Names and the construction of identity: Evidence from Toni Morrison's *Tar Baby*

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We argue that the processes of naming and being named contribute critically to the construction of self-identity. Toni Morrison's novel *Tar Baby* provides a rich source of data to assess this claim. We begin by examining names in the common ground of individuals and of communities. We then consider how names are the tools by which human categories are created. We provide an information processing analysis of the mechanisms of naming effects through a discussion of the functions served by concepts and the schematic basis of using names to construct social reality.

1. Introduction

The first crisis in Toni Morrison's novel *Tar Baby* arises when an intruder is discovered hiding in a closet of the mansion, L'Arbe de la Croix. The head of the household, Valerian Street, shocks all assembled by saying:

> "Good evening, sir. Would you care for a drink?" (p. 80)

Once the drink has been accepted, Street goes on to inquire:

> "How long have you been with us, Mister –? I'm sorry, I don't know your name." (p. 92)

The intruder answers the first question, but does not give his name. After intervening conversation, Street asks again:

> "I'm sorry, but I don' t know your name."
> "That makes us even," said the man with a wide smile, "I don't know yours either."
> (p. 94)

Before the intruder volunteers a name, the reader is made privy to the roots of his secrecy:

> He didn't like to think too far in advance anyway, but he supposed he'd have to think up a story to tell them about who he was and what his name was. Oh, he had been alone so long, hiding and running so long. In eight years he'd had seven documented identities and before that a few undocumented ones, so he barely remembered his real original name himself. Actually the name most truly his wasn't on any of the Social Security cards, union dues cards, discharge papers, and everybody who knew it or remembered it in connection with him could very well be dead. Son. It was the name that called forth the true him. The him that he never lied to, the one he tucked in at night and the one he did not want to die. The other selves were like the words he spoke – fabrications of the moment, misinformation required to protect Son from harm and to secure that one reality at least.   (p. 139)

When the intruder encounters Street the next morning, he reveals a less personal name:

> "Good morning, Mr. Sheek," said the man.
> "Street. Valerian Street," said Valerian. "What did you say your name was?"
> "Green. William Green."
> "Well, good morning, Willie. Sleep well?"   (p. 146)

The wealthy white man immediately coins an uninvited diminutive, *Willie*, to refer to the black intruder. As the book progresses, the name *Willie* is only used by the white characters. One stratum of black characters, those who have come with Valerian Street from the United States to the Caribbean Island, Isle des Chevaliers, call Willie Son. A second stratum of black characters, natives of a neighboring island, refer to Son as *the chocolate eater*. Son's identity – his concept of his function in the world – is partially defined by how he is named by these groups of individuals. His identity is further constructed by the names he must use to refer to those around him. The use of names in the construction of identity is a major concern of Morrison's novel. We will use *Tar Baby* as a domain in which to explore the hypothesis that the processes of naming and being named contribute critically to the construction of self-identity.

In the broadest sense, our theoretical framework is derived from the writings of sociologists like Cooley (1902/1964) who argued that the sense of self is derived from the reflection of the self-image one casts on others; the metaphor being that of a looking-glass self. More recently, social psychologists have also underscored the influence of social conditions on the development of a sense of many selves (McGuire and McGuire 1988). Endorsing this social determinism view of self-development in opposition to other more individualistic alternatives, we will suggest that the looking-glass self reflects with the greatest precision when our identities and the identities of others are focussed into names. The very act of naming, of labelling and identifying, has

the power to create and form a self-identity (see hooks 1989). Subsequently, it is with names that we negotiate our self-identities, within the constraints of social circumstances.

On our view, "self-identities" are cognitive structures with important functional consequences. A self-identity is more than a list of beliefs about oneself. Rather, this structure encodes critical information about what roles one assumes with respect to other individuals and serves to generate behavioral choices in day-to-day interactions.

We will make our claims about the way that name use contributes to self-identity against the background of the two preferences that speakers and listeners ordinarily bring to situations of naming (Sacks and Schegloff 1979). In general, speakers prefer to utter names that will (1) prompt recognition with (2) a minimal amount of effort. This leads speakers to prefer simple name forms such as *Debbie, Alexandra*, or *Brown*. Many of our critical examples will comprise situations in which speakers have violated these preferences. We will suggest that much self-knowledge is obtained when such violations are committed and acknowledged.

Our hypothesis about the role of names in the construction of identity is a general one about language use. We have turned to Morrison's novel to develop our ideas because it provides some advantages beyond what we could expect from transcriptions of the real-world. Besides particularly elegant prose, Morrison provides a situation in which characters interact in very complex patterns displaying relationships of varying intimacy. There are at least three well-defined levels of status in the book – the wealthy white Americans, the "refined" black American servants, and the "rough" Caribbean servants – but much of the action of the book arises because two characters, Son and Jade, don't fit comfortably into this hierarchy. Through the conventions of fiction, Morrison affords us the privilege of hearing what the variety of characters call each other face-to-face, behind each other's backs, and even in their private thoughts. We would be hard-pressed to record so much information with such accuracy in the real world. In using Morrison's book as data, we believe that she is giving an accurate portrayal of how name use does, in fact, function under non-fictional circumstances. (For other examples of literature used as data, see Friedrich 1972, Gautam 1987.)

We begin by examining names in the common ground of individuals and of communities. We then consider how names are the tools by which human categories are created. Of particular interest here is the thesis that the privileged use of names creates categories of inclusion and exclusion. The method of analysis we employ is derived from modern views of information processing in cognitive science. As concepts, names have an *identification* aspect that serves information processing goals, as well as a *relational* aspect that often serves an additional political function of maintaining status hierarchies of gender, race, and social class. We provide a cognitive analysis of

the mechanisms of naming effects through a discussion of the functions served by concepts and the schematic basis of using names to construct social reality.

Our analysis is not primarily concerned with the specific characteristics of names or, for example, their etymological meanings (see Fishman 1984, MacKethan 1986/1987, and Stein 1980 for such analyses of Morrison's novels; Ragussis 1986 provides an extended treatment of naming in fiction.) Nor do we intend to provide a theory of name interpretation in literature. Our perspective is, instead, informed by the information processing constraints that dominate real-world conversations. Our unique contribution is derived from an application of the tools of cognitive science to the powerful literary exposition of the processes of naming and being named in *Tar Baby*.

2. Names and common ground

The basic function of a name is to distinguish one individual (a human being, dog, or chair) from among an array of possibilities. Philosophical investigations of name use (see, e.g., Kripke 1980, Searle 1983) have concerned themselves largely with addressing the question, "How in the utterance of a name does the speaker succeed in referring to an object?" (Searle 1983: 234). From the variety of answers to this question, we adopt the common core of concern with social aspects of name use: Whatever type of content it is that enables names to refer, that content must be shared or the reference will fail. Felicitous name use is accomplished by the exploitation of mutual knowledge, or common ground, between the speaker who uses a particular name – Willie, Son, or chocolate eater – and the addressees who are meant to understand it (Clark and Marshall 1981). Although we will not offer arguments to decide among the various philosophical theories of name use, we hope to explicate some of the manifestations of common ground that are taken as background for the majority of these theories.

Common ground, itself, has been the subject of philosophical investigation (for a review, see Smith 1982). At issue has been how it is that language users can assure themselves that any information is, in fact, in common ground: "Mutual knowledge" seems to presuppose that speakers and addressees have carried out the impossible task of confirming an infinite series of interacting knowledge statements (e.g., "I know that he knows that I know that ...."). Clark and Marshall (1981) proposed that language users are able to overcome the "mutual knowledge paradox" by coupling assumptions of rationality (i.e., the speaker believes that the addressee will act in a rational fashion) with one of three forms of *copresence: community membership*, where the speaker and addressee are both members of the same well-defined community; *linguistic copresence*, where the speaker and addressee have shared the same language experience; and *physical copresence*, where the speaker and addressee have

shared the same physical environment. Crucially, when language users engage in conversation they continually have opportunities to confirm or disconfirm assumptions about common ground: if a reference fails (and the addressee is aware that it has failed), it is the addressee's immediate responsibility to signal that failure (see Clark and Schaefer 1989, Clark and Wilkes-Gibbs 1986, Schober and Clark 1989). In that sense, all reference involves a form of negotiation. A speaker offers a referring phrase; an addressee accepts or rejects it as adequate. In particular, when a speaker uses a name to refer to an individual, the speaker is signalling the belief that the addressee must have a referent available in common ground that is uniquely specified by that content (however the content functions). A failure by the addressee to undermine this belief (by, for example, saying "Who?") is good evidence that the assumption of common ground is warranted. Assumptions of rationality, knowledge of copresence, and the potential for negotiated corrections all allow speakers to achieve effects with names beyond merely picking out a referent. We now explore, at the levels of both individual and society, how speakers exploit names in service of self-identity, when correct reference is assured by common ground.

2.1. Name use among individuals

Ready establishment of common ground, coupled with systematic opportunities for correction, gives language users almost unlimited freedom to coin names to their liking. Although some names may inherently serve their function more efficiently (cf. Carroll 1985, Sacks and Schegloff 1979), more or less any phrase that is appropriately designed with respect to common ground, by virtue of some form of copresence, will refer effectively. Valerian Street's wife, for example, is initially introduced in the book as "the Principal Beauty of Maine" (p. 11). We learn later that Margaret (her "real" name) had been so labelled after acquiring the title of Miss Maine, by a newspaper published by the envious grandfather of a runner-up (p. 54). This appellation is used ironically throughout the early parts of the novel, with its insulting intent made most manifest by Ondine, the cook and housekeeper, to her husband Sydney: "What's the Principal Beauty hollering about?" (p. 34). Because it taps into special shared knowledge, *Principal Beauty* goes well beyond the basic function of distinguishing Margaret from the other characters in the novel. It is no accident that this is the first view Morrison gives us of this character. It informs the reader that there is a history to the relationship of these two characters, and more importantly, establishes common ground between the reader and the character of Ondine. Together they can observe and judge the Principal Beauty, who as the book unravels, emerges as a decidedly unpleasant character.

We can see the use of common ground most vividly in situations in which a creative name is used to the exclusion of something conventional. One such name is based on the appearance of Ondine's hair. Sydney's assessment is positive:

> He looked at her heavy white braids sitting on her head like a royal diadem. (p. 97)

But, Thérèse, the woman from the neighboring island who relieves Ondine of the more physical household chores, and Gideon, who assumes the same role with respect to Sydney, have mutually agreed upon a different image:

> [S]he [Thérèse] was ... eager for Gideon to finish with the hens and join her on some pretext or other for if the heavy one with the braids crossed like two silver machetes on her head caught them chatting in the washhouse or in the garden behind, she would fly into a rage and her machetes would glitter and clang on her head. (p. 88).

This image, and a similarly vivid one related to Sydney, becomes encapsulated and is used continually when Thérèse speaks to Gideon:

> "And machete-hair she don't like it. Tried to keep them apart. But it didn't work. He find her, swim the whole ocean big, till he find her, eh? Make machete-hair too mad. Now she tell her bow-tie husband ..." Thérèse sat on the wooden chair and rocked in the telling, pressing her fingers into Gideon's shoulder as each new sequence presented itself to her. "Bow-tie get mad very. 'Cause he lives near machete-hair's thumb ..." (p. 108)

And when Gideon speaks to Thérèse:

> "It's not important who this one loves and who this one hates and what bow-tie do or what machete-hair don't do if you don't figure the white ones and what they thinking about it all." (p. 95)

That this is an image upon which the two have mutually settled is made evident when Thérèse unsuccessfully attempts to use the expression outside of their dyad, in conversation with Son:

> "I [Thérèse] said you wouldn't ask machete-hair for anything, so I left food for you in the washhouse. You never came for it."
> "Machete-hair? The cook?"
> "That one. That devil." (p. 153)

Son can infer to whom *machete-hair* refers because of the small number of available referents, not because the expression itself is transparent. *Machete-hair* is a referring phrase anchored in the common ground of Gideon and Thérèse. And it is through the label *machete-hair* that the pair not only identify Ondine but also maintain their negative emotions about her. The

name *machete-hair* allows them to package incoming knowledge and maintain their beliefs about Ondine with great purity.

In each case, the phrases succeed in naming because they have survived a process of negotiation. The participants have identified an entity that needed a name and have settled upon a phrase outside of normal preferences – by mutual consent – that will serve that naming function (Clark and Wilkes-Gibbs 1986). At some point in their interactions, the speaker has proposed the phrase and the addressee has accepted it.

We can find particular evidence for such mutuality in situations in which some entity is in common ground but no name has been agreed upon. Late in the novel, Son appears in Gideon and Thérèse's home and says:

> "I need some information." ...
> "What you want to know?" Gideon asked, drying his ears.
> "If she's there. If she's not, I need an address." (p. 297)

Son's pronoun, *she*, is unheralded, that is, there is no nearby referent of the type we would normally expect in the vicinity of a pronoun (Gerrig 1986). Rather than referring to something in the text, Son's *she* refers to the only woman who is unambiguously salient in the common ground he shares with Gideon and Thérèse. Gideon understands perfectly well and answers without, once again, using Jade's conventional name:

> "Christ," said Gideon, and snapped his cloth in disgust. "I knew it. The yalla. ..."
> "I have to find her." Son's voice was flat, stale. (p. 297)

Son's *she* succeeds in referring with the success that is generally reserved for conventional names. The unheralded pronoun may be necessary partially because the three characters share no conventional name for Jade. (Thérèse has referred to her as *the fast-ass* (pp. 107, 111, 112) but the book provides no evidence about whether she has used this epithet or some other name in front of Son.) But, of more importance, the bare unheralded pronoun adds power to the moment by displaying exactly how salient Jade is in their common ground. In this context, Son could have selected almost any phrase that included some allusion to the female gender and he would have referred successfully. *She* makes this profoundly evident.

A lesson to be drawn from these examples is that often differentiation from others is not the major burden under which a name labors. Although this is the initial purpose of names, there are many situations of name use in which referents are sufficiently salient in common ground that a name can serve some greater function.

2.2. Name use among communities

Although names are agreed upon among small groups of individuals, they attain their *relative* significance within larger language communities. Language communities, and here we will be focussing on American speakers of English, share at least two types of knowledge about names. A first type relates to how names are formed. If we know someone named Valerian Street, we know that he might conventionally be called *Mr. Street, Street, Valerian*, or *Val*. Unconventional or creative names of the type *Principal Beauty of Maine* or *machete-hair* can be unlimited. A second type of knowledge relates to the relative status of different types of names in terms of social factors such as politeness, status, and intimacy (cf. Brown and Levinson 1987, Murphy 1988). On the whole, we believe *Mr. Street* is more polite and accords more status than *Street. Valerian*, and especially *Val*, implies more intimacy than *Mr. Street*. Common ground or context can be used to override these expectations – *Mr. Street* can be made to express ironic disrespect – but the effect of such irony is nonetheless calculated against this background of shared convention.

It is against this background that we can start to see how names serve to construct identity. Consider this brief interchange between Jade and her aunt Ondine. They are discussing what ought to be done about the intruder. Jade begins (Nanadine is her nickname for her aunt):

> "It's not my house, Nanadine. Valerian invited him to dinner."
> "Crazy."
> "So it's Valerian who has to tell him to go."
> "Why'd he put him in the guest room though? Sydney almost had a stroke when Mr. Street told him to take him there." (p. 88)

Jade calls Valerian Street, *Valerian*; Ondine calls him *Mr. Street*. There's very little more they could do to show explicitly how they stand with respect to him: what level of status and intimacy they hold both with respect to Street and within the broader world. The difference is particularly compelling because Ondine is Jade's aunt and the woman who raised her. The disparity between equivalence at that level and non-equivalence at another level – as marked by the use of names – adds much tension here.

3. Names and the definition of human categories

We will now demonstrate that names not only distinguish individuals, but they place them in particular categories (see also Sacks 1979). In parallel to our discussion of common ground – individual versus societal – we will consider categories at these two levels as well. The discussion will be organized around

two passes through the social hierarchy of *Tar Baby*. We will first consider how each of the status groups labels the other groups looking down the social ladder. We will then examine naming climbing back up. Finally, we will consider the characters Son and Jade as cases apart. Along the way, we will raise the possibility that names are as much forming as they are describing reality.

3.1. Looking down: Name use toward lower status individuals

Valerian Street is at the status pinnacle of the *Tar Baby* hierarchy. Although he seems to have lost some control over the details of his environment, Street rules over the other inhabitants of his mansion. Although she is considered to be a somewhat pathetic figure, his wife, Margaret, shares in at least the social aspects of this authority. Valerian and Margaret are quite conventional in the names they used toward their valet and housekeeper, who are husband and wife. To their faces they are always addressed as *Sydney* and *Ondine*, certainly never as *Mr.* or *Mrs. Childs*. This holds true in almost all references outside of their hearing except when Margaret is trying to dramatize her perception of the role they have come to play for, in particular, Valerian. She calls Sydney, "Sydney the Precious" (p. 31). Margaret is also able to bring in some of the racial aspects of this dependency. When they discuss the couples' proposed departure she chides:

"You're scared. Scared Kingfish and Beulah won't take care of you." (p. 31)

(And Valerian replies: "I have always taken care of them.")

The Streets and the Childs jointly look down upon the lower stratum of servants and they behave identically in their naming behavior toward them. Our first introduction to this caste comes early on when Sydney asks Mr. Street:

"You want Yardman to bring you thalomide? He can't even pronounce it." (p. 18)

Somewhat later, we learn that *Yardman* is a generic name. After Margaret has requested a mango for breakfast, Ondine complains:

"Even the colored people down here don't eat mangoes."
"Sure they do." [Sydney replied.]
"Yardmen," said Ondine. "And beggars." (p. 33)

Yardmen, and *Yardman* in particular, is generic – and Ondine's utterance suggests that the term is used pejoratively. We learn the name of Yardman's female counterpart when Ondine has disclosed the theft of chocolate:

"Must be Yardman," said Sydney, "or one of them Marys." (p. 39)

Soon after we learn how Mary is used as the name of a category rather than as
a specific name:

> Yardman came alone on Saturdays, pulling his own oars in his own mud-colored boat with
> *Prix-de France* fading in blue on the prow. Today being Saturday and no dinner party or
> special work to be done, he did not bring a Mary who, according to Sydney, might be his wife,
> his mother, his daughter, his sister, his woman, his aunt or even a next-door neighbor. She
> looked a little different to the occupants of L'Arbe de la Croix each time, except for her Greta
> Garbo hat. They all referred to her as Mary and couldn't ever be wrong about it because all
> the baptized black women on the island had Mary among their names. (p. 40)
> Ondine tried unsuccessfully, for months to get a Mary who would work inside. With no
> explicit refusal or general explanation each Mary took the potatoes, the pot, the paper sack
> and the paring knife outdoors to the part of the courtyard the kitchen opened onto. (p. 41)

It is through Son's refusal to use the generic Yardman and Mary that
Morrison is able to convey the dehumanization that occurs in interpersonal
relationships through the vehicle of naming (see Fishman 1984 for a similar
analysis). The readers (and Son) learn fairly soon that Yardman and Mary
have names, *Gideon* and *Thérèse*. We also learn that, with the exception of a
second young girl that Gideon brings on occasion, Alma Estée, Thérèse is the
only "Mary" ever in the employ of the Streets. Gideon explains to Son:

> "She [Thérèse] doesn't like the Americans for meanness. Just because they a little snooty
> sometimes. I get along with them okay. When they say to let Thérèse go, I say okay. But I
> bring her right back and tell them it's a brand-new woman."
> "They don't know?"
> "Not yet. They don't pay her any attention." (p. 153)

The use of names adds greatly to the appreciation of the irony. The name
Mary is used as a generic term to refer to the stream of women the inhabitants
of L'Arbe de la Croix believe appear at Yardman's side. *Mary* is supposed to
save them effort from differentiating among these referents. Instead, it causes
them to overlook the absence of difference; if they made an attempt to
differentiate they would see that their task was in vain. *Mary* allows them to
make this error in perception – and Gideon and Thérèse can enjoy the joke at
their expense. This is a powerful example of name use guiding the perception
of reality. *Mary* appears to cause a failure of cognition.

3.2. Looking up: Name use toward higher status individuals

Sydney and Ondine – the servants who have come with the Streets from
Philadelphia – are wholly conventional in their fashion of addressing their
employers. They use Mr. and Mrs. Street almost exclusively when addressing
the Streets directly or when speaking about them when they are absent. To the
extent that the narration reveals their private thought, even there the chosen

forms are *Mr.* and *Mrs. Street.* Such deference may be unsurprising against
our expectations about servants and employers, but here it is particularly
poignant because of the period of time for which the couple has served the
Streets. Over several decades, Sydney and Ondine have established an almost
uncanny intimacy, particularly with Valerian, but the name forever marks the
relationship as a formal, serving, distant one. Human categories are formed by
the privilege of familiar address, and Valerian has failed to break down the
labelling barriers that keep the Streets and the Childs in separate categories.

The exceptions to the rule of formal address are the occasions on which
Ondine and Sydney, in private conversation, call Margaret *the Principal
Beauty* or *the Principal Beauty of Maine* (pp. 28, 29, 84). Ondine spends much
of the novel despising Margaret; the origins of her hatred emerge as a climatic
surprise of the work. Nonetheless, her only compelling revenge – prior to this
climax – is when she indulges in this small bit of namecalling.

If Ondine uses such verbal aggression infrequently to redress some long
hidden wrong, Gideon and Thérèse – the servants from the island – use it
continually to redress the dehumanizing abuse of *Yardman* and *Mary.* Their
referring phrases *machete-hair* and *bow-tie man* are brilliant exploitations of
common ground to create intimacy and solidarity. Each time Thérèse utters
one of these names, as she does frequently, she also heightens our sense of
irony. When forced to address Ondine, she emits a timid, "Oui, Madame".
Ondine is not privy to the depths of feeling that underlie "Mary's" responses
to her, but Gideon is and the reader is. *Machete-hair* neatly encapsulates those
depths. The reader is pleased to be equally part of this intimate company.

The use of names here reinforces a claim that has been made with more
esoteric forms of language, that creativity fosters intimacy. Consider what
happens with a novel metaphor, as in Morrison's repetition of *the maiden
aunts*:

> Fog came to that place in wisps sometimes, like the hair of maiden aunts. Hair so thin and
> pale it went unnoticed until masses of it gathered around the house and threw back one's own
> reflection from the windows. The sixty-four bulbs in the dining room chandelier were no more
> than a rhinestone clip in the hair of the maiden aunts. (p. 62)

This elegant image is used several times in the next several pages:

> Jadine and Margaret touched their cheeks and temples to dry the places the maiden aunts
> were kissing. (p. 62)

> The maiden aunts smiled and tossed their maiden aunt hair. (p. 65)

> The maiden aunts, huddled in the corners of the room were smiling in their sleep. (p. 77)

> ... and now a scream so loud and full of terror it woke the maiden aunts from their sleep in
> the corners of the room. (p. 78)

We can take the initial use of the phrase as a concealed invitation to join in the enjoyment of this image; once we have expended the effort toward appreciation we are joined in a community of comprehenders. Our enjoyment in being part of this community is heightened by the certainty that – because the image is complex – not just anyone could become a member (Cohen 1979, see also Gerrig and Gibbs 1988).

Names are at once a more homely and more striking example of the same phenomenon. Language users are critically aware both of who they are including and excluding by their choice of names. If two friends are conversing and wish to discuss other parties while simultaneously excluding overhearers, they are free to choose any phrase that they believe will distinguish their victims without revealing their identities (see Clark and Schaefer 1987). The process of obfuscation can be easy and the sense of triumph in succeeding can be great.

Gideon and Thérèse have brought the pleasures of community upon themselves. Each time *machete-hair* is uttered it renews their sense of superiority – in language if not in life. Morrison's invention of these terms for her lowest status characters suggests that we might look for such phrases emerging in the lower tiers of real life hierarchies. All people can thrill in the solidarity of renaming their putative superiors.

3.3. Jade and Son: Naming and uncertain status

Son and Jade are cases apart in *Tar Baby* exactly because of ambiguities about where they fit in the book's strict hierarchy. Jade is the niece of Sydney and Ondine, and as an orphan was partially raised by them, but she is well-educated and has had a successful career as a model in Paris. While on Isle des Chevaliers, she has been working as Margaret Street's personal assistant. Son is an intruder who is discovered in Margaret's closet. As the novel progresses, he sheds his status as a criminal but his appropriate role is never clearly worked out. Much of the tension of the novel arises as we observe Son and Jade moving from public enmity toward a torrid affair.

Jade's use of names suggests that she belongs at once to both the world of the Childs and the world of the Streets. Her family name is also Childs and the endearing nickname for Ondine, *Nanadine* ("[Ondine] loved it when her niece called her that – a child's effort to manage 'Aunt Ondine'," p. 38) shows emotional bonding. Conversely, Jade is privileged to call the Streets *Valerian* and *Margaret*, and does so even in conversations in which her aunt and uncle will (or can) not, as described earlier. Why has Jade earned this privilege if Sydney and Ondine have not? The Childs have a considerably more intimate relationship with the Streets. If status is the key, then the constant reminder – each time Jade performs the simple act of naming – can't help but grate upon the family relations. Although Sydney and Ondine may be pleased that their niece will have life experiences denied to them, they can hardly avoid feeling

some distress at being continually reminded of being relegated to a lower rung. The differential privilege of *Valerian* versus *Mr. Street* helps pull the family apart.

In referring to Gideon and Thérèse, Jade follows the family convention of referring to them as *Yardman* and *Mary*. Jade introduces the first term to Son in the same scene in which they begin to talk about their own names:

> [Jade begins,] "Yardman can get some things for you."
> "Who?" ...
> "Yardman. The gardener."
> "That his name?"
> "No." She smiled ... "But he answers to it. Which is something, at least. Some people don't have a name of any kind."
> He smiled too, moving away from the bed toward her.
> "What do you like? Billy? Paul? What about Rastus?"
> "Don't be funny. What *is* your name?"
> "What's yours?"
> "Jade."
> He shook his head as though he knew better.
> "Okay. Jadine. Jadine Childs." (p. 115)

The difference in their sense of racial identity will loom large as a problem for Jade and Son as a couple. Again we see this difference encapsulated in their use of names for Gideon and Thérèse. Son is sent off with the pair to become more presentable to the inhabitants of L'Arbe de la Croix. He learns the true names that lie behind the generics, and employs appropriate standards of politeness ("Miss Thérèse", p. 131). When he returns to the mansion, the use of the generics grates:

> [Ondine asks], "You went off with Yardman yesterday?"
> It bothered him that everybody called Gideon Yardman, as though he had not been mothered. (p. 161)

Soon, these names become Son's ammunition to hasten the deterioration of Christmas dinner:

> [Valerian said,] "We should have thought of this before. Give Ondine a day off, and you get to show off in the kitchen, Margaret. It's good to have some plain Pennsylvania food for a change. This *is* an old-fashioned Christmas."
> "Too bad Gideon couldn't come." Son, who seemed to be the only one genuinely enjoying the food, had been silent until then.
> "Who?" asked Valerian.
> "Gideon. Yardman."
> "His name is Gideon?" asked Jadine.
> "What a beautiful name. Gideon." Valerian smiled.
> "Well, at least we knew Mary's name. Mary," said Jadine.
> "Nope," said Son.
> "No?"
> "Thérèse."
> "Thérèse? Wonderful," said Valerian. (pp. 172–173)

We soon learn that Valerian is amused because he has secretly fired Gideon and Thérèse for the theft of some apples (something the reader knows Thérèse adores). Valerian's line continues:

"Thérèse the Thief and Gideon the Get Away Man."

Intentionally, Son has tried to return some of Gideon and Thérèse's humanity. Unintentionally, he has introduced the dinner topic that forever shatters the equanimity of L'Arbe de la Croix. One important consequence of this train of events is the consummation of Son and Jade's relationship. It dissolves, over time, because Jade cannot accept the type of life Son wishes them to lead as black Americans. Jade's refusal to adopt Son's view of solidarity with black people is summarized poignantly when she encounters the young girl who had occasionally accompanied Gideon and Thérèse to help with chores around L'Arbe de la Croix:

"Bye, Mary, I have to go. Good luck." Jadine pushed open the door and was gone.
"Alma," whispered the girl. "Alma Estée." (p. 290)

When Son is not campaigning to have other people's names restored, he is often being evasive about his own. He claims to Jade that "everybody calls me Son" (p. 173) but that isn't true. Although Sydney, Ondine, and Jade come to call him by that name, Valerian and Margaret call him *Willie*, and Gideon, Thérèse, and Alma Estée use *chocolate eater*. *Willie* communicates succinctly the attitude of superiority that Valerian takes toward Son. *Chocolate eater* functions much more complexly. Ondine provides the first hint that leads toward the coining of this name:

"There's something in this house that loves bittersweet chocolate. I had six eight-ounce boxes. Now there's two."
"Rats?" asked Sydney ...
"If rats fold wrappers, then yes, rats." (p. 39)

After Son is discovered in the closet, Ondine is surprised that she hadn't been suspicious that someone was about:

"Well, I didn't know it. Although why I didn't, I can't figure. Stuff has been missing for weeks – all my chocolate, the Evian. No telling what else." (p. 88)

But even as the inhabitants of the mansion are coming to grips with Son's foreshadowed presence, Thérèse is revealing her own longstanding knowledge and her role in his survival:

Gideon and she had a bet on how long the chocolate eater could last. Gideon said, "Long as he wants. Till New Year," while she said, "No. The chocolate eater's heart would betray him – not his mind or stomach." (p. 104)

Thérèse had sensed Son's presence soon after his accidental arrival on the island. With Gideon she had conspired to keep him from starvation. Gideon removed a pane from the window leading to the pantry "and told machete-hair he was having trouble getting another" (p. 106):

> And soon they saw bits of folded foil in funny places and they knew he had gotten from the pantry chocolate at the very least. Once Gideon saw an empty Evian bottle in the gazebo. Then they knew he had fresh water too. (p. 106)

Despite the critical role that Thérèse and Gideon have had to play to keep Son alive, Thérèse attributes to him magical properties, as the man "who ate chocolate in the night and lived like a foraging animal and who was as silent as a star" (p. 104). She believes that he was one of the blind "horsemen" (p. 106) who, according to local mythology, inhabit the Isle des Chevaliers (and hence its name). When Son is accepted into their company, Gideon recounts to him the myth of the horsemen:

> "They ride those horses all over the hills. They learned to ride through the rain forest avoiding all sorts of trees and things. They race each other, and for sport they sleep with the swamp women in Sein de Vieilles. Just before a storm you can hear them screwing way over here. Sounds like thunder," he said, and burst into derisive laughter. (pp. 152–153)

And Thérèse admits:

> "We thought you was one." (p. 153)

Despite "thought", mythical ideas are very much active:

> [Thérèse] stood at the portable stove burning the hair [Son's] she had swept up from the floor, burning it carefully and methodically with many glances at the chocolate eater to show him she meant him no evil. (p. 150)

The name *chocolate eater* is so well established before Gideon and Thérèse discover Son's mere humanity that the mythologizing can't be reversed. Toward the end of the novel, Son seeks out Thérèse to solicit her help in finding Jade:

> He stood close to Thérèse for a full minute before she recognized him and shrieked, "Chocolate eater! Chocolate eater!" almost knocking her tray of smoked eels to the ground. (p. 296)

When Gideon and Thérèse discover that Son has come to find out "If she's there," Gideon tries to dissuade Son from seeking Jade out, but Thérèse insists that Son be allowed to go:

> "Let him," said Thérèse. "Kill them, chocolate eater." (p. 301)

Finally, although almost blind, Thérèse decides to take Son to Isle des
Chevaliers herself but she takes him to the far side of the island from which he
will have a dangerous trek to find L'Arbe de la Croix. Son does not under-
stand. Thérèse explains:

> "Hurry," she urged him. "They are waiting."
> "Waiting? Who's waiting?" Suddenly he was alarmed.
> "The men. The men are waiting for you." She was pulling the oars now, moving out. "You
> can choose now. You can get free of her. They are waiting in the hills for you. They are naked
> and they are blind too. I have seen them; their eyes have no color in them. But they gallop;
> they race those horses like angels all over the hills where the rain forest is, where the champion
> daisy trees still grow. Go there. Choose them." (p. 306)

To Thérèse, Son is the *chocolate eater*. He has the ability to abandon the
human world for the superhuman. Readers have wondered about Morrison's
intentions with the end of *Tar Baby* (cf. Coleman 1986). Can Thérèse expect
Son to survive? *Chocolate eater* suggests a sincere belief that Son transcends
mortal constraints.

The use of *chocolate eater* appears to shape Thérèse's thought with respect
to Son. This is one of many instances in which patterns of name use have
guided people's cognitive stances with respect to themselves and others (see
Sachs 1979). In the final section we pull together the strands of this theme.

4. The mechanisms of naming effects: A cognitive science view

Our general conclusion based on our analysis of *Tar Baby* is that names can
serve to guide the way that language users experience identity. We do not want
to claim that names uniquely cause self- and other-concepts (see Goffman
1959, 1967). Rather, we believe that the continual, vivid use of names can
hardly help but influence our construction of the world. To illustrate this
claim, we examine in the context of naming, two widely used theoretical
notions from cognitive psychology: the function of concepts, and the power of
schemas in creating and maintaining identity. Our argument is that we can
understand the experience of names in *Tar Baby*, and in everyday life, as a
consequence of the ordinary functioning of concepts and schemas.

4.1. Names as concepts

Looking at names as concepts will allow us to examine the content of mental
representations. Experimental psychologists have discussed several different
aspects of the term "concept". We will discuss two of these, the *relational
definition* and the *identification function* (see Miller and Johnson-Laird 1976,

Murphy and Medin 1985, Sperber and Wilson 1986). Each of these aspects will illuminate the role of names as concepts in cognition.

The relational aspect of a concept refers to its connections to other concepts. Sidney and Ondine's reference to Valerian as *Mr. Street* signifies a relationship of subservience, respect, gratitude, and mutual protection. Street pays their salary, and treats them in a manner consciously acceptable to them; they, in return, have breakfast ready, encourage him to drink postum, and silently bear the dark secret of Margaret's perpetration of child abuse. In contrast, Son refers to Valerian as just *Street* and feels no loyalty to maintaining peace with him when a principle is at stake (for example, at the fateful dinner that changes all relationships forever). And similarly, although Thérèse and Gideon are the pawns of Valerian's suspicion, they, distanced by the anonymity of *Yardman* and *Mary*, are not encumbered by the use and the relational consequences of *Mr. Street*. Even if they did refer to Valerian as *Mr. Street*, only some of the defining relationships (as in the use of the term by Sidney and Ondine) are appropriate or necessary.

In communication, a word (name) serves an identification function to allow a person to call another's attention to a concept occurring in a specific context. Of interest to us is what the use of a name indicates about the lexicon of the speaker's internal thoughts. The existence of a word (name) indicates that the speaker has an internal label for a particular concept. According to models of cognition (Newell and Simon 1972), thoughts are structures built from such labels. The labels created in working memory by newly forming thoughts serve as pointers to previously formed thoughts. If working memory were infinitely expandable, a system of pointers to older thoughts would be of no value, because the thinker might as well bring the old structures themselves into working memory. But working memory is limited, and so the labels are vitally necessary. The richest example of this mechanism of naming effects is Thérèse's use of *machete-hair*. The label affords the other characters and the reader easy access to relevant information about Ondine and the relationship between Thérèse and Ondine. In the next section, we take this idea further by discussing how names provide the entry points into generic knowledge structures called schemas.

4.2. Schemas in naming

Cognitive and social psychologists have identified many situations in which past information from memory can affect people's experiences of present situations. For example, in a classic study, individuals were presented with ambiguous drawings and provided with one of two labels. In one case, the drawing presented something midway between a pair of eye glasses and a dumbbell. Once provided with one of these labels, individuals tended to reconstruct, in later drawings, objects that looked like either eye glasses or

dumbbells (Carmichael et al. 1932). When called upon to interpret a situation, people do so in terms of information already stored in memory (Bartlett 1932, Taylor and Crocker 1981). Labels, and particularly names, serve well to evoke that information.

These effects occur because memory is organized into structures, called *schemas*, which store related information together. They can be thought of as relational formulae that represent the knowledge that *X* stands in some general or specific relation to *Y*. Schemas are available for all the objects and situations with which we have repeated experience. People know, for example, what typical features are possessed by a chair, what typically happens when we enter a doctor's office, and what behavior is expected in complex social situations.

We suggested earlier that knowledge about names is shared as a consequence of being members of a language community. This information – about, for example, the way in which names mark status and intimacy – is encoded as a schema in memory. Each type of a name carries with it a certain amount of baggage. When, for example, someone suggests that he or she be called by a given name rather than by their family name (*Valerian* versus *Mr. Street*), language users can generate many expectations about what other types of liberties they might be entitled to take. When Sydney addresses Valerian as *Mr. Street* he is simultaneously communicating information about the role relations between them. When Ondine calls Thérèse *Mary* and Thérèse calls Ondine *machete-hair* they are robbing each other of individuality by virtue of information that is elicited from memory. When Thérèse calls Son *chocolate eater* she is creating a deity where none existed before.

Schemas also facilitate the encoding of deviations from expected behavior. Ondine refers to Street as *Mr. Street*. If that is the way that Street is represented for her in memory, then she is cognitively primed to notice a difference when Jade calls him *Valerian*. Given this organization of memory, each time Jade uses *Valerian* Ondine is unfailingly reminded of the difference in privilege; the divergence from Ondine's expectations will occasion dissonance and mental response. A name evokes a schema and alters the way in which relationships are perceived.

This effect of language on thought can be observed through two functions schemas can serve, predicting the world and assigning causality (Hunt and Banaji 1988). When Morrison names her characters by a label that represents a function, such as Yardman or chocolate eater, she allows the reader to easily "go beyond the information given". The reader can predict that Yardman has lower status than the other characters, and that he can be easily disposed of if his work is not satisfactory. It is to create simple relational functions between people and the job they do that nursery tales and children's stories use character names that directly implicate status, function, and personality (e.g., The Big Bad Wolf, Snow White, and Peter Pumpkin Eater). Similarly, when

Morrison has Valerian say "Willie" in response to Son stating his name as "Green. William Green", her putative intention is to allow the reader to predict the relation that "Willie" can and will bear to Valerian. Thus, given limited computing capacity, schemas (here, in the form of names), function powerfully to provide expectations about what the reader is likely to encounter.

Each of us is uniquely defined by the names that are used by us and toward us. Names mark those with whom we have (or do not have) equal status and those with whom we are (and are not) intimate: they mark the roles we play with respect to other individuals. Names can be used as weapons to improve our self-concept. They can create new realities or confirm those that existed before. What is true in the complex fictional world of Toni Morrison's *Tar Baby* is also true in our equally complex non-fictional worlds.

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