GIRLHOOD LOVE AND QUEER SORROW IN TONI MORRISON’S *SULA*

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Toni Morrison’s 1973 novel, *Sula*, focuses above all else on an intense relationship between two women. In a conversation with Claudia Tate, Morrison argued, “Friendship between women is special, different, and has never been depicted as the major focus of a novel before *Sula*. Nobody ever talked about friendship between women” (157). Yet when critics engage *Sula* (frequently overshadowed by the works that preceded and followed it—1970’s *The Bluest Eye* and 1977’s *Song of Solomon*), they often take up the way it explodes the possibilities of storytelling. *Sula* breaks down simple binaries, and in doing so, offers an alternate conception of morality. It bends the limits of language through its integration of folk language and culture. It tells a story of a Black community largely without catering to the white gaze. The novel enacts these serious literary projects, yet it is ultimately concerned with the relationship between two girls who become women, Sula and Nel. The two girls meet in childhood dreams and find both love and a sense of self in the other. Their relationship produces pleasure, pain, guilt, and ultimately holds the two in thrall even after death, a literally haunting love and communion.

Morrison published *Sula* in the moment of the Black Arts Movement, where Black writers spun urgent and political conversations over what constituted the Black Aesthetic.1 *Sula* creates its own formative aesthetic set while centralizing the relationship between two women, pushing boundaries of sexual freedom, relationality, and language. Sula and Nel become close as girls living in the Bottom, the hilly, Black neighborhood of Medallion, Ohio. Nel marries the handsome but insecure Jude at twenty, and Sula leaves town for ten years, a temporal gap unaccounted for in the novel. Upon Sula’s return, the two resume their relationship’s rhythm until Sula thoughtlessly sleeps with Jude. After the two become estranged, Nel tends to her family alone, while Sula engages in casual sex that bolsters her growing status as pariah. Sula has one last affair with a man named Ajax, who leaves her solitary and confused. Sula dies

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1 It should be noted that like many 20th-century literary and political movements, the public voice of the movement...
young, after a final visit from Nel. Nel cannot fully conceive of what it means to lose Sula until years later, and when she does, she cries out in pain and release.

*Sula* tells the story of Sula and Nel in a language where we only learn of love through loss, where, in the words of Kathryn Bond Stockton, “loveliness clings to cruelty...and literally, to dirt” (74). The work takes up an alternative linguistic ordering, where its setting, the town of the “Bottom,” is the highest hill in the valley. In the Bottom, community cannot be thought of without its pariahs, marriage cannot be conjured without a recognition of death.² The novel describes sorrow lyrically, even beautifully, an “interweave of lyricism and dramatic event” that Hortense J Spillers argues intentionally reveals the difficulty of processing troubling events (72). *Sula* collides pleasure and pain, ceremony and destruction, and orgasmic and sorrowful howls. It registers dramatic events not only through poetic language, but also through a disassociation of event and affect that builds on and complicates registers of trauma.³ Critical analysis of the text often takes up these aesthetic attributes.⁴ However, there have been few compelling conclusions that analyze the relationship between Sula and Nel. I fear that aesthetics have often been taken up at the expense of a relational analysis, despite the ways that the two readings could inform one another.

When critics have engaged the relationship between Sula and Nel, they often offer political interpretations. In fact, readings of their relationship continue to influence an entire school of criticism: contemporary queer of color critique. For in 1978, before Audre Lorde had published *Sister Outsider* and prior to Kimberlé Crenshaw’s introduction of intersectionality into a theoretical vernacular, Barbara Smith built her pioneering work “Toward a Black Feminist

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² “Most of them had never been to a big wedding; they simply assumed it was rather like a funeral” (80).
³ As Barbara Johnson notes in *The Feminist Difference*, “The disassociation of affect and event is one of Morrison’s most striking literary techniques in this novel, both in her narrative voice (in which things like infanticide are not exclaimed over) and in the emotional lives of her characters” (81).
⁴ As a sample survey, in Harold Bloom’s 1994 collection of *Sula* criticism, the majority of the thirteen essays the critics engage in “aesthetics” readings (granted Harold Bloom himself veers towards aesthetic readings; however, broad surveys on other bibliographies tend to suggest the same weighting towards aesthetics).
Criticism” around Sula, innovatively conceiving of Black lesbian subjectivity through language. Smith argued: “Sula is an exceedingly lesbian novel” (2234). While contemporary critics and even Morrison herself have written off Smith’s critique as overly identitarian (or in the case of Morrison, disagreeing on the grounds that it reduces the radical potential of platonic friendship), a close reading of Smith reveals a more nuanced line of questioning about the dialectical relationships between political and literary production. Despite its reception as purely political, Smith’s theory is in fact deeply bound up in the literary. Her ambitious task in her queer reading of Sula is to create a “specifically Black female language” through tracing linguistic silences, gaps, and affective gestures in order to grasp forms of identity and relationality typically obscured or illegible in critical readings (2229). While Barbara Smith pioneered this analysis and provides the most thorough queer reading of Sula to date, she was not alone in her analysis. A group of self-identified Black lesbian feminists saw vast political-literary potential in Sula, including Lorraine Bethel, Audre Lorde, and Cheryl Clarke.

Morrison disagreed with Smith’s assessment of Sula rather forcefully, arguing, “there is no homosexuality in Sula” (157). Yet, the theory she develops in her scholarly work Playing in the Dark argues that language can, and always has, historically reflected systems of domination in a literary unconsciousness. Morrison argues that it is absurd to think that American literature

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5 Smith would not be the only critic scrutinized for political engagement, and critics such as Hortense Spillers, Barbara Christian, Madhu Dubey, Gurleen Grewal, and Jan Furman would argue that the friendship is political and oppositional—without overtly taking up a queer analysis. These critics (broadly) argue that these women (or sometimes, just Sula) refuse to assimilate to community relationship standards, creating an oppositional space.

6 Lorraine Bethel commented on a lesbian subtext in Sula in an unpublished essay that Adrienne Rich’s “Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence” built considerably on (Rich, a white woman who worked closely with Audre Lorde, also advocated for a lesbian reading). Audre Lorde in a 1983 interview, noted “Sula is the ultimate black female of our time” (Ferguson, 126). Cheryl Clarke wrote a retrospective of lesbian community-building around Sula in her essay “Lesbianism, 2000,” as anthologized in this bridge we call home: “We recovered, discovered, and paid long-overdue homage... We had the right to read 'lesbian' into the motive of every black woman writer and imagined black woman, including Morrison and 'Sula.' Morrison didn't like it one bit” (235).

7 I want to push back against an encompassing view of authorial control in this essay; however, Morrison’s “intent” is one of the most compelling and most heard counterarguments against reading a queer erotic subtext in Sula. Additionally, Morrison’s critical work in Playing in the Dark holds a persistent impact across disciplines of Black studies, sociology, and literary criticism. This essay primarily appeals to Morrison as “critic” rather than Morrison as “author.”
written by white people, about (mostly) white people remains “uninformed, and unshaped by the four-hundred-year-old presence of, first Africans and then African-Americans in the United States” (23). She claims that classic white American literature offers a metacommentary on race and Blackness whether its authors realize it or not. In a similar matter, I want to push a reading of the novel to a place where we can imagine a Black queer unconscious. Evelynn Hammonds theorizes in Black (W)holes that part of what constitutes a Black, female, queer reading is tracing textual “silence, erasure, and invisibility” (5). The silence of an overt Black female queer presence in the text and in many of its criticisms does not necessarily negate its possibility. Similar to how the irrefutable existence of African-Americans in the milieu of literary production demands a racial analysis, perhaps more texts would lend themselves well towards tracing a Black queer presence, whether queer sex is depicted or not.

When interrogating what brings Sula and Nel together in the novel, no contemporary critic has engaged the text alongside contemporary queer of color critique, even though the school of thought is indebted to Barbara Smith’s initial polemic. Contemporary critics Roderick Ferguson, José Esteban Muñoz, David Eng, Sharon P. Holland, and Jack Halberstam, for example, continue in the legacy of Smith, and theorize the current field of queer of color critique through interrogating affect, antinormativity, and disidentification. Not only is contemporary criticism shaped by Sula critique, but also we approach Sula from a literary context in which Elena Ferrante and Mary Gaitskill popularize the “girlhood friendship” trope. Sula and the theoretical conversation it provoked deeply influence our literary moment; however, critics have not yet taken the text up alongside the theory its criticism inspired. In the past fifteen years, despite the emergence of queer of color critique and Morrison’s 2003 publication of Love, which

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8 Roderick Ferguson’s 2004 Aberrations in Black: Towards a Queer of Color Critique is largely credited as the first work to coin the term, “queer of color critique,” as a way of speaking to a pre-existing set of theoretical moves in sexuality and race analysis (Tompkins 186). His theory offers a methodology for articulating queer subjects as always alongside formations of nation, class, race, and citizenship. The title of his text echoes the language of Smith’s essay, which he works substantially with in his criticism.
in some ways reworks the relationship between Sula and Nel, no published scholarship has taken up the relationship between Sula and Nel as central to their argument. This relationship is difficult. And despite the limitations the text could place on a pure queer reading, it deserves to be taken up in the context of the theoretical texts indebted to Barbara Smith’s revolutionary critique.

Using queer criticism as a way of reading relationality in *Sula* is not without its risks. In taking up queer of color critique and queer theory to discuss a text that does not denote a sexual relationship between two women, it is all-too-easy to speak only in abstractions. Queer theorists remain divided over the question of what should or should not “qualify” as queer. As many, including Leo Bersani and, to a lesser extent, Eve Kofosky Sedgwick have maintained, one of the biggest risks queer theory can take—and that which the work of Michael Warner purports, for example—is taking the sex out of the queer, making queerness into any force oppositional to the norm.9 Rather than Adrienne Rich’s notion of a lesbian continuum, where identifying a “lesbian” presence can be as simple as a refusal to conform to heteronormative relationship standards,10 these theorists maintain that while queerness has a variety of political connotations, it is also about fucking. Conversely, there has been a recent call in queer theory to move away from sex as the “be-all and end-all,” as Maggie Nelson has worded it (111). This essay will trace the eroticism that the text performs through silences and yearning, rather than relying on singular events to encapsulate an entire affective experience. Yet, in doing so, it will take seriously the *limitations* the novel places on sex, recognizing their need to be analyzed alongside questions about connection.

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9 “Queer studies frequently takes the sex out of being queer,” writes Leo Bersani in “Gay Betrayals” (42). Bersani targets Michael Warner’s note in *Fear of a Queer Planet* that "queer" can be a signifier that is sexually indeterminate, arguing that Warner makes queerness into "a universal political category, embracing every one [sic.] who resists ‘regimes of the normal’” (41).

10 Rich’s 1980 “Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence” remains the prime example of this theory, in which she targeted intense female friendships, girlhood connection, or, borrowing the language of Audre Lorde, the simple “sharing of joy” intensely with another as lesbian experiences on a continuum (136).
I will centralize the relationship between Sula and Nel, and in doing so, suggest two alternate ways to critically look at relationality and queerness in the text. The first is to integrate close reading with contemporary queer of color critique. Roderick Ferguson’s 2004 *Aberrations in Black: Towards a Queer of Color Critique* is the only contemporary criticism to do a serious study of Barbara Smith’s reading of *Sula* (and fittingly, the text that coined the term “queer of color critique). The work argues that that critics failed to engage early Black lesbian feminism despite its rather innovative complications of static notions of identity; however, Ferguson’s argument is based in a broad political-theoretical context rather than a close reading of the text. Both Ferguson and Smith’s arguments hinge on a reading of Sula’s individualist pariah status more so than the shared relationship between women. They also both privilege theory over close reading. My work builds on their political articulations that express critically ignored realities of queer of color existence, that therefore pave the way for close reading. My essay reinstates close reading as central in tracing Sula and Nel’s connection. In addition, it focuses on queerness and opposition in Sula and Nel’s *relationship*, not simply in the individual acts of Sula. Through a close reading of how the women connect, it articulates a queer unconsciousness in the text.

The second alternative perspective this essay offers on approaching queer relationality is to collide the “Black feminist” versus “binary shattering” readings of the text. In Routledge’s 2011 guide to Toni Morrison’s work, editor Pelagia Goulimari synthesizes the critiques of *Sula* into two principle camps that a more contemporary review of the literature corroborates: 1) that it provoked a Black feminist reading, and 2) that its aesthetic and linguistic praxis critiques pure binary oppositions (167). Yet I am interested in how Sula and Nel’s relationship is in fact figured in the text’s aesthetic moves. Yes, *Sula* challenges binaries and couples sorrow and loveliness, but it does so to reveal something about its central relationship.
Through tracing the mental, physical, and ethereal connections between Sula and Nel, I argue that an erotic presence exists between the two women. The text never depicts sex in their relationship; however, its ghostly and dream-like qualities afford it eroticism and suggest a perpetual, sensual yearning. Other erotic relationships in the text do exist, but do not produce shared communion; rather, they incite sorrow and solitude. Sula and Nel’s relationship produces sorrow as well, but a different kind of sorrow—produced by virtue of the other and for the other.

Ultimately this sorrow in *Sula* is a loss of potential for queer contact. Sorrow lingers throughout Nel and Sula’s relationship in a shared sense of yearning. The text embeds this feeling, this sense of lost potential for queer contact, in its approaches to aesthetics and pleasure: the way that love stories are only told through loss, the way that event and affect are disassociated. When Nel must reckon with Sula’s death at the end of the text, a “gray ball” bursts and she howls. This aesthetic move can be thought of as a sonic and visual coupling that accounts for the loss embedded in their relationship, as well as a greater sense of loss that persistently reveals how joy and community can be experienced in the Bottom. In this sense, a reading of queer relationality does not exist in opposition to “aesthetics-based” readings of *Sula*. Rather, they depend on one another. In order to understand the aesthetics of the text—suicide, gray balls, howls of sorrow—the reader must also be receptive to an erotic relationship between Sula and Nel, the relationship the text hinges on, that produces its affective work.

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The text binds Sula and Nel together over a forty-five-year span (1920-1965), persisting through years of separation and Sula’s death. Sula and Nel come together through mental engagement: conversations that flow without interruption, carrying one’s words into the other. They come together through shared senses of one another’s physicality, knowing gazes at the other’s body, an intuition to the other’s form. They come together through ritual and shared guilt,
and their relationship is perhaps just as constituted by wrongdoings, meanness, and shame as it is joy and nurturing. And they come together through something ethereal: a dream that haunts the text through a shared feeling of yearning.

Morrison acquired a reputation as something of a magical realist after the critical celebration of Beloved; however, there is a way in which she has always worked against strict encasings of history, fact, and poetry in her work, particularly in Sula. Sula may be a novel with a backwards-looking historic gaze, however, there is something fantastical about the relationship between the two girls/women, an erotic connection that seems in some way beyond the linearly dated scope of the text. Audre Lorde theorizes the erotic as first and foremost, “the power which comes from sharing deeply any pursuit with another person.” (56). The erotic is produced in moments of extreme connection and offers a power that is spiritual and rather ineffable. Under Lorde’s argument, the erotic evokes, even unconsciously, “the power of our unexpressed or unrecognized feeling,” aligning the erotic with the spiritual, ineffable, and unconscious—and opening it up beyond pure physical contact to a range of mental and psychic states (53).

A close reading of Sula and Nel’s relationship reveals two pre-requisites to their connection. One pre-requisite is deeply grounded: a sense of self. The other, ethereal: a sense of dreams. Both manifest yearning, a yearning persistent in the work. Sula begins with Nel. After visiting her mother’s family, forced to reckon with her mother’s shame and vulnerability, Nel returns home confronted by a sense of self, gazing at her image in the mirror, proclaiming, “I’m me. I’m not their daughter. I’m not Nel. I’m me. Me” (28). She repeats the word “me,” feeling “a gathering in her like power, like joy, like fear” (28). Nel’s self-discovery provides the pathway to another, for as the novel establishes, “her new found me-ness gave her the strength to cultivate a friend” (29). The novel then defines interpersonal connection as an active, rather than passive,

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11 Morrison discusses the common application of this label to her work and her own resistance towards it in a 1986 interview with Christina Davis (225-6).
extension towards another, evocative of bell hooks’s argument that “‘love’ is most often defined as a noun, yet...we would all love better if we used it as a verb” (All About Love, 4). Connection with the other requires strength in self, and the desire to nourish a relationship. And yet, Nel’s sense of self is problematized by her refusal of identity at the moment that she claims it: she specifically says, “I’m not Nel. I’m me. Me,” implying an important disidentification from herself as Nel.

After reaching a sense of self (perhaps through a refusal of the assigned self), the second way that Sula and Nel connect is through interior, erotic fantasy, beginning in their first dreamy encounter. Dreams may well be the ultimate staging ground for the erotic, for their senseless, transcendent possibilities. And the novel centralizes dreamscapes in Sula and Nel’s connection; for there is no precise moment where the narrative dramatizes a first encounter between the two women. It is as though the two have always been together, evoking a larger disjunction of affect and event in the novel. The text privileges the girls’ dreamy and affective contact over any literal event, supplementing the eroticism of dreams in the text. The narrative turns to mention that “it was in dreams that the two girls had first met” in the middle of a scene, when the text has already established the close relationship between the two (51). As the two girls walk to get ice cream, they vie for glances from the men in custard-colored pants who loiter outside the ice cream bar, fantasizing about stumbling into their outspread legs, imagining their cocks as “the thing that clotted their dreams” (50). At this moment the narrative shifts to a dreamscape describing the girls’ first meeting, situating their ethereal introduction already in an erotic and mysterious, less-than-innocent space. Erotic feeling and connection emerge from loneliness, for their dreams are inspired by a shared “loneliness... so profound it intoxicated them and sent them stumbling into Technicolored visions” (51). The text therefore suggests that mutual delight and connection must
always be coupled with sorrow and loneliness. Each girl fantasizes separately, and Nel’s is passive and romantic:

Nel, an only child...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 (51-52).

For Nel, longing is never abated. And yet her unrealized yearning for a “fiery prince” produces pleasure. Her dream echoes conventional romance myths: Nel performs the heterosexual and passive damsel, while Sula stands in as potentially both prince and spectator. Whether Sula is prince or viewer is further confused by the narrative’s juxtaposition of Nel’s fantasy quickly to Sula’s, without ever naming a precise moment in dreams where the two meet one another, just detailing the yearning of it all. While Nel’s fantasy of a fiery prince may never truly be realized in this dream, it still incites pleasure by virtue of its possibility. Perhaps the dream’s eroticism then hinges on its unconsummated longing, the persistence of the prince’s “approach.” Longing produces erotic pleasure, yet also perpetuates the sorrow and loneliness of yearning.

Sula reads as a heroic knight (with activity akin to a fiery prince), as she imagines herself “galloping through her own mind on a gray-and-white horse tasting sugar and smelling roses in full view of a someone who shared both the taste and the speed” (52). She figures herself as the dominant actor, arriving and regarded as opposed to anticipating and attentive. In this sense, Sula and Nel’s fantasies of longing and spectatorship complement one another. From the shared description of their dream onwards, the text suggests an erotic sense of connection. Because the novel never details a concrete meeting moment between the two, it leaves this yearning, the “unexpressed or unrecognized feeling” as Lorde worded it, unresolved. Longing is never abated, and it permeates the text.
The ethereal nature of the connection between Sula and Nel comes into play even after death, and forces the reader to reckon with haunting. For Sula dies in 1940, alone and estranged from Nel after sleeping with her husband. The text actually carries on to describe Sula’s subjectivity after death. The text clearly delineates that her dreamy dialogue occurs after death, that she speaks as a ghost: “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). Sula’s ghostly call bolsters the text’s primacy of the affective and ethereal. It reinstates a possibility for communication after death, back in the dreamscapes where their entire relationship began.

Sula and Nel are not only brought together through an erotic ethereality but also through intellectual connection. In dialogue, their speech is often unmediated by qualifiers or verbs, even the classic descriptor, “she said.” For instance, upon their adulthood reunion, the two discuss Medallion and its gossip. Their conversation is dizzying: they match one another perfectly, with one voice seeping into the other:

“How you doin’?” Sula moved a pile of ironed diapers from a chair and sat down.  
“Oh, I ain’t strangled nobody yet so I guess I’m all right.’  
“Well if you change your mind call me.’  
“Somebody need killin’?’  
“Half this town need it.’  
“And the other half?’  
“A drawn-out disease.’  
“Oh, come on. Is Medallion that bad?’  
“Didn’t nobody tell you?”’ (96).

As the scene continues, the lack of qualifiers in the dialogue sets a rhythm that enacts the creativity embedded in the space that Sula and Nel craft for themselves. It also reveals an exclusive connection, as their conversation becomes dizzying for the reader to keep up with. The two enrich one another’s wit, observations, and humor. Conversation provokes connection and

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12 Avery Gordon’s theory of haunting is helpful here, and rather consistent with Morrison’s notion of tracing silences in Playing in the Dark. Gordon theorizes: “To write stories concerning exclusions and invisibilities is to write ghost stories” (17). For Gordon, ghost stories are deeply bound up in affect, and in fact she argues that Raymond Williams’s notion of a “structure of feeling” provides “the most appropriate description of how hauntings are transmitted and received” (18). Tracing silences in a text is therefore an emotional, ghostly task.
collapses interpersonal distance. Even in Sula’s later affair with Ajax, the only relationship she pursues with a man that truly impacts her, she is attracted to him not for sex, but for conversation. He captivates Sula because, “her real pleasure was the fact that he talked to her. They had genuine conversations” (127). Sula’s affair produces pleasure to the extent that it can echo her connection with Nel.

Sula and Nel’s intuitive connection leads them to erotically register one another’s physicality. Moments of their shared bodily recognition are distinct from the physical and sexual connections they experience with men; rather, their attentiveness to one another’s bodies suggests a Black queer unconsciousness. Often the text describes their bodies with great care and mutual attention in moments where they do not touch at all, where an awareness of “unexpressed or unrecognized feeling” guides the reader to a shared sense of physicality. For instance, after Nel marries Jude, she feels comforted by a glance at Sula’s body. The two do not make eye contact, nor do they touch, however, Nel can tenderly perceive Sula’s emotions just through a glance at “a slim figure in blue, gliding, with just a hint of a strut, down the path toward the road...Even from the rear Nel could tell that it was Sula and she was smiling; that something deep down in that litheness was amused” (85). Sula and Nel do not touch here, yet Nel can derive emotional meaning simply from Sula’s deeply physical presence—that goes all the way “deep down.” There is no honeymoon scene after Jude and Nel’s wedding—this is the transition the reader receives from a wedding ceremony to Sula’s return ten years later, which, if nothing else, reminds the reader which is the chief relationship in the text.

Shared bodily attentiveness can create a space where the girls do inconceivable things. A physical and erotic ritual precedes when the two, as girls, accidently drown the boy Chicken Little. The two lie by the river, and the narrative dwells on their physical positioning as they encounter natural wildness: “They lay in the grass, their foreheads almost touching, their bodies
stretched away from each other at an 180-degree angle. Sula’s head rested on her arm, an undone braid coiled around her wrist. Nel leaned on her elbows and worried long blades of grass with her fingers” (58). Sula then senses Nel’s “grass play” without making eye contact or exchanging words, just sensing her bodily movements (58). They begin to strip the earth, moving from tearing apart grass blades to stabbing twigs into the ground. In neither the glance at Nel’s wedding nor in this pre-ceremonial rest do the two women touch. Nonetheless, they register one another’s body with a degree of tenderness and attentiveness. Their shared alertness suggests that an underlying physical connection of “not touching” may prove more meaningful than any “touch” in the text, precisely for its lack of completion. This moment evokes Morrison’s argument in Playing in the Dark: that what is missing is central.13

It is fitting that the twig play born out of shared physical understanding leads to the girls’ ceremonial drowning of Chicken Little, for the third force connecting Sula and Nel is ritual and shared guilt. While it is easy to take up friendship as somehow less “complicated” than love relationships, an examination of their encounter with Chicken Little forces the reader to wonder if the relationship between Sula and Nel is perhaps just as constituted by wrongdoing, meanness, and shame as it is positive feelings and shared nurturing—or if nurturing and cruelty mutually inform one another in the moral order of the Bottom.

As the girls’ ritual continues, the two beat sticks into the ground, uprooting the surface, and drilling holes with the sticks: “Together they worked until the two holes were one and the same” (58). And then a child happens upon their soil “grave,” Chicken Little, and the girls tease

13 In Playing in the Dark, Morrison performs a close reading of Ernest Hemingway’s 1937 novel To Have and Have Not, where white crew leader Harry Morgan takes a crew including a Black man on a fishing trip. The fishing mission is a disappointment and verges on hopelessness, however, at a crucial moment, the Black man steers the ship and identifies a fleet of flying fish. The narrative, however, does not allow him to speak. Hemingway bypasses the problem with the awkward: “The n---- was still taking her out and I looked and saw he had seen a patch of flying fish burst out ahead” (73), offering an impossible sensory exchange (“saw he had seen”) to avoid articulating who made the central discovery. In this sense, only through absences—the absence of dialogue, full personhood, of the Black sailor—can the reader determine what is central.
him for his innocence, briefly sharing their space with him (59). Sula swings him around in circles, and then, the text reveals that he falls into the water as though a necessary eventuality: “When he slipped from her hands and sailed away over the water they could still hear his bubbly laughter” (60-61). Sula technically lets Chicken Little go, yet the two girls share responsibility.\footnote{In her essay “Bottom Values,” Kathryn Bond Stockton argues that the girls kill Chicken Little in an erotic play that is one of many moments of “loving cruelty” in the text (93). The two girls use twigs as a “woman’s penile proxy” (92) to create a grave for Chicken Little (the word “grave” echoing the literal word the text uses to describe the hole in the dirt). In this sense, a macabre sexual order produces the death of Chicken Little, which Stockton argues can be read as either his liberation from systems of oppression, or an unjust killing for which Sula and Nel are never held accountable. Stockton takes up Sula with an eye for contemporary queer of color critique, though opts to analyze community formations in the Bottom more broadly as opposed to Sula and Nel’s relationship.}

Upon the death of Chicken Little, Sula’s grandmother Eva figures both girls as equally complacent despite Sula’s archetypical “dominant” role. In one of the text’s final scenes, Nel visits Eva in the now-white-dominated elderly home. After Nel performs her token politeness and familial reverence, Eva responds: “Tell me how you killed that little boy” (168). While Nel protests that Sula was the offender, Eva’s response evokes the language of prior, warmer passages that describe the love between the girls: “You. Sula. What’s the difference? You was there. You watched, didn’t you?” (168). Their connection, their mutuality, is not an innocent means to transcendence; rather, it provokes shared guilt, shame, and pleasurable sin, performing what Stockton names as “loving cruelty” (93). The two jointly create the space where Chicken Little falls—a shared innovation of their girlhood space that provokes death and guilt. Nel recalls with pleasure that in watching him fall, she felt “the tranquillity that follows a joyful stimulation. Just as the water closed peacefully over the turbulence of Chicken Little’s body, so had contentment washed over her enjoyment” (170). Moments of shared joy also implicate destruction, death, and sorrow; they invite wails and promises from spectral strangers. The novel then, introduces sorrow in an urgent way: always coupled with moments of extreme and pleasurable connection, embedded in the makeup of the text’s central relationship.
In order to address the contradictions embedded in the shared killing, we can examine the productive messiness of Sula and Nel’s relationship through a lens of queer of color critique. For the two connect over a shared disidentificatory praxis that refuses normative or stable identity. As the text pushes the boundaries of a love relationship, the two unite over a shared disavowal of ascribed identity and produce a creative, shameful, erotic space. When the novel first describes their relationship, it defines it in this manner, as a shared creative enterprise in response to enforced identity: “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). By acknowledging the demands of identity and negating its mandates, the two create a space where they can enact new forms of relationality and identity.

_Sula_ works on dominant theories of identity and relationality through a creative process of disidentification. José Esteban Muñoz theorizes disidentification as a practice embedded in the artistic production of queer people of color. Disidentification, according to Muñoz, is a means of decoding mass culture from the positionality of a minoritized subject, who “works on and against” dominant culture, creating a new approach to identity that does not diagnostically buy in to the prevailing fiction of identity production, nor completely negate the pre-existing social order (11). Muñoz, like Roderick Ferguson, underscores the importance of the 1980s Black feminists (such as Smith and Lorde) as theoretical precursors to a contemporary theory of disidentification.¹⁵ He points to Morrison’s _Playing in the Dark_ as an early work of disidentification, arguing, “The act of locating African presence in canonical white literature is an example of disidentification employed for a focused political process... the disidentificatory

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¹⁵ This move is in fact a radical one, for as Muñoz notes, often critics laud these women (or simply note their existence) without really engaging their work. Muñoz argues, “the powerful queer feminist theorist/activists that are most often cited—Lorde, Barbara Smith, Anzaldúa, and Moraga, among others—are barely ever critically engaged and instead are... merely adored from a distance” (11). Jack Halberstam poses a complementary argument in his essay “Shadow Feminisms” in the 2011 _The Queer Art of Failure_.

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optic is turned to shadows and fissures within the text, where racialized presences can be liberated from the protective custody of the white literary imagination” (29).

The politics of difference enacted in Muñoz’s theory of disidentification articulates a shared practice that implicates Sula and Nel, whose relationship is born out of a recognition of their difference: that they are “neither white nor male.” In addition, their relationship refuses a neat assessment of simple positivity—it challenges white patriarchal standards without offering neat solutions. Through their creative practice of disidentification, Nel and Sula create a new way of connecting outside of the Bottom’s pre-existing relational standards. Their creative, messy, and erotic relationship evokes queer of color urgencies to negate identity in order to burst it open and expose alternative possibilities for relationality. Through disidentificatory praxis, the text stretches and plays on questions that Morrison poses as critic in the Foreword to Sula:

“What is friendship between women when unmediated by men? What choices are available to black women outside their own society’s approval?” (xiii). Ferguson makes a case for taking up identity only to disperse it in his reclamation of early lesbian of color feminist critiques of Sula, writing, “lesbian of color feminism contributed to the theorization of identity by arguing that if identity is posed, it must be constantly contravened to address [a] variety of social contradictions” (126-127). The novel plays with the expansiveness of identity through posing and breaching it in turn. Sula can be read as a theory of identity that does something that Barbara Smith cannot. Sula is not alone in this identificatory strategy, and other literary works can be read in the same vein, for instance, Baldwin’s Notes of a Native Son theorizes a way of writing about race that ends with a message of love that cannot be read without an abundance of contradictions that risk negating that identificatory message—love alongside rage alongside longing alongside silences. Through the unpleasantness of Sula and Nel’s friendship, through its refusal to easily file into normative relationship structures, and through the disjuncture between
event and affect as the women register their affection for one another, the text responds to normative notions of identity and relationality by webbing them with contradictions. In doing so, its refusal of pure identity enacts a strategy that informs contemporary queer of color critique. Together, Sula and Nel create the novel’s most enthralling relationship—its messiest and most erotic—of queer longing tangled up with sorrow.

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Sula and Nel connect over ritual, physicality, conversation, dreams, and shared refusals of assigned identity, which together constitute an erotic subtext between the two women. The erotic produces affective registers of yearning, sorrow, and love that linger through the text. And yet, limitations persist that impede connection between the two women.

Sula and Nel never have sex in *Sula*. While there are scenes where they possess an intuitive understanding of the other’s body, none of these sections gesture to an eminent, textual sexual relation. In addition, exactly thirty years after the 1973 publication of *Sula*, Morrison would go on to publish *Love*, which takes up a love relationship between two young girls/women, Christine and Heed, that seems to respond to *Sula* in some key way, and still completely avoids representing lesbian sex in the text.\(^{16}\)

Not only is there no queer sex in *Sula*, but also Toni Morrison herself wanted to steer the textual dialogue away from queerness in order to explore what she saw as an untapped potential to discover the radicalness of female friendship. Morrison writes that the only kind of relationship between women entertained in literature before *Sula* was a homosexual one, and, in her words, “there is no homosexuality in *Sula*. Relationships between women were always

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\(^{16}\) While I am not interested in a “biography” driven argument as other *Sula* critics have done (see John Duvall’s 2002 *The Identifying Fictions of Toni Morrison*, for example), or notions of closed-system authorial intent, I do think that a possible argument for Morrison resisting queer representation in 1973 would be the masculine context and the critical silencing of Black lesbian thinkers (while that problem persists, *Sula* predated the 1980s storm of Black lesbian thought). However, by 2003, Morrison had time to consider an erotic presence in *Sula* and very well may have had fewer structural limitations in place for teasing out a queer relationship. In this sense, the time gap works against an argument that Morrison perhaps needed to make the queer presence more subtle, or suppressed.
written as though they were subordinate to some other roles they’re playing” (157). Morrison does urgent reparative work in elevating the radical potential of women’s friendships, especially given that in criticism these readings are often alienated in favor of theories of “binaries” and “aesthetics.” However, I also would like to point out and play with the binary Morrison erects between “homosexuality” and friendship, and with the potentially pejorative way that she disparages any labeling of women’s friendship as “homosexual.” Figuring friendship in strict opposition to homosexuality risks cutting off ways of understanding connection that do not fit into diagnostics of relationality. Particularly in a text that from the beginning challenges static notions of community relations through the Bottom, it therefore seems absurd to note the “friendship” elements between Sula and Nel at the expense of exploring eroticism.

In order to critique the “friendship” versus “homosexual” binary in the text, we may look to how the text addresses other forms of relationality through its approaches to sexual relationships, marriage, and broader community formations. By doing so, we can examine not only relational norms but also what feelings they produce.

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The Bottom poses a challenge to white heteronormative structures, and in doing so, offers unique forms of relationality that cannot be viewed as a priori, or taken for granted without analysis. Critics often figure Sula and Nel’s relationship to the Bottom as purely oppositional, but that is a simplistic and rather individualist way of reading the interactions between individual and community. Sula and Nel create an erotic space within a larger community that already suggests that the reader consider different forms of relationality. For the text suggests that the Bottom both produces the conditions for Sula and Nel’s relationship, and that the Bottom may rely on Sula to become itself.
“n----- joke”: a white farmer convinces his freed slave to take hilly land, rather than fertile valley soil, under the guise that it constitutes the “bottom of heaven” (5). And yet: “Still it was lovely up in the Bottom” (5). The Bottom emerges from a series of reversals of a white capitalist narrative that then create a space for joy. The text represents the moment when white people register the Bottom as a favorable place to live as the “collapse” of the Bottom, reversing the traditional success rhetoric of a white supremacist economic structure. These reversals of sorrow, pleasure, and capitalism can be generative, turning the rolling highlands of the Bottom into a desirable land, which in this sense, challenges the mainstream (white) sexual order.

The Bottom offers its own community expectations and a specific town order: where evil is expected and tolerated, where grandmothers read dreams to the children, where despite expectations for marriage and female fidelity, Sula’s mother, Hannah Peace, is free to casually sleep with all the married men in town—and the wives are essentially okay with that. Being in a family, even nurturing a family in Medallion can necessitate giving three children the same name, killing a child, letting a mother burn. Outside the privileges that whiteness confers, the heterosexual model of familial success falls short, as does the metaphor of community as family. Roderick Ferguson writes of the necessary intersections between class, citizenship, race, and sexuality when taking up a queer analysis, noting that liberal ideology purports the white bourgeois, heterosexual family as the ultimate metaphor for society. Ferguson argues that the family metaphor breeds an environment where “the base of sociological arguments about African-American cultural inferiority lay questions about how well African-Americans

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17 By 1965, Nel reflects that “Nobody colored lived much up in the Bottom any more. White people were building towers for television stations up there and there was a rumor about a golf course or something. Anyway, hill land was more valuable now...The black people, for all their new look, seemed awfully anxious to get to the valley, or leave town, and abandon the hills to whoever was interested. It was sad, because the Bottom had been a real place...Now there weren’t any places left” (166). The rise of business in the Bottom is depicted only as a loss, consistent with the text’s general refusal to accommodate the white gaze.
approximated heteronormative ideals and practices embodied in whiteness and ennobled in American citizenship” (20). The Bottom is a space of relationality unmediated by the white gaze, offering generative options for relationality, even if the residents “had no time to think about it” (6). As Berlant and Warner theorize in “Sex in Public,” “changed possibilities of identity, intelligibility, publics, culture, and sex... appear when the heterosexual couple is no longer the referent or privileged example of sexual culture” (2600). As Ferguson’s critique makes clear, it is specifically the white heterosexual couple that offers this restriction on Black intelligibility. The text’s work to create an alternate sexual culture is all the more radical for its refusal to defer to the white literary gaze.

Not only does the Bottom offer a fundamental challenge to the white bourgeois family, but also the town in fact produces and nurtures Sula. Ironically, as critic Melvin Dixon points out, “we know nothing of Sula’s life away from Medallion—her time spent in college, in New York, and in other parts of the country—because Sula’s real character, however enigmatic, comes from this community, this Medallion” (98). It is easy to think of Sula and Nel as simply confined by the Bottom, or Sula as always acting in opposition to community norms. Yet in Medallion, pariahs are seen as natural deviations, inevitably a part of the community, for “aberrations were as much a part of nature as grace” (118). People in the Bottom meet evil with “an acceptance that bordered on welcome,” and therefore its morality and norms in this sense nurture the development of Sula (89). While the Bottom nurtures Sula, she stretches its limits, particularly through the creative space that she and Nel innovate through their friendship.

Relationality in the Bottom does not lend itself to a strict binary between “friendship” and “queer;” rather, it innovates different community models and relational forms across the text, through the ways that it nurtures, injures, alienates, and celebrates its inhabitants. Nonetheless, one of the primary relationship models available to women in the Bottom is marriage. The text
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represents marriage as an institution that does no service for women, while sex offers a way for women to connect with their own selves, as opposed to another.

The only marriage that the text closely engages is between Jude and Nel, which enacts patriarchal power relations of possessiveness and feminine nurturing. Jude feels compelled to prove his masculinity, which he sees as threatened by the white men who take the jobs in town, including the new opportunity to build the tunnel connecting Medallion to another town. These pressures lead him to pursue marriage: “it was rage, rage, and a determination to take on a man’s role anyhow that made him press Nel about settling down” (82). He desires Nel’s caretaking, to indulge in her patient listening, for her “to shore him up,” and fears that without a wife he himself would feel “like a woman” (83). Nel is drawn to the idea of “being needed by someone,” suggesting her compliance with the possessiveness embedded in marriage (84). Nel readily performs nurturing, “high-tuned to his moods” (103), and ends up caring for a family completely alone when Jude leaves her. In none of its family structures does Sula pose marriage as a positive institution for women: Sula’s grandmother Eva, her mother Hannah, and Nel’s mother Helene all raise their children alone, and the only one who stays married is Helene, whose husband is almost never present; however, “His long absences were quite bearable for Helene” (17). The only thing that reassures Eva about her broken marriage is hating her former, neglectful husband (named “BoyBoy”) all of her life (36). The novel does not pose marriage as necessary or even helpful for women, and when the text engages marriage, it does not offer anything more than pure patriarchy.

Sex, on the other hand, can offer women in the Bottom a means of connection. However, this connection is not with their male sexual partners; rather, it is with a sense of self and a sense of sorrow. Eroticism between women looks starkly different from the heterosexual relationships they pursue, where sex becomes an antisocial and anticommunal exercise. The text de-centers
heterosexual sex as a means of connection, posing mental and ethereal eroticism over their overt physical manifestations.

In *Sula*, sex breeds sorrow and solitude. Sula insists on many sexual liaisons, conceiving of sex as “the only place where she could find what she was looking for: misery and the ability to feel deep sorrow” (122). Her sorrow *generates* a sharpened sense of self, yet this generativity is not communal; rather, it is deeply individualist.

In his essay, “Is the Rectum a Grave?” Leo Bersani theorizes that sex may not be pleasurable for most people at all. Rather, “anticommunal, antiegalitarian, antinurturing, antiloving,” sex is desirable precisely due to its capability to incite a loss or gain of power, an experience of shame or mastery (27). Sex under Bersani’s understanding negates connection. And it creates: a possibility to master a feeling of power, to feel pleasurable shame, to access the generative value of powerlessness. Many theorists, including Cherrie Moraga, Biman Basu and Amber Jamila Mussar have taken up the suppressed values of feminine sorrow and submission. Ann Cvetkovich argues that receptiveness to sorrow, in the tradition of Bersani, is in fact a key element of femme sexuality, re-appropriating Freud and Bersani to argue for sex *negativity*. According to Cvetkovich, penetration can provoke sorrow, and “allowing a place for trauma within sexuality is consistent with efforts to keep sexuality queer, to maintain a place for shame and perversion within public discourses of sexuality rather than purging them of their messiness in order to make them acceptable” (63). The expansive and *unacceptable* way in which Sula engages in heterosexual affairs evokes Cvetkovich’s pro-messy, pro-sorrow polemic.

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18 Cherie Moraga writes in *Loving in the War Years* that penetration was devalued in the myth of *La Malniché*—or the fucked one—who was socially ostracized for having sex with the white colonizer. Moraga argues that this myth led her to fear penetration, despite recognizing in her femme lovers the vulnerability and possibility that comes with it. Biman Basu’s work on race and sadomasochism includes the essay “Peverting Heterosexuality: The Competent Practice of the Object in Selina, Sula, Ursa,” where he argues that Sula uses penetration as an emancipatory way to access a generative object-position. Amber Jamila Musser’s *Sensational Flesh* continues in the vein of Basu, arguing for an eroticization of power, but also posits that Black women cannot necessarily always access the generative possibilities of masochism and voluntarily taking on the object-position.
Considering Sula’s embrace of misery through the lens of sexuality critics, two things become clear: 1) embracing or enjoying penetration is a taboo under heterosexism (in the words of Bersani: “Phallocentricism is... the denial of the allure of powerlessness”), and 2) that the act of penetration may very well be a way to access meaningful, productive pain. *Sula* recuperates both aspects of penetration by taking up the passive role in sex that so many sex theorists sidestep and refusing to negate the affective responses it generates.

In this sense, sex is not a communal way for two people to reach understanding in the novel, but a way for each individual to autoerotically touch themselves (mentally, physically, psychically). In the moment of penetration, Sula feels “utmost irony and outrage in lying under someone, in a position of surrender, feeling her own abiding strength and limitless power” (123). The text does not seem to offer moments of reciprocity or communion between the men and women who sleep together. After Sula reflects on the power she feels, her physical communication with the man she is sleeping with evokes affective dissonance and disconnect: “she looked up at him in wonder trying to recall his name; and he looked down at her, smiling with tender understanding of the state of tearful gratitude to which he believed he had brought her. She waited impatiently for him to turn away” (123).

The text’s sex scenes are full of these dissonances: consider, for instance when Nel walks in on Sula and Jude naked. Their contact is haphazard, their “not” touching emphasized: “they had been down on all fours naked, not touching except their lips... Nibbling at each other, not even touching, not even looking at each other” (105). While Nel registers that the two have had sex, the scene of discovery is described repeatedly with the language of “not touching” “not even touching” (105).

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19 Kathryn Bond Stockton neatly synthesizes this shortsighted alienation: “the problem with the sexuality theorists (from Catherine MacKinnon and Andrea Dworkin to Michel Foucault)...is that they all seek ‘to alleviate’ ‘the problem’ of the passive role in sex as ‘demeaning’ (though in quite different ways, to say the least).” (15).
Sex separates. It sunders Sula and Nel’s bond, while bringing Sula ever-closer with a sense of self. Moments where the text gestures towards sexual pleasure are products of the affection between Sula and Nel. For instance, consider the tempting, custard-colored pants of the boys at the ice cream shop. Sula and Nel ritually visit in order to register a scopophilic gaze, akin to the shared sensuality of beating sticks into the ground. And when Sula returns to town, Nel’s tempered relationship with Jude brightens in Sula’s company. Sula’s physical presence makes Nel feel “clever, gentle, and a little raunchy” (95), and through the same process of enrichment, Sula brightens Nel’s sex life, inspiring between Nel and Jude “a playfulness that was reflected in their lovemaking” (95). This playfulness and sensuality is a result of tender care between two women, as opposed to a sensual drive between a heterosexual sex pairing.

*Sula* shifts sex away from its archetypical reading as a joyful connecting force between a couple. A gaze at a friend’s rear substitutes a honeymoon moment in a new marriage. A life-changing relationship begins not in the realm of touching but in that of dreams. And perhaps the text foretells Maggie Nelson’s 2015 autotheoretical intervention on queer theory: “If queerness is all about disturbing normative sexual assumptions and practices, isn’t one of those that sex is the be-all and end-all?” (111). The text de-centers sex as the prime place for communion and opens it up as a space to tackle pleasure and sorrow instead.

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Embedded in these sections on heterosexual sex is an aesthetic that gestures to the connection between the two women. Sula, reflecting on her sex life, suggests a rather strange form of a gray ball, coupled with a howl. The narrative focuses on her interiority:

When she left off cooperating with her body and began to assert herself in the act, particles of strength gathered in her like steel shavings drawn to spacious magnetic center, forming a tight cluster that nothing, it seemed, could break. And there was utmost irony and outrage in lying under someone, in a position of surrender, feeling her own abiding strength and limitless power. But the cluster did break, fall apart, and in her panic to hold it together she leaped from the edge
into soundlessness and went down howling, howling in a stinging awareness of the endings of things: an eye of sorrow in the midst of all that hurricane rage of joy. (123)

There is a visual landscape in *Sula*: of watery weather, hurricaned landscapes, and gray balls.

The language of the “steel shavings drawn to spacious magnetic center” calls directly to perhaps the text’s most lingering visual—of a gray ball—and connects it to a haunting sound of a howl that cuts across the text. Here, aesthetics cling to and inform sexuality. The sound and physical forms that sadness take on in *Sula* have great stakes, and reveal how sorrow and pleasure work in interchange between Sula and Nel. Sorrow takes on a physical form and bursts in an orgasmic moment, accompanied by sound.

The sound-trace, sexual desire, and physical shape of a gray ball collide most climatically in *Sula’s* conclusion—a collision of sexual/sorrowful moans, of dusty, steely gray circles, of a dissonance between a sound’s idea and its utterance, the breeze and leaves of the Bottom. The sonic-visual conclusion suggests aesthetics as an answer to the perplexing sorrow, joy, and unyielding power of Sula and Nel’s relationship.20

Nel visits Sula’s grave and passes by Shadrack, the shell-shocked war veteran whose spectral presence in the Bottom is both prophetic and carnivalesque. As the other pariah of the Bottom, the text suggests Shadrack as Sula’s double. Shadrack and Nel move past one another, but he does not recognize her and they pass without contact. And then, a feeling interrupts Nel:

> “Suddenly Nel stopped. Her eye twitched and burned a little. ‘Sula?’ she whispered, gazing at the tops of trees. ‘Sula?’

20 Fred Moten makes the case in *In the Break* that there is something embedded in the Black radical aesthetic tradition that necessitates a new study of the “convergence of blackness and the irreducible sound of necessarily visual performance” (1). Moten hinges his argument for the convergence of sound and visual in Black aesthetics on a scene of subjugation in Frederick Douglass’s narrative of the violence done to his Aunt Hester, her cries of pain juxtaposed by a scene of call-and-response shared slave songs, that Douglass argues do the most to reveal the sorrow of slavery, precisely through their beauty, their “tradition of devotion both to the happy and tragic possibilities embedded in passionate utterance and response” (21). He uses this juxtaposition of sound to argue for a necessary coupling of beauty and trauma As a poet-critic, Fred Moten does many things, but a key reparative work he offers in both what he says and how he says it is his argument for the convergence of the visual and sonic to access Black radical aesthetics. These demands call the critic to liberate sound from the analytic of the visual, and posit aesthetics as a challenge to ontological questions of being.
Leaves stirred; mud shifted; there was the smell of overripe green things. A soft ball of fur broke and scattered like dandelion spores in the breeze. ‘All that time, all that time, I thought I was missing Jude.’ And the loss pressed down on her chest and came up into her throat. ‘We was girls together,’ she said as though explaining something. ‘Oh Lord, Sula,’ she cried, ‘girl, girl, girlgirlgirl’ It was a fine cry—loud and long—but it had no bottom and it had no top, just circles and circles of sorrow (174).

Sorrow and ecstasy cling to one another. The body and metaphor together release to speak to loss through a noise and the sight of pieces of fur. This final passage converges a variety of visual erotic signifiers in order to suggest a new way of understanding Sula and Nel’s relationship.

The moment that Nel finally recognizes the lingering power of Sula’s influence occurs when the metaphorical release of the gray ball corresponds with the sonic and circular cry: “Girl, girl, girlgirlgirl,” where erotic and traumatic signifiers converge. Upon Nel’s call to Sula, “a soft ball of fur broke and scattered like dandelion spores in the breeze.”

The ball of fur first emerges around Nel’s imagination when she witnesses Sula and Jude sleeping together, an affective response to sorrow that builds up over decades. Similarly to the negation that occurs when Nel witnesses the two—they were not touching, not even touching—Nel experiences sensory dissonance between her interior emotions and their exterior manifestation, or her own ability to express them. Her response to Sula and Jude together produces two lacks that hold Nel in thrall: a soundless cry and a sightless ball. A sight that Nel has never seen consumes her, yet she cannot deny its thrall, just out of view: “She could not see it, but she knew exactly what it looked like. A gray ball hovering just there. Just there. To the right. Quiet, gray, dirty. A ball of muddy strings, but without weight; fluffy but terrible in its malevolence” (108-109). In a moment of erotic sorrow, a gray ball emerges, too terrible to fully register, but unbearably present, even if only in metaphor. The ball haunts Nel, hovering over her daily life.

Accompanied by the gray ball she cannot bear to look at is a howl Nel cannot release as much as she longs to, a historic howl inherited, “the oldest cry” for one’s own lonely pain (108).
Nel waits in anticipation for the howl after she sees Sula and Jude together: “The mud shifted, the leaves stirred, the smell of overripe green things enveloped her and announced the beginnings of her very own howl. But it did not come” (108). The novel introduces sound in its lack, its dissonance with emotive or natural states: something that should emerge at a moment of recognition or synchronicity that all-too-often falls short.

The tension of the soundless howl and the hovering gray ball—the two symbols of affective responses to erotic sorrow—both release in the final moment of the novel. The gray ball bursts, and the howl escapes, the climactic moment of both sorrow and erotics. Both had weighed on Nel for nearly a third of the text—for twenty-eight years (1937-1965), the tension and longing for completion compiling. The long-deferred howl provides a release of necessary sorrow but also is erotic for the tension that builds to its release, mirroring Sula’s earlier howl in orgasm.21

For if one compares the language used to describe Nel’s realization of her enduring love for Sula to Sula’s reflections on sex, the aesthetic signifiers mimic one another: a gray ball bursts and scatters, and a howl conjures both sorrow and joy, “an eye of sorrow in the midst of all that hurricane rage of joy” (123). Among mud, leaves, gravestones (a ghostly confrontation), and the passing form of Shadrack, Nel reaches her own and only orgasmic moment in the text in her recognition of Sula. The text therefore ends in a moment of orgasmic sorrow, of final, longed-for release of yearning by way of great pain.

This is not about aesthetic notions of the uncanny in *Sula*, though sound and sight matter. I am concerned about what this final moment of orgasmic sorrow means for Sula and Nel. Nel

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21 Multiple critics have previously noted the eroticism of this moment: John Duvall writes that “Read in relation to the final image of shifting mud and the orgasmic release of the soft ball of fur, the wishes and longings Nel experiences are for the Peace absent from her thighs” (69). Keith Byerman would note that the final cry of Nel constitutes a “cathartic release” that mimics orgasm, though does not explicitly connect the eroticism of Nel’s release to Sula’s orgasm (196).
communes with Sula and herself through a final release, equally erotic and macabre. And perhaps what these separate, erotic moments where the women recognize one another convey is a potential, or a gap between the emotive and its literal manifestation, that is lost in their relationship.

_Sula_ tells a love story through showing what is lost. And perhaps that is the only way to tell a love story, particularly in a text where pleasure and loss are so intimately linked. Morrison would argue in a 1980 interview with Anne Koenen that her idea of real romantic love “probably is very closely related to blues. There’s always somebody leaving somebody, and there’s never any vengeance, any bitterness. There’s just an observance of it” (71). _Sula_ ends with a sorrow for love lost with a lingering awareness of how great that love really was. It ends with a cry that turns in circles, unmediated, yet aurally able to finally release at least some tension pent-up in the book, the tension of the longing that began during Sula and Nel’s shared dreams, never abated, only recognized at text’s end for its lack of completion. The cry offers release and a recognition of the relationship’s thrall. A blues cry, a cry for lost love.

The ending of _Sula_ therefore reveals a lost potential between the two women. In this sense, maybe the text never was concerned with a sexual relationship between them. For this is a novel where event and affect are continually dissociated, with affective and ethereal spaces often privileged over matter-of-fact circumstance, a novel where sex is a place to access isolation rather than connection. Love stories are told through loss in _Sula_, and a blues cry does the most to bear testimony to love. In this sense, erotics always bear a twinge of sorrow in _Sula_, and incite a perpetual state of yearning, unrealized like the knight who never quite visits Nel’s dreams. Queerness is therefore a _lost potential_ between the two women, and the sorrow of the love story is due to that loss. The potential of queer connection spectrally haunts the yearning, erotics, and grief embedded in their relationship without a physical match to its psychic demands. The
perpetual yearning and shared loss of queer potential in *Sula* illuminates a broader way that the novel reveals a coupling of connection and loss, and a disjuncture of affect and event. By identifying a queer unconsciousness permeating the text, we can then understand the sorrowful and ecstatic undertones embedded in its central relationship. Nel and Sula’s unrealized desire gives the text a twinge of mourning, yes, but also reveals the haunting and perpetual nature of the love between the two women.

The novel suggests a disjuncture of action and connection, a yearning that permeates the work and dramatizes the distance between feeling and its physical manifestations. By thinking of queerness as existing only as a lost potential, rendering the ending both erotic and sorrowful, the rest of the text opens up to read a pattern in Sula and Nel’s relationship, through which *experiences of joy and community are embedded with feelings of loss and sorrow*. In this sense, Nel and Sula’s communion over their killing of Chicken Little enacts a moment of loss alongside joy and connection. The elder women’s howls during Chicken’s funeral service suggest this as well: they scream on their feet in the church that day in rage and acceptance, and Sula and Nel walk home together holding hands, dreaming of butterflies. In this passage too is a deferral between emotion and physical response. When Chicken’s mother saw his unrecognizable body, “her mouth flew wide open again and it was seven hours before she was able to close it and make the first sound” (64). This spectral sound haunts the space in-between, a lingering emotive response like a gray ball, waiting for release in pleasurable sorrow.

Perhaps the Bottom foretells this cry for lost potential in its very makeup. The ritual of National Suicide Day frames how moments of destruction are posited as moments of joy and community. Shadrack leads a procession every year on January third called National Suicide Day. It begins as a shock, yet quickly weaves into the fabrics of the town. Shadrack imagines
National Suicide Day as a way to “mak[e] a place for fear as a way of controlling it,” to acknowledge the presence of fear and death in order to abate its persistent thrall (14).

After Sula’s death, the town joins Shadrack on National Suicide Day in a macabre parade with Shadrack leading the “pied piper’s band” (159). The parade is expansive, radically inclusive, comprised of “Everybody, Dessie, Tar Baby, Patsy, Mr. Buckland Reed, Teapot’s Mamma, Valentine, the deweys, Mrs. Jackson, Irene, the proprietor of the Palace of Cosmetology, Reba, the Herrod brothers and flocks of teenagers” (159)—beginning with “Everybody,” then moving out to the most specific characters, and together they laugh (“Never before had they laughed”) (159). They dance. They skip. They crowd in a frenzy and, in a thrilling release, they take to the tunnel that for so long they were forbidden to build, the tunnel Jude could never work on, and destroy it, relishing the feeling of killing every piece of it. Many of them die in the tunnel. This episode offers one of the most joyous feelings of communal celebration, of a shared release of pain, of near-transcendence, only to turn this erotic religiosity on its head and pose this ecstatic moment as the day that the earth would cave in and kill the inhabitants of the Bottom. Connection and mutual recognition occur, but must be coupled with sadness, even death. The texture of emotion, of trauma coalescing with joy, is informed by the ultimate feeling embedded in Sula and Nel’s relationship. An awareness of a Black queer unconsciousness in the text, then, requires an awareness of emotional life, the affect the text describes and produces, that can be traced across the politics of a town and the love between two women.

In *Black Looks*, bell hooks argues that “without a way to name our pain, we are also without the words to articulate our pleasure” (4). Hooks suggests that for Black women, articulating pleasure relies on being able to express pain. *Sula* tests the fullest extent of pleasure and sorrow in a relationship and in language, through the narrative of two Black women. Sorrow
according to *Sula*, is how we learn of love, through a matter-of-fact blues cry that recognizes sorrow without self-pity, where cries of sorrow can only truly come through shared recognition. José Muñoz argues that for “blacks, queers, or any queers of color” melancholia is quotidian, yet recognizing and embracing its sorrow offers a potential to “(re)construct identity” (74). In this sense, the final moment where Nel recognizes the enormous loss of Sula, offers hope, even if it hinges on sorrow. Yearning between the two women persists even after Sula dies, revealing the lingering nature of the love between the two women, due to its ghostly, dreamy, and erotic qualities. In this moment, Nel looks back and faces it. As Heather Love writes, “allowing oneself to be haunted can open up a ‘reparative future’” (151). The sorrow of the ending need not suggest pessimism; rather, Nel finally recognizes the thrall that Sula continues to hold on her, and there is hope in that recognition. Sula offers a ghostly call to Nel after death and here Nel may answer: in a howl she finally begins to perceive, in a moment of loss, how good love between the two of them really could be.
Works Cited


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