

## Performativity and Black Womanhood

The portrayal of externalized gender performance of black female characters in *Homegoing* and *The Bluest Eye*



Amanda Lamers  
S4241460  
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Supervisor: Dr. U. Wilbers

ENGELSE TAAL EN CULTUUR

Teacher who will receive this document: Dr. Usha  
Wilbers

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Name of student: Amanda Lamers

Student number: 4241460

## **Abstract**

This thesis will examine the novels *The Bluest Eye* by Toni Morrison, and *Homegoing* by Yaa Gyasi. It will analyse specifically the externalized performances of gender, black womanhood in particular. The thesis determines externalised performance as the social expectations of black women, and how they are perceived by members of their community, as well as how the black female characters internalize or reject the concept of black womanhood imposed on them. The methodological framework will look at concepts of gender and blackness and combine these two to analyse the black female characters in these novels.

## **Keywords**

Toni Morrison, Yaa Gyasi, *The Bluest Eye*, *Homegoing*, gender studies, postcolonial studies, gender performativity, black identity, blackness, intersectionality

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## Introduction

“I know what every colored woman in this country is doing...Dying. Just like me.”  
(Sula, Morrison 143)

In the 1960s, Toni Morrison began writing fiction for a small get together with other writers and poets where they discussed each other's works. It was here that she developed the story about a little black girl that wished to have blue eyes which turned into her first novel, *The Bluest Eye*. In the years after that, she continued settling into the literary world with novels such as *Sula*, *Song of Solomon*, and *Beloved*, which won her a Pulitzer prize. Her literary fiction was further celebrated and awarded when she won the Nobel Prize of Literature in 1993, fully establishing her as a great African-American novelist, and making her the first black woman to win the prize. Morrison, who is known for focussing on black women in her novels, has also written essays on gender and race (Grimes). She is highly valued by the African-American community, with Henry Louis Gates Jr., the chairman of the Afro-American studies department at Harvard University calling her “our greatest writer” (qtd. in Grimes par. 8).

In contrast to Morrison, Yaa Gyasi is 26 and has only just arrived to the publishing scene with her debut novel *Homegoing*, published in 2016. She was born in Ghana but moved to the United States as a child, and did not go back to home country until she was 20 years old, looking for inspiration for her novel (Wolfe par. 2). Incidentally, Gyasi started writing after being inspired by Morrison, “She was the first black woman writer that I'd ever read, and it just blew me away how amazing she was, it really just set the seed for me that black women can do this” (qtd. in Wolfe par 12). She got multiple offers after the publishers' initial readings, culminating in a seven-figure offer from Knopf, which she accepted. *Homegoing* has also won her three awards, one of them the PEN/Hemingway award (Wolfe par. 14)

This thesis will be analyzing two works, namely *The Bluest Eye* by Toni Morrison, and *Homegoing* by Yaa Gyasi, through the lenses of externalized performance of gender, black identity, and how these intersect and define black womanhood. Thus the research question will be as following: in which ways do *The Bluest Eye* by Toni Morrison and *Homegoing* by Yaa Gyasi present the externalized performance of gender, specifically black womanhood, within the framework of Butler's performativity theory?

The preliminary hypothesis is that the two novels will showcase how society treats black women, whose intersection of being a woman and being black create a unique

oppression. *The Bluest Eye* shows that black women are deemed lesser than white women, and how the women express themselves when they either internalize that message or reject it. *Homegoing* shows the impact of seeing black women as lesser beings on a larger scale, as it focusses on two lineages of black women and the consequences of slavery on further generations. Comparing the two novels will give an answer to how they present gender performance, and will show the different ways the requirement of a certain gender performance impacts lives of black women.

To answer the research question, the first chapter will explain the theoretical and methodological framework that will be used to analyse the novels. It will first and foremost talk about Judith Butler's *Gender performativity theory* and Frantz Fanon's *Black Skin White Masks* novel. Kimberle Crenshaw's intersectionality theory will be used as an important article to combine those two theories together. It will explain how this thesis defines externalized performance of gender, and what is meant with black identity. Together these theories combined will give an understanding of black womanhood and can then be used to analyse how the two chosen novels present the externalized performance of black womanhood. The specific sources from these three writers are: Butler's *Performative Acts and Gender Constitution*, which was her first essay on gender performance, and *Gender Trouble* in which Butler goes into the theory of gender performance more in depth; Fanon's *Black Skin, White Masks*, which will give an insight into the self-definition of black people in a white society; Crenshaw's *Demarginalizing the intersection of Race and Sex*, and *Mapping the Margine*, in which Crenshaw introduces the concept of intersectionality.

The second chapter will focus on Yaa Gyasi's novel *Homegoing*. It will look at several female characters and analyse what impact slavery, heritage, the time they live in and society have on perceptions of black womanhood, whether these characters internalize certain perceptions, and how they deal with their heritage. Every female that has a narrative chapter in the novel will be looked at separately.

The third chapter will focus on Toni Morrison's novel *The Bluest Eye*. It will analyse several female characters and the society in which they live in, what society's ideals about beauty and womanhood are. Whether the women in the novel internalize these ideals and pass them on to others, or whether they reject these ideals will be examined specifically.

The conclusion will give an overview on the theory, and synthesize the novels that have been analysed, and compare and contrast them to give an answer to the research question.

## Chapter 1: Theory and Methodology

To answer the research question, this chapter will deal with the theoretical and methodological framework that will be used to analyse the two novels. An understanding of how Judith Butler's gender performativity theory works, especially regarding the external experience and performance will be explained first. Frantz Fanon's *Black Skin, White Masks* will help clarify the psychology and self-definition of black people living in a predominantly white society due to colonialism. Kimberle Crenshaw and her essays on the concept intersectionality, which she coined, where she clarifies what she means with the intersection of identity markers will be explained to help combine all these theories together. All these theories will give an answer to what black womanhood is and how the two novels present the externalised performance of black womanhood.

Butler first introduced the concept of gender performance in her 1988 essay *Performative Acts and Gender Constitution*, which she developed further in her book *Gender Trouble*, published in 1990. Butler calls on Simone de Beauvoir's claim that "one is not born, but, rather, *becomes* a woman" (qtd. *Performative Acts and Gender Constitution* 519). She explains that when thinking of gender in this way, gender is not a stable identity, nor agency that permits certain actions but that it is "an identity instituted through a stylized repetition of acts" (519). She goes on to say that it is instituted through the body, so that mundane things such as movement and positioning of the body help establish the gendered self. These mundane movements are performed in front of a social audience, by which she means the people that a person interacts with, and through these movements the audience and the actors themselves "come to believe and perform in the mode of belief". She goes against the belief that the gendered self comes before the acts by saying that instead the actions are not only what create the gendered self, but also create an illusion, an object of belief so that the actor believes their actions come from the identity, and not the other way around (519, 520).

Butler is quick to point out that mundane movements are not all that help constitute gender. She calls on another statement of Simone de Beauvoir, where Beauvoir explains in her novel that gender has always been a historical situation rather than a fact. The body is in an active process where it embodies the contemporary culture and historical possibilities of its time (520, 521). Butler underscores again that a person has to become a woman, and by doing so they conform to the contemporary cultural climate the person inhabits, which is in



turn sustained by their conformity. She calls this a 'strategy' instead of a 'project', as the word projects implies that the person that performs their gender has a strong agency over their body and identity, while strategy suggests a mechanism for survival. Performing a gender in the wrong way will be counteracted by punishments, so even those who have not internalized the concept of gender in their own cultural or historical context will feel pressured to perform a gender correctly (522, 526). Punishments would not exist if not for the fact that the majority not only performs the gender that was subscribed to them, culturally and historically, but that this majority also believes and internalizes the concept of their gender. That is how the concept of their gender is passed on and sustained, effectively creating a constant loop. The cultural concept of gender is set. The majority sees the performance, internalizes and believes it, performs the gender they are subscribed. Future generations will see, internalize and perform the same concepts (526, 529)

Important to note is that Butler talks about the clash of internalized and externalized gender performance in her essay, and what a woman might think of their gender opposed to what they are performing externally. The thesis will only focus on external factors, such as cultural concept of gender in the time of when the characters in the two novels were alive, how they react to that and what impact that has further on in their lives.

Frantz Fanon's book *Black Skin, White Masks* was published in 1952, and in it he studies the physiological effects white colonialism had on the black people that were colonized. He introduces two concepts:

"There is a fact: White men consider themselves superior to black men. There is another fact: Black men want to prove to white men, at all costs, the richness of their thought, the equal value of their intellect" (Fanon 3).

He notes that black people have developed an inferiority complex, and attributes it to two things; lower economic status, and the internalisation of inferiority. The internalisation of inferiority and lower economic status that perpetuated this internalisation come from years of oppression and slavery. Fanon is convinced that there is only one destiny for black people, and that is conformity with whiteness (Fanon 4).

In his first chapter, Fanon discusses blackness and language. He argues that every colonized person is eventually confronted with the mother language of their colonizers, and the fact that once a colonized person learns to speak their colonizers language fluently, they will be elevated above their station was previously seen as 'savage'. He argues that "To speak a language is to take on a world, a culture" (Fanon 9, 26). He talks about his own experiences as a French speaking black man, being perceived as better than other black people by white people that address him, claiming that he is not as other black people. He is in fact white on the inside in white people's eyes. Fanon also stresses that there are black people aiming to educate themselves in the way their colonizers have been, and intend to be seen as white on the inside. To summarize, Fanon expresses again, that because of the inferiority complex black people have, there are black people that aim to be white.

Fanon stipulates the constant prejudice and racial stereotypes black people face on a daily basis in chapter eight of his book. He guides the reader through these prejudices he faces by personal anecdotes. He explains, after the anecdote, that white people have barred black people from participation of 'normal' society. He argues that it can be clearly seen in the segregation of the southern states of America, and that black people have to police themselves in order to not live up to the prejudices and stereotypes set up against them. That is why black people can never truly define themselves, because they are always defining themselves opposite a concept of them that already exists. This feeds further into the inferiority complex and desire to become white.

Important to note is that Fanon wrote this specifically about the French colonial empire and its 'subjects', and only briefly mentions African-Americans and segregation. Segregation was very much alive in the time the novel was published, thus Fanon's insights into the physiological consequences of slavery and colonialism are valuable and can be applied to other groups such as the African-Americans, which is what this thesis will do.

The last theory that needs to be discussed is intersectionality theory created by Crenshaw in 1989. *Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex* is the essay in which she coined the term intersectionality. In the introduction, she stresses that she coined the term to make a specifically black feminist criticism to contemporary discourse that treated gender and race as mutually exclusive categories for analysis, and did not take in account that a black woman's experiences are different from a white woman's experiences (*Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex* 139). She focusses on feminist and post-

colonial theory, because black women are often excluded from discourse due to race and gender being considered mutually exclusive, and when discourse does mention black women, their experiences are never truly done justice because of the same reason. She shows evidence of this by looking at court cases, where judges have dismissed cases on the basis that black women's experiences are either racism or misogyny, and are only protected insofar their experiences correlate with either women or black men, and the discrimination against them is not seen as unique (143, 144). Crenshaw goes on to say that "The value of feminist theory to Black women is diminished because it evolves from a white racial context that is seldom acknowledged" (154). They are explicitly excluded as white women often speak for 'all women', disregarding the fact that how agents of the patriarchy, in particular white men, subjugate women is not from a non-racial or non-gendered perspective. Feminist theory is thus lacking in analysing work about and of black women (155).

Butler and Fanon both developed relevant theories on gender and on race respectively. Both fail to mention the intersection of race and gender however. Butler does not mention that the concept of gender is linked to race, and what a black woman is expected to perform is different from a white woman. Fanon talks of all black people, but does not mention if womanhood changes the definition of blackness for women, or if it changes their inferiority complex in any way. That is the reason that Crenshaw's theory is an important backdrop to combine both theories. To understand black womanhood, both theories need to be combined under the notion that they individually do not do the experiences of black women justice, and that their identity and oppression is uniquely different from white women or black men.

These three theories encompass the theory and methodology needed to analyse how the two novels present the externalised performance of black womanhood. Fanon's work is a window into blackness and the creation of such an identity. It also shows the effects on black people's psychology after years of being perceived as inferior. Butler gives an understanding of gender performativity, societal expectations of gender and how this can be internalized and reiterated to society so that the concept of gender may survive further generations. Crenshaw's critique on feminist and postcolonial theory on the exclusion of black women as its own unique oppression is an important backdrop for Fanon's and Butler's theory, as they can now be combined to give an understanding of black female characters in the two novels the thesis will be discussing. This theory will be applied to the two novels, *Homegoing* and *The Bluest Eye* as they are analysed. The way black women in the novels are treated, and the

concept of gender and race they ought to perform by the society around them will be analysed. Furthermore, how the black women react to this concept that they are supposed to perform, whether they internalize or reject it, will also be examined. How do other characters, men and women, look at them? What do they say about gender? What do they say about the colour of their skin? Did slavery happen because of these concepts of black womanhood? How do the women react to this concept? Do they internalize the message given on the idealized concept of gender? Do they reject this concept of race and gender? How do people react to how the women perform their black womanhood? These are some of the questions that will be answered in the following chapters. The answers will give a comprehensive look into the externalized performance of black womanhood in the two novels which will answer the research question: in what way do *The Bluest Eye* by Toni Morrison and *Homegoing* by Yaa Gyasi present the externalized performance of gender, specifically black womanhood, within the framework of Butler's performativity theory?

## Chapter 2: Homegoing

The novel *Homegoing*, written by Yaa Gyasi, deals with the lineages of two African women, Effia and Esi, who are from what is now contemporarily known as Ghana. Effia's entire lineage, except one descendant, stays in Ghana through her marriage of a white slaver trader. Esi's lineage continues in the United States after she is sold into slavery. The first two chapters are from Effia and Esi's perspective, and in the proceeding chapters the novel demonstrates the perspective of one of their children each, until the novel reaches the 'present'. This thesis will examine every chapter that is from the perspective of a woman. Societal expectations of women, black women in particular, will be analysed, as well as whether the female characters perform these gender and race expectations or reject these notions altogether. *Homegoing* follows these characters as each consecutive descendant lives in a different period from their initial ancestor. Both lineages also are placed in different countries, one in the United States and the other in Ghana. Therefore, the societal expectations are subject to change as cultural values shift through time and place. All these societal markers will be examined per chapter.

The first chapter in the novel follows Effia, who is born in Fanteland, an area in contemporary Ghana that used to be populated by the Fante people. Effia's chapter regards her childhood, and subsequent marriage shortly after the beginning stages of puberty. She grows up abused by her mother Baaba, discovering later that this is because her mother is not her biological mother, and that Baaba has always resented her for having to pretend to be her mother. This hatred cumulates into a plan where Baaba forbids Effia from telling anyone about her first menstruation, and schemes to have her married to a white man despite Cobbe's, Effia's father, apparent wishes. Baaba's plans succeed and Effia marries the governor of the Cape Coast Castle where she spends the rest of her days.

The depiction of Effia's life gives the reader a perspective in the Fante's cultural expectations of women. Once their body goes through puberty, as Effia's did, "her breasts arriv[ing]", which she described as "two lumps that sprung from her chest, as soft as mango flesh", the presumption is that "first blood would soon follow", that Fante women would begin to menstruate. It is then expected of men to offer gifts to entice a woman's parents into accepting a marriage proposal, as "the men of the village" did when Effia's breasts grew, prompting them to "[wait] for the chance to ask Baaba and Cobbe for her hand" (Gyasi 5). When a white British man visits the compound, Cobbe leads him around the village and tells

him: “Here, in this village...each wife has her own hut. This is the hut she shares with her children. When it is her husband’s night to be with her, he goes to her in her hut” (Gyasi 6). It is also established that women have little to no choice in whom they marry. When Effia asks her mother why another village girl will marry the British soldier, her mother answers “Because her mother says so” and her father tells Effia often that he has “bigger plans for [her] than to live as a white man’s wife. [She] will marry a man of our village” (Gyasi 6-7). The first instance of gender performance for Effia is when her family tries to make her look as desirable as possible for Abeeku, “plait[ing] Effia's hair”, presenting her as “a ram, strong, willful”, with her skin “oiled” and “gold in her ears” (Gyasi 7). Effia, in line with her father's wishes, hopes to marry Abeeku, and these preparations represent the ideal of womanhood and Effia's values as a wife—her beauty, strength, will, and wealth. These ideals are called into question during the meeting when Effia expresses doubt as to what kind of wife Abeeku needs, and when she asks Abeeku about the British, her parents “[send] her sharp looks”. Effia acknowledges that her mother Baaba “practiced silence and preferred the same from Effia” and “it was only when Effia didn’t speak or question, when she made herself small” that her mother loves her. She wonders whether Abeeku wants her to be silent and small as well (Gyasi 8). She fails to perform her gender adequately in her mother’s eyes, who expects her to stay silent. Judith Butler argues that when gender is performed wrongly, the performer will often be punished (Butler 526). Effia is indeed punished. Whenever she makes herself small and stays silent she feels love, or “something like it”, from her mother. When she fails to do so she is beaten instead (Gyasi 5, 8). Effia is exposed to more white men as the chapter progresses. She also encounters a biracial girl for the first time, and her mother whose British husband has died. At that point in the narrative, Effia learns about the difference between white women and black women for the first time when the mother exclaims: “They take care of you, oh, these men! It is like they have never been with a woman before. I don’t know what their British wives were doing. I tell you, my husband looked at me like I was water and he was fire, and every night he had to be put out” (Gyasi 10). Kimberlé Crenshaw’s theory applies in this instance as she explained in *Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex* that black women experience different societal expectations, and thus a unique oppression (Crenshaw 144). The line suggests that there are different societal expectations for white and black women. Black women are more ‘liberal’ towards sex, and can thus sate the white man’s lust, while white women are hinted to be more prudish. This is reinforced later, when Effia marries James Collins, the governor of the Cape Coast Castle. She slowly learns English as she lives with him in the Castle, and she notices that the white men around her call the black

women “wenches”, while the word “wife” is reserved for “the white women across the Atlantic” (Gyasi 17). White women are meant to be married, and black women are meant to exist solely as sexual objects.

Effia experiences the beginning stages of colonialism when she lives at the Castle for a longer period of time. Whenever Effia tries to talk about fables of Anansi the spider and other folklore, James gets visibly uncomfortable. He speaks of “voodoo” and “black magic”, and Effia states that: “the need to call this thing “good” and this thing “bad,” this thing “white” and this thing “black,” was an impulse that [she] did not understand” (Gyasi 21). He expects her to conform to (white) Christian norms and values, a societal expectation she has not encountered before. She relishes whenever she can speak Fante with the other “wenches”, because the other men “[tell] her to speak English” (Gyasi 21). One of the other wenches tells them that her husband cannot pronounce her name well, and wants to call her Emily instead. Frantz Fanon asserts in *Black Skin White Masks* that “To speak a language is to take on a world, a culture” (Fanon 26). These instances that Effia and the other wenches experience suggest that the white men in the Castle see their own culture as “good” and Effia’s culture as “bad”. Their names are changed to ‘more suitable’ English names, they are told to speak English, and they cannot practice their own ‘religion’ or speak of tales from their own upbringing. Fanon addresses this in chapter 1 of his book. The white man sees himself as above black people.

One of the most important expectations a woman in this cultural context is required to perform is motherhood. It is assumed that all the women will please their husband and have their children. This is the motivation behind the women in Fanteland receiving gifts from suitors when they menstruate for the first time. They must marry and produce children for their prospective husbands as soon as possible. This expectation does not change when black women are married to the white men in the Castle. Adwoa, one of the wenches, advises Effia that “If [she] don’t give that man children soon, he will take [her] right back” explaining that her own husband “has kept me flat on my back since I arrived in this place” and that Adwoa is “probably expecting right now as we speak” (Gyasi 19). Effia follows her advice and prepares herself for James by once again “plait[ing] and smooth[ing] her hair”, “spread[ing] oil on her skin”, and applying “red clay on the apples of her cheeks and the curve of her lips” (Gyasi 20). She even becomes more active during sex, performing her womanhood perfectly as James reacts well to her actions. When she is pregnant, James is so happy that he “[picks] her up and [dances] her around their quarters” (Gyasi 23). Effia shows resistance to the idea

of equating “blackness” with “bad”, but she has fully internalised the idea that every woman must perform motherhood.

Esi’s chapter immediately showcases the condition Esi lives in as she is held in the dungeon of the Cape Coast Castle. Her chapter deals mostly with the other side of externalized gender performance; there is less of a focus on how she is expected to perform her gender, but quite an emphasis on she is treated by society. The manner in which she is expected to perform gender are not different than those expected of Effia, although Esi is Asante. The men have multiple wives as well, and women are expected to become mothers, and do house chores. When Esi’s mother receives a housegirl from her husband, she exclaims “she’s useless” when the housegirl is bad at her chores, that “she spilled oil; she didn’t sweep under things; she didn’t have good stories for the children” (Gyasi 31). The housegirl fails to perform, and is beaten by Esi’s father. When Esi’s mother tries to intervene by yelling “No!”, he “[raises] his hand to his wife, anger flashing quickly through his eyes like steam from cold water hitting a hot pan”, indicating women are supposed to perform obedience, as was asked of Effia (Gyasi 31). There is little information in the text as to how Esi performs her gender, She is not punished for doing it incorrectly however, thus it can be assumed she is good at performing her gender as is expected of her, because “Kwasi Nnuro brought sixty yams. More yams than any other suitor had ever brought before” (Gyasi 26). This indicates that she was desirable as a prospective wife. During her stay in the dungeon Esi notes “Before the Castle, she was the prettiest girl in the village. Now she was thin air”, which exemplifies that she was perceived well by the other villagers (Gyasi 28).

“Esi learned to split her life into Before the Castle and Now. Before the Castle, she was the daughter of Big Man and his third wife, Maame. Now she was dust” (Gyasi 28). This part in Esi’s life brings the story back to Fanon’s theory, “white men consider themselves superior to black men”, adding this to Crenshaw’s theory on intersectionality, this also extends to black women (Fanon 3). White men consider them above black women, and it is exemplified in how they treat Esi and the other black women who are sold into slavery. Esi is fifteen when she is imprisoned in the dungeon with “so many bodies” that there are days they all have “to lie, stomach down, so that women could be stacked on top of them” (Gyasi 27). After three weeks, “the waste on the dungeon floor [is] up to Esi’s ankles”, and there are so many women in the dungeon she finds it difficult to breathe (Gyasi 40). Not much later, a few soldiers walk in, and one soldier starts sexually assaulting one of the women. Another soldier drags Esi out of the room, she tries to resist but “the lack of food” and “the wounds



from the beatings” leave her too weak to do so (Gyasi 41). He brings her to his quarters above the dungeons, and she notes that she is “so unused to light”, and that it blinds her now. He rapes her, and afterwards “he [looks] horrified, disgusted with her. As though he were the one who had had something taken from him. As though he were the one who had been violated” (Gyasi 41). Esi realises that “the soldier had done something that even the other soldiers would find fault with” (Gyasi 41). It is unclear whether the soldiers would shun the act of rape or that he raped a black woman from the dungeon. Esi becomes listless as a result of her rape, and while she has not stopped bleeding since that night she cannot bring herself to care (Gyasi 42). She is shipped off soon afterwards, and when she catches Governor James’ eyes he gives her a pitying smile. Esi has learnt, however, that “white men smiling just meant more evil was coming with the next wave” (Gyasi 42).

The next female perspective the novel introduces is that of Ness, Esi’s daughter. She was born a slave in the United States, and was separated from her mother at a young age. Her story involves her experiences with slavery. Her mother hardened because of the journey to the United States, and Ness finds comfort in the silent strength her mother exudes. It is the reason why Ness exudes the same silent strength as her mother does. At the beginning of the chapter Ness has just arrived at a new slave master’s plantation from her old master, of whom she only refers to as ‘the Devil’ and the place as ‘Hell’ (Gyasi 69). She describes her experiences on both her old plantation and her new plantation. It is on her new plantation she gets into trouble once again, for defending one of the slave girls. Her fate is left unknown.

Fanon’s argument that white people consider themselves above black people is once again relevant when Ness recalls a memory in which her mother was beaten when their master caught her teaching Ness the Twi language (Gyasi 60). The expectations of black womanhood have changed drastically from what Effia and Esi experienced in their Fante and Asante culture, respectively. The white masters require each of their black slaves to be “tame, a good, hard worker who rarely fought or caused trouble” (Gyasi 71). Black enslaved women were expected to do more than work the entire day; they were also expected to bear children. The duty of motherhood has not changed, but the connotation has. Motherhood for black women is now a means of producing more slaves for their white masters, and marriage is now for “reasons of insurance” rather than the “joining of two families” (Gyasi 20, 67). The lighter-skinned, beautiful enslaved black women were separated from the others, and the women considered too dark, were “field slaves”; Ness is considered “too pretty to be a field n\*\*\*er” (Gyasi 61). Her new master has an outfit he puts house slaves in, described as “a

little outfit...a white button-down with a boat neckline and capped sleeves, a long black skirt attached to a little black apron” (Gyasi 61). While she gets dressed, one of the other house slaves argues against Ness working at the house, seeing her unfit. Susan, the white mistress, defends her husband’s position, and Ness remarks: “If Susan was like any of the other masters’ wives, she must have known that her husband’s bringing a new n\*\*\*er into the house meant she had better pay attention. In this and every other southern county, men’s eyes, and other body parts, had been known to wander” (Gyasi 61). The lighter-skinned black women are at the house not only to do house chores, but to function as an object of lust for their white masters. Ness cannot live up to this performance, however. She has scars marring her entire body, as she defied her previous master when smuggling her son from the plantation. Punishment for failure of gender and race performance is clear, mutilation or death.

The following female perspective skips one generation, as the previous generation were male, and the setting shifts back to Ghana. Abena is an unmarried twenty-five-year-old woman, which is “unheard of, in her village or any other on this continent or the next” (Gyasi 113). Finding a husband, caring for him, and baring his children is still the main expectation for black women in Ghana. Her failure to meet the expectation is dependent on two things: the superstition surrounding Abena who is considered to have inherited a curse from her father, who is called Unlucky by the entire village, and her failure to perform womanhood. Her parents never hit her, unlike the other children in the village. Abena has never been punished by her parents for her failure to perform her gender, instead they “treated her as an equal, asking her opinion and discussing their plans with her” (Gyasi 113). Abena was “born to parents who let her speak her mind, go after what she wanted, even if that thing was limited to boys” (Gyasi 114). She does not perform her own gender, rather she performs what is considered the male gender. When her childhood friend Ohene escorts her to the Golden Stool of the Asante kings, he mocks her by calling her “[Unlucky’s] precious ‘son,’ Abena,” (Gyasi 120), further exhibiting her failure to perform her gender, and the fact that others have noticed. Abena and Ohene start having sex after the trip, and in her brazenness Abena does not worry about being noticed, even though they have not married yet. The village experience two years of failed harvest, and Abena is finally punished for her failed gender performance. The village elders believe she has cursed the entire village because she has had sex brazenly before being married. She would be exiled if she conceived before marriage or if there were seven bad years of harvest. Abena is allowed to stay in the end, as “The bad years had ended

before her seventh year of adultery and she had not yet conceived a child” (Gyasi 127). She leaves, however, when she learns that Ohene cannot marry her that season, and she senses that she is pregnant.

Abena’s daughter, Akua, is the next female perspective that is introduced. She is born at the missionary Abena fled to after she left the village. Her mother dies when she is young, and she is left alone with the white missionary. When she is six years old, the missionary suddenly declares he will homeschool her. He gives her the English name Deborah. Their first lesson consists of the missionary pointing a switch at her, declaring her “a sinner and a heathen” and that “all people on the black continent must give up their heathenism and turn to God. Be thankful that the British are here to show you how to live a good and moral life” (Gyasi 152). Colonialism and the idea of white supremacy that Fanon discusses are apparent in the missionary’s words. After every lesson he bends her over and gives her lashes while he constantly repeats that Akua is “a sinner and a heathen”. Akua leaves the missionary to marry Asamoah after he has proposed to her, and with the help of a fetish priest she rejects the missionary’s teachings and simply walks out on him. In her later years, Akua visits the missionary and comes to learn that her mother had rejected his teachings just as she had, and he had drowned her while trying to forcefully baptize the woman (Gyasi 155). It is expected of Akua to be a good housewife to Asamoah, and to an extent she performs her task well. She bore him three children, and helps her mother-in-law with the chores around the compound. She fails to do it consistently however, often having to “shake herself out of a stupor” or being accused of “idleness” (Gyasi 154). Once her husband leaves for war, her failure to perform her gender role is evident enough for her mother-in-law to lock her up in a hut, and take her children away from her. It becomes apparent in the story, when she burns her own children in her sleep, that her failure to perform her gender is because of mental illness (Gyasi 164).

Willie, Ness’ great-granddaughter, is the following female story introduced. Willie grew up in Pratt City, a coal miner’s city, that she leaves when she marries Robert, who is incredibly white-passing, as they want a better life for their children. They are one of the many black people who moved to Harlem in New York City during the Great Migration. Willie cannot perform the expectations of motherhood when she is in New York, as both she and Robert need to look for jobs due to their poverty. Willie leaves her son Carson with a black woman called Bess who lives on the first floor of the apartment building they are staying in. She is so busy with work that when she picks up Carson from Bess, she hears him

call Bess 'Mama' (Gyasi 174). Most of Willie's story deals with the segregation of black and white people. Robert is white-passing to the point that other white people mistake him for a white person, which gets them in trouble when Robert kisses Willie's cheek just before entering a store to apply for a job:

““Excuse me, sir,” Robert said. “I saw the sign outside there.”

“You married to a black woman?” the store clerk said, his eyes never leaving Willie's.

Robert looked at Willie.

Robert spoke softly. “I worked in a store before. Down south.”

“No job here,” the man said.

“I'm saying I have experience with—”

“No job here,” the man repeated, more gruffly this time” (Gyasi 170).

The segregation is even more evident when Willie gets a cleaning job at the Morrisises, “a wealthy black family who lived on the southern edge of Harlem. The family had not yet resigned themselves to their own blackness, so they crept as close to the white folks as the city would allow. They could go no further, their skin too dark to get an apartment just one street down” (Gyasi 171) Willie, who is a great singer and always wished to sing professionally, also tries to get a job as one at a jazz club, but she is told that she is “too dark” (Gyasi 173). She does get a cleaning job at the jazz club, but after another incident with Robert, who has been pretending to be a white man and works there as well, both are fired from their job, and they finally split up. Years later, Willie sees him in the white part of New York with a white wife and white children. She smiles, and forgives him.

The last female descendant in the novel is Marjorie. She is the granddaughter of Akua, but she grew up mostly in the United States, the first of her lineage to do so. Her chapter focusses on the differences of blackness in the United States opposed to blackness in Ghana. Marjorie realises on her first day of school in the United States that “there were more black children than [she] was used to seeing in Alabama, but it took only a few conversations with them for Marjorie to realize that they were not the same kind of black that she was. That indeed she was the wrong kind” (Gyasi 221). She is reading a novel when she is confronted

by the black girls in her class. When she answers their questions, one of the girls exclaims: “You sound like a white girl. White girl. White girl. White girl” (Gyasi 221). Marjorie thinks back of an incident in Ghana, when black children would point at white tourists and point out the difference in skin colour. Her father explains that the children of Ghana “had been born to a place emptied of its colonizers”, and that to point out skin colour was “an innocent act, an interpretation of race as skin color” (Gyasi 222).

Marjorie realises that this is not the case in the United States:

“Now, keeping her head down and fighting back tears as Tisha and her friends called her “white girl,” Marjorie was made aware, yet again, that here “white” could be the way a person talked; “black,” the music a person listened to. In Ghana you could only be what you were, what your skin announced to the world” (Gyasi 222).

The performance of gender, specifically black womanhood, is different in Ghana than it is in the United States. Blackness used to have meaning in Ghana back when it was still heavily colonized, but it only had meaning when in contact with the white colonizers. Marjorie grew up without the white colonizers in her country and did not have to be aware of her blackness, other than the neutrality of her skin colour. She is in a different cultural society in the United States, and has difficulty performing black womanhood according to the specific environment she resides in. Having moved to the United States gets rid of the traditional housewife gender role expected of her in Ghana, however. This opens more avenues for Marjorie, which she takes advantage of when she goes to university.

A running thread through all the externalized performances of the black female characters in *Homegoing* is motherhood, with the exception of Marjorie. There is also a clear difference between the role of black women within the lineage living in the United States as opposed to the lineage in Ghana. The black women in Ghana perform as the traditional housewife, caretaker of the children role. The black women in the United States cannot be housewives in the beginning, as slavery forces them to work in the white master’s house or on the plantations, and when free, the threat of abject poverty forces them to perform labour for white families. Marjorie, the last descendant, is the only one that breaks free from these constraints to an extent. The novel ends before any details can be given on whether she has children or not, but she is the first female character in the novel that is able to attend a university, hopefully giving her a better future career path than the menial jobs that Willie was forced to contend with. The novel thus presents different ways of externalized

performances. The expectations within the female gender roles in Ghana tend to stay the same, although there are multiple female characters in the novel from Ghana that fail to perform these gender roles adequately, and get punished by result. Survival takes the forefront of the experiences for female gender role performance in the United States, as blackness in opposition with whiteness is also more highlighted there, because of the system of slavery, and later segregation. Blackness and whiteness have a different meaning in the United States as opposed to Ghana, and therefore the novel presents this in different ways among the two lineages.

### Chapter 3: The Bluest Eye

Toni Morrison's novel, *The Bluest Eye*, takes place in a small community in Ohio. The narrative follows the lives of the MacTeer and Breedlove families, and several other supporting characters. A nine-year-old black girl named Claudia Macteer narrates a majority of the story, although Pecola Breedlove, an eleven-year-old black girl, is the protagonist of the novel. The novel periodically shifts between the perspectives and experiences of other characters, such as Pecola's mother Polly's childhood. The title *The Bluest Eye* refers to Pecola's wish of acquiring blue eyes, as she believes she will be beautiful once she has them. The thesis will examine several female characters, focussing in depth on the most prominent female characters, namely Pecola Breedlove, Claudia Macteer, and Frieda Macteer. Societal expectations of women, black women in particular, will be analysed, as well as whether the female characters perform these gender and race expectations or reject these notions. The novel spans an entire year, divided into seasons, and with each season having several chapters. The thesis will study the externalised performance of black womanhood per season.

The novel begins with the season autumn. It introduces us to the nine-year-old narrator Claudia Macteer, and her ten-year-old sister Frieda. Claudia describes moments in her life that stress on the fact that they are children, and not well respected by adults; "Adults do not talk to us—they give us directions. They issue orders without providing information" (Morrison 11). This is shown again when a new boarder arrives, Mr Henry.

"Frieda and I were not introduced to him—merely pointed out. Like, here is the bathroom; the clothes closet is here; and these are my kids, Frieda and Claudia; watch out for this window; it don't open all the way" (Morrison 15).

Ruth Rosenberg argues in her article *Seeds in Hard Ground: Black Girlhood in The Bluest Eye* that "their status, it is impressed upon them, is a little lower than that of the furniture" (Rosenberg 437). Rosenberg further notes that the Macteer children are often whipped by their mother, as are other black children. She explains that it is how black parents often handle their children. She uses the writer Ralph Ellison to explain:

"One of the Southern N\*gro family's methods of protecting the child is the severe beating—a homeopathic dose of the violence generated by black and white

relationships. Such beatings... were administered for the child's own good" (qtd. in Rosenberg 438).

Claudia internalizes that image of black motherhood as she realizes that her mother's painful caring is "love, thick and dark as Alaga syrup", and that when she recalls autumn "I think of somebody with hands who does not want me to die" (Morrison 12).

Later in autumn, the Macteers receive another new boarder, Pecola Breedlove. Claudia gives the first cultural expectations of women when Frieda and Pecola have a conversation about a Shirley Temple cup. Claudia expresses her hatred of Shirley Temple while Frieda and Pecola talk about how cute she is. She explains that she does not hate Shirley Temple because she is cute, but because she dances with Bojangles, who should have been dancing with Claudia. "Instead he was enjoying, sharing, giving a lovely dance thing with one of those little white girls whose socks never slid down under their heels" (Morrison 17). When Claudia tells the girls she likes Jane Withers, a brunette instead of the blonde Shirley, the other girls "[give her] a puzzled look", and continue talking about Shirley instead (Morrison 17). Claudia explains to the reader that as she was younger than Pecola and Frieda, she "had not yet arrived at the turning point in the development of my psyche which would allow me to love her. What I felt at that time was unsullied hatred" (Morrison 17). She recounts a story of receiving a doll for Christmas. She is confused by the doll she receives, but knows that everyone expects her to want it, "adults, older girls, shops, magazines, newspapers, window signs—all the world had agreed that a blue-eyed, yellow-haired, pink-skinned doll was what every girl child treasured" (Morrison 17). Claudia also quickly learns what she is supposed to do with the doll, despite her wishes: "rock it, fabricate storied situations around it, even sleep with it" (Morrison 18). She shows an awareness of the cultural expectations of women; she is supposed to love white girls with blue eyes and blonde hair, find them beautiful, and she is supposed to feel motherly towards them. Claudia performs exactly what they want from her, at first. She notes that "when I took [the doll] to bed, its hard unyielding limbs resisted my flesh—the tapered fingertips on those dimpled hands scratched" (Morrison 18). She becomes frustrated with the doll, however, and her inability to find its beauty:

"I fingered the face, wondering at the single-stroke eyebrows; picked at the pearly teeth stuck like two piano keys between red bowline lips. Traced the turned-up nose,



poked the glassy blue eyeballs, twisted the yellow hair. I could not love it” (Morrison 18).

She destroys the doll instead, going against the gender expectations she is supposed to perform. The adults punish her by yelling, and Claudia notes “how strong was their outrage. Tears threatened to erase the aloofness of their authority” (Morrison 18). Claudia acknowledges that the destruction of the white doll is not the “true horror”, but that “the truly horrifying thing was the transference of the same impulses to little white girls” (Morrison 19). She continues to question the perceived beauty of white children by asking:

“What made people look at them and say, “Awwwww,” but not for me? The eye slide of black women as they approached them on the street, and the possessive gentleness of their touch as they handled them” (Morrison 19).

She reflects as narrator on her hatred, learning at one point in her youth how “repulsive” her “disinterested violence” is, and that “[her] shame floundered about for refuge” (Morrison 19). She declares that “the best hiding place was love” (Morrison 19). Claudia argues that the reason why black women love white women so much is due to their hatred first. They perform love towards whiteness, as is expected of them, to compensate for the repulsiveness of their hatred. By performing this love consistently, they internalize the ideas and start truly loving white women. This scene ties in with Frantz Fanon’s theory. He claims that “a normal N\*gro child, having grown up within a normal family, will become abnormal on the slightest contact with the white world” (Fanon 112). He exemplifies this with comic books that young black boys read. The comic books portray an image of blackness that equates to wrongness by consistently portraying black people as villains. White people are the heroes in the story, thus whiteness is righteousness (Fanon 113). Claudia received a white doll and is consistently told that the doll is beautiful. Pictures of Shirley Temple are on their cups and on television, where she is portrayed as a cute girl. Frieda and Pecola have already internalized the message of ‘white is beautiful’. Claudia admits at the end that she too succumbs to it eventually.

The chapter shifts to a few days later. Claudia and Frieda’s mother Mrs Macteer is complaining about Pecola, who has drunk three quarters of milk. Claudia notes that “we knew she was fond of the Shirley Temple cup and took every opportunity to drink milk out of it just to handle and see sweet Shirley’s face” (Morrison 20). This foreshadows how deep Pecola has internalized the ideal concept of gender. The girls go outside so that Pecola can escape Mrs Macteer’s anger. They are discussing what to do to keep themselves from being

bored, when suddenly Pecola has blood running down her legs. Frieda is the only one that has an inkling of what is happening, explaining “that’s ministration... Noooo. You won’t die. It just means you can have a baby!” (Morrison 23). Claudia and Frieda cause a ruckus as they try to help Pecola, although they do not fully understand how to assist her. Mrs Macteer, attracted by the disturbance, thinks they are “playing nasty”, but notices what is going on when Pecola’s makeshift sanitary towel falls to the ground. When the girls have gone to bed later that evening, Claudia notices the difference between them:

“We were full of awe and respect for Pecola. Lying next to a real person who was really ministratin’ was somehow sacred. She was different from us now—grown-up-like. She, herself, felt the distance, but refused to lord it over us” (Morrison 26).

The scene signifies the importance of menstruation in the concept of gender. Girlhood transforms into womanhood as a girl starts their menstrual cycle. Her externalised performance must change to conform to the idea of womanhood.

The next chapter gives a clear insight into the Breedloves’ internalisation of blackness as wrongness. The Breedloves live at a storefront, not because of poverty, but because they believe they are ugly, and “although their poverty was traditional and stultifying, it was not unique. But their ugliness was unique” (Morrison 31). They have become so convinced that they are ugly, ugliness has become part of their performance:

“Mrs. Breedlove, Sammy Breedlove, and Pecola Breedlove—wore their ugliness, put it on, so to speak, although it did not belong to them... You looked at them and wondered why they were so ugly; you looked closely and could not find the source. Then you realized that it came from conviction, their conviction. It was as though some mysterious all-knowing master had given each one a cloak of ugliness to wear, and they had each accepted it without question. The master had said, “You are ugly people.” They had looked about themselves and saw nothing to contradict the statement; saw, in fact, support for it leaning at them from every billboard, every movie, every glance” (Morrison 31).

The Breedloves have come to believe through popular media and social attitude that they are ugly because they are black. The “mysterious all-knowing master” also invokes the image of a slave master. Pecola is examined in depth in the chapter, and it is in this chapter that her desire to have blue eyes is introduced. She wishes for blue eyes as she deals with being either ignored completely, or targeted through bullying.

“It had occurred to Pecola some time ago that if her eyes, those eyes that held the pictures, and knew the sights—if those eyes of hers were different, that is to say, beautiful, she herself would be different. If she looked different, beautiful, maybe Cholly would be different, and Mrs. Breedlove too” (Morrison 37).

It is shown how deeply Pecola has internalised the idea of being ugly, so convinced of her ugliness that she prays for blue eyes each night for a year, and has yet to give up hope. Pecola is reminded of her ‘ugliness’ often, such as when she is confronted with the storekeeper of a small grocery shop when she tries to buy some candy:

“He does not see her, because for him there is nothing to see. How can a fifty-two-year-old white immigrant storekeeper... *see* a little black girl? Nothing in his life even suggested that the feat was possible, not to say desirable or necessary” (Morrison 37).

He looks at her, but does not truly see her as he addresses Pecola. Pecola is used to this kind of behaviour, but she notes that there is something unusual about the way the storekeeper stares. There is a paradoxical moment of simultaneous regard and disregard; Pecola is considered and dismissed by the man, who has a "total absence of human recognition" in regards to her, because of "her blackness" which "is static and dread". Yet even in "the vacuum where curiosity ought to lodge" and the emptiness and "glazed separateness" between a white "grown [...] man" and "a little girl", there is "an edge" of "distaste", which Pecola "has seen [...] lurking in the eyes of all white people" (Morrison 37). Her "blackness [...] accounts for" both "the vacuum" and the "distaste in white eyes". Because of her blackness Pecola is considered lesser, worthy of distaste, and yet simultaneously unworthy of recognition at all (Morrison 38). It is an example of Fanon's assertion that white men see themselves as above black people (Fanon 3). Pecola is constantly reminded of her blackness, and of the fact that people think that it is her blackness that is ugly. Insecurity grips her, which is why she makes herself as small and quiet as possible:

“She points her finger at the Mary Janes—a little black shaft of finger, its tip pressed on the display window. The quietly inoffensive assertion of a black child's attempt to communicate with a white adult” (Morrison 38).

When she tries to pay him, “he hesitates, not wanting to touch her hand” (Morrison 39). She feels “the inexplicable shame” ebb as she walks outside. She feels anger instead, feeling “a sense of being in anger. A reality and presence. An awareness of worth. It is a lovely surging” (Morrison 39). The feeling is not sustained however, as “its thirst [is] too quickly quenched”

and her shame wells up again (Morrison 39). Pecola quickly eats her candy before she can cry. Her delight is in the candy's yellow wrapping paper, as every wrapper has a picture of Mary Jane. Mary Jane, like Shirley Temple, is white with blonde hair and blue eyes. Pecola finds her eyes pretty, and as she eats the candy she imagines that she can become Mary Jane through them, that "to eat the candy is somehow to eat the eyes, eat Mary Jane. Love Mary Jane. Be Mary Jane" (Morrison 39). This also parallels Pecola drinking three quarters of milk with the Shirley Temple mug. Claudia did not fully understand Pecola back then. She did not simply want to look at Shirley Temple on the mug. She also wanted to become Shirley Temple by 'drinking her'. Throughout the chapter Pecola performs the cultural expectations of black womanhood in accordance with the societal context she resides. She has internalised that blackness is ugly, and it has become a part of her performance through her belief. That belief is sustained by the entire community surrounding her, with the exception of Claudia and to a lesser extent Frieda. She is never praised for her willingness to perform black womanhood, however. There is the implication that constantly sustaining the negative connotations with blackness is more important than praising those who uphold it.

Winter comes to Ohio, and a new girl named Maureen Peal arrives to their school. Claudia describes her as "a high-yellow dream child with long brown hair braided into two lynch ropes that hung down her back". Merriam-Webster defines high-yellow as "a black person of light complexion". The 'high' part refers to the social class of the person, as being of lighter complexion gives certain privileges. Claudia immediately notices that Maureen is treated differently; "white boys didn't stone her, white girls didn't suck their teeth when she was assigned to be their work partners; black girls stepped aside when she wanted to use the sink in the girls' toilet" (Morrison 46). This causes Claudia and Frieda to be both "bemused, irritated, and fascinated by her" (Morrison 46). Their drive to reject the cultural concept of black womanhood comes back into play here, as they "look hard for flaws to restore our equilibrium" (Morrison 47). They laugh behind Maureen's back once they have found those flaws, but only do it in private, as they both notice the other girls "adore her" (Morrison 47). Claudia admits her jealousy to the reader, and her propensity for violence against lighter girls comes to the forefront once again when Maureen has a locker beside her. At one point, Maureen offers to walk the girls home, as she lives close by. They come across Pecola and four black boys who are bullying her. They harass her by singing: "Black e mo. Black e mo. Yadaddsleepsnekked. Black e mo black e mo ya dadd sleeps nekked. Black e mo..." (Morrison 47). Claudia notes that they are insulting her over "matters over which the victim

had no control". It does not matter that "they themselves were black", Claudia clarifies; "it was their contempt for their own blackness that gave the first insult its teeth" (Morrison 48). Frieda immediately jumps to Pecola's defence, and Claudia quickly joins her. However, it is only when Maureen mixes into the conflict that the boys stop their bullying. Maureen acts overtly friendly with Pecola once the boys have dispersed, which pleasantly surprises Claudia and Frieda. They endeavour to think better of Maureen, until they notice she is asking Pecola questions about her father that visibly make her uncomfortable. The situation escalates and reaches a climax when Maureen brings blackness into the conversation:

"What do I care about her old black daddy?" asked Maureen.

"Black? Who you calling black?"

"You!"

"You think you so cute!" (Morrison 52).

Maureen seems visibly shaken by Claudia's claim that she is not cute. She runs across the street, and once she feels safe she shouts: "I am cute! And you ugly! Black and ugly black e mos. I am cute!" (Morrison 52). Claudia and Frieda leave Pecola to go home after the incident, and are confronted with a sense of helplessness as they realise "the weight of [Maureen's] remark" (Morrison 52). Claudia describes them as "sinking under the wisdom, accuracy, and relevance of Maureen's last words" (Morrison 53). They realise that there is no use in rejecting the notion as everyone around them agrees with Maureen's statement.

"Dolls we could destroy, but we could not destroy the honey voices of parents and aunts, the obedience in the eyes of our peers, the slippery light in the eyes of our teachers when they encountered the Maureen Peals of the world" (Morrison 53).

This reiterates Fanon's argument that all black children will become 'abnormal' when encountering white culture, and that they are helpless to stop it (Fanon 112). It also shows the notion that the lighter skinned black people come, the higher they move in social class as they are considered more beautiful than darker skinned black people. Alice Walker coined the term 'colourism' to describe this phenomenon (Walker 290).

Another example of colourism happens when the novel describes the life of Geraldine and her son Junior. Geraldine performs black womanhood perfectly; she makes herself soft and quiet, she straightens her hair so it looks more like white hair and she went to college to

“learn how to do the white man’s work with refinement” (Morrison 58). Junior is raised with the same societal expectations. He plays with white children often as he knows that is what his mother prefers:

“White kids; his mother did not like him to play with n\*\*\*ers. She had explained to him the difference between colored people and n\*\*\*ers. They were easily identifiable. Colored people were neat and quiet; n\*\*\*ers were dirty and loud” (Morrison 60).

There is an incident where Junior lures Pecola into his house when she bumps into him near school. Junior cannot handle the affection his mother’s cat gives Pecola, and tries to abuse him, which results in a struggle over the cat with Pecola. The cat accidentally dies in the struggle just when Geraldine arrives at home. Junior blames Pecola for the cat’s death and makes it seem as if Pecola invaded their house to do so, even though he is the one that lured her in and locked her up. The novel gives a toxic insight into Geraldine’s mind as she regards Pecola. There is nothing in her mind except contempt for how she perceives Pecola to be, likening her to vermin. “Get out,” she said, her voice quiet. “You nasty little black bitch. Get out of my house” (Morrison 67). Pecola is once again confronted with the negative connotations associated with blackness.

When spring has arrived, Claudia and Frieda try to find Pecola, because they want to ask her a favour. They manage to find her at Pecola’s mother Pauline Breedlove’s work. The girls find out that Pauline Breedlove works as a servant at a rich white family’s house. Mrs Breedlove allows them to come into the house, but tells them that they need to stand “stock still” and cannot “mess anything up” (Morrison 73). A young blonde girl walks into the kitchen just as Mrs Breedlove leaves to handle the family’s washing. She turns visibly anxious when she sees the three other girls standing in the kitchen. “A familiar violence” rises in Claudia when the girl asks where “Polly” is (Morrison 73). “Her calling Mrs. Breedlove Polly, when even Pecola called her mother Mrs. Breedlove, seemed reason enough to scratch her” (Morrison 74). Frieda notices something on the stove while the little girl keeps calling for Polly. When Pecola moves closer to examine it by touching she accidentally tilts the pan. The blueberries in the pan splash everywhere. Pecola slips in the mess just as her mother arrives. Mrs Breedlove starts swearing at the girls, but promptly stops as the little girl starts crying. She immediately rushes to her to calm her down, whilst throwing Claudia, Frieda and Pecola out of the house. As they leave the house, they can hear Mrs Breedlove calming the girl. The girl asks her “Who were they, Polly?” twice, but each time Mrs

Breedlove answers with “Don’t worry none, baby” (Morrison 75). This scene exemplifies Claudia’s confusion earlier in the text over why black women handle white girls with “a possessive gentleness” in their touch. Pauline Breedlove performs black womanhood just as she is supposed to; a disregard for her own black child, but motherly care for a white child. Pauline’s thoughts on Pecola’s birth are revealed in the following chapter, showing her internalized distaste for Pecola’s blackness: “but I knowed she was ugly. Head full of pretty hair, but Lord she was ugly” (Morrison 87). It is heavily implied that throughout the novel that Pecola’s internalisation of the societal concept of black womanhood began with her mother. Butler’s theory becomes relevant here. She argues that the concept of gender can only be sustained by conforming to the social construct of gender, internalise it, and then perform it so that others can in turn internalise and perform it. This way the concept becomes a self-sustaining loop that cannot be broken. This is exactly what is occurring between Pauline and Pecola. Pauline internalised the performance of black womanhood in her youth, and performed it as adequately as she could. Pecola grew up with the societal expectations of black women enforced on her. She internalised it as well, to such an extent that her greatest wish is to have white people’s features. They have created the self-sustaining loop.

Cholly Breedlove, Pecola’s father, gives an insight into why black women might be so despised in the community. Cholly is ten when he attends the funeral of his great aunt Jimmy. There, he meets a young girl named Darlene that he plays with in the evening. They tickle and lay on each other in a field. Just as they start kissing, two white men find them. Cholly tries to scramble away from Darlene, but the white men show their guns and start demanding he has sex with her, saying: “I said, get on wid it. An’ make it good, n\*\*\*er, make it good” (Morrison 102). Cholly does not truly understand what sex is at that age, so he simply simulates how he thinks it is supposed to be done. He starts to hate Darlene while being forced to “make-believe”. The narrator notes:

“Never did he once consider directing his hatred toward the hunters. Such an emotion would have destroyed him. They were big, white, armed men. He was small, black, helpless. His subconscious knew what his conscious mind did not guess—that hating them would have consumed him, burned him up like a piece of soft coal, leaving only flakes of ash and a question mark of smoke” (Morrison 104).

He turns his hatred towards Darlene instead, “the one who bore witness to his failure, his impotence [...] whom he had not been able to protect, to spare, to cover from the round moon

glow of the flashlight” (Morrison 104). It is implied here that due to the helplessness black men experience, they turn their hatred towards black women instead. This is the reason why black women have such a low standing in society.

Summer brings the novel to a close. The constant burden of harassment, abuse and bullying has torn Pecola down. The final chapter shows the reader that Pecola has become delusional. She talks to an imaginary friend throughout the chapter, but does not realise they are imaginary. She notices that others do not seem to see her friend, but in the end her mind does not make the connection that her friend is not real. She fully believes that she has blue eyes now, and thinks she has become beautiful. The situation has flipped around in her mind; people do not avert their gaze because they want to ignore her, but because they are jealous of her new-found beauty. Pecola slowly turns paranoid that she is not the person with the bluest eyes in the world, and aggravates her imaginary friend so much that the friend leaves. The novel switches back to Claudia narrating, looking back on that period in her childhood. She admits that the community has done Pecola wrong:

“All of our waste which we dumped on her and which she absorbed. And all of our beauty, which was hers first and which she gave to us. All of us—all who knew her—felt so wholesome after we cleaned ourselves on her. We were so beautiful when we stood astride her ugliness” (Morrison 138).

She reveals that the whole community was complicit in violating Pecola, mirroring oppression of black women as Pecola has become a vehicle for self-hatred in the black community.

The entirety of the novel revolves around the perception of black women. Through events in Pecola and Claudia’s lives it gives the perception that black women are ugly because of their blackness, and they should worship and mother white girls and women. Pecola and Pauline Breedlove have internalised this ideal to such an extent that they perform their perceived ugliness. Other characters in the novel do not dispel that perception; instead they actively sustain this image through the continued harassment and abuse towards Pecola in particular. The only two characters in the novel that are seemingly critical of this performance are Claudia and Frieda. Claudia is more critical of it than Frieda. She explains that due to her younger age she has not yet learned to hate the colour of her skin. Nearing the end of the novel both girls come to realise that there is little they can do about how black women are treated. They are portrayed as helpless against a system that is too large for them



to handle on their own. The end the novel reveals that Pecola is a metaphor for the self-hatred in the black community. Pecola has collapsed under the burden of all the sustained oppression against her black womanhood. She copes by falling into the delusion that she has received blue eyes, which she has always wished for. Claudia and Frieda, who throughout the novel have fought against the perception of black womanhood, concede their defeat. The system is evolved in such a way that all characters are complicit in perpetuating it. The novel has thus presented the externalized performance of black womanhood by portraying the way black women are regarded as lesser and ugly compared to their lighter counterparts, and that internalisation of this concept is critical for sustaining this concept.

## Conclusion

Toni Morrison writes in her foreword to *The Bluest Eye* that she “focused [...] on how something as grotesque as the demonization of an entire race could take root inside the most delicate member of society: a child; the most vulnerable member: a female” (Morrison 5). Both Morrison and Yaa Gyasi have portrayed this demonization of the black race in their novels. Gyasi’s 2016 debut novel *Homegoing* has won international praise by winning three awards, so it can be expected that she will continue working on a career in writing (Wolfe par. 14). She was inspired by Toni Morrison’s established body of literature, as Morrison had continued writing on African-American identity and the problems in African-American communities after her debut novel *The Bluest Eye*. Notable works include *Sula* (1973), *Song of Solomon* (1977), and *Beloved* (1987). Her latest work was *God Help The Child*, published in 2015, which touched upon colourism in the black community, a theme that also appears in *The Bluest Eye*.

The thesis analysed the presentation of black womanhood in the two novels *The Bluest Eye* and *Homegoing* by examining the intersection of externalised gender performance and the presentation of blackness. It specifically focussed at how both novels portrayed the way black women were expected to perform their gender and their race, and how other people perceived them. It also examined whether the black female characters performed this adequately, or whether they rejected the concepts instead. Therefore the thesis aimed to answer the research question: in what way do *The Bluest Eye* by Toni Morrison and *Homegoing* by Yaa Gyasi present the externalized performance of gender, specifically black womanhood, within the framework of Butler’s performativity theory?

The theory chapter stipulated what theories would be used to analyse and answer the research question; namely, Judith Butler’s *Gender performativity theory*, Frantz Fanon’s *Black Skin White Masks* novel, and Kimberle Crenshaw’s intersectionality theory, which was instrumental in bringing the two previous theories together. Judith Butler’s performativity theory argues that gender was not biological, but rather a social construct. This social construct comes from the time and culture in which a person resides. There are certain ideals and roles that a woman is expected to model herself after and perform. For example, motherhood, staying quiet, acting reserved and obedient, etc. Butler claims that these social concepts imposed on people can only be sustained through the internalisation of the concepts.

This internalisation can only happen through the policing of gender performance. People are punished by society whenever they perform their gender in a way that does not conform to societal expectations. The thesis explained that with externalised performance is reflected in the way society perceives black women, and the roles they are expected to perform adequately. The way black women then adhere to, or reject the concept is also part of externalised performance. Frantz Fanon's post-colonial novel *Black Skin White Masks* addresses the effect of white colonialism on the way society perceives blackness and black people. He argues that white men see themselves as above black people. White people have convinced other black people to equate blackness with wrongness by treating black people as lesser, and reinforce that idea through the use of the popular culture mediums that bring negative connotations to blackness. Young black children who consume popular culture then internalize the negative connotations, and that negativity is simultaneously sustained by the way they are treated in society. Fanon gives meaning to the concept of blackness. Kimberle Crenshaw's intersectionality theory is important for binding Butler and Fanon's theories together. She critiques gender and post-colonial theory on their inability to create a complete picture of black womanhood. She argues that blackness and gender intersect to create black womanhood, and that one cannot be viewed separately from the other. Using Crenshaw's theory to combine Butler and Fanon's theory creates the definition of black womanhood that is used in this thesis. This definition of black womanhood, and the understanding of gender performativity, were used to analyse and examine *The Bluest Eye* and *Homegoing*.

The chapter on *Homegoing* examined how the black female characters that had their own chapter in the novel were portrayed in regards to externalised performance of black womanhood. A recurring performance in all their chapters, except Marjorie's, was the expectation of women to become mothers. There was a clear difference between the lineages of Effia and Esi's. Effia's lineage stayed largely in what is now contemporarily known as Ghana. Here the women were expected to take a 'traditional housewife' role. Women married young, and became the primary caretaker in the household in terms of domestic chores. They had to cook, take care of the children, and did not have to work outside of the domestic sphere. Esi's lineage came to the United States through slavery. The experience of the black female characters was decidedly different from the ones living in Ghana. Slavery forced them to work the entire day. There was hardly any leisure except eating and sleeping, making it hard for women to take the role of caretaker of the household. Only lighter skinned black women who were considered beautiful could work in the slave master's house, and in that

case they would take care of domestic chores. The following generations that achieved freedom through abolition were still confronted with abject poverty. They had to work to survive. Important to note is that when the women took up work they were relegated to jobs that conformed to the caretaker notion, such as cleaning. Another difference between the two lineages is that the women of Ghana fail to perform the role they are expected to perform more often than the women in the United States. An explanation for this difference might be that survival takes the forefront of the experiences for female gender role performance in the United States, as blackness in opposition with whiteness is also more highlighted there, because of the system of slavery, and later segregation. It is not until Marjorie, the last descendant, that the concept of black womanhood truly starts to shift. Marjorie is able to attend university, giving her more chances in future's workforce. The novel portrays these differences in externalised performances of black womanhood in both lineages.

The chapter *The Bluest Eye* examined how the novel portrayed the externalised performance of black womanhood, focussing on a small community in Ohio. All black female characters are constantly confronted with how black womanhood is perceived by others. Through Claudia's eyes and Pecola's experiences, the notion of black womanhood is revealed; blackness is a synonym to ugliness, and black women should love and take care of white women. The novel stresses the consequences of this perception as Pecola receives abuse and harassment throughout the novel. Pecola serves as a metaphor for black people's self-hatred. She is constantly confronted with the perception of others in her community. The burden of all the harassment eventually drives Pecola into a delusional fantasy world in which she can cope. Claudia and Frieda do their best to reject the social construct surrounding black womanhood, but realise in the end that their resistance is futile; there will always be someone else that sustains the concept. The novel presents the externalised performance of black womanhood by portraying the way black women are viewed as lesser and ugly compared to their lighter or white counterparts, and that internalisation of this concept is critical for sustaining this concept.

Both novels portray that people perceive blackness with negative connotations. *The Bluest Eye* clearly stresses that being black is synonymous to being ugly. *Homegoing* portrays it in a different way. Blackness is not portrayed as ugliness but simply as lesser and uncivilized. *Homegoing* also shows that this is a clear consequence of coming into contact with white people. *The Bluest Eye* is unable to portray this as every black person in the United States has come into contact with the white world. In terms of gender, both novels

present motherhood, and a caretaking role as part of black womanhood. All the female characters are expected to have children, take care of them, and take care of domestic chores.

The most noticeable difference between the novels is internalisation of blackness as wrongness. *The Bluest Eye* portrays the harsh reality of this internalisation. Pecola shows this to the extreme. She becomes so obsessed with having a 'white' feature that she spirals into a delusional fantasy world where she has blue eyes. Characters like Frieda and Claudia come to understand the futility in rejecting the notion, as they cannot go against the majority. Claudia admits to the reader that even she worshipped white women in her later years. *Homegoing* does not show this aspect of blackness, however. The novel shows consequences of slavery and colonialism, such as the loss of one's original language, and that blackness is equated to wrongness through that. The women are aware of the societal concept, but are never mentioned to have internalised it. Whenever they do perform it, it is only out of survival and not because they truly believe that their skin colour is ugly.

The introduction of this thesis gave a preliminary hypothesis to the research question. This hypothesis was that the two novels would showcase the manner in which society treats black women, whose intersection of being a woman and being black create a unique oppression. *The Bluest Eye* would likely show that black women are deemed lesser than white women, and how the women express themselves when they either internalize that message or reject it. *Homegoing* would show the impact of seeing black women as lesser beings on a larger scale, as it focussed on two lineages of black women and the consequences of slavery on further generations. After analysing and comparing the two novels, the answer to the research question is that both novels portray black womanhood as considered inherently lesser than white womanhood, and that a traditional mother and caretaker role is important to their performance. There are differences in how the black female characters internalise this construct. *The Bluest Eyes* implies that all black women will internalise these expectations eventually, as the system is too big to fight against. *Homegoing* portrays the black female characters as conforming to survive in the world they live in. They do not have to agree or internalise with the concept to do so.

More research can be done on why there is such a noticeable difference between how the two novels deal with internalisation, which goes beyond the scope of this thesis. Could this difference be because one novel was written in the 1970s and the other in 2016? The way black authors portray black people might have shifted through the years as their politics have.

The African-American community have been in the media prominently with groups such as “Black Lives Matter” crying out against the injustice of the oppression black people face. Yaa Gyasi could have portrayed her black female characters that reject this internalisation, just as most black people in the current era try to reject it as well. The novel *Homegoing* itself is also only one year old, and there has only been minimal research on the novel. There is still much that can be done in terms of using gender and post-colonial theory to analyse this book.

The process of writing the thesis was easier than was anticipated. The minimum length was the most frightening and pushback, but while analysing and examining the novels in-depth, the process went faster than expected. The theory was already familiar through the usage of them in gender and post-colonial courses, therefore the theory was not hard to use in analysing and examining the chapters.

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