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”Let loose the dogs”: Messiness and Ethical Wrangling in Toni Morrison’s *Tar Baby*

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Abstract

This paper metatextually explores Toni Morrison’s 1981 *Tar Baby* and its female protagonist – a black model named Jadine Childs – by way of the text’s correlation with the Supermodel Phenomenon of the late 1970s and the early ’80s alongside social and political issues related to notions of post civil rights era racial arrival, success, and “selling out.” This argument draws a correlation between the experiences of the fictional Jadine and the internationally renowned supermodel Iman Abdulmajid whose career began in 1975. While this parallel is central to this essay’s execution, this article’s trajectory is informed and complicated by situating the character of Jadine in terms of historical research regarding the rise of the Supermodel Phenomenon and by way of reading the novel in the context of Black Pragmatism. Jadine confronts not only the tensions and expectation of the modeling world, but also the frictions between this professional realm and her black womanhood. These pressures are stressed in her relationships with her black radicalist lover, Son, her aunt Ondine, and the “woman in yellow” whom Jadine encounters in a Parisian supra market. By placing a black model in conversation with questions of authenticity and ancestry circulating in the post civil-rights era 1970’s and ‘80s America, Morrison leads her readers to question what it means to be truly “modern” or “fully integrated” and, contrarily, what it means to “sell out.” In its interrogation of racial arrival, this article suggests that this notion is not as definitive as Jadine has been taught to believe. Jadine’s final decision to pursue the possibility of a “fourth option” in Europe is, perhaps, a means of cultural re-approachment as opposed to a move toward “selling out.”

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“Let Loose the Dogs”: Messiness and Ethical Wrangling in Toni Morrison's *Tar Baby*

Faith M. Avery

As Toni Morrison's 1981 novel, *Tar Baby*, draws to a close and the tension between the central characters, Jadine and Son, reaches its peak, the omniscient narration voices the questions that Morrison's readers have been grappling with since the novel's opening pages: "One had a past, the other a future and each one bore the culture to save the race in his hands. Mama-spoiled black man, will you mature with me? Culture bearing black woman, whose culture are you bearing?" (269). Much of the initial critical conversation concerning *Tar Baby* revolves around efforts to determine where the reader's sentiments should lie. Are we to sympathize with Son, a sensitive man deeply attuned to his "ancient properties," whose concern with black folk values, community, and ancestral heritage are primary to his personal identity?¹ Or, are we to invest in Jadine, the highly educated black model—the epitome of colonized beauty—who all but rejects her heritage and ancestry as incompatible with the fast-paced, modern, lifestyle that she associates with success? The conflicting forces at work within *Tar Baby* are, indeed, complex and frustrating. The novel's conclusion—in which Jadine returns to Paris, ostensibly to resume her glamorous lifestyle while Son runs, "lickety-split," away with the mythic blind and naked horsemen on the Isle des Chevaliers—provides no definitive answers (306). The fates of Son and Jadine do not satisfy the desire for a final statement about the possibility (or lack thereof) for reconciliation between modern expectations of Western "sophistication" and black cultural tradition. However, the call for a clear resolution to the novel is reductive. Toni Morrison's postmodern technique is such that it never resolves.² Rather, she consistently pushes her reader toward further ethical wrangling, insisting upon the reader's obligation to struggle with the moral issues at

hand.³ With this in mind, Jadine may not only be read as exemplary of the challenges to black identity in a post civil rights moment of racial “arrival”—in which civil rights such as equity and equality in the work force, education, etc. are advertised and celebrated as having been completely attained—but she also allows Morrison to confront notions of racial “selling out” that have been historically, and still remain, prominent within the African American community. It seems as though Jadine’s final departure to Europe indicates a choice of selfishness and therein racial betrayal. However, selfishness is valenced throughout the novel in such a way that it requires Jadine and Morrison’s readers to question whether selfishness in the name of autonomous selfhood is, in fact, synonymous with “selling out.” This disorienting contradiction allows Morrison to direct both Jadine’s and her reader’s continued ethical examination toward issues of racial and cultural re-approachment as opposed to reading Jadine’s departure to Europe as definitive racial betrayal.

Randall Kennedy closely explores the notion of the “sellout” in contemporary Black America. He not only examines what it means to sell out, but also challenges common accusations of doing so in the name of achievement in the late twentieth century. Certain occupations, and certain requirements of some occupations, prompt accusations of selling out (64). Perhaps the greatest problem with the use of sellout rhetoric “involves determining what constitutes the best interest of blacks and the best means for achieving controversial goals” (72). Thus, in some situations, allegations of selling out are less than clearly defined. Taking care to note that “Sellout rhetoric and its concomitant attitudes, gestures, and strategies can prompt excessive self-censorship, truncate needed debate, and nurture demagoguery,” Kennedy calls for the maintenance of a black solidarity that regulates sellout rhetoric in such a way that stimulates a certain thoughtful consideration of racial betrayal (84). In *Tar Baby* Morrison signals a similar ethical dilemma, refusing to position Jadine definitively as a sellout. Rather, she leaves both Jadine and her reader to struggle with the stakes of late twentieth century achievement in a way that would not have been necessary had Jadine’s final “choice” between Western success and cultural heritage been made indisputably clear. While the occupations that Kennedy notes are primarily connected to the law and criminal justice, the requirements of Jadine’s career as a supermodel incite similar accusations of selling out, particularly in the 1970s and ‘80s, a moment of alleged post civil rights era arrival.

While this article does not aim to take a dichotomous position in regards to whether or not Jadine is ultimately a sellout, it examines Morrison’s complication of the notion itself in such a way that demands recognition of the ethical dilemma of Jadine’s condition. In order to do this, I will elaborate upon two of *Tar Baby*’s historical impulses—the high fashion industry and the post civil rights era notions of arrival and black pragmatism—and I will turn to the novel itself in exploration of Jadine’s figurative position as a cultural orphan. The incorporation of a pragmatic lens illustrates the ways in which post civil rights racial arrival is much more fraught than the term suggests, positioning arrival as a privilege that has not been uniformly awarded. I will proceed to elaborate upon the situation of the 1980s “Supermodel Phenomenon” in which Jadine is immersed, articulating the ways in which this industry’s ideals and expectations refuse the African American woman a condition of

arrival. Finally, a turn to Jadine's position as a cultural orphan brings to light the fraught nature of cultural and racial heritage within the text. Before delving into these analyses, though, it is crucial to position the present argument in terms of ongoing critical conversation, particularly the critics who call for a more definitive, or complete, ending to the novel as well as perspectives that challenge these dichotomous tendencies.

In his oft referenced article, "The Quest for Wholeness in Toni Morrison's *Tar Baby*," James Coleman posits that *Tar Baby* indicates "an ending that shows clearly what the possibilities are for this twentieth-century Black man burdened with Black cultural tradition and this twentieth-century Black woman who has reverted to negative white Western values" (69). The broad treatment of the possibilities of community and folk values in Morrison's fourth novel holds the potential to uncover frightening and provocative implications regarding the intersection of black folk values and white, Western sophistication (72). Coleman articulates the two possible endings that readers, and critics, entertain throughout the novel. The first is the suggestion of "the possibility that Black writers must break the mold of Black novels that show Black characters successfully integrating and living by clearly defined Black folk values in the context of a white world" (72). The second is that "Black people must become increasingly sophisticated, in the white Western sense, and not exhibit perceptible Black folk values, as Son does" (72). Because Morrison's conclusion does not definitively push either of these implications, Coleman ultimately deems *Tar Baby* a "failure" (72). His article, published just five years after the novel's publication, is symptomatic of the contemporary attitude of racial arrival and, as such, does not so much complicate Morrison's text, but exacerbates and extends the seemingly binaristic struggle. While Coleman is correct that neither articulated outcome is fully realized within the text, what he and other early critics of *Tar Baby* have neglected to explore are the ways in which Morrison positions both as incompatible with Jadine's condition, a condition that serves as an allegory for the exploration of post civil rights possibility.

In a more generous attempt to "periodize" Toni Morrison's writing, Malin Walther Pereira positions *Tar Baby* as a pivotal moment in Morrison's career. This suggestion not only distinguishes the figure of Jadine from the African American women of Morrison's previous novels, but also contextualizes the novel's central conflict within the rest of Morrison's oeuvre. Pereira emphasizes Morrison's emergence as a writer during the Black Arts Movement (1964-74), arguing that, beginning with *The Bluest Eye*'s focus upon the "colonizing effects of white female beauty on a black girl and her community," Morrison's writing speaks directly to the Black Arts Movement's concern with "decolonizing the black psyche" (73). Whereas, in previous novels, Morrison depicts black women characters as overwhelmed by white beauty ideals, "an obsession with a standard of white female beauty that, in turn, renders black women and girls invisible," *Tar Baby*'s Jadine does not so much have to "put on" beauty (74). Rather, her beauty fits naturally into these ideals. As if to echo Son's observation that "Nothing's priceless. Everything has a price," Pereira suggests that "Jadine represents the cultural costs to the African American community of blacks who identify with white culture to the extent that they reject their own.

Jadine is not absorbed only by white culture's definition of beauty, she fully identifies with European cultural values about art, nature, family, and money" (Morrison 117, Pereira 75). However, Pereira also suggests that "Unlike the previous three female characters [(in reference to Pecola, Nel, and Hagar)], who are hurt by, struggle with, and ultimately succumb to internalized views of beauty, Jadine is thoroughly happy with a definition of beauty based upon white standards, because she fits it" (75). Pereira neglects to acknowledge that, although Jadine is not troubled by enforced white standards of beauty or an inability to conform, she is confronted by the external social and political conflicts that her easy conformity incites, particularly in a post civil rights moment of racial arrival. As I will demonstrate in the final portion of this analysis, Jadine's conformity is, in part, driven by her situation as a literal and cultural orphan. As such, her success becomes not simply a situation of self-aggrandizement, but a mechanism for survival in the modern world. Furthermore, Morrison's choice to position Jadine as a highly educated and successful black model imbues her character with a distinct set of tensions. Unlike both Coleman and Pereira propose, Jadine must not only choose whether or not to embrace her cultural heritage but must also consider the impact that such a choice would have upon her chosen career and success therein.

For Morrison to suggest a clear resolution to Jadine's personal struggle would be to imply a clean reconciliation between modernity, black womanhood, and cultural heritage—a point of resolution that has not been articulated in Morrison's previous novels and is not present in the contemporary cultural condition of the late 1970s and early '80s. Rather than remaining with Son on the Isle des Chevaliers, Jadine departs the fictional island to return to Paris where she will attempt to "forget the man who fucked like a star" yet realizes that she must still "tangle with the woman in yellow—with her and with all the night women who had *looked* at her," effectively extending her grappling with the social and political tensions that they symbolize (Morrison 292, 290 italics original). The conclusion that Jadine has chosen to disavow her "ancient properties" and all that Son stands for is not only too simple, but inaccurate. Although she ultimately rejects Son and the notions of black radicalism for which he stands, Jadine does not return to Paris unchanged. She recognizes that even in resuming her position of privilege and conformity to white standards of beauty she must still "tangle" with the woman in yellow and the night women and, by extension, the frictions between modernity, cultural heritage, and black womanhood that they represent. Though her apparent rejection of her "ancient properties" causes some to read Jadine as a sellout, her return to Europe suggests a cultural re-approachment that is not available to her in the United States or the transitive space of the Isle des Chevaliers.

Pragmatism and Post Civil Rights Era "Messiness"

Engaging the character of Jadine via a pragmatic lens provides a useful means of contextualizing her social and internal conflicts and the multiplying nature of her "stuckness," her unresolving state of liminality and struggle. A pragmatic approach requires us to ask whether the reliance upon lineage that Son proposes can, in fact,

be a solution to Jadine's modern frustrations of identity or whether she represents the epitome of "soullessness." As a vessel for such investigation she becomes less of a coherent personality and more of an allegory for the exploration of post civil rights era possibility.

Eddie Glaude's *In a Shade of Blue: Pragmatism and the Politics of Black America* applies a pragmatic lens to African American politics in an effort to dislodge biased and simplistic perspectives of African American life.⁴ Glaude aims to instill a thinking that appreciates the complexity and intricacy of black life and focuses on the potential of the future. He observes that the period of history following the civil rights era, essentially 1970 to the present, is often treated as a period of arrival. This 2007 text notes, among other signs of racial progress, "a rapid expansion of the black middle class, the emergence of African American CEOs of Fortune 500 companies... [and] an African American woman as president of an Ivy League institution," all of which lead some to argue that we no longer "need to retreat to racial enclaves for comfort and security" or "appeal to race in matters of politics" (128). However, these signs of "progress" stand alongside an expansion of the black "underclass" and the chronic ills of poverty which leads others to suggest that we cannot afford to ignore race in political matters "because America remains fundamentally shaped by white supremacy" (128).⁵ While these issues are distinct to a significantly more contemporary political climate than the 1980s of *Tar Baby*, they are nonetheless symptomatic of the post civil rights era "messiness" from which the figure of Jadine emerges. In the socio-political climate of 1970s and '80s America, Jadine, as a well-educated, successful, black model, would have been—like the Fortune 500 CEO—an emblem of arrival and racial achievement. Unlike the CEO, however, her public conformity to white supremacist notions of beauty would have been received—and is received, most obviously by Son—as an unproductive and regressive compromise, a selling out. Glaude's observations highlight the crux of Jadine's dilemma. Although her success is essentially valuable, the rhetoric of post civil rights era arrival requires that this success come without cultural and racial sacrifice. Contrarily, the expectations of the modeling industry indicate that this is a space in which the African American has yet to arrive at a moment of equity with white colleagues. By placing this friction at the center of her text Morrison challenges definite notions of what selling out does or should look like.

Glaude's explication of a "post-soul politics" is useful in contextualizing Jadine's particular situation and the racial and cultural conflicts she is faced with. The "post-soul generation" began with those who were born after the 1964 Civil Rights Act and the 1965 Voting Rights Act, coming of age during the Reagan administration, and was marked by "many African Americans"[sic] experiencing unprecedented inclusion in American society, which altered the nature of their political commitments and actions, and by heightening levels of poverty and unimaginable violence" (132). This caused concerns to shift away from issues directly pertaining to segregation and essential notions of blackness toward those immediately relevant to post civil rights modernity. Post-soul politics strain to come to reconciliation with the legacy of the civil rights movement and the black power era, a conflict that is especially visible in *Tar Baby* and principally manifest with the choices with which

Jadine struggles.

Another aim of *In Shades of Blue* that proves particularly enlightening when parsing the figure of Jadine is Glaude's call for young African Americans to become active in "defining the contours of a post-soul politics without succumbing to the temptation of nostalgic longing for a past period of black political action... to identify an emergent public, and to confront directly the social needs and opportunities it presents" (132). Glaude's description of a forward moving African American politics correlates with Morrison's decision to leave the conclusion of *Tar Baby* unresolved. Son, the symbol of a fixed and determined black radicalism, runs with the blind and naked horsemen into the realm of diasporan myth. On the other hand, both Jadine and the reader are left to struggle with the legacy of black radicalism and to work through what it means to move "forward" in the opportunities available to a woman who has already attained a measure of "success" in a society predicated upon white supremacy. Jadine's position as a black woman imbues her with a certain traditional obligation as "culture bearer" ("Culture bearing black woman, whose culture are you bearing?"), even as this same femaleness puts her at a disadvantage in a culture that is not only white supremacist but patriarchal as well.

Before the civil rights movement, Jadine would have been received by the African American collectivity as a valued instance of racial advancement. Jadine's rise in fame and class would have been perceived as good for the progress of the African American community. It would have been understood that, in order to succeed, she had no choice but to compromise her racial authenticity. However, Jadine's situation in the post civil rights era of arrival complicates her success. The climate of post-soul politics requires Morrison's readers to regard Jadine as a crystallization of the notion that black success became a much more combustible concept at this historical moment. In the absence of the civil rights movement, her situation is no longer an unquestionable indication of forward motion for the race as a whole, but an instance of *individual* achievement. This requires us to ask what we make of individual success in the absence of the civil rights movement. To what extent does Jadine's *choice* to conform to white standards of beauty and to reject the heritage and black radicalism that Son represents indicate racial regression? Jadine, whose education and class status would have facilitated her advancement in other areas in which African American women had begun to succeed, chooses to embrace these standards of beauty within the industries of fashion and modeling. Without the narrative of racial advancement, the post civil rights era and post-soul political "messiness" obscures the ability to judge whether Jadine's attempt to succeed in a space that requires suppressions and conformities of racial identity is beneficial or regressive. The narrative of post civil rights arrival glosses over the still relevant question of who is allowed to succeed in spaces such as the modeling industry. It simplifies the ongoing conflict inherent in Jadine's character. Consequently, it is crucial to recognize that Morrison's choice to situate Jadine as a well-educated, upper-class black woman active in the industries of fashion and modeling necessitates an examination of the expectations, restrictions, and standards of conformity that were inflicted upon models, especially those who do not inherently meet white expectations of beauty.

The 1980s “Supermodel Phenomenon” and Jadine as Black Model

Central to the analysis of Jadine’s character is her situation as a black model at this particular historical moment. In a comparison of Jadine and Helga, the black teacher turned model central to Nella Larsen’s *Quicksand*, Ann Rayson likens their experiences as African American models in Europe to that of Josephine Baker, the “Bronze Venus,” who “Symbolized the mythical black American in Europe... creating the exotic primitive Paris was ready for in the 1920s” (Rayson 87). According to Rayson, the Europeans in both of the aforementioned novels want to see Jadine and Helga in the same way that the Europeans of the 1920s saw Josephine Baker—as “rare exotics” (88). While this comparison is believable, there are seventy years of cultural evolution between Josephine Baker and Jadine Childs. In *Second Skin* Anne Cheng notes that Baker represents “the first time that black skin is, and can be, glamorized” (110). Consequently, Baker symbolizes a racial “first,” a visible and public achievement toward racial advancement. Even as Baker’s success is an instance of racial advancement, accepted as good for the collective regardless of its problematic elements, Baker challenged the expectations of white supremacist beauty ideals from within their own constraints. Although she was undeniably exoticized, she took on popular notions of “abject darkness” by legitimizing the glamorization of black skin. Thus, Josephine Baker solidified her position as a symbol of racial advancement amidst the struggle for civil rights, exceeding the expectations of black success by resisting white defined beauty, even while working within its confines.

In the era of post-soul politics following the civil rights era, the figure of Jadine cannot represent the same communal successes as Josephine Baker. Unlike Baker who was valued for her rareness and originality, Jadine begins her modeling career in the 1980s during a period known as the “Supermodel Phenomenon.” This cultural event brought with it heightened expectations and tensions surrounding the figure of the model, particularly those bodies that do not precisely meet standards of white beauty. Consequently, Jadine faces a very different set of expectations, ideals, and challenges. By successfully conforming to said ideals as opposed to resisting or rejecting them, Jadine’s success becomes suspect in the eyes of an African American public that believes itself to have reached a moment of achievement in which such conformities no longer seem to serve a larger purpose. As Glaude points out, this way of thinking is overly simplistic and ignores the multiplicities and intricacies, or the “messiness,” of post civil rights era black life.

While Jadine’s situation is not entirely disparate from that of Josephine Baker, it is illuminating to examine the experiences of a more contemporary figure such as Iman Abdulmajid. Speaking to the *New York Times*, Iman describes her arrival in the United States from Kenya in 1975. At 19, Iman, the daughter of a Somali diplomat, was a college student majoring in political science. She was fluent in five languages (Agins). In her autobiography Iman recalls that, shortly after her “discovery” by photographer Peter Beard, the *New York Post* fashion writer Eugenia Sheppard wrote an article claiming that “[Iman] was discovered in the wilds of the jungle herding cattle, that she didn’t speak a word of English and that she was six feet tall—half of which was neck” (Reproduced in “Intimate Iman”). Iman is uncomfortable with this, noting that her “silence made [her] an accomplice” to the “African Princess-

Jungle Bunny myth” (Reproduced in “Intimate Iman”). Although white magazines portrayed her as “exotic,” Iman recalls that black magazines considered her not “ethnic” enough. Within the African American community, it was not uncommon to be rejected as a “model, chosen and anointed by the White fashion elite” and to be met with undisguised comments about how she “[looked] like a White woman” or “[didn’t] look African” (Reproduced in “Intimate Iman”). Iman’s struggles correlate with the sentiments of the post-soul era during which her career began. The climate and beauty ideals within the white modeling industry demanded that she perform an exoticized version of blackness in order to succeed. In this post civil rights moment of arrival in which the African American community had begun to valorize authenticity over the demands of individual successes, Iman occupied a liminal space of conflict between two sets of ideals. She was pressured from one direction by the powers of the fashion world to conform to Western standards of beauty, and from the other by an African American community that perceived conformity in the name of success to be an instance of racial betrayal.

Significantly, when Iman arrived on the scene, Beverly Johnson was the only well-known black model in America. In 1974, Beverly Johnson became the first black model to appear on the cover of *Vogue*. This was a time when “the fashion world was still arguing about whether Black was beautiful, and there was a serious quota: Only one Black model made it to the top at a time” (Reproduced in “Intimate Iman”). Even though the civil rights era marked a moment of arrival there were still many places, such as the modeling and fashion industries, in which African Americans had yet to arrive. However, without the banner of “civil rights,” successes such as those of Iman and Jadine seemingly serve no greater purpose than that of the individual.

Iman’s experience portrays a woman who is vividly aware of the tensions bestowed upon young black women in 1970s and ‘80s America by the dominant culture as well as the African American community. She is, quite nearly, a mirror image of *Tar Baby*’s Jadine. As Morrison observes in an interview with Charles Ruas, Jadine is “the kind of person that we ought to be, a fully integrated, fearless young woman”—a statement which demonstrates her awareness of the idealized vision of success put forth in post civil rights America (*Conversations* 110). Nevertheless, Morrison also recognizes the sacrifice that the African American community finds problematic, noting that something has been lost in this “full integration,” along with the heritage and identity that Iman laments is the loss of a “nurturing ability,” that “one surrenders, or can surrender, in order to do this other thing—in order to go and get a degree in art history, learn four languages and be in the movies and stuff” (131). This speaks to Morrison’s choice to situate the conflict between Son and Jadine as a love story, upon a gender divide that necessarily calls into question Jadine’s obligation, as a black female, to the nurturance and bearing of culture. Thus, in spite of her “fully integrated” façade, Jadine presents an embodiment of the conflicts that Morrison sees as inherent within the emerging figure of the modern black woman of the 1980s.

Patricia Soley-Beltran outlines the rise of the Supermodel Phenomenon, noting that the 1970s saw an economic recession that brought with it the incorporation of

models' fees within the advertising campaign of the product being endorsed, giving rise to the "Supermodel Phenomenon" that began in the late 1970s and thrived throughout the 80s (313). During this recession it became crucial to be able to "look a million dollars" (313). The economy's recovery in the late 70s and early 80s led to "a demand for models who could display great 'energy' and a sense of 'fun,'" which becomes evident in Jadine's performance of her professional persona (313).

At the center of *Tar Baby*, Jadine epitomizes the "million dollar" look as we see her draped in the half a million dollar jewels of Catherine the Great or pressing her naked body into a coat of ninety perfect seal skins. She translates for Son a biographical magazine caption that describes her accomplishments as a student, actress, and model. Jadine says that the magazine is "trying to be hip" when it says that "If you travel as Jade does in what the Americans call the fast lane, you need elegant but easy-to-pack frocks" (Morrison 117). Morrison, herself, takes issue with the image of the "new, capitalistic, modern American black which is what everybody thought was the ultimate in integration," suggesting that Jadine "may be a person who has all the accoutrements of *self-centeredness*, but is not centered at all. She may be really just piling stuff on—more jewels, you know, sort of a costume idea of a woman" (*Conversations* 105, 194 italics original). This depiction of Jadine illustrates not only an idealized image of black female modernity, but the manner in which Jadine's "putting on" of these markers of success represents a mechanism of survival in the modern world. Her "self-centeredness" is indicative of an inherently interstitial character's attempt to survive in a world that demands complete devotion of identity. Jadine's easy conformity to white beauty standards and her ability to "put on" beauty provide a place of safety and security that shields her from confronting her liminality.

Our first substantial introduction to Jadine occurs as she lies in bed pondering her encounter with a woman we know only as "the woman in yellow" in a Parisian Supra Market, an interaction that causes Jadine to doubt the safety of her success. Jadine had recently been selected for the cover of *Elle* magazine and passed her oral exams at the Sorbonne. "Under such benevolent circumstances, knowing she was intelligent and lucky" she entered the supermarket in search of a spread of exotic ingredients (Morrison 45). Jadine is taken aback by the woman in yellow who is "much too tall" with "too much hip," "too much bust," and "skin like tar against the canary yellow dress" (45). She is a woman whom Jadine believes "the agency would laugh...out of the lobby," an "unphotographable beauty" (45, 46). Jadine recalls that the woman in yellow "walked down the aisle as though her many-colored sandals were pressing gold tracks on the floor. Two upside-down V's were scored into each of her cheeks, her hair was wrapped in a gelée as yellow as her dress" and in her eyes Jadine saw something "so powerful it had burnt away the eyelashes" (45). By way of the marks on her skin and clothing and a body that is described as "too much," the woman in yellow's Africanness disrupts the expectations of Western (read white) beauty ideals. Stopping outside to make eye contact with Jadine and to spit out of disdain, she poses a challenge to the version of beauty that Jadine has been taught to celebrate, threatening the safety and security that Jadine sees in her education and career.⁶

The woman in yellow makes Jadine feel “lonely and inauthentic,” leading her to contemplate Ryk, the white European who wants to marry her (48). Jadine thinks to herself:

“I wonder if the person he wants to marry is me or a black girl? And if it isn’t me he wants, but any black girl who looks like me, talks and acts like me, what will happen when he finds out that I hate ear hoops, that I don’t have to straighten my hair, that Mingus puts me to sleep, that sometimes I want to get out of my skin and be the only person inside—not American—not black—just me?” (48)

Not only does this illustrate Jadine’s concern that she might be desirable to a white European male solely on the basis of her “exotic” or “authentic” blackness, but it also demonstrates Jadine’s awareness of those features that facilitate her success as a model. Her “persona” is distinctly American and black and conforms to the prescribed standards of authenticity. She worries that she will forfeit her authentic façade as well as her appeal when Ryk discovers that she does not, in fact, embody cultural expectations, such as an appreciation for classic Jazz, that are credited to the idealistic African American woman. Jadine is forced to recognize that such expectations are inscribed upon the body of the black model. After seeing the woman in yellow, her college degree and the prestige of the cover of *Elle* no longer assure her. Her molded exterior no longer appeases her. Jadine finds herself longing not simply for the cultural authenticity that the woman in yellow exudes, but to cast off a superimposed identity and to be “just me” (47).⁷ She is conflicted, caught between her performance of the “fully integrated modern Black woman” and her desire for the autonomous self-hood and authenticity of the woman in yellow. Jadine has no choice but to recognize her inherent liminality in this post civil rights moment of “messiness.” The notion that—beneath the façade of her performance, yet distinct from the African authenticity represented within the woman in yellow—there exists an identity that conforms to neither ideal completely but is, instead, “just me,” correlates with the tensions between success and authenticity inherent in post-soul era African American life.

Jadine epitomizes a performance of blackness that meets the paradoxical expectations of whiteness prescribed for the black supermodel.⁸ In the modeling world Jadine is known as “the copper Venus”—a title which exoticizes her on the basis of her copper skin tone, not directly accenting her “blackness,” but more aptly her “otherness” (Morrison 115). Still, her beauty is likened to that of Venus, a symbol distinctly associated with a standard of white beauty. She lives a life that appears to be definitively white and bourgeois, working for Margaret who, along with Valerian, is her “patron,” a term that she understands as not simply “taking care” of her, but as educating her, and paying for her travel, lodgings, clothes, and schooling (118). Her patrons have “created her,” have facilitated her success as a model. Although she recognizes that Ondine and Sydney are “all the family [she has],” Jadine is “friends” with Margaret, and even dines with her and Valerian, allowing Sydney and Ondine,

who raised her from childhood, to serve and wait upon her along with their white employers (118-19). Jadine's success in fashion and modeling and, by extension, her safety and survival in post civil rights era modernity, are contingent upon the patronage of the Streets and, by extension, her deliberate distance from Sydney and Ondine, "all the family [she has]."

In spite of the ease with which Jadine carries the persona of "the copper Venus," when Son calls her a "little white girl" she is extremely offended, exclaiming "I'm not... you know I'm not white... I am going to kill you. For that alone. Just for that. For pulling that black-woman-white-woman shit on me" (121). This, in conjunction with the discomfort Jadine feels when recalling the woman in yellow and her uncertainty about Ryk's motives, illustrates her awareness of the tensions imbued within the figure of the "black" model—and, perhaps more accurately, within the "fully integrated... capitalistic, modern American black" whom Morrison describes—at this particular historical moment. These are the instances in which we see Jadine beginning to grapple with the implications of being a "white" or "black" woman in the modern world and to what extent her successes have been contingent upon her ability to be a "white woman," both publically and in her personal relationships.

Jadine as Cultural Orphan and the Isle Des Chevaliers as Transitive Space

No matter how perfectly Jadine performs beauty, she cannot avoid the struggle that her internalization of beauty standards creates when faced with expectations of cultural and racial authenticity—whether in the Caribbean, New York, Eloë, or Paris. With no solidified notion of what it means to be "home," Jadine cyclically frolics in and out of the Caribbean Isle des Chevaliers that is, for many of the other characters, fraught with issues of ancestry, identity, and the hierarchies of slavery and colonization. Jadine is most comfortable in that liminal position between home and away represented by the Isle des Chevaliers. While this fictional Caribbean island presents a multiplicity of opportunities to interrogate colonial hierarchy, race, mythical and ancient properties, the natural, etc. it is, for Jadine, a primarily transitive space.⁹ In particular, L'Arbe de la Croix, the estate of Valerian Street, provides a locale that Jadine perceives as removed from the pressures and conflicts of the modern world, an escape from the climate in which the contradictions of her liminal identity are constantly called into question. It is here that she truly takes on a sense of cultural orphanhood. Removed from the African American community of her childhood and isolated from the island's black community, Jadine separates herself from the aunt and uncle who raised her, while associating primarily with Margaret and Valerian Street, her financial patrons. The patronage of the Streets allows Jadine to reject the culture that she was born into and to act upon this rejection by deliberately distancing herself from the aunt and uncle who raised her, effectively orphaning herself, and moving to create a different lifestyle. However, it is precisely the interstitial space of the Isle des Chevaliers—and, more specifically, Son's disruption of the comfortable interstitiality—that propels Jadine back to Europe and into the modern world with the recognition that her survival therein requires a continuous struggle between ex-

pectations of authenticity and the requisites of black female success in post civil rights modernity.

As critics have suggested, Jadine's fierce independence and separation from her aunt and uncle is deliberate, a product of the individualism celebrated within capitalist modernity. However, this fails to account for Jadine's status as a cultural orphan. The only window into Jadine's life before her mother's death is her recollection of watching a female dog being chased and mounted by male dogs on Morgan Street in Baltimore. Jadine follows the dog, "who had done nothing but be 'in heat' which she couldn't help but which was her fault just the same," and watches as a retired postman beats the dog with the mop. Jadine catches up with her behind a gas station only to find her "standing very quietly while another dog sniffed her ass embarrassing [Jadine] in the sunlight" (Morrison 124).

In this moment, Jadine determines "never to be broken in the hands of any man" (124). Growing up in Philadelphia, she decides that "anybody who wanted nice from this little colored girl would have to get it with pliers and chloroform, because Never" (124). Although Jadine eased into adulthood and allowed her "pugnacious lips" to become a "seductive pout" she observes that "beneath the easy manners was a claw always ready to rein in the dogs, because Never" (124). On some level, Jadine equates her situation as a "little colored girl" with that of the female dog in heat and she determines to assert control over those aspects of her identity that would place her in a position of vulnerability, whether that means being "broken" by a man or giving "nice" to those who expect it from her by virtue of the color of her skin. This scene recalls Glaude's observations about the "heightening levels of poverty and unimaginable violence" facing the post-soul generation of African Americans in a post civil rights era celebrated as a moment of arrival and success (132). It indicates a pivotal moment in the development of Jadine's character and the first choice she makes toward facilitating her personal success. Significantly, this choice—a deliberate move toward cultural orphanhood—occurs prior to Jadine's literal orphaning with the death of her mother and directly results from her observations about the hostility of the contemporary cultural condition. Jadine's reaction to the female dog in Baltimore is not simply a response to issues of gender and vulnerability, but she is also dealing with questions tied to sex, sophistication, and surveillance. In Jadine's mind, the dogs in Baltimore are indicative of the violence and poverty associated with the growing black underclass. Jadine is embarrassed in her position as surveiller, not only by the visibility of the dog's subordination to the male dogs and the postman, but by its inability to compose itself, even after the fact. To the young Jadine, it seems that the only way to evade such a fate is by "reining in the dogs," which she does first with the "pugnacious lips" of an obstinate child and later by seeking safety in the "seductive pout" of a model. As a highly educated model, Jadine is not only in a position of hyper-surveillance, but constantly required to maintain her sophistication.

Throughout *Tar Baby* the image of the dogs recurs as a figment of Jadine's imagination and symbolizes her desire to remain in control of her visibility and to suppress the situation that the dogs represent. Son, more than any other character or situation, triggers Jadine's recollections of the dogs and when she feels threatened by him and

the tensions that he embodies she sees “small dark dogs galloping on silver feet” (94, 113). The event that prompts Jadine’s recollection of the encounter with the dogs in Baltimore is when Son grabs her and, as she struggles against him, he smells her. Jadine threatens to tell Valerian. However, as she muses on the trauma of this scene she realizes that to tell Valerian would be to acknowledge that “there is something in [her] to be smelled which [Son has] discovered and smelled [himself]. And no seal-skin coat or million-dollar earrings can disguise it” (125). This scene not only forces Jadine to confront her performance of racial authenticity as Son accuses her of being “a little white girl,” but it also situates the “sealskin coat [and] million-dollar earrings”—and everything from her modeling career to her sophisticated education—as a survival mechanism, a means of “reining in the dogs,” an attempt to control the manner in which she is surveilled by other African Americans (121). However, the realization that “there is something in her... and no sealskin coat or million-dollar earrings can disguise it” is the second provocation (the first being her encounter with the woman in yellow) that initiates Jadine’s internal struggle between the demands of individual success in the modern world and the inescapable pull of heritage and authenticity. This also causes Jadine to recognize that even the transitive space of the Isle des Chevaliers does not provide an escape from the conflicts of post civil rights modernity.

As suggested above, it is significant that we are introduced to Jadine’s dogs in the space of the Isle des Chevaliers. They are solely triggered by her interactions with Son. Only when Son turns the conversation to “the copper Venus,” and the world of modeling representative of safety, sophistication, and controlled surveillance, does Jadine feel as though she can drop the leashes. After their encounter in the bedroom, Jadine says to herself “You son of a bitch I need this like a wart. I came here to get some rest and have some peace and find out if I really wanted to kick my legs up on a runway and let buyers with Binaca breath lick my ears or if I wanted to roam around Europe instead” (125). Neither option implies that Jadine entertains any doubts about her desire to return to her Parisian high-life. Son, in forcing Jadine to question the safety of her success as well as the security that she associates with the island, calls her certainty into question, bringing the “small dark dogs galloping on silver feet” to the Isle des Chevaliers (113).

From the moment that Son begins to describe his home in the rural Florida town of Eloë, Jadine associates it with dogs, remarking “God, I know it already: gas stations, dust, heat, dogs, shacks, general store with ice coolers filled with Dr. Pepper” (172). We later learn that Francine, an Eloë woman of unparalleled athletic talent, was “attacked by the dogs” and it was precisely her “skill” that got her into the predicament, leaving her in an indefinite state of nervousness (268). Thus, Morrison paints a picture of Eloë in which “the dogs” are inherent in its description and where said dogs regulate, or disallow, even the suggestion of a skilled woman. Jadine refuses to think that Eloë could ever provide a “home” for her, referring to it always as “God. Eloë” (173 ff), and fleeing from its grasp at her first opportunity.

Conversely, when Jadine arrives in New York with Son she thinks “this is home... with an orphan’s delight... if there was ever a black woman’s town, New York was it” (222). She is drawn to New York because it has “gone on to something

more interesting to it than the black people who fascinated it a decade ago” (222). Jadine associates New York with black women in the apparently infinite positions of power and success of modernity, noting that “The manifesto was simple: ‘Talk shit. Take none’” (222). However, by the end of her stay, she has realized that “New York was not her home after all. The dogs were leashed in the city but the reins were not always secure” (288). Jadine is forced to recognize that she cannot escape from society’s inherent socio-political conflicts. Even in the progressive space of New York a successful and educated young woman such as Jadine must face the realities of modern black womanhood that the dogs represent.

Son and Jadine’s stay in New York is marked by the tensions embedded within the questions “Mama-spoiled black man, will you mature with me? Culture bearing black woman, whose culture are you bearing?” (269). Son pressures Jadine to return with him to Eloë and all that it represents, while Jadine pushes Son to return to school and adapt to the modern standards of success that she attributes to New York. As they argue each asks the other “Why do you want to *change* me” (266 italics original). Son responds that he cannot live just for the city; it cannot be his purpose in life. When Jadine pushes the importance of “making it” Son responds that “If I make it in New York then that’s all I do... That’s not life” (266). Son’s reply calls into question what it means to succeed, especially as an individual. Jadine is in the process of “making it” as a model and such achievement requires great sacrifice of identity. Son calls into question the fruits of such sacrifice. Only a very specific person “makes it” in the world of fashion and modeling, yet the implications of this achievement are unclear. Jadine’s return to Europe, to “tangle” with the woman in yellow, adds another layer of complexity to her dilemma. Once one has made the choice to succeed in a post civil rights moment where “making it” has lost its sense of communal triumph, what is the worth of success?

Although Jadine’s initial return to the Caribbean indicates an attempt to distance herself from the strains of her Parisian high-life, a relief from the constant surveillance of her public image, Jadine ultimately deems Europe the most suitable environment in which to confront the struggle that she learns that she cannot avoid. Son’s presence reveals that even the seemingly transitive space of the Isle des Chevaliers is imbued with problematic hierarchies and the tensions of post civil rights modernity. As a cultural orphan, Jadine recognizes that a return to the United States would inevitably be accompanied by a scrutiny of her racial and cultural allegiances specific to the post civil rights era cultural climate, as well as a surveillance that does not necessarily receive her success and sophistication in a positive light. Coming to this realization, Jadine remarks that “she always thought she had three choices: marry a dope king or a doctor, model, or teach art at Jackson High. In Europe she thought there might be a fourth choice” (225). Immediately, Europe presents the possibility of a more meaningful realization of success than America. However, in light of the novel’s conclusion, this “fourth choice” becomes the opportunity to confront, head on, the conflict that has been building throughout the novel and to grapple with the condition of her cultural orphanhood without the requirement of cleanly adhering to the expectations of the African American collective.

When Jadine returns to L’Arbe de la Croix alone, she responds to Ondine’s sur-

prise at Son's absence saying, "when haven't I been by myself" (275). She prides herself in breaking away from Son and in "having refused to be broken in the big ugly hands of any man" (275). As she waits in the airport for her flight to Paris Jadine observes that "there were no shelters... No matter what you did, the diaspora mothers with pumping breasts would impugn your character. And an African woman, with a single glance from eyes that had burned away their own lashes, could discredit your elements" (288). For many critics these lines are problematic; it seems as if Jadine intends to return to her life in Europe virtually unfazed. While she is bothered by the idea that her success might be cheapened in contrast with such images, she nevertheless recognizes that the confrontation between these two worlds is unavoidable. On board her one way flight to Orly Jadine decides to "begin at Go. Let loose the dogs, tangle with the woman in yellow—with her and with all the night women who had *looked* at her... No more dreams of safety... A grown woman did not need safety or its dreams. She *was* the safety she longed for" (290 italics original). Up until this moment Jadine has kept the dogs tightly reined in because even the thought of them "galloping" free frightens her. The possibility of being read as anything less than perfectly sophisticated was unacceptable. Thus, Jadine's decision to "let loose the dogs" signifies a marked departure from the control she had exerted in every aspect of her life up to this point. Concurrently, she has decided not to marry Ryk. She literally begins "at Go," with a clean slate, prepared to re-approach culture and tradition. In this moment Jadine disavows "safety [and] its dreams." This initially appears to be a rejection of all that the night women and the woman in yellow represent, but on a more complex level her decision speaks to her self-created "dream" of safety symbolized by her successes as a model and by the recurring "dream" of the dogs. Though it is simple to read Jadine's departure as a move of ignorance and refusal, the complexity of her internal thoughts throughout her exit from the text suggests otherwise. She does not let go of her desire to "make it" in the modern world but begins to understand that such an attempt cannot be "safe," but is imbued with conflicts that she must not and cannot avoid.

Conclusion

I have demonstrated that the closing scenes of *Tar Baby* do not represent Toni Morrison's inability to make a point or to draw the elements of a plot together—in short, her "failure" as a novelist. Rather, these indicate the highest of expectations for character and reader alike. Jadine, as a twentieth-century black woman—a literal and cultural orphan—is sent into the realm of modern expectations and post civil rights "messiness" to grapple with what it means to succeed without the support of the African American community. Alongside Jadine, Morrison expects her reader to wrangle with what it means to sell out one's race or cultural inheritance when such compromises are no longer seen as communal successes. While she cannot reconcile the conformities of identity inherent in the figure of the 1980s supermodel, Jadine must realize that, as a modern black woman, she cannot expect to find safety in the "self-centeredness" of such conformities.

As Glaude suggests, recognition of the complexities and intricacies inherent in the

post-soul condition may guide Morrison's audience to the conclusion that, perhaps, there is no one perfect modern African American condition. Rather, there is a multiplicity of ways that the modern subject might struggle with the unavoidable tensions of modernity and post civil rights "messiness." Although Jadine's decision is read by the African American community as a rejection of heritage and cultural authenticity in favor of personal advancement, she has come to recognize this as an element of inevitable surveillance. This, in conjunction with her acceptance of the struggle and her relinquishing of safety and control represent a step forward. Furthermore, her departure from the fictitious Isle des Chevaliers, which represents her orphanhood and dislocation, thrusts Jadine back into direct confrontation with the choices she has been faced with throughout her life. She chooses the "fourth option," beginning at "Go" with the recognition that racial arrival is not as definitive as she has been taught to believe. In Europe she may pursue a cultural re-approachment, one which recognizes the conformities her success and sophistication require, but that acknowledges the elements of her racial and cultural identity that cannot be ignored.

Notes

- ¹ Various sources referenced in this essay choose to capitalize the word "Black." In the interest of consistency I have chosen to leave the word "black" lowercase in the portions of this essay that are my own.
- ² For more on Morrison's unresolving postmodern technique see Letitia Moffitt's "Finding the Door: Vision/Revision and Stereotype in Toni Morrison's *Tar Baby*" (2004), which positions *Tar Baby*'s "fragmented and highly subjective narrative structure" as a means of requiring the reader to understand each character's perspective as "limited" and thereby "embrace the complexity that comes with multiple visions" (12). See also Trudier Harris' chapter "Tar Baby" in *Fiction and Folklore: The Novels of Toni Morrison* (1991), which touches upon Morrison's "refusal to stratify her works into absolutes" (138-39).
- ³ In "Doing Things with Ethics: *Beloved*, *Sula*, and the Reading of Judgment" Yung-Hsing Wu makes a similar case regarding literature and ethics as well as the reader's obligation to grapple with the insoluble ethics in Morrison's texts, specifically *Beloved* and *Sula*.
- ⁴ While I have emphasized Glaude's text as the frame of reference for my pragmatic analysis, Walton Mayumba's *The Shadow and the Act: Black Intellectual Practice, Jazz Improvisation, and Philosophical Pragmatism* (2009) and Cornel West's *The American Evasion of Philosophy: A Genealogy of Pragmatism* (1989) both provide insightful engagements regarding black pragmatism.
- ⁵ From this point on I will refer to the social and political climate of the 1980s as one of "white supremacy." While I recognize that this is a loaded term I, like Glaude, find it an adequate means of expressing both the political ideology and underlying belief--whether conscious, intentional, or not--that white

people are superior to people of other racial backgrounds and should hold more lucrative political, economical, and social positions.

- 6 In "The Woman in Yellow in Toni Morrison's *Tar Baby*" (2012) Angela Shaw-Thornburg's close reading of the woman in yellow suggests that Jadine's return to Paris does not symbolize an attempt to evade her "ancient properties" but, instead, denotes "a decision to begin exploring the 'new properties' of an African-American identity shaped by encounters with other people of African descent" (56).
- 7 "Cultural authenticity" is another loaded term and its relevance within the black community is highly debated/contested. In *Real Black: Adventures in Racial Sincerity* (2005) John L. Jackson Jr. suggests that the term "authenticity" is an imposed and reductive denial of agency and humanity. He presents the term "sincerity" as a more accurate and internal way of conceptualizing race. I use the term "authenticity" because of Jadine's declaration that the woman in yellow made her feel "inauthentic."
- 8 In "Size zero high-end ethnic: Cultural production and the reproduction of culture in fashion modeling" (2010) sociologist Ashley Mears investigates the manner in which the polemical issues of slenderness and racial exclusion--relying upon conventions, imitation, and stereotypes in the choosing of models--manifests within the modeling industry.
- 9 See Allison Carruth's "'The Chocolate Eater': Food Traffic and Environmental Justice in Toni Morrison's *Tar Baby*" (2009), Trudier Harris' chapter "Tar Baby" in *Fiction and Folklore: The Novels of Toni Morrison* (1991), and Evelyn Hawthorne's "On Gaining the Double-Vision: *Tar Baby* as Diasporean Novel" (1988).

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