

**"They Treated Me Like A Geography Lesson:"  
Beauty Culture and Ethnicity  
in Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* and  
Julia Alvarez's *How the Garcia Girls Lost Their Accents***

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In her book *The Beauty Myth: How Images of Beauty Are Used Against Women*, Naomi Wolf poses the hypothesis that American society upholds a beauty standard for women to emulate. The problem, Wolf argues, lies not in the idea of beauty itself, but in the standards that are upheld; even though these standards are virtually impossible for every woman to achieve, Madison Avenue nevertheless daily bombards women with images of the ideal female: statuesque, thin, European, blue-eyed, blond-haired beauties. Because these standards are impossible to achieve, Wolf goes on to say that these images are literally killing women around the globe. Perfect women are on television, magazine ads, movies, billboards. Everywhere a woman turns, there is a reminder of what she cannot be, yet should aspire to be. In reaction to these images, Wolf says that women should reject the standards that are dictated from boardrooms and cultivate their own inner and outer beauty, on their own terms.

Wolf argues that beauty is more than just a pretty face. In a consumer society, beauty becomes a commodity, yet another way to control women.

"Beauty" is a currency system like the gold standard. Like any economy, it is determined by politics, and in the modern age in the West it is the last, best belief system that keeps male dominance intact. In assigning value to women in a vertical hierarchy according to a culturally imposed physical standard, it is an expression of power relations in which women must unnaturally compete for resources that men have appropriated for themselves (12).

Despite her disclaimer that the beauty myth is propelled by a "culturally imposed physical standard," Wolf argues that the

beauty myth affects all women, regardless of age, race, creed or color. Since it is an imposed system that is designed to maintain male dominance, race is not an issue: all women suffer at the hands of the beauty myth.

Although Wolf may claim to speak for all women, her argument that the beauty myth affects all women holds true only to a certain degree, because the culturally imposed standard that she takes issue with is embedded into her argument. The beauty myth does affect all women. What Wolf fails to take into account is whether or not the beauty myth affects all women equally. The question that is raised is this: If a society upholds a standard that is, by its nature, exclusive what effects are rendered on those who are excluded?

Wolf attempts to be as thorough as possible in her argument. She discusses many different aspects of the beauty culture, including television, print (magazines), culture, and religion. What Wolf fails to discuss is the role of the woman of color and her reaction to a system that says she has no place in it. Now, the concern is not only with effects, but with coping strategies: how does the woman of color react to the beauty myth? Indeed, does she have a voice at all given these circumstances?

Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* offers one little girl's reaction to a standard that tells her that only little white girls with blue eyes and blond hair equates prettiness. Through Pecola, Morrison explores the damage that such an exclusive definition can wreak. Although the standards are unfair because they are exclusionary by nature, they are nevertheless applied to all as if all were equal. Julia Alvarez also argues with the definition, adding another dimension to the paradigm. In *How the Garcia Girls Lost Their Accents*, Alvarez explores the questions of how a woman who fits the beauty ideal copes when she is still deemed Other. By demonstrating that beauty is not defined by skin color alone, Alvarez delineates the coping strategies available to Latinas in the United States.

In *The Souls of Black Folk*, W.E.B. Du Bois offers a beginning point to understanding the psyches of those who do not fit the definitions set by dominant society. He posits that African-

Americans experience double-consciousness in that they are constantly viewing themselves through a lense created by dominant society.

[T]he Negro is a sort of seventh son, born with a veil, and gifted with a second-sight in this American world, -- a world which yields him no true self-consciousness, but *only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world*. It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, *this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity*. One ever feels his twoness, -- an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder (my emphasis, 3).

With double-consciousness in mind, the reader can better understand Pecola's life and reaction to society's definition is easier to understand. Throughout her life she is told that she cannot come close to beauty. In comparison to others, Pecola, and all those who do not fit the definition of beautiful, is treated as an aberration.

You looked at them [the Breedlove family] and wondered why they were so ugly; you looked closely and could not find the source. Then you realized that it came from conviction, their conviction. It was as though some mysterious all-knowing master had given each one a cloak of ugliness to wear, and they had each accepted it without question. The master had said, "You are ugly people." *They had looked about themselves and saw nothing to contradict the statement; saw, in fact, support for it leaning at them from every billboard, every movie, every glance*. "Yes," they had said. "You are right." And they took the ugliness in their hands, threw it as a mantle over them, and went about the world with it. (my emphasis, Morrison 34)

Using this standard, society punishes people for innate traits over which they have absolutely no control. Only the beautiful faces, those leaning from the billboards, movies, and glances, are worthy of notice.

Nevertheless, Pecola strives to be beautiful. She is convinced that if she were only beautiful, her life would be beautiful as well, as the images around her seem to suggest.

Each night, without fail, she prayed for blue eyes. Fer-  
vently, for a year she had prayed. Although somewhat  
discouraged, she was not without hope. To have something  
as wonderful as that happen would take a long, long time.  
Thrown, in this way, into the binding conviction that only a  
miracle could relieve her, *she would never know her  
beauty. She would see only what there was to see: the eyes  
of other people* (40).

Unable to see herself as a person with value, Pecola relies on the perceptions of others, of dominant culture, for validation. The danger here is that the lense through which she is perceived will always find her lacking. Du Bois' description of double-consciousness points to the need to validate oneself apart from the outside standard. Instead, in receiving the message that only little white girls with blond hair and blue eyes are pretty, Pecola fails to understand the sinister implications of the definition that she so desperately wants to fulfill. She does not understand the sacrifice she will have to make in order to have blue eyes: to become someone else. According to the standard that she hopes to fulfill, Pecola would have to stop being a little black girl and become Shirley Temple.

In an attempt to consume the images in order to become the image, Pecola drinks milk by the quart from a blue and white Shirley Temple cup. She also eats candies with a picture of the icon on the wrapper.

Each pale yellow wrapper has a picture on it. A picture of little Mary Jane, for whom the candy is named. Smiling white face. Blond hair in gentle disarray, blue eyes looking at her out of a world of clean comfort. The eyes are petulant, mischievous. To Pecola they are simply pretty. . . . To eat the candy is somehow to eat the eyes, *eat Mary Jane. Love Mary Jane. Be Mary Jane* (my emphasis, 43)

Failing to comprehend the message that Mary Jane's picture sends to her, that there is something sinister and destructive about those blue eyes and beauty, Pecola continues to yearn for the unattainable. "Starving" for attention and validation, Pecola will never comprehend the true message that beauty culture sends to her. Even if her dreams were fulfilled and the "eating" of the images gave her blue eyes, Pecola still would not understand the price she will have paid for becoming someone she is not.

In "'The Evil of Fulfillment': Women and Violence in *The Bluest Eye*", Karla Alwes argues that the only way Pecola can "become Mary Jane" is at the price of herself. In order for the wish to become true, to take on this new identity, "that can only be achieved through the usurpation of herself" (92). Taking the argument one step further, in his "Toni Morrison's 'Allegory of the Cave': Movies, Consumption, and Platonic Realism in *The Bluest Eye*," Thomas Fick states that by eating the Mary Jane candies, Pecola partakes in the economy of consumption, both literally and figuratively. The candy enables Pecola to reject her true identity and ingest a new one (18). But with that ingestion, she must no longer be Pecola Breedlove.

Pecola's indoctrination to the beauty myth begins at home with her mother, Pauline Breedlove. Having watched the silver screen and learned that white beauty is the standard for all, Pauline reinforces the idea that only white women can be beautiful. Before she has Pecola she frequents the movies in order to forget her own miserable life. Her education is a thorough one, for when she stops going to the movies, she continues to use the standard of beauty that she learned there. "She was never able, after her education in the movies, to look at a face and not assign it some category in the scale of absolute beauty, and the scale was one she absorbed in full from the silver screen" (Morrison 97). So when she has her own daughter, she cannot help but apply that standard to her as well. Pauline cannot warn her daughter of the destructive and sinister qualities of the beauty myth and how to combat it. She lacks the inner-strength that the narrator of the novel, Claudia, has to combat the beauty myth. Instead, she, too, tries to fulfill the definition.

Fick argues that Pauline is held captive by the images of the silver screen in the same way that the people in Plato's "Allegory of the Cave" are held captive by the shadows they see on the wall. For them, and Pauline, the shadows they see are reality. So in the same way, the standard of beauty that Pauline sees in the movies is her perception of beauty. "The characters who measure themselves against advertisements and movies are captives not because they are ignorant of the world above and behind, but because they believe that there is such a world" (15).<sup>1</sup>

For Pecola, the standard that is set before her is so antithetical to who and what she is that she will never be able to fit the definition of beauty. For this reason, she will never recover from her insanity. Having both "bought" and "consumed" (by eating Mary Jane candies) the destructive definition, in order to continue, Pecola must have blue eyes. In *Invisibility Blues: From Pop to Theory*, Michele Wallace argues that there can be no recovery for Pecola. She epitomizes "the ultimate victim who will never be able to speak for herself" (230). Pecola's story is told by Claudia, someone who begrudgingly accepts the beauty myth.

For Sandi, however, there is hope. She does recover from her madness and finds her voice in feminism. She learns to speak out for herself and against all that renders women victims. For example, when her sisters plan to hire a dancer for their father's birthday party, Sandi refuses to partake in the exploitation of women. "A band of music was what she'd pitch in on; her married sisters could split it three ways if they wanted to be sexists" (33).

But even with her ability to speak out, to defend herself against the crimes perpetrated on women, Sandi continues to accept the definition of woman dictated by majority culture. Touting a feminism that is not specific to women of color, much less Latinas, Sandi continues to believe in the system that gives birth to her insanity. According to Paul Smith, in order for a person to resist outside definitions, the person must be able to individuate him- or herself- from it. Since Sandi continues to inscribe herself by embracing a feminism foreign to her background, she is unable to individuate, and thus resist, the beauty

myth. This may be why she, too, remains unable to tell her story, one which her mother relates. Ultimately, Sandi cannot claim victory over the beauty myth, only a truce that could be disrupted at any moment.

If Sandi learns how to cope with this superimposed standard of beauty, her sister, Yolanda, is the survivor of the battle with the (white) American beauty standard. In some ways, she understands why she cannot be an American woman exclusively. Because she does not have the "fine looks, blue eyes, peaches and cream skin, everything going for her," Yolanda learns to define herself outside of the beauty myth. When she has a nervous breakdown, it is no accident that she has "allergic reactions" to language, a tool of colonization. For her, words are of the utmost importance, because they carry thoughts, emotions, beliefs.

Yolanda's allergy to language can be understood if critiqued against *Decolonising the Mind* by Ngũgĩ Wa Thiong'o who argues that language carries culture, values, definitions. Once another language is imposed upon a person, that person's very being is threatened, for with the language that that person communicates with also comes that person's way of defining him/herself.

Language carries culture, and culture carries, particularly through orature and literature, the entire body of values by which we come to perceive ourselves and our place in the world. . . . To control a people's culture is to control their tools of self-definition in relationship to others. (Thiong'o 16)

In abandoning their mother tongue and smoothing out their accents, the Garcia girls believe themselves to be bona fide transformed Americans. At one point Yolanda is "complimented. . . on [her] 'accentless' English and [told]. . . that [her] parents must be so proud" (Alvarez 100).

Although intended to be a compliment, it endorses Yolanda's abandonment of Dominican culture and heritage. By American standards, this abandonment is good, proving that any and all can come to America and be accepted. What it fails to



acknowledge is the fact that acceptance is conditional: in order to be considered for acceptance, immigrants must abandon their culture, language, values, customs. But even with this adjustment to American lifestyle, acceptance is not guaranteed, because the standards are never stable, forever changing according to the wants, needs, and desires of majority society.

When the Garcia girls come to the United States, they must learn a new language, and with that language, Ngugi would argue, a new culture. The difference between Pecola and the Garcia girls lies in the form of their colonization. Unlike Pecola, they have another culture that they can find refuge in, that allows them to run "into the safety of [their] first tongue, where the proudly monolingual [Americans] could not catch [them], even if [they] tried" (Alvarez 72).

Taking his argument one step further, Ngugi states that the colonization of the mind is detrimental in that it forces the sacrifice of one culture, language, value system, heritage, to another. In order for the conquered to navigate the unfamiliar waters of the conqueror's world, he/she must learn to read the charts that map the conqueror's waters. What naturally ensues is a relinquishment of customs, language, values, and heritage for that of the conqueror.

Yolanda serves as the voice to tell the true experience of America for the Garcia girls, understanding exactly what has happened to them in their colonization. She knows the importance of having the accents ironed out of her speech and having her teeth straightened: both are an attempt to help her "fit in." Despite her parents' good-willed intentions of helping their daughters make the transition from immigrants to Americans, they reinforce their position as "outsider." By making these changes, these adjustments, they are telling their daughters in order to become an American, they must shed their Dominican heritage.

The efforts of the Garcia girls' parents to help their daughters fit in American society is to no avail. Straightened teeth and accentless English do not make them Americans. Several times Yolanda states that "she believes that she has never felt at home in the United States, never," (12) and that she and her

sisters "were trying to fit in American among Americans; *they needed help figuring out who they were, why the Irish kids whose grandparents had been micks were calling them spics*" (my emphasis, 138). Yolanda knows all too well her status as an outsider, as Other. The only time that she does find herself "included" (albeit a tenuous inclusion) is when she dates Rudy Elmhurst while at college. But even in this situation, she finds that her inclusion is not because she is valued for herself as Yolanda Garcia, but because she has something to teach this red-blooded American boy.

[Rudy] had told them [his parents] he was seeing "a Spanish girl," and he reported they said that should be interesting for him to find out about people from other cultures. It bothered me that they should treat me like a geography lesson for their son. But I didn't have the vocabulary back then to explain even to myself what annoyed me about their remark. (Alvarez 98)

What Yolanda takes issue with is key to her experience in the U.S. In this country, she is not a person; she is an exotic being, an Other, who can be experienced by dominant society in order to learn more about life.

In their comment that Yolanda "should be interesting for [Rudy]," the Elmhursts reinforce Yolanda's status as Other. She is something that Rudy can experience in order to edify himself. By relegating her status to that of a geography lesson, the Elmhursts reduce Yolanda to being little more than her sister, Sandi, imagined herself to be: a monkey. In being treated as less than human, in being called monkeys and geography lessons, their status as Other is reinscribed.

In *Black Looks*, bell hooks describes a conversation that she overhears in which three white, jock-type college-age men are discussing how many women of color they will sleep with while they are at college. Hooks observes that,

[t]o these young males and their buddies, fucking was a way to confront the Other, as well as a way to make themselves over, to leave behind white "Innocence" and enter the world of "experi-

ence." Getting a bit of the Other, in this case engaging in sexual encounters with non-white females, was considered a ritual of transcendence, a movement out into a world of difference that would transform, an acceptable rite of passage. The direct objective was not simply to sexually possess the Other; it was to be changed in some way by the encounter (23-24).

Rudy Elmhurst and his parents treat Yolanda in much the same way. By dating her, knowing her, Rudy will, in some way or another, be changed by her. She is not a person whom he wants to know for herself; she is, as she states, a geography lesson for him. When he presses her to have sex with him, he attempts to "know" and "encounter" the Other in such a way that will transform him.

His assumption that Yolanda is free with her sexuality speaks to the stereotypes that white America believes of the Other. When Rudy presses Yolanda to sleep with him and she refuses, he cannot understand her reluctance. "'You know,' he said, 'I thought you'd be hot-blooded, being Spanish and all, and that under all the Catholic bull-shit, you'd be really free, instead of all hung up like these cotillion chicks from prep schools. But Jesus, you're worse than a fucking Puritan'" (Alvarez 99). Rudy fails to look beyond the stereotype of the "hot Latin lover," lumping Yolanda with all other "Spanish" peoples. Because he is unable to know who she is, Rudy cannot begin to know what Yolanda is experiencing in her own confrontation with the U.S. and its customs. Rudy's only desire is to "get a bit of the Other." Because his goal is to be transformed by the Other, Rudy becomes angry when Yolanda refuses to be the stereotype. Instead, she proves to be no different from the white girls he knows; Yolanda is just as much of a Puritan as those "cotillion chicks from prep schools."

In no way does Rudy consider his desire to sleep with Yolanda as racist, even as his assumption that she bestows sexual favors freely points to his blatant racism. For him, Yolanda is a sexual commodity, allowing him to say that he experienced the Other and has been transformed by it/them. By sleeping with Yolanda, Rudy will lose his innocence and enter the ranks of the

experienced. bell hooks helps us understand why Rudy has no genuine desire to know Yolanda.

Within commodity culture, ethnicity becomes spice, seasoning that can liven up the dull dish that is mainstream white culture. Cultural taboos around sexuality and desire are transgressed and made explicit as the media bombards folks with a message of difference no longer based on the white supremacist assumption that "blondes have more fun." The "real fun" is to be had by bringing to the surface all those "nasty" unconscious fantasies and longings about contact with the Other embedded in the secret (not so secret) deep structure of white supremacy (22).

By assuming that Yolanda is "hot-blooded, being Spanish and all," Rudy adds to the image of the Other as spice, making Yolanda not a person, but a body to consume sexually.

By refusing to sleep with Rudy, Yolanda manages to maintain her hold on her "roots," her values and culture. At the same time, Yolanda attempts to reconcile within herself the mestizo that Guerrero describes, melding her newly found American identity and her Dominican heritage. After Rudy "dumps" her when she refuses to have sex with him, Yolanda begins to question her status as a hyphenated American. Recognizing the incongruous aspects of her personality, Yolanda says, "I would never find someone who would understand my peculiar mix of Catholicism and agnosticism, Hispanic and American styles" (99).

In "trying to figure out who she is," Yolanda learns the lesson of colonization. She and her sisters may be able to act like Americans, but deep in their hearts they will always have an allegiance to their heritage. She decides that the whole idea of trying to be someone she is not cannot be a way of life for her. With her decision to return to the Dominican Republic, Yolanda rejects the very definition of Anglo beauty, and all other American standards as well, standards that cause Sandi's nervous breakdown. Her decision to reject America and the ideals/standards that it embraces "enables," in Paul Smith's words, her resistance. Although Yolanda also suffers a nervous breakdown,

she comes to recognize the cause of her breakdown. She cannot be a hyphenated American because no one in America will accept her as she is. She bemoans her inability to find someone who will understand her "peculiar mix of . . . Hispanic and American styles" (99).

Instead of voicing her opinions against the system that causes her breakdown, as Sandi does with her questionable feminism, Yolanda makes it such that she will never again have to measure herself against a definition imposed by outsiders unless she chooses to do so. On the island, she will not be inundated with ubiquitous images of thin, blond-haired, blue-eyed white women with whom she must compete. She will be a Dominican woman, period.

Yolanda's decision to return to the island is nonetheless problematic. There, she will confront problems of classism and sexism, but the basic difference lies within her own definition of self. Her confrontations will not be based upon competition with a superimposed definition, but one with which she was raised and knows how to manage. On the island as a little girl, she knows that she is an important person because she is a de la Torre girl. However, the males in her family are given more attention because in a machismo oriented culture, men come first.

Alvarez accentuates the importance of Yolanda's decision to return to the island by beginning *Garcia Girls* with it. By telling the story of the girls's assimilation/acculturation backwards, Alvarez allows the reader to view the evolution of the girls's development while simultaneously reinforcing Yolanda's decision to reject everything she experienced in America. In showing how the girls do not feel comfortable in American society, Yolanda's decision becomes easier to understand because in returning to her "roots," she will be the woman that Americans could only dare her to be. Rudy Elmhurst wanted her to be a body and her husband wanted her to be a possession (he traces his name on her breast at one point, "marking" her as his). In the Dominican Republic, Yolanda can be who she wants to be without having to conform to others' standards.

Although her return to the island could be interpreted as

an attempt to regain some idea of the island as a paradise/refuge (signaled by Yolanda's search for guavas at the beginning of the novel), she is nonetheless returning to a heritage that she was forced to abandon when she became an "American." Even though her command of Spanish at the beginning of the novel is halting, on the island she can speak her mother tongue without feeling as if she were a foreigner in a foreign land as she did in the United States. For example, her aunts chide her when she begins to speak English, telling her to use the language of her heritage, her culture, her people. Instead of accepting the language of the conqueror, as Sandi does in her ingestion of the canon, Yolanda must communicate in her mother tongue, fully accepting her identity as a Dominican woman.

There are aspects of island life that Yolanda will resist (machismo, for example), but she so desperately wants to resuscitate her heritage that she hopes "she has learned, at last, to let the mighty wave of tradition roll on through her life and break on some other female shore" (9). Yolanda is willing to make sacrifices in order to reclaim her heritage, herself. These sacrifices do not require that she measure herself against a standard that is impossible for her to fulfill.

Those definitions, those standards of what it is to be beautiful, to be an American, bring about the destruction of both Pecola and Sandi. They must live in a world that does not allow for their existence. Because they are deemed Other, "lesser than," they will never be accepted by mainstream society. They will always be the measuring stick that will allow others to say, "At least I have this or that." They remain on the margin of society, hoping to be included in the majority, not knowing that the hope they cling to only destroys them.

The difference between the Garcia girls and Pecola lies in appearance. Because Pecola can never look like Shirley Temple, she will never gain acceptance into dominant culture. With her ability to "pass" for Anglo, Sandi has the dubious privilege of standing closer to the edge of acceptance. However, her acceptance is conditioned on the existence of Pecola. As long as there are Pecola's in the United States, Sandi has the potential to enter

the dominant sphere. In either case, neither Pecola nor Sandi are fully accepted for who they are.

In mainstream America, appearance is everything. Because they can be nothing else but Other according to (white) mainstream society, they remain the "geography lesson" that Rudy Elmhurst learns. When the Garcia girls refuse to use a standard that is given to them by mainstream white America, they can refuse to be considered less than human and geography lessons. The Garcia girls may be able to move in the right circles, use the right fork for the salad course, and frequent the chic restaurants, but their presence will never be welcome. In Alvarez's words, they may meet "the right kind of Americans all right, but they didn't exactly mix with us" (108).

<sup>1</sup>Knowing that appearance can win conditional acceptance, in Nella Larsen's *Passing*, Clare Kendry "passes" as a white woman to live in white high society. Unknowingly married to a black woman, Clare's husband calls her "Nig" because she grows darker as she grows older. Clare never tells her husband of her true identity because she knows he will never accept her as a black woman. She must maintain her "facade" in order to keep her standing in white society.

Despite the ambiguity of the text (the reader does not know if Clare commits suicide or if either her husband or her friend pushes her out of a six story window), the message is clear that "passing" is not sufficient.

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## **This Color Brown**

Lenora Castillo

This color brown  
is no silk shawl  
I drape around my shoulders  
to impress  
nor winter coat  
thrown out when worn  
or out of style  
this color brown

This color brown  
does not rub off nor  
wash away or disappear  
if I close my eyes  
and pray  
or claim that I  
am something else  
besides  
this color brown

This color brown  
makes you cross the street  
avoid my eyes,  
my smile  
my voice...  
this color brown

This color brown  
is what I am  
what I will always be...  
Look at me!  
I weep, I bleed,  
I sing and dance and read and curse and...  
love  
I am like you...except  
this color brown.