
Matriarchs and Troubling Friends: Toni Morrison's *Sula* and the Moynihan Report

Hsiao-wen Chen

ABSTRACT

This essay reads Toni Morrison's 1973 novel *Sula* as a critical response to Daniel Patrick Moynihan's 1965 report "The Negro Family" as well as to the various lines of criticism the report received. Blaming black female-headed households and the absence of black fathers for causing poverty in African American communities, the Moynihan Report provoked great controversy during the 1960s and 1970s. Although many black activists and writers were galvanized in opposition to the report's racism and sexism, some of their critiques turned out to be problematic. This essay shows how some responses to the report reinforced white regulations imposed on black women, denied the possibility of black women serving as heads of families, celebrated black women's resistance without delving into the underlying reasons, and dismissed the political importance of bonds between black women. By portraying two starkly different kinds of female-headed households and a disruptive friendship between two black women, Morrison's *Sula* criticizes the Moynihan Report *and* addresses its problematic reception by recognizing and complicating the figure of the black matriarch, exposing the structural discrimination that makes black women suffer and black families disintegrate in the first place, and proposing the feminist political work that uneasy black female friendships can launch.

KEYWORDS black matriarch, the Moynihan Report, *Sula*, black female friendship, black feminism

Ex-position, Issue No. 49, June 2023 | National Taiwan University
DOI: 10.6153/EXP.202306_(49).0003

Hsiao-wen CHEN, PhD Candidate, Department of Foreign Languages and Literatures, National Taiwan University, Taiwan

Commenting on the theme of her novel *Sula*, Toni Morrison says, “*Sula* talks about friendship between women at a time—I was writing it in 1969—when women and women’s friendships weren’t considered worthy subjects for fiction” (qtd. in Denard 204). Morrison’s statement raises several questions: Why were the themes of black women and women’s friendships not considered important in the late 1960s? What was the social and political status of black women in that era? Why did Morrison, contrary to popular opinion at the time, think that female friendship was important enough to write about? What message does the theme of female friendship in *Sula* convey, given the context in which *Sula* was written and published? Lastly, given friendship’s importance in the novel, why does Morrison, instead of portraying a warm and faithful friendship, create one fraught with conflicts and tensions, including *Sula*’s betrayal of Nel by sleeping with Nel’s husband?

This essay explores the above questions by examining *Sula* with reference to its context in the sociopolitical milieu of the United States in the 1960s and 1970s. Tessa Roynon argues that, when reading Morrison’s historical novels, it is important to attend to the dual time frames of her works: “the time in which a novel is set and the time in which she is writing it” (100). *Sula*, though set between 1919 and 1965, was written in 1969 and published in 1973. Although those periods do not overlap or intersect, comparing and juxtaposing them yields an interpretation that addresses both historically rooted and contemporarily significant issues. In line with Barbara Smith’s contention that black women writers create literature “as a direct result of the specific political, social and economic experience they have been obliged to share” (188), this essay also attends to how the sociopolitical context of the 1960s and 1970s informed Morrison’s work.

In particular, I investigate how *Sula* engages with racial and gender discourses provoked by a nationally circulated report issued in 1965: “The Negro Family: The Case for National Action,” a sociological brief written by Daniel Patrick Moynihan and commonly referred to as “the Moynihan Report.” A sociologist and Assistant Secretary of the Department of Labor at the time, Moynihan contended that black female-headed households and absent black fathers were jointly responsible for poverty in the African American community. The solutions he proposed were to improve black men’s socio-economic status and restore their traditional role in the family. Although originally intended for interdepartmental reference within the US government to counter black men’s unemployment, the report was

I would like to express my gratitude to Prof. Liang-ya Liou for her invaluable comments and advice on the earlier draft of the article. I would also like to thank the two anonymous reviewers and Prof. Manuel Herrero-Puertas for their insightful suggestions.

soon leaked to the public, sparked fierce controversy, and received a barrage of criticisms from black writers and activists. However, those attacks were sometimes problematic themselves, especially when they reinforced oppressive regulations of black families and black women. This essay suggests that *Sula* should be counted among those works responding to the Moynihan Report and, more than that, *Sula* echoes, questions, and complicates other comments and criticisms surrounding the report.

In the first part of the essay, I discuss Moynihan's controversial report and examine how various critics have interpreted it on social, political, and cultural grounds. I suggest that some of those comments made in response to the report rightly attacked its racism and sexism but also aroused concerns by denying that black women can be the heads of families, celebrating black women's resistance without delving into the underlying reasons, and dismissing the political importance of bonds between black women. In view of those problems, the second part of this essay analyzes how *Sula* echoes, challenges, and complicates those different lines of interpretation. I argue that, by portraying two highly different female-headed black households and an uneasy friendship between black women, Morrison's *Sula* not only criticizes the Moynihan Report but also addresses the problematic aspects of the mentioned criticisms by recognizing and complicating the figure of the black matriarch, exposing the structural discrimination that make black women suffer and black families disintegrate in the first place, and proposing the kind of feminist political work that a discordant black female friendship can launch and develop.

The Moynihan Report and Its Critics

In "The Negro Family," Moynihan uses statistics, charts, and tables to identify female-headed African American families as a major source of "the tangle of pathology" (75). Moynihan documents that "almost one-fourth of Negro families are headed by females" and claims that this absence of powerful fathers leads to poverty, welfare dependency, and high rates of delinquency (55). Citing other studies, the report illustrates that "in 44 percent of the Negro families studied, the wife was dominant, as against 20 percent of white wives" in the same position (76-77). Further investigating the causes of a high percentage of black female-headed households, Moynihan explains that there is a gender gap in educational attainment, as "Negro females [are] better educated than Negro males," and concludes that the gap leads to other disparities, including employment and income (77). Thus, when the father is "not present," "unemployed," or "makes such a low wage," the "dependence

on the mother's income undermines the position of the father" (71).

Moynihan controversially concludes from the above statistics that the government's affirmative action programs might benefit just black women and unexpectedly hinder black men: "it may well be that these efforts have redounded mostly to the benefit of Negro women, and may even have accentuated the comparative disadvantage of Negro men" (79). Emphasizing black men's disadvantage in both family and society, Moynihan recommends that they join the military service because this job offers economic stability while providing "an utterly masculine world" where they can restore their manhood:

Given the strains of the disorganized and matrifocal family life in which so many Negro youth come of age, the Armed Forces are a dramatic and desperately needed change: a world away from women, a world run by strong men of unquestioned authority. (88)

In other words, an environment governed and organized by women is viewed as detrimental and pernicious to black men.

Highlighting the problem of black matriarchy and stressing the importance of restoring black manhood, the Moynihan Report reverberated profoundly throughout the black community and provoked discussions about how black women and men should act and behave to achieve the goal of black liberation. Even if disliking white experts' intervention, many black male activists endorsed and echoed Moynihan's contention. For example, while contending that social environment is the real cause of black poverty, civil rights leader Bayard Rustin nonetheless agreed with Moynihan's claim that black men should assume a dominant role in their families: "the Negro family can be reconstructed only where the Negro male is permitted to be the economic and psychological head of the family" (418). Similarly, Maulana Karenga, Black Power activist and leader of the black nationalist group, US Organization, proclaimed: "What makes a woman appealing is femininity and she can't be feminine without being submissive. A man has to be a leader and he has to be a man who bases his leadership on knowledge, wisdom and understanding" (qtd. in Matthews 235). During the civil rights and Black Power eras, black manhood became equal to revolutionary force and black freedom. To achieve racial equality, some male black activists used manhood as a yardstick against which to measure black liberation.

Focusing not only on black masculinity but also on femininity, some black male activists and writers applied the Victorian code of womanhood to black women's roles as devoted wives and mothers. In his 1970 article "Black Woman,"

Black Arts Movement leader Imamu Amiri Baraka refuted the idea of gender equality and stressed instead the “complementary” roles of women in the family:

We could never be equals . . . nature has not provided thus. . . . But this means that we will complement each other, that you, who I call my house, because there is no house without a man and his wife, are the single element in the universe that perfectly completes my essence. (8)

**Toni Morrison's
Sula and
the Moynihan
Report**

Echoing Moynihan’s assertion about the importance of a male-centered black family, Baraka’s remark concerned only black men’s completeness and placed women on a supplementary, rather than complementary, position in relation to men. Baraka’s argument tried to show that black men and women are just *different*, but what his statement really reveals is that women’s job is primarily to serve men and secondarily to care for children: “We say that a Black woman must first be able to inspire her man, then she must be able to teach our children” (8). In other words, there was no need for black women to pursue their own goals.

Besides advocating the image of the subordinated wife, some other black writers also employed the Black Queen as an ideal cultural representation of black women to attack Moynihan’s stereotypes of domineering, henpecking matriarchs. The image of the Black Queen is a metaphor useful in articulating black nationalism and black self-determination and in envisioning independent black states. For example, in “The Coronation of the Black Queen,” Baraka suggests that, when choosing a Homecoming Queen on campus, black students should promote “traditional black coronation ceremonies” once conducted in “the Akan (or Ashanti) [in present-day Ghana] and The Ancient Egyptian” rituals, rather than “using derivative, European-oriented rites” (46). In the ceremonies, queen candidates are to be praised as “Black and beautiful, the finest thing on the planet” (47). At the end of the ceremonies, the winner should “swear allegiance to the spirit and reality of the black nation” and declare “*WEUSI, SIFA OTE MTU WEUSI* (all praises to the black man)” (48). The Black Queen is portrayed as powerful, confident, and elegant, but unlike a matriarch, she is subservient to the black man. As Lee Bernstein puts it, “the literary Black Queen was usually placed on a pedestal far from the front lines” (119). Morrison deemed such an elegant and admirable image of the black woman as exotic and unreal: “I suppose at bottom we are all beautiful queens, but for the moment it is perhaps just as well to remain useful women. One wonders if Nefertiti [the queen of ancient Egypt] could have lasted 10 minutes in a welfare office” (“What the Black Woman” 23). Both the subordinated woman and the Black Queen are employed to challenge Moynihan’s contention about

Ex-position
June
2023

black matriarchs, but they simply represent another set of regulating images used by others, especially black males, to define black women.

Advocacy of black virility and patriarchy permeated not only politics and aesthetics, but also sociology, the discipline upon which the Moynihan Report was based. In his 1970 essay, “The Myth of the Black Matriarchy,” African American sociologist Robert Staples criticized Moynihan’s idea of matriarchy by arguing that the term meant to designate women in a “high position” and having real power, while black women were, in reality, a “defenseless group against the onslaught of white racism in its most virulent sexual and economic manifestations” (11). Trying to foreground black women’s contribution to the black community and refute their emasculating image, Staples celebrated black women’s ability to produce black offspring and their supportive attitude toward black male leaders: “From her womb have come the revolutionary warriors of our time. The revolutionary vanguard has a male leadership but the black woman has stepped beside her man engaged in struggle and given him her total faith and commitment” (16). Even though Staples tried to counteract Moynihan’s presentation of black women as domineering, he reduced black women to their reproductive function and subordinated them to black men.

Confronted with black men’s sexist attacks against the Moynihan Report, black women activists and writers also expressed their views on the report and its ensuing (and no less problematic) male-centered critiques. For example, Prathia Hall, a prominent figure of The Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), recalled how the Moynihan Report restrained black women from expressing their strength and power in the 1960s and 1970s:

[S]omething *did* happen in our community after 1965 . . . there was a sense of the whole matriarchy thing, and wanting our family to look like what we were told white families looked like, and so many younger women at that point became very defensive about their strengths. And we have gone through a period of black women being extremely repressed, at least, in terms of ambivalence about strength. . . . (Hall et al. 146)

Hall’s observation proved that the Moynihan Report had significantly influenced how the black community perceived their family structures and gender roles. It signaled a time when black men felt they should restore their manhood and occupy a leading position, expecting black women to restrain their strength and shun the limelight.

If black liberation movements were highly androcentric and largely concerned with black men’s freedom, then black women struggled to carve out a space where

their experiences and views could be freely expressed and adequately valued. Toni Cade Bambara's 1970 edited work *The Black Woman: An Anthology* provided a space for black women to articulate their experiences and criticize both white sociology and black patriarchy. In the preface, Bambara states that one of the goals of the book is to "explore ourselves and set the record straight on the matriarch and the evil Black bitch" (6). Many articles included in this anthology criticized not only Moynihan's analysis of black matriarchy but also its acceptance by some members of the black community. For example, in "Is the Black Male Castrated?" Jean Carey Bond and Patricia Peery show how the report is "so successfully popularized that even Blacks have swallowed his assumptions and conclusions hook, line, and sinker" (143). They also cast doubt on a scientific racism that had long been used to categorize blacks as inherently inferior: "many members of the avant-garde are still capable of being mesmerized by racist social scientific thought" (143). In her own article in *The Black Woman*, Bambara points out the irony of how the black liberation movements requested black women to become as obedient and submissive as slaves: "She is being encouraged—in the name of the revolution no less—to cultivate 'virtues' that if listed would sound like the personality traits of slaves" ("On the Issue of Roles" 125).

Another influential feminist response to the Moynihan Report was the refutation of white sociology and the turn to historical and anthropological explorations of black culture and life experience. While the Moynihan Report relied on statistics and white standards of family to judge the black family as "disorganized" and inferior (88), historical and anthropological approaches focused on narratives of daily life to present a human aspect of black experience and describe black culture on its own terms. For example, Bambara suggested that black women writers have to "delve into history and pay tribute to all our warriors from the ancient times to the slave trade to Harriet Tubman to Fannie Lou Hamer to the woman of this morning" (Preface 6). Similarly, in "Memory, Creation, and Writing," Morrison writes that, when constructing literature, she relies on "the ruse of memory" because she "cannot trust the literature and the sociology of other people to help me [her] know the truth of my [her] own cultural sources. It also prevents my [her] preoccupations from descending into sociology" (386). Black feminists have cast serious doubts on knowledge created by sociologists, especially white sociologists.

Furthermore, Carol Stack's anthropological work *All Our Kin: Strategies for Survival in a Black Community* (1974) delivered a well-known counterargument against the Moynihan Report. Growing up in a Jewish family near Harlem and closely identifying with the black community, Stack became an anthropologist who saw black families not as broken but different from the white nuclear family

paradigm. Stack depicts a poor black community in Chicago adopting “a cooperative style” rather than abiding by a “middle-class ethic of individualism and competition” (43). For instance, in terms of child-rearing, individual mothers and fathers were not sole caregivers because there were “shared community expectations of rights and duties toward children” (Stack 73). Focusing on extended kinship, social networks, alternative resources, and cooperative arrangements, Stack’s book demonstrated that a different approach to the black family could yield a new understanding of how poor black communities operated.

Women writers’ responses provided significant correctives to masculinist comments on the Moynihan Report, but they also aroused some concerns. First, in order to refute the “myth” of the black matriarchy, there was a tendency to deny that women can be heads of families and pioneers in the historical struggle for racial equality. For example, even though Bond and Peery criticized the Moynihan Report as well as those black people who had imbibed Moynihan’s misrepresentation of black women, they nonetheless assured black men that they had been more prominent than black women throughout history:

Sojourner Truth and Harriet Tubman notwithstanding, Black men hold the majority among our political (and cultural) heroes: Frederick Douglas, W. E. B. Du Bois, Marcus Garvey, Malcolm X, et al. Indeed, the Black man always surfaces with his manhood not only intact, but much more intact than that of his oppressor. (147)

In order to debunk prevailing views on black matriarchy, the authors demonstrated that the black community had always been led by men, but they did not question why female leaders and activists were fewer and less visible than male ones. That the female head of the black family has been so readily cast as “a matriarchal villain” implies that she can by no means be a good character (La Rue 42). Dismissed as a myth, folktale, and stereotype, the black woman as the head of the family is regarded as unreal and non-existent. In later years, Hortense J. Spillers’s “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe: An American Grammar Book” (1987) recognizes the importance of the black matriarchy by investigating the term’s historical formation and exclusion from the framework of white gender norms. However, rather than attempting to prove that black mothers and families conform to the white male-centered family model, Spillers calls for “claiming the monstrosity” of the black matriarch. By embracing that monstrosity, black women could stand “out of the traditional symbolics of female gender [established by white patriarchal norms]” and “[gain] the *insurgent* ground as female social subject” (Spillers 80). Neither

villain nor heroine, the black mother as the head of the family is a complicated figure who crafts her own family story.

Some feminists have countered misconceptions about black families and womanhood by celebrating black women's resistance to numerous difficulties in history, yet without identifying the social and structural oppressions producing those difficulties in the first place. Such celebrations have emphasized individual black women's remarkable capabilities to sustain the black family and community, yet they have overlooked the painful cost these women pay to overcome those difficulties. For example, even though Stack's *All Our Kin* aptly challenged the primacy of the white family model and denied that black families were broken, the study too optimistically presented "the poorest section of a black community in the Midwestern city" as vibrant and productive (1), praising it for becoming "highly adaptive" to a racist society and for its "resilient response to the social-economic conditions of poverty" (124). While it is important to protest against the labels and stereotypes that stigmatize black families and black women, the celebrations of their resilience may gloss over the fact that these collectives suffer economic deprivation and structural discrimination. Reflecting on the ramifications of the Moynihan Report in 2009, black sociologist William Julius Wilson maintained that, during the Black Power era, arguments proclaiming that "blacks were displaying the ability to survive and even flourish in a ghetto community" transformed a "self-destructive" community into a "creative" one (36). Thus, it is not enough to embrace black women's strength under oppressive conditions; rather, later in the essay, I will show that Morrison's *Sula* also reveals what causes those destitute conditions as well as the sacrifices black women make in order to respond to them.

Moreover, an anthropological work like Stack's *All Our Kin*, which emphasized the structure of the black family as a unique feature of black culture, risks positioning African Americans as the Others. As Daniel Geary cautions us, anthropology is "a discipline formed to study peoples considered primitive and exotic," thus Stack's work "risked accentuating the otherness of poor African Americans even more than the Moynihan Report had" (168). In fact, such an anthropological approach is adopted mainly in the strand of cultural anthropology, which values the perspective of cultural relativism—"no culture . . . is inherently superior or inferior to any other" (Peoples and Bailey 14). While cultural relativism may help destigmatize black families and black women by emphasizing black culture's uniqueness, it also sets up black and white cultures and societies as discrete and unrelated, overlooking the ways in which white society has harmed the black community. Later in this essay, I will show how Morrison's *Sula* emulates but also complicates such an anthropological perspective.

Ex-position
June
2023

Finally, some responses to the Moynihan Report tended to disregard relationships between women, including lesbian relationships and female friendships, and even treated them with hostility. For instance, Michele Wallace's book *Black Macho and the Myth of the Superwoman* (1979) criticized black patriarchal domination during the civil rights and Black Power movements but greatly underestimated the power of black women's bonds. A renowned black cultural critic, Wallace wrote this book at the age of twenty-seven. Upon publication, the book was widely discussed in the media and "caused a massive uproar in the black community" (Springer 115). The book claimed that the Moynihan Report provided black men with an excuse to blame black women and assert their authority: "This report did not *create* hostility. It merely helped to bring the hostility to the surface. The result was a brain-shattering explosion upon the heads of black women" (Wallace 12). Although Wallace challenged the predominance of "black macho" types during the black liberation movements, she nonetheless expressed serious doubts about black women who bonded together in an attempt to confront sexism and racism:

I've noticed the appearance of a number of black women's organizations and conferences. . . . But everything I've seen so far has been an imitation of what white feminists have done before. . . . Some black women have come together because they can't find husbands. Some are angry with their boyfriends. The lesbians are looking for a public forum for their sexual preference. Others notice that if one follows in the footsteps of the white feminists, a lucrative position or promotion may come up before long.

These women have trouble agreeing on things. Their organizations break up quickly and yet more keep forming. (175)

Even if black women's organizations and alliances did experience difficulties and conflicts, Wallace's view reveals a serious distrust of black women who came together politically. Wallace dismisses them as apolitical and opportunistic, suggesting that they merely gather to fulfill their personal or emotional needs. If Wallace's 1979 work raised such a strong suspicion of the relationships between black women, then it is little wonder that Morrison would affirm, in 1969: "women's friendships weren't considered worthy subjects for fiction" (qtd. in Denard 204).

Written in 1969 and published in 1973, *Sula* echoes and questions critical responses to the Moynihan Report. In particular, I argue that it engages with the three concerns I have just discussed: the denied importance of female heads of households, the disregard for various forms of structural oppression against black women and black families, and the distrust of relationships between black women.

Portraying two different female-headed households in a black community as well as a fraught female friendship, Morrison depicts variations on the black matriarchal family, the harm inflicted on black women and families by systemic racial and gender inequalities, as well as black women's different attachments and conflicts. By reclaiming the importance of black matriarchs and delineating a difficult friendship between black women, *Sula* provides a different insight into the Moynihan Report.

***Sula* and the Moynihan Report**

Sula echoes and complicates critiques of the Moynihan Report on many fronts. Like those critiques that adopt anthropological and historical approaches to challenge the social science undergirding the Moynihan Report, *Sula*, too, engages with anthropological and historical constructions of the black community. In terms of the anthropological approach, like Stack's *All Our Kin* (which considers that a poor black community in Chicago is *different* rather than broken), *Sula* also creates a black community, called the Bottom, to some extent isolated from white society and enjoying its own culture, religion, folklore, and belief systems. For instance, the Bottom has its own calendar, which measures time based on the National Suicide Day created by a World War I veteran, Shadrack; the community predicts events by observing natural or supernatural phenomena such as a strong gust of "wind" (*Sula* 73), Eva's missing comb (75), or "a plague of robins" (89). Morrison states:

[Her work] must centralize and animate information discredited by the West—discredited not because it is not true or useful or even of some racial value, but because it is information held by discredited people, information dismissed as "lore" or "gossip" or "magic" or "sentiment." ("Memory" 387)

Sula's anthropological presentation of a black community returns discredited black culture to the center stage and acknowledges its distinctive ways of living and knowing.

Moreover, like the black community in Chicago Stack describes as a cooperative group, people in the Bottom also assist each other. When Eva becomes impoverished and unable to provide for her children after her husband's abandonment, "people were very willing to help" (*Sula* 32). Mrs. Suggs brings her "a warm bowl of peas" and "a plate of cold bread," and Mrs. Jackson gives her "a little milk" for her children (*Sula* 32). To find a more stable source of financial support, Eva even

leaves her children with Mrs. Suggs for eighteen months without giving her any advance notice. Thus, the Bottom is a self-supporting community; through its social network people in need receive help.

However, *Sula* employs not only an anthropological approach to endow the black community and black culture with agency, but also a historical framework to identify and expose white racism and the systemic deprivation that have resulted in pain and loss for black people over a long historical period. Unlike the traditional anthropological approach, which tends to view studied subjects as primitive, exotic, jubilant, and unrelated to (so-called civilized) mainstream society, *Sula* demonstrates how, historically, white discrimination and oppression have damaged the black community. Thus, although the Bottom is described as a vibrant and cooperative community, the novel's prologue reminds readers that its history can be traced back to a "nigger joke": the Bottom's barren land was given by a white master who promised his slave a piece of fertile land after he exploited his labor, but tricked him instead into accepting a sterile piece of land (*Sula* 4). Though presented as a "joke," this folk tale foreshadows the fact that, since the Bottom was founded, racial inequality and white domination have shaped the community greatly, regardless of how isolated it appears to be from white society. Rather than celebrating the Bottom as a creative and thriving black community, after Stack's Chicago community, Morrison explores the destructive consequences of segregation and discrimination through historical lenses.

Focusing particularly on the historical constructions of the so-called "dysfunctional" female-headed families and the allegedly "emasculating" black women ("the tangle of pathology" described in the Moynihan Report [75]), the novel refutes the report's oversimplification of black women and black families based only on sociological representation. By creating two domineering black mothers—Helene Wright and Eva Peace—and their respective families faced with black fathers' absence, Morrison does not defend black women by showing how they are supportive of, or even submissive to, black men, as some of the male critics of the Moynihan Report argued and expected. Instead, Morrison uncovers black women's and black families' historical complexity. On the one hand, like many of her contemporary feminist critics, Morrison demonstrates black women's resilience and strength in overcoming numerous difficult conditions throughout history. On the other hand, more than merely celebrating their fortitude, Morrison underscores structural racism and sexism by illustrating how black women and families suffer and struggle within the novel's historical setting.

The novel unravels black matriarchs and their families in three ways. First, it addresses black mothers' relationships with black fathers. In opposition to the

Moynihan Report, which argues that black women's dominance and strength causes black men to lose their manhood and thus become more likely to leave home, the novel shows how racial inequality plays a significant role in determining black men's disadvantaged status, and it is black fathers' absence that inflicts pain on the mother rather than the other way around. As Morrison stated in an interview: "Everybody knows, deep down, that black men were emasculated by white men, period. And that black women didn't take any part in that" ("Intimate" 479). In both the Peace and Wright households, black men's self-identity and self-esteem are severely damaged when they work, or try to work, under white systems. For example, in the Peace family, Eva Peace's husband BoyBoy has worked for "a white carpenter" and later leaves the Bottom and abandons Eva to pursue "new money" (*Sula* 33, 36). Although BoyBoy pretends to be thriving under white men's supervision, Eva finds that, beneath his "shine," there is "defeat in the stalk of his neck and the curious tight way he held his shoulders" (*Sula* 36). Rather than being dominated by Eva and thus leaving home, before he leaves the Bottom, "he did whatever he could that he liked, and he liked womanizing best, drinking second, and abusing Eva third" (*Sula* 32). Both a victim of an unequal racial system and a perpetrator of domestic violence, BoyBoy is consequently a failed man, abusive husband, and irresponsible father. Rather than chasing BoyBoy away from home, Eva suffers the double oppression of racial and gender inequalities, which are partially attributable to BoyBoy's abandonment. Rather than causing her family's disintegration, the black matriarch herself is the one who stays and supports the family.

Similarly, in the Wright household, Helene Wright's husband Wiley is not constrained by Helene but by systemic white oppression. Whereas Helene stays at home and takes care of the household, Wiley works as a seaman, which signifies his less confined status and his ability to pursue freedom and mobility. As Morrison mentioned in an interview, "the traveling Ulysses theme" is "one of the monumental themes in black literature about men" ("Intimate" 486). However, the novel exposes how white supremacy hampers Wiley's mobility (understood as both physical movement and upward social mobility). Morrison emphasizes that Wiley is indeed "a ship's cook" rather than holding a navigational position on the ship (*Sula* 17). Wiley's occupation recalls the historical period when "Jim Crow was going to sea," to quote W. Jeffrey Bolster (216). Bolster argues that, because of racial segregation and discrimination in the latter half of the nineteenth century, white seamen did not want to work with black men. Thus, "late-nineteenth and early-twentieth-century maritime unions . . . allowed men of color to sail only as cooks and stewards" (Bolster 216). Unlike BoyBoy, though, Wiley at least has a stable job and provides for his family, yet the novel indicates that, even under better conditions, black men

are seriously restricted by the unequal racial system rather than by black women. Once again, in her husband's absence, Helene assumes responsibility for managing the household and caring for their child.

Another example is Jude, Nel Wright's husband, whose experience signifies the persistent racial discrimination against black men during the late 1920s, following the experiences of BoyBoy and Wiley in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries respectively. Jude "crave[s] to do the white man's work" but is never given an equal opportunity to compete with the white man for a job in a construction project (*Sula* 128). Besides, his later abandonment of Nel in the late 1930s and prolonged absence from the 1940s to the 1960s suggests that the black mother continues to suffer racial and gender exploitations well into the latter half of the twentieth century, the period when the Moynihan Report was widely publicized and debated. In *Sula*, both the Peace and Wright households are female-headed families, but they counter Moynihan's argument, which proposes that female heads of household dominate their husbands and cause black families to disintegrate. In contrast, Morrison stresses that the unequal racial system restricts black men, while black mothers stay and prevent the family from falling apart.

In addition to exploring black mothers' relationships with black fathers, Morrison also focuses on black mothers' image and underscores their various dimensions. If the Moynihan Report imagines black mothers as domineering black matriarchs, then the novel shows that they are multifaceted and more complex than that. Helene Wright is a case in point. As her husband is largely absent, working as a seaman, Helene assumes complete charge of the household and is indeed portrayed as a powerful mother, endowed with authority: "Helene Wright was an impressive woman. . . . A woman who won all social battles with presence and a conviction of the legitimacy of her authority. . . . She loved her house and enjoyed manipulating her daughter and her husband" (*Sula* 18). Even if the husband/father is absent, the Wrights are by no means poverty-stricken, as the Moynihan Report would predict. Instead, they adopt a middle-class lifestyle and conform to what Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham refers to as "the politics of respectability," a survival strategy developed by middle-class black women during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries to combat racial discrimination (185). While black women were stereotyped as "unclean, disease-carrying, and promiscuous conjoined with representations of black households as dirty, pathological, and disorderly," advocates of the politics of respectability observed norms of "purity, order, and cleanliness" in order to challenge negative stereotypes about them (Higginbotham 202). In *Sula*, Helene adopts this survival strategy by exhibiting her respectability and dignity. Rather than allowing her home to appear poor and "disorganized"

(Moynihan 88), Helene maintains an “oppressive neatness of her home” that signifies her middle-class status (*Sula* 29).

Beyond that, having been raised by her religious grandmother, Cecile, and kept away from her Creole prostitute mother, Rochelle, Helene grew up in another female-headed home committed to religious “piety” and “sexual purity” (Higginbotham 194). To a certain extent, Helene is raised to follow the Victorian norms of womanhood, but instead of becoming an angel in the house, she becomes a powerful matriarch. While, in the 1960s and 1970s, the Moynihan Report created an image of emasculating black women and their “disorganized” families (88), and some of its critics promoted another one-dimensional image of black women as conventional and submissive, *Sula*’s Helene challenges their constructions. Helene is both powerful and conventional, thereby demonstrating that such a matriarchal figure needs to be powerful, controlling, ladylike, and conventional simultaneously to survive in the historical scene of the 1920s. In presenting or anticipating black mothers and wives as either controlling or conventional, both the Moynihan Report and its male critics exhibit a limited understanding of the multifaceted characteristics displayed by black mothers as they confront structural discrimination.

In a similar vein, Morrison describes Eva Peace as another powerful matriarch—a “creator and sovereign” of a large house who oversees and governs her tenants and children: “[She] sat in a wagon on the third floor directing the lives of her children, friends, strays, and a constant stream of boarders” (*Sula* 30). However, unlike the image of the matriarchal “villain” that the Moynihan Report presented and its critics denied, Eva is indeed tyrannical but also sacrificial. She “free[s] [Plum’s] stools” by hand when he is a baby suffering from constipation (*Sula* 34), but she also sets Plum on fire after he returns from World War I and becomes a heroin addict (*Sula* 47). She is sufficiently generous to adopt three orphans, the Deweys, but, at the same time, she dictates their ways of life and represses their individuality.

Eva’s life story challenges both the image of the domineering black matriarch that the Moynihan Report presents and the image of the Black Queen that black writers of the Black Arts Movement crafted. She is a much more complicated figure. Although Eva appears to behave like a Queen, as she sits on the top floor of the house and commands others’ lives, she is not placed on a pedestal and protected by soldiers. Abandoned by BoyBoy, Eva is left stranded and destitute, and allegedly puts her leg under a train to obtain insurance money. Unlike sociologist Robert Staples, who defends black women for supporting male leaders, Morrison describes Eva as a warrior in her own right. In order to survive, Eva exhibits

multifaceted character traits. She is domineering, controlling, sacrificial, and courageous, but never reduced to a queen or a villain.

Among all of black mothers' multifaceted characteristics, their power is often the most vilified trait. However, Morrison shows that the power that the Moynihan Report attributes to black women is simply the other side of their vulnerability under inequality regimes throughout history. Like her contemporary feminist critics, Morrison celebrates and showcases black mothers' power and strength, but she emphasizes simultaneously that their power and leading roles in their families do not derive from an advantaged or dominant position, as the Moynihan Report proposes, but is instead the product of racial inequality and economic deprivation. Thus, whenever the black matriarch exerts her power, that power goes hand in hand with her vulnerability under unequal racial and economic systems.

For example, adopting the politics of respectability, Helene regards a respectable demeanor as the most powerful weapon a black woman can employ. Such a form of power culminates when she has to travel with her daughter to the segregated South to visit her dying grandmother, an event for which she prepares by making a magnificent dress in the fashion of an indestructible armor:

Helene thought about the trip South with heavy misgiving but decided that she had the best protection: her manner and her bearing, to which she would add a beautiful dress. She bought some deep-brown wool and three-fourths of a yard of matching velvet. Out of this she made herself a heavy but elegant dress with velvet collar and pockets. (*Sula* 19)

This "heavy but elegant dress" that Helene "sew[s] far into the night" embodies all the power and authority that she can marshal to signify her middle-class status and propriety (*Sula* 19). However, the novel demonstrates that neither of these qualities benefits her when confronted with white supremacy. When Helene and her daughter Nel mistakenly board the white-only car of the segregated train, a white conductor humiliates Helene, and, in response, she tries to disarm him by "smil[ing] dazzlingly and coquettishly" at him (*Sula* 21). Aboard this Jim Crow segregated train, even if Helene puts on her most powerful dress/armor, her protective outfit "come[s] undone" and exposes her "custard-colored skin" (*Sula* 22). If the black matriarch's power is described as domineering and sometimes evil, then we see her power pales entirely in comparison with the forces of white racism, and Helene must muster her power to respond to racial inequality under the Jim Crow law.

Along the same lines, Morrison simultaneously reveals Eva's power and vulnerability under structural racism and sexism, which exposes the Moynihan Report's

problematic attribution of black poverty to black mothers' personal traits. Her valor and helplessness manifest concurrently in her act of self-mutilation. On the one hand, rather than making her weak, the loss of her leg appears instead to enhance her authority and solidify her power. Thus, even though she sits in a wheelchair that is "so low," her physical position does not diminish her aura of loftiness and majesty: "They [people in the community] all had the impression that they were looking up at her, up into the open distances of her eyes, up into the soft black of her nostrils and up at the crest of her chin" (*Sula* 31). From Sula's perspective, her grandmother's missing leg even becomes the source of her evilness and sovereignty: "Just 'cause you was bad enough to cut off your own leg you think you got a right to kick everybody with the stump" (*Sula* 92-93). Ironically, Eva's patriarchal power is encapsulated in her missing leg.

Conversely, her absent leg also indicates her vulnerability, attributable to unequal racial and gender systems. Her self-mutilation signifies her desperate need for money, the kind of economic vulnerability black women widely experienced in the early twentieth century. Enobong Hannah Branch argues that, in the early twentieth century, black communities across the US generally struggled with poverty, but black women, in particular, bore the brunt of economic impoverishment because "race and gender intersected to constrain black women's occupational choices producing persistent poverty" (107). In the novel, even domestic service, at the time the most common non-farm job for black women (Franklin 77), is not a viable option for Eva, as the job requires her to be away from home "from five thirty or earlier in the morning until dark—way past eight," and thus, leave her children unattended (*Sula* 33). Without equal job opportunities and her husband's presence, Eva has to increase her power, which is, in fact, inextricably linked to her vulnerability as a black mother under unequal racial and gender systems. While Moynihan and other male critics may have interpreted Eva's power as the cause of a dysfunctional black family, *Sula* shows that her power holds the family together and serves as a reasonable response to structural problems.

The novel not only explores the diverse qualities of black mothers but also complicates the relationship between black mothers and their children, revealing how institutionalized racism throughout history plays a crucial role in shaping and blighting both mother-son and mother-daughter relationships. Regarding mother-son relationships, the most controversial example is that between Eva and her son, Plum, whom Eva sets on fire after he returns from World War I and later becomes a drug addict. At first glance, Plum's story appears to support Moynihan's argument that the mother's domination and the feminine environment in a female-headed household harm black sons' development. Yet a careful consideration of

the historical context reveals that Morrison challenges Moynihan's proposition that black men should leave the "matrifocal family life" and join the military forces, which provide "a world run by strong men of unquestioned authority" (88). Although it is undeniable that what Eva does to Plum is horrendous, the novel calls attention to the way in which white structural violence contributes to the black mother's violent act. The black soldiers depicted in the novel all demonstrate World War I's horrific effects on their lives during and after the war. Shadrack becomes mentally unstable after he returns from the war wounded; the fact that the two returning black soldiers travel on the same segregated train as Helene and Nel suggests that African Americans do not earn equal rights or see an end to discrimination after fighting for their country (*Sula* 22).

Plum is no exception. The novel indicates that he is aware of, and highly likely to encounter, the brutality of race riots during the Red Summer of 1919 upon his return from the war. After the war, as black and white soldiers returned and competed for jobs in the labor market, and the black community demanded the equal rights they were promised before joining the war, "the number of lynchings increased from sixty-three in 1918 to seventy-seven in 1919," with "more than twenty-six race riots erupt[ing] in the first summer following the war" (Mjagkij 144). Given that the most vicious riots occurred in "Chicago, Washington, D.C., and Arkansas" (Covey and Eisnach xxv), Plum, who returns to the US from the war and travels around "New York, Washington, D.C., and Chicago" in 1919 not "get[ting] back to Medallion until 1920" (*Sula* 45), must have experienced and witnessed the violence inflicted upon black veterans and the black community.

Eva seems to believe that, after Plum returns from the war, his behavior indicates that he has lost the desire to live. In a conversation with Hannah about Plum's death, Eva tells Hannah that Plum's deranged acts after taking drugs remind Eva of the time when she had difficulty bearing Plum, as if "he didn't even want to be born": "when he came back from that war he wanted to git back in [Eva's womb]" (*Sula* 71). As Eva watches Plum become increasingly ill due to drug use, she ultimately decides to prevent Plum from "crawl[ing] back in [her] womb" and ends his life (*Sula* 71). Against the backdrop of such social turmoil and racial violence, it is regrettable that Eva does not allow Plum to survive. However, it is equally important to understand Plum's story through the lens of historical and institutional injustice, rather than that of an individual black mother's domination. In discussing how Morrison's *Beloved* challenges the Moynihan Report, which downplays the traumatic effects of systemic racism in the post-civil rights era, James Berger argues that "Morrison describes an act of unspeakable violence between blacks, within an African American family" but that this instance of violence "cannot be understood

without the recognition that law and science, power and official knowledge continue to violate African American lives” (410-11). Berger’s contention also applies to the mother-son relationship between Eva and Plum. Before he goes to war, Morrison states that Plum, “Eva’s last child . . . to whom she hoped to bequeath everything, floated in a constant swaddle of love and affection” (*Sula* 45). But the war, which inflicts violence and further aggravates racial discrimination, breaks the promises of equality and significantly changes black children.

Like Plum, black daughters also experience pain and loneliness while growing up in female-headed families. The daughters in both the Peace and Wright households do not receive much attention and affection from their mothers. The Peace daughters do not feel that their mother loves them: Hannah asks Eva whether she “even love[s] us [her children]” (*Sula* 67), while Sula is disheartened when she hears Hannah say that she loves Sula but does not “like” her (*Sula* 57). Similarly, in the Wright household, Helene is alienated from her Creole mother, Rochelle, and Helene’s daughter, Nel, lives in “the high silence of her mother’s incredibly orderly house, feeling the neatness pointing at her back” (*Sula* 51).

Yet, Morrison neither attributes black children’s pain solely to their mothers’ particular traits, as does the Moynihan Report, nor does she simply celebrate black mothers’ strength and resilience, as some feminist critics tend to do. Instead, she depicts the destructive consequences of black mothers being overwhelmed by dealing with poverty, racism, and daily chores, and shows as well that systemic inequality plays an invisible role in shaping mother-daughter relationships and affecting black children’s lives. Thus, the conversation between Eva and Hannah illustrates that the aloof mother-daughter relationship is the product of long-standing social and economic deprivation that makes black children’s survival a luxury. While Helene questions whether or not Eva loves her children and defines love as doing deeds, including “playin’ with us,” Eva explains that “nobody [was] playin’ in 1895,” when “niggers were dying like flies” (*Sula* 68). Similarly, Nel feels suffocated by her mother’s regulations about beauty and manners and is aware that she has “the nose her mother hated” (*Sula* 28); however, Nel and her mother’s journey down South reveals the way racial discrimination prompts Helene to adopt a certain demeanor as a survival strategy to protect her daughter and herself, although such a strategy proves ineffective. On the one hand, Morrison does not avoid demonstrating the harm that mothers inflict on their daughters; on the other, she calls attention to the ways in which racial and economic inequalities shape or even cause such harm.

Morrison not only draws attention to how structural racism and sexism affect and constrain black families and the black community, she also presents a hopeful

prospect for combating these forms of oppression through black women's coalitions, as exemplified by Nel and Sula's bonding. In discussing Morrison's *Paradise* in connection with the Moynihan Report, Eden Osucha has shown that, in *Paradise*, "the Convent women's queer intimacy" is presented as an alternative domestic arrangement to the idealized white, heteropatriarchal family paradigm championed in the Moynihan Report (258). According to Osucha, bonds between women have the potential to serve as a resistant force against the intersectional oppression of racism and sexism. Similarly, in *Sula*, the bond between Nel and Sula also exhibits such potential. Yet, their coalition is shown to be a troubling one because it involves members who are similar, but also different, intimate but distant. The novel suggests that any effective black feminist coalition must acknowledge both the commonalities and differences among black women in its efforts to address structural racism and sexism.

Critics have often discussed the relationship between Nel and Sula as either close or separate, their personalities either similar or opposite. Some have demonstrated that Sula and Nel's friendship is based on their similar gender and racial status. They argue that the bond between Nel and Sula provides a significant means of mutual support when they develop self-identity and combat social inequality. For example, suggesting that "identification" is the main "psychological mechanism that draws women together" (415), Elizabeth Abel argues that Sula and Nel have "an ideal female friendship" which can only be attained "with another version of oneself" (429). Amidst many injustices and impositions, their friendship represents "a freely chosen expression of self" (Abel 428). In a similar vein, Diane Gillespie and Missy Dehn Kubitschek suggest that Nel and Sula are "mutually creative selves-in-relation," which shows how they grow and develop by forming a mutual bond (40). Gillespie and Kubitschek argue, for example, that "the friendship between Sula and Nel in many ways nurtures both girls by supplying the lacks in their mother-daughter relationships" (40).

Other critics have suggested that Nel and Sula represent opposite value systems and thus it is conceivable that their friendship cannot persist. For instance, Philip Page contends that "Sula and Nel are almost opposites, as suggested by their mutual fascination with the other's house and family" (68). Their relationship, Page affirms, "questions the stereotype of undying friendship" (69). In addition, Cassandra Fetters suggests that Nel and Sula actually "mistake each other for the same," and "their feeling as if they were one and the same . . . prevents their recognizing each other as subjects" (40). This line of critique emphasizes the differences between Nel and Sula and even questions whether they were once similar and close.

Particularly relevant to my essay are two articles that discuss *Sula* with relation to the Moynihan Report and present opposite views on Sula and Nel's relationship as well as their characteristics: Roderick Ferguson's "Something Else to Be: *Sula*, *The Moynihan Report*, and the Negations of Black Lesbian Feminism" and Gregg Santori's "*Sula* and the Sociologist." In his article, Ferguson argues that the close bond between Nel and Sula challenges the heteropatriarchal ideology upheld in the Moynihan Report as well as black nationalist movements, which sought to "regulate nonheteronormative racial formations" (137). Thus, Morrison's *Sula* "provide[s] black lesbian feminists with a model for alternative subjectivities" (Ferguson 118). While Ferguson demonstrates that Nel and Sula together create "something else to be" (110), Santori reads them as fundamentally opposite and irreconcilable. By suggesting that the Moynihan Report marks an era of bio-power governance that redirects attention from the problem of white supremacy to that of black family life, Santori argues that the Peace women, particularly Eva and Sula, "act in a sovereign fashion" to resist Moynihan's bio-political usurpation of black women's capacity, while Nel tends to "defer to the biopolitical norm and not to individual sovereignty" (8). Both articles investigate *Sula* in relation to the Moynihan Report; the former emphasizes the political cohesion between Nel and Sula, while the latter stresses their differences and oppositions.

These articles shed new light on the relationship between Nel and Sula. However, the first line of interpretation, which stresses Nel and Sula's similarity and considers their friendship a resistant and cohesive force against racism, sexism, and heterosexism, seldom addresses how Nel and Sula's divisions and conflicts can also have political significance in developing black women's political coalitions and combating social inequality. Furthermore, the second interpretation, which indicates that Nel and Sula represent diverging approaches to racial politics and value systems, also disregards the fact that their similarities and closeness possess a strong cohesive force against structural discrimination. Taking into consideration the friendship and fractures between Nel and Sula, I suggest that, on the one hand, their closeness serves as an important source of support for one another when resisting racial and gender inequality, and, on the other hand, their separation unlocks a debate about the politics of black women negotiating their differences, disagreements, and conflicts when they come together to establish a bond.

In the novel, Nel and Sula's friendship often appears as a silver lining amidst clouds of suffering and inequalities. Based on their shared racial and gender positions as "neither white nor male," Sula and Nel's close bond helps them confront oppression and regulations that derive, whether directly or indirectly, from structural racism and sexism (*Sula* 52). Before Nel marries Jude, their closeness is

Ex-position
June
2023

manifested in the fact that they are described as one and the same: “They themselves had difficulty distinguishing one’s thoughts from the other’s” (*Sula* 83). Also, “a compliment to one was a compliment to the other, and cruelty to one was a challenge to the other” (*Sula* 84). Morrison describes how such a close female friendship, based on shared marginality in a racist and sexist society, is significant in carving out a space where young black women can momentarily breathe the air of freedom and escape their oppressive surroundings. Thus, while Nel feels suffocated by her mother’s request that she pull her nose, after meeting Sula, she “slid[es] the clothespin under the blanket as soon as she got in the bed” (*Sula* 55). In turn, when Sula is “aware of a sting in her eye” upon hearing her mother’s hurtful remark, it is Nel who appears and “pull[s] her away from dark thoughts back into the bright, hot daylight” (*Sula* 57). Moreover, when white Irish boys confront Sula and Nel on their way to school, Sula cuts her own finger to intimidate the bullies and protect Nel. Their similar racial and gender marginality prompts them to form a bond that helps them through lonely childhoods ridden with numerous disastrous events.

However, despite their shared racial and gender positions, Nel and Sula also diverge from each other. After Nel marries, their similarity and unity change significantly. Sula has gone to college, while Nel has become the mother of three children. Over the course of ten years, their lives never intersect. Marriage has separated them for so long that, when they reunite, they no longer share similar belief systems and have become very different persons. And so, Sula is unable to predict what Nel thinks and finds it surprising that she has hurt Nel by sleeping with her husband: “She had no thought at all of causing Nel pain when she bedded down with Jude” (*Sula* 119). In the old days, when it came to boys’ affections, “they never quarreled, those two, the way some girlfriends did over boys, or competed against each other for them” (*Sula* 84). According to what Sula remembers, “they had always shared the affection of other people: compared how a boy kissed, what line he used with one and then the other” (*Sula* 119). It is highly likely that Sula still believes that sharing boys’ affection bears witness to their friendship. In addition, when the black community dislikes her, Sula is also surprised that “Nel was one of them”: “It had surprised her a little and saddened her a good deal when Nel behaved the way the others would have. Nel was one of the reasons she had drifted back to Medallion” (*Sula* 120). Sula’s misjudgment of Nel reveals that, as friends, they no longer understand each other. From Sula’s point of view, Nel has become another person; in turn, from Nel’s perspective, Sula has become a betrayer.

Morrison’s portrayal of Nel and Sula’s friendship as both close and disrupted recalls Jacques Derrida’s theorization of an inclusive political collective that operates

by “lodg[ing] the enemy in the heart of the friend” (58). In *Politics of Friendship*, Derrida challenges traditional philosophical discourses that view similarities between male friends as a conceptual foundation for forming a political collective, such as a democratic nation. This canonical form of male-centered political alliance embraces only sameness, resemblance, and kindred spirits; it excludes the difference and otherness embodied by alternative social bonds, such as those between women. Thus, Derrida’s book purports to explore an expanded form of political collectivity by deconstructing the androcentric framework of friendship and the masculinist form of politics it represents: “Let us ask ourselves what would then be the politics of such a ‘beyond the principle of fraternity’” (viii). By challenging conventional understandings of friendship in classical philosophy, such as Aristotle’s axiom that “the friend is another self” (qtd. in Derrida 24), which prioritizes similarity and identification, Derrida brings discord and conflicts into the politics of friendship: “Friendship, a ‘superior’ friendship, returns with the enemy” (72).

From Nel’s perspective, Sula is a friend who returns as an enemy. Sula wounds Nel by sleeping with her husband, and in turn, when Nel sides with those in the community who dislike Sula, Nel also hurts Sula. According to Derrida, those wounds are what urge friends to recognize the fact that they are not just similar, but different to the extent that they may hurt each other like an enemy:

No friend without the possible wound. . . . Friendship to remedy a wrongdoing, friendship to answer a possible wrongdoing or crime, friendship of consolation or of mourning, friendship of reparation—in the hypothesis that there could ever be another. But it is true—there are quite a number of differences. (153)

Those wounds that derive from differences between friends are key to Derrida’s understanding of an inclusive political coalition. When friends begin to cope with those wounds, they concern themselves with issues that extend beyond the limits of common characteristics. In *Sula*, Morrison portrays how friends articulate their wounds and how that articulation matters for political alliances.

Near the end of the novel, Nel and Sula have a fierce conversation that reveals their wounds and differences. At the side of Sula’s deathbed, Nel confronts her with what she did to Nel’s marriage and with her irresponsible, man-like behavior: “You can’t do it all. You a woman and a colored woman at that. You can’t act like a man. You can’t be walking around all independent-like, doing whatever you like, taking what you want, leaving what you don’t” (*Sula* 142). In response, Sula attacks Nel for being unable to be herself: “my lonely is mine. Now your lonely is somebody else’s. Made by somebody else and handed to you. Ain’t that something? A

Ex-position
June
2023

secondhand lonely” (*Sula* 143). Their debate boils down to a final question raised by Sula: “How [do] you know . . . [a]bout who was good. How [do] you know it was you? . . . Maybe it was me” (*Sula* 146). Sula’s final question aptly concludes their argument because it is precisely the question of what is right and wrong that marks the core of their differences. As Liang-ya Liou argues,

[B]y delineating the change of their relationship from intimacy to tension, Morrison explores the significance of Sula’s presence in ways that both challenge conventional concepts of right and wrong and affirm Sula’s efforts to quest for black female subjectivity. (85)

The novel does not give us a clear answer to that question, but it does show how important it is for Nel and Sula to have an opportunity to exchange their beliefs and negotiate their differences even if, in the end, they cannot reach an agreement. As Yung-Hsing Wu suggests, *Sula* investigates an ethics “based on *articulating*, rather than resolving, this divergence [between right and wrong]” (788; emphasis added).

Their intense conversation sets an example for what black women in the 1970s might do when trying to join politically but without fully agreeing with each other. As discussed earlier, Wallace’s book challenges the Moynihan Report, but simultaneously casts serious doubts about black women’s attempt to form an effective coalition by suggesting that their motivations for forming organizations are purely personal rather than political, and that “these women have trouble agreeing on things” (175). However, Morrison demonstrates that women’s “personal” worries do form the basis for a black feminist consciousness and political agenda. Furthermore, when black women with different backgrounds and various life struggles disagree with each other, they should engage in dialogue and exchange their diverse perspectives.

Take Nel, for example. She fits the image of one of those black women whom Wallace describes as wives who “can’t find husbands” (175), but her marriage to, and separation from, Jude highlights issues that are also raised in the debate surrounding the Moynihan controversy. In the beginning, Nel and Jude’s marriage seems to fit the model of what Baraka calls a “complementary” marriage, in which Jude promises to “shelter her, love her, grow old with her,” and Nel understands Jude’s “pain” and is willing to “help” and “soothe” it (*Sula* 83). Nevertheless, the novel reveals that the marriage is intended to only “make one Jude,” and Jude abandons his wife and children easily, even though his act of abandonment may involve some systemic causes (*Sula* 83). *Sula* reveals the cruel fact that black men

do desert their wives and children and women have to seek out each other for support and advice. This is why even after Sula has sex with Jude, who then abandons Nel, Nel finds it unbelievable that she is still “thinking what Sula said” because she “would have to ask somebody about that” (*Sula* 108, 110). Nel is what Wallace refers to as a woman who “can’t find a husband,” but her questions about her marriage and Jude’s desertion, as well as her desire to talk about them with her female friend, are not personal and trivial matters; they overlap with significant political issues during the 1970s.

In addition, it may be true that black women “have trouble agreeing on things” because they are so diverse. They include married women without husbands, single women who are angry with their boyfriends, or lesbians who cannot find partners—also because they are as different and distant as Nel and Sula have become. However, conversations among these heterogeneous black women may pave the way for an inclusive political coalition. When Nel and Sula ultimately reinitiate their conversation and express their anger and discontent to one another, their discourse is about black women’s independence, black women acting like men, and the difficulty of being a single mother. Their conversation and disagreements demonstrate a wide spectrum of political issues that concern black women with different social backgrounds and moral values. Although they probably cannot agree, through their fierce conversation and bitter dispute, black women’s concerns crystalize and the potential of a black feminist political project is thus opened.

Written and published in the late 1960s and early 1970s, *Sula* should be considered one of the crucial texts that engaged in the debate about the Moynihan Report. The report provoked great controversy and galvanized critics in many fields who responded to its arguments over decades. Unlike many of its contemporary interpretations recounted here, *Sula* acknowledges and complicates the black matriarch rather than denying this black female figure. However, more than celebrating the strength and audacity of female heads of households, Morrison also highlights the structural racism and sexism that cause black women to suffer and black families to disintegrate in the first place. To address systemic racial and gender inequalities, Morrison accentuates the importance of female friendship in initiating a form of black feminist political work that recognizes commonalities, differences, and conflicts, and thus enables conversations among heterogeneous black women.

WORKS CITED

Ex-position
June
2023

- Abel, Elizabeth. "(E)Merging Identities: The Dynamics of Female Friendship in Contemporary Fiction by Women." *Signs* 6.3 (1981): 413-35.
- Bambara, Toni Cade, ed. *The Black Woman: An Anthology*. New York: New American Library, 1970.
- . "On the Issue of Roles." Bambara 123-36.
- . Preface. Bambara 1-8.
- Baraka, Imamu Amiri. "Black Woman." *Black World* (July 1970): 7-11.
- . "The Coronation of the Black Queen." *The Black Scholar* 1.8 (1970): 46-48.
- Berger, James. "Ghosts of Liberalism: Morrison's *Beloved* and the Moynihan Report." *PMLA* 111.3 (1996): 408-20.
- Bernstein, Lee. *America is the Prison: Arts and Politics in Prison in the 1970s*. Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina P, 2010.
- Bolster, W. Jeffrey. *Black Jacks: African American Seamen in the Age of Sail*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1997.
- Bond, Jean Carey, and Patricia Peery. "Is the Black Male Castrated?" Bambara 141-48.
- Branch, Enobong Hannah. "Racism, Sexism, and the Constraints on Black Women's Labor in 1920." *Race, Identity and Work*. Ed. Ethel L. Mickey and Adia Harvey Wingfield. Bingley: Emerald, 2019. 91-112.
- Covey, Herbert C., and Dwight Eisnach, eds. *Daily Life of African Americans in Primary Documents*. Vol. 1. Santa Barbara: Greenwood, 2021.
- Denard, Carolyn C., ed. *Toni Morrison: Conversations*. Jackson: UP of Mississippi, 2008.
- Derrida, Jacques. *The Politics of Friendship*. Trans. George Collins. London: Verso, 2005.
- Ferguson, Roderick. "Something Else to Be: *Sula*, *The Moynihan Report*, and the Negotiations of Black Lesbian Feminism." *Aberrations in Black: Toward a Queer of Color Critique*. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 2004. 110-37.
- Fetters, Cassandra. "The Continual Search for Sisterhood: Narcissism, Projection, and Intersubjective Disruptions in Toni Morrison's *Sula* and Feminist Communities." *Meridians: Feminism, Race, Transnationalism* 13.2 (2016): 28-55.
- Franklin, Donna L. *Ensuring Inequality: The Structural Transformation of the African-American Family*. New York: Oxford UP, 1997.
- Geary, Daniel. *Beyond Civil Rights: The Moynihan Report and Its Legacy*. Philadelphia: U of Pennsylvania P, 2015.
- Gillespie, Diane, and Missy Dehn Kubitschek. "Who Cares? Women-Centered Psychology in *Sula*." *Toni Morrison's Fiction: Contemporary Criticism*. Ed. David L. Middleton. New York: Garland, 2000. 61-91.
- Hall, Prathia, Mary King, Casey Hayden, Jean Wheeler Smith, Joyce Ladner, Kathie

- Sarachild, Michael Thelwell, and Bernice Johnson Reagon. "SNCC Women and the Stirrings of Feminism." *A Circle of Trust: Remembering SNCC*. Ed. Cheryl Lynn Greenberg. New Brunswick: Rutgers UP, 1998. 127-51.
- Higginbotham, Evelyn Brooks. *Righteous Discontent: The Women's Movement in the Black Baptist Church, 1880-1920*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1993.
- La Rue, Linda. "The Black Movement and Women's Liberation." *The Black Scholar* 1.7 (1970): 36-42.
- Liou, Liang-ya. *Race, Gender, and Representation: Toni Morrison's The Bluest Eye, Sula, Song of Solomon, and Beloved*. Taipei: Bookman, 2000. 57-93.
- Matthews, Tracye A. "'No One Ever Asks What a Man's Role in the Revolution Is': Gender and Sexual Politics in the Black Panther Party, 1966-1971." *Sisters in the Struggle: African American Women in the Civil Rights-Black Power Movement*. Ed. Bettye Collier-Thomas and V. P. Franklin. New York: New York UP, 2001. 230-56.
- Mjagkij, Nina. *Loyalty in the Time of Trial: The African American Experience During World War I*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2011.
- Morrison, Toni. "'Intimate Things in Place': A Conversation with Toni Morrison." Interview by Robert Stepto. *The Massachusetts Review* 18.3 (1977): 473-89.
- . "Memory, Creation, and Writing." *Thought* 59.235 (1984): 385-90.
- . *Sula*. 1973. New York: Vintage, 2004.
- . "What the Black Woman Thinks about Women's Lib." *What Moves at the Margin: Selected Nonfiction*. Ed. Carolyn C. Denard. Jackson: UP of Mississippi, 2008. 18-30.
- Moynihan, Daniel Patrick. "The Negro Family: The Case for National Action." *Rainwater and Yancey* 39-124.
- Osucha, Eden. "Race and the Regulation of Intimacy in the Moynihan Report, the Griswold Decision, and Morrison's *Paradise*." *American Literary History* 27.2 (2015): 256-84.
- Page, Philip. *Dangerous Freedom: Fusion and Fragmentation in Toni Morrison's Novels*. Jackson: UP of Mississippi, 1995. 60-83.
- Peoples, James, and Garrick Bailey. *Humanity: An Introduction to Cultural Anthropology*. Belmont, CA: Wadsworth, Cengage Learning, 2015.
- Rainwater, Lee, and William L. Yancey, eds. *The Moynihan Report and the Politics of Controversy: A Trans-Action Social Science and Public Policy Report*. Cambridge, MA: MIT P, 1967.
- Royonon, Tessa. *The Cambridge Introduction to Toni Morrison*. New York: Cambridge UP, 2013.
- Rustin, Bayard. "Why Don't Negroes. . . ." *The Moynihan Report and the Politics of Controversy: A Trans-Action Social Science and Public Policy Report*. Rainwater and Yancey 417-26.

Ex-position
June
2023

- Santori, Gregg. "Sula and the Sociologist: Toni Morrison on American Biopower after Civil Rights." *Theory & Event* 15.1 (2012): 1-18.
- Smith, Barbara. "Toward A Black Feminist Criticism." *Women's Studies* 2 (1979): 183-94.
- Spillers, Hortense J. "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book." *Diacritics* 17.2 (1987): 64-81.
- Springer, Kimberly. "Black Feminists Respond to Black Power Masculinism." *The Black Power Movement: Rethinking the Civil Rights-Black Power Era*. Ed. Peniel E. Joseph. New York: Routledge, 2006. 105-18.
- Stack, Carol. *All Our Kin: Strategies for Survival in a Black Community*. New York: Basic, 1974.
- Staples, Robert. "The Myth of the Black Matriarchy." *The Black Scholar* 1. 3/4 (1970): 8-16.
- Wallace, Michele. *Black Macho and the Myth of the Superwoman*. New York: Verso, 1999.
- Wilson, William Julius. "The Moynihan Report and Research on the Black Community." *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 621 (2009): 34-46.
- Wu, Yung-Hsing. "Doing Things with Ethics: *Beloved*, *Sula*, and the Reading of Judgment." *MFS: Modern Fiction Studies* 49.4 (2003): 780-805.

**Manuscript received 15 July 2022,
accepted for publication 29 May 2023