

Adjustment without Improvement: Racial Hegemony in *The Bluest Eye*

The characters in Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* live in the racially segregated American city of the 1940s. In their book *Racial Formation in the United States*, Michael Omi and Howard Winant explore the dynamics of racism in the same country where Morrison's characters live. They develop the idea that racism is an unavoidable element of social structure that has become institutionalized in the United States and has been able to stay that way, in part, by means of Antonio Gramsci's idea of hegemony. Morrison's main characters, three little girls named Pecola, Frieda, and Claudia and their relatives all experience the pressure of racial hegemony in their Ohio town and engage it on a daily basis. The ideas of racial hegemony and its oppressive effects are also explored in Jane Kuenz's article "'The Bluest Eye': notes on history, community, and black female subjectivity." In another feminist essay, the Nigerian feminist Oyèronké Oyewùmí examines "African American motherhood in a racist society," shows how hegemonic consent affects the way African American women see themselves (Oyewùmí 178). *The Bluest Eye* represents racial hegemony and its manifestations, while the other texts further explain and analyze its negative effects on women and young girls who are exposed to it in everyday objects.

According to Omi and Winant, racial hegemony developed in the United States after many years of racial dictatorship. According to the authors, a racial dictatorship draws a "color line," which becomes society's main way of dividing people, and then institutionalizes that line, mainly through politics and more importantly, the laws formed by politicians (66). Omi and Winant argue that, in contrast to the coercion of a racial dictatorship, an Italian named Antonio Gramsci placed great importance on the concept of hegemony, which is even more powerful

because it includes the element of consent of the oppressed in addition to coercive, violent oppression. They say that “although rule can be obtained by force, it cannot be secured and maintained...without the element of consent” (67). Continuing, they note that if society can make racial oppression seem like “common sense” that there is a racial minority and it is oppressed, the ruling group will have little trouble staying in power (67). Throughout their argument, Omi and Winant use the term “racial formation” to describe the “sociohistorical process by which racial categories are created, inhabited, transformed, and destroyed” and explore racism in the United States (55). Racial formations are essential to understanding their argument and its real-world applications because they are the main mechanisms of oppression. It is important to note that they can also be good, when used to change or destroy previous misconceptions or constructions. All of these ideas prove to be extremely important in discussing the lives of characters in *The Bluest Eye*.

Hegemony and hegemonic consent are relative to most oppression, whether it is based on racial, gender, class, or other social constructions. Both Omi and Winant and Morrison focus on racial hegemony. The racial hegemonic consent that is added to oppressive coercion plays a key role in the lives of three young girls in Morrison’s novel; it is represented by many of the cultural concepts that constantly surround them. Jane Kuenz, a professor of American literature and critical essayist, writes that in the novel “black female bodies [are] the sites of fascist invasions...the terrain on which is mapped the encroachment and colonization of African-American experiences...by a seemingly hegemonic white culture” (421). Racial hegemony, then, is harmful because it invades the people whose oppression it fosters. For Claudia, Frieda, and Pecola, hegemony is a normal part of society taught by those older than them and that they must learn in order to function in society.

The earliest major representation of a hegemonic society in Morrison's novel appears the first time that Claudia and Frieda, who are sisters, are joined by Pecola, who is coming to live with their family temporarily. Frieda offers Pecola some white milk out of a Shirley Temple cup as a way of welcoming her. The two girls then have a "loving conversation" about their adoration for Shirley (19). They consent to racial hegemony through their love not for an actual young girl, but for the media-created *idea* of Shirley Temple.

Pecola especially believes in the little girl's superiority because she knows herself to be shrouded in ugliness, as is said throughout the novel. Not only does she enjoy some milk out of the Shirley Temple cup, but continues to drink the other family's entire supply of milk. She literally takes in as much of the white liquid from the cup with a white girl's picture on it as possible.

In a way this shows Pecola's desire to go beyond talking about and looking at Shirley Temple and *imbibe* her in large quantities. She believes that if she consumes enough of the young white girl she admires so much she might become more like her, which is the ultimate symbol of hegemonic approval and consent as described by Omi and Winant. This connects to their theory that racial dictatorship, the historical precedent of racial hegemony, "defined 'American' identity as white" and media images like that of Shirley Temple define white as beautiful. To not be white is to be ugly and an outsider, both of which are things that Pecola feels describe her (66). To drink the white milk is to drink in the American whiteness and sense of belonging she lacks. It is easy to connect this physical intake of whiteness with a later incident in which Pecola buys Mary Jane candies in order to "eat Mary Jane. Love Mary Jane. Be Mary Jane." (Morrison 50). Like Shirley Temple, Mary Jane is an abstract hegemonic idea more than she is a real girl. In both cases the girl does not just consent to her oppression; she wants

desperately to be part of the better race and to be part of her community. Jane Kuenz notes that “racial and ethnic difference is erased and replaced by a purportedly equal ability to consume” (422). Pecola may be made to feel like an outsider in some racially segregated places, but inside Claudia and Frieda’s home where she possesses milk and a Shirley Temple cup, no one else can remind her that her efforts to become white through consumption are not changing the color of her skin.

Claudia’s feelings about Shirley Temple and the cup are in strong opposition to those of Pecola and Frieda. She shows her disapproval of the hegemonic society in which she lives more than once throughout the novel. While the other girls are talking, she explains through narration that because she is younger than Frieda and Pecola, she is not old enough to have “arrived at the turning point in the development of [her] psyche which would allow [her] to love [Shirley]” (Morrison 19). The reader may understand from that statement that racial hegemony is something that must be acquired through childhood exposure to it. Racial inferiority, then, must be taught, and because it is not natural children do not learn it quickly or easily.

Morrison’s second major example of how racial hegemony works to foster consent in these young girls immediately follows Claudia’s narration of the Shirley Temple cup. Claudia describes the adults who give their children blue-eyed, blonde-haired baby dolls for Christmas. They have also been integrated into a society of racial hegemony and honestly believe that little African American girls could want nothing more than a white doll, so much so that “nobody ever asked [her] what [she] wanted for Christmas,” they just bought the dolls (21). Their high expectations of the girls’ reactions to the dolls show that, for them, whiteness is ideal and beautiful. Although the little girls holding the dolls are not white, maybe by pretending to take care of a white child they can learn something about beauty from them. The racial hegemonic

consent described by Omi and Winant has clearly inundated not only Claudia's friend and sister, but the adults whose job as parents is to raise her and turn her into an obedient woman.

Claudia refers to dolls that she would receive as gifts as "all the Shirley Temples of the world" and tells of her "unsullied hatred" for them (Morrison 19). Not yet accepting racial hegemony, she finds the dolls revolting, "unyielding," "bone-cold,"¹ and generally "uncomfortable" (Morrison 20). When the doll says "Mama" to anyone who pulls a string in its back, Claudia hears "the bleat of a dying lamb" and longs to destroy the toy (21). The doll fits into a "sociohistorical process by which racial categories are created... and destroyed," or racial formation, according to Omi and Winant: its whiteness is a social category to which black girls are subjected, and Claudia literally destroys it, thereby destroying a negative racial project (55). The fact that Claudia's relatives buy it for her represents their giving in to racial hegemony. However, Claudia rejects the accompanying oppressive ideas, transforming them into hate and destruction upon destroying the doll. Claudia does not simply reject the hegemonic society around her, but questions how it is constructed. She destroys toys that she is supposed to love not only out of hate, but also "to find the beauty, the desirability that ha[ve] escaped [her]" (Morrison 20). In this case curiosity is not acceptance of, but a challenge to socially-constructed ideas of racial inferiority.

Jane Kuenz further explores the dynamics of Morrison's black characters possessing white baby dolls. She describes a phenomenon in which "racial and ethnic differences are not allowed to be represented" (421). No matter what race the child who receives the doll is, its presence will reinforce the idea that white is normal, which is essential to the hierarchy of racial hegemony. A young African American girl playing with a white doll is supposed to forget that

¹ Interestingly, her descriptor "bone-cold" is one of the only examples of a physical white thing to represent whiteness in a negative, somewhat morbid tone. Unlike the whiteness of bones, that of milk and white baby dolls, for example, is not generally used in negative imagery.

black babies exist, and it shouldn't occur to her that they are normal when she has grown up owning and loving white ones. In an ideal racial hegemony a black mother will strive to make her children as white and as similar to those dolls she loved as a child as possible, an idea which will be further examined in the character of Geraldine.

Later in the same chapter, Claudia describes the horrified reactions of actual white girls when she would pinch them, as she had pinched her dolls, they would be physically hurt and react by crying. About that and therefore the dolls, she says:

When I learned how repulsive this disinterested violence was, that it was repulsive because it was disinterested, my shame floundered about for refuge. The best hiding place was love. Thus the conversion from pristine sadism to fabricated hatred, to fraudulent love. (Morrison 23)

It has been argued that Claudia gives up her "resistance" to the racial hegemony around her and gives in to it as she had not been able to before. However, it seems that if that were true and Claudia were abandoning the feelings she had before giving in to racial hegemony, her love would be genuine like Pecola's and Frieda's and not "fraudulent" as she describes it. She also calls this transformation "adjustment without improvement," while simply adjusting to loving Shirley Temple and her dolls would be a true improvement in the eyes of society because it would mean that she had given into racial hegemony (23). The fact that she does not see it as an improvement means that she still understands and remembers her hatred but has *learned* not to experience it. The word "learned" by itself in that passage is irrefutable proof that hegemony is taught to children over time and not naturally developed; racial hierarchy is purely a social construction.

The Bluest Eye's most striking example of a black woman learning racial hegemony and accepting the white-dominated hierarchy it imposes is Geraldine. It is probable that Pecola's and Claudia's mothers teach racial hegemony without knowing it; they perpetuate ideas of white superiority because it is part of how they grew up. However, Geraldine devotes herself and her entire life to the idea of white superiority and trying to "eschew inappropriate manifestations of black American culture by maintaining 'the line between colored and nigger'" (Kuenz 427). She sees passion itself as part of the "funkiness" she associates with the wrong side of the color line and refuses herself the enjoyment of sex with her husband, or any passionate feelings in other parts of her life (Morrison 83). Though her son, Junior, "long[s] to play with the black boys," she tells him that they are not good enough for him and insists that he make white friends (87).

While Pecola tries to make herself white by drinking white milk from a cup with a white girl on it, Geraldine "put[s] Jergens lotion on [her son's] face to keep the skin from becoming ashen" any time the weather is cold, even though his skin is fair (87). She forces him to act white and play with white children, but also focuses her attention on keeping his skin from acting too black. In 2003, more than half a century after *The Bluest Eye* takes place and decades after it was written, Oyèronké Oyewùmí still feels a need to attack racism in America because of its prominence. She says that it is a "self-defeating step for Africans to treat their skin pigmentation as something to be explained" and that blackness as otherness is taken for granted here, though it shouldn't be (178). This confirms Omi and Winant's claim about a necessary white American identity that sees blackness as "otherness" (Omi 66). In that view, Geraldine's embarrassment of her and her son's race as well as her efforts to cover it up through actions and physical steps is the ultimate in racial hegemonic consent. It is the ultimate proof that racial hierarchy is effective and securely in place in *The Bluest Eye*.

Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* demonstrates the idea of hegemonic consent to racial inferiority that Michael Omi and Howard Winant explore in *Racial Formation in the United States*. The characters of Pecola, Claudia, and Frieda grow up in an American hegemonic society and are raised by adults who consent to racial hegemony and believe that white people are superior to them as well as being more beautiful. Claudia resists consenting to the ideologies which others around her give in to so easily and in doing so combats the system which oppresses them and her, though eventually she does learn to show "fraudulent love" to it and the people who are hierarchically above her. Morrison's novel clearly demonstrates the many negative effects of growing up or raising children in a town controlled by hegemonic consent. It is important to examine the results of extreme submission to societal hegemonies – for example, Omi and Winant describe and Morrison depicts a rigid, separating color line; and also to realize that as shown in *The Bluest Eye*, communities can never benefit from negative racial projects.

Works Cited

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