

Reflecting on the Residual: Toni Morrison, Race, Gender, and Strategic Essentialism

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Introduction

In this paper I will examine the ways in which Toni Morrison's *Tar Baby* reproduces the relations of production by promoting her traditional views of gender and her essentialist racist politics. I will investigate *Tar Baby* using Althusser's idea of interpellation and the reproduction of the relations of production to do this. This project will conflict with traditional readings of this text as it will completely contradict Morrison's own views of how it should be read as she has articulated in her interviews and nonfiction work.

Chapter One: Defining “Reproducing the Relations of Production,” “Interpellation,” and Considering Toni Morrison’s Work to Stop the Reproduction

Reproduction of Relations of Production

Althusser states that Ideological State Apparatuses work together to reproduce the relations of production. In order to understand what this means we need to define some concepts such as the mode of production, means of production, and the relations of production. The mode of production is the way economic production is organized in a society. Examples of different modes of production are Communism, Feudalism, and Capitalism. All of these are economic systems that shape the way goods are produced in a society. The mode of production includes both the means of production or productive forces, and the relations of production. The means of production are the forces or materials that are used to produce goods. This includes raw materials, factories, machines, and the labor force that are all used together to produce goods. Labor is the most important productive force and the one that is key for this discussion. Without labor, the other forces of production cannot produce materials. People have to put it all together. The relationship of production is the bond between capitalists and the workers. In the capitalist system, the people who own the means of production pay the workers to produce materials. However, those workers are paid as little as possible so that the owners or capitalists can make as much as possible. Therefore, the labor force is exploited. The labor force lives poorly so that the capitalists can live extremely well. This is obviously unfair and leads us to wonder why people put up with it. Why don't the workers rebel?

Reproducing the Relations of Production

In trying to understand the reproduction of the relations of production we are asking how capitalists are able to keep exploiting workers and continue a system that is obviously unfair. Louis Althusser argues that the main way the ruling class (capitalists) is able to keep the system going is through the use of Ideological State Apparatuses or ISAs. ISAs are institutions such as Education, Religion, Family, and Politics. All of these institutions are private and function for very different reasons, however they are similar in that they help to reproduce the relations of production. Althusser says, “If the ISAs function massively and predominantly by ideology, what unifies their diversity is precisely this functioning, insofar as the ideology by which the function is always in fact unified, despite its diversity and contradictions, *beneath the ruling ideology*, which is the ideology of the ruling class” (146). This means that all of these institutions, that seem to function differently, work in subtle and symbolic ways to inculcate the ideology of the dominant in society. They create our consciousness. Thus, workers cannot rebel against the ruling class because the ruling class controls the way they think. For example, if ideology teaches me that I am inferior because of my social class, gender, and race, I will believe it and not challenge my being forced to live in conditions inferior to those of people in the dominant. Or if the Family ISA says that I should work to help take care of my family, and the Education ISA puts me in a school where I am not well taught, and I am told that it’s my fault for not being smart enough when I do poorly on state tests, I will most likely drop out. What is crucial to understand about the insidious nature of the dominant is that I will think it is my decision to drop out, but it is really the dominant interpellating me into adopting the path seen as “normal” for people who are in lower social classes.

Interpellation, Literature, and Ideology

Interpellation

One of Althusser's main arguments is that ideology interpellates individuals as subjects. This means there are no individuals in the romantic sense—no spontaneous and unique soul—but that our consciousness is made up by ideology. Althusser declares that “ideology has always-already interpellated individuals as subjects, which amounts to making it clear that individuals are always-already interpellated as subjects, which necessarily leads us to one last proposition: individuals are always already subjects” (176). This means there is no identity outside of what we have been taught by our society. Even if we resist the ruling ideology, it is still the foundation of our identities, as it has been inculcated by ISAs from our birth. Althusser uses birth as an example of this truth: “I hardly need add that this familial configuration, in its uniqueness, highly structured, and that it is implacable and more or less pathological structure that the former subject to-be will have to ‘find’ ‘its’ place, i.e. ‘become the sexual subject (boy or girl) which it already is in advance’” (Althusser 13). When we are born, we are assigned a gender and made to perform it for the rest of our lives, and until very recently people have accepted it completely because ideology has made gender roles a concrete reality, and we are always-already interpellated by ideology.

Literature

Literature is generally seen as aesthetic and neutral, and therefore, as outside ideology, since it is “made up” and not “real.” But this perception of texts as safe only makes us more

susceptible to absorbing latent dominant ideology within the text. For example, when we watch Fox News in our present time, we immediately recognize it as being influenced by conservative politics and the concerns of the dominant in society, and so we are not vulnerable to the views expressed on it—we are guarded and even oppositional towards anything said. We would respond the same if we read a piece of Nazi propaganda. But since most literary writers oppose the dominant in society, we do not read them in a guarded or oppositional way, even though their work is also influenced by dominant ideology.

In *Criticism and Ideology*, Terry Eagleton says “the texts presents itself to us less as historical than as a sportive flight from history, a reversal and resistance of history, a momentarily liberated zone in which the exigencies of the real seem to evaporate, an enclave of freedom enclosed within the realm of necessity” (72). Eagleton is saying that literary texts seem to be free from history, and the ideological structures of history, because of manipulations of time and setting, as well as their fantastical, or oppositional nature. But, he further argues, “It is precisely in this absence of the particular real that the text most significantly refers—refers not to concrete situations, but to an ideological formation, (and hence obliquely, to history) which ‘concrete situations’ have actually produced” (74). So, though texts are free of reality, they are produced in reality, and our sense of reality comes from the ideology of our culture. Thus, even when a writer tries to write against the dominant ideology, they end up reproducing aspects of it because the dominant ideology is an inescapable part of their consciousness. It is the very substance of who they are and how they think. That means that the literary texts produced by author-subjects are even more dangerous than openly propagandistic texts, because since we believe they are safe, we are not conscious of the ideology they are spreading, and how we, in turn, are interpellated by them.

For example, Nathaniel Hawthorne refused to participate in the nineteenth century Abolitionist movement, a part of the Political ISA of the time. However, traces of that Political ISA are present in the form of the Black Man in *The Scarlet Letter* (632-636 Yellin). The Black Man offering his book with iron clasps and an iron pen to people, asking them to write their name in blood, and then branding them with his mark can be seen as representative of the nineteenth century Abolitionist movement (Yellin 647). Leland Person says that Hawthorne would have “personal reasons to criticize the feminist anti-slavery position and to situate Hester Prynne within the ideological context that discourse created” (663). Hawthorne would have heard of people who tried to free slaves and were branded. We know that he was asked by his abolitionist relatives to get involved and sign petitions to end slavery. So, while Hawthorne is against this political ISA of his time, he unconsciously validates it, at least to some extent, by reproducing the tensions between blacks and whites in a text set in the seventeenth century, a world without the same political significations, and a world in which black “simply” meant evil.

Toni Morrison: Premiere Literary Figure Fighting Racism through Art

Toni Morrison is the premiere literary figure of the last 30 years—the Faulkner or Hemingway of our time. She is not only the winner of the most distinguished prizes in Literature, the Nobel and Pulitzer Prize, but she was awarded a Presidential Medal of Freedom. When she was given her medal, she was introduced as a writer who “challenges our concepts of race and gender” (Award Video 0:25). Morrison has been seen as the most significant writer in America for the last 40 years: she has been called the “conscience of America” (Hobby 1), and her work has been said to “strip away the idols of whiteness and of Blackness” (Denard 196). Morrison is thought to have had a literal impact on the way race is viewed in America, and she says explicitly that she “writes for black people,” and that she must “concentrate on the political

plight of black people” (qt in Hobby 1). Morrison’s work is meant to be an active tool against the ideology of the dominant. Morrison critic Lucille Fultz argues that “At the core of Morrison’s fiction is the issue of how to construct race as a discursive subject and simultaneously create individual subjectivities and the possibility for intersubjective relations” (Fultz 21). This means that through a conversation Morrison starts with readers, and through the co-creation with them of characters, she attempts to both highlight race and explore how individuals can get beyond racial barriers and communicate with each other as genuine individuality

Racism and Ideology

Racism is an ISA used throughout the world, and as noted above ISAs work to maintain the relations of production. In *Racism, Sexism, Power and Ideology*, Collette Guillaumin argues that “Racism is a specific symbolic system operating inside the system of power relations of a particular type of society” (30). Racism is a symbolic system for Guillaumin, meaning that it is not real or natural, and neither is race: both are social constructs and, as Guillaumin observes, they are constructed to aid in the determination of power relations. In our society, racial difference is seen as biological fact, but in reality it is a tool for the dominant within the economic system of capitalism. Besides being a way of thinking and a practice by groups like the Ku Kux Klan and Alt-Righters, racism is in its most dangerous form something that is part of most people and “extends beyond conscious thought” (Guillamin 29). If we view racism as an ISA that means that we are interpellated as subjects into it; we have internalized it to the point that we cannot see how it manipulates our thoughts and behavior socially.

Let us take as an example a group of white people who own a business and who may not consciously think racist thoughts and might even believe that racism is wrong, but who may still

fail to hire black people. This is because racism is so ingrained in the minds of our culture that, when given an option between hiring a black or a white person, a white person will hire another white person because the ideology of racism has taught us in various ways that black people are inferior and will do an inferior job. Further, racist ideology does not only work in the minds of the white economically dominant race, but it also works in the minds of black people. In the article, “What is Internalized Racism?” Donna Bivens, asserts “As people of color are victimized by racism, we internalize it. That is, we develop ideas, beliefs, actions and behaviors that support or collude with racism. This internalized racism has its own systemic reality and its own negative consequences in the lives and communities of people of color” (2). Internalized racism forces blacks to view themselves as inferior and thus maintain their place in society, as servants to the dominant, which reproduces the relations of production. Further racism causes blacks to internalize the idea of genuine racial difference, that the races are fundamentally unlike and therefore to blacks as well as to white, racial separation in society seems natural.

Morrison Exposes Racist Ideology

Morrison uses her work to alert readers to the ways in which racism has interpellated them as subjects. She has demonstrated the workings of racism from the very beginning of her career as a novelist in 1970 with *The Bluest Eye*. In that novel a young black girl is taught that she is ugly because of her very blackness, not only by white people or the depictions of white beauty in popular culture, but by the black community in which she lives. In the book the main character, Pecola, tries often to find the secret of her “ugliness,” which can be found in the other characters’ reference to her as “an ugly little black girl” (*BE* 16). In the novel black is always associated with ugliness, and the character considered beautiful, Maureen Peal, is half white. Morrison writes the novel in response to 60s slogans of “Black is Beautiful” in order to question

the need for the statement (Forward, *BE* 2). She says in her introduction to the novel: “Why, although reviled by others, could this beauty not be taken for granted within the community? Why did it need wide public articulation to exist?” (Forward, *BE* 2). In asking these questions, Morrison allows her readers to question how racist ideology has informed their notions of beauty and race. Her questioning provides a path to possible freedom from that way of thinking, because freedom from ideology begins with increasing people’s awareness of it, so they can have some agency over how it works on them.

Morrison recognizes racism as an Ideological State Apparatus. In *Playing in The Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* she says that:

Race has become metaphorical—a way of referring to and disguising forces, events, classes, and expressions of social decay and economic divisions far more threatening to the body politic than biological ‘race’ ever was.... [racism] has assumed a metaphorical life so completely embedded in daily discourse that it is perhaps more necessary and more on display than ever before. (63)

This statement furthers Guilaumin’s assertion that racism is symbolic. Morrison means that racism has taken on meanings far beyond individual people’s open and acknowledged hatred and discriminatory actions, but that it is an ISA whose beliefs and values we have unconsciously absorbed and that are present in all of our interactions. Just as we can see racism informing our views on beauty in *The Bluest Eye*, it also informs what feel like “natural” views on poverty, intellectuality, and ability, as mentioned in the above example of workplace discrimination.

Morrison realizes that racism is present in all literature and discourse, and that it is inescapable. Yet while recognizing this, she still persistently tries to fight it. “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” (qt. in Fultz 8). In order to understand her degree of freedom, Morrison realizes that she has to be alert to how this world has shaped her own thoughts. Most people consider Morrison to be super “woke.” Fultz writes that “Morrison is always conscious of a white presence—be it marginal or central.” By “a white presence” she means “the actual presence of or interactions between blacks and whites and or the indirect presence of whites through material culture or vestiges of white oppression” (12). This statement demonstrates that Fultz along with most readers of Morrison—myself included since my initial reading of her work at the age of 12—think her to be incapable of spreading ideas from the dominant ideology or reproducing the relations of production, because Morrison appears to be completely self-aware and knows how racist ideology affects her and therefore her characters. Althusser would say, however, that no one is completely self-aware or knows the extent to which ideology has interpellated them, because ideology shapes our reality.

Why We Should be Wary of Popular Authors

Althusser would argue that this recognition by the dominant suggests that Morrison’s work is probably not completely a tool for freedom because if it were the dominant would attempt to suppress it rather than promote it. The suppression of work that goes against the dominant culture is what Raymond Williams refers to as the selective tradition. Williams says, “It is very important to try to understand the operation of a selective tradition. To some extent, the selection begins within the period itself; from the whole body of activities, certain things are selected for value and emphasis. In general this selection will reflect the organization of the period as a whole” (50). Williams also says, “selection will be governed by many kinds of special interest, including class interests” (51). Since the dominant are in charge of publishing

and academia, the selection will almost always reflect their interests. The dominant refuses to recognize texts that are truly contradictory to its agenda and stifles revolutionary texts just as it stifles revolutionary groups. Most people, for example, are likely aware that the Black Panthers were sabotaged and targeted by the FBI (Jones 1). The assumption behind why the FBI targeted the Panthers is that they were “protecting” citizens from the violence they would cause. But, in fact, the dominant was protecting itself from the change in racial values that the Panthers could have created.

Chapter 2: Toni Morrison: Reproducing the Ideology of the Family ISA with Regard to Gender

Morrison's Unconscious Interpellation into Dominant Gender and Family Ideologies

Morrison says that she wants her characters, her readers, and herself to be free, but her views of “freedom” in racial relations simultaneously reproduce oppression in gender relations. Morrison insists because she is a black writer, her work must deal with racial conflicts, but she states that “the conflicts of gender is a cultural illness” (qt in Mckay 147), and thinks of the women’s liberation movement as a family quarrel between white men and white women (What the Black Woman Thinks Morrison 3). Thus, she does not attempt to deal with issues of gender. However, they are still present in her work. Morrison asserts that the conflicts explored in *Tar Baby* have nothing to do with gender:

Jadine and Son have no problems as far as men and women are concerned. 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. It was not because he was a man and she was a woman that conflict arose between them. (qt in Mckay 147)

Morrison, however, fails to realize the gendered nature of work in our society and how the responsibilities she presents for each character in *Tar Baby* are highly gendered. She embraces residual/dominant views and expectations of women as nurturers and mothers, and in *Tar Baby* Jadine is pushed to embrace these views as well. Karin Luisa Badt asserts that *Tar Baby* is a

novel about returning to the roots of the body, which she posits as maternal. Badt believes that Jadine is “reminded of her ancient properties by ‘the diaspora mothers’ (*TB*) black women who are *fertile*” (574). Morrison confirms this by claiming that the problem with Jadine is “not paying attention to the ancient properties—which for me means the ability to be ‘the ship’ *and* ‘the safe harbor’” (qt in Wilson 135). Morrison repeats this ship/harbor analogy in several interviews. By it she means that black women have traditionally been able to balance careers, including being slaves or domestic workers, as well as reproduce—which is why Badt mentions fertility—and maintain roles as nurturers within the family and community. She still believes that black women should preserve this balance.

Morrison’s Naturalization of Social Gender Relations

Morrison views nurturing and reproducing as ancient and therefore natural, but they are not natural, only cultural and as such are assigned by the dominant within culture and work to their benefit. Guilaumin asserts that the naturalization of gender roles is a key aspect of dominant ideology: “Both the classical, conservative right, through the family, and the cynical right, through the channel of reproduction, treat...[the] relation between the sexes as a fundamental and incontrovertible datum...the confinement of women to reproductive materiality is the prerequisite of a right-wing position” (173). So when Morrison asserts that the “quality of nurturing is essential” (qt in Ruas 104) and “to lose that [the ability to work and nurture] would be to diminish ourselves unnecessarily” (105), we can see that she has unwittingly accepted right-wing dominant positions and ideologies. Morrison thinks that when she voices these ideas, she is speaking from an individual sense of what is right and that accepting these responsibilities is an essential part of a woman’s life. She does not realize, however, that she has been conditioned by Ideological State Apparatuses like Family, Religion, Politics, and Media. These

ISAs all work together to maintain the relations of production, keeping dominant white male capitalists in their place at the top and positioning women to work for them often in unpaid or underpaid “natural” servile positions. While Morrison has managed to escape the socioeconomic background she was born into, a feat that ISAs make nearly impossible to accomplish, she has become an unconscious agent of those ISAs with her gender rhetoric.

In Althusser’s social hierarchy Morrison would be the professional ideologue who regurgitates ideology that is beneficial to the dominant, making subjects submissive by equating their submissiveness to virtue, morality, and transcendence (Althusser 157). She commends black women for: “Managing households and other people’s children and two jobs and listening to everybody and at the same time creating, singing, holding, bearing, transferring the culture for generations” she goes on to further glorify this excess of overwork when she states “We’ve been walking on water for four hundred years” (qt in Moyers 270). All of these positions are traditional subject positions for black women: mothering, caretaking in underpaid or unpaid domestic positions, and holding up the community, but Morrison equates doing this work to godliness.

Why a Critique of Gender in Morrison’s Work is Necessary

Morrison thinks that she is uplifting black women by making them admire their historical positions as women who had to be laborers for everyone: their white male owners, their husbands, and their families. But she is only perpetuating the black woman’s subject position. This depiction of the strong black woman who can and should “do it all” is valued within the black community, and we must re-examine it because while always putting everyone above oneself can be admirable, it can also lead to self-destruction and a lack of fulfillment. Morrison is one of the most widely read contemporary black female writers; she is frequently assigned to

high school and college students, and so continues to influence how contemporary black women see themselves. We need to question how the ISAs of her time influenced her views on gender roles and how those views influence her writing. We must find a politically useful way to read her novels that does not leave us vulnerable to absorbing residual/dominant gender ideologies and reproducing the relations of production. *Tar Baby* and *God Help the Child* are two of the most important of her oeuvre to review because they are her only books set in the contemporary moment and directly address gender tensions that we can currently relate to.

How the Family ISA Interpellates Women

The Family is one of the most significant ISAs and is responsible for inculcating dominant gender ideology. A family teaches women their place in the dominant order, and in that order, they are above all caretakers. While women are no longer relegated to the home and are allowed to have careers, marriage and children are still seen as their primary goal. This awareness of gender dynamics is so embedded in contemporary consciousness that it is even cited in popular music such as Beyonce's "Flawless." In the song Beyonce cites Chichimanda Ngozi Adichie who says, "Because I am female I am expected to aspire to marriage. I am expected to make my life choices. Always keeping in mind that marriage is the most important. You can have ambition but not too much." Adichie's words are reflective of the fact that women are still expected to take care of all the needs of the home and the family, as well as to make money to support it.

Working both in and outside the home is a relatively new development for white women but has always been the case for black women. Black women have traditionally had to take on both roles, something that is physically and mentally exhausting. Morrison admires this black history and believes women's ability to be nurturers and laborers is an essential skill. In an

interview she was asked the question: “Can women like Jadine, who have options Black women never had before, reconcile freedom with responsibilities—to elderly, men, children?”

Morrison’s response in 1981 was “We have to...It’s part of the whole nurturing thing. My mother took care of me...When she gets in that position, I have to do that for her. And my children have to see that; they have to participate in it” (qt in Wilson 131). Morrison is spreading ideology that she believes is her own, but that she has inherited from black culture. But this ideology completely aligns with dominant gender ideology taught by the Family ISA, that says women have to be nurturers, and that they are responsible for the care of everyone.

Family ISA: What’s in a Name?

One of the first ways Family tries to reproduce itself in each individual family is through the naming process. For example, my whole name contains both my mother and grandmother’s name. The choosing of my name had very little to do with hopes for who I might be as a person, but what my family wanted to reproduce in me. They are unconscious of this and just see it as natural and customary to name a child after their parents or grandparents. So the fact that Jadine’s name in *Tar Baby* is like Ondine, her mother-figure, is no coincidence. Morrison’s naming of Jadine is her very first attempt to interpellate her as an individual to Ondine a subject. In *Tar Baby* we witness Jadine, a single independent woman, being forced to become more like Ondine, a woman who is a subject and servant to her husband and to her white male boss. Jadine’s very first attempt to defy her similarity to Ondine is by shortening her name to Jade: she tries to cut off the part of her name, and her person, that is like Ondine. None of the black people in the novel, however, accept her shortened name nor do they accept her attempts to break out of conventional gender roles. Morrison claims that “She [Jadine] is cut off. She does not have, as Therese [a spiritualist] says, her ancient properties; she does not have what Ondine has...she

needs a little bit of Ondine to be a complete woman” (qt in Ruas 104). This statement is indicative of Morrison's own interpellation. Morrison believes that without what she deems the womanly nature of nurturing, Jadine is incomplete.

Tar Baby: Ondine Conforms to Dominant Gender Ideologies and is Materially Appropriated

In *Tar Baby* Ondine embodies all of the values that Morrison promotes. Ondine has spent her whole life doing what Morrison terms in an interview, “the nurturing thing.” From the moment she enters the book we are able to see how much of a toll that nurturing has taken on her: “She was seventeen years her husband’s junior, but her hair braided across the crown of her head, was completely white. Sydney’s hair wasn’t as black as it appeared, but it certainly wasn’t white” (*TB* 34). By including that description, Morrison seems to be unconsciously alluding to the different kinds of work expected from a man versus a woman and the stress that comes with women’s work. Ondine’s work starts with her own family, Sydney and Jadine. While Sydney works for Valerian, Ondine works for Valerian and Sydney. She is a cook for Valerian, but when Valerian isn’t eating, Sydney is. Her job never ends. She says, “I know my kitchens. Better than I know my face” (39). She has had no time for self-exploration, only time to make sure others’ needs were met. She is the self sacrificer, and Jadine, her orphaned niece, gets a great deal of her devotion. Ondine says, “I would’ve stood on my feet all day to put her through school. And when my feet were gone I would’ve cooked on my knees” (Morrison 192). Ondine is a traditional woman and as such, taking care of children is the first priority in her life. It comes before her own well-being and she feels that is something to be proud of. Ondine’s thoughts are similar to Morrison when she states, “If I were a 110 and my son were 70 and he got hurt I would still be responsible for taking care of him” (qt in Wilson 134). Women’s work is open ended. It has no beginning or close, it encompasses them, and their self-worth comes from being able to

do it all. Guillaumin states that women are materially appropriated by the dominant, meaning that their whole selves are a social tool assigned to the physical care of other beings, and thus “Each second of her [women’s] time—and without hope of seeing this absorption end at a fixed hour, even at night—she is absorbed into other individualities” (189).

The truth of the appropriation of women is reflected in Ondine’s relationship with Jadine. Jadine becomes an extension of Ondine’s selfhood, and Ondine’s own mental idea of her own individuality is tied inextricably to Jadine as well as her other caretaking positions as wife and domestic. Ondine says of Jadine, “She crowned me, that girl did. No matter how tired I was or what went wrong, she was my crown ” (193). This crowning refers to the fact that society leads women to feel incomplete until they have children. Ondine has no children of her own, and until she adopts Jadine she feels like she is lacking something: the crowning is Jadine completing her womanhood. Ondine has used all of her savings to put Jadine through school, and so she sees Jadine as her future. Similarly, Morrison says, “The future for me is always my children—whether I can stay healthy long enough to be there or be available to them” (qt in Wilson 136). Again, Morrison shows her complete acceptance of the appropriation of women’s time and materiality, and Ondine becomes the vessel through which she can impart the ideology she has been interpellated by.

Appropriation of Women Works to the Benefit of the Dominant

Ondine is a reflection of Morrison who sees being a mother as her primary purpose, even above being a writer, a professor, and an editor. If she has failed at being a mother, she has failed at being a person, and none of her other accomplishments matter. This is the work of the Family ISA, teaching women that their role is first and foremost the care of others. These teachings do not stop with women being available to their family, but with them serving the dominant. Ondine

doesn't only care for her family but she also does unpaid emotional labor for the Streets as well. Ondine cares about Valerian's health, giving him nutritious food to eat when he tells her not to. Valerian complains saying, "I could hire somebody who wouldn't keep things from me. Sneak Postum into a good pot of coffee, saccharin in the lime pie, and don't think I don't know about the phony salt" (Morrison 20). She is also there for his son when he is a child. When Sydney says, "You spoiled him stupid [Michael, Valerian's son]," she replies, "You can't spoil a child. Love and good food never spoiled nobody" (Morrison 35). She has spoiled him in a way she probably couldn't spoil Jadine, since she was off at boarding schools. Ondine feels it is her job to overcompensate for the love and care Michael doesn't get from his own mother, who actually physically abuses him. Ondine knows about the abuse, and thus it becomes another of her jobs to cushion the pain for Michael, and to keep the pain of knowing about the abuse from Valerian. All of this emotional work is not only uncompensated, but often isn't even acknowledged or appreciated.

Valerian is shaken to the core when he finally finds out about the abuse. He becomes physically weaker. After Ondine exposes the truth at the dining table at Christmas, Valerian sits there for hours "His knees trembling, his fingers shuddering on the tablecloth" (*TB* 232). He never stops trembling, and he thinks "I will never be strong enough to hear it" (*TB* 232), when Margaret tries to speak to him about the abuse. Ondine knew how it would affect the household, and by maintaining the secret for so long she keeps the household together. However, carrying a secret like that was emotionally draining for her. You can feel the degree of her stress when she finally reveals the abuse: "'I used to hold him and pet him. He was so scared.' Her voice was hardly audible under the sobbing" (*TB* 209), and when she finishes telling the story, she breaks down (209).

Margaret and Ondine are about the same age however Ondine's hair is completely white and Margaret has retained her beauty pageant winning red hair. Ondine ages so much faster because she takes on all of the work that Margaret did not do. Margaret asks Ondine, "You loved my son, didn't you?" It was more of a statement than a question," and Ondine replies, "I love anything small that needs it" (*TB* 241). Ondine has loved Margaret's son for her, and Margaret has expected her to, because while white women have to conform to some extent to dominant gender roles, poor women and poor black women are indoctrinated to follow them more closely. Ondine harbors a grudge against Margaret because she resents that she has had to protect her too, by keeping her secret. Margaret even gets to transfer some of her guilt on Ondine since she didn't attempt to prevent or expose the abuse. Margaret has the nerve to tell Ondine, "You should have stopped me" (*TB* 241). While Margaret did not take responsibility for her actions, she knows that Ondine will. Ondine may be revealing some of Morrison's struggles with the idea of being a carer when she says, "Maybe it don't pay to love nothing" (*TB* 283). Caring is work, and it is very seldom paid back fully, because it is seen as obligatory. Jadine, Michael, Sydney, Valerian, and Margaret don't feel that Ondine has done anything but what she *should* as a woman. They don't value her work; they only expect it. When women spend their whole lives nurturing because they have been taught that nurturing is virtuous, they are left feeling empty and lost, which Ondine experiences acutely towards the end of the book. The ideology of the Family ISA always works out for the dominant, because it makes women, especially black women, always put the needs of others over their own, even those who have historically oppressed them.

Ondine Forcing Jadine into Dominant Gender Ideologies—Caring for the Family

The Family ISA has taught Morrison that there is only one way to be a woman, and in the novel, Ondine tries to teach Jadine how to be this kind of woman. Ondine says, “Jadine, a girl has got to be a daughter first. She have to learn that. And if she never learn to be a daughter; she can never learn how to be a woman. I mean a real woman; a woman good enough for a child, a woman good enough for a man” (TB 281). This statement is demonstrative of how ISAs work: a girl must *learn* to be a daughter, meaning that she learns from her mother how to care for others. She must also *learn* because the behavior while presented by ISAs as natural, is far from it. Such learning is highly problematic. Are women born and bred not for themselves as individuals, but to be interpellated, to be a subject, only good enough to serve? Guillaumin would say that they are and believes that “Individuality rightly is a precarious conquest, often denied to a whole class, whose individuality is forced to become diluted, materially and actually, into other individualities” (189). Therefore, Jadine’s journey to selfhood and individuality is nearly impossible and viewed as alien by women like Ondine who accept their “natural” place in the dominant order. Jadine says she wants to escape extremely limiting subject positions as a black American woman, and be “only the person inside...just me” (TB 47). But the dominant ideology makes it so that a woman more concerned with her own selfhood than the care of others appears unnatural. Dominant culture also teaches women, especially black women, to nurture, so that they will be taken care of by them, so that black women will work as a nurses and not doctors, or secretaries and not executives. Or maybe they might even become a house servant, like Ondine is, choosing one of the few occupations allowed to black women for a significant amount of American history. If Jadine had stayed on the island to take care of her family, she would have also had to take care of the Streets. Jadine would have reproduced the relations of production because she would have been stuck being what the white male dominant needs to keep

capitalism going, a black woman to take care of them the way Ondine has been doing her whole life for both of the Streets.

Son Forcing Jadine into Dominant Gender Ideologies—Caring for the Community

The main characters in *Tar Baby* are Jadine and Son, and the way Morrison says they function in the book is to teach one another. Morrison says that the central issue for them both is working out what their responsibilities are to the black community. Son's "responsibilities," however, are treated differently from Jadine's because the book follows dominant gender ISAs. Son is never told that he is responsible for anyone. He is quite infantile; he forages for food on the island until he gets caught, and Jadine takes care of him financially when they leave the island. In "Maternal Conceptions in Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* and *Tar Baby*: A Woman Has to Be A Daughter Before She Can Be Any Kind of Woman," Andrea O'Reilly says that "Her [Morrison's] emphasis upon responsibility makes commitment to kin and community central to her definition of black womanhood" (84). But this dedication to community seems solely placed on black women, not men.

Many critics argue that Jadine is not properly grounded in a black community and that is why she does not accept that her primary role should be as a caregiver to anyone, Son included. James Coleman proposes that "As an orphan, Jadine has seen no examples of...folk responsibility" (67). But Son is born and bred in a black agrarian community, and still does not understand what he owes that community. When he does come home after 10 years of drifting, his father asks him: "How come you never put no note or nothin in them envelopes? I kept on lookin for a note" (*TB* 249). Son has sent sporadic money orders, but he never bothers to write a letter, or even purchase the money orders; he sends various women to buy them. But this is the only admonishment he gets; everyone else in the community is just grateful to see him for as

long as he cares to stay. No one asks where he has been or asks him to stay, unlike when Jadine comes to the island to visit at the end of the book and leaves shortly after. Then she is treated with contempt by her family, and Sydney says “She didn’t do well by us” (*TB* 282). Son, on the other hand, is treated with love and given sympathy by both the community and Morrison’s writing. This is because men are not expected to take care of the family the same way women are. The narrator’s requests of Jadine are very different from those directed at Son: “Mama spoiled black man, will you mature with me? Culture bearing black women, whose culture are you bearing?” (*TB* 268). Son and black men in general are asked to grow up a little, something that is for their own good, while Jadine and other black women are responsible for bearing or carrying the black community and maintaining its culture. These are completely dis-proportional requests.

Jadine also asks a lot less of Son than he asks of her. She simply requests he get a job or go to school, while his requests are much more selfish. Before he even formally meets her, he creeps around the house trying to mold her into something she is not: “He had thought hard during those times in order to manipulate her dreams, to insert his own dreams into her so she would not wake or stir or turn over on her stomach but lie still and dream steadily about yellow houses with white doors which women shouted Come in honey you! And the fat black ladies in white minding the pie table” (*TB* 119). Son is telepathically trying to teach Jadine the values of his community, Eloë, a place free of a physical white male presence, but still a male dominated society informed by dominant cultural norms. It is one in which women are sexually repressed, and live to care for men like Son, constantly making sure they have had enough pie. Son wants Jadine to conform to the traditional gender roles of Eloë. One could even suggest that his reason for going to Eloë after all those years is to indoctrinate Jadine in his community values. He was

on the run from Eloë for quite a while, and nothing changes in his legal status, but he insists on going there after he meets Jadine. Jadine sharply rebels against everything Eloë stands for, and when they get back and fight, he makes it clear that she is worthless as a woman if she can't conform to the traditions of the women of Eloë. He makes demands that they get married, that she leave her career, and take care of him along with her Aunt Ondine and Uncle Sydney. He reduces her whole education to nothing, saying "The truth is that whatever you learned in those colleges that didn't include me ain't shit...until you know about me you don't know nothing about yourself. And you don't know anything, anything at all about your children" (*TB* 269). He holds her out of a window while doing this, violently trying to tell Jadine exactly what Ondine does, that her education is worth nothing if she can't be a wife and a mother. He also tells her that she should never have left Ondine and Sydney on the island, that she should go back and cook for them, essentially repeating the cycle of black women nurturing others and sacrificing themselves.

Doing Both: Is it Possible?

Morrison says that Jadine has "Lost the tar quality" by this she means the ability to hold something together that would otherwise fall apart—which is what I mean by the nurturing ability. That's what one surrenders, or can surrender in order to do this other thing, in order to go get a degree in art history, learn four languages and stuff. That sounds like I'm putting it down; I'm not. I'm only saying that the point is to be able to do both" (qt in Wilson 131). Morrison believes that women should be able to nurture and hold a family together while excelling intellectually and in their careers. She makes having a career and academic success sound like the easy part and argues that without being able to nurture, a woman has lost her true identity. O'Reilly states that "Morrison constructs a very specific definition of black womanhood. Black

women, according to Morrison, are providers and nurturers; they inhabit the public sphere of work and the private realm of home and so unproblematically” (85). Morrison so emphatically believes in women’s ability to do both because the women in her family had to, as most black women do. Poverty and oppression didn’t allow one to simply be a homemaker like their white counterparts nor did it allow most black women to have careers in which they could hire supports for home caring—nannies, babysitters, nurses for older parents, etc. Morrison alludes to a history of black women getting through terrible obstacles and still being able to have children and nurture: “Since it was possible for my mother, my grandmother and her mother to do what they did, which to me is scary, really scary—snatching children and roaming around in the night; running away from the South and living in Detroit, can’t read or write; in a big city trying to stay alive and keep those children when you can’t even read the road signs—now, *these* are hard things to do. And if they can do that, surely I can work at Random House and cook” (qt in Wilson 131). This kind of comparison is debilitating for black women who are not going through extreme hardships, but still have difficult lives. Just as Son reduces Jadine’s education, Morrison’s words also appear to trivialize intellectual work like her editorial position at Random House, though working at an institution like that is hard labor in multiple ways. Also, the women from Morrison’s family were doing what they had to in order to stay alive; they weren’t trying to grow financially or intellectually or liberate themselves from oppression as Morrison does and Jadine attempts to in the novel.

The women Morrison speaks of were strong, and survived events we could not imagine going through today while managing their “careers” and their households. However, the conditions available for women to do both work and nurture in the present have changed drastically. Morrison says, “Our history as black women is the history of women who could

build a house and have some children, and there was no problem” (qt in Wilson 135). The work Morrison describes is home work, work that can be done in the home. These women were able to fulfill their responsibilities to the home and to their “careers” at the same time. Morrison’s idea of a complete human being, and a complete woman, is to be able to do both fully. That was more possible for the black women who lived in an agrarian style environment like the women of Eloë, or who did housework like Ondine. Son lists the women of Eloë’s impressive accomplishments: “Cheyenne...could drop a pheasant like an Indian. His mother...roped horses when she was a girl...his grandmother built a whole cowshed with only Rosa to help” (*TB* 268). They were all able to do all of this work and still get married and have children. Ondine is allowed to care for her husband, Jadine, and even love the Street’s son, all from her home. Morrison says that her ancestors would not want to hear about her bourgeois troubles because they were doing harder work: “They were boiling sheets and shooting pheasant and stuff, then they got married to people and had children and fights” (qt in Wilson 132). These women could manage their work and plan their time around their children and family.

But, if Jadine had stayed on the island to take care of her family that would mean ending her career. Jadine and Morrison both have to live in cosmopolitan areas, though Morrison does not explicitly acknowledge this. Son wants Jadine to live a lifestyle more like the women he grew up with, but that option isn’t available to a woman like Jadine. Critic Peter Erickson acknowledges this truth, saying “There is little suggestion that she [Jadine] could have both ‘nurturing’ and ‘building’” (305). The text and Morrison treat Jadine unsympathetically for not doing both, but it does not propose a way that she could fulfill a nurturing role without sacrificing her dreams.

While women like Jadine and Morrison aren't doing the physical labor needed to sustain life, they are doing the intellectual and emotional labor of trying to advance in it, and I believe that deserves equal admiration. Black women like Jadine who work in fields like art history and fashion have to work in constant contact with white males. This means they have to do the mental labor of being constantly self-conscious and aware of the image they project to whites. Jadine is obviously experienced at this and the workplace dynamic can be seen in how she behaves around the Streets. She says she is "uncomfortable with the way Margaret stirred her into blackening up or universalizing out" (*TB* 44). Also, when she is with Valerian she carefully considers the effect her behavior has on him: "She believed Valerian was comforted, made more secure, by her presence at the table" (*TB* 92). She has to manage herself around him and keep him feeling unthreatened, unlike the women of Eloë, and the women Morrison describes. They both live at a safe distance from the white men who oppress them, a place where they can at least be themselves. Even Ondine is allowed to rest and say anything she would like about the Streets from her kitchen. But Jadine must be guarded around her 'patrons'

Morrison's Emergent Views

Althusser says that change to the dominant ideology can happen over time, but very slowly. This change can be seen in *Tar Baby*. Ondine and Son, echoing Morrison, are both so indoctrinated by ideology that they cannot see a future for a woman like Jadine who chooses independence over nurturing. Son "tried to imagine what kind of woman she [Jadine] would be in 50 years. Would she be like Therese? Or Ondine? Or Rosa or Sally Brown?" (*TB* 268). He cannot imagine a future for Jadine because she is nothing like these women; she is a new kind of woman. Jadine tells Son "I belong to me" (*TB* 118), before explaining to him her relation to the

Child's or the Street's at the beginning of the book, and she proves it by not allowing herself to be lost in the care of them or him. Jadine becomes a revolutionary character.

While Morrison is indoctrinated by ideology she still managed to present the possibility for the discussion of it, and discussion is where change can happen. Morrison disagrees with Jadine and other contemporary women who have turned away from traditional womanhood, but she still creates them, just as Nathaniel Hawthorne hates women who rebel, but still creates a character who is rebellious, Hester, in *The Scarlet Letter*. In a 1976 interview called "Intimate Things In Place," Morrison says that Sula, the main character in her novel written before *Tar Baby*, is "masculine." She says: "She's adventuresome, she trusts herself, she's not scared...she will leave and try anything...So that quality of masculinity-and I mean in this pure sense—in a woman at that time is outrage, total outrage. She can't get away with that" (qt in Stepto 26). Morrison kills Sula very early in that book because she believes that a woman who doesn't conform to gender roles cannot possibly exist in the time *Sula* is set in. She cannot even be called a woman because she is not the kind of woman Morrison and the dominant believe in. However, in *Tar Baby* published only five years later than *Sula* but set about 25 years later, Jadine displays the same adventurous nature as Sula and still lives. Jadine "feels very lean and male" (*TB* 275) at the end of the novel. But Morrison lets Jadine do what she deems the "male" thing and leave Son with no goodbye. While Morrison does not approve of Jadine's decision and in her own voice as the narrator, compares Jadine to a soldier ant who "eats her own wing muscles until she bears her eggs" (*TB* 291), she allows her to escape everyone's attempt to subject her to traditional womanhood. Unconsciously, Morrison wants Jadine and herself to be free from confinement to nurturing capacities, just as we all want to be free from appropriation and domination. By creating a character and allowing that character to defy all of her own dominant gender ideology,

Morrison is beginning a conversation about freedom that is necessary. It is a kind of freedom she cannot participate in because of her age: she has been indoctrinated by dominant ideology in a way that Jadine has not, being 50 at the time *Tar Baby* was published, and belonging to a stricter ideological culture. So by creating a character like Jadine, Morrison is creating an emergent viewpoint. Morrison is creating a freedom she cannot access but people like me can when we study characters like Jadine in an interrogative manner.

Chapter 3: Toni Morrison and Strategic Essentialism

Gayatri Spivak and Strategic Essentialism

Defining Strategic Essentialism

Gayatri Spivak's *Subaltern Studies: Deconstructing Historiography* was groundbreaking in its use of a new term, "strategic essentialism." She uses the term to explain the work of the Subaltern Studies Collective. Spivak recognizes the goal of the collective's work is to "investigate, discover, and establish a subaltern [specifically lower caste Indian] or peasant consciousness" (10). This project is obviously essentialist and seeks to ascribe an inherent nature to a marginalized group, effectively limiting their room for subjectivity. Spivak argues, however, that the group recognizes that they are studying the consciousness of a "historicized political species" rather than Indian peasant consciousness in general. Recognizing the way historical or social forces have shaped this "consciousness" makes the collective's work "a strategic use of positivist essentialism in a scrupulously visible political interest" (13). Their work is strategic because they are only essentializing a group's consciousness in order to fight their marginalization. Through the process of unification, the collective gives the group a power and cohesiveness they cannot have when seen as separate individuals.

Positives of Strategic Essentialism

Taking up a position of strategic essentialism at first seems positive, and it can be. One example is when Black people across the African Diaspora, through movements like Pan Africanism, identified themselves as black. By identifying as black rather than as their specific nationality or region, they show that they are unified in the racial oppression they experienced from white imperialists. They reduce their subjectivity by not asserting the specific ways in

which oppression affected people in Ghana, versus people in Jamaica, or the US, but give their common oppression an increased visibility which they could not have otherwise.

Negatives of Strategic Essentialism

Spivak argues that Strategic Essentialism becomes negative, however, when groups assume that “If properly executed it will lead to firm ground, to some *thing* that can be disclosed” (10). Similarly, Stuart Hall warns against seeing cultural identity as a “a fixed essence...lying unchanged outside history and culture...[or] some universal and transcendental spirit inside us on which history has made no fundamental mark.” Hall argues that cultural identity “is not once-and-for-all. It is not a fixed origin to which we can make some final and absolute Return” (226). Strategic essentialism fails when groups forget that the essentialism is for a strategic political purpose only and view the unified identity as a signifier of a metaphysical group consciousness to be found.

Strategic Essentialism Within the Black Community and as Possessed by Toni Morrison

Strategic essentialism is something that has been practiced in varying forms in the black community. In the 60s Malcolm X taught that white people came from an abnormal gene, were devils, and that black people were the only true humans. His rhetoric was completely essentialist but it was necessary at a time when dominant stereotypes of blackness depicted blacks as inferior. Malcolm X galvanized blacks by telling them they were superior, making them actively want to fight their oppression. Malcolm X and the Nation of Islam inspired other black nationalist groups like the 5 percenters. One of their main tenets is “the black man is God and his proper name is ALLAH” and that “black people are the original people of the planet Earth” (Johnson 1).

Strategic essentialism is still employed by black nationalists today and is still dispersed and absorbed throughout the culture. Dr. Umar Johnson, a popular black nationalist who appears monthly on one of the most listened to black radio shows, “The Breakfast Club,” has said in an interview: “You can’t take self-hating Black people and think you’re going to lead them in a renaissance to reclaim who they are. You’ve got to change that mind. Therefore, if we were trained into inferiority, we’re going to have to be trained back into superiority. We’re going to have to be trained back into our normal state of mind” (qt from interview with kentakepage.com). Dr. Umar, like Malcolm X employs strategic essentialism to argue that superiority is the “natural” state of mind for black people, and spreads that rhetoric throughout the culture. Also, like Malcolm X, Umar’s essentialism opposes all dominant stereotypes, and black people so readily accept this kind of black nationalist thinking because of a need to distinguish themselves from those who have oppressed them. The need to see those who have treated them in beastly ways, as beasts themselves, or at the very least as definitively and intrinsically different from Blacks, is again a kind of strategy for black people to deal with their oppression. By unifying as an essentialized group, they can hold on to their integrity and claim essential characteristics different from any ascribed to them by the white dominant.

The way Morrison describes her family’s feelings about whiteness are similar to the feelings held by black nationalists: “My parents took issue over the question of whether it was possible for white people to improve. They assumed black people were the humans of the globe; but had serious doubts about the quality and existence of white humanity” (*A Slow Walk* 4). The beliefs of Morrison’s parents indicate that the idea of racial difference is not something only held by white supremacists, or black nationalists, but by many average black people. Morrison also dedicates *Tar Baby* to her family, specifically her female ancestors, saying that “each of them

knew their true and ancient properties.” Morrison’s dedication to them represents what she believes to be “authentic” black womanhood as a means of creating a unified cultural identity.

Tar Baby: Ahistoricizing and Naturalizing Blackness

In conceptualizing *Tar Baby*, Morrison focuses on themes of tradition and cultural memory. She bases her story on the *Tar Baby* folktale and says that the guiding image for her novel is the tar itself. In the original tale a farmer fashions a tar baby, a sticky feminized figure made of tar, that traps the cunning Brer Rabbit, but Brer convinces the farmer that the worst thing he could do to him would be to bring him home. So the farmer sets him free in Brer’s very own briar patch. In *Memory & Creation* Morrison speaks about focusing on tar as the central image of her novel:

Creation meant putting the...pieces [of the tar baby tale] together in parts, first of all

concentrating on tar as a part. What is it, and where does it come from? What are its holy uses and its profane uses—consideration of which led to the guiding motif: ahistorical earth and historical earth. (5)

Throughout the novel, black characters whom Morrison presents to us as organic are referred to as having “tar qualities,” i.e., “skin like tar” (*TB* 45). In the previous chapter I presented tar as a quality that allowed black women to hold things together, but tar also functions as a symbol of blackness for Morrison, and in contemplating it she immediately uses words like “holy” and “ahistoric”—the language of the transcendent and spiritual or of essentialism. Guillaumin argues that dominant groups appropriate dominated ones by making them appear as if “they are independent of social relationships, that they pre-exist all history and all determined concrete conditions” (217). Ahistoricizing blackness serves a variety of purposes for the dominant. It

obscures how history and social forces have created the idea of racial difference, reinforces blackness as other, and makes oppressive social relationships seem timeless and therefore natural. So, when Morrison ahistoricizes blackness she is unwittingly perpetuating the appropriation of black people.

Morrison is using the same methods as Malcolm X and other black nationalist to force black people to see themselves as belonging to a higher power, a power above oppression. Morrison is different from these cultural leaders, however, because while they assign black people superior traits to uplift them, Morrison mostly tries to celebrate stereotypical traits believed to be already held by blacks. It makes no sense to embrace these traits in a society where “popular prejudice mistakes itself for ‘human nature’” (Spivak 20). In a racist culture that already believes blacks have intrinsic—usually negative qualities—and that sees particular stereotypical black behaviors as natural, Morrison’s arguing that Blackness has intrinsic qualities simply reinforces dominant stereotypes. Clearly Morrison is trying to change negative prejudices into positive ones, but she is not succeeding.

Tar: A Transcendent Spirit Inside Us

Morrison again reinforces the image of tar/blackness as mythical in the Foreword to the novel. She argues, “It was the image of tar, however, artfully shaped that led me to African masks: ancient, alive, breathing, their features exaggerated, their power mysterious. A blatant sculpture sitting at the heart of the folktale became the bones of the narrative” (2). Morrison is very obviously looking for examples of a way to harness black power; the masks themselves are symbols of a mythical blackness that she feels hasn’t been tampered with or violently influenced by western culture. The masks are still whole—they were present before colonialism and have

managed to withstand it. The novel is asking black people to remember what Morrison deems to be a forgotten and elemental blackness that she believes has also transcended colonialism. Many critics read the novel as Morrison intends, and completely accept the essentialism of that project. In “The Gender of Diaspora in Toni Morrison’s *Tar Baby*,” Yogita Goyal argues that through the use of myth the novel “creates a sentient nature that is itself the repository of any tradition, continuity, or resistance blacks might need today” (394). Morrison confirms this goal, and states that this novel “must bear witness and identify that which is useful from the past and that which ought to be discarded” (MC 390). Angelita Reyes is another critic who agrees with and supports Morrison’s use of myth. She sees this nature and past as African and claims that the central theme of the novel is that “Black people in the New World must not lose sight of their African consciousness” (1). In all of these statements, blackness is not treated as a cultural identity, but as an established final nature. Guillaumin states that groups are naturalized in order to maintain their use as objects: “an object is always in its rightful place, and what it is used for, it will always be used for. That is its ‘nature.’” This kind of finality accompanies power relations in human societies” (222). The only things assigned a kind of stagnant nature are objects, and by assigning an essential nature to black people, Morrison is only furthering the likelihood that they will be used in the same way they have been for the last three hundred years—to support the wealth and power of whites.

Son: The Authentic and Mythical Black Male?

The tar theme helps Morrison set up what she says is a seven part structure in the novel and she describes the first step in that structure in this way: “Coming out of the sea (that which was there before earth) is both the beginning and the end of the book—in both of which Son emerges from the sea in a section that is not numbered as a chapter” (MC 390). Son coming out

of the sea is an important image as he is made to seem ahistoric, natural, and mythic. Morrison uses birthing imagery to make it appear as if he is created by the sea itself: “a wide empty tunnel. He struggled to rise out of it and was turned three times.” We are also told that the sea “heaved and pulsed in the ammonia scented air” (*TB* 4). Finally, at the end of the novel, Son seems to return to a mythic register, joining the ghostly blind horseman of the island. There, a character also related to myth and who has breasts that never stop producing milk tells him, “They are waiting in the hills for you. They are naked and they are blind too” (*TB* 304). By choosing to join these men instead of chasing the contemporary Jadine, Son becomes firmly a part of myth in the novel. Goyal asserts that the novel uses a mythical mode “to accrue a sense of diasporic presence that goes beyond time and space.” She argues that “allied with nature, and powerful in its mythology, this idea of diaspora offers a way of rejecting the norms of white culture” (394). Goyal sees the natural, magical, and mythic as the norms of black culture. She does not bother to say what the norms of white culture are because whiteness is everything else.

While blackness is fixed in an ethereal and intangible realm, whiteness is fixed firmly in this one and in all of those social relations aligned with power. Guillaumin confirms the truth of these relations saying “The first move of dominant groups is to define themselves in relation to the system which is ideologically decreed to be the foundation of the society...by culture (the élite), by property (the bourgeoisie), by knowledge (the mandarins, the scribes), by their action on the real world” (237). Whereas the dominated, she says, “float in a universe of eternal essences which completely encircles them...where, enclosed in their ‘being’, they fulfill duties that only nature assigns to them” (220). Morrison says that Son has the “tar quality,” meaning he represents authentic blackness in the novel. It is problematic, however, that the character representing blackness in the novel is allied with nature and myth because it assigns blackness a

fixed and static final nature. Whiteness on the other hand is unlimited, changeable, and individual.

Son and Blackness as Natural vs. Valerian and Whiteness Dominating the Natural

Guillaumin states that “the socially dominant see themselves as dominating Nature itself” but the “dominated...are only the pre-programmed elements of Nature” (211). In *Tar Baby* we see Valerian, as a representative of the white capitalist dominant, controlling nature and black people, while Son, a representative of the black dominated, is depicted as a part of nature. In a review of *Tar Baby*, Brina Caplan sets up the novel as a “symbolic conflict of colors” (529). She argues that “Valerian’s stark white and red” are the colors of a candy sold primarily to blacks in the South and contrast with the colors evoked by William Son Green whose “ethos” is “represented by earth tones: cadmium yellow, tar, Hansa red, and the green of his name” (529). Valerian is a part of social structures like capitalism, and his family had “taken a little bit of sugar and cocoa” (*TB* 51) from the earth and from dominated people who owned it previously: cocoa and sugar are both from the Caribbean, which was stolen from the natives. Further, Valerian has used the labor of the dominated group to make products which are then sold back to them. Thus, Valerian is firmly apart of the system that is the ideological foundation of our society—capitalism. Son on the other hand is a part of the earth and says, “I know all about plants” (*TB* 148) and is able to make a dying plant in Valerian’s garden bloom again in one day. The way in which Morrison represents blackness as earthly and natural and whiteness as a part of the social forces that dominate nature perpetuates a system in which white male capitalists own the earth and black people’s labor is appropriated to work the earth. Having Son represent “authentic blackness” is a clear example of strategic essentialism but shows the limits of it. bell hooks argues that essentialism in black liberation struggles “created the idea of the ‘primitive’

and promoted the notion of an ‘authentic experience,’ seeing as ‘natural’ those expressions of black life which conformed to a pre-existing pattern or stereotype” (hooks 11). Son conforms to pre-existing stereotypes of black people as people of the earth. Even tar, the organic material that he is associated with in the novel, is an earthly material. Morrison tries to make the way we see capitalism and the selfish quests for wealth it encourages as negative and a wholesome relation to the earth as positive. Again, she is trying to change the way both blacks and whites regard the stereotypes outlined above; however, even if all stereotypical roles are regarded positively, they are still confining stereotypes, actually limiting Black potential while seemingly celebrating it.

Son as a Reflection of Morrison and Black Nationalist Points of View

Son uses the same kind of essentialist language as Morrison does and his character is unfortunately used to transmit her essentialist views. The book is set in the 1970s and so Son reflects black nationalists when he says things like, “White folks and black people should not sit down and eat together...They should work together sometimes, but they should not eat together or live together or sleep together. Do any of those personal things in life” (*TB* 210). Son’s statement is similar to Malcolm X stating that black people should maintain segregation or Morrison saying “I teach my children that there is a part of yourself that you keep from white people-always” (qt in Dowling 51). Son echoes Morrison and perpetuates the belief that whites and blacks are essentially different and should stay apart, even though segregation only fuels ignorance and racism.

Morrison imagines that she is highlighting racial difference; she clearly is seeking to find a kind of fixed black identity. But she is only re-inscribing stereotypes and racism in her depiction of Son as a natural and mythical figure which further proves the failure of essentialism

as a strategy. bell hooks contends that “[a]bandoning essentialist notions would be a serious challenge to racism. Contemporary African-American resistance struggle must be rooted in a process of decolonization that continually opposes reinscribing notions of ‘authentic’ black identity” (11). hooks argues that departing from essentialism in the black community provides the strongest challenge to racism, precisely because racism is founded on essentialist ideas that a real difference exists between the races. Racism cannot be fought through the very terms that makes it appear to be necessary in the first place.

The Problem with Portraying Son as “Authentic”

In *Tar Baby*, many stereotypical images of blackness are represented as authentic and are portrayed by Son. Son is cast as the wild, black, “prince of the earth” (Caplan 2) and Jadine describes him as being “wild, aggressive...[and] uncivilized” (*TB* 113). Morrison is quite enchanted with that image of black masculinity, and wild black male characters like Son, who are unattached to the larger society, recur throughout her work in figures such as Ajax in *Sula*, Cholly in *The Bluest Eye*, and Paul D in *Beloved*. In an interview Morrison talks about her fascination with black men who roam, or leave their families and lives: “Although in sociological terms that [roaming] is described as a major failing of black men—they do not stay at home and take care of their children, they are not there—they are not there—that has always been to me one of the most attractive features about black male life....But the fact that they would split in a minute just delights me” (qt in Morrison/Stepito 26). Morrison also says in another interview that “There’s a wildness that they [black men] have, a nice wildness. It’s Pre-Christ in the best sense. It’s Eve. This special lack of restraint, which is a part of human life and is best typified in certain black males, is of particular interest to me (qt in Tate 165). Morrison sees wildness as the “true” nature of black men and an enviable one, and she

perpetuates this image; however, it is only a stereotype. The problem with perpetuating that stereotype of male blackness as authentic, is that it has been created by the dominant, and so serves their needs. It is what Patricia Hill Collins calls a “controlling image” which serves to “to make racism, sexism, poverty, and other forms of social injustice appear to be natural, normal, and inevitable parts of everyday life” (70). The image of the wild black man implies that black men are less civilized than white men and more prone to lawlessness. So, black men being jailed at higher rates than whites become a “normal” outcome of their “natural” wildness. The acceptance of these qualities as “essential” does not help any black people. Morrison may position black men as wild and envy them for it because of the confining ways she discusses black womanhood, which I discussed in detail in the last chapter. If black women imagine themselves to be confined to reproduction and caretaking, the notion that black men are allowed to be wild could seem highly attractive.

These images of wild black men are not only taken to be accurate by some black people, but also by whites. So, when writers like Morrison celebrate these images and black people accept these images as “their own,” they are actually only perpetuating those images that are often derogatory and are used by the dominant as negative stereotypes. For example, when Valerian sees Son, the embodiment of the stereotypical authentic black male, he immediately recognizes the stereotype of the wild black man as “real” and “natural.” Valerian compares the blacks in his household—Ondine, Sydney, and Jadine—to Son and finds them inauthentic. Ondine and Sydney have worked as Valerian’s cook and butler for years and represent a very different kind of blackness than Son. They are adept at white social etiquette and they are hard-workers; Sydney is referred to by the narrator as an “industrious Philadelphia negro” (Morrison 61) and his character is quite a contrast to Son who is so wild and roaming that he can

never hold a job. When the members of the Street household find Son hiding in the closet, Valerian sees “Jade’s frightened ... [face], Sydney and Ondine looking at the prisoner with faces as black as his but smug” and “their manner struck him as ‘bourgeois’ ...false...[and] Uncle Tom-ish” (*TB* 144). It is indicative of how internalized stereotypes of blackness are in whites that when Son, a black man with dreads, who is dirty from weeks of living without showers or real food, is found lurking on his property in his wife’s closet, Valerian sees him as “true” simply because he fits the common stereotype of what genuine blackness looks like. Sydney, Ondine, and Jadine are therefore, by comparison, “false.”

Valerian’s comparison is unfair to the Sydney and Ondine, as well as his expectation that they should be more welcoming to an intruder in their home just because he is black. The only similarity between the Childs and Son is their blackness, and while blacks should unite strategically when it is politically useful to do so, the assumption made by Valerian that all blacks are essentially the same and therefore should stick together is racist and alienating. In a country where black people have so many different ways of living, and come from a variety of socioeconomic backgrounds, it makes little sense to think we all should immediately relate. Similarly, hooks states that it is necessary to “acknowledge the way in which class mobility has altered collective black experience so that racism does not necessarily have the same impact on every Black life. Such a critique allows us to affirm multiple black identities and varied black experience” (11).

Evaluating essentialist notions that hide the wide variety of black experience would allow blacks more room to be seen as individuals. If the man found in the closet were white, Sydney, Ondine, and Jadine would never expect Valerian to share a bond with him. This is because white people are seen as individuals, and black people are seen as one all the same, reflected in the

racist statement “They all look alike.” So when black people accept and perpetuate images of black authenticity, they are only encouraging whites to continue to view them as an undifferentiated mass, instead of as individual people who are as different from one another as they are.

Jadine: An Enemy and Cultural Orphan

By Morrison’s definitions, anyone who chooses to react based on their own subjectivities instead of from the point of view of a group consciousness is furthering the fracture of the black community. But Spivak asserts that “The task of the ‘consciousness’ of class or collectivity within a social field of exploitation and domination is thus necessarily self-alienating” because class, or race is not “an inalienable description of a human reality” (14). In other words, race and class are social constructs and may not always be felt by the people within them; social situations can change the way we are positioned by them. In the novel, Jadine is treated as an enemy for not “recognizing” her racial identity in the way others do. Her educated and therefore, different voice is called “The mocking voice, the superior managerial, administrative, clerk in-a-fucking loan office tone” and Son calls her “a gatekeeper, advance bitch, house bitch, welfare office torpedo, corporate cunt, tar baby side-of-the-road whore trap” (219). All of these epithets make her an enemy of the black community and a white ally, who simply traps men like Son. Since she does not perform the cultural identity Morrison promotes, Jadine is seen by most critics as a character who “abnegates blackness and become[s] the Westernized orphan” (Fultz 40).

Jadine’s relationship to Son and other black characters in the book illustrates how essentialist points of view exclude and alienate members of a minority group who do not fit the essentialized identity the group assumes. Gideon, an island native also called Yardman who does

odd jobs for the Streets, says to Son in reference to Jadine: “Your first yalla? ... Look out. It’s hard for them not to be white people. Hard, I’m telling you. Most never make it” (*TB* 155).

Gideon believes that because of Jadine’s very light skin, she is essentially less black and more white. Also, Jadine’s Sorbonne education, her privileged status as a model and the beneficiary of the Street’s patronage, make her different from most of the black people that a man like Gideon has ever known. Jadine cannot be black in Gideon’s mind because of the essentialist idea that black people are the same—provincial, dark earthly, and poor—and Jadine is too different. The fact that Jadine has more ties to the white community than to a black one—she is considering marrying a white man at the start of the novel—means that, for Gideon and Morrison, she has to have forgotten the “truth” of her blackness. The novel implies that Jadine is lost and critics like Angelita Reyes accept this reading, asserting that “Jadine succumbs to ideas of materialism and Euro-American cultural behavior without any perception of her own relationship to the Past. She is without a sensibility of landscape in the New World and in the connected consciousness of African people” (6). Reyes’ reading of Jadine shows the ways in which black people are looked at as connected to each other and therefore the same, as well as how their identity is fixed in the past, allowing little room for the future, which is why Jadine, a contemporary woman is treated with such a lack of sympathy. Hall argues that instead of trying to locate an African consciousness rooted in the past, we should view “cultural identity [as]...a matter of ‘becoming’ as well as of ‘being’. It belongs to the future as much as to the past. It is not something which already exists, transcending place, time, history and culture” (225). Viewing cultural identity as Hall describes would allow Jadine to be read in a way that would not admonish her for not being in tune with an imaginary shared consciousness, one that is positioned in the past with no room for future subjectivity.

Son also accuses Jadine of being white: “‘Rape? Why you little white girls always think somebody’s trying to rape you?’ ‘White?’ She was startled out of fury. ‘I’m not...you know I’m not white!’ ‘No? Then why don’t you settle down and stop acting like it’” (*TB* 121). To Son, blackness is a fixed quality with implied behaviors, and since Jadine has lost her blackness, she can act like she is not black. Morrison says, “You can be black genetically and choose not to be. You just change your mind or your eyes. It’s just a mindset” (qt in Washington 236). In that statement she implies blackness goes beyond social relationships and is a scientific fact, as well as that genetic blackness comes with a natural set of behaviors one can try their best to deny. Gullaumin believes that positions like Morrison’s are ultimately the work of the dominant ideology: “The idea of a genetic determination of appropriation and belief in its ‘programmed’ character...are thus the product...of a particular type of appropriation (where one entire class is institutionally appropriated on a stable basis and considered as the reservoir of exchangeable material individualities)” (219). Jadine resists appropriation and her individuality is not exchangeable with that of other black people in the novel. So, while Jadine is phenotypically black, Morrison and Son believe that she has chosen to reject the behaviors they assume black people naturally have.

Jadine: A Culturally Alienated Character

The acceptance of stereotypical images of authentic blackness leads to the exclusion of blacks who do not fit the stereotype and is not strategic because it ultimately de-unifies the community. In the documentary *Black Isn’t* activist Barbara Smith provides an example of how the practice of excluding blacks who do not conform to stereotypes of what blackness “should be” can hurt black liberation struggles: “I was very committed to the Civil Rights Movement, but I was constantly getting the message that I was not black enough. You know how they did that

back in those days, they probably still do. I was not black enough because I was at an elite school, I was not black enough because, I spoke, you know, fairly standard English.” Since, Smith did not fit the image of what a black activist should be, she was excluded from spaces where she could have helped the struggle. Smith is seen as not black enough precisely because of her education. Education is believed to be the realm of the dominant who Guillaumin claims, “define themselves in relation to the system which is ideologically decreed to be the foundation of the society” (226) which is education, whereas the dominated are essentially defined in relation to nature.

Morrison, Son, and Gideon’s idea of what it means to be black does not allow room for individual subjectivity outside of a set of essentialist stereotypes and alienates women like Jadine and Smith who are just as black as anyone else, but who have had experiences black people do not usually have the opportunities to have and are shaped by those experiences. Jadine spent most of her life in elite boarding schools and universities and has been exposed to parts of culture that Son, Yardman, and even her family have never had the chance to see. However, though Jadine has had privileges and behaviors that are different from most black people, she is still black and is still affected by racism and black oppression. Her own experience of racism is evidenced by her thoughts when she considers marrying a white man: “I guess the person I want to marry is him, but I wonder if the person he wants to marry is me or a black girl” (*TB* 47).

While black people see a woman like Jadine as “less black” because of her behaviors and experiences, she is still seen as black to white people, so she is subject to the same kind of prejudice and fetishization that other black women have to endure and is just as hyper aware of it as they are. She realizes that while she sees Ryke, her prospective fiancée, as a person, he may only see her as possessing racialized identity or as an exotic other. Jadine also recognizes that

even with her education, in the 80s as a black woman in America, her career choices are severely limited: “She always thought she had three choices: marry a dope king or a doctor, model, or teach art at Jackson High. In Europe she thought there might be a fourth choice” (*TB* 225). The narrow opportunities for a woman like her are still, at least in her mind, to be someone’s wife, the object of a white male gaze, or a poor teacher because she is both black and a woman. She thinks that in Europe she has a chance to transcend these identities because racial relations are not as codified there as in the US. While Morrison and Son, reflecting Morrison’s views, think of blackness as an essential quality, it is an identity based on shared experiences of oppression under a marginal system. Jadine is black because she shares those experiences, even though she does not adhere to essentialist ideas of what blackness should be.

Conclusion

In this project I have examined the ways in which Toni Morrison, known as the greatest living American author, reproduces the relations of production in her novel *Tar Baby*. I demonstrated throughout this paper proof of how Morrison's acceptance and promotion of traditional gender roles as well as her essentialist racial politics permeate the novel. Morrison is said to be a revolutionary writer but this novel does not revolutionize power relations but maintains and perpetuates them. I believe my work is important as there is very little criticism on this novel, which most people consider to be Morrison's most political work, and the criticism that is available does not interrogate Morrison's views but only promulgates them. I consider the reason for this lack of investigative criticism is that Morrison writes non-fiction that critiques her own work and has done so many interviews that tell readers how to view her work. I also believe that the naturalization of both gender roles and essential racial difference is so deeply embedded in our culture that it is difficult to root them out, especially when conveyed through Morrison's brilliant prose. But it is increasingly important for us to undermine this kind of ideology, especially as they become more subtle and less explicitly demonstrated in society, because they both support the structures that continue to appropriate women and minority racial groups. I do not believe that Morrison should cease to be a central figure in the canon, but I suggest that critics and readers stop relying on Morrison's own words to supply the only meaning for her fiction. Just as I have found ways to read Jadine that are contrary to Morrison's own views, but are present and available in the work, other readers can look for more politically useful and meaningful ways to see Morrison's novels.

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