On the Contrary: The Shared Sensory Experience of Toni Morrison’s *Sula*

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**INTRODUCTION**

According to a footnote in Freud’s *Interpretation of Dreams*, “most ancient languages…have only a single word to describe the two contraries at the extreme ends of a series of quantities or activities (e.g., ‘strong-weak,’ ‘old-young,’ ‘far-near,’ ‘bind-sever’)” (Freud 824). After claiming that the structure of the unconscious is defined by “contrast,” Freud asserts: “The way in which dreams treat the category of contraries and contradictories is highly remarkable. It is simply disregarded. ‘No’ seems not to exist as far as dreams are concerned. [Dreams] show a particular preference for combining contrasts into a unity or for representing them as one and the same thing” (Freud 824).

A landscape that shatters our traditional conception of binary oppositions is not only a framework for understanding our dreams, but also for understanding Morrison’s fiction and worldview. *Sula* is reminiscent of dreams in many ways, namely in Morrison’s role as a “mythmaker” who finds meaning in “nature, primitivism, the past, the supernatural, and spiritual love” (Heinze 3).

In the following passage, we learn that the titular character of *Sula* and her best friend Nel first met “in dreams”:

> for it was in dreams that the two girls had first met. Long before Edna Finch's Mellow House opened, even before they marched through the chocolate halls of Garfield Primary School out onto the playground and stood facing each other through the ropes of the one vacant swing ("Go on." "No. You go."), they had 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. When Nel, an only child, sat on the steps of her back porch surrounded by the high silence of her mother's incredibly orderly house, feeling the neatness pointing at her back, she studied the poplars and fell easily into a picture of herself lying on a flowered bed, tangled in her own hair, waiting for some fiery prince. He approached but never quite arrived. But always, watching the dream along with her, were some smiling sympathetic eyes. Someone as interested as she herself in the flow of her imagined hair, the thickness of the mattress of flowers, the voile sleeves that closed below her elbows in gold-threaded cuffs” (Morrison 51).
The language of this passage suggests a certain mythologized quality to the relationship between Sula and Nel, who are described as having “made each other’s acquaintance in the delirium of their noon dreams” (51).

This passage also introduces us to the idea of interest, a key component of Morrison’s aesthetic. Interest refers to the act of deriving sensory pleasure from an experience (Lynch). When an experience grabs our attention and stimulates our senses, we are able to become “interested,” in spite of how we might evaluate it in terms of morality. While aesthetics can elicit emotional responses, these emotional responses are not always in line with what we anticipate them to be. Aesthetics establish a new category of emotion—one that is not human and only exists in the context of language itself (Eliot 960).

In this essay, I hope to create a working definition of the distinct Morrisonian aesthetic by examining the ways in which Morrison (in Freud’s words) “combin[es] contrasts into a unity” and ultimately refocuses our attention onto the entire sensory experience—even when (or perhaps especially when) the experience is something gruesome or mundane. In Sula, Morrison positions herself as storyteller, rather than novelist, and thus endows the text with an oral quality. This allows her to establish a shared experience with the reader. Morrison does not confine herself to the rigid boundaries of “novel” or “text,” but instead is able to transcend the formula and create an experience that prioritizes sensory pleasure. Morrison’s aesthetic is one that relies upon tempo, tactility and taste. With that being said, she does not jettison visual beauty and human emotion, but ostensibly reframes them.
BOTTOM’S UP

In analyzing Morrison’s aesthetic, let us start by looking at how she chooses to begin the novel. Before we learn anything about Sula, we are introduced to “the Bottom,” a black neighborhood in Ohio, in which the entire novel takes place. The Bottom is a microcosm of Morrison’s aesthetic, as evidenced by its sensory and musical qualities, as well as by its name. Although it is referred to as “the Bottom,” it is actually located “up in the hills” (Morrison 5). Thus it is simultaneously configured as both the “bottom” and the “top.” As Freud would say, the Bottom represents two opposing ideas “as one and the same thing.”

We are told that the Bottom’s name is merely “a joke. A nigger joke” (5). The name came into being when “a good white farmer promised freedom and a piece of bottom land to his slave if he would perform some very difficult chores” (5). However, “when the slave completed the work” the farmer “didn’t want to give up any [of his] land,” so he tricked the slave into requesting the infertile land up in the hills. The farmer told his slave that “when God looks down” the hills are “the bottom,” which made the land desirable to him (5). Eventually, the Bottom thrives, leading some to question if maybe the farmer “was right after all”—perhaps the hills really were “the bottom of heaven” (6).

By opening with a description of the Bottom, Morrison makes the rhetorical choice to ease the reader in to *Sula* by creating a “lobby” of sorts (Morrison xvi). This situates the reader before he is “introduced to the goings-on of the characters” (xv). *Sula* is the only one of Morrison’s novels that has such an introduction, which Morrison refers to as a “deference…paid to the ‘white’ gaze” (Morrison xvi; “Unspeakable Things Unspoken”). Here, vision is raced as white, thus suggesting that the reliance upon the visual as the primary means of interpretation
and sensory pleasure is an element of the “White” aesthetic paradigm that Morrison hopes to reconfigure.

Morrison’s choice to include this “lobby” is intended to “[let] a stranger in” to the circle and also to reaffirm his status as an outsider—the reader can be seen as more of a visitor than a member of the community (xv). He sees the Bottom from a point of quaint distance. Because the reader is eased in to the chaos, he is more likely to be shocked, disarmed and disoriented when the trauma eventually comes to fruition. Once the reader is adequately comfortable, all expectations are shattered by the events that follow.

The first description of the Bottom draws our attention to its exotic qualities, namely through the lenses of sound and touch. Here, the white outsider is using visual cues to analyze the Bottom, while ignoring the other sensory components of the experience:

> On quiet days people in the valley houses could hear singing sometimes, banjos sometimes, and, if a valley man happened to have business up in those hills—collecting rent or insurance payments—he might see a dark woman in a flowered dress doing a bit of a cakewalk, a bit of black bottom, a bit of ‘messing around’ to the lively notes of a mouth organ. Her bare feet would raise the saffron dust that floated down on the coveralls and bunion-split shoes of the man breathing music in and out of his harmonica (Morrison 4).

We are presented with the musical images of “singing,” “banjos,” “a mouth organ,” and a “harmonica” (4). While these are among the more explicit mentions of music in the text, from this point forward, music pervades the prose and serves as a framework for Morrison’s aesthetic.

While “black people” watching the abovementioned “dark woman” “would laugh and rub their knees”—a tactile and auditory experience—the white “valley man” would most likely “hear the laughter and not notice the adult pain” (4). Referring to their pain as “adult” emphasizes the tendency of the white outsider to trivialize or generalize the African-American experience. In this situation, the white outsider would “have to stand in the back of Greater Saint Matthew’s and let the tenor’s voice dress him in silk, or touch the hands of the spoon carvers…and let the
fingers that danced on wood kiss his skin. Otherwise the pain would escape him even though the laughter was part of the pain” (4). That is to say, in order to fully experience the culture and its intrinsic pain, a complete sensory experience is required. The language of this passage suggests distance and unfamiliarity, namely in the way the white outsider responds to musicality and tactility. He hears the laughter but does not experience it; by merely acknowledging the laughter, he is ignoring the pain that comes with it. Laughter does not hide the pain, but instead is “part of the pain” (4).

The landscape of the Bottom combines the contrasts of up/down, visual/auditory, insider/outside, and pain/pleasure, which draw our attention to the inter-reliance of perceived opposites: a phenomenon that continues to resurface throughout *Sula*. Together, these oppositional forces create something vastly more complex and contradictory than each does on its own. Morrrison’s aesthetics are far more dynamic and disparate than even this striking initial description of “the Bottom” allows us to realize.

**SOUND ADVICE**

Morrison’s initial description of the Bottom provides us with a basic aesthetic framework. This description suggests that while Morrison relies heavily on all senses, it is her orchestration of sound that is most powerful. Therefore, let us direct our attention to an important binary: Sound/Text.

Morrison has stated, “it is important that there is sound in my books—that you can hear it, that I can hear it” (McKay 427). In writing fiction, Morrison’s aim has been to make “black” art. When asked what makes a book “black,” she answered: “The only analogy I have for it is music…I don’t have the vocabulary to explain it better” (427).
In *Sula*, we are seldom explicitly presented with lyrics, but music remains an omnipresent force throughout. The prose embodies a certain musical quality, namely in its structure of dialogue, shattering of contradictions, and most importantly, the prioritization of sensory experience. This musicality establishes a tension with the frequent emphasis that is placed on vision in prose. Music, unlike visual description, is primarily concerned with presence and performance.

Morrison frequently draws our attention “away from the visual, the static, the remote, or idealized object” and redirects it toward “an experience of physical beauty that is tangible and improvisational, relational and contextual” and involves “mutual efforts to feel as we see” (Stern 78-79). Beauty comes from our reaction; our reaction does not come from beauty (88). What Morrison is fundamentally concerned with is the way an experience feels, rather than how an experience looks.

Music pervades the text, even in describing the most mundane activities, such as when Sula’s mother Hannah is eating “Kentucky Wonders” which are a type of pole bean. Hannah “pinch[es] off the tips of the Kentucky Wonders and snap[s] their long pods…with the sound of the cracking and snapping and her swift-fingered movements, she seem[s] to be playing a complicated instrument” (Morrison 68). Certainly, music is also prominently featured in more conventionally substantial events than eating vegetables, such as Chicken Little’s funeral, but the perceived ordinariness of an event does not make it any less aesthetically viable.

At the funeral service for Chicken Little—a young boy whom Sula unintentionally drowns—we see the interface between sound and text at work:

*The Junior Choir, dressed in white, sang "Nearer My God to Thee" and "Precious Memories," their eyes fastened on the songbooks they did not need, for this was the first time their voices had presided at a real-life event... Then they left their pews. For with some emotions one has to stand. They spoke, for they were full and needed to say. They swayed, for the rivulets of grief or of ecstasy must be rocked. And when*
they thought of all that life and death locked into that little closed coffin they danced and screamed, not to protest God’s will but to acknowledge it and confirm once more their conviction that the only way to avoid the Hand of God is to get in it” (Morrison 64-66).

In this passage, the choir is not presiding over the event, their voices are. As the choir sings, those attending the funeral feel the urge to “stand” and leave “their pews.” They speak because they feel “full” and need to elevate this fullness. Speech, however, is not the only component of this experience. Language by itself is not powerful enough to provide an outlet for their emotions, so they sway “for the rivulets of grief or of ecstasy must be rocked.” Here, grief and ecstasy, two binary opposites, are conflated as analogous experiences that can be ruptured by motion. Finally, they dance. This scene combines music, language, sound and movement into a resonant aesthetic experience. They are dancing and screaming “not to protest God’s will” but instead “to acknowledge it and confirm…their conviction that the only way to avoid the Hand of God is to get in it.” This theme is an integral component of Sula: that good is not possible without evil; pain without pleasure; and grief without celebration. The only way to avoid evil is to embrace it. The only way to counteract pain is to acknowledge it.

ORAL RELATIVISM

The presence of sound in Sula is not confined to the auditory imagery described in the previous sections. Sound is an inescapable force throughout the novel that takes on many different forms. One key feature of Morrison’s prose is that it not merely meant to be read, but to be heard as well. This idea of reading vs. hearing sets up another contrary at work: Oral/Written. Morrison’s work has been referred to as a type of “oral literature,” which some have deemed a “preposterous term” (Basu 89). This phrase, however, perfectly embodies Morrison’s ability to
combine contradictions into a cohesive unit. *Sula* effectively communicates an oral experience through text, and in doing so, reconfigures the literary experience on a sensory level.

One potentially problematic aspect of transcribing an oral language is that there will inevitably be “gaps and spaces” present when converting one medium to another (Atkinson 15). This is due in part to the fact that our written language “does not contain symbols to represent the inflection, tone, and non-verbal gestures of Black English” or other oral languages for that matter (14). These perceived inadequacies are not bugs of Morrison’s work but rather key aesthetic features; they strategically allow the reader to fill in the gaps where no explicit information is given. Morrison recently said that she particularly likes to employ this strategy when describing sex scenes, because she feels like the reader will know best what he or she finds pleasurable in such settings, and would therefore be doing him/her an injustice by filling in too many details (Drexel). Thus, one of the most important sounds in Morrison’s aesthetic is silence itself.

The functionality of silence is also evidenced by another key feature of Morrison’s aesthetic: dialogue. In reproducing a conversation, Morrison often does not provide context or speech tags, which can often leave the reader feeling disoriented. When this—often a series of indented lines without any mention of speaker—occurs, Morrison is ostensibly reproducing the pace, “turn-taking process” and aesthetic experience of an actual conversation (Atkinson 15). As Yvonne Atkinson describes:

*The shortness of the turns implies a rapid fire, compressed conversation that is spontaneous, possibly overlapping, just like an oral conversation between friends. The reader is not told where the conversation is taking place...Morrison leaves space for the reader to fill. She knows that there will be “holes and spaces” in the text that are caused by writing down an oral language, but Morrison also expects the reader to fill in those gaps with communal knowledge. (Atkinson 15).*
In a conversation between Sula and Ajax—with whom she has a brief affair—we see several of the abovementioned techniques at work. This string of untagged dialogue mimics the turn-taking behavior of conversation:

“Worth it?”
“Don’t know yet. Go ‘way”
“Airplanes?”
“Airplanes.”
“Lindbergh know about you?”
“Go ‘way”

(Morrison 128)

Without speaker attributions to orient the reader, or any beats, descriptions or moments of action interposed throughout, we are left with a rhythmic, oral experience, ostensibly characterized by absence. Thus, the reader is able to fill in these gaps subjectively.

Other apparent gaps include those in the reader’s knowledge of the Black lexicon. Morrison liberally uses words, phrases and neologisms that exist only in “Black English,” which further establishes the insider/outsider dynamic between the black insider and white outsider. For example, in Sula, Eva refers to Uncle Paul as “triflin’” (Morrison 68), and Sula coins the term “disremember” (Morrison 116; Atkinson 28). Here, one disarming approach Morrison could have taken would have been to define these terms in the form of a footnote, glossary or textual aside; however, Morrison never does. Instead, she strategically allows these words to remain undefined and uses them as a key for the reader to gain access into an exclusive community.

Morrison’s use of “Black English” as well as “the rituals and style of the oral tradition” serve to “bear Witness to African-American culture” (Atkinson 28). Here “Witness” refers to one side of the “Witness/Testify” binary: (23).

Witness/Testify is a shared collective memory, a cultural ritual that promotes solidarity and cohesion, creating a living archive of African-American culture. Witnessing is shared experience, emotional, physical, communal, historical—it is social empathy. Testifying articulates and validates the shared experience through gesture, sign, symbol or verbal expression. In both oral tradition and in literature, the participants of Witness/Testify must “bear witness” to the joys and sorrows of
life, and then they must Testify, tell, pass on, share the event with others...In written
discourse the reader becomes both symbolic and actual participant in the storytelling
event through shared experience, shared emotional response, and connection made
by the communal aspect of the event. (Atkinson 23).

In this binary, a fundamental component of African-American culture, “one who Witnesses
[also] has an obligation to Testify,” thus both the author and the reader are expected to fulfill
both roles (Atkinson 23). Witness/Testify represents “a shared collective memory, a cultural
ritual that promotes solidarity and cohesion, creating a living archive of African-American
culture. Witnessing is a shared experience, emotional, physical, [and] communal” (23).

In her 2013 lecture at Drexel University (which I attended), Morrison addressed the
shared experience of author and reader. Here, she emphasized the oral quality of African-
American literature and the need for the participation of a reader as the chorus. This call-and-
response technique, as Morrison argues, is reminiscent of African-American culture. “Call-and-
response” is defined as “an outward expression of the group, indicating a connection, a shared
history and culture, and unifying the listener and the speaker” (Atkinson, McKay 427). If the
reader is taken aback or confused by this call-and-response, this suggests a lack of communal
knowledge and consequently positions the reader as an outsider.

Those who are a part of this oral call-and-response tradition understand the need to
“participate in the conversation” (Atkinson 15). This evokes the Barthian idea that the text is a
tradition in which the reader must participate and thereby rewrite. In “From Work to Text,”
Barthes argues that a reader “plays at the Text” and also “plays the text” (Barthes, 62-63). The
second seems to suggest something musical, as if the reader is playing the text like an
instrument. While it may seem like a strange notion to imagine a reader actively participating in
a conversation with a novel, this participation can be in the form of a “humh” after a round of
dialogue, which would signify “understanding and appreciation” (Atkinson 15). It can also occur
in the form of a “smile,” “laugh,” or a “head wag,” or perhaps on the most basic level, it can “put you in the mind of other women who [share] their lives through conversation with friends” (Atkinson 13). Ultimately, “readers of Morrison’s texts are given the opportunity—the invitation to participate in the storytelling event” (Atkinson 28). Much like a preacher of a sermon, Morrison does not ask for an “mmhmm,” the “mmhmm” is an automatic communal response that inherently stems from this form of storytelling.

Morrison has often stated that she views herself as more of a storyteller than a novelist. In Morrison’s literary paradigm, the author is not lecturing the reader; instead she is conversing with the reader. Therefore, her work can be seen as persuasive rather than dictatorial, which allows the reader to engage in a participatory relationship with the text. When such a relationship between author and reader emerges, the line between storyteller and novelist—roles that have been traditionally viewed as oppositional—is ostensibly blurred.

ON THE DOUBLE

As the previous sections have suggested, embracing contradictions is a fundamental component of Morrison’s aesthetic. In her aesthetic paradigm, even repetition can act as a contradiction. One way to think of this phenomenon is as a Repeat/Reconfigure binary; Morrison is essentially using repetition as a way to reconfigure the literary paradigm.

Although they are described as opposites through nearly every lens, Sula and Nel are simultaneously presented as doubles for one another (Lynch). Their friendship is described as “so close [that] they themselves [have] difficulty distinguishing one’s thoughts from the other’s” (Morrison 83). For Nel, talking to Sula has always been a conversation with herself” (95). Sula sees Nel as “the closest thing to both an other and a self” (119). At one point, Eva refers to Nel
as “Sula,” and when Nel corrects her, she replies, “You. Sula. What’s the difference?...Just alike. Both of you. Never was no difference between you” (168). Within the framework of Morrison’s aesthetic, even perceived opposites can be classified as identical or interchangeable.

In Sula, when certain sounds, words and characters are repeated or doubled, they exist in an altered state. When Sula confronts Shadrack—a World War II veteran who lives in the Bottom—after suspecting that he witnessed Chicken Little’s death, he utters the word “Always” (62). When Sula recounts the story to Nel, she says “Always. Always” (63). In the original scene, the word “always” was only spoken once, but as she recalls the experience, there is an apparent doubling. Once a word or sound is doubled, its meaning has ostensibly changed. Morrison is thus able to deconstruct the idea of repetition, in that she is able to repeat a tradition while simultaneously altering it.

When I encountered this scene, I was reminded of the poem “Blah-Blah” by Harriet Mullen, another African-American author whose work has been viewed as a specific criticism of the binary system. “Blah-Blah,” is essentially an alphabetical list of doubled sounds—one sound is produced and then it is repeated (“Ack-Ack, aye aye/ Baa baa” etc.) (Lynch). In using such a form, Mullen, like Morrison, suggests that we can in fact be innovative while still repeating cultural traditions. This is reminiscent of blues lyrics, in which certain lines are always repeated. Mullen’s poem also encourages the reader to participate in the experience by reading the sounds aloud. Much like Morrison’s text, “Blah Blah” elucidates the ability to take a tradition and to simultaneously repeat and alter it. The work of Morrison, Mullen, and other black authors riffs on this tradition by using repetition to innovate and rebel.
AESTHETIC JUSTICE

Another form of innovation and rebellion Morrison takes on is her critique of the white ideal of physical beauty. The slogan “Black is Beautiful” infuriated Morrison (Stern 89). She saw this expression as nothing more than a “white idea turned inside out”—a concept comparable with the naming of the Bottom—that diminishes human worth to an evaluation of physical appearance and visual beauty (89). Morrison has stated that the aesthetic of “idealized beauty” is “one of the most dangerous of societal constructs because, by placing value on a very limited set of physical criteria, it can reduce human beings on sight to objects” (Heinze 15). Thus, in her work, Morrison “does not merely circumvent Western aesthetic standards, but invents entirely original ways to approach the beautiful as work or process (Stern 78-79).

Nel’s mother Helene certainly ascribes to these “Western aesthetic standards.” When we are first introduced to Helene, she is “grateful” that Nel did not inherit her “great beauty” (Morrison 18). Unlike Helene, Nel’s “skin [has] dusk in it,” “her lashes [are] substantial but not undignified in their length,” her nose is “broad” and “flat,” and her lips are “generous” (18). The features that Helene prides herself on are characteristically “white”: her light skin, her thin nose, her small lips. Helene frequently reminds Nel “to pull her nose,” and to use a hot comb in her hair, with the hopes that her nose will become thinner and her hair will be smoother—characteristically “white” traits (55). However, after Nel meets Sula, she is no longer interested in straight hair or a thin nose. Sula draws Nel’s attention away from the visual and from the white ideal and redirects it toward experience and pleasure.

Nel has a strong reaction to the “custard” color of her mother’s skin. Nel believes that “if this tall, proud woman…who [is] very particular about her friends, who slip[s] into church with unequaled elegance, who [can] quell a roustabout with a look, if she [is] really custard, then there
[is] a chance that Nel [is] too” (Morrison 22). Custard, which connotes food and taste, is
gendered as white. Much like the description of “the Bottom,” in which auditory and tactile
images are used to establish distance, here, an image linked to taste is what renders Helene
exotic.

Sula’s mother Hannah’s “beauty” is inextricably linked to sound, rather than the
conventional visual. Although her initial introduction is riddled with visual images such as her
“old print wraparound,” “slim ankles,” long neck and “smile-eyes,” none of these images are
particularly striking—at least not in the framework of conventional “Western aesthetic
standards” (Morrison 42). What is most striking in this scene is the auditory description:
“Nobody…could say ‘hey sugar’ like Hannah” (43). It is when men hear Hannah that they are
inclined to tip their hats “down a little over their eyes, [hoist] their trousers and [think] about the
hollow place at the base of her neck” (43). Here, the auditory usurps the visual, shifting our focus
away from the misguided “Black is Beautiful” refrain.

As teenage girls, Sula and Nel are subjected to the male gaze. As they walk down the
street, men stare at their “stalklike legs, [dwell] on the cords in the backs of their knees and
[remember] old dance steps they had not done in twenty years” (50). One of these men is Ajax,
who refers to Sula and Nel as “pig meat” which one would assume to be an objectifying insult;
however, he says it “softly but definitively” and there is “no mistaking the compliment” (50).
Here, an insult becomes beautiful due to auditory experience. Ajax, who has a “magnificently
foul mouth,” is known for the way he handles words: “When he [says] "hell" he hit[s] the h with
his lungs and the impact [is] greater than the achievement of the most imaginative foul mouth in
the town. He [can] say ‘shit’ with a nastiness impossible to imitate” (50).
In the following passage, Sula somewhat paradoxically tries to find beauty in Ajax by breaking through the layers of skin—finding what is below the surface. This description tries to reconcile what “the visual has missed” and prioritizes tactile pleasure over visual beauty: (Stern 86-87)

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 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 pairing knife—that will do—and scrape away at the gold, it will fall away and there will be alabaster....
Then I can take 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...
I will put my hand deep into your soil, lift it, sift it with my fingers, feel its warm surface and dewy chill below (Stern 86-87; Morrison 130-131).

As evidenced by this passage, Morrison (in Kant’s terms) prioritizes the “beautiful view of an object” rather than the “beautiful object” itself (Bernard translation of Kant; Stern 88). Beauty lies in how “bodies feel” rather than how they “individually look” (Stern 90).

This prioritization of “feeling” over “looking” is apparent in Sula and Nel’s interactions, which are characterized by a fluid musical quality that makes it seem as if they were meant to be in each other’s company. When Sula returns to the Bottom after years of traveling and no contact with Nel, Nel equates seeing her again to “getting the use of an eye back” or “having a cataract removed” (Morrison 85). While vision is the initial focus of this description, Sula and Nel proceed to engage in a back and forth string of rhythmic dialogue that accounts for over two full pages of text. In terms of general content, there is nothing revelatory in this exchange; instead, it serves to illuminate their complex yet effortless relationship that is not bogged down by binaries or societal norms, but is instead characterized by natural pleasure (96-97).

In order to further elucidate Morrison’s critique on assessing an individual based on their visual beauty, I would like to shift our focus to the deweys, three children that Eva takes in. The
deweys look “nothing alike” but are somehow indistinguishable to the people around them (39). In spite of their stark difference in visual appearance—they vary in age, size and race—the deweys eventually come to serve as a single unit, and live under the guise of a single cohesive dewey identity. The deweys’ teacher thinks she will “have no problem distinguishing among them, because they [look] nothing alike” but eventually they all get “mixed up in her head, and finally she literally [can] not believe her eyes” as the deweys speak with “one voice” and think with “one mind” (39). The fact that the deweys look nothing alike and are still deemed identical ostensibly devalues the visual as the primary means for interpretation, pleasure and stimulation. Still, there is clearly a difference between prioritizing the total sensory experience and abandoning the visual altogether. Although the visual remains a central component of Morrison’s aesthetic, she reframes our interpretation of the visual by elevating the other senses. Armed with an aesthetic that prioritizes experience, we are able to shatter the oppressive white or Western ideals of beauty, culture, literature and language.

**OPPOSITE SEX**

Another Western model that Morrison ostensibly reconfigures is that of sexual relationships. In *Sula*, Morrison prioritizes sensory experience, thus, sexual relationships (as the conventional epitome of sensual pleasure) seem like a necessary issue to address. While sex does provide us with a fascinating insight into Morrison’s distinct aesthetic in *Sula*, it is perhaps not in the way we might anticipate.

The aesthetics of sex between man and woman are less than vibrant. Take Nel’s relationship with Jude, for example. Nel’s “love for Jude” is equated to a “steady gray web around her heart” (Morrison 95). This is certainly not in line with the conventional aesthetic that
we as readers have come expect when it comes to love; however, this image is complicated (or rather, elevated) when Sula comes into the picture. Sula’s presence is “reflected in [Nel and Jude’s] lovemaking” (95). In her presence, this “gray web” becomes a “bright and easy affection” (95). Sula also elevates other aspects of Nel and Jude’s life from mundane to aesthetically remarkable: she is able to make the piles of dishes in Nel and Jude’s sink look “as though they belong there,” and “the dust on the lamps [sparkle]” and Nel’s “grimy intractable” children look like “three wild things happily insouciant in the May shine” (96).

While Sula does not find sex “ugly,” she is nonetheless “bored” by “sexual aesthetics” (122). As Smith describes, “the nearest that Sula comes to actually loving a man is in a brief affair with Ajax” (2233). What Sula values most about Ajax is “the brilliance he ‘allows her to show” (2233). Because Sula, like her mother, “uses men for sex” she does not experience a “communion with them” but is instead able to “further [delve] into [her] self” (2234). This notion reconfigures the once prevalent view of the woman as a submissive pleasure-giver, and suggests that sex can be an empowering personal experience for a woman that is not inextricably linked to a man.

Much of the description surrounding Ajax and Sula’s relationship is related to sensory pleasure, but not the traditional sensory pleasures that one might associate with sexual experiences or with love. Ajax brings Sula quarts of milk, to which she replies, “I don’t like milk;” Ajax then reminds her “but you like bottles don’t you?” (Morrison 124). Ajax holds up one of the bottles and calls out “Ain’t that pretty” to which the narrator (rather than Sula) responds, “indeed it was” (124). Later, Sula watches Ajax let the “cold milk run into his mouth,” she focuses specifically on the “rhythm in his throat” and experiences “growing interest” (124). Ajax then pours the rest of the milk out, rinses it out and “present[s] it to [Sula]” (125). Sula
takes “the bottle with one hand and his wrist with the other and pull[s] him into the pantry” (125). This sequence of events suggests that it is her interest in the bottle, as well as the musical qualities of his drinking the milk that drives her to have sex with him. Ajax continues to present her with objects she can be interested in: “clusters of black berries still on their branches,” “meal-fried porgies wrapped in a salmon colored sheet of the Pittsburgh Courier,” “a handful of jacks,” “two boxes of lime Jell-Well,” “a hunk of ice-wagon ice,” “a can of Old Dutch Cleanser with the bonneted woman chasing dirt with her stick,” “a page of Tillie the Toiler comics,” “and more gleaming white bottles of milk”; he also “let[s] loose” a “jar of butterflies…in the bedroom” (125).

After her brief relationship with Ajax comes to an end, Sula “look[s] around for tangible evidence of his having ever been there”; she looks for the butterflies and other objects he brought to her, but finds nothing other than “his stunning absence” (135). “His absence [is] everywhere, stinging everything, giving the furnishings primary colors, sharp outlines to the corners of rooms and gold light to the dust collecting on table tops” (135). Thus, his “absence” can be viewed (or rather, experienced) as a presence in itself—described as “stunning,” “decorative” and “ornate” (135). Eventually, Sula discovers that his name is in fact “Albert Jacks” or “A. Jacks,” (rather than Ajax) and as a result, experiences a period of disillusionment. Sula learns his “vital statistics from his drivers license: Born 1901, height 5'11”, weight 152 lbs., eyes brown, hair black, color black. Oh yes, skin black. Very black,” but it is not until she learns his full name that she suffers this sense of anger and loss (Morrison 135). Here, it is sound that spurs her pain. It was sound that deceived her. Sula screams: “I didn’t even know his name. And if I didn’t know his name, then there is nothing I did know and I have known nothing ever at all since the one thing I wanted was to know his name so how could he help but leave me since he was making love to a
woman who didn’t even know his name” (136). Sula has seen Ajax. She has spoken to Ajax. She has heard Ajax. She has had sex with Ajax. But, without knowing his name, she still feels as if she does not truly know him—her experience of Ajax is left without a fundamental component. Sula finds pleasure and comfort in naming; therefore, finding out that her name for Ajax was wrong all along is devastating.

When Nel catches her husband Jude sleeping with Sula, the narrative switches to Nel’s perspective. This rhetorical choice is reminiscent of Freud’s commentary on dreams and reminds us of Morrison’s role as storyteller rather than novelist. Here, the narrative shifts from omniscient third person to first person so seamlessly without any break to signal the switch. In this passage, Nel sees Sula and Jude “on all fours like (uh huh, go on, say it) like dogs” (Morrison 105). The inclusion of the parenthetical remark serves as a direct call-and-response with the reader by breaking the fourth wall and directly acknowledging the existence of the reader. Nel describes wanting to hear Sula speak “lovely college words” such as “aesthetic” and “rapport” because they sound “so comfortable and firm” emphasizing the pleasure and comfort that can be found in sound (105).

In her breakdown after seeing Jude and Sula, Nel “look[s] around for a place to be. A small place” (Morrison 106). The closet does not interest her because it is “too dark” and she wants “to be in a very small, very bright place” so she decides on the bathroom which she deems “small enough to contain her grief” and “bright enough to throw into relief the dark things that clutter her” (106). Nel sinks “to the tile floor next to the toilet” and waits “for something to happen…inside” (106). Nel needs to create an environment for herself that is conducive to her pain. Her mind travels to Chicken Little’s death, which leads her to realize that in death, “the body must move and throw itself about, the eyes must roll, the heads should have no peace, and
the throat should release all the yearning, despair and outrage that accompany the stupidity of loss” (107). In order to combat loss, or rather the “stupidity” of it, the body must react in order to release the grief and complete the experience.

**COMPOUND INTEREST**

At this point, I would like to discuss what is perhaps the most surprising of all of Morrison’s aesthetic components: the aestheticization of death. In *Sula*, even death can be a sensory and musical experience. This is a result of *interest*. When we are talking about interest, we are talking about deriving sensory pleasure from an experience, not a mere naïve curiosity as the word might initially suggest (Lynch).

One of the central propositions of Morrison’s aesthetic is that interest can usurp boredom, morality and human emotion to create a vibrant sensory experience. This is why Sula is able to watch with “interest” as her mother Hannah burns alive; Sula says: “I stood there…watching her burn and was thrilled. I wanted her to keep jerking like that, to keep on dancing” (Morrison 147). Here, one of the most gruesome ways to die—being burned alive—is likened to dancing, an activity which connotes music, motion and sensory pleasure.

Something similar occurs at the very start of the novel when Shadrack witnesses a dismembered soldier. Shadrack is surrounded by “shellfire,” when he notices the “bite of a nail in his boot which pierce[s] the ball of his foot whenever he [comes] down on it” (Morrison 7-8). This superficially unpleasant experience is something that interests Shadrack as he takes note of the sensation. Shadrack watches as the “face of a soldier near him [flies] off” (8). But, “before he [can] register shock, the rest of the soldier’s head disappear[s] under the inverted soup bowl of his helmet” (8). In spite of the fact that “brain tissue” is dripping “down its back,” Shadrack sees
rhythm and beauty in the soldier’s body as it runs away, headless. The headless body takes “no direction from the brain” and “[runs] on with energy and grace” (7-8). This description of musical motion endows this grotesque event with aesthetic value. The comparison of the helmet to a soup bowl removes the emotional component of this aesthetic experience, as it equates a brutal mutilation to an everyday object—one that is associated with food and comfort. After the soldier’s head is blown off, Shadrack continues to watch, and ostensibly derives aesthetic pleasure from the experience—he becomes interested.

T.S. Eliot provides us with one framework through which to view the absence of human emotion in aesthetics. In “Tradition and the Individual Talent,” Eliot argues, “it is not the ‘greatness,’ the intensity, of the emotions, the components, but the intensity of the artistic process” (Eliot, 960). “The business of the poet is not to find new emotions, but to use the ordinary ones and, in working them up into poetry, to express feelings which are not in actual emotions at all” (960). It is for this reason that death in literature can be a beautiful aesthetic experience, or that there are blurred lines between pain and pleasure, happiness and sadness, grief and celebration, etc. Emotions in poetry and prose are complex, but hold with them a different brand of complexity than the “human” emotions we experience in everyday life. There is “human emotion” and there is “art emotion,” which “has life in the poem and not in the history of the poet” (961). Thus, human emotion is separate from interest, while art emotion embodies it.

Throughout the novel, Sula seeks out ways to become interested. Sula’s “dangerous” actions are a result of her “idle imagination”—she is an “artist with no art form” (Morrison 121). “Had she paints, or clay, or knew the discipline of the dance, or strings; had she anything to engage her tremendous curiosity and her gift for metaphor, she might have exchanged the restlessness and preoccupation with whim for an activity that provided her with all she yearned
for” (121). Sula, “who [can] hardly be counted on to sustain any emotion for more than three minutes” (53) must name her pain in order to take control of it. In the moments leading up to her own death, Sula cannot endure the pain anymore—or rather, the boredom and monotony of it (Lynch). To counteract this dissonance, Sula attempts to “concentrat[e] on the throbs” and then classifies them (Lynch; Morrison 148). By naming her pain “waves,” “hammer strokes,” “razor edges,” and “small explosions,” she is able to add variety to her current monotony and aestheticize her pain (Lynch; Morrison 148).

Just before her death, Sula has a dream in which the “Clabber Girl Baking Powder lady [is] smiling and beckoning to her,” but when Sula approaches her she “disintegrate[s] into white dust” (Morrison 148). While the “disintegration [is] awful to see” what is even more disturbing to Sula is the “feel of the powder” and its “starchy slipperiness” (148). Eventually, the powder “cover[s] her, fill[s] her eyes, her nose, her throat” and she awakens “gagging and overwhelmed with the smell of smoke” (148). Next, “pain [takes] hold” initially as a “fluttering” of “doves in her stomach,” and then as a “kind of burning, followed by a spread of thin wires to other parts of her body” (148). Eventually, Sula “notice[s]” that she is “not breathing” and that her “heart [has] stopped completely” (149). She displays a sense of awareness as she realizes “she [is] dead” (149). Finally, Sula feels “her face smiling” and announces “Well, I’ll be damned…it didn’t even hurt. Wait’ll I tell Nel” (149). Sula somehow finds life in her own death.

**DISFORM MEETS FUNCTION**

One question that has yet to be addressed fully is: what are the implications of these key features of Morrison’s aesthetic? The aesthetic model which I have working with is one of shared sensory experience. While the aestheticization of the gruesome and mundane is ostensibly
significant, what has not been examined as diligently is the empowerment that comes with turning something painful into something beautiful. Morrison’s aesthetics are all the more powerful in their connection to cultural and historical realities. It is important, as we try to dissect Morrison’s aesthetic, that we are aware of this underlying tension between aesthetics and their political implications.

This tension is evidenced by Morrison’s aestheticization of deformities. In *Sula*, we are presented with disfigurements and deformities as symbols of beauty. These deformities “evoke the body’s touching vulnerability” as “hieroglyphs” that serve as “clues to a culture and a history more than to individual personality” (Stern 39, 89). They recall the painful history of African-Americans, but by positing them as aesthetically beautiful, Morrison is able to reconfigure the paradigm by redistributing control to the oppressed. By reclaiming pain and injury as badges of honor, Morrison revalues the past as a beautiful symbol of power rather than one of shame or weakness.

In the case of Eva, Sula’s grandmother, her severed leg is mythologized, while her remaining leg is considered beautiful. Eva often tells children that her leg “got up buy itself one day and walked on off” and that she then “hobbled after it but it ran too fast” (Morrison 30). Another version of the story is that she “had a corn on her toe and it just grew and grew and grew until her whole foot was a corn and then it traveled on up her leg and wouldn’t stop growing” (30-31). Some residents of the Bottom also believe that “Eva stuck [her leg] under a train and made them pay off,” while others believe that she sold her leg “to the hospital for $10,000” (31). In spite of her missing leg, Eva attracts a “regular flock of gentlemen callers” (41). In fact, it is her disfigurement that makes her desirable. Men long to see her “lovely calf” and “neat shoe” (41). Eva’s remaining leg is described as “magnificent…stockinged and shod at all times and in
all weather” (31). She makes no attempt to hide her disfigurement as her dresses are all “mid calf so that her one glamorous leg [is] always in view as well as the long fall of space below her left thigh” (31). Even the empty space where her missing leg once was is aestheticized; there is a powerful presence in this absence.

One of Eva’s friends creates a makeshift wheelchair for her out of a “child’s wagon” which is “so low that children who [speak to Eva] standing up [are] at eye level with her, and adults, standing or sitting, [have] to look down at her” (Morrison 31). No one, however, realizes that they are literally looking down at Eva—reminiscent of “the Bottom”—instead, they all have “the impression [of] looking up at her, up into the open distances of her eyes, up into the soft black of her nostrils and up at the crest of her chin” even when she is low to the ground and in this absurd contraption (31). Eva’s disfigurement endows her with a level of honor and respect because—whatever the cause of it may be—her severed leg represents a rich and painful history that African-Americans inevitably carry.

Sula is also disfigured by her lack of disfigurement—society views her as deformed because she has “lost no teeth,” “suffered no bruises,” “developed no ring of fat at the waist or pocket at the back of her neck,” and has no “scars” (115). She is “free of any normal signs of vulnerability,” which qualifies her as an outsider. Sula’s signs of strength as an African-American female position her as an outsider. This is one of many instances in which the aesthetic merges with the political—ostensibly, the fact that bruises and scars are the “norm” for women in the Bottom can serve a greater social commentary on the way [African-American] women are treated in society.

Sula uses mutilation as a form of empowerment when she cuts off the tip of her finger to scare off a group of boys who are taunting her and Nel. “Holding the knife in her right hand,”
Sula pulls “the slate toward her[self] and press[es] her left forefinger down hard on its edge” and “slash[es] off…the tip of her finger” (Morrison 54). The boys who are harassing Sula and Nel stare “open-mouthed at the wound and the scrap of flesh, like a button mushroom, curling in the cherry blood that ran into the corners of the slate” and retreat (55). This painful experience of intentional mutilation is likened to food: Sula’s severed fingertip a “button mushroom” and her blood a “cherry,” an aesthetic tactic that occurs again when Eva mistakes a glass of blood-tainted water for Strawberry Crush. Much like in her sexual experiences, Sula is able to put herself in a position of power, here by essentially disfiguring herself.

In her aestheticization of violence, death, mutilation and pain, Morrison is opposing an ideology of oppression. Morrison’s aesthetic is reminiscent of the sorrow songs in Du Bois’ The Souls of Black Folk—a keystone of African-American literature and culture—which was written seventy years before Sula. Du Bois’ iconic work uses songs to express a “spirit of suffering” that is “fundamental to black identity” (Gooding-Williams 115). Du Bois includes a musical epigraph at the beginning of each chapter. One particularly striking example occurs at the start of “Of the Coming of John,” which Du Bois later suggests is a vehicle for expressing “the voice of exile” (115). This voice is not merely one of exile, but equally one of celebration that is able to look beyond the suffering (115). This draws our attention to the binary of Grief/Celebration. For slaves, shared songs were a primary way of expressing their suffering. Singing did not hide the pain; it was part of it. Morrison’s aestheticization of death, pain and suffering can be seen as the literary equivalent of a sorrow song; it reconfigures an otherwise shameful, or painful, or gruesome event into vivid sensory experience. In Sula, death is often likened to dancing, while disfigurements are often made into objects of beauty. Thus, Morrison’s aesthetic—a rhythmic,
pulsing, throbbing experience—can be viewed as an empowering way to reclaim a painful cultural past.

**THE GRAVEYARD SHIFT**

Returning once more to the question of what defines Morrison’s aesthetic, I would like to direct your attention to the final scene in the novel. If the opening section of *Sula* was a gentle and melodious welcome into Morrison’s aesthetic, the final moments are a powerful and cacophonous exit. In the penultimate scene, Nel goes to the cemetery where Sula is buried alongside her uncle Plum, her mother Hannah, and her aunt Pearl. There, “each flat slab [has] one word carved on it. Together they read like a chant: PEACE 1895-1921, PEACE 1890-1923, PEACE 1910-1940, PEACE 1892-1959” (174). For Nel, “they [are] not dead people. They [are] words. Not even words. Wishes, longings” (174). The names on the gravestones are able to transcend mere language and take on a resonant musical quality as a “chant.” Amid this chant of “Peace,” chaos ensues. Nel feels her eye “twitch[ing] and burn[ing]” and whispers “Sula?” (174). Then “leaves [stir],” “mud shift[s]” and Nel smells “overripe green things” (174). This sensory experience allows Nel to achieve an *anagnorisis*: all this time she thought she had been missing Jude, but in fact, she was missing Sula. The loss of Sula “press[es] down on her chest and [comes] up into her throat” (174). Nel’s emotional realization is one that is aestheticized by the way her body’s visceral reaction. “We was girls together,” Nel says, and then begins to cry “girl, girl, girlgirlgirl,” which marks the painful realization they were never able to be women together; Nel was always linked to Jude. This rhythmic chant combines music, repetition and doubling into a painful and resonant emotional experience. Nel’s cry is as “loud and long” but with “no bottom” and “no top,” instead it just consists of “circles and circles of sorrow” (174). This final
image—which in Freudian terms “combin[es] contrasts into a unity”—is one that sums up Morrison’s aesthetic as it fuses all of the previously discussed elements into a cohesive but simultaneously dissonant image. As the title would suggest, it is Sula who controls the rhythm of the story, and she continues to do so even after her death. The music begins in a soft steady pace of distant realism and then finds its way into a loud and deafening emotional collapse.

CONCLUSION

In dreams, we cannot always remember visually what we saw, but instead we remember how the dream made us feel. A dream seamlessly weaves together seemingly irreconcilable contradictions; and in dreams, opposites can essentially serve as stand-ins or surrogates. This is also true for Morrison’s fiction. Ultimately, Sula is a composite of so many disparate components that somehow work in tandem to create a masterful and resonant work of art, characterized by this distinct Morrisonian aesthetic.

Morrison is a storyteller and a novelist. Sula is a pariah and a protagonist. Nel is a double and an other. Death is beautiful and painful. Sula is a folktale and a novel. A political commentary and an aesthetic masterpiece. Musical and literary. A written work steeped in oral tradition. A sensory experience that we as readers, listeners and witnesses are undoubtedly interested in.
WORKS CITED


