

“We Was Girls Together”: Erotic Power and Sisterhood as an Avenue for Resistance in Morrison’s *Sula*

Power is not granted to communities of women, even less so to communities of women of color. It instead must be taken and derived from any source possible, a skill that is necessarily taught. Toni Morrison’s *Sula* is an investigation of how women of color navigate and leverage power. Morrison uses a powerful female friendship to illustrate important truths about identity and female selfhood through her characters Nel and Sula. These two characters become the examples by which female readers are able to internalize and confront their understanding of themselves and their power in social settings. Morrison, with these characters, teaches readers the cornerstone to female empowerment: me-ness.

Nel Wright and Sula Peace create their own community of power to help both girls negotiate boundaries within the immediate communities of their families and the Bottom. This power cements itself on a “sisterhood” more intimate and regulating force than friendship. Their sisterhood is the source of their resistance to the larger entities around them, and it is through this sisterhood that each character discovers moments of what Morrison casually dubs Nel’s “me-ness.” But what are the stakes of this me-ness? How do they both find it? Sula and Nel’s intimate sisterhood intermingles and contrasts with the Bottom’s power as a community, giving the girls a personal and social, though liminal, leverage to subvert expectations within the Bottom. However, this me-mess, attainable in youth, slips away in adolescence and early adulthood.

Audre Lorde asserts in “The Uses of Erotic: The Erotic as Power,” that the erotic is a “resource within each of us that lies in a deeply female and spiritual plane, firmly rooted in the power of our unexpressed or unrecognized feeling” (1999, 339). This is not a perverse eroticism,

one devoid of all emotions, purely physical, and deemed pornographic. Rather, the erotic is a means to personal joy, a me-ness. It is “an assertion of the lifeforce of women” that is discouraged because of its inherent power to transform the way women think about themselves and others (1999, 343). This erotic power forms an intimacy between women through their innate understanding of the erotic which then leads to an understanding of the self—a sisterhood leading to a personal understanding. Once the erotic has been realized, women begin attempting to find that feeling in daily life. They look for this intimacy in their relationships, which can only be obtained in homosocial relationships between women. This “creative power and harmony,” can only be understood within the realm of “woman.” Thus, this erotic power, by its alignment to the female, is resistance.

As both Nel and Sula come to understand their connection and contrast with the community of the Bottom—and as both had previously realized they were neither male nor white and thus in a place of less social power—they enter into their first authentic relationship. Sula and Nel are able to find “in each other’s eyes the intimacy” they were looking for (Morrison 2004, 52). This intimacy reflects what Lorde denotes as an inherent human need: “the need for sharing deep feeling” (1993, 342). The two girls are now equipped with a companion who they share their intimate feelings and “passions of love, in its deepest meanings” (Lorde 1993, 341). This emotional and erotic bond gives rise to an understanding of self and entrance into an authentic relationship, bringing a more personal understanding.

The me-ness that Morrison creates for these characters is more intimate than autonomy and ever vital to blooming adolescence. This me-ness acknowledges a collective experience that also allows space for individuality. That is not to say, however, that me-ness is singularly

isolated. Me-ness encompasses all of the girls' experiences, which lie in a space that is neither white nor male. Thus, the creation of me-ness mandates autonomy and intersectionality. Me-ness exists in a space beyond the simple power to make autonomous decisions. Me-ness acknowledges the intimacy of sisterhood while asserting personhood without being selfish. Fetter argues that *Sula* plays into "ongoing blind spots in feminism" including the "early erasures of difference and insistence on sameness" which make it impossible for each girl to see the other as separate from themselves (2015, 40). This mutual connection creates—rather than destroys, as Fetter would argue—a sense of self. Conflicts within their relationship encourage each character to embrace the me-ness of black womanhood rather than erasing a sense of self. Through the power of the erotic, Sula and Nel gain a connection to each other and their. Me-ness, then, is an innocent unifying space that allows for each girl to see themselves through their understanding of the other. This conception of self through the understanding of another is created by, and accounts for, Sula and Nel's existence as foiled characters. As one character is understood through her interactions with other characters, so each woman is understood through their interaction with other women.

Nel's first moment of utilizing her power is in choosing to be friends with Sula—it is in the same moment that Nel decides "I'm me. I'm not their daughter. I'm not Nel. I'm me" (Morrison 2004, 28). This vocalization of self gives Nel power and a sense of purpose. It is within this moment that Nel begins to imagine herself outside of her mother's expectations and develop the new goal of being "wonderful." It is not explained what "wonderful" entails, aside from Nel's desire to leave the city of Medallion, but it is inconsequential. It is the desire itself, not the details of said desire, that inspire Nel's power. This me-ness, as Morrison calls it, grants

Nel the understanding and power to choose her own companion in Sula “in spite of her mother” (2004, 29). This decision acts as a form of resistance from her mother’s manipulation; it is the her actualization of self.

As children, the sisterhood—the identity together—created a line of defense to protect against threats such as mothers and schoolyard boys. As the two began to mature, Nel, who never quarreled with Sula over boys, began to rejoice in the “new feeling of being needed by someone who saw her singly” (Morrison 2004, 84). This is the initial split from the intimate friendship of the two women and, while it appeared to be the natural progression of things, Nel’s search for self merely caused her to relocate her dependency. So, while Nel imagines that she is separating herself from Sula and creating a new identity, Jude sees their marriage as a moment where Nel becomes one with him. This assumption that Nel will become one with Jude in marriage dislocates her me-ness with the same methods Morrison has seen in real life. It is the same way that women lose their selfhood daily.

Later, in Sula’s search for a connection outside of Nel, sex became her way of creating a personal power through which she may interpret her me-ness. Sula enters an emotional intimacy with herself after each intimate moment with men. Sula resists the conceptions of sex for pleasure, marriage, or procreation, using it instead to enter into a “postcoital privateness in which she met herself, welcomed herself, and joined herself in matchless harmony” (Morrison 2004, 123). In these moments, Sula, unlike her mother, is able to scrutinize the “beginnings of our sense of self and the chaos of our strongest feelings,” especially those feelings of loneliness (Lorde 1993, 340). Sula’s use of the sexually erotic is an attempt to find actualized feelings of personhood, to force them to the forefront. Yet these moments are not comforting as me-ness is.

Sula's betrayal of Nel in their adult life is shattering, not because Nel misses her husband but, rather, because it distances Nel from the person with whom she shared the most intimacy: Sula. Even in adulthood, Nel was the only person Sula was pleased to please, an honor no man ever earns from Sula. By disregarding their intimate relationship, Sula and Nel unknowingly deserting the connection that has formed their independent-yet-collective understanding of selves. This desertion causes both women to search for themselves and a similar zenith of intimacy in places and partners that fail. The ultimate experience of seeing another human in the same vein that one understands themselves has happened for Sula. Since her girlhood with Nel she has connected on the most basic, vital part of her being to another woman who could fully conceive and encourage her. Sula and Nel search for this intimacy in men for years without realizing that it was actualized already.

Morrison makes sisterhood the cornerstone of female development; it is the vessel for me-ness. Sula only searches for intimacy with men in the absence of her connection with Nel. Sula is looking for a partnership that matches her previous sisterhood, complete with its open sharing of ideas. Morrison describes Sula's "real pleasure was the fact that [Ajax] talked to her" (127). But she is searching for the type of intimacy that she shared with Nel; an erotic intimacy that leads to me-ness. However, Sula's quest mimics the way the community of the Bottom has interpreted "intimate" relationship between heterosexual couples: domesticity. As Sula tries to emulate the domestic qualities she has observed so she may regain a sense of intimacy, Morrison writes Ajax out. Ajax as a character and model cannot comprehend the level of intimacy that Sula seeks, and it becomes apparent that Sula cannot and will not be able to find

a similar intimacy to what she experienced with Nel in childhood. Sula's search fails because Morrison understood that this relationship could not sustain Sula in the same way.

The book concludes with Nel's realization that, in the years since her husband and Sula's infidelity, it was her friend's companionship she missed the most: the utterance of "We was girls together," followed by the cry "girl, girl, girlgirlgirl" (Morrison 2004, 174). This moment before death, a re-lived climax of their erotic bond, begs the question: Why can these two characters coexist as girls but not women? Again, the answer is power. The liminal power each character derive from their intimacy was still much less than the social power they would grow into and be responsible for as women. "Girl" provides a much freer, non threatening image to the community; it allows for the two to unite and, without upsetting the norms, create themselves within their erotic power. This me-ness, however, if not regulated or brought back into the dominant discourse of the community, poses a threat. Though simply the aftermath of an autonomous girl, an autonomous woman, outside of the community's power, is a threat. However, it could also be argued that "girl" is the more innocent form, the part of being a woman that is in it's purest form before the communal notions of womanhood distort a person's understanding of themselves.

Morrison is very direct when she writes that Sula "had been looking all along for a friend, and it took her a while to discover that a lover was not a comrade and could never be - for a woman" (121). This level of comfort and me-ness is only available through womanhood or a knowledge of the erotic. Though Morrison's *Sula* was crafted before Audre Lorde's "The Use of the Erotic," it is clear that the two are in agreement of the particular significance of being woman and her relationship with various forms of herself. Both Sula and Nel understand and derive their

power from their relationship with the erotic which formulates itself in the more common phrase, sisterhood. Nel was Sula's last conscious thought, a desire to tell Nel of what was to come with death. This moment is brief but demonstrates the intimate connection these two women share, how each one combine to create the erotic "self" of the other. Both Nel and Sula are products of their womanhood culturally and erotically. As Nel realizes after Sula's death, the intimacy she was looking to fill would never have been filled alone nor with the help of a man. This intimacy, like the hole the two dug by the riverside in their girlhood, needed to be filled together. Prince Charming never seemed to arrive—but he never needed to.

Bibliography

- Eckard, Paula Gallant. "Sula: Finding the Peace of the Mother's Body." *Maternal Body and Voice in Toni Morrison, Bobbie Ann Mason, and Lee Smith*, University of Missouri Press, 2002, pp. 51–61.
- Fetters, Cassandra. "The Continual Search for Sisterhood: Narcissism, Projection, and Intersubjective Disruptions in Toni Morrison's *Sula* and Feminist Communities." *Meridians: Feminism, Race, Transnationalism*, vol. 13, no. 2, Oct. 2015, pp. 28-55.
- Galehouse, Maggie. "New World Woman': Toni Morrison's *Sula*." *Papers on Language & Literature*, vol. 35, no. 4, Fall 1999, p. 339. EBSCOhost
- Gillespie, Diance, and Missy Dehn Kubitschek. "Who Cares? Women-Centered Psychology in *Sula*." *Toni Morrison's Fiction: Contemporary Criticism*, edited by David L. Middleton, Garland Pub., 1997, pp. 61–91.
- Goodley, Dan, editor. "Difference: Disability, Gender, Race, Sexuality and Social Class." *Disability Studies: An Interdisciplinary Introduction*, 2nd ed., Sage, 2017, pp. 44–58.
- Hill Collins, Patricia. "The New Politics of Community." *American Sociological Review*, vol. 75, no. 1, Feb. 2010, pp. 7-30.
- Linton, S., & Rousso, H. (1988). Sexuality counseling for people with disabilities. In E. Weinstein, & R. Efram (Eds.), *Sexuality Counseling: Issues & Implications* (114-134). Belmont, CA: Thomson Brooks/Cole.
- Lorde, Audre. "The Uses of Erotic: The Erotic as Power." *The Lesbian and Gay Studies Reader*, edited by Henry Abelove, Routledge, 1993, pp. 339–343.
- Maxwell, Marilyn. *Male Rage, Female Fury: Gender and Violence in Contemporary American Fiction*. Lanham, MD: U of America, 2000. Print.
- Mayberry, Susan Neal. "Something Other Than a Family Quarrel: Morrison's Review of the Masculine." *Can't I Love What I Criticize: The Masculine and Morrison*, University of Georgia Press, 2007, pp. 1–14.
- Mayberry, Susan Neal. "An Elegy on Black Masculinity: The Beautiful Boys in *Sula*." *Can't I Love What I Criticize: The Masculine and Morrison*, University of Georgia Press, 2007, pp. 51-70.
- McDowell, Linda, "Introduction: Place and Gender," in *Gender, Identity, & Place: Understanding Feminist Geographies* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), pp. 1-33.
- Morrison, Toni. *Sula*. Vintage International, 2004.
- Rand, Lizabeth A. "'We All That's Left': Identity Formation and the relationship between Eva and Sula Peace." *CLA Journal* 44, no. 3 (2001): 341-49.