

The Mythic and the Historic in Morrison: A Formalistic Study

Daniel P. Popernack
English

Speaking of Richard Wright, Toni Morrison observed that Wright's artistic endeavor was to "make an art form that is both unquestionably beautiful and also political at the same time" (Brown 455). This same dilemma emerges in Morrison's work as a tension between narrative based in history and narrative based in a mythopoetic framework.¹ Her novels spiral around a central mystery, revealing with each gyration alternating pieces of Black history and Black myth. Although Morrison does occasionally draw upon classical mythology, it is—in her words— "usually to show that something has gone wrong" (461). Instead, she creates a self-referential (hence mythopoetic²) system that criticism has interpreted as magic realism, folkloric narrative, or Africanism. My intention is not to argue against these well-researched assertions but to identify how the existence of a mythic imagination in Morrison's novels rubs against the realistic elements of her work. Even more, these dueling textures are simultaneously developed through Morrison's creation of characters who straddle the temporal divide—historical vs. (a- or extra-) historical. Select passages from *Song of Solomon*, and *Tar Baby* illuminate how Morrison's novels use the contrast of these textures to engage in a wider discussion of the nature of a uniquely African-American identity and mythology.

Given that this analysis is primarily formalistic, a quick definition of terms would be beneficial. At the risk of being overly reductivist, the formal qualities that are common in Morrison's fiction are: the historical ethos, the mythic family/person/enclave, and a central mystery that unites them. *Beloved's* Sethe is a handy example for a quick explanation of these three elements. Morrison drew Sethe directly from the historical account of Mary Garner and her family's

¹ "Since the twinned birth of bourgeois capitalism and the novel in the eighteenth century, realism and fantasy have represented the Janus-faced Enlightenment through their several genres, constituting each other as fictive modes while appearing to be mutually exclusive" (Moglen 17).

² "If we no longer look to myth for reality, we are still drawn to mythopoesis, where gods, heroes, and supernatural conflicts exist on a purely symbolic level, tying us to our past and showing us our origins. Myths become "agents of stability," not restricting us to a specific place or even to a specific culture but using the specific to ponder the enduring questions of all men" (Harris 69).

narrative spans from the Middle Passage to Sweet Home to the “free” north. 124, however, becomes the prototypical Morrisonian “enclave” when Beloved’s return morphs the story from slave narrative to neo-Gothic ghost story. Often, houses such as 124, families (and even Convents) stand in as small extra-historical bubbles that fester in their self-enforced isolation. Within their walls, mythic imagination subsumes history and the reader senses the disconnect between the peculiar goings-on within and the general march of history without. Even within Morrison’s “haunted houses,” the bodily persons of her characters likewise become extrahistorical places upon which history inscribes itself. The chokeberry tree adorning Sethe’s back is a hieroglyphic standing in for the entirety of slavery; it does not, however, represent the mystery that is the engine within the novel—Sethe’s murder of Beloved. This central mystery—the validity and reliving of “anaconda love”—is the lynchpin that holds together the disparate, chaotic, and often befuddling narrative stops and starts in the novel. Sethe, as the focal point of history and what many have identified as a cult of motherhood³ that runs through Morrison’s writing, is a particularly revealing figure in the tracking of these two planes in other works.

The potential for (mythic) flight and the (historical) need to fight (against overt, violent racism) are the two major thrusts in *Song of Solomon*. Within the first few pages, Morrison sets up the dichotomy that Milkman Dead and his estranged friend Guitar will enact throughout the novel. Indeed, even before she had completed *Song*, she stated that in “relationships between men there is something other operating” (Step 482). This “something” underscoring Milkman and Guitar in *Song* is the conflict between relatively stable post-slavery Michigan and the siren song of a painful past calling from the south. Structured like a palindrome, the novel begins with (a failed) flight and ends with (a presumably successful) flight. Robert Smith’s leap marks the descent of the Seven Days into insanity while Milkman begins his upward ascent into the folklore of his people:

[Ruth Foster talking to others at the site of Smith’s suicide:] “Did he come with a caul?”

“You should have dried it and made him some tea from it to drink. If you don’t he’ll see ghosts.”

“You believe that?”

“I don’t, but that’s what the old people say.” (*Solomon* 10)

³ Moglen, Brown, Wyatt, Nissen, Harris, Middleton, Davis and others are a sample of the many critics who identify motherhood as being a central concern in Morrison’s novels. Often, critics examine the link between Morrison and Alice Walkers “In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens”

Guitar's fall is his engagement with history through the eyepiece of militant racism; Milkman indeed sees "ghosts" as he follows the aural/oral clues that lead to his symbolic sublimation through flight. Through these two men, the novel examines the enigmatic quality of righteous retribution and the possibility of re-engagement with a mythic past.

The Seven Days represent an anxiety that reoccurs in Morrison's novels: the artificial manipulation of history in the name of self-defense. The Seven Days hide behind the illusion of indifference by invoking a sort of twisted Hegelian dialectic. The Seven Days feign impersonality, self-figuring as the antithesis to the "unnatural" Whites' thesis. Their view of history, however, lacks the essential Hegelian synthesis; Guitar insists that he the bloody path of history is irrevocable: "the killing goes on and on. So will we" (156). The Whites' writers and artists are named as accomplices in the systematic brutalization of Blacks and Guitar even ascribes their "depravity" to "the structure of their [Whites'] chromosomes" (157). Above all, the Seven Days justify themselves as executors of "Numbers. Balance. Ratio. And the earth, the land [...] soggy with black people's blood" (158). These desperate appeals to science and fatalistic history place the Seven Days in Morrison's cross-hairs; characters who attempt to cut themselves off from humanity—whether for sociological or psychological reasons—become monstrous. Their stand against what they perceive as an anonymous white leviathan will only drive them to inhumanity, suicide, and—in Guitar's case—fratricide. In terms of Forster's "flat" and "round" characters, Morrison winnows Guitar down over the course of the novel. His progress from being Milkman's boon companion and engaging other characters in dialogue to his figuring (at the novel's end) as a lurking, seemingly omnipresent threat reflects the diminishing of his humanity in the name of the Seven Days monomaniacal project. As this study continues to point out characters who intentionally isolate themselves, it would be useful to keep in mind both Bakhtinian dialogism and Morrison's own views on the importance of call-and-response (oral/aural) in order to move discourse further. Attempts at laceration from the general discourse of the novel and its historical place invariably lead to tragedy. Ironically, it is Guitar who says of the odd cameo of a peacock that the bird will never fly: "Can't nobody fly with all that shit. Wanna fly, you got to give up the shit that weighs you down" (179). Like Joyce's nightmare from which one cannot awake, history is "shit" of which Guitar and the Seven Days are not able to divest themselves and, thus, unable to engage with reality.

For Milkman, on the other hand, he lacks—perhaps fortuitously—the strong hand of the Seven Days to dictate how he should engage with reality. Instead, Pilate and Macon Dead are the two possible paths towards realization of the self. Their father's (Milkman's grandfather's) death is the mystery that Milkman must

confront in order to learn to “fly.” Macon does not reveal to his son that he comes from slave-stock until the young man is already well into his twenties. This absurdity (one would think this would have come up at some point!) is Macon’s attempt to isolate his son from the painful mystery of his grandfather’s murder simply because he was a Black man who “owned things [...] and let the things [he] owned own other things” (55). In fact, Macon’s insistence on ownership of both objects and history does not exclude his son. Macon Senior (it is easy to forget the Milkman is, as well, Macon) forces his son into his tutelage and tries to activate some latent “dignity” in him by employing him. Far from the salt-of-the-earth grandfather, Macon’s feishization of objects and Milkman’s unsuitability for manual labor (his “burning defect” embodied in a short left leg) indicate a generational movement away from the agrarian south. It is as if the movement north literally disfigures the Dead family, making them physically unrecognizable from their past ancestors.⁴

Pilate, although equally damaged by the memory of her father’s murder, offers a path to reconciliation of the self that acknowledges the permanence of the past. For her, the present is an accumulation of the past, open to interference and “visitations.” In an oddly symbolic choice, Morrison places Chapter 5—the most gynocentric chapter and a recapitulation of the life and times of a navel-less woman—at the center of the book, an *ombligo mundi* of a very stylized novel. Chapter 5 reveals a Pilate that is not the Witch of the South Side, purveyor of moonshine, and near murderess of suitors. Instead, she is portrayed as a wanderer, symbolically carrying her name in her own ear and the soil of her journey. When her father appears to her as an apparition and tells her to “Sing, Sing” (which the reader later learns is a piece of Milkman’s mythic puzzle) she:

knew he was telling her to go back to Pennsylvania and collect what was left of the man she and Macon had murdered. (The fact that she had struck no blow [to the man] was irrelevant. She was part of her brother’s act, because, then, she and he were one. (147)

⁴ “Toni Morrison [in her first four novels] juxtaposes two categories of people’s dreams and aspirations, visions of how life should be lived. The first dreamtypes are idyllic, for their proponents’ chief aims are to live in concord with people and nature while remaining true to their own heritage. In contrast, dreams in the second category advocate not brotherhood but the competitive acquisition of power or money [...] Throughout all four books, Morrison affirms the superiority of idyllic values over competitive success ones” (House181). Although the “superiority of the idyllic” could be problematic, House correctly identifies these two contrary movements/types in Morrison.

The transferability of experience (“she and he were one”) is essential to the ability of a character to intuit and engage with the past. Her sensibilities leave her open to visitation by the past in a way that Macon has managed either to forget or to ignore intentionally. Her lack of a navel seems to imply that her food is supernatural stuff; by the time her line descends to Hagar, this lack of corporeality may be the curse that causes her granddaughter’s death. Hagar cannot kill her murderer (Milkman) because “try as she might, the ball joint in her shoulders would not move [she becomes a part of a tableau] the paralyzed woman and the frozen man” (130). Even more than any previous female figures, the triad of women in Pilate’s family begins to look less like social outcasts a la Sula and Pecola and more like conjurers and ephemeral beings standing on the sideline of history. The “greenish-gray” powder that Ruth procures from Pilate to excite Macon’s sexual fervor introduces—for the first time in a very overt way—the possibility for feminine magic into Morrison’s work. Whereas Lena and Corinthians are left to wither under the Macons and Bryn Mawrs (“a four-year dose of liberal education [...] unfit her for eighty percent of the useful work of the world”) Pilate represents a femininity that is the vessel of past knowledge (189).

This fine-tuning of different types of (African-American) femininity on the peripheries of a male-driven socio-historical reality is well evidenced in the scene depicting Milkman’s arrest. Corinthians seems confused that “she had just come from a house in which men sat in a lit kitchen talking in loud excited voices, only to meet an identical scene at home” (202). She wonders if this part of the night (presumably a violent urban landscape heretofore obscured from her sight by Macon) has always belonged exclusively to men: “if perhaps it was a secret hour in which men rose like giants from dragon’s teeth” (202). Keep in mind Morrison’s admission that invocations of Western myth as a sign that something has gone awry; Corinthians, the tragically delicate ingénue, thinks of the urban experience (her experience) in terms of a scene from Jason’s quests⁵. As a spectator, she is unable to understand what her father and brother are speaking of “with so much passion.” The reality of Milkman being arrested for being in the wrong place at the wrong time in the wrong skin forces the father and son to confront that only the family’s relative affluence has managed to save them from the shame and submission that is their race’s lot even in the north. Cynthia Davis has identified that:

when coercion is exercised by Whites [in Morrison’s fiction] it is depicted as *anti-mythic* [...] it destroys the links between generations that are

⁵ Jason assembled a great group of heroes, known as the Argonauts after their ship, the Argo. The group of heroes included the Boreads (sons of Boreas, the North Wind) who could fly.

foundations of a mythos [...] and emphasizes the denial of responsibility in the faceless anti-myth. (335)

Davis's appraisal does not allow space for coercion or self-hate on the part of Blacks. Socioeconomic divides permit Macon to direct his ire upon "that yellow-eyed nigger" Guitar rather than upon the racial prejudice of the police. Milkman, the more "hip" of the two perhaps due to his contact with Guitar, knows that popular culture and mass media are White culture's most effective instruments of oppression. Regardless of the complexity of the Dead family history and their unique road back to Shalimar, they are conflated into the hunt "for the Negro that killed that boy" (204). Milkman understands that "They always say [that the culprit is Black] every time" because "they" (read Whites) have to. Milkman is only freed when Pilate, effecting the "Yassuh, boss" stereotype even to the extent of "changing her voice," is able to manipulate White expectations to set all straight and return home with her bag of bones. What is left opaque to the two men because they have yet to realize the mythic importance of the bones is: 1) "What's crazier? Her hauling a sack of gold around all this time or hauling a dead man's bones around?" and 2) how she intuited Milkman's intention well enough to understand the situation immediately. Until Corinthians casts him out of the house, Milkman is unable to understand that his aunt speaks with the ghosts he has yet to meet but from whom he springs.

From Milkman's time with Circe (this name itself a misleading allusion to Western myth) to his leap at the novel's end, there is a drastic change in pacing and tone in the prose that mimetically reflects his acceleration towards his climactic "take-off." Prior to Part II, the novel revolves around the Dead family, the incestuous relationship between Hagar and Milkman, and the stagnancy of the town (Milkman "wondered what they would do if they didn't have black and white problems to talk about" (107)). After his departure for the south, however, the novel takes a turn towards...for lack of a better example...something more akin to a hardboiled Dan Brown novel than a classic Morrisonian meditation on slavery's lingering effect on a family. The reliance upon memory, word play, coincidence, and listening have a touch more *jouissance* than readers anticipate from Morrison; usually (and I have *Beloved* in mind particularly) the supernatural and history are revealed through painful admission and arduous discovery. It is easy to forget that the allure of money and the threat of lethal confrontation with Guitar impel Milkman southwards and past-wards; whatever he discovers about his mythic pedigree is consequential. Indeed, as he enters the cave "he smelled money [...] it was like candy and sex [...] Las Vegas [...] to win" (251).

Still, Circe is pivotal in reading the second half of the novel not as a series of word puzzles but as an unwitting discovery of the mythic past. As is typical in

immigration stories (and *Song* is one played in reverse) a female “births” the immigrant into his/her new northern self. Likewise, Circe “guards this entrance into the past. She initiates Milkman into his own past, showing both the power and the destructiveness of his heritage, and channels his rebelliousness into a quest for his own identity” (Harris 74). Again, before his hunting excursion and his anointing (for sacrifice?) by Sweet, his motives are suspect and likely monetarily driven. However, Circe does warn Milkman that his “ear is on [his] head, but it’s not connected to [his] brain” (229). Besides being an elaborate admonishment, she is pointing out to him that he must “commit [his experience in Virginia] to his personal, oral memory, just as his slave and African ancestors learned, not to an artificial, external memory—a written record” (Middleton 72). Not only do female characters in Morrison novels seem more finely in-tune with myth, they also act as the Janus faced portal to “birth” errant Blacks back into commune with their mythic roots.⁶

This internalization of experience and its relationship to first-hand experience is a major divide in what a reader makes of Milkman’s last “ride.” Whether Milkman “knew what Shalimar knew” in a historical or in a mythic manner⁷ in which he relives Shalimar’s experience typologically lends a distinct “Lady-or-the-Tiger-ness” (Harris’s words) to the ending. At this critical junction, a reader must decide whether Morrison is answering the “screaming from the sixties” for a uniquely Black mythology (also referred to as “[Amiri] Baraka’s cry”) and allowing Milkman to partake in it...or if this concept collapses under its own airiness. His sojourn in the south has exposed him to his family’s past. It has also exposed him to an agrarian, somewhat southern way of life within which he feels like a perpetual outsider. Can one experience the south—the true south—without also experiencing bondage? Put another way, does the south become a different place if one is constantly aware that one can leave at one’s will? Whether it is bondage as his grandfather experienced or the bondage implicit in Morrison’s portrayal of Shalimar as inescapably impoverished, Milkman does not feel the yoke. The dilemma forces the reader to simultaneously feel the excitement of Milkman—heretofore a shiftless, ambitionless youth—discovering lost parts of his “self” and the contrary impression that Milkman is an interloper in his own

⁶ Of course, Baby Suggs’ sermon in the forest is a classic example. Much like Circe, Baby Suggs urges listeners to reconnect with their bodies. Dissecting them (the listeners) into hands, laughs, dances, and wails, she opens up the possibility of self-refashioning out of the parts, albeit in an oddly set-aside, mythic clearing in the forest.

⁷ As in the concept of rememory in *Beloved*. In rememory, one can actually re-experience the past in first person by being in the physical place in which the act first occurred. This braces Sethe’s decision to keep her children away from Sweet home and is reminiscent of the tangibility of time in Proust.

historical past. This study does not intend to disprove relatively optimistic readings of Milkman's consummation of a leap into the mythic sublime, joining the flying Africans whose bloodline he carries. However, Morrison is too insistent upon the historical ramifications of the novel—the nascent battle for Civil Rights and the social machinations of the Seven Days—to forget that we are reading the tale of a Michigan Blackman, on a hunt for his father's gold, sprinting across the landscape that his ancestors had to till.

The effects of progress upon Black identity for subsequent generations come to the forefront in the character of Jadine from *Tar Baby*. Again, Morrison intertwines myth, motherhood, and organic femininity but—for the Sorbonne educated Jadine confronted with the town of Eloë—this isolation from the past becomes a literal nightmare. John Duvall in “Descent in the House of Chloe: Race, Rape, and Identity in Toni Morrison's *Tar Baby*” identifies a very real possibility that Jadine stands in for the Duboisian “talented tenth,” a class of Blacks entrusted with the education of other less privileged Blacks. More importantly in terms of *Tar Baby* is—Duvall argues—Morrison's place in this talented tenth. Interviewers of Morrison seem constantly concerned with the artistic crisis (perhaps projected upon her) of writing about a class of people from whom one derives the meat of one's fiction but who may be unable to access one's work; simply put, many of the historically determined, impoverished, illiterate, agrarian types that Morrison marshals in her fiction may be quite literally incapable of reading and appreciating Morrison. Duvall asserts that:

If there is a novel of Morrison's that fully registers W. E. B. Du Bois's sense of the double-consciousness of African Americans, it is *Tar Baby*. Even more than *Song of Solomon*, *Tar Baby* represents Morrison's struggle to fashion a usable identity [...] figuring the self as female, Morrison creates a more ambivalent and troubled relation to that novel's black agrarian community. (326)

While Duvall may overstate the case for biographical interjection into the text⁸, he resists the urge to link Jadine's apprehension towards mother-figures with her author. Jadine ruminates on a single Black woman, dressed in yellow, holding

⁸Morrison was born Chloe Ardelia Wofford (Ardelia after her grandmother who also makes a cameo in her dedication to *Tar Baby*), married Harold Morrison, published under Toni Morrison saying (why lie?) that her middle name was Anthony. *Tar Baby* is dedicated to members of her family and a quote afterwards refers to “the house of Chloe.” Duvall speculates that her refusal of Chloe may stem from less than savory depictions of “Chloes” in *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and *Invisible Man* (330). Minor in classics at Howard, she may also be reacting against the Greek pastoral in the myth of Daphnis and Chloe (Duvall 330 footnote).

three eggs (fertility) and has a vision of the ageless women standing around her bed in Eloë with one breast exposed (a possible allusion to the single-breasted Amazons?) These visions of overt femininity are vaguely horrifying to her but the text does not explicitly explain why; the reader is left to assume that she feels an unfounded sense of ineptitude. Even at her most assertively feminine moment, when the sight of her naked genitalia forces Son to flee their New York apartment, the integrity of her femininity is underscored or made absurd by the Cheech and Chong t-shirt adorning her torso. Her stylized, fashion-model, modern aesthetic beauty is at best a mockery of the authentic symbols of womanhood that saturate Morrison's fiction. Is this a function of Jadine's education or upbringing under the creepily benevolent Valerian Street? Is she of the class of Americans who—as a cipher for modern sterility—“spent their whole lives bathing bathing bathing washing away the stench of cesspools as though pure soap had anything to do with purity?” (*Tar Baby* 203). Her anxiety about scent, particularly her denial of smelling Son while he physically accosts her, demonstrates an avoidance of the organic corporeality of experience that Morrison typically associates with historical suffering. The chokeberry tree on Sethe's back, Hannah Peace removing feces pellets from the constipated Plum, and Widow Ealing bleeding the demons out of her daughter are a smattering of the examples of the alleviation and infliction of pain as signifiers of motherhood in Morrison's rural, pre-industrial America. These are the gigantic women to whom Alice Walker ascribes the salvation of Black culture. These are the same women who Jadine—as modern, progressive Black woman—is haunted by. As Karin Luisa Badt observes: “this incessant literary return to the mother [...] is both an expression of a psychological desire to recover the repressed—the lost object of desire—and an expression of a political desire to recover the past” (567).

My reading of *Tar Baby* searches to dislodge Jadine and Son's tryst from history and place it in a discourse of modernized mythology. The critically elusive element of *Tar Baby* may be founded in the unusual (in terms of historical vs. mythological) textures that Morrison creates. Valerian and Sydney's enactment of master and slave portrays them as a superannuated, racially charged Odd Couple; never at complete ease but together nonetheless, the boundary between master and servant dissolves into a model of codependence. Thérèse, with ever-flowing breasts and eerily unquestioning acceptance of the island's myth, is the locus of traditional, ancient, earth-based, gynocentric myth that (as I have demonstrated in *Song of Solomon*) permeates Morrison's work. Typically—if there is any typicality in Morrison—these two poles would suffice to create tension: the capitalist Valerian searching to “civilize” the island with his candy money and greenhouse and the ghost-seeing/speaking native inhabitants of the Isle de Chevaliers. In other words, the novel in one sense is the story of the American in

exile attempting to impose the historical narrative of imperialism upon a self-referential mythic place. Jadine and Son's relationship exists *outside* of this tension. Criticism of the novel tends to place Son in league with Thérèse and company; it is important to remember that, until his symbolic surrender to the Isle de Chevaliers at the end of the novel, he is operating against another tension: Jadine's adoption of White/Western ideals of beauty.

Malin Walther Pereira's attempt to periodize Morrison's work hinges on *Tar Baby's* treatment of "the colonization of African American beauty by white notions of beauty" (75). Pereira observes that, after *Tar Baby*:

Morrison's central concern [is] self-reflexive African American characters focused on issues of identity, memory and love [while in earlier works she focuses on] black characters' struggles with the effects of psychological and cultural colonization. (80)

These "periods" are useful in the present study of historical and mythic sensibilities in that they acknowledge a growing self-reflexive and self-referential element in Black identity as Morrison portrays it. However, there is a particularly (scholastically) troubling move in *Tar Baby* that does not fit well into sweeping analyses: the polyvalent ant imagery throughout the novel. The reoccurring ants mark a different type of self-reflexivity that may only find a direct parallel in *Jazz* narrating itself: art commenting on its own formation and, in doing so, disengaging with myth and history alike. To reemploy the quote that opened this paper, the ant imagery in *Tar Baby* aims towards being "unquestionably beautiful" (read aesthetically based) rather than "political."

The first employment of ants as synecdoche for nature reveals the central crisis in Son's life: lack of rites of passage. Morrison makes a point of stating that the "soldier ants were not out in the night wind [...] but heavy clouds grouped themselves behind the hills as though for a parade" (165). This language (and referring to the clouds as a "herd") seems to collapse the image of the ant and the wind, conflating them into a tempest encircling the mysterious "orphan," Son, without doing him harm. "Unbaptized, uncircumcised, minus puberty rites or the formal rites of manhood," Son reflects "there was something wrong with the rites. He had wanted another way" (166). He refuses to become part of the great class of "undocumented men" upon whom can be projected the narrative of "Huck Finn," "Nigger Jims," "Calibans," and "John Henrys." Inside the extra-historical tempest of wind/ants, Son's ruminations introduce the unsettled and unsettling theme of forging a new Black, male identity that must start as essentially faceless and formless. To engage the historical, literary, and cultural portrayals of Black masculinity is to enter into a discourse that only seeks to pigeonhole and

taxonomize.⁹ Son's position as run-away and criminal is not accidental. As outsider he has the privileged position of anonymity and it is exactly this formlessness that attracts a woman like Jadine who is mired in Western projections upon Blackness. In a 1995 interview, Morrison said of creating strong Black male characters that "Yes, that's right. I create a threat [...] Ulysses left home and you all said he was a hero. But when a black character leaves home you say he is irresponsible" (Brown 472). Son's search for identity is necessarily a threatening, transgressive act and Sydney's—"the genuine Philadelphia Negro mentioned in the book of that name"—fear of Son is commensurate to Jadine's attraction to his unsettling presence. Sydney quite literally takes pride in embodying a literary type; Son rails against and flees from this activity.

The peculiar use of ants may also be a tip of the hat to Marquez, whose fictional city Macondo and the Buendía family are overrun by the entropic forces of nature as symbolized by ants. Sydney's struggles to keep the ants out of Valerian's green house and Son's mastery of them clearly engage in the imperialist theme running through the novel. The captive native plants held in the greenhouse, the boom of classical music, and the "Philadelphia Negro" are the bubble of control that Valerian is able to exhort over the island. Sydney (the Philadelphia Negro entrusted with maintaining the illusion of order in the greenhouse) understands that "cement [...] is all that will keep this earth still. This place dislocates everything [...] and something serious had to be done about the ants" (284). Valerian's "dancing hands" are useless against these entropic forces of nature and must employ his servants to surround him in his security blanket of blaring classical music. Worn down in paradise, the final residing image of Valerian is his head bobbing eternally while Sydney spoons potato into his mouth. "Things grew or died where and how they pleased. Isle de Chevaliers filled in the spaces that had been the island's to begin with" (242). The power embodied in the ants undoes attempts at imperialization; just as the Seven Days' struggle to enforce a narrative upon history leads inevitably to insanity, Valerian's battle against entropy leads to senile solipsism.

Once Morrison has charged the symbol of the ant with this destructive power, she twists it in Jadine's mind into a picture of fierce womanhood that is peculiar in her work. This is not to say that Jadine herself embodies these values but, rather, that this ideal—much like the woman in yellow and the women of Eloë—has entered into her vocabulary of feminine identities. Unlike other young, beautiful characters like Sula and Dorcas Manfred who seem to spring from the

⁹ In an expanded form of this paper, it would be interesting to apply bell hooks' analysis of Black masculinity in *We Real Cool* to the figuring of Son as both orphan and son of the Eloë community.

femme fatale and Ophelia traditions, the Ant Queen is a “little Amazon” whose identity is based in natural cycles. John Duvall states that “Morrison learned a number of techniques from the modernists, and her fiction contains numerous scenes in which the main thing that is not represented is the main thing” (334).¹⁰ This rings especially true in the symbolic inversion of rape in Jadine’s meditations on the plane flying away from Isle de Chevaliers. I happen to know (thanks to the wonders of television) that female ants copulate only once and, in this single *soiree*, “collect” enough sperm to reproduce for the rest of their life. The oddity of an in-depth discussion of entomology during Jadine’s departure underscores that Morrison has jumped the tracks into a new type of fiction. Highly stylized in the fashion of the modernists, the register blends scientific exposition with a projected Jadine from the future: “No time for dreaming, although sometimes, late in life, somewhere between the thirtieth and fortieth generation [...] she will recall the rush of wind on her belly [...] airborne, suspended, open, trusting, frightened, vulnerable, *girlish*” (291 emphasis mine).

In this odd passage, the queen finds a mate when some “four-million-year-old magic she is heiress to” tells her “it is time.” The invocation of generational magic invites cross-readings with the aforementioned critics who have identified the cult of motherhood in Morrison. Instead of the female body acting as vessel of the past and mythology, it is here figured as a self-sufficient, unique item: “a grown woman did not need the safety or its dreams. She *was* the safety she longed for” (290). Instead of Sethe carrying history in her womb across the Ohio or a *minha mãe* speaking across time to her daughter, Florens, Jadine seems more similar to Milkman—weightless, unburdened—than other females. The critical juncture here is if one interprets this as a contrary model of femininity that Morrison offers or if it represents the particular ideals of Jadine as modern Black female. I tend to lean towards the latter based on Jadine’s problematic last thought, that it would be difficult to forget the “man who fucked like a star” (292). At the risk of falling into the succubus/saint dichotomy of womanhood, this vivacious celebration of sexuality seems particularly superficial and vulgar. For example, try inserting the words “fuck like a star” in any other female character’s mouth and one notices that Jadine stands apart in Morrison’s fiction. Even Sula’s vulgar yet prophetic tirade is based in her position as outsider (“after all the dogs have fucked all the cats [...] there’ll be a little love left over for me” (*Sula* 146)). Jadine incites fear and trepidation much like Son because she inhabits a space that

¹⁰ Duvall is fiercely critical in regards to this point: “Son’s sexual violation of Jadine is startling in two ways: first, for the way that critics have commented upon this key scene without noticing the sexual violation; and second, for the way that Morrison’s own less-than-candid remarks on her novel have helped to conceal the rape” (335).

is beyond easy definition; a Black woman who simultaneously adopts the White ideals of beauty that ruined one of her mother figures (Margaret Street, the *principle beauty*) while acknowledging the ancient power embodied in her and activated by her other mother figure (Ondine). The extent to which one reads Jadine as both monstrously confused or confusedly monstrous (Can we help but feel sympathy for Ondine?) is a function of her place as orphan outside historical or mythical determination. In this light, she presents a third alternative, albeit superficial, half-formed, and frighteningly recognizable in its modern sense of detachment.

The last scene of the novel is equally ambiguous as it, again, enters into representational language the isolates the reader from the “main thing” being represented. As with Milkman’s leap, there is a definite “lady-or-tiger-ness” to Son scurrying back onto the island and being transformed into an acoustic metaphor (“Lickety-split, lickety-split” as an onomatopoeia representing the spectral *chevaliers* of the island.) As opposed to the difficulty of applying an overriding narrative to Jadine’s last “flight,” Son’s boat trip with Thérèse can be read as a parallel to Circe’s relation to Milkman—a reversal of the immigrant story. Gideon implores Son to forget Jadine and Son insists that one cannot forget a “woman whose eyebrows were a study, whose face was enough to engage your attention all your life, [the sound of] all the music he had ever wanted to play?” (299). What he is referring to, however, is an ideal Jadine that—the reader who has just learned of her Ant Queen transformation—no longer applies to the real Jadine. He isolates her beauty and the romantic satisfaction that finds its root in the Platonic idea of the “other half” who completes the first. Alma Estée in her “dried-blood red” wig is a parody of these Westernized conceptions of beauty and its slapdash superimposition on Black femininity. When Son removes her wig to reveal her “midnight skin and antelope eyes” (Africanist beauty) she “howled and resecured it on her head with clenched fingers;” if he retains any illusory ambitions to reveal Jadine’s African beauty to her, this highly stylized joke that Morrison plays on him shakes them from his mind in a bout of “dizziness.”

Thérèse offers to carry Son to the port to hunt down Jadine but, instead of returning/introducing Son to modern reality as the immigrant narrative would suggest, births him back into the realm of myth. She urges him to “get free of [Jadine. The *chevaliers*] are waiting in the hills for you. They are naked and they are blind too” (306). The final paragraph mimetically portrays his re-birth and transformation into a mythic type:

First he *crawled* the rocks one by one [...] till his hands touched shore and the *nursing* sound of the sea was behind him. He [...] *crawled* off then *stood up* [then] took a few tentative steps [...] He threw out his hands to

guide and steady his going [...] The mist lifted and the trees stepped back a bit as if to make the way easier for a *certain kind of man*. (306 emphasis mine)

The language depicts Son as growing up before the reader's eyes, almost a riff on the painting of man evolving from his simian origins. What Son evolves into, however, is a "certain kind of man." This phrase is as equally enigmatic as "the man who fucked like a star" and perhaps intentionally so. Son's confused search for Jadine in the swamp of Isle de Chevaliers is parallel to Milkman's hunt for the treasure in Virginia and, likewise, ends in his ambiguous sublimation into myth. *Tar Baby*, however, does not offer a sense of consummation or balance in the sacrifice of the male protagonist. Whereas Milkman unwittingly reenacts his African heritage, Son seems to be "a kind of cartoon rabbit [escaping] back into his same-as-it-never-was briar patch" (Duvall 347). In Son's uneasy surrender to a mythology that is not his own, Morrison complicates the concept of mythic authenticity. Just as *Song of Solomon*—as an answer to collective cry during the sixties for a markedly African-American mythology—questions Milkman's ability to relive Shalimar's experience, *Tar Baby* undermines diasporic and Africanist claims to a mythology of their own. The fervor and "lickety-split"edness of Son's entry into the mythos of the *chevaliers* is suspect; the reader, just as Gideon says, is left wondering if Thérèse has misled her ward: "'Two big fools,'" said Gideon. "One blind, the other gone mad!"' (*Tar Baby* 302).

In parallel readings *Song of Solomon* and *Tar Baby*, this study aims not to give definite answers but to identify two basic axes along which Morrison forms her characters. These two novels in particular depict characters transgressing the boundaries between history and myth, sometimes victim and sometimes victor to either. Within her work, there is a typological reiteration of these types that is revealing. The Seven Days' manipulation of history is reminiscent of the leading family's in *Ruby* artificially avoiding African-American subjugation in a predominantly White society; a well-intentioned project results in violent and misled means (racial engineering and the xenophobic massacre at the Convent.) In both instances, historically determined characters strike back at the forces that created them and, in doing so, become monstrous. Oracular, mythically inspired woman such as Consolata, Baby Suggs, Circe, Lina, and Thérèse form a pantheon of guiding lights in their novels and their wraithlike presence often stands opposed to the historical place in which they exist. Their demeanor borders on voodoo and they work in mysterious ways; the reader must wonder if Consolata urging the women at the Convent to paint their dolorous lives upon chalk duplicates works towards diminishing the need for a Convent within which to shelter. Morrison is careful not to privilege either sensibility (historical or mythic) but, rather, employs

them to explore questions of a distinct African American identity and mythology (not as a negative definition in a White hegemony.) Morrison's fiction confronts the reader with a central mystery (murder, incest, theft, hate) and like *L.*—the narrator in *Love*—leaves him/her with the impression that “something else was to blame” (*Love* 9). Neither deterministic history nor Africanist myth are responsible for the complex struggles her characters confront but, rather, both textures lay their claim.

Works Cited

Badt, Karin Luisa. "The Roots of the Body in Toni Morrison: A Mater of "Ancient Properties"." *African American Review* 29.4 (1995): 567-577.

Brown, Cecil and Toni Morrison. "Interview with Toni Morrison." *The Massachusetts Review* 36.3 (1995): 455-473.

Davis, Cynthia A. "Self, Society, and Myth in Toni Morrison's Fiction." *Contemporary Literature* 23.3 (1982): 323-342.

Duvall, John. "Descent in the "House of Chloe": Race, Rape, and Identity in Toni Morrison's "Tar Baby"." *Contemporary Literature* 38.2 (1997): 325-349.

Gauthier, Marni. "The Other Side of "Paradise": Toni Morrison's (Un)Making of Mythic History." *African American Review* 39.3 (2005): 395-414.

Hamilton, Cynthia S. "Revisions, Rememories, and Exorcisms: Toni Morrison and the Slave Narrative." *Journal of American Studies* 30.3 (1996): 429-445.

Harris, Leslie. "Myth as Structure in Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon*." *MELUS* 7.3 (1980): 69-76.

Harris, Trudier. "Toni Morrison: Solo Flight through Literature into History." *World Literature Today* 68.1 (1994): 9-14.

House, Elizabeth. "The "Sweet Life" in Toni Morrison's Fiction." *American Literature* 56.2 (1984): 181-202.

Middleton, Joyce I. "Orality, Literacy, and Memory in Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon*." *College English* 55.1 (1993): 64-75.

Moglen, Helene. "Redeeming History: Toni Morrison's "Beloved"." *Cultural Critique* 24 (1993): 17-40.

Morrison, Toni. *Love*. New York: Vintage Books, 2005.

—. *Song of Solomon*. New York: Vintage Books, 2004.

—. *Sula*. New York: Plume, 1987.

—. Tar Baby. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., 1981.

Pereira, Malin Walther. "Periodizing Toni Morrison's Work from "The Bluest Eye" to "Jazz:" The Importance of "Tar Baby"." MELUS 22.3 (1997): 71-82.

Stepo, Robert and Toni Morrison. "'Intimate Things in Place": A Conversation with Toni Morrison." The Massachusetts Review 18.3 (1977): 473-489.