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## Toward an Affective Problematics: A Deleuze-Guattarian Reading of Morality and Friendship in Toni Morrison's *Sula*

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It might sound rather convincing to assume that we owe the pleasure of reading the novel form to our elemental repository of physical perception, to our feelings. This would be true only if mere feelings could add up to something more than just emotions, to some deep understanding of the human. After all, a moment of epiphany, where we begin to realize things that dramatically disturb our normal state of mind, is not just emotional, nor indeed a simple moment. Despite its root in the corporeal, a mo(ve)ment of affective realization reaches beyond the realm of the human and opens up the plane of virtual potentials. In this work, we intend to map out the points and relations of affective singularity that pervade the narrative of Toni Morrison's *Sula* (1973). Also, we will discuss how these mo(ve)ments of sensation give form to Sula's and Nel's experiences and contribute to an affective transformation in morality and friendship.

Keywords: Gilles Deleuze; Felix Guattari; Toni Morrison; *Sula*; affect; emotion

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### Una lectura de la amistad y la moralidad en *Sula* de Toni Morrison bajo el prisma de Deleuze y Guattari. La afectividad a debate

Podría resultar convincente asumir que el placer de leer formas novelísticas está relacionado con nuestro repositorio de percepciones físicas, con nuestros sentimientos. Este aserto sólo podría ser cierto si tales sentimientos nos llevaran más allá de las emociones hacia una comprensión más profunda de lo humano. En realidad, el momento epifánico en que se nos revelan las situaciones que perturban de forma radical nuestros estados mentales normales no es un solo momento, ni es tampoco puramente emocional. Pese a estar enraizado en lo corpóreo, cualquier mo(vi)m(i)ento de comprensión de la afectividad va más allá del ámbito

de lo humano para abrirse a un ámbito mayor de posibilidades. En este trabajo queremos explorar aquellos aspectos de la singularidad afectiva que impregnan la novela *Sula* (1973) de Toni Morrison. Además, se estudiará el modo cómo los distintos mo(vi)m(i)entos de emoción en la novela dan forma a las experiencias de sus protagonistas, Sula y Nel, y contribuyen a su transformación afectiva en términos morales y de amistad.

Palabras clave: Gilles Deleuze; Felix Guattari; Toni Morrison; *Sula*; afectividad/afectos; emociones

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Novels are a great form, if not the greatest, to deal with human characters, explore human life, provide solutions to human problems, even problematize human solutions. What else could the novel relate to if not to the human? We wish here to enumerate three of the various dimensions that account for the humanness of any human character in a novel, namely, experience, belief and emotion. Although it would be too inflated a claim to posit that these elements are exclusive to human beings, we are positive that the experience-belief-emotion triad forms an infinite range of possibilities that no other beings can rival in complexity. Take Madame Bovary, Mrs. Dalloway, Jude, Gatsby, Lady Chatterley. When we remember the great characters of the novel, it is for their encounters, judgments and feelings—however eccentric, flawed, involuted, vain or abject the character might be. A character's belief, judgment, attitude, supposition or mindset can be said to take shape in the encounter between experience and emotion, just as a character's emotion is the result of an encounter between experience and judgment, attitude, belief. Experience, however, is directly connected with the outside, with happenings and incidents.

Gilles Deleuze utilizes the term experience/impression not in the laboratory sense—that is, as a valid source of objective knowledge that establishes itself through the scientific method—but as the process through which an individual's cognition/perception engages in an involuntary encounter with the world outside. The experiencing individual, as a result, senses the urge/necessity to interpret/decipher the sign(s) emitted by “a substance, an object, a being” (Deleuze [1964] 2000, 4). Deleuze considers that the act of interpretation/reading moves beyond the limits of “strictly intellectual truths [insofar as] they lack ‘necessity.’” But in art or in literature, when intelligence supervenes, it is always *after*, not before: “The impression is for the writer what experimentation is for the scientist, with this difference, that in the scientist the work of the intelligence proceeds and in the writer comes after” (23; emphasis in the original). According to Alan Bourassa, “[t]he human character in the novel is the result of a certain set of experiences, both expected and unexpected. [In fact,] a character is the sum total of its experiences” (2009, 11-13). Thus, it is not until something happens that a character can gain experience, understanding, awareness. In this sense, experience is accumulative; it is what gives depth to the character by making change and transformation inevitable.

Now that we are entangled in the experience-belief-emotion triad, let us pose some questions as a way out. What advantage is there in the novel that distinguishes it from the myriad of other sources, other forms of knowledge that similarly stake a claim to a definition of the human? A quick but shallow answer would be that readers can grasp such insight, such awareness through sympathy, by responding emotionally. But what is the point of reading—or writing for that matter—more and more novels if we can have that understanding from our encounter with our first novel(s)? And, what, then, is the point of reading critically or practicing literary criticism? After all, not

all novels have that charge of insight to give a reader the ultimate sensation, the sharp feeling that perhaps one has made a once-in-a-lifetime discovery. We will argue that the novel provides for us the much appreciated opportunity to draw lines of flight, to move beyond the human and open ourselves up to the realm of virtual potentials, to the nonhuman. To this end, we will draw on Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari's theory of affect as a virtual, nonhuman reality that actualizes into, is constitutive of and is differentiated from human emotions ([1991] 1994). In addition, we will develop two instances of problematic, two networks of singular mo(ve)ments for Toni Morrison's *Sula* ([1973] 2004): one, based on the synthesis of emotions—we will see how this problematic fails to take us beyond the human—and another, based on the synthesis of affects—the problematic that will draw a line of flight and open up the realm of the virtual. However, before discussing the novel in terms of a problematic, we will offer a brief narrative and contextual sketch of *Sula*.

## 2. TEXT AND CONTEXT

In *Sula*, Toni Morrison follows the life—and death—of her title character from 1919 to 1965 with a ten-year interval in the middle that divides the novel into two parts. The first part of the novel outlines Sula's childhood friendship with her one great companion and only true friend Nel. They live in a fictional place called the Bottom, a hilly part of the town of Medallion, which was given as a token of freedom by a white farmer to his slave. Although the land is not fertile, the slave is tricked into believing that the Bottom is so called because it is the first place that God sees when he looks down from heaven (Morrison [1973] 2004, 5). The appellation suggests that the African American inhabitants of the Bottom are still subject to racial oppression even after regaining their—nominal—freedom. Following Nel's marriage to Jude Greene, Sula feels dejected and leaves town. The second part of the novel begins when Sula returns to Medallion only to find out that she is seen as evil incarnate by the townspeople because of her disregard for conventional moral codes. Sula sleeps with Nel's husband, which causes a rift between Jude and Nel and between the two friends. It is only after Sula's death that Nel, who is haunted by a lingering sense of grief up until the novel's end, reconstructs her spiritual connection with her childhood friend.

Male characters are often absent in the Bottom community. The Bottom's men, faced with a crisis of masculinity, struggle with their economic position and gender role in society. Sula loses her father when young and her grandmother Eva is left with three children by her husband. Nel is raised by her mother Helene since her father works as a chef for a shipping company and spends most of his time away from home. Morrison's narrative reflects the fact that "African American men have historically been blocked from enacting both the traditional African and traditional American mainstream gender roles of provider and protector" (Lawrence-Webb, Littlefield and Okundaye 2004, 628). Receiving little or no protection from their men, black women were forced

to exercise self-reliance and take care of their children by themselves. As bell hooks suggests in *Ain't I a Woman*, African American women were doubly oppressed in the patriarchal society of the United States: "Sexism and racism intensified and magnified the sufferings and oppressions of black women" (1982, 22). Motherhood was left as the only possible institution that could bring power to women, operating as "a symbol of power" and "an empowering experience" (Collins 2000, 192-198). However, Morrison invents a female character who not only rejects the standard roles of mother and wife but also moves beyond the limits of womanhood through an insistence on shaping herself differently. And she does so by "posing the radical possibility that women friends could and should share male lovers, even in the context of wedlock, [as] an alternative to heteronormative romantic love based in [sic] jealous possession" (Fulton 2006, 74). Morrison's narrative is revolutionary in that it portrays a sort of unconventional, open morality and considers the possibility of feminine friendship alongside marriage, which was radical at the time. In a conversation, Morrison tells Gloria Naylor of how some men were "genuinely terrified" of the notion of friendship between women when she went to certain places to talk about *Sula* ([1985] 1994, 200).

Although it can be received as a novel that authentically represents the cultural and historical conditions of the period, *Sula* is not exclusively context-bound or culturally specific. According to Joseph McLaren,

*Sula* [...] is not primarily concerned with the social conflict between the white and the African American communities of Medallion. The novel mostly concerns the way African American communities both include and exclude those members who have violated community mores or who have become dislocated in ways that cause them to live on the moral or social margins. The novel presents characters who each signify an adaptation to this community, a community divided by class. (2010, 5567)

Similarly, as Hortense J. Spillers suggests,

Morrison [...] imagines a character whose failings are directly traceable to the absence of a discursive/imaginative project—some *thing* to do, some object-subject relationship which establishes the identity in time and space. We do not see Sula in relationship to an "oppressor," a "whitey," a male, a dominant and dominating being outside the self. No Manichean analysis demanding a polarity of interest—black/white, male/female, good/bad—will work here. Instead, Sula emerges as an embodiment of a metaphysical chaos in pursuit of an activity both proper and sufficient to herself. (1999, 54; emphasis in the original)

Relying on Alan Bourassa's critical method in his analysis of Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* (Bourassa 2009), we approach *Sula* not as a specifically African American text but as the expression of a universal human situation/possibility.

### 3. FROM THE PROBLEMATIC OF THE PERSONAL

It would not be too implausible to suggest that literature is the scope of problems. After all, pure happiness is not so much maintained as wished for in our everyday lives, and in our fiction. Even when achieved, happiness proves so elusive, so transitory that one begins to doubt if it had existed in the first place. It is not difficult to name a plethora of problems faced by the key character of *Sula* and by Nel, the other key character of the novel: from the disillusionment/estrangement that Sula and Nel undergo in their relationships with their mothers to the mutual loss of a profound feminine bond. In a sense, Morrison portrays in this novel how Sula and Nel struggle from crisis to crisis. But this treatment of a problem does not, to us, appeal as a satisfactory approach since it misses the complex dynamics of the problematics that we always encounter in the act of reading. The character's problems are always defined in terms of personality, experience, identity, emotion—being too confined to the personal. Inasmuch as this is true of any novelistic character, we can be certain that it is also true of Sula and Nel, whose struggles, encounters and decisions form the entire set of crises that comprise the novel. Nevertheless, it is still possible to speak of another type of problem, another type of problematic that is encountered by the reader in the reading process. And it can only be described as having a curious tactile sensation under the skin, a weightless feeling of heaviness, an unnameable set of twists and turns, of knots and loops and of thresholds that cannot be directly expressed in the content of the story. It is only when these singular points reverberate together that a certain problematic begins to reveal itself.

Here is a key question for us: What is the problematic of *Sula*, the string of singular points that resonate in the story and yet resist easy articulation? One might describe it in terms of complexity, ambiguity, oddity or eccentricity. We can equally well use a myriad of other words that point to an intensive, unnamable, indefinable quality and that contain an element of confusion, undecidability, uncertainty. The problem is thus constituted by certain moments of *Sula* where one feels an overtone of complexity, a sense of ambiguity or oddity in comparison to which other moments—however serious or vague—seem plain and simple, perhaps the plainness and simplicity by which so much personal experience seems to be typified. The problematic moments experienced by Sula are numerous: her grandmother Eva's immolation of her son Plum out of mercy, Sula's slicing off of her own fingertip to ward off harassing white boys, a neighborhood boy's slipping into the river and his subsequent drowning, Sula's mother Hannah's accidental and fatal burning, Sula's departure from her hometown and her subsequent return, the encounter and exchange of words between Sula and Nel after ten years of separation and Sula's momentary theft of Nel's husband—among others. There are also other key questions for us to ponder: What characterizes these scenes with their complexity or ambiguity? Why do these moments form a kind of enclosure, a kind of frame for the novel? It is as if, reading *Sula*, one is in the presence of two novels: one, the surface novel or plotline recognizably about characters with a psychology, with

emotions, with relationships, with identity; and another novel, at a deeper level, that constitutes the texture, the perceptions and affections of *Sula*. For us to express the real, complex workings of this problem, we must ask still another question: What basically is a problem? In *The Logic of Sense*, Gilles Deleuze provides us with an answer by setting up the problematic against the *event*: "The mode of the event is the problematic. One must not say that there are problematic events, but that events bear exclusively upon problems and define their conditions. [...] A problem is determined only by the singular points which express its conditions. We do not say that the problem is thereby resolved; on the contrary, it is determined as a problem" ([1969] 2002, 54).

One might wonder what practical implications there are in Deleuze's definition, with its intensifying complexity, what he assumes a reader can actually do with a problem and its conditions. Fortunately, he goes on to clarify the point for us: "[T]he question is not that of quantifying or measuring human properties, but rather, on the one hand, that of problematizing human events, and, on the other, that of developing as various human events the conditions of a problem" (55). For Deleuze, the problematic is best conceived of as a network of relations between different points of singularity. The act of reading then is constituted not just by one instant, one event of complexity, one singularity, but rather by a patchwork of singular points that are strung out along the line of the reading. It follows that the problematic can only be articulated when we are able to discover not just the points and events, the moments and movements, but the relations of singularity that run between them. We have already pointed out in passing several moments of complexity that seem to run through Morrison's narrative. Before we proceed to map out the problematic of *Sula* along a line or spectrum of singular points, we must first recognize what the endpoints of this line, the extremities of this spectrum are. Between what two points do the points of complexity unfold? It would not be off the mark to name them as morality and friendship, the two great forces whose perpetual clash and overlap pervade the narrative of *Sula*. Friendship, when broken, propels Sula from man to man for fulfillment in love, which she nonetheless fails to reach. It is also the very same force that nourishes attachment and fuels contention between Sula and Nel.

A keen reader can realize how one terminus of the problematic, the question of morality, is closely connected with a certain sense of ambiguity in the course of the novel and in the character of Sula. Morrison unsettles the seemingly primordial dualism of good and evil in *Sula* by animating the relativity of meaning. According to Rachel Lee, "*Sula* broaches the subject not only of semantic integrity (how we can convey what we mean) but also of epistemological integrity (how [we can] know anything since there is no objective perspective and no objective essence or truth to know)" (1994, 571). The idea, then, can be evolved to apply to the figure of Sula herself: "How can we understand or know Sula, who is not only egoless or without a self (and hence undeterminable) but who also is unable to know anything herself?" (571). It is because of her doubting, her questioning nature that Sula does not hesitate to give vent to

an epistemological antagonism toward Manichean ethics. Once, she challenges Eva's adherence to Christian morality in her judgments of right and wrong, of good and evil:

[Eva] "Bible say honor thy father and thy mother that thy days may be long upon the land thy God giveth thee."

[Sula] "Mamma must have skipped that part. Her days wasn't too long."

[Eva] "Pus mouth! God's going to strike you!"

[Sula] "Which God? The one watched you burn Plum?" (Morrison [1973] 2004, 93)

Sula's question 'Which God?' not only undermines Eva's conception of good and evil but also the substantiality of evil in general. We would not be far wrong to claim that ambiguity in *Sula* finds its ultimate expression in the question of (a)morality. In this line, Spillers recognizes how Sula's negation of shallow moral codes allows her to escape categorical and simplistic definitions of personality:

Despite our misgivings at Sula's insistence and at the very degree of alienation Morrison accords her, we are prepared to accept her negative, naysaying freedom as a necessary declaration of independence [...] that leads us as well as the author away from the limited repertoire of powerless virtue and sentimental pathos. Sula is neither tragic nor pathetic; she does not amuse or accommodate. For black audiences, she is not consciousness of the black race personified, nor "tragic mulatto," nor, for white ones, is she "mammie," "Negress," "coon," or "maid." She is herself. (1999, 54-55)

In a word, the rejection of absolutes and the absence of a moral reference have made a very complex, ambiguous, eccentric character out of Sula. The *Sula* reader can also see how the other terminus of the problematic, the question of friendship, resounds in the novel with a sense of oddity. Despite the two friends' childhood closeness and companionship, Sula and Nel reach a point of failed understanding in their relationship. These two forces—that is, morality and friendship—remain the ultimate great incompatibles of *Sula*. However, it is not possible to claim that they are incompatibles unless we add a third term, some assumption, concept or idea that acts as a connective, as the glue between the two. It follows that the third term may fail to function as a synthesizer, to yield a proper solution. So we begin to conceive of a type of false problem, a type of trap we can all too easily fall into. It is precisely by breaking into this trap—exploring the central crises of the novel—and by breaking out of it—working out of the crises—that we as readers can finally manage to articulate the other problematic, the complex problematic of singularity.

Sula opposes the community's brand of morality with a deeply felt personal experience. Throughout the course of the narrative, we frequently encounter a form of emotional self-revelation as we follow the shift from fury to terror, to thrill, to curiosity, to frustration. Sula's individualism, her rejection of an exterior ethical



principle is reanimated by her introspective contemplation of emotions: “[W]ith a twist that was all her own imagination, she lived out her days exploring her own thoughts and emotions, giving them full reign, feeling no obligation to please anybody unless their pleasure pleased her” (Morrison [1973] 2004, 118). Despite the fact that Sula undermines any notion of pure morality, she seeks a pure word to describe the feeling, the loneliness she pursues in sexual love. It is the type of loneliness that is conceivable or desired without any necessary prior negation of relation to another—a form of absence that antedates presence, “a loneliness so profound the word itself had no meaning. For loneliness assumed the absence of other people, and the solitude she found in that desperate terrain had never admitted the possibility of other people” (123). It is no wonder that this ambitious longing for a word that escapes words proves nothing but a failure. Sula’s idea of loneliness in a vacuum, then, is not only aborted but also replaced by a deeply felt, untraceable nostalgia and supplemented by a list of lost items: “She wept then. Tears for the deaths of the littlest things: the castaway shoes of children; broken stems of marsh grass battered and drowned by the sea; prom photographs of dead women she never knew; wedding rings in pawnshop windows; the tidy bodies of Cornish hens in a nest of rice” (123). It is in terms of the self/the person that Sula makes her decision to leave Medallion in the wake of Nel’s marriage to Jude. She takes the path to urban life, travels from town to town, goes to college and allegedly sleeps with white men too—as a gesture of antipathy against Nel’s submission to the moral, the matrimonial.

In contrast to Sula, who chooses to revel in her spirit of self-reliance, Nel is morally conscious of the codes and conventions of social decorum. In “Sula and the Primacy of Woman-to-Woman Bonds,” Stephanie A. Demetrakopoulos traces Nel’s conformism back to her mother’s rigidly protective behavior, and to her family history: “Nel’s matrilineal line suffers from an Eve/Mary bedrock of feminine duality, the whore/Madonna polarity. Nel’s mother, Helene, has been carefully taught to hate her own mother, Rochelle, an Eve figure, a ‘Creole whore’” ([1987] 1999, 79). Also in contrast to Sula’s self-sought loneliness and freewheeling denial of roots, Nel is more of a nest-making, domestic figure. She marries, bears children and keeps the home fires burning. Realizing that “a lover was not a comrade and could never be—for a woman” (Morrison [1973] 2004, 121), Sula returns to Medallion after ten years and meets Nel once again. The encounter bears testimony to both a metaphorical and a literal distance, an odd lack of mutual understanding. It is in terms of the personal that their exchange is terminated by Nel’s distracting act of proffering tea:

“You been gone too long, Sula.”

“Not too long, but maybe too far.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” [...]

“Oh, I don’t know.”

“Want some cool tea?” (96)

It is in the conflict, the encounter between friendship and morality, the morality of the black community that Sula dismisses through her liberated way of life, that the emotion, the individuality, the personhood of Sula takes form. Ironically, it is with the same kind of awareness—the consciousness of her desires and her friendship—that Sula sleeps with her best friend’s husband. Sula’s dismissal and breaching of normative morality comes into conflict with Nel’s conception of feminine friendship. Jude leaves home and Nel refuses to see Sula for some time. Nel’s emotional response, her deeply felt agony and devastation in the face of her husband’s betrayal derives from the fact that her womanhood, individuality and vulnerability have been all too available, too exposed to Jude:

But Jude [...] you *knew* me. All those days and years, Jude, you *knew* me. My ways and my hands and how my stomach folded and how we tried to get Mickey to nurse and how about the time when the landlord said... but you said... and I cried, Jude. You knew me and had listened to the things I said at night, and heard me in the bathroom and laughed at my raggedy girdle and I laughed too because I knew you too, Jude. So how could you leave me when you knew me? (104-105; emphasis in the original)

The question remains unanswered. Apparently, Sula has been acutely conscious of her emotions all along. And this certain consciousness reaches its climax when Nel finally goes to pay a visit to Sula, who is burning with fever, lying on her deathbed. In response to Nel’s implicit denunciation of her wayward lifestyle—“Lonely, ain’t it?” (143)—Sula, once again, affirms her desire for absolute loneliness—a state constituted by a sense of missing or longing, but without an object: “Yes. But my lonely is *mine*. Now your lonely is somebody else’s. Made by somebody else and handed to you. Ain’t that something? A secondhand lonely” (143; emphasis in the original).

#### 4. TOWARD THE PROBLEMATIC OF AFFECTS

Every problem deserves an appropriate answer. But the problem whose three points are morality, emotion and friendship receives no answer whatsoever since it constitutes a false one. In this false problematic, morality is represented by the most sordid, mechanistic criteria of good and evil, and blinds itself to the complexities of the human mind, the nuances of love and friendship and the subtle movements of social life. It sets itself up as ethical, but its morality is nothing but a kind of backward stubbornness and unquestioning faith in a simplified set of laws, the kind of morality that allows the women of Bottom to not worry, to even take it as a compliment that Sula’s mother Hannah has casual sex with their husbands as long as she does not possess them, while at the same time fretting over Sula’s relationships with white men—“the thing for which there was no understanding, no excuse, no compassion. The route from which there was no way back, the dirt that could not ever be washed away” (Morrison [1973] 2004, 112).

Sula's attempt to compensate for the loss of Nel's affection and counter the blinkered morality of the black community is purely in terms of character or the person, that is, based on her personal feelings and experiences. It is a false problem because emotion/character does not resist the morality to which Sula stands opposed. To anchor oneself to the personal is never to counter or escape the instrumentalist morality of a self-righteous community but only to become its plaything. It is for the very same reason that with her decision to return, Sula becomes a pawn to the moral whims of a self-infatuated community. When a plague of robins accompanies Sula home, the people of the town are encouraged to interpret it as a bad omen, as evidence that she is a source of evil (89). And Sula confirms the allegation by committing her old grandmother Eva to a nursing home, and "the people in the Bottom shook their heads and said Sula was a roach" (112). It is only when she is present that the community can attribute random occurrences of misfortune to her—such as a child's falling off of Sula's porch and a man's accidental choking to death as Sula passes by (113-114). By the same token, it is only in Sula's presence that Nel can identify herself as a "good woman" (138). Marked by promiscuity in the eye of a moralist community, Sula serves only as a foil for reinforcing the community's sense of properness. We realize that the personal, the deeply felt emotion does not undercut mechanistic morality since it is itself morality's proudest accomplishment. To the false problem of morality-emotion-friendship, then, we must provide an alternative, a more effectual problem whose solution is not hampered by the conditions of the problem itself. We specify this alternate problem as morality-affect-friendship and assume that it exceeds the limits of the individual, the inward, the emotional. But how do we reach this desired alternative?

In *What Is Philosophy?*, Deleuze and Guattari identify the three creative dimensions of thought that compose the human subject, namely, philosophy, science and art. Whereas "philosophy extracts *concepts* [...], science extracts *prospects* [...], and art extracts *percepts* and *affects*" ([1991] 1994, 24; emphasis in the original). These distinct means forming human existence make possible the production of new modes of conceiving, observing and feeling/perceiving. As Claire Colebrook stresses in her book *Gilles Deleuze*, "[c]oncepts are not labels or names that we attach to things; they produce an orientation or a direction for thinking" (2002, 15-16). A concept, then, is never meant to simply add one more word to a language or increase life quantitatively. Likewise, the material of art—and of literature for that matter—is to be treated not as a function of representation but as a means of intensive, differential production. If the task of philosophy is to produce new concepts that move us and our language away from the fixity of prefabricated clichés and commonsensical opinions, art is meant to produce new affects and percepts that furnish us with the possibility of moving beyond personal feelings and simplistic generalizations. In a sense, affects both comprise and are essential to art. In the words of John Hughes, "the work of art preserves a being of sensation as 'a compound of percepts and affects' independent [...] of the lived perceptions and affections of the artist or his or her viewer or reader. Once again, not the perception—

what one sees—but the percept as the virtual event of a becoming by which newly constituted relations of things and self are given to be seen” (1997, 71). In the same vein, Brian Massumi contrasts affect as intensity with feeling as personal emotion:

AFFECT/AFFECTION. Neither word denotes a personal feeling (sentiment in Deleuze and Guattari). *L'affect* (Spinoza's *affectus*) is an ability to affect and be affected. It is a prepersonal intensity corresponding to the passage from one experiential state of the body to another and implying an augmentation or diminution in that body's capacity to act. *L'affection* (Spinoza's *affection*) is each such state considered as an encounter between the affected body and a second, affecting, body (with body taken in its broadest possible sense to include “mental” or ideal bodies). (1987, xvii; emphasis in the original)

Massumi's notion of affect is a dynamic force, with the potential or capacity to ‘affect’ and ‘be affected,’ to expand and retract, and to constitute change, transition, transmutation in the event of an encounter. In a conversation with Mary Zournazi, Massumi addresses emotion as simply one narrow fragment, one actual state of a wider range of virtual possibilities and potentialities: “[A]n emotion is a very partial expression of affect. It only draws on a limited selection of memories and only activates certain reflexes or tendencies” (Zournazi 2002, 213). Also, in “Literature, Character, and the Human,” Bourassa separates affect from emotion, from the simply human:

[A]lthough affect is often used interchangeably with emotion, we can see that affect goes beyond the realm of emotion. It is more accurate to say that emotion is a branch of affect. Emotion is one way of marking an impingement of one force upon another—the potentiality of human judgment brought together with a particular experience, leading to a particular feeling. But an action is also an affect, a perception is an affect, a composite of perception, feeling, movement can be an affect. (2009, 26)

We thus see that affects are not merely the preserve of personal experiences and felt emotions, but put us in touch with the far greater source of all potentials, the relations of force. In fact, affects are prepersonal intensities that form human beings, but are not limited to the human. As Deleuze and Guattari remind us, there is something nonhuman, virtual, intense to every affect: “Sensations, percepts, and affects are *beings* whose validity lies in themselves and exceeds any lived. They could be said to exist in the absence of man because man [...] is himself a compound of percepts and affects” ([1991] 1994, 164; emphasis in the original).

If the problem of Morrison's *Sula* is the conjuncture of morality-affect-friendship, our main task is to directly address the complexity, the specificity of affect. What affective movements inform *Sula*? How do they constitute prepersonal intensities/haecceities? And how do these affects relate to the endpoints of morality and friendship? After all, we cannot reconcile ourselves with a friendship that is only

personal and a morality that is only mechanistic. In this line, we will focus on two affective mo(ve)ments in *Sula*: what we will call the affective mo(ve)ment of sensation and the epiphanic reconfiguration of morality and friendship. Sula and Nel experience moments of sensation that, despite bearing an emotional charge, cannot be reduced to any single emotional component. The three most important mo(ve)ments of affective sensation occur (1) when Sula overhears her mother's statement about not liking her just as Nel is similarly disappointed with her mother for not reacting to racial humiliation (fury/disappointment), (2) when Sula swings a neighborhood boy around and accidentally throws him into the river, leading to his drowning (fear/terror), and (3) when Sula watches her mother Hannah burn to death and does nothing to save her (thrill). These three mo(ve)ments constitute intense instances of crossing well-defined thresholds of the personal, the individual. In all three mo(ve)ments, the characters are pushed into a sensation at the very moment that they are least expecting it.

The summer of her twelfth year, Sula has one of her first experiences of fury/disappointment as she overhears Hannah's conversing with friends. While the others do not admit that the difficulties associated with raising children have negatively affected their maternal love, Hannah does so unapologetically. She tells one of her friends, "You love [your child], like I love Sula. I just don't like her. That's the difference" (Morrison [1973] 2004, 57). Shocked by the reality of her mother's detachment from her, Sula rushes up the stairs—where she stays for some time "in bewilderment," painfully "aware of a sting in her eye" (57). After this critical event in Sula's childhood, there seems to be little hope that her relationship with Hannah will ever fully recover. According to Elizabeth Ann Beaulieu, Sula's emotional disconnection from her mother leaves her emptied, without a center: "When women deny their mothers in Morrison's novels, as they often do, the result is a loss of self or center" (2003, 116). Despite its initially devastating impact, the realization—that her mother does not like her—plays a crucial role in Sula's future character development. In much the same manner, Nel experiences estrangement as she accompanies her mother Helene on a trip to New Orleans to see her ailing grandmother. Helene walks through the white only compartment of a passenger car and is harshly reprimanded by the conductor. In response to the humiliation, she does nothing but "[smile] dazzlingly and coquettishly" (Morrison [1973] 2004, 21). Nel is disillusioned with the image of her mother as a strong and right-minded woman and decides to never follow in her quietism, and instead to "always be on her guard" against it: "If this tall, proud woman, this woman who was very particular about her friends, who slipped into church with unequaled elegance, who could quell a roustabout with a look, if she were really custard, then there was a chance that Nel was too" (22). Following their separate experiences of disappointment with their mothers, Sula and Nel try to compensate for this lost sense of belonging in one another's company where they can "afford to abandon the ways of other people and concentrate on their own perceptions of things" (55).

Sula and Nel are to experience still another surge of sensation while playing together on the river bank, uprooting grass and digging holes. Later when Chicken Little, a small boy from the neighborhood, joins the two of them, Sula tries to give him a swing: “Sula picked him up by his hands and swung him outward then around and around. His knickers ballooned and his shrieks of frightened joy startled the birds and the fat grasshoppers. When he slipped from her hands and sailed away out over the water they could still hear his bubbly laughter” (60-61). Overcome by terror and still expecting him to “come back up, laughing,” the two girls “[stare] at the water” in a state of disbelief and helplessness (61). As the expectation of his resurfacing gradually diminishes, Nel realizes that Shadrack, the town’s shell-shocked veteran of World War I, has witnessed the scene. Sula runs to his cottage in mixed terror and embarrassment to ensure that he will not tell. Even before she finds the courage to ask the question, Shadrack nods his head and mysteriously answers, “Always” (62). Interpreting this as a promise, Sula rushes “back to Nel and the dark closed place in the water,” where she bursts into tears and is consoled by Nel (62). Secrecy consigns Sula and Nel to their interiority and develops into isolation, “a space, a separateness, between them” (64).

Sula’s perception of terror in response to Chicken Little’s death is in contrast to a completely different sensation in the dramatic scene that occurs shortly afterward. Hannah accidentally sets herself on fire while lighting a fire in the yard. Realizing that her daughter is burning, Eva throws herself out of the top floor window in an attempt to smother the flames, but miscalculates and comes “crashing down some twelve feet from Hannah’s smoke” (76). Hannah runs out into the street where the neighbors throw water on her and put out the flames, but she is severely injured and dies during the transfer to the hospital. Eva is also taken to the hospital where she muses over the events of that day and remembers that as she was on the ground, reaching for Hannah, Sula was standing on the back porch, watching her mother burn without doing anything to help her. When Eva mentions this to a few friends, they insist that it was probably because Sula was too shocked to react. However, Eva remains “convinced that Sula had watched Hannah burn not because she was paralyzed, but because she was interested” (78). In retrospect, Sula reflects on her uncanny passivity and detachment, her voyeuristic fascination and thrill in watching the horrific spectacle of her mother on fire: “I didn’t mean anything. I never meant anything. I stood there watching her burn and was thrilled. I wanted her to keep on jerking like that, to keep on dancing” (147).

The novel provides us with two potential explanations for Sula’s anti-passionate coolness. In the first, the narrator diagnoses Sula with a basic lack of egoism: “She was completely free of ambition, with no affection for money, property or things, no greed, no desire to command attention or compliments—no ego. For that reason she felt no compulsion to verify herself—be consistent with herself” (119). In the other, the narrator reveals that Sula’s eccentricity, curiosity and frustration are all the result of a creative imagination that has no medium, no object:

In a way her strangeness, her naiveté, her craving for the other half of her equation was the consequence of an idle imagination. Had she paints, or clay, or knew the discipline of the dance or strings; had she anything to engage her tremendous curiosity and her gift for metaphor, she might have exchanged the restlessness and preoccupation with whim for an activity that provided her with all she yearned for. And like any artist with no art form she became dangerous. (121)

A still more credible analysis would be to posit that Sula, in going her own way, in making her own decisions, captures and hypostatizes her affects. In the words of Spillers, “[w]hatever Sula has become, whatever she is, is a matter of her own choices, [however] ill-formed and ill-informed” (1999, 54). And it is this uninhibited openness to possibilities that produces an aura of distinction around the character of Sula. Her adoption/affirmation of these affects is so successful, in fact, that she lives in the realm of the actual and the real. Sula’s ethical/aesthetic philosophy captures for her the dangers of the affective, the intense. Whereas Sula is a woman of her own making, Nel—at least initially—cannot actualize the affects that comprise her. Morrison characterizes Nel as a psychologically inhibited and unimaginative figure in that her obsessive/repressive mother has driven “her daughter’s imagination underground” (18). Nel’s unarticulated belief that she cannot simultaneously experience heterosexual love and feminine friendship deprives her of both Sula’s company and Jude’s love. She hesitates to create a morality of her own, and instead remains complaisant and plays the good daughter of the community. Morrison complicates the problem further by suggesting in a conversation with Robert B. Stepto that Sula and Nel can be taken as “two sides of the same person, or two sides of one extraordinary character” (1979, 216). While the novel begins with and for the most part centers on Sula, it is ultimately Nel’s.

It is not until her second reunion with Sula that Nel begins to form an affective friendship that will run counter to her personal sense of love and the abstract morality of the black community. We can see the first hints of Nel’s transformation, her gradual self-recognition, in her decision to go and visit her dying friend despite all that has gone between them. In this reunion, Sula undermines—even reverses—Nel’s delusion that her own actions are driven by virtue, that she is morally superior to Sula:

“How you know?” Sula asked.

“Know what?” Nel still wouldn’t look at her.

“About who was good. How you know it was you?”

“What you mean?”

“I mean maybe it wasn’t you. Maybe it was me.” (Morrison [1973] 2004, 146)

Nel leaves in silence, closing the door behind her. It is still not clear that the challenge to Nel’s conception of virtue has taken effect. And it is still not possible to determine that her perceptions are transmuting into affective awareness, the consciousness of

sensations, of energies, of flows. The undermining of Nel's mental framework is only a negative byproduct of the new kind of perception, the truly materialistic awareness that is about to be formed. What is more, friendship, attachment, closeness and love are not a matter of emotion. One does not just have an emotional sense of friendship; one does not simply feel forgotten, unloved, overlooked, betrayed. According to Bourassa,

[t]he feelings themselves are only offshoots of a larger affective condition, and because the condition is affective rather than emotional, it preexists the evaluations we or the character might place upon it, and so mutates as it undergoes its own history. It is not bound to any emotional or moral evaluation, so love, as affect, can migrate from ethical situation to ethical situation. (2009, 69-70)

Sometime later, Nel goes to pay a call on Eva who is left by Sula at Sunnydale, a home for the aged. In the middle of a disjointed conversation, Eva surprises Nel by inquiring how she killed Chicken Little. As Nel tries to disambiguate that it was Sula who threw the little boy in the river, Eva challenges her innocence: "You. Sula. What's the difference? You was there. You watched, didn't you?" (Morrison [1973] 2004, 168). Eva's vision that Sula and Nel are one and the same—"just alike" (169)—begins to haunt Nel. She remembers the good feeling, the feeling of enjoyment and contentment, when Chicken's hands slipped from Sula's, and when water finally closed over the place where he sank. Nel ultimately recognizes her own guilt, her moral failure, but her friendship is not separate from the moral valuation she places upon it. Nel's appropriation/appreciation of her friendship as a potential, a force, an affect becomes possible as soon as her prejudices, her misrecognitions fall away. When she can take Sula's love upon herself, it becomes a question, not of feeling, but of movement, of relation, and it is in this movement that she finds not only a world she has never before seen, not only the meaning of love, but the ethics that has escaped her all along, even in her greatest commitment to the catholic morality of the black community. Nel gradually walks into this unsettling world of possibility, and although it is impossible to go back and fix things with Sula, just as she is still within the stark confines of the black community's morality, she is about to experience a pure affective movement, one that enables her to perceive the difference between a true friendship and a self-centered, self-righteous, self-indulgent relationship. It is but a short step before she falls into her new awareness. The moment of this change is to come shortly after Nel visits the colored part of the cemetery at Beechnut Park where Sula is buried alongside other members of the Peace family. After Nel accidentally encounters Shadrack as she is leaving—"and it is in the accident that we see the greatest workings of affect, in the chance encounter, the fall one takes into one's future [or past]" (Bourassa 2009, 70)—she begins to see what she has missed. Nel realizes that her deepest attachment to another human being was to Sula, not to Jude, nor to any man whatsoever.



All that time, all that time, I thought I was missing Jude.” And the loss pressed down on her chest and came up into her throat. “We was girls together,” she said as though explaining something. “O Lord, Sula,” she cried, “girl, girl, girlgirlgirl.” It was a fine cry—loud and long—but it had no bottom and it had no top, just circles and circles of sorrow. (Morrison [1973] 2004, 174)

It is so often the case that emotions follow events immediately whereas affects, being complex, accumulative and singular, form over time. As Barbara Johnson puts it:

The dissociation of affect and event is one of Morrison's most striking literary techniques in this novel, both in her narrative voice (in which things like infanticide are not exclaimed over) and in the emotional lives of her characters. The most important example of affective discontinuity is Nel's reaction to the discovery of Jude, her husband, naked on the floor with Sula, her best friend. She tries to howl in pain but cannot do so until seventy pages later when she realizes that she mourns the loss of Sula rather than Jude. ([1993] 2008, 168)

We seem to have finally captured the movement by which Nel achieves the realization to articulate the problem of morality-affect-friendship more thoroughly. In the false problem of morality-emotion-friendship, we have observed that a third term—here, emotion—intervenes between the two endpoints of morality and friendship only to hamper the possibility of reaching true awareness. Emotion, as a medium between friendship and morality, reduces morality to nothing more than a set of mechanical laws, and friendship to nothing more than personal feeling, a synthesis that fails to challenge catholic morality and is in fact itself appropriated by it. We can always restructure this problem to attain a more workable synthesis by replacing emotion with affect. A change in one dimension of the problem changes the problematic altogether because, as posited by Bourassa, “the problem is a continuous multiplicity that depends upon the relationship, the differential relationship, of all of its terms” (2009, 71). The new problematic that we come to, then, is the problematic of morality-affect-friendship, the two endpoints of which relate to one another with more clarity, more vigor. Morality is no longer the scope of blind mechanisms but of virtual potentialities, of forces, intensities and haecceities that open up endless possibilities for transmutation. Sula's morality, which ultimately becomes Nel's realization/epiphany, is a morality without boundaries, one that neither fixates nor is fixated. Friendship, in its turn, operates as a catalyst of perception, of sensation, so that when it comes in touch with morality, it does not collapse into some passive personal interiority, but rather alters morality into an intensive flow that is constantly in the process of formation, deformation and reformation. It is essential for us to note that affect is precisely what keeps friendship from the danger of fixation. Friendship is not a thing, not a concrete object that demands to be felt, but is rather a question of prepersonal intensities, relations and movements. By the end of the novel, Nel has moved from a closed world of binary

morality and of possessive love into a world of affective recognition. When she emerges from her inwardness, she will know where the fault lines/lines of flight are and what transformations are just beneath the threshold of existence.

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