

## **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

What happens to a dream deferred?

Does it dry up  
 like a raisin in the sun?  
 Or fester like a sore—  
 And then run?  
 Does it stink like rotten meat?  
 Or crust and sugar over—  
 like a syrupy sweet?

Maybe it just sags  
 like a heavy load.

*Or does it explode?*

—Langston Hughes, “Harlem”

Michel Foucault asks himself, in *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, why he has written a history of the prison: “Simply because I am interested in the past? No, if one means by that writing the history of the past in terms of the present. Yes, if one means writing the history of the present” (1979: 31). The history he wants to present, in other words, is not the past which has ceased existing, as the conventional knowledge might have it. Rather, it is the past that remains alive: the historical present, which is to be addressed through an analysis of the power that has created it. Such a historical *and* critical undertaking accords with the “anthropology of art,” which Houston A. Baker, Jr. posits in *The Journey Back: Issues in Black Literature and Criticism*. Art should be studied, he argues, not in an isolated situation, but in relation to the other disciplines and systems of a given society. If one wishes to understand a work of art, it is essential to reconstruct its cultural context, the ensemble of the forces that has made it possible (1983: xvi). Sidney W. Mintz and Richard Price share a similar view in *The Birth of African-American Culture: An Anthropological Perspective*. They propound that the present cannot be truly understood without reference to the past: the latter

must be viewed as the conditioning circumstance of the former (1992: 83-84). While the focus of their research may vary, all of the above theories highlight forces in the past that have helped shape the targets of their investigation. Very much in the same vein, my paper examines how Toni Morrison re(-)views the molding effects of the past on African-American life and culture in *Sula*, a novel that engages deeply with the historical present. It inquires into her interrogation of some “time-honored” factors of racial/sexual discrimination in American history—how they have successfully propelled themselves into various forms of domination, and how they have kept deferring the materialization of African-Americans’ dream of true equality, especially within the economic realms of American society. Consisting of episodes, ranging mostly between 1919 and 1965, this literary text brings to light those forces in their corresponding cultural/social contexts of American history, disclosing concomitantly the latent causes of widespread injuries in African-American life. The correlation between the text and its historical context, which this paper ventures to explore, manifests itself most vividly in Morrison’s representation of the “nigger” joke, the unemployment in the Bottom community, and her rhetoric of death.

## I. “Bottom Up”

The “nigger” joke in the opening chapter of *Sula* serves well as the wedging prologue of the whole fiction. With ironic gloom as its keynote, this comic tale subtly paves the way for the subsequent episodes to follow in cogent agreement. It tells how a cunning white farmer, refusing to give away a piece of bottom land he has promised, tricks his gullible black slave into preferring what he calls “the Bottom” (5), which actually sits high up in the hills. While acknowledging the stark reality, the astute master explains under false pretenses: “when God looks down, it’s the bottom. That’s why we call it so. It’s the bottom

of heaven—best land there is” (5). In the name of God, the specious argument of the master literally turns the land upside down, successfully inducing the emancipated slave to fall into the trap through his own volition. The hilly land, nevertheless, turns out to be useless for agricultural purposes. Quite the opposite of the master’s promise, it proves to be a wasteland, a living hell: “where planting was backbreaking, where the soil slid down and washed away the seeds, and where the wind lingered all through the winter” (5). This broken promise on the part of the white farmer, as Baker explicitly points out, bespeaks the deprivation of the means of production that characterizes America’s relationship to former slaves (1993: 238). The ghost of that nightmarish history of slavery, so to speak, remains alive and continues haunting the Bottom people even long after its official demise. All too often, it tucks itself into the racist mind, reviving in new guises when given the opportunity. Thus exploited and deprived of the better means of production by the white master’s sophistry, the liberated slave and his people cannot but try to manage with the “given” situation. It is the situation of “the freedman [who] has not yet found in freedom his promised land” (Du Bois, 1990: 10). While there might be hope of advancement in the world, there seems to be little of hope in the Bottom community, in Ohio. The hilly “bottom land,” as a matter of fact, carries very little chance of truly becoming “the bottom of heaven,” as the “good and kind” farmer has promised. In the course of time, the community there remains a part of the bottom stratum of society, ironically carrying out the literal meaning of its forced geographical name.

The “nigger” joke, to state the obvious, does more than just provoke laughter. Morrison’s deliberation on the derogatory term “nigger” opens up, so to speak, “the Pandora’s box” in American history, namely the controversial issue of racism against blacks. The adoption of such an extremely offensive word for an African-American seems to indicate a strong intention on the part

of the author to wield pungent criticism in her aesthetic performance. That is, by virtue of her fictional representation, Morrison reflects and criticizes the deeply rooted prejudice against blacks in America. Satirically, the interplay between the master and slave in the joke describes the contours of a racist society in miniature. It illustrates, in a roundabout way, how the racial discrimination against blacks under slavery has insinuated itself into the socio-economic infrastructure of the allegedly free society, especially through the lawful doctrine of racial segregation. Approved by the Supreme Court in 1896, this “separate but equal” doctrine had held sway for more than half a century until the Supreme Court under Chief Justice Earl Warren struck it down in 1954 (Currie, 1988: 57).<sup>1</sup> Anthony P. Polednak’s *Segregation, Poverty, and Mortality in Urban African Americans* reinforces the view that this doctrine made a strong impact on the history of residential segregation. As Polednak points out, many northern cities in America showed sharp rises in black-white segregation starting around 1910-1920, and by 1940 segregation was an ingrained institution (1997: 22). It is more than likely that the situation in American South was still more serious, given the political climate then and there, and, on top of it, the violent racist crimes committed by the Ku Klux Klan during and after the Reconstruction.

In “The Novel Today,” John Maxwell Coetzee explores interrelations between the novel and history in the South Africa of the 1980s, the same decade as the publication of *Sula*. He argues that history is not reality: it is a discourse constructed upon reality. Likewise, fiction is a kind of discourse. Coetzee wonders if it is sometimes more true than history “because it deals with the

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<sup>1</sup> Supreme Court approved segregation with “separate but equal” ruling in the case of *Plessy v. Ferguson* in 1896. It declared that “separate” facilities for whites and blacks were permissible so long as they were “equal.” And David P. Currie contends that Earl Warren laid the ground for the substantial progress in racial equality in the subsequent decades by breaking this doctrine.

underlying patterns of force at work in our private and public life, in contrast to straight or orthodox history, which unavoidably has to deal with mountains of events without detectable pattern, with brute contingency” (1988: 2). The novel’s potential for veracity thus reinforced, Coetzee further calls attention to a pressing problem: the appetite of history to appropriate and colonize the novel. Considering the circumstances, he posits that the novel has only two choices: “supplementarity or rivalry” (1988: 3). The former serves to complement the doubtful truth in history; the latter, demythologize history to uncover its fictitious position. Seemingly incompatible in Coetzee’s either-or scenario, these two options for the novel nevertheless find in Morrison’s fiction the capacity to coexist and join forces. Specifically, they collaborate with each other in pursuit of the reality that lies beneath the fabricated discourses of history. Hand in hand, they disclose the underlying patterns of force at work in the historical present of *Sula*, contributing together to what Coetzee calls “the higher truth of fiction” (1988: 2).

Put side by side, Morrison’s fiction and orthodox American history complement and compete with each other in a most intricate and intriguing manner. The dubious division of space (the bottom land vs. the hilly land) in the “nigger” joke, on the one hand sheds lights on the nature of segregation in the factual political context to which *Sula* alludes. The above-mentioned historical statistics concerning residential segregation, on the other hand, strengthen Morrison’s insinuation of a joint conspiracy of “Jim Crowism”<sup>2</sup> and the racist socio-economic stratification, as portrayed through the master’s schemed “spatial quarantine” in the joke. The deceitful bargain in Morrison’s comic satire, furthermore,

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<sup>2</sup> “Jim Crowism” refers to the institution of racial segregation or the practice of discrimination against blacks by legal enforcement or traditional sanctions. Alluding disparagingly to a stereotype black man, “Jim Crow” comes from the name of a Negro plantation song of the early nineteenth century. It is also a stage presentation of a song and dance first performed by Thomas D. Rice (1808-1860) and later by other actors dressed as “nigger minstrels” (“Jim Crow,” 2006).

draws attention to the nation's well-meant laws which have not been executed faithfully. The Thirteenth (1865), Fourteenth (1868), and Fifteenth (1870) Amendments to the Constitution, for example, guarantee African-Americans their basic rights as citizens. These promissory notes, however, prove hard to cash in the racist environment. With the white master willfully changing his promise, Morrison's satirical joke in *Sula* stands out in the sphere of fiction to rival history in its own comic way. Explicitly, it divests the orthodox history of its myths by challenging the validity of these "benign" laws and the actual practices of "separate but *unequal*" doctrine in American society. The treacherous nature of the grandfather clause<sup>3</sup> in the late nineteenth century and the early twentieth century, for instance, finds its literary double in the white master's sophistry in Morrison's joke. The former—through contriving the legal loophole of poll tax—attempts to prevent the blacks from voting; the latter—through devising a pretense, to deprive the emancipated slave of his promised land. In essence, they both aim to safeguard the privileged—by keeping something pre-existing to remain the same, despite the change to the contrary in the rules applied to newer situations.

In the episode entitled "1920," Morrison addresses the problem of racial segregation from a woman's perspective, calling attention to the obscure bias underneath—the sexual prejudice that accompanies racial discrimination. During their trip to New Orleans in a segregated train, Helene Wright and her daughter Nel encounter a series of humiliations. Conspicuous among them is

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<sup>3</sup> The Grandfather Clause was a legal mechanism passed by seven Southern states (from 1895 to 1910) to deny suffrage to Black Americans. As an aspect of the Southern Jim Crow laws, the Grandfather Clause stated that anyone whose grandfather had voted before the Civil War did not have to pay poll taxes. The measure was an attempt to force the poll tax on blacks—whose grandfathers obviously had not voted before the Civil War—thus stopping nearly all blacks from voting. In 1915 the Supreme Court finally declared the grandfather clause unconstitutional, because it violated equal voting rights guaranteed by the Fifteenth Amendment ("Grandfather Clause," 2006).



Helene's failure to find in the stationhouse "a door that said COLORED WOMEN" (23-24). While the men stand under the station roofs, she and her daughter, instead, have to squat in the grass for toilet, like the other colored females. In this most unsettling episode, they have to go through the same mortifying experience again and again until the train finally reaches their destination. Embedded in sexual as well as racial prejudices, the spatial quarantine of their enforced "toilet training" thus corresponds closely to the segregation in the "nigger" joke.

Besides its historical implications, Morrison's seemingly nonsensical joke makes much more sense than it appears. Its sense, as Sigmund Freud points out in *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*, lies in "the revelation and demonstration of something else that is stupid and nonsensical" (1989: 67). Behind its façade of absurdity, the sense of the "nigger" joke, as it were, seems ready to come out at one's call. Furthermore, by making the white master cunning and contemptible, this tale turns the tables on its target enemy. When the colored folks in the Bottom community tell on themselves, it offers them "a little comfort somehow" (5). In other words, it provides them, the victims of this "practical joke," with an opportunity to counter the authority of their victimizers, and the enjoyment of overcoming it. This satirical tale thereby represents, as Freud puts it, "a rebellion against that authority, a liberation from its pressure" (1989: 125). From behind its mask, the latent content of the "nigger" joke seeks to rival the dominating power; the "black" side of its black humor strives to release the anger and bitterness that comes with being black in America. More specifically, the joke evinces, in a comic way, the helplessness of Jude, Sula, Shadrack, and all the other black people who live in the Bottom of Medallion, Ohio. This funny, yet dark, tale and the ensuing episodes in *Sula* thus cohere in the pervasive pessimism of the Bottom community. Together they allow the author to underscore the slow pace of social progress, questioning whether the nation's grand pledge of true equality will be enough to change the national tune or turn out to be a bad check—just like

the promise of the white farmer in Morrison's allegorical joke.

## II. The Dream Deferred

Echoing the broken promise in the “nigger” joke, the plight of Jude Greene in the 1927 episode of *Sula* brings into full view, once again, the fundamental patterns of force at work in African-American life. It exposes, in particular, the depraved nature of the prevalent unemployment in the Bottom of Medallion. Put differently, it is “unemployment arising out of unfulfilled promises” (Ogunyemi, 1979: 130). A hopeful young man in the Bottom community, Jude often dreams of the chance to build the New River Road, a job opportunity which, presumably, should be open to all eligible people. Its realization, nevertheless, is delayed time and again. The true meaning of this deferment finally comes to him: “It was after he stood in lines for six days running and saw the gang boss pick out thin-armed white boys from the Virginia hills and the bull-necked Greeks and Italians and heard over and over, ‘Nothing else today. Come back tomorrow,’ that he got the message” (82). Thanks to the bias against the color of his skin, Jude’s great expectation of a job turns into a pipe dream in the rainbow nation. The year 1937 finds the hopes of the Bottom people glimmering once more in view of the building of a tunnel: “For three years there were rumors that blacks would work it, and hope was high in spite of the fact that the River Road leading to the tunnel had encouraged similar hopes in 1927 but had ended up being built entirely by white labor—hillbillies and immigrants taking even the lowest jobs” (151). Despite its previous frustration, the tenacious black dream of job opportunities remains, groping for any chance that might come by. However, the chances were slim, as always. Given the ardent racism against blacks in the first half of the twentieth century, it seems quite inevitable for the dream of the Bottom people to sag, as though under “a heavy load,” as Langston Hughes’ poem contemplates.

The dream motif in Hughes' poem has reiterated itself in many American texts. "I Have A Dream" by Martin Luther King, Jr., for one, brought it to the fore again on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial, in Washington, DC, on August 28, 1963. In that speech, delivered to the "March for Jobs and Freedom," King defines his dream as "a dream deeply rooted in the American dream" (2001: 85). The creed he alludes to reads thus: "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal" (2001: 85). This belief in equality, as prescribed by *The Declaration of Independence* of 1776, however, fails to truly materialize in terms of job opportunity, which, more often than not, is a matter of life and death to the poverty-stricken. From this perspective, Morrison's depiction of the plight of the unemployed in *Sula* and the publication of the novel in 1973, are highly significant. According to US Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics, the average unemployment ratio of blacks to whites was still 2:1 in both 1960s and 1970s (Brimmer, 1997: 11). In an interview in 1980, Morrison openly expresses her concern over this economic problem: "We still have the highest rate of unemployment: up to 40% among Blacks, to 7% of the total population" (1980: 28). It is indeed "A Slow Walk of Trees," as she puts it metaphorically (1976: 104). That perhaps explains why the problem of blacks' low employment stands prominently in *Sula* and many other literary works.

Terry McMillan's fiction *Mama*, for example, probes into the blacks' preference of welfare in the face of their unstable job opportunities: "Those on welfare looked for opportunities in all employable cracks and crevices but once they found jobs, many of them realized that their welfare checks were steadier and went a lot further. So a lot of them stopped looking altogether and spent their afternoons watching soap operas and gossiping" (1987: 30). Echoing the Bottom in Morrison's joke, the black community in McMillan's fiction remains a disadvantaged minority in the labor market. The scarcity and uncertainty of the blacks' job opportunities account for their prevalent nonchalance and hence

the vicious circle of unemployment. Their proper means of production still await the government to provide. Along similar lines, Morrison's portrayal of the Bottom's deprived livelihood realizes the dangling promises and imminent perils in the texture of African-American life. The invariable postponement of the African-American dream greatly contributes to the pains of being black; *Sula* thus points the finger at the real historical forces at work.

In his study of segregation history, Anthony P. Polednak calls attention to competition in the labor market in the first half of the twentieth century: "World Wars I and II, with an interruption during the Depression, brought job opportunities in the industrial North and Midwest, but also increased competition between a growing black minority and the white populations of these areas." (1997: 22) Jude's plight in *Sula* attests to that history of stiff competition; meanwhile, it alludes to the accompanying racism that has made employment even more difficult for the blacks. The gang boss' preference for workers of other races, for instance, exemplifies what economist Gary S. Becker calls "tastes for discrimination" (1992: 39). Such tastes on the part of the employers, Becker suspects, must be satisfied simultaneously while maximizing profits. Feeding themselves on their covert symbiosis with the market economy, tastes for discrimination soon spread nationwide, with those in the South about twice as rampant as those in the North in 1940 (Becker, 1957 156). Even now, in the absence of race-specific measures to assure equal job opportunity—be it in the South or the North—such aversions against the blacks often predominate in the labor market. The present effects of past discrimination thereby continue to perpetuate job inequality, as illustrated in the plight of Jude and his fellow men in the Bottom.

### III. The Bottom Dystopia

Individual economic problems aside, the Bottom community has yet to face menaces from both outside and inside. As time changes, the structure of the nation's economy alters, redefining property values and with them the landscape. The hilly land, perhaps to the surprise of the white master in the satirical joke, becomes more valuable on the market because wealthy whites come to favor it: "White people were building towers for television stations up there and there was a rumor about a golf course or something" (166). The prospect for the Bottom's economic boom, however, does not prevent its people from leaving. The concluding episode entitled "1965" in *Sula* finds this black community on the verge of falling apart: its people move out for some other places while wealthy whites take it over. Consequently, the invasion of this new power re-charts the demographics of the hilly land, accelerating the on-going collapse of the Bottom community:

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. These young ones kept talking about the community, but they left the hills to the poor, the old, the stubborn—and the rich white folks. Maybe it hadn't been a community, but it had been a place. Now there weren't any places left, just separate houses with separate televisions and separate telephones and less and less dropping by. (166)

With its landscape radically reshaped, the Bottom at this stage exemplifies the economic/political climate of the subsequent decade to Chief Justice Earl Warren's ruling in 1954. As American history finally moves toward its age of desegregation, the black community encounters the taxing problem of maintaining its integrity, with the result that many of its people leave, by choice, or by force of circumstances. The connection between the land and

its people withers away; the once “neighborhood” (3) becomes history. Telecommunications replaces direct human contact. The threefold repetition of “separate” in Morrison’s depiction of the Bottom thus marks it out as a land of desolation and alienation for blacks.

In addition to black folks’ forsaking their desolate place, Morrison’s portrayal of the Bottom in *Sula* invites attention to the vicious circle of violence in African-American society. It illustrates how violence from without has given rise to more violence within the black community; it illustrates how their collective traumata fester into their common spite, disintegrating their egos and leaving them even more vulnerable to the manifold violence in their lives. Jude’s rage and hurt for his dream held off, in a larger sense, signifies that of the black folks in the Bottom for the postponement of their common hope. Specifically, it is hope that “kept them convinced that some magic ‘government’ was going to lift them up” from their misery (160). No substantial help was offered by the ruling authorities; their grudging rankled and contributed to the “spite that galloped all over the Bottom” (171). This observation of Eva Peace, Sula’s grandmother, brings forth the issue of hatred transference in the black community. As Richard Wright describes in *Black Boy*, many African-Americans solve the problem of being black by passing their hatred of themselves on to others with a black skin and fighting with them (1992: 277). Wright’s analysis, so to speak, showcases the aftermath of racism not merely on the individual members, but on the black community as a whole. In *Song of Solomon*, Morrison demonstrates the adverse effect of hatred transference through Guitar Bains’ analogy of the card game: “The cards are stacked against us and just trying to stay in the game, stay alive and in the game, makes us do funny things. Things we can’t help. Things that make us hurt one another” (1987: 87). Obviously, Guitar is not the only character that endorses such a frame of reference in Morrison’s literature. Eva, in *Sula*, provides another example of a character glimpsing the treacherous nature of such a game. She is

fully aware of her own strong will to hurt people around her: “she stayed away from Sula’s funeral and accused Nel of drowning Chicken Little for spite” (171). Thus, Eva’s self-knowledge of her own hostility— together with her malicious act of blaming Nel and the stark context of Chicken Little’s violent death—gives evidence of the widespread dark malevolence in the Bottom.

In an interview about her novel *Paradise*, Morrison alerts the public to what she believes to be the immediate menace of black community—“the enormous political, cultural and generational animosity” (Verdelle, 1998: 78) that rules the African-American community. Such internecine hostility, as depicted in *Sula*, constantly breaks out in violence. In addition to the untimely demise of Chicken Little, narratives of frenzy underpin the life of Peace Women. The novelty of adopting “Peace” as a family name, however, stands heavy with irony, considering that their family seldom stays at peace with itself or with the outside world. Rumor has it that Eva Peace, as a strategy of survival, allows her leg to suffer damage and then to be amputated, so as to support her family with the insurance money. A tough matriarchal figure in the Bottom, she further takes a drastic measure as a last resort when realizing that her son, Plum, will never have the courage to emancipate himself from his heroin addiction. To put an end to his problem, she burns him to death while he is asleep. In a manner that is just as extreme in effect, Sula’s life is also entangled with violence and convicted evil. When terrified, she mutilates herself for self-protection, like the time, at the age of eleven, she cuts off the tip of her finger—to scare away a bunch of teenage Irish hunkies. She is also the person who, for some obscure reason, lets Chicken Little slip out of her grasp and drown. To top it all, Sula’s evil climaxes in *watching* her mother, Hannah, burn. She stands on the back porch just looking, as her grandmother Eva sees and suspects, “not because she was paralyzed, but because she was interested” (78). This burning scene offers a grandstand view of the complex spite chain in Peace Women. While Eva’s perception tells how Sula witnesses the performance of Hannah’s death, her own

frame of mind betrays simultaneously the grudge borne within. Both the perceiver and the perceived hence remain deeply enmeshed in the circularity of violence.

Besides prevalent animosity, *Sula* features the Bottom community as a dystopia which lacks something central, something essential to maintain its integrity. It needs some enduring and adhesive hard core to prevent its people from emigrating to meet their needs. Such a deficiency on the communal level corresponds closely to that of its individual members. Two pariahs in the Bottom—that is, Sula and Shadrack—stand out in this regard. Just like the society they reside in, both characters undergo a severe disintegration of self, having no center to pull themselves together. Sula’s sense of self, to be more specific, encounters its first trauma when she overhears Hannah’s remark about disliking her. The “sting in her eye” (57) then foreshadows the subsequent hurt she imposes upon others and herself, buttressing once again Wright’s scenario of hatred transference. The bruised ego of Sula further crumbles through her dubious contribution to the death of Chicken Little. Both incidents contribute to her lack of solid ego and her sense of detachment:

The first experience taught her there was no other that you could count on; the second that there was no self to count on either. She had no center, no speck around which to grow. . . . She was completely free of ambition, with no affection for money, property or things, no greed, no desire to command attention or compliments—no ego. (118-119)

Lacking a cohesive center to hold onto, Sula breaks loose from herself and her community. Morrison points out directly, in Anne Koenen’s interview, Sula’s lack of commitment. She regards Sula as an unusual character in the sense that she is much more a contemporary of ours than her time allows. However, Sula’s tragic flaw is her incapability to connect with other people. She becomes “the one out of sequence” (Koenen,



1984: 207) in the eyes of her author. She feels no obligation, not to mention any close attachment, to her people or her land. Defying traditional norms, Sula drifts in her ultimate freedom and indifference of social exclusion. Meanwhile, her spite keeps hunting potential victims whenever given the chance. As a result, Eva is sent away to a notorious institution by Sula, and Nel's husband leaves her behind, thanks to his illicit love affair with Sula. After years of self-exile, Sula's tenacious "sting" still remains, biting others and herself alike—until her life comes to a bitter end. A social outcast who is absolutely apathetic and hurtful, Sula thus embodies her author's insight into the transference of internecine enmity that tears apart the Bottom community from within and accelerates its decline.

#### **IV. Danse Macabre**

Besides Sula, Shadrack is the other antinomian in the Bottom community who demonstrates how violence can lacerate or shatter the egos of its victims. Engaged in the First World War as a private in the army, he experiences the devastating effect of violence that human beings inflict upon one another in armed conflict:

He ran, bayonet fixed, deep in the great sweep of men flying across this field. Wincing at the pain in his foot, he turned his head a little to the right and saw the face of a soldier near him fly off. Before he could register shock, the rest of the soldier's head disappeared under the inverted soup bowl of his helmet. But stubbornly, taking no direction from the brain, the body of the headless soldier ran on, with energy and grace, ignoring altogether the drip and slide of brain tissue down its back. (8)

The horror of such a phantasmagorical sight, this spectacle of a living death, perhaps comes too strong and sudden for Shadrack to fully comprehend or to cope with properly. Afterward, he finds himself a much shaken and shattered person: "Blasted and

permanently astonished by the events of 1917, he had returned to Medallion handsome but ravaged” (7).<sup>4</sup> His traumatic experience with the violence and inhumanity of war renders him a walking shadow with identity crisis. Aimlessly Shadrack wanders around, “not daring to acknowledge the fact that he didn’t even know who or what he was” (12). It is not until he sees his own dark reflection in the toilet water that his new self starts to take shape again. The blackness of his own complexion, to state the implied, gives Shadrack something essential—something central to grow around. As a result, he seems capable of regaining his footing to a “certain” degree. His recaptured self, however, turns out to be much twisted in popular opinion. Behaving in a wacky, shocking manner, he succeeds in defying the conventional social norms: “The terrible Shad who walked about with his penis out, who peed in front of ladies and girl-children, the only black who could curse white people and get away with it” (61-62). Ironically, it takes a quasi-manic and antinomian like Shadrack to escape punishment for rebelling against the white authorities in the Bottom community. Such tolerance for his bizarre or “insane” behavior exposes again the redundancy of sanity in a racist society.

Through his minor use of eccentricity, Shadrack further allows the author to read history against its grain. Horrorstruck by the sight of the headless soldier he experienced in World War I, Shadrack tries to deal with his urgent need of fear management in a most peculiar way. To negotiate with the outside world of unexpected violence, he starts a twelve-day struggle—a struggle to organize and focus experience:

It had to do with making a place for fear as a way of

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<sup>4</sup> Phillip Novak interestingly argues that Morrison uses this image of war to represent cultural discontinuity, with Shadrack, the shell-shocked veteran, as a record of that discontinuity. It functions as the shorthand for the impact of Western history on African-American culture. Shadrack thus presents the beginning of history in the fiction as “a form of dislocation, of fragmentation and incoherence” (1999: 187).

controlling it. He knew the smell of death and was terrified of it, for he could not anticipate it. It was not death or dying that frightened him, but the unexpectedness of both. In sorting it all out, he hit on the notion that if one day a year were devoted to it, everybody could get it out of the way and the rest of the year would be safe and free. In this manner he instituted National Suicide Day. (14)

Given that his chances of success are very slim, Shadrack's attempt to counteract the unpredictability of death appears to be a sheer wild-goose chase. Deep inside, however, such an exercise in futility harbors a black man's instinct for survival as well as his deep anxiety over the unexpectedness of his demise. The more intense his fear, the more desperate and outlandish his defense mechanism turns out to be. Accordingly, the extreme absurdity of Shadrack's measure speaks volumes for the true extent of his problems in American society.

The establishment of National Suicide Day, Houston A. Baker, Jr. propounds, is intended as a *prophylaxis* against the chaos of terrifying and unstable existence. Through a manipulation of images and instruments of death, it is meant affectively to reduce death to a residual category (1993: 239). In terms of function, it serves to decrease the threat of death, hopefully to such a degree that this imaginary device can truly ward off the imminent dangers in the material black life. Shadrack's politics of reduction thereby presents a fresh battlefield for him to counteract the hostility in his living space with the novelty of his time mechanism. Baker's insightful reading actually joins forces with Walter Benjamin's observation of calendrical time and human thinking: "Where thinking suddenly stops in a configuration pregnant with tensions, it gives that configuration a shock, by which it crystallizes into a monad" (1968: 262-263). To counterbalance the unpredictability of violence and death, shell-shocked Shadrack creates a predictable "monad" in the temporal continuum of unpredictable black life.

Like the historical materialist in Benjamin's theoretical scenario, he recognizes in this structure the sign of a Messianic cessation of happening, or put differently, a revolutionary chance in the struggle against the impending threat of death. The eccentric time monad he contrives is heavily pregnant with tension. On the one hand, it embodies Shadrack's personal monument of terrified consciousness or "reason dazzled," as Michel Foucault defines such moments in *Madness and Civilization* (1988: 158). It signifies, in other words, the vertigo of the aftershock that he has fallen victim to following his experience of violence during World War I. On the other hand, it depicts fully the (un-)expected violence in the collective life of his race. Its expectedness resides in the common occurrence of racism and savagery in the Bottom, as experienced by Shadrack, Sula, Jude and many other characters; its unexpectedness, in the uncertainty of occurrence which often catches them off-guard. Its un-anticipated violence reaches its climax in Morrison's portrayal of the Bottom people's final catastrophe.

On top of its emblematic significance, the temporal "monad" of Shadrack's loony invention gives fresh impetus to the collective catharsis of the Bottom people. In episode "1941" Shadrack's annual observance of National Suicide Day, to his great surprise, summons up the parade of black community for the first time: "Maybe just a brief moment, for once, of not feeling fear, of looking at death in the sunshine and being unafraid" (159). It triggers a fierce response and invokes their vehement protest—fermented mostly by the long-time frustration that has been held at bay. With their common dream of equal employment perpetually put off, many black folks join the parade to release themselves from the pains of their lives. In response to "Shadrack's doomy, gloomy bell" (158), they follow Shadrack in his ritual performance every January third:

Everybody . . . got into the mood and, laughing,  
dancing, calling to one another, formed a pied piper's

band behind Shadrack. As the initial group of about twenty people passed more houses, they called to the people standing in doors and leaning out of windows to join them; to help them open further this slit in the veil, this respite from anxiety, from dignity, from gravity, from the weight of that very adult pain that had undergirded them all those years before. Called to them to come out and play in the sunshine—as though the sunshine would last, as though there really was hope. The same hope that kept them picking beans for other farmers; kept them from finally leaving as they talked of doing; kept them knee-deep in other people’s dirt; kept them excited about other people’s wars; kept them solicitous of white people’s children; kept them convinced that some magic “government” was going to lift them up, out and away from that dirt, those beans, those wars. (159-160)

It is in the mixed language of pain, hope, and desperation that Morrison sets the key tone of the Bottom people’s parade and foreshadows their upcoming calamity. In response to Shadrack’s practice of National Suicide Day, the pain of being black speaks for itself through the outburst of their spontaneous gathering. Its suddenness lays bare the hidden depth of their suffering as well as the discontent that they can contain no more. Their long tolerance of “that very adult pain,” moreover, betrays the true nature of their hope—the hope that has kept them hoping against hope in their long-lasting struggle for life of genuine democracy. Conversely, this trope of “hope” in the context of the Bottom people’s parade denotes their false sense of hope because of governmental negligence. It is in such an intriguing manner that the author makes negative the seemingly positive quality of black folk’s “hope.” It underscores instead its resonance of despair—the very absence of their true hope. Driven by their disappointment at the lack of progress, the Bottom people follow Shadrack to “kill” the tunnel they are forbidden to build. They, nevertheless, inadvertently meet their deaths by going too far into the cause of their outrage, unwittingly effecting the literal sense of “National Suicide Day.”

Morrison's rhetoric of death, as illustrated in the Bottom people's disastrous parade, gives birth to a high-powered critical iconography in literary representational practices. On the day particularly devoted to death, the black folks accidentally perform their *danse macabre*, with Shadrack as the personified Death leading them toward their grave. Also called the *dance of death*, *danse macabre* is a late-medieval allegory on the inevitability and universality of death. It is a literary or pictorial representation of a procession, or dance, of figures both living and dead, the living arranged in order of their rank, and the dead leading them to the grave.<sup>5</sup> The concept probably gained momentum in the late Middle Ages as a result of the cultural obsession with death, inspired in the main by the Black Death in the mid-fourteenth century and the Hundred Years' War (1337-1453) between France and England ("Death, Dance of," 2006). Hans Holbein's paintings of the macabre, for instance, illustrate how Death, in diverse skeleton-states, accompanies people from all walks of life, including emperor, king, pope, monk, nun, soldier, beggar, child, new-married lady, etc. (see Appendix). His painting entitled "A Cemetery," in particular, depicts how several Deaths play on noisy instruments to summon mortals to attend them (see Appendix), coincidentally echoing, across time and genre, Shadrack's doomful bell in *Sula*. Furthermore, the Bottom people's procession to their doom mimics the allegorical *dance of death* in the sense that it exposes how fragile and vulnerable mortals can be, especially when a decent living becomes too difficult a task. Fortuitously, this tragic

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<sup>5</sup> Beatrice White, in her introduction to *The Dance of Death*, observes that *danse macabre* has much more of the character of a procession than of a dance. The subjects, each strictly according to rank, advance gravely and reluctantly; Death alone indulges in grotesque and mocking dancing attitudes. She also notes that the grotesque, mocking dancer in the first macabre dances is alluded to as "Le Mort," and is intended not as a representation of Death, but of the living man himself in his future shape. The shape depicted therefore is that of a decomposing corpse. It was not until the Renaissance made anatomy possible that the figure of the dancer became a skeleton and Death took the place of the individual man (1931: x).

episode is entitled “1941”—the year when the Fair Employment Practices Committee was created at the demand of Asa Philip Randolph.<sup>6</sup> This is closely followed by the final episode, entitled “1965,” the year when Equal Employment Opportunity Commission was established to prohibit discrimination in employment.<sup>7</sup> Once again, Morrison’s fiction complements and competes with history. In between these two important yet often impotent official promises of equality in American history, the black folks’ *danse macabre* looms larger than life. Its nightmare scenario displays the humanity of the oppressed and the inhumanity of the racist systems that oppress them. Closely corresponding to narratives of individual deaths, the Bottom people’s collective death strikes home the destructive molding effects of the past in *Sula*.

In *Race Matters*, Cornel West regards the violent racial protests in south central Los Angeles, in 1992, as “the consequence of a lethal linkage of economic decline, cultural decay, and political lethargy in American life” (1994: 4).<sup>8</sup> Significantly, the same deadly cause sets the stage for black folks’ *danse macabre* in Morrison’s fiction, whose publication occurred about two decades ahead of Los Angeles riot. In this regard, *Sula* performs more than the two possible functions

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<sup>6</sup> Asa Philip Randolph was a dedicated and persistent leader in the struggle for justice and parity for the African-American community. Much concerned about the problem of black unemployment, he warned President Franklin D. Roosevelt that he would lead thousands of blacks in a protest march on Washington, D.C. As a result, Roosevelt, on June 25, 1941, issued Executive Order 8802, barring discrimination in defense industries and federal bureaus and creating the Fair Employment Practices Committee (“Randolph, A. Philip,” 2006).

<sup>7</sup> The government agency of Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) was established on July 2, 1965, by Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 to “ensure equality of opportunity by vigorously enforcing federal legislation prohibiting discrimination in employment”—particularly discrimination on the basis of religion, race, sex, color, national origin, age, or disability (“Equal Employment Opportunity Commission,” 2006).

<sup>8</sup> The riot in south central Los Angeles in 1992 was sparked by the verdict which acquitted the LAPD police of charges in the Rodney King case.

which Coetzee posits. As a supplement *and* rival to American history, it also seems capable of predicting future events in an uncanny way. Or rather it is only in the nature of discrimination, whatever treacherous form it takes in civilization. When it comes to tenacious bias, seldom is the past truly past, and history tends to repeat itself. *Sula* reveals the ironic truth of the stubborn and persistent barbarism in human history, through the “nigger” joke, inequality of job opportunity, and various narratives of disaster. The final catastrophe of collective “Black Death” is the bitterest irony—death unexpectedly falls on a day which Shadrack has created deliberately to counteract its expectedness and prevent it from happening again. It calls into question the efficacy of that very implementation, accentuating once again the (un-)expected violence in Morrison’s dystopia of the Bottom.



## Appendix



The Dance of Death (Hans Holbein's masterpiece of the macabre, originally published in Lyons in 1538) (Holbein, 1538: homepage)



A Cemetery (from Holbein's *The Dance of Death*) (Holbein, 1538: 5)

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## 《蘇拉》中的夢想、暴力和「死亡之舞」

林雅惠

### 摘 要

期待真正自由平等的夢想總是被延遲，會怎樣？本文試圖探究摩里森如何透過《蘇拉》的災難敘述來尋求解答。介於文本和其歷史／社會背景間，她的死亡修辭如何釐清非裔美國人在二十世紀承受的傷害及其潛藏的原因？個人認為，除了(自我)毀滅的情節外，薛爵克 (Shadrack) 創造的「國家自殺日」最耐人尋味。一方面，它具體呈現個人意識的恐慌或「暈眩的理智」(“reason dazzled”)，如傅柯 (M. Foucault) 所言。另一方面，它亦影射其族群生活「不」可預期的暴力和脆弱。隨著薛爵克，「底層」社區在小說結束前的「死亡之舞」不僅質疑他個人創舉之效力，也再次強調黑人族群生活的暴力充斥、政府的疏失、以及總是被延遲的夢想。

**關鍵詞：**童妮·摩里森、《蘇拉》、非裔美國人、夢想、「死亡之舞」