

Derrida's *Différance*

In his essay “Différance” in 1987, Derrida states that *différance* is “literally neither a word nor a concept” (3), but it functions, rather as a condition of possibility of meaning. Derrida further notes that the graphic difference—replacing an *e* with an *a* (*différance* instead of *différence*)—“is read, or it is written but it cannot be heard” (Ibid.). *Différance* does not exist in reality, but it is a coinage made by Derrida to show the inadequacy of western metaphysics. In an attempt to comprehend the world, we will definitely and inevitably fall into the trap of binary oppositions—right or wrong, truth or false, black or white. Consequently, Derrida's *différance*, which distinctly differs from the French word *différence*, opens the possibility of multi-layered and multi-faceted meanings in any representation—it is a critique of representation.

Taking *différance* as a critique of representation, Derrida further explicates his term *différance* in details: “*Différance* is the non-full, non-simple, structured and differentiating origin of differences. Thus, the name “origin” no longer suits it” (11). *Différance*, meaning both differ and defer, cannot be defined as *this* or *that*. Derrida points out that

one could reconsider all the pairs of opposites on which philosophy is constructed and on which our discourses lives, not in order to see oppositions erase itself but to see what indicates that each of the terms must appear as the *différance* of the other, as the other different and deferred in the economy of the same (the intelligible as differing-deferring the sensible, as the sensible different and deferred,... culture as nature different and deferred, differing-deferring. (17)

In this sense, Derrida's view of meaning as *différance*, as the infinite play of differing and deferring, constitutes a most radical attack on a western classical view of representation—there is no fixed and definite meaning, only movement, dynamics, and play.

Toni Morrison's *difference*

Though Morrison is not referencing Derrida's *différance*, she simply acts it

without theorizing it. As a minority African-American writer, she probably has no intention of trying to break the western metaphysics; she just does without being aware of it. Besides, Morrison's writing, linking structuralism and post-structuralism, opens possibilities of meaning, which is analogous to Derrida's *différance*.

Morrison once said: "My work requires me to think about how free I can be as an African-American woman writer in my genderized, sexualized, wholly racialized world." These are the exact words that Morrison writes in her book of essays, *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and Literary Imagination*.¹ Refusing to be pigeonholed as a black female writer in a white-dominant literary world full of gender, sexual, and racial discrimination, Morrison adds with wisdom, "my project rises from delight, not disappointment..." (Ibid.). The binary opposition of delight and disappointment further exemplifies Morrison's strategic employment of binarism as well as her rejection of being categorized as a black woman writer in a white-male society. She finds that the oppositions of black/white, male/female need to be challenged and re-inscribed. In this respect, it is also the focal core of the French philosopher Jacques Derrida's deconstruction, which emphasizes de-constructing, de-centering, and debunking binary oppositions conceptualized in Western metaphysics. In this way, Derrida's deconstruction appeals and applies to Morrison's oeuvre, for both of them are built upon dismantling the domination of the narrative discourse and the displacement of the marginal discourse.

As Aoi Mori points out, "Morrison attempts to alter Euro-American dichotomies by returning to the past before Western Civilization was established in order to deconstruct the legitimacy of racism and reconstruct a new sphere for African Americans" (21). In this way, Morrison's novel is theoretically and politically charged. According to Linden Peach, the relationship between African-American writing and Derrida's deconstruction is one of two sides of a coin: they complement each other in a certain way. As she avers,

In one respect, deconstruction, developed by the French philosopher Jacques

¹http://nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/literature/laureates/1993/press.html

Derrida, has an obvious appeal for critics of African-American literature. Its primary concern of deconstruction... is the way in which we tend to structure our thinking in terms of binary opposites such as conscious and unconscious or speech and writing.... Its concern is with the way in which one element in that binarism—African/American, white/black, male/female—is privileged over another. (6)

With the same emphasis on tensions, contradictions, and oppositions within a single text, Morrison's writing and Derrida's deconstruction seek to challenge the values and assumptions implicit in hierarchies of opposites, which frequently privileges white over black, man over woman, self over other. Therefore, Morrison's oeuvre, when analyzed with Derrida's deconstruction, tends to reshape and re-form Western notions of binary opposition, making itself even more invigorating, illustrating, and illuminating.

Derrida's Différance & Toni Morrison's *Tar Baby*

We may be inclined to associate or identify Jadine or Son with its title, *Tar Baby*, but the novel deals with more than the love story between these two characters. The uncompromising issues of race, gender, and politics which surround the narrative structure are persistently the ultimate concerns that Morrison orchestrates and levels her sights at in her fictional writing world. Meaning, as Linden Peach cogently points out, is "subject to what the French theorist, Derrida, identifies as the 'active,' moving discord of different forces" (77). The skillfully arranged pairs, the white master, the black servants and their field helpers, as well as the black couple who fall in love with each other are the typical binary oppositions that we encounter in *Tar Baby*. However, by employing Derrida's concept of *différance*, in the sense of both difference and defer, the meaning of *Tar Baby* is incessantly different and deferred because "it is always relational, never self-present or self-constituted" (Ibid.). The naming of characters, the binary oppositions of nature and culture, and the dichotomy of the blacks and the whites evidently illustrate the instability and indeterminacies of Morrison's text in general, for while it attempts to define or pinpoint certain fixed meanings, it simultaneously dismantles and disrupts them, thereby attenuating what it aims to achieve.

Meaning itself is forever transforming, transcribing, and transfiguring.

The Myth of Tar Baby

Morrison's *Tar Baby*,² as its title insinuates, extends the possibilities of the multiple-layered meanings which perpetually disrupt and dislodge the logo-centrism that it pretends to sustain. As Linden Peach asserts, "One of the central concerns of *Tar Baby* is the way in which meaning itself is very difficult to pin down, being plural and contested rather than singular and uncontested" (77). The meaning of *Tar Baby* is essentially plural and contested as evidenced by the epigraph: "For it hath been declared unto me of you, my brethren, by them which are of the house of Chloe, that there are contentions among you" (I Corinthians 1:11). Namely, "It has come to my knowledge, through those of the house of Chloe, that there are divisions among you, my brothers."³ The setting of the story as well as the major events of the narrative centers upon the candy manufacturer, Valerian's household; it is indeed "a house of Chloe." Coincidentally, Morrison's given name is Chloe, which may have led her to the above mentioned epigraph, wherein Valerian's grand huge kingdom, similar to the house of Chloe in the Holy Scriptures, is foretold to be full of contentions, divisions, and quarrels throughout the narrative.

Derived from an African trickster tale, the Tar Baby myth "uses a traditional African myth to project the reader beyond the conventional parameters of the contemporary in order to throw the complexities and tensions of the present into relief" (Peach 79). Taking advantage of the old African folklore tale, *Tar Baby* shatters and recreates the pre-conceived concepts that we may have developed of the traditional African trickster.⁴ In fact, the novel *Tar Baby* "inverts and

²The term "Tar Baby" is intriguing by itself. Originally, the Tar-Baby was a doll made of tar and turpentine, used to entrap Br'er Rabbit in the second of the Uncle Remus stories. The more that Br'er Rabbit fought the Tar-Baby, the more entangled he became. In contemporary usage a tar baby refers to any "sticky situation" that is only aggravated by efforts to solve it. The definition of tar baby is taken from the online source: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tar_baby

³Translation taken from http://bible.cc/1_corinthians/1-11.htm.

⁴Philip Page observes that instead of one monologic myth, Morrison insists upon multiplicity. In an interview, she calls attention to additional associations with tar: "At one time a tar pit was a holy place, at least an important place, because tar was used to build things. It came naturally out of the earth; it held together things like Moses's little boat and the pyramids. For me the tar baby came to mean the black woman who can hold things together" (LeClair 27).

deconstructs a number of prior texts including the Western African myth of Anaanu,” as well as “the American vernacular tale of Brer Rabbit” (Ibid.). By employing ancient African mythological and legendary tales, Morrison skillfully rewrites and re-inscribes the old stories with new significance without sacrificing the embedded merit in the narrative. Instead of embracing the age-old both/and dichotomy and a tight polarity between either black and white, nature and culture, the text of Morrison's *Tar Baby* refuses to be defined and categorized in terms of such simple binary oppositions. Furthermore, the value revealed in the novel is far more complex and complicated than the original underlining narrative discourse of the original story. Indeed, by utilizing one of Derrida's conspicuous concepts of deconstruction, the multifaceted meaning of the revived Tar Baby myth never remains stable or stagnant; it is to be perpetually deferred and differed.

Morrison's Tar Baby Story

The Tar Baby myth, as recreated and reshaped by Morrison in *Tar Baby*, emphasizes a relationship built upon two lovers, Jadine and Son, one being the Tar Baby and the other one, Brer Rabbit. As Cynthia A Davis points out, “She [Morrison] is therefore very concerned with the sources of myth, with mythos and personal myth. All the novels try to show the machinery of myth, the ways that meaning can modify experience” (36). In *Tar Baby*, Morrison utilizes the old Tar Baby myth by offering a romantic story about two African-American lovers with a modern touch. Whereas Jadine allures Son with her superb beauty, Son, represented as the trickster figure, (un)intentionally hides himself in Margaret's closet and eventually turns the whole household of Valerian upside down. However, as the meaning of the text is perpetually deferred and differentiated, we cannot merely degrade or downgrade the character, Son, in Morrison's *Tar Baby* to the traditional folklore figure, Brer Rabbit, according to the one-to-one slot-filling rule.

The Naming of Characters

The paired characters in *Tar Baby* are endowed with more than a single name which signifies the constant referral and deferral of meaning and reinforces the ever-greater impossibility of the unwaveringly univocal meaning of much of the

language, universe. As Barbara Hill Rigney observes, “Son represents ‘a son of Africa’ and also ‘a son of the American black male experience’” (43). The naming of Son suggests at least two different meanings, a son of Africa and the Son of the Lord, Jesus Christ. Throughout the narrative, Son uses various pseudonyms at different periods when he is on the run to disguise his real identity—William Green, Herbert Robinson, Louis Stover. He never reveals his true name so that he will neither be identified nor disdained as a fugitive. Using a false name is analogous to wearing a mask and thereby Son can protect himself from being harmed from outer society at large. Parallel to the trickster figure in the African-American folklore tradition, Son represents an enigmatic character whose real name cannot be revealed to the reader.

Besides, most of the leading characters in *Tar Baby* have at least two names, which refer to their perpetual fragmentation. Jadine is generally called Jade on the white Streets, which in essence connotes *hardness*. Though a born black, she is white on the outside and it is hard for her to change her deeply-rooted westernized bourgeois thinking. Though she is light-skinned, she is ironically and significantly called “Copper Venus” (Peach 83). Moreover, Jadine’s surname is Childs, intimating that even though she possesses an innocent, good-looking and angelic face, which appears on the cover page of the fashion magazine “Elle,” yet it seems she can only think and act as a not fully grown child does. Named “Childs,” Jadine is no less immature than Son, whose infantile appellation suggests that he is to serve as the link between the old and new patrilinear generation. Valerian’s name associates him with a type of plant whose flowers have a medicinal effect as a sedative.

Inheriting a candy factory from his family, Valerian enjoys a lifestyle that is comfortable to the degree of luxury, as reflected in the name of the scrumptious candy that he is named after. Sydney calls Valerian Mr. Street, denoting Valerian’s sovereignty over the area in which he sojourns. “Valerian,” the master of his grand villa on the L’Arbe de la Croix, is also redolent of the name of a Roman emperor.⁵ The name Valerian, derived from the Latin proper noun

⁵Valerian (P. Licinius Valerianus), born before 200 A.D., married Egnatia Mariniana and had two sons. As an

Valerius, refers to *valeo* signifying “to be vigorous,” “to have power and to be strong,” though it can also mean either “to bid farewell” or “to scorn.” Thus, the name, Valerian, can carry numerous different meanings in itself. His queen-like wife, Margaret, powerless as she is in her own house, has various names like Margaret Lenore or Margarete. Other major characters include the black servants. Ondine is called Nanadine by Jadine, but she is known as Ondine on the Streets, which is more appropriate for her role.

As to the black servants in the novel, no one cares about the real identities of Thérèse and Gideon, who are generally called Yardman and Mary on the Streets, meaning “the man working in the yard,” while Mary is a common name for maids. Names are used interchangeably, such as Jade/Jadine, Ondine/Nanadine, Margaret Lenore/Margarete, Gideon/Yardman (Rigney 43). As Aoi Mori convincingly asserts, “In *Tar Baby*, Morrison employs a name theme to reveal a class issue in Western hierarchy. In this hierarchy, people of a lower class are deprived of their names by their oppressors” (Ibid.). This is especially true when Sydney and Ondine call the native black servants, Gideon and Yardman, because they regard themselves as their superiors. By reducing the black native servants to mere labels, Valerian’s black housekeepers’ act in pretty much the same way as their white owners do in treating the blacks as second-class citizens, the lowest ones of the social strata. The meaning of proper names is employed, to exploit and abuse in the interest of dominance; it is forever indefinite and inappropriate; it is forever transferring and transcribing and transfiguring.

Consequently, the original purpose of the proper names is to signify, or to define an individual self in a community, but in the end proper names are forever improper, for they suggest instable, fluid, dynamic, multilayered, multiple meanings and a play of floating signifiers, in Derrida’s terms.

Nature vs. Culture

The major parts of the novel, *Tar Baby*, is set in an unusual geographical location,

ex-consul he was sent to Rome, in 238, on behalf of Gordian I to obtain senatorial approval of Gordian's replacement of Maximinus Thrax as emperor. Further, the Roman emperor Valerian is said to be the one that persecuted Christians. The above information is taken from online source: <http://ancienthistory.about.com/od/szemperors/g/Valerian.htm>Find

neither a small town in South nor a metropolitan city in the North; it is outside of the United States on a fictitious island named Isle des Chevaliers in the Caribbean. Even the island is problematic, for it is vaguely called either “Isle des Chevaliers” (9) or “Isle de *le* Chevalier” (47), off and on. Devoid of its specific symbolic signification, the setting is explicitly described by Morrison thus: “the end of the world was nothing more than a collection of magnificent winter houses on Isle des Chevaliers” (9). An isolated island by itself, both within and without the world, the island serves as a perfect site, a no-place to be found on the map, for Morrison to explore and experiment on complex and entangled issues of race, gender and politics through a well-wrought story of paired black and white characters—Jadine and Son, Valerian and Margaret, and Ondine and Sydney.

Moreover, the African folk myth in the narrative is also both enigmatic and baffling. As Philip Page cogently points out, “Are those horsemen one hundred French, white noblemen or one hundred blind, black ex-slaves? What is the status of these horsemen and the swamp women?” (109). Without providing exclusive, definite answers to these seemingly insignificant details, Morrison purposely employs an ambivalent and ambiguous postmodern writing style to allow readers to freely figure out the meaning within the novelistic narrative.

The juxtaposition of nature and human culture is particularly apparent in the description of the island’s primitiveness next to its human civilization. As Philip Page lucidly asserts, “Part of the island's confusion is the two faces it presents: the apparently wild, mythic, ‘back’ side with its thick trees and its swamp, and its human, seemingly civilized, ‘front’ side” (109). With a façade consisting of the ancient, mythic elements of its swamp and thick champion daisy trees which “were part of a rain forest already two thousand years old and scheduled for eternity” (9), the island is paradoxically compared to a new Garden of Eden with its green lushness and natural abundance.

Nature is presented as double-edged, particularly structured in binary oppositions. Thus, on the contrary, instead of being a blissful paradise, the island itself can also be depicted a hellish place, a “boiling graveyard” (72). Its climate is peaceful, but its insects are wilted, as the “bees have no sting on Isle des Chevaliers, nor honey”

(81). Its orchids are profuse but the water left in them burn children's fingers (87). Fog is hazy, for it is thus described by Morrison: "Fog came to that place in wisps sometimes, like the hair of maiden aunts" (62). Nature takes up its dominance on the island, especially since things go back to their natural state so quickly in that place such that the courtyard bricks keep popping out of place. Nature itself, with its inherently life-giving qualities, bestows thoughts on human beings, for Morrison insists that the butterflies "didn't believe" the rumor about Jadine's sealskin coat while the avocado trees think that Jadine has misused the word "horseshit." As Nature imposes its power upon human order, the subsequent disorder leading to chaos occurs due to the imbalance of nature and human civilization. Naturally, the place itself dislocates everything.

Valerian's greenhouse also illustrates how "nature is overrun by culture to create an artificial microcosm for the entertainment of its sole proprietor, Valerian" (Hsu 97). Human culture, which sometimes can supersede nature, is epitomized in Valerian's methods of growing plants. Just it is believed in the recently advanced farming industry that cows produce more fresh milk and corn generates a better crop when classical music is played to them, Valerian uses the same method to nourish his plants in his greenhouse. In fact, "he settled finally on Bach for germination, Haydn and Liszt for strong sprouting. After that all of the plants seemed content with Rampal's Rondol in D" (9). However, what works best for natural plants is not human cultural interference but is to be attributed to Son's primitive way of shaking the plants hard with his hands so that they can bloom according to natural law.

Therefore, everything is out of its normal order on the *Isle des Chevaliers*. Indeed, Morrison is deliberately eluding constructing a binary oppositional world of nature and human civilization. The ensuing consequence of this juxtaposition is the inevitable entangling and confusion, as Morrison notes that "the river has become a swamp and the tree's dreams have become nightmares" (8). When natural order is interfered with, chaos and disorder inevitably and irresistibly loom wide.

Race, Culture, and Difference

The permanent deferment of univocal meaning can be extended to the issue of cultural identity, as we closely analyze and examine the black maverick, Son, and his light-skinned lover, Jadine, throughout the narrative. Without a specific temporal and spatial setting, black identity is continuously contested when the issue of race is enmeshed in educational, cultural and social factors. In the Jadine-Son story, two black lovers who are so divergently different from each other in their educational/cultural/racial background can also simultaneously become so mutually and fatally attractive after disposing of their preconceived prejudices against each other. Therefore, if we treat the Jadine-Son pair as representing two divergent worlds, one the European-white urban culture and the other the black rural folk culture, we have a dichotomy that is analogous to the age-old binary opposition of white/black, woman/man, culture/uncultured that constantly oppose and simultaneously grind against each other. As Bouson points out with insight, “*Tar Baby* invokes and contests dominant representations with their polarizing binarisms of black/white, nature/culture, primitive/civilized, polluted/pure” (105). Nevertheless, Morrison refuses this simplified dissection by continually confusing and compounding our ways of thinking thorough her narrative technique. At first, Jadine views Son as the primitive, the underclass, and the black savage who attempts to rape her.

In fact, Son appears in front of Jadine with his stinky smell, which is usually associated more with an animal than a human being. The correlation between the black and the barbarian is ostensibly demonstrated in Jadine’s initial encounter with Son, the black outlaw who hides in Margaret’s closet. Therefore, it is natural for Jadine to use the word “ape” to describe him as something beastly, which can be chopped up, sliced off and fed upon. Jadine is commonly mistaken for a “little white girl” because of her light-skin as well as her behavior, and Son views her in the same way—over and against white girls’ stereotypical idea of black men, who are nasty, evil and animal-like. The clear-cut polarity of the blacks and the whites is depicted here as straightforwardly typical and authentic in the narrative.

In addition to presenting the inappropriate binarism of the black and white,

Morrison is particularly skillful in bringing the “traces” out in the Son-Jadine love story. Derrida argues that “all words/signs contain traces of the ones which have preceded them; every sign in a chain of meaning carries these traces in inexhaustible complexity” (qtd. in Peach 84). These traces can be “traced” in the story of Jadine and Son as they develop their intimate relationship from mere strangers to passionate lovers. The first time Son goes to bed with Jadine, his hands are described as extremely huge. “Then, for the first time, she saw his *huge hands*.... Now she could not help looking, seeing those *hands large enough to sit down in. Large enough to hold your whole head. Large enough, maybe, to put your whole self into*” (211-12, my emphasis). Metaphorically, Son’s hands are “large enough” to confine and take hold of the westernized Jadine with their extra-large size, empowering her and encroaching upon her way of thinking by means of Son’s physically sleeping next to her.

This incident carries traces of the past experience that he had when he kissed Jadine’s bare foot. More specifically, when Jadine first meets Son, she is attracted to his overpowering “chain-gang hair” and starts to wonder what it means. When Jadine was alone in her bedroom, she recalled Son’s overpowering hair, which looked like bundles of whips. Son’s hair, depicted as “bundles of long whips or lashes” (113) is associated with wildness, aggressiveness and viciousness. It is a sign of violence and the uncivilized behavior that malevolent gangsters are connected with. The first impression that Son leaves upon Jadine is dominated by his overpowering hair, likened to evil, immediately frightening and threatening Jadine who associates him with his nigger stereotype who can harm, murder and even rape women. For Jadine, the intruder Son, as his overpowering hair indicates, is far less than a real human being of flesh and blood, but rather a hairy animal which would attack and assault her at any time.

The earlier impression that Jadine formed of Son is later completely changed after Son transforms himself into the handsome, well-informed, and sexually attractive other through washing himself clean. As Morrison tells us, “*But he was bathed now, clipped and beautiful with spacious tender eyes and a woodsy voice. His smile was always a surprise like a sudden rustle of wind across the savanna of*

his face. Playful sometimes, sometimes not. Sometimes it made her grab the reins” (181, my emphasis). The change of Son’s outfit symbolizes the metamorphosis of his outer appearance, from an ape-like animal to a well-bred, civilized and good-looking young man. Like magic, Son transforms himself through washing, just as the frog becomes the handsome prince in the fairy story through the love of a woman. It is no wonder that, all of a sudden, Jadine has fallen in love, even though she is probably unaware of it at this initial stage; she has developed her liking for Son because of his “playful” smile, which almost fatally attracts and allures Jadine with its special charms.

The indeterminacy of meaning is further complicated when it comes to the definition of the African American. In terms of African-American culture, Son attempts to transform Jadine’s perspective by imposing and instilling his own preconceived perception of it, naming what his hometown Eloë represents to him without realizing that Eloë is a poor, uncultured and undeveloped black community. As Furman lucidly observes, “perhaps in clinging to Eloë, he [Son] is romanticizing the past and home which to him has always been a place that was presided over by wide black women...” (144). The repeated statement from the omniscient and omnipotent narrator: “But he insisted on Eloë” (223) and “Yet he insisted on Eloë” (225) underlies the importance of the conventional African-American heritage, especially to the runaway Son when the pair of lovers is discussing where they should settle down and start a new life of their own. As Peach astutely asserts, “Traditionally Africa is symbolized for Son by Eloë, but despite its positive qualities—collectivism and egalitarianism—it is a poor, underdeveloped and largely illiterate community” (85). Eloë, the black village, does not resemble the nostalgic paradise where Son envisions enjoying living with Jadine happily ever after. Instead of romanticizing Eloë as an ideal black village of the good old days, Morrison reminds us of the cruel reality of Eloë—a worn-out, poverty-stricken area where the blacks live, struggle, subsist and survive.

Moreover, as Philip Page observes, “In Morrison’s *Tar Baby*, Son attempts to go home again, but his visit to Eloë, the site both of his upbringing and of his accidental murder of his wife, leads to his separation from Jadine and his

permanent exile” (8). Consequently, Eloë, a traditional black village in Morrison's depiction, represents an example of their typical black heritage that African-Americans both love and hate, as evidenced by Son's ambivalent attitude, which he refuses to face.

In opposition to Eloë, New York, as conceived by Jadine, stands for the place where real African-American culture is maintained and sustained. In fact, the Big Apple, metropolitan city and melting pot, merges a diversity of ethnical backgrounds, thanks to which Jadine receives her high-level education and develops her cultural consciousness with a western yardstick. As Jadine convincingly puts it, “This is home. The city had gone on to something more interesting to it than the black people who had fascinated it a decade ago, but if ever there was a black woman's town, New York was it” (222). However, Son thinks “the black girls in New York City were crying and their men were looking neither to the right nor to the left” (185) while he sees their faces as gray and colorless with heavy plum lipstick. As a result, from Son's point of view, New York is a dismal and gloomy city, a completely foreign metropolitan city which he, however has never been before. Therefore, his unfamiliarity with New York is a clear indication of his concept of African-American culture, one that is estranged, unfitting and even inaccurate.

As the story of Jadine and Son unfolds, the ambiguity and ambivalence of meaning is further explicated in similar episodes. The example of the swamp women opens possibilities of various interpretations. At first the swamp women mistake Jadine for an escaped child who has returned to them. However, it appears that Jadine is trying to escape from them. Entangled and engulfed in this haunted black tradition, Jadine refuses to take the easier route by embracing her black cultural heritage wholeheartedly. Throughout the narrative, she is ambivalent about the black culture she is supposed to accept and identify with, especially when the swamp women and later the night women, who represent black women's nurturing and supportive power, constantly appear to her to remind her of her black origin. Indeed, the night women whom Jadine dreams about in Eloë either represent the black womanhood or motherhood that Jadine attempts to avoid. In

her terms the “woman’s woman” is “the mother/sister/she” (47). Therefore, Jadine, symbolizing the present, far away from her original black culture, is completely disconnected from her ancestral mothers, which causes the woman in yellow at the market to spit at her.

The woman with “too much hip” and “too much bust” offers three eggs to Jadine and the night women who boldly expose their child-bearing breasts to her are symbols of fertility, reminding Jadine that she is also part of the black culture. In the waking dream, Jadine conceives of the night women as continually chasing her, but she cannot get rid of them. They look so terrible to her not only in their outer appearance but also in their hostile attitude toward her, for they thrust out their breasts like weapons to frighten and threaten her. As Morrison further delineates the night women that Jadine keeps seeing,

The night women were not merely against her (and her alone—not him), not merely looking superior over their sagging breasts and folded stomachs, they seemed somehow in agreement with each other about her, and were all out to get her, tie her, bind her. Grab the person she had worked hard to become and choke it off with their soft loose tits. (262)

Jadine is terribly frightened when she confronts the nurturing qualities of black womanhood and motherhood that the night women represent as these women attempt to “get her, tie her, bind her and even choke her off” (Ibid.). If Jadine associates the proud and noble woman in yellow with blackness, she is also repelled at the night women who shamelessly expose their saggy breasts to her in public. Indeed, whereas Morrison on the one hand values the traditional African heritage, she also relentlessly reveals Jadine’s ambivalent attitude toward blackness. As Bouson insightfully asserts,

In *Tar Baby* not only is the black elitist Jadine identified as the white-constructed tar baby used to trap Son, the representative black underclass man of the folk, but Jadine also lacks the positive qualities Morrison associates with tar: both the maternal, nurturing qualities that act as a social “glue,” and also the “tar” of blackness that comes from being in touch with one’s African-American roots. (104)

The tarlike qualities of black womanhood, in contrast to the light-skinned Jadine, continuously confound and perplex Jadine with their unresolved dilemmas and identity problems. Being black is not simply an epidermal sign, but refers to and touches upon cultural, social and racial issues.

Jadine is afraid of confronting her black heritage, just as she rejects the night women with their saggy weapons. In this sense, for Jadine, the black past is forever bygone, but it still constantly persists in returning to and invading the present, just as the woman in yellow and the night women do.

Jadine, as the central figure in the narrative, embodies Tar Baby with its intriguing and complex meaning related to being a black woman. As Robert G. O'Meally astutely points out, "In this novel of classic confrontation between the 'bourgeois' black woman and the 'downhome' black man, some of the most passionate writing emerges from passages concerning the meaning of blackness" (34). Morrison does not depict Jadine as the typical black woman who burdens herself with her cultural heritage: she neither blackens up nor universalizes Jadine, who refuses to be categorized as the stereotypical black woman because of her epidermal sign, the color of her skin. Jadine is neither the white culture that she identifies with, nor the black woman constructed by the black tradition, embodied by the night women and woman in yellow. No matter how hard she resists the black culture that Son represents, she belongs in part to the African-American heritage that she persistently denies.

In his discussion of Morrison's *Tar Baby*, Butler-Evans further describes Jadine as follows: "Jadine can be said to represent what had previously been 'unpresentable,' the individual Black woman who deconstructs the notion of 'the Black woman,' a fictive construction generated by the ideological desires of a mythical community" (162). The black woman that Jadine represents, paradoxically, deconstructs the concept of "Black woman" in traditional ideology.

Ondine and Sydney

The paired couple, Ondine and Sydney, black skinned as they are, resemble and respond more like whites, for they are largely influenced and have assimilated

themselves to western standards and concepts, which consider the white race better than the black. As Mbalia asserts, the black servants, Ondine and Sydney, obviously “identify more with their employers and their employers’ culture than they do with their own people and their own culture” (93). When Sydney warns Son not to hang around any longer at the Valerian’s house, he proudly describes himself thus:

I am a Phil-a-delphia Negro mentioned in the book of the very same name. My people owned drugstores and taught school while yours were cutting their faces open so as to be able to tell one of you from the other. And if you looking to lounge here and live off the fat of the land, and if you think I’m going to wait on you, think twice! (163)

The triply divided word “Phil-a-delphia” reinforces the inherited pride that Sydney carries with him, having risen above the black slave’s lowliness in social status. From this point, Sydney regards himself *as if* he were the white master Valerian, admonishing Son for his haughty presumption. Moreover, since Ondine and Sydney have worked for Valerian on the island for more than 30 years, they live in a completely isolated world, detached from the outside world, and thus they seldom involve themselves in the black community. They have no close friends in their daily lives except those working for their king-like white master, Valerian, and his much younger wife, Margaret. As Eleanor W. Traylor points out, “the servants of Margaret and Valerian Street, Ondine and Sydney Childs, are like members of the family. They have nourished and made stable the Street residences for over thirty years” (140). Indeed, they are so involved in the ways of the Street family that they have assimilated the white culture and become indistinguishable from much of the Street family, with no real ties to other blacks except for their blood relationship with Jadine, who would live with them “at Valerian’s house” in the summer.

Besides, Ondine and Sydney live in a suite of their own within Valerian’s huge mansion on Isle des Chevaliers and they rarely associate or mingle with other blacks. It is natural that they adhere to their white master’s lifestyle and way of thinking because they have known Valerian and Margaret for so long. Evidently, Ondine and Sydney are not mere ordinary black servants in the white man’s big

manor house, but are more like companions and guardians of the white family. Not only do they take care of their masters, but they also anticipate their needs and desires to the degree of prescribing for their masters' needs. Like Valerian and Margaret, the black servants, Ondine and Sydney, call the black helpers at the Street house, Gideon and Therese, Yardman and Mary, as if they were the white masters, positioned higher than other blacks as to racial, social, and economic status. As proper Philadelphia Negros, Ondine and Sydney treat Gideon and Terese as insignificant "niggers," a pejorative term with many negative connotations.

A few examples will suffice to clarify that they identify more with the whites than their own race, the blacks. Laden with a tradition of seeking approval from the white masters of the Old South, Ondine and Sydney are black servants who value their white master's praises and preferences. They allow themselves to be called Kingfish and Beuleh by Margaret, their nicknames, and even Ondine refers to Margaret's kitchen as her own place because they treasure their master's possessions and even come to believe that they can be equal with the whites. When their niece, Jadine, stays with them on vacations, Ondine feels secure and comments to Sydney that as long as Jadine is with them on the island, they will not be dismissed from Valerian's house even after openly confronting their white master by verbal attack.

On the other hand, Morrison does not simply categorize these two black servants according to the stereotypical idea that these blacks are being oppressed by their white oppressors. As Furman points out with insight, "Morrison resists any urge to sanctify them [Ondine and Sydney] as oppressed servants" (53). They both share the weaknesses that their white masters possess, for both of them are proud of themselves and seize chances to usurp power whenever possible. Under the façade of a harmonious master-servant relationship, the aggravated and threatening tension between both sides eventually ruptures at its apex on Christmas Eve when the white master and black servants sit together at one table for dinner. As the nonconformist, Son, astutely asserts, "white folks and black folks should not sit down and eat together" (210). Later, Son discusses with Jadine the quarrel that happened at Christmas dinner:

As Jadine recalls the disturbance caused by the Christmas dinner, Son makes his remarks on the white and the black.

“It means,” he said, talking into her hair.

“Oh, Son.” Jadine looked up at him and smiled a tiny smile.

“It’s true,” he said. “They should work together sometimes, but they should not *eat* together or *live* together or *sleep* together. Do any of those personal things in life.” (210, my emphasis)

Both Ondine and Sydney are emotionally hurt when Valerian fires their helpers, Yardman and Mary, for stealing apples without notifying his black servants in advance. Annoyed by Margaret who steps into the kitchen that Ondine both reigns and works in, Ondine naturally vents her emotions during the verbal quarrel with her master Valerian. Ondine thus cries out:

“I’ll tell it. She [Margaret] wants to meddle in my kitchen, fooling around with pies. And *my* help gets fired!”

“*Your* kitchen? *Your* help?” Valerian was astonished.

“Yes my kitchen and yes my help. If not mine, whose?”

“You are losing your mind!” shouted Valerian.

Ondine was fuming now. “The first time in her life she tries to boil water and I get slapped in the face. Keep that bitch out of my kitchen. She’s not fit to enter it. She’s no cook and she’s no mother.” (207)

Ondine regards the white man’s kitchen as exclusively her own because it is the place where she rigorously prepares the meals, working on them single-handedly. It is her sole kingdom that no one else, she insists, can enter without her permission, including her white female master. Upon entering it, Margaret unwittingly offends and unintentionally intrudes into Ondine’s private sphere of influence even though the latter is merely the black cook, in Valerian’s eyes. Similarly, Ondine’s husband, Sydney, has performed his duties as a diligent butler and companion for Valerian and there is no doubt that they have raised themselves thanks to their white master’s financial generosity.

Moreover, the differences between employer and employee have weakened after

their living together for thirty years. Therefore, at the end, the roles of master and servant are partially reversed: Ondine obtains substantial authority, while Valerian has lost some of his power as we see from the quarrel between Ondine and Valerian. Valerian no longer has the same authority as white master. By the same token, Sydney becomes not only Valerian's butler but also his caregiver. Thus, Valerian and Sydney can have the following conversation,

"Sydney, you are drinking my wine."

"Next time that mulatto comes, I'll tell him to bring you back a pair of huaraches."

"I don't want any huaraches."

"Sure you do. Nice pair of huaraches be good for you. You're your feet feel good. This time next year, you'll thank me for em."

"What do you mean, this time next year? I'm going back."

"I figure we're going to be here a long time, Mr. Street. A good long time."

"What's happening here. Something's happening here."

"Don't agitate yourself. Rest your mind." Sydney put down the wineglass, and went to the record player. He held the arm over the record and turned to Valerian. "*We'll give you the best of care. Just like we always done.* That's something you ain't never got to worry about." (278, my emphasis)

Eventually, the differences between master and servant are greatly erased and leveled, for Sydney talks to Valerian more like a comforter, assuring him that he and Ondine will take as good care of him as before.

Thérèse and Gideon

The two black helpers, Thérèse and Gideon, working for the black servants, Ondine and Sydney, in Valerian's household, play a significantly major role in the narrative despite their minor or low social status. Thérèse, like the Greek blind seer Tiresias who directs Odysseus across the River Styx, acts as a prophet and a wiser

black, i.e., one with the mask of a black servant, who is frequently associated with laziness, stupidity and illiteracy. She derisively calls Ondine “machete-hair” when talking to Gideon. She refers to her boss, Sydney, as “the bow-tie,” and to Jadine, the white-constructed black elitist, as the “chippy” and the “fast-ass,” the “bitch” and “cow” (108, 107, 112). The half-joking, half-contemptuous nicknames that she skillfully employs to mock at the upper-class of her black folks immediately turn the social stratum upside down: the upper becomes the lower, the lower the higher, with the power of language. Situated at the fringe of society, the objective and off-center-stage Thérèse is a more credible character than the major characters, Jadine and Son, when she makes casual but crucial comments on the whites.

In recounting the story of Son and Jadine, Thérèse (un)intentionally omits the white couple, ignoring or forgetting their existence. As she tells the romanticized love story, ““I told you!” says Thérèse. “He’s a horseman come down here to get her. He was just skulking around waiting for his chance” (107). She imagines that Son is one of the ancient horse riders who has come down from the island’s hills for Jadine or “he’s an old boyfriend and he the one sent her the box” (108). Thérèse continues making up her inventive romance of the black couple: “And machete-hair she don’t like it. Tried to keep them apart. But it didn’t work. He find her, swim the whole ocean big, till he find her, eh? Make machete-hair too mad. Now she tell her bow-tie husband . . . Bow-tie get mad very. ‘Cause he lives near machete-hair’s thumb . . .” (108). When Gideon reminds her that she has not mentioned the white Americans in the love story of Son and Jadine, Thérèse realizes that indeed she has forgotten their role. However, she honestly replies that she cannot imagine “how would they fit into the story?” (111), indicating that the whites are not part of her story.

For centuries white writers ignore black characters in their mainstream writing and now, through the black underclass Thérèse’s counter-narrative, the position of the blacks has been made lopsided. As Thérèse resumes her contemplation,

She realized then that all her life she thought they felt nothing at all.
Oh, well, yes, she knew they talked and laughed and died and had

babies. But she had never attached any feeling to any of it. She thought of her priest, the shopkeepers, the gendarmes, the schoolteachers Alma talked about, the two little French girls she took care of one day when the governess ran away, and the hundreds of French babies who used to nurse at her magical breasts. What went on inside them? Inside. (112)

The inside of the whites is barely imaginable to Thérèse, just as she never ventures to step inside Valerian's house either. It is not her place, for the whites deny the existence of the blacks in both the social and economic sphere. Indeed, Thérèse, as a lower-class servant in the Valerian household, lacks any identifiable position in the white hierarchy; she is called "Mary" and hired again and again without being given any specific identity, but she is the guardian that leads Son back to the shore of his folk myth, as a visionary prophet for lost blacks. As to Gideon, he pretends that he is illiterate so that he does not have to do extra work that his master would demand; indeed, Gideon is essentially clever with his ideas, for pretending to be illiterate is certainly the best weapon with which to fight the white mistreatment of black servants. Both Thérèse and Gideon, though their masters regard them as ignorant and lazy, are clever enough to break open a window to allow "chocolate-eater" to enter the house, and they take possession of the precious apples that they pick for their white masters. They wear masks to protect themselves from unnecessarily outer harm so that they are able to live comfortably and, at ease among the lower-class ensconced in their familiar social position below the western, white male-dominated bourgeois.

Ending with Unresolved Contentions

Morrison's *Tar Baby* ends with unresolved contentions:

This rescue was not going well. She thought she was rescuing him... He thought he was rescuing her... Each was pulling the other away from the maw of hell—its very ridge top. Each knew the world as it was meant to be or ought to be. One had a past, the other a future and each one bore the culture to save the race in his hands. (267)

According to Pierre-Damien Mvuyekure, Morrison's *Tar Baby* "ends with unresolved contentions," suggesting that "neither of these lovers has a monopoly on how to read culture, the text of Son's own life, or the text of how Jadine's life is connected to those of the community from which both have emerged" (228). The two lovers, Jadine and Son, come from two distinct cultures—one white and one black—from which they emerge and then immerse themselves in after their passionate encounter.

As the seer-prophet Thérèse leads Son in a return to the mythic past, Son encounters the first black blind slaves, who arrived at the island hundreds of years ago. She warns Son to forget Jadine, for Jadine does not possess any genuine cultural heritage. As Thérèse tells Son, "Forget her. There is nothing in her parts for you. She has forgotten her ancient properties" (305). What awaits him ahead are the mythic black ancestors riding horses like angels over the hills. As Thérèse prophetically predicts, "They are waiting in the hills for you. They are naked and they are blind too. I have seen them; their eyes have no color in them. But they gallop; they race those horses like angels all over the hills where the rain forest is, where the champion daisy trees still grow" (263). The bright and romanticized future by way of the past does not make the darkened ending seem positive and affirmative, as evidenced by the ending, "Lickety-split. Lickety-split. Lickety-lickety-lickety-split" (264). The rest of it is left for readers to imagine and interpret.

The unresolved ending of *Tar Baby* highlights the unsettling issues of race, culture and class, which are all mixed up in the Son-Jadine story. Despite the single race that they are supposed to identify with, the paired lovers uncover more differences from within after they fall for each other. As for their educational backgrounds, Son is the illiterate black whereas Jadine is the elite white. In terms of ethnicity, the dyad lovers share and belong to the African-American lineage, which one firmly holds to and the other is inclined to partly avoid and partly accept. The relationship between the blacks and the whites becomes even more densely entangled in cultural, racial and educational issues. However, as meaning is continuously being transcribed and transformed, the love story of Son and Jadine,

just like the multiple versions of the Tar Baby myth, demands the reader's further interpretation and dissection through active participation by way of exploring and examining.

To sum up, the love story of Jadine and Son in Morrison's *Tar Baby* unlocks the possibilities of different interpretations, which solicit the reader's efforts to figure out the meanings of the binary oppositions formed by black and white, man and woman, and master and servant. While Jadine epitomizes the high-class, the beautiful, the present, the white culture, the educated and the civilized African-American woman, Son stands for the exact opposite of her: the low, the ugly, the past, the black culture, the uneducated and the uncivilized African-American man. Besides the differences between the dyad lovers within themselves, more differences are found between the master and servant, the servant and servant-helpers and the husband and wife.

By (de)constructing the pre-set binary oppositions, the traditional concept of hierarchy is made lopsided, as evidenced by the reversed world that Morrison depicts. However ephemeral it is, the mutually romantic relationship established by the paired lovers, Jadine and Son, involves racial, social and educational issues, which complicates and confuses the simple story about love, often requiring (re)adjustment from both sides. Besides the story of the white master and the black servants, the fictional but almost fatal love between Jadine and Son explores and examines different levels of meaning in terms of the dichotomy of black/white, low/high, educated/uneducated on *Isle des Chevaliers*, a no-man's land without the influence of outer forces. Instead of leading the unhappy married life that the white dyad--Valerian and Margaret--have had, or living happily ever after like the prince and the princess in a fairy story, Jadine and Son experience initial fusion and final separation. Despite the world of differences that the lovers share, they have met, loved and parted in the end. However, the unresolved ending of the story suggests the open-endedness of interpretation described in postmodern theories. When employing the concept of Derrida's *différance*--meaning both differ and defer--in analyzing the dichotomy of traditional concepts, Morrison leaves "traces" or spaces for readers to participate in, as they fill in the void with their insights and interpretations.

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