

Black Women's Business

Female Entrepreneurship and Economic Agency in

Toni Morrison's *God Help the Child*

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Toni Morrison's latest novel, *God Help the Child* (2015), features her professionally most successful protagonist to date: Lula Ann Bridewell, known as Bride, an executive who manages her own line of products at a Los Angeles based cosmetics company. In prior novels, female characters predominantly participated in informal economies. In *Home* (2012), for example, which is set in the 1950s, the female protagonist works as an untrained nurse in a private practice. In *Love* (2003), the women of the male owner's family effectively run the hotel business that he neglects in favor of devoting himself to his mistress and his grief. In *Paradise* (1997), none of the women who live at the convent had a job prior to their arrival, with some of them housewives, others simply scraping by. As a result of these informal economic structures, the women's source of income and thus their (financial) security and autonomy is often precarious or at least dependent on men.

To some degree, this prevalence of female characters without a professional career or a stable source of income independent of men is a consequence of the historical setting of most of Morrison's novels. Several take place, in part or even fully, during the time of slavery – such as *Song of Solomon* (1977), *Beloved* (1987) and *A Mercy* (2008) – when the opportunities for exercising economic agency were limited at best (for both sexes). Even more importantly, her novels present and explore precisely the kind of work black women have done that historically has received little

recognition, such as child rearing, keeping the family together, organizing the community.¹ Yet even in the stories that are set in the 20th century and that portray women in professional positions or as financially secure – such as *Love, Home* and parts of *Sula* (1973) and *Song of Solomon* – Morrison is much more interested in the corrupting influence of wealth as such, whether inherited, won, or enjoyed through relationships with men. This is also the case in *Tar Baby* (1981) whose protagonist is a successful fashion model and, as reviewers have noted, a potential predecessor of Bride.² In light of these tendencies and themes in Morrison’s novels, Bride’s success in *God Help the Child* warrants a closer look, in particular when considering that it is premised on the beauty industry and on the fact that Bride is strategically “capitaliz[ing] on her dark skin” (*Child* 143).

While she is portrayed as having a knack for inventing and marketing cosmetic products, such as eye shadows, lipsticks, etc., Bride’s success at Sylvia Inc. is crucially based on her self-marketing, without which her cosmetics line would not have received any attention and which is focused on her very dark skin which she highlights by wearing only white clothes. This form of self-marketing connects her success to her childhood trauma, her mother Sweetness’s rejection. Herself light-skinned, Sweetness was incapable of accepting the fact of her daughter’s skin and raised her in a cold and punitive environment, in which her affection became a coveted prize for Bride. The irony of her material success and recognition being based on the very color of skin that her mother regarded as an impediment to success and even as a liability is explicit in the narrative and a special source of satisfaction for Bride: “I sold my elegant blackness to all those childhood ghosts and now they pay me for it” (57). Yet, does Bride’s ability to turn herself into a commodity and sell herself for a price of her own asking mean that she possesses economic agency? Does Bride offer a model of black female entrepreneurship and success?

To investigate these questions, this article draws on Morrison’s previous novels as well as on recent scholarship about the connection between the rise of professional black beauty salons and the emergence of female

1 For a study of the representation of African American women’s work in which “work” explicitly refers to this aspect see, for example, Courtney Thorsson’s *Women’s Work* (2013), which also discusses Morrison’s *Paradise*.

2 See, for example, Hermione Hoby’s review in *The Guardian*.

black leadership in business and politics in the early 20th century. The concept of economic agency employed here, however, is not based on the kind of rational actor model that modern economics tends to apply when inquiring into economic behavior, but on a recognition of the historical genesis of individual as well as collective agency. Specifically, this article borrows the idea of agency as emerging from the interrelationship between institutions and habitus, between history objectified and history embodied, as proposed by Pierre Bourdieu. Bourdieu's understanding of agency stresses practical knowledge, embodiment, and history in a way that accounts for the endlessly creative acts and strategies by which agents navigate social fields – at the same time that it takes serious the limited horizon of possibilities available to any agent at any moment in his or her trajectory.

MADAM WALKER AND THE PROFESSIONALIZATION OF BEAUTY

For early 20th-century African American leaders like W. E. B. Du Bois and Booker T. Washington, the rise and success of black businessmen was a key element of the advancement of black people and the security of their Civil Rights. Accordingly, in 1900, Washington established the National Negro Business League (NNBL), while Du Bois had helped to organize a conference on the theme of black business the previous year. As Tiffany M. Gill notes in her recent study of the relationship between Civil Rights activism and female entrepreneurship in the beauty industry, the initial debates over black business posited “entrepreneurship primarily as a masculine ideal” and discussed women’s potential to contribute only in terms of their “roles [...] as consumers and nurturers of the next generation of young male entrepreneurs” (12).³ Simultaneously, however, with the support of

3 See pp. 7 ff. in Gill’s *Beauty Shop Politics* (2010) for an overview of black female business activities in colonial and antebellum times, as well as for a detailed presentation of gendered business roles in the African American community at the turn of the century. Also see the chapter “Antebellum Free Black Women Enterprises” in Juliet Walker’s *The History of Black Business in America* (1998).

the National Association of Colored Women's Clubs (NACWC),⁴ black women's business clubs began to spread throughout the country. Their aim was to improve black women's financial security while also promoting middle-class ideals of feminine respectability and domestic responsibility. As Gill puts it, this two-pronged approach left the business clubs "[c]aught between a desire to prove black women's ability to succeed in the business world and the desire to assert their femininity, something they had been denied throughout their history" (17).

It was through the example and influence of businesswomen like Madam C. J. Walker and Annie Malone that female entrepreneurship gained respectability in the black community and was recognized as a form of social and political activism during the first two decades of the 20th century. Yet the beauty industry had been and remained at the center of controversies over the dominant beauty ideals for black women, even as Walker and Malone took over. Before they introduced their products and business models, the beauty industry had been dominated by white businessmen whose companies advertised skin bleaching creams and hair straightener to ameliorate what was presented as inferior physical attributes in black women.⁵ Annie Malone pioneered a hair product that was ostensibly *not* designed to straighten hair but to improve its condition by treating scalp diseases, though it did "temporarily alter black women's hair by stretching and adding shine to it" (Gill 20). Moreover, Malone established a system in which her agents would carry her products into black women's homes as they went from door to door and offered free scalp treatments. One of her saleswomen opened her own business in 1906 and soon rose to even greater prominence than Malone under the name of Madam C. J. Walker. As Tiffany Gill explains, Malone and Walker "created what they called 'hair systems,' which included hair-product manufacturing, distribution, and sales throughout the United States and the African diaspora as well as salons and eventually beauty colleges and training programs" (22).

4 The NACWC was established in 1896 as the National Association of Colored Women (NACW).

5 Gill points out that it was Anthony Overton, a black businessman, who first moved toward a different beauty ideal for black women when he established the Overton Hygienic Company in 1898, which sold "High Brown Face Powder" and employed only Blacks (19).

But it was only when Madam Walker decided to attend the NNBL annual convention in 1912 and boldly claimed a place at the podium that the African American male leadership took note of the women's potential for the political struggle. In 1915, as Gill recounts, "the NNBL chose the 'Beauty Parlor Business' as the theme of the sixteenth annual convention" (24).

The rise of the black beauty industry was inextricably connected to the emergence of modern black womanhood in the urban centers of the North. On the one hand, it provided women avenues to entrepreneurship and thus to financial stability, on the other, it gave them access to a modern urban lifestyle. Fueled by the Great Migration, this transformation turned black women into consumers and entrepreneurs. An important aspect of this transformation was that Walker and Malone initiated and supported a process of professionalization of the beauty trade. They helped to bring the work of beauticians closer to the status of nurses and teachers, which had been the only other professions open to black women before. Yet there was an important difference: The training and education was both more affordable and less time-intensive than teaching and nursing, and therefore available to a broader stratum of women. This professionalization of the beauty industry was reflected in the fact that the women who had trained at one of Madam Walker's beauty colleges were not called hairdressers, but "beauty culturists" (Gill 49),⁶ and they were not only trained to provide a service to their customers but also taught to assume leadership: "Beauty college curricula instilled in their students the strategic importance of using their position to influence their communities" (47).

Gill's study *Beauty Shop Politics* shows that during the following decades beauty parlors assumed a significant role in the Civil Rights struggle, as they "provid[ed] one of the most important opportunities for black women to assert leadership in their communities and in the larger political arena" (2). By the beginning of the 1960s, beauty salons offered black

6 In *Masculine Domination*, Bourdieu explains that this step in the professionalization of a trade also signifies upon a gendered symbolic order: "[T]he same task may be noble and difficult, when performed by men, or insignificant and imperceptible, easy and futile, when performed by women. As is seen in the difference between the chef and the cook, the couturier and the seamstress, a reputedly female task only has to be taken over by a man and performed outside the private sphere in order for it to be thereby ennobled and transfigured" (60).

women not only financial security, but a “unique institutional space they controlled” and “access [...] to black women within their communities,” which allowed them to take an active role in the Civil Rights struggle and contribute to the movement’s political infrastructure (99). Of course, by that time, Gill notes, “the practice of straightening or pressing one’s hair [...] had become so deeply entrenched in black women’s lives that there was little discussion over its meaning” (105). This would change by the end of the decade, with the advent of the Afro and the Black is Beautiful movement.

MORRISON AND THE BUSINESS OF BEAUTY

In one of the most famous photographs of Toni Morrison, she walks side by side with Angela Davis. It is the spring of 1974 and both women, evidently deep in conversation, sport impressive Afros. It is hard to overestimate the political significance of this hairdo during the 1970s,⁷ just as it is hard to overestimate the significance of the hair-motif in Morrison’s work.⁸ Physical beauty, in general, is a central topic in her novels, starting with her first, *The Bluest Eye* (1970), whose protagonist, a young girl named Pecola, wishes for the blue eyes that mainstream culture celebrates as the standard ideal of beauty because she believes that it will make her more lovable. As countless scholars have since demonstrated,⁹ Morrison’s novels present a powerful indictment of a black beauty ideal defined by white standards, on the objectification of the female body and the reduction of black women to passive consumers. By contrast, novels like *Song of Solomon* and *Tar Baby* suggest an alternative definition of black beauty based on a rejection of

7 For research on this topic, see, for example, Ayanna Byrd and Lori Tharps, *Hair Story* (2001); Maxine Leeds Craig, *Ain’t I a Beauty Queen* (2002); Susannah Walker, “Black Is Profitable” (2007).

8 In particular in *Song of Solomon* (1973), in which Hagar becomes convinced that her lover, Milkman, has left her for a woman with straight copper-colored hair. When Milkman finally returns and finds that Hagar has killed herself, her mother hands him a box of her hair as a reminder of his responsibility for her death. See, e.g., Ashe.

9 See, for example, Tait; Kuenz; Miner.

both the position of consumer and the position of the object to be (visually) consumed. As Malin LaVon Walther has argued, in Morrison's novels women's beauty is based on their usefulness (as opposed to idleness), on the fundamental reality of their bodies as grounded in a racial experience, and on their refusal to operate within a "specular system," in which the female body is a body represented and hence an object of consumption (775).

Morrison's critique of an ideal of beauty defined by white standards of femininity also underwrites her representation of the era in which the beauty parlors of Madam Walker and Annie Malone had their heyday. *Jazz* tells the story of a couple that once moved to New York City from the South, Joe and Violet, and of the girl, Dorcas, with whom Joe falls in love and whom he shoots after their breakup. Famous for its narrative voice, the novel recreates the cityscape of Harlem in the 1920s and underscores both the opportunities and the many dangers in store for its black citizens. Significantly, both Joe and Violet earn money by selling beauty: Joe is an agent for beauty products, while Violet works as a hairdresser in people's homes. Her informal work is contrasted with the "legally licensed beauticians" (5) who can charge more than her and who work at salons while "Violet carries her tools and her trade [...] into the overheated apartments of women who wake in the afternoon, pour gin in their tea and don't care what she has done" (13). After Joe has killed his lover and after Violet has attempted to cut up the corpse's face during the funeral wake, the money from Violet's hairdressing keeps the couple afloat.

Black women in *Jazz* participate in formal and informal economies. They earn money by cleaning offices (40-41) or by watching children "for mothers who worked out of the house" (55), and some, like the Dumfrey sisters, have "nice paper-handling jobs: one took tickets at the Lafayette; the other worked in the counting house" (19). But what is significant about the portrait of women's work in the novel is the pleasure that women of Violet's generation take in a job well done. In a scene in the apartment of Alice Manfred, a seamstress and Dorcas's aunt, "a woman of fifty and independent means" (54), the fact that women like Alice and Violet are never idle is addressed:

Alice ironed and Violet watched. [...]

The iron hissed at the damp fabric. Violet leaned her cheek on her palm. "You iron like my grandmother. Yoke last."

“That’s the test of a first-class ironing.”

“Some do it yoke first.”

“And have to do it over. I hate a lazy ironing.”

“Where you learn to sew like that?”

“They kept us children busy. Idle hands, you know.”

“We picked cotton, chopped wood, plowed. I never knew what it was to fold my hands. This here is as close as I ever been to watching my hands do nothing.” (112)

The narrative also emphasizes the social aspect of Violet’s hairdressing which takes place in the private space of homes, whether her own or her customers’: “Violet is sudsing the thin gray hair, murmuring ‘Ha mercy’ at appropriate breaks in the old lady’s stream of confidences” (16). Their work is presented as more than the source of an income independent of their husbands or the business of another.

Violet’s and Alice’s work is characterized as useful in a social and practical sense: It contributes to the welfare of their families and their communities and as such is a source of agency for the women. The difference to the women of Dorcas’s generation becomes apparent in the different uses of time because a visit to the beauty parlor requires leisure time.

The beauticians have it beat when it comes to that: you get to lie back instead of lean forward; you don’t have to press a towel in your eyes to keep the soapy water out because at a proper beauty parlor it drains down the back of your head into the sink. So, sometimes, even if the legal beautician is not as adept as Violet, a regular customer will sneak to a shop just for the pleasure of a comfy shampoo. (18)

To enjoy the pleasures available at a beauty parlor,¹⁰ women need to pay with money and time. Such practice requires a habitus different from Alice and Violet’s because their pleasure derives precisely not from being idle.

10 This pleasure is qualitatively different from the intimacy of hair washing, as described before, with Violet. The intimacy created by washing somebody’s hair and body is a central element in *Love*, for example during a scene in which Junior helps Heed to wash and dye her hair. Gill repeatedly underscores the importance of this intimacy in the beauty salons, as well as what she calls a politics of dignity (121).

By contrast, Joe's young lover, Dorcas, is a regular customer at a beauty parlor.

In *Jazz*, the problem with female entrepreneurship as a source of economic agency is that its emergence goes hand in hand with the development of a black (female) consumer identity. Idleness, shallowness, and a possessive way of thinking are manifestations of this identity that also defines Dorcas's choice of a new lover: "Other women want him—badly—and he has been selective. What they want and the prize it is his to give is his savvy self" (188). This "savvy self" is a performance and a commodity that ultimately rests on a split between real and ideal, a split that obstructs an experience of the self as authentic and whole. This split becomes apparent to Dorcas's friend, Felice, as she recalls a game that she used to play with Dorcas:

Dorcas and I used to make up love scenes and describe them to each other. [...] Something about it bothered me, though. Not the loving stuff, but the picture I had of myself when I did it. Nothing like me. I saw myself as somebody I'd seen in a picture show or a magazine. Then it would work. If I pictured myself the way I am it seemed wrong. (208-9)

Echoing Violet, Felice describes this sense as "having another you inside that isn't anything like you" (209). But the beauty industry as criticized in Morrison's novels, together with white mainstream culture (movies and magazines), depends for profits on customers that specifically desire such an ideal self, on dispositions that are attuned to the structures of consumer capitalism.

PROFESSIONAL WOMEN AND THE COMMODIFICATION OF THE SELF

To some extent, Bride in *God Help the Child* embodies this logic of the consumer identity taken to its extreme. In the chapters in which she narrates her story the commodification of her self is presented as an achievement in power and control: "I sold my elegant blackness to all those childhood ghosts and now they pay me for it" (57). The backdrop of her statement is the novel's serious pun on the market for this commodity, as when her

personality coach tells her that “[b]lack sells. It’s the hottest commodity in the civilized world” (36). But the question that Bride’s success raises is whether the fact that she is doing the selling herself – rather than being sold as African slaves were for centuries in the so-called civilized world – is enough to prove that she is now in a position of autonomy and power as well as of self-identity; or whether her economic agency is ultimately still directed by the very “childhood ghosts” she had set out to defeat.

As did previous novels, *God Help the Child* suggests that ownership of the self is a prerequisite for agency. Yet this ownership is not a Lockean form of ownership, conceived to explain and legitimate a commercial exchange, such as of one’s labor for money. Whereas Florence in *A Mercy* must learn that giving up oneself entirely to those we love is a form of enslavement that deprives her of her agency and selfhood, Bride’s lesson in self-enslavement is part of a critique of the American capitalist system with its roots in black slavery. In particular, it is a critique of the beauty industry as capitalizing on the commercialization of female bodies at the same time that it is selling the illusion of agency and self-ownership by equating them with the body’s market value. In other words, in the corporate world of *God Help the Child* ownership of the self, self-possession, and autonomy are strongly encouraged yet they are always already premised on the cash value of this self and thus only gained in order to be sold.

At first, the fact that Lula Ann Bridewell is making a career out of her particularly dark skin seems to defy her mother’s rejection – which is portrayed as a result of the racist system she herself grew up in and as an attempt to prepare her daughter for the social stigma attached to skin that is, in Sweetness’s words, “[m]idnight black, Sudanese black” (4). But black skin is still a liability, as Bride herself admits when she recounts how she started with “a job working stock,” not where customers could see her (36). She needs to invent herself as a commodity, beginning with her name or rather, her brand: “Lula Ann Bridewell is no longer available and she was never a woman. Lula Ann was a sixteen-year-old-me who dropped that dumb countryfied name as soon as I left high school” (11). It’s “Bride” she is selling to her customers through her product line: “YOU, GIRL: Cosmetics for Your Personal Millennium. It’s for girls and women of all complexions from ebony to lemonade to milk. And it’s mine, all mine—the idea, the brand, the campaign” (10). “YOU, GIRL,” which resonates so strongly with Felice’s description of that other “you inside that isn’t anything like

you,” originates with her personality coach, Jeri, who “call[s] himself a ‘total person’ designer” and is responsible for her “makeover” (33). It is Jeri who adds the necessary final ingredient or perhaps “packag[ing]” for her product (Wyatt 33):

“You should always wear white, Bride. Only white and all white all the time.” [...] “Not only because of your name,” he told me, “but because of what it does to your licorice skin,” he said. “And black is the new black. Know what I mean? Wait. You’re more Hershey’s syrup than licorice. Makes people think of whipped cream and chocolate soufflé every time they see you.” (33)

Always clothed in white garments, the blackness of Bride’s skin becomes relational: It depends on the presence of whiteness to show it off, to frame it, maybe even to contain it. This dependence finds an echo in her name, “Bride.” Not just because, as Jeri suggests, a bride wears white, but because a bride is a bride in relation to a groom. She is a woman who is soon to be married or has just married. In this regard, her dress and her name also stage her as the quintessential object of exchange in a patriarchal society.¹¹

This dependence is even constitutional for Bride’s relationship with Booker who, when remembering the beginning of their relationship, calls her a “midnight Galatea always and already alive” (132). But Galatea is the creation of the artist Pygmalion, a feminine ideal come alive, and even though Booker may not be Pygmalion in this comparison, it suggests that she is created for consumption by a male gaze. In addition, Galatea’s name means *She who is milk-white*, a meaning that is now framed by Booker’s addition of “midnight,” as if to invert the relationship between the framing white garments and Bride’s black skin. The success of Bride’s beauty, while it appears to affirm the beauty of black womanhood, remains dependent on a structure of perception that is essentially white and male.

11 While women are no longer goods of exchange in a marriage market based on the symbolic order of kinship structures, Bourdieu does emphasize the role that women still play as guardians or perhaps even managers of the symbolic capital of the family; see *Masculine Domination* 98-100. Bride’s chosen name is also significant, of course, with respect to the fact that her body seems to lose the signs of womanhood, thereby rendering her even more virginal (and immature) than the name suggests.

The novel is straightforward in its rejection of the beauty industry as a field in which female economic agency can grow and become meaningful. Sylvia, Inc., Bride tells us, “used to be Sylph Corsets for Discriminating Women back in the forties, but changed its name and ownership to Sylvia Apparel, then to Sylvia, Inc., before going flat-out hip with six cool cosmetics lines, one of which is mine” (10). Making money of the practice of constraining women’s bodies, the cosmetics corporation is a twin of the correctional facility in which Sofia, Bride’s former teacher, is incarcerated.

Decagon Women’s Correctional Center, right outside Norristown, owned by a private company, is worshipped by the locals for the work it provides [...] most of all [for] construction laborers [...] [who were] adding wing after wing to house the increasing flood of violent, sinful women committing bloody female crimes. Lucky for the state, crime does pay. (13)

Both corporations are making money with the management of women’s bodies, and it is significant in this respect that Sofia rejects not only Bride’s offer of a plane ticket but also of cosmetics for a makeover. The fact that Sofia is white also underscores that the novel’s critique of a culture based on the marketability of the self is universal. It constrains “girls and women of all complexions from ebony to lemonade to milk.”

As critics have noted, the novel’s portrayal of the beauty industry and its protagonist’s self-commodification is reminiscent of Morrison’s 1981 novel *Tar Baby*, which tells the story of Son and Jadine, as well as of the wealthy white employers of Jadine’s aunt. Jadine is a Sorbonne-educated fashion model, orphaned at age twelve and presently at the height of her commercial success, whereas Son is a mysterious stranger, a drifter who tries to resist and break with what he perceives as the trappings of white capitalist culture. While scholars have suggested many possible incarnations of the tar baby in the novel, often focusing on Jadine, John Lutz, in a recent interpretation, argues that the tar baby represents not so much a single character as “the destructive, self-negating social desires inspired by the system of commodity fetishism” (57). In Lutz’s reading, Jadine and Son move in a world peopled by “brand names,” while people are turned into objects, a double movement that he brings into dialogue with “Marx’s memorable phrase” that “‘relations between people’ have been transformed into ‘relations between things’” (57). In this sense, the scene in which

Jadine makes love to her new and expensive sealskin coat – a gift from a suitor – epitomizes

the substitution of material objects for human relationships by foregrounding the hidden brutality that informs the system of commodity production and exchange. Described as “the hides of ninety baby seals stitched together so nicely you could not tell what part had sheltered their cute little hearts and which had cushioned their skulls” [...], the coat serves as a concrete manifestation of the exploitative character of commodity production. (Lutz 59)

In *Tar Baby*, exploitation and domination are continually shown to underwrite the capitalist system as such, which means that identity, liberty, and community are impossible for the characters as long as they stay within this system.

This is ultimately also the problem of Bride’s career in *God Help the Child*. Trading in beauty, the industry in which she succeeds is deeply entwined with a history of female oppression that distorts the self. While Bride does not fetishize the expensive objects with which she surrounds herself – consider the fate of the increasingly shabby Jaguar – her cosmetics line “YOU, GIRL” does bear a resemblance to the function of the sealskin coat, in particular when it is anthropomorphized, as in the following passage, in which Bride worries what her injured face might do to her brand if she were seen in public: “And what if the local newspaper gets the story along with my photograph? Embarrassment would be nothing next to the jokes directed at YOU, GIRL. From YOU, GIRL to BOO, GIRL” (22). The brand has become an extension of herself, locking Bride in a narcissistic loop in which her self and her brand serve to recognize and affirm each other.

The beauty industry is thus anathema to what is essential in Morrison’s novels when it comes to selfhood and subjectivity: a relational understanding of the self, in which characters grow by caring for others. They do not grow through a love that is infatuation, as Bride reveals when she muses that Booker’s love made her feel “curried, safe, owned” (56).¹² This is the kind of infatuation that leads Florence to attack her lover with a hammer after he has told her, “Own yourself, woman” (*A Mercy* 139). But they grow

12 Compare also her description of her feeling “safe, colonized somehow” (78).

through caring for someone who is their own separate self, such as the girl Rain, whom Bride literally protects with “[her] own self” from the shots of a shotgun, and such as Queen, for whom Booker and Bride care jointly (105). By the time, Bride has taken her place at Booker’s side to care for his aunt, she can tell him, “I don’t know about my job and don’t care. I’ll get another one” (168).

RADICAL SELF-RELIANCE AND THE HORIZON OF POSSIBILITIES

For Bourdieu, agency is the result of the interrelationship between two histories: one individual and embodied, one collective and institutional. These histories dialectically define a horizon of possibilities, a wide range of possible actions, choices, behaviors which, while limited by this horizon, are nonetheless greatly variable. As I have shown elsewhere, Morrison’s novels explore these two levels in which the past is present in the present: how the past seeks to perpetuate itself into the future and how this process becomes obstructed, interrupted, or redirected.¹³ Moments of crisis are moments in which the categories of perception, action, and appreciation on the basis of which agents inhabit the social world no longer apply. Such moments offer a potentially liberating discordance in which novelty can emerge and change occur and which can thereby widen the horizon.¹⁴ In *Tar Baby*, Jadine returns to her familiar environment in Paris, rejecting the possibility of changing. But Son is given a radical opportunity: Left on a small island in the Caribbean, he joins a mythical community of blind men and presumably abandons his life in American society.

13 See Stefanie Mueller, *The Presence of the Past in the Novels of Toni Morrison* (2013).

14 Bourdieu explains this discordance in terms of a “gap”: “[H]abitus helps to determine what transforms it. If it is accepted that the principle of the transformation of habitus lies in the gap, experienced as a positive or negative surprise, between expectation and experience, one must suppose that the extent of this gap and the significance attributed to it depend on habitus: one person’s disappointment may be another’s unexpected satisfaction, with the corresponding effects of reinforcement or inhibition” (*Pascalian Meditations* 149).

In *God Help the Child*, Bride tells Booker that she is pregnant, after which he takes her hand and they both drive away in her Jaguar. Even without the subsequent and final chapter in which Bride's mother Sweetness comments on her daughter's pregnancy by saying, "Good luck and God help the child" (178), this ending does not bode well. For one thing, the sentimental set-up and the road-movie ending that has the couple driving into a "future" that they believe they are free to "imagine" is reminiscent of the high-gloss love stories that had earlier been shown to distort Bride's perception of the world and herself in it, as in the following passage in which she tries to console herself after Booker has left her (175).

Well, anyway, it was nothing like those doublepage spreads in fashion magazines, you know, couples standing half naked in surf, looking so fierce and downright mean, their sexuality like lightning and the sky going dark to show off the shine of their skin. I love those ads. [...] Why I kept comparing us to magazine spreads and music I can't say, but it tickled me to settle on "I Wanna Dance with Somebody." (9)

While they may have exorcised the child-ghosts that haunted them, Bride and Booker are not free of a history that is inscribed in their bodies and that structures the world that is available to them. The "future" that they "imagine" is less an open road that they follow in Bride's "dusty gray car," "leaning back on the headrests to let their spines sink into the seats' soft hide of cattle" (175), than it is a horizon of possibilities rooted in the very past they are driving away from. While *Tar Baby's* Son may perform a radical break with the world as he knew it, he did join a community by doing so. Yet communal bonds are conspicuously absent from *God Help this Child*.

All characters in the novel appear isolated, whether it is Bride's mother, Sweetness, who only receives letters and money from her daughter, or Booker's aunt Queen, who has several children but has lost touch with them. Even the impromptu family that Evelyn, Steve, and Rain have formed is merely "a fake family" (104), and Brooklyn, Bride's colleague at Sylvia, Inc., is not "a true friend," but an ambitious competitor who uses her influence over Bride to her advantage (29). Morrison's emphasis on the isolation of the characters is the more significant, as in her previous novels social bonds are presented as nurturing, often enabling characters to connect with the past healingly. In this light, the drive that concludes Bride's

narrative and presents her and Booker united yet alone with each other, is too Hollywood-esque, too glossy, to be real. In their celebration of one another, Bride and Booker also evoke a form of *radical self-reliance* that has become a fashionable staple of the neoliberal-capitalist regime in the 21st century.¹⁵ It is here that the novel's criticism of contemporary entrepreneurial agency is most pronounced.

The novel criticizes a model of female entrepreneurship that follows the ideal of liberal individualism, in which ownership of the self is a value because it is the prerequisite for entering the capitalist system of exchange. That Morrison's depiction of the contemporary beauty industry is spot on in this respect becomes apparent when we look at fashion model and entertainer Tyra Banks. As if reviving the "hair systems" with which Madam Walker and Annie Malone had once contributed to the emergence of a new black woman, Banks recently launched her own cosmetics company.¹⁶ TYRA Beauty uses a multi-level marketing system in which women receive bonuses not just for selling products at their homes but also for recruiting new "Beautytainers."¹⁷ The company's mission statement explains (see the section "Business" on their website):

My goal is to help you be the CEO of your life! YOU can start your own business by selling TYRA Beauty products. I am galvanizing a community of entrepreneurs called "Beautytainers" who will sell products by throwing fierce parties at their

15 I am borrowing this term from the mission statement of the Burning Man Festival (see Harvey), which has arguably emerged as the annual celebration of neoliberal lifestyle.

16 Ralina Joseph analyzes Banks as "performing a post-racial, post-feminist ideology," explaining that she "has made a career out of presenting herself, on the one hand, as a 'post-identity' everywoman who embodies a universal appeal because of her positioning as a liberal, democratic, colorblind subject, and on the other hand as an African-American supermodel who embodies niche desirability because of her positioning as a racially specific, black female subject" (238).

17 The company was launched in 2015 and its business model is similar to long-established predecessors such as Mary Kay. Banks has been criticized for what some see as the company's exploitative practices (see Marthe) while she has also been invited to teach a "personal-brands course" at Stanford University (see Bazzaz).

homes and online. We'll provide cool, customized ways to help our Beautytainers use their social media networks to promote their business, and they'll be able to create a personalized TYRA Beauty website with cutting edge technology. Plus, my TYRA Beauty team and I will train our Beautytainers in the art of fusing beauty and entertainment and rackin' up them Bank\$igns!

I'm a business, man. And you can be, too!

From the capitalized brand name to the commercialized domestic space and the idea of a life turned into a company, the mission statement eerily evokes Bride's YOU, GIRL. It is this ideal of radical self-reliance in which every woman is the CEO of her own life, responsible for herself alone and connecting with others only to exchange commodities, that the novel rejects as a source of economic agency for black women.

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