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MFS Modern Fiction Studies, Volume 39, Number 3&4, Fall/Winter 1993, pp. 597-621 (Article)

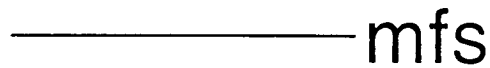
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## CONTESTED VISIONS/DOUBLE-VISION IN *TAR BABY*<sup>1</sup>



Judylyn S. Ryan

IN HER INCISIVE CRITIQUE OF "THE RACE FOR THEORY," Barbara Christian deplores the "academic hegemony" of "Western philosophers from the old literary elite" (53, 51). Beyond the intense solipsism of this "new" critical discourse, the "takeover" constitutes as well an ideological hegemony since it imposes an interpretive framework that is both Eurocentric and androcentric on literature by "black, women, [and] third world" writers (52). Among the many consequences Christian discusses is the development of an "alien" critical language and its tendency to obscure the political concerns and transformative intentions of the text. Toni Morrison has echoed this critique in *Playing in the Dark* with the observation that "Criticism as a form of knowledge is capable of robbing literature not only of its own implicit and explicit ideology but of its ideas as well" (9). Christian attempts to foil this robbery/displacement and, instead, to resituate the (Black woman) literary artist as conscious and primary theorist, for, she notes, "My folk . . . have always been a race for theory" (52). What distinguishes this tradition, Christian concludes, is that "our theorizing (and I intentionally use the verb rather than the noun) is often in narrative forms, in the stories we create, in riddles and proverbs, in the play with language, since dynamic rather than fixed ideas seem more to our liking" (52). Consequently, this

discussion of *Tar Baby* pays particular attention to the “theorizing” within the text in order to explore several interpretive possibilities. First, to illuminate the ways in which the novel rejects the limiting prescription for a unidimensional discussion of gender conflicts, even as it confronts and responds to it as a significant constituent within a multidimensional and complex matrix. Second, to examine the ways in which the novel critiques a European materialist vision without renting the clichéd words, images and plots that are conventionally employed for any analysis of capitalist exploitation and class hierarchies. Third, to evaluate the depiction of individuals who are not permanently quagmired in the seeming immutability of their cultural/class “predicament”—with all its ramifications—but who, along with the readers, are assisted in imagining some form of resolution. And, finally, to suggest some of the ways in which the novel participates in and extends that conscious intertextuality—call-and-response poetics—among Black women literary artists.

Toni Morrison’s fiction displays an extensive concern with the erasure of African<sup>2</sup> cultural consciousness and cultural history, and the persisting cultural illness which this erasure precipitates.<sup>3</sup> The cultivated lack of cultural historical consciousness, and the displacement of “peoplehood” which it engenders, is a central theme in several of Morrison’s novels. In *Song of Solomon* (1977), for example, Milkman’s inadvertent and increasingly captivating quest to literally piece together—to *re-collect*—the story of his ancestors facilitates the reinscription of his own cultural and historical consciousness. Milkman’s acknowledgement and reevaluation of his abuse of Hagar and of his disrespect of Pilate, Ruth Foster, and his sisters *following* his recovery of the past is noteworthy. Since the erasure of cultural self-consciousness expresses itself in a range of self-destructive attitudes, Morrison rightly views these factors as central to understanding and, perhaps, resolving the particular tensions that exist between Black women and Black men. Coming after the transformation in Milkman’s treatment of women—his relationship with Sweet, for example—which the recovery of his past inspires and facilitates, one might see *Tar Baby* (1981), with its compilation of antagonistic relationships, as the continuing elaboration of a cultural trauma which the earlier novel uncovers. In a 1982 interview with Nellie McKay, Morrison observed that “there is a serious question about black male and black female relationships in the twentieth century. I just think that the argument has always turned on something it should not turn on: gender. I think that the conflict of genders is a cultural illness” (“An Interview” 421). Of her several novels, *Tar Baby* is specifically crafted to explore this “serious question” of relationships

between African men and African women in the twentieth century. Significantly, the “contentions” between Black women and Black men—alluded to in the novel’s epigraph<sup>4</sup>—fall largely outside the parameters of gender(ed) relationships or heterosexual romance, and within the domain of class antagonisms. Morrison’s observation must, therefore, be interpreted in its broader context, as a reference to the connections between the “conflict of genders,” “cultural illness” and class conflicts. In light of Morrison’s stated analysis of the origin and dimensions of conflicts within the Black community, a useful approach to interpreting the novel would be to examine the means by which it articulates this conviction that “cultural illness” influences and informs gender relationships within the African American community, as well as to evaluate the nature and history of that “cultural illness” so as to discover what possible insights the text offers toward a recovery and/or resolution.

In his turn-of-the-century definition of double-consciousness, W. E. B. DuBois accurately gauges the deleterious impact racism has on cultural self-consciousness and identity in his conclusion that “the Negro is . . . born with a veil, and gifted with second-sight in this American world,—a world which yields him no true self-consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world” (14). In *The Souls of Black Folk* DuBois notes that “It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others, of measuring one’s soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity” (14). Although this difference is not articulated—but is implicit—in DuBois’s discussion, the term “double-consciousness” refers to two distinct realities. As a process, double-consciousness refers to a state of psychological conflict between opposing cultural world views—what DuBois designates as the internalization of “two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings, two warring ideals.” As a final state or outcome, double-consciousness refers to a debilitating resolution in which externally derived and distorted perceptions of the self constitute a *single* but alienated self-consciousness. Some eighty years after DuBois first coined the term, the Kenyan writer/critic Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o detailed the features and lingering consequences of this outcome, placing it in a global context:

The effect of the cultural bomb is to annihilate a people’s belief in their names, in their languages, in their environment, in their heritage of struggle, in their unity, in their capacities and ultimately in themselves. It makes them see their past as one wasteland of non-achievement and it makes them want to distance themselves from that wasteland. It makes them want

to identify with that which is furthest removed from themselves; for instance, with other people's languages rather than their own. . . . The intended results are despair, despondency and a collective death-wish. (3)

In referring to these consequences as the *intended* results of a "cultural bomb," wa Thiong'o's analysis identifies the agency behind this double-consciousness which DuBois's discussion only vaguely signals. Wa Thiong'o concludes, "Imperialism is total: it has economic, political, military, cultural and psychological consequences for the people of the world today. . . . But the biggest weapon wielded and actually daily unleashed by imperialism against the collective defiance [of the oppressed] is the cultural bomb" (2-3). This observation illuminates the sociopolitical implications behind Morrison's text which re-presents a social milieu characterized by a prominent economic and political hierarchy, and which is most revealing in its simultaneous contemporaneity and its resemblance to the nineteenth-century southern plantation. Morrison's depiction of relationships in the plantation household of Valerian Street (whose name recalls the sleep-inducing drug extracted from dried roots) contributes to the full exposition of the ways in which the "cultural bomb" inculcates a self-alienating materialist world view, which in turn motivates class and gender conflicts between Black men and Black women.

Diversity among human beings guarantees a potentially beneficial range of different visions. However, when these different visions are manipulated to determine and denote advantages (economic, political and social) and disadvantages, choices available and choices unavailable, then these differences accrue an element of contestation. The contemporary world is characterized by a complex matrix with axes of contestation along dimensions of race/culture, class, gender, territorial/geopolitical nationality, religion, sexual orientation, etc. For obvious historical reasons, contestation has been a central feature of the social, political, and cultural dynamic between Euro-Americans and African Americans. This contestation, because it remains unmediated and unresolved (even now in the post-Civil Rights era), has generated a double-voiced social discourse, characterized by a Euro-American dominant voice/world view and an African-American "minor"/opposing voice/world view, which, in their humanist dimensions and directions, are substantively and categorically different. Interestingly, double-consciousness not only attests to the existence of these contesting visions, but it also reflects a "resolution" of sorts, in the acceptance of the dominant world view on the part of *some* African Americans. (Since the impact of racism

and cultural imperialism, and the resistance to these, vary from place to place and over time, it bears mentioning that every African American is *not* equally vulnerable to double-consciousness. Likewise, the opportunities for transformative intervention also vary. Indeed, double-vision originates in some type of transformative intervention.) Double-vision represents an unchauvinistic comprehension of these contesting visions, as a prerequisite for mapping out a wholesome path of emergence—individually and collectively—from this debilitating conflict and irresolution.

Unlike *Song of Solomon*, which depicts Milkman's emergence and recuperation from "cultural illness" through his journey of immersion into the U. S. South,<sup>5</sup> *Tar Baby* is set on an island in the Caribbean owned by a retired Euro-American candy magnate, and focuses on a variety of relationships within Valerian's household: between the butler/maid couple, Sydney and Ondine Childs, dubbed "Kingfish and Beulah," and Valerian and his wife, Margaret, the "Principal Beauty of Maine"; between the Childs and their jet-setting niece, Jadine, "the Copper Venus"; between the indoor/"house" servants and the outdoor/"field" servants, Gideon and Thérèse, whom Sydney, Ondine and Jadine rename "Yardman" and "the Marys." The central focus, however, is on the relationship between the European-educated African American woman, Jadine Childs, and a Florida-born African man, called Son. For the first half of the narrative, there is, however, no "relationship" to speak of between the two. The most striking aspect of the relationship between Jadine and Son is not, however, its delayed beginning, but rather, that each, viewing the other's world as impoverished and/or unsafe, sees it as an occasion to "rescue" the other.

Waiting in New York City for Jadine's arrival from Isle des Chevaliers, the narrator states that Son "saw it all as a rescue: first tearing her mind away from that blinding awe. Then the physical escape from *the plantation*. His first, hers to follow two days later. . . . He thought of it not just as love, but as rescue" (189-190; emphasis added). Son's attempt to "rescue" Jadine from that "blinding awe" of all things European does not begin with the escape to New York. Rather, it begins during the nights he spent undetected in the house, in Jadine's bedroom, "when he crouched there watching her sleep and trying to change her dreams" (112). The narrator recalls that "He had thought hard during those times in order to manipulate her dreams, to insert his own dreams into her . . . the dreams he wanted her to have" (102), dreams that celebrate the day to day rituals of Black people's lives, unfettered by materialist trappings. Neverthe-

less, "he barely had time to breathe into her the smell of tar and its shiny consistency" (102). And while Son attempts to "insert his own dreams into" Jadine, he also recognizes that "at any moment she might . . . press her dreams of gold and cloisonné and honey-colored silk into him and then who would mind the pie table in the basement of the church?" (103). For Jadine, too, believes that they are *both* at risk, but for her, the danger lies in being claimed/seduced by the vision of a self-loving African woman consciousness embodied in the "diaspora mothers," the "night women." She confronts this possibility when alone in New York, waiting for Son to return from Eloe.<sup>6</sup> And when Son returns, she "fought him . . . but most of the time she knew she was fighting the night women. The mamas who had seduced him and were trying to lay claim to her. It would be the fight of their lives to get away from that coven that had nothing to show but breasts" (226).

While the conflict of genders may originate in cultural illness, the depiction of that illness in *Tar Baby* is both sexualized and gender-inflected. The references to Son's attempt to "insert" a culturally conscious dream into Jadine, and to Jadine's attempt to "press" her class-conscious dreams into Son, reveal the gendered aspects of this conflict. Not only does this sexualized and gendered liaison between Jadine and Son dominate the cast of contentious relationships, but their obsession with rescuing each other recalls several gender- and class-inflected narratives of rescue. On Son's part, these include the narrative of the peasant who rescues the princess from danger or imprisonment, the narrative of the culturally conscious/literate who rescues the culturally unconscious/alienated, the narrative of the supposedly mature elder who rescues the child/Childs, and the narrative of the formerly enslaved African who returns to rescue another enslaved relative or friend via the Underground Railroad. (The use of Gideon's passport to facilitate Son's departure completes the last motif.) On Jadine's part, the narrative patterns include the sophisticate who rescues/uplifts the "noble" savage from his primitivism; the representative of the "talented tenth" who rescues one of the designated untalented nine-tenths/folk from educational, cultural and sociopolitical stagnation; and the supposedly mature woman who rescues the son/Son.

Son's and Jadine's competing agendas for rescue and conflicting perceptions of the threat facing them underscore the central thematic axis in the novel: the problematic and contested nature of vision as an act and process informed by, and fraught with, historical, social, cultural and political consequences. Indeed, the nature and

modes of seeing is a recurring motif in *Tar Baby*. The narrative introduces and develops this motif via the story of the one hundred blind horsemen who roam the hills of Isle des Chevaliers (and for whom the island is named):

Gideon told him a story about a race of blind people descended from some slaves who went blind the minute they saw Dominique. . . . Their ship foundered and sank with Frenchmen, horses and slaves aboard. The blinded slaves could not see how or where to swim so they were at the mercy of the current and the tide. They floated and trod water and ended up on that island along with the horses that had swum ashore. Some of them were only partially blinded and were rescued later by the French, and returned to Queen of France and indenture. The others, totally blind, hid. (130-131)

To determine the significance and source of this "blindness," one has to consider what these enslaved Africans would have seen after emerging from the pit of the slave ship. Two recent texts, both published after *Tar Baby*, and whose attention to a more historically meaningful depiction of Black peoples' lives exemplifies and extends the call-and-response dialectics among African women literary artists, provide an answer to this and other related questions.

In *i is a long memoried woman* (1983), Grace Nichols's titular narrator "had imagined this new world to be— / bereft of fecundity" but "wasn't prepared / for . . . the utter / rawness of life everywhere" (8). The abundance of cruelty, misery and death that was the crossing gave the women, men, and children in the pit of the slave ship the correct understanding that this was not prelude to paradise. For middle passage survivors,<sup>7</sup> therefore, the brilliance and greenery of the "New World" landscape was inconsistent with their preconception of it as "bereft of fecundity." The fact that these Africans "went blind" must be seen as a willed and self-conscious act of survival, inspired by the need to decipher the promise hinted at in that beginning of hell, the slave ship. Hence the subsequent testimony of Nichols's long-memoried woman that "These islands green / with green blades" are "fertile / with brutality" (31). And in Paule Marshall's *Praisesong for the Widow* (1983), this recognition that the landscape which appeared to be blooming with the "rawness of life everywhere" was also "fertile / with brutality" prompted the homeward trek of those long-gone Ibos. As Aunt Cuney tells Avey,

[T]he minute those Ibos was brought on shore they just stopped, my gran' said, and taken a look around. A good long look. Not saying a word. Just studying the place real good. Just taking their time and studying on it.

And they seen things that day you and me don't have the power to see. 'Cause those pure-born Africans was people my gran' said could see



in more ways than one. . . . Well, they seen everything that was to happen 'round here that day. . . . Those Ibos didn't miss a thing. Even seen you and me standing here talking about 'em. And when they got through sizing up the place real good and seen what was to come, they turned, my gran' said, and looked at the white folks what brought 'em here. . . . And . . . when they *knew* just from looking at 'em how those folks was gonna do, do you know what the Ibos did? Do you . . . ? [ . . . ]

. . . They just turned, my gran' said, all of 'em . . . and walked on back down to the edge of the river here. Every las' man, woman and chile. And they wasn't taking they time no more. They had seen what they had seen and those Ibos was stepping! . . . Those Ibos! Just upped and walked on away not two minutes after getting here! (37-39)

To achieve this vision of the brutality awaiting them, without "missing a thing," these Africans had to blind themselves to the landscape's "cane dancing," "palm waving" come-back-to-Jamaica/Grenada/Puerto Rico/South Carolina beauty, to close the short-sighted natural eyes in order to see, as Gideon says, "with the eye of the mind." In *Tar Baby*, the ones who "were only partially blinded" went to meet their supposed "rescuers" and were reenslaved. The others, having fully achieved "second sight"/double-vision, understood that "rescue" meant slavery and hid. Son's rejection of Jadine's plans to have Valerian finance his education and/or business venture signals his double-vision of the nexus between "rescue" and slavery/indebtedness.

This transformed blindness or second-sight, to return to the language of DuBois's analysis, is the primary feature in the strategies African peoples have devised to survive and overcome the fertile brutality of European/Euro-American imperialism in the "New World." Double-vision or second-sight differs from, but originates in, an *efun*-esque transformation of double-consciousness. (*Efun* is a ritually prepared chalk which is used for cleansing in Yoruba religion. It is said to have the power to transform the negative energy within an entity into a positive potential.) The word "nigger," as *African Americans use it intra-communally* to express, among other things, a benevolent cultural kinship, is a perfect linguistic example of this "cleansing"/transformation. The renaming of Not Doctor Street in *Song of Solomon* is another. It is, therefore, possible to refer to *efunesque* transformations within African American experience.<sup>8</sup> Both of the examples above arise from an initial contestation: in the first, involving the image and definition of Black peoples, in the second, involving the naming of the territory, a Black neighborhood, to honor someone's ancestor—either Mister Mains (most probably), or Doctor

Foster. Significantly, the transformation does not erase the opposing signification. It simply clears a partial space to allow for an additional meaning, one that, moreover, remembers the history of contestation and the attempted distortion so that both the attempt to impose a distorted meaning and the resistance to that distortion are encoded in the transformed name. While double-consciousness is initially a negative experience characterized by an unreconciled and self-alienating "two-ness of being" in which externally derived distorted perceptions of the African identity are dominant ("measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity"), it can be "cleansed"/transformed into a positive potential—double-vision—which is contiguous with the blues impulse. That is, following this transformation there is a reconciliation and dialectic of the two seemingly antithetical possibilities: the ability to view oneself through one's own culturally informed, historically meaningful and communally affirmative perspective, with simultaneous access to the lenses constructed, and with which one is viewed by the machinators of that "cultural bomb." The person "gifted" with this double-vision achieves an understanding that is greater than the sum of the constituent realities. In its simultaneous presentation and mediation of contested visions of reality, *Tar Baby* extends this double-vision.

Contesting visions are introduced and developed throughout the novel, and in such a manner as to provide the reader with an insight into how they both inform and reflect social relations. The contestation of names that the characters assign to each other is illustrative. While Sydney, Ondine, and Jadine express their own double-consciousness and dehumanize Gideon and Thérèse by naming them "Yardman" and "Mary," respectively, Thérèse reciprocates their contempt for her by renaming them "bow-tie," "machete hair," and the "fast ass." Nevertheless, for the reader with a culturally informed double-vision, the name "Yardman," like the term "swamp women," carries a positive value as a coded reference to the folk, the ordinary and extraordinary Black people of Son's pie-table-in-the-church-basement dream memories. And while Margaret assigns Sydney and Ondine to a subordinate class/cultural status by designating them "Kingfish and Beulah"—a label that conspicuously announces its origin in minstrelsy—they express their contempt for her working-class background and assumed airs by dubbing her the "Principal Beauty of Maine." This depiction provides the reader with a more comprehensive understanding of the reciprocal nature of this con-

testation of naming. *Both* the superordinate and the subordinate exercise this prerogative of naming.

While the names of the central characters—Son and the Childses—evoke memories of the racist designation of Black men as “boys” and the paternalistic view of all Black people as childlike, Morrison’s naming intensifies the contestation and prompts an urgent and introspective interrogation of the characters’ maturity. For Jadine and Son, the two would-be mature rescuers, this interrogation escalates into a fierce exchange of accusations on the eve of their breakup, articulated through the narrative consciousness: “Each knew the world as it was meant or ought to be. One had a past, the other a future and each one bore the culture to save the race in his hands. Mama-spoiled black man, will you mature with me? Culture-bearing black woman, whose culture are you bearing?” (232).

Contestation also informs Son’s and Jadine’s differing perspectives of the world, and creates much of the friction in their relationship. The initial discrepancy in their perceptions sets the stage for the many contentions in their brief romance. Arriving in the United States from Isle des Chevaliers, Son sees that “The black girls in New York City were crying. . . . Crying from a grief so stark you would have thought they’d been condemned to death by starvation in the lobby of Alice Tully Hall” (185-186). Two days later, Jadine brings a different view, that “if ever there was a black woman’s town, New York was it” (191). While neither will admit the validity of the other’s perspective, for the reader with historically and culturally informed double-vision, both observations are clearly accurate.

Perhaps the most important description of contesting visions comes in the wake of Son’s challenge to Valerian over his firing of “two people who had dared to want some of his apples” (175). Valerian is confident in his indignation over Son’s impertinence in questioning him because “Somewhere in the back of [his] mind one hundred French chevaliers were roaming the hills on horses. Their swords were in their scabbards and their epaulets glittered in the sun. Backs straight, shoulders high—alert but restful in the security of the Napoleonic Code” (177). Son, on the other hand, is secure in his right to challenge “one of the killers of the world” because

Somewhere in back of [his] mind one hundred black men on one hundred unshod horses rode blind and naked through the hills and had done so for hundreds of years. They knew the rain forest when it was a rain forest, they knew where the river began, where the roots twisted above the ground;

they knew all there was to know about the island and had not even seen it. They had floated in strange waters blind, but they were still there racing each other for sport in the hills behind this white man's house. (177)

Interestingly, while the narrative consciousness registers and confirms the presence of the blind African horsemen, *only* Valerian visualizes the French militia men. Still, this discursive layering indicates a much larger dispute over whose social and cultural praxis is sanctioned by the competing histories contained in the geography.

If contestation characterizes the novel's internal dynamic, supratextually it facilitates a decisive resolution in mediating these differing visions toward the construction of a critically enabling double-vision. Indeed, the narrative structure expresses and participates in this double-vision. The representation and resolution in the botanical world of corresponding relationships and events in the human world demonstrates how double-vision informs the structure of the narrative. Morrison's representation of the botanical world in *Tar Baby* serves several related purposes. First, it allows her to critique a European/Euro-American capitalist apparatus that has unleashed a cycle of destruction on nature which we have only now come to acknowledge, amid the life-threatening realities of acid rain, ozone depletion, toxic waste, the contamination of lakes, rivers and oceans, etc. The description of what happened to the "[p]oor insulted, brokenhearted river" that becomes a swamp, Sein de Vieilles, exemplifies this innovatively articulated critique. Second, it allows her to develop and resolve complex human relationships and situations. The importance of the relationship between Jadine and Son is fully revealed through the double-vision afforded by a botanical representation, which occurs even before the two become lovers. And when, at the end of the novel, Son is "revolted by the possibility of being freed" of his enervating love for Jadine and redirected toward a culturally conscious vision, this dénouement is represented in a fusion of the escape motif from the tar baby story with the complicity of the botanical world with which he is in harmony. Finally, since the "swamp women" and "blind horsemen," who inhabit the natural world exploited and devastated by the capitalist agency of "killers of the world" like Valerian, are identified as Black women and Black men, the novel combines a description of the environmental/ecological consequences of capitalist exploitation with a description of the sociological consequences. The description of Jadine standing "up to [her] kneecaps in rot" in Sein de Vieilles is perhaps an oblique reference to the economic stagnation of Black communities like Eloe and, on a broader scale, to the declining economic condition of the

African American community as a whole. The briar patch “home” that Son remembers as “very dry, green and quiet” (144) has become a swamp.

Sein de Vieilles is the swamp created by the “killers of the world,” a by-product of their program for maximizing their own wealth by “civilizing” the planet. While waiting in the stalled jeep for Son to return with the gasoline, Jadine decides to “seek shelter from the sun under the trees to the left of the road, in spite of the unpleasant odor” (155). When Jadine walks toward the swamp, she discovers that

The trees were not as close together as she'd thought. Tall bushes had made them seem so. She approached the shade and peeped in between the trees. She almost laughed at what she saw. Young trees ringed and soared above the wavy mossy floor. . . . In the center under a roof of green was a lawn of the same dark green the Dutchmen loved to use. . . . It was amazing; the place looked like something by Bruce White or Fazetta—an elegant comic book illustration. She stepped through some bushes that looked like rhododendron and onto the mossy floor. The lawn, the center of the place began only a couple of yards ahead. She walked toward it and sank up to her knees. She dropped the pad and charcoal and grabbed the waist of a tree which shivered in her arms and swayed as though it wished to dance with her. (156)

Son is that “tree that wished to dance with” Jadine, as his magical movement in the narrative indicates.

In a conversation with Robert Stepto, Morrison confessed that “there is an incredible amount of magic and feistiness in black men that nobody has been able to wipe out. But everybody has tried” (“Intimate Things” 479). More than the young Cholly Breedlove who falls in love with Pauline’s broken foot, more than Ajax—one of the people who could fly—more than Guitar or Milkman, Son, like his prototype, Tea Cake in Hurston’s *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, is that Black “magic” man, whom the narrator repeatedly describes as a tree. While waiting for Jadine in New York, Son remembers having “stood in her bedroom, a towel wrapped around his waist. . . . Staring at a heart-red tree desperately in love with a woman he could not risk loving because he could not afford to lose her” (189), suggesting that he *is* the “tree that wished to dance with [Jadine]”! And when his first conversation with Jadine ends with her angry exit, Son

stood before the mirror looking at his hair. It spread like layer upon layer of wings upon his head, more alive than the sealskin. It made him doubt that hair was in fact dead cells. Black people’s hair, in any case, was

definitely alive. Left alone and untended it was like foliage and from a distance it looked like nothing less than the crown of a deciduous tree. (114)

The narrator's reflection on the "left alone and untended" beauty of Black hair contrasts sharply with Jadine's perception of Son's dreadlocked hair as "Wild, aggressive, vicious hair that needed to be put in jail. Uncivilized, reform-school hair. Mau Mau, Attica, chain-gang hair" (97). Typically double-conscious, Jadine acknowledges that "spaces, mountains, savannas—all those were in [Son's] forehead and eyes" (135), but like her interest in the tamed, trimmed, civilized patch of lawn in the center of the circle of trees, she is only willing to admit her attraction to Son when he is "*clipped and beautiful*" (155; emphasis added). How Jadine responds to the tree whose waist she grabs, illuminates many aspects of the relationship between the two lovers and the influence of that cultural illness on their relationship.

After being disappointed in her advance toward the patch of "lawn of the same dark green the Dutchmen loved to use," Jadine holds on to the tree in desperation. The narrator states that

She struggled to lift her feet and sank an inch or two farther down into the moss-covered jelly. The pad with Son's face badly sketched looked up at her and the women hanging in the trees looked down at her. There is an easy way to get out of this, she thought, and every Girl Scout knows what it is but I don't. . . . Perhaps she was supposed to lie horizontally. She tightened her arms around the tree and it swayed as though it wished to dance with her. Count, she thought. I will count to fifty and then pull, then count again and pull again. She had only to hang on until Son returned and shout— fifteen minutes, not more. And she would spend it edging up the tree that wanted to dance. . . . Count. Just count. Don't sweat or you'll lose your partner, the tree. Cleave together like lovers. Press together like man and wife. Cling to your partner, hang on to him and never let him go. Creep up on him a millimeter at a time, slower than the slime and cover him like the moss. Caress his bark and finger his ridges. Sway when he sways and shiver with him too. Whisper your numbers from one to fifty into the parts that have been lifted away and left tender skin behind. Love him and trust him with your life because you are up to your kneecaps in rot. (156)

The insistent repetition of the tree wanting to dance with Jadine is Morrison's way of inscribing this love affair in a Black cultural context. As the editors of *The Heart of the Race* confirm, "Alongside music, dance has been our most important form of cultural expression. . . . Historically dance has always been integral to Black culture.

There is literally a dance for everything, back in the land of our ancestors—a dance for death, for birth, for weddings, for social occasions, for everything you can imagine” (Bryan et al. 202-203). Given the multifunctionality of dance in African culture, this seems a particularly appropriate coding of the love affair. Indeed the first part of their relationship—before Eloë—is really a dance of cleaving to, caressing, and covering each other. Of their early life in New York, the narrator states,

[H]e let her be still and cry after she told him about her mother and the awful hat she’d worn to the funeral. . . . She poured her heart out to him and he to her. Dumb things, secret things, sin and heroism. They told each other all of it. Or all they could. . . . Gradually she came to feel unorphaned. He cherished and safeguarded her. When she woke in the night from an uneasy dream she had only to turn and there was the stability of his shoulder and his limitless, eternal chest. No part of her was hidden from him. . . . He unorphaned her completely. Gave her a brand-new childhood. (193, 197)

At the beginning of the narrative, Jadine admits to her own “orphanhood,” her lack of self-conscious understanding of, and alienation from, an African woman identity in thinking about the woman in yellow she had seen in a grocery store in Paris: “The woman had made her feel lonely in a way. Lonely and inauthentic” (40). Therefore, at the points in their relationship when Jadine seems to be moving toward a recovery of her cultural identity as an African woman, she is, in fact, being “unorphaned” and restored to her role as a *daughter*. When she goes to Eloë, Rosa, in repeatedly referring to her as “daughter,” explicitly attempts to unorphan, reclaim, and revise Jadine’s identity as a member of the cultural community. As Nanadine belatedly explains, “‘A daughter is a woman that cares about where she come from and takes care of them that took care of her’” (242). In terms of the botanical representation, it is, therefore, understandable that the swamp women “were delighted when first they saw her, thinking a runaway child had been restored to them” (157). Back in New York, however, Jadine fiercely rejects this attempt to restore a self-conscious African female identity:

The night women [that is, *all* the Black women named in the narrative: Cheyenne, Rosa, Thérèse, Son’s dead mother, Sally Sarah Sadie Brown, Ondine, Soldier’s wife Ellen, Francine, her own dead mother, and the woman in yellow] were not merely against her (and her alone—not him), not merely looking superior over their sagging breasts and folded stomachs, they seemed somehow in agreement with each other about her, and were all out to get her, tie her, bind her. Grab the person she had worked hard to become and choke it off with their soft loose tits.

Jadine sipped the grapefruit juice. Its clean, light acid dissolved the morning cloud from her tongue. "No, Rosa. I am not your daughter, and he is not your son." (225)

Perhaps the most revealing sign of Jadine's confusion is her perception of breasts, a symbol of sustenance, as the implement for destroying—"choking off"—what she had become. Jadine is not, I think, unaware of the fact that these women are trying to reveal and nurture another dimension of her identity. Rather, she is afraid that whoever this person might be, she will be faced with the same lack of choice, the same economic and sociopolitical stagnation that these "swamp women" face. In reaching this conclusion, she mistakenly believes that the circumscribed lives these women lead stem from some *intrinsic* quality, some personal weakness on their part, rather than from capitalist exploitation: "The women [including 'Nanadine with the tight-fisted braids looking sorrowful at the kitchen table and accusatory in that room'] had looked awful to her: onion heels, potbellies, hair surrendered to rags and braids. And the breasts they thrust at her like weapons were soft, loose bags closed at the tip with a brunette eye" (225). So she tells Nanadine, "'I don't want to be . . . like you'" (243). Read carefully, however, the metaphor indicates that what Jadine has become is a manifestation of hunger or unconsciousness. Interestingly, this hunger first appears in the narrative in Son's perception that "The black girls in New York City were crying. . . . Crying from a grief so stark you would have thought they'd been condemned to death by starvation in the lobby of Alice Tully Hall. Death by starvation in Mikell's, death by starvation on the campus of C.U.N.Y. And death by starvation at the reception desks of large corporations" (185-186). The text underscores the importance of Jadine's rejection of the opportunity to "feed," and of this name/identity—and, by extension, Son's as well—when Nanadine insists, in her parting conversation with Jadine that

"a girl has got to be a daughter first. . . . And if she never learns how to be a daughter, she can't never learn how to be a woman . . . good enough even for the respect of other women. . . . You don't need your own natural mother to be a daughter. All you need is to feel a certain way, a certain careful way about people older than you are." (242)

Ondine's explanation emphasizes the reciprocal nature of daughter/mother roles, and the symbiotic relationship between any generation and its elders.

While in Morrison's earlier novel *Song of Solomon*, Milkman lacks a self-conscious *grounding* in an African cultural and historical base,



Jadine is not only rootless but, in receiving a Eurocentric education, has been *grafted* onto a self-alienating cultural base from which to view her own and the experiences of other African peoples.<sup>9</sup> Roberto Fernández Retamar's discussion of cultural imperialism in *Calibán* offers an apt commentary on the character Jadine in his analysis of the figure of Ariel. In order to recover from the self-alienating effects of a Euro-American/European education, Retamar concludes that the "intelligentsia," for whom Ariel's eager subservience is exemplary, "must . . . sever the nexus of *dependence* upon the metropolitan culture from which it has learned, nonetheless, a language as well as a conceptual and technical apparatus. That language will be of profit, to use Shakespearean terminology, in cursing Prospero" 63. In "Friday on the Potomac," the introductory essay for the volume of critical essays on the Thomas/Hill hearings, *Racing Justice, En-gendering Power*, Morrison extends this analysis of the diseased relationship between colonizer-cum-"rescuer" and the colonized, noting that "The problem of internalizing the master's tongue is the problem of the rescued. Unlike the problems of survivors who may be lucky, fated, etc., the rescued have the problem of debt" (xxv). A typical representative of "the rescued," Jadine repeatedly expresses a deep (and false) sense of indebtedness to Valerian, telling Son "'a million times'" that "'He put me through school'" (226). Unassisted by helpers who might intervene to facilitate this recovery from the master's tongue and thought, Jadine wants only to *graft* Son into a similar relationship of indebtedness—as part of her "rescue" effort—as the argument over the financing of his college education demonstrates.

Jadine's narcotic dependence on Valerian both impairs her vision and creates an obsessive need to defend him. Son carefully notes the type of "blinding awe" Jadine's dependence on, and indebtedness to, Valerian creates. During the Christmas dinner shoot-out over the firing of Gideon and Thérèse:

Jadine had defended him. Poured his wine, offered him a helping of this, a dab of that and smiled when she did not have to. Soothed down any disturbance that might fluster him; quieted even the mild objections her own aunt raised, and sat next to him more alive and responsive and attentive than even his own wife was, basking in the cold light that came from one of the killers of the world. (175)

And while Valerian's opinion is important to her, her uncle's and aunt's are not: "They were family. . . . Nanadine and Sydney mattered a lot to her but what they thought did not" (41). Jadine completely

distorts and denies the truth of the years of sacrifice her aunt and uncle made on her behalf, telling herself that "they had gotten Valerian to pay her tuition while they sent her the rest, *having no one else to spend it on*" (41; emphasis added.) As she tells Son, "[Margaret] and Valerian are my patrons. . . . They educated me. Paid for my travel, my lodgings, my clothes, my schools" (101). The truth emerges, however, from Ondine's confession that "We don't have a place of our own. And the little bit of savings went to Jadine. Not that I regret a penny of it. I don't. . . . I would have stood on my feet all day all night to put her through that school. And when my feet were gone, I would have cooked on my knees" (166). Son later summarizes Jadine's responsibility to her uncle and aunt, giving his own corrective evaluation of Valerian's contribution to her education:

"That was toilet paper, Jadine. He *should* have wiped his ass after he shit over your uncle and aunt. . . . Why don't you ask me to help you buy a house and put your aunt and uncle in it and take that woman off her feet? Her feet are killing her, killing her, and let them live like people for a change, like the people you never studied, like the people you can't photograph. *They* are the ones who put you through school, woman, they are the ones. Not him. They worked for him all their lives. And you left them down there with him not knowing if they had a job or not. You should cook for *them*. (226, 228)

The fact that Ondine looks several years older than Margaret, even though the actual difference in their ages is only four years, perhaps indicates just how much "shit" has covered Ondine and Sydney.

The cultural dimensions and implications of Jadine's impaired vision appear in her actions, comments and conversations throughout the narrative. As an example, her comments on the relative merit of European art versus traditional African art fully reveal someone who, in the language of wa Thiong'o's analysis, viewing her past as "one wasteland of non-achievement," has distanced herself from that putative "wasteland" and clearly identifies with "that which is furthest removed from herself." As she informs 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" (62). Jadine is here expressing and endorsing an imperialistic view of the artistic production of one culture as mere raw material for the expression of European "genius." As a contemporary parallel, one would also expect her to agree that Paul Simon's music is "better" than the African musicians he *tried* to imitate, his interest being proof of Simon's "genius." These and other similar remarks indicate that

Jadine's formal education has provided her with no knowledge of her own culture and history. For while she claims to understand Picasso's genius, she displays not even passing interest in discovering the genius behind the mask-making tradition, nor even in evaluating the criteria for making these judgments involving different cultural aesthetics. Son's outburst on the paucity of her much-touted education, "'The truth is that whatever you learned in those colleges that didn't include me ain't shit. . . . If they didn't teach you that, then they didn't teach you nothing, because until you know about me, you don't know nothing about yourself. And you don't know anything, anything at all about your children and anything at all about your mama and your papa'" (227-228), is simply a very contemporary demand for a multicultural education. Jadine's response to this demand, "'You want to be a yardman all your life?'" (228), is disturbing in its suggestion that in order to be materially secure, to "ascend" out of the poverty trap, African peoples must dedicate themselves to the knowledge of European/Euro-American culture and that alone; or that knowledge of one's particular cultural history impedes socio-economic progress. Given the previous discussion of the positive reference coded in the name "Yardman," Jadine's question carries, as well, an element of surprise at Son's persistence in clinging to an African cultural identity and self-consciousness.

Jadine's rejection of the choice to heal her own double-consciousness by claiming an African woman consciousness is prefigured in the account of her entry into *Sein de Vieilles* when the swamp women—who are synonymous with the "night women"—discover, "upon looking closer [that] . . . This girl was fighting to get away from them" (157). Morrison fashions her own coded celebration of the human worth of these swamp women in their silent observation of Jadine's flight:

The women hanging from the trees were quiet now, but arrogant—mindful as they were of their value, their exceptional femaleness; knowing as they did that the first world of the world had been built with their sacred properties; that they alone could hold together the stones of pyramids and the rushes of Moses's crib; knowing their steady consistency, their pace of glaciers, their permanent embrace, they wondered at the girl's desperate struggle down below to be free, to be something other than they were. (157)

This reference to tar as a "sacred property" constitutes yet another example of *efunesque* transformation in the narrative. While most readers are familiar with the folktale—which Son later retells—about the white farmer who made a tar baby as a trap to destroy an allegedly pilfering rabbit,<sup>10</sup> supratextually tar is represented as the

symbol for a positive cultural potential—that is, the Black woman’s “exceptional femaleness.” As Morrison explains in another interview, with Tom LeClair,

“Tar baby” is also a name, like “nigger,” that white people call black children, black girls, as I recall. Tar seemed to me to be an odd thing to be in a Western story, and I found that there is a tar lady in African mythology. I started thinking about tar. At one time, a tar pit was a holy place, at least an important place, because tar was used to build things. It came naturally out of the earth; it held together things like Moses’ little boat and the pyramids. *For me, the tar baby came to mean the black woman who can hold things together.* (“An Interview” 255; emphasis added)

Or, to use the language of this analysis, the Black woman who can reconcile and attain seemingly antithetical possibilities.

Subverting the standard view of the tar baby as an object created by and for another, Morrison, in yet another *efunesque* transformation, reclaims and represents the autonomous subjectivity of the tar baby. For the Black woman—whose identity as tar baby Morrison revises and validates—some form of initiation is required for the transformation into, and restoration of, her “true and ancient properties.” Jadine’s entry into *Sein de Vieilles* symbolizes the beginning of this transformative initiation. Her ability to value Son’s human worth and to accept him as a mate, despite her initial estimate of him as a “swamp rat” evidences her beginning initiation. It is, therefore, overwhelmingly significant that the community of swamp women “were delighted when first they saw her, thinking a runaway child had been *restored* to them” (157; emphasis added). The description of Jadine’s and Son’s life in New York City—before Eloë—provides a parallel depiction of the early phase of Jadine’s initiation and of the harmonious interaction of autonomous “tar baby” and “rabbit.” In a jazz-like riff on the rabbit’s signature, “Lickety-split,” Morrison captures their vulnerability, sensitivity, and capacity for empowering each other in this early phase: “She wondered if she should hold back, keep something in store from him, but *he opened the part on her head with his fingers and drove his tongue through the part*. There was nothing to forgive, nothing to win and the future was five minutes away” (197). Once she balks at the initiation, however, Jadine’s double-consciousness reasserts itself even more intensely.

Beyond the frequent references to her impaired vision, signalled by her shortcomings as visual artist/photographer, Jadine’s distorted view of the world, and the fractured consciousness from which it derives, is fully displayed in her acceptance of reality as consisting

of binary oppositions. On the verge of abandoning the initiation (into reconciling antithetical possibilities) which she—a “tar-less” African woman—has not been able to complete, she admits that “This rescue was not going well. She thought she was rescuing him from the night women who wanted him for themselves, wanted him feeling superior in a cradle, deferring to him; wanted her to settle for wifely competence when she could be almighty, to settle for fertility rather than originality, nurturing instead of building” (231). Although there is nothing inherently antithetical in nurturing and building, or in fertility and originality, Jadine has internalized what poet and essayist June Jordan describes in “Toward a Black Balancing of Love and Hatred” as “the white either/or system of dividing the world into unnecessary conflict” (85). Assuming the stance of the Cartesian subject, Jadine therefore posits these as polemical choices: nurturing *versus* building; fertility *versus* originality. Morrison concludes that “When we feel that work and the house are mutually exclusive, then we have serious emotional or psychological problems, and we feel oppressed. But if we regard it as just one more thing you do, it’s an enhancement. Black women are both ship and safe harbor” (“An Interview,” Lester 49).

Morrison’s re-claiming of tar as an ancient property—as evidenced by the novel’s dedication<sup>11</sup>—demonstrates that *efunesque* re-visions are both transformative and restorative. Indeed, *Tar Baby* is a novel whose central project involves several restorative dimensions. Apart from those already mentioned, the text restores a critical understanding of the ways in which class conflicts undermine and contaminate relationships between women and men, and of the extent to which the resolution of gender conflicts in the Black community is intimately connected to the struggle against cultural imperialism and the materialist vision it inculcates. As the novel demonstrates and as Morrison has observed,

Many of the problems modern couples have are caused not so much by conflicting gender roles as by the other “differences” the culture offers. . . . Jadine and Son had no problems as far as men and women are concerned. They knew exactly what to do. But they had a problem about what work to do, when and where to do it, and where to live. Those things hinged on what they felt about who they were, and what their responsibilities were in being black. The question for each was whether he or she was really a member of the tribe. (“An Interview,” McKay 421-422)

In deciding to return to Paris, in pursuit of her unidimensional “greatness,” Jadine offers her own response to the question of her membership in, recognition of, and responsibilities to “the tribe,”

especially the uncle and aunt who (mis)raised her and who, in their old age, are beginning to need her to hold things together:

She thought [New York City] could be a shelter for her because there the night women could be beaten, reduced to shadows and confined to the briar patch where they belonged. . . . There were no shelters anyway; it was adolescent to think that there were. Every orphan knew that and knew also that mothers however beautiful were not fair. No matter what you did, the diaspora mothers with pumping breasts would impugn your character. And an African woman [Ms. Morrison, perhaps?], with a single glance from eyes that had burned away their own lashes, could discredit your elements. (248)

Indeed, the novel convincingly discredits Jadine's agenda for "rescue," not because financial security is to be disdained, nor because it is maliciously intentioned, but because it is undergirded by a materialist and self-alienating consciousness which recommends selling one's cultural inheritance and "birthright for a mess of pottage" (214), as the narrator of James Weldon Johnson's *The Autobiography of An Ex-Colored Man* phrases it. At the same time, the text validates Son's "rescue" agenda, not because it is coherent or well-planned, but because it perceives and values "the ancient properties" that constitute a communally conscious cultural world view, although this is undermined by his attempt to *impose* rescue. Despite the deliberate omission of a critical commentary on Son's rescue agenda, supratextually he is revealed to be, like Jadine, an "orphan" of sorts and, as such, an incompetent helper. Nowhere is this more clearly depicted than in the violence with which he tries to "convince" Jadine of the correctness of his own view by hanging her out of the window. Indeed, the only successful intervention that the novel depicts is one that is framed by choice. Explaining her decision to bring Son to the far side of Isle des Chevaliers, Thérèse states, "'This is the place. Where you can take a choice. Back there you say you don't. Now you do'" (262). The element of conscious choice makes this not an act of rescue, but an act of survival—without indebtedness.

Toni Morrison develops a multilayered, and deceptively double-voiced discourse within *Tar Baby*. One layer involves the creation of a narrative consciousness that is intimately connected to the character Son but distanced from Jadine. Another involves an extensive exploration of the impact of "cultural illness" on the relationship between Jadine and Son, and an almost cursory, or coded, evaluation of its impact on the relationship between Jadine and her family/parents, Sydney and Ondine. 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, as he is, by Jadine's departure, and the failure of both the love affair and the "rescue" effort. As a result, the reader is emotionally invested in the question of *why* the rescue and initiation failed, and how this might have been prevented. That these questions linger beyond the novel's closure attests to Morrison's dexterity in positioning the reader so that s/he wants/has to create some meaning out of the text. In "Rootedness: The Ancestor as Foundation," Morrison acknowledges that "to have the reader work *with* the author in the construction of the book—is what's important. What is left out is as important as what is there" (341).

Part of the answer to the reader's lingering questions about the rescue lies in the fact that while the question of *why* prioritize the rescue of Jadine is resoundingly answered, Son, the self-appointed rescuer, never fully considers *how* this might be performed. His handling of the central courtship ritual of taking the beloved to meet the people whom one is trying (or trying not!) to be/become demonstrates his insensitivity to Jadine's quite legitimate concerns and fears. This abandonment is prefigured in the account of Jadine's entry into Sein des Vieilles where she is both bewildered and disoriented, and must—in Son's absence—negotiate her own passage. Similarly then, Eloë is for the uninitiated—of whom Jadine is certainly one, despite her unrecognized cultural kinship to this community—a bewildering and disorienting territory. If double-consciousness is rightly perceived as an unconscious manifestation of involuntary cultural alienation, then some thoughtful intervention and/or initiation, not a sudden baptism or "rescue," is required to facilitate a transformation and recovery.

With regard to the more important question of Jadine's initiation, what needs to be considered is the impact on the two people for whom its incompleteness entails the greatest consequence. Perceiving that Jadine has not yet matured into her role and responsibility as a daughter, Sydney and Ondine speculate on the likelihood of her fulfilling one of the most intimate and integral duties owed to one's parents:

"You think she'll bury us, Ondine?"

"I think we're going to have to bury ourselves, Sydney." (245)

While the tone here is quite dismal, it is still not definitive. At age twenty-five, with a global community of "night women" waiting, in

Paris, Rome, New York, and elsewhere, if not to rescue, then certainly to challenge and inspire her, Jadine may yet *re-collect* her "true and ancient properties" and move beyond double-consciousness to double-vision.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>I would like to thank the following friends and colleagues for their comments on earlier drafts of this essay: Jacqui Alexander, Katherine Bassard, Wesley Brown, Abena P. A. Busia, Estella Conwill Májozo, Faith Smith, and especially Cheryl A. Wall.

<sup>2</sup>Throughout this discussion the word "African" is used interchangeably with "Black" to denote cultural identity and praxis, in contradistinction from its usage to denote a collective geopolitical nationality. The term "continental African" is used to indicate the latter.

<sup>3</sup>For New World African peoples the truncation of cultural history deliberately machinated during (and after) slavery has been and continues to be one of the most haunting absences. In *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, Zora Neale Hurston exposes this mutilation/absence when Nanny tells Janie that "'us colored folks is branches without roots'" (31). Hurston further alludes to its debilitating effect in the narrator's observation that "Nanny's head and face looked like the standing roots of some old tree that had been torn away by storm. Foundation of ancient power that no longer mattered" (26). For a discussion of the ways in which images of dismemberment are deployed throughout African American literature to signal psychological and political states, see Májozo.

<sup>4</sup>The epigraph reads in its entirety:

For it hath been declared  
unto me of you, my brethen, by them  
which are of the house of Chloe, that there are  
contentions among you. I Corinthians 1:11

<sup>5</sup>Milkman's "journey of immersion" into the South to reconnect with kin and culture exactly follows that of the "articulate kinsman" identified in Robert Stepto's study of African American narrative, *From Behind the Veil*.

<sup>6</sup>Eatonville, Hurston's all-Black hometown in South Florida, has been mythologized in her work and in contemporary criticism as a ritual ground that, despite its contradictions and limitations, was the sustaining foundation beneath Hurston's creativity and cultural self-consciousness. In the economically depressed Eloë, Morrison confronts us with the late-twentieth-century version of what that ritual ground, because of economic and political developments of the intervening five or six decades, would have evolved into. Beyond the similar geographies depicted in *Their Eyes Were Watching God* and *Tar Baby*, the drawing of the character Son also recalls Hurston's Tea Cake, who although not from Eatonville (he lives seven miles away in Orlando), is the man with whom Janie finally enjoys a fulfilling relationship, free of materialist obsession, and who assists her in maturing into a full self-confidence and capability. This conscious re-visioning of Hurston again exemplifies double-vision in the novel and contributes another dimension of historicity.

<sup>7</sup>For a discussion of the neglected dimensions of the experience of middle passage survivors, and an analysis of the term itself, see Katherine Bassard's essay forthcoming in *American Literary History*.

<sup>8</sup>My use of the term "efunesque transformation" seeks to advance the goal of inventing culturally informed critical tools for analyzing texts within the African



American literary tradition. Stephen Henderson's coinage of the term "mascon" in his profoundly illuminating interpretive model for *Understanding the New Black Poetry* exemplifies the enabling potential of this project. Henry Louis Gates, Jr., likewise a contributor to this effort with his expert deployment of "signifyin(g)" as a critical term, summarizes the broad objectives of this venture with the observation that "The challenge of black literary criticism is to derive principles of literary criticism from the black tradition itself, as defined in the idiom of critical theory but also in the idiom which constitutes the 'language of blackness,' the signifyin(g) difference which makes the black tradition our very own" (8).

<sup>9</sup>Indeed, Eleanor Traylor's analysis of *Tar Baby* suggests an even more deliberate abandonment: "Ondine and Sydney give Jadine over to Valerian and Margaret, who guide her choices and mold her ways and steer her thinking" (140).

<sup>10</sup>While Son's description confirms the version of the tale that Morrison uses, Trudier Harris offers a useful synopsis of other variants. Whatever the cultural "origin" and initial significance of the tar baby folktale, in the slavery and postslavery context it conveys an important socio-economic analysis. Given the history—begun in feudal Europe—of denying the rights of workers to any of the "carrots" they produced, the rabbit's pilfering, like Gideon's and Thérèse's, actually indicts the exploitative economic and political establishment that systematically overlooks and negates the physical risks experienced by workers, and reserves the harvest for the owners of capital who are identified as the sole risk-takers. Son's challenge to Valerian, "'You didn't row eighteen miles to bring [the apples] here. They did'" (177), explodes the myth, revises the entire episode, and provides us, in the words of Dionne Brand's poetry, with "old pictures of the new world."

<sup>11</sup>The dedication reads:

For  
Mrs. Caroline Smith  
Mrs. Millie McTyeire  
Mrs. Ardelia Willis  
Mrs. Ramah Wofford  
Mrs. Lois Brooks  
—and each of their sisters,  
all of whom knew  
their true and ancient  
properties.

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