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RACIALIZED BEAUTY: THE CONSTRUCTION OF RACIALIZED-GENDERED IDENTITIES IN THE NOVELS OF TONI MORRISON

In her seminal essay on women and femininity, Simone de Beauvoir affirmed that, “beauty is not an idea one contemplates but a reality that reveals itself [...]. Only through women does beauty exist in the world” (1997, 165-166). With these powerful words in one of the most acclaimed works of feminist philosophy, Beauvoir defined femininity as being socially constructed. In other words, women are defined by the standards society places upon them- such as beauty and femininity, both judged according to masculine stereotypes. Within this framework, men have all qualities and women lack some. In Beauvoir’s own words, “Woman does not think of herself without the man” (26). To clarify her statement, women simply are not men.¹

Aligning with Beauvoir, in her recent studies on the “Beauty Myth” (1990), Naomi Wolf has traced the historical path of this theory, demonstrating how the recurrent refrain of an aesthetic criterion is socially constructed and thus imposed by Western society. Throughout history, women have always coped with the notion of attractiveness struggling to define their body in relation to social and cultural impositions. In this regard, it is easy to understand how Western society has played a pivotal role projecting socially constructed attractive expectations which correspond to a specific body type that conforms to the white criteria. Given this, at the core of an ideal of pulchritude there is a legitimate white identity and the creation of an aesthetic paradigm that is exclusively based on white principles. As such, the concept of beauty in modern society is an ever-changing one, and strictly associated with a Western ideal through which an idealistic identity is constructed. In this regard, appearance is central to a female self-definition. I take this statement as my starting point as I choose to develop this line of inquiry through the lens of African-American literature.

Such statements would seem in line with the perspective of one of America’s most venerated living writers, Toni Morrison, whose literary work is prominently based on the racialized social construction of beauty as a dominant trait in the creation of self-identity among African-American women. Before addressing the problems Morrison sees with regard to the fictive social construction of self-discriminated identities, I would like to venture into a brief discussion on the concept of social racialization and take a more critical look on the conceptual meaning of “racialization of attractiveness.” As Anne Tate has argued, “racialization means that there is an inscription of beauty on some bodies and not others so that beauty is always embodied as white” (2009, 18).² Considering whiteness as the exclusive standard of physical pulchritude, the value of black identity is eventually diminished. As such, black women suffer from the impossibility of constructing an ideal femininity in a racialized society which accepts a unique aesthetic parameter through implicit racial bias and the marginalization of otherness. Paul Taylor supported this claim in the belief that “a white-dominated culture has *racialized*³ beauty that it has defined beauty per se in terms of white beauty, in terms of the physical features that the people we consider white are more likely to have” (1999, 17). Thus, it is through the imposition of exclusive standards of aesthetic appeal that white-dominated culture has racialized the concept of beauty, marginalizing those black women who are unavoidably excluded from an ideal femininity in a society that discriminates in its diversity. Indeed, it is skin colour and difference that generate the social construction of a physical aspect based on a discrimination that is deeply rooted on diversity. I contend- with

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¹ For a more detailed study of this concept see Judith Butler’s interpretation of Beauvoir’s social definition of beauty in *Sex and Gender in Simone De Beauvoir’s Second Sex*, 1986.

² For an epistemological definition look at Tate’s semantic meaning of “racialization” in *Black Beauty: Aesthetics, Stylization, Politics- Beauty, Wisdom and Racialization* (2009, 18).

³ Emphasis in the original.



and beyond Taylor- that African-American women present a lack of identity that is both racialized by dominant white impositions and also socially constructed.

Every Morrison scholar has acknowledged that the central theme of all her work is the persistent quest for a female allurements defined by white aesthetic ideals. Following such a line of thought, this essay aims at analyzing how attractiveness becomes, among most of Toni Morrison's black female characters, a social construct inevitably leading to the struggle for an identity, and to the lack of one. In this essay, I delve the analysis into three novels: *The Bluest Eye* (1970), *Song of Solomon* (1977) and *Tar Baby* (1981).

Before focusing attention on the representation of the beauty canon, it is essential to pose a few questions: What lies beneath the recurrent refrain of aesthetic appearance? How is an African-American identity constructed in relation to physical pulchritude? In order to address these issues, let us first consider Morrison's distinction between black women and white women. In an influential article published in *The New York Times* in 1971, "What the Black Woman Thinks about Women's Lib," Toni Morrison claimed that, "Black women are different from white women because they view themselves differently [...] and throughout history, "black women have been able to envy white women" (1971, 14). In other words, their sense of being different from others forces them to imitate an "ideal self" which they do not have. In such an interpretative approach, beauty for Toni Morrison is the stereotype of diversity: it represents the threshold of transforming an identity racialized by social models. This explains the recurrent dichotomy between beauty and ugliness in her novels in which the former conforms to the white society, whereas the latter is associated to the black community. In the words of the writer, quoted above, appearance becomes an obstacle for African-American women, who struggle in an incessant quest for an aesthetic criterion. The sense of the shattered self of her black women characters is central in her narrative, illustrating a racialized and gendered lack of identity.

Following Morrison's narrative trajectory, it is essential to begin from her most acclaimed novel *The Bluest Eye*. Throughout the novel, the disintegration of female subjectivity is illustrated through the imposition of white middle class American epitomes of beauty on the self-making process of a young African-American girl. The stereotype of appearance is placed upon the vulnerable figure of the young protagonist, Pecola Breedlove, an example par excellence of a fractured self and a young woman who is constantly torn between physical attractiveness and ugliness, simultaneously seeking an identity and losing the sense of her self. Indeed, the protagonists' lacerated identity shifts away from the white physical ideal to the detriment of a black aesthetic allurements. Below I will return to this stance, which leads us to assume that Morrison's choice problematizes the ongoing conflict between models of beauty albeit with no possible solution.

Yet, in *The Bluest Eye* physical pulchritude is at the core of the protagonist's female subjectivity. In order to define herself, Pecola needs to adhere to those aesthetic norms imposed by the white community. A memorable passage captures the narrator's insistence on Pecola's wish to acquire the standards of white fairness through the obsessive desire for blue eyes. The narrator reports, "Each night, without fail, she prayed for blue eyes [...] Thrown, in this way, into the blinding conviction that only a miracle could relieve her, she would never know her beauty" (1993, 47). The impossibility of encompassing those aesthetic values inevitably forces Pecola to "escape" beauty. She is different and thus emarginated, ugly, scorned, and rejected from an ideal she cannot attain.

Although the plot revolves around the vulnerable figure of Pecola, Claudia, the nine-year-old African-American narrator, expresses her rebellion for the white beauty stereotype through her hatred for dolls. Early in the novel, the aesthetic image is illustrated by the gift of "a big blue-eyed baby doll" (20), which represents that aesthetic epitome Claudia and Pecola will never reach. Possessing the doll leads them to discover the beauty and their inexplicable "otherness." As Claudia confesses while holding the doll at night,

When I took it to bed [...] it was the most uncomfortable, patently aggressive sleeping companion. I had only one desire, to dismember it. To see of what it was made, to discover the dearness, to find the beauty, to find the desirability that had escaped me, but apparently only me (22).

The emphasis on the beauty that has escaped her represents an alienation caused by the scorn of a society that marks her as different. In the perspective of Toni Morrison, the doll motif offers that unachievable image of pulchritude that Claudia and Pecola will never encompass, thus representing that physical appearance they are supposed to embody. The plot inevitably unfolds with the constant imposition of white physical



archetypes. The most evident is represented by Pecola's fondness for a mug decorated with Shirley Temple's picture and filled with white milk. Once more, the whiteness of the milk, as well as the image of that blonde blue-eyed white iconic model, both serve as reminders of her conflicting physical aspect.

Moreover, rather than merely portraying the social imposition of aesthetic stereotypes, *The Bluest Eye* shifts from the recurrent dualism of fairness and ugliness. In other words, as beauty is socially imposed, so is unattractiveness. Pecola's family is aware of their ugliness, which is defined by the way society perceives their image. As the narrator reports in reference to the Breedloves and their physical appearance, "You looked at them and wondered why they were so ugly, you looked closely and you could not find the source. [...] The Master had said, 'You are ugly people'. They had looked about themselves and saw nothing to contradict the statement" (39). This quote demonstrates how Morrison's ideal of beauty, and thus identity, is oriented between two polar opposites-fairness and ugliness- which respectively convert aesthetic attraction into a utopian white archetype while diminishing the value of black allurements. Needless to say, society becomes a mirror through which Pecola reflects her image of unattractiveness and her sense of a split self.

Drawing on racist aesthetics and the position of privilege from which African-American women are judged, Tate argues that "Questions of bodily practices, such as those of beauty, are always discursive and subject to the gaze of the other" (2009, 18). Undoubtedly, black women are different in their aesthetic appearance and inevitably exposed to a social scrutiny. With respect to this premise, American sociologist Charles Cooley in the "Looking Glass-Self Theory" (1992), observes that the individual's identity and self-image is inevitably framed by the perception society has of his physical appearance. Society defines how others perceive a physical image grounded on social and cultural impositions. Consequently, the perception of ourselves comes not from who we really are, but from how we believe others detect our self-image through public display. Society acts as a mirror or as a reflection of an identity based on physical parameters, in which beauty is the backbone of a self-process formation based on appearance. The theory of the "Reflected I," defined by Cooley, lies deep within Morrison's recurrent emphasis on the attainment of an aesthetic exemplar in characters who see their image reflected on a society that constructs an identity based on iconic idols of femininity.

Referring back to the character of Pecola in *The Bluest Eye*, she sees what other people see of herself, being inevitably condemned to a physical aspect that stigmatizes the different aesthetic paradigm she externalizes. She is aware of her ugliness only from her reflection on other people. Her incessant quest for an identity and the constant hope for a physical alteration are prominently generated by the gaze of society. As the narrator reports with reference to people staring at Pecola, "She would never know her beauty. She would only see what there was to see: the eyes of other people" (47).

What is more, in the afterword and final part of the novel, Toni Morrison writes about Pecola, "*The Bluest Eye* was my effort to say something about [...] the experience of what she possessed and why she prayed for so radical an alteration. [...] The novel pecks away at the gaze that condemned her" (211-210). This quote is evidence that the female protagonist is condemned to a lack of identity due to the construction of a social scrutiny associated to an exclusive utopian aesthetic appeal. "Pecola remains invisible even to herself until she can envision the alter-ego that fits her ideal of beauty" (López Ramirez 2013, 79). Thus, she undergoes an identity fragmentation caused by her self-making process.

Another novel whose female figure struggles for the acquisition of the white beauty norms is the African-American woman character of Hagar in *Song of Solomon*. Despite the protagonist's morbid feelings for her man, Milkman, and her perpetual hope for a possible relationship, she is frustrated and constantly repudiated. Therefore, Hagar finds the explanation of Milkman's refusal in her physical aspect. As a result, her displeasing appearance is rejected by a man whose beauty parameters conform to the white European image. A deeper significance of this emerges when Hagar mistakenly sees herself reflected in the mirror. The reflection of her image brings on the acknowledgement of Milkman's scorn. After partially seeing her unattractive reflection, Hagar states: "Look at how I look. I look awful. No wonder he didn't want me. I look terrible" (2004, 308). Once more, this is evidence of a bad, negative female beauty exemplar, rejected because of her inability to conform to the idealistic white aesthetic model.

As a consequence of her displeasing fascination, Hagar goes on a beauty transformation that will secure Milkman's attention. Moreover, the hierarchy of white physical criteria will be subsequently confirmed when Hagar realizes that, "He loves silky hair, penny-colored hair, lemon-colored skin and a thin nose. He's never going to like my hair" (315-316). When Hagar surprises Milkman with a woman that corresponds to the white



ideal of pulchritude, she sees herself reflected in that appealing paradox that lacerates her identity emphasizing the distinctness of an aesthetic parameter that will always discriminate her diversity. As a consequence, she begins a process of physical alteration buying beauty products “to fix herself up” (316), to conform herself to the white canon. Conversely, Pilate responds to Hagar’s dislike with words of comfort saying: “How can he not love your hair? It’s the same hair that grow out his armpits. The same hair that crawls up out of his crotch on up his stomach. All over his chest. The very same. [...] He got to love it” (315). Pilate’s plea is reminiscent of Malcom X’s famous speech- delivered on May 5, 1962- in which he supported the claim that black people’s natural features, such as hair and skin, are also beautiful. As Pilate reminds Hagar, Malcom X addressed the black community querying,

Who taught you to hate the texture of your hair? Who taught you to hate the color of your skin? To such extent you bleach to get like the white man. Who taught you to hate the shape of your nose and the shape of your lips? Who taught you to hate yourself from the top of your head to the soles of your feet? Who taught you to hate your kind? Who taught you to hate the race that you belong to? [...] (1962).⁴

As Malcom X dwells upon the value of black beauty among African-Americans, so does Pilate, who supports Hagar and reminds her that “black is beautiful.” This parallelism provides an excellent example of how Morrison increasingly draws on the problematization of a self-making conflict lessening the value of black beauty without offering a possible resolution.

The impossibility to attain that physical stereotype culminates in Hagar’s alteration which corresponds to an unsuitable masquerade. Her aesthetic mutation delineates a new physical aspect that does not pertain either to her race or to her real image. The inadequacy of her new appearance is explained by the narrator in the detailed description of her new unappealing aspect.

Hagar stripped herself naked there, and without taking time to dry her face or hair or feet, she dressed herself up in the white-with-a-band-of-color skirt and matching bolero, the Maidenform brassiere, the Fruit-of-the-Loom panties, the no color hose, the Playtex garter belt and the Joyce con brios. [...] Finally she poured a little youth blend into her palm and smoothed it over her face. (314)

Yet, as for Pecola in *The Bluest Eye*, Hagar’s effortless attempt to modify her aesthetic allurements is confirmed by the gaze of Pilate and Reba who, despite their aid in the process of aesthetic transformation, cannot avoid reacting at the sight of Hagar in her new appeal.

At last she opened the door and presented herself to Pilate and Reba. And it was in their eyes that she saw what she hadn’t seen before in the mirror: the wet ripped hose, the soiled white dress, the sticky lumpy face powder, the streaked rouge, and the white wet shoals of hair. All this she saw in their eyes and the sight filled her with water warmer and much older than the rain. (314)

Pilate and Reba represent Hagar’s mirror of her self-image and the perception society has of her aspect. They reveal her real nature, acting as visual evidence of that image of beauty she cannot achieve. As she has done before, but now arguably in a more evident way, Morrison illustrates an identity torn between fairness and ugliness, and the impossibility for a fractured self to attain an exemplar based on exclusive aesthetic parameters. Hagar is black, ugly, scorned, and rejected because of her physical appearance. She is inauthentic in her attempt to reach the authentic white model. The impossibility of fulfilling the prefixed

⁴ Extract from Malcom X’s speech delivered on May 5, 1962 in Los Angeles at the funeral service of Ronald Stokes, African-American member of the NOI, killed in a confrontation with LAPD. (<https://genius.com/Malcolm-x-who-taught-you-to-hate-yourself-annotated>. Last Visited January 26, 2017).



standard of Western beauty and a final refusal leads her to death. Death is, for Morrison, the end of a physical and psychological destruction that represents the frustration and the futility of reaching an ideal that is never fulfilled. Given this, we might consider Hagar's struggle for a physical transformation as yet another attempt to construct an identity, disliking her self, in the hopeless effort to encompass the white aesthetic values.

However, the physical archetype of whiteness is partially accomplished by the character of Jadine in *Tar Baby*. Differently from the previous two female characters, who struggle in vain and succumb to the white ideal in a personal downfall, Jadine as an African-American moves to Europe, participating in beauty contests and becoming a model portrayed on the cover of fashion magazines such as *Vogue*. Jadine not only enjoys being part of the white community, but she also identifies with European society, absorbing and sharing the values of white-dominated culture. She is the product of white class.

Although acknowledging Jadine's adherence to the white aesthetic allurements, Morrison portrays her scornful unattractiveness in her return trip to America. If in Paris she was accepted as an ideal of pulchritude, although different from the classic European standards, she is eventually refused by her own community, which does not recognize her as part of African-American cultural identity. This is confirmed early in the novel, when a black woman spits at Jadine as an admonishment for her seeming refusal to belong to the black race. Thus, even if other people in the store are not shocked by the woman's eccentric clothing, Jadine stares at her, identifying her appearance as an unconventional and, in her words, "unphotographable beauty" (2016, 45). She states,

The woman walked down the aisle as though her many-colored sandals were passing gold tracks on the floor. Two upside-down V's were scored into each of her cheeks, her hair was rapped in a gelée as yellow as her dress. The people in the aisles watched her without embarrassment, with full glances instead of sly ones. (45)

As the scene makes clear, Jadine is astonished by the lack of embarrassment for what, in her eyes, resembles an exemplar of displeasing appearance. This act should inevitably produce critical glances from other people and confirms her sense of being different from the aesthetic criteria of that community. As the scene continues, the woman's impetus against white beauty manifests itself through her hostile choice to spit at Jadine:

And there, just there- a moment before the cataclysm when all loveliness and life and breath was about to disappear- the woman turned her head sharply around to the left and looked right at Jadine. Turned those eyes too beautiful for eyelashes on Jadine and, with a small parting of her lips, shot an arrow of saliva between her teeth down to the pavement and the hearts below. Actually it didn't matter, when you have fallen in love rage is superfluous; insult impossible. (46)

This moment exposes the contraposition of two cultures and of their different aesthetic parameters. Morrison's narrative choice problematizing and geographically decentralizing the acquisition of the white aesthetic model across the Atlantic highlights the clear racial distinction with a culture, the American one, whose attractive criteria discriminates in its aesthetic diversity. Still, the decision to shift the attainment of the white physical model in Europe explains Morrison's choice of illustrating how African-American women's identity is lacerated in the contrast between positive and negative physical patterns prominently based on the racialization of a different standard of beauty. As the woman spits at Jadine, recognizing her as non-belonging to the African-American community, she is firmly convinced of the power of her appeal to the extent that she interprets the woman's gesture as an act of jealousy of her excessive fascination, which is almost unconventional in black culture. Once again, the black woman's reaction in *Tar Baby* is Jadine's mirror in the black community. As it was for Pecola and Hagar before her, Jadine's aesthetic image reflects on society and, in this case, on a woman whose reaction defines the social perception of her identity. Jadine's social looking glass reveals her physical aspect as well as her lack of a black identity. Through this act, Morrison shows, once again, that despite the attempts by black women to imitate and to pertain to the ideal standard of white pulchritude, their identity in their own community is, and always will be, unaccepted and unconventional. Furthermore, the incessant emphasis on the paradigm of white attractiveness shifts the



ideal diminishing the value of black beauty. The result is the portrayal of women who, no matter their adherence to those standards, lack identity and aesthetic appeal in a racialized society.

In contraposition to the convoluted figure of Jadine is the white icon of Margaret Street in *Tar Baby*, also known as “The Principal Beauty of Maine,” a name she has adopted as a queen of beauty contests. This figure represents the ideal of fairness and, as for Pecola’s doll and Hagar’s love rival, serves as expression of that European attractiveness that Jadine is constantly trying to accomplish. These images allow us to more closely consider the role of white women in Morrison’s novels, as characters who are enshrined as an exemplar of pulchritude. Even though beautiful, she is different. It is precisely this difference that contributes to altering her perception of identity, forcing her to leave her country. *Tar Baby* is Morrison’s attempt to illustrate how the accomplishment of white beauty standards is still problematic in the African-American community, where difference is targeted as a symbol of a different culture and a different ethnic identity. In this case, despite her indisputable charm, Jadine’s skin colour is still associated with that black community she has rejected. Given this, Jadine follows an ideal that does not exist in black society. Summarizing Morrison’s paradigm, there is a persistent impossibility of reaching Western aesthetic parameters among African-American women of which she does not offer a possible solution.

As a final note, this essay did not attempt to provide a clear motivation of Morrison’s choice in her central concern on beauty, rather to bring to light certain aspects of her narrative such as the racialization and social construction of female allurements, among African-American women, under the lens of ethnic identity and racial discrimination. Identity and beauty are strictly related concepts in Morrison’s narratives, allowing us to understand the fragmented personality of her women characters. In her novels, there is a female identity ripped and torn between two contraposed images- fairness and ugliness- which through the imposition of a white aesthetic parameter goes to the detriment of a black beauty that is rather inexistent, discriminated and nonemphasized. As Tate implies, in her novels Morrison epitomizes how skin colour in America is used as a parameter to judge beauty (2009, 19).

Our narrative approach has provided insight to the psychological fragmentation of identity, among Morrison’s female characters, and to the impossibility for black women of reaching an aesthetic parameter- the white one- which superimposes its exclusiveness. By giving centrality to feminine characters and their physical obsession with the body, Morrison illustrates the convoluted struggle of African-American women to shape an identity that is deeply rooted on the attainment a white physical exemplar of pulchritude. The fragile personalities of her women exemplify the investigation of a white aesthetic standard that cannot be internalized. Her characters become enveloped in the illusion of re-making a self through the persistent accomplishment of iconic parameters.

Morrison problematizes this conflict between white fairness and black unattractiveness to the detriment of black beauty, without offering a possible solution. She sees no redeeming function in the incapability of black women to reach that aesthetic epitome that is the only way possible for the creation of a female identity. The white-centric discourse on the lack of an African-American image of pulchritude illustrates Morrison’s choice to hinge on the social construction of beauty emphasizing how the contingent aspects of social selves are inevitably entangled in an identity-formation process grounded on social aesthetic impositions.

We, as readers, follow her characters’ personal conflicts embarking on a journey that is emotionally destabilizing and leads to a process of identity formation. We struggle along with Morrison’s black women, perceiving their trauma in a quest for identity through the attainment of an unachievable aesthetic appeal.

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