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Feeding the Magical Breasts : The Cultural Poetics of Toni Morrison's *Tar Baby*

Yukiko FUKASE

Characterized by critics as “willfully disturbing,” Toni Morrison’s fourth novel, *Tar Baby* (1981), has received “less critical attention” than her other novels because of its perceived stereotypical character depictions and Eurocentric tendencies (Bouson 103, Duvall 325). The novel’s light-colored protagonist Jadine, with her preference for *Ave Maria* over gospel music, has been viewed as a typical Du Boisian in pursuit of upward mobility in white-dominated society, a product of European culture severed from her African American heritage.⁽¹⁾ In contrast, the character of Thérèse, invested with mythic Caribbean qualities, may at once be seen as a keeper of “ancient properties”⁽²⁾ and as a mammy-like figure. The novel revolves around the journey of Jadine from her life as a Sorbonne graduate and model in Paris to her surrogate family on a Caribbean island, a journey that has been viewed skeptically because Jadine’s “geographical movements translate into her embracing of a Eurocentric view of the world and her abandonment of a potentially Afrocentric perspective” (Harris 131-2).

Yet Jadine’s voyage can be located within a literary tradition that dates from the nineteenth-century slave narrative in which journeys serve as metaphors for the African-American diaspora (Carby 136). In view of Paul Gilroy’s concept of diaspora, which reexamines transatlantic cultural affiliation, Jadine’s journey from Paris to the Caribbean can

be reinterpreted as a challenge to received conceptions of black women's "ancient properties." Through its protagonist's encounters with Afro-Caribbean and Afro-American women during her journey across the Atlantic – and through its basis in African American folklore⁽³⁾– Toni Morrison's *Tar Baby* explores fundamental issues of gender and race.

I Blackness and Femaleness

Jadine's journey from Paris to Florida, New York, the fictional Isle des Chevaliers in the Carribean, and once again Paris is replete with surprising and terrifying encounters with black women whose striking blackness and femaleness define their identities. Stephen Greenblatt casts light on these encounters in his discussion of early voyagers to the New World:

For the early voyagers, wonder not only marked the new but mediated between outside and inside. . . . Hence the ease with which the very words *marvel* and *wonder* shift between the designation of a material object and the designation of a response to the object, between intense, almost phantasmagorical inward states and thoroughly externalized objects that can, after the initial moments of astonishment have passed, be touched, catalogued, inventoried, possessed. (22)

As identified by Greenblatt, the interchangeable senses of "marvel" and "wonder" whereby the voyagers named and possessed the Others whom they met might well be applied to Jadine's response to the black woman she encounters at a supermarket in Paris:

Under her long canary yellow dress Jadine knew there was too much hip, too much bust. The agency would laugh her out of the lobby, so why was she and everybody else in the store transfixed? The height? The skin like tar against the canary yellow dress? .

. . . Jadine gasped. Just a little. Just a sudden intake of air. Just a quick snatch of breath before that woman's woman — that mother / sister / she; that unphotographable beauty — took it all away. (42-43)

Despite Trudier Harris's claim that Jadine's "visual vantage point . . . aligns her with the evaluators of blackness who would assign it a lesser value" (132), Jadine feels "lonely and inauthentic" (45) when confronted with — and indeed disdained by — the woman in yellow. Astonished by the woman's "transcendent beauty" (45), Jadine wonders if it is a similar beauty that has attracted her white fiancé Ryk to her, despite Jadine's own desire to "get out of her color of skin" (45).

Undecided on marriage to Ryk and unsettled by the woman in yellow, Jadine undertakes her voyage to the Carribean in part to consider her future, only to discover new mysteries and surprising developments during her journey that complicate matters further. Jadine, orphaned since the age of twelve, first pays a visit to Isle des Chevaliers in the Caribbean to see her surrogate family: her white patron Valerian, his wife Margaret, and their servants, her uncle Sydney and aunt Ondine. There Jadine happens to meet an African-American stranger, Son, who arrives uninvited at Valerian's mansion in search of food and a place to hide from the police.

Although Son is guilty of killing his wife for her unfaithfulness, Valerian receives him as a guest. Jadine faces Son in her room the day after he is discovered: "She moved a little to her left to see what the mirror reflected behind her. There he stood in mauve silk pajamas, his skin as dark as a river-bed, his eyes as steady and clear as a thief's" (113). Surprised by his intense blackness — which she neither possesses nor desires — Jadine derogates Son, calling him an "ugly barefoot baboon" (121). In response, Son points out that she shares the same

“smell” as him (122).

Indeed, for all that their backgrounds differ markedly, Jadine does find a sympathy for Son. In contrast to Jadine’s privileged upbringing, Son belongs to the uneducated lower class; raised in a rural black community in the South, he is a member of the “international legion of day laborers and muscleman, gamblers, sidewalk merchants, migrants, unlicensed crewmen on ships with volatile cargo, part-time mercenaries, full-time gigolos, or curbside musicians” (167). Yet despite their differences, Jadine finds herself so deeply attracted by Son’s “spacious tender eyes and a woodsy voice” (182) that she falls in love with him.⁽⁴⁾

One day Jadine goes on a drive with Son during which their relationship deepens, but also during which Jadine has a fearful experience related to the legend of the mythic horsemen of the Isle des Chevaliers. This legend has two versions; as Alma Jean Billingslea-Brown points out, one version applies to Valerian and the other wealthy Americans living on the island, and the other to the Afro-Caribbean characters (70).⁽⁵⁾

The first version centers on one hundred French chevaliers who managed to reach the island after escaping from a sinking slave ship. As Valerian imagines the story, the hundred French chevaliers, after arriving on the island, roam “the hills on horses. Their swords were in the scabbards and their epaulettes glittered in the sun. Backs straight, shoulders high — alert but restful in the security of the Napoleonic Code” (207).

The other version of the story, as imagined by island native Gideon, focuses upon the slaves whom the chevalier’s ship was transporting. These slaves became blind at the moment they saw the island. Having no idea which way to go, the slaves who managed to escape from the sinking ship found their way onto the island by following the horses.

Some of the slaves were recaptured, but others escaped into the hills. Gideon recounts how the slaves too rode “all over the hills. They learned to ride through the rain forest, avoiding all sorts of trees and things. They race each other, and for sport they sleep with the swamp women in Sein de Vieilles” (153).

Jadine’s fearful experience concerns these “swamp women” who live in the island’s dense forest. During her drive with Son, Jadine is left alone for a time when Son leaves to get gasoline for their car. While she is waiting, Jadine takes a walk in the forest. There she is accidentally caught in the Sein de Vieilles swamp, where she finds the swamp women looking down at her from the trees above as she struggles to free herself:

The young tree sighed and swayed. The women looked down from the rafters of the trees and stopped murmuring. They were delighted when first they saw her, thinking a runaway child had been restored to them. But upon looking closer they saw differently. This girl was fighting to get away from them. The women hanging from the trees were quiet now, but arrogant — mindful as they were of their value, their exceptional femaleness; knowing as they did that the first world of the world had been built with their sacred properties; . . . they wondered at the girl’s desperate struggle down below to be free, to be something other than they were. (184)

Jadine manages to escape the swamp, “mucilage” of which defiles her “white” skirt (185), but unsettled by the swamp women, she no longer wants to stay on the island. Jadine soon departs and Son joins her; together they travel via New York to Son’s birthplace, the town of Eloë, Florida.

In Eloë, Jadine is to survive one further shocking and perplexing

encounter. Where Paris and New York are cosmopolitan, Jadine finds Eloë provincial, and the conservative social strictures of the town prevent her from sleeping with Son since they are not married. It is decided that Jadine will stay alone at Son's aunt's house, but nonetheless, Jadine invites Son to visit her bed at night. While they are sleeping together, Jadine has a vision of black women, some unknown to her but others familiar, including her own mother, Ondine, and the woman in yellow. The women surround her, and Jadine cries:

“What do you want with me, goddamn it!”

They looked as though they had just been waiting for that question and they each pulled out a breast and showed it to her. Jadine started to tremble. They stood around in the room . . . revealing one breast and then two and Jadine was shocked. . . . “I have breasts too,” she said or thought or willed, “I have breasts too.” But they didn't believe her. They just held their own higher and pushed their own farther out and looked at her. All of them revealing both their breasts except the woman in yellow. She did something more shocking — she stretched out a long arm and showed Jadine her three big eggs. It scared her so, she began to cry. (260-61)

Her encounter with the full breasts of these women frightens Jadine, who may or may not possess such breasts herself. At first, Jadine “thought” that she too had breasts, but then became uncertain, and “willed” — that is, wanted — to have breasts like theirs herself. For Jadine, the night women are “awful”; they “grab the person she had worked hard to become and choke it off with their soft loose tits” (264). This shocking night encounter in Eloë, like the Paris encounter with the woman in yellow, emphasizes the difference between the breasts of the black women she meets and Jadine's. For Jadine, the breasts of the

black women, though surprising and frightening, possess qualities beyond the sort of beauty valued by Jadine's model agency; the "big eggs" of the woman in yellow suggest the qualities of "nurturing and fertility" that these women possess (Duvall 340).

Soon after her frightening dream in Eloë, Jadine leaves for New York to start a new life. Although Son follows her, they eventually break up because he cannot accept the materialism of the society. At their parting, Son insults Jadine with a slur, accusing her of being a "tar baby" conceived by her white patron Valerian. This attack is intensified by Valerian's washing lady Thérèse, who admonishes Son: "Forget her. There is nothing in her parts for you. She has forgotten her ancient properties" (308). In view of the issues of racial identity at stake in Jadine's journey, the nature of these "ancient properties" of Thérèse's admonishment bear closer consideration.⁽⁶⁾

II Magical Breasts: Ancient Properties Reexamined

In themselves, breasts are of course "properties" of female bodies, and an examination of a certain characteristic of Thérèse's breasts will reveal the broader sense of the notion of "properties" in *Tar Baby*, a notion informed by racial as well as gender issues. Before coming to Valerian's to work as a washing lady, Thérèse used to be a nanny and wet nurse for the French.⁽⁷⁾ When powdered milk became popular, Thérèse became angry: "How can you feed a baby a thing calling itself Enfamil. Sounds like murder and a bad reputation. But my breasts go on giving" (154). Thérèse thus identifies the unique "properties" of her own breasts, which are called "magical" because they "give milk" with no relationship to her pregnancy (291).

The implications of the term "magical" raise the question of who originally designated Thérèse's breasts as such. Although the reader

hears the character Alma Estée refer to Thérèse's breasts as "magical," it does not necessarily follow that the usage originates with Alma, a black friend of Thérèse and her husband Gideon, since Alma does not herself benefit directly from the breasts. Considering again Greenblatt's argument that naming and possessing are implicit to "marvel" and "wonder," it follows that naming breasts "magical" involves an act of differentiation rooted in white norms.⁽⁸⁾ Thérèse believes that her ever-flowing breasts are a property that she herself possesses, but conversely she herself has been the property of whites who consumed the "magic" she produced.⁽⁹⁾

The use of the term "magical" for Thérèse's breasts furthermore invites inquiry into the nature of breasts that are not magical but rather are natural. If "magical" breasts are those that always produce milk, it follows that breasts that only produce during the normal period of lactation may be considered natural. That is to say, the body as milk-giver comprises the natural norm.

From this perspective, Jadine's breasts deviate from the norm because they work not for milk-giving but for her own sexual pleasure. Nestling on a "seductive" fur coat given to her by her fiancé Ryk (112), Jadine becomes flushed when she leaves "the print of her nipples and things" (114).⁽¹⁰⁾ Jadine's breasts, which are neither "magical" nor natural insofar as they are not employed as milk-givers, spark the recognition that "magical breasts," presupposing natural breasts, inevitably gender the female bodies to which they are attributed.

However, although Thérèse's magical breasts "still give milk," they are no longer used for this purpose because, as Alma Estée puts it, "there is nobody to nurse them" (291). In Jadine's view, this is the case because Thérèse is "not looking in the right places" (291). Jadine suggests that Thérèse is not suited to earning her living as a washing

lady at Valerian's mansion, but nonetheless Jadine also believes that Thérèse will be exploited and literally consumed by whites wherever she moves for as long as she serves as a nanny for their babies.

Jadine might well apply this sentiment to herself; in her journey across the Atlantic, she never finds a place to settle. Thus at the end of the novel, Jadine decides to return to Paris during a final visit to the Caribbean islands to retrieve her fur coat. In taking her leave, Jadine bids farewell to Alma Estée, who works at the airport as a cleaner: "Bye, Mary, I have to go. Good luck.' Jadine pushed open the door and was gone" (292). In Paris, not only her white fiancé and brilliant career but also the black woman in yellow awaits Jadine, and in view of this the purpose and significance of her return merit close attention.

III Being En Route

Jadine's return to Paris at the end of her journey parallels Son's return to Isle des Chevaliers, and both journeys remain problematic at the end of the novel. Soon after breaking up with Jadine in New York, Son has second thoughts and revisits the Caribbean island in pursuit of her. However, Thérèse manages to prevent Son from seeing Jadine, leading him far from Valerian's mansion to the opposite side of the island, where she encourages him to join the legendary horsemen:

"Hurry," she urged him. "They are waiting."

"Waiting? Who's waiting?" Suddenly he was alarmed.

"The men. The men are waiting for you." . . . "You can choose now. You can get free of her. They are waiting in the hills for you. . . . Go there. Choose them." (308)

Although it is not clear where he ultimately goes, in Harris's view, "Son embraces the world Thérèse has offered" (148). Moreover, Billingslea-Brown contends that "Son recollects the legend" of the horsemen (70)

in arguing that the use of the structural device of journey as voluntary movement across space and time rewrites “the historical journey of forced migration of African people to the New World” (68).⁽¹¹⁾

In contrast to these affirmative readings of Son’s journey, Jadine’s has been viewed negatively as a runaway’s search for safety. The novel frames this search in terms of “shelters”:

There were no shelters anyway; it was adolescent to think that there were. Every orphan knew that and knew also that mothers however beautiful were not fair. 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. (290)

In Harris’s view, Jadine’s return to Paris is a retreat to a safer place: “she has run away from Son in part because she doubts her ability not to give in to the passion he represents, but also because the pull of Paris is safer; it can be controlled without the same kind of exertion” (137). Yet although Harris’s analysis sheds light on Jadine’s return, the novel itself does not fully clarify her search for “shelters.” Nor does it reveal the identity and nature of “the diaspora mothers with pumping breasts” whose blame Jadine’s journey attracts, much less their qualifications for impugning Jadine.

However, from both Morrison’s own comments and the dedication to *Tar Baby*, the clear implication is that Morrison herself regards “the diaspora mothers” as black women whose ancient properties — that is, blackness and motherhood — are intact. In a conversation with Thomas LeClair, Morrison made clear that *Tar Baby* is based not only upon the well-known *Uncle Remus* story, but also on a “tar lady” story similarly originating in African myth:

I started thinking about tar. At one time, a tar pit was a holy place, at least an important place, because tar was used to build things. It came naturally out of the earth; it held together things like Moses's little boat and the pyramids. (122)

In light of her essay "Rootedness: The Ancestors as Foundation" (1984), in which Morrison furthermore argues for the significance of maintaining African-American heritage, "the diaspora mothers" may be understood to signify the woman in yellow, the swamp women on the Caribbean island, and the night women at Eloë - that is, all of the women in whom the "ancient properties" are embodied. Against this background, Bouson reads *Tar Baby* as "an uplifting diasporan tale of racial pride, since it describes an escape from slavery and entry into the glorious world of myth and legend" (107).

But whereas Bouson views diaspora as an "entry" into the traditional African origins of the African-American world, Gilroy's concept of diaspora in *The Black Atlantic* (1993) involves more than a return to origins. In his careful analysis, Gilroy warns against Afrocentric definitions of diaspora:

This chapter includes a meditation on the diaspora concept which was imported into Pan-African politics and black history from unacknowledged Jewish sources. I suggest that this concept should be cherished for its ability to pose the relationship between ethnic sameness and differentiation: a *changing* same. (x-xi)

Gilroy explains that his concept of diaspora entails not a return to an immutable original condition but rather an ongoing process of acculturation:

My concern here is less with explaining their longevity and enduring appeal than with exploring some of the special political

problems that arise from the fatal junction of the concept of nationality with the concept of culture and the affinities and affiliations which link the blacks of the West to one of their adoptive, parental cultures: the intellectual heritage of the West since the Enlightenment. (2)

Though critics for whom diaspora must be understood in the context of continuity might blame Jadine for breaking with her heritage, Gilroy's reexamination of diaspora provides a framework for reinterpreting the purpose and significance of Jadine's journey.

Beyond issues of continuity, the term "diaspora mothers" engages abiding theoretical concerns about the convergence of race and gender as Judith Butler contests the claim that "the sexual difference is more primary or more fundamental than other kinds of differences, including racial difference" (181). Confronting the woman in yellow, the "diaspora mother," Jadine feels "lonely and inauthentic" because she is caught in a trap where the essentials, race and the female body, hold primacy. when Jadine is about to leave the airport, however, she asks herself "what did they have in common even, besides the breasts" (263)? As the preceding discussion of "magical breasts" has demonstrated, this question must be pondered with the awareness that, insofar as not all breasts are accorded the same significance, Jadine does not after all have even "the breast" in common with the "diaspora mothers."

Jadine's decision to return to Paris should therefore not be understood as a search for refuge or a retreat. Going to Paris is an attempt to escape the trap of essentialism, and it is no easy challenge:

She would go back to Paris and begin at Go. Let loose the dogs, tangle with the woman in yellow — with her and with all the night women who had *looked* at her. . . . A grown woman did not need safety or its dreams. She *was* the safety she longed for.

As she intends to again confront the woman in yellow, Paris is not a safe place for Jadine. Rather, Jadine herself “*was* the safety she longed for,” a safety predicated on the negotiation of identity with other black women.

In effect, the novel is itself a tar baby designed by Toni Morrison. As Bouson points out, “critic-readers get stuck in the ‘tar-baby’ of a critical and emotional impasse,” (129) with Jadine on the verge of returning to Paris and Son likely to disappear into a legendary world. However, Paul Gilroy’s concept of diaspora, with its insistence on the ongoing affiliation of cultures and the negotiation of sameness and difference, provides the reader with a way out of the impasse. Jadine is criticized by “the diaspora mothers” for lacking “ancient properties,” but ultimately her journey emerges as a process of questioning and subverting these same properties. The preceding examination of Thérèse’s “magical breasts” has revealed deceptions concerning race and gender implicit in her construction of “ancient properties,” more specifically revealing that Thérèse’s breasts — to the extent that they are “magical” — represent a differentiated Other to be possessed, and without which the possessors do not exist. It is worth noting that at the close of the novel, Jadine has not yet arrived in Paris. Rather, we leave her at the airport on the Caribbean island, en route, not rooted anywhere.⁽¹²⁾ Like Jadine, the reader is thus afforded an escape from her entrapment, even as the woman in yellow, the swamp women, and the night women expect her to remain stuck.

Notes

- (1) Critics are divided in their assessments of Jadine. Although Jadine is seen as “a black woman who turns her back on family, denies her

heritage,” she is also seen to be “struggling to define what it means to be a woman with options that were not available to her forebears” (Harris 128, Paquet 202). Brooks Bouson provides cogent summaries of critical discourse on *Jadine* (126). In my examination of *Jadine*, I am indebted to Judith Butler’s argument concerning light-skinned middle-class women in Nella Larsen’s *Passing* (1929).

- (2) Toni Morrison, *Tar Baby* 308; all subsequent references are to the 1991 Picador edition and will appear in the text.
- (3) The tar baby story has its origins in the trickster tales of African American folklore. In this story, the traditional trickster is Brer Rabbit, who gets into trouble because of his laziness and other faults, but escapes through his cunning. A well-known tar baby story is “The Wonderful Tar-Baby Story” in Joel Chandler Harris’s *Uncle Remus* (1880). In this version, Brer Rabbit becomes stuck to a tar baby, a doll coated in tar, which – being a doll – shows no reaction to Brer Rabbit. It is not clear if Brer Rabbit can escape in *Uncle Remus*, though in other versions Brer Rabbit does manage to escape by deceiving Brer Fox, the maker of the tar baby. Many critics have examined how Toni Morrison reconstructs the story by focusing on the relationship between *Jadine* and Son. See Trudier Harris, *Fiction and Folklore: The Novels of Toni Morrison* (Knoxville: U of Tennessee P, 1991); Philip Page, *Dangerous Freedom: Fusion and Fragmentation in Toni Morrison’s Novels* (Jackson: UP of Mississippi, 1995).
- (4) Bouson explains the love between Son and *Jadine* from the perspective of stereotypical conceptions of dark-skinned men’s desires for light-skinned or white women: “possessing an ideal (white) beauty gives the black man a feeling of power” (117). Julia V. Emberley reads the relationship as a description of “heterosexist racism” (420).
- (5) Alma Jean Billingslea-Brown claims that the latter version concerning the blind slaves is more germane to the theme of this novel, the “return to the source” (71).
- (6) Readings critical of *Jadine*’s refusal of black rural community and motherhood are based not only on Thérèse’s claim that *Jadine* does not possess “ancient properties,” but also on the dedication of the novel, which reads:

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

John Duvall states that the dedication to Morrison's mother, sister, aunts, and grandmother shows that Morrison respects the continuity of black women and their motherhood. Moreover, Duvall explains that "the very need to declare her authenticity suggests that Morrison also has questioned herself regarding the validity of this claim, especially given the name changes that transform Chloe Wofford into Toni Morrison" (328).

- (7) Regarding the history of the nanny in Europe and the United States, see Barbara Bush, "Hard Labor : Women, Childhood, and Resistance in British Caribbean Slave Societies," *Feminism and the Body*, ed. Londa Schiebinger (New York : Oxford UP, 2000) 234-62 ; Linda M. Blum, *At the Breast : Ideologies of Breastfeeding and Motherhood in the Contemporary United States*. (Boston : Beacon, 1999) ; Londa Schiebinger, *Nature's Body : Gender in the Making of Modern Science* (Boston : Beacon, 1993) ; Marilyn Yalom, *A History of the Breast* (New York : Ballantine, 1997).
- (8) This line of inquiry also touches upon the emergence of magical realism, a literary genre that emerged in Latin America in the 1960s. Lois Parkinson Zamora and Wendy B. Faris explain that the appearance of "the supernatural" in magical realist novels, which aims to blur the boundary between the real and the magical, "is not a simple or obvious matter, but is an ordinary matter," that is, "magic is no longer quixotic madness, but normative and normalizing" (3). In a conversation with Thomas LeClair, Morrison said "I think the South American novelists have the best now" (127) ; nonetheless she does not like to be called a magical realist, which to some might imply that she has "no intellect" (Gilroy, *Small Acts* 181).
- (9) Mahasweta Devi's "Stanadayini" [Breast-Giver] (1987), which was

translated from Bengali into English by Gayatri Spivack in her *In Other Worlds : Essays in Cultural Politics*, describes a lower-class woman, Jashoda, who has “surplus milk” (225). Jashoda is respected as a sacred woman in her role as nanny for an upper-class family. Nonetheless, Jashoda is dismissed after the children are grown, and ends up dying of breast cancer.

- (10) Julia V. Emberley explains that Jadine “is inscribed by a taxonomy of values linked to the animal corporeality of black bodies” by wearing the fur coat, and only later “returns to the world of the civilized, to bathe, to dress, to forget the onanistic and seductive foreplay with the fur coat” (422-23).
- (11) On the other hand, Son is criticized for his reluctance to face the real world. In the view of Barbara Christian, Son “has no future” because “although he feels an intense racial identity, he does not join with others to change anything” (79).
- (12) I borrow this phraseology from Paul Gilroy. When Gilroy advances his arguments of W. E. B. Du Bois, he states that Du Bois’s “long nomadic life” is meaningful for its “lack of roots and the proliferation of routes” (Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic* 117).

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