

Caught in Tar Baby

Finding Double Meanings/Understandings
through Blackness + Tar + Orishá + Black Magic

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Great Black Novels

A Midterm Expanded Into A Final

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Blackness

My black experience is a trifecta – on a daily basis the *power*, the *beauty* and the *pain* associated with my blackness is center stage. My blackness, my body, my identity is innately political. Through my education I am constantly thoughtful about ways in which black people in particular are taught to relate to ourselves and how others are taught to relate to our blackness. Education is deeply political, and one of the most impactful moments while in undergrad at California of the Arts was in a color theory class where the politics of *value* were put on center stage.

We were asked to make personal associations to different colors and taught the uses of the values black and white. It was evident to me; one of two black women in that class, that we were not only learning the uses of black and white but hierarchical associations. In the context of the course, *value* meaning the lightness or darkness of a color became replaced with an understanding of societal importance. In that exercise the associations were not intended to be racialized, but for me, a black woman, I couldn't escape the reality that each association meant to my skin, body, and my positionality in society in the United States. The connections students made in that class evidenced that we are taught to align words like black to convey something threatening, brown to dirty and the word white to purity and virtue. These correlations spoke volumes to the racialized sociopolitics of the United States - a state of relations where white-ness is predominant.

Margaret whispers with fright, “Black” at the first sight of Son hiding.¹ The black man is introduced, parting through the blackness of the dark closet. Toni Morrison's novel *Tar Baby* is

¹ Morrison, *Tar Baby*, 79

immensely black, the reader is introduced to the characters through the blackness of the environment and the blackness of the characters. With Sydney's .32 caliber pistol at Son's back. The reader is confronted with a racialized introduction to the black character. In the pages to follow the vernacular that coated the household's thoughts, "nigger", "dope addict ape", "black sperm" are shot into the next scene—seduction: the black seal coat wrapped around Jadies' naked body.² It is only fitting for the two main black characters that they find themselves wrapped in black objects, and black forces becoming entangled together in an attempt at a black love.

Tar

Blackness and tar relate in my mind and bring up images of torture inflicted against black bodies. I think of scenarios like the one in Margaret Walker's historical novel *Jubilee* where a woman dragged from her home by three white men,

“They poured hot tar all over her and she is just blistered from head to foot. Then they covered her with chicken feathers, and just ain't no ways to help her at all. Even if you gits the cold tar off without tearing off her skin and her flesh she still burdened black underneath it.”³

The anxiety around blackness— anti blackness— is mediated throughout the novel *Tar Baby*. Toni Morrison is on to something with the preface to her novel being her memory of the traditional American story of Br'er Rabbit. Alike the tar baby, there's tension, a stickiness to the relationships of black bodies. Morrison pictures in *Tar Baby* the real life tension between black bodies and white bodies, black men and black women, and afro-caribbean culture and western

² Morrison, *Tar Baby*, 83,87,86

³ Walker, *Jubilee*, 366

culture. *Blackness is sticky*, it attracts the masses and the audience becomes attached. Stuck in its allure, it is beauty, and it's encompassing. The texture of the tar baby can also be understood as what one tries to pull itself from. The practice of distancing oneself from blackness is historical. While the masses love to consume what is black, anti blackness is evidenced in a global social treatment of those that are darker skinned. Blackness is seen as dangerous, and the allure then becomes spectacle, and the regard transforms into one of disgust and distrust. As a reader we see this in Son's introduction to L'Arbe de la Croix house. His character doesn't escape the politics of his blackness when he is found in the house, nor as he becomes a part of the household.

Valerian the head of the house is captivated by Son. There's a mystique about Son and Valerian's fascination of his being is comparable to the awe and therefore objectification black bodies receive. Valerian is less interested in who Son is but rather entertained by the intrusion. While at first the rest of those in the house: Margret, Jadine, Ondine, and Sydney are less amused and rather cautious of Son. For them he embodies blackness in the way I relate blackness and tar: violent, sticky, distrustful, and dangerously interesting.

Africa

The most interesting, conquered, consumed, dangerous and black places on earth— Africa. African American literature that is connected to the caribbean is contextualized by Africa. Morrison alludes to the products of colonialism across the novel *Tar Baby*, allowing the environment to personify the emotional and cultural histories made present. Morrison's work is nuanced in her way of intertwining setting and history. The novel opens with a scene that could be straight out of a fugitive slave narrative. "He swung one leg over the railing, hesitated and

considered diving headfirst, but, trusting what his feet could tell him more than what his hands could, changed his mind and simply stepped away from the ship.”⁴ One could easily relate the character going overboard to the history of black bodies choosing to jump off slave ships during the middle passage; a choice made out of desperation and simultaneous comfort in greeting death over the abuse of Caribbean and American slavery.

Of the 11 million Africans that were transported against their will those that survived the journey brought with them the culture and vast spiritual traditions, as well as a relationship to water that echoes through the consciousness of black folk across generations like my own.⁵ This history is why black bodies of the African diaspora have a particular relationship to water. The ocean acts not only as a symbolic site of trauma, in relation to the transatlantic slave trade, and continued postcolonial migration of black and brown bodies, but also a point of transformation through practices similar to the vein of a baptism. Morrison positions the environment in the novel as not only a driving force but personifies nature with an agency that shifts a general model of human personification and environmental objectification. She guides the reader through the novel with the spirit of the environment right alongside the black characters. Water becomes a central character, and a trope that connects to a lineage of symbolism between black bodies and water.

Borrowing the language of Christine Sharpe who manages to grapple vast complexities of being *in the wake*, and I look at Son as this figure that is hooked much like a sea creature caught

⁴ Morrison, 3

⁵ Segal, 368

in the wake – of the ocean, of slavery, *awake* but trapped⁶. The image of Son receding beneath water and being trapped in the wake cycles thematically from beginning to the end of *Tar Baby*.

Orishás

For her readers knowledgeable on vodun, yoruba, or santeria, the location of a caribbean island especially in a postmodern context paints a scene that considers the Orishás⁷. Just in the first few pages, we are introduced to “the water-lady”, with her “hand like an insistent woman” tug, and turn Son through the water allowing him to float on in moments, where we encounter visual moments like the sun moving into a blood tinted ocean like a fresh heart.⁸ The metaphor of a woman water spirit in the form of an Orisha is, Yemayá⁹. It’s evident that Son jumps off the boat towards life rather than death, in this tradition, Yemayá challenges him and in the symbolism of water, rebirths him only to let him go where she pleased – beside a boat crewed by women. Morrison doesn’t explicitly claim the Orishás, rather utilizes the symbolism of water and relationships to women throughout the novel. Water is female, and like in Morrison’s memory of the Br’er Rabbit tale, the Tar Baby is female as well. She is what traps and challenges.

He is a child of Yemayá, conditioned with all of the oceans historical black deaths, and in this novel becomes hooked and resistant to the current he is being pulled within. There's an

⁶ Borrowing from Christina Sharpe’s book, *In The Wake: On Blackness and Being*, that deals with black experiences through the “orthography of the wake”; wake of slave ship, the wake of mourning the dead, in the wake of being “woke”, and/or aware. A theme I will later refer back to.

⁷ Vodun, Yoruba, Santeria, are all spiritual and religious practices, originated out of West Africa and were spread across the caribbean and the Americas through the migration of Africans, with a belief in main deities (Orishá) that oversee forces of nature among many other spirits.

⁸ Morrison, *Tar Baby*, 4

⁹ Yemayá (spanish), also known as Yemanjá (portuguese), Yemoja (Yoruba), Mami Wata (Creole), is the Orishá goddess of all forms of water, the ocean, rivers, etc. She is one of the most powerful Orishá and is also symbolic of creation, birth, and womanhood.

intimacy, that water requires, one has to be one with the water in order to survive, and when in a body of water the black body innately becomes in relationship to a history of black bodies that were within the water. Son is wrapped in the “pitch-black sea”, in the beginning and later in the novel dips into the calm of his tub water once back in the United States.¹⁰ Via the water Son is brought to location, and through memory over again. With love, Yemaya guides Son, cupping him in the palm of her hand.¹¹

Son is not the only one challenged by the orishás, Jadine’s sense of identity is constantly being disputed. She represents black womanhood engrossed in eurocentricity, uninterested in claiming the racial pressures of her blackness, or the untamed nature of the island and the other black people residing. Jadine can be perceived as the tar baby, the trickster, the unattainable allure that ironically blackness is. But in the Br’er Rabbit tale, the mind behind the manipulation is not the tar baby but rather the farmer, who is insistent on using the tar baby as object and tool for his capture. Jadine navigates the world through her beauty, a resource she is traditionally gifted with but also conditioned to believe will ease her problems. Her role symbolizes the way in which blackness again can be alluring but dangerous. Dangerous for Son because he gets engrossed in her, but more so frightening for herself, because she doesn’t face her black identity and it is something she like Son cannot shake no matter where she runs to.

Even across the Atlantic in Paris, the orisha follow Jadine. She meets the woman in yellow and must confront all of her tensions surrounding African heritage and her black womanhood that the woman embodies. “The skin like tar against the canary yellow dress? The woman walked down the aisle as through her many colored sandals were pressing gold tracks on

¹⁰ Morrison, *Tar Baby*, 4, 221

¹¹ Morrison, *Tar Baby*, 5

the floor.”¹²The people in the grocery had their eyes on the woman in yellow, and in that moment Jadine had to process the possibility that blackness holds beauty and leaves it’s “gold” trace. The woman was beauty— black as can be, dressed brightly, in yellow and vibrant in all ways.

Representations of yellow in vodoun are commonly associated with Oshún, another female orishá. The woman in yellow embodies something almost magical and is an image caught in Jadine’s mind. Oshún like Yemayá, is of water, what challenges but also nourishes. Oshún is oriented around love and healing, and I grew up understanding her to be one of the most beautiful orisha. This inclusion of a black woman owning her black beauty, wrapped in the dress of a goddess representing love and healing is important in understanding what Jadine lacks. She has yet to resolve her love life, and is so consumed in her eurocentric notions of beauty she isn’t able to heal and own what troubles her about her blackness.

Black Magic

Whether the magical realism Morrison embellishes the Caribbean land with is symbolic, over the top or not, the cultural and spiritual is palpable. The vodoun can be perceived as mumbo jumbo or fantasy, however I have reverence for the practice even in the dismissal because the power isn’t able to be touched. I relate it to black joy, black power— a form of black magic (however one wants to understand that): something encompassing of vibrancy and only for us.

Son alike the environment, alike the ocean, that he could not fight against, cannot be tamed, even as much as Jadine tries, Jadine is less interested in the allure of the islands forces, while we see Son, embrace and become carried *into* the wake. As consumed as Son becomes

¹² Morrison, *Tar Baby*, 45

with Jadine, even as he looks at her water is brought into his memory, “He looked at her face in the mirror and was reminded of days at sea when water looked like the sky.”¹³ She is beauty for him but a beauty deeply connected to the land. Son’s character becomes stuck. What is he is stuck to become less and less apparent as the symbol of tar shifts. Son may be trapped in the tar of his tar baby the beautiful Jadine or maybe he is attached to the magical land embedded with a deep historical spirituality. Regardless, once the two of them have left the island Son is still drawn back and then hopelessly back to his Jadine. A battle Morrison does not fully resolve. Without his beautiful tar baby to hold him together, he is still searching, lost to the mythical, lost to the herds men, running across the beauty and through the magic of the island where “the trees stepped back a bit... to make the way easier for a certain kind of man.”¹⁴ Jadine is left on an unresolved journey of her own, in which I’d like to believe her departure from the island will be a start of her tapping into her black magic (*beauty*).

Toni Morrison has been able to find an esoteric voice through literature that has the ability to relate to our communities and relate to the ancestors (orishas) and heed respect to the intersections of African descended peoples. Morrison’s choice to not resolve the novel connects to my understanding that black communities may not be able reach a singular resolve considering the deep roots in pain and trauma.

Ashé

¹³ Morrison, *Tar Baby*, 230

¹⁴ Morrison, *Tar Baby*, 306