

AN AFRICAN-AMERICAN THEOLOGIAN'S LOOK AT AFROCENTRISM DESPITE THE GLARE OF THE BLUEST EYE

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On the surface Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*, apart from one memorable line I will emphasize, has little to do with Afrocentrism - the commitment to see life in the light of the African heritage and the Continent's current struggles and hopes. Saddled with self-hate - notwithstanding something healthy and wholesome about the two woman-child protagonists, Claudia and Frieda MacTeer - Morrison's characters *destroy* one of their own, Pecola Breedlove. In the picture Morrison paints Pecola personifies black alienation. Her skin is too dark, her hair too nappy, and her family too poor and unlettered *and* dysfunctional. Her father rapes her, a desecration that intensifies her desire for blue eyes. She thinks people will love her if her eyes are blue. This venue is *American* - so much so it would be better to place African under erasure. Given the alienated characters' preoccupation with the drawbacks of nappy hair, their idolization of white film stars, their coveting of light skin and straight hair, the novel is really about coloredness. (Coloredness casts no aspersion on the so-called Colored people of South Africa - many of whom prefer to be called Black. Neither does it refer to a Blydenesque disdain for "race mixing." It refers to a form of alienation I will discuss in more detail later.) It is, however, precisely this tragic condition that makes *The Bluest Eye* pertinent to the problem of Afrocentrism.

What one means by Afrocentrism varies. Certain Afrocentrists, the "Nile Valley" contingent, reclaim and reappropriate the rich legacies of the black Egyptians. Others, such as myself, prefer a less ancient Africa. Here heritage entails the reclaiming and reappropriation of Niger-Congo ancestors, whose integrity, mores, and creativity are - "one three centuries removed" (Cullen) - still with us in memory and in song. By way of those modes one knows that the old Africans were not heathens in need of Western civilization.

With regard to the Continent's current struggles and hopes, Afrocentrism in this essay is principally, but not solely, informed by the work of African artists, such as Wole Soyinka and Chinua Achebe, and particularly by African

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theologians such as Barthélemy Adoukonou and Jean-Marc Éla. These writers and theologians inform one of just what it means to be an African today.

The Bluest Eye is an interlocutor for such Afrocentric concerns because it causes one to ponder *why* Africa is so far away, and its distance an antitoxin for a people so Westernized as to languish as the colored people their oppressor's have made them.

Looming above its pages is the juggernaut shadow of white hegemony. This is so abnormal that an Afrocentric theologian might well see whiteness as an invasive element analogous to incest. I do not infer the vulgar incest depicted in the novel, that final, deadly rape of Pecola by her alienated, though decadently free, father. I refer to the tyrant incest that, divested of its sexual connotations, is implied in the novel's final pages:

There is no gift for the beloved. The lover alone possesses his gift of love. The loved one is shorn, neutralized, frozen in the glare of the lover's inward eye (Morrison 1970, 160).

The *thing* about white supremacy is that it, in narcissistic love, gratifies itself ("the inward eye") at its victim's expense.

This forbidden love thrives on a deviant closeness, and nothing healthy issues from it. Its disease, in part, is that the violated ones see themselves as kin to those who fleece, nullify, and paralyze. The sin of misguided eros has been projected onto blacks, who, estranged from their otherness, see the exploitative relationships as good for them. This love leads to "social impoverishment, the loss of differentiation which would block the development of [humankind]" (May 1969, 115).

Take for instance Morrison's Elihue Micah Whitcomb, an emasculated spiritualist, and - a pedophile, whom the community has dubbed "Soaphead Church." His complicity in Pecola's final delusion is explained by the coloredness he covets as his "pedigree."

He had been reared in a family proud of its academic achievements and its mixed blood - in fact, they believed the former was based on the latter. A Sir Whitcomb, some decaying British nobleman, who chose to disintegrate under a sun more easeful than England's, had introduced the white strain into the family in the early 1800s. Being a gentleman by order of the King, he had done the civilized thing for his mulatto bastard - provided it with three hundred pounds sterling, to the great satisfaction of the bastard's mother, who felt that fortune had smiled on her. The bastard too was grateful, and regarded as his life's goal the hoarding of this white strain. He bestowed his favors on a fifteen-year-old girl of similar parentage. She like a good victorian parody, learned from her husband all that

was worth learning - to separate herself in body, mind, and spirit from all that suggested Africa [added]; *to cultivate the habits, taste, preferences that her absent father-in-law and foolish mother-in-law would have approved* (*Ibid.*, 132).

It is not that Soaphead is a product of miscegenation which makes him colored, but his idolatry of Sir Whitcomb's Civilization and phenotype - an idolatry that renders him well-suited to "minister" to Pecola.

When, after her father's assault, Pecola comes to Soaphead asking to be cured from her pathetic blackness, *he* understands. In God's name he deceives her into believing she has what she desires. The bluest eyes. Quite satisfied with his Pecola performance, he taunts his god. "You forgot, Lord." Soaphead says: "You forgot how and when to be God." "That's why I changed the little girl's eyes for her, and I didn't touch her; not a finger did I lay on her. But I gave her those blue eyes she wanted. Not for pleasure, and not for money. I did what you did not, could not, would not do: I looked at that ugly little black girl, and I loved her. I played you. And it was a very good show!" "I ... have caused a miracle. I gave her the blue eyes. I gave her the blue, blue, two blue eyes. *Cobalt* blue [added]" (*Ibid.*, 143).

He loved her. But what is this thing called love? Surely not a gift from One whose love is free of "racial" stipulation. Truth be told, Soaphead is giftless, for his "*God*" beyond god is no true Thou, but an apotheosized I (the bluest one). Soaphead gives Pecola only what had been given him, the disdain of the Thou - the African other, the enigma of an "un-Negro tongue (Hughes)." Like those whose mores he covets, Soaphead can not see that "... the Thou of the other ... *is* [added] the divine Thou. ... [that] the way to the other ... is also the way to the divine Thou, a way of recognition or rejection" (Bonhoeffer 1963, 37). If one rejects innocent blackness, for all the vulgar reasons associated with a reigning and unjust aesthetic, one rejects God as well. This is because such rejection is deeply *sinful*. Dissimulated by the power of denial, this unholy rejection is integral to what Morrison calls the "*Thing*" (it makes black children ugly and white ones beautiful).

Afrocentrism, through which blacks discover an otherness we have been taught to disdain, helps us overcome this demented rejection of God and self because it exorcises the cobalt blue eye, and, with it, the pathetic coloredness all too common in the United States today. So by coloredness I mean a spiritual deformity, I mean precisely the outcome of this quasi-incestuous relationship that renders blacks vitiated versions of the Master Race. With our otherness annulled in a fatally suffocating relationship, we, to borrow a line from V.Y. Mudimbe, become "the key, which in its abnormal differences, specifies the identity of the Same" (Mudimbe 1988, 12). The colored person

is thus “the inversed figure of the Same”: a *colored*, and therefore aberrant, white person (*Ibid.*, 180). Let me discuss aspects of such coloredness in some detail.

Certain elements of black, so-called underclass, life - while entailing remarkably the memory of Africa in rhythm, syntax, and conscious identification with the Continent through Afrocentric accoutrements - are profane, misogynist, prone to glorify black males' tragic criminalization, and hostile to higher learning. To be African-American in this context is to be crude. This crudeness makes its way into aspects of rap music that, though in large measure very *African-American* and prophetic, is too often nihilistic and feeds the syndrome of the bluest eye. In its glare *African-Americanness* is but a beastly heathenism, for black skin is inimical to civilization. The African root of black identity is the fact of origin only.

Reified roots and “African,” however, are not the same thing: - African pertains to the dignity of the African legacy in the New World *and* to the critical assimilation of what Africans like Achebe and Éla are thinking. New World blacks unaware of what those Africans have to say about Africa are not *African-American*.

Neither are those middle class blacks who pursue the American dream above all others and exacerbate in *their* inward eye the alienating syndrome of *The Bluest Eye*. Eager to dissolve the hyphen between African and American, they are unconcerned with Africa. Despite the sad revelations of Derrick Bell's *Faces at the Bottom of the Well*, they covet their American identity. (They would no doubt be astounded should Bell's space traders arrive and remind them of precisely *why* they are not fully satisfied with the America they would cut off from Africa.) And they bring to mind yet another of Morrison's characters, the upwardly mobile Geraldine.

She represents a peculiar American folk, who, like Soaphead, are paragons of alienation. They revel in doing “the white man's work with refinement: home economics to prepare his food; teacher education to instruct black children in obedience; music to sooth the weary master and entertain his blunted soul” (Morrison, 68). No blues. No swinging; nothing that comes close to the joyous abandon one finds among the “Holy Rollers.” *No Afro* dancing. Anything that smacks of the ethnicity whites disapprove of is a problem for them. So Geraldine plays down her full lips; and women of her ilk “worry, worry, worry about the edges of their hair” (*Ibid.*). It is Geraldine indeed who brings out the coloredness of the black middle class with pathetic poignancy. She explains to her son the distinction between colored people and niggers. The distinction is shamefully superficial: Hair must be cropped close “to avoid any suggestion of wool.” And lotion must be applied reli-

giously to remove any hint of ashiness. Geraldine has been miseducated. She believes the “line between colored and nigger [is] not always clear; subtle and telltale signs [threaten] to erode it, and the watch [has] to be constant” (*Ibid.*, 71).

Like many of the whites they emulate, middleclass blacks like Geraldine have but a shallow understanding of injustice. Never mind that Geraldine’s “niggers” are being victimized. Proper folk like Geraldine see only what their inward eye lets them see in regard to the Pecolas of the world: “Grass wouldn’t grow where they lived. Flowers died. Shades fell down. Tin cans and tires blossomed where they lived. They lived on cold black-eyed peas and soda pop. Like flies they hovered; like flies they settled” (*Ibid.*, 75).

Perhaps the most troubling ramifications of coloredness are found in the black church. Not the Sanctified Church that, despite its shortcomings, becomes, “in an old remembered way” (Cullen) and in the height of worship, “an unchained demanding other” (Morrison). I mean the bourgeois black church content with the worship bequeathed to them by whites. Content with a blue-eyed Jesus, who does not have to be depicted in icon to be really present, such churches eschew shouting (the remembered behavior of the slaves with salt water ways). Like Morrison’s Geraldine, bourgeois black church folk “know how to behave.”

That this is so was brought home forcibly to me some years ago during the feting of a highly renowned black theologian. After a day of crude presentations in his honor, the assembly retreated to a church for worship. I was struck by the European tenor of the service - the magisterial organ, the triumphant hymns (I recall not one spiritual or gospel song) the European clerical attire. No drums; no jazz: nothing part of a code that breaks the back of the Western captivity to the staid, so-called civilized response to “the” Word. Only the preacher, a product of the Sanctified Church, conjured a bit of spontaneity from the congregation, thereby giving welcome respite from what seemed to be an annoying contradiction: *African-Americans* theologians and church folk worshipping in ways little different from whites.

I can hardly claim that coloredness was the essential thing at that church gathering. But to sing the oppressors’ song in their key at such an auspicious occasion was hard to take. How hopelessly Westernized we seemed, and - how far removed from Africa. Despite the lectures, the worship service weighed on me as reminiscent of De Gobineau’s dictum held dear by *The Bluest Eye’s* Whitcombs: “...all civilizations derive from the white race, that none can exist without its help, and that a society is great and brilliant only so far as it preserves the blood of the noble group that created it” (Morrison 1970, 133).

Are we African-Americans if content with a hand-me-down culture all too evident during our most auspicious events? Do we, acculturated products of a violent association, not place ourselves in a deep freeze when Africanness is so truncated as to be banned from high culture? Why are we so willing to be *African-American* and not *African-American*? What is the virtue of the former?

To be *African-American* surely means that we have had to overcome a blistering whiteness. We have had to overcome tremendous odds through strength of character and the power of our cultures. Our insight into the claim that "God is no respecter of persons"; our music, spawned from the sacred and summoning still the power of resistance; our folk poetry captured in works such as Sterling Brown's "Old Lem" - these are all noble. But at the root of all these things - to quote a line from the impressive rap group Digable Planets's song "Where I'm From" - "it's Africa at work" that accounts for our distinction. "One three centuries removed" notwithstanding, the African heritage is strong enough to thaw the embrace of a Civilization that would suspend us in its image.

The power of this African heritage at work notwithstanding, Afrocentric theologians need the counsel and the example of Africans to purge coloredness from our American existence. Works such as Soyinka's *Myth Literature and the African World* and his *Ìsarà*, as well as Achebe's *Anthills of the Savannah* and his *Hopes and Impediments* complement *The Bluest Eye* because they aid our resistance to the unsafe "love" of free whites, who covet the coloredness that flatters *them*.

In the works of the Nigerians I have mentioned - and I am not giving priority to a region as the hallmark of Afrocentrism - one is taught masterfully how Westernization is mitigated by respect for the "living" reality of the ancestors' alterity. Their living legacy hardly eclipses the problem of alienation within the Continent itself, for one encounters in African literature the problem of the agglutinated elite, who account significantly for high infant mortality and the starvation of the peasants. But not even these problems introduce the cul-de-sac of debilitating coloredness. No pervasive acceptance of alien surnames. No *esprit du corps* sated with the stigma of New World slavery's deprivations. No inward glare that neutralizes, shears, and freezes.

This lack of coloredness is also characteristic of African theologians, who forestall whiteness and its demonic internalization by blacks. They too know the real Africa beset by the curse of the nation-state (Davidson); and one is made aware of the connection between suffering and hope. In Africa today, suffering, an unimpeachable element in Christian God-talk, is the product of neocolonialism; while hope is the glimmer of promise stemming from both

the precolonial past and faith in a liberated future. In Éla's words, which I translate as follows, an Africa "delivered from exploitation and slavery would still await liberation, which must occur on the eighth day." The promise of that day "invites us to revive a hope that is active in order to register in history's actuality the signs of the world to come" (Éla 1983, 83). African theology's movement from *pierre d'attente/adaptation* - idioms related to the chimera of *négritude* - to its current focus on liberation has freed Christianity from its narrow, if imperious, Western interpretations (Young 1993).

A liberated Christianity allows one to explore Africanness in terms of the juxtaposition of the black Christ and the *theologia crucis*. The two came together for me in a new way as I watched a very bad, meaning "B," movie entitled *Exorcist III*.

During one scene a black Christ is depicted. But the figure on the crucifix is really colored. He is a Sambo Jesus: big bogus red lips, bulging Uncle Tom eyes. The movie's intent was to portray the devil's work; and what better way than by way of the jiggerboo Jesus? How better to defame the typically aryan Jesus than to subject him to burnt cork? Yet, because of the influence African theologians have had on me, the scene brought to light the illusion of both the jiggerboo and the aryan Jesus. The jiggerboo Jesus is always hidden in the "normal" one. In embracing Africanness as defined by *Africans*, one sees that coloredness is but a projection of the bluest eye. (There are no jiggerboos in Africa - only in white America. There may be alienated Africans; but no jiggerboos.) In caricaturing Jesus in a way deemed to be blasphemous, the movie brought to light the sin of the giftless lover, a lover whose deity is but the apotheosis of the will to self-gratification and self-glorification.

My Afrocentric orientation notwithstanding, the bogus black Christ led me to reconsider Luther's claim that Christ had become a brazen serpent: "... When I feel the remorse and sting of conscience for sin, I behold that brazen serpent Christ hanging upon the Cross." While there is an allusion here to Numbers 21: 8-9, the serpent Christ, like the jiggerboo one, brings to light the immensity of the sin of projection. The sin of the "darky" caricature and the sin of the one "who is made sin for us" coincide because both yield the scapegoat, who is only ostensibly deformed. The genuine deformity rests deep within the scapegoater. The trouble with Luther, however, is that he is often made an abettor of the bluest eye. He is not seen as a medium through whom God speaks to the *world* in Jesus' name. Rather, he is seen as a Protestant Titan, who perpetuates Eurocentrism (which in its theological mode always involves the hegemony of the Germans). Afrocentrism is necessary if such sensibilities are not to profane African-Americans.

More and more, then, the work of African theologians help African-Americans resist coloredness. More and more, African-Americans must have Afrocentric vision, without assuming that we can *return* to Africa. We are "stuck" in America; there is for us - as African theologian Barthélemy Adoukonou poignantly observes - no possibility of capturing what Africa was to *our* ancestors, no return to the "maternal bosom of indifferentiation and security," no unfettered existence under the benevolent regard of Africa. "The hour of deracination has sounded. *Il n'y a pas de retour possible*" (Adoukonou 1981, 55). But we CAN Identify with the Continent tenaciously. Learning African languages, focusing variously on specific nations, bringing the work of African theologians to the center of our own work, we can be Afrocentric. What better way to banish coloredness from our hearts and minds? What better way to neutralize the glare of the inward eye?

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