RESISTANCE AND/IN DIASPORA: THE CARIBBEAN PRESENCE IN TONI MORRISON’S TAR BABY

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ABSTRACT

This thesis analyses the elements of the Caribbean in Toni Morrison’s novel Tar Baby. Those elements are found and studied in the novel’s setting and in the characters of Afro Caribbean origin and their relationships with African American characters. In this way, this thesis delves into the way in which Morrison’s novel engages the concept of Black Diaspora identity, its limits and possibilities. The themes of nationalism, capitalism and neo-colonialism surface as points of tension that simultaneously prevent and permit forms of kinship between nationally diverse members of the African diaspora. I argue that the fluid intersections of members of the African Diaspora in the West develop into forms of resistance against hegemonic, dominant Euro American paradigms. Indeed, Morrison reveals there is space for a Afro diasporic community in the West, in the sense that the contact between dissimilar members of this community results in productive modes of resistance against domination and tyranny. The reading of Tar Baby that elicits these views is informed by Paul Gilroy’s concept of The Black Atlantic and Antonio Benitez Rojo’s description of Caribbeanness in The Repeating Island.
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Unlike any other novel in her repertoire, Toni Morrison’s *Tar Baby* deeply engages the concept of Black Diaspora identity. In many ways, it constitutes an essay over the limits and possibilities of Diaspora as a route to be traversed by black individuals in their quest for a collective and historical identity in the contemporary western world. An essential part of this proposition emerges from close observation of the author’s unique choice of setting: this is the only one of her novels that is largely set outside of the United States. In doing so, the themes of nationalism, capitalism and neo-colonialism surface as points of tension that simultaneously prevent and permit forms of kinship between nationally diverse members of the African diaspora. Therefore, Morrison’s decision to place Son and Jadine’s struggles with their black identity in the Caribbean merits closer attention than scholars and critics have given it thus far. Indeed, Morrison’s choice of the Caribbean as setting and her inclusion of secondary Afro-Caribbean characters is essential to what I believe is one of the novel’s messages: that the fluid intersections of members of the African Diaspora in the West develop into forms of resistance against hegemonic, dominant Euro American paradigms. Indeed, Morrison reveals there is space for a black diasporic community in the West, in the sense that the contact between dissimilar members of this community results in productive modes of resistance against domination and tyranny.¹

¹ In theorizing the concept of the Black Atlantic, Gilroy uses the terms Black Diaspora and Black Diasporic to describe the presence of peoples of African descent on both sides of the Atlantic, namely Europe, Africa, America and the Caribbean. My analysis uses his concept of the Black Atlantic as a polyphonic unit that may encompass these peoples in their resistance to a EuroAmerican system that subjugates peoples of color. However, I have limited the scope of my reading to the presence of members of this diaspora in the Americas, more precisely the U. S and the Caribbean. Therefore, I use the term African Diaspora in the West to describe these communities.
To speak of something multiple and hybrid that in its multiplicity and hybridity opposes a EuroAmerican order of linearity and boundaries is, of course, to engage Paul Gilroy’s concept of the black Atlantic. In his book *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness*, Gilroy calls for new conceptual systems that abandon the Cartesian, linear, binary systems of EuroAmerican paradigms. Paradigms that, as Gilroy notes, created the binaries and classifications that avowed the exploitation of peoples of color through slavery and colonialism. As a part of this project, Gilroy indicts the Africentric movements that revel in a mythic African tradition and civilization supposedly anterior and superior to western civilization. He believes that Africentricity reproduces the master narrative, precisely because it relies in the chronological linearity and binary classification of EuroAmerican paradigms. Gilroy explains,

The Africentric movement appears to rely upon a linear idea of time that is enclosed at each end by the grand narrative of African advancement. This is momentarily interrupted by slavery and colonialism, which make no substantial impact upon African tradition or the capacity of Black intellectuals to align themselves with it. The anteriority of African civilization to western civilization is asserted not in order to escape this linear time but in order to claim it and subordinate it without even attempting to change the terms themselves. (191)

Moreover, Gilroy denounces how the unreflective adoption of such conceptualizations of time and history derive from systems of thought in which race and ethnicity are made to correspond with national and cultural identity. Such classifications and correspondences, typical of EuroAmerican thought, impede the conception of a black diasporic community. Gilroy explains how, despite the fact that the conceptual correspondence or race and ethnicity to national and cultural identity have served as one of the basis of racist and oppressive systems,
many black British and American academicians have continued to operate under those assumptions. To counteract this dynamic he proposes, “In opposition to both of these nationalist or ethnically absolute approaches, I want to develop the suggestion that cultural historians could take the Atlantic as one single, complex unit of analysis in their discussions of the modern world and use it to produce an explicitly transnational and intercultural perspective” (15). Moreover, Gilroy insists “that much of the precious intellectual legacy claimed by African-American intellectuals as the substance of their particularity is in fact only partly their absolute ethnic property” (15). Therefore, his proposal of the black Atlantic as a unit of analysis – a unit that is rhizomorphic, fractal, transcultural and international (40) – resists the correspondence of race and ethnicity to national and cultural identity which opens new horizons for the search of identity for the peoples of the black Diaspora and, what is more important, recovers and reifies the historical and contemporary influence of some black communities over the others: “the idea of the black Atlantic can be used to show that there are other claims to it [the intellectual legacy claimed by African American intellectuals] which can be based on the structure of the African diaspora into the Western hemisphere” (Gilroy 15).

Gilroy’s propositions can surely enrich one’s reading of a novel like *Tar Baby* which in many instances evaluates and problematizes African American identity by interrogating the intersectional identities of nationally diverse black characters. Indeed, an analysis of the novel through the lens of Gilroy’s concept of the black Atlantic would bring matters of ethnicity, nationality and international relations to the front of the analysis. Moreover, because the concept of a black diasporic culture is presented in *Tar Baby* through the interaction of Afro Caribbean and African American characters in a Caribbean setting, my approximation to the novel has also been informed by Antonio Benitez Rojo’s *The Repeating Island*. Like Gilroy, Benítez Rojo
explores possibilities of a multiple, hybrid and stereophonic unit in which peoples of the African diaspora can find their home in the West.

*The Repeating Island* rejects the simplistic approach of syncretism which would reduce Diaspora to the mere addition of one culture/ethnicity to another. Instead, it embraces the vertiginous concept of a space of order in chaos, that accepts hybrid and even contradicting existences. That space is the Caribbean, as a physical space but mostly as a concept. In the book, Benítez Rojo portrays the Caribbean (as space and as text) as a multiple (as opposed to syncretic) space that is forever escaping a rigid definition and which defies categories of space and time:

the Caribbean is not a common archipelago but a meta-archipelago, and as meta archipelago it has the virtue of having neither a boundary nor a center […] if someone needed a visual explanation, a graphic picture of what that is, I would refer him to the spiral chaos of the Milky Way, the unpredictable flux of transformative plasma that spins calmly in our globe’s firmament, that sketches in an ‘other’ shape that keeps changing, with some objects born to light while others disappear into the womb of darkness; change, transit, return, fluxes of sidereal matter. (4)

Benitez Rojo’s “spiral chaos” comes to mind as *Tar Baby’s* protagonist, Son, (and by extension the reader, too) enter the Caribbean by “whirling in a vortex” (*TB* 4).

One could say that Benitez Rojo’s rereading of the Caribbean attempts to “change the terms” of EuroAmerican thought in the way that Gilroy argues that Africentric approaches do not do so. Pointing in that direction, Benitez Rojo states that “The peoples of the sea, or better, the Peoples of the Sea proliferate incessantly while differentiating themselves from one another,
travelling together toward the infinite. Certain dynamics of their culture also repeat and sail through the seas of time without reaching anywhere” (16).

A reading of *Tar Baby* informed by *The Black Atlantic* and *The Repeating Island* would see the Caribbean emerge as the space in which the linearity and categorization that are characteristic of EuroAmerican thought are deconstructed, inverted and resignified. In short, the Caribbean could offer a space in which “European particularism no longer dictate absolute, universal standards for human achievement, norms and aspirations” (Gilroy 8), where the scientific, rational discourses of modernity that justified slavery encounter a potent counter-discourse –that of magic and myth– whose power and justification rely precisely in its ahistoricity.

To look at myth and “reality” (or what is thus considered by EuroAmerican standards) as discourses that may interplay in terms of equality and which simultaneously converge and diverge, may open the interpretations of *Tar Baby*’s treatment of black identity. For instance, Yogita Goyal is one of the few scholars who has studied this novel with some reference to the Caribbean and the only one I have encountered so far who focuses on the limits and possibilities of a diasporic identity in the novel. According to Goyal, Morrison engages the topic on two different and separate levels. Goyal describes, first, a realist approach in which the relationships between members of the African Diaspora are necessarily fractured, characterized by difference, disagreement and miscommunication (408). Then, she argues that Morrison does consider the possibility of a diasporic identity but only to conclude that it can only exist in the form of mythic memory. She writes:

Morrison's resolution creates an impossible tension between realism and myth, between politics and fantasy, suggesting that diaspora as a viable option can only
be represented in mythic terms and not with recognizable political content.

Riddled with contradictions, diaspora can accordingly exist only as an aesthetic repository for the contemporary black writer (410).

Goyal’s reading of diaspora in *Tar Baby* as portrayed in a realist vs. mythic instance disregards the possibility of a diaspora with a “recognizable political content”, relegating diaspora identity to an exclusively aesthetic pursuit. On the contrary, by reading the novel along with Gilroy and Benitez Rojo’s propositions, I contend that in *Tar Baby’s* Caribbean the real and the mythic become inseparable; the binary or confrontation between both instances doesn’t exist. Therefore, the representation of diaspora that Goyal recognizes as portrayed in “mythic terms” is very much real and very much political. In fact, as I will argue throughout this paper, the mythical affects the real: the diaspora that exists in the mythical arena translates into recognizable political content, in the form of resistance and liberation.

Indeed, in Benitez Rojo’s Caribbean, “unlike what happens in the West, scientific knowledge and traditional knowledge coexist as differences within the same system” (17). What is more, he insists that “the most perceptible movement that the Caribbean text carries out is, paradoxically, the one that tends to project it outside its generic ambit: metonymic displacement toward scenic, ritual, and mythological forms, that is, towards machines that specialize in producing bifurcations and paradoxes” (25). Therefore, his reading of the Caribbean, as a place and as a text, not only accepts difference, contradiction, “bifurcations and paradoxes” but it considers them constitutive of the ‘Caribbeanness’ of the text. Therefore, a reading of *Tar Baby* informed by these views would allow the reader to understand the multiplicity, hybridity and layers of meaning that the novel presents as more than mere contradictions or narrative openness and, instead, read in them the possibility of an order in/of Chaos, of a multiplicity that does not
reduce or undermine any of its components, of hybridity in a “single, complex unit” (Gilroy 15). In other words, these approaches would allow the reader to view the differences between Afro-Caribbean and African American characters as fractured and characterized by disagreement and difference without this being an impediment to also consider the “recognizable political content” when these characters are brought to each others’ presence.

In her book *Toni Morrison and the Idea of Africa*, LaVinia Jennings explores Morrison’s treatment of ancestors in her works. She treats *Song of Solomon*, *Tar Baby* and *Beloved* as “a trilogy that contains literal and symbolic, physical and metaphysical delineations of ancestorship that have traceable West and Central African provenance” (82). Jennings reads the Caribbean in *Tar Baby* as the stepping stone Morrison must traverse between her exploration of African American ancestry in *Song of Solomon* and her homage to the ancestors lost in the Middle Passage in *Beloved*, as she moves regressively in time to map the ancestorship of the New World. Jennings maintains that “island disembarkation signaled not only the end of the Middle Passage but also the end of their national and familial identities” (83). However, she also recognizes that, in addition to being the place in which families where dismembered and the stories of ancestors lost, the Caribbean was the port of entry and continues to be a place of preservation of African ancestral beliefs. Therefore, the Caribbean emerges as a hub for Afro diasporic history and culture, a place where African American characters may go back to retrace an afro diasporic past. As such, in a novel in which African Americans and Afro Caribbean characters meet (or reencounter each other) I have decided to analyze the convergence and divergence of African American characters with the descendants of the ancestors they once were forced to leave behind in the Caribbean islands.
To read the Caribbean of *Tar Baby* in Benitez Rojo’s terms and under the light of Gilroy’s concept of the black Atlantic is to look at Morrison’s movement back to the Caribbean as more than a regression in time— which requires the linearity of the EuroAmerican concept that both Gilroy and Benitez Rojo want to counteract— or as a simple mythologizing of the past— which requires the split between myth and reality that Benitez Rojo argues is absent in the Caribbean. If anything, to read *Tar Baby* with the concepts of chaos, multiplicity and hybridity that Benitez Rojo and Gilroy advance, is to read the rememory of the Caribbean. Morrison’s concept of rememory as theorized in her novel *Beloved* resignifies the duality of a shared history of pain and suffering as a source of solace and dignity. She writes: “If a house burns down, it's gone, but the place--the picture of it--stays, and not just in my rememory, but out there, in the world. What I remember is a picture floating around out there outside my head. I mean, even if I don't think it, even if I die, the picture of what I did, or knew, or saw is still out there. Right in the place where it happened” (*Beloved*). The Caribbean in Morrison’s *Tar Baby* is, I posit, such ahistorical, ever present rememory that all members of the black Diaspora can make available to themselves, and adopt it as part of their own history and tradition, if they, as I argue Son does, choose to do so. To embrace that rememory of the Caribbean is, therefore, to access the space of shared resistance that the Caribbean makes available to all.

Rememory – as reification of the history of slavery as a source of identification and dignity– is a central part of Morrison’s approximation to the neoslave narrative. While *Tar Baby* does not explicitly contain this type of narrative, it does use the setting in the Caribbean and multiple references to the slave plantation system – which operated both in the United States and

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2 Like Lavinia Jennings does in *Toni Morrison and the Idea of Africa*, chapter 4: “Kanda: Living elders, the ancestral presence and the ancestor as foundation.”

3 Like Goyita Goyal suggests in her article, previously mentioned here, “The Gender of Diaspora in Toni Morrison’s *Tar Baby.*”
in the Caribbean – to reference slavery and colonization as a past that is shared by Afro diasporic characters. To evaluate the possibilities of an Afro diasporic community in *Tar Baby* would require to evaluate the connection of the novel to this this liberatory project, which would reify the significance of slavery for all Afro diasporic communities in the West.

In the introduction to her study on contemporary Black women’s writing, Angelyn Mitchell expands the understanding of neoslave narratives\(^4\) to help readers think more expansively about the liberatory stakes involved in them. She argues that “the same details are told about slavery in the twentieth century narrative; its urgencies, however, have perdured and now take the form of contemporary communications about ways contemporary readers can free themselves from the pain and shame that are residual of the legacy of slavery in the United States” (3). I propose here that *Tar Baby* performs a liberatory function that extends not only to the descendants of slaves in the United States but which attempts to include other members of the African diaspora in the West. As African America and the African Caribbean come together through the setting and the characters in the novel, even if and when the chasms between these black cultures is highlighted, the reader comes to discern that being in each other’s presence results in enhanced forms of resistance for the characters.

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\(^4\) These were initially defined by Bernard W. Bell as “residually oral, modern narratives of escape from bondage to freedom.”
I. THE CARIBBEAN AS SETTING: A SPACE OF/FOR RESISTANCE

A close reading of the Caribbean setting that Morrison crafts for the novel reveals that its architecture, composition and characteristics foreground a thematic of silent, covert yet insurrect resistance from the subordinate against the master. Moreover, the Caribbean nature, as shown above, interacts with the African American characters in ways that enhance their fitness to survive and resist in a world dominated by a white master. The setting, thus, contains reading keys with which to interpret the relationships that develop between African American and Afro Caribbean characters; to find in it the possibilities that emerge from the encounter between diverse members of the African diaspora in the Americas. Of course, without disregarding Morrison’s full awareness that such possibilities are limited by a context dominated by neocolonialism/U.S imperialism and closed concepts of nationality and ethnicity.

In *Tar Baby*, as Son finally returns to the U.S.A, his country of birth, and finds himself in New York City, the quintessential center of mainstream American culture, his heretofore impetus to fight the system and paradigms that Valerian Street represents weakens. Morrison narrates:

He stood up searching for the anger that had shaken him so that first time and again on Christmas Day. [...] He needed the blood-clot heads of the bougainvillea, the simple green rage of the avocado, the fruit of the banana trees puffed up and stiff like the fingers of gouty kings. Here, prestressed concrete and steel contained anger, folded it back on itself to become a craving for things rather than vengeance (*TB* 221).

His waning strength to resist is presented as a direct consequence of the environment he now inhabits or, more precisely, the fact that he is no longer in the presence of natural elements that
embody power, rage and defiance. Thus, as the novel comes to a close, the reader is prompted back to a revision of the Caribbean landscape as a repository of insurrection and an element that influences the characters’ efforts to resist.

The conception of the Caribbean nature as a resisting force rests parallel between European colonialism and the U.S neo-colonialism/imperialism that the novel portrays. The Caribbean island that is the novel’s setting, with its natural elements, emerges as the container of ahistorical, traditional resisting energies and insurrectional vibrations that continue to be present as successive models of tyranny and domination are imposed over the island. The characters, the African American ones, respond and are affected by this energies in ways that I explore below.

1. Narratives of Domination and Counter-Narratives of Resistance

The novel takes place in Dominique, a fictional archipelago nation in the Caribbean. Isle des Chevaliers, a small island in this archipelago has been bought and occupied by Valerian Street, a white American magnate and the former owner of a candy empire, who has made it his winter house. Here he lives with his wife, Margaret, and his black servants, Sydney and Ondine. Jadine, the servants’ niece, who has been educated in Paris at Valerian’s expense, is visiting them all at the time of the narration. In setting the novel thusly, Morrison evokes the colonizing movement of Eurocentric, capitalistic cultures and peoples into non Euro-American territories in at least three different historical moments: 19th-century European colonialism in “the New World,” 20th-century European colonialism in Africa and contemporary American neo-colonialist/imperialist exploitation of resources in the Global South. By so doing, Morrison presents an intricate system of relations and interwoven narratives of domination.
Isle des Chevaliers, the novel’s primary setting, is portrayed from the beginning as a disrupted natural paradise. The novel begins with the destruction and displacement of endemic nature by man-made structures. This confrontation evokes a colonial enterprise in which a Eurocentric system barges into a natural, mythical and magical space and uproots its indigenous populations, a theme that is furthered by the reference to a workforce “imported from Haiti” (9). The reference to the displaced and uprooted Haitian laborers as an “imported” workforce and the reference to the exploitation of natural resources with no regard for anything but business and profit, sets the tone for the history of colonialism, slavery, neo-colonialism and U.S imperialism that the novel presents, explores and complicates.

Furthermore, the allusion to Haiti is noteworthy because it emphasizes the connection between the appropriation of this space by the American magnate, Valerian Street, and the colonization and exploitation of the Caribbean by European powers from the “discovery” of the New World onwards. Of course, it is no coincidence that Valerian’s fortune comes from candy manufactured with sugarcane extracted from the Caribbean in a fashion that parallels the sugar trade conducted by European powers in the Caribbean during Transatlantic slavery, characterized by the indiscriminate exploitation of colonized land and the use of slave labor. In this way, the shared history of the U.S and the Caribbean with regards to slavery and the plantation system is illustrated while at the same time showing that the U.S, as a more recent world power, continues to exploit people and resources in the Global South.

French colonialism, thus, appears as a synecdoche for European colonialism. Dominique is clearly a former 19th-century French colony – locals speak French, like in Haiti, the place where the laborers who build Valerian’s house lived. This trope is furthered through the presence of Dr. Michelin, a French dentist who has been expelled from Algeria and has come to live in
Dominique, where he refuses to repair the teeth of Black locals. Therefore, through the reference to Algeria and the race and colonial relations in that country, this character introduces the narrative of 20\textsuperscript{th}-century European colonialism in Africa. Moreover, the doctor’s friendship with Valerian Street establishes a parallel between them as white colonizers. They are thus described: “Both felt as though they had been run out of their homes. Robert Michelin expelled from Algeria; Valerian Street voluntarily exiled from Philadelphia” (TB 15). In this manner, the conquest and colonization of the “New World”, 20\textsuperscript{th}-century colonialism in Africa and contemporary US imperialism in the Caribbean conflate, denouncing the pervasive Euro-American cultural, social and economic system that justifies and permits these enterprises of domination and exploitation that successively and omnipresently – in the past and in the present, in the U.S, Africa and the Caribbean – have warranted the oppression and abuse of communities of color.

As all of the above shows, Morrison creates a space in which several narratives of domination – European colonialism in Africa and the Americas and contemporary U.S imperialism/neocolonialism – and the relationships between those narratives are evoked and made evident. What is more, the convergence of these narratives in one space reveals the many forms in which domination has been exercised not only from the Global North to the Global South but primordially how it has characteristically oppressed peoples of color, especially black populations. Indeed, all instances of domination that the novel evokes have used racism as the quintessential tool for the domination of a community of European descent over other communities.

What is central to this analysis is that in \textit{Tar Baby}, such narratives of domination are confronted by counter-narratives of resistance. In fact, the very construction of a setting in the
Caribbean contains the main indicators of a confrontation between a native culture of peoples of African descent and an invader community of peoples of European origin. Remarkably, it portrays the resistance to the intruder as a tradition and heritage of Africana cultures the world over. In that way, the setting in which most of the action of the novel takes place signals to what Morrison has identified as the major thing that binds peoples of the African diaspora: “the clear identification of what the enemy forces are, not this person or that person and so on, but the acknowledgment of a way of life dreamed up for us by some other people who are at the moment in power, and knowing the ways in which it can be subverted” (Morrison, An Interview 229). The setting, thus, becomes the ideal space to witness the ways in which the interaction between African America and the African Caribbean results in enhanced forms of resistance against the dominant culture.

In *Tar Baby*, resistance begins with naming practices. Dominique is a fictional place whose name evokes Haiti’s name under French colonial rule: Sainte-Domingue. Interestingly, the name may also recall the island of Dominica which was first colonized by the French and later ceded to the British. In any case, the history of Black peoples in both territories is remarkable: Haiti was liberated from colonial rule through the only successful slave revolt in history to become the first independent South American nation and the only one in the period to have a Black-led government. On the other hand, following the abolition of slavery in the British colonies, Dominica became the first and only British colony in the Caribbean to have a black-controlled legislature in the 19th century. In addition to its name, Dominique also contains the tradition of dignity and resistance in one of its foundational myths. Isle des Chevaliers, an island within the archipelago of Dominique, is populated by black Slaves who went blind at the site of the island, and fled, only to hunt its forests eternally. As I explore later in more detail, those
mythical blind slaves embody a tradition of quiet, insurrectional resistance that is the island’s main characteristic.

Therefore, Morrison’s Dominique, through name and myth, invokes the common history of peoples of the black diaspora in the West, alluding not only to the abuse they have historically and recently endured but emphatically referencing a tradition of resistance and dignity that is not exclusive to any one nationality, encompassing all Afro diasporic subjects. Accordingly, the characters in Tar Baby are situated in a scenario that highlights a history of resistance that is common to members of the African diaspora in the Americas; a setting in the Caribbean that, in encompassing these narratives of domination and counter-narratives of resistance, enhances the forms of resistance in which all black characters engage in.

Indeed, this is why I consider Tar Baby to have the accents of a liberatory narrative: there is a clear reference to the history of communities that escape from bondage to freedom – Haiti, Dominica, the black riders of Isle des Chevaliers – which resignifies that history as one of resistance and dignity. Moreover, the narrative of slavery is framed in such a way that the relationships between slavery in the US and slavery in the Caribbean are underscored establishing the connections between colonialist practices that resulted in slavery in the past and the neocolonialism/U.S imperialism that warrants the exploitation of peoples of color in the present. In this way the novel portrays the many ways in which, historically and presently, black communities stand up against all forms of tyranny and domination. Nevertheless, Morrison is clearly wary of the realities of the contemporary western world and the intersectional identities of black characters that include not only an African heritage but also a contemporary national origin that influences their relationships as citizens of either the contemporary Global North or the Global South. Therefore, I intend to analyze how Morrison constructs a setting in which the
differences between African American and Afro Caribbean elements clash but at the same time support and advance each other’s modes of resistance.

The description of the island’s nature and the way in which it is effectively colonized by winter houses stages a confrontation between two opposing worldviews and paradigms which is, in fact, a constitutive feature of neoslave narratives: “The desire to return to slavery and to explore it in imaginative writing has offered Morrison and a number of other contemporary black writers a means to restage a confrontation between rational, scientific, and enlightened Euro-American thought and the supposedly primitive, cultureless and bestial African slaves” (Gilroy 220).

From the very beginning, the novel recovers and resignifies an apparent primitiveness by personifying the island’s nature and giving it a voice that, wisely, warns about the impending disaster that is brought about by a capitalistic Euro-American paradigm. This wise nature describes the arrival of the colonizer in apocalyptic terms: “The end of the world, as it turned out, was nothing more than a collection of winter houses on Isle des Chevaliers […] Wild parrots that had escaped the stones of hungry children in Queen of France agreed and raised havoc as they flew away to look for yet another refuge” (Tar Baby 9). Precisely, the system of the invader brutally violates everything that is local. Isle des Chevaliers contains eternal, ahistorical natural elements so permanent that they serve as the reference to the naming of things: “the sea-green green of the sea and the sky-blue sky of the sky” (9). The invading EuroAmerican system desecrates those and replaces them with a defective construction (that is so precisely because it defies nature: “They sometimes forgot or ignored the determination of water to flow downhill so the toilets and bidets could not always produce a strong swirl of water” (10)). In fact, not only
are these autochthonous elements destroyed and replaced but they are replaced by something that represents ideas of classification and private property, characteristic of Eurocentric systems.

With its plumb doors, knobs, hinges and “locks secure as turtles” (9) this house that stands for Euro-American ideas of capital, property and the idea of civilization vs. barbarism interrupts the flow of a river, effectively separating it from its source and killing it, much in the way in which the transatlantic slave trade and later the plantation system broke matrilineal lines and separated sons and daughters from their mothers and their motherland. The personified, mother-like river is thus described: “Poor insulted, broken hearted river. Poor demented stream. Now it sat in one place like a grandmother and became a swamp the Haitians called Sein de Veilles. And witches’ tit it was: a shriveled, fog bound oval seeping with a thick black substance that even mosquitoes could not live near” (10). The river is “like a grandmother” that cannot continue to perform her motherly duties to nourish and sustain life, but which has found a way to remain there, threateningly present and in the form of a tit, of all things, one of the novel’s most prominent symbols of authenticity, tradition and fertility. In that way, the disposition of elements in the setting – the artificiality of the house surrounded by a responsive, hypervigilant environment – embodies the confrontation of two opposing worldviews: one that exploits and destroys, one that quietly but subversively resists. And that resistance emerges from and is nourished from the myths of former African slaves in the island: witches and black horsemen who covertly oppose the sterility imposed upon them.

By setting this story in the contemporary Caribbean Morrison crafts a version of the neoslave narrative that reifies the significance of a history of bondage and slavery suffered both in the U.S and the Caribbean. In addition, the novel stages a confrontation with a Euro-American system of thought through the reference to a mythical nature that can voice and resist the abuse
of the invader. However, the transversal narratives of domination also point out that formerly and currently oppressed communities may also be involved in dynamics in which one is involved in the oppression of the other. In this specific case, the narration establishes a connection between a colonial past and an imperialistic present in which “rational, scientific and Euro-American thought” is being used to appropriate the land and the people and to establish the domination of one nation (the U.S, including members of the African American community) over another (Dominique).

In this novel as, I expect to show, the current dynamics between members of the African diaspora of diverse national origin that put them at odds with each other do not impede all opportunities for this black populations to influence each other, especially when it comes to confronting oppression. In short, despite the many points of divergence between African American and Afro Caribbean peoples, *Tar Baby* shows that in the presence of other members of the African diaspora in the West, African American characters develop a greater consciousness of their circumstances and, thus, an enhanced self-awareness and will to resist. The Afro Caribbean setting, then, lays the ground and reading keys for this reading.

2. An Inside/Outside Dynamic

A largely important theme that relates to the ideas introduced above is that of Black authenticity. Many have read the novel through a strictly binary lens in which Son is unquestionably redeemed attachment and connection to his African American roots while Jadine is irredeemably condemned by the loss of her “ancient properties.”. In such a reading, Sydney and, especially, Ondine, are assumed to be in total connection and in tune with their ancestry and their identity. However, a closer look at the way in which the black characters – African American and Afro
Caribbean – relate to the setting may problematize this reading and show Morrison’s awareness of the power imbalances that define the relationships between characters that share an ancestry and a history (of slavery and resistance) but also identify with a national identity that places them in disparate historic and socio-economic situations.

Indeed, one could argue that the construction of the setting as described above determines spaces of authenticity and inauthenticity. From the confrontation between the architecture and design of Valerian’s house and the permanent forces of nature that have eternally been present in the island, results a fabricated, inauthentic home, that is nothing more than an artifice: “Every effort had been made to keep it from looking ‘designed’. Almost nothing was askew and the few things that were had charm: the little island touches here and there (a washhouse, a kitchen garden, for example) were practical” (TB 10). The introduction of a construction that strives to belong to its surroundings but fails to do so certainly mirrors the characters’ identity struggles with their heritage and lineage in a world that pushes them to assimilate to mainstream white culture.

More importantly, this disposition of the setting creates an inside/outside dynamic – the inside perfectly separated from the outside by plumb door “and their knobs, hinges and locks secure as turtles” (11) – in which that which belongs inside Valerian’s mansion represents a fundamental disconnect with the island and, arguably, its locals, and stands as a symbol of Euro-American capitalistic principles of private property and appropriation of the land and the labor. Such a binary dynamic offers some of the first glimpses into the complicated relationships between characters of African descent.

The natural surroundings are ascribed to the local Black characters. When the relationship between Ondine and Thérèse is introduced, Morrison narrates: “Ondine tried,
unsuccessfully, for months to get a Mary who would work inside. With no explicit refusal or
general explanation each Mary took the potatoes, the pot, the paper, sack and the pairing knife
outdoors to the part of the courtyard the kitchen opened onto. It enraged Ondine because it gave
the place a nasty common look” (41). Indeed, even though she is forced by her circumstances to
work for Valerian, Thérèse (or Mary, as Ondine calls her) refuses to enter the realm that would
put her completely under his grasp. A space in which Ondine has clearly been trapped.

In fact, Ondine and Sydney always remain inside and protect the private property and the
hierarchies that it imposes. In fact, once Son’s arrival threatens the social order in the house, so
well defined by the architecture and the position that every character occupies within – “Mr.
Street had him stay in the guest room. The guest room. You understand me? (100) – Ondine’s
main concern is that she will lose her place inside the house and be forced to move to where the
local Caribbean blacks live and adopt behaviors that Ondine herself associates with being and
staying outside: “Keep on and you’ll have us over in them shacks in Queen of France. You want
me shucking crayfish on a porch like those Marys? Do you?” (101). Ondine associates the
outside space with poverty and barbarism, showing how she has internalized and now defends
the EuroAmerican paradigms that keep her inside the house.

However, it is important to recognize that precisely Ondine’s place inside the house has a
particularity. Valerian’s house is described in terms of something temporary, while Ondine’s
space within that has is the only permanent space. The novel describes the house in the following
terms: “Except for the kitchen, which had a look of permanence, the rest of the house had a hotel
feel about it – a kind of sooner or later leaving appearance” (12). Clearly, the particularity of the
kitchen as a place of authenticity ties back to the themes of mothering and nurturance. More
importantly, however, Ondine’s relationship to the home as an inside space and the kitchen as
the only permanent or authentic space within that home – as opposed to the artificiality that the rest of the house represents – symbolizes Ondine’s troubling position as the guardian of conflicting traditions: she is connected to her African American roots in a way that Jadine isn’t but she is also very protective of mainstream American culture and the capitalistic system that exploits her and her husband and limits them to an existence of servitude and loyalty to white masters. The latter is what prevents her from establishing any relation of kinship with the local landscape and her local counterparts while the former opens up a window of possibility for a productive relationship with the Afro Caribbean characters.

Son, for his part, initially occupies a conflicting space within this binary. For example, his first encounter with Gideon is mediated by the inside/outside binary. Looking outside of one of the home’s windows, the sight of Gideon working in the garden brings about so strong and accurate a memory that Son is brought to tears. Son looks through a window at a moment in which his sojourn inside the house, in the second-floor rooms (where Valerian, Margaret and Jadine belong) has him at the verge of losing his connection to his identity. He has, literally and figuratively, washed his blackness: “the water that ran into the drain was dark – charcoal gray. As black as the sea before sunrise” and placated the hair that “was like foliage and from a distance looked like nothing else than the crown of a deciduous tree” (132). He occupies a position of superiority, as Valerian’s guest and the occupant of a room in the second floor of the house, where Jadine, Valerian and Margaret sleep. In fact, from this position of superiority, looking down from a second-floor window, wrapped in an “Easter white towel” (140) he looks more like the golden haired “little boys in Easter white shorts” (139) that he envied in his youth than he looks like the sweaty black man working in the yard. It is the sight of Gideon at work, in
contact with the nature outside, that reminds Son of his origins: “‘Thanks’, whispered Son, ‘one more second of your smoke-house cot might had brought me there at last’” (140).

As in this critical scene, several others show that some of the characters perceive the Caribbean as a space of encounter with lost roots and origins. Jadine flees to the Caribbean after her encounter with the African lady in yellow in Paris, which is evidently the moment in which her sense of identity becomes destabilized. Similarly, Valerian moves to Isle des Chevaliers because he “wanted his own youth again and a way to spend it. His was taken away from him when his father died” (54). However, by the end of the novel, only Son reaches a true reconnection with his ancestorship, as will be later explored.

Valerian’s attempt to right the wrongs of his youth is an evident failure, beginning with his attempt at making a home which results artificial, fabricated and at odds which the place in which it is erected. More so, his greenhouse further demonstrates his disconnect with his surroundings and the utter artificiality of the home he has attempted to build. In effect, the greenhouse illustrates Valerian’s attempt to impose his way of life and his system of thought to a place where it most definitely does not belong; “instead of the exuberant life of the tropics, Valerian as demigod imposes his own airless greenhouse with the characteristic disregard of the colonizer for existing rhythms and patters of life in the colony” (Grewal 85). Therefore, his view of the place he has chosen to, supposedly, recuperate his youth is mediated by the absolute artifice that is his greenhouse:

Valerian was in his greenhouse staring out of one of the glass widows imagining what was not so: that the woman in the washhouse was bending over a scrub board rubbing pillow slips with a bar of orange Octagon soap. He knew perfectly well that a washer and dryer were installed there … but the scrub board, the
pillow slips and the orange soap were major parts of what he wished to see: the backyard of the house of his childhood in Philadelphia. (TB 140)

Because he doesn’t belong to the place where he has come (and conquered) his construction and imaginary of the Caribbean as a tropical paradise that he can manipulate to produce the memories he wishes to come to terms with are revealed as mere fabrication.

In the opposite way, Son’s first encounter with Gidéon resembles Valerian’s experience – looking through a window from the inside to the outside – and it is juxtaposed in the narration as the account of Son’s almost mystical experience of reconnection with his past immediately follows Valerian’s fabrication of a revival of his youth. Evidently, the juxtaposition serves to demonstrate the diametrically opposite experiences of both with which Son’s complicated connection and closeness to the Caribbean – both in terms of the environment and the Afro Caribbean characters – is introduced.

3. Elements of the Outside

The reader may observe three important natural elements of the Caribbean environment – which belong to the realm of the outside – that illustrate the forces that fight against the dynamics of the realm of the inside. What is more, those insurrectional elements are shown in connection to the liberation of African American characters that are effectively trapped in the white man’s house.

The moon

Valerian and Jadine expose a superficial consideration of the Caribbean as a space solace and encounter with self which, clearly, feeds from neo-colonialist ideas of idyllic vacation and
retirement in the Caribbean. However, the living, insurrect nature that surrounds them reveals that the island is, for those in Valerian’s realm, a place of atonement and distress, making L’Arbe de la Croix – the tree of crucifixion – quite an appropriate name for the place. Morrison, then, constructs a natural environment that looks and judges the actions and behaviors of human beings. The author herself has identified as a common trope of mainstream white literature the “contemplation of serene nature” as a source of solace (The Ancestor 62). The personification of nature in the novel turns that literary tradition on its head.

In fact, the moon stands out as one of the main instances of nature’s gaze: “Luckily in the Caribbean there is no fear. The unsocketed eye that watches sleepers is not threatening – it is merely alert, which anyone can tell for it has no lid and cannot wax or wane. No one speaks of a quarter or half moon in the Caribbean it is always full, always adrift and curious” (43). Certainly, as the narration advances, the reader learns to recognize the misleading element of that lack of fear. In Jadine’s case, the gaze of the African woman in yellow has caused her to escape to the Caribbean, where she expects to evade the feeling of solitude and inauthenticity that such encounter has caused. However, in the Caribbean the moon is an alert eye, an eye with no lid, which parallels the gaze of the African woman whose “eyes had burnt away their lashes” (47). At one point, Jadine futilely tries to escape both gazes: “Jadine kicked off the sheet and buried herself under the pillow to keep the moonlight out of her eyes and the woman in yellow out of her mind” (49). In the Caribbean, the gaze of the African ancestor is not only present but greater, more vigilant, almost omnipresent.

In this way, that African gaze in the Caribbean may help to keep Jadine’s Eurocentric aspirations in check. As she is trying to hide under the sheets both from the Caribbean moon and the memory of the African woman, Jadine is reminded of the myth of the riders. However, she
has only heard versions of the myth as told by Valerian, Margaret and Dr. Michelin, who have made the riders “French chevaliers roaming the hills on horses” (206). In the Caribbean night, “She tried to visualize them, wave after wave of chevaliers but somehow that made her think of the woman in yellow” (48). Jadine is, under the Caribbean moon’s gaze and through the memory of the woman in yellow, subconsciously fighting the appropriation of the island’s foundational myth by its European and American contemporary ‘colonizers’.

Meanwhile, “down below, where the moon couldn’t get to… Ondine dreaming of sliding into water, frightened that her heavy legs and swollen ankles will sink her” (61). Ondine’s dreams make her confront her fear of old age, of not being able to take care of Valerian, and of not having Jadine take care of them when she can no longer take care of herself and her husband. Again, the moonlight shines a light over the problematic way in which an African American character has built her identity; trapped in Valerian’s space, Ondine is unable to construct her identity as anything other than a servant who needs to be able to stand in order to be able to serve. At the same time, Sydney’s dreams remind him of his past and his upwards move in society. “He is in Baltimore now as usual … he had left that city to go to Philadelphia and there he became one of those industrious Philadelphia Negroes— the proudest people in the race” (61). But every morning he forgets. The moon in the Caribbean both reconnects him to his origins and remarks how he has forgotten where he comes from and where he began, thus, revealing to the reader his problematic mistreatment of Son and the black locals.

However, the forms of atonement that Ondine and Sydney must confront are still incomplete and sheltered. Because they have chosen to always remain inside the house that Valerian built, they keep themselves protected from the gaze of the moon in the Caribbean. Indeed, one must observe that their being kept in the lower sections of Valerian’s house ensures
that they are never fully awakened and enlightened, literally and figuratively, by the Caribbean moon.

It must also be noted that when he arrives in Isle des Chevaliers Son is said to have “exchanged stares with the moon” (8). As the reader continues to witness Son’s developing relationship with the Caribbean and its local inhabitants, such an initial exchange may be read as symbolic of Son’s openness to see the Caribbean and be seen by it, in ways in which Ondine, Sydney and Jadine never really do so, specifically because they choose for the most part to remain inside the house, within Valerian’s realm.

The trees and the swamp

Son’s willingness to see and be seen by the Caribbean, shown when he “exchanged stares with the moon” contrasts with Jadine’s attempts to hide from it. This is one of the ways in which the novel shows how the protagonists determine an interiority-exteriority with respect to how much they allow the Caribbean to enter them, physically and, most of all, spiritually. Jadine’s experience with the swamp women and the swamp trees is another good symbol of this dynamic. When she is stuck at the edge of the swamp she dares to see the swamp for the first time. “This was the ugly part of Isle des Chevaliers – the part she averted her eyes from whenever she drove past” (181). However, she chooses a distant point of view, feigning to be a distant observer or copier of what she sees which is why “she took her pad and a stick of charcoal” (181). However, she falls and is absorbed by the swamp, forced to a lot more than merely observe with an aesthetic interest. It is important to recall that the swamp contains what is left after the white man’s invasion of the island: the remnants of the river and “those trees that had been spared” (10). In short, the last enclave of resistance against Valerian’s colonization of the island. Indeed,
at the end of the novel those same trees “where marshaling for war” (274) to recover the lost territory. It is with one of those trees that Jadine finds herself in an erotic dance with: “Perhaps she was supposed to lie horizontally. She tightened her arms around the tree and it swayed as though it wished to dance with her […] Cleave together, like lovers. Press together like man and wife. Cling to your partner, hang on to him and never let him go […] love him and trust him with your life because you are up to your knees in rot” (183).

In her book *Toni Morrison and the Idea of Africa*, La Vinia Delois Jennings reads this episode as a failed voudun ritual that results from Jadine’s refusal to accept possession by the black spirits. She explains that it “is a veiled Voudun possession initiation that climaxes in a divine/blind horseman attempting to mount Jadine who, in the position of the horse and potential serviteur, will have none of it. She rejects the loa swamp women who want to claim her as one of her own” (131). However, the failed possession of Jadine by Afro-Caribbean forces can also be understood through the reading keys that the novel itself offers. If, as I have proposed, the nature in this Caribbean island stands for black resistance against Euro-American systems of domination, then this scene must be read as Jadine’s participation in that resistance; the soon to become warrior tree helps her escape the ‘rot’ that the white colonization has produced on the island. Of course, she resists the invitation to fully join the swamp women, but it is after this episode that she finally recognizes to herself her deep attraction towards Son and defends him against the white woman’s prejudiced fear of rape by the black man.

**The ants**

Soldier ants are a clear leitmotif in the novel; they are a fixture of the Caribbean landscape, constantly fighting against Valerians efforts to keep them outside; “soldier ants trying
one more time to enter the green house and being thwarted as usual by the muslin dipped in poison and taped to the doorsill” (104). And, remarkably, it is Son who brings them to the house. “And it was he who brought the soldier ants onto the property with his trail of foil paper containing flecks of chocolate that the ants loved and sought vigorously” (104). Both Son and the ants steal and consume Valerian’s chocolate which, in turn, has been made with sugar and cocoa stolen/exploited in the Caribbean. In the same way in which they recover their chocolate, towards the end of the novel the ants recover the space that the white colonizer has taken from them. After the Christmas dinner in which Son, Sydney and Ondine openly confront Valerian, “The latch of the door can be left unhooked, the muslin removed, for the soldier ants are beautiful and whatever they do will be a part of it […] Isle des Chevaliers filled in the space that had been the island’s to begin with” (242).

In fact, the island’s victory is directly Sydney’s win. Once the ground makes the bricks pop from the ground, the trees seem to engulf the greenhouse and the ants “had already eaten through the loudspeaker wires” (284), Sydney begins to have more and more control over his destiny: with a weakened Valerian he can drink the master’s wine, argue that “Ondine and me, we like it down here” and, finally, be able to assure their permanence where he and Ondine choose to remain (287), granted he does it quietly and covertly, just like the nature that has started to take over Valerian’s construction.

Given this reading of the nature in the Caribbean as symbolic of resistance it is necessary to address the parallel established between the queen soldier ant and Jadine. In a stream of consciousness fashion, the narrator portrays the ants as a symbol of femininity, maternity and female independence and fierceness that, indeed, passes from mother to daughters. But at some point, the narration shifts back and forth between the ant and Jadine, effectively blurring the
difference between one and the other. From a symbolic and narrative point of view, in the same way in which the ants have recovered their space in Valerian’s property, filling in the space that had been “the island’s to begin with”, in this scene the presence of the queen ant seems to have claimed Jadine symbolically and spiritually: by the end of the chapter they are both one. The reader could say that, in this way, at least, the black, resisting presence in the Caribbean has reclaimed Jadine in the way that, earlier, the swamp women – which like the ants symbolize independent femininity and resistance – could not.

Moreover, I suggest that this “takeover” may also be symbolic of physical changes in the female protagonist. The ant/Jadine scene concentrates on the animal’s mating and reproductive rituals while reminding both the reader and Jadine of her intense sexual encounters with Son: “But soldier ants do not have time for dreaming. They are women and they have much to do. Still it would be hard. So very hard to forget the man who fucked like a star” (292). In addition, the queen ant is said to only bear mostly female offspring: “The life of their world requires organization so tight and sacrifice so complete that there is little need for males and they are seldom produced” (290). If the reader is to take this Jadine/queen ant parallel to heart, then I believe when Jadine flies off to Paris she is pregnant with a black daughter.

The motherless child who doesn’t know how to be a daughter becomes a mother herself and must decide what kind of black mother to be. Earlier in the novel, Son has recriminated her by saying: “You turn little black babies into little white ones; you turn black brothers into white brothers” (270). Subsequently, Jadine remembers the “mother-daughter days” she could not partake in. Unlike Son, who has been obsessed with the prospect of a Son – “What would he call his son? Son of Son?” (219), he wonders – Jadine does seem to foresee her redemption in the memory/prospect of a mother daughter relationship.
What is more, the other black females in the novel, Ondine and Thérèse, are also portrayed in connection to soldier ants. The ants first appear before Thérèse is introduced. In fact, they march between Ondine, who is working inside the house, and Thérèse, who works outside, directing the reader’s gaze from one to the other and, one could say, placing them in the same plane. Granted, Thérèse, fully in tune with the island’s nature can “hear the soldier ants so clearly” (104) (which helps her discover Son’s presence before anyone else) whereas Ondine cannot. In any case, the symbol of the ants brings all female characters together as part of the same army. Jadine’s baby girls has “diaspora mothers” (288) for grandmothers, thus, marking the union between Ondine’s abilities to nourish and bear the African American culture and Thérèse’s sensibilities and connection to the Afro Caribbean nature. As the novel closes, the diaspora daughter travels to the heart of Europe, carrying with her the heritage of insurrect, covert resisting forces of a queen soldier ant.
II. AFRICAN AMERICAN AND AFRO CARIBBEAN CHARACTERS IN THE PRESENCE OF ONE ANOTHER: OPPORTUNITIES FOR SELF-AWARENESS AND ENHANCED FORMS OF RESISTANCE

As I explored in chapter one, Morrison’s construction of a setting in the Caribbean lays the map and disposes the elements of a stage that will contain the many tensions between American, African American and Afro Caribbean cultures and communities. Therefore, the elements of the setting serve as a guide to interpret the relationships between characters, and, for this study in particular, the relationships between characters of African descent and the way in which they demonstrate the limits and possibilities of a potential black diaspora culture. Morrison does not offer a comforting or smooth resolution of the differences between members of the African diaspora; she is clear to illustrate the clashes between beings who, despite having a common heritage and ancestorship, are embedded in a capitalistic, neo-colonial system that relies in their alienation to one another. Nevertheless, Morrison makes African American and Afro Caribbean character tangle with each other, not to show unrealistic forms of kinship but to demonstrate that there is much to be gained from this contact with each other; sometimes they awaken each other to their circumstances in order to better resist them, sometimes they cause each other to, do away with systems of thought that complicate their survival in a world dominated by the white first world and, when they do form bonds with one another, as is the case for Son, Gideon and Thérèse, they may find an entrance into the original diasporic community to which they all belong.
1. Building Self-Awareness

Because so much meaning in the setting is revealed through the names of places – Dominique, Isle des Chevaliers, L’Arbe de la Croix– it seems fitting to begin to examine the relationships between Afro Caribbean and African American characters by looking at naming practices. Indeed, the reader is made aware of the tensions between these characters and the lack of solidarity between them from the moment in which the three Afro Caribbean characters are introduced. As Ondine discovers the disappearance of wrapped chocolate and bottles of Evian water from the pantry, Sydney is quick to lay the blame on the island’s black locals: ‘“Must be Yardman,” said Sydney, ‘or one of them Mary’s”’ (39). The phrase reveals the extent to which Sydney, Ondine and Jadine have adopted a Euro American system of thought and sentiment that prevents them from bonding or identifying in any way with the black locals in Dominique. Surely, from the start Sydney and Ondine reveal themselves to be what Doreatha Drummond Mbala calls the African American petty bourgeoisie:

While it is true that the ruling class in the United States (all of whom are from European descent) consists of those who own and control the means of production, it is also true that there are those (including Africans) who so ardently wish to belong to this class that they exhibit the same behavioral patterns, dress in the same manner, use the same language patterns, and, most unfortunately share the same ideology as those of their oppressors. (Mbala 72)

In effect, it is naming practices and the stereotyping that goes with them that most clearly illustrates this situation; in calling Gidéon and Thérèse “Yardman” and “them Marys,” Sydney, Ondine and Jadine participate in the same undermining racial stereotyping and erasure of black people’s individuality – physical and metaphysical – that Margaret uses when she calls Sydney
and Ondine “Kingfish and Beulah” (39) just a few pages earlier. Moreover, looking from the inside (Valerian’s space) to the outside, they judge the Afro Caribbean man through the stereotypes that the white masters have long since used against black populations in the U.S: “all three looked out the kitchen window at the old man as though they could discover with their eyes an uncontrolled craving for chocolate and bottled water in his” (42). Valerian’s window operates like the pair of glasses through which Gideon is seen as inherently dishonest and a thief.

The main Afro Caribbean characters, Thérèse and Gidéon, fight back by naming the Americans, too. The hierarchy established by the American blacks is clearly felt and resented by Thérèse and wins Ondine the nickname “machete-hair”. Indeed, the nickname is used as a symbol of her contempt, authoritativeness and sense of superiority: “if the heavy one with the braids crossed like two silver machetes on her head caught them chatting in the washhouse or in the garden behind, she would fly into a rage and her machetes would glitter and clang on her head” (TB 104). In turn, Sydney is called “bow-tie”, evidently as a form of mockery of his effort to adjust to an aristocratic, outdated model and the inappropriateness of his attire in the tropical climate.

The evident discrepancies in terms of class and nationality between these groups of characters are initially depicted as unsurmountable differences that not only impede any form of solidarity between them but, what is more, which perpetuate systems of abuse and domination from one against the other. However, while this continues to be true throughout the novel and the differences between these characters are never fully resolved – they cannot, realistically, be solved – it is also true that being in each other’s presence provokes an important evolution in their sense of reality and, thus, self-awareness.
Each in their corner, Thérèse and Ondine are sometimes in denial about their lives’ predicaments. As Sydney and Ondine perpetuate the master’s oppressive system in their naïve believe that they are to Valerian more than mere servants, Mary Thérèse is also willfully blind to the real influence of the white masters in her life. One could say, even, that her harsh indictment of Sydney and Ondine constitutes a way for her to avoid dealing with her position and participation in the white master’s world. It is clear from this that one of the narrative lines of the novel includes the development of the secondary characters of African descent—Sydney, Ondine, Mary Thérèse and Gideon—in their perceptions and attitudes towards the white masters; a character development that supports and reinforces the identity struggles of the main characters: Jadine and Son.

In this respect, some critics have read Son’s role in the novel as that of a savior: the messiah who appears to free his people, spiritually and even, otherwise. However, because the setting in the Caribbean has been seen to underline and buttress the characters’ resistance, it is necessary to observe how the Afro Caribbean and African American characters influence each other’s perceptions of and behaviors toward Valerian; how they awaken to and come to terms with their positionality, which then becomes instrumental into the ways in which they initiate forms of resistance and begin to gradually take control over their own destinies.

To be unaware of one’s situation is, in the novel’s own ethical parameters, a loathsome thing to be. The narrator annotates: “was there anything so loathsome as a willfully innocent man? Hardly” (243). Therefore, by the novel’s own definition, to open one’s eyes to a situation that rules one’s life is the only way for a character to evolve. Valerian’s removal of the Afro Caribbean characters from L’Arbe de la Croix prompts Sydney and Ondine’s ‘fall’ from innocence which constitutes a step forward in a process of self-recognition and re-creation of
one’s history and identity. As described in the first chapter, it is after the many revelations that occur in the Christmas dinner—one of which is the one just described— that Sydney and Ondine consciously begin to manipulate their position in order to exercise at least veiled forms of governing their lives and destinies. Indeed, after this episode, Ondine recognizes how her position in the Street household is a matter of necessity rather than of love. When Jadine asks “Do you want to stay?”, Ondine answers, “Do we have a choice?” (280). And she finally realizes that the security she expected from Jadine’s position as a favorite of Valerian is nothing but a vain illusion and admits to her husband that she believes “we’re going to have to bury ourselves” (284). In other words, she realizes that Jadine’s closeness to the white master is more her loss than her gain, as she had figured thus far.

More importantly, Ondine confronts her role in Margaret’s abuse of her child in a way that is liberating for her and puts the responsibility where it ought to be. Morrison has said: “It’s my view that one of the things that black women were able to do in many situations was to make it possible for white women to remain infantile. Margaret has been thoroughly crippled by her husband, who kept her that way, and Ondine helped” (Conversations 93) The novel shows that Ondine’s silence over Margaret’s behavior emerged from a sense of shared guilt and a sense of responsibility for a boy that was not hers, effectively shielding Margaret from facing her direct responsibility. Ondine says: “But once I started keeping it – then it was like my secret too. Sometimes I thought if you all let me go there won’t be anyone around to take the edge off it. I didn’t want to leave him there, all by himself” (TB 241). But after the Christmas dinner incident she is finally able to point at Margaret’s responsibility, saying “You should have stopped yourself” and “I was a girl, just like you” (241) and, finally, “I’m not responsible for that, no” (283).
Where some critics have read Son as a messiah-like, savior figure, I contend that if the reader was to look for Christ-like figures they could not ignore the way in which Gidéon and Thérèse’s sacrifice (their dismissal by Valerian and subsequent disappearance from L’Arbe de la Croix) constitutes an eye-opening re-birth for Sydney and Ondine, who can no longer deceive themselves in considering that Valerian accepts them as a part of his family.

This process works sometimes in the opposite way as well. The presence of African Americans in the island forces Thérèse to grapple with the world around her and the racist dynamics that characterize it, forcing her out of her willful blindness. As shown, Thérèse jumps into a dehumanizing game through name-calling which mirrors that of which she is a victim and which leads her to preclude any form of kinship with Sydney and Ondine. In fact, “her hatreds were complex and passionate as exemplified by her refusal to speak to the American Negroes, and never even to acknowledge the presence of the White Americans in her world” (111). Thérèse is also guilty of the sin of innocence; she forces herself to remain oblivious to the power dynamics that govern her life. The novel reveals how this diminished sense of self and deceptive imaginary of the social environment she inhabits prevents her from making sense of the world. Without acknowledging those whose presence she wants to erase she cannot continue to explain the events going on at L’Arbe de la Croix. As she makes up a story to explain Son’s presence at the house, Gideon must remind her that “It’s not important who this one loves and this one hates and what bow-tie do or what machete-hair don’t do if you don’t figure on the white ones and what they thinking about it all” (111). Thérèse must come to an awareness of Sydney and Ondine’s role in the house; even if they also engage in tyrannical attitudes the true tyrant behind it all is the white master. In a way, Ondine and Thérèse are juxtaposed to show two sides of the same coin; they have both invested themselves in caring for white children – Ondine as
Michael’s “nanny” and Thérèse as a nurse for “hundreds of French babies who used to nurse at her magical breasts” (112) – while alienating themselves, in opposing yet equivalent ways, from acknowledging the exploitative system that they inhabit. Therefore, each of them is very much instrumental in one another’s awakening.

Drummond Mbalia is one of the critics who advances as interpretation of Son as a messianic figure. Mbalia understands Son’s role in the island as a “Christ-like figure in L’Arbre de la Croix who saves his people, the revolutionary who politically educates his people, the son, everyone’s son – Franklin Green, Willian Green, Herbert Robinson – devoid of selfish individualism and conscious of himself as an African” (78). Such a reading takes Son’s considerations of himself as a savior to be true, disregarding the fact that he does not first appear as a fully formed, fully politically aware man. Instead, despite Son’s intentions and political awareness at the beginning of the novel, there is much he has yet to discover with the help of Gideon and Thérèse. I do not mean to deny that having “joined that great class of undocumented men” (TB 166), Son arrives in the island with a clear conscious of power imbalances and the domination exercised by capitalistic systems against peoples of color. However, I propose that the influence of Afro Caribbean characters in the development of his self-consciousness is the most conspicuous. Indeed, his sojourn in the Caribbean and his closeness to Afro Caribbean characters constitutes a crucial stepping stone in his struggle with his identity as a socially aware African American man in the contemporary world.

In the most evident level, for instance, if Son is to act as a savior of his folk, he requires an initiation into the island’s culture. Joyce Hope Scott claims that “Son Green, like Milkman Dead, embarks on a quest leading to his reinscription into the indigenous culture of the Africana people of the Caribbean” (33). However, an analysis of this quest must grapple with the
complications of Son’s claim to that culture which he, as an American, is not necessarily or immediately a part of; there is much he needs to see and hear before he can join the eternally resisting blind riders of Ile des Chevaliers. Indeed, Son requires someone that will introduce him to the island’s foundational myth – the African version of it, that is – without which, during the Christmas dinner, he would not be able to command “one hundred black men on one hundred unshod horses” against Valerian’s “one hundred French chevaliers” (206). This issue is not minor given how much of what is at stake in this confrontation is the centuries old African heritage transmitted orally – the blind riders “rode blind and naked through the hills and had done so for hundreds of years” (206) – pitted against forces legitimized through a European system of written inscription and codification – the French chevaliers roamed “alert but restful in the security of the Napoleonic Code” (206). Therefore, Son’s one-to-one connection with the Afro Caribbean folk who can speak the island’s tradition/myth is instrumental to his advocacy for his folk.

Furthermore, in this “quest” Son must indeed grapple with his existence as an American; one that is not at all like Valerian Street but who is nonetheless recognized as such by people who “paraded the American Negro through the streets of town like a king” (149). Son’s parade recalls the parade in which Valerian, ‘the Candy King’, and Margaret, ‘The Principal Beauty of Maine, meet. America’s cultural imperialism in the Caribbean warrants the local Caribbean people’s glorification of the foreigner, much in the way in which a white supremacist culture celebrates white beauty and warrants all privileges to the white man. Son must, therefore, abandon the parade and enter Gideon and Thérèse’s home in order to finally meet eye to eye with them.
It is undeniable that Son arrives at Isle des Chevaliers with a profound connection to his roots and ancestorship which, of course, deeply contrasts with Jadine’s loss of her “ancient properties”. However, it is important to realize that even though Son is “conscious of himself as an African” (Drummond Mbalia 78) his coming to terms with his identity and his blackness is not without complication since it must also include an awareness of himself as an American, the citizen of a country identifiable to others as part of a nation that exploits people and resources outside of its national borders (sometimes with the participation of black Americans such as Sydney, Ondine and Jadine). Morrison has said that “so much of what is true about Afro-Americans is not only the African but the American – we are very much that and trying to separate those things out can be very difficult, if you want to separate them out. We are a brand new human being in this country” (An Interview 225). In many ways, only in the Caribbean and in the company of Afro Caribbean people will Son finally reconcile the polarities that indeed make him a brand new human being.

Morrison takes Son through a journey in which he must confront what it is to be African and American. This journey is depicted in a progressive manner and starts with his life as a sailor: “Since 1971 Son had been seeing the United States through the international edition of Time, by way of shortwave radio and the views of other crewmen” (TB 167). A pivotal point in this discovery of himself through the eyes of others is what prompts him to jump ship and, thus, jumpstarts the novel’s action. Indeed, Son’s journey to Dominique and then Isle des Chevaliers begins when, despite being a part of “that great class of undocumented men” he is reminded of his national origin by a Mexican sailor that directly connects his violent behavior to his American origin.
When he thought of America he thought of the tongue that the Mexican drew in Uncle Sam’s mouth: the map of the U.S as an ill-shaped tongue ringed with teeth and crammed with the corpses of children. The Mexican had presented it to him with a smile the day Son bashed the snapper’s head in. ‘Americano’ said the Mexican, and handed him the picture. (167)

This scene is not devoid of racial overtones and Morrison clearly illustrates different behaviors by citizens of countries of the Global North and those of the Global South. “The Swede roared but the Mexican was suddenly quiet, and later handed him the drawing, saying, Americano. Cierito Americano. Es verdad’, and maybe it was so” (167). It is no small coincidence that it is this incident that finally causes Son to jump ship and land in Isle des Chevaliers, Dominique where he meets not only the people in Valerian’s household but also creates a close relationship to the island’s local blacks.

In fact, the closeness Son develops with Dominique’s black locals marks the height of his discovery of what being an American is. In many ways, Son’s interactions with Jadine contain an identity struggle in which he must decide what his African heritage means to him and to his identity in the 20th century. However, the subtext that develops in his interactions with Afro Caribbean characters force both him and the novel’s reader to consider other intersections of his identity. In this moment, his nationality becomes a crucial one.

Indeed, Gidéon and Thérèse each share experiences and points of view that force a confrontation with the African Americans’ national identity. On one side, as a laborer who fully participates in the international capitalist system and, more importantly, as a former immigrant to the US who acquired US citizenship through marriage, Gideon becomes fundamental in introducing the tensions of the concept of citizenship. This fact is not only revealing to the
reader, who must confront this intersection of the characters’ identity in a way that Morrison does not explore elsewhere in her novels, but also in a way that is very significant to Son’s evolution as a character and the development of his character’s sense of identity. Indeed, forced by economic reasons Gideon migrates to the United States and marries an African American woman he describes as a “crazy nurse woman” (154) only to acquire an American passport. However minor this subtext may be, it does reveal the power imbalance between an African American woman and an Afro Caribbean man in the United States.

Moreover, Gideon’s citizenship is one that he loses after a long absence from the States – “‘You’ve been away so long you must’ve lost your citizenship by now’” (154), Son remarks; unlike Son himself who, as an American born, throughout the novel is expected to recover his citizenship papers. Son’s situation as an American citizen is a permanent one, while Gideon’s is not. For Gideon, American citizenship is only a fact of his experience and not an element of his identity. This is why, when he abandoned the States, it is said that “he hadn’t left much: just U.S citizenship, the advantage of which was the ability to send an occasional ten-dollar money order, buy a leisure suit and watch TV” (109). Indeed, life in the U.S is reduced to labor, making money and leisure, thus putting into perspective Son’s idealization of his home country. In fact, the abyss between Son’s American citizenship and Gideon’s is further enhanced by the irony that results from Son being able to return to the U.S by using Gideon’s passport.

Furthermore, Gideon’s experience in the U.S which leads him to conclude that “the U.S is a bad place to die in” (154), serves as another counterpoint to Son’s idealization of his hometown, Eloé and of “the black folks he was carrying around in his heart all those years” (217). In many ways, in his experience as an immigrant and with the distance that this allows him from the nation that he is judging, Gidéon gives Son a point of view of his country that he
has never contemplated thus far and which constitutes a premonition of Son’s disappointment with New York, which occurs a few pages later.

On the other side, Thérèse’s apparent provincialism offers an interesting reversal of terms and narratives that can be read as a form of resistance against the dominant EuroAmerican paradigm. In fact, one could interpret Thérèse’s approximation to U.S. culture as a form of signifyin’; she takes quintessential elements of American culture and their designations in American English and reads them literally, resulting in a convoluted, carnivalesque reading of American culture. Indeed, Thérèse stages a scathing critique of American capitalism by reverting signifiers of scientism, technological advancement and, even, feminine liberation:

Thérèse had her own views of understanding that had nothing to do with the world’s views. However he [Gideon] tried to explain a blood bank to her, or an eye bank, she always twisted it. The word bank, he thought, confused her. And it was true. Thérèse said that America was where doctors took the stomachs, eyes, umbilical cords, the backs of the neck where the hair grew, blood, sperm, hearts and fingers of the poor and froze them in large packages to be sold later to the rich. Where children as well as grown people slept with dogs in their beds. Where women took their children behind trees and sold them to strangers. Where everybody on the television set was naked and that even priests were women. Where for a bar of gold a doctor could put you into a machine and, in a matter of minutes, would change you from a man to a woman or a woman to a man. (151)

A superficial reading of Thérèse’s literal reading of American culture could lead to the conclusion that “Therese's critique of America, rather than functioning as an anti-colonial rejection, institutes various oppositions between nature and artifice. While the Caribbean is over flowing with fertility, America has become so consumed with materialism that it has forgotten
the proper roles for men and women” (Goyal 405). Such a reading impedes an understanding of Thérèse’s influence in Son’s exploration of a fundamental part of his identity arguing that “While Son places an enormous amount of value in Therese and Gideon, it is difficult for readers to follow his lead in light of these statements about race and gender” (Goyal 406).

On the contrary, if the reader takes Morrison’s construction of a setting that centers on the confrontation between nature and artifice as a reading key, Thérèse’s signifyin’ in this episode may be read in a new light. Gilroy explains how modern, rational thought has been the basis of systems of domination in the past and in the present. Which is why an exploration into different cultural systems serves to reveal the fact that

the desire to pit these cultural systems against each other arises from present conditions.

In particular, it is formed by the need to indict those forms of rationality which have been rendered implausible by their racially exclusive character and further to explore the history of their complicity with terror systematically and rationally practised as a form of political and economic administration. (Gilroy 223)

Thérèse’s views of the United States precisely fall into this confrontation of cultural systems and, despite her misreadings and misjudgements, it does offer the reader a point of view from which to critically reflect on the markers of American culture that Thérèse reverts.

Thérèse deconstructs the pervasive civilization vs. barbarism discourse that constitutes one of the pillars of EuroAmerican thought and the resulting colonialist and neo-colonialist practices that it typically engages in. Thérèse’s depiction of the U.S is embedded in a scene in which Gideon insist on her primitiveness and ignorance. The reader who has carefully followed the significance of the different forms of knowledge that the novel presents –the ancestral, ahistorical knowledge of trees, ants and butterflies and Thérèse’s magical features, for instance –
must recognize that Gideon has been acculturated in a way not very different from the assimilationist education Jadine has received. In fact, the novel evidences how Gideon’s having bought into that binary narrative of civilization and barbarism is what has warranted the continued domination of the EuroAmerican system over him: “finally, all of his forty years of immigrant labor paid off when an American who owned a house on Isle des Chevaliers came to stay and needed a regular handyman/gardener with boat skills, English and a manner less haughty than that of the local Blacks” (110). However fleetingly, Thérèse breaks this circle of repeated and ever expanding domination, at least discursively.

As Thérèse turns the terms of American culture on their head she even puts in tension the very concept of truth that Gideon presents as an absolute – “the word ‘bank’, he thought, confused her. And it was true” (TB 151). There are, however, many truths in her discourse that a careful reader cannot ignore. First, her misreading of procedures like abortion, blood and organ donation, and sex changing operations, alternate with true assertions (even if they constitute generalizations) such as dogs sleeping in beds, the hypersexualization of massive media culture or women as priests. Moreover, her literal reading of medical procedures carries several underlying truths if one considers practices common in the US such as selling blood plasma or participating in medical trials for financial compensation, or even just looking at who is granted or denied healthcare in a capitalistic society.

Thérèse arms Son with the framework with which he, later in the narration, effectuates his own reading of New York. As he arrives in this center of American culture his description of black girls who “stoked their cocks into bikini underwear and opened their shirts to their tits” (215) and the black men who had snipped off their testicles and pasted them to their chests” (216) are reminiscent of Thérèse’s description of Americans with “a man’s parts and a woman’s
parts on the same person” (151) while Son’s imaginary of old people in kennels match Thérèse’s dogs sleeping in beds. If anything, this shows how Son finally must confront the fact that a lot of what he criticizes in American society, and thus most of what Thérèse depicts, is applicable not only to white American culture but to an ever-enlarging part of the black community who, like Jadine, has assimilated to this Western modernity.

2. Deconstructing Paradigms, Binaries and Absolutes

Joyce Hope Scott maintains that “Tar Baby draws on the idea of carnival as it emerged in the Caribbean” where “for Afro Caribbean people carnival became a way to express the disruptive power of new forms to pervade and illuminate contrarieties within their society” (33-34). In other terms, a turning up side down of paradigms, such as the one Thérèse stages and Son learns, serves the community of the oppressed to deal with, figure out and resist the system imposed by the oppressor. It is undeniable that while being critical of American capitalism Thérèse is at the same time fascinated by some of the aspects of that culture. Indeed, Thérèse’s signifyin’ of free abortions and D & C’s or the ability to “change from a man to a woman or a woman to a man” (151) occurs amid a scene characterized by male domination; Gideon orders her to “close down your mouth” and Son answers patronizingly to her questions: “Son was laughing. ‘Right,’ he said. ‘Right’” (152) after she has prepared and served food for them both “but did not eat with them” (150).

In that way, Thérèse’s positionality as both repulsed and fascinated by American culture may begin to resolve one of the novel’s main unresolved issues. Jadine “reveals as false consciousness Son’s many assumptions about the wholesomeness of the agrarian past. There is nothing romantic about poverty, nothing autonomous about and all-black town run by white
electricity, nothing enabling about not being educated or part of the institutions of modernity” while she must face Son’s “scathing critique of postmodernity –there is nothing pretty about being objectified on the cover of a fashion magazine, nothing positive about conforming to the dehumanizing creed of high capitalism, nothing valuable in being educated to forget where she came from” (Grewal 89). Indeed, Jadine and Son each represent apparently irreconcilable forms of blackness in the postmodern West. However, a close reading of Thérèse and Gideon show that there are characters who have, to a greater or lesser extent, learned to “pervade and illuminate contrarieties within their societies” (Hope Scott 34), who are capable of facing “at least two ways at once” (Gilroy 3) as the only way to survive in a system that has been imposed on them.

Jadine and Son reveal an “impasse” that “is symptomatic of a large crisis of the third world locked in the arms of the first” (Grewal 89). Many readers and critics of the novel have criticized Morrison’s refusal to reconcile these opposite positions or to offer a solution. While I do not mean to say that Morrison, in fact, resolves the novel’s central conflict once and for all, I do want to suggest that closer attention to the Afro Caribbean characters might offer readers an insight into the practical ways in which the third world survives while it resists this entanglement with the first world. I can see how Gideon and Thérèse embody Benítez Rojo’s depiction of Caribbean culture in the face of oppression:

the Caribbean is not an apocalyptic world […] the choices of all or nothing, for or against, honor or blood have nothing to do with the culture of the Caribbean. These are ideological propositions articulated in Europe which the Caribbean shares only in declamatory terms […] In Chicago a beaten soul says: ‘I can’t take it anymore,’ and gives himself up to drugs or to he most desperate violence. In
Havana he would say: ‘The thing to do is not to die,’ or perhaps: ‘here I am, fucked but happy.’ (Benitez Rojo 10)

The 20th century requires Son to grow out of his “mama-spoiled back man” ways (TB 269) in order to exact his own fall out of innocence and abandon his idealization of absolute authenticity and non-assimilation as a true possibility. However, he must at the same time remain truthful to the influence of his ancestors, especially his female ancestors and the black women he grew up around. At this crossroads, he must learn to say, “the thing to do is not to die,” if he wants to continue to survive and resist.

Despite his sensibility to the plight of peoples of color, Son arrives at the island with a binary, manichean vision of self-identity and race relations. After sympathizing with him for several pages the reader is suddenly confronted with the realization that Son’s vision is not wholesome or absolutely correct or even productive for the members of his community. When, in his manicheism he calls Jadine a “little white girl” she attacks his paternalism and chauvinism by calling him out “For pulling that white-woman-black woman shit” and for thinking he can know or tell her “what a black woman is or ought to be” (121).

Benitez Rojo describes the Euro American Weltanschauung in the following terms: white rhythms, basically, articulate themselves in a binary fashion; here is the rhythm of steps marching or running, of territorializing; it is the narrative of conquest and colonization, of the assembly line, of technological knowledge, of computers and positivist ideologies; they are narcissistic rhythms, obsessed with their own legitimation, carrying guilt, alienation, and signs of death which they hide by proposing themselves as the best rhythms existing now or ever. (24)4
European cultures and systems, then, are those which create binaries and classifications, placing themselves on the good side of those binaries and the best position in those classifications.

That image has helped inform my understanding of Son’s development in the novel. He creeps into the island with his absolute vision of good blackness and bad blackness—an articulation in a binary fashion—but is soon forced to understand a multiplicity in the world. In his clash with Jadine’s worldview and under the influence of Thérèse and Gideon Son must begin to accept and understand the polyphony that, as a man of color in the 20th century, he needs to learn to manipulate in order to better survive and resist. A manipulation that Gidéon, Thérèse and even the island’s nature perform throughout the novel. I contend that in many instances Thérèse and Gidéon show him an entrance to the community that Benítez Rojo calls the People of the Sea, a community that erases binaries and classifications to accept an all-encompassing hybridity and chaos that opposes and destroys the pervasive EuroAmerican systems in place. Benítez Rojo describes the People of the Sea in these terms:

The copper, black and yellow rhythms, if quite different from one another, have something in common: they belong to the Peoples of the Sea. These rhythms, when compared to the ones mentioned earlier, appear as turbulent and erratic, or, if you like, as eruptions of gases and lava that issue from an elemental stratum, still in formation; in this respect, they are rhythms without a past, or better, rhythms whose past is in the present, and they legitimize themselves by themselves. (24)

Keith E. Byerman maintains that Jadine’s “love is totalitarian and cannot incorporate the differences that are part of [Son’s] concrete being” while “He comes, on the other hand, to realize that his love must assume difference; because of this, he leaves, returns and then pursues her back to the Caribbean” (124). Undeniably, Son’s love for Jadine is largely the cause of his
final acceptance of difference. However, it is important to question why Son, who in the beginning is so absolutely incapable of considering Jadine’s or anyone else’s worldview, is finally the one character who is prepared to entertain and accept difference. In my reading, Son’s close contact with the Afro Caribbean characters helps answer that question.

In her article “Paradise Lost and Found: Dualism and Edenic Myth in Toni Morrison's Tar Baby,” Lauren Lepow argues that, like in her previous novel’s, in Tar Baby Morrison constructs a critique of dualistic thought, given how it constitutes the principal basis of sexism, racism and class distinction (364). Therefore, in Lepow’s reading “Jadine is the novel's hero because she is from the beginning insistent on not being limited by dualism” (372), by contrast to Son who supposedly embodies dualistic thought throughout the novel. I believe that while this is true of Son at the beginning of the novel, and while he struggles to move out from these dualistic paradigms, it would only remain true if the reader does not consider the character’s development and the influence of Afro Caribbean characters in this process. And as I argue below, his development as a character –much of which relates to a newfound capacity to entertain difference and multiplicity– is what makes him the “certain kind of man” that the island’s nature welcomes and embraces at the end of the novel.

3. Opening Doors, Opening Borders

The presence of Afro Caribbean characters in the novel brings forward the tension between borders –national and cultural– and openness, solidarity and commonality between members of the African Diaspora in the West. As I have previously explored, narratives such as Gideon’s immigration to the US and elements such as visas and passports or the inside/outside structure that the construction of the setting follows, continuously remind the characters and the readers of
the limits – physical and otherwise – that divide them. However, the Afro Caribbean characters are also instrumental in allowing Son to overcome those limits, first, physically but, on closer reading, also emotionally and spiritually.

I propose a reading of three episodes in the novel which mark instances of open borders and solidarity between black characters and which allow for the survival and development of Son as a human being and as a character. In other words, Gideon and Thérèse are responsible for allowing Son to overcome physical limits and borders which, in the end, warrant Son’s “reinscription into the indigenous culture of the Africana people of the Caribbean” (Hope Scott 33). First, Gideon and Thérèse purposefully allow Son to enter the house’s pantry. As Son first arrives in Isle des Chevaliers and is hiding and starving “it was Gideon who had the solution: instead of fixing the sash on the window of the pantry as he was ordered, he removed one of its panes and told machete-hair he was having trouble getting another” (106). Remarkably, they feel compelled to help him because they identify, first, his similarities to them: they believe he is a starving horseman, a former slave, marooned and gone blind, just like their ancestors.

Later, Gideon’s passport allows Son to leave L’Arbe de la Croix to return to his country of birth. In this case, Son and Gideon can literally identify as one another. But, more importantly, they subvert the conditions of a racist system that discriminates against both of them equally in order for Son to trespass the borders of the U.S nation. Gideon “was quite willing to lend his passport to the man who shared his anger at the Americans”, an identity swap that he deems possible because “he agreed that one black face would look like another and a difference of twenty years would not be noticed in a black man’s five-year-old passport” (218). It is noteworthy that Son and Jadine’s split from L’Arbe de la Croix is described in terms of an escape from the plantation: “He saw it all as a rescue: first, tearing her mind away from that
blinding awe. Then, the physical escape from the plantation” (219). The parallel established between L’Arbe de la Croix and a slave plantation is not only reminiscent of the many correspondences between the plantation enterprise and Valerian’s neo-colonialist endeavors in the Caribbean but, more importantly, it connects historical instances of collaboration and solidarity between black men (such as the collective effort of enslaved and freed men to allow some to escape plantations). Subjugated by the same racist system in modern times, Gideon and Thérèse collaborate with Son in his and Jadine’s escape from Valerian’s modern day plantation in the Caribbean.

Finally, Thérèse opens for Son the door to reinscription into the Africana culture of the Caribbean which he has begun to understand in his visits to Gideon and Thérèse’s home. Indeed, he is not only given choice – “This is the place. Where you can take a choice. Back there you say you don’t. Now you do”, (305) Thérèse tells him – but he comes prepared to face that choice precisely because he has been initiated into the foundational myth of the island: one that warrants everlasting insurrection around Valerian. In that way, Son’s liberation is a victory to all characters of African descent. And, more specifically, it is also Thérèse and Gideon’s final revenge on Valerian and the system he represents: “Only the storyteller and the myths remain as it is ultimately they who have silenced white male authority and committed the final ‘comic assault’ on traditionally held notions about idyllic retirement retreats in the Caribbean” (Hope Scott 40).

In other words, the Afro Caribbean characters ensure the hero’s physical survival, enhance his knowledge of self – they open up the borders of the U.S not only literally but also by allowing him to grapple with his national identity in new ways – and, finally lead him to the utmost realization of his revolution: he joins a legion of mythical fighters. One could read these
three instances of openness and solidarity as a progressive triad: Thérèse and Gideon allow him access to food ensuring his physical survival, they open national borders in more ways than one – his tangling with his Americanness and the actual ability to cross nation borders in order to free himself and his lover from Valerian’s domination – and, ultimately, the final spiritual liberation that he obtains as he joins the black mythical horsemen.

This progression ensures that the Son comes full circle. Indeed, Morrison herself refers to the circularity of Son’s progression in the novel, which she also chose to make evident in the novel’s very structure.

Neither of these sections has a chapter head – They are parentheses around the book. In the first one, the suggestion was birth because the water pushes and urges him away from the shore, and there is the ammonia scented air. He comes out of it as from a womb. In the last part there is a similar kind of birth, except that this time he is being urged by the water to go ashore. This time he stands up and runs, and there is cooperation with the land and the fog. (Conversations 150)

Son is born twice into Isle des Chevaliers. However, the island’s first reaction is to reject his presence; in the sea the hand of a “water lady” was forcing him away “from the shore” (TB 4).

The man who returns to the island’s shore at the end is not the same man who first arrived, this second time “The mist lifted and the trees stepped back to make the way easier for a certain kind of man” (306, emphasis mine).

Peter B. Erickson proposes that “On land, [Thérèse] takes over the water-lady’s role as benevolent maternal sponsor” (303). One could also say that Thérèse, like the water lady, also submerges Son in a counterclockwise whirling vortex (TB 4) in which he is made to reconsider what it is to be American as well as African and which puts into question the dualistic paradigms
he held as he first arrived on the island. Only then, only when he has shared a boat ride with Thérèse – like he initially did with the American women upon his first arrival in the island – he is the kind of African American man who can join his African brothers in the Caribbean.

As I have mentioned, some critics have argued that only Jadine “shows potential for continued development and eventual self-redemption. She has chosen to leave Son's paradise as well as Valerian's, for neither holds her salvation” (Lepow 376). I argue that by the end of the novel they have both reconsidered the classificatory, dualistic paradigms of EuroAmerican thought. In Son’s particular case, his significant development in this aspect responded to the kinship he forms with Gideon and Thérèse, which prepares him to join the mythical, original diasporic community of the blind horsemen in which blindness “is a communally shared way of being in the world; in its ‘alternality’ it represents liberation. And because of its ideological ‘outsidedness’, it is a trope of the carnivalesque, confronting and dismantling preconceived notions of the acceptable found in dominant discourses about normalcy and appropriate ways of being in the world” (Hope Scott 39).
CONCLUSION

Because of its sheer territorial magnitude, its indisputable first place as a world power and its unequaled influence in the West, particularly in the Americas, the United States and its citizens can sometimes afford themselves to construct identities in a sort of echo chamber. Paul Gilroy specifies the complications of this situations with regards to the study of race relations in the US arguing “that much of the precious intellectual legacy claimed by African-American intellectuals as the substance of their particularity is in fact only partly their absolute ethnic property” (15).

In her essay “On the Backs of Blacks,” Morrison recognizes that with modern day immigration “it doesn’t matter anymore what shade the newcomer’s skin is. A hostile posture toward resident blacks must be struck at the Americanizing door before it will open” (147). In many ways, Gilroy and Morrison illustrate two sides of the same coin: today, an ignorance of each other’s existence in the world is only beneficial to the Eurocentric systems in power that, historically and presently, subjugate and dominate peoples of color.

An awareness of this situation has guided my reading of Tar Baby, in search for the possibilities that emerge when the African American identity is brought outside of its echo chamber. In the intersection of race and nationality I have read emerging forms of self-awareness and resistance that serve to oppose both racism and imperialism. Even when the differences seem unsurmountable, as is the case between Thérèse and Ondine, I believe that the mere interaction between them, the fact of being forced into each other’s presence, is already enlightening and constructive to their self-identity and their experience of the world around them. Of course, as is the case with Son, a more intimate contact and the development of a close relationship between
members of the African Diaspora of diverse national origin warrants the most definite, most lasting forms of resistance.
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