

**The construction, destruction and reconfiguration of a community
in Toni Morrison's *Sula*¹**

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“(...) if ten thousand worlds had been my own,
I would have freely parted with them all
to have exchanged my condition
with the meanest slave in my own country.”
Olaudah Equiano (a former slave), *Equiano's Travels*

1. In the paradise of the enemy

Africans have always attached a great significance to the land — essential for their economical and spiritual survival — and have adored it through legends, myths and chants. Ironically, History proves that few ethnic groups have been so barbarically uprooted and dislocated from their environment. Slavery is a dark chronicle of loss — but also a saga of resistance and reinvention of an ethnic group put into bondage in the paradise of the captor. It is no wonder that contemporary African-American writers like Alice Walker (*The Color Purple*, 1982), Sherley Anne Williams (*Dessa Rose*, 1986) or Toni Morrison (*Beloved*, 1987) found in slavery material and inspiration for poignant novels that testify against the comfort of indifference, create awareness, and demand historical responsibility.

Negroes first lost contact with their land of birth by being captured and brought as slaves to the sugar islands of the Antilles, the cane fields of Brazil, and the plantations of British North America (Tindall, 1989: 120). Transportation in the hot, stinky, over-crowded and infected hulls of slave ships lasted over four to six weeks and many — especially the children and the old — didn't resist and succumbed to smallpox or dysentery (Walvin, 1994: 42, 49). Despair was common, suicide was not rare and, with hardly any exceptions, mutiny proved to be futile.

Living and toiling in a nation where everything was different (language, dominant

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ethnicity, political system, myths and beliefs) confused the captives and led them into an identity crisis (Tindall, 1989: 123). It is hard to imagine their anguish, so crudely expressed in figures: historians estimate that sixty million slaves died — victims of sickness, starvation, cruelty or suicide. This is uncertain data; indeed some researchers would hold that the number could triple this (Angelo, 1994: 257).

The distance from Africa brought about ethnic fragmentation and a loss of communal identity. In order to prevent any chances to rebel, it was usual for planters to buy slaves from different tribes, ensuring that they were not able to understand each other's languages. For the same purpose, and to facilitate communication between Negroes and the white foremen, slaveholders forced the captives to give up their native tongues and adopt English both at home and in the fields.

This change of language accounts for an irrevocable loss of a large patrimony of legends and traditions — forgotten because untranslatable into English or into the North-American social, religious or cultural reality. The consequence of this compulsive acculturation was the removal of any historic and literary past upon which slaves could have based their identity. Interestingly enough, the slaves of Hilton Head Island and the Lowcountry region of South Carolina invented "Gullah", which is not only a dialect that combines a variety of African languages and English, but also a blend of Baptist Church creed and African spirituality and superstition. This dialect allowed them to communicate, sing, pray, and preserve folktales.

With the loss of land, the African-American was also robbed of his own name, a crucial aspect of identity. The slave's original name was frequently replaced with a nickname in accordance with his/her physical appearance, psychological characteristics or biographical incidents (Fabre, 1988: 109). In an interview with Thomas LeClair, Morrison reflects upon this topic:

If you come from Africa, your name is gone. It is particularly problematic because it is not just your name but your family, your tribe. When you die, how can you connect with your ancestors if you have lost your name? That's a huge psychological scar. The best thing you can do is take another name which is yours because it reflects something about you or your own choice. (LeClair, 1994: 126)

Examples of this practice abound in the pages of Morrison's *Beloved*: Paul D is called so to distinguish him alphabetically from the other slaves with the same name, and Sixo, because he was the sixth of a group of male Africans. Even after the abolition of slavery, African-Americans continued to find new nicknames for their own, some of them witty and

imaginative: Soaphead combed his hair with soap instead of lacquer; Milkman had been breastfed until a later stage of his life. Other names were taken at random from the Bible — this is the case of two baby girls: Corinthians and the even less-fortunate Pilate, who inherited the name of the roman procurator from Judea responsible for condemning Jesus Christ to crucifixion.

A second *diaspora* and a second loss of the land took place in the 19th and 20th centuries when thousands upon thousands of African-Americans abandoned the southern states and went to the north. The aim of this new journey was to escape the persecutions and lynching that darkened each day of the lives of the black people in the south. The north became the Promised Land, as the popular song revealed:

Yes, we are going to the north!
I don't care what state,
Just so I cross the Dixon Line
From this southern land of hate
Lynched and burned and shot and hung,
And not a word is said. (Takaki, 1993: 342)

The preferred destinies of successive waves of migrants were the cities of Detroit, Cleveland, Chicago, Pittsburgh and New York City. Only the first of these saw the number of African-Americans multiply by eight between 1910 and 1920 (Takaki, 1993: 340, 341), while the years 1916 to 1918 saw the exit of more than 450 000 black people from the South (Montgomery, 1995: 378).

This new loss of the land led to a second crisis of identity. The black person of the south had to learn the ways and customs of the north and had to adapt to a different landscape and climate. In short, the identity crisis of the African-Americans (without name, nor liberty, nor ancestors) is deeply rooted in the loss of the homeland.

In this paper, I intend to study:

- a) The different attitudes that, in Toni Morrison's *Sula*, African-Americans and European-Americans present in relation to the land;
- b) The tensions and dilemmas that derive from these two opposite perspectives;
- c) The way in which capitalist progress alters the *modus vivendi* and the identity of a rural African-American community.

2. Identity matters

A little over two centuries ago, in *Letters from an American Farmer* (1782), Hector de

Crèvecoeur asked “what is an American?” In the same way, the black community may now ask itself “what is an African-American?” It is a relevant question given the historical circumstances in which blacks were robbed of several traces of their identity — land, name, language and cultural past. The answer doesn’t only interest a minority but a whole nation that is self-defined by the kaleidoscope of all the ethnic groups who live and interact in it.

Indeed, identity exists in itself by virtue of reference to other identities. An individual will recognise him/herself not only by a reflection of the self, but also by the image that others have. And an individual will only have true importance when seen in family — which, in turn, is part of a more ample community sphere, and a part of the multicultural nation. Each grouping judges its predecessor in a dynamic process in which the group configures itself from among what it wishes to be; what it can be; and what it is allowed to be.

Conscious of these facts, Toni Morrison makes the search for the ethnic African-American identity the main theme of her work. As the author states in an interview with Judith Wilson, her novels focus on the same subject: “that whole world of Black people in this country” (Wilson, 1994: 137). Morrison concentrates on the way the black community perceives the white community and vice-versa; how the two integrate; how they diverge, accept and redefine themselves; how the nation is a house of mirrors in which each group is reflected.

In this search for identity, there is the recurring element of the *land* in all of Morrison’s novels. The writer labours over the geographical, community and economic spaces, showing the tensions that result from human beings’ cohabitation with nature and reflecting or subverting myths linked to the soil. In *The Bluest Eye* (1970), for instances, Pecola, a black teenager raped by her own father, embodies the legendary Persephone and the sterility of the land; *Sula* (1973) depicts the tension between a small and passive rural African-American community and a striving white town; in *Tar Baby* (1981), Morrison holds colonialism and capitalism responsible for the destruction of nature.

In an interview with Bessie Jones, Morrison argues that the black culture sees the land as a generous mother; on the contrary, western capitalist culture values the earth as a source of profit (Jones, 1992: 178). In the African tradition, the soil is common property and its exploitation is linked not to *possession* but to *tradition* and ancestral heritage. No-one can say “this field is mine” because it is culturally implicit that the land belongs to the ancestors — which is the same as saying that it belongs to everybody because it doesn’t belong to anybody who is alive.

The environmental impact of the life and economy of the African tribes was minimal since they shared everything and conducted a subsistence economy. The human being saw

him/herself as merely another species from among others, and didn't attach importance to prosperity or to possessions. Therefore, the hierarchy wasn't based on *profit* (for example rich and poor) but on *age* (the elders, adults, youths and children) and on *function* within the tribe (chief, witch doctor, warriors and hunters).

In some of Morrison's work, neoprimitivism arises, a re-evaluation of the pre-industrial America, closer to the land and further from the factories of consumerism (Heinze, 1993: 105). Was Morrison able to present fictionally the anxieties of her ethnic group at a time when so many black people abandoned the agrarian south in search of the urban north, attracted by an economy based more on commerce and services than on agriculture? The novel *Sula* offers some clues to understand this question.

3. *Sula*: reaching the Bottom

In *Sula*, Morrison laments this change of values and denounces the consequences of capitalism on the black community of Bottom, Ohio, between the First World War and 1965, a remarkable year for the movement in favour of civil rights in the USA.

Immediately in the first line, referring to Bottom, the narrator states: "In that place, where they tore the nightshade and blackberry patches from their roots to make room for the Medallion City Golf Course, there was once a neighbourhood" (Morrison, 1993: 3). This beginning lists some pairs of opposites which would be analysed throughout the novel: Place/neighborhood (physical space/human space); roots/City Golf Course (nature/profit); they/neighborhood (the whites/the blacks) (Page, 1995: 62). In this context, the novel presents two opposite spaces — Medallion, the town of the whites, and Bottom, where the blacks live:

(...) a neighborhood where on quiet days people in the valley could hear singing sometimes, banjos sometimes, and, if a valley man happened to have business up in those hills — collecting rent or insurance payments — he might see a dark woman in a flowered dress doing a bit of a cakewalk, a bit of black bottom, a bit of 'messing around' to the lively notes of a mouth organ. (Morrison, 1993: 5)

Here the first irony of the work is found: this village is not located at the bottom of a valley, as the reader would be led to think by the name "Bottom", but at the top of the hills around Medallion. This contradiction results from an excuse found by a Euro-American landowner in order to sell the land to a naïve black person:

The master said, 'Oh, no! See those hills? That's bottom land, rich and fertile.'

'But that's high up in the hills,' said the slave.

'High up from us,' said the master, 'but not when God looks down, it's Bottom. That's why we call it so. It's Bottom of heaven — best land there is.' (Morrison, 1993: 4)

The African-American purchased the poor land of the hills while the whites settled into the rich valley near the river. Bottom is not fertile like the Sweet Home plantation in *Beloved*, nor does it have the paradise-like beauty of the Isle of the Chevaliers in *Tar Baby*. However, there is something more precious: the sense of community. It is this spirit that turned Bottom into a unique place where the African-Americans felt part of a unified fraternal group. Medallion, on the other hand, is nothing but an uncharacteristic city reserved for the leisure of the European Americans where the blacks can work, but not live.

The situation is turned round when the whites consider the market value of Bottom. They plan to construct a golf course there, a few bungalows and a tunnel to link the hills of the valley. All of this is part of a luxury resort where the wealthy can relax during holidays and weekends. As Denise Heinze explains, this invasion perturbs the balance of the community: "What happens eventually in *Sula* is a mixing and melding of values, a swapping of one structure for another, which creates, in Morrison's eyes, ideological miscegenation of the worst sort" (Heinze, 1993: 105).

The changes invert the values of the two worlds: the whites want peace and quiet now, away from the city — a sense of community. At the same time, the African-Americans become infected with a desire for profit, they have ambitions of work posts, which were, hitherto, reserved for the European-Americans, and so they migrate to the valley. "The black people, for all their new look, seemed awfully anxious to get to the valley, or leave town, and abandon the hills to whoever was interested" (Morrison, 1993: 166). During the process, the blacks assimilated the values of the whites — competition, economic progress and wealth — as status symbols.

The break-up of the black community occurred in 1927 when Nel married Jude and surrendered to the traditional African-American way of life, and when Jude got a job as a servant in Hotel Medallion in town. These attitudes represent opposite positions: on one hand, maintaining the tradition *without* questioning it; on the other, moving out of Bottom. Neither attitude led to what could have been a renewal within the principles and physical space of the community, or *reconfiguration*.

In Bottom, everyone wanted to work in the tunnel and get rich, to collaborate with the Euro-American invader, forgetting about the community space, the *known land* where

interaction between group members is bred. Even the attempt to destroy the tunnel where the African-Americans had not been authorized to work fails, and the activists die — symptomatically on National Suicide Day.

4. Places, not communities

Cultural accommodation to urban values and ways of life, and the subsequent loss of communal identity, is a frequent phenomenon in multicultural societies in general, and in North-American society in particular. To write *Sula*, Morrison resorted to an anecdote her mother had told her frequently:

When she first got married, she and my father went to live in Pittsburgh. And I remember her telling me that in those days all the people lived in the hills of Pittsburgh, but now they live amid the smoke and dirt in the heart of that city. It's clear up in those hills, and so I used that idea, but in a small river town in Ohio. (Stepto, 1994: 12)

The anthropologist Anthony Cohen notes that small ethnic populations, like the fictional Bottom, are becoming more and more subject to the external pressures of industrialization and urbanization. This “assault on social encapsulation” is a process that causes the most closed community to acquire other ways of life (Cohen, 1995: 44).

Could this mean that Bottom was destined to lose its identity? Could assimilation be an inevitable process in the multicultural society? It would seem that small communities tend to integrate in a homogenous culture — a widespread idea in the media by some specialists and politicians. However, in most cases, this assimilation is superficial, “a veneer which masks real and significant differences at a deep level” (Cohen, 1995: 44). According to Cohen, in reality, what happens is a *reconfiguration*. The structures of a culture adapt themselves to another, but the symbolic frontiers strengthen, especially through art (music, regional literature, traditional crafts), and with the help of ethnographic research. This happens because ethnic minorities are *dynamic*, accepting some external influences, but declining others that question their essence. In this context, in my opinion, the people of Bottom could have shown more resistance to the profound alteration of their space and economic traditions. In other words, the village is not an inevitable victim of Medallion but some kind of volunteer martyr.

In the last chapter, the narrator comments: “Maybe it [Bottom] hadn't been a community, but it had been a place” (Morrison, 1993: 166), reminding the reader of the

beginning of the novel, “In that place, where they tore the nightshade and blackberry patches from their roots to make room for the Medallion City Golf Course, there was once a neighborhood” (Morrison, 1993: 3). This closes a narrative cycle and opens another with the ambiguous words “Things were so much better in 1965. Or so it seemed” (Morrison, 1993: 163). From the point of view of the black people, there were indeed economic benefits, albeit a price to pay, which was submission to capitalism. In the end, the community assimilated, unconditionally, external values, and the Bottom became just another uncharacteristic place — a tourist spot like so many others.

To conclude, Morrison places value on the earth as a space where an ethnic community can live in harmony according to its traditions and social and economic lifestyles. Her novels in general and *Sula* in particular reflect the inevitability of progress but also question the total acceptance of external influences. In fiction and in reality, each ethnic group must decide its own path between acculturation and assimilation, self-consciousness and like-mindedness, heritage and choice, roots and routes.

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