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Abstract

Central to Toni Morrison's political strategy throughout her oeuvre is the disruption of the white gaze, a move that often exposes our readerly reliance on race to read human motivation. Employing what we call the "tragic black girl motif," this paper explores how *God Help the Child*, Morrison's last novel, continues this disruption of the white gaze vis-à-vis her treatment of colorism, patriarchy, classism, slavery, and self-determination.

> But I am not tragically colored. There is no great sorrow dammed up in my soul, nor lurking behind my eyes. I do not mind at all. I do not belong to the sobbing school of Negrohood who hold that nature somehow has given them a lowdown dirty deal and whose feelings are all hurt about it.
>
> —Zora Neal Hurston, *How It Feels to Be Colored Me* (2022)

In 2015 Black feminist literary scholar Farah Jasmine Griffin engaged Toni Morrison in a deeply personal way about her novel *God Help the Child* (hereafter *GHTC*), featuring a physically attractive, dark-skinned Black woman protagonist, Bride, who has a thriving modeling career. Griffin, a dark-skinned woman who has experienced colorism within and beyond Black spaces, wanted to know why Morrison's rendering of Bride was so unflattering, if not outright damning. Griffin states, "I, for one, was so grateful for a jet-black woman character who was described as gorgeous and stunning, because I don't think I've ever seen that. And then you . . .[create this stunning jet-black woman character] only to undermine *my* investment in it and *my* need to have that" (Morrison 2015b, 27:57 to 28:22; emphasis added). Griffin then asks, "Why do you do that? Why do you give . . . us [this character] and then snatch it back?" (Morrison 2015b, 28:26). Although Morrison clearly appreciates Griffin's concerns and her desire for uplifting and redemptive representations of dark-skinned women and girls in literature, she reminds Griffin that while *GHTC* certainly interrogates variables of colorism, white

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supremacy, patriarchy, and structural inequalities, her chief goal is to, at once, complicate and disrupt our intraracial reliance on perceived notions of Black humanity in general and Black women's humanity in particular. To this end, Morrison employs Bride's beauty as a dark-skinned woman as a literary device to probe the intraracial logics of how we experience and make sense of white supremacist patriarchal capitalism within and across race-gender lines. She tells Griffin that Bride's shortcomings and subjectivity as a Black woman cannot productively be understood through the lens of race or, by extension, the lens of colorism. To wit, Bride's issues revolve around her damaged relationship with her colorist mother, her need to "crisis-bond" with her wounded, self-absorbed lover Booker, and her unwitting participation as a love-starved child in protecting her pedophile landlord in one instant and sending an innocent woman accused of pedophilia to prison in another. As Morrison states, "Even when [we feature] . . . the glorious glorious [sic] beauty of a glorious Black woman [in literature]. It ain't enough" to encapsulate the subjectivity and plight of Black women and girls (Morrison 2015b, 31:49).

Morrison's response serves as a reflection of one of the hallmarks of her literary politics, namely, to decenter whiteness as it pertains to Black humanity. Morrison's aim is not to attend to our pain under the thumb of white supremacy or to make Black suffering more palatable for the white gaze. On the contrary, she consciously resists conflating (Black) humanity with (white) oppression. Indeed, she reminds us time and again throughout her oeuvre that, however much we are invested in "race," we are, at bottom, complex human beings navigating a labyrinth of challenging social, cultural, and political issues. Concomitantly, we are reminded that Black people are neither reducible as human subjects to our racial circumstances nor, by extension, to what white people have imagined us to be. Ultimately, Morrison wants her readers to grapple with their overreliance on race and the extent to which this overreliance renders us "bad readers" of our actions and emotions. The most salient example of this dynamic is Morrison's only short story, *Recitatif*, wherein she deliberately frustrates the reader's ability to determine which of the two protagonists is Black or white. She describes this short story as "an experiment in the removal of all racial codes from a narrative about two characters of different races for whom racial identity is crucial" (Morrison 1992, xi). The paradox is that, while "race" radically informs how they are treated in the world and understand their identities, it ultimately tells us nothing substantive about their humanity. Almost instinctively, the reader is seduced into trying to figure out the race of each character, which, ultimately, Morrison makes impossible. The frustration that inevitably ensues from

the standpoint of the reader is actually the point of the experiment. What we strive as readers to know—the race of the characters—is precisely what prevents us from genuinely engaging with the complexity of their humanity.

Morrison's most ambitious engagement with this phenomenon of race is *Paradise*. In the novel Morrison introduces the story of 158 freedmen who were unwelcome and turned away by residents in the Negro towns who thought the freedmen were too poor and dark skinned to be admitted. Though the ones rejecting these freedmen are also Black and formerly enslaved people, they see themselves as set apart and superior to these freedmen. After being rejected from their own kind, so to speak, the freedmen travel in deplorable conditions and end up founding their own town, which they symbolically call Haven. Due to how they were treated, "neither the founders of Haven nor their descendants could tolerate anybody but themselves" (Morrison 1997, 13). Years later when residents of Haven started to leave, the Morgan twins, grandchildren of one of the founding fathers of Haven, started to rally others around their plans to start a new Black community elsewhere. Fifteen families moved out of Haven and formed New Haven. New Haven eventually was renamed Ruby to mark the death of the Morgan twins' sister, Ruby (the first person to die in the new town), who died due to lack of medical care because she was dark skinned. The New Fathers abided by a one drop rule that viewed the tainted as anyone with white blood or light skin. Their superiority complex ultimately becomes their undoing as they end up scapegoating a group of vulnerable "outsider" women of color in a convent just outside the parameters of town for their own social and cultural failings. This is arguably the first time in Morrison's oeuvre that she introduces a scenario in which dark skin can be weaponized in a similar way as whiteness (Ikard 2007).[1] Here, *Paradise* shows that markers of difference can be rendered liabilities and can be flipped in order to oppress others.

Morrison puts a finer point on her theoretical approach to race in *Playing in the Dark*. She reminds us that what we think we know about Blackness and race derives partly from white supremacist ideology and what she calls the Africanist presence (Morrison 1992, 6). Morrison defines the Africanist presence as primitive and fixed notions of Africa and Blackness that whites have invented in order to uphold themselves as superior and transcendent. In her efforts to disrupt this bankrupt reliance on race and the Africanist

1. For a more extensive analysis of Morrison's racial strategy in *Paradise* see David Ikard's chapter "Killing the White Girl First" in *Breaking the Silence Toward a Black Male Feminist Criticism*.

presence, Morrison has spent the extent of her career producing fiction that not only explores the complex dynamics of Black humanity beyond long-standing racial scripts but also consciously disrupts our readerly dependence on race to understand Black experiences and specifically the experiences of Black women. The rub, of course, is that Black folks have unwittingly become wedded to these scripts in ways that center whiteness and, by extension, prioritize the white gaze. To borrow a Black colloquialism, white supremacy is living rent-free in Black consciousness when it comes to thinking about our humanity, inherent value, and self-determination.

While there is a robust and growing body of scholarship on *GHTC*, most scholars focus on Bride's dark skin color, and how it subverts Westernized beauty standards as she wields it to her advantage. Manuela López Ramírez surmises that Western beauty construction is at the core of what has prevented Bride from "developing ethnic pride and racial love" and believes that Morrison's intent is to illustrate Bride's trauma as a consequence stemming from her construction of beauty (Ramirez 2017, 173–89). Similarly, Cynthia R. Wallace contends that Morrison's writing of Bride's childhood trauma "refuses to let readers forget that the source of her [Bride's] trouble is not her own moral failing but, rather, what Christina Sharpe calls 'the weather' of white supremacy" (Wallace 2021, 713–35). She concludes that Morrison's chief aim is to solicit white empathy for Black suffering.

While these scholars offer useful insights into traditional aspects of colorism and its emotional and psychological impact on Black consciousness and self-esteem, they prefigure Bride as a victim without agency or culpability for her actions. As we will demonstrate below, Morrison is ostensibly critiquing the ways in which we understand and experience colorism and Black womanhood in much the same way as she flips the racial script on white supremacy and dark skin in *Paradise*. That is to say, she leverages our racial expectations in such a way as to expose the limits of race-centric thinking to understanding (Black) human consciousness. Centering this hallmark of Morrison's racial politics, we argue that in *GHTC* Morrison exposes and disrupts our bankrupt reliance on race and what we call the "tragic dark-skin girl motif." This motif addresses the phenomenon of attaching particular racial characteristics to dark-skin African American girls and women that ultimately render them irredeemably tragic. Their darker skin opens them up to a number of racial assaults within and beyond the Black community. Usually, this emphasis on dark skin is employed to call attention to the problems of racism and colorism in reference to the emotional and psychological consciousness of Black girls and women. That is, when this motif is employed, the goal is to

humanize the experiences of Black girls, particularly dark-skinned girls and women, to show the toll that racial assaults take on their sanity, self-esteem, and self-determination. The problem with this impulse is that it overdetermines the significance of white supremacist assaults on Black women and girls' complex humanity. Black women and girls are reduced to the sum of their racial assaults, and whiteness is (mis)read as a defining variable of their identity. Highly attuned to the limitations and problems of this motif in *GHTC*, Morrison creates a character in Bride who, despite being the target of dehumanizing colorist attacks, including by her mother, manages to turn the tables and become a supermodel and successful entrepreneur. Defying our readerly expectations even further, Morrison does not treat this feat as heroic or even exceptional; for that matter, she does not encourage us to empathize with Bride as a victim. On the contrary, she pulls back the curtain, so to speak, to expose Bride as a shallow, narcissistic, and immature person. Again, this move frustrates the reader *by design*. Even though Bride is such a hopelessly flawed character, our readerly expectation is that we would be able to empathize with her as a victim of colorism. Indeed, the more we try to make sense of her humanity through her response to racism and white supremacy, the more we are led astray thematically. Griffin exemplifies this vexed readerly phenomenon in her response to Morrison's unflattering rendering of Bride. Morrison ultimately shows that the real tragedy is our bankrupt reliance on race, not her complex rendering of Bride's humanity and subjectivity.

It is crucial to note that the tragic dark-skin girl motif under interrogation in *GHTC* is partly a product of Morrison's attempt early on in her career to speak to Black women and girls' oppression at the hands of whites and men. Morrison's first attempt to speak to this oppression, *The Bluest Eye* (1970), epitomizes this motif in her characterization of Pecola Breedlove. Morrison's ostensible goal in writing *The Bluest Eye* was to bring the complex humanity of Black girls and women into full view, including how they cope with suffering at the hands of whites, Black men, and even other Black girls/women. Because her dark skin has marked her as socially undesirable even within Black spaces, Pecola internalizes racial inferiority in tragically pathological ways; she begins to think of her dark skin as a kind of curse and fantasizes about becoming white as if whiteness embodies perfection. Morrison illuminates this dynamic early in the novel in her depiction of Pecola's interaction with a white store owner, Mr. Yacobowski, who sells her candy. Pecola presupposes that Mr. Yacobowski doesn't want to make contact with her Black skin because it is repulsive. As a result, after she receives her candy—which Mr. Yacobowski puts on the counter instead of in her hand—and leaves the

shop, she is overcome with shame. To prevent herself from completely succumbing to this shame, Pecola fixates on the symbolic currency of whiteness that the candy represents for her:

> Each pale yellow wrapper has a picture on it . . . Smiling white face. Blond hair in gentle disarray, blue eyes looking at her out of a world of clean comfort . . . To Pecola they are simply pretty. She eats the candy, and its sweetness is good. To eat the candy is somehow to eat the eyes, eat Mary Jane. Love Mary Jane. Be Mary Jane. (Morrison 1994, 49)

Here, Morrison shows how Pecola internalizes white supremacy to the point of believing herself to be inferior. Indeed, she experiences Mr. Yacobowski's visible disgust at having to engage with her as confirmation of her inferiority. It never crosses her mind that Mr. Yacobowski's internalized white supremacy is the problem, not her Afrocentric features. Her coping method is to escape into the fantasy of whiteness. More specifically, she fantasizes about becoming Mary Jane as she indulges in the rarely enjoyed candy treat. Noticeably, Morrison renders Pecola an agentless victim without even the capacity to hold others accountable for their attacks against her. Though Morrison is clearly elucidating the toxic impact of white supremacist patriarchy on Black girls' consciousness, her rendering of Pecola as a pure agentless victim conveys that whiteness does indeed dictate the terms of her humanity. Pecola's spectacular victimization leaves little room to see her humanity beyond the relentless and vicious assaults she endures from all sides, including from her poor and downtrodden parents. Moreover, Morrison's rendering of Pecola makes it difficult to see dark skin beyond the boundaries of white supremacy. This is not to say that Morrison ignores the ways that internalized white supremacy pits Blacks against each other and manufactures colorism (we see this most saliently when the narrator describes the motives behind the Black boys' bullying of Pecola after school). Instead, Morrison does not present us with any dark skin characters who defy the tragic dark-skin girl motif.

In terms of colorism and agency, it is also crucial to note how Morrison (mis)characterizes the "light-skinned" Black character Maureen Peal, who weaponizes her light-skin "beauty" and cultural currency against Pecola for sport. By her own admission, Morrison introduces Peal in the narrative to highlight Pecola and darker-skinned Black girls' suffering at the hands of Black girls who enjoy a large degree of intraracial privilege because of their Eurocentric features. In an interview with writer Gloria Naylor, Morrison explains that she is clearly much more attuned to this slippage in her later writing and especially in *GHTC* (Morrison 1985, 3). Reflecting on her own

writerly intent in *Playing in the Dark*, Morrison (1992) writes: "The kind of work I have always wanted to do requires me to learn how to maneuver ways to free up language from its sometimes sinister, frequently lazy, almost always predictable employment of racially informed and determined chains" (18). Morrison holds true to this aim in *GHTC* by exposing and challenging our reliance on race to understand Black consciousness via the character Bride. More specifically, she challenges our readerly impulse to see a dark-skin character like Bride as tragic because of her skin tone and the colorist assaults she experiences even within Black spaces. Morrison "misleads" us at the novel's outset by leaving us racial cues about Bride that invoke the tragic dark-skin girl motif (Ikard 2007).[2] Bride's mother, Sweetness, is transparently disgusted with Bride's Black skin from birth and even contemplated smothering her as a baby because of it. Bride's father (who is lighter skinned) supposedly abandons her as a result of her dark skin. Morrison's framing of Bride's parents' mindsets and their toxic colorism seemingly prompts us to see her as a victim. Morrison further plays on these feelings when Bride offers us insight into what it was like for her to grow up with dark skin:

> She's sort of pretty under all that black. Neighbors and their daughters agreed. Sweetness never attended parent-teacher meetings or volleyball games. I was encouraged to take business courses not the college track, community college instead of four-year state universities. I didn't do any of that. After I don't know how many refusals, I finally got a job working stock—never sales where customers could see me. (Morrison 2015a, 35)

Our readerly expectations of a tragic dark-skin motif are turned upside down when Bride, through her self-determination, decides that dark skin will not be her curse. Her breakthrough occurs when she confides in an acquaintance and fashion stylist, Jeri, who remakes her image to emphasize her Black skin. He tells her that "Black sells" and encourages her to emphasize rather than downplay her dark skin (Morrison 2015a, 36). Shattering our readerly expectations about how colorism will impact her future, Bride follows his advice and develops a wardrobe made up of mostly white clothing to accentuate her dark skin. The result was spectacular: "Everywhere I went I got double takes but not like the faintly disgusted ones I used to get as a kid. These were adoring looks, stunned but hungry" (Morrison 2015a, 34). Bride's Blackness, then, becomes her chief asset, placing her in elite social circles, boosting her

2. David Ikard discusses a similar Morrisonian device in his chapter "Killing the White Girl First" in *Breaking the Silence Toward a Black Male Feminist Criticism*.

self-esteem, and generating public praise and adoration. Reveling in her ingenuity and gumption, Bride opines, "I sold my elegant blackness to all those childhood ghosts and now they pay me for it . . . I have to say, forcing those tormentors—the real ones and others like them—to drool with envy when they see me is more than payback. It's glory" (Morrison 2015a, 57).

That Morrison gives Bride the insight and fortitude to see beyond the socially imposed limitations of her dark skin is instructive. Though colorism certainly lands its blows, it ultimately does not crush Bride's spirit or define her identity as it does to Pecola. Our path to understanding Pecola leads us in the direction of her suffering and lack of agency. She is fragile and defenseless. She lacks even the capacity to imagine dark skin as beautiful or redemptive. Thus, her descent into madness, following her father's sexual assault, is as tragic as it is predictable. Morrison provides Bride with both the gumption and intelligence to overcome her racial circumstances. Though she is certainly hurt by colorism, it does not define her identity or dictate her path in life. Metaphorically speaking, she is the very antithesis of the tragic dark-skin girl motif. Accustomed as we are to identifying with this motif, however, we lean into Bride as an agentless victim even though Morrison presents us with a character who is not only thriving socially and economically but also self-centered and prone to displacing the responsibility of her actions onto others. We are frustrated like Griffin because our race-gender expectations—which encourage us to see the intersections of colorism, racism, and sexism as defining variables of Black women's humanity—do not line up with the complex humanity of Bride. She is neither "tragically colored," to invoke Zora Neale Hurston's apt phrasing, nor is she "heroically colored," wise, or celebratory. Morrison's treatment of the 8-rocks—and particularly the twin brothers Deacon and Steward—in *Paradise* comes immediately to mind. As one of the authors of this essay has written elsewhere, the abuse that the 8-rocks experience at the hands of whites and their dismissal by other Black freedmen with whom they sought refuge in their initial journey for freedom do not inspire them to be more generous and inclusive than their oppressors and rivals (Scott 2022). Instead, they massage and weaponize their oppression and suffering to the point of becoming ethically and morally blind, bloodthirsty, and terroristic. The utopia they seek to create becomes instead a kind of prison of their own making. Convinced that their past suffering gives them license to impose their values and will onto others, they avoid self-reflection and choose instead to blame the weak and vulnerable for the failings of their imagined utopia. Though Bride does not have the same tendencies toward violence as a means to power and control as the men of Ruby, she embodies

many of their traits of blindness and displaced responsibility. In this way, Morrison uses colorism and Black girls' social vulnerability to jolt our racial sensibility and remind us of the dangers of conflating suffering with insight or lived experience with cultural understanding.

The catalyst for Morrison's disruptive colorist intervention in *GHTC* stems, in part, from her own experiences with "reverse colorism" in her extended family. In a 2016 interview about the novel, Morrison details a significant childhood event involving her dark-skinned great-grandmother that forever altered her understanding of colorism and consequently shaped her treatment of Bride in the novel. The event occurred when Morrison was around three years old and her sister was four. The two were playing together on the floor when her great-grandmother paid her family a visit:

> My great-grandmother was visiting from . . . Flint, Michigan. She was understood to be a legend, she was understood to be the wise one, she was understood to be the head. She was a very sought-after midwife. This was the first time I had ever seen this. When she walked into a room, all the males stood up. Without any prompting. She was this incredible presence, mythological the way the families talked about her. She walked in and she greeted my mother. She carried a cane, which I don't think she needed. She said, "Those children have been tampered with." My mother was offended. Three years old, you think there's nothing but you. I thought it sounded interesting, "tampered," exotic. She was the darkest woman I had ever seen. My great-grandmother was pitch black, saying we have been tampered with. We were not pure as she was. We were sullied inside. It may occur to you that I've been talking about that for forever. (McCardle 2020)

There are several crucial takeaways from Morrison's recollection of her great-grandmother. The most striking is that in her family, dark skin—rather than light skin—was a mark of prestige and "purity." Even as Morrison is impressed by her great-grandmother's stature (which even prompted the men to revere her), she is mortified by being deemed tainted for having lighter skin. The word "tainted" here denotes a dilution, so to speak, of the African bloodline. To be "tainted," then, means to be the product of solicitous miscegenation. So, by extension, Morrison's great-grandmother was suggesting that she and her sister were somehow less than ideal human beings because of their white ancestry. This form of reverse colorism—especially from such a revered matriarch—was devastating. In essence, Morrison and her sister were being blamed for a circumstance of "race mixing" in which they had no say. In this vein, her light skin marks her as somehow "ruined," if not undesirable, because of her white admixture. What Morrison gleans from this

crucial childhood encounter is that colorism, at its core, is a vehicle of denigration and dehumanization. From this vantage point, the racial component of it is secondary. One can surmise that this racial purity discourse within Morrison's family was a source of pride because it ostensibly undermined white supremacist notions of Black inferiority/white superiority and, in turn, encouraged the family to celebrate and revere their Afrocentric features. While on its face this self-defensive strategy and mindset seems progressive, if not, revolutionary, it still reproduced a version of colorism that mapped shame onto the bodies of family members, like Morrison, who, at least visibly, appeared to have Eurocentric features. The inherent danger of such a self-defensive posture is clear. Rather than explode the white supremacist racial discourse that maps meaning onto skin color, this strategic reversal simply realigns the domains of superiority and inferiority. It is this tricky phenomenon of reproducing oppression that most concerns Morrison and drives her disruptive colorist politics in *GHTC*.

Morrison elucidates her thematic strategy most dramatically in her rendering of Bride's interactions with white elementary teacher Sophia Huxley. Desperate to please her color-struck, mentally troubled mother Sweetness, Bride agrees to testify against Sophia in a high-profile child molestation case. Bride and four other children are coached by bloodthirsty teacher-psychologists to finger Sophia for the crimes. Based chiefly on these coached false testimonies, Sophia is sentenced to twenty-five years in prison and serves fifteen. The irony, of course, is that Bride *does* indeed witness an act of child molestation firsthand by her white landlord, Mr. Leigh. When he notices her watching, he calls her a "little nigger cunt" and tells her to close her window and "get the fuck outta here" (Morrison 2015a, 55). When she shares the information with Sweetness, she is told with malice to keep quiet about the incident. Sweetness fears revealing the crime will likely lead to their eviction from the reasonably priced apartment in a "mixed" neighborhood that she has fought so hard to secure. Bride rightly observes: "[W]hen I told Sweetness what I'd seen, she was furious. Not about a little crying boy, but about spreading the story. She wasn't interested in tiny fists or big hairy thighs; she was interested in keeping our apartment" (Morrison 2015a, 54). Sweetness's righteous indignation at Sophia's alleged child molestation and insistence that Bride testify against her is highly suspect, given what we know about her feelings toward Mr. Leigh. Even if we account for how the cruel realities of racism informed and complicated Black self-determination (in all likelihood, Sweetness would have been evicted from her apartment, and Mr. Leigh would have likely avoided prosecution because the chief witness

against him was a little Black girl), Sweetness's wickedly ruthless and calculating mentality about colorism, whiteness, and parenting (she seriously contemplates infanticide because of Bride's dark complexion) encourage us to see her radically disparate responses to child molestation as deeply troubling.

Morrison makes clear that even though we cannot hold the child Bride responsible for this horrific miscarriage of justice concerning Sophia, we can—and should—hold the adult Bride responsible for how she attempts to address her coerced complicity in destroying Sophia's life. Here, we should keep in mind that Morrison is highly attentive to our readerly impulse (especially as Black folks) to "protect" Bride and validate her victimization and vulnerability as a Black girl under the thumb of white supremacy and intraracial complicity in oppression. However appealing or cathartic such a rendering might be, it also paradoxically centers whiteness and encourages us to read through a tragic Black girl motif. Bride's humanity becomes reducible to her hardships and intersectional suffering as a Black working-class girl. Within this framework, we are encouraged to understand her plight and individual agency vis-à-vis the prism of race. Statistically speaking, Black girls and women have been shown to have very high self-esteem despite the myriad ways in which they are assaulted by whites and often within Black spaces by Black boys and men (Byrd and Shavers 2013, 244–65). In many ways, Morrison embodied this reality to discuss her intellectual superiority to many of the whites, and white men in particular, who tried to intimidate her throughout her life. This is to not to say that Black women are somehow impervious to stress or attacks on their character or person or, for that matter, giving currency to the dangerous discourse of strong Black womanhood. Rather the point is that wholesale identity-focused modes of critique are too constrictive to encompass the complex scope of Black women's consciousness and agency. The reality is that Bride is at once a victim of racism, bad parenting, sexism, and colorism within Black spaces and is also a principal agent in destroying the life of an innocent woman, Sophia, who happens to be white. The crucial point for Morrison is that Bride has experienced a series of painful, if not traumatic, childhood events that she has allowed to define her adulthood in unhealthy and destructive ways (her lover Booker is also emotionally "handicapped" in this way).

As Morrison explains in a 2015 interview with Charlie Rose, our childhood hardships or traumas can, if we let them, define our lives in emotionally "debilitating" ways. If these childhood hardships/traumas are not critically examined and reckoned with, they can make us self-absorbed, cynical, and even cruel, rather than empathetic, thoughtful, and compassionate: "The

best . . .[remedy to self-absorption] is to stop thinking about yourself and start thinking about someone else. And start taking care of someone else—move . . . [self-absorption] out. It's not always about you" (Morrison 2015c, 9:26–10:14). Indeed, Morrison expresses this sentiment most strikingly in Booker's self-reflections after his aunt Queen accuses him of using the death of his older brother Adam as a crutch to keep him from taking ownership of his life choices. Addressing his dead brother directly, Booker proclaims, "*I apologize for enslaving you in order to chain myself to the illusion of control and the cheap seduction of power. No slaveowner could have done it better*" (Morrison 2015a, 161; emphasis added). Booker's internal reflections here offer additional insights into Morrison's rendering of Bride and dismantling of the tragic Black girl motif. The reference to slavery is particularly revealing as it underscores how insidious and toxic this type of self-absorption can be. As we know, a key strategy for maintaining control over the enslaved populations was to convince them that their status of inferiority was natural and, in turn, get them to reinforce such thinking in their dealings with each other. To be sure, violence and terrorism were also key to keeping the enslaved under control, but the system could not have sustained itself if not for this internalization of racial inferiority. In equating Booker's self-absorption with Adam's death with slavery, Morrison is trying to call our attention to how his need to hold on to the devastating pain of loss—rather than seeking to learn and heal from it (which, ironically, is the advice that Queen originally gave him)—has made him dangerously irresponsible and self-righteous and stunted his maturation. In an internal dialogue, Booker admits, "I've been charmed by my own intelligence and the moral positions I've taken, along with the insolence that accompanies them. But where is the brilliant research, the enlightening books, the masterpieces I used to dream of producing? Nowhere. Instead I write notes about the shortcomings of others. Easy. So easy. What about my own?" (Morrison 2015a, 160–61).

Though Bride is at least self-aware enough to know that she has a responsibility to address her role in destroying Sophia's life, she is as "lost" as Booker. At the point in her adult life in which she realizes the harm that she was coerced into doing to Sophia, Bride could have presumably gone to the police and offered to retract her false testimony. After all, she was a child when it happened. There would have been little risk involved beyond upsetting, perhaps, some of the adults who orchestrated the sham testimony. Even if Bride felt unsafe going to the police and retracting her testimony—a reality that most Black folks can certainly empathize with, given the white supremacist corruption within our judicial system—she could have at least offered

a sincere apology and expressed remorse. What she does instead is try to alleviate her feelings of guilt by giving Sophia an expensive assortment of beauty products, an expensive airline gift certificate, and five thousand dollars in cash ("About two hundred dollars for each year if she had served her full sentence") (Morrison 2015a, 20). Bride is so convinced of her righteousness that she is completely unprepared for Sophia's response of rage and violence. Even though Bride experiences her gift-giving act as gracious and thoughtful, it is clearly designed to alleviate her guilt and responsibility for destroying Sophia's life. To Bride's thinking, the gifts will provide Sophia with "comfort" and "help her forget [about her fifteen-year stint in prison] and take the edge off bad luck, hopelessness, and boredom." (Morrison 2015a, 12). But Sophia is not just someone who has experienced "bad luck" or "hopelessness" by chance; she was intentionally singled out for persecution and, lacking evidence, her accusers orchestrated a campaign of indictment that included coaching children to testify against her. Moreover, the nature of her crimes against children means that she will, in effect, be considered a criminal for life because she has to register as a child predator. This is borne out by the fact that she loses a job that she loves because her employer—a grandmother—moves her grandchildren into her house. The terms of Sophia's probation forbid her not only from direct contact with children but even from living within close proximity. Bride's elitist and victim-centric response to Sophia's reaction bespeaks the depths of her self-absorption: "Even Sofia Huxley, of all people, erased me. A convict. A convict! She could have said, 'No thanks,' or even 'Get out!' No. She went postal. Maybe fist fighting is prison talk. Instead of words, broken bones and drawing blood is inmate conversation. I'm not sure which is worse, being dumped like trash [by Booker] or whipped like a *slave*" (Morrison 2015a, 38; emphasis added).

Given that Bride is no stranger to victimization at all levels of her life, including by her own mother who contemplated infanticide because of her dark skin, the reader is shocked by her calculated cognitive dissonance. Even more shocking is her problematic invocation of slavery. Historically speaking, (Southern) white women were notoriously supportive of white men and the institution of slavery despite how destructive white patriarchy was to white women's agency, self-determination, and even physical safety (under the laws of coverture during the antebellum period, wives were the legal property of their husbands). The modern-day version of this allegiance to white patriarchy is embodied in the metaphor of "Karen"—a racist white woman who weaponizes the police and terrorizes Black folks, including children, for non-criminal activities, like grilling out in a public park or even asking

her to obey the law (think of Amy Cooper's response in Central Park to Christian Cooper, a Black man and birdwatcher, who simply asked her to leash her dog as the law mandated). Morrison upsets our racial sensibilities here because it is Bride, not Sophia, who is weaponizing authority and class status. It is also Bride who is misrepresenting her own violence against Sophia as philanthropy and further indicting the victim for her own victimization. To wit, Sophia is only a "convict" because she was falsely imprisoned. Moreover, her prison status has nothing to do with her humanity, nor does it entitle Bride to treat her differently than she would anyone else. To compare her beating at the hands of Sophia to slavery, then, is the ultimate betrayal. Bride's behavior is more in line with the white descendants of slave owners, not the Black enslaved population. She provokes violence with her loaded, self-serving philanthropy and then condemns the true victim for having the audacity to be offended and retaliate in kind. This scene is most unsettling because we still exist in a historical moment in which such violence in the name of philanthropy and (white) goodwill plague our communities. But we must keep in mind that Morrison is not interested in centering whiteness or, concomitantly, shackling Black humanity to white consciousness as if Black consciousness, morality, or emotional agency were inextricably tied to whiteness. As she has stated repeatedly throughout her illustrious career, she is interested in "writing *without* the white gaze" (Ghansah 2015; emphasis added). What this means, on one level, is resisting the impulse to write political literature designed to highlight the ways that whites have oppressed and abused Black bodies. The ultimate aim is to hold whites accountable for their long history of destroying Blacks with impunity. While there is certainly value (political, social, and cultural) in validating Black suffering at the hands of whites, especially in a white supremacist society that perpetually seeks to obscure and/or erase the history of state-sanctioned white terrorism, preoccupying ourselves with how whites have harmed us paradoxically affirms the centrality of whiteness to Black humanity. Besides, as Morrison reminds us time and again, white supremacist ideology anticipates this move. That is precisely why, for example, the typical white retort to, say, ending police brutality against black communities, is "Well, what about Black-on-Black crime?" Morrison rightly labels such racist attempts to displace responsibility of victimizer onto the victimized as distractions:

> The function, the very serious function of racism is distraction. It keeps you from doing your work. It keeps you explaining, over and over again, your reason for being. Somebody says you have no language and you spend twenty

> years proving that you do. Somebody says your head isn't shaped properly so you have scientists working on the fact that it is. Somebody says you have no art, so you dredge that up. Somebody says you have no kingdoms, so you dredge that up. None of this is necessary. There will always be one more thing. (Morrison 1975)

Even though Bride and her mother Sweetness have certainly been victimized at the hands of whites, their victimization does not embody or define their humanity or ultimately dictate their agency. However harmful white supremacy has been to them, it does not tell us anything useful about who they are as human beings. Sweetness, for instance, repeatedly invokes white supremacy to explain away her colorist elitism and to justify her despicable treatment toward Bride. At the outset of the novel she explains, "Some of you probably think it's a bad thing to group ourselves according to skin color—the lighter, the better—in social clubs, neighborhoods, churches, sororities, even colored schools. But how else can we hold onto a little dignity?" (Morrison 2015a, 4).

To her twisted thinking, white supremacy compels, if not forces, lighter-skinned Blacks like her to look down on darker-skinned Blacks to affirm her humanity. She argues that we cannot indict her for being a colorist because she is the victim of a white supremacist society. She is the victim and white supremacy is the culprit. Darker-skinned people are collateral damage in the quest for dignity. The perpetuation of white supremacy (which colorism ultimately is), then, becomes the answer to negotiating white supremacy. Tellingly, Black men were employing a version of such logic (racism made me do it) to justify intraracial patriarchal privilege and to explain away domestic violence against Black women. Black feminist activists and scholars have rejected this logic, noting that such victim-centric thinking distorts how Black men are reproducing a version of domination and oppression that they are ostensibly indicating in whites. Erasing Black women's suffering becomes the collateral damage in the fight against the dehumanization and (white) emasculation of Black men. Beyond the obvious problems of such erasure for the most vulnerable groups even within historically oppressed communities, Morrison wants to press the reader to engage with (Black) humanity as a thing apart from the fiction of "race," and by extension, the centrality of whiteness, so that we can grapple with the humanity of people who happen to be raced Black rather than to see "race" as a fixed reality that defines and confines Black identity. As (Black) readers we want to empathize with Bride; we want her racial pain to be validated; we want her to win; and

we want her white and colorist tormentors to be punished accordingly. In other words, what we want in this Black fiction is something that most of us can't have in our material racial realities, including public affirmation that we have been targeted, wronged, exploited, injured, and the like. But Morrison is having none of it, namely, because we already know as Black folks that racial oppression is real, even if our white peers refuse to fully acknowledge it.

The tragic Black girl motif prompts us to seek a silver lining to the racial tragedy or, at the very least, render the victimized Black girl as worthy of our empathy, to present her pain as legitimate and real. In *GHTC*, Morrison continues to disrupt this expectation. She anticipates that the reader wants a "happy ending," that we want to see Bride emerge, if not somehow heroic, at least demonstrate growth and have her suffering under the thumb of white supremacy and its offspring, colorism, validated. But, to borrow Morrison's language, the tragic Black girl trope "is not enough" to shed light on the stakes of unreckoned-with childhood pain/hardships for Black folks and Black women/girls in particular. Two crucial moments of disruption are telling in this regard. Both such moments introduce possibilities for growth/redemption, only to have them dashed or corrupted in some way. The first of these moments is Rain's commentary about how Bride saves her life by using her body as a shield against the gunfire of rabid racists. The second is the moment that Bride comforts a badly burned Queen after the horrible house fire. In Rain's brief stream-of-consciousness narrative, we are presented with a wholly different image of Bride as someone who thinks nothing of putting her life on the line to protect a child. Rain, a white child who has been pimped out by her own mother and kicked out of the house before being taken in by a white hippie couple, is perhaps the most physically and emotionally abused character in the novel. Understandably, the tragic circumstances of her childhood have made her emotionally hard and untrusting. And yet she develops a bond with Bride around shared experiences of childhood traumas. In the chapter in question, we learn that Rain and Bride have a near-death experience when a couple of white locals decide to shoot at them out of unprovoked racial malice. In a selfless act of bravery, Bride throws herself in the way of the incoming bullets and takes a buckshot to her hands. While she is being attended to by Steve and Evelyn, Rain's adoptive parents, Rain observes, "My heart was beating fast because nobody had done that before. I mean Steve and Evelyn took me in and all, but nobody put their own self in danger to save me. Save my life. But that's what my black lady did without even thinking about it." She then concludes poignantly, "She's gone now but

who knows maybe I'll see her again sometime. I miss my black lady" (Morrison 2015a, 106).

Despite these moving engagements with Rain, which should be life-altering, Bride's inherent self-absorbed character goes unchanged. In reference to the second crucial moment of disruption mentioned above, Morrison is not shy about expounding on the idea that Bride, regardless of her past trauma, is not a wholly sympathetic character. After Bride and Booker drag Queen out of her burning house onto the front lawn, and Bride takes off her shirt to smother the flame in Queen's hair, this thoughtful act becomes overshadowed by Bride's narcissism. Bride observes that, upon the arrival of the ambulance, everyone is transfixed not with Queen—the barely lucid burn victim—but by Bride's plump breasts. Bride revels in this immediate attention as her feelings are described as delightful, and she even delays accepting a blanket to cover herself until she notices Booker's disapproving gaze. Even in light of Booker's gaze, Morrison furthers this egocentric position by narrating: "But it was hard to suppress her glee, even though she was *slightly* [emphasis added] ashamed at dividing her attention between the sad sight of Queen's slide into the back of the ambulance and the magical return of her flawless breast" (Morrison 2015a, 166).

This becomes a curious moment because, as opposed to demonstrating humility in a rather tragic event, Bride expresses happiness at becoming the center of everyone's attention. There is a salient disconnect here. Morrison arguably baits the reader with cues that signal a transformative moment for Bride. However, what we're given is someone who has failed to rise to the occasion and become this empathetic character. Indeed, this is the attention that Bride is used to receiving. Ironically, it is Queen who disrupted this consistent stream of praise after their initial meeting. When she first meets Bride, who has journeyed from the city to find Booker, Queen observes candidly, "You look like something a raccoon found and refused to eat" (Morrison 2015a, 144). Queen's candor does more than bruise Bride's ego about her beauty (after all, as an adult, her rich dark skin and Afrocentric features have been the source of praise and not ridicule), it triggers deep-rooted childhood traumas around colorism: "For the past three years she'd only been told how exotic, how gorgeous she was—everywhere, from almost everybody—stunning, dreamy, hot, wow! Now this old woman with wooly red hair and judging eyes had deleted an entire vocabulary of compliments in one stroke" (Morrison 2015a, 144). But, alas, Queen is not the problem. To be sure, her comments are not meant to be injurious in any way. Moreover, there is no evidence that she has any colorist biases. What Bride's response reveals, then, is the extent to which her childhood traumas around colorism continue to

dictate how she sees the world and her place in it. The tragedy that Morrison brings to fore here—albeit subtly—is that Bride's mistreatment at the hands of her mother has stunted her emotional maturity and, more specifically, her ability to empathize with the pain of others, including people that she has directly hurt. (Consequently, this phenomenon also explains why Bride is at once drawn to and confused by Booker's brokenness and lack of empathy.) This extreme self-centeredness becomes its own emotional prison. Rather than make her more sympathetic to the pain of others—including those who have similar experiences of colorism and childhood traumas—Bride's suffering and concomitant preoccupation with victimization make her insensitive and, at times, even cruel. This phenomenon is borne out most dramatically in the ways that Morrison incorporates magical realism of a sort to mark how Bride experiences Booker's rejection and abandonment. After Booker unexpectedly leaves, Bride's body undergoes a slow metamorphosis from physical womanhood to girlhood—a metamorphosis that only she appears to see. The first signs of this metamorphosis occur in the restroom at a diner when Bride is trying to track Booker down. When she uses the bathroom, she becomes "alarmed by her hairless pudenda." (Morrison 2015a, 81). Then, shortly thereafter, while recovering from her accident at Evelyn and Steve's house, she realizes during a bath that her chest was "[c]ompletely flat, with only the nipples to prove it was not her back" (Morrison 2015a, 92). She then later discovers that her body had gotten smaller (she is able to fit in Rain's clothes), and her menstrual cycle was delayed.

Even though most scholars read Bride's relationship with Rain as redemptive—and, by extension, the catalyst for the reversal of this metamorphosis into adolescence (when her breasts "return")—the political trajectory of the novel simply does not bear this out (Harris 2020, 9–27). Even as Bride's bravery and selflessness are clearly on display when she sacrifices her life to save Rain from gunfire, we never see any more evidence of such growth after she leaves Rain's house. In fact, Bride never mentions Rain or the events of the white terrorist attack again after she leaves her house. Moreover, her noticeably vain response to the "return" of her breast and physical womanhood while Queen lay smoldering and near death epitomizes narcissism rather than selflessness. It becomes abundantly clear that Bride's relationship with Rain does not constitute a true metamorphosis of mind and spirit. If anything, Morrison appears to be using the scene to simultaneously humanize Bride and to disrupt our readerly expectation that injustice gives birth to growth and insight. As (Black) readers, we want the racial underdog to win or, at the very least, to be redeemed in some way. But what we know—and

Morrison refuses to let us forget—is that growth and maturity are not organic or inevitable even among the most oppressed; that the very expectation of such is itself part of the problem. In a word, oppression does not make the oppressed more loving, more caring, or more forgiving. In fact, it can often have the opposite effect.

Morrison underscores this notion further in her rendering of Booker's epiphany about his unhealthy obsession with his brother Adam's murder. Even after Booker acknowledges that his obsession with Adam's death has stunted his emotional growth, maturity, and even his career productivity, he cannot find healthy paths beyond victimization. Ironically, it is Queen, who initially instructs Booker not to let go of Adam, who sees this propensity toward victimization and narcissism in Booker and Bride. After witnessing their bloody reunion, in which Bride breaks a beer bottle over his head, Queen muses:

> They will blow it . . . Each will cling to a sad little story of hurt and sorrow—some long-ago trouble and pain life dumped on their pure and innocent selves. And each one will rewrite that story forever, knowing the plot, guessing the theme, inventing its meaning and dismissing its origin. What a waste. She knew from personal experience how hard loving was, how selfish and how easily sundered. Withholding sex or relying on it, ignoring children or devouring them, rerouting true feelings or locking them out. Youth being the excuse for that fortune-cookie love—until it wasn't, until it became pure adult stupidity. (Morrison 2015a, 158)

It is certainly no accident that Morrison enlists Queen to deliver this critical indictment of Booker and Bride. In many regards, Queen speaks from experience. She allowed her desires for companionship with men to override her good judgment in terms of raising and protecting her children, each of whom she is estranged from. Her most painful estrangement is from her daughter Hannah, whom she failed to adequately protect from incestuous assault by her biological father. So, in a way, her indictment of them is also an indictment of her own shortcomings in explaining away her daughter's trauma. She acutely understands, then, that claims of "innocence," like those that activate Bride and Booker's blindness to their self-centeredness, can not only be toxic but also weaponized in ways that can do irreparable damage to loved ones.

Given Morrison's propensity to disrupt our (Black) readerly expectations of empathy in *GHTC*, she was bound to ruffle more than a few feathers. In a scathing review of *GHTC*, noted artist Kara Walker expresses her disappointment

with how Morrison characterizes Bride throughout the novel. She writes that like Sweetness, who is so mortified by her daughter's dark skin that she refuses to touch her or be affectionate, "Morrison doesn't seem to want to touch Bride either—at least not tenderly" (Walker 2015). She further expounds, "[t]he narrative hovers, averts its eyes and sucks its teeth at the misfortunes of the [all] characters" (Walker 2015, 4). Walker's contention is that Morrison is insensitive to Bride and the unfair colorist assaults she bears from all sides. Moreover, Walker feels that Morrison is outright uncaring, if not irresponsible, in her treatment of Bride. Invoking a conspicuously personal tone, Walker (2015) concludes that, like Bride, she "was left hungering for warmth. I wanted to be lured even deeper into that awful golden landscape. I wanted to tug at the sleeve of the storyteller and say, 'Yes, yes, I know all that, I get the message, but the story is the thing; tell me the part about the trees again, and don't forget the sunlight'" (5). Even as it is understandable that Walker (who, no doubt, has been the target of racism and sexism) yearns for Morrison to be more empathetic in her treatment of Bride (especially because of how infrequently the issue of colorism and Black girls is broached in literature), her critique misses the mark. While certainly admirable, writing with an expressed intent to generate empathy for Black suffering holds little appeal for Morrison. In fact, we would argue that Morrison is intentionally disrupting the tragic Black girl motif. Consistent with her writing impulses, Morrison presents us (Black folks) with something that we think we understand, like colorism, only to subvert it in such a way as to expose our overreliance on "race" or "racial experiences" to understand (Black) humanity. Her chief concern in *GHTC* is not colorism or generating empathy for Black women and girls per se; rather, she wants to illuminate how civil rights gains and, more pointedly, our participation in gross capitalism have stunted our compassion and sensitivity to each other and encouraged us to be hyper-individualistic and shortsighted. No other scene in the novel highlights this more dramatically than Booker's disastrous send-off of his Aunt Queen.

What is intended to be a heartfelt expression of love collapses into a literal and figurative mess because even as Booker experiences the send-off as a gesture of love to honor his Aunt Queen, the reality is that his heart is in the wrong place. We see this dynamic at play in his inexplicable anger when he botches his musical tribute song, "Kind of Blue," and the pouring of his aunt's ashes in the stream. The narrator reports that, "the ashes were lumpy and difficult to toss and his musical tribute . . . was off-key and uninspired" (Morrison 2015a, 173). The narrator explains, "It never occurred to [Booker]

that Queen would die or even could die. Much of the time, while he tended to her feet and listened to her breath he was thinking about *his own unease*" (Morrison 2015a, 173; emphasis added). Here, Morrison highlights Booker's immaturity and self-centeredness. Booker essentially throws a tantrum at a funeral ritual. He is not expressing anger at the loss of his aunt per se, but rather at how her death has "disrupted" and inconvenienced his life. After he angrily tosses his trumpet into the stream, he reflects internally, "How disrupted his life had become, what with caring for an aunt he adored and who was now dead due to her own carelessness—who the hell burns bedsprings these days?" (Morrison 2015a, 173). Even in grief and mourning, Booker centers and prioritizes his suffering to the point of blaming his aunt for being careless and bringing about her own demise. Though Booker has certainly experienced unspeakable losses, the most consequential being the murder of his older brother Adam, he has nursed and obsessed over his suffering to such an extreme extent that it has made him callous and insensitive rather than loving and empathetic.

Ultimately, the problems of self-centeredness and emotional immaturity come full circle in Sweetness's commentary at the end of the novel. Imagining herself as the chief victim, Sweetness explains away her emotionally abusive parenting of Bride as a necessary evil of raising a dark-skinned daughter in a white supremacist and colorist society. Indeed, she believes her tough love actually assisted in Bride's successful career. What she grossly ignores is that she was ashamed of her daughter and weaponized that (colorist) shame against her, including making Bride the reason her husband abandoned them. Her willful blindness allows her to avoid taking responsibility for her actions, but, in effect, it has also resulted in her loneliness.

Bride pays for her mother to stay in an upscale nursing facility but refuses to visit her. Sweetness expounds on this familial estrangement as she reflects on the letter she receives from Bride disclosing her pregnancy: "There is no return address on the envelope. So I guess I'm still the bad parent being punished forever till the day I die for doing the well-intended and, in fact, necessary way I brought her up" (Morrison 2015a, 177). Here, Sweetness has taken Bride's implementation of boundaries as an opportunity to center herself, prioritize her feelings, and moreover, justify the toxic way she raised Bride. In effect, she overlooks Bride's action of extending an olive branch and instead takes it as a hit to her questionable character. Sweetness then surmises, "I know she hates me," when in reality Bride has conceded to love her mother from a distance (Morrison 2015a, 177). Indeed, raising a dark-skin

Black girl in a colorist society has its trials and tribulations; however, it serves as no excuse to treat one's daughter as callously as Sweetness treated Bride.

This scene in no way suggests that Morrison is indifferent to the unique suffering that dark-skinned Black girls or the mothers tasked with raising them experience because of colorism in America writ large. To suggest otherwise based on her unimpeachable record of exposing and contextualizing the problems with colorism within the community is absurd. Instead, Morrison closes this novel by unearthing her thematic strategy most clearly through Sweetness, when she conveys, "If I sound irritable, ungrateful, part of it is because underneath is regret. All the little things I didn't do or did wrong" (Morrison 2015a, 177). Given Sweetness's obsession with how white people would have treated Bride because of her dark skin, she inadvertently centered them and their judgment and made her behavior inextricable from theirs. As a result, she never provided Bride with the love and affection that was lacking in the white supremacist patriarchal society from which she arguably tries to shield her. In a word, Morrison loves Black people, and she is primarily concerned with the plight of Black women and girls; the paradox of this concern that Walker unfortunately misses is that Morrison loves us enough to hold us accountable for our behavior so we may have an opportunity to treat others effectively and without regret. In this way, she reminds the reader that Black humanity is not dictated or defined by white supremacy or our suffering under it, but rather it is bound up within our resilience and ability to determine our own agency even in the most daunting of circumstances. With all due respect to Kara Walker, who is a brilliant artist in her own right, Morrison not only loves Bride and Booker enough to portray them with a kind of ruthless honesty, but, more importantly, she loves the Black community enough to demand that we do not accept the premise that our brutal history of victimization in this country somehow excuses us from accountability to each other and even to those who continue to oppress us.

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