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Post What? Disarticulating Post-Discourses in Toni Morrison's *God Help the Child*

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Abstract: In the midst of the proliferation of post-discourses, this essay investigates how Toni Morrison's *God Help the Child* (2015) offers a timely exploration of the hurting Black female body that calls into question, if not outright refutes, whether Americans have entered a post-racial, post-Black, and post-feminist era. This essay opens with a critical context section that situates *God Help the Child* within and against post-discourses, before examining how resemblances with Morrison's prior works like *Beloved* (1987) and *The Bluest Eye* (1970) confirm that the legacy of slavery still dictates the way Black female bodies are seen and treated in twenty-first-century America. Ultimately, what this study intends is to speak the unspeakable: race still matters despite the silencing effects of post-discourses.

Keywords: Toni Morrison; *God Help the Child*; Black female body; pain; violence; commodification; post-racial; post-Black; post-feminist; double-consciousness

1. Introduction

The maimed bodies of African American males and females that fill the pages of Toni Morrison's *God Help the Child* remind us that the legacy of slavery still affects African American bodies [1]. With its focus on physical and emotional pain, Morrison's latest novel is reminiscent of canonical neo-slave narratives like Octavia Butler's *Kindred* (1979) [2] or Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1987) [3]. Both of these earlier texts transport the readers back in time to witness the cruelty of the slave economy and its impact on the Black female body. For instance, *Kindred* opens with a graphic representation of the mutilated arm of its African American female protagonist, Dana, whose maimed limb illustrates that she cannot come back unharmed from the past. *Beloved* similarly centers on a female character, Sethe, whose lacerated back functions as a constant reminder of the brutality of her life as a slave [4]. As characteristic of the genre of the neo-slave narrative, these texts highlight the physical impact of slavery. *God Help the Child* is anchored in the present, yet it is connected to this past in its exploration of how and why the black body of its female protagonist, Lula Ann, is still hurting, even after she undergoes a supposedly liberating makeover. Although she superficially transforms and changes her name to Bride, Lula Ann still carries with her the scars of her childhood. If Morrison explores what it means to be a slave and a mother during slavery in *Beloved*, and later how it might have been for "a young slave—black girl when there was no racism" in *A Mercy* (2008), in her eleventh novel, *God Help the Child*, Morrison invites readers to look at how it might feel to be a black woman in America today and to reconsider or at least complicate claims of post-raciality [5].

This essay investigates how Morrison's depictions of the Black female body—its victimization as well as its commodification—shatter the myth of a post-racial America. The first part positions *God*

Help the Child within and against post-discourses, before delving into more in-depth textual analysis.¹ Though this study centers on the racialized body in *God Help the Child*, in the second section, I also draw parallels to Morrison's earlier fiction, with a particular focus on *Beloved* and the *Bluest Eye* (1970) [6]. After examining the traumatizing effects of slavery in *Beloved* and its legacy in the twentieth century in the *Bluest Eye*, in *God Help the Child* Morrison situates the hurting Black body in the twenty-first century—a supposed post-racial era that shares disturbing resemblances with past periods described in her previous works. Set in different times, all three nevertheless contain related explorations of the psychological and physical pain inflicted on Black women.

2. Critical Context

Very little scholarly attention has been devoted to post-racial discourse in Morrison's work as a whole and nothing has yet been published on *God Help the Child*. By contrast, numerous reviews and interviews characterize her previous novel, *A Mercy*, as a post-racial text [7]. Published during the 2008 election and set in what Morrison has described as a "pre-racial" era, "when slavery was not associated with racism," this novel sparked conversations about its assumed allegorical representation of the present in America [8]. Interestingly, instead of demonstrating that we are post or past race and racism, the insistence on labeling this work as post-racial often signals the opposite. Examining this tendency, ethnic studies scholar Jessica Wells Cantiello notes how reviewers insist on making post-racial claims at the same time as they paradoxically reinforce a black/white paradigm [9]. In response to this phenomenon, Cantiello analyzes how Morrison's destabilization of race throughout *A Mercy* cannot be equated with her endorsement of post-raciality. As Cantiello asserts, Morrison rejects the term "post-racial" ([9], p. 167), precisely because it seems to imply "that we have erased racism" ([9], p. 168; [10]).

The purpose of this essay is to examine how *God Help the Child* similarly disarticulates racial categories, exposing them as detrimental social constructs that still dictate the ways Black female bodies are perceived and treated to this day. Whereas *A Mercy* is set in the past, which leads Cantiello to declare that connections with the present should not be overstated, the same cannot be said about *God Help the Child*. No stretch needs to be made to perceive how contemporary Morrison's latest novel is and how, for our interest here, it depicts the Black female body in a supposed post-racial era. What makes *God Help the Child* groundbreaking is precisely what reviewers criticize about the novel: that it is anchored in the present [11]. Instead of serving as what David Ulin interprets as "little more than a distraction," the focus on the disintegrating female body at the heart of this narrative reveals the urgency to acknowledge that the scars of slavery may no longer be visible to the eye, but that the Black female body still experiences systemic physical and psychological violence [12].

With its focus on the need to break cycles of silence and to speak up about past traumas, *God Help the Child* prompts readers to question the stifling effects of concepts like colorblindness and post-raciality. As Sherrow O. Pinder argues in her groundbreaking study of the relationship between colorblindness, post-raciality, and the apparatus of whiteness, "The election of the Illinois senator has encouraged the rearticulation of colorblindness to reject the significance of race in determining social outcomes" ([7], p. 2). At a time when race seems to no longer matter, since Barack Obama was elected president in the United States, colorblindness silences activism instead of promoting racial equality. Far from prospering in an allegedly non-discriminatory era, African Americans have entered what

¹ Although post-Black, post-racial, and post feminist discourses represent different lenses through which we might interpret the present moment in America, they share an admitted desire to move respectively post/past old definitions of Blackness, race, and feminism. Each of these trends includes various definitions of those terms. Yet, as I will explore later on, post-discourses often combine to silence, and therefore further reinforce, the systemic oppression that Black women face in today's America.

Americanist Eddie Glaude Jr. calls “the Great Black Depression” ([13], p. 18), losing much more in the past decade than their fellow Americans [13].²

Morrison herself was quick to comment that Obama’s election corresponds to a time when we should reflect on race as a construct with very real consequences. For instance, after the death of Freddie Gray—an African American man who died in police custody in 2015—Morrison noted the necessity to examine the enduring significance of race [14]. She also shared her fears for her own children in such a climate [15]. What has struck some reviewers of *God Help the Child* as an incoherent narrative lacking character development or depth is instead a provocative indictment against the illusion of post-raciality. It is no coincidence that the very character that seems to belong to a post-racial generation gets shot just because of her skin color. With overlapping narratives connecting traumatized characters across time and place, Morrison forces her readers to acknowledge the pervasive mental and physical damages racism and sexism still cause to this day, particularly for Black girls and women.

As opposed to reviewers’ insistence that *God Help the Child* primarily addresses universal childhood trauma or to their critical rejection of the novel as a failure, I want to suggest how *God Help the Child* exposes the new kind of racism that is characteristic of our era.³ In this novel, Morrison anchors childhood trauma in what it means to be a “beaten up little girl” “because of her color” [14]. Though she makes broader claims about abuse, in a novel where childhood trauma seems omnipresent, Morrison also directly addresses how portraying the significance of race in the shaping of a child’s identity was a key concern in the creation of *God Help the Child*: “I knew I wanted to work with the trauma of race slash colour, and to see what it did to children if it’s not understood” [16]. In her interview for *The Telegraph*, Morrison indicates that rather than believing that racism is vanishing, we need to look at the ways it manifests itself differently. She comments, “The question of race (...) is not static” [17]. As if already addressing post-racial and post-Black discourses, Morrison further asserts: “It always seemed to me that the people who invented the hierarchy of ‘race’ when it was convenient for them ought not to be the ones to explain it away, now that it does not suit their purposes for it to exist” ([18], p. 3). *God Help the Child* responds to this silencing of race to fictionalize what Pinder calls “the third wave of racism—that is, racism without ‘seeing’ race” ([7], p. 16).

In its treatment of this new form of racism, *God Help the Child* undermines post-raciality as well as post-Blackness. Throughout its examination of the millennials, this novel depicts a generation whose hope is to belong to a post-racial world free of racism, or at least, a post-Black society, in which there are many ways to be Black. Post-Blackness, according to Touré, one of its most vocal advocates, is the refusal to let “being black hold [him] back” ([19], p. 4). His uplifting message paired with his denunciation of homogenizing media ([19], p. 7) and limiting claims of Black authenticity ([19], p. 4) are particularly appealing. For him as well as for Harry J. Elam, Jr. and Douglas A Jones, Jr., editors of *The Methuen Drama Book of Post-Black Plays*, who also denounce the restricting effects of insisting on Black authenticity, Obama’s 2008 election marked a turning point for artists to explore more freely the various meanings of Blackness [20]. Distancing themselves from the concept of post-raciality as a “bankrupt concept that reflects a naïve understanding of race in America” ([19], p. 12), post-Black artists acknowledge that racism still exists while also seeking to differentiate themselves from previous generations of Black artists ([20], pp. ix, xi).

² Glaude provides alarming numbers that illustrate how the 2008 financial crisis had a much deeper impact on African Americans: “African Americans lost 31 percent of wealth between 2007 and 2010. White Americans lost 11 percent. By 2009, 35 percent of African American households had zero or negative net worth. According to the Pew Research Center, by 2011, black families had lost 53 percent of their wealth” ([13], p. 18). Going beyond a strictly economic analysis of the period, Glaude provocatively asks, “how many times have we watched black parents in anguish as they buried their children? As they stood before the press and demanded justice, joined with other parents in a communion of grief? The deaths of Trayvon Martin, Michael Brown, Sandra Bland, and so many others shattered any illusion we might have had about a post-racial America” ([13], p. 6).

³ For dismissive reviews, see for instance, Scott Rion Amilcar’s “An Examination of Blackness, Beauty, and a Lie that Binds” or David L. Ulin’s “The Heavy Weight of Justice: Toni Morrison’s Themes of Family and Legacy Infuse her Latest Novel but the Magic is Missing” [11,12].

Insisting on the fluidity of Blackness, like post-Blackness advocates do, though, is nothing new. In 1988, for instance, Morrison declares: “We are not, in fact, ‘other’. We are choices” ([18], p. 9).⁴ Similarly, the use of parody that Elam, Jr. and Jones, Jr. identify as characteristic of post-Black art has been used consistently for decades, if not centuries, and has been identified by many as a trope of Black art ([20], pp. x, xii).⁵ In this sense, I agree with K. Merinda Simmons, co-editor of *The Trouble With Post Blackness*, who criticizes post-Blackness advocates “who want to see the concept as a wholly new and unique thing” ([24], p. 11). More troubling yet, in his desire to “move beyond double-consciousness” ([19], p. 10), Touré does not fully address the intersections of multiple systems of oppression that limit the opportunities of many who might not as easily achieve being “rooted in but not restricted by Blackness” ([19], p. 12) and for whom there might not be “forty million ways to be Black” ([19], p. 5) or even “an infinity” ([19], p. 12).⁶ As *God Help the Child* reveals, Black female bodies are constantly stigmatized and subjected to violence. Though post-racial and post-Black discourses are different, in their aspirations to rise above discrimination, both theories run the risk of overlooking systemic oppression and its particular effects on Black women.

The problem with post-Blackness, in the words of Stephanie Li, who offers a pertinent exploration of post-raciality and post-Blackness in Morrison’s recent work *Desdemona* (2012), is that, “With its emphasis on individualist expressions of racial identity, post-blackness threatens to become a dangerous abdication of history” ([26], p. 38). Morrison, like post-Black advocates, refuses to reinforce a fixed understanding of Black authenticity. But, unlike Touré, she does not deem it necessary to disconnect herself from the past in order to do so. As a result, her works are both anchored in social and literary history *and* informed by a desire to redefine Blackness and Black tradition as non-monolithic concepts. *God Help the Child* provides a provocative example of how addressing the past can challenge rather than reinforce racial and gender constructs. It is in bridging the past with the present, particularly in the ways the legacy of slavery still shapes contemporary images of the Black female body, that *God Help the Child* reminds readers not to declare a post-racial or post-Black era too soon.

3. Discussion

This narrative, which recounts how an accomplished executive named Bride falls apart when her lover abandons her, illustrates the fragility of the post-racial myth. Bride had the power to reinvent and rename herself twice, once at sixteen from Lula Ann Bridewell to Ann Bride and again at eighteen to simply Bride in order to get a job ([1], p. 11). She changed her name and her appearance to transform herself from a rejected daughter into a successful advertising manager who has a cosmetics line of her own. Yet, the mental and physical alterations that manifest themselves after her separation from her lover, Booker, suggest that her makeover was more a façade than a liberating tool. His departure brings back a not so distant past before Lula Ann’s transformation into Bride—a time when she constantly faced rejection because of the ways her darker skin color was stigmatized, even by her own light-skinned parents. As her body disintegrates so does the boundary between the past and the present. This loop in the narrative between different time periods reinforces how past prejudices still shape social and familial relations. Whereas Touré praises post-Black models like Obama as “rooted in

⁴ Even before, Black writers have repeatedly insisted on different nuances and shades of skin as well as Blackness, often reinforcing this sense of variety through accounts relying on multi-perspectives and rejecting accepted literary genres. As early as 1903, Du Bois’s *The Souls of Black Folk* is a perfect example of both strategies deployed to counter stereotypes of Blackness [21].

⁵ For parody in Black art, see [22,23].

⁶ In her documentary, *A Girl Like Me*, Kiri Davis shows us the distressing reality in which she replicates the 1940s Clarks’s doll experiments. As we see, very little has changed in the internalization of standards of beauty as portrayed in the media and replicated throughout the doll industry. Davis reveals how, among the twenty-one children she interviewed, fifty-one still preferred the white doll. More problematic even, we see their reluctance to identify with the doll they have just identified as “the bad doll” just because it is Black. When children are trained to see Blackness as negative, are there really an infinite number of ways to be Black. As appealing as this claim may be, it seems disconnected from the very real effects of discourses of Blackness in America ([14], p. 2). See [25].

but not restricted by Blackness," *God Help the Child* presents readers with female characters whose life and sense of self are directly shaped by internalized racism. A case in point, the first chapter gives us access to the worldview of Sweetness, Lula Ann's mother. Both uprooted from yet restricted by her understanding of Blackness, Sweetness internalizes racism and subsequently discriminates against her own daughter, Lula Ann/Bride. Sweetness openly condemns the segregation her parents suffered even in church, where they had to use the bible "reserved for Negroes" ([1], p. 4) or the housing discrimination that made it challenging for her to find an apartment for Lula Ann and herself ([1], p. 6), but she fails to see her own biases toward her daughter. Steeped in racist discourses, Sweetness spends more time wondering why her daughter's skin is blue black, when both her and her husband are light-skinned, instead of addressing systemic racism.

In *God Help the Child*, Morrison portrays a world in which her Black female characters suffer from what W. E. B. Du Bois characterizes as double consciousness—a split between the desire to achieve the American Dream and the impossibility to fully do so as African American women. As Du Bois explains in his seminal work *The Souls of Black Folk*, double-consciousness corresponds to "this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others" ([21], p. 8). A century after Du Bois famously detailed the power of the gaze and the internalization of racism, Morrison portrays Sweetness as a mother who sees herself and her daughter through the eyes of the racist society in which she lives, describing her own child, Lula Ann, as a "pickaninny" ([1], p. 5). This opening chapter makes evident that the problem of the color line is still the problem of our century. It dictates Sweetness's behavior, as when she claims, "I had to be strict, very strict. Lula Ann needed to learn how to behave, how to keep her head down and not to make trouble" ([1], p. 7, emphasis mine). She does not notice how she is transferring her internalized shame; rather, she sees her harsh education as a survival tool. For Sweetness, policing Lula Ann's body is imperative to prevent her victimization. In the second chapter where she is the narrator, Sweetness stresses again how she acted out of necessity: "I had to protect her" ([1], pp. 41, 43). The world she depicts is one "where you could be sent to a juvenile lockup for talking back or fighting in school, a world where you'd be the last one hired and the first one fired" ([1], p. 40). After seeing white boys bully a little Black girl, she justifies her tough love as a means to educate her daughter about what she calls "skin privileges" ([1], p. 43). Even after her daughter changes her name to Bride and becomes a successful executive, Sweetness is still incapable of reflecting on the trauma she inflicted on her. She has regrets ([1], p. 177), yet she congratulates herself for her daughter's success: "Some of my schooling must have rubbed off" ([1], p. 178). Full of contradictions, she believes, at least partially, that things have changed when "blue blacks are all over TV, in fashion magazines, commercials, even starring in movies" ([1], p. 177) and yet she still warns about "how the world is" and what it entails to be a Black mother in this environment ([1], p. 178). Trapped between an alluring post-racial myth and her own colorism, Sweetness remains in a state of arrested development.

Though Sweetness's daughter Lula Ann/Bride is born in the 1990s, the legacy of slavery is still very much present. In a manner reminiscent of Toni Morrison's early exploration of desperate maternal acts to protect children from slavery in *Beloved*, the opening chapter, itself entitled "Sweetness" after its narrator, recalls *Beloved's* plantation life in nineteenth-century Sweet Home. Both are misnomers: nothing is sweet about Sweetness's parenting or life in Sweet Home, the plantation in *Beloved*. Inspired by what might have motivated enslaved Margaret Garner to kill her own child in the mid-1850s, Morrison wrote *Beloved* to describe the plight of women during slavery. In *Beloved*, Sethe is a mother who escapes Sweet Home with her children after being brutally beaten and humiliated, only to find herself a victim of the Fugitive Slave Act, according to which she could be returned to her former owner even across state lines. The beautiful image of the "chokecherry tree" ([3], pp. 18, 93) that appears throughout the narrative to describe the marks that beatings left on her back cannot begin to represent the pain Sethe had to undergo—the very pain and humiliation of being dehumanized

and treated like cattle that she wants her children never to experience.⁷ Under slavery, her body is not hers, legally belonging to someone who can do with it as he pleases. Although she does represent an object within the slave economy, it is not an object of art as the image of the tree might evoke. As former Sweet Home slave Paul D comments when they meet again after the Civil War, “her back skin had been dead for years” ([3], p. 21), “a revolting clump of scars” ([3], p. 25). Her spirit has also been broken, the result of the psychological violence that has been inflicted on her to force her into submission. In fact, what Sethe remembers most is the humiliation of having her milk taken by Schoolteacher’s nephews ([3], pp. 19, 83). As Kimberly Juanita Brown expounds, under the slave system, this humiliating act “layers violence with maternity” ([4], p. 57). They not only treat Sethe like an animal, but they also take away her role as a mother. Because of her slave status, Sethe cannot be a woman, a mother, or a provider for her children.

The parallel between *Beloved* and *God Help the Child* forces readers to recognize the physical and emotional violence still at work in race relations in America. Whereas Sethe kills her youngest daughter not to let her fall into the hands of her owner when he comes to reclaim Sethe and her children, in *God Help the Child*, centuries later, the reader witnesses a mother contemplating the possible murder of her child: “I held a blanket over her face and pressed. But I couldn’t do that, no matter how much I wished she hadn’t been born with that color” ([1], p. 5). One might be quicker to judge Sethe for actually going through with the killing, but here, though not committed, this crime is more disturbing. In *Beloved*, Sethe clearly blames slavery and systematic abuse: “I couldn’t let her nor any of em live under schoolteacher” ([3], p. 192). She was trying to keep them “safe” when “what she wanted for her children was exactly what was missing in 124: safety” ([3], p. 192). In her own house, here referenced as 124, there is no sense of safety or shelter. Considered property, Sethe cannot have a home of her own in which to protect her family. There is no state or property line strong enough to constitute a boundary for the all-powerful slave-owner who can come at anytime to reclaim his goods. Morrison herself comments in the foreword: “Assertions of parenthood under conditions peculiar to the logic of institutional enslavement were criminal” ([3], p. xvii). Contrastingly, in *God Help the Child*, Sweetness blames the baby’s color, as if it was wrong by definition rather than seen and portrayed that way as a means to maintain racial hierarchies. Sweetness internalizes the discrimination she suffers and replicates this system within the family unit. She might not run the risk of being whipped or captured back into slavery, but she nonetheless has to face daily humiliations and discriminatory practices from which she is trying to “protect” ([1], pp. 41, 43) Lula Ann. The striking similarities between novels set centuries apart only further reinforce the sense that the objectified female Black body used and tortured during slavery still cannot escape objectification and violence.

To Lula Ann’s light-skinned parents her body is untouchable, as if marked by sin for being “too Black” ([1], p. 144). For Sweetness and her husband Louis, colorism enabled them to “hold on to a little dignity” in a world that otherwise discriminated against them ([1], p. 4). Apparently, the only way to be Black and survive for them is to have light skin, as if allowing them to be closer to white privilege. In their eyes, Lula Ann’s birth disrupts their access to the only privilege their light skin had afforded them until then. Louis cannot see Lula Ann as a baby. He only sees an abnormality, a repulsive object, much like slave owners describe Black bodies in *Beloved*. Looking at her, he exclaims, “What the hell is *this*?” ([1], p. 5, emphasis mine). For him, she is “an enemy,” which leads Sweetness to declare that her birth “broke our marriage to pieces” ([1], p. 5). Lula Ann’s black body is unacceptable for both parents, who blame each other for her blackness. More concerned about their “dignity” in a world where the color of your skin clearly seems to make a difference (even by association), both parents reject their role as caretakers: her father abandons Lula Ann and her mother spends her life physically and emotionally distancing herself from her.

⁷ For a study of violence in *Beloved*, see [27,28].

Chapter two, entitled “Bride,” changes the tone to optimistically portray a post-racial society. For a brief moment, it does seem possible to put the past behind. Bride, as the reader learns, is actually Lula Ann, Sweetness’s daughter. Far from the neglected little girl, rejected because of her dark skin, this protagonist seems to have it all, temporarily giving the impression that at least some can achieve the American Dream. At that point in the narrative, Bride is a twenty-three-year-old regional manager in a small cosmetics company in California. She is an independent Black woman living in a luxurious apartment and owning a luxury car, who embodies the ideals of a post-racial, and maybe a post-patriarchal, capitalist society. She even subverts the controlling image of the Black lady as defined by Patricia Hill Collins—that is as a high-achieving yet too assertive middle-class Black woman who cannot get married precisely for what are seen as her castrating tendencies [29]. Far from suffering from what Collins suggests is the typical isolation and demonization imposed on successful Black females, Bride maintains control over both her personal and her work life. In her own words she is “hot” and “successful” ([1], p. 11). Supposedly able to have both a career and a man, Bride appears to belong to a new post-Black, and even potentially post-feminist society in which Black women can have it all.

Bride’s character illustrates both the appeal and the contradictions of post-feminism. It is only when she finds a way for her body to become acceptable that Bride feels accomplished. What seems like her liberation might just be the more glamorous yet connected facet of the objectification of her body. Indeed, after her transformation, Bride seems to leave her past behind and embrace a new era when Black women can be successful. Both her achievements as well as her desire to put the past to rest evoke key aspects of post-feminism. In Robert Goldman’s words: “the category of ‘postfeminism’ emerged during the 1980s to designate a new generation of women who take for granted the victories secured by their elders, presuming their right to equitable treatment both in the workplace and at home, while shunning the label of feminism” ([30], p. 130). Working in a cosmetics company selling consumer goods as emancipating tools, Bride overlooks the contradictions of an industry that allows her to ascend socially at the same time as it dictates how to control female bodies, including her own. She completely embraces her makeover, without questioning her participation in and complicity with her self-packaging. This phenomenon aligns itself with a particular trend in post-feminism, which Goldman refers to as “commodity feminism,” that is “an aesthetically depoliticized version of a potentially oppositional feminism”, which “has sublated the judging power of the male gaze into a self-policing narcissistic gaze”, and according to which “woman gains power by participating in the fetishism of commodity appearances” ([30], pp. 108, 121, 130; [31]). This type of feminism inscribes itself in a new wave of feminism, or a “post-feminist sensibility” that is “characterized among other things by a marked intensification of the scrutiny of women’s bodies” and by the ways “in which power and ideology operate through the construction of subjects, not through top-down imposition but through negotiation, mediation, resistance and articulation” ([32], pp. 439–40). Rosalind Gill, in fact, highlights the centrality of the relationship between subjectivity and representation to explore how under discourses of choice, post-feminism creates a “pernicious disciplinary regime,” in which women have internalized standards of beauty to develop a “makeover paradigm” that encourages “self-monitoring and self-discipline” ([32], pp. 438, 441). In its depiction of commodity feminism, *God Help the Child* documents how it is the willing commodification of the female body that makes it appear as if we were in a post-feminist era, no longer requiring political action in order to gain equal rights. However, as Goldman suggests, behind the alluring façade of free choice, the advertising industry recasts the female body as powerful yet objectified nonetheless.

In *God Help the Child*, this internalized gaze doubly polices the gendered and racialized body. Behind the appearance of a self-made woman, there is a more complex subjection: a racialized body

bound to the demands of the market.⁸ During Bride's first interview, which eventually leads to her position as advertising executive, Bride is almost rejected based on her appearance. It is only after a significant makeover suggested by a third-party—Jeri, “a ‘total person’ designer” ([1], p. 33)—that Bride gets the job and quickly ascends in the firm. While Black is fashionable, it is so only when packaged a certain way. The objectification of her body, described profusely in edible terms, transforms Bride into an acceptable commodity ([1], pp. 36–39). Once considered “too-Black,” her skin now evokes “licorice,” “Hershey’s syrup,” “chocolate soufflé,” “Bonbons. Hand-dipped” ([1], p. 33). This accessorizing process is so extreme that there seems to be merely one way for her Blackness to be acceptable: as an edible or animalized commodity, reminding the viewers of pastries or of a “panther in snow” ([1], p. 34). This self-fashioning brings to mind the ways advertising encourages the creation of docile female bodies [33]. In the words of Marita Sturken and Lisa Cartwright: “The world of advertising speaks the language of self-management, self-control, and conformity. These are *docile bodies*, to borrow a term from Michel Foucault—bodies that are socially trained, regulated, and managed by cultural norms” ([33], p. 216). Bride's body appears trapped in an endless ad that forces self-control and packaging to make her Blackness acceptable and valuable.

Bride can only rise “above” race when literally wrapped in whiteness. Following her designer's advice, she agrees to exclusively dress in white in order to contrast with the color of her skin. White outfits reinforce her visual commodification. What this young executive perceives as “payback” or “glory” over past bullying ([1], p. 57) turns her into what Jeri calls “the hottest commodity in the civilized world” ([1], p. 36), but a commodity nonetheless. The discourse of the civilizing mission has altered itself rather than disappeared. Bride's body, though now celebrated, is admired for its animalistic and edible qualities.⁹ This refashioning functions as a new kind of branding, not as a literal stamp on the body of the slave to mark it as cattle, but an act of objectification still inscribed on the body as a product for consumption. Instead of Touré's idealized post-Black society, in which there are forty million ways to be Black, for Bride's over-determined body there are two options: unpackaged Blackness leading to abuse or packaged Blackness leading to fetishization. In neither case is there a free Black subject post- or past-Blackness. Seen through this lens, her rebranding as “Bride” suggests more than the shortening of her “countrified name.” It alludes to the necessity to wear bridal white to embody whiteness, even if only in clothes, in order to enter the privileged world of advertising.

Further, in Morrison's latest novel, Bride actually takes part in the production of these commodities, emerging as a modern-day Madame C. J. Walker—one of the first African American female millionaires, who made her fortune thanks to the lucrative beauty products she developed in the early twentieth century. As a successful Black executive, Bride becomes the poster child for colorblindness and post-raciality, unwittingly contributing to reinforcing whiteness and white privilege. Pinder explains, “Colorblindness and post-raciality are clearly about reinforcing and maintaining whiteness and white privilege” ([7], p. 34). Though she is confident and prosperous, Bride is completely immersed in the cosmetic industry and its discourse of beauty. Moreover, she seems oblivious to its gender bias. When she describes the firm for which she works, she seems to believe that she lives in a post-racial *and* a post-feminist society. She acknowledges “the frumpy past” of the firm that used to call itself “Sylph Corsets for Discriminating Women” in the 1940s ([1], p. 10), oblivious to similar constricting norms in the Personal Millennium Line she designed. Instead, she sees it with pride: “I named it YOU, GIRL: Cosmetics for Your Personal Millennium,” “It's mine, all mine—the idea, the brand the campaign” ([1], p. 10). Designing make-up for all skin tones promises a democratization

⁸ This is typical of postfeminist sensibilities, which, according to Gill, have a “tendency to entangle feminist and antifeminist discourses.” ([32], p. 442).

⁹ This brings to mind another Black female body which was paraded around Europe in the nineteenth century—that of Sarah Baartman. Called the Black Venus or the Hottentot Venus, she gained fame but only as an oversexualized and animalized body, which was ultimately dissected and whose remains were put on display after her death. For Bride, the first time she feels any worth is when she starts participating in her own commodification but Baartman's past looms over her.

of the cosmetic industry: “It’s for girls and women of all complexions from ebony to lemonade to milk” ([1], p. 10). It does not occur to Bride that make-up, like corsets, is meant to promote certain racialized and gendered standards of beauty.¹⁰ For her, designing a line of cosmetics for all skin tones is a way to allow other women of color to become valuable and desirable. Immersed in commodity feminism, she participates in advertising the appeal of docile bodies.

Her complicity extends to her personal life. With her boyfriend, Booker, she has no name. With him as with her personal designer, Bride is objectified. She is “baby” or “my girl”, accent on the *my*” ([1], p. 11) and when he leaves her, she suddenly is not only not his but no longer a woman. This change is even physical. She notes, “Every bit of pubic hair was gone” ([1], p. 12). Like her hair, a confident sense of womanhood has been “erased” ([1], pp. 13, 38) by Booker’s sudden departure after six months of happiness. When her lover abandons her, Bride starts doubting the possibility of having both a career and a fulfilling love life. Her first thoughts reinforce the sense of isolation that seems to be the price to pay as a successful, wealthy Black woman. In her mind, Booker left because he felt threatened by her being the breadwinner: “I guess I threatened his ego by doing some Good Samaritan thing not directed at him. Selfish bastard. I paid the rent, not him, and the maid too. When we went to clubs and concerts we rode in my beautiful Jaguar or in cars I hired. I bought him beautiful shirts—although he never wore them—and did all the shopping” ([1], p. 12). Here, Bride addresses common reasons why Black ladies are often stigmatized as castrating and therefore end up alone.¹¹

However, the novel shows that Bride does not attempt to take away Booker’s manhood. Rather, Bride is the one falling apart when Booker negates her womanhood. Bride’s disintegration starts after she hears her lover confess: “You not the woman I want” ([1], p. 8). When Bride describes the destructive power of Booker’s statement, she conflates verbal and physical violence: “He hit me harder than a fist with six words” ([1], p. 10). The connection between her fragmentation and Booker’s departure illuminates the role of the male gaze in the (de-) construction of Lula Ann/now Bride’s identity. Indeed, her lover’s rejection exposes the shaky foundations of Bride’s post-racial mask, transforming her from a successful, advertising executive into a “scared” girl “melting away” ([1], p. 8). Her life of privilege, with its “suede and silk cushions” ([1], p. 10) cannot shelter her. With the description of Bride’s perceived physical regression, *God Help the Child* depicts how the United States is neither post-racial nor post-feminist. It sheds light on the intersections of systems of oppression that work together to objectify Black female bodies.

Even when Bride feels beautiful, she looks for male approval. She only sees herself through a male, often Eurocentric mediatized gaze, which Bertram Ashe describes as a “Male-driven sense of female beauty” ([36], p. 586). Though focused on *Song of Solomon* (1977), an earlier novel by Morrison also touching on the internalization of beauty standards, Ashe’s essay “Why don’t he like my hair?” can help elucidate Bride’s sense of melting away in *God Help the Child*. In response to what Angela M. Neal, Midge L. Wilson, and Ashe identify as the profound impact of the consumer system on Black females ([36], p. 579; [37].), Ashe analyzes *Song of Solomon* to imagine alternative models of beauty. In particular, he highlights how Milkman, “charged with choosing between Hagar, with her allegiance to the white ideal of beauty, and a woman like Pilate, who has rejected a pursuit of that ideal, he opts for a woman who lives outside of the expectations of the white cultural norm” ([36], p. 589). *God Help the Child* similarly questions standards of beauty. Like Milkman, who has to undergo a whole journey to appreciate Pilate’s beauty in *Song of Solomon*, Bride has to undergo emotional and physical transformations before she can appreciate herself outside of alienating beauty norms. Scholar Malin LaVon Walther (now Malin Pereira), in fact, insists on Morrison’s strategic deployment of alternative models of beauty throughout her oeuvre as a rejection of “beauty as defined by white consumer culture, as both racist and frivolous” ([38], p. 775). In *God Help the Child*, Morrison again warns against the

¹⁰ On “the mythical norm,” see [34,35].

¹¹ About Black ladies portrayed as castrating see ([29], p. 81).

damaging effects of a beauty industry that might provide temporary reassurance while tapping into women's insecurities ([33], p. 197).

Bride's search for Booker represents a journey to uncover the ways in which her insecurities are directly connected to the beauty industry in which she works. Bride needs to learn how her sense of self is always already filtered through mediatized definitions of beauty, even when it superficially seems positive. Her geographical travels encourage her to initiate a mental retrospection to realize how she has always been looking for love and appreciation in a world where being a Black little girl meant having no value. Growing up, Lula Ann never felt acceptance within society or within her home. It is only in a desperate attempt to be accepted despite what she saw as "the curse" of her Black skin, that Lula Ann/Bride agreed to testify against Sophia Huxley, her former kindergarten teacher, whom she wrongly accused of molestation. Performing the role of the victimized Black body to convict an innocent was the only way for Lula Ann to receive positive attention from outsiders as well as from her own mother.

Trying to make amends, Bride is as oblivious about the trauma inflicted on Sophia during her fifteen-year prison sentence as she is about the source of her own traumatized body.¹² In both cases, violence and humiliation are inscribed on the body. Due to her imprisonment, her once lively kindergarten teacher is now a shadow of herself, a diminished, and to a certain extent, amputated version of younger Sophia: "thin as a rope. Size 1 panties; an A-cup bra, if any" ([1], p. 16). Yet, instead of seeing the marks on Sophia's body as a direct result of the conditions of life for incarcerated women, Bride can only think in terms of the commodities she might need to erase the traces of trauma: "She could sure use some GlamGlo. Formalize Wrinkle Softener and Juicy Bronze would give color to the whey of her skin," "a little Botox and some Tango-Matte, not glitter, would have softened her lips" ([1], p. 16). Bride is as immersed in commercialized post-racial beauty ideals as she was in her mother's colorism. As the readers later find out, Bride spends all her life looking for some validation, "to get some love" ([1], p. 156) in a world that otherwise defined her as valueless because of the color of her skin or only usable as an exotic commodity. Marita Sturken and Lisa Cartwright note about commodity culture that, "It has been argued that people derived their sense of their place in the world and their self-image at least in part through their purchase and use of commodities which seemed to give meaning to their lives in the absence of the meaning derived from the closer-knit community" ([33], p. 193). Lula Ann/Bride is an extreme case since she had no positive sense of self until her makeover. After succeeding in the same beauty industry that had previously portrayed her as unlovable, she firmly believes in the transformative powers of commodity culture.

When she shows up at the door of Sophia's hotel just after her release with a beauty care package, an airline ticket, and two hundred dollars for each year spent in prison, Sophia mercilessly beats her up ([1], p. 20). In this scene, Sophia unleashes the physical and psychological suffering she has experienced for the past fifteen years. Bride's disfigurement works as a reminder of her complicity in a system that punished one of the only individuals who had actually accepted Lula Ann/Bride prior to her makeover. Bride's coworker, Brooklyn, describes the extent of her injuries: "Ugly black stitches, puffy eye, bandages on her forehead, lips so Ubangi she can't pronounce the r in raw, which is what her skin looks like—all pink and blue-black. Worse than anything is her nose—nostrils wide as an orangutan's under gauze the size of a bagel" ([1], p. 26). Her face at once summons the "revolting clump of scars" on Sethe's back in *Beloved* as well as the worst caricatures of Black bodies during slavery. This assault highlights the price Bride has to pay for wrongly convicting an innocent person

¹² In capitalist America, there is a clear class bias when it comes to describing the prison—a private enterprise that brings in benefits for the owners, poorly-paid yet "worshipped" jobs for the people living in this depressed area ([1], p. 13), and a place where women criminals are "caged" ([1], p. 14). Particularly telling is the focus on cars, "mostly just worn Toyotas and ancient Chevys" ([1], emphasis mine p. 15). Though this is not the focus here, Morrison's description of the prison system and its effect on people who, like Sophia Huxley, are forced to learn "automatic obedience" ([1], p. 19) also touches on another key contemporary issue.

to get her mother's approval, the impossibility to make amends to Sophia after being responsible for the pain she suffered during her incarceration, as well as the lasting power of Booker's words. In a passage again strangely reminiscent of *Beloved*, Bride confides, "I'll never forget, and if I tried to, the scars, let alone the shame, wouldn't let me" ([1], p. 29). She adds, "I'm not sure which is worse, being dumped like trash or whipped like a slave" ([1], p. 39). The second statement is all the more shocking after the reader discovers the painful details of the assault and the slow recovery thereafter. Although only used as a comparison, the reference to the brutality inflicted on a slave, and even worse, the fact that her sense of physical and emotional dismemberment following Booker's departure seems to bear close comparison with this beating evoke the pain that Black female bodies and psyches still undergo. Through its gradual effacement and repeated injuries, Bride's hurting body, far from read and treated as post-racial, manifests the impact of centuries of Black female rejection and subjugation.

Throughout her emotional and physical disintegration, Bride is still not reflecting on the connections between her desperate search for love, her internalization of standards of beauty, and her sense of disappearance. In the words of Malin Pereira, "The effect of popular American culture's visual construction of beauty is that it bestows presence or absence" ([35], p. 124). In this sense, it is not Booker's cruel statement or Sophia's attack that destroys her sense of self (both emotional and physical), but the lasting effects of a life exposed to racialized and gendered beauty discourses hiding underneath hollow post-racial discourses. Despite recovering from Sophia's attack, Bride continues disappearing, which makes manifest her shattered sense of self, the lasting effects of her traumatic childhood, and the continuing impact of gendered standards of beauty. After her pubic hair's erasure, she progressively discovers "virgin earlobes" ([1], p. 51), hairless armpits ([1], p. 52), lighter weight ([1], p. 81), a "completely flat" chest ([1], p. 92) "like a botched mastectomy" ([1], p. 95), and "a delayed menstrual period" ([1], p. 95)—an overall "shrinking body" ([1], p. 93). As Bride finally realizes, "the body changes began not simply after he left, but because he left" ([1], p. 94), "Him, she thought. His curse" ([1], p. 95). All the transformations are connected to Booker, confirming the impact of a male-driven sense of female beauty.

But behind Bride's fixation on Booker's declaration that she is not the woman he wants lies a much larger systemic negation of her status as a woman: her forbidden access to the myth of true womanhood on account on her race [39]. Bride's regression to Lula Ann vividly illustrates what Kimberly Juanita Brown depicts as "the afterimage of slavery" ([4], p. 18). For Brown, "Black women enter the frame photographically—as a collective body *always already* in pieces, their inability to unify a collective discourse only lengthens the measure of their malleability" ([4], p. 191). In the case of Bride, the reader can actually picture this body "always already in pieces," the rejected pieces of Lula Ann, the ephemerally successful packaging of her body for consumption, and her subsequent shattering back into pieces when Booker rejects her. Bride's hurting body and fractured sense of self call attention to the pain that Black women experience and which might otherwise pass unnoticed or silenced by post-racial and post-feminist discourses [4]. In *God Help the Child* this erasure is peculiar because it corresponds to the erasure of racism as a thing of the past, as if the scars were vague remnants of past inflictions rather than reminders of the still violent present.

Bride's body in pain serves as vivid metaphor for the relentless systemic discrimination against Black women. Her body is under constant attack, not just in the ways her body regresses to that of a little girl after Booker's departure or is attacked by Sophia, but also by the series of injuries she endures afterward: a car accident leading to a broken leg ([1], p. 88), a shooting ([1], p. 105), a slap ([1], p. 152), and a burn ([1], p. 165). And those are only the physical scars. Her deeper scars, like her mysterious ailment, are invisible, connected to untold truths. Putting in conversation Elaine Scarry's study of the body in pain and Sherrow Pinder's analysis of the racialized body helps shed light on the hurting Black body in *God Help the Child*. Scarry stresses that emotional and physical pain are different, since for her only physical pain stands out for its "resistance to language" ([40], p. 4), its "unsharability" ([40], p. 4), its "objectlessness" ([40], p. 162). Yet, Scarry's groundbreaking work on pain inexplicably overlooks works by writers of the Black diaspora on the

subject—a “curious oversight,” as Kimberly Juanita Brown states, particularly when “the black female body is central to the discourse on physical pain” ([4], p. 97). By contrast, building on Fanon’s concept of the epidermalization of racism, Pinder suggests that the pain experienced by racialized bodies is both emotional and physical, which helps us understand the ways racism affects nonwhite bodies so that they cannot escape the white gaze. Pinder declares: “for those who experience racism, there are feelings of racism that cannot be named because the experience goes deeper than mere thoughts” ([7], p. 118). For her, this “feeling” is described in ways similar to how Scarry characterizes pain as indescribable and without a specific object. Pinder herself makes that connection in the epilogue, claiming: “The body is located within racism and is in noncommunicable pain; it is fragmented, and in order to be in this world, it is ‘put together by another self’ that is not of one’s choosing, which can only lead to the corporeal modality of physical reductionism and abjection” ([7], p. 119, citing Fanon). In *God Help the Child*, as Bride is seemingly regressing to a pre-pubescent being, she feels isolated, constantly trying to hide these traumatic alterations that paradoxically seem to go unnoticed. In this sense, the novel exposes the invisibility of Black pain and asks readers not to treat pain, both physical and emotional, as what Scarry describes as “an invisible geography” ([40], p. 3).

It is through Bride’s hallucination and physical disintegration that *God Help the Child* is most reminiscent of *The Bluest Eye*.¹³ The protagonists of both novels yearn for love and undergo literal or imagined physical transformations in their attempts to find acceptance in a family and in a society that does not validate or value them. As bell hooks explains, “opening a magazine or book, turning on the television set, watching a film, or looking at photographs in public spaces, we are most likely to see images of black people that reinforce and reinscribe white supremacy” ([42], p. 1). Although on the surface level, Bride seems to belong to another generation of emancipated women of color who can be successful and embrace their Blackness, one could also argue that she is as entrapped in normative beauty myths as the women of the Breedlove family in *The Bluest Eye*. Bride’s overreliance on cosmetics and fashion resembles Pauline Breedlove’s own masking strategy through make-up and clothing ([6], p. 119). Reading the following passage from *The Bluest Eye* about the effects of the media and the movies, one could easily apply it to Bride:

Along with the idea of romantic love, she was introduced to another—physical beauty. Probably the most destructive ideas in the history of human thought. Both originated in envy, thrived in insecurity, and ended in disillusion. In equating beauty with virtue, she stripped her mind, bound it, and collected self-contempt by the heap. ([6], p. 22)

Even grown-up Bride reflecting on her love life admits, “Why I kept comparing us to magazine spreads and music I can’t say” ([1], p. 9). The connections between love, value, beauty, and the media are central to understanding the shattered sense of self that Pauline Breedlove and her daughter Pecola share with Lula Ann/Bride ([35], p. 123).

Both little girls, Pecola in *The Bluest Eye* and Lula Ann/Bride in *God Help the Child* associate their Blackness with the sense of being unwanted and wonder about love—“What did love feel like” ([6], p. 57) and “how do you get somebody to love you” ([6], p. 32) when you do not look the part? In *God Help the Child*, Lula Ann is starving for affection growing up, which leads her to misbehave just to get attention. Since her body is deemed unlovable, physical pain becomes for her an affirmation that she exists: “I used to pray she would slap my face or spank me just to feel her touch” ([1], p. 31). Lula Ann, like Pecola, embodies Frantz Fanon’s concept of the epidermalization of racism, described in *The Bluest Eye* as “a cloak of ugliness” ([6], p. 39). This external image is accepted, worn, and reproduced:

The master had said, ‘you are ugly people.’ They had looked about themselves and saw nothing to contradict the statement; saw, in fact, support for it leaning at them from every

¹³ For brief comparisons between *The Bluest Eye* and *God Help the Child*, see [11,17,41].

billboard, every movie, every glance. ‘Yes,’ they had said. ‘You are right.’ And they took the ugliness in their hands, threw it as a mantle over them, and went about the world with it. ([6], p. 39)

Having internalized the gaze of the master, they feel worthless.¹⁴ Their shared sense of alienation and abjection is directly connected to white hegemonic notions of race ([43], p. 5). The standards of white beauty shape, or rather dislocate, their sense of self [44]. In *The Bluest Eye*, young Pecola is so enamored by Shirley Temple’s image that she would not stop drinking from a cup adorned with her image to vicariously be closer to this icon. As her friend, the narrator, Claudia, notices: “She took every opportunity to drink milk out of it just to handle and see sweet Shirley’s face” ([6], p. 23). Paul Taylor’s essay “Malcom’s Conk and Danto’s Colors” elucidates Pecola’s desire for blue eyes, noting that, “it is logical for her to conceive of the whole process of personal improvement as a movement from ugliness to beauty” ([45], p. 59). Unable to have access to white privilege, Pecola tries to literally consume whiteness. She repeats a similar process of vicarious experience with whiteness when she eats the candies wrapped with the picture of a beautiful blue-eyed girl: “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” ([6], p. 50). Bombarded by media representations extoling white standards of beauty, which her mom only reinforces, Pecola firmly believes that the only way to be beautiful, and therefore lovable, is to have blue eyes.

Like Sweetness who considers her daughter repulsive and asks her not to refer to her as mom, Pecola’s mother, Pauline, also comments on what she believes to be her daughter’s lack of beauty: “I knowed she was ugly” ([6], p. 126) and asks her child to call her Mrs. Breedlove [46]. This forced estrangement is fortified by her completely different attitude with the child of the white Williams family for whom Pauline works. This little white girl can affectionately call her “Polly,” whereas her own daughter cannot. Pauline’s inability to love her daughter reaches its climax with the spilled pie episode at the Williams’ home. The pie episode, in which Pauline abuses Pecola for spilling a pie instead of comforting her for burning herself, validates Pecola’s assumption that she must have blue eyes in order to be loved. Indeed, although Pecola is burnt, it is the blue-eyed girl whom Pauline comforts, thus enhancing Pecola’s rejection of her brown eyes ([6], pp. 108–9). In *The Bluest Eye* and *God Help the Child*, these families are so immersed in racist discourses that they reinforce their children’s low self-esteem. Although *God Help the Child* is set during a supposed post-racial era, it is eerily reminiscent of a novel set forty years prior. Rather than being what Ulin considers a failed echo of the *Bluest Eye*, *God Help the Child* explores the shifting ways racism still haunts the beauty industry and, more importantly, the ways contemporary beauty norms continue to cause self-alienation [12].

Further, the conflation of lovability and beauty, which ultimately leads to the delusion that Pecola has finally acquired blue eyes, resembles Bride’s own hallucination in *God Help the Child*. Whereas Pecola imagines herself beautiful the only way she knows how, with blue eyes, Bride’s sense of beauty is shattered by her lover’s rejection and she imagines herself regressing to the scared little Black girl reminiscent of Pecola. Both share a sense of erasure: under the pressure of beauty standards, Pecola wishes she could “disappear” ([6], p. 45) and eventually thinks she does except for her imagined blue eyes while Bride fears she is gradually regressing to her older self. Both feel alienated from their own bodies, forced to imagine conversations between their split selves. Even their names, Bridewell and Breedlove, echo each other and indirectly reflect their desperate search for love. Set decades apart, both books illustrate the damaging effects of the beauty industry and the media. Seen together, these works urge readers not only to revisit the past through a process of “rememory,” but also to come to terms with the fact that we are not past the effects of slavery and far from post-racial. What was the “unspeakable” ([3], p. 69) in *Beloved* was the painful decision to kill one own’s child to protect her from slavery. *God Help the Child* connects to this past of slavery in suggesting that much is still unspeakable

¹⁴ On the crippling effects of standards of beauty in *The Bluest Eye*, see ([38], p. 776).

within race relations in America. The intratextual flashbacks and the intertextual references to previous works like *Beloved* and *The Bluest Eye* undermine post-Black claims about the infinity of ways to be Black. In these three works by Morrison, there may be multiple ways to be Black, but always within a white apparatus that claims and tries to objectify Black bodies.

It is when Bride feels the closest to disappearing after Booker's departure, Sophia's attack, and her car accident that she can emancipate herself from the constraints of beauty standards. When Bride arrives in Whiskey, a small village in California, in her search for Booker, she first meets his aunt, Queen, who describes her as "something a raccoon found and refused to eat" ([1], p. 144). In the eyes of this older woman, Bride is no longer an edible commodity, not even for scavenger animals like raccoons. Although this transformation away from the "exotic" makes Bride fear to regress to "the ugly, too-black little girl in her mother's house" ([1], p. 144), it leads to a first step in self-empowerment. No longer able to hide behind her post-racial mask, Bride can learn to value herself outside of the discourse of commodity feminism. Women can both internalize and replicate the male gaze, serving as enforcers or helpmates. In this sense, *God Help the Child* paves the way for a new understanding of the body that aligns itself with Malin Pereira's call for a redefinition of beauty: "Were individual women to realize that female beauty is not a matter of personal failure or achievement, but, rather, an ideological expression of patriarchy and capitalism, the power of the beauty myth would diminish" ([35], p. xiii). From *The Bluest Eye* to *God Help the Child*, "Morrison re-defines female beauty by grounding it in racial identity" ([35], p. 130). In *God Help the Child*, Bride's meeting with a woman outside of the beauty industry helps her free herself from the prison of artifices she felt necessary for her success. Welcomed in Queen's home regardless of her appearance, Bride can acknowledge her past "shallowness" and "cowardice" ([1], p. 151). No longer feeling like she has to submit to the pressures of the market in order to have value or be deemed desirable, Bride can face up to her former lover and admit her past mistakes.

Bride's silence had functioned like a "bomb" ([1], p. 113)—a bomb that explodes when she finally unleashes a life of pent-up pain on Booker. As with Sophia Huxley, Bride's bottled-up pain goes from expressing itself as self-effacement to outward destruction. Far from idyllic, their "reunion" is marked by violence as they slap each other and Bride hits Booker with a bottle ([1], p. 155; [47]). In a scene that is filled with bloody descriptions, Morrison showcases the spilling over of the violence inflicted on Bride throughout her life. Empowered and for the first time self-assured, she affirms: "You don't have to love me but you damn well have to respect me" ([1], p. 154). After what looks like a warrior's sleep, "deeper than drunkenness, deeper than any she had known" ([1], p. 161), Bride feels "strong" ([1], p. 161). This is a rebirth for Bride: "Having confessed Lula Ann's sins she felt newly born" ([1], p. 162). No longer a victim of self-alienation or beauty consumerism, Bride reveals her darkest secret—that she wrongly accused Sophia in a desperate attempt to be loved by her mother ([1], p. 153). Whereas Bride had tried to mask her pain beneath an illusory post-Black performance, she recognizes: "The pieces of it that she had stitched together: personal glamour, control in an exciting even creative profession, sexual freedom and most of all a shield that protected her from an overly intense feeling, be it rage, embarrassment or love" ([1], p. 79). It is only by acknowledging how Bride is more of a mask than a new identity, that she can feel reborn.¹⁵

¹⁵ Booker similarly needs to break the silence to stop his auto-destruction. After both Bride and Queen challenge him, Booker acknowledges that his aunt is right in calling him a "fool" ([1], p. 157) for wallowing in his pain over his brother Adam's death and feeling superior to others. It should be noted that, as suggested above with Booker's own trauma, the focus of *God Help the Child* is not entirely on the female racialized body, nor should it be, particularly given the ways male bodies are constantly under attack and subjected to vilification, imprisonment, or even police brutality. Despite Booker's physical disintegration not being as drastic as Bride's, his body also reveals hidden pain. He has "swollen fingers" after knocking unconscious a sexual predator, he spends a night in jail after attacking irresponsible parents ([1], p. 129), and "wrecked his shoulder" working ([1], p. 160). Although Booker seems to willingly put himself in those situations, he is equally hurting from a pain whose effects he only starts acknowledging after Bride confronts him. In her rewriting of the role of patriarchy, Morrison redefines masculinity. Booker learns not to disregard or feel superior to others and instead face his emotions, his sense of loss, and his impotence to suppress his rage. Only after he does so can he imagine a life with Bride and become a

In the way that Bride's hurt body calls for recognition of her traumas, so does the narrative call for an end to the silence imposed by post-racial and post-Black discourses. It is only in confronting her pain that Bride moves on with her life. *God Help the Child* goes further in showing a widespread tendency to try to cover past traumas, and yet an equally pressing necessity to address them. On her journey to find Booker, Bride has a car accident and meets a little girl, Rain, who has been severely abused and now seems to have been rescued by a couple of well-intentioned hippies. What Bride's sudden appearance in Rain's life reveals is that their good intentions do not change the fact that this kind couple in a way kidnapped her, nor can they erase the hurt she has experienced. In fact, their naïve efforts to try to help Rain forget about her past and move on make matters worse. It is only when she meets Bride and is finally allowed to speak about her traumatic childhood that Rain is released from her anger and her murderous thoughts ([1], p. 104). This episode is important in more ways than one. First, it shows a collective responsibility in addressing how the past still impacts the present—an endeavor all the more necessary under the spellbinding myth of a post-racial America. Second, it showcases how even if people mean well, their actions might be detrimental. Finally, though the novel presents a strong indictment against systematic and systemic racial discrimination, it also deconstructs assumptions about who is a victim, a convict, or even a good citizen—an important gesture to destabilize assumptions about race and gender.

At the close of the novel, Booker and Bride are reunited, about to become parents, and all traces of physical disintegration gone, seemingly reinforcing that Bride's happiness relies on her relationship with Booker, which has led reviewers to criticize this seemingly easy ending [12]. Yet, it is the very confrontation with Booker, not just their reconciliation, which brings her a sense of strength. What the readers know is that Bride feels whole again and intends to stay that way with or without Booker. Additionally, it is not when she is reunited with Booker that she feels whole again, but instead by risking her own life, burning her hands, and literally stripping herself to rescue and extinguish flames in Queen's hair when the latter is a victim of a house fire. It is through a selfless act of love for another woman that Bride recovers her breasts ([1], p. 166). She turns her gaze outward to realize that others might need help too. It is Bride and Booker's shared love for Queen, as they devote all their time and energy to try to bring her back to life, which leads them to imagine a possible future together. Trying to build a community: "They worked together like a true couple thinking not of themselves, but of helping somebody else" ([1], p. 167). Rather than extolling the virtue of American individualism à la Touré, Morrison envisions the possibility of progress when we start "thinking about somebody else" [14].

Bride's final step in her transformation is to overcome her alienation and develop healing bonds instead. For her, Queen functions as what Stephanie Li describes as "the ancestor" common to many Morrison's stories [26]. Though Li focuses most of her analysis on *Desdemona*, her elaboration on Morrison's "Rootedness: The Ancestor as Foundation" can help situate Queen as a key ancestor. In *God Help the Child*, the elder or ancestor is Booker's aunt. Although she has committed numerous mistakes with her own children, Queen provides Bride with an alternative motherly figure, who is not as obsessed with her colorism as Sweetness was. Through this encounter with Queen, Bride initiates a new cycle of introspection, rejection of superficial standards of beauty, empowerment, and community building. Rather than representing old-fashioned traditions or siding with Booker/patriarchy just to protect her nephew or excusing his mistakes, Queen encourages Bride to stand her ground to transform what was primarily a superficial relationship based on looks into a meaningful union informed by an understanding of their respective past. It is through a sense of sisterhood with an unconventional ancestor that Bride can learn to value herself and to re-envision a future with Booker. In this sense,

real partner, who "offered her the hand that did not need a lie to deserve it, the hand of trust and caring for—a combination that some call natural love" ([1], p. 175). This is consistent with Morrison's overall project to redefine masculinity as, for instance, in *Beloved* where she explores the trauma of Sweet Home men and Paul D. in particular, or in *The Bluest Eye* where she depicts the humiliation and pain experienced by Pecola's father, Cholly Breedlove.

as Li suggests about *Desdemona*, rather than offering post-Black literature, Morrison “reaches toward new representations of blackness, representations that are always historically informed” ([26], p. 42). She creates new ways to understand Blackness and Black literature, in which female bonds might even trump heterosexual unions ([26], p. 44). Barbara Smith’s comment on female friendships in Morrison’s *Sula* (1973) seems applicable to *God Help the Child*: “It is difficult to imagine a more evocative metaphor for what women can be to each other, the ‘pricelessness’ they achieve in refusing to sell themselves for male approval, the total worth that they can only find in each other’s eyes” ([48], p. 142). What the readers witness at the end of the novel is the possibility for Bride to believe in herself with or without Booker, precisely because Queen has allowed her to escape commodity feminism. Additionally, whereas it is not within the scope of this essay, it is important to note that Morrison redefines both femininity and masculinity throughout *God Help the Child* [49]. The union of Bride and Booker at the close of the novel does not necessarily indicate an abdication to patriarchy. Instead, it can suggest the need to redefine Black manhood alongside Black womanhood in order to build stronger communities. As opposed to the friends alluded to in Billie Holiday’s song “God Bless the Child,” who “when you’re gone, spending ends/They don’t come no more,” Bride develops new bonds only possible once she discovers a sense of self that is not tied to the myth of a post-racial and post-feminist America. In *God Help the Child*, Morrison at once destabilizes the myth of post-racialism and the a-historicity of post-Blackness, with characters that are keenly aware of the systemic racism that surrounds them. Although Bride and Booker’s hope that their future child will be “immune to illness, protected from kidnap, beatings, rape, racism, insult, hurt, self-loathing, abandonment” ([1], p. 175) is called into question by the line “so they believed” ([1], p. 175), these two protagonists at least illustrate the need to refuse silence and hopefully work toward disentangling the ways internalized concepts of race and gender still impact our sense of self and our social relations.

4. Conclusions

God Help the Child disarticulates patriarchy and race as constructs at the same time as it reveals the very real physical and emotional impact these notions have on members of society, and Black women in particular. When Booker comments that “scientifically there’s no such thing as race,” he is quick to add, “racism without race is a choice” ([1], p. 143). Declaring a post-racial era erases that choice, and in so doing perpetrates racism. Bride thus reflects, “His words were rational and, at the time, soothing but had little to do with day-to-day experience” ([1], p. 143). Stressing the necessity for its protagonist to undergo multiple physical, emotional, and mental alterations as the only means to hope for a future, this text ultimately urges its readers to do the same. Rather than pitying self-destructive characters like Sweetness, Morrison’s novel prompts us to think about the future of our children and suggests that, if there is to be any, we need to start acknowledging that we still do not live in a post-patriarchal or post-racial society. In depicting Bride’s physical transformations, it warns against the lasting presence of colorism within African American communities and the destructive effects of the media. It also cautions against women’s complicity in sustaining post-racial and post-feminist discourses that mask instead of challenge the exploitation of Black female bodies. The fact that Bride lived a sheltered life until her physical regression only reinforces the jarring contrast between the comforting illusion of a post-racial, post-feminist society and the harsh realities of enduring racial discrimination. Morrison destroys as she seeks to rebuild and redefine standards of Black female beauty. Her preoccupation with the disintegration of the Black female body, common to many of her novels, thus marks an invitation to further explore what it means to be a Black woman in the United States today. With *God Help the Child*, Morrison particularly encourages readers to break the silence imposed by claims that we now live in a post-racial, post-Black, post-feminist society to instead recognize how racism, violence, and sexism still shape women’s lives. Tragic as it is, *God Help the Child* ultimately provides hope, particularly for those willing to question the appeal of American individualism to build a more inclusive sense of community.

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