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The (Wo)man, the Myth, the Legend: Destruction and Restoration

Through the Myth-bearing Female Body in Toni Morrison's *Tar Baby* and *Beloved*

At the root of many of Toni Morrison's work is the centrality of the female myth.

Whether in Pilate's oral accounts in *Song of Solomon* or Florens' narrativized inscriptions in *A Mercy*, the women in Morrison's work don't just function as participants in the novel's central myths; they act as crucial historians, preserving the marginalized myths of their family and culture in what becomes a form of gendered power. In *Tar Baby* and *Beloved*, however, Morrison complicates the characterization of this feminine mythology. The two novels are situated in vastly different socio-cultural landscapes — both in the sense of historical moment when they were written as well as the context within the novels themselves, and thus the cultural tensions Jadine and Sethe must navigate in their respective stories necessarily assume different forms. Yet as seemingly removed as they are from one another, as Jadine struggles to negotiate Westernized conceptions of womanhood alongside cultural ties and Sethe wrestles with the boundary between community and individual trauma, the question, in both novels, ultimately becomes one of self-characterization: when black women are tasked with guarding myth — and by proxy, cultural history — how, Morrison asks, does that responsibility, one equally capable of restoration or destruction, alter a black woman's sense of self? Morrison's resistance to characterizing this female mythologization as exclusively positive or negative enables *Tar Baby* and *Beloved* to explore these questions through their protagonists' struggles. Even as she

imagines Jadine and Sethe in different socio-cultural ecologies, then, Morrison's construction of the female body as a site of mythologized cultural memory highlights how the inheritance of the intersectional black female identity — and with it, the responsibility to preserve cultural memory — can fundamentally destabilize selfhood, forcing a reckoning with both self-ascribed identity and belonging within the racial and gendered diaspora.

Evaluating Jadine's struggle with her sense of self and cultural memory through myth does not just require an understanding of plot and character but also of the contextual framework that makes that tension possible; both the socio-cultural context in which Morrison's authored *Tar Baby* as well as the setting within the story coincide to inform the novel's approach to the female myth. Published in 1981, *Tar Baby* is situated on the brink of the rise of the Black Power movement and its call "for the overthrow of white hegemony's manifestations—racism, (neo)colonialism, class oppression, white violence, capitalism, sexism, and imperialism" (Swan). The movement's drive for such change on a transnational scale laid the groundwork for a global and literary preoccupation with the concept of "black authenticity" and the approach to diasporic tradition, the tension between assimilation to modern white power structures and loyalty to the black cultural tradition in the contemporary realm. Mired in such debates, the Isle des Chevaliers, provides the prime pressure cooker in which those tensions can erupt — especially for such a character as Jadine who, as an orphaned member of the diasporic community, is forced to negotiate the contradicting impulses foregrounded by the Black Power movement. The island is marked by physical isolation. Accessible only by boat and hours away from the mainland, the land and those who inhabit it are literally removed from the institution of slavery in the United States; any historicized myth or tangential source that exists to tie Jadine to her cultural history is then either preserved in the implicit personification of the land itself or in those who inhabit the

racial and cultural awareness necessary to act as guiding forces for Jadine — both sources that remain in different ways, inaccessible to her.

On some level, this inaccessibility can be attributed to the work of broader, more systemic forces; what remnants of historical myth preserved in the island have either been colonized — “the men [gnawing] through the daisy trees until, wild-eyed and yelling, they broke in two and hit the ground” and carved into liminal spaces that require effort to reach — “the women hanging in the trees” when Jadine gets stuck in the mud, “the mist [lifting] and the trees [stepping] back” as Son enters the wild rain forest (Morrison 10, 182). Though that damage is visible to those in the native and lower class communities, the colonizers have distanced themselves from the destruction whether by ignoring it — “beyond its providing the weather that helped our prevented the steamers bringing mail, [Valerian] never gave the sea a thought” — or aestheticizing it such that its loss is erased altogether — “bougainvillea, avocado, poinsettia, lime, banana, coconut and the last of the rain forest’s champion trees” (Morrison 11, 10). They have relegated the rest of the island “to the outskirts of town,” the “part of the boulevard where the sea threw up what it could not digest...Whatever life there is on the sand got desperate” (Morrison 149). As much as Jadine’s detachment from the black cultural tradition is driven by this natural isolation, however, Jadine — in her figurative rootlessness, the socially constructed environment that has bred her inculcated philosophy — must also claim some accountability for her own cultural disconnect. Orphaned as she is, Jadine is reared within the white patriarchal order. As Son observes, she caters herself to Valerian, “pour[ing] *his* wine...[taking] *his* part, trying to calm Ondine and Sydney to *his* satisfaction (Morrison 219). Even as her aunt and uncle work in the kitchens below, Jadine lives aboveground, eats at the Street family dinner table with Valerian at its head. In this sense, she becomes the portrait of what Spillers describes as the

“woman on the boundary...whose human and familial status by the very nature of the case, had yet to be defined” (Spillers 74). Her rootlessness makes her into a cultural and feminine void, and it is in that identification, “...under the press of a patronymic, patrifocal, patrilineal, and patriarchal order,” that Jadine’s integration into the Street family, her inability to fully envision herself as a woman of the black diaspora crystallizes (Spillers 76). Without a genetic linkage to a paternal father, Valerian fills “the blank space where his proper name will fit” by assuming the role of Jadine’s “captor father,” and “kinship” loses meaning, since it can be invaded at any given and arbitrary moment by the property relations’ (Spillers 80, 74). Removed from the historical site of the slavery’s legacy and raised as the pseudo-child of the Street household, Jadine’s privileged upbringing enables her to construct a fabricated illusion divorced from racial structures — including removing herself from the kinship of the African American community. She has learned to like ‘Ave Maria’ better than gospel music” and “Picasso...better than an Itumba mask,” though she “wish[es] it weren’t so” (Morrison 74). She partially excises her biological family — Ondine and Sydney — from her life, substituting their blood ties with the “ownership” that Valerian exerts over her through his patronage. By adopting this form of pseudo-kinship based in capitalistic debt, Jadine is tamed into the epitome of W.E.B Du Bois’s “talented tenth,” an assimilated product of cultural disconnect. She learns that the only way to succeed as a black woman is to operate on a binary — either alignment with the white community or the African American tradition — and uphold her distance from her culture through this inculcated parochial philosophy. Yet this transformation functions as more than an education; it fundamentally shifts her perception of self, race, and femininity, creating an unbreachable distance between herself and Ondine, never mind herself and Thérèse — and by proxy, losing her only remaining access point to the feminine cultural myth.

Situated within the black diaspora discourse and Jadine's characterization as a product of white racial structures, the way *Tar Baby* envisions Jadine's conception of the female myth pivots on her struggle to reconcile self-authenticity with the authenticity of black womanhood. *Tar Baby*'s representation of black womanhood is rooted strongly in the nationalistic idea of the "diaspora mother," a model in which the female is equalized with what Morrison calls "an exceptional femaleness" (Morrison 183). Throughout the novel, this framework appears as quintessentially maternal, mythical, and physically manifested. Figures like Ondine and the "pie-making" ladies of Eloë center themselves in acts of care: the meals they cook and present to their loved ones, the quiet attention paid to their children — biological or not. In Thérèse and even — in a sense — the woman in yellow, the maternalistic femininity assumes a mysticity: Thérèse's breasts which "go on giving...to this day!" function as symbols of her fertility while her blindness transforms her into an almost seer-like figure (Morrison 154). The woman in yellow who haunts Jadine's dreams appears repeatedly with her three eggs — objects directly associated with reproduction — who is magnetically self-confident in her black femininity, serves as a subject of fascination and envy for Jadine. Yet as maternalistic as these women are, their nurturing impulse does not dispossess them of their underlying strength; rather, it's from this matriarchal instinct that they derive their power, a characterization Frazeri defines as "a spirit of independence and a keen sense of her personal rights" (Frazeri qtd. in Spillers 74). Ondine's work in the kitchen and child-rearing manifests with a fervor: "I would have stood on my feet all day all night to put her through that school. And when my feet were gone, I would have cooked on my knees" (Morrison 193). Thérèse's endless mothering quality is counterbalanced with the daily labor she performs for the Street family. The woman in yellow's self-confidence and goddess-like quality give her the authority to not only move through the world confidently, "as

though her many-colored sandals were pressing gold tracks on the floor,” but to cast judgement on others, the same way she does when she spits at Jadine (Morrison 45). In each of these exemplifications of black womanhood, the quality of feminine nurture echoes the dual physical and maternal labor performed by enslaved women, taking the stereotypical “Mammy” role enforced on black woman and reenvisioning it as black female power. In their mirrors of this historicized model, these female examples draw upon the prototype of black female strength and inscribe it onto their own bodies; they guard the legacy of cultural history and female power by preserving it within themselves. In some ways, then, this model grounded in black nationalism is critically constructive. Its ability to preserve black history represents a necessary form of resistance. Especially for members of a community whose history forced them to adapt unconventional ways in order to protect their cultures from erasure, this infusion of mythic strength, the integration of mythic tradition onto the female body serves as a means both of cultural preservation and empowerment.

In other ways, however, this philosophy of culturalized motherhood, particularly as it’s absorbed into and asserted onto the black woman’s body, has just as much potential to be destructive. As much as Ondine and Thérèse inhabit their matriarchal roles with strength, the assumed responsibilities associated with this mythic womanhood are not light; throughout *Tar Baby*, Morrison directly complicates this tradition through Jadine as a way to reveal “with great sensitivity the kinds of demands a project of cultural nationalism makes on women, entailing — among other things — a reproductive definition of womanhood” (Goyal). In contrast to the nomadic mobility permitted to men like Son, under the tradition of the diaspora mother, women function “as stable purveyors of tradition” (Goyal). Their responsibility lies not only in the preservation of culture within their own bodies, but in the bearing of children as a means of

ensuring that tradition is inherited. In her refusal to “settle for wifely competence when she could be almighty, to settle for fertility rather than originality, nurturing instead of building,” Jadine and her desire for independence are neither framed as freedom nor considered relative to her autonomy (Morrison 269). Instead, both Son, Thérèse, Ondine — the creators and inheritors of the diaspora motherhood standard — interpret it “as a threat to the community, and her mobility (rather than as a sign of transnational affiliation or self-reliance) as a sign of alienation” (Goyal). This judgement of Jadine is edged in irony; in their attempt to preserve the mythic tradition — a practice that was created to resist the dehumanizing institution of slavery, that was crafted out of an erasure of autonomy — Son and the diaspora mothers supplant Jadine’s own desires by imposing the framework on her body. Son, in his idealistic vision of Jadine, pictures her among the women in Eloë, living “yellow houses with white doors” and “minding the pie table in the basement of the church” (Morrison 119). When he envisions not only his future *with* Jadine, but a future *for* her, he does so through the pre-established futures of other diasporic mothers, never as her own person: “Would she be Thérèse? Or Ondine? Or Rosa or Sally Brown, or maybe even Francine...” (Morrison 268). Both of these aspirational fantasies of Jadine are aggressively domestic and implicitly maternalistic in nature, and while they align almost perfectly with the idea of authentic black femininity as conducted and solidified by the diaspora mother — the tradition of racial unity, the absorption of Jadine into the maternal standard and the black diaspora — they bear no resemblance to any of Jadine’s characterization whose life as a European-educated model has been defined by independence and movement. In mapping the identities of other women onto Jadine, Son ostensibly erases Jadine’s own desires and dreams in favor of his own elevated and nationalistic vision. Ironically, Ondine, who, as an employee of the Street family, should understand the drive for freedom, exercises that same form of control. Even

as she demands selflessness of Jadine, urging her to “be a daughter first...a real woman: a woman good enough for a child; good enough for a man — good enough even for the respect of other women,” the imposition of this tradition inherently disregards Jadine, who has expressed no desire to bear children (Morrison 281). While working towards the aims constructive to their philosophy, both Ondine and Son enforce the expectations of the diaspora mother onto Jadine and in their judgement, disallow her of any of her own dreams and ambitions in favor of shaping her to their own (Goyal).

This is where judgement of Jadine’s character requires further examination. Though the framework of black nationalism acts as a form of distinct strength and central means of cultural mythologization for many of the characters in *Tar Baby*, Jadine joins the ranks of the later generations who Spillers observes as interpreting the ‘African-American female’s “dominance” and “strength,”’ as a “pathology,” as an instrument of castration’ (Spillers 74). In her qualification that this applies to “both black and white, oddly enough,” Spillers’s characterization of this disparity as an issue not of race, but of generation and femininity informs the nature of Jadine’s resistance (Spillers 74). Notably, even though Jadine rejects the idea of the diaspora mother, she is acutely aware of her intersectional identity — her position as a woman and more specifically, as a black woman. Informed by her success as a Parisian model, however — a career funded by Valerian and operating within white expectations which state that “it’s marriage *or* a career for them, not both, not *and*” — Jadine perceives her integrity of self and the myth immortalized in the female body as a binary (Tate 162). As a model, she is capable of mobility and derives her empowerment not from a connection to any community, but from her own self-worth. This almost masculine independence is directly contrasted with the environment established by the feminine myth of the diaspora mother. When Jadine argues with Ondine, she

chafes against the implication that Ondine is “asking [Jadine] to parent [her]” when she “can’t do that now” (Morrison 281). When she travels to Eloë with Son, she fights to reclaim her womanhood in the presence of the fertile and implicitly maternal figures she sees, insisting that “I have breasts too” as they “each pulled out a breast and showed it to her,” the woman in yellow “show[ing] Jadine her three big eggs” (Morrison 258-259). Her experience with the women in the trees is framed through a lens of stagnancy; she “[sinks] up to her knees, [struggles] to lift her feet” and thus, literally, becomes trapped in a situation in which “movement was not possible” (Morrison 182). In this contrastive relationship between the individual and the maternal, mobility and stagnancy, Jadine perceives an impossible choice between her membership to the black diaspora and self-defined identity: to be a truly authentic African woman, according to the standards enforced by the diaspora mother, is to be tied to a group, to motherhood, and as a result, requires her to sacrifice her rights as an individual. For a woman whose life in Paris is grounded in the search for choice — in the United States, her only ones were to “marry a dope king or a doctor, model, or teach art at Jackson High. In Europe she thought there might be a fourth choice” — to lose that autonomy would be to lose herself (Morrison 225). In this sense then, Jadine’s resistance to embracing her black identity is rooted not necessarily in an implicit aversion to the diasporic community or the cultural myth, but to the restrictions imposed by the model of the diaspora mother — the only version of black womanhood that has been presented to her as authentic — and her simultaneous inability to transcend ‘the logic of binary choices, “blackening up or universalizing out”’ (Goyal; Morrison 64). Unable to reconcile racial unity with the maintenance of self-identity, Jadine becomes defiant of what Morrison frames as the ability of black women “to combine the nest and the adventure... [to be] both safe harbor and ship...both inn and trail.” (Tate 161). The friction between mythic cultural history and

contemporary individualism simply becomes a matter of choice: how to succeed as a black woman in the contemporary age. For Jadine, who is “estranged from the vagabond itinerancy of the men, on the basis of her class and gender, and from the women because she feels no need to parent or to receive and transmit cultural values,” who wishes to “get out of my skin and be only the person inside—not American—not black—just me” and is, in this sense, only “looking for a conception of self beyond the given logic of racial determinism,” the answer seems predetermined (Tate 162; Goyal; Morrison 48). She chooses individualism, the world in which she is capable of the greatest autonomy and thereby, chooses herself.

As easy as it is to judge Jadine for her rejection of the cultural history the other black women of the diaspora have worked so hard to preserve, , as much as her invalidation of the diaspora mother belies deeper issues of Jadine’s racial perception of herself, to demonize Jadine for these choices does damage on several fronts: not only does it discredit the friction Jadine is experiencing between her conceptualization of self-being and the overwhelming force of the expectations of black nationalism that Son expects from her, it also risks enacting the same violence Son and Ondine assert against Jadine, forcing her into a framework she is overtly rejecting. Jadine’s “stylized, fashion-model, modern aesthetic beauty” should not be considered, as it is phrased in some criticisms, “a mockery of the authentic symbols of womanhood that saturate Morrison’s fiction” just because it defies the fertile, maternal, and nurturing qualities characteristic of the diaspora mother (Popernack 9). In her introduction of Jadine — even in Jadine’s existence as a character — Morrison questions the singularity of such a mindset. Yes, cultural memory and history through myth is necessary to orient oneself in relation to African American femininity and, consequently, as a realization of the self in full: as Morrison states, it’s a black woman’s responsibility to be “both safe harbor harbor and the ship” (Tate 161). On the

other hand, presenting the diaspora mother as the only pathway to achieving that balance is exactly the reason why Jadine chafes against it: as much as the role preserves the cultural mythology, enforcing it as the sole option for achieving womanhood confines, relegates women to a life spent sacrificing the self. Jadine verbalizes this exact deprivation in her visualization of the queen ant: “Almost all of them are women and there is so much to do — the work is literally endless. So many to be born and fed, then found and buried. There is no time for dreaming” (Morrison 290). In this sense, boxing Jadine and others like her into a singular definition of black womanhood both deprives them of empowerment through individualism and mobility and powers a cyclical loss in which their aspirations as individuals are sacrificed at the altar of communal dreaming. Through Jadine, Morrison makes visible the idea that the two are not mutually exclusive. To be both the ship and the harbor does not, then, necessitate being a harbor for everyone; in Jadine’s case, she learns to fulfill both roles for herself: “a grown woman did not need the safety or its dreams. She *was* the safety she longed for” (Morrison 290). In this philosophy, Jadine adopts a form of self-trust, confidence, and independence. She relinquishes herself of the burden of care, and though she is spiritually exiled in her rejection of the expectations of the diaspora mother, she inhabits a different definition of freedom — one that is not a denial of femininity altogether but a creation of her own vision of womanhood: “Instead of the female body acting as vessel of the past and mythology, it is here figured as a self-sufficient, unique item” (Popernack 12).

As visualized within the isolation of Isle des Chevaliers, Morrison’s construction of women as a site of cultural myth becomes a vehicle for investigating the effects of a contemporary diasporic environment — accompanied by its corresponding pressures — on black female identity. By pitting a modern, capitalist individualism against the cultural myth preserved

by the tradition of the diaspora mother, Morrison proposes a diasporic model that can only exist in simultaneity; while the myth — an embodiment of cultural history — can be mapped onto the bodies of some as a source of black female empowerment and an engine for the preservation of cultural memory and racial identity, it cannot exist as the only means of cultural connection, nor can it be fully characterized as constructive. When imposed on others, the tradition can just as easily function as a destructive medium, limiting the available pathways to cultural reclamation for black women — and consequently, driving those like Jadine to cultural alienation as a means of preserving their feminine freedom. In this way, Morrison illustrates that sole ascription to either cultural tradition or modern ideology fails; for a black woman to operate within the contemporary realm requires a redefinition of black diasporic cultural connection and the expansion of identity-preserving pathways that allow for reconciliation between the self and the cultural community.

Whereas in *Tar Baby*, the constructive and destructive nature of the female body as a vessel for cultural myth is examined through the lens of self-identity, *Beloved*'s approach — while still envisioning myth as cultural memory — raises a different question: what happens when the communal feminine space is lost and the individual body becomes the site of mythic haunting? Just as historical and literary context enabled *Tar Baby*'s discussion of feminized myth within the diasporic tradition, the way that cultural memory and myth assume female form in *Beloved* is informed by both the novel's socio-cultural and geographic context. When writing *Beloved*, Morrison, of course, drew direct inspiration from the violent yet maternally motivated story of Margaret Garner, who killed her child to rescue them from slavery; this narrative speaks to a struggle with the psychological scars of slavery on the micro-level. Yet Morrison's writing must also be contextualized within a broader social reckoning: the civil rights movement.

Characterized by the fight for legal citizenship, this historical moment reflects not only the African American community's drive to reclaim their humanity, but their struggle to confront the psychological trauma of slavery on a communal level through a healing of systemic evil. *Beloved* pays homage to that quality, centered around large-scale community and microcosmic family that are, like the civil rights movement, struggling to rediscover themselves while still marked with slavery's scars. Set on the border between the "free" North and the enslaved South — separated only by the Ohio River — within a house framed in the gothic tradition — of which haunting and ghosts are a hallmark — and thus, veritably in the backyard of slavery, *Beloved's* setting enables 124's and Sethe's haunting on the level of both literary tradition and historical memory. By bridging the gap between literary framing and literal historicization, Morrison doesn't just craft a landscape that is pervaded by ghosts; she memorializes history as a resistance against historical erasure, a window into the long-lasting trauma preserved in cultural memory as myth — and a prime location in which to question the dynamics of mythical trauma as they operate on an individual and communal level.

Morrison's approach to myth as a feminine in space in *Beloved* ascribes the novel a much different meaning than that discussed in *Tar Baby*; while *Beloved* still preserves the idea of myth as cultural memory, whereas *Tar Baby's* definition of the feminine myth is grounded in one central model — the diaspora mother — and its role in Jadine's self-reckoning, *Beloved* is preoccupied with how myth represents a recovery of and a healing from the past as accessed through the female body. This female-inhabited authority is perhaps most evident in the characterization of Baby Suggs. Framed within *Beloved*, Baby Suggs's body marks a nexus of feminine power, cultural memory, and spiritual solidarity — and it is only through this intersectionality, that she emerges as the novel's central matriarchal and spiritual leader. As a

black woman — and black mother at that — Baby Suggs carries the trauma of namelessness, of having to bear children knowing she “would never see [them] change into adulthood anyway” (Morrison 163). Like other black women before her, her body becomes the site of violence, damage, and cultural weight: the slave life “had busted her legs, back, head, eyes, hands, kidneys, womb, and tongue,” yet simultaneously tasked with the responsibility of passing traditions and stories onto the next generation, she is forced to assume the role of guardian, a transmitter of cultural memory (Morrison 102). What her femininity and this internalization of enslaved history also enables, however, is transformation into a spiritual leader and by proxy, a community healer. Having “nothing left to make a living but her heart — which she put to work at once,” marked repetitively by the implicit characterization of “holy,” Bay Suggs confronts the damage enacted by slavery and uses it to reinvent herself not as a “body, God and nature, master and servant, reminiscent of Christianity” — notably, she is “uncalled, unrobed, unanointed” — but as a goddess of Black feminist theology, “internaliz[ing] rather than objectif[y]ing deity” (Morrison 102; Trace 16). In this conversion of trauma into love, in locating the source of this healing mechanism within the body, Baby Suggs also extends her holiness outwards, adopting a role as a founder of matriarchal spiritual spaces and thereby becoming the engine for community recovery. In *The Clearing*, when she preaches “in this place here, we flesh; flesh that weeps, laughs; flesh that dances on bare feet in grass. Love it. Love it hard,” converting dehumanized flesh back to comprehensive body, she “offers [the community] her great big heart” as a guiding point for bodily reclamation through love just as she reclaimed hers (Morrison 103). Prior to *Beloved*’s death, under Baby Suggs’ rule, 124 is characterized as a joyful, community-centric domain, a “cheerful, buzzing house where Baby Suggs, holy, loved cautioned, fed, chastised and soothed” (Morrison 102). When Sethe desperately searches for guidance after *Beloved*’s arrival

displaces her slow-healing family, she returns not to the house which Beloved has invaded, but to the Clearing and the memories of the communal spaces that Baby Suggs created: the place where she can reconnect with “Baby Suggs’ long-distance love,” where “with Baby Suggs’ heart in charge, the people let go” (Morrison 112, 111). Rather than internalizing her pain, Baby Suggs turns it outwards, and through this inversion, not only confronts and consequently, releases her own trauma but also builds a community such that others are able to do the same. She joins a tradition of black women “who are linked through the recognition of their suffering, which generates the mythologies that distinguish the Black experience from the white experience” (Trace 16). Through Baby Suggs’ character, Morrison reimagines the power of the female body as derived not just from its ability to store myth, but from its ability to transform myth into a form of community religion, a vehicle for solidarity, shared confrontation of trauma and by proxy, communal healing.

Considering the female body and its containment of cultural myth and memory as a source of healing yields a critical qualification, however: the healing is only ever accomplished as long as those community spaces exist to encourage the simultaneous confrontation and release of the trauma. What occurs when that solidarity is lost is critically, evident in Sethe’s progression from recovering escapee to a degrading state of figurative re-enslavement by her trauma. Sethe’s reflections on her own half-finished healing are always cast through the establishment of community connection. That it was only “at 124 and in the Clearing, along with the others, she had claimed herself,” that those “Days of healing, ease and real-talk. Days of company: knowing the names of forty, fifty other Negroes, their views, habits; where they had been and what done; of feeling their fun and sorrow along with her own, which made it better,” highlights that her healing requires both the unearthing of her own individual experiences and the cohesion created

through hearing the experiences of others in their enslavement (Morrison 111). Being able to disclose her pain to others and share in theirs as well, establishes a dialogue of community belonging that alleviates the mental load exacted by the trauma of slavery; as a member of a similarly burdened collective, she does not have to bear the weight of it alone. However, that burden is never fully alleviated. In fact, the feminine body and its capability for storing myth becomes the source of her haunting. In Sethe's violation by schoolteacher's nephews, "femininity loses its sacredness in slaver," then so does "motherhood" as female blood-rite/right, catalyzing an accumulation of motherhood-motivated trauma within the self that is reignited when schoolteacher arrives at 124 and culminates in Sethe's killing of Beloved (Spillers 75). This marks a fundamental departure from the established community dynamic and, consequently, from Sethe's belonging within it. While previously, the town functions as a coping mechanism, their conversation, music, and sound — whether in the form of laughter or crying in the Clearing or "real-talk" in 124 — helping Sethe to confront and release the trauma from her escape, in the wake of Beloved's death, "they waited till the cart turned about, headed west to town. And then no words. Humming. No words at all" (Morrison 179). The descent of this silence is revealing as both an abandonment of Sethe and Baby Suggs by the community and accordingly, a stagnancy in the communal healing process; without sound, both the community and the inhabitants of 124 lack an outlet for the excavation of their cultural history. Instead, it stays trapped within themselves — and as represented by Sethe, to devastating effect. Lacking the support system afforded to her by the community — and with the reappearance of Beloved, the mythologized memory that her body won't allow her to forget — Sethe's internalization of her guilt towards Beloved becomes destructive: Sethe locks the door to visitors, "cut[s] Denver out completely" from her and Beloved's relationship (Morrison 282). "The flesh between

[Sethe's] forefinger and thumb was thin as china silk," and her eyes become "bright but dead, alert but vacant," pushing her to the point where "it's as though [Sethe] had lost her mind" (Morrison 281, 285, 282). The imagery of this progression is rooted in degradation and deprivation; with no outlet to help her relieve her guilt, Sethe isolates in what can be interpreted as a self-imposed entrapment with the manifestation of her guilt. Deprived of community belonging and trapped in 124 with her daughters, Sethe's only measure of identity is motherhood, and fundamentally associated with Beloved as that element of her is, she further internalizes the guilt. She hyper-fixates on it, "paying attention to everything about Beloved," and in the process, sacrifices her autonomy to Beloved in an attempt to "take care of and make up for," while also admitting herself and Denver to a cyclical harm that risks the destruction of them both (Morrison 286).

Any relief from this cycle — and the way the end to this mythical haunting is finally realized — returns to the idea of communal participation and the reestablishment of Sethe's belonging within the racial community. Before Beloved's presence drives him away, Paul D's return enables a brief resumption of Sethe's healing process. Possessed of the unique ability to "walk into a house and make women cry. Because with him, in his presence, they could," Paul D fulfills a proxy role as an outlet for Sethe's grief (Morrison 20). In his adoration of her scars — "he rubbed his cheek on her back and learned that way her sorrow, the roots of it" — his exorcism of 124, and his push to take Denver and Sethe to the carnival, Paul D echoes the same culture of recovery that Baby Suggs created in her role as spiritual and community leader (Morrison 20). He transforms 124 from house into the semblance of a home, the beginning of a conversion back to the welcoming environment 124 used to exist as. He prompts Sethe into verbal confrontation with her trauma, establishing an understanding of her pain — both through

their shared history and even after his arrival, his continued efforts to encourage her vulnerability, exposing his own experiences as demonstrated in his willingness to talk about his emasculation at the hands of schoolteacher via the bit and Mister. In this, Paul D mirrors the same method, exchanging pain to form solidarity, that brought Sethe comfort in the Clearing and shaped her sense of belonging within the community. Paired with Stamp Paid's efforts to reestablish connection with Sethe and the inhabitants of 124 — his visit to Paul D in the church empowers Paul D to return to 124, and though he fails numerous times, he is the only one of the community to try “to visit Sethe...broke through the loud hasty voices to the mumbling beyond it” — this hypothesis of the feminine body as the sole arbiter between myth — cultural memory — and reconciliation with trauma is complicated further (Morrison 203). Accounting for the critical roles these male figures play in the healing process, minor as they are, though the responsibility for preserving and carrying the cultural myth still falls to women, the task of reconciling it cannot be fully characterized as a female sphere.

If Paul D's return marks a brief moment of contact between Sethe and the outside community, enabling a temporary period of recovery within 124, then Denver's initiative consummates Sethe's return to the communal identity — and thus the beginning of an effective healing process, both for herself and for Sethe. In spite of the community's rejection of Sethe after Beloved's death, it's the women — the vessels for cultural memory and thus the ones that bear the greatest connection to Sethe in her baggage as a mother and a black woman — that become her salvation; these women are the ones who provide Denver and Sethe with what food they can offer: “a sack of white beans...a plate of cold rabbit meat...a basket of eggs,” who enable Denver's autonomy and access to the community by finding her a job working for the Bodwins and teaching her to read, who gather outside of 124, bearing “what they could and what

they believed would work...Christian faith — as shield and sword” to drive Beloved from the house (Morrison 292-293, 303). Perhaps most importantly, however, they inculcate Denver with communal and cultural memory, “inaugurat[ing] her life in the world as a woman” (Morrison 292). This open dialogue rooted in cultural memory, recall of “the days when 124 was a way station, the place they assembled to catch news, taste oxtail soup, leave their children, cut out a skirt,” mementos like the “tonic mixed there that cured a relative” or “the border of a pillowslip...French-knotted in Baby Suggs’ kitchen,” functions as an alternative form of the communicative healing practices that Baby Suggs preached (Morrison 293). In these kindnesses and the transmission of their personal experiences, they don’t just gift Denver missing memories of a home and a grandmother that she has lost. They tangentially redefine her perspective on the cultural myth that has haunted her and her mother all their lives, help her unlearn it as a source of individualized, insulated horror and reenvision it as a worthwhile, constructive tradition. Their memories become evidence that cultural myth — and the ability of the female body to contain it — is not implicitly destructive; it contains restorative properties as well. In this restoration of faith — both in community and in her identity as a woman — these women gift Denver the sense of racial and cultural belonging that Sethe lost in her isolation. In this sense then, the women of the local community represent not only the revival of 124 on the literal level — giving its inhabitants the sustenance they need to live — but by performing the exorcism that finally expulses Beloved from the house, by reintroducing sound back into the home and Denver back into the community culture — and by proxy, the gendered and racialized myth — they serve as vehicles for an intergenerational recovery from the inherited trauma of slavery.

In Morrison’s *Tar Baby* and *Beloved*, black women are often tasked with the responsibility of inheriting cultural memory in the form of myth, serving as intersectional

portraits for the interaction between female and black identity and transforming their bodies into articulators of cultural preservation, recovery, and remembrance. Even as Morrison situates these two novels in vastly different terrains, the female figures in both become central to considering the simultaneous damage and restoration that inheritance enacts on the black female body.

Contextualized within the diasporic condition, *Tar Baby* draws upon the struggle to reconcile the expectation to embody this myth — and its accompanying ramifications on reproductive autonomy and physical mobility — with the contemporary impulse for self-determination implicit to the diasporic condition; the normative mythological form of the “diaspora mother” as modeled through Jadine’s battle, and her ultimate inability, to find a middle ground between the two provides a lens through which to understand how the maternal, care-oriented tradition can be both a source of strength and cultural preservation as well as a cause of alienation, especially when possession of culture-driven communal identity and individual selfhood are interpreted as mutually exclusive. In *Beloved*, where cultural memory and myth become synonymous with trauma, those ideas of the community and individual are explored in a different way. In the concurrent portrayal of female spiritual spaces and domestic horror, *Beloved* analyzes the simultaneous destructive and constructive capability of containing cultural history by questioning whose body bears the weight of it and highlighting the necessary role of community as a mediator between history and healing. As the juxtaposition between Sethe, Baby Suggs, and the townswomen illuminates, mythologized memory can act as a driver of cultural revitalization and recovery from slavery’s trauma when grounded in community connection but can just as equally become a self-destructive method when that solidarity is lost and the myth internalized individually. By posing these questions of whether the female storage of myth is accepted or imposed, shared amongst the community or isolated in the individual, *Tar Baby* and *Beloved*

yield a critical lesson: as much as the preservation of cultural history is central to memorializing the black experience, this tradition necessitates a deconstruction of the mechanisms through which it is inherited. It means ensuring that as socio-cultural terrain changes, practices must be modified such that myth functions constructively — as strength, not violence. Perhaps most importantly, it means honoring, not just the myths, memories, and history being preserved, but the bodies, rights, and freedoms of those who bear them.

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