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Authenticity and Blackness: Defining the Conflict in "Tar Baby"

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**AUTHENTICITY AND BLACKNESS:
DEFINING THE CONFLICT IN *TAR BABY***

A Thesis

Presented to

The Faculty of the Department of English
The College of William and Mary in Virginia

In Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Art

By


Kathy N. Meadows

1997

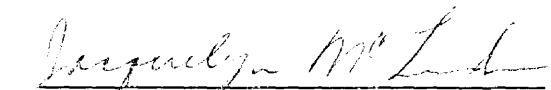
APPROVAL SHEET

This Thesis is submitted in the partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the degree of


Master of Arts

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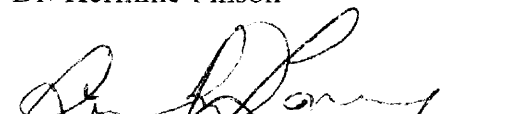
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Dr. Jacquelyn McLendon

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Dr. Hermine Pinson

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Richard Lowry".

Dr. Richard Lowry

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ABSTRACT

This thesis examines the problems inherent in establishing rules that divide African-Americans into groups such as inauthentic and authentic. In *Tar Baby*, Morrison insinuates that the possession of such ancient properties as nurturance and fertility authenticate the African-American woman specifically and also helps to define blackness generally. Yet, she problematizes this concept with the depiction of Jadine, the main character, who sees herself as an upwardly mobile African-American woman who is struggling to survive in American society. Jadine becomes a representative inauthentic black woman measured by the terms of the novel's black community, while Son, another key character and a male, seems representative of the authentic. In moving Son and Jadine through the literary landscape, Morrison exposes the problems inherent in binary oppositional categories such as authentic and inauthentic. At the same time she employs the tar baby folk tale as a cautionary tale to warn the wayward young African-American male and female that they have lost their cultural ties to the African-American community; she believes African-American men and women have forsaken their authenticity and blackness. The result is a text that leaves unresolved many of the issues it raises.

**AUTHENTICITY AND BLACKNESS:
DEFINING THE CONFLICT IN *TAR BABY***

INTRODUCTION

In “Eruptions of Funk: Historicising Toni Morrison,” Susan Willis states that the problem at the center of Morrison’s writing is “how to maintain an African-American cultural heritage once the relationship with the black rural South has been stretched thin over distance and generations” (309). As Willis suggests, maintaining cultural heritage is at the heart of the conflict in several of Morrison’s texts, particularly in *Tar Baby*, in which the conflict develops from the two principal characters’ oppositional views of how to honor one’s cultural heritage. On one side, Son advocates maintaining cultural heritage through strict adherence to traditional roles in African-American society and, on the other, Jadine insists that one’s African-American cultural heritage is honored by succeeding in white society. However, there is something larger at stake in the conflict between Son and Jadine. The novel comments on more than just male versus female sexual politics, it offers us a harsh glimpse at the larger issue of cultural authenticity, “blackness,” the unstated but omnipresent issue at the heart of *Tar Baby*. Willis concurs, acknowledging that Son’s and Jadine’s individual struggles are but a metaphor for the larger struggle of all African-Americans as they attempt to find their place in modern society while maintaining their cultural ties (315).

While Morrison uses *Tar Baby* as a vehicle to chastise young African-American men and women for their cultural misbehavior, it is Jadine, at

whom Morrison directs most of her criticism, thus making *Tar Baby* a cautionary story for young African-American women who have assimilated into white, capitalist society.¹ Moreover, the novel's preface, a quotation from the bible, warns us before the novel even begins that there are conflicts among Morrison's characters:

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 (I Corinthians 1:11).

These conflicts begin to unfold in Chapter Two when Morrison presents Jadine, who chooses self-fulfillment and monetary success over the more traditional values represented by Son, the young, African-American prodigal "son" with whom the novel opens. These two contending ideologies frame the novel and present a focus for critical discussion of the text. It is through Son and Jadine that Morrison problematizes representations of the South as the foundation of African-American culture and representations of Northern cities like New York as cultural wastelands. It is also through these two characters that Morrison articulates the flaws in modern African-American women.

¹ For a detail explanation of *Tar Baby* as a cautionary tale, see Marilyn Sanders Mobley's article "Narrative Dilemma: Jadine as Cultural Orphan in *Tar Baby*."

Yet, *Tar Baby* is itself problematic, for even while it challenges essentialist representations of cultural place, it seems to assert essentialist notions of cultural authenticity or “blackness.” Throughout the text Morrison chastises Jadine for not fitting into her “real” community. For example, in the canary woman episode, Jadine feels “lonely and inauthentic” (40). Does Jadine’s feeling inauthentic suggest that the canary woman is then authentic? This question is implicitly answered when Jadine becomes the object of criticism by African-American matriarchal figures. If the canary woman is authentic, then to be authentic one must embrace what the canary woman represents, nurturing and fertility. This paper will examine the images of nurturance and fertility alluded to in the text through the canary woman. In addition to using the canary woman, Morrison reinforces her nurturance/fertility metaphor later in the text with Marie-Therese and the female phantoms who haunt Jadine. This powerful metaphor leads to another question: is Morrison suggesting that one must embrace nurturing and motherhood in order to be considered an authentic woman in the African-American community? While the text implies that Jadine has lost her ancient properties of nurturance, fertility, and motherhood and is inauthentic, it does not implicate Son whatsoever. Riddled with startling images of motherhood and fertility, *Tar Baby* offers fewer corresponding images of the authentic male; there is no foil for Son in the text. In contrast to Jadine, Son is only lightly rebuked for his abandonment of his “home,”

Eloe, Florida. Furthermore, Morrison doesn't articulate a set of male ancient properties or create an image of the male authentic figure beyond that of Son. The fact that he is treated like the prodigal "son" by the residents of Eloe, Florida indicates Morrison's ambivalence toward her own subject.

This essay explores that ambivalence by exploring the tensions between Jadine and Son whose different visions regarding "blackness" reflect the ideals of the communities that nurtured them. While critics such as Roberta Rubenstein criticize the unresolved conflict between Jadine and Son, it is a significant part of the text because the lack of resolution reflects Morrison's own conflict with issues she examines.

By the end of the novel it is clear that the rural South is not Eden. Further, both Jadine and Son are still transient characters running from their pasts. The unresolved nature of the text is as much a part of the power of the novel as the tar baby folk tale because it invites analysis and encourages re-reading of the text. This essay explores the issues of blackness and authenticity that drive the text and produce the ambiguity that makes *Tar Baby* a literary enigma.

CHAPTER I

THE ISSUE OF AUTHENTICITY

The novel *Tar Baby* is an exploration of cultural authenticity.

Authenticity in this case is validated through connections to the African-American community. Morrison begins the novel with Son's emergence from the sea and ends her text with his return to the island, framing her evocative tale with a character on the run, disconnected from his community. It is only after presenting Son's escape from the merchant ship and describing with meticulous detail the island, its indigenous people, its folklore, and the foreigners who inhabit the island that Morrison allows the reader to meet Jadine, the principal character. The detailed introduction of Son is indicative of Morrison's approach to her two principle characters: Son's life will be explored in detail while Jadine's past life remains, for the most part, obscure. Though Son enters the text like a thief under the cover of darkness, he is able to form relationships with other black characters like Yardman, the Caribbean native of African descent who discovers Son, and Marie-Therese, also a Caribbean native of African descent who claims to be a "seer," and temporarily to become a part of their community. Jadine, on the other hand, fails to connect even with her Aunt and Uncle, Ondine and Sydney. Like Son, she is a transient character, but her lack of rootedness is a part of her lifestyle. Not only is she a guest on the island, but the text

implicitly suggests that she has no true home of her own. She has an apartment in New York, another in Paris, but these places are merely points of rest in the trek to find her place in society, black and white.

Jadine, unlike Son, enters the text passively, asleep in the midst of a dream. This is no ordinary dream, but a nightmare in which innocuous fancy hats become sinister and threatening. Her nightmare is not an ordinary tableau of terror, but an insidious allusion to her inability to claim her "self," her spiritual connection to African-American culture. In her dream, Jadine is encircled by large hats:

Large beautiful women's hats like Norma Shearer's and Mae West's and Jeanette MacDonald's. . . Feathers. Veils. Flowers. Brims flat, brims drooping, brims folded, and rounded. Hat after lovely sailing hat surrounding her until she is finger-snapping awake. She lay there under the eye of the moon wondering why the hats had shamed and repelled her so. (37)

The hats don't attack Jadine in her dream, they merely surround her. It is Jadine who gives the dream sinister connotations by stating that the hats shamed and repelled her. Her strong emotional response stems from her divided consciousness; she desires the beautiful hats of Shearer, West, and MacDonald and what they represent, but she squirms with discomfort when she ponders her desire. Shearer, West, and MacDonald represent the white

world of glamour and prestige that Jadine desires as an African-American woman, but cannot have.

Although Jadine's desire for the hats is similar to Pecola Breedlove's obsessive desire for blue eyes in Morrison's first novel, *The Bluest Eyes*, unlike Pecola Jadine is old enough to recognize that these hats are symbols. Still, she is too shallow to admit to herself that they represent white society and everything she aspires to be. Hats, like clothes, have been used by society to indicate class. In her nightmare, Jadine's hats are worn by beautiful white women, further implicating Jadine's subconscious affinity to white America. Not only does Jadine connect with these white women, she embraces their images. As a model Jadine accepts that these women, actresses constantly employing fictive images for their audiences, are the "standard" that she must live up to. The veiled nature of the hats and the women who wear them mirrors the veiled nature of Jadine's life. The hats embody the many facades that Jadine appropriates in order to function in society, both black and white. Metaphorically, the hats allude to Jadine's chameleon-like image and the way she hides herself from others.

Reinforcing the obscuring nature of the hats, Morrison presents Jadine in bed under the "eye"(37) of the moon. The eye of the moon is both foreboding and protective, for it exposes Jadine's fears and flaws as it illuminates her subconscious thoughts through dreams. However, this identity crisis only occurs in the landscape of Jadine's dreams; she considers

the revelation of the dual nature of her existence with the hats a mere figment of dream-induced terror instead of an illumination of her existence. She stops “looking for the center of her fear” and is “reminded of another picture that was not a dream. Two months ago, in Paris, the day she went grocery shopping” (37). Jadine fails to see that this dream is a commentary on her existence as a social pariah in both black and white society. She doesn’t truly belong in either community. Marginalized by both Black and White communities, she searches for a place to be herself without having to put on a hat to disguise her “self.” Thus, like Son, she runs away to find a place to be herself.

Within this panorama of disguise and denial, Morrison insinuates the issue of authenticity. Jadine’s nightmare reminds her of an incident that occurred while she shopped for groceries in Paris. While strolling through the upscale “Supra Market” (37), Jadine sees a “vision,” a woman with “skin like tar against the canary yellow dress” (38). Jadine recognizes the natural beauty of the woman in the yellow dress, but acknowledges that she does not fit into Western views of beauty. “The vision itself was a woman much too tall,” Jadine criticized, “Under her long canary yellow dress Jadine knew there was too much hip, too much bust” (38). This woman represents not just a vision, but an authentic woman unconcerned about western views of her body, her color, her femininity. She is a foil for Jadine who conforms to the traditional western aesthetic of beauty that finds light-brown skin and Caucasian features in the African-American woman more palatable. As

Jadine assures the reader, “the agency would laugh her out of the lobby”(38), for the canary woman would not be marketable in their world. The narrator paints vivid images of the canary woman and Jadine in order to deepen the contrast between the two women, illustrating a social structure in which Jadine’s beauty, and thus her person, is valued higher than that of the canary woman. The use of “African” (39) to describe the canary woman distances her from Jadine who has embraced European culture, subtly implying that Jadine’s consciousness is not that of an *authentic* African-American. Indeed, Jadine’s lighter skin separates her from all the other African-Americans in the text whose color is noted by the narrator. This pattern illustrates the economics of color that Morrison seems to be commenting on: darker colored skin is devalued in the white society.

Against this valuation, Morrison reasserts procreation and fertility as important traits of the African-American woman by having the supernatural, tar-colored woman purchase three single eggs. This act is not only a self-affirming gesture but also a cleverly symbolic metaphor for the will to procreate, an empowering act to take back the two “feminine” traits that Jadine seeks to ignore. The canary woman's reclamation of her nurturing and procreative nature transforms her into a vision; she becomes an African goddess of fertility with the power to control her own reproduction.

The most important implication of the canary woman scenario occurs with her last action. As the canary woman leaves the store, she makes one last symbolic gesture toward the occupants of the store, Jadine included:

Jadine followed her profile, then her back as she passed the store window--followed her all the way to the edge of the world where the plate glass stopped. And there, just there-- a moment before the cataclysm when all loveliness and breath in the world was about to disappear--the woman turned her head sharply around to the left and looked right at Jadine and, with a small parting of her lips, shot an arrow of saliva between her teeth down to the pavement and the hearts below. (39)

Cataclysmic is how Jadine describes this event. The woman made her feel “lonely and inauthentic” (40). As an image of the authentic, the canary woman's last action illuminates the text’s pervasive negative attitude toward African-American women who condone the white, Eurocentric power structure. Following the idea of the canary woman as an authentic tar-woman who actively seeks fertility and reproduction, the spitting becomes a disdainful gesture against Jadine's desire to create herself instead of honoring her cultural past and nurturing her community. The canary woman becomes a critic as she attacks Jadine while creating an ideal of the authentic in the text.

The spitting scene occurs as Jadine experiences a run of good luck, so she considers it a minor incident. With exaggerated casualness, Jadine

dismisses the "cataclysm" (38); "When you have fallen in love," she murmurs to herself, "rage is superfluous; insult impossible. You mumble 'bitch,' but the hunger never moves, never closes. It is placed, open and always ready for another canary-yellow dress, other tar-black fingers holding three white eggs; or eyes whose force has burnt away their lashes" (38). Yet, Jadine seems to envy the canary woman who has too much hip and bust. She sees in the canary woman something she, a heralded, educated fashion model lacks: a sense of self. The narrator recounts that Jadine's luck continued, as if the insult was a positive action. Embedded in this intricately woven incident is a powerful authorial statement on the importance of the canary woman. The implication is that Jadine is lucky to have chanced upon seeing the canary woman as if women like her were rare and endangered. Jadine states that her chance encounter with the canary woman was "another piece of her luck" (38), describing her as a "woman's woman --- that mother/ sister/ she --- that unphotographable beauty" (39). The canary woman incident bolsters Morrison's agenda in the text to rebuke young African-American women who have forgotten their roots, their authenticity and blackness.

In addition to redefining the traditional view of femininity and womanhood, Morrison's use of color explains how pigment may be an economic tool in European, American, and African-American societies. Jadine, the assimilated African-American woman, has a caramel-colored complexion and Caucasian features that allow her to market her beauty as

exotic in the Western European world and America. Jadine uses her coloring to identify herself as a rarity, an exotic creature that stands out in contrast to blond-haired, blue-eyed women. In introducing the canary woman, Morrison refutes the notion that Caucasian features are the only standard of beauty. Jadine, in a moment of humility, proclaims that the canary woman has an "unphotographable beauty" that transcends all lines of color (39). Though Jadine acknowledges that the canary woman would never be a model in her world, she cannot deny the essence of beauty that radiates from the woman. More importantly, she envies the canary woman's grace and self-possession.

In her canary yellow dress, the African woman moves with purpose through the text. Since yellow is a primary or unmixed color that is used as a base to create other colors, Morrison's use of this color seems to be an allusion to the authentic nature of the canary woman. Taking this analogy a step further, her use of yellow, a primary color, reflects the nature of the African woman as a creator, her womb as the base from which life is created. Finally, the canary yellow dress connotes the authentic untainted nature of the canary woman; her beauty is the loveliness of uncorrupted, nature. Morrison's canary woman is the quintessential "natural" woman.

It becomes difficult to understand Morrison's use of color further in the novel. For instance, on the Isle Des Chevaliers, blacks are divided into a plantation hierarchy of house and field slaves. Darker characters like Yardman and Marie-Therese have menial positions on the island, while the

only lighter-colored character in the text occupies a privileged position in society of the island. Class in terms of occupation and family history becomes a factor in the hierarchy that separates the people of African descent from each other on the island. As the "colored" characters emerge and interact, Jadine is identified as an outcast. She is not part of the African-American community on the island because she inhabits the white, Western world. Yet, she is not a part of white society either, for she is merely tolerated as an exotic creature. This division develops from Jadine's position as a guest in the Street household, her Sorbonne education, and her extravagant lifestyle. Willingly, Jadine becomes a guest of the Streets, a wealthy white couple, and accordingly treats the other African-Americans like servants instead peers. Her behavior extends to her aunt and uncle who must serve her as a guest in the Street household. The familial bonds that we expect between aunt, uncle, and niece are nonexistent and replaced by superficial relations with the Streets and the maiden aunts. Though Jadine is tacitly allowed to circulate with the Streets, she is not a member of the family.

Valerian and Margaret Street acknowledge Jadine's nature as different from the other people of African descent by treating her as a guest. They allow her to inhabit the guest room while Ondine and Sydney, her aunt and uncle, stay in the servants' quarters. Ondine and Sydney live in rooms that display a marked difference from the rest of the house: "Here were second hand furniture, table scarves, tiny pillows, scatter rugs and the

smell of human beings" (137). The blood tie between aunt and niece is weakened by their different economic ties to the Streets. Ondine and Sydney work for the Streets and try to maintain a civil, but distant relationship. Jadine crosses these social boundaries, treating the Streets as if they were family. Valerian and Margaret go so far as to give Jadine a nickname, "Jade"(54), an honor usually reserved for family members. Like an acquaintance, Jadine receives perfunctory kisses from Valerian's maiden aunts before dinner while Sydney, her uncle, stands at attention with his head bowed, ever the vigilant servant. This scene indelibly places Jadine in a class above Sydney and Ondine. As a quasi-member of the Street family and only an acquaintance to her blood relatives, Jadine is a true member of neither family, an orphan who circulates in both societies belonging to neither.

Holding a degree from the Sorbonne, Jadine is allowed to circulate in the affluent world of the Streets as an exotic, trained bird of paradise that they keep for entertainment. This becomes apparent when Margaret and Valerian argue about the position of African-Americans. While Valerian argues that whites should not "consort" with blacks, the narrator tells us that "although the theme of [Margaret's] defense in the argument was that Ondine or Sydney (if not all colored people) was just as good as they were, she didn't believe it" (50). This statement reinforces the view that Margaret and Valerian use Jadine as an ornament for their personal pleasure. Sydney and Ondine, unlike Jadine, serve the Streets only as employees.

They are not allowed to cross the substantial invisible barriers that separate the affluent Streets from their servants. On the other hand, Jadine's appearance and affluence allow her to enter the Street's world, though she is still not considered their "equal."

The difference between her relatives' lives and Jadine's life is a major point in the novel. Jadine is not part of Ondine's and Sydney's community, even though they raised her as their own child. Jadine's otherness is defined in terms of her lack of connection to the African-American community. The novel never explains how Jadine entered the Westernized world of the Streets, but the narrator alludes to her educational background as the culprit, suggesting that Jadine's experiences at the Sorbonne taught her the value of assimilation and western economics --- capitalism. After leaving the Sorbonne, Jadine became a part of bourgeois American and European society, craving material possessions and wealth as affirmations of her self worth. She separates herself from her family, Ondine and Sydney, and the African-American community, an idea I will return to in detail later.

In her article, "Ancient Properties in the New World: The Paradox of the 'Other' in Toni Morrison's *Tar Baby*," Angelita Reyes suggests that Jadine is a "pariah of the community"(21). She functions as a lurid reflection of African-American womanhood that has been diseased by materialistic, Eurocentric morality. "Euro-American new world culture,"

Reyes posits, "usurps people like Jadine and makes them lose sight of their connected properties"(21). As an orphan Jadine is susceptible to the lure of a culture that is hers because she is American, but not hers because she descends from a people robbed of their cultural heritage as a result of slavery. The interconnected nature of Jadine's identity as an African-American precipitates the cultural crisis that emerges as Jadine confronts her "self" and her cultural past.

CHAPTER II

ANCIENT PROPERTIES DEFINED

The conflict between family and individual, self and society underscores another key ideology that develops throughout the narrative, the idea of ancient properties. In her article on the female ancestor as the cultural foundation for African-American women characters in *Their Eyes Were Watching God* and *Tar Baby*, Sandra Pouchet Paquet suggests that *Tar Baby* is a novel that exposes the conflict between the inner and the outer self, the individual and community (513). Morrison constructs the self versus society conflict to reinvent the young African-American male and female image of the authentic. Assembling certain feminine traits which reinforce the nurturing nature of womanhood, Morrison constructs a cult of African-American womanhood that seems to embrace only African-American women who choose to follow traditional roles of nurturing and procreation.

The narrative suggests that the ancient properties of nurturance and fertility authenticate African-American womanhood. Ondine and Marie-Therese, two representatives of the authentic, provide the nurturing element in the community of the Isle Des Chevalier. While neither has given birth, they both act as mother-figures to other characters in the text. However, the issue is, can there be more than one vision of the authentic? Can Jadine be authentic while *not* being a

nurturing mother-figure, but an independent career women who doesn't want children. Concentrating on the feminine center of the text, Morrison employs ancient properties to create the authentic for womanhood.

Through key events, Morrison skillfully elucidates her paradigm of fertility and nurturance, ancient properties that encapsulate the ideal of the monolithic earth mother, the all nurturing, female who functions to serve her heritage and culture. Jadine seeks to deny her mothering nature by denying her reproductive instincts. However, as she travels through Morrison's exotic landscape on the Isle Des Chevaliers, she becomes a victim of her own insecurities about her authenticity:

The women looked down from the rafters of the trees and stopped murmuring. 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; that they could hold together the stones of the pyramids and the rushes of Moses's crib; knowing their steady consistency, their pace of glaciers. their permanent embrace, they

wondered at the girl's desperate struggle down below to be free, to be something other than they were. (157)

This seeming confrontation with the women in the trees is in actuality Jadine's confrontation with her own insecurities. When she tumbles into the tar-like mud pit in the primitive jungle of the island, the *tar*-like substance produces primordial fears in Jadine. She begins to hallucinate, envisioning women in the trees above taunting her as she struggles to escape the black quagmire. Displaying a disdain similar to the canary woman in the market, the haunting sibylline figures mock Jadine's struggles to escape from her own ancient properties of nurturance and fertility and elude her cultural history. They see her struggles to escape her ancestral connection with them as repudiating the sacrifices they made for *their* children and *their* cultural heritage. Insidiously, Jadine's subconscious creates these imps of femininity, revealing her angst over her decision to pursue her own needs rather than to acknowledge any responsibility she might have to her cultural community. As she cowers under the trees, the phantasmic women seem to grow stronger; Jadine's mind attacks her weak ego, expanding the phantoms until they emerge as mother-goddesses, life-givers to all the world. The women in the trees become like the canary woman, the "mother/sister/she" (39).

In Jadine's second confrontation with her insecurities, the nature of ancient properties crystallizes as the force of cultural nurturance, motherhood. Returning with Son to his home in Eloë, Florida, Jadine again confronts a community that asks her to be a nurturer, a giver; she must become a woman by the community's definition of the word. Again, Jadine is the social pariah, cut off from the Black community. She is excluded because she does not follow what the community perceives as the cult of true African-American womanhood. Ironically, the ideals of authentic womanhood insinuated by the text divide rather than unite the African-American female community, marginalizing any woman who chooses not to nurture or procreate. Jadine's continuous confrontations with women ancestors are evidence of such an indictment. The host of women she envisions one night after making love to Son seem to accuse her of being inauthentic, with pointed gestures of exposing their breasts to her. The canary woman's showing her "three big eggs" (38) suggests that they believe she has lost her ancient properties of fertility and nurturance:

Rosa and Therese and Son's dead mother and Sally Sarah Sadie Brown and Ondine and Soldier's wife Ellen and Francine from the mental institution and her own dead mother and even the woman in yellow. All there crowding into the Room. Some of them she did not know, recognize, but they were all there spoiling her love-making, taking

away her sex like succubi, but not his. . . . "What do you want with me, goddamn it!" They just looked as though they had just been waiting for that question and 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. This was not the dream of hats for in that she was asleep, her eyes closed. Here she was wide-awake, but in total darkness looking at her own mother for God's sake and *Nanadine* "I have Breasts too,- she said, or thought or willed, "I have breasts too." But they didn't believe her. They just held their own higher and pushed their own further out and looked at her. All of them revealing both their breasts except the woman in yellow. She did something more shocking---she stretched out a long arm and showed Jadine her three big eggs. It scared her so, she began to cry. (222)

These women are born of Jadine's insecurities about her decisions to satisfy her "self" and disregard black society's and her family's definition of womanhood. Jadine chooses to ignore any nurturing instinct she has in order to satisfy her ambition for money and position in her community; this is why the women in the trees taunt Jadine and why the maternal

specters haunt her dreams. While consciously she has chosen to pursue ambition, subconsciously the battle still rages for her soul.

In Morrison's interview with Gloria Naylor for *Southern Literature* she explains that the desire to nurture is "peculiar to women. And I thought, 'it's interesting because the best thing that is in us is also the thing that makes us sabotage ourselves, sabotage in the sense that our life is not as worthy of our perception of the best part of ourselves'" (585). Clearly, Morrison acknowledges the problems involved in supporting the ancient properties of Marie-Therese, resident seeress on the island. She implies that this conflict of interest is endemic to the female psyche; thus, Jadine's major failure is her inability to reach inside her "self" and explore the nurturing side of her character which is also a part of her feminine heritage.

The text's indictment of Jadine's inauthentic womanhood is also an indictment of her "blackness," or lack thereof, since gender and race are inextricably connected. In *The Crime of Innocence in the Fiction of Toni Morrison*, Terry Otten argues that "with its apparent poverty, ignorance and isolation, Elodie defines all the 'blackness' Jadine has long struggled to escape" equating "blackness" with lack of education and lower class (76). Likewise Marilyn Mobley in "Narrative Dilemma: Jadine as Cultural Orphan in Toni Morrison's *Tar Baby*," discusses Jadine's "divided consciousness" and contends that the division occurs from Jadine's

"rejection of the cultural construction of race and mothering that are part of the Afro-American heritage" (763). Indeed, most critics concur with Mobley, classifying the entire text as an examination of Jadine's denial of her "self" and her flight from her cultural past-- her ancient properties as connected to her cultural heritage.

Son, on the other hand, represents the cultural traditions of African-American society that Morrison supports with her negative portraiture of Jadine. Although both Jadine and Son are depicted as social pariahs, the difference lies in the fact that Son embraces the African-American community and resists the disruptive influences of mainstream American society. The narrator even implies that Son has an uncorrupted black consciousness, which as I will show, is not quite the case. Interestingly, not once in the novel do we observe a positive portrait of a professional African-American woman. The women who receive approval are the women of Eloie and Marie-Therese, not the women on the streets of New York with the "tight jeans" and "high, high heels"(185). The text often comments on black people generally, and black women particularly from Son's perspective. He describes the black women of New York City as nothing less than grotesque. The novel never counters Son's vision or balances it with an equivalent scene from Jadine's point of view. Thus, we are left with an image of the city women as grotesque, parodies of womanhood.

The point is that Son's disenchantment with the men and women he sees in New York leads him to question not individuals, but the entire African-American community there. He doesn't like television because it is "black people in whiteface playing black people in blackface" (186). He concludes that these black New Yorkers are "a whole new race of people he was once familiar with" (187) and summarily dismisses them as inauthentic. Son distrusts these "new" African-Americans because they are not like Marie-Therese or Gideon (186). Yet, Morrison doesn't allow us to completely buy Son's vision. On the next page Son exposes his own flawed judgment when he remembers trying to check into the Hilton:

It made him shiver. How long had he been gone, anyway? If those were the black folks he was carrying around in his heart all those years, who on earth was he? The trouble he'd had the night he checked in was representative of how estranged he felt from these new people. . . .The clerk was about to give him a very hard time because no, he would not be paying with a credit card, and no, no check either. Cash. Two nights. Cash. Son had chosen that line to wait in because the clerk's little pecan-pie face looked friendly; now he realized the boy was in love with his identification badge. Son was surprised at himself. He seldom misjudged people.
(187)

Son has a clear history of misjudging people; he misjudged Jadine. This statement gives the reader reason to re-examine Son's previous diatribe in a new light. Son's judgment *is* dubious; therefore, his dismissal of the city men and women, the entire community, is suspect.

As the text unfolds, we see that Son is a repository, not only for the cultural heritage that Jadine lacks but also for the ideal of authenticity that the text champions. Cultivating associations with the primitive, the narrator describes Son as wild:

His hair looked overpowering -- physically overpowering, like bundles of long whips or lashes that grab her and beat her to jelly. And would. Wild and aggressive, vicious hair that needed to be put in jail. Uncivilized, reform school hair. Mau-Mau, Attica, chain-gang hair. (97)

Son's appearance indicates his state of mind, wild and untamed.

However, his "long whips or lashes that . . . beat her to jelly" (97) evoke connections to slavery, images of Son as master and Jadine as slave.

These two images typify the problems of decoding Son's character in the novel. Is he an elegant, unfettered symbol of the authentic cultural past, or is he another oppressor, a master who would have Jadine as his slave? Thus, the stage is set for the collision of ideals that emerges from the relationship between Son and Jadine.

CHAPTER III

SON AND JADINE:

WHEN CULTURES COLLIDE

The crux of *Tar Baby* is the taut conflict between Son, the prodigal Son, and Jadine, the dilettante. Son is a rootless man with a violent past. His exploits frame the novel as he is, like Jadine, constantly on the move. Sandra Pouchet Paquet theorizes that in *Tar Baby* to be in motion is "to be in the business of making yourself" (512). Born in Eloë, Florida, Son fled from his native land to avoid a murder conviction. His abandonment of his post by diving overboard and his subsequent immersion in the Caribbean and ensuing emergence on the Isle Des Chevalier alludes to baptism; Son recreates himself by jumping overboard. On the island he can assume another persona, one not connected to the crime he committed in Eloë. Since the allusion to Baptism is subverted by Son's change as an act of deceit, the question becomes whether or not Son actually remakes a "self" and whether or not he is entirely credible as a representation of cultural authenticity or "blackness." Thus, Son's views of Jadine are also called into question, which is significant since at various intervals in the text he becomes the traditional voice of the community. It is Son, not Ondine or Sydney, who articulates the cultural flaws in Jadine, though Ondine does give voice to Jadine's lack of maternal (read feminine) qualities. A character who lives

by the traditions of the black community, specifically the small town of Eloe, Son chastises Jadine for her lack of connection to her heritage, her cultural community. Son supports a traditional view of the African-American community that springs from his desire to return to a gentler time when he was a part of the community in Eloe. His views are chauvinistic, yet he articulates an ideal that allows him to interact with the black community more often than Jadine.

Most criticism of *Tar Baby* concentrates on the dislocation of Jadine from the African-American community that consists of her aunt and uncle and the other African-Americans in the text. Not one African-American character befriends Jadine nor does she instigate a friendship with any African-American characters besides Son. Angelita Reyes classifies Jadine as one of those outcast figures that Morrison uses as an example of what an authentic African-American is *not* (21). However, Son is also an outsider, expelled from Eloe because of his crime.

Examination of Son's past illuminates the tightly woven bonds that once existed between Son and his family. Reyes suggests that he connects back to an African collective unconscious (19). The connectedness Son feels with Eloe and its inhabitants is a bond, a family tie. Morrison painstakingly weaves a tapestry of familial history which clearly connects Son to Eloe:

His father, Franklin G. Green, had been called Old Man since he was seven years old and when he grew up, got married, had a baby boy, the baby was called Old Man's son until the second child was born and the first became simply Son. They all used to be here--all of them. Horace who lived in Gainesville, Frank G. who died in Korea, his sister Francine who was in a mental home in Jacksonville, and the baby girl Porky Green who still lived in Eloe, so Soldier said, but went to Florida A and M on a track scholarship. They had all been in this house together at one time with his mother. (212)

Morrison gives Son this family history, while she gives Jadine a wistful, shadowy memory of a mother and no mention of a father. Not only does this history connect Son to a community, but it also explains his behavior. Son left home because of his unfaithful wife whom he killed in a fit of passion. Morrison depicts Son as a victim of the American justice system that did not understand his overwhelming love for his wife and the pain he felt at her infidelity. She explains his behavior through his background, but does not do the same for Jadine; thus, we cannot sympathize with Jadine because we never see how her character developed.

In stark contrast to Jadine, Son also has true friendships. Soldier, Son's best friend, is the first person Son greets when he returns to Eloe; they hug each other like long lost brothers. Son's friendships are real

bonds with people with whom he has shared deep emotional experiences. Jadine's friends, primarily whites, are portrayed as vague ghosts of figures who allow Jadine to sublet their apartments and who chat with her on the phone, illustrating the superficial nature of her relationships when compared to Son's deep, emotional reunions with his black friends. Morrison seems to imply that the affinity Son has with others in Eloë results from their communal past; everyone in Eloë knows everyone else and they are all a part of an extended family. The novel suggests that history forms the roots of Son's life connecting him to his community and his cultural past.

Son's relationships are not without their problems, however, as evidenced by his conflict with his father. For instance, on one occasion Son sent money to his father, but failed to write a single word of greeting. When his father, Old Man, asks why he never wrote a note, Son stops and ponders the question. He remembers how he usually sent a woman out to buy stamps and mail his letters. He remembers that he was always in a hurry; he had no time. His explanation to his father is that he didn't want anyone to trace him, but even he acknowledges that the excuse "was too lame an excuse to continue with " (215). Further, upon returning to Eloë, Son does not immediately go to greet his father, but goes to Soldier's house to have a reunion with his friend. This preference for extended family over immediate family is never explained by Son or

the narrator. Both these actions call into question Son's character and his sincerity.

The community, with the exception of his father, never comments on Son's misbehavior. Even his father refuses to blame him for his actions, questioning him but not judging him. Conversely, Jadine's distance from Ondine and Sydney, her career, her entire life are indicted by Marie-Therese, Son, Ondine, Sydney, the canary woman-- almost every African-American character in the text. Is Jadine's estrangement from the African-American community a greater sin than Son's distance from his father and the community of Elo? This difference in the treatment of her primary characters raises questions about how Morrison defines the authentic African-American male and female. Morrison seems to tie authenticity to cultural connections to the African-American community, but neither Son nor Jadine are a part of the African-American communities in the novel. They are both rootless, transient characters searching for fulfillment or, in Son's case, running from their past.

Though both characters are in motion, they are rootless for different reasons. We come to understand Son's transience as different from Jadine's because of the cultural ties he has formed and the ways in which memory of them continues to shape his life. Jadine's transience, however, is a manifestation of her lack of ties and the result of two opposing forces: her desires for self-fulfillment and the pressure of the

views of the African-American community represented by Son, her aunt and uncle and others. Jadine, a woman who has feminist aspirations for independence, is defined in the text as inauthentic both as it concerns her womanhood, as we have seen, and her "blackness."

The cultural conflict between Jadine as progressive and Son as traditional is at the heart of the novel. The philosophies of each character form the basis for the conflict in the text and the articulation of the tar baby folk tale. Near the end of the text when the narrator describes the conflict between Son and Jadine, she begins her explanation through Jadine's point of view:

This rescue was not going well. She thought she was rescuing him from the night women who wanted him for themselves, wanted him feeling superior in a cradle, deferring to him; wanted her to settle for wifely competence when she could be almighty, to settle for fertility rather than originality, nurturing instead of building. He thought he was rescuing her from Valerian, meaning them, the aliens, the people who in a mere three hundred years had killed a world millions of years old (231).

The narrator goes on to lift Son and Jadine's struggle to the struggle of all African-American men and women: "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?" (232). In one statement Morrison questions the nature of the psyche of the black man and attacks the cultural veracity of the black woman. She continues this problematic questioning by exploring the tar baby folk tale.

Morrison employs the tar baby folk tale to solidify her use of the text as a cautionary tale. It is Son who recounts the tale while accusing Jadine of selling out her cultural heritage. Son tells Jadine a story about a white farmer who jealously guards his garden from Brer Rabbit, whom he considers a pest. When Brer Rabbit comes and eats some of the cabbages, the farmer has a plan to get him by making a tar baby. Son uses the tale to illustrate his view of Jadine as the tar baby, an image created by the white man, Valerian in her case. "He made it, you hear me? he made it!"(233), Son accusingly shouts at Jadine. The folk tale motif illustrates both the racial and cultural conflicts between Son's and Jadine's views of authenticity and blackness. The tar baby image is most prominent in the text when Son recites the tale. The accusatory nature of his recitation clearly places blame on Jadine for participating in a society he considers abhorrent. With the recitation of the folk tale the conflict between Son and Jadine crystallizes and we observe how authenticity and blackness rend their nascent relationship.

CONCLUSION

AUTHENTICITY, BLACKNESS, AND THE INDIVIDUAL

Several novels later, *Tar Baby* is still one of Toni Morrison's most enigmatic texts. It asks, as do all her novels, penetrating questions about the nature of African-American communities. That it goes further in its attempt to inculcate notions of authenticity as it applies to gender and race has been a source of praise and censure. Unfortunately it fails in the latter, race, managing only to complicate an already complex issue. Clearly, Morrison's text is a cautionary tale warning African-American women of the effects of forsaking their ancient properties and warning African-American men that they need to be more mature. Yet, in its adherence to rigid cultural traditions, it finally fails to provide space for cultural self-definition. Furthermore, Morrison's attempt to define authenticity for all African-American women is problematic since the act of being an African-American is a self-defining act.

Tar Baby suggests that African-American women should reclaim their cultural history and follow the values of their maternal ancestors. However, the ancient properties espoused in the text are in direct conflict with the budding individuality of young African-American women like Jadine who choose careers over motherhood. Motherhood and womanhood have become separate for these young women. Jadine's disconnection from the African-American community is many critics'

chief grievance with her character, but who decides which traits or characteristics should be cast as gauges for black or female authenticity? The unresolved nature of *Tar Baby* hinges on Morrison's attempts to define authenticity and blackness. *Tar Baby* illustrates how this subjective view of what it means to be an African American seems to be more a gauge of geographical and class difference than a gauge of consciousness. African-Americans have fought for years to escape the narrow confines of racial stereotypes, yet critical discourse still seems to adhere to ambiguous, stifling concepts.

While Morrison's use of authenticity is problematic, her view of Jadine as disconnected from her community is debatable. Jadine does not feel bound to her fellow African-Americans, even to her relatives, but neither do they feel bound to her. Ondine and Sydney clothe and feed Jadine, but the connection between aunt, uncle, and niece is never solid. Blame for this lack of bonding falls squarely on all parties. Son also forsakes his community, abrogating his responsibility by refusing to participate in the struggle for a place in American society along with other African-Americans. He steadfastly refuses any connection with white society and claims that law school only exists to further the power of the white race. Instead, he chooses menial work with little mental stimulation; he cops out. Son is afraid that law school would make him a part of "the system," a sell-out. He chooses to be safe in servitude, a non-

threat to the white authority that he so despises. Yet, with all his flaws, the narrator still prefers Son's traditional views of the roles of women to Jadine's view of womanhood as "self" sustaining and non-nurturing.

Unfortunately, Morrison finds no midpoint between these two extremes.

Tar Baby's attempt to reclaim the African-American culture is admirable. In connecting African-Americans to their cultural past the novel takes back some of the history stolen by American society through slavery. However, the danger is that in looking back to the past, we tend to have a nostalgic view of history. African-American history includes the traditions of fertility and nurturance that Morrison seeks to continue, but it also includes a stifling, rigid view of the roles of females in society which can be detrimental to modern women. This later role creates the ambiguity that develops in the text. *Tar Baby's* authenticity does not permit the young African-American woman to choose how she would like to live her life; it alienates her for choosing anything but motherhood. For the young African-American female, to be a woman is to *choose* motherhood and not procreate out of a sense of obligation to the community.

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