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## The Hybridizing Nature of Ancestor Presence in Morrison's *Sula*

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## **Cover Page Footnote**

I would like to acknowledge Dr. Sarah Terry, whose guidance as a professor allowed for me to sharpen the critical analysis skills necessary to attempt to delve into this subject, and of course, Toni Morrison, whose insight and brilliance inspires and enlightens me daily.

Toni Morrison refers to the presence, or lack thereof, of black characters in literature as “a very, very serious problem of education” as black literature has been historically taught “as sociology, as tolerance, not as a serious, rigorous art form” (Taylor-Guthrie 258). There is a duality to the conflict that she sees: first, unconscious exclusion of the black body in literature and second, the derogatory inclusion, in which darkness is emblematic of negativity and haunting (Taylor-Guthrie 264). Both of these issues in American literature are representative of the innate and institutionalized manner of marginalizing the black body as a product of the supremacist hegemonies under which all social constructs operate. As a means of remedying this, Morrison seeks to write to a specifically black audience as part of what she would consider a black literary canon in which black people are represented honestly and thoroughly rather than being fenced into one-dimensional representations as has been done countless times in Western literature. One element to maintaining this authenticity in her narrative is to integrate an aspect to her novel that allows for the incorporation of the old African tradition of oral storytelling in the more recent written form; as she puts it, “to recreate something out of an old art...the something that defines what makes a book ‘black’” (Taylor-Guthrie 153). This addition of an element from the past traditions of African storytelling manifests itself in Morrison’s writing as an ancestral figure or presence in the novel.

In *Rootedness: The Ancestor as Foundation*, Morrison claims that the presence of an ancestor in her literature and in any African-American literature is necessary, as the characters must respond to this ancestor’s presence in a direct way that affects their development. To her, these ancestors are “timeless people whose relationships to the characters are benevolent, instructive, and protective, and they provide a certain kind of wisdom” (Lewis 91) and their presence in the novel is significant in the growth of the individual or community, as well as a

“defining continuum in Black art” (Jennings 81). In incorporating this figure into her novels, Morrison establishes a recurring tradition: the ever-present and familiar authority of the ancestor influences and pushes its surrounding members and community to develop. Furthermore, this figure or presence is indicative of the type of black literary canon Morrison wants to establish: rooted in hybridizing the African oral traditions and the written form. This hybridization takes the form of an ancestral figure whose presence simultaneously weaves in modes of African traditionalism and dictates the cultural truths of the period in the novel. As Morrison says, these ancestral figures are the “culture bearers” (Taylor-Guthrie 140), and their inclusion in the novels serve as a bridging point between the past and present cultures, mixing the two and influencing the communities through their understanding. Morrison further argues that a novel cannot simply repeat what was once said, but must reinvent ways of understanding; she believes that “a novel written a certain way can do precisely what spirituals... or stories or mythos or folkore did,” (183) expressing cultural truths. In the contemporary moment, this cultural truth is a mixture of African tradition and the sociopolitical realities of the Western sphere, and it is precisely this duality that she manages to express through her ancestral figures in her project to create an authentic black literary canon.

In her novel *Sula*, Morrison’s inclusion of the ancestral presence manifests itself in two physical forms; first, in Sula herself, the alienated and autonomous woman whose presence pushes the town into a community united in its hatred of her, and Shadrack, Sula’s counterpart whose presence is largely tolerated and accepted in the community. The differences in Sula and Shadrack’s effects on the town as ancestor presences in this novel represent two parts of her hybridizing project: the roots of black culture in the African past and the integration of this African past into the movements of the present. Specifically, I will establish first that Sula and

Shadrack, through a connection with bodies of water and in their relationship with one another and the town, represent a link to African traditionalism that is seamlessly woven into the modernity of the novel. Secondly, I will expand on how the differences in the autonomous expressions of these two characters and the subsequent community response to each are indicative of an incorporation of the ancestral presence in the social realities of the day in the Afrodiaspora, primarily in response to patriarchal and white supremacist pressures.

*Sula* and Shadrack are established as ancestral presences within the novel primarily in the strength of their relationship based in African roots and in their respective effects on their town. In “African Traditions in Morrison’s *Sula*,” Lewis argues that *Sula* is primarily a novel written from “an African aesthetic” (91) with the characters of *Sula* and Shadrack serving as displaced ancestral spirits in the town, as perhaps is first indicated by their distinctly African names with roots in the Babangi and Kongo languages. Specifically, she makes a case for the two characters as river spirits, guardians of water bodies, and for their relationship as “a spiritual kinship—metaphorically, a marriage of traditional West African water spirit/priest to a water priestess, both oracles of a river god” (Lewis 92). Shadrack’s identity as an ancestral presence is arguably more clearly established in the novel. Lewis argues that his identity as someone displaced from the material world is established from the point that Shadrack loses consciousness on the field during World War I and wakes up in a hospital; in certain traditional African beliefs, losing consciousness during a time of trauma is a point at which the soul is displaced from the body and transported to the spirit world to become “an active participant” (Lewis 92), only able to be brought back by spiritual mediation. When he wakes up from his unconscious state, he is horrified by the state of his uncontrollable hands, which appear to “grow in higgledy-piggledy fashion like Jack’s beanstalk” (Morrison 11), a description reminiscent of the suspension of

reality found in a mythological or fairytale setting. After he is released from the hospital, he spends “a haven of more than a year, only eight days of which he fully recollected” (Morrison 11) wandering around in a trance-like state until he returns to his town. While these descriptions of his state after service in the war are clearly indicative of some post-traumatic effects, the descriptions are also the first and only image of the character that the audience is acquainted with, and his presence as a spiritual being not entirely rooted in physical reality is established here. Shadrack also has a continuing association with water in the novel: firstly, the last day of his service in World War I happens when his battalion is attacked after having crossed a stream. Although he steps on a nail and experiences severe psychological trauma from seeing the gore around him, he is left relatively unscathed after crossing the water body while those around him were blown apart (Morrison 8). Secondly, the last moment of his memories from the hospital he wakes up in is his realizing that the river “which he knew was full of fish” (Morrison 10) was outside of his window; this moment of serenity and recognition connected with the river is juxtaposed with the panic he feels upon being forced to cooperate with the physicians and nurses in his post-traumatic state, reinforcing his innate connection with water. When he arrives at his town, he builds his home on the river and is the only person known to live there; when Sula and Nel are panicked that somebody saw the death of Chicken Little, their first thought is of Shadrack’s home on the river, and immediately following his mention, Sula observes, “the water was so peaceful now” (Morrison 61). This scene also serves as the establishing point of the link between Sula and Shadrack and the starting point of defining Sula as the other, unknowing ancestral presence in the town.

The scene in which Chicken Little is thrown into the water is written in a way that suggests a sacrifice or ritual practice, rather than a murder or accident. Sula forces a belligerent

and unwilling Chicken Little into playing a game with her that results in his death; in the description, “the water darken[s] and close[s] quickly” (Morrison 61) like it is accepting the child. While she is horrified in the moment, eliminating the idea of premeditation, she is also distinctly aware of the daunting “peace of the river” (Morrison 61) and its connection with Shadrack, which is why she runs to see him and confirm whether or not he witnessed the event. Even though he didn’t, Shadrack responds in the affirmative to her unspoken question because he recognizes a connection between them, a kinship that he knows from the moment he sees her birthmark; while there are multiple interpretations amongst the town of what exactly the misshapen mark is, he has complete clarity in declaring it to be “a tadpole over her eye” (Morrison 157), a mark of life born in the water that unites them both ancestrally. In a moment of charged connection, he describes the moment as recognizing her wanting something “only he could give” and responding by saying “always” as an assurance of permanency (Morrison 157), with a smile that Sula describes as “heavy with lust and time to come” (Morrison 62), indicating the longevity and immortality of their connection and roots. He thinks of her as “his visitor, his company, his guest, his social life, his woman, his daughter, his friend” (Morrison 157); essentially, as his counterpart in life. Even though Sula is far more grounded in physical reality and unaware of her ancestral presence, she feels the link to Shadrack as well, first in recognizing the mysticism in the hands that only Shadrack saw in his post-traumatic state and thinking in a moment of recognition that hands as gentle as his could never harm her (Morrison 62). She also feels the residual effects of the moment as his “promise licked at her feet” like waves of water, (Morrison 63) a promise that is later realized at her moment of death when she longs for the water that would “curl [her] into its heavy softness and... envelop her, carry her, and wash her tired flesh always,” remembering that someone, her spiritual kin, had promised her “a sleep of

water always” (Morrison 149). Furthermore, after Sula’s death, she becomes even more inextricably tied to the water and river. During Eva’s funeral when the townspeople sing “Shall We Gather at the River,” Nel remarks that it was though “Sula answered them even then, for it began to rain” (Morrison 173). On her way to the river, she stops suddenly, feeling Sula’s spiritual presence, which prompts her to call out to her in a moment of stark realization (Morrison 173-4). Simultaneously, Shadrack remembers how “the river had killed” all of the fish, a death of the “silver-gray flashes.... tremor” (Morrison 174), and spirit of the water that existed when Sula was alive. If Shadrack is the guardian of the river and Sula is his counterpart, the loss of these guardian spirits takes its toll on not only the river, but also the town. In the last Suicide Day that Shadrack commemorates immediately following Sula’s death, several townspeople follow Shadrack around town in a trance and in very primal understanding of “the Spirit’s touch which made them dance [and]... the river’s baptisms under suns just like” the one in Bottom (Morrison 160). However, although they are finally connecting with the spirits of their African heritage, which the “suns just like this one” (Morrison 160) line suggests, they immediately meet their deaths in a chamber of water while a tunnel collapses on them following the physical loss of one of their ancestral water spirits and the disillusionment of the other. Years later, the town of Bottom is being sold to the “rich white folks [who] were building homes in the hills” (Morrison 166) as it is being gentrified, the only lasting link to the ancestral presences that were once there seen in “the blacks still huddled by the river bend” (Morrison 166) as though desperate for the protection that they once had but weren’t appreciative of.

In establishing these characters as ancestral figures through their interactions with each other and the town, Morrison subtly weaves in African cultural roots with which black culture is inextricably united. Lewis states that many people are “oblivious to the fact that after some three-



hundred plus years in America, African tradition continues to manifest itself in our lives” (92); including the link to these roots in the ancestral figures of her novel, Morrison merges the maintenance of African heredity and cultural practices with an expression of contemporary cultural truths. This is mainly conducted through the ways in which both Sula and Shadrack, as ancestral figures, act as representative figures in the ways that they handle various forms of systematic oppression. If the ancestor’s presence in the novel is to push its surrounding members to develop and grow, their integration of African roots must be combined in some way with their teachings on how to act in the contemporary moment as well in order to maintain true authenticity in the black literature of today.

Sula and Shadrack have a different degree of effect on the community of Bottom and represent a different manner of ancestral teaching in their respective relationships with the town. Sula, for one, is characterized in the novel by her unwillingness to participate in traditional patriarchal notions of femininity and her adamant choice to remain as autonomous and independent as possible. African literature professor Christopher Okonwko claims that Sula, as the ancestral figure, can also be read as an *ogbanje-abiku*, or a “Nigerian/West African spirit” child who is characterized by being “doggedly disagreeable and vicious” and demanding “to be allowed just to be... [her] atypical self” (657). He claims that the *ogbanje* is considered a negative presence because of these selfish characteristics, but that the “constructive qualities are sometimes overlooked” for this figure, just as Sula’s are in the novel (Okonwko 657). As an ancestral form, her politics are representative of upholding traditionalism while simultaneously moving the town in the proper direction through the negative reinforcement of her behaviors and actions. The town’s primary fear of Sula stems from her unwillingness to engage in the town’s communal acts and subscribe to traditions in the town; she came to “church suppers without

underwear” (Morrison 115), made no comments about the quality of someone’s food, and made no move to interact in a meaningful way with the community. She puts her grandmother in a nursing home, the height of disgrace within the black community, which is centered on communal care, and goes against the inherent values of her town, which believed her to be evil, “laughing at their god” (Morrison 115). This is a significant moment, as it establishes that the community conflates values with deity, which is exactly what these ancestral figures are representing, and the role that Sula is upholding in her negative reinforcement of values in the town. Later in the novel, Nel criticizes Sula for her arrogance, saying “you a woman and a colored woman at that. You can’t act like a man. You can’t be walking around all independent-like, doing whatever you like, taking what you want, leaving what you don’t,” to which Sula responds: “I’m a woman and colored. Ain’t that the same as being a man?” (Morrison 142) It is in this central argument that Sula’s role as the ancestral figure and the pushing force behind the community development in this novel comes into focus: the character herself solves the inherent problems caused by the interaction of patriarchal and white supremacist systems by adopting the personality of an independent and carefree man, rather than finding solace in community and common ancestry in face of the common detrimental stimulus.

In several novels, Morrison conveys a certain distaste for aligning herself with movements based on retribution for past crimes, or pride movements based on a specific phenotypic element as a response to marginalization. She even says herself that Sula adopting entirely male actions in response to her recognition of patriarchal influences is “what made her so terrible” (Taylor-Guthrie 185). She does, however, appear to believe in the significance of identifying with the roots of black ancestry in order to react to the past and present appropriately. Through her supposedly destructive and selfish actions, Sula becomes the driving force behind

the bettering of the town as she shows what is inappropriate to reinforce appropriate reactions to the societal pressures of the contemporary moment. In response to Sula's negative presence, the town "looked at the evil stony-eyed and let it run" (Morrison 113), banding together in spite of it and coming out the better because of it. Sula interacting with the young boy Teapot leads to his mother taking him to the hospital in a fury, realizing afterwards that her deprivation of maternal care was causing physical ailments for her son, and in turn becoming a role model mother. Sula putting Eva away in a home forces those in the community who complained about caring for their in-laws to clean "those old women's spittoons without a murmur" (Morrison 153) and the northern migrants into Medallion who never experienced slavery develop a "reactionary compassion for Southern-born blacks" (Morrison 154) as a response to Sula, who expressed no communal empathy. In the face of poverty leading to malnutrition, inability to care for family members, and inter-race divisions based on demographics, Sula's presence alone soothes these rifts by enforcing better parental care, better in-law care, and better compassion between demographic populations of African-Americans through her terrible actions. Even after her death, Sula wreaks destruction as a means of demonstrating the incorrect priorities of the town; in this case, the fixation on the tunnel on the river that might hire black workers despite similar rumors having been prevalent for three years with no evidence in sight and the previous tunnels of same form had been "built entirely by white labor" (Morrison 151). With Sula making a resurgence as the river spirit and goddess, "Morrison depicts the collapse of a tunnel built by racist and capitalist powers" (Pessoni 450) in a water chamber that can be compared to the bosom of the water goddess. In this form, Sula is destroying a potential work project that, for too long, held the interests of the town in a demeaning fashion. Critic Michele Pessoni argues that "because [Sula] is able to explore aspects of the archetypal self considered to be 'evil,' by the

end of the novel she is able to move beyond the patriarchal imaging of the archetypal feminine as destroyer into a more healthy image of the feminine as representative of wholeness and connection” (446). Furthermore, her image of the destructive presence is similar to the idea of the spirit of the Earth Mother or ultimate Goddess (Sokoloff 430) that is present in many eastern faith systems, including that of African mysticism. While Sula began her journey in the novel as an unwilling or unaware ancestral presence, she later comes into her status as the goddess form and even tells Nel with a distinct self-awareness at the end of her life that after all the terrible things that her presence had held at bay had occurred, she would be missed (Morrison 146). Personi refers to this as “atonement with the spirit of the Goddess,” making Sula eventually become “the spiritual force whom the entire community sought all along” (441).

Shadrack’s presence and ancestral teaching also follows the concept of unity in community and taking part in the values that have existed through generations of black communities, but addresses more the emotional and primal aspects of community response to institutionalized marginalization. When he was suffering from symptoms of his post-traumatic stress disorder publicly, Shadrack was arrested on the suspicion of drunkenness and public misconduct, his status as a veteran irrelevant as the general societal trend of the incarceration of black men and the criminalization of the black body manifests itself. However, rather than fighting back or in some way displaying aggressive behavior, Shadrack finds calmness from his pain in that moment by looking at his own reflection and seeing “a black so definite, so unequivocal, it astonished him....when the blackness greeted him with its indisputable presence, he wanted nothing more” (Morrison 13). His means of adjusting in a moment of torturous pain, both physical and mental, is to revel in the calmness that his blackness affords him. In this moment, as an ancestral presence in this novel, Shadrack is representative of a form of

connection with the past and with the common ancestry as a means of coping and responding to pressures. In a way, he also acts as a form of negative reinforcement to engage with the community and force them into developing, as Morrison initially claims about the ancestor in her novels. When Shadrack institutes National Suicide Day, he enforces and allows for a type of coping mechanism that aggressively compartmentalizes all fears of death and destruction into one day and allows for freedom from fear in the remaining days of the year. He believed, in creating the day, that it was a means of “making a place for fear as a way of controlling it” and having some form of power over that which seeks to overtake and overcome (Morrison 14).

However, the people of Bottom refuse to participate; they at least subconsciously recognize his ancestral significance in that that “his voice was so full of authority and thunder” (Morrison 15) and that he had a power in the community, but mostly go on to become acclimated to and ignore National Suicide Day, allowing for it to be a part of regular town life. What they do not do, however, is take advantage of the venue Shadrack provides to allow to genuinely feel pain and fear. This avoidance and lack of expression continues for several years until Sula’s death, after which the last National Suicide Day results in a parade of townspeople following Shadrack around dancing and singing in a clear connection to their ancestral past which spoke to them in this mode of expression (Morrison 160). In this moment, just as Sula’s water spirit destroys the tunnel itself, they finally see, clear-cut, the hopelessness of the white-built tunnel and the undelivered promises that the town had been hinging on from that structure. Suddenly, they are overcome with hatred and realization of their pain and suffering because of the capitalist, supremacist systems of oppression that have kept them hoping for so long for jobs working on the tunnel, only to have them give up health care, infrastructure, and many other necessities as pawns in the system. They realize very clearly the things they have given up “the

teeth unrepaired, the coal credit cut off, the chest pains unattended, the school shoes unbought,” (Morrison 161) the total communal neglect of the community because of this false promise, and decide to completely destroy it and “wipe from the face of the earth... the leaf-dead promise” (Morrison 162). In this moment, they finally allow themselves to see the reality of the systems under which they have been operating and the promises that they had been falsely lead to believe in. Rather than completely cutting themselves off from feeling the pain and the hatred, they realize in one swooping moment and allow themselves to succumb to the feelings. This scene appears to be part of a two-fold process: one, the townspeople finally understand the value of realizing societal and cultural truths, and second, the townspeople realize the detriment of them having repressed these truths for all of these years. While Shadrack, like Sula, is not a liked or loved but rather a tolerated presence in the town, he addresses in another instructive manner an aspect of coping and understanding the contemporary cultural realities, just as Sula does.

What is seen overall through the interactions of these ancestral spirit forms with the community throughout the novel is a simultaneous maintenance of African traditionalism while embracing and in some way educating about the present prevailing conditions. While neither of these presences are necessary benevolent, they are certainly instructive and in a way, protective, as the town ceases to be itself without the presence of these two figures and their maintenance of black heritage. This is not a case study that is limited to *Sula*; ancestral presences are found very blatantly in Morrison’s *Song of Solomon*, *Beloved*, and even *The Bluest Eye*, all of which deserve and require further analysis into the methodology which Morrison employs to allow these figure to be the bridging point between past and present, especially in the specific cultural moments and social conditions that the characters are functioning other that defines the type of ancestral figure is written into the novel. In analyzing these texts and specifically these figures, one gets a step

closer to formulating a response to the question of “*How does Toni Morrison want her contemporaries to react to the past?*” What constitutes a proper means of existing in modern society in the face of systematic pressures and hegemonic systems that marginalize and pick at the soul, and what does not? One part of her answer seems to be in righting a wrong that has been prevalent through canonical literature, which is to reclaim “black literature,” or create a canon that represents black people as nuanced, elaborate, autonomous, rather than fencing them into a specific one-dimensional narrative. This physical manifestation of the link between the African past and the cultural guides of the present is a key element to this project of establishing a black literary canon. The authenticity in black characters and a black community that she seeks in not only her novels but in all black novels is achieved in this mode of engaging an ancestor, and her effort to convey black people as she knows them and is familiar with them is realized in the nuance and duality of these figures.

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