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The “Black Butterflies”:
Color in Toni Morrison’s
God Help the Child
and the Inverted White Gaze

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Abstract

The discourse on beauty has primarily been focused on the white gaze to prescribe its normative standards. The white gaze conceptualizes the way in which beauty is dwelled on within society: the foisting of Caucasian-looking beauty canons on black women, and the veneration of whiteness as superior. Black bodies are vanguards, either being desired or erased. In literature, the expression “white gaze” communicates an intended white reader, and the racial bias that confines black characters to marginal or non-existent representations in white narratives. In *God Help the Child*, Toni Morrison, exposes the “Africanist” (an exoticized, derogatory representation of African heritage), and inverts the gaze. Morrison’s storytelling is a polymorphic sensory experience of story and color, as the lives of her characters are saturated with the pigments of their ascendancy and traumas. This thesis is guided by the following research questions: How does blackness feature in *God Help the Child*? To what extent does an inversion of the white gaze take place in the novel? I contend that Bride’s dark skin is used by Morrison to define an understanding of race that compellingly re-signifies the very notions of race and racism inspired by the ’60s motto “Black is Beautiful”. The way in which the character intentionally turns her darkness into her greatest asset is validation of a self-authenticating strategy that suggests other, more affirmative and restored ways of tenancing in dark skin and blackness, both in the African American collective and the hegemonic society. By an inversion of blackness and its constructed postulates, Morrison gives agency to her protagonist. A sort of poetic justice occurs in the novel. Morrison fills the wounds of history with golden pipe dreams of blackness and inverts the white gaze. In effect, black holds all colors.

Key words: Chromatism, Dark Beauty, Ebony-Black Beauty, White Beauty, Black Skin, Blue-Black Skin, Afro-textured Hair, Black Color, White Mask, Slavery, Race Prejudice, Black Identity, Toni Morrison, *God Help the Child*, Africanist in Literature, Black Beauty in Media, Whiteness, Inverted White Gaze, White Gaze, Black Gaze.

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1. Introduction

When an “irritant” becomes trapped in a mollusk, the animal senses this element and coats it with mother-of-pearl, which is the same composite it uses to build its shell (Kennedy J. P., thoughtco.com). Toni Morrison’s narratives are likewise made of composites: a chromatic patchwork of identities and peregrinations of black characters on “the stage of life”, pearls made by *irritants*. Morrison’s storytelling is a multifarious sensory experience of words and color, as the lives of her characters are saturated with the dyes of their traumas and triumphs. Color can be exploited as ethnic difference — or elevated.

Morrison’s eleventh novel, *God Help the Child*, has an ostentatious title that rings fated; echoing the title of Billie Holiday’s classic song “God Bless the Child”, a blues song the singer recorded in 1941 (A. Davis 12). The novel itself traffics in blues. The story is set in twentieth-century America, in which being consumable is part of a fantasy of flashiness and entirety surfacing, or better blanketing, the sonority of human inner lives: the lives of Bride, Booker, Sweetness. Morrison’s last novel adopts the author’s quintessential themes of beauty, American blackness versus whiteness, slavery and the ghosts of communal and individual traumas, inholding the lasting injury of rejection for having a skin color which is too dark, hair that is too kinky. The term kinky hair, also called “nappy hair” or “bad” hair, describes tightly coiled, curly hair. Natural styles such as the Afro are referred to as kinky hair. “Good Hair” is hair that is naturally straighter in texture. “Good” hair is perceived as more desirable (Banks 118).

Morrison creates characters that haunt our memory. She revisits the history of slavery, by putting powerful human faces to harrowing accounts of incest, rape, abuse. The author accumulates Bride’s dossier, opening the door to Bride’s phrenic interiority, to a life driven by internalized trauma: the *irritants*. The wounds that Bride carries are born from childhood traumas of rejection and from the witnessing of sexual incest; and collaterally, or rather by proxy, of her mother’s ancestry, from the violence endured by generations of African Americans. Bride’s story is a reminder of what it means to be black and to be *beautifully* black, Bride’s blue-black skin and her dark kinky hair become signifiers of identity formation. The heroine overcomes her disabling history to forge a black female identity freed from stereotypical prescripts of “inferior” melanism (the notion that higher levels of melanin give black men and women inherently inferior traits to white people), and hair kinkiness and arrives

in a place of “black is beautiful”. In the end, Bride transforms into a woman who can at last value herself as “her own best thing”.

At the onset of the story, *God Help the Child*, Bride is regional manager at a cosmetics company. She possesses strong will and ambition. Her blackness shifts from invisibility to strikingly visible as an industry colleague advises her to dress exclusively in white. Bride’s blue-black skin color is paired with white. Bride reverses her blackness to a counterstatement, to an economic “glory”.

The current scholarship on the novel has explored the themes of identity and childhood trauma as “unmothered children and disrupted innocence” in the academic work of Kusha Tiwary for *God Help the Child*, for example. But scholars have not examined the novel from an inverted white gaze, the perspective of blackness, the gaze of the triumphant black woman, hyper visible, glorious in its literary brightness. This thesis is guided by the following research questions: How does blackness feature in *God Help the Child*? To what extent does an inversion of the white gaze take place in the novel? I contend that Bride’s dark skin is used by Morrison to define an understanding of race that compellingly re-signifies the very notions of race and racism inspired by the ’60s motto “Black is Beautiful”. The way in which the character intentionally turns her darkness into her greatest asset is validation of a self-authenticating strategy that suggest other, more affirmative and restored ways of tenancing in dark skin and blackness, both in the African American collective and the hegemonic society. By an inversion of blackness and its constructed postulates, Morrison gives agency to her protagonist and a sort of poetic justice occurs in the novel.

In the present thesis, I first ground my work on Morrison’s philosophy of color binaries and the symbolization of blackness, the Africanism in white literature which we encounter in *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*. In addition, I complement Morrison’s concept with bell hooks’s intersectional approach to black womanhood. In her essays, hooks analyzes historical sexism, and racism and the effects of the white gaze on black female psyche and bodies. Then I examine Morrison’s description of physical pain through her startling use of color. I go on to explore how black skin and natural African hair (the Afro), are symbols of natural physical beauty and pride in the novel and how love and truth have the power to reverse Bride’s destiny and the constitution of her subjectivity. Through an analysis of the lasting impact of slavery and culture on matters of black beauty and self, I present the whys and wherefores “Black is Beautiful”. I draw on contemporary studies with reference to skin color and hair to support my analysis. My essay traces how Morrison’s female protagonist, Bride, conclusively embarks on a quest for love and intimacy that is also a

quest for bodily healing – a suturing of wounds both physical and psychic that can address histories of violence, hatred, alienation and rage. In *God Help the Child*, the pain is described in chromaticity, as my thesis concludes.

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1 We were “Playing in the Dark”

In *God Help the Child*, Bride is the prima donna who, despite of her past, becomes an erect adult black woman. Morrison is an African American author. All principal characters in Morrison’s novels are black. Black characters have long occupied marginal positions in white literary settings. Morrison uses her theoretical lens through which to explore the question of fictitious literary blackness transpiring in narratives written by white authors. According to the author, white society throughout African American history has forced black women and men to live up to the stereotypes it had itself created. The ways in which the dominant white culture constructs blackness in its literature is different from its black counterpart. In order to inquire into the nature of like highly discriminatory social constructs, Toni Morrison wrote a series of essays including *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*, in which she analyses the internal color line within white literature, especially the representations of black characters – and of blackness in general – in “white” literature. In *God Help the Child*, Morrison engages in the battle to transform the “image”, to invert the white gaze which sees blackness as inferior, as lacking. It is the socially constructed white gaze. Growing up during the years of the Great Depression, Morrison was the first woman in her family to attend college where she discovered blackness as an identity. In her writing, she demonstrates the pervasive presence of racial prejudice in white literature, commenting on the effects of colonialism or the imperialistic white gaze upon the colonizer himself, “pouring rhetorical acid on the fingers of a black hand may indeed destroy the prints, but not the hand. Besides, what happens in that violent self-serving act of erasure to the hands, the fingers, the fingerprints of the one who does the pouring? Do they remain acid-free?” (Morrison, *Playing in the Dark* 46). Morrison scrutinizes how in white literature “images of blackness can be [...] all the self-contradictory features of the self. Whiteness, alone, is mute, meaningless, unfathomable, pointless, frozen, veiled curtained, dreaded, senseless, implacable” (*Playing in the Dark* 59). In her own narrative Morrison inverts the white gaze by giving depth and meaning to black characters.

The scholar W.E.B. DuBois had long challenged the cherished American myth of equality: “The problem of the twentieth century is the problem of the color line” (23). He believed that the black people historical trauma had not been forgotten or erased, the ghosts of pain lived on in the slaves’ progeny. He described the African American experience of “double consciousness” as that of the black man’s looking at himself through the eyes of a “world that looks on in amused contempt and pity” (DuBois 11). The sociologist Paul Gilroy stated in his work *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* that “race” is a myth, a fiction, an arbitrary invention, which is relatively recent and “absolutely modern” (146).

Morrison continues on the tradition that DuBois’ vision has transferred to posterity: “you have to stake out and identify those who have preceded you – resummoning them, acknowledging them is just one step in that process of reclamation” (qtd. in C. Davis 224-25). In *Playing in the Dark*, Morrison dwells on the erased or forgotten in conventional white literature, the suppression and silencing of the dark, “Africanist” Other, in an attempt to subvert old narratives with new recordings. She claims that an idealized image of American individualism is an image of whiteness that has been built on the exclusion of blackness and on its background. Morrison examines how white narratives contain conscious or unconscious variations of a “black presence”, including in the notorious classics written by Cather, Poe or Hemingway. It is a participation of “blackness” which exists solely for the ego-gratification of white characters gathering identity unto themselves. In analyzing the character of the white protagonist, Sapphira, in Willa Cather’s last novel, *Sapphira and the Slave Girl*, Morrison individuates for example how the “white woman gathers identity unto herself from the wholly available and serviceable lives of Africanist others”. Sapphira is in actuality a “desperate” woman, “whose social pedestal rests on the sturdy spine of racial degradation” (*Playing in the Dark* 25). Morrison asserts that as it came to be historically in society and in literature, blacks did not and do not attain agency.

Black fictional characters in white fiction are largely sketchy, marginal, often nameless or invisible, and the black experience, created by the imagination of the white writer, is economized to a simple “Africanism”, a “deep abiding darkness” that invades the narrative; the stereotypical black Other, an immoral, servile “savage” character, the “Africanist”. This “Africanist” further allows the white characters to gather fictional physical attributes and stellar actions upon themselves. And where the literature is bereft of manifest black characters, the “fabricated darkness” still pervades it “for in that construction of blackness and enslavement could be found not only the not-free but also, with the dramatic polarity created by skin color, the projection of the not-me” (Morrison, *Playing in the Dark* 38).

Black people are subject to “the continuous play” of culture, power and history. Audre Lorde emphasizes in her work published in 1984 that “inequality of power relations that occurs in everyday life in both private and public domains is experienced on different and individual levels” (114). The feminist author bell hooks articulates the intersection of race, class and gender oppression in two heuristic literary works: *Ain't I a Woman* and *Black Looks, Race and Representation*.

2.2 *Ain't I a Woman?* – The Power of Choice

In the course of her work, bell hooks has examined the complex “multidimensionality that human identities encompass”, the intersectionality of gender, sexual and racial inequality impacting the lives of black women. Intersectionality is “the study of interconnected relations of multiple forms or systems of oppression, domination or discrimination”. An American black feminist lawyer, Kimberlé Crenshaw, is credited with coining the term intersectionality in an article in 1989, which highlighted how the American legal system failed to recognize that race and gender were simultaneous factors in cases against black women (139).

Ain't I a Woman was originally the title of a speech given by Sojourner Truth. A staunch advocate for human rights, Truth had been born a slave and was involved first in the anti-slavery movement and later on she became involved in the women's rights movement. Sojourner contended that even after the abolition of slavery, black women were treated with less gallantry and reverence than white women. She called attention to the difference of treatment and experiences of women based on race, class and gender and demanded that all women be included in the women's suffrage agendas. She clamored indignation towards the women's movement stating that white feminists had stolen the subjective roles of black women.

While attending university, bell hooks began a 10-year project to examine the double oppression of black women who experience both sexism and racism. She contends in her work that these two poles of female subjugation began with slavery and continue to have ripple effects in today's cultural ways of looking at black women and their bodies, in particular in connection to their skin color and hair (hooks, *Black Looks* 3). bell hooks individuates an interlocking system of oppressions. She notes a link between the internalized self-hatred of black people and the constant consumption of media representations of whiteness, especially in the realm of popular culture (hooks, *Black Looks* 167).

The opening chapter of her book *Ain't I a Woman* chronicles the history of black female slaves and their plight. When “Irish Nell”, a white indentured servant married a black slave, and was sold to a southern plantation owner, her previous employer, Lord Baltimore, was aghast and had a current law repealed. The law established that “free borne woman shall inter marry with any slave ... [she] shall serve the master of such slave during the life of her husband. Her children would also be slaves” (Maryland State Archives, msa.maryland.gov). Until this time African slaves had been mostly men but from this point forward, one third of the cargo aboard most ships became captured female Africans. African women lived for the most part in patriarchal societies and were accustomed to obeying their men, plus they could be easily captured. Likewise, women found guilty of committing a crime such as adultery, were “sold in bondage”. Once aboard the slave ships they were branded with an iron, stripped of their clothing “and beaten on all parts of their bodies” (hooks, *Ain't I a Woman* 18). If they cried, they were severely lashed. White slavers could rape them or brutalize them at will without fear of punishment. If they had been captured pregnant, they would often give birth while exposed to the other passengers on the ship and to the elements. Slavers often maltreated the women’s children as well. The torments women and men alike endured on the ships were “an indoctrination process that would transform free individuals into slaves with no identity” (hooks, *Ain't I a Woman* 19). If black male slaves tried to resist, they would be castrated in front of other slaves. Whipped, beaten, and sexually assaulted, black women had no rights: neither to their own bodies, nor to their offspring. Their children were property of their masters and were regularly sold to other plantation owners. Once they reached the plantations, they were compelled to labor in the fields, and as workers in the household of the holding family. Black women were breeders and objects. Even after the abolition of slavery they continued to be oppressed and the black woman came to be portrayed as an “evil sexual temptress”, a sexual “savage”.

Throughout history, two factors have determined the life of a black woman: her being born black and her being born female. Growing up, Bride is made to interiorize that blackness is ugly. hooks refers to such interiorization as one of the evils perpetuated against young black girls; their external appearance dominated by white norms of physical attractiveness. Hair is a marker of difference that black women recognize at an early age, particularly given media representations of what constitutes beauty. According to hooks, black women have been indoctrinated by a white supremacist lens to believe that whiteness is desirable and beautiful, and to deem blackness as ugly. Since slavery days, lighter skin was perceived by slave owners as more European, hence more aesthetically pleasing. As we have

seen previously, Bride's color is problematic to Sweetness. She perceived her daughter's color as a trace of pure African blood, of those "subhuman" female ancestors who were raped by slaveowners during slavery, consequently birthing children who were "whitened up". Sweetness is grappling with the suppressed cognition of the loathing her ancestors had witnessed, throughout their enslaved past, because of the color of their skin. Sweetness's parents gained "white" privileges through their light skin color, and Sweetness prides herself for having "yellow-skin", thus being upper-level to the "non-human" aids her in maintaining a sense of selfhood. Ironically, Bride's color indicates racial purity while Sweetness's marks of "yellowness" signal racial meddling or miscegenation. When Bride reveals to Booker that Sweetness had "hated her for her black skin", Booker responds: "it's just a color, [...] a genetic trait – not a flaw, not a curse, not a blessing nor a sin [...]. Scientifically there's no such thing as race, Bride, so racism without race is a choice. Taught, of course by those who need it, but still a choice. Folks who practice it would be nothing without it" (Morrison, *God Help the Child* 143).

In her book of essays, *Yearning*, hooks urges her readers to remember the pain of slavery because "true resistance begins with people confronting pain, whether it's [ours] or somebody else's, and wanting to do something to change it. That is what connects us – our awareness" (215). hooks sees a pathway to freedom through *love*. Love is that transformational force that demands of each individual regardless of whether they are black or white, to make a shared effort for the survival of humanity. hooks turns back to the words of Martin Luther King Jr. to advocate for a collective unification of society and a disassociation from polarization and hatred (*Yearning* 212):

"Let us not seek to satisfy our thirst for freedom by drinking from the cup of bitterness and hatred. [...], many of our white brothers [...] have come to realize that their destiny is tied up with our destiny. And they have come to realize that their freedom is inextricably bound to our freedom" (King Jr., M. L., americanrhetoric.com).

These are the words King spoke to a crowd of protesters during his "I Have a Dream" speech, delivered on Aug. 28, 1963, in Washington, on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial (King Jr., M. L., americanrhetoric.com).

3. The Colors of “*God Help the Child*”

Traumas find articulation in *God Help the Child* through a rhetoric of color. In the novel, the reader is swathed in Bride’s blackness. Sweetness is horrified by Bride’s blue-black skin-color which she describes as “midnight black, Sudanese black” (Morrison, *God Help the Child* 3). “Her tar-colored skin [...] is a cross she will always carry” (Morrison, *God Help the Child* 7). Jeri compares her garb to a “black-coffee-and-white-cream palette. A panther in snow” (Morrison, *God Help the Child* 50). Bride’s blue-black darkness is a commodity to be expended. Her skin color is compared conversely to Hershey’s syrup, licorice and chocolate soufflé (Morrison, *God Help the Child* 33), a palette of food items. Bride’s eyes are “crow black with a blue tint” (Morrison, *God Help the Child* 6). They are “witchy”, “alien” eyes. The colors black and blue are racially loaded. According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, the color blue has long been used as a racialized descriptor. In history, the paleness of skin was a marker of refinement. The term “blue blood” referred to skin that was so pale that blue veins were visible (“blue”). Sweetness describes Bride’s darker-hued skin as “blue-black”, and in this way, refers to both lightness and darkness. Moreover, the expression looking *blue* historically meant “*melancholy, sorrow*” and it is currently used to articulate a feeling of sadness (“blue”). The novel is steeped in the *blues*, and a mellifluous throb cadences Morrison’s prose. Booker’s days are filled with music, and Booker himself, becomes a street musician while living as a vagrant. When Queen, his beloved aunt dies, he scatters her ashes in a makeshift ceremony playing on his trumpet the music of “Kind of Blue” by Miles Davis.

Bride’s blackness is paired with whiteness. Bride covers, clads her blackness with whiteness and shortens her name to Bride. This pairing of black and white Bride personates throughout the novel. There are many variations of whiteness: “I learned how many shades of white there were: ivory, oyster, alabaster, paper white, snow, cream, ecru, Champagne, ghost, bone” (Morrison, *God Help the Child* 33). Jeri tells Bride: “you should always wear white, Bride. Only white and all white all the time...not only because of your name but because of what it does to your licorice skin” (Morrison, *God Help the Child* 33). Morrison writes a commentary on racism by mapping a language of color onto the skin of her characters. Bride’s “draping” of her black skin in white accentuates her darkness. Morrison quasi-associates these descriptions of black and white with a likely racialized discourse, echoing Frantz Fanon’s own reflections in his publication *Black Skin, White Masks*. For Fanon the colonized subject imitates the culture of the colonizer and hence wears the “white mask” (*Black Skin, White Masks* 117).

“If I am black, [...]it is because, having offered my skin, I have been able to absorb all the cosmic effluvia. I am truly a ray of sunlight” (Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks* 45). While Sweetness pushed baby Lulu Ann Bridewell, (Bride is the name Bride gives herself as an adult), in the baby carriage “friends or strangers would lean down and peek in”. They would utter: “She is sort of pretty under all that black” casting her pigment as a garment, a “mask” (Morrison, *God Help the Child* 35). Bride replays the trauma of her racialized skin when she uses the shaving kit Booker had left behind and lathers her face with white foam. Using the dull part of the blade, she “carve[s] dark chocolate lanes through swirls of white lather” (Morrison, *God Help the Child* 35). Bride’s hand removes the *camouflage* of white foam. Morrison’s language of color edges on being, anon, race-related: striae of darkness drawing out the layer of whiteness, the “mask”. Her imaginative writing gradually reveals the concealed preciousness: blackness; inverting the literary white gaze.

Flanking black and white there is yellow. To the reader’s eye, two stories provide profundity to the narrative, namely, those of Bride and Booker. Booker is a man whose older brother Adam was brutally raped and murdered as a young boy. Booker, who becomes Bride’s lover, is an intellectual who loves music. He is plagued by his brother’s death and cannot, until the novel’s end, disclose this horrific family casualty to Bride (Adam’s body had been found dismembered). Both characters drudge to find a language to detail their past traumas to the other. Morrison employs a yellow glow to illuminate Booker’s last vision of Adam. “The last time Booker saw Adam he was wearing a yellow t-shirt and skateboarding down the sidewalk in twilight”. Adam “floated” down the sidewalk, “between edges and towering trees” like “a spot of gold, down a shadowy tunnel, toward the mouth of a living sun” (Morrison, *God Help the Child* 115). Adam [was] “another little black boy gone” (Morrison, *God Help the Child* 114). There was luminosity in the child’s short life, light before darkness, before death. His death left such a profound feeling of loss in Booker that it defined him. He lived in his absence “like the silence of the Japanese gong that is more thrilling than whatever sound may follow”, silence turning into a language of feelings. Booker’s life became filled with blues music. He spent his days playing the trumpet and performing on streets corners. Booker finally allows his brother to rest “I apologize for enslaving you in order to chain myself [...]. No slaveowner could have done it better” (Morrison, *God Help the Child* 161). Booker places a single yellow rose on Adam’s coffin and later on his grave and inscribes his skin with Adam’s color by having a yellow rose tattooed on his black skin. It is light that makes seeing color a possibility. The first time Booker caught a glimpse of Bride’s unusual beauty, he had stood playing his trumpet

in the rain, the musical notes floating “through drops of rain”; and the “air smelled like lilac” (Morrison, *God Help the Child* 131), when he played while remembering her”.

Upon getting out of prison, Sofia is startled by grass so green it hurts her eyes. “The flowers seem to be painted because I didn’t remember roses that shade of lavender or sunflowers so blindingly bright” (Morrison, *God Help the Child* 68-69). When recollecting her beating of Bride, Sofia describes her internal unbinding as “ripping blue-and-white wallpaper”, like the corner of dining room wall at her “Mommy’s house”; the corner where she would stand countless times as punishment, “the blue-and-white wallpaper I came to know better than my own face. Roses, lilacs, clematis all shades of blue against snowy white” (Morrison, *God Help the Child* 76). In Morrison’s narrative world, the sky, becomes a “carnival” of colors at dusk when “sun and moon [share] the horizon” (*God Help the Child* 78).

The above scenes provide an exposition, a social commentary through a chromatic discourse. The pigmentation of black variations carries the terminology of racial hierarchy. Blackness is seen as a barrier to social participation, to beauty, to self. Where racism demonstrates itself upon a woman’s body and permeates surfaces of differences: appending the color of one’s skin and the shape of one’s hair.

4. Black is Beautiful

As a child when Bride was in school, she was treated as a “freak, strange, soiling like a spill of ink on white paper” (Morrison, *God Help the Child* 56). Through the years she has stashed “immunity”. She has developed into a “deep dark beauty who doesn’t need Botox for kissable lips or tanning spas to hide a deathlike pallor. [And she doesn’t] need silicon in [her] butt” (Morrison, *God Help the Child* 57). Physical and facial features equated with African Americans, produce their own beautiful counter-narrative. For example, nowadays, fuller lips, tanned skin, a curvaceous body, a pronounced backside, and curly hair are fashionable. White women who do not naturally have these beauty attributes pay to have what black women possess naturally. In addition, the popularity of models such as Sudanese-born Alek Wek further provides a visual, popular opposite narrative to White physical attributes. We find this counterpoise in *God Help the Child*. Morrison punctuates a counternarrative of black beauty in her description of Bride’s attractiveness. In the novel, racism works not by explicitly barring blackness from the realm of the beautiful but in overexaggerating it “Black sells. It’s the hottest

commodity in the civilized world” (Morrison, *God Help the Child* 36), Jeri tells Bride. Bride’s blackness is a material thing that makes a thing of her: “at first I couldn’t see past all that black to know who she was and just plain love her” (Morrison, *God Help the Child* 43). Sweetness tells the reader. And Bride takes the thing, her skin color, her body, and harnesses their value and converts them to “glory”, “I sold my elegant blackness to all those childhood ghosts and now [...] they drool with envy when they see me [that] is more than payback. It’s glory” (Morrison, *God Help the Child* 57).

4.1 Look at *my* Hair!

The black feminist scholar bell hooks uses hair as a medium to comprehend the complex identity politics that intersect along the lines of “race, gender, class, sexuality, power, and beauty” (Banks 148). Whereas an “ideal” physical beauty is flaunted in cultural media, hooks observes that an environment of racism, segregation and inequality is psychologically damaging to women and children. “Recently, attending black church on a Sunday, I observed that almost every little girl had some form of long fake hair” (hooks, *Black Looks* xi-xii). Sweetness points out that “fixing [Bride’s] wild hair was always a trial, but I braided it down tight for the court appearance” (Morrison, *God Help the Child* 178). There is an association between hairstyling practices and self-esteem which hooks attributes to broader cultural and political forces: “the deeply ideological nature of imagery determines not only how other people think about us but how we think about ourselves” (hooks, *Black Looks* 7). Exploring the realm of media, hooks observes that many of the African American artists glorified for their beauty tend to have a lighter skin and long, wavy hair. Little girls grow up from babyhood onwards to believe they are beautiful until they enter society and discover that “the world does not see me this way” (hooks, *Black Looks* 3). In her work *Talking Back*, hooks further explains how black women have assimilated the white normative standards of beauty, and have become convinced that “straightened hair is more beautiful” than curly, kinky, natural hair; and that lighter skin makes one more worthy and more valuable in the eyes of others (116). According to hooks, black girls grow up knowing that hair is “significant”, and every little black girl has heard her mother say: “now it’s time to get your hair combed”. Black girls, hooks contends, grow up watching Disney fairy tales and admire the blue-eyed, blond princess who is rescued by a handsome prince and lives happily ever after (*Black Looks* 3). The Eurocentric beauty ideals which are valorized in Disney film hegemonize young minds generating fantasies of beauty

ideals they can attain only if they manipulate their hair and skin to these valued norms. According to hooks, Pop artists of the like of Beyoncé create images affirming a white aesthetic of female beauty, by wearing wigs with long, blond, straight hair, which, in her view, sends out a specific message to women: “if I cannot be a white woman, I can at least look like a copy of the real thing” (*Black Looks* 18). hooks advocates for black women to decolonize their minds since they suffer from internalized racism.

Historically, since the 17th century, African American women and their beauty have been differentiated against white beauty standards, especially pertaining to their skin color and hair. The relationship between African American women and their hair goes back to the days of slavery and it is connected with the notion of the color caste system: the belief that the lighter one’s skin color, the better one is, and that straighter hair is better than kinky hair. This thinking creates a hierarchy of skin color and beauty that was promoted and supported by slave masters and slavery. The woman with the wavy hair was considered more attractive and had “good” hair, as opposed to the woman with the kinky hair who had “bad” hair. The notions of “good” hair and “bad” hair derive from a social construction of beauty standards (Banks 86-87). In *400 Years without a Comb*, the American businessman Willie Morrow gives us an account of the history of black hairstyling practices, in an attempt to examine the forces that shape black people’s lives. Morrow contends that “what has personal significance is at least in part a product of how we are regarded and treated by others” (17). He argues that skin color and curly, kinky hair are closely associated and cannot be separated, and that their symbolism acquires personal significance among people of African descent. Morrow uses Africa as a point of departure and studies the significance of hair for the last four hundred years. He claims that under slavery African Americans were “robbed of the wide-toothed comb” which they needed to groom their hair and made to feel ashamed of their kinky hair. He notes how in African societies curly and kinky hair were symbolic of status and were extolled. In contrast, when Africans reached American soil as slaves, their curly and kinky hair became a symbol of subservience (Morrow 17). During slavery, black women who were lighter skinned and had features that were associated with mixed progeny tended to be house slaves and “those black women with darker-skin hues, kinky hair, and broader facial features, tended to be field slaves” (Banks 15). This legacy has brought African women to disguise and alter their bodies to be able to feel attractive and “to loath their physical black self”, to believe that Black is not beautiful, and to wish to assimilate to the hegemonic white standards of beauty. Blacks of mixed heritage accrued patterns of advantage and class mobility by “emulating whiteness” (Gullickson 157).

4.2 Natural is Beautiful: The Afro

In *God Help the Child*, the artistic significances of Bride's stunning black beauty and individuality are being instrumentalized to subvert the typecast representations of blackness in white narratives. In her research on the "Black is Beautiful" movement, Ingrid Banks points out a tantamount picture: one of pride in natural black beauty. Illustrated by the work of French philosopher de Beauvoir in 1961, early studies about the female body centered on its objectification (8). Hair was typically associated with broader cultural and social forces; Freud had given in his essay *Medusa's Head* a pictography of "hair" as a symbol of castration (4). The scholar Edmund Leach dubs hair a signifier of "social control" (147). In a similar fashion, in her work *Hair: Sex, Society, and Symbolism*, Wendy Cooper argues that skin and hair are "important physical attributes for racial classification. [...] Hair not only varies in terms of type and texture among different races but also within race categories" and "as a gauge of female attractiveness" (Cooper 20). Until the mid-1960s, black women's hair was always straightened.

The human rights activist Malcom X spoke out publicly against hair straightening practices, which he believed caused black women to feel ashamed of their beauty. Gloria Wade-Gayles in 1993 admitted that her decision to wear an Afro was prompted by her political commitment to the Civil Rights Movement (133). Very few African American women wore their hair in the natural style before about 1965. By the mid- to late 1960s the natural Afro emerged as a symbol of black pride for both female and male activists, and further as a symbol of resistance to oppression.

In 1966, the feminist Stokely Carmichael declared that the motto "black is beautiful" was not just a symbol of political resistance alone. African women felt a communal sense of pride in themselves and their being "naturally" beautiful (Banks 61). In the words of an activist of the time, "there is beauty in what we are, without having to make ourselves into something we aren't" (Banks 45). From being a symbol of political commitment, the Afro had quickly come to signify an appreciation of one's natural heritage, an abandoning of artifice and a celebration of black womanhood. Further, it became a fashion statement. In her dissertation, "Black is Beautiful: Personal Transformation and Political Change", scholar Maxine Craig, affirms that the Afro appeared years before the Black Power Movement, as an early celebration of African beauty (399). In the year 1963, writer Margaret Burroughs overcame her own hair insecurities and ignoring the disapproval of family, friends and work colleagues, she began sporting an Afro. She had come to the conclusion that kinky hair "was [indeed] beautiful" (qtd. in D. K. King 42). Later in life, the Afro became for her a "symbol of racial consciousness"

(qtd. in D. K. King 42). Another wearer of natural hair as a political statement was, in the early 1960s, jazz singer Abbey Lincoln. Lincoln used her image to celebrate black womanhood. During a press conference in 1963, Lincoln told her interviewer “The black woman is most beautiful and perfectly wonderful. I am proud of her”. She further added: “it is a woman’s ultimate desire and duty to be beautiful. All women want to be beautiful” (qtd. in Lirhue 20).

Brownmiller, author of the book *Femininity*, examines closely how the media broadcasts a message of femininity that both black and white women hanker to uphold, hopeful of yielding personal and social rewards. Brownmiller declares that “in its natural state, hair is not only an issue for black women, but other groups as well. [...] We’re trying to get, to do something with the curly texture and they’re trying to do something with the straight texture” (Brownmiller 50). Jones and Shorter-Gooden accentuate Brownmiller’s argument by highlighting that “not every woman who decided to straighten her hair or change the color of her eyes by wearing contacts believes that beauty is synonymous with whiteness. Trying on a new look, even one often associated with Europeans, does not automatically imply self-hatred (Jones and Shorter-Gooden 178). There is a “social climate” that welcomes these “short and natural styles” styles that are prevalent on the level of fashion, may still exist on the margins. The margin becomes a site of resistance and self-empowerment when black women reject imposed ideologies of what is considered beautiful or fitting “non-white women would have been unable to develop positive self-concepts if they had not exercised their power to reject the powerful’s definition of their reality” (hooks, *Feminist Theory* 91).

Between the years 1960 and 1990 black women appeared to have internalized the “Black is Beautiful” movement. Bond and Cash conducted a social experiment in 1992 and published their findings in an article titled *Black Beauty: Skin Color and Body Images among African-American College Women*. What they found was that the majority of the women in their experiment had a higher self-esteem and a higher perception of their body image and “felt satisfied with their skin color irrespective of how light or dark they actually were” (Bond and Cash 874).

Although scholars researching the impact of the “Black is Beautiful” movement challenged white standards of beauty, skin-color discrimination still exists today. In recent years, feminist scholars such as Judith Butler have viewed the female body as socially constructed (21). Since the early twentieth Century, African Americans have begun associating hairstyles with their ability to obtain a job in an interview or achieve economic success (George 27). Ironically, “the altered nature of relaxed or permed hair is seen as natural, whereas natural hair or unaltered hair is defined as unnatural” (Banks 24).

In his essay *In Slavery and Social Death: A comparative Study*, Orlando Patterson argues that skin color and hair among Blacks are racial signifiers. Black hair has not escaped political readings about how Blacks construct identities. (Patterson 61). Black beauty is formulated as an asset in *God Help the Child*. A grown-up Bride embraces and celebrates her blackness. Hair and skin reflect notions of identity and self-esteem. Bride has reached a level of satisfaction with her body image. She flaunts her blackness by wearing white clothes and is admired and defined as gorgeous by women and men alike. Below, I illustrate Bride's journey to healing and selfhood.

5. Bride's Search for Selfhood/ Identity

Morrison employs the structure of the Bildungsroman to chart the trials the protagonist of her novel undergoes toward empowerment and self-realization. This last novel is a pilgrimage to proud selfhood. Notwithstanding her external beauty, Bride's beauty fails to give her happiness or affirm her humanity. After Booker's abandonment, Bride's body becomes consumed by her past the way Sweetness's life was consumed by her ancestor's history of racism and slavery. In the words of bell hooks, "identities are the names we give to the different ways we are positioned and position ourselves within the narratives of the past" (hooks, *Black Looks* 5). In *God Help the Child*, the ghost of history is present in Bride's violent past. In childhood, Bride had known the pain of rejection from her parents and her peers. Sweetness characterizes a young Bride: "she was talking back, refusing to eat what I cooked, primping her hair. When I braided it, she'd go to school and unbraided it. I couldn't let her go bad. I slammed the lid and warned her of the names she'd be called" (Morrison, *God Help the Child* 178).

As an adult Bride attempts to counter the narrative of the past by the commodification of her life and becomes aware that her internalized pain is too great. Her quest for Booker is a quest for love and self. Bride starts her search for Booker to find out what he meant by "You not the Woman I want" (Morrison, *God Help the Child* 8). Bride grasped her own lack of identity, selfhood, when she replied: "neither am I" (Morrison, *God Help the Child* 8). When Bride begins to confront the lie she told about Sofia, and the reasons why she told it, her body begins to degrade. She wakes up one day to find her ears are unpierced and before long her breasts disappear, her menstruation stops, her pubic hair goes missing. The parts of her that signal beauty and womanhood fade as she undergoes a "crazed transformation back into a

scared little girl” (Morrison, *God Help the Child* 142). She experiences a bodily undoing as she struggles to articulate the trauma of the social violence she endured as a child. The finger she had pointed in the courtroom against Sophia Huxley was meant for Mr. Leigh, her white landlord, she had witnessed sexually assaulting an unnamed boy, “a white kid with brown hair”. “[Mr. Leigh] was leaning over short, fat legs of a child between his hairy white thighs” (Morrison, *God Help the Child*, 54). Upon sighting Bride watching him, the landlord had shouted at her “little nigger cunt! Close that window and get the fuck outta there” (Morrison, *God Help the Child* 54). Her bodily transformation symbolizes a regression into her past. Her body signals her need to confront those ghosts of the past in her present, especially her girlish body that had been negated touch and love. Bride objectifies her guilt and loss in unconscious self-hatred even if as a child she had not understood the transgression and the consequences of accusing an innocent. She becomes the shadow of her past, her current body revisiting her adolescent body.

Bride’s healing begins in the cabin she shares with her hosts Evelyn and her husband, and a white little girl: Rain. In her quest to find Booker, she had embarked on a road trip that resulted in a car accident. Because of a broken leg, she is forced to stay with a white family for six weeks. Their home becomes a refuge and the site of her “rebirth”. Her mobility is limited, and she needs to be carried around like a child, a baby. She is bathed by Evelyn in a sponging routine that represents the crossroads of her transformation and healing. Evelyn does not show any repugnance to touch the black skin of the “girl” (then Lulu Ann). “Distaste was all over [Sweetness’s] face when I was little and she had to bath me”, Bride recalls (Morrison, *God Help the Child* 31). The recovered dignity of her girlish body is the premise Bride needs to formulate a new understanding of her own self-worth. Young Bride had been denied “forms of physical bonding”, which are pivotal for the development of a loving perception of self (hooks, *Sisters of the Yam* 117). Bride finds a kindred spirit in Rain, the young girl who was found in the rain and adopted by Evelyn and her husband. Bride catches an exchange between Rain and her adoptive mother about her: “Why is her skin so black?”, “For the same reason yours is so white”, “Oh you mean like my kitten?”, “Right. Born that way” (Morrison, *God Help the Child* 85). Rain also had her share of pain at the hands of her mother and when Bride saves her life after she is assaulted by street boys, Rain is grateful: “nobody had [...] put their own self in danger to save me. Save my life. But that’s what my black lady did [...] I miss my black lady” (Morrison, *God Help the Child* 106).

The encounters in the cabin help Bride break her pattern of self-hatred and self-destruction which had begun in Sofia Huxley’s hotel room. She had gone to visit Sofia Huxley

and upon revealing her identity to the ex-convict, she had been brutally assaulted. Ms. Huxley had been released from jail and Bride had intended to gift her a large sum of money and a vacation, in an attempt to assuage her childhood guilt. While the physical bruises had painfully healed, the interior wounds continued to hurt her.

At the end of the novel, Bride's pregnancy is a window of opportunity for ancestral trauma to turn into awareness and forgiveness. Upon learning about Bride's pregnancy, Sweetness, now living in a nursing home, lonely, and receiving her daughter's money but not her visits, is assailed by regret for "all the things [she] didn't do or did wrong". She recalls how she "screamed at her to keep her from tattling on the landlord – the dog"; and regrets the way she reacted when Bride had her first menstruation, yet "I did the best for her under the circumstances. [...]. The last time I saw her she looked so good, I forgot about her color [...]. Things have changed a mite from when I was young. Blue blacks are all over TV, in fashion magazines, commercials, even starring in movies" (Morrison, *God Help the Child* 176). However, even if Sweetness is repentant of her treatment of Bride when she was little, she still presumes true that she "had to protect her. She didn't know the world [...], a world where you would be the last one hired and the first one fired. She couldn't know any of that or how her black skin would scare white people or make them laugh and trick her" (Morrison, *God Help the Child* 41). Sweetness's victimization of Bride had been ultimately an expression of Sweetness's own despair. The quasi-racial hatred Sweetness feels is internalized "obsession" with whiteness, "white supremacist" thinking. In *The Wretched of the Earth*, Fanon asserted that colonization was aimed at robbing the colonized of cultural memory and self (40). Because of Bride's darkness, her "high yellow" mother considers smothering her baby to death. The lyrics of Billie Holiday's song: "But God bless the child that's got his own" contained in the solo "God Bless the Child", are an ode to self-love, and illustrate Bride's feat in her fictional journey to self. A concept to which Fanon ascribes "I am not the slave of the Slavery that dehumanized my ancestors. [...]. I am not a prisoner of history. I should not seek there for the meaning of my destiny" (*Black Skin, White Masks* 229-230).

Morrison's last novel, *God Help the Child*, appears to be a reversal of her first novel *The Bluest Eye*. Pecola's yearning for blue eyes is echoed in Bride's wolverine eyes, which her friend Brooklyn calls: "Alien eyes, [...] but guys think they are gorgeous" (Morrison, *God Help the Child* 23). The ugly blackness of Pecola is replaced with a blackness which has become "the hottest commodity in the civilized world".

The intellectual James Cone, comparably to Morrison in *God Help the Child*, offers a homogenous perspective of Blackness. In *A Black Theology of Liberation*, he identifies

with Blackness all that is good, righteous, positive and with whiteness all that is bad and wicked (an indirect example from Morrison's novel could be the description of the white landlord molesting the unnamed white boy which Lulu Ann, aka Bride, witnesses from her upper-story window). Cone calls for a questioning of prevailing habits of thinking about race "the logic of white supremacy would be radically undermined if everyone would learn to identify with and love blackness" (110). He radically urges Whites to absorb "the difference of blackness [and] destroy themselves and be born again as beautiful black persons" (Cone 110).

6. Conclusion

Morrison's prose is highly lyrical, elegiac : "her hair [was] like a million black butterflies asleep on her head" (*God Help the Child* 133). The author gives the impression to express a rich ethnic wisdom and a passionate sense of onus for social justice, interlacing the real and the fictional. Her stories have the power to affect us as if "our real lives are governed and directed by the stories we read, write and tell ourselves" (Bennett and Royle 63). Morrison is masterful at creating a web of significance in which each individual life is fitted into a larger picture of meaningful encounters, into a larger picture of universal truths, and, of black history. "It is black 'soul', the pain and joy of reacting [...] and affirming blackness" (Cone 28). As a young adult, Bride did not conform her identity to any pre-existing cultural and social classification. She transcended normative binaries of blackness and whiteness and reclaimed and limelighted her abject "Other". This notion is interpreted by Booker: "I refuse to be ashamed of my shame, you know the one assigned to me who matches the [...] degraded morality of those who insist upon this most facile of human feelings of inferiority (Morrison, *God Help the Child* 150).

In Morrison's fictional story, *God Help the Child*, excavating a selfhood that has been long buried, beneath stereotype and trauma, is a tortuous endeavor. Yet, Bride did it. That is what fiction "can do, and do well, [...] evoke, hint at, so to speak, that which may have been experienced" (hooks, *Yearning* 216), such as during slavery for instance, and then offer an obsequy of some sort. The experience of slavery was, for African Americans and their descendants, "a holocaust experience – [a] tragedy of such ongoing magnitude", black people still suffer from it today (hooks, *Yearning* 216). Morrison's novels are empathic ceremonies of "proper burial", to stop the "haunting" for consequent generations. Cone makes it clear that

“black [...] is beautiful, oppressors have made it ugly” (Cone 16). Such is the beauty of the black characters we encounter in Morrison’s novel: *God Help the Child*.

Bride’s journey is a humanist one. Her quest is not a hard-won victory over the oppressor. She worships her own blackness and succeeds in obliterating the internalized ugliness. Finding value in herself and in her work, the character composes a nurturing relationship with Booker. I have drawn on the thinking of bell hooks and Toni Morrison, to show how Morrison’s heroine, Bride, represents proud, strong black women. Their forebears sweated blood and imagined a future where they would come out of slavery into a space of beauty. History shows that no material pain succeeded in ravaging their dreaming. “My grandmother”, hooks recounts, “was a quiltmaker. She [taught] me about color. Look, she [told me]. What the light does to color” (hooks, *Yearning* 103). In *God Help the Child*, Morrison fictionalizes a yearning for literary beauty, the beauty that comes from the chromatism of the inverted white gaze, the black gaze.

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