected to adolescent sexuality and that there are distinct aspects exclusive to each period.

children while still a child herself. Puberty designates the time when reproduction becomes possible. While she was raised to desire reproduction, Ursa is unprepared for the moment when she must carry the ancestral responsibility of bearing children. In line with the possibility of conceiving, menarche becomes a defining moment for Ursa, where she will be able to fulfill her duty to her family by bearing children. During this period, it is evident that Ursa was terrified of attaining sexual maturity and carrying a child. She distinctly remembers an incident in school where a boy was rubbing up against her. Ursa relates: "I wouldn't hardly eat for a whole week, thinking he'd given me a baby, even though I knew from May Alice that you couldn't get them unless they had it in you. I wouldn't eat because I thought starving myself would get rid of it" (134). Ursa is overcome by a sense of imminent danger related to her burgeoning sexuality. While reproduction is what Ursa has been taught to want, it is also what she fears the most.

The trauma of her ancestors affects Ursa both psychologically and physically. The embodied expression of trauma is evident in Ursa's struggle to engage in sexual relations. Ursa's fear is revealed through the struggles she faces with having sex, struggles which are intertwined with the trauma she has inherited from her ancestors. One of Ursa's most distinct memories during adolescence involves witnessing her friend May Alice's menarche and sexual awakening. After starting her menstrual cycle, her friend becomes sexually active, which leads to her pregnancy. Being older and more experienced than Ursa, May Alice teaches her about periods, boys, and sex. In one such conversation, the older girl relates her initiation into sex to Ursa¹¹:

"...I played like I didn't know what he was going to do, but I did. Then he put his thing in me, and my pussy got all bloody."

¹¹ While she seems older than Ursa, May Alice is 14 years old. She's still a child herself when she becomes sexually active and pregnant.

“You said you already bleed.”

“I do, but that’s not the only kind of bleeding a woman, I mean a girl, have to put up with. The first time a man sticks it in you, you bleed.”

“Does it hurt?”

“It does for a little while, and then it feels good.”

“Naw it don’t.”

“Yes, it does.”

“How can it feel good if it hurts.”

“I said it hurts for a little while and then all the hurting goes, and then it feels good.”

“I don’t believe you.” (130-131)

Ursa seems convinced that sex cannot be a source of pleasure. Ursa’s interpretation of sexual relations is tainted with her ancestors’ history of sexual exploitation. The association of sex and reproductive potential influences her understanding of intimacy and desire. Reproductive sexuality is inextricably linked to the violence Corregidora has inflicted on Ursa’s foremothers. She believes that sexual relations engrave the female body with trauma. In his article, Fortenberry proceeds to explore how “adolescence brings into play detailed and complex rules governing sexual display, sexual interaction, mating, and reproduction” (285). Ursa’s attitudes about sexuality shape her developing beliefs about the concepts of desire, sex, and pleasure. The fears she carries from her adolescence are more evident when she becomes sexually active as an adult.

Ursa’s capacity to fully embrace her body and enjoy her sexual experiences is curtailed through the confinement of her sexuality to her reproductive potential. This narrative creates an

equivalence between sexual identity and reproductive identity as she becomes unable to distinguish between her sexuality and her role as a child bearer. Ursa's failure to safely negotiate the transition from childhood into adulthood results in her inability to fulfill her preordained role. It seems that adult Ursa is stuck in that transitory period and remains in her original state of confusion and terror related to sexuality and the inability to bear children. As Van der Kolk elucidates, in describing the consequences of trauma, individuals who are exposed to, or experience deep trauma often find themselves "stopped in their growth" (53). Ursa's challenging transition into womanhood hinders her from experiencing healthy sexual development. This is evident through her struggles to express her sexuality, find pleasure, and convey her love and intimacy in appropriate ways. Ursa's adult life is tainted by the sexual ideals and behaviors she forged during adolescence.¹²

The novel's second section offers insight into Ursa's sexual life, which is still ruled by the fear she exhibits as an adolescent. For her, sex is painful and complicated. Ursa relates that she is troubled by the fact that she cannot enjoy sex; she is bothered that she is unable to feel anything:

"What bothers you?"

"It bothers me because I can't make generations."

"What bothers you?"

"It bothers me because I can't."

"What bothers you, Ursa?"

"It bothers me because I can't fuck."

"What bothers you, Ursa?"

"It bothers me because I can't feel anything." (Jones 85)

¹² This idea is further explored in the work of Joanna Stacey and Veronica Lozano previously mentioned in the chapter.

Ursa does not seem to enjoy sexual relations, claiming that she is “numb between her legs” (84). At the same time, however, she seeks intimacy from her partners. Herman explores how trauma causes individuals to both avoid intimate relationships and eagerly seek them out. For traumatized people, “their capacity for intimacy is compromised by intense and contradictory feelings of need and fear” (Herman 56). While Ursa searches for intimacy from her partners, she is unable to articulate her sexual desires and needs, which are tainted by the fears she has inherited from her ancestors. She seems unable to process her emotions since she has been taught that the only goal of intimacy is bearing children as opposed to attaining pleasure.

The most vivid scene investigating the connection between adult and adolescent Ursa occurs in the novel's third section. After May Alice gives birth, Ursa visits her in the hospital. In a conversation between the two girls, May Alice reflects on the similar feelings associated with giving birth and having sexual intercourse:

“She started telling me how the baby felt coming out from between her legs.”

“Don’t tell me about that.” I stepped away from the bed.

“When it happens to you, you’ll be wanting to talk about it too.”

“Naw, I won’t, cause it ain’t gonna happen to me.”

“Don’t be such a baby,” she said. “When you started bleeding you still acted like a baby.”

I bet when you have your first man in you, you’ll still act like you do now. Like a baby.” (137)

Ursa’s fear of pregnancy and bearing children is evident in this scene. Ursa physically recoils from the conversation and insists that she will not be having children or sexual relations in the future. The experience of terror during this time of her life continues to haunt adult Ursa. In one

scene between Mutt and Ursa, the latter is portrayed as struggling to have sex. While Mutt is understanding and starts soothing Ursa, his affection reopens the unresolved conflicts of childhood and adolescence. His act makes Ursa relive the struggles she harbored as an adolescent over sexuality, identity, and intimacy. Ursa views Mutt's soothing as a reflection of the way one soothes a baby. Consequently, Ursa remembers being labeled as a baby during adolescence and conveys her fears to Mutt, claiming that "I act like a child, don't I? Somebody told me even after I'd had a man, I'd still act like a child" (146). Indeed, Ursa's experiences as an adolescent are revived after the trauma she experiences with Mutt, especially him being the cause of her miscarriage and hysterectomy. Even after her divorce from Mutt, these memories continue to plague and affect her adult self.

Ursa's struggles are inextricably linked to both the inherited trauma she carries and her complex relationship with her mother. Ursa fails to connect with her mother, whom she describes as "closed up like a fist" (96). Their relationship is defined by an emotional distance, as Ursa's mother consciously chooses to conceal her memories and emotions from her daughter. According to the psychologist Faye Z. Belgrave, a girl identifies with her mother in order to create a sense of mature female identity as the latter models, both directly and indirectly, appropriate behavior. In her book *African American Girls* (2009), she argues that "Mothers teach and socialize their daughters about every aspect of her life, including being female, being a mother, how to relate to and care for others, and about health, and sexuality" (39). In Ursa's case, her mother's secretive nature and her reluctance to share her experiences hinder Ursa's ability to understand her and identify with her. The absence of this maternal connection and guidance leaves Ursa alienated and disconnected. As a result, she lacks the knowledge needed to fully mature and develop. Ursa's yearning to connect with her mother is assuaged only when she visits

her and discovers her private memories, which occurs later in the novel when Ursa is middle-aged.

The conversation serves as a critical moment of connection and understanding between the two women. In relating details about her relationship with Ursa's father, her mother discloses her own struggles with sexuality, claiming that "Corregidora is responsible for that part of [her] life, if Corregidora hadn't happened that part of [her] life never would have happened" (Jones 105). In the context of Corregidora's legacy, the relationship Ursa's mother fosters with her ex-husband is influenced by the trauma she experiences and the necessity to bear generations. Ursa's mother, who is also taught that her sole role is to make generations, feels obligated to continue the family lineage. This impacts the mother's understanding of her relationship with her partner. Fueled by the haunting legacy of her ancestors, Ursa's mother only desires sexual relations to fulfill her primary role and give birth to Ursa. While describing her experience with sex, her mother admits that she was incapable of feeling the pleasure associated with the act. Her struggles with her sexuality are evident through her continuous assertion of "I didn't feel like a woman" (108). Her admission of not feeling like a woman underscores the profound effects of her family trauma on her understanding of womanhood and her own sexual identity. The mother's situation mirrors that of her daughter; the legacy of their ancestors inordinately influences these two women's relationships and experiences. By being able to relate to her mother, this conversation serves as a catalyst for Ursa to move beyond the trauma of her foremothers and discover her own sexuality.

Following her conversation with her mother, Ursa, who finally understands the way her struggles were shaped by Corregidora's legacy, returns to her first husband Mutt. Having uncovered the secrets of her family, Ursa is ready to take control of her own identity. As a result

of her inability to conceive, Ursa is no longer confined to the constraints of her family's legacy. Consequently, her sexual identity is no longer defined by her reproductive potential. Being free from her foremothers' influence enables Ursa to embrace her sexuality and desire and to experience sexual intimacy on her own terms. When she returns to Mutt, Ursa successfully uncovers the last missing piece from her family's story. Ursa understands that the act that Great Gram did to Corregidora "had to be something sexual" (176), she thus deciphers that Great Gram also used her sexuality as a means of fulfillment, agency, and vengeance, rather than just a reproductive tool. This recognition pushes Ursa to use her sexuality for her own satisfaction. For the first time in the novel, her ancestors' memories do not emerge as disruptive dream sequences or fragmented memories. Ursa chooses to reanimate the memory of her foremothers by recreating the scene between Great Gram and Corregidora on her own terms.

1.5. Conclusion

Gayl Jones's *Corregidora* offers a compelling exploration of intergenerational trauma and its significant impact on succeeding generations. Through the experiences of the Corregidora women, the novel offers insight into the sexual abuse of enslaved girls and women, while examining how the legacy of slavery is transmitted through generations. Jones probes the complexities of individual and collective memories, highlighting the consequences related to concealing truths. Through the lives of the women, the novel offers a complex study of the themes of womanhood, identity, and sexuality within a context of a history profoundly marked by pain and violence. Most importantly, *Corregidora* provides an opportunity to ponder the significance of puberty in defining sexual identity and behaviors. The novel examines the way Ursa's experience as an adolescent as well as the experience of her foremothers become part of her own ancestral memory, one that shapes her identity formation.

Chapter Two: The Trauma of the First Bleeding in Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*

1.1. Introduction

Toni Morrison's 1970 novel *The Bluest Eye* recounts the tragic story of Pecola Breedlove, a young African American girl who grows up in a community that rejects and undermines her, leading to her descent into madness. The novel offers a powerful image of the difficulties encountered by black girls as they navigate adolescence and the transformative period of puberty. Morrison exposes how the intersection of racial, gender, and socioeconomic oppression renders this experience unique and more difficult for black girls. Through the experiences of the three main characters, Pecola, Claudia, and Freida, the author illustrates the damaging impact social expectations can have on a child's journey towards growth and self-discovery. *The Bluest Eye* is mainly narrated from the perspective of Claudia, both as a child and an adult, reminiscing about her childhood. In addition, there is a section in the novel told from the perspective of adolescent Pauline and Cholly. Regardless of the shift in narrators, the author consciously chooses to relay the stories of children and adolescents from their own perspectives. In an interview, Morrison explains that the reason behind writing *The Bluest Eye* was because "[she] wanted to read about people who were Black and were young and nobody wrote about them. And whenever they did [write about them] they were never center stage" ("Why I wrote *The Bluest Eye*"). While the novel is told from the innocent perspective of children, it remains a story brimming with trauma. From Pecola's experience with menarche to the brutal act of her rape, *The Bluest Eye* chronicles the trajectory of trauma in the little girl's life, eventually leading to her dissociation and descent into madness. This chapter investigates the transition from

girlhood into womanhood as is presented in the novel. The first part studies the economic situation of Pecola's family, exploring the ways in which it influences her coming-of-age journey. The second part delves into Pecola's experience with menarche, offering glimpses of the terror of the first bleeding and the sexualization associated with it. Finally, the third part studies the role of the community during the transition from childhood into adulthood, highlighting the importance of support and guidance for adolescents.

1.2. Pecola's Coming of Age

In Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*, the depiction of Pecola Breedlove's coming of age is inextricably connected to the complex interplay of race, class, and socioeconomic status. Through Pecola's experience, the novel highlights how these factors impact the development of children and adolescents. Pecola's story epitomizes the effects of systemic disparities on the identity formation of young girls. As an impoverished black girl, Pecola's experience with puberty in *The Bluest Eye* becomes more complex and challenging. Her experience is shaped by her family's economic situation and their social standing, which exacerbate the difficulties she faces. The novel, thus, underscores how these systemic inequities alter the experiences of young girls by affecting the ways in which they navigate the transition from girlhood to womanhood.

Pecola comes from an economically disadvantaged family. When they first got married, her parents migrated together from Kentucky to Lorain, Ohio, because there were more job opportunities there. Pauline and Cholly moved north with the hope that their lives would become better and that their financial condition would improve.¹³ However, life becomes more difficult,

¹³ Pecola's parents were part of a major migration wave in the United States. It was known as the second wave of the Great Migration, occurring from the 1940s to the 1970s, when millions of African Americans moved from the South towards Northern states to seek better economic conditions and more job opportunities.

and they find themselves struggling financially. Pauline works as a house servant for a white family, the Fishers, where she spends long hours cleaning and caring for their children while getting paid minimum wage. Cholly is a blue-collar worker who holds a job at a steel mill, a position often associated with dangerous working conditions and low pay. During this time, due to limited work opportunities and racial segregation, these two occupations were among the only available options for African Americans. Black women usually found themselves working as house servants or laundresses, and black men often gravitated towards mining and railway work.¹⁴ Consequently, these low-paying jobs do not provide Pauline and Cholly with sufficient income to provide for their family.

The Breedloves's economic instability is evident in the condition of their living situation. The family of four lives on the first floor of a two-story, abandoned building that was once a storefront. While the current occupants of the neighborhood might have forgotten about the Breedlove family, Claudia still remembers the way the family lived "nestled together in the storefront" (34). In her recollections, she offers a picture of the family's living conditions:

There was a living room, which the family called the front room, and the bedroom, where all the living was done... The bedroom had three beds: a narrow iron bed for Sammy, fourteen years old, another for Pecola, eleven years old, and a double bed for Cholly and Mrs. Breedlove. In the center of the bedroom, for the even distribution of heat, stood a coal stove. Trunks, chairs and a small end table, and a cardboard "wardrobe" closet were placed around the walls. The kitchen was in the back of this apartment, a separate room.

¹⁴ For more information on the working conditions and statistics of African Americans go to: <https://www.loc.gov/collections/america-at-work-and-leisure-1894-to-1915/articles-and-essays/america-at-work/>.

There were no bath facilities. Only a toilet bowl, inaccessible to the eye, if not the ear, of the tenants. (35)

This chapter is dedicated to describing the family's house. The settings of their living situation can be read as a reflection of the family's impoverishment. Just like the abandoned store, the Breedloves do not harmonize with the other families in the neighborhood, and they are either ignored or harassed by the other residents. Additionally, the house indicates the family's economic struggles, emphasizing their destitution, lack of privacy, and hygiene challenges due to their limited resources. Consequently, the novel accentuates the deprivation associated with economic precarity.

In the novel, Morrison does not offer a depiction of the time of slavery; rather, she establishes a narrative that subtly reveals the ongoing consequences of the slave system and how it continues to affect the lives and identities of African Americans. Through the social situation of Pecola's family, Morrison critically examines the ongoing repercussions of slavery. In her book *Lose Your Mother: A Journey Along the Atlantic Slave Route* (2007), Saidiya Hartman asserts that black lives are still affected and endangered by a racial and political agenda that was established centuries ago. Hartman's concept is concerned with what has endured after the time of slavery, such as economic disparities and systemic racism. She coins this notion as "the afterlife of slavery," defining it as "skewed life chances, limited access to health and education, premature death, incarceration, and impoverishment" (6). Hartman's words provide the different effects of slavery on the socioeconomic conditions of African Americans, perfectly encapsulating the situation of Pecola's family. Indeed, the family's ongoing struggles with poverty and limited opportunities are embedded in Pauline and Cholly's childhoods as they were both deprived of educational and economic opportunities. Pauline was made to leave school

when she was fifteen years old as her family moved to Kentucky, looking for better living conditions. In like manner, Cholly, who is abandoned by his parents, left school as a child to start working in order to support himself. After their marriage, their move to Ohio was not easy. With Cholly working at the steel mill and Pauline taking jobs as a day worker, life among both white people and Northern blacks becomes more challenging as the couple quickly find themselves at the bottom of the social hierarchy. Consequently, the parents' situation shapes their children's future lives.

Being members of the Breedlove family, Pecola and her brother Sammy are born into poverty. Throughout the novel, the experiences of the two children are shaped by their socioeconomic conditions. For instance, Pecola's experience with menarche and menstruation is influenced not only by her skin color but also by her social position. Indeed, a study conducted by Ann C Herbert et al. in 2017, reveals that girls belonging to low-income families, report having negative experiences of puberty, specifically in relation to menarche and menstruation. These girls describe their experiences as traumatizing, often associating them with uncleanness and nastiness.¹⁵ While Morrison does not address the issue directly, "being a minority in both caste and class," Pecola's identity formation and transition into womanhood are shaped by her economic condition (Morrison 17). Due to her living situation, she cannot access clean, private, and safe spaces during the critical period of transition through puberty. Through the description of the "house," the narrative reveals that Pecola sleeps in the same room as both her parents and her older brother Sammy; in addition, she has no access to "bath facilities" as her home only has

¹⁵ Ann C Herbert does not explore the reasons behind the association between menarche and uncleanness. However, this association could be related to a lack of menstrual products specifically for low-income families. For decades, period products have been regarded as a luxury and many low-income families have been unable to afford them. Recently, diverse movements have been pushing for menstrual products to be treated as a human right, ensuring that girls from different social classes are able to afford them.

a toilet bowl. The cramped space does not offer Pecola with the needed privacy to comfortably and safely navigate the bodily changes associated with puberty. In addition, her living situation does not provide the necessary amenities to maintain proper hygiene, which is of critical importance during menarche. Consequently, Pecola's experience with menarche highlights the ways in which puberty is affected by socio-economic conditions.

The introduction of Pecola's situation occurs early in the novel through the perspective of Claudia MacTeer. In the first chapter, entitled "Autumn," the adult Claudia reflects on her own childhood memories, particularly the arrival of Pecola into their household. The county assigns Pecola to the MacTeer family after her father, Charles/Cholly Breedlove, burns down their house. Claudia recalls that her "mama had told [them] two days earlier that a 'case' was coming—a girl who had no place to go" (16). From the beginning, referring to Pecola as a "case" establishes the young girl's precarious socioeconomic situation; in effect, she is presented as a particular problem that needs to be investigated and resolved. Additionally, referring to her as a "case" reinforces the notion that Pecola's identity and value are determined by her family's and economic conditions, as she is automatically judged wanting by a faceless governmental bureaucracy. Pecola's situation is further accentuated upon her unfortunate encounter with Geraldine, a bourgeois black woman whose vicious son traps Pecola in their seemingly welcoming home. After the son kills the family cat, he blames Pecola. Geraldine does not question her son's behavior and immediately lashes out at the little girl, viewing her as ugly and inferior:

She looked at Pecola. Saw the dirty torn dress, the plaits sticking out on her head, hair matted where the plaits had come undone, the muddy shoes with the wad of gum peeping

out from between the cheap soles, the soiled socks, one of which had been walked down into the heel of the shoe. She saw the safety pin holding the hem of the dress up. (91)

With the contact occurring between Pecola and Geraldine's family, the economic disparities between the different social classes are made more evident. Geraldine's neatness and cleanliness contrast with Pecola's worn-out and unkempt clothing. For Geraldine, who actively seeks to distance herself from poor blacks, Pecola symbolizes all the characteristics she disdains. Through the criticism of Pecola's attire, Geraldine reinforces the idea that social class establishes the hierarchy of human life and determines the worth of individuals.

Pecola's arrival to the MacTeer household crystalizes her struggles during this critical time of transition. Claudia remembers that Pecola "came with nothing. No little paper bag with the other dress, or a nightgown, or two pair of whitish bloomers. She just appeared with a white woman and sat down" (18). The inability to provide underwear for their children reflects the family's financial situation. Due to poverty and their lack of access to resources, they are unable to provide basic necessities for their children, after everything the family owns gets destroyed in the fire—caused by Cholly. Not owning a change of bloomers can have implications for Pecola's personal hygiene, especially during menstruation. In addition, her family's financial situation affects Pecola's ability to access menstrual health products. When she starts menstruating, Pecola relies on the MacTeer family. It is Mrs. MacTeer who takes care of her by bathing her and washing her soiled clothing, and Frieda who provides her with cotton and a napkin as a layer of protection and comfort.

Morrison provides a framework that intertwines race, gender, and socioeconomic status to permit readers to understand the interconnected effects of these factors on the experiences of young black girls. In their article "The Psychology of Puberty: What Aren't We Studying That

We Should?”, Jane Mendle and Mary Kate Koch assert that the transition from childhood into adolescence is one of life’s most psychologically complex stages. The transitory period does not only involve physical changes, but it also affects how adolescents perceive themselves. In the novel, Pecola is reduced to her precarious economic situation and vulnerable social status, two factors that she has no control over, further leading to her marginalization and influencing her perception of herself. Growing up in poverty, Pecola lacks access to basic essentials, which socially places her in an abject position. The perception of Pecola as inferior by the other residents of the neighborhood creates a profound sense of inadequacy as the little girl starts associating her socioeconomic situation with her personal worth. Pecola internalizes these beliefs, resulting in a negative self-image. She sees herself as unworthy, unattractive, and less deserving than her peers because she is poor and dark-skinned. Consequently, Pecola’s sense of inferiority originates not only from the colorism of the neighborhood but also from the racism and bias of the larger national culture, resulting in her internalized self-disdain.

In Morrison’s *The Bluest Eye*, Pecola Breedlove’s socio-economic conditions influence her maturation. Through Pecola’s experience, the novel illuminates the profound impacts of racism and classism on the development of children and adolescents. As a poor black girl, Pecola lacks access to basic necessities, making her experience with menarche even more complex and challenging. Her family’s economic vulnerability amplifies the obstacles she faces, ultimately affecting her self-perception.

1.3. The First Bleeding

Morrison’s *The Bluest Eye* captures the transition of young girls into womanhood, offering glimpses of the dread surrounding the first bleeding. Pecola’s experience with menarche is a defining aspect of the novel. Menarche, the beginning of menstruation, represents a

significantly transformative event in the life of Pecola. Her struggles during this period shed light on the broader themes of identity, social expectations, and internalized self-hatred. Pecola's fate, by the end of the novel, further highlights the sexual objectification initiated by the arrival of the menses.

In the first section of the novel, entitled "Autumn," Morrison relates Pecola's first bleeding, which occurs in the presence of her two friends, Claudia and Frieda. On a languid Saturday afternoon, the girls escape Mrs. MacTeer's nagging and sit outside on the porch to avoid her insults, which is when the event occurs. Claudia, the narrator, relates the scene depicting Pecola's naïveté and her panic:

Suddenly Pecola bolted straight up, her eyes wide with terror. A whinnying sound came from her mouth.

"What's the matter with you?" Frieda stood up too.

Then we both looked where Pecola was staring. Blood was running down her legs. Some drops were on the steps. I leaped up. "Hey. You cut yourself? Look. It's all over your dress."

A brownish-red stain discolored the back of her dress. She kept whinnying, standing with her legs far apart. (Morrison 27)

Pecola stands transfixed, her eyes filled with horror as blood trickles down her legs. She is unsure of what fell upon her and asks, "Am I going to die?" (28). Pecola's fear during her first period emphasizes her lack of preparation and unfamiliarity with the concept of menarche. Her ignorance demonstrates that Pauline never provided her with any information on the topic of menstruation. According to Rodriguez White, "the function of the mother in menstrual education is important because girls may learn sex-role identity and related behaviours primarily through

interaction and observation in the mother-daughter relationship” (66). Indeed, mothers are regarded as the primary source of information for menarche and menstruation. Under normal conditions, Pecola should have obtained information regarding reproductive health by communicating with her mother. However, the relationship between Pecola and her mother is not based on communication and understanding.¹⁶ This ignorance and lack of preparation thus render the experience more traumatic for Pecola.

Although a transformative event, menarche is not necessarily always traumatic as each adolescent may experience the event differently with a different outcome. Considering Pecola’s economic and social situation, she is more vulnerable to experiencing trauma during menarche. According to Judith Herman, traumatic events affect those who are helpless and powerless most intensively. She posits this idea when discussing the resistance to traumatic events. She claims that some individuals can withstand difficult situations while “those at the other end of the spectrum may be particularly vulnerable. Predictably, those who are already disempowered or disconnected from others are most at risk” (60). Pecola’s vulnerability intersects with negligent parents, dismissive adults, bullying peers, and a racist society that rejects her, rendering her situation more challenging. With the absence of support and guidance from her community, Pecola lacks the resources to understand and navigate the changes happening to her body.

Menarche is the event that transforms Pecola into a woman, signaling her fertility. In response to Pecola’s fear of death, Frieda explains that she’s “ministratin,” which “means [she] can have a baby” (Jones 27-28).¹⁷ Menarche defines young Pecola’s reproductive and sexual potential, marking “a transition from childhood [which is] (culturally constructed as asexual), to

¹⁶ This will be further explored in the fourth section of the chapter.

¹⁷ Frieda who is indeed younger than Pecola has some knowledge about menarche and menstruation, yet her innocence is still evident in her fear and the fact that she wanted to hide the event from her mother.

womanhood [representing] (a sexualized, objectified other)” (Bobier 303). This notion would further plague Pecola as her fear and uncertainty become evident later when she is lying in bed with her friends, and she asks ““Is it true that I can have a baby now?’... ‘But... how?’” (Jones 32). The trauma of menarche is partly due to Pecola’s now being able to become pregnant and bear children, foreshadowing her fate by the end of the novel. Pecola’s difficult transition into adulthood leads to tragic consequences as the little girl gets raped and impregnated by her intoxicated father. In his drunken state, Cholly is consumed by contrasting feelings of violence and tenderness towards Pecola, whom he uses to redeem his own sanity and right his past sexual relations.¹⁸ Puberty thus becomes a dreaded boundary, eroding childhood’s relative innocence and freedom, replacing it with the heavy burdens of adulthood.

During puberty, it is difficult for girls to navigate both their changing bodies and the process of sexualization that emerges with these changes. In *Trauma and Recovery* (1997), Herman argues that children and adolescents are generally less physically powerful and more socially vulnerable than adults; they are, therefore, more prone to be violated and assaulted. She further affirms that “adolescent girls are particularly vulnerable to the trauma of rape” (61). Indeed, numerous survivors of child sexual abuse emphasized the vulnerability related to young girls’ emerging sexuality and the significance attributed to these young girls’ bodies in a society that exploits female sexuality (Lee 349). However, the intersection of gender and racial discrimination renders this period significantly more challenging for black girls. A ground-

¹⁸ As Pecola’s rapist, Cholly can be regarded as the antagonist of the story. Cholly’s background and his experiences during adolescence create a complex character that is both a victim and a perpetrator of violence. A glimpse into his past shows that the rape is the culmination of his painful and buried traumatic experiences. He makes use of Pecola’s body to satisfy his sexual desires and relieve his repressed psychological troubles. For further reading, see: Donald B. Gibson, “Text and Countertext in Toni Morrison’s *The Bluest Eye*.” in *Lit: Literature Interpretation Theory*, (1989), 19–32.

breaking study conducted by Rebecca Epstein in 2017 found that adults perceived black girls and white girls, between the ages of 5-14 years old, in a different manner. Black girls were considered less innocent and more mature than white girls of the same age. This is known as the concept of “adultification,” which describes how black children are perceived as older than they are (Koch and Kozhumam 963). In her study, Epstein affirms that “beginning as early as 5 years of age, Black girls were more likely to be viewed as behaving and seeming older than their stated age; more knowledgeable about adult topics, including sex” (8). This unjust societal perception further complicates this critical period for black girls. Despite their young age, once these girls reach menarche, they are socially perceived as sexually mature and are thus more at risk of sexual advances and abuse.

Extensive literature exists today focusing on the sexual exploitation of children and specifically the exploitation of black girls. However, there is little written from the perspective of the children themselves. In his article “The Adolescent Complexities of Race, Gender, and Class in Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*,” Douglass Mahaffey considers *The Bluest Eye* as “the most qualified of Morrison’s novels to be called a work of adolescent literature that intertwines the difficulties associated with adolescent girls’ self-definition in terms of race, gender and class” (157). Certainly, in the foreword of the novel, Morrison asserts that in writing the book she was interested in voicing “the most delicate member of society: a child; the most vulnerable member: a female” (Morrison xi). *The Bluest Eye* essentially focuses on the characters of three young girls, Claudia, Freida, and Pecola aged respectively, nine, ten, and eleven years old. Through these characters, Morrison “enter[s] the life of [those] least likely to withstand such damaging forces because of youth, gender, and race” (x). Having this novel written from the perspective of a child further accentuates the innocence and vulnerability of these children.

As stated above, *The Bluest Eye* offers glimpses of the trauma associated with menarche. The novel also explores the sexualization and adultification initiated during puberty, specifically with the arrival of the menses. Before the occurrence of the first bleeding, Pecola was considered a regular young girl. However, one drop of blood later, her briefs become “the little-girl-gone-to-woman pants” (31). Claudia declares that Pecola “was different from us now —grown-up-like. She, herself, felt the distance, but refused to lord it over us” (32). With the beginning of the menstrual cycle, Pecola is no longer perceived as a little girl. She is condemned to leave her childhood innocence behind and cross into the realm of womanhood. In the novel, the portrayal of the sexualization of menarche is compounded by the rape of Pecola months after she starts bleeding for the first time.

The rape scene, is narrated from Cholly’s perspective, revealing Pecola’s vulnerability and highlighting the profound impact of the violation on her. When relating the incident, Cholly focuses on his own actions, providing little insight into Pecola’s reaction. He claims that “the only sounds [Pecola] made —[was] a hollow suck of air in the back of her throat” (163). Pecola is silenced during the scene, further highlighting her vulnerability and helplessness in the face of traumatic events. It is only later that Pecola’s feelings are revealed, “when she regained consciousness, she was lying on the kitchen floor under a heavy quilt, trying to connect the pain between her legs to the face of her mother looming over her” (163). Pecola does not seem to understand what happened to her; she feels pain between her legs. The rape is reminiscent of the first bleeding as Pecola finds herself unable to explain what has occurred to her private region; the two events might have looked similar to her as both were happening to her without her control and affecting the same area in her body. For the little girl, one form of bleeding

essentially leads to the other. Hence, menarche engenders for Pecola another traumatic experience that would impact her forever.

Aside from Pecola's story, the novel reveals other cases of sexual assault committed against girls. For instance, Mr. Henry, a tenant of the MacTeers tries to molest Frieda. Frieda relates the incident to her younger sister claiming that the old man touched her "'Here and here.' She pointed to the tiny breasts, that like two fallen acorns, scattered a few faded rose leaves on her dress" (99). The naïveté of the two sisters is evident in their different reactions to the sexual assault committed against Frieda. Young Claudia, who still does not understand the magnitude of the act, is fascinated, and cannot comprehend why her sister is crying. On the other hand, Frieda fears that she might be ruined just because someone touched her breasts. However, unlike Pecola, Frieda "had the benefit of supportive parents" (x). Once they discover the abusive behavior of Mr. Henry, they automatically believe their daughter and come to her rescue. Her parents intervene, put Mr. Henry out of the house, and even resort to violence to protect Frieda. The difference between Pecola and Frieda's parents highlights that the Breedloves's situation does not necessarily represent the average black family. The complexity of the novel thus lies in its varied depictions of family dynamics.

The Bluest Eye further exposes the reality of the sexual assault and victimization of young girls through the character of Soaphead Church, who is notorious for his sexual molestations. This old man is a predatory character whose "attentions therefore gradually settled on those humans whose bodies were least offensive—children... he further limited his interests to little girls. They were usually manageable and frequently seductive" (166). Characters like Soaphead Church reflect the predators that prey on the vulnerability of young girls. While he provides council for the community, which grants him a position of power in the society, he

abuses his privileged position to exploit the unprotected. When referring to his acts of sexual assault, he relates that “[he would give] them mints, money, and they’d eat ice cream with their legs open while [he] played with them. It was like a party” (181). Ironically, Soaphead Church does not molest Pecola, whom he considers “pitifully unattractive” (173). Instead, he only gives attention to Pecola when he manipulates her into killing the elderly dog, blessing her with what she believes are blue eyes—which is equally cruel and destructive. This power imbalance further accentuates the vulnerability of these young girls.

1.4. The Role of the Community

The community in *The Bluest Eye* plays a significant role in Pecola’s coming of age. The social environment in which Pecola is raised renders her transition from childhood into adulthood more challenging. Indeed, it is necessary to study the relationships that the young protagonist experiences within her community to better understand her struggles. During puberty, the role of the community is crucial in grounding the adolescents’ sense of self. Puberty represents a delicate period where adolescents undergo significant physical, emotional, and psychological changes. To successfully navigate these transitions, teenagers require assistance. The community serves as the main source of support and guidance, and it plays a vital role in molding the adolescents’ identities, influencing their perceptions of themselves and their position in the world. Consequently, Morrison uses the community to reflect the societal attitudes that shape and hinder Pecola’s journey towards self-discovery, leading to her tragic ending.

The family represents the first social unit where the adolescent begins to explore their identity and surroundings. In the foreword of *The Bluest Eye*, Morrison describes the Breedloves as “a crippled and a crippling family” (xii) whose dysfunction causes Pecola’s devastation. The family consists of four members: Charles/ Cholly (the father), Pauline/Polly (the mother),

Sammy (the older brother), and Pecola (the youngest member). Pecola's parents are depicted as both physically and emotionally unavailable.¹⁹ Pauline dedicates most of her time to her work as a housekeeper for a white family. She describes her children as mere "afterthoughts one has just before sleep," (Morrison 127) stating that she started to neglect them increasingly with each passing day. The distance between Pecola and Pauline is established from the early stages of the novel when Pecola refers to her mother as "Mrs. Breedlove." The choice of the name demonstrates how this relationship is characterized by formality and detachment. Additionally, the father is also frequently absent due to his own personal struggles. Cholly, who was abandoned by both of his parents, cannot "comprehend what such a relationship should be" (160). The birth of his children "rendered him totally dysfunctional" (160) and he often found himself distant and unable to form a stable connection with them. Cholly, who cannot handle the pressure and responsibility of fatherhood and married life, turns to alcohol as a form of self-medication to deal with his own traumas. However, his addiction leads him to become more violent towards his family and more oblivious and inconsiderate of their needs. In reaction to his parents' treatment, Sammy constantly seeks to distance himself from the household. Pecola's brother is known "to have run away from home no less than twenty-seven times," (43) often leaving his sister alone with their parents for months. The family's physical absence, thus, creates a void in Pecola's life, depriving her of the support and guidance she requires during her teenage years.

¹⁹ The portrayal of Pecola's family and the description of their housing situation (which is studied earlier in the chapter) comes as a stark contrast to the Dick and Jane primer with which Morrison opens the novel. The Dick and Jane narrative presents the image of an ideal home and family, an image Pecola is unable to relate to or attain. For further reading see Debra T. Werrlein, "Not so Fast, Dick and Jane: Reimagining Childhood and Nation in the Bluest Eye," in *MELUS* (2005), 53–72.

Pecola's family represents her initiation into the larger social system, where she starts navigating the formation of her self-identity. Pecola's relationship with her mother Pauline, which rests at the center of the novel, has the greatest impact on Pecola's development. Paul Douglass Mahaffey argues that "Pauline's relationship with Pecola is especially tragic because it is a situation in which a mother and daughter exist in a patriarchal and racist environment which does not allow them the chance to construct a positive and subjective identity" (161). Indeed, Pauline's own struggles and insecurities prevent her from offering Pecola emotional nurturing and support. Pauline's behavior reveals a deep contempt and rejection, which she projects on Pecola. After her marriage, Pauline discovers picture shows and gets introduced to the more significant concepts of romantic love and physical beauty. Unable to attain the white beauty standards presented in the cinema, Pauline is met with disappointment as she accepts her fate and settles "down to just being ugly" (Morrison 123). Pauline, who longs to be accepted by others while simultaneously struggling to recognize her own self-worth, develops "a fear of growing up, fear of other people, fear of life" (128), which she instills into Pecola, limiting her daughter's ability to recognize and accept her own process of maturation and hindering her from forming healthy and meaningful connections with others. During the transformative period of puberty, instead of providing Pecola with the space to grow and discover herself, Pauline entraps Pecola into a cycle of self-doubt and low self-esteem.

The second social space that Pecola inhabits is her school. Pecola's struggles are evident in this space as she is frequently ignored by both her teachers and her classmates. Pecola claims that "Her teachers had always treated her this way. They tried never to glance at her, and called on her only when everyone was required to respond" (45-46). In *The Body Keeps the Score* (2014), Bessel Van der Kolk discusses the importance of school on the identity formation of

children, positing that schools represent spaces where children, who suffer from neglect and abuse in their households, are “seen and known, learn to regulate themselves, and where they can develop a sense of agency” (353). In Pecola’s situation, this social space fails to fulfill its potential. Instead of being a refuge, Pecola’s school becomes another site of discrimination and neglect. Her teachers’ treatment and their failure to engage with her on emotional and social levels mirror the neglect and mistreatment she experiences within her family. The deliberate disregard exacerbates her feelings of invisibility, highlighting her insignificance in the school environment. During the crucial time of adolescence, Pecola desperately seeks validation from the adults in her life. The absence of recognition from her teachers, thus, hinders Pecola from developing a sense of agency, trapping her in a cycle of powerlessness.

The social exclusion Pecola faces at school extends beyond her teachers’ neglect, as her classmates also ostracize her. She believes her classmates either ignore or despise her as they actively exclude her from social interactions. Pecola’s isolation is further exemplified by the fact that she “was the only member of her class who sat alone at a double desk” (45). This physical separation from her classmates symbolizes the structural obstacles that actively exclude Pecola from the classroom’s social scene, highlighting her alienation. Faye Z. Belgrave explores the experiences of African American adolescent girls between the ages of 10 and 14 as they navigate puberty. She asserts the importance of friends and peers on teenage girls’ psychological and social development as these friends offer them emotional, social, and psychological assistance. The psychologist argues that “Girls who are isolated and who do not have friends are more likely to have lower self-esteem and other interpersonal problems than those with friends” (52). Indeed, the ideas presented by Belgrave align with Pecola’s experiences, highlighting the adverse effects of social isolation on self-perception. The social relations Pecola fosters with her classmates do

not encourage a positive self-concept, instead they aggravate her feelings of inadequacy. The lack of supportive friendships denies Pecola the emotional and psychological support she needs during this formative period in her life.

Not only does Pecola face ignorance and exclusion from her classmates, but she also experiences bullying and humiliation. She is often laughed at and mocked for her physical appearance and her family's socioeconomic situation. Claudia recollects witnessing Pecola being harassed by a group of boys in the playground. Claudia was accompanied by her sister, Frieda, and Maureen, a classmate, when they came upon "a group of boys [who were] circling and holding at bay a victim, Pecola Breedlove" while singing "Black e mo. Black e mo. Yadaddsleepsnecked. Black e mo black e mo ya dadd sleeps necked. Black e mo..." (65). The boys create a verse that specifically targets Pecola's physical appearance and her family's circumstances, mocking her father's behavior of sleeping naked. Pecola is unfairly blamed and ridiculed for matters she has no control over. The girl is held responsible for her father's actions and their accusation that he chooses to sleep naked in front of her. Ironically, the children would not have known of Cholly's sleeping habits; their attack on Pecola is a plausible projection of their own insecurities, fears, and shame that could be related to their own situations at home. Claudia describes how the boys "danced a macabre ballet around the victim, whom, for their own sake, they were prepared to sacrifice to the flaming pit" (65). The boys' actions reflect a power dynamic in which they have complete control over Pecola, perceiving her as a helpless, sacrificial figure. Through her perceived abjection, Pecola becomes a target for mockery and ridicule, causing her more emotional suffering.

The children's play can seem inconsequential as they can be regarded as innocents who lack awareness and knowledge. However, this scene holds a more profound significance as it

reflects the way the community treats Pecola. Being a black, female child with dark skin, Pecola does not conform to societal ideals and often finds herself pushed to the margins of the already marginalized society she belongs to. In the words of Christina Sharpe, Pecola is not rejected from the community, “she is the ejection, the abjection, by, on, through which” the community “reimagines and reconstitutes itself” (29).²⁰ Claudia relates the way the contrast between the community and Pecola made them feel better about themselves:

All of us—all who knew her—felt so wholesome after we cleaned ourselves on her. We were so beautiful when we stood astride her ugliness. Her simplicity decorated us, her guilt sanctified us, her pain made us glow with health, her awkwardness made us think we had a sense of humor. Her inarticulateness made us believe we were eloquent. Her poverty kept us generous. (Morrison 205)

Still struggling with internalized self-contempt, the community projects its insecurities onto Pecola. The young girl becomes the focal point of the community’s self-disdain as she embodies all the characteristics they want to obliterate. By scapegoating the little girl, they distance themselves from their own distorted self-perceptions and find a sense of validation.

Pecola’s relationships with her community become more salient when she starts navigating the transition from girlhood into womanhood. Female relatives, girl friends, and community members play an essential role during the arrival of the menses. In her article, “The Menarche Journey, Embodied Connections and Disconnections,” Niva Piran presents the importance of a supportive community during menarche. She asserts that the support and

²⁰ These are the words of Christina Sharpe when referring to the case of Aereile Jackson, in her book *In the Wake*. She writes “Jackson wasn’t ejected from the system: she is the ejection, the abjection, by, on, through, which the system reimagines and reconstitutes itself” (29).

guidance offered by the community “enhance experiences of embodied pride and self-worth, and, hence, positive embodiment” (209). The author further discusses how the lack of community support and affirmation results in a disempowering process, rendering the transition period more challenging. Having an absent mother figure and no friends, Pecola is denied this support. The closest thing Pecola has to a community is her relationship with Claudia and Freida. While the two girls play an important role in Pecola’s experience with menarche, they are also helpless and unable to provide her with the needed guidance and support.

Pecola’s exclusion from society becomes more pronounced following the traumatic event of her father’s rape. The community chooses to blame Pecola instead of providing her with the help she desperately requires during that time. Claudia reveals that the community was “disgusted, amused, shocked, outraged, or even excited by the story” (Morrison 190). She claims that she waited for someone to sympathize with Pecola and say, “‘Poor little girl’ or ‘Poor baby,’ but there was only head-wagging where those words should have been” (190). When referring to Pecola’s sexual assault, the adults claim that “‘she carr[ies] some of the blame... how come she didn’t fight him?’” (189). Instead of offering Pecola their assistance, the community pushes for the girl’s removal from school, further aggravating her pain. The community is prepared to scapegoat and blame Pecola because it is easier than coming to her aid and admitting their complicity in the acts committed against her. According to Van der Kolk, in the aftermath of a traumatic event, “a good support network constitutes the single most powerful protection against becoming traumatized” (212). He asserts that healing and recovery occur in the context of human relations. By not being offered a safe space to heal, Pecola is unable to vent and externalize her emotions and feelings as she does not have the opportunity to share her trauma with others. The continuous repression of her feelings leads her to spiral out of control. Consequently, Pecola uses

dissociation as a survival mechanism against a world that devalues and dismisses her experiences.

In *Trauma and Recovery*, Herman examines how the sexual abuse of children is perceived and navigated in society. She argues that “when the victim is already devalued (a woman, a child), she may find that the most dramatic events of her life take place outside of the realm of socially validated reality. Her experience becomes unspeakable” (8). Being both a female and a child, Pecola bears an even more enormous burden. Herman claims that “the people closest to the victim will not necessarily rally to her aid; in fact, her community may be more supportive to the offender than to her... She may find herself driven out of a school, a job, or a peer group” (62). Indeed, while Cholly had the advantage of running away and evading responsibility, Pecola was the one punished for his actions. The young girl is rejected from the community, everyone ignores her, and she no longer attends school. Thus, Pecola is discredited to the point where she starts rejecting the idea that she was raped. By the end of the novel, as Pecola’s mental health deteriorates, her own rejection of the traumas she has endured becomes a form of self-protection.

1.5. Conclusion

Toni Morrison’s *The Bluest Eye* offers a provocative exploration of the complexities of childhood and adolescence. By exploring Pecola’s transition from childhood into adulthood, Morrison reveals how racial oppression and societal marginalization can have harmful impacts on young black girls’ coming-of-age journeys. In the novel, Pecola’s experience with menarche is inflicted by racism, poverty, and classism. The absence of basic necessities and proper guidance leaves Pecola more vulnerable to societal pressures and unattainable beauty standards.

Most importantly, the novel demonstrates the importance of both the family and the community's support during this transitional period.

Conclusion

Gayl Jones's *Corregidora* and Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* are intriguing novels that intersect through their exploration of the challenges faced by black girls and young women, especially when transitioning from childhood into adulthood. The two novels divulge the ways in which the legacy of slavery has impacted, and continues to impact, young black girls' coming-of-age journeys. The abolition of slavery did not prevent the persistence of its effects among the black community. For the female protagonists in the two works, the move from girlhood into womanhood is tainted with both personal and inherited traumas. Both novels illustrate the aftermaths of slavery but with different approaches. Indeed, *Corregidora* provides a closer examination of enslavement, highlighting how it influences the identities of both the enslaved and their descendants. In *The Bluest Eye*, however, the consequences of slavery are examined in the context of socioeconomic status, emphasizing how social class shapes the development of children and adolescents.

In *Corregidora*, through the character of Ursa, Jones reveals the complex relationship between past traumatic events and present personal memories. Ursa, who does not have a firsthand experience with slavery, is raised by her previously enslaved foremothers, who continuously remind her of the traumas they have endured at the hands of their former owner, Corregidora. The memories of her ancestors profoundly affect Ursa, shaping how she perceives and understands the world around her. With the incessant repetition of their stories, the Corregidora women urge Ursa to both witness and bear the burden of their traumas. While consistently asking Ursa to bear generations can be read as a form of resistance, these women end up reproducing the objectification they had already endured during their enslavement. From the age of five, Ursa is taught that her primary role is to bear generations. Defining Ursa's value

through her reproductive capacities influences the development of her sexual identity, especially during the critical time of adolescence. The traumas of her ancestors taint Ursa's attitudes about sexuality. With the arrival of the menses, she becomes able to bear children and carry her family's legacy. Ursa's initiation into womanhood shapes her sexual identity, creating fears and struggles that continue to plague her during adulthood. In the novel, the trauma of menarche lies in Ursa's inability to transition into womanhood safely. Ursa's difficult journey restrains her from attaining sexual maturity, which is evident in her struggles to communicate love and intimacy with her partners.

Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* deals directly with the challenges young black girls face as they navigate the transitory period of adolescence. Through the experience of Pecola Breedlove, a socially and economically vulnerable African American girl, Morrison exposes how racism and social class shape girls' coming-of-age journeys. The novel does not offer a direct exploration of enslavement, instead, it highlights the ways in which this system continues to shape the lives of black people on individual and collective levels. The Breedloves's economic and social situation influences Pecola's experience with menarche. Pecola, who shares the same room with her parents and her brother Sammy, is not provided with the space to safely and comfortably transition into womanhood. The lack of necessities and adequate amenities to maintain proper hygiene amplifies Pecola's challenges during puberty. In addition, both Pecola and her family's social status and skin color result in their rejection from society. The community, grappling with their own deeply ingrained self-hatred, mock and ostracize Pecola, who represents all their insecurities. In her journey towards adulthood, Pecola is not provided with the guidance and support of the community. The novel captures the dread surrounding the first bleeding, as Pecola's struggles become more evident when she starts menstruating. Pecola's fears further

highlight her innocence and lack of preparation. By the end of the novel, the micro-aggressions Pecola faces morph into consequential feats as she gets raped by her father, leading to her descent into madness. With the story of young Pecola, Morrison sheds light on the broader themes of racism, societal norms, and internalized self-hatred, highlighting their damaging effects on children and adolescents.

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