Tar Baby and the Black Feminist Literary Tradition

Priti Chitnis Gress

College of William & Mary - Arts & Sciences

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TAR BABY AND THE BLACK FEMINIST LITERARY TRADITION

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This thesis is submitted in partial fulfillment of
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Priti Carol Chitnis

Author

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Hermine Pinson

Susan Donaldson

Nancy Schoenberger
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The writer wishes to express her appreciation to Professor Hermine Pinson, under whose guidance this paper was written, for her patient guidance and criticism throughout the investigation. The author is also indebted to Professors Susan Donaldson and Nancy Schoenberger for their careful reading and criticism of the manuscript.
The purpose of this paper is to examine through close reading Toni Morrison's *Tar Baby* as an exemplary text in the development of the black feminist literary tradition of the late twentieth century. Published in 1981, *Tar Baby* is situated during the period in which black women writers began to write and speak about their position in the American literary canon.

This essay is divided into three major sections. **Section I: Names** explores the trope of naming and its significance to the characters in *Tar Baby*, as well as on a larger scale, black women writers. **Section II: Signs and Signifiers** examines various “signs” in the novel as sites of contested meaning for the characters. Particular attention is given to the sign “black woman” and how Morrison's interpretations of this sign can be linked to the ideas of other black women writers and critics. **Section III: Ideologies and Outcomes** investigates the ideologies of colonialism, socialism and capitalism as they relate to the microcosmic world of the *Tar Baby* characters as well as the macrocosmic real world of the late twentieth century.

The conclusion of this study is that the conflicting discourses and ideologies of the characters in *Tar Baby* can be linked on several levels to the grievances and concerns of the black feminist literary tradition of the late twentieth century.
TAR BABY AND THE BLACK FEMINIST LITERARY TRADITION
Introduction

Both the dedication page and the epigraph of Toni Morrison's *Tar Baby* introduce two of the novel's propelling themes. The book is dedicated to five women (and all their sisters), "all of whom knew their true and ancient properties." The epigraph from I Corinthians 1:11 alludes to St. Paul's chastisement of the members of the early church in the house of Chloe for the contentions that exist among them. Morrison is writing in the modern post-structuralist age, one in which contentions arise from the elusiveness of meaning—the meanings of words, social positions, and gendered identity become harder to contain and define. Thus the issues that *Tar Baby* begins with and consistently returns to are (a) the contentious and clashing discourses of blacks and whites that characterize the post-colonial era, one in which long existing hierarchies and social systems are being displaced, and (b) the need for a historical consciousness in this modern age of instability.

It would be appropriate at the beginning of this essay to examine the term "discourse." The word "discourse" is traditionally defined as "communication of thoughts by words; talk; conversation." In this essay, however, the term can be understood as a combination of the following meanings:

(a) the actual words one speaks

(b) an individual's perspective or orientation

(c) the "ideology" or set of beliefs and values that govern an individual's actions

(d) the already existing "story" or meta-narrative to which an individual subscribes

(or) the personal "story" that an individual creates for himself/herself
As the characters in *Tar Baby* speak out their various discourses in an attempt to explain themselves and map out their positions in the world, the reader invariably "hears" what the contentions in the house of Valerian Street are—his home becomes a Tower of Babel, a virtual cacophony of conflicting voices that mis-name and misunderstand each other. As Morrison notes in a 1983 interview, "Each one speaks his or her own language, has an individual set of metaphors, and notices things differently from other people." Her assessment of the characters in *Tar Baby* becomes a constructive angle from which to approach the text.

In many ways, as a black woman writer, Morrison is uniquely suited to record the conflicting voices and discourses of the modern age. In her essay on black women writers' dialogics and dialectics, Mae Gwendolyn Henderson contends that these writers actively explore the "other" in themselves and Others: "Through their intimacy with the discourse of the other(s), black women writers weave into their work competing and complementary discourses—discourses that seek both to adjudicate competing claims and witness common concerns."3 Thus the conflicting voices of the characters in *Tar Baby* mirror the struggle of a black woman writer to create a story (discourse) in which various competing voices can be heard and recognized in the search for meaning.

In the preface to *Playing in the Dark*, Morrison herself comments upon her task as a writer, "I am interested in what prompts and makes possible this process of entering what one is estranged from—and in what disables the foray, for purposes of
fiction, into corners of the consciousness held off and away from reach of the writer’s imagination. My work requires me to think about how free I can be as an African-American woman writer in my genderized, sexualized, wholly racialized world.” This quest for “freedom,” “truth,” and “authenticity” in a restrictive context becomes the writer’s task as well as that of her characters. Published in 1981, *Tar Baby* is a text exemplary of black feminist sentiments of the 1970s and 1980s, when black women writers and critics were writing and speaking out about their place in the academic and literary world and in the African-American canon. Black women writers were not as widely read and well known as black male writers like Richard Wright and Ralph Ellison in the early to mid-twentieth century, and the black women writers of the late twentieth century wrote in an attempt to “claim” their part of both language and the African-American text.

*Tar Baby* can be read as a didactic text on several levels. The novel’s title itself is taken from a fable with a moral lesson. In the tar baby folktale, a white farmer fashions a baby out of sticky tar to attract and trap a rabbit that has been stealing carrots from his garden. When the rabbit sees the tar baby and reaches out to touch it, he becomes stuck. Morrison’s novel follows the lesson in the fable to the extent that “Jade Childs,” her first name a semi-precious stone and last name another term for infant, can be read as “tar baby,” although she is fashioned not from tar but from expensive attractants like cloisonné, raw silk, and sealskin coats (several of the luxurious commodities associated with Jade). Jade, “created” by her rich patron, Valerian, who influences her tastes and choices, becomes a trap for a pilferer like Son
(it is Son who hides in Valerian’s house for days stealing chocolate and Evian water for sustenance). The lesson of the folktale is reiterated near the end of the novel when Son almost forsakes his origins, hometown, and social values to pursue Jade but finally chooses to run away from the trap “Lickety-lickety-lickety-split” (306), echoing the rabbit of the folktale.

At the same time the novel is the coming of age/awareness story of Jadine Childs, a figurative “child” who must grow into a woman after learning various lessons from consciousness-raising characters like the African woman, Ondine, and Son, who are figured as role models for Jade, whose cultural identity is dispersed. Through their influence, Jade can be re-fashioned as a more sensitive and culturally aware individual.

When Jade falls into the quicksand-like tar pit in Sein de Veilles, the swamp women, who are like the night women who will haunt her later in the novel, “were delighted when they first saw her, thinking a runaway child had been restored to them” (183). Jade’s struggle to free herself is a rejection of the tar’s and thus the women’s “sacred properties”: “they alone could hold together the stones of the pyramids and the rushes of Moses’s crib” (183). In this episode, the tar is a distinctly female symbol of ancient, original strength and sustenance—one that could awaken a consciousness in Jade.

Morrison presents various “readings” of the folktale, along with the divergent dreams and beliefs of her characters more to highlight differences than to settle them. A tidy ending, in which compromises between ideologies and discourses are reached, proves elusive as characters are faced with the knowledge that words, language, names, and codes are no longer viable means of communication in the modern age. As
she examines this failure of language to justly and accurately represent the situation of characters/speakers, Morrison suggests that a successful modern consciousness (particularly that of a black woman) can negotiate various systems of meaning and come to terms with divergent histories. This consciousness allows one to acknowledge contentious ideologies but at the same time not forsake one’s origins, heritage, and history. The path to awareness that her characters tread is in many ways similar to the evolution of a modern black feminist theory, in which black women writers address and record aspects of their historical past, as women and as writers, in terms of their position among other writers today.
I. Names

The issue of names and naming is one that black feminist critics were especially concerned with in the 1970s and 1980s. Black women writers began to address their personal histories through the "names" they have borne and continue to bear. In her essay, "In Search of our Mother's Gardens," Alice Walker points out the many contrary "names" that are ascribed to black women: "Black women are called . . . 'the mule of the world,' . . . We have also been called 'Matriarchs,' 'Superwomen,' and 'Mean and Evil Bitches.' Not to mention 'Castraters' and 'Sapphire's Mama.' When we have pleaded for understanding, our character has been distorted; when we have asked for simple caring, we have been handed empty appellations . . ."5 Hortense J. Spillers begins a 1987 essay with a similar sentiment, "Let's face it. I am a marked woman, but not everybody knows my name. 'Peaches' and 'Brown Sugar,' 'Sapphire' and 'Earth Mother,' 'Aunty,' 'Granny,' God's 'Holy Fool,' a 'Miss Ebony First,' or 'Black Woman at the Podium': I describe a locus of confounded identities."6 Much of the writing of black women concentrates upon the quandary they are in as artists: to play the "correct" role—be it that of matriarch, educator, or modern feminist—and at the same time remain true to inner needs and drives. This problem of "dispersed identity" is one that Morrison closely examines in Tar Baby, especially in terms of the characters' names and the different roles each character plays.
Jade’s search for her own “role” in the modern world is colored by a resistance to and guilt about stereotypical black female roles like “Earth Mother” (the African woman), “Matriarch” (Ondine and Thérèse), and “Aunty” and “Granny” (the women of Eloie). She clashes with Son on the issue of what an “authentic” black woman should be against the backdrop of the liberal and feminist ideologies of the late twentieth century. Jade and Son also conflict in their attitudes toward money, education and white people. As critic Judylyn Ryan points out, each subscribes to different “stories” (discourses) and each attempts to “convert” the other:

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 formerly enslaved African who returns to rescue another enslaved relative or friend via the Underground Railroad . . . 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.”

These divergent narratives become the crux of Jade’s and Son’s problems, and although the discordant relationship between Jade and Son dominates the novel, there are many other sites of conflict that contribute to their variant discourses and difficulties. Valerian Street is the wealthy owner of a candy factory in Philadelphia and
L’Arbe de la Croix. He is estranged from his younger wife, Margaret (who resides with him), and their son, Michael, who has moved away from their home and blatantly rejects Valerian’s lifestyle, wealth, and values. Margaret suffers from guilt over the abuse she inflicted on Michael as a baby, and the verbal/psychological abuse she endures from Valerian.

The Streets’ servants and Jade’s uncle and aunt, Sydney and Ondine Childs, the butler and cook, are in the uneasy situation of depending wholly on Valerian for their livelihood, being indebted to him for paying for their niece’s education, and resenting him for his totalitarian control over their lives. Jade clashes with her uncle and aunt by rejecting their values, crediting Valerian instead of them for her education and opportunities, and resenting Sydney and Ondine for “needing” her.

Gideon and Thérèse, the island characters, work for the Street household but are distanced from Valerian in almost every aspect: racially, socially, and economically. While his household survives through their labor (as his candy factory flourished through their ancestors’ sugar cane and labor), Valerian is completely insensitive to their needs and fires them for taking some apples.

Son is an American black man from a rural Florida town, Eloé, who jumps ship and ends up in Valerian’s island home. He and Jade fall into a romantic relationship and return to America, only to find their different upbringings, orientations, and values incompatible.

All of the novel’s major characters are part of Valerian Street’s household, and the contentious relationships between them are illustrated even in the way they address
and refer to one another. The trope of naming is one that Morrison relies on heavily in
*Tar Baby*, as almost every character is referred to by various names or titles. Valerian
Street, the white man at the center of the characters' outcomes, informs Son, "The
candy was named after me. I was named after an emperor"(146), alluding to his status
as the "Candy King," who is ruling his own island in true despotic fashion. His name
also suggests the sleep-inducing drug, Valium, which explains to some extent his
absent-mindedness toward his wife's and son's suffering. Margaret, Valerian's wife, is
mockingly dubbed the "Principal Beauty of Maine" by a rival beauty contestant's
grandfather, and she proves herself the aging beauty queen throughout the text.
Morrison highlights Margaret's vanity and physical attributes to emphasize her role as
Valerian's "prize" and to link her with Jadine, another beauty queen, whose modeling
is consistently figured as a "white" endeavor.

Below Valerian and Margaret on the household hierarchy are Sydney and
Ondine, dubbed "Kingfish and Beulah" by Margaret and "Bow-Tie and Machete-Hair"
by the ones below them. Sydney and Ondine communicate with their employers as
well as those employed beneath them, but their status as servants keeps them
constantly concerned for their jobs, uncertain about their "friendship" with Valerian,
and distanced from the local servants. Gideon and Thérèse, dubbed "Yardman" and
"Mary" by the other characters (except Son), are at the bottom of the hierarchy that
Morrison creates. The narrator explains the employers' reasoning in naming them
thus: "[Gideon would] bring a Mary who, according to Sydney, might be his wife, his
mother, his daughter, his sister, his woman, his aunt or even a next-door neighbor . . .
They all referred to her as Mary and couldn't ever be wrong about it because all the baptized black women on the island had Mary among their names" (40). By reducing all the island women to one name, the Americans rob them of their various identities and treat them with the standard insensitivity of a colonizing power. This unwillingness to learn the "real" names of its servants on the part of Valerian's household signals the problem that naming poses in the text. Since almost all the characters constantly displace "real" names in favor of various false names and titles, the possibility of honest communication and interaction is eliminated. Jade explains "Yardman" to Son and concludes, "But he answers to it. Which is something, at least. Some people don't have a name of any kind" (115). Her statement belies her ignorance about the importance of names and naming. The fact that she effectively denies Gideon the right to a real name brings to the fore Morrison's characterization of the rich and privileged as the ones with the crucial power of naming and Jadine as culturally insensitive and naïve—in need of an education.

Son's insistence on learning the real names of the island characters and his ability to communicate with Valerian and Jade as well make him a character who can negotiate the rungs of the hierarchy with more ease than the others. Jade, too, is a character whose position in the hierarchical structure is unstable in a less positive way—while she sits to dinner with Valerian and Margaret, she also knows she is their black servants' niece, and too educated and upper-class to consort with Gideon and Thérèse. Having no specified rank in the hierarchy, Jade and Son move among the others in their uncertain spaces.
Both Jade's and Son's names also indicate the importance of the issue of "naming." Thérèse names Jade the "fast ass" and also refers to her as the "Copper Venus," her title in the modeling world. Jadine as "Copper Venus"—a commodity of the fashion industry decked in silk and jewels—both awes and disconcerts Son. Jade's own name signifies her "jaded" qualities, her disaffection with the "values" of the black community, embodied in Ondine, Son and the night women.

Son's names also distinguish his various characteristics. While he is the "native son" of the black community, he is at the same time a "son" figure for Valerian: "But [Valerian] was astonished to see—unconjured—his only living son in the dining room last night . . . and Valerian believed that was part of the reason he invited the black man to have a seat, the forepresence of Michael in the dining room"(143). In this passage, Son is linked to Valerian through Michael in a unique way. While Michael is the one that all the characters await at Christmas, it is Son who shows up and takes his place at the table. Michael is also a character who, having been abused by his mother and misunderstood by his father, rejects Margaret and Valerian for much the same reason his servants do. Michael, like Son, is of a socialist bent, living on an Indian reservation and taking up various social causes, and like Son, he accuses Jade of abandoning her history and people (72). As Valerian cannot comprehend the ideological beliefs of his own son, he is presented with just such another enigma in Son—someone whose actions and motivations are baffling to him.

Ironically, while Son represents authenticity and originality, his own identity is multi-faceted and cloaked in various layers. The narrator relates,
In eight years he'd had seven documented identities and before that a few undocumented ones, so he barely remembered his real original name himself. Actually the name most truly his wasn't on any of the Social Security cards, union dues cards, discharge papers, and everybody who knew it or remembered it in connection with him could very well be dead. Son. It was the name that called forth the true him. The him that he never lied to, the one he tucked in at night and the one he did not want to die. The other selves were like the words he spoke—fabrications of the moment, misinformation required to protect Son from harm and to secure that one reality at least. (139)

This passage, Son sorting through his various roles and names to find some core of authenticity, echoes ideas from Morrison’s earlier novel, *Song of Solomon*, published just before *Tar Baby* in 1977. In that novel, Morrison begins to introduce the link between the trope of naming and the search for origins—how truly a name represents someone or something. In many ways Son is like Milkman Dead, whose search for his ancestors begins with a name—*Charlemagne*, a small town in Virginia—that eventually unravels itself as *Shalimar*, pronounced *Shallemone*, like *Sugarman*, and finally to *Solomon*, Milkman’s great-grandfather who magically flew through the air back to Africa. As Milkman follows different leads, the name itself metamorphoses into an ancient truth—a part of his history that he was only dimly aware of finally comes clear and even “explains” himself to himself.

Milkman reflects, “Under the recorded names were other names, just as “Macon Dead,” recorded for all time in some dusty file, hid from view the real names of people, places, and things. Names that had meaning. No wonder Pilate put hers in
her ear. When you know your name, you should hang on to it, *for unless it is noted down and remembered, it will die when you do.* In this passage, Milkman recognizes that a name stands for more than just the object it represents—his own name obscures and at the same time includes many others from far away in the past—his father, aunt, grandfathers and great-grandfather, Solomon. His search through the past literally yields his "true and ancient properties," and with this consciousness of the original story of Solomon, Milkman can re-evaluate his own discourse/perspective. In some ways the character of Son can be read as a continuation of Milkman's character in *Song of Solomon.* Both are preoccupied with their histories, and while Milkman's battle involves searching through layers to find his origins before he can accept and appreciate them, Son's struggle is to keep alive the history, beliefs and values that he already knows.

Morrison's emphasis on Son's "authentic self" is interesting in terms of the fact that other people (as well as he himself) regularly re-name him. Jade and Margaret are prone to casting "animalistic" titles onto Son. Jade calls him a "nigger" and "ugly barefoot baboon"(121) and Margaret likens him to an "ape"(87) and "gorilla"(129), racist insults typically hurled at blacks. In some ways, Son's status as original and authentic black man is reinforced by these insults. Jade's ignorance, the fact that she throws stereotypical racist insults at a member of her own race, again proves how distanced she is from her heritage and origins. Her act is self-abrogating and at the same time, a means of distancing herself from what she fears is part of herself. Son's *name* itself is also not without its racial connotation, as critic Judylyn
Ryan comments, "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 character's maturity." Thus Morrison's attention to the issue of naming and names as signifiers of characters' traits, prejudices, and possibilities throughout the text is a commentary on the power dynamics that exist between her characters. Morrison consistently represents renaming as "mis-naming," which in turn signals the complex webs of misunderstanding within the novel, as the characters begin to distance themselves from each other rather than becoming more familiar with each other.

In *Tar Baby* Morrison emphasizes the importance of the cultural practice of "naming" by illustrating many of its causes and effects. Historically "naming" tends to signal an individual’s attempt either to identify with something foreign or to distance himself/herself from the foreign object. Most of the characters in *Tar Baby* do not rename others in an attempt to incorporate the other into his/her personal discourse and thus become familiar with it, but rather in an attempt to dissociate from what is foreign.
II. *Signs and Signifiers*

Morrison further emphasizes the failures and possibilities of language in the post-colonial era by presenting various signs and signifiers as specific points of contestation. Several words and symbols in *Tar Baby* serve as double signifiers, whose multiple meanings result in miscommunication and misunderstanding among the characters. One signifier that carries multiple interpretations and becomes a site for starkly differing meanings is the Chevalier legend. Jadine considers what Margaret and Valerian have told her about the Isle de Chevalier,

> Beyond the window etched against the light of a blazing moon she could see the hills at the other side of the island where one hundred horsemen rode one hundred horses, so Valerian said. That was how the island got its name . . . but Margaret, who had accompanied them on the tour of the grounds when Jadine first arrived, said no such thing. One rider. Just one. Therefore Isle de *le* Chevalier. One French soldier on a horse, not a hundred (47).

It is significant that Valerian believes in many horsemen and in their European origin. Later in the text, the narrator relates, "Somewhere in the back of Valerian's 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"(206). Thus linked to Napoleon, Valerian, as emperor of the island, is a distinctly colonizing force. For him the Chevalier horsemen become his personal army in a figurative sense, signifying a powerful, war-like European presence on the island.
The blacks on the island, however, adhere to a different myth of the horsemen. Gideon relates to Son the story of a race of slaves who went blind when they saw Dominique and who still exist as the horsemen:

Their ship foundered and sank with French men, 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 . . . They learned to ride through the rain forest avoiding all sorts of trees and things. They race each other, and for sport they sleep with the swamp women in Sein de Veilles.

Gideon considers Thérèse to be a descendent of the blinded slaves, and because of her virtual blindness, credits her with the ability to “see” with the mind’s eye. Son, of course, is the character most closely linked to the blind horsemen. In the opening section, he swims and boards a ship, which when it reaches the dock, affords Son the same vantage point of Isle de Chevalier as the horsemen of the legend, “There he saw the stars and exchanged stares with the moon, but he could see very little of the land, which was just as well because he was gazing at the shore of an island that, three hundred years ago, had struck slaves blind the moment they saw it” (8). The slaves’ blindness is a physical manifestation of their resistance to the life of enslavement in store for them. In the legend this retaliation is figured as the means of transcendence for the ones who become totally blind. They do not drown or die, but rather, they are
transformed into immortal, supernatural beings who really come to “own” the island by roaming its hills and forests and mating with the swamp women in Sein de Veilles.

Thérèse, the “Tiresias” of the text, is the archetypal aged wise woman who can discern truth more clearly than the other characters despite her blindness. She immediately associates Son with the horsemen and urges him to join the spirits at the end of the novel. Son himself adopts Gideon’s and Thérèse’s version of the story, which proves meaningful at the disastrous Christmas dinner as Valerian’s and Son’s ideologies become finally and strikingly incompatible. At the same moment that Valerian mentally conjures the Napoleonic swordsmen, Son’s mind is racing with “one hundred black men on one hundred unshod horses” riding “blind and naked through the hills” (206). Their starkly differing interpretations of the story indicate that while they are both attracted to the heroic aspects of the legend, neither can imagine the horsemen as different from himself. Each one appropriates the story as it relates to his own history, and ironically, each one turns to the same myth as a means to combat the other’s discourse/outlook.

Son’s version of the Chevalier legend is itself an echo of the black experience under a colonizing white power. There are various accounts of the jarring impact that first meetings between blacks and whites produce. As critic Hortense J. Spillers points out, “... the visual shock waves touched off when African and European ‘met’ reverberated on both sides of the encounter” and yielded “a veritable descent into the loss of communicative force.” According to the legend, the slaves who are totally blinded acquire a magical power and effectually escape from all colonial intrusions.
“living” in complete separation from their former captors. In a similar manner, Solomon in *Song of Solomon* flies back to Africa and leaves his family and life in America behind completely. Son enacts this myth at the end of the novel, as Thérèse urges him to “choose” the horsemen over Jade. Like a blind man, he stumbles with hands outstretched across the island terrain, “Breathing heavily with his mouth open he took a few tentative steps. The pebbles made him stumble and so did the roots of the trees. He threw out his hands to guide and steady his going. By and by he walked steadier, now steadier. The mist lifted and the trees stepped back a bit as if to make the way easier for a certain kind of man. Then he ran. Lickety-split. Lickety-split.”(306). Like the blind horsemen who see with the mind’s eye, Son sees beyond the pretensions of the inhabitants of L’Arbe de la Croix to the truth underneath: he learns Gideon’s and Thérèse’s real names, recognizes the black islanders as the ones truly entitled to the land, and possesses a consciousness and concern for those at the bottom of the social hierarchy. While at the end of the novel he is in danger of forsaking these values and becoming “enslaved” by the capitalist concerns that propel Jade’s world, he senses that he has lost “what it was that used to comfort him so, used to reside with him, in him like royalty in his veins. Used to people his dreams, and anchor his floating days” (294)—his sense of community with his people, the ones in Eloë and the ones on the island. The sight of Alma Estée in her red wig, aspiring to the idea of “western beauty” that Jade and her magazines espouse, moves Son to remember his former values of fraternity: “‘Oh baby baby baby baby,’ he said, and went to her to take off the wig, to lift it, tear it, throw it far from her midnight skin and
antelope eyes" (299). Alma Estée resists Son, and he himself is too confused and
“blind” to sort out the meaning behind his impulse.

Son “converges” with the myth of the horsemen at the end of the novel,
figuratively (or literally) claiming his “true and ancient properties,” and displaying
awareness of a reality that Valerian and many of the others on the island cannot
comprehend. Like the blinded slaves, Son’s vision is enhanced and he “escapes” the
lure of the material world both in order to survive and keep intact his consciousness of
community. Even the narrative voice suggests that Son’s version of the myth is indeed
the true one, and thus the dynamics of communication fail in this instance, as the white
characters have no inkling about the truth of the matter, and as Son rejects Jade and
Valerian’s world and seemingly escapes it completely—signifying the impossibility of
compromise and equality between the exploited and their captors.

In terms of conflicting signs and signifiers, Morrison also makes a distinction
between the islander’s point of view and the American one. Gideon’s disappointment
with his time in America leads him to lie and create a false story of his success there.
At the same time, he and Thérèse represent strong anti-American voices in the text.
Thérèse’s rage against Enfamil (the manufactured baby formula that ends her career as
a wet nurse) and curiosity about American women’s abortions signals her own resort
to new or created meaning. Gideon explains,

that Thérèse had her own views of understanding that had nothing to do with
the world’s views. That however he tried to explain a blood bank to her, or an
eye bank, she always twisted it. The word ‘bank,’ he thought, confused her.
And it was true. Thérèse said America was where doctors took the stomachs,
eyes, umbilical cords, the backs of the neck where the hair grew, blood, sperm, hearts and fingers of the poor and froze them in plastic packages to be sold later to the rich. (151)

The term "bank" as a sign from the capitalist world rightly confuses Thérèse into thinking its usage always involves exchange of commodity or currency. Her "mis-reading" of various Western signifiers once again speaks of the division between the two worlds: the blacks and whites on the island are a microcosmic representation of the Third World and capitalist America, respectively. In one respect, Thérèse's act of "mis-reading" is a creative one. By transforming the meaning of the word "bank," she does reveal a fundamental truth about the economic hardship she herself has endured at capitalist hands: figuratively speaking, her own body and labor have been packaged and sold to the rich.

Thus Thérèse's "mind's eye" allows her to perceive the situation accurately—while her inferences appear ludicrous on the surface, there is truth in them. For Thérèse and Gideon, Sydney and Ondine are vehicles of the capitalist power that controls their livelihood, and thus they perceive them through their physical attributes alone, as "Bow-Tie" and "Machete-Hair." This is the islanders' way of turning the tables on people that objectify them. In truth, Sydney and Ondine are in little better position—they must tread carefully to keep their boss/master content (as Sydney's excruciatingly careful dance around the dinner table testifies). They too are victims of the capitalist endeavor, but unlike Gideon and Thérèse who are fired and Son who escapes, they remained enslaved—their lives, labor, and bodies remain in Valerian's
Another site of contested meaning is Son's "original dime." He describes what it signifies to him: "My original dime . . . The one San Francisco gave me for cleaning a tub of sheephead . . . Nothing I ever earned since was like that dime. That was the best money in the world and the only real money I ever had"(169). For the non-capitalist Son, the dime symbolizes the work he performed more than the actual monetary profit he earns. Jade's last gesture toward Son in the text is marked by their two separate readings of this signifier. She throws a dime at him and says, "Take it. Now you know where it came from, your original dime: some black woman like me fucked a white man for it then gave it to Frisco who made you work your ass off for it. That's your original dime"(272). While Jade also emphasizes the effort behind the money, rather than its face value, she effectively deflates the signifier of any sentimental meaning that Son has attributed to it. Jade reminds him that money in the hands of a black man has usually been at the cost of an exploited black woman.

Jade retells the story from her own perspective, one in which the dime is earned with compromise and sacrifice. The dime is one of the most significant sites of conflict between the two. Morrison makes a point about the black man’s inability to recognize/acknowledge the compromised status of the black woman, who literally, like Jadine, sells herself to earn the dime. The passage reveals Jadine’s growing and unsettling awareness of the manner in which she has commodified herself for profit. Her remoteness from her cultural heritage and “authentic black womanhood” (as described by Son and Ondine) creates a situation in which Jadine, “the motherless
daughter, who, without maternal mirroring, becomes ensnared within a white symbolic order that ‘protects’ her from her own eroticism by exploiting and commodifying her sexuality.” Jade appropriates Son’s term, “original dime,” and transforms it to reflect her own discourse. In many ways, she rejects its fundamental meaning, its “true properties” so to speak, and ascribes new meaning—from her perspective, the dime passes through several hands before it reaches Son.

Most of Tar Baby is a testament to the contentions between Jade and Son. Their impressions of New York City become another point at which they conflict: Son sees an infertile landscape with crying black girls, their pimp-like men, and transvestites. Jadine, however, revels in a return to the city that "oils her joints" and makes her feel like giggling: "if ever there was a black woman's town, New York was it" (222). Son begins to detest the very elements of the city that Jade enjoys. He criticizes the city’s effect on Jade, ascribing a series of names/roles on her:

The mocking voice, the superior managerial, administrative, clerk-in-a-fucking-loan-office tone she took. Gatekeeper, advance bitch, house-bitch, welfare office torpedo, corporate cunt, tar baby side-of-the-road whore trap, who called a black man old enough to be her father "Yardman" and who couldn't give a shit who he himself was and only wanted his name to file away in her restrung brain so she could remember it when the cops came to fill out the report. (220)

Jade, on the other hand, views New York as a city of possibility for black women: "Snapping whips behind the tellers' windows, kicking ass at Con Edison offices, barking orders in the record companies, hospitals, public schools. They refused loans
at Household Finance, withheld unemployment checks and drivers' licenses, issued parking tickets and summonses . . . Jadine remembered and loved it all" (222). Thus while New York City signifies infertility and confused gender systems for Son, to Jade it is a site of potentiality or revenge for the twentieth-century black woman.

Son's native Eloe is also a place that neither character can reconcile with the other for much the same reason. For Jade New York City becomes a capitalist locale in which the black woman, though exploited, can achieve recognition, success, and an entry into the "white" world, none of which is possible in Eloe. Jade's reaction to the rural Florida town reiterates her remoteness from her own history and origins. Her dilemma is one of being completely uncomprehending and excluded from the language and customs of the townspeople: " . . . but she didn't understand at all, no more than she understood the language [Son] was using when he talked to Soldier and Drake and Ellen and the others who stopped by; no more than she could understand (or accept) her being shunted off with Ellen and the children while the men grouped on the porch . . ." (246). The sexist social practices of this rural, all-black community elude Jade, and she reacts defensively as she has before, by enacting a colonizing/condescending role towards the people.

As Jade pulls out her camera to "capture" her "subjects" on film, the ensuing scene becomes a comic combination of National Geographic encounter with the wild and high-fashion photo-shoot: " 'This way. Beautiful. Hold it. Hooooold it. Heaven,' click, click, click, click."(251) Jade contextualizes the unfamiliar (and threatening) surroundings in the only patterns she has learned from her white benefactor and
European education—conquest and capture. By casting the residents of Eloe as alien (subject to tourist’s photos), Jade displays her own instinct to objectify the town and thus contain it within parameters that she can control (the photographs). Son recognizes this quality in Jade and snatches the camera from her, almost in an attempt to preserve for himself the innocence of the photographed individuals. The photos become significant later in New York, when Son finds them and “sees” his hometown through Jadine’s lens: “Beatrice, pretty Beatrice, Soldier’s daughter. She looked stupid. Ellen, sweet cookie-faced Ellen, the one he always thought so pretty. She looked stupid. They all looked stupid, backwoodsy, dumb, dead . . .” (272-3). Son views Eloe as a site of authentic community and fraternity, where family and old friends live together and take care of each other. Thoughts of his home have sustained and comforted him throughout his life:

When danger was most imminent and he fell asleep in spite of himself they were there—the yellow houses with white doors, the ladies at the pie table at Good Shepherd—Aunt Rosa; Soldier’s mother May Downing whom they called Mama May; Drake’s grandmother Winnie Boon who switched them every spring; Miss Tyler who had taught him how to play piano, and the younger women: Beatrice, Ellen, and the children who had been born while he was away. The men: Old Man, Rascal, Turner and Soldier and Drake and Ernie Paul who left the service a first lieutenant and how had his own mortuary in Montgomery, Alabama, and doin fine. There were no photos of them, but they were there in the pictures of trees behind their houses, the fields where
they worked, the river they fished, the church where they testified, the joints
where they drank. (294-5)

The people of Eloe are connected to each other and the land in a manner that is rare in
late twentieth century capitalist America. Son remembers the people of Eloe as
nurturing and nourishing above all—men and women who teach him, feed him and
love him, basic necessities that he feels children like Alma Estée are deprived of
through capitalism.

When he sees Jade’s pictures, and thus views the town from her perspective,
he “loses sight” and consciousness of Eloe’s attributes. The warmth, simplicity and
nourishment of the town cannot be seen in the photos, but only through the mind’s
eye, and in this instance, Son is temporarily blinded by his love for Jade.

Jade herself is also “blind” to Eloe’s merit, and her alienation from black
culture and heritage is made strikingly clear during her visit to the town. She tries “to
talk ‘down home’ like Ondine,” but the women of Eloe’s “worshipful stares and
nonconversation” (250-51) annoy her. Although her own mother and Ondine are
among the “night women” that visit her dreams in Eloe, Jade feels completely alienated
and self-conscious around these women. Despite the fact that she is overtly a more
glamorous and stereotypically beautiful female, she recognizes a “feminine”
characteristic that consists of strength and the ability to nourish and “create” (children,
families, and homes) in these women that she utterly lacks.

As Jade attempts to reconcile some troubling questions of "identity," she
constantly runs across the signifier "woman." Morrison lays the groundwork for the
important role this signifier will play in the lives of both the women and men in her novel in its opening pages. Son’s escape from the H.M.S. Stor Konigsgaarten to the boat that Margaret and Jade are on is represented as a child/young boy’s search for a protective woman/mother. The water that he swims in is figured as a female who keeps him from reaching the island’s shore, “the water-lady cupped him in the palm of her hand, and nudged him out to sea” (5). The “feminine” water pushes him toward the boat the two women are aboard. An exhausted, hungry Son searches for maternal nourishment on the boat. When he hears the sounds of the women walking on deck, “the sound only a woman’s thigh could make” (6), he interprets it as a “delicious autumn invitation to come in out of the rain and curl up by the stove”(6). When he searches for the curry he smells, he abruptly discovers something about these women: “The women had not cooked—they had warmed up carry-out food that they’d brought aboard”(8). Thus Margaret and Jade are introduced as women who lack sustenance and nourishment for the boy/son. The “real” women in the novel literally cook—from Ondine to Thérèse to the pie ladies at church. Their simple act of preparing food casts them in the role of nurturers, providers, and sustainers. Margaret and Jadine, who do not perform this role, are essentially ineffective women as a result. -The conflict- between Ondine and Margaret over who “owns” the kitchen, then, is a very real battle for the title of “authentic, real woman.”

A theme that recurs through the novel is the notion of the “good mother” vs. the “inhuman, destructive mother.” Ondine’s startling accusation against Margaret of abusing her son Michael at the Christmas dinner is the most significant example in the
Margaret’s brutal treatment of her baby clearly designates her as an unnatural and unloving mother. Margaret too is a victim of the classist snobbery of Valerian and his family, and capitalist structures in general. Her abuse of Michael is a mislaid act of rebellion against Valerian and his system of beliefs. As critic Margot Gaylé Backus points out, “Her abuse of Valerian’s child, the production of which signifies another way in which her body has been appropriated by Valerian, proves to be the one act of ‘industrial sabotage’ that Margaret allows herself... her torture of Michael is the one autonomous act through which she momentarily and compulsively attempts to reclaim her body from a state of perpetual fragmentation.”

Backus rightly points to Valerian and the capitalist system as the real initiators of the abuse Margaret inflicts on her son, but the issue deserves a closer look. Why has Margaret’s natural instinct to nurture and protect her child been extinguished? Ondine, for example, while she is not Valerian’s wife, is a servant in his home who has been controlled and manipulated by him. But unlike Margaret, Ondine’s nurturing instincts remain intact, and she does not transfer abuse onto anyone else. Morrison points out that all women are abused and objectified in the capitalist endeavor, but a few possess the strength to resist its ill effects.

Thérèse’s notions of American mothers, “women [who] took their children behind trees in the park and sold them to strangers” (151) and “women who clawed their wombs” (153) during abortions, reiterate the threat of the “destructive mother”
that awaits children of the First World. Even though she has no biological children, Thérèse herself represents true maternity and authentic womanhood with her nourishing “magic breasts” that continue to lactate despite her age. Ondine is another ironically non-biological “mother” who considers herself far more entitled to the title of “woman” than Margaret, the text’s biological mother: “I am the woman in this house. None other. As God is my witness, there is none other” (209). Morrison again elevates only the nurturers and providers to the status of true womanhood.

Another character who becomes emblematic of “woman” the signifier is the voluptuous African woman that Jade spots in Paris: “She would deny it now, but along with everybody else in the market, Jadine gasped. Just a little. Just a sudden intake of air. Just a quick snatch of breath before that woman’s woman—that mother/sister/she; that unphotographable beauty—took it all away” (46) [emphasis mine]. This woman, as her large breasts, hips and eggs signify, represents the quintessential female, and it is these qualities of fertility that distinguish her; "for the African symbolizes Origin. Jadine's view of the African shocks her into a recognition of her own ‘fashioned’ and false womanhood (she is model and mannequin, artifice), while the woman in canary yellow, she instinctively feels, has authenticity."13 Thus the African woman's ancient aspects—blackness, age, large body, Eastern clothing—distinguish her from the modern, slim, young, "yalla," European-hip Jadine. Morrison suggests that the “good” mother—one whose mind, body and soul is capable of nurturing and protecting not only her offspring but her whole community/society, is a remnant of the old, Eastern world. The inhumane “bad” mother then is a product of the Western capitalist
enterprise, in which commodified women cannot give up thinness, "beauty," and looking young to submit themselves to the rigors of pregnancy, childbearing and child rearing. As Western women lose their essential quality of nurturing, they become more and more removed from the signifier that Morrison presents as "true woman."

Jadine's hallucination in which the night women enter her room, expose their breasts to her, and "[take] away her sex like succubi" (258), also contributes to her construction of the word "woman."

When Jadine falls into the tar pit, the "women" in the trees figure in much the same capacity as the night women:

The women looked down from the rafters of the trees and stopped murmuring. They were delighted when first they saw her, thinking a runaway child had been restored to them. But upon looking closer they saw differently. This girl was fighting to get away from them. 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. (183)

Morrison comments in this passage on Jadine's dismissal of the women whose "exceptional femaleness" and "sacred properties" lend them a power that is unavailable to her. The mythic nature of the night women and the swamp women gives them an essentialness or archetypal quality of which Jadine is aware only insofar as she lacks it.

Jade's struggle to define the essential nature of woman becomes the reader's struggle
as well throughout the text.

Morrison has explained her construction of Jade as a true orphan who is unable to make crucial connections, "She is cut off. She does not have, as Thérèse says, her ancient properties; she does not have what Ondine has . . . she needs a little bit of Ondine to be a complete woman . . . That quality of nurturing is to me essential." Ondine's explanation to Jade near the end of the novel, then, is an echo of this sentiment: "Jadine, 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. I mean a real woman: a woman good enough for a child, good enough for a man—good enough even for the respect of other women" (281). Of course Jade struggles with the term "black" and "woman" and how to put these signifiers together adequately. Her resolution to return to Paris and "tangle" with the woman in yellow at the end of the novel suggests that Jade's days of flatly rejecting the essential, maternal female that Morrison valorizes are over. After her consciousness is raised by Son and all the women who haunt her, Jadine seeks to reconcile her own "femaleness."

Jade’s ideological dilemmas about both her womanhood and race are echoed in the works of black women writers and critics. Spillers points out, “The African-American female’s historic claim to the territory of womanhood and ‘femininity’ still tends to rest too solidly on the subtle and shifting calibrations of liberal ideology.” She goes on to say that events like giving “birth” that traditionally define womanhood have altered meaning for African-American women who were enslaved, because “birth” did not necessarily precede “motherhood” and “matriarchy” was not always
possible to women whose spouse and offspring were often dispersed. As characters like Ondine, Son and the women of Eloé embrace family and community ties, it is partly to remember not to take them for granted.

Catherine Belsey also points to the problematic issues women face: “Women as a group in our society are both produced and inhibited by contradictory discourses. Very broadly, we participate in the liberal humanist discourse of freedom, self-determination and rationality and at the same time in the specifically feminine discourse offered by society of submission, relative inadequacy and irrational intuition.”16 These conflicting definitions of womanhood are most apparent in the modern era, in which the feminist movement and liberal ideology have certainly introduced new possibilities and roles for women. Morrison points out in *Tar Baby* that a character like Jade, who has benefited from a liberal education and become materially successful, cannot be complete/whole until she respects and adopts the connective and nurturing (maternal and filial) aspects of womanhood that link history with the present and future. Morrison contends that these are the aspects that authenticate “womanhood” and contextualize it in any era.
III. **Ideologies and Outcomes**

Morrison's representations of disparate cultures, genders, economic backgrounds, and languages through the conflicting signifiers her characters use draws attention to the various "texts" that comprise her narrative. In many ways the characters attempt to impose their individual "texts" onto others, and when ideologies clash, there is more than just a theoretical impasse to be overcome. The literal reality of language and actions also blocks communication between characters.

When he meets Jadine, Son admits that he wants to "insert his own dreams into her" so that she "would . . . dream steadily the dreams he wanted her to have about yellow houses with white doors . . . and the fat black ladies in white dresses minding the pie table in the basement of the church . . ."(119). Son wishes to impose his own discourse and set of relevant signifiers—pie ladies, white flapping sheets, six-string guitars and a nickel nickelodeon—upon her. His literal desire to "manipulate her dreams" signals Son's attempt to inculcate her into his own text. His fear, that 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?"(120), reveals the fundamental incompatibility of their mutual texts—to adopt Jade's discourse, Son envisions having to abandon his entirely.

Throughout the novel, Jade and Son attempt to impose their personal set of signs upon each other and consistently fail at comprehension and communication. Morrison describes their "language" while they are in love enough to accept each
other's discourses: "Their language diminished to code at times, and at others ballooned out to monologues delivered while cradled in each other's arms . . . together they could not concentrate on the given world. They reinvented it, remembered it through the other" (230). At this point Morrison calls attention to the lovers' desire to understand and learn the new language of the other. For Jade and Son, however, this is a type of torpor stage, and once they awaken to the realities of money, careers and future, their individual texts become incompatible again. Once she faces the actual reality of Eloe, Jadine immediately falls into incomprehension: "but she didn't understand at all, no more than she understood the language [Son] was using when he talked to Soldier and Drake and Ellen and the others who stopped by" (246). Jade is literally unable to read Son's text at this point. The "language" of Eloe, as well as its signs—pie ladies, churches, an old slip to wear at night—become insensible and even abhorrent to Jade.

In many ways, Jade and Son repeat the pattern of colonialism, as each attempts to force a discourse or outcome upon the other and wherein one party is dominant and privileged and the other in turn must be passive and exploited. Valerian Street, to whom all the characters are indebted in some manner because he "rescues" them and brings them into his household, is the text's grand imperial force. Ryan points out that Jadine not only takes on the role of the "rescued" individual but tries to convert Son to her "religion" as well: "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." Thus by wishing Son to mimic her own postures of gratitude, Jadine demonstrates that she has been effectively colonized and indoctrinated into the "master's tongue." By adopting the language, values, and gestures of the "master," Jadine replays the colonial model by attempting to "rescue" and thus colonize Son.

This notion of Valerian as the island's emperor and colonizer is made explicit on several occasions. When Son first approaches L'Arbe de la Croix he passes through much forest land and a "foul smelling swamp" full of mosquitoes. When he sees the impressive mansion, he thinks, "How cool and civilized the house looked. After that hot solitary walk through darkness lined by trees muttering in their sleep, how cool, clean, and civilized it looked"(134). Here Morrison plays with the notion of "civilized" vs. "savage" in which Valerian's home becomes a bastion of white "civilization" on an otherwise wild and "untamed" terrain. The island's topography—its trees, diamondback snakes, and swamps—is often represented as possessing human characteristics. Valerian's "invasion" into this landscape is thus likened to a typical colonial endeavor.

Son's affinity with the island's landscape immediately sets him in opposition to Valerian: "Morrison makes Son the center of a primal consciousness that senses humanity in all things, that talks with plants and animals, calls back the past and the dead, and tries to enter the world of other people's dreams." Son in many ways embodies the forces of nature that Valerian is removing in order to "civilize" the island, as Son's connection with the Chevalier horsemen at the end of the text
indicates. Son also identifies with the local blacks on the island far more than he does with Valerian's household.

The other revealing construction that Morrison establishes in the opposition between Valerian and Son is the conflict between the modern capitalist enterprise and the more socialist approach. At the Christmas dinner, the narrator relates, "The evening eyes met those of the man with savannas in his face. The man who respected industry looked over a gulf at the man who prized fraternity" (205). By chastising Valerian for dismissing Gideon and Thérèse, Son also criticizes the "wasteful" capitalist endeavor: "Son's mouth went dry as he watched Valerian . . . [who] had been able to dismiss with a flutter of his fingers the people whose sugar and cocoa had allowed him to grow old in regal comfort; although he had taken the sugar and cocoa and paid for it as though it had no value, as though the cutting of cane and picking of beans was child's play and had no value" (203). Sugar and cocoa, the traditional colonial products, appropriately figure in Valerian's exploitation. Son criticizes the modern capitalist system that devalues black labor and products to such a degree. His own ideology, a concern for brotherhood, is certainly of a socialist bent. Morrison presents him, as a seaman, as someone capable of observing the Western world from a distance: "Son's experiencing of America from outside its perimeters—through the agencies of print and audio technologies, and the free education of initiated crewmen—forces Son to invent his own meanings. His new perceptions of his culture are disturbing ones, for now he sees that its history is 'sticky,' 'loud, red, and sticky.'" 19 From this vantage point outside of the hegemony, Son is able to critique the existing
social and economic systems of his time in an observant and sensitive manner.

To turn to the novel's outcomes, then, allows some conclusions to be drawn regarding Morrison's messages in the text. In many ways, as the "children" or younger generation on the horizon of shaping and changing the policies of the future, Son, Jade, and Michael are the characters whose outcomes are crucial to the text. The alternative that Son chooses has already been analyzed in the previous sections of this paper, but a few additional conclusions can be drawn. His myth-like escape to the realm of the magical horsemen signals Son's reaffirmation of the values of fraternity and community. Critic Evelyn Hawthorne suggests about Son,

While he is the most socially unredeemable of the characters in the novel (he has killed a wife, is undereducated, is incapable of making a future in America, and has invaded and menaced a household), he is the most sympathetically treated character in the novel; indeed he is Morrison's reflector character of the work. Morrison's intention would seem to be to show that Son, as man diminue, can be led by ancestral wisdom (of the blind Thérèse) to make a beginning . . . Son, as the novel concludes, is guided into a decision to undergo a rite of passage. In the uncharted terrain of his blind ancestors, he is asked to maneuver and survive. He is put into purposeful circumstances . . .

Hawthorne's reading suggests that Son's purpose in the text is revealed at the end of the novel—to escape discriminatory structures by becoming supernatural, powerful, and completely removed from the physical, real world. The reading is somewhat problematic because Son's purpose is also to influence and assist others. He wins the
trust and admiration of Gideon and Thérèse, who finally find a defender and champion in him. 'Son is also the vechicle for many of the characters' education: he challenges Valerian about firing Gideon and Thérèse and in the debacle that ensues, Margaret can finally admit and begin to repair her mistreatment of Michael and Valerian is finally forced to open his eyes to the truth of his wife’s and son’s pain. Jadine, of course, is the character most influenced by Son, as he “troubles” her into reconsidering her own actions, beliefs, and values. In these cases, Son’s purpose is achieved before he even chooses the path of the blind horsemen. His final choice, then, can really be read as an avowal of what he already embodies.

The outcomes of Michael and Jade are less clear in the novel. As the absent character, Michael does not witness or become influenced by the same events that the others do, making his “outcome” less a result or choice than Son’s or Jade’s. Critic Margot Gayle Backus, however, reads Margaret’s announcement at the end of the novel that Michael will begin the semester at Berkeley as “somewhat sinister, given Michael’s previous position as an organic intellectual” and sees his return to college as his “apparent reincorporation into the middle class.” Her reading is not necessarily correct, as Michael could also be viewed as an individual who educates himself in order to perform his social duties more effectively. The fact that Michael avoids his parents at Christmas time also signals that he eludes the traps of capitalism.

Jade’s decision to return to Paris can be read in various ways as well. Critic Backus sees it as problematic, “She escapes the horror of a battering relationship, but does so only to return to her facilitating role within Euro-American capitalism as an
assimilated black intellectual and a pornographic sign for white male domination.”

Backus’ reading is supported by the fact that Jade returns to Isle de Chevalier, not to
comfort or bond with her uncle and aunt, but to retrieve an expensive commodity, her
sealskin coat. When Ondine attempts to point out the nurturing, connective roles that
women can play—“daughter” and “mother”—Jade blatantly rejects them. Her final
misnaming and dismissal of Alma Estée at the airport also signals that she has failed to
learn the important lessons set before her.

Morrison does, however, provide a momentary view of hope for Jadine, who
on the airplane considers her dilemma: “The same sixteen answers to the question
What went wrong? Kicked like a chorus line. Having sixteen answers meant having
none. So none it was. Zero. She would go back to Paris and begin at Go. Let loose
the dogs, tangle with the woman in yellow—with her and all the night women who had
looked at her” (290). This passage certainly signals a new beginning for Jade, and as
Morrison indicates throughout the text, ideological dilemmas and contentions with
names, signs, and discourses are never swiftly and easily resolved. Comprehension
and consciousness take time to acquire, as the image of the female soldier ant near the
end of the novel suggests. The ant builds her kingdom (a productive family of
offspring) with much industry, sacrifice, and strength of character. Her tireless and
single-minded pursuit becomes rewarding only after years of facing and solving
problems. For Jade, also, failure includes the possibility for success, as the rite of
passage from “child” to “woman” involves setbacks, disappointments, and
misunderstanding before real “re-learning” and awareness is possible.
In Conclusion

In *Tar Baby*, Morrison effectively transfers a variety of subtexts into the language and ideologies of her characters. From their constant urges to "re-name" each other to their efforts to impress a personal text/discourse onto another individual, Morrison's characters play out a fascinating game with words and signs. The questions the author raises about colonialism and the capitalist system as well as about "racial" and gendered "identity" in the twentieth century are consistently edged with commentary about the true usefulness of language and sign systems for the modern individual. "Mis-understandings" and failures—in terms of social, racial and sexual conflict—of the modern age are more than clashes of theory and ideology, she points out; instead, they are also the failure of discourse itself—modern discourse no longer encompasses the variety of language, words, and options necessary to communicate both within and without.

As critic Barbara Smith comments, "A black feminist approach to literature that embodies the realization that the politics of sex as well as the politics of race and class are crucially interlocking factors in the works of black women writers is an absolute necessity." As black women writers bring all these issues—gender, race, class—to the fore through their choice of language and words and their ability to draw from or criticize the meta-narratives that propel society, a unique style of discourse becomes available.
The struggle to create a black feminist perspective in theory is one that has been waged for over three decades now. *Tar Baby* can certainly be read as a timely text that reiterates many of the concerns and ideas of the movement to explore and define the black feminist voice, especially as Morrison tackles the idea of “black womanhood” through the character Jade. As Barbara Christian reflects on the struggle of black woman writers, she notes,

By the early seventies, I knew some black women had written. I’d read Phillis Wheatley, Gwendolyn Brooks, and Lorraine Hansberry. I’d heard poets like Nikki Giovanni and June Jordan read. I’d known women in my childhood and adolescence who’d written stories. Yet I had never, in my years of formal schooling from kindergarten in the black Virgin Islands through a Ph.D. at white Columbia, heard even the name of one black woman writer.24

The absence of such significant voices in the literary and academic world seems ludicrous by today’s standards, yet a very specific campaign to make a place for their writing was undertaken by black female writers and critics.

With attention to their own marginality and ability to enter into other discourses, writers like Morrison consciously build the foundations of black feminist theory. As Christian goes on to conclude, “In the space created for us by our foremothers, by our sisters in streets, the houses, the factories, the schools, we were now able to speak and to listen to each other, to hear our own language, to refine and critique it across time and space, through the written word.”25 This statement echoes the sentiment of *Tar Baby*’s dedication page, as writers exalt the “true and ancient properties” of many silent foremothers who provide the foundation for the voices and
writing of today.

12. Ibid. 438.
20. Ibid. 104-105.
22. Ibid. 440.
25. Ibid. 48.
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VITA

Priti Carol Chitnis


In August 1995, the author entered the College of William and Mary as a graduate assistant in the Department of English.

The author is presently an editor at Hippocrene Books, a publishing house in New York City.