

THE DISABLED BODY IN TONI MORRISON'S  
NOVEL *SULA*

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NOVEL SULA

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## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION: THE PERCEPTION OF THE BODY IN TONI MORRISON'S NOVEL *SULA* AND DISABILITY THEORY

The theoretical reflection on disability has provided a new understanding of how people react to the disabled body and how they relate to the body in general. This alone would justify approaching Toni Morrison's novel *Sula* through the lens of disability concepts and theories: the book features quite a number of disabled, ill and mad characters; more importantly, though, *Sula* is a novel about embodiment – a careful recording of the characters' experiences as felt and communicated through the body. Although there are times when the narrator expresses the characters' thoughts and feelings directly, more often than not the access to these thoughts and feelings are intermediated by the description of the body. One such example occurs when Nel Wright is travelling by train with her mother and watches the expression of three black soldiers shift from apathy to hatred: "She saw the muscles of their faces tighten, a movement under the skin from blood to marble. No change in the expression of their eyes, but a hard wetness that veiled them" (21-22). The narrator typically delays explaining the meaning of these shifts in the body – sometimes for entire chapters, and even indefinitely. As a result, the body assumes a central place in the novel, as the source of meanings and the source of the narrative: one has to "read" the self in the lines and traits of the body. In this particular example, Nel interprets the

men's expression as hatred towards her mother. Her explanation, however, is delayed until after the scene is over, and readers have had to imagine an interpretation of their own: anger, shame, disgust, and so on. In instances such as this, the readers can no longer rely on verbal cues to construct meaning; instead, they have to read the bodies of the characters in order to understand their stories. Morrison thus bridges the gap between the lived reality of people living through their bodies and the idea of characters as abstract collections of thoughts and feelings.

The emphasis on embodiment is more than a matter of "realism," or accuracy in recording people's lived experiences. *Sula* is not simply the story of bodies: it is rather a story of bodies confiscated and then reclaimed. There is the account of Shadrack, who is drafted into military service and who returns after the war to his hometown almost completely mad and so changed that people have trouble recognizing him. Then there is the story of Eva Peace, abandoned by her husband and unable to provide food for her children; the only way she can ensure that the children survive is to lay her leg on the railroad track and collect the insurance – or so the rumor goes among the people of the Bottom. There is also the story of Nel Wright and her loveless marriage to Jude, which turns her into a sort of accessory to her husband, "the hem – the tuck and hold that hid his raveling edges" (82). More threatening than war, or social institutions like marriage or motherhood, towering above all constraints, is the problem of racism. Children and adults, men and women are all affected by it. Before their neighborhood is razed to the ground, the black inhabitants of the Bottom gather to protest against being excluded from the building of New River Road. They dash into the incomplete tunnel at the end of the road and try to destroy it, but get caught underneath the ruins and die.

On the other hand, these stories end with the characters regaining control over their bodies. Shadrack's madness is a strategy for survival, an armistice he concludes with death and violence: he allows for one day in the year to be dedicated to "National Suicide Day," believing that in this way the rest of the year will remain beyond the scope of violence and death. This

armistice allows him to keep on living and prevents him from drifting into complete madness. Like Shadrack manages to extricate himself from complete madness, Eva Peace achieves independence – not only financial, but also from any kind of social pressures – through the sacrifice of her leg. Her self-mutilation is such a powerful gesture that it exempts her from further proving her motherly dedication to her children. No one doubts it except her daughter Hannah, and her granddaughter, Sula. After the accident, Eva abandons her role as a mother and becomes a “sovereign” instead. When her son turns to drugs and reverts to the helplessness of a child, Eva kills him and explains to Hannah that she can no longer be a mother: “there wasn’t space for him in my womb” (74). Unlike Eva, Nel is too weak to achieve independence on her own and is even unaware of the trivial role she is made to play in her marriage with Jude. On the other side, Sula, returning to Medallion after many years, understands immediately how manipulative and selfish Nel’s husband is. Sula’s words and actions set in motion a series of events that end in Jude’s departure; it is not until almost thirty years later that Nel understands how little Jude meant for her. Even the mass drowning in which so many of the Bottom’s inhabitants perish can be seen as a way of regaining control over the body and freedom to assign meaning to it: as the people destroy the tunnel, they erase the traces of their exclusion; they replace “the work of the thin-armed Virginia boys, the bull-necked Greeks and the knife-faced man who waved the leaf-dead promise” with their own bodies (161). They are now a permanent feature of the forbidden territory. The mass drowning expresses the determination to break racial boundaries, to encroach on what had belonged hitherto exclusively to the white people.

As it appears from these examples from *Sula*, violence and control are recurrent problems in relation to the body. In order to better understand images of embodiment in *Sula* without limiting the discussion to either race, gender or disability, I focus my argument on body difference. In particular, I am interested in the issues of assuming control over one’s body and connecting to others. I borrow terms and ideas from disability theory so as to clarify characters’

reactions in the novel and I occasionally pinpoint possible limitations or omissions in the theoretical models.

### 1. The concept of “normal” body

If the body is a constant preoccupation in the novel, disability by itself is not. Instead, Morrison follows the lines of intersection between disability, race and gender. In *Sula*, black characters, especially black women, are disproportionately vulnerable to violence and poverty. Disability scholarship is particularly useful for understanding how various forms of social oppression are interrelated. After identifying disability as “the missing term in the race, class, gender triad” (*Enforcing Normalcy* 1), Lennard Davis explains that all four concepts have undergone an identical ideological shift in the late eighteenth and nineteenth century, as a result of the emergence and hegemony of the “norm.” Far from being a natural, spontaneous concept, the norm is a set of concepts that have arisen from historical circumstances. Davis explains why the emergence of the norm created problems for bodies that do not conform to the it. Norm, Davis claims, is prescriptive: “The concept of a norm, unlike that of an ideal, implies that the majority of the population must or should somehow be part of the norm” (29). As a result, what was previously perceived as physical variation is interpreted from that point on as physical deviance that needs to be corrected. While Davis focuses almost exclusively on disability, he sets up a model that explains why there are commonalities among different types of oppression, whether they are rooted in race, nationality, gender, class or ability. His theory validates the insights of other writers reflecting on the confluence between disability and other types of oppression<sup>1</sup>. It also justifies an interpretation of the body in *Sula* from the perspective of disability models: such an approach does not only describe how the body responds to a crisis, but also how disability, madness and illness are related to issues such as racism and sexism. At the same time, however,

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<sup>1</sup> Arthur W. Frank, for example, describes illness narratives as a reaction against what he calls “medical colonization” by analogy to political colonization (10-13).

one must not minimize distinctions among various types of social oppression and even among different bodies. As Susan Wendell pointed out in relation to disabled people, one should not overlook the particularities of concrete bodily experiences: “Social oppression may be the only thing the disabled have in common; our struggle with our bodies are extremely diverse” (Davis, *Disability Studies Reader* 264). Indeed, the characters of *Sula* experience oppression very differently from each other: there are significant differences between men’s and women’s struggles, among various generations, and among people of various economic means. Even the two friends who are the main protagonists of the book, Nel Wright and Sula Peace, experience oppression very differently – to the degree that they become estranged for a considerable length of time. Thinking back on their childhood together, Sula sums up their relation as being “two throats and one eye” (147), capturing both the unity and separation between herself and Nel.

Other than providing a framework for mapping the correlation of disability, race and gender, disability studies have also provided tools for understanding cultural attitudes toward the body and how these attitudes change. Of particular interest for understanding *Sula* is the idea that the intrusion of illness and disability in people’s lives forces them to alter their attitudes towards the body. The new perceptions often challenge conventional body imagery and body-related values. For instance, disability literature and disability culture challenge the generally accepted idea of the human body as an autonomous being, isolated from other bodies and from its environment. Susan Wendell thus calls into question the ideal of autonomy and independence. She notes that such an ideal is unrealistic for people with disabilities, who often rely on help from others. For Wendell, our “cultural obsession with independence” leads to the stigmatization of disabled people. In order to counter the exclusion of the disabled, Wendell argues, we must revise our cultural attitudes: “we have to change social values to recognize the value of depending on others and being depended upon” (“Towards a Feminist Theory of Disability” 119). Without denying the importance of autonomy, Wendell argues that absolute independence is an untenable



ideal, not only for the disabled, but also for the able-bodied. She thus proposes the ideal of interdependence as an alternative. This alternative is not only an ethical choice – aimed at integrating the disabled into society – but also a more realistic approach to the body in general: “humans are not fully autonomous, but must always be understood in a condition of interdependence” (*The Rejected Body* 149). Debra Connors also insists that expectations of independence from others are at odds with the reality of human experience: “independence does not truly reflect anyone’s reality. As a species we are emphatically interdependent. Disabled people cannot be independent, not because we are pitiable or helpless but because we are human” (97).

In *Sula*, the issues of dependency and connectedness are explored from the perspective of the friendship between Sula Peace and Nel Wright as well as family relationships. Sula and Nel’s friendship is based not only on affinity, but also on a mutual need for another “presence”: long before they actually meet, the two girls have “already made each other’s acquaintance in the delirium of their noon dreams. They were solitary little girls whose loneliness was so profound it intoxicated them and sent them stumbling into Technicolored visions that always included a presence, a someone, who, quite like the dreamer, shared the delight of the dream” (51). The two girls’ friendship is in direct opposition to the sense of disconnection between family members. Their loneliness is the result of “distant mothers and incomprehensible fathers” (52), and their case is in no way singular. The Bottom is populated by an endless gallery of orphans, abandoned, or neglected children. The adults are just as vulnerable when they discover their disconnectedness from the others. Shadrack, Hannah Peace, and Eva Peace lose their desire to live when they understand how isolated they have become. After Eva loses her children – one gets married, the other two die – she feels life is unbearable; rather than feeling grateful toward the man who saved her life, Eva “cursed him every day for thirty-seven years thereafter and would have cursed him for the rest of her life except by then she was already ninety years old and forgot things” (77).

The precariousness of life in *Medallion* only amplifies the characters' dependence on each other, to the point that survival itself depends on the others. When Eva's husband abandons her with three little children, the only thing that saves them from starvation is the neighbors' kindness. At the same time, however, the novel exposes the perils of interdependency, like when Nel becomes possessive of her friend, or when motherly care degenerates into interference and control with the characters of Helene Wright and Eva Peace. The novel thus acknowledges the basic need for human connection, highlighting both the benefits and the trappings of interdependence.

Related to the idea of human interdependence is the concept of the body's connectedness to the environment. Texts recounting the experience of being wounded, sick or disabled describe the body as dependent on other bodies or objects in a far greater degree than the commonly thought. These foreign objects, through their constant vicinity to the disabled body, eventually come to be considered as a part of it; the apparent boundaries between the disabled person's body and the outer world become blurred. The disabled body is one with fluid boundaries, flowing outside its physical limits and including foreign bodies. In "A Cyborg Manifesto," Donna Haraway celebrates this blurring of the body's boundaries as a possibility for reconstructing the body freely. Haraway uses the metaphor of the cyborg to describe a body that undermines ideals of wholeness, unified identity and separateness. Instead, the cyborg stands for "partial identities and contradictory standpoints" (154) and it acknowledges its symbiotic relationship with machines: "Why should our bodies end at the skin, or include at best other beings encapsulated by skin? [...] For us, in imagination and in other practices, machines can be prosthetic devices, intimate components, friendly selves" (178). Haraway mainly writes from a feminist perspective, but suggests that her theory is equally relevant for other types of oppression grounded in physical difference, like race or disability. Writers like Susan Wendell and Tobin Siebers have pinpointed the limitations of Haraway's theory. The cyborg theory is one-sided, Siebers explains, as the body is not merely a cultural object that can be reshaped at will; it is also "a biological agent teeming

with vital and often chaotic forces [...], capable of influencing and transforming social languages as they are capable of influencing and transforming it” (Davis, *The Disability Studies Reader* 180). In a similar vein, Wendell writes: “I do not think my body is a cultural representation, although I recognize that my experience of it is both highly interpreted and very influenced by cultural [...] representations” (*The Rejected Body* 44). As for the relationship between the human body and prosthetic objects, Siebers feels that one should downplay the negative aspects of it. Alluding in part to Haraway’s cyborg theory, he writes: “Frequently, the objects that people with disabilities are forced to live with – prostheses, wheelchairs, braces, and other devices – are viewed not as potential sources of pain but as marvelous examples of the plasticity of the human form or as devices of empowerment” (177). The sense that the boundaries of the body, far from being fixed, are perpetually fluctuating leads to a feeling of vulnerability, but also of connectedness with the surroundings and belonging to the community of friends and family. These combined insights of these body theorists are useful for understanding the close, yet often uneasy relationship between the characters of *Sula* and their environment. The characters’ sense of identity emerges at the confluence of the body and the space they inhabit.

## 2. Arthur W. Frank and the ideal body

Other than the issue of physical pain, Haraway’s theory discards the problem of losing control over the body. While Haraway writes about the “responsibility” of reconstructing the body (149), Susan Wendell and Arthur W. Frank consider that, contrary to common perceptions, the ability to control the body is extremely limited. Wendell thus talks about the “myth of control” (*The Rejected Body* 93-94), while Frank writes that the body is by definition uncontrollable (49). In *The Wounded Storyteller* (1995), Arthur W. Frank explains that ill people imagine their bodies differently, and some of his conclusions are applicable to disabled people. For instance, features like the increased sense of the body’s unpredictability and the valuing of interpersonal relations are common to the perception of both illness and disability. In the second

chapter of the book, Frank couples body qualities to reactions that people have towards their ill bodies. The four features Frank selects are contingency, “the body’s condition of being subject to forces that cannot be controlled” (31), which can trigger reactions of acceptance or attempts to regain control (31-32); corporeality, or the condition of being “embodied,” with people becoming either associated or dissociated from their bodies (33-35); “shared corporeality,” or “the shared condition of being bodies,” with people imagining their bodies as either isolated (the “monadic” body) or in relation with others (the “dyadic” body) (35-37); finally, presence and absence of desire splits the bodies into productive ones and bodies lacking desire, respectively (37-40). As in the case of disabled bodies, the ill body, according to Frank, shares these features with healthy bodies, the only difference being that one of intensity. In healthy bodies, such qualities lie dormant or manifest themselves so subtly that they can be ignored; when illness (or disability) sets in, these same qualities are so exacerbated that people must acknowledge and explain them. Thus, Frank talks about “the fundamental contingency of life” (49) and, commenting on the issue of desire or lack thereof, remarks that: “This plot of desire lost and regained informs all lives at various points, but illness demands reflection on cycles of when desire is lacking and when the body produces desire” (39). Frank insists that his observations are not restricted to issues specific to illness, but extend to bodily experiences in general: “control, body-relatedness, other-relatedness, and desire [...] are *general* body problems” (29). As a consequence, Frank’s model can be applied to all instances of embodiment in *Sula*, not only those related to illness or disability.

Frank goes beyond describing possible attitudes toward the body: he assigns ethical value to them. Ideally, the body accepts its contingency, does not dissociate between the body and the self, places itself in relation with other bodies rather than emphasizing its individuality, and maintains its desire. The convergence of all these features produces what Frank terms the “communicative body”: “When a body that associates with its own contingency turns outward in

dyadic relatedness, it sees reflections of its own suffering in the bodies of others. When the body is a desiring one, the person wants and needs to relieve the suffering of others” (49). Frank’s model is particularly relevant for a discussion of Toni Morrison’s *Sula* because it can explain the various ways in which characters imagine their bodies, the peculiarity of their values, and, finally, the intertwining of attitudes toward the body and ethical choices.

### 3. Morrison’s version of the ideal body in *Sula*

In *Sula* as well, characters readjust their value system and their understanding of the body as they grapple with body crises like being displaced, or becoming aware of their vulnerability and mortality. From the variety of reactions to the perceived frailty of the body, an ideal response emerges: Sula’s. Much like the ideal disabled body described by Arthur W. Frank in *The Wounded Storyteller* (1995), Sula tolerates biological failure without dissociating herself from the body; she also seeks avidly to connect with others. At the same time, however, Sula’s character and the novel in general call into question the desirability of attitudes and characteristics that Frank seems to consider unequivocally positive. Most conspicuously, Morrison’s novel raises doubts about the altruism and sincerity of what Frank would call “placing one’s self and body within the ‘community of pain’, or being “a body *for* other bodies” (37); the mothers of *Sula* in particular are particularly disturbing figures, by turns nurturing, and murderous. Sula’s character mistrusts people’s desire to be part of a community in the absence of genuine affinity with the others. When her alienated friend reminds Sula of her isolation, she retorts: “Yes. But my lonely is *mine*. Now your lonely is somebody else’s. Made by somebody else and handed to you. Ain’t that something? A secondhanded lonely” (143). The novel does not question the value of relatedness; rather, it separates real involvement with the others from simple gregariousness. All too often, characters are shown flocking in groups out of cowardice and weakness. Sula, in particular, is sensitive to the malignancy of insincere social relations, especially inside families. The men come home looking for “milkwarm commiseration” and the married women have

“folded [...] into starched coffins, their sides bursting with other people’s skinned dreams and bony regrets” (122). Becoming part of a community forces one to be false not only to others, but also to oneself.

By exposing the darker sides of interpersonal relationships, the novel refines the concept of what Frank calls other-relatedness. More importantly, however, is the way *Sula* redefines crisis. For Frank, problems of embodiment appear at moments of discontinuity, when illness, for instance, disrupts the habitual patterns of life: “During illness, people who have always *been* bodies have distinctive problems *continuing* to be the same sorts of bodies they have been” (28). In contrast, *Sula* also shows the tediousness of continuity. The main character of the novel in particular experiences predictability as a crisis: as she lies in her bed dying, Sula is troubled by the sameness of life, not by the illness taking over: “That’s the same sun I looked at when I was twelve, the same pear trees. If I live a hundred years my urine will flow the same way, my armpits and breath will smell the same. My hair will grow from the same holes. I didn’t mean anything” (147). Rather than idealizing the healthy body, Sula perceives it at this moment as entirely prosaic. Rather than experiencing body continuity and predictability as either comforting or normal, she rejoices in change. Even the extreme consequence of illness, the ultimate proof of body frailty – death – appears to the character as a rebirth, completely devoid of negative connotations. Sula’s attitude cannot be explained merely through a yearning for novelty; its roots go back to her early years in the Bottom, when she notices the effects fear has on her friends. Nel and Shadrack are both afraid of violence and the perspective of losing control over their own bodies. In order to avoid the boys who bully her, Nel devises a long, complicated route to return home from school; she keeps up her daily routine of avoidance until Sula decides to put an end to this prolonged state of fear by confronting the boys. Shadrack is consumed by his preoccupation with avoiding danger to an even greater extent. Even if he has confined death to a single day in the year by instituting National Suicide Day, Shadrack is always fearful. He recognizes a kindred

spirit in Sula because he perceives terror in her eyes and he attributes it to the same fear of death that dominates his own thoughts. Both Shadrack and Nel become so preoccupied with avoiding death and danger that they fail to notice how fear has taken over their lives. Paradoxically, by attempting to maintain control at all times over their bodies and avoid violence, Shadrack and Nel lose their freedom entirely; for them, like for many other people in the Bottom, fear has become a permanent state. Therefore, Sula's refusal to place too much value on predictability can be seen as a refusal to be afraid.

To complicate Frank's model even further, the main characters of the novel question the idea of continuum between opposite states like order and chaos, life and death, permanency and mortality. Time and again, the characters in the novel witness the disturbing coexistence of what would seem mutually exclusive states: "taking no direction from the brain, the body of the headless soldier ran on, with energy and grace, ignoring altogether the drip and slide of brain tissue down its back" (8). Unlike in Frank's model, where the problem is loss of control, or "contingency," in *Sula* the crisis is triggered by the incongruous manifestation of both control and lack thereof, the overlapping of life and death, like in the example above. The characters in the novel must reconcile themselves not with the idea of mortality or loss of control, but with the hybrid quality of embodiment, its ability to harbor combines antagonistic states. By comparison, Frank's model is based on the assumption that the body imagines itself on a continuum between alternative impulses – the merging of opposite states of being is not taken into account.

Describing the range of reactions to the body's loss of control during illness, Frank writes: "As body-selves, people interpret their bodies and make choices: the person can either seek perfected levels of predictability, at whatever cost, or can accept varying degrees of contingency" (32). Frank continues to say that "most people do both, and strategies vary as to what is sought to be controlled, where, and how" (33), but the meaning here seems to be that people *successively* seek control and accept chaos in their bodily experiences, depending on the circumstances. Elsewhere,

Frank refers explicitly to chronological succession and uses a special metaphor to suggest the separateness of attitudes: “because the body is moving in time, the condition of any actual body represents a layering of types. Each of us is not one type or another, but a shifting foreground and background of types” (51). By contrast, the focus in *Sula* is on the *simultaneity* of conflicting body images and desires.

The body problems and the range of responses suggested in *Sula* are thus more complex and double-sided than the ones suggested in Frank’s study. The body’s fragility is as much a problem as its endurance. The body resists both dispersion and permanence. “The real hell of Hell is that it is forever,” Sula thinks (107) Her friend, Nel, feels the exact opposite: “Hell ain’t things lasting forever. Hell is change” (108). From an ethical perspective, the ideal body in *Sula* is deeply immersed in its own individuality; it is also thirsty for otherness and capable of empathy. Neither monadic nor dyadic, the ideal body in the novel is portrayed as engaged: participating fully and sincerely in the life of the self as well as in the life of others. By contrast, Frank proposes the communicative or “communing” body (49) as counteracting “modernist society’s emphasis on individual achievement” (37). Reading *Sula* through the lens of disability theories or concepts highlights both the power of these theories to clarify problems of embodiment and the need to revise certain ideas so as to reflect more accurately the variety of human experience.

In the second chapter of this paper, I use Lennard J. Davis’s concept of the “norm” to justify the connection between various types of oppression based on body differences. At the same time I show how Davis’s injunction to resist normalcy takes an interesting form in *Sula*. The novel does not only displace the “normal” body by foregrounding black, female, disabled characters; it invalidates the very assumptions on which the concept of norm rests, in particular, the idea that bodies are stable and therefore can be compared to a common standard. In Chapter III, I adapt Arthur W. Frank idea of “contingency and the ideal body types he describes to explain the numerous instances of violence in the novel and the characters’ reactions to violence. Finally



Chapter IV is a discussion of how ideals of interdependency (Wendell) and the “dyadic” body (Frank) compare to the ideal body in *Sula*.

## CHAPTER II

### RETHINKING THE “NORM”: THE UNSTABLE BODY

One similarity between the disabled body and the body in Morrison’s novel is the idea of instability. As Lennard J. Davis shows in *Enforcing Normalcy* (1995), the modern concept of normalcy revolves around measurable proportions and attributes. Thus, in order to understand the meaning of norm, one must, says Davis, turn to statistics. Davis’s analysis of the connection between the concept of norm and statistical science seems to underline another flaw in the conventional understanding of the body: the assumption that the body is stable. Unless the body’s characteristics are assumed to be stable, measurement cannot take place. Although Davis does not address the issue of the fundamental instability of the body<sup>2</sup>, discussing instead variation among different bodies, the two concepts seem to be related. As a result, resisting the “tyranny of the norm” (*Enforcing Normalcy* 29) entails postulating an unstable body, and then showcasing its manifestations.

*Sula* features inconsistent bodies, which defy classification. The bodies in the novel shift continuously from one state to the other; they often experience the simultaneous presence of conflicting states. One such instance occurs when twelve-year old Sula plays with a little boy by the shore of a river and accidentally causes him to drown, while her friend Nel is looking on:

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<sup>2</sup>In Chapter 6 of *Enforcing Normalcy*, Davis talks however about “the true self of the fragmented body” (139), as opposed to the illusory whole body. (126-157)

She picked him up by his hands and swung him outward then around and around. His knickers ballooned and his shrieks of frightened joy startled the birds and the grasshoppers. When he slipped from her hands and sailed away out over the water they could still hear his bubbly laughter. The water darkened and closed quickly over the place where Chicken Little sank. The pressure of his hard and tight little fingers was still in Sula's palms as she stood looking at the closed place in the water. They expected him to come back up, laughing. Both girls stared at the water. (60-61)

Sula and Nel perceive the body as present and absent at the same time. They can no longer see the boy, but they can still hear his laughter and feel the touch of his hand. This double-nature of the body is not merely the impression of a moment. At Chicken Little's funeral, the two girls feel that "only the coffin would lie in the earth; the bubbly laughter and the press of fingers in the palm will stay aboveground forever" (66). These scenes describe an unstable, or shifting body by playing opposites against each other – like life and death, containment (the coffin) and dissipation (the laughter), permanence (pressure of the boy's fingers) and interruption (the body swallowed by the water). Trudier Harris (1991) remarks on the contrast between "the peacefulness of the water [and] its destructive capabilities" when the river quietly engulfs the boy's body (81). She also notices how the characters give shape to a space that does not exist – at least not visually: "Repeatedly, the smoothness of the water into which Chicken Little sank is referred to as a "place," as if there is actually a marker there: 61, 'she stood looking at the closed place in the water'; 62, 'the dark closed place in the water'; 101, "the closed place in the water spread before them'; 118, 'on the bank of a river with a closed place in the middle'" (82). Even the memory of the event retains this duality: years after Chicken Little's death, Nel and Sula recall not only the laughter of the boy and the clasp of his hands, but also the gap underneath the water where his body must have fallen.

The passage thus foregrounds the ambiguities of the body, the wavering between equally authentic, if contradictory, states of being. Some characters in the novel have difficulties acknowledging this overlapping, and imagine ways to control it. Such is Shadrack, who invents National Suicide Day to prevent the possibility of death occurring during the rest of the year: “It was not death or dying that frightened him, but the unexpectedness of both. In sorting it all out, he hit on the notion that if one day a year were devoted to it, everybody could get it out of the way and the rest of the year would be safe and free” (14). Shadrack’s madness consists then of thinking that he can separate life and death and regulate their boundaries. By contrast, Sula imagines life and death as akin, with no boundaries of separation, so much so that she registers her own death as an imperceptible shift between the two states:

The effort to recall was too great; it loosened a knot in her chest that turned her thoughts again to the pain. While in this state of weary anticipation, she noticed that she was not breathing, that her heart had stopped completely. [...] Then she realized, or rather sensed, that there was not going to be any pain. She was not breathing because she didn’t have to. [...] She was dead. Sula felt her face smiling. ‘Well, I’ll be damned,’ she thought, “it didn’t even hurt. Wait’ll I tell Nel.” (149)

The description of Sula’s death contradicts not only the character’s own expectations, but most likely the readers’ as well, when the narrative ventures further than its usual scope. What both the narrator’s transgression and Sula’s journey into death shows is the artificiality of boundaries, literary or conceptual.

Ironically, Shadrack’s madness is caused by a traumatic event not unlike the one Nel and Sula witness, although much more violent in nature. The story of Shadrack begins with a battle scene during World War I. During the shellfire, Shadrack feels neither fear nor exhilaration, as he had expected, but a concrete and rather mundane sensation of increasing physical pain as a nail

pierces through his boot into his foot. His body is not only susceptible to being pierced, it also disperses into a hostile, potentially deadly environment: “The day was cold enough to make his breath visible, and he wondered for a moment at the purity and whiteness of his own breath among the dirty, gray explosions surrounding him” (8). The body is thus doubly vulnerable as it is exposed to exterior intrusions and tends to expand outside its limits. But these rather mundane sensations are negligible in comparison to what Shadrack sees next: “he turned his head a little to the right and saw the face of a soldier near him fly off. Before he could register shock, the rest of the soldier’s head disappeared under the inverted soup bowl of his helmet. But stubbornly, taking no direction from the brain, the body of the headless soldier ran on, with energy and grace, ignoring altogether the drip and slide of brain tissue down its back” (8). In the horror of the moment, Shadrack feels that the integrity of the body is illusory and that the boundaries of the body are frail and deceptive. The barriers of the body raises do not prevent it from disintegrating: neither helmet, nor skin or skull can protect the soldier’s body. The fragmented body harbors life and death simultaneously, both states equally forceful. The erasure of boundaries between apparently irreconcilable states torments Shadrack for months to come, until he finds enough strength to naively reestablish them.

Another instance of the shifting body in the novel exposes the prejudice of racial difference, even inside the black community. Helene Wright, daughter of a Creole prostitute, is relieved that her own child has inherited more distinctly black features. The passage reporting the mother’s appraisal of her child’s appearance is slightly comical, as Mrs. Wright is torn between rejoicing in Nel’s black traits while finding them downright plain and even wishing for some “improvement.” As the narrator puts it, Helene Wright felt “grateful, deep down in her heart, that the child had not inherited the great beauty that was hers: that her skin had dusk in it, that her lashes were substantial but not undignified in their length, that she had taken the broad flat nose of Wiley (although Helene expected to improve it somewhat) and his generous lips” (18). There

is, in Mrs. Wright's judgment, a direct relation between the body's appearance and its morality, and the long lashes of a baby predict a penchant toward moral looseness in later life. Helene imitates the behavior of her grandmother, who has shielded her from "her mother's wild blood" by raising her "under the dolesome eyes of a multicolored Virgin Mary" (15). As curious and far-fetched as Helene Wright's evaluation of her child might appear, her opinions are shared by the people in the Bottom. When Nel is twelve years old,

she was the color of wet sandpaper – just dark enough to escape the blows of the pitch-black truebloods and the contempt of old women who worried about such things as bad blood mixtures and knew that the origins of a mule and a mulatto were one and the same. Had she been any lighter-skinned she would have needed either her mother's protection on the way to school or a streak of mean to defend herself. (52)

Even the way one perceives race is thus informed by general attitudes towards the body: in this hypothetical case the narrator relates, the violence and moral sanction is justified by the belief that racial boundaries must be enforced. There is a clear conflation between physical features and moral values in this example of racial discrimination. The "pitch-black" children, exemplifying the "purity" of the race are thus called "truebloods"; as for Helene's mother, she is identified as a "Creole whore" for the most part, as if there is a relation between her mixed lineage and her occupation. The way Nel narrowly escapes prejudice and a darker color would have placed her in a vulnerable position, while her pitch-black peers enjoy a privileged status shows how intensely the characters in the novel are preoccupied with maintaining clear borders between races, however ambiguous real bodies are.

Thus, there emerge two opposite attitudes toward the body's instability: one of rejection, resulting in efforts to reassert the boundaries between different or opposite conditions; the other of acceptance, even celebration of it. Sula allows herself to experience freely, without fear, the

body's antagonistic tendencies. When she experiences the body's dissipation, she is able to connect with others, although death is always a threat. As the body turns inwards, "free of the possibility of distraction" (148), she is able to understand herself better, although she feels "a loneliness so profound that the word itself had no meaning" (123).

## CHAPTER III

### THE VULNERABILITY OF THE BODY – VIOLENCE AND RACISM

#### 1. Violence as contingency

As Trudier Harris observes, “in almost every one of the years Morrison pauses upon in *Sula*, a death occurs.” Not only that, but “all of them are violent [deaths]” (79). Many of these deaths are accidental, and come so unexpectedly that the body seems permanently on the brink of annihilation. The most harmless activities, like playing, sleeping and cooking, can bring about death in the most unexpected ways. This apparently permanent hovering over the edge of death explains why so many of the characters in the story consider taking all sorts of precautionary measures to protect themselves. From clothing to rituals, from the way they keep their houses to way they relate to other people, all the daily gestures are a reflection of this pervasive fear. In *The Wounded Storyteller*, Arthur W. Frank remarks that illness entails a sense of loss of control over an unpredictable body. People who cannot come to terms with the body’s unpredictability, or “contingency,” struggle to restore predictability and assume control of their bodies. Frank does not define contingency in medical terms, but more broadly as “the body’s condition of being subject to forces that cannot be controlled” (31).



There are three main sources of violence or endangerment in *Sula*: the manifestations of a violent God, racial and gender-related vulnerability and poverty. Often, these various types of vulnerability overlap, to the point that it becomes impossible to underpin the exact nature of a violent incident. Such is the case when many people of the Bottom die when they attempt to destroy “the tunnel they were forbidden to build” (161) and drown when a shield collapses. It is difficult to decide whether this tragedy is simply accidental or can be imputed to the denial of jobs to the people of the Bottom for over ten years. On top of this, the mass drowning takes place on National Suicide Day, a holiday celebrated only by the black people of Medallion. So in the seemingly straightforward, factual recounting of the event, the narrator introduces ambiguities that cannot be resolved.

## 2. Metaphysical contingency

Most interpretations of violence emanating from God are based on the passage from *Sula*, which explains why everyone in the Bottom is convinced that Sula is evil, yet they are reluctant to chase her out of town:

In their world, aberrations were as much a part of nature as grace. They would no more run Sula out of town than they would kill the robins that brought her back, for in their secret awareness of Him, He was not the God of three faces they sang about. They knew quite well that He had four, and that the fourth explained Sula. They had lived with various forms of evil all their days, and it wasn't that they believed God would take care of them. It was rather that they knew God had a brother and that brother hadn't spared God's son, so why should he spare them? (118)

Allen Alexander interprets the presence of a dangerous God in Morrison's novels as an echo of traditional African deities, with human attributes and not entirely benevolent. Unless the characters are assimilated into white culture, Alexander claims, they will reject “Western notions

of dualism, the belief that good and evil exist as separate forces” (300). While this seems to explain the passage about the four faces of God, the idea that belief in such a deity is a rejection of the duality good –evil doesn’t seem to work in *Sula*. Paradoxically, by casting all the responsibility of evil on Sula and turning her into a scapegoat (Reddy 39), the people of the Bottom cast themselves as innocent and effectively separate good from evil inside their community. The narrative of separation seems effective, changing them

in accountable yet mysterious ways. Once the source of their personal misfortune was identified, they had leave to protect and love one another. They began to cherish their husbands and wives, protect their children, repair their homes and in general band together against the devil in their midst. (117-18)

Despite this overflowing of generosity and love, the scapegoat strategy is essentially flawed, for the people of the Bottom are not really purged of meanness. The only change is that now their entire venom is concentrated against Sula – at least that’s how she imagines things to be: “Their eyes so intent on the wayward stranger who trips into their net, they were blind to the cobalt on their own back” (120). Thus, the act of purification is merely a matter of self-deception from the main character’s perspective. While the people in the Bottom feel they are keeping evil at bay by distancing themselves physically from it, Sula thinks their reaction stems from fear of acknowledging the duplicity of their own nature. By contrast, Sula practices introspection, reproaching herself for watching her mother burn and feeling “thrilled” (147), or detecting weaknesses to which she had thought she’d be impervious, such as becoming possessive about her lover. Thus, Sula paves the way for her friend’s journey from self-deceptive religiousness, which “hid from her the true motives for her charity” (139), to the final admission of what she really feels in the last lines of the book.

### 3. Racism and sexism as forms of contingency

The issues of racial oppression and oppression of women in Toni Morrison's novels have gained a lot of attention from critics, who have linked these concepts to the pervasiveness of violent imagery. In *Sula*, except for the death of Chicken Little, all other instances can be linked to discriminatory political and socioeconomic policies. Such is the draft policy in the case of the men who go to war, or the denial of jobs to the black people of Medallion, which angers them so much that they rush to their death unwittingly. This is certainly a more covert type of racism than what one character from the story experiences traveling south in a Jim Crow rail car, but the consequences are just as terrible. The repeated violence and the characters' efforts to assume control over their own bodies hints to the historical circumstances of post-slavery racism and the condition of women at the beginning of the twentieth century.

In spite of the abundance of violence and social oppression in the novel, *Sula* is not a story of victims. Quite the contrary: even as they seem at their most desperate moment, the main characters always find the means to survive. Marc Ledbetter suggests in *Victims and Postmodern Narrative or Doing Violence to the Body* that in Morrison's novels violence does not only summon images of death – it has a decisive role in identity formation:

Characters see and understand themselves and the world most profoundly when in the grip of terror. Using tradition, apocalyptic language, the restoration of the self develops through a spiritual journey that involves violence and chaos which takes characters to the extremes of human endurance and, in turn, allows, even forces, self-discovery" (37-38).

It is true that characters often learn from traumatic experiences: they develop strategies for survival or ways to intimidate, punish, or protest against those who have wronged them. But just as often, they fail, giving in to fear or indulging in self-deprecation. Such an example is Jude Greene. After attempting vainly to get a "manly" job building a new road in Medallion, Jude

understands that neither him, nor the other black men from the Bottom will ever get hired. Determined “to a man’s role anyhow,” he decides to get married so as to have “someone to take care about his hurt” (82), “someone to shore him up” (83). Surely enough, Jude’s married life is just what he imagined it would be: Nel, attentive to her husband’s needs, provides sympathy whenever Jude comes back home complaining about “white man running it” and eager to share “some whiney tale that peaked somewhere between anger and a lapping desire for comfort” (102-103). Although the discrimination is real, Jude’s behavior takes away all remnants of dignity he had left. Even worse, Jude’s need for comfort only creates more misery around him, for when the burden of family life becomes too heavy, he simply leaves.

As a counterpart to these stories of failure, *Sula* describes the ways in which characters reinvent themselves in order to survive. The “1919” chapter at the beginning of the book recounts Shadrack’s war experience and subsequent madness. The focus is not really on recalling the ravages of the war: the description of Shadrack’s military life takes less than a page in the novel. Rather, the chapter follows Shadrack as he slowly invents another way of being and a different way of looking at the world around him. Although people in the Medallion are shocked to see him so changed and find themselves regretting the young man he was before the war, Shadrack’s ability to rebuild an identity and place some order in his vision of the world is nonetheless impressive and it is described in the book as a rebirth: “the first sleep of his new life [was] deeper than the hospital drugs; deeper than the pits of plums, steadier than the condor’s wing; more tranquil than the curve of eggs” (14). There is no hint of defeat or weakness in this passage, despite the fact that Shadrack never regains his sanity. Paul Gilroy, commenting on *Beloved*, confirms that madness can be one of the possible “strategies for survival” (221). Thus, Gilroy talks about “deliberately going mad in order, as one of the characters says in the book, ‘in order not to lose your mind’” (221). Gilroy’s remark explains Shadrack’s relative success in resuming a

more or less normal life among the people of the Bottom, who in their turn come to accept him as one of theirs.

Other veterans in the book, who return home sane, have to suffer the indignities of racial prejudice. As Eileen Barrett observes, during the 1920s, the black soldiers returning from the Great War found that, in spite of their sacrifice, they were still subject to racial persecution; their return home in 1919 was marked by the highest number of lynchings in the United States (29). The veterans that Helene Wright and her daughter see on the train, in the train car for “colored only,” have “closed face” and “locked eyes”; even their hatred is internalized, a mere “movement under the skin” (21). Plum, the beloved son of Eva Peace, returns from war a heroin addict, exasperating his mother with his weakness until she sets him on fire.

Racial discrimination ranges from political oppression to economic disempowerment. Following the relative prosperity of the war, new building projects are planned for Medallion, but they exclude giving work to the black people of the Bottom. The geographic exclusion of the black community is mirrored by an economic exclusion. The very first pages of the book describe the relationship between the white community of Medallion and the black people in the Bottom as one of economic inequality. The white men who come to the Bottom are in the business of “collecting rent or insurance payments” (4), while the black spoon carvers have been out of work for eight years. The story of how the Bottom began describes a new kind of racial oppression, one that is not based on political, but economic disempowerment: “A good white farmer promised freedom and a piece of bottom land to his slave if he would perform some very difficult chores. When the slave completed the work, he asked the farmer to keep his end of the bargain. Freedom was easy – the farmer had no objection to that. But he didn’t want to give up any land” (5). So the farmer gives his former slave some land up in the hills, reassuring him that “It’s the bottom of heaven – best land there is” (5). Towards the end of the novel, the problem of economic deprivation becomes even more keenly felt. When survival is rendered impossible for the people

of the Bottom, they rebel but they only manage to kill themselves. Katy Ryan (2000), addressing the idea of suicide and the larger issue of violence in Morrison's novels, rejects the idea of passivity and victimization. For Ryan, the body in these novels is not a prey to traumatic circumstances; instead, it derives power from its ability to withstand violence, from its willingness to place itself into harm's way, as it were. Ryan thus talks about "revolutionary suicide" in the case of the mass drowning under the tunnel:

Suicide Day leads not to glorified, individual deaths but to a political protest in which identity is collective: The bodies of the indistinguishable Deweys are never found, and no one knows who went first. For those people in the Bottom who "did not believe that death was accidental life might be, but death was deliberate" (90)-the march toward the tunnel advances with a fatal intention. (402)

The account of the event seems to confirm Ryan's observations, for the narrator insists on the high spirits of the crowd marching down towards the tunnel, "as though there really was hope" (160). The people from the Bottom clearly feel that their protesting would effect a change. The drowning of the people foreshadows the involvement in the second World War and new waves of killings among the black, for the year is 1941 and hope for a change still "kept them excited about other people's wars" (160). As Ryan puts it, "by the next January 3, Shadrack's National Suicide Day will be replaced by an international one"(402). Thus the novel comes full circle: although the participation in the first World War had not brought about the freedom that black people expected, the people in the Bottom are ready to march towards death once again.

As for the black female characters in *Sula*, their plight is even worse than that of men, for they enjoy even less freedom. Nel and Sula are only twelve, but they already understand the limitations of their status: "Because each had discovered years before that they were neither white nor male, and that all freedom and triumph was forbidden to them, they had set about creating

something else to be” (52). For Sula, the only alternative is to reject the role of motherhood, for only in this way can she enjoy the same freedom as the men. She confesses without hesitation to her friend Nel that even if she had children she would abandon them to preserve her freedom: “I really would act like what you call a man. Every man I ever knew left his children” (143). Unlike Nel, who describes independence as “acting like a man,” Sula feels that freedom and caring for one’s children are not roles that belong naturally to either men or women. For Nel, who feels she needs to provide for her children, freedom comes much later, when they no longer need her. In 1965, Nel can afford to look around her, because there is nothing else to do. Remembering the past, she sorts she is able to finally separate between the irrelevant things in her life and the truly important. Neither the loss of husband or the estrangement of her children pain her, but only the loss of her friend, Sula.

#### 4. Arthur Frank’s body types and the characters of *Sula*

Whether violence and oppression are related to race, gender, or the general human condition, the reactions to violence approximate the responses to contingency that Arthur Frank describes. Some of the central characters in *Sula* veer towards acceptance, others towards rejection of the body’s unpredictability. Shadrack is an example of what Frank calls “disciplined” bodies, who fear most of all loss of control and attempt to reassert “predictability.” One of the most painful discoveries Shadrack makes after watching a soldier die is that the body is unpredictable. After coming out of shock, he “looked around for his hands. His glance was cautious at first, for he had to be very careful – anything could be anywhere” (8). Shadrack’s later efforts aim to restore the body’s predictability by reestablishing its boundaries and setting up barriers between the body and the chaotic world outside. His body recovers meaning and functionality inside his shack by the river, which he keeps militarily neat and clean. Time is also segmented carefully, with days of soberness clearly separated from days where he drinks, and destruction and madness concentrates in the third day of January so it does not “contaminate” the

rest of the year. To ensure that the body is safe from outside intrusions and is prevented from dispersing itself, characters like Shadrack imagine or build defensive walls, and their efforts are reflected in the narrative by what Patricia McKee calls “patterns of containment” or “patterns of expulsion” in “Spacing and Placing Experience in Toni Morrison’s *Sula*.” McKee associates the patterns of containment with Shadrack and Helene Wright, “who practice strict containments and limitations of experience that keep things in their places” (7) and the patterns of expulsion with the Peace women, who “enforce violent expulsions from their houses and their bodies, intent on getting rid of things and keeping their distance rather than keeping order” (10).

Shadrack tries to regain a sense of safety by reinforcing the boundaries of his body: he feels safe when he is put in a straightjacket in the hospital and is able to find a sense of identity when he is locked in a prison cell. Shadrack constantly fears that, unless the body keeps itself strictly delimited from the outward world, loss of identity and death will occur. His fears are confirmed later in the novel, when water swallows up Chicken Little’s body, and the fire “licking [Hannah’s] blue cotton dress” dissolves barriers and destroys her body. Shadrack’s desire to reestablish the limits of the body is obvious when, after regaining self-awareness in the hospital, he stares apprehensively at the food tray hoping that the food would not flow outside the set boundaries. There are multiple correspondences between the description of food and the human body, and the entire scene echoes the previous description of the soldier’s helmet turned “soup bowl” (8):

Before him a tray was a large tin plate divided into three triangles. In one triangle was rice, in another meat, and in the third stewed tomatoes. A small round depression held a cup of whitish liquid. Shadrack stared at the soft colors that filled these triangles: the *lumpy whiteness* of rice, the *quivering blood* tomatoes, the grayish-brown *meat*. All their repugnance was contained in the neat balance of the triangle - a balance that soothed him, transferred some of its equilibrium to him. Thus reassured that the white, the red and



the brown would stay where they were – *would not explode or burst forth from their restricted zones* – he suddenly felt hungry and looked around for his hands. (8, my emphasis)

When searching for his hands, Shadrack discovers two “lumps beneath the beige blanket on either side of his hips” (9). The cover satisfies the need for a containing structure, which projects a sense of order and ensures that the matter is not exposed and does not spread over. But when Shadrack uncovers his hands as he tries to eat, he imagines seeing them prolonged monstrously into fingers: “Slowly he directed one hand toward the cup and, just as he was about to spread into fingers, they began to grow in higgledy-piggledy fashion like Jack’s beanstalk all over the tray and the bed” (9). Barriers set up to protect the body’s integrity end up having the opposite effect when they melt together and fuse with the body. Since death in *Sula* often occurs when the body fails to maintain separateness between itself and the bordering surfaces, Shadrack’s terror at feeling his fingers fuse with his shoelaces is understandable.

Helene Wright’s attitude is very similar to Shadrack’s: for her, too, the body’s unpredictability is a source of worry. Taking her grandmother’s advice, Mrs. Wright is “constantly on guard for any sign of her mother’s wild blood” (17)/ From her point of view, the body is or needs to be under constant supervision, rigidly controlled so that it remains safely within certain limits. For Helene Wright, these limits are not physical, as they are for the war veteran; instead, she places her life inside certain moral, racial and class-related norms that she follows rigorously and imposes on her daughter.

Coming from the South, Helene Wright is keenly aware of the perception, among white people, that black people are somehow subhuman. Even in Ohio, she feels that she needs to be permanently on the guard so as not to confirm such expectations, and the reactions of some white characters in the novel prove her right. For instance, a white bargeman is asking himself “When

[...] will those people ever be anything but animals” (63). Eager to distance herself from such perceptions, Mrs. Wright embraces white middle class values: keeping her house perfectly clean and orderly, she is a woman with unflinching views on morality and eager to stress her relative economic prosperity. Helene Wright’s love for order and control are defined and imposed from the outside, from her desire to replicate the image of the white body and the values that she associates with white middle-class society. Although she is content with her own appearance, Helene cannot help but feel that her daughter’s features need to be corrected as much as possible. Nel’s “generous lips” (18) and “plain brown eyes” (28) are beyond repair, but the “broad, flat nose” (18) can be lengthened with a clothspin and the unruly hair straightened with the hot comb. (55). This is what Arthur Frank calls the “mirroring body” – one that “grooms itself in conformity to an internalized set of ideal images” (44). Frank’s definition only applies, however, if by “body image” one understands not only a set of physical features but also a set of values associated to a specific body type. In Helene Wright’s case, the traits she attributes to the white body seem to include moral and religious righteousness as well as economic ease.

Among the black people of the Bottom, in *Medallion*, Helene cuts an impressive figure: she is a respected authority among them, but when she takes a train back to New Orleans to visit her dying grandmother, all the frailty of her persona is exposed. As soon as Helene gets on the train, the conductor rebuffs her for crossing through a whites only rail car, and adds unceremoniously: “Now git your butt on in there” (21). In spite of all her beauty and elegant demeanor, Helene is still a “gal” (18). Left without resources, Mrs. Wright sheepishly smiles back at the conductor and obeys, to the silent anger of the other black passengers. The train misadventure shows how untenable Helene Wright’s attitude is, both because it’s ineffective and because it isolates her from her peers. Even her daughter, Nel, who witnesses the event, makes a resolution never to retrace her mother’s steps.

Helene Wright's desire to replicate the white body extends to her daughter: "While you sittin' there, honey, go 'head and pull your nose,'" she suggests to Nel at some point in the story. But after the trip to the South and especially after becoming friends with Sula, Nel starts to reject her mother's values; she has no interest in either lengthening her nose or straightening her hair: "after she met Sula, Nel slid the clothpin under the blanket as soon as she got on the bed, [...] and although [...] there was still the hateful comb to suffer through each Saturday evening, its consequences – smooth hair – no longer interested her" (55). This introduces the next feature in Frank's body typology that explains how characters in the novel relate to each other: other-relatedness. The most appropriate example to illustrate the positive side of other-relatedness is the friendship between Nel Wright and Sula Peace. The closeness between Nel and Sula compensates for the isolation they feel inside their own families and allows them "to grow on": "Daughters of distant mothers and incomprehensible fathers (Sula's because he was dead; Nel's because he wasn't), they found in each other's eyes the intimacy they were looking for" (52). The paragraph also points out the danger of dysfunctional relations, and especially the problems of estrangement inside families. The novel contrasts the falsity of family life to the friendship of Nel and Sula until the very last lines of the book.

Eva Peace, Sula's grandmother on the other side, would be best described as a "dominating" body, which "defines itself in force" and "assumes the contingency of disease but never accepts it." At the same time, "the [dominating] body's will turns against the other rather than toward itself" (Frank 46). Although she misses one leg, Eva does not hide it, but rather accentuates its absence by wearing mid-calf dresses. Her disability is a source of power, as she tells the children frightening stories about the loss of her leg and intimidates adults by proudly displaying both the empty space where below her left thigh and the intact right leg. This display is not so much a matter of coquetry as it is a way of asserting power and control: her right leg is described as being not beautiful, but "magnificent" and "glamorous." Disability for both Eva

and, later, Sula, is the result and the means to assert control and impose their will. Like her grandmother, Sula is intuitively aware that the mutilated body has the ability to control through fear or intimidation. When the white older boys try to harass her and her friend, Sula scares them off by slashing off the tip of her finger. Her gesture does not come from fear, like Nel imagines later, or from defiance, but rather from a desire to protect her friend. Eva, who is forced by circumstances to sacrifice her leg in order to provide for her children, Sula makes a very deliberate decision to confront the boys. Although Nel and Sula could continue avoiding the Irish boys by taking a different route home, Sula decides one day they should take “the shortest way” home, knowing that they will meet the bullies. While Sula’s only regret is that she had cut off “only the tip of her finger” (54), Eva is overwhelmed by hatred for the man who abandoned her and caused the loss of her leg, BoyBoy.

Eva’s increasing desire to retain control, resulting in the death of both her children, will ultimately lead to her downfall. Similarly, when Sula becomes possessive of her lover, Ajax, she loses him. Possessiveness and control appear to be a matter of boundaries losing their flexibility and growing rigid, restricting freedom of movement and hurting the body, like Shadrack’s shoes: “Exhausted, his feet clotted with pain, he sat down at the curbside to take off his shoes. He [...] fumbled with the laces of the heavy high-topped shoes. [...] he fought a rising hysteria that was not merely anxiety to free his aching feet; his very life depended on the release of the knots” (12). Eva’s house/womb cannot expand to contain a full-grown man, and Ajax detects “the scent of the nest” (133) in Sula’s tidied up house. The tendency to impose order and cleanliness is associated throughout the book with the self within fixed boundaries. Although characters sometimes desire a sense of order in their lives and the community privileges it over any indication of chaos, the connotations of order and (fixed) boundaries tend to become increasingly negative as the story progresses.

For instance, as characters search for safe boundaries to contain their bodies, they discover that seclusion inside protective walls is not necessarily safe. Karin Luisa Badt, in her article on the psychological and political interpretations of the “incessant literary return to the mother” (567) in Morrison’s novels, analyzes the characters’ desire to hide the body inside protective walls as a longing to return to the womb. Badt also describes the dangers of searching for safety: “There are those who are subsumed by the mother, never to return. Fusing and merging with the mother, one risks self-annihilation” (574). This is precisely what happens to Plum, a heroin addict after his return from the war, who is killed by his mother because of his helplessness. When Eva tries to justify her act to Hannah, she explains that “there wasn’t space for him in my womb. And he was crawling back” (71).

The best example of the “communicative” body, which “accepts its contingency as part of the fundamental contingency of life” and sees itself as part of a community is Sula in the last part of the novel. Having accepted in turn the body as contingent (she witnesses calmly the body suffering and dying, including her own) and yielding control over the body (she understands that it would have been useless to try to take control over her lover’s body the way Eva Peace controlled the bodies of the people she loved), Sula’s last thoughts recorded in the novel are for her friend, Nel. What distinguishes Sula from Nel and all the other people from the Bottom is her relentless curiosity and her frankness, towards herself as much as toward others. Sula is impervious to conventional morality to such a degree that some commentators have described her as “clearly immoral” (Harris 78). Sula’s apparent lack of empathy for any other human being, in particular is probably her most troubling characteristic, as it is “antithetical to the tenets of the community and to most human relationships” (Harris 79). This is certainly the reason for Sula’s isolation in the Medallion community, where she is feared even by her grandmother. However, Sula does not see herself as amoral; on the contrary, she points out to her friend that she might be the “good” one. In other words, Sula has built her own ethical system, one that is as demanding

and precise perhaps as Nel's Christian values. At the center of it is the need to venture out of the trodden path. As Terry Otten explains in his study of the theme of the fall in Morrison's novels, the author of *Sula* "projects a fortunate fall idea through characters who must destroy the false identity ascribed to them as blacks in a spurious 'garden.' Those co-opted by the system, such as [...] Helene Wright [...], or those totally victimized by it [...] suffer unredeemable defeat. Only those courageous enough and strong enough to risk freedom gain a measure of victory" (67). If Otten's analysis is correct, then the final conversation between the two friends makes sense, as Sula's parting words are an invitation for Nel to reconsider her values:

"How do you know?" Sula asked.

"Know what?" Nel still wouldn't look at her.

"About who was good. How do you know it was you?"

"What do you mean?"

"I mean maybe it wasn't you. Maybe it was me." (146)

As this passage suggests, it is not only the individuals who have to reinvent themselves, but the community as well, questioning its moral standards, stretching the limits of its tolerance and, like Sula, imagining a different morality. Sula redefines sin as the refusal to fall: when she thinks of her neighbors in Medallion, she imagines them as

spiders whose only thought was the next rung of the web, who dangled in dark dry places, suspended by their own spittle, more terrified of the free fall than the snake's breath below. [...] If they were touched by the snake's breath, however fatal, they were merely victims and knew how to behave in that role [...]. But the free fall, oh no, that required- demanded – invention, a thing to do with the wings, a way of holding the legs

and most of all a full surrender to the downward flight if they wished to taste their tongues or stay alive. (120)

Sula's beliefs are in stark contrast to Christian ideas of innocence; for her, there are no innocent victims, only complacent ones. The only responsibilities are survival and self-knowledge.

Another passage that highlights how different Sula's perception is from the other characters describes how she imagines her lover's body:

If I take a chamois and rub real hard on the bone, right on the ledge of your cheek bone, some of the black will disappear. It will flake away into the chamois and underneath there will be gold leaf. I can see it shining through the black. I know it is there ... [...]

And if I take a nail file or even Eva's old paring knife – that will do – and scrape away at the gold, it will fall away and there will be alabaster. The alabaster is what gives your face its planes, its curves. That is why your mouth smiling does not reach your eyes. Alabaster is giving it a gravity that resists a total smile. [...]

Then I can teach a chisel and small tap hammer and tap away at the alabaster. It will crack then like ice under the pick, and through the breaks I will see the loam, fertile, free of pebbles and twigs. For it is the loam that is giving you that smell. (130)

Many critics interpret this passage as a redefining of beauty. To Katherine Stern, for example, this passage suggests an added ethical component to beauty. First, Stern explains, this passage challenges and replaces the Western perception of beauty as visual and objective. It requires participation, involvement and warmth on the part of the beholder: “In [Morrison]’s narratives, beauty depends on the beholder’s craft or intention and results from labor upon the body either by the hands or the imagination” (Conner 78-79). More importantly, this kind of beauty that one

creates through touch and imagination highlights the constructedness of body images and includes an ethical dimension that Western aesthetics neglects:

Morrison is fascinated by how the imagination comes to bear on the sense of touch to produce or stage beauty. She invents scene after scene in which these two aspects of aesthetic response, touch and imagination, conspicuously oppose or counter-balance the visual and objective tendencies of western thinking about beauty. However, Morrison's shift of attention to the tactile and imaginary does not serve merely to evade the problems of visual beauty [...]. Rather, [...] her "beauty formula" seems to define a necessarily ethical and inclusive response to human bodies, one that extends tenderness to every person and precludes doing harm. (Conner 79)

As Katherine Stern suggests, this passage seems to highlight a new and ethically "appropriate" understanding of beauty. Interestingly, the entire process is likened to the work of a sculptor carving into bone, gold and alabaster. These repeated allusions serve to contrast the idealized beauty depicted in art and the reality of particular bodies. The passage certainly reinstitutes the human body as the primary site of beauty rather than a certain artistic vision of it, as Sula feels compelled to go beyond the "bone," the "gold" and the "alabaster" to find her answer. At the same time, the unmoving beauty of the art object is devalued in this text: no longer a sign of imperishable beauty, the alabaster mask has a rigid quality that impoverishes A's smile: "The alabaster is what gives your face its planes, its curves. That is why your mouth smiling does not reach your eyes. Alabaster is giving it a gravity that resists a total smile" (130) One might therefore infer from Morrison's book, that beauty lies primarily in change, , in the plasticity of the living body and nature, not in the frozen object of art. Lack of change is certainly what Sula abhors most. At the same time, the emphasis is placed equally on Sula's experience of the beautiful, the fleeting perception that she strives for, as it is on A. Thus, Morrison rewrites beauty: neither objective nor subjective, it derives from a feeling of human interconnectedness in



which both sides are equally important. At the same time, beauty is not a distinct event, separable from the rest of one's existence; it is only one single strand in a multiplicity of experiences, along with love, happiness and the search for authenticity in the case of Sula.

## CHAPTER IV

### CONNECTEDNESS – THE SELF AND THE COMMUNITY

In *Sula* violence on its own is not as damaging as some characters' responses to it. For instance, Nel despises her mother when she notices how servile Helene acts toward white people and how frightened she is of them. Jude, BoyBoy and many of the men in the novel are perceived as weak and childlike, as they are entirely dependent on women to support themselves financially, or to regain some sense of self-confidence. When BoyBoy returns to Medallion to visit his former wife and flaunt his newly found prosperity and his last conquest, Eva is not taken in by this show of independence. She likens BoyBoy's overblown confidence to that of a child who has mastered some ordinary skill:

Eva looked out of the screen door and saw a woman in a pea-green dress leaning on the smallest pear tree. Glancing back at him, she was reminded of Plum's face when he managed to get the meat out of a walnut all by himself. Eva smiled again, and poured the lemondade. (36)

A generation later, Jude Greene repeats BoyBoy's fate. His marriage is nothing more than an alibi meant to conceal how helpless and needy he is: "He needed someone to care about his hurt, to care very deeply. [...] And if he were to be a man, that someone could no longer be his mother" (82). Without downplaying the impact of violence and racism, *Sula* is concerned mostly with how characters' responses have a negative impact on their own lives and on the lives of others, more so than the economic and social conditions. Above all, the novel seems to suggest, people are responsible for what they do and how they relate to others.

In spite of the presence of violence in their lives, many of the characters in *Sula* manage to build friendships and retain a sense of connectedness with the others and with one's environment. Arthur W. Frank, referring to possible responses to illness speaks of "placing one's self and body within the 'community of pain'" (37). On a more general level, terms like "inclusion," "access," "connectedness" on one side and "exclusion," "isolation," and "segregation" on the other side keep resurfacing in discussions about disability, whether the main concern is the civil rights of people living with disabilities or the need to rethink cultural attitudes and concepts. "Normal" bodies privilege autonomy, separateness and wholeness, while disabled authors present the body as living in a relationship of symbiosis with its surroundings, neighboring bodies and objects. The two differing perceptions of the body's relation to the environment are more than a strictly physical matter; they influence the way identity is imagined and the degree to which individuals consider themselves as discrete entities or undistinguishable parts of a community. Connectedness lies at the core of the disabled community's identity. Describing the criteria for selecting the literary works which would be included in his anthology of writings of disabled authors, Kenny Fries explains: "If asked what, beside the fact that all the work in *Staring Back* has been written by a writer who lives with a disability and that I chose each piece first and foremost for its literary merit, binds together this work, I must reply it is the theme of human connection – connection with the past, connection one another, connection with our bodies, connection with ourselves" (3). Disability literature and disability culture thus propose an alternative to the generally accepted concept of the body as independent and isolated from other bodies. Texts recounting the experience of being wounded, sick or disabled describe a body with fluid boundaries, flowing outside its visible physical limits to incorporate "foreign bodies" as parts of one's identity. Whether these are animate (friends, family members or lovers) or inanimate (prostheses, wheelchairs, houses, places) there is a pervading feeling of communion between the body and its surroundings, enhanced by the suggestion that the boundaries of the body, far from being fixed, are perpetually fluctuating. In *Sula*, the relation between the black

community and the place where they live exemplifies the close connection between self and the environment, while the friendship between Sula Peace and Nel Wright emphasizes the need for human connectedness.

#### 1. Relation between the body and its environment

From the very first lines, the book shows people and the place they inhabit coexisting in an organic relation:

In that place, where they tore the nightshade and blackberry patches from their roots to make room for the Medallion City Golf course, there was once a neighborhood. It stood in the hills above the valley town of Medallion and spread all the way to the river. It is called the suburbs now, but when black people lived there it was called the Bottom. (4)

Both the place and the people are shaped by the presence of the other. In order to make place for the golf course and the suburbs, the buildings as well as the trees of the Bottom must be brought down; the hills change their name, not only their appearance, after the black community leave. In their turn, the former inhabitants of the Bottom undergo significant changes: scattered all over the valley and farther away from Medallion, they no longer form a community. As Nel Wright ponders in the “1965” chapter, “there weren’t any places left, just separate houses with separate televisions and separate telephones and less and less dropping by” (166). People are so much attached to the place they inhabit that the novel portrays racism as denial of land. The “nigger joke” in the opening chapter explains how the black people were banished from the fertile valley land to the hilly surroundings of Medallion, and the end of the novel reports yet another exodus, thus placing the black community in a state of eternal “homelessness”

To reinforce the idea of racial oppression, the narrator tracks the complete erasure of the past as the Bottom turns into the Medallion City Golf Course. As the metaphor of uprooting suggests, the displacement of the black community is a form of annihilation: the erasure of

geographical features results in the erasure of the people who have once inhabited the place: “The beeches are gone now, and so are the pear trees where children sat and yelled down through the blossoms to passersby” (3). On the other hand, the novel cancels this double erasure of the place and its people by bringing before the eyes of the reader the entire community with its quirky inhabitants and their sometimes strange lives. At the same time, the new hills are described as a sort of non-place, as Nel describes it. In order to build the golf course, the contractors must remove all shape, color, smell and human presence from the land. They must “level the stripped and faded buildings that clutter the road,” “raze” and “knock to dust” all buildings until “there will be nothing left of the Bottom” (3). The entire novel is thus a process of restitution of a place and its people through memory.

Perhaps no other character embodies the close connection between place and the self like Shadrack. His experience during World War I in France suggests that the memory of his hometown is as much part of his being as his “grave black face” (13). Only these two certainties remain after the shock of the war has erased everything else from Shadrack’s mind. While all other memories are forgotten, the image of the Bottom and its people persists: “He saw a window that looked out on a river which he knew was full of fish. Someone was speaking softly just outside the door...” (10). This memory gives Shadrack a sense of direction and purpose when he doesn’t even know who he is and saves him from complete madness. Even if he is equipped with a set of “very official looking papers,” Shadrack’s only certainties are the concreteness of his body and the existence of a place where he belongs:

Twenty-two years old, weak, hot, frightened, not daring to acknowledge the fact that he didn’t even know who or what he was... with no past, no language, no tribe, no source, no address book, no comb, no pencil, no clock, no handkerchief, no rug, no bed, no can opener, no faded postcard, no soap, no key, no tobacco pouch, no soiled underwear and nothing nothing nothing to do... he was sure of one thing only: the unchecked

monstrosity of his hands. He cried soundlessly at the curbside of a small Midwestern town wondering where the window was, and the river, and the soft voices just outside the door... (12)

The reassurance of a place and a community to which he belongs gives Shadrack the strength to confront what he really is and reach Medallion – damaged, but alive.

Shadrack is not the only inhabitant of Medallion who derives a sense of self from the place he inhabits. Space is so important for the characters in *Sula* that, often, the relation between character and place is the first thing the narrator describes. Thus, the chapter on Helene Wright starts with the intriguing statement that “It had to be as far away from the Sundown House as possible” (17), announcing the Helene’s fear of racial discrimination, as well as her rejection of the past and her own self. Once the importance of placement is established, the narrator follows Mrs. Wright travel between Medallion and the Sundown House in New Orleans, and traces the dramatic identity shifts that the character suffers between these points. The fluctuations in Helen Wright’s being expose the gap between the real and the invented self; they also bear witness to the impact of geography on people: if in Medallion Mrs. Wright was “a woman who won all social battles with presence and a conviction of the legitimacy of her authority,” (18), as soon as she get on a South-bound train and gets admonished by the white conductor, she turns into “a street pup that wags its tail at the very doorjamb of the butcher shop he has been kicked away from only moments before” (21). Mrs. Wright measures her success in life in the distance she has managed to put between herself and her former life: “All in all her life was a satisfactory one. [...] She would sigh sometimes just before falling asleep, thinking that she had indeed come far enough from the Sundown House” (19). By shifting characters from one place to another, the novel emphasizes how much the self depends on its surroundings and exposes the inconsistencies in the characters’ identity.

If the hills of Medallion are an expression of the black community's collective identity, individual differences are marked through the different configuration of the houses. People's social and economic status is apparent in their house's placement in the Bottom. After Eva Peace achieves some level of prosperity, she moves from the edges of the town, "sixty feet back from the road" (33), closer to its center, on Carpenter Road. The chapter introducing Sula and Eva Peace by placing both characters of in a particular setting before revealing anything else about them, their circumstances or family:

Sula Peace lived in a house of many rooms that had been built over a period of five years to the specifications of its owner, who kept adding things: more stairways – there were three sets on the second floor – more rooms, doors and stoops. There were rooms that had three doors, others that opened out on the porch only and were inaccessible from any other part of the house; others that you could get to you only by going through somebody's bedroom. The creator and sovereign of this enormous house [...] was Eva Peace, who sat in a wagon on the third floor directing the lives of her children, friends, strays, and a constant stream of boarders. (30)

Before Eva's story is even begun, her whimsical personality, her authority and strong will is felt in the architecture of the house. As for Sula, the Peace home with its freedom and chaos allows her to explore the world freely and order her impressions of it by herself. Even the friendship between Sula and Nel extends to an appreciation of the other's house: Sula, for instance, likes the peaceful, unchanging atmosphere in Nel's house, where she is unusually calm and quiet. Nel in turn is fascinated by Sula's enormous house, with its never ceasing organic-like expansion and unpredictable architecture reflecting the owner's whims and needs. Nel's preference for the Peace house is a sign of rebellion against the oppressive order of her own home and her mother's efforts to discipline the body. The girl envies Eva's ability to retain full control over the space, which she rearranges according to her needs, as well as over her own body: she is the "creator and

sovereign” of the house and of her body. Helen Wright’s home suggests the constant attempt to model and control the body according to moral rules, while the Peace house, where there is a climate of freedom bordering on anarchy, and where “all sorts of people dropped in,” is a place where the body is the one that molds the environment (29). Eva Peace continually rebuilds her house, adding architectural features (“more stairways, more rooms, doors and stoops” (31). Impractical as some of these changes may seem, they allow Eva to display her ability to control her environment. Rigid and fluid architecture are rooted in the body and reflect the two different views about the body and how it relates to the outward world. For Eva, it is the external structures that need to yield to the self, and not the other way around. Whether these external structures are physical features of the environment, or social and moral expectations, Eva takes pleasure in reversing the balance so that the self becomes sovereign. Not only the house, but the people in it as well are refashioned to satisfy the owner’s slightest whim, for Eva reserves the right to regulate her tenants’ lives as she pleases. She makes quick decisions about the people in her house with a complete disregard for what anybody else may think, reassigning names, roles, and even racial identities.

Eva’s delectation in exercising power, so apparent in the way she rules her house, shows her determination to play a masculine role: all other women in the Bottom (except Sula, later on) depend on their husbands to provide a home. Even the seemingly strong-minded Helene Wright lives in the house that her husband “put her in” (17). By contrast, Eva is able to not only build her own house, but to build a better version than her husband had. Instead of a shaky one-room cabin, Eva moves to an impressive house, so large that it can accommodate tenants as well as her family. Just like BoyBoy indulges in womanizing without concern for his family, Eva allows herself the same sexual freedom without concern for what is expected of her: “Eva, old as she was, and with one leg, had a regular flock of gentleman callers, and although she did not participate in the act of love, there was a good deal of teasing and pecking and laughter” (41).



By contrast, Helene Wright, and to a certain extent, Nel Wright, mold themselves into conformity to moral precepts and social expectations – and this process is also expressed in the relation they have to their spatial surroundings. Helene’s house is the outward sign of her dogged pursuit of middle-class status, with its “brick porch and real lace curtains at the window” (17). Nel Wright, in spite of her reluctance to yield to her mother as a child, becomes in her adult years a bland version of Helene. The concern for compliance with the role she must play stifles Nel’s natural impulses and feelings to the point that, when she finds her husband Jude in bed with Sula, she can’t stop thinking that the bedroom must seem “small” and “shambly,” and that “it would have been better if I had gotten the dust out from under the bed” (106). It takes Nel almost thirty years to acknowledge what she feels about Jude and Sula’s betrayal. The beginning of *Sula* establishes place as another dimension of the body, while the way in which characters relate to each other is essential in this story about family and friendship.

## 2. Connection between characters: family relations, friendship

The relationship between the body and the house it inhabits is in many ways similar to the interplay between the individual and the community. Although vital to the characters’ development, the community of Medallion can be unforgiving, inflexible in its rules and oppressive. Nel, for instance, envies Sula’s freedom, but is unable to break the pattern her mother has set for her. Dutiful wife and mother, she feels strangely disconnected from her children and the people of Medallion, longing for the friendship of Sula. As Mark C. Conner observes,

Most readers view Morrison’s emphasis on community in an overwhelmingly positive light, seeing the community as nurturing, cohesive, and healing, and the individual’s place within the community as one of security and comfort. [...] But in fact the communities depicted throughout Morrison’s fiction, from *The Bluest Eye* to *Paradise*, are predatory, vampiric, sterile, cowardly, threatening; and the individual must struggle

desperately to survive in the midst of this damaging community - a struggle that is often a losing one, resulting in the fragmentation and destruction of these desperate selves. (49)

In *Sula*, the community often has a damaging impact on its members, particularly those who stray from the ascribed path – but Medallion is at the same time a source of strength, comfort, and a place of belonging. More importantly, the rules of life in the town are often bent to accommodate an uncommon occurrence or an atypical individual. When Shadrack returns, his neighbors are scared by his madness at first, but they grow increasingly acceptant of his behavior and fears and incorporate National Suicide Day into their lives. For all its negative potential, the community’s understanding and acceptance is extremely important for all characters. Even Sula, the most defiant character in the novel, imagines a day when the people of Medallion might reconsider their rules and standards of propriety to embrace the outsiders. When the most terrible sins Nel can conceive will have been committed, Sula claims, “they’ll love me all right” (145-146).

## CHAPTER V

### CONCLUSION

The body's relationship with the space it inhabits and the other bodies, its communicativeness, or fight for autonomy raises problems of independence versus dependence. In *Sula*, there is also a permanent tension between characters with opposing ideas on the problem of autonomy versus dependency on other bodies. Often, these conflicts are sustained by one and the same character. Eva, for instance, welcomes strangers in her house, but is less tolerant of her own children's presence. She sees herself as a separate being and rejects her children in spite of her love for them. Adults, she believes, are to live independently or else die. When Plum comes back home after the war and lives in his mother's house, she feels that as a failure on his part to conform to "be a man" (72). Eva's murderous act is, from her perspective, no more than an attempt to restore some dignity to her son: "I done everything I could to make him leave me and go on and be a man but he wouldn't, and I had to keep him out so I just thought of a way he could die like a man not all scrunched up inside my womb, but like a man" (72). For Hannah, dependency and love are connected. She requires an explanation from Eva and asks her repeatedly whether she loved her children. Eva, however, feels that ensuring the survival of her children exempts her from loving them. She is proven wrong in the end: after Plum and

Hannah die, Eva remains estranged from the rest of her family and ends up in a nursing home.

By contrast, the only thing that survives the passage of time, the dismantlement of the Bottom, and even death, is the friendship between Nel and Sula. Dependent on each other to grow up in a hostile environment, the two friends are so closely connected that people like Eva and Shadrack cannot tell them apart. Long after Sula's death, Eva Peace reminds Nel that there is no difference between herself and Sula. Through the friendship of Nel and Sula, the novel makes the transition from the realm of violence and fear to a world of peace with oneself and connectedness with the others. Dependence and the fluctuating edges of the body, perceived as symptoms of vulnerability in the beginning of the novel as Shadrack tries to make sense of his war experiences, are revalued in the novel through the friendship of Sula and Nel. If Eva Peace creates a house fit for her body, Sula creates a community around her (bodily) experiences and she dreams of sharing even her last and loneliest one with her friend, Nel: "Wait'll I tell Nel," she promises herself when she realizes she is dead. If the novel starts by presenting the body as vulnerable, *Sula* progressively introduces a vision of the body whose permeability contains the promise of reaching a state of "matchless harmony" (123) with oneself and with the others.

The issues of control over the body and connectedness among the members of a community cannot be separated in *Sula* from the larger context of African-American history and the legacy of slavery. Sasha Weiss, noticing the important place that the body assumes in Morrison's novels, explains it in connection to the writer's need to translate African-American history into a literary text. Referring to an interview Morrison had granted to *The Paris Review* in 1993, Weiss explains that, in order to make these historical experience more immediate to readers, the writer had to ground the story in the individual and his/her bodily experiences: Morrison "describes sensory, bodily experience with more keenness and immediacy than almost any other contemporary novelist. Speaking about *Beloved* [...], she goes some way to explaining why: her aim is to make her novels be 'truly felt,' to 'translate the historical into the personal'"

(17). Building a narration based on the concrete body experiences has the effect of not only making history more palpable to readers, but it also lends a second life to bodies whose histories might have otherwise been forgotten. *Sula* thus renders visible a community that had long been marginalized in American literature.

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Scope and Method of Study: This thesis identifies similarities between body imagery and in Toni Morrison's 1973 novel *Sula* and in selected disability literary and theoretical texts. The purpose of this comparison is to determine whether the alternative attitudes towards the body that these texts propose challenge common cultural concepts of normalcy and beauty. The study also outlines similarities in the social and political context out of which these texts appeared.

Findings and Conclusions: The similarities observed in body representations in the novel and in the selection of disability texts converge towards a new attitude towards the body. This new attitude could be described as a revaluing of the body's frailty and limitations and a celebration of perpetual change. Like disability texts, Morrison's novel rejects conventional interpretations of the ideal body as a stable, visual object. She emphasizes a new type of perception, based on touch and imagination, and a new type of body, essentially vulnerable and unstable.

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