

A TRANSNATIONAL READING OF TONI MORRISON'S *TAR BABY*

IULIU RAȚIU*

Abstract The transnational reading of *Tar Baby* and the identification of certain aspects of this theoretical framework will be the focus of this paper. Even though, as a whole, transnationalism seems to be a rather negative option given the fact that the novel's ending is a perfect *cul-de-sac*, Morrison's approach to solving this crux is by deconstructing the ever-present binary of myth vs. reality. The opposition between colonization and the black cultural mythos as represented in the novel by the "love-me-hate-me" relationship between Jadine and Son seems to be the most compelling rendering of the transnationalism from above / transnationalism from below binary. When Jadine manages to escape this binary, by acquiring a new identity through what Lionnet and Shih call a minoritized culture, the transnationalism from above / transnationalism from below paradigm is reinstated by the irreconcilable antagonism between Valerian and Son. In the end, by reinterpreting the myth of Eden through the lenses of the tar baby parable, Morrison literally creates, both out of clay and tar, a transnational identity for Jadine who leaves behind a traditional and dual world, proving that her reality is more compelling than Son's or Valerian's myths.

Keywords Transnationalism from below, transnationalism from above, identity, culture, race.

Tar Baby, Toni Morrison's fourth novel originally published in 1981, is arguably one of the most problematic of her works. The plethora of divergent interpretations and Morrison's intention to have a white couple among the protagonists of the novel make *Tar Baby* representative for a type of literary works that force readers to either love them or hate them. If there were a common ground where almost all critics met, that would certainly have to do with Morrison's willingness to play along this divide and let the reader choose his or her own interpretation. What critics call "dualistic perspective", "double vision", "dual-culture", or "competing visions" comes to represent Morrison's objective of using opposing stereotypes in order to break them down. On the one hand, Morrison mixes two seemingly disparate stories of creation (the tar

* Babeș-Bolyai University of Cluj-Napoca. iuliu.ratiu@econ.ubbcluj.ro.

ORCID: 0009-0002-2779-3402.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.26424/philobib.2023.28.1.05>.

baby tale and the myth of Eden), while on the other she purposely confines her characters to schematic (almost dual) features in order to have them shatter their identities and acquire new ones, given the chance. By reinterpreting the myth of Eden through the lenses of the tar baby parable, Morrison literally creates, both out of clay and tar, a transnational identity for Jadine, who leaves behind the traditional and dual world of Valerian and Son.

But Jadine is not the only character marked by the possibility of acquiring a transnational transformation, because, one way or another, all the characters in Morrison's novel are put in a situation where they can choose a new, more fluid, and plastic identity. By reinforcing opposing stereotypes, by making use of binaries, Morrison is in fact providing a choice for both her characters and her readers. The author describes the alternatives, but does not offer a reason for the choice, because the choice is individual. The transnational reading of *Tar Baby* and the identification of certain aspects of this theoretical framework will be the focus of this paper. Even though, as a whole, transnationalism seems to be a rather negative option given the fact that the novel's ending is a perfect *cul-de-sac*, Morrison's approach to solving this crux is by deconstructing the ever-present binary of myth vs. reality, because in the end Jadine's reality is more compelling than Son's myths.

In itself, transnationalism is a rather plastic and fluid concept. It has attached to its meaning both real and mythical characteristics. The real characteristics have to do with the personal experience of millions and millions of people all over the world that need to constantly negotiate their identity when faced with labor migration, while the mythical characteristics, in the sense of ideological constructs, have to do with the theoretical accommodations of this concept. Some theorists, like Russell Duncan and Clara Junker, consider transnationalism in relation to nationalism and perceive it as involving a "loosening of boundaries, a deterritorialization of the nation-state, and higher degrees of interconnectedness among cultures and peoples across the globe."¹ In their view, this approach of transnationalism bears a positive outcome since it creates a "transnational solidarity – a new communitarianism beyond the loyalties to any one place or ethnic group [and this solidarity encourages] border crossings that push and tear at the fabric of national homogeneity to negotiate new identities for individuals and nations."² Their optimistic point of view is reinforced by Françoise Lionnet and Shu-mei Shih who discuss the transnational in relation to the global and view it as "a space of exchange and participation wherever processes of hybridization occur and where it is still possible for cultures to be produced and performed without necessary mediation from the center."³ While Duncan and Junker linked transnationalism to multiculturalism, Lionnet and Shih present the interconnectivity between transnationalism and globalization. Seeing it as "part and parcel of the process of globalization," they summarize the two forms that scholars attributed to the term.

¹ Russell Duncan and Clara Junker, eds., *Transnational America: Contours of Modern US Culture* (Copenhagen: Museum Tusulanum Press, 2004), 8.

² *Ibid.*, 8.

³ Françoise Lionnet and Shu-mei Shih, eds., *Minor Transnationalism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005), 5.

The so-called transnationalism from above relates to the multinational corporate sector and is “associated with the utopic views of globalization, which celebrate the overcoming of national boundaries for the constitution of a liberal market, the hybridization of cultures, and the expansion of democracies and universal human rights.”⁴ By contrast, transnationalism from below refers to the “dystopic visions of globalization [that] point toward such negative consequences as environmental and health hazards, ‘McDonaldization’ of cultures, the exasperated disparity between the rich and the poor, and the increased exploitation of Third World labor contributing to the financial wealth of the North at the expense of the South.”⁵ Thus presented, the two formulations of transnationalism justify both a positive and a negative outlook of the matter. As a last resort, it seems that everything depends on the symbolical charge that the utopic McWorld can sustain. If we are to believe Duncan and Junker, everything is in place when we understand that the heterogeneity of cultures is preserved as long as “the border-crossers are giving rise to pluralism and adding strength to the nation-state.”⁶ But, as Lionnet and Shih point out, their optimism might become pessimism when the same utopic McWorld leads to negative consequences surfaced from the exploitative hegemony of corporate world.

In this respect, Masao Miyoshi considers transnationalism from above as definitely negative. For him, transnationalism is no longer part of the globalization process and its multicultural perspective; rather it is an instrument of colonialism, thus making transnational corporations (TNCs) the equivalent of the declining nation-state and vehicles of oppression and exploitation. Miyoshi’s concern is real because he understands the spread of transnationalism in a corporate form as a danger of creating a new ruling class that controls information, technology and finance on a global scale by continuing colonialism, because TNCs “operate over distance. While they homogenize regions, they remain aliens and outsiders in each place, faithful only to the exclusive clubs of which they are members. True, old colonialism operated in the name of nations, ethnicities, and races, and transnational corporatism tends toward nationlessness. [...] TNCs rationalize and execute the objectives of colonialism with greater efficiency and rationalism. [...] In order to exploit the different economic and political conditions among the current nation-states, they ignore the borders to their own advantage.”⁷ Unfortunately, Miyoshi does not present an alternative to this overpowering tendency of transnationalism from above, overseeing in a way the option suggested by Lionnet and Shih who advocate for the “counterhegemonic operations of the nonelite who refuse assimilation to one given nation-state.”⁸ Moreover, they also try to reconcile the two opposing and conflicting formulations of transnationalism by stating that the “binary model of above-and-

⁴ Ibid., 6.

⁵ Ibid., 6.

⁶ Duncan and Junker, 7.

⁷ Masao Miyoshi, “A Borderless World?” in *Asian American Studies: A Reader*, eds. Jean Yu-wen Shen Wu and Min Song, (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2000), 223-24.

⁸ Lionnet and Shih, 6.

below, the utopic and the dystopic, and the global and the local [lacks] an awareness and recognition of the creative interventions the networks of minoritized cultures produce within and across national boundaries.”⁹ In all probabilities, it is in this concept of “minoritized cultures” that the aspects of transnationalism in Morrison’s *Tar Baby* need to be looked for. If characters like Valerian and Jadine represent embodiments of the transnationalism from above paradigm, while characters like Son and Gideon incarnate the transnationalism from below perspective, then it can be argued that Jadine is also the representative of a minoritized culture. Accused of being assimilated and of passing, Jadine fights back by resisting both white corporatism and black tradition. In the end, Jadine succeeds in creating a new identity in which, as Lionnet and Shih argue, both the “minority and the diasporic necessarily participate in the moment of transnationalism.”¹⁰ Unlike Son, Jadine understands that resistance to the major, represented by Valerian and white capitalism, is just another way of “reify[ing] the boundaries of communities by placing the focus on action and reaction, excluding other forms of participating in the transnational that may be more proactive and more creative.”¹¹ Instead of confining herself to a traditional life, she chooses the proactive and creative opportunity given by Europe.

Much has been written about the choices Morrison gives to her characters and to her readers. More than that, there are voices who believe that Jadine’s flight to Europe is the manifestation of her choice to remain colonized, denying her cultural heritage. In the context of her work, argues Malin Walther Pereira, Jadine’s action represents Morrison’s final word on colonization, because once “Jadine’s plane takes off and she leaves the novel, Morrison [...] turns the novel’s attention to the black cultural mythos of the blind horseman and the tar baby folktale.”¹² The opposition between colonization and the black cultural mythos as represented in the novel by the “love-me-hate-me” relationship between Jadine and Son is the most compelling rendering of the traditionalism from above / traditionalism from below binary.

The light-skinned fashion model educated in France, Jadine is the girl who modeled for Caron. This little detail bears great significance because, when Ondine mispronounces the name of the company, one of the many fashion companies that make use of Jadine’s image, the niece is prompt in correcting Nanadine’s pronunciation: “Caron. [...] Not Karen.”¹³ Charon, spelled differently, but pronounced the same as Caron, is in Greek mythology the ferryman of the dead. The souls of the deceased are brought to him by Hermes, and Charon ferries them across the river Acheron. He only accepts the dead which are buried or burned with the proper rites, and solely if they pay him for their passage. Those who cannot afford the passage, or are not admitted by Charon, are doomed to wander on the banks of the Styx for a

⁹ Ibid., 7.

¹⁰ Ibid., 7.

¹¹ Ibid., 7.

¹² Malin Walther Pereira, “Periodizing Toni Morrison’s Work from *The Bluest Eye* to *Jazz*: The Importance of *Tar Baby*,” *MELUS* 22, no. 3 (Fall 1997): 76.

¹³ Toni Morrison, *Tar Baby* (New York: Vintage, 2004), 40.

hundred years. The moral of this mythological interlude is that Jadine “has forgotten her ancient properties”¹⁴ by embracing the benefits of the white world. Because she is passing for white, it means Jadine is literally *dead* for the people in the family (Sydney and Ondine who lose all hope of Jadine parenting them) and for the people of her race (Son, but also Therese, Gideon, or Alma). In contrast, because he cannot afford the passage, Son is doomed to join the blind horsemen and wander for a hundred years, in a similar passage sequence where Therese plays Charon’s role.

But this is a pessimistic reading of the novel. Even though Morrison’s intention is to stereotype a dual world by opposing Jadine to Son, the characters’ actions can sustain other possible interpretations. It is true that, presumably, in the end, Jadine is denying her black heritage by embracing assimilation wholeheartedly, while Son, joining the race of the blind men, is literally stepping on a mythological path, but these extreme perspectives give way to more subtle and ingenious solutions. Seen through the lenses of transnationalism from above, Jadine represents for Son the homogenizing and hegemonic effects of white society. She is the symbol of corporate success and global market. Jadine is the “Gatekeeper, advance bitch, house-bitch, welfare office torpedo, corporate cunt, tar baby side-of-the-road whore trap,”¹⁵ whom Son wants to rescue. Margaret’s shopping companion and Valerian’s protégée, Jadine is the epitome of the success city girl, who, in Margaret’s words has “Everything. Europe. The future. The world.”¹⁶ “Model of industry and planning,”¹⁷ Jadine is the cultural orphan confronted with choices and individual decisions: “She always thought she had three choices: marry a dope king or a doctor, model or teach art at Jackson High. In Europe she thought there might be a fourth choice.”¹⁸

If Jadine is not from anywhere, as Son accuses her, he is from Eloë. From the point of view of transnationalism from below, Son represents the real agent of resistance. When, in the end, leading him to the back of Isle des Chevaliers, Therese asks him to make a choice, Son is out of options. He can only choose the blind horsemen. For him, Eloë, his native town, represents an imaginary homeland. His whole existence seems to be framed following the tar baby tale. Son is the Brer Rabbit by all accounts. From the time he jumps the ship at the beginning of the novel in search for a way back home until the end of the novel when he returns to Isle des Chevaliers, Son appears to be caught in Brer Fox’s garden. The name of the ship that brings him to the Caribbean, H.M.S. Konigsgaarten, translates as “the king’s backyard.” This cuts through the meaning of the novel in the sense that, because Son had been trapped in an eight-year long exile, now it is time to return home and leave the white man’s garden. His dreams about yellow brick houses and ladies minding the pie are about to come true. But, in his efforts to rescue Jadine from Valerian’s plantation, Son gets trapped again.

¹⁴ Ibid., 305.

¹⁵ Ibid., 219-20.

¹⁶ Ibid., 29.

¹⁷ Ibid., 267.

¹⁸ Ibid., 225.

This time Jadine as the tar baby really hooks him for good, thus all he can do is look for her, even go to France, as a last attempt to change. Unfortunately, the novel ends without telling us if ever Son is able to find Jadine. All we have access to are Therese's two unanswered questions: "If you cannot find her what will you do? Live in the garden of some other white people house?"¹⁹ As much as we are inclined to give both Jadine and Son a chance of working out their differences, that would be against Morrison's intention. Jadine is no better than Son and Son no worse than Jadine. Once we understand that, we begin to see the author's real talent in deconstructing stereotypes. If Son represents the tradition and the past, Jadine embodies the new and the future. When she opposes Jadine's "this world" to Son's "dump Eloë", Morrison is undermining the credibility and reliability of stereotypes. When Son, as an agent of transnationalism from below, realizes Jadine's efforts to acquire a new identity, he becomes himself a cultural orphan by ending up in a mythical limbo.

Son is the agent of the counterhegemonic discourse in the novel, who refuses assimilation. He is the one who questions Valerian's actions; he blames Jadine for not taking care of her relatives; and he is the one showing interest in and consideration for the names and lives of Therese, Gideon, and Alma. His transnational identity seems to be created as a response to the oppression of corporate America. Discharged from the army *without humor and honor* for kicking a M.P. in the groin, forced to leave Eloë for killing his wife, unable to cope with Valerian's whimsical attitude towards subalterns and intrigued by Jadine's superior, managerial and administrative tone, Son chooses his own law, as Jadine blames him, and wanders the seas for eight years. And yet, as the Mexican fisherman calls him, he is "Americano. Cierta Americano. Es verdad."²⁰ In eight homeless years, with seven documented identities and a few undocumented ones, Son becomes part of the "International legion of day laborers and musclemen, gamblers, sidewalk merchants, migrants, unlicensed crewmen on ships with volatile cargo, part-time mercenaries, full-time gigolos, or curbside musicians. What distinguished them from other men (aside from their terror of Social Security cards and *cédula de identidad*) was their refusal to equate work with life and the inability to stay anywhere for long. Some were Huck Finns some Nigger Jims. Others were Calibans, Staggerlees and John Henrys. Anarchic, wandering, they read about their hometown in the pages of out-of-town newspapers."²¹ But from all the selves he acquired, there was one that "called forth the true him. The *him* that he never lied to, the one he tucked in at night and the one he did not want to die. The other selves were like the words he spoke – fabrications of the moment, misinformation required to protect Son from harm and to secure that one reality at least."²²

And that one reality is Eloë. Lionnet and Shih's notes inform once again the present discussion of transnational aspects in *Tar Baby*. They write that "All too often the emphasis on a major-resistant mode of cultural practices denies the complex and multiple forms of cultural

¹⁹ Ibid., 305.

²⁰ Ibid., 167.

²¹ Ibid., 167.

²² Ibid., 139.

expressions of minorities and diasporic peoples and hides their micropractices of transnationality in their multiple, paradoxical, or even irreverent relations with the economic transnationalism of contemporary empires. Common conceptions of resistance to the major reify the boundaries of communities by placing the focus on the action and reaction, excluding other forms of participation in the transnational."²³ Eloë, his cradle, as Jadine calls it, represents a major-resistant mode of cultural practice. By constantly making reference to his hometown, Son is actually reinforcing plain and solid boundaries between the dominant and the subaltern. Willingly, he reifies the borders Jadine needs to cross in order to participate in the transnational moment. If, for Jadine, the border crossing is a conscientious effort of moving on and making peace with the past and with the nightmarish obsessions she has, for Son the clear delineation of the dual worlds is an attempt to preserve the tradition he cherishes.

If we are to give full credit to the novel, it seems that Son as representing the transnationalism from below paradigm finds the real opponent in Valerian's belief system as representative for the transnationalism from above. This way, by directly opposing Son to Valerian, the novel shifts the opponent pressure from Jadine, allowing her to actively engage in a minoritized transnational practice. By differentiating herself from both Valerian and Son, Jadine manages to leave behind the real obstacles in her identity development: the white materialism and the black tradition. If Valerian's world is marred from the beginning of the novel, when Morrison writes that "The end of the world, as it turned out, was nothing more than a collection of magnificent winter houses on Isle des Chevaliers,"²⁴ Son's world slowly loses its ground while the protagonist tries to impose his ideas and dreams on Jadine. Thus, confronted with two decaying worlds, Jadine has no other option than to make her own.

L'Arbe de la Croix, Valerian's mansion, is the prototype of any plantation. Valerian and Margaret Street are the masters and Sydney and Ondine Childs are their servants. Jadine is the masters' protégée and the servants' niece, this placing her in a special position that can ease the pressure between the two families, touching on the Streets' ego of engaging in a civilizing mission by educating the servants' niece and by consolidating the Childs' loyalty and pride of having one of them part of the white man's world. Moreover, the presence of Therese, Gideon, and Alma (otherwise known as the Yardman and the Marys) as locals lending a helping hand to Sydney and Ondine, secures for everybody a status quo, making them comfortable with their little problems and selected privileges.

But this unnatural calmness and fake easiness is literally shattered once Son steps on the plantation. He forces the other characters to assume the roles scripted by the transnationalism from above / transnationalism from below paradigm. Thus, it becomes obvious that Valerian is a perfect embodiment of the elite-controlled macrostructural process of globalization. Confined to a voluntary exile, he tries to replicate in the tropics the life style he had when he ran the family's candy factory back in Philadelphia. Moreover, when Valerian spoils the natural resources of the Caribbean island both by building there his retirement

²³ Lionnet and Shih, 7.

²⁴ Morrison, 9.

mansion and by using the tropical sugar cane as a main supply for his candy factory, he is the direct purveyor of environmental and health hazards caused by the imperial practices. His greenhouse is also a symbol of his exploitative performance and it is not surprising that a man by the name of Green is about to break down his entire establishment.

But this does not happen from the beginning. Apart from scaring Margaret, Sydney and Ondine, the first time Son makes his presence felt among the inhabitants of L'Arbe de la Croix, it seems that Son has a benefic influence. He teaches Valerian how to keep the ants out of his green house and how to help the flowers bloom. These two minor details, like other apparently insignificant details in the novel, help give contour to the characters. Literally, the mirror put in front of the ants to prevent them from entering the greenhouse is the mirror in which Son reflects his true self that prevents him from entering the white man's world, while the shake he applies to the flower that does not want to open up is similar to the *shake* (and quite literally, rape!) he administers Jadine, helping her flourish into a new identity. In this respect, Son arguably plays a positive role and his wildness is about to be tempered and civilized. As the narrator points out, "The black man had brought luck to the greenhouse, maybe he'd bring luck to the whole celebration,"²⁵ while Valerian refers to his actions as "black magic."²⁶ From his generosity as a master and for his own entertainment, Valerian invites the intruder to stay and tries his best to help him go back to the U.S. It is, after all, a favor Valerian can indulge in an effort to reconcile with the son, Michael, whose presence is eagerly awaited for Christmas. But, as we are about to find out, reconciliation between father and son is denied, and Son's presence precipitates the implosion of two concurrent realities.

L'Arbe de la Croix and Eloë are finally facing each other at the Christmas dinner, but what comes out of that celebration breaks down both Valerian's and Son's worlds because, as he tells Jadine later, "white folks and black folks should not sit down and eat together."²⁷ The scene is probably the most important in the novel because, after that clash, all the protagonists need to reassess their identities. Even though, for a limited period of time, Jadine and Son try to rescue one another and reconcile their opposing points of view, their eventual separation proves the point of the novel that emphasizes individual and subtler solutions to the moral predicament of binaries: white vs. black, past vs. future. In fact, the Christmas dinner is a showcase of opposing stereotypes. The clash between Valerian and Son, one sitting at the head of the table and the other, across from him, at the bottom of the table, represents the clash between the two forms of transnationalism. Valerian's discretionary practice in mastering his domain is met by Son's arrogance in questioning his moral precedence. One hundred French chevaliers with swords and epaulets are ready to confront one hundred black naked blind horsemen in a never-ending imperial battle. By avoiding enslavement, the black horsemen from the back of Son's mind are finally ready to resist and confront oppression. Blamed for having fired Therese, Gideon, and Alma for stealing apples, Valerian says the he did

²⁵ Ibid., 187.

²⁶ Ibid., 189.

²⁷ Ibid., 210.

not fire them because they took the apples; instead, he fired them for not asking him for the apples. The implications of this scene cut through the entire debate of colonialism, as if the slaves had ever been asked if they wanted to be enslaved. The language of the master is finally being questioned, and Valerian seems to lose control over it when his commands are no longer followed and Ondine, the servant, gets to tell a most horrible truth.

Ondine's silence resembles Michael's silence because they both are victims of oppression, one from the masters, the other one from his mother. When Ondine, prompted by Son's resistance, finally finds a voice to tell Michael's story of mutilations inflicted by his mother, she also finds it in her power to confront her master. In this way, Son's presence precipitated the separation of the protagonists into two categories: Valerian and Margaret on the one side, Ondine, Michael, Therese, Gideon and Alma on the other. In effect, these are the forces behind the two formulations of transnationalism from above and from below. What had been at the beginning of the Christmas scene a simple opposition between Son and Valerian, between black and white, becomes a rather complex confrontation between two worlds whose boundaries seem to become more flexible. For instance, Valerian loses his authority, so that Sydney and Margaret need to take care of him; Ondine claims the kitchen her territory and tries to work on her relationship with Margaret; Michael gives up his social work and goes to school; finally, Gideon, Therese and Alma, their access on the island being denied, try to make a living in Dominique, which is the real place in-between.

Jadine alone seems to escape both these worlds. In the novel, her real place in-between is represented by New York. While Son feels estranged from the new people in New York and looks for familiar people like the Gideons and the Thereses of the city, Jadine believes that New York is home: "This is home, she thought with an orphan's delight; not Paris, not Baltimore, not Philadelphia."²⁸ The city is to become the place where she and Son can make a living together, a place where she is "unorphaned" by his love. Self-absorbed in their feelings, they try to rescue one another. Son wants to take her away from Valerian's plantation and, on a symbolic level, to reconnect her with her heritage, while Jadine wants to educate Son and integrate him into the real world. Even before visiting Eloë, "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?"²⁹ It seems that both are on different, irreconcilable agendas, and since New York is just the place in-between, they both go their separate ways to bear the culture to save their race. But in the end, even though her solution seems individual and selfish, Jadine's new culture does not only save her race, it also saves her gender.

Jadine thus becomes representative for the minoritized culture that Lionnet and Shih invoke in their overview of transnationalism. It takes her a long time to realize it, but Jadine, the girl who modeled for Caron, highly educated and successful on the Parisian fashion stage,

²⁸ Ibid., 222.

²⁹ Ibid., 269.

can only succeed on her own in a complex and demanding world when she decides to give up all pressures coming from her family, her past and tradition, and construct a whole new identity. Forced to choose between being orphan and parenting Sydney and Ondine, between Ryk and Son, between New York and Eloë, between the dreams of women with large hats and women with large breast, between the lady in yellow and the sealskin coat, Jadine chooses none and decides to go back to Paris. Her Caribbean retreat and her American passage through New York and Eloë finally convinced her to return to Paris and confront the lady in yellow. At the end of a novel based on binaries, Jadine's flight to France undoes the last one. The lady in yellow, the vision that supposedly made her reconsider her European passing, and Ryk, the rich lover that wanted to buy her with a sealskin coat are mere stereotypes of black heritage and white materialism. By going back to Paris to "tangle with the woman in yellow"³⁰ and to give back the coat to Mr. Sealskin (even though she carefully folds the coat on the empty seat beside her in the plane, her gesture of turning the coat with the lining out, instead of fondling with it as she did when she first got it, makes it pretty clear that her adventure with Ryk is over), Jadine transforms herself from a cultural orphan into a prodigal daughter in search of a new identity, transgressing the black and white divide.

This binary is also evident from a narratorial perspective since Morrison reinforces the opposition by retelling two famous myths. Because the reinterpretation or the creation of alternative myths has long been a practice of resistance to the dominant discourse, Morrison's choice of mixing a white traditional religious myth with a black folk tale is in itself representative for the type of creative and active transnational trait of minoritized cultures Lionnet and Shih talk about. Arguably, the myth of Eden is a colonizing story, thus being a direct exponent of traditionalism from above. Either by looking for the lost paradise on earth or by aiming to reach it in the afterlife, the European colonizers tried throughout the centuries to impose their religious beliefs on the people they conquered. More than that, they were embarked on a civilizing mission to educate the children of nature, as they called the peoples whose lands they took and whose lives they oppressed. The fact that the Streets' servants are called the Childs and that Valerian pays for Jadine's education clearly explains the colonizing charge of the Eden story. The tar baby folk tale takes the opposing view of a counterhegemonic narrative that surprises readers with Brer Rabbit's ingenuity in convincing Brer Fox to free him. In the context of the present analysis, Jadine is definitely the Brer Rabbit while Son is the Brer Fox. It can arguably be asserted that, in an effort to counteract the dominant white culture, the supporter of black tradition overemphasized resistance to such an extent that it left people like Jadine no other choice but to deny both white and black essentialism and embark on a self-discovery journey on the transnational route.

When discussing a complex and complicated novel such as *Tar Baby*, theories like the ones promoted by Russell Duncan, Clara Junker, Masao Miyoshi, Françoise Lionnet and Shumei Shih help bring extra light to the understanding of literary works. In Morrison's case, a transnational reading of *Tar Baby* offered a fresh solution to the novel's treatment of binaries.

³⁰ Ibid., 291.

When analysing the novel, literary critics were ready to praise Morrison's use of stereotypes in depicting the intricate relationships between white capitalism and African American tradition. They were also ready to admire the craft with which the author was able to reform and reinterpret famous cultural myths and folk tales to support her ideas. But the same critics had a hard time understanding Morrison's and her characters' stand vis-à-vis the black vs. white controversy. Some were ready to take Son's side and to consider him the real keeper of African American tradition; by contrast, others regarded Jadine as the new embodiment of the African American tradition because of her agency and progressive thinking; yet, others were blaming the author for not providing a solution to the problem she raised.

A transnational reading is capable of reconciling all these divergent takes. Using Lionnet and Shih's discussion of transnationalism and their use of minoritized cultures, it can be argued that that the African American tradition vs. white capitalism binary can be integrated in a more comprehensive paradigm of transnationalism from below and transnationalism from above. As shown before, Son represents the resistant site, while Valerian is the symbol of the dominant. Their clash leads to the formation of Jadine's minoritized culture which, by opposition to both Son's and Valerian's worlds, participates in the transnational development of identity. Thus, everybody seems to participate in a transnational moment, Son and, to some extent, Valerian by provoking it and Jadine by experiencing it. The fact that Paris awaits her with the same below / above dialectic, lady in yellow vs. Ryk, means that there really is no other alternative for Jadine, but to acquire a new identity in spite of this binary.