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THE UNKOWABLE NEGRO: BLACK HAIR (AND -NESS) DECOLONIZED

by Jevohn Newsome

When I landed on Planet Oakland during the Black Panther Party's fiftieth anniversary, I decided not to cut my hair.[1] I'd just arrived from my hometown—Inglewood, Los Angeles—where my Guyanese mother routinely raised her brow. Every day she'd say my afro looked dirt dry, in need of moisture, conditioners and oils. But even my freshly washed shea scented frizz couldn't impress her. I'd always comb out the curls and she hated that. She'd become a disciple of the *new* natural movement, embodying the gospel as seen on YouTube tutorials where loose curls are queen and edges must remain laid. Reminds me of how my grandmother always preferred her hair permed for as long as photographs could tell. Her short brown hair, semi-salted now, combed back, chemically straight, and not a strand out of line. Natural or not, neither her nor my mom knew why they preferred their hair tame. But on Planet Oakland, I decided to let my hair do its thing. After all, tameness is a tool of white supremacy.

The perception of black hair—and by extension, black people—as a wilderness designed to be tamed, inspired the colonizer's most nefarious invention: civility. Toni Morrison's *Tar*

[1] A reference to Ishmael Reed's "Welcome to Planet Oakland." New York Times. August 29, 2003. https://www.nytimes.com/2003/08/29/opinion/welcome-to-planet-oakland.html

Baby explores this machination of imperialism by dissecting the psyche of a bi-racial American named Jadine, an artist/model yearning to escape her blackest parts. She doesn't love her hair. When compared to black actress Marpessa Dawn, Jadine defensively lashes out. Even though Dawn's hair flows like rippling rivers in the wind, Jadine instead envies the "stringy" hair of her blue-eyed patron's wife, Margaret Street, [2] "The [so-called] Principal Beauty of Maine."[3] While Jadine claims to reject black or white labels, like Jean Toomer and O.J. Simpson once did, her perspective manifests as a fear of what 'black' signifies under a colonial context.

Margaret Street, despite her trailer-park-past, will always fit the blue-eyed, loose-haired, standard of civility, making her transition into wealth relatively seamless, only complicated by the learning curve of upper class culture.[4] Ondine, the mammy-esque house servant, can only imitate her way into civility through respectability and servitude. To do so, she must fight the connotation of her blackest traits, her "machete-hair,"[5] and assimilate to whiteness. Failing to fit the mold might leave her expendable like Yardman, the anonymous field servant. Parallel to Jadine's uncritical claim that black art is derivative of European art, that "Picasso is better than an Itumba mask,"[6] the colonizer uses perceived civility to rig historical narratives; to claim the civilized is universally "better" than what is deemed 'primitive'. Therefore, civility rebrands black and brown people as the uncivilized who must chase the colonizer's cruel eyes to get by. When Jadine meets Son, the black stranger hiding in the Street estate, she derides his freeform dreads as "Wild, aggressive, vicious hair that needed to be put in jail…reform-school hair. Mau

[2] Toni Morrison, *Tar Baby* (New York: Random House, 1981), 64
[3] Ibid., 11
[4] Ibid., 55-58
[5] Ibid., 111
[6] Ibid., 74

Mau, Attica, chain-gang hair."[7] By this association, Son is the signified savage. Only after he shaves his locks does she consider him a beautiful man.

Civility is a symbolic front, and the U.S. government coats itself in it while rebranding Latin Americans as illegals, Muslim Americans as terrorists, black Americans as criminals—Cowboys and Indians. Never mind the U.S. backed atrocities at El Mozote; [8] never mind U.S. drone strikes terraforming Syrian families; never mind the civilian slaughter in the streets by police, violent setback after setback dealt against black and brown people within and without our gates. But U.S. citizens, convinced they never need to ask or explore *why*, instead pledge to the flag—the symbol of self-proclaimed civilizers—and say the savages done did it to themselves. Who are the real savages?

Civility is a public relations game and thus, it's only when Margaret Street's outed as an abusive mother that her façade of being the white-thus-innocent fair maiden dissolves with shock. [9] Yet, we're unsurprised by Son's violent characterization, straight out of the Fox News segments we're so familiar with. His "Mau Mau" hair instead of symbolizing colonial independence and liberation, is rebranded as a wilderness untamed.

Morrison writes, "Black people's hair, in any case, was definitely alive."[10] Admittedly, what Jadine feared, I also once feared. My mother and grandmother have feared it too—the fear of lacking control. To say our hair lives is to also attest to the war between kinks and combs, between identities designated to us and identities we choose, those identities we dream up and invent. Taming our hair, even with all-natural-anti-frizz-leave-in-conditioner, still gives in to the

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[7] Ibid., 113
[8] In 1992, the Argentinian Forensic Anthropology Team exhumed the remains of women and children gunned down by the Right-Wing Salvadorian Army, who received arms and training from the United States, during the Salvadorian Civil War in 1980. For more on El Mozote, see Mark Danner's "The Truth of El Mozote" and *The Massacre at El Mozote*.
[9] Morrison, 207
[10] Ibid., 132

visual language of civility. There's a reason the *new* natural hair movement doesn't advocate for black Americans to coat their braids in red clay like the Himba people. We're still playing by the rules of civility, of moderate modern life, avoiding the radically indigenous.

My Guyanese mother doesn't consider herself African, simply black. Yet Guyana, that South American colony, shares souls with the Caribbean, Isle de Chevaliers, the setting of *Tar Baby*—sites of African captivity, forced labor, and rebellions both minor or major. Morrison's supernatural metaphors, describing black hair as a living natural force, serve as a challenge to the colonial context. Jadine's hair springs up "into a rain cloud" in the island fog, akin to the rain Orisha of the Yoruba pantheon, Obarese.[11] Son's beard looks "tangled and crackled like lightning," akin to the thunder Orisha, Shango. His dreads like "the crown of a deciduous tree," like the home of Isle de Chevaliers' rumored swamp women who watch the living from high branches.[12] Son and Jadine are deeply rooted in the sublime spiritual energy that still conquers the island regardless of imperial imposition. The sands of the beach that blinded slaves still tell its story.[13] The equestrian ghosts that haunt the hills still race through the inhabitants' mind. Nature on Isle de Chevaliers carries with it an ancestry that cannot be denied nor detained; thus, Son returns to the hills to become one with the island's mythos.[14]

In the words of L.A. rapper, Busdriver, "the 'nigga' is the unknowable." To Driver's point, black Americans, boogey-manned and stripped of cultural context, have become a "mislabeled parcel of electricity" even amongst ourselves. [15] When I arrived on Planet Oakland, the it's-all-love kind of love hit the air. The Line 72 riders gave me laughs and lessons. The

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[11] Ibid., 64
[12] Ibid., 132
[13] Ibid., 152 "the blind race"
[14] Ibid., 306
[15] From the song "Species of Property" off the album *Thumbs* (Temporary/Whatever, 2015). At the end of the track, Busdriver recites a poem he wrote for Baltimore, after the murder of Michael Brown, in which the speaker reflects on his son asking, "what a nigger was".

passersby signaled with fists in the air and with familial smiles that my hair, semi-dry or not, symbolizes unity. Symbolizes the seeds sown by the very Black Panther Party for Self Defense, sabotaged by the FBI, but living on through the impact of Sarah Webster Fabio's Black Studies, now Ethnic Studies, and the lineage of La Raza's historic walk outs, now the erupting voices of a generation of future thinkers, educators, historians, and activists. Old professors taught me about Kerouac and the white Beats but never Baraka and the Black Arts. The Civil Rights Era led to integrated neighborhoods but not integrated curriculums. And so, if our histories are up against a legacy of obscurity, of crude summary, of such rigid hegemony, then this is our call to action: It's up to us to conjure up the counternarratives.