



**"THE CHOCOLATE EATER":
FOOD TRAFFIC AND
ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE IN
TONI MORRISON'S *TAR BABY***

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In 2008, the UN Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) released its annual food security report, whose authors open with the poignant observation that "world hunger is increasing" ("High Food Prices" 2).¹ This food crisis can be understood as an effect of economic globalization—or more precisely, of a food system that consolidates agricultural production and distribution in corporations headquartered chiefly in North America, Europe, and Asia. As the FAO report suggests, communities in the developing world are at risk within this system because they depend increasingly on imported goods for nourishment and because the number of small-scale farmers who provide an alternative food source is shrinking (2–4). The UN tacitly correlates this condition of food insecurity² to factors ranging from poverty to climate change (4).³ In the contemporary period then, world hunger stands as a pressing environmental crisis that derives from a world economy in which the fully industrialized structure seems neither ecologically sustainable nor socially just.

Written nearly thirty years before the 2008 FAO report, Toni Morrison's fourth novel resonates with this paradigm of hunger by framing the food system in the terms of environmental justice—a social movement that asserts the interdependence of class, ethnic-

ity, and ecology.⁴ Named for an African American folktale,⁵ *Tar Baby* imagines the contemporary era through an entwined narrative of hunger, consumerism, and environmental exploitation. Food tropes prove especially crucial to this narrative and elucidate the novel's geographic setting: the fictionalized Caribbean islands of Dominique and Isle des Chevaliers. In the novel Isle des Chevaliers is transformed into a modern vacation community by white US candy executive Valerian Street. The island figures as a palimpsest of unsustainable environmental development and unjust trade practices, a geographic imaginary that embodies the *longue durée* of Caribbean history.⁶ *Tar Baby* concretizes this history via the symbols of Street Brothers Candy Company and the "candy giants" (53), which together emblemize the extraction of natural resources from the region in the service of not only profit but also consumer tastes for exoticized foods like sugar and chocolate.⁷ Attentive to both social and ecological forms of injustice, the novel critiques this food economy while eschewing binaries of land and market or producer and consumer. In *Tar Baby*, every character is a consumer with appetites that highlight a complex relationship to the Caribbean and to the global marketplace.

Recent accounts of the novel have attended to its geographic contours primarily by framing the story as a meditation on whether black diasporic identity can "offer an alternative to Western oppression" (Goyal 393).⁸ Critics have not gone far enough, however, in explicating the novel's environmental imagination, partly because they focus on *Tar Baby's* African American rather than African Caribbean characters and partly because they foreground the love affair of Son and Jadine at the expense of the novel's other plots. Addressing the multiple plots of *Tar Baby*, I argue that its principle setting of the Francophone Caribbean cannot be understood without Morrison's intricate story of hunger, consumption, and food traffic—a story that speaks directly to the environmental justice movement as well as postcolonial ecocriticism.⁹ This argument extends the scope of ecocriticism to reveal food as the locus of both Morrison's environmental imagination and the wider imagination of environmental justice.¹⁰

Cosmopolitan Tastes and the Specter of Hunger

A synopsis of *Tar Baby* demonstrates the crucial status of food to Morrison's only pan-American novel. When the story begins, Valerian Street has just sold his company to a multinational candy corporation and is living with his wife Margaret at their estate, L'Arbe de La Croix, along with Sydney and Ondine Childs, a black Philadelphia couple who have worked for the Street family since the 1940s, and

the Childses' niece Jadine, who has recently left a thriving modeling career and ill-timed marriage proposal in Paris. In addition to the characters who inhabit the estate, four others play a major role in the plot: Thérèse, Gideon, Michael, and the novel's arguable protagonist Son. Along with Alma Estée, Thérèse, and Gideon are the African Caribbean residents of Dominique who work on Isle des Chevaliers as day laborers, but lose their jobs at L'Arbe de la Croix over an imported crate of apples purchased for Christmas dinner, from which they allegedly steal several pieces of fruit. Ostensibly held in honor of Michael, the Street's estranged adult son, the dinner serves as the novel's climax. Michael's failure to show for Christmas brings about a major conflict. During dinner, Ondine exposes Margaret as a once-abusive mother (explaining Michael's estrangement), while Son assails Valerian as a real estate speculator and candy profiteer. We first encounter Son in the novel's prologue, where he absconds from the cargo ship that employs him, stows away in a boat that Jadine and Margaret are sailing in the Dominique harbor, and makes his way to L'Arbe de la Croix looking for food. Son then disappears for three chapters, leaving only traces in the form of empty chocolate wrappers and other food scraps. These alimentary remnants bewilder the other characters—especially Ondine, who manages the estate kitchen. When Margaret finally discovers Son hiding out in the house, Valerian outrages both his wife and the Childs by inviting the stranger to stay for dinner and, ultimately, to stay on as a guest. In narrating this sequence of events to Gideon, Thérèse nicknames Son "the chocolate eater" (*Tar Baby* 104).

Prior readings of *Tar Baby* emphasize not the novel's conflicts surrounding food and land, however, but rather the tumultuous romance between the cosmopolitan Jadine, who dreams of owning a clothing store in New York or Paris, and the itinerant Son, who longs to return to his rural hometown of Eloë, Florida. Yogita Goyal, who persuasively revises prior interpretations of Son as the "defender of [African American] tradition" against Jadine's wanderlust, maintains that the couple occupies "the heart of the novel" (396, 402). In response, I would argue that the relationship between Jadine and Son acts as a kind of red herring, a tar baby for the reader that can occlude the novel's wider conflicts over race, place, and trade. As the above synopsis suggests, those conflicts turn on matters of food. In the case of Son, hunger, rather than attraction, first leads him to hide out at L'Arbe de la Croix, and "a bowl of pineapple," rather than Jadine, first inspires him to cross the kitchen threshold and enter Valerian Street's dream home (*Tar Baby* 137).

The significance of food in *Tar Baby*—and its precedence to the love story—poignantly emerges in Jadine's recollection of a Parisian

shopping trip. John Duvall has argued that Jadine functions in the novel to question ancestral forms of belonging and identity by asserting the relative freedom of cosmopolitanism (347).¹¹ The supermarket scene affirms Duvall's argument while troubling Jadine's cosmopolitan life in Paris. We encounter her recollection of the shopping trip in chapter two, shortly after Jadine has arrived in Isle des Chevaliers to work for the Streets as Margaret's assistant. During a night of fitful sleep, Jadine has a nightmare that awakens her to thoughts of "another picture that was not a dream": "Two months ago, in Paris, the day she went grocery shopping." The memory may seem blandly familiar to middle-class urban readers, comprising a long drive from central Paris to a suburban "Supra Market," where "everything on her list was sure to be." Jadine makes this journey in preparation for a dinner party planned to celebrate her high marks on a recent art history exam and the "good news" that *Elle* magazine will feature her face on its next cover. The foods that Jadine purchases for the meal signal her tastes for what we might term fusion cuisine: "Major Grey's chutney, real brown rice, fresh pimiento, tamarind rinds, coconut and the split breasts of two young lambs; . . . Chinese mushrooms and arugula; palm hearts and Bertolli's Tuscany olive oil" (*Tar Baby* 44). The narrator glibly sums up the dinner Jadine will later prepare from these ingredients as "a rich and tacky menu of dishes Easterners thought up for Westerners in order to indispose them, but which were printed in *Vogue* and *Elle* in a manner impressive to a twenty-five-year-old" (45). This ironic remark superimposes Jadine's upcoming *Elle* cover on her grocery cart. Linking the international models and multicultural recipes in *Elle* to the goods that fill the Supra Market's aisles, the narrator provocatively aligns fashion and food as industries that structure the tastes of Western consumers. Resonant with postcolonial critiques of globalization, this passage suggests that *Elle* trades on the saleable quality of Jadine's mixed ethnicity just as the supermarket trades on the exoticized flavors of Southeast Asian and Latin American foods.

In developing this analogy, *Tar Baby* represents the supermarket as a built environment in which the spatial familiarity prevents most shoppers from perceiving the social relations that underlie its commodities. The scene demonstrates this reifying power of the supermarket by disrupting its economic procedures.¹² When a tall African woman in a canary yellow dress enters the store, Jadine's humdrum shopping trip comes to an end. Critics, in focusing on this woman as one of the novel's so-called diaspora mothers who counter Jadine's cosmopolitanism, tend to neglect the African woman as a character in her own right. The woman deserves closer scrutiny in that her actions divert attention from Jadine to her own "less commodifiable" body

(Ngai 114) and to the supermarket itself. "The agency would laugh her out of the lobby," Jadine reflects, "so why was she and everybody else in the store transfixed? The height? The skin like tar against the canary yellow dress?" The woman's visibility as African unsettles not simply Jadine's identity as a model of mixed ethnicity, but also her habits as an urban consumer of food. Declining the conventions of the supermarket, the woman visits only the dairy section, where she removes three eggs from a carton and proceeds to the register without a cart or basket, holding the unpackaged food "aloft between her earlobe and shoulder" (*Tar Baby* 45). When the woman insists on purchasing the three lone eggs against store policy, the scene traverses the border between quotidian transaction and symbolic action: "the woman reached into the pocket of her yellow dress and put a ten-louis piece on the counter and walked away, away, gold tracking the floor and leaving them all behind" (45–46). The charged elements of this exchange (the woman's stony silence, gold-clad figure, and resounding departure) clash with its banal details (the clerk's explanation of store policy and the woman's exact payment for the eggs). This formal hybridity defamiliarizes the supermarket, upending Jadine's blasé attitude toward her shopping list.

The African woman's violation of the supermarket's protocols is one of several scenes in *Tar Baby* that critique the metropolitan consumer economy for reifying goods and thus eschewing their environmental and social histories. While Jadine imagines the beautiful African woman to be a vision who will simply disappear through the glass doors of the Supra Market, the narrator asserts her embodied reality: "She did of course" float through the glass, but only because "the door always opened when you stepped on the mat before it" (46). When the vision of the African woman runs up against the glass and metal structure of a grocery store façade, the scene undercuts Jadine's desire to shop with little care for the origins of the food in her cart. In his theory of consumer culture, Pierre Bourdieu argues that the value of any marketplace inheres in the spatial "conditions of acquisition" that dictate where and how different consumers acquire goods and thus distinguish themselves from others (65–66). By comparison, the Supra Market scene in *Tar Baby* conceptualizes the market as a space where the acquisition of commodities (and cultural capital) allows consumers to overlook the social and geographic histories of their purchases. The African woman in the yellow dress enters this marketplace as a kind of interloper who, in rejecting its conditions of acquisition, disrupts other consumers' oblivion of the world beyond its doors.

The Supra Market scene ends with a direct confrontation between the woman and Jadine, who remains fixated on the woman's

canary yellow dress. The African woman returns Jadine's admiring gaze by facing the store window and shooting "an arrow of saliva between her teeth down to the pavement and the hearts below" (46). This visceral rebuke sparks a hunger in Jadine for this "woman's woman" beauty. This metaphorical hunger for the African woman's beauty distracts many readers from the consumer habits and bodily hungers that structure this scene and, moreover, proves pivotal to *Tar Baby*—a novel that counters commodity fetishism by returning the global economy to the social and ecological origins of its commodities and, above all, its foodstuffs.

Tar Baby announces its preoccupation with food early on in the unlabeled prologue that chronicles Son's arrival on Isle des Chevaliers. The prologue's first paragraph describes the as-yet-unnamed Son standing on the deck of the H. M. S. *Stor Konigsgaarten* and gazing at the harbor of Queen of France, Dominique, a fictionalized place that evokes both Fort-de-France, Martinique and the postcolonial writings of Aimé Césaire and Édouard Glissant. After jumping ship and swimming across the harbor, Son comes upon the small *Seabird II* sailboat, which Jadine and Margaret have taken out for a sunset dinner sail. Unbeknownst to the women, Son hoists himself on board and hides out in a small dark closet where he drifts into a light sleep and dreams of the "pie ladies" in his hometown of Eloe. The reverie is cut short when a bottle of Bain de Soleil thumps down the hallway to within inches of Son's hideout. Against the object of leisure that Margaret's Bain de Soleil bottle signifies, the narrative injects the pressing fact of Son's hunger. As Margaret and Jadine disembark, Son turns to examine the closet: a storage room containing snorkeling gear, fishing equipment, and "twelve miniature orange trees, all bearing fruit." The only objects that capture Son's attention are the oranges, which he immediately consumes with a "wide surgical hunger . . . unaccounted for" by his relatively short fast (7). To satiate this hunger, Son proceeds to the galley where he finds the remnants of the women's shared meal: leftover curry, stale Norwegian flat bread, Dijon mustard, a cut lime, and bottled water. A diminished version of Jadine's Parisian dinner party, this odd assortment of foods offers a microcosm of contemporary eating practices, which the novel imagines to be at once cosmopolitan and imperialistic. As Son finishes off the bread and mustard, the narrator transitions from enumerating the remnants of Son's modern meal to evoking the three-hundred-year history of Caribbean slavery:

He covered the bread with mustard, ate it and drank all that was left of the bottled water before going back on deck. There he saw the stars and exchanged stares with

the moon, but he could see very little of the land, which was just as well because he was gazing at the shore of an island that, three hundred years ago, had struck slaves blind the moment they saw it. (8)

A reference to the slaves whose ghosts, according to local legend, inhabit Isle des Chevaliers, this passage correlates Son's hunger and the women's multicultural meal with the history of Caribbean colonialism. As in the Supra Market scene, the passage thus turns our attention from everyday commodities to the places—and geopolitical histories—that have produced them.

The novel makes palpable, moreover, the injustices of the contemporary economy, whose postindustrial system of agriculture and trade continues to rely on exploited labor while leaving many people hungry. Another scene that proves significant to this vision of the world food system takes place during an evening meal that Son shares with Gideon and Thérèse at their home in Queen of France, Dominique. As their guest, Son enjoys a meal of local delicacies that includes fried goat meat, smoked fish, pepper gravy, sweet cookies, canned milk, thick black coffee, and a bottle of rum. Over after-dinner rum and coffee, the conversation turns to the daily habits of North Americans, which Thérèse extrapolates from sensational TV programs. In this exchange, Thérèse interrogates Son about the US market for tropical foods: "They grow food in pots to decorate their houses? Avocado and banana and potato and limes?" (152). While none are indigenous to the Caribbean, three of the four foods that Thérèse identifies as ornamental plants in US households (avocado, banana, and lime) do grow in the forests of Isle des Chevaliers and are, in addition, traditional exports of the Caribbean economy.¹³ Thérèse's query underscores the cultural transformation of these foodstuffs from crops into decorative plants, implicitly critiquing US consumer culture for aestheticizing foods from the Caribbean and other tropical locales.

The scene juxtaposes such consumer fetishism in the United States with the colonial history of agriculture in the Caribbean. Just as Jadine's encounter with the African woman in the Supra Market conjures the symbolic diaspora mothers and Son's foraged meal aboard *Seabird II* alludes to slavery, the shared meal in Thérèse and Gideon's kitchen calls up the descendants of the island's mythical blind slaves. Following Thérèse's invective against North American houseplants, Gideon recounts for Son the local folktale of African slaves who went blind on first seeing the Dominique harbor and then escaped to Isle des Chevaliers on French horses:

"They ride those horses all over the hills. They learned to ride through the rain forest avoiding all sorts of things. They race each other, and for sport they sleep with the swamp women in Sein de Veilles. Just before a storm you can hear them screwing way over here. Sounds like thunder," he said, and burst into derisive laughter.

Son laughed too, then asked, "Seriously, did anybody ever see one of them?"

"No, and they can't stand for sighted people to look at them without their permission. No telling what they'll do if they know you saw them."

"We thought you was one," said Thérèse.

"She thought," said Gideon. "Not me. Personally I think the blindness comes from second-degree syphilis."
(152–53)

This gritty and sardonic telling of the legend culminates in a blunt reference to syphilis that rejects romantic mythologies of the Caribbean. In Gideon's version of the folktale, modern-day inhabitants of Dominique like Thérèse owe their blindness not to legendary slaves but to a common virus that concretizes—rather than mythologizes—the colonial history of trafficking in people, plants, and disease.

This dizzying evening of banter and storytelling intoxicates Son and makes "his head light" (153). Yet Son's intoxication in the scene is also literal, inhering in his physical consumption of food and drink. The after-dinner conversation dovetails, in particular, with the characters' consumption of rum, the drink produced from Caribbean sugarcane that was "the most sought after commodity[,] the largest single English import, and the most valuable item in the French overseas trade" during the colonial period (Turner). As the catalyst for Gideon's revisionary story of the blind slaves, the bottle of rum at the dinner table works as a metonym of both the colonial slave trade and postcolonial consumer culture. The appearance of a rum bottle in a Caribbean kitchen troubles its reification in the West as a consumer product devoid of history or geography. Indeed, reification has become a deliberate marketing strategy for corporations such as Bacardi, Diageo, and Pernod Ricard, which downplay the geographic origins and histories of rum production to promote their brands' tropical "flavors."¹⁴ As Bruce Robbins argues about popular commodity discourses, the marketing of rum deploys a rhetoric of "commodity democratization" that stresses the agency of things in creating global markets and satisfying consumer desires, a rhetoric that occludes historical relationships between laborers, governments, corporations, consumers, and ecosystems (5). Consider, for example,

a 2005 article in the *Nation* entitled "The Secret History of Rum," which opens with an anthropomorphic picture of the commodity's global power: "Rum has always tended to favor and flavor rebellion, from the pirates and buccaneers of the seventeenth century to the American Revolution onward" (par. 1).¹⁵ The *Nation's* portrait perpetuates the Western fiction of rum here by displacing the agency of people and places with a narrative of rum as a propagator of globalization. For example, the author argues that, "sugar and rum pretty much introduced globalization to a waiting world, tying together Europe, the Americas, Africa, and the Caribbean in a complex alcoholic web of trade and credit." Through their brand identities, the world's leading rum producers reinforce this personification of rum. For example, Bacardi markets its Carta Blanca line as an affable dreamer: "the soul of the BACARDI brand—youthful, high-quality, sociable, sensual and passionate" ("Homepage"). Similarly, Pernod Ricard describes the metamorphosis of its Havana Club brand from an "elite" spirit of the Spanish crown to a "worldwide" drink for the masses ("Brands"). Perhaps most notably, Diageo promotes Captain Morgan rum with the icon of a Welsh buccaneer, whose cartoonish incarnation skews Captain Henry Morgan's historical role in the British conquests of Panama and Jamaica (Barnes and Mitchell 46). Counter to these marketing discourses, the scene in *Tar Baby* resituates rum consumption in the site of its production, just as the myth of Isle des Chevaliers (as told by Gideon and Thérèse to an intoxicated Son) returns the wider consumer economy in foodstuffs to its historical roots in colonization.

Food Routes and Cocoa Estates

The interweaving of eating and empire in *Tar Baby* returns us to the first paragraph of the prologue in which Son stands at the railing of the H. M. S. *Stor Konigsgaarten* staring at the Queen of France in "sweet expectation" (3). A careful analysis of the ship's name illuminates its significance as an amalgam of colonial and contemporary trade routes. The ship's name is not simply Germanic, as critic Evelyn Hawthorne suggests in her translation of *Konigsgaarten*, but rather a composite of linguistic signifiers.¹⁶ As for the other term, "stor" is the Swedish word for great or vast, which expands the name's meaning to "the great king's garden," or perhaps more likely, "the king's vast garden." The ship's naval prefix of H. M. S. is of course the English marker of "Her Majesty's Ship," a designator that frames the novel with a militaristic sign of European empire.

To open the novel with the H. M. S. *Stor Konigsgaarten* signals not just Son's current labor but also his complex past by alluding to his military record (he fought in Vietnam but was dishonorably discharged for insubordination). It seems improbable that Son would arrive in the Caribbean aboard an English naval ship given he has been migrating for the past eight years as an undocumented laborer in container ports and on cargo vessels. Thus, we can understand Son to inhabit several distinct identities in the novel's prologue: (1) the military defector, (2) the colonial explorer who gazes on an island harbor, (3) the migrant worker who travels by sea, and (4) the African captive who jumps ship to escape slavery. According to this multivalent reading of Son's arrival, the H. M. S. *Stor Konigsgaarten* appears to be a realistic object of contemporary shipping routes and a symbol of the militarized history of colonial and postcolonial trade. Her Majesty's Ship, the King's Great Garden is, on this reading, a diachronic symbol of the trade routes and power relations that have shaped the Caribbean since the fifteenth century. The Edenic valence of the ship's name further resonates with the horticultural space that Son discovers on Isle des Chevaliers. Through his journey from the ship to L'Arbe de la Croix, in other words, Son migrates from an Edenic emblem of the British empire to the botanical paradise that Valerian Street attempts to construct in the Caribbean.

Furthermore, the ship's polyphonic name encapsulates the multiple nations that have laid claim to the Caribbean over centuries. In the particular case of Martinique—the most probable inspiration for Morrison's *Dominique*—French settlers occupied the island in 1635 and proceeded to construct Fort-de-France, clear forests for sugar plantations, and, by decree of King Louis XIII, enslave the indigenous population. In a subsequent war, the French army killed or removed by force the island's Carib population, thus fueling the slave trade from Africa and the migration of indentured servants from India. The French were not the islands' only colonists, however. In response to the 1791 slave revolt in Haiti, England went to war with France in the Caribbean and seized control of Martinique's colonial government and sugar trade from 1794 to 1814.¹⁷ In the modern period, the Nazi-controlled Vichy government of World War II temporarily ruled Martinique and nearby Guadeloupe, a period chronicled in Patrick Chamoiseau's fictional narrative of the Fort-de-France street markets, *Chronicle of the Seven Sorrows*.¹⁸ Since reestablishing political control of Martinique, France has continued to oversee the island. Yet French governance remains only part of the island's post-WWII story in the sense that Dutch, German, Scandinavian, English, and US corporations have all invested in Martinique. In this context, Morrison's naming of the H. M. S. *Stor Konigsgaarten* revises nationalist

narratives of the Americas—and the French Antilles specifically—by creating a symbol of the transnational structure of Caribbean history in the colonial and postcolonial periods.

The novel's plot traces the historical evolution of the Francophone Caribbean from a "colonial daughter" of France (to cite a prominent colonial trope) to a commercial interest of the United States. While the fictional Isle des Chevaliers is privately-owned, Valerian's purchase of it recalls the history of St. Thomas, St. John, and St. Croix, all three of which the United States acquired from Denmark in 1917 for \$25 million (Heuman 162). Geographer Dennis Conway notes about such post-Monroe Doctrine acts that "European hegemony [has gradually given] way to U.S. hegemony" in the Caribbean (Conway 30).¹⁹ The many scenes of eating in *Tar Baby* crystallize this transfer of power by mapping the historical movement from a colonial to late capitalist economy—an economy in which an American-led paradigm of free trade carries on the imperial trade in cocoa, sugarcane, and other Caribbean commodities. If the novel opens with a marker of European empire, then, it plays that history forward in the arguably neocolonial figures of US chocolate executive Valerian Street and the multinational "candy giants" (53).

The modern history of Isle des Chevaliers evolves from the neoimperial aspirations of Valerian Street to establish, in Morrison's words, a Caribbean "fiefdom" ("Interview" 417).²⁰ It is thus not surprising that Valerian's name, which alludes to an herbal sleep aid and an obscure Roman emperor (Weigel),²¹ simultaneously refers to his greenhouse (the site of his gardening and finicky dining) and his economic power (Llewellyn). The double valence suggests that Valerian acts as a kind of horticultural emperor on the island, explaining the many references in the novel to his "head-on-a-coin profile."

As the reader learns early on, Street employs his profits from Street Brothers Candy Company to buy Isle des Chevaliers for "almost nothing" (53). He then contracts a Mexican architect to build an impressive vacation home in the hills, "away from the mosquitoes," and later subdivides other parcels for sale to "discreet" buyers (10). In this account of the island's recent development, the novel recalls colonial discourses of the Caribbean. In his 1493 letter to King Ferdinand of Spain, for example, Columbus enumerates the physical resources that he first encounters in the West Indies, accentuating their fecundity and material value to the Spanish crown. Just as Valerian evokes the specter of French chevaliers to guard his estate, Columbus intermingles a pastoral description of the islands' landscape with repeated references to the imperial army that backs him (115). Morrison evokes this Columbian rhetoric directly in the initial description of Isle des Chevaliers by reshaping the trope of



Fig. 1. Roman coin with profile of Emperor Valerian, A.D. 253–260. ©Justin D. Paola, 1995. Courtesy of *A Visual Compendium of Roman Emperors*. <http://www.thepaolas.com/Emperors/emperors.html>.

new world wonders to describe not just the landscape but also the built environment:

The end of the world, as it turned out, was nothing more than a collection of magnificent winter houses on Isle des Chevaliers. When laborers imported from Haiti came to clear the land, clouds and fish were convinced that the world was over, that the sea-green green of the sea and the sky-blue blue of the sky were no longer permanent. Only the champion daisy trees were serene. After all, they were part of a rain forest already two thousand years old and scheduled for eternity, so they ignored the men and continued to rock the diamondbacks that slept in their arms. It took the river to persuade them that indeed the world was altered. (*Tar Baby* 9)

Interweaving early modern and postmodern alterations of the environment, this description resonates with Édouard Glissant's premise that "history is spread out beneath [the] surface" of Caribbean islands (11). Powerfully reminiscent of sugar cultivation in the colonial period, Valerian's redevelopment of Isle des Chevaliers transmutes a dynamic ecosystem into a stagnant swamp, a change attributable to clear-cutting. Akin to Glissant's description of Martinique in *Le Discours Antillais*, Morrison here represents the island as a palimpsest of environmental erosion and exploited labor: "The men had already folded the earth where there had been no fold and hollowed her where there had been no hollow" (*Tar Baby* 9).²² Colonized many times over, the overdeveloped island has become fallow, relegating new growth on the island to Valerian's ornamental greenhouse.

Tar Baby implicitly critiques Valerian's private community as an environmental injustice that relies on both underpaid labor and ecological erosion. The rapid development of Isle des Chevaliers into vacation estates—a project that employs migrant workers—also evicts natural flora and fauna and produces a kind of ecological entropy when the island stagnates in the wake of Valerian's project. However, while the opulent homes of Isle des Chevaliers threaten the island's environmental health, the novel asserts the ecosystem's resilience through the so-called swamp women whose ghosts inhabit and animate the evidently stagnant river. This observation extends Karla Armbruster and Kathleen R. Wallace's analysis of the "nonhuman perspective" in *Tar Baby*. According to Armbruster and Wallace, "Morrison returns to this . . . perspective repeatedly throughout the novel, emphasizing that, although nature is profoundly affected by human activities, it also has a life and perspective of its own" (212). Morrison does not romanticize the jungle ecosystem, however, but instead highlights its constructed nature by recalling that cultivated sugarcane has transformed many Caribbean plains into brackish swamps (Mintz xviii).

The depiction of Isle des Chevaliers as both a vacation community and a swamp unsettles the pastoral tropes that pervade Valerian's imagination of the island. The narrator, for example, alternates rapidly between primordial ecological features and mundane manmade ones (the house doors, toilets, and kitchen garden). Reflective of a postmodern ecological sensibility, *Tar Baby* here portrays the Caribbean island as far from natural. Valerian's Mexican-designed estate and ornamental greenhouse seem to grow in the Isle des Chevaliers hills alongside the river and rainforest. The novel hereby asserts the intimate, if fraught, relationship between built and wild environments on the island and, by extension, between economic and ecological processes of development.²³ *Tar Baby* thus affirms Marxist geographer David Harvey's argument that, "the social side of [an ecosystem] cannot be evaded as somehow radically different from its ecological integument . . . the circulation of money and of capital have to be construed as ecological variables every bit as important as the circulation of air and water" (*Spaces of Global Capitalism* 88).

"Candy Giants" and Free Trade

Interweaving hunger, consumerism, and development, *Tar Baby* makes matters of land and money (or ecology and economics) utterly intertwined, and it does so largely via the "historical legacies of imperialist exploitation" (Huggan 702). An emblem of those legacies,

Valerian profits not only from tourist speculation but also from the international food trade. When he decides to sell his candy business and retire full time to Isle des Chevaliers, Valerian turns his attentions simultaneously to gardening and investing, "measuring French colonial taxes against American residential ones, killing off rats, snakes and other destructive animal life, [and otherwise] adjusting the terrain for comfortable living" (54). As with his initial development of the island in the 1950s, Valerian's retirement activities in the late 1970s evince ecological and economic forms of opportunism—he will just as soon kill off pests to maintain his garden as pay French colonial taxes to improve his finances.

This representation of Valerian as a de facto descendent of the French planter class, which his friendship with the French Algerian exile Dr. Michelin crystallizes, correlates directly to his stake in the cultivation and circulation of sweets. In the opening description of the island, Morrison enumerates the edible plants that grow on Isle des Chevaliers—tamarind, sugar, and cocoa—foodstuffs that have driven the foreign interest in and the environmental degradation of the Caribbean since the seventeenth century. As with Jadine's Parisian shopping cart, this catalog of transplanted flora functions as an ecological mark of the slave trade as well as the food trade. The horticultural catalogue counters the presence of branded food commodities in the novel (Major Grey's chutney, Evian water, Malibu rum) by insisting on the social and environmental histories that lie beneath them. Of course, the novel is not immune to the process of reification. Both the bottle of Major Grey's chutney in the Supra Market and the empty carton of curry in the *Seabird* galley are oblique traces of the South Asian diaspora in the Caribbean that *Tar Baby* sublimates more than narrates. At the same time, the novel asserts quite powerfully the geopolitics of food that a bottle of Major Grey's chutney or a bar of Street Brothers chocolate occlude. When Valerian looks out from his greenhouse to foodstuffs, he recalls the past and present trade routes that foreground the multiple lineages of Caribbean history.

Although *Tar Baby* traces Valerian's economic status as a retired candy executive to the colonial trade in sugar and cocoa, the novel ultimately distinguishes colonialism from the contemporary global economy. The novel proves incisive in representing the modern economy as structured around capital and value-added goods: in other words, corporate tax credits rather than gold and chocolate bars rather than cocoa beans. This distinction between colonialism and what Fredric Jameson and Ernest Mandel term late capitalism becomes clear when Valerian waxes romantic about the tropical foods that ornament his island estate: "He'd had countless discussions with

friends and clients about the house he was building in the Caribbean, about land value, tax credits, architects, designers, space, line, color, breeze, tamarind trees, hurricanes, cocoa, banana and fleur de fuego" (54). This ecological inventory of Isle des Chevaliers reminds us that colonialism and late capitalism each proceed through the cultivation, extraction, and export of the very foodstuffs that Valerian lists. Yet the parallel that the narrator suggests between the retired American CEO and the seventeenth-century French planter does not withstand close scrutiny. While the profits of Street Brothers chocolate bars enable Valerian to retire to Isle des Chevaliers, he perceives the cocoa plant not as the raw material of his wealth but as just one more pleasing feature of the Caribbean landscape. A food executive whose confection company resides in Philadelphia, far from its tropical food source, Valerian can indeed imagine the cocoa populating Isle des Chevaliers as ornament rather than resource, allowing him in turn to imagine his own position in the Caribbean not as a colonist but as a retiree.

Valerian's inability to see cocoa plants as the raw material for the candy industry is a particular effect of economic globalization that marks him as a late capitalist CEO, just as Jadine's grocery list marks her as a cosmopolitan consumer. It is not surprising then that Morrison locates Street Brothers Candy Company in Philadelphia, a complex geographic reference to both Hershey, Pennsylvania and W.E.B. DuBois's "Philadelphia Negro." Now the largest candy corporation in the world, the Hershey Corporation originated as a family-owned company modeled after Swiss and Belgian chocolate makers. This story has become one of the founding myths of American business, a fact that Sophie Coe's popular history of chocolate affirms: "In that traditionally 'Pennsylvania Dutch' country there rose a chocolate operation that would be a formidable rival to its European competitors" (252). Coe's rhetoric here echoes Valerian's self-portrait in the novel as a candy entrepreneur who "never left the neighborhood or forgot the workers," even when his company expanded to acquire "more salesmen and . . . machinery" (*Tar Baby* 52). Valerian's nostalgic reflection on his management record comes just before we learn that he has recently sold the family company to a "candy giant," which "could and did triple [the company's] volume in two years" (52). Despite this corporate buyout, Valerian maintains that his company remains a family business. In some sense, the self-image is accurate. In contrast to the Hershey Bar or the Nestlé Kit Kat, Street Brothers' best-selling candy brand, Teddy Boys, is a regional rather than global commodity. And instead of enjoying an international market, the brand sells primarily in corner stores in the American Northeast and South, a significant detail that Son reveals in his recollection of

buying the candy during his Florida adolescence. Unlike the Hershey Corporation, Street Brothers Candy Company does not expand into the contemporary system of public companies and integrated supply chains, but sells out to that system instead. In this sense, Valerian can be understood as a relic of the American robber baron who gives rise, ultimately, to the multinational corporation and its institutions of free trade.

The representation of free trade in *Tar Baby*—crystallized in the Parisian Supra Market that Jadine patronizes and the corporate buyout that Valerian authorizes—comes into striking relief when Morrison alludes to a 1975 controversy surrounding the global formula industry. The reference appears just once, when Gideon tells Son that Thérèse worked as a wet nurse to local white mothers until the emergence of infant formula in Dominique made her work superfluous. This revelation occurs on the same evening that Son dines with Gideon and Thérèse in the Queen of France. After Gideon debunks the folktale of the blind slaves, the conversation turns to food. Thérèse casually remarks that she knew of Son's presence at L'Arbe de la Croix early on, having discovered the empty chocolate wrappers on the grounds, and had asked Gideon to leave the pantry window open so that Son could "get the food" (153). In exchange for this unsolicited altruism, Thérèse asks Son for further information about American women, whom she imagines drown their young and claw their own wombs. Gideon interrupts Thérèse in mid-sentence, noting that this view of mothers in the United States stems from her prior experience as a wet nurse and subsequent conception of formula as an aberration of food akin to the use of tropical crops as houseplants:

"She was a wet nurse," [Gideon] told Son, "and made her living from white babies. Then formula came and she almost starved to death. Fishing kept her alive."

"Enfamil," said Thérèse, banging her fist on the table. "How can you feed a baby a thing calling itself Enfamil. Sounds like murder and a bad reputation. But my breasts go on giving," she said. "I got milk to this day!" (154)

Moving from the fantastically violent mothers of American talk shows to the "bad reputation" of infant formula in Dominique, this passage juxtaposes the rise of a US formula brand with the decline of Thérèse's livelihood. The significance of this account of formula is difficult to overstate. In the 1970s, corporations aggressively promoted formula to mothers in developing countries by employing local women to market the product as a nourishing food for infants.²⁴ In response to allegations of illegal sales practices, an international industry coal-

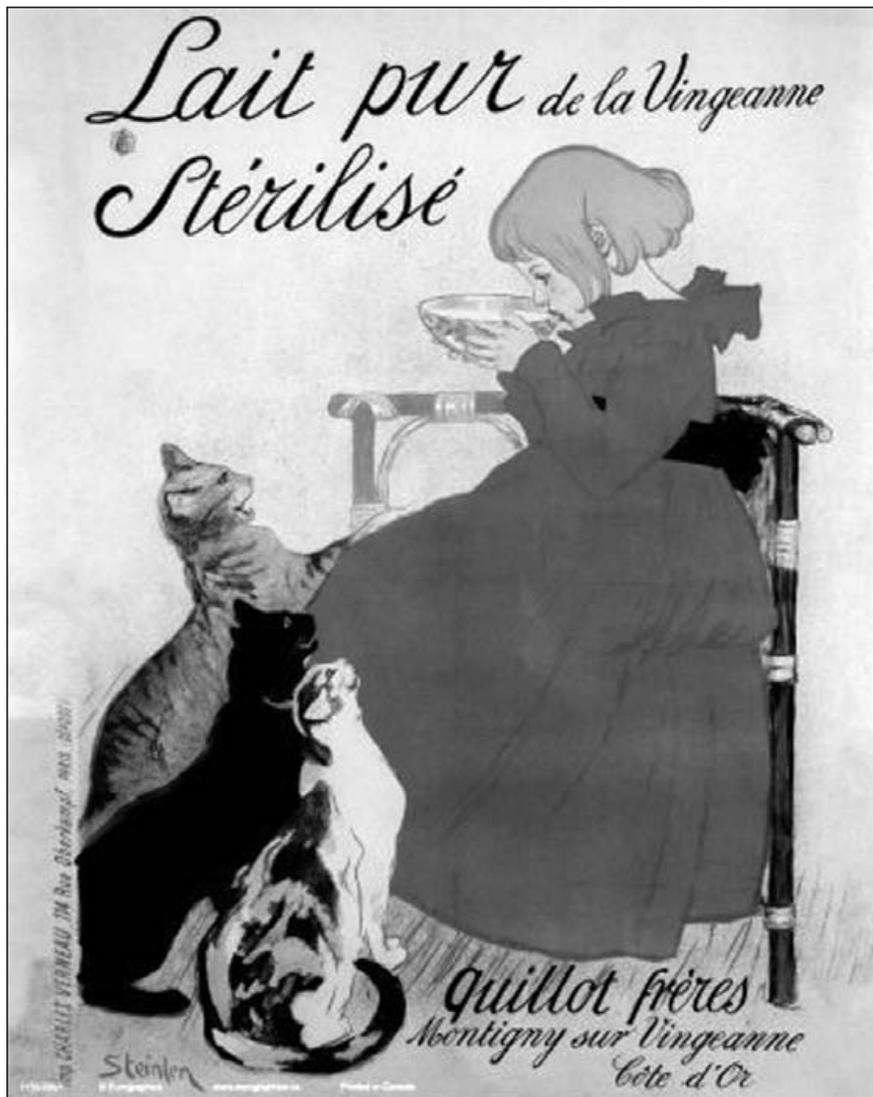


Fig. 2. Advertisement for Nestle's Milk, 1895, by Théophile Alexandre Steinlen.

tion formed to develop a code of marketing ethics (Crittenden 56). The coalition acted to ensure free trade instead, and formula exports expanded throughout the seventies and eighties. Although Morrison figures the target market for formula as affluent white families on Dominique who once employed Thérèse as a wet nurse, consumer product companies in fact targeted low-income women in Africa and Latin America ("UN Baby Formula" B2). When the companies promoted formula "drops" in Africa as a form of food relief that would alleviate hunger, a media exposé of tainted formula packages provoked international outrage.²⁵

The allusion to Enfamil in *Tar Baby* thus returns us to the problem of hunger in the era of multinational food corporations. The allusion further clarifies the novel's seemingly disparate concerns with motherhood and food. The largest manufacturer of infant formula in the 1970s was the Swiss-based Nestlé Corporation, whose worldwide business got its start with sterilized milk products that the company began marketing in the late nineteenth century. As vintage French advertisements suggest, Nestlé was the first company to promote formula as a "sterile" alternative to breast milk and an ideal food for children.

This material history elucidates the historical alliance of the formula and candy industries. More importantly, it demonstrates that the thematic preoccupations in *Tar Baby* with motherhood and child abuse are coextensive with the novel's imagination of the colonial and postcolonial trade in sweets. Alongside the novel's black diaspora mothers (Ondine, Thérèse, the African woman, and the "pie ladies" of Eloë), *Tar Baby* presents not only the abusive mothering of Margaret but also the economic opportunism of food corporations. Precisely because the Nestlé Corporation is a likely candidate for the "candy giant" that acquires Street Brothers Candy Company, Valerian's economic windfall ties directly to Thérèse's economic displacement and her attendant lack of food security as compared, especially, to the Street's opulent meals. The conjunction of child abuse and food disempowerment in *Tar Baby* attests, moreover, that the novel should be read as an environmental justice text. In recent decades, cocoa and sugar—which are vital raw materials for the food industry—have been of concern to environmental and human rights organizations largely because of two practices that in many cases enable their cultivation: clear-cutting and child labor. Through a transnational story of consumer culture, bodily hunger, and land development, *Tar Baby* takes for its creative impetus the injustices that have fueled this global food economy—from slavery to environmental degradation. In this sense, *Tar Baby* stands as a crucial text within the environmental justice movement for decolonization of the world economy, a crucial text, in other words, for fair trade.

Notes

1. The report estimates that 923 million people in the world are undernourished, an increase of 80 million people since the early nineties. During this same period, world food organizations committed to reducing world hunger by fifty percent by the year 2015, a goal they are far from realizing ("State of Food Insecurity" 2).

2. Food security is an established field of research and policymaking. While some definitions emphasize the availability and quantity of food in a community as a measure of food security, others assess food security in terms of a community's access to foods that provide nourishment while reflecting regional/ethnic identities. See Allen, Espíndola, and Hanumantha.
3. Ecologists have shown that industrial agriculture contributes to climate change substantially. At the same time, severe weather patterns attributable to climate change have put agricultural systems at risk, particularly in the global South, which in turn contribute to food insecurity. See the FAO 2008 report, "Climate Change and Food Security," as well as both Garrett and Gregory.
4. In the United States, the environmental justice movement primarily advocates for low-income urban communities on issues ranging from pollution to famine. The movement took shape as a coalition of social justice activists, community groups, urban planners, environmentalists, sociologists, and lawyers. In the context of the global South, sociologists Ramachandra Guha and Juan Martinez-Alíer have been influential in theorizing what they term "the environmentalism of the poor" and are crucial figures for environmental justice in a postcolonial context (3–21). A few literary critics have begun to examine environmental justice as not only a social movement but also an interpretive paradigm for ecocriticism: see, for example, Armbruster and Wallace, Bennett, and Reed.
5. In the foreword to *Tar Baby*, Morrison suggests that the original folktale of the tar baby who ensnares Bre'r Rabbit turns on a conflict between master and slave over the intertwined issues of hunger, race, and agriculture.
6. I use the term *longue durée* in the sense articulated by Braudel: "a history to be measured in centuries: the history of the long, even of the very long time span, of the *longue durée*" (27).
7. For comprehensive cultural histories of chocolate and sugar, see Coe and Mintz respectively.
8. Drawing on Paul Gilroy's theory of the Black Atlantic, both Goyal and Evelyn Hawthorne argue that *Tar Baby* participates in contemporary discourses of African diaspora and diasporic identity. Goyal provides a compelling formulation of this problematic: "Set largely on a fictional Caribbean island, the novel urgently asks the question, what does diaspora mean? Can racial unity offer a clear alternative to Western oppression? Can a unified black diasporic identity counter the modernity that alienates and fragments?" (393).
9. Graham Huggan expresses the need for further work in this area thus: "Some form of active exchange between the critical projects of postcolonialism and ecologism now seems urgently necessary" (721). In addition to Huggan, recent work in the emerging field of postcolonial ecocriticism includes Cilano and DeLoughrey and Handley.

10. This argument takes seriously Raymond Williams's 1972 warning against the "intellectual separation" of materialist and ecological approaches to cultural studies (84). Here, I would also cite Lawrence Buell's call in *The Future of Environmental Criticism* to extend the concept of environment in literary studies by addressing how "'natural' and 'social' environments impinge on one another" (127).
11. Duvall interprets the fight between Jadine and Son in the New York section of the novel as a rape scene and argues that Jadine leaves Son to reject patriarchal ideas of possession. This reading, he argues, "confirms Morrison's refusal to endorse an African American identity that would allow black men—in unacknowledged complicity with white patriarchy—to assume property rights in black women. Black women, the text also suggests, need not be tied to an agrarian community in order to partake of the ancient properties but, like Jadine (or indeed like Toni Morrison), may migrate freely, with or without men, to the city and beyond" (347).
12. Informed by Lukács, I use the term reification to signify the process in capitalist economies by which complex social (and I would add ecological) relationships are reduced to the circulation and marketing of *commodities*.
13. The avocado originated in southern Mexico and was carried to the West Indies and other tropical climates in the seventeenth century; the lime is native to Indonesia and Malaysia, and was introduced into the Caribbean islands by the Spanish in the sixteenth century; the banana also originated in the Indo-Malaysia region and was introduced to West Africa and South Africa by the Portuguese in the early sixteenth century ("New Crop").
14. London-based Diageo owns Jamaican-distilled Captain Morgan's Rum, while French-based Pernod Ricard owns Barbados-distilled Malibu Rum and Cuban-aged Havana Club.
15. By comparison, consider the chapter titles to a recent economic analysis of the historical chocolate trade by William Gervase Clarence-Smith: "The commodity chain," "The consumption of chocolate," and "Modes of cultivation."
16. In German, *könig* translates as king; while in Dutch the root is "koning." Gaarten is a slightly altered version of the German gärten.
17. For extended histories of Caribbean colonial history, see Heuman and O'Shaughnessy.
18. Dominica remained under the command of the exiled French General Charles de Gaulle supported by US and English military; Dominica was, notably, the only island of the three to achieve political independence in the 1960s. See Burton, Erikson and Minson, and Wiley.
19. For a transnational analysis of the 1823 Monroe Doctrine, see Bender.

20. I draw the term "neoimperial" most directly from David Harvey's recent histories of free trade and neoliberal capitalism: *The New Imperialism* and *Spaces of Global Capitalism: Towards a Theory of Uneven Development*.
21. From research that is currently available, valerian herb has been promoted as a natural sleep aid since the late 1970s; however, the herb has been used as a medicinal aid since the ancient period. For more on the history of the valerian herb, see Weigel and Llewellyn.
22. Glissant emphasizes the transformation of Martinique as a result of both colonial plantations and contemporary resorts: "In the Center, the literal undulations of the cane fields. The mountains are subdued and become hills. . . . The delta has been chewed up by make-believe enterprises, by an airstrip. Falling away before us, tiers of banana trees, a curtain of dense green foam between us and the land" (10–11).
23. In this sense, *Tar Baby* resonates with the ecological sensibility of Karen Tei Yamashita's *Through the Arc of the Rainforest* as Ursula Heise has recently described it. I am thinking particularly of Heise's theorization of the fantastic Matacão rock (a rock in the Brazilian rainforest formed out of an imagined underground migration of international plastic waste) as well as Heise's analysis of the novel's junkyard scene: "This junkyard ecosystem echoes the more drastic ecological mutation in the novel, that from waste and rock into plastic" (144–45).
24. Evelyn Hawthorne first alerted me to this reference in her analysis of this scene and the wider issues of motherhood in the novel.
25. We may assume that Morrison, whose meticulous research for *Paradise* Richard Schur has well documented, read the press surrounding this global controversy.

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