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The Tar Babies of *Tar Baby* by Toni Morrison

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ABSTRACT: This article aims to analyse *Tar Baby* by Toni Morrison as a novel centred around the eponymous figure. The tar baby is a doll-like figure from Black American folklore, an object made of tar, rags, and buttons. In folklore sources, the function of the tar baby is difficult to understand or describe; it serves as a kind of decoy or trap, and its victims get attached to its sticky surface. As the novel draws close parallels between its two protagonists and the tar baby, Henry Louis Gates's theory of Signifyin(g) is applied with a view to determine who is the eponymous thing. Although the characters represent two opposing outlooks on life, they exert almost inextricable attraction to one another. Each of them, just like tar baby, exhibits its viscosity that glues, and, hence, traps the other in this stormy relation. The paper follows this trope focusing on the characters' sticky properties, which resonate with the doll in the folktale. The tar baby is linked to the signifying monkey, a tempting trickster from Yoruba mythology, who attempts to manipulate signification, subvert dominant cultural codes, and bring on some kind of contact with other characters. As the theory focuses largely on the ambiguous and the symbolic functions of the object, the paper endeavours to discover what the discussed characters stand for and how they manifest their tar baby qualities. The conclusion that follows is that both Jadine and Son can be perceived as the tar babies of the story, especially tar babies to each other, trapping and sticking to one another.

KEYWORDS: Signifyin(g), folklore, culture, identity, tar baby

Tar Baby by Toni Morrison is quite an unusual novel in her collection. Set outside of the United States, it stands out from Morrison's other books, which are deeply embedded in American reality. With its changing setting, from the Caribbean to New York to a small village in Florida, the story revolves around Jadine and Son, who represent conflicting approaches to life. The tension between Blackness and Whiteness, tradition and change, the past and the present

is equally strong as the mutual attraction the aforementioned characters feel towards one another. Being torn between the two worlds, they cannot reach any agreement, and each of them tries to affect and change the other. Despite their multiple conflicts, misunderstandings, and mutually bad influence, they persist in a relation that stifles them both. The unfolding of their relationship parallels a traditional African folktale referenced in the novel's title. Such a re-working of a traditional tale can be analysed via the theory of Signifyin(g), a concept also rooted in African folklore and described as "the black trope for all other tropes, the trope of tropes, the figure of figures" (Gates 2014: 88). Seemingly, it is a prevalent feature of African American texts, and yet to properly define it and to fully grasp what it entails is somehow a cumbersome task. Gates (2014: 82–87) points out that the concept, which has been flattened to a simple verbal duel and a witty use of words, bears comparison with figuration and encompasses some hidden meaning that is visible and understandable only to those who are receptive to it. Collective and shared knowledge is clearly crucial for deciphering this double-voiced discourse embedded within African American vernacular English. In the case of Morrison's novel, it is the tar baby folktale which provides the context and the main reference point for the book. While trying to understand the meaning behind this modern reworking, the theory of Signifyin(g) will prove particularly useful. Arguably, it will help facilitate the process of determining what the eponymous tar baby is and what it is supposed to mean.

Developed in *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African American Literary Criticism* (1988), Gates's concept of Signifyin(g) has its origins in African American vernacular traditions and indicates a rhetorical practice based on irony, double meaning, revision, repetition, and indirection. As argued (Gates 2014: 66–67), Black American writing often creates meaning through its relationship with other texts, arriving at a process of "repetition and revision" (Gates 2014: 66) or "repetition with a signal difference" (Gates 2014: 56). Thus, rather than simply reproducing earlier narratives, new texts transform already existing motifs, themes, and forms. Consequently, new meaning is generated through revision and reinterpretation. For Gates (2014: 66), Signifyin(g) bears resemblance to a type of intertextuality specific to the Black American literary tradition. Basing his theory on the figure of the Signifying Monkey, a trickster character present in Yoruba folklore, who relies on its wit and cunning to outsmart stronger animals, he proposes that African American texts employ double-voiced discourse. This happens with a simultaneous invocation and revision of preceding literary and cultural forms. As a result, it is not only from the individual text that meaning can be derived but also from the text's dialogical relation to other literary works. Signifyin(g) makes it possible to investigate how a given text, in this case Morrison's novel, critiques, echoes, revises, and reworks earlier literary tropes, with special focuses devoted to revisions, inversions, repetitions which potentially create new cultural meaning.

As the title of the novel is a direct reference to an African American folktale, attention is drawn to its focal position within the text, as well as to the

importance of folktales in African American culture. Orality, the main channel of literary communication that enslaved people brought to the Americas, is an inextricable part of this folklore and tradition. It was, indeed, through storytelling that Black slaves maintained their cultural values, discussed their ideas of the creation of the world and conveyed moral truths. Though there are many distinguishable types of African American folktales, the one that is particularly pertinent to this research is the trickery tale. In the trickery tale the virtually weaker character, the trickster, as the type of the tale may suggest, always outsmarts the supposedly stronger one, which is the case in the tar baby story (Britannica n.d./b). Within this particular folktale, some of the stock characters that permeate African American folklore are easily discernible, namely, Br'er Rabbit as the African American and Br'er Fox as the slaveholder, but there still remains a figure whose role is elusive – the tar baby. This figure, although it is not a living creature, but, rather, a simple object, has some kind of eeriness about it, since it serves as an entrapment for the Rabbit and is created solely for the purpose of punishing the trickster.

To answer the question of the tar baby's identity in the novel, it is necessary to quickly recapitulate the plot of the original folktale. The story revolves around Br'er Rabbit, a trickster character whom Br'er Fox and other predator characters want to punish. Therefore, Br'er Fox constructs a figure made of tar, and clothes it, so that it looks like a living creature. When the rabbit passes by and welcomes the tar baby and is ignored, he decides to punch it, and the longer he punches, the more stuck he becomes. Having caught his rival, Br'er Fox ponders various ways of physical punishment. But, as a trickster, the rabbit manages to free himself by lying that to be taken to the briar patch, a natural habitat for rabbits, would be the most painful punishment. This is exactly what happens (Britannica n.d./a). The most popular and widely-known version of this story was first made available in print to the general public in 1880 by Joel Chandler Harris, who collected a wide range of such folktales and published them in "Uncle Remus, His Songs and His Sayings: The Folk-lore of the Old Plantation" (1880). In his version what the reader learns about the eponymous tar baby is quite limited.

An one fine mornin he foun some tracks, / An he shuck his head (I m
tellin you de facts!) / An he went off an got im some shoemaker's wax,
/ An pitch an rozzum, an den an dar / He mould him a baby outer de tar,
/ Wid leg an body, an head an han – / An it look like it settin dar playin
in de san– / An he hide hisse'f whar he kin see / Whatsomever gwine
ter happen ter de Tar- / Baby-ee- / De Tar-Baby-ow, de Tar-Baby-oh-
/ An den he hide an lay mighty low! (Harris 1904: 8).

Apart from the information that the tar baby is made of tar, wax and looks like a human, there is not much about its appearance. This lack of specificity can stem from the fact that the tar baby folktale was originally transmitted orally;

thus, there could be multiple versions of it. Such a scarce description has its benefits, namely, it allows for greater interference of the storyteller. Toni Morrison herself admits to never having read the story and, instead, hearing it as a child from her mother, to whom the story had also been told, which demonstrates the long tradition of the folktale being passed on from one generation to the other. In her version of the story, the figure had “a dress on and a bonnet” (Taylor-Guthrie 1994: 102). Moreover, there are also many pictures and images that present the tar baby in a more vivid and detailed way, with eyes made from buttons, a nose made of cork, a hat and a coat.

Still, there is one thing that remains the same in all versions of the tar baby tale. Namely, the eponymous item is not an active participant of the story. It is an inanimate object. Despite its significance to the story and the fact that it is present in the title, the tar baby is not the main character but, rather, a catalyst for the rabbit’s misfortune. On the level of Morrison’s novel, it can be the character, whose sticky personality entraps others, which results in their downfall. Son is generally considered to be a trickster character (O’Meally 1981; Scott 2007; Koizumi 2011; Kolehmainen 2018), he is identified as Br’er Rabbit of the story, the man who falls prey to Jadine; however, there is a certain stickiness to his character that contributes to Jadine’s cultural confusion and identity struggle. It may not be Son as such that elicits Jadine’s sense of cultural alienation, as it starts much earlier, in Paris, when a Black woman in yellow dress in a shop looks at Jadine, spits at her and makes her feel “[l]onely and inauthentic” (Morrison 1991: 45). Having graduated from Sorbonne, working as an international model and being, to some extent, dependent on Valerian’s money, Jadine has drifted away from her roots, which she is reminded of by the moment at the shop. What Son does with his traditional and conservative outlook on the world is “pick up where the African woman left off” (Harris 1991: 134), and exacerbate Jadine’s doubts and the conundrum she has found herself in. Even though their first encounters do not indicate a possibility of further romantic relation, as Jadine is afraid of his “physically overpowering [...] Mau Mau, Attica, chain-gang hair” (Morrison 1991: 113), the roughness of his look and his mysterious intentions, the dynamics between them evolve and change as the novel unfolds, drawing them together closer and closer. As argued by Trudier Harris (1991: 120), at this point of the book, with his bedraggled look, Son is the embodiment of the tar baby which alludes to racial stereotypes of Blackness being inextricable from animality or dirtiness. It is, indeed, in such an attire that he sneaks into Jadine’s bedroom at night and tries “to insert his own dreams into her [...] to breathe into her the smell of tar and its shiny consistency” (Morrison 1991: 119–120) as if being a tar baby himself he had the capacity of turning her into one as well. The dreams that he wants to insert into her own are the ones of a traditional Black community; hence, even when she is quite unaware and remains unbothered by his behaviour, he still serves a figure of cultural entrapment who wants to place Jadine in a middle of a conservative reality and imprint in her his system of values.

Jadine's sense of identity and belonging is distorted by Son on multiple occasions, indeed, he calls her a White girl (Morrison 1991: 121), which she actively opposes, but when he reveals that he "smelled [her – W. D.] too" (Morrison 191: 122), Jadine is adamant to go to Valerian and have Son thrown out from the house. Nonetheless, she does not. She is equally repulsed by and attracted to Son, unable to take action as he sows the seeds of doubt that Valerian

would understand that there was something in [Jadine] to smell and that [Son] smelled it and if Valerian understands that then he will understand everything and even if he makes [Son] go away, he will still know that there is something in [Jadine] to be smelled which [Son has] discovered and smelled [him]self. And no sealskin coat or million-dollar earrings can disguise it (Morrison 1991: 125).

These racing thought that appear in Jadine's mind are the result of Son's Signifyin(g) speech. Although he does so indirectly, Son alludes to the similarity between the two of them. Instead of openly discussing identity and race, he relies on figurative language of which Jadine has to make sense. Considering the fact that she interprets his intentions properly proves the applicability of Gates' (2014: 55) theory. Indeed, it demonstrates that meaning emerges through double-voiced discourse because the smell metaphor refers to both physical appearance and a shared racial and cultural identity; an identity that Jadine tries to distance or cut herself from. What is particularly problematic for her is the concept of race and the array of stereotypes it brings with itself. As for now, her race does not play a crucial role at the L'Arbe de la Croix. Contrary to her aunt and uncle, she is not relegated to the servant position, and she enjoys all the privileges of the White inhabitants of the house. The appearance of Son threatens her position, as Valerian may notice in her what other characters see in Son. If so, no culturally European, modern and extravagant object, such as a sealskin coat given to her by a lover, will be able to mask their resemblance. This violent interaction between them is the moment when Son's sticky character becomes evident, leaving Jadine not only helpless in the face of his offensive behaviour, but also embarrassed by the vision of her "telling on a black man to a white man" (Morrison 1991: 126). Jadine may still refuse to share the worldview with Son and reject his preconceptions about racial division, but he manages to elicit some kind of loyalty on her side.

The loyalty she feels towards Son is just the incipient stage of his playing the role of the tar baby of the novel. His "sticky" properties become more obvious as the tension and attraction between the characters increases. Once Son has taken care of his appearance, Jadine notices that she is "more frightened of his good looks than she had been by his ugliness" (Morrison 1991: 158). According to Harris (1991: 120), the attraction that Jadine feels towards Son is irresistible, she is drawn to him just as Br'er Rabbit is drawn to the tar baby. There are many instances when she tries to placate her emotions and hold

“tight to the reins of black dogs with silver feet” (Morrison 1991: 158), or reason herself out of the idea of pursuing a romantic or sexual relation with him, but the temptation is too strong. Such is the viscosity of Son that Jadine is unable to hold the dogs on the leash any longer and the overpowering attraction clouds her judgment. It is particularly visible once Jadine and Son return from their trip to the beach, and she engages in a conversation with Margaret. During this encounter, Jadine not only protects Son, but also gets frustrated with Margaret’s insinuations of him wanting to sexually abuse the White woman. This arouses the feeling of jealousy in Jadine, which makes her realise that she is “competing with [Margaret] for rape” (Morrison 1991: 187). Interestingly, such thoughts come to her mind after the accident that happens on route. That is, after she falls into the tar pit and gets temporarily stuck there. The physical encounter with this sticky substance could be interpreted as the beginning of Son’s stickiness drawing in Jadine. Indeed, it is this direct contact with the tar, a building block of the tar baby, that prompts her deep attraction towards Son. From the perspective of Signifyin(g), Morrison repeats and revises the folklore motif of tar. She provides a “repetition with a signal difference” (Gates 2014: 73). While, in the original folktale, the tar baby entraps the rabbit physically, here the tar gains a new meaning of emotional attachment or entrapment. Therefore, the folklore theme remains clearly the same, but it is endowed with new meaning that allows for the discussion of culture, identity, and race.

The passion between the characters does not lessen once Son succeeds in seducing Jadine. If anything, it only intensifies together with Jadine’s identity confusion. In going to Eloë, Son’s hometown, Jadine gives Son a chance, and decides to try out his vision of life in his hometown. Unfortunately, once they arrive, she becomes aware that what Son cherishes the most is completely unsuitable to her needs. In the traditional and conservative community of Eloë, Jadine feels forlorn and out of place. She finds her only safe space in closeness with Son and, in particular, in the physical and sexual relationship she has with him. She can cling to him in the town that makes her feel as if she were not enough, not Black enough and not feminine enough. The fears that are inflicted by Son and, later, by his community, culminate when Jadine hallucinates a group of Black women that she knows, has seen or heard about “crowding into the room [...] taking away her sex [...] revealing one breast and then two” (Morrison 1991: 259–260), mocking her attitude, emancipated and far-from-conventional, which results not only in her cultural estrangement and alienation, but also a total rejection and denunciation of her roots. After the vision, Jadine leaves Eloë, and when Son comes back to New York, they constantly fight, and thus she decides to go to Paris and forget him. Just as Br’er Rabbit, she frees herself from the tar baby and goes back to her briar patch, where she rarely feels judged because of her race and where she can be colourless. Harris (1991: 137) puts forward that Jadine escapes from Son because she rejects what he wanted to impose on her as a woman and as a Black person, as it is threatening to her. Still, the remnants of the tar are hard to clean off

because it is hard to forget about a man who made love to her “like a star” (Morrison 1991: 294).

It is somehow clearer to see Jadine as the tar baby. In one of her interviews, the author herself discusses a version of the original folktale deconstructed in the story. In this version, the eponymous tar baby is dressed as a woman. For Morrison, the folktale is a love story between the tar baby that represents a Black woman and Br’er Rabbit, who stands for a Black man, which is the symbolism she applied to Jadine and Son, respectively (Taylor-Guthrie 1994: 47, 94). Evidently, even the main idea behind the creation of the novel aligns with Gates’s Signifyin(g) theory. The author revises a well-known tale and re-works it in such a way that it fits her vision; as a result, she transforms it into a complex romance.

What is peculiar about Jadine as a Black woman being able to enjoy all the privileges that she has, such as the access to good education, a career in modelling or even the simple act of eating together with Valerian and Margaret on the terrace, rather than with Ondine and Sydney in the kitchen, is the fact that, just as the tar baby in the folktale, she was “created” by a White man. It is Valerian who sponsored her education and whom she can ask for help any time and about whom she and Son argued while in New York. In the context of this group, the role-share, as distinguished by Rayson (1998), goes as follows: Valerian is a Br’er Fox, who constructed a tar baby, namely, Jadine, to trap Son, the trickster of the novel. It is an observation that is acknowledged even by Son himself when he decides to tell Jadine a story about “a white farmer [who] had [...] [a] farm. And a rabbit came along and ate a couple of his... ow... cabbages. [...] [And] He made him a tar baby” (Morrison 1991: 273). Son is well aware of the fact that he is inexplicably drawn to Jadine from the very beginning of his life in the Caribbean house. He secretly visits her bedroom at night and watches her while she sleeps, which signifies her appeal and his fascination. He even admits at one point that “[h]e wanted to go home but that woman was on his mind [...] but [he was] not on hers” (Morrison 1991: 169), which bears a striking resemblance to the original folktale, since it is the tar baby’s indifference and virtual impoliteness that makes the rabbit strike it. In Morrison’s version of the story, it is Jadine’s initial disgust and then a seeming lack of interest that makes Son so persistent.

Once the couple leaves L’Arbe de la Croix and moves to New York, Jadine’s stickiness is reinforced and she begins to exert more power over Son. As Harris (1991: 124) notices, she becomes both a tar baby, with such stickiness that glues Son to her, and a trickster that brings Son to her briar patch, turning him into a victim. She wants him to Europeanise himself, conform to what she believes to be a superior culture, find employment or educate himself. Reluctant at first, Son finally accedes to her propositions, takes the exams and immerses himself, to a certain extent, into this foreign culture; thus, he loses a part of his identity for the sake of the tar baby. What is also pointed out by Harris (1991: 125) is that the cultural conversion practiced by Jadine could be interpreted as the

emasculatation of Son, because to comply with American values with regard to the economic status and societal roles is ultimately unmanly. Particularly, it is so for a man such as Son, who perceives the hegemony of White culture as the continuation of the racial oppression and does not want to be obedient towards the system. Interestingly, Son is not oblivious to the effects that Jadine has on him. On the contrary, he calls her "Gatekeeper [...] tar baby side-of-the-road whore trap"; thus, he is fully aware of the possible pernicious consequences that a relation with her may have on him. Importantly, this description can be interpreted as an act of Signifyin(g), because it references directly the eponymous figure; thus, it provides a cultural reference and assumes that it will be understood. As Gates (2014: 93–94) points out, shared knowledge lies at the core of Signifyin(g), because it ensures understanding. Nevertheless, the act of Signifyin(g) does not end here. Not only does Son use the folklore, but he also adapts it to his current situation; hence, he revises it. Despite the negative charge of this utterance, the attraction between Son and Jadine is irresistible. Moreover, Son is not the only one who thinks Jadine as potentially dangerous to him: so does Gideon. Referred to disrespectfully as "Yardman" by the inhabitants of Valerian's house, Gideon has been employed as a handyman and a groundkeeper. His occupation grants him access to the events in the house and turns him into a careful observer. He notices that Jadine comes together with a certain cultural baggage, European/White, of which Son should be wary. She is his "first yalla", meaning a Black woman of light complexion, and he should be careful of "the stuff they put down" (Morrison 1991: 156), such as the rejection of African traditions and the embodiment of White ideals as they consciously choose to forgo their roots. Additionally, Soldier, Son's friend from Eloë, gets involved in a conversation with Jadine in which he indirectly alludes to Son's poor judgment when it comes to women and that "he wouldn't know a good woman from a snake" (Morrison 1991: 257). Considering the fact that Jadine has found herself in a place that is so behind the times and outdated in comparison to all the other places she has visited, she looks at it with a slight sense of superiority on her side. She simply does not fit into the community of Eloë, and the community of Eloë does not fit into her, so, as Soldier points out, she poses a threat to his life-long friend.

Son is so infatuated with Jadine that nothing, not even her leaving him, seems to impede his pursuit. The gravity of her attraction is so overpowering that he is willing to submit to her utterly and depart from his culture entirely. Harris (1991: 126) notices that he renounces himself for the sake of finding her and being with her at all cost, which points to his lack of control over his own life. At one point he exclaims that "[w]hatever she wants, [he has] to do it, want it. But first [he has] to find her" (Morrison 1991: 275), which clearly points to his inability of letting her go. Despite Son's earlier resistance, he is now defeated, and he is ever more determined to act as she pleases. A similar conclusion is reached by Scott (2007: 39), who notices that what distinguishes Son from Br'er Rabbit at this point is his total inability to independently free

himself from the tar baby. It is Therese, Gideon's wife, whose deep connection to Black tradition, culture, and folklore allows her to step in. She helps Son make a decision, which, once again, indicates what both Harris (1991) and Scott (2007) claim, namely, Son's loss of independence, to choose blind horsemen as his comrades, and he does indeed run "lickety-split" (Morrison 1991: 309) ahead.

Evidently, it is impossible to assign the role of the eponymous figure exclusively to either Jadine or Son. They both exhibit a certain level of stickiness and some sticky properties. Therefore, they can both function as tar babies, which is how Harris (1991) repeatedly presents them throughout her entire work. Moreover, they can also function as each other's tar babies. The mutual attraction that they feel perfectly reflects the aforementioned idea. Son is equally besotted with Jadine as Jadine is with him, and they are both equally trapped by each other despite their conflicting views; therefore, they both demonstrate the properties of a tar baby. Harris (1991) points to various events in the story in which their roles as tar babies become more or less prominent, transform or combine with something else. Ironically, it is actually through the descriptions of violence and torpor, not the descriptions of affection that the inextricability of their situation is made visible.

Though sociable and active at first, Jadine and Son quickly become alienated from the outside world and succumb to the space of Jadine's flat. Their New York reality is marked by stagnation. Their relationship is so consuming, and they become codependent, as if merged into one, that neither of them leaves the flat anymore.

They were the last lovers in New York City – the first in the world – so their passion was inefficient and kept no savings account. [...] They didn't go to parties anymore – other people interfered with their view of each other. They stopped going to Suggs and Across 110th Street. They stopped laughing and began to smile at each other. From across the room, across the mattress, across the table. Their language diminished to code at times, and at others ballooned to monologues delivered while cradled in the other's arms (Morrison 1991: 231–232).

Even though this happens in New York, which is Jadine's briar patch, and which is where Jadine grows in power (Harris 1991: 124), Son's allure has by no means decreased and he still draws Jadine to himself and is equally drawn by her. Nevertheless, between the lines, one may already perceive their relationship breaking down. They can function together only in this artificially created vacuum to which the outside world has no access and over which it has no power. Their contradictory beliefs and unmatching personalities do not really matter in their secluded environment, because they cease to interact with society that could shed light on their differences. Much as this situation already shows an unhealthy relationship which is on the verge of obsession, what happens after their trip to Eloë is even worse. Once again back in New

York, they fight violently over Valerian, education and employment, but all these arguments and misunderstandings seem to stem from the same problem, namely, their profound cultural differences. Son's rejection of formal education and his reluctance to borrow money from Valerian in order to start their own business, both of which are closely connected to the White hegemonic culture, and Jadine's assimilation within this culture, lead to fits of rage and physical violence on both sides. Their beliefs are so ingrained within them that neither is open to listening to the other side, but, simultaneously, they both want the best for each other. This mutual lack of understanding is captured by the narrator towards the end of the novel. As explained,

[Jadine] 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. He thought he was rescuing her from Valerian, meaning them, the aliens, the people who in a mere three hundred years had killed a world millions of years old. [...] Each was pulling the other away from the maw of hell – its very ridge top. Each knew the world as it was meant or ought to be. One had a past, the other a future and each one bore the culture to save the race in his hands. Mama-spoiled black man, will you mature with me? Culture-bearing black woman, whose culture are you bearing? (Morrison 1991: 271–272)

Emphasised here are Jadine's and Son's diverging outlooks on life. While the former perceives tradition as outdated and severely limiting for her self-development, the latter recognises White culture as superimposed and oppressive. Although both have the other's best interest at heart, they cannot find any common ground. Their conflicting visions are irreconcilable. As a character who is forward-oriented, Jadine wants Son to reject the past and to mature with her. What maturity means for her is, most probably, progress and adherence to modern-day values. On the other hand, for Son, the past is of utmost importance. The memory of the atrocities aimed against Black people is something that affects his life. It seems that, for Son, Black culture and tradition are in itself an act of subversion and resistance. Thus, he cannot forgive Jadine for rejecting it and succumbing to the rule of the White oppressor.

The confrontation with the real world, the events in *Eloe* and the reality of living in New York break Son and Jadine's ideal bubble of bliss and happiness. Son's resentment towards White people, his living in the past and strong self-identity confronted with Jadine's denouncement of Black culture and absorption of White values, her looking forward to the future and leaving the past behind become too substantial a difference to allow them to be together. No matter how strong the attraction is, no matter how strong is the glue that each of them exerts, it is simply not strong enough to hold them together.

In *Tar Baby* by Toni Morrison, one may find more than just one character who fits into the eponymous role. Both Jadine's and Son's positions in the story fluctuate, since they can be interpreted as tricksters, tar babies, both at once, or neither at a particular moment. Nevertheless, their tar-like qualities are exposed through their overall interactions, behaviour and choices with a mutually detrimental result. The trope of Signifyin(g) in the novel is visible through not only the reworking of a folktale but also the metaphorical and symbolic meaning. It is in its non-straightforwardness that the story embodies the spirit of what Gates (2014) describes as Signifyin(g). Though at first glance it is a love story, the book engages with much more serious issues of race, identity and culture. Morrison presents two conflicting attitudes and personifies them in the characters of Son and Jadine, simultaneously positioning them at the two extremes. Whichever pole the character represents, they are at an impasse because of their all-or-nothing perspective; however, by leaving *Tar Baby* quite open-ended, Morrison gives hope for future reconciliation.

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