Names | A Journal of Onomastics

Place Names in Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*: A Literary Landscape of Racism

Christine De Vinne
Ursuline College, Cleveland, Ohio, USA

ans-names.pitt.edu
ISSN: 0027-7738 (print) 1756-2279 (web) Vol. 70 No. 3, Summer 2022 DOI 10.5195/names.2022.2395

Abstract

The Bluest Eye, by Toni Morrison, recounts the story of Pecola Breedlove, an eleven-year-old Black girl in Lorain, Ohio, where her wish for blue eyes represents desire for what she is denied, the privileges of her white classmates and the comforts of a safe home. Amid this novel set in 1941 during the Great Migration, a placename-based analysis reveals a literary landscape of racism in the mid-20th-century US, from the Jim Crow South to the industrial North. A toponymic study reveals how Morrison uses place names as stylistic devices in two ways. In the narrative present, she deploys them as opening frames for immediate lessons in racial behaviors for the children who are her main characters; in the narrative past, she uses them to recall distant locations from adult characters' histories to suggest ways in which racism persists across space and time. In combination, Morrison's application of toponymy and setting casts Lorain as a microcosm of the nation and implicates all its citizens in the racist ideology that destroys Pecola and her family.

Keywords: Toni Morrison, *The Bluest Eye*, toponymy, place names, racism, African American literature, literary onomastics, Great Migration

---

> I want to draw a map, so to speak, of a critical geography and use that map to open as much space for discovery, intellectual adventure, and close exploration as did the original charting of the New World—without the mandate for conquest.
> (Morrison 1993, 3)

Nobel Laureate Toni Morrison sets her first novel, *The Bluest Eye* (1970), in her hometown of Lorain, Ohio, twenty-five miles west of Cleveland. Composed at the height of the US civil rights movement, the work grows from her memory of a childhood friend, African American like herself, who yearns for blue eyes. In her 1993 Afterword, Morrison articulates the truth behind the girl's longing: "Implicit in her desire was racial self-loathing" (1994, 210). "[T]wenty years later", Morrison confesses, "I was still wondering about how one learns that", 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" (210). A half-century after its publication, E. Patrick Johnson underscores her grim insight by declaring that the work endures "because racism and our internalization of it persists, but also because Morrison provides us a language—a primer—to put a name to that process of internalization" (2020, 679).

In *The Bluest Eye*, Morrison provides not just a language for racism but also a toponymy for it, and she incorporates place names as stylistic devices to call attention to the past and present effects of ingrained prejudices. Issues of race permeate this story of families in a small Midwestern city on the cusp of World War II. At its center stands eleven-year-old Pecola Breedlove, whose parents arrive during the Great Migration, tracing an overland arc that transplanted more than six million Blacks from the rural South to the urban North and West. Racial differences are splayed on every page of the novel, from its opening invocation of the Dick and Jane primer to its closing image of Pecola amid Lorain's weeds.[1] In a seemingly benign community in the nation's heartland, Morrison calls her readers to confront an "impalpable form of racist ideology that, because of its indefinable nature, is paradoxically more pervasive, psychologically damaging and difficult to contest than extreme, overt forms of racism" (Baillie 2013, 55). As an analysis of toponyms in the novel will show, Morrison uses place names to stake out lessons in racial boundaries and casts Lorain as a microcosm of the nation, all its citizens implicated in the bigotries that destroy Pecola and her family.

Toponyms in a Literary Landscape

Despite the specificity of Morrison's locale and its aptness to her themes, scholars who consider names in *The Bluest Eye* typically gloss over its setting and focus instead on the names of its characters. In fact, given Morrison's creativity with character names, along with the marked preference that literary onomastics demonstrates for anthroponyms over toponyms (Cavill 2016), it is no surprise that attention to the naming of characters and neglect of place names run throughout studies of her corpus.[2] Predictably, then, scholars who recognize the incongruity of a loveless family called *Breedlove* or a foul character with as clean a name as *Soaphead* might note the location of Lorain on Ohio's Lake Erie shore but likely dismiss other place names in the text.[3]

Overlooked as they are, and spare—Morrison pocketing most of them in two compact narrative catalogs—place names remain a key element in *The Bluest Eye*. Their importance calls for a literary toponymic analysis,

DOI 10.5195/names.2022.2395 Vol. 70 No. 3, Summer 2022 ISSN: 0027-7738 (print) 1756-2279 (web)

which, unlike a sociolinguistic study of the origin, etymology, or distribution of place names, explores ways in which an author's use of toponymy enhances the development of character or action and, in general, the meaning of a work. In *The Bluest Eye*, in particular, Morrison weaves her characters into the toponymy of their lives through sharply etched place memories cast in retrospective narration. The work of W. F. H. Nicolaisen provides an early lens for such memory-based toponymy when he asserts that the private, abstract space of personal recollection can be fixed in recognizable sites, whence it "persuades through its designated locatability" (1988, 135), its "onomastic precision" (1988, 137) lending credibility. Anchoring her narrative in undeniably real places, then, Morrison is better able to persuade readers of the undeniably real effects of racism. Nicolaisen further observes that stories arising from oral tradition often relate a significant event, situated "in historical time and in mappable space" (1991, 240). The verifiable toponyms in such a tale, he suggests, represent "location, juxtaposition, journeying, shelter, generational interior and exterior space", a "space of expectation and fulfillment" (1988, 140). In this way, place names in *The Bluest Eye* validate the message it embeds in its account of migrational journeys, its characters' ongoing quest for shelter, and above all the expectation that feeds Pecola's dreams. '

Morrison's own past supplies the toponymy of *The Bluest Eye*. Loyal to her roots, she tells an audience at Oberlin College in Lorain County, "'In my work, no matter where it's set—New York, Martinique, wherever—the process, the imaginative process, always starts right here on the lip of Lake Erie'" (Haliburton 2019). When locating her first novel in her native place, Morrison reports, "I was very, very conscious of [the] mood and atmosphere of my hometown" and "used literal descriptions of neighborhoods" (Jones and Vinson 1985, 171), complete with local toponyms. In the hodonymy of the novel's Lorain, the MacTeer family, nine-year-old Claudia, ten-year-old Frieda, and their parents, live on Twenty-first Street. There they take in Pecola after her father burns the Breedlove family out of its storefront home at the corner of Thirty-fifth Street and Broadway Avenue. On their way to Washington Irving School, the girls walk down Broadway past the Dreamland Theater and Isaley's ice cream parlor.[4] So concrete is the fictional cityscape that locations in the novel can be mapped onto the historical streets of Lorain (Woo 2019), where a "flophouse" on the seedy side of town was named *The Breedlove* (Bonilla 2021), imprinted with desperation long before it became "almost too obviously ironic" (Dorothy Lee 1984, 347) a surname for Pecola's family. If toponyms in actual 1941 Lorain define the kind of linguistic landscape that Guy Puzey (2016) describes, in the Lorain of the novel they define a vital literary landscape: names on street signs, buildings, businesses, and schools, all the visible markers that set the scene for and, from Nicolaisen's perspective, heighten the impact of each race-inflected interaction that Morrison relates.[5]

While Morrison's choice of setting is clearly autobiographical, she equally intends it as archetypal. An industrial crossroads, Lorain between the world wars boasted shipyards and railroads linking it to every major US city. Its factories employed thousands, and its movie theaters glowed with the Hollywood of Greta Garbo and Shirley Temple, whose silver-screen images, flickering through the pages of the novel, defined national standards of female beauty. Here Claudia, Frieda, and Pecola share a city with numerous ethnic groups, Blacks next to European-born neighbors, an immigrant-rich diversity that Morrison conjures by surname and byname: Rosemary Villanucci, the girl next door with the "dough-white face" (30); Mr. Yacobowski, the blinkered grocer who stocks Pecola's favorite candy; the prostitutes called China, Poland, and the Maginot Line who befriend her. Even as some enclaves in the city, both historical and fictional, were preserved for whites, notably the tree-lined, lakefront streets of the steel barons where Pecola's mother worked, most neighborhoods were defined by economics rather than ethnicity, and schools were integrated (Campbell 2021; Piscopo 2021).[6] Nicknamed the "International City" (Trymaine Lee 2020) for its dozens of nationalities, Lorain took pride in representing a mobile, and upwardly mobile, nation.

If Morrison's novel critiques "the artificial boundaries of citizenship, gender, race, and history" (Gillan 2002, 283), then those boundaries cut across the map of an actual place. While Darwin Turner regards the Lorain of *The Bluest Eye* as "a world of grotesques", peopled with characters "whose psyches have been deformed" (1984, 362), Lisa Long declares it representative, nestled in the Midwest, "the 'heartland,' the most American of all places" (2013, 110).[7] Long aligns perceptions of the region, "both at the center of national life and on its margins" (105), with the position of Blacks in the US, central yet marginalized, often recognized on sight yet reduced to invisibility. Introducing explicit local toponymy and believable, affecting characters, then, Morrison makes of Lorain "a meaningful 'everyplace'" (Long 2013, 119) that universalizes her themes of injustice reinforced by misguided education. Indeed, Morrison insists, "When the locality is clear, fully realized, then it becomes universal" (Ruas 1981, 96).[8]

Thus, for a novel based on an encounter stored for decades in her memory, Morrison chooses very personal place names that turn her hometown into Everytown, rendered both believable and prototypical. There she crafts the local as fractal image of the national; place names specific to one small city in 1941 are writ large on the map of fifty states in 1970. In Morrison's art, the actions related in Lorain's precisely articulated neighborhoods lead directly to the collective condemnation in the novel's closing image of Pecola destroyed, the ruin of her city and the victim of her nation's prejudices.

ISSN: 0027-7738 (print) 1756-2279 (web) Vol. 70 No. 3, Summer 2022 DOI 10.5195/names.2022.2395

Place Names and Race Lessons

Having staked out her setting with such purpose, Morrison deftly adopts its toponyms as stylistic devices. Here, features in a work of literature, their narrative function overtakes their linguistic import. Claudia's voice, recounting the daily lives of family and classmates, turns names of streets, buildings, and landmarks into signposts alerting audiences to object lessons in disparity. When readers come upon one of Claudia's sharply drawn, place-name-rich sequences, they should take note: a tutorial in the local, everyday application of racism will ensue.

One such tutorial is delivered, aptly, at the elementary school. After Maureen Peal, a "high-yellow dream child" (62), transfers into Washington Irving from Toledo, teachers and classmates alike defer to her. Claudia and Frieda, meanwhile, are simultaneously "bemused, irritated, and fascinated" (63). When the newcomer makes an overture of friendship, Claudia refuses to give ground to this light-skinned (ar)rival:

> "Which way do you go home"? [Maureen asks.]
> "Down Twenty-first Street to Broadway".
> "Why don't you go down Twenty-second Street"?
> "'Cause I live on Twenty-first Street".
> "Oh, I can walk that way, I guess. Partly, anyway".
> "Free country." (64)

What follows this place-name frame is a demonstration of in-group discrimination when, after Claudia's uncertain victory, the girls head outside to find a circle of classmates goading Pecola, dark-skinned and, by common consensus, "ugly" (38). While the boys chant, "'Black e mo. Black e mo. Yadaddsleepsnekked'", the narrator observes, "It was their contempt for their own blackness that gave the first insult its teeth. They seemed to have taken all of their smoothly cultivated ignorance, their exquisitely learned self-hatred, [...] and sucked it all up into a fiery cone of scorn" (65). In a schoolyard in a "[f]ree country", in local territory they can name and navigate, the children show their mastery of intraracial bias.

The MacTeers leap to Pecola's defense, but the bullying ends only when the boys notice Maureen with her green "springtime eyes so wide with interest" (66-67) and slink away. Maureen then leads the girls downtown to Isaley's for ice cream that only she can afford, Morrison's introduction of a brand name on the storefront signaling a lesson that will continue. Outside the shop, the sting of a treat they could not share, after jeers they could not stop, brings feelings to a boil for Claudia and Frieda, until the four girls are slinging the same insults, the shame of fathers naked and the color of their skin. In a final taunt, the golden Maureen shouts at Claudia, Frieda, and Pecola across the street, on the other side of Broadway, "'I *am* cute! And you ugly! Black and ugly e mos. I *am* cute!'" (73). Claudia is left to puzzle over Maureen's elevated status: "If she was cute [...] [w]hat did we lack? [...] The *Thing* to fear was the *Thing* that made *her* beautiful, and not us" (74). Schooled in tacit rules of racism and complexion, Claudia narrates from her nine-year-old perception yet with an increasingly mature sense of her place in the named world.[9]

Pecola knows Lorain as intimately as do her friends, and *The Bluest Eye* initiates another object lesson in prejudice when she starts out "down Garden Avenue" (47) to "Yacobowski's Fresh Veg. Meat and Sundries Store" (48) for candy. Her deeply felt connection to her neighborhood suggests the affective "Toponymic Attachment" that Laura Kostanski founds on "toponyms which symbolize interaction and identification with the landscape" (2016, 413). Here, Pecola walks contentedly along "an avenue gently buffeted by the familiar and therefore loved images" (47), the dandelions, the Y-shaped crack in the pavement, and the smooth slate sidewalk, where "owning them made her part of the world, and the world a part of her" (48). However, when she reaches the store, the grocer, an outsider himself, refuses to acknowledge her in her own native place: "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?" (48). He stalls, "not wanting to touch her hand" in the exchange, three packs of candy for three pennies (49).

With shame and anger warring inside her, Pecola is out the door, back on Garden Street, with her favorite sweets, Mary Janes, each wrapped with a golden image: "Smiling white face. Blond hair in gentle disarray, blue eyes looking at her out of a world of clean comfort" (50). Pecola is both soothed and aroused as she consumes the image that consumes her: "To eat the candy is somehow to eat the eyes, eat Mary Jane. Love Mary Jane. Be Mary Jane" (50). Unseen and unloved, at age eleven already she has absorbed the message that will destroy her, a need to become what she is not.[10] The sympathetic reader, primed by now familiar toponyms, observes and learns as well. Through Morrison's subtle art, place names, easily overlooked, flag supplemental instruction in privilege and power.

Washington Irving School, Mr. Yacobowski's store, Broadway and the streets that lace the neighborhood: Morrison frames the girls' experiences of intolerance with place names that they know by heart. The precision of the spatial setting contrasts with the ambiguity of messages that children imbibe without fully understanding either the personal or the political impact. On the streets of their hometown, they learn vital distinctions

DOI 10.5195/names.2022.2395 Vol. 70 No. 3, Summer 2022 ISSN: 0027-7738 (print) 1756-2279 (web)

between insiders and outsiders, while readers watch "*innocence and faith*" (6) die like the seeds that Claudia and Frieda plant in their "*little plot of black dirt*" (6) in Lorain, Ohio.

Past Made Present in the Great Migration

Morrison's temporal setting for *The Bluest Eye* is as apposite as its location and equally significant to her critique. From fall through summer, she chronicles the seasons of 1941, the year that would lead the US into World War II, end the Great Depression, and prompt the anti-discriminatory Fair Employment Act.[11] It would also prompt another surge in the social, economic, and political phenomenon known as the Great Migration—its very name rooted in geographic and thus toponymic exchange—responsible for remaking the demographics of the country and transforming the lives of generations of Blacks.[12]

To distinguish those who carry the sights, the sounds, the episodic memory of the South, Morrison sets her adult characters apart from their children in geography as well as experience. For those transported by tectonic shift from the rural South to the urban North, she invokes a distant map, far removed from 1941 Lorain. Theirs is different toponymy:

> They come from Mobile. Aiken. From Newport News. From Marietta. From Meridian. And the sound of these places in their mouths make you think of love. When you ask them where they are from, they tilt their heads and say "Mobile" and you think you've been kissed. They say "Aiken" and you see a white butterfly glance off a fence with a torn wing. They say "Nagadoches" and you say "Yes, I will." You don't know what these towns are like, but you love what happens to the air when they open their lips and let the names ease out. (81)

Names of the half-dozen cities and towns in this inventory are interwoven with evocative sensory images: the sounds of love, the brush of a kiss, a dancing butterfly, a breathless "yes". Morrison conjures the poignant pull of memory to lace together what Nicolaisen calls a "string of toponymic pearls", a chain of "spellings and sounds associated with a loss", loss of youth and its "irrecoverable pleasures" (1991, 243).[13] Her language suggests the intensity of Kostanski's Toponymic Attachment, affection "intrinsically linked" with places known physically and emotionally (2016, 415). Here, interrupting Claudia's narration, the voice of an omniscient narrator adds to the ethereal quality of the names and calls directly to "you", the reader, for empathic response.

Definitive as the names appear, however, Morrison delivers them with sly indirection. Not only are their memories muted by time and nostalgia, but their locations proliferate because they are not uniquely fixed in topography. *Mobile* is a city in Alabama but also a district defined by the US Army Corps of Engineers stretching across that state into Mississippi, Florida, and Georgia. *Aiken* dots the maps of South Carolina, Texas, and Mississippi (USGS). *Newport News* not only connects Virginia to ports up and down the coast but, as an eastern terminus of the transcontinental railroad, to stations all the way to San Francisco. *Marietta* names a city in Georgia but also towns in Florida, Alabama, Oklahoma, Texas, Mississippi, and both Carolinas (USGS). Mississippi may boast the largest *Meridian*, but that toponym also appears in eight other Southern states, three times on the map of Oklahoma alone (USGS). "Nagadoches" reinforces the orality of cultural memory, the softened, reconstructed sound of *Nacogdoches* transported to northern Ohio from eastern Texas—or perhaps, as *Natchitoches*, from Louisiana. Thus, this handful of names comes to represent an entire region, indeterminate points of origin for millions of migrants in the aggregate. If Morrison universalizes Lorain by recounting its minute details, she universalizes the South by counterpoint, by conjuring a huge geographical swath, almost a million square miles, its hometowns wistfully remembered by unnamed individuals, in the collective third-person plural "[t]hey" who forsake it.

Yet, the narrator warns, "You don't know what these towns are like" (81), and the ache of loss belies enduring memories from the post-Reconstruction South. There, Jim Crow laws denied the right to vote, sanctioned lynchings, and restricted education and property ownership, while an agricultural economy tied many who had been freed with Emancipation to punishing sharecropping agreements (Sernett 1997; Wilkerson 2010). Against this backdrop, the North held hopes of higher pay, better education, and a less overt intolerance, where "lynch ropes" (62) appeared in Lorain only in Maureen Peal's long brown braids. Not everyone who fled found a promised land, however. Stripped of family, farm, and Southern communal traditions, migrants lost supports that might have fortified them against the harsh Northern winters, the impersonal forces of industry, and the resentment of established Blacks toward unskilled newcomers (Sernett 1997; Wilkinson 2010; Mamczur 2019).[14] Untethered, migrants needed to find housing and employment in an often inhospitable predominantly white society, as Pauline Breedlove discovers: "*I missed my people. I weren't used to so much white folks* [...] *Up north they was everywhere* [...] *and colored folks few and far between.* [...] *That was the lonesomest time of my life*" (117).

The Breedloves, in fact, embody the despair of the movement, just as the MacTeers testify to its hard-won successes, and Morrison reinforces the contrast between them in toponymic terms. Claudia's father harbors his

ISSN: 0027-7738 (print) 1756-2279 (web) Vol. 70 No. 3, Summer 2022 DOI 10.5195/names.2022.2395

family in their own home, a shelter even without luxury, and stands undaunted when Ohio winters turn his forehead into "the frozen sweep of the Erie" (61), while her mother pins flannel around her child's neck and tucks her in with warm quilts. Morrison ties these migrants to their adopted lake- and landscape in a narrative that only hints at their Southern roots, Mrs. MacTeer cooking mustard greens and dealing out "[l]ove, thick and dark as Alaga syrup" (12), a sugary taste of home from the Alabama-Georgia Syrup Company (ALAGA), state toponyms transmuted into brand name. Safe in the arms of her family, Claudia experiences her parents' relocation at secondhand and draws from it her resilient first-person voice, ultimately able to admit the role that she and her community play in Pecola's desecration.

Shifting to third-person, Morrison provides backstories for the Breedloves in an omniscient voice tolling hardships in the South and defeats in the North. Cholly, she reveals, hails from Georgia and Pauline from Alabama, the birthplaces of Morrison's own parents.[15] Meeting by chance in Kentucky, the pair move to Lorain, where a happy marriage devolves into utter dysfunction. Cholly, deserted by his parents, has known the wide kinship circle of the rural South but also the emasculating extremes of its racism. Disowned a second time by his father in Macon, he affords his family a precarious existence in an abandoned store, where "joylessness stank, pervading everything" (36) and where he violates Pecola at the kitchen sink. Pauline, who beats the daughter her husband rapes, carries misfortunes from the South as well, in the foot that she drags from Alabama and, likely, the decay that costs her her front tooth in a Lorain movie theater. With an inescapable past, she serves the Fisher family as a mammy-like domestic servant, replicating antebellum subjugation in the post-bellum North. Amid Cholly's and Pauline's toponymic dislocations, Morrison implies, their experiences in the South provide a necessary context for the personal and social tragedy that marks their lives in the North.[16]

The MacTeers and Breedloves, then, embody a six-million-strong movement, family history intersecting with national history. Morrison pairs the elusive toponymy of her adult characters' past with the particular toponymy of her young characters' present to reinforce her depiction of Lorain as prototypical. Overlayed, their stories show "how seemingly isolated experiences of oppression can interconnect and compound each other to corrupt individuals as well as their families, communities, or nations over time" (Werrlein 2005, 69), with the violation of Pecola as unpardonable exemplum. The MacTeers and Breedloves, the Antenuccis, Yacobowskis, and Fishers are bound together in a system of racism so pervasive that neither North nor South can afford escape.

Global Place Names and National Accountability

Into a narrative that indicts a nation, Morrison introduces a key character who has migrated from outside its borders. Elihue Micah Whitcomb wanders an errant path, from his Caribbean birth to studies abroad and a personal migration traced by city names across the US: a hotel in Chicago, a jail in Cincinnati, a park in Harlem, and, ultimately, the backroom apartment of Bertha Reese in Lorain. There, now Soaphead Church, he casts himself as "'Reader, Adviser, and Interpreter of Dreams'" (165).[17] It is to this false prophet that Pecola appeals for the blue eyes of her white dreams, and through him Morrison extends the toponomy of racism beyond the US before circling back to call a nation to accountability.

For a character capable of entertaining Pecola's most earnest desire, Morrison must create, she realizes, someone "who dealt with fortune-telling, dream-telling and so on, who would also believe that she was right, that it was preferable for her to have blue eyes" (Stepto 1976, 22). With this unholy combination, Morrison invokes the colonial history of racism in a descent from the "mulatto bastard" of a "decaying British nobleman" (167) in the early nineteenth-century Caribbean. Over a century later, his depleted heir in Ohio evinces a tangle of unresolved paradoxes and a confused amalgam of Western and African theologies (Alexander 1998). He has become a confirmed misanthrope with "keen sexual cravings" (166), a failed minister who, even as storefront churches proliferated with the Great Migration (Sernett 1997; Blocker 1999), leads no flock. His emotional defilement of Pecola only compounds the physical violation wreaked by her father.

After dispensing with the desperate girl (and Bertha's aging dog) in an act of self-proclaimed power—"I, I have caused a miracle" (182)—Soaphead begins his tirade of justification, a six-page apologia to the divine, by recording a geography replete with place names, the nesonyms and hydronyms of his West Indies origin:

> Once upon a time I lived greenly and youngish on one of your islands. An island of the archipelago in the South Atlantic between North and South America, enclosing the Caribbean Sea and the Gulf of Mexico: divided into the Greater Antilles, the Lesser Antilles, and the Bahama Islands. Not the Windward or Leeward Island colonies, mark you, but within, of course, the Greater of the two Antilles (while the precision of my prose may be, at times, laborious, it is necessary that I identify myself to you clearly). (177)

His topo-lineage replicates the unresolved contradictions of his personal life. Between continents labeled *North* and *South*, amid an indeterminate swirl of tides, *Caribbean* and *Mexican*, he traces his birth to islands whose

DOI 10.5195/names.2022.2395 Vol. 70 No. 3, Summer 2022 ISSN: 0027-7738 (print) 1756-2279 (web)

names distinguish the *Greater* from the *Lesser* (and the *Bahamas*) and the *Windward* from the *Leeward*, while he uses his inchoate origins both to excuse and to condemn behavior that "mistook violence for passion, indolence for leisure, and thought recklessness was freedom" (177). Morrison, simultaneously, uses the place names of his geographic autobiography to summon the outset of African slavery in the Western Hemisphere, one end point of the Middle Passage. Generations later in a line intent on "lightening the family complexion" (168), Soaphead fails to land anywhere exact. He addresses his Maker from Earth, but not from any specific location, not even his current lodging in Lorain. Toponyms approximate his place in the world, but, for all his supposed "precision", his behavior forestalls any sense of anchor or belonging.

A misguided, misunderstood child finds in this alienated man exactly the perversity that Morrison envisioned, someone who applauds her desire "to rise up out of the pit of her blackness" as a wish "most deserving of fulfillment" (174) and sees himself the instrument to grant it. After her encounter with him, Pecola too belongs nowhere. Lost in the mappable grid of Lorain, Ohio, she has "stepped over into madness" (206), transported from plotted streets to uncharted realms of delusion, where her dreams of white-privileged beauty come true. Her baby dead, she is exiled to the edge of town, where she picks her way among garbage and weeds, "all the waste and beauty of the world—which is what she herself was" (205). Decades before the critical theories of intersectionality and misogynoir, Morrison acknowledges her "a total and complete victim" (Stepto 1976, 17).

Only Claudia, the true "Interpreter of Dreams", can make sense of this child-mother's pain, by assigning and accepting blame, not to any single wrongdoer but to the collective. "[W]e had failed her", a now wiser friend pronounces; "[a]ll of us—all who knew her—felt so wholesome after we cleaned ourselves on her" (204-5). Claudia's retrospective wisdom is driven home by reduplicated first-person plurals, "we", "all of us", "ourselves", that overwrite the autobiographical voice of the narrator with the communal voice of the audience. From the novel's opening pages, where two sisters pray for magic with seeds in the "*unyielding earth*" (6), to its final paragraph, Morrison damns a nation by tying Pecola's ruin not to named individuals or places but to the ubiquitous unnamed ground. The failure of Claudia and Frieda's marigolds, like Cholly's own failed seed, lies in "the fault of the earth, the land, of our town" (206). Morrison's art sweeps from the concrete to the symbolic and from the specificity of Lorain's nomenclature to the universality of a national call to judgment: "I even think now that the land of the entire country was hostile to marigolds that year" (206). In Debra Werrlein's blunt judgment, "Morrison leaves the ideologies of innocent childhood and benevolent nation standing with Pecola at the local garbage heap" (2005, 70).

As intimate participant-narrator, Claudia earns the right to "explicate" the damning text, suggests Minrose C. Gwin; she "seizes" the "story of Pecola's multiple victimizations and, in so doing, shows us how to read that story" (2002, 326). Indeed, Morrison would argue, reading *The Bluest Eye* rightly requires audiences to share the blame: "My writing expects, demands participatory reading" (Tate 1983, 164). In *The Bluest Eye*, having twinned one child's ruin with the collective ruin that racism unleashes, she offers neither its damaged characters nor its audience any easy escape.[18] In her hometown setting, she seals the fate of a child and exposes the guilt of a nation. John Duvall concludes that through Claudia's voice she projects a "theory of radical implication" in a "communal/self-critique" that excuses no one (1997, 242).

In the years after the publication of her first novel, Morrison speaks at length about the intentions behind her work, about the themes that find their earliest expression in a story set in her Lorain. She writes, she says, about "love" and "how to survive *whole* in a world where we are all of us, in some measure, *victims* of *something*" (Bakerman 1977, 40). In *The Bluest Eye*, she defines a corner of that world of victims by naming its places, and there a toponymic overlay reveals a linguistic landscape inescapably imprinted with the nation's racialized culture.

Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest.

Notes

[1] The primer series, begun in the 1940s with characters Dick and Jane, foregrounding the white heteronormative family of mother, father, son, daughter, younger sister, and dog, provides a much-studied frame for the novel. See Werrlein (2005) for discussion and bibliography.

[2] See, for example, Schreiner 2019; Milne 2012; Hayes 2004; MacKethan 2003; Duvall 1997; Moraru 1996; Bishop 1993; Fishman 1984; Stein 1980. In literary onomastic studies, Peter Backhaus (2020) notes, discussion of characters' names often privileges the symbolic function, typically based on etymology, some of it speculative. Cavill (2016) observes in parallel that place names themselves may have initially carried

ISSN: 0027-7738 (print) 1756-2279 (web) Vol. 70 No. 3, Summer 2022 DOI 10.5195/names.2022.2395

metaphorical weight, but in common usage they bear much less Cratylic potential than the names that authors choose for their characters.

[3] The city of Lorain takes its name from Lorain County, established in 1822 and named by Herman Ely, founder of the city of Elyria, the county seat, after the Lorraine region in France (Lorain County Sheriff's Office 2021).

[4] Morrison recasts the spelling of an actual brand name, *Isaly's*, as *Isaley's*. Isaly's was an ice cream and lunch-counter chain founded by the Isaly family of Swiss immigrants, who settled in Monroe County, Ohio; by the 1940s it had spread throughout Ohio, West Virginia, and western Pennsylvania (Isaly's 2021).

[5] The field of linguistic landscape study makes clear that the physical world can form not just backdrop but readable text (Puzey 2016). The argument here proposes an extension of the concept to the fictive world, to the study of a literary linguistic landscape.

[6] While Lorain's integrated neighborhoods offered more geographic mobility than the segregated areas of many large Northern urban centers in the early twentieth century (Kusmer 1978), housing shortages kept home ownership out of reach for most factory workers regardless of ethnicity. By 1930, in nearby Cleveland, over a third of Black families stretched their budgets by taking in lodgers (Phillips 2001), like the indelicate Mr. Henry who boards with the MacTeers.

[7] The US Census Bureau identifies twelve states in the Midwest region, with Ohio at the eastern boundary and North Dakota, South Dakota, Nebraska, and Kansas at the western boundary. Prior to 1984, the bureau termed it the North Central Region (US Census Bureau 2021).

[8] Within her universalized setting, Morrison makes clear that she chose "a unique situation, not a representative one" in Pecola: "The extremity of Pecola's case stemmed largely from a crippled and crippling family—unlike the average black family and unlike the narrator's" (210).

[9] Gurleen Grewal observes, comprehensively, that Claudia's consciousness "is given an adult understanding, its utopian energy of uninhibited desire channeled toward political critique" (1997, 126).

[10] Pecola is the lost central character in a novel that, as Malin Walther Pereira (1997) recognizes, demonstrates how white standards of female beauty colonize not just one Black girl but an entire community.

[11] In the face of a severe labor shortage, Franklin D. Roosevelt signed Executive Order 8802 on June 25, 1941; it banned "discrimination in the employment of workers in defense industries or government because of race, creed, color, or national origin" and created a Committee on Fair Employment Practice (National Archives).

[12] Whereas in 1910, before World War I, almost 90% of Blacks lived in the rural South, by 1970, a generation after World War II, almost 90% lived in metropolitan areas stretching across the US (Price-Spratlen 2008).

[13] Relocation effectively severed migrants from their former homes, since once in the North many found that the cost of travel and work time lost prevented them from ever seeing their birthplaces again (Phillips 2001).

[14] Letters, family histories, interviews, and hundreds of firsthand accounts preserved by the Federal Writers' Project tell stories of racism, housing shortages, and a job market that plunged with the Great Depression (Mamczur 2019; Wilkerson 2010; Giffin 2005). Reflecting on the emotional toll of the Great Migration, bell hooks sees in *The Bluest Eye* Morrison's attempt "to fictively document the way moving from the agrarian south to the industrialized north wounded the psyches of black folk" (2015, 137).

[15] The two states also replicate the demographics of the region; in 1930 Georgia and Alabama accounted for more Blacks in-migration to Cleveland than any other outside states (Kusmer 1978).

[16] In their deficiencies, Pauline and Cholly embody, in Grewal's appraisal, the cumulative effects of subjugation and, through the defeat that they experience and cruelty that they inflict, demonstrate "the way individuals collude in their own victimization by internalizing a dominant culture's values" (1997, 120).

[17] Although the naming and renaming of Soaphead Church lie outside the scope of this toponymic study, the text points to his hair "pomaded with soap lather" as a conceivable source for the given name and "his days as a guest preacher" for the supposed surname (167).

[18] Morrison warns of her writing, "I do not want to bow out with easy answers to complex questions" (McKay 1983, 145). For *The Bluest Eye* in particular, as Kathryn Earle discovers in teaching it, "The novel depicts a vicious cycle of pain, degradation, and victimization, and it defies any simple interpretation that will enable the reader to put it to rest" (1997, 32).

References

ALAGA Syrup Company. 2021. "About: The ALAGA Story". Accessed 4 August 2021. https://www.alagasyrup.com/

DOI 10.5195/names.2022.2395 Vol. 70 No. 3, Summer 2022 ISSN: 0027-7738 (print) 1756-2279 (web)

Alexander, Allen. 1998. "The Fourth Face: The Image of God in Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*". *African American Review* 32, no. 2: 293–303. Accessed 4 August 2021. https://doi.org/10.2307/3042126

Backhaus, Peter. 2020. "'Harry, You *Must* Stop Living in the Past": Names as Acts of Recall in John Updike's *Rabbit Angstrom*". *Names* 68, no. 4: 210–221.

Baillie, Justine. 2013. *Toni Morrison and Literary Tradition: The Invention of an Aesthetic*. London: Bloomsbury Publishing.

Bakerman, Jane. 1977. "The Seams Can't Show: An Interview with Toni Morrison". *Conversations with Toni Morrison*. Edited by Danille Taylor-Guthrie. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1994, 30–42.

Bishop, John. 1993. "Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*". *The Explicator* 51, no. 4: 252–255.

Blocker, Jr., Jack S. 2003. "Building Networks: Cooperation and Communication Among African Americans in the Urban Midwest, 1860–1910". *Indiana Magazine of History* 99, no. 4: 370–386.

Bonilla, Tamika. 2021. Lorain Historical Society. Interview. July 7.

Campbell, Cheri. 2021. Lorain Public Library System. Interview. July 7.

Cavill, Paul. 2016. "Language-Based Approaches to Names in Literature". *The Oxford Handbook of Names and Naming*. Edited by Carole Hough. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 355–367.

Duvall, John N. 1997. "Naming Invisible Authority: Toni Morrison's Covert Letter to Ralph Ellison". *Studies in American Fiction* 25, no. 2: 241–253.

Earle, Kathryn. 1997. "Teaching Controversy: *The Bluest Eye* in the Multicultural Classroom". *Approaches to Teaching the Novels of Toni Morrison*. Edited by Nettie Y. McKay and Kathryn Earle. New York: Modern Language Association, 27–33.

Fishman, Charles. 1984. "Naming Names: Three Recent Novels by Women Writers". *Names* 32, no. 1: 33–44.

Giffin, William W. 2005. *African Americans and the Color Line in Ohio, 1915–1930*. Columbus: Ohio State University Press.

Gillan, Jennifer. 2002. "Focusing on the Wrong Front: Historical Displacement, the Maginot Line, and *The Bluest Eye*". *African American Review* 36, no. 2: 283–298.

Grewal, Gurleen. 1997. "'Laundering the Head of Whitewash': Mimicry and Resistance in *The Bluest Eye*". *Approaches to Teaching the Novels of Toni Morrison*. Edited by Nettie Y. McKay and Kathryn Earle. New York: Modern Language Association, 118–126.

Gwin, Minrose C. 2002. "'Hereisthehouse': Cultural Spaces of Incest in *The Bluest Eye*". *Incest and the Literary Imagination*. Edited by Elizabeth Barnes. University Press of Florida, 316–328.

Haliburton, Jennifer. 2019. "Remembering Toni Morrison". Ohiomagazine.com. August 2019. Accessed 4 August 2021. https://www.ohiomagazine.com/arts/article/remembering-toni-morrison.

Hayes, Elizabeth T. 2004. "The Named and the Nameless: Morrison's 124 and Naylor's 'the Other Place' as Semiotic *Chorae*". *African American Review* 38, no. 4: 669–681.

hooks, bell. 2015. *Sisters of the Yam: Black Women and Self-Recovery*. New York: Routledge.

Isaly's. 2021. "The History of Isaly's". Accessed 27 November 2021. https://isalys.com.

Johnson, E. Patrick. 2020. "The House That Race Built". *College Literature: A Journal of Critical Literary Studies* 47, no. 4: 678–681.

Jones, Bessie W., and Audrey Vinson. 1985. "An Interview with Toni Morrison". *Conversations with Toni Morrison*. Edited by Danille Taylor-Guthrie. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1994, 171–187.

Kostanski, Laura. 2016. "Toponymic Attachment". *The Oxford Handbook of Names and Naming*. Edited by Carole Hough. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 412–426.

Kusmer, Kenneth L. 1978. *A Ghetto Takes Shape: Black Cleveland, 1870-1930*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press.

Lee, Dorothy H. 1984. "The Quest for Self: Triumph and Failure in the Works of Toni Morrison". *Black Women Writers (1950–1980): A Critical Evaluation*. Edited by Mari Evans. Garden City, NY: Anchor Books, 346–360.

Lee, Trymaine. 2020. "The Heartland: Life and Loss in Ohio's Steel City". Photos by Matt Black. MSNBC. Accessed 4 December 2021. https://www.nbcnews.com/specials/geographyofpoverty-heartland-1/

Long, Lisa A. 2013. "A New Midwesternism in Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*". *Twentieth-Century Literature* 59, no. 1: 104–125.

Lorain County Sheriff's Office. 2021. "History of the Lorain County Sheriff's Office". Accessed 26 November 2021. https://loraincountysheriff.com/history-of-the-lorain-county-sheriffs-office/

ISSN: 0027-7738 (print) 1756-2279 (web) Vol. 70 No. 3, Summer 2022 DOI 10.5195/names.2022.2395

MacKethan, Lucinda H. 2003. "Names to Bear Witness: The Theme and Tradition of Naming in Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon*". *Toni Morrison's* Song of Solomon: *A Casebook*. Edited by Jan Furman. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 185–197.

Mamczur, Patryk. 2019. "Rent Parties, Old Settlers and Jitterbugs: The Everyday Life of African Americans After Their Exodus to Northern Cities as Preserved in Oral Histories, 1917–1945". *Prace Historyczne* 146, no. 3: 535–547.

McKay, Nellie. 1983. "An Interview with Toni Morrison". *Conversations with Toni Morrison*. Edited by Danille Taylor-Guthrie. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1994, 138–155.

Milne, Leah. 2012. "Choosing Africa: The Importance of Naming in *Beloved* and *The Poisonwood Bible*". *CLA Journal* 55, no. 4: 352–369.

Moraru, Christian. 1996. "Reading the Onomastic Text: 'The Politics of the Proper Name' in Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon*". *Names* 44, no. 3: 189–204.

Morrison, Toni. 1993. *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*. New York: Vintage Books.

Morrison, Toni. (1970) 1994. *The Bluest Eye*. New York: Penguin Books USA.

National Archives. 2022. "Executive Order 8802: Prohibition of Discrimination in the Defense Industry (1941)". Accessed 18 April 2022. https://www.archives.gov/milestone-documents/executive-order-8802

Nicolaisen, W. F. H. 1988. "The Toponymy of Remembered Childhood". *Names* 36, nos. 3 & 4: 133–142.

Nicolaisen, W. F. H. 1991. "Name that Past: Placenames in Autobiographical Writings". *Names* 39, no. 3: 239-248.

Pereira, Malin Walther. 1997. "Periodizing Toni Morrison's Work from *The Bluest Eye* to *Jazz*: The Importance of *Tar Baby*". *MELUS* 22, no. 3: 71–82.

Phillips, Kimberley L. 2001. "'But it is a fine place to make money': Migration and African-American Families in Cleveland, 1915-1929". *Journal of Social History* 30, no. 2: 393–413.

Piscopo, Barbara. 2021. Lorain Historical Society. Interview and tour. July 7.

Price-Spratlen, Townsand. 2008. "Urban Destination Selection among African Americans during the 1950s Great Migration". *Social Science History* 32, no. 2: 437–469.

Puzey, Guy. 2016. "Linguistic Landscapes". *The Oxford Handbook of Names and Naming*. Edited by Carole Hough. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 395–411.

Ruas, Charles. 1981. "Toni Morrison". *Conversations with Toni Morrison*. Edited by Danille Taylor-Guthrie. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1994, 93–118.

Schreiner, Samantha. 2019. "Naming, Identity and Intersectionality in Toni Morrison's *Sula*, *Beloved* and *A Mercy*". *English Academy Review* 36, no. 2: 38–48.

Sernett, Milton C. 1997. *Bound for the Promised Land: African American Religion and the Great Migration*. Durham: Duke University Press.

Stein, Karen. 1980. "'I Didn't Even Know His Name': Name and Naming in Toni Morrison's *Sula*". *Names* 28, no. 3: 226–229.

Stepto, Robert. 1976. "Intimate Things in Place: A Conversation with Toni Morrison". *Conversations with Toni Morrison*. Edited by Danille Taylor-Guthrie. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1994, 10–29.

Tate, Claudia. 1983. "Toni Morrison". *Conversations with Toni Morrison*. Edited by Danille Taylor-Guthrie. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1994, 156–170.

Turner, Darwin T. 1984. "Theme, Characterization, and Style in the Works of Toni Morrison". *Black Women Writers (1950–1980): A Critical Evaluation*. Edited by Mari Evans. Garden City, NY: Anchor Books, 361–369.

U.S. Census Bureau. 2021. "Census Regions and Divisions of the United States". Accessed 27 November 2021. https://www2.census.gov/geo/pdfs/maps-data/maps/reference/us_regdiv.pdf

USGS. United States Geological Survey. 2022. Geographic Names Information System. Accessed 18 April 2022. https://edits.nationalmap.gov/apps/gaz-domestic/public/search/names

Werrlein, Debra T. 2005. "Not So Fast, Dick and Jane: Reimagining Childhood and Nation in *The Bluest Eye*". *MELUS* 30, no. 4: 53–72.

Wilkerson, Isabel. 2010. *The Warmth of Other Suns: The Epic Story of America's Great Migration*. New York: Random House.

DOI 10.5195/names.2022.2395 Vol. 70 No. 3, Summer 2022 ISSN: 0027-7738 (print) 1756-2279 (web)

Woo, Jewon. 2019. "Toni Morrison's Lorain". Accessed 2 August 2021. https://uploads.knightlab.com/storymapjs/3bde773f6fea3d4e97bc8a9373de6b0e/toni-morrisons-lorain/index.html

Note on Contributor

Christine De Vinne is professor of English at Ursuline College in Cleveland, Ohio. She studies names in their literary and cultural contexts. Her onomastic work has appeared in *Names*, *Onomastica Canadiana*, *Onoma*, *Antipodes*, and various anthologies.

Correspondence to: Christine De Vinne, Ursuline College, cdevinne@ursuline.edu

ISSN: 0027-7738 (print) 1756-2279 (web) Vol. 70 No. 3, Summer 2022 DOI 10.5195/names.2022.2395