

L I N D A K R U M H O L Z

Blackness and Art in Toni Morrison's *Tar Baby*

I heard Black for the first time in the wake of the Civil Rights movement, in the wake of the de-colonization and nationalistic struggles. Black was created as a political category in a certain historical moment. It was created as a consequence of certain symbolic and ideological struggles. We said, "You have spent five, six, seven hundred years elaborating the symbolism through which Black is a negative factor. Now I don't want another term. I want that term, that negative one, that's the one I want. I want a piece of that action. I want to take it out of the way in which it has been articulated in religious discourse, in ethnographic discourse, in literary discourse, in visual discourse. I want to pluck it out of its articulation and rearticulate it in a new way."

In that very struggle is a change of consciousness, a change of self-recognition, a new process of identification, the emergence into visibility of a new subject. A subject that was always there, but emerging, historically.

Stuart Hall, "Old and New Identities"

In *Tar Baby*, Toni Morrison explores blackness to show readers that we are all implicated in the construction of blackness and to propose ways that black art can reveal and transform those constructions. Many critics have discussed Morrison's engagement with concepts of blackness in *Tar Baby*; most focus on Jadine and Son as representations of beliefs about blackness. For example,

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Yogita Goyal associates Son with black nationalist beliefs and Jadine with concepts of cosmopolitanism and the African diaspora. Goyal argues convincingly that Morrison shows the problems with both characters and their beliefs; she argues that "neither can be upheld as a reliable authority on race or gender, as Morrison uses the two to displace the other's certainties and to reveal their limitations" (406). Many critics, including Goyal, conclude that Morrison favors either Son or Jadine and his or her respective manifestation of blackness, but critics have also emphasized the ambiguity of the novel, an ambiguity described as "multiplicity," "double consciousness," and an embrace of "both/and" rather than "either/or" philosophies.¹ Madelyn Jablon, in an essay about teaching *Tar Baby*, writes that students "realize that Morrison does not ask the audience to choose between assimilationism and nationalism [Jablon's definition of Jadine's and Son's respective positions]. She illuminates the strengths and weaknesses of each and recommends neither" (74). Jablon concludes that the novel "hold[s] up a mirror in which readers can see their own beliefs" (76). Michael Wood similarly argues that readers' interpretations of Morrison's novels often reveal more about the readers' beliefs than Morrison's. Wood argues that through the shifting and indeterminate narrative perspectives in *Paradise*, "when a character articulates what we think, or think we think, or would like to think, this version seems to override all others, to belong to a removed realm of truth, and probably to be the author's own view" (117). While the "paradise" of a "removed realm of truth" is not available to any of the novel's characters, nor to Morrison or the reader, Wood argues that "the temptation itself is part of Morrison's art." In *Tar Baby*, Morrison reveals the temptation of a singular and correct definition of blackness, as well as the high stakes people see in their own beliefs. Son and Jadine embody concepts of blackness, and they also exemplify the investments people have in

1. Craig Werner emphasizes the "multiplicity" of mythic and interpretive frameworks in *Tar Baby* and concludes, "Morrison provides no pat answers" (156, 165). Judylyn S. Ryan argues that Jadine needs to shift from the distortions of "double-consciousness" to the cultural breadth of "double-vision" (605). Madelyn Jablon cites Deborah E. McDowell's assertion that Morrison's fiction demands a "shift from an either/or orientation to one that is both/and, full of shifts and contradictions" (80) and agrees that *Tar Baby* "suggest[s] a way of thinking preferable to Kierkegaard's dichotomy of 'either/or'" (74).

their own definitions of blackness; when each struggles to "rescue" the other, Morrison writes, "Each was pulling the other away from the maw of hell—its very ridge top. Each knew the world as it was meant or ought to be" (269). In *Tar Baby*, as in *Paradise*, Morrison provokes readers to grapple with both the desire to know and the dangers of knowing "the world as it was meant or ought to be." Morrison immerses readers in competing concepts of blackness to show the pitfalls in constructing meanings of blackness, while at the same time asserting the urgent need to engage with those meanings.

In *Tar Baby*, blackness is active and productive; it is an approach to history and knowledge that requires certain aesthetic strategies. Several critics of *Tar Baby* have explored the link between blackness and aesthetics. Malin Walther reads *Tar Baby* as a revision of *The Tempest*, in which Valerian is the artist-magician Prospero, Jadine the orphaned Miranda, and Son the savage Caliban; Walther creates a compelling argument that "Morrison targets colonialism as the root of aesthetic hegemony, revealing art's inherent politics" (138). Maria DiBattista reads *Tar Baby* in relation to Morrison's epigraph; she argues that the contentions in the "house of Chloe" are Morrison's own contending ideas about black writing, and that *Tar Baby* is "a cautionary tale about the risks inherent in black writing" (98).² Like Walther, I argue that Morrison links aesthetics to history and power, and like DiBattista, I read the novel as a drama of Morrison's contending ideas about blackness and art. But Walther's conclusion that "Eurocentric aesthetics was the tar baby" (147) and DiBattista's focus on Morrison's choice between realist and romance fiction conventions do not account for the complexity and thoroughness of Morrison's treatment of blackness and aesthetics in *Tar Baby*.

Morrison constructs blackness not as a form of judgment or standards but as a history, a rhetoric, an ethics, a way of seeing and knowing the world, and as an aesthetic that encompasses all of these things. Morrison writes about *Tar Baby*, "I simply wanted to write literature that was irrevocably, indisputably Black, not because its characters were, or because I was, but because it took as its creative

2. Morrison's epigraph, from 1 Corinthians 1:11, reads, "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." Chloe is Morrison's birth name.

task and sought as its credentials those recognized and verifiable principles of Black art" ("Memory" 389).³ Morrison does not construct black aesthetics as a choice between European or African and African American traditions; as Jablon argues, *Tar Baby* "asserts the impossibility of disengaging African American culture from Western culture" (*Black Metafiction* 97).⁴ Morrison's black aesthetic does not designate and categorize right or wrong formal approaches. Morrison's black aesthetic is not inherent in all African Americans, nor is it exclusive to black Americans, but its philosophical roots in black culture as well as in the perspective of the oppressed make it more apparent and available to black people. In *Tar Baby*, the black aesthetic reveals blackness and its meanings; it makes visible the often invisible and inescapable ideologies of race; it shows the ways in which struggles over racial meanings have real consequences in the world; and it shows readers their activity and complicity in the production and consumption of blackness. In this way, the novel *Tar Baby* becomes the reader's tar baby; we are immersed in the tar, in the meanings of blackness, and we must work through the ways of thinking that make blackness horrifying, threatening, or liberating.

In the novel, an anonymous black man, later known as Son, jumps ship and finds his way to the estate of a white American candy magnate, Valerian Street, on a Caribbean island; there the man hides and steals food until he is discovered by Valerian's wife, Margaret. Valerian's household includes the black servants Sydney and Ondine Childs and their orphaned niece Jadine Childs, who was raised by her aunt and uncle and sent to school by Valerian.

3. In "Memory, Creation, and Writing," Morrison defines the characteristics of the "aesthetic tradition of Afro-American culture" as "antiphony, the group nature of art, its functionality, its improvisational nature, its relationship to audience performance, the critical voice which upholds tradition and communal values and which also provides occasion for an individual to transcend and/or defy group restrictions" (389). These characteristics are meant to be descriptive rather than prescriptive; she writes, "Nothing would be more hateful to me than a monolithic prescription for what Black literature is or ought to be."

4. Jablon states that the novel "has its origin in a myth [the tar baby story] that asserts the impossibility of disengaging African American culture from Western culture." Jablon describes this as a change in Morrison's beliefs from *Song of Solomon*, in which "Milkman's acceptance of and entry into the myth of the flying African [is] a process of de-Westernization."

Jadine finds herself socially between worlds; she is a cosmopolitan fashion model with an art degree from a university in Paris. Son's presence forces to the surface the hidden stories, both the ways the entire household ignores and dehumanizes the Caribbean servants, Thérèse, Gideon, and Alma Estée, and that Margaret abused her son Michael when he was an infant. After revelations shake the household, Jadine and Son run away together, travel to "her" town of New York City and "his" in Eloë, Florida. They love and fight passionately until Jadine runs away and Son returns to the Isle des Chevaliers to find her or join the mythic horsemen.

I argue that Morrison connects certain aesthetic choices in *Tar Baby* to blackness: she converts long-standing representations of blackness—as absence and excess—into rhetorical strategies; she uses the word "tar" to dismantle the embedded racism in language; and she refers to African concepts of masks and Nommo to define active relationships between the text, the readers, and the world. I also argue that the plot works as a metafiction about the history and purpose of black art. Through her investigation of blackness and aesthetics in *Tar Baby*, Morrison delves into representations of blackness while she describes the role of language in ideology, the ways in which art and culture intersect with politics and economics, and the ways in which literature can engage with and transform readers, and thus transform cultural meanings and their manifestations in the world.

Absence and Excess

In the first aesthetic strategy I discuss, the use of textual absences and excesses, Morrison converts traditional representations of blackness into aesthetic choices; specifically, racialized associations of blackness with absence and excess become rhetorical strategies that comment on and transform systems of representation. Blackness has been used to signify many kinds of absence—the absence of light, of goodness and purity, of rationality. These definitions and others have informed racial ideologies of white superiority while also contributing to the larger erasures and absences of black people from history and even from humanity. In a wonderful scene in *Sula*, Morrison evokes the historical association of blackness with absence,

then reverses it. The shell-shocked Shadrack finds definition when a potentially demeaning moment becomes instead a revelation; he looks at his reflection in the water of a toilet in a jail cell and sees "[a] blackness so definite, so unequivocal, it astonished him" (13).

The strategies of absence that Morrison uses in *Tar Baby* are familiar from her other novels: she calls attention to absences through the prolonged absence of a central character, through historical allusions and elisions, and through references to secrets and untold stories. In *Tar Baby*, Michael, the son of Valerian and Margaret and the focus of attention in the Street household, never appears. Michael is figured as a sacrificial victim, and his absence is a central motivating and symbolic presence. Michael's ever-present absence is reminiscent of Sula's absences in *Sula*, as well as Beloved's role as the historical, psychological, and symbolic presence and absence around which *Beloved* focuses. Morrison also alludes to historical events without elaboration in many of her novels; obvious examples are references to wars in *Sula*, to Emmett Till's lynching and the killing of four girls in a Birmingham church in *Song of Solomon*, and to the Middle Passage in *Beloved*. In *Tar Baby*, Morrison alludes to the history of sugar, a story at the center of the economic and social relations in Valerian's house and at the center of colonization and enslavement in the Americas. In her novels, the marked absence of characters and histories is further emphasized by references to the silences surrounding individual lives and collective histories, to the stories of horror and suffering that have not been told and can hardly be articulated or grasped in language—what Morrison calls the "unspeakable things unspoken."⁵

Morrison's use of strategic absences calls attention to what is absent or silenced in our collective knowledge and history. Paul Gilroy makes clear the simultaneous impossibility and necessity of representing what is outside of utterance and historical acceptability: "some black writers have already begun the vital work of enquiring into terrors that exhaust the resources of language amidst the debris of a catastrophe which prohibits the existence of their art at the same time as demanding its continuance" (218). Stuart

5. Morrison's phrase "unspeakable thoughts, unspoken" (*Beloved* 199) is transformed in her essay title to "Unspeakable Things Unspoken."

Hall writes, "Everything that can be spoken is on the ground of the enormous voices that have not, or cannot yet be heard" (48). Through narrative absences, Morrison calls attention to these other absences, and she incites readers to fill the textual and historical absences with knowledge and imagination. Part of the power of Morrison's novels is that she makes readers want to know things in order to fill absences in the narrative that, on many levels, they may not want to know, about the world and themselves.

Blackness has also been associated with excess. Where whiteness is posited as the unraced norm, blackness is the racialized excess. In keeping with the contradictory nature of racial stereotypes, blackness and black people are simultaneously invisible and hypervisible, represented as excessive in emotions, dress, and self-expression. In Morrison's novels, excess has been represented by the phrase "too much." This phrase is most familiar in *Beloved*, where it represents both white excess, the excesses of white horrors inflicted upon enslaved black people, and the concomitant black excess, the psychological and emotional consequences of being pushed beyond one's limits. In *Tar Baby*, "too much" is connected to aesthetic judgments, especially those of Jadine, who visually satisfies and embraces Western aesthetics; she describes both the beauty of the African woman in Paris and the lush nature of the Caribbean island as "too much" (45, 68).⁶

Like absence, excess provokes readers to engage with and create meaning. Susan Corey situates Morrison's use of aesthetic extremes within theories of the grotesque, in which "the grotesque is an aesthetic form that works through exaggeration, distortion, contradiction, disorder, and shock to disrupt a sense of normalcy" (32). Like the carnivalesque, the grotesque pushes readers beyond the limits of social and imaginative norms. Corey concludes, "With its capacity to surprise, shock, and disrupt complacency, the grotesque brings readers to a heightened state of awareness and involves them in the process of making meaning" (47). Besides the aesthetic excess defined by the grotesque, Morrison uses other forms of textual excess in *Tar Baby* to create "too much" meaning and thereby

6. Walther also describes "too much" as Jadine's acceptance of Eurocentric aesthetics (144).

disrupt interpretive stability. For example, there is an excess of literary allusions made evident by the range of critical readings. Walther reads *Tar Baby* in relation to *The Tempest*, Lauren Lepow to the Biblical fall and Milton's *Paradise Lost*, Terry Otten to the Biblical fall, Sandra Pouchet Paquet to Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, Eleanor W. Traylor to Olaudah Equiano's narrative and Richard Wright's *Native Son*, Trudier Harris and Judylyn Ryan to slave narratives, Julia V. Emberley to Frantz Fanon's *Black Skin, White Masks*, and a number of critics, including Harris, Craig Werner, and Madelyn Jablon (*Black Metafictions*), to the tar baby story. While one textual antecedent may clarify a text, this excess of intertextuality destabilizes meaning. Morrison likewise uses an excess of imagery that suffuses the novel with interpretive possibilities. Finally, she creates a linguistic excess that disrupts signifying systems, which I discuss in regard to the word "tar."

By employing blackness as an aesthetic strategy, Morrison confronts the ways that black people have been both excessively represented and made absent in white literature, history, and ideology. Morrison's narrative strategies of excess and absence also make her novels difficult to understand and interpret and thus connect blackness to an ethics of reading and knowledge. Both James Phelan and Doris Sommer argue that the difficulty of Morrison's fiction defines an ethical relationship with readers. The text resists interpretive mastery and full comprehension because full comprehension implies an appropriation of difference to one's own meaning that erases the difference of another's experience, a difference that remains, at some level, unknowable.⁷ Morrison's novels resist being fully understood and consumed, but she uses the drive to comprehend, even to master the text, as a lure to knowledge, which can lead to (a sometimes devastating) self-knowledge. The difficulties of

7. Both Phelan and Sommer are writing about *Beloved*. Phelan defines *Beloved* as a "stubborn" text that leads readers to desire to "possess" its secrets while reminding readers of the hubris involved in the drive for interpretive mastery; the way in which *Beloved* engages readers in the complexity of desire and responsibility, he argues, comprises an ethics of reading. Sommer uses Levinas to support her idea that *Beloved's* resistance to interpretation undermines Western claims to the universality of art and experience. She writes, "resistant texts erect ethical constraints" (24). In *Tar Baby*, the interpretive difficulty similarly constructs an ethics of reading.

Morrison's novels engage readers in the pleasure and power of interpretation, of creating meaning, while they remind us of the limits on and the responsibility for the meaning we create.

Tar

In another aesthetic strategy connected to blackness, Morrison uses tar to represent blackness and then draws on all of the definitions of "tar" to create an excess of meaning that undermines the opposition between blackness and whiteness in racial and racist formulations. Critics generally agree that "tar" represents blackness, and many read Jadine's and Son's responses to tar to indicate their feelings about black identity. For Jadine, tar represents both black identity and the white stereotypical beliefs about blackness that threaten her. Jadine's first confrontation with tar occurs in Paris when she is shopping for food to celebrate three achievements: she is on the cover of *Elle* magazine, she passed her orals in art history, and three "gorgeous" men clamor for her favors (44). The appearance of the beautiful African woman in the canary yellow dress with "skin like tar" and "tar-black fingers" raises all of Jadine's conflicting feelings about white standards of success and about blackness, so she flees Europe (45, 46). In Jadine's subsequent encounters, tar represents everything that shames and frightens her. When Son wishes to "breathe into her the smell of tar and its shiny consistency" (120), Jadine associates the smell with uncontrollable sexuality and animal nature; she describes him as a rapist and a baboon, and she connects herself to the bitch in heat who is beaten for her own nature and others' desires (121, 123). Immediately after she gives in to her desire and considers sleeping with Son, she falls into the quicksandlike tar pit; after her struggle she has "rot" sticking to her like "pitch" (183, 185). Like Helga Crane in Nella Larsen's *Quicksand*, Jadine struggles within and against white representations of blackness as sensual, animalistic, and sexually voracious. In the "pitch-dark room" in Eloë, all of Jadine's unconscious fears in the form of dead and living women, the "night women," threaten to engulf her in images of blackness, femininity, and death (258-59). The only times Jadine feels safe in the blackness are when she and Son make love and Son transforms "tar" into a throbbing "star" (214, 292).

Tar, like blackness, is associated both with absence and excess; it is dark and dread, void of light, form, or meaning, and it is natural, wild, sticky, smelly, out of control, always leaving behind a persistent residue. Tar signifies blackness as it has been constituted in ideologies of race, as well as its possible meanings beyond those ideologies; thus tar is the trap of white dominant ideology and the way to become free of it. In Spike Lee's film *Malcolm X*, Malcolm learns in prison that definitions of "black" and "white" construct an imprisoning racial logic; Abdul R. JanMohamed describes "black" and "white" as part of a "Manichean allegory" that "is based on a transformation of racial difference into moral and even metaphysical difference" (80). In *Playing in the Dark*, Morrison explains, "The kind of work I have always wanted to do requires me to learn how to maneuver ways to free up the language from its sometimes sinister, frequently lazy, almost always predictable employment of racially informed and determined chains" (xi). Tar is the sticky stuff of ideology, the culturally constructed meanings internalized in language and our unconscious minds, and it is the potential transformation through knowledge and self-knowledge that enables and requires us to see (in and through) blackness. In *Tar Baby*, Morrison uses tar to free the language from its signifying chains, to play in and with the dark.

Morrison uses the multiple meanings of tar to dismantle racial ideologies perpetuated in language and to unlock the signifying chains. "Tar" is defined in the *Oxford English Dictionary* as a "thick, viscid, black or dark-coloured, inflammable liquid, obtained by the destructive distillation of wood (esp. pine, fir, or larch), coal, or other organic substance." Tar derives from wood, and the word derives from an Old English word for "tree." According to the *OED*, "coal-tar" is the basis for charcoal, for certain medicinal treatments, and for dyes, most notably for "mauve." "Coal-tar" is one of three naturally occurring forms of carbon; carbon is the basic element of all organic life, an element with "a great affinity for bonding" whose "forms include one of the softest (graphite) and one of the hardest (diamond) substances known."⁸ "Tar" has other meanings in the *OED*: as a noun it is a label for sailors and a derogatory reference to

8. Some of the language in this sentence comes from a now-defunct definition in Wikipedia; the assertions are verifiable, and I find the language useful for my argument.

mixed race or dark-skinned people ("tar-pot," "tar baby"); as a verb, it means to beat unmercifully ("beat the tar out of"), to smear with tar, or to dirty or defile ("tarred with the same brush").

In *Tar Baby*, Morrison draws on multiple meanings of "tar" as well as related references to pitch, charcoal, mauve, and graphite; these references come up most frequently in relation to Son. Son is a "tar," a sailor, who dives into the "pitch-black sea" (4). He wants to "breathe into [Jadine] the smell of tar and its shiny consistency," he wears "mauve silk pajamas," and he brings Valerian's "mauve" petaled hydrangea back to life with his "black magic" (120, 113, 187, 189). When he showers, "[t]he water that ran into the drain was dark—charcoal gray" (132). His hair connects him to trees—"it was like foliage and from a distance it looked like nothing less than the crown of a deciduous tree" (132)—and when it is cut, "great clouds of glittering graphite hair fell to the floor," connecting Son to both tar and writing (150).

Tar, in *Tar Baby*, signifies blackness well beyond traditional connotations of evil, negation, absence, and death; blackness takes on new metaphysical and even spiritual meanings. It is the basis of organic life with an affinity for bonding; thus blackness is a basic element of nature and human society. Blackness is soft and hard and in between; it is related to graphite, used for writing and art, and to diamonds, the epitome of beauty and value. Through tar, blackness signifies racial denigration, physical punishment, and dirt, but it also signifies life, language, art, the material and spiritual worlds, trees, creativity, medicine, color, and beauty. "Tar" constructs an excess of meaning, the slippage of meaning that allows blackness to escape the oppositional logic of "black" and "white" and to undermine the structure of meaning on which racial ideology depends. "Tar" is also an anagram for "art."

Most critics discuss tar in Morrison's novel in relation to the Tar Baby tale. In a common version of the tale, a white farmer creates a tar baby to catch Brer Rabbit. Brer Rabbit tries to speak with the tar baby, but he is answered by silence, so he hits it and gets caught in the tar. When the farmer gets hold of him, Brer Rabbit tricks the farmer into throwing him into the briar patch, his home and safety. In most readings of *Tar Baby*, Brer Rabbit is associated with black people struggling against white domination, and the tar baby is a deception created by white society that compels black people's

complicity and entrapment. My argument here is similar, since I argue that the tar baby and tar represent white constructions of blackness in general. But in *Tar Baby*, there is no safety, no briar patch, no place outside of white ideology for characters or readers. Instead of condemning the tar baby, the silent white construction of blackness, Morrison delves into the tar in order to investigate and transform its construction. Morrison makes the silent tar baby—and the tar—speak. By giving the tar, the blackness itself, a voice, the white construction of blackness is answered, the imposed silence broken; the trap becomes ineffectual. In this way, Morrison is also Brer Rabbit, the trickster, who reverses the power arrangement through linguistic finesse. This is the potential of black art, to create a new tar baby, an imaginative production born through the voice and view of blackness that challenges the racial logic of America.

Masks and Nommo

While masks and "Nommo" are referred to only briefly in *Tar Baby*, they give clues to the African theories of art that inform Morrison's aesthetic purposes throughout her fiction; masks describe an active relationship between author and reader, and Nommo, an African word that has come to mean the generative power of naming, defines the power of language and writing to shape the world.⁹ In an often-cited passage, Morrison alludes to African masks when Jadine says to Valerian: "Picasso is better than an Itumba mask. The fact that he was intrigued by them is proof of *his* genius, not the mask-makers'" (74). As many critics note, this statement makes clear Jadine's embrace of European aesthetic criteria, but it also situates Morrison's aesthetic choices in relation to African and European philosophies of art. Masks are central to Janheinz Jahn's comparisons between African and European concepts of art in *Muntu: African Culture and the Western World*. Jahn explains that in African art, the mask is

9. Nommo is the name of a deity of the Dogon people of Mali; for many West Africans and African Americans, Nommo has come to mean the spiritual power of the word, the creative power of language or naming. Janheinz Jahn clarifies the concept of Nommo as a spiritual and creative force through a comparison to the concept of Logos: "Logos has made all things, once for all, to become as they are, and since then all generated things remain as they are, and undergo no further transformation. Nommo, on the other hand, goes on unceasingly creating and procreating, creating even gods" (132).

created both by the artist who sculpts it and the dancer who wears it: "For just as the poem is incomplete if it is not recited, so the mask is incomplete so long as no one wears it, so long as it is not used" (171). Here he clarifies one difference between African and European art: "The African work of art, whether poetry, music, carving or mask, is 'complete' only when it is Nommo, productive word, effective word, or function. If it loses its functional efficacy it becomes valueless" (172). Jahn argues, unlike Jadine, that European artists such as Picasso, "when they made the acquaintance of African visual art, at once understood its creative magic." But for modernists, the art object was a self-enclosed artifact; art was not meant to be functional or creative in the world. Morrison's evocation of African masks represents her desire to produce black art that is actively creative in the world, an art that becomes functional through a dynamic collaboration between the author and the reader.

Morrison further elaborates on the functional role of art in "Unspeakable Things Unspoken," when she uses masks to describe *Tar Baby*. In the passage, masks connect the assumption of social roles to the transformative possibilities of art:

The Tar Baby tale seemed to me to be about masks. Not masks as covering what is to be hidden, but how masks come to life, take life over, exercise the tensions between itself and what it covers. For Son, the most effective mask is none. For the others the construction is careful and delicately borne, but the masks they make have a life of their own and collide with those they come in contact with. The texture of the novel seemed to want leanness, architecture that was worn and ancient like a piece of mask sculpture: exaggerated, breathing, just athwart the representational life it displaced. Thus, the first and last sentences had to match, as the exterior planes match the interior, concave ones inside the mask.

(30-31)

Morrison begins by talking about the characters and how they exemplify the ways that masks function. Here masks resemble social roles and performances as well as the social beliefs and conflicts that are manifested through them. She concludes by comparing the novel to "a piece of mask sculpture" (30). Although she uses the analogy to describe the fit between the first and last sentences, implicit in the analogy is another image of the novel as a mask that the author creates and the reader wears. The mask here is also more

than the relationship between author and reader. The worn and ancient architecture implies that the novel is shaped by history; the mask brings history to life. The mask both locates and dislocates the reader. Its fit comprises a mode of seeing created by the author and brought to life through interactions among history, the author, and the reader. But the mask is also "exaggerated," too much, "athwart," misaligned. Morrison creates a way of seeing while also making readers uncomfortable at times, so we are made aware of the fiction and the mask. Thus the mask represents fiction's power to let readers see through another's eyes, while it also points to the limits in our access to other's perspectives, limits that send us back to ourselves and create a potential for self-evaluation and knowledge.

In Jahn's explanation of African art, masks manifest the power of Nommo. In *Tar Baby*, Nommo is the name of an angry, homeless young black woman whom Son and Jadine befriend briefly; Morrison alludes to Nommo only through this enigmatic appearance during the height of Son and Jadine's love affair (227–28). Nommo is the spiritual power of language; it makes language material, active, and creative. The spiritual concept of Nommo is much different from poststructuralist concepts of language in ideology, but in both, language creates what it names. In *Tar Baby*, Morrison repeatedly names body parts—hair, eyes, breasts, hands, and feet—especially of black people's bodies. Morrison's evocation of bodies is reminiscent of Baby Suggs's words in the Clearing when she names the parts of formerly enslaved people's bodies that they must retrieve, psychologically and symbolically.

Morrison's treatment of food in *Tar Baby* likewise represents the power of Nommo, the power of naming to create reality. *Tar Baby* is bursting with references to food; food signifies temptation and desire, nurturance and love, taste and aesthetics, while it defines social arrangements and economic relationships. Food also reveals the relationship between representations and the material world, between cultural and economic power.¹⁰ In *Tar Baby*, food defines the

10. Eleanor W. Traylor, Marilyn Sanders Mobley, and Peter B. Erickson read food as an indicator of nourishing or nurturing relationships; Mobley expands the cultural significance of this nourishment in her assertion that Morrison's art is a form of cultural sustenance. Andrew Warnes discusses food in *Tar Baby* as a representation of African American history and experiences.

social order; it locates people and designates their social position. For example, in the first chapter, every conversation but one centers on food, and the preparation, service, consumption, and preferences of food establish the roles and judgments of the characters. Food defines relationships between the kitchen and the dining room (dictated by racial and class distinctions), between the Caribbean and the States (clarified by Margaret's demands for turkey, pumpkin, and apples), and among social classes (Ondine belittles Margaret's lower-class taste when she says, "Even the colored people down here don't eat mangoes" [33]). The novel delineates the relationship between the production and consumption of food and the production and consumption of cultural meanings; Morrison tells us who eats what, where, and with whom, who prepares the food, and in the case of sugar, its source in the fields and factories. Because food is the only commodity that we literally consume, our physical bodies are constituted by cultural meanings; food underlines the material consequences of cultural meanings. Morrison also makes clear that the concept of "social location" is not simply a theoretical tool; it always points to real material locations and relations, to people's lives, minds, and bodies as they are constituted by the production and consumption of commodities and meaning.

Words, histories, and representations shape and create bodies and people's relations to their bodies. Through Son's perspective, we also get some of Morrison's most overt economic views regarding the contemporary lives of oppressed people; we are shown the people whose labor brings the food. The naming of the basic necessities of life and of the bodies of those who produce and consume those necessities reminds readers of the real people, the real relations of power, and the real hunger to which the fictional world refers. Morrison's statement "For Son, the most effective mask is none" captures the contradiction that the efficacy of fiction is in its revelation of the real world. It also indicates Son's role as a representation of black art, of fiction itself, as an unmasking of the relationship between author, text, and reader.

Tar Baby: The Story of Black Art

In *Tar Baby*, Morrison uses figures and concepts of blackness as the basis for aesthetic choices in order to create a specifically black art

while engaging with, disrupting, and reconstructing representations of blackness. Her aesthetic choices experiment with the link between blackness and art, while the plot, the story of the anonymous black man, is a metafiction about the creation of black art and the ways in which fictions participate in the construction of the world. In *Metafiction: The Theory and Practice of Self-Conscious Fiction*, Patricia Waugh defines metafiction as literary works in which writers "explore a *theory* of fiction through the *practice* of writing fiction" (2). In *Black Metafictions*, Jablon describes an African American tradition of literary self-consciousness and metafictional theorizing. Because in metafiction the theory emerges from the literature, Jablon proposes that the analysis of metafiction is a way to seek and develop distinctively African American theoretical approaches. Jablon includes *Tar Baby* as an example of metafiction because of its self-conscious revision of and intertextual dialogue with the tar baby story, but I read *Tar Baby* as a type of metafiction that Jablon calls a "mimesis of process," characteristic of novels that "focus on their own production and often suggest that the production of this text is parallel to the creative process that we are involved in in the creation of the world" (27). Metafiction inquires into the relationship between the fictional and real worlds. Waugh writes:

Metafiction is a term given to fictional writing which self-consciously and systematically draws attention to its status as an artefact in order to pose questions about the relationship between fiction and reality. In providing a critique of their own methods of construction, such writings not only examine the fundamental structures of narrative fiction, they also explore the possible fictionality of the world outside the literary fictional text.

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In *Tar Baby*, Morrison uses metafiction to "explore the possible fictionality of the world," but she does not do it in order to produce a postmodern despair regarding the ability to create history and meaning; instead Morrison interrogates the ways in which fictional constructions have real consequences and indeed constitute the real.¹¹ Michael Wood describes a similar process in *Paradise*; he

11. In *Black Metafictions*, Jablon identifies these beliefs as "the new realism"; she writes, "Unlike the postmodernists, who questioned objective reality, new realists view reality as a social construct built on a consensus of opinion" (108n11).

argues that the novel re-creates for readers the ways in which fictions create reality for the characters:

[T]he freedom of fiction not only permits the imagining of alternatives to the given world, it infiltrates the world itself, reshapes it. It is true the world to be reshaped is fictional, but then the historical world too has often been altered by powerful fictions—of racial superiority among other notable things. The open intervention of fiction within Morrison's fiction is not floating self-reference but a model for the mind's capacity to change what it sees—its real but not limitless capacity.

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The characters' investments in their own versions of paradise reveal "the mind's capacity to change what it sees"; the novel reveals the ways in which fictions, such as the ideal of paradise, function to shape and limit perceptions and thereby to create the world. In *Tar Baby*, Morrison initiates a similar inquiry into the ways in which concepts of blackness and the fictions of race construct the real world.¹²

In Morrison's metafictional subtext, the anonymous black man enacts theories about blackness and art. In the prologue, he is described as the tar baby, an imaginative production of author and reader, born into imaginations already saturated with a history of cultural meanings. In the first chapters, the man's presence on Valerian's estate dramatizes the history of representations of blackness and the struggle for black self-representations within white culture. Finally, Son demonstrates the role of black art to reveal what is hidden behind white liberal formulations of culture; Son reveals the structural inequalities, the relationship of culture to economics, and the ways in which constructions of blackness can reinforce or potentially transform relations of power.

12. Morrison's formulation of blackness as a fiction with real existence and consequences is similar to the definition of race given by Michael Omi and Howard Winant, who write: "There is a continuous temptation to think of race as an *essence*, as something fixed, concrete, and objective. And there is also an opposite temptation: to imagine race as a mere *illusion*, a purely ideological construct which some ideal non-racist social order would eliminate. It is necessary to challenge both these positions, to disrupt and reframe the rigid and bipolar manner in which they are posed and debated, and to transcend the presumably irreconcilable relationship between them. . . . Thus we should think of race as an element of social structure rather than as an irregularity within it; we should see race as a dimension of human representation rather than an illusion" (54–55).

In the prologue to *Tar Baby*, Morrison depicts the conception of the work of art within literary history and the history of colonial and racial domination. The anonymous man is the tar baby. He is connected to tar as a sailor and as a black man whose "skin blended well with the dark waters," the "pitch-black sea" (3, 4). He is like a baby, without identity or possessions, with "no things to gather—no book of postage stamps, no razor blade or key to any door," and with the overwhelming hunger of a newborn (3, 7).¹³ The man is born in "water that heaved and pulsed in the ammonia-scented air" (4); Morrison clarifies this birth imagery elsewhere and describes the "disruption caused by the man born out of the womb of the sea accompanied by ammonia odors of birth" ("Memory" 390). The prologue describes the birth of black art, of the tar baby, in the mind of the author and the reader.

The prologue also addresses the complex relationship between the author and the reader. The anonymous man decides: "It was better not to plan, not to have a ready-made story because, however tight, prepared stories sounded most like a lie. The sex, weight, the demeanor of whomever he encountered would inform and determine his tale" (5). One challenge for a novelist is to achieve this flexibility with a written text. The man's desire to reach Dominique, with its echoes of God and power—"Domini," "dominion," "domination"—and his coercion by the "water-lady" suggest the author's hand and the struggles of both author and readers with authorial control (4–6). If one reads the prologue as a contemplation of the relations between text, author, and reader, then the first sentence of the novel—"He believed he was safe"—refers not only to a false sense of safety in the man but also to a false sense of security in author and reader as they begin the book (3).¹⁴

The work of black art, the tar baby, is also born into historical and literary contexts that shape its inception by the author and its

13. The list of negatives here, and in a similar description in *Sula* of Shadrack's release from the hospital (12), also suggests the condition of Africans brought forcibly to the Americas.

14. Regarding the first sentence and the idea of safety in *Tar Baby*, Morrison writes: "The unease about this view of safety is important because safety itself is the desire of each person in the novel. Locating it, creating it, losing it" ("Unspeakable" 30).

reception by the reader. The sea into which the man dives, a traditional symbol of the unconscious mind, is filled with literary and cultural allusions, some of which I have mentioned, including *The Tempest*, *Moby-Dick*, Olaudah Equiano's narrative, stories of the Middle Passage, Genesis, and Virginia Woolf's *The Waves*. The birth of black art is also set within the history of colonialism, the point of origin of racial constructions of black and white. The ship from which the man leaps is named the HMS *Stor Konigsgaarten*, a name that connects monarchy and European power with the Edenic myth. "King's Garden" neatly conflates God and king, as did Europeans in justifying colonial conquest and slavery. Thus Morrison locates this new artistic creation within the powerful creation myths of the Garden of Eden and the New World, underscoring the power of fictional narratives.

The anonymous black man's arrival on Valerian's island estate precipitates the romance plot, but it also portrays the history of black representations and the struggle for black self-representations in white culture. The man's entry into the estate is first described with images of slavery. After a "bracelet of water . . . tightened around his ankles," the man arrives, like transported Africans, at "[t]he end of the world" (4, 9). Valerian's household replicates the social hierarchy and dynamics of a southern plantation. The anonymous man's initial invisibility and eventual reception in Valerian's household reveal the constitutive role of black men in white culture, a role Morrison treats in greater depth in *Playing in the Dark*. The man's silent passage through the house while the inhabitants sleep and dream represents the ways in which unconscious fears and desires have been projected on to the black man. He first appears to Margaret who, in her horror, describes him as "Black" and "disgusting," an obvious projection of her own shame (79, 83). The man appears next to Valerian, who sees him as an avatar and "forepresence" of his son Michael (143). The man does not show up again until (over thirty pages later) he appears in Jadine's mirror. Between his appearances in the dining room and in Jadine's room, the man is referred to by Margaret, Jadine, Sydney, and Ondine as "the nigger." When he finally materializes in Jadine's mirror, a reflection of her internalized fears about and desires for blackness, her attention to his smell, his hair, and his sexuality reinforces all of the stereotypes of black men as violent,

animalistic rapists (113). The fears he embodies for Jadine, and for Margaret, Sydney, and Ondine, represent the ways blackness and "niggers" have been constructed to police the desires and behaviors of black people and white women.

The man's subsequent transformation and acceptance into the household signal the historical emergence of African American self-expression; Son now has a name and a narrative point of view, and he is beautiful. Son's process of cleaning up is figured suggestively both as a rebirth and as a loss of blackness. His shower is suffused with images of rebirth; the soap tastes of milk, the shampoo contains "placenta protein" (132). After the "charcoal gray" water washes down the drain, Son wraps himself in "an Easter white towel" (132, 140). The emphasis on "Easter white," repeated three times in the paragraph, brings together rebirth with the recurring motif of dirt and cleanliness and its associations with blackness and whiteness in the novel. Showered and wrapped in the white towel, Son looks out the window at Yardman's back, and the contrast between their situations is too painful for him: "You would have thought something was leaving him and all he could see was its back" (140). Son's distress reflects the concern of many black and subaltern writers who find that when they are put in a position to speak for the folk, they are already set at a distance from them.¹⁵

15. Once Son and Jadine leave the island, the ways in which the story can be read in relation to the history of black art become more complicated; the struggles between their ideas of blackness and culture have been the focus of most critical debates about the novel. I will add two suggestions. First, one could connect Jadine's role in Valerian's household to the history of representations of black women, from the tragic mulatta whose beauty and "whiteness" gave her special status in white culture to black women's fictional creations like Hurston's Janie and Larsen's Helga Crane. Second, Jadine and Son may represent the authorial conflict reflected in the words "aesthetic" and "rapport," words from *Sula* that are discussed in Barbara Johnson's wonderful analysis of that novel. Johnson writes, "If aesthetics is taken as the domain of the contemplation of forms, implying detachment and distance, and rapport is taken as the dynamics of connectedness, the two words name an opposition, or at least a set of issues, that are central in *Sula*" (9). Within this formulation, Jadine is associated with aesthetics, both in her objectification as an art object and in her use of drawing and photography to set others at a distance. Son, with his commitment to "fraternity," represents the artistic desire for rapport. Their love affair demonstrates the artistic power of the union of aesthetics and rapport, especially in the description of their love as a work of art (230). The power of that artistic union may also account for Son's deep desire for Jadine.

Through her depiction of Son's experiences in Valerian's house, Morrison asserts the need to know the history of representations of blackness, because that history shapes the significance of our utterances and representations whether we know it or not. Neither black art nor any racial representation can be simply an act of self-expression; all acts of representation carry the burden and implications of this history. While Son dramatizes the history of black art, Valerian's house represents the domain of white culture within which these struggles take place; Valerian and his house represent the aesthetic and philosophical beliefs of white liberal humanism and show how those beliefs mask the relationship between culture and power. One meaning of Valerian's name, from the Latin *valeo*, is "to be worth" (Traylor 138); Valerian demonstrates the ways in which the production and maintenance of economic and cultural values intersect.

Valerian and his house are described in relation to art and aesthetics. Valerian's house is acclaimed, in terms usually reserved for literary works, as "the most handsomely articulated and blessedly unrhetorical house in the Caribbean" (11).¹⁶ Valerian's self-image and internal narratives embody the values of white liberal humanism; he judges himself as a businessman and a father to be a good man, using the terms "normal," "decent," and "fair" (53). Valerian's belief in his goodness as both a capitalist and a man of culture represents the liberal humanist belief in culture as a set of universal values that emerges from an arena completely separate from economics and relations of power. In *Cultural Geography: A Critical Introduction*, Don Mitchell explains how the very concept of culture does cultural work:

Indeed, the idea of culture drives an ideological wedge precisely between the workings of economy and the workings of other aspects of social life. "The *best* knowledge and thought of the time" [Matthew Arnold], no less than spiritual qualities, habits and patterns attributed to various "ways of

16. Marc C. Conner notes that houses in Morrison's novels act as synecdoches of the relationships of individuals to communities, as sites of struggle between desires for home and the realities of homelessness, between safety and danger, belonging and exclusion ("From the Sublime"). In that regard, it is interesting to consider the significance of Thérèse's house in *Dominique*, as well as "the house of Chloe" in the epigraph.

life," can be made to work in systems of domination and social control to the degree that they are seen as free-floating, hovering somewhere above the material social and economic workings of everyday life.

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The definition of culture as a separate realm makes it innocent; it hides the hegemonic power of culture, the ways that culture maintains and reproduces the existing relations of economic and social power.¹⁷ Valerian's aesthetic beliefs are embodied by his wife Margaret, facetiously dubbed "the Principal Beauty"; Margaret captures the contradictions in Valerian's principles of beauty (11). Not only does her beauty hide "unspeakable" horrors, but even after those horrors are revealed and Margaret begins to recover, Valerian cannot reconcile the beauty and the horror.

Morrison emphasizes Valerian's role as arbiter of culture by portraying his struggles in terms of messages sent and received. As a representative for liberal humanist ideals, Valerian believes he is meant to deliver a momentous message: "He was never sent with the message the world was waiting for. He knew the message was not his, that he had not thought it up, but he believed he was worthy of delivering it" (54). In his sleep, Valerian's unconscious fears are revealed as literary and aesthetic concerns; he is obsessed with finding the right words, "the exact wording, even the spelling of the crucial words" (43). But rather than a universal proclamation, the "crucial words" that emerge are as cryptic as any dream: "*These ice-boxes are brown broken perspective v-i-o-l-i-a-x is something more and can't be coal note*" (49). The unconscious words bring together concerns about blackness and aesthetics; the "*brown broken perspective*," the "*coal note*," and "*something more*" connote a disruption of aesthetic norms. The spelled-out nonword "violiax" creates an overlay of meanings related to power and aesthetics: viol, violin, violation, violence, and ax. Valerian's unconscious distress about aesthetics reinforces his reason for reading only mail; he had "given up books because the language in them had changed so much—stained with

17. Raymond Williams, in his elaboration of Antonio Gramsci's definition of hegemony, likewise describes the vulnerability of hegemony and the power of counterhegemonic art (112–13).

rivulets of disorder and meaninglessness" (14). His unconscious messages about race and power, like those books, remain unread.

Valerian's failure to deliver a momentous message to the world is overshadowed by the messages—from his infant son and from Son—that he fails to receive. Valerian remains unmoved when Son reveals the oppression on which his power is based, but the knowledge of his son's abuse destroys him. Valerian realizes he had ignored the signs of his infant son's abuse, had "[p]reoccupied himself with the construction of the world and its inhabitants according to this imagined message. But had chosen not to know the real message that his son had mailed to him from underneath the sink" (243). Valerian's confrontation with his son's abuse undermines his imaginary world, the ideology of whiteness, the self-image he had constructed based on his inherent decency and innocence. While Valerian's breakdown could signal a transformation of cultural power, the new people in charge of Valerian's household, Margaret and Sydney, keep the form and function of the house intact. Ondine observes, "Master, patient, baby—it don't matter. He's still the center of everything" (279). Morrison suggests that it is not enough for the cultural and economic dominance of white men to be overturned; the system of defining and maintaining values must be transformed as well.

Son represents Morrison's ideas about black art; black art exposes the oppression and suffering hidden beneath the façade of sweetness and light and articulates the relationship between cultural and economic power. In a gesture of liberal egalitarianism, Valerian gives the black Son a seat at the symbolic table, secure in his own power and authority. But rather than passively representing Valerian's benevolence and fairness, Son turns the tables on him; Son exposes the hypocrisy and oppression that are hidden behind the façade of beauty and decency. When Valerian demands that Son leave the house and Son refuses, Valerian asks, "Whose house is this?" (206). Although Valerian intends this to be a rhetorical question that underscores his ownership and right to rule, he instead articulates an unintended question about the legitimacy of his power.

In *Playing in the Dark*, Morrison asserts her desire to make visible what is invisible in representations of race. As a metaphor for the process of revelation, she describes watching the activity within a fishbowl, then suddenly becoming aware of the bowl, "the structure

that transparently (and invisibly) permits the ordered life it contains to exist in the larger world" (17). Son reveals the invisible structures of racial, cultural, and economic power and, by making them visible, upsets the status quo in Valerian's house. Son's revelation of the unseen also constructs blackness as a way of seeing, an idea reinforced by metaphors of blindness and vision in the novel. Blackness is a revelation beyond the visible, a move from blindness to insight, a form of vision usually accessible only to the oppressed who see through and beyond the reality constructed by dominant ideology. For example, Son's first act at Valerian's table is to say "Hi" to Sydney (88). The act of seeing Sydney while in his role of invisible servant is so disruptive that Sydney drops something for the first time in his career (note also that in Jadine's retelling of the story, she makes Sydney invisible once again, referring to her own uncle as "the butler" [123]). Son makes visible for the other characters—and for readers—the racial ideologies, economic inequalities, and silenced histories that support white cultural and social dominance.

In the climactic scene at Christmas dinner, Son speaks for and makes visible all of the absent and abused people: Gideon and Thérèse, whom Valerian has fired; all of the unnamed Caribbean workers whose invisible labors are the foundation of Valerian's fortune; and Michael, Valerian and Margaret's abused son. The link between Michael and Son connects the revelation of the child's abuse to the revelation of systemic abuse; it connects the personal to the political. Added to the symbolism of Christmas dinner, Michael's role as a sacrificial victim who suffers for the sins of others becomes symbolic of the sacrificial role of all those for whom Son speaks, for society's sacrificial victims whose suffering must remain silent and invisible to uphold the innocence and decency of the social and economic system.

Morrison uses sugar to complete the metafiction; sugar reveals the historical silences, the link between economic and cultural values, and the aesthetic issues of black art.¹⁸ Sugar is the basis of

18. Other critics also relate Morrison's use of sugar and candy in her novels to economic issues; Elizabeth House connects sugar to bourgeois concepts of "the sweet life," and Susan Willis argues that "[i]n Morrison's writing, candy is often associated with capitalism" (177n6).

Valerian's wealth as heir to a candy empire, but the Caribbean laborers who cut the sugar cane and pick the cocoa beans remain invisible to him. Only Son notes their importance and their absence—and only to readers—at Christmas dinner (202–3). Valerian's wealth based on sugar, as well as the setting of the novel in the Caribbean, points to the history of sugar and its role in American colonialism, racism, and capitalism. The European desire for sugar was part of what drove colonial exploration, seizure of lands, and exploitation of African laborers. Sugar was a mainstay of the southern United States plantation economy, and it was and still is central to the colonial and neocolonial economies of the Caribbean.¹⁹ Son's allusion to the silenced history of sugar reveals the racial and economic oppression hidden beneath Valerian's and, by association, white hegemonic culture's professions of decency and fairness.

This acknowledgment further establishes Son's role, and the role of black art, to make visible systemic inequalities. But sugar also addresses aesthetic concerns about the ways in which authors make aesthetically palatable invisible and "unspeakable" histories. Both Son and Margaret, who each represent different aesthetic philosophies, are associated with sugar. Son is briefly connected with sugar when Jadine asks him what she should call him and he answers, "What about Sugar?" (174). Son's main connection with sugar is in the revelation of its hidden role in structuring relations of power. Margaret is the Principal Beauty, the embodiment of "sweetness and light." When Son sees her tanning, he compares her to a "warming" marshmallow: "inside the white smooth skin was liquid sugar, no bones, no cartilage—just liquid sugar, soft and a little pully" (196). Valerian also connects her to sugar; when he first sees her in a Christmas parade, he is shaken by her beauty and by her resemblance to the red and white candies named after him: "She was all

19. Among the many historical accounts of sugar in the Caribbean, Sidney W. Mintz's *Sweetness and Power* best complements this discussion in that Mintz connects economic production to the production of cultural meanings. For Mintz, sugar is central to the development of capitalism as a system of production of material wealth and cultural meanings; thus sugar connects the development of capitalism to the development of racial ideologies.

red and white, like the Valerians" (51). Margaret's candylike beauty becomes more ominous when one remembers the red and white peppermint sticks in *Song of Solomon*, given to Guitar's siblings at his father's funeral, described as "the bone-white and blood-red stick" (225). Margaret's sweetness similarly hides "unspeakable" horrors, the cutting and burning of her infant son. Morrison stresses the "unspeakable" nature of Margaret's act: the infant Michael "had no vocabulary for what was happening to him," and Margaret "did not have the vocabulary to describe what she had come to know, remember" (234, 236). Margaret's only word for the abuse is "delicious" (231).

Margaret dramatizes Morrison's dilemma of how to narrate what is "unspeakable," and get readers to read it, without making the violence pleasurable for the reader. Barbara Johnson pursues this question when she asks: "What is the nature of our pleasure in contemplating trauma? What would be a response that would embody rapport rather than aesthetics? Is this what Toni Morrison is challenging us to consider? Or is she merely trying to make us less innocent in our contemplation, our analysis, our 'interest'?" (10). Sugar illustrates the dilemma of black art, caught between the need to reveal the "unspeakable things unspoken" and the danger of portraying the "unspeakable" with an aesthetic beauty and distance that turns the violence into something "delicious" for the reader.

In refusing to see the role of sugar and his own participation in structures of oppression, Valerian represents a failed reader for whom the sweetness of life, of art and beauty, has no connection to the suffering of others. He fails to read Michael's silent messages: his humming under the sink, his wordless song, his "[f]ire red" trunk (76, 234, 21). The revelation of Michael's abuse destroys Valerian's belief in his own decency; he thinks: "[T]here was something so foul in that, something in the crime of innocence so revolting it paralyzed him. He had not known because he had not taken the trouble to know. He was satisfied with what he did know. Knowing more was inconvenient and frightening" (242). Valerian's "crime of innocence" extends beyond his ignorance of his son's abuse; it is also his willful blindness to racial and class privilege and to the sacrifices of others necessary to maintain his way of life and self-image.

Valerian's "crime of innocence" describes the power of cultural and national fictions to mask real relations; most importantly, it condemns all those who refuse to know how their way of life affects others. Such ignorance can be used to maintain a national way of life and self-image, as seen in the question asked by many Americans after September 11, 2001, "Why don't they like us?" with the implication, "We're so decent and innocent." When we describe the United States as the freest and fairest nation in the world, the many U.S. citizens whose lives are distorted by poverty, imprisonment, and disease are made invisible and unspeakable. When an interviewer asked Morrison in 1981, "Do you think that the prejudices will erode away, or do you think they are always going to renew themselves?" Morrison answered, "No, I think all your people [I assume this phrase refers here to white people] think that because they're taught to. I think that it will last as long as the economy remains this way" ("Toni Morrison" 118). In *Tar Baby*, Morrison makes some of her clearest statements about the relationships among cultural representations, economic inequalities, and racial oppression.

Sugar makes visible the connections between economic power and the power of cultural representations. Sugar also defines the challenges for black art in how to reveal what is unspeakable, how to make real the structures and experiences of oppression, how to make readers see history in the landscape and oppression in the food we eat. How can the work of art make readers desire knowledge, feel complicitous rather than innocent, make them willing to take on knowledge rather than refuse it or let it paralyze them? And how can art do all this despite the temptation of ignorance and innocence, despite the possibility of the sweet life offered in the stories of hegemonic culture?

In *Tar Baby*, Morrison confronts readers with blackness; she illuminates the ways in which blackness has been constructed to support racial ideologies and inequalities, and she compels readers to grapple with their own interests in constructions of blackness. Morrison ends *Tar Baby* where it begins, with Son's arrival on the Isle des Chevaliers and another symbolic birth in the darkness. As with all of her novels' endings, Morrison sends readers back to themselves; now Son is part of the readers' imaginations, he is our tar baby, and his choices are our choices. The conclusion reminds us that the meanings we have created from this novel may speak as

much (or more) about our desires for meaning as they do about Morrison's. But in the end, the novel is, I believe, about the need for self-consciousness regarding our constructions of meaning. When we create meaning in order to make ourselves safe, to ensure our innocence and purity, then we are in the greatest danger of self-deception. Morrison suggests the need for people to accept their complicity, immerse themselves in blackness, and learn blackness as a way of seeing that might transform racial meanings, relations of power, and people's lives. In *Tar Baby*, Morrison illuminates her artistic beliefs and purposes; she dramatizes theories of hegemony that link art to power and thus delineate the high stakes of cultural representations, and she highlights aesthetic and rhetorical strategies that give the work of art the potential to transform readers and, consequently, to transform the cultural and material world.

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