

THE EXPERIENCE
OF
CULTURE CLASH
IN
TONI MORRISON'S TAR BABY

An Essay by
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Compared to all the other novels by Toni Morrison *Tar Baby*¹ certainly is her most unusual one. It is not set exclusively inside of the United States but – among other places and as the focus point – on a remote island in the Caribbean Sea. Instead of featuring chiefly members of the black community as main characters, white Americans play an important role not only as a cultural background against which the black community is set, but also as actual personnel of the novel. In fact, entire scenes consist solely of the interaction between white characters. Apart from these novelties, *Tar Baby* is full of wealth, money, high society, jet set, and luxury, while Morrison's usual social setting is the working and middle class. The wealthy white society is always present in the background, surrounding and creating a space in which the main characters struggle, but in *Tar Baby* it is more than that: it is the foreground, the ground of action. Two thirds of the novel are located in and around L'Arbe de la Croix, a property built and owned by a former candy manufacturer, Valerian Street, as a summer house and residence for his retirement. Besides him and his wife, their servants Sydney and Ondine are living there, joined by Jadine, the servants' niece. Her life is the most glamorous one: not only did she benefit from the best education in the United States, she also received a Master's Degree in art history at the Sorbonne in Paris. In addition to this, she has started a career as a fashion model, with her photo appearing on the title page of *Elle* as the current climax. A rich Parisian man is interested in marrying her, emphasising his offer with an expensive sealskin coat. In short, her situation seems to fit the description: she made it in the white man's world.

Keeping this unusual context in mind (which the reader can find in every summary on the back of his/her copy), the opening sentences of *Tar Baby* do not sound like a Toni Morrison novel at all:

He believed he was safe. He stood at the railing of H.M.S. *Stor Koningsgaarten* and sucked in great gulps of air, his heart pounding in sweet expectation as he stared at the harbor. Queen of France blushed a little in the lessening light and lowered her lashes before his gaze. Seven girlish white cruisers bobbed in the harbor but a mile or so down current was a deserted pier. (TB 3)

¹Toni Morrison, *Tar Baby* (New York: Plume, Penguin Books, 1982) in the following the novel is referred to as TB, followed by relevant pages in round brackets

As a white European reader, it is easy to make up all kinds of stories out of this beginning, none of them fitting a Toni Morrison pattern before or after *Tar Baby*. Although the very first sentence suggests that someone has somehow escaped from an unsafe place and feels secure now – which allows the reader to imagine that s/he has entered a dangerous or dramatic situation – the playfulness and sexual implications of the next sentences revise this impression: “Sweet expectation”, blushing, lowered lashes, and bobbing girlish cruisers seem to belong to a romantic love story, and it is not difficult to think of a reason for some kind of escape in this context: a hide-and-seek-game, a male rival, or a playful fight between lovers which will be resolved soon.

Interesting enough, a literary critic familiar with the African-American cultural background draws a completely different conclusion: regarding the image of a man standing on the deck of a ship, Eleanor Taylor argues that this opening scene

calls to mind a similar one from a book written 194 years ago. The man . . . is reminiscent of a man called Equiano in *The Life of Olaudah Equiano* or *Gustavas Vassa, the African* (1789). Equiano’s tale is a slave narrative recounting the historical and mythical, the terrifying and mighty passage of the African from the oldest world to the newest.²

These differences concerning the associations connected with Morrison’s text lead to what Wendy Harding and Jacky Martin call the “interface,”³ which is defined as “a process of mutual and conflicting occupation of one common cultural field” out of two or more directions – so to speak – resulting in “constant cycles of flux and mutation” (10). Harding and Martin stress the “increased complexification and expansion” caused by the interface, where “the underlying dynamic principle would be . . . interferential rather than dichotomous, multiplicative rather than reductive” (10). The English language itself is, of course, such an interface, since it is used by various cultures in “mutual and conflicting” ways, in which different meanings can be linked to shared phonetic units, spellings can vary, and new semantic units can be created out of a common ground. The effect of the interface on the text is the possibility to produce quite differing readings, depending on the cultural direction the reader is coming from, and no reading can simply be disqualified because it is suggested by the “wrong” cultural background. Without any doubt and as demonstrated above, a white European, an Anglo-American, or an African-American will read *Tar Baby* in different ways exactly because of the different associations and cultural information s/he carries with her/him. At the same time, the concept of the interface, by stressing that “divisions in culture

²Eleanor W. Taylor, “The Fabulous World of Toni Morrison: *Tar Baby*” in *Critical Essays on Toni Morrison*, Nelli Y. McKay, ed. (Boston: G.K. Hall & Co, 1988) 137-138

³Wendy Harding and Jacky Martin, *A World of Difference: An Inter-Cultural Study of Toni Morrison’s Novels* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1994)

are never dichotomous,”⁴ points out that Morrison’s texts are not inaccessible to readers from cultural backgrounds other than hers. Cultures always interact with each other, and the particular interaction between Anglo-American and African-American culture is already stated in the hyphen that connects them. In interviews⁵ Toni Morrison repeatedly remarks that, although she writes mainly for her people and doesn’t intend to explain African-American culture to a white audience, just as Dostojewski didn’t explain Russian culture to her, of course everybody is in principle able to read and understand her work:

A woman wrote a book on woman writers, and she has an apology in the preface in which she explains why the book doesn’t include any black woman writers. She says she doesn’t feel qualified to criticize their work. I think that’s dishonest scholarship. . . . I feel perfectly qualified to discuss Emily Dickinson, or anybody for that matter, because I assume what Jane Austen and all those people have to say has something to do with life and being human in the world. Why she could not figure out that the preoccupation of black characters is this as well startled me, as though our lives are so exotic that the differences are incomprehensible. (160)

It should be obvious by now that culture clash plays an important role for the reading of Toni Morrison’s novels. It certainly accounts for the production of differing interpretations which cannot be brushed aside just because the reader is or is not African-American. I, therefore, want to discuss in this essay two interfaces in a more detailed way, that are important for the reading of *Tar Baby*, the relation between the individual and the community, and the concept of the role of women. As I intend to show in the following, the differing occupation of these cultural fields can cause quite different evaluations concerning the “message” of the text.

The experience of culture clash, however, is not only a subject for the reader concerning her/his act of reading, but also for the text itself on the level of its story.⁶ Thus, the intended discussion already exists inside of the novel and is therefore more relevant for *Tar Baby* than for any other book of fiction by Morrison. For that reason the outlined exploration of interfaces will be combined with an examination of the content of the novel, since each will be useful to illuminate the other.

Culture clash does not only describe an important characteristic of the environment *Tar Baby* is written in, but also the novel’s main subject which circles around Toni Morrison’s remark:

⁴ibid 6

⁵Danielle Taylor-Guthrie, ed. *Conversations with Toni Morrison* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1994)

⁶I claim that although they influence and determine each other the text and the act of reading are separate units.

Now people choose to be Black. They used to be *born* Black. That's not true anymore. You can be Black genetically and choose not to be. You can change your mind . . . It's just a mind-set.⁷

What does belong to this “mind-set” and how does it differ from the white one? The initial setting of *Tar Baby* reads like “a kind of laboratory where racial, familial, class, and gender expectations [the latter points are here seen as subordinated to the issue of race] can be tested.”⁸ Located on a remote island in the Caribbean Sea live the main characters who represent the two cultural concepts under examination. They can be divided into the following groups: Valerian Street, the rich candy manufacturer from Philadelphia, who is spending his retirement on the Isle des Chevaliers, and Margaret Street, his wife and former Beauty Queen of Maine, are members of the white American society, whereas Gideon and Thérèse, natives from the island who are working as gardener and washer woman for the Streets, belong to the black community, including Son, one of Morrison's “outlaws”, who lives everywhere and nowhere, because he killed his wife and her lover, and who escapes from a ship he was working on to the Isle des Chevaliers, where he starts living in the Street household, first in a hiding place, and after his discovery as a guest. Between these two poles, the spectrum from white to black is covered by the remaining household members: closest to the black community are Sydney and Ondine Childs, both proud “Philadelphia Negroes,” who work for the Streets as servant and cook, thereby virtually running their household. Since they separate themselves from the island's native population, especially from Gideon and Thérèse whom they regard as inferior, and since they share a lot of their employers' values, they can not be considered as “pure” members of the black community, but as mixed with the white culture represented by their employers. Even more, in fact almost completely immersed in the white – not only American but also European – culture is Jadine, the Childs' niece, who has lived with them since her parents had died in her childhood. As a consequence of being brought up in the Streets' household, her education was paid for by Valerian Street, eventually leading to her Master's Degree at the Sorbonne. Quite contrary to Pecola in Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*,⁹ Jadine is a success in white society, in particular in terms of beauty, which is confirmed by her appearance on the title page of *Elle* as a fashion model. Her eyes may not be blue, but she satisfies the white concept of female beauty to such degree that she becomes one of its icons, simply *the Elle*. This fact is further proven by a Parisian man's intention to marry her. It is certainly no accident that Jadine achieves all this in the world's beauty and fashion capital, where the men are famous for their expertise in women, or to be more precise: in women's exterior

⁷Danielle Taylor-Guthrie, ed. *Conversations with Toni Morrison* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1994) 236

⁸Philip Page, *Dangerous Freedom: Fusion and Fragmentation in Toni Morrison's Novels* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1995) 109

⁹Toni Morrison, *The Bluest Eye* (New York: Plume, Penguin 1994, first published 1970)

appearance. The Streets' grown-up son Michael – although absent in person – is another important character in the novel who occupies his own position in the spectrum between the cultures. He disappointed his father by choosing not to take over his candy business and has been working in several areas Valerian doesn't value very much. His latest plan is to become an environmental lawyer. Contrasting Jadine, Michael is concerned about the survival of the traditions of different cultures and criticizes his parents' protégé for leaving behind her cultural background. Since Michael keeps some distance to the white society and is interested in exploring and valuing different cultural concepts, he is certainly closer to Son, Gideon and Thérèse than Jadine or even Sydney and Ondine.

At the beginning of the novel, the outlined relations between the representatives of the white and black culture in and around Valerian Street's house L'Arbe de la Croix are seemingly settled. But with the discovery of Son in Margaret Street's closet, covered tensions, that have been hinted at before, erupt when his influence throws the poorly balanced and unstable system of the household into disorder. Margaret, Sydney and Ondine mistrust Son and want to force him to leave the house. In the heat of the moment Sydney even proposes to shoot him. The Childs experience particular difficulties to adjust to Son's presence and to his position as a guest, since this allows him to sleep close to his hosts in the "white" part of the house while they – despite the fact that they are contrary to Son respectable "Philadelphia Negroes" – have to stay in the servants' quarters. Valerian, on the other hand and mainly as a counteraction to his wife's hysterical behaviour during Son's discovery, invites the stranger to stay in his house until he can make arrangements for his return to the United States. He feels contempt for the Childs' hostile and Jadine's contradictory response to Son since, in his opinion, he belongs to their own people. Valerian's behaviour, however, is not informed by a general contempt for racism but by a contempt for – in his eyes – illegitimate racism, which is in a way an even more racist response than the one of his employees. Almost as soon as he is discovered, Son starts a relationship with Jadine which will be characterized by mutual alternating states of attraction and repulsion. The "main experiment" in the "laboratory Isle des Chevaliers" begins:

What is the problem between a pair of lovers who really love one another but are culturally different? What is the battle about? Culture? Class? . . . How can you manage to love another person under these circumstances if your culture, your class, your education are that different?¹⁰

The arising battle between Son and Jadine turns out to be a fight about the "mutual and conflicting occupation of one common cultural field", in short, about "interfaces". Son acts as Jadine's counterpart, representing a traditional black

¹⁰Danielle Taylor-Guthrie, ed. *Conversations with Toni Morrison* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1994) 270

background, whereas Jadine is the modern Anglo-American, i.e. “white”, woman. They perceive each other through almost every stereotype societies can think of: As soon as Son enters Jadine’s room for the first time – at least to her knowledge – she considers his hair as “wild, aggressive”, “uncivilized . . . chain gang hair”, “hair that needed to be put in jail” (TB 113), thereby using the stereotype of the dangerously aggressive black man, shortly afterwards repeated by her thought, “I shouldn’t make him angry.” (TB 114) She then treats him like a stupid, uneducated, illiterate “nigger” (her words) by ridiculing him when she lies about the origin of her earrings shown on a photo in *Elle* (TB 123) and by asking him whether he understands the meaning of the word “patron” (118). When provoked by his behaviour, she calls him “ape,” (TB 121) corresponding to his – in her eyes – uncivilized looks, and accuses him of attempted rape (TB 121). His reaction in turn is, “Why you little white girls always think somebody’s trying to rape you?” (TB 121), hereby putting her explicitly in the category of the white woman. With a remark about her skin colour, Jadine argues against this opinion, but he confirms his judgment: “Then why don’t you . . . stop acting like it.” (TB 121) Jadine’s astonishing and disturbing white, racist viewpoint is summarized in her final insult which ends their first meeting:

you ugly barefoot baboon! . . . A white man thought you were a human being and should be treated like one. He’s civilized and made the mistake of thinking you might be too. That’s because he didn’t smell you. But I did and I know you’re an animal because I smell you. (TB 121)¹¹

The opposing positions are set up and the fight can take its course.

One topic Son and Jadine dispute about, is the relation between the individual and the community s/he belongs to. Already in their first “close encounter” the question of “belonging” comes up. Jadine refers to herself and the whole Street household with the pronoun “us,” thereby causing Son to ask her: “Us? You call yourself ‘us’? . . . But you . . . you’re not a member of the family. I mean you don’t belong to anybody here, do you?” (TB 118) Jadine’s telling answer is: “I belong to me. But I live here.” (TB 118) After this remark she tells him first that she is working for Margaret Street (as a private secretary) and talks only then about the Childs who are her remaining family. The sequence of her answer clearly points out Jadine’s priorities. First of all she is herself, thereby considering her individuality and separateness as the highest value. By doing so, she conforms to the Anglo-American culture she is so immersed in. As Patrick Bryce Bjork notes

¹¹an ironic reaction to this collection of prejudices is a current US American television commercial in which a young and obviously wealthy African-American couple, living in an unmistakably Anglo-American environment, advises the audience to use an especially safe Anti-Perspirant with the remark: “Anything else would be *uncivilized*.”

American discourse, both past and present, public and private, revels in individual spirit and assertion, . . . many Americans have learned to appreciate and accept the romantic appeal of being self-reliant, of transcending society, and ultimately defining a single, private self.¹²

Jadine then defines herself by her work, a factor that is also important for the Anglo-American society, but only of minor concern for African-American communities. Harding and Martin remind us that in all the other novels by Toni Morrison, which are usually located inside the black community, “social functions such as education, professional preoccupations, commercial transactions . . . are only glancingly mentioned.”¹³ Much more important are the abilities to nourish others, to heal, and to perform other vital functions for the community.¹⁴ In short, African-American culture stresses the importance of “finding and accepting identity within the group, the clan, the neighborhood.”¹⁵ As Houston A. Baker explains further

Black American culture is characterized by a collectivistic ethos; society is not viewed as [an] . . . arena in which the individual can work out his [sic!] own destiny and gain a share of America’s benefits by his own efforts. To the black American these benefits are not attained solely by individual effort, but by changes in the nature of society and the social, economic, and political advancement of a whole race of people.¹⁶

Since the family is the smallest unit of the African-American community, it would have been only natural for Jadine as a black woman to mention her aunt and uncle first. They are the people she belongs to. Jadine’s opinion is, however, that she belongs first of all to herself. In this regard she reminds of Sula about whom Toni Morrison says

She, Sula, put her grandmother away. That is considered awful because among Black people that never happened. You must take care of each other. That’s more unforgivable than anything else she does, because it suggests a lack of her sense of community.”¹⁷

¹²Patrick Bryce Bjork, *The Novels of Toni Morrison: The Search for Self and Place Within the Community* (New York; Berlin; Bern; Paris; Wien: Lang, 1992, 1994) viii

¹³Wendy Harding and Jacky Martin, *A World of Difference: An Inter-Cultural Study of Toni Morrison’s Novels* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1994) 89

¹⁴ibid 92

¹⁵Patrick Bryce Bjork, *The Novels of Toni Morrison: The Search for Self and Place Within the Community* (New York; Berlin; Bern; Paris; Wien: Lang, 1992, 1994) viii

¹⁶Houston A. Baker as quoted ibid ix

¹⁷Danielle Taylor-Guthrie, ed. *Conversations with Toni Morrison* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1994) 68

It is important to note, however, that the opposition Anglo-American society perceives between individuality and community, is also subject to this specific cultural background. Harding and Martin argue that instead “Morrison’s fictional community is made up of characters who acquire *individuality through* [emphasis mine] interrelation with each other rather than through opposition to the group.”¹⁸ In fact, “the only way to find *individual fulfillment* [emphasis mine] in Morrison’s world is within the collective context.”¹⁹

Son, of course, is the character who values community more than individuality, although he is defined as an outlaw. In her interviews Morrison points out that, for an African-American, being an outlaw doesn’t mean that a person does not belong to a community any longer. No matter how annoying a member is s/he remains exactly that: a member. The whole idea of excluding someone completely from a community is in fact Anglo-American and therefore just another cultural interface linked to the sphere of a culture’s understanding of individuality and community.²⁰ Thus, although Son leads his life in exile he still has a place he belongs to.

Son’s preference for an environment that is organized as a community becomes obvious during his stay in New York, where he starts living with Jadine after the dramatic eruption of tension in L’Arbe de la Croix during the household’s Christmas dinner. While Jadine feels that she can flourish in The City, since “New York oiled her joints and she moved as though they were oiled [,] her legs were longer here, her neck really connected her body to her head” (TB 221), Son’s impression is completely different:

“The Black Girls in New York were crying and their men were looking neither to the right nor to the left . . . they did not wish to see the crying girls split into two parts by their tight jeans, screaming at the top of their high, high heels, straining against the pull of their braids and the fluorescent combs holding their hair. . . . It depressed him [Son], all that crying, for it was silent and veiled by plum lipstick and the thin gay lines over their eyes. (TB 215-216)

Seen from Son’s viewpoint, New York is not a safe place for African-American people. Women seem to be split apart by their attempt to satisfy different concepts of beauty (braided hair and thin, arched eyebrows), and men do not care about “their” women any longer.

In addition, familiar oppositions seem to have become blurred and this turns out to distress Son the most: “He had tried a little television . . . , but the black people in whiteface playing black people in blackface unnerved him. Even their skin had changed through the marvel of color TV. A gray patina covered them

¹⁸Wendy Harding and Jacky Martin, *A World of Difference: An Inter-Cultural Study of Toni Morrison’s Novels* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1994) 90

¹⁹ibid 102

²⁰ibid 8, 15, 168

all” (TB 216). Son is deeply confused: “If those were the black folks . . . , who on earth was he?” (TB 217)

Son experiences the so far strongest clash with Jadine’s cultural background which consists exactly of the mixture he finds so hard to comprehend. Used to the rural South and the all black community where he grew up, Son cannot adjust to the different environment he finds himself in. Instead, “he insisted on Eloë” (TB 223) which is his home town and the manifestation of his cultural beliefs. Son is as determined to bring Jadine to this place as she is to share New York with him and “make it theirs” (TB 222). When Jadine finally gives in to his plans it’s her turn to go through a culture clash. This time, the emphasis is put on society’s concept of the role of the woman. The issue, however, is closely related to the corresponding understanding of the relation between the individual and the community.

When Son and Jadine arrive in Eloë and meet the first members of the community, Jadine is surprised to find out that she enters a space with a strong separation between the sexes. While Son talks to the men, Jadine is expected to stay with the women, which she can neither understand nor accept (TB 246). It is, moreover, difficult for her to relate to the women in this gender-separated world, thus, she “run[s] out of conversation . . . ten minutes after it started” (TB 246) In addition to that, she feels hurt by the behaviour of the men who “grouped on the porch and, after a greeting, ignored her” (TB 246).

Son, on the other hand, hopes that Jadine might be able to understand and to adjust her behaviour according to the new requirements. Since he saw her secretly during his first nights in the Streets’ house, while she was asleep, he had tried to

manipulate her dreams, to insert his own dreams into her so she would . . . dream steadily the dreams he wanted her to have about 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. (119)

Obviously, Son’s understanding of the role of women is – at least from a white European viewpoint – a very traditional one: he dreams of women caring lovingly for their children, of women organizing church life and of women doing housework. His imagination matches exactly the in Germany so called “three Ks”, which describe the traditional female responsibilities: kids, Kirche (church), kitchen. Son’s further dreams about Jadine’s vulnerability and his role as her protector without whom she will not be able to survive, which he entertains in New York, confirm this impression. In this case, the old fashioned, almost biblical sounding syntax, rhythm and choice of words, used to express them, stress their archaic and antiquated quality, in particular, since this style is decidedly distinct from Son’s usual, casual use of language:

it would be his duty to keep the climate mild for her, to hold back with his hands if need be thunder, drought and all manner of winterkill, and he would blow with his own lips a gentle enough breeze for her to tinkle in. The birdlike defenselessness he had loved while she slept and saw when she took his hand on the stairs was his to protect. He would have to be alert, feed her with his mouth if he had to, construct a world of steel and down for her to flourish in. (TB 220)

To bad that Jadine does not share this sweet dream. Instead, she is haunted by a nightmare she first experiences in Eloë almost as a reaction to her anger about the – in her view unbelievable – gender related and moral laws in the community. In this nightmare Jadine is visited by a group of African-American women, among them Thérèse and Ondine who

each pulled out a breast and showed it to her. . . . They stood around in the room . . . revealing one breast and then two and Jadine was shocked. . . . “I have breasts too,” she said or thought or willed, . . . But they didn’t believe her. They just held their own higher and pushed their own farther out and looked at her. (TB 258)

Jadine feels threatened by these “night women,” as she calls them later, in particular by their demonstration of their sex. By not believing in her affirmation that she also has breasts, they seem to doubt that she is a woman like they are. Their breasts, the incarnation and symbol of their womanhood, range literally higher than Jadine’s.

Another member of the night women is the woman in the yellow dress, whom Jadine – tellingly – meets for the first time in a supermarket in Paris when she wants to buy food for a celebration of her appearance on the title page of *Elle*. Like everybody else in the supermarket, Jadine is “transfixed” (TB 45) by the appearance of this woman that is completely different from her own: “Under her long canary yellow dress Jadine knew there was too much hip, too much bust. The agency would laugh her out of the lobby” (TB 45). Although this woman obviously does not comply with the Western idea of beauty she makes Jadine gasp. Described as a “woman’s woman - that mother/ sister/ she; that unphotographable beauty” (TB 46) the woman in the yellow dress is the African-American incarnation of womanhood – not Jadine, despite and because of the fact that she is the celebrated model. Jadine admires her, follows her and the unknown woman spits into her face. This demonstration of contempt causes Jadine to “feel lonely in a way. Lonely and inauthentic.” (TB 48) Confused she leaves Paris to seek shelter in L’Arbe de la Croix.

Also in this house, however, Jadine is finally confronted with the African-American concept of the role of the woman. Only hours before she leaves to go back to Paris, Ondine advises her:

a girl has got to be a daughter first. She have to learn that. And if she never learns how to be a daughter, she can't never learn how to be a woman. I mean a real woman: a woman good enough for a child; good enough for a man – good enough for the respect of other women. . . . You don't need your own natural mother to be a daughter. All you need is to feel a certain way, a careful way about people older than you. . . . A daughter is a woman that cares about where she come from and takes care of them that took care of her. . . . I don't want you to care about me for my sake. I want you to care about me for yours. (TB 281)

But Jadine cannot accept this concept. With the remark “There are other ways to be a woman, . . . I don't want to learn how to be the kind of woman you're talking about because I don't want to be that kind of woman.” (TB 281-282) she states her position and goes back to her life in Paris, reassuring herself that “a grown woman did not need safety or its dreams. She *was* the safety she longed for.” (TB 291)

Which leads us back to the high value of the self-reliant individual in Anglo-American culture. This individual does not need others to confirm her/his worth. S/he does not need to remember where s/he comes from. It might even be better to transcend this origin. To take care for those who once cared for the individual, is often considered and experienced as an obstacle on her/his way to individual fulfillment.

Again it should be noted that this “binary opposition” is an Anglo-American construction, just like the opposition between the woman as nurturer and the woman who pursues her career and plans. As Toni Morrison explains: “One of the characteristics of Black women's experience was that they did not have to choose between a career and a home. They did both.”²¹

In *Tar Baby*, however, the “binary oppositions” set up between the “mind-sets” of Jadine and Son do not resolve. The outcome of Toni Morrison's experiment is separation because a mutual agreement cannot be found. Each of the characters insists on her/his world view. While Jadine moves back to Paris to take up the life she left in confusion, Son is lead by Thérèse into a mythical existence among the blind horsemen who – according to an old legend – still live on the Isle des Chevaliers. By eventually walking into the realm of myth, Son stays just as close to the African-American culture as Jadine does to her Anglo-American one.

Morrison herself acknowledges the “interface-character” of the discussed concepts and the culture clash that takes place when the differing concepts meet. Concerning *Sula*, she points out that “Critics devoted to the Western heroic tradition

²¹Danielle Taylor-Guthrie, ed. *Conversations with Toni Morrison* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1994) 72

– the individual alone and triumphant – see Sula as a survivor. In the Black community she is lost.”²² The same argument, however, can be applied to *Tar Baby*.

Critics with an Anglo-American background tend to regard Jadine as the novels ultimate heroine who copes with a temporary crisis and manages to stay true to herself. The individual proves to be really “triumphant.” Anglo-American feminist critics often share this evaluation, since Jadine personifies the modern woman, rejects the traditional gender roles and acts according to the values of the feminist movement. Her emphasis on her personal goals proves to be just as valuable to feminists as it is to Anglo-American society in general, in particular since she resists the by now obsolete romantic plot in which the heroine of course sacrifices her own ideas and plans if she is rewarded with the man she loves. Jadine is not willing to make this sacrifice.

Exactly this stubbornness and resistance to the values of the community disqualify Jadine in the eyes of critics who have the African-American culture in mind. From their point of view, the hero is Son, sent almost as a Christ-like redeemer to liberate Jadine from her “wrong” ways and from the destructive influence of the white society. Son is then considered to be a healer and a nurturer, and Jadine should be prepared to follow him.

Both readings can be underpinned by Morrison’s text just because it consists of the discussed interfaces, thereby gaining considerable complexity. I therefore want to argue that *Tar Baby* does not present an unmistakable hero/ine to the reader. Both Jadine and Son are depicted with merits as well as flaws, and it is up to the reader to find her/his way through the complexity of Toni Morrison’s world. Philip Page points out that

as opposed to the characters’ fixed, unitary perspectives . . . the novel itself stretches beyond any monologic meaning to become polyvocal, and the characters’ narrow essentialism is implicitly devalued.²³

It is ultimately the narrative representation of this complexity through – among other means – the depiction of interfaces as exemplified above, thereby creating the experience of culture clash, which in my opinion accounts for the appreciation of Toni Morrison as a novelist. As she herself notes in one of her interviews: The freedom of the individual lies in her/his possibility to choose, not in the possibility not to choose.²⁴ Morrison is not willing to present simple solutions for complex situations. She advises her readers, however, that the either/or modus is not always the most favourable way of problem solving.

²²ibid 68

²³Philip Page, *Dangerous Freedom: Fusion and Fragmentation in Toni Morrison’s Novels* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1995) 131

²⁴Danielle Taylor-Guthrie, ed. *Conversations with Toni Morrison* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1994)

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