

Introducing the Fantastic Findings Forum

By Howard Rambsy II

For far too long, legitimacy in scholarly publishing has been implicitly tied to articles of 6,000 to 8,000 words or more. What that meant, in practice, is that an abundance of short insights went unpublished. Yet some of our most generative and illuminating ideas appear in relatively brief observations.

I began to envision an idea, what I called the “Fantastic Findings Forum,” where a group of scholars in African American literature would respond in 250 to 400 words to a common prompt highlighting a useful, interesting, surprising, or overlooked discovery that they had made. The forum makes room for a convergence of brief illuminating reflections, rather than the single-authored essays that pervade our discipline. It is designed to foreground discovery and the value of attentive rereading.

Like many of my projects, I enlisted the collaboration of Elizabeth Cali, who has worked with me on several initiatives and provided the basis for my first prompt in the series, which invited contributors to reflect on a notable moment they had previously overlooked in a Toni Morrison novel and why that discovery now matters to them.

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How Morrison Treats Sex and Intimacy

By Elizabeth Cali

Sex has little to say for intimacy in Morrison’s fiction.

One of the earliest lessons readers learn when encountering Toni Morrison’s fiction is the complexity with which she navigates well worn ideas and topics, the way she re-works and disrupts ideas readers presume they fully understand – ideas like safety, friendship, even sex.

Returning to Morrison’s novels for close study over several years provided me the space to think deeply about the significance of key scenes and moments that emerge in class discussion and broad conversation about Morrison’s major works. I began to notice, first as an inkling and later an expanding thread of possibility, that although Morrison positions consensual sexual involvement as a site of tension in her characters’ relationships with one another, that sexual activity is remarkably positioned as a harbinger of failed intimacy.

Not unlike everyday people, Morrison’s characters turn to sex for comfort and the release of pent up longing, as Sethe and Paul D do upon Paul D’s arrival at 124 in *Beloved*. And they turn to sex for entertainment and distraction as Jude Greene and Sula do in *Sula*. But it’s most interesting that sex is rarely, if ever, where Morrison’s characters find emotional and psychological intimacy. Rather, Sethe and Paul D are disaffected from any notions of romantic enchantment once they – finally, from Paul D’s perspective – become sexually involved. They turn away from one another in the briefly shared bed. And while Jude Greene takes off following Nel’s discovery of his betrayal with Sula, the fact that sex with her friend’s husband could drive Nel away from her leaves Sula baffled.

No, sex seems a distinctly unsuitable or failed road to intimacy for Morrison's characters. Indeed, moments of emotional and psychological intimacy arrive for Morrison's characters often when they are at a great physical distance from one another. Consider the moment that Sixo, in *Beloved*, describes the 40-mile woman as "a friend of my mind." And then there's Nel's sorrowful realization as *Sula* closes, in which she mourns the distance that sexual betrayal placed between her and her best friend upon Sula's passing: "All that time, all that time, I thought I was missing Jude" [...] 'O Lord, Sula,' she cried, 'girl,girl,girlgirlgirl.'" They've never been farther apart. Or closer.

Sula: Preventing a Fight Scene

By Donavan Ramon

I vividly recall my first time reading *Sula*. It was twenty years ago, in my undergraduate *Black Women Writers* course at Hunter College. Most of the readings were in an anthology, but this was one of the few texts we read in its entirety, and one of the first in my reading history that I could not put down. As I research fight scenes by Black men, rereading *Sula* reminds me that there is something fundamentally different about the ones Black women writers narrate. In Morrison's case, *Sula* actually *prevents* a fight scene through her self-mutilation in front of four white boys.

I was raised primarily around women, but this society of "outlaw women" in the text was unlike any I had ever encountered. One of the many reasons the title character is an outlaw woman is that she stands up for herself and exhibits little fear around men, especially compared to the cautious Nel. This is crystallized in their youth: "four white boys in their early teens" bullied Nel on her way from school, pushing her to the point of taking a longer route home. However, when she walks home with Sula, they take "the shortest way" and encounter the boys who intend to terrorize them. Preparing to fight back, Sula retrieves her knife and slices off her own fingertip!

I agree with Sula's message here that there are no limits to what she would do to *them* given her own self-mutilation. On a more symbolic level, Sula fights off the Four Horsemen from the Book of Revelation. They are in the desolate land of the Bottom and represent impending doom. The Biblical Four Horsemen symbolize the catastrophe of the Apocalypse, while Morrison's Four Horsemen foreshadow many tragedies, including Chicken Little's death in the next scene. Black writers referencing the New Testament is nothing new; what is new is how Sula responds to the symbolic Four Horsemen by cutting off the tip of her finger to keep them away. Morrison provides the introduction to my edition, arguing that "outlaw women are fascinating" in part because they are "not under the rule of men." Few scenes in *Sula* affirm this more than scaring off the symbolic Four Horsemen with a missing fingertip.

Morrison's One Liners as Witness

By Cindy N. Reed

I listened to Toni Morrison's textured, sure tone narrating the *Sula* audiobook, taking pleasure in being read to as I followed along with a print copy. Quite familiar with the novel and knowing what to expect, I still clung to every word of Eva's notable monologue during a confrontation with her daughter Hannah. Hearing the words as my eyes moved across the page intensified the reading experience, allowing me to feel the full tension of Eva's polemic against Hannah's question of if she ever loved her children. I anticipated the auditory delivery of a signature Morrison one-liner I often felt vividly on the page—only it never came.

The audio recording omits the pivotal remark on which the scene hinges when an insulted mother checks an uncertain child: “what you talkin’ ‘bout did I love you girl I stayed alive for you” (69). *I stayed alive for you*. The one-liner refutes Hannah’s misconception of the physical evidence of parental affection and instead reframes love as an act of daily presence and endurance. What’s more, Eva’s response insists that choosing to live for someone is as loving as playing with children in their youth or the singular act of sacrificing her life in death for them. Without this line in the audio version, the force of Eva’s retort falls flat.

The omission caused me to consider the significance of Morrison’s one-liners beyond artistic expression. While Eva’s remark indirectly answers Hannah’s question and serves as a release valve to express mounting tension between the characters, the writer’s one-liners also resonate with readers by speaking our elusive experiences and sentiments. Reading as a daughter and a mother, I felt the weight of Eva’s words on the page, locating a way to interpret my parents’ approaches and situate my own maternal perspective. My strong appreciation of a Morrison one-liner is hardly singular; her readers often have one, and sometimes several, phrases or sentences they value most—lines that stop them in their tracks the first time they read it, lingers in their thoughts, and springs forth from memory on command.

Just as Morrison’s one-liners testify to the inner lives of her characters, they bear witness to her readers by offering language to articulate the emotions and experiences we often sense but struggle to say.

Remembering Manlove

By Angel Dye

The women characters in Toni Morrison’s *Sula* are so dynamic and rich for analyzing that it is somewhat easy to overlook the equally significant impacts of the men in the novel—regardless of how present or absent they are textually. One of those important men who I have somehow how pushed out of my mind in many readings of *Sula* is the title character’s grandfather, Eva Peace’s husband nicknamed “BoyBoy.” BoyBoy’s absence accounts for so much of the nontraditional maternal and feminine knowledge that is passed down to Sula through Eva and her mother Hannah.

Eva’s belief that her life in Medallion is clouded with poverty because BoyBoy’s job as a carpenter’s assistant moves them away from her family in Virginia is a detail that I had not sat with seriously until recently. “They lived there a year before they had an outhouse” is such a quick but devastating truth about the Peace family’s lack of resources and, I imagine, dignity (33). Eva’s decision to sacrifice one of her legs for a payout changes the financial situation that BoyBoy leaves her and their three children in when he walks out after five years, but it does not eradicate her hate for him. “Knowing that she would hate him long and well” gives Eva’s life purpose, and it’s this irreverent regard for men that Hannah and Sula inherit from the matriarch.

Morrison was a product of The Great Migration, the granddaughter of sharecroppers who migrated to Ohio from Alabama, so her brief inclusion of Eva’s Virginia roots and subsequent bitterness at leaving them for a man is resonant. So much of who Hannah and Eva become—male-centered women whose supposed “manlove” is actually sex- and attention-love—is because they have only learned to hate one man intensely, the disappeared BoyBoy (41). I’m seeing BoyBoy’s presence/absence with new eyes now because so much of what we love about Morrison novels is their dynamic character descriptions, but with only a glimpse of this integral male character in *Sula*, the Peace women’s stories still cohere around Eva’s hatred of him and their insistence on their own pleasure with every other man as a means to that end.

A common critique of Morrison is that her work is misandrist, but her careful situation of BoyBoy in a narrative about flippant, complex women reminds me that she’s an architect and a realist upending gender and sexual politics at all times.

Same Holiday, New Shadrack

By Jeremiah Carter

The first time I read *Sula*, I understood the 1941 tunnel disaster as the logical culmination of Shadrack's madness, the inevitable end of a ritual that had always flirted with catastrophe. National Suicide Day seemed like a joke that finally turned literal. I did not linger over the quiet pages that precede it, the subtle shifts in Shadrack's interior life. I remembered the bell and the rope; I forgot the loneliness.

Returning to the novel, I was struck by Morrison's line that "Shadrack had improved enough to feel lonely." That sentence undid my earlier reading. The compulsive order that once governed him begins to erode not into chaos but into absence. He drinks less. He forgets to mark the days. He misses the noise that once protected him from feeling anything at all. The robin that flies into his shack and then escapes leaves him bereft; he waits for its return. This is not deterioration but recovery. He is becoming capable of longing. Even Sula's purple-and-white belt takes on new weight. When he recalls telling her "always," it no longer sounds like a delusion but like an attempt to promise continuity in a world defined by decay. He shifts from mastering death to comforting life.

The tunnel disaster reads differently now. The community joins Shadrack's procession at the very moment he has begun loosening his dependence on ritual. He does not lead them as a prophet of annihilation but as a man who has, quietly, begun to heal. The catastrophe feels less like the fulfillment of madness and more like a tragic convergence of exclusion and hope, with Shadrack caught in the middle.

Recognizing that I once overlooked his loneliness reminds me how easily I mistake visible ritual for pathology while missing the fragile, interior work of becoming human again.

Covenant-Making and Breaking in *Beloved*

By Tisha M. Brooks

I've been reading Morrison's novels for 30 years and *Beloved* is one I return to annually. Anyone who knows me, knows I love to annotate Morrison's work but there's no text I've annotated more than *Beloved*. Given how closely I have tended to this novel, I was surprised to have my reading of the text transformed by my first-year undergraduate research assistant this semester.*

For the past 2 months, the 2 of us have met weekly to discuss Morrison's novel. Recently, when discussing the woodshed scene, she explained, "I keep coming back to the moment when Sethe nurses Denver after killing her sister." "So," the narrator explains, "Denver took her mother's milk right along with the blood of her sister" (152). After reading this line aloud, my student said, "I think this is a covenant." I'm sure my eyes visibly widened at this pronouncement. Despite having previously written about Morrison's reference to biblical covenant in the novel's epigraph from Romans 9:25, I somehow had missed the spiritual significance of this moment. And naming this act as covenantal expanded and deepened my reading of the free Black community foregrounded in the novel as well as my understanding of the arrival of the four horsemen.

As my student asserted, the transference of blood binds together Denver, her murdered sibling, *Beloved*, and their mother Sethe. Her reading pushed me to see how blood also reflects the breakdown of covenant between Sethe and the community. Previous scenes in the book bear witness to a collective covenant declaring this free Black community as a space of freedom - a shared commitment to stand down slavery in all its forms. The

subsequent failure of anyone in the community to warn Baby Suggs or Sethe about the arrival of the four horsemen marks a break in the shared promise of and commitment to freedom. As such, the entire community becomes vulnerable to slavery's violence and recklessness. While the law defines Sethe as both property and criminal, by the end, the novel showcases a shift in the community's own judgmental response when Denver reaches out for help. When the women gather around 124 Bluestone Road to bathe Sethe in song, the covenant is restored this time through sound rather than through blood, as they once again reassert their collective responsibility to protect each other from the evils of the world.

Without these weekly discussions of Morrison's novel, I would have missed the invasion of the four horsemen as the consequence of broken covenant and the women's sound bath in the end as a marker of covenant restored.

*Many thanks to Nmesomachukwu Ezeokafor for her insightful contributions to my reading of *Beloved*.

Milkman Against the Flow

By Howard Rambsy II

The first time, almost thirty years ago, and on the occasions after that when I encountered that scene, I either overlooked it or forgot that I had read it. Then, not so long ago, in one of our many conversations about life and literature, I made a comment about something that had happened out in the world, and my colleague Elizabeth Cali compared it to a scene in *Song of Solomon* in which Milkman walks in one direction while everyone else moves the other way. I initially agreed, then realized I wasn't sure which scene she meant and had to ask her to clarify.

There it was, with Milkman recalling a "long-ago evening" when "everybody was crammed on one side of the street, going in the direction he was coming from. Nobody was going his way" (106). Ultimately, it's not a major scene, but it contributes to one of those many subtle moments in the narrative where Milkman is coming to realize that he's been missing something, that things are not going along with his sense of direction.

In interviews, Morrison mentioned that she had a particular image in mind for the scene: Edvard Munch's *Evening on Karl Johan Street* (1892), where a crowd advances toward the viewer and a solitary figure moves against the flow. That scene with Milkman walking opposite everyone else now stands out to me in part because of how I came to recognize that I had overlooked it: I needed to be in extended conversations with a serious Morrison reader who assumed that the scene was also on my mind. The first couple of times that I read *Song of Solomon*, I did so outside of class, on my own, and before writing about the novel. I was not inclined to linger on what seemed like minor details. Instead, I simply read this book, which I consider one of my all-time favorites, for fun.

Realizing that I missed that scene reminds me how reading Morrison depends on participating in a community of active, attentive readers, how their eyes and ears can assist in extending my own senses of perception.