Master’s Dissertation/

RACE AND GENDER: THE INVISIBILITY OF BLACK WOMEN AND HOW THEY FOUGHT IT

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ABSTRACT

The situation of African-American women in the United States during the nineteenth-century was defined by racist expectations and morals. Although slavery had already been abolished, racist beliefs continued spreading and black people suffered discrimination and victimization. Black women were doubly victimized, not only because of their race, but also because of their gender. It is in this context that black female writers found a way of portraying the injustices and the invisibility suffered as a result of racism through literature. The purpose of this dissertation is to study two novels by African-American women authors – *The Bluest Eye* (1970) by Toni Morrison and *Push* (1996) by Sapphire – and to examine how they explore black women’s marginalization in the American community at the time. This study will focus on two issues. One: how invisibility affected black women, who were paradoxically considered sexual objects to be exploited and physically repulsive at once. By virtue of both the family traumas transmitted from one generation of black people to the next and of white standards of beauty, black females did not question the racist views imposed on their race and accepted them as true. Two: different ways through which black females liberated themselves from the social confines of Western culture. Through education, beauty and insanity, the main characters in these novels fought invisibility and became active members of American society.

Keywords: Racism, discrimination, race, gender, marginalization, invisibility, traumas, white standards of beauty, education, beauty, insanity.
RESUMEN

La situación de las mujeres afroamericanas en Estados Unidos en el siglo diecinueve se definió por las expectaciones y morales racistas. Aunque ya se había abolido la esclavitud, las creencias racistas continuaron expandiéndose y las personas negras sufrieron discriminación y victimización. Las mujeres negras fueron doblemente victimizadas, no solamente por su raza, sino también por su género. Es en este contexto que las escritoras negras encontraron una manera de representar las injusticias y la invisibilidad sufridas como resultado del racismo a través de la literatura. El objetivo de esta tesis es estudiar dos novelas de escritoras afroamericanas - The Bluest Eye (1970) de Toni Morrison y Push (1996) de Sapphire - y examinar cómo éstas exploran la marginalización de las mujeres negras en la comunidad americana de entonces. Este estudio se centrará en dos cuestiones. Una: cómo la invisibilidad afectó a las mujeres negras, a quienes paradójicamente se las consideraba objetos sexuales y físicamente repulsivas al mismo tiempo. Debido tanto a los traumas familiares transmitidos de una generación de personas negras a otra como a los estándares de belleza blancos, las mujeres negras no cuestionaban las visiones racistas impuestas a su raza y las aceptaban como verdaderas. Dos: las distintas maneras por las que las mujeres negras se liberaron de las limitaciones sociales de la cultura occidental. A través de la educación, la belleza y la locura, los personajes principales en estas novelas lucharon contra la invisibilidad y se convirtieron en miembros activos de la sociedad americana.

Palabras clave: Racismo, discriminación, raza, género, marginalización, invisibilidad, traumas, estándares de belleza blancos, educación, belleza, locura.
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1. INTRODUCTION

The dimension of black racism has always been a disputed subject and topic of study for scholars and researchers who have theorized about the reality lived by African-Americans even nowadays. Black people have been experiencing everyday racism during many years, not only at the time when slavery was legal, but also later, as the same beliefs spread. Some centuries ago, having a black skin was a mark of slavery for both men and women, and so they were viewed as animals and considered uncivilized. Whereas blackness was related to animality, savagery and its connotations of dirt and sin\(^1\), whiteness meant virtue and beauty. Even once slavery was abolished, people of color still suffered from physical abuse as well as emotional traumas simply because of their race, and these consequences of racism were illustrated in their being rendered invisible in the racist American society. Racism could be understood as another way of ideology, since ideology may imply misleading beliefs and attitudes towards the minority group as well as misrepresent facts, and this would result in social inequalities. Ideology normally serves the interests of the dominant class, and some expressions of ideological belief can promote oppression towards the subordinate social group. Whiteness dominated the social hierarchy and created negative views and attitudes towards blacks, being deprived of lots of rights and believed to be an inferior race. By way of illustration, invisibility for African-Americans was observed in their marginalization at the workplace, less job opportunities, the victimization of the female body as a sexual object or the exclusion in social activities such as the right to vote or to be educated.

Research has been done on the unfair situation of black people along the years, and the topic has proved to be wide and extensive. Although it may be the case that concern about the invisibility of African-American has always existed, my purpose in writing this essay was to focus on both analyzing in which ways invisibility was portrayed in African-American literature and on examining how this invisibility could also be overcome. More concretely, I aimed at investigating this topic from the point of view of gender, and that is why, my major issue was to delve into the lives of African-American females, since their situation, on account of being women, was even worse than that of men. To that end, I selected two works where both invisibility and visibility could be dealt with and explored. I will examine American books *The Bluest Eye* (1970) by Toni Morrison and *Push* (1996) by Sapphire, in which the

\(^1\) White people associated blacks with savagery and violence. At the same time, this form of behavior was related to notions of dirt and sin.
protagonists, Pecola Breedlove and Precious Jones, are victims of invisibility, but they also find ways to fight it.

Debate persists about this theme, so I attempt to continue the study on black females’ conditions from a more positive viewpoint, which is that of the existence of ways to fight invisibility and become visible in society. In the pages that follow, the possibility for black women of separating themselves from the impositions of the white-dominated society, of being happy, and, definitely, of living their own lives will be explored.

This dissertation will be divided into four sections. The first one will be “Literature review,” which is the theoretical framework and the part where the general topic of the research project will be introduced. It will also set the scene of the research. The second section, called “Female victims of invisibility,” will be dedicated to the description of the ways through which black women experience invisibility. It will be divided into two sections, which are “Family” and “Standards of beauty.” The first one will tackle the problem of parents abusing their children and transmitting their traumas to them; the second one will be about the oppression especially young girls can feel because of not being able to fit into the model of beauty that the white culture defines. Thirdly, “Fighting invisibility” will be the core of the research, since the paths the main characters follow to overcome invisibility will be assessed in regard to the invisibility studied in the previous section. This part will also be divided into three sections, which will be called “Education,” “Beauty” and “Madness.” These three ways to be visible in community will be examined and scrutinized to prove whether or not they are effective to the end. Finally, in “Conclusions,” I will mention the most important points addressed in the dissertation and the conclusions from the investigation will be presented.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. Theory of Invisibility

Invisibility is often defined as “an absence of, or erroneous representations of, oppressed groups and/ or individuals” (Fryberg and Townsend, 2008, as quoted in Sesko and Biernat, 2010, p. 357). The idea of black women being invisible has long been heated debate in feminist writings. Psychologist Anderson J. Franklin developed a theory called theory of invisibility in which he stated that African-American men suffered from a kind of social invisibility that had an impact on their identity. Because of the existence of harsh racism in society, males were discriminated and isolated, as illustrated in: “We are not literally invisible – that might sometimes be preferable. But on the streets, in stores, on elevators and in restaurants [African
American men] are seen as potential criminals or servants, not as ourselves” (Franklin, 1993, p. 34).

Even though Franklin theorized about African American men, it is necessary to mention that women also encountered social invisibility in society and had feelings of devalued worth of themselves. That is why, the experience of invisibility and Franklin’s theory would apply to both men and women in this essay. Finally, Franklin claimed that there are seven elements by which African Americans may feel invisible:

(a) One feels a lack of recognition or appropriate acknowledgement; (b) one feels there is no satisfaction or gratification from the encounter (it is painful and injurious); (c) one feels self-doubt about legitimacy – such as “Am I in the right place, should I be here?”; (d) there is no validation from the experience – “Am I a person of worth?” – or the person seeks some form of corroboration of experiences from another person; (e) one feels disrespected (this is lead to by the previous elements and is linked to the following); One’s sense of dignity is compromised and challenged; (g) one’s basic identity is shaken, if not uprooted. (1999, p. 764)

Invisibility could be said to be a bias which influences black people’s identity as for how they see themselves and how the world perceives them. These two factors would lead them to develop their identity. The concept of identity is a social construct that refers to “social categories and to the sources of an individual’s self-respect or dignity” (Feardon, 1999, p. 2). There are two ways of exploring one’s identity, which are, on the one hand, by regarding it in relation to personal features or ideology, and, on the other, by considering one’s attributes and describing them with reference to social category (Feardon, 1999).

Similarly, Francis M. Deng explains that “identity is used in [his] book to describe the way individuals and groups define themselves and are defined by others on the basis of race, ethnicity, religion, language and culture” (1995, p. 1). In this regard, racism is a part of the construction of black people’s identities, and “The negative stereotypes imposed on African American males contradict their beliefs about who they are, thus creating a state of confusion and bewilderment” (Yeh, 1999, p. 811). There may be tension and confusion in creating one’s identity, with difficulty defining oneself because of the experience of invisibility. Blacks became aware of the racism and developed their identity by integrating the messages and the oppression towards their race in their inner self. Historical context plays a key role in identity.
formation, and as for women, their own self-hatred crucially contributed to their formation of identity and, consequently, to their own victimization.

Patricia Williams (1997, as quoted in Wane, 2013) also delves into spirit injury, which is caused by internalized pain and self-rejection because of the violence, prejudices, discrimination and insults black people encountered. Spirit injury may even be more hurtful than physical violence, which is one of its consequences too: “While violence in any form is injurious, the spirit injuries of emotional or psychological violence are effectively hidden. When violence, particularly a ceaseless and protracted case, is internalized, it festers and spills over into feelings of rage, despair, or hopelessness” (Wane, 2013, p. 11).

2.2. Racism, Critical Race Theory and Racial Formation Theory

To begin with, it is important to think about the concept of *racism*. Racism should be understood as “ways in which people devalue, disadvantage, demean, and in general unfairly regard others” (Jones, 1997, p. 7). James M. Jones also adds that racism involves some important factors:

First, the basis of group characteristics is assumed to rest on biology – race is a biological concept. Second, racism has, as a necessary premise, the superiority of one’s own race. Third, racism rationalizes institutional and cultural practices that formalize the hierarchical domination of one racial group over another. Therefore, although racism shares certain aspects of prejudice, it takes on a decidedly broader and more complex meaning. (1997, p. 11)

Another theory worth mentioning in this chapter is the Critical Race Theory (CRT). Born in the mid-1970s, it is a critical study of culture and society with regard to race and power. In other words, it “is a collection of activists and scholars interested in studying and transforming the relationship among race, racism, and power” (Delgado and Stefancic, 2001, p. 2). It defends that race and racism are endemic and interact with other oppressing forces like class, language, sexuality, etc. (Delgado, 1995). CRT also lies on other important theories such as critical legal studies and radical feminism. Nevertheless, the most important aspect hold by this theory is the ‘social construction’ thesis, which defends that race is a social construct. It is claimed that identity is not objective or fixed, nor does it correspond to biological reality, but society creates and manipulates it, and even retires it when convenient (Delgado, 1995). It is also “a socially constructed term with material consequences, [which] shackles people as social normal and values are ascribed to a person’s skin colour or hair texture” (Wane, 2013, p. 6). Hence, the
dominant group of society (which in this case is formed by white people) racialized the minority group (people of color), a fact which showed the ordinariness of racism and represented another way of colonialism and victimhood.

The Racial Formation Theory by Michael Omi and Howard Winant arose from a 1994 study about race in the United States that focused on 1960-1990, but which controversially only mentioned indigenous people in two pages (Robertson, 2015). It states that race is a process which is “constantly being transformed by political struggle” (Omi and Winant, 1994, as quoted in Robertson, 2015, p. 116-117). In this regard, race can be considered a factor which brings unequal possibilities and access to different aspects in society. Omi and Winant recognized that the government plays an important role in differentiating racial groups through ideology and politics (Robertson, 2015). Yet, there have been critics of this theory who claim that it is too limited. On the one hand, Joe R. Feagin (2006) asserts that the theory is too optimistic and that racial oppression is reinforced instead of being attacked in order to protect the privileges of white people. Eduardo Bonilla-Silva (1997) also criticizes the racial formation theory because it is too idealistic. He proposes a theory of social systems which interacts within all social institutions such as education or the media to improve communal living. Regrettably, Omi and Winant’s theory concentrated too much on how racial meanings were formed rather than on how it was possible that the racial structure of the US functioned within a supremacist white ideology (in Robertson, 2015).

2.3. Black Women and the Construction of Black Feminist Thought

It could be claimed that one of the most relevant points to be found in literature on race, gender and ethnicity is about racism. Emphasis has been given to ethnicity and race when examining black oppression. Maria W. Stewart was a black abolitionist and a women’s right activist who has been very well-known for being the first woman who publically spoke to both white and black audiences about women’s rights. In 1831, she asked: “How long shall the fair daughters of Africa be compelled to bury their minds and talents beneath a load of iron pots and kettles?” (Stewart and Richardson, 1987, p. 38). She encouraged black women to forge self-definitions in order to stop the oppression they were suffering because of factors such as race, gender and class.

Historically, the English colonial expansion in North America and the Caribbean in the 17th century represented the beginning of slavery. Slaves were also sold to European merchants and the slave trade began: they were taken to the slave ship – where they lived in poor conditions
and were even chained with iron shackles – to start the Middle Passage (Blackburn, 1997). By and large, male slaves outnumbered female slaves, although the vast majority of black women were abducted and shipped through the Middle Passage for the Atlantic slave trade too. As slaves, they were oppressed and reduced to “an entity of flesh whose extra-discursive construction was illegible within a Eurocentric sex/ gender system” (Spilers, 1987, as quoted in Murray, 2016, p. 68). European white people reduced women’s body to flesh and females were marginalized and victimized simply by virtue of their race and gender. Also, there was control of images of black women with an ideology of domination; that is to say, black women were portrayed in images as hypersexualized as a means to render them as “exploitable oversexualized bodies” (Wane and Jagire, 2013, p. xviii). This is an example of what is called ‘hypervisibility’ (Aitchison, 1999), since black women’s bodies were depicted in stereotyped ways throughout leisure spaces (advertisement, mainly) which at the same time promoted their exploitation and oppression as sexual objects. Women’s invisibility was configured through hypervisibility and ideology, and the female body was commodified and appropriated. They were also obliged to work relentlessly and were inhumanly treated (Wane and Jagire, 2013).

Once slavery was abolished and years later, black people still suffered from racism. This external source along with race-based stereotypes were not the only factors that constructed their identity. Continuous situations being exposed to these encounters led to the internalization of racism. Williams and Williams-Morris define internalized racism as “the acceptance, by marginalized racial populations, of the negative societal beliefs and stere-type-s about themselves” (2000, p. 255). In other words, African-Americans constructed their thoughts according to what the racist American community felt about them. As for women, if the levels of internalized racism increased, so did their chances of regarding themselves as inferior, unaccepted, outsiders and as ‘the Other’. One of the most widely examined manifestations of internalized biases is Stereotype Threat. It was a theory first proposed by social psychologist Claude Steele, and it arose due to the existence of negative stereotypes (Steele and Aronson, 1995). Thus, it is an internal fight in which there is a confrontation of the individual’s sense of self and the negative stereotypes received by the social group:

The existence of [a negative] stereotype means that anything one does or any of one’s features that conform to it make the stereotype more plausible as a self-characterization in the eyes of others, and perhaps even in one’s own eyes. We call this predicament *stereotype threat* and argue that it is experienced, essentially, as a self-evaluative threat. (Steele and Aronson, 1995, p. 797)
In this regard, individuals would attempt to reduce their targets to the expectations of the community and to gain insight into the evaluations other people have of them. Negative characteristics were attributed to African-Americans, and racial stereotypes, confronted with those of oneself, shaped the negative attitude blacks had towards themselves. Beliefs that color-skinned people were animal-like savages and inferior to the white culture were transmitted and acquired within the black community, who became victims and developed internalized racism.

Similarly, the stereotypes the white society utilized to describe black women burdened and dehumanized them in an even more unfair way than males. The image promoted of black men was that of simple-minded and docile persons who were naturally seen as exploitable. Vis-à-vis black women, the images projected about them were more pervasive, since, not only did they have to suffer from social oppression on account of being black, but they were also victimized because of their gender. As a consequence, stereotypes of what society thought to be beauty and femininity were constantly promoted. Provided that the ubiquity of the stereotypes among black women was apparent and undeniable, they were very likely to become victims of society’s constructions and expectations. Black women were the most vulnerable social group to this stereotype, and more concretely, to the detrimental effects of the Western standards of beauty, since they emphasized white skin and straight fair hair into which black females could not fit. Thus, it can be deduced that one of the most important reasons why women suffered from invisibility and were rendered invisible in society was beauty. They internalized these negative stereotypes and developed self-hatred:

If young black women stand in contrast to what society dictates as attractive, they may find it difficult to grow to accept themselves. As a result, the internalization of racialized beauty standards can perpetuate into a lifelong, intergenerational culture of self-hatred. (Hunter, 1998, as quoted in Bryant, 2013, p. 81)

The internalization of the standards of beauty also had an impact on women’s academic success. The research conducted by Holcomb-McCoy and Moore-Thomas (2001) demonstrates that hair and skin color can shape academic achievement, since black adolescent females alienated and isolated themselves. This resulted in a high number of school abandonments. It can be claimed that the educational system reinforced these standards of beauty, which were also learned from the family (Bryant, 2013), and that attractive people were given more social and job opportunities.
Another reproduction of the invisibility that marginalized black women suffered was their difficulty accessing education. Education was a way of fighting and becoming visible at the time. There was a high absence of black women in the education system, and without the right education, women could not face and eradicate racism (Arao, 2016). Male patriarchy controlled who had access to knowledge and education in a white-dominated society. If black women produced knowledge, it was dangerous for the dominant social group because education represented their path to achieve a better world where everybody would be equal, so they encountered many obstacles in their fight for knowledge.

The education system in US has been racist and sexist for more than 200 years (Zamani, 2003). Consequently, African American women, despite fighting to be educated, were ignored both as students and as administrators due to their race and gender. Constance Carroll claims: “Black women in higher education are isolated, underutilized, and often demoralized” (1982, p. 115), which results in there being not many black institutional leaders in the educational environment. For his part, Howard-Vital (1989) states that African-American women suffered from disinterest and from androcentric and ethnocentric viewpoints in the educational environment, which means that education placed males and the white culture at the center, leaving aside those who did not fit into this stereotype (Howard-Vital, 1989).

Worth mentioning with regard to black people’s invisibility are racial microaggressions. They are “brief, everyday exchanges that send denigrating messages to people of color because they belong to a racial minority group” (Sue et al., 2007, p. 273) and can lead to situations of stress, anger, confusion and marginalization. Women have always been the most vulnerable social group to the attacks and have been assigned to the lowest status in society (Carty, 1993). Derald W. Sue, Christina M. Capodilupo, and Aisha M. B. Holder (2008) carried out a study on microaggressions experienced by African Americans, and six specific types of microaggressions were identified: inferior social status, assumed feeling of white superiority, intellectually inferior, violence, second-class citizenship and assumed universality of the Black experience (as quoted in N’cho, 2015). Normally, these racial and gender-based microaggressions were told orally through harsh comments in daily interactions.

As it is, microaggressions were also common within families. Parents were very hard with their children and usually transferred their own spirit injuries and traumas to them. Black children, and especially black girls, were victims in their own homes, so it was impossible for them to learn how to fight racism, since they had grown up with an internalized one. These
black children were raised without love and were emotionally abused, so they could not be aware of the fact that their parents were making them victims through microaggressions. As happens with beauty, families were also even harder with black girls, who were even sexually raped because they were physically weaker and were not taught how to protest:

Black girls are especially vulnerable to childhood sexual assaults. Within their families and communities, fathers, stepfathers, uncles, brothers, and other male relatives are part of a general climate of violence that makes young Black girls appropriate sexual targets for predatory older men. (Collins, 2010, p. 88)

Black females remained silent and felt restrained about the violation. Their family contributed to render them invisible, and girls conformed because they did not know any other way of family love. As has been mentioned, women’s identity was not only shaped by their race and their gender, but families also played a devastating role. In some black families, parents abused their children sexually, physically and emotionally. Given that the vast majority of black people suffered from social marginalization and oppression, both the progenitors and children experienced abuse. This oppression inevitably influenced black women’s formation of identity, leading them to feel inferior and to internalize racism. Dante Cicchetti states that “females with a story of maltreatment (maltreatment females) showed the same types of abusive behaviors towards offspring that they had experienced themselves as infants” (2016, p. 431). In this way, parents transmitted their traumas to their children and victimized them because they had been taught to treat offspring this way.

There have been many events in racialized women’s lives which have victimized and pushed them to the margin. Being a “minority within the minority” (Madibo, 2005, as quoted in Wane and Jagire, 2013, p. xv) because women of color faced double forms of oppression in terms of race and gender, women were never given the chance to articulate their experiences. As Gloria T. Hull and Barbara Smith affirm, “[n]aming and describing our experiences are important initial steps, but not alone sufficient to get us where we need to go […]” (1982, p. xxi, as quoted in Wane and Jagire, 2013, p. xiii). Therefore, it is paramount to examine their lives and develop an analytical framework to understand their situation and the status quo which legitimized the oppression.

Another important issue to deal with is insanity in black women. Madness was considered a female sickness and it was thought that women confused reality with their own figments of imagination. As Remi Akujabi claims, “women are more vulnerable to insanity
than men for the sole reason that the instability of their reproductive systems often interferes with their sexual, emotional, and rational control” (2006). Women were deemed as the Other in society, and so they were believed not to be needed in political or economic spheres. As seen, victimized women remained invisible in community and disempowered by the white culture. These oppressed women did not have a voice to talk and could not fit themselves into white standards and values. They were robbed of identity and submitted to the power of the dominant group. In society, dark-skinned women were rendered as "voiceless bodies, aimlessly walking from place to place until suspected of madness and taken to the mental hospital" (Jackson, 2005, p. 104). Being victims of social exclusion, madness could be defined as a state in which the unconscious controls the conscious (Felman, 1997). Loneliness and victimization led black women to become insane, but madness, as a result of scarring situations and a confrontation of identity definition, would also be a way for women to fight back.

Different aspects which have contributed to the construction of the black feminist thought have been examined. It could be stated that “Black feminist thought is […] meant to elucidate and analyze the historical, social, cultural and economic relationships of women of African descent as a basis for development of a liberatory praxis” (Wane, 2013, p. 38). By and large, black women are survivors because they suffered from social disparities, sexualization, subjugation and marginalization, and have long fought for gender and racial equality.

3. FEMALE VICTIMS OF INVISIBILITY

As brutalized objects, African-American women have been oppressed and victimized in society for many years. One manifestation of this victimization is the invisibility black women suffered in different aspects of their lives, which will be examined in this paper. Not only their gender, but also their race (and other factors such as class or ableism²) are the main reasons of the oppression and of the unfair social constructions which arose in society, so they were rendered doubly invisible.

3.1. Family

The concepts of ‘family’ and ‘family values’ can dramatically vary depending on the social group, and when these terms are defined by the dominant one, it is the female sex that

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² According to the OED, ableism is defined as “discrimination in favour of able-bodied people; prejudice against or disregard of the needs of disabled people.”
feels the consequences the most. The traditional family ideal, constantly in debate, should theoretically consist of:

Heterosexual, racially homogeneous couples who produce their own biological children. Such families should have a specific authority structure, namely, a father-head earning an adequate family wage, a stay-at-home wife and mother, and children. Idealizing the traditional family as a private haven from a public world, family is seen as being held together through primary emotional bonds of love and caring. (Collins, 2000, p. 47)

This ideal conception does not correspond to African-American families depicted in the novels at hand. In these black families, the situation is rather complicated, since all members are normally (or have been) abused, both by social values and by their own relatives, as we will examine. Factors such as traumas, social marginalization and difficulties making a living surround the family, so violence and abuse are likely to occur.

We are now going to explore the familiar situation in the novels *The Bluest Eye* and *Push* in order to explain how the families of the two main characters contribute to the invisibility of these black females in society.

Regarding *The Bluest Eye*, the topic of the family can be approached in different ways. From the very beginning of the novel, white and black families are clearly differentiated. A chunk of *Dick and Jane* is included by Morrison to be compared with the whole story. *Dick and Jane*, far from being innocent, is a political book which includes twelve lessons aimed at children to be indoctrinated and celebrates the ideal white happy family. Blacks are not included in the primer and therefore, not included in the idea of citizens of America, so it can be claimed that kids are taught from their childhood to exclude black people. At the same time, black children are indoctrinated that they are different and that they do not fit into society. In the book being studied, some parts of the primer are compared with Pecola and her family’s life.

To begin with, Pecola and her parents are poor and used to live together in an abandoned area in inadequate conditions: “The Breedloves did not live in a storefront because they were having temporary difficulty adjusting to the cutbacks at the plant. They lived there because they were poor and black […]” (Morrison, 1988, p. 38). No one cares about them and they hardly interact with one another:
Festering together in the debris of a realtor’s whim. They slipped in and out of the box of peeling gray, making no stir in the neighborhood, no sound in the labor force, and no wave in the mayor’s office. Each member of the family in his own cell of consciousness, each making his own patchwork quilt of reality – collecting fragments of experience here, pieces of information there. (Morrison, 1988, p. 35)

It can be observed that they are abandoned and excluded from society, on the one side, and that they do not form the ideal traditional family, on the other. They are a broken family in which there is no communication or love.

As afore mentioned, Pecola’s parents contribute to her invisibility in society. It is necessary to know about their past to understand their present and why they act the way they do. Cholly Breedlove and Pauline (or Polly) Williams were humiliated and victimized when they were younger. There is never a single story, and by virtue of this past, their lives completely change.

Regarding Pauline, she has had a quite difficult life. She is the ninth of ten children and her family is poor too, as usually happens to black families. She has a deformity in her feet and she blames it for her problems with her relatives: “Her general feeling of separateness and unworthiness she blamed on her foot” (Morrison, 1988, p. 103). She does not feel any sense of belonging, and consequently, she feels lonely until she meets Cholly. They fall deeply in love with each other and he even makes her problem with her feet seem special, making Polly extremely happy: “She was secure and grateful; he was kind and lively. She had not known there was so much laughter in the world” (Morrison, 1988, p. 108). Both agree to go to the North to start a new life, but being there, the origin of their condemnation starts and everything changes for them. Polly loses her front tooth, which is a metaphor and a symbol of their degradation:

“Oh and Cholly was getting along good then. We come up north; supposed to be more jobs and all. We moved into two rooms up over a furniture store, and I set about housekeeping. Cholly was working at the steel plant, and everything was looking good. I don’t know what all happened. Everything changed. It was hard to get to know folks up here, and I missed my people. I werren’t used to so much white folks. […] But they want all over us. Up north they was everywhere […] That was the lonesomest time of my life.” (Morrison, 1988, p. 108-109)
Polly does not feel comfortable in the North anymore, and Cholly comes home late and starts to drink. Polly feels very lonely again, and little by little, the couple starts to grow apart, with little to tell each other. As a result, she takes refuge in romantic movies: “‘The onliest time I be happy seem like when I was in the picture show’” (Morrison, 1988, p. 114). She watches men taking care of women and realizes that Cholly is not like that. The situation worsens, and Cholly even hits Polly: “He didn’t hit me too hard, ‘cause I were pregnant I guess, but the fights, once they got started up again, kept up. He began to make me madder than anything I knowed, and I couldn’t keep my hand off him” (Morrison, 1988, p. 114). In addition, she confesses that she hits her two children: “‘I’d catch myself hollering at them and beating them, and I’d feel sorry for them, but I couldn’t seem to stop’” (Morrison, 1988, p. 115). All in all, Polly has been victimized by her husband in her youth and this marginalization endures in her present, which is one of the reason why she treats Pecola badly.

Another example of Polly’s victimization occurs when giving birth to the second baby. The doctor claims that black women do not suffer in this situation and that they are less sensitive to pain. He also considers Polly a savage and compares her to a horse because of being black: “‘When he got to me he said now these here women you don’t have any trouble with. They deliver right away and with no pain. Just like horses’” (Morrison, 1988, p. 115). In this regard, it can be observed that black women were animalized and dehumanized, with animal-like characteristics. No doctor asks Polly how she feels, but they do to white women. Doctors are kind and loving with them, but they do not care for black ones. This is one example of the animalization of the black female body.

Once Polly’s life has been considered, it can be claimed that she has had a very unhappy life and that she has not known what love is. She has been oppressed and marginalized all her life, lacking in love and care. The relationship between Polly and Pecola, which is almost null, can now be analyzed. Polly practically abandons her when she takes up housekeeping in a house owned by rich people. Polly finds herself unable to care about her family and her house, so she moves to the Fisher family’s house. She finds love and acceptance in this family, which are two things she has been deprived of and what she also deprives her family of at the same time.

More than there being a relation of mistress/master and servant between Polly and the Fisher family, the roles of black domestic workers evolve and servants “lived and worked intimately with their white folks […]” (Genovese, 1976, p. 332). On one occasion, Polly becomes completely mad at Pecola when she accidentally splashes blackish blueberries on the
floor of the kitchen. After this incident, Polly feels no pity on her daughter, but the other way round: “Crazy fool… my floor, mess… look what you… work… get on out… now that… crazy… my floor, my floor… my floor” (Morrison, 1988, p. 101). Her preference for the white girl is shown when Polly turns to her to calm her down while ignoring her daughter, who feels miserable after her mother’s reaction. Therefore, it could be claimed that Pauline wrongly places her anger and suffering on her family, concretely, on Pecola. This is the reason why it can be affirmed that Pecola’s mother contributes to the invisibility of the main female character in society, and she is unfairly doing to her daughter what her family and her husband did to her. Brooks J. Bouson states that “While Pauline dotes on the little white Fisher girl, she neglects and physically abuses Pecola, transferring to her daughter her deep-rooted contempt for her own blackness” (2000, p. 34).

Similarly, Cholly, Pecola’s father, has also had a complicated existence. He is abandoned by his parents and his aunt Jimmy rescues him from dying in the railroad. His father runs away when he finds out that Cholly’s mother is pregnant. Living with Aunt Jimmy is not easy, especially, when she obliges him to sleep with her or when she whips him. Therefore, “Cholly understands from a young age that parent/child relationship is not necessarily one that is filled with love” (Andrews, 2010, p. 141). Cholly is never taught how to be a father or how to love because all what he has ever received has been hatred or convenience. That is why, he is unable to relate to his family.

However, what really changes Cholly’s life is a terrible experience in his adolescence. The turning point for Cholly’s identity is when he is making love for the first time with a girl called Darlene and, all of a sudden, two white men catch them. In addition, there is here one more example of the black body being animalized, when it is said: “There was no mistake about their being white; he could smell it” (Morrison, 1988, p. 136). Smelling is a feature of dogs, but not of humans, so an animalistic quality is here attributed to a human being. Coming back to the scene, this event causes Cholly a trauma, and constitutes the beginning of his hatred towards his family and of his violence: “Cholly, moving faster, looked at Darlene. He hated her. He almost wished he could do it – hard, long, and painfully, he hated her so much” (Morrison, 1988, p. 137). The two white men humiliate Cholly and destroy his manhood. As they are white and society is ruled by white culture, Cholly cannot get angry at them, so he displaces the hatred to weaker people, that is, to Darlene and to his family, who will be escape goats for his frustrations: “Sullen irritable, he cultivated his hatred of Darlene. Never did he once consider directing his hatred toward the hunters. Such an emotion would have destroyed him. They were
big, white, armed men. He was small, black, helpless. [...] hating them would have consumed
him” (Morrison, 1988, p. 139). From this experience, Cholly learns that emotions – anger in his
case – can also be expressed through sex (Andrews, 2010). As Sandra L. Bloom states, “Under
such circumstances, people frequently turn to substances, like drugs or alcohol, or behaviors
like sex or eating or even engagement in violence, all of which help them to calm down, at least
temporarily” (1999, p. 4), and Cholly uses violence towards women.

In addition, Cholly suffers from another deception when he is determined to find his
father. When they meet, he is totally rejected by his father, who tells him angrily “‘Now get the
fuck out of my face!’” (Morrison, 1988, p. 144). This also contributes to the construction of
Cholly’s identity, which would later cause him problems with his family. Also, when Cholly
meets Polly, he is not happy because “to be required to sleep with the same woman forever was
a curious and unnatural idea to him” (Morrison, 1988, p. 148), and he searches refuge in alcohol,
which helps him forget his problems.

By looking through Cholly’s past, it is now possible to study and explain the relation he
has with Pecola. He is a broken man, bothered by the fact that his parents abandoned him. He
is never taught how to love or how to have fatherly affection. Pecola is raped by her father on
different occasions, but there is heated debate among scholars about whether this rape is the
result of Cholly’s horrible past or whether Cholly is, by raping her, giving her the only way of
love he has ever known (Andrews, 2010). Cholly feels both love and repulsion towards his
daughter, since she reminds him of his traumatic childhood. She is also “a rejected child, and
is this quality that connects her with her father” (Andrews, 2010, p. 141). Pecola is washing the
dishes the moment before Cholly rapes her, and “the sequence of his emotions was revulsion,
guilt, pity, then love. His revulsion was a reaction to her young, helpless, hopeless presence.
[...] Why did she have to look so whipped? She was a child – unburdened – why wasn’t she
happy?” (Morrison, 1988, p. 149). Cholly knows he has never given her love, the same way his
parents did not to him, so he sees Pecola as “the physical embodiment of his desolate past”
(Andrews, 2010, p. 142). Fury and love are the mixed feelings Cholly has when looking at
Pecola: “He wanted to fuck her – tenderly” (Morrison, 1988, p. 150). He experiences tenderness
towards her, and without knowing how to react, he chooses to do so as natural as he knows,
which results in a sexual reaction. Cholly cannot express love in any other way but through sex.

It is usually common that parents observe in their children parts of themselves. He sees
in Pecola everything he hates of himself, and Jane S. Bakerman describes him as being “set
adrift by the death of his guardian, taunted and humiliated by white men during his first sexual encounter, [he] does not know about nurturing love, and feeling love, he is incapable of expressing it healthfully” (1981, p. 544).

The three characters being examined (Polly, Cholly and Pecola) are excluded from society, and as highlighted above, they are also guilty of the victimization of her daughter, since they project on her an identity which renders her invisible. Additionally, Polly, Cholly and Pecola suffer from spirit injury, since they are emotionally raped and excluded from society, which in turn lead them to feel self-hatred. All in all, the three of them suffer from oppression because of being black, and the parents, along with society, impose on their daughter the racist marginalization.

On the other hand, Push is another instance where the family is one of the main causes for the main female character to feel oppressed in community. The protagonist is a 16-year-old girl called Claireece ‘Precious’ Jones and lives in Harlem. She is sexually, physically and emotionally abused by her parents, and is pregnant with her second child – who, as the first one, is the result of being raped by her father, Carl. Her father has AIDS and infects his daughter with it when abusing her. Precious is black, overweight and illiterate, so she has to face many real social obstacles which result in racism. The novel is “a startling tribute to the strong urban voice of the underrepresented and abused” (Wilson, 2012, p. 31).

The incest stories in the novel are central to Precious’ victimization. She is poor and endures “almost unspeakable sexual and emotional abuse” (Ziesenheim and Darling, 2013, p. 171). In addition, the usual sexual harassment normally takes place in front of the mother, Mary, who not only permits it, but also sexually abuses Precious herself. It may be argued that Mary overlooks Carl’s abuse towards the teenager because recognizing it as abuse may bring devastating memories of her traumatic past to her:

A flashback is a sudden intrusive re-experiencing of a fragment of those traumatic, unverbalized memories. Flashbacks are likely to occur when people are upset, stressed, frightened, or aroused or when triggered by any association to the traumatic event. […] Without words, the traumatic past is experienced as being in the ever present ‘Now’ (Bloom, 1999, p. 6).

Precious’ second pregnancy is crucial because it triggers awareness of the oppression she is suffering on her parents’ behalf and prompts her to take control of her life. Hence, the birth of a self-conscious Precious is found, and she stops being the victim to become the subject
(Liddell, 1999). It starts her internal fight in which she confronts her own self with the negative stereotypes surrounding her (Stereotype Threat). Similarly, she also starts to care about her two children, who did not matter to her until then, and to play the role of a mother.

Precious’ victimization is not even prevented by the social system when she gives birth to her children. It could have prevented her second pregnancy, but the nurses and the police are passive and even consider that it is her fault that her father sexually abuses her: “Why no one put Carl in jail after I have baby by him when I am twelve?” (Sapphire, 1998, p. 125). In this way, American society was also responsible for her victimization, since white Americans ignored others’ suffering and were accomplices of the abuse black people were suffering at the time. Thus, what Sapphire is doing in this novel is exploring black people’s oppression and giving them visibility at the same time. Marq Wilson claims that “Sapphire’s greatest achievement as an artist stems from her powerful ability to give a voice to those who have not been heard” (2012, p. 32).

Precious’ mother, Mary Johnston, treats Precious like a slave: “Mama sleep. I be back before she wake up, back in time to clean up and fix breakfast for Mama. Why Mama do anything? One time I ax her, when I get up from her knocking me down, she say, That’s what you here for” (Sapphire, 1998, p. 22). It seems obvious that she does not love Precious, neither does her father, and the young girl is aware of this lack of love: “A long time I don’t say nuffin’, jus’ look at Mama. This what I come out of? Like Abdul and Little Mongo come out of me. It she ever said a kind word to me I don’t remember it. […] Since I was little her husband fuck me beat me. My daddy. I want to hate him – […]” (Sapphire, 1998, p. 85). Deprived of protection, love and nurturance, Precious is living a devastating situation, and later in the novel, she finds both parents guilty of her poor existence. Sherry Ziesenheim and Matthew J. Darling consider that “Precious’s story is tragic, but her near-heroic attempts to overcome her traumatic circumstances leave even the most cynical reader feeling sympathetic for Precious and rooting for her success” (2013, p. 172).

Moreover, Mary lives on welfare because she pretends she is taking care of her granddaughter, which is a lie. So when Precious confesses to a social worker that her daughter is living with her grandmother, Toosie, Mary is deprived of welfare and chases Precious out of home. She does not care that she has just given birth. Mary also forces her to binge eat, and as mentioned, she sexually, emotionally and physically abuses Precious. One example of this incest is illustrated in:
I feel Mama’s hand between my legs, moving up my thigh. Her hand stop, she getting ready to pinch me if I move. I just lay still still, keep my eye close. I can tell Mama’s other hand between her legs now ‘cause the smell fill the room. […] Mama’s hand creepy spider, up my legs, in my pussy. God please! Thank you god I say as I fall asleep. (Sapphire, 1998, p. 21).

Precious is used to oppression and deems it as something normal in her life: “For many children, in fact, traumatic experience becomes the norm rather than the exception and they fail to develop a concept of what is normal or healthy” (Bloom, 1999, p. 8).

Precious is the most evident victim of the novel, and it is difficult for readers not to regard Mary as anything but a monster. However, despite not being explicitly stated throughout the novel because it is exclusively told from Precious’ point of view, it is believed by some researchers that Mary also experienced some traumas in her early ages that are perpetrated on her daughter. Ziesenheim and Darling attribute “her seemingly abhorrent behavior toward her daughter to her own victimization and the victimization in her family history” (2013, p. 172). It can be reckoned that Mary has also been oppressed by her parents and by the society and is therefore a victim.

For this reason, she may marginalize her daughter, since this is the only way of love she has ever had. Mary cannot be separated from her origins, and the past is what constructs people’s identity. Mary is also raped by Carl in the present: “Carl come in the night, take food, what money they is, fuck us bofe” (Sapphire, 1998, p. 85). Because of her past and her present, Mary is traumatized and cannot provide her daughter with love and care: “[…] people who have been traumatized need to learn to create relationships that are not based on terror and the abuse of power, even though abusive power feels normal and right” (Bloom, 1999, p. 10). Equally important, Mary is unable to encourage her daughter to escape victimization and protect herself, but she imposes on her a reality in which Precious feels helpless. Mary’s victimization did not end during her early age, but unfortunately, she is not able to notice her marginalization and oppression as Precious finally does. Reconsideration to Mary as a character should probably be given, as she “displays the encoded effects of her own abused past” (Ziesenheim and Darling, 2013, p. 174) and her own past influences the way she treats Precious.

Once she decides to start a new life and to overcome her traumas, Precious becomes aware of the fact that their parents have had their own dramatic pasts, and that this is the cause of their current oppressive behavior towards her:
I’m alive inside. A bird is my heart. Mama and Daddy is not win. I’m winning. I’m drinking hot chocolate in the Village wif girls – all kind who love me. How that is so I don’t know. How Mama and Daddy know me sixteen years and hate me, how a stranger meet me and love me. Must be what they already had in they pocket. (Sapphire, 1998, p. 131)

She is conscious that, despite their parents’ harassment towards her, she has been able to liberate herself and understands that the oppression lived by her parents led them to act the way they did. Precious somehow comprehends their behavior and decides to continue with her own life without focusing on blaming them for her unhappiness. Precious’ parents have been victims of spirit injury and internalized prejudices towards black people which made them feel emotionally hurt. Consequently, Precious was a scapegoat, a victim of spirit injury because her parents used to victimize her in the same way that they were in their youth.

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The main female characters in _The Bluest Eye_ and _Push_ are rendered invisible in society, and their relation with their families is one of the causes. Since their parents have also suffered oppression and marginalization in their past and do so even in their present, they wrongly place their frustrations and terrible experiences on Pecola and Precious. Their lack of compassion and sorrow towards their daughters is part of the oppression. By being sexually and emotionally abused, animalized and dehumanized, black people constructed their identity as the Other (internalized racism), which is linked to internalized racism, and suffered from microaggressions from their own relatives. Pecola and Precious are victims of racism and of their families, who also contribute to the creation of their ideology, in which they regard themselves as inferior and powerless. Another way whereby people become invisible in society is the standards of beauty, which are going to be explored in the next section.

### 3.2. Standards of female beauty

Black women were usually vulnerable to the Western ideal of beauty. Children and teenagers were the ones who felt most pressured by these European standards of beauty (Russell, Wilson and Hall, 1992, as quoted in Bryant, 2013). These standards emphasized white skin and fair hair and excluded black women and girls because they could not fit into them. Black women internalized the European beauty standards through family, the media, advertising, etc. and internalized self-hatred. The following quote by Margaret Burroughs summarizes this fact very well:
What shall I tell my children who are black, of what it means to be a captive in this dark skin? What shall I tell my dear one, fruit of my womb, of how beautiful they are when everywhere they turn they are faced with abhorrence of everything that is black? [...] What shall I tell my dear ones raised in a white world. A place where white has been made to represent all that is good and pure and fine and decent, where clouds are white and dolls, and heaven surely is a white, white place with angels robed in white, and cotton candy and ice cream and milk and ruffled Sunday dresses and dream houses and long sleek Cadillac’s and Angel’s food is white... all, all... white. What can I say therefore, when my child Comes home in tears because a playmate Has called him black, big lipped, flat nosed and nappy headed? (2009, p. 2).

In the following paragraphs, we are going to study how the standards of beauty condemn the main female characters in *The Bluest Eye* and *Push*. The notion of the Western standards of beauty defended that beauty and attractiveness were closely associated to whiteness. They had a detrimental effect on black women, who, as a result, internalized the beauty standards and felt unaccepted.

In *The Bluest Eye*, the Breedloves consider themselves ugly because they do not fit into the model of beauty that white society portrays: “[...] they believed they were ugly. Although their poverty was traditional and stultifying, it was not unique. But their ugliness was unique. No one could have convinced them that they were not relentlessly and aggressively ugly. [...] You looked at them and wondered why they were so ugly” (Morrison, 1988, p. 38). Roberta Rubenstein explains that “The Breedlove family’s sense of utter hopelessness and helplessness is externalized in their appearance: both literal and spiritual poverty manifest themselves as ugliness in a world in which beauty is equated with success” (Rubenstein, 1993, p. 127).

Polly’s internalization of the white standards of beauty is illustrated in the scene of the kitchen, already highlighted. Polly is too focused on the cleanliness of the kitchen and wants to keep everything as white as possible. “We stepped into the kitchen, a large spacious room. Mrs. Breedlove’s skin glowed like taffeta in the reflection of white porcelain, white woodwork, polished cabinets, and brilliant copperware” (Morrison, 1988, p. 100). The repetition of the word ‘white’ and Polly’s obsession with keeping everything spotless are a symbol of the hatred she feels towards her own race. As she has had such a terrible life due to the fact of being black, she wants everything clean and white, as if it were a way for herself to erase her past. Black people, as seen, were linked to dirt, and she wants nothing that reminds her of her blackness.
Polly’s desire to belong to white society leads her to leave her own daughter aside, and this results in Pecola feeling insignificant and unloved.

Polly was already a victim of physical beauty when she was young and her relation with Cholly started to deteriorate. Because of her feelings of loneliness, she becomes obsessed with romantic love in movies and tries to live the life of the protagonists. Soon she realizes that her marriage with Polly is neither what she expected nor the way love is portrayed in fiction: “Along with the idea of romantic love, she was introduced to another – physical beauty. Probably the most destructive ideas in the history of human thought. Both originated in envy, thrived in insecurity, and ended in disillusion” (Morrison, 1988, p. 113). Polly feels socially excluded from the white standards and develops self-hatred. Incapable of living up to this ideal of love and beauty she gets depressed, surrenders and lets herself go: “‘Look like I just didn’t care no more after that. I let my hair go back, plaits it up, and settled down to just being ugly” (Morrison, 1988, p. 114). Polly is a prime example of what internalized racism is. She has accepted the negative social stereotypes about herself and considers herself inferior. She does not experience Stereotype Threat, which would imply one’s confrontation with his/ her inner beliefs and the negative ones received from the dominant group. With a feeling of a devalued worth of herself, this internalized racism will influence Pecola, who will also suffer from it and will be excluded from the white community.

The viewpoints of Pecola and Claudia Macteer – the child of the family the protagonist is living with and the narrator of much of the book – about the standards of beauty can be contrasted. Claudia challenges the stereotypes of white culture and is unwilling to accept them: “Adults, older girls, shops, magazines, newspapers, window signs – all the world had agreed that a blue-eyed, yellow-haired, pink-skinned doll was what every girl treasured” (Morrison, 1988, p. 23). Claudia is given a “big, blue-eyed Baby Doll” (Morrison, 1988, p. 22) as a gift at Christmas, and is aware that her family thought that it would be the perfect gift for a little girl because it epitomizes the feminine beauty. However, Claudia perceives the racism and feels revolted by its aspect. She just wants to “dismember it” (Morrison, 1988, p. 23) to find what makes it so desirable. Yet, her hatred goes beyond dolls and is extended to all white girls in the world. For instance, Claudia also detests the white young actress girl Shirley Temple, and claims: “[...] I had felt a stranger, more frightening thing than hatred for all the Shirley Temples of the world” (Morrison, 1988, p. 22). This sentence refers to those white and fair girls who advertise the white standards of beauty and discriminate those who do not fit into them. So Claudia, despite being so young, is the only one who understands the contradictions found in
the standards and questions what society assumes beauty is. She can be claimed to be a defender of the social construction thesis by CRT, which holds that identity is a social construct and that the dominant group establishes the norms and morals of many social aspects – in this case, the ones about beauty.

On the contrary, Pecola admires the Shirley Temple drawn on a cup of milk and becomes obsessed with it. She also believes that by drinking lots of milk – which is white as well – from a Shirley Temple cup, she will become whiter, and that by becoming white and beautiful, she will be happier: “She was a long time with the milk, and gazed fondly at the silhouette of Shirley’s Temple dimpled face. Frieda and she had a loving conversation about how cu-ute” (Morrison, 1988, p. 21). Pecola is “concentrated in her sad fantasy of obtaining blue eyes. Through them, she might see and be seen as a real person and thus acquire the self-determination denied her by her circumstances as well as by her race and gender” (Rubenstein, 1993, p. 130). Her desire to be pretty is linked to the abuse from her parents, and beauty is her way to escape from it.

With regard to Push, the white standards of beauty do not affect Precious as much as they do Pecola and Polly, but it is also an important topic to reflect upon. Precious is obese, black-skinned, illiterate and pregnant, so she does not fit into the confines of the society’s paradigm. She does not love herself and thinks herself unworthy. Her physical appearance along with her family and her class are locking her out of society, but it just represents one more reason why she feels victimized. In other words, she is not as focused as Pecola on becoming beautiful or on having blue eyes. Precious does not think that by becoming whiter her problems will be solved, but that being black is just one more drawback for her happiness.

It is very likely that Precious’ mother is also a victim of the standards of beauty, and has transmitted this anxiety to her daughter. The way Precious’ parents treat her is also a trigger that may make her feel ugly and excluded from the world. Being physically unpleasant is, in fact, one of the causes why Precious is discriminated in society. Black people internalized the standards of beauty and became victims. As Paul C. Taylor affirms:

One of the cornerstones of the modern West has been the hierarchical valuation of human types along racial lines. […] The most prominent type of racialised ranking represents blackness as a condition to be despised, and most tokens of this type extend this attitude to cover the physical features that are central to the description of black identity. (1999, p. 16)
Contrary to what happens in *The Bluest Eye*, Precious learns to see beauty in both white and black people after attending an alternative school which gives her the strength to become a powerful woman. But this will be studied below. It is in this school that Precious hears about white women’s stories of abuse and understands that they can also experience the same terrible circumstances as black females. This would also help her break the chains that metaphorically enslave her and understand that white people’s impressions and stereotypes should not affect her. At a certain moment she stops caring so much about being attractive and comprehends that what really matters in one’s inner self and that she is beautiful inside:

[…] I just don’t always want to be crying like white bitch on TV movies. Since I ain’ no white bitch. I understand that now. I am not white bitch. I am not Janet Jackson or Madonna on the *inside*. I always thought I was someone different on the inside. That I was just fat and black and ugly to people on the OUTSIDE. And if they could see *inside* me they would see something lovely and not keep laughing at me […] Mama and Daddy would recognize me as… as, I don’t know, Precious! But I am not different on the inside. Inside I thought was so beautiful is a black girl too. (Sapphire, 1998, p. 125)

Precious overcomes the racism she internalized – of which she had been victim for many years – and now she values herself as a woman who has ambitions in life and who wants to improve as a human being. When she resolves the internal fight between her inner beliefs and the ones promoted by the white culture (Stereotype Threat) she reaches the conclusion that people should not be valued for their beauty, but for what they really are inside.

* The black female characters of both *The Bluest Eye* and *Push* are marginalized in society because of her race and her physical aspect. Polly, Pecola, Precious and her mother are victims of the white standards of beauty because they cannot fit into the model of what white social values depict as appropriate. They feel both physically and psychologically ugly and portray this fact through their actions. Living in a world in which it is believed that success is linked to beauty, these females do not value themselves and develop self-hatred as a result of internalized racism.
4. FIGHTING INVISIBILITY

Feminist Sueli Carneiro highlights that women should become self-determining and adopt an attitude of empowerment in order to overcome social constraints on their race and gender: “We have more to do than just hope to for a better future… What we have to do is to organize, and to never stop questioning. What we have to do, as always, is plenty if work” (1995, p. 17). African-American women have traditionally been marginalized and victimized by white culture on account of racism. Black feminist thought highlights the importance for women to become aware of this type of oppression and to seek ways for empowerment. In a racist world, it was necessary not only that black women shifted their mindset, but also that social institutions changed. After being oppressed and brutalized for a long time, some black women decided to fight back in different ways.

4.1. Madness

Under traumatic circumstances, the individual can undergo different transformations and experience distinct emotions. One of the most likely consequences for black women as a result of their victimization in the white society is physic disintegration. African-American women were oppressed and marginalized because of her gender and her race, resulting in them developing schizophrenia as a weapon to fight the social confines. As Soshana Felman asserts, “What we consider ‘madness’, whether it appears in women or in men, is either the acting out of the devalued female role or the total or partial rejection of one’s sex-role stereotype” (1997, p. 134). In this regard, insanity is the expression of revolt against racist abuse and a means to fight invisibility.

Insanity affects Pecola Breedlove in *The Bluest Eye* as a result of her inferiority and of her refusal to be a victim. Pecola illustrates the pervasive effects of the internalization of racism. Her skin color is at the core of her sense of inferiority and she is highly affected by the white standards of beauty into which she cannot fit. Pecola remains invisible until the moment she envisions another self that follows the white standards of beauty and that is therefore accepted in society. Her madness represents a rejection of surrendering to Western dominance and a way of becoming visible.

As already explained, Pecola is conscious that nobody loves her and hates herself because of her physical appearance. She is sexually abused by her father, and some people even claim that she carries some blame for it: “Ought to. She carry some of the blame.’ / ‘Oh, come on. She ain’t but twelve or so.’ / ‘Yeah. But you never know. How come she didn’t fight him?’”
(Morrison, 1988, p. 175). Nobody shows compassion to her, and this lack of support contributes to her becoming insane. Pecola is an adolescent who is more vulnerable to feel marginalized in such a hostile world. Her inner self is destroyed and her mind is colonized by white social rules, which leads to self-hatred. As Elaine Showalter points out:

Schizophrenia is the perfect literary metaphor for the female condition, expressive of women’s... dependency on external, often masculine definitions of the self, split between the body as sexual object and the mind as subject, and vulnerability to conflicting social messages about femininity and maturity. (1987, p. 213)

Psychic disintegration is inextricably linked to white power, gender and race. However, it can also be considered a protest against cultural assumptions and practices.

Rejection from her own family and from the community are the main causes of Pecola’s ordeal and internalized self-contempt. She looks for acceptance and approval; that is why, she wishes to be beautiful and to have blue eyes. She goes deeper and deeper into loss of consciousness throughout the book as a rejection of the real world and the unfair circumstances she is experiencing. She is also aware of her invisibility and her existential nonbeing in society. Nevertheless, it is sexual abuse from her father that triggers insanity. When she is raped by her father for the second time, she cannot accept it and succumbs to schizophrenia, losing track of reality. This ultimate victimization is her path to a fantasy world where she has blue eyes, and therefore, represents the only way for her to survive the oppression of the white standards of beauty: “Pecola takes a definite step towards insanity when she decides to make her dreams come true and, so, she visits Soaphead Church, a sort of pedophile magician, with a unique request: blue eyes, which Pecola truly believes would change her world” (Ramírez, 2013, p. 82). Soaphead Church ‘gives’ her blue eyes, which she is the only one who can see:

‘What can I do for you, my child?’

[...] ‘I can’t go to school no more. And I thought maybe you could help me.’

‘Help you how? Tell me. Don’t be frightened.’

‘My eyes.’

‘What about your eyes?’

‘I want them blue.’
Soaphead pursued his lips, and let his tongue stroke a gold inlay. He thought it was at once the most fantastic and most logical petition he had ever received. Here was an ugly little girl asking for beauty. A surge of love and understanding swept through him, but was quickly replaced by anger. Anger that he was powerless to help her. Of all the wishes people had brought him – money, love, revenge – this seemed to him the most poignant and the one most deserving of fulfillment. A little black girl who wanted to rise up out of the pit of her blackness and see the world with blue eyes. [...] ‘Take this food and give it to the creature sleeping on the porch. Make sure he eats it. And mark well how he behaves. If nothing happens, you will know that God has refused you. If the animal behaves strangely, your wish will be granted in the day following this one.’ (Morrison, 1988, p. 160-162)

It can be observed that Soaphead takes pity on Pecola and decides to help her believe she has got blue eyes. At first sight, he already notices that she feels miserable by virtue of her black condition and is ‘wholly convinced that if black people were more like white people they would be better off’ (Stepto, 1994, as quoted in Ramírez, 2013, p. 82).

As Claudia affirms, Pecola “stepped over into madness, a madness which protected her from us simply because it bored us in the end” (Morrison, 1988, p. 189). She becomes insane because she cannot continue with the racism suffered so far any more. The world she invents in which she has blue eyes represents shelter for her, and so does her invented friend, who represents a “survival strategy” (Ramírez, 2013, p. 83) for her. That is why, Pecola asks her “Why didn’t I know you before?” (Morrison, 1988, p. 180) and her friend says “You didn’t need me before” (Morrison, 1988, p. 180). This friend is born out from abuse and hatred and epitomizes Pecola’s mental breakdown. It is only at the end of the book when Pecola’s voice is fully heard in the conversation with her friend, who is a figment of her imagination. Her blue eyes are not real, but are part of her imagination too. Pecola creates this imaginary world to survive marginalization and fight invisibility.

Furthermore, Pecola is also preoccupied with beauty in this world and asks her friend whether her eyes are “bluely nice” (Morrison, 1988, p. 179) and “bluer” (Morrison, 1988, p. 181) than anybody’s. As Trudier Harris highlights, “Pecola’s society has taught her not merely to want to be beautiful but to be the most beautiful of all, for only in such supremacy can she erase the lack of affection, the constant lack of approval” (1991, as quoted in Ramírez, 2013, p. 83).
The protagonist encounters racist attitudes and beliefs towards herself, and the pain she experiences through invisibility eventually drives her mad. More importantly, as a consequence, Pecola becomes hypervisible in society. After being victimized with microaggressions and internalizing racism, she develops schizophrenia, which turns her hypervisible to society. People are now more aware of her presence, although nobody seems to be willing to admit their role played in her journey to insanity and just observes her in the distance.

Finally, Claudia’s voice is heard again at the end of the book as a sort of personal reflection upon Pecola’s situation: “We tried to see her without looking at her, and never, never, went near. Not because she was absurd, or repulsive, or because we were frightened, but because we had failed her” (Morrison, 1988, p. 188). With her use of the verb ‘to see’, she refers to the fact that nobody wants to get involved in Pecola’s life. Contrary to the verb ‘to look’, which here means to take part in the other person’s life and looking inside her heart. Claudia realizes that the community and herself have been responsible for Pecola’s state and that it has also been their fault:

All our waste which we dumped on her and which she absorbed. And all of our beauty, which was hers first and which she gave to us. 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 believe we were eloquent. Her poverty kept us generous. Even her waking dreams we used – to silence our nightmares. (Morrison, 1988, p. 189)

All of them have contributed to Pecola’s internalization of the norms of the dominant group and have been participants of her oppression, treating her as a scapegoat. Unfortunately, Pecola does not experience the so-called Stereotype Threat, which consists in confronting one’s inner self with the negative beliefs of the society. She never questions them and feels so victimized and obsessed with the expectations imposed that she is not able to see reality and reach this internal fight that would improve her life.

* * *

Madness in *The Bluest Eye* is the only way the main character finds to fight invisibility. Even though she is not totally liberated, Pecola’s insanity represents the end of her marginalization in society. Her subversive act through psychic disintegration depicts her
rejection of a world full of pain and suffering for those who could not fit into the white standards. Thus, going insane could be considered a survival strategy and a way of inventing oneself to feel empowered.

4.2. Beauty

As has been mentioned throughout the dissertation, African-American people suffered from racism in American society and were therefore deemed as inferior. White culture victimized and ridiculed the black race, resulting in this being an obstacle for the creation of a positive individual identity. Morals, expectations and roles were socially imposed for blacks, who were also caused to believe that they were inferior, ugly and weak.

The standards of beauty marginalized black people because they could not follow them, and this led them to have a misconception of their own identity, being rendered invisible in community. Nevertheless, beauty could also play another role and represent a means to create a different identity of themselves. In the case of the novels *The Bluest Eye* and *Push*, the main characters’ understanding of beauty undergoes different kinds of transformation throughout the book which would make them stronger so as to deal with the impositions of society.

With regard to *The Bluest Eye*, Pecola, becomes schizophrenic at the end of the book because of the white standards of beauty into which she cannot fit and the racism towards black people. Pecola internalizes the view of beauty as being white, and at the end, she believes she has got blue eyes. She thinks that now that she is beautiful, she will be visible and accepted in society. Therefore, it can be assumed that beauty in this story is also depicted as a way to fight invisibility. Notwithstanding the fact that Pecola has gone mad, she feels that through beauty she has overcome the social impositions and the invisibility suffered all her life.

In this regard, Pecola creates an identity of her own – which is a figment of her imagination – to fight social and cultural impositions. She wants to be part of the community and avoid discrimination, which will be achieved if she is lovely and attractive. At the end, she regards herself as pretty, which is a means to avoid being rendered invisible in society. Thus, Pecola redefines herself through an invented identity that depicts her as beautiful and allows her to overcome social racism.

As for *Push*, Precious has always been harassed for being ugly and fat, and these factors have contributed to low self-esteem and self-confidence. The time Precious remains an illiterate victim, she has a very poor self-image. However, thanks to education (which will be studied in
Precious comprehends that beauty is not as important as it is widely believed, and, once she is able to understand that her happiness does not depend on what the others (the white community) think, she starts to exist, metaphorically. Precious does not care about being beauty, thin or white anymore, but, after having been victimized because of social impositions – also transmitted by their parents –, she just wants to be happy the way she is, taking care of her children and evolving like a human being. Precious matures, and by forgetting about the white standards of beauty, she fights invisibility.

At the end of the book, black identity is constructed by the main characters, Pecola and Precious, in a distinct way. Whereas Pecola needs to be beautiful to be happy and imagines a physical appearance of herself which does not correspond to reality, beauty does not matter to Precious, who decides to take on responsibilities in her life and think more about her own welfare. Precious is now an independent and mature woman who realizes that beauty is something secondary to live a complete life. On the contrary, Pecola keeps believing that she needs to be beautiful to achieve happiness, so it can be stated that the feelings of devalued worth of themselves are changed in *Push*, but not in *The Bluest Eye*. All in all, the two different viewpoints and actions of the protagonists, despite being extremely opposed and distinct, bring them victory as a way to fight invisibility in terms of beauty, be it from a schizophrenic viewpoint or a more realistic and mature one.

4.3. Education

In the domain of education, black Americans had lots of difficulties accessing it because of their race. Racism towards dark-skinned people was found in various aspects of life, and education was also one of them. Experiences of social, familiar and economic oppression did not permit African-Americans to receive a solid education, so they could not be educated to become conscious of their unfair situation. As Heather Andrea Williams states, “the ability to read and write, they knew, could provide them with access to centers of power and could enable them to both shape and gain access to rights for the freed people” (2005, p. 47).

Education of black people was a key factor in changing their social situation and in attempting to obtain equal status in society. White people were aware of this fact, and for this
reason, they hindered blacks’ access to it. According to racial formation theory, unequal conditions were given to different races. For this reason, black people had difficulty accessing education. We are now going to explore how education is used by Precious Jones from *Push* as means to improve her social condition, that is to say, to fight invisibility.

*Push* describes the protagonist’s liberation from victimization through not a literal journey, but a journey into literacy. The story takes places in Harlem, a place of black artistic Renaissance and with a long literary history. When Precious gets pregnant, her school decides that she has to attend an alternative school called Higher Education Alternative Each One Teach One located in Hotel Theresa:

‘I want to talk to you about your education.’ This bitch crazy. I was going to school everyday till her honky ass snatch me out the hall, fuck with my mind, make me go off on her, suspend me from school jus’ because I’m pregnant – you know, end up my education. (Sapphire, 1998, p. 15)

Notwithstanding her mother’s insistence on applying for welfare, Precious starts her story of liberation by attending this school, so what at first seemed a misfortune would turn out to be her salvation. Her new teacher is called Ms. Blue Rain, and all her classmates come from troubled backgrounds and are illiterate too.

Through the help of Ms. Blue Rain, Precious learns to read and write, which would enable her to build a new life. Ms. Blue Rain introduces critical pedagogy in her lessons, which emphasizes the individual and examines ideological forces and social progress. Critical pedagogy is “an implicit understanding that power is negotiated daily by teachers and students” (Sarroub and Quadros, 2015, p. 252). Using such critical theory in the classroom is usually aimed at students who have suffered from oppression and inequality so that they can reflect upon these aspects and critically examine the norms and values outside the educational setting. The way in which Ms. Blue Rain introduces critical pedagogy is by telling students to keep a journal where they should write about their lives and experiences every day: “‘Every day,’ Miz Rain say, ‘we gonna read and write in our notebooks.’” (Sapphire, 1998, p. 49). Then, she would establish a dialogue with her pupils by writing properly their sentences and by answering and asking more questions:

She tell everyone to not talk and to write for the next fifteen minutes. Everybody is trying something. After time up Miz Rain come to my book ax me to read what I wrote. I reads: ‘Little Mongo on my mind.’
Underneaf what I wrote Miz Rain write what I said in pencil.

li Mgo mi m

(*Little Mongo on my mind*)

Then she write:

Who is Little Mongo?

She read me what she wrote, tell me to write my answer to her question in the book. I copy Little Mongo’s name from where Miz Rain had wrote it.

Little mony is mi cie

Miz Rain read, ‘Little Monso is my child?’ She have question in her voice. I say, ‘Yes yes.’ Miz Rain know Little Mongo is my child ‘cause I wrote it in my journal. I am happy to be writing. I am happy to be in school. Miz Rain say we gonna write everyday, that mean home too. ‘N she gonna write back everyday. Thas great.

(Sapphire, 1998, p. 61-62)

It can be claimed that Precious is proud of herself because she can read and tells Ms. Blue Rain about her child through writing. From that moment onwards, she wants to continue learning from Ms. Blue Rain’s answers. In addition, readers also notice Precious’ illiteracy from the spelling and grammatical mistakes of the entries in her journal, to the point that it is sometimes difficult to decipher the writing – for example, there are vowels or whole syllables missing.

Precious and the rest of the students are initially worried about carrying out this task because they do not know how to read or write. This is observed in “How we gonna write if we can’t read? Shit, how we gonna write if we can’t write!” (Sapphire, 1998, p. 49) and in “I wonder what reading books be like” (Sapphire, 1998, p. 51). However, Ms. Blue Rain encourages them to try it by saying “‘The longest journey begin with a single step’” (Sapphire, 1998, p. 49) and “we all in this together” (Sapphire, 1998, p. 50). She understands that this is not an easy task, so she gives them inspiration because they really need this journey into literacy.

‘What’s wrong Precious?’

I struggles for air, ‘I… the pages look alike to me.’ I breave in deep, there I said it.

Miz Rain sigh sad like. ‘I think I understand you, Precious. But for now, I want to try, push yourself Precious, go for it.’ (Sapphire, 1998, p. 53-54)
It can be observed that Ms. Blue Rain plays a key role in Precious’ literacy journey. Through dialogical education, students are forced to participate and there is therefore learning. She gives Precious a new understanding of the world, and this will result in her rising as a new woman. Ms. Blue Rain is considered a conductor because she gets to know her students and extends contact with them. She gives her students the key to improve their lives, which is writing: “Writing could be the boat carry you to the other side. […] I think telling your story git you over that river Precious. […] ‘Open your notebook Precious.’ ‘I’m tired,’ I says. She says, ‘I know you are but you can’t stop now Precious, you gotta push.’ And I do” (Sapphier, 1998, p. 97). However, Ms. Blue Rain is temporary, and once she is not needed anymore, she disappears in the story, and her role would be played by Precious and the other transformed women.

Throughout her journey to discover literacy, Precious is also confronted with terrible past experiences. She writes about traumatic memories which make her reflect upon her life, and similarly, she experiences memories of abuse during the lessons:

‘This gonna be painless,’ Miz Rain say, ‘I just want you to read a page from this little book.’ All the air go out my body. I grab my stomach. Miz Rain look scared. ‘Precious!’ My head water. I see bad things. I see my daddy. I see TVs I hear rap music I want something to eat I want fuck feeling from Daddy I want die I want die. (Sapphire, 1998, p. 53)

As already mentioned, Precious feels anxious about learning at the beginning, and in those moments of nervousness when she is told to read and write, she usually feels the same sensations that when she is sexually abused by her father.

Precious’ mother is against her daughter attending a school and claims that she will not learn anything from there: “Mama say this new school ain’ ahit. Say you can’t learn nuffin’ writing in no book. […] But Mama wrong. I is learning” (Sapphire, 1998, p. 65). In fact, she does not only learn to read and write, but she also starts to see life in a different way. Before attending this alternative school, Precious was ignorant of what incest was, but now that she can read, she notices she has suffered from parental abuse. She translates the word ‘incest’ into ‘insect’ into her own language before knowing through education what it is really happening to her; and then, she learns about incest and can really turn against the abuse, but not before:

‘Well, I just write in my notebook till I git wif some kinda therapist I can trust. Actually that help me more than talking to her. Plus I’m going to start going to meetings wif Rits for insect survivor –’
‘Incest,’ girl name Bunny say.

‘Thas what I mean.’

‘Well, it ain’t what you been saying.’

‘so, what’s the big dral insect, incest?’ I say.

‘One’s where your parents molest you, the other is like a roach or bugs,’ Bunny say. (Sapphire, 1998, p. 123)

Through language and literacy, she knows she is being abused by her parents and she decides to change her life. Little by little, she becomes a woman of words who writes better and more elaborately than before. She becomes a poet and now feels that her life has sense: “I think how alive I am, every part of me that is cells, proteins, nutrons, hairs, pussy, eyeballs, nervus system, brain. I goet poems, a son, friends. I want to live so bad” (Sapphire, 1998, p. 137). This fact of becoming increasingly aware of her long unfair situation and of learning about life is inextricably linked to the Stereotype Threat. This represents Precious’ internal fight after tackling her devalued worth of herself as a result of negative expectations and microaggressions with her new beliefs and aspirations in life about being a new and better person.

Furthermore, it is important to mention that Precious’ transformation can be observed in her posters. Posters are worth mentioning because they depict Precious’s projection of identity, her desires and her evolution. At the beginning of the story, Precious has just one poster of Louis Farrakhan, who was an activist and the leader of NOI (Nation of Islam): “First thing I see when I wake up is picture of Farrakhan’s face on my wall. I love him” (Sapphire, 1998, p. 34). Historically, Farrakhan was both highly praised and criticized because of his anti-white, anti-Semitic and homophobic arguments, and he also organized the well-known Million March Man in Washington for African-American men in 1995 (in Gardell, 1996). It promoted African-American unity, but it excluded black women. It can be claimed that Farrakhan is divisive in Push because whereas Precious loves him, Ms. Blue Rain hates him. The latter affirms that he alienates Jewish people and homosexuals, which leads Precious to reflect upon her admiration towards him: “Miz Rain say Farrakhan is jive anti-Semitic, homophile fool” (Sapphire, 1998, p. 74). Ms. Blue Rain, who is lesbian, gives Precious a new understanding of life and wants her to comprehend that such beliefs impede progress in society.

Her transformation will bring another poster of Harriet Tubman. Tubman was an African-American abolitionist who was born into slavery and escaped. She also rescued people
from it and gave them freedom. Ms. Blue Rain tells Precious about this and suggests her watching *Roots*, a TV series based on Alex Haley’s work, in order to know about black’s history, that is, hers. Precious did not know about this before, but now, she can know about the origins of her race and the pains suffered.

Finally, there is a third poster on Precious’ wall, and now it is Alice Walker who depicts Precious’ evolution: “I got Alice Walker up there with Harriet Tubman ‘n Farrakhan” (Sapphire, 1998, p. 87). Precious is literate now and knows about *The Color Purple*. She compares her life with the protagonist’s, Celie, and realizes that life can be worth living – and especially, she asks for love. From this book, she can also learn about rape and incest and see that she is not the only one in the world who suffers from abuse.

At the beginning, Farrakhan is Precious’ unique reference point, but Ms. Blue Rain broadens her understanding of the world. Precious now knows about life and the abuse she has been suffering: “I am going to put it all behind me and never say it again. I don’t blame nobody. I just want to say when I was twelve, TWELVE, somebody hadda help me it not be like it is now” (Sapphire, 1998, p. 125). Precious comprehends that her pain, as well as the pain of her race and gender, could be avoided if society were not so racist.

Now that Precious is a new woman, she is strong enough to fight back and help those who, like her, have not been shown the way to build a new life and are not conscious of their unfair situation. Thanks to education, Precious can save her injured spirit and becomes a mediator and a conductor to help others who are in the same situation. She understands they also deserve to be given the chance to learn about the racist norms which are oppressing them and fight them.

* Writing in *Push* is a transformative act in black women’s lives, since it represents literacy and evolution of identity. Ms. Blue Rain cannot be considered a prototypical teacher, but an inspirational teacher who, through her technique of dialogue journal writing, makes Precious write herself into being. She also cares about learning, not grades, and is a participant who plays an active role in the process of learning. She teaches women who are marginalized to overcome invisibility and become new people. Education was significant for black women to achieve equality and social status, although they encountered many difficulties accessing it at the time. Later on, these new women became helpers and mediators themselves. All in all,
the title of the book refers to the fact of being brave and giving a chance to one’s potential, or in other words, to fight against social norms and expectations and be visible in society.

5. CONCLUSION

African-Americans writers have considered literature a means to show the world the cruel social conditions that people of their race experienced some decades ago. In this regard, some female writers tend to focus on the lives of black women in order to portray the injustices they had to live not only because of their race, but also because of their gender. The novels *The Bluest Eye* by Toni Morrison and *Push* by Sapphire illustrate the struggle of the color-skinned protagonists, Pecola Breedlove and Precious Jones, for better life conditions and identity in a racist American society. They suffer from invisibility in different aspects, which are mainly observed in their relationship with their family – who transmit their traumatic experiences to their daughters and treat them badly – and in the white standards of beauty that are portrayed in the community and that affect their self-esteem – black people cannot fit into them and are thus excluded –. Both factors result in their being marginalized and victimized on account of their race.

I studied the distinct problems that the protagonists face in their lives as well as the social constructions imposed on African-Americans, especially, on females. In *The Bluest Eye*, Pecola is a victim of the white impositions on blacks. I argue that the main cause for this is her family. Her parents do not care about her and she is completely forgotten as well as sexually and emotionally abused. One of the most important points of this book is that of listening to the voice of the narrator who is telling the story. Morrison provides readers with past stories of Pecola’s parents which lead us to feel sorry about a rapist and an abuser. Also, the stories which traumatized Cholly and Polly in their youth are crucial because they defined their personality, resulting in them also treating cruelly and passing their traumas to Pecola. Nevertheless, it could be claimed that Cholly and Polly do not know any other form of behavior or love to give to Pecola and that their behavior is also justified by the fact that they hate their own race and see themselves in Pecola.

As seen, Pecola becomes obsessed with the fact that having blue eyes and fair skin will bring her happiness. She considers herself repulsive, since she is conscious that her physical appearance does not correspond to the white standards of beauty. At the end, she turns mad because of the social pressure on beauty and believes she has got blue eyes. Since Pecola does not have any friend or relative to whom turn to for help, she is more vulnerable to racism. Her
madness and her fantasy of beauty are ways to fight invisibility, since now she has created a new identity and a world of her own – a figment of her imagination – which would allow her to continue her life without being affected by the prejudices and disdains of society. Pecola, who has been a victim of racism and spirit injury, becomes hypervisible in society as consequence of her own invisibility and schizophrenia, which represents a weapon against racism. Once she goes insane, people around her realize the traumatic situation she has lived for years, although without daring to get too involved in her new world.

Vis-à-vis *Push*, Precious is also a victim of white social constructions, mainly due to her parents’ behavior and attitude towards her and to her lack of education. Therefore, she is sexually and emotionally raped too, but she does not know what incest is until she is educated in an alternative school. She is expelled from her former school because she gives birth to two children as a result of her father’s abuse. However, her mother does not subscribe to the idea of her daughter attending school. In fact, she states that schools do not teach anything worthy. As it happens in *The Bluest Eye*, Precious’ parents transmit their traumas to her.

As can be observed, Precious is alone in her suffering, and even worse, she is not conscious of it. She also regards herself as ugly because of the standards, but in this book, *Push*, they are not given as much importance as in *The Bluest Eye*. Precious’ teacher, Ms. Blue Rain, is a very important figure for her, since she encourages Precious to change her life and be a different and better person with critical understanding of the world. Thus, Ms. Blue Rain is a guide, a conductor, who helps Precious to break out of her innocence and to realize what is happening in her life. Precious does not only become literate, but understands the abuse she has been suffering all her life and notices that now she has to take care of herself and of her children. Furthermore, contrary to what happens to Pecola, she stops giving importance to beauty and accepts herself the way she is. She affirms that she is beautiful inside and that she now feels more alive than ever, without caring about what others may think of her. Therefore, it could be claimed that both beauty and education are the paths through which Precious fights invisibility and comprehends the world.

Similarly, some paramount aspects which are common in both books can be highlighted. First, Pecola and Precious suffer from microaggressions of both society and their families. White people denigrate blacks though insults or racist comments on a daily basis which are not even concealed or dissimulated. Second, and as consequence, they experience internalized racism which leads them to accept and agree to the negative beliefs about themselves. Third, society
manipulates identity as people please, which illustrates that identity is a social construct that changes over the years. In these two books, it is the white people who construct black identity in a way that whiteness is seen as superior – this claim is related to the Critical Race Theory, which defends that race is a social construction. And finally, the inferiority and invisibility which Pecola and Precious suffer bring unequal possibilities just because of race – this is linked to the Racial Formation Theory, which claims that access to aspects such as medicine or education is not equal.

By and large, I have explored how invisibility can affect the main black female characters in *The Bluest Eye* and *Push* and the ways it is overcome. All in all, both books provide a vision of how unfair and miserable life could be for African-American women in a white-dominated society and some of the aspects they had to fight to stop being rendered invisible in community.

6. REFERENCES


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