

FICTION

Testing the strength of the black cultural bond

Tar Baby
By Toni Morrison
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By Barbara Christian

In Toni Morrison's *Tar Baby* the urban ladies screams at Son, her ambitious black lover, "I was learning how to make it in this world. The one we live in, not the one in your head. Not that dump Eloë, this world. And the truth is I could not have done that without the help and care of some poor old white dude who thought I had brains enough to learn something."

Son retorts, "You do exactly what bitches have always done: take care of white folks' children.... You turn little black babies into little white ones; you turn your black brothers into white brothers; you turn your men into white men...." He punctuates his accusation by reciting the black folk tale *Tar Baby*. Morrison's fourth novel turns on this folk tale, a story that embodies the continuing dilemma of Afro-Americans.

In the folk tale, a farmer tries to catch a rabbit, whom he sees as a thief, by making a tar baby, black, visually attracting, sticky, and placing it in the middle of his cabbage patch. Morrison extends it to a contemporary fable as she analyzes the complexities of class, race and sex as they affect Afro-Americans.

The farmer is Valerian Street, owner of a candy empire, products as attractive and sticky as tar. The aging candy emperor retires to a Caribbean island, Isle de le Chevalier, whose people had produced the sugar and cocoa from which the candy was made, and who are left with neither cocoa and sugar nor money. Valerian's only concern is his greenhouse, "a place of controlled, ever-flowering life to greet death in" on this tropical land of uncontrolled and overwhelming growth. Named after a Roman emperor, Valerian bestows his name on a red and white candy, which is neither profitable nor tasty. He brings with him his much younger wife, Margaret, whose red hair and



white skin closely resemble his name-sake candy, but who is a child of ethnic lower-class parents. Her claims to any worth are her beauty, now fading, and Michael, the over-absent son she has borne the majestic candy king.

Valerian also brings with him his two trustworthy black servants of many years, Sydney and Ondine. Their entire lives are spent ministering to his and Margaret's needs in workshops for which they have steady jobs, a



An illustration appearing on the book jacket of *TAR BABY*.

relatively unhassled existence and the opportunity, through him, to educate and spoil their orphaned niece, Jadine. Because of their industriousness, they label themselves Philadelphia Negroes and they see themselves as a cut above their slovenly brethren. In actuality, they are cut off from any community. They in turn are ministered to by two black natives of the island, Gideon (Yardman) and Therese, whose humanity Ondine and Sydney do not even acknowledge so much as to ask their names. As we meet the house servants, they seem to be in control of Valerian and his house, though finally, they are controlled by his whims.

Jadine resembles an Afro-American princess. Beautiful, bright, educated, ambitious, she discusses perfumes with Margaret, exchanging witticisms and eats meals with Valerian, while her aunt and uncle serve dinner and make the beds. Assisted by Valerian, she has completed a degree in Art History at the Sorbonne, has been a successful model in Paris and is being wooed by a wealthy Parisian who has proposed marriage. Her major concern is "making it," being comfortable and happy. She is lulled into dream until she is awakened one day in Paris by the sight of an authentically beautiful African woman with skin like tar against a canary yellow dress, who invalidates the marvellously successful Jadine by spitting at her. The woman haunts Jadine, make her feel "lonely and inauthentic." She flees Paris to recuperate in the bosom of her relatives.

Into this clean, cool and civilized cabbage patch comes Son, the rabbit, the thief, the swamp nigger. A man with many different names and social security numbers, he belongs to that company of men identified by their "refusal to equate work with life and an inability to stay anywhere for long." Born and raised in Eloë, a black village in Florida, but on the run for the accidental but enraged killing of his unfaithful wife, he has roamed, starved and thought about life. When he steals into Valerian's house like a refugee, he lives a nighttime existence, unknown to anyone as he falls in love with the sleeping Jadine, "his appetite for her so gargantuan, it lost focus and spread to his eyes, the curtains, the moonlight."

Lush and menacing.

In keeping with Morrison's other three novels, *The Bluest Eye*, *Sula* and *Song of Solomon*, nature is as complex and important a character as the human beings

who live in it. Much of the novel takes place in Isle de le Chevalier, the sight of which 300 years before struck slaves blind the moment they saw it. According to the natives of Dominique, some of these blind ones were carried by the "water-lady" current to the Isle where they ride their horses and screw the swamp ladies. Their descendants do not see with their eyes but with the eye of the mind and therefore cannot be trusted. The Isle de Chevalier is a land human beings have tried to control, evicting the river from where it had lived, forcing the champion daisy trees to alter their growth. Here the emperor butterflies talk and the swamp whispers with the voices of women. Nature is both lush and menacing, resisting the candy king's greenhouse by sending troops of soldier ants to invade it, pulling the slick Jadine into quicksand after a picnic on the beach.

When Son emerges from the lady-water, Therese thinks he is one of the mythical horsemen who has come to take the lovely but errant Jadine away. Like a field slave who invades the Big House, Son's presence exposes the illusions of the relationships



Toni Morrison's fourth novel turns on the tar baby folk tale.

which Valerian, Margaret, Sydney, Ondine and especially Jadine have woven. His appearance of wild blackness exposes Sydney and Ondine's short-sighted classist hypocrisy as the servants jump to protect their master Valerian from one of their own. His resistance to Valerian's authority—by insisting on the bond he believes must exist between Gideon and Therese and Sydney and Ondine—finally leads to Ondine's exposure of Margaret's secret: in hatred for her husband she habitually abused her baby son. This revelation in turn exposes Valerian's great crime, one

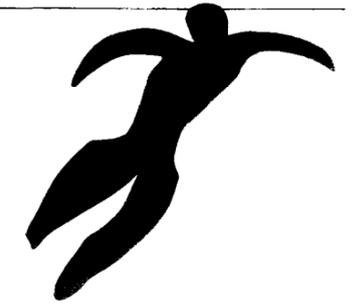
only those in power can afford. He was guilty of innocence; "he had not taken the trouble to know."

Clash of values.

The critical conflict in the novel is between the values of the individualistic and materialistic Jadine and the roots-bound Son. These two respond to something deep inside each other. As Therese the myth-teller said, Son had come for Jadine. But Jadine goes for herself even if it means using what whites give her. She sees New York as a black woman's town where the manifesto is "Talk Shit, Take None." In contrast, Son sees New York as a place where "the black girls were crying" and where "the street was choked with beautiful males who had found the whole business of being black and men at the same time too difficult and so they dumped it." He loves Eloë, his black village where there is hardly electricity but much fraternity.

For Jadine, Eloë restricts her as a person and a woman. Her dreams there become nightmares filled with women—her mother, Ondine, the African woman in yellow—who upbraids her and make her feel obscene. For her, in Eloë, "there was maybe a past but definitely no future." What Jadine wants Son to do is to get a job, use his talents, make some money. These things Son will not do for he feels that the world excludes him as himself.

But just as Jadine knows her way only too well, Son knows no



intact, her conclusion being "she was the safety she longed for." Too late, Son follows her back to the Isle after deciding that his opinion of Eloë was incorrect. But Therese, the myth-teller, will not let him succumb to the tar baby. She takes him to the back of the Isle where the horsemen still hide, blind and seeing.

As he steps gingerly into those mists of myth we are still left with the dilemma of *Tar Baby*, for Son moves to another world that has little impact on this one and Jadine cops out to a world of values that eventually must be a dead end, if not for her, most decidedly for her own. Finally, both their solutions for this group dilemma are individual.

Besides the artificial facileness of the novel, what is disturbing about it is Morrison's insistence that stereotypes that were not true 100 years ago have now become reality. They myth that house slaves traditionally separated themselves from field slaves is not supported by historical evidence. Instead, both groups usually saw themselves as bound to each other by their race, culture and oppression. Morrison

also uses erroneous stereotypes by characterizing the house slave as female and the field slave as male. Yet if Morrison's perceptions are correct, the devastating effects of Western values on blacks in this century may mean that we are worse off than we were 100 years ago. ■

Barbara Christian, who heads the Afro-American Studies program at University of California, Berkeley, has recently published *Black Women Novelists: the Development of a Tradition, 1892-1976*.

KIDS

Socking it to the cartoon movie matinee

By Charles Sugnet

First it was *Superman*, then *Popeye*, then *Excalibur*. Now my kids are pestering me to take them to *The Lone Ranger*, and pretty soon it'll be *Raiders of the Lost Ark* and *Superman II*. My friends say I'm just an old grouch, but I dread each of the highly promoted cartoon remakes I know my children will want to see.

There's more to my objection than personal dislike. I think these movies teach little girls to be passive, valuable objects men fight over or rescue. They teach little boys to make themselves rigid, relying on the thrust of phallic weapons like the sword *Excalibur* or the similarly shaped magic flashlights of *Star Wars*.

After my five-year-old son saw *Star Wars*, he announced that he wanted to be a storm trooper when he grew up. After I explained about the Third Reich and why I didn't like storm troopers, he decided not to be one. But he still finds their plastic armor and face masks "cool" and is taken with the whole fantasy of invulnerability.

Children are small and vulnerable, so I suppose they've always fantasized about being large and invulnerable. Just behind the fantasy of wearing armor is the fantasy of being armor. Clark Kent, the bespectacled wimp,

gets Lois Lane's attention by making himself hard all over and flying through the air. Popeye's forearms swell up and bulge when he's getting powerful. And David Banner, the Incredible Hulk, has a tumescent chest, which swells up and bursts his shirt when he feels aggressive. (One small child I know asked her parents the logical question: why don't his pants swell up too?)

There's nothing new about the identification of masculinity with hardness and erectness, and males in this culture have always been fascinated with phallic weapons like swords, guns and missiles. The swordfighting servants in *Romeo and Juliet* were making double entendres about their "naked weapons" nearly 400 years ago. In the same play, the Friar tells Romeo to prove his manhood by rising and standing. Etymology shows our culture's equations of sex with violence—"vagina" is, in Latin, sheath or scabbard, and "fuck" derives from a Germanic verb "to strike."

The current wave of space war movies and cartoon remakes doesn't add much to the basic content of these old patterns, but does make them more objectionable than ever. This is partly because feminism and the various peace movements of our era should have taught us better, and partly because large production budgets give the old



Of course children like to dream about being large and invulnerable. But can we indulge them like this?

fantasies a technoerotic glamour that comic books and TV episodes couldn't achieve. Never has turning yourself into a fighting machine, or a clam with a gorgeous plastic shell, seemed so attractive.

The attraction extends outside the movie house. At a day care center where I sometimes work, nearly half the kids have some kind of superhero plastered on their T-shirts. You can get Superman sneakers, *Star Wars* pajamas, thermal underwear with the Incredible Hulk on them, and "underoos," jockey-

type briefs for kids, with a choice of heroes. As one woman who teaches at the day care center said, "If it weren't for Wonder Woman, we'd be out of it completely."

No joke.

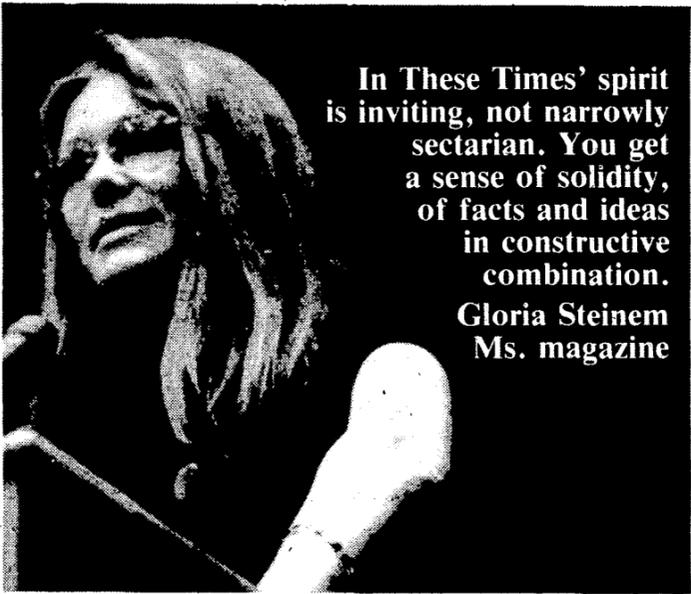
My friends tell me I take these movies too seriously, that they're just camp, funny send-ups. There's no doubt that film can do that sort of thing—I think Stanley Kubrick did it beautifully at the end of *Dr. Strangelove* when he had Slim Pickens whoop, holler, and

wave his cowboy hat as he fell from the bomb bay of a B-52 and rode a nuclear weapon down to the biggest orgasm of all. And some adult viewers of *Star Wars* may be laughing at a Freudian joke while Luke Skywalker flies down a narrow passage in the death star to drop his bomb precisely into the small opening where it will cause an explosion. But the kids aren't laughing at that moment—they're learning about love and war. They'll grow up to resemble the men who write letters to the editor of *Penthouse* about "shooting my wad," or "exploding in her." They'll grow up to imitate Zbigniew Brzezinski, Jimmy Carter's maniacal security adviser, who kept a plastic statue of Darth Vader on his desk in between two pointed intercontinental ballistic missiles.

The planet can't stand another generation of such warriors. If the bomb is dropped, it isn't going to go "Sock!" or "Pow!" And even if we manage to avoid having another war, it's painful to see the kids' erotic energy being channelled in ways that limit their human potential so drastically.

So why am I letting my children see these movies at all? I don't believe in censorship, and I don't think you can isolate your kids from the dominant culture—prohibiting something only makes it more attractive. So I let my children be exposed to the new mythology. But I also take them to films like Chaplin's *Modern Times* (which they loved) and Renoir's *Grand Illusion* (which they intuitively understood, in spite of linguistic and historical obstacles). And I keep trying to show and tell them that to be a creature of flesh and bone is to be vulnerable, and not all the armor or spinach or rockets in the world can change that.

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Riots

Continued from page 24

to nationalist groups, but not to socialist ones. The model of political organization built on the workplace, on shopfloor solidarity, means little to people who have never been in a workplace, don't have bosses and are excluded from trade unions. Unemployment is not experienced as a struggle for work but as a struggle for independence in which the state and the police in particular exercise power. For the young unemployed, leisure time activities are not just breaks from work but the site of a power struggle.

Commentators assume that everyone out of work is miserable but the question posed by Britain's riots, and by some of the riots in Zurich, Berlin and Amsterdam over the last year is whether such misery must be passive. The young are less tied to the family than the adult unemployed and they have more fluid relationship to the economy. As hustlers surviving in the insterstices of the declining state they confront not despair but cruelly niggling authority.

The common strand uniting all the riots was youth, but youth is a social category, the effect of young people's special treatment by employers and governments. In Britain, youth unemployment is a new phenomenon. It has been a problem of any sort only since 1972, and today's teenagers are the first generation not to leave school, go to work, and grow up quite smoothly (their parents were the affluent, rock 'n roll teenagers of the '50s).

The most striking thing about inner-city areas such as Brixton and Toxteth is that they are not ghettos but communities made up of all sorts of people on the fringes of the social system. Decaying housing is cheap housing, dead factories can be occupied, cheap shop space is available for coops, communes and political groups. Both Brixton and Toxteth are inhabited by whites as well as blacks, by students, ex-students and bohemians; by Trotskyists and militants, by single parents, women's groups and gays. The resulting communities are places of pleasure as well as despair.

British economists now assume that no matter who decides economic policy, Britain will soon have one million unemployed youths in 1990. The polit-

ical fight prefigured by the riots is not for work, but for space—space to live, space to play, space (if we're all very lucky) to put together new race, sex and class relations. Commentators have belatedly been listening to old records—finding the despair of youth in punk, the violence of oi, the bitterness in reggae. What they have missed is the fun and defiance, the way black and white groups like the Beat and UB40, inner-city intellectuals like the Fall and the Au Pairs, have turned attention into a dance floor drive.

After the Asian killings in Coventry, the Specials organized a daylong protest concert, with grudging support from the local council and the police. In the wake of National Front threats only 2,000 people came. They were young, tense, friendly and defiant. Coventry youth was on display on a damp evening, the stadium ringed by policemen. The Specials played intensely. "This town is becoming like a ghost town," they sang. And for a moment the demons were exorcised.

Simon Frith teaches sociology at the University of Warwick and writes on popular music. This article first appeared in different form in the *Village Voice*.