

Making Choices: “Dangerously Female” Rereading in *Sula*

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A discussion of the ‘other American novel’, in this case Toni Morrison’s *Sula*, inevitably raises the question of the literary canon, a vastly complex and controversial concept in the history of the literatures of the United States of America. What Morrison finds so astonishing about this debate is not “the resistance to the displacement of works or to the expansion of genre within it, but the virulent passion that accompanies this resistance, and, more importantly, the quality of its defense weaponry” (1990: 204). “Is there a canon in this class?” Henry Louis Gates Jr. provocatively asks.¹ Rather than pit Harold Bloom against what he calls the School of Resentment, I shall rely on Morrison, who presents a much more balanced argument in her “Unspeakable Things Unspoken: The Afro-American Presence in American Literature” of 1989. Incidentally, I discover that I have rightly fled to this School, which includes, in Bloom’s opinion, all literary critics who do not live by aesthetics alone, as defined by three men from the British Isles, Ruskin, Pater, and Wilde, over a century ago and who embark on “canonical crusades...” (1993: 1). One of Morrison’s many insights is particularly worth bearing in mind. She states she does not intend to live without Aeschylus, Shakespeare, James, Twain, Hawthorne or Melville, but there are ways “to enhance canon readings without enshrining them” (Morrison, 1990: 204-5).² This depends, of course, on one’s location. Whereas she may feel “intellectually at home” with Greek tragedy, because of its similarities to African-American “communal structures”, she realises that this is hardly “a requisite for the pleasure” others may take who are unfamiliar with her home.

¹ Gates started his private canon at the age of twelve. Theodore Parker’s speech of 1846 is the first to mention the word canon in association with the African-American literary tradition. It proposes that the slave narratives are a truly indigenous and original literature —unlike the “romances” written by N. Hawthorne et al. (Gates, 1990: 168).

² Her reading of Herman Melville’s *Moby Dick* is exceptional: she explores an “unspeakable” meaning, which has remained the “hidden course”, the truth in the Face of Falsehood.

Her point is that the form of Greek tragedy is subject to “varieties of provocative love because it is masterly, but not because the civilisation which is its referent was flawless or superior”. In this respect, it is worth mentioning the radical—and “savage”—canonical re-routing from scholasticism to humanism. It took, as Morrison argues following Martin Bernal, a mere “seventy years to eliminate Egypt as the cradle of civilisation and its model and replace it with Greece”, subsequently “seen not merely as the epitome of Europe but also as its pure childhood” (1990: 206).³ For the eighteenth and nineteenth century Romantics and racists it was intolerable for Greece “to have been the result of the mixture of native Europeans and colonizing Africans and Semites” (Bernal, 1987: 2).⁴ In other words, western literatures are all too often perceived as the offspring of Greek literature, a child itself, rather than the offspring of a literature whose adult strength lies in its response to earlier literatures.

Considering that feminist scholarship has assaulted the male part of the “whitemale question”, the target of much canonical debate, Morrison (1990: 201) decides to focus “on the white part of the equation” and addresses “ways in which the presence of Afro-American literature and the awareness of its culture both resuscitate the study of literature in the United States and raise that study’s standards”. Her point of departure is stated as follows: “Canon building is Empire building. Canon defense is national defense. Canon debate [...] is the clash of cultures, and *all* of the interests are vested”. The colonised, repressed and silenced have “rendered speakable what was formerly unspoken”. They cannot simply be imagined by others: “We have always been imagining ourselves. [...] We are subjects of our own narrative, witnesses to and participants in our own experience, and [...] in the experience of those with whom we have come in contact. We are not, in fact, ‘other’. We are choices” (1990: 207-208). Bloom (1990: 2) picks this up, explaining that “one function of literary study

³ Bernal (1987: 1) argues that there are two models of Greek history: “one viewing Greece as essentially European or Aryan [the Aryan Model] and the other seeing it as Levantine, on the periphery of the Egyptian and Semitic cultural area [the Ancient Model]”. The Ancient Model “was the conventional view among Greeks in the Classical and Hellenistic ages. [...] Most people are surprised to learn that the Aryan Model [...] developed only during the first half of the 19th century”.

⁴ It is worth noting that Aleksandr Pushkin’s great great grandfather was an African slave, who styled himself Ibrahim Petrovich Gannibal and was a favourite of Peter the Great. His place of origin is still a mystery, although Chad, originally suggested by V. Nabokov, is more likely than Ethiopia, according to a Russian expert from Benin, Dieudonné Gnamankov. Pushkin wrote “Blackamoor of Peter the Great”, an unfinished romance about his ancestor. Cf. Hugh Barnes. *Gannibal. The Moor of Petersburg (Profile)* and Frances Somers Cock. *The Moor of St. Petersburg. In the Footsteps of a Black Russian* (Goldhawk Press), both of 2005.

is to help us make choices”, but his argument in *The Western Canon* severely restricts our choices. He may be able to read Morrison’s work, because “her imagination, whatever her social purpose, transcends ideology and polemics, and enters again into the literary space occupied by fantasy and romance of authentic aesthetic dignity”, but he “cannot trust [his] own aesthetic reactions” when it comes to Alice Walker or Ishmael Reed, for example (Bloom, 1990: 2). These two voices speak from very different positions. Whereas Bloom’s argument represents, or so he believes, the dominant discourse, Morrison speaks within and outside it; the (white) male critic asserts disdainfully, and the black woman writer and scholar argues convincingly, appropriating the master’s tools for her own dismantling purposes, to misquote Audre Lorde.

Morrison proposes three particularly productive critical approaches to the reading of African-American literature. The first is “the development of a theory of literature that truly accommodates Afro-American literature”. This is “based on its culture, its history, and the artistic strategies the works employ to negotiate the world it inhabits”. The second examines and re-interprets “the American canon [...] for the ‘unspeakable things unspoken’”;⁵ she perceives this as a “search [...] for the ghost in the machine” (1990: 210). William Faulkner’s work is one instance of an attempt to de-phantomise, so to speak, this apparent ghost. Her third project studies and rereads contemporary and/or ‘non-canonical literature’ for “the impact Afro-American presence has had”, as Morrison summarises it, “on the structure of the work, the linguistic practice, and fictional enterprise in which it is engaged” (1990: 217).⁶ This focus may enable critics to discover the cultural specificity of an African-American work rather than base their studies on the *writer’s* ethnicity. The three approaches inevitably coexist, but I shall focus principally on the first and the third. At this point, Morrison gives us a piece of excellent advice: in order to illustrate how all this may be achieved, she will draw on her own work rather than imposing a theory upon it. She chooses this method not only because she knows her own work best but also because “[w]riting is, *after* all, an act of language, its practice. But *first* of all it is an effort of the will to discover” (1990: 217). Her intention, again excellent

⁵ This includes “the ways in which the presence of Afro-Americans has shaped the choices, the language, the structure of the meaning of so much American literature” (Morrison, 1990: 210).

⁶ Morrison writes: “I am always amazed by the resonances, the structural gearshifts, and the uses to which Afro-American narrative, persona and idiom are put in contemporary ‘white’ literature”. The most valuable point of entry into the question of cultural (or racial) distinction, the one most fraught, is “its language — its unpoliced, seditious, confrontational, manipulative, inventive, disruptive, masked and unmasked language” (1990: 210).

advice, is to "suggest some of the ways in which [she] activates language and ways in which language activates [her]" by examining the first sentences of her books.

After a discussion of the first sentence in *The Bluest Eye*—"Quiet as it's kept, there were no marigolds in the fall of 1941"—which opens with a phrase that implies "a suggestion of illicit gossip, of thrilling revelation", inviting the reader to share "sudden familiarity or instant intimacy", Morrison concludes:

The points I have tried to illustrate are my choices of language (speakerly, aural, colloquial), my reliance for full comprehension on codes embedded in black culture, my effort to effect immediate co-conspiracy and intimacy (without any distancing, explanatory fabric), as well as my (failed) attempt to shape a silence while breaking it are attempts (many unsatisfactory) to transfigure the complexity and wealth of Afro-American culture into a language worthy of the culture (1990: 218-21).

It is a daunting task to study Morrison's work, if one is not, for example, familiar with the codes embedded in black culture. However, reading is a learned activity, as so many women critics including Morrison have said: "As a reader (before becoming a writer) I read as I had been taught to do" (1992: xii). The theories that characterise both author and audience as a "coherent, unified entity" exclude African-American literature, among others (Jablon, 1997: 129-30). The writers of 'minority' literatures thus tend to emphasise the diverse audiences they have always had to address by indicating the messages sent to each reading community. In relation to African-American literature, the scholars often speak of a "double audience", constituted by members of the black culture and by other uninformed readers.⁷

The "positioning of the reader has justifiable claims", Morrison argues, upon the struggle "to interpret and perform within a common language shareable imaginative universes" (1992: xii). If the "readers of virtually all American fiction have been positioned as white", and the language "can powerfully evoke and enforce hidden signs of racial superiority, cultural hegemony, and dismissive 'othering' of people and language" (Morrison, 1992: xii, x), one wonders how common that common language is (my emphasis). Moreover, are these imaginative universes truly shareable? "[H]ow free I can be as an African-American woman writer in my genderized, sexualized, wholly racialized

⁷ Besides the diversity of narratees, a significant strategy of resistance, African Americans are still searching for the most appropriate theories to explain the significance of the first person, a characteristic of their narrative from its earliest renderings, generally the slave narratives.

world” (Morrison, 1992: 4). She does not have the same access, as she says, to the “traditionally useful constructs of blackness” (Morrison, 1992: x). For her, neither “blackness nor ‘people of color’ stimulates [...] notions of excessive, limitless love, anarchy, or routine dread”. Her vulnerability as a writer would lie “in romanticizing blackness, rather than demonizing it; vilifying whiteness rather than reifying it”. Might I, as a woman who has been taught how to read from similar mode of perception, not fall into another such trap?

There is a general consensus of opinion among those who do have the authority that Morrison writes about otherness. Linden Peach suggests that Morrison is a writer for whom Salman Rushdie’s definition of ‘hybridity’ is appropriate: “people who root themselves in ideas rather than places, in memories as much as in material things; people who have been obliged to define themselves—because they are so defined by others— by their otherness; people in whose deepest selves strange fusions occur, unprecedented unions between what they were and where they find themselves” (Rushdie, 1991: 124-25). Morrison thus has to learn “how to manoeuvre ways to free up the language from its sometimes sinister, frequently lazy, almost always predictable employment of racially informed and determined chains” (1992: xi). In this respect, the “race for theory”, as Barbara Christian calls it, strikes a responsive chord: with its reliance on its prophets, “its refusal even to mention specific works of creative writers”, its “gross generalizations about culture” and “the incomprehensibility of the language set adrift in literary circles”, it has “silenced many of us to the extent that we feel we can no long discuss our literature, while others have developed intense writing blocks...” (Wall, 1989: 7-8). Black women’s writing, or “our literature”, may be read, in order to reach “an understanding of the systems and semiotic processes” that make their work possible (Culler, 1981: 12), alongside, for example, such cultural artefacts as blues produced by African-American women. In this case, an alternative literary theory to this linguistic and conceptual labyrinth described by Christian may help us, as Cheryl Wall argues, to move beyond identifying blues metaphors and celebrating blues singers as artistic models to understanding how blues aesthetics and ethics are inscribed (1989: 8). Similarly, if we read black women’s writing in the context of African and European philosophical and religious systems, we may mark “when and how this writing privileges ‘other’ ways of knowing”; and, in a complementary move, other ways of theorising about race, gender and class, such as those embraced under the term “Africana Womanism”, coined by Clenora Hudson-Weems. As these examples show, Christian’s questioning of (whitemale) theory, like that of Morrison, has had a lasting effect on African-American literary criticism. On one hand, these scholars have developed a refreshingly accessible critical discourse, thereby expressing their desire to communicate their ideas to more

than the select few. On the other, they have realised they do not have to “*master* the canon of criticism, to *imitate* and *apply* it”, as Gates originally thought, but should turn “to the black tradition itself to develop theories of criticism indigenous to our literature” (Jablon, 1997: 2).

Black feminist critics do not “shy away from literary theory”, as Gates puts it, but “translate it into the black idiom, renaming principles of criticism where appropriate” (Jablon, 1997: 82).⁸ From a black feminist perspective, the literary texts themselves represent “otherness”, opening the doors to other, and perhaps new, critical perspectives and ways of reading. This is crucial to the study of African-American fiction. When reading *Sula*, one cannot, as the author makes clear by using dates for the titles of her chapters, extract it from its context and treat it, as Josephine Donovan has said, “as if it were an aesthetic machine made up of paradoxes, images, symbols, etc. as so many nuts and bolts easily disintegrated from the whole”, however inevitable this may seem (Lanser, 1993: 611). Ashraf H. A. Rushdy argues that Morrison’s novels make an important contribution to establishing a form of literary theory for African-American writing — “a theory based”, to quote Christian again, “on an inherited culture, an inherited ‘history’, and the understanding of the ways that any given artistic work negotiates between those cultural/historical worlds it inhabits” (Peach, 1988: 22). Mae Gwendolyn Henderson’s argument that Morrison’s primary emphasis is “on the act of rereading”, this time speaking specifically about *Sula*, returns us to the question of the reader (1989: 34, 30). The self-inscription of black women requires, she proposes, “disruption, rereading and rewriting the conventional stories, as well as revising the conventional generic forms that convey these stories”. Somewhat like writing back, talking back, as bell hooks understands it, lies at the heart of *Sula*: “for the oppressed, the colonized, the exploited”, this “gesture of defiance” heals, makes new life and growth possible. This act of speech of talking back is “the expression of our movement from object to subject — the liberated voice” (1989: 9). Using a multiplicity of voices, this text registers black women’s challenge to their conditioning as objects of white and black male discourse. Published in 1973, it responds specifically to the Black Aesthetic movement and black nationalist discourse, but abounding in contradictions it both accomplishes this task and resists it.

Morrison’s first challenge lies in the title: can this be the story of Sula, if she is largely absent from the narrative? Moreover, the narrator’s technique of delaying information about this young woman has made critics suggest that

⁸ Many African-American women writers and scholars prefer not to use the term feminism, because they associate it with a movement that excluded and still excludes them.

she is not the only main character. The battle with the dominant discourse of whiteness in the literary imagination begins here. Morrison eventually conceded, much against her better judgement, to mention Sula and Shadrack, the two main characters, at the end of the first chapter (1990: 222). This heavy-handed end to “the welcome aboard” still annoys her: it was a craven “surrender to a worn-out technique of novel writing: the overt announcement to whom to pay attention”. I would agree with her resistance: Sula is on the title page and the second chapter is dedicated to Shadrack. Yet her comment on these two characters perhaps explains her reasons for this welcome: “Sula as (feminine) solubility and Shadrack’s (male) fixative are two extreme ways of dealing with displacement—a prevalent theme in the narrative of black people”.⁹ The differing opinions concerning this sign of resistance should not be seen as oppositional but as different complementary approaches. The community locate the force of evil in Sula Peace, which simply has to be survived. Sandi Russell is of the opinion that Sula is “one of the most thought-provoking and controversial heroines ever to emerge in American literature” (1990: 97). McDowell, in turn, sustains that Morrison’s transgression “begins with questioning traditional notions of SELF as they have been translated into narrative” by criticising such concepts as ‘protagonist’, ‘hero’ and ‘major character’ (1990: 153).

These different critical approaches to *Sula* reveal that Morrison does not confine herself to one plot. The novel treats of a black community, the majority of which drown in 1941 of sheer frustration from false promises of work as the unwanted outcasts of the town of Medallion (in Ohio, the setting of several of Morrison’s novels), when they follow Shadrack, the “Pied Piper”, to the tunnel on National Suicide Day, which he founded upon his return from fighting in the so-called Great War. This reading of the plot emphasises, on one hand, race politics, which hooks insists, even in 1995, silences and desexualises women because no woman can interrupt this “interracial homo-social patriarchal bonding”(1995: 2-3), a slightly controversial statement in light of the Peace women. On the other, it foregrounds the significance Morrison attaches to the community, her addressee:

If anything I do, in the way of writing novels (or whatever I write), isn’t about the village or the community or about you, then it is not about anything. I am not interested in indulging myself in some private, closed exercise of my imagination that fulfills only the obligation of my personal dreams—which is to say yes, the work must be political. It must have that as its thrust (1988: 344-45).

⁹ G. Genette’s study of titles is of no help at all (1997: 82-83).

Running through the years from 1919 to 1941 and a final chapter set in 1965, *Sula* evokes, moreover, "a past that often involved shifts of values in African-American communities, sometimes migration from the rural South or West Indies to the small-town or urban North" (Christian, 1990: 326). Shadrack's annual holiday "provides the frame for this narrative of collective mourning", as much for the loss of men in the World Wars and in the Vietnam War as for the death of the community, and yet "dislodges suicide", as Katy Ryan argues, "from the presumable realm of the solitary and hopeless". Instead, it hints at "a transformative and revolutionary ethics, a configuration of love and belonging..." (2000: 10-13).¹⁰

Another plot concerns the relationship between Sula Peace, the granddaughter of unconventional Eva Peace, and the community, particularly Nel Wright, the daughter of the uppity Helene Wright. The heterosexual romance plot vies and coexists with the underlying lesbian plot in this narrative of female awakening. According to this reading, Morrison privileges gender and class politics. Nel marries Jude and has children, but loses her husband when Sula, who has been away for ten years, spends a night with him. Sula cannot understand why Nel feels she has betrayed her, until she falls in love with Ajax, who flees the day after she puts a ribbon in her hair, cleans the house and puts two place-settings on the table. Always the rebel, nonetheless, Sula returns from her travels a wiser woman and, despite the year (1937), shows many of the characteristics of a new woman of which the black nationalist discourse of the time when Morrison published this novel would have approved had she been a man. Indeed, she has learned how to appropriate male discourse, as Henderson argues. Upon her deathbed, she tries to explain friendship to Nel, but her friend only awakens to this in 1965: "'All that time, all that time, I thought I was missing Jude.' And the loss pressed down on her chest and came up into her throat. 'We was girls together,' she said as though explaining something. 'O Lord, Sula,' she cried, 'girl,girl,girlgirlgirl'" (*sic*) (174).¹¹

Morrison had originally planned to begin this text with the first sentence of the chapter entitled "1919": "Except for World War II, nothing ever interfered with the celebration of National Suicide Day" (7). Considering this was beginning "in medias res with a vengeance, because there was no res to be in the middle of—no implied world in which to locate the specificity and the resonances of the sentence", she abandoned this plan, though it remained her preferred opening. It would have called "greater attention to the traumatic dis-

¹⁰ Cf. Ryan's "Revolutionary Suicide in Toni Morrison's Fiction" for an intriguing study of suicide in this novel and the effect of these wars particularly on African-American men.

¹¹ The page numbers placed within brackets all come from Toni Morrison's *Sula*.

placement this most wasteful capitalist war had on black people in particular, and [thrown] into relief the creative, if outlawed, determination to survive it whole” (Morrison, 1990: 223-224). By means of this connection, Morrison effectively criticises not only the displacement experienced by black soldiers who had fought for homeland, freedom and democracy during the World Wars and the Vietnam War but also the hostile and violent reception upon their return to the USA. Apparently, she began writing this novel in 1969, “a period of extraordinary political activity” (Morrison, 1990: 221), shortly after Muhammad Ali, for example, had been sentenced to five years’ imprisonment for his refusal to fight in Vietnam, the assassination of Malcolm X and the Watts riots (Ryan, 2000: 13).¹²

The whole narrative is encased by the bad joke which provides the setting and recalls the history of slavery. The farmer promises his “slave” freedom and “a piece of bottom land “if he performs some difficult chores: “Freedom was easy [but] he didn’t want to give up any land” (5). Can we not perceive in this bad joke an allusion to Shakespeare’s *The Tempest*, so central to the Anglophone literature of the USA? When the ‘slave’ questions why his former ‘master’ has given him “hilly land”, the farmer says: ““High up from us [...] but when God looks down, it’s the bottom. That’s why we call it so. It’s the bottom of heaven—best land there is”” (5). The hunters who go up to the Bottom wonder “in private if maybe the white farmer was right after all” (6). Gradually, property developers move into the Bottom and by 1965 white economic power is reaffirmed. The oppression of this community originates overtly in the so-called linear hierarchy of tops and bottoms, but the original false promise is ironically fulfilled, as the methods of segregation change: from this white perspective, the hill-land is now really closer to heaven and the inner cities to hell. The circular repetition of history which reinforces the economic and racial exploitation of blacks is not, Madhu Dubey suggests, identical to the circular movement of the text’s structure (1998: 83-84). Morrison has characterised the structure as “more spiral than circular” (Tate, 1983: 128); it is accumulative rather than repetitive. The beginning and ending points of the narrative’s spiral do not quite overlap, thus leaving open the possibility of transformation and resisting a “cyclic temporal vision”.

This foregrounding of a black community in which women, particularly the Peace women, are the dominant presence leads Morrison to open with a presentation, which she felt was needed in 1969, but which later embarrassed her. Her other novels written before 1990, and I would include *Paradise*, “refuse

¹² Gates read James Baldwin, a cornerstone in his life as an African-American writer and critic, during the Watts riots (1990: 166).

[this] seductive safe harbour”, refuse “to cater to the diminished expectations of the reader, or his or her alarm heightened by the emotional luggage one carries into the black-topic text” (Morrison, 1990: 221). Morrison’s explanation of the “stage-setting” of the opening of *Sula* identifies her anxiety of authorship at the time. She felt “forced”, as she puts it, to resort to certain strategies in order to try “to accommodate the mere fact of writing about, for and out of black culture while accommodating and responding to mainstream ‘white’ culture”: the double audience I mentioned earlier. This struggle to create imaginative universes that all readers can share in one way or another is a cornerstone of her political, literary and academic agenda. Over twenty years later, Morrison tragically argues that “ignoring race” in literary discourse “is understood to be a graceful, even generous, liberal gesture. To notice is to recognize an already discredited difference. To enforce its invisibility through silence is to allow the black body a shadowless participation in the dominant cultural body” (1992: 9). Thus, her “compromise” is to employ a white valley man’s perspective for the opening, to whom the conception and growth of the Bottom “is mightily strange, even exotic”. Her first sentence is long by Morrisonian standards: “In that place, where they tore nightshade and blackberry patches from their roots to make room for the Medallion City Golf Course, there was once a neighborhood” (3).

Morrison wants “to posit a door, turn its knob and beckon for some four or five pages” (1990: 221). However, this first sentence tells us the overall story of the birth and death of the neighbourhood and its plot, even if the narrator does not go into the details of its demise.¹³ The white man’s perspective is obvious: from some moment in the future, he lays emphasis on the Medallion City Golf Course and barely mentions the community. At the end of the novel, the narrator states: “White people were building towers for television stations up there and there was a rumor about a golf course or something” (166). By “letting a stranger in through whose eyes [the neighborhood] can be viewed”, Morrison claims she could introduce “an outside-the-circle reader into the circle” (1990: 221).

Once the strangers are drawn in, the key to this novel reading experience, whatever expectations may be, is the recognition that there are more than two ways of interpreting signs. For example, the characters perceive Sula’s birthmark as representing a variety of images: it is a “stemmed rose” for Eva and Nel, a “scary black thing” for Nel’s children, a “tadpole” for Shadrack, a “copperhead”, a “rattlesnake” for Jude, and ash from her mother’s burning body. It acts “as a metaphor for her figurative selves, her multiple identity”

¹³ Morrison spent three months writing the opening chapter of *Sula* (1990: 221).

(McDowell, 1990: 154). Morrison's resistance to reader complacency is also observed in her strategy of withholding narrative information by representing significant events in fragmentary form. For instance, the one-legged Eva Peace kills her dear son Plum, another shell-shocked veteran, by fire, reminding us of other such painful deaths in Morrison's texts.¹⁴ In "1921" the narrator tells us that after her husband BoyBoy's final visit, she withdrew to her room and only came down once "to light a fire, the smoke of which was in her hair for years" (37). At the end of the chapter, the narrator observes Eva setting Plum alight after soaking him in kerosene and records Plum's thoughts. The first perspective on this act is that of the dying man: "He opened his eyes and saw what he imagined was the great wing of an eagle pouring a wet lightness over him. Some kind of baptism, some kind of blessing, he thought. Everything is going to be all right, it said" (47).

In "1923", Eva renders her reasons in "two voices. Like two people talking at the same time, saying the same thing, one a fraction of a second behind the other" (71-72). She does not suggest that he is a "junkie", as Hannah, Eva's daughter, has found out. Eva's only concern is that her son must die as a man: "There wasn't any space for him in my womb. And he was crawlin' back [...] so I just thought of a way he could die like a man not all scrunched up inside my womb, but like a man". This same year Sula watches Hannah, her mother, dying in a fire. Two predominant motifs are death by fire and water.

Similarly, Eva presents an interpretation of the various "strange things" that happened in 1923, although she is never really sure how many there were or in what order they took place. After her attempt to save Hannah from burning to death by throwing herself out of the window, Eva, lying in a hospital bed, interprets the significance of the sequence of events *a posteriori*, or what she calls "the perfection of the judgement against her": "She remembered the wedding dream [Hannah dreamt about her red dress] and recalled that weddings always meant death. And the red gown, well that was the fire, as she should have known. She remembered something else too, and try as she might to deny it, she knew that [...] she had seen Sula standing on the back porch just looking" (78).

However, when the narrator organises the sequence of events she starts with the "second strange thing" (67), as she calls it, thereby confusing the reader when s/he reaches Eva's interpretation, which is, moreover, incomplete: it gives no explanation for Sula's reaction. This compels the reader to interact emotionally with character and storyteller in order to reach some understanding of these 'events' from at least two perspectives. This is, of course, the point. Indeed, this narrative uses many of the strategies of oral storytelling, which would transmit emotion

¹⁴ Obviously, some events are never satisfactorily explained, such as how Eva lost her leg.

through a call and response strategy. Combining orality and literature, this narrative may be described as orature. Eva's summary at the end of the chapter, the repetition throughout it, the reiteration of such motifs as red, death and the Peace women who act as the links in the chain of events, which are narrated swiftly with many ellipses, as well as the conversational tone, the direct address to an audience and the shift in perspective, "like the blurred notes played by a jazz guitarist" (Jablon, 1997: 77), make this a "speakerly text", as Morrison calls it.

A point Morrison emphasises is her activation of the English language. Her analogies, for example, often produce mixed responses, as we have observed. The men compare the sun to "a hot white bitch" when it rises the morning after the wind tore "over the hills rattling roofs and loosening doors" (73). Expecting rain, the people welcome it, but they wait "in vain, for no lightning no thunder no rain came..." (73). The adjectives "hot" and "white" have many meanings in this narrative universe. When Sula returns from her travels accompanied by a plague of robins, the community condemns her, or, more importantly, recognise her difference. It is, however, the men who give her the "final label". She "was guilty of the unforgivable thing—the thing for which there was no understanding, no excuse, no compassion. [...] They said that Sula slept with white men" (112). The narrator, whose sympathies generally lie with the women in the community, launches a diatribe against the inconsistencies of black men who attempt to draw closer to their white counterparts, whatever the means:

Every one of them imagined the scene, each according to his own predilections—Sula underneath some white man—and it filled them with choking disgust. There was nothing lower she could do, nothing filthier. The fact that their own skin color was proof that it had happened in their own families was no deterrent to their bile. Nor was the willingness of black men to lie in the beds of white women a consideration that might lead them toward tolerance. They insisted that all unions between white men and black women be rape; for a black woman to be willing was literally unthinkable. In that way, they regarded integration with precisely the same venom that white people did.

So they laid broomsticks across their doors at night and sprinkled salt on porch steps (113).

Morrison's linguistic and political interest in denouncing this sexist and racist stance, accompanied by superstition, lies behind the creation of her most powerful characters. The emphasis on skin colour recalls her mixed feelings towards Black Aesthetics and black nationalist discourse.

Having decided upon a political stance and literary compromise in the opening sentence quoted above, Morrison turns her attention to this narrative

discourse to explain how she has brought in “the specificity and the *difference*; the nostalgia, the history, and the nostalgia for the history; the violence done to it and the consequences of that violence” between “place” and “neighborhood”, the anonymous place that has become a neighbourhood (1990: 222). “Once” creates the tone of nostalgia; the connotation of the word “neighborhood” evokes their history and their longing for it. Violence, an everyday experience in the Bottom, is suggested through the tearing up of the plants by their roots: “they tore nightshade and blackberry patches from their roots” (3). Its consequences are implied through the disposal of this undergrowth to make room for a “manicured” golf course by an anonymous “they” who cannot “afford to differentiate what is displaced” (Morrison, 1990: 222). Both plants have darkness and blackness in them and represent the contrasting components that thrived together in “that place”. Whereas nightshade is exotic, dangerous and produces toxic berries, the blackberry is a familiar and harmless plant which produces a “nourishing berry”.

The plants represent Sula and Nel, the two main complementary characters. Morrison perceives Sula as “quintessentially black, metaphysically black”, as “new world black and new world woman” responding inventively and finding choices where there appears to be no choice (Morrison, 1990: 223). In her final conversation with Nel, she refers to herself as a special black woman, one with choices: “I got my mind [...] my lonely is *mine*. Now your lonely is somebody else’s [...] A secondhand lonely”, she tells Nel (121). Morrison explains that her “perception of Sula’s double-dose of chosen blackness and biological blackness is in the presence of those two words of darkness in ‘night/[j]shade’ as well as in the uncommon quality of the vine itself”; varieties include the “enchanter” and the “bittersweet” (1990: 223). Thus, nightshade enchants as it is “thought to counteract witchcraft”: Sula represents the witch and the witch(-)doctor, thereby questioning the stereotypical response to these figures. The community fear attending “the burial of the witch”, Sula, following the disasters they blame her for after her return to the Bottom. Ajax’s mother is depicted as “an evil conjure woman” but her sons adore her; Ajax is attracted to Sula because she “was perhaps the only other woman he knew whose life was her own, who [was apparently] not interested in nailing him” (127). Subversive, uncontrollable, disruptive, outlawed and imaginative, Sula is described as “dangerously female”; “like an artist with no art form, she became dangerous” (121): an aside to *Black Aesthetics*? Free of ambition and ego, she has “tremendous curiosity” and a “gift for metaphor”, notable, for example, in the vignettes in which she responds to Ajax’s lovemaking. Always searching for the “other half of her equation”, she finds out that for a woman “a lover was not a comrade and could never be”. Nel “is the closest thing to both an other and a self” (119), but after

Sula's act of disloyalty Nel withdraws into the community: "the flick of their tongues would river her back into her little dry corner where she would cling to her spittle high above the breath of the snake and the fall" (120). Another sign of Sula's creativity is precisely her power to reread things, to make choices. Perhaps the best instance of Sula's deconstructive rereading of the black male text is, Henderson argues, her reformulation of Jude's tale about his victimization as a black man in a white world:

I don't know what the fuss is about. I mean, everything in the world loves you. White men love you. They spend so much time worry ing about your penis they forget their own. The only thing they want to do is cut off a nigger's privates. And if that ain't love and respect I don't know what is. And white women? They chase you all to every corner of the earth, feel for you under every bed [...] Now ain't that love? They think rape soon's they see you, and if they don't get the rape they looking for, they scream it anyway just so the search won't be in vain. [...] And if that ain't enough, you love your-selves. Nothing in this world loves a black man more than another black man (103-104).

In her role as a new black woman, Sula turns Jude's tale of powerlessness into a tale of power. It has been said that this interpretation demonstrates how Jude uses racial politics to mask sexual politics. The combination of characteristics evoked by nightshade seems "a wonderful constellation of signs for Sula" (Morrison, 1990: 223).

The prickly blackberry patch, nourishing and never needing to be tended once rooted and bearing, typifies Nel. Her awakening, heralded at the end "when the thorns of her self-protection are removed by Eva, puts her back in touch with the complex, contradictory, evasive, independent, liquid modernity Sula insisted upon". This modernity eventually releases her from the past, as it "ushers in the Jazz Age (an age *defined* by Afro-American art and culture), and requires new kinds of intelligence to define oneself" (Morrison, 1990: 223).

Dubey suggests that "Nel and Sula's union", which survives until the closure, "constitutes the novel's strongest challenge to Black Aesthetic discourse" (1998: 73). Under this discourse, women writers were supposed "to depict male-female relationships as necessary, complementary unions". However this union may challenge this discourse, it does not entirely displace "the heterosexual formula of a man and a woman forming a complete person". Their first meeting is, Dubey writes, structured as "a typical romantic, heterosexual encounter". Their fantasies are described as "Technicolored visions" (73), indicating their conventional nature. "Nel imagines herself in a fairy-tale heroine's posture of waiting passively for a prince", while Sula is the active prince: the union thus

has heterosexual undertones, even if their fantasies betray, as Barbara Smith has also argued, “their hidden desire for a feminine rather than a masculine lover” (Dubey, 1998: 73). Moreover, the opposition between Nel (blackberry) and Sula (nightshade), the central structuring device of the novel “reflects and refigures the black nationalist opposition of community and individual, past and present, absence and presence” (Dubey, 1998: 73). Thus, these oppositions also transgress the boundaries of black nationalist discourse; this feminine pair “unbalances, even if it cannot fully dismantle, the hierarchical gender opposition of black nationalist and US white middle-class ideology” (Dubey, 1998: 85). Following this line of thought, we might suggest that while blackberry and nightshade can thrive together on the same ground, both must be uprooted and displaced in order to dismantle, once and for all, the top/bottom hierarchy dominating the hegemonic discourse of the period. Morrison concludes that this opening is “a softer embrace than Shadrack’s organized, public madness” because “the references to the community’s stability and creativeness (music, dancing, craft, religion, irony, wit [...]) refract and subsume their pain”, even if she does replicate “the demiurge of discriminatory prosecutorial racial oppression in the loss to commercial ‘progress’ of the village” (1990: 224).

Naming is another strategy Morrison alerts us to. From the earliest slave narratives the writers have had to change their names, suppress incidents too violent to relate and encode their meaning in order to make their material presentable to a white readership.¹⁵ Morrison has been criticised for using such names as BoyBoy or Chicken Little — a boy whom Sula accidentally drowns. These names recall the inherited history of slavery when marks or brands on the body were more often the sign of identity, such as Sethe’s back in *Beloved*; at that time, naming depended on the owner. Sula’s birthmark, however different, shows how all selves are multiple, divided, fragmented. Thus, Morrison’s “re-conceptualisation of character has clear and direct implications for Afro-American literature and critical study”, because the self is always unstable, perceived “as perpetually in process” (McDowell, 1990: 154). The verbal equivalent of such marks is the name, which makes the character part of a community¹⁶ and often determines, in the case of Morrison’s work, how the character is viewed by the community. Choosing one’s own name can, in tragic cases, also represent

¹⁵ Even Toni Morrison changed her name from Chloe to Toni whilst at Howard University and, traditionally, from Wofford to Morrison when she married in 1958.

¹⁶ In interview with Thomas Le Clair, Morrison said: “If you come from Africa, your name is gone. It is particularly problematic because it is not just your name but your family, your tribe. When you die, how can you connect with your ancestors if you have lost your name? That’s a huge psychological scar” (cf. Rigney, 1998: 57).

a rejection of race and culture. For example, Helene Sabat, who was born to a Creole prostitute, changes her name to Helene Wright: the implications of rightness and whiteness take the place of those "exotic associations with the witch's Sabbath" (Rigney, 1998: 60-61).

Rigney further argues that bestowing a name is a sign of power; "the act of naming another reflects a desire to regulate and therefore to control". Matriarchal power, "always ambiguous in Morrison's novels, includes the ambiguous power to name" (1998: 61). For example, Eva Peace—a name of the greatest irony¹⁷ has already emasculated her son before she murders him by calling him "Sweet Plum", just as she ridicules Tar Baby's white skin and reduces the "deweys" to one person by calling them all by the same name: "What you need to tell them apart for? They's all deweys" (32). "Eva is a triumphant figure, one-legged or not", Morrison has said in interview. "She's playing God. She maims people. But she says all of the important things" (Rigney, 1998: 62). The African mothers, the ancestor figures, are also "the transmitters of culture and the inventors of language, itself the operative agency of culture" (Rigney, 1998: 62). However, they are no more individuated than the deweys, Rigney argues: they represent a group consciousness, a history and a culture. Morrison explains that her characters have ancestors, not "just parents [...] but timeless people whose relationships to the characters are benevolent, instructive, and protective, [and who] provide a certain kind of wisdom" (Rigney, 1998: 62). She has even described herself as a "conduit" for the tales of the tribes. "In choosing the name Sula, she just thought it 'was a nice colored girl's name'" (Russell, 1990: 97), only to find out from the Africanist Melville Herscovitz that in Tui (a dialect of the Ashanti language) Sula means water. Not only is Sula often associated with water in this text, but, as we have seen, images of water, fire, earth and wind are also signs or omens of events as well as representing aspects of the characters' personalities.

Naming a character is only one part of a lengthy process. The "naming and giving voice to one's experience" is an essential part of the process of politicisation, especially for silenced groups, but this process "must be linked to education for critical consciousness that teaches about structures of domination and how they function" (Hooks, 1989: 108). This is evident on various levels in *Sula*. The most obvious examples would be the naming of the Bottom, which is assimilated by its residents, and National Suicide Day. Other instances reveal the discovery of an identity, such as Shadrack's eventual recognition of self after

¹⁷ The New Zealander Sonja Davies (11.11.1923 to 12.06. 2005), who campaigned for women's rights, against the Vietnam War and for a nuclear-free New Zealand, was known as "Mrs Peace" (Dear, 2005: 27).

his loss of identity in the war, when he sees his black face in the prison toilet bowl (12-13), and Nel's initiation on this process when she looks in the mirror after her trip to the South with her mother: "I'm me. I am not their daughter. I'm not Nel. I'm me. Me" (28).

In her study of post-war women novelists from Simone de Beauvoir to Joyce Carol Oates, Lorna Sage argues that these novelists "are agents of *alterneity*, interested [...] in reinscribing the boundaries of fiction" (1992: x) (my emphasis). The novel has, moreover, "proved a lot more habitable than it looked to Beauvoir: uncovering its conventions has disclosed its power to define an invented place". Following a discussion of Joyce Johnson's *Minor Characters*, now a mere footnote to the story of the Beat Generation, and James Baldwin's disgusted response to Jack Kerouac's work — "to stand before someone else's mirror is", as Baldwin says, "to find yourself travestied and distorted" (Sage, 1992: 120)— she suggests that both women and black writers are "blessed" with an "extra awareness of the effort of invention involved"; even if the "world had prepared no place for them, except (naturally) as symbolising 'nature' in opposition to the dizzying acrobatics of culture". In the stories of such men writers as Kerouac and V. Nabokov, women represent continuity (Sage, 1992: 188). This might lead to the misconception that Morrison, acting as the "mythical matriarch" of African-American literature, would attempt to produce a home for her novels. However, Morrison's narratives are "spectacularly discontinuous, with time chopped up and voices in conflict — deliberate refusals to reproduce the world" (Sage, 1992: 179). One of her most vivid and explicit versions of a woman's uncanonical life is *Sula*. The pariah and outsider of the community, Sula is the artist who reconstructs it but refuses to reproduce it.

"Who else [other than J.C. Oates] could so exactly convey the subversive thought that there's *no end to it*?" Sage asks (1992: 191-92). My reply would be Toni Morrison, who proposes an effective model of resistance to (white) male literary theory located in counter-discursive practice, as she fuses textual practices from different conventions. Moreover, *Sula*'s story extends far beyond its specific "place" of the Bottom, by invading and challenging other communities, such as the home created in *Mrs Dalloway* by Virginia Woolf, a pioneer of twentieth-century (mainstream) feminism. Both works are initially set in roughly the same period when the principal male character returns from the front with combat neurosis. *Mrs Dalloway*'s Septimus Warren Smith commits suicide in 1923 and *Sula*'s Shadrack institutes National Suicide Day on January 3rd, 1920, which eventually leads to mass suicide in 1941.¹⁸ The community do not mean to enter the tunnel, but "their need to kill all" (161-62), particularly

¹⁸ Three months before Virginia Woolf met death by drowning.

the false promise of work given to the people living in the Bottom community in 1927¹⁹ and later, makes them set caution to one side. "High up on the bank ringing his bell", Shadrack is one of the few survivors. This self-inflicted death leads Katy Ryan to argue that it overtly participates in racial and class struggles; the suicides in Morrison's novels should not be perceived as "capitulation to dominant powers" but as part of "a larger multivalent narrative of black survival in North America" (2000: 1). Eileen Barrett observes, in turn: "While Woolf shows how England sacrifices individual white men to maintain its world dominance, Morrison shows how an entire black community is sacrificed to racist domination" (1994: 26), the "assertion of whiteness as ideology", as Morrison puts it (1990: 214). In relation to the main women characters, Clarissa Dalloway, deeply moved by Smith's suicide which distracts attention at her party in Westminster, represents this supremacist position; Sula Peace, who dies in 1940, is portrayed as a "new world black and new world woman", the "uncontrollable" and inspiringly imaginative artist who offers choices, accepts no preconceived form or theory and proposes a new image of the woman for our times.

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¹⁹ Marcus Garvey was deported to Jamaica in the same year.

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