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Tarred and Floral: Femininity, Race, and the Abject in Bayou

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Tarred and Floral: Femininity, Race, and the Abject in *Bayou*

by

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DEDICATION

To my dear mother whose support, understanding, kindness, and clarity of mind I could not imagine completing this degree and project without.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I owe a great deal of gratitude to my thesis director and reader for their patience and forgiveness during this process.

ABSTRACT

This thesis analyzes abjection in the African-American female experience using *Bayou*, a graphic novel series by Jeremy Love and Patrick Morgan. I examine the relationship between the protagonist, Lee, and her late mother, Tar Baby, to reveal the latter as an abject component of the former's identity. The project continues a trend of reading abjection into the African-American experience using gothic fiction and focuses on multiple scenes that serve as intersections of violence and femininity. It draws on sociological and psychological studies concerning black womanhood and beauty politics to extend investigation to the Mississippi community Lee and Tar Baby share. Finding that the dynamic between mother and daughter is mirrored in Tar Baby's relationship with her community, this paper views abjection as a continuous challenge in black bodies on an individual and communal scale.

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INTRODUCTION

“Oh hey, sugah. Grab that comb and come do my hair” (Love and Morgan 2: 7). After unceremoniously coming upon her late mother singing in a washtub, bathed in soft glowing light, Lee Wagstaff is greeted with an invitation to comb her hair. As Lee combs, the luminescent, floral wallpapered room begins to burn red. Under that sinister light, the bathing woman bleeds thick pitch, quickly becoming a dripping tar covered monster. Horrified and confused, Lee backs up as the creature reaches towards her; from its oozing form seeps a quiet “Lee...” (2: 10). Human one moment and monstrous the next, Lee’s mother, Tar Baby, is one of many hybrid and transforming beasts in Jeremy Love and Patrick Morgan’s graphic novel series *Bayou*, but she is the only one so deeply connected to the main character. How does this woman, her appearances few and seemingly minor within the brutal woodland wonderland of *Bayou*, function as one of Lee’s many obstacles? What role does their bond play in this violent, fantastical adventure story?

Bayou follows Lee Wagstaff, a prepubescent African American girl in the fictional Charon, Mississippi during Jim Crow. When her friend Lily Westmoreland, daughter to the white family that owns the Wagstaff’s land, is kidnapped by a peculiar swamp monster while trying to retrieve a locket from the bayou, Lee’s father Calvin is blamed for the child’s disappearance. Faced with the tasks of retrieving Lily and clearing her father’s name before it is too late, Lee enters the bayou and resurfaces in a fantastical and brutal land known as Nawlins or Dixie. In this strange, violent new world, Lee and the companions she gathers along the way struggle to survive the many hazards that cross

their path. All the while, in the background, the mysterious and sinister antagonist Bossman Bog pulls the strings behind Lee's trials and the sagely butterfly-winged Mother Sista watches the shifting, tumultuous changes to Dixie unfold—wary of Bog's efforts and concerned for Lee's.

Volume one introduces the Charon cast, kicks off Lee's adventure, and chronicles the first treacherous leg of her journey. The plot begins when Lee and Lily's day of play near the bayou ends with a mysterious hand from the swamp snatching the locket from Lily's neck while neither girl is paying attention. Lily's mother blames Lee for the missing locket and Lily—assuming that it must have fallen off on its own—returns to the area the next day to retrieve the locket and hopefully calm her mother's anger. Lee, having sworn off becoming further involved in Lily's locket and accepted her punishment for the stolen necklace, is only observing Lily's efforts when the actual thief rises from the murky waters. The robber, a hulking overall clad simpleton called Cotton-Eyed Joe, grabs and swallows Lily whole before smiling at Lee and returning to the bayou. In her panic, Lee grabs the only thing left behind by Joe, Lily's shoe, runs back home, and faints. When she comes to, her father is being taken to jail as the guilty party in the disappearance of Lily Westmoreland with the primary physical evidence being the shoe Lee dropped before she collapsed. With her father's life in danger as locals thirst for blood and Lily's fate unknown, Lee plunges into the bayou in hopes of saving her father and friend. After a run in with a human-eel hybrid called a Golliwog, Lee is rescued by a friendly, gentle green behemoth named Bayou. Bayou, about the same size as Joe, helps Lee get to the giant's lair, but is too worried about upsetting the enigmatic Bossman to help Lee any further. Lee's confrontation with Joe ends with a swarm of Jim Crows

picking apart his body and stealing Lily from his remains on behalf of Bossman. Before she can give chase, a team of Bossman's henchmen attack Lee and Bayou, prompting the later to defend Lee and himself, thus rebelling against the will of Bossman. The volume ends with the pair, united, heading off to find information that could lead them to Bossman and Lily.

Volume two features a considerable amount of action as the danger level of Lee's adventure increases drastically. Stagger Lee is introduced as a more physical antagonist for the span of the novel; he's a lawless, amoral, vicious man infamous for his violent acts and ready to hunt down Lee and company. The search for information leads Lee to Rabbit and a selection of other helpers and hazards along the way. Rabbit, rough and a little surly, isn't very interested in helping Lee. Rather, he prefers to live a life of self-interest and freedom, looking out for number one and side stepping troubles. To that end, he drugs the group with spiked gumbo one night when they've taken shelter with one of Rabbit's past lovers. Before he can make his escape, things take a grim turn at the volume's end as Lee is approached by Uncle Remus in her dreams while Stagger Lee intercepts the group from outside. Remus, one of Bog's men, is keen on convincing Lee to give up her efforts in Dixie and rages when Lee rejects the offer to give up Lily in exchange for her father and happiness. When Lee wakes from the dream and escapes Remus, Stagger and Bayou are embroiled in a fight that ends with both combatants falling—Stagger to Bayou and Bayou to a cloud of Jim Crows. The volume ends on a somber note with the remnants of Lee's team taking a train to their next destination, their future and safety uncertain.

As an adventure story, *Bayou* follows both a physical and mental journey for Lee. While she traverses the ruthless, rough Dixie, she is also meeting and engaging themes and issues in preparation for adulthood as a black young lady in Charon. The primary ground of Lee's bildungsroman is Tar Baby. A singer by trade, she died when a flood swept away the local juke joint she worked in; she doesn't appear *Bayou* as a living character. Instead, Tar Baby is seen through dream sequences, conversation, and flashbacks—filtered through the minds and mouths of other characters. Given their screen time, Tar Baby and the subject of femininity seem to be subplots, but analyzation of both illuminate what this tale means for Lee as a coming-of-age narrative. Moments in which Lee directly deals with Tar Baby in Dixie reveal her as representative of the abject within Lee's identity. Unmovable, the abject Tar Baby is a source of discord in Lee's self, simultaneously helping define the body she is rejected by. Examination of Lee's relationship with the memory of her mother unearths a similar condition in the black community of Charon itself. Exhibiting an ailment that troubles even the world outside of its pages, *Bayou* depicts bodies—individual and collective—dealing with the abject.

CHAPTER 1

APPLIED SOURCES

The basis for exploring Lee's condition, and Charon's by extension, is *Gothic America: Narrative, History, and Nation* by Teresa A. Goddu, a historical and literary study of American Gothicism. In addition, Ingrid Banks' *Hair Matters: Beauty, Power, and Black Women's Consciousness*, Beth Turner's "Colorism in Dael Orlandersmith's *Yellowman*: The Effect of Intra-racial Racism on Black Identity and the Concept of Black Community," and Tiffany G. Townsend and company's "I'm No Jezebel; I Am Young, Gifted, and Black: Identity, Sexuality, and Black Girls" serve as supplementary sources of insight into beauty, skin tone, and hair politics in the black community. I draw on these four secondary sources to analyze Charon and Lee's relationship with Tar Baby, making note of the role her physical appearance, lifestyle, and reputation play in how her memory is treated by different groups. Focusing closely on the dynamics at work in Lee's few interactions with Tar Baby in Dixie, this essay sheds light on what Tar Baby means to Lee's identity. In doing so, it also illuminates the nature of both her relationship to Charon and the process at work in black bodies, singular and communal.

Exploration of *Bayou* is both aided and inspired by Teresa A. Goddu's *Gothic America: Narrative, History, and Nation* and the book's treatment of Gothicism, abjection, and African Americans' relationship with the gothic and history. To begin, this essay's understanding of *Bayou* and its use of the gothic adopts the position on the genre taken by *Gothic America*. There, Goddu examines gothic narratives through their

respective historical contexts, thus contradicting the notion of the gothic as “an escapist retreat” from the political, economic, and social climates they nod to or exist in (2).

Connecting American gothic works or scenes that employ their characteristics to social contexts, Goddu’s book works to not only historicize gothic works, but also analyze how the gothic can communicate issues outside the confines of its text, especially history’s horrors. On the subject of these horrors, *Gothic America* pays close attention to the use of the gothic—mostly through ghosts, violence, and horror—in African American race and slavery narratives. The text is bookended by references to *Native Son* and *Black Boy* and jumpstarts its efforts to connect Gothicism in literature to history with Richard Wright’s. In conjunction with Wright, Goddu’s study exemplifies the role history plays in African American gothic, paying specific attention to the way slavery’s horrors provided fertile ground for the production of gothic literature and how that literature reproduced the history behind it, effectively functioning as a conduit for the ghost of slavery. Similarly, gothic characteristics in *Bayou* can be seen as both stemming from and expressing the turmoil and pain of different parts of everyday life. For instance, the series’ murder of blood thirsty crows, in their method of picking targets to pieces, denote the daily chipping away at the mind and rights involved in living under Jim Crow laws. I argue that Tar Baby’s monstrousness is an expression of the anxiety she incites on the subject of black womanhood. Reading the series’ horror as commentary on the society and sociopolitical climate fits *Gothic America*’s interpretation of American gothic literature.

Near its end, Goddu’s introduction clarifies how the text views the relationship between America and its gothic literature as a case of abjection. According to Goddu “Like the abject, the gothic serves as the ghost that both helps to run the machine of

national identity and disrupts it” (10). In its treatment of history and often contradicting observations on the nation’s rosy mythology, American gothic literature works like a double-edged sword by uniting and strengthening the idealized images of American identity, yet critiquing and casting doubt on such notions of the country, nationhood, and being an American. Like national identity for Goddu, race and gender identity in *Bayou* appears to meet with its abject components on gothic grounds. This paper embraces viewing the gothic as a genre that conducts a body’s (be it a physical person or group identity) self analyzation by giving what is silenced and pushed away a means to haunt in concrete form.

The issue of black women’s hair in *Bayou*, though seemingly minor in light of the larger plot, is useful in understanding Lee’s treatment of Tar Baby. The primary component to Lee’s concerns and hair politics in the series thus far is the contrast between straight and nappy hair. Tar Baby has a different kind of hair than Lee, straighter and apparently easier to comb through. Lee views her mother’s hair as a factor in her womanhood. In addition, hair is a ground on which she and her mother are openly separated. According to the nightmare’s Tar Baby, Lee’s hair is different because she “take[s] after [her] daddy” and other Wagstaffs (Love and Morgan 2: 8). This split not only allies Lee with masculinity, but also indicates that hair and femininity or types of black womanhood walk hand in hand. Analyzing the way hair is treated aids the process of unpacking Lee’s feelings about Tar Baby and where she stands in terms of womanhood as it is represented by other females and their features.

Ingrid Banks’ *Hair Matters: Beauty, Power, and Black Women’s Consciousness* tracks political and cultural meanings found in modern and contemporary black hair.

Serving as a source of insight into the role hair plays in social identity for black women, *Hair Matters* is a study in black femininity and beauty culture conducted through interviews. Banks' examination of the dichotomy between "bad" hair and straight or pliable so-called "good" hair informs what can be read into those kinds of hair from the position of young growing black girl.

The introduction to *Hair Matters* swiftly and clearly address and defines the issue of kinky (bad) versus straight (good) hair outside of and within the black community. Following an anecdote about the poor reception received when a white teacher reads Carolivia Herron's *Nappy Hair* to her students, Banks states:

For black women in this society, what is considered desirable and undesirable hair is based on one's hair texture. What is deemed desirable is measured against white standards of beauty, which include long and straight hair (usually blonde), that is, hair that is not kinky or nappy. Consequently, black women's hair, in general, fits outside of what is considered desirable in mainstream society. Within black communities, straighter variety and texture are privileged as well. Such hair is described as "good," while nappy hair like [the main character's hair] is "bad." Therefore, the kinky and nappy hair that Herron celebrates in her story goes uncelebrated among a race of people still nursing the wounds of slavery (2).

This quote succinctly describes a large portion of the political climate surrounding black hair: what is desired and celebrated tends to be whatever lies closest to mainstream ideals. Bad hair is defined by Banks as any hair texture that is curly, kinky, and thick. Seen as the opposite of good hair, it's difficult to handle and doesn't typically lay. Natural hair, while specifically referring to hair that hasn't been chemically straightened,

also can be considered nappy and therefore bad. Bad hair, styled or not, can carry connotations of black pride or active rebellion against mainstream standards of beauty or societal pressures. Good hair is “naturally straighter in texture”, meaning that the category doesn’t include relaxed or straightened hair; hair modified through chemicals or tools is a means through which to achieve the appearance of good hair (Banks 172). As Banks and her interviewees point out, the factors that determine good or bad hair are generally manageability, length, and its ability to lay. Hair that, without intervention, grows long and is easy to take care of is considered “good” while hair that is difficult to comb or grow, perhaps coarse, and could be described as “wooly” or “fluffy” is seen as bad. To clarify the weight of the labels “good” and “bad,” they carry informal sanctions like other beauty standards such as body hair or the use of make-up, and run under the surface black femininity spoken or not.

Banks’ book continues to tease out the complications concerning hair—tackling the concerns that arise in contemporary conversation and behavior while drawing on past trends and events important to black hair culture. While *Hair Matters* is largely a discussion that keeps its eyes on more modern issues such as the black power and afro movement, Bo Derek’s cornrows in the film *10*, and the introduction of hair straightening products like the hot comb, flat iron, and relaxer, it maintains focus on the conflict between hair that’s kinky and hair that isn’t. This divide between types of hair and their treatment is useful to a discussion of Tar Baby and womanhood because of the relevance of hair in this Alice in Wonderland style of adventure story. Hair is important to Lee’s character—her bond to her mother and her own desires—so investigating possible meanings behind hair whenever it appears is vital to understanding the changes in Lee on

her journey. Reading hair in popular contexts alongside what can be discerned from characters in *Bayou*, enriches its meaning and role in Lee's coming-of-age.

A factor in addressing Tar Baby is seeing her character through the lens of other people since she has, so far, only appeared in flashbacks and dreams. Publically, she seems to be pigeonholed as extremely sexual and hazardous; she's portrayed as an unsavory figure by many characters. Providing background information on a more racially tinged version of the "whore" archetype, "I'm no Jezebel; I am Young, Gifted, and Black: Identity, Sexuality, and Black Girls" is a sociological and psychological study conducted by Tiffany G. Townsend, Anita Jones Tomas, Torsten B. Neilands, and Tiffany R. Jackson. It was conducted in order to determine the relationships, if any, between facets of young African American females' identity and stereotypical images of black women. Particularly, Townsend et al. is concerned with possible links between the saturation of overtly sexualized black women in media and the rate of sexual activity amongst girls. "I'm no Jezebel" draws heavily on archetypes of black women built on American culture and uses the Modern Jezebel Scale, defined as "a 20-item measure that assesses Black adolescent girls' identification with stereotypes that have been constructed about Black girls/women" (277). This scale is a modification of a survey for older black women and tests for four stereotypes: the Mammy, Jezebel, Sapphire, and Superwoman.

Townsend and company's scale focuses on the former two paradigms. The Mammy figure corresponds to characters like Mammy in Mitchell's *Gone with the Wind* and is categorized by her large size, dark skin, and asexuality. Usually serving as the help officially or informally, "I'm no Jezebel" pits the character type in "direct opposition" to the Jezebel (274). The Jezebel is often characterized by racially mixed features including

long hair and light skin, and is seen as almost uncontrollably sexual and manipulative. More contemporary forms of the Jezebel include gold diggers, baby mamas, and music video girls; all of which tend to be viewed as materialistic, sexual, and domineering.

The foiling of the Jezebel and Mammy illustrates, amongst other things, colorism. According to Townsend et al, colorism refers to “Skin color stratification” and often involves lighter skin being considered a more appreciated, beautiful trait (274). In “I’m no Jezebel,” this skin color dynamic corresponds to the two figures’ sexuality or lack thereof with the dark skin leading to a decreased desirability factor, and therefore, muted sexuality and vice versa, but it should be noted that Tar Baby doesn’t completely fit the Jezebel mold due to her skin. That being said, Tar Baby’s hair does align her with more European or white features and, as the issue of “good” and “bad” hair indicates, achieving mainstream beauty can be a case of ticking as many boxes as possible. While skin tone is one aspect she doesn’t fulfill as far as the Jezebel goes, colorism plays in a role in how Tar Baby received her nickname. The nightmare’s Tar Baby tells Lee that “redbones,” an informal term referring to light-skinned black women, gave her the name out of jealousy (Love and Morgan 2: 9). Though “Tar Baby” can be a play on her being the type of woman who men can become mired in, it is likely a mockery of her skin color given the fact that light-skinned peers named her. Sexual activity is a primary factor in Tar Baby’s Jezebel status, but colorism and hair politics play a role in the way she’s branded as well.

“I’m no Jezebel” roots the Jezebel and other sexual black female character types in a history of dehumanizing black women, saying:

Although women of other ethnicities have also experienced sexual victimization, the legacy of slavery associates the sexual exploitation of African American women with distinct dehumanizing and degrading practices. In order to justify their enslavement and incessant sexual violation, the role of primitive sex object was ascribed to women of African descent, resulting in images of African American women as animal-like, savage, and highly sexual beings (274).

Tar Baby becomes more like an object the more flat images of who she was dominate, making her nickname also function as a hint to her own objectification. Joel Chandler Harris' Tar Baby isn't a sentient being in the Uncle Remus tale, "The Wonderful Tar Baby Story," but its very lack of action as an inactive object moves the story towards its conclusion. Sarah Appleton Aguiar, author of *The Bitch is Back: Wicked Women in Literature*, explains that female archetypes can be overly simplified and static from a feminist perspective, but the role culture plays in archetypes is what makes the classification system difficult to dismiss. Not only are archetypes in fiction culture and "accepted as recognized standards for human behavior," they are "culturally defined"—informed by how society reads or views behaviors at a certain times (Aguiar 14, 15). Within *Bayou*, the work Lee is able to do with her mother's memory complicates the flat archetype of Tar Baby by highlighting the objectification and simplification taking place in her characterization. In other words, Lee's interactions with Tar Baby in Dixie undo the flattening of her character. As Aguiar explains, Lee's handling of the flattened Tar Baby is as much a person daughter-to-mother dialogue as it is a communal one; the act of ascribing labels or archetypes reflects a community's values and anxieties.

While “I’m no Jezebel” introduces colorism in black female beauty politics, the issue, its historical foundations, and effects on the African American community and individual are directly engaged in Beth Turner’s “Colorism in Dael Orlandersmith’s *Yellowman*: The Effect of Intraracial Racism on Black Identity and the Concept of Black Community.” *Yellowman* is a play that follows the troubled romance and growth of Eugene, a light-skinned, thin fellow from a nicer part of town, and Alma, his dark-skinned, heavy-set love interest from a rural section of the community. The play highlights the differences between the two and the way said differences complicate their lives and interactions as well as their respective families’. Set in the coastal South Carolinian Lowcountry in the mid-1900s, the story draws attention to the grounds on which what is considered to be one ethnic group, in one town, can be divided. With this division in mind, Turner’s essay is a study into how *Yellowman* showcases colorism and classism’s ability to undercut black solidarity. Ultimately, examining Tar Baby and Lee’s relationship will bleed into a focus on grounds of division and friendly fire in the fictional black community in *Bayou*, so Turner’s analyzation is as much a model for analysis as it is an informational source for learning more about colorism.

Like the study provided by Townsend et al., “Colorism in Dael Orlandersmith’s *Yellowman*” locates the roots of colorism among African Americans in the special treatment allotted to mixed race black people who possessed features like light skin. The article, quoting anthropologist Obiagele Lake, states that mulatto slaves were typically more expensive, thus owning light-skinned slaves was an indication of wealth. They were often “favored with ‘relatively’ better positions” on the plantation such as house work or a position of authority over other slaves (39). In addition, they were more likely to be

free. Turner supplies figures from Lake which inform that “in 1850[,] nearly 35% of the population of mulattoes was free while only 1% of the dark-skinned population was liberated” (39). Lake goes on to say that some mulattoes who gained wealth kept land and slaves as well. After emancipation, “The practice of favoring the light-skinned mulattoes with education, opportunity, and manumission, combined with the racists brainwashing about the superiority of people with whiter skin deepened the hierarchal rift among color lines in the African American community” (39). Turner, using Lake, sets the scene of *Yellowman* by providing examples of the depths of color-based division in the black community, describing how some mulatto churches had skin tone cut off lines, rejecting anyone darker than a certain hue, and some families maintained relationships with whites while actively avoiding sexually or socially mixing with darker skinned people. In discussing the continuation of colorism, in formal and informal settings, Turner’s article draws on a condition, Post Traumatic Slave Syndrome (PTSS), coined by Joy DeGruy Leary in *Post Traumatic Slave Syndrome: America’s Legacy of Enduring Injury and Healing*. Extended subjection to a variety of traumatic events and stressors instilled strategies and rules of survival for slaves, and eventually became beliefs, practices, and mores for families and communities that continue to this day. Colorism is a “vestigial of the slavery era,” adopted as the law of the land in early times and kept as a part of the black and American community (Turner 38).

As previous sources have explained, the mainstream notion of beauty favors white features and the closer one is to those ideals, the more positively they are received. Turner’s article adds to the role color can play in femininity by highlighting the separation of black women from womanhood in general. According to the piece, they

were excluded from the nineteenth century's Cult of True Womanhood and that same lack was femininity is only given a more positive spin in the modern Superwoman archetype. The archetype, through by Townsend as exemplified in the iconography of Michael Obama and Oprah, is described by Michael Bennet and Vanessa D. Dickerson in *Recovering the Black Female Body: Self-Representations by African American Women* as "dehumaniz[ing]" because it idealizes woman "as a machine built for endurance" and social perfection (qtd. in Turner 41). Compounding this lack of femininity and humanity is colorism which further divides a community pushed aside. Turner's "Colorism in Dael Orlandersmith's *Yellowman*" helps set the scene of *Bayou* in terms of where black womanhood likely stood during Lee's youth—it is twice wounded and growing into it means confronting those scars and cuts to some degree. Tar Baby is the catalyst through which Lee meets and interacts with the politics of black womanhood—hair, skin tone, sex, domesticity, and community. Furthermore, highlighting the systems that could be running under the Lee-on-Tar Baby subplot of *Bayou* fleshes out not only said subplot, but Charon's characterization of Tar Baby.

CHAPTER 2

TAR BABY, LEE, AND CHARON

The scenes of monstrosity and violence in *Bayou* explore anxiety over Lee's relationship with her late mother, known to readers only by her stage name, Tar Baby. In volume two, Lee explains to Bayou that she "don't remember [Tar Baby] much" indicating that her mother died when Lee was younger (Love and Morgan 2: 12). Although Tar Baby is, thus far, a reoccurring character in the series, she is not wholly based on Lee physically interacting with her. Rather, she and nods to her appear in dream sequences, memories, flashbacks, and hallucinations. This in mind, the majority of Tar Baby's appearances can be seen as constructs of Lee's mind based on legend, rumor, and speculation from other people in her community. Viewing Tar Baby as a largely spectral, imaginary character invites reading moments involving her as periods where her themes—namely hair, beauty, morality, womanhood, and sexuality—are being interrogated or investigated. Likewise, comic panels and dialogue that dwell on the aforementioned themes hint that Lee is engaging the memory of her mother and, by extension, her own femininity.

Lee's understanding of Tar Baby is informed by the community of Charon, particularly Calvin and her aunt on her mother's side, Lucy. Through these sources, Tar Baby is colored by beauty standards and morality norms. Tar Baby's nature as a female is a primary field of conflict for different sources of information with Calvin regularly recalling Tar Baby's skills as a singer and homemaker, while others draw attention to her

promiscuity and sexual appeal. Broadly speaking, Tar Baby's image, as gathered from opposing groups and sides, ranges from "mother" to "whore" in terms of archetypes and she is seen in an unfavorable light by most, while only being openly seen positively by her husband.

Tar Baby's public life as a singer and supposedly "loose" woman is the primary ground for poor opinions of her (Love and Morgan 1: 14). In the earlier pages of volume one, Tar Baby's first mention is accompanied by a reputation for high levels of sexual activity and sin. When Lee is describing her mother and her disappearance to Lily, she mentions that her aunt thought Tar Baby "was a loose woman" and a local religious figure, Reverend Mills, claimed that the flood that took the juke joint was divine punishment (1: 14). These comments on the flood and Lee's mother reveal that Tar Baby and other frequenters of the juke joint were frowned upon and sometimes seen as sinners by others. In other words, they hint at the sense of scandal Tar Baby's desirability and workplace carried. The views of Lucy and Mills are expanded and illustrated in volume two's Dixie juke joint scene. On the hunt for Rabbit, Lee and Bayou journey to a juke joint where a menagerie of woodland animals are partying. Lee, hair pressed and dress new, is approached by Reverend Bear whose attentions quickly become sexually tinged, punctuated by giving the side of her face a long lick. He claims that he'll "cleanse" Lee so that being amongst the "dancing heathens" in the club with them won't tarnish her (Love and Morgan 2: 41). The male bear's actions, using religious rhetoric to frame the events he's hoping to set in motion while engaging in the supposed sinfulness himself, hint that religious leaders and citizens who defame Tar Baby and juke joints hypocritically desire or pursue her and nightlife privately. Just as the reverend's advances

start to ramp-up, his wife barges into the club and, after her husband claims that he was tempted by Lee, she accuses the girl of being a “harlot” (Love and Morgan 2: 46). The female bear’s anger and accusations are in the vein of the informal shaming Lucy uses when reacting to her sister’s popularity with men. While neither character is directly linked to Mills and Lucy respectively, they fit the mold of their behavior and provide more examples of the kind of treatment Tar Baby and people like her could receive.

Another facet of public knowledge on Tar Baby is her stage name which carries connotations of her reputation and appearance, and how other women received her. The name is directly mentioned in the first of two Tar Baby nightmares, the dream sequences in which Lee approaches her mother, singing while bathing in a galvanized steel washtub, and begins combing her hair by request. While tending to her mother’s hair, Lee asks if she’ll ever become as physically desirable as she. Tar Baby responds by declaring that the men who chased after her did so out of lust and not love. Continuing, she explains that a man’s sexual interest doesn’t mean he thinks the object of interest is pretty and draws a difference between hardworking Wagstaffs like Lee and Calvin, and her “wicked” self (Love and Morgan 2: 14). On the topic of how she’s received by other women, she says “Heh, I even have them redbones green with envy. ‘Tarbaby’ they call me” (2: 14). The conversation is cut short by Tar Baby’s sudden transformation into a humanoid, tar covered monster and a sudden appearance by Stagger Lee. According to her, Tar Baby is a nickname her light-skinned peers gave her to mock her dark skin, but it also works as commentary on her relationships with men.

The corresponding Uncle Remus tale conveys the implication that Tar Baby is hazardous to those she attracts. In Joel Chandler Harris’ “The Wonderful Tar Baby

Story,” Brer Fox fashions a “contrapshun” with the appearance of a small black straw-hatted doll out of turpentine and tar, and leaves it on the side of the road in an attempt to capture Brer Rabbit (Harris). He calls his creation Tar-Baby and lays low until the target approaches and tries to strike-up a conversation with the doll. Annoyed that the stranger won’t respond to his small talk, Brer Rabbit quickly engages the creation in a physical fight and gets stuck in the tar. Emerging from the brush, Brer Fox has a hearty laugh at Brer Rabbit’s predicament. The story ends without revealing whether Brer Rabbit escapes or is eaten by the fox. By giving Lee’s mother this name, both other women and fans insinuate that she’s dangerously attractive—pleasing to the senses, but toxic and bad news by nature. Generally speaking, the people of Charon’s views on Tar Baby are harsh and largely based on her sexual history and appearance.

Meanwhile, Calvin is a supporter of Tar Baby; Lee and readers are able to see a more tender side to her when Calvin is involved. In the same panel, in the very text bubble that readily branded Lee’s mother loose, Calvin is credited with recognizing and praising her talent as a singer and it can be assumed that his positivity makes a difference for Lee. Each volume contains an image of Tar Baby performing and the images’ differences depict that Lee’s understanding of Tar Baby as a performer, likely tinged by Calvin’s input, is tamer than that of Rabbit who has a more risqué history with Tar Baby. The image conjured by Lee, appearing as she mentions her mother and the flood that claimed both she and the juke joint, has muted colors unlike Rabbit’s vibrant flashback. The differences in color are most noted when regarding the presence of red. Both versions have Tar Baby with feathers in her hair, a double looped necklace, and a red sequined dress. In Lee’s scene, Tar Baby’s dress is longer and its color is muted to pink

with a shade slightly lighter than the salmon rimming panels nearby. Rabbit's memory of the night of the flood sports a rich-red clad Tar Baby with matching panels. Rabbit, in his human form, carried on a professional and romantic or sexual relationship with Tar Baby, so it is more likely that the flashback featuring Bayou and himself is colored by the passion of an affair and the juke joint lifestyle. Lee's version is still marked by the idea that Tar Baby is promiscuous and sinful, but perhaps the toned-down aspect of her appearance in volume one is partially based on Calvin's view of his wife.

Calvin also provides Lee and readers with an idea of Tar Baby as a wife and mother when he complements Lee's cooking and appears to compare it with her mother's by saying "I swear, your cookin' is getting better and better. Before long, you'll be as good as your—" before being cut off by Lee (Love and Morgan 1: 30). Calvin's role as a representative of Tar Baby's domestic history is also expressed in Lee's bathtub nightmare. There, Tar Baby's description of herself and Calvin's treatment of her present the widower as Tar Baby's better half. While Lee is combing her hair, Tar Baby describes Calvin's love as truer than that of the men she was popular among—men who merely wanted "a roll in the hay" (Love and Morgan 2: 9). She goes on to recall the way her husband's love for her made him continue their relationship despite her spending nights away from home only to return smelling like alcohol and "men's toilet water" (2: 9). After discussing Calvin, "built for hard work, not ramblin'" just like other Wagstaffs, she dwells on her own "wickedness" as tar seeps from her eyes and scalp (2: 9). Calvin is portrayed as hardworking and separate from the party scene, as well as either forgiving or oblivious. Meanwhile, Tar Baby doesn't deny that she is a party girl mired in the sex and violence that can come prepackaged with the juke joint scene. She identifies herself as

awful while Calvin appears to be morally separate from her. Furthermore, the leaking pitch suggests that—like the Remus tale’s trap—Tar Baby was a poor wife and woman, a poison and hindrance that Calvin was bogged down in. If Lee’s conversation with her is a construct of Tar Baby rather than a ghost or dream-based Dixie beast, then it can be assumed that Lee has enough information of Tar Baby to be able to imagine her parents’ relationship. At this point in the series, Calvin appears to be his wife’s most vocal supporter—the only source of positivity against an almost overwhelmingly negative majority. He appears to be the wholesome part of Tar Baby’s posthumous image.

The Tar Baby gathered from Charon’s community is one desired, but marginalized and simplified by women and men. Calvin’s memory of Tar Baby is stripped of her physical form and highlighted by her skills. In contrast, Lee’s mother seems to be publically known for her body, attractiveness, and the sexually heated atmosphere of her work place—essentially surface qualities. Lee’s patchwork image of Tar Baby is multifaceted and somewhat conflicted, and without her own personal experiences with the actual woman, she must consider this image in the process of coming to terms with her mother and womanhood. One of the concerns tackled in Dixie and is understanding Tar Baby’s position in Lee’s female identity.

Multiple scenes and interactions that take place prior to entering the bayou hint at Tar Baby’s importance to Lee and encourage tracing Lee’s understanding of her. The two moments during which Lee, Calvin, and the topic of Tar Baby meet—namely, Lee’s brief discussion of Tar Baby while playing with Lily and the Wagstaffs’ post-locket-theft dinner—suggest that the truth of her mother’s character, or at least a truer and more

cohesive image than that collected from others, is something Lee itches to find. Together, these scenes prepare readers for further exploration into Tar Baby and black womanhood.

The first clue that interrogating Tar Baby's public image is one of several important strands in the series is Calvin's comparison of his wife's singing voice to a mockingbird. When Lee is describing Tar Baby to Lily in the first volume's early pages, she says that "My momma was beautiful and my daddy say she had a voice like a mockingbird," with "mockingbird" larger and bolder than rest of the text in the text bubble (Love and Morgan 1: 14). Emphasizing the bird with letter formatting expresses increased adoration or emotion on Lee's part and encourages digging deeper into the word for any information it might yield. "Mockingbird," in conjunction with Lee's name, calls to mind the American classic southern bildungsroman *How to Kill a Mockingbird* by Harper Lee. Aside from the growth of Scout, the female lead, Lee's novel concerns overcoming racial inequality in a bid to prove the innocence of Tom Robinson, a black male accused of raping a white woman. The light allusions to *How to Kill a Mockingbird* could mean that one aspect of Lee's own coming-of-age journey will not only be saving her father, but uncovering some degree of truth concerning her mother as well.

The second hint to the series' interest in Tar Baby's image surfaces when Lee and her father are having dinner after Miss Westmoreland has accused Lee of losing Lily's locket. Readers enter the pair's meal already in progress as Calvin is complementing Lee's cooking. Lee interjects and cuts the praise short to discuss the charges against her. After her father reveals that, despite having agreed to Lee's punishment for the losing the locket, he doesn't believe she's guilty, Lee asks why her father didn't defend her or put up a fight against Westmoreland. In response, Calvin explains that resistance might

jeopardize their safety and livelihood, and the locket isn't worth the risk. The compliment that Lee cuts off seems to have been leading to a positive comparison between Lee and her mother in terms of cooking ability, giving Tar Baby presence in the scene for both the characters and audience. As with the Harper Lee reference, the proximity of Tar Baby to discussions of or allusions to the topics of innocence, guilt, and defense can be interpreted as a clue that Tar Baby's reputation is due for revaluation—particularly for Lee and her identity.

Moments where she physically meets Tar Baby or themes and issues associated with her explore how Lee engages her mother's memory and where it fits in Lee's identity. The Tar Baby nightmare is Lee's chance to meet and interact with Tar Baby as she's been conjured by Lee's mind. The nightmare can easily be described as clouded or hazy and this quality helps it feel jarring and unsettling against other scenes in *Bayou* thus far. This feverish space is seemingly separated from the main events of the graphic novel and contains just about all things related to Tar Baby: the topics of black femininity, sexuality, and romance alongside violence and the concepts of conservative morality. The nightmare works as Tar Baby's domain and functions as the more straightforward meeting place of Lee and her understanding of her mother. The juke joint in Dixie is an episode that explores the dynamics of Tar Baby's relationship to the party scene and her community with Lee, for the moment, standing in her mother's place. The danger she faces during she and Bayou's visit to the juke joint allows her to see the reception that can accompany beauty. Furthermore, it is the stage on which Lee's more negative feelings towards her mother's femininity are aired; it picks up the depiction of Tar Baby inspired anxiety where the nightmare's monstrous transformation left off.

Finally, the Remus deal scene summarizes the desires and fears Lee simultaneously holds when it comes to her mother. Relatively shorter than the bathtub nightmare and juke joint episode, the Remus scene illustrates the condition of Lee's identity by presenting an idealized version of Tar Baby as a part of Lee and stacking it against what the current situation Lee's self faces. Together, the nightmare, Dixie juke joint, and Remus scene stand as evidence to the important role Lee's late mother plays in her daughter's feminine identity and chart her efforts to work through the complicated relationship between herself and her mother, as well as the notion of black womanhood.

CHAPTER 3

MOTHER AND DAUGHTER IN DIXIE

The Tar Baby nightmare shows the importance and value placed on Tar Baby as not only Lee's mother, but as a representative of a facet of Lee's identity. Though Lee claims to "dream about mama all the time" despite hardly remembering her, this dream is unique in that Lee actually talks to her mother (Love and Morgan 2: 12). This, in conjunction with the fact that Lee "can't seem to tell if dreams are real or not" in the bayou, indicates that this dream sequence is a particularly vivid experience and could function as more than a baffling product of exhaustion or platform for Stagger Lee's appearance (2: 12). Rather, it appears to be a special meeting place for Lee and a being conjured from her own mind and memory. Here, Tar Baby occupies an almost goddess or idol like position in the scene thanks to the ambiance of the graphic novel panels as well as the behavior of the characters involved and the placement of set pieces. When viewed as a whole, these components present Tar Baby as significant to Lee's identity as both a parent and symbol of femininity, though still distant and unreachable.

The sudden transition to the scene alongside the filters and affects applied to the comic panels are arguably the most attention grabbing, or rather, disorienting aspects of the scene. The early pages of volume two move between three scenes strung together by a song; it begins as background music when Stagger Lee is standing over his first victim of the comic, continues as a song being sung by a chain gang, and ends as the tune Tar Baby

is singing in the bathtub. The lack of transition for the physical move from the chain gang's field to the bathroom is jarring, especially considering readers are seeing this space for the first time without any set up to let them know they've been dropped into a dream sequence. Adding to the effect is the fact that this marks the first time characters are meeting Tar Baby given that her only prior appearance was a single shot of her on stage while Lee spoke over it.

The pages' coloring, providing the effect of a room lit by a single window and stifled with Tar Baby's cigarette smoke, give the bathroom a unique quality. With the window as its source, the glow transitions from a pale green tint in the first page, to a pink one as Lee and Tar Baby talk, and finishes as a glaring red when Tar Baby is fully transformed and Stagger Lee appears. The hazy property provided by the lighting is only aided by the room's busy, multi-colored floral wallpaper. Be it out of focus in close ups or in focus elsewhere, the wallpaper is a delirious splattering of pastels over a barely visible brown background. The walls themselves seem to be illuminated after the first page of the scene; a room that first appeared to be a little dark seems to be fully lit by the time Lee enters the room on the next page. Though the window stays, making another physical appearance over the monstrous Tar Baby's shoulder, the wall hums with light from an unknown source. With its placement and color, the Tar Baby nightmare sequence feels as if it is hovering out of line with the scenes that immediately precede and succeed it, thus adding to its dreamlike quality and enforcing its distinctiveness. These characteristics make the scene feel otherworldly, even in *Bayou*'s fantastical setting.

Character positioning, behavior, and appearance also factors into viewing the room as Tar Baby's ethereal domain. Arguably, Tar Baby's drunken air works in

conjunction with the dreaminess of the room; her lidded eyes and relaxed, open demeanor sync perfectly with the warm buzzing of the room's blurring, hazy features. Character positioning is also an element in Tar Baby's depiction. The way the panels present Tar Baby, zooming into her exposed, nude body parts, help make her look far bigger than Lee in a metaphysical or supernatural sense. That is, the way that Tar Baby's body is emphasized by being cut up and spread across multiple panels or zoomed in on creates the effect that she is larger than Lee in the same way a deity or specter is larger than a mortal; the largeness being more indicative of one's unearthliness or value rather than physical size. As Lee combs Tar Baby's hair, it is obvious that their size difference is nothing out of the ordinary, but this can be viewed as an illustration of the idea that Lee is closest to this idol Tar Baby in servitude. Lee's service, in the form of combing her hair, and position beneath Tar Baby as the receiver of the wisdom being imparted from mother to daughter solidify the feeling of a small, human creature in the glorious presence of an otherworldly, god-like being. This concept is displayed in Lee's introduction to the episode as well. She appears in the scene at the first panel of the second page after Tar Baby introduces her with "Oh hey, sugah. Grab that comb and come do my hair" (Love and Morgan 2: 7). The panel that follows has Tar Baby's legs, hand, and upper torso—all peeking out from the rim of the washtub—in the foreground with Lee standing in the background. With her simplified face, only a pair of white, black rimmed dots as eyes and no mouth, Lee looks small and a little dwarfed by her mother. In this panel, Lee answers with "OK mama" and Tar Baby responds by saying, "Bless you honey, such a sweet chil'" (Love and Morgan 2: 8). Tar Baby's speech pattern is embellished by pet

names giving her a doting quality as well as, following the idea of Tar Baby as a deity in this tiny space, the air of a pleased or appeased god over a devotee.

Viewing Tar Baby as a presiding goddess in this domain, the key set pieces of the scene can be seen as components of her motif. Identifying these components here allows for translating them as indicative of Tar Baby or the topic of Tar Baby in other scenes, like symbolic items or gestures in Christian iconography. The items in Tar Baby's bathroom can be split, for organizational purposes, into two groups according to what they denote. Her alcohol bottle and cigarette nod to juke joints since juke joint scenes in the series typically have characters drinking or smoking. Along with the song she's singing, mildly bawdy in its gestures towards what it means when one isn't sleepy, but still "feel[s] like layin' down," these items help bring the juke joint into this intimate space (Love and Morgan 2: 7).

Meanwhile, floral wallpaper and hair seem to be the more feminine pieces in the room. In volume one, hair comes into focus for a moment when Lily and Lee are together discussing Lee's previous work helping fish the corpse of a peer—mutilated and lynched for whistling at a white woman—from the bayou. The scene becomes the first indication of what Lee thinks about her own ideas of beauty with when she says, as she toys with the ends of Lily's hair, "Your hair is pretty, I wish I had hair like yours" (Love and Morgan 1: 10). In volume two, the nightmare is the first mention of hair and, like volume one's, it has Lee admiring and touching another's hair; she combs through Tar Baby's straight hair, asking "Mama, how come my hair ain't pretty like yours?" (Love and Morgan 2: 8). Lee's desire for and appreciation of straighter hair continues when she and Bayou visit a mother rabbit and her warren of energetic kids in search of Rabbit. Mrs.

Rabbit is shocked at the state of Lee's hair upon first sight and immediately calls for her hot comb and pressing oil. By sunset, Lee is appraising her new look in a nearby river's reflection, declaring "I don't think my hair ever looked this pretty" (Love and Morgan 2: 22). After Bayou recommends continuing their travels, Lee, obviously pleased with the results of the hot comb treatment, answers "I just wanna look fo' a spell longer" (2: 22). In the panel containing Lee's reflection, her hair has been smoothed back into a bun or fluffy pony tail. A few loosely curled strands hang around her face and a yellow daisy-like flower is tucked right above her ear. Two of Tar Baby's icons—hair and the flower—are contained in Lee's new hairstyle and carried into the juke joint where Bayou and Lee hope to find Rabbit. Reading Lee as adorning articles of Tar Baby through this hairstyle allows for the juke joint episode to work as a second meeting place for Lee and her mother, the former temporarily taking Tar Baby's role.

With Lee occupying a role or space Tar Baby seems to typically hold in club settings, the juke joint scene functions as a stage for Lee to draw on some of the negative aspects of Tar Baby whereas the previous stage—the nightmare—was somewhat in awe of her. Arguably, the club episode further addresses the implications around the dream's pivot into nightmare territory. Stagger Lee aside, his appearance an intrusion and attack powered by his own will since "[Stagger Lee] can find you in yah damn dreams," Tar Baby's transformation from woman to tar monster alters the dream and, by extension, the perception of Lee's feelings about her mother (Love and Morgan 2: 14). Since the tar begins leaking from her eyes and scalp while she's speaking, Tar Baby's words could be what sparked Lee's anxiety or horror and the change that bubbled from it. The line between human and monster is one panel where the tar is dripping down Tar Baby's face

and she's closing a reflection on her wickedness. In the panels prior, the conversation steers to Tar Baby's life outside of the home. Tar Baby aligns herself with wickedness, defining it through action: "Love make ol' Calvin let me in the house at the crackadawn wit' my breath smellin' like gin and my clothes smellin' like men's toilet water. That's love. Seen a man slit another's throat with a straight razor over me. That ain't love, that's wickedness" (Love and Morgan 2: 9). She continues on, confiding that "Mama said I was a wicked woman. Figure I am. You'll make a good man a good wife someday. Don't have to be pretty for that" (2: 9). The next panel ends the speech with "Heh, heh, you a Wagstaff! Y'all built for hard work, not ramblin'. That wicked, that ramblin' spirit, makes life hell" (2: 9). One reason these words could invoke anxiety in Lee is that they package beauty and Tar Baby's physical qualities with troubles meaning that, if Lee were to gain the physical characteristics she likes, she would run the risk of being stuck in or developing an affinity for the "ramblin' spirit." Said spirit has been associated with sinfulness, divine punishment, a troubled marriage, shallow affection, and the ire of others; it's generally undesirable. Tar Baby's transformation denotes Lee acknowledging and being shaken by the negative edge to Tar Baby who, here, represents the portion of Lee's identity—ties to mother, feminine beauty—she would like to get closer too.

The juke joint episode is where the repulsive aspects of that the Tar Baby facet of her identity—played by Lee—is addressed by another portion of her self—played by the reverend bear's wife. Two primary aspects of Miss Bear help package her as a representative of a part of Lee's identity: her appearance and rhetoric against Lee. Miss Bear and Lee are dressed similarly, both in light teal, short-sleeved, knee length dresses. They also both have bags on their person—each a muted red or dark salmon, though the

bear has a much nicer purse that's shaped stiffly and sports golden hardware. Finally, both wear a yellow daisy on their head with Lee's in her hair and Miss Bear's pinned to her reddish hat. Working alongside Miss Bear's clothing is the way she and Lee are physically juxtaposed at times, particularly when Miss Bear first turns her attention directly on Lee. When the reverend's wife first enters, demanding to know exactly what her husband's up to with "that little heifer," she's situated in the club's entryway with her husband looking over his shoulder in shock (Love and Morgan 2: 42). In the next panel, she's smacking her husband and he's deflecting guilt onto Lee, saying that she seduced him. After a shot of Miss Bear looking aghast towards the reader, Lee and Miss Bear are depicted facing each other in white space uncontained by a panel. Lee, blown back by the force of Miss Bear's aggression, is staggering backwards with one foot in the air and the other planted. Meanwhile, Miss Bear, hands on hips, is leaning forward and down to shout directly at Lee with one high-heeled foot grounded and the other kicked up behind her. This image depicts Lee and Miss Bear in similar, yet opposing poses with the later towering over her opponent; her legs are thicker and stand taller than Lee. These visual cues suggest that the two females are two sides of the same coin.

Miss Bear's verbal attacks against Lee are often based on her assumption that the girl is a loose woman intentionally wooing the reverend. Lobbing labels like "harlot" and accusing other women of trying to steal husbands isn't unusual for a club scene—other juke joint scenes in volume two have minor romantic disputes of a similar nature (Love and Morgan 2: 46). However, those scenes appear after Bayou and Lee's juke joint visit leaving Tar Baby to be the first parallel to being branded a temptress. The nightmare and Lee's description of Tar Baby in volume one reveal that Tar Baby is seen as a seductive

party woman and isn't on good terms with other women because of how popular she is with men. Miss Bear, with an outfit so similar to Lee's, is a version of Lee verbalizing and acting on the assumptions other people tend to make about Tar Baby—things Lee has no doubt absorbed to a degree growing up.

Together, these characteristics make Miss Bear seem like a stand-in for a different kind of femininity—someone like Aunt Lucy, with her family of four counting a dog and Christianized morality. With Lucy being the only named adult black woman in Lee's life, Lucy and her influence could count for a portion of Lee's belief and value system, a facet of her identity. When Miss Bear lashes out at Lee, it is as if a version of Lee colored largely by Lucy and other similar voices is rejecting and attacking a version that, as illustrated with Lee's adornments, is more in line with Tar Baby. While Lee herself doesn't behave as though she has the wickedness discussed in the bathtub scene, the connection between Tar Baby's desirable looks and wickedness exists and hasn't been separated yet. As a result, wearing Tar Baby vestments means wearing the wickedness, especially as far as the other Lee—Miss Bear—is concerned. Miss Bear, Reverend Bear, Bayou, and Lee are separated soon after Miss Bear draws a gun; Bayou bursts through a wall to escape and a flash flood does the rest of the work as it sweeps away the club goers. The skirmish between Miss Bear and Lee is never solved to satisfaction, so the sides at odds in Lee's self don't settle their differences. Instead, the conflict at the end of the juke joint episode provides a snap shot of Lee's condition, her in conflict and rejecting a part of itself.

The difficulty of that rejection is that the Tar Baby portion of Lee's identity is still a part of the overarching self and that its presence helps define the rejecting portion.

This case of abjection is further engaged in the dream sequence where Lee meets Uncle Remus. By Bossman's orders, Remus tries to strike a deal with Lee so that she'll give up her efforts in Dixie. This dream opens with a vision of Lee being lifted in the air by her father in front of yellow cottage more classic in design than the actual Wagstaff home, a simple wooden shed-like structure. Lee's hair is flowing in the breeze, whipping around luxuriously just like her red dress. The scene stands waiting before Uncle Remus and the actual Lee. He tells her that Bossman will give her the things she wants, "That house, good eatin', pretty hair. Most of all, yo' daddy, safe and sound," if she'll just walk towards the vision (Love and Morgan 2: 137). Before Lee can make a decision, Mother Sista interrupts to remind Lee of Lily—the girl's safety and whereabouts are not included in the deal. Lee decides that she's willing to continue to search for Lily even at the risk of her and her father's lives, prompting Remus to angrily transform into a giant rooster and attack. Before Remus can deal any damage, the scene switches to the exact start of the Tar Baby nightmare that appears earlier in the comic. Lee awakens with a gasp and coughing fit in the panels after Tar Baby delivers the "Oh hey, sugah, grab that comb and come do my hair" line (Love and Morgan 2: 143).

The deal addresses the conflicting aspects of Lee's identity, particularly the desire for Tar Baby beauty and rejection of the lifestyle that supposedly comes with it by providing the ideal solution and condition for Lee's self. Lee, dressed in a rich vibrant red, calls to mind the dress Tar Baby wears on stage in Rabbit's flashback. Along with the hair, the two create another Lee-Tar Baby hybrid like the one in the juke joint episode discussed previously. However, unlike that hairy situation with the bears, the deal version of Lee is able to exist peacefully alongside her father in a more family oriented

environment. The situation offered by the Bossman cancels out the drawbacks of beauty; no slut shaming and no weakened families, but a peaceful home life without violence or negative feelings. If Lee's anxiety about the facet of her identity that includes Tar Baby stems from the idea that it comes prepackaged with a "ramblin'" lifestyle that Lee doesn't seem to like or value, the deal offers a safer and less objectionable version of that facet. With Calvin and house, happy and prosperous, beside Lee, beautiful to her standards, the vision illustrates Lee's identity at peace.

The dream's end denotes that the actual facet of Lee's identity represented by Tar Baby is still abject and jarring—repulsive, yet irremovable. One way of interpreting Tar Baby's appearance and the way she ends the dream is to understand her appearance as a similar, but opposing force. Similar in form to the juxtaposition of Miss Bear and Lee, the repulsive identity component stands against the idealized version. By placing them on opposite ends of the dream, the book's structure allows them to face each other in way that is similar to the way Lee and Miss Bear were positioned in the juke joint white-space image. This arrangement invites comparison of the two versions of Tar Baby and the identity she denotes—one accepted and harmoniously integrated into the overall Lee, the other kept, but at arm's length. That Lee's dream conjured the image of Tar Baby after being presented with the Bossman's deal suggests that Lee herself recognizes that, for the time being at least, Tar Baby will remain the abject identity within her own.

CHAPTER 4

CONCLUSION; ABJECTION IN THE BLACK EXPERIENCE

Lee's struggles with her identity could reflect similar troubles in Charon's African American community. Despite being pursued in some ways, Tar Baby still qualifies as a bit of a social outcast. Without any evidence of close female friends and a complementary dosage of low regard for her sexual reputation from the female community, Tar Baby appears to be informally ostracized by women. Meanwhile, according to dream Tar Baby's words, the men who pursued her did so for lust alone and such activity went on outside of Tar Baby's marriage. The degree of taboo applied to such actions, particularly by the dream version of Tar Baby, helps color male attention as separating her from the community as a secret or an aside to marriages or the "normal" life outside of juke joints and the cover of night. In addition, the fact that Lee's pursuer in the juke joint was a member of the religious community hints that Tar Baby was favored or wanted, privately, by people who were members of the group that contributed to her vilification or upheld the rhetoric that bashed her. Another nudge to those same ends is a compliment mentioned in the nightmare scene. Tar Baby says that men called her "the Rose of Sharon"—an allusion to the Song of Solomon line which reads "I am the rose of Sharon, and the lily of the valleys" (*King James Bible*, Song of Solomon 2.1). The "Rose of Sharon" remark is the only compliment provided by Tar Baby; it suggests that men who lusted after her routinely chose religiously tinged lines. Finally, that she is so

thoroughly linked with the juke joint—proven by examples in the series to be a space for exploring desires, breaking norms, and partaking of vices—rather than other facets of her life like motherhood or being a wife, separates her from the public mainstream which is more controlled by norms and mores. Instead, it aligns her with a realm visited for release and kept at reputation-safe distance. As one of the abject in the community, Tar Baby is emotionally and physically pushed to the far edge of the main body.

Dislike of Tar Baby could stem from how, while she herself or her features are desirable, the insinuations that run under them are not. In other words, Tar Baby's physical attractiveness indicates uncomfortable truths and suggestions that prompt rejection of her for the comfort of the community's identity. In terms of Lee's Tar Baby dilemma, the combination of beauty and violence is jarring because Lee doesn't want the later; ideally, Lee could continue to prefer certain beauty standards without inviting or becoming embroiled in a lifestyle she doesn't want. Worsening the situation is the indispensability of the Tar Baby identity facet since it helps define the portion of Lee's self that is rejecting and setting itself apart from Tar Baby's qualities. However, another reason the connection of beauty and violence or vice is disturbing is the commentary it can make on cultural issues like sexuality, the treatment of women, marriage, and popular, publically held norms and values. Arguably, it is this kind of commentary that repulses the community when it comes to Tar Baby since it shakes the foundation of "we" community and culture is grounded on. The things that make her different from or lesser to them indicate ugly or unsettling things that attack or upend the smoothed out main or public culture of the community. Tar Baby has to be verbally, emotionally, and physically kept at bay in order to avoid a rupture in the community's identity.

One example of this dynamic at work could be hair politics in the world of *Bayou*. As Banks discusses, hair like Tar Baby's is desirable in terms of beauty standards and privilege for black women; generally speaking, the closer to mainstream ideals, the better. Debatably, the same could be said for the *Bayou* universe. Miss Rabbit and her hair straightening products signpost the importance some place on straight hair. None of the children in her brood are depicted with human hair on their heads—their anthropomorphism extends to only their clothes and the fact that they're bipedal. This means that Miss Rabbit's hot comb is only for her and, despite how busy she may be as a mother, she takes the time to straighten her hair. Furthermore, given that Lee and Bayou appear out of the blue and her hairdo is a straightened bob, there's reason to believe that Miss Rabbit regularly straightens her hair making the chore apart of her beauty routine. Even her reaction to Lee's hair expresses the degree to which hair straightening is popular and expected: having only just met her, she shouts "Sweet loud in heaven above! Look at that po' child's head! Look like steel wool" (Love and Morgan 2: 20).

Lee's appreciation for straighter hair falls in line with the "good" and "bad" hair standards explored in *Hair Matters*, but as the book indicates, hidden within those standards is the privileging of mainstream, whiter physical features. Though all of the specific attributes that factor into her unpopularity have not been revealed, Tar Baby's assumedly natural straight hair is likely one of the grounds on which she's disliked by some. Envyng her hair or how it may increase her desirability factor, raises questions about the intersections of aesthetics and race that—as Banks' interviews reveal—can be uncomfortable and dividing. Does wanting or favoring straight hair make one any less black? Do such desires truly reflect self-hatred? Rather than allow her to continue to

spark such questions, the community informally relegates Tar Baby to its dark edge. By viewing her as the “other” and making her somewhat of a villain, the overall body can avoid seeing Tar Baby as a part of its self and similar to other members. Were it to do so, the qualities in and treatment of her that are unique to her experiences would stand out and call into question the group’s values, upsetting the community’s claims to unity. The horror of such an upheaval is that, with its shared beliefs and sense of group identity shaken, what happens to the body that is a community?

Does the discord in this fictional community have some roots outside of *Bayou*’s pages? Banks, Townsend, and Turner all call attention to the many grounds on which the black community is struggling to maintain or towards unity and solidarity. Divisions drawn and the labels applied simultaneously divide the community as a body while enforcing a more cohesive, if not smaller and more exclusive, identities and bodies within. Lee’s engagement with Tar Baby in *Dixie* allows her to explore the abject of her identity through physical interaction, facilitating the self-exploration involved in coming-of-age and preparing for adulthood. Her efforts are also reflective of and perhaps preliminary to a similar struggle on a larger scale. Between *Bayou* and social analyses like those by Banks, Townsend, and Turner, the black experience seems to be a process of dealing with the abject in one’s body, collective or individual, in an effort towards definition, solidarity, and stability.

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