

Still and Silent Pain in *The Bluest Eye*

The second chapter of *The Bluest Eye* details Pecola's process of mental disappearance. Closing her eyes, parts of her body begin to fade away as she strives to escape the Breedlove's fighting. But, much to Pecola's frustration, no matter how still she is, her eyes remain. Pecola's eyes inform her silence; her eyes confront her with images even as she has no mouth to speak them. Pecola holds still so that she can be silent, but her eyes stand between herself and nothingness. Because Pecola's attempt to completely disappear fails, stillness hurts her; it rids her body of opportunities for expression as she continues to see. When the rest of her body disappears, her eyes become the site of her memory and her only means for expression. But, even when Pecola exists as only her eyes, Morrison invites the reader to identify with Pecola's pain, emphasizing the "hold" of memories on her body. The agonizing effects of stillness in *The Bluest Eye* exemplify that remaining silent is not the same as doing nothing; rather, it is a painful attempt at becoming nothing.

Pecola chooses to remain silent in the midst of the Breedlove's fighting, reflecting her internalization of injustice. This internalization, in turn, leads her to remain still in an attempt to escape. Following the Breedlove's fight, Morrison details Pecola's process of disappearing, beginning with her suppression of sickness:

Letting herself breathe easy now, Pecola covered her head with the quilt. The sick feeling, which she had tried to prevent by holding in her stomach, came quickly in spite of her precaution. There surged in her the desire to heave, but as always, she knew she would not.

"Please, God," she whispered into the palm of her hand. "Please make me disappear."

She squeezed her eyes shut. Little parts of her body faded away. Now slowly, now with a

rush. Slowly again. Her fingers went, one by one; then her arms disappeared all the way to the elbow. Her feet now. Yes, that was good. The legs all at once. It was hardest above the thighs. She had to be real still and pull. (Morrison 44-45)

This scene begins not with Pecola's desire to disappear but with her suppression of "the desire to heave." Before Pecola can follow her desire to disappear, she must push past her bodily reaction to Breedlove's actions. Pecola's desire to heave also symbolizes the sickening effects of silence. In the essay "The Transformation of Silence into Language and Action," Audre Lorde lays out these effects in vibrant detail, asking the reader, "What are the tyrannies you swallow day by day and attempt to make your own, until you will sicken and die of them, still in silence?" (Lorde 12). Pecola's "holding in" of her stomach parallels the swallowing of injustice—she refuses to react; instead, she holds the situation's wrongness inside her. Pecola's knowledge that she "would not" heave creates the image of Pecola literally swallowing sickness created by familial abuse. By holding in her reaction, Pecola internalizes the Breedlove's abuse, effectively making it her own. She then keeps this abuse within her as she remains still and attempts to disappear.

By employing stillness to remain silent, Pecola trades pain that leads to action for pain that represses, unable to completely escape into nothingness. Her stillness demolishes the opportunity for action, stifling the parts of her that can speak but leaving her alive. The assertion that Pecola has "to be real still and pull" equates stillness with the act of pulling rather than an absence of action. The word "pull" also implies the body's resistance to disappearance. Pecola's focus momentarily overcomes this resistance as her mind begins to pull her apart into nothing. To become nothing, Pecola must first separate into pieces. "Little parts" of her fade away—her fingers, legs, elbows— and each requires individual attention. With each part of the body that she loses, Pecola loses a means of expressing pain in a way that can affect her surroundings. But

because Pecola's eyes remain, her pain opposes true nothingness: death. The intersection of pain and death is similarly central to Lorde's exploration of silence. When faced with the possibility of a cancerous tumor, Lorde asks herself, "Of what had I ever been afraid? To question or to speak as I believed could have meant pain, or death. But we all hurt in so many different ways, all the time, and pain will either change or end. Death, on the other hand, is the final silence" (Lorde 11). Pecola does not completely disappear; therefore, she does not experience "the final silence." Stillness never absolves her pain; it actively and painfully maintains her silence, opposing death, which is the absence of pain. While Pecola resists nothingness by remaining alive, her separation of the body from its whole mirrors a deconstruction of advocacy. Therefore, when Pecola fails to become nothing, she excruciatingly silences her internal resistance.

In depicting Pecola's failed attempt to disappear, Morrison critiques the use of silence as evasion, detailing the painful knowledge that continues despite it. Pecola's leftover eyes epitomize the pain that results from a divided existence. After her legs disappear, the narrator describes how "Her stomach would not go. But finally it, too, went away. Then her chest, her neck. The face was hard, too. Almost done, almost. Only her tight, tight eyes were left. They were always left. Try as she might, she could never get her eyes to disappear" (Morrison 45). The repetition of the word "left" characterizes Pecola's eyes as remnants of her now-gone body. After all else has disappeared, Pecola's eyes *are* Pecola. But, existing without a body, her eyes foster far more pain than her whole self. The eyes' refusal to disappear corresponds with the ending of Pecola's internal monologue. Pecola's thoughts shine through her descriptions of disappearance; she praises her disappearing limbs while reassuring herself that she is "Almost there, almost." But, when Pecola's eyes refuse to disappear, her voice remains silent. At this moment, the description of her "tight tight eyes" conveys her frustration, deviating from her inner expressions

of praise and difficulty. Without her face, Pecola's eyes are her only remaining means of expression, but her eyes betray her by showing only old memories. Pecola's eyes severely limit her by only absorbing information, contributing to the scene's tonal shift towards resignation.

Although Pecola has done away with the rest of her body, her eyes provide a specific type of pain because they encapsulate her memory. After describing Pecola's leftover eyes, the narrator asks, "So what was the point? They were everything. Everything was there, in them. All of those pictures, all of those faces" (Morrison 45). The repetition that the eyes were "everything" centers Pecola's existence around her eyes. In this way, Morrison characterizes seeing as the opposite of nothing; it is everything. Furthermore, the reference to faces and pictures being "in" the eyes defines eyes as the site of memory rather than the brain or body. Pecola's eyes reflect pure internalization, drinking in images without a barrier. The descriptions of pictures and faces are strikingly vague compared to the description of Pecola's disappearance. While this inability to mediate her experiences causes Pecola pain, the exact memories that pain Pecola remain out of reach. The narrator pressures the reader to imagine the pain that Pecola endures in her memory without Pecola's guidance. On a meta-level, this description causes pain within the audience by encouraging the reader to ascribe pain to a character with no agency of her own.

While Pecola's eyes hold memories of the Breedloves, Pecola's bodily stillness alludes to slavery's lingering "hold" on her body. In the chapter "The Weather," Christina Sharpe uses slave ships, particularly the "hold," to exemplify the oppressiveness of the anti-Black climate. Sharpe describes slavery's aftereffects on Black people, explaining that "slavery was not singular; it was, rather, a singularity—a weather event or phenomenon likely to occur around a particular time, or date, or set of circumstances. Emancipation did not make free Black life free; it continues to hold

us in that singularity" (Sharpe 106). While Pecola's eyes show her personal memories, ideas that are more than memories—oppressive experiences that circulate like the weather—"hold" her body still. The singularity of anti-Blackness affects Pecola's ability to respond, as her body braces for the pervasive, hostile climate. Describing Pecola's relinquishment, the narrator states, "She had long ago given up the idea of running away to see new pictures, new faces, as Sammy had so often done" (Morrison 45). Relinquishing the idea of running, Pecola stagnates despite her brother's freedom. Sammy's escape provides the "air of freedom" that "might linger around the ship" (Sharpe 104). However, just as the air "does not reach into the hold" (Sharpe 104), this freedom does not reach into Pecola's body. By positioning freedom as unreachable, the narrator situates Pecola's body similarly to the "hold." Additionally, because the novel differentiates Pecola and Sammy by gender, not only do the aftereffects of slavery influence Pecola's body, but gender restraints, too, withhold her freedom.

Just as "hold" operates on several levels, as does "still." Stillness expressed through the eyes has dualistic implications, as the audience registers Pecola's physical stillness alongside the metaphorical stillness of repressed expression. Pecola's eyes are central to expressing her stillness, paralleling Sharpe's photographic analysis in "The Weather." Examining two photographs of Black women's eyes, Sharpe describes "Delia and Drana sitting there (still) and then standing there (still), and clothed and unclothed (still) and protected only by eyelashes (still)" (Sharpe 118). The dual meanings of "stillness" associate the word with the passage of time. The expression that Pecola had "long ago given up" emphasizes that the pain arises from not only Pecola's suppression of emotion but also from the persistence of her surroundings. Because Pecola's situation is unchanging, her surroundings are similarly "still." Furthermore, even as the audience only looks at Pecola through text, the description of Pecola's eyes allows

the audience to identify with her pain. Upon looking at the two photographs, Sharpe describes the process of identification through the eyes. By looking at Pecola, the audience "registers in [her] eyes an 'I' and 'we' that is and are holding something in, holding on, and held, still." (Sharpe 118). Leaving Pecola's memories vaguely defined, Morrison brings to mind the readers' own painful memories, pressuring the reader to identify on some level with Pecola's desire to disappear. Using this identification, Morrison invites the reader to consider what they are holding in and holding "still."

Throughout *The Bluest Eye*, Morrison creates tension between silence and narrativization, as the novel is itself a retelling of Pecola's experience by Claudia in which Pecola's voice is absent. Although narrativizing Pecola's experience gives voice to her pain, this voice also engages in silencing of its own. Despite being a documentation of repressed pain, the novel begins with the line "Quiet as it's kept" (Morrison 1). Referencing the whispered nature of this account, Claudia invites the reader to take part in the town's silence. Although Pecola's silent internalization repeatedly fails her, Claudia's externalization does not always succeed, either. In the preface, Claudia describes the blame passed between herself and Frieda; the sisters externalize the injustice of Pecola's situation, but their targets are one another. Unable to completely rebel against the systemic issues of the town, Claudia and Frieda, too, inflict pain on each other as a means of coping with injustice. Claudia's reaction is described before the central narrative so that the audience remembers Claudia's misplaced blame as she narrates Pecola's life. By including Claudia's own pain, Morrison pressures the reader to question if the retelling of Pecola's experience is an act of advocacy, of giving a voice to pain, or one of silencing.

Works Cited

Lorde, Audre. "The Transformation of Language into Silence and Action." *Sister Outsider*,

Random House Inc., 1984.

Morrison, Toni. *The Bluest Eye*. First Vintage International Edition, 1970.

Sharpe, Christina. "The Weather." *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being*, Duke University Press,

2016.