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## Descent in the "House of Chloe": Race, Rape, and Identity in Toni Morrison's *Tar Baby*

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**T**oni Morrison's *Tar Baby* seems for a number of readers an aberration in her development as a writer. Set largely on a kind of rich man's fantasy island in the Caribbean and concerned for the first time with representing rounded white characters, Morrison's fourth novel is somewhat marginal in her canon; it is less frequently taught and receives relatively less critical attention than her other novels. Nevertheless, the way *Tar Baby* carries forward the thematics of Morrison's earlier work reveals that it centrally participates in her ongoing fictive projects. Notably there is the issue of how the media constructs Western beauty as a universal standard. In this regard, Pecola Breedlove in Morrison's first novel, *The Bluest Eye*, points the way to Jadine Childs in *Tar Baby*. Both accept a Western valuation of beauty, although for opposite reasons: Pecola, a dark-skinned black girl, because she cannot approach the cultural imperative, and Jadine, a light-skinned black, because she can embody its image on Parisian fashion runways. But *Tar Baby* is even more closely related to the project in *Song of Solomon*. Both novels focus on the struggles of young African Americans—Milkman Dead and Jadine Childs—whose subjectivities are split between a desire to assimilate to the values of the white middle class and the voices that urge them to acknowledge a black racial identity. In both novels, Morrison seems engaged in a form of self-fashioning, using these two characters to

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figure her own struggle to construct an authentic identity as an African American woman.<sup>1</sup> Growing up in the working-class town of Lorain, Ohio, where there were no black neighborhoods, Morrison experienced a youth and adolescence largely free of race consciousness. "I never absorbed racism," Morrison says in a 1992 interview; "I never took it in. That's why I wrote *The Bluest Eye*, to find out how it felt" (Bigsby 28). Morrison's account of her relation to *The Bluest Eye* invites one to speculate on how her subsequent fiction figures in a project of racial self-discovery.

In *Song of Solomon*, the gesture is overt. Milkman is born the day after Morrison's birthday, February 18, 1931.<sup>2</sup> The action of the novel covers thirty-two years, ending in 1963 when Milkman finally achieves a racialized identity, a time that corresponds in Morrison's life to a marriage that was soon to end and the beginning of her career as a writer. *Tar Baby*, I shall argue, for all its distance and displacements from Morrison's maturation in Lorain, Ohio, is as deeply personal as *Song of Solomon*, which more directly draws on her family history. To say that these novels register the personal is not to deny the ways in which they comment on larger social and political issues; nevertheless, Morrison's fourth novel allows her to examine fictively her success as a novelist in a white-dominated publishing and literary establishment, especially as that success impinges on her identity as an African American woman. If there is a novel of Morrison's that fully registers W. E. B. Du Bois's sense of the double-consciousness of African Americans, it is *Tar Baby*.<sup>3</sup> Even

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1. I wish to be clear from the outset. I am not questioning the authenticity of Toni Morrison's racial identity. I am constructing an argument about one of her novels that I believe tells, in coded form, Morrison's own fictive interrogation about such identity. I draw explicitly on Stephen Greenblatt's term from *Renaissance Self-Fashioning: From More to Shakespeare*. Greenblatt uses "self-fashioning" to speak of "the power to impose a shape upon oneself" as "an aspect of the more general power to control identity" (1). He speaks of the homologous ways literature functions as a concrete historical embodiment: "as a manifestation of the concrete behavior of its particular author, as itself the expression of the codes by which behavior is shaped, and as a reflection upon those codes" (4).

2. I am indebted to Barbara Williams Lewis for pointing out that the opening page of the novel begins on Morrison's birthday and to Teresa Towner who noticed that, although Ruth goes into the hospital on this day, her son is not born until the following day.

3. Judylyn S. Ryan has made this point specifically in relation to *Tar Baby* (600). More recently, Denise Heinze has made Du Bois the jumping-off point for her larger consideration of Morrison in *The Dilemma of "Double-Consciousness": Toni Morrison's Novels*.

more than *Song of Solomon*, *Tar Baby* represents Morrison's struggle to fashion a usable identity. Figuring her self as male in *Song of Solomon*, Morrison has Milkman embrace a sense of Africanized identity in the all-black agrarian community of Shalimar, Virginia, but his acceptance into this community is hardly gender neutral; the men signal their approval of Milkman by their willingness to share their prostitute, Sweet. In *Tar Baby*, however, figuring the self as female, Morrison creates a more ambivalent and troubled relation to that novel's black agrarian community, Eloë, Florida; the African American woman, the text suggests, may not be able to identify with an agrarian community in the same way that the African American man does.

Jadine Childs, with her Sorbonne education and her modeling career, is overtly marked as a woman whose identity is in crisis; she becomes aware of that crisis in a Parisian supermarket when a black woman wearing a yellow dress (who exemplifies a mesmerizing non-Western beauty) looks at Jadine and spits. Jadine's retreat to her benefactor's island signals her attempt to step back and assess the competing demands of the white world and of racial identity. Morrison, herself a relatively light-skinned black, who in 1981 was coming fully into her own as a major figure in American literature, seems to have created the honey-colored Jadine, whether consciously or not, as a figuration of her own subject position: not a Sorbonne degree, but an M.A. from Cornell; not a black model, but a model of black success—as an editor at Random House, as the winner of numerous literary prizes, and as a figure much sought after by the popular print media for interviews and photos.<sup>4</sup> Jadine may be a cover girl for *Elle*, but Toni Morrison appears on the cover of *Newsweek* when *Tar Baby* is published. But perhaps the most significant evidence for pursuing the homologues between author and character occur on the novel's penultimate page: an "authentic" black, Thérèse, an island woman whose "magic breasts" symbolize her nurturing and maternal role, identifies Jadine as a woman who has "forgotten her ancient properties" (305). This phrase—"ancient

4. Morrison delineates Jadine's skin throughout the novel as honey-colored, a designation that itself may be another oblique self-reference, since a journalistic biography described Morrison's skin as "honey-brown." See the Morrison entry in *Current Biography Yearbook* (267).

properties"—first appears prior to the novel's first page. Morrison dedicates her novel to

Mrs. Caroline Smith  
 Mrs. Millie MacTeer  
 Mrs. Ardelia Willis  
 Mrs. Ramah Wofford  
 Mrs. Lois Brooks  
 —and each of their sisters,  
 all of whom knew  
 their true and ancient  
 properties

By naming the women in her family—her mother, sister, aunts, and grandmother—Morrison indirectly includes herself as one of those sisters who has remained true to her identity as an African American woman. Yet the very need to declare her authenticity suggests that Morrison also has questioned herself regarding the validity of this claim, especially given the name changes that transform Chloe Wofford into Toni Morrison.<sup>5</sup> Wofford becomes Morrison when she marries Jamaican architect Harold Morrison in 1958, but more interesting is Morrison's decision to become known as "Toni." In a conversation with Colette Dowling in 1979, Morrison claims to have made the change in college "[b]ecause the people at Howard seemed to have difficulty pronouncing" Chloe (Dowling 50).<sup>6</sup>

A curiously covert commentary on this substitution appears to take place in the intertextual dialogue between the dedication, quoted above, and the epigraph Morrison chooses to preface *Tar Baby*: "For it hath been declared unto me of you, my brethren, by them which are of the house of Chloe, that there are contentions among you." This quotation from the King James Bible (1 Cor. 1:11) resonates in ways over and above the private meaning Morrison encodes regarding her decision to change her name from Chloe to

5. Eleanor W. Traylor first drew my attention to the dedication through her suggestion that these women "are the guides to whom the narrative voice of the writer is accountable" (149).

6. This story is repeated in Douglas Century's biography aimed at adolescent readers (33).

Toni.<sup>7</sup> The “contentions among you,” for example, registers Morrison’s attempt to address African Americans and their divisions, especially those between women and men.<sup>8</sup> But the epigraph refuses to point forward into the fictional world exclusively, since Morrison, in fact, just has named a group of women who, in Morrison’s childhood, were literally in the “house of Chloe.”

What makes Morrison’s coded reference to her own name change so striking is the way her fiction repeatedly examines the possibility for African Americans to forge an authentic identity for themselves. Often Morrison ties this quest for identity to African American names and the act of naming. Responding to Thomas LeClair’s question about the significance of naming in *Song of Solomon*, she argues that for African Americans, “[t]he best thing you can do is take another name which is yours because it reflects something about you or your own choice” (Morrison, “Language” 126). In *Song of Solomon*, Guitar Banes, responding to Milkman’s complaint that he does not like his name, says, “Let me tell you somethin, baby. Niggers get their names the way they get everything else—the best way they can” (88). It is difficult not to hear in Milkman’s complaint about his name Morrison’s relation to her own name. Curiously, one of Milkman’s sisters is named First Corinthians, the biblical book that provides Morrison her epigraph for *Tar Baby*. So it seems that Chloe is present again in coded form in *Song of Solomon*.

Morrison denies “Chloe” and chooses “Toni,” but why? It is hard, perhaps, to register why such a change might have been useful, especially since recently “Chloe” has gained a certain cachet, as evidenced by the white female characters who bear this name in two recent television dramas, *ER* and *Malibu Shores*. But in the 1950s, to a bright young black woman with career aspirations, “Chloe” strongly signaled a form of racialized identity from which Morrison may have wished to distance herself. Quite simply, this name often signals a particularly hated form of racial oppression and servility in the agrarian South. In her undergraduate and graduate literary

7. Marilyn E. Mobley briefly notes with regard to the epigraph that Morrison was “born Chloe Anthony Wofford” (762).

8. The Revised Standard Version of the Bible offers an alternative translation of the epigraph Morrison uses, speaking of “Chloe’s people,” and in one sense, all the characters in *Tar Baby* are just that—Chloe’s people.

studies, Morrison certainly could find unflattering Chloes in American literature.<sup>9</sup> For example, in Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852), Uncle Tom's wife, the prized cook of the Shelby family, who loves her master's son better than her own children, is named Aunt Chloe. A more contemporary novel refigures Uncle Tom's wife. In Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* (1953), Aunt Cloe is the old midwife whom Jim Trueblood fears will abort the incestuous pregnancy of his daughter. In short, these Aunt Chloes participate in a racial stereotype that signifies in a fashion parallel to Aunt Jemima. Whatever the exact motivation for Morrison's decision to become Toni, one thing is clear: the matter of identity was not a given for Toni Morrison, because she rejects her given name.

One might object that I am placing too much emphasis on this name change. After all, the published biographical information on Morrison agrees that her full name was Chloe Anthony Wofford, so that the adoption of "Toni" as a substitute for "Chloe" still honors her given name, if somewhat obliquely.<sup>10</sup> Morrison's middle name, however, was not Anthony; her birth certificate indicates her full name as Chloe Ardelia Wofford, which reveals that Ramah and George Wofford named their daughter for her maternal grandmother, Ardelia Willis.<sup>11</sup> While the origin of "Toni" is now obscure, the example of Milkman Dead illustrates that names in the African

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9. Minor in classics at Howard, Morrison may have known of Longus's romance *Daphnis and Chloe* and been put off by the associations the name has with the Greek pastoral. In fact, the echoes between *Daphnis and Chloe* and *Tar Baby* might be the subject of another paper. Note the romance's island setting, the orphaned status of both Daphnis and Chloe, and the many obstacles to the consummation of their love; moreover, Daphnis's secret royal identity is suggestive of the way that Son serves as a metaphorical substitute for Valerian's son, Michael.

10. For example, Morrison is identified as Chloe Anthony Wofford in Henry Louis Gates, Jr.'s preface to *Toni Morrison: Critical Perspectives Past and Present* (ix) and in Nellie Y. McKay's introduction to her edited collection *Critical Essays on Toni Morrison* (3). Gates and McKay merely repeat a presumably reliable fact from numerous other sources, such as *Current Biography Yearbook* 1979 and *Contemporary Authors* (1972). Morrison herself publishes her birth name as Chloe Anthony Wofford in *Who's Who in America* from the 1984–85 edition through the 1996 edition.

11. I first became aware of a possible discrepancy regarding Morrison's name when I looked at her 1955 Cornell master's thesis, "Virginia Woolf's and William Faulkner's Treatment of the Alienated"; the title page of the thesis employs "Ardellia" [sic] as her middle name. Morrison's birth certificate is part of the public record in Lorain, Ohio, at the Department of Health.

American community do not come exclusively from birth certificates. Moreover, the naming of Milkman's grandfather, the original Macon Dead, through a gesture of casual racism by a drunken Union soldier, is but one example in Morrison's fiction that should remind the reader not to place too much faith in legal documents. But Morrison's name change seems fundamentally different from those suggested by Milkman and Macon Dead because there is no apparent need to subvert a white authority to name, since "Ardelia" comes from her parents.

Why, then, has Morrison constructed "Anthony" as the fictional origin of "Toni"? Perhaps by 1979 (when she tells Dowling that "Toni" is derived from "Anthony") Morrison was uncomfortable with a first name that might be perceived as masking familial identity. Or perhaps one might read the fictional Anthony/Toni as a gesture of authorial self-fashioning, akin to Willa Cather's employment of William in certain instances or to William Faulkner's insertion of a *u* in his family name. What Morrison seems to have done is to have created an authorial identity that can only be true insofar as it is fictional, as the examples from *Tar Baby* and *Song of Solomon* suggest. Both possibilities—an uneasiness over disguised identity and an authorial self-fashioning—converge in a candid statement Morrison makes to Christopher Bigsby in 1992: "I am really Chloe Anthony Wofford. That's who I am. I have been writing under this other person's name. I write some things now as Chloe Wofford, private things. I regret having called myself Toni Morrison when I published my first novel, *The Bluest Eye*" (Bigsby 28). In a sense, however, only by denying Chloe (as well as Ardelia) as her public name can Morrison become Chloe in her private discursive creation of herself as novelist. What a certain symbolic logic in *Tar Baby* reveals, then, is the way Morrison uses her novel to respond to doubts—whether her own or those of others—about her authenticity.

Despite Morrison's substitution of "Anthony" for "Ardelia," she nevertheless identifies with her maternal grandmother in an essay on the black experience in America that appeared in *The New York Times Magazine* on our nation's Bicentennial. The essay, "A Slow Walk of Trees (as Grandmother Would Say) Hopeless (as Grandfather Would Say)," meditates on the status of African Americans and

begins with a comparison of how Morrison's grandparents, Ardelia and John Solomon Willis, had viewed the prospects for racial progress. The essay contrasts her grandfather's pessimism with her grandmother's optimism: "And [Ardelia] would pay attention to the music [her husband played on the violin] but not to the sadness in her husband's eyes, for she would see what she expected to see—not the occasional historical repetition, but, like the slow walk of certain species of trees from the flatlands up into the mountains, she would see the signs of irrevocable and permanent change" (104, 150). The essay catalogs problems Morrison sees in America's treatment of blacks, but at the midpoint she returns to her grandmother: "Maybe Ardelia Willis had the best idea. One sees signs of her vision and the fruits of her prophecy in spite of the dread-lock statistics" (160). Morrison herself finishes the essay on a note of cautious optimism. Both *Song of Solomon* and *Tar Baby*, concerned as they are with the construction of authentic identity, seem anticipated by Morrison's personal reminiscence, which serves, in effect, as her declaration of identity, particularly as the granddaughter of Ardelia Willis.

The overtly personal dedication and the coded reference to personal identity in the biblical epigraph prefacing *Tar Baby*, therefore, imply that the personal does not drop out once one turns the page and enters Morrison's fictional world. Taken together, dedication and epigraph create a curious parallel between Morrison's relation to her women relatives and Jadine's struggle with the "night women" in *Tar Baby* who haunt her dreams and demand her acceptance of a particular enactment of black female identity. The novel in one sense becomes a disguised portrait of the artist as a young woman. To the extent that this description is valid, the logic of the plot implies that Jadine, as an African American woman, has not yet achieved a racialized adult identity but that an important precondition of that identity has been reached: namely, she recognizes that black female identity need not accept its construction by black men when that construction is complicitous with the assumptions of white patriarchy.

In *Tar Baby*, whatever racialized identity Jadine may be able to construct is marked in its inception by rape. But this rape seems almost to resist the resisting reader; that is, it is a rape that is rhetori-



cally constructed to deny the reader's awareness of the violence.<sup>12</sup> In this regard, the rape in *Tar Baby* produces an oddly homologous relation to Toni Morrison's act of self-naming that intentionally obscures the origins of her name. Yet Morrison provides clues in her novel about both the hidden rape and her hidden name. Taken together, these two gestures of concealment speak to the profoundly difficult negotiation of black female identity that Morrison performs. As a successful black woman whose work is validated by white corporate and academic culture, she does not wish to dismiss the constructions of identity and community made by black men, who are largely excluded from those same structures that confirm her success, but at the same time she wishes to maintain that the black woman cannot be forced, sexually or psychologically, back to the agrarian past.

Like Jadine, who is physically violated, Morrison in a sense has been violated metaphorically by the white corporate publishing world that forced her to put Chloe undercover. But there may also be elements in black male culture that participate in that violation. Morrison provides a fictive account of tensions between African American women and men that Michele Wallace's study of black machismo mapped in 1979, a year that places it directly between Morrison's own meditations on African American masculinity in *Song of Solomon* and *Tar Baby*. Wallace acknowledges the real and horrific oppression of African American men during slavery but argues that this has led to a contemporary construction of black masculinity that sees its manhood as dependent on the subservience of the African American woman; from a black male perspective, black women's subservience is in part penance for their complicity with white men during slavery (Wallace 13–16). So it seems there would be equally good reasons for Morrison to wish to abandon the agrarian implications of Chloe for either white men's or black men's mythologizing of black women. What plays the role of the violating black male in Morrison's life may not be a particular individual (as it

12. Morrison's treatment of rape in *Tar Baby* seems fundamentally different from the paradigm Laura E. Tanner articulates in *Intimate Violence: Reading Rape and Torture in Twentieth Century Fiction*. For Tanner, the act of reading rape rhetorically implicates the reader, but in Morrison's novel, how can the reader assert a "right to resist the message of the text" (103) when the text itself resists revealing the rape?

is for Jadine) but rather an intersection of racial and sexual ideology that makes the rape of a black woman by a black man practically unimaginable: "To black people, rape means the lynching of a black man. Obsession with the lynching of the black man seems to leave no room in the black male consciousness for any awareness of the oppression of black women" (Wallace 120).

Morrison learned a number of techniques from the modernists, and her fiction contains numerous scenes in which the main thing that is not represented is the main thing. Thus it is with the crucial violation that occasions the demise of Son and Jadine's relationship. Many critics note the impasse that Son and Jadine come to when the narrator says: "Each knew the world as it was meant or ought to be. One had a past, the other a future and each one bore the culture to save the race in his hands. Mama-spoiled black man, will you mature with me? Culture-bearing black woman, whose culture are you bearing?" (269). In the heated argument that ensues, lines are crossed not merely rhetorically but also physically. The first telling detail comes immediately prior to Son's telling Jadine the story of the tar baby, when "he tore open his shirt" (270). This gesture is the prelude to a rape. As he tells her the story of tar baby that identifies her as the creation of a white man, Jadine speaks the following lines; for emphasis, I will cite only Jadine's half of the dialogue:

"Don't touch me. Don't you touch me." . . .

"Quit! leave me *alone!*" . . .

"You better kill me. Because if you don't, when you're through, I'm going to kill you." . . .

"I am going to kill you. *Kill* you." . . .

"As sure I live," she said. "I'm going to kill you."

After Son leaves, Jadine "lay in wrinkled sheets, slippery, gutted" and is unable to use her hands to remove a piece of hair from her mouth (271). More telling is Son's response when he returns four hours later; he is "repentant, terrified that he had gone too far" (271). During their final conversation, Jadine is wearing only a T-shirt, which leads to this description of her from Son's point of view: "The Cheech and Chong T-shirt was up around her waist and her nakedness below embarrassed him now. He had produced that nakedness and having soiled it, it shamed him" (272). Son's sexual

violation of Jadine is startling in two ways: first, for the way that critics have commented upon this key scene without noticing the sexual violation; and second, for the way that Morrison's own less-than-candid remarks on her novel have helped to conceal the rape.<sup>13</sup>

Speaking of Son and Jadine in an interview, Morrison cryptically notes: "I may have some attitude about which one is more right than the other, but in a funny sense that book was very unsettling to me because everybody was sort of wrong. (Laughter) Some more wrong than others" ("Interview" [Jones and Vinson] 178). What the rape suggests is that the one who is "more right" counterintuitively may be Jadine, even though she still has much to learn. At the very least, the scene should make problematic those discussions that identify Son as the source of value in the novel.<sup>14</sup> Morrison's ambivalent discussion that refuses to name the rape points to a similar deflection of attention away from the act in *Tar Baby*.

There are good reasons for readers to miss Son's rape of Jadine because the text is at pains to construct Son as nonrapist by questioning stereotypes about black male sexuality. When Son is first "introduced" to Valerian's household, it is with a gun at his back and with a general presumption that he was planning to rape Margaret, Valerian's wife, since he had been hiding in her closet. Having jumped ship and lived on next to nothing on the island for several days, he is unkempt, dirty, and (from a white perspective) the very image of criminality—"a black man with dreadlock hair" (80).

The next day, Sydney Shield, Jadine's uncle, who is the Street's very proper butler, is outraged that Valerian has extended his hospi-

13. Peter B. Erickson maintains that "the central fact about the Jadine-Son relationship is its failure" and that "the interest lies in the reasons for the failure" (21); however, quoting material from the page on which the rape has occurred, he says only that "Jadine's definitive decision to break with Son . . . is immediately preceded by her recollection of 'the mother-daughter day' at college" (21). Mobley characterizes the end of the Jadine-Son relationship as follows: "Because Son is rooted in the past, symbolized by his romantic attachment to Elsie, and because Jadine feels the key to personal and collective success is to forget the past, their relationship cannot hold itself together. The novel goes full circle in that once again a crisis causes Jadine to flee" (768-69). Other critical treatments similarly fail to see the sexual violence of this "crisis."

14. The most extreme articulation of this may be James Coleman's; he claims, "The sentiments of the reader are most likely with Son, a sensitive, warm man who possesses definite folk values and qualities" (65). See also Hawthorne 104.

tality to the stranger. Ondine, Sydney's wife, tries to calm him, and their conversation helps undermine the possibility that Son could ever be named as a rapist.<sup>15</sup> Ondine notes that Valerian had been drinking, but Sydney replies:

"Ain't that much whiskey in the world make a man sleep with a wife-raper down the hall."

"He didn't rape anybody. Didn't even try."

"Oh? You know what's on his mind, do you?"

"I know he's been here long enough and quiet enough to rape, kill, steal—do whatever he wanted and all he did was eat."

(99)

Sydney is not satisfied because Son has been given the guest room next to his niece and he fears for Jadine's safety. His fears, apparently, are not unfounded, for the next day, Son appears in Jadine's room, grabs her from behind, and buries his face in her hair. The ensuing dialogue, precisely because of the parallels to the scene in which Son does rape Jadine, serves to disguise rather than highlight the later scene:

"You rape me and they'll feed you to the alligators. Count on it, nigger. You good as dead right now."

"Rape? Why you little white girls always think somebody's trying to rape you?"

"White?" She was startled out of fury. "I'm not . . . you know I'm not white!"

"No? Then why don't you settle down and stop acting like it."

"Oh, God," she moaned. "Oh, good God, I think you better throw me out of the window because as soon as you let me loose *I am going to kill you*. For that alone. Just for that. For pulling that black-woman-white-woman shit on me. Never mind the rest. What you said before, that was nasty and mean, but if you think you can get away with telling me what a black woman is or ought to be . . ."

(121; emphasis added, ellipses in original)

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15. Even Trudier Harris, who aptly describes Son's sexual aggressiveness, claims that Son "certainly does not rape anyone" (120). Harris, however, perhaps better than anyone, has described the way in which Son as much as Jadine is figured as a tar baby (119). Missing Son's rape of Jadine leads her finally to see him as the more victimized of the two; for Harris, Jadine simply leaves Son "when he proves intractable" (125).

Important here is that Jadine looks for safety in “they”—the men (Sydney, Valerian) who will protect her from rape. The sexual insult culminates when Son tells Jadine that he smells her, suggesting that over and above the smell of his unwashed body he can smell her response to him as a woman. However much she wishes to deny it, this moment implicates Jadine and makes her unable to tell Valerian of Son’s insult.

But even Son’s overt sexual aggression is diffused beforehand in the way that Son, in the days before his discovery, has been entering Jadine’s room at night to gaze on her sleeping features. Surely here was his opportunity to rape her, and yet he restrains himself physically, content with an apparently innocuous goal:

he had thought hard during those times in order to manipulate her dreams, to insert his own dreams into her so she would not wake or stir or turn over on her stomach but would lie still and dream steadily the dreams he wanted her to have about yellow houses with white doors which women opened and shouted Come on in, you honey you! and the fat black ladies in white dresses minding the pie table in the basement of the church and white wet sheets flapping on a line.

(119)<sup>16</sup>

Again the text insists on Son as nonrapist, and yet clearly his goal is penetration/insertion, the penetration of Jadine’s unconscious, in order to get this “yellow” to think the world in terms of the black woman in the yellow dress whose insult sends Jadine scurrying back to Valerian’s island in the beginning. The question is whether Son’s penetration will be forced or consensual. Son’s vision of a black pastoral has its origins in his memories of his agrarian home, Eloë, Florida.

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16. Son’s desire to reconstitute Jadine’s subjectivity recalls Wallace’s point about the African American male, “particularly since the Black Movement,” who wishes to “define the black woman. He is the one who tells her whether or not she is a woman and what it is to be a woman”; this woman “is the workhorse that keeps his house functioning, she is the foundation of his community, she raises his children, and she faithfully votes for him in elections, goes to his movies, reads his books, watches him on television, buys in his stores, solicits his services as doctor, lawyer, accountant” (14). Both Morrison and Wallace argue that African American women should have greater autonomy in determining identity.

One effect of Son's sexual advance is a moment of self-reflexivity in which Jadine is aware of her double-consciousness. Intending to tell Valerian of Son's insult, her thoughts lead her to how she enacts a subject position for whites: "She needed only to be stunning, and to convince them she was not as smart as they were. Say the obvious, ask stupid questions, laugh with abandon, look interested, and light up at any display of their humanity if they showed it" (126–27). This moment of reflection helps define Son's function as a mentor figure to Jadine, just as Guitar's insistence on racialized identity forces Milkman to question his urge to assimilate to middle-class culture in *Song of Solomon*.

The protracted courtship that precedes Son and Jadine's consummation of their desire again seems to show how restrained Son can be. Jadine certainly is more attracted to Son after he has bathed, shaved, cut his hair, and donned some of Valerian's old clothes. She agrees to go down to the beach with him for lunch. In the ensuing conversation he is able to persuade Jadine to allow him to touch the arch of her foot, a curious moment of sexual simulacrum; she asks him to stop, "but his forefinger stayed where his finger had been in the valley of her naked foot. Even after she laced up the canvas shoes" (179–80). This moment of sexual foreplay marks Son's initial success in his desire to restructure Jadine's unconscious; when the jeep runs out of gas and Son leaves Jadine to get fuel, she encounters for the first time an eerie presence that in this scene is only subliminal but which will later become the nightmare vision that attends her relationship with Son. Walking along a part of the island known as Sein de Veilles, or "witch's tit," Jadine falls into a black, tarlike jelly that threatens to engulf her. Although Son is literally absent, he remains present in the sketch Jadine has made of him. From the trees, spirit women look down at Jadine's struggle:

They were delighted when first they saw her, thinking a runaway child had been restored to them. But upon looking closer they saw differently. This girl was fighting to get away from them. The women hanging from the trees were quiet now, but arrogant—mindful as they were of their value, their exceptional femaleness; knowing as they did that the first world of the world had been built with their sacred properties.

(183)

Although Jadine is unaware of these women, whose sacred properties are most centrally the ability to bring forth new life, their presence marks the extent to which Son's agenda with Jadine seems to be advancing. These women are the mythologized version of Son's pie ladies, nurturing mothers all. What Jadine's encounter with the women in the trees suggests is that Son's mentoring, while it has something important to teach her, is also fraught with danger.

Son might seem the anti-Valerian in the way he crushes his host's racist/classist assumptions at the Christmas dinner on the island and destroys Valerian's illusion of mastery. Shortly after this abortive dinner, Jadine and Son consummate their relationship in a scene that shows Son's tender, careful treatment of Jadine. Son and Jadine then fly to New York, where Son's desire to remake Jadine is countered by her equally strong urge to reshape him. In an effort to complete his restructuring of her unconscious, Son insists on their going to the origin of his image of black agrarian bliss, Eloë, Florida.

By taking Jadine to Eloë, Son hopes to reveal to Jadine an authentic African American community, one that will cause her to abandon her investment in white culture. In this regard, Son again plays the same role for Jadine that Guitar plays for Milkman. But as I have argued elsewhere, Guitar can lead Milkman only so far, and ultimately Milkman must reject Guitar's notion that killing white people is about "loving" black people, because the *Seven Days*, against their stated intentions, turns out to be about black men protecting their property interests in black women (Duvall). In this regard, Guitar, who initially seemed to present an alternative to the paternalism of Macon Dead, Milkman's father, stands revealed as another embodiment of the patriarchal impulse.

Eloë also reveals itself to be a far more appealing place for men than for women in that everyone seems to accept that what men do is more important. Jadine is estranged from this close-knit community that seems to foster segregation of a different type—not race-based, but gender-based. The men of Eloë immediately absorb Son into themselves, leaving Jadine in the company of rural women; these same men regard the light-skinned Jadine as Son's trophy. It is in Eloë that Son's goal, a fundamental reshaping of the way Jadine imagines the world, seems to be nearly complete; Jadine, however, does not experience her new dreamscape as soothing but rather as a

nightmare populated by the night women. Trapped in the tar pit on Valerian's island, Jadine could not see the women of witch's tit watching her; now, making love to Son in Eloë, only she can see a fantastic group of women—including Son's former lover Cheyenne, Thérèse, his Aunt Rosa, Jadine's dead mother, Ondine, and the woman in the yellow dress—crowd into the room: "they each pulled out a breast and showed it to her. Jadine started to tremble. They stood around in the room, jostling each other gently, gently—there wasn't much room—revealing one breast and then two and Jadine was shocked" (258). But Jadine's biggest fright comes when the woman in the yellow dress "stretched out a long arm and showed Jadine her three big eggs," the clearest sign of the nurturing and fertility of these women (258–59). To commit to the community of Eloë and the enactment of female identity represented by the night women and the pie ladies comes at too high a price for a woman such as Jadine, for it is to acquiesce to a form of patriarchal agrarianism that strictly limits women's role to the natural creation of motherhood. Son's father decrees that Jadine may not sleep with Son because they are not married, and though this may seem an innocuous representation of the moral values of a more traditional community, the father's decision points to a more sinister set of assumptions behind such tradition regarding the need for male control of female sexuality. Cheyenne's presence in this group of night women particularly underscores the patriarchal nature of this community. Son "accidentally" kills her in a moment of male rage: he drives a car through their house because of her infidelity. This act exists in a logical continuum with the general patriarchal assumptions of Eloë, where a man is expected to limit the autonomy of "his" woman. A number of readers, though, are willing to forgive Son this violence—a violence that might otherwise anticipate his rape of Jadine—as an understandable male response.

What Son wants to do to the fashion model Jadine is what Valerian already has done to Margaret, the former Maine beauty queen—namely, construct a female subjectivity that effaces itself the better to serve male identity.<sup>17</sup> If Valerian has made Jadine a tar

17. In passing, one should note that the opening paragraph of the article in *Newsweek* with Morrison's picture on the cover identifies her, among her other identities, as a former beauty queen. See Strouse 52.



baby in one sense (a black woman more cathected to white culture than black), Son surely wishes to make her a tar baby in another (a nurturing black mama who will never ask to share a male authority or autonomy). On this particular point, what's so African about Son, or Eloë for that matter? Just as Morrison refashions Chloe, with its connotations of stereotyped black agrarian identity, into Toni, so must Jadine distance herself from Eloë and its patriarchal agrarianism.<sup>18</sup>

Before Son returns to New York, Jadine's dreams are so completely consumed by the night women that Jadine feels "the helpless victim of a dream that chose" her (262). When Son does return to New York, their relationship quickly deteriorates, so much so that during an argument Son picks up Jadine and dangles her out the window of their apartment while he tells her she must cease her classist assumptions and be kinder to her aunt and uncle. His violent "pedagogy" anticipates his attempt a few pages later to rape her into a "correct" subject position.

As Jadine lies in bed in the immediate aftermath of Son's rape, her thoughts turn not to her sexual violation but rather to the sense of lack coalescing around a particular image—a beech tree on her undergraduate campus and an annual mother-daughter day each April in which girls in pastel skirts sway arm in arm with their mothers: "Pale sulfur light sprinkled so softly with lilac it made her want to cry. . . . but her tears were not because there was no one to sing with under the biggest beech in the state, but because of the light, pale sulfur sprinkled with lilac" (271). Jadine's tears are not an orphan's cry for the mother's body but rather an acknowledgment that she has been unable to participate in a ceremony that, whatever elements of "bourgeoisie sentiment and alumni hustling" (271) it may include, still signifies the ancient properties, the intergenerational linkage of women nurturing women. It is precisely this recognition of her lack that suggests it may be possible for Jadine to forge a new identity as she returns to Paris.

Crucially, Jadine exits the novel on an airplane, a gesture that

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18. Given Morrison's other clues regarding her name, Eloë seems to suggest a pun (visual at least) on Chloe; this possible link makes sense symbolically, for just as Jadine rejects agrarian Eloë, Morrison denies the agrarian implications of Chloe by taking Toni as her public name.

recalls Milkman's plane flight that begins part 2 of *Song of Solomon*. Milkman's flight initially represents an entirely selfish desire for Pilate's gold but becomes transformed during the course of his journey into a quest for familial and racial identity.<sup>19</sup> Classist to the end, Jadine in the airport restroom still addresses Alma Estée as Mary, the generic name given all women servants at Valerian's house. The Jadine who leaves for Paris is certainly monstrous, but it is the monstrosity of a narcissism perhaps necessary to become an artist. Morrison's comments on Jadine in published interviews are contradictory, though she is careful to distance herself from her character's shortcomings. For example, unlike Jadine, who in the aftermath of Son's rape feels unable to provide emotional support for the aunt who raised her, Morrison makes clear her difference: "My mother took care of me when I could not go to the bathroom or feed myself. When she gets in that position, I have to do that for her" ("Conversation" 131). Perhaps the need to distance herself from Jadine arises because there is so much of Morrison in her character. Both are educated in a Eurocentric tradition; Morrison's response to the question "At what time in your life did you form specific judgments about the value of being Black?" creates a curiously homologous relation between author and character:

I came to that as a clear statement very late in life, I think, because I left home, say at 17 and went to school, and the things I studied were Western and, you know, I was terrifically fascinated with all of that, and at that time any information that came to me from my own people seemed to me to be backwoods and uninformed. You know, they hadn't read all these wonderful books. You know how college students are. And, I think, I didn't regard it as valuable as being Black. . . . But the consciousness of being Black I think happened when I left Cornell and went to teach at Texas Southern University. . . . So I think it was as a novice teacher, and that was in 1957 or 1958, that I began to think about Black culture as a subject, as an idea, as a discipline.

("Interview" [Jones and Vinson] 173-74)

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19. Sandra Pouchet Paquet perceptively notes this parallel between *Song of Solomon* and *Tar Baby*, arguing that Jadine's situation is more ambiguous than Milkman's because, unlike Milkman, Jadine cannot accept a segregated, patriarchal black rural community as the basis for identity (512).

Morrison here has identified herself as a young woman who only comes to a racialized consciousness at an age very close to the twenty-five-year-old Jadine.

What remains unclear in both *Tar Baby* and Morrison's subsequent commentary is whether an African American woman's right relation to the "ancient properties" is innate or learned. In two separate interviews conducted in 1981, Morrison seems to agree with Thérèse's evaluation of Jadine, which asserts that this young woman has lost her ancient properties.<sup>20</sup> Yet what Ondine despairs of in her final conversation with Jadine is that she has failed to *teach* her niece those nurturing properties: "Jadine, a girl has got to be a daughter first. She have to learn that. And if she never learns how to be a daughter, she can't never learn how to be a woman" (281). In a 1983 interview, Morrison maintains that her character *has* learned something when Nellie McKay asks, "Is Jadine ever going to know who she is?" Morrison responds: "I hope so. She has a good shot at it, a good chance. Now she knows something that she did not know before. She may know why she was running away. And maybe, the biggest thing that she can learn, even if she never gets back to Son, is that dreams of safety are childish" (150). Again Morrison's comments deflect attention away from Son's violence. Her characterization here also contradicts both Thérèse's and Morrison's earlier assessment of Jadine as a woman who has *forgotten* her ancient properties; in this version, the ancient properties are not innate but rather are learned. And if they are not innate, can we speak of Jadine losing what she never had or forgetting what she never knew?

On the plane to Paris, Jadine's thoughts in the aftermath of Son's rape reveal her as pregnant with the possibilities of a new identity that can sort through the competing claims of African Americanness and womanhood. Unable to determine which of the possibilities might account for the failure of her relationship with Son, Jadine thinks:

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20. Speaking with Judith Wilson, Morrison claims that Jadine "has lost the tar quality, the ability to hold something together that otherwise would fall apart—which is what I mean by the nurturing ability" ("Conversation" 131). Morrison more explicitly positions herself with Thérèse when speaking with Charles Ruas: Jadine, she says, "does not have, as Thérèse says . . . her ancient properties" ("Toni Morrison" 104).

Having sixteen answers meant having none. So none it was. Zero. She would go back to Paris and begin at Go. Let loose the dogs, tangle with the woman in yellow—with her and with all the night women who had *looked* at her. No more shoulders and limitless chests. No more dreams of safety. No more. Perhaps that was the thing—the thing Ondine was saying. A grown woman did not need safety or its dreams. She *was* the safety she longed for.

(290)

Strikingly, the word “rape” is again absent, since that would seem to provide a single immediate answer to the question of what went wrong. But this does not mean that Jadine does not take the rape seriously; rather, she is thinking about the reasons that lead to the violation. Jadine can and must leave Son, but she still loves Son. Throughout her meditation on the plane, the rape is, as in its initial representation, a trace—more absent than present. Although she does not wish to become a woman like Ondine, her aunt’s words still lead her to a realization. Jadine’s dissipated dream of safety was her belief that good men would protect her from bad men; earlier she believed that Valerian and Sydney could protect her from Son’s potential rape. In Son the categories good man/bad man have collapsed so thoroughly that the distinction becomes meaningless. Jadine’s reflections echo the language of the decision Pilate comes to when she has been shunned because she lacks a navel (a discovery that only happens when she has sex with men):

Although she was hampered by huge ignorances, but not in any way unintelligent, when she realized what her situation in the world was and would probably always be she threw away every assumption she had learned and began at zero. First off, she cut her hair. That was one thing she didn’t want to have to think about anymore. Then she tackled the problem of trying to decide how she wanted to live and what was valuable to her. When am I happy and when am I sad and what is the difference? What do I need to know to stay alive? What is true in the world? . . . Throughout this fresh, if common, pursuit of knowledge, one conviction crowned her efforts: since death held no terrors for her . . . , she knew there was nothing to fear.

(149)

It initially may seem odd to compare the self-centered Jadine to Pilate, who perhaps more than any character in Morrison’s fiction

represents the ability to transcend self-love; nevertheless, Jadine seems poised at the same moment of Thoreauvian self-scrutiny that Pilate experienced. It is important to remember that Pilate only becomes Pilate *after* this fundamental reassessment. For both Pilate and Jadine, their recognition is that they cannot look toward men for their safety or authentic identity. Tellingly for Jadine, she takes the words of her surrogate mother, Ondine, as a way to begin her rethinking. *Song of Solomon*, then, may provide one way to read Jadine's exit from the novel. Milkman learned about African American male identity from Guitar to a certain point, beyond which he had to reject Guitar and turn to Pilate for guidance. So too Jadine has had Son to take her part of the way toward a racialized identity but she, like Milkman, must reject her initial mentor when that mentor's version of African American identity specifically denies equality to black women. The Jadine who flies to Paris appears to have the potential to become self-piloted/Pilated.

Ironically, the very reason that Jadine must leave Son—his sexual violation of her—produces her resolution to confront the night women who suggest she has failed to achieve an appropriately nurturing gendered identity. In this regard, Son perhaps has performed his rescue of Jadine but not in the way that he had hoped to with her focusing that nurturance on him. Immediately following Jadine's realization that her dream of safety is over, there is a conceit that initially appears to be directly introduced by the narrator; however, the extended metaphor follows Jadine's thought shift (through a good modernist representation of the workings of the unconscious) from the words of Ondine, her aunt, to the life cycle of soldier ants. The soldier ants point as much to Son as to her aunt, for it was Son's chocolate-eating that drew the soldier ants to Valerian's greenhouse. But Jadine's vision is of a society that is almost exclusively female, since the male ant's only role is to impregnate the queen, after which the male dies. Jadine's conception of this female society is harsh but needs to be read with an awareness of her as a rape victim:

She seals herself off from all society and eats her own wing muscles until she bears her eggs. When the first larvae appear, there is nothing to feed them so she gives them their unhatched sisters until they are old enough

and strong enough to hunt and bring their prey back to the kingdom. That is all. Bearing, hunting, eating, fighting, burying. No time for dreaming.

(291)

Previously terrified of the woman in the yellow dress who held up the chicken eggs, Jadine now appropriates eggs for herself.<sup>21</sup> For all its grimness, this conceit reiterates the notion of self-reliance while insisting upon female fecundity; Jadine here confronts the ancient property of female nurturance in its starkest, most primal form. This figuration of the mother almost anticipates Sethe's thick love in *Beloved* that kills one daughter only then to suckle another with a combination of mother's milk and sister's blood. The return at the end of the chapter from the insect to the human world shows how traumatic it has been for Jadine to have been sexually violated by the man she loves. At the same time, the figuration of Son as "the man who fucked like a star" (291) points back to the consensual moment on Valerian's island when they initially consummated their love. In that first sexual union, Son tells Jadine to imagine herself as a star feels itself: "Star throbs. Over and over and over. Like this. Stars just throb and throb and throb and sometimes, when they can't throb anymore, when they can't hold it anymore, they fall out of the sky" (214). By explicitly ending the chapter with Jadine's recollection of Son's gentleness, the novel implies that, despite her pain, Jadine will be able to retain that which has been nurturing in her relationship with Son.

Consistent with Morrison's image of the soldier ants, after he rapes Jadine, Son metaphorically dies. His one role—to initiate her struggle to attain an authentic racialized and gendered identity—is over. Although he attempts to pursue Jadine back to Valerian's island, Thérèse rows him to the back side of the island, where Son essentially ceases to be representational, becoming instead a kind of cartoon rabbit and escaping back into his same-as-it-never-was briar patch. Son is relegated to the trash heap not of history but of

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21. Lauren Lepow suggests that the soldier ant queen "is a deliberately antiromantic image of solitary fecundity designed to reinforce our knowledge that Jade must be alone in her act of self-redemption" (376).

mythology. Morrison, speaking of Son's end, claims that he "may identify totally and exclusively with the past, which is a kind of death, because it means you have no future, but a suspended place" ("Toni Morrison" 112).

My reading both of Morrison's self-fashioning through her name change and of the origin of Jadine's adult subjectivity in a moment of sexual violation necessarily is speculative; nevertheless, the evidence that joins these two realms of fiction suggests that Morrison, while writing her fourth novel, was wrestling with her own "night women," those internalized voices that might question her for layering nontraditional roles onto her maternal one. In 1981, when *Tar Baby* appeared, Morrison had left behind Lorain, Ohio, along with her birth name; she was raising two sons by herself, while giving a high priority to a career that made her as much the cultural as the natural creator. The identity Morrison was fashioning for herself obviously exceeds the boundaries of Son's version of black female subjectivity. Despite the reluctance of the novel (and subsequently the author) to name the violation, Morrison's representation of Son's rape of Jadine illustrates that any reading that unreflexively yearns for his nostalgic vision is inadequate. Reading this fiction as a form of authorial self-fashioning allows one to see that *Tar Baby*, like *Song of Solomon*, confirms Morrison's refusal to endorse an African American identity that would allow black men—in unacknowledged complicity with white patriarchy—to assume property rights in black women. Black women, the text also suggests, need not be tied to an agrarian community in order to partake of the ancient properties but, like Jadine (or indeed like Toni Morrison), may migrate freely, with or without men, to the city and beyond.

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