

## The portrayal of Sexual Abuse in *The Bluest Eye* (1970) and *The Unbelonging* (1985): Toni Morrison's and Joan Riley's Anticipation of the #MeToo Movement.

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### Abstract

#MeToo was created in 2006 by Tarana Burke who put in place an organization to help Black women who are victims of sexual violence. In 2017, the phrase was widely used online by American women to denounce the misconduct of powerful male predators. The movement was then exported to countries such as Britain thanks to the primordial role of the Internet which contributed into making #MeToo a rallying cry against sexual abuse. However, rape has always been a real concern in the West, even long before the birth of Burke's brainchild. Toni Morrison raises the question in her novel, *The Bluest Eye* (1970), while Joan Riley covers it in *The Unbelonging* (1985). These two books emphasize the horrific nature of sexual assault and its consequences on the victim through a crude description of the two main protagonists' shocking experience. This paper uses Deborah King's "multiple jeopardy" and Kimberlé Crenshaw's "intersectionality" to show that Morrison and Riley anticipate the discourse of the #MeToo movement. Both novelists portray a female character subject to rape to sound the alarm on the combined effects of racism, sexism, and classism that expose Black girls to sexual violence. The analysis focuses first on the depiction of incestuous rape in the two fictional works and its psychological and social consequences for Pecola Breedlove and Hyacinth Williams. It then considers how the intersecting forces of race, gender, and class enable the sexual exploitation of Black women by predatory male figures.

**Keywords:** #MeToo, rape, intersectionality, Kimberlé Crenshaw, Deborah King, Toni Morrison, Joan Riley

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### Résumé

Le mouvement #MeToo a été créé en 2006 par Tarana Burke qui a mis en place une organisation visant à assister les femmes noires victimes de sévices sexuels. En 2017, l'expression est largement utilisée en ligne par les Américaines pour dénoncer l'inconduite de puissants prédateurs sexuels. Le mouvement est par la suite exporté vers d'autres pays tels que le Royaume-Uni grâce au rôle primordial joué par l'internet qui a contribué à faire du #MeToo un cri de ralliement contre les abus sexuels. Seulement, le viol a toujours constitué un véritable problème en Occident, même bien avant l'avènement du projet de Burke. Toni Morrison l'aborde dans *The Bluest Eye* (1970), ainsi que Joan Riley dans *The Unbelonging* (1985). Ces deux œuvres mettent en exergue l'horreur de l'agression sexuelle et les ravages qu'elle inflige à la victime à travers une narration poignante et sans fard de l'expérience traumatique vécue par les deux protagonistes. L'article s'appuie sur deux théories, le "multiple jeopardy" de Deborah King et l'intersectionnalité de Kimberlé Crenshaw, afin de montrer que Morrison et Riley anticipent le discours du mouvement #MeToo. Les deux romancières mettent en scène une figure féminine confrontée au viol afin de dénoncer, avec force, le racisme, le sexisme et les inégalités de classe qui exposent les jeunes filles noires à la violence sexuelle. L'analyse se focalise d'abord sur la description du viol incestueux dans les œuvres fictives et ses impacts sur Pecola Breedlove et Hyacinth Williams respectivement, avant de montrer comment la race, le genre et la classe sociale favorisent l'exploitation sexuelle de la femme noire par des personnages masculins immoraux.

**Mots-clés :** #MeToo, viol, intersectionnalité, Kimberlé Crenshaw, Deborah King, Toni Morrison, Joan Riley.

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### I. Introduction

Following the 2017 #MeToo movement, academics and critics in general started pondering over the massive denunciation of sexual harassment and abuse. Sarah Jaffe, in "The Collective Power of #MeToo" (2018, p. 80), emphasizes the impact of the movement and how it foregrounded solidarity and reparations for the victims (p. 86). Megan Murphy in her 'Introduction to "#MeToo Movement"', upholds that the effort to combat harassment reached unexpected heights. One of the accomplishments of #MeToo, the critic writes (2019, p. 63), is that it has shown "how widespread the problem of sexual harassment and abuse is". Camille Gibson et al. corroborate Murphy's stance in their article, 'Understanding the 2017 "Me Too" Movement's Timing'. Dealing with the question of why 2017 was a pivotal year during which many "accused perpetrators" (2019, p. 2) faced

reckoning, they (2019, p. 3) affirm that #MeToo gained momentum thanks to the many celebrities who shared their stories of sexual violence. Alicia Boyd and Bree McEwan add in, ‘Viral Paradox: The Intersection of “me too” and #MeToo’ (2022, p. 2), that Alyssa Milano’s hashtag “had the potential to disrupt the already established work of [Tarana Burke]”. In other words, the online uproar has allowed many white survivors of sexual violence to come forward and dominate the discourse on #MeToo, while relegating women of color to the fringes as usual. Be that as it may, the #MeToo movement was crucial in ripping the veil of sexual abuse.

However, the lifting of the veil surrounding the sexual abuse of women of color, particularly young girls, and the sensitization against its consequences on the victim did not start with Burke’s activism. As a matter of fact, a remarkable work had been done by Black female novelists regarding young girls’ exposure to sexual assault, particularly with the groundbreaking depictions by Toni Morrison and Joan Riley. In respectively *The Bluest Eye* (1970) and *The Unbelonging* (1985), the two writers anticipate the discourses of the social movement that would be popularized decades later by Alyssa Milano’s tweet. Morrison (1931-2019) is a Black female American Nobel Prize laureate in Literature. Her literary production centers on “the African-American experience”, as Tessa Roynon explains in *The Cambridge Introduction to Toni Morrison* (2013, p. 13). Morrison once declared her ambition to “change the past” by “[approaching]... the personal lives of those whom the dominant culture has silenced, erased, or forgotten” (Roynon, 2013, p. 13). This commitment is visible in her first novel, *The Bluest Eye* (1970), which recounts the fictional life of Pecola Breedlove, an insecure Black girl, rejected by society and sexually assaulted by her own father. The sexual abuse of women and children is a recurrent theme in Morrison’s subsequent works too, including *Love, Home, God Help the Child*, etc.

*The Bluest Eye*’s subject matter is one of the central themes developed in Joan Riley’s *The Unbelonging* (1985) which tells the story of a young Jamaican protagonist, Hyacinth Williams, summoned to London by her father, Lawrence, who later tries to rape her. In “‘Wives and Workers’: The Novels of Joan Riley” (2004, p. 68), Davis Ellis paraphrases Marla Bishop who introduces the Black British authoress as the first “West Indian born woman” (1958) to publish a novel in Britain. Riley’s commitment appears in her fiction and critical work. Her article “Writing Reality in a Hostile Environment” challenges two public perceptions about Black literature in the United Kingdom. The female novelist (1994, p. 548) does not agree with the widespread belief that “[men] defined the Black experience”, nor does she accept the long-perceived idea “that the pattern of racial ‘co-existence’ in the United States was one that any situation of Black and white would undergo”. Her desire to represent social groups that were hitherto marginalized is illustrated in *The Unbelonging*, even if the novel did not trigger a strong condemnation of sexual assault in British society or in the Black community.

The representation of sexual assault is at the heart of Morrison’s and Riley’s texts and has garnered interest particularly from critics analyzing *The Bluest Eye*. Monica Michlin talks about Cholly Breedlove’s abuse of his daughter and scrutinizes the link that exists between the father’s unjustified misconduct and his encounter with two white people during an intimate moment with a girl. In her article, “Narrative as Empowerment: Push and the Signifying on Prior African-American Novels on Incest” (2006, p. 179), she indicates that “[the] entire scene is a replay of Cholly’s own traumatic scene of sexual initiation”. Tessa Roynon validates Michlin’s critical outlook. She (2013, p. 20) reveals that the “voyeurism” the male character “was subjected to” sets the stage for “Cholly’s rape of his own daughter”.

*The Unbelonging* did not ignite the same critical fervor as *The Bluest Eye*, due to “Riley’s commitment to reality rather than realism”, according to Ellis (2004, p. 71). Nevertheless, commentators of the female writer’s first novel pinpoint the fatherly figure’s displaced aggression. The Jamaican authoress’s work does not stick to traditional description of race and ethnicity. In “Sexual Citizenship and Vulnerable Bodies in Makeda Silvera’s *The Heart Does Not Bend* and Joan Riley’s *The Unbelonging*” (2016, p. 62), Wiebke Beushausen admits that Riley also paints sexual violence in the Black community. This view is confirmed by Isabel Carrera Suárez, in “Absent Mother(land)s: Joan Riley’s Fiction”. Suárez (1991, p. 293) stresses Riley’s depiction of the bullying circle in her narrative. But, neither she nor the other reviewers of Toni Morrison’s and Joan Riley’s books discuss the importance of the works in the subsequent debate on the prevalence of sexual abuse in society. They all come short of stressing the two stories’ potential in anticipating the concerns of a social movement of the scope of #MeToo.

How do *The Bluest Eye* and *The Unbelonging* prefigure the massive uproar caused by the #MeToo movement? What are the challenges that impede female Black characters’ aspiration to live in safe communities where they do not fall prey to ill-intentioned men? How do the two women authors address the nagging question of rape in Black circles? These are some issues this article exploits in order to demonstrate that Morrison and Riley’s texts anticipate the voice of the #MeToo movement.

This study utilizes Deborah King’s “multiple jeopardy” and Kimberlé Crenshaw’s “intersectionality” to explain how, before the advent of social media, Toni Morrison and Joan Riley portray the traumatic experience of fictional characters such as Pecola Breedlove and Hyacinth Williams who, because of racism, sexism, and classism, faced many hindrances to have their stories be heard by the rest of society. In “Multiple Jeopardy, Multiple Consciousness: The Context of a Black Feminist Ideology” (1988, p. 47), Deborah King chooses the term “multiple”, instead of “double” or “triple” jeopardy, since it better captures Black women’s sufferings in the

West. The whole phrase, she justifies, translates a complex reality that correlates, for the said impacted, to the effects of “racism multiplied by sexism multiplied by classism”.

Kimberlé Crenshaw formulates a similar viewpoint in “Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics”. She (1989, p. 140) argues that the plight of Black women is unique. As women, their sex predisposes them to manifold hardships unbeknownst to men. Their color, on the other hand, renders them vulnerable to discriminations that white women are complicit in, as it was the case during slavery (King, 1988, p. 47). Crenshaw calls for the ending of such injustices. Like Deborah King, she illustrates the exposure of Black women to multifaceted oppressions in the West and the need to place them at the center of the theoretical debate for antiracist and feminist agendas to be more effective.

The analysis hypothesizes that, though their effect was minimal compared to #MeToo, through a shocking portrayal of young Black girls’ assault by the fatherly figure and the impacts on the protagonists, *The Bluest Eye* and *The Unbelonging* pre-empt the discourse of the social movement. It argues that Morrison and Riley’s texts harshly denounce rape in their respective debut novels and show how the combined effects of race, gender, and class hinder the main protagonists’ capacity to defend themselves against sexual predation. The ensuing discussion is structured around two parts. The first point will focus on Morrison and Riley’s condemnation of rape in literary texts published before the advent of the #MeToo movement will be studied. And the second will delve into Black girls’ challenge to deal with sexual assault because of the imbricated nature of their multiple oppressions.

### **1- Morrison and Riley: forerunners of rape denunciation in *The Bluest Eye* and *The Unbelonging*.**

The effect of rape on the victim is at the forefront of Toni Morrison’s first novel. In *The Bluest Eye*, the main character, Pecola Breedlove, is sexually abused by her father, Cholly, when she is just eleven years old (Morrison, 1970, p. 161). This episode is so difficult to read. The heterodiegetic narrator of the story portrays the scene in a way that inspires total aversion towards the fatherly figure. Cholly Breedlove is drunk when he comes home and sees his daughter “washing dishes”. At the moment he looks at her, a number of emotions run through his head. He is overwhelmed by the girl’s innocence and unhappiness which somehow conflict with his impotence. Being in that state of mind, the only way that Pauline’s husband thinks of subduing his guilt is to rape his daughter. This whole scene inspires repulsion.

The detailed description of the father’s incestuous act puts in the limelight the horrific nature of sexual assault. Cholly Breedlove is depicted through the traits of a mentally unstable person. While looking at his daughter, he sees Pauline (the girl’s mother) during their first encounter in Kentucky. At this particular moment, the narrator reports that Pecola’s father no longer thinks reasonably:

The tenderness welled up in him, and he sank to his knees, his eyes on the foot of his daughter. Crawling on all fours towards her, he raised his hand and caught the foot in an upward stroke. Pecola lost balance and was about to careen to the floor. Cholly raised his other hand to her hips to save her from falling. He put his head down and nibbled at the back of her leg. His mouth trembled at the firm sweetness of the flesh. He closed his eyes, letting his fingers dig into her waist. The rigidity of her shocked body, the silence of her stunned throat, was better than Pauline’s easy laughter had been (Morrison, 1970, p. 162).

This passage stands as a profound assessment of Cholly’s current state of mind. The male character lives in his own subjective reality. Pauline’s husband crawls. Under the influence of alcohol, he unleashes the most primal and degrading impulses a father could harbor toward his daughter. The next chain of actions shows a rapist trying to lamely justify his horrendous deed and a victim who is shocked beyond measure; the fact that it is an incestuous act amplifies the horror.

The narrator continues with the description of the dreadful act. He could have spared some blatant details, but his decision to use appalling phrases like “The tightness of her vagina” and “the gigantic thrust” (Morrison, 1970, p. 163) adds to the unpleasantness of the scene. Beyond the excruciating pain that Pecola feels (she faints), the whole experience is unbearable and its repercussions are far more devastating for Sammy’s sister. At the end of the novel, Pecola reports that her father assaulted her again while she was reading (Morrison, 1970, p. 200). Unfortunately, even Pauline does not believe her story after the first rape, and she remains silent “about the second time”. The main protagonist’s loneliness is one of the reasons that expose her to Cholly’s depravity. Marc Conner (2000) considers this pattern to be specific to the author’s early fictional works. In the chapter “From the Sublime to the Beautiful: the Aesthetic Progression of Toni Morrison”, the editor of *The Aesthetics of Toni Morrison: Speaking the Unspeakable* elaborates on that idea:

*The Bluest Eye* presents the fundamental pattern of Morrison's early novels: an isolated figure, cut off from the community, must undergo a harrowing experience, an ontologically threatening encounter with what is variously

described as the unspeakable, the otherworldly, the demonic—that is, the sublime. In the encounter with the sublime, these characters are excluded from a general gathering together of the community in beauty and harmony, and are condemned to fragmentation, psychosis, and death (Conner, 2000, p. 52).

Pecola is rejected by almost all the other characters. Claudia MacTeer shares the main protagonist's sorrow when Sammy's sister loses her baby. The homodiegetic narrator is puzzled by people's unapologetic demeanor (Morrison, 1970, p. 190). As a pariah, Pecola faces many challenges. Being defenseless, she falls prey to Cholly's sexual abuse. Though she doesn't die in the end, she loses her grip on reality.

Pecola Breedlove's madness can be interpreted differently. Although, it is connected to her obsession with blue eyes, the traumatic experience stemming from her rape is at the center of it, and Claudia's concluding remarks are illustrative: "A little Black girl yearns for the blue eyes of a little white girl, and the horror at the heart of her yearning is exceeded only by the evil of fulfillment" (Morrison, 1970, p. 204). The "evil of fulfillment" that the first-person narrator is talking about can be explained by Cholly's reprehensible act. The female character loses her mind, after she is sexually assaulted a second time by her father. This manifestation of trauma tallies with Michelle Balaev's description in "Trauma Studies" (2018), a chapter in David Richter's *A Companion to Literary Theory*. Recalling the model initiated by Cathy Caruth, Balaev declares:

In the traditional trauma model pioneered by Cathy Caruth, trauma is viewed as an event that fragments consciousness and prevents direct linguistic representation. The model draws attention to the severity of suffering by suggesting the traumatic experience irrevocably damages the psyche. Trauma is an unassimilated event that shatters identity and remains outside normal memory and narrative representation (2018, p. 363).

This traditional definition of trauma matches up Pecola's reaction. The female character's resistance to articulating the full extent of her abuse by Cholly, combined with her defensive irritability and disjointed monologue at the end of the novel, reveal the silent burden of her suffering. She talks to herself as a result of a fractured psyche originating largely from her father's incestuous act.

The Black girl's exposure to sexual violence and the resulting psychological trauma is a major theme in Joan Riley's *The Unbelonging* where the protagonist, aged fourteen (Riley, 1985, p. 50), is assaulted by her own father. Hyacinth Williams is able to run away from Lawrence before he succeeds in his endeavor. Yet, the third-person narration insists on the protagonist's abandonment to a world devoid of protection. First Aunt Joyce's niece leaves Jamaica to join a father she doesn't know in London. She feels cold everywhere and constantly faces Mr. Williams's anger. Lawrence is a violent figure. He traumatizes Hyacinth and always punishes her whenever he gets drunk. Consequently, the Jamaican girl wets her bed and is left with trauma years after Maureen's husband tries to rape her.

Lawrence's attitude towards Hyacinth changes once the Caribbean girl starts menstruating. His shift in behavior prompts his wife's reaction. Maureen warns her stepdaughter: "'You must watch your father (...) You old enough for him to trouble you like he did with your cousin.'" (Riley, 1985, p. 45) Before Hyacinth, Mr. Williams assaulted Anne (the main character's cousin), but Maureen refuses to let her husband harass Aunt Joyce's niece. The Jamaican maiden does not worry about her stepmother's warnings nonetheless. Beushausen (2016, p. 69) notes: 'Her father, Lawrence, and stepmother, Maureen, too, "welcome" Hyacinth with rejection and hatred. Maureen punishes the new family member with psychological cruelty, and Lawrence is physically violent and abusive'. Hyacinth does not like Maureen with whom she has a troubled relationship. Florence's childhood friend only understands her message once Lawrence's wife leaves the house out of fear of being killed by the violent man.

"Since the period incident" (Riley, 1985, p. 47), Hyacinth's father "started to watch her bathe" (Riley, 1985, p. 52). At this point, Maureen strives to protect her stepdaughter. She dares to scold Lawrence for the first time: "'leave the girl alone!' [...] 'I see the way you keep troubling the girl,'" the woman continued. 'What are you trying to do? You never going to satisfied?'" (Riley, 1985, p. 52) The woman's stance surprises the main protagonist who has never seen her confront Mr. Williams before, but it is to no avail. The Black man's brutality forces his wife to leave the household. With Maureen gone, the father's immoral devise finds no restraint. The young and innocent victim is puzzled by his attitude, until one night during which she becomes aware of the man's malevolent intent. The narrator recounts the scene in a very detailed and upsetting manner:

She could feel his hand pulling at her panties, while his breath, rancid with stale liquor, was in her mouth, in her nose, travelling down her throat, making her retch, her stomach churn in protest. Now she could feel the lump rubbing against her bully, and she heaved, the sickness bubbling up, salt liquid pouring into her mouth.

'Incest! Incest!' The word drummed in her ears as she felt his hands pinching and pawing her (Riley, 1985, p. 62-3).



The heterodiegetic narrator tells the story from the girl's perspective to underscore the gut-wrenching experience she is undergoing. A drunk Lawrence wants to rape her and she is defenseless. She only sees through the father's trick and foul endeavor when Mr. Williams' actions become too obvious. Lawrence's iniquitous desire terrifies the Jamaican girl. The father no longer cares that Hyacinth is his "flesh and blood" (Riley, 1985, p. 53), and the daughter knows that she has to fight back in order to prevent him from deflowering her. She succeeds in running away from her predator in time, but her escape cannot erase the strain on her psyche.

Lawrence Williams' attempt to sexually abuse her own daughter further isolates Hyacinth. At sixteen years old, she still has a problem to get along with the other girls in Littlethorpe. Joyce's niece is often haunted by the father's lump (Riley, 1985, p. 77). This horrific reality undermines her capacity to transition towards a healthy juvenile life. She feels unsecure, fearful that the other young ladies will discover her secret. The Jamaican girl distances herself from social interactions to find solace in "old Mills and Boon books that Auntie Susan had been about to throw away" (Riley, 1985, p. 78). Her past experience leads her to distrust Black men to the point that an intimate moment with Charles only rekindles old memories. Hyacinth's description of the act summarizes her feelings: "a painful, messy business" (Riley, 1985, p. 131). She disliked being around men Mr. Williams has robbed of her of her innocence.

Through their two debut novels, Toni Morrison and Joan Riley highlight how heinous sexual assault is. They vehemently sound the alarm about the danger it is to society and to the victim. *The Bluest Eye* and *The Unbelonging* portray the plight of many young Black women whose lives are ruined by despicable sexual predators. The two novels are ridden with multiple clues on how racism, sexism, and classism hamper the Black girl's ability to fend off aggression.

## **2- The interconnection between Black women's multiple oppressions and the struggle to confront sexual violence**

In reading the novels under study through the lens of Deborah King's "multiple jeopardy" and Kimberlé Crenshaw's "intersectionality", one can understand how difficult it is for young ladies to escape sexual exploitation in Black communities. In "Multiple Jeopardy, Multiple Consciousness: The Context of a Black Feminist Ideology", Deborah King observes that women of African descent are subject "to several, simultaneous oppressions but to the multiplicative relationships among them as well" (1988, p. 47). Black women's experience is unique and their sufferings are complex and unmatched. Kimberlé Crenshaw purports the same idea in "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics". The critic (1989, p. 140) shows how the Black woman is left out of the different struggles because of her identity. She is excluded by white feminists because of the color of her skin, and she isn't granted the merit she deserves in the struggle to end racism given that she is a woman.

Toni Morrison and Joan Riley address the multifaceted oppressions of the Black woman in their works. They insist on how race, sex, and social status expose Black girls to many challenges in the United States and in Britain. In fact, Blacks as a group are ostracized and Black men persecute Black women solely on the basis of gender. This multilayered oppression is at the core of the plot in the two novels. Male characters are seen as victims and culprits at once. This is the case of Cholly Breedlove in *The Bluest Eye*. Through an analepsis, chapter eight opens with a protagonist abandoned by his mother when he "was four days old" (Morrison, 1970, p. 132). At just thirteen (160), while being intimate with a girl, Darlene, for the first time, two white men come across them and, using derogatory racist words like "nigger" and "coon" (Morrison, 1970, p. 148), force him to continue. This racist incident and the male character's rejection by his father (Morrison, 1970, p. 156) are profoundly connected with male characters' reprehensible behavior in the novel. Morrison's characterization of Cholly Breedlove completely aligns with traditional psychoanalysis theory. In her article, "Psychoanalytic Theory and Infant Development", Judy Shuttlesworth (1989, p. 22) attests: "The experience of psychoanalytic work with adults has long supported the conviction that adult patients' current ways of functioning have a complex history dating back to early childhood and indeed infancy". The development of the person's personality starts in their childhood. An infancy nurtured with parental love and care facilitates normal psychological growth. A young Cholly did not spend time with his biological parents. As an adult, he does not know how to behave properly in front of his daughter whom he deflowers.

To better support the linkage between racism and rape, Toni Morrison depicts another male character whose troubled past influences his pedophilic inclination towards little girls (Morrison, 1970, p. 178-9). Elihue Micah Whitcomb grows up in a racist family, one that is "proud of (...) its mixed blood" (Morrison, 1970, p. 167). His mother passes away "soon after childbirth" (Morrison, 1970, p. 169). Through education, the young Caribbean student revels in "self-deception". At seventeen (Morrison, 1970, p. 169), incapable of appreciating true love, his wife, Beatrice, leaves him. Whitcomb then goes to Ohio to accept the name Soaphead Church and become a "Reader, Adviser, and Interpreter of Dreams." (Morrison, 1970, p. 167) He hates the idea of being with adults and only prefers to be entertained by young girls. Soaphead is a pervert, but his twisted mind is proof that racially-motivated self-rejection can induce deviant behavior. He does not touch Pecola. Yet, he convinces the main protagonist that if she gives poison to his old landlady's (Bertha Reese) old dog, she will have blue eyes (Morrison,

1970, p. 175). Whitcomb's act stands as symbolic rape in the sense that he uses his position to inflict further damage on Pauline's daughter, just like the white men do with Sammy's father, according to Tessa Roynon. Reflecting on Cholly's racist encounter with the white men, Roynon contends:

Given that this voyeurism is itself a kind of violation, the author sets Cholly's rape of his own daughter in a wider political context, insisting on the inevitable relatedness of racially and sexually motivated abuses of power. Morrison reinforces this point through the later account of Soaphead Church, whose inherited horror of "all that suggested Africa" translates into "a patronage of little girls" (Roynon, 2013, p. 20).

Both male protagonists are victims of racism. They suffer from the constraints of external and repressive forces that preclude them from exerting any power. In a sense, they feel emasculated, and resort to sexual abuse to recover their stolen masculinity. This does not mean, though, that their deeds are condoned. Toni Morrison only proves that racial prejudice gives rise to destructive posture. The other thing is that Cholly Breedlove and Soaphead Church's interactions with Pecola comfort Deborah King and Kimberlé Crenshaw in their postulate on the multiple oppressions of Black women. The two characters did not have an easy childhood. Racism also plays a central role in their deviant adult life. In return, they oppress Pecola who is young, Black, destitute, without protection, and rejected by society. They both contribute to the circumstances causing Pecola's mental decline. The intertwining of these different factors confirms King's (1988, p. 47) assertion that "racism, sexism, and classism constitute three, interdependent control systems". The complex condition of *The Bluest Eye's* main protagonist can solely be grasped through a consideration of this imbrication. Besides, Crenshaw (1989, p. 140) highlights that "any analysis that does not take intersectionality into account cannot sufficiently address the particular manner in which Black women are subordinated".

Joan Riley is aware of the overlapping of racism, sexism, and classism with regards to women's subjugation. Her novel, *The Unbelonging*, conveys a discourse similar to *The Bluest Eye's*, in terms of disempowerment and emasculation of sexual predators. Lawrence Williams feels humiliated as a consequence of English racism. His warnings to Hyacinth translate a state of constant fear: "'They don't like neaga in this country. All them white people smile up them face with them plastic smile, and then when you trust them, them kill you.'" (Riley, 1985, p. 51) The xenophobia that Lawrence runs into in London traumatizes him. His hopes of better living conditions and a decent job vanish in Britain. He finds a different reality in Europe. The hatred of the local population has made him docile in front of white Londoners. At the hospital where he takes Hyacinth to see why she is wetting the bed, the father's attitude surprises his daughter: "her father took off his cap, looked servile" (Riley, 1985, p. 29). This last piece of information is very valuable. It gives a glimpse into an important detail that is not covered throughout the story. The narrator does not give one example of Lawrence being belittled by a white person. Wiebke Beushausen takes that role. She describes the Jamaican man's character as follows:

He is frustrated and feels disempowered by his everyday struggles against racism in England, where he was hoping to encounter better working and living conditions than in Jamaica. His frustration at being socially and economically marginalized manifests itself not only in the mistreatment of his wife and daughter, but also in the sexual assaults on Hyacinth's pubescent body as a way to reconfirm his masculinity and reclaim power within a sphere he is able to dominate (Beushausen, 2016, p. 69-70).

Maureen's husband is emasculated. In England, he is treated like a pariah. The white population gives him no possibility to assert his will in public. He would like to be seen, heard, and respected. The main protagonist's father cannot fulfill this desire, since his hosts do not allow him to. The only option that he has left is to torment those under his tutelage, namely, Maureen and Hyacinth. Lawrence terrorizes his family as a "coping mechanism" (Morrison, 1985, p. 70). Beushausen summons Frank Rudy Cooper's article "Against Bipolar Black Masculinity: Intersectionality, Assimilation, Identity Performance, and Hierarchy", particularly the concept of "compensatory subordination", to summarize the fatherly figure's behavior. The critic maintains:

[Lawrence's] behavior can be explained by the concept of "compensatory subordination" (...) as the direct outcome and psychological effect of fear and disempowerment. This kind of coping mechanism is discernible in Hyacinth's treatment of her two younger stepbrothers, as well as in Maureen's comportment toward Hyacinth, hence is in itself not a particularly male-gendered form of violence. However, this is not an attempt to justify Lawrence's abusive behavior or absolve him of his moral guilt. It rather proves the point that individual violence often stems from unequal social power structures, which, as the novel suggests, have a colonial continuity (Beushausen, 2016, p. 70).

The Jamaican protagonist's violence is related to the uneven socioeconomic stratification that welcomes him in the host country. The coping strategy that he adopts grants him the possibility to exert a certain power in the domestic circle of his house. Still, Wieke Beushausen clarifies that his behavior towards Hyacinth is not acceptable. Lawrence's conduct is even reprehensible. Meriam Chancy holds the same statement in *Searching for Safe Spaces: Afro-Caribbean Women Writers in Exile*. She (1997, p. 53) points out Mr. Williams's guilt. After all, xenophobia alone cannot truly justify the Caribbean father's alcoholism and brutality towards his family, or even the attempt to rape his pubescent daughter.

Lawrence Williams and Cholly Breedlove fail to live up to family and social expectations. Western racism does not allow them to explore their full potential. Still, this setback does not grant him the freedom to subjugate others. Morrison and Riley do not just portray white racism. They rather focus on the unpredictable and complex consequences of racial bias and the necessity to combat all forms of discrimination. *The Bluest Eye* and *The Unbelonging* tackle the intersecting of the multiple oppressions that Black women are confronted with. The young female characters represented in the two novels live through many predicaments that jeopardize any prospect of a normal life. Furthermore, both Toni Morrison and Joan Riley face challenges following their decisions to publish narratives about rape in Black communities. This problem is related to the ubiquitous racial, economic, and sexual discriminations in the West. As Harold Bloom (2010, p. 18) puts it in *Toni Morrison's The Bluest Eye: Bloom's Guides*, behind Morrison's difficulty to publish her text in the sixties and the fact that the book went out of print in 1974, there is a reluctance by readers to take an "uncomfortable look at American society". Morrison attacks white privilege through the use of the Dick and Jane primer. By having three versions of the same passage, one that is grammatically correct, one that is less readable, and one without punctuation or spacing, the female African-American writer demonstrates that America only favors whiteness as Marc Conner (2000, p. 53) implies. Thus, Pecola's lunacy towards the end of the narrative means the impossibility of self-fulfillment in the presence of discrimination.

Joan Riley follows in Toni Morrison's footsteps. She depicts a protagonist who is denied any prospect of belonging in society. This deliberate choice provoked a wave of hostility that the Jamaican-born novelist and critic understands. In "Writing Reality in a Hostile Environment", she claims:

Choosing to write about women considered losers raises other questions of hostility ...both from radical black men, seeing themselves as scapegoated by an unholy alliance of black women and white feminist (sic), and from black feminists, unable to accept the portrayal of weakness as well as strength in black women as an integral part of their essential humanness (Riley, 1994, p. 549).

Riley's truthfulness causes her unpopularity. She publishes *The Unbelonging* at a time when (1985), Black people wished to be portrayed differently in the media. Domestic violence is present in Black communities, but they do not want to be reminded of it in public. They were rather concerned with face-saving than reporting an undeniable fact that ruined many people's existence. Black women did not tolerate a negative description of female characters. They were not ready to participate in a debate on intra-racial rape let alone one in which they see themselves as lacking the possibility of empowerment. This is the reason why, in *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center*, bell hooks (1984, p. 81) sustains that "men have a primary role to play [...] in the area of exposing, confronting, opposing, and transforming the sexism of their male peers".

## II. Conclusion

Decades before #MeToo, Toni Morrison and Joan Riley meticulously covered the issue of rape in their respective debut novels, *The Bluest Eye* and *The Unbelonging*. Both texts deal extensively with the devastating effects of sexual abuse on the victim. Through meticulous description, they are able of painting the horrific nature of incestuous abuse. Neither Morrison nor Riley give in in the face of the unfathomable pain caused by a father's assault of his daughter. In the two works, the heterodiegetic narrators expose the details, laying bare the thoughts of each character to give a comprehensive picture of the whole traumatic experience. The two victims, namely Pecola Breedlove and Hyacinth Williams, see dramatic changes in their lives after their fatherly figures' sexual aggression. If Pecola ends getting pregnant before losing her mind, Hyacinth runs away from Lawrence's home in time to foil his mentor's immoral deed. Joyce's niece is then haunted for the rest of the narrative. Both stories draw the attention on the lack of protection that erode the young protagonists' peace of mind. Pecola and Hyacinth's abusers are Black male characters who failed miserably in society because of the combined effects of racism, sexism, and classism. Pauline's husband was abandoned by his parents at an early age. He lacks the parental love and care necessary for normal growth. He does not know how to behave in his own family and racial discrimination does not give him a chance for more socioeconomic opportunities. Lawrence Williams left Jamaica hoping for a better future in England, but is met with ostracism and the absence of decent employment. He drinks to forget his misfortune and, like Cholly, oppresses those under his tutelage as a coping mechanism. Both men become violent, once they feel castrated. To regain their masculinity, they brutalize their family members.

Sammy's father rapes Pauline's daughter twice, while Mr. Williams frequently beats then tries to assault Maureen's stepdaughter. Morrison and Riley clearly show that Cholly and Lawrence's wrongful acts cannot be pardoned. The two fictional figures are victims and oppressors at the same time. Their evil behavior must not be condoned just for the sake of the tough living conditions that Black men experience in the West. Through their portrayal, the writers underscore the intertwining of race, gender, and class. Racial discrimination does not give a fair chance to Black men who are subject to destitution. This succession of oppressions is more detrimental to Black women who are young (old), poor, weak, sick, without protection, and exploited by Black men as seen through the analysis. This reference to Deborah King's "multiple jeopardy" and Kimberlé Crenshaw's "intersectionality" by Toni Morrison and Joan Riley to denounce the rape of Black girls allows the two novelists to pave the way for the emergence of the #MeToo movement, even though *The Bluest Eye* and *The Unbelonging* did not produce the same hype as Tarana Burke's creation or Alyssa Milano's subsequent viral tweet.

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