

The Figure *Sula* Makes: The Narrative Technique of Defragmentation

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As part of a larger research, this essay introduces the concept of an aesthetics of defragmentation in an attempt to create a critical–theoretical context intrinsic to African American cultural traditions for the reading of Toni Morrison’s fiction. Here, I specifically argue that the narrative technique of defragmentation I observed in *Sula* enacts the characters’ acts of becoming, which, yet again, mirror African American women’s historical efforts to survive whole in Diaspora. In terms of fiction, it means a mode of narrative that is both related and fragmented. The narrative evolves along broken lines out of restless processes of rhythmic dispersion and recollection of fragmented images, storylines, and character descriptions. The aesthetics of defragmentation I propose here dynamically incorporates both the modernist and the postmodernist impulses that arguably energize Morrison’s fiction and hails the redemptive power of Morrison’s culture-bearing art.

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I believe that literature reclaims private life.
— Toni Morrison

The intention of this paper is to initiate a critical–theoretical context for the reading of Toni Morrison’s fiction. The conceptual framework governing it will be constructed around what I call processes of fragmentation and defragmentation. I borrowed this notion from a computer program and applied it to the dynamics of self-creation represented in Morrison’s novels. Morrison herself describes – without using these words – processes of fragmentation when she characterizes contemporary American existence as one loaded with “feelings of rage, fear, disorder, helplessness ... the shudder of the intellect when language has failed it.” Nevertheless, she also asserts her belief in the redemptive power of literature (Myers). I take Morrison to call attention to the fragmented sense of time, language, and existence in today’s United States. Fragmentation occurs when individuals are unable to experience the flow of time because they are lost in its unconnected pieces; when their thoughts are chipped into clicks to copy–paste the blitz of chaotic images piercing the brain at Internet speed; and when verbal expressions are abbreviated to mind boggling series of acronyms. At such times, she suggests, literature can act as a ‘defragmenter’ that may enable writers and readers alike to construct more coherent and cohesive stories – narratives – of their own selves: to reclaim their private lives by being prompted into what I call the creative process of defragmentation.

This reading of *Sula*, then, advances the concept of ‘creative process of defragmentation,’ which arguably energizes Morrison’s fiction. From a narrower perspective, it specifically claims that in *Sula*, Morrison uses the narrative technique of defragmentation to (re)enact the processes of the female characters’ own self-creation: their ordeals and experiments of becoming. I will try to demonstrate this specific claim through the close-reading of the novel so as to argue that the female self-creation which is (re)presented (both presented and represented) in the novel is a process predominantly fuelled by deliberate defragmentation, where defragmentation itself is an active response to the forced fragmentation African American women have always passively suffered, yet actively challenged.¹

In the terminology of this paper, African Americans’ overall fragmented state demanded a constant dialogue with the past relics and present scraps of their texts and selves in order to maintain a loose cultural and textual continuity, a frail sense of belonging, and self-respect. Morrison’s storytelling epitomizes dialogism in time and space, point of view, character, technique, and composition. Her writing evolves through a constantly though unexpectedly shifting point of view, an unpredictable choir of narrative voices, juxtaposed fragments of events and images that are in dialogue with one another but could hardly form a straightforward linear cause-an-effect plot; that is, a monologue (*сказ*).²

Without claiming that any sorts of wholeness or authentic self have ever existed in African American literary or life experience, this paper only wishes to propose that *Sula*’s narrative technique of defragmentation may re-enact a yearning for an authentic self and existential wholeness. My research is based on primary literary and visual texts rather than on secondary, theoretical hypotheses. I have observed a formal and thematic striving for textual as well as thematic wholeness and authenticity in *Sula* (and elsewhere),³ therefore, I set out to explore the diverse expressions of this artistic struggle for wholeness and to see whether or not it has some roots in the practices of African American vernacular art forms, such as quilting, blues, jazz, and storytelling, as well as in American cultural history and history.⁴ Current African American literary scholars and critics do not appear to contradict my thesis, though. Bernard

W. Bell in *The Contemporary African American Novel: Its Folk Roots and Modern Literary Branches* sums up his basic theoretical beliefs almost in the exact terms of my own tentative findings pointing to a four-century-old tenet of formal and thematic defragmentation in African American literature (and culture).⁵ I suggest rereading primary literary and visual texts from the perspective of the self-creative defragmentation process this paper tentatively articulates by the close-reading of Morrison's *Sula*.⁶

The narrative technique of defragmentation in *Sula* is enacted in the first chapter. In the course of the novel, narrator and reader together will "try to tie the loose cords" of the text just as Shadrack, "[l]aced and silent in his small bed ... tried to tie the loose cords in his mind" (10). Narrator and reader will need to be plotting their course throughout the novel: where they would have to leap next (11). This journey will make the walkers shuffle, grow dizzy, stop for breath and start again "stumbling and sweating" (12) to order (defragment) the disorderly (fragmented) imagery and storylines of the novel. However, certain narrative knots, cross-bucks, will tentatively pave the way. Like Shadrack's "very life depended on the release of the knots" (12) of his shoelaces, the making of the whole story also depends on the disentanglement of the narrative nodes that amount to the chronological plotline of *Sula*. Together with Shadrack returning back home to the Bottom, narrator and reader alike will begin "a struggle to order and focus experience" (15), which is the main preoccupation of the inhabitants of the Bottom, too.

They were mightily preoccupied with earthly things – and each other, wondering even as early as 1920 what Shadrack was all about, what that little girl Sula who grew into a woman in their town was all about, and what they themselves were all about, tucked up there in the Bottom. (6)

Sula is an unruly novel; however, its plot could be explored along two main aesthetic devices. On the one hand, [1a] the narrative is arranged into a chronological sequence of chapters in the form of 'story quilts' – like in Faith Ringgold's *French Collection* – where each story quilt focuses on a significant event by telling and showing a literal or a figurative death (Christian 1980, Reddy 1988). The motif of death constitutes the basic cord of the novel. It runs through the whole text as its "hot solo" (Gioia 112–113). Following the prologue, the narrative "cross-bucks" (Baker 8), focal points, the knots on Shadrack's "hangman's rope" are metonymically titled by the years when the focal events happen. An alternative, [1b] symbolic structuring of the novel follows the diamond pattern in quilting, where the diamond is symbolic of the cycles of life. Each apex symbolizes a stage in life: birth, life, death, and rebirth. The steady motif of death intersecting the novel is sometimes forced out of rhythm by an offbeat accentuation of the rebirth motif in death. Thus, the motif of death is not a solo but a duet, a collaboration of "a cowbell and a hangman's rope calling the people together" (14). Therefore, just as Shadrack's National Suicide Day functions to "order and focus experience," the chain of deaths anchored in narrated time in chronological order functions to order and focus the novel's fragmented text.

In addition to the [1] rhythmically woven and knotted motif of literal and metaphorical deaths articulated in the pulsating imagery of water, fire, air, and earth, *Sula*'s narrative design, on the other hand, displays [2] a rich though fragmented pattern of sensual imagery. The fragments of a larger picture, event, or scene are repeated with difference, for instance, from a different point of view. These fragments of images, events, and scenes are in dialogue with

one another and with their vernacular subtexts to form the texture of the novel. This dialogue within and among the novel's fragments enables the defragmentation of the novel's text into momentary narrative wholes. In African and African American quilting (to use a simile culturally more specific than the process of defragmentation), these conventions are called multiple patterning and pattern improvisation, where changes in the pattern signify on the previous forms, modify the established meanings, and open up spaces for new possible meanings (Wahlman 42–69). These three dynamic qualities of signifying, modifying, and opening up new space are also characteristic of the narrative technique of defragmentation.

To illustrate how multiple patterning and pattern improvisations leading to defragmentation work in *Sula*, let us have a quick look at one typical example evolving in chapters "1921" and "1923." The narrator uses the image of a spoon to sum up the crucial characteristics of Eva's two children who live with her, Hannah and Plum. Sula once sees Hannah having sex "curled spoon in the arms of a man" (44), where the metaphor of the curled spoon intimates Hannah's great sexual appetite or fervent "manlove." When Plum returns from war, he behaves like a drunkard but never drinks. Eva watches and Hannah waits for signs. Eventually, Hannah discovers the "bent spoon black from steady cooking" (45), where the burnt bent spoon signifies Plum's addiction to heroin. The repetition of the spoon figure with a slight, practical difference to fit the different purpose now has a double effect. First, the curled spoon of Hannah's orgasmic, convoluted, body reinforces the idea that both Hannah and Plum spoon out pleasure from their indulgencies, which are both addictions. Second, the bent spoon black from constant burning suggests that it may be as dangerous to abuse sex as drugs. Hannah's joyous coquetry with men is fairly overshadowed by Plum's cheerful obsession with heroin, because of the spoon image repeated within a slightly different pattern in a significantly different context. Later, when Eva gets prepared to burn Plum, she first holds him in her arms. Plum draws blissful pleasure from his mother's embrace; however, that embrace is also the grip of death for him. When he burns, the "*whoosh* of flames engulfed him" (48): the motifs of burning and embrace are repeated and joined. Plum is literally burning while he is metaphorically embraced. Hannah is metaphorically burning in sexual pleasure while literally embraced. In chapter "1923," in Hannah's burning scene, her agonizing, convoluted, body is "smoke-and-flame-bound" (76). Now, the motifs of burning and embrace are reversed. Eva smells the "familiar odour of cooked flesh" (77), which reminds her and the reader of Plum's wet burning as well as of the image of the "bent spoon black from steady cooking" (45). The multiply patterned and repeatedly improvised upon curved and bent spoon imagery has come to a full circle, just as Hannah's and Plum's somewhat distorted lives have.

The events, however, prompt Eva into thinking and remembering. She muses over "the perfection of the judgment against her" (78), which is a process of defragmentation: past things are shortly arranged and gain meaning from Eva's current point of view. She makes cause-and-effect relations between the events and signs she has experienced and seen in the past two years. A well-formed, coherent, and cohesive plotline emerges from the past that culminates in Eva's present thoughts and forebodes future logical expectations in connection with Sula, who in Eva's opinion "watched Hannah burn not because she was paralyzed, but because she was interested" (78). It is also significant that Eva discusses her doubts with other members of the community. The community has a direct impact on individuals in the Bottom. By remembering what has happened and by combining the fragments of events into a meaningful narrative pattern, Eva performs both the acts of self-defragmentation and textual defragmentation: she thinks she has understood something of her self as well as something of

what has been happening around her and what she can expect to happen in the future. Both Eva's consciousness and *Sula's* fragmented text enjoy a momentary wholeness.

Now, let us read the first concrete full account of narrative defragmentation. In "1920," Helene and Nel need to travel down to New Orleans, because Helene's grandmother, Cecile Sabat, a pious woman who raised her and saved her from her Creole whore mother, Rochelle, is dying. The return seems inevitable. Helene is deeply troubled to go south. She is keenly aware of the strict rules of segregation, both written and unwritten. Her best protection, she thinks, is an elegant dress, but when distraction leads her, by accident, into a train's Whites Only car, not even her beautiful brown dress can save her from being humiliated by the racist white conductor. Later, they are further humiliated, because there are no toilets for black people on the train: Helene and Nel must pee on the field and use leaves instead of toilet paper. Whereas Helene is able to transform herself into a model of pious and honourable personality in the Bottom, the South slowly strips her of all protective clothing. This fragmentation begins the moment she steps into the southbound train, when the white conductor calls her "gal" (10), a marker that denies Helene's individuality, her wholeness as a person. The word instantly reminds her of her Southern upbringing. The memory makes her physically tremble (20). During their trip South, Nel sees the exterior of her once-powerful mother slowly fall to pieces, and she realizes that, beneath, her mother is weak and vulnerable.

After they have arrived back home, though, Nel experiences her first private moment of self-defragmentation by resolving to develop her "me-ness" (28–29). The process of her very intimate, minuscule self-defragmentation is a crystallized model for all other such processes in the novel.

Nel sat on the red-velvet sofa listening to her mother but remembering the smell and the tight, tight hug of the woman in yellow who rubbed burned matches over her eyes. Late that night after the fire was made, the cold supper eaten, the surface dust removed, Nel lay in bed thinking of her trip. She remembered clearly the urine running down and into her stockings until she learned how to squat properly; the disgust of the face of the dead woman and the sound of the funeral drums. It had been an exhilarating trip but a fearful one. She had been frightened of the soldiers' eyes on the train, the black wreath on the door, the custard pudding she believed lurked under her mother's heavy dress, the feel of unknown streets and unknown people. But she had gone on a trip, and now she was different. She got out of bed and lit the lamp to look in the mirror. There was her face, plain brown eyes, three braids and the nose her mother hated. She looked for a long time and suddenly a shiver ran through her. "I am me," she whispered. "Me."

Nel didn't know quite what she meant, but on the other hand she knew exactly what she meant.

"I'm me. I'm not their daughter. I'm not Nel. I'm me. Me."

Each time she said the word me there was a gathering in her like power, like joy, like fear. Back in bed with her discovery she stared out the window at the dark leaves of the horse chestnut.

"Me," she murmured. And then, sinking deeper into the quilts, "I want ... I want to be ... wonderful. Oh, Jesus, make me wonderful."

The many experiences of her trip crowded in on her. She slept. (28–29) [shading added.]

In her late night musing over their trip, Nel first recollects her memories, the temporal fragments of her experience, then enumerates her distinctive body parts, her spatial corporal fragments. She has seen a dead body, the disintegration of her mother's racial identity, and taken part in a funeral. In her remembering, all four natural elements gather: air in the form of the smell of Rochelle's perfume, fire burning in the fireplace in the room, earth in the form of dust, and urine as water. The gathering of the elements creating and recreating the cycle of life, death, and rebirth are paralleled in a similar gathering of power, joy, and fear in Nel's consciousness. She fast rearranges the spatial-temporal bits and pieces at hand and consciously initiates a new story about herself. Nel's self-defragmentation is also a textual defragmentation, since the scattered images, events, and character sketches gain significance from Nel's present point of view. By looking back, the narrative seems to have been amounting to this climatic moment. It appears logical that Nel may now openly "cultivate a friend in spite of her mother" because of her "new found me-ness" (29). Nel sleeps only to wake up reborn the next morning. In *Sula*, defragmentation is, then, a complex process of reckoning of temporal and spatial fragments available after experiencing a severe loss, usually a death. Technically, in the process of defragmentation, the actual imagery of all four natural elements gathers around a narrative centre of gravity. From that moment, both text and self appear to be coherent and cohesive. In the life of the novel, these are moments of emplotment. In the life of the individual character, these are moments of revelation, redemption, and a sense of self-reliance.

As critics usually notice, the focalizing event in each chapter of *Sula* is a literal or a figurative death (Christian 1980, Reddy 1988).⁷ These deaths are different in nature/Nature, though. Whenever a significant death occurs, the scattered imagery of the two basic elements of Nature – fire and water – gathers. Whenever a death bearing a germ of rebirth occurs, all four Natural elements – water, fire, air, and earth – gather. Such deaths-rebirths are somewhat all connected to Sula. The combination of the two kinds of gathering lends the narrative its thematic pulsation, its syncopated rhythmic pattern.

The two most complex and significant deaths are those of the headless soldier running next to Shadrack in the battlefield and of Sula. They both die a literal and a symbolic death. He is not only a soldier but also The Unknown Solider commemorating the many futile deaths in World War I. Under the influence of this death, Shadrack establishes National Suicide Day, which runs its full course in the novel, fulfilling its vocation by marching many into the mouth of the New River Road tunnel, which collapses in "1941." 1941 is also the year when the U.S. openly gets involved in World War II. On a symbolic level, the death of an/the unknown soldier and the National Suicide Day connect the two world wars. Some critics rightly read *Sula* as an anti-war novel (Hunt 1993).

By the time of Sula's death in 1940, she has become the pariah of the town: a real mythic figure. Her comings and goings are accompanied with bad Nature signs, which the community reads to testify to her evil nature. She is a roach, a bitch, and Devil incarnate (113–117). While she lives, the Bottom people dislocate all their hatred into her, and once "the source of their personal misfortune was identified, they had leave to protect an love each other" (117). Sula thus acts as a defragmenter in the life of the Bottom. People gaining some

free space to rearrange the fragments of their miserable lives, “began to cherish their husbands and wives, protect their children, repair their homes and in general band together against the devil in their midst” (117–118).

Sula’s death is not less significant than her life. As mythic figures often do, Sula dies with many – three – deaths: symbolic, metaphoric, and physical. When Nel visits Sula on her deathbed, Sula asks her:

“You think I don’t know what your life is like just because I ain’t living it? I know what every colored woman in this country is doing.”

“What’ that?”

“Dying. Just like me. But the difference is they dying like a stump. Me, I’m going down like one of those redwoods. I sure did live in this world.” (143)

Her dying, first, symbolizes every African American woman’s life. This wider, symbolic significance of Sula’s death also plays an important structuring role in the narrative. Her two metaphorical deaths on the sheet signify on the novel’s narrative technique. Her physical death will figure in the future lives of Shadrack, the Bottom, and Nel by invoking moments of wholeness through processes of defragmentation.

Sula’s multifaceted death is the centre of narrative gravity in the novel, the focal defragmenting device. All narrative particles – past and future fragments of images, events, plotlines, and themes – seem to gravitate toward it. The best description of this process of gathering and scattering, that is defragmentation, is Sula’s first lovemaking scene leading her to “the postcoital privateness in which she met herself, welcomed herself, and joined herself in matchless harmony” (123); and in which *Sula*’s text meets its fragments, welcomes itself, and joins itself in matchless harmony, though, for just a little while.

During lovemaking she found and needed to find the cutting edge. When she left off cooperating with her body and began to assert herself in the act, particles of strength gathered in her like steel shavings drawn to a spacious magnetic center, forming a tight cluster that nothing, it seemed, could break. And there was utmost irony and outrage in lying under someone, in a position of surrender, feeling her own abiding strength and limitless power. But the cluster did break, fall apart, and in her panic to hold it together she leaped from the edge into soundlessness and went down howling, howling in a stinging awareness of the endings of things: an eye of sorrow in the midst of all that hurricane rage of joy. There, in the center of that silence was not eternity but death of time and loneliness so profound the word itself had no meaning. For loneliness assumed the absence of other people, and the solitude she found in that desperate terrain had never admitted the possibility of other people. She wept then. (123)

To achieve moments of wholeness, Sula/*Sula* needs asserting the self to gather the fragments of experience/text into a coherent and cohesive cluster of life/narrative. Despite the desire to maintain this ideal state of fullness, self/text disintegrates. In a relationship, this state is both that of submission and domination, in which self and text realize their limits: boundaries and possibilities. The passage seems to suggest that self-defragmentation, or self-reliance, involves recognizing “the endings of things,” that is, missing both the self and the other while

they are still present by experiencing “the closed place in the middle” of the self (61, 62, 64, 118, 170). In the narrative, such moments create new point of views that enable transitory emplotment that fills the voids, breaks, cracks, and discontinuities of the text.

While Sula is literally dying in “1940,” not only do the ingredients of the main patterns of imagery and themes gather, but also the four main Natural elements draw closer: fire—fever, water—river—sweat, air—wind, earth—vegetation, heralding *Sula/Sula’s* self-defragmentation. It is a false alarm, though. After Nel leaves her old friend, Sula remembers their friendship and her life. “Pictures drifted through her head as lightly as dandelion spores” (147). The dandelion spores of the past all seem the same to her, somewhat dusted. After that, she has a dream of disintegration and her panic to collect the dust of the disintegrated body in handfuls. Then, the elements overwhelm her. Pain takes hold.

First a fluttering as of doves in her stomach, then a kind of burning, followed by a spread of thin wires to other parts of her body. Once the wires of liquid pain were in place, they jelled and began to throb. (148)

Just as tiny streaks of different but intermingling storylines twine all over the narrative, Sula’s body is interlaced with thin wires of pain. Whenever these thin wires gather the narrative’s heartthrob intensifies. The three most intense narrative heartthrobs, the most complicated knots on Shadrack’s hangman’s rope, are the death of Sula and Nel’s friendship, Sula’s dying and death, and Nel’s revival, which mutually presuppose as well as contain one another.

The narration, the imagery, and the structure of Sula’s dying all re-enact the scene in which their friendship is killed by Sula’s infidelity and Nel’s timidity to look at the “gray ball of fur” of her suppressed feelings for Jude and Sula (104–111). Neither Nel nor Sula are capable of self-defragmentation at these climatic moments. They both fail to “rememory” each other. Although Sula realizes that all she has needed is to the boundaries of her own self; and although the reader is half convinced that death is the best thing that could happen to the burned out, feverish Sula (149), neither Sula nor the narrative gain a new point of view from which the fragments of both her life and her story could undergo the redemptive process of defragmentation to achieve wholeness through successful emplotment. Sula’s life-fragments are scattered in wind like “dandelion spores” while Nel’s life-fragments are condensed in a “muddy ball of fur,” neither of which promise liberation and redemption, which is well expressed in both women’s inability to cry with the healing cry of the women at Chicken Little’s and Hannah’s funerals. Since Sula dies, she will never have the possibility to listen to Nel’s story and accept her point of view. In a narrative sense, she is “damned.” Nel, however, may listen to what Sula can tell her, she may recognize the importance of sharing experience with others in making her own self.

Nel’s awakening scene is a process of both narrative and personal defragmentation. After having been faced with several obscure particles of her past by Eva, she rearranges the fragments, and the new constellation of events allows her to gain a new point of view. It is significant that she is able to do so because of letting Sula’s perspective emerge. By “listening” to the other side of their story, Nel frees up some free space that is necessary to run the process of defragmentation.

Outside she fastened her coat against the rising wind. The top button was missing so she covered her throat with her hand. A bright space opened in her head and memory seeped into it. (169) ...

Shadrack and Nel moved in different directions. The distance between them increased as they remembered gone things.

Suddenly Nel stopped. Her eye twitched and burned a little.

“Sula?” she whispered, gazing at the tops of trees. “Sula?”

Leaves stirred; mud shifted; there was the smell of overripe green things. A soft ball of fur broke and scattered like dandelion spores in the breeze.

“All that time, all that time, I thought I was missing Jude.” And the loss pressed down on her chest and came up into her throat. “We was girls together,” she said as though explaining something. “O Lord, Sula,” she cried, “girl, girl, girlgirlgirl.” (174)

Technically, the narrative collects all four natural elements. The main protagonists, or their names on the page, reappear, and most significantly, the overall quilt of Sula and Nel's friendship is pieced together: all main visual and aural patterns and images of their relationship or of their individual selves are reiterated, gathered in one final story quilt surface. By visualizing the break of Nel's private “gray ball of fur” metaphor by Sula's deathbed metaphor of scattered “dandelion spores,” the narrative reinforces the girls selves in relation and dialogue with each other through the temporary defragmentation of their “opposite directions” and “separate thoughts.” Nel's deferred moment of defragmentation fulfils itself, bearing a tentative promise of rebirth. Sula's life too earns its symbolic and pragmatic significance as a defragmenting power in the novel: destructive and creative; that is, redemptive.

Morrison works with the most basic creative ingredients available at hand: water, fire, earth, air, and their rhythmic combinations. This brief reading will observe how the multiply patterned mud imagery functions as an aesthetic import in the narrative. To map the novel's figurative texture in its entirety would transgress the limits of this paper. Nonetheless, the mud pattern may illustrate Morrison's overall technique of crafting—quilting the novel's imagery via fragmentation—defragmentation. Though the mud imagery is present all through the narrative, it is scattered throughout. The gathering of its elements further syncopates the heartbeat of the novel, and that is why the novel is so heart-gripping and heart-breaking at the same time without being simply pathetic.

Sula's main element is water, her eyes “were as steady and clean as rain” (53), and in the eyes of Nel, rain remains the main metaphor for her throughout the novel. In “1965,” when Nel is musing about Sula's funeral and the collapse of the tunnel, she identifies Sula with rain. Nel remembers the people eventually starting singing “Shall We Gather at the River?” “Perhaps Sula answered them even then, for it started to rain” (173), ponders Nel. Her remark alludes to the tunnel accident later in January, caused by a landslide because of the sudden melting of ice into water. When Sula returns and the robins finally leave in May, Nel senses the “green, rain-soaked Saturday nights” (94): the surest sign for Sula's presence back in her life. Not only does Sula carry the sign of water, she is also burning inside. Eva and the people in the Bottom call it “Hellfire” (93), but for Ajax, this mixture of water and fire is bliss on earth (128). “His idea of bliss (on earth as opposed to bliss in the sky) was a long bath in piping-hot water” (128). That “piping-hot water” stands for Sula's character is reinforced a couple of

lines further down, when Sula reminds Ajax that “Soaking in hot water give you a bad back;” with Ajax replying: “Soaking in Sula give me a bad back” (128).

Nel is more down to earth, down to vegetation. Every time the narrative is focalized from her point of view, earthy things abound: overripe green things, green grass, uprooted grass, leaves, dead leaves, daffodils, earth, soil, dust, and dirt. The narrator describes her enthusiasm because of Sula’s being back with a set of imagery moulded out of the fruit of earth and water.

Nel alone noticed the peculiar quality of May that followed the leaving of the birds. It had sheen, a glimmering as of green, rain-soaked Saturday nights ... of lemon-yellow afternoons bright with iced drinks and splashes of daffodils. It showed in the damp faces of her children and the river-smoothness of their voices. (94)

When they meet at twelve as “unshaped, formless things” (53) and set out to create themselves “something else to be,” their “meeting was fortunate, for it let them use each other to grow on” (52). They are fertile soil (Nel) and refreshing rain (Sula) for each other.

Mud, the mix of water and earth, is the third universal symbol for creation apart from water and fire. In the novel, the mud imagery suggests Sula and Nel’s togetherness and allusions to that, signals Nel’s missing of Sula in specific, and the pain of missing as such in general. It suggests that Sula and Nel together could have a chance of becoming. Their togetherness, however, would not mean a fusion and dissolution of their private selves. As Nel says, “Sula never competed; she simply helped others define themselves” (95). The connected though different nature of Sula and Nel’s shared self-creation is compellingly imitated in their laughter duet. “Her rapid soprano and Sula’s dark sleepy chuckle made a duet that frightened the cat and made the children run in from the back yard” (97). Also, when Sula enters Nel’s home, to Nel, everything seems to belong:

“the dishes piled in the sink looked as though they belonged there; the dust on the lamps sparkled; the hair brush lying on the “good” sofa in the living room did not have to be apologetically retrieved, and Nel’s grimy intractable children looked like their wild things happily insouciant in the May shine. (96)

Sula’s mere presence defragments Nel’s life with Jude, which “over the years had spun a steady gray web around her heart” (95). Nel feels to belong, too. Yet, it will take her as long and as far as the last page of the book to realize that she has always belonged to Sula rather than Jude.

I take mud to be a metaphor for Sula’s and Nel’s friendship, and the recognition of its missing. First, when they meet, the narrator calls them “unshaped, formless things,” as their creator who is going to shape them out of their ‘mudness’. Second, the river scene is the primary scene that shows how deeply the two little girls have clung to each other. Their ritual of digging and burying foreshadows a relationship for lifetime: only death can part them. Nel and Sula are playing in the grass digging a hole and then burying debris in it (mixing the rubbles of their separate lives), the image of mud is evoked by the constant mixing of earth and water vocabulary, like river, earth, sweat, dust, water, and dirt. Third, Nel first senses the

shifting mud in her guts after she has lost both Jude and Sula, when earth and water finally make mud, that is the word ‘mud’ is actually uttered in the book (104). Its meaning, however, is still unclear. The textual context suggests that this shifting movement of mud is more connected to Nel’s realization of the stupid loss of Sula than that of Jude: Nel thinks of Sula and Chicken Little’s funeral while the image of mud forms. “There was stirring, a movement of mud and dead leaves. She thought of the women at Chicken Little’s funeral” (107). It sounds like a sensual–emotional paraphrase of “the stupidity of loss” (107), the women cry for at the funeral.

Stirring has erotic connotations in the novel; and leaves, dead leaves may refer to Nel’s metaphoric death, since her symbolic medium of life is earth, vegetation.

There was stirring, a movement of mud and dead leaves. ... (107)

The mud shifted, the leaves stirred, the smell of overripe green things enveloped her and she announced the beginnings of her very own howl.

But it did not come.

The odor evaporated; the leaves were still, the mud settled. And finally there was nothing, just a flake of something dry and nasty in her throat. (108)

The pattern of shifting mud, stirring leaves, and smell of overripe things thus may signify Nel’s turning outside of her inside, her utter fragmentation, metaphorical vivisection. Jude’s name does not figure in these pages, whereas Sula’s figures five times. Actually, Nel is having a fictive conversation with her. Nel’s own howl does not come, either because she does not know for whom to cry or because she represses her cry for Sula. How much of it is conscious or unconscious one cannot say, but from this moment, Nel is playing in the dark.

The ingredients of the mud pattern improvised upon will figure again in Sula’s and Ajax’s lovemaking scene in “1939.” In this second death on the sheet picture, Sula is metaphorically vivisectioning Ajax’s body in her desire to understand the source of his beauty, and to possess him.

I will put my hand deep into your soil, lift it, sift it with my fingers, feel its warm surface and dewy chill below.

...

I will water your soil, keep it rich and moist. But how much? How much water to keep the loam moist? And how much loam will I need to keep my water still? And when do the two make mud?... (131)

Here again Ajax’s inside is turned out, his soil is being stirred up in Sula’s imagination. The scene is overtly sexual. Water and earth here too would make mud, which represents a strong desire for union with the beloved. However, in the symbolic frame of the novel, Ajax, the bird of freedom, the lover of airplanes and the blue sky, bears the element of air not earth. Mud, thus, only signifies the desire for emotional fulfilment, a “desire for love” (131). After Ajax elopes, Sula’s stream of consciousness monologue is actually a dialogue with what Nel said or would say in a similar situation. The mud pattern has gotten richer with its erotic overtones and the reader is surer that Nel’s shifting mud stirs up emotions of missing Sula rather than Jude. The imagery of mud belongs to both Sula’s and Nel’s means of expression

and imagination. This complex, bittersweet earth–vegetation pattern appears to signify the desire for love as well as the pain of the void, both the presence and the absence of the beloved stir up in Sula and Nel.

In “1940,” the mud imagery again falls into pieces. It remains present, though only in the form of its reminiscences. As Nel is visiting the dying Sula, it breaks into ingredients: dirt, stirring, and dew of sweat. After Sula finishes her hate speech about how the folks in the Bottom are going to love her, that is, miss her, she closes her eyes and thinks of “the wind pressing her dress between her legs as she ran up the bank of the river to four leaf-locked trees and the digging of holes in the earth” (146). Sula remembers the river scene with Nel, when the two first made mud. Nel, leaving, enumerates the missing presences of things and persons around, including Sula, however she does not quite turn to look at her. She leaves with an empty heart (146); while Sula thinks of her: “[Nel] thinking how much I have cost her and never remember the days when we were two throats and one eye and we had no price” (147). The two old friends fail to assemble the fragments of their friendship into a temporary whole.

At the tunnel disaster, literal mud buries and suffocates people. The event is focalized more from the Bottom’s point of view – for whom, Sula served as the container of their hatred (unlike for Nel, who deposited all her love in her). Therefore, the mixture of earth and water becomes a force of doomsday destruction rather than creation. In its full creative power, the multi-patterned mud imagery gathers at the end of the novel, which is focalized from Nel’s point of view.

Leaves stirred; mud shifted; there was the smell of overripe green things. A soft ball of fur broke and scattered like dandelion spores in the breeze. (174)

This is the fullest aesthetic constellation of Nel’s and Sula’s friendship in the novel. The combination of the complex water–earth–vegetation images and the interplay between the two globular patterns of Nel’s “ball of fur” and Sula’s “dandelion spores” together open up a narrative free space that enables both Nel’s and the novel’s creative defragmentation to begin. The dandelion spores of Sula’s experimental life that carried “Eva’s arrogance and Hannah’s self-indulgence” but lacked their sense of communal belonging (118) act as redemptive defragmenters for the soft ball of fur of Nel’s retiring, caring though timid, unimaginative self.

In *Beloved*, Paul D with his mouth traces out the amiable “chokecherry tree” of the sore whip scars – the fragmented tissue – in Sethe’s back (13–18), hence stirring up the memories of their shared past life back at Sweet Home. This is how the process of defragmentation works in *Sula*, too. It recognizes the fragmented state of existence as the form of being; however, by rejecting the state of forgetfulness, it also generates creative actions for achieving a sense of temporary whole existence by kneading it out of the temporal and spatial fragments within reach. What the creative process of defragmentation does is to momentarily (re)arrange the scraps and relics of fragmented selves to (re)create a contiguous form of being; which, in turn, results in opening up a great deal of free space for present and future use. The space freed up that way engenders the creation of a temporary sense of an effectively whole self. By the same token, the free space created by defragmentation may initiate a spatial shift toward a sense of self that becomes appropriate at that moment: an incomplete self pushes itself to the

fore and develops into the main figure of self-consciousness because a critical fragment that has been missing now has been (re)collected. The person's rememored life experience now is acting as the background to that figure.⁸

Processes of defragmentation thus involve both time travelling and space sliding. Just as African American diasporic life beginning with the Middle Passage, they demand both temporal and spatial gathering of fragmented selves. Accordingly, processes of defragmentation as a means of self-creation actuate both the gathering of fragments out of one's entire life experience – perceived and real – like a magnet attracts iron shavings into moments in which one feels whole and the bringing to the focal point a figure of self that becomes potent through spatial shifts for a moment. As follows, the creative process of defragmentation may help loosen the theoretical tension between constructivist (post-modern constructed) and essentialist (modernist authentic) models of self: the making up and the finding out (Step 19–20 and Duvall 8).

In my view, inspired by *Sula*'s narrative technique and the novel's elaboration of self-creation as a process of becoming through processes of defragmentation, the leading motifs of African American women's cultural experience in the American African Diaspora are the mutually superimposed patterns of their forced fragmentation and of their restless solos for self-defragmentation. These are the recurring themes individual black women (artists) can clearly recognize from fragments as well as join in and perform together with rhythmic variations but still in the overall swing of the syncopated composition of African American cultural traditions. This disorderly dynamics of destructive fragmentation and creative defragmentation, I have proposed, constitutes, governs, controls, and alters; that is, defines the redemptive aesthetics of Morrison's fiction. I have argued that *Sula*'s narrative technique of defragmentation (re)enacts the creative processes of the female characters' everyday struggles for becoming in the novel, which, in turn, may also mirror African American women's ingenious efforts to survive in Diaspora. In this way, *Sula* is both a *metaphora* and an *amphora* for life.

¹ The idea to name the self-creational process enacted by the narrative technique I observed while reading *Sula* as a "creative process of defragmentation" occurred to me while I was running Microsoft's DEFRAG.exe program because my PC had slowed down, practically becoming inoperative. I watched the little dynamic three-dimensional icon constructed of small building bricks of different colours. A tiny portion of the whole loose assembly – the lower segment of one vertical plane and one horizontal plane – remained still, but most of its particles kept pulsating: by dispersing outward and, then, rapidly flocking backward to form a slackly integrated block again. For an instant, the assembly became re-collected though visibly different at each recollection. This animated icon graphically demonstrates the general idea behind the concept of defragmentation: the process of defragmentation searches for and relocates (defragments) the scattered clusters (fragments) of disintegrated (fragmented) entities in order to make them temporarily, loosely integrated, yet a bit differently than before. In order to work effectively, the program of defragmentation needs some initial free space. However, it also frees up space on the hard disk, which in turn, enables even better performance. As a parallel, literature may provide this free space for the self-defragmentation of writers and readers alike while it may also open up additional space for their creating their own lives.

² Mikhail Bakhtin's theories of dialogism (*расказ*) and heteroglossia (*раноречие*) in the discourse of novel have also served as helpful source of vocabulary to describe the self-creational strategies in *Sula*. Dialogism, heteroglossia, and verbal improvisation have been key creative survival strategies in African American artistic as well as cultural existence.

³ Descriptions of fragmentation–defragmentation abound in Morrison's novels. Here I can only show some concrete cases with no desire either to exhaust the theme or to close-read them. In *The Bluest Eye*, the narrator describes the Breedloves as: "each member of the family in his own cell of consciousness, each making his own patchwork quilt of reality – collecting fragments of experience here, pieces of information there. From the tiny

impressions gleaned from one another, they created a sense of belonging and tried to make do with the way they found each other” (25). About *Tar Baby*, Morrison told Thomas LeClair in 1981 that in “*Tar Baby*, [she uses] that old story because despite its funny, happy ending, it used to frighten me. The story has a tar baby in it which is used by a white man to catch a rabbit. ‘Tar baby’ is also a name, like nigger, that white people call black children, black girls, as I recall. Tar seemed to me to be an odd thing to be in a Western story, and I found that there is a tar lady in African mythology. I started thinking about tar. At one time, a tar pit was a holy place, at least an important place, because tar was used to build things. It came naturally out of the earth; it held together things like Moses’s little boat and the pyramids. For me, the tar baby came to mean the black woman who can hold things together. The story was a point of departure to history and prophecy. That’s what I mean by dusting off the myth, looking closely at it to see what it might conceal...” (122). See also Judlyn S. Ryan’s “Contested Visions/Double-Vision in *Tar Baby*” (1997). In *Paradise*, the image of the Oven, which the 8R men keep dismantling and rebuilding brick by brick any time they move on, also symbolize their fragmented migrant lives as well as their yearning and struggling for wholeness, a settlement of their own. *Love* ends with Christine “on her knees” gathering the broke body of “Heed in her arms” (177).

⁴ W.E.B. Du Bois’s philosophical propositions that a cultural and psychological double-consciousness exists in the soul of black folks, Zora Neale Hurston’s anthropological observations on the characteristics of Negro self-expressions, Houston A. Baker’s theory of blues aesthetics and (*W*)*holeness*, Henry Louis Gates Jr.’s theory of signifyin(g) and the “speakerly text” have all informed my research at some or other stage. Toni Morrison’s concept of rememory, bell hooks’s project of self-recovery, Audre Lorde’s mission for reintegration, Alice Walker, Faith Ringgold, Lucille Clifton, and Romare Bearden’s visual and poetic quilting aesthetics, John Wideman’s use of African *obi* cosmology as narrative technique, and Nina Simone’s African-based call-and-response jazz aesthetics have all been instrumental in forming my opinion that a yearning for wholeness has arguably energized African American artistic endeavours, as it shows in *Sula*’s narrative technique, too. bell hooks, for instance, calls the experience of recognizing and valuing the implications of being an African American woman as “struggle for self-recovery” in *Talking Back* (1989). Under the term ‘self-recovery’, she understands the “oppressed struggle in language to recover ourselves – to rewrite, to reconcile, to renew,” and also “the oppressed struggle in language to read ourselves – to reunite, to reconcile, to renew” (28). See also Elizabeth Alexander, “Coming out Blackened and Whole: “Fragmentation and Reintegration in Audre Lorde’s *Zami* and the *Cancer Journals*” (1994). More recently, Bernard W. Bell’s study of African American fiction entitled *The Contemporary African American Novel: Its Folk Roots and Modern Branches* (2004) seems to support my idea according to which African American literature has been permeated with a yearning for achieved wholeness and a quest for a provisory authentic self.

⁵ Bell points out in *Contemporary African American Novel*: “American and African American vernacular revisionist cultural and literary critics use our cultural capital and double consciousness to contest and complicate the master narratives and myths of the natural, universal superiority of Western culture and the innate purity, unity, and dominance of white people, especially men. We also use our double consciousness to express either an Afrocentric or African Americentric type of modernism and postmodernism that acknowledges the limitations and possibilities of cultural relativism and provisional truths in the quest for personal and collective freedom, literacy, and wholeness” (xvi).

⁶ Deborah E. McDowell reads *Sula* as a pioneering piece of post-modern fiction that frustrates the binary oppositions of black/white, male/female/, good/evil, positive/negative, and self/other ruling traditional (African) American critical (male) inquiry and literature. The narrative blurs and complicates binary oppositions and blurs the boundaries they create – limitations that alienate the self from the other, and the self from himself or herself. *Sula* is rich in irony and ambiguity; the reader enters a world here, “a world that demands a shift from a dialectical either/or orientation to one that is dialogical, or both/and, full of shifts and contradictions, particularly shifting and contradictory conceptions of the self” (60). McDowell is right in saying that the novel does not have a central character, and that the notion of character as “static *essence*” is replaced with the “idea of character as *process*” (61). For McDowell, *Sula/Sula* is exemplary because it/she fails to attain a wholeness of being. In his response to McDowell’s paper, Michael Awkward points out that McDowell elsewhere overtly contradicts what she posits about wholeness in *Sula*. In “*The Changing Same:” Generational Connections and Black Women Novelists*, she argues that despite the current wave of literary criticism and theory that calls into question richly delineated autonomous characters as wholes imagining the black woman as a “whole” character of “self” has been a consistent preoccupation of black female novelists throughout history. ... It seems appropriate, therefore, to allow the critical concerns of black women’s novels to emerge organically from those texts, rather than to allow current critical fashion to dictate what those concerns should be (Awkward 74). As McDowell here also states, African American women novelists traditionally tend to perceive of wholeness as a goal worthy of

struggle and endurance. Wholeness in these canonical works is not represented as “static essence” but as *process*. Pauline E. Hopkins’ *Contending Forces: A Romance of Negro Life North and South*, Zora Neal Hurston’s *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, Toni Morrison’s *Song of Solomon*, and Alice Walker’s *The Color Purple* all depict processes of achieved/failed wholeness.

⁷ “1919” describes the literal/symbolic death of an/the unknown soldier in war and the origins of the National Suicide Day. Then, four concrete cases of death follow. In “1920,” Nel’s great-grandmother, Cecile Sabat dies of old age and is buried. In “1921” Eva burns, that is, kills Plum. “1922” witnesses Nel and Sula’s drowning of Chicken Little in the river, while “1923,” the accidental burning of Hannah Peace. On the way to hospital, Eva possibly smothers the disfigured Hannah. The next three chapters focus on metaphoric deaths. In “1927” Nel’s “me-ness” dies when she marries Jude. From Eva’s dream of a wedding before Hannah’s death, the reader knows that wedding also means death in the Bottom’s belief system. In deed, Jude thinks that he and Nel will “make one Jude” (83). “1937” depicts the death of Nel and Sula’s friendship. Nel hibernates both her sexual, emotional and intellectual self-consciousness. The infidelities of Jude and Sula take the desire to love out of both her “thighs” and “heart” (110–111). In “1939,” readers and narrator join in Sula’s ‘death on the sheet’ scene with Ajax, where ‘death on the sheet’ is an Elizabethan metaphor for orgasm. “1940” brings Sula’s literal death whereas in “1941,” many townspeople celebrate the National Suicide Day, marching into the river tunnel, which collapses. Their literal deaths allegorize the community’s spiritual and physical falling apart. “1965” is engulfed in death. Nel’s eulogy for the deserted, metaphorically dead, Bottom is the opening theme. A visit in the hospice follows, where the once animated but now feeble-minded Eva reminds Nel of her share in Chicken Little’s death. The confused Nel visits Sula’s grave, remembers how Sula died and was buried, and comes across Shadrack, who is death personified, “a little shaggier, a little older, still energetically mad” (173). The narrative spirals back on itself: the novel ends sometime short before it starts with the depiction of the Bottom’s literal eradication. Despite Nel’s revival scene, the wiser but sadder reader begins to miss Nel, “the woman hurrying along the road with the sunset in her face” (173) up there in the Bottom, where “once was a neighborhood” (1).

⁸ The closest thing the creative process of defragmentation clings to is Morrison’s concept of “rememory.” To rememory is to perform a conscious act of imagination and to reconfigure the events of one’s life into a story. All events must go through the creative power of memory and imagination, and then be “disremembered,” put into their reconfigured places in one’s life story.

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