

Queer Black Feminist Self-Poetics in Toni Morrison's *Sula*

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Abstract

This paper integrates Black and queer feminist theories to investigate the poetics of self and subjectivity in Toni Morrison's *Sula* that, until now, has not been explored due to the absence of a theoretical approach that allows for the eponymous protagonist's liberatory self-fashioning to be accessed. Drawing on critical scholarship such as bell hooks, Audre Lorde, Sara Ahmed, Jack Halberstam, and Lee Edelman, I critique white supremacist, cis-heteronormative, and phallogocentric influences on identity, desire, pleasure, kinship, motherhood, and community and spotlight how Morrison uses the protagonist, Sula, as a queer Black feminist technology to rupture these influences. I highlight the relevance of integrating Black feminist and queer scholarship to imagine and actualize radical notions of subjectivity, sexuality, and erotic and intellectual pleasure beyond white and masculinist affective norms and obligations.

Keywords

American Literature; Phallogocentrism; Queer Black Feminism; Sexuality; Toni Morrison.

Introduction

As one would expect of a Black literary scholar who has won several awards and the prestigious Nobel and Pulitzer Prizes, Toni Morrison's novels have triggered seasoned critical analysis and theoretical scholarship. *Sula*, her second novel published in 1973, continues to be a subject of extensive critical analysis and academic discussions to this day. This, to quote Christopher N. Okonkwo, is a major compliment to both Morrison's storytelling genius and the text's "thematic and technical density and its ability to handle, without blinking or sweating, such polyvocal scholarship, all of which has, undeniably enriched our appreciation of Morrison's absorbing work" (651).

A survey of scholarship on *Sula* reveals that a significant portion has rightly examined the discourse of subjectivity and identity, but from the perspective of how the Black community, implicated in the systems of race, patriarchy, capitalism, and modernity, impedes the Black female protagonist's radical self-actualization (see Nigro; Bergenholtz; Page; Mancelos). Surprisingly, hardly any of the scholarship attempts to explore or reference the queer poetics of self that Morrison's novel chronicles to disrupt the phallogocentric spatial and social arrangement of the Black community. So, while the novel tells the story of two young Black women's racial-gendered becoming against the backdrop of a Black community, critical analysis of *Sula*'s thematic substance only goes in one direction—the becoming of a Black female subjectivity that is truncated by the racial-gendered arrangement of the Black community. This, I argue, is due to the absence of theories that can access *Sula*'s regenerative turn, underscoring the importance of overlapping queer scholarship with Black feminists' groundbreaking intersectional work. Given that the novel has been extensively researched in global literary studies, the next subchapter will provide a theoretical background to clarify my contribution to existing queer Black feminist scholarship on the novel.

Queer Black Feminist Approach to Reading *Sula*

A few critical essays that engage with the novel from a queer Black feminist lens are: Barbara Smith's "Toward a Black Feminist Criticism" (1978), Christopher N. Okonkwo's "A Critical Divination: Reading *Sula* as Ogbanje-Abiku" (2004), Geta LeSeur's "Moving Beyond the Boundaries of Self, Community, and the Other in Toni Morrison's *Sula* and *Paradise*" (2002), and Ceron L. Bryant's "Seeking Peace: The Application of Third Space Theory in Toni Morrison's *Sula*" (2013). Smith, Okonkwo, and Bryant illuminate some of the novel's queer structuring and thematic ruminations outside the boundaries of the hegemony of white/Western supremacy and heteropatriarchy. Smith's article, one of the earliest to undertake an analysis of the novel, highlights how the overt female friendships, physical sexuality of the Black female characters, and *Sula*'s non-conformity function to "expose the contradictions of supposedly normal life" (24), 'normal' being the "heterosexual institutions of male/female relationships, marriage, and the family" (23). Okonkwo on the other hand situates the novel's structure and theme within the alternative reality of African cosmologies, analyzing *Sula*'s material and affective independence within the malevolent ogbanje's complex ontology.² LeSeur's and Bryant's essays remind us of how Eva Peace and *Sula*'s re-creations of self and environ-

ment move them into the conceptualization of a third space “beyond the reach of any form of oppression” (Bryant 251) and “forces readers to evaluate the traditional classificatory systems, and in the process restructure long-held beliefs about the hierarchical orderings of Black and white, women and men” (LeSeur 19).

In *Black Looks: Race and Representation* (1992), bell hooks critiques contemporary Black feminist writers for perpetuating a narrow brand of oppressed subjectivity that leaves little room for narratives of conscious resistance. Her critique of these writings extends to *Sula*. While acknowledging that it is indeed difficult for “Black women to construct radical subjectivity within white supremacist capitalist patriarchy” (*Black Looks* 46), hooks argues that Morrison’s quintessential novel fails to develop the critical pedagogy needed to cultivate a Black feminist consciousness through which a Black female subject can successfully assert radical subjectivity. Instead, *Sula*’s rebellion and struggle for selfhood is constructed within the “conventional Western notions of a unitary self” (hooks, *Black Looks* 51), which inevitably leads to her premature death, demonstrating that only by self-sacrificing can a Black woman hope to survive within the interlocking system. While this might be a fitting analysis for Morrison’s *The Bluest Eye*, which chronicles the Black female protagonist’s descent into madness due to her internalization of white beauty standards, I argue that *Sula*’s analysis cannot be left at that totalizing end. Hooks’s reading of *Sula*’s exercise of autonomy outside the spheres of embedded relationality and her subsequent death as the disastrous end to her “privatized self-discovery” (*Black Looks* 50) underscores the absence of a nuanced exploration of sexual politics within hooks’s feminist analysis of the novel. Nevertheless, hooks raises crucial insights into the construction of Black womanhood, which she expands upon in *Communion: The Female Search for Love* (2002), arguing that Black women’s work of emotion, connection, and community must be redirected from caring for men and stabilizing male dominant ideologies, towards self-knowledge, self-liberation and relational practices that are essential for social justice and true liberation.

This brings to the fore the overlapping necessity of queer and Black feminist scholarship to engage with the queer poetics of self as represented in *Sula*. In mapping this radical teleology, I harken back to Black feminist writings that urge us towards a queer and queerer perspective on feminist subjectivity, sexuality, and resistance. Audre Lorde, in her collection of essays and speeches, urges women to acknowledge “the strength of the erotic into a true knowledge” (56) for the entire disruption of the “European-American male tradition” (59) that wants women to be powerless, deeply fragmented and only perceived as object of use. Similarly, Laura Alexandra Harris, referencing Black feminist writers such as Lorde, Smith, Jackie Goldsby, etc., who have integrated sexuality into their writings, argues that the multiple modifiers—queer black feminism—allow for boundaries between race, class, and sexual feminist politics to be bridged and many interstices sutured in ways that elide mainstream feminist discourse, including Black feminism. Harris contends that only by politicizing pleasure and desire beyond the scope of the personal, such as with race, class, and gender, can new feminist connections be made, and the parameters of radical subjectivity be redrawn to include Black, straight, and lesbian women, who understand emancipation as “the liberty to fuck” (29) and to

“define their own pleasure” (28). In both works, feeling, desire, and sexuality take center stage in their feminist resistance to white and male supremacist structures of power.

Recent scholarship has expanded the discourse on queer subjectivity and resistance, exploring new directions and perspectives. Sara Ahmed, using spatial concepts of line, turn, table, orientation, and direction, in her widely influential book *Queer Phenomenology* (2006), explores sexuality as a spatial formation that sexualizes bodies through their inhabitation of space. Ahmed's queer work refutes the arbitrariness of heterosexuality and argues that heterosexuality is an effect of the line of compulsory heterosexuality and histories of colonialism that naturalizes this line of desire towards the opposite sex. It is this orientation as an accumulation of values tied to straightness that allows for racial and sexual intimacy to be offered to some bodies while denying it to others. This straight line sets the limits of “who is and is not in a given collective” (Ahmed 119). The constant negotiation of contact between the body and space and the straightening line of demarcation, however, opens up the possibility of producing moments of disorientation and queer effects. Doing queer work thus entails rethinking and re-reading these moments of embodied disorientation to expose the straightness of the line, bring new objects into view, and make new spatial impressions that can reshape the body surface.

Likewise, Jack Halberstam and Lee Edelman in *In a Queer Time and Place* (2005) and *No Future* (2004), respectively, argue for a rethinking of queerness beyond sexual identity (i.e., being gay, lesbian, and transgender). This echoes bell hooks's popular soundbite derived from her 2017 conversation on liberating the Black female Body: “queer not as who you are having sex with, that can be a dimension of it; but queer as being about the self that is at odds with everything around it and has to invent and create and find a place to speak and to thrive and to live” (hooks, *Are you Still a Slave?*, 01:27:35–01:28:00). Both Halberstam and Edelman argue that while being queer does not intrinsically equate to rejecting conventional heteronormative narratives of family and reproductive futurism, the allure of queer discourse must nevertheless be rooted in its potential to rupture and counter this pervasive running commentary on the dominant logics of identity, self-actualization, and alliance in relation to time and space. Edelman further argues for a form of queerness that refuses to partake in mainstream culture's obsession with orienting political discourse around the “absolute value of reproductive futurism” (3). Instead, queerness must actively resist the literal and symbolic emphasis on the child³ as the focal point for future visions and embrace its own oppositional and disruptive qualities.

Encouraged by these critical queer and queerer turns towards and away from structures of identity, I am motivated to propose a queer Black feminist reading of *Sula* that highlights how Sula's unceasing proclamation of radical selfhood serves as queer moments to rupture the phallogocentric and naturalized “organizing principle of communal relations” (Edelman 2). I examine the eponymous character's radical self-poetics, which turns away from white and male-centered affective structures, as a technology that allows for new ways of thinking about desire, kinship, and community to emerge. Following Ahmed's assertion on the straightening device of whiteness and compulsory heterosexuality and on stepping out

of line as crucial to the emergence of queerness, my analysis will begin with an examination of the characterizations of other female characters—Sula's grandmother (Eva), her mother (Hannah), her childhood friend (Nel) and Nel's mother (Helene Wright)—within the Bottom's phallogocentric collective line. This is because only through their juxtaposition with Sula can Sula's queerness be perceived.

The Bottom, Its Phallogocentric Geography, and Its Black Female Characters

Many critics share the perspective that *Sula* is a narrative concerned with the geography and ethos of a racialized community and self. This perspective emphasizes how both seek to achieve balance amid the wider historical forces of white supremacy, which orient the characters' bodies simultaneously toward the hegemonic white world and toward one another within their racialized community (Heinze; Nigro; LeSeur; Mancelos; Baillie; Bryant). Denise Heinze explores the historical epoch depicted in the novel, spanning 1919 to 1941, as integral to the critical reading of the novel and the configuration of the fictional community. Heinze describes the great waves of migration, directly after World War I, as a period that held great promise for change in the Black condition but soon petered out in an "ever increasing racist America" (115). Black people's response to this myth of liberation would be to redirect their efforts towards building their own distinctive communities as represented in *Sula*.

In the first chapter, Morrison's vivid description of the spatial, temporal, and social mapping of the Bottom, in Medallion Ohio, allows for the wider historical events that frame the community and its internal interactions to shine through. The opening paragraph thrusts us into the narrative of a community that has crumbled under the tides of gentrification and has been demolished to make room for the city's golf course. Once a Black neighborhood in the early 1900s standing in the hills above the town of Medallion, the folkloric tale of how the neighborhood came to acquire its name 'the Bottom' is immediately tied to the wider history of U.S. Jim Crow segregation and the devices used to prevent Black people from fully integrating into U.S. society despite the abolition of slavery. As payment for an enslaved person's work for his "good white farmer" master (Morrison 5), the enslaved Black ancestor is tricked into accepting the hilly backbreaking land instead of the rich valley land which was agreed upon in their contract. By being sequestered in an unvegetated land, the Black neighborhood is denied "comfort through space" and an intimacy that comes with belonging to a liberated white collective (Ahmed 136). The Black community's resilience, creativity, and humor shine through as they transform the affect of their barren landscape with hearty laughter, music, dance, shared understanding, and the lighthearted consolation that, at the very least, they could "literally look down on the white folks" (Morrison 5). For a community like this, formed in close proximity to whiteness, yet as a dialectical Other and a negation, there is something already extraordinary and might we say queer about its orientation, i.e., its many histories and directions that it passes through and accumulates in order to arrive as the Bottom literally and metaphorically.

It is this extraordinariness of a community, the detail of its internal relationality, disruptive contradictions, individual acts of subversion, and possibilities of self-actualization for individual Black women that Morrison attempts to put under narrative scrutiny. As Morrison

herself attests, making the community as strong as a character was an intentional choice to spotlight the “life-giving, very very strong sustenance that people got from the neighborhood” and the fundamental and unbreakable connection, care, and genuine interest the women showed towards one another, family, and children (Morrison and Stepto 474). For a reading steeped in a queer Black feminist approach, this immediately stimulates the fundamental question of why *Sula* would defy a community as strong, enduring and giving as the Bottom and what *Sula*'s defiance reveals about her positionality vis-à-vis the community's social norms? It would appear that this is also what Morrison hopes her writing of *Sula* Peace does: “to spark outrage, total outrage” and provoke fresh waves of critical perspectives and penetrating analysis (Morrison and Stepto 487).

Morrison's portrayal of a diverse range of Black female characters are crucial in examining the intersectional issues often overlooked or oversimplified in race and gender discourses. *Sula* and Nel's grandmothers and mothers represent an older generation, whose lives have been shaped by slavery and segregation and whose primary concern is survival for their Black families and community in white and male privileged America. *Sula* thus joins a lineage of intellectual works by Black women aiming to explore the “private, hidden space of Black women's consciousness, the ‘inside’ ideas that allow Black women to cope with and, in many cases, transcend the confines of intersecting oppressions of race, class, gender, and sexuality” (Collins 98). Eva, *Sula*'s grandmother, is portrayed as a matriarch left to shoulder the responsibilities of three children when her husband, BoyBoy, abruptly abandons her after “five years of a sad and disgruntled marriage” that involved infidelity, alcohol abuse and domestic violence (Morrison 32). Confronted with the imminent threat of starvation and seeing no alternative, she entrusts her children to a neighbor and reappears eighteen months later with “two crutches, a new black pocketbook, and one leg” (34). She collects her children, builds an enormous house with many rooms, committing herself to overseeing the wellbeing of her children and the community at large. Through her caring acts alongside her love for “maleness”, she comes to command respect from everyone and special attention from the men of the community (41).

While Eva's positionality can be viewed as a “Third Space” identity contesting both patriarchal and conventional familial norms (Bryant 253), an intersectional analysis reveals that this is only partially accurate. Patricia Hill Collins's Black feminist work on the controlling stereotypical images of Black womanhood provides an apt perspective on how Eva's character typifies the stereotypical image of the matriarch. As Collins highlights, African American women have often been objectified through four prominent stereotypes—the mammy, the matriarch, the welfare mother and the jezebel/hoochie (72-84). The Black matriarch is a race- and gender-specific controlling image used to influence both white women and Black men's gendered identities. Stereotyped as aggressive, assertive, sexless, impoverished, and emasculating, the matriarch “serves as a powerful symbol for both Black and white women of what can go wrong if white patriarchal power is challenged”, while simultaneously being cast as the “fundamental source of Black cultural deficiency” (Collins 77). A critical analysis, however, reveals that it is only but an attempt to regulate aspects of Black women's conduct

perceived as challenging the existing order, especially considering the emphasis on respect, self-reliance, courage, and personal empowerment within Black feminist thought (Collins 78). So, while Eva's gender performance can be analyzed as defying "patriarchal notions of womanhood and motherhood" (Bryant 254), she still feels at home within the Black community such as the one described in *Sula*. Despite her intense hatred for BoyBoy, her practice of identity, community, desire, and motherhood is still drawn along the line of phallogocentrism. She lavishes all her attention on men, including Plum, her only son, stokes their male ego, and criticizes young wives for not "getting their men's supper ready on time; about how to launder shirts, press them, etc." (Morrison 42). She accuses Sula Peace, her granddaughter, who refuses to fall in line, of being selfish for not wanting to be married, have a baby, and be settled within the community. When Sula points out the fact that both her and her mother also were able to live without attachments to men, her response "Not by choice" (93) is insightful about her conscious politics. Although her self-reliance clearly challenges prevailing white supremacist notions of femininity, her self-actualization does not indicate any feminist conscious politics that, as hooks argues, should also critique phallogocentric socialization in Black life and "patriarchal notions of motherhood" in the Black community (hooks et al. 95). In the end, her hatred for BoyBoy only pushes her into the stereotypical resourceful matriarchal role, which is, for her and many Black women, a customary role.

Hannah, Eva's daughter, also inherits the love of "maleness for its own sake" (Morrison 41). After the death of Sula's father, she chooses not to enter into a committed relationship with any man but instead to have sexual relationships with "a steady sequence of lovers, mostly the husbands of her friends and neighbors" (42). She treats men as though they were "complete and perfect" just as they were and the men in return love and protect her "against any vitriol that newcomers or their wives might spill" (45). Her behavior exasperates all the women of the Bottom but does not disrupt the masculinist values of the community. Even after she dies in a fire, the women of the Bottom lovingly wash her body in tears as though they "themselves had been her lovers" (77). This, I argue, is because Hannah's self-actualized character, while choosing to be "unfettered by matrimonial laws and expectations" (Bryant 258), nevertheless steadies the line of phallogocentrism and the "racialized, gendered symbol of deviant female sexuality", popularly known as the hoochie⁴ (Collins 83).

In the other part of the Bottom where Nel Wright is raised, the reader also meets a phallogocentric structure that shapes identity, desire, and motherhood in the household of Helene Wright. Born in a brothel to a Creole sex worker, Helene Wright spends her life feeling flawed and compensating for her mother's lifestyle. To do this, she turns towards the conventional lifestyle, gets married to a respectable seaman, births Nel, and controls her own household with an "oppressive neatness" (Morrison 29) that leaves room for little to no subversion. Nel is groomed to become a wife and mother and whatever "sparkle" or "splutter" and creativity she exhibits is rubbed down to a "dull glow" (83). Nel's rebellious phase occurs when she befriends Sula, but this period is short-lived. Meeting for the first time in the playground of their primary school, an intense female friendship quickly forms due to their shared understanding of vivid sexual desires shaped within their distinct spatial experience, Sula's in her "household of

throbbing disorder” (52) and Nel in the “high silence of her mother’s incredibly orderly house” (51). Described as the opposite of each other, they find contentment in mirroring each other’s light and complementing each other’s differences until their desires move them in opposite direction. Nel fulfills Helene’s dream by marrying a twenty-year-old attractive Black man, Jude Green, while Sula aggravates Eva by going to college in the city. Nel’s marriage to Jude, prompted only by a desire to “help, to soothe” Jude’s pain, portends a surrender to the Bottom’s dominant cis-heteronormative and phallogocentric orientation of desire and motherhood (83).

On the discourse of phallogocentrism and the Black community, bell hooks argues that the gendered politics of slavery and white supremacist capitalism, which denied Black men the freedom to fulfill traditional masculine and benevolent patriarchal roles, play a substantial role in shaping the gender roles maintained within the Black community (*The Crisis of African American Gender Relations* 93-98). Highlighting a distinction between patriarchy, which revolves around male dominance and power, and phallogocentrism, which centers on the symbolic significance and prestige attributed to the penis, hooks argues that Black men were compelled to adopt a “fierce phallogocentrism” that prioritized power not merely in terms of provision but within the realm of sexual conquest (*Black Looks* 94). The implication for Black women seeking a semblance of male protection was that they had to embrace a contradictory gender ideology. They were expected to be working women while simultaneously accepting their perceived inferiority. This model of masculine privilege and domination is evident in the character of Jude Green, who marries Nel primarily because of the racial dynamics that thwart his dream of becoming a working man and contributing to the labor-intensive prosperity of the larger Medallion society. Following a stint as a waiter at the Hotel Medallion that leaves him dissatisfied, Jude attempts to secure a road-construction job at the city hall but faces rejection along with other young Black men. The only miscellaneous positions available were reserved for old and feeble Black men who were perceived as less threatening to the white supremacist climate. Morrison’s entry into the socialization of Black masculinity as an institutionalized structure of domination is eloquently captured through Jude’s bruised male ego:

So it was rage, rage and a determination to take on a man’s role anyhow that made him press Nel about settling down. He needed some of his appetites filled, some posture of adulthood recognized, but mostly he wanted someone to care about his hurt, to care very deeply. Deep enough to ask, ‘How you feel? You all right? Want some coffee? And if he were to be a man, that someone could no longer be his mother. He chose the girl who had always been kind, who had never seemed hell-bent to marry, who made the whole venture seem like his idea, his conquest. The more he thought about marriage, the more attractive it became. Whatever his fortune, whatever the cut of his garment, there would always be the hem—the tuck and fold that hid his raveling edges; a someone sweet, industrious and loyal to shore him up. And in return he would shelter her, love her, grow old with her, without that someone he was a waiter hanging around a kitchen like a woman. With her he was the head of a household pinned to an unsatisfactory job out of necessity. The two of them together would make one Jude. (Morrison 83)

Within this phallogocentric framework of meaning, only the oppressed Black male is recognized as fully human. It does not matter that both Jude and Nel are oppressed under white supremacy, neither does it matter that Jude cannot provide like the stereotypical white male figure. Nel is expected to assimilate herself into Jude to fulfill his needs and give meaning to his racialized life while her own identity fades into obscurity. Jude's pain accordingly activates Nel's caregiving conditioning. Prior to recognizing his pain, she was merely flattered by his attention and indifferent to his hints of marriage. In the Bottom formed between and betwixt the ethics of domination, Jude's pain acts as a "homing device" (Ahmed 9) that helps Nel to find her way around the "politics of heterosexual love and romance" (hooks, *Communion* 39) and remain a productive part of the community. This narrative of Black male pain and Black female caregiving is similarly reflected in the sentiments expressed by another Black male character: "That 'all they want, man, is they own misery. Ax em to die for you and they yours for life" (Morrison 83). Nel eventually becomes entangled in the phallogocentric orientation of the Bottom. Much like BoyBoy, Jude abandons her, leaving her with the responsibility of caring for three children. Like Eva, Helene, and Hannah, she absorbs the affect of the Bottom, towing its phallogocentric line. It is no surprise that Sula, characterized by her eccentricity, rejects this affective line of the Bottom. This leads to my next subchapter, exploring how Morrison utilizes Sula Peace as a queer Black feminist technology.

Sula Peace as Queer Black Feminist Technology

In the second half of the novel, Sula returns to the Bottom after spending ten years away. This is also when we begin to clearly perceive her self-poetics and the community's perception of her as evil. To stave off her evil, the community "laid broomsticks across their doors at night and sprinkled salt on porch steps [...], watched her far more closely than they watched any other roach or bitch in the town, and their alertness was gratified. Things began to happen" (Morrison 113). Although Sula is the protagonist of the novel and the queer Black feminist technology necessary for rupturing the Bottom's phallogocentric order, critics have noted that she does not fully emerge until the second half of the text. Christopher N. Okonkwo argues that this delayed emergence reflects Morrison's interest in centering "community, elevating it over the individual" (658). I suggest an alternative viewpoint. I posit that centering the community spatially, temporally, and relationally serves the purpose of providing insight into the accumulation of community and gender values Sula will reject in her adulthood. While Sula's unconventional behavior is evident in the first part of the novel through volatile mood swings, acts of self-mutilation and blood spilling to repel bullies at school, the accidental drowning of Chicken Little etc., we fully encounter the extent of her self-expression a decade later, following her return to the Bottom.

Similar to Morrison's vivid description of the Bottom framed by folkloric tales in the first part, Sula's return after spending ten years away is framed by the superstitious belief of the Bottom, foreshadowing her disruption of the Bottom's phallogocentric line. Her return coincides with the resurgence of a plague of robins, a bird species viewed by the community as both vicious and disruptive, foreshadowing her disruptive potential. Within moments of Sula's reunion with Eva, tensions quickly escalate between them, particularly concerning the

topic of marriage, with Eva asking Sula; “When you gone to get married? You need to have some babies. It’ll settle you” (Morrison 92). Sula vehemently rejects the idea of creating a family and insists on focusing solely on her own self-creation: “I don’t want to make somebody else. I want to make myself” (92). This idea of non-phallogocentric self-creation is perceived as narcissism by Eva who believes that women have “no business floatin’ around without no man” (93). Eva’s continuous attempt to control Sula’s self-poetics by invoking biblical values about “Hellfire” and honor for “thy father and thy mother that thy days may be long upon the land thy God giveth thee” (93) is met with radical self-poetics from Sula who responds, “Mamma must have skipped that part. Her days wasn’t too long. [...] Whatever’s burning in me is mine!” (93). The women’s argument is key because “it codifies the extreme oddity the Bottom groups into evil and evil days” (Okonkwo 659) and also invokes Sula’s queerness and her compulsion to exist outside of the expected heteronormative trajectory of birth, life, reproduction, and death, put together in such order and in relation to the phallic.

To read *Sula* as a queer Black feminist technology is to read her characterization in relation to the masculinist values to which she withdraws her allegiance and the “ascription of negativity” she embraces (Edelman 4). As Nel perfectly describes her: “Sula never competed, she simply helped others define themselves” (Morrison 95). If being raced, gendered, and sexualized is being consigned to a space of non-being and nothingness from which one will continually fail at attempting to reach subjectivity and selfhood, as Black scholars have argued, the burden of queer futurity, in light of this failure, according to Edelman, is to explore this charged realm of nothingness and “fuck the social order and the Child in whose name we’re collectively terrorized [...]; fuck the whole network of Symbolic relations and the future that serves as its prop” (29). What this means is that queerness cannot be a destination, and neither can it be entreated in the pursuit of coherence and stability. Queer politics must continue to revel in the gap between two realities, prioritizing the construction and illumination of new entryways into either no or new futures.

Sula’s return and her self-fashioning outside the boundaries of the Bottom’s phallogocentrism leads to new entryways of meaning-making. She also spreads the affect to Nel, who has grown weary under the burden of caregiving. With Sula’s return, Nel experiences a shift in her mood and starts appreciating the beauty in her environment, finding joy in past memories, and showing affection to her children. She connects all these transformations to Sula’s return, likening it to “getting the use of an eye back, having a cataract removed” (Morrison 95). Nel’s love life with Jude, which “over the years had spun a steady gray web around her heart” also gets a makeover and transforms into “a bright and easy affection, a playfulness that was reflected in their lovemaking” (95). Jude, accustomed to having his Black male experience take center stage, is likewise decentered as Sula introduces a new and intersectional perspective on the race and gender challenges faced by the residents of the Bottom:

I mean, I don’t know what the fuss is about. I mean, everything in the world loves you. White men love you. They spend so much time worrying about your penis they forget their own. The only thing they want to do is cut off a nigger’s privates. And if that ain’t

love and respect I don't know what is. And white women? They chase you all to every corner of the earth, feel for you under every bed. I knew a white woman wouldn't leave the house after 6 o'clock for fear one of you would snatch her. Now ain't that love? They think rape soon's they see you, and if they don't get the rape they looking for, they scream it anyway just so the search won't be in vain. Colored women worry themselves into bad health just trying to hang on to your cuffs. Even little children—white and black, boys and girls—spend all their childhood eating their hearts out 'cause they think you don't love them. And if that ain't enough, you love yourselves. Nothing in the world loves a black man more than another black man. You hear of solitary white men, but niggers? Can't stay away from one another a whole day. It looks to me like you the envy of the world. (103-04)

Sula's commentary challenges the simplistic oppressed portrait of Black masculinity commonly portrayed in the Bottom and points out instead that Black men in the US white supremacist economy are “both idolized and punished, romanticized yet vilified” (hooks, *Black Looks* 97) and still benefit from the colonial gender system because of their refusal to withdraw their allegiance from the entire system of domination.

The community is also not left out of the rupture caused by Sula's queerness. While they find her guilty of things like sleeping with white men (a signifier of integration forbidden to Black women) and putting Eva into a nursing home (a signifier of white/Western capitalist ethos), Sula's queer negativity illuminates the tensions of the logic of heteronormative futurity that holds the Bottom women in check. Ironically, her queer negativity unites the people of the Bottom in solidarity, reshaping how they interact and engage in communal practices. Husbands and wives start expressing a reciprocal kind of love and parents start ensuring the wellbeing of their children and home. Morrison underscores Sula's presence as the catalyst for this renewed sense of solidarity: “Their conviction of Sula's evil changed them in accountable yet mysterious ways. [...] They began to cherish their husbands and wives, protect their children, repair their homes and in general band together against the *devil* in their midst” (Morrison 117-18, emphasis mine). After Sula's demise and with no aberration to sustain their internal social order, the façade of perfection crumbles and the “self-constituting negation” (Edelman 5) of the social order is exposed. In the aftermath of her death, the dissatisfaction of the women with the social order resurfaces. They start beating their children out of frustration and exhaustion, “[uncod- dle] their husbands”, and express “a steeping resentment of the burdens of old people” and their constrained roles as mothers (Morrison 154). Sula's queer negativity in relation to the Bottom's self-forming negation exemplifies the arguments from Black and queer feminists about the costs often borne by marginalized individuals for the sake of progress within the framework of colonial temporality.

So, while Sula suffers noteworthy criticism as a self-destructive Black female character whose self-fashioning does not translate into tangible material power (hooks, *Black Looks* 50-51), her queer symbolic subjectivity serves as an entryway into engaging with new poetics of the self and having complex conversations about topics of race, gender, sexuality, morality, and structures of power and their intersections. As Toni Morrison herself confesses about the

difficulty of writing the eponymous character: “Sula was hard, for me; very difficult to make up that kind of character. Not difficult to think up, but difficult to describe a woman who could be used as a classic type of evil force” to complicate the binaries of good and evil (Morrison and Stepto 475). A woman who commits the cultural taboos of sleeping with her best friend’s husband, placing her grandmother in a nursing home, having casual sexual relationships with men, attending church suppers without underwear, or showing no excitement for the community’s rituals. How does this deeply flawed woman become an entryway into “alternative methods of alliance, forms of transgender embodiment, and those forms of representation dedicated to capturing these willfully eccentric modes of being” (Halberstam 1)?

As Chinua Achebe writes in *Named for Victoria, Queen of England* (2007), “distance becomes not a separation but a bringing together like the necessary backward step which a judicious viewer may take in order to see a canvas steadily and fully” (191). First, Sula’s choice to travel out of the Bottom instead of marrying as is the gendered norm functions as a queer Black feminist entryway into viewing and appraising the broader system beyond the Bottom in order to access new structures of consciousness. Second, her choice to return instigates a collective introspection for both Sula and the community, urging them to reconsider their understanding and affect of community. This reflective process holds the potential for the emergence of new consciousness. Sula’s unencumbered travel around the US from Ohio to “Nashville, Detroit, New Orleans, New York, Philadelphia, Macon, and San Diego” empowers her to see the myth of freedom espoused by racist, sexist, and capitalist America (Morrison 120). From the south to the north, the cities “held the same people, working the same mouths, sweating the same sweat”, all weary in an increasingly industrialized America (120). Translating a “mechanized economy into a mechanized way of living and thinking” (Heinze 105), everyone soon began to speak the “same language of love, the same entertainments of love, the same cooling of love” (Morrison 120-121). Likewise, all the women look miserable from “[folding] themselves into starched coffins, their sides bursting with other people’s skinned dreams and bony regrets” (Morrison 122). Sula comes to the realization that the only way to reach subjectivity and “be that version of herself which she sought to reach out to and touch with an ungloved hand” is to become intimate with herself, mood, and whim (121). In the face of this stark reality continually shrouded by “the structuring optimism” of American politics (Edelman 5), Sula would come to embrace her queer negativity, reveling in her own erotic and intellectual pleasure.

As Laura Alexandra Harris notes, bringing pleasure from the private into the public and intersecting it with race, class and gender allows for new feminist practices that call “into question naturalized identities and communities” (3). Sula’s experiments with pleasure becomes “a site for enacting, exceeding, undoing, and remaking relations of power” (Hartman 61). In this private site, we find a complex awareness of self, life, and death like none other. She has sex with multiple men, regards sex as “wicked” as opposed to “healthy or beautiful” (Morrison 122) that tradition confines it to, embracing a more complex understanding of human desire and interaction. Through these non-conformist intimate encounters, she comes to the realization of her own autonomy and experiences the paradox of “lying under someone, in a position of surrender” (123) and yet being able to assert her own agency and power as a subject.

She transcends the limitations of the gender binary, recognizing that power is not determined by anatomical differences such as having a penis or assuming a dominant position during sex. Having sexual experiences outside of heteronormative and phallogocentric boundaries and obligations allows her to enter into an erotic and intellectual realm usually closed off to women. Sex, which begins as a fun activity, transforms into a space of empowerment as she begins to connect and surrender to her body in new ways and to draw from it “abiding strength and limitless power” (123). Within this erotic realm, she becomes intimate with time and loneliness as objects of her own desires, thus positioning herself as the subject of her own pleasure and dismantling the notion of power as strictly white and masculine constructs. She encounters herself repeatedly, is able to love herself completely, and embraces a more fluid understanding of power rooted in autonomy. This is in contrast to Eva, Hannah, Helene, Nel, and the Bottom women’s experience of loneliness engendered by their men’s abandonment and a valuation of time as linear geared towards constant productivity, consumption, and survival.

In an ironic turn of events shortly before her death, Sula also comes to know desire through the phallogocentric lens. This is Morrison’s way of creating an affect of community, illustrating how being in close proximity to community can elicit conventional emotions and bind us to the community. Sula functioning as a queer Black technology affects not only the community but is equally affected by it. However, Sula’s desire is directed towards a kindred soul in the form of a man, Ajax, whose use of time is also pleasure-centered and who neither cares to possess a woman through patriarchal caregiving nor be possessed. The intimacy they share includes mutual respect, with both inviting each other into their private thoughts, fulfilling Sula’s longstanding desire. He leaves her soon after she tells him, “Come on. Lean on me” following his altercation with the police (Morrison 133), thus imparting a lesson about the challenges of maintaining the continuity of the queer self in proximity to a conventional community. Having encountered herself on a deeper realm outside of the phallogocentric structure, however, her queer self is not severely impacted by Ajax’s leaving. She lets go of her possessiveness toward him and follows her liberating thoughts with a song from the past: “There aren’t any more new songs and I have sung all the ones there are. I have sung them all. I have sung all the songs there are” (137). This melody functions as a metaphor, underscoring her self-poetics and her rejection of the phallogocentric future imposed on women. Moreover, having come full circle, she can now also speak on the reality of being Black and woman. As she tells Nel at the end on her sick bed, “You think I don’t know what your life is like just because I ain’t living it? I know what every colored woman in this country doing. [...] Dying. Just like me. But the difference is they dying like a stump. Me, I’m going down like one of those redwoods. I sure did live in this world (143).

While Sula’s premature death has been critiqued as signifying the end of an unfulfilling life (hooks; Nigro; Page), I argue that Sula’s life was far from unfulfilling and reading this otherwise would be denying her the right to define herself as a queer Black woman on her own terms within the cesspool of racist and sexist America, a right Sula consistently exercised until her last breath. Sula rejects Nel’s worldview and instead uses her final moments to emphasize her self-poetics: “Is that what I’m supposed to do? Spend my life keeping a man? [...] They

ain't worth more than me. And besides, I never loved no man because he was worth it. Worth didn't have nothing to do with it. [...] My mind did. That's all" (Morrison 143–44). Sula's queer negativity vis-à-vis her refusal to embrace maternal and phallogocentric desire foisted upon Black women in the Black community initiates new and radical forms of sexuality, intimacy, pleasure, and kinship. Likewise, her contentment with her imminent death disrupts the teleology of Black female life as designed by the white and male supremacist system, which defines Black womanhood fundamentally by their maternal desire, sacrifice, labor to the racialized capitalist economy, and devotion to men. Sula's life and death thus serve as a percussor to an imminent and expansive queer Black feminist revolution. Her conversation with Nel in her final moments is very telling about Morrison's deployment of her as a queer Black feminist technology. When Nel interprets her dying alone as being lonely and reminds her if only she had chosen a heteronormative, reproductive future just like them, Sula's uncompromising response: "Yes. But my lonely is *mine*. Now your lonely is somebody else's. made by somebody else and handed to you. Ain't that something? A secondhand lonely" solidifies her queer Black feminist self-poetics (143).

Conclusion

While Morrison's *Sula* undoubtedly explores the Black community's resilience, it also underscores that communities, especially those forged amidst the monstrosity of slavery and oppression, can simultaneously serve as havens as well as conceal internal tensions. In writing the anatomy of the Bottom and Black female characters like Eva, Hannah, and Helene Wright, Morrison shows sharp sensitivity to the messy histories of the Black community. We find that Black womanhood is constructed outside of the boundaries of white and male supremacy yet informed by it. While these characters show tremendous strength under racial conditions and embody matriarchal roles and other sexually freeing identities unfettered by conventional matrimonial laws, their notions of identity, desire, and motherhood nevertheless steady the line of phallogocentrism. For this reason, they are considered admirable women and subjected to punishment, while also being revered, as exemplified in the experiences of characters such as Eva, Helene, Hannah, and Nel. Thus, it may be argued that their embodiments of Black womanhood do not seek to call into question their own allegiance and acceptance of naturalized and phallogocentric-informed identities, kinship, intimacy, maternal desire, and affiliation.

In light of this, Morrison uses Sula not as a means to undermine the racial-gendered values that have traditionally occupied a central position within the Black community and given it a distinctive quality of life. Instead, she uses her to examine the history of Black (female) bodies subjected to multiple forms of systemic oppression and to transform the cultural politics of sexuality, intimacy, desire, and motherhood. By writing a character who embraces and exceeds the space of negation, Morrison succeeds in calling our attention to queer spaces of intimacy, desire, and kinship marked by negation that hold potential for queer Black self-poetics. As we see in the end, after the death of Sula, the Bottom also disintegrates physically and socially—with plenty of the town people dying in a tunnel⁵ and the rest trading their lives in the Bottom for the allure of industrialization in the valley. White people, craving the rich cul-

tural environment created by Black people, move in to gentrify the Bottom and Black people, craving assimilation and ascension into the white dominant socio-economic society, move out of the Bottom to the valley. The deceitful act of the white farmer during slavery, offering the Black enslaved ancestor less fertile hilly land instead of the promised rich valley land, and the subsequent coveting and gentrification of the same land by white people after slavery, offers a powerful commentary on the enduring power dynamics perpetuated by white supremacy. It serves as a lesson on the workings of the system and how aligning ourselves with it, whether fully or partially, will inevitably lead to our deterioration. *Sula* thus becomes a queer Black feminist technology used by Morrison to urge racialized communities to examine their own traditions and allegiance so as to avoid their own inevitable disintegration and death like the Bottom.

Notes

¹ I use technology as a nod to Isiah Lavender III's idea of freedom technology, which he defines in *Afrofuturism Rising: The Literary Prehistory of a Movement* (2019), as forms of practical knowledge that help Black people to control their history of enslavement.

² Ogbanje in African cosmology refers to spirit children with complex identity. They are born only to die and be born again and again. They are known to exhibit aberrant and non-conformist traits. By exploring *Sula*'s subjectivity within this framework, Okonkwo makes visible multiple gender and sexual identities within the transatlantic African tradition.

³ Edelman explains the symbolism of the child as a fantasmatic universalized subject, not to be confused with a real child, that serves to regulate political discourse and meaning making and terroristically holds everyone to a higher collective futuristic purpose. This symbolic child marks the fetishistic fixation of heteronormativity; and everything fought, won, and lost is always done in the service of this child and self-fashioning and alliances not invested psychically in preserving this absolute value of reproductive futurism are judged as narcissistic and deficient.

⁴ Patricia Collins explains 'the hoochie' as the racialized deviant version of the passive, prim, and proper white woman within the overarching white supremacist system. The hoochie's image of womanhood is constructed around her insatiable sexual appetite, which helps define the boundaries of white heteronormativity.

⁵ The tunnel built in the white part of town became the focal point of the Bottom people's intense emotions. In a collective frenzy, they march into it with the intention of destroying it, but the tunnel tragically collapses, trapping and killing the majority of the people. This tunnel serves as a metaphor for white dominant institutions always already rigged against Black people and Black people's continuous attempts to be integrated into it, which leads to colossal tragedy.

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