



Beyond the Color Line: Re-assessing the Concept of Blackness in Toni Morrison's *God Help the Child*

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Abstract - This paper aims at understanding from a literary standpoint the mechanism at work in the assessment of a trope. Blackness, beyond the color line, is a metaphoric construct that describes a given mode of perception and a code of representation on race matters. It takes as well into account both spatiality and temporality that are inscribed in the dynamics of movement. The produced imagery is a set of diachronic terms ranging from Negro, Black, African, Black American, Afro-American, African (-) American. These terminologies –figuratively turned in color lines characterize Blacks in the United States. Like for Colored people in general, the color line is a demarcation line from the Majority that sets different races in an intersubjective relationship. It is interesting then to re-appraise the notion of Blackness that participates in the making of the trope, with the view to determine whether this concept is inherent to the color of the skin. And if not, to show the incidence that it has in Toni Morrison's latest novel *God Help the Child*.

Key words: Blackness, (Post-)racial era, Africanness, (In)visibility, Slavery, mulatto.

Résumé - Cette réflexion a pour but de comprendre le traitement littéraire et les mécanismes d'élaboration d'un trope. Ne désignant pas que la couleur de la peau, la noirceur est aussi une construction métaphorique qui conduit à apprécier les modes de perception et les codes de représentation d'une communauté raciale précise. Elle s'inscrit dans une dynamique à la fois spatiale et temporelle – mouvements conduisant à la production d'un imaginaire diachronique. Nègre, Noir, Africain, Noir américain, Afro-Américain et Africain (-) Américain sont autant de terminologies figurales pour marquer la ligne de démarcation, qui caractérise le sujet noir des Etats-Unis. Autant pour les hommes de couleur de façon générale, la couleur de la peau est un critère d'identification raciale qui les dissocie de la Majorité blanche, en les cantonnant paradoxalement dans des relations intersubjectives. Il est ainsi intéressant de réévaluer la notion de noirceur en tant que trope, dans l'objectif de relever le détachement sémantique et de montrer son incidence dans l'économie du tout dernier roman de Toni Morrison intitulé *God Help the Child*.

Mots clés: la noirceur, l'ère (post-)raciale, africanité, (In)visibilité, esclavage, métisse.

1. The Black Subject in the Racial Era

The novel *God Help the Child* deals with the representation of the Black subject in the Racial era. The awareness of the color line is primarily determined by Blackness or the reference to the black skin color. This perception centered on the skin color is at the origin of the rejection of the other.¹ The other being defined by his/her distinctive physiological features apart from the skin color, lips, eyes, hair, and nose are other criteria taken into account to distinguish one race from another. The Racial era driven by Darwin evolutionist theory has indeed greatly influenced inter-racial behaviors.

By the way, racism and sexism help fathom out the ideological implications of the concept of Blackness. The Racial era is out of context, since racial issues are today as evoked and vivid as they were sixty years back at the time of the

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¹ Claude Lévi-Strauss, *Race et histoire*. Paris : Folio, 1987, pp. 9-10.



Civil Rights movement, with regard to the headlines of columns in U.S. media. The Racial era is not manifestly over, as Toni Morrison tends to prove it in her latest novel, where “skin privileges” (*GHC*, p. 43) determine characters’ actions and motivations all through the story, a parallel with the American society today.

The author’s concern is expressed through the recurrence of racial issues in her writings. They haunt her novels, giving the feeling of an unfinished work. From a thematic standpoint, the author’s novels are inscribed in circularity. No evolution, but maturation is targeted with the insistence of themes such as alienation in *The Bluest Eye*, sexism in *Sula*, the quest of identity in *Song of Solomon*, trauma and the reconstruction of memory in *Beloved*, and so and so forth. This set of topics discloses Morrison’s attempt at understanding and curing the plagues of the American society.

Toni Morrison re-opens in her latest novel *God Help the Child* the debate on Blackness as a pathway to apprehend race matters. The patent example of racist deeds comes in the description of the narrator meeting her White friend’s parents, as it is illustrated in: “I remember one date in particular, a medical student who persuaded me to join him on a visit to his parents’ house up north. As soon as he introduced me it was clear I was there to terrorize his family, a means of threat to this nice old white couple” (*GHC*, p. 36). The language which bears the racial prejudice used in *God Help the Child* by the narrator naturally exposes an ambient racism, justified by the difference of skin color, being born Black. Racism comes out in the articulation of the absence of causality in this passage to mean non-acceptance and rejection. The narrator is right away excluded because of her difference, her Blackness precisely.

The color line articulation is ignored or sided out as a major theme in Post-modern African American literature. This is to compare with the literary production of the Harlem Renaissance, with Ralph Ellison’s novel *Invisible Man* and Zora Neale Hurston’s short story “How It Feels to be Colored Me” just to cite a few, which explore in depth the question of skin color in a discriminatory and segregationist America. *God Help the Child* shows the complexity of the concept of Blackness.

The semantics of the novel uses polysemy as a means to spawn literary imagination. In the Racial era, Blackness denies humanity to the Black subject. It is perceived as a wrong or something “witchy” (*GHC*, p. 6) to get rid of, as it clearly appears on public signs saying: “KILL THE FREAKS and NO MERCY FOR DEVILS” (*GHC*, p. 42). They give the representation of the Black subject in the society, just as to deepen the idea of negativity and demonization of the Black subject.

Even the description of a newborn betrays this negativity in the discourse of a mother horrified by the skin color of her baby girl. It shows how the ideology



of racism affects and imprisons individuals. It leads to the rejection not only of the other, but also the self. It reads: "an hour after they pulled her out from my legs to realize something was wrong. Really wrong. She was so black she scared me" (*GHC*, p. 3). Negation is assimilated to Blackness. The black skin color is natural, pigmentation results from melanin. But the mode of perception inscribed reveals the aversion to be born black as a curse.² A parallel is drawn to mean the burden or the sins, Jesus Christ carrying his cross, when Lula Mae talking about her daughter contends that: "Her color is a cross she will always carry" (*GHC*, p. 7).

The color line in the African American community presents different degrees of Blackness. The "light-skinned" are given more consideration, as they can pass for white. The novel evokes the "mulatto types" - ranked as Black from the knowledge of ancestry and the presence of a few distinctive traits unveiling their Blackness. The other category is considered White having no awareness of their Blackness. For the latter, their assimilation favors their integration, and above all their [self-]acceptance.

The dark ones are discriminated in the society. Such is the case of the character Tar whose name is quite evocative. They endure a double negation. Its expression outside the community is a racist deed, a "wrong" as stated in the passage above. Rejection and negation are also experienced within the African American community. The insistence of "Really wrong" indicates the interiorization of this negation. It comes as a core ingredient in Morrison's writing. As compared to her earlier novels, Blackness emphasizes in *God Help the Child* the complexity of her characters.

The use of such terms "Midnightblack" and "Sudanese black" to mean it is not linked to the recollection of the African origins. That which may generate in the logic of cultural reconstruction pride as in the slogan "To be black and proud." In this very context, these are derogatory terms, since the society as a whole negates the pure expression of Blackness, as to be terrified by it. It is why it reads: "she scared me." In the economy of the text, the color line participates both to the aesthetics of the Black subject and his/her identity in the Racial era. In the poetics of the text, it constructs a whole discourse through which the subject gets to the perception of his/her identity and social status. But it stands also as a canvas through which the subject gets to the knowledge of his/his history, culture, and tradition. So the term "black color" is loaded with meaning. It is polysemic, and it gives to the author's writing its depth, the complexity of each of character. The very concept of Blackness should be apprehended in a plurality.

² Winthrop D. Jordan, *White Over Black : American Attitudes Toward the Negro 1550-1812*. Baltimore, Mariland : Penguin Books Inc., 1969, p. 41.



The dynamics of the author's writing leads to a heterogeneous narrative. The apprehension of characters is not limited or circumscribed to the skin color, even though the color of the skin justifies the development of the story, as it is linked to events. Blackness evokes Africanness³ and the recollection of the experiences of slavery and segregation. Writing may also find its ingredients in the collective memory. It discloses archetypal figures belonging to the mythology of African American people. Morrisonian characters like "the flying tribe" and the character of Beloved evoking "Mani Watta" in *Beloved* revisit the legends and myths found in the African culture.

In the Racial era, the color line plays a core role in the assessment of the Black subject. Blackness gives shape to the subject. It defines his/her identity. In the text, it is the articulation through which the subject is re-humanized. For the color line reconnects the subject with his/her self – a consistency that permits to lead to self-assertion and self-realization. Blackness reunites the subject with the past. Writing becomes thus a site of memory, a place of evocation and invocation where is recreated and celebrated the belonging to a lost Africanity.

Under the weight of the White hegemony, the concept of Africanity is not essentially dependent on the color line, as it is generally perceived. Based on the skin color, Africanity is indeed rejected, made absent since the character is deprived of human essence. Blackness is, in other terms, a negation. The black color means, as scientifically proven, the absence of color. Or black designates the absolute vacuum, that which goes with the nihilistic articulation of racism, as it is conceived as an ideology.⁴ This argument finds authority in the context of slavery, where the Black subject is reduced to a slave or a subhuman to signify the negation of Blackness. Africanity definitely appears as an abstract concept that cannot be systematically linked to the black skin color. In this case, it is interesting to analyze how it is fused in Whiteness.

2. The Black Subject in the Post-Racial Era

Toni Morrison's text *God Help the Child* initiates a reflection on the racial determination of Mulatto. The novel is particularly concerned with a form of invisibility that denies the African essence and identity to the subject. Here, Blackness is blurred, not perceptible. They "pass for white" – it reads. In a racialized American society, the Mulatto type is the expression of racial mixture

³ Richard, M. D. (1988). Les Liens avec L'Afrique. *Africain en Amérique* (Textes réunis par Daniel J. Crowley). Paris: Editions Caribéennes, pp. 101-102.

⁴ Henry Louis Gates, Jr. (1989). *Figures in Black: Words, Signs, and the 'Racial' Self*. New York – Oxford: Oxford University Press, p. 274.



that makes the Melting Pot. But the existence of a third part is excluded, as it rejects ambivalence that makes up the Mulatto type.

Theoretically, the Mulatto is a figure of duality – that comes with, on the one hand white blood; black on the other. Paradoxically, the Mulatto type is also homogeneous, unique – neither black, nor white. But they are dissociated, and not accepted as an integral community as such. The interracial dynamics that sets and determines the relations between Majority and Minority remains strictly rigid, with no way for a third and intermediate composite. The Mulatto type is not fundamentally a race, distinct from White and/or Yellow.

Reversely, a Mulatto is systematically categorized as being Black despite the low percentage of black blood running in his/her veins.⁵ Even though his/her Whiteness is much apparent, it is bluntly denied at the allegations on a possible affiliation with the Black community. Blackness as a recourse becomes a space of racial identification. It explains why Mulattos are mingled with not only the Black community, but also the Minority, as it is evidenced in the political realm, during Presidential elections where their votes count. Toni Morrison's novel gives a fictitious, but quite symbolic figure "twenty percent" to mean how they could be representative.

In this categorization, the question of identity and subjectivity does not prevail, because the Post-racial writing is more concerned with community matters. The interracial rigidity defines the conditions of the subject in this era. The rhetorical question that inaugurates the novel is pertinent in that sense. It reads: "Can you imagine how many white folks have Negro blood running and hiding in their veins?" This question underlines the loss of background that derives from a lack of knowledge on genealogy. Characterized by an unawareness of the color line, Post-racial identification standards are not systematically based on the skin color. This element is not that determinant, because of the dissociation of Blackness from the skin color and the assimilation of this concept with culture that bespeaks the history and tradition of a people. The deconstruction of the notion of Blackness is operated through prohibition, a principle that is at the core of racist, segregationist, and discriminatory policies. It implicates property, as it establishes the right of ownership with all privileges given the dominators. This social unbalance has an impact on the individual. S/he is dispossessed of the sacred element that constructs his/her subjectivity. The character of Lula Mae, who passes for White, is interesting in that sense. She is denied of her whiteness, because she is not allowed to touch "the same Bible." It reads: "and God knows what other intimate things they

⁵ Winthrop, D. J. (1969). *White Over Black: American Attitudes Toward the Negro 1550-1812*. Baltimore, Maryland: Penguin Books Inc. p. 524.



made her do, but no touching of the same Bible" (GHC, p. 4). White people's Bible is a de-structuring element that reminds Lula of her Blackness. Yet, Blackness here is separated from the black skin color.

In touching the same Bible, Lula would recover her Whiteness from the intimate shared and the privilege of "the lighter - the better" way of life. The Bible is more of an ideological instrument, a means of power in the hands of the rich white couple. The question of the difference of skin color is in the Post-racial society de-centered. The Post-racial era rejects the discourse on the color line. For other means of control are being prioritized.

The formula "the lighter - the better" shows the distance from the black skin color. It grants to the individual a social recognition and a status close to the privileged. That is why it reads: "because of my mother's skin color, she wasn't stopped from trying on hats in the department stores or using their ladies' room." "The lighter - the better" reveals homogeneity as an ideological intention. "The lighter - the better" describes as well in this era a mode of survival adapted slaves. Mulatto would benefit of some advantages (*i.e.* being in the master's house with more protection from the master), as compared to the dark-skinned slaves working in harsh conditions in plantations." The lighter - the better" reveals thirdly a mode of integration for citizenship for the Colored people. The "high-yellow" (GHC, p. 6) would be given access to some areas where dark ones are denied entrance.

In the Post-racial era, Blackness definitely becomes the expression of self-acceptance. It defines the individual as a subject involved in a process of re-appropriation.⁶ The black skin color is an object of desire, as it reads "something classy" (GHC, p. 33). It is assimilated to the licorice, a dried root from a Mediterranean plant which is used in medicines. It also gives flavor to food, especially sweets. Blackness is then made into a commodity in the commercialized world. The "licorice skin" or the "new black" evoking black sweets turns Blackness into a consumer product. The Post-racial era then gives way a redefinition of this concept, as it is distanced from its racial considerations mentioned above.

In addition, the reconceptualization of the notion of Blackness in the Post-racial era has, among others, a sexual and erotic dimension. It enhances the image of the Black subject as a sex appeal. The novel justifies it saying that: "All my boyfriends treating [...] me like a medal, a shiny quiet testimony to their prowess." The black skin which was formerly or in the Racial era the discriminating element negating the subject. Now it participates not only to the affirmation, but also the aesthetics of the Black subject. Blackness is, to reinforce this idea, described as "the hottest commodity in the civilized world" (GHC,

⁶*Ibid.*, p. 246.



p.36). Its perception as being something irresistible is constructed in the comparison with the licorice as an appetizing ingredient, and the parallel goes as well with the sweets.

Another articulation – the body is perceived as a space of assertion and subjectivity. The body that makes the Black aesthetics in the Post-racial era is literally rendered visible owing to its Blackness, as the text puts it in:

'walking down the hall toward the interviewer's office, I could see the effect I was having: wide admiring eyes, grins and whispers: "Whoa!" "Oh, baby.'" Visibility is sustained by "to see."

"See" is a transitive verb with two objects. One made explicit – it clearly indicates other characters. Whereas the other is implicit – it refers to the self. The reflexivity of this verb is indeed used to point out self-consciousness and the awareness of the others. Through their reactions is constructed the narrator's visibility. The phenomenology of perception is elaborated in a communication schema. It ascertains existence. It celebrates by the way the Black subject as an individual, raising his/her singularity through Blackness. The term "Black sells" definitely reveals the desalienation of the subject involved in a progress of re-appropriation. In other terms, the repossessed self here Blackness discloses the value of the female subject in particular.

3. Gender as a Postulate Defining Post-Raciality

The treatment of race matters, especially the apprehension and perception of the notion of race evolve with time. The historical rendering of this concept is in some respects pertinent, but it still remains limited. Race as a conceptual notion contains self-contradictory elements. They somehow nourish in the American context nihilism that takes off all credibility to the concept. The theoretical complexity and instability of this notion create a distance with Blackness to be definitely apprehended as an aesthetics. The evolution of criteria of racial identification gives way to other forms of representation which do not any longer legitimate the difference of the skin color. Negation being placed on the notion of race, the emphasis is now put on the body, the female body particularly.⁷

In other words, Post-raciality calls for individuality. The prevalence of the individual on societal issues related to racism, discrimination, and segregation being disguised or not has seen the replacement of the concept of race by the notion of Minority. It has an incidence on subjectivation and the social position with its capitalistic corollaries. Behind what appears as a slogan "Black sells" (*GHC*, p. 36) in the narrative, is designed a capitalist vision that turns

⁷ Bell hooks, "Black is a Woman's Color", *Fields of Writing: Readings across the Disciplines*, Eds. Comley, Hamilton, Klaus, Scholes, and Sommers. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1994, p. 61.



Blackness into a commodity in the consumer society. This has an impact not only on an inter-racial basis. But its effects are also perceived at an intra-racial dimension.

For long time, it has been denied of its value. It has been negated, rejected, and ignored – made invisible. Today, it is rediscovered. Blackness appears more as “an exotic beauty” (GHC, p. 80), fascinating, and attractive with an added value, as it reads in the novel:

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. (GHC, p. 57).

The significance of the added value resides in the sense of existence that it grants to the Black subject. The recognition of her presence, sweeping away any form of invisibility, is articulated in the following passage: “I am complimented constantly at the party – how beautiful, how pretty, so hot, so lovely, *everyone says*,” (GHC, p. 51, *my emphasis*).

This “*everyone says*” builds a discourse on the subject. It participates as well to her emancipation – to the process of acquisition of not merely political rights, as it was the case during the Civil Rights movement back in 1960s. But it contributes above all to the social and cultural affirmation of the Black subject. Beyond its aesthetics, Blackness is an ideological tool at the disposal of the African American women aspiring for more freedom and social justice, as it reads: “freedom is never free. You have to fight for it. Work for it and make sure you are able to handle it.” (GHC, p. 70). The notion of Blackness is thus politically oriented.

Politics prevails in the narrative, even though the aesthetic dimension of the concept, which concerns the mode of representation, is more transparent. The Post-racial conception of Blackness is all along the text associated with sexuality – a type which has nothing to do with eroticism, with regard to the portrayal of black female characters. In the novel *God Help the Child*, Lula Ann's case is all the more interesting that she is depicted as the scapegoat for being born dark-skinned. It reads:

Lula Ann needed to learn how to behave, how to keep her head down and not to make trouble. I don't care how many times she changes her name. Her color is a cross she will always carry. It's not my fault. It's not my fault. It's not. (GHC, p. 7).

The image of the cross as a reference to Jesus Christ represents in the novel the black skin color. It evokes the sin or the curse to be born black. It metaphorically expresses the social and cultural burden of the Black female subject.



However, self-realization is achieved through the liberation of sexuality⁸, as it is inscribed in the dynamics of the text. If racial prejudice deprives the Black subject of her liberties, it is therefore an obstacle – a weight that impedes her self-assertion. But when Blackness is perceived as an “exotic beauty” as it appears in the novel, it is then made into “the hottest commodity in the civilized world.” Associated with sexuality and as an object of desire, Blackness is irresistible as to explain Lula Ann’s attractiveness in the following passage: “All my boyfriends were typecast: would-be actors, rappers, professional athletes, players waiting for my crotch [...]; others, already having made it, treating me like a medal, a shiny quiet testimony to their prowess.” (GHC, p. 36). Blackness reinforces the character’s sex appeal. It then becomes an instrument of seduction.

The Post-racial era is characterized by a subversion of the concept of Blackness as it becomes a means of desalienation. It inscribes as a matter of fact the Black subject in an intersubjective dynamics. In it, the concept of Blackness refers no longer to the Otherness, in so much as it removes the difference. The establishment of a distance in the Racial era results in the negation and rejection of the Other as an *alter ego*. But the Post-racial theorization of the concept of Blackness is rather founded on Sameness, as illustrated in the chapter entitled “Rain”. It consequently builds the whole composed of the interaction of both Blackness and Whiteness. The logic of opposition is here abandoned and replaced by a correlation necessary to define identities as in a mirror effect⁹ suggested in the following passage:

Evelyn is real good to me and so is Steve but they frown or look away if I say stuff about how smart I was when I was thrown out [...] until they brought me a kitten. She’s a cat now and I tell her everything. My black lady listens to me tell how it saw. (GHC, p. 105).

What may appear at first sight like a dialog between the white narrator and the black lady is indeed a monolog. The kitten is a substitute of the absent lady – a token that marks the presence of the black lady. Talking to the cat comes to talking to the black lady who is gone. It is, in other terms, synonymous with talking to (her)self. Sameness designates one’s self or identical selves. Blackness gives way accordingly to the liberation of the speech. It helps apprehend Whiteness, since now as the narrator used to do, she can tell everything about her life. This is what comes out of her words:

I apologize for enslaving you in order to chain myself to the illusion of control and the cheap seduction of power. No slave owner could have done it better. (GHC, p. 161).

⁸ Naomi Wolf, *The Beauty Myth : How Images of Beauty Are Used Against Women ?* New York: Doubleday, 1992, p. 143.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 145.



Reading Blackness in Toni Morrison's *God Help the Child* reveals some of its implications on the definition and apprehension of feminism. This novel redefines the borders of the feminist philosophy through a clear-cut distinction. Feminist concerns differ from one community to another. They are, in the African American community especially as the novel presents them, centered on the status and condition of the African American female subjects, with respect to their history, tradition, and culture. Alice Walker speaks of womanism¹⁰ in lieu of feminism. Even though, gender issues appear in all feminist discourses, they are differently treated, regarding the specificities of each people.

The United States is a multicultural and multiracial country. Interaction should be taken into account in the assessment of feminism. Morrison's novel *God help the Child* deconstructs the paradigm of the master versus the slave, Majority versus Minority, Black versus White, etc., which has an incidence on the definition of feminism. The novel shows how these elements interact, as it reads:

I don't miss you anymore adam rather i miss the emotion that you're your dying produced a feeling so strong it defined me while it erased you leaving only your absence for me to live in like the silence of the Japanese gong that is more thrilling than whatever sound may follow.

Feminism is rather a western concept, which bears the tradition, the mode of perception and representation of the White world. But in the dynamics of Toni Morrison's novel *God help the Child*, Blackness contributes to understand it. Blackness revitalizes it at a time of crisis, by provoking "an envy", by "glamorizing it", producing "a feeling so strong." Blackness is metaphorically compared to the Japanese gong – a percussion instrument, to signify its undeniable effects, the echo of its combative philosophy.

4. Conclusion

In his two major books *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African-American Literary Criticism* (1988) and *Figures in Black: Words, Signs, and the 'Racial' Self* (1989), Henry Louis Gates, Jr. has theorized the concept of Blackness in the African American history and literature. It is a structuring notion that helps understand the Black subject from an ontological and philosophical perspective. And in Toni Morrison's latest novel *God help the Child*, Blackness signifies the subject beyond the color line. It is turned, on the one hand, into a space of

¹⁰Bettye J. Parker-Smith, "Alice Walker's Women: In Search of Some Peace of Mind", *Black Women Writers (1950-1980): A Critical Evaluation*. Ed. Mari Evans. New York: Anchor Press/Doubleday, 1984, p. 485.



expression. On the other, it triggers expressivity – a function that categorizes it as a trope with an obvious implication on the aesthetics of the text. Blackness gives way to a kind of writing where history is embedded in the discredited body. The political articulation of the concept of Blackness comes from this passage from the body to the text – a change of space and place which has led Henry Louis Gates to revisit the concept of Blackness from a geo-poetic perspective in a PBS home video documentary entitled *America Beyond the Color Line*.

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