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Tar Baby: The Performance of Object

by Ra Malika Imhotep

I owe a large part of my current preoccupation with Black southern vernacular culture and all its living objects to a childhood spent in Atlanta, Georgia watching members of the Kuumba Storytellers embody Afro-diasporic folktales. One such storyteller, Akbar Imhotep—actor, storyteller, puppeteer, puppet-maker, poet—is my father.

In [a 2010 video](#) recorded by Spencer Simrill, Jr., Akbar Imhotep performs the famous Uncle Remus tale “Brer Rabbit and the Tar Baby” in the backyard of the Wren’s Nest in Atlanta, Georgia. The Wren’s Nest is a national landmark nestled in Atlanta’s West End neighborhood, and was the home of Joel Chandler Harris, a white male writer who, by some measures, had an exploitative and fetishistic relationship to the Georgia plantation stories he inscribed through the character of Uncle Remus. In fact, the house was purchased and expanded with the profits garnered by his best-selling Uncle Remus books. Harris’s Uncle Remus is a simulacrum—a copy for which there is no original—of the figure of the griot, the guardian of oral tradition in many African traditions.

As a performer at the Wren’s Nest, Akbar Imhotep serves as a bridge between the fictional nineteenth-century image of Uncle Remus and the Black cultural nationalist imperative to reclaim the African past. The 2010 recording shows him, wearing a fugu or smock from Northern Ghana, as he leads the audience in call-and-response, first ensuring they can pronounce his name “Akbar,” and then beginning an introductory chant that enlists the listener to help open the door “so that all the stories [he has] to tell can come through”:

Stories come and stories go (*stories come and stories go*)

Listen to the words and help them grow (*listen to the words and help them grow*)

It matters not if the stories are true (*it matters not if the stories are true*)

Only what they mean to you ... (*only what they mean to you ...*)

And thus begins the retelling of a story I have been “stuck on” since I was a child sitting in that same backyard, watching my father lead the audience on a journey from Uncle Remus’s Georgia plantation to Anansi the Spider’s West African jungle. To conjure up the stories’ distinct characters, Akbar Imhotep employs a range of gestures and voice manipulations. He is at once both prey and predator, Brer Rabbit, Brer Fox, and Brer Bear. The only figure of the story he does not himself embody is that of the Tar Baby. The Tar Baby instead is assembled in mid-air, a performing object built through the performer’s gestures. The audience watches Imhotep place the eyes, the nose, and the hat onto the imagined figure. The Tar Baby comes alive in the mind’s eye, through the performer’s manipulation of space.

While the material traces of Afro-diasporic puppetry traditions may not have been preserved, or may not have existed in forms we could recognize today, Imhotep’s performance illustrates that the idea of the “performative object” is present in the history and practice of Black oral narratives. Storytellers or griots employ a host of representational strategies, using elements of costumes, masks, and gestures to convey the action of a plot. As Imhotep walks around the figure, peers down at it, bends his knees to get a closer look, he effectively creates an object that the arc of the story is dependent on.

Imhotep keeps his audience engaged through the incorporation of several moments of “question and answer.” Allowing the audience’s voices to break into the story, Imhotep further emphasizes the feeling of collective journeying. At one point he pauses to ask the audience: “Why can’t the Tar Baby talk?” A chorus of white children answer:

It doesn’t have a voice!

It’s not even real, it’s just tar!

It’s not alive!

Have my daddy tell it, the Tar Baby is real. It may not ever “say nothin” but it exists as he created it, right there, in real time. It might have no “breath,” no “heart,” no “stomach”; it might “just be tar,” but it’s real.

Where I read in the original story indications that the Tar Baby is gendered as female, my father feels that the “little bitty person, little baby” is gender neutral. While

my father's retelling uses gender neutral or masculine pronouns to refer to the object he created, I interpret his performance of Brer Fox "dressin' up the figure" to ensure it catches Brer Rabbit's attention as a subtle index to the character's femininity.

My gendered reading is also a result of my own adolescent identification with the figure. In the Wren's Nest there is a li'l Tar Baby sitting on a pedestal. It is a shiny, gummy-looking little black thing that I remember being transfixed by as a child. Now I think it had everything to do with my own being a little black thing, seeing her characteristics mirrored in a seemingly inanimate object. This identification has stuck with me. Watching the recording, hearing the young white girl innocently describe all the ways the Tar Baby "is not even real" feels like a bigger statement, perhaps even an understandably naïve comment on my own marginalized personhood as a queer Black woman.

Central to my larger project is a commitment to the ways Black feminist artists, scholars, and writers have theorized what Ntozake Shange and Martin Heidegger would term "being-in-the-world"—with an emphasis on Black women's negotiations of strategic commodification in pursuit of survival and sustenance for self, family, and community. In this pairing of Shange's Black feminist poetics with Western philosophy, I am imagining the terrain of "Black feminist ontology" with and after Heidegger, understanding that Black women fulfill the two distinguishing features of Heidegger's "da-sein," in that the Black feminist subject inherently 1) takes its own being as an issue worth interrogating, and 2) is constantly engaged in activities and tasks that she *cares* about.

When Black feminist philosopher and literary critic Hortense J. Spillers says, "my country needs me, and if I were not here I would have to be invented," in her 1987 essay "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book," I see Brer Fox grabbing hold of some turpentine and tar to make him up an object that will serve to feed him. And that's not to imply that there is something holy or just about Brer Fox's act of creation—in fact the case I want to make is that the inventor, regardless of his intentions, is just a vessel through which what Therese, a Caribbean character in Toni Morrison's 1981 novel *Tar Baby*, describes as the "ancient properties" of Blackness express themselves.

On the Matter of Holding it All Together

In the book I've just completed, *Tar Baby*, I use that old story because, despite its funny, happy ending, it used to frighten me. The story has a tar baby in it which is used by a white man to catch a rabbit. "Tar baby" is also a name, like nigger, that white people call black children, black girls, as I recall. Tar seemed to me to be an odd thing to be in a Western story, and I found that there is a tar lady in African mythology. I started thinking about tar. At one time, a tar pit was a holy place, at least an important place, because tar was used to build things. It came naturally out of the earth; it held together things like Moses's little boat and the pyramids. For me, *the tar baby came to mean the black woman who can hold things together*. The story was a point of departure to history and prophecy. That's what I mean by dusting off the myth, looking closely at it to see what it might conceal.

—Toni Morrison¹

In *Blackness and Value*, Lindon Barrett discusses the ways "the Black woman" was constructed, through slavery, as the primary vessel through which capital and sex could be exchanged freely without posing a substantial threat to the capitalist hetero-patriarchal hegemony espoused and maintained by the white ruling class (225–27). Black women's reproductive capacity functioned as the principal site of their value, fundamentally shaping their experience of slavery and their expressions of sociality and resistance. For Spillers, the erotic instantiation of the captive Black body as flesh is the act of "pornotroping." The pornotrope is the "externally imposed meaning" marked on the enslaved. As pornotrope, the captive body becomes "the source of an irresistible, destructive sensuality" which is simultaneously reduced "to a thing," a "being for the captor." As such, a being conscripted in service to its captor, "the captured sexualities proved a physical and biological expression of 'otherness'" (Spillers 67). The move I want to make is to consider how the figure of the Tar Baby might prove to be a useful heuristic for understanding this "irresistible, destructive sensuality." Tar is black and sticky—its material both performs and signifies its Blackness, and in its Blackness it

¹ Toni Morrison, qtd. in Leclair; emphasis added.

demands engagement. In the folktale it is the voiceless allure of the Tar Baby figure that entraps Brer Rabbit. The tar marks and holds him as prey. In Imhotep's performance the immaterial presence of the Tar Baby is what holds the audience in the world of the story.

Most readings of the Tar Baby folktale center Brer Rabbit as the archetypal trickster figure. Black identification with Brer Rabbit is understood as one of the primary functions of this element of the Black oral tradition. These trickster tales give Black folks space to envision themselves as cunning, as "smarter than massa." The briar patch has been hailed as the field/the ancestral lands/the ghetto/the hood—and all the other "unlivable" geographies in which Black folks make and sustain life. These readings are appropriate, useful and necessary, but I'm "stuck on" the gendered Blackness of the Tar Baby and what seeing (and refusing to discard) this figure as more than just a means to an end might open up for Black studies.

"The Performative Object"

If puppetry is, as John Bell describes it, "the animation of objects," and Black folks were constructed through the trans-Atlantic slave trade as animate objects, productive commodities or "God-breathing machines" to quote Linda Brent/Harriet Jacobs, it strikes me as compelling to think across the terrain of puppetry studies and the more philosophical edges of Black studies. Poet-philosopher-theorist Fred Moten opens his first book *In The Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition* with a chapter entitled "Resistance of the Object: Aunt Hester's Scream," in which he reenters the *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* and turns to the scene of Aunt Hester's brutal corporal punishment and the aural resonance of her scream to "move through and against" the works of Karl Marx, Saidiya V. Hartman, and Peggy Phelan. Hartman opens *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America* with a critical reference to the *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*. "The 'terrible spectacle' that introduced Frederick Douglass to slavery," she writes, "was the beating of his Aunt Hester." Hartman references but does not reproduce the scene to "call attention to the ease with which such scenes are usually reiterated, the casualness with which they are circulated, and the consequences of this routine display of the slave's ravaged body" (17). This introductory passage sets the stakes for the paradigm-shifting work Hartman

does in *Scenes*. Throughout the text, she complicates archival and contemporary engagements with the spectacular Black body by re-examining the brutal conditions under which Black folks have been compelled to perform and make life.

Where Hartman decides to withhold the scene through which Aunt Hester is “ungendered,” or violently reduced to a mass of wounded flesh, Fred Moten engages the false promise of that withholding, arguing that Blackness/the scene objection will always reproduce itself. And it is in the terribly beautiful musicality of that reproduction that Moten finds “the historical reality of commodities who spoke” (Hartman; Spillers 67; Moten 6).

Which is to say that: for Moten, the fact of Black life, the sound of Aunt Hester’s scream, proves, in opposition to Marx, that the Commodity/the Object *does* speak. It does not have to be dreamt up or speculated (as Marx does); the history of African laborers rendered “black” through the process of the trans-Atlantic slave trade is rich with evidence of the voice of the object. As referenced by Paulette Richards, lynchings were another “terrible spectacle” in the history of Black life in the US. In this instance, that spectacle can be linked to the ways that images of police brutality and state-sanctioned homicide are consumed in our contemporary moment; the “Black body” is separated from the “Black person.” Strung up, or streamed on auto-play, the Black body becomes an object onto which the audience (which here is the American/global public) can project its fictions of otherness.

This troubled history of the Black body as animate object ghosts my engagement with Black puppetry arts. But rather than allow that site of violence, or scene of subjection, to define and set the limits for how Blackness can be animated, Black storytellers and puppeteers insert themselves and their histories into the act. For my father, this distinction can be seen clearly between his beginnings as puppeteer, performing with his body concealed by a black curtain, and the kinds of embodied storytelling described in the opening of this essay.

In the absence of the material performing object, Akbar Imhotep conjures up the Tar Baby and requires the audience to believe in the products of his performative labor, to know she is real. In this act, the griot also simultaneously challenges the audience to reimagine their relationship to the figure of Uncle Remus. He is not real, but acting as his

progeny, Imhotep imbues the figure of the Black storyteller with an African-inflected Socratic method of *teaching*. Imhotep's performance in Joel Chandler Harris's backyard gives life to Remus's tales. Figuratively, Imhotep takes the Black puppet off Harris's hands. Of Harris, Of Remus, Of Brer Fox and Brer Bear, the Tar Baby is an object's object. She is invented to hold it all together.

In turning to the Tar Baby as a narrative element in a folktale that has circulated throughout the African diaspora, and most notably comes into the US imaginary by way of the Uncle Remus tales recorded and published by Joel Chandler Harris, I hope to reengage Moten and Hartman by thinking about the ways the figure of the Tar Baby—which is raced as Black and gendered as female within the original Uncle Remus tale—embodies Hartman's act of withholding voice, but is still a figure of performative materiality as evidenced by the ways her body is engaged in the text of the story and in the performative retelling of the story. I'm thinking here of my colleague Ianna Hawkins Owen's work on the mammy figure and declarative silence. While Owen's driving provocation illuminates Black asexual possibility within and beyond Black studies, what she offers in terms of a way to read the distinction between being silent and saying nothing proves useful to my contemplation of the Tar Baby—who, to have the story tell it, "ain't sayin' nuthin'."

The performing object, animated by the will of the story, signifies even in the absence of voice or readily perceptible presence. As my father reassures his audience that the Tar Baby is real, I hear a call to consider the ways these real, living Black objects mark the space around them. I'm just starting to pursue these questions and present many without fully fleshed-out answers. The opportunity to think through my father's work and the resonance of one particular story yields a bounty of critical thought I look forward to interrogating further. I close with a few questions that might stimulate future inquiries:

1. Does the ever-shifting interplay between object/subject, performer/prop provoked by African American puppetry tell us something new about Black life in the wake of the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade?
2. How might a Black feminist/Black woman's critical sense of labor and "togetherness" further flesh out an understanding of the Tar Baby folktale?

3. Where do we go from here? What is the place of real, living Black objects in our future?

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