

УДК 821.111.09(73);141.72
DOI: 10.24144/2617-3921.2020.18.239-250

Oksana Lutsyshyna
*PhD, Lecturer in Ukrainian Studies,
Department of Slavic and Eurasian Studies,
University of Texas at Austin, USA
oxana_flo@yahoo.com*

Olga Kishko
*Senior teacher of English Philology department
Uzhhorod national university
Orcid.org/0000-003-1485-2653
Uzhhorod, Ukraine, +38(050)6786304
olga.kishko@uzhnu.edu.ua*

Toni Morrison's *Sula*: queering binaries, uniting traditions

Анотація. Стаття розглядає роман Тоні Моррісон «Сула» з точки зору феміністської теорії і квір-теорії. Роман викликав чимало дискусій у середовищі літературознавців і культурологів. Вони розглянули складну структуру роману, гендерні стосунки, дружні стосунки між жінками, наголос на жіночій сексуальності, тощо. Хоча дехто з дослідниць пропонував віднести роман до «лесбійської» літератури, це викликало заперечення, тому що в романі немає сексуального контакту між жінками. У даній статті обстоюється думка, що доречніше підійти до твору з позицій квір-теорії, тобто континууму сексуальності, розмитості термінології, аніж з позицій

чітко визначених гендерних і сексуальних ідентичностей, не обов'язково властивим афроамериканцям у тому ж вигляді, в якому вони властиві білим. Квір теорія є частиною постструктуралістичної критичної теорії, яка з'явилась на початку 1990х, увібравши досвід гендерних досліджень. У статті досліджено зв'язок роману «Сула» з міфологією народу йоруба і, зокрема, сама постать головної героїні, Сули, яка уособлює «Адже», життєву силу, втілену в жінці. Авторка прослідковує зв'язок роману з європейською традицією карнавалу, і повалення звичних ієрархій. Як це не парадоксально, але безпечним місцем для чорношкірої жінки, її надійним притулком є плавність, текучість, що притаманна воді. В даному випадку Тоні Моррісон посилається на річкових богів та духів африканських предків. Письменниця ніби викликає їх до цього світу. Зроблено висновок, що роман «Сула» і сама Сула-протагоністка ставлять собі за мету сутнісно змінити епістемологічні підходи, задіяні «білим» фемінізмом, а також цілою західною епістемною традицією, яка стоїть на бінарних опозиціях. «Сула» прагне їх розмонтувати.

Ключові слова: феміністський підхід, квір, раса, ідентичність, примусова гетеросексуальність, йоруба, Адже, епістемологічна бінарність

Abstract. This article analyzes Toni Morrison's novel Sula from the point of view of feminist theory and queer theory. The novel inspired a lot of debates between scholars, who looked at various aspects of the novel, such as its complex web of relationships between and within genders, its take on race, and its exploration of female sexuality. While the term "lesbian" literature does not seem to fit the novel, the scholars agreed on the term "queer" literature. It can be explained by the fact that Sula depicts intense and existentially significant relationships between women, but without the sexual dimension. The article's use of queer theory enables the researcher to view the novel, as well as the protagonist, within the queer continuum rather than through the binding approach of fixed gender and sexual identities that were not necessarily typical in African American communities. The article turns to the African religions references in Sula, such as the beliefs of the Yoruba people, encoded by Toni Morrison in particular Sula herself being an embodiment of Aje, the spirit of female power. We can see that Toni Morrison also skillfully employs the Western tradition, and this is what makes Sula so complex and so prone to be analyzed with the help of queer theory – the binaries in this text are not fixed and open to interpretation. Though the African matrix is not directly related to queer theory, it is a part of the meaning of the text. The author also turns to the European medieval tradition of "misrule." All these identities only lock black womanhood in. Paradoxically, a black woman's safe space, the shelter of her stability is rooted in fluidity – perhaps, alluding to the waters and the river gods and spirits of the African ancestors whom Toni Morrison summons to this world. The world that in its Western dimension appears to be "misruled," "carnavalesque" and "upside down" – it all depends from what angle to look at. The article concludes that the novel, and the

character of Sula, strives to dismantle the biases of white feminism, as well as the epistemological binaries of and western discourse.

Keywords: feminist, queer, race, identity, compulsory heterosexuality, Yoruba tradition, Aje, epistemological binary

Introduction. The name of Toni Morrison, American writer and Nobel prize laureate is widely known in the world. Her creative work has been attracting attention of literary critics for many years, and her novel *Sula* is the object of discussion among them. For example one should mention the name of Barbara Smith [smith], who is attempting to read *Sula* as a lesbian text and is searching for a paradigm of interpretation that would encompass more than just the analysis of gender, race or sexuality separately. She argues that *Sula* raises issues that concern “Black women’s autonomy,” and also critiques “heterosexual institutions of male-female relationships, marriage, and the family” [10]. Laura Harris agrees that “lesbian literature” emerges “not because women [in the text] are “lovers,” but because they are the central figures, are positively portrayed and have pivotal relationships with each other” [4]. In her critique of Smith’s article Deborah McDowell states that such a definition of lesbianism is too broad. It “*subsumes far more Black women writers, particularly contemporary ones, than not into the canon of Lesbian writers*” [8, p.170]. She further problematizes the issue with “lesbian” readings of *Sula* claiming that for a long time the works of Black women writers were regarded only “*practically ...rather than theoretically*” [8, p.169], without employing paradigms of the actual literary analysis. The readings were rather ideological than actually literary. We share the opinions of those scholars who refer *Sula* to the so-called queer literature.

Methodology. The main method of research employed in the given article is close reading, also known as close textual analysis, which investigates the relationship between the internal workings of discourse in order to discover what makes a particular text function persuasively. Close reading may be related to the hermeneutical triangle since three important traits are examined: the author of the text; the audience and the message itself. Close reading attempts to reveal the detailed, often concealed, tools that give a particular text stylistic consistency and rhetorical effect.

Results and discussion. The discourse of queer theory is capable of explaining and validating the term “lesbian” without producing reductionist readings, - and incorporating race as a category of analysis, too. It is evident that this text does not deal only with female desire and female sexuality, but touches upon sexuality in general, in particular in relation to race. Male (and racialized) sexuality is being discussed and “queered” (that is, put outside the framework of binaries). Laura Alexandra Harris justly argues that “*race is its own queer category... Further, in the US system of black and white race works queer*” [4, p.11]. *Sula* is not just a story of sexuality: it is a story of black sexuality, male *and* female, and certainly not only

“lesbian” – black sexuality put in the context of hostile white environment and often defined by it.

Sula may not be a “lesbian” text, but it is definitely a “queer” one. Deborah McDowell mentions that *Sula* defies binary oppositions; “*it glories in paradox and ambiguity*” [8, p.168]). Ambiguity is something queer theory accepts readily in fact, queer theory has even been criticized for insufficient “political stance” which relies on fixed identities and clear ideological platforms. However, it is still a useful body of theory precisely because of its “*theoretical, that is philosophical, inclination: it strives to look for certain explanations and, in Foucault’s terms, “genealogies.” A genealogy, according to Michel Foucault, is “a historical_knowledge of struggles”* [3, p.], of social forces shaping the concept.

Primarily created as a discourse that deals with issues of sexuality, queer theory also evolved to have a broader meaning. It establishes a continuum of non-conformity in general, often referred to as “queer” [2], striving to deconstruct binary oppositions. Queer is “*deviating from the expected or normal... strange... odd or unconventional in behavior*” [2]. By analyzing both the discourse of sexuality in *Sula* as well as that of “queer? ambiguities we can examine the novel more fully and take a close look at different categories and epistemologies at play.

One particular paragraph is especially curious in this respect: the words of *Sula* when she, already fatally ill, is visited by her friend Nel. This little speech is a kind of quintessence of all the discourses that appear in the novel. It is where they intersect. Nel asks *Sula*, who is, by this point, hated in the community for being viewed as “*evil,*” a harbinger of the changes for the worst, a woman, who sleeps with other women’s men, and, what is worse, with white men, thus violating the racial and class taboos, - “*You... lying here in dirt you did in this town and you still expect folks to love you?*” [9, p.145]. *Sula* responds bitterly: *Oh, they’ll love me all right. It will take time, but they’ll love me...After all the old women have lain with the teen-agers; when all the young girls have slept with their old drunken uncles; after all the black men fuck all the white ones; when all the white women kiss all the black ones; when the guards have raped all the jailbirds and after all the whores make love to their grannies; after all the faggots get their mothers’ trim; when Lindbergh sleeps with Bessie Smith and Norma Shearer makes it with Stepin Fetchit; after all the dogs have fucked all the cats and every weathervane on every barn flies off the roof to mount the hogs... then there’ll be a little love left over for me. And I know just what it will feel like* [9, p.145-146].

Opening the text with the ambiguous joke about the “Bottom” (which is actually “the top”), Morrison, as it was already mentioned, “*consistently frustrates any attempts to think in strictly binary terms*” [1, p.89]. We see many strong women in the story, but none of them is just “good” or just “bad.” The concept of matriarchy – with *Eva* being one of the main “mothers” of the story – is blurred: we cannot decide whether it is a positive or a negative thing. The paradigm that could explain this ambiguity is that of African aesthetics. Vashti Crutcher Lewis offers a very interesting reading of *Sula* as a text that employs African tradition [6, p.97]. It

accounts for some of the ambiguities in the text: or, rather, whatever is viewed as an ambiguity in the European ontological tradition that rests on binary oppositions, stops being ambiguous. In her book “Our Mothers, Our Powers, Our Texts: Manifestations of Aje in Africana Literature” Teresa Washington refers to Yoruba spiritual traditions in which Aje, defined as “an embodiment of power and an expression of the matrix of potentiality from which that power emanates,” plays a crucial role [12, p.17]. “Aje” is the secret of life itself, and it most often manifests in women, as part of female power and female spirituality. However, it is not just an innocuous “good” force – it can be potentially dangerous.

Hence, the images of “ambiguous” matriarchs, the carriers of Aje power, in Morrison’s *Sula*: Eva and Mrs. Jacks, Ajax’s mother, in *Sula*. Eva Peace “exercises supreme control over her community” [12, p.218]. As for Mrs. Jacks, she is described as “*an evil conjure woman, blessed with seven adoring children*” [9, p. 126]. Washington argues that Morrison here deliberately “conflate[es] such adjectives as *evil, blessed, and adored,*” [12, p.247] thus indicating the “mix-up” of “good” and “evil,” the disappearance of the dichotomy so crucial to the Western mind. We are reminded that matriarchs are neither “good” nor “bad,” but simply powerful. “*Mrs. Jacks emerges as yet a nother paradoxical Mother of Power who hones a “discredited” force for members of her community and recycles aspects of that force in her seven sons*” [12, p.247]. *Sula* herself is a woman of Aje, but she and her grandmother, Eva, cannot coexist in Medallion; it is too small of a place for two such strong priestesses. Therefore she puts Eva in the nursing home – an act seen as “evil” by members of the community (as it seems, the power of Aje in *Sula* is manifesting itself more as a negative thing than as a positive one, since *Sula*’s actions, by any standards, are not very ethical).

Vashti Crutcher Lewis claims that *Sula* is a “priestess” whose realm is water (the source of Aje power in Yoruba tradition), and Shadrack is her spiritual husband, leader and “*the oracle of the river-God*” [6, p.94], “*a provider dispensed by the gods to “always” be there for the displaced Sula*” [6, p.92]. She is a mystery for the community, and he is a kind of a village fool whom nobody takes particularly seriously – he is “crazy.” But the issues of her non-conformity and his madness are interpreted differently if considered from the point of view of the Yoruba tradition: *Sula* is a woman of Aje and Shadrack is the oracle, someone who during his illness and the time of being unconscious was talking to the ancestors [6, p. 92]. This reading helps establish a continuum of epistemologies present in *Sula*: we see that the referral to African ancestry is very prominent in this text.

The interpretation of *Sula* in the framework of the African tradition is indeed fascinating, but it is not the only tradition present. We can see that Toni Morrison also skillfully employs the Western tradition, and this is what makes *Sula* so complex and so prone to be analyzed with the help of queer theory – the binaries in this text are not fixed and open to interpretation. Though the African matrix is not directly related to queer theory, it is a part of the meaning of the text that is vibrantly present, and it should not be ignored. Queer reading, both as interpretation of sexuality and

race (or, rather, sexuality-as-race and race-as-sexuality) and the insight into the nature of ambiguities of the novel (continuum of non-conformity), is more relevant to the “Western” part of the discourse of the text, and yet, since the two traditions are interconnected, the African paradigm must be at least outlined. The African tradition is also important in terms of the issue of gender and “proper” gender roles: Sula is not behaving as a “woman”. Her “Africanness” is almost the marker of her “queerness.” She is not nurturing, “kind” and “good” in the conventional sense, being the heir of the tradition of the ambiguous matriarchs whose powers can be potentially healing or damaging, or both at the same time.

The scene depicted by Sula is a world upside down. It is a strange combination of mixed-up sexualities, races and social statuses which reminds us of a “dance macabre” of the Middle Ages (here we see the Western tradition emphasized). It can be interpreted as a reference to the traditions of the Carnival, the time of festivities during which the social roles were not observed. Carnival, or the medieval *Misrule*, was the time when all the hierarchies were thwarted: the fool was a crowned king, the men were dressed as women, women – as men, and the “top” and the “bottom,” as Mikhail Bakhtin would say, took each other’s place (it is probably not accidental that Morrison incorporates the joke about the Bottom which is really the Top, early in her text, thus indicating to us early on that her novel is not about fixed and stable identities. Usually such festivities happened around Christmas time. “*Medieval Misrule often broke down regulated sexual behavior and gender rules... men didn’t have to act like “men,” women didn’t have to act like “women,” and sex was for love and pleasure, not for reproduction*” [2, p.4]. Carnival, according to Bakhtin, was “*the suspension of hierarchical differences between people*” [5, p.30].

What happens in this topsy-turvy world Sula describes to Nel. It is first and foremost the world where all the sexual taboos are violated, the most important of them being the racial ones “...*after all the black men fuck all the white ones; when all the white women kiss all the black ones... when Lindbergh sleeps with Bessie Smith and Norma Shearer makes it with Stepin Fetchit*” [9, p.145-146]. The “sex” Sula talks about is not just about sexuality, but also about race, and race becomes a crucial factor in this “carnavalesque” picture. Sula queers the discourse of acceptable social and amorous relations.

The reference to black men having sex with the white ones is the most obvious example of queering. Sula points out earlier in the text the perverse “love” of the white men towards the blacks. “*White men love you,*” – she says to Jude. “*They spend so much time worrying about your penis they forget their own. The only thing they want to do is to cut off a nigger’s privates. And if that ain’t love and respect I don’t know what is*” [9, p.103]. “Black” is constructed as Other, with the sexuality of the Other being labeled as perverse, “deviant” and excessive. Masculinity of the Other is always either too threatening and therefore has to be eliminated, diminished, or ridiculed. The history of lynching and castrating black men by the white ones testifies to this.

In his analysis of a notoriously racist novel by Thomas Dixon, *The Leopard's Spots: A Romance of the White Man's Burden* (1902), Mason Stokes states that “hooded, white-sheeted” KKK is employing the image “of white racial erection...Anglo-Saxons respond to ...[black penis] with one of their own – an erection for an erection... Worried over myths of black sexual prowess, white men respond to black sexual threat with arousal” [11, p.139]. Black men are feared and desired at the same time. The white woman becomes the site of anxiety, and the black man has to pay the cost of this anxiety. Sula asks: *And white women? They chase you all to every corner of the earth, feel for you under every bed. I knew a white woman wouldn't leave the house after 6 o'clock for fear one of you would snatch her. Now ain't that love?* [9, p.103.]

“White women,” – according to Sula, should “*kiss all the black ones*” [9, p. 146], and, technically, this is the only overt reference to lesbianism present in the novel. This is, of course, another mocking, Misrule-inspired statement. However, in the light of Barbara Smith's argument the issue of female desire – black female sexuality – comes forth. To some extent, I read Smith's proposition to view *Sula* as a “lesbian” text due to the importance of a strong female friendship, which is erotically charged – as an attempt to draw our attention to the existence of a desire that is both liberating and liberated from the male and white power. This desire is supposedly free from the necessity to conform to the male and white stereotypical ideas of black female sexuality. Smith found no better word for this desire as “lesbian,” since “lesbian” came to denote a female space, a “separatism” from the dominant patriarchal structures.

In her article “It's Not Safe. Not Safe at All”: Sexuality in Nella Larsen's *Passing*,” Deborah McDowell talks about the myths “*perpetuated throughout history about black women's libidinousness*” [7, p.617]. Black female slaves supposedly were wanton and seductive, and the white masters could not resist them. Therefore, in the history of black literature depiction of female sexuality was always a risky and difficult subject as hypersexual. For a black woman to be depicted as a sexual being in ways that would not succumb to these stereotypes is not an easy task. When discussing Nella Larsen's book *Passing*, Deborah McDowell emphasizes that though the novel has lesbian overtones, it never states so explicitly, instead making the issue of “passing” (a light-skinned black woman passes for white) a metaphor for sexual transgressing [7, p. 618]. It seemed to be the only narrative strategy in the times of Larsen (Harlem Renaissance) to write about female sexuality in a way both relatively safe and yet subversive. Race became the marker of sexuality, and (lesbian) sexuality was conceptualized in terms of race: to step outside of your race was to step outside of your sexuality, to love another woman, and to love a woman was the prerogative of her who “passes” as something else. As a black woman, the protagonist does not dare to be a “lesbian” – this is a “white” thing, too dangerous to do. Blacks are oppressed enough, and there is no need to add another dimension to this oppression. In the black community one cannot be a “lesbian” – one can only be a black woman.

One cannot analyze race and sexuality separately from each other: the myth of universal sisterhood was never true, and white women often saw black women in the same way white men saw black women – as sexually incontinent, always ready to seduce the white people. Sula herself is opposed by the community on the grounds of sleeping with white men – as a black woman, she is not supposed to do this, this is “unthinkable” and can only be happening due to “rape” [9, p. 113], with her not just raped as a “woman” but as a “black woman.” Being a black woman means being a female partner to a black man - not to a white woman and not to a black woman. Therefore, Sula’s comment sounds so subversive: in truth, she encourages black women to step outside of their race, supposedly stepping outside of their sexuality.

She also makes an unlikely couple from a white actress Norma Shearer and a controversial black comedian Stepin Fetchit, whose real name was Lincoln Theodore Monroe Andrew Perry. Stepin Fetchit portrayed the black man as not very intelligent, perhaps alluding to the mid-nineteenth-century “minstrel” show. Here a white woman is not paired with a “real” black man, a sexual beast ready to rape her and steal her away from a white man, but with a self-parodying individual whose identity is already confusing to both blacks and whites. Being “black” stands for being “queer.” The white community imagines that Stepin Fetchit is amusing, believing that he aims at entertaining them, when in fact he might be more into mocking them and subverting their expectations – without them realizing it, and the black community is unhappy with the fact that his humor is self-denigrating, humiliating the blacks (though he may be only exposing, in a series of complex rituals of defamiliarization, the process of subverting the white expectations). At any rate, the very mention of his name indicates a strong presence of the queered discourse, a fluid identity, one of the most prominent ambiguities of the American culture. Sula, as always, makes it even queerer.

Sula also utters a rather strange thing: “*After all the whores make love to their grannies*” [9, p.145]. Why such a choice? If in other “pairs” she produces it is usually the “extremes,” normally in terms of race, that are pinned against each other, here we have an unlikely juxtaposition of a whore and a grandmother. I cannot but speculate on Sula referring to herself (she is viewed as a whore by the community – and not even just because she sleeps with the town men, but because she is rumored to sleep with white men [9, p. 113] and her grandmother Eva. The issue of motherhood and maternal connections is important in Sula. The novel, though, does not show us any “happy cases” – all the mother-daughter relations are highly problematic, with Eva having no time and energy to “play” with her daughter Hannah, with Hannah being too preoccupied with herself and her own sexuality to mother Sula, with Helene being too restrictive and “proper” to connect with Nel on a somewhat meaningful level. Sula and her grandmother do not get along. Sula tells Eva directly: “*Don’t talk to me how much you gave me, Big Mamma, and how much I owe you or none of that*” [9, p. 92]. Eva, the ambiguous matriarch, the Aje woman in Yoruba culture, is bestowed with a lot of potential, but, as I have already mentioned, this does not mean that she is a “good” person, since in the African

tradition such matriarchs are not necessarily evaluated in terms of the binary “good”/“bad.”

“Whore” and “grandmother” definitely make one of the queerest couples in the topsy-turvy world of Sula’s personal Misrule. On the one hand, we can read this sarcastic proposition of “lovemaking,” paradoxically, as Sula’s desire to separate herself from her grandmother by carving another identity for herself, albeit an unflattering one (“whore”), by creating a binary. It is better to be a whore than to continue the line of the unfortunate women-mothers who do not let their children individuate, like the deweys who never grow up and never even learn that they are not one person but three, Plum who wishes to return to the maternal womb, or Hannah who lives in the shadow of her omnipotent mother. On the other hand, as we saw, Sula despises binaries. She tends to queer not so much that which *she* herself considers to be extreme, separate and different, but what the society presents as such and which is stereotyped against. We almost have to read it “vice versa.”

Sula and her grandmother supposedly represent two drastically different ways of existence (Eva being the mother of a family, a nurturer, and Sula “*throwing her life away*” [9, p. 93] – but do they really? After all, they are both equally socially disadvantaged, as (poor) women of color, and in this sense there is a bond between them. They are in a “lesbian” continuum of female connections (eventually betrayed by Sula), of black female space, where they are together to help each other, to comfort and to provide a holding environment. So, when Sula says that they should “make love” (the choice of the expression “make love” is remarkable, too – considering that in all other cases Sula uses much less gentle expressions - “to lay,” “to fuck,” “to sleep with” – this is the only “couple” that can “love”), she puts forth, in a grotesque way, this “lesbian” idea of a (black) female space, a safe heaven, a shelter from racial and gender oppression.

The world portrayed by Sula is quite disturbing. It is a parody, a satire, a queering, Misrule, but it is almost too bitter to be a play or a joke. This Carnival ends badly, too (not like the real carnival, which is only a game, a safe way to vent frustration [5, p. 12]. *Sula’s* (and Sula’s) Misrule is not “controlled,” – it is really quite unruly. The town folks are lead to their death by the “fool” (Shadrack) who becomes “king” by assuming the role of a spiritual priest. The sacred and the profane trade places: what everybody laughed about before and did not take seriously – Shadrack’s National Suicide Day – suddenly gains a tragic prominence, emerging from the realm of the “funny” and “casual.” This Carnival ends in death, thus signifying that its nature from the start was not playful. The people of the Bottom die in the tunnel – the Bottom which is the Top does become the “bottom,” the inside of the land, in one terrifying change of scenery. The participants of the Misrule are punished for engaging in it only on the level of a game. Sula is also punished: though she sees the world in a carnivalesque upside-down way, she does nothing to “warn” the people. She only thinks about herself.

In the passage that was analyzed above Sula plays with binaries. Different identities are juxtaposed against each other. But she mocks the fixed identities, and

her laughter indicates that we are, literally, not to accept these identities without questioning them. When identities are fixed, they become rigid, oppressive and therefore problematic. Men and women, black and white, young and old, go past us in the evoked procession of ghosts. We see them violating sexual taboos, especially the racial ones. When these “Others” are coupled with each other, the binary nature of their relationship to each other is exposed. In a way, none of these identities can exist without the Other: white needs black as its “bad” and “less privileged” counterpart, “men” need “women,” “faggots” need “straight people,” and “grandma,” strangely enough, needs a “whore.”

We remember the African tradition that is also present in the text. In this tradition binaries are not given such a prominent place as in the West. Whatever happens, happens according to some other metaphysics unknown to us. The “murder” of Chicken Little stops being a murder and becomes a ritual of sacrifice to the spirits of water, gods of river [6, p. 95], Eva and Sula are not viewed as “bad” – or “good” women, and become the women of Aje, a special power granted to them by their African ancestors, Shadrack’s role is not that of the crazy man, but a man outside of the very paradigm that could judge him as being crazy or not – he is someone who spoke to the ancestral spirits and visited the “other” world, - and the people who die in the tunnel perish not only because they are indignant about the existing social order but because they neglected their African roots (many of the ones who dies there were also the ones who especially hated Sula, not recognizing her as a “priestess” [6, p.95]. The African tradition coexists with the Christian one: they are intertwined, creating a complex amalgam, like the beliefs about the Virgin of Guadeloupe who is a Christian saint and a pagan goddess of the past at the same time.

It is interesting to point out, though, that these traditions, each in their way challenging the assumption of a binary and compromising it, themselves do not constitute a binary. They are not pinned against each other – the relationship between them is much more fluid. This makes a lot of sense: if one of the goals of the novel was to destabilize the binary, to compromise it. As Rita Bergenholtz points out, *Sula* is “an extended satire on binary (reductive, cliché) thinking” [1, p.89]. The beginning and the end of the text are symptomatic: if at first we see the contrasting “top” and “bottom,” the last sentence of the text is not about hierarchies any more: it is about “*circles and circles of sorrow*” [9, p.174].

It would probably be reasonable to say that such blending of traditions and refusal to follow binary thinking, this marker of the Western epistemology, is a feature important for the whole realm of ethnic literature. *Sula* cannot be read from just one prospective (e.g., from the point of view only of Biblical symbolism). This obscures the meaning of the novel, and offers a reductionist interpretation. Queer theory, though, is a useful paradigm that allows room for the African aesthetics and epistemology as well as deconstructing some the Western concepts. It can conceptualize sexuality and race, or sexuality-as-race and race-as-sexuality.

Perhaps, Barbara Smith relates to these “ruptures” in the narrative structure of *Sula*, the impossibility to explain certain scenes and certain characters or their behavior when she calls the novel “lesbian.” If a “sentence refuses to do what it is supposed to do, if there are strong images of women and if there is a refusal to be linear, the result is innately lesbian literature,” she claims [10]. By “lesbian” she strives to denote a kind of a continuum, a space for black female experience that does not have other shelter. However, this particular identity word “lesbian” is so firmly rooted in the idea of a binary that it becomes an unsuitable choice for marking the novel. If somebody – or something – is “lesbian,” then it must have its counterpart – “not lesbian” or “heterosexual.” Besides, even the issue of a lesbian continuum was not created to encompass the issue of race. When we call *Sula* a “lesbian” novel, we may be prompted to conceptualize it within a very “Western” framework, without reference to other important structures present in the text.

On the other hand, queer theory offers a chance for a much richer reading. Its stance to deconstruct binary oppositions agrees with the main stance of the novel which relishes in ambiguities. A “lesbian” space becomes a “queer” space, accounting for racial and sexual tensions simultaneously, recognizing the interlocking nature of oppression. Moreover, queer theory allows for coexistence with the African aesthetics. The African tradition looms behind the Christian, Biblical surface, making the novel truly deep, like the waters of which Sula (the character) is the priestess. The two traditions are skillfully and effortlessly combined, and the metaphor of Misrule is a helpful tool for a more profound analysis.

Conclusions. Both traditions discussed above have one thing in common: they are preoccupied with the search for the “space,” “safe space,” a (female) “continuum” for a black woman. She cannot really be a “lesbian,” because being a lesbian means being “white.” She has to either pass for white, to step outside her race, and yet the Western epistemological binaries prove to be too restrictive. A safe space, a continuum or a black woman lies outside the framework of these binaries. She does not want to be a “black slave” to the white men, with her body treated as commodity; she does not want to be just a convenient wife to a black man. She does not want to be only a rival to a white woman who sees her as a seductress. All these identities only lock black womanhood in. Paradoxically, a black woman’s safe space, the shelter of her stability is rooted in fluidity – perhaps, alluding to the waters and the river gods and spirits of the African ancestors whom Toni Morrison summons to this world. The world that in its Western dimension appears to be “misruled,” “carnavalesque” and “upside down” – it all depends from what angle to look.

REFERENCES

1. Bergenholtz Rita. Toni Morrison’s *Sula*: A Satire on Binary Thinking. *African American Review*. 1996. 30.1 P.89-98
2. Bronski Mason. ”There’s something about Harry”. *Weekly Planet*. 2003. 07/31

3. Foucault Michel. Two Lectures. *Power/Knowledge*. New York: Pantheon Books, 1980. P. 78-108.
4. Harris Laura Alexandra. Queer Black feminism: the pleasure principle. *Feminist Review*. 1996. 54. P.3-30
5. Humphrey Chris. The politics of carnival: festive Misrule in Medieval England. Manchester: Manchester UP, 2001.
6. Lewis Vashti Crutcher. African tradition in Toni Morrison's Sula. *Phylon*. 1960. 48.1 P.91-97.
7. McDowell Deborah. "It's not safe. Not safe at all": sexuality in Nella Larsen's Passing. *The Lesbian and Gay Studies Reader*. New York: Routledge, 1993. P.616-625.
8. McDowell Deborah. New directions in Black feminist criticism. African American literary theory: a reader. New York: New York UP, 2000. P.167-177.
9. Morrison Toni. Sula. New York: Vintage, 2004.
10. Smith Barbara. "Toward a Black feminist criticism." *The new feminist criticism: essays on women, literature and theory*. New York: Pantheon Books, 1985.
11. Stokes Mason. White heterosexuality: a romance of the straight man' burden. New York: Routledge, 2005. P.131-150.
12. Washington Teresa. Our mothers, our powers, our texts: manifestations of Aje in Africana literature. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 2005.