

“Water-borne Soil”: Hybridity and Divided Traditions in Toni Morrison’s *Sula*

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Abstract

Considering the “hyphenated identities” present in America, the present essay addresses the role of fragmentation, identity and identification, and tradition in the African American experience as portrayed in Toni Morrison’s *Sula*. Through the lenses of both African American Studies and Identity Studies, the works of Vashti Crutcher Lewis (“African Tradition in Toni Morrison’s *Sula*”) and Stuart Albert (“The Definition and Metadefinition of Identity”), respectively, will be used to ponder how identity - individual and collective - reacts to strict measurement, and how the experience of African Americans is divided under the two points of reference that compose its nomenclature.¹ One may ask, then, how traditions which have been forcefully erased make a claim on the present, even when and where they are at a disadvantage, and how (if at all) identification is possible when obliteration has already occurred; how traditions and experiences co-exist in an environment which favours hierarchy and limitation. Additionally, how do representations of past traditions move in territories and cultures which reject them, and in what ways is fluidity possible? Can the solution be found in the convergence of the opposed experiences, or is there a side to be picked at all times? In what ways does the revelation of hybridity to oppressed and suppressed societies trigger a self-awareness from which there is no escaping? And what is the role of creation and creativity amidst these tensions, considering that identity is composed by the same questions that challenge it?

Keywords: African American Studies; Identity Studies; Tradition; Territory; Hybridity

Resumo

À luz das identidades hifenizadas presentes na América, o presente ensaio considera o papel da fragmentação, identidade e identificação, e tradição na experiência afro-americana tal como surge representada em *Sula* de Toni Morrison. Através da lente dos Estudos Afro-Americanos e dos Estudos de Identidade, os trabalhos de Vashti Crutcher Lewis (“African Tradition in Toni Morrison’s *Sula*”) e Stuart Albert (“The Definition and Metadefinition of Identity”), respetivamente, serão usados para ponderar como a identidade - individual e coletiva - reage a

medição estrita, e como a experiência dos afro-americanos é dividida sob os dois pontos de referência que compõem a sua nomenclatura. Pode-se perguntar, então, como é que tradições que foram apagadas produzem uma reivindicação do presente, mesmo quando e onde estão em desvantagem, e como (se de todo) identificação é possível quando a obliteração já ocorreu; como tradições e experiências coexistem num ambiente que favorece hierarquia e limitação. Adicionalmente, como é que representações de tradições passadas se movem em territórios e culturas que os rejeitam, e de que maneiras é que fluidez é possível? Pode a solução ser encontrada na convergência de experiências opostas, ou existe um lado a ser escolhido a todos os momentos? De que maneiras é que a revelação de hibridismo a sociedades oprimidas e suprimidas desencadeia uma autoconsciência da qual não há escapatória? E qual é o papel de criação e criatividade entre estas tensões, considerando que identidade é composta pelas mesmas questões que a desafiam?

Palavras-chave: Estudos Afro-Americanos; Estudos de Identidade; Tradição; Território; Hibridismo

Identities, both in their shared and individual configurations, have never been linear. Earl Lewis' "To Turn as on a Pivot: Writing African Americans into a History of Overlapping Diasporas" (1995) delineates a brief history of identity formation and perception of and by African people in America that highlights the recurrent struggle found in establishing and adapting identity in a culture which rejects black presence, yet is relationally-defined, including a consideration of the transition in nomenclature of this group from Africans to African Americans (E. Lewis 771-2). Moreover, considerations of African mythology and tradition have been located in an American "culturally-specific structure" (Wilentz 21), inside which Toni Morrison's work is recognized as of relevance in establishing African American presence in the relational racial experience as worthy of its own standing. However, *Sula* (both the novel and its protagonist) hasn't been perceived as a questioning of how identity can survive if it is caught between two different worlds, and how the two presented realms may be considered as riddled with expectation and rigidity.

As Stuart Albert places it in "The Definition and Metadefinition of Identity", identity and identification may be considered as questions that defy measurement and limitation:

Identity may define the boundary between utilitarian and deontological logics; it may express a need for uniqueness and privacy. It honors the ineffable. To measure identity may require that one measure its reluctance to being measured, that one study the genius of its disguises and the way it eludes capture while still claiming presence as a core defining feature. (3)

This is especially relevant once one considers that the act of measuring implies being “subject to control” (3), according to Albert. Being caught between obligation and imposed moral structures, selfhood undergoes a circumscription and mutilation that redefines it in acceptability if it is to belong to collective experiences of identification. However, as Albert argues, it is in the nature of identity to reject such limitation and to maintain fluidity, in what becomes an act of resistance.

Toni Morrison’s second novel, *Sula*, introduces the community of the Bottom of Medallion, which suffers from the limitation imposed on identity described by Albert. Having been originated by the deceitful exchange of “hilly land, where planting was backbreaking, where the soil slid down and washed away the seeds, and where the wind lingered all through the winter” (Morrison 5), for African enslaved work devised by an American landowner, the Bottom of Medallion’s residents are fragmented between two realities and identities.

In the beginning of the narrative, the enslaved African man is already in American territory, and his origins (as well as those of the farmer) are undisclosed. Despite there being no open acknowledgement of both the slave and the farmer’s roots, one can understand the dynamics of their relationship as defined by hierarchized power in their geopolitical location. The African slave expresses no wish to return to Africa because Africa is not a concept allowed to him - all he knows is the American territory and experience in which he is enslaved, and his only possibility for identity is one which he must create himself (in a rather American manner). However, this possibility for identity is undermined by the already-existing identity which, both literally and figuratively, owns the foundation, the grounds upon which the slave’s identity may be built.

As the territory which the slave is to occupy is granted by the white man in exchange for the African man’s labour, so is the African man’s experience dominated and regulated by the (white) American standards and projections of identity that the enslaved man is to adhere to and attempt to thrive in. In an American world of experience, the African man is never to fully belong, regardless of his attempts, because his efforts at power and identity are undermined by those already in power (and part of the dominant identity). The African man develops a community that is never perceived as fully American, but rather African American.

Being African in America means that one’s origins, tradition and heritage refer to the African continent and its multiple experiences; however, in the enslavement of African people and their shipment as material goods to America, this heritage was nullified in favour of white domination. Thus, the reclaiming and regenerating of an

African identity by the slave can only be conducted under the conditions allowed in American land and experience, because this domination remains. As the newly-(re)generated African identity can exist solely in (white) American terms that reject it as exterior, it grows distorted into the white idea of what black existence is and should be - “[a] nigger joke” that is to be manipulated into giving “white folks . . . a little comfort somewhere” (Morrison 4).

The use of “African” in an American territory and experience which rejects the word and its people not only depicts a difference in origin and tradition, but also demonstrates a distinction, a differentiation as a group in the American dynamics and society. If to be African American is to be understood as a part of a group that is inside the American reality, it is also to be understood as solely partially included, as the erasure of the multiplicity of African traditions, experiences, identities and bodies is maintained as a submissive tool that is only allowed survival if it adheres to American systems - in other words, the only part of African Americans that is acceptable inside American society is the “American” one.

In Morrison’s novel, however, Sula and Shadrack reject this erasure in favour of an authenticity that carries African undertones. Both characters understand how the community becomes fragmented in American territory, and denounce these processes of severance and fragmentation, displaying through their fluidity an alternate mode of experience that would be regenerative to the community. Vashti Crutcher Lewis argues that Shadrack and Sula are representative of a “West African water spirit/priest” and “water priestess”, respectively, and that Shadrack’s fluid hands, his material proximity to and subsistence on the river and its resources are part of an African heritage he is capable of recovering (92-3). Aligned with Sula’s contact and perception of water as figuratively *ground*-breaking - her accidental throwing of Chicken Little into the river having severed her connection to American standards and expectations (Morrison 118-9), and her insistence that the Deweys needed a bath (74) - one understands that references to water in the novel are intimately connected with African experience, tradition and identity that are displaced in American soil. Moreover, Shadrack’s understanding of Sula’s birthmark “as a tadpole - a water creature”, defining of African heritage and tradition (V.C. Lewis 93) confirms the connection between the two as water-borne, and, thus, African-borne.²

Indeed, both characters are used by the community as points of opposite reference by which to measure themselves, their value, and their capacity for (American, and, thus, white) identity. As Lewis advances,

Sula and Shadrack represent black sons and daughters of America who would be more at home in Africa. In traditional African cultures, they would be neither pariahs or mysteries, since they both represent tradition and a profound rootedness in African cosmology. To the people of the Bottoms, Sula is an enigma and Shadrack is a downright shame. (V.C. Lewis 92)³

However, Sula, Shadrack and the community of the Bottom of Medallion (hinted to represent a number of African communities in America, by evidencing the plurality of the Bottom and of different Bottoms - in all its scatological expression) are not in Africa, and their African roots have been torn from both African soil, through the institution of slavery, as well as from American soil, as made evident by the white farmer's deceit (and the posterior construction of the characteristically white Medallion City Golf Course). Instead, they are placed inside standards that reject them and attempt to manipulate them into submission and repression - a measuring denounced by Stuart Albert (3) that becomes particularly relevant regarding Sula's birthmark.

The mark Sula has over her eye is solely perceived as a tadpole by Shadrack (in what can also be considered to be an African measuring, in its wish for a shared bond that requires Sula to fully identify with African tradition), but other characters view her birthmark as symbols of their own standing and perception of Sula. From a grounded "stemmed rose" (Morrison 52) to a stinging "rattlesnake" (104), even to the omen-riddled certainty that it represented her mother's ashes "marking [Sula] from the beginning" (114), the protagonist's birthmark was a reflection not only of what the community believed about Sula, but also of her transformative potential. Indeed, Sula may be a tadpole in her capacity for the (re)generation of an African tradition and perception, but the waters she has resided and grown upon are American-based. Her evolution and growth into part of an aquatic or terrestrial environment depended on how the protagonist related to her community and to how this community reacted to the binary limitation of water-soil/Africa-America.

Indeed, the two experiences and traditions co-exist, yet there is a characteristic resistance to convergence insomuch as all characters are forced to 'pick a side' in what turns into hierarchical tension between the two realms. As Monika Hoffarth-Zelloe argues, "[p]aradoxes and split personalities arise out of the conflict between an individual's search for independence and society's demands, norms and values" (115). The African Americans in the Bottom of Medallion are torn between two iterations of societal experience and identity - one that is African in its tradition and history, yet it is inserted in an American territory, and another that is American in its

configuration, and which holds the African one at bay -, they become fragmented in the forced suppression of their collective history. Similarly to how Nel, Sula's childhood friend, develops "a ball of muddy strings" (Morrison 109) composed of her repressed and torn interiority, so do the people of the community suppress their wish for an independent identity, devoid of white pressure, in favour of dominant rule, creating self-rejection and division within the community itself - as made evident from the black-white tension that Nel's mother, Helene, creates and submits herself to when in contact with a white train conductor (20-2).

While V.C. Lewis argues that Sula represents an African tradition and experience that is displaced, the protagonist cannot be solely considered through an African lens. Sula, unlike other characters, including Shadrack (whose African perception exists in opposition to the American standard), understands this division between the two traditions and attempts to develop one that is a convergence of the two, even if such a confluence is frowned upon by the (white standards of the) community of the Bottom of Medallion. Sula, instead, represents a hybridity which cannot be contained by the opposite points of reference, preferring a self-determined spectrum of identity.

As Stuart Albert continues,

Identification is defined, in part, by the kinds of metaphysical quagmires that one chooses to engage. Nor can one discuss the concept of identification without at some point running into all of the difficulties surrounding the concept of self. A definition serving a revelatory function does not hide these troubles because a term is defined by the troubles that are part of its nature. Lear is Lear because of the troubles that surround him and that comprise his nature. (9)

Precisely because Sula lives in rejection of the absolute and defined identities provided to her, opting for a selfhood that embraces both experiences, she is an absolutely fluid character (although not fully aquatic) whose concept of self is undefined and refuses measurement and, thus, control - in her "experimental life", Sula "felt no compulsion to verify herself-be consistent with herself" (Morrison 119). It is through the rejection of hierarchical standings and oppositional referencing that Sula is capable not only of complementing her community's sense of selfhood, but of responding to the unescapable self-awareness in identification and identity. Indeed, "Sula never competed [by entering the oppositional dynamics of the Bottom]; she simply helped others define themselves" (Morrison 95), even if the community of the Bottom of Medallion perceived itself in contrast to the protagonist.

Through her fluidity and her attempted movement towards self-discovery in frustrated artistic capacity (Morrison 121) and sexual intercourse (Morrison 122-3), Sula sought to generate an identity-charged fertile “mud” that would be composed of both African “water” and American “loam” (Morrison 131). The protagonist uses her creative impulses as a means through which a new identity may be built for, as Stuart Albert further argues, “[t]o be generative is to give rise to and, like a magnet, attract clusters of questions” (8). Thus, in accordance with Albert’s argument, Sula provides a series of individual questionings for the community of the Bottom of Medallion in her creational capability. The protagonist’s rejection of a strict control in definition - and even of definition in itself - ignites a critical overview in the community regarding its own functioning and dynamics.

Despite perceiving Sula as a “[d]evil”, the members of the community changed their ways in her presence: “[t]heir conviction of Sula’s evil changed them in accountable yet mysterious ways. Once the source of their personal misfortune was identified, they had leave to protect and love one another” (Morrison 117). The Bottom’s passive attitude towards evil - “The purpose of evil was to survive it” (Morrison 90) - betrayed an observation that, in Sula’s demarcation and creation of a new identity, led them to self-awareness. Indeed, the people of the Bottom of Medallion start behaving differently after Sula’s arrival, which reveals that they were capable of developing critical self-perception, at least to some degree. Even if this shift in consciousness and recognition remained adherent to the white perception rooted in the territory and the community returned to their old habits after Sula’s passing, they could never truly have their connection to African tradition entirely severed.

This shift is the reason why Sula, even in her dying bed, claims that she is “going down like one of those redwoods”, and that she “sure did live in this world”, contrary to the expectations for black women to be submissive in America, the protagonist arguing that they are “dying like a stump” (Morrison 143). Indeed, even if Sula’s roots are forcefully denied by the American soil and its inhabitants, her deep-rooted African heritage - which finds in water its sustenance, survival, and prospering - causes her to become a heavy differentiating force, even after her fall. Unlike those around her, who have attempted to fully give up their African heritage in favour of (white) expectations which perceive them as inferior, Sula develops as an independent product of both African water and American loam, asserting her and the Afro-American experience as a self-defined creation. Sula wishes to create a *reclamation* of African

identity in, as well as with, American land, to trigger the transformation of a barren and suppressed desert into fertile soil from which identity may bloom.

However, Sula's death requires an abandonment of the material body and land in which her creativity resided and that the unyielding land and its dynamics rejected, consequently forcing her to take refuge in an African "sleep of water always" (Morrison 149). The permanence of this protection after destruction is solely possible, nevertheless, because of the protagonist's acceptance of her African heritage and her attempt to create it anew. This is integral both to Nel's movement towards her climatic self-discovery by the end of the novel, as a consequence of her constant circumscription of selfhood into an American image, and the community's confrontation with their own impotence and controlled measuring when facing the New River Road tunnel and attempt to destroy the construction site as a symbol of their collective repression (Morrison 161).

Indeed, Lewis argues that "[w]hat begins in glee and celebration of Sula's death ends in violent rage to kill the memories of deferred dreams in racist America" (V.C. Lewis 96) in the confrontation of the division between an African tradition and an overpowering American experience in the Suicide Day Parade. Lewis' argument that the harsh weather and collective death is a direct and vengeful consequence of the community's scorning of Sula (V.C. Lewis 95-6) comes into fruition when one considers the parallel enjoyment of Sula's death. Just as the community "felt that either *because* Sula was dead or just *after* she was dead a brighter day was dawning" and that "it was with a strong sense of hope that the people in the Bottom watched October close" (Morrison 150-1), laughter issued from seeing Shadrack's proposal for suicide:

Maybe the sun; maybe the clots of green showing in the hills promising so much; maybe the contrast between Shadrack's doomy, gloomy bell glinting in all that sweet sunshine. Maybe just a brief moment, for once, of not feeling fear, of looking at death in the sunshine and being unafraid. [Dessie, and then, the community] laughed. (Morrison 158-9)

When coming into contact with the dismissed African (id)entity that is Shadrack (the corporeal representation of African water and tradition), after the death of Sula (the one who brought to light the limitations imposed on the community and granted them self-awareness), the community of the Bottom revelled in their regained stability. However, this stability and prospering translated into complaisance with the dynamics that repressed them. It is when facing the tunnel that Sula's wish for the community

to understand its own submission is fulfilled. Yet, in their attempt to destroy (and, thus, fully disconnect with) the American experience that was the foundation of their existence, they were flooded and drowned in erupting African water. The attempt to be rid of the rigid soil becomes as destructive to the community as the suppression of water and fluidity, because neither expression of identity represents their reality, and the dominant experience benefits from the correspondingly oppositional standing. As Shadrack had proposed, the community engaged in suicide by dissolving their African heritage and Sula - the emblem for (re)generative identity -, instead maintaining their adherence to the polar systems of identity and identification that benefit the community's obliteration.

Once more, and as in the case of the enslaved African man, the possibility of returning to a fully African identity can no longer be after the forced displacement created by slavery. Although Africa is the place of origin of the traditions portrayed by Shadrack, the community can never fully return neither to the origin nor to the traditions as they were, instead being forced to, like Sula, (re)create, (re)claim and (re-)learn identity. Yet, even if the community has been materially destroyed, one is left to wonder if their (albeit violent) "sleep of water" (149) was not, as may have been the case with Sula, a peaceful reward for their understanding of their suppression and their attempt at liberation. In the convergence of African heritage with and in American land, the community might have been capable not only of discovering an identity that is authentic to its reality, but also one that generates a critical perception over that same experience - yet the community chose destruction instead of natural creation as a means for liberation, consequently being struck by death.

Nevertheless, the questioning and self-discovery is the convergence attempted by Sula, and, in accordance with Stuart Albert's argument, the obstacles her community faces define both her and the community itself: if "a term is defined by the troubles that are part of its nature" and "Lear is Lear because of the troubles that surround him and that comprise his nature" (9), then Sula is Sula due to the troubling experimentation she conducts in her life, as well as to the muddy metaphysical matters of identity she creates in death. Yet these troubles do not define her or the community of the Bottom of Medallion insomuch as they do not present a measurement of their existence; instead, these troubles become characterizations of experiences and experiments that are self-aware and self-valuing in themselves. Only through the convergence of past heritage with present circumstances can creative possibilities come into existence.

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¹ The present essay emerges as a brief complement to my MA dissertation entitled "'Experimental Lives': Systems of Domination and Artistic Divergence in James Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* and Toni Morrison's *Sula*" (FLUP, 2022). Consequently, themes such as systems of domination and opposition, creation and creativity, and fluidity, among others, are shared, albeit approached through different lenses.

² Another character who may be considered to have a connection to water, and, thus, an African identity is Plum, Eva's son and Sula's uncle, who "*floated* in a constant swaddle of love and affection, until 1917 when he went to war" (Morrison 45, emphasis added). His addiction to drugs - a consequence of what can be understood as post-traumatic stress disorder from his military experience - led to Eva deciding to burn him, but his presence in the novel revolves around water. As Eva is rocking him as one would a baby, she reminisces about giving Plum a bath when he was a child and how he "*dripped water*" on her, and the impulse that led the mother to burn her child was her drinking what she thought would be "*strawberry crush*", only to discover it to be "*blood-tainted water*" (47, emphasis added). As Eva drenches Plum in kerosene, he feels as if he were undergoing "[s]ome kind of baptism, some kind of blessing" in an assuring "*wet light*" - "[i]t wound itself-this wet light-all about him, *splashing* and *running* into his skin" (47, emphasis added), just before being *engulfed* in flames. The "1921" chapter comes to an end by displaying that the only possibility of saving Plum would be through "water" (48), but such an attempt is frustrated

by Eva's flaming destruction, a reflection of American expectation. Despite Plum's deviance from expectations being self-destructive, the fact that fluidity is a central aspect of his character further cements the dichotomous reading of a harsh American soil against African water.

³ While it is not clear whether the use of the plural in "Bottoms" is intentional or a mere error in the article, the idea of the Bottom of Medallion's systems and dynamics being indefinitely reproduced through African American communities in what becomes an infinity of Medallions is relevant to this and many other studies.