

Banning Blackness: Race, Gender-Based Violence, and Classroom Censorship

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ABSTRACT. This paper examines how the relationship between race and gender-based violence impacts how schools choose which books to ban. In particular, this paper focuses on Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* (1970) and the novel's place on the American Library Association's compiled lists of the most frequently banned books in the United States. Using an analysis of *The Bluest Eye* in conversation with the work of academics such as Spillers (1987) and Crenshaw (1991), this paper posits the intersection between race and rape in *The Bluest Eye* — and how that intersection implicates white supremacy in gendered violence — which leads to schools banning *The Bluest Eye* more frequently than other books involving rape without a racialized lens.

The American Library Association's list of the most frequently banned books in the United States makes an easy reading list for up-and-coming rebels, but reveals a disturbing reality: books that challenge deep beliefs — especially those rooted in unexamined morality or the destruction of existing systems of power — elicit strong, negative reactions. Despite the Supreme Court's ruling in the case *Board of Education, Island Trees Union Free School District No. 26 v. Pico* (1982) that schools could not ban books on the basis of restricting diversity, the court granted schools leeway to ban books if administrators provided a “non-discriminatory” explanation for the books' removal, giving schools the leeway to eliminate most books by labelling them “educationally unsuitable.”

The Bluest Eye by Toni Morrison epitomizes this problem; the novel, which focuses on an 11-year-old Black girl named Pecola in the 1940s, appears on three of the ALA's Top Ten Most Banned Books lists from 2001-2014 (ALA, 2017). *The Bluest Eye* bears the label of containing "sexually explicit content," presumably referring to a scene in which Cholly, Pecola's father, violently rapes her. While school districts scrutinizing a book containing graphic rape is understandable, the frequency with which *The Bluest Eye* stars on banned books lists compared to its thematically-similar counterparts with white protagonists demonstrates how the novel's banning is predicated upon more than sexual assault. Other books that portray the rape of children just as graphically as *The Bluest Eye* — *Lolita*, which portrays the graphic rape of a white 12-year-old, or *Speak*, which portrays the graphic rape of a white 14-year-old — appear far less frequently on the ALA's banned books lists, or not at all.

The difference between *The Bluest Eye* and novels such as *Lolita* and *Speak* lies in Pecola's race. Pecola is Black. More importantly, Pecola's blackness is tied to her sexual assault through her conflation of blue eyes and safety and the racism behind her rapist's anger. Even though Pecola's sexual assault is a short scene in the novel, Pecola's rape illuminates how racism often intersects with sexual violence. *The Bluest Eye* incriminates not only Cholly, but everyone complicit in institutional racism, rendering the novel's content a greater threat to white supremacy and patriarchy than the content of books with sexual assaults divorced from racism. School districts banning *The Bluest Eye* continues a larger project of white-dominated educational institutions preventing the dissemination of material acknowledging Black women's humanity and bodily integrity.

Violence Against Black Women

While violence against women is endemic in all communities, it has a particular resonance when men who are subjugated turn against women within their community. Cholly's

powerlessness in *The Bluest Eye* must be understood in a larger history of white people presuming Black men were sexual predators and rapacious toward white women. In addition, Black men were unable to protect Black women from white men's abuse and knew lynching was the overarching threat to any Black man who crossed the line (Williams, 1986). A legacy of slavery and domination over Black bodies in the United States leads to what academic Hortense Spillers (1987) terms the "ungendering" of Black bodies in her work, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book." This ungendering is a process of stripping Black people of humanity through rendering their bodies mere flesh, rather than extensions of their humanity. Elaine Brown, a former chairperson for the Black Panther Party, echoes this sentiment in *NO! The Rape Documentary* when she states, "To be poor and Black and female in America is about the bottom of all that, because we are so irrelevant ... that's why we can be raped, because what difference does it make?" (Simmons, 2006). Perhaps Pecola's rape threatens white supremacist institutions because it actively works against a larger project of ungendering Black bodies. The scene's location near the end of the novel, a climax after a hundred pages of readers empathizing with Pecola, forces readers to recognize the rape as a violation of a body, rather than a physical action against ungendered flesh. In creating Pecola's character and providing specific details about Pecola's life (such as how Pecola identifies with the weeds she sees in sidewalk cracks and how she deals with daily bullying in school), Morrison humanizes Pecola, therefore eliciting feelings of injustice as Pecola's rape unfolds.

The increased prevalence of violence against Black women, and people treating Black women's bodies as "lesser" or illegitimate, permeates society beyond school bookshelves. Toni Irving (2007), an assistant English professor at University of Notre Dame, examined police reports of sexual assault perpetrated against Black women in Philadelphia over several years. Irving's evaluation of police

reports revealed police repeatedly treated Black rape victims as not-victims and unworthy of protection; police often accusing Black victims of being prostitutes. In her analysis of these reports, Irving (2007) asserts, “Failure to investigate implicitly suggests that the women do not live under ‘normal’ standards of social or sexual propriety, that they are outside the community and ineligible for its protection and thus beyond the scope of citizenship” (p. 76). The historical disenfranchisement of Black women plays into the indifference the legal system has to violence against Black bodies, allowing gendered violence against Black women to continue unaddressed. Kimberle Crenshaw (1991) similarly evaluated violence against women of color, with a particular focus on the intersection between racism, sexism, and gender-based violence. In her groundbreaking essay, “Mapping the Margins,” Crenshaw conducted a field study of battered women’s shelters in Los Angeles with a focus on shelters situated in minority communities. Crenshaw found a strong correlation between the type of racial discrimination Pecola faces in *The Bluest Eye* — inability to access education or employment, lower socioeconomic status, increased stigmatization— and the difficulty women of color had in Los Angeles accessing anti-violence resources, and consequently, being able to leave their abusive partners. As Crenshaw (1991) notes, shelters “must also confront the other multilayered and routinized forms of domination that often converge in these women’s lives, hindering their ability to create alternatives to the abusive relationships that brought them to shelters in the first place” (p. 1245). Crenshaw’s essay illustrates a societal inability to adequately address the needs of Black survivors of violence.

Cholly’s Racialized Anger and Dehumanization

Morrison (1970) frames the rape scene at the heart of *The Bluest Eye*’s banning in a larger narrative of Cholly’s life story. Thus Cholly’s anger at white people forms the backdrop of his violence toward Pecola. Years before Cholly rapes Pecola,

two white men catch Cholly having sex with a girl, Darlene. The men ask Cholly to finish in front of them and shine a flashlight on Cholly as he completes the sex act — an event befitting a “sexual assault” through coercion label, in modern terms. However, rather than hate the two white men for Cholly’s traumatizing experience, the narrator states Cholly “had not hated the white men; he hated, despised, the girl” (Morrison, 1970, p. 42). Cholly transfers his anger regarding his sexual shame and powerlessness to women in his community. Morrison brings up the scene again shortly before Cholly rapes Pecola; this time, Morrison displays the scene in agonizing detail akin to how she describes Pecola’s rape. The proximity of Cholly’s flashback to his decision to rape Pecola creates a powerful fusion between Cholly’s anger at white men and compulsive need to assert dominance over women. The merging of these scenes connects Pecola’s rape to the racist actions of the white men (and thus, institutional racism), implicating white supremacy in the gender-based violence Pecola experiences.

Morrison also reminds the reader of Cholly’s helplessness as a Black man both after he is caught with Darlene and right before he rapes Pecola. This reminder draws a powerful connection between the two scenes. In Cholly reflecting upon what happened with Darlene, the narrator states Cholly “was small, black, helpless” (Morrison, 1970, p. 150). The reference to Cholly’s race in this description reminds the reader that racialized violence forms the basis of Cholly’s feelings of helplessness. Then, only pages after this comment — and right before Cholly rapes Pecola — Cholly’s feelings of helplessness surface when the narrator asks, “What could a burned-out black man say to the hunched back of his eleven-year-old daughter?” (Morrison, 1970, p. 161). As with the aftermath of Cholly’s sexual encounter with Darlene, the premise of Pecola’s rape is helplessness, anger, and racism.

Morrison’s image mirroring during scenes of the racial violence Cholly experiences and the sexual violence Pecola experiences furthers the connection between

racialized and sexual violence in *The Bluest Eye*. When Cholly has flashbacks to the Darlene incident, the narrator reveals Cholly “could think only of ... Darlene’s hands” (Morrison, 1970, p. 150). In describing Cholly’s rape of Pecola, the narrator remarks Cholly “was conscious of her wet, soapy hands on his wrists” (Morrison, 1970, p. 163). In both incidents, Cholly’s consciousness drifts toward the same imagery — the hands of the girl. The repeated imagery anchors Pecola’s rape in the racism perpetrated against Cholly, thus anchoring rape in racial violence.

Conclusion

There are, of course, problems with introducing serious material in high school classrooms — particularly material containing sexual violence like *The Bluest Eye* — due to students’ immaturity. Sharon Bernstein (1995), a sociologist from University of California-Berkeley, recounted her experience observing an eleventh grade English class in a California high school for six weeks as they read *The Bluest Eye*. The class of twenty students contained predominantly Black students with a few more boys than girls (in Bernstein’s binary gender classification). Bernstein’s recollections of the events that took place are disturbing. Bernstein charts the shaming of Black female sexuality in class discussions and the boys’ tendencies to mock or silence the girls in the class. While girls in the class engaged in a conversation directly implicating racism in Pecola’s rape, boys in the class failed to engage in discussions about the intersection of racism and gender-based violence, and further, mocked the violence itself. One boy, Bernstein (1995) recalls, “started swinging his arms as if he were beating someone, and exclaimed ‘But he will tell you as he’s beating you! Clean the house! Clean the house!’” (p. 27). The boy’s comment elicited laughter. In conclusion, Bernstein insinuates perhaps the immaturity with which that high school class approached *The Bluest Eye* is reason to question its use in classrooms.

However, despite the challenges of assigning *The Bluest Eye*, the novel initiates a vital dialogue about racism's role in motivating gender-based violence. The novel's subject matter remains relevant to a high school audience, perhaps explaining why the novel provokes discomfort; Black girls are far more likely to experience sexual assault before age eighteen than their white peers and an estimated 40% of Black girls experience sexual abuse or assault before age eighteen (Africana Voices Against Violence, 2002). As Irving (2007) argues, "For the assaulted, silenced, and imprisoned, literature is that rare opportunity to lend voice with wide distribution to thousands of women mired by false classification, disinclination, and devaluation" (p. 80). *The Bluest Eye* offers a small window into a world of violence and discrimination inaccessible in most other literary works portraying gender-based violence, such as the less-frequently banned novels *Lolita* and *Speak*. When schools ignore Black characters, particularly characters who experience sexual violence, schools send a message that Black narratives are inherently obscene and sexual assault only matters if its victims are white. The erasure of Black bodies in accepted literature reverberates in the larger framework of society; for example, Black women are less likely to report instances of rape than their white peers (17% compared to 44%, according to a 2005 Justice Department study), and media coverage around sexual violence focuses principally on white narratives (Adams, 2015). As one student at Morgan State quoted in Allante Adams' article in *City Paper* puts it, "If a black man rapes a white woman, it's wrong because white is pure. But as a black woman, if I get raped it's because I deserved it" (2015).

Pecola may be a fictional character, but schools' erasure of her plight through banning *The Bluest Eye*, and schools' classification of Pecola's story as obscener than the stories of white female rape victims, accentuates a dangerous norm of ignoring Black survivors of gender-based violence. The fact that gender-based violence is often invisible, and violence against Black women doubly so, makes

understanding Pecola's plight as a racialized denial of her fundamental rights so crucial.

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