

# To Hope against Hope: Post-Civil Rights Children Running Lickety-Split in Toni Morrison's *Tar Baby*\*

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To be a Negro in America is to hope against hope.

-*Where Do We Go from Here: Chaos or Community?*  
Martin Luther King Jr.

## Locating *Tar Baby*

Not only the Civil Rights movement itself but its prehistory and aftermath resonate throughout Toni Morrison's fictions. While Morrison defines herself as "not a big joiner"<sup>1</sup> of the movement, it is not too far-fetched to suggest that she, who started her career as a writer with the publication of *The Bluest Eye* in 1970, has hardly been impervious to the influence of the turbulent era. Her debut interrogates psychic injuries of internalized racism by touching upon the meaning of "Black is

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1. See a *Chicago Maroon* interview with O'Neil.

beautiful” from a viewpoint in 1941. *Sula* (1973) portrays a “new world black and new world woman” who has grown up to be “disruptive, imaginative, modern, out-of-the-house, outlawed, unpolicing, uncontained and uncontainable” (Morrison, “Unspeakable Things Unspoken” 25) partly from the cultural soil of the 1960s. *Song of Solomon* (1977), mostly set in the 1960s, traces Milkman’s lineage back to the time of the Freedman’s Bureau and directly confronts political awareness of the era with historical events embedded within the main plot such as the murders of Emmett Till and four black girls in a Birmingham church. *Beloved* (1987), set in Cincinnati eight years after the end of the Civil War, retrospectively provides a nuanced commentary on the failed utopian promise of Civil Rights by presenting the end of the Freedmen’s Bureau. Delineated in *Jazz* (1992) is another prehistory of the movement—the frustration of African Americans facing the falling away of a utopian impulse after World War I. It is set in the era of the Harlem Renaissance and the mass migration against the backdrop of a panoramic presentation of the 1919 procession of veterans of the 369 Regiment on Fifth Avenue and the East St. Louis riots. *Paradise* (1997), moving back to the immediate era after the Emancipation, is narrated from the lens of the late years of the Civil Rights movement. In company with each character’s journey into Bill Cosey’s legacy in *Love* (2003), readers are drawn into the history of the woolly mid-twentieth century America, which references, if not outright directly, the Civil Rights era. In addition, it is no less noteworthy that Morrison published *Dreaming Emmett* (1981), her first play, and *Remember: The Journey to School Integration* (2004), which provides an account of experiences of the children who lived in the age of “separate but equal” schooling in a blend of fictional narrative, historiography, and archival photographs.<sup>2</sup>

Given such trajectories of Morrison’s life-long interest in the movement and its persistent impact on her work, this article

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2. *Remember* was published on the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the historic Brown v. Board of Education Supreme Court decision ending legal school segregation, which had persisted until May 17, 1954.

aims at reconsidering Morrison's *Tar Baby* (1981)-a "much-neglected novel" (Goyal 394) and "an aberration" (Duvall 325) in her oeuvre—by (re)locating it as a post-Civil Rights fiction.<sup>3</sup> Although Morrison hardly mentions specific dates in *Tar Baby*, one may deduce that the novel opens around the fall of 1979. It ends with characters lost between the haunting past and an uncertain future, and faced with impending Ronald Reagan's presidency, which "incorporated sexual and racial differences into a discourse of multicultural diversity in order to dissolve their potential unifying values for political and social protest" (Emberley 407). This temporal setting pinpoints the plights in which African Americans were still caught in the "legally" integrated America, and brings into sharp relief the question of how to locate the 1981 novel on the grid of Morrison oeuvre within the context of the Civil Rights movement and its impact on her fiction writing.

Against the backdrop of the sharp contrast of the two leads, Son Green and Jadine Childs, reigning traditional evaluations of *Tar Baby* have been revolving around the divide of racial authenticity aligned with black rural geographies and feminist-oriented critique of the Black Nationalist ideologies. Viewed in this light, Son, who is "black as coal" (220), figures as a semiotic embodiment of blackness, and light-skinned Jadine, who is preoccupied with upward mobility, as a character co-opted into white values. One is a prideful son of the race and bearer of its tradition while homeless and poverty-stricken. The other is a cultural orphan out of touch with "ancestral properties" (305) while educated and competent. Not a few critics have thus discussed *Tar Baby* from the vantage point of the divides of integrationist/separatist, nationalist/feminist, authenticity/

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3. The term, "post-Civil Rights fiction," is used in this article to refer to fictions which mainly deal with the particular sentiment in the mid-1970s when the spirit of the movement visibly eroded and civil rights agenda was diluted. In a similar vein with the post-Civil Rights period, the "pre-Reagan era" in this article particularly refers to the years between the Bicentennial in 1976 and the 1980 presidential election. See Schur for a context in which the post-Civil Rights era is articulated in Morrison's oeuvre.

rootlessness, community demands/personal aims, traditional values/new possibilities, and so on.<sup>4</sup>

A problem attendant upon such views is that they consequently have only to reiterate the gendered politics of the Civil Rights movement such as the male-centered ideologies and the critique of gendered hierarchy within the black community. For instance, when the novel is discussed with a focus on the split of "one [Son] had a past, the other [Jadine] a future" (269), it amounts to suggesting that one has no future and the other no past. Then, higher education for Jadine becomes equated with a white value system, yet career advancement nonetheless requires a higher education. For Son, his identity becomes so entangled with the assertion of his authentic blackness that he seeks to secure it through regulation of Jadine's black femininity. As such, the existing scholarship on *Tar Baby* is, not infrequently, too much focused on the idea that juggling of personal aims and racial uplift are at odds and stops short of inquiry into a larger context of post-Civil Rights era. It seems to me to be responsible, if ever, for the novel being labeled a "much neglected novel" and "an aberration," and consequently miss the complex aspects of "an age of choice"<sup>5</sup> into which the characters are thrown with the advent of the 1980s. With strident positions on the waning of the civil rights commitment and falling away of momentums, the post-civil rights movement days were witnessing the continued foot-dragging on civil rights and its concomitant increasing backlash while African Americans were not yet enjoying the fruits of their efforts. Likewise, both Son and Jadine are tortured by the contradictory choices available to them.

My aim to relocate *Tar Baby* in this article is thus not an

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4. For strong points of such a view, see Coleman, Hawthorne, and Paquet.

5. Portraying the title character initiated into the movement, Alice Walker stresses in her 1976 Meridian a new set of choices available to Meridian within the context of the Bicentennial Celebration. Meridian is presented as a character who can never come to terms with choices in terms of traditional values usually available to her predecessors such as endurance and subservience: "It never occurred to her that her mother's and her grandmother's extreme purity of life was compelled by necessity. They had not lived in an age of choice" (124).

attempt to make any claim for inclusiveness in the deployment of my methodology that is meant to render obsolete prior interpretations.<sup>6</sup> Rather, it is settled on primarily for the range of critical concerns it is most likely to demonstrate about the existing scholarship on *Tar Baby*—to tackle the critical problems predicated upon the question of how and why I read the novel as a post-Civil Rights fiction and provide compelling entries into the issues which the act of relocating brings to light. As a point of departure, I will demonstrate how Son and Jadine stand in for post-Civil Rights children and "quiet as it's kept," *Tar Baby* as a post-Civil Rights fiction narrativizes "the after" without necessarily privileging the "post" by capturing the post-Civil Rights anxieties the post-Civil Rights children are faced with in the pre-Reagan era.<sup>7</sup> Finally, this article will argue that the post-

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6. Recent approaches to *Tar Baby* conditioned by diaspora and Black Atlantic Studies are worth consideration for the issues under discussion. Particularly, Goyal's reading of the novel is notable for the ways that he excavates the two different strains of narrative styles—mythic and real—by implicating gender in a diasporan context. Morrison has sought to expand the history of slavery in the United States by linking it in a larger history of the Middle Passage, as noted in her well-known dedication of *Beloved* to "sixty million and more." Set out of the United States on a Caribbean Island that was once a colonial outpost of the French Empire, *Tar Baby* seems to inscribe a colonial schema in a colonized fantasy space. While such readings undeniably contribute to expanding the parameters of the studies of the novel, they, I would like to argue, are likely to gloss over the question of how to locate the 1981 novel on the grid of Morrison's oeuvre within the context of her interest in the movement. In addition, while there are some characters from Central or South America in her novels such as Soaphead Church in *The Bluest Eye* and Consolata in *Paradise*, it is hard to say that such characters' Caribbean ties have any sustaining resonance to the extent that Thomas Sutpen's in William Faulkner's *Absalom, Absalom!* (1936) do.

7. *The Bluest Eye* begins with the well-known phrase, "Quiet as it's kept" as the narrator, Claudia MacTeer takes readers into her confidence. "Quiet as it's kept," in its usage on a daily basis, means that "this is just for between you and me while nobody talks about this" by fostering a trusting and warm atmosphere. But the narrator actually is confiding what is already widely-known or rumored. This quiet-as-it's-kept way is also the case with the fashion in which Morrison embeds the Harlem Renaissance within *Jazz*. My argument here is that post-Civil Rights anxieties are inscribed in *Tar Baby* in this typically Morrisonian way.

Civil Rights era is staged for the characters who are compelled to don and doff his or her masks by learning to choose a performative identity over an alternative subjectivity, which is particularly well embedded within the deployment of the tar baby folktale.

### Poster Children for the Post-Civil Rights Era

Son and Jadine—a "downhome" black man and a green-eyed, fair-complexioned black woman of the "new black middle class" that "came of age in the 1960s during an unprecedented American economic boom and in the hub of a thriving mass culture" (West 36)—are the two leads on the central stage of *Tar Baby*. Twenty-five-year old Jadine is a Sorbonne-educated high fashion model pursuing her splendid career in Paris. She is now home for Christmas in Isle des Chevaliers, a fictional Caribbean Island of Dominique. Her guardians, uncle Sydney Childs and aunt Ondine Childs work as a butler and a cook for Valerian Street, a retired candy magnate from Philadelphia and his wife, Margaret Street in a mansion called L'Arbe de la Croix. The residents of the mansion, ensconced in each own pigeonhole-like space, live in a neatly compartmentalized way. Valerian spends most of his time in a stereo-equipped greenhouse while Margaret seems to be exiled in her bedroom. Sydney and Ondine "hold their place" in their quarters unless needed for service for their masters. As a transgressor into and intruder to a white-owned space, Son, a black drifter who has deserted from the army and jumped on ship, stows away at the mansion in search of food. When Son is found hiding in Margaret's closet, the residents are irritated at first and then interested. After a brief period of push and pull, Son and Jadine make love and elope for New York City. After a visit to Son's hometown, Eloie in Florida and a devastating clash back in New York, Jadine leaves Son for Dominique, and finally returns to Paris for her white lover.

The typical Morrisonian confrontation between African

American males and females is presented in *Tar Baby* as a variation on the issue of how to form a viable black identity around 1980. Son's romantic attachment to his hometown, an all-black community and his resultant disdain for anything associate with white America are pitted against Jadine's attempts to fashion what she sees as a better life for herself as an educated, upwardly mobile African American woman. Jadine's resistance to defining herself on Son's terms situates her in the precarious position of claiming cultural roots beyond the African American community, signaling a dangerous distance from her cultural roots as Son pointedly tells her: "until you know about me, you don't know nothing about yourself. And you don't know anything, anything at all about your children and anything at all about your mama and your papa" (264). In this vignette, Morrison herself seems to target Jadine as a cultural orphan in danger who has lost a vital connection to her African American and more specifically her black female roots. In an interview, Morrison emphasizes the ancient roots of tar that has been revered in African mythology because "it came naturally out of the earth; it held together things like Moses's little boat and the pyramids" ("The Language Must Not Sweat" 122). In another interview with Judith Wilson, Morrison speaks of Jadine as a character who "has lost the tar quality, the ability to hold things together that otherwise would fall apart—which is what I mean by the nurturing ability" (131). To the blame that she is promoting the myth of the black womanhood and "Superwoman" (131) by conveying the sense that black women are the wellspring for safety, security, and connection available for the never-ending need of uplifting the race, Morrison answers:

No black woman should apologize for being educated or anything else. The problem is not paying attention to the ancient properties—which for me means that ability to be "the ship" *and* "the safe harbor." Our history as Black women is the history of women who could build a house *and* have some children, and there was no problem." ... One

doesn't have to make a choice between whether to dance or to cook—do both. And if we can't do it, then it can't be done!" (135)<sup>8</sup>

While she does not discuss how black women can strike a balance between individual aspirations and communal goals, Morrison is well aware of the problem of relying on the entrenched notion of black womanhood to make that balance clear because "tar," while binding one to the "ancient properties," may also hold one down—what begins as a critique of the self-centered (or self-interested) materialism of the late seventies and early eighties black females runs risk of advocating authentic black womanhood. Morrison may contradict herself in several interviews as such, but my argument here is that her contradictory viewpoints are not accidental. Put otherwise, they symptomatically articulate that Son and Jadine, in a fundamental sense, are a sort of post-Civil Rights children—the poster children for their time-period, faced with a set of new challenges, possibilities, and choices that are not grasped any more under the rubric of male/female, separatist/integrationist, and communal/individual divides. While it is not clear how to come to terms with the contradictory choices available to Son and Jadine, one thing is clear: no matter what they choose, they are considered to be either authentic or lacking by that choice. The very moment one chooses to be authentic the other cannot but be lacking as well-exemplified in an often-quoted description of Son and Jadine's relationship as a kind of "war": "Each knew the world as it was meant to be. One had a past, the other a future and each 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).

It is precisely at this juncture that *Tar Baby* differentiates itself both from the Black Aesthetic literature that "consolidated around the sign of race" during the 1960s and 1970s, and from the black feminist critique of that race-centered aesthetic that

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8. All the emphases in quotes are hereafter in original unless noted otherwise.



called into question "the ideological program of black cultural nationalism" (Dubey 1). It is hard to deny that Black Nationalist's conception of race in stable and unitary terms contributed in part to restructuring African Americans' economic, social, and political position, and the black feminist critique had the merit of rendering visible black women's specificities that would be otherwise muted and ignored. However, those two seemingly distinct positions—a position and its counter position—were ironically legitimized by each other's oppositional presence in the form of "supplementary distancing" in a Spivakian/Derridian sense (Spivak 250). In other words, each position, whether opposed to or dependent on gendered expectations and norms for black women, still remains locked in the notion of "black womanhood" that contains a hidden propensity to congeal the term into a fixed category and "to homogenize and essentialize black women" (McDowell 53). What emerges then is an unwitting collusion with the essentialist myths of "black macho" and "black matriarchy" that serve to explain black disadvantage and to compensate for the awful sense of powerlessness which afflicts African Americans by displacing their frustration at the whole matrix of racial discrimination, social marginality, and economic drawback into the world of sexual politics.<sup>9</sup> For instance, if *Tar Baby* is read as a fiction that reiterates the problematics of the 1960s and 1970s, it remains within a logic underlying the notorious Moynihan Report, officially titled *The Negro Family: The Case for National Action* (1965). Released in the wake of the Watts Riots in 1965, the Report put the accusing finger on the "matriarchal structure" (qtd. Rainwater 29) as a true root cause of the African American community's pathology, despondency, and deterioration, thereby fostering a myth to render black America's failings readily comprehensible. As a result, it becomes clear that a horde of investments in black women's identities are bound up with the issue of authentic black womanhood, particularly in connection with the prescription of

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9. See Hazel V. Carby's *Reconstructing Womanhood* (1989) and Michele Wallace's *Black Macho and the Myth of the Superwoman* (1976) for details.

racial uplift in the face of personal freedom.

Morrison thus should not be understood in *Tar Baby* as merely torn between promoting what comes to be recognized as authentic black female subjectivity and criticizing the male-centered ideologies that inevitably accompany the enactment of authentic womanhood, each of which corresponds to the continuing concerns of the 1960s and 1970s. Rather, she seeks to reflect on the choices that have become much more complex for the poster children for the post-Civil Rights era when the spirit of the movement has visibly eroded, the movement strategy of protest as a means of advancement was giving way to a less confrontational quest for achievement, and there seemed to be no longer any community unified by a euphoric sense of common mission. Morrison never valorizes either Son or Jadine over the other in *Tar Baby*, contending that the novel is "very unsettling" even to her "because everybody was sort of wrong" (Morrison, "Interview" [Jones and Vinson] 178).

### **"What I want *from* You" VS. "What I want *for* You"**

*Tar Baby* begins with Son's unwavering sense of safety and security ("He believed he was safe") and immediately defamiliarizes that sense through a series of contradictions and contentions, which make Son and Jadine "sort of wrong" as they are confronting an ever-bleaker future with fewer options to lead a viable life as post-Civil Rights children. In this regard, it is worth consideration to ask why Son is conspicuously presented as a figure supplemented by femaleness while he emerges as firmly grounded in black masculinity aligned with African American tradition and values in the early part of the novel, particularly when weighed against Jadine's cultural instability. The preface of the novel symbolically illustrates a birth process of Son, through which his safety is confirmed by "femaleness":

HE BELIVED he was safe. He stood at the railing of H.M.S. Stor Konigsgaarten and sucked in great gulps of air, his heart pounding in sweet expectation as he stared at the

harbor. Queen of France blushed a little in the lessening light and lowered her lashes before his gaze. Seven girlish white cruisers bobbed in the harbor but a mile or so down current was a deserted pier. . . . He took off his shoes and knotted the laces of each one through the belt hood of his pants. Then, after a leisurely look around, he ducked through the passageway and returned to the top deck. He swung one leg over the railing, hesitated and considered diving headfirst, but, trusting what his feet could tell him more than what his hands could, changed his mind and simply stepped away from the ship. The water was so soft and warm that it was up to his armpits before he realized he was in it. (3)

Son's safety is confirmed once he jumps ship, surrounded by femaleness. The island that he uses as his swimming marker is called "the queen of France" and this queen "blushed a little in the lessening light and lowered her lashes before his gaze." Furthermore, "seven girlish white cruisers bobbed in the harbor" and the hand of the sea is firm "like an insistent woman" (4), thereby presupposing a merger of safety and femaleness through the interrelation of water, a ship and a harbor. Interestingly, this merger meshes well with Morrison's remark in the interview with Wilson in which she suggests that black women should be both "the ship and the safe harbor." The safety-as-femaleness equation takes on its full force when Son encounters the sea, the "water-lady" who guides him to his destination. His struggling with female fluid helps one note that it is a birthing process as Morrison in an interview with Nellie McKay describes the novel's opening scene "as a birth" in which Son emerges out of the water as if "from a womb" (150). As Son recollects later in the novel, the opening evokes his metaphoric rebirth: "tired, weak and tired, as though he had swum seven seas for seven years only to arrive at the place he had started from: thirsty, barefoot and alone" (135-36). The mythic tone of the quoted passage implies that Son has returned to the world of femaleness and femaleness is not necessarily at odds with his

maleness. Rather, those seemingly incompatible categories of maleness and femaleness are revealed to be mutually constitutive. This recognition becomes significant, particularly given that Son's perpetual need "to hide, to look for cover" (136) is prominent on the island where he first appears chronically drifting as both an army renegade and a black male intruder.

The two lead characters' trip to Son's hometown Eloë in Florida is another instance in which one is compelled to reconfigure the contention between Son and Jadine beyond the simplistic divide of maleness and femaleness. Son's purpose to take Jadine to the all-black town is to make her recognize the nurturing aspects of home and fraternity and to "rescue" the cultural orphan who he thinks places great value on what she can own with her Sorbonne education and modeling career. Contrary to Son's expectation, Morrison, however, complicates the dichotomy of rootedness/rootlessness by juxtaposing Son's romanticized version of Eloë with a close-up revelation of it. In Eloë, Jadine immediately feels the constriction of the gender norms which demand separate male and female domains. The convincing representation of the moral values of the traditional community that forbid Son and Jadine to sleep in the same room because they are not married instantly backfires when Soldier, one of Son's hometown friend, tells Jadine that Son's now dead wife Cheyenne "had the best pussy in Florida the absolute best" (254): "Oh, yea, Son knows people. He just gets confused when it comes to women. With most everything else, he thinks with his heart. But when it comes to women he thinks with dick" (255).<sup>10</sup> All Soldier cares about the cohabitation of Jadine and Son is "[w]ho's controlling it?" (255). What Jadine feels suffocates her in Eloë is a hidden moral of "male control of female sexuality" (Duvall 111). As a result, Jadine feels herself reduced

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10. Son's propensity to reduce gender to a generic biological sign repeatedly draws our attention. For instance, Son, in Streets' mansion, once asks Jadine how much she has paid to get a modeling job. Almost ignoring Jadine asking back, "what are you talking about?" he continues his conjectures: "Dick. That you had to suck, I mean to get all that gold and be in the movies. Or was it pussy? I guess for model's it's more pussy than cock" (120).

to a generic biological sign of the "pussy" and comes to realize "a lie, a joke, kept secret by people who could not function elsewhere": "Eloe was rotten. . . . There was no life there. Maybe a past but definitely no future and finally there was no interest" (259).

In a nightmare she has in Eloe, Jadine encounters Son's dead wife, his dead mother, his dead mother-in-law, his aunt Rosa, and his sister Francine, Jadine's dead mother, her aunt Ondine, and Thérèse, who threat Jadine by thrusting their breasts to her. Jadine tries to retort, "I have breast, too" (258), but her protest futilely attests to her inability to recognize the dimensions of the familial past and cultural roots that could heal and affirm her sense of self. However, a twist is added here when Morrison implies that the authenticity model the "night women" represent also illustrate a major drawback. For example, Cheyenne, Son's dead wife, whom Son accidentally killed when catching her in bed with a thirteen-year-old boy, is known more for her sexual desire than for her nurturing ability; once a promising student and athlete, Francine has been placed in a mental institution; Ondine, who always stresses the importance of the nurturing role of women, is childless; Thérèse, whose "magic breast" nursed hundreds of white babies, ironically has none of her own, either.

Given all those limitations of Son's authenticity models he seeks to impose upon Jadine, what emerges from Son's failed attempt to "rescue" Jadine is that he is unwittingly put in an equally, if not more, dangerous cultural situation. In having a confrontation with Son back in New York City, Jadine faces up to him:

The truth is that while you were driving your car into your wife's bed I was being educated. While you were hiding from a small-town sheriff or some insurance company, hiding from a rap a two-bit lawyer could have gotten you out of, I was being educated, I was working, I was making something out of my life. I was learning how to make it in this world. The one we live in, not the one in your

head. Not that dump Eloë; *this* world. And the truth is I could not have done that without the help and care of some poor old white dude who thought I had brains enough to learning something! Stop loving your ignorance—it isn't lovable." (264)

Earlier Jadine impresses upon Son in a similar vein that he is victimized by his attempts to defy what is out of Black America as she tells him to "stop making excuses about not having anything. Not even your original dime. It's not romantic. And it's not free. It's dumb. You think you are above it. . . . But you're not above it, you're just without it" (171). In rejecting the terms of participation in the formal rites of being educated and having a job, Son is likely to be a cultural fugitive to the extent that Jadine becomes a cultural orphan who envisions a color-blind society in the post-Civil Rights days by clinging to the possibility that "I want to get out of my skin and be only the person inside—not American—not black—just me" (48). Undeniably, Jadine is "sort of wrong" in that she naively considers the "small, yet juicy piece of the expanding American pie" (West 36) gained by the struggles during the Civil Rights movement to be a sign of easy resolution of Du Boisian double-consciousness. Simultaneously, however, it is implied that Son cannot escape the fate "to hide, to look for cover" perpetually as a black male since his chronically drifting lifestyle as one of the "undocumented men" (166) is propelled less by his crime of murder or his status as a runaway soldier than by the haunting reality of what it means for him to conceive of a stable and viable identity in the post-integration era.

Interestingly, it is in this context that Son accuses Jadine of passing for white as he doubts the racial identity of Jadine who reveals her fear for his black sexuality: "Why you little *white* girls always think somebody's trying to rape you?" (121, emphasis added). Later he no longer refers to her as "white." When challenged by Jadine, Son in turn flattens her into a traditionally entrenched notion of black womanhood by asking her not to turn her "black brothers into white brothers" (270).

Alternately placing Jadine within various mythologies that mark her as white or black, Son appears to be maintaining his confidence in his own seemingly stable and proud identity as a black male. However, Son's identity is called into question little by little because he is so consumed with the assertion of being not white that he does not realize that his positionality is endangered by that assertion. For instance, when Son bristles at Jadine's insistence that he be educated in law by replying that "I don't want to know their law; I want to know mine" (263), Son's exclusionary logic is no less limited than Jadine's belief that she is ensconced in a fully integrated society where she believe she can "make it."

When Jadine returns to the island to retrieve her things after the confrontation with Son in New York City, she and her aunt Ondine dispute as to what it means to be a "woman." Ondine maintains that Jadine should be a daughter first to be a good woman. It is though this position, according to Ondine, that a woman learns how to become "good enough for a child; good enough for a man—good enough for the respect of other women" (281). In prescribing gender norms in that increasing order of abstraction—individual, familial, communal—that are circumscribed as "proper," one woman is seeking to indicate a danger of being entirely self-reliant, wholly focused on being contemporary, and losing cultural connection to the other who wants to make choices for her life on her own terms. Ondine attempts to persuade Jadine to realize how much she cares for her protégé without any intention to turn to her niece in return for her guardianship: "What I want *from* you is what I want *for* you. I don't want you to care about me for my sake. I want you to care about me for yours" (281, emphasis added). Nonetheless, Ondine's admonition actually verges on discrediting itself because her yearning to mold Jadine as a "good" woman is not much different from Son's furtive desire to define Jadine on his own terms, thereby evidencing the disturbing incompatibility of "what I want from you" and "what I want for you."

Given the divergence of "what I want from you" and "what I want for you" that stands out in the contentiousness among

the characters, the racial passing Son calls forth by alternately marking Jadine either black or white is not racial passing *per se* in the sense that Jadine knows how to perform for whites instead of merely identifying with them and consciously chooses a performative identity over an alternative subjectivity: "She needed only to be stunning, and to convince them she was not as smart as they were" (126). Son either taunts Jadine's "passing" into white privilege or molds her into his notion of authentic black womanhood, but he ironically has to don the mask of dominance to unmask Jadine's inauthenticity as a black female and, by the same token, to mask his own vulnerability as a black male. Likewise, Jadine scoffs at Son's romantic attachment to his backward hometown and his models of authenticity while troubled by the feelings of inauthenticity, rootlessness, and a sense of being out of her "appropriate" place. In this sense, the post-Civil Rights era represented in *Tar Baby* is staged as "an age of masquerade" where each character alternately dons and doffs his or her masks, never bridging the chasm between "what I want from you" and "what I want for you." It is precisely in this context that Morrison's comment in an interview that "everybody was sort of wrong" (or "everybody was coerced to be wrong" as I may paraphrase it in accordance with my arguments so far) strikes a resonant ring throughout the text and captures post-Civil Rights anxieties.

### **An Age of Masquerade: Relocating the Tar Baby Folktale**

O Land and Soil, red soil and sweet-gum tree,  
 So scant of grass, so profligate of pines  
 Now just before an epoch's sun declines  
 Thy son, in time, I have returned to thee,  
 Thy son, I have in time returned to thee.

—"Song of the Son," Jean Toomer

A close examination of the deployment of the tar baby story



in *Tar Baby* brings into sharp relief the masquerade set on the stage of the post-Civil Rights era where each character dons and doffs his or her masks, and offers compelling evidences for complicated readings of the folktale that range from a retelling of the story to the inscription of prehistories of the movement from the antebellum South. Son's accusation of Jadine's passing for white takes place as a response to Jadine's threat to Son when she struggles to break free from his tight hold on her as they are alone in her bedroom. An intimation of rape resurfaces in relatively overlooked passages later in the novel, where a question arises—if Son actually rapes or at least physically abuses Jadine. Duvall's contribution to the scholarship on the novel serves here as a case in point to answer the question.<sup>11</sup> Tearing "open his shirt," Son begins the first measure of his orchestration of the story, "'I got a story for you'" (270). When he leaves Jadine's bedroom after his tirade, she is left behind completely at a loss "in wrinkled sheets, slippery, gutted, not thinking of killing him" (271). As he is back to Jadine several hours later, Son appears to be "repentant, terrified that he had gone too far" (271). Subsequently he is "ashamed" of "her nakedness" that he has "produced" and "soiled" (272). Duvall in his ingenious analysis of the scene compels one to consider why Morrison represents the rape in such a way that it is "rhetorically constructed to deny the reader's awareness of the violence" (332). Building upon Duvall's insight, I would like to use the disclosure of sexual violence to examine how it is intertwined with the tar baby story Son addresses here and how the merger of them subtly captures the environment which cradles the post-Civil Rights anxieties.

The tar baby story within the African American trickster folktale tradition is a product of an expansive historical, geographical, and cultural framework encompassing more than

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11. My reading of Morrison's intimation of rape of Jadine by Son in this part of the novel (270-72) is greatly indebted to Duvall's brilliant analysis. See Duvall, especially 332-35.

12. For a study of the tar baby story's transformation in *Tar Baby*, see Harris, especially 116-38.

100 versions and dating back about 2000 years.<sup>12</sup> The folktale as popularly known in the United States relates Brer Rabbit's entrapment by a sticky tar or wax figure strategically placed by a farmer (or another animal, usually a fox, in some versions). The farmer in this way seeks to entrap the animal that continually trespasses onto his farmland to eat his produce. Seeing the tar figure and upset that he will not converse with it, Brer Rabbit hits it only to find himself stuck to the tar baby. The tale turns in the rabbit's favor when he extricates himself from the predicament by begging his captor not to throw him into the briar patch as a punishment, while actually prompting him to do it because rabbits are at home in thickets. In Son's version of this African American story of trickery, entrapment, and escape, Jadine is the dressed up tar baby fashioned by the white farmer and Son the rabbit entrapped in the white farmer's briar patch. No wonder that it is implied from this picture that the white farmer in Son's story is Valerian Street who has supported Jadine in terms of financing her way through college and cheering for her pursuit of modeling career, and kept his eyes shut to Son's stay in his mansion earlier in the novel despite all the other residents' disapproval of it. As a result, Son's charge against Jadine who is molded by the white man and entraps him is understandable.

On the other hand, focusing solely on the entrapment aspect of the story rather than the escape, Son misses the creative power of the trickster story which served for slaves as a strategy of survival in a hostile environment. If the liberating potential of the story lies in the possibility of reversing the trickster-dupe roles and turning an unfavorable situation into a way out, Son's clinging to the entrapment aspect of the story should be understood as quite an intentional move. In other words, if it is because Son is troubled by Jadine's aberration from his mold he tries to impose upon her (even through sexual violence) that he accuses her of being like the tar baby, the very subjectivity he seeks to project onto her is also a tar baby trap for Jadine. Consequently, he is deeply involved in the mean trickery game, ironically, as another tar baby while he is privileging himself as

an outsider from the vantage point of blaming the tar baby.

Son's inextricable complicity in the trickery takes on added meanings, given that the tar baby story entered popular American culture notably featuring a female tar baby in "The Wonderful Tar Baby Story" with the 1880 publication of a collection of folktale under the title of *Uncle Remus: His Songs and His Saying* by white southern journalist Joel Chandler Harris.<sup>13</sup> If Son's implication in the story is linked to its appropriation by a white male literary tradition, it is revealed that he can conceive of the tar baby story only through the configuration of the black female who entraps a black male like himself and is herself entrapped by a white man. Accordingly, even as he views himself as being outside the trickery game, his outsider position is ironically conditioned by the white man's authority, which reminds one of the framing of slave narratives in the 19th century—a number of slave narratives were often accompanied by documents (mostly in the form of prefaces written by white anti-slavery activists or journalists) attesting to the authenticity of the writer to refute the deep-seated stereotypes of a illiterate black person with rudimentary capacity for intellection. As those prefaces supplement slave narrative writers' authorship with a different kind of authority and signal the difficulty with which racial others constitute themselves through the repudiation of otherness, the very limitation of Son's version of tar baby story draws attention to intriguing parallels between the post-Civil Rights era and the postbellum South—the heartbreaking realization that things have not changed as much as African Americans expect after the civil rights struggles as Morrison remarks ominously at the beginning of the 1965 section of *Sula*: "Things were so much

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13. Walt Disney's 1946 *Song of the South*, a film based upon Harris's work, also affected American popular culture's reception of the tar baby story.

14. Needless to say, the year 1965 indicates the year when the Voting Rights Act was passed, following the 1964 Civil Rights Act. Not accidentally, *Sula* begins with the well-know "nigger joke" revolving around the meaning of a place called "the Bottom," which illustrates the arbitrariness of the meaning readily appropriated in privileging the person in power.

better in 1965. Or so it seemed" (163).<sup>14</sup> Likewise, the post-Civil Rights children may be still stuck in the "circles of sorrow" (Sula 174).

The parallel between the age that cradles the post-Civil Rights children and a prehistory of the movement in the postbellum America adds another twist to Son's version of tar baby story by placing *Tar Baby* in a reconfigured setting. Each character assumes roles that have changed little from the plantation past even though "it seemed" that "things were so much better" in the post-Civil Rights era. Valerian Street emerges as a wealthy white plantation master (it is not a mere coincidence that he is a retired candy magnate, which conjures up the image of sugarcanes deeply associated with the plantation past of the South). The Streets rely on the service of the "house negro" couple, Sydney and Ondine, and the two "field negroes," Thérèse and Gideon who do more physical and menial work from time to time. The plantation master need not discipline the slaves-now-servants any more. Son in turn becomes a black runaway slave in the myths of the plantation South.

In this newly configured setting, the question of why Morrison deliberately withholds tangible proof that would enables reader to arrive at a definite conclusion concerning Son's rape of Jadine is brought to bear upon the white rape complex and lynching frenzy of post-Reconstruction America. Eric Sundquist poses a provoking suggestion in this regard that the issue of black male rape is actually the product of white male America's response to the threat that a politically empowered black male posed to a white body politics: "rape was the mask behind which disenfranchisement was hidden, but it was part of the larger charade of plantation mythology that set out to restore Southern pride and revive a paradigm of white manliness that the legacy of the war and the economic and political rise of blacks during Reconstruction had called seriously into question" (425).

If the myth of black male rape arises from the post-Reconstruction South's attempt to disempower and emasculate

the freed slaves, then, this notion of rape as a kind of mask for white male America complicates my assertion that Son uses rape as an attempt to secure his outsider position in narrating his tar baby story. To put it otherwise, the very fact that the occurrence or at least some possibility of rape emerges as a form of masking the black male character's vulnerability is complicated by the suggestion that the notion of black male rape takes hold in the American psyche as an attempt to mask white male anxiety. Therefore, the complex nature of rape embedded within the Son's version of tar baby story bespeaks a complicated masquerade in which Son's masking is easily reversed—Son as another tar baby and his inextricable ties to the white farmer. It undercuts Son's perspicuity as the storyteller.

### **Post-Civil Rights Children Running Lickety-Split**

When Jadine has left Dominique for her white lover in Paris after deciding to break up with him, Son, one step behind in the Island, is seen running "lickety-split" and, in a reenactment of the opening of the novel, reborn in the image of a baby learning to walk:

First he crawled the rocks one by one, one by one, till his hands touched shore and the nursing sound of the sea was behind him. He felt around, crawled off and then stood up. Breathing heavily with his mouth open he took a few tentative steps. The pebbles made him stumble and so did the roots of trees. He threw out his hands to guide and steady his going. By and by he walked steadier, now steadier. The mist lifted and the trees stepped back a bit as if to make the way easier for a certain kind of man. Then he ran. Lickety-split. Lickety-split. Looking neither to the left nor to the right. Lickety-split. Lickety-split. Licket-lickety-lickety-split" (306)

Is Son again becoming a Brer Rabbit going back to his briar

patch without recognizing the possibility of practicing transgression inherent in the tar baby story? Is he really struggling with the message his encounter with Jadine has left for him (or a lesson, if any, he learned from his experience with Jadine)? Just as the novel ends without advocating an alternative black female subjectivity for Jadine, it does not seem to provide any vision to Son that could lead to a clear mandate for a future.

What arises from such a bleak outlook on the future is the question of "where do we go from here," which Martin Luther King, Jr. used as the title for his last book. That question calls forth the time when African Americans were actually facing a sorry choice in the 1980 presidential election. Jimmy Carter asked for their support on the basis of his many black federal appointments, but avoided committing his administration to alleviating the economic plight of depressed blacks or to pressing for an end to residential or school segregation. The Republican nominee, Ronald Reagan as a Barry Goldwater enthusiast, made clear his continued opposition to racial integration in the schools, to affirmative action, and to the varied government programs designed to aid the poor and the unemployed.<sup>15</sup> *Tar Baby* neither references such historical events nor offers any political milestones. It instead makes apprehensions and anxieties, which the post-Civil Rights children cannot choose but feel in the post-integration era, palpable without directly claiming historical referentiality. One may be perplexed by this "historical" novel that is set in such a significant era and yet seemingly ignores "real" history or "what

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15. Reagan established his place in the US political landscape most notably through his opposition to the 1964 Civil Rights Act and his tough stance toward the rioters in Watts. Barry Goldwater (1909-1998) called "Mr. Conservative" was a five-term Senator from Arizona. His supporters also rallied behind Reagan particularly when he became Governor of California in 1967 and President in 1981. Goldwater's influence on Reagan's political viewpoints is well exemplified by Reagan's efforts to turn back the clock on racial matters during his terms of office such as his attempts to restore federal tax exemptions to private schools that practiced racial discrimination, (which was blocked by the Supreme Court in 1983), to elevate the ultra-conservative William Rehnquist to Chief Justice and to replace retiring liberal-moderate justices with conservatives.

really happened." Furthermore, one may ask why Morrison, who is ostensibly engrossed in writing historical novels and reshaping historical memory, seems to be deliberately "anti-historical" (of course, not ahistorical) in her approach to history. However, it is this typical Morrisonian method that provides a valuable framework for understanding the choices Morrison has subsequently made regarding her own historical reconstruction—the method that enables her to render represented what is "unspeakable" and what is "unspoken" (à la Morrison's acclaimed essay, "Unspeakable Things Unspoken: The Afro-American Presence in American Literature"), particularly in her historical trilogy, *Beloved* (1987), *Jazz* (1992), and *Paradise* (1998). For instance, Morrison contends that she in *Jazz* seeks "to tell a very simple story about people who do not know that they are living in the jazz age, and to never use the word" (Morrison, "Toni Morrison: The Art of Fiction" 117).

My reading of *Tar Baby* as a post-Civil Rights fiction in this article thus does not necessarily privilege the "post" by pointing to a movement beyond a specific point as the prefix may signal. Neither burdened by the past nor eulogizing the past in a nostalgic overtone, it never asserts the obsolescence of the movement as what is left behind. Accordingly, my reading has to do not with the "post" *per se*, but rather with the characters' specific attitudes to the "post" that shed light on some relatively ignored aspects of the novel. In sum, *Tar Baby* narrativizes a "past" and a "post" of the movement in the manner of palimpsest that can both revitalize the present moment and call forth a future while the novel is consistently skeptical of the notion of a movement "beyond." Such a paradox—both desirous of a movement "beyond" and dismissive of it—is at the heart of the post-Civil Rights fiction.

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Abstract

To Hope against Hope: post-Civil  
Rights Children  
Running Lickety-Split in Toni  
Morrison's *Tar Baby*

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Given the trajectory of Toni Morrison's life-long interest in the Civil Rights movement and its persistent impact on her work, this article aims at reconsidering Morrison's *Tar Baby* (1981) by relocating it as a post-Civil Rights fiction. With a focus on the range of critical concerns it is most likely to demonstrate about the existing scholarship on the novel, this article tackles the critical problems predicated upon the question of how and why I read the novel as a post-Civil Rights fiction and provides compelling entries into the issues which the act of relocating brings to light.

While polarized over the issue of how to form a viable black identity around 1980, Son and Jadine, the two leads on the central stage of *Tar Baby*, stand in for post-Civil Rights children faced with a set of new challenges, possibilities, and choices that are not grasped any more under the rubric of male/female, separatist/integrationist, and communal/individual divides when the Civil Rights movement has visibly eroded, the

movement strategy of protest as a means of advancement is giving way to a less confrontational quest for achievement, and there seems to be no longer any community unified by a euphoric sense of common mission. This post-integration and pre-Reagan era is staged for a masquerade in which each character is compelled to don and doff his or her masks alternately by learning to choose a performative identity over an alternative subjectivity as the reconfiguration of the tar baby folk tale well demonstrates.

Hardly providing any vision that can lead to a clear mandate for a future, *Tar Baby* thus does not necessarily privilege the "post" by pointing to a movement beyond a specific point as the prefix may signal. Rather, it narrativizes a past and a "post" of the movement in the manner of palimpsest that can both revitalize the present moment and call forth a future while the novel is consistently skeptical of the notion of a movement "beyond." Such a paradox—both desirous of a movement "beyond" and dismissive of it—is at the heart of the anxieties the post-Civil Rights children cannot choose but feel.

Key words: Toni Morrison, *Tar Baby*, post-Civil Rights, post-integration, performative, masquerade, pre-Reagan

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