

“Fitting into the Story”: Western Romance and Blackness in Toni Morrison’s *Tar Baby*

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Abstract

As scholars such as Belinda Edmondson and Tyrone Yarbrough suggest, the narrative genre of the “romance” is an inherently white creation. Revolving around the chivalric tale, the “romance” narrative traditionally features unattainable, virtuous women and courageous knights who set out to rescue them. Considering this, then, the “romance” narrative seems unsuited for African American experiences, which have historically been defined in opposition to “whiteness” and “purity.” But are black experiences incompatible with love stories in themselves? The novels of Toni Morrison would suggest not—even if the western romance narrative framework is problematic for black characters. Though Son and Jadine of Morrison’s *Tar Baby* (1981) meet with racially-based difficulties, gender roles, and class values that impede their relationship, the novel intimates that love narratives starring black characters can actually reveal information about the way both Anglo-American and African American communities think about blackness and love stories. Using *Tar Baby* as a case study, then, I argue that the narrative form of the western romance presents black experiences as problematically uniform and sexualized; because of the eroticized perceptions and community-driven social expectations surrounding their existence, African American characters struggle to fit into the boundaries of the sanitized western romance even as their creators forge new narratives. These new love stories, created by Morrison and other authors such as Gayl Jones and Alice Walker, possess the freedom to debunk the negative stereotypes presented by the western romance, ultimately exploring alternative methods of expressing black experiences with love.

Keywords: Love, African American Identity, Toni Morrison

1. Introduction

Toni Morrison’s novels have long explored the way black experiences impact heterosexual romantic love. In *Beloved* (1987), two white men violate the slave woman Sethe, rendering her husband insane and destroying their marriage. In *A Mercy* (2008), a handsome free blacksmith refuses to love Florens, a young slave girl, because slavery has made her “head ... empty and [her] body ... wild” (141). In *Jazz* (1992), the black migration movements of the twentieth century temporarily threaten the romance between Violet and her husband, Joe; as the characters attempt to settle down in the racially-tense urban landscape of New York, they find their marriage tested by changing definitions of black authenticity. And in *Tar Baby* (1981), the romantic heroes Son and Jadine struggle to construct black identities in the late-twentieth century, impeding their ability to achieve the “happily ever after” characteristic of the European romantic form.

Tar Baby, one of Morrison’s least-studied novels, provides an effective way to probe narratives of black intimacy because it can be read as a commentary on the European chivalric tale. Described by Vintage International Press as Morrison’s “reinvention of the love story,” the novel charts the relationship between Jadine Childs and “Son”

(formally named William Green in the novel), two characters who fall in love yet struggle to reconcile their disparate senses of black identity. For Jadine, a successful fashion model who has studied art history at the Sorbonne in France, Son's meandering anti-capitalist existence represents a "cultural throwback" that she finds detestable (275). For Son, who flies by the seat of his pants and harbors dreams of "yellow houses with white doors which women opened and shouted Come on in, you honey you!," Jadine's materialistic behaviors and dependence on her white benefactor, Valerian, indicates a lack of awareness of her "ancient properties" —in other words, a departure from her black roots (119, 305). *Tar Baby* can be read, however, as much more than a love story. As though they were acting out romantic scripts of the Western hero and heroine, Son and Jadine actively conform to the tropes of the chivalric tale as they move through their own narrative —whether they conform intentionally or not. And as Morrison takes readers through her characters' impassioned but ephemeral romance, she probes the intersections between blackness and the Western romantic form as readers know it, ultimately calling attention to the misalliance between black experiences and Western romantic fantasy through an almost metafictional approach. Morrison and *Tar Baby* suggest that black experiences in the West are constantly being defined through problematic narratives that involve stereotyping and cultural uniformity, both of which fail to capture the complex, multi-faceted nature of African American identities and realities.

Tar Baby is not a self-reflexive work, per se —that is, *Tar Baby* is not a novel that deals with the writing of novels or of fiction— but the novel repeatedly refers to Son and Jadine as the romantic protagonists of the story, calling attention to the way they imitate the behaviors of characters in chivalric roles. In one notable section of the novel, Thérèse, the washerwoman for the white owners of L'Arbe de la Croix, Valerian and Margaret Street, questions Son and Jadine's roles as the central romantic heroes of *Tar Baby*. As she reflects on the appearance of Son on the Isle des Chevaliers and his subsequent interest in Jadine, Thérèse imagines the outcome of their relationship and attempts with some difficulty to place the two —rather than Valerian and Margaret— as the romantic pair in the novel's love story: "It was true, she thought. She had forgotten the white Americans. How would they fit into the story? She could not imagine them" (111). Temporarily at least, Thérèse struggles to accommodate both the novel's black and white couples in the Western romantic narrative framework, particularly because the romantic structure in the novel treats the characters differently. Son and Jadine initially seem like the central romantic pair, yes, but what to make of the white couple Valerian and Margaret? In what follows, Thérèse identifies Son as "the chocolate-eating man" who plays the role of the "lover" and Jadine as "the fast-ass... coquette who had turned him down" (111). Valerian and Margaret, she later realizes, are of no importance: "She realized then that all her life she thought they felt nothing at all" (112). But though Thérèse eventually identifies Son and Jadine as the romantic heroes of *Tar Baby*, her temporary confusion points to a larger conflict surrounding the novel: how do black experiences "fit into the story" —the story of the Western romance— at all? In fact, the narrative form of the Western romance presents black experiences as problematically uniform and sexualized. However, in *Tar Baby*, Morrison explores how the eroticized perceptions surrounding Jadine and Son's existence cause conflict in their relationship and prevent the two from articulating their relationship in a chivalric sense.

The questions that *Tar Baby* poses about black experiences and the chivalric romance contain a particular relevance to larger American cultural identity—at least, as it relates to popular culture. Scholar Stuart Hall writes:

[Popular culture] is an arena that is *profoundly* mythic. It is a theater of popular desires, a theater of popular fantasies. It is where we discover and play with the identifications of ourselves, where we are imagined, where we are represented, not only to the audiences out there who do not get the message, but to ourselves for the first time. (Hall, 113)

I am not arguing that the chivalric romance is perfect or even unflawed in its portrayals of human love, but I am suggesting that it has affected the ways we think about heterosexual love in our contemporary culture. After all, popular films such as *Tristan + Isolde*, *The Lord of the Rings* series, and *Titanic* contain strong elements of the chivalric tale, which suggests that this narrative format has some value for our society. More specifically, I would also argue that just as Son and Jadine act out romantic scripts in *Tar Baby*, we act out romantic scripts in our own lives. As we "play with the identifications of ourselves," we get our ideas about love and romance from literature, and we imagine our desires for our lives based on what is promoted in popular culture. And if minorities are denied access to ideas about love—as flawed as some of those ideas might be— then they are also denied the chance to understand components of themselves through a literary and pop cultural perspective.

2. *Tar Baby*'s Romantic Heroes, Stereotypes, and Problematized Sites of Romance

Academic scholars have long studied the problematic intersections of blackness and Western romance and questioned whether or not black characters are capable of functioning with this European framework. Though today the term “romance” increasingly refers to any sort of love story where two characters fall in love—regardless of their racial background or ethnicity—the romance has specifically European foundations, originating in twelfth-century France as the “medieval romance.” Featuring “knightly adventure, courtly love, and chivalric ideals,” the romance usually promotes European bourgeois and aristocratic sentiments, creating stories that feature a rescuing knight figure who sets out to slay his foe and obtain the amorous passion of a beautiful, chaste woman (Murfin, 446). As they research the ramifications and dominant ideologies perpetuated by the chivalric narrative, scholars Belinda Edmondson and Tyrone Yarbrough suggest that this European heritage inherently makes the “romance” unsuitable for expressing African American experiences. Edmondson writes, “the romance genre ... [is] an essentially white form, based on the European chivalric tradition” and suggests that African Americans and other minorities are inherently excluded from the genre (Edmondson, 191). Yarbrough echoes this sentiment, arguing that, “Romantic expression does appear in African American culture” though “African societies had neither Romance languages nor the Romance genre” (Yarbrough, 28, 24). The “romance narrative” in itself then—and not, to clarify, the universal emotional feeling of love or the more general “love story”—is fundamentally white and exclusionary to African Americans and other minorities. (After all, blackness and African American experiences have historically been defined in opposition to “whiteness” and “purity.”) In *Tar Baby*, Morrison explores the problematic merging of black experiences and Western romance tropes, first by placing her characters in the roles of the “beautiful, unattainable lady” and the “worshipping knight” then by preventing them from fully inhabiting those roles, roles which are further enhanced by the mythic qualities of the island L’Arbe de la Croix where the characters first meet..

Morrison initially sets up Son and Jadine as *Tar Baby*'s romantic heroes, contrasting their position in the novel with Valerian and Margaret's. Morrison describes Margaret, Valerian's wife and mistress of L'Arbe de la Croix, as the “Principal Beauty of Maine” (11), and since other characters refer to her as the “Principal Beauty” throughout the course of the novel, Margaret can be read as the “principal” or “main” beauty of the story itself, as well (though Morrison later prevents her from taking on the role of the novel's central romantic heroine). Before we meet Margaret, however, we first hear of her through Valerian's perspective. Margaret, as we learn, immediately occupies the role of the desirable princess awaiting rescue from the prince:

His walk from the inn had taken him only two blocks to the main street when he found himself in the middle of a local Snow Carnival Parade. He saw the polar bear and then he saw her. ... A rosy-cheeked girl was holding on to one of the bear's forefeet like a bride. ... The moment he saw her something inside him knelt down. (16)

Margaret's “rosy-cheeked” beauty immediately forces Valerian to “kne[el] down”—an action that resembles the behavior of a knight in a chivalric romance—and indeed, Valerian, as he tells Son, is named for an emperor, further suiting him for the role of the knightly figure (146).

But it is the “yalla” model Jadine—and not Margaret—who serves as the true romantic heroine of *Tar Baby*, particularly because her beauty eclipses that of her white counterpart's. Morrison depicts her black heroine as a beautiful, desirable model whose beauty “[m]ade those white girls disappear right off the page” of a Paris magazine, directly eclipsing Anglo-American—and therefore Margaret's beauty. Jadine has “mink-colored” eyes, “glowing” “yalla” skin, and “a nineteen-year-old face” paired with “the eyes and mouth of a woman of three decades” (40, 119, 45.) Through Morrison's descriptions of Jadine, the reader understands that Jadine's beauty perhaps overshadows Margaret's, and Jadine is just as worthy as her white counterpart of being the “principal beauty” of the novel. *Tar Baby* calls attention to the problematic way that beauty makes a character worthy of romantic attention within a literary context. Much in the way that the chivalric tale praises the virginal, beautiful woman figure, *Tar Baby* praises Jadine, even over Margaret, for being remarkably beautiful. Morrison allows her darker-skinned romantic heroine to surpass Margaret as the novel's central romantic heroine, though she later points out Jadine's incompatibility with the Western romantic role because of the stereotypes that she confronts as a black woman.

Just as she sets up Jadine as the romantic heroine, Morrison also sets up Son as the “heroic knight” of *Tar Baby*. Thérèse describes him as “a horseman come down to get [Jadine]” (107). As Son walks through the halls of L'Arbe de la Croix while its inhabitants are sleeping, he enters Jadine's room and “watch[es] her sleep”; his “nighttime possession complete with a beautiful sleeping woman” reminds readers of the Sleeping Beauty fairy tale, where the prince gazes upon the sleeping princess before waking her with a kiss (138). Though Son lacks the material and financial security that the usual princely or knightly figure possesses in a fairy tale romance, his intentions are

certainly chivalric: Son longs to “insert his own dreams into her” and rescue her from what he perceives as the threats of “whiteness” —in the form of Valerian and Margaret— that surround her (119). His noble aims, even if they later go awry, position him as the “worshiping knight” to Jadine’s “lady figure.” Indeed the novel constantly makes references to Son as the male romantic hero, thrusting both him and Jadine into chivalric roles that their own experiences prevent them from fully inhabiting. The stereotypical narratives surrounding blackness in the late-twentieth century soon make them wholly incompatible with the tropes of the Western romantic genre.

Despite their initial conformities to the role of romantic hero and heroine, perceptions of Son and Jadine’s blackness quickly prevent them from fully inhabiting these archetypes. As one of the few scholars to discuss romantic love in *Tar Baby*, Patricia Magness comments on the inability of Son and Jadine to conform to the Western romance. Using Chrétien de Troyes’ *Le Chevalier de la Charrete* to outline the tropes and narrative patterns of the Western romantic chivalric tale, Magness identifies Jadine as the “beautiful, unattainable lady of *Tar Baby*” and Son as “a knight, a chevalier on the Isle des Chevaliers” (Magness, 87, 89). Indeed, as she examines Morrison’s use of “the courtly love model” and its “inadequacy” for telling Son and Jadine’s love story, Magness concludes that “the myth of romantic love is not big enough to encompass both their worlds, and it shatters, leaving them to their separate choices and their separate lives” (Magness, 98). For Magness, the chivalric tale, with its “ideal, unattainable woman” and “worship[ing]” knight figure, is an unrealistic and insufficient narrative structure for both “white and black” women (Magness, 86, 87, 98). “The comfortable cliché of courtly love,” Magness writes, “is no comfort in the realities of life” (Magness, 99).

Though I agree with Magness’ sentiments regarding the problems of the chivalric tale, I would also add that racial boundaries —and not just the insufficiencies of the chivalric romance— prevent Son and Jadine from fitting into the Western romantic narrative, a narrative format that, despite its flaws, is nonetheless presented repeatedly in pop culture in works such as *The Lord of the Rings* and *Titanic*. With negative stereotypes pervading their very existence, Son and Jadine are incapable of fitting into what Magness calls the “unattainable lady” and a knight who “comes to her rescue” (Magness, 87, 90). Patricia Hill Collins discusses the negative social perceptions of black manhood and womanhood that are applicable not only to the lives of African Americans off the page, but also to Son and Jadine. “African American men who see Black women as being physically unattractive, domineering, and promiscuous and African American women who see Black men as being criminally inclined, promiscuous, and dangerous evaluate the worth of their potential sexual partners and love interests through distorted lenses,” writes Collins (Collins, 255). These distorted lenses make their way into Morrison’s *Tar Baby*, ultimately clouding Son and Jadine’s initial perceptions of one another.

During their first encounter, Jadine immediately perceives Son, a black man, through a stereotypical lens, and negative perceptions of blackness threaten their romance from the beginning. Though she “[does] not dare” say anything when she discovers that Son has been hiding in Margaret’s closet and makes polite conversation with him over dinner (80), Jadine later reveals her fear of Son when she is alone with him for the first time. In fact, her actions during her first private interaction with him belie her earlier attempts to console Margaret: “We were all scared, Margaret ... If he’d been white we would still have been scared” (129). As she looks at Son when he appears in her bedroom, she associates Son’s appearance with criminal behavior. “[H]is eyes” are “steady and clear as a thief’s” (113). His dreadlocks “[look] overpowering—physically overpowering like bundles of long whips or lashes that could grab her and beat her to jelly. And would.” She thinks of this same hair as “[w]ild, aggressive, vicious hair that [needs] to be put in jail” (113). Without knowing Son’s character, Jadine immediately thinks of him as a criminal, a negative perception of black manhood constantly proliferated by the media and stereotyping, as well as an affront to her own identity as an upper middle class black woman, one who tries her hardest to shy away from any stereotype. Though one could argue that Jadine fears Son because he hides in Margaret’s closet unbeknownst to the inhabitants of L’Arbe de la Croix—which is hardly indicative of a noble character—a closer inspection of her perceptions of Son reveals otherwise. While she stares at Son, Jadine does not consider Son’s *behavior* criminal, but instead imagines his criminal tendencies through his dreadlocked, “chain-gang hair,” dreadlocks being a physical trait directly associated with blackness (113). Further, she does not fully realize the implications of Son’s behavior until she is confronted with his physical image: “the thought that she had not grasped fully the night before, the picture that only Margaret had seen clearly was framed for her now in the fruitwood of the mirror: this man had been living among them (in their *things*) for days. And they had not known it. What had he seen or heard? What was he doing there?” (114). The physical manifestation of race provokes the most fear in Jadine, and her negative perceptions about black masculinity cloud her perceptions of Son as a potential romantic figure. Unlike the “harmless” white skin of male characters in Western romantic narratives, Son’s coded dark skin immediately separates him from the archetype of the “noble knight.” Before he can make Jadine fall in love with him, he must first correct her view of him as a criminal. Racial stereotypes about Son’s character make him incompatible with the Western romance.

Likewise, Son's perceptions of Jadine as a "promiscuous" black woman prevent him from fully seeing her as an "ideal, unattainable woman" figure. When he learns of her success as a fashion model, Son immediately assumes that deviant sexual behaviors—and not talent or hard work—are the source of Jadine's accomplishments:

"How much?" he asked her. "Was it a lot?" His voice was quiet.

"What are you talking about? How much what?"

"Dick. That you had to suck, I mean to get all that gold and be in the movies. Or was it pussy? I guess for models it's more pussy than cock." (120)

As Son likens Jadine to a "black whor[e]" (120), he isolates her from the archetype of the romantic heroine. Though Son, admittedly, has an emotional attachment to Jadine before he learns that she is a fashion model—before he was discovered in Margaret's closet, "he used to slip into her room" and watch her sleep (119)—his assumption that Jadine is not the "virginal or naive younger woman" of the European chivalric tale points to the uncomfortable match between perceptions of blackness and Western romantic conventions (191). It is, for example, the sexualized images of Jadine as a black fashion model that brings him to this conclusion about her "not-so-virginal" character. Just before he asks Jadine "how much...dick [she] had to suck," Son views pictures of her posing for a fashion magazine and eroticizes them. Through his eyes, Jadine has "cleavage supported ... by silver lamé." His attention remains fixed on her "wet and open lips" even as he flips through pictures of her in other poses. As he gazes upon her form on the magazine page, he "traces her blouse with his forefinger" (116). Even as he views Jadine's tasteful magazine pictures—pictures that feature her wearing formal jewelry worth "thirty-two thousand dollars" and have captions describing her outfits as "elegant but easy-to-pack frocks" (117)—Son sexualizes her, eyeing her "cleavage" and "open lips" until he finally asks her "how much [dick] she had to suck" and assumes that she is promiscuous. Here, Jadine's identity as a black woman causes Son to assume that her behaviors are overtly sexual. *Tar Baby* reveals, then, that putting black characters into a Western romance narrative immediately calls attention to their larger societal perceptions; unlike the white characters Valerian and Margaret, who have no negative stereotypes to impede their progress as romantic heroes and maintain an untainted first encounter, the novel's black characters must contend with "unloveable" perceptions that render their places within a sanitized Western narrative decidedly unsanitized (250).

The "criminal" and "promiscuous" stereotypes that impact Son and Jadine's roles as romantic heroes individually, however, are not the only negative perceptions that affect their developing romance. Instead, Jadine reads their first private interactions as highly sexualized—especially when contrasted with Valerian and Margaret's stale, marital relations. As she makes a comparison between her behavior with Son and those of a bitch in heat, Jadine animalizes their encounter, calling attention to the way black intimate relations have historically been read as hypersexualized instead of affectionate. When Jadine grows angered by Son's comments about her sexuality and lashes out at him, he "[swings] her around, holding her from behind in the vise of his arms" (121). Disturbed by the encounter, Jadine later reflects on the incident, comparing both Son and herself to dogs slaking their lust in the summer:

He had jangled something in her that was so repulsive, so awful, and he had managed to make her feel that the thing that repelled her was not in him, but in her. That was why she was ashamed. He was the one who smelled. Rife, ripe. But she was the one he wanted to smell. Like an animal. Treating her like another animal and both of them must have looked just like it in that room. One dog sniffing at the hindquarters of another, and the female, her back to him, not moving, but letting herself be sniffed, letting him nuzzle her asshole as the man had nuzzled hers... (123)

Though Son and Jadine do not actually have sexual intercourse in this portion of the novel, the scene remains sexually charged, intensified by Jadine's consideration of the scene as decidedly animalistic. Son's behavior "shames" her, and though "he [is] the one" who has grabbed her from behind and who "smell[s]," Jadine is nonetheless aware that "both of them...looked just like [animals] in that room."

But why does Jadine read their encounter as overly animalistic rather than merely threatening? Though the scene is decidedly violent, Jadine acknowledges that "other men had done worse to her and tried worse," but she is particularly affected by Son's behavior (123). Once again, racial stereotypes interfere with her perceptions of Son. Just seconds after Son grabs her from behind, Jadine accuses him of "trying to rape her" (123). Though the assumption is certainly logical, Jadine's perceptions of Son as an animal occur long before he grabs her. While watching Son eat at the dinner table, Jadine watches him "burro[w] in his plate like an animal" and "when he smile[s] she [sees] small dark dogs galloping on silver feet" (94). Here, Jadine perceives Son as "animalistic" because he does not fit into the white upper-class world where she so comfortably belongs. And when she gets a

private moment with him, Jadine immediately associates Son with being a “rapist,” a stereotype that results from the myth of the hypersexual “black buck” figure. A surprised Son, however, responds by asking her “Rape? Why you little white girls always think somebody’s trying to rape you?” (121). Son’s association of Jadine with “white girls” implies that he is aware of the stereotypes surrounding his blackness and that Jadine is influenced by those stereotypes. Son does not, for example, accuse Jadine of being “overcautious” or “paranoid,” but instead accuses her of being “white,” or, in other words, fearful of his blackness “just as white girls will fantasize about black men as sexual predators” (559). Jadine, though she is a black woman, buys into this stereotype. Son’s blackness immediately makes the scene animalistic rather than merely precarious. Further, Son’s darker skin seems to bring out Jadine’s awareness of her own: “he had managed to make her feel that the thing that repelled her was not in him, but in her.” Jadine suddenly seems to become aware of their mutual blackness and therefore, the mutual perceptions of hypersexualization that plagues their existence. Suddenly, both African American characters are distanced from the purity of the Western romantic structure by the sexually animalistic stereotypes surrounding their behaviors.

But it is important to realize that the only “animalistic” sexual encounters in the novel are between Son and Jadine. In fact, Valerian and Margaret’s more sensual moments are still decidedly stale —so stale, in fact, that sexual intercourse between Morrison’s white characters is not at all obvious upon an initial read. Though Morrison lets readers know that Valerian and Margaret have a child named Michael (and therefore, must have had sexual intercourse at some point), she also hints at the passionless state of their marriage, which contrasts with Son and Jadine’s intense sexual intimacy. In the first few pages of the novel, Valerian remarks to Margaret that it’s “hard to tell” what she thinks of L’Arbe de la Croix “when a wife sleeps separately from her mate” (25). The chaste behaviors of her white characters, even in this absurd post-marital context, are characteristic of the purity associated with white women in a tale of chivalry. This immediately contrasts the sexualized encounter between Son and Jadine who have their first solitary interaction in the privacy of Jadine’s bedroom rather than in a public setting; unlike Valerian and Margaret, who do not even share a bedroom as husband and wife, Son and Jadine have their first social interaction in the sexual intimacy and privacy of Jadine’s bedroom. Morrison hints at Valerian and Margaret’s sanitized sexuality yet again in a scene where Valerian practically begs Margaret to show him a little sexual passion; sex between Valerian and Margaret, Morrison illustrates in a scene of straight dialogue between her white characters, is a calculated effort rather than a spontaneous experience:

‘...I *am* sorry, Margaret. I liked what you did though.’
‘Sure. We’ll do it again sometime.’
‘Soon?’
‘Soon.’
‘Now.’
‘Now?’
‘Why not?’
‘It doesn’t work like that Valerian. I mean I can’t just lie down in the middle of the afternoon.’
(189)

Here, Valerian asks Margaret to clarify just how “soon” they’ll “do it again,” calling attention to the apparent infrequency of the act. And even when he makes the suggestion that they “do it ... now,” Margaret is reluctant to be spontaneous. Despite the fact that she has no job or household duties to maintain, Margaret insists that she “can’t just lie down in the middle of the afternoon.” Sex, for the white couple of *Tar Baby*, is hardly the fiery, animalistic occurrence that it is for Son and Jadine. As she uses her “reinvention of the love story” to contrast perceptions of black behaviors with the conventions of the chivalric tale, Morrison juxtaposes stereotypes of white chastity with black promiscuity, pointing out the latter’s incompatibility with Western romance.

3. Getting Unstuck: Exploring Other Narratives of Black Love

As *Tar Baby* engages with the chivalric tale and the “community uplift” narrative, it ultimately calls attention to the way both Anglo-American and African-American societies think about love and perceptions of black identity. By pointing out the negative stereotypes that prevent Son and Jadine from fully fitting into the Western romance, Morrison illustrates the problems between contemporary black identities and Anglo-American depictions of romantic love.

But if the “Western romantic narrative” is not inherently black in itself, does this mean that larger stories expressing heterosexual love are fundamentally at odds with black experiences? Perhaps not. *Tar Baby*’s title

invokes another sort of myth entirely, one rooted in African American oral traditions. The original “Tar Baby” myth varies depending on the story teller, but generally Brer Rabbit, a sort of trickster figure, becomes the enemy of Brer Fox or a farmer. One day, the Fox/Farmer character places a baby made of tar in the center of the road. Brer Rabbit attempts to greet the tar baby, which, as an inanimate object, makes no reply. This frustrates Brer Rabbit, and he fights the baby, only to get stuck in the tar.

Brer Rabbit does eventually trick the farmer/fox character into giving him his freedom, but the important part of this oral narrative involves the process of his becoming stuck. Just as Brer Rabbit becomes stuck in the tar, Son and Jadine become stuck as they attempt to fit into a western romantic genre that cannot accommodate their experiences as people of color in twentieth-century America. In the chivalric tale, the worshipping knight cannot be perceived as criminal, nor can the “chaste lady” figure be perceived as hypersexualized. Son and Jadine’s relationship ultimately fails because of societal pressures and stereotypes that prevent them from achieving bliss by the Western romantic standards they seek to embody.

Morrison’s titular invocation of the “Tar Baby” myth, then, suggests alternative narrative routes for Son and Jadine. Though the specific forms of the “Western romance” might be incompatible with the complexity of black experiences, the broader “love story” is not. These love stories, stories that feature black characters in central romantic roles without relying on the conventions of the Western romance, can actually uncover more conducive methods of expressing black experiences. Works such as Gayl Jones’ *Corregidora*, Alice Walker’s *The Temple of My Familiar*, Dorothy West’s *The Wedding*, and numerous other late-twentieth century black narratives put new spins on black identity and love. *Corregidora*’s Ursa longs to “make generations” yet embraces her own singular identity, and the novel refuses to present black sexuality as shameful and exclusive from affectionate love (Jones, 22). *The Temple of My Familiar*’s Fanny searches for a more organic love, one devoid of marital connotations as the Western world knows it. *The Wedding*’s Shelby learns that “identity is not inherent” and that “equating love with order and homogeneity” is not the reality of the world (West, 82). The complexly individual nature of these novels, as they separate from the tradition of the Western romance, find new contexts and methods of exploring the plurality of black identities and heterosexual romantic love. In these new narratives, Morrison and other authors create stories that “[allow for a more luxurious connection] to love that is both erotic and yet romantic, that does not deny collective identity yet allows black people to see themselves as individuals” (Edmondson, 206). It is possible, then, that we shouldn’t want Son and Jadine to fit into the chivalric romance. Instead, we should just be satisfied that the possibility exists for them to create their own narratives, ones that can accommodate their realities.

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