

“Blackish Blueberries Everywhere”: Deromanticized Soul Food in Toni Morrison’s *The Bluest Eye*

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Introduction

“Soul food” is an intriguing term, characterized by a feeling—soulfulness—rather than a direct reference to a specific culture or region. However, given the 1960s connotation of the word “soul” with blackness, the phrase most commonly refers to Southern black cuisine, birthed in slavery, and taking inspiration from Southern, African, indigenous, and other culinary traditions. The cuisine became fashionable during the “Soul Era” of the 1960s and 1970s, as a wave of social movements asked African Americans to embrace their blackness, and often represented the black community as a unified, organic entity.¹ These included the Black is Beautiful movement, the Black Power Movement, and its sister movement started by Amiri Baraka, the Black Arts Movement (BAM), which promoted the creation of black art, seeking to move away from Western ideology and create a “black aesthetic” that defined African American cultural values and a singular essence of blackness.² Soul food was frequently characterized as the social glue that kept the harmonious black community together during this time. Writers and cultural figures depicted soul food as if it contained magical qualities to heal, unite, and produce nostalgia for African American people, a prideful cornerstone of African American culture. James Brown, the most important musical figure in the Black Power Movement and often referred to as “the King of Soul,” marks the end of his song “Make it Funky Part I” by singing “Neckbones! Candied yams! turnips! Smothered steak. Smothered steak! Grits and gravy!

Cracking bread...” “Make it Funky Part II” then begins with “Be up on your thing, brother. Snap peas, Mobile gumbo, hunk of cornbread, buttermilk” (Brown). The song as a whole expresses a message of black pride through belttable lyrics and a danceable beat meant to enjoy with others in a communal embrace of blackness. Its opening and closing references to soul food attest to the importance of the cuisine in the era’s understanding of the black aesthetic. The song positions the consumption of soul food as one of the inherent qualities of being black—the race’s “funkiness.” This article is interested in writers who deconstruct this simplistic idea of a coalescent black community and the romantic/organic view towards soul food through an insider position. It’s from this curiosity that we land at Toni Morrison’s writing.

Throughout her career, Morrison used her prose to assert her sympathetic, yet critical eye towards the African American and black community. Her writing was not only concerned with outside forces that plagued the black community that she belonged to, but also the internal fissures and tensions within it. She came of age as a writer during the “Soul Era,” which is reflected in her first novel, *The Bluest Eye*, in which depictions of soul food dishes disrupt this romantic vision of a unified black community. Throughout all of her works, Morrison is unafraid to portray black people in unsentimental, complex ways, and *The Bluest Eye* is no exception. While the “Soul Era” spoke of soul food’s ability to bring black people together, Morrison also depicts soul food as a force that contributes from the disunification of the black community and that can harm black people, physically and emotionally. She does not entirely disregard soul food’s positive role in the black community. Rather she contrasts flashbacks to the interwar South, where food appears in the community in a more romanticized way, to the fictional present of the novel in the urban North of the 1940s, where soul food shows the cracks in the black community. These fractures are often caused by class tensions and the invading dogma of white

supremacy, revealing how these forces prevent the vision of the supposed harmony community the “Soul Era” ran on.

At this point one might ask why *food* is something we should pay any attention to at all in scholarly discussions, especially this one. Though grounded in cultural anthropology, food studies engages a wide range of disciplines, from political science to economics to literary criticism. As Counihan and Van Esterik point out, the richness of the field stems from its ability to connect internal worlds to external ones: the personal to the impersonal, the material to the immaterial, the body to the soul. There is “an important relationship between food and word that literary scholars have identified in a range of recent works ... [and an] intricate relationship between eating and writing and the writing on eating” says Gitanjali G. Shahani in the 2018 essay collection *Food and Literature* (2). More and more, literary scholars are exploring questions of food, hunger, and appetite in their criticism, turning “to food as subject, as form, as landscape, as polemic, as political movement, as aesthetic statement, and as key ingredient in literature” (Shahani 2). The time has come for us to start digesting our literature along with our lunch.

In order to set the stage for close readings of *The Bluest Eye*, I’ll now discuss how a few more thinkers have linked food to society/literature/culture. Roland Barthes saw food as part of his theory of semiotics, arguing that food is a signal and a system of communication that requires our attention. Food is a system of communication, is a sign for themes, replaces behaviors, and signals other behaviors to start. He writes in “Toward a Psychosociology of Contemporary Food Consumption” that “an entire ‘world’ (social environment) is present and signified by food” (Barthes 26). He also writes that “food permits a person... to partake each day of the national past” (Barthes 27). Though referring to French food specifically in this latter quotation, both of

these statements transfer well when discussing soul food in African American culture and literature. Soul food has an implicit connection to American slavery. And though cooking was one of the few areas in slave culture in which enslaved people could express freedom, even this freedom was extremely narrow. Additionally, white Americans have historically used stereotypes about black people's gustatory habits to assert power over them, as well as to profit themselves, employing racist caricatures of black people to sell their products². Morrison uses this knowledge— that every piece of food a black person in the US does or does not eat may contain historical meaning—to explore the racially tense social environments in *The Bluest Eye*. Pierre Bourdieu contributes to this connection between food and social environments in *Distinction: A Social Critique of Judgement of Taste*, which presents the argument that taste in food reinforces their social class identity. Catherine Keyser points out that this “account is equally apt for the construction of racial hierarchies” (148). We see this theory come to fruition in *The Bluest Eye*, where characters use their food choices to reject some or all aspects of their blackness in ways that reveal the intimate links between race and class.

Several critics have looked towards the food of Morrison's novels, though there remains a fissure in the discussions when it comes to incorporating cultural history into analyses. The section “Hunger” written by Lynn Marie Houston in the *The Toni Morrison Encyclopedia* devotes itself to naming food, hunger, and appetite as important motifs in Morrison's novels, however it does not reference *The Bluest Eye* specifically or cite instances of soul cuisine that appear in Morrison's work. Houston claims that food and hunger negotiate and define racial politics and that food imagery frequently acts to define characters and their relationships. She writes that Morrison uses offerings of food to show the hospitality of strangers and uses hunger to characterize sexual appetites while also revealing characters' secret anxiety over their selfhood

and history. “‘Apple Pie’ Ideology and the Politics of Appetite in the Novels of Toni Morrison” does analyze soul dishes from *The Bluest Eye* but does not name them as such. Emma Parker contrasts the sweet language Pauline Breedlove uses with the Fisher child with the rotten language she spews at Pecola after she drops the cobbler. Parker contends that this incident exemplifies Pauline’s value of whiteness and hatred of blackness, and that Claudia and Frieda nickname Maureen Peel “Meringue Pie” to use sweetness as an insult, a transgressive act meant to resist the value system of white skin over black. However, Parker fails to view the cobbler and pie-insult as more than general conduit for sweetness. She does not question why Morrison chose these two desserts as opposed to any other sweet, nor does she explore the larger implications of an African American writer making references to soul food.

Elizabeth House makes a similar move, identifying food as a major motif in Morrison’s work, writing that it is Morrison’s “primary ‘hook’... connect[ing] sweets, especially commercially prepared candy and pies, with competitive success dreams... showing that neither [sugar nor outward success] is truly nourishing to human life” (182). However, House too sees these instances of candy and pies in Morrison’s work as simply “sweets,” avoiding closely reading the unique imagery and historical context that each of Morrison’s sweets evoke. Instead, many critics, including those mentioned above, have proposed a connection between capitalism and commercialization to Morrison’s symbolic sweets³. Nevertheless, this leaves us to question how to interpret the highly symbolic non-commercialized foods in Morrison’s work, and to otherwise break out of this oversimplified framework.

The Soul Era

Toni Morrison began her writing career during the “Soul era” in the 1960s, beginning to write *The Bluest Eye*, her first novel, in 1962, publishing in 1970 (Morrison xi). This period in African American culture ran on the notion of racial essentialism, claiming that black people had an inherent soulfulness: a sensibility and heart that could not be replicated by whites. Through this black aesthetic, the Soul Era spoke of a “black cultural unity that imbue[d] blacks with a certain quality of being by their race alone” (Guillory and Green 3). The Black Arts Movement, Black Pride Movement, and Black is Beautiful Movement all emerged during this era and intersected with each other, often romanticizing African American culture in an attempt to disprove the shame US society had contributed to blackness, black people, and black-created things since the arrival of the first slave ship. Soul music was a pivotal aspect of this era, in which African American artists created unapologetically black music forms, combining blues dance music with the black gospel tradition (Stephens 1). Funk music pushed this emphasis on the “natural” and vital power of blackness into the 1970s.

Soul food became fashionable during this time as African Americans attempted to pull Southern black cuisine out of the shame US society had attributed to it do to its association with slavery and blackness (Jones Bolsterli & Tipton-Martin 104). Soul food also aligned with the Soul Era’s value of black community, the cuisine often spoken and written of in terms of the strong bonds it built in the community and rose in popularity during the Soul Era. Dozens of soul food cookbooks were published between 1960-1970, including *Soul Food Cookery*, a spiral-bound cookbook containing over 250 soul food recipes by African American entrepreneur Inez Y. Kaiser (Lee).⁴ When asked to define the term “soul food” in an interview with the *Washington Post*, Kaiser remarked, “I think of the word ‘soul’ as meaning unity and as a means of identifying with black culture... soul food is a means of bringing people together... Basic food

that sticks to the ribs and produces emotional satisfaction; just basic staples that produce a tasty meal on a limited budget” (Lee).

Other newspapers, black and white, began to notice the buzz around soul food too, and the “soul” that defined it. The *Negro Digest* published an article in 1964 called “The Emergence of Soul” which pondered the new term, corresponded with *Jet*, another popular black magazine, to inform the reader that “the specific menu for [a soul food dinner] need not concern us. What we are concerned with is this question: What was the ‘soul’ that pervaded that food” (Westbrook 12). The article defines the “soul” of soul food as an essence of black perseverance and the history that binds black people together. In an interview with *Ebony* in 1967, Edward Brooke (the first popularly elected black senator) admitted his love for soul food and defined himself as a “soul brother,” prompting the reporter to write that this “revelation, perhaps, would be meaningful for Negroes” (Booker 150). Meanwhile, the craze even made its way up to places as far away from the South as Maine and upstate New York. A 1969 issue of the *Schenectady Gazette* observed that “the demand for soul food is becoming so great that the prices for these items have increased in the last few months and a chain of restaurants serving soul foods has sprung up” (82). Meanwhile, an article in the *Lewiston Evening Journal* from the same year observed that soul food “is food that does more than fill you up, right? When it comes down to it, it’s probably the food your mammy fed you when you were little, the kind you ordered on your birthday,” associating the term with happy childhood memories and a positive emotional connection (Payette 5). *Lewiston* and *The New York Times*, amongst other publications, also made a point to report the 1969 “Soul Food Ball” hosted at the Waldorf-Astoria, a benefit attended by Bill Cosby and other Hollywood members.

Edna Lewis, the eventual first recipient of the James Beard Living Legend award, also became active during this time. Lewis, a black chef from Virginia and previous co-owner of New York's famed Café Nicholson, started a revolution to dig Southern cuisine out of its shameful reputation, publishing three Southern cookbooks in the 1970s. Lewis was open about the fact that her recipes are inspired by the black Virginian community of Freetown, "a community founded by emancipated slaves" (Franklin 3). Her recipes easily earn the label of "soul food," especially considering how some are prefaced with stories from Lewis eating them with her family and community. However, Lewis's books were always marketed under the label of "Southern cooking" not "Soul Food," perhaps a testament to the deeper level of disrespect the term "Soul food" could still evoke outside of the black community.

As a cook at Café Nicholson, she served simple soul food, including to notable writers including Tennessee Williams and Truman Capote. Sarah A. Franklin writes in the anthology *Edna Lewis: At Home with an American Original*:

Miss Lewis ... cooked and wrote of food as a means to explore and commemorate her childhood experiences and memories of everyday life ... In Lewis's portrayals of her birthplace, food was a source ... of great joy It's important to remember that when Lewis [was active] the long shadow of slavery and the trauma of the Civil War [had] tainted popular notions of the South and its cuisine with shame (3-5).

These memories come from a childhood spent in the black community of Freetown. Southern black cuisine tasted of a sentimentality for black community. She positioned food as one of the cornerstones of black community, portraying "a childhood that could only be described as idyllic, in which ... cooking sustained and entertained an entire community" (Lewis, Waters, et al. i). By portraying the food of the African American South in this way, Lewis combated the

negative view of Southern food (and therefore soul food) and gave its worthy place of respect on the culinary table. She created an idealized vision of an African American community, united through its food, a vision which Toni Morrison challenges in *The Bluest Eye*.

Another “Soul Era” figure Morrison challenged through her depiction of soul food was BAM founder Amiri Baraka. Though he also wrote about negative aspects of the black community, publishing *In Our Terribleness* in 1970, soul food is one aspect of black life that he romanticized. He dedicated an essay to the topic in 1968, recounting:

“Sweet potato pies,” a good friend of mine asked recently, “Do they taste anything like pumpkin?” Negative. They taste more like memory, if you're not uptown...I had to go to Rutgers before I found people who thought grits were meant to be eaten with milk and sugar, instead of gravy and pork sausage . . . and that's one of the reasons I left. (97)

Baraka depicts soul food here with the type of sentimentality that Morrison avoids, relating it to a nostalgia of growing up in the black community. To combat the long-standing negative view of soul food, he places the cuisine on a pedestal above other foods.

Whites have historically created stereotypes about African American foodways to assert power over them, shaming both the people and the cuisine (Williams-Forson, “More Than Just the ‘Big Piece of Chicken’”). While Baraka’s appetite for soul food is genuine, his conviction to write this essay on soul food, rather than any other food he found enjoyable, directly relates to rebelling against the shameful view of soul food and rearticulating it as a source of solidarity and strength.⁵

Soul Food in *The Bluest Eye*

Toni Morrison discussed the Black Arts Movement and the black aesthetic during the “Soul Era” in an essay she wrote about the aesthetics of Romare Bearden. There, she comments that in the 1960s, “the alternative canon that the new black critics urged had several goals: nationalism, revolutionary success, cultural hegemony ... an aesthetic put to the service of ... a *cohesive cultural flowering*” (“Abrupt Stops” 179, my emphasis). The black characters depicted in *The Bluest Eye* are far from this unified envision of black culture that BAM aspired to. The reason Morrison chose to depict black people differently might be because of what she says on the next page of the essay. For black artists, she wrote, “the urgency of de-stereotyping is so strong it can push easily into sentimentality” (ibid. 180). Morrison resisted depicting black people as model minorities, instead choosing to write nuanced black characters, rejecting the romantic idea of a black community that BAM and other similar movements was founded on and preached. The representation of food in *The Bluest Eye* is one of the main ways Morrison accomplishes this.

The Bluest Eye was written in direct conversation with the social and cultural movements of the 1960s. The novel tells the story of Pecola Breedlove, a black child psychologically broken by the equation of whiteness with beauty and blackness with ugliness, a value system enforced in social and domestic spaces. In some ways, it reinforces the Black is Beautiful movement, using Pecola’s character to argue why such a campaign is necessary. Additionally, by writing of the damaging effects of Eurocentric beauty standards, Morrison aligns herself with the goal of the black Arts Movement to destroy “white ideas, white ways of looking at the world” (Neal 30). At the same time, however, Morrison critiques the more sentimental aspects from within these movements that glamorized the black community. Bitter, disunifying depictions of soul food that appear in the 1940 timeline in *The Bluest Eye* are contrasted with flashbacks of sentimental

depictions of the food of from Pauline and Cholly Breedlove's childhoods. These recollections evoke a sense of love, unity, and pleasure in early twentieth-century Southern black life that align themselves more with the aesthetics of the "Soul Era."

Pauline Breedlove is written to have interacted with smashed berries and their juice in two meaningful moments. The first time is when she goes berry picking as a child. The second time is when she bakes a berry cobbler, a type of soul food, as an adult. Both times, the berries get smashed and their juice spills. As a child, Pauline accepts the presence of berry juice, but in adulthood, the presence of spilt berries are upsetting enough to make her abuse her daughter. These divergent reactions from youth to adulthood reveal that white supremacy and Eurocentric beauty standards have damaged Pauline's perception of blackness throughout her life.

The flashback to Pauline's youth comes when present-day Pauline relates her memory of berry picking as a child to when she met Cholly as a teenager. She recalls that when she first met him, "*it was like... that time when all us chil'ren went berry picking after a funeral and I put some in my pocket... and they mashed up and... [m]y whole dress was messed with purple, and it never did wash out. Not the dress nor me... I could feel that purple deep inside me... all of them colors was in me*" (Morrison 116). In childhood, berry picking enforces a relationship between Pauline and other black children. Morrison writes this memory as an idyllic scene of black community enabled by food, in tune with messaging during the "Soul Era." Pauline does not appear upset that the berries became mashed, or that the berry juice stain permanently stained her dress. Instead, she relates the instance positively to Cholly's tickling her foot, associated erotic pleasure, an acceptance of her "coloredness," i.e. blackness, and an embracement of black love.

In adulthood however, Pauline desires the love of white folk over black, and is no longer comfortable with her inner blackness/self. This is reflected by her outrage when Pecola spills a

berry cobbler Pauline has just made for her white employers, spilling berry juice everywhere. This change in Pauline reflects how white supremacy and the enforcement of Eurocentric beauty standards, like we see throughout the novel, can turn children embracing of their blackness to adults who embrace white supremacist values to their and their family's detriment. We can point to this change in Pauline to when she moved north to Lorain, Ohio. Pauline has consistent interaction with white people in Lorain, unlike in Alabama. She likely encountered more racism and messaging that she was racial inferior once up North (Morrison 117). Additionally, she asserts that "dirty" black Ohioans were unkind to her, pointing to a divide between Southern and Northern African Americans, and a shame working class African Americans felt from their counterparts in the middle class (Morrison 117). These divisions prevented Pauline from forming relationships with other black people with whom she can experience black pride, or at least black acceptance, like she did as a child. The Breedloves' descent into poverty once up North additionally reinforces Pauline's hatred of herself for being an impoverished, "dirty" black woman.

The novel ties the breakdown of Pauline's self-image and relationship to blackness through the breakdown of her tooth, a malady that would obstruct her ability to enjoy berries as she used to. The tooth breaks soon after Pauline and Cholly first move to Lorain. "[T]he weakened roots, having grown accustomed to the poison, responded one day to severe pressure, and the tooth fell free, leaving a ragged stump behind. But even before the little brown speck [in the tooth], there must have been the conditions, the setting for it to exist in the first place," Morrison states (117). Pauline's tooth, like her positive relationship to blackness, has rotted, due to being accustomed to the poison of the white supremacist society she lives in. In addition to the increase in discrimination she likely experienced after the move, Morrison describes Pauline's

internalization of white supremacy as coming from moviegoing. Through the cinema, she learns to associate whiteness with domestic harmony, cleanliness, wealth, and “physical beauty” (Morrison 122). Morrison describes physical beauty as “the most destructive ideas in the history of human thought,” yet one that Pauline sees as a “virtue” (122). Apropos of this, Pauline’s tooth comes out when she’s at the movies, while seeing a film starring Jean Harlow, her hair styled to look like the actress’s. *“There I was... trying to look like Jean Harlow and a front tooth gone. Everything went then ... I let my hair go back, plaited it up, and settled down to just being ugly,”* she recalls (Morrison 123). The loss of the tooth reinforces to Pauline that she is ugly and poor, the rotten tooth likely a result of a lack of dental care. Her life and appearance contrast with the white, wealthy Harlow, whom US society praises as beautiful. The loss of the tooth represents and cements Pauline’s association of blackness with poverty, ugliness, and dirtiness, and whiteness with wealth, beauty, and cleanliness. Going to the movies was the “severe pressure” that made both Pauline and her tooth snap, but she was already under the “setting” of a white supremacist forces especially strong in Lorain (Morrison 117). Missing a tooth, Pauline's ability to chew food will be impaired; her ability to have a positive relationship with other black people, whose relationships are strengthened through food, is destroyed.

This change in Pauline is evident in her job as a domestic servant for the Fishers in 1940, exhibiting an “allegiance to the white family and rejection of her own [black one]” (House 183). She uses a soul dish, berry cobbler, to win the love and respect of the white family who employ her, revealing her hatred and disgust towards her poor, black family. Film taught Pauline to equate whiteness with wealth and cleanliness, and this is reinforced by the Fishers’ perfect white home with adorned with white towels, porcelain tubs, and silvery taps, which Pauline loves (Morrison 127). These items contrast Pauline’s dingy, black, ugly home. Pauline feels

acceptance and love from the Fishers. There, she becomes a white person's fantasy of a black person. She does this to win over the love of a white family, which she now values over the love of her own family or race, and to experience some of the material luxuries that come with white wealth. However, their affection for her is dependent on her being "the ideal servant" (Morrison 127). Eager to serve, she is everything a white family wants a black person to be.

In order to maintain their love, Pauline can never make a mistake that would reveal her humanity, subjecthood, in the house. She can never, and does never, display a less-pristine version of blackness which a white family would not approve of. She desires the love and approval of the white world, and believes in white supremacy, showing affection to the young Fisher girl that she has never shown to her daughter. Though Pauline is touched that they give her a nickname, "Polly," something she was denied in her own family, it is a pejorative nickname (Morrison, *The Bluest Eye* 126). "Polly" has remarkable oral resemblance to the word "dolly," especially when said by Fishers' young daughter, who, like her parents, see's Pauline as her doll or pet: an inferior who exists only for their use. Pauline distances herself from subjectivity, turning herself into a black object, because she desperately wants to be close to the white world, even though she knows she will never be white. She "escapes ... the disappointments of her life by seeking refuge in the white family" (Carpenter 82). She can pretend her plight as an impoverished, black woman does not exist when cooking in the beautiful home of a white family, where she receives affection and can temporarily live in their white luxury.

The Fishers love and value Pauline's signature berry cobbler (Morrison 127). After abolition, "fruit cobblers ... were ... familiar foods in Southern black homes," a dish that inherited the tradition of baking fruit during slavery from English masters (Douglass Opie 19,

55). Pauline, a black southerner who moved to Lorain from Alabama, feels love and importance when she bakes them, since she makes them perfectly and for white enjoyment. This is a contrast to messaging from figures like Baraka, Lewis, and Brown who wrote of soul food as something meant to bring black people together, not for black people to use to please white people. Pauline calls attention to her blackness by baking a Southern-black desert for the Fishers, but one can't equate this action as evidence of Pauline's black pride. Characteristic of African American women during the 1940s, the things Pauline does in public, including the food she prepares, is with intent; she is careful to only show the public what she wants them to see (Williams-Forsen, *Building Houses out of Chicken Legs*, 95). Unlike Maureen Peel, Pauline is comfortable displaying her blackness, as long as it is a subservient, idealized version of her blackness created for white pleasure.

The cobbler does not reveal that Pauline is trying to be white in the household, or that she hates all forms of blackness, as Parker argues in "Apple Pie Ideology." If Pauline wanted to hide her blackness in the household, she would not have baked an iconic Southern/soul dish in a white, Northern household. Pauline feels comfortable exemplifying her blackness by baking the cobbler only because the dark blueberry cobbler presents the same white-pleasing, pristine, white-serving blackness that she parades for the Fishers. The dish reveals Pauline's shame over impoverished blackness, and her desire to hide it in the Fisher's home. Claudia sees one of Pauline's freshly-baked cobblers when she and Frieda visit Pecola while she is helping her mother at the Fisher home. At first, the cobbler's purple juice only "burst[s] here and there through the crust" (Morrison 108). The pie's dark berries, like Pauline's blackness, are mostly hidden between a sweet crust – Pauline masks her plight as an impoverished, black woman through the sweetness and perfection she performs and enjoys in the white home. Pauline's true

self (the berries) is constrained by the sweetness of the white, wealthy home (the crust), into which she escapes into.

Things quickly turn disastrous when Pecola accidentally knocks the pan of cobbler over, “splattering blackish blueberries everywhere,” leading Pauline to begin abusing her (Morrison, *The Bluest Eye* 109). Pauline’s clumsy black daughter is a reflection of herself and her life outside of the Fisher residence. Unlike the Fishers, the Breedloves live in a world of poverty, abuse, and imperfection. Pecola infects the perfect white household with a negative action, clumsiness, which makes the Breedloves look like “ugly” black people Pauline believes they are (Morrison 45). Pauline has taught her children “a fear of being clumsy,” knowing that such a display of human imperfection would fracture their acceptance into white spaces (Morrison 38). She abuses Pecola because she exposes their family’s imperfection and is reminded that her life at the Fishers is a facade. Pauline’s true experience of blackness – messy and dark like the fallen berries—are exposed. Her true life is no longer hidden beneath the sweet crust of the white-ish crust, the “sweet” front that she performs inside the white home for white approval.

Pauline’s appropriation of the cobbler for white acceptance harms Pecola physically and psychologically. The scene dismantles the notion of soul food inspiring black community or acting as an expression of black pride. It does the opposite, the cobbler weakening Pauline’s relationship to her daughter and the MacTeers, while also contributing to her daughter’s inferiority complex based around her race. Like many women, Pauline “negotiate[s] the dialectical relationship between the internal identity formation of their families and the externally influenced medium of popular culture,” dictating the “symbolic language of food” within her family (Williams-Forsen, *Building Houses Out of Chicken Legs* 92). And following what anthropologist Pamela Quaggiotto writes about mothers generally, as a mother, Pauline would

determine “what her dishes and meals will say about herself, her family, and the world,” (qtd. in Williams-Forsen, “More than Just the ‘Big Piece of Chicken’” 52). Claudia recounts how when the cobbler spills, the juice of the berries

splashed on Pecola’s legs, and the burn must’ve been painful, for she cried out In one gallop [Mrs. Breedlove] was on Pecola and with the back of her hand, knocked her to the floor. Pecola slid in the pie juice, one leg folded under her. Mrs. Breedlove yanked her up by the arm, slapped her again, and in a thin voice with anger, abused Pecola directly and Frieda and me by implication. “Crazy fool . . . my floor, mess . . . look what you . . . work, get on out . . . now that . . . crazy . . . my floor, my floor . . . my floor” Her words were hotter and darker than the smoking berries, and we backed away in dread” (Morrison, *The Bluest Eye* 109).

Pecola is burned by the pie and experiences her mother’s abuse while entangled in the pain of the cobbler, its juice causing her to slip. While Pauline appropriates the cobbler to present a positive view of herself and her blackness to white society, she simultaneously reinforces the negative view of blackness that Pecola has also learned from popular culture and the external world. Contributing to Pecola’s psychosis at the end of the novel, she teaches Pecola that she should be ashamed of her black self. Pecola witnesses her mother’s affection towards the Fisher girl, and her preference for the Fisher family is evident by how she lashes out at her daughter for destroying the cobbler meant for them. Additionally, one of the injuries Pecola receives from the cobbler is a burn, an injury that damages the skin. The cobbler’s juice makes Pecola’s black skin feel like an injury and a deformity, as nasty to look at as a burn.

The divergent use of berries in *The Bluest Eye* is not the first time it provides contrasting representations of (soul) food.⁶ This is because the novel does not call for a complete

abandonment of soul food or reject it as a useful agent that helps bring people together. Rather, Morrison asks us to reconsider viewing soul food as the magical glue that binds the members of a utopian black community together. We see this most through Cholly's recollection of Aunt Jimmy's death. In a cool and matter of fact tone, Morrison writes, "[i]t was in the spring, a very chilly spring, that Aunt Jimmy died of peach cobbler," as if this were a usual cause of death. It's also worth noting that the cobbler's sweetness is not the cause of its poisonous effect as Parker or House might argue, since the women who visit Aunt Jimmy claim that "sweet bread" wouldn't have made her sick like the cobbler did (Morrison 137).² Friends come to take care of her, bringing potlicker with them and an array of fresh Southern produce that might as well have been picked from Edna Lewis's garden (Morrison 135). This scene is aligned with the community-binding vision of soul food during the Soul Era, with women gathering to provide comfort to a dying through the cuisine. However, it was soul food that caused Aunt Jimmy's sickness and eventual death in the first place. Morrison uses the cobbler-that-kills to introduce skepticism about the unifying, soulful power of food in African American culture, while still acknowledging that affirming gatherings involving food do exist.

The anecdote about Aunt Jimmy appears directly after Cholly has recalled the idyllic memory from childhood. The adult Cholly believes he is "ugly," as all the Breedloves do in the present day (Morrison 45). Similarly to his wife, the novel charts the evolution of Cholly's view towards blackness, from a childhood where he experienced the joy of a Southern black community through food, to traumatic experiences in US society as a black man that make him internalize white supremacy, such as being sexually performed by white police officers as a teenager who call him "nigger" (Morrison 49). The watermelon scene in contrast is perhaps the most sentimental moment in the novel: It evokes both the rejection of white standards

preached by BAM, and the general belief of the pivotal role of food in connecting black community. Specifically, Cholly's memory is of eating chunks of smashed watermelon off the ground at a picnic with other church members when he was young. The novel describes that "[l]ittle children scrambled for pieces on the ground. Women picked at the seeds for the smallest ones and broke off little bits of the meat for themselves," as well as the imagery of Blue and Cholly sharing "the heart of the watermelon" together evoke an idyllic portrait of a Southern black community (Morrison 133). The church members focus on the mutual enjoyment of the fruit, not the stigmatizing white gaze of Caucasian passersby who could use what they see at the picnic to promote their view of black people as watermelon-eating savages.

This moment juxtaposes with the character of Maureen Peel, who, already being fully indoctrinated into a white supremacist belief system, unlike boy-aged Cholly, has the opposite reaction to being linked to food associated with Southern blackness. Morrison also uses the subplot of Maureen Peel to present a nuanced portrayal of a *disunified* black community, where food divides black people from each other in addition bringing them together. The subplot turns 1960s-1970s soul food discourse on its head, including the prior berry-picking and watermelon-eating moments. She removes (soul) food's sacred status as a community-binding potion for African Americans, using it to reveal issues of colorism and class tensions in black culture.

Claudia MacTeer, the child narrator of the novel, and her sister Frieda, immediately become jealous of Maureen Peel when they encounter her at school. Maureen is a "high yellow dream child," a mixed-race child. "She was rich, at least by our standards... as rich as the richest of the white girls, swaddled by comfort and care," Claudia comments, reasonably placing Maureen in the middle class (Morrison 62). Maureen's light skin affords her relative wealth and popularity that Frieda and Claudia lack, as lighter-skinned African Americans like Maureen

historically operate in a “generally higher socioeconomic status” than those with darker skin (Breland, et. al 2257). Seeing how she is favored for her light skin, she performs whiteness. She refers to herself as “cute,” but the dark-skinned Pecola and the MacTeers are “black and ugly” (Morrison 77). Maureen works to distance herself from blackness, using food to accomplish this.

We learn much about Maureen through Claudia’s observations of her lunchtime habits, recounting, “she never had to search for anybody to eat with in the cafeteria – [black girls] flocked to... her... where she opened fastidious lunches, shaming our jelly-stained bread with egg-salad sandwiches cut into four dainty squares, pink-frosted cupcakes, stocks of celery, and carrots, proud, dark apples” (Morrison 62-63). The lunch is somewhat community-binding as the black girls come together in the cafeteria. However, Maureen uses the food she brings to school to reflect her wealth and purposefully distance herself from any association with blackness. And by signaling her social class, she further divides her from Claudia and Freida.

This long-winded list of lunch items Maureen brings to school reflects the 1940s black middle class’s effort to eat visually appealing foods in order to negate negative stereotypes about black people. According to W.E.B. Du Bois and Augustus Granville Dill, “the real basis of color prejudice in America is that the Negroes as a race are rude and thoughtless in manners and all together quite hopeless in sexual morals... property rights... and truth” (qtd in Williams-Forsen, *Building Houses out of Chicken Legs* 94). As a result, “some middle-class black people felt the need to disassociate themselves from foods heavily connected to ‘the folk’” (Williams-Forsen 94). Charlotte Hawkins Brown, an African American reformer of the era, also encouraged this disassociation and substitution of new food habits for black people. In 1940, the year *The Bluest Eye* takes place, she republished *The Correct Thing to Do, to Say, to Wear*, a conduct manual which aimed to teach African Americans social graces. The directive echoed some of “the

concerns held by middle class Northern blacks about immigrants who arrived from the South ... it was widely believed by the 'better classes' of blacks that African American respectability was directly tied to ... social ... advancement ... Brown had a range of principles 'upon which charms depends' ... many related to food consumption" (Williams-Forson 94). And to abolish negative stereotypes, Brown advised that food, amongst other things, should be visually satisfying in addition to tasty.

Williams-Forson's further description of Brown's tips around food strikingly resemble Maureen Peel's lunchroom habits:

In her book of manners, Brown provides a question-and-answer section wherein she includes questions about how to eat foods that have bones or seeds. She instructs the reader on the proper ways to politely remove these foods from the mouth. She also suggests that food like bacon "when crisp, brittle, and dry may be eaten from the fingers, otherwise should be cut with the fork" (95).

Brown's directive also included recipes for a series of foods black people should eat, including "chopped olive sandwiches," "frosted cakes," "stuffed tomatoes," and other items which Williams-Forson accurately describes as "dainties" (95). Such meticulous food preparation and delicate food items reflect the food Maureen brings to school: cupcakes that have been frosted, celery sticks that have been sliced, and most notably, sandwiches that have been cut into "dainty squares." Maureen has purposefully packed a lunch that doesn't contain foods that would call attention to her blackness.

Claudia's anthropomorphization of Maureen's "proud apples" speaks of Maureen's pride for the display of social correctness and wealth that she has achieved through the food she brings to school. Maureen's pride signals her feeling of superiority over the other black girls,

representing the population of those in the black middle class in the 1930s and 1940s whose warped perception “rendered black people, and especially working-class black people, as a social problem (Williams-Forsen 94). For Maureen, her sense of superiority is also tied to her light skin. Not only does the Peel’s family light skin afford Maureen and them a place in the middle-class, but Maureen internalizes the Eurocentric beauty standards that deem her beautiful and dark-skinned girls ugly.

Soul food does not bind the children together as members of the black community but divides them. Claudia and Frieda’s distaste for Maureen lead them to revolt against her by giving her the pejorative nickname “meringue pie,” referring to the soul food dessert lemon meringue pie. During slavery, plantation cooks would often make the pie, having ample access to lemons. Now, lemon meringue pie is a staple in soul restaurants and prominent African American cooks including Edna Lewis, Leah Chase, and Joe Randal have published recipes for the pie (Tipton-Martin 309).

The MacTeers first refer to Maureen as “meringue pie” behind her back: Claudia says it to her directly during their fight walking home from school:

“You think you so cute!” I swung at her and missed... she screamed at us, I *am* cute! And you ugly! black and ugly e mos. I *am* cute!... The weight of her remark stunned us, and it was a second or two before Frieda and I collected ourselves enough to shout, “Six-finger-dog-tooth-meringue-pie!” We chanted this most powerful of arsenal of insults as long as we could see the green stems and rabbit fur (Morrison 78).

The sisters wield this reference to soul food as an insult, throwing a metaphorical pie in Maureen’s face. Like the pie itself, the nickname has several layers. Food is used as a system of communication, “an entire ‘world’ (social environment) is present and signified by food”

(Barthes 26). Maureen tries to be white, the key to popularity, affluence, and beauty. However, Claudia and Frieda know her “yellowness,” her blackness. They call attention to Maureen’s blackness by equating her to a soul food dessert, associating her with the very cuisine she and other members of the black middle class have tried to distance themselves from. Maureen recognizes that this soul food-based insult is directly related to her blackness, which is why she insists that she *is* cute, the antonym to black for the girls in Lorain. She begins to doubt her beauty if what Claudia says is true, and that she is in fact black, her attempt to distance herself from blackness a failure.

Maureen has tried desperately to whip her whiteness into shape, just as the white meringue of the pie is whipped vigorously to cover the yellow lemon filling, as Edna Lewis instructs to do in her recipe (240). However, this forced white cover is not entirely successful. Lewis’s last instruction is to “bake until lightly browned” (Lewis 240). Maureen Peel’s brownness peeks through and the MacTeers recognize her blackness. “Maureen’s last name suggests the degree to which her outward appearance is merely a covering,” (House 183). This is also suggested by the imagery of the lemon meringue pie, both motifs symbolized through lemon-related food items, the peel and the pie.

After Claudia weaponizes this reference to soul food to get one up on Maureen, the MacTeers (and Pecola, no more than a helpless bystander at this point) become divided from her, calling attention to sources of division in the black community over the white-supremacist, Eurocentric society that has created the issue of colorism. Maureen has fallen so susceptible to white-supremacist forces and Euro-centric standards of beauty, questioning her “cuteness” after being outed as not black, that the only thing she knows how to do is to lash out at the MacTeers and Pecola, explicitly equating their ugliness to their blackness, completing their separation from

her, and one acting as a one of the black people in Pecola's life who perpetuates her race-based self-hatred.

Through her representation of (soul) food, *The Bluest Eye* disrupts not only the romanticized view towards the cuisine during the "Soul Era," but the idealization of the black community as a whole. She argues that the community cannot be as harmonious as represented during the era if it can be fractured by soul food, the very thing that's supposed to unite it. Food is not enough to bind a community, she argues, calling for greater action to address some of the issues in the black community rooted in white supremacy and its soul sister, classism. While this article addresses soul food in *The Bluest Eye*, this motif calls to be explored in Morrison's other work. If Morrison is critiquing the glamorized representation of soul food 1960s African American discourse, additional research of her novels might explore the question of whether she proposes an alternative way to think about the role of "soul food" in African American culture. Particular attention might be paid towards Morrison's 1986 novel *Beloved*, written during the "Post-Soul Era" that was more critical towards the Black Arts Movement. That text moves closer towards the origins of soul food and black food stereotypes through its setting in slavery, positioning itself as an interesting text to juxtapose with the *The Bluest Eye*'s dual examination of the 1940s and the Soul Era, in addition to being a useful text to track how Morrison's thoughts towards on soul food evolved from the 1960s to 1980s.

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¹See Guillory and Green's *Soul : Black Power, Politics, and Pleasure*.

² See Larry Neal's article "The Black Arts Movement."

³ See Allison Carruth's "'The Chocolate Eater': Food Traffic and Environmental Justice in Toni Morrison's *Tar Baby*," Thomas H. Fick's "Toni Morrison's 'Allegory of the Cave': Movies, Consumption and Platonic Realism in *The Bluest Eye*," and Susan's Willis's "Eruptions of Funk: Historicizing Toni Morrison."

⁴ See *The Jemima Code: Two Centuries of African American Cookbooks*.

⁵ By 2007, when he wrote a new introduction to *Black Fire*, Baraka had recognized that he had previously over-simplified the black community and falsely believed there was an inherent unity that bound all black people together. "Soul Food" reflects this over-simplification. By placing soul food on a godly level, he did the same for the black community in general.

⁶ This essay focuses on the novel's symbolic use of soul food, though *The Bluest Eye* contains many non-soul metaphors as well.