

Representing the (Un-)Expected —Dream, Violence, and “Danse Macabre” in Toni Morrison’s *Sula*

Ya-huei Lin

Department of Western Languages and Literature
National University of Kaohsiung
E-mail: yhlin@nuk.edu.tw

Abstract

What happens to a dream deferred? Does it “fester like a sore and then run”? And if it explodes, as Langston Hughes surmises in *Harlem*, what form of violence does it take? This paper attempts to explore how Toni Morrison entertains the possible answers to the above questions through diverse narratives of disaster in *Sula*. Between this literary text and its historical/social context, how does Morrison’s rhetoric of death help bring into light the latent causes of widespread injuries in African-American life during the first half of the twentieth Century? And what is the most essential or effective impetus of that rhetoric? Tales of (self-)annihilation aside, Shadrack’s coinage of National Suicide Day, I believe, offers a most rewarding point for critical investigation. On the one hand, it is a public monument to private terror: to “reason dazzled,” as Michel Foucault expresses it in *Madness and Civilization*. On the other hand, it depicts to full capacity the (un-)anticipated violence and vulnerability in the collective life of his race. By

following Shadrack to “kill” the tunnel they are forbidden to build, black folks perform their “Danse Macabre” and inadvertently meet their deaths by going too far into the cause of their outrage. Unwittingly they effect the literal sense of “National Suicide Day.”

Key Words: Toni Morrison, *Sula*, African-American, Dream, Danse Macabre