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Periodization as Metaphor: Transcending Time in Toni Morrison's *Sula* and "Recitatif"

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Abstract:
Toni Morrison spoke and wrote extensively about the primacy of the art of creating fiction, resisting any critical, academic, or social attempts, however well-intentioned, to categorize her texts and wrest their autonomy. Implicit in periodization, one such "lazy labeling" strategy long embraced by critics and pedagogues, is a power dynamic that diminishes the artist, her art, and the reader's experience of both. This discussion of two related works by Morrison, *Sula* and "Recitatif," contextualizes her aesthetic theory by closely examining her defiance of conventional norms for narrative structure, character delineation, and even setting description. As both narratives trace their respective protagonists' lifelong journeys, which propel forward and revert to earlier times to attain truth, Morrison exposes the mendacity of a singularly linear progression of finite time periods. This consideration of *Sula* and "Recitatif" focuses on the texts as models of Morrison's insistence upon connection, ambiguity, and circularity in fiction. As metaphorical argument for a literary canon that transcends classification by time periods or any other limiting, arbitrarily prescribed criteria, Morrison's narratives resonate timelessly.

Anyone who has taught or taken a literature survey course knows the chronological succession of named periods or ages framed by inclusive dates, with the obligatory lists of recurrent themes and identifying traits. Debates about the relative critical, historical, and pedagogical merit of this approach are familiar. Of greater concern to the study of literature today, however, is the power dynamic implicit in underlying assumptions of periodization. The convention posits that literature is subject to separation, classification, and labeling. Comparative judgments of works designated for named categories inevitably ensue, creating a hierarchy based on contrived expectations. It is this attempt of external agents to define an author's narrative that Toni Morrison's fiction addresses, for she "refuse[s] to explain, or even acknowledge, the 'problem' as anything other than an artistic one."[1] The genesis of Morrison's vision of

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this dynamic may be cultural and historical, but its impact on aesthetics is the metaphorical focus of her 1973 novel *Sula* and 1983 short story "Recitatif." Morrison understates her intent to "write fiction unencumbered by other people's expectations,"[2] for these narratives do more than elude periodization; they explicitly resist all attempts to categorize by time or any other limiting parameters. All of the literary elements in these connected works combine to defy facile division and labeling based upon time. Through these strategies of metafiction, *Sula* and "Recitatif" ultimately become narratives about fiction and its purpose in relation to time.

The description of the setting with which *Sula* opens prepares for a series of ironic reversals calculated to defy classification and limited perspective of any kind. The black neighborhood in the Ohio town of Medallion is "the part they called the Bottom in spite of the fact that it was up in the hills."[3] Local legend traces the misnomer back to a trick that a white farmer once played on his slave, convincing him that the hilly land the slave was receiving as a reward was "'bottom land, rich and fertile.'"[4] The master reassured the skeptical slave that the land is "'[h]igh up from us, [. . .] but when God looks down, it's the bottom [. . .] It's the bottom of heaven—best land there is.'"[5] The universe of the novel is clear; power inherent in hierarchy is disingenuous, and categories, including the language that delineates them, are relative concepts.

Framed by this setting, the narrative structure of *Sula* is one device that Morrison uses to metaphorically reject the constraints of periodization. The structure she selects to explore the complexities of female friendship is carefully crafted to mimic the interdependence of past, present, and future in the relationship of Sula and Nel. The chapter headings appear to suggest a conventional linear trajectory. Part One contains chapters named "1919," "1920," "1921," "1922," "1923," and "1927"; the headings in Part Two are "1937," "1939," "1940," "1941," and "1965." However, the unequal focus on early vs. later years, combined with increasingly irregular gaps of four, ten, two, and twenty-four years, avoids the continuous time pattern of periodization. The chronological markers are incidental to the action, serving merely as a counterpoint to the girls' journey that always circles back and attains meaning only through reference to the past: their own, their families', and their community's. No developments belong exclusively to one dimension of time; the narrative propels forward and reverts back simultaneously.

The trajectory of *Sula* literally revolves around two seminal incidents in the story of Sula and Nellie's friendship, the first of which is their unintentional involvement in the drowning death of a local child, a case of mischief turned tragedy. At twelve years old, they are playfully teasing a

little boy, Chicken Little, by the river. Sula is swinging him "around and around"[6] by his hands when "[. . .] he slipped from her hands and sailed away out over the water [. . .] The water darkened and closed quickly over the place where Chicken Little sank."[7] Of particular significance to the novel's use of time is the girls' immediate response to his drowning; they freeze and think of consequences for themselves rather than the fate of the boy, "the something newly missing."[8] The posture that each initially adopts makes the incident a different experience for Sula and for Nel, thus shaping the dynamic of their relationship. Sula "collapsed in tears"[9] while Nel tries to calm Sula with a reassurance that thinly veils disavowal of responsibility: "'You didn't mean it. It ain't your fault.'"[10] Even at the boy's funeral, Nel comforts herself with the ironic certainty that "she had 'done nothing.'"[11] After the boy's burial, the girls' sense that the shared secret of his demise "would stay aboveground forever"[12] is prophetic, for it becomes the reference point for their subsequent interactions.

The Chicken Little story is not a static incident that belongs exclusively to a finite period in the past, but a dynamic narrative which can reflect and facilitate change. The narrative radiates outward from the incident in expanding circles that reveal new details about its impact over time. Each reference to the drowning echoes the girls' initial responses until the inadequacy of the alleged contrast between them becomes clear. For example, fifteen years later, an argument over Sula's commitment of her grandmother Eva to a nursing home, a decision which Nel condemns, evokes the drowning incident and the friends' established dynamic. Sula admits, "'Whenever I was scared before, you knew just what to do.' The closed place in the water spread before them [. . .] The situation was clear to [Nel] now. Sula, like always, was incapable of making any but the most trivial decisions."[13] Allusion to the past informs Sula's helpless, dependent attitude and Nel's responsible, morally superior posture. Even Sula's deathbed scene, in which Nel arrives to help her despite an earlier rupture in their friendship, hearkens back to their roles in the drowning: "Nel, [Sula] remembered, always thrived in a crisis. The closed place in the water [. . .] Nel was the best."[14] It is not until long after Sula's death, when Nel is fifty-five, that an unexpected reference to the drowning incident finally reconciles the girls' narratives of their roles. During Nel's visit to Sula's grandmother in her nursing home, Eva startles Nel with a direct accusation: "'Tell me how you killed that little boy.'"[15] Angrily defending herself against such "lies,"[16] Nel indicts the late Sula as the culprit, while Eva insists upon Nel's complicity because she "'was there'" and she "'watched.'"[17] Eva's assessment of their shared

blame challenges Nel's long-held belief in her moral high ground, forcing her to revisit the childhood incident and confront nagging questions about a truth she has always avoided: "[. . .] it was there anyway, as it had always been, the old feeling and the old question. The good feeling she had had when Chicken's hands slipped [. . .] 'Why didn't I feel bad when it happened?'"[18] Thus, the cyclical return to a pivotal incident with evolving perspectives advances towards truth and unity in a way that a linear progression of finite time periods could not.

The novel's structure similarly revolves around another far more divisive incident that occurs much later in the friends' lives, alternating perspectives until they coalesce. Nel, now married with three children, is delighted that "[h]er old friend had come home"[19] after a ten-year absence until she enters her own bedroom to find her husband Jude in intimate relations with Sula. The shock is devastating: "That was too much. To lose Jude and not have Sula to talk to about it because it was Sula that he had left her for."[20] Though it may be difficult to conceive of more than one way of viewing such a betrayal, the narrative again avoids absolute classification, juxtaposing diametrically opposed stances instead. Sula's inability to comprehend the irreparable rift with Nel depends upon her own family history: "[Sula] had no thought at all of causing Nel pain when she bedded down with Jude [. . .] but having had no intimate knowledge of marriage, having lived in a house with women who thought all men available, [. . .] she was ill prepared for the possessiveness of the one person she felt close to."[21] Considering herself the victim, Sula is "surprised [. . .] and saddened"[22] by Nel's behavior "as the wronged wife."[23] However, the next cycle past the betrayal reveals its enduring impact on Nel's life, portraying her as the victim. Jude's complete abandonment of Nel and the children following the affair forces her to find work cleaning, devote herself to maternal responsibilities, and at thirty, never really have another love relationship. Despite the treachery, however, Nel checks in on the terminally ill Sula three years later. Appealing to their girlhood bond, Nel asks the long unspoken question: "'How come you did it, Sula?'"[24] Sula's response again reverses expectations and blurs any presumptive delineation between victim and offender: "'If we were such good friends, how come you couldn't get over it?'"[25] The conflation of attitudes appears justified at Sula's funeral when Nel realizes that the loss she has been carrying since the betrayal is that of her childhood friend, *not* her husband: "'All that time, all that time, I thought I was missing Jude [. . .] We was girls together [. . .]'"[26] As in the drowning incident, two seemingly antithetical stances in fact have always contained each other; both girls are victims, both offend-

ers. Time as a continuum unites what discrete time periods attempt to divide. Recalling the inverted setting of the Bottom, the novel's final line serves as a coda to the recursive structure that has literally come full circle with Nel's epiphany: "It was a fine cry—loud and long—but it had no bottom and it had no top, just circles and circles of sorrow."[27] The image captures the problem of periodization; it attempts to impose hierarchical order upon narrative that continuously evolves and cannot be contained without jeopardizing its truth.

If these pivotal events in the narrative appear to suggest an alignment of characters according to conventional norms, Morrison dares any such categorization to withstand the permutations of time. The recurrent motif of good vs. evil interests Morrison less for its moral implications than its accessibility as a paradigm of either/or dichotomy, but attempts to classify characters by such abstractions fail spectacularly. For instance, after Sula "took Jude, then ditched him for others,"[28] she becomes the town pariah from whom the people of the Bottom seek to distance themselves physically and morally. As a result, Sula inadvertently becomes a force for good in the Bottom: "Their conviction of Sula's evil changed them in accountable yet mysterious ways [. . .] They began to cherish their husbands and wives, protect their children, repair their homes and in general band together against the devil in their midst."[29] Morrison reinforces the salutary effect that Sula has on the community by reversing it upon her death. Despite "the general relief that Sula's death brought,"[30] the townspeople revert to their former lax, irresponsible ways: "[. . .] mothers who had defended their children from Sula's malevolence (or who had defended their positions as mothers from Sula's scorn for the role) now had nothing to rub up against. The tension was gone and so was the reason for the effort they had made."[31] While neighborhood pariah Sula ironically exerts a positive influence, the Bottom's paragon Nel elicits a similarly antithetical reaction in Sula. From the beginning, Nel's self-proclaimed blamelessness in the boy's drowning leads Sula to believe in her own amorality: "[. . .] her one major feeling of responsibility had been exorcised on the bank of a river with a closed place in the middle."[32] The experience taught her "that there was no self to count on [. . .] She had no center, no speck around which to grow."[33] Her conviction becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy while the holier-than-thou affect of Nel readily collapses under scrutiny. To suggest that they switch roles still presumes categories; rather, they become one. As Eva's final judgment declares, "'Just alike. Both of you. Never was no difference between you.'"[34] Thus, perennial delineation of characters as good or evil fails as a measure of where their individual and joint narratives take them over time.

Morrison's minor characters also reinforce the misguided focus on classification as a window into literary texts. Evading binary poles, these iconoclasts invent themselves rather than conforming to their designated place in the social hierarchy. Shadrack is the "drunk, loud, obscene, funny and outrageous"[35] town eccentric whose combat experience has left him brutally fragmented, "[b]lasted and permanently astonished by the events of 1917."[36] As a solution to the fear that plagues him, he creates National Suicide Day on January 3, 1920: "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."[37] A bizarre logic underlies the designation of an annual day for people to "kill themselves or each other."[38] The townspeople "knew Shadrack was crazy but that did not mean that he didn't have any sense,"[39] for his character integrates qualities of madness and reason. Shadrack's connection to the Chicken Little drowning incident further exposes the mendacity of narratives confined to a single moment in time. When the boy drowns and Nel says, "'Somebody saw,'"[40] Sula runs across the bridge to find Shadrack, as he would be the only potential witness. She is too terrified to ask the "terrible Shad"[41] the question that he seems to answer anyway: "He was smiling, a great smile, heavy with lust and time to come. He nodded his head as though answering a question, and said [. . .] 'Always,'"[42] the single word looming ominously over the girls' future with the constant threat of apprehension. Only after Sula's death does the novel cycle back to Shadrack's memory of this encounter, revealing the fallacy of his threatening public persona. He recalls trying to comfort the only visitor he ever had, a scared, crying little girl: "[. . .] to stop the hurt from spilling out of her eyes [. . .] He had said 'always' to convince her, assure her, of permanency."[43] To emphasize the necessity of the two images of Shadrack to the narrative, Morrison chooses the word "always" as Sula's dying thought: "Always. Who said that? She tried hard to think. Who was it that had promised her a sleep of water always?"[44] Thus, the word "always" forever unites Sula with Shadrack and even with the drowned boy, whose "sleep of water"[45] she caused. Partial truths perpetuated by the impulse to classify dissolve as the narrative reconciles contraries of madness/reason, iconoclast/conformist, and life/death.

Another supporting character that trivializes classification by moral absolutes is Eva, Sula's grandmother, who seems to embody wildly contradictory traits. One of the novel's many women who is deserted by her husband and left with young children to support, Eva becomes an amputee, allegedly having "stuck [her leg] under a train and made

them pay off."[46] This self-sacrifice seems curiously at odds with a later incident involving her youngest child and only son, Plum. Like Shadrack, Plum is permanently damaged by his World War I service, but he returns home a heroin addict. Realizing this, Eva goes down to his room one night, embraces him while tearfully recalling memories of his childhood, then soaks him in kerosene and burns him to death. She later explains to eldest daughter Hannah: "'[. . .] he was crawlin' back. Being helpless and thinking baby thoughts [. . .]'"[47] Plum's dependence on drugs and on Eva would have forever trapped him in one time period, infancy, stunting his capacity for self-actualization. A much later fire-related incident features Eva diving out of her third-floor window in a futile attempt to save daughter Hannah, whose dress has caught fire. The deaths of two children by conflagration, one intentional and one accidental, may stretch credulity, but the function of the juxtaposition is clear. Any attempt at classification of Eva limits the complexity of her character as the same maternal impulse paradoxically drives the murder of one child and the heroic attempt to save the other. As with Sula's betrayal of Nel, the extremity of her actions evades both judgment and categorization.

Sula's dying question to Nellie thus applies to Eva as well: "'How you know? [. . .] About who was good. How you know it was you? [. . .] I mean maybe it wasn't you. Maybe it was me.'"[48] Morrison's challenge to the presumption of power in the recurrent "'How you know?'" extends to those who would separate, classify, and label literary creations. To claim that this is the *wrong* approach to literature would be to fall into the either/or trap that Morrison so assiduously shuns. Whether a literary work and its characters neatly fit into any preordained, sequential categories is simply not as crucial as issues of individual autonomy: the power of self-determination; the capacity for creation on one's own terms; and the ability to refuse ownership by an "other," whether the "other" is a husband, a parent, a friend, a narcotic, a social norm, or a literary convention.

Even the simple act of naming becomes a potential threat to autonomy if its motivation is ownership. Two pointed references to nomenclature serve as a poignant metaphorical rejection of arbitrary attempts to differentiate by names and dates. In one case, Eva magnanimously takes in three needy boys as foster children. Snatching "the caps off their heads,"[49] Eva "ignore[s] their names"[50] and renames them. Indifferent to their "markedly different"[51] appearance and ethnicity, Eva calls *each* of them "dewey."[52] The "deeply black"[53] jaundiced boy, the red-headed "freckled"[54] boy, and the "half Mexican"[55] one collectively become "deweys,"[56] with Morrison explicitly omitting capitalization for proper names. When

people question how the three boys will be distinguished, Eva replies, "'What you need to tell them apart for? They's all deweys.'"[57] Against town objections, Eva has the seven-, five-, and four- year old boys all start school together, insisting, "'How you know? They all come here the same year.'"[58] Eva decides they're all "six years old,"[59] and unfettered by limiting labels and time distinctions, the boys flourish: "Slowly each boy came out of whatever cocoon he was in at the time his mother or somebody gave him away, and accepted Eva's view, becoming in fact as well as in name a dewey—joining with the other two to become [. . .] inseparable."[60]

A contrasting attitude towards nomenclature also yields results consistent with its intent. Despite her earlier contempt for best friend Nel's "possessiveness"[61] of her *own* husband, Sula later craves ownership of Ajax, one of her many lovers: "Sula began to discover what possession was. Not love, perhaps, but possession or at least the desire for it."[62] A mutually intense affair ends when Ajax "detect[s] the scent of the nest"[63] and abruptly leaves her. Bereft by his "stunning absence,"[64] Sula finds his forgotten driver's license and discovers that his name was not what she had thought at all: "But what was this? Albert Jacks? His name was Albert Jacks? A. Jacks. She had thought it was Ajax."[65] The inaccuracy of Ajax's name ironically recalls Eva's question about the ages of the "deweys" and anticipates Sula's deathbed question to Nel about the girls' relative moral character: "'How you know?'"[66] Sula's erroneous certainty about Ajax's name reflects the inevitable destruction of that which she seeks to possess, while Eva's laissez-faire attitude towards classification by name and age leads the "deweys" to blossom and attain almost divine status, "a trinity with a plural name."[67] Thus, the device of nomenclature becomes another element which metaphorically rejects periodization as a power play based on labeling. The novel's focused analysis of names dismisses the validity of named categories in periodization, the determination of membership in those categories, and most importantly, the relevance of such an approach to literature. "'How you know?'", indeed.

Permeating all of these strategies in *Sula* is Morrison's narrative voice, a key component of the novel's metaphorical resistance to ordering systems like periodization. The final boundary that collapses is that between reader and narrator as Morrison never assumes a posture of authorial ownership. Third-person narration alternately recounts the thoughts and actions of the two protagonists, with variations in point of view advancing the novel's overall scheme. For example, the shift from third to second person when Nellie witnesses her husband's infidelity with Sula thrusts the reader into the scene: "They are not doing that. I am just standing

here and seeing it, but they are not really doing it. But then they did look up. Or you did. You did, Jude [. . .] And finally you just got up and started putting on your clothes [. . .]"[68] Conflating character and reader insures that the narrative will never be fixed in time; it will recreate itself with each reader's response to Nel's heartbroken words to her husband. The use of apostrophe to address reader as character also elevates the status of the reader, thus ceding control of the narrative, a strategy that becomes more prevalent as the novel nears the end. Morrison adopts an increasingly tentative posture, leaving decisions to the reader. In stating that the residents of the Bottom "felt that either because Sula was dead or just after she was dead a brighter day was dawning,"[69] the narrator allows the reader to determine causation or correlation. Similarly, when the final chapter opens with, "Things were so much better in 1965. Or so it seemed,"[70] the reader should not expect the narrator to distinguish appearance from reality. Thus, Morrison not only defies classification by external agents; she even admonishes the reader not to rely on *her* as the final arbiter of her own work.

As the conclusion returns to the opening image of inversion that the Bottom conveyed, Morrison reverses it yet again due to changes which gentrification has wrought: "[. . .] the Bottom had collapsed."[71] Her concluding lament serves as a final emblem of the consequences of periodization: "It was sad, because the Bottom had been a real place [. . .] 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."[72] Separation as an organizing principle limits realization of the full potential of individuals, communities, and the narratives that authors write about them.

As if balking even at critical classification of herself as a novelist, Morrison writes her only short story, "Recitatif," in 1983. Her renewed focus on the relationship of two girls founded on a shared childhood trauma again suggests that narrative does not belong to one time period, either in the writer's career or in her works. Unlike *Sula*, "Recitatif" avoids indication of specific years, but social/cultural references in the story span the 1950's through the 1970's. As the story transposes now familiar themes and tropes to a more contemporary milieu, its design similarly serves as a metaphorical challenge to the assumptions of periodization. "Recitatif" revives many of the same patterns that *Sula* follows, but the story's compressed form and perhaps its later publication date exude a more adamant rejection of such codified approaches to art.

In "Recitatif," the fierce defiance of any impulse towards classification begins with characterization. Unlike Sula and Nellie, who grow up

together, Twyla and Roberta forge a bond in the four months which they spend together as roommates in the St. Bonaventure orphanage. The two eight-year-olds share a unique status at St. Bonny's because both have living mothers who cannot take care of them: "My mother danced all night and Roberta's was sick."[73] The limitations of classification by irrelevant criteria such as ethnicity, region, and race are immediately apparent as Twyla says: "We didn't like each other all that much at first, but nobody else wanted to play with us because we weren't real orphans with beautiful dead parents in the sky. We were dumped. Even the New York City Puerto Ricans and the upstate Indians ignored us. All kinds of kids were in there, black ones, white ones, even two Koreans."[74] St. Bonny's has its own social hierarchy, and the girls' similar narratives through age eight determine their place in it. A rationale for the girls' connection based on what they are *not*, i.e., "real orphans," replaces predictable benchmarks of who they are, thus inverting underlying assumptions of character delineation.

While *Sula* provides evidence which can support ambiguous readings of Sula and Nellie as good and/or evil characters, the duality in "Recitatif" is more explicitly racial, and Morrison refuses to entertain such a line of inquiry. After Twyla's early statement that "we looked like salt and pepper standing there and that's what the other kids called us sometimes,"[75] Morrison withholds any definitive clues to the girls' respective racial identities, scoffing at the mental gymnastics that will ensue. Initial impressions serve only to tap into stereotypical images that have no grounding in the text. For example, Twyla must room with "a girl from a whole other race,"[76] about whom Twyla's mother had said, "they never washed their hair and they smelled funny."[77] Twyla's opinion that the food at the shelter "was good,"[78] while "Roberta hated it,"[79] does not advance racial identification any more successfully. Neither does the description of the girls' mothers, who come to St. Bonny's for a visit on the same day. Twyla's "dancing mother"[80] Mary shows up wearing "those ugly green slacks that made her behind stick out"[81] to go to chapel, and forgets to pack a lunch. Roberta's statuesque mother wears "the biggest cross I'd ever seen,"[82] carries "the biggest Bible ever made,"[83] won't shake Mary's hand, and brings a lunch of "chicken legs and ham sandwiches and oranges and a whole box of chocolate-covered grahams."[84] Ascribing definitive identifications to such generic descriptions is virtually impossible. Selected use of the pronoun "they" in later confrontations between the girls further exposes readily interchangeable generalizations: "Everything is so easy for them. They think they own the world";[85] "Who do they think they are?"[86] As the girls' race remains

indistinguishable, the myopic insistence upon classification becomes worse than laughable, for it overlooks the shared story of neglect that has landed two eight-year-old girls with living mothers in an orphanage, a narrative which crosses boundaries of race and time.

Equally effective in flouting classification as the omission of definitive identifiers is Morrison's strategy for supporting characters, imbuing each of them with opposing traits. While *Sula* undermines the good vs. evil dichotomy, the ambiguity in "Recitatif" lies in physical traits, a focus better suited to a younger point of view in a shorter genre. The brief description of Maggie, the mute kitchen woman at the orphanage, consists of multiple dualities which defy facile categorization while validating the girls' conflicting memories of her later in life. Twyla knows that Maggie can't cry or scream "'even if somebody tries to kill her'"[87] but wonders whether "she could hear and didn't let on."[88] Maggie combines age and youth, for "[s]he was old"[89] but "wasn't much taller"[90] than the eight-year-old girls and "wore this really stupid little hat—a kid's hat with earflaps."[91] Male and female boundaries also merge as a later reference to her hat calls it a "baby-boy hat."[92] In contrast to the girls' physical description, which is totally devoid of racial indicators, Maggie is ambiguously "sandy colored."[93] She also "rocked when she walked,"[94] suggesting oscillating movement between two sides. Even her bow legs, which Twyla recalls as "legs like parentheses,"[95] convey a forward and back yet inclusive image.

The other characters whose duality lends itself to a shifting role in the girls' narrative are the "gar girls," the "big girls on the second floor."[96] Twyla recalls that she and Roberta were scared of the teenage "girls with lipstick and eyebrow pencil"[97] who bullied them in the orchard at St. Bonny's. However, in hindsight, Twyla suggests an alternate reality that ironically aligns them with her and Roberta's status as outcasts: "Fifteen, sixteen, even, some of them were. They were put-out girls scared runaways most of them. Poor little girls who fought their uncles off but looked tough to us, and mean. God did they look mean."[98] As in *Sula*, references to nomenclature reinforce ambiguity, for Twyla and Roberta's name for the "big girls"[99] at St. Bonny's, "gar girls,"[100] is based on a mistake, "Roberta's misheard word for the evil stone faces described in a civics class."[101] The misnomer undermines the protagonists' absolute image of the big girls as "tough"[102] and "mean,"[103] allowing the narrative to evolve over time. Even place names evade singular connotations associated with settings fixed in time. The orchard at St. Bonny's, scene of the girls' bullying, is far from the prototypical Eden, despite its "[t]wo acres, four maybe, of these little apple trees [. . .] Empty and

crooked like beggar women when I first came to St. Bonny's but fat with flowers when I left."[104] However, Twyla's adult admission that the smell of "[a]pple blossoms"[105] still makes her "go soft"[106] suggests that this inverted Eden, which she repeatedly says "really wasn't bad"[107] is the closest Twyla comes to a childhood home.

Consistent with the framework of *Sula*, the recursive structure of "Recitatif" traces the journey of Twyla and Roberta through time, exposing the questionable basis for division and progressing towards unity. At the center of the structure this time is a single incident that occurs during the protagonists' four-month stay at the orphanage. It involves Maggie, the mute kitchen worker: "Maggie fell down [in the orchard] once [. . .] And the big girls laughed at her. We should have helped her up, I know, but we were scared of those girls with lipstick and eyebrow pencil."[108] Twyla and Roberta's four-month sojourn at St. Bonny's comes to an end with each going her separate way. However, despite its lack of detail, this Maggie incident becomes central to several random encounters that the girls have over a loosely defined time span throughout their lives. The incident continues to reverberate in sometimes conflicting versions long past its place in their childhood, again suggesting that narrative does not belong to one time period. Only a repeated return to the past eventually permits forward movement towards wholeness.

Despite the seemingly random nature of the four post-orphanage meetings, they are carefully conceived to cross boundaries separating past and present, the personal and the political, the ideal and the real. With almost scientific precision, the girls alternate as catalyst for each reunion to dramatize their power struggle over competing narratives. The rigidity and artifice of this scheme mimic similar traits in periodization and initially result in a widening chasm between the girls over conflicting memories of the Maggie incident. Each encounter includes a glimpse of the current social milieu, a reference to the Maggie incident, and a refrain-like inquiry about each other's mothers. The repetitive nature of the encounters draws upon another art form which combines elements of repetition and circularity to create a harmonious whole. In music, the titular framing device, "recitatif," refers to "[m]usical declamation of the kind usual in the narrative and dialogue parts of opera and oratorio, sung in the rhythm of ordinary speech with many words on the same note."[109] It is precisely the sometimes contentious dialogue between Twyla and Roberta in these meetings that advances the narrative until it concludes "on the same note."[110]

The first encounter occurs when the girls are about 16 or 17 as Twyla is waitressing at a Howard Johnson's, and Roberta is eating in a booth

with a couple of guys, the employee/customer distinction setting the tone. Happy to recognize her, Twyla initiates the conversation and is disappointed by Roberta's snippy response that she and her friends are on their way to the Coast because one of them has "an appointment with Hendrix,"[111] whom she shames Twyla for not knowing. The avoidance of direct mention of the Maggie incident, only eight years removed from its occurrence, points to the emotional work that lies ahead for both girls and the role that narrative will play in it. Twyla speculates that like her, Roberta "never talked about [St. Bonny's] to anybody."[112] However, the encounter does end by circling back to their childhood connection when Twyla asks about Roberta's mother: "'How's your mother' I asked. Her grin cracked her whole face,"[113] and Twyla responds in kind about her own mother. A return to their initial bond from the past bridges the present divisions that the passage of time has sown.

The next chance encounter occurs twelve years later in a grocery store with Roberta initiating the contact this time. Both are now married with children, but clear class differences exist with Twyla worried "about spending [her husband's] fireman salary so foolishly"[114] while Roberta, married to a widower into "[c]omputers and stuff,"[115] is "[. . .] dressed to kill. Diamonds on her hand [. . .],"[116] and is shopping with a chauffeured limousine. Despite these differences, the exchange is much warmer this time as they catch each other up on their current lives before inevitably cycling back to their initial bond: "Now we were behaving like sisters separated for much too long. Those four short months were nothing in time."[117] Twyla's observation that the duration of the St. Bonny's experience has no correlation to its impact suggests the irrelevance of time spans designated for literary periods; in fact, those four months were *everything* in time. The tone of the reunion changes, however, over starkly different memories of the Maggie incident. Roberta now insists that Maggie didn't fall down: "'No Twyla. They [gar girls] knocked her down [. . .] and tore her clothes. In the orchard.'"[118] Reluctant to revisit a version of events that she has clung to, Twyla leaves the meeting disturbed that Roberta's new recollection "had messed up [her] past somehow."[119] Both versions contain a truth that cannot emerge if each girl's narrative exists in isolation stuck in the past. The refrain-like inquiry about their mothers, this time initiated by Roberta, again relieves the tension and draws them back to their original connection, with Twyla replying that her mother never stopped dancing, and Roberta, that hers never got well.

Occurring the next fall, probably around 1975, against the backdrop of the "[r]acial strife"[120] associated with busing, the ostensibly most hostile meeting ironically masks the girls' unity. The two mothers find

themselves on opposite sides of a protest about an issue that affects them equally, with Roberta against sending her four stepchildren "'out of the neighborhood'"[121] and Twyla not minding that her "'boy's being bussed too.'"[122] Evoking their own childhood history of being "dumped,"[123] the issue becomes more personal than social. Their interaction predictably resorts to childish fighting and name-calling, with the two leveling the identical charge at each other: "'I wonder what made me think you were different.'"[124] Although the *double entendre* tacitly acknowledges their oneness, their tension inevitably circles back to the Maggie incident, with Roberta seemingly changing the narrative yet again, now accusing Twyla and herself: "'[You] kicked a poor old black lady when she was down on the ground [. . .] [y]ou kicked her. We both did. You kicked a black lady who couldn't even scream.'"[125] Although none of this account aligns with Twyla's memory, including Maggie's race, the necessity of their competing narratives becomes clear. In the picket line, Roberta carries a sign that reads, "MOTHERS HAVE RIGHTS TOO!";[126] in response, Twyla makes one that says, "AND SO DO CHILDREN****,"[127]noting that her "sign didn't make sense without Roberta's."[128] The dependence on each other's signs for meaning is more than grammatical, for their respective narratives of the Maggie incident to date have been analogous to slogans emblazoned on placards with no intent of hearing an opposing viewpoint. Even the requisite inquiry about their mothers' well-being, back in Twyla's court this time, only deepens the divide as she asks it on a cardboard sign. The question, "IS YOUR MOTHER WELL?"[129] receives no answer as the protests near an end. When the busing furor subsides after "a nasty six weeks"[130] and school finally opens, "the kids settled down like nothing in the world had happened."[131] The children's return to a normalcy that preceded a conflict not of their own making signals a similarly harmonious resolution of discord in the Twyla/Roberta relationship.

Some years after the busing confrontation, Twyla has an epiphany that prefaces the girls' fourth and final encounter. As point of view epitomizes Morrison's critique of periodization in *Sula*, it serves the same function in "Recitatif." In the recurrent pattern of the girls' exchanges, Roberta changes the details of the Maggie incident at will, while first-person narrator Twyla acts as reporter, reacting to her accounts. Only when Twyla, the girl who feared not being heard, actually hears Roberta does Twyla grasp the unity of their versions:

> I tried to assure myself about the race thing for a long time until it dawned on me that the truth was already there, and Roberta

> knew it [. . .]I didn't join in with the gar girls and kick that lady, but I sure did want to [. . .] Maggie was my dancing mother. Deaf, I thought, and dumb [. . .] Nobody who would hear you if you cried in the night [. . .] And when the gar girls pushed her down [. . .] I knew she wouldn't scream, couldn't—just like me and I was glad about that.[132]

Twyla's realization finally verbalizes the implicit connection between the two superficially disparate motifs of each encounter: Maggie and their mothers. Thus, assimilation of the narrative voice with perspectives representing other times, backgrounds, and intentions expands the narrative's capacity for truth.

Noticeably absent from the fourth encounter in the trajectory towards unity is any backdrop of social/racial tension. In fact, the setting is a snowy Christmas Eve, the ultimate image of peace and harmony. "Frazzled"[133] with Christmas preparations, Twyla stops for coffee in a diner, thus reverting back to the context of the girls' first post-orphanage meeting when they were teenagers. True to the established, alternating pattern, this time it is Roberta, "[i]n a silvery evening gown and dark fur coat [. . .] a little bit drunk,"[134] who spots Twyla and initiates the exchange. Dispensing with any formalities, Roberta immediately and urgently needs to tell Twyla something about St. Bonny's and Maggie. She "'can't be sure'"[135] whether Maggie was black, but her revelation about the incident in the orchard essentially repeats Twyla's earlier epiphany using the identical language: "'[. . .] because she [Maggie] couldn't talk— [. . .] I thought she was crazy. She'd been brought up in an institution like my mother was and like I thought I would be too [. . .] We didn't kick her. It was the gar girls [. . .] But, well, I wanted to. I really wanted them to hurt her.'"[136] In admitting their suppressed desire to hurt Maggie for her personification of their mothers, Twyla and Roberta own the misplaced pain they have been directing at each other. Their new shared lines about wanting to hurt Maggie cement the bond that their earlier repetition of hostile lines concealed. The two narratives become one, differentiated only by the specific associations the girls make between Maggie and their respective mothers. The obligatory refrain about the status of their mothers now takes the form of a declarative statement rather than a question, further suggesting a new reconciliation with truth: "'Did I tell you, my mother, she never did stop dancing.' 'Yes. You told me. And mine, she never got well.'"[137] The synthesis of their never *really* competing narratives not only facilitates reconciliation between the girls, but also allows outreach beyond themselves. Roberta now cares about the effect that her misrep-

resentation of the childhood incident may have had on Twyla: "'[. . .] I don't want you to carry that around.'"[138] Finally, crying through her whole confession to Twyla, Roberta ends their last encounter, and the story, with a question: "[. . .] she really was crying. 'Oh shit, Twyla. Shit, shit, shit. What the hell happened to Maggie?'"[139] The sincerely empathetic question becomes possible only when both girls relinquish territorial ownership of limited, one-dimensional narratives fixed in time. As all divisions collapse, Roberta and Twyla become one with each other, with Maggie, with the gar girls, and even with their mothers, whose neglected responsibility the girls have fulfilled in their role as mothers.

Morrison's repeated focus on the journey of two girls from childhood to adulthood is an apt metaphor for the role of narrative through time. The journeys are distinguished mainly by their respective conclusions, with each reiterating Morrison's stance on presumptions of separation, classification, and labeling. Recognition of oneness with Sula comes too late for Nellie, so *Sula* ends in "circles of sorrow."[140] In contrast, Twyla and Roberta's realization of their shared narrative concludes "Recitatif" on a note of acceptance, reconciliation, and forward movement. The categorization which Morrison repeatedly defies is emblematic of any posture of superiority that seeks to wrest individual agency, limit possibilities, and "diminish [. . .] expectations of the reader."[141] The intent of periodization may be to clarify, but labeling what a literary work *is* also dictates what it is *not*. The impulse towards unity and connectedness that permeates *Sula* and "Recitatif" urges an approach to literature that transcends classification. In systematically opting for connection, ambiguity, and relativism, Morrison offers an aesthetic which values universality over a convention that hinders it.

NOTES

1. Toni Morrison, *Sula* (New York: Vintage Books, 1973), xiii.
2. Ibid., xv.
3. Ibid., 4.
4. Ibid., 5.
5. Ibid.
6. Ibid., 60.
7. Ibid., 61.
8. Ibid.
9. Ibid., 62.
10. Ibid., 62–63.
11. Ibid., 65.
12. Ibid., 66.
13. Ibid., 101.

14. Ibid., 141.
15. Ibid., 168.
16. Ibid., 169.
17. Ibid., 168.
18. Ibid., 170.
19. Ibid., 95.
20. Ibid., 110.
21. Ibid., 119.
22. Ibid., 120.
23. Ibid.
24. Ibid., 144.
25. Ibid., 145.
26. Ibid., 174.
27. Ibid.
28. Ibid., 112.
29. Ibid., 118.
30. Ibid., 153.
31. Ibid.
32. Ibid., 118.
33. Ibid., 119.
34. Ibid., 169.
35. Ibid., 15.
36. Ibid., 7.
37. Ibid., 14.
38. Ibid.
39. Ibid., 15.
40. Ibid., 61.
41. Ibid.
42. Ibid.
43. Ibid., 157.
44. Ibid., 149.
45. Ibid.
46. Ibid., 31.
47. Ibid., 71–72.
48. Ibid., 146.
49. Ibid., 37.
50. Ibid.
51. Ibid., 38.
52. Ibid.
53. Ibid.
54. Ibid.
55. Ibid.
56. Ibid.
57. Ibid.
58. Ibid., 39.
59. Ibid.
60. Ibid., 38.
61. Ibid., 119.

62. Ibid., 131.
63. Ibid., 133.
64. Ibid., 134.
65. Ibid., 135.
66. Ibid., 146.
67. Ibid., 38.
68. Ibid., 105–106.
69. Ibid., 151.
70. Ibid., 163.
71. Ibid., 165.
72. Ibid., 166.
73. Toni Morrison, "Recitatif" (New York: Random House, 1983), 3.
74. Ibid., 6.
75. Ibid.
76. Ibid., 4.
77. Ibid.
78. Ibid., 6.
79. Ibid.
80. Ibid., 11.
81. Ibid., 14.
82. Ibid., 15.
83. Ibid.
84. Ibid., 17.
85. Ibid., 27.
86. Ibid., 39.
87. Ibid., 9.
88. Ibid., 10.
89. Ibid., 9.
90. Ibid.
91. Ibid.
92. Ibid., 10.
93. Ibid., 9.
94. Ibid.
95. Ibid., 8.
96. Ibid., 7.
97. Ibid., 8.
98. Ibid., 7.
99. Ibid., 29.
100. Ibid.
101. Ibid.
102. Ibid., 7.
103. Ibid.
104. Ibid., 8.
105. Ibid., 18.
106. Ibid.
107. Ibid., 7.
108. Ibid., 8.

109. Zadie Smith, introduction to "Recitatif," by Toni Morrison (New York: Random House, 1983), ix.
110. Ibid., ix.
111. Morrison, "Recitatif," 22.
112. Ibid., 21.
113. Ibid., 23.
114. Ibid., 25.
115. Ibid., 32.
116. Ibid., 26.
117. Ibid., 30.
118. Ibid., 32.
119. Ibid., 35.
120. Ibid., 36.
121. Ibid., 38.
122. Ibid.
123. Ibid., 6.
124. Ibid., 39.
125. Ibid., 42.
126. Ibid., 37.
127. Ibid., 42.
128. Ibid., 43.
129. Ibid., 44.
130. Ibid.
131. Ibid., 45.
132. Morrison, "Recitatif," 46–47.
133. Ibid., 49.
134. Ibid.
135. Ibid., 50.
136. Ibid.
137. Ibid., 52.
138. Ibid., 50.
139. Ibid., 52.
140. Morrison, *Sula*, 174.
141. Ibid., xv.