

**On Questions of Travel: Toni Morrison's
Jazz, Sula and Tar Baby**

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Abstrat:

This article discusses themes of travel present in three of Morrison's narratives, namely, Jazz, Sula and Tar Baby. In these novels, travel is posited as a displacing factor since physical moves significantly comprise a form of psychological dislocation which betides the experience of the traveler. Characteristic to these novels is the traveler's anxiety of failing to adapt to the new place and the fear of losing their homeland forever. Morrison's present novels draw on the psychological displacement effected by the physical move and epitomized by the traveler's endeavor to fit in a new place.

To overcome effects of the emotional displacement engendered by the physical move, these three novels suggest that migrants acknowledge candidly their respective origins and the valuable communal traditions related to one's home. However, Morrison warns against the danger of the nostalgia that befalls the traveler who lives in constant and obsessive recollection of the old home and their past in it. Jazz brings up the example of Joe Trace as a reminder of how obsessive recollection of the past is likely to predispose migrants to conditions of melancholia. In Sula, Morrison simultaneously emphasizes the importance of traditions and warns us against the adoption of a ghetto mentality which confines people to one place. In Tar Baby, the narrative explores the displacement of Jadine who, by reason of her travels in Europe, has entirely separated herself from the values and traditions of the African-American community. Jadine is dislocated because she can not consider herself European, neither can she perceive her own people as integral part of herself. Embedded in the novels is the stress on communal traditions and home values as instrumental in resisting the emotional displacement accompanying the experience of travel.

Key Words: Morrison's, Jazz, Sula, Tar Baby, nostalgia, traveler, the narrative, traditions, African-American community, home values, experience of travel.

عن قضايا السفر في روايات توني موريسن "الجاز" "سولا" و "تار بابي"

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الملخص:

يناقش هذا المقال موضوعة السفر في أعمال توني موريسن السردية الثلاثة: "الجاز" "سولا"، و "تار بابي". ففي هذه الروايات، يتم الانطلاق من موضوعة السفر باعتبارها عامل إزاحة، وذلك لأن السفر انتقال منطوق على انزياح نفسي تشي بالكثير فيما يتعلق بتجربة المسافر. وتتسم هذه الروايات بقلق ملحوظ لدى المسافر من أن يخفق في التأقلم مع المكان الجديد وبخوفه من أن يفقد موطنه الأصلي إلى الأبد. وتعتمد هذه الروايات على تقديم الانزياح النفسي الذي يحدثه التنقل من مكان إلى آخر والذي يتمثل في سعي المسافر إلى أن يتواءم مع المكان الجديد. ومن أجل التغلب على الانزياح الوجداني الناشئ عن التنقل، توحى هذه الروايات بأن على المهاجر أن لا يتنكر أبدا لأصوله أو تقاليد وطنه. غير أن موريسن تحذر من خطورة الحنين الذي يصيب المهاجر الذي يعيش حالة دائمة من الهوس بموطنه الأصلي وبذكرياته عنه.

مصطلحات أساسية: توني موريسن، السردية، الجاز، سولا، تار بابي، السفر، الانزياح النفسي، الانزياح الوجداني، المهاجر، الحنين، الموطن الأصلي، الذاكرة.

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Think of the long trip home.
Should we have stayed at home and
thought of here?
Where should we be today?
Continent, city country, society:
the choice is never wide and never
free.
And here, or there ... No. Should
we have stayed
at home, wherever that may be?
Elizabeth Bishop, Questions of
Travel

The tropes of migration present in Toni Morrison's novels relate to the mass migration of African-Americans from the South to the North. Especially after the Civil War, the search for economic advancement and the need to escape racial oppression were among the driving forces behind the move of African-Americans to industrial Northern cities. This migration has had its significance in post-colonial discourse, and the uprooting of post-colonial populations has generated forms of resistance especially against the tangible racism of big cities. The following will analyze the themes of migration in three of Morrison's novels, *Jazz*, *Sula* and *Tar Baby*. These

novels are particularly significant for emphasizing the importance of migration in producing sites for post-colonial resistance. The migration themes present in the three narratives are also a commentary on identity formation and resistance to hegemonic discourses.

In *Jazz*, the narrative foregrounds the search of the post-colonial subject for empowering historical roots and longer lasting values against the alienating styles of big cities. The quest for origins in *Jazz* is exemplified by Joe Trace's longing for rural living, the longing that follows the physical displacement of leaving one's place of origin

for another geographical location. In the North, Joe Trace, Violet Trace and Alice Manfred become displaced victims; albeit their attempts to integrate into the new place, they suffer from being members of a minority group. Migration is also associated with psychological displacement engendered by the migrants' struggle to plant themselves in the new environment and by their fear of having forever lost their homeland. Especially with Joe Trace, psychological displacement manifests itself in his attempts to substitute one form of behavior for

another, trying to shed attributes of his former self as hunter in the woods and adopt instead the borrowed conduct of an urban solicitor.

In *Jazz*, migrant characters like Joe Trace, Violet Trace and Alice Manfred are voluntary economic migrants. Joe and Violet's choice to leave the rural South for an urban industrial North came out of the need to improve their living conditions. In addition to their aspiration for economic and social advancement, the Traces' move was motivated by the need to escape from an oppressive South. Importantly, the narrative depicts the disabling influence of racial violence on both Violet and her mother Rose Dear. While in the South, Violet was haunted by the fear lest she would follow the same path of her mother's profound distress and end up committing suicide. Rose Dear suffered separation from a nomadic spouse who traveled around the country, pursuing the cause of liberation for Southern black Americans. While waiting for her husband, Rose Dear was surprised by some white assailants who inserted themselves into her home, destroyed items of furniture, even breaking the chair she was

sitting on. In retrospect, Violet is mostly disconcerted by her Rose Dear's passive attitude towards her vicious aggressors. Violet ponders the event,

“When they got to the table where our mother sat nursing an empty cup, they took the table out from under her and then, while she sat there alone, and all by herself like, cup in hand, they came back and tipped the chair she sat in. She didn't jump up right away, so they shook it a bit and since she still stayed seated- looking ahead at nobody- they just tipped her out of it like the way you get the cat off the seat if you don't want to touch it or pick it up in your arms. (98)”

Soon after this incident of racial violence, Rose Dear committed suicide by jumping down a well. Although the narrative doesn't openly maintain the connection between the two incidents, the narrative covertly hints at the possibility that Rose Dear's distress was likely to have been aggravated by the aforementioned assault.

After her mother's suicide, Violet is troubled by the image of a well and the threat of being devoured by it. She hence struggles "against the pull of the well" (104), the same well that "sucked her sleep" (102). Violet's determination never to have children relates to her mother's suicide, to her fear lest she will do to her children what Rose Dear has done to her when she "dropped herself down the well and missed all the fun" (102). The possibility of Violet's repeating her mother's suicide lies in the continuation of the same conditions which brought about Rose Dear's death. Like Rose Dear, Violet internalizes the racial violence perpetrated by white Southerners against blacks. What might have pushed her mother to committing suicide could therefore be reason enough for Violet to repeat that act. Still Violet perceives the "well" antithetically as an oppressive space and a place of warmth and privacy. The narrator asserts, "Violet never forgot Rose Dear or the place she has thrown herself into, a place so narrow, so dark it was pure" (101-1). This dual perception of the "well" consists of Violet's fear of dying in it or by it and her paradoxical yearning to withdraw to its protective and hiding

space. The well thereby becomes a symbol of Violet's psychological instability: while she is haunted by the "pull of a narrow well" (104), she still ponders over the purity of its narrowness.

Likewise, Violet's sense of home is dual: "As she grew older, Violet could neither stay where she was nor go away" (102). In the South Violet has suffered from feelings of dislocation and separation, that is, wherever home is she doesn't experience its genuine feel since she is emotionally separated from home by circumstances of oppression. In the case of Violet, dislocation is not the result of the traveler's attempt to acclimate to a new place. Rather, dislocation happens as a result of Violet's failure to adapt to the restraining conditions of home. Thus *Jazz* conceptualizes dislocation as a syndrome recurring mostly at home and prior to migration. The narrative of *Jazz* embodies the notion that migration is not the only and primary condition of displacement. Prior to leaving their homelands, migrants like Violet and Joe Trace experienced feelings of dislocation and displacement. 1 In *Jazz*, displacement at home was brought about by racial oppression and economic insufficiency.

Racism and poverty play major roles in Violet and Joe's decision to migrate North. It becomes difficult for the Traces to settle in the South, especially when they hear about the job opportunities available in the North. The narrator asserts:

Their Baltimore dreams were displaced by more powerful ones. Joe knew people living in the city and some who'd been there and come home with tales to make Baltimore weep. The money to be earned for doing light work- standing in front of a door, carrying food on a tray, even cleaning strangers' shoes- got you in a day more money than any of them had earned in one whole harvest. (106).

As Jocelyn Joshua Chadwick contends, the promise the city offers is "paradoxical in its nature" (172). Migrants in the city are at the mercy of its precarious promises. The menial jobs allocated to African-American migrants have confined them, in Revathi Krishnaswamy's words, to a class of "Indentured laborers, subsisting on the margins of alien(ating) societies" (134). However, some migrants have found

the city as fulfilling to its promise as possible. For Joe and Violet, the city becomes an economic catalyst and Joe picks up easy jobs such as selling "Cleopatra products in the neighborhood" (128). The city as well was fair to Violet who has taken a job in hairdressing. Nevertheless, the narrator's sarcasm is covertly at work to expose the dual side of the city's promise of freedom. The narrator remarks, "The A&P hires a colored clerk. Big-legged women with pink kitty tongues roll money into green tubes for later on. ... Nobody wants to be an emergency at Harlem hospital but if the Negro surgeon is visiting, pride cuts down the pain . . . I like the way the city makes people think they can do what they want and run away with it" (7). Hence, the city has offered only a restricted form of freedom. The A&P has one black clerk only, black women still do the manual work of rolling money, and white people boycott the emergency room when the one black surgeon is in charge.

Migrants might get better social opportunities only at the price of becoming victims of racial and social discrimination. Jocelyn Joshua Chadwick comments on the manner in which Jazz exposes

the city's specious generosity. She states, "What Morrison depicts over and over is the paradoxical promise that is at once positive and negative, and therefore, metamorphic, to all new comers as well as veterans in the city" (172). Even veterans of the city were deceived by its tantalizing promises. The narrative depicts the disenfranchisement and poverty of black migrants in the city. In *Jazz*, Morrison uncovers the exploitation of migrants as blue-collar workers. Once they are restricted to the "service capacity," migrants are also forced to inhabit the site of the margin. The world of the city therefore produces internal exiles consisting of the emotional and physical exile created at the margin. Internal exiles are illustrated in bell hooks' insight into the status of black Americans in industrial Kentucky. bell hooks asserts, "Across those [railroad] tracks was a world we could work in as maids, as janitors, as prostitutes as far as it was in a service capacity. We could enter that world but we could not live there" (341). In the city, displacement consists in banishing migrants to marginal sites. In this sense, displacement is a post-migration condition due to the fact

that migrants can enter the city without actually being part of it.

What mostly identifies the negative side of the city is its latent racism. Alice Manfred, for example, experiences city racism as insidious to her self-esteem. Despite the fact that she has done well as a seamstress, the city for her is a segregating place, a place where "[w]hitemen leaned out of motor cars with folded dollar bills peeping from their palms. It was where salesmen touched her and only her as if she were part of the goods they had condescended to sell her; it was the tissue required if the management was generous enough to let you try on a blouse (but not hat) in a store" (54). In this instance, the narrative explicitly comments on the "hierarchical" differentiation of black women. In the city, Alice is doubly distressed by both gender discrimination and racism. Another unique example of the city's racism is the murder of Alice Manfred's niece, Dorcas, which goes uninvestigated by the police. Joe Trace kills Dorcas when she abandons him for a younger lover. Outraged by both Joe's disloyalty and Dorcas's audacious act of stealing her husband, Violet

tries to deface Dorcas' dead body with a knife. Alice Manfred abstains from having the police involved in either the killing of her niece or the attempted violation of her niece's corpse because she is wholly convinced that in the city black people are of little if any consequence. For Alice, Joe Trace and the corrupting atmosphere of the city are equally responsible for the murder of her niece. As she sees it, city debauchery stems out of its music and styles. Since her arrival in Harlem, Alice was confounded by the "race music" in which she "swore she heard a complicated anger in... something hostile that disguised itself as flourish and roaring seduction. But the part she hates most is its appetite. Its longing for the bash, the slit... It faked happiness, faked welcome, but it did not make her feel generous, this juke joint, barrel hooch, tank house music" (57). From that kind of music, Alice has tried in vain to protect her niece. The narrator states, "Alice Manfred has worked hard to privatize her niece, for she was no match to a city seeping music that begged and challenged each and every day. "'Come,' it said. 'Come and do wrong'" (67). The

manner in which Alice perceives city music as vile will hereafter help her come to terms with Dorcas' death.

Alice's experience of city fashion is even more disconcerting than the way she relates to city music. She views fashion with inconsistency, that is, without being able to decide whether she likes it or not. Without admitting it, Alice Manfred has been enthralled by city style. The narrator exposes her dual sense of the city as exemplified in the manner she relates to its fashion: "High-heeled shoes with the graceful straps across the arch, the vampy hats closed on the head with brims framing the face, make up of any kind—all of that was outlawed in Alice Manfred's house. Especially the coats slung low in the back and not buttoned... Privately Alice admired them, the coats and the women who wore them" (55). Once she views Dorcas' demeanor from the angle of this paradoxical perception of the city, Alice Manfred begins to understand how it is unavoidable for Dorcas to be corrupted by the city's numerous temptations.

Still Alice Manfred has to figure out the dangerous tendency to violence city migrants like Joe

Trace and his wife Violet have expressed. Hence she meditates, “the husband shot; the wife stabbed. Nothing. Nothing her niece did or tried could equal the violence done to her” (79). Ironically, Alice and Violet Trace come together in an attempt to understand not only the puzzle of Joe’s murder of Dorcas but also the drawbacks of their surroundings. Out of their shared isolation, Alice and Violet come across the insurmountable barriers of Joe’s murder of Dorcas and Violet’s attack on the corpse to develop woman-bonding. Because she bonds with Violet, Alice will be able to excavate her internalized patriarchal oppression caused by her husband’s abandonment when he abandoned her for another woman. Through Violet’s anger and her attempt to attack the dead body of her husband’s young mistress, Alice is encouraged to remember how at some point in her life she too has been “starving for blood” (86). Like Violet, Alice has never intended to direct her anger against the husband. Rather, her “craving settled on the red liquid coursing through the other woman’s vein” (86). Violet enables Alice to recognize the immense pain her

husband’s disloyalty has cost her. On the other hand, Alice’s company has helped Violet to recognize her own madness and to unravel her own identity no matter how “slow” and “degenerative” the process is (Barnes 291). With Alice, Violet is able to break her long-sustained silence, the silence that reflects on her inability to adapt to her new environment.

When she arrives in the city, Violet is mostly known as a “snappy, determined girl and a hard working young woman, with the sharp snatch-gossip tongue of a beautician” (23). Gradually, she develops unbreakable silences which “[o]ver time annoy her husband, then puzzle him and finally depress him” (24). Violet’s silence breaks only when she insists on being admitted into Alice’s company. Together with Alice, Violet laughs at “that Violet,” the other raggedy Violet that sits in the street, steals a baby, attacks a corpse in the casket and gets rid of her birds. Alice looks beyond the city’s condemnation of Violet when she discovers in her a multifaceted Violet who is more than a just crazy and violent woman. What brings Alice and Violet together is not

only their age similarity or shared feelings of loss, but also factors of their loneliness and isolation.

In *Jazz*, the narrative depicts displacement as a condition brought about by the absence of a strong ethnic group identity. In their quest to acquire a citified image, migrants tend to turn their backs on their Southern values, neglecting mostly the importance of the community in sustaining a strong sense of individual and group identity. For example, the narrator is disappointed in the citified migrants Violet's customers represent, the ones who "wake up in the afternoon, pour gin in their tea"(13) and always "need their hair done" (14). From these migrant customers, Violet could never have the support that she needs, the thing which drives her to Alice Manfred's doors. As migrants, Alice and Violet locate displacement at the heart of the city and its inclusion of racism, isolation and corruption. Together Alice and Violet come to understand their shared feelings of loneliness and therefore help each other to confront feelings of loss, especially the loss of homeland. Alice and Violet relate to each other through their shared struggle

for self-realization and affirmation. Their quest for cultural healing in the collective sheds light on the post-colonial resistance embedded in the narrative of *Jazz*.

In an essay entitled "Cultural Hybridity in Tayeb Salih's *Mousim al-Hijra ila al-Shamal* (Season of Migration to the North)" Patricia Geesey defines the cultural hybrid as the "resulting offspring" of the contact between two disparate cultures (129). Similarly *Jazz* epitomizes the concept of hybridity as a result of the contact between two separate cultures, especially in presenting Joe Trace as the offspring of the mixture between the culture of the South and that of the North. His awareness of his "mixed origins" creates in him the debilitating fear of having sacrificed his former cultural heritage. In Geesey's words, Joe Trace is "subject to the laws of cultural hybridity and contamination in a post-colonial sense" (36). In mourning the loss of his young mistress, Joe Trace restricts himself within the confines of his apartment at Lenox. Since the death of Dorcas, he takes to the permanent posture of sitting by a window, facing the city and "crying along with the glass pane"

(118). Joe Trace's profound sadness expressed by "crying so openly" (118) is indicative of a state of melancholia brought about by mourning the loss of the beloved. Nevertheless, his self-imposed confinement at home should not be mistaken as acknowledgment of remorse or even repentance. His surname "Trace" may be symbolic to his need to cling to a trace, the trace of his love, home and lost youth. The narrator asserts, "[h]e minds her death, is so sorry about it, but he minded more the possibility of his memory failing to conjure up the dearness" (28). By conjuring up images of lost objects, Joe Trace has been able to survive feelings of loss. Dorcas for him is like the memory of the rural scenes he has clung to in order to survive his alienation in the city. At some point, Joe Trace even conflates the memory of Dorcas with that of the country: "But all I lived through, all I seen, and not one of those changes prepared me for her. For Dorcas. You would have thought I was twenty, back in Palestine satisfying my appetites for the first time under a walnut tree" (129). The recurring images of trees signal Joe's struggle to come to terms with what he left behind.

According to Patricia Geesey, trees stand as symbol of "stability and rootedness" (131). The manner in which he adheres to recollections of rural spots marks the need for self-affirmation. Joe Trace stands as epitome of the displaced migrant who often treasures memories as a way of warding off the fear of losing a rooted sense of identity.

Morrison's text entirely reflects on the phenomenon of displacement and expatriation experienced by Southern blacks migrating to the North. Caren Kaplan, for example, might see in Joe Trace an enactment of the "exile" who is both "melancholic and nostalgic about an irreparable loss and separation from the familiar or beloved" (30). According to Kaplan, "manifestations of nostalgia participate in Europe-American constructions of exile: nostalgia for the past; for home; for a 'mother-tongue'; for the particulars that signify the experience of the familiar once it has been lost. Such nostalgia is rooted in the notion that it is 'natural' to be at 'home' and that separation from that can never be assuaged by anything but return" (33). In this instance Kaplan is talking about the Euro-American

construction of modernist nostalgia. The narrative of *Jazz* depicts a form of nostalgia similar to the one Kaplan has mentioned. According to Richard Hardack, there is a “familiar enough modernist trope of self-alienation, of seeing oneself among ill-fitting popular culture [which] in *Jazz* is used to achieve a more dynamic critique of the American desire for a stable and self-containing male identity” (460). Particularly with the character of Joe Trace, *Jazz* epitomizes tropes of self alienation and nostalgia for irreparable losses. His inability to “achieve successful acclimation” in the new environment adds to his feelings of loss. 2 The narrative thereby reminds us that it is “the city that develops a crooked kind of mourning” (111).

In Raymond Williams’ words *Jazz* embodies “singular narrative of unsettlement, homelessness, solitude and impoverished independence” (*The Politics* 34). In his voluntary seclusion, Joe Trace invents and clings to exile as implements of self-containment. Hence his solitary confinement is a defense mechanism against the “wasteland” atmosphere of the city. Bigger than his love for Dorcas or the memory of that love

is Joe Trace’s sense of him(self) as monolith: the murder of Dorcas has after all been engendered by his desire to assert his domination over her. Bewildered by the audacity of Joe Trace’s murder of her niece, Alice Manfred wonders at “what she called the impunity of the man who killed her niece just because he could” (73). Indeed, Joe Trace has not only given himself the right to kill Dorcas but to grieve over her. The post-colonial theorist Renato Rosaldo would explain Joe Trace’s despondency and his bountiful weeping in terms of imperialist nostalgia. As Rosaldo contends, “Imperialist nostalgia revolves around a paradox: A person kills somebody and then mourns the victim. In more attenuated form, someone deliberately alters a form of life, and then regrets that things have not remained as they were prior to intervention (69-70). Joe Trace’s yearning for the beloved he himself killed is a clear example of imperialist nostalgia. His tears mourn a lost situation, not a missed individual. Dorcas as symbol is more significant that the human being she represents. Her death marks the end of a symbol: the end of dominion and the final loss of what used to be home with all its

connotations.

The narrator of *Jazz*, who is also a migrant in Harlem, holds on steadily to the memory of rural settings she/he left behind. In referring to the volatile and often unstable nature of the city, the narrator insists on using country images, enhancing thus the inner perception of the country's malleability. The narrator states, "the city, in its own way, gets down at you. . . The city is smart at this: smelling good and looking raunchy . . . sending secret messages disguised as public signs . . . Covering your moans with its own (64). In this instance the narrative depicts the narrator's fear that she or he as well has been exposed to the same form of cultural "contamination" that has badly influenced the people she/he observes from her apartment. The fear of cultural "contamination" is associated with the migrants' apprehension that they have forever lost the "purity" of origin due to the contact with other cultures. Notwithstanding the fact that "pure" origins are only mythical, some migrants obsess over mourning the loss of their past "purity." In *Jazz*, the narrator is apprehensive of the possibility that migrants have lost self- authenticity by ceasing to be

sincere to their primeval values and neglecting to abide by the traditions of the old home. *Jazz* portrays the migrants' disavowal of their former ideals, especially when they attempt to absorb city styles. The narrator therefore regrettably observes "how soon country people forget. When they fall in love with a city, it is forever, and it is like forever" (33). In adopting the stance of the composed writer, the narrator of *Jazz* manages to separate from other Harlem residents and also divert the attention from her or his cultural uncertainties. Despite the apparent reluctance to admit it, the narrator has been affected by the cultural "contact" between North and South. Hence, the narrator projects fears of displacement and onto other characters, especially when she or he implants in them dreams of "big trees . . . bigger than those in the park" (43).

Moreover, the narrator betrays her or his implicit approval of and possible complicity in the murder of Dorcas when she openly proclaims, "I always believed that girl was a pack of lies" (72). It is quite possible that the narrator and Joe Trace have figuratively and literally killed Dorcas because she represents

the city values they both want to eradicate.³ Central to the present concern is Richard Hardack's observation of how "each character derives his or her voice from this narcissistically echoing narrator" (463). Most probably the narrator has seen in Dorcas an epitome of the cultural "contamination" she also discerns in her/him self. Hence the narrator's approval of Dorcas' death stands evidence of his/her condemnation of the girl. The narrator accordingly struggles against the threat of cultural "contamination" by dreaming of more stable and better rooted locations.

Seen from a post-colonial perspective, the threat of cultural "contamination" is related with the experience of migration in general. Migration even has impacts on the sensibilities of the ones who stayed behind, especially when they get in contact with those who came back from migrant places. In *Sula*, the community condemns Sula for the cultural "contamination" identifiable with "newcomers." The very manner of Sula's return to the Bottom abruptly separates her from Bottom people: "Sula stepped off the Cincinnati Flyer into the robin

shit and began the long climb into the Bottom. She was dressed in a manner that was as close to a movie star as anyone would ever see. A black crepe dress splashed with pink and yellow zinnias . . . a black purse . . . so small, so charming—no one had seen anything like it ever before, including the mayor's wife and the music teacher, both of whom had been to Rome" (90). The community has arbitrarily "classified" Sula as an "outsider." In Craig Werner's words, Sula comes back literally "clothed with the image of the colonialist" (76). To Bottom people, Sula's arrival is ominous, it is associated with a plague of robins: "Accompanied by a plague of robins, Sula came back to Medallion" (89). For them, Sula now belongs to a different world and they are certainly destabilized by her introducing that world into their lives.

Despite her long absence, Sula feels at home in the Bottom. Apart from her manner of clothing, there is no evidence in the narrative to show that Sula is changed by her ten-year nomadic experience. Nonetheless, her own community can no longer feel at home with her. They see further evidence of

Sula's assimilation of standards of the "white" world when she puts her grandmother Eva in a residential home and when she steals her friend Nel's husband. To them, Sula has exposed her own cultural "contamination", and they misinterpret Sula's styles as symptoms of her post-travel alienation from them. The community of the Bottom unanimously perceives in Sula a form of metropolitan ideology they are not familiar with.

When the community denounces Sula as an alien, it remains oblivious to the fact that, as a woman, Sula has subsisted on the margin of the male-dominated world of the Bottom even prior to her departure. The community's strong preferences for lighter skinned women doubly confirms both Sula's and Nel's awareness of their marginality. The narrator remarks, "Because each had discovered years before that they were neither white nor male, and that all freedom and triumph was forbidden to them, they had set about creating something else to be" (52). Ironically, Sula is categorized an "outsider" only after spending ten years away from the Bottom. The community's failure

to recognize the old Sula in the new one strategically sheds light on the arbitrariness of their rejection of her. Implicit in the narrative is the critique of the narrow scope of the community's judgment since it confines Sula to the trope of the "traveler" who is both unlike them and different from what she used to be.

The narrative also delves into the characters of the people of the Bottom to expose their sharing of attributes similar to the ones they condemn Sula for. For example, the narrator precisely opposes the naming of Sula as "pariah" for reasons of her easy styles when the people of the Bottom have completely forgotten their "own easy ways" (112). The men in the community are especially keen on deploring Sula for the "unforgivable thing" (112), referring to her easy habits of sleeping with white men. Contradicting the community's claims to "purity" and their share in the "filthier" thing they accuse Sula of, the narrator comments,

The fact that their own skin color was proof that it had happened in their own families was no deterrent to their bile. Nor was the willingness of black men to

lie on the beds of white women a consideration that might lead them toward tolerance. They insisted that all unions between white men and black women be rape; for a black woman to be willing was literally unthinkable. In that way, they regarded integration with precisely the same venom that white people did (113).

Central to this concern is Claudia Tate's observation that "the community in Morrison's fiction is never benign, and like all her other characters, community itself is morally ambiguous, comprising as it does a force for conformity, a demand for sanity, an argument for rationality- none of which qualities are desirable for either Morrison or her wilderness characters" (53). Rather than sharing the community's moral ambiguity, Sula chooses to openly breach the norms of their double standards.

One question is whether the community would denounce Sula with such fervor if she had not left the Bottom. Her alienation from the community is metaphorically established in relation to the plague of robins which coincides with her arrival at the Bottom. Sula's illicit wanderings make her especially

guilty in the eyes of the community. After Sula steals her best friend's husband, the community's condemnation becomes final and they righteously name her a "roach". Sula's past is now called into question as every body begins to recall Eva's version of what happened on the day Sula's mother Hannah was caught in fire. Eva claims that she saw Sula watch with interest her mother in flames. That they associate the evil in Sula with factors of her nomadism is implied in their never denouncing the ones who have stayed behind on grounds of misconduct similar to that of Sula's. While they reminisce over how Sula watched with "interest" her mother Hannah burn, they fail to remember how Eva herself burnt her son Plum. Ironically, Eva was never named "pariah," and Hannah was not denounced for her "easy ways" and recurrent sexual intimacies with married men. Roberta Rubenstein argues that Sula is "the dark shadow, the Other, that undermines both white and black fantasies of female goodness, beauty and upward mobility. Her position at the bottom of the bottom symbolizes the regrettable need to pronounce someone inferior in

order to defend a fragile sense of self-worth" (130). Categorizing Sula as "underground" self is the community's way of asserting their identity and strength. The further Sula drifts from the community, the more important her presence becomes to them. The Bottom people want to set themselves against whatever evil Sula represents. The narrative asserts, "Their conviction of Sula's evil changed them in accountable yet mysterious ways. Once the source of their personal misfortune was identified, they had leave to love and protect one another. They began to cherish their husbands and wives, protect their children, repair their homes and in general band together against the devil in their midst" (117). The references in this passage to the community's need of recognizing itself against the limits of Sula are crucial. Morrison's narrative makes it clear that Sula after all is not much different from the people who condemn her.

Moreover, Sula becomes worthy of the community's contempt per excellence when she chooses not to recognize the limitations of her gender. Unlike her friend Nel, she refuses to marry in accordance with

the traditions of the community. Rather than relying on marital or motherhood bonds to define her as a person, Sula builds a sense of identity by the deliberate dismissal of these bonds as norms. When Eva refers to Sula's single and motherless status as improper, Sula responds, "I don't want to make somebody else, I want to make myself" (92). By subverting the patriarchal rules embraced by the community, Sula becomes a threatening presence, and Bottom people unanimously agree that "she was laughing at their God" (115). The god Sula refuses to solicit is the revered patriarchal and traditional deity whose "magic 'government' was going to lift them up, out and away from that dirt, those beans, those wars" (160).

Rather than despairing over absences in their lives, the Bottom people occupy themselves with obsessing over Sula's aberration. The steadfastness of economic insufficiency forms one of the major absences among the Bottom community. People in the Bottom could not rely on agriculture because the Bottom is located on mountainous areas where land cultivation is backbreaking work. The white community of Medallion

have literally displaced the black community when they ousted them to the hilly parts they --the white people-- paradoxically named the Bottom. Medallion's white farmers managed to discharge the black residents of the fertile soil of the valley. They tricked a poor black farmer to accept the hilltop land rather than the promised bottom land which is more suitable for farming. The farmer was led to believe that hilltop land was closer to heaven, hence the naming of the hilly side of Medallion as Bottom to Heaven. The black community inhabiting the heights of Medallion is symbolically situated at the bottom of its economic and social stratum. By assigning the heights to black people, Medallion's white community manage to exclude blacks from agriculture, Medallion's major source of production. This literal displacement has created emotional dislocation among the black community that misses real attachment to land or to any other substantial source of living. Patricia McKee contends that missing or absent attachments means a "massive 'displacement'" (4). Bottom people can only avoid factors of their displacement by obsessing

over the evil in Sula. McKee writes of Sula, "By identifying Sula as evil and rejecting her categorically, people in the Bottom are able to keep their distance from absences they cannot afford to acknowledge" (4).

The hopes of the Bottom people to benefit economically from the construction of a tunnel site are shattered as it turns out that white workers exclusively get hired for the job. When Bottom people spontaneously join Shadrack in celebrating his ritual of National Suicide Day, they end up destroying the tunnel site. The destruction of the tunnel marks the revolt against the economic obliteration of blacks by whites. Significantly, Bottom people begin to recognize their economic deprivation as a major absence only after Sula's death, when they cease to rely on her evil as a way of avoiding reality. Morrison herself asserts, "I wanted Sula to be missed by the reader. That's why she dies early" ("Spacing" 4). Commenting on Morrison's statement, McKee writes, "To miss Sula is to recognize her occupation in and of the Bottom: what she did there and how she was a necessary part of the place, not only as

presence but also because she took the place of absence" (4). Instead of dwelling over the absence of economic stability, the community of the Bottom occupied themselves with inventing a Sula's different from them. Sula's death becomes a major absence to the Bottom people, especially to her friend Nel, as it takes Nel a long time to discover that it is Sula and not her husband Jude that she misses. Nel suddenly realizes that Sula after all is an integral part of herself, her own significant "other". To the Bottom, however, Sula remains the internal "other" whose irrationality has given them the urge to be rational. When Sula is absent, the people of the Bottom lose the wholesome outlook Sula's presence enabled. The massive deaths caused by the destruction of the tunnel indicates the exhaustion of the Bottom's potential to put up with major absences.

What Nel mostly misses in Sula is the latter's subversive nonconformity to the absolute conventions of the Bottom. Nel realizes that she and Sula are one item when Eva tells her, "Just alike. Both of you. Never was no difference between you" (169).

In this instance, Eva introduces Nel to a form of truth she has not yet discovered in herself, the truth that "All these years she had been secretly proud of her calm, controlled behavior when Sula was uncontrollable, her compassion for Sula's frightened and shamed eyes. Now it seemed that what she had thought was maturity, serenity and compassion was only the tranquillity that follows a joyful stimulation" (170). Bemoaning Sula's death, Nel cries out, "We was girls together" (174). This is significant: Nel has willfully shared Sula's laughter at the town's out-of-date traditions, but has hidden her laughter behind assumed conformity. Like the rest of town, Nel has condemned Sula less for her easy habits of sleeping with men and more for the fear of cultural "contamination" Sula presented ever since she came back to the Bottom.

What the narrative implicitly critiques is the community's adoption of the modern world's paradigms of "purity". The persistent questioning of the anomalous and "discriminatory" status ascribed to Sula is the primary underlying theme of the narrative. Sula has been assigned the position

of the migrant and diaspora and her impurity becomes foundational to the community's perception of itself as "pure". While the community condemns Sula as the breeder of alien ideologies, the narrative defends Sula as the positive hybrid. Homi Bhabha, for example, comments on the empowering effects of hybridity in that it "displays the necessary deformation and displacement of all sites of discrimination and domination. It unsettles the narcissistic or mimetic demands of colonial power [by implicating] its identifications in strategies of subversion that turns the gaze of the discriminated back upon the eye of power" (112). In *Sula*, the narrative locates sites of discrimination and domination at the heart of the community's embrace of authoritarian and patriarchal traditions. Sula's hybridity is seen in light of her resisting practices against patriarchal replication and perpetuation of colonial hegemony. Instead of passively submitting to the Bottom's patriarchal traditions and their unjust demand for women to accept marital and maternal roles, Sula lives in accordance with her own imagination. Significantly, the narrative depicts Sula as

neither an "outsider" to nor as part of the Bottom. Likewise, the narrative offers no indication that Sula has assimilated the values of the ("white?") world she left behind. For example, the narrative does not depict Sula as culturally destabilized by the long absence from her homeland. In Bhabha's words, Sula occupies the "in-between space," that is, "the Third space of enunciations- that carries the burden on the meaning of culture" (38). The third space the narrative of *Sula* embraces is the world that Sula herself occupies: a world which admits no fixed positions and completely abandons monolithic choices of either/or for the diverse orientations of both/and.

Like Morrison's other novels, *Sula* predicates tradition as a way out of social and psychological entrapment. The narrative covertly asserts the necessity to cast aside the old-fashioned patriarchal traditions of gender oppression. The narrative thereby abstains from either criticizing or apologizing for Sula's destruction of the patriarchal norms of the Bottom. Still Sula does not in any way invoke the modernist project and its advocating of the arbitrary overthrow of all forms of

traditions. In a sense, Sula follows the line of Walter Benjamin's insistence on the indispensability of the continuous attempt to "wrest tradition away from a conformism that is about to overpower it" (681). Likewise, Sula advocates the endeavor to liberate traditions from smug conformism. In *Sula*, Morrison calls for the preservation of certain binding traditions. For example, she regrettably proclaims the disintegration of certain communal traditions caused by the community's adoption of the values of the modern world. The narrative states,

The black people, for all their new look, seemed awfully anxious to get to the valley, or leave town and abandon the hills to whoever was interested. It was sad, because the Bottom had been a real place. These young men kept talking about the community, but they left the hills to the poor, the old, the stubborn- and the rich white folks. (166)

The narrative pinpoints the actual abandonment of the Bottom by its people. Those who left the Bottom will probably not go back, and those who stayed behind

have forgotten some important communal traditions. Unlike the migrants who leave without a chance of ever coming back, Sula returns to the Bottom. The narrative therefore remains uncritical of her temporary absence from the Bottom. However, the narrative critiques the manner in which Bottom people have negatively perceived Sula's absence by relating a plague of robins to her unexpected arrival. In *Sula*, Morrison abandons the adoption of ghetto mentality by refusing to confine her characters within narrowly defined cultural domains. ⁴ Still the narrative is not negligent of the losses combined with the experiences of travel, a clear example is Eva's return to the Bottom with a leg amputated. Nel's mother has her sense of identity troubled when on board the train the conductor calls her "girl." And Shadrack loses his sanity when he travels to fight a war and participate in the inhuman and unnecessary killing of others.

Like Joe Trace and unlike Sula, Jadine in *Tar Baby* predicates the negative attributes of hybridity. Travel for Jadine is a major destabilizing force, rendering her irreparably dislocated. Jadine's

travel in Europe is likely to disconnect her from ancestral and cultural roots. While in Europe, Jadine worked as a model and she obtained a degree in European art history. The narrative pinpoints the paradoxes of Jadine's success as a European art historian and her tremendous failure to grasp African tradition and folk culture. Her education in Paris was a form of compromise since it was subsidized by Valerian Street, the white industrialist who employs her uncle and aunt as butler and cook.

Jadine's cultural displacement is evident in the dilemma she faces when her European boyfriend proposes to marry her. In this instance, she is confident that he is the man she wants to marry; still she is not sure if he really wants her. Thus, she wonders if "the person he wants to marry is me or a black girl? And if it isn't me he wants, but any black girl who looks like me, talks and acts like me, what will happen if he finds out that I hate ear loops, that I don't have to straighten my hair . . . that sometimes I want to get out of my skin and be only the person inside- not American- not black, just me" (48). This reveals Jadine's awareness that her possession of

a white form of beauty is her only license into wealthy society. Jadine probably knows that her career in modeling is a form of compromise, which is likely to engender in her feelings of disingenuousness and cultural vulnerability. For example, Jadine is emotionally destabilized by an African woman with a yellow dress who spits at her. The woman's insulting gesture makes Jadine feel out of place in Paris. So she immediately takes a flight out of Paris to Isle des Chevaliers, a small island on the Caribbean where Valerian Street and her aunt and uncle reside. The woman's gesture has derailing effects on her because Jadine fully understands its meaning: the woman Jadine wants to identify with as "sister/mother/she" (46) has entirely rejected her as member of the race. Jadine also identifies the woman in the yellow dress as the archetypal mother by virtue of "too much hip" and "too much bust" (45). To Jadine, she is the "woman's woman", the "unphotographable beauty", the "eyes whose force has burnt away their lashes" (46). What Jadine wants from the woman is recognition, she "wanted that woman to like and respect her" (47).

The woman instead shows only contempt and Jadine perceives the woman's disregard to be directed at her own rootlessness. The incident is especially significant since it points out Jadine's distance from her African heritage. The gesture which forces Jadine out of Paris has also destabilized her sense of identity.

Her escape back to Isle des Chevaliers is most likely motivated by Jadine's search for roots, for a place she might identify with home. However, the island only reinforces Jadine's alienation from her own culture. She is displaced even among the people she calls family: she can not relate to the Streets, who sponsored her education, neither can she be daughter to the uncle and aunt who adopted her when she was twelve years old. To the black people in the community, Jadine is the daughter who estranged herself from them. In their solid rootedness, the trees remind Jadine of her inappropriate separation from her roots. Alone in the woods, she imagines the presence of women hung from trees. Like the woman she encounters in Paris, the women she sees hanging from trees represent the stability and

rootedness she herself lacks. The narrative comments.

The young trees sighed and swayed. The women looked down from the rafters of the trees and stopped murmuring. They were delighted when they first saw her, thinking a runaway child had been restored to them. The women hanging from the trees were quiet now, but arrogant, mindful as they were of their own value, their exceptional femaleness; knowing as they did that the first world of the world had been built with their exceptional femaleness. (183)

The narrator's above comment is symbolic of Jadine's cultural orphanage, her inherent awareness of it and the resulting guilt. Jadine has sacrificed her own cultural competency when she attempts to assimilate white values and norms. To the black people of Isle des Chevaliers, Jadine is now a complete stranger and has surely lost her connection with her ancestral roots in the African community. As Craig Werner might have it, Jadine's "struggle between two

irreconcilable strivings threatens to plunge the black person trying to escape his or her native culture into a sort of halfway house, where that person is accepted neither as part of the European world nor part of the black one” (70). Jadine has obviously shunned African values for the white world in which she travels, the same white world that accepts her only as half-white and not as completely black.

When Jadine attempts to reconnect with her ancestral roots through her romantic affair with Son, she fails. The African American lover she picks on the island is metaphoric of the nurturing ancestor she never had: “She wanted a little human warmth, some unsullied person to be near, so she took his hand without thinking about it and said ‘that’s awful’” (210). Inherently, Jadine is aware of both her need for Son and Son’s willingness to meet her needs. The text comments, “For the first time she saw his huge hands. One hand alone was big enough for two. A finger spread that could reach hither for you” (211). The hand is another metaphor of the type of inner strength Jadine lacks. Son’s immediate plan is to liberate Jadine from her subordination to

the Streets. He wants to help Jadine out of her psychological entrapment to the Streets who sponsored her education, and he goes along with Jadine’s plan to escape the Street’s homestead.

In New York, Son is disoriented by the haunting gloominess he identifies with the city. The discernible despondency of the city is especially typical of black women: “Black girls in New York City were crying and their men were looking neither to the right nor to the left. . . . Oh, their mouths were heavy with plum lipstick and their eyebrows were a thin gay line, but nothing could stop their crying and nothing could persuade their men to look to the right or look to the left” (214). This reflects on the apparent dichotomy between the city and the country side. Son, who has grown up in the warmth of the country, is likely to perceive New York as an alienating and melancholic dwelling. As in *Jazz*, The narrative of *Tar Baby* overtly comments on the disenfranchisement of black people in big cities. For example, the narrator comments on the manner in which the women’s sadness has touched Son, “It depressed him all that crying, for it was silent and

veiled by plum lipstick and thin gay lines over their eyes” (216). Jadine, on the other hand, remains unaware of the disconsolate people Son has noticed in New York. She is so happy in New York to the extent that she wants to “giggle” (221). New York is surely the place where she feels at home: “New York oiled her joints and she moved as though they were oiled. Her legs were longer here, her neck really connected her body to her head” (221). Unlike Son, Jadine experiences the city as empowering.

Son's disappointment in New York invokes his dreams of Eloe, his original small town in North Florida. In Eloe, Jadine's identity crisis reaches its climax. As she sees it, Son and the rest of the black community of Eloe connect to women only in terms of patriarchal domination and control. Jadine's identity crisis takes the form of sexual fears and she dreams of “night women” who were “all there crowding into the room. Some of them she did not know, recognize, but they were all there spoiling her love making, taking her sex like succubi; but not his” (258). Son contradicts Jadine essentializing rhetoric and asserts the economic independence and the indispensable

role of the women in Eloe. The narrator notes,

“She kept barking at him about equality, sexual equality, as though he thought women were inferior. He could not understand that. Before Francine was attacked by the dogs, she gave him ten points on the court and still beat him... Cheyenne [Son's former wife] was driving a beat up old truck at age nine, four years before he could even shift gears, and she could drop a pheasant like an Indian. His mother's memory was kept alive by those who remembered how she roped horses when she was a girl. (268)”

Son's observation here eliminates the myth of independence attributed to the female city dwellers against their supposedly less independent country counterparts. No matter what Son says, Jadine is confirmed in her belief that women in Eloe are subjects to men's control especially in their acceptance of their role as mothers and protectors. As Jadine sees it, Eloe is still entrapped in a certain set of traditions in which men relate to women only as ultimate mothers.

Back in New York, Jadine and Son fight each other with relentless vehemence. Jadine wants to raise Son from the extreme poverty she identifies with Eloë and bind him to the world of finesse she relates to the city. Likewise, Son tries to pull Jadine away from what he sees as fraudulent city styles and he ardently resists her attempts to make him part of her world. In view of their irreconcilable differences, their romantic affair is inevitably fated. The narrator asserts, Each was pulling the other away from the maw of hell- its very ridge top. Each knew the world as it was meant or ought to be (269).”

Like differences in their own characters, the disparities of their world cannot be bridged, and Jadine’s flight back to Paris is significant enough of the unfeasibility of compromise.

In this final instance of Jadine’s frequent travels lies the truth of Jadine’s inability to recognize herself as a real human apart from travel. Only in adopting the cultural standards of some metropolitan site could Jadine come to a closer affirmation of her own identity. Still her onetime escape from Paris stands as evidence of her

awareness that she is not an integral part of the other world she covets. The certitude of Jadine’s lack of cultural genuineness has prevented her from integrating into the world of Eloë. Evidence of her dislocation and separation is seen in her adoption of values different from those embraced by her own group. Son, on the other hand, goes back to the Isle des les Chevalier searching for Jadine. Marie Terese, a black ancestral figure, manages to convince him to “forget her,” adding that “There is nothing in her parts for you. She has forgotten her ancient properties” (305). Son decides to stay on the island and become one of its legendary knights, immersing himself further in his folk tradition and African roots. Contrasted with the narrative implicit critique of Jadine’s departure to Paris is a covertly sympathetic tone with Son’s decision to stay on the island. The Streets continue to reside on the island, living like prisoners in their big mansion and letting themselves be consumed by the guilt of having abused and neglected their only son.

Just as the narrative is explicitly critical of cultural precariousness, it also implicitly invalidates Eloë’s

patriarchal conventions and Son's conformity to them. Like Sula, Tar Baby covertly calls out for a withdrawal from some of the traditions that overpower personal freedom. Tar Baby and Jazz focus on the negative aspects of the experience of hybridity. The three narratives advocate traditions as empowering tools against the alienating forces of expatriation. But the texts also emphasize the importance of shedding some traditions of the patriarchal control of men over women. Jazz invites the formation of ethnic group identity, while it cautions against blind absorption of city norms on the part of southern migrants. Sula advocates hybridity, especially when the hybrid resists assimilating the values of restrictive mother communities. While Sula insists on the importance of communal bonding, it is critical of the community's attempt to police Sula's personal liberty. Morrison's Jazz, Sula and Tar Baby include an analysis of how travel affects identity formation. The three texts call for resistance against assimilation in a post-colonial

context.

The three texts, Jazz, Sula, and Tar Baby deal with the theme of migration of African-Americans from the rural South to industrial Northern cities and the coexisting movement to metropolitan sites. In the context of Morrison's narratives, migration is significant since it brings up themes of emotional displacement brought about by the physical move from one geographical location to the other. The migrant is displaced by the attempt to acclimate to the new place and by his/her awareness of factors of racism identifying metropolitan locations. The three narratives provide migrant people with tools of resistance consisting of communal bonding among migrants and adherence to one's cultural values and traditions. In the three narratives, Morrison also insists on casting out old-fashioned traditions which overpower freedom and bring about gender oppression.

Notes

- 1 I use the two nouns interchangeably and both usages should convey the same meaning, that is, one's incapacity to experience feelings of belonging to one's own home, especially when home offers no more than conditions of oppression and economic insufficiency.
- 2 Caren Kaplan uses Elsa Triolet's argument that human beings are like plants and animals and that certain species cannot achieve successful acclimation, *Questions of Travel*, p. 33.
- 3 This echoes Evalyn Accad's comment on Sa'eed's killing of the English woman he marries because she represents Western values that he wants to eradicate. Accad is quoted in Patricia Geesey's "cultural hybridity in Tayeb Salih's *Mousim al-Hijra ila al-Shamal*," p. 134.
- 4 Salman Rushdie warns against the adoption of ghetto mentality. In *Imaginary Homelands*, he reminds us not "to forget that there is a world beyond the community to which we belong, to confine ourselves within narrowly defined cultural frontiers, would be, I believe, to go involuntarily into that form of internal exile which in South Africa is called the 'homeland,'" p. 19.

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