Peace Fires: Necessary Arson in *Sula*

In the United States, racial identity remains entangled with the oppressive expectations established by the institution of slavery. Despite its long-standing abolishment, slavery remains a persistent wound on the American consciousness -- its crippling hegemonic structures continue to define, limit, and police the boundaries of black identity. In the novel *Sula*, Toni Morrison engages the legacy of slavery through three generations of the Peace family, whose racial and gendered pain -- both external and self-inflicted -- is confronted through tragedies of fire and flood. Inheriting a propensity for fire, Sula Peace acts as figurative arsonist: her deviant actions disrupt the restrictive order of the black neighborhood of the Bottom, destroying deep-rooted oppressive structures with a force that can best be likened to wildfire. While Sula's actions are received as criminal and destructive, they instead constitute a redemptive controlled burn: in stripping away the institutions of race, gender, and nationality from her community's cultural landscape, she reveals the fertile "soil" of self-knowledge that nurtures individual and national prosperity.

In the novel's opening pages, Morrison writes the history of the Bottom in terms of failed harvest, isolating social infertility as the lasting consequence of slavery. As a reflection of the false promise of an American dream for African-Americans, the history of the Bottom is one of denied prosperity: a master promises his slave an amount of property, but tricks him into accepting infertile land "where planting was backbreaking, where the soil slid down and washed
away the seeds" (5). This story identifies the source of suffering within the Bottom, whose inhabitants are botanically represented as "nightshade and blackberry patches [torn] from their roots" (3) -- an image that conjures the forced removal of blackness from its life-source, just as slaves themselves were torn from their personal histories. Like crops planted in arid soil, the blacks of the Bottom are unable to firmly "plant" themselves to achieve individual growth -- they live at constant threat of being uprooted and swept away by their oppressors. This metaphor of failed agriculture composes the "circles and circles of sorrow" that entrap and devalue black life, condemning the people of the Bottom to an impermanent and powerless existence (174).

Thus does Morrison select her means to destroy these circles: fire, which bears the power to burn through existing crops and create newly fertile spaces for planting. The first fiery figure of Sula emerges in Shadrack, who is mentally incinerated by the fires of World War I: his introduction to the novel arrives "adangle with shouts and explosions," with "shellfire all around him" (7). Despite his engagement in the war, Shadrack is unable to access the identity of soldier, recalling his war experience as "something called it." His inability to "muster up the proper feeling…to accommodate it" expresses the loss of words that arises from the denial of experience that his difference of race imposes (7). Because of his blackness, Shadrack is denied the essential aspects of the soldier experience: where an ordinary (white) soldier would experience feelings of national pride, brotherhood with his comrades, and a sense of purpose, Shadrack is denied access to these feelings and an exclusion from the soldier identity. With no soulful connection to his war effort, Shadrack is reduced to a slave-like body of physical labor. This reduction materializes in his traumatic flashbacks, which are haunted by images of disembodiment: he imagines the "face of a soldier near him fly off…the body of the headless soldier [running] on" (8). During his hospitalization, Shadrack becomes divided from his own
body: he hallucinates his hands growing uncontrollably and overtaking the rest of his body. In the prelude's agricultural terms: Shadrack's identity is only "planted," or validated, by the sheer labor value of his hands, which grow "like Jack's beanstalk" (9) -- a structure for others to climb, ascending the ranks of society while Shadrack himself remains immobilized. This relegation to a state of modern slavery strips Shadrack of all aspects of personhood: he has "no past, no language, no tribe, no source…only the unchecked monstrosity of his hands" (12). Through Shadrack's alienation, Morrison defines the legacy of slavery that her novel counteracts: by invalidating black lives and experiences, age-old racism reduces blacks to nothing more than the value of their labor, which raises the white elite to the height of their power.

In her discussion of black nationalist politics within literature, Aida Hussen defines the "black rage" that categorizes Shadrack's suffering: subject to "tremendously hostile sociopolitical circumstances," his traumas are translated into "individuated and at times incompatible or even illegible forms of grief" (Hussen 316). Shadrack's grief takes shape in the institution of National Suicide Day, which stands as a "productive fiction of cohesion" for the uncontainable destruction Shadrack has witnessed within the war (316). The holiday's tidy containment of death to one day enables Shadrack to grapple with his personal traumas with the sense of shared suffering he was disallowed as a black soldier -- National Suicide Day "easily, quietly" becomes a part of "the fabric of life up in the Bottom" (Morrison 16). Suicide Day falls into Hussen's terms as a "black nationalist claim of radical racial rebirth…an attempt to evade the grip of death" which constantly threatens the modern slave (Hussen 307): Shadrack's compression of death is actually an effort to contain the history of slavery, which is otherwise overwhelming in its perpetuity. The torched figure of Shadrack presides over the novel's engagement of slavery, standing as both
victim and model of failed progress -- his futile campaign to limit oppression informs Sula's effort to destroy the oppressive force altogether.

Morrison's modeling of response to oppression continues in her characterization of the Wright family, who, unlike the Peace family, demonstrate a self-hating contentment within the structures that oppress them. A fixture of the Bottom's "most conservative black church," Helene Wright serves as the novel's leading upholder of racist expectations (Morrison 18). Like Shadrack, Helene seeks an escape from personal history: the daughter of a "Creole whore," her actions run in a trajectory away from the blackness and sexuality embodied by her mother (17). To escape from the ascribed inferiority of black womanhood, Helene overrides her racial and sexual shame through subordination to the supremacy of white maleness. Helene relentlessly imposes this hateful self-image upon her daughter, Nel, whose identity becomes fugitive to its oppressive rule: like a runaway slave, her imagination is "[driven] underground" (18) by her mother's dictation of what is -- in accordance to the family name -- "right." It is not until Nel travels to meet her grandmother, Rochelle, that she is able to think independently of her mother's oppressive patterns. On the train to Louisiana, Nel first witnesses her mother's weakness: when a white train conductor discriminates against her, Helene simply smiles, eliciting the hatred of two black soldiers who are "stricken" by her compliance with the racist's demands (19). Nel is shocked at the sight of her mother's cowardice, seeing her no longer as an "impressive woman" but as "custard" -- a comparison that invokes spinelessness, nonresistance, and edibility (18, 22). Nel's transformed view of her mother causes a shift in her self-image, which was previously replicated from her mother's own: "if this tall, proud woman…were really custard, then there was a chance that Nel was too" (23).
Nel's abandonment of her mother's influence is finalized upon meeting Rochelle, whose arrival heralds the promise of self-determination. Rochelle's first and only appearance associates her with flowers, which in Morrison's figuration of plants as identity suggests a flourishing of individual growth: she enters the scene from "a magnificent garden," marked with a "sweet odor of gardenias" (24, 25). In keeping with her role as enlightened messenger, Rochelle's appearance evokes angelic imagery: her "canary-yellow dress" casts a bright beam of light through the funereal atmosphere; her hair is described as a "halo-like roll" (26). And as angels are biblically described as "flames of fire," so too does Rochelle demonstrate a fiery capacity: "she struck a match, blew it out, and darkened her eyebrows with the burnt head" (26). In this action, Morrison's multifaceted fire gains an association with black beauty and self-love, burning away a racist preoccupation with white aesthetics. Executing an arson of Helene's white idealism, which dictates that Nel "pull her nose" for a whiter appearance (28), Rochelle emphasizes her dark features with a sense of acceptance and pride in her blackness-- and by extension, her own identity. While she appears for scarcely two pages, Rochelle establishes the paradigm of self-love that stands as Sula's counter to racial self-hatred and identity loss.

As Rochelle departs, her final goodbye -- "'Voir! 'Voir!'" (27) -- serves as Nel's final call to self-discovery: the French au revoir is pared down to the verb voir, meaning "to see" in the sense of "to understand." Urged to not only see, but truly understand her own identity, Nel is struck with a realization following her fiery encounter with Rochelle: "after the fire was made," she declares that "I'm me. I'm not their daughter…I'm not Nel. I'm me" (28). Unbound from her mother's oppressive inheritance, Nel's newfound me-ness affords her a space to "plant" her identity and "cultivate a friend" in Sula (29). Unified by Nel and Sula's status as "neither white nor male," their friendship serves as the soil that nourishes each other's identity -- they "use each
other to grow on" (52). In her examination of black feminist love-politics, Jennifer Nash provides language for the sisterhood between Nel and Sula: it is a means of "claiming, embracing, and restoring the wounded black female self" (Nash 3). Claiming that love is "[more than] simply a practice of self-valuation," Nash redefines it as "a strategy for remaking the self and moving beyond the limitations of self-hood" (3). Sula's friendship with Nel reaches its moment of transcendence when the two girls inadvertently cause the death of Chicken Little, a young boy who interrupts their "planting" of self: the girls "[strip twigs] to a smooth, creamy innocence," creating personal effigies, and "tear up rooted grass" to create a growing space for their symbols of identity (Morrison 58). Chicken Little's drowning washes away this gesture toward self, leaving the feeling of "something newly missing" (61) -- the girls suffer the loss of their "planted" identities, as well as their childlike innocence. Her sense of self uprooted, Sula is restored to permanence by Shadrack, whose only response when confronted about the incident is the word "always" -- a reassurance that although this trauma has destabilized her sense of identity, Sula has not been fundamentally changed. Despite her feeling of "something newly missing," she is not dispossessed of her selfhood, as she remains herself and "always" will be. Through his ability to "convince her, assure her, of permanency," Shadrack reestablishes Sula's understanding of self as something that cannot be lost to the oppressive external forces that manifest in Chicken Little's sudden interruption and intrusive surveillance of the girls' self-planting (152). Following this reassurance of self, Sula's awareness of her own invulnerability immunizes her to the disruptive sight, judgment, and expectations of others, allowing her to transcend even the selfhood she first sought to attain: "her one major feeling of responsibility had been exorcised on the bank of a river. The first experience taught her…that there was no self to count on. She was completely free…[she had] no ego" (119).
Sula's development as arsonist for peace is then completed through defiance of her own family, which consists of three women touched by fire: Eva, the biblical "Eve" of original arson, Hannah, whose fiery death shatters Sula's idleness, and Sula herself, whose childhood culminates in a mastery of fire that neither her mother nor grandmother achieve. It is Eva who first unleashes the power of fire within the text, establishing it as a force of loving destruction: her murder of her beloved son, Plum, is committed as a tragic coup de grâce of his heroin-addled existence. As Eva douses him with kerosene, Plum imagines "the great wing of an eagle pouring a wet lightness over him," suggesting an ascension to freedom in his fiery "baptism" (47). In her admission to Hannah, Eva explains her actions as an effort to salvage Plum's identity as a man: "I done everything I could to make him leave me and go on and live and be a man but he wouldn't...I just thought of a way he could die like a man" (72). While Sula rejects Eva's murderous brand of arson, her own "fires" are set with the same intention to "[help] others define themselves" (95).

Sula at last inherits fire as her mother burns to death: instead of being "struck dumb, as anybody would be who saw her own mamma burn up," she is "interested" (78). This incident serves as Sula's final preparation to burn through the indifference of oppression, as she witnesses the burning of her uncaring mother who "[loves] her," but "just [doesn't] like her" (57). Offering love to various men instead of her own daughter, Hannah upholds the patriarchy that Sula wishes to destroy: she "rubbed no edges, made no demands, made the man feel as though he were complete and wonderful just as he was" at the cost of her own identity (43). Upon Sula's return to the town, her own sexual exploits are an attempt to release Nel from the patriarchal grip of her husband, Jude, who seizes Nel's me-ness for himself, whispering "me too" upon marrying her (85). With the conviction that "any more fires in this house, I'm lighting them," Sula sets to burn
through Nel's relationship to the core of her lost friend's identity (93). Purposeful rather than pleasurable, Sula's sexual encounter with Jude is passionless and mechanical: when Nel discovers them, they are "not even touching, not even looking at each other" (105). Her relationship destroyed, Nel is stripped of her contrived domestic identity -- she is left with "no thighs and no heart, just her brain raveling away" (111). Nel's grief materializes in her imagining of a mysterious gray ball of "fur and string and hair" -- materials distinguished by their flammability (109). These ashen remains of her false identity disperse only over Sula's grave, when Nel realizes that her mourning for Jude was in fact grief for the lost love of sisterhood. As Nel cries "we was girls together…O Lord, Sula," the gray ball "[breaks] and [scatters]," leaving Nel with a permanent re-discovery of her own identity (174).

Sula's fiery return liberates not only Nel, but the entire community of the Bottom, whose inhabitants harness their self-hating anxieties into the energy of hating her instead. In her critique, Maggie Galehouse discusses Sula's actions as a constructive reordering of black social strata: she "allows the Bottom to create its own bottom -- to build, in the collective rejection of her, a frame of social rules over which it can stretch its own convictions" (Galehouse 356). It is only through hating Sula that the people of the Bottom are only available to approach peace and prosperity: "because they believe her to be evil, she provides for them an antidote to themselves" (356). Sula's interracial sex with white men conducts an arson of unspoken racial law that incinerates the power of the Bottom's racial and patriarchal orders, causing a peaceful turn toward equality: the shock of the action forces a "consideration that might lead them toward tolerance," while there is a resurgence of beneficent love as the citizens "[begin] to cherish their husbands and wives" (Morrison 113, 117). Her task completed, Sula dies in a "violent explosion" of peace (149), causing the Bottom to be swept by an "abiding gentleness of spirit" that seals the
community's determination to overcome all adversity -- "not failed crops, not rednecks…not racist Protestants" could "keep them away from their God," their peace, and their prosperity (150).

While the Bottom's redemption by fire is quickly subsumed by ice, Sula's message of overcoming persists despite this relapse into oppression. The end of the Bottom's "late-harvesting" peace does not render Sula's efforts a failure, but asserts that peace is a never-ending endeavor: even after it is achieved, it must be fought for with the same intensity that established it (152). Sula's conviction to "[go] down like one of those redwoods" rather than die "like a stump" encapsulates the novel's fierce commitment to the personal growth and self-preservation that empower true peace (143). Composing Sula as her own pyre of self-knowledge's obstacles, Morrison writes with the power to destroy the lingering oppression that challenges the individual, revealing the true core of American identity -- an irrepressible human spirit, which endures all fires that attempt to burn it away.
Works Cited


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