Oral Storytelling as an Act of Resistance in Morrison’s *Tar Baby*

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Received on: 21-11-2018

Accepted on: 5-3-2019

Abstract

This paper argues that the African tradition of oral storytelling is an act of resistance conferring agency to oppressed African-Americans and countering existing Eurocentric discourses. Specifically, the paper relates storytelling, a process of telling local and personal narratives from an African vantage point, to the theoretical underpinnings of Afrocentricity expostulated by African-American theorist, Molefe Kete Asante. Storytelling serves the aims of Afrocentricity as they both work towards endowing the African subject with agency to free voices from the margin so as to subvert white supremacists’ discourse. The study brings into focus how the storytelling experience proceeds towards the liberation and transformation of the storyteller and the listener in Toni Morrison’s *Tar Baby* (1981). It additionally exhibits how agency is born during this process enabling the disempowered subjects to become speaking powers in recounting their stories and in deciding their own fate in a diverse society.

Keywords: African-Americans, Afrocentricity, agency, oral storytelling, resistance, *Tar Baby*.

Introduction

One of the *sui generis* forms of cultural expression is oral storytelling. African storytellers have upheld this folkloric tradition to entertain and educate, and more, to transmit their aboriginal knowledge to the next generations. In *The Oral Tradition of the Baganda of Uganda*, Immaculate Kizza (2010) writes that oral tradition is “an encyclopedia of the various people’s histories, cultural experiences, traditions and values; a record of their feelings, attitudes, and responses to their experiences and environment; and also a tool for preserving and disseminating that knowledge both internally and globally” (p: 7). This tradition is crucial to keeping records of the past and cultural events. In this light, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o (1986) states that “orature has its roots in the lives of the peasantry. It is primarily their compositions, their songs, their art, which form the basis of the national and resistance culture during the colonial and neo-colonial times” (95). For him, since colonialism is deemed as a form of oppression, oral narratives not only substitute hegemonic discourses but express and restore history and culture for relegated, indigenous people. Orature has been a fundamental medium for African-Americans of displaying resistance to authoritarian regimes, imperial ideologies and cultural dominance. Hence, orature is regarded as a subversive strategy that goes against the established systems.

African-American Noble Prize novelist, Toni Morrison, generously provides her readers with an outstanding fiction to speculate on. Her narratives historically reveal facts about the institution of slavery and its aftermath. She is one of the most prominent Harlem Renaissance writers who have taken on the burden of re-conceptualizing the notion of “black art” with more focus on African cultural legacy. On this
account, the collective duty here is to forge an African-based weapon to resist stereotyping, oppression, segregation and Western epistemologies (Bodenner 2006, 2). This being so, she constantly endeavors to capture the unique black experience to render her race’s heritage recognized as a parallel culture. Hence, to unearth buried stories and subvert the hidden agenda of white supremacy, Morrison employs the African tradition of oral storytelling as it bestows empowerment, agency, and liberation to the characters of *Tar Baby*.

Morrison’s *Tar Baby* has received less criticism in comparison to her previously published novels. There is scanty criticism regarding the trope of oral storytelling as a measure of resistance. Most of the critical responses have focused on storytellers in terms of providing and manipulating knowledge. In “Contentions in the House of Chloe: Morrison’s *Tar Baby*,” Maria DiBattista (2005) comments that like most of Morrison’s fictions, the narrative “is filled with storytellers who act as her surrogates. They devise or invent stories in order to make sense of the world; for them narrative truly functions... as a form of knowledge” (162). Telling stories may deliver certain knowledge; yet fabricating and altering stories may fail to arrest an image of truth about things. DiBattista also argues that “... sometimes the sheer inventiveness of the storyteller can exhaust the resources of a language, and hence obliterate any way of determining what is fact, what invention, what an outright falsehood” (162). In addition, recent criticism entails Morrison’s characterization as a whole. In the essay “Self, Society and Myth in Toni Morrison’s Fiction”, Cynthia Davis demonstrates that “All of Morrison’s characters exist in a world defined by its blackness and by the surrounding white society that both violates and denies it” (27). Davis expounds Morrison’s vocation of portraying characters in a constant struggle amongst the oppressive white trappings to gain minor rights.

Morrison states in her book *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* that “The desire for freedom is proceeded by oppression” (62). She explains that the characters she depicts still yearn for both physical and psychological liberation from this oppressiveness. Elizabeth A. Beaulieu in her book *The Toni Morrison Encyclopedia* affirms that “Morrison engages characters in calling on the wisdom of their African ancestors to help them mediate and rise above their circumstances” (2). Beaulieu adds, “In order to survive, Morrison’s characters need to choose whether to exist in the shadows, submerging their identities, or to fight back, proving that they have a self worth respecting [sic]” (170). Unquestionably, the characters’ experiences illustrate the challenges and confrontations in relation to the struggle for self-assertion, black community building and cultural heritage restoration. Some critics have addressed Morrison’s protagonist from the perspective of African American folklore. In his critical essay “The Briar Patch as Modernist Myth: Morrison, Barthes, and *Tar Baby As-Is*”, Craig H. Werner (1988) investigates Morrison’s employment of Br’er Rabbit and the tar baby. For Werner, it is Son who plays the role of “the classic trickster; gauging all actions for survival” (164). Other critics have discussed the novel in light of self-identity, marking the protagonist Jadine as “a white production”. John Duvall labels Jadine as an African-American “woman whose identity is in crisis” (101). Even J. Brooks Bouson sees Jadine “as a white-constructed tar baby used to trap Son” (104). Subsequently, the previous critical responses have eschewed the trope of oral storytelling and the condition of oppression caused by white supremacy.
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This study tracks down oral storytelling performances and examines Thérèse’s myth-telling as a measure of empowerment and granting agency. Also, it places the emphasis on cultural oppression and the protagonist’s victorious behaviour amidst the New World.

Set in Isle des Chevaliers, an island off the coast of Dominica in the Caribbean, by the end of 1970s, *Tar Baby*, at first blush, appears to be a love story between Jadine Childs and Son Green who struggle to coexist together. The climax reaches its apogee when the lovers visit Eloë, Son’s “cradle” in Florida. Their relationship starts to crumble when Jadine feels a sense of otherness in Son’s hometown and finally decides to depart for Paris. However, on a deeper level, the novel offers a snapshot of Son’s internal ordeal while trying to retain his “Africanness” as he finishes up rejecting the constructs of the white society represented by the Streets.

The irreconcilable binary opposition of the New World and the Old World is mirrored through the love relationship between Jadine and Son respectively. The characters represent two divergent poles of cultures and history which set up the conflict of the story. Jadine’s and Son’s disagreement is an allegory for the struggle between present/past, Western values/Black African culture, and assimilation/rootedness. To integrate with each other is evidently impossible as Morrison writes that “Each [is] pulling the other away from the maw of hell-its very ridge top. Each [knows] the world as it [is] meant or ought to be. One [has] a past, the other a future and each one [bears] the culture to save the race in his hands” (Morrison 1981, 269). This reflects on the inability of the black culture to melt down within the White one. The novel chronicles the journey of Son from oppression towards liberation and self-actualization. By listening to Thérèse’s story, Son acquires agency in deciding his fate.

Thus, Morrison’s *Tar Baby* is to be analyzed from the vantage point of Molefi Kete Asante’s Afrocentricity in addressing African-Americans’ oppression, orature, agency, and resistance of white supremacy. Focusing on orature and agency, the novel is read as a critique of the characters’ oral storytelling process which pilots them towards cultural resistance and Afrocentric embrace. In the book *Afrocentricity: The Theory of Social Change*, Asante (2003) popularizes his theory in a response to Eurocentricity which begets a state of oppression and suppression for ‘disadvantaged’ people owing to its refutation of any other native knowledge (145). To Asante (2003), “the best road to all health, economic, political, cultural, and psychological in the African community is through a centered positioning of ourselves within our story” (vii). Centeredness is prerequisite in the journey of overturning the vestiges of Westernization. He identifies being black with being “against all forms of oppression, racism, classism... and white racial domination” (2). The subject is called to adopt “an African ideology, distinct from a Eurocentric ideology, that allows African agency, that is, a sense of self actualizing based upon the best interests of African people” (1). African-Americans should “rediscover” their “ideology of heritage” and have a clear understanding that there is no substitute for their own history and culture. They are hailed to acquire agency which stems from the unique African experiences in order to reassess their historical and cultural values and therefore, invoke a new reality and vision on all facts (3-4).

The term orature has been first coined by the Ugandan linguist Pio Zirimu in the early 1970s “to counter the tendency to see arts communicated orally and received aurally as an inferior or a lower rung
in the linear development of literature” (Ngũgĩ 2010, 4). In this respect, in *The Afrocentric Idea*, Asante (1998) writes that all African cultural communications are dominated by “a vocal-expressive modality” (73). He uses “the term *orature* to refer to... the sum total of oral tradition, which includes vocality, drumming, storytelling, praise singing, and naming” (italics in original, 72). According to this, oral storytelling which is deeply-rooted in folkloric oral tradition serves as a fundamental prop to save the African identity and cultural heritage from erasure and oblivion.

Asante (1998) introduces the concept of *nommo*, the spoken word, which has been an effective instrument of communication and transformation for blacks during the difficult times of slavery (95). African-Americans devise distinct communication patterns alternative to those practiced in Eurocentric discourses in order to ensure their survival and defiance. “Everything appears to have rested upon the life-giving power of the word: life, death, disease, health, and... even liberation” (96). Interestingly, Asante goes on to explain that contemporary speakers believe that white racism has been the main hindrance to the liberation of the African mind and body. Voicing matters of racism and slavery delineates the centrality and uniqueness of this experience in African-American history; their antiapartheid, antiracist, antislavery position and discourse are a reflection of their long-standing resistance (99).

To Asante (1998), being Afrocentric is the essential weapon to redeem the black man’s African voice, dignity and pride in America. For him, African-American people should rebel but need leaders or agents of transformation with a messianic role. Their speeches have to “possess the special *nommo* force and power that could be delivered only with a personal sense of messianism” (italics in original, 140). Their oral interactive enactment very often ends with “a method of mythication” (102). Myth is “a productive force, it creates discourse forms that enable speakers to use cultural sources effectively” (108). Using African-based myths gives rise to black culture and serves as a reminder of African shared history. The messiah-like enablers work on two programs: black salvation and world salvation (101). They use every possible way to energize the disempowered people “to take control over their minds and bodies through an Afrocentric lifestyle” (Asante 2003, 131); this energy is found in the midst of people through connections, interactions and encounters with others which are basically verbal (Asante 1998, 202-203). That is, the *nommo* experience rescues the African subjects from collapse and arms them with truth to transgress the established norms which delimit the arena of their agency.

In reference to the function of oral storytelling in the work under consideration, Morrison uses this trope as a form of resistance which leads to Afrocentricity. Both Morrison and Asante, therefore, seek to disrupt the inaccuracies of Western monolithic discourse, particularly the dichotomy of center/periphery. As far as *Tar Baby* is concerned, it revolves around contentions and conflicts grounded on implicit biases and prejudices, and learned within the white cultural context. Through the text, Morrison stages a correction and a redefinition of the black history and cultural legacy. Interestingly, Afrocentricity is, at the core, a revolutionary theory which “attack[s] the very falsifications of truth and attitudes of self-hatred that have oppressed a great many of us” (Asante 2003, 2-3). This discloses that African-Americans who continue to live in a state of oppression owing to the Eurocentric racist proclamations must free their minds and bodies with the aid of the African tradition of oral storytelling.
Morrison moves out of the boundaries of social realism and mythologizes the history of her race to substitute the stereotypes and show the indignities the slaves have been forced to suffer during the Middle Passage. This infamous passage refers to the capturing and transportation of millions of native Africans on ships, chained in rows, across the Atlantic to the Americas to be sold into slavery. At that, she subverts the white man’s version of historical accounts (Valerian’s). She introduces the myth of “the Chevaliers” as the backdrop of her novel. These horsemen are black slaves brought from West Africa to the Caribbean island. The novelist portrays them as basically “subjects” or rather “tricksters” who managed to survive the horrors of slavery. In doing so, she revisits her folkloric culture and gives an oral quality to her narrative.

Morrison presents the legend of the blind horsemen through the character, Thérèse’s creative narrative to Son. The fisherman’s tale says that they are descendants of slaves who have lost their sight when they see Dominique. The ones who have refused to return to slavery run away and hide in the hills and the swamps of the island. The survival and defiance of the fugitives in the New World can be likened to the victory of “the trickster” in the African folktale. The story features Br’er Rabbit as the trickster-hero who outwits the farmer. The latter places a sticky doll to entrap the hare for stealing the cabbage from the garden. Br’er Rabbit gets angry at the doll which does not greet him back and tries to beat it. He becomes affixed to the tar but managed to convince the farmer to get him out of the tar and throw him in the briar patch. The trickster laughingly escapes, shouting that the briar patch is his original home. This manipulation resembles the slaves who run away from their masters and embrace nature as their natural home.

Morrison enlivens the trickster’s tale so as to reach Afrocentric ends. In this context, Asante (2003) says that “our folklore... is a manifestation of our culture” (108). He accentuates the impossible divorce between folklore and cultural legacy. Hence, by telling stories, the black subject is resisting, disturbing the white metanarrative and preserving the African existence. Through the oral trope, Morrison demonstrates that African-Americans do possess a parallel culture and a rich history, and subverts the myth of the “civilizing mission” that the whites use to justify their imperialistic intentions of colonizing the African mind and body.

Asante (1998) rightly states that any analysis of the black past should recognize the significance of vocal expression, which he terms nommo, as a powerful “transformative agent” (98). By transforming the African-Americans into “subjects” of their own destiny, agency is born, which means that the process of becoming Afrocentric begins with the mere decision of vocalizing one’s untold story in order to resist, survive, and correct historical accounts. This step is the basic action towards liberation and recovery. Asante (2003) writes that “[o]ur history cannot be left for others to write” (45). For him, knowing one’s history is imperative to contribute to the total rise of consciousness which is crucial to the African liberation from racist concepts. This means that Afrocentricity aims at changing the status quo of African-Americans through reanimating the African sensibility in them and correcting the false and demeaning portrayals to catch back the true sense of the African soul.
Morrison always writes with a special emphasis on the African-American past and the recovery of the disremembered history to highlight the outcome of slave trade including displacement. In an interview with Christina Davis (1994), Morrison divulges that the conqueror’s history contains “a great deal of obfuscation and distortion and erasure” (224-225). She adds that it is our job to reclaim the black people’s history and recover the annihilated self (Davis, 1994, 224-225).

From an Afrocentric stance, to unravel those silenced stories and to subvert the hidden agenda of oppressor’s regimes, Morrison reinterprets the trickster’s story and employs the trope of oral storytelling as it bestows empowerment and agency to the novel’s characters, mainly the protagonist Son and the ancestral voice Thérèse. The structuring of the narrative around an implicit telling and assertion of the myth of the horse riders enables the author to reposition the Africans at the center of their own stories.

As an imperishable part of cultures, myths are those traditional stories or tales having functional value for societies and having the ability to connect humans to nature intending to explain their origin and show their ways. They are regarded as “deep utterances” which do “maintain our symbolic life at a conscious level” (Asante 1998, 107-108). For Asante, there is no substitute symbolism for the Africans except returning to African-American mythology. He assumes that the “rediscovery” and acceptance of the African past escorts the rise of the African spirit in the coming generations and ensures “the African continuum”.

Morrison devotes the last part of her novel to foreground the power of oral tradition in liberating the African subject. She gives voice to the ancestor Thérèse, who in turn, reconstitutes Son as an agent. Telling an oral story then becomes an instrument of resistance against white supremacy. Obviously, Son’s relationship with Thérèse strengthens his act of defying the Eurocentric expectations through storytelling and its call and response pattern, accentuating the validity of his Afrocentric inclinations.

Morrison employs oral storytelling as a decolonizing approach in participatory conversations. Each character tells fragments of history, placing African-based myth at the center of the narrative. Throughout their renditions, the storytellers and story-listeners engage in a process of becoming, meaning that change and challenge take place. By discussing Son’s actions and his relationship to his lover Jadine, and Thérèse and Gideon, we examine how African modes of storytelling used by the enabler Thérèse grant agency to the listener of the tale, Son. The call and response strategy reaffirms the functionality and importance of the content of the mythic tale being told as a medium of cultural resistance. In other words, storytelling here works on the two levels of manipulative and transformative words; through listening to Thérèse’s speech, Son is pushed to act accordingly as a subject towards victory and freedom. In doing so, he embraces his black identity and eventually Afrocentricity; the story, itself, operates as a powerful tool in liberating ancestral voices, sustaining an indigenous tradition and resisting white supremacist discourse.

Morrison’s Tar Baby begins with an illusion of safety. The protagonist Son embarks on a voyage of insecurity as “HE [BELIEVES] he [is] safe” [sic] when arriving at Isle de Chevaliers (Morrison 1981, 3). He is a black undocumented man who escapes from his hometown Eloé after accidentally murdering his wife for adultery. We later learn his true name. The name William Green, as obvious, carries a chapter of history within. He comes with memories of childhood traumas, an unsuccessful marriage, and a vagabond
life. Despite the fact that he has several birth certificates, he relishes his blackness with a well-defined sense of self. He feels connected to his own place and people (294).

Morrison locates her text in an African-American context as she deals with an issue that any African is likely to face within the white man’s system. The identity crisis of Jadine and Son is manifested through their hesitation between making up or breaking up or on a deeper level between assimilation and returning to roots. Son finds it difficult to acquiesce in the temptations of the New World assimilation. He recalls the love and protection of his home and life in Eloe. When gazing at the photographs Jadine has taken in his “cradle”, he tries “to find in them what it was used to comfort him so, used to reside with him, in him like royalty in veins” (Morrison 1981, 294). He feels relieved in the perfect memories of his black community.

The protagonist Son, who is like any other African roaming in diaspora, is prone to the threat of cultural annihilation which Ama Mazama explains:

> At times, cultural genocide may become so effectively implemented by the oppressive group that many of the oppressed internalize the racist rationale for the contempt in which their culture is held. As a result, they start identifying with their oppressors’ culture as if, or wishing, it were theirs, while disassociating from their own culture. (210)

Thus, for him, the destruction of the indigenous culture’s foundations is the attempt of white supremacy to spread their Eurocentric and capitalist paradigms, and to obliterate the minorities’ native identity, culture, and ethnicity. It is, thus, the extermination of the cultural rituals and institutions of oppressed groups per se.

As for Thérèse, she is one of “the diaspora mothers” (Morrison 1981, 288), and the only one able to foreshadow the danger from the very beginning that Son cannot see, that “integration [is] an attempt to absorb black culture into white culture” (Asante 2003, 35). Son is eventually rescued by responding to Thérèse’s account about the mythic men. At the end, he is unable to give up his principles to protect his love and his ego, and then decides to join the legendary blind chevaliers to liberate himself from Jadine’s love and thus, white oppression.

The narrator first makes available for the readers a version of the folk myth as soon as Son arrives to the Caribbean island. “There he [sees] the stars and exchange[s] stares with the moon, but he [can] see very little of the land, which [is] just as well because he [is] gazing at the shore of an island that, three hundred years ago, ha[ve] struck slaves blind the moment they [see] it” (Morrison 1981, 8). Yet, later in chapter five, we learn different versions of the same tale when Son gets familiar with the islanders, namely Valerian, Thérèse and Gideon.

The narrative of the island’s myth is circulated by a duo of voices in a call and response pattern, between Valerian, and Thérèse and Gideon. The contrasting versions explaining the origin of the island’s name generate different responses. In the first part of Tar Baby, Valerian who is a white man of wealth and stature and the owner of L’Arbre de La Croix narrates his own version about the chevaliers which is apparently dominated by the established discourse. He reports that the island is named after one hundred French horsemen who, even after years, still roam the hills on one hundred horses at the other side of the
island at night (Morrison 1981, 47). To him, “[t]heir swords are still in their scabbards and their epaulets still glitter in the sun. Backs straight, shoulders high-alert but restful in the security of the Napoleonic Code” (206). This mythologized rendition hints to the power seized and maintained by the white men in the island. In his Westernized version, the issue of slavery is ruled out; however, it cannot be expunged from the African-American memory.

In the course of the novel, Morrison introduces a detailed but different version of the blind men galloping their horses through the conversation between Son, Thérèse and Gideon. The legend is about African slaves whose ship capsizes and the current draws them to the island’s shore along with the horses. Over the hills, “they [learn] to ride through the rain forests avoiding all sorts of tree and things. They race each other, and for sport they sleep with the swamp women in Sein de Vielles” (Morrison 1981, 152-153). Gideon adds that “... they can’t stand for sighted people to look at them without their permission. No telling what they’ll do if they know you [have seen] them” (153). In doing so, Morrison subverts Valerian’s narrative through this African Caribbean version which is literally a counter narrative myth. She reconstitutes Thérèse and Gideon with voice and Afrocentric agency to resist white supremacy. The couple manages the myth discourse in an attempt to respond to Valerian’s tale by correcting the origin of the island’s appellation. In this light, Asante (1998) affirms, “The seizing of the ground is itself an act of assertion... although the message content may be different from what it would have emanated from established leaders” (35). Their narrative opens the gate for incredulity vis-à-vis metanarratives as Edward Said (1978) articulates: “narrative... introduces an opposing point of view, perspective, consciousness to the unitary web of vision” (240). The mythic tale, thus, “offers alternate perspectives to the grander narratives of the world which often only place a select few as key storytellers” (Sium and Ritskes 2013, 6). Thérèse’s myth-telling and management rise against the dominating cultures and evidences Morrison’s constant attempts to correct the previous historical records on slavery which is a step to the fore in creating discourses of resistance. This confirms what A. O. Scott describes as the “burden of cultural importance” as it provides “illumination of epochs, communities, of the nation itself” (18).

Put in other words, the myth inscribes the infamous story of the black slaves who hide from the French masters in the foggy woods and learn how to ride the stallions and then go blind and run naked. It illustrates disempowered subjects who create “agency” for themselves and break through. Thérèse thinks Son, at their first encounter, to be one of the mythic horsemen inhabiting the hills of Isle de Chevaliers, telling Gideon that “He’s a horseman come down here together. He [is] just skulking around waiting for his dance” (Morrison 1981, 107). She foresees him riding with them on horseback (89). On this account, she is a “messiah-like” figure with “prophetic visions” capable of mitigating her nation’s suffering through nommo as Asante has ascertained (Asante, 1998, 100-101). For him, in messianism, the nommo is a rhetoric strategy having the power of transformation through orature to ensure both Black salvation and world salvation.

Storytellers are culture transmitters and knowledge bearers; they are often the elder members, having the capability to remold communities through their sayings (Sium and Ritskes 2013, v). Morrison
introduces the myth of the chevaliers reified by the character Thérèse who presumably belongs to them. Thérèse is an elder, illiterate, blind and black servant who is married to Gideon. She is a woman whose “... hatreds [are] complex and passionate as exemplified by her refusal to speak to American Negroes, and never even to acknowledge the presence of white Americans in her world” (Morrison 1981, 110). Her husband is also so angry at the Americans and helps “Thérèse prepare all sorts of potions and incantations for their destruction (218).” In these narrative lines, their attitudes towards the Whites underscore the identity struggles in the novel.

Son’s closeness to African Caribbean characters, namely Gideon and Thérèse, is crucial in his identity struggle in the New World; yet, the blind woman is more instrumental in Son’s awakening and self-consciousness. Particularly, the narrative depicts Thérèse as having close connection and affiliation to the land as she reflects the African tradition of indigenous storytellers, having the capacities of the “griot” in modifying and inventing stories to suit the audience. For instance, she shares with her husband imaginative scenarios of betrayal about the greenhouse’s inhabitants:

“And machete-hair she don’t like it. Tired to keep them apart. But it didn’t work. He find her, swim the whole ocean big, till he find her, eh?”... The more she invented the more she rocked and the more she rocked the more her English crumbled till finally it became dust in her mouth stopping the flow of her imagination and she spat it out altogether and let the story shimmer through the clear cascade of the French of Dominique. (Morrison 1981, 108)

Storytelling has the power of enabling “[its] clients to manipulate their stories, shape the outcomes, and thereby gain control, first over the story and then over their own lives” (Sturm 2013, 563). Yet, it shows the fragility of truth and questions its credibility in universal discourses. Accordingly, the aptitude of the storyteller to alter stories, as wished, challenges the objectivity of the Western discourse and articulates different cultural epistemologies.

Asante evinces that “it is precisely the power of the word, whether in music or speeches, that authentically speaks of an African heritage” (Asante, 1998, 97). Thérèse still believes in the power of nommo to permeate the African existence. Her narrative is the embodiment of the oppressor’s violence and injustice against African slaves; a story which has been effaced from the grander narratives. She, who maintains the dialogue between the past and the present, employs the chevaliers’ story to shape its results on Son. She, as best she could, says invalid nommo waiting for a specific reaction from Son as Asante asserts that “expression seems expertly planned to evoke responses, much as a speaker might prepare persuasive arguments with an eye toward a special kind of reaction” (96). For him, it is imperative to recognize the power of what he terms as nommo or the vocal expression as “a transforming agent” (98). Using a rooted-in-its-own-culture myth to remind Son of the sufferings of his race and the need for cultural restitution is a witty mechanism to render him reconcile with his black culture.

In the last episode of the novel, Thérèse again jumps in another manipulative game. Her invalid story is not for the sake of enjoying the possibilities but to rescue Son, and subsequently her people. In her idiosyncratic view, her untrue accounts would transform the powerlessness of her folks into
subversion; they would save the entire race. She acts as a savior and gives a false account for Son about the horsemen who would take him to his lover’s place.

As the novel reaches its end, Morrison employs Thérèse wisely, because she is the only one who has the power of knowledge and manipulation to help Son transcend the jeopardy of “cultural genocide”. Thérèse has a historical consciousness which enables her to maintain agency. She reproduces history from and for the African-American community thanks to her knowledge about “the institution of slavery from beginning to end” (Asante 1998, 102). She “can control the future, controls a portion of time and holds a key to the audience’s knowledge. Thus, the imperative mood commands the listeners, directs their knowledge, and assesses their performance” (31). She is “the speaking power” which leads to the liberation of Son. Her interference proves that she knows a lot about the chevaliers and it can be interpreted in two ways. First, she consciously intends to derail Son’s way and make him re-assess his decision; yet, her intention is to make him aware of a more important matter, his African cultural heritage and identity. Second, this, according to Asante’s Afrocentric estimation, demonstrates that “the enemies of Africa are plotting every conceivable way to derail our consciousness” (Asante 2003, 9), in a broader sense. Thérèse wants, like Asante, to make of Son an “awakened African”. Even the novelist wants to show that every African bears the burden of getting rid of Eurocentric hegemony.

The repertoire of storytelling consists of personal narratives, true life stories, humorous narratives, anecdotes and legends (Kilanova 2013, 314). Its great value lies beneath its power to “recreate the past, and because of this it reestablishes and reinvents identity of the local group, collectively and individually, as memory and reality” (314). Stories then become leading and subjective experiences for people towards “victory” functioning as a cultural guide sustaining its continuation. In the narrative, Thérèse’s dialogue with Son represents a force which gives hope of surpassing the oppression rather than quelling or yielding to it. Hence, the blind woman is regarded as a visionary leader and an empowering agent who is reminiscent of the importance of the nommo and the African ancestry in a way that her narrative carries a disclaimer about the myth which prioritizes Western discourse and marginalizes the African one.

In the theoretical context, Asante (2007) avers that white supremacy “remove[s] the normal course of agency, self-assertion, and cultural definition based on Africa’s own historical development, turning the continent’s people and their descendants in other parts of the world into a beggar people” (56). Erasing the historical, cultural and racial identity of Africans is what Morrison aspires to recover in Tar Baby, particularly in its final section wherein she touches on Son’s response to the telling of the competing versions. As Son believes in his compatriots’ version, he receives guidance and “feels his way” towards Afrocentricity. According to Asante (2003), he “rediscovers” his past (84), through the African-centered tale which in its nature resists Valerian’s version epitomizing the Western discourse. He is the “responder” to the call of his ancestors as he, Thérèse, and the myth emphasize the importance of roots and exemplify an authentic African continuity (84–85). Hence, Morrison succeeded in building “an interposing myth” between nature and civilization in her text. Her insertion of the local narrative as “a productive force” allows the speakers and listeners to use their culture in an effective way in order to relate themselves to nature (Asante 1998, 108).
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As a historical knowledge holder, Thérèse embodies the island’s myth which runs through the background of the novel forming a centrality of the island’s history, and is understood as a local story, in particular. The narrative illuminates the mysticism of the African-based myth as it possesses magical and spiritual properties. Thérèse sets free the ancestors’ voice to redeem the black identity. Through this character, Morrison accentuates the fact that Black people in the New World diaspora must preserve their “Afrocentric consciousness”. This ancestral figure manipulates a myth to convince Son to stick to his African origins. Son then embraces the island’s memory to enter in the space of liberation that Afrocentric oratory offers.

Son’s love relationship with Jadine destabilizes his identity and has him at the verge of denying his roots. Because Jadine, as the novel closes, decides to escape from Eloé’s women and Son’s pressure following the charmed life of modeling in Paris, Son delves in a state of depression and confusion. Son’s consciousness of oppression starts with his encounter with Jadine who represents a dangerous transformer who would turn black fellows into white ones.

She is “a production of white culture” and a lure tempting Son to pursue a Europeanized way of thinking and living (Mbalia 1991, 75). Throughout the novel, she attempts to “rescue” him from what she believes to be his complex of “white-folks-black-folks primitivism” (Morrison 1981, 275). She wants him to adopt that culture and Valerian to pay for his education; a favor done by “one of the killers of the world” which Son strongly refuses (204).

On that account, Son finds himself caught in the labyrinth of indecisiveness, whether to pursue his lover to Paris or to preserve his identity for the sake of his race. Because of Jadine’s refusal to stay with him in his “cradle”, his oppression is intensified, especially that no one agrees on aiding him to find his girl excluding Thérèse (Morrison 1981, 298-299). The latter seems to be the most conscious character about Son’s predicament. Gideon and Thérèse tell him that Jadine is gone and advise him to let “the yalla” go. He gets depressed at the news and decides to run and fetch her in Paris (302). Thérèse conspiringly accepts to take him to her while earlier in the novel Gideon tells Son not to believe her and that “she’s a mean one and one of the blind race. You can’t tell them nothing. They love lies” (152). He later insists on him not to trust her but in vain (302). Gideon’s doubt regarding Thérèse’s claim questions the validity and universality of the master narratives structured by white supremacists.

In the closing scenes of the novel, Son expresses his depression telling Gideon that he cannot let go the woman he has always been dreaming of (Morrison 1981, 298-299). Notwithstanding that Gideon tells him to give up on Jadine, he determinedly sets his mind on going to Paris to retrieve her. Meanwhile, Thérèse dishonestly tells him that she can take him to Jadine’s place. Impatiently, Son follows Thérèse to the back of Isle de Chevaliers in the midst of the fog.

At a certain moment, Son becomes incredulous about Thérèse’s ability to take him to Jadine when he becomes unable to see his way owing to the fog. Thérèse answers, determinedly:

“Don’t see; feel,” she said. “You can feel your way, but hurry, hurry; I have to get back.”

“This doesn’t make sense. Why don’t you go to the other side, where the dock is?”

“No,” she said. “This is the place.”
“Isle des Chevaliers?”

“Yes. Yes. The far side.”

“Are you sure?”

“Positive.” (Morrison 1981, 304)

As Son is “the suffering genre” of the African Caribbean myth, his victory evidently depends on his pain. The myth provides solutions to his identity crisis by turning his suffering “into positive, victorious consciousness” (Asante 1998, 113-115). This highlights that the voice of the blind woman is of cardinal importance in mentoring Son as she tries to persuade him saying: “Forget her. There’s nothing in her parts for you. She has forgotten her ancient properties” (Morrison 1981, 305). She seems to be very wary of letting him discover her lie as she urges him to hurry and become one of the horsemen because they are waiting for him. She leaves him alone in the island telling him that: “You can choose now. You can get free of her. They are waiting in the hills for you. They are naked and they are blind too... Go there. Choose them” (306). In spite of her blindness, she can foresee the possible destruction of Son’s self-identity if he goes to Paris due to white temptations in effacing native identities in the chaotic New World. That is, she concocts invalid narratives backing up a local myth to bring about change, to awaken, and to assist her community members in resistance and recovery.

Doreatha Mbalia (1991) suggests that Son is the “messianic figure” in the island (87); yet Thérèse, whose mission is “messianic in nature,” seems to be the prophet-like character as well as Asante (2003) validates that Africans “have a formidable history, replete with the voice of God, the ancestors and the prophets” (10). As is evident, Morrison intends to create a different “tar lady” and explains in an interview, her standpoint about the tar baby folktale. She states that in African mythology, “a tar pit was a holy place... [tar] held together things like Moses’s little boat and the pyramids. For [her], the tar lady [comes] to mean the black woman who could hold things together” (Cited in David 2000, 100). The point here is that it is Thérèse, through her manipulative words, who could save Son from falling apart.

To Asante (2003), the breakdown experience is violent. One must relocate one’s self out of oppression and victimization through condemning all of those behavioral patterns “which hark back to slave mentality” (129). Son’s pursuit for Jadine will hold him enslaved to Eurocentric hegemony. Thérèse drives him to the foggy part of the island which can be likened to the briar patch which does not seem to be a predicament but rather resistance, freedom and ancestral home. Son’s final decision of running with the horse riders reinforces his reconnection to his ancestors. He, in other terms, finds solace in a legendary story rooted in the African oral tradition; he is persuaded that the black horsemen would take him to his lover in some ways. Responding to the legend makes him persevere through the oppressive forces and directs him towards “victory”. In support of Asante’s belief that it is the African past and the spirit of our ancestors which gives power (95), narrating such a myth reestablishes a link between the past and the present.

From the perspective of Afrocentricity, Thérèse resorts to her roots speaking from the ancestral home, and for her own people (Asante 2003, 106). She, in a final conversation, leads Son to “awareness” and “transcendence”. Son becomes the new-born messenger who has the ability to choose his own fate.
Riding over the hills is a “transcendence mode” which can be similar to Milkman’s dream of flying in *Songs of Solomon* (1977) as “an escapist fantasy, a desperate departure from the oppressive jurisdiction of the real” (DiBattista 2005, 151). In view of this, Joyce H. Scott (2007) analogizes Son to Milkman claiming, “Son Green, like Milkman Dead, embarks on a quest leading to his re-inscription into the indigenous culture of Africana people of the Caribbean” (33). The chevaliers spend eternal years recovering from the inconceivable realities of the Middle Passage. They, like tricksters, learn how to ride horses as a means to escape being re-captured by the French masters. While Jadine is irredeemably enticed in the hegemonic mechanisms of Eurocentrism, Son’s trickster-like response is typified in victoriously running the briar pitch towards freedom. He progressively “breaks through” towards self-liberation from the “oppressive” love and white threats (Asante 2003, 130):

First he crawl[s] the rocks one by one, one by one, till his hands touched shore and the nursing sound of the sea was behind him. He [feels] around, crawl[s] off and then [stands] up. Breathing heavily with his mouth open he [takes] a few tentative steps. The pebbles [make] him stumble and so [do] the roots of trees. He [throws] out his hands to guide and steady his going. By and by he walk[s] steadier, now steadier... Then he [runs].... Lickety-split. Lickety-split. Looking neither to the left nor to the right (Morrison, 1981, 306)

Son “climbs” from “oppression” towards safety and salvation. Since myths are tales of “triumphs and victories”, his embrace of the myth makes him mythically and victoriously reach his Afrocentricity. Asante states that the perspective of Afrocentricity is “associated with the discovery, location, and actualizing of African agency within the context of history and culture” (Asante 2003, 3). Knowing one’s past and history bolsters the African American’s attitude against white supremacy.

Subversively, the counter-myth of the chevaliers remains alive in Son’s memory: “Somewhere in the back of Son’s mind one hundred black men and one hundred unshod horses [ride] blind and naked through the hills and [have] done so far hundreds of years” (Morrison 1981, 206). It is as if this myth specifically reclains an untold chapter of history belonging to indigenous people. The myth telling is adduced to impart the importance of allowing the “rediscovery” of the African past in order to raise one’s spirit into the future generations (Asante 2003, 84). Son, who is supposed to be in jail after committing a murder, is reborn into freedom. He reconnects with nature, his true African self, and runs towards his African reality. Consequently, he survives out of the precincts of the mundane world and achieves “Afrocentric awareness”, the ultimate level of transformation.

Interestingly, Katrice Horsley (2007) explores in her article “Storytelling, Conflict and Diversity” the rationale of storytelling amongst Bengali women in the UK. Her findings reveal that the experience of sharing stories prepares “a safe space in which personal and cultural stories can be shared,” which gives agency and voice leading to the liberation of storyteller and the listener, and thus community reconstruction (267). Relying on the folkloric tradition and its power in modeling stories and maneuvering them allow for an engagement with the basis Afrocentric concern. Viewed from this angle, ultimately, Son passes “the test of sacrifice [which] is the willingness to be Afrocentric everywhere and at all costs” (Asante 2003, 67). His mythical experience allows him to truly reconnect with his ancestry.
The blind race’s re-apparition towards the end of the novel is as if these people are back to reclaim their “Son”. Joining the legendary men is, hence, a record of resistance “which... result[s] in a consciousness of victory based upon Afrocentric connections” (Asante 2003, 101). His action is literally a death but allegorically indicates a new start towards “collective conscious will”, and heralds his victory and, in turn, his Afrocentricity. In Asante’s thought, “to be Afrocentric is to be in touch with one’s ultimate reality in every way” (131). Son’s ultimate reality is, with the help of Thérèse, choosing to remain a black African and embracing Afrocentricity as a liberating model.

Son’s response to his ancestral call borne by the blind woman displays the agency of an African individual in his own story. Son’s quest of becoming Afrocentric is validated through the storytelling’s power in defiance and transformation. Morrison empowers Thérèse to get Son out of the periphery and locate him in “the center”. He becomes an active “agent” able to decide his own fate. Indeed, “The role of the storyteller is central to the exercise of agency and renewal” (Siu and Ritskes 2013, v). Thérèse exercises agency within the act of storytelling in order to transform Son’s internal conflict into peace, to transform his oppression into victory, and to transform his cultural alienation into ancestral connectivity.

Ostensibly, the novel’s myth is a subversive inclusion in order to defy the conventional patterns of the authoritarian narrative. Morrison ties resistance to telling local stories gleaned from the African oral tradition. Stories are then a cultural site of resistance and subversion. Thérèse’s words save Son from the trappings of Westernization in which Jadine is enticed. Thérèse is the manifestation of orality in the text; namely the ancestral voice of salvation. She is considered as an agent of empowerment and transformation, and the enabler who helps her folks retain control over their minds and bodies (Asante 2003, 131). Through her manipulative words, she shows to the African Americans that they now have a choice; they have agency. Her Afrocentric motility enables her to move the narrative however she wishes. This also provides readers with an understanding of the African culture and renders them cognizant of the diverse African experiences and the diversity of cultures without denying them.

Placed against the historical context of an African American experience, Morrison indubitably endows Thérèse with mythic traits as the voice of wisdom transmitter in order to trigger Son’s “Afrocentric consciousness” as the story of the blind chevaliers is both an illustration of the role of African oral tradition and a mere personification of the Black past and culture indicating the sense of African resistance. What is germane to the previous statement is that storytelling counters the overarching universals of the dominant culture’s efforts to negate the African identity as DoVeanna S. Fulton (2006) validates in Speaking Power: Black Feminist Orality in Women’s Narratives of Slavery (3). She endorses that oral storytelling is utilized as an instrument “to relate not only the pain, degradation, and oppression of slavery, but also to celebrate the subversions, struggles, and triumphs of Black experience in the midst of slavery and afterward” (Fluton, 2006, 3). The myth tale celebrates the African culture in a way that Africanizes Son and reinforces his cultural inheritance because unlike Jadine, he refuses to syncretize his culture of origin with the New World.

Significantly, the incorporation of a subversive myth as a specificity to the author’s race revives the historical and cultural legacy and proves Morrison’s Afrocentric orientation. Again in Black Looks: Race
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and *Representation*, bell hooks (1992) maintains the idea that the undetectable rootedness of storytelling in African culture paves the way for “healing through awareness” and “recovery through love”, meaning loving blackness, for the teller and the listener (20). Indeed, the myth telling has tangible historical and cultural significance, and exerts a big impact on Son’s healing and resistance. In doing so, Morrison proves the right ways in which true folk stories should work as oral storytelling is a reification of the erasable history of slavery.

As a result, Morrison managed to undercut the existence of a single-voiced narrative vis-à-vis her people’s history. That is, she inserts different voices in her text to create several levels of consciousness and interpretation. Mikhail Bakhtin (1986) introduces “monologism” as a concept which denies the presence of alternative points of view and can challenge the West’s “universal truth” (68). By giving room to unrecorded stories to be heard and double-checked, the black Americans step outside the historical constraints set by the fixed European historicism.

Asante (2007) pinpoints in his *An Afrocentric Manifesto: Toward an Afrocentric Renaissance* that “an understanding of African history, culture, and language cannot take place without reference or response to classical African cultures” (64). The legend of the horsemen/tricksters unmask the biggest myth behind imperialism. It posits a transformative counter-story in response to the menace of cultural assimilation in the New World. African-American storytelling breaks up with grand narratives. In other words, “metanarratives”, as Jean-François Lyotard (1979) terms in *Introduction: The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, deny other probable narratives and only seek universal truths. Telling particular local stories as counter-narratives replace majoritarian narratives presenting a more straightforward depiction of the diverse experiences of the black race; and it prompts challenging and subverting the untrustworthy official discourses through opening the gate for the multiplicity of perspectives (6). Purposefully, Morrison through her text delivers a different sense of the “true” conjoined with multiple versions of interpretations.

The nommo experience led by Thérèse transforms Son into a “subject” and creates agency in him. It is not only a matter of an individual resistance but the entire race is resisting; it is an issue of communal survival and cultural transmission. In this regard, African “oral storytelling contains the power needed to effect change” (Ford 2014, 131). It, then serves to bring about social change and validates the cultural distinctiveness of black people. Storytelling also deconstructs and reconstructs the communal history shaped by the white supremacists. It, thus, operates as a counter-hegemonic medium which seeks to subvert the dominant cultures’ attempts to dismantle indigenous cultures.

**Conclusion**

Because Son, as a displaced African, is subject to Eurocentric hegemony, Thérèse can only draw from oral history in an effort to make Son resist white supremacy. Son trusts Thérèse’s words about the chevaliers to uphold his cultural and racial identity and free himself from Jadine’s love. This myth not only supplies the text with fictional dimensions but also connects Son back to his ancestors and his African history spotlighting the experience of slavery. Morrison employs Thérèse insightfully as she is
bequeathed wisdom and loyalty vis-à-vis her African cultural lore. Her prowess in subjectively manipulating the story for Son denies the existence of absolute validity and univocality regarding historical records constructed by the dominant culture. At that, she offers alternative histories within which the position of oppressed subjects becomes central. Afrocentricity, in this vein, bids defiance to oppressive forces and world-defining ideologies.
References


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