

# Magical Realism in Toni Morrison's *Tar Baby*

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*Tar Baby* (1981) is Morrison's first novel to be set outside the United States, taking place on a Caribbean island in the present day, and the first to posit white characters at the center of the plot. Created by local Haitian laborers, the novel's setting, an island paradise called Isle de Chevaliers, is characterized by capitalist exploitation, implying both colonial and postcolonial times — and also the hegemonic logic therein — out of whose context magical realism arises. Significantly, *Tar Baby* in fact takes over the central themes Morrison explores in *Song of Solomon* — not only the folkloric and biblical implications but also the search for identity of the protagonists, a young black man and woman in each story, who both are immersed in white capitalist values, and lack African roots. However, suggesting the similarities between the Caribbean and the African American cultures, the setting enables the author to explore the issues inside the United States more deeply, at the same time making the novel magical and mythic. Although it may be true, as John Duvall points out, that “[*Tar Baby*] is less frequently taught and receives relatively less critical attention than Morrison's other novels” (99), perhaps because of its controversial complexities, it will be the novel with which I will confirm Morrison's technical and textual use of magical realism, which presents her enchanted cosmology, as well as consider her position in the postcolonial context.

## Postlapsarian Paradise

In the chapter entitled “The Imperial Routes of Mark Twain,” Amy Kaplan explores how, known “for his outspoken condemnation of imperialism at the end of his life,” Twain's trip to Hawaii as a journalist in 1866, just after the Civil War, influenced his career as a writer, and how he viewed American imperialism outside the United States (19). Kaplan points out that Hawaii is the

place where Twain experienced “conflicts between the colonial preconceptions he brought with him to Hawaii and the tumultuous social changes he found there that overflowed and unsettled the imperial framework of his writing” (19). Kaplan then proposes that “the national identity of Mark Twain, his ‘Americanness,’ was forged in an international context of imperial expansion” (52). If U.S. imperialist actions abroad shaped this “quintessential American author,” in the same way, the anarchy of empire in the postcolonial era has made Morrison *both* an “American” *and* an “African American” author in the U.S. Twain’s view of Hawaii is in certain ways like Morrison’s description of Isle de Chevaliers in *Tar Baby*, reflecting the very similar slavery-related conflicts that Morrison fictionalizes. It is this conflict and the paradisaean image of the setting, as in Hawaii, that allows her text to be considered magical realist.

The story certainly evokes the Genesis story, the myth of Eden, offering thematic views not only of the creation of human beings, but also of temptation, entrapment, a fall, and salvation. This paradisaean image is on the other hand described as highly ironic. It is a “paradise” — similar to Twain’s image of Hawaiian paradise — that has no “labor or history” as “a labor-free Eden,” leading to the image of “idleness” as “an innate racial characteristic” (Kaplan 80); it is also a “paradise” that “merges the present and the past by transcending historical time” (54).

Very similarly, Isle de Chevaliers is Morrison’s creation of the tropical paradise, the Garden of Eden, which conceals internal turmoil while retaining a postlapsarian image. The narrator describes the tropical facility, for instance, like bees which “have no sting on Isle des Chevaliers, nor honey” and “are fat and lazy, curious about nothing” (81). To this Caribbean island, accompanied by two black servants, Sydney and Ondine, Valerian Street, the wealthy, white owner of a big vacation house, retreats from his candy manufacturing in Philadelphia. His factory’s candy, “Valerians” symbolically shows his present status in the U.S. since it has turned to be a “real flop” and except for “Jigs,” “nobody in the East or Midwest touched them”: “They sat in movie house display cases and on candy store shelves until they were hard as marbles and stuck together like grapes” (50–51). Valerian appears to be a benevolent humanitarian in his supporting of the education of Jadine Childs, his servants’ niece, and his allowing Son Green, a young black intruder, to stay in their

house. The tension and instabilities in the power relationships inside the Street household, however, gradually reveal that Valerian is, as his name itself suggests, an emperor-like or god-like figure at "the center of the world" (Ruas 101).

Isle des Chevaliers is initially turned into a natural "paradise" by Valerian's capitalist development, which dispossesses Haitians of their land for almost nothing. Suggesting the conquerors' colonialist violation, Valerian exploitatively manipulates everything on this Caribbean island, all the nature and people, where the people have been forced into "a postlapsarian capitalist system of commodified labor" (Kaplan 80). Morrison starts the novel with a detailed description of cultivation of the land owned by Valerian: "The end of the world, as it turned out, was nothing more than a collection of magnificent winter houses on Isle des Chevaliers. When laborers imported from Haiti came to clear the land, clouds and fish were convinced that the world was over, that the sea-green green of the sea and the sky-blue sky of the sky were no longer permanent" (9).

As Son later conceives that "wilderness wasn't wild anymore or threatening; wildlife needed human protection to exist at all" (221), Valerian/U.S. imperialism is described as merciless in acquiring a new colony for his/its overseas empire, that is, in the "new rapings" of the land and indigenous people (Hawthorne 103). Thérèse, an indigenous woman, understands America as the place "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 plastic 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 in the park and sold them to strangers" (151). Gideon, a native yardman and only called "Yardman" by the Streets, is also so angry at the Americans that he helps "Thérèse prepare all sorts of potions and incantations for their destruction, just in case there was such a thing as magic after all" (218). Indeed, this violation is the representation of the origins of magical realism, a body of tragic myths that the New World experienced through its creation. Although Morrison puts Valerian, symbolic of the Euro-American value of capitalism, at the "center" of the novel, what she attempts to describe is an "anarchy," a chaos, inside the seemingly orderly "empire" in the colonized

but paradisaean landscape of the indigenous site. It is rather the U.S. — imperial — force that Morrison presents as cannibalistic. In so doing, she undertakes to subvert the myths the colonizing people have created for the colonized, nonwhite people, and replace them with a genuine one.

Isle de Chevaliers is an island that “three hundred years ago, had struck slaves blind the moment they saw it” (8), and where Valerian’s paradise, *L’Arbe de la Croix*, is constructed by the exploited Haitian labor above *Sein de Vieilles*, witch’s tit — “a shriveled fogbound oval seeping with a thick black substance that even mosquitoes could not live near” (10) — with this myth from the descendants of African slaves indicating the spirit of African resistance. The myth is subversive, for the blinded slaves still scare “the rich Americans” with their mythical existence: “They learned to ride through the rain forests avoiding all sorts of trees and things. They race each other, and for sport they sleep with the swamp women in *Sein de Vieilles*. . . . they can’t stand for sighted people to look at them without their permission. No telling what they’ll do if they know you saw them” (152–3).

Notable for its natural beauty, “wide, breezy and full of light,” *L’Arbe de la Croix* is elaborately designed “to keep it from looking ‘designed,’” and is said to be “the most handsomely articulated and blessedly unrhetoical house in the Caribbean” (11). Its natural quality seems to be nostalgic and recalls Renato Rosaldo’s discussion of “imperialist nostalgia,” where “agents of colonialism long for the very forms of life they intentionally altered or destroyed,” using “a pose of ‘innocent yearning’ both to capture people’s imaginations and to conceal its complicity with often brutal domination” (107–08). Valerian does not wear “nylon or tricot,” “none of the man-made fibers,” but “everything he owns has to be made by Mother Nature” (277). His greenhouse, which is artificially formed in the midst of a natural garden, additionally serves as a site of recovery where he takes “very good care of the greenhouse for it was a nice place to talk to his ghosts in peace while he transplanted, fed, air-layered, rooted, watered, dried and thinned his plants” (14). Perhaps it is because of nostalgia that Valerian allows Son, an uncultivated, savage, nature-oriented black man, to stay in the house: “spaces, mountains, savannas — all those were in his forehead and eyes” (158). Here, in a sense, Valerian mourns not only for the lost nature of the pre-colonial land but also for the lost

authenticity back in the U.S., a mourning that Kaplan terms "the imperialist melancholia" (57).

### **Folktale and Tricksters**

As is well-known, in *Tar Baby*, Morrison embeds at the center of the novel the African American folktale, "Tar Baby," whose roots lie in West African folklore and whose allegorical interpretations enhance the novel's magical aesthetic, in the same way as does the use of the myth of the flying Africans in *Song of Solomon*, but "in a more direct, bold way" (Ruas 109). "Tar Baby" (1879) is derived from one of the Uncle Remus tales by Joel Chandler Harris, who is, according to Robert Hemenway, a white Southerner "with a sentimental attachment to a plantation memory," and created in Uncle Remus a character who has "nothing but pleasant memories of the discipline of slavery" (8). It may be true that Harris's white perspective more or less affects the tales in racist ways, yet Hemenway's assertion that "Harris did not in any significant way tamper with the stories themselves" (23) is valid: Uncle Remus himself is the only part of the stories he created. Harris is the type of American author who Morrison might believe did not use "Africanism" as "a vehicle"<sup>1</sup> but truly wrote African American oral folktales.

Concerning Morrison's use of the tar baby folktale, it is necessary to examine the significance a trickster figure offers in the novel since its functions are closely connected with concepts of magical realism. According to Jeanne Rosier Smith, the increased appearance of the trickster parallels the growth of ethnic literatures in America (xi), where the borders and boundaries of "American" literature are continually changing, suggesting the "ever-shifting boundaries" between the dominant and the marginalized (Kaplan 1); hence tricksters "shake things up, splinter the monologic, shatter the hierarchies" (Smith xii). As not only a character but also a rhetorical agent, then, Smith argues, a trickster, embedded in a cultural context, "serves to combat racial and sexual oppression and to affirm and create personal and cultural identity for women writers who have historically been subjugated because of their race and gender (2). Writers of color in the U.S. indeed in certain ways share historical experiences and oppressions with Latin American magical realist writers, but since a trickster is "a profoundly cross-cultural and therefore truly American phe-

nomenon" (Smith xiii), Morrison uses the trickster figure as one of the strategies for writing her unique brand of magical realism in the U.S., exploring racial and sexual identity for her people.

Cynthia Whitney Hallett asserts that Morrison herself is a trickster as an author who "may purposely outwit or mislead the reader in order to create a specific, final narrative effect" (354). Tricksters in Morrison's novels, including *Tar Baby*, become essential figures for her to subvert Western archetypal patterns and turn the texts into the African American folkloric modes that originated in African cosmology. Importantly, although some versions of the Tar Baby story, including the white American version, end with Br'er Rabbit being freed from the tar in the briar patch by the white master/Br'er Fox, in the Harris version entitled "The Wonderful Tar-Baby Story," Br'er Rabbit is unable to escape, stuck to the tar baby. (It is unclear whether he can escape or not, though he appears in other Uncle Remus stories.) In Morrison's story, Son remains — psychologically and erotically — completely attached to Jadine almost to the end, but as a trickster maneuvers to "escape" from Jadine/the tar baby, to save himself at the very last by returning to the briar patch, to his "roots." Morrison thus suggests that tricks are a necessary force for the weak (black slaves) to survive.

Also importantly, Smith explains the trickster as a representation of identity confusion, "a mythic trope for the postmodern" (16), and its biggest contribution to the postmodern is "the notion that identity can be multiplicitous and that the deconstruction of a falsely unitary language need not lead to incoherence" (17). This also contributes to the creation of "an altered sense of the real that challenges perceived, western ways of knowing" (17). Using such trickster figures, in which she mixes folkloric myth with "ordinality," "fact," and history, Morrison represents a broader sense of the real, accompanied by multiple identities that are accepted from a larger worldview.

Regarding Morrison's use of the tar baby folktale, some critics such as Trudier Harris assert that Morrison assigns the characters overlapping parts of a tar baby, a trickster Br'er Rabbit, and victims, while it would be proper to identify Son as Br'er Rabbit and Jadine Childs as the tar baby. In the Harris version, the tar baby is referred to as "she," and more importantly, as Aimee L. Pozorski states, "according to Morrison, the 'tar baby' myth transcribed in

Southern folklore originates not only in African trickster tales of Anaaun, but also in the ancient African 'tar lady,' considered a powerful mythical symbol of Black womanhood because of her power and creativity in binding things together" (234). In fact, Jadine is "created" by Br'er Fox, a white master, Valerian, and traps Son. Being an intruder who is discovered hiding in the bedroom of Margaret Street, Valerian's wife, on the other hand, Son is a trickster figure, Br'er Rabbit, described as subhuman, an underclass, filthy black man with dreadlocks, a "stinking ignorant swamp nigger," clearly an outcast in the Western culture (100). The narrator tells about his past, what he has been:

In those eight homeless years he had joined that great underclass of undocumented men. And although there were more of his kind in the world than students or soldiers, unlike students or soldiers they were not counted. . . . What distinguished them from other men (aside from their terror of Social Security cards and *cédula de identidad*) was their refusal to equate work with life and an inability to stay anywhere for long. (166)

It is, however, the subversive power and wit of the blackness in him, a perhaps unexpected "power," that makes him a frightening outcast, as shown symbolically by Margaret's one word, "Black!" in his appearance in the novel. According to Joyce Hope Scott, who supports Bakhtin's theory of the carnivalesque, "'outside' groups, like African Americans, marginalized by a dominant ideology within 'non-carnival' time, not only gain a voice during carnival, but also disrupt the ideology that seeks to silence them" (33). Linked with the ideological whiteness that Morrison specifically explores in *Playing in the Dark*, this subversive power leads to the site of indigenous resistance. Under the same historical past, it is in the words of Scott, "the spirit of African resistance seen in maroon communities of runaway slaves and freed Africans who revised and reformulated the European celebration brought by English, French, and other European slavers and colonists to the Islands" (33–34). In *Tar Baby*, wearing a "mask" and embodying a subversive strategy, Son not only secures himself but also tries to "rescue" Jadine, extending to his marginalized, African American cultural roots without perpetuating the dominating culture with the silence that usually accompanies "masking." Just as an African woman Jadine encounters in the supermarket in Paris — a woman with "the skin like tar against the canary yellow dress" who "shot an arrow of saliva

between her teeth down to the pavement and the hearts below" (45, 46) — makes her feel "lonely and inauthentic" (48), so Son, serving as a racial figure, the "son" of black people, challenges widely accepted notions of the superiority of Jadine's European education. He frightens Jadine, warning that she should "settle down and stop acting like it [white]" (121), and that her desire to "mak[e] it" is something "so repulsive, so awful" (126, 123). Feeling "inauthentic" in her white value, in fact, Jadine sarcastically acknowledges that "with white people the rules were even simpler. She needed only to be stunning, and to convince them she was not as smart as they were. Say the obvious, ask stupid questions, laugh with abandon, look interested, and light up at any display of their humanity if they showed it. Most of it required only charm — occasionally panache" (126–7). Moreover, in their encounter in Jadine's bedroom, Son forcefully presses up against Jadine, which, in its association with rape, is suggestive of Br'er Rabbit's slapping the tar baby and its stickiness. The fact that Jadine can never hear a reference to Little Red Riding Hood without a tremor to the end of her life shows that she is also sexually afraid of Son. Yet the story is not so simple: since Son thinks that he is superior to her both in teaching the folk values and in his manhood, he, Br'er Rabbit, is caught after all by the tar baby/Jadine.

While Jadine is sleeping, Son attempts to press into her the smell of "tar" and his dreams, dreams rooted in his private nostalgia for folk imagery: "yellow houses with white doors which women opened and shouted Come on in, you honey you! And the fat black ladies in white dresses minding the pie table in the basement of the church and white wet sheets flapping on a line, and the sound of a six-string guitar plucked after supper while children scooped walnuts up off the ground and handed them to her" (119). Rather than sexual violence, this imagery hints at the merging of Jadine and Son, and indicates Morrison's crosscultural intention, an integration of dualistic paradigms, ultimately "a racial utopia" (Hemenway 19) like that achieved by the Uncle Remus stories, where black and white share their childhood.

However, New York and Eloë completely separate Son and Jadine in reality. Getting away from the Caribbean island, Jadine is happy in New York and "feel[s] like giggling" (221), while New York's modern, materialistic society depresses Son with "all that crying," though Son, a lonely, unstable black man,



possibly has "a future" with Jadine: "There was a future. A reason for hauling ass in the morning. No more moment to moment play-it-as-it-comes existence. That stomach required planning. Thinking through a move long before it was made. What would he name his son? Son of Son?" (219). Eloë is, on the other hand, an all-black town with only ninety houses and three-hundred-eighty-five people that is for Son the roots of his being, which he identifies by an "original dime," the one that he for the first time gets for cleaning a tub of sheephead, yet Jadine mocks at: "It's not romantic. And it's not being free. It's dumb. . . . It's a prison, poverty is. Look at what its absence made you do: run, hide, steal, lie" (171). For Jadine, Eloë is "a burnt-out place": "There was no life here. Maybe a past but definitely no future and finally there was no interest" (259). It is then because of the "night women" that she decides to leave Eloë. Significantly here, the appearance of phantoms is one of Morrison's techniques of magical realism. Rejecting loose breasts and eggs, Jadine is scared by the nightmare, phantom vision of the "night women," who seemingly agree about getting Jadine out and taking Son back from her. What they deny is "the person she had worked hard to become" (262) since it cannot embrace both the past, including the folk past, and a maternal role, symbolized by their breasts, that will be connected with their cultural role, the "ancient properties" (305).

Jadine, on this point, cannot be the "tar lady" Morrison anticipates, a symbol of black womanhood with the ability to retain the community. In fact, earlier in the novel, the fact that Jadine gets caught in the swamp after the picnic (here she is literally a "tar" lady) shows that she is an ambivalent character, also a trickster. The swamp women, witches, are hanging in the tree and looking down at Jadine: "The young tree sighed and swayed. The women looked down from the rafters of the trees and stopped murmuring. They were delighted when first they saw her, thinking a runaway child had been restored to them. But upon looking closer they saw differently. This girl was fighting to *get away* from them" (183 emphasis mine). After escaping from the tar pit, which was associated with motherhood (Pozorski 234) and — according to Morrison, "a sacred place because tar comes out of the earth and has the power to build things" — Jadine cleans its "blackness" off her body, remaining unable to identify with the spirit of femaleness.

Interweaving racial and sexual issues, the “night women” recall Twain’s “dancing corpus” explored by Kaplan. During his travels through Hawaii, Twain, trying to escape the present, political turbulence, repeatedly gazed on Hawaiian women and funeral rites and burial sites, “as if sex and death could anchor him in a reality untouched by the very social transformation that [had] brought him to Hawaii” (Kaplan 66). In *Tar Baby*, like native women “dancing the ‘lascivious hula,’” the “night women” wave their breasts at Jadine and frighten her: “they each pulled out a breast and showed it to her. . . . They stood around in the room, jostling each other gently, gently — there wasn’t much room — revealing one breast and then two . . .” (258). What’s more, in Twain’s letters, as Kaplan discusses, the curious association of native women with death and their sexuality with remnants of a dying ancient culture is also true to the appearance of the “night women” in *Tar Baby*. They are associated with the past and its folk tradition in the old black town, Eloë, where Jadine feels stuck “with a pack of Neanderthals who think sex is dirty or strange or something” (257).

In these images of “the eroticized female body,” on the other hand, there is — drawn from the colonial discourse of missionaries and travelers — a linkage between Hawaiian women and a pre-Christian uncivilized past (Kaplan 66). Similarly with the naked body, the “night women” also may be seen as the standard for measuring “the barbarism” of traditional society. Further, such women are, to borrow the words of Twain, “away down at the bottom of this pile of tyranny and superstition,” and “abject slaves of all”; they are “degraded to the level of beasts, and thought to be no better” (qtd. in Kaplan 67). Yet Morrison rejects such colonial discourse with Son, who does not understand why Jadine keeps barking at him about sexual equality, perceiving that “anybody who thought women were inferior didn’t come out of north Florida” (268), and gives breasts more positive meanings in nurturing maternal terms, which is actually problematic for Jadine.

It is Son’s presence that, preserving the folk tradition, can redeem from Valerian Jadine, whose tribal soul is devoted to white education and sophistication: for Valerian is to Son the one of “the aliens, the people who in a mere three hundred years had killed a world millions of years old” (269). Jadine, on the other hand, thinks that she is rescuing him: “This rescue was not going

well. She thought she was rescuing him from the night women who wanted him for themselves, wanted him feeling superior in a cradle, deferring to him; wanted her to settle for wifely competence when she could be almighty, to settle for fertility rather than originality, nurturing instead of building" (269). Jadine most likely cannot appreciate her responsibilities concerning the "ancient properties" in the community of Eloë, a small town hardly affected by the changing reality outside. To Jadine, unable to conform to the demands of female subjectivity and female identity limited to motherhood, succumbing to Son's expectation in the sex-based town of Eloë means to be his "tar baby," in the same way as she is created by a white master, Valerian. Furthermore, Jadine's rejection of the "ancient properties" also implies Morrison/Jadine's question about the conscious conceptualization of the tar baby, which might be connected stereotypically with blackness, animality, and filth as well as "a traditionally submissive, nonresistant role" in male violation (Harris 120, 124). In fact, Jadine remembers the female dog in her childhood memories of Baltimore, where the dog was pursued by several males and became "the bitch" that was knocked over the head. Jadine thought the female dog was "she who had done nothing but be 'in heat' which she couldn't help but which was her fault just the same so it was she who was beaten and cracked over the head and spine with the mop handle and made to run away" (124). At the age of twelve, then, Jadine resolved that she would "never" be broken and controlled by any man.

In this way, Jadine, who searches for identity, may never be integrated into the African-based culture of Eloë because of her rejection of not only "tar," its blackness, but also of the femininity and fertility of woman. Abandoning the black community and leaving for Paris, Jadine concludes that "a grown woman did not need safety or its dreams. She *was* the safety she longed for" (290), and this thought leads to the metaphor of the soldier ants, which march toward the greenhouse, drown by the foil of chocolate Son has left behind. Apparently pointing to Son as well as Ondine, then, Jadine considers the matriarchal society of soldier ants, where the male only plays the role of impregnating the queen:

Once the lady has collected the sperm, she too falls to the ground, but

unless she breaks her back or neck or is eaten by one of a thousand things, she staggers to her legs and looks for a stone to rub on, cracking and shredding the wings she will never need again. Then she begins her journey searching for a suitable place to build her kingdom. . . . She seals herself off from all society and eats her own wing muscles until she bears her eggs. . . . Bearing, hunting, eating, fighting, burying. No time for dreaming. . . . (291)

Although she seemingly praises this female fecundity, Jadine recognizes that soldier ant society — the forgetting of “the man who fucked like a star” (292) — is very hard. In this position of Jadine’s, her struggle with the “ancient properties” symbolized by the “night women,” Morrison’s own ambivalence as a successful African American woman writer may be seen. As Morrison writes, “there’s no reason for her [Jadine] to be like Ondine — I’m not recommending that — but she needs a little bit of Ondine to be a complete woman” (Ruas 104). The black woman in yellow in Paris, spitting at Jadine, informs Jadine that she is not “a complete woman,” only an educated woman who embraces an Old World, Euro-centric, cultural view *into* her light-black skin. It is the double-consciousness in this ambivalence that gives Morrison the impetus to make her novel enchanted by using elements of magical realism, since it, being neither one nor the other, offers possibilities to blur the borderlines. Moving from South through North and beyond into Paris, Jadine transcends the limited norms, newly *creating* herself in her quest for identity, as Morrison does in the literary world in the U.S. Jadine/the “tar baby,” therefore, parts with Son/Br’er Rabbit of her own accord.

In returning from New York to the island, on the other hand, Son is indeed Br’er Rabbit managing to escape from the tar baby, Jadine, by being thrown into a briar patch at the end of the story. It is Thérèse, with her “magical breast” which still gives milk, who plays the role of a nurturing mother or a mentor for Son. Closely tied to the land, she is a native woman who preserves the folk traditions, in contrast to Jadine in the modern, materialistic New York and Paris, and Valerian in L’Arbe de la Croix. Asking Son to kill the Streets, she is, in the words of Smith, “a third trickster, the mythical, visionary, and apparently marginalized,” and ends the conflicting relationship between Son and Jadine (129). Thérèse leads Son to the back of Isle des Chevaliers, where

he is offered to choose the blind horsemen, the myth and legend, rather than Jadine, who “has forgotten her ancient properties” (305): “You can choose now. You can get free of her. They are waiting in the hills for you. . . . they race those horses like angels all over the hills where the rain forest is, where the champion daisy trees still grow. Go there. Choose them” (306). Son, like Br’er Rabbit, is free to race “lickety-split” into the woods, when “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). Son becomes one with nature in the realm of the legendary blind horsemen, suggesting his spiritual rebirth. As Keith E. Byerman asserts, it is also an “immersion into the black folk world” (qtd. in Harris 148–49), and Son’s life is thus indeed intermingled with the myth. In the same way Milkman jumps into the air and becomes part of the myth at the end of *Song of Solomon*, the real and the myth are merged in *Tar Baby*. In contrast to Milkman, who finds a new ability to “fly” without even leaving the ground, Son attains the ability to see beyond seeing as part of the blind horsemen and nature; he does not suffer from Br’er Fox’s/Valerian’s blindness, “the crime of innocence” (242), which lands the rabbit in the briar patch at the end of the folktale. Using blindness as an empowering symbol,<sup>2</sup> Morrison portrays Thérèse, who is a descendant of the blind slaves, a captive to the New World, as possessing “their eye of the mind” (152). By accepting the legendary world offered by the blind Thérèse, Son places himself perhaps in the “right” place, where his own “roots” are.

### Resistance

In *Tar Baby*, it is the marginalized Son who as an outsider and/but a central figure critiques the values in Isle des Chevaliers where a dominant ideology pervades. According to Scott, taking Bakhtin’s arguments, “only by being outside of a culture can one understand his own culture” (33). Son observes the United States from his outside viewpoint: “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. It seemed sticky. Loud, red and sticky. Its fields spongy, its pavements slick with the blood of all the best people. . . . a map of the U.S. as an ill-shaped tongue ringed by teeth and crammed with the corpses of children” (167). With Son’s perspectives from

the margins of history, where he reclaims the spirit of nature through the blind horsemen, Morrison creates a narrative that not only resists the dominant but also functions between the two cultural modes of the dominant and the marginalized, unmasking the reality under the anarchy of empire.

Set on a Caribbean island, *Tar Baby* conveys the spirit of resistance in the indigenous community, evidenced by the role of nature from the beginning of the story, with nature's rage against the conquerors' violation. The turmoil in the Street household during the Christmas dinner seems to represent the epitome of the social resistance on the island, where Valerian's established order, the power relationship that corrupts, is broken down by Son's intrusion. No one — including Son and the black servants, Sydney and Ondine — “was in his proper place” on that occasion (194). Stirred by Valerian's firing of Thérèse for stealing apples, the blacks rebel against Valerian and his wife Margaret. As he watches Valerian's face, Son is thinking of imperial domination and the history of slavery and colonization on Isle des Chevaliers:

Son's mouth went dry as he watched Valerian chewing a piece of ham, his head-of-a-coin profile content, approving even of the flavor in his mouth although he had been able to dismiss with a flutter of the fingers the people whose sugar and cocoa had allowed him to grow old in regal comfort; although he had taken the sugar and cocoa and paid for it as though it had no value. . . . they [the Americans] could defecate over a whole people and come there to live and defecate some more by tearing up the land. . . . (202–03)

In addition, Morrison deliberately connects the two men's consciousnesses with the myth of the blind horsemen, which is associated with the real maroon societies of the Caribbean, whose members escaped from slavery to the mountains and remained independent in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.<sup>3</sup> For Valerian, the blind horsemen are heroic French chevaliers who “are roaming the hills on horses”: “Their swords were in their scabbards and their epaulets glittered in the sun. Backs straight, shoulders high — alert but restful in the security of the Napoleonic Code”; in Son's mind, on the other hand, “one hundred black men on one hundred unshod horses rode blind and naked through the hills and had done so for hundreds of years” (206). Through these different perspectives and their conflict, Morrison represents the hundred

years of empire-building — colonization and slavery — in the Americas; and also, using a spirituality or faith unlike that of Western Christianity, she conveys the essence of magical realism with its African roots, which subversively stands against the imperial exploitation of the land and the people constructing “paradise.” It is ironic that by the end of the turmoil, with nobody following Valerian’s bidding, Valerian realizes that “he had played a silly game, and everyone was out of place” (208). Now aware of Margaret’s violence, her abuse of their son, he is trembling like a lonely star. As if predicting Valerian’s fate, Son tells Jadine: “Stars just throb and throb and throb and sometimes, when they can’t throb anymore, when they can’t hold it anymore, they fall out of the sky” (214).

Mark Frisch argues with regard to “nature, postmodernity, and real marvelous” that “the development of the real-marvelous (*lo real maravilloso*) as represented by writers such as Alejo Carpentier, Juan Rulfo, Gabriel García Márquez, and others defines and reflects this merging of human consciousness with the natural world” (67), and, I believe, Morrison is among these writers. In the relationship between nature and modernity/postmodernity, according to Frisch, the modernist writers of the Americas viewed the harmony between men and nature, which was destroyed by Western conquerors, as a thing of the past, “something that perhaps could be recouped, but for the moment is lost or is disappearing” (68), while postmodern culture redefines this link, shifting to “a sense of man and nature as one” (74). The natural world is then often merged with human consciousness and accompanied by mythical implications, an aspect of magical realist writing that can be seen in *Tar Baby* as well.

In *Tar Baby*, all the creatures and plants in the natural world are significant participants in the novel. In the beginning of *Tar Baby*, the narrator reveals nature’s rage and grief at how violated it is by the vacation homes of wealthy people: “The men had gnawed through the daisy trees until, wild-eyed and yelling, they broke in two and hit the ground. . . . When it was over, and houses instead grew in the hills, those trees that had been spared dreamed of their comrades for years afterward” (10). The emperor butterflies observe Jadine from outside of the window because they “didn’t believe” “what the angel trumpets had described to them: the hides of ninety baby seals stitched together so nicely you could not tell what part had sheltered their cute little

hearts and which had cushioned their skulls” (87); the angel trumpets cannot breathe — they “fall” because of the painful air after the catastrophe of Christmas dinner. Operating as characters, in this way, elements of nature are given a voice that is not allowed to the indigenous people. Here nature does not simply observe, but also “bears witness” to the often disastrous dramas unfolding in the human world. Now “after thirty years of shame,” with the declining power of the “emperor” Valerian, nature is “marshaling for war” (274). At the end of the story, the champion daisy trees on the hill welcome Son, who runs “lickety-split” into the woods, where the trees make the way easier for him, a kindred spirit united with the land. In this unification may be found a nostalgia for the nature destroyed by postcolonialism as well. With Son, Morrison recovers the harmony between humankind and nature in her postmodern magical realism.

### Conclusion

In the preface to the 1981 edition of *Tar Baby*, Morrison states, “I fondled it, scratched and pressed it with my fingertips as one does the head and spine of a favorite cat — to get at the secret of its structure without disturbing its mystery” (qtd. in Smith 127). By interweaving African folklore, legend, and trickster figures, and using nature’s sentience, Morrison helps readers reach the “secret” and the “mystery” of both the story and the characters. What’s more, she reflects the difficulties and complications of U.S. imperialism in the ironically created island paradise of Isle de Chevaliers, similar to those Twain found in his journey to Hawaii. While Twain’s view is, however, based on the perspectives of the white writers Morrison critiques in *Playing in the Dark*, she represents “the anarchy of empire” from the perspective of the indigenous site on the distant, colonial island.

What Morrison suggests is, then, as Nicole Aljoe puts it, “nothing is as simple or straightforward as it seems” under conditions of imperialism (344). Where *Tar Baby* includes multiple issues in its complex web of human relationships and even relationships between human and nature, perhaps most significant is Son’s figure as a trickster. As a spectator from the outside, Son maintains his distance from the Valerian household both in time and space, to the extent that it is “marvelous” to him. It is also Son who exposes and de-



stroys Valerian's paradisaean empire by triggering the challenge of the one-way imposition of power, as the chaos of the Christmas dinner represents. Because of Son, the delicate power relationships and hierarchy in the Valerian household are finally overturned, exhibiting the revolutionary quality or consciousness of the trickster. This is the very consciousness of magical realism in the postcolonial context, the consciousness with which magical realist writers attempt to subvert the social systems that disguise reality, the neat hierarchy of the world.

Moreover, the image of "tar" permeates the story and is specifically symbolic of Jadine. In the foreword to the 1981 edition of *Tar Baby*, Morrison writes that "it was the image of tar . . . artfully shaped, black, disturbing, threatening yet inviting, that led me to African masks" (xiii). In creating a new "tar lady"/Jadine, an educated young black woman who successfully works as a model in white society in Paris, Morrison presents new dimensions to racial and sexual conceptions, to the "ancient properties." Because *each* knows "the world as it [is] meant or ought to be," and *each* "[bears] the culture to save the race in his hands" (269), Son and Jadine cannot integrate: the culture Son holds is African-based, while Jadine's arises from the notion of achieving the American Dream. Using trickster and folkloric figures, Morrison suggests the multiplicity of identity in this postmodern world. Interweaving features of magical realism, in this way, *Tar Baby* could be what Morrison desires to find out, that is, the "artistic articulation of [this country's] past that was not available in history, which is what art and fiction can do but sometimes history refuses to do" ("Faulkner" 296).

#### Notes

1 Morrison explains that "Africanism is the vehicle by which the American self knows itself as not enslaved, but free; not repulsive, but desirable; not helpless, but licensed and powerful; not history-less, but historical; not damned, but innocent; not a blind accident of evolution, but a progressive fulfillment of destiny" (*Playing* 52).

2 According to Susan Willis, blindness is "another way of giving metaphoric expression to social difference and freedom. It overlaps with the functions of lack in that the lack of sight, which in bourgeois society is the basis for an individual's alienation, is in the mythic world the basis for the group's cohesion and absolute alternality" (103).

3 According to Willis, "the myth of blind horsemen has its roots in the many real

Maroon societies whose very existence depended on seclusion and invisibility. This is the social reality for which blindness is a metaphoric reversal" (103).

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