Finding the Door: Vision/Revision and Stereotype in Toni Morrison's *Tar Baby*

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More than two decades and three novels after its publication, Toni Morrison's *Tar Baby* continues to create on readers an impression similar to the one that the original tar baby folktale had on Morrison herself: She called it "a rather complicated story" that "worried" her with many unanswered questions (O'Meally 36). At the beginning of the novel, readers may be troubled by a cast of characters defined in large part by racist, sexist, and classist stereotypes; at its conclusion, an unsettling ambiguity leaves readers perplexed by an equal set of unanswered questions. Moreover, critics have often been troubled by the novel's apparent overall lack of "wholeness," its fragmented and highly subjective narrative structure, and the absence of a single character who is definitively accepted as representing the novel's central vision. With all of those "worrisome" facets—its use of stereotypes, its fragmented narrative, and its lack of resolution—*Tar Baby* confuses readers because it is *meant* to be confusing, in the sense of resisting easy categorizing and convenient definition. Its movement toward ambiguity is a movement away from the limitations of stereotype, a movement that is achieved through multiple viewpoints: Although each individual character's vision is limited, their combined viewpoints allow for the possibility of blurring the boundaries between individuals (freeing them from preset roles) and of permitting self-knowledge (freeing individuals from self-imposed limitations). In the novel, Morrison focuses on the way stereotypes are easily created or envisioned and then—given the complexities of motivation, perception and context—taken apart or "revisioned." Once taken apart, these limited, fragmented perspectives become the responsibility of the novel's readers. Morrison neither provides a simplified vision nor expects us to cull our own; rather, she challenges us to embrace the complexity that comes with multiple visions.

When it first appeared, many critics attempted to find the "angle" for which Morrison was aiming in this complex novel, the one perspective that would make it all cohere. At the same time (and, I believe, as a result), these critics often concluded that the novel was, as Robert O'Meally stated in his review, "flawed" (33)—specifically, as James Coleman put it, "Morrison's unclear directions and garbled messages leave the reader in a muddle" (72). Later criticism has been more likely to acknowledge that the "muddle" is intentional—that Morrison "supplies material for widely divergent analyses of her mythic fiction" (Jurecic and Rampersad 153) and "insists on multiplicity" (Page 130)—though these later studies also often focus more on *specific* aspects or techniques in the novel, such as Morrison's use of African mythology.[1] Even after examining the full range of literary criticism on *Tar Baby*, important questions remain: Why is this novel so hard to pin down, and what does Morrison gain by creating a story that defies a single, easy explanation?

At the center of this "complicated story" is the relationship between sparring lovers Son and Jadine. Over the years, many critics have felt it necessary to choose sides in this "battle," deciding that one character or the other represents the central—or "true"—vision of the novel. Usually (although not universally),[2] Son comes out on top, mainly to those who believe that he represents values endorsed in the novel by Morrison herself. Specifically, Son is often credited with being connected to African American ideals of community and nature, whereas Jadine is criticized for abandoning these. Wilfred Samuels and Clenora Hudson-Weems state that "Son does not share Jadine's white values. She embraces the materialistic society [. . .] He, on the other hand, tries to reject the standards of the dominant culture" (87). Karla Holloway similarly depicts Son as "representing natural truth" (126) and Jadine as "sacrific[ing] feminine as well as racial self" (119); Doreatha Mbalia describes Jadine as expressing "her hatred of Africa and all that is associated with it" (72); Son reflects a "people-class mentality" with a "sincere love for living things," especially African people (76). Finally, James Coleman sees Jadine as initially representing "the antithesis of Black folk and community values" and claims that "the sentiments of the reader are most likely with Son, a sensitive, warm man who possesses definite folk values and qualities" (65). It is difficult to bring the warm, sincere character portrayed in these analyses into harmony with the character who kills his wife and dangles his girlfriend out a window. Whether Son expresses (and Morrison endorses) the values attributed to him (and I think these and other critics make a strong case that both character and author do just that), as a realistic character in a novel, he does not always *act* according to his values. He constantly (and convincingly) chastises Jadine for failing to care for her aunt and uncle ("*They* are the ones who put you through school," he reminds her when she credits Valerian for her education; "You should cook for *them*" [265]), and yet Son himself has sent only checks, no letters, to the father he has not visited in years. He speaks lovingly of "the fat black ladies in white dresses minding the pie table in the basement church" (119), but the two women he has fallen in love with—

sexpot Cheyenne and sophisticated, ambitious Jadine—are impossibly at odds with that image. He "insists on Eloe" as being a kind of ideal black community but spends less than a single chapter of the book there (and, at the book's conclusion, seems unlikely ever to return).

These inconsistencies may engender some of the most troubling questions about this book: Why would Morrison create a strong, educated, independent black woman character who appears to be "in the wrong" and an abusive, hypocritical male character on the side of "right"? These issues are bothersome even to those who see Son and Jadine as fairly equal in terms of "right" and "wrong." Philip Page notes that although Jadine's "self-reliance and determination are admirable, the novel's discourse undermines her" (127); Judylyn Ryan states that "Morrison's creation of a narrative consciousness that seems to acquiesce to, if it does not quite sanction, Son's perspective (shortsightedness and all) leaves the reader taken aback and frustrated" (619). The frustration, I believe, comes in part from the fact that many of Morrison's readers are more likely to identify with Jadine's situation—college educated, attracted to cities like New York and Paris, even materialistic—than with Son's. Yet these attributes do not appear in the novel to be particularly positive; Jadine's education (in Europe, with a concentration on European art) is often associated with her assimilation, as is her love of New York and Paris; and her materialism reflects the way she values things over relationships—as Terry Otten puts it, the way she "sells herself to the moneyed urban culture" (75). These same readers may feel compelled to identify Son's values as being more closely aligned with Morrison's. But at the same time, it is difficult to imagine that all of Son's views are in sync with Morrison's; as Ann Rayson points out, "who among Morrison's female readers, Black or white, would choose to mind the pie table" (89), the fate Son seems to want for Sorbonne-educated Jadine. Similarly, it is difficult to imagine that a Cornell-educated, best-selling novelist and Nobel laureate would be contented in such a role. I argue that this "frustration" is intentional on Morrison's part—and ultimately effective. Morrison has deliberately created Son as an apparent moral yardstick for all of the other characters, and although we may initially believe we are supposed to side with him, in fact, I believe she has crafted her own tar-baby-like "trap." The trap is in judging the characters in terms of overly simplistic, quickly formed definitions based on their apparent roles—a trap into which the characters themselves initially fall, given their limited visions, but that readers may avoid, given that from our vantage point we are able to see multiple visions.

As the main characters are introduced in the novel, each fits smoothly into an easily identified role. Although much of the first chapter consists of uninterrupted, rapid-fire dialogue with no identifying tag lines, it is not difficult to recognize who is speaking, even without narrative intervention, because each character's speech seems appropriate to his or her role. Valerian's dry, wry words, for example, are clearly those of the sophisticated head of a wealthy household (correcting his wife's pronunciation of *distingué* and groaning over her attempt at *Joyeux Noël*);

Margaret's speech reflects the frivolous and petulant "trophy wife" ("You will not mention it! You will tell her!" she insists to Sydney regarding the apple pie she wants Ondine to bake); Sydney speaks briefly and formally to them as loyal servant (answering Valerian's sardonic "I am going to kill you" with a soothing "Yes, sir" [33]). As more details on the characters' situations emerge, it also appears that in addition to placing every character in a role, Morrison has also stacked the house with glaringly symbolic stereotypes. Jadine, for example, is light-skinned and European-educated (extreme symbols of cultural assimilation), a stunningly beautiful model (extreme representation of female objectification), and an orphan (extreme figure of alienation from family and community); Valerian, meanwhile, is old, white, male, and wealthy, living with black servants on a colonized island—one would be hard pressed to find a clearer representation of social and cultural domination. And yet, having the reader identify these characters with their easily recognized roles is not Morrison's only intent because, precluding this from happening, she shows how the characters themselves view each other in stereotypical terms—and how that results in the entrapment of both the viewer and the viewed.

No two figures in the story appear to share the exact same background, which highlights their isolation from each other; there is always some level at which they cannot connect or relate, always barriers of some sort between them, whether of class, sex, race, age, or experience. These barriers are created as the characters seek to define themselves and each other, but they ultimately reinforce the stereotypes. Harding and Martin note that "when the narrative is focalized through the consciousness of any of the characters, it reproduces the clichés of racist and sexist prejudices" (76); to this I would add classist prejudices. For example, Valerian sees Margaret as resembling a red-and-white candy—pretty, but ultimately frivolous and insubstantial, like the trophy wife he makes her. Thérèse and Gideon are Mary and Yardman (essentially functions, nameless and faceless) to the Childs, who in turn are "machete-hair" and "bow-tie" (describing superficiality, affectation) to Thérèse—nicknames that serve to distance each "class" from the other. Valerian even sees his own son as a "quisling" and a "kitten," suggesting weakened masculinity. These stereotypes create boundaries that separate characters from each other; Ondine and Sydney stereotype Thérèse and Gideon to distinguish themselves, as "house servants," from the "yard workers." At the same time, Thérèse's nicknames for the Childs show how she distinguishes herself as being natural, rather than artificial, and as one who refuses to pander to whites. Initially this is the only way the characters can relate to each other: by creating boundaries by means of stereotypes, to define themselves.

When Son enters the picture, the stereotyping escalates; his unexpected arrival seems to threaten the established order and roles within the house, requiring the characters to reaffirm their boundaries. Margaret sees Son as a black rapist "jerking off" in her Anne Klein shoes, a view that is contingent on her own view of herself as an object of sexual conquest—which, given the way Valerian once saw her as candy, was exactly the way she had been viewed. Sydney and Ondine see

Son as a "swamp nigger," once again separating themselves from a "lower class" of African Americans who are dirty—and, as such, are a reminder of field slavery. At the other extreme, Thérèse "looks" at Son and sees one of the fabled horsemen of the island "smiling at her as he rode away wet and naked on a stallion" (104). Even though this is possibly the most positive endorsement in the novel of one character by another, Thérèse is described as "inventing" Son's escapades out of her "imagination"; therefore, perhaps her imposition of myth on Son may be simply another version of stereotyping.[3] He is, after all, not one of the mythic horsemen but a Vietnam veteran from North Florida currently on the run for killing his wife. Moreover, Thérèse's hatred for white oppressors is reflected in an either-or system of classification similar to the Childses': either you are one of them, associated with white society, or you are one of us, associated with the island and nature. To Thérèse, Son's dirtiness reflects his naturalness, and because he initially appears as an unwelcome outsider to L'Arbe de la Croix, she views him as "us." Each character's view of Son is limited to a single interpretation based on a single context; whether that interpretation is positive or negative, it is clearly not complete.

Son himself is as quick to form stereotypes as any other character; he accuses Jadine of acting like a "little white girl" and later calls her a barrage of sex- and race-based stereotype names: "[g]atekeeper, advance bitch, house-bitch, welfare office torpedo, corporate cunt, tar baby side-of-the-road whore trap" (219–20).[4] Readers who choose to view either Son or Jadine as the voice of righteousness must experience some uncomfortable moments of conflict in the novel. As "nasty" as may be Son's accusation of Jadine as a "little white girl," it is borne out in the clear signs of her assimilation and distancing herself from anything black. Yet she immediately rages back at Son for "pulling that black-woman-white-woman shit" and for thinking he "can get away with telling [her] what a black woman is or ought to be" (220). Although Son and Jadine both may have uncovered elements of truth here—Jadine has embraced white stereotypes along with white culture; Son's view is extremely dualistic in setting specific behaviors for "white" and "black"—each character's vision is limited. However, readers cannot pit one character against the other and see one as "right" and the other "wrong"; even conceding that each has moments of truth and error reflects only part of Morrison's intent. The "danger" that Morrison exposes here is that identifying those who are guilty of stereotyping tends to create further stereotypes; one categorization engenders another. Jadine, seeing Son as a rapist, relies on one set of stereotypical assumptions; whereas Son, seeing Jadine as a white girl "wannabe," relies on another, equally stereotypical set of views.[5] Once again, the characters' simplistic definitions of each other result in a "boxing in" of both.

As Son and Jadine continue to interact during several months, however, their visioning and revisioning of each other question this kind of definition. The scene in which Son tells Jadine how he killed Cheyenne unfolds as layers of interpretation. He says the killing was a mistake; her sarcastic reply is:

> "Sure. You didn't mean to, right?"
> "Oh, I meant to, but I didn't mean to. I meant the killing but I didn't mean the death. I went too far."
> "That's not so smart. Death frequently follows killing [. . .] Who'd you kill?" she said.
> "A woman."
> "I should have known. That's all you could think to do with your life? Kill a woman? Was she black?"
> "Yes."
> "Of course. Of course she was [. . .] Don't tell me. You found her with somebody else and shot her.'
> "No. I mean yes." (176)

In this curious scene, Jadine correctly guesses the story as though it were "typical" for "someone like Son," but her interpretation of Son appears to be only partially informed, as Son shows genuine sorrow and remorse for his actions. At the same time, if the reader is tempted to side with Son against Jadine at this point, Son notices that Jadine withdraws from him physically, which he takes as a sign of fear, and he admits that he "liked her fear . . . it made him feel protective and violent at the same time." Then she takes him to task for misinterpreting her: "'You thought I sat this way because I was afraid?'" And just a few lines later, she tries "to figure out whether he was the man who understood potted plants or the man who drove through houses" (178). The reader may similarly be trying to "figure out" Son: if he is the moral center of the novel, why does he appear to fall into stereotypes of either protecting or dominating women, and why is the woman he married described by Son and Soldier solely in terms of her sex?6 Similarly, if Jadine is so easily able to guess what Son has done because it fits the stereotype of what she believes about his character, is she justified in her view of Son as dangerous, or is this simply more evidence that Jadine holds stereotypical views about black men? These questions, like these characters, are not easy to figure out; Son and Jadine are not as simple as they might initially seem to each other or to readers.

Vilifying one character, such as Jadine, and lauding another, such as Son, may collapse under scrutiny of all characters and situations in the novel. If Son is right in chastising Jadine for looking down at Gideon and Thérèse (calling them the generic "Yardman" and "Mary" without bothering to learn their real names), why does he make a similar mistake with Alma Estée—virtually ignoring her until he notices her bright red wig? ("Oh, she was good enough to run to the store for him," she thinks bitterly, "[. . . but] not good enough to be remembered at all" [300].) Conversely, blaming Jadine for abandoning her African heritage suggests equal blame for Alma Estée for wanting that red wig. Why is Alma Estée merely pathetic whereas Jadine is "wrong"—simply because of the way Son judges each character? Moreover, readers who see Son as the moral center of the novel should note that his vision, like Jadine's, is not immune to revision. His nostalgia about Eloe may seem genuine and commendable, making Jadine's revulsion of the town seem shallow and narrow-minded given that Son has credibly denounced Jadine

for turning her back on the past. And yet, the moment during the visit to Eloe when Soldier aggressively states that Son's ex-wife "had the best pussy in Florida" must lead readers to feel at least an involuntary twinge of sympathy for Jadine. Jadine experiences as sexist and oppressive Son's utopian image of an all-black community living in harmony.[7] When Son views the photographs she took of Eloe, he notes that it looks "stupid, backwoodsy, dumb, dead," because he literally and metaphorically sees his utopia through Jadine's lens. Morrison herself notes in an interview with Nellie McKay that perhaps there is "just a little bit of fraud" in Son's belief that he "belonged" to Eloe—"you can't really trust all that he says" (148). Coleman suggests that Son left Eloe not just because of Cheyenne's death, but "because its provincialism and slow ways did not fulfill him" (67); that seems borne out by the fact that a man who can "do anything," as Son says he can (270), would seem about as contented in Eloe as would a woman with "temper, energy, [and] ideas of her own" (298), as Son describes Jadine near the end of the novel. This does not mean that Son's original view of Eloe is wrong, but simply that Jadine's interpretation cannot be ignored; neither character's vision can approach completeness without consideration of the other's.

As the novel progresses, Morrison makes it increasingly difficult to condemn any of the characters wholesale for their stereotyping, because she increasingly provides a sense of the contexts in which these stereotypes arise. Margaret and Jadine are clearly wrong for assuming that Son, a black man, is out to rape them—and yet, one woman finds him hiding in her closet and the other is physically overpowered by him when their assumptions are made. Still, Margaret uses the immediate situation of a black man being found in her closet as the sole basis for her judgment, just as Jadine uses Son's unkempt appearance, foul language, and threat of violence (i.e., throwing her out the window) as the basis for calling him an animal. Both women are unaware of the sequence of events that produced him there; these events are recounted after the fact by Son, who emphatically reiterates a good three or four times that "he had not followed the women." At the same time, Son uses their stereotypical views of him to impose a similar categorical view on them, seeing them as "white women" who always think they might be raped. He cannot know (as the reader is aware) that both Margaret and Jadine have had to deal with aggressive sexual overtures by men—Margaret "fighting off cousins in cars, dentists in chairs" (83) and Jadine bitterly recalling how, as a child, she "was so quick to learn, but no touchee, teacher, and no, I do not smile, because Never" (124). This is not to say that Margaret's and Jadine's personal experiences are intended to justify or mitigate their views of Son. I argue that the opposite is true—rather than justifying their stereotypes, the personal histories of the characters ultimately contribute to the erosion of stereotypical views, if not for the characters within the story, then for the reader of the story. As readers, we are never limited to a single viewpoint; being privy to their personal histories, we are allowed to see that the characters have depths that exceed the stereotypes they create and are forced into.

What further complicates the picture is that despite their stereotyping tendencies, the characters also have moments of insight into each other that seem truly perceptive—and surprisingly accurate. Son recognizes that the industrialist Valerian has unjustly fired Gideon and Thérèse—"dismiss[ed] with a flutter of the fingers the people whose sugar and cocoa had allowed him to grow old in regal comfort" (202–03). Valerian scorns Michael's boyish notions of how to "help" African Americans as his son's wish for "a race of exotics skipping around being picturesque for him," while Michael seems justified in criticizing Jadine for "abandoning her history" (72–73). Jadine, meanwhile, is able to recognize Margaret's thinly veiled racism (and even at times acknowledge her own), as when Margaret calls Son a "gorilla" and "Jadine's neck prickled at the description. She had volunteered nigger—but not gorilla" (129). Even Margaret has her share of perceptive interpretation: When she asks why Ondine never revealed knowledge of Margaret's abuse of her son, Margaret notes, "you felt good hating me, didn't you? I could be the mean white lady and you could be the good colored one" (240). Ondine's speech that "a girl has got to be a daughter first" seems to be a reinterpretation of Jadine's vision of the night women—that rather than representing a stereotypical view of women as nurturers and nothing else, the vision is supposed to show Jadine that she has cut herself off from any notion of familial relationship. And to complete this impromptu "chain" of interpretation, Jadine reminds Son that although he may criticize Valerian for making his money by exploiting people, Son's own "original dime" is not the pure and honestly earned wage he would imagine. "Now you know where it came from, your original dime: some black woman like me fucked a white man for it and then *gave* it to Frisco who made you work your ass off for it" (272). What is important about this circle of interpretation is not that one particular character accurately perceives another, but that all of the characters have such moments. No character is exempt from being "revealed" by another; every view is both limited and perceptive, and all are connected.

Morrison seems to anticipate critical analysis of her characters by having other characters beat critics to the punch, so to speak. Sydney has been almost universally described as an Uncle Tom (even Morrison herself has called him that [McKay 148]). But in the same scene in which Sydney speaks proudly of being "a Phil-a-delphia Negro," as distinguished from Son, Sydney scathingly notes, "White folks play with Negroes," scorning Valerian's seemingly kind actions to Son as being solely for Valerian's own amusement (162–63)—hardly the words of easygoing servility associated with the Uncle Tom stereotype. On the other side, Valerian (the wealthy white man who seems to fit the role of villain in this novel) identifies the Childses' pride in their "house" status, as opposed to working in the yard, as unflatteringly "bourgeois" (a term many critics also use). If we agree with Sydney's assessment of Valerian, can we believe Valerian's assessment of Sydney? The answer is that Morrison intends for us to consider both; subjective viewpoints can be perceptive even when at odds with each other. More

important, they complicate and ultimately erode stereotypes. Sydney is more than a complacent Uncle Tom; he has a lucid understanding of how manipulative Valerian can be. Even if clearly identified as representative of the evils of oppression of race, class, and gender, Valerian also appears throughout much of the novel as thoughtful and even kind.[8] One fact does not negate the other—Valerian's seemingly amiable personality does not mean that white America is exonerated for its oppression of others; nor does what Valerian represents "cancel out" any positive qualities of his character. These two views of Valerian—or any set of seemingly contradictory views on any character—complicate any simplistic vision of him; stereotypes, by definition, are simplistic visions.

And yet all characters in *Tar Baby* are obviously not created equal. This is the only one of Morrison's seven novels in which there are "major" white characters; Valerian and Margaret Street are as prominent as Sydney and Ondine Childs. Clearly, white society is responsible for creating the stereotypes portrayed in the novel, either directly (viewing black men as dangerous) or indirectly (creating "class" systems among blacks so that "house" blacks look down on "yard" blacks). As a result, not all characters' viewpoints bear the same weight. Marilyn Mobley's analysis of Jadine's comment about Picasso being "better than an Itumba mask" is that with this statement Jadine "not only reveals her negative, stereotypical attitudes toward Afro-American and African culture, but . . . attempts to justify her distance from that culture" (Mobley 765–66). However, that remark comes during a discussion between Valerian and Jadine about Michael, who chastised Jadine for her rejection of African culture, from his position as a white male inheritor of the culture that suppressed it. For the white son of a millionaire - industrialist to lecture Jadine, an orphan described by Son as being "from nowhere," on abandoning her history and returning to "handicraft and barter" may strike the reader as absurd—just as it had Jadine and Valerian, despite the fact that these two may "represent" the assimilated and the oppressor. Interestingly, when Son takes Jadine to task for the same thing—for abandoning her people—the accusation no longer seems silly but just, simply because he, unlike Michael, is in a better position to understand the importance of maintaining a culture that is in danger of being eradicated. The visionary moral yardstick varies from character to character, based on race, class, sex, and historical context, simply because judgment of these characters must be flexible. More important, multiple levels of context clearly need to be considered in any situation in the novel. Son does not consider Thérèse's and Gideon's theft of the apples to be worthy of punishment, whereas Valerian's "theft," the theft of white capitalists, makes his mouth go dry—because Thérèse and Gideon have had their land stolen from them by the likes of Valerian. In other words, a historical context that defends one character may damn another—which suggests that definition needs to be flexible, able to accommodate contextual differences.

Morrison does not allow simplistic "good" and "evil" terminology to stick; judging these characters is always complex and multilayered.[9] As easy as it is to

see that Valerian represents any number of evils that have befallen both the fictional Caribbean island and America itself, it seems likely that readers will have moments, as Jadine does, of admiring him. Valerian is the only member of L'Arbe de la Croix who shows no fear the day Son is discovered; he, in fact, very civilly welcomes Son to the house and invites him to stay. Thus, it appears that Valerian has not accepted the stereotype of the black man as a dangerous intruder to society. On the other hand, why should Valerian fear Son? Valerian continues not being afraid "at noon the next day, when Sydney tapped quietly on his door and brought his mail and his baked potato" (145). Embedded within this sentence is a subtle reminder that the only black men Valerian deals with are his servants; when he was mugged by black men, he showed no fear because, as he told his assailants, "I don't *know* you" (91). Fittingly, Valerian's crime is eventually interpreted as the "crime of innocence," and although this is possibly the strongest indictment of a character in the book, Valerian himself does the indicting. Morrison even allows the man who "could defecate over a whole people" (203) a moment of self-knowledge to defy his stereotype; she allows him to see his guilt precisely because that may be the strongest indictment of all. Other characters have condemned him throughout the novel (including, to different degrees, Son, Sydney, Ondine, and Thérèse), but Valerian's view of himself at the moment of self-realization is one of the more unbiased in the novel. He has nothing to gain by it; it would be much more convenient to continue blaming Margaret, the "freak" who "bloodied her baby."

It may be as easy to vilify Margaret for her abuse as to condemn Cholly's rape of Pecola in *The Bluest Eye* as the act of one man, but just as Pecola's destruction is presented as the result of a network of events and people, Margaret's abuse does not begin or end with her. Once again, it takes another character's vision to reveal this: Ondine, sole witness to the abuse and the person who finally exposes Margaret, understands at the end that Margaret "didn't stick pins in her baby. She stuck em in his baby. Her baby she loved" (279). The "he," of course, is Valerian, who kept Margaret isolated (most damagingly forbidding her to become friends with Ondine) and continued to remind her of her "inferior" background (he points out her lack of table manners and poor French pronunciation). Ondine recognizes that Margaret (as Margaret herself fervently believes throughout the novel) does not fit the stereotype of "one of those women in the *National Enquirer*" (209)—that is, a purely evil woman who abused an innocent child—because the simplistic binaries of "evil" and "innocent" have been turned on their heads in the course of the novel.[10]

It is important to note that there is no outside "referee" to all of this action nor any fixed point of reference external to the characters. Morrison retells the novel's scenes as though providing multiple interpretations of them. Son's "hi" greeting to Sydney is noted several times, first by Jadine relaying it to Ondine, second by the narrator (in a peculiar paragraph that switches its point of view several times), and finally by Ondine relaying it back to Sydney. Similarly, Philip Page notes that we are shown the scene of Son speaking to Valerian in the greenhouse three times,

from three different points of view; he also notes that the narrator is sometimes flat-out wrong, claiming at one point that only the bougainvillea see Jadine naked, when later on Gideon reveals that he saw her as well (Page 111). It would appear that the narrator may be included as a subjective watcher along with the cast of characters. Moreover, the greenhouse scene, briefly told from the point of view of flowers, is one of many instances in which something other than a human character observes the action. Butterflies, wild parrots, champion daisy trees, fish, clouds, river, as well as water lady and swamp women all are described as having emotions and perceptions, and in many instances these "natural" beings observe and relay what happens in the Street household—additional reminders that the novel has no "central vision" but rather multiple, fragmented visions.

Tar Baby superficially appears to progress from stability to chaos and back to stability, concluding with a sense of having returned full circle; all of the characters have returned to their original roles. Valerian is still being taken care of; Ondine and Sydney remain dependent on the Streets (because Jadine will not help them); Jadine returns to immersion in European culture; Son disappears. Yet there is still chaos and confusion. Nature is encroaching on the house; Sydney notes "that the bricks that edged the courtyard were popping up out of the ground [. . . u]rged, it seemed to him, out of the earth" and the ants "had already eaten through the loudspeaker wires" (284). Roles appear to have reversed to some degree as well; Valerian continues at the center of things, but Margaret now takes charge of him like some doting mother, "her movements directed and sure" (276), and Sydney makes the major household decisions, declaring that instead of returning to Philadelphia, "we're going to be here a long time" in Isle des Chevaliers (287). Moreover, Margaret and Ondine seem to entertain the idea of being friends again, a feat that was "almost" too late (241) but still might be possible. Boundaries have clearly eroded; as Lauren Lepow notes, Toni Morrison's novels often establish that "all things can be their 'opposites'" (365). Valerian thus can be "guilty of innocence"; Margaret, the "baby killer," can become almost angelically maternal; and Sydney, the proud Philadelphia Negro so often called an Uncle Tom, can help himself to his boss's wine in front of him and ignore the man's request to put on music. Now, at the end, the characters both are and are not in their "proper places."

Roles in L'Arbe de la Croix may have blurred at the end of the novel, but Jadine and Son have separated, and the boundaries between them appear insurmountable. Yet I argue that through their combined visions during their interaction, both characters end up altering their definitions of themselves or their values or both. At the beginning of the novel, Jadine had returned to the island after seeing the woman in yellow and feeling "inauthentic," recognizing that this woman represents clearly what Jadine is not. At the end, Jadine tells Margaret that she is not going back to marry Ryk (thus her life is not returning full circle); rather, she is going back to "tangle with the woman in yellow—with her and with all the night women who had *looked* at her" (290, italics in original). "Tangle"

suggests mixing, if in a more combative way than blending; Jadine is clearly not going back to hide behind anything. Her much-quoted conclusion that "she *was* the safety she longed for" (perhaps a precursor to Sethe being told at the end of *Beloved* "You your best thing") suggests a kind of "merging" within herself: the thing she thought she would find outside herself she now believes is within her. As Morrison herself has said in various interviews, Jadine at the end of the story "knows something that she did not know before" (McKay 150), and "she hasn't opened the door, but she knows where the door is" (Ruas 108). Her entanglement with Son helped her to find that door, for in a way the "dreams of safety" she speaks of are his dreams—as Jill Matus puts it, "dreams of the warm and nurturing South, where women mind the pie tables" (96). She may reject those dreams, but in doing so she has revised—"revisioned"—herself.

Ironically, the movement toward ambiguity in the novel is strongest in Son; despite the fact that he is often interpreted as being the novel's central vision, his vision at the end is the most confused. The man who had reproached Jadine for acting like a scared little white girl praises her to Gideon in the last chapter for having "temper, energy, [and] ideas of her own" (298). Yet, a few sentences later, he sees Alma Estée with the wig of "synthetic dried blood," and everything in him is "all mixed up." His confused internal monologue weighs the way he once felt about Jadine against the things he once valued:

> He had it straight before: the pie ladies and the six-string banjo and then he was seduced, corrupted by cloisonné and raw silk the color of honey and he was willing to change, to love the cloisonné, to abandon the pie ladies and the nickel nickelodeon and Eloe itself and Frisco too because she had given him back his original dime [. . .] and made him see it the way it was, the way it really was, not just a dazzling coin, but a piece of currency with a history rooted in gold and cloisonné and humiliation and death. (299)

Son, like Jadine, seems to be struggling to find the "door" that will free him from his confusion; his thoughts here still reflect a binary mentality—Jadine "corrupting" him suggests that he still sees her values as the wrong ones—and yet his confusion comes precisely because he realizes that these binaries cannot be reconciled. Does Son's inability to fit both Jadine and the pie ladies into his vision necessarily mean one or the other is wrong and must be abandoned? If he values Jadine as a strong, independent woman, can he still value Eloe and the pie ladies? Until the final chapter, he might have answered "no," given that "he insisted on Eloe" and that his vision for a future with Jadine had once involved little more than his "tak[ing] care of her and, later, their children" (219). Yet, as he says once again, "It was all mixed up. He did not know what to think or feel" (299). This "mixed-up" feeling returns to Son after Alma Estée refuses to let him take the wig from her, as though she were "an avocado with earrings"; if she had "just stood there" passively, Son thinks, "he could have sorted it out." But "just standing there" is precisely what both Alma Estée and Jadine have refused to do. Because

Son can now value Jadine as a woman with ideas of her own, and yet also recognize that she has turned away from values such as "fraternity" (299) that he once held and may still hold dear, Son no longer has the simplistic binary vision that once he had held.

The mysterious final scene of the novel describes how Thérèse has dropped Son, who is attempting to return to Jadine, on the wrong side of the island; she urges him instead of doing that to join the mythical blind horsemen. Although hesitant at first, Son willingly crawls, walks, and then runs into the fog—that is, into a place where outlines are no longer clear. The last lines of the novel seem to imply that Son has in fact merged into the world of myth. The tar baby myth ("lickety split") has fused with Toni Morrison's own created myth about the horsemen, which merges with the novel—itself a kind of myth. This may be profoundly unsatisfying to readers. Why does Morrison leave us, in the "real" world, with nothing to hold on to save the ambiguity of myth? One could almost see hints of a Shakespearean epilogue reminding readers that we have witnessed merely shadows in a play. Anticipating the final paragraph of *Jazz*, *Tar Baby*'s ending may be a glimmer of Morrison inviting the reader to "look where our hands are now." The reader, after all, is one of the viewpoints of the novel, although a special one that both stands apart from the action and is privileged with seeing all of the characters' points of view together. Ours, unlike the characters', is not a limited vision. The "correct" point of view is neither Son's nor Jadine's, nor that of any other character, but rather our own—"correct" not in terms of "moral correctness" but simply in that our vision is a composite of all others and, as such, is the most complete. Even if each individual perspective within this novel is limited, *Tar Baby* immerses readers in a plurality of these perspectives; by doing so, it insists on a complex vision that renders stereotypes—and the binaries that result from simplistic identification of stereotypes—impossible. If *Tar Baby* ends with no clear resolution, that is because Morrison leaves this responsibility to us, the readers: the bird, to paraphrase her Nobel Prize acceptance speech, is in our hands.

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NOTES

I would like to thank Susan Strehle for her insightful comments, which greatly benefited this essay.

1. Many essays discuss Morrison's use of the tar baby myth in this novel, among them Ann Jurecic and Arnold Rampersad's discussion of myth and countermyth, Linden Peach's notes on how the tar baby story's meaning is "endlessly deferred" in the novel (87), and Maria DiBattista's discussion of how the use of myth defines Morrison as a storyteller, as distinguished from a novelist (99).

2. Lauren Lepow presents a defense of Jadine by saying that unlike Son, she avoids binary thinking; she "refuses to choose between the apparent opposites offered her—'blackening up or univer-

saling out'" (373). Lepow believes that Morrison supports Jadine by calling her "culture-bearing black woman" and that Son's question of "whose culture are you bearing" represents an "either-or" mentality that the novel does not support (374).

3. Some critics have seen Thérèse, like Son, as representing Morrison in the novel; Philip Page analyzes Thérèse's "invention" as reflecting the way she "parallels the narrator and the author as verbal meaning-makers" (118). On the other hand, DiBattista presents a thorough analysis of how Thérèse's story about Son is as unreliable as any other character's view of him: "whatever wisdom she possesses is drowned in the cascade of her invention, which dazzles but does not enlighten" (106–07).

4. Wendy Harding and Jacky Martin describe Jadine's view of Son (specifically his "Mau Mau, Attica, chain-gang hair") as reflecting white racism, whereas Son's view of Jadine, epitomized by the quote I have used here, reflects a sexist view to "balance" Jadine's racist one.

5. In Jurecic and Rampersad's discussion of myth and countermyth in *Tar Baby*, the authors note that both Jadine and Son "look to the spectrum of available representations of race, class, and gender for those myths by which they can define themselves" (150).

6. Stephanie Demetrakopoulos describes Jadine as being "culture with no nature," the polar opposite of Cheyenne's apparent embodiment of "pure sexuality" (135).

7. Peach notes that Son's idealistic view of traditional African society is a very limiting one; it "offers little opportunity for growth and intellectual development, especially for black women" (94).

8. Terry Otten notes that Morrison views Valerian with both "fondness and outrage" and that he is "worthy both of judgment and compassion" because of "his essential flawed humanity, not simply from his whiteness" (74).

9. Trudier Harris notes Morrison's "consistent refusal to stratify her works into absolutes; evil can perhaps reside in good human beings just as goodness can in those presumed to be evil" (138–39).

10. Lepow speaks of Morrison as being strongly critical of dualistic thinking, defining dualism as "any system of thought that polarizes what we perceive," and states that it "is a narrowing world view" that "cuts the individual off from the 'other.'" Lepow further believes that Tar Baby is the "fullest realization" of Morrison's critique of dualism (363).

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