

And My Sign Didn't Make Sense Without Hers:
Challenging Stereotypes in Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*,
"Recitatif", and *Tar Baby*

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1. Introduction

1.1 *The Thesis*

In this thesis, I shall explore stereotypes in two of Nobel laureate Toni Morrison's novels, *The Bluest Eye* (1970) and *Tar Baby* (1981), and her only short story, "Recitatif" (1983). My primary motivation for selecting an African American theme for my thesis arose from acquainting myself with slave narratives, writings from the Harlem Renaissance, and with postcolonial rewritings. As a student of literature, I found the study of African American literature distinctively fascinating, and especially the concept of the Other captured my interest. Applied also in other fields, the study of the Other, which is of course inextricable from the study of racial stereotyping, is one of the principal elements in the postcolonial study of literature. What provoked me to investigate the prejudicial structures in Toni Morrison's production is the clever usage of stereotyping, in addition to a personal interest in her oeuvre. While I recognize that the author and her work has gathered a considerable amount of attention, both among the general public and within literary research, I am convinced many areas are still left unstudied. One of the reasons for this is that Morrison's production has a quality that the works always leave the reader mystified. Partly due to their tale-like nature, the stories never appear to satisfy their interpreters, but instead, seem to invite readers into a conversation with them. Therefore, I intend not to insist on a simple interpretation myself, but to propose a reading that could open some new aspects to the conversation.

Of Morrison's ten fictional works, *The Bluest Eye*, "Recitatif", and *Tar Baby* provide the best possible terrain to analyze the workings of stereotyping and racially inflected language for many reasons. Not only do they provide three markedly different settings, but they also handle the complex issue of stereotyping in different ways. In addition, in these particular works, Morrison's challenging of stereotypes becomes apparent quite extensively, providing a multidimensional view on the issue. My aim is not only to

uncover the diversity of stereotyping in these works, but to see stereotyping as a part of a wider social construction, racism, a complex construction in itself. This thesis is, thus, an attempt to move, as Joep Leerssen puts it in his article “The Rhetoric of National Character: A Programmatic Survey” (2000), “beyond merely inventorying the ‘vocabulary’ of national prejudice [...] and turn to its ‘grammar’” (271). In this thesis, I shall argue that stereotypes are challenged in these works through their construction in *The Bluest Eye*, and deconstruction in “Recitatif”, and that *Tar Baby* provides ways of thinking that might help to get beyond stereotypes.

For some people, racial discrimination in its most tragic sense belongs to history and it might be considered outdated to study its structures. Morrison, however, argues in her theoretical work *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* (1992) that racism “has assumed a metaphorical life so completely embedded in daily discourse that it is perhaps more necessary and more on display than ever before” (63). That is, especially on account of its contemporarily veiled nature, it is still relevant to study the linguistic structures of racism. Additionally, although the works discussed in this thesis present a distinctively *African American* problem, in our ever-globalizing world examining the structures of racial discrimination is not at all *démodé*, but quite the contrary; it is a highly current topic. It has also been a current topic for a long time. The polarization between black and white people dates back to the very first encounter between the two races and it is still a marked part of our language, whether concealed or blatant. Although the dichotomy between darkness and light was found before it, it was colonization that brought about the myths that construct cotemporary racial stereotyping, as George Yancy puts it in “Colonial Gazing: the Production of the Body as ‘Other’” (2008):

Colonial invasive powers bring with them their own myths, beliefs, and forms of colonial ordering which create a bifurcated form of hierarchy that is designed to distinguish between the natives and the colonizers, a form of hierarchy where the colonizer (white, good, intelligent, ethical, beautiful, civilized) is superior in all things, while the native (dark, exotic, sexually uncontrollable, bad, stupid, ugly, savage, backward) is inferior.
(4)

These hierarchies are existent in our language even today. Looking at, for example, the definitions for black and white in a thesaurus one finds that while whiteness is usually associated with positive images, such as “light”, “bright”, “candid” or “pure”, “black” is a synonym for words such as “dirty” and “funereal” (*Roget’s Thesaurus*, 221, emphasis in original). This polarization between black and white has found its corporeal counterpart in the African-derived peoples in most of the early American literature. Furthermore, in the framework of black slavery in America, as Morrison points out, “with the dramatic polarity created by skin color, the projection of the not-me”, was found (*Playing in the Dark*¹, 38). The “not-me” or the Other, i.e. the self defined by what it is not, prevails in our language, both written and spoken, and stereotyping as a method of distancing oneself from the Other, is and continues to be a relevant subject.

Why discuss black stereotyping in the production of an African American author whose own critical interest is in the use of black characters in white American literature, then? Morrison discusses the functions of Africanist personae in the works of, for example, Poe, Hemingway, and Willa Cather in *Playing in the Dark*. To me, she deploys similar functions for many characters that she found in the novels of the white Americans in her own fictional production. In a sense, she rewrites “the ways in which a nonwhite, Africanlike (or Africanist) presence or persona was constructed in the United States, and the imaginative uses this fabricated presence served” (*Playing*, 6) into her own characters. The reason for doing this, I think, is in the hope of eventually defying those constructions. By employing stereotypes in an excessive manner, she continuously both ridicules and questions them. I intend to show in this thesis that, in these three works especially, there is a chance of deconstructing racially inflected language.

¹ Henceforth, *Playing*.

1.2 Background and Methodology

While Toni Morrison is known for her being particularly a black woman writer who concentrates on the Afro-American experience in her writing, one must see her work as a part of a wider black literary tradition. For this purpose, I have familiarized myself with thinkers such as Frantz Fanon² and W.E.B. Du Bois, and been highly influenced by their writings. W.E.B. Du Bois's *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903) has given me the historical framework knowledge of the African American thought; especially his writings of double consciousness works as a foundation on which I can look to while discussing *The Bluest Eye*, "Recitatif", and *Tar Baby* in a more recent framework. Frantz Fanon, honoured by important names in the postcolonial study of literature such as Homi K. Bhabha and Edward Said, has analyzed the psychopathology of colonization in the mid-twentieth century in *Black Skin, White Masks*³ (originally, *Peau Noire, Masques Blancs*, 1952). Called "the purveyor of the transgressive and transitional truth" ("Foreword: Remembering Fanon" in *Black Skin*, ix) by Bhabha, Fanon provides a more radical view than Du Bois, "reflect[ing] his personal frustrations with racism" (*Encyclopaedia Britannica*). Although he notes that he "belong[s] irreducibly to [his] time" (15) and that his ideas are "valid only for the Antilles" (16), Fanon has given me important knowledge that can be applied also to the modern African American problem presented in my primary sources.

The key texts for the background information on stereotypes have been Michael Pickering's "The Concept of the Other" in *Stereotyping: The Politics of Representation* (2001) and Joep Leerssen's article "The Rhetoric of National Character: A Programmatic Survey" (2000). Pickering outlines the most important notions in the study of the Other and stereotyping, while Leerssen's article concentrates on stereotyping as national characterization. Pickering's views will be discussed in more depth in the chapter on *The Bluest Eye*, since it is imperative to take them into

² Frantz Fanon (b. 1925, Martinique—d. Dec. 6, 1961, Washington, D.C., U.S.), was a West Indian philosopher and psychoanalyst (*Encyclopaedia Britannica*).

³ Henceforth, *Black Skin*.

consideration before going onto seeing how stereotypes are constructed in the novel. As for the more specific criticism on *The Bluest Eye*, “Recitatif”, and *Tar Baby*, I have sketched a brief outline at the beginning of every chapter.

In addition to the historical views on the African American experience, perhaps one of the most important inspirations for my work has been Morrison herself. Studying her interviews, and especially her critical work, *Playing in the Dark*, has proved vital for my study. One of Morrison’s major interests, notable in all of the three works discussed in this thesis, is to find out how “‘literary whiteness’ and ‘literary blackness’ [is] made, and what is the consequence of that construction” (*Playing*, xii), as she notes in the preface. My approach also acknowledges Morrison’s personal life and her thoughts about her own writing, or as she puts it, “the author’s presence—her or his intentions, blindness, and sight—is part of the imaginative activity” (*ibid.*). While Morrison concentrates on how Africanist personae were viewed in the literature of the white canon of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, her views, together with the ideas of Fanon and Du Bois, form the core of the background on the study of stereotyping in the African American framework.

At this point it is worth saying a few words on the criticism of my primary sources before proceeding to the separate chapters on them. One reason why I chose to discuss these three works is that, though *The Bluest Eye* has been studied in detail, *Tar Baby* has not received great attention, and “Recitatif” is rarely even mentioned in the studies on Morrison’s work. Overall, critics seem to be more interested in the last two novels Morrison wrote before winning the Nobel prize, particularly *Beloved* (1987) and, to a lesser extent, *Jazz* (1992). While I agree that these two works are certainly worth critical attention, more recognition should be given to the less studied and perhaps misjudged works, such as *Tar Baby* and “Recitatif”.

Additionally, when *The Bluest Eye* and *Tar Baby* have been studied, the criticism has mainly concentrated on femininity, (feminine) sexuality, (beauty) aesthetics, and motherhood, whereas the criticism on “Recitatif” mainly concentrates on reader

responses. Morrison is seen primarily as a woman writer, and even though the characters discussed in this thesis are also mostly women, I do not seek to make any comments on the impact the characters' (or the author's) gender might have on the interpretation of the works. My focus is on racial stereotyping, its causes and consequences in language and society in my three chosen texts. My aim is to show that, whether men or women, for the characters in these fictional works, as well as for "real people", there is an opportunity to challenge stereotypes.

My thesis starts with *The Bluest Eye*, which has received the most critical attention. In the chapter on Morrison's first novel, I present the framework study of othering, as provided by Pickering. In addition, I introduce the ideas of critics that have studied *The Bluest Eye*, such as Tuire Valkeakari and Allen Alexander, and I intend to explore the novel in greater depth in the light of their views. I will argue that the novel's protagonist Pecola's construction as the stereotypical Other is a consequence of the black community's internalization of white values. These values are based on traditional myths of blackness and whiteness and the internalization of those myths in the novel leads to the scapegoating of Pecola. In *The Bluest Eye*, structures of victimization are most clearly present, and it is the key work in analyzing stereotypes in Morrison's fiction.

In the chapter on "Recitatif", I introduce the studies of Howard Sklar, David Goldstein-Shirley, and Elizabeth Abel. While taking into account their interest in the role of the reader, I seek to propose a different kind of reading, one that aims to find out how literature can deconstruct the stereotypes constructed in *The Bluest Eye*. I shall argue that while the ethnic identities of the two protagonists are not revealed, the short story continuously deconstructs stereotypes by inverting them and perhaps eventually subverting them. I will also suggest that the character of Maggie plays a significant role in the deconstruction of stereotypes, to the point that she might be considered the main character of the short story.

Although written two years before “Recitatif”, I see *Tar Baby* as the final part of Morrison’s challenging of stereotypes in these three works. In the chapter on *Tar Baby*, I aim to propose a reading that sees it possible for a fictional character, and therefore probably also for a real person, to acquire freedom from the limiting categories of stereotyping. I shall introduce several studies on *Tar Baby*, ones which I found most interesting and most supportive of my own analysis. Since many of the critics, including Ann Rayson and Evelyn Hawthorne, see the protagonist, Jadine, as an African American woman who chooses to forsake her heritage for the materialistic values of money and success of white society, I prefer a reading that sees her as a character who neither wishes to be burdened by the values of white society nor by black society. Furthermore, in this novel, it is primarily black essentialism that the protagonist fights to break free from. This reading puts Jadine in the role of Brer Rabbit as represented in the traditional trickster tale, while in the studies I have read she is generally seen as the tar baby. The challenging of stereotypes by Morrison in these works will therefore move from the construction of stereotypes, through deconstructing them, and finally attaining freedom from them. Next, the construction of stereotypes and the myths of blackness and whiteness will be discussed.

2. Cleaning Oneself on Others: The Social and Psychological Construction of Stereotypes in *The Bluest Eye*

2.1 Introduction

Joep Leerssen notes that “political and ideological developments over the last two decades [...] have given fresh urgency and relevance to the study of national and cultural identity constructs and stereotypes” (268). He also suggests that “national characterizations take place in a polarity between self and Other” (271). In this chapter, my main aim is to show how the polarities between self and Other are constructed in Toni Morrison’s first published novel, *The Bluest Eye*.

This novel depicts approximately one year in the life of a community in Lorain, Ohio, where Morrison herself spent her childhood. *The Bluest Eye* is a story of a black girl, Pecola Breedlove, whose fondest wish is to have blue eyes. Having been raped by her father, she gets pregnant, the baby dies and Pecola sinks into schizophrenia. The action in the novel centres on periods in the lives of Pecola and her parents Pauline and Cholly Breedlove, and the lives of the principal narrator, Claudia MacTeer as well as her sister, Frieda MacTeer, are also important in the narrative. For this thesis, the most important character to look at is Pecola, but I also discuss a group of other characters whose lives intersect with Pecola’s.

Even though in *The Bluest Eye* Pecola goes through a series of soul-destroying experiences, the novel is not simply a cry for sympathy or a pronouncement of injustice but has a deeper, more forward-looking meaning. In this novel, Morrison translates the workings and ramifications of racism, and does it by involving her characters in discriminatory practices such as othering and scapegoating, arising from the

internalization of the values of white culture and social myths. Even though these practices are for most parts intraracial in this novel, what I call “cleaning oneself on others” clearly reflects the early formation of white American identities as projected on the African self. In *The Bluest Eye*, the people of the black community have internalized cultural myths related to whiteness and blackness that are based on polar opposites, and have consequently started to objectify and scapegoat one of the members of their community, Pecola. In this chapter, I aim to show how stereotypes are constructed by the means of othering, internalization, and scapegoating in *The Bluest Eye*.

2.2 Through the Eyes of Other People: Secondary Sources

The Bluest Eye has been studied from a wide variety of perspectives. As the protagonist is a little girl, studies of childhood and more specifically girlhood have been made (for example, Ruth Rosenberg’s “Seeds in Hard Ground: Black Girlhood in *The Bluest Eye*” (1987) and Debra T. Werrlein’s “Not so Fast, Dick and Jane: Reimagining Childhood and Nation in *The Bluest Eye*” (2005)). In addition, the feminist perspective has been a very fruitful point of view for critics (an example of this is Jane Kuenz’s “*The Bluest Eye*: Notes on History, Community, and Black Female Subjectivity” (1993)).

The Bluest Eye is, however, specifically a novel of a black community in the United States in the 1940s and it portrays different kinds of discriminatory structures. My study concentrates on how these structures are constructed via polar opposites. In pursuing this theme, I will introduce three concepts that will help in locating the causalities of racist behaviour in Morrison’s complex novel: the Other, internalization, and scapegoating. I will give a short introduction about how these concepts have been studied and then show how the theories can be applied to *The Bluest Eye*.

The Other is a concept close to the concept of stereotyping and in *Stereotyping: The Politics of Representation* (2001) Michael Pickering discusses the difference between

the two terms. He notes that even though the concept of the Other has somewhat replaced stereotyping in much literary discourse, it has not completely displaced the term and that there are parallels (as well as differences) between them (47-48, 69). Both of them are, he notes, means of categorizing others from a superior perspective (47), creating boundaries between me and not-me or us and not-us. Both of them can be seen as “[strategies] of symbolic expulsion” or as “mundane exorcistic ritual[s]” (48), which is again close to the notion of scapegoating that will be discussed later. Stereotyping is a tool for resisting threats to one’s identity or the identity of a group by creating boundaries between “me” and “the Other”, and the Other is in this way constructed as the outcome of stereotypical behaviour (ibid.).

Pickering brings the two terms into “analytical conjunction” in order to show that even though there are parallels between them, conceptually the notion of the Other is more analytically valuable than the idea of stereotyping (47, 71). He suggests that the damage caused by both othering and stereotyping concerns not only the objects of the behaviour but also those who contribute to the discriminatory action (48-49, 69). However, the concept of the Other brings “more clearly into the frame both those involved in the process of othering as well as the object of [the] process” (69). As the stereotypical object may have positive value as well, the Other is always subjugated as inferior to benefit the subject (71). The concept of the Other, therefore, “heightens attention both to the subjugation of the stereotypical Other, and to those who produce the stereotypical object and thereby by implication define themselves as subjects” (ibid.). Pickering argues that this is the main difference that makes the Other an advance on the notion of stereotype (ibid.) and is clearly in line with what Toni Morrison notes in *Playing in the Dark*: it is just as valuable to study the imagination of the people that make discrimination possible as it is to study those who suffer from it (11-12). To Pickering, the concept of the Other also makes it easier to study causalities and relations of power and this furthers a more complex examination of the subject (69). Since the two terms “complement and enhance each other as conceptual items in the critical vocabulary” (Pickering, 47), I will be using both of them here, mainly focusing on the concept of the Other, however.

The concept of the Other, in general, can be easily pointed out in the behaviour of white people towards African peoples during the past few centuries. Pickering emphasizes the awareness of history as an important factor in understanding stereotypical representations of the Other (49) and discusses Social Darwinism in this light (53). First introduced in the late 19th century and popularized in America at the same point in time as the events in *The Bluest Eye* as well as Nazism, Social Darwinism was a social adaptation of Darwin's theory of evolution by natural selection (*Encyclopaedia Britannica*). The term has little to do with Darwin himself, but is, among others, linked to Francis Galton, the founder of eugenics (Pickering, 53), and philosopher and sociologist Herbert Spencer. At its most general, Social Darwinism refers to a "theory that societies, classes, and races are subject to and a product of Darwinian laws of natural selection" (*Oxford English Dictionary*). This includes the assumption that "the life of humans in society [is] a struggle for existence ruled by 'survival of the fittest' a phrase proposed by the British philosopher and scientist Herbert Spencer" (*Encyclopaedia Britannica*). The theory has links to the ideas of eugenics and Nazism, and thus offers an important framework in examining the discriminatory structures in *The Bluest Eye*, as well as the other works discussed in this thesis.

As Pickering uncovers the history of the concept of the Other further, he talks about "the white racial phantasm of the Primitive", which he calls the "primary Other" (51). The Primitive represented to Western Europeans of the 19th century people who were about to lose the struggle between races, because they were "lacking in the capacity to evolve", and would be eliminated, while the groups with the fittest individuals would survive (53-54). In this way, the Primitive stood for the polar opposite of "Western European nations [that] were represented as having attained the peak of [...] development" (54). Pickering notes that:

Western societies [of the late 19th century] classifying themselves as modern and civilised relied heavily on the contrast between their own sense of advancement and the idea of racially backward and inferior societies. Those who were conceived as *inferior* in this way became *interior* to national identity in the West by becoming its Other, its decivilised counterpart. (51, emphasis in original)

Similarly, the Primitive became “the conceptual opposite of the civilised subject” (52). Toni Morrison concentrates on the African American experience in *Playing in the Dark*, suggesting that early American identities were also defined by the white American self always in dual opposition with the Africanist presence (*Playing*, 52), making the African American people the ultimate not-me, an object.

Even though it is an unequalizing and destructive construction, the Other is essential to the identity of the subject of othering. Dualism between me and not-me is needed to maintain the strength of the subject’s identity as well as to try to balance the relation between “us” and “them” (Pickering, 72). The stereotypical Other is always an object, and those who create this object always identify themselves as subjects: “the Other is always constructed as an object for the benefit of the subject who stands in need of an objectified Other in order to achieve a masterly self-definition” (71).

The objectification of the Other leads, according to Pickering, to a loss of identity. In line with W.E.B Dubois’s writing of double-consciousness, he suggests that:

The indelible effect of this recognition of yourself as Other creates a twoness of vision that allows you to see yourself only through the eyes of others, leaving your own, secret striving for a more independent sense of identity bereft in ‘a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity’. (77)

As the object of othering, one starts to perceive oneself as the Other as well, which leads to an identity torn “between yourself [...] and the racialised object that represents you” (77), Pickering argues. With this torn identity, it is hard to have a positive image of one’s self, and to Pickering, it is “an intense struggle – not only against external images and representations of you objectified as Other, but also against all you have internalised from those images and representations, absorbed into your own twoness, your own torn self” (ibid.).

Internalization, then, can mean a variety of things depending on what field is in question. For psychology and sociology (and the study of literature, accordingly), internalization means adopting or incorporating norms and values of a group as one's own (*Oxford English Dictionary*).

In the postcolonial study of literature, internalization often refers to the internalization of the values of the dominant (white) culture, including the norms and values of Christianity. Allen Alexander discusses in his article, "The Fourth Face: The Image of God in Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*" (1998), the differences between Western theology and the African vision of God as portrayed by Morrison in her novel. Alexander argues that both Pauline and Pecola absorb the values of white culture: "Pauline molds her lifestyle to correspond to what the dominant culture applauds" (298) and for Pecola "the white cultural framework [...] has become her guidepost for living" (299).

To Alexander, many of the values that are internalized in *The Bluest Eye* are linked to Christianity that for its part relies strongly on dualism, or what he calls the "Western theological tradition of either-or thinking" (294). It means that one believes that "the differences between good and evil, righteous and unrighteous, believer and nonbeliever, are clearly demarcated" (ibid.), whereas in the African tradition God and Evil are seen as more interrelated (297) and God is more humanlike (295). Therefore, "[i]n order to adapt [to the white culture], both Pauline and Pecola have to embrace the Western concept of dualism—of believing that life is divisible, that good is distinguishable from evil, that the past, present, and future are disconnected" (300). This kind of internalization of dualism, trying to "measure [the] world with black-and-white scales" (301) can result, according to Alexander, in the loss of one's identity (302). Alexander seems to be suggesting that dualism is a Western concept and that internalizing such ideas leads not only to a split identity but to the loss of identity altogether. In *The Bluest Eye*, the fact that dualism is a Western thinking pattern becomes very clear, and is closely linked to Christianity.

Having internalized the dualistic mode of thinking from the dominant white culture, the black and mixed-race communities in *The Bluest Eye* end up turning Pecola symbolically into a scapegoat. Originating from the rituals of ancient Syria and Greece, for example (and, of course, the Bible), the term “scapegoat” refers to a person “who is blamed or punished for the sins of others” (*Oxford English Dictionary*). Scapegoating, accordingly, can be “aggressively punitive behaviour directed for whatever reason against other (weaker) persons or groups” (*ibid.*). Scapegoating is close to othering in a sense that it is a method of excluding one person out of a group and making that person an object. In *Religious Idiom and the African American Novel, 1952-1998* (2007) Tuire Valkeakari suggests that the structure of Pecola’s treatment clearly follows the structure of the original scapegoat ritual: “scapegoaters symbolically transfer characteristics that they despise in themselves onto a scapegoat and then reject the victim” (81). Even though it follows traditional structures of scapegoating, Pecola’s treatment has some unique features.

White Americans are known to have scapegoated blacks for centuries but in this novel the discrimination is intraracial. Valkeakari argues that victimization in *The Bluest Eye* is twofold: “while portraying an African American community that victimizes one of its most vulnerable members, *The Bluest Eye* ultimately presents this intracommunal black cruelty as originating with the racially discriminatory values and practices of white society” (78). This means that the black community in the novel has internalized the values of white culture as well as the practices of othering, and this leads to the scapegoating of Pecola. In this way, scapegoating as a “strategy of victimization” (80) can be seen as resulting from “cultural myths related to ‘whiteness’ and ‘blackness’” (78) as well as the victimization the scapegoaters themselves have been subjected to (81). They have internalized “white America’s racist stigmatization of a derogatively defined ‘blackness’” and “tragically make a member of their own community a vicarious sufferer” (*ibid.*). This Valkeakari calls “intraracial scapegoating” (80) and its ambition is to clean the scapegoaters from their alleged sins, or the “sin” of being black (83). Morrison does this, according to Valkeakari, “both to criticize racial discrimination *and* to reveal mechanisms that allow racism’s damaging aftereffects to operate and accumulate in the black communities” (77, emphasis in original).

The community's symbolical cleaning themselves on Pecola can be seen as a purification ritual, Pecola becoming a black Christ, taking the sins of a whole community symbolically on her shoulders. To Valkeakari, however, she represents an “*inverted* Christ figure” (99, emphasis in original): she is “a scapegoat whose tragic social death cannot save, redeem, or purify a community suffering from antiblack racism and racial self-loathing” (90). The internalization of the worst features of white society and ultimately turning a member of the community into a scapegoat causes only damaging aftereffects for both the oppressors and the victim similarly to the practice of othering.

2.3 In Other Words: The Construction of Pecola as Other

One major difference between the notion of the stereotype and the concept of the Other is that the latter also emphasizes the subject, making the patterns of duality more obvious. In *The Bluest Eye*, the Other is constructed through marked dualism. The heterogeneous community of Lorain always perceive themselves and others by relying on the dichotomy between “me” and “not-me”. This is how they are able to objectify other people (in this case, Pecola), and make themselves subjects. Objectifying the Other in order to retain and strengthen one's identity here reflects the early formation of white American identities. Toni Morrison has explained this in *Playing in the Dark*:

Africanism is the vehicle by which the American self knows itself as not enslaved, but free; not repulsive, but desirable; not helpless, but licensed and powerful; not history-less, but historical; not damned, but innocent; not a blind accident of evolution, but a progressive fulfillment of destiny. (52)

Africanism to Morrison means not only all that is derived from Africa, but also the experience of the (early) African self in the United States. To Morrison, the Africanist population has served (at least in literature of the white canon) as a polar opposite of

freedom. Typical of polar opposites, one does not make sense without the other: without people that are enslaved, there is no such thing as freedom. This dependency of the notion of freedom on the notion of slavery reflects the fact that the Other is needed by the self to retain identity. “Africanism is inextricable from the definition of Americanness” (65) as the Other is inextricable from the self. Also in the literature of the white canon, Morrison argues, the African self has served as a vehicle to meditate on morality, the relationship between mind and body, and the discussion of issues that were fearful to white people (64). In *The Bluest Eye*, Morrison creates a similar structure in a community where there are white, black, and mixed-race people, and the degrees of othering are multiple.

The construction of Pecola as the Other in her own community relies heavily on the me/not-me dichotomy. Claudia’s “confession” (Valkeakari, 95) makes Pecola’s role in the community very clear:

All of us [...] felt so wholesome after we cleaned ourselves on her. We were so beautiful when we stood astride her ugliness. Her simplicity decorated us, her guilt sanctified us, her pain made us glow with health, her awkwardness made us think we had a sense of humor. Her inarticulateness made us believe we were eloquent. Her poverty kept us generous. Even her waking dreams we used—to silence our own nightmares. (*The Bluest Eye*⁴, 163)

Pecola represents to these people everything they do not wish to be. Her construction as the Other helps balance the relation between the self and its opposite by incarnating it and thus making the identities of the subjects stronger. Only because of her ugliness, can others in the black community have a sense of their own beauty. In this way, they use Pecola as a vehicle for identity formation and preservation. In a sense, Pecola can be seen as a “pariah figure”, representing both black people as pariahs and pariahs within communities “that are very useful for the conscience of that community” (Tate, 129), as Morrison notes in *Black Women Writers at Work* (1983). In *The Bluest Eye*, othering is

⁴ Henceforth, *BE*

collective, and the existence of the Other also strengthens group identities. When Pecola stays with the MacTeer family, Claudia says that, “[w]e had fun in those few days Pecola was with us. Frieda and I stopped fighting each other and concentrated on our guest” (*BE*, 12). Even though they do not concentrate on bullying Pecola but try to “keep her from feeling outdoors” (*ibid.*), the boundary between “her” and “us” is a strong one and unites Claudia and Frieda more closely.

Of course, identity formation through the construction of the Other is a fantasy, as Claudia admits later on:

we were not strong, only aggressive; we were not free, merely licensed; we were not compassionate, we were polite; not good, but well behaved. We courted death in order to call ourselves brave, and hid like thieves from life. We substituted good grammar for intellect; we switched habits to simulate maturity; we rearranged lies and called it truth, seeing in the new pattern of an old idea of the Revelation of the Word. (*BE*, 163)

With this confession, Morrison clearly implies that antiblack racism is based on an illusion, and relies on fantasy. The people of the community have internalized the racially victimizing values and norms of white society, so the foundation of their action also rests on an illusion. The dualism between the Primitive and the modern civilized subject has always been a fantasy, and accordingly, everything based on it is fantasy as well. At the same time, Claudia’s depiction of the true being of the community, in the quotation above, could easily be applied to the stereotypical representation of what in the 19th century embodied the highest extreme of humanity: “the silken baron of civilisation” (Pickering, 59), the white man. Many of the characters seem to be seeking to imitate that image, in order to distance themselves from the primitive Other, as if those two extremes represented the only options in life. Claudia’s confession makes it clear how destructive this kind of imitating can be. Although the “Primitive society [...] never existed” (Pickering, 57), myths based on it live and breed. Persistent social mythologies are clearly one of the major “mechanisms that allow racism’s damaging aftereffects to operate and accumulate in the black communities” (Valkeakari, 77), or, keep the illusion alive.

What Pecola represents to the mixed-race community of Lorain is highly dependent on traditional myths and stereotypes of blackness and also heavily linked with the notion of the Primitive. The way one of the mixed-race characters, Geraldine, views the difference between a mixed-race person and a “nigger” alludes to the views of Western European people in the 19th century, and namely the “underlying assumption [...] that modern society had evolved from its antithesis” (Pickering, 53). To Geraldine Pecola “epitomizes an ultimate embodiment of impurity and ‘Funk’” (Valkeakari, 86). The myth of black impurity is alluded to here, and the “Funk” Geraldine wants to get rid of is “[t]he dreadful funkiness of passion, the funkiness of nature, the funkiness of the wide range of human emotions” (*BE*, 64). These links to passion, nature, and relying more on emotions than reason are typical racist myths of blackness, whereas myths of whiteness are associated with such things as order, reason, and scientific advancement. Geraldine creates a boundary between the likes of Pecola and herself by supporting to these dualistic notions, because she feels that “[t]he line between colored and nigger was not always clear; subtle and telltale signs threatened to erode it, and the watch had to be constant” (*BE*, 68). In other words, since Geraldine is of a mixed-race descent, the relation between herself and the Other is especially unstable: she sees herself as “in-between” as neither black nor white. She does not want to be in the same category as Pecola, so she distances herself from her by stereotypical means. Pickering notes that “[t]he ideological function of othering is to attempt to make the relation stable, to give it a static and durable shape and temporally to fast-freeze the configurations of difference and similarity it constructs” (72). This distancing, which is highly important to Geraldine’s community, also affects the way in which Pecola sees herself.

The construction of Pecola as Other in the community leads her to internalize other people’s views, and to see herself and her cultural heritage as Other. This is a development which parallels the history of colonization, explained by Yancy:

The white colonialist strategy was to get the colonized Black (or native) to undergo a process of epistemic violence, a process where the Black begins to internalize all of the colonizer’s

myths and thus begins to see his/her identity through the paradigm of white supremacy/ Eurocentricity. (7)

Thus, Pecola is obsessed with representations of white beauty, such as a mug with Shirley Temple's picture on it, and candy wrappers with Mary Jane's images on them, and most tragically with the need to have the blue eyes which she thinks would change her life. Without the blue eyes, she thinks she would "see only what there was to see: the eyes of other people" (*BE*, 35). The eyes of other people tear Pecola's identity in two as she starts to see herself as the Other. Her identity is "split, broken, dispersed into its abjected images, its alienated representations" (Pickering, 78), represented in the novel by Pecola's eventual sinking into schizophrenia. The climax of her construction as Other is alluded to by her moving to a house "on the edge of town" (*BE*, 162), apart from everybody, but present "where you can see her even now, once in a while" (*ibid.*).

Othering in *The Bluest Eye* is constructed on a long history of discrimination and myths of whiteness and blackness. The basic dichotomy between the self and the Other is the very foundation of the ways in which the characters view themselves and each other. By internalizing the views of others, it is possible for the victims to start to view themselves as Other. In *The Bluest Eye*, it becomes clear that conscious or subconscious internalization can have tragic consequences.

2.4 Internalization: Your Uncleanliness Next to My Godliness

To understand the intraracial or intracommunal othering and victimization in *The Bluest Eye* it is important to note that such behaviour originates from the values of the dominant (white) culture the characters have internalized. The internalization in *The Bluest Eye* relies extensively on traditional myths related to blackness, also widely internalized by the community. For example, beauty, order, and cleanliness are often related to whiteness, whereas "the Negro" has been seen as unattractive, unclean, and unintelligent (Pickering, 53). The characters' views of these issues also rely on highly

stereotypified notions and dualism. Along with the other characters, Pecola has internalized the “racialized, absolutized, and ontologically generalized ‘aesthetic dualism’” (Valkeakari, 79) of white beauty versus alleged black ugliness and prays for blue eyes every night. She has also internalized other people’s views of her as “black, poor, and ugly, the antithesis of all that the society values” (Klotman, 124) and passively accepts her fate.

Many of Pecola’s internalized values have come from her mother, Pauline, who has absorbed the values of white culture as well as the values of (white) Christianity. Before working for a white family and turning to Jesus, Pauline tries to internalize the norms of her own culture: as a younger woman, after migrating from the South, she tries to act like the other Northern black women. She ends up feeling she has failed as the women make fun of her not straightening her hair, not knowing how to make up correctly, or how to speak like a proper black woman (*BE*, 92). Pauline feels that “*Northern colored folk was different too*”, that they were “[d]icty-like”⁵ and “[n]o better than whites for meanness” (*BE*, 91, emphasis in original) so she cannot try to assimilate to their culture, either. Even though she seems to despise white people, failing as a “proper black woman” makes her crave to be more like them. She absorbs information about white people from the cinema, where she thinks “she learned all there was to love and all there was to hate” (*BE*, 95) and creates an image of whiteness in which “[w]hite men [were] taking such good care of they [sic] women, and all they dressed up in big clean houses” (*BE*, 95, emphasis in original). From the movies she internalizes the myths of stable white families, of white respectability, which is again in dualistic opposition with the myth of the black Primitive. According to Pickering, early study of the non-European peoples suggested that “[t]he Primitive was nomadic rather than settled into a territorial state; sexually promiscuous by cultural sanction rather than monogamous and grouped in nuclear family units” (Pickering, 52-53), clearly in opposition with what Pauline absorbs from the cinema.

⁵ The word “dicty”, according to *Oxford English Dictionary*, refers to a “black person regarded as snobbish, pretentious, self-important, or ‘stuck-up’”.

The relationship between Pauline and her husband, Cholly, also resembles the relation between the Primitive Other and the “civilized subject” (Pickering, 52): having internalized the dualism of white Christianity, Pauline sees Cholly as the antithesis of her own righteousness. Without Cholly’s sins, Pauline’s godliness would make less sense: “If Cholly had stopped drinking, she would never have forgiven Jesus. She needed Cholly’s sins desperately. The lower he sank, the wilder and more irresponsible he became, the more splendid she and her task became. In the name of Jesus” (*BE*, 99).

Pauline’s “task” of being a good Christian and internalizing the white values reaches its climax when she starts working for a white family, the Fishers. She escapes her African American heritage by imitating white people and finds “beauty, order, cleanliness, and praise” (*BE*, 99) in the Fisher household. The family offers a contrast to Pauline’s own poor house, which she quits taking care of, and represents an alternative reality in which she feels safe. The safety comes from an illusion of order: “Here she could arrange things, clean things, line things up in neat rows” (*ibid.*). She feels content with her stereotypical role as Polly the maid: “She became what is known as an ideal servant, for such a role filled practically all of her needs” (98). Having internalized the “Western theological tradition of either-or thinking” (Alexander, 294) she cannot see anything good in her own family anymore or bad about the Fishers. Pauline holds, in strongly Christianized terms, “Cholly as a model of sin and failure, she [bears] him like a crown of thorns, and her children like a cross” (*BE*, 98). In the Fisher household, on the other hand, “[p]ower, praise, and luxury [are] hers” (99). She creates motherly feelings towards the daughter of the Fisher family, whereas she does not even realize that her own daughter has been raped by Cholly. She hushes and soothes the little Fisher girl when she is frightened by Pecola and the MacTeer girls (85), while she beats into Pecola “a fear of growing up, fear of other people, fear of life” (100). Pauline’s own culture as well as her family becomes the Other for her as she falls into the stereotype of “the ideal servant” (99). The internalization of white values and dualistic thinking leads her to become estranged from her cultural heritage and this is what happens to every character that tries to resist his or her own true self in *The Bluest Eye*.

Geraldine, as an example of the “sugar-brown Mobile girls” (*BE*, 64), has internalized a wide set of norms and values from the white culture. She resists her cultural heritage by leaning mainly on myths of white order and cleanliness. She and the other people of the mixed-race community struggle not to be like black people and, in Valkeakari’s words, “[l]iving in a cultural environment that scorns and ridicules blackness, they have learned to survive by imitating whiteness” (83). This is illustrated in Geraldine seeing Pecola and other “negroes” as people with “[h]air uncombed, dresses falling apart, shoes untied and caked with dirt” (*BE*, 72), whereas she makes sure that her son wears white shirts and blue trousers and has hair “cut as close to his scalp as possible to avoid any suggestion of wool” (67-68). Like every other mixed-race woman in Lorain, she herself has “white blouses starched, blue skirts almost purple from ironing” (64). The women try to educate themselves how to be white in order to serve their white husbands:

They go to land-grant colleges, normal schools, and learn how to do the white man’s work with refinement: home economics to prepare his food; teacher education to instruct black children in obedience; music to soothe the weary master and entertain his blunted soul. (64)

By imitating whiteness and still not becoming white, they rid themselves of their cultural heritage yet ironically behave almost like slaves to their weary “masters”.

The way Geraldine sees the white world she wants to be a part of is well represented by the Dick-and-Jane reader excerpt with which Morrison opens her novel, discussed by Phyllis R. Klotman in “Dick-And-Jane and Shirley Temple Sensibility in *The Bluest Eye*” (1979). The reader, Klotman suggests, stands for the family: “middle-class, secure, suburban and white, replete with dog, cat, non-working mother and leisure-time father” (123), i.e. the stereotypical representation of the perfect, white, nuclear family. Slightly altered structurally (the spacing removed, for example), the Dick-and-Jane reader relates to every part of the novel, representing to Klotman the lifestyles of the different families in the story (*ibid.*). In my reading, the gradual fragmentation of the Dick-and-Jane reader alludes to the gradual understanding that the novel offers of the destructiveness of internalizing such invalid images of life, as well as Pecola’s gradual destruction.

Timothy B. Powell suggests in “Toni Morrison: The Struggle to Depict the Black Figure on the White Page” (1990) that the reader symbolizes “how white values and standards are woven into the very texture of the fabric of American life” (749). One of these values is obviously Christianity, and the stereotypical image of the white nuclear family might also be seen as including the notion of being a “good Christian”.

Christianity is one of the strongest sets of norms and values that the characters internalize in *The Bluest Eye*. For example, everything in Geraldine’s behaviour implies that she wants to be a good (white) Christian. She is one of the girls who “do not drink, smoke, or swear, and [...] still call sex ‘nookey’” (*BE*, 64). This in line with Pauline’s vision of a virtuous person: “She was an active church woman, did not drink, smoke, or carouse” (100). The views of the two women are obviously internalized from the dualistic world of the Christian church, where “shouting [i]s frowned upon” (99). In addition to cleanliness, Christianity, with its strong dualistic mode, seems to be the key to get as close to whiteness as possible for these characters. The novel is highly based on Christological narrative, discussed by Valkeakari in relation to the notion of the scapegoat, which will be discussed next.

2.5 Scapegoating: Exorcising Self-Contempt

As noted earlier, scapegoating in *The Bluest Eye* is twofold: having internalized the values of the white culture, the people of the community turn Pecola into a scapegoat, but they are only projecting onto her their own experiences of discrimination. Their victimization of Pecola originates from the oppression they have themselves been subjected to, and this leads to “*chains of victimization*” (Valkeakari, 81, emphasis in original). Valkeakari notes, “[u]nable to confront the *prima causa* of their frustrating social condition, Morrison’s black Lorainites tragically make a member of their own community a vicarious sufferer” (ibid., emphasis in original). Centuries of discrimination is a burden too hard to handle for them, but at the same time they fall

prey to the very same structures of action which have only damaging consequences for both the victim and the people who contribute to the victimization.

The chains of victimization are most apparent in a scene where a group of black boys mock Pecola. They bully her with a verse “Black e mo. Black e mo. Yadaddsleepsnekked. Black e mo black e mo ya dadd sleeps nekked. Black e mo . . .” (*BE*, 50), referring to Pecola’s blackness and her father’s supposed sleeping with no clothes. Claudia acknowledges that the reason for this intraracial victimization lies in the disgust of the scapegoaters with themselves:

It was their contempt for their own blackness that gave the first insult its teeth. They seemed to have taken all of their smoothly cultivated ignorance, their exquisitely learned self-hatred, their elaborately designed hopelessness and sucked it all up into a fiery cone of scorn that had burned for ages in the hollows of their minds—cooled—and spilled over lips of outrage, consuming whatever was in its path. (*BE*, 50)

The discrimination their ancestors have been subjected to for centuries have symbolically produced a “fiery cone of scorn”, now ready to be projected onto anybody. The action is inconsistent since the “mob” also consists of black people. Morrison ironically presents the boys’ disgust with themselves as something they have produced themselves. In addition, phrases such as “smoothly cultivated”, “exquisitely learned”, and “elaborately designed” might be associated more with (white) high culture than young black boys “[h]eady with the smell of their own musk” (*BE*, 50). Connected to the words “ignorance”, “self-hatred”, and “hopelessness”, more likely to be associated with the bullies, they serve in underlining the inconsistency of the actions of the boys. Of course, it becomes clear that such feelings are not something that one has designed or cultivated or can control but, quite the contrary, they arise from the racial frustration caused by hundreds of years of discrimination and internalizing the oppressors’ values.

This scene also introduces the ritual aspect of scapegoating. The boys dance “a macabre ballet” around Pecola who they were “prepared to sacrifice to the flaming pit” (*BE*, 50).

They resemble some ancient tribespeople getting ready to project their sins onto Pecola in order to purify themselves and drive the victim away. The ritual is interrupted as Frieda stops them by defending Pecola, but the scene is important because it underscores the racial and social hierarchies in the novel. The boys are represented as primitives with their enchantment and “macabre ballet”, and still Pecola is below them in the hierarchy of the community. Even the myth of the primitive cannot save her from her fate.

The notion of scapegoating also relies on cultural myths related to blackness and whiteness, mainly on the myth of black impurity versus white purity. Scapegoating is traditionally seen as a purification ritual but here the alleged uncleanliness of the scapegoaters is in their blackness, which they symbolically put on Pecola’s shoulders for her to carry as a burden (Valkeakari, 82). They clean themselves on Pecola and are “so beautiful [standing] astride her ugliness” (*BE*, 163). The clichéd idiom “cleanliness is next to godliness” is alluded to here: if impurity is connected to blackness, and cleanliness really next to godliness, this makes white people closer to God. By cleaning themselves on Pecola, the other black characters could be closer to being white and then, by implication, closer to God.

Pecola’s role as an impure scapegoat is seen in the scene where she gets her first period. As Valkeakari decodes the Christological allusions in the narrative of *The Bluest Eye*, she notes that “[t]he Levitical regulations of menstruating women’s social conduct ultimately addresses cleanliness and uncleanliness” (89). When Pecola starts bleeding, a panic-stricken scene starts where the main ambition for the characters involved is to make Pecola clean, as well as not become contaminated with her blood themselves. Frieda even tells Claudia to bury the “little-girl-gone-to-woman pants” (*BE*, 23). Here Morrison ironically uses the strategy of fetishization, which to her is “often used to assert the categorical absolutism of civilization and savagery” (*Playing*, 68). Here “the pollution of African blood and sex” (*ibid.*) seems to be frightening to people that are also black. As the girls lie in bed next to each other on the day Pecola gets her first period, Claudia feels the boundary between them. She also thinks that “[Pecola], herself, felt the *distance*, but refused to *lord* it over us” (*BE*, 23, my emphasis). Here, Pecola is

not simply constructed as the Other, the boundary between the girls is something sacred (ibid.) and it might allude to the distance that is felt between Christ and others, highlighting Pecola's turning into the ultimate scapegoat. This is also alluded to with the verb choice "lord". The fact that Pecola passively refuses to use perhaps her only chance to be above others, refusing to lord it over Claudia and Frieda, might be the deciding factor of her fate.

Pecola stands for a black Christ in many ways but her crucifixion becomes a failure for everybody. To Valkeakari, she represents an "*inverted* Christ figure" (99, emphasis in original). She notes that "Claudia and Frieda MacTeer's sympathetic embrace of the powerless and vulnerable Pecola ironically reverses the familiar image of Jesus welcoming the children: here, the two little MacTeer sisters do their best to energetically assist the helpless 'Christ'" (91). This is well shown in the scene of Pecola's menstruation, as well as in the scene where she gets bullied by the crowd of boys. The help of other children does not save Pecola from her fate, however: she does not achieve a second coming and thus cannot save the community from the sin of blackness. The roles are again reversed as Claudia says that they could no longer even look at Pecola after her baby died because they feel they had failed her (*BE*, 162). The ritual of scapegoating comes to its finale as the community rejects Pecola for good: "So we avoided Pecola Breedlove—forever" (ibid.).

Another scene which reflects the ritual of scapegoating is Pecola's visit to Geraldine's house. To Valkeakari, it is two-staged, including both the projection of sin and the banishment: Pecola first takes the blame for killing Geraldine's cat, and then she is driven off from "the midst of the 'righteous'" (Valkeakari, 81). The scapegoating ritual is started by Geraldine's son, Junior, who tricks Pecola into coming into his house and then starts bullying her. He throws their black cat into Pecola's face, figuratively throwing his internalized racial self-hatred at Pecola in order to purify himself. In this disturbing scene, the strength of Pecola's emotions can be felt on the phonetic level: "She sucked in her breath in *f*ear and surprise and *f*elt *f*ur in her mouth" (*BE*, 70, my emphasis). The use of alliteration here foregrounds the choking effect that the cat thrown in Pecola's face causes. Geraldine's view of her own heritage is represented to

me by her black cat that has blue eyes: she sees herself as no longer black, or as Fanon puts it: “Not yet white, no longer wholly black, I was damned” (138). To Geraldine, only having blue eyes wouldn’t be enough, but to Pecola, the cat’s “blue eyes [signify] the desired goal of ‘whiteness’ (or, ultimately, lovability)” (Valkeakari, 85). Although she can be considered black herself, Geraldine views Pecola as the incarnation of blackness and, having put on Pecola the rest of her and her son’s “sin” of blackness, throws her out of her house: “You nasty little black bitch. Get out of my house” (*BE*, 72).

The scapegoating rite includes the banishment of the scapegoat in the same way the Other is cast out to the periphery, or the margins of society; the scapegoat is driven off and rejected. After cleaning themselves on Pecola, the people in the community watch the scapegoat fall into madness, so she is symbolically driven off, without the capability of living by the norms of white society internalized by the community. And she passively accepts it. Morrison has noted in an interview with Bettye J. Parker that in Pecola, she created “a passive kind of person and the people around her who create the kind of situation that she is in” (*Sturdy Black Bridges*, 252). Even Pecola’s inability to defend herself is turned against herself by the community: “And she let us, and thereby deserved our contempt” (*BE*, 163). René Girard notes in *The Scapegoat* (1986) that it is indeed the power of dualism that makes the victims unable to stand for themselves: “The polarization exerts such a constraint on those polarized that the victims cannot prove their innocence” (40).

All of the three notions discussed here, othering, internalization, and scapegoating work in a similar way. They work as romantic love and physical beauty are said to work in *The Bluest Eye*: “Both originated in envy, thrived in insecurity, and ended in disillusion” (95). In this novel, all of these practices are based on powerful social mythologies that for their part rely on dualistic thinking patterns. Dualism, then, is represented as a Western concept, and the novel obviously warns against weighing “the world with black-and-white scales” (Alexander, 301). All of the people involved in these practices seem to end up with a split identity or no identity at all, whereas the practice itself has led to no benefit for the subject or the object. In addition to showing

that racism benefits no one, Claudia's narrative seems to suggest that a victim is always a victim, an object. Whoever performs the discriminatory behaviour, the structures are the same:

Love is never any better than the lover. Wicked people love wickedly, violent people love violently, weak people love weakly, stupid people love stupidly, but the love of a free man is never safe. There is no gift for the beloved. The lover alone possesses his gift of love. The loved one is shorn, neutralized, frozen in the glare of the lover's inward eye. (*BE*, 163)

Although strongly criticizing myths and dualistic thinking, Morrison reminds readers that the subject/object dichotomy is real and a resistant one. This is important because, according to Girard, anyone as a part of a community can be a victimizer, or a "persecutor": "Those who make up the crowd are always potential persecutors, for they dream of purging the community of the impure elements that corrupt it, the traitors who undermine it" (*The Scapegoat*, 16).

2.6 Conclusions

In *The Bluest Eye* Toni Morrison has obviously tried to present her audience with some of the consequences that racism can bring about. It is true that racism and discriminatory practices such as othering or scapegoating hurt not only the objects of prejudice but also those who perpetuate such behaviour. In *The Bluest Eye*, the discriminatory practices are set forth by people that are themselves the victims or the progeny of victims of racial discrimination. The behavioural structures are still the same: they are learned from generation to generation and oppressor by oppressor unless the chains of victimization are cut.

Morrison's aim in this novel is to translate the workings of racist behaviour, and to encourage awareness of its structures in order to make a change. I agree with Tuire

Valkeakari's suggestion that Morrison has a message for both white and black readers. She notes that Claudia's narrative "warns black audiences against racial self-loathing and seeks to support African American self-esteem" (Valkeakari, 99), which is a major aim of Morrison's production. For white readers, of course, the novel offers views on the causes and consequences of anti-black racism, as well as an opportunity to see how it is constructed. This may lead to the examining of one's own patterns of stereotypical thinking, highlighted in "Recitatif", which will be discussed in the next chapter.

3. “From a Whole Other Race”: Deconstructing Stereotypes in “Recitatif”

3.1 Introduction

In *Playing in the Dark*, Morrison writes:

My vulnerability would lie in romanticizing blackness rather than demonizing it; vilifying whiteness rather than reifying it. The kind of work I have always wanted to do requires me to learn how to maneuver ways to free up the language from its sometimes sinister, frequently lazy, almost always predictable employment of racially informed and determined chains. (xi)

In her only short story, “Recitatif” (1983), written nine years before *Playing in the Dark*, Toni Morrison had already started working on this mission. “Recitatif” continues the discussion on the issues started in *The Bluest Eye*: the myths concerning blackness and whiteness, and the consequences of racial discrimination partly caused by sustaining these myths in society. As I made clear in the earlier chapter, *The Bluest Eye* shows how stereotypes are socially and psychologically constructed, and how the age-old myths of blackness and whiteness can be internalized by the victims of those myths and create discrimination in a quite homogeneous community. “Recitatif” takes a step further in order to show how literature can challenge stereotypes based on those myths and perhaps even help to deconstruct them.

“Recitatif” tells a story of two girls, Twyla and Roberta, both abandoned by their caretakers. They first meet in an orphanage where they spend four months together, and then meet four times as adults in different places and situations in life. This short story is typical of Morrison’s writing in that it searches for ways to both depict and subvert racial discrimination and its consequences. In *Playing in the Dark*, Morrison argues that,

“[t]he act of enforcing racelessness in literary discourse is itself a racial act” (46) and what makes “Recitatif” unique is indeed that the narrative never reveals which of the main characters is black and which white, even though it makes it clear that one of them is of African-American descent and the other is white. The ethnic identities of the other characters remain a mystery as well, and the speculation around the skin colour of Twyla and Roberta, as well as Maggie, a mute kitchen woman in the orphanage, forms the thematic core of the narrative in addition to the critical conversation concerning the short story. Even though Morrison has excised all racial codes that would directly link either of the main characters to a particular race, the mass of more relativistic codes in the narrative can help in trying to discover the characters’ racial identities.

However, it is not finding out the truth about the characters’ races that is important in reading this short story, but the fact that “Recitatif” shows that racial stereotyping is based on illusion, since however much racial coding the short story contains, one can never be certain about the reality of the story. By giving these clues, without conclusion, Morrison inverts and subverts traditional stereotypes and myths concerning blackness and whiteness. In this way, we are shown “[h]ow ‘literary whiteness’ and ‘literary blackness’ [is] made, and what is the consequence of that construction” (*Playing*, xii). In this chapter, I intend to show how the myths of blackness and whiteness, already introduced in the chapter on *The Bluest Eye*, work in this story and how they are inverted and thus possibly subverted by the author in order to raise consciousness about the workings of racial stereotyping and racism both in language and society. In this way, “Recitatif” is an example of how literature can help in deconstructing racial stereotypes.

3.2 Introduction to Secondary Sources

Given that “Recitatif” is a short story by a highly recognized author, it has attracted a remarkably small amount of attention from critics. The reasons for this might concern the lower appreciation of the short story as a genre, as well as the radical nature of the anthology it was originally published in: *Confirmation: An Anthology of African*

American Women, edited by Amiri Baraka and Amina Baraka⁶ (Goldstein-Shirley, 97)⁷. The few studies on “Recitatif” largely concentrate on the uncertain ethnic identities of the two main characters, though since male characters are omitted from it, the story would also call for feminist criticism. “Recitatif” is, moreover, a unique story, which gives ground for the discussion of racism and stereotypes from a point of view that is not only significant but also rare.⁸ Morrison’s strategy of leaving the question of the ethnic identities of the characters unanswered links the short story more to its historical background and social setting, since the reader is forced to find the answer from other things than mere clues concerning the characters’ appearances.

However, perhaps because “Recitatif” leaves more questions unanswered than other works by Morrison, it seems that studying this story would demand that we consider the role of the reader. The role of the reader’s own social and ethnic background is emphasized in the production of meaning, as one inevitably only recognizes stereotypes that one is familiar with and leans more on one’s own experiences of racial stereotyping in subjective interpretation. Indeed, Joep Leerssen argues, “[n]ational stereotyping takes shape not just in the binary polarity between texts-that-represent and nations-that-are-represented but also in the triangular situation of texts, represented nations, and an audience’s *Erwartungshorizont* [the horizon of expectations]” (281, emphasis in original). The reader’s own preconceptions shape the individual interpretations of “Recitatif”, and both David Goldstein-Shirley and Howard Sklar have made strong cases for this. Goldstein-Shirley’s main argument is that the story is left to the reader to conclude, while Sklar concentrates on reader sympathy especially in relation to the character of Maggie. I will now briefly introduce a number of interpretations of “Recitatif” and then move on to my own reading of the story.

⁶ Amiri Baraka is a well-known black radical writer, formerly known as LeRoi Jones. Amina Baraka, formerly known as Sylvia Robinson, was married to him in 1966.

⁷ Goldstein-Shirley argued in 1999 that ““Recitatif” has received almost no scholarly attention”, although a few studies have been written since then.

⁸ Similar examples could be works with “tragic mulatta” figures in them, where the ethnic identities of the protagonists are ambiguous due to their hidden mixed-race descent. An example of this is the protagonist in Pauline Hopkins’ *Hagar’s Daughter* (1901-1902).

In his article, “Race/[Gender] Toni Morrison’s ‘Recitatif’” (1999), David Goldstein-Shirley concentrates on the involvement of the reader in “Morrison’s grand project of deconstructing race and racism” (97). His article is relevant for the purposes of this thesis for it opens up points concerning the possible ethnic identities of the protagonists in “Recitatif”, offering details which provide a fuller understanding of the story. Goldstein-Shirley bases his conclusions on four “tactics” that Morrison uses to

further [the story’s] strategy of inducing the reader’s involvement in its thematic goal: (1) bracketing—that is, setting aside—gender in the text; (2) ‘staging’ within the text the ‘real world’ debate about school desegregation and mandatory busing; (3) modeling a particularly African-American storytelling style; and (4) using cleverly ambiguous racial codes in its descriptions of the main characters. (97)

Even though my main interest is the last point, it is worth taking the other three into account while exploring the racial coding in the story, since the tactics are somewhat interdependent.

In order to trace the importance of Morrison’s use of African American storytelling tradition, Goldstein-Shirley applies Robert Stepto’s model of African American narratives to “Recitatif”. He concludes that, as “Recitatif” is a framed tale, typical of African American narratives, it should include a novice teller and a master teller. Twyla could be seen as the novice teller, because she tells Roberta’s story, who would then be the master teller. Even though it might be likely for some readers that Twyla as the narrator would be black, Roberta is actually the master storyteller and therefore, in keeping with the tradition, black (103). Goldstein-Shirley also suggests that certain aspects of the social setting of Roberta and Twyla’s story give clues to their possible ethnic identities. To him this kind of “staging” can be seen, for example, in the part where the girls picket for and against mandatory bussing (97), which took place mainly in the 70’s and 80’s in order to racially desegregate schools. He suggests, though, that the author is unbiased in the conflict, leaving the ethnic identities of the protagonists for the reader to solve.

To Goldstein-Shirley, these methods, in addition to the bracketing of gender, contribute “to the story’s strategy of recruiting the reader in [the story’s] mission to deconstruct racism” (101), this strategy “distinguish[ing] not only ‘Recitatif,’ but all of Morrison’s work” (108). Even though the role of the reader is not my primary focus, Goldstein-Shirley’s observations on it help in showing how the story deconstructs stereotypes and consequently, racism. He argues, for example, that

[b]y coupling ‘people’ and ‘language,’ Morrison makes clear that her deconstruction of racial codes in the language of her works, most self-consciously in ‘Recitatif,’ is, to her, akin to deconstructing racism. Her writing is the means by which she challenges the racism embedded in language and in society. (104)

In addition to emphasizing the reader’s role in the deconstructing of the racial codes, Goldstein-Shirley suggests that “the success of the story as a deconstructor of racism *in the reader’s mind* depends” on “reading the debate between Twyla and Roberta about the incident with Maggie” (105, emphasis in original). Maggie’s role will be explored in section 3.4. and it has been also discussed by Howard Sklar.

Sklar also concentrates on the role of the reader in his article “‘What the Hell Happened to Maggie?’ The Sympathetic Effects of Race- and Disability-Related Stereotypes in Toni Morrison’s ‘Recitatif’” (Forthcoming, summer 2011). He suggests that “however much the reader may be inclined to assign the racial identities of the characters based on the limited impressions provided by the beginning of the story, the narrative consistently confounds such inclinations by reversing impressions and expectations” (13), a theme I will develop further in this chapter. Sklar’s work has influenced my own study particularly because of his insights concerning the role of Maggie. He notes that the “story’s ethical center lies in the changes in the way that the two girls/women perceive Maggie” (23), and that Maggie becomes “the most *visible* representation of blackness” (ibid., emphasis in original) once she is temporarily identified as black, which neither Twyla nor Roberta is. To Sklar, “in much the same way that Morrison

plays with readers' often stereotypical perceptions of the racial identities of her characters, she presents Maggie in ways that rely on stereotype and suggestion" (1). In his article, Sklar discusses shifts in emotions of the two girls towards each other, as also affecting the way the reader perceives them (19). He sees their growing sympathy for Maggie as "propel[ing] them towards a less defensive stance towards each other" (1) and developing Maggie "beyond the stereotypes with which she is introduced" (ibid.). In my reading, the fact that Twyla and Roberta argue about the ethnicity of Maggie through the whole story, never coming to a conclusion about it, gives the reader more clues to the protagonists' possible racial identities rather than explaining the identity of Maggie as such. However, even though she is a character almost entirely based on stereotype, Maggie fails to give the reader any watertight evidence of the three characters' racial identities. Consequently, the excessive use of stereotypical characterization leads only to challenging the supposed power of stereotyping.

It is important to note here that Maggie is characterized as being disabled in some way, and can be seen as a kind of "narrative prosthesis" (a term used by David T. Mitchell and Sharon Snyder in "Narrative Prosthesis and the Materiality of Metaphor", 2002), which is characterized as "the perpetual discursive dependency on disability" (15-16). Mitchell explains this further by noting that "[t]he coinage of the phrase 'narrative prosthesis' argues that disability has been used throughout history as a crutch on which literary narratives lean for their representational power, disruptive potentiality, and social critique" (17). Thus, the function of disabled characters in literature parallels the use of African American characters in the literature of white canon. In this way, Maggie's disability symbolizes the African American presence as the stereotypical Other.

Sklar also makes observations on the clues that might lead readers to make conclusions regarding the ethnic identities of the protagonists. In another article, "Sympathy for the Other: The Emotional Effects of Racial Ambiguity in Toni Morrison's 'Recitatif'" (2005), he notes that "[o]ne of the immediate consequences of this ambiguity is that it subverts the reader's identification with either character based on race" (6). While agreeing with this point, I shall also argue that the strategy of offering highly ambiguous

stereotypes is used by the author to subvert stereotypes as such. In his articles, Sklar concentrates on Maggie, who for him “comes to symbolize the subject position of African Americans generally” (“What the Hell”, 23). Maggie does indeed represent the more traditional subject position of African Americans, a kind of “surrogate black bod[y]” (*Playing*, 26) that Morrison discusses in her theoretical work. In this way, Maggie might be seen as the most important character in the story.

Elizabeth Abel also takes a position which relies on the supposition that the role of the reader is highly significant in looking at “Recitatif”. In her article “Black Writing, White Reading: Race and the Politics of Feminist Interpretation” (1993) she notes that “[b]y forcing us to construct racial categories from highly ambiguous social cues, ‘Recitatif’ elicits and exposes the unarticulated racial codes that operate at the boundaries of consciousness” (472). In my reading, Morrison does this in order to help deconstruct these linguistic codes. Abel shows how Roberta can be seen as African American and argues that Maggie is a “figure of racial undecidability” (472). Maggie’s role becomes the most important clue in deciding the protagonists’ racial identities: “‘Recitatif’ ends with parallel recognitions by Twyla and Roberta that each perceived the mute Maggie as her own unresponsive, rejecting mother, and therefore hated and wanted to harm her” (495). This clue, overlooked by both Goldstein-Shirley and Sklar, is supported by Helene Adams Androne’s suggestion in “Revised Memories and Colliding Identities: Absence and Presence in Toni Morrison’s ‘Recitatif’ and Viramontes’s ‘Tears on My Pillow’” (2007): “Twyla and Roberta realize that Maggie’s identity as powerless and stigmatized intersects with their mothers’ identities and their own identities as outcasts” (141). The fact that Twyla and Roberta link their own experiences with Maggie again helps to locate her role as a narrative prosthesis, she being the key evidence to the mystery of Twyla and Roberta’s identities. This is also significant to the reader’s interpretation of them, as Abel puts it, “[t]he two girls’ readings of Maggie become in turn clues for our readings of them, readings that emanate similarly from our own cultural locations” (472).

Homi K. Bhabha notes in his preface to *Black Skin, White Masks* that “the question of identification is never an affirmation of a pre-given identity, never a self-fulfilling

prophecy — it is always the production of an ‘image’ of identity and the transformation of the subject in assuming that image” (xvi). In the next section, I will turn to the myths that construct those images of identity in “Recitatif” and how stereotypical images are inverted in order to subvert them.

3.3 “Like Salt and Pepper”: Subverting Mythologies

Joep Leerssen states that “it should be obvious that one cannot hypostatize all the various possible reactions and scheme activations triggered by a given text into an ideal-typical, generalized reader (‘the’ Reader, with a capital *R*)” (287, emphasis in original). I have now introduced several studies that accentuate the role of the reader. While I agree that considering the possible reactions among readers is significant in reading “Recitatif”, it is also true that one cannot be certain how this particular story affects readers in general or if reading this story can contribute to the actual production of meaning. What is important here is to see how racial stereotypes work in this story, or more specifically, how they are *worked on* in order to both raise consciousness of them and try to prove them powerless and unnecessary. While the use of stereotypical imagery and allusions to the historical setting of the story’s five scenes is extensive in “Recitatif”, I will only use examples that are most relevant for this thesis. I will then go on to analyze how traditional imagery of blackness and whiteness is used in “Recitatif” and how the images are inverted, perhaps to be eventually subverted. In section 3.4., I will turn to considering the role of Maggie in the light of the imagery discussed below.

Throughout the story, the reader is given different sets of clues that seem to be there to help decide the possible ethnic identities of Twyla and Roberta. It is made clear from the very beginning of the story that the girls are from different races, since it is immediately after moving to the orphanage that the story’s narrator, Twyla, says that “it was something else to be stuck in a strange place with a girl from a whole other race”

(“Recitatif”⁹, 203). That one of the protagonists is black and the other white becomes clear as Twyla reports that the other children in the orphanage used to call them “salt and pepper” (RE, 204), and that is also what they “looked like” (ibid.). These are actually the only clues that one can be certain of, the others being as ambivalent and ambiguous as stereotypes are, as well as the myths they are based on.

Even though Morrison has stated that in “Recitatif” all racial codes are actually removed (*Playing*, xi), there are a number of clues that can be seen as racial codes. These include the economic situations or classes of the girls in different stages of life, their behaviour in the racial strife over mandatory bussing, and the narrative structure (e.g. the significance of the race of the narrator, discussed by Goldstein-Shirley and Sklar). Also, minor details exist that are not taken into account here, for example the significance of the characters’ names, discussed by Abel (476). I will now explore my main interest, the ambiguous racial coding that makes it impossible to locate the ethnic identities of the characters but that rather raises consciousness of stereotypical thinking patterns.

While the skin colours of Twyla and Roberta are not straightforwardly discussed in “Recitatif”, several other physical or appearance-related clues are given. For example, Roberta reminds Twyla that she used to curl her hair during their stay in the shelter (RE, 221). Here the stereotype seems to be a simple one: one easily concludes that since African American hair is always already curly, Roberta would be black. However, this presumption is challenged by the fact that on the day their mothers come to visit them in the orphanage, they “[curl] each other’s hair” (RE, 207). From a stereotypical point of view, rather than curling, the Afro-American hair would need braiding or straightening in order to be in line with white American beauty standards. Howard Sklar provides important points concerning hair in “Sympathy for the Other”:

the fact that one character curled the other’s hair should not be taken as evidence, one way or the other, of either character’s

⁹ Henceforth, RE

racial identity, since natural black hair can be curled (in terms of style), and it is also possible that Twyla (or Roberta) had *straightened* hair, as many black girls did during the 60's. Twyla's assertion, in retrospect, that 'I hated your hands in my hair', with its echoes of the resentment that some black people feel towards the apparent desire of some whites to touch black hair, [...] further confuses the question of the characters' identities. (6, emphasis in original)

Thus, the stereotype is subverted without it giving any specific support to either of the possible interpretations.

The implications concerning appearance are quite limited in the story, but there are other physical clues than those that concern exterior features. For example, Twyla remembers her mother having warned her that the people of Roberta's race "never washed their hair and they smelled funny" (RE, 203). Twyla validates Mary's stereotypical notion by saying, "Roberta sure did. Smell funny, I mean" (ibid.). This is clearly a reference to the notion of the alleged uncleanness of blacks, which I discussed in an earlier chapter. It is therefore likely that also in Twyla's mother, Mary's, thoughts, "beauty, order, cleanliness, and praise" (BE, 99) are connected with the white race. This hypothesis is subverted, though, as we meet the mothers of the two girls: Twyla reports her mother having looked cheap and ragged in a "fur jacket with the pocket linings so ripped she had to pull to get her hands out of them" (RE, 208). Roberta's mother, on the other hand, with an enormous cross on her chest and an even larger bible in her hand, looks like the incarnation of order and sanctity. Of course, religiousness might be also historically linked to blacks here, in view of, for example, W.E.B. Du Bois's argument from the early 20th century: "all in all, we black men seem the sole oasis of simple faith and reverence in a dusty desert of dollars and smartness" (*The Souls of Black Folk*, 7), even though Mary, whose "idea of supper was popcorn and a can of Yoo-Hoo" (RE, 205) does not truly convince as a valid example of "dollars and smartness". With these ambiguous physical clues it is impossible to deduce the races of the characters, either.

As the girls grow older, there are a few references to the characters' outer appearance. When they meet in the coffee shop where Twyla works several years after staying at the orphanage, Roberta has hair "so big and wild [that Twyla] could hardly see her face" (RE, 211), with a "powder-blue halter and shorts outfit and earrings the size of bracelets" (ibid.). It seems at first reading that Roberta has an Afro haircut, as well as her companions, two men "smothered in head and facial hair" (ibid.). In the 60s', the time frame of this scene, blacks started to emphasize their African features as beautiful, and in order to challenge white beauty norms the slogan "Black is Beautiful" was introduced, "asserting pride in Blackness and Black self-awareness" (*Oxford English Dictionary*). Therefore, the supposed Afro hairstyles of Roberta and her travelling companions could be an example of this movement, making Roberta African American in the story. This hypothesis is supported by the fact that Roberta wears huge ear hoops, yet another stereotypical notion of the appearance of black women¹⁰, also referred to in *Tar Baby*. It is given that Roberta's male companions are of the same race as she is, since she explains her patronizing behaviour towards Twyla later with the fact that they were of different races: "Oh, Twyla, you know how it was in those days: black-white. You know how everything was" (RE, 218).

It is likely for the reader to assume that Roberta and her friends are African American, but a reverse interpretation is also possible. First, it is quite possible that white people might also have had Afro hairstyles at that time. Also, in this scene, Twyla is situated in a serving position: she works in the coffee shop where Roberta is a customer. This might function as a reminder of the servant-role associated with black characters in the literature of the white canon. Also the fact that Roberta is going to see Jimi Hendrix might strengthen the supposition of Roberta as black, even though Elizabeth Abel's point negates this theory: "passion for Jimi Hendrix [...] actually circulated independently of race throughout the counterculture of the 1960s [...] Jimi Hendrix appealed more to white than to black audiences" (474). Thus, these clues concerning the

¹⁰ For example, Elizabeth Abel calls both the Afro hair cut and the hoop earrings "cultural accessories" (474), as signifying Roberta's blackness to her.

characters' physical features provide no real evidence to lean on in trying to uncover the protagonists' racial identities.

Another set of stereotypes concern what I call the emotional/intellectual world of the characters. As I made clear earlier, blackness is often stereotypically linked with intellectual inferiority, but "Recitatif" tells a story of two girls who were both "eight years old and got F's all the time" (204). Therefore, it is not possible to try to draw any conclusions leaning on the racist myth of white intelligence and black stupidity. As the girls grow older, Twyla seems to be more ignorant at least of what is going on in the politics concerning blacks and whites. This might allude to the stereotypical notion of black ignorance, but is again challenged by Abel, who argues that Roberta's awareness of the politics concerning the bussing situation only enlightens her "insider's [i.e. black person's] perspective on power and race relations" (472). The stereotype is again inverted if one looks at how Twyla feels about the bussing situation: "I knew I was supposed to feel something strong, but I didn't know what" (RE, 219-220). To Sklar, "Twyla's ambivalence [...] leaves readers with the impression that she feels no personal stake in the issue; in other words, that she is white" ("Sympathy for the Other", 4). It might also be assumed that racial strife would arouse more strong feelings in a black person, though black apathy on this issue is not impossible. In addition, since Roberta seems to feel more passionately about the conflict, the myth of black passion would put her back in the position of the black character. Even if Twyla is portrayed as ignorant, it cannot be concluded that she is less intelligent than Roberta, who as a child "couldn't read at all and didn't even listen to the teacher", "wasn't good at anything except jacks" (204), and as an adult she acquires her fortune by marrying a rich IBM executive, her main intellectual achievement being learning to read (216). Roberta's ignorance in school, however, seems to be more a matter of choice: Twyla states that whereas Roberta didn't listen to the teacher, the reason for her own low grades was that she "couldn't remember what [she] read or what the teacher said" (204), although it might also be read as a deficiency in her learning skills. However, as they still lived in the shelter, Twyla says she liked Roberta because "she understood things so fast" (204) and is herself intelligent enough to tell and discuss the story to begin with. Although this might refer to the girls' understanding of *each other*, Twyla and Roberta's intellectual

levels are characterized as somewhat equal, so the racist stereotype of black ignorance versus white intelligence cannot be applied here.

Looking at the intellectual levels of the mothers of Twyla and Roberta is yet again an insecure means of finding out the real racial identities of the protagonists. Twyla says her mother, Mary, “simpleminded as ever”, “was still grinning because [she was] not too swift when it [came] to what’s really going on” (RE, 209). This could again refer to the supposed unintelligence of blacks, if the intellectuality of Roberta’s mother was clear. The only thing that is told about her is that she is highly religious and sick and whether she is physically or mentally ill is not made clear. She has been brought up in an institution (226) and is not reported to have any physical handicap, so the latter could apply here. The fact that Roberta’s mother “look[s] down at” Twyla and her mother (209), might signal her feelings of white superiority, but her overall muteness, especially in the light of the theory of the stereotypical Other, could reverse that image. Michael Pickering’s description of the Other can be easily applied to Roberta’s mother: she is both “silenced and spoken for” and “seen but not recognized” (Pickering, 78) when Roberta tries to introduce her to Twyla and Mary (RE, 209) and she does not respond.

A number of additional clues concerning Twyla and Roberta’s mothers could also be discussed here. When the girls’ mothers come to visit them in the orphanage, Roberta’s mother has brought all kinds of food for Roberta to eat while she reads the Bible to her, whereas Mary does not bring anything for her daughter (RE, 210). It could be stereotypically deduced that since Roberta’s mother is clearly better-off, she must be white. In addition, an interesting point is made by Morrison in *Playing in the Dark* about a stereotypical preconception of many whites that “slave women are not mothers; they are ‘naturally dead,’ with no obligations to their offspring or their own parents” (21), which might further emphasize Mary’s blackness for some readers. This image is reversed as one considers the African American family structure. It might be appropriate to take into consideration the fact that slavery took away the father’s roles, such as providing for the family and discipline, but maintained the mother’s. During slavery, the master was the one to provide for and discipline the families but the mother

was still allowed to nurture and take care of the children. While both Twyla and Roberta's fathers are absent in "Recitatif", it is Roberta's mother who still has got the ability to take care of her daughter. Mary, on the other hand, left with no man to provide for her family, seems like she was "the little girl looking for her mother" (RE, 208) instead of Twyla.

The supposition of Roberta's mother as African American is again reversed as one looks at the portrayal of Mary in the same scene, where Mary is clearly linked to the traditional image of the primitive. For example, Mary, who according to Twyla, was "groaning all the while" (RE, 209) during their meeting, had a "ratty fur jacket" (208) on. It is clear that the word "groan" alludes to something here, since it is repeated twice. In my reading it signals the animal-like nature of Mary, which consequently might turn us to consider the primitive, "the conceptual opposite of the civilised subject" (Pickering, 52). Morrison would call this "Metaphysical condensation" which "allows the writer to transform social and historical differences into universal differences" (*Playing*, 68). Additionally, she argues, "equating speech with grunts or other animal sounds closes off the possibility of communication" (ibid.), and this is also an example of Morrison employing stereotypical structures in her work in order to fight them. In addition to Mary's representing the "sexually promiscuous" (Pickering, 52) nature of the primitive groaning in her fur jacket; she is also otherwise portrayed like an animal. Mary is like a wild animal mother who growls at Roberta's mother: "That bitch!" (RE, 209) in order to protect her brood. Indeed, Twyla comments, "I wanted to stay buried in her fur all day" (208). The use of the word "ratty" is significant here because it is used by Morrison in *The Bluest Eye*, linking Cholly with animals: "[Cholly] had joined the animals; was indeed, an old dog, a snake, a ratty nigger (*BE*, 12). This intertextual link is significant because it clearly emphasizes Mary's portrayal as an animal, as the stereotypical primitive, and consequently encourages the racist mind to see her as black.

Looking at how the characters see each other in different scenes might also help in defining the characters. It is clear that Twyla feels inferior to Roberta. Traditionally, this might project the "Negro's" alleged inferiority, described by Frantz Fanon, "[o]ut of the blackest part of my soul, across the zebra striping of my mind, surges this desire to be

suddenly *white*. I wish to be acknowledged not as *black* but as *white*” (*Black Skin*, 63, emphasis in original). It is Twyla’s subservient attitude towards Roberta that might signal her blackness in the face of the white superiority that Roberta represents. Then again, it might mean just the opposite, as Elizabeth Abel notes, “Twyla’s sense of social and physical inadequacy vis-à-vis Roberta, like her representation of her mother’s inferiority to Roberta’s, signalled Twyla’s whiteness to me by articulating a white woman’s fantasy [...] about black women’s potency” (473-474). Leerssen’s point that “[o]ver time, as current stereotypes are found inadequate, they are not so much canceled and forgotten as giving rise to their very opposite” (278), becomes clear as it impossible to be absolutely sure which of the theories is accurate. Of course, one cannot overlook the possibility that one of the girls has internalized the beauty aesthetics and other values of the other girl’s race, which would further complicate the interpretation of this story.

Morrison states in *Playing in the Dark*, “[t]he world does not become raceless or will not become unracialized by assertion” (46) and thus we are obliged to return to considering the importance of the reader in determining literary meanings. Since “Recitatif” is packed with stereotypical images of blackness and whiteness, most readers find themselves encountering their own, perhaps unconscious, racially prejudiced thinking patterns. In most readers, reading “Recitatif” awakens an awareness of their own, superficial stereotypical judgements that they cast over the characters. The reason for this is that the text continually deconstructs the often stereotypical hypotheses of readers by undermining them, as exemplified above. In this way the reader becomes conscious of his or her own racial prejudices and stereotyping. This might come as a shock to readers who have considered themselves as unprejudiced before and consequently might try to change the stereotypical thinking patterns that they encounter. Thus, Morrison’s persistent deconstructing of stereotypes in “Recitatif” might help deconstruct them also in society, and here the role of the reader is crucial. As I made clear earlier, an analysis of Maggie’s role in “Recitatif” involves the reader as an important factor in the production of meaning, and I will now present my reading of Maggie’s case.

3.4 The Tertiary Other: The Case of Maggie

Since the evidence of Twyla and Roberta's racial identities is so ambiguous, the narrative demands that we consider the role of Maggie, who is almost completely based on stereotype, both in relation to her alleged disability and African descent. Maggie is a rather one-dimensional character and she works as a kind of metaphor in her prosthesis-like role of shedding some light on the process by which stereotypes are confirmed and reconfirmed in this story. Sklar examines the "introduction of the apparently disabled Maggie and the significance of her disability for the development of readers' sympathy for all three characters" ("What the Hell", 1), concluding that, by the end of the novel, "Morrison subtly expands the depiction of Maggie, amplifying it beyond simple stereotype to the suggestion of consciousness, and thereby induces an element of sympathy for the character" (22). In my view, the fact that Maggie has an impairment of sorts is important, but not particularly for the sake of the disability or disabled people in general; it serves instead a function in the discussion of racial discrimination. Although based on stereotypical notions, Maggie's portrayal fails to give any conclusive evidence, and she could be read as serving as a metaphor for African Americans in general. As stated before, Morrison argues in *Playing in the Dark* that Africanist personae were used by white writers to meditate on things that were fearful to white people, for example (63-64). In my view, Maggie is used here similarly as a surrogate body through which the protagonists reflect their own experiences and consequently the reader can consider his or her relationship with stereotypes. Thus, for the purposes of this thesis, Maggie's role is highly significant.

Maggie is characterized in highly stereotypical terms, the stereotypes concerning mostly her disability, however. In the very beginning of the story we are introduced to a kitchen woman with "legs like parentheses" (RE, 205) who "rocked when she walked" (206) and "couldn't talk" (205). Based on the information given by Twyla, the reader easily makes assumptions on Maggie's situation: in addition to suffering from some kind of physical handicap, Maggie is possibly deaf and mute. She is also reported wearing "a

kid's hat with ear flaps" (206) which to Twyla is stupid "[e]ven for a mute" (ibid.). Here we encounter traditional stereotypes concerning (intellectually) disabled people discussed by Sklar: "the child-like dress, the inability to dress in ways that are age-appropriate, the possibly oversized head (in the event that the hat actually isn't too small, but merely too small for *her*)" ("What the Hell", 21, emphasis in original). The girls try to contact Maggie by calling her names, and whether Maggie is unable to hear or unwilling to respond remains uncertain: "She just rocked on, the chin straps of her baby-boy hat swaying from side to side" (RE, 206). The children make fun of Maggie, and one day this leads to Maggie either falling down or being pushed down in the orphanage orchard. Twyla and Roberta argue about their participation in the incident, and whether Maggie was white or black, throughout the story. The reason why this disabled character is included in "Recitatif" might be explained by David Mitchell's argument that, while the able body might be too ordinary to serve a certain narrative function, "the disabled body becomes a paramount device of characterization" (Mitchell, 29). Indeed, Mitchell argues, "the dependency on disability proves essential to, even the essence of, the story of difference" (ibid.). "Recitatif" is surely concerned with difference, and below I will look at how Maggie's character affects the difference between Twyla and Roberta.

While the truth of the two protagonists' ethnicity is veiled in "Recitatif", Maggie works as a character through which racial discrimination can be discussed. The fact that Maggie is disabled cannot be overlooked, because the stereotypical characterization is based on her supposed disability. However, in addition to her being a disabled character, Maggie's ambiguous skin colour is mentioned and this links her to the study of racial stereotyping. As explained above, in Twyla and Roberta's case it is impossible to decide which of them represents the textual Other, since the implications concerning race are so ambivalent. Consequently, the portrayal of Maggie becomes a suitable way of discussing this concept: Maggie's alleged deafness and muteness clearly embody the silence of the Other, and her unidimensionality echoes the invisibility of the Other. Maggie is silenced: we can only count on other people's testimonies of the state of her disability and we receive no information about her feelings. Her muteness might also reflect her initial inexistence to others, because, as Fanon puts it, "it is implicit that to

speak is to exist absolutely for the other” (17). Maggie possesses what one might call a triple identity, (or triple consciousness, in reference to W.E.B. Du Bois’s ideas of double consciousness): her identity is split between her racial identity, her identity as a disabled person, and her own sense of self. She becomes a scapegoat-like figure as Twyla and Roberta explain their own past through her suffering, waiting until the very end of the story to ask themselves: “What the hell happened to Maggie?” (RE, 227). The racial issues discussed become more apparent as Twyla and Roberta argue about Maggie’s race. In a sense, they recreate their own past at the expense of Maggie’s in the same way that Africanist narrative was “used in the construction of a history and a context for whites by positing history-lessness and context-lessness for blacks” (*Playing*, 53). The truth about whether Maggie is black or white is not fundamentally important; the crucial thing to look at is how Twyla and Roberta view her over the years.

In the first scene, Twyla comments on Maggie’s skin colour. She says Maggie was “sandy-colored” (RE, 206), and it might be appropriate to assume that she is in fact of mixed-race descent. Of course, being mixed-race refers to being black to some people,¹¹ whereas a Caucasian person might have a sandy-coloured complexion, so we cannot come to any watertight conclusions by relying on Twyla’s comment; however, Twyla here foregrounds the race-issue concerning Maggie so that the reader will be alert for future clues. In the third scene, Roberta merely states that Maggie did not fall down in the orchard but was actually pushed down by the big girls living in the orphanage, called by Twyla “the gar girls” (225). Twyla and Roberta continue quarrelling about the incident in the fourth scene, and also about whether Maggie was black or white. Here Roberta insists on Maggie’s being black by stating that Twyla is still “the same little state kid who kicked a poor old black lady when she was down on the ground” (222). Roberta remembers that they had both kicked Maggie when she was on the ground and that she was black, too. Twyla disagrees with Roberta on both accusations, and they call each other liars (*ibid.*). Roberta’s claims puzzle Twyla, and she cannot be sure about the truth. Roberta’s allegation, “You kicked a black lady and you have the nerve to call me

¹¹ E.g., according to the historical “one-drop” rule, “[d]esignating an ideology in which a person is regarded as black if he or she has even the smallest degree of black African ancestry” (*Oxford English Dictionary*).

a bigot” (ibid.), could arguably suggest that Roberta is black because she seems defensive of the fact that Maggie was black and obviously thinks that Twyla committed a bigger crime by kicking Maggie even though they both participated in it. The girls continue mentioning their mothers throughout the story, and the most valuable clues to the girls’ racial identities concern them as much as Maggie.

In the fifth scene, years after the girls are sucked into a fight over school bussing, Twyla is still thinking about Maggie, and still cannot understand why Roberta insisted on her being black. She knows for certain she did not kick her but cannot make up her mind about Maggie’s race. Suddenly the truth dawns on her, and Twyla is sure Roberta is aware of it as well:

Maggie was my dancing mother. Deaf, I thought, and dumb. Nobody inside. Nobody who would hear you if you cried in the night. Nobody who could tell you anything important you could use. Rocking, dancing, swaying as she walked. And when the gar girls pushed her down, and started roughhousing, I knew she wouldn’t scream, couldn’t—just like me—and I was glad about that. (RE, 225)

According to Adams Androne, “Maggie represents the intersection of [the girls’] identities and their desire to revise their pasts to explain their present selves” (137). Maggie reminds Twyla of the relationship with her mother who neglected her because she went “danc[ing] all night” (RE, 203). Maggie’s awkward way of moving reminds Twyla of her mother’s moving, perhaps because she was drunk when she came home from dancing. In Maggie’s deafness and muteness Twyla sees the lack of communication between her and her mother: Mary’s absence and her own inability to ask anybody for help. It could be argued that she cannot see Maggie as black because her mother is white. In this way, Maggie turns into an ultimate surrogate body, her true self entirely invisible, and her primary textual importance being the uncovering of the two protagonists’ identities.

In the last scene, Maggie's role is further uncovered as it becomes clear that, as Abel points out, "Twyla and Roberta [...] each perceived the mute Maggie as her own unresponsive, rejecting mother, and therefore hated and wanted to harm her" (495). Roberta also connects the character of Maggie with her mother's: it might be that Maggie has a similar way of moving as Roberta's mother, who is described by Twyla as "[b]igger than any man" (RE, 209). Also, Roberta's mother is sick (as one might stereotypically conclude that Maggie is, while associating disability with illness) and she is described as never saying anything at all, either (ibid.). Like her mother, and what Roberta fears is her fate as well, Maggie was "brought up in an institution" (226). In this last scene, Roberta is not sure of the kitchen woman's ethnicity, either, and admits that they did not participate in the assaulting of Maggie. However, Roberta's earlier identification of Maggie as black could be explained as being similar to Twyla's: she connects Maggie with her mother so deeply that she cannot see Maggie as an individual. Perhaps because Roberta and her mother are actually black, Roberta remembers Maggie having been black all the time. Only when she has gone through various stages in life can she admit that she is not sure about Maggie's race and starts seeing the kitchen woman as a person with identity and feelings. This is illustrated in the last line of the story: "What the hell happened to Maggie?" (RE, 227), an idea close to what Sklar proposes in "What the Hell Happened to Maggie?". Of course, even Maggie fails to provide any conclusive evidence, and the question of the characters' racial identities remains unanswered.

In order to see "Recitatif" as a story that is concerned with deconstructing stereotypes, it might be valid to take into account the possibility that Maggie did not survive the attack by the big girls in the orphanage. The text alludes to death and killing in many scenes, and considering what Morrison has stated in an interview with Claudia Tate, "[i]f I'm talking about death, you should know to expect it because the omens alert you" (*Black Women Writers at Work*, 1983, 124), it could be argued that Maggie actually died. The "omens" that the story provides are Twyla's statements about her mother: "I could have killed her" (RE, 208, 210) and "All I could think of was that she really needed to be killed" (209), for example. Also her question about Maggie before the accident, "what about if somebody tries to kill her?" (206), seems to foreshadow the fate of the kitchen

woman. Even if it was true that Twyla and Roberta did not involve in the assaulting of Maggie, as Roberta admits later (226), the incident has been very traumatic to them, considering for example Twyla's repetitious dreams of the orchid (205) and the fact that they feel guilty for having "watched and never tried to help her and never called for help" (225). Maggie's possible death in the story, which is also supported by the fact that she is not described as doing anything after the accident, symbolizes in my reading the deconstruction of stereotypes. Initially based on stereotype, little by little she fades away, along with the power of stereotypical imagery in the story. If seen as representing the Africanist presence as a surrogate body, Maggie's death might signal the redundancy of that construction.

3.5 Conclusions

Stereotypes work by being changeable and interchangeable; they can be reinvented, inverted or lie dormant and then come to life again. As Leerssen notes, "[t]hese changes do not occur by falsification. Old images are not abrogated by new developments; they are merely relieved from their duties pro tem. They remain subliminally present in the social discourse and can always be reactivated should the occasion arise" (278). "Recitatif" shows us how those age-old images can be used in literature in such ways that they are not immediately recognized but when they are, they can raise the reader's consciousness of his or her own liability to stereotype. Most importantly, "Recitatif" shows how literature can help deconstruct these stereotypes, and it does this by inverting the images of blackness and whiteness. In addition to the ambiguous racial identities of the two protagonists, a supplementary character, Maggie, serves an important role in this aim.

To return to the title of this thesis, it is worth remembering Morrison's argument that "Africanism is inextricable from the definition of Americanness" (*Playing*, 65). In "Recitatif", Africanism is impossible to locate and the textual Other with which to make sense of one's own self, seems to be lost. Until the last page, Maggie is indeed

considered as the Other by Twyla and Roberta, but the reader is left with a story which seems to provide no securities. It is clear that this is precisely what the author wanted: Morrison says in an interview with Nellie McKay that she would like her books to have the same kind of quality that Jazz music has. She says that Jazz musicians “have the ability to make you want it, and remember the want. That is a part of what I want to put into my books. They will never fully satisfy – never fully” (429). This characteristic feature in Morrison’s writing is notable in all of her work, but the dissatisfaction of readers perhaps reaches its peak in the novel that will be discussed next, *Tar Baby*.

4. One Drop Short: Getting Beyond Stereotypes in *Tar Baby*

4.1 Introduction

Malin Walther Pereira argues in her article, “Toni Morrison’s Work from *The Bluest Eye* to *Jazz*: The Importance of *Tar Baby*” (1997), that Morrison’s fourth novel, *Tar Baby*, is “the least admired, least researched, and least taught of her novels” (72). She explains this by noting that many critics have been unsatisfied by the novel’s lack of conclusion and been frustrated by its refusal to answer questions, which to her signal *Tar Baby*’s function as a “transitional text in Morrison’s oeuvre” (ibid.). James Coleman has, for example, adjudged the novel “a failure” in “The Quest for Wholeness in Toni Morrison’s *Tar Baby*” (1986, 72). In my view, much of *Tar Baby*’s excellence lies in the way it allows readers to make variable interpretations by not making easy assertions. In *Tar Baby*, Morrison provides a story that echoes old myths such as the originally oral Tar Baby story, the myth of Eden, and again, the traditional myths concerning blackness and whiteness. Although written two years before “Recitatif”, I see *Tar Baby* as the final part of a continuum in Toni Morrison’s challenging of stereotypes, having begun in *The Bluest Eye* and continued in “Recitatif”. While persistently deconstructing racial stereotyping, *Tar Baby* presents many of the possibilities for an individual to get beyond stereotypes.

Tar Baby’s action is mostly placed on an island in the Caribbean, Isle des Chevaliers, where the reader encounters stereotypified characters. A house on the island, L’Arbe de la Croix, is inhabited by its owner Valerian, a retired head of a candy factory, and his wife, Margaret, a former beauty queen. Sydney and Ondine are their “first-rate” black servants, whose mixed-race niece, Jadine, is staying with them on the island to figure out her life. Valerian has paid for Jadine’s studies in Paris and with the education Jadine seems to have internalized the values of her white patron instead of those of her uncle and aunt. All the characters seem to have settled for their, apparently well-defined, roles,

including the descendants of African slaves on the island, Gideon, Thérèse, and Alma Estée. The seeming equilibrium is unstabilized when a black American outcast, Son, invades the island and falls in love with Jadine. Son accuses Jadine of rejecting the ideals of African American life, and tries to force her into the image he has of authentic African American women by bringing her to his hometown, Eloë, Florida, which is an all-black community. Having failed in finding a way of living both of them could accept in both New York and Eloë, the lovers split and Jadine returns to Europe while Son vanishes into a myth, apparently becoming one of the legendary spirit horsemen of the island. One way to look at *Tar Baby* is to see it as a story of Jadine's internalization of the values of white society, and fighting the values of "her own people" the black characters continually impose on her, in order to go back to her life as a super model. I shall argue that while in *The Bluest Eye* internalization of the values of another culture led to the loss of one's self, here Jadine has not internalized either the values of white culture, or black culture. Instead, by the end of the novel, she manages to show that she is beyond such notions as skin colour and cultural nationalism.

Basing much of its events and characterization on the traditional Tar Baby story,¹² many critics have studied this novel in its light. It is quite easy to find the equivalents from the earlier story by placing Valerian in the role of Brer Fox, Son in the role of Brer Rabbit, and Jadine as the tar baby. While finding several problems in this reading, I also find readings that claim that Jadine indiscriminately drops her heritage in order to play the white man's pet, inadequate, if not even inaccurate. On the other hand, readings that see Jadine as a hero are problematic as well, since trying to point out heroes and villains expresses a rather dualistic interpretation, which is associated with a more Eurocentric view. However, like most of the early trickster stories of Afro-American culture,¹³ *Tar Baby* is a story of survival. Thus, I would like to present a reading that sees Jadine as a

¹² I will be using the version in one of Joel Chandler Harris' Uncle Remus books here (*The Favorite Uncle Remus: The Wonderful Tar Baby*, 1948, originally 1881). Although a number of (oral) versions of the tale have been found in the folklore of many Native American, Meso-American, and South American tribes, Morrison clearly explores the tale's African roots in *Tar Baby*.

¹³ Robert Bone argues in *Down Home* (1975), that many of the animal fables created by the early Afro-Americans were concerned with the thematics of survival (32-33).

person who is eventually able to live up to her identity as “only the person inside—not American—not black—just [herself]” (*Tar Baby*,¹⁴ 48).

4.2 “Having Sixteen Answers Meant Having None”: Criticism of *Tar Baby*

Although *Tar Baby* has received a relatively small amount of criticism compared to, for example, *The Bluest Eye*, there are several angles from which it might be studied, given that the novel itself provides no ultimate answers. As noted above, *Tar Baby* has been analyzed in the light of the story of Brer Rabbit and Tar Baby, and it is indeed important for the reader to be aware of the story in order to understand one of Morrison’s most complex works. However, like “Recitatif”, the novel seems to resist a simple reading by continually deconstructing and inverting what readers might assume to be the “right” answers to the novel’s questions. In addition to the traditional trickster myth, the readings that I would like to introduce here bring into the conversation the myth of Eden, the tradition of diasporan thought, feminist criticism, as well as views on stereotyping in the novel.

In her article, “Foreign Exotic or Domestic Drudge? The African American Woman in *Quicksand* and *Tar Baby*” (1998), Ann Rayson argues that although Jadine has largely internalized the values of white society, she constantly encounters with the ideals that the black community seem to think would best suit her. In Rayson’s view, *Tar Baby* is a “sad [indictment] of the choices available to African American women” (87): either to accept the role of an exotic in the white man’s world or to give up education and become a “domestic drudge” in order to be authentic. Rayson suggests that Jadine makes a choice of giving up her heritage and remaining an inauthentic black woman in order to survive. Pursuing this reading, Rayson sees Jadine as the tar baby, made by Valerian (Brer Fox) in order to trick Son (Brer Rabbit) (88). She argues that Jadine’s

¹⁴ Henceforth, *TB*

preference to remain the inauthentic tar baby reflects the fact that, in *Tar Baby*, “the conflicts over racial identity are unresolved, with tragic consequences” (99), while “the tragic mulatto remains tragic” (97). I find this reading hard to accept, since to me, “Jadine’s efforts to progress beyond the farmer, the rabbit, and the tar baby” (ibid.) do succeed in many ways and this will be further discussed in section 4.4. Unlike many novels from the Harlem Renaissance, for example, *Tar Baby* lacks real tragedy, so I do not see it valid to consider Jadine as a tragic mulatta as such. However, Rayson’s article provides helpful insights concerning the pigeonholing of Jadine, as well as the other characters. She, for example, is disturbed by Morrison’s seeming association of whiteness with education and blackness with sexuality and authenticity, with no possibility for an individual of having both (98). To me, this is merely an example of Morrison’s employment of common stereotypes in her novels, rather than asserting that “one cannot be educated and be an authentic black person” (ibid.).

Letitia L. Moffitt’s article “Finding the Door: Vision/Revision in Toni Morrison’s *Tar Baby*” (2004) is concerned with how stereotypes are constructed and viewed (and reviewed) in *Tar Baby*, and the consequences of the limited visions with which the characters view themselves and each other (15). Moffitt argues that creating boundaries through stereotypes is a means of defining one’s self for the characters in this novel (ibid.), a development that was also clear in the study of *The Bluest Eye*. Through providing readers multiple, limited viewpoints of the characters, *Tar Baby* “immerses readers in a plurality of these perspectives; by doing so, it insists on a complex vision that renders stereotypes—and the binaries that result from simplistic identification of stereotypes—impossible” (24). In other words, due to the excessive use of stereotypical views, the novel constantly fights stereotyping and is perhaps able to deconstruct them.

Moffitt points out that because of the extensive stereotyping in the novel, many critics have been fixated on trying to point out the “moral center” (17) or the “central—or ‘true’—vision” (13) of the novel. She argues that viewing these characters in the light of these stereotypical categorizations is a “tar-baby-like ‘trap’” (14) created by Morrison, a view I agree with. Thus, trying to identify the most admirable character in the novel leads to nothing but frustration: “Readers who choose to view either Son or Jadine as

the voice of righteousness must experience some uncomfortable moments of conflict in the novel” (16). To avoid the trap, Moffitt argues, requires merging these multiple visions in order for readers to create a full view of the novel and its characters (14). Due to multiple focalizers in the novel, details of the characters’ past lives and consequently also the hidden motives behind their action become clear, and this fact, according to Moffitt, “contribute[s] to the erosion of stereotypical views, if not for the characters within the story, then for the reader of the story” (18). Moffitt argues that the characters’ seeing each other in highly limited terms leads to the pigeonholing of both the object and the subject of stereotyping (16) but once the stereotypes are “revised” by the reader, it might be possible to get beyond them. In order to accomplish this, the reader must take into account context and be flexible in reviewing the characters: “Morrison does not allow simplistic ‘good’ and ‘evil’ terminology to stick; judging these characters is always complex and multilayered” (20).

Lauren Lepow’s article “Paradise Lost and Found: Dualism and Edenic Myth in Toni Morrison’s *Tar Baby*” (1987) deals with dualism in Morrison’s fiction and thus more closely with the “good” and “evil” terminology mentioned by Moffitt. Lepow argues that in her novels, “Morrison [...] suggests that transcending dualism is one ideal, imaginable route beyond our culturally ingrained and religiously sanctioned sexism, racism, and other self-narrowing dogmas” (364) and that in *Tar Baby*, “Morrison’s critique of dualism [...] finds fullest realization” (ibid.). Dualism to Lepow is connected to Christianity (363), and she links *Tar Baby* to the myth of Eden, since they are both “stories about temptation and entrapment, the fall from grace, and redemption” (365). She also connects *Tar Baby* to Milton’s *Paradise Lost* (1667), and shows how Morrison recasts these stories in multiple ways. She shows that the island, as well as the house, L’Arbe de la Croix, can be seen as symbolizing both heaven and hell, and therefore shows “how easily the apparent polarities [...] can overlap and merge” (367). To Lepow, for example, Valerian appears as a god-like creator (ibid.), while Son “strongly evokes the traditional Satan” (370) as both “an intruder in Eden” and as “a temptation to Jadine” (ibid.). Lepow argues that the original sin is represented in the novel as the characters’ dualistic thinking patterns (369), and views Jadine as the novel’s hero because she refuses this (372). The redemption in this novel

would thus be reclaiming “one’s own true nature” (ibid.), accomplished only by Jadine, an idea close to my own argument. I agree with Lepow in that “[r]edemption must involve the discovery or rediscovery that, to be truly meaningful, the voice of authority must come from within; it must not arise from some arbitrary system” (372), that to me is represented in this novel by the essentialist views of black womanhood.

However, noting that, “all things can be their ‘opposites’” (365), Lepow also considers the characters’ roles from different points of view by, for example, viewing Son as both a creator and a redeemer (of Jadine), and Jadine as Satanic (371). Jadine can be compared to Milton’s Satan “[t]rapped in the pitchy swamp” (ibid.) and “tempts Son not because she is Valerian’s creation, but because she is her own” (ibid.). Taking these facets into consideration here allows for multiple viewpoints and challenges dualistic thinking. The most important question *Tar Baby* raises is thus to Lepow: “How far can dualism be transcended?” (365). The question is important for this thesis as well, since getting beyond stereotypes requires the transcending of dualism.

Like Moffitt, Lepow seems to think that it is possible for readers to have a full view of the novel: “Morrison’s richly allusive prose effects the superimposition of one half of our dualistic world view upon the other. Thus, we begin to achieve an integrated perspective, not only of setting but also of characters” (367). Although I do not agree with seeing Jadine as a hero as such, Lepow’s argument that Jadine “refuses to internalize an external image – either black or white – as a definition of self” (373) is the ground for my own study. In contrast with Rayson’s views, Lepow points out that Jadine “shows potential for continued development and eventual self-redemption” (376) and can be seen as created by Morrison to urge us to “transcend dualism and external authority, to be our own justification” (ibid.). Although *Tar Baby* leaves the question of transcending dualism open, Lepow admits that “the possibility of self-redemption flavors its conclusion” (365).

Before analyzing the dualistic and stereotypical roles the other characters impose on Jadine, and her possible self-redemption, one issue must be considered: the fact that the

action primarily takes place in the Caribbean. Evelyn Hawthorne sees *Tar Baby* as “a genre work—a Diasporean novel which forsakes boundaries to transcend cultural insularity and promote an inclusive vision of African peoples and cultures” (100) in her article “On Gaining the Double-Vision: *Tar Baby* as Diasporean Novel” (1988). She suggests that *Tar Baby* explores “the common identity of African people of mainland America and the West Indies, a people that have been identified with separate histories and artificially made different” (100). Hawthorne argues that the “‘American’ conflict which the book dramatizes is given the foreign location of Isle des Chevaliers, and this allows Morrison to link two histories dimmed by time and separation” (ibid.). While this is certainly true, setting the story primarily in the Caribbean allows for the exploration of complex racial issues more closely. The fact that the action moves between the Caribbean and the United States, and even incorporates images of Jadine’s life in Europe, highlights the Caribbean as a staging post in the Black Diaspora, which further foregrounds *Tar Baby*’s diasporean qualities. However, setting the novel primarily on this particular island on the Caribbean also allows for an intenser focus.¹⁵

Hawthorne is one of the critics who have obviously chosen sides in the “battle” between Jadine and Son. She suggests that Jadine’s losing her “Diasporean values”, or her links with her African heritage, makes her also lose her “essential humanity” (103), which is rather ironic since in my reading it is in fact the (black) essentialism that Jadine is running away from. Furthermore, she suggests, Jadine is constantly ridiculed by the novel, while Son is “Morrison’s reflector character of the work” (104), apparently reflecting the author’s intention to show that Son “can be led by ancestral wisdom [...] to make a beginning” (ibid.). Additionally, to Hawthorne, Son’s “self” is the only one “in the process of reformation” at the conclusion of the story (106). I shall argue that it is actually Jadine whose self is in the process of reformation at the end of the novel, but first it is appropriate to look at the options available for her, i.e. the limiting stereotypical categories that are imposed on her throughout the novel.

¹⁵ In an interview with Nellie McKay, Morrison revealed her intentions about the setting in *Tar Baby*: “In *Tar Baby*, I wanted to be in a place where the characters had no access to any of the escape routes that people have in a large city [...] I wanted to examine that kind of fiefdom [...] a kind of Eden” (417).

4.3 Stereotypical Roles Imposed on Jadine

At first reading, and also by reading the studies made on *Tar Baby*, one might be restricted to an interpretation that sees Jadine as an African American woman who has, consciously or unconsciously, lost her “ancient properties” (*TB*, 305) and internalized the values of the white culture. This reading is supported by the fact that Jadine has got her education in Europe with the financial assistance of her white patron. While the conflict in this novel is undoubtedly “between assimilation and cultural nationalism represented by the sealskin coat Ryk has given her and the pie table” (Rayson, 94), the stereotypical, limiting categories which Jadine is continually forced into do not come from the white characters but primarily from the black community. Moffitt argues that “Jadine has embraced white stereotypes along with white culture” (16), but when compared to a character who has obviously internalized white stereotypes and culture, Geraldine in *The Bluest Eye*, it is clear that Jadine’s situation is quite different. While Valerian is portrayed as the traditional master-figure, it is actually Son, Sydney and Ondine, and the folk past represented by the different women in different places that try to conquer and dominate Jadine, who would thus assume the role of Brer Rabbit. In this way, the tar baby of the trickster myth is represented in this novel by the clutches of black culture, whose most obvious embodiment is Son.

Son can be seen as a character who embodies many of the traditional stereotypes associated with blackness. At his worst he is ignorant, unclean, almost animal-like, while at his best he is natural, sensual, and most importantly here, appreciates the values of his black ancestors. But Son notes at the beginning of the novel, “however tight, prepared stories sounded most like a lie” (*TB*, 5), and his portrayal may be too extravagant and obviously stereotypical for him to be the purveyor of African American values in this novel. In my reading, Son represents one of the tar pits, the limiting categories that might imprison Jadine. Son breathes into Jadine “the smell of tar” (120), or his dreams of Eloë, and tries thus to force Jadine into becoming a representative of

his limited vision of black cultural ancestry. She does get stuck, for a while, on Son's "physically overpowering" hair (113), "[s]paces, mountains, savannas" in his face (158), and the way he makes her feel unorphaned. That Son is a part of the tar baby image is obvious also in the sections where Jadine first attacks him with her fists in L'Arbe de la Croix (120) and then chokes him with both hands in New York City (263). In these scenes, she physically attacks him only to get more stuck on this representation of blackness just like Brer Rabbit in the *Wonderful Tar Baby*.

By trying to turn Jadine into the image he has of African American women, Son reveals himself to be the personification of stereotypical and dualistic thinking in the novel. While the "local Blacks" (*TB*, 110) of the island feel "contempt [...] in their hearts for everybody but themselves" (*ibid.*), Son literally employs a black-and-white world view. He does not "want any discussion about shades of black folk" (155) and feels that "white folks and black folks should not sit down and eat together" (210). He does not see Jadine as a "yalla", who according to Gideon, "don't come to being black natural-like" (155), but sees her as one of the, in his view, obsessively unified black community and tries to replace the values she has internalized from whites with his own views of black properties. According to Son, "[p]eople don't mix races; they abandon them or pick them" (270). Moffitt argues that "Son's view is extremely dualistic in setting specific behaviors for 'white' and 'black'" (16) and I think Son's fate in figuratively becoming one of the spirit horse men of Isle des Chevaliers at the end of the novel reflects his loss of identity due to his employment of such dualistic thinking patterns.

Son's world view is not only black-and-white; it is also narrow and inconsistent. The vision of a woman Son wants Jadine to turn into relies heavily on stereotype. He wants her to stop behaving like a "little white [girl]" (*TB*, 121), stop shaving her bodily hair (226) and continuously ridicules and depreciates Jadine's intellectual and financial success. He, on the other hand, seems to appreciate things such as poverty and ignorance. Bringing back the Duboisean thought, he apparently thinks that black people represent *merely* "the sole oasis of simple faith and reverence in a dusty desert of dollars and smartness" (*The Souls of Black Folk*, 7). Son has embraced the stereotypical notions associated with blackness and has turned them in his mind into something to be grateful

for. In a way, he has “conceptualized” his identity “as an ignoble savage [...], bestial, hyper-sexual, criminal, violent, uncivilized, brutish, dirty, inferior, and as a *problem*” (Yancy, 7, emphasis in original), in line of white racist thinking. However, he dreams of a future in his all-black, culturally transfixed hometown Eloë, where money or success is not important, and wants to make Jadine a part of his dream. As he sees all black people as equal, he is sure that Jadine has merely internalized her ways from her white patron. Ironically, it is actually Valerian that seems to share his views on equality between black people, marked by Jadine’s observation of him: “Doesn’t [Valerian] know the difference between one Black and another or does he think we’re all . . .” (*TB*, 125). However, Son tries to save Jadine as though she were a slave under Valerian’s whip, and ends up himself as a slave owner, physically and emotionally abusing Jadine until she has to save herself from him.

Son has in fact unconsciously internalized many of his views from white society, similarly to the internalization of white values in *The Bluest Eye*, except for the fact that he resists what he thinks is white. He, for example, associates education with white society and thus resists the whole idea of being educated himself. A similar development can be seen in his sentiments toward money. Although he mostly comes across as a “warm man who possesses definite folk values and qualities” (Coleman, 65), he seems incapable of acknowledging that black people should also be able to educate themselves and strive for success and that education and success are not always associated with whiteness. Some critics have been deceived by Son’s narrow worldview: Rayson, for example, suggests that “[t]he equation seems to be that whites are educated, exploitative, but not authentically sexual. To be white is to give up black sexuality, hence authenticity. [...] But to be black is to give up education and any pursuit of the puritan work ethic” (98). While Rayson believes this to reflect Morrison’s ideas, Jadine is not deluded enough to drop her hunger for both knowledge and sexuality. She thinks that Son only loves his ignorance (*TB*, 264) and tries to get him to “get excited about money” (171), but after having been in Eloë she understands that Son’s views of racial issues are fossilized and she must redeem herself from him and the other limiting tar pits.

Sydney and Ondine, Jadine's uncle and aunt and Valerian's servants, also represent one of the tar pits for Jadine. Finding all black people equal is not self-evident for the "black bourgeoisie" (Rayson, 94) couple; they actually employ racial hierarchies within the black community. They strongly categorize other people, but at the same time, are afraid of ending up pigeonholed themselves. Ondine sees herself as the only woman in the house (*TB*, 209), while Sydney notes more than twice that he is a Philadelphia Negro,¹⁶ "the proudest people in the race" (61). They, as house servants, are above the yard workers Gideon and Thérèse, while Son, without "a dime and no prospect of one" (191), represents the lowest category of African American people for them. While they somewhat disdain both white people and the "lesser" black people on the island, and feel an insuperable contempt for Son, the "stinking ignorant swamp nigger" (100), they seem to have a clear vision what they want for Jadine. As the story progresses, though, it becomes clearer that it is not actually a question of what they want *for* Jadine but what they want *of* her. In addition to them wanting Jadine to provide them safety and credit for their race, Ondine admits by the end of the novel, "[m]aybe I just wanted her to feel sorry for us [...] and that's a lowdown wish if I ever had one" (282).

While it is obvious for many of the characters and most of the critics that Valerian the fox has "made" Jadine the tar baby by paying for her education, it is actually Sydney and Ondine who feel most need to take credit for Jadine's success. Jadine understands that Sydney and Ondine "had gotten Valerian to pay her tuition while they sent her the rest" (*TB*, 49) and Ondine keeps reminding that she "would have stood on [her] feet all day all night to put [Jadine] through that school" (193). Ondine sees Jadine as her "crown" (282), and she and Sydney are continually "boasting" (49) about Jadine's success to the point that Margaret calls Ondine "Mother Superior" (84). In return, they seem to want Jadine to offer them safety for the rest of their lives: "Nothing can happen to us as long as she's here" (102). They are not comfortable with the idea of Jadine marrying Ryk, who is "[w]hite but European which was not as bad as white and

¹⁶ What Sydney is referring to here is *Philadelphia Negro; A Social Study* (1899) by W.E.B. Du Bois, "the first case study of a black community in the United States" (*Encyclopaedia Britannica*). In this sociological study Du Bois argues that problems faced by blacks in Philadelphia were due to their treatment in history, and "their relegation in the present to the most menial and lowest-paying jobs" (University of Pennsylvania Press), instead of any issues concerning race as such.

American” (48), but are terrified of her running off with a “no-count Negro” (193) like Son. Although their views on racial hierarchies seem to alter from time to time, and on the outside they seem to want what is best for Jade, they represent one of the limited and stereotypical visions of the novel. If Jadine was to listen to their stereotypical views and act upon them, her choices in life would be quite limited. Jadine does refute Ondine’s quite essentialist views of black womanhood with the words: “I don’t want to learn how to be the kind of woman you’re talking about because I don’t want to be that kind of woman” (282). This might be interpreted as Jadine’s “reject[ing] the roles of mother, daughter, and woman to stay the tar baby” (Rayson, 95), but to me it marks her becoming aware of what kind of woman she is by the end of the novel.

In addition to the roles imposed on Jadine by the characters discussed above, there are three key scenes which symbolize the tar pits Jadine needs to rescue herself from. These include an encounter with a beautiful, deeply black woman in a yellow dress in a French supermarket, the Isle des Chevaliers swamp women when she literally falls into a tar pit, and the night women in Eloë.

Jadine’s encounter with the woman in yellow is the initiatory scene of her self-reflection and marks the beginning of her path to self-redemption. Before travelling to Isle des Chevaliers, Jadine sees a woman with “skin like tar against [her] canary yellow dress” (*TB*, 45) and “eyes too beautiful for lashes” (*ibid.*). The woman buys three eggs and walks out the supermarket while all the other customers, including Jadine, gaze at her in awe. Jadine follows her with her eyes, and suddenly the woman “look[s] right at Jadine” and “with a small parting of her lips, sho[ots] an arrow of saliva between her teeth down to the pavement” (46). Before this incident Jadine knows she is “intelligent and lucky” (45), but this insult makes her feel “[I]onely and inauthentic” (48). It is the encounter with the woman in yellow that makes Jadine leave her apparently perfect life in Paris and travel to Isle des Chevaliers to meet her uncle and aunt. While on the outside Jadine feels that “actually [the woman’s insult] didn’t matter” (46), the African woman keeps haunting her throughout the novel. To Hawthorne, “[t]he contrasting images of Jadine and the African woman [...] spotlight the novel’s continual highlighting of cultural values and the need to know the past, for the African symbolizes Origin” (104). While

agreeing with this point, in my reading the “Origin” is largely a part of the tar baby image Jadine first gets stuck on and then struggles to be free from.

The woman in yellow is a part of the tar baby image in the novel in that she symbolizes Africa, maternity, and Jadine’s self as enforced on her by the black community. Jadine views the woman before the spitting as a “woman’s woman—that mother/sister/she” (46) and it might be argued that she represents Jadine’s own sense of self similarly to what the name “Son” symbolizes to Son:

It was the name 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. (139)

This is in line with Morrison’s suggestion that the woman in yellow symbolizes “the original self – the self that we betray when we lie, the one that is always there” (McKay, 422). In my reading, though, the woman in yellow only *reminds* Jadine of her true self, as a “real, [...] complete individual who owns herself” (ibid.), and thus the feelings of inauthenticity evoke in Jadine the urge not to fall into any categories but to become what she really is. The woman’s lack of (eye) “lashes” might also stand for an allegory to the slave past, which the woman has “burned away” with the power of her originality. Still, the woman in yellow stands for stereotypical images of Africa with her deeply black skin, “many-colored sandals” and hair “wrapped in a gelée as yellow as her dress” (*TB*, 45). She represents the feminine and maternal roles seemingly prescribed for Jadine with her body with “too much hip, too much bust” (ibid.), holding the three beginnings of life in her hand. While appearing first to Jadine as an exotic fruit, “an addition to the coconut and tamarind, a kind of plus to go with the limes and pimiento” (ibid.), the woman ultimately makes her feel inauthentic. The woman in yellow represents a vision of African womanhood that Jadine cannot subscribe to, and she makes Jadine flee from Paris.

In addition to her reminding Jadine of what constitutes her “true self”, the reasons for which the woman in yellow makes Jadine feel inauthentic also concern beauty. According to Walther Pereira, “Jadine struggles not against a white-defined standard of female beauty, but against a black-defined beauty, as represented by the woman in yellow” (75), which to me underlines the fact that the woman is a part of the tar baby figure. Polarities between natural and artificial beauty can also be deployed here, signified by the woman’s eyes so beautiful that they had “burnt away their lashes” (*TB*, 46) in contrast with the fact that Jadine “could look so much younger when she *chose*” (45, my emphasis). That is, as Jadine is able to change the way she looks with makeup, or “the regimen that held her at the twenty-year-old peak” (267), the woman in yellow possesses something so powerful in her eyes that she does not need lashes, not to mention mascara. While Jadine has just got her picture in *Vogue* and *Elle*, the woman in yellow is characterized as “that unphotographable beauty” (46), further foregrounding the contrast between natural and artificial beauty. While the woman in yellow clearly stands for African women and black-defined beauty standards, the reason for her insulting Jadine could also lie in the fact that Jadine is mixed-race, implying that mixed blood is not authentic. After all, the woman in yellow has judged Jadine purely on appearance at this point. In my reading, the woman symbolizes the natural, maternal roles imposed on Jadine, reminding in her yellow dress of the yellow houses in Son’s dreams (6), or the “domestic drudge”-values Rayson talks about in her article, the reality of African (American) motherhood contrasted with the images of glamour the woman in yellow represents. Feeling lonely and inauthentic, Jadine travels to Isle des Chevaliers only to encounter more aspects of those maternal roles.

The next major scene where Jadine encounters the stereotypical roles is when she literally falls into a tar pit in a swamp called Sein de Vieilles.¹⁷ Jadine falls into the tar and manages to save herself by clinging on to a tree “which shivered in her arms and swayed as though it wished to dance with her” (182). This scene is partly supernatural since the tree Jadine holds onto acts like a human being and Jadine’s stream of consciousness imagines the “swamp women” whispering instructions to her:

¹⁷ Loosely translated, “old women’s breasts”, translated by Morrison: “witch’s tit” (*TB*, 10).

Count. Just count. Don't sweat or you'll lose your partner, the tree. Cleave together like lovers. Press together like man and wife. Cling to your partner, hang on to him and never let him go. [...] Sway when he sways and shiver with him too. [...] Love him and trust him with your life because you are up to your kneecaps in rot. (182-183)

The swamp women's suggestion would thus be that Jadine needs to hang on to her African roots and perhaps choose to give in to Son, sexually and emotionally, as the embodiment of African values. Son is clearly allied with the swamp women, alluded to by his renaming by Sydney as a "swamp nigger" (100). Additionally, the "smell of tar" Son wanted to breathe into Jadine could be associated with the "pitchlike smell" (105) the swamp women are reported to have by Thérèse. After this scene, Son and Jadine's love affair starts, but this scene also foreshadows Jadine's self-redemption as she is in fact able to save herself from the pit, without anyone's help and to the swamp women's amazement. The swamp women stand for ancient maternal powers, "exceptional femaleness" (183), and try to make Jadine one of them. Jadine manages to pull herself out of the tar pit, leaving the women wondering "at the girl's desperate struggle down below to be free, to be something other than they [are]" (ibid.). Because Jadine is able to save herself from the pit, and consequently avoids turning into a soul sister for the swamp women, this scene is the primary representation of Jadine's escape from black female essentialism.

Also in *Eloe*, Jadine feels that she is being intimidated by supernatural forces to adopt a nativist position. The representation of the tar baby figure is obvious in the scene where the "night women" attack Jadine in a dream after she has been sleeping with Son. The group consists of the women in the novel who have African descent, including Ondine, Thérèse, the woman in yellow, as well as Jadine's own dead mother. In this scene, all of the female characters connected to the tar baby image are present, wanting Jadine to "settle for wifely competence when she could be almighty, to settle for fertility rather than originality, nurturing instead of building" (269). The values of wifely competence, fertility, and nurturing are symbolized by the women's breasts that they pull out as weapons. The woman in yellow, now turned into a symbolic character, instead of

showing Jadine her breasts, shows her the three supermarket eggs (259), here symbols of fertility and maternity. The night women seem to share Son's views of acknowledging one's past: "because until you know about me, you don't know nothing about yourself. And you don't know anything, anything at all about your children and anything at all about your mama and your papa" (264-265). The women's demand of becoming one with her origins and embracing the motherly values grows oppressive for Jadine, who is afraid that the women are about to "[g]rab the person she had worked hard to become and choke it off with their soft loose tits" (262). The nipples of the motherly, "soft, loose tits" are described as "brunette eye[s]" (261), underlining the women's desire to "lay claim to" (262) Jadine, i.e. "fix" her in order to make her one of them by casting on her their own "colonial gaze". In the dream, Jadine tries to convince the women that she too has breasts (258), or feminine values, but the women don't believe her. Frightened from this dream, Jadine leaves Eloë and heads back to New York.

While it is important to note that the people who try to "get her, tie her, bind her" (262) are black, Jadine's struggle to survive also includes the values white people may try to force on her. For example, Margaret "stirred [Jadine] into blackening up or universalizing out, always alluding to or ferreting out what she believed were racial characteristics" (64) while Jadine "ended up resisting both" (ibid.). Although Margaret does not see Jadine's blackness as a problem, Jadine feels burdened by it because of Margaret's stereotypical views. Margaret and Valerian's son, Michael, seems to share Son's views on what Jadine should become. Jadine thinks "he wanted [her] to string cowrie beads or sell Afro combs. The system was all fucked up he said and only a return to handicraft and barter could change it" (73). Ironically, Valerian is the only person that supports Jadine's growth as a person, without the burden of blackness or femaleness. While he criticizes Michael's "idea of racial progress" as "All Voodoo to the People" (72), he thinks the world is open for a person like Jadine: "look what she has to go back to [...] Everything. Europe. The future. The world" (29). In my reading, Valerian is right; after facing the tar pits, and surviving them, Jadine does have the opportunity to become what she really is.

Jadine is continuously being attacked by people, real and supernatural, who all seem to have scripted roles for her. The values associated with those roles are mainly black-defined and mainly come from the black community. These values include motherly/wifely roles as well as the stereotypical images of women minding the pie table (*TB*, 120) of Son's dreams. In a sense, Jadine is doubly colonized: she has to fight against both white colonialism and black patriarchy. However, my reading sees the eventual redemption of Jadine from these limiting categories as retelling the survival of Brer Rabbit in the *Wonderful Tar Baby*. I will now go on to discussing Jadine's self-redemption in detail, both in the light of the tale and considering issues not connected to it.

4.4 "I Belong to Me": Jadine's Survival

He simply wishes to make it possible for a man to be both a Negro and an American, without being cursed and spit upon by his fellows, without having the doors of Opportunity closed roughly in his face. (Du Bois, 3)

This wish from the early 20th century is in my view also the wish of Jadine as a modern day African American woman, a wish that is at least partly actualized in the course of the novel. While many critics see Jadine's return to Paris as her dropping her heritage, I see it as a survival, a self-redemption. For example, Walther Pereira argues that "Jadine *chooses* to reject the swamp women and Son, and decides to return to her life in Europe, and thus chooses to remain colonized" (75, emphasis in original). This reading would imply that Jadine has accepted and adopted the values of white society but to me Jadine ultimately frees herself from the uncritical internalization of the values of black culture. Toni Morrison said in a recent interview that she values the kind of black people that are "hungry for education, hungry for choices" (Toni Morrison: Young People and Possibilities) and, most importantly here, people that "don't want any obstacles, [people that] don't wanna be burdened by blackness, maleness, femaleness, nothing" (ibid.). In my reading, in Jadine, Morrison has created this kind of character: Jadine does not want

to be burdened by anything – blackness, femaleness, poverty, unintelligence – even though she is constantly defined by her blackness, and forced to respect values that black people think she should. As discussed above, Son seems to be the embodiment of those values, at times, also in a respectable manner. However, Morrison discussed a notion opposite to the likes of Jadine in the same interview: “It’s like a fake blackness, it’s all masking” (ibid.). Relying on this notion, it might be argued that Son indeed represents the people for whom blackness is “just a metaphor, they’re not doing anything” (ibid.). This contradiction can be illustrated by Jadine’s words to Son in New York:

while you were driving your car into your wife’s bed I was being educated. While you were hiding from a small-town sheriff or some insurance company, hiding from a rap a two-bit lawyer could have gotten you out of, I was being educated, I was working, I was making something out of my life. I was learning how to make it in *this* world. The one we live in, not the one in your head. Not that dump Eloe; *this* world. (264, emphasis in original)

Jadine wants to be educated, wants to make sure she survives in the modern world. In the interview Morrison talked about Princeton-educated blacks who are “hungry for education” and “dazzled” (i.e. bemused) when people bring up notions of what black people supposedly “cannot do” (Toni Morrison: *Young People and Possibilities*). Jadine is this kind of person. Son’s fighting for his heritage, on the other hand, seems to actualize only on the level of words: he tries to preserve his perception of self as a black person by only aggressively demeaning others. His seeming inability to actually *do* something for his race reminds me of a belief of Fanon: “Fervor is the weapon of choice of the impotent” (*Black Skin*, 11). While not stating that Jadine is “the voice of righteousness” (Moffitt, 16) in this novel, however, I shall argue that she does survive the stereotypical categorizing by refusing to be the exotic pet of white people, the image of African American women of Son’s dreams, or a soul sister of the swamp women.

Some critics have seen Jadine’s self-redemption as echoing her role as a hero. Cynthia Davis argues in her article, “Self, Society, and Myth in Toni Morrison’s Fiction” (1982)

that “[t]here are Morrison characters who refuse to become images, to submerge themselves in a role” (331) and that those characters are “clearly existential heroes, ‘free’ in the Sartrean sense of being their own creators” (ibid.). While Jadine clearly qualifies as an “existential hero”, I think here this reading is problematic, since trying to point out heroes and villains brings us back to dualistic thinking. Seeing Jadine as a hero would again strengthen the polar opposites of good/bad, right/wrong, black/white Jadine struggles to extract herself from. With the story of *The Wonderful Tar Baby* in mind, an African tale brought over by slaves and transformed into a plantation fable, it is perhaps best to see Morrison’s *Tar Baby* primarily as a story of Jadine’s survival and self-transformation, rather than as a story of heroism.

Interpreting Jadine’s fate as a survival requires the reader to take into account the traditional tale of the tar baby as well as the construction of the stereotypical “tar pits” she avoids. In this reinterpretation, Brer Fox represents white society, tar baby the clutches of the black community and therefore Brer Rabbit would be Jadine as representing a person who manages to save herself from stereotypes. It is, indeed, on account of the history of discrimination that black people have been forced to create a strong sense of a united community. Therefore, the tar baby in this story could be seen as an artefact of white society. In addition, Jadine’s seemingly internalized white values could be seen as a part of Brer Rabbit’s hubris. In the Tar Baby story, “Brer Rabbit oversteps himself, taking on the white man’s ways of arrogance and willfulness, and bullying the tarry representative of blackness” (Bone, 38-39). In this novel, Jadine’s bullying Son and the other representatives of blackness can be seen both in her rather patronizing views of Son and in trying to extract herself from those limiting tar pits discussed above. By the end of the novel, she appears to be succeeding in breaking free, getting beyond limitations arising from either white or black values. Almost defeated by her “adversaries”, she travels to Europe, which first seemed as a hostile place for her, but where she can well find a sanctuary, even a home. In my reading, therefore, Paris symbolizes the briar patch where Brer Rabbit is left by the end of *The Wonderful Tar Baby*. Paralleling Brer Rabbit’s story, Jadine might be saved, but story is left unconcluded without any definite answers about her eventual fate.

Although the tar baby figure consists of many different aspects here, Jadine's survival is mostly connected to breaking away from Son. The ways in which Jadine gets stuck on Son are primarily sexual. This is apparent immediately after her first encounter with Son when she compares herself to a dog that "had done nothing but be 'in heat' which she couldn't help but which was her fault just the same" (*TB*, 124). It becomes obvious that Jadine does not resist sexuality as such; she only resists her sexual attraction to Son. Rayson argues, "[i]n this case Jadine sacrifices passion, Son, for her role as exotic pet engaged to Ryk" (96) but to me it is obvious that she is not leaving Son to marry Ryk, she is only leaving behind the limiting values he stands for. Seduction is a dance to Son (213), so he can be seen as allied with "the tree that wanted to dance" (182) with Jadine at the swamp. The fact that Jadine saves herself from the pit by stepping on the "hard thing that seemed to be growing out of her partner the tree" (183), i.e. the tree's phallus, therefore explains her redemption from Son. It might be argued that it means that Jadine hereby saves herself by destroying Son's manhood, but in my reading this scene signifies the fact that by resisting Son and his sexuality, she resists the wifely and motherly roles apparently prescribed for her. She gains freedom through her own actions and thoughts, without sacrificing her own sexuality and without making compromises.

Jadine also manages to resist the night women by resisting Son. She understands that Son cannot save her from the night women because they have him already and starts fighting the night women by fighting Son, and in this way she begins to gain self-redemption. She fights Son like an animal, "crawl[ing] on all fours" (*TB*, 263) and biting him (264), foregrounding her Brer Rabbit-like role. Showing that the conflicts between Jadine and Son are only a mask, and that Jadine is actually fighting the stereotypical roles imposed on her, the narrator makes sarcastic remarks about the situation: "Other times they fought about work; surely *that* was the problem (265, emphasis in original). Jadine extricates herself from Son and consequently from the night women and all the roles prescribed for her by refusing to assimilate to Son's ideals: "You stay in that medieval slave basket if you want to. You will stay there by yourself. Don't ask me to do it with you. I won't" (271). It could be argued that this scene embodies one of Fanon's ideas: "The educated Negro, slave of the spontaneous and

cosmic Negro myth, feels at a given stage that his race no longer understands him [...] Or that he no longer understands it” (*Black Skin*, 16). Evelyn Hawthorne argues that Jadine returns to her life in Paris because she is “[t]oo fully a woman of the West” (104), but Jadine is actually hurt by the night women (*TB*, 262) and cannot let Son, who is connected with them, hurt her anymore (271). She does not understand, and does not need to understand the roles prescribed for her by others, and since they have deeply hurt her, she returns to Paris.

As Jadine leaves New York for Paris, she travels through Isle des Chevaliers, her self-created survival being alluded to in a number of textual details. While first staying at L’Arbe de la Croix, she notes that “[t]his shaggy-dog style I wear has to be worked on, and I mean *worked on*” (*TB*, 64, emphasis in original). Now on her way back to Europe, having resisted stereotypical roles, she wears a new hairdo that Margaret calls a “Poodle-cut” (276), and Ondine does not like: “fluffy, frothy as though it was important to look like a schoolgirl” (278). A negative reading might see this as Jadine’s surrender to white beauty standards, but the fact that Morrison writes that Jadine has turned her hair into “[s]omething different” (276), suggests rather that she has organized her sense of self. She has now claimed her original beauty and identity, prophesied by Ondine earlier in the novel: “There would be the hurricane wind of eyelashes falling through the air and the weighty crash of lid on lid” (96). That is, she has now symbolically burned away her own lashes, like the woman in yellow, and the night women have closed their (evil) eyes to her, i.e. they no longer try to “lay claim” to Jadine. She is not yet totally free from haunting, however, since Alma Estée’s wig at the airport reminds her of inauthenticity and her remarks on Thérèse’s “magic breasts” (289) evoke the night women. But having “glanced at the wig in the mirror and then back to her own lashes” (288) she leaves behind the “*pale yellow concrete blocks*” of the Dominique airport (287, my emphasis) and, by implication, also the yellow houses of Son’s dreams and the woman in yellow.

In addition, after having left for Paris and sitting on the plane, Jadine and the roles she has been forced into are explored by the imagery of ants, the life of soldier ants being presented as all “[b]earing, hunting, eating, fighting, burying” (*TB*, 291). It might

initially seem that Jadine is being equated with the ants who have “no time for dreaming” (290), but it is actually the night women that are being compared to the ants, since when in the dream they attacked Jadine, they “poured out of the dark like ants out of a hive” (258). Since the reality of African (American) motherhood is often domestic drudgery, the night women can be easily connected to the ants. The eggs the woman in yellow showed Jadine in Eloë can now be associated with the eggs of the ant queen who “eats her own wing muscles until she bears her eggs” (291), wings symbolizing freedom. While the ant queen’s only function is reproducing, and the male ants only need wings for breeding, Jadine now has time for dreaming. Although the wings with which she is now flying, “[a]board the 707” (290) are artificial, she has managed to resist to “eat her own wing muscles” (291), and she has learned something. She returns to Paris, knowing something “she did not know before” (McKay, 424); as Morrison explains: “[s]he may [now] know why she was running away” (ibid.). In my reading, throughout the novel she has been running away from both her feelings of inauthenticity and the tar pits discussed in the earlier section. While to Morrison there is a “strong possibility that [Son] joins or is captured by the horsemen – captured by the past, by the wish, by the prehistoric times” (McKay, 425), Jadine avoids that fate once resisted the essentialist vision of black womanhood.

This reading makes it possible to see Jadine as a character who is in fact able to redeem herself from the stereotypical roles imposed on her. While it is not the only way to interpret this novel, and acknowledging that Brer Rabbit is a highly controversial figure, Jadine’s possible self-redemption can be seen in the light of the survival of Brer Rabbit. Jadine resists the tar pits represented by Son, Sydney and Ondine, as well as the woman in yellow and the women in *Sein de Vieilles* and Eloë and, according to Morrison, “has a good shot at” learning to know who she really is (McKay, 424).

4.5 Conclusions

Toni Morrison talks about her motivations as a writer in an interview with Nellie McKay (1983):

There is always something more interesting at stake than a clear resolution in a novel. I'm interested in survival – who survives and who does not, and why – and I would like to chart a course that suggests where the dangers are and where the safety might be. I do not want to bow out with easy answers to complex questions. (420)

In *Tar Baby*, this aim is certainly materialized, as Jadine is being pressured from several directions into being something she is not, yet might well be able to survive at the end of the novel. There is no clear resolution in this novel which allows it to be interpreted from several points of views. I have now presented a reading that sees the conclusion of the novel as the protagonist's self-redemption and consequential transcending of stereotypical roles enforced on her. Jadine does get beyond stereotyping, beyond the limitations of both black and white societies.

Because *Tar Baby* is less overtly political than the other works by Morrison, and because its ending is left unconcluded, interpreting this novel has been extremely frustrating for most readers. Since in this novel “romanticizing blackness” and “vilifying whiteness” (*Playing*, xi) is not self-evident, it has become a struggle for critics to try and find the most sympathetic character. Many seem to have chosen their sides, such as Rayson and Hawthorne, while some have felt the need to combine the characters of Jadine and Son in order to build a vision of a joint character that “embod[ies] positive Black folk values of caring, community responsibility, and collective effort, as well as the quest for material success in the modern world”

(Coleman, 66).¹⁸ Overall, critics are perplexed by *Tar Baby*, and indeed, as the version Morrison first heard of the tar baby story, so is her rewriting of it “[v]ery funny, then scary, then funny again. Yet puzzling” (Morrison’s preface to *Tar Baby*, xii).

One of the reasons why *Tar Baby* might be hard for readers to decode is in its excessive use of both white and black stereotyping. The characters first come across as the embodiments of stereotypical thinking, and initially it seems easy to put them into the roles to match the Tar Baby tale. All of the characters are portrayed in stereotypical terms, and they view and treat each other in ways based almost entirely on stereotype. Here the reader is likely to search for the most sympathetic character in a group of people where all seem to be villains. The ways in which the novel reveals readers’ own stereotypical thinking patterns and how this novel could collaborate in destroying them might be an interesting issue to study in more detail. Moffitt argues that, “[t]he ‘danger’ that Morrison exposes here is that identifying those who are guilty of stereotyping tends to create further stereotypes; one categorization engenders another” (16). These chains of stereotypes are notable on the narrative level but also the reader might get stuck and reveal his or her own stereotypical thinking patterns and perhaps create new ones. To accept that the novel is multilayered and does not in fact provide any answers is one way of broadening one’s reading and countering stereotypical thinking.

Seeing the novel in this way means that the novel becomes the tar baby. Moffitt has argued that viewing the characters in *Tar Baby* in stereotypical terms is a “tar-baby-like ‘trap’” (14) but the novel as a whole could also be seen as a trap. It is clear that Morrison has meant *Tar Baby* to be complex, even confusing, and reading this novel has got readers trapped on the very original sin presented in the novel, that is, dualistic thinking. While it is clear that readers get stuck on *Tar Baby*, it is not yet certain if one is able to out-trick the trickster i.e. decode *Tar Baby*. Perhaps no answers are actually

18 In addition, Letitia. L. Moffitt argues that “neither character’s vision can approach completeness without consideration of the other’s” (18).

required in reading this novel, because according to Jadine, “Having sixteen answers meant having none. So none it was. Zero” (*TB*, 290).

5. “Between Me and the Other World”: Conclusions

There is no break/between/yesterday and today/mother and son/air and earth/all are a part/of the other/like/with this typewriter/I am connected/with these words/and these words/with this paper/and this paper with you. (“August 8” by Norman Jordan in *My Black Me*, 31)

In a difficult issue, as challenging stereotypes unquestionably is, all matters seem to be a part of the other. Without the concept of blackness, whiteness would not exist, and as for freedom – one needs to know what slavery means. While all cultures undeniably need their mythologies, some myths demand to be annihilated and left in the past. What is the potential of challenging racial stereotypes in literature, then? Is it realizable, or is our language so contaminated with manifestations of racism that the mission of deconstructing stereotypes proves unattainable in literature, and an abstract irrelevance in society?

In the previous chapters, I have charted a course in Toni Morrison’s production which to me offers the most potential for fulfilling the ambition of challenging stereotypes. In *The Bluest Eye*, it is the foundation of the prejudicial constructions that is of relevance, accessible through the critical exploration of the characters in context with the protagonist, Pecola Breedlove. The novel allows the scrutiny of the ancient mythology of blackness and thus contributes to the study of stereotypes by focusing on the circumstances in which the constructions of racial prejudice arise. After tracing the foundations of racial prejudice, it is logical to turn to a work in which the orderliness of these constructions is transgressed. In approaching “Recitatif”, I aspired to explore the various ways in which literature can reverse customary stereotypes in order to combat them both in language and ideally also in readers’ thoughts. In decoding the portrayal of Twyla and Roberta, an interpreter confronts stereotypes that are consistently reversed by the narrative, and customary beliefs are thus optimally revealed and reversed also for the readers. Fighting stereotypes by their excessive use prevails in *Tar Baby*, with a

hope of eventually surpassing the spuriously asserted power of them. Although written previously to “Recitatif”, *Tar Baby* is an advancement in that the novel leaves its reader with an image of a world where life unburdened by stereotypes is a possibility. This is exhibited by the prospective salvation of the protagonist, Jadine, who, like the existentialist hero, achieves a degree of freedom by being her own creator.

In pursuing these themes, I discovered that while the stereotypical constructions created hundreds of years ago have undergone changes, literature can contribute to their further transformation, perhaps even suppression. In these three works, Morrison has utilized familiar stereotypes in such an exaggerated quantity that it is legitimate to argue that she has done it in order to raise awareness of them. The awareness, ideally, would then contribute to the readers’ alertness towards their own preconceptions about racial issues. Even though not thoroughly covered, this ideal forms the main relevance of my thesis: the fact that racial prejudice can be contested in literature entails a hope of a parallel development also in language.

Thus, examining the readers’ role in the interpretation in more depth would be a natural step further in the study of *The Bluest Eye*, “Recitatif”, and *Tar Baby*. Audience is also important to Morrison who, respecting the tradition of African American storytelling, says that “it is the affective and participatory relationship between the artist or the speaker and the audience that is of primary importance” (*Black Women Writers (1950-1980)*, 341). Of course, conducting a study in the light of reader-response theories would require wide-ranging empirical study from the critic, unrealizable in a relatively narrow study like this, however. To go further with this theme, and given the emotional depth of the subject matters, these works offer a fertile ground for the study of reader empathy and sympathy. Howard Sklar has already carried out such a study on “Recitatif”, but a related study could also be performed on *The Bluest Eye* and *Tar Baby*. While Pecola is obviously an extremely sympathetic character, there are other characters worthy of our sympathy in *The Bluest Eye*, and the way reader sympathy moves back and forth between Jadine to Son would also prove deserving of critical attention.

In this thesis, I have focused on black female stereotyping but evidently interesting work could be done by concentrating on the black male characters. My aim in selecting female characters has not been to pursue a particular feminist point of view, but rather reflects the fact that most of Morrison's protagonists are women. While analyzing the stereotypical constructions according to the female characters, I found that it would also be valuable to look at how the male characters are constructed in *The Bluest Eye* and *Tar Baby*.¹⁹ There are clear similarities between Cholly and Son, for example, both in their portrayal and their function in the novels. They might primarily seem to be sinners but once studied carefully, they do awaken reader sympathy. Given the background information of their past lives and the history of prejudice, Son and even Cholly can appear as sympathetic characters. The question of the choices for African American women that *Tar Baby* has awakened in some critics, may also be relocated in the male characters. Is the destiny of African American men that they come to be "Calibans, Staggerlees and John Henrys" (*TB*, 166) and is it true, as Rayson suggests, that "[i]n the late twentieth century, it is the African American male who is trapped" (97)?

It would be equally interesting to study how the white male, or white female is constructed in Morrison's oeuvre. Morrison argues in *Playing in the Dark* that "[m]y project is an effort to avert the critical gaze from the racial object to the racial subject; from the described and imagined to the describers and imaginers; from the serving to the served" (90). Although by this she means looking at the oppressors in white American literature, a study could be made on the representations of white people in her novels. What are the stereotypical roles imposed on them? What are the choices for white men and women? Does the omitting or ignoring of white people in Morrison's literature parallel her views on the portrayal of blacks in the white American canon? It is true that Morrison has been studied in great depth, but the parade of interesting topics of discussion seems endless.

¹⁹ In "Recitatif", male characters are omitted altogether and the implications of this are discussed by Goldstein-Shirley.

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