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Confronting The Over-sexualization of Afro-Latina Women in *The Bluest Eye* and *The Poet X*

A Thesis in English

by

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Contents

Introduction

A woman's body "is like a myth. A story distorted, waiting for others to stop and stare" (Acevedo, 48). As a modern Latina woman, Xiomara, the main character in *The Poet X*, is gifted with curves and sexuality that she views as "powerful" allowing her to write poems entitled "Feeling Myself," yet society attempts to reduce her body to just sex (Acevedo, 92). At home, Xiomara is a "myth" to her mother. Her mother views that same body as nothing but a dangerous weapon. To Xiomara's mother, her body is one that should be covered and protected by God because anything less would mean that Xiomara has strayed from her righteous path and seduced her male peers willingly. As a teenage girl, Xiomara has been taught that she is in a losing fight; over-sexualization is all she will ever be unless she is as religious as a nun. She lives in "a story distorted" that leaves her stuck in a constant state of confusion and frustration in Harlem, New York in 2018.

Seventy-eight years before Xiomara's story can be told, a young Black girl, Pecola Breedlove, lives in a society where her dark brown skin is viewed as ugly. Toni Morrison, the author of *The Bluest Eye,* makes Pecola struggle to find her place in a world that celebrates a white standard of beauty, so much so that Pecola idealizes the blue eye. As a young girl Pecola believes that "if those eyes of hers were different, that is to say, beautiful, she herself would be different" (Morrison, 46). In a way, Pecola was set up to be a victim all her life because she couldn't be "different" and "beautiful." Instead, she has been beaten down by a stereotype that predates her, a stereotype that tells men and society that she is promiscuous and sexually aggressive simply because of the color of her skin. In 1940 Loraine, Ohio, Pecola's body was viewed as property and her skin forced her to feel devalued in such a way that compelled her to encapsulate herself in silence.

Before diving into the argument at hand, I think it is important to address and define the terms in which I will be discussing women of color. Afro-Latina is typically a term that describes a woman or girl that is of mixed race usually of African and Latin American descent. However, for the purposes of this paper, the term will not define a mixed-race woman. Instead, the term will be used to show an encompassing relationship between Black and Latina women in the United States. While both races suffer from their unique challenges in America, women of color are still grappling with a shared obstacle, an over-sexualization by society. Xiomara is of Dominican descent living in Harlem, New York in the mid-2000s. Her challenges as a modern woman stem partially from her immigrant mother who was born and raised in a religious Dominican lifestyle that Xiomara does not always connect with. In contrast, Pecola is a young Black girl born and raised in Loraine, Ohio in the 1940s. The society in which she lives does not value Black women and is pulling stereotypical ideology from the Reconstruction era. The Afro-Latina term in this paper will encompass the connected relationship between these groups of women. When speaking specifically about Pecola I will use the term Black to honor the experiences of women who are Black but are not African and to keep an open dialogue for those who find relatability in Pecola's story. To me, Pecola's story goes beyond African descent and Xiomara's goes further than her Dominican heritage therefore the term Afro-Latina will be utilized when both books are being discussed.

On the surface, *The Poet X*, written by Elizabeth Acevedo, and Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* seem to be telling two very different stories, written in different periods, about seemingly different cultures. Yet, when you break past the surface level, I would argue that these two novels, written by women of color, confront the same core message that is sent to adolescent women of color in the United States; women, specifically Afro-Latina women, are promiscuous,

sexual beings, and have bodies that turn on the men in our society. Instead of addressing these issues, society has told Afro-Latina women that this sexual nature that the world views them as is their fault. Rather than shying away from this topic both Morrison and Acevedo confront the over-sexualization of Afro-Latina women through their coming-of-age novels giving a voice to young women who may suffer in silence.

Although many of these experiences highlighted within both novels are shared between Afro-Latina women I will analyze the two novels separately. The first half of the thesis will focus on Toni Morrison's novel *The Bluest Eye*, in simple terms, because the novel was written before *The Poet X*. Morrison gave a foundation for future female authors of color to challenge the sexualized stereotypes when she wrote a novel that utilized controversial topics such as sex, the white beauty standard, and how the Black community used and accepted sexualized stereotypes against their own women. My argument begins by looking at how Morrison used the white beauty standard, Pecola Breedlove's want for blue eyes, and her physical ugliness to highlight how society influenced a young Black girl's ability to hold space and function within a world that only celebrated white beauty. My argument then moves to analyzing Pecola's silence and internalization of sexual stereotypes. For Pecola silence has become a natural occurrence yet many have argued that her silence is a deterioration of her innocence. However, this analysis falls short in my opinion because Pecola's silence is a consequence of sexualized stereotypes and it is used as a symbol for Black women who have had to succumb to internalizing negative ideas about their actions and bodies. After focusing on internalization I evaluate Pecola's community; her familial community, the abandonment of the Black community, and the only female community that does not reject her. My argument then transitions to analyzing how the historical image of the Jezebel is a connecting and shared experience for Afro-Latina women. Structurally,

both novels are discussed within this chapter due to the fact that, in my opinion, the Jezebel has transcended race and affects contemporary Afro-Latina women in a new way. Pecola's detachment from the stereotypical Jezebel allows Morrison to challenge the idealism and long-held acceptance of the controlling image that stemmed from the Reconstruction Era while Xiomara's experience with the Jezebel image infiltrates how society views her curves and body image. My argument shifts to solely focusing on *The Poet X* and illuminates a dichotomy that plagues Latina women. The "virgin/whore" dichotomy stems from the restrictive Christian religion that Mami, Xiomara's mother, and Papi, Xiomara's father, follow. These juxtaposed ideals of the virgin and whore create an internal struggle for Xiomara since she is unable to decipher if the conservative virgin is who she truly should be emulating or if she is the whore that her parents and society have convinced her she is becoming. Finally, my argument ends by highlighting how Xiomara takes action and redefines the negative sexualized stereotypes for herself and society. Instead of succumbing to any of the ideals that her parents and society have forced Xiomara to internalize, she, instead, rediscovers her own body and the positive ways her physicality and sexuality can bring her a new sense of self.

Chapter 1: Beauty Standards in a White-Dominated World

"A little black girl yearns for the blue eyes of a little white girl, and the horror at the heart of her yearning is exceeded only by the evil of fulfillment" (Morrison, 204). At the heart of Claudia's, the narrator's, statement in *The Bluest Eye*, there is a want for something unattainable. For centuries white standards of beauty have dominated society forcing Afro-Latina women to be depicted " not [as] beautiful and admired as … the delicate bodies of their white counterparts" (Gentles-Pert, 199). Instead, Afro-Latina women are expected to be "thick," with "bigger butts," "thick lips" and "voluptuous bodies" (210). This white-dominated idea of Afro-Latina bodies gives way to a stereotype that minority women are more sexual in nature creating an environment where the white standard of beauty is unattainable. A dominant white society has taken their bodies and created a sexualized construct that juxtaposes white women's pure beauty against Black women's. The "white counterparts," for the purpose of this essay, refer to blonde, blue-eyed women, who are celebrated for their thin frames. These white women are seen as delicate, worthy of love, and less promiscuous creating an environment that racially divides women.

Blue Eyes

At the end of Morrison's novel, Pecola receives the eyes that she has longed for throughout the entirety of her story. For many readers, Pecola's want for blue eyes means that she "yearns for a surrogate for whiteness… Whiteness makes her acceptable." I would argue against the notion of "whiteness" since Morrison utilizes the eyes as a way to confront the over-sexualization that white colonialism has placed on Black women instead of finding a "surrogate"

(Hyman, 256). Pecola never finds the "surrogate" instead she has to become a part of a fantasy world locked in her mind. The narrator highlights that Pecola, "prayed for blue eyes" but there was no way that she could emulate white beauty without a miracle; instead Pecola "... would never know her beauty. She would see only what there was to see: the eyes of other people" (46-47). For Black women "the eyes of other people" bring negative stereotypes about their bodies and sexuality. These stereotypes, as highlighted by Sarah Nuamah in her policy research entitled "Public Perceptions of Black Girls and their Punitive Consequences", were forced upon Black women and accepted by society as truth:

> During slavery, the white American majority justified the sexual exploitation of Black women by developing stereotypes that labeled Black women as seductive, hypersexual, and immoral... Now ingrained in American culture, these stereotypes created a hierarchy of femininity, in which white women, understood to be sexually pure and moral, represented the feminine ideal. In contrast, Black women understood to be sexually promiscuous, represented a deviation. (Nuamah, 4)

Pecola is engrossed in a world where the "feminine ideal" is everything but her own image. She has dark, Black, skin, and is deemed ugly by those around her which subsequently influences Pecola to internalize a negative self-image. Since her physical appearance varies so greatly from the world around the "hierarchy" of beauty is established; Pecola is at the bottom of the ladder. However, Morrison has Pecola deviate and latch on to the desire to have blue eyes to show how young Black girls can attempt to reject the internalization of being seen as hypersexual. Morrison displays that Pecola would only see herself through others' eyes thereby making a commentary on how a stereotype can create a negative self-image. Pecola detests her brown eyes because they represent a "hierarchy" that she did not choose to be a part of. Since historical colonialism has told Black women that they are lower in society than white women, Pecola's ability to choose what she desires rejects instead of conforms to the "feminine ideal" that white society has

deemed beautiful. Since the "white majority" has told Pecola that her place is, "understood to be promiscuous" and "represented as deviation" Pecola's desire represents a new pathway in rejecting the stereotypes and negative internalization of an "evil" self-image.

Within Morrison's novel, Pecola's love for blue eyes is not about the need to become a white standard of beauty but it is, instead, a confrontation of over-sexualization in which Morrison challenges us to think about the consequences of sexualized stereotypes placed on black women. During a fight between Pecola's father, Cholly, and mother, Mrs. Breedlove, Pecola feels a deep urge to disappear piece by piece. Within this scene Pecola's need to disappear causes her to become a bystander within her own story. One morning while the Breedloves were at home, Mrs. Breedlove nagged Cholly to get coal for the house so that they could stay warm while he lay in bed hungover. Cholly did not move as swiftly and Mrs. Breelove would have liked so she threatened, "But if I sneeze once, just once, God help your butt" (Morrison, 41). Instead of allowing Cholly to get up in his own time, Mrs. Breedlove provoked Cholly by sneezing which sparked Pecola's parents to physically and brutally abuse one another. During the fight Pecola wishes that she would "disappear" pleading with God to take away pieces of herself; "Little parts of her body faded away… Her fingers went, one by one; then her arms disappeared all the way to the elbow… The legs all at once. It was hardest above the thighs… Then her chest, her neck… Only her tight, tight eyes were left. They were always left. (Morrison, 45). At first glance, Pecola's body parts disappearing would indicate that she wants to leave the turmoil that is presented in front of her yet each body part that leaves Pecola is one that can be used during sexual encounters. The only part of her body that remains is the one she wants to change and cannot be sexualized. To Pecola if her eyes were blue she may have wanted to be seen and would have kept all parts of her body. Her brown eyes connect

with her Black body which carries a hypersexualized stereotype within society. She disappears to leave her parents highlighting that she wants to lose her brown eyes and Black skin to escape society's sexualized stereotypes. Having Pecola hate herself to such an extent that she would wish to disappear brings forth the consequences of sexualizing young Black women. Pecola's self-esteem and self-image are at such a low point at this moment that she hyper-fixates on blue eyes. We see this fixation in Pecola's lack of openness, exemplified through her brown eyes remaining tightly shut, and her inability to stand up against the injustice that is placed in front. She remains a bystander in her own life and in a world that idealizes white beauty. After Morrison has Pecola beg God to disappear the reader is forced into an uncomfortable situation where Pecola's ugliness further pushes her into an obsessive admiration with blue eyes.

Later that day, after her parents have fought, Pecola travels to Mr. Yacobowski's grocery store to buy some candy. While at the store she purchases candy and she idealizes the image of Mary Jane that is staring up at her from the wrapper. Pecola adores Mary Jane's white beauty so much so that she eventually eats the candy hoping to attain the blue eyes that are staring up at her. The narrator states:

> Each pale yellow wrapper has a picture on it. A picture of little Mary Jane, for whom the candy is named. Smiling white face. Blond hair in gentle disarray, blue eyes looking at her out of a world of clean comfort. The eyes are petulant, mischievous. To Pecola they are simply pretty. She eats the candy, and its sweetness is good. To eat the candy is somehow to eat the eyes, eat Mary Jane. Love Mary Jane. Be Mary Jane. Three pennies had brought her nine lovely orgasms with Mary Jane. Lovely Mary Jane, for whom the candy is named. (Morrison, 50)

Morrison, in this moment, highlights the white standards of beauty that are celebrated by mainstream society when she uses language, such as "gentle disarray," "clean comfort,"

"sweetness," and "simply pretty," to describe Pecola's envious fascination with Mary Jane's appearance. This language glorifies Mary Jane's skin color and sweetness placing Pecola as Mary Jane's direct opposite. The description of Mary Jane's appearance is society's views about white women and how their physical features are emblematic. Since Mary Jane is on the wrapper the white idealistic image is circulated for any young Black girl to see. The commercialism of Mary Jane's image highlights the white standard of beauty that Pecola and other Black girls, cannot attain. Morrison's confrontation with Black women's over-sexualization comes when Pecola eats the candy and has "nine lovely orgasms with Mary Jane." Thinking of an eleven-year-old having "orgasms" over a piece of candy generates discomfort for the reader but causes one to question why this candy would bring her such euphoria. The "orgasms" illuminate an inner contentment that Pecola lacks about herself. She cannot relate or become Mary Jane so she eats her hoping the blue eyes can change her from the inside out. Mary Jane is everything that Pecola is not and by stating that Pecola had "orgasms" she is internalizing, both literally and figuratively, the blue eyes because it is in opposition to the stereotypes that women in her culture face. She has internalized the negativity and sexualized stereotypes portrayed by society as highlighted through the action of eating the candy hoping for blue eyes. If the blue eyes could give her figurative "orgasms" the lack of the blue eyes displays that Pecola views herself as being void of happiness due to the over-sexualization placed on Black women.

Visible Ugliness

Morrison creates a young, female character that is beaten down by her community for a physical appearance that she cannot control. Pecola is not an attractive young woman by her

society's standards. Her family's physical features are written in a negative light by Morrison when Claudia, the narrator, describes:

> The eyes, the small eyes set closely together under narrow foreheads, The low, irregular hairlines, which seemed even more irregular in contrast to the straight, heavy eyebrows with nearly met. Keen but crooked noses, with insolent nostrils. They had high cheekbones, and their ears turned forward. Shapely lips which called attention not to themselves but to the rest of the face. You looked at them and wondered why they were so ugly; you looked closely and could not find the source. (39).

Morrison made Pecola, and her family, the literal opposite of the sexualized Black woman. Her physical ugliness is used as a weapon to let Pecola live outside of the normalized reality of a hyper-sexualized stereotype. Morrison could have created a physically attractive character that was similar to "Baartman, a South African slave, [who] was brought to Europe in 1810 for the purposes of displaying her enlarged… genitals and buttocks. … the image of the voluptuous… was harnessed to represent the hypersexuality and inferior intelligence of Black women and justified their exploitation…" (Gentles-Peart, 199). Pecola is the non-sexualized version of Baartman. Since Pecola's ugliness and lack of "voluptuous" body contradicts that of Baartman's image Morrison avoids establishing a "controlling images [that] are used by white supremacist culture[s] to construct and normalize expectations of Black women's attitudes, temperament, sexuality, and bodies" (Gentles-Peart, 203). Morrison uses Pecola as a foil for the construct and normalization of negative expectations.

The foil that Morrison constructs with Pecola's character carries over into her social interactions. Pecola's visible ugliness should give her an entrance into society because she would not be seen as a threat to other women since she is the opposite of a sexualized being. However, the narrator points out that:

> As long as she [Pecola] looked the way she did, as long as she was ugly, she would have to stay with these people. Somehow she belonged to them. Long hours she sat looking in the mirror, trying to discover the secret of ugliness, the ugliness that made her ignored and despised at school, by teachers and classmates alike… She also knew that when one of the girls at school wanted to be particularly insulting to a boy, or wanted to get an immediate response from him she could say. "Bobby loves Pecola Breedlove"... and never fail to get peals of laughter from those in earshot, and mock anger from the accused (Morrison, 45-46).

Pecola experiences isolation from her peers due to her ugliness which emphasizes that she is a consequence of accepted stereotypes leading her to still be used as a threat. Instead of experiencing strong bonds with the women around her, she is left with only her "mirror" as comfort. Her reflection in the mirror is where she is trying to seek answers because she cannot find common ground with these women. The girls at her school ultimately sexualize Pecola's ugliness by attaching "love" to the boys in her class. Her isolation and ugliness do not protect her from the hypersexuality standard placed upon Black women. Her ugliness is used as a weapon instead of her beauty being seen as promiscuous or sexual therefore "ugliness is put on Pecola" by those who can't accept that she isn't a sexual object (Hyman, 258). Morrison actively has the male children who are being mocked lash out in "anger" at the thought of someone believing that they could "love Pecola Breedlove" (Morrison, 46). Morrison generates an encounter through Pecola that readers can empathize with forcing them to observe young Black women as more than sexualized objects.

At the beginning of the novel Pecola goes into the Fresh Veg. Meat and Sundries Store and she is victimized by Mr. Yacobowski, the white store owner. Mr. Yacobowski is not close to Pecola and doesn't have a connection to her other than being a part of the same community; however, his treatment of her emphasizes society's obsession with beauty, specifically white

beauty. As stated previously, Pecola is the opposite of the white standard of beauty and is created to be a physically "ugly" character which isolates her. Pecola merely walks into the store and is instantly isolated for who she is. Morrison writes:

> Somewhere between retina and object, between vision and view, his eyes draw back, hesitate, and hover… he need not waste the effort of a glance. He does not see her, because for him there is nothing to see… She looks up at him and sees the vacuum where curiosity ought to lodge. And something more. The total absence of human recognition—the glazed separateness… But she has seen interest, disgust, even anger in grown male eyes. Yet this vacuum is not new to her. She has seen it lurking in the eyes of all white people. So. The distaste must be for her, her blackness. (Morrison, 48-49)

Pecola is met with hesitation, a lack of "curiosity," an "absence of human recognition," "separateness," "disgust," "anger" and "distaste" portraying how Pecola's "blackness" doesn't turn into a sexualized encounter. While Mr. Yacobowski doesn't view Pecola as a sexualized object for him; he is acting from historical stereotypes and simply rejecting her dark skin as beautiful. Morrison makes Pecola darker due to the fact that "colorism embodies preference and desire for light skin as well as other attendant features. Hair, eye color, and facial features function along with color in complex ways to shape opportunities, norms regarding attractiveness, self-concept, and overall body image" (Thompson et al. 338). If Morrison had made Pecola light skin Mr. Yacobowski may have accepted her and not gazed at her in a way that forced her isolation. Morrison creates this encounter to highlight how white society's ideas of "attractiveness" and "overall body image" do not match the turmoil that the ideals actually place on Black women. Pecola lacks white "attractiveness" to confront the hyper-sexualized stereotypes that burden women of color. This causes Pecola to be more rejectable by the white

community. Since Pecola dawns dark skin she has been separated even further from her community of white peers who do not look like her. For "dark-skinned women were seen as occupying the bottom rungs of the social ladder, least marriageable" which is wrapped up in Pecola's character (Morrison, 338). Mr. Yacobowski and Pecola's encounter seems simplistic yet there is an internalized distance created by Pecola's appearance which influences her lack of community.

Morrison uses Pecola's ugliness to disturb the reader's emotions when Cholly, her father, rapes Pecola for the first time in their kitchen. Throughout the novel, Cholly is a secondary character hiding in the background. He is an ugly drunk who beats Mrs. Breedlove, Pecola's mother while maintaining an heir of mystery. Towards the end of the novel, Morrison reveals a disturbing past in which Cholly was a victim of racism and prejudice. Ultimately, Cholly is a victim himself, yet in a drunken rage, Cholly rapes Pecola. During this scene, Morrison highlights Pecola's ugliness and has it mimic Cholly's emotions:

> His revulsion was a reaction to her young, helpless, hopeless presence… Why did she have to look so whipped?... The clear statement of her misery was an accusation. He wanted to break her neck-but tenderly…What could a burned out black man say to the hunched back of his eleven year old daughter? If he looked into her face he would see those haunted, loving eyes. The hauntedness would irritate him- the love would move him to fury. (161)

The ugliness of Cholly's emotions matches Pecola's "hunched back," "hauntedness," "whipped" look, and "helpless, hopeless presence." Although there are many motivations for rape, one might assume that a rape would, especially for a family member and young girl, require the rapist to have a sexual attraction towards the victim, however, this is not the case for Cholly.

Morrison removes all sexuality from Pecola and the emotions of Cholly to counteract inappropriate sexuality that is placed on Black women (American Psychological Association, Task Force on the Sexualization of Girls, 1). The tone of this scene highlights Morrison's confrontation of over-sexualization because the reality is that a girl deemed completely unattractive and ugly by everyone around her is incapable of escaping a sexualized attack. Hyman argues that "although the incestuous rape is a brutal act for the reader, in a subtle sense, the rape illustrates Pecola's breach with the world that has given her the name ugly…" and amplifies Morrison's confrontation (Hyman, 261). She is the opposite of stereotypes and mainstream beauty but still can't escape the sexualization of society. Since even she can't escape, Morrison pushes us to think about why Black women carry around a burden of sexualization when they can be paradoxically different from the mainstream beauty society celebrates.

Chapter 2: Internalization and Silence

But there are some who collapse, silently, anonymously, with no voice to express or acknowledge it. They are invisible. - Toni Morrison, *The Bluest Eye*

Although Pecola is central to *The Bluest Eye* she harbors a silence that is hauntingly present as if it is its own creature. In Morrison's Afterword to the novel she discusses her goals within the novel; "my attempt to shape silence while breaking it are attempts to transfigure" (Morrison, 215). I want to look here at how Pecola's silence "transfigure[s]" a conversation surrounding sexualization. Pecola utilizes simple, modest language throughout the novel that could be perceived as the result of a choice that Morrison made to make her a believable child who is beaten down by everything around her. Yet, the language does not hide her silent pain, instead, the modest language influences the silence to stand out as a consequence of a stereotype of Black women since it is not hidden behind complex sentence structure and verbiage. During an encounter between Claudia, Frieda, Maureen, and Pecola, the girls reveal that Pecola has, potentially, seen Cholly Breedlove, her father, naked. Maureen originally begins the conversation by asking Pecola if she had ever seen a "naked man" to which Pecola responds, "Nobody's father would be naked in front of his own daughter. Not unless he was dirty too" (71). Pecola unconsciously changes the language from "naked man" to naked "father" raising a question about promiscuity, its representation within the Breedlove home, and how society judges the result of a father's nakedness. The idea that nakedness leads to "dirty" encounters influences the idea that the "nakedness" Cholly presented to Pecola was attached to a sexual situation. Maureen claims she does not care about Pecola seeing her father naked while Frieda claims that's all she cares about. Pecola is seemingly the focus of the conversation yet she remains on the outside in silence until she attempts to put an end to the other girls' thoughts. Pecola uses simple language when she begins to speak to the girls such as, "You better be quiet,"

"Well, you stop talking about my daddy," "I did not" in order to try and silence the others yet her attempts fail. The simplistic language gives the reader a shallow understanding of Pecola's pain at this moment because the girls' thoughts about the potential sexualized situation have taken over. She begins to revert into silence when her voice isn't heard by the others. Her language at this moment is not strong enough to change the other girls' perceptions and break the idea that there was a sexual encounter in her home. Pecola attempts to silence the argument about perceived promiscuity in her household but she fails. Her simplistic language is symbolic of the attempt that Black women make to change the hypersexualized, societal narrative that has historically surrounded them; the narrative has already taken on a life of its own since the girls do not allow Pecola's simplistic language to change their thoughts about the sexual nature of Cholly's nakedness. However, in Pecola's attempts to use silencing tactics to end the argument her body language becomes the focal point for the reader creating a voice for the silent internalization that Pecola has been forced to endure; "Pecola tucked her head in–a funny, sad, helpless movement. A kind of hunching of the shoulders, pulling in of the neck, as though she wanted to cover her ears" (72). Pecola's want to cover her ears shows Pecola's initial collapse into silence highlighting how the promiscuous ideas of Black women can compel a woman to stay silent. The ideas that Maureen and Frieda discuss illuminate the sexualized stereotypes of society and Pecola's response to those ideas portrays Black women's need to stay silent to protect themselves. Pecola tries to block out the voices that reveal her negative internalization since she is "sad" and "helpless" at this moment. Pecola's body language is the consequence of negative stereotyping and her descent into silence at this moment illuminates the confrontation Morrison is engaging in. Morrison brings up the stereotype through Maureen, pushing the idea of Cholly's nakedness, while the confrontation of the stereotype is displayed in the discomfort that

Pecola is forced to endure. Morrison shows the reader that the judgments of society can cause Black women to feel disconnected from a healthy body image and subsequently internalize a negative self-image thereby contradicting the historical idea that Black women desire sex and promiscuity. If Pecola desired sex and wanted to manipulate Cholly into the sexual encounter she would not have tried to make herself physically smaller by "hunching over" and "pulling in" her neck. Morrison's rejection of the hypersexualized stereotype is evident in Pecola's physical reaction to the girls and her silence.

Pecola's silence within *The Bluest Eye* has been evaluated by many as a representation of her powerlessness, low self-esteem, and a consequence of trama filled childhood. As a child who is seemingly abandoned and rejected by the society she lives in, Pecola's silence can easily be read as her way of hiding in order to protect herself since she lacks the power to change her circumstances. Instead of changing her circumstances, Pecola's silence has been viewed as the deterioration of her "child-like innocence" (Mahaffey, 155). However, I would argue that these interpretations fall short of recognizing how Pecola's victimization and silence stem from sexual objectification and a hypersexualized stereotyping of Black women within society. In some ways, Pecola can be seen as superhuman for enduring the pain that society and her family have given her. She has been raped twice by her father, watched her mother survive domestic abuse, had an absent father who was in jail and out of jail, struggled with classmates and teachers who ignored her and suffers from a society that breaks her down for being ugly. However, I believe her silence is emblematic of her victimization taking over and is used as a way for Morrison to confront sexual objectification and stereotypes as a shared experience. In Morrison's "*Foreword*", she states, "But as singular as Pecola's life was, I believed some aspects of her woundability were lodged in all young girls" (Morrison, xii). Pecola's "woundabiliy" highlights

the wounds left by over-sexualization and is relatable to readers since it is a shared experience for Black women and "all young girls". People who are victimized do not always run around telling others of their pain because they are the product of someone else's failure. Morrison's ability to create complexity within Pecola's character that stems from her singularity and silence emphasizes how Morrison is confronting the acceptance of these sexualized stereotypes within society.

By the end of the novel, Pecola's silence has a voice of its own, garnering a different kind of attention to her victimization. Pecola's victimization is underscored by the silence that she portrays to the reader at the end of the novel when she hallucinates and has a conversation with herself. Within this conversation, it is revealed that Cholly has raped his daughter for a second time and Pecola continues to hold on to her silence. She states:

Then why didn't you tell Mrs. Breedlove?

I did tell her!

I don't mean about the first time. I mean about the second time, when you were sleeping on the couch.

I wasn't sleeping! I was reading!

You don't have to shout.

You don't understand anything, do you? She didn't even believe me when I told her.

So that's why you didn't tell her about the second time?

She wouldn't have believed me then either.

You're right. No use telling her when she wouldn't believe you.

That's what I am trying to get through your thick head. (200)

In this scene, Morrison confronts over-sexualization through silence in a multitude of ways. First, Pecola is having an internal dialogue with her subconscious about her need to remain silent. Cholly, rapes his daughter twice consequently sexualizing Pecola to emphasize how Black women and girls cannot escape the promiscuity that has historically been placed upon them. The repetition of the act removed a piece of Pecola's innocence that had been subjected to over-sexualization forcing her to dive further into silence. Morrison confronts a form of sexualization, that Black women want and enjoy sex, with Pecola's silence. Her internalized silence places a barrier between Pecola and the world around her. The fact that the conversation is with Pecola's subconscious enhances her "woundability" via the lack of connection she has with those in her immediate family and society. Pecola illuminates her "woundability" when she displays a shift in her tone. The exclamation points used in the first two lines illuminate Pecola's frustration, however, those exclamation points transition to periods at the end of her statements modeling how her tone and overall emotions have transitioned into internalized pain. Pecola's own subconscious highlights her lack of connection stating that Pecola's own mother "wouldn't believe" her, thereby forcing Pecola to internalize the pain she has experienced. The reader is presented with a challenge to unpack how far Pecola has fallen into victimization. Instead of trying again to tell her mother about the second rape Pecola internalizes the pain and chooses silence as a coping mechanism. Oversexualization is typically seen as an external image through one's behaviors, clothing, body, and engagement within sexual acts but Pecola's internalization of becoming a sexualized object, as seen by a direct internal dialogue, operates differently. At this moment Pecola's internal dialogue shows the consequences of over-sexualization placed on Black women because the sexual objectification that Pecola has experienced places her in a restrictive environment where her own subconscious has conformed to society and makes her

believe that she lacks the ability to confront the negative aspects of over-sexualization. In a sense, Cholly and society have "exploited" her inferiority within society to convince her that there is "No use in telling [Mrs. Breedlove] when she wouldn't believe you" (200). This silent agreement made between Pecola and her subconscious portrays her lack of fight which is harnessed to confront a controlling image of "hypersexuality." Morrison writes a complex ending to her novel with the clash of an external ideal and an internalized consequence.

Secondly, Pecola's silent conversation with her subconscious highlights the negative consequences of rape and the silence that comes from negative social reactions surrounding disclosure. During the conversation Pecola portrays how, "negative reactions [to rape]… serve a silencing function" when she focuses on her mother's inability to believe her after her original disclosure (Ahrens, 263). Since her mother didn't believe her the first time that she disclosed her rape, Pecola becomes silent and speaks to only herself about the second attack. Pecola's own mind convinces and surprisingly agrees with her silence by stating "*No use telling her when she wouldn't believe you"* (Morrison, 200). This negative reaction to the first rape causes Pecola to internalize and convince herself that her voice isn't enough to tell her own story. Her mother victim-blames Pecola when she didn't believe her which causes a "secondary victimization" that many rape victims encounter after they have been exposed to "negative reactions… [that] effectively quash rape survivors' voices, rendering them silent and powerless" (Ahrens 264). Since Pecola has already been created as a powerless victim of society she lacks the ability to disclose the second rape. Instead, the reader can see that Pecola self-blames because she has internalized her mother's victim blaming, which is a common reaction among rape survivors. Morrison has Pecola scold her subconscious when she states:

See there! You don't even know what you're talking about. It was when I was washing dishes.

Oh, yes. Dishes.

By myself. In the kitchen.

Well, I'm glad you didn't let him.

Yes.

Did you?

Did I what?

Let him.

Now who's crazy?

I am, I guess.

You sure are." (Morrison, 199)

This self-blame is Morrison highlighting the consequences of sexualization and rape against Black women. Pecola represents how rape victims that "had been blamed for the assault previously served to heighten feelings of self-blame…survivors become more cautious and critical of future disclosure opportunities and ultimately opted to remain silent rather than risk further harm" (Ahrens, 270). Pecola's scolding of her subconscious illuminates an internalized negative critique; she is critical of herself by questioning her own understanding of the situation and places blame on herself when she asks "*Did you… Let him*" (299). Pecola firmly emphasizes that her subconscious is "crazy" emphasizing the self-blame that she is experiencing. This agreeable nature of her own voice is Morrison's way of showing Pecola's use of silence to portray how much rape can affect the psyche.

The creation of Pecola's damaged psyche forces the reader to grapple with the shame that sexualization can inflict on its victims, allowing Morrison to effectively confront over-sexualization. Pecola's shame stems from the silence that she is forced to endure after the rape by her father followed by her mother's negative judgments. For rape survivors, "... shame evolves within a person when they anticipate, infer, or experience negative judgement and rejection from other individuals, institutions, and /or anticipate judgement…" (Bhuptani, Messman, 2). Polly Breedlove, Pecola's mother, is incapable of believing her daughter about a sexualized attack when the reality of the situation is that Pecola is the victim of an incestual rape. Mrs. Breedlove can't place blame on her husband and accept his faults so she places blame on Pecola which Pecola effectively internalizes by turning her mother's blame into her own shame. The negative reaction and judgment that her mother places on her fosters a growth of shame within Pecola. Pecola's shame is mirrored in her silence when she discusses Cholly with her subconscious stating;

And Cholly could make anybody do anything.

He could not.

He made you, didn't he?

Shut up! ... You always talk so dirty…

You sure are mean today.

You keep on saying mean and sneaky things. I thought you were my friend.

I am. I am…

And you don't have to be afraid of Cholly coming at you anymore.

No.

That was horrible, wasn't it?

Yes.

The second time too?

Yes.

Really? The second time too?

Leave me alone! You better leave me alone.

Can't you take a joke? I was only funning. (Morrison, 199-201)

During this exchange with herself Pecola's internalized blame, displayed by her subconscious questions, and emotional pain, highlighted by her yelling at herself, is on display. Her subconscious is essentially abandoning her when she begins to self-blame which forces Pecola to aggressively tell herself to "Shut up!", "Leave me alone!", "I thought you were my friend", and states that she was just "funning." In this moment Pecola's psyche can't fend off the emotional damage that Cholly has inflicted on her through the two rapes and that her mother has reinforced through victim-blaming and silencing. The ramifications of this sexualized act that Pecola is experiencing highlight how victims with "elevated shame…engage in… self criticism, start isolating themselves from sources of support or feel abandoned… or feel overwhelmed by their emotional pain, all of which are pathways to distress" (Bhuptani, Messman, 3). Pecola's own voice, her subconscious, is causing her distress because she is battering herself with blame. Her subconscious uses a menacing tone when she pushes Pecola to talk about Cholly which is more disturbing than if Morrison had written a gruesome rape scene. Morrison uses Pecola as a way to show that a seemingly ugly, disliked, and outcasted girl can still be a victim of sexualization. Pecola can't hide from the acts and stereotypes that have been placed on her so Morrison emphasizes the internalized struggle and silence that haunts victims

Chapter 3: A Lack of Community

One problem was centering the weight of the novel's inquiry on so delicate and vulnerable a character could smash her and lead readers into the comfort of pitying her rather than into an interrogation of themselves for the smashing. - Toni Morrison *The Bluest Eye*

Familial Community

Morrison's novel forces readers to engage in an exploration of how society and community can abandon those who seemingly go against the grain of societal norms, and outcasts for who they are and the positions they are born into. In the mid-20th century, in the South, Black people were excluded from white society due to segregation laws forcing the white and Black communities to function as opposites. This segregation forced Black people to seek a community with other Black people because of the separation that existed. Even when segregation was no longer the law of the land, it persisted. For example, there was "'massive resistance' in the South to public school desegregation" when the Supreme Court passed "*Brown vs Board of Education (1954)"* (Aldrige, 484). In regards to desegregation, W.E.B. Du Bois was concerned "about the likelihood that African American children would lose a sense of themselves as an African-descended people by attending schools where African and African American history and culture were not included" (484). The environment of racism and white beauty standards would influence some Black people to want to join the white community in order to be accepted.

Within Pecola's hometown of Loraine, Ohio, many Black people, like Mrs. Breedlove and eventually Pecola, preferred to try to join in the white community where they would only be accepted as servants and lower class. In Morrison's novel, Pecola lacks any supportive community, causing her to be subjected to stereotypes and sexualization. Former literature has brought to light that "African American women's primary sources of self-esteem are family,

friends, church and community" (Brown, 528). Pecola is the contrast; she lacks any source that she can pull self-esteem from as her community abandons her consistently. Pecola's family, whom you would expect to be her first line of support in building a positive self-image, instead devalues her and leaves her to fend for herself.

While Pecola was visiting her mother, Mrs. Breedlove, at work, she encountered the daughter of the white family that owned the house. The original description of the young girl reacting to Pecola and the narrator foreshadows the abandonment that her mother will force her to succumb to. Claudia, the narrator, states that the young girl, "wore a pink sunback dress and pink fluffy bedroom slippers with two bunny ears pointed up from the tips. Her hair was corn yellow and bound in a thick ribbon. When she saw us, fear danced across her face for a second. She looked anxiously around the kitchen" (Morrison, 109). The description of the young girl highlights her celebrated beauty and innocence while her initial reaction emphasizes white society's rejection of Black women. The young white girl's "pink" outfit, "bunny" slippers, and "corn yellow" hair, create an angelic image. However, her reaction of fear is a learned behavior and portrays Pecola as the direct opposite of angelic. Mrs. Breedlove's reaction to Pecola dropping the cobbler she made to the floor reinforces the rejection society has of Black women and the young girl mimics the learned fear when she catches a sight of young Black girls standing in the kitchen. During this scene, the narrator states:

> It may have been nervousness, awkwardness, but the pan tilted under Pecola's fingers and fell to the floor, splattering blackish berries everywhere. Most of the juice splashed on Pecola's legs, and the burn must have been painful, for she cried out and began hopping about just as Mrs. Breedlove entered… In one gallop she was on Pecola, and with the back of her hand knocked her to the floor… Mrs. Breedlove yanked her up by

> the arm, slapped her again, and in a voice thin with anger, abused Pecola directly… The little girl in pink started to cry. Mrs. Breedlove turned to her. 'Hush baby, hush. Come here. Oh, Lord, look at your dress. Don't cry no more. Polly will change it. (Morrison, 109)

Pecola's mother mimics society's need to nurture young white women and allow young women of color to fend for themselves. Pecola is physically injured with burns yet Mrs. Breedlove can't find it in her to comfort her own daughter. Instead, she abandons Pecola, hitting her and then consoling the white girl. Morrison writes this scene to demonstrate society's betrayal of Black women. She has taken a relatable moment and turned it into a cruel representation of how a lack of community–including familial community– can damage a child, deteriorating their sense of self. Pecola's physical injuries parallel society's constant barrage of sexualized stereotyping placed on Black women and her mother's acceptance of those ideas. Since the injuries Pecola sustains come from her mother's cooking and from Mrs. Breedlove herself, Morrison challenges the reader to see that the lack of parental nurturing that Pecola is subjected to parallels the internal damage left by sexualization. The burns and physical punishment push Pecola to further embody the damaged self-image that Black women can attain from over-sexualization and celebration of white standards of beauty. Morrison moves the internal consequences to the external in order to highlight how Mrs. Breedlove has internalized the white-dominated ideals of femininity and beauty. Mrs. Breedlove has perpetuated the white-dominant world in this moment and Pecola is again taught that her physical body and visible pain do not matter as much as the young white girl who suffers from abstract fear only to be coddled and comforted. If Morrison had created a mother that was capable of going against society's celebration of white beauty then the novel would have had a vastly different message. Mrs. Breelove's flaws highlight society's

imperfections and push them to the forefront for the reader to grapple with. The reader must consider how Mrs. Breedlove could look at her young daughter and withhold from her the support that might allow her to have a positive self-image. Unfortunately for Pecola, she doesn't just lack a familial community, but her entire community disregards her and thrusts her to the outskirts.

Community Abandonment

Pecola's lack of community may begin with her family, however it does not end there. Pecola lived in Loraine, Ohio during the 1940s, "the eve of both war and economic recovery in American history" and a time of "angry protest movement against racism" (Werrlein, 55). The community that Pecola lives in is struggling to deal with societal issues that cause them to be underrepresented in the mainstream world. Even though "Morrison captures this underrepresented aspect of American history" one wouldn't expect to see a community abandon and neglect one of their own (56). From a bird's eye view Pecola is a member of the Black community of Lorraine, Ohio due to the fact that she lives there, attends the town's school, temporarily lives with the McTeer girls Claudia and Frieda, and is identifiable by the adult citizens that reside in Lorraine. However, for all intents and purposes, Pecola is not a member of her town's Black community because that community doesn't accept her as their own. Instead, they cast her out and leave her to fend for herself.

For the entirety of Pecola's life, she has never been accepted into the society in which she lives leaving her isolated from having a community to help her navigate a world where Black women are sexualized. During Pecola's schooling, she was "ignored or despised at school, by teachers and classmates alike" influencing her understanding of her role within the community (Morrison, 45). She would be the "only member of her class who sat alone at a double desk. The

first letter of her name forced her to sit in the front of the room always" which would seem like an equitable way to seat children because it would lack bias keeping them in alphabetical order; however, another little girl's name fell alphabetically before Pecola's, "Marie Appolonaire" and she "shared a desk with Luke Angelino" (45). Her physical isolation and the teacher's lack of logical order tell Pecola that as a young child, she is not worthy of entry into any community. The isolation she is forced to endure, sitting "alone at a double desk" mirrors the town's lack of acceptance and creates a subliminal message for Pecola. The message tells her peers that Pecola must be kept at a distance and influences Pecola to remain in the background. Adults have told her she isn't worthy of companionship. Similarly, "Her teachers had always treated her this way. They tried never to glance at her, and called on her only when everyone was required to respond" (45-46). Combining Pecola's physical isolation with the adult neglect of her opinions and intelligence the teachers are mimicking white society's stereotypical views of Black women. Historically, while Black women have regularly had their intelligence disregarded, they have been valued for their sexuality and physical image. Being the opposite of even the limited ideals that were celebrated and considered Black identity, Pecola was consistently left without a support system. She had no one to turn to in these moments, highlighting how isolated Black women feel when they cannot uphold the sexualized identity that society tells them that they should be embodying.

Towards the end of Morrison's novel, Pecola becomes pregnant due to incestual rape which causes her community to discard her completely. Morrison transitions from a passive form of community abandonment with Pecola's educational environment to a more severe abandonment surrounding a sexual act that she was the victim of. When she became pregnant by Cholly, her father, the community did not rally around her to support her in a time of

considerable pain. Instead, they gossiped about her and victim-blamed her as if she had any control over the situation at eleven years old. The women in the community gossip about Pecola:

> "Don't nobody know nothing about them anyway. Where they come from or nothing. Don't seem to have no people."
>
> "What you reckon make him do a thing like that?"
>
> "Beats me. Just nasty."
>
> "Well they ought to take her out of school."
>
> "Ought to. She carry some of the blame."
>
> "Oh, come on. She ain't but twelve or so."
>
> "Yeah. But you never know. How come she didn't fight him?"
>
> "Maybe she did."
>
> "Yeah? You never know."
>
> … But we listened for the one who would say, 'Poor little girl,' or 'Poor baby,' but there was only head-wagging where those words should have been. We looked for eyes creased with concern, but saw only veils. (189-190)

As pointed out by the narrator, no one seemed to have concern for Pecola and no one ever built a system of support around her. Instead, her supposed community removes their support by spreading lies and blaming her. Inherently, the women in the community have sexually objectified Pecola in a similar way that white people sexually objectify Black women, boiling her existence down to the rape that she encountered. The sexual act has defined Pecola which parallels how white society has allowed the negative stereotypes of Black women being hypersexualized to overpower them. This Black community in Loraine has unequivocally agreed with the white dominant society's opinions of Black women when they believed they were

actually escaping the stereotypes by victim blaming her. Instead of blaming Cholly and highlighting how men need to take responsibility for their roles in the sexualization of women, the Black female community in Loraine has unconsciously perpetuated the hypersexualized stereotypes that white society has placed on Black women. Pecola has to continue to live with society sexualizing her because of the victim blaming and lack of community that she could not change; especially for rape victims "no matter what they did or how they behave, they are likely to be blamed for their assault… this blame may be so traumatizing that they are effectively silenced by the negative reactions they receive… Such silences thereby obstruct our ability to engage in social change" (Ahrens, 270). Morrison emphasizes this lack of "social change" through the abandonment that even the Black community has engaged in with Pecola. Instead of having effective "social change" for the Black community in Loraine, Pecola has become a sexualized Black girl through the shame that her community has placed on her. As a rape victim, Pecola is being rejected in a multitude of ways by even her Black community which portrays her as "that Black girl". Pecola remains a sexualized victim which eventually deteriorates her.

A Refusal to Engage

Morrison does offer Pecola an opportunity for a community in one of the most unlikely places within Loraine; instead of providing Pecola with friendship with children her own age or adult guidance from her family members, Morrison creates a potential community within a group of "whores" (Morrison, 50). Pecola knows these women due to their location; they live above the Breedlove's storefront and Pecola is consistently able to engage in conversations with them. Morrison lays out their relationship when she states, "Pecola loved them, visited them, and ran their errands. They, in turn, did not despise her" (50-51). No other community members in

Loraine take Pecola in and allow her a place at their table; the "whores" do not "despise her." Morrison is providing Pecola a chance to become humanized by a society that has consistently beaten her down. These women allow her to incorporate herself into their lives and feel as though she has friends. They provide her with the only positive adult influences in her life. China, Poland, and Marie are confident with their sexuality and who they are. These women are the sexualized stereotype of promiscuity that Morrison has consistently confronted; however, she uses them to highlight how Black women can take control of their own vision of themselves. The narrator describes the whores as:

> Three merry gargoyles. Three merry harridans… They did not belong to those generations of prostitutes created in novels, with great and generous hearts, dedicated, because of the horror of circumstance, to ameliorating the luckless, barren life of circumstance, to ameliorating the luckless, barren life of men, taking money incidentally and humbly for their "understanding." Nor were they from the sensitive breed of young girl, gone wrong at the hands of fate, forced to cultivate outward brittleness in order to protect her springtime from further shock, but knowing full well she was cut out for better things and could make the right man happy. Neither were they sloppy, inadequate whores…They abused their visitors with a scorn grown mechanical from use… they took delight in cheating them… Neither did they have respect for women… deceived their husbands… Nor were they protective and solicitous of youthful innocence… They were whores in whores' clothing, whores who had never been young and had no word for innocence. With Pecola they were as free as they were with each other. (55-57)

Morrison writes the whores as women who are unapologetically themselves and understand what they project to the world. She repetitively projects the idea that the women were more complex

than their whore title when she starts her sentences with “Nor were they” or “Neither were they.” By starting her sentences in this way Morrison is confronting the idea that they, and women who engage in sexual activities, are one-note characters. Their complexities stem from their lack of protective nature, not belonging to the full stereotype of generational prostitutes, and displaying the freedom that they live their lives by. As Black women, “peers may influence their sexual socialisation, leading them to believe that sexuality is their only asset or source of esteem” (Brown, 527). The reader’s fear of Pecola hanging out with the whores would be that she would want to become them and become sexually promiscuous consequently adopting the stereotype of hypersexuality that Morrison is confronting. Yet the whores do not ask Pecola to be a part of their lives and Pecola does not follow. Instead, they show her freedom by being “as free as they were with each other” (Morrison, 57). This freedom that they embody presents Pecola with a community that she could emulate; the “whores” are the only positive role models in her life yet she makes a choice not to imitate their actions or lifestyle and they make a choice to not ask Pecola to follow them. There is a silent understanding between the women and Pecola that her lack of engagement in their lifestyle is not a rejection of their sexual freedom but a form of community for a girl who is seemingly abandoned by everyone else. Morrison has the narrator highlight that “if Pecola had announced her intention to live the life they did, they would not have tried to dissuade her or voiced any alarm” (57). Even though this was the case neither party ever stated that their intention of interacting with one another was to have Pecola become one of them. Pecola never needed to believe that her only “asset or source of esteem” was wrapped up in her sexual nature because Morrison has her confront the stereotype of hypersexuality that the whores embrace by not following in their footsteps. The expectation that society and the reader may have is challenged at the end of the chapter with Pecola looking at the women and

wondering “Were they real?” (58). This questioning highlights Pecola's refusal to engage in the potential community that may have saved her eventual deterioration because she could not conceive that Black women could be as hypersexual as society attempts to make them.

Chapter 4: A Controlling Image for Afro-Latinas: The Jezebel

During the slavery era, the controlling image of the Jezebel became one of the most prominent stereotypes used to justify sexual activities between white men and Black women. The Jezebel is a historical image that portrays a, "sexually aggressive Black woman that was… used to position all Black women as sexually deviant and available… [the image has] often presented [Black women] as having a voluptuous body" (Gentles-Peart, 203). The Jezebel is stereotypical in nature and provides negative depictions of Black women as being "oversexed, promiscuous, angry, and loud" (Brown, 525). This image allowed white society to place Black women in a lower position because of the contrast that it presented against white women who were, "portrayed as models of self-respect, self-control, and modesty - even sexual purity" (Jim Crow Museum). For centuries this image has plagued Black women causing them to be seen in a static way and often leaving them with a negative self-image. The prevalence of this image can "result in African American girls and women internalising these stereotypes, believing they provide a standard for conceptualizing African American women and their sexuality" (Brown, 526). Internalization of this negative image can cause Black women to sexually objectify themselves and believe that the only value that they have in society is sex and their appearance. Not only can the image be harmfully internalized, but the stereotype can dictate how non-Black people continue to interact within Black communities. The Jezebel image has eased an acceptance of "sexual aggression" and contributed to Black women neglecting to report their "experiences of harassment [that then] further compounded… the reluctance of some… women to label sexual harassment out of concern that it will lead others to focus on the images of them as sexually promiscuous and draw undue attention to themselves" (Brown, 527). Kamille Gentles-Peart argues that the Jezebel image has continued to inform society's views of Black women in the

modern era due to the fact that the Jezebel has morphed into "the 'thick black woman', the notion that Black women are naturally curvy and voluptuous" (200). This changing ideal, according to Gentles-Peart, is an attempt to create a more positive association between Black women and their bodies: "They attempt to radically ascribe value to the ample Black female physique, associating it with strength and power or the strong Black woman. In fact, the 'large' Black female body is now commonly accepted in African American communities as ideal" (203). Even though the Jezebel image may be changing it has been prevalent for centuries influencing authors like Toni Morrison and Elizabeth Acevedo to need to challenge the image to highlight to society how the stereotype has transcended races and has created negative depictions of Afro-Latina women.

Morrison confronts the Jezebel image of being promiscuous and sexually aggressive by creating a main character like Pecola Breedlove who is in complete contrast with the stereotype. Pecola lacks outward sexuality and internalizes societal views of Black women allowing it to affect her own self-image. Morrison's creation of Pecola's physical appearance is in direct confrontation with the Jezebel stereotype of a voluptuous body and sexual promiscuity as she is consistently described as ugly and lacking attractiveness. Pecola's physical features–which she shares with the other members of her family–include, "small eyes," "narrow foreheads," "irregular hairlines," "heavy eyebrows," "crooked noses," "ears turned forward," "shapely lips" as a result of which people look "at them and wondered why they were so ugly" (Morrison, 38-39). The depiction of the Breedloves and Pecola does not create an image of sexual attractiveness. Morrison's use of negative adjectives leads the reader to imagine a girl who evokes pity instead of a beautiful woman. Pecola's physical appearance goes against how sexualization can "hold a person to a standard that equates physical attractiveness… with being

sexy" (American Psychological Association, Task Force on the Sexualization of Girls, 1). Commonly, symmetry within the face evokes more attractiveness yet Morrison utilized asymmetry in her description to hide Pecola causing her to not meet the standard of physical beauty set by white society. Her ugliness makes the reader pity her yet the ugliness is Morrison's way of highlighting how sexualization can garner too much attention for Black women. Pecola's lack of physical attractiveness causes her to feel the need to hide and not draw attention to herself. As stated previously this is a negative reaction to the Jezebel stereotype that Black women subsequently can encounter. In order to hide herself and remain invisible Pecola utilizes her ugliness as a voice for her, "She hid behind hers. Concealed, veiled, eclipsed—-peeping out from behind the shroud very seldom, and then only to yearn for the return on her mask" (39). Pecola's innate desire to be invisible from society highlights how negative sexualized attention, due to the Jezebel stereotype, can cause one to isolate. Pecola feels more comfortable "veiled," "eclipsed," and hidden behind a "mask." Her ugliness is her mask and veil that conceals the hurt that is inflicted on Black women through the stereotype. Pecola embodies Morrison's confrontation with the Jezebel; Morrison is creating a character that highlights how over-sexualization can steal young, Black, female youth. Not only is Pecola physically a contradiction to what women are expected to look like, but she also lacks the sexual appetite that the Jezebel is known for having.

One component of the Jezebel image that controls how Black women are viewed is the sexual aggression and manipulation that the history of the Jezebel carries. For Pecola, sex is not something that she can understand. She does not want to have sex and the idea of naked men is considered dirty. After having her period for the first time Pecola and Frieda Mac Teer have a conversation about love:

"Is it true that I can have a baby now?"

"Sure," said Frieda drowsily. "Sure you can."

"But … how?" Her voice was hollow with wonder.

"Oh," said Frieda, "somebody has to love you." …

Then Pecola asked a question that had never entered my mind. "How do you do that? I mean, how do you get somebody to love you?" (32)

Although this conversation can be seen as childlike due to the casual questions being asked, Morrison foreshadows how Pecola's innocence will be lost due to a sexual act. The "love" that Pecola is curious about represents an innocence that she still maintains before she has been sexualized. The Jezebel image has not affected her yet because of the innocence that she maintains at this moment. Morrison sets up her challenge of the stereotype by first displaying young Black youth that has not become a product of negative societal views. It is not until after this moment of menstruation and innocence that Pecola becomes a byproduct of the Jezebel image. During the winter months, Pecola is personally confronted with the Jezebel image for the first time. Maureen, Claudia, Freida, and Pecola were walking to buy ice cream. The girls began to discuss if they had begun menstruating; Maureen and Pecola were the only two of the group who had begun this process and Maureen started to explain the natural function highlighting why periods occur. As the girls began to talk about babies and how they get blood Maureen made a comment about boys having "all sorts of things they don't need" which sparked a conversation between her and Pecola about seeing her father naked (Morrison, 70). Morrison writes,

[Maureen] must have been thinking about her last remark, for she said to Pecola,

"Did you ever see a naked man?"

Pecola blinked, then looked away. "No. where would I see a naked man?"

"I don't know. I just asked."

"I wouldn't even look at him, even if I did see him. That's dirty. Who wants to see a naked man?" Pecola was agitated. "Nobody's father would be naked in front of his own daughter. Not unless he was dirty too."

"I didn't say 'father.' I just said 'a naked man.' "

"Well…"

"How come you said 'father'?" Maureen wanted to know. (71)

The reader can notice that the original conversation about "love" that emphasized Pecola's innocence turns into a sexualized conversation that is deemed "dirty" through the influence of the Jezebel image. As a young Black woman, Maureen stereotypes Pecola assuming that she would have seen a "naked man." Pecola's agitation and frustrated reaction to the questioning highlights her need to not be a product of the Jezebel image. Pecola's own Black community, through Maureen's character, has used the Jezebel image to sexually objectify their own highlighting how the historical image has infused itself into all areas of Pecola's life. Morrison creates this challenge to the stereotype by infusing Pecola's own community with the acceptance of the Jezebel image. Furthermore, knowing that Cholly rapes his daughter, later in the novel, brings another layer to the Jezebel's influence at this moment because of her defensiveness at the question. This defensiveness could represent Pecola's fear of labeling "sexual harassment out of concern that it will lead others to focus on the images of them as sexually promiscuous and draw undue attention to themselves" (Brown, 527). Since Pecola is already a character who attempts to recede into the background her defensiveness, coupled with the "dirty" conversation about naked men, portrays how the Jezebel image ultimately breaks down innocence within the Black community. The Jezebel image has sparked fear within Pecola in this moment which is

Morrison's way of confronting sexualization by exposing the emotions that come from the negative stereotype. Morrison is challenging the reader to question the acceptance of an image that negatively affects Black youth's self-image.

Lastly, Morrison confronts the Jezebel image that plagues Black women when she writes about Cholly's rape of Pecola. Cholly, Pecola's father, comes home one night in a drunken state and finds Pecola in the kitchen. Her body language mixed with his inebriated mind causes him to lust after his daughter while being stuck in a memory of her mother. For Cholly, the memory is a positive one as it is the exact moment he falls in love with Mrs. Breedlove however, by coupling the memory with his drunken state Morrison has created a distorted reality for Cholly in which he can't decipher what is real and what is stuck in his mind. Morrison has Pecola mimic body language that her mother, Mrs. Breedlove, was performing the day that Cholly first met her causing him to function off of guilt and former lust. Morrison writes as Cholly rapes Pecola:

> The timid, tucked-in look of the scratching toe-that was what Pauline was doing the first time he saw her in Kentucky… The rigidness of her shocked body, the silence of her stunned throat was better than Pauline's easy laughter had been… He wanted to fuck her—tenderly. But the tenderness would not hold… Following the disintegration—the falling away—of sexual desire, he was conscious of her wet, soapy hands on his wrists, the fingers clenching, but whether her grip was from a hopeless but stubborn struggle to be free, or from some other emotion he could not tell. Removing himself from her was so painful to him he cut it short and snatched his genitals out of her dry harbor of her vagina. She appeared to have fainted. Cholly stood up and could see only her grayish panties, so sad and limp around her ankles… The hatred would not let him pick her up, the tenderness forced him to cover her. So when the child regained consciousness, she was

> lying on the kitchen floor under a heavy quilt, trying to connect the pain between her legs with the face of her mother looming over her. (Morrison, 162-163)

Morrison writes this scene from Cholly's point of view instead of Pecola's as a way to confront the Jezebel image. Cholly's point of view portrays society's ideals about the Jezebel being promiscuous which, "reinforces rape myths, promoting the idea that an African American woman may have behaved in a way that facilitated her victimisation" (Brown, 527). The scene being written from Cholly's point of view reinforces the idea that Pecola facilitated her "victimisation" however, the emotional components of "hatred" and "disintegration" that Cholly feels towards Pecola coupled with his mental state reveals that the Jezebel, and Pecola, were not manipulative or promiscuous. Pecola did not manipulate Cholly into thinking there was a sexual attraction between the two of them nor did she present him with the idea that she wanted pleasure from a sexual experience. The description of the rape does not garner a sexual tone, instead, it is horrific for the reader. Pecola's demise due to the rape, confronts the ideas of promiscuity and wanted pleasure for Black women. Pecola is not in control of her own body, Cholly is and she is physically damaged as a result. By showing the reader an actual rape and the consequences of rape–Pecola's "dry harbour," her fainting spell, the "pain between her legs," and the shocked silence–Morrison emphasizes the physical consequences of rape. The Jezebel with its animations of promiscuity and pleasure, which Morrison underlines, is rooted in rape. Morrison writes Pecola as being detached from sexualization and pleasure in this moment. Her use of negative adjectives to portray both the interior and exterior pain counters the Jezebel image stereotype. Contemporary depictions of the Jezebel image portray "African American women as hyper sexual" and " in complete control of their sexuality" such that "some women may [even] find this perception of sexual power enticing, given the devalued status they may

feel" (Brown, 527). However, Pecola's character resists this contemporary ideal of the Jezebel because of her lack of participation within the sexualized act. While elsewhere in the novel Morrison shows how Cholly's sexual abuse at the hands of white men asks the reader to empathize with him, yet here Morrison calls out Cholly and subsequently Black men for their participation in sexually objectifying Black women. Cholly's sexual objectification and sexualized act devalue his own daughter as a young Black woman: "the hatred would not let him pick her up, the tenderness forced him to cover her."(Morrison, 163). Cholly does attempt to protect Pecola by covering her "tenderness," which I would argue is her innocence. In this moment Cholly expresses guilt for his role in sexualizing his own daughter. Through Cholly's character, Morrison confronts the Black community's acceptance and even embrace of the Jezebel figure. Morrison makes Cholly's want to give "tenderness" to his daughter which is an uncomfortable experience for the reader due to the fact that the incestual act is violent against Pecola's emotional well-being, her psyche, and her body. Pecola is incapable of experiencing sexual power during this scene thereby challenging the manipulative control and perceived pleasure that the Jezebel embodies. Instead of utilizing sexual power Pecola is left in a damaged state, underscoring how damaging the Jezebel image can be both physically and internally.

Similarly to how the Jezebel image has created a stereotyped idea of Black women Latina women have also become a sexualized archetype within society. Latinas have become, "essentialized as… eroticized… promiscuous and out of control" and "constructed as hypersexual and lower-class urban girls of color" (Garcia, iix-xii). Latina women are also expected to have curvy bodies that are viewed as sexual in nature placing an unrealistic expectation of beauty onto Latina women. Acevedo highlights through an Afro-Latina woman, Xiomara, how the Jezebel image has become generalized and negatively influences female

Latina women when Xiomara wants to hide her own body from society. At the beginning of *The Poet X* Xiomara writes about how she feels "unhide-able". She states:

> I am unhide-able.
>
> Taller than even my father, with what Mami has always said
> was "a little too much body for such a young girl."
> I am the baby fat that settled into D-cups and swinging hips
> so that the boys who called me a whale in middle school
> now ask me to send them pictures of myself in a thong.
>
> The other girls call me conceited. Ho. Thot. Fast.
> When your body takes up more room than your voice
> you are always the target of well-aimed rumors,
> which is why I let my knuckles talk for me.
> Which is why I learned to shrug when my name is replaced
> by insults.
>
> I've forced my skin just as thick as I am. (Acevedo, 5)

Within the poem, Xiomara addresses how negative sexual stereotypes of Latina women are affecting her when she speaks about her mother's views about her body, society's negative language towards her, her need to replace their sexual ideas with physical violence, and her physical voluptuous appearance. Physically, Xiomara falls into the historical physique of the Jezebel through her "D-cups" and "swinging hips" emphasizing the sexualization of Latina

bodies. These physical features portray the transition that Xiomara has literally and figuratively made into a sexualized object. Acevedo emphasizes this point when Xiomara writes about the transition of a young man's thought process about women. She is no longer seen as a "whale" and her curves have become sexually objectified by the young boys because they need to see her in her "thong". The boys represent society's sexual objectification of Afro-Latina women's curves creating a message of hypersexuality. This hypersexuality associated with the voluptuous body that is depicted in Acevedo's writing influences Xiomara's abandonment of a positive acceptance of her own body. Acevedo begins to confront the consequences of generalizing the Jezebel image for Afro-Latina women with the physique that she writes for Xiomara since hypersexuality has been associated with voluptuous curves in the 20th and 21st centuries. Xiomara is being depicted as having a "shapely body [that] was seductive" (Brown, 526). Her "shapely figure is "unhide-able" prompting Acevedo to confront not only the image of the oversexualized Jezebel and Latinas but the conforming thoughts that Xiomara has about herself. Xiomara has naturally moved through puberty causing her to physically transition but it is the outside messaging that has told her that these changes make her sexually attractive and promiscuous. The boys and her mother have taught Xiomara that her body brings unwarranted attention displaying why women would want to hide themselves from the unwelcome sexual objectification. That internalized need to hide from sexualized attention is a relatable emotion for women of Afro-Latina ancestry as the Jezebel has become a more generalized contemporary stereotype. Acevedo has highlighted Xiomara's conformity in her thinking about her own image by stating that her "body takes up more room than your voice" Latina women have come to believe that the only piece of value they have within society is their bodies. Acevedo's main character represents the Afro-Latina female experience by exposing how "their focus on their

bodies demonstrates that they themselves have not evaded the dominant norms… they place emphasis on their bodies, thus reinforcing, rather than disrupting the body's significance" (Gentles-Peart, 207). For Xiomara, the Jezebel image has been reinforced by her peers, her mother, and the men she encounters which has modeled an accepted thought process that Xiomara conforms to. Acevedo further emphasizes the negativity of a recurring Jezebel image when she has Xiomara's mother judge and objectify her.

Xiomara cannot escape the sexualized stereotype even in her own home; her mother, Mami, has sexualized her daughter using her faith. Mami is the representation of how "stereotypical depictions may result in…girls and women internalising these stereotypes, believing they provide a standard for conceptualising… women and their sexuality" (526). As an immigrant from the Dominican Republic Mami has come to the United States where white culture has typically dominated. Since the Jezebel is a white-created image from a slavery-ridden South, it is unsurprising that it would influence her to look at her daughter in a way that white culture views Afro-Latina women. Instead of providing emotional support for Xiomara who is clearly going through puberty she negatively sexualizes her changing physique by stating "a little too much body for such a young girl." (Acevedo, 5). Having Mami use the phrasing "too much" gives an undertone of disapproval over a body that she cannot control. The undertone provides negative messaging about Xiomara's new body influencing her to think that she should avoid promoting her body in an outward way because it is "too much" and sexual. Mami views her as society does as hyper-sexual and promiscuous solely based on her physical features. By reinforcing this idea for Xiomara she is setting her daughter up for a lifetime of insecurities, yet in the same breath, she is showing Xiomara how the world views her. Acevedo further emphasizes how the hypersexuality narrative being placed on Xiomara, from multiple places,

creates an environment of insecurity for her internally; “This stew of mixed-up ingredients: / partly flattered they think I’m attractive, / partly scared they’re only interested in my ass and boobs, / and a good measure of Mami-will-kill-me fear sprinkled on top” (32). Instead of being Xiomara’s ally, Mami unconsciously conforms to a white world that she has grown accustomed to and breeds “fear” into Xiomara’s thoughts about her own attractiveness and her attractiveness towards boys. Acevedo utilizes these “mixed-up” feelings to reveal how the Jezebel image has become more generalized forcing young Latina women to believe that they are “too much” and feel “scared” that boys are “only interested in… ass and boobs”. Since Mami is one of the “ingredients” causing this turmoil for Xiomara, Mami has revealed her own conformity to a white dominant view of Latina women. By illuminating the negativity of over-sexualization stemming from the Jezebel, Acevedo is portraying the hardships that Latina women face; the conformity her mother engages in and the unfair sexualization of her daughter parallels the experiences that Black women face in regards to the Jezebel.

Finally, Acevedo has Xiomara highlight the consequences of the Jezebel by having Xiomara receive harmful language and turn into the aggressive loud personality of the historical Jezebel. Since Xiomara is “unhide-able,” Acevedo allows the Jezebel to influence Xiomara’s interactions with other women in her peer group. After highlighting what the boys think about her body Xiomara discusses how the girls in her peer group view her based on her physical appearance; “The other girls call me conceited. Ho. Thot. Fast” (5). There is no explanation given for why the girls feel this way about Xiomara therefore the reader has to make the connection that the sexual slurs, “Ho. Thot. Fast”, being thrown at her are the result of her physical appearance. The girls have associated Xiomara’s appearance with sex creating the assumption that she is throwing sex around and is easy. “Latinas are essentialized as… eroticized

as promiscuous and out of control" similar to that of the Jezebel therefore Acevedo is exposing how Latina women are not privy to a world where the Jezebel does not influence how they are viewed (Garcia, vii). Xiomara's promiscuity is asserted within the slang even though no actions were given to justify the profanity. Similarly to Mami, the girls have replicated the sexualization that the white world assigned to the curves of Latina women. The slurs and stereotypes that the girls are perpetuating cause Xiomara to mirror the Jezebel's perceived personality of being "oversexed, promiscuous, angry and loud" (Brown, 525). Within the "Unhide-able" poem the representation of the Jezebel that Xiomara is embodying is displayed when she states, "When your body takes up more room than your voice / you are always the target of well-aimed rumors, / which is why I let my knuckles talk for me. (Acevedo, 5). Xiomara becomes the angry portion of the Jezebel's personality when she feels the need to confront the girls with her "knuckles". She feels she has lost that "loud" voice because the stereotypes have taken over and forced her body to take "up more room". Even though Xiomara is embodying the Jezebel by the end of this poem through her angry actions Acevedo is using Xiomara's anger to highlight how the Jezebel has caused Afro-Latinas great pain. The image has stripped Afro-Latina women of their voices causing negative reactions; Pecola moves into silence and rejection of the Jezebel while Xiomara has to embrace the Jezebel but lose a part of herself instead.

Chapter 5: Relationships

No one, not even your twin brother, / will understand the burden / you feel because of your birth; / your mother has sight for nothing but you two and God; / your father seems to be / serving a penance, an oath of solitary silence - The Poet X, Elizabeth Acevedo

The Virgin

Within *The Poet X* Elizabeth Acevedo utilizes familial and religious relationships to confront the over-sexualization of Latina women. Mami, Xiomara's mother, is a representation of a religiously traditional idea of Latina women. She is an immigrant to the United States and has latched on to her religion allowing the Catholic church's ideals to guide her parenting and feelings about sex. For Mami, a woman should be modest, hide their bodies from men, and keep to themselves so that others in the community do not get the wrong impression. She unconsciously blames women for the unwarranted attention that men give them. Her thought process is so stringent that she isolates herself from anyone who does not follow her own moral guidelines. The church is where Mami feels the most comfortable and herself, yet her relationship with God has created a barrier between herself and Xiomara. Unknowingly, Mami has created a suffocating environment for a young woman trying to find her way in a modern United States. Living in Harlem is a vast change from the life Mami lived in the Dominican Republic and the society ideals that she holds consistently clash with her daughter's Americanized lifestyle. Acevedo pushes Xiomara's mother to embrace an extreme version of religion instead of just making her a practicing Catholic;

> Your mother will engrave
>
> your name on a bracelet,
>
> the words *Mi Hija* on the other side.

This will be your favorite gift.

This will become your despised shackle.

Your mother will take to church

like a dove thrust into the sky.

She was faithful before, but now

she will go to Mass every single day.

You will be forced to go with her

Until your knees learn the splinters of pews,

the mustiness of incense,

the way the priest's robe tries to shush silent

all the echoing doubts

ringing in your heart (Acevedo, 20)

In Xiomara's description of her mother the reader can feel the barrier within their relationship through the metaphor about her bracelet being a "despised shackle," Xiomara's statements about being "forced to go with her," and her ending sentiments about "all the echoing doubts / ringing in your heart." By juxtaposing Mami and Xiomara's feelings about religion, at the beginning of the novel, Acevedo foreshadows the conflicts that will stem from Mami enforcing her religion and restrictive practice upon Xiomara. Xiomara states, "She was faithful before, but now / she will go to Mass every single day." Mami's faith is highlighted as being more than that of the average practicing Catholic because of the frequency she attends Mass. For Xiomara, Mami and the church have morphed into the same establishment with one representing the other. This is

shown when Xiomara describes “You will be forced to go with her/ Until your knees learn the splinters of the pews.” The forced action coupled with the splinters being embedded in her knees alludes to the fact that her mother and the church have no separation. Xiomara cannot escape the forced religion and cannot escape the physical pain that Mami and religion are causing her to endure.

Xiomara has been conditioned to be the “good” girl but she struggles to fit into the sexuality standards set by Mami and the church. But what does a “good girl” actually mean for a Dominican teenager living in Harlem? She could mirror what the church and Mami want by sticking to the “virgin/whore dichotomy” and living by a set of “restrictive extremes” that can be “intrinsically dangerous” (Garcia, vii). These extremes can produce negative messaging for young women, a deterioration of a positive relationship with their bodies, and a consistent inner struggle between how to represent both sides of the dichotomy without committing to one or the other. The dichotomy teaches a young woman that she must maintain chastity and that to be the “virgin” one must only express themselves sexually “within a marriage or [through] another type of culturally sanctioned monogamous union” (Gottschall et al. 2). By perpetuating the “virgin” as the celebrated idealistic woman (modest, conservative, etc.), society tells Latina women that being the opposite makes you a “whore” which can cause a natural self deterioration within the psyche for women. According to Jonathan Gottschall, “Women who fail to embody this [virgin] ideal are ‘whores’: they are explicitly or symbolically immoral and dangerously concupiscent” (Gottschall et al. 2). For Xiomara the church and her mother celebrate the “virgin” and try to guide her away from the “whore” stereotype that society and the church has unfairly created for women who deviate from their expectations. In a poem entitled “Church Mass” Xiomara

illuminates her internalized struggle with how the church and her mother want her to present herself to the world and live:

> When I'm told girls
>
> Shouldn't. Shouldn't. Shouldn't.
>
> Why I'm told
>
> To wait. To stop. To obey
>
> When I'm told not to be like
>
> Delilah. Lot's Wife. Eve.
>
> When the only girl I'm supposed to be
>
> was an impregnated virgin
>
> Who was probably scared shitless.
>
> When I'm told fear and fire
>
> are all this life will hold for me.
>
> When I look around the church
>
> and none of the depictions of angels
>
> or Jesus or Mary, not one of the disciples
>
> look like me: morenita and big and angry. (Acevedo, 58-59)

Xiomara highlights the "virgin" component of the dichotomy that she is expected to be by stating that the "only girl I'm supposed to be / was an impregnated virgin.".The "impregnated virgin," also known as "Mary," is literally an impossible standard. Xiomara points out to the reader that she is incapable of meeting this standard when she uses "was" in the past tense as if she has already made the transition from "virgin" to "whore." The stringent expectation leaves no room

for error creating an environment of “fear and fire” which foreshadows that she can only represent the “whore” in the eyes of the church and Mami. Xiomara further emphasizes the rejection of any type of deviation from the “virgin” by stating that she is consistently told that she “Shouldn’t,” “To stop. To obey,” and “not to be like / Delilah. Lot’s Wife. Eve.” Mami even says, during a conversation with Papi that is overheard by Xiomara, “I just don’t know about that girl…Recently, she’s got all kinds of devils inside of her” (62). Then Papi confirms Mami’s suspicions by saying, “It’s that age. Teenage girls are overexcited. / Puberty changes their mind. Son locas” (63). Xiomara’s parents have revealed Xiomara’s deviation from the “virgin” by saying there are “devils inside of her” and that she is now “loca” or crazy. Their disapproval is emphasized by the language they use about their daughter. Her parents have influenced Xiomara’s mindset about how she views her own sexuality, emphasized by the fact that she states “that soon my feelings will drown me faster / than the church’s baptismal water” (63). Her “feelings" drowning her is the consequence of Mami and Papi’s negative view of the deviation from the virgin. This mindset that her parents and the church maintain inherently sexualizes Latina women, and Xiomara, who find empowerment in their bodies. Nonetheless, Xiomara states that she “was” supposed to be the “impregnated virgin” signaling to the reader that this is not something she wants to become or can maintain because the language switches to the past tense (59).

Within the novel Xiomara internally struggles with the two sides of her own nature. She eventually allows her own voice and feelings to drive her into a new relationship with a boy named Aman. The relationship between the two characters is innocent with Aman valuing her mind and voice over her body. Xiomara finds confidence in Aman’s views of her influencing the revelation that she is not just viewed as a sexualized object that her mother and society have set

her up to believe. With Aman, Xiomara feels free to act like a normal teenager who does not have to conform to the restrictive set of guidelines that her mother and the church have placed upon her. Mami had previously laid out strict dating rules for Xiomara that were rooted in religion,

I can't have a boyfriend
until I am done with college.
And even then,
she got strict rules
on what kinds of boy
he better be.

And Mami's words
have always been
scripture set in stone.

So I already know
going to a park
alone with Aman
might as well be
the eighth deadly sin.

But I can't wait
to do it anyway. (Acevedo, 91)

Mami has grounded her ideals about Xiomara's dating life in religion which is portrayed through needing the boys that Xiomara dates to be rooted in "scripture" which influences Mami's judgment that an innocent park date would be considered the "eighth deadly sin." For Mami, if a man was engaged with "scripture" and fundamentally grounded in religion then he would have the qualities necessary for her daughter. With religion guiding a man's mind Mami believes that there is less chance of promiscuity with Xiomara because she would be modeling the "virgin" components of the virgin/whore dichotomy (Gottschall et al. 2). Yet, the reader sees Xiomara begin to detach herself from the religious ways of her mother when she commits the "eighth deadly sin" and shows her excitement to go to the park anyway. Acevedo utilizes Xiomara's rejection of her mother to confront the conservative mold of sexuality that she is trying to make Xiomara fit into. Xiomara claims that she can't wait "to do it anyway," breaking away from the mold of the virgin. For Mami, this action would instantly mean that Xiomara had slipped into the "whore" complex of the "virgin/whore" paradigm and Mami would have failed to mold her daughter into the "virgin." This transition allows Acevedo's readers to empathize with Xiomara because she is taking control of her own life and attempting to forge her own path; Xiomara is confronting her mother's version of what sexuality should be for Latina women in this moment which is emphasized by the innocent environment of the date. Xiomara's internalized battle at this moment highlights how the "virgin" ideals of sexuality are a burden for Xiomara representing the negative aspects of attempting to fit into a mold of conservatism. The abstinence of sexuality that Mami is trying to enforce actually places more sexualization on Xiomara due to the fact that her natural emotions and feelings prevent her from embracing the church thereby transitioning Xiomara into the "whore."

When Mami is confronted with the realization that Xiomara is not the "virgin" that Mami had hoped for she clings to her religion in such an extreme way that she attempts to physically and mentally break Xiomara of her "whore" ways. Xiomara and Aman had been able to hide their relationship from Mami for the majority of the novel, going to the park when she was supposed to be at confirmation class, sneaking out to be with each other on early release days, and texting under the covers at night. After spending a day together and ice skating, Xiomara and Aman ride the train and Xiomara misses her stop due to the fact that the two cannot stop kissing each other. After leaving the train and walking home she arrived at the front door of her apartment. Still in complete bliss, she overhears her mother yelling. She hears Mami talking about someone with a "tongue down his throat" and that she "had to get off the train a stop early" prompting Xiomara to realize that "Mami's eyes were a fan / and my make out session on the train / was the shit hitting it" (Acevedo, 192). Mami discovers that Xiomara is moving into the "whore" dichotomy which causes Mami to move even further into the extreme to try to keep Xiomara grounded in the "virgin" ideal. This moment is the first time that Mami is fully confronted with the realization that her daughter is not the "virgin" that she wants her to be. In a complete rage:

> Mami / drags / me / by /my / shirt / to / her / altar / of / the / Virgin. / Pushes / me / down / until / I / kneel. / 'Look the Virgin Mary in the eye, girl. Ask for forgiveness.' / I / bow / my / head / hoping / to / find / air … / 'Don't make me get more rice. Mira la Santa María in the eye…' / 'Last chance, Xiomara. 'Santa María, llena eres de gracias…'/ My / mother / yanks / my / hair, / pulling / my / face / up / from / the / tiles, / constructing / a / church / arch / of / my / spine / until / Mary's / face / is / an / inch / from / mine; / I / am / no / ant. / Only / sharply / torn. / Something / broken. / In / my / mother's / hand…

> Mami's hard hands / make me dizzy and nauseous. / Mami prays and prays / while my knees bite into grains of rice. / Mami repeats herself / while her statue of the Virgin watches. / The whole house witnesses / as I pray this steep, steep price. (198- 209)

Instead of trying to understand her daughter at this moment, Mami aggressively forces religion on Xiomara through the consistent repetition of having Xiomara ask for forgiveness to "Mary," and the physical manipulation of Xiomara's spine into a "church arch." Mami's physicality is a representation of her loss of control over the "virgin" ideal which parallels society's forceful attempts to control the image of Latina women. As Xiomara's sexual nature has been exposed the "virgin" image that Mami was trying to make her conform to breaks. Mami is left with no means of saving Xiomara from the "whore" so she physically abuses her into submission with the hope that the physicality will cause Xiomara to blindly accept a religious representation of the virgin. Xiomara has become "something broken" because of the demands that the virgin/whore dichotomy has placed on her. In this battle between Mami and Xiomara, Acevedo portrays society's ability to break young women with negative stereotypes. Acevedo confronts how Latina women are sexualized with this physical scene and internal breakage that Xiomara is experiencing. What Mami believes is that Xiomara needs to reject the promiscuity she was engaging in and accept the image and virtues of the Virgin Mary. Acevedo is making a commentary on how Mami has sexualized her own daughter, subconsciously, due to the fact that she is trying to avoid the harmful negativity that a promiscuous reputation and sexualized image bring. Her opposition to the "whore" and embrace of the "virgin" illuminates how Mami has sexualized her own daughter and conformed to the society she lives in without recognizing her own role.

The Whore

Xiomara's transition into womanhood, through puberty, signifies to Mami that her daughter has made the ultimate leap from "virgin" to "whore"; since Mami fears this transition she negatively impacts Xiomara's psyche and causes her to feel the shame that her mother places onto her. Instead of providing Xiomara with support in a moment of fear and confusion, her mother beats shame into her for something she cannot control. Her mother equates her menstruation to sexuality, instantly associating her with a "cuero", the Dominican term for whore. During one of Xiomara's first few English classes, she is tasked with writing "about the most impactful day of your life" and she chooses to write a rough draft about her first period in fifth grade (Acevedo, 39). This rough draft that Xiomara writes is not turned in so she is only giving this information to the reader which can be seen as a form of silent disclosure spurred on by shame. In the poem, she writes:

I put the tampon in wrong. It only stuck up halfway
And the blood smeared between my thighs.

When Mami came home I was crying.
I pointed at the instructions;
Mami put her hand out but didn't take them.
Instead she backhanded me so quick she cut open my lip.

'Good girls don't wear tampones.
Are you still a virgin? Are you having relations'

I didn't know how to answer her, I could only cry.

She shook her head and told me to skip church that day.

Threw away the box of tampons, saying they were for cueros.

That she would buy me pads. Said eleven was too young

That she would pray on my behalf.

I didn't understand what she was saying.

But I stopped crying. I licked at my split lip.

I prayed for the bleeding to stop. (Acevedo, 39-40)

She places an instant stigma on Xiomara and gives her no opportunity to understand what is happening to her body by asking if she is still a "virgin" who is "having relations". The shame Mami places on Xiomara causes her to silently suffer and internalize the blame that her mother has unfairly placed on her. Many young women experience menstruation as a time of fear and confusion. Menstruating changes a young woman's life and due to the fact that "menstruation and sexual activity often share the same intimate location on a woman's bodies, shame regarding menstruation might influence a woman's general approach to her sexuality" (Schooler et al. 324). For Xiomara's mother, "menstruation and sex are presented as means to the end of procreation" (Schooler et al. 325). Since she is incapable of seeing her daughter as anything but a sexual being she begins to objectify her and see her daughter's body "solely as an object to be evaluated and consumed by others" (Schooler et al. 326). This is further underscored by Mami's physical attack and views of Xiomara using a "tampon" as a means to stop the bleeding. Mami states, "Good girls don't wear tampones" and instantly "Threw away the box of tampons, saying

they were for cueros. / That she would buy me pads." highlighting how some cultural connotations associated with tampons being a penetrative action. Mami is associating the act of putting a tampon in with the sexual act of physical, sexual penetration that tears the hymen and causes a woman to lose their virginity. The "pads" that Mami said she would buy Xiomara is her attachment to the "virgin" since the pad lacks sexual connotations. Mami neglects to explain this to directly to Xiomara so this encounter leaves Xiomara associating tampons with "cueros". Since Mami sexualizes Xiomara at this moment by directly and indirectly associating menstruation with sexual deviance she represents societal views placed on Latina women. Mami attaches society's views of promiscuity and hypersexuality to Xiomara and Xiomara's silent disclosure highlights the troublesome consequences of how shame can influence a negative relationship with sexuality. Xiomara's first idea of her own body isn't a positive one which is disconcerting for the reader because the consequences of "feeling shameful frequently evokes a critical evaluation of one's whole self, shame about menstruation is likely to extend more broadly to the body as a whole" (Schooler et al. 325). At eleven, Xiomara has the image of her body and sexuality shaped by shame. She does not retaliate or combat her mother's opinions of who she is and what her body represents, instead, she silently prays "for the bleeding to stop." (Acevedo, 40).

The "whore" component of the "virgin/whore dichotomy" is reemphasized through Xiomara's connection with men and her father as her story upholds (Gottschall et al. 2). Xiomara has always had an issue with men and boys who sexually objectify her which leads to the unnecessary burden of being seen as promiscuous and a whore. Xiomara is consistently impacted by the "whore" dichotomy because she is living in a society that does not condemn men for their wandering eyes and mind. Xiomara has felt this burden since puberty transitioned her into a

woman. The “whore dichotomy” and the male gaze’s damage is pictured when Xiomara portrays the consistency in which she is sexualized:

It happens when I’m at bodegas.

It happens when I am at school.

It happens when I’m on a train.

It happens when I’m standing on the platform.

It happens when I’m sitting on the stoop.

It happens when I’m turning the corner.

It happens when I forget to be on guard.

It happens all the time. (52)

Acevedo has Xiomara first point out where she is sexually objectified by men to highlight that women cannot escape from the sexualized thoughts about men. These places range from very public places like “standing on the platform” to areas of safety “at school” or “turning a corner”. The frequency of the men’s sexualized thoughts about Xiomara creates an environment that makes her feel unsafe; she feels as though she needs to be “on guard” in order to avoid the “whore” dichotomy. Yet Acevedo confronts the “whore” by not allowing Xiomara to be able to avoid sexualization in a patriarchal society. Instead of avoiding consistency, Acevedo has Xiomara go one step further and portray how it is not just the environment that she is in where sexualization makes her feel unsafe. Xiomara further describes:

It happens when I wear shorts.

It happens when I wear jeans.

It happens when I stare at the ground.

It happens when I stare ahead.

It happens when I'm walking.

It happens when I'm sitting.

It happens when I'm on the phone.

It simply never stops.

(Acevedo, 52)

Acevedo's use of anaphora within this poem, "It happens when I'm" highlights the abuse that Xiomara is enduring from the sexualization. Xiomara's expression of the abuse portrays her inability to escape the "whore". Acevedo is highlighting the idea that the whore "is defined as sensuous because she affects men in a certain way…she arouses them, she makes them tend toward "sinful" behavior" (Wolff, 209). However, Acevedo is also emphasizing the lack of repercussions for men's behavior towards women. She confronts the sexualization of Latina women by forcing the consistency of Xiomara's sexual objectification to highlight how society doesn't condemn men and force them to change their behavior. As Gottschall explains, "in the feminist view [of] the virgin/whore dichotomy is another excrescence of sexual double standards that prevail in patriarchal societies" (Gottschall et al. 2). The double standard within society gives men a free pass to act sexually promiscuous or engage in behavior that could be seen as hypersexual, yet women, especially Latina women, are degraded by the sexual objectification that men have placed upon them. Acevedo writes the consistency of sexual objectification to highlight the lack of punishments and condemnation that men are being given for the actions that they are engaging in. Without the punishments men feel more comfortable to continue their sexual objectification of Latina women at the "bodegas," "school," "train," "platform," "stoop," and the "corner" (Acevedo, 52). The acceptance of these actions creates the double standard that has led women to call Xiomara "Ho. Thot. [and] Fast" without any actual action to justify their

sexualized slurs (Acevedo, 5). This sexualized perspective that follows her has made Xiomara admit that she has not been able "to stop looking. / At the drug dealers, the ball players, random guys on the train. / But although I like to look, I hate to be seen" (50). Xiomara has subsequently gone into her shell because her wandering eyes bring daggers to her reputation. She has internalized the double standard knowing that her looking in the direction of men will make her seem like a whore while the men have free reign to make her seem sexual at any given moment. This double standard has forced Latina women, and Xiomara, to feel as though they are valued for nothing more than their bodies because their reputations are damaged by the male sexual gaze. Xiomara slips into the "whore" dichotomy because of the male perceptions of her body and their sexualized view of Latina women.

The reader might expect that Xiomara would be able to avoid the "whore" dichotomy at home with her father since Mami and Papi have rooted themselves within a more conservative stance in regard to sexuality, yet Papi's previous sexual experiences in the Dominican Republic and his degradation of Xiomara contradict the "virgin" ideal further influencing how Xiomara is unfairly viewed as the "whore". Acevedo writes Mami and Papi as foils for each other; Mami's harsh religious convictions contrast with Papi's silent and somewhat absent personality illuminating both of their flaws in sexualizing their daughter. Papi, Xiomara's father, seems to have lived two different lives. In the Dominican Republic, he was a womanizer who didn't want to be tied down by marriage, however after the birth of his children, his marriage to Mami, and their subsequent move to Harlem he has become a silent form of sexual objectification. Xiomara states that when people talk about her father they say:

Papi was a mujeriego.

That he would get drunk at the barber shop

and touch the thigh of any woman
who walked to close.

They say his tongue was slick
with compliments and his body
was like a tambor with the skin
stretched too tight…

You can have a father who, if people asked,
you had to say lived with you.
You have to say is around.

But even as he brushes by you
on the way to the bathroom
he could be gone as anybody,

Just because your father's present
Doesn't mean he isn't absent. (Acevedo, 64-65)

For Xiomara to know how he used to be a "mujeriego" or womanizer she is silently being taught what the most important man in her life values about women. By sexually touching women and making sexual comments to women, he has displayed that at his core he is a representation of society and only sees women for their bodies. Yet the juxtaposition of how he treats Xiomara, being "present" but "absent", and how he treated women in the past only reinforces the "whore"

dichotomy for her. Unless Xiomara moves into the "whore" dichotomy her father will not engage with her. Remaining in the "virgin" side of the dichotomy, which her mother would like her to stay in, only teaches Xiomara that attention from men, even positive attention, will not be given to her if she remains modest. While Papi is not viewing his daughter as a sexual object he is effectively teaching her what behavior and standards she needs to meet to get attention from men and feel loved in a sexualized world.

Even though Papi is effectively silent throughout most of the novel, his detrimental use of the word "cuero" or whore symbolizes how society blindly accepts the idea that Latina women are hypersexual and promiscuous. Xiomara begins to date a young man named Aman at the beginning of her school year. They met in biology class and began to connect with each other, outside of the classroom, through music and Xiomara's poetry. For both Xiomara and Aman, they found a safe space within one another where there was no judgment. After spending the day with Aman, while Xiomara believed her mother was at work, they were on their way home and began making out with him on the train; once Xiomara arrived home she could hear her parents arguing about her relationship through the front door. She states that:

> My parents are still yelling in the bedroom,
> And because I never yell back at them
> I don't scream at my father
> When he calls me a cuero.
>
> I don't yell how the whole block whispers
> when I walk down the street
> about all the women

who made a cuero out of him.

But men are never called cueros…

Trying to unhear…

my father call me the names

all the kids have called me

since I grew breasts. (195)

"Cuero" in Spanish means whore or slut and for Xiomara to hear her father refer to her in this way crushes any hope of her having a safe space from the sexualization of society. At this moment, Xiomara has learned that her father has blindly conformed to society's views of Latina women and his daughter. Acevedo emphasizes the detrimental power that viewing Latina women as promiscuous and hyper-sexual has by having Xiomara state at the end of the poem, "trying to unhear… / my father call me the names / all the kids have called me / since I grew breasts". Xiomara has now learned that no environment in her life is fully safe when she is stereotyped and only viewed for her sexual nature. By viewing his daughter in this way Papi has displayed how society continues to promote the "whore" dichotomy through "the sexual double standards that prevail in patriarchal societies" (Gottschall et al. 2). Even though Aman, Xiomara's boyfriend, played a role in the argument that ensued, Acevedo created the character of Aman to be one of the most positive influences within Xiomara's life by being the opposite of Papi. He is the male figure in her life that does not only celebrate and value Xiomara for her looks only, instead, he gives her the confidence to figure out what she wants out of her own sexuality and use of her body. Acevedo emphasizes her challenge of the "whore" ideal by illuminating how the

stereotype of Latinas can be used to create pain, through Xiomara's father, and how a positive figure, like Aman, that is the opposite of society can influence a sexualized stereotype's power.

Chapter 6: Discovering A New Ideal

Throughout *The Poet X,* Acevedo creates instances for Xiomara where she is able to break the mold that her family, society, and religion are attempting to make her fit into and fully confront the over-sexualization of Latina women. Acevedo's novel highlights the obstacles that Latina women must face in regard to over-sexualization; many times these moments were presented as areas of growth for Xiomara where she could reclaim her own sexuality and confront society's views of her. Living in a religious and Dominican household Xiomara's views of a healthy sexual lifestyle were stunted. Yet, Acevedo confronts the stereotypes of Latina women through Xiomara's rediscovery of her body, Twin's sexuality, and her reclamation of the meaning of the word cuero. This chapter will break down each of these moments to evaluate how Xiomara's empowerment serves as a tool to confront promiscuity and unfair hypersexuality placed on the body and actions of Latina women.

Reclaiming Her Body

In order to protect herself from the negativity within society that stems from perceptions of her body, Xiomara physically and emotionally reclaims the power of her own body and reshapes it into something positive that she can find confidence in. Xiomara's greatest asset, physically, has been her fists since she has been fighting for herself and her brother, whom she calls Twin, her whole life. While attending her freshman year of high school, Xiomara discovers that school is not a place where she can find safety from the sexualized societal views of Latina women. Within the confines of the high school building she consistently has to find ways to stand up for herself when boys grab or touch her inappropriately. The boys have decided that her body is theirs to claim and touch, pushing her to a breaking point. This mindset that the boys

have is not one that is uncommon; the mindset has taught Latina women that they are inferior and their bodies are only good for male sexual desires. As Lyza M. Garcia states, "from an early age, Xiomara has been conditioned to believe that her body's functions are shameful and that sexual desire needs to be suppressed" (Garcia, 16). Xiomara has learned this message about her body from her mother and her religion. Both have given her the message that she needs to avoid any type of behavior, dress, or action that could give other people the wrong impression about what type of girl she is. The forced internalization of this notion from her mother and her religion influences Xiomara to reject the negative stereotyping and use her body as a tool to eradicate that same negative stereotyping from her self-image. While at school, after the confrontation with her parents about her makeout session with Aman, Xiomara goes to her locker innocently and is groped by a random boy:

I'm so out of it the next morning
as I put my things away in my locker
that I don't notice the group of guys
circling near until one bumps me,
both his hands palming and squeezing my ass..

And I can tell by how his boys laugh
how he smirks while saying "oops"
that this was not an accident.

Aman is here. He'll do something…
Of course, someone who I've talked to

about how weird it feels to be stared at

and touched as public property…

But Aman doesn't move…

… no one will ever take care of me but me.

Pushing away from my locker,

I face the dude who groped me

push him hard in the back.

He stumbles but before he can react

I look him dead in the eye:

"If you ever touch me again I'll put my nails

through every pimple in your fucking face." (Acevedo, 218-219)

Xiomara's ability to stand up for herself using her own body by "push[ing] him hard in the back" coupled with the emotional realization that, "no one will ever take care of me but me" affirms how Xiomara is using her body confidently and ridding herself of the negative stereotype. The boys attempted to claim her body as their own by "squeezing" her butt and groping her create a situation where Xiomara had no other choice but to stand up for herself. By reclaiming her own body and space Xiomara is showing the school, and society, that she will not allow the sexualized stereotypes to weigh her down like an anchor. Acevedo has confronted stereotypes of sexualization through Xiomara's aggression in order to "ascribe value to the… female physique, associating it with strength and power" (Gentles-Peart, 203). This confrontation between the

boys and Xiomara reshapes the narrative through which Latinas are negatively stereotyped for their voluptuous bodies. The restorative nature of this moment allows Xiomara to reshape a Latina "body image that is theirs and allows them to exist outside" of the confines of hypersexuality (210). Not only does Xiomara physically reclaim her body in front of her school society, but she internally begins to change her mind about her own sexuality when she masturbates for the first time.

Since Xiomara has been raised in a religious household she has been taught that any type of sexual desire or activity is a sin, emphasizing to her internal psyche that her own body and natural feelings are wrong. For Xiomara's entire life, Mami has shaped the narrative in Xiomara's head that in order to be a good girl she must suppress any type of confidence in her own body and sexual emotions. Acevedo has written Xiomara's character as one that "is forced to recognize, early on in her life, the presence of multiple mechanisms of marginalization, relating to gender, sexuality… and cultural background" (Illmonen, 12). Xiomara has been marginalized by the stereotypes associated with being a Latina woman, the Catholic religion's ideals, the type of lifestyle she has been told she needs to live, and the idea that being a woman who presents herself against the norm will provide the world with the wrong image. Even though Xiomara understands how she is marginalized, she doubts that this has to be the life she lives and independently changes her own mindset by accepting herself as a sexual being. One night after her feelings have intensified for Aman, Xiomara describes:

> In bed at night
> my fingers search
> a heat I have no name for.

Sliding into a center,

finding a hidden core,

or stem, or maybe the root

I'm learning how to caress

and breath at the same time.

How to be silent

and feel something grow

inside me.

And when it all builds up,

I sink into my mattress.

I feel such a release. Such a relief.

I feel such a shame

settle like a blanket

covering me head to toe.

To make myself feel this way

is a dirty thing, right?

Then why does it feel so good? (Acevedo 130-131)

During this scene Xiomara is literally learning what pleases her through masturbation, however, what she is discovering is larger than a physical "release." She is in control of a moment of intercourse and there is no one there to tell her that she is wrong, a cuero, or a bad girl. Acevedo chooses not to avoid sexuality in the novel with this scene where Xiomara is discovering and changing her own opinion of what sexuality means to her. Xiomara feels the blanket of shame yet the reader sees her questioning "why does it feel so good?" asserting her developing mindset. Her confidence in her own opinions of herself that she is learning and controlling at this moment stems from feeling "something grow." Of course, literally, she is feeling the pleasure of her physical interaction with herself, but I would argue that the something growing inside her is her own confidence in the understanding that sexual feelings and thoughts do not make her anything more than a healthy, teenage girl. Acevedo writes this scene to have Xiomara challenge "sexual policing" and confront how "Latina girls' identities and bodies are assigned meaning… [and] generally … perceived to be… slutty" (Garcia, xii). Xiomara cannot be policed by anyone at this moment; her parents cannot express their distaste for her discovery and society cannot tell her that this act makes her more hypersexual, instead she is alone in her discovery of confidence and exploration of her own body.

Discovering A Shared Experience

For Xiomara Twin is the only male figure in her life, before Aman, who accepts her and sees her for who she is; his lack of viewing her as a sexually promiscuous and lustful girl provides Xiomara with a different male figure that she can rely on. In a poem entitled "I Decided a Long Time Ago," Xiomara expresses why her brother is the only boy she could love:

> Twin is the only boy I will ever love. / I don't want a converted man-whore like my father… / But I have to love Twin. / Not just because we're blood, but because / he's the best boy I know… My brother ain't no stereotype, that's for sure… although speaking to him / is like talking to a scatterbrained saint, / every now and then, he'll say, in barely a mumble, / something that shocks the shit out of me… / "Xiomara, you look different. / Like something inside of you has shifted." (Acevedo, 97).

For Xiomara, Twin recognizing that "something inside" has "shifted" means that someone is seeing past her sexuality, specifically a male figure. For Xiomara, this is more important than if Twin was her equal. This bond that she feels for Twin causes her to consistently need to fight for him since, as she stated he "ain't no stereotype." He is not aggressive and doesn't chase after women; he had always been beaten up for his size and intellect therefore Xiomara has always felt the need to protect him. This inherent need to protect her brother stems from Twin's ability to see her for more than the stereotypes society sees her as. Twin is the opposite of the catcalling men that Xiomara experiences in public and the boys that grope women in school hallways; Twin's deviation from the accepted male norm causes Xiomara to have adoration for her brother. Their positive bond is a way for Acevedo to confront the negativity that hypersexuality brings thereby providing the two with a community that they can both lean on in times of struggle.

In the novel, Acevedo creates a gay male character Xavier, also known as "Twin" Xiomara's brother, to bring a different dimension to confronting sexualization for Latina women. Xiomara has always wondered about Twin's sexuality and her suspicions about him being gay had never been confirmed due to Twin's silence. Twin's silence about his sexuality is unsurprising since "The Catholic Church's position on homosexuality is based on a distinction between being lesbian or gay and acting on it… to be wrong and sinful." (Human Rights

Campaign). Since the Batistas, Xiomara and Twin's parents, are rooted in religion and portraying to the world that they are of the conservative and virginal ideal, Twin's sexuality is a piece of his identity that is kept a secret for almost the entirety of the book. Being closeted is not an uncommon practice among the Latinx community since the "condemnation of LGBTQ Latinxs in communities of faith" creates an environment that fosters anxiety and depression influencing the want to stay "closeted" (Human Rights Campaign). One day Twin came home from school with a black eye. Twin and Xiomara go to different schools because of Twin's intellect, so when Xiomara feels the need to use her fists to physically protect him she has to take a train to a different part of Harlem. Xiomara, being fully unaware of the truth about his sexuality, goes to Twin's school to confront the boys who gave him a black eye because she has always felt the need to protect her brother. When she arrives at Twin's school she notices:

> he's not alone. / He's with a tall, red-haired boy / with fingers the color of milk / that brush lint off of my brother's sweater softly / the way Aman sometimes squeezes my hand… / I look between them, confirming what I've always known…/ Without knowing. / That Twin was. / We never said. / I think he was scared. / I think I was, too. / He's Mami's miracle. / He would become her sin… But maybe my silence. / Just made him feel more alone. / Maybe my silence. / Condones the ugly things people think. (98-101, 177)

Xiomara is now confronted with a divergent type of sexualization that has forced her brother into "silence" parallel to her own. She recognizes at this moment how the negative stereotyping and religious condemnation that has been forced upon her is actually a shared bond that she and her brother have. Her scared emotions about Twin being seen as "sinful" force her to accept that she hasn't been any better to him than society has been to her: " Maybe my silence. / Condones the

ugly things people think." Acevedo utilizes Twin's homosexuality to confront the conformity that society engages in that encourages Latinx youth to remain silent about their sexuality. Xiomara's tone is one of realization and contempt for her own ability to make her brother feel alone and "condone" society's views on sexuality. If she feels confused and doubtful about her own sexualization and sexual nature due to the religion she is exposed to then she is able to empathize more deeply with her brother because he is experiencing the same issues.

Twin and Xiomara form a community for each other over their shared experiences and the restrictive nature of their mother's religion. Before Xiomara has the realization that Twin is gay the two silently support each other in their relationships that are unconfirmed to each other at the time. One night Twin and Xiomara are sitting in their room both texting on their phones. Their conversation reveals their bond surrounding their sexuality;

> 'Who you been texting so much lately?' / The question shoulders past my lips / and I stop with one of my headphones / halfway into my ear. / Twin has never kept secrets from me… / 'Xiomara we don't have to do this, right? / Maybe with everyone else we need to explain. / But we both know we're messing around / and that Mami and Papi will kill us if they find out… / I don't know what they would do / if the person he brought home was not a girl. (Acevedo, 154).

As Twin points out the siblings do not have to fake the support they have for one another creating a safe space within the confines of their room and their cellphones. They both find solace in their silent community at this moment as Twin points out that they "both know we're messing around / and that Mami and Papi will kill us if they find out". Their silent communication confirms this safety because their silence is their agreement to not go into further detail and expose the sexual nature of their lives knowing that the consequences would be

damaging. Xiomara's concern about Twin potentially bringing home a man instead of a woman illuminates a moment of support for her brother's forbidden sexuality in the Christian community. Without forcing Twin to come out she unconsciously gives him a space where he can remain closeted thereby protecting him from the transition from the virgin to whore that she has experienced at the hands of her parents. Twin gives Xiomara this same courtesy by not prying into her relationship business. His acceptance of her "messing around" gives Xiomara a sense of comfort that she does not have in any other aspect of her home life. Similarly, her lack of pushing him to expose his secret gives him a sense of security that his sexuality is important and worth protecting.

Conclusion

Why Does It Matter?

By confronting over-sexualization head-on, Acevedo and Morrison challenge readers to question the narratives that have been ingrained in society, prompting a reevaluation of cultural norms and perceptions of Afro-Latina women. Morrison and Acevedo create literature that portrays how sexualized stereotypes can transform the physical and emotional state of young women of color. Both authors tackle showing how adolescent women struggle to find their space in a world that places value on their bodies and sex without ever thinking of the consequences that may follow. Pecola learns that regardless of her physical appearance, as a Black woman, she is going to be viewed by society as someone who manipulates men, specifically Cholly, her father, into having sex with her. She is abandoned and sexualized by the Black female community throughout the novel consequently highlighting the acceptance of the messaging within the Black community. Pecola also does not have a physical appearance that forces her to feel overtly sexualized; however, her appearance being nonsexual excludes her from a community that values beauty, specifically white beauty. Unlike Pecola, Xiomara has to find internal confidence to break away from the religious, virgin ideal her mother desperately tries to keep her in and use that same confidence to transform her own internalized views of sexualization to show society that she can redefine sexual stereotypes. Xiomara struggles to transform a lifetime of restriction but discovers an avenue from her physicality, her aggression towards the boys who groped her, and an intimate moment acted on in the confines of her own bedroom, the first time she masturbates. The confrontation that these authors make within their novels has sparked debate over the value of having them in an educational setting when they heavily focus on sex.

Censorship has begun to creep back into American society causing libraries and schools to remove books from their curriculums and shelves. *The Bluest Eye* has landed on the American Library Association's Top 100 Banned Books list from 2010-2019 garnering the 13th position. According to PBS, the book has been challenged based on its "sexually explicit material…graphic descriptions and…disturbing language" (PBS, 2017). Similarly, *The Poet X* has become one of the newest additions to banned book lists since its publication in 2018. The book has mostly been challenged based on "its profanity, sexual references, and anti-Christian verses" (Harper, 2020). Acevedo and Morrison's confrontation of the sexualized stereotypes that society places on Afro-Latina women emphasizes a need for coming-of-age novels written by minority, female authors who shed light on a topic that young women of color have to confront in their daily lives. Censoring or banning these two novels implies that our society condones those same promiscuous and hypersexual stereotypes that Acevedo and Morrison are confronting. Both authors did not shy away from the topic of sex; while they may be confronting the over-sexualization of Afro-Latina women by overtly talking about sex they are underscoring the need for this discussion to be had. Attempting to censor the books for their very nature only condones the same message that the young women in the novels face; hide yourself because if people perceive your body and being as sexual then you must be promiscuous and wanting those ideals. For example, in North Carolina, there was a lawsuit filed in 2020 that asked that the book be banned because it was considered "anti-Christian" and went against Christian values. Presumably, those values involve the virgin complex that stifled Xiomara into feeling that she could only be a white, virgin, saint and from which she deviates. Xiomara's coming-of-age story that involves sex and her challenge of Christian ideals is actually a story of a young woman finding self-empowerment through her shifting perspectives on how she views herself as a sexual

being and how she views her religion as stifling. By trying to censor a story that portrays a deviation from "Christian values" in order to create a new version of sexuality, school districts are telling their Latina students an individualized perception of sexuality is not accepted and the stereotype is what stands. Both authors confront over-sexualization by making their characters the consequences of sexualized stereotypes. Morrison writes about Pecola's downfall and tragic breakdown to display what can happen to a young woman who lacks community and is isolated; being left to her own vices Pecola cannot fend off the sexualization and is physically raped by her father and then emotionally raped by her community that victim blames her for the incestual act. Acevedo allows Xiomara's narration to portray how stringent religious rules can negatively impact the self-image of a young Latina and cause her to have an internal struggle about her own emotional attachment to sex and sexualization. By parents, conservative organizations, and school districts censoring novels with sexual topics society is taking away stories that Afro-Latina women can find themselves in. Representation of Afro-Latina women is necessary for society to see if we want to challenge the cultural norms and work to not conform to the historical ideals of hypersexuality and promiscuity that have attached themselves to minority women.

As an educator myself these novels sparked my interest in focusing my argument around Afro-Latina women because the narrators' voices and experiences are ones my own students have encountered. Toni Morrison's novel initially piqued my interest in African American literature during my undergraduate degree because Pecola's voice was not one I had experienced in my own high school education. We read almost no texts by African American women and Pecola's tragic journey highlighted an idealism of beauty and blackness that, as a white woman, did not change how the world viewed me but had an emotional impact on women of color. For

me, Pecola's story, while sexual in nature, is one that needs to be taught in classrooms because it is a voice that will continue to give representation to minority women and highlight a shared struggle that Afro-Latina women face. In comparison, Xiomara's voice is one that I hear every day in my urban, tenth-grade high school classroom. I teach in a school system that is predominantly Hispanic and there have been countless times where my teenage Latina students complain about how their parents view them as women criticizing their wardrobe and actions as sexual without understanding the damage that their words have left. Xiomara's creativity and self-discovery cannot be diminished by the sexual topics within the novel because her struggle is universal for my students. I listen to the reactions of my Afro-Latina female students who are deemed "thick" and "promiscuous" by the boys in high school, just as Xiomara was negatively stereotyped as, find a way to change the narrative about their bodies using their confidence in their own body image to command and take up space. I can visualize my students within Pecola and Xiomara knowing that their stories are the ones that need to be represented. Elizabeth Acevedo and Toni Morrison challenge a complex of over-sexualization of Afro-Latina women that young teenage girls are still coming in contact with in the twenty-first century therefore these stories are ones I will continue to advocate for because advocating for their stories is advocating for my own students.

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