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The History within Toni Morrison's Sula

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Introduction

At the time I am writing this unit, the world is fairly shut down because of the Covid-19 virus. By now, the effects on our daily lives have accumulated—from how we work, travel, dress, shop, educate, socialize, and maintain our physical and mental health. Lives that were already challenging are more so. We realize that the events during which we live can have deeply seated effects on ourselves and our communities. We can learn life stories through history, and we can learn history through life stories, whether biography memoir, autobiography, or fiction.

Toni Morrison's *Sula* is a novel that has enough rich literary craft to stand on its own in a classroom, but also to lend itself to exploration of an additional context—that of the influence of history on setting, theme, and especially character. Beginning with the development of black towns and communities and moving from World War I through the Forties then to 1965, the civil rights movement, *Sula* looks at a selection of black-fought "battles—the veteran, the orphans. . . the laborers, confined to a village by the same forces that mandated the struggle." In her foreward, Morrison acknowledges the connection. Referring to World War I, Morrison mentions the "traumatic displacement this most wasteful capitalist war had on black people." Still, the novel is a testament to the characters' strategies for survival, for the creative ways they respond to "discriminatory, prosecutorial racial oppression."[1] As with the effects of Covid-19 on us today, the lives and motivations of the characters cannot be separated from their historical context.

In our seminar American History through American Lives, we didn't just study history, we focused on ways to contextualize individual life stories—real or fictional. We explored methods of teaching "intellectually honest" history in an age when we have immediate access to information through our phones. The facts at our fingertips may be accurate, or they may be intentionally or inadvertently false; regardless, rather than knowing a compendium of facts, our students are better prepared as historians and critical thinkers if we teach them to ask the right questions of a variety of sources. Sam Wineburg's book *Why Learn History(When It's Already on Your Phone)* was our introductory guide.

Over a four-week period, my ELA students will read the novel and study it for its literary sense while also using a historical-critical lens. As we progress through the novel, we will study primary and secondary sources that give us varied and challenging perspectives on each historical event or problem relating to the lives of our black characters. Sources include letters, news stories, political cartoons, war posters, photographs, civic

documents, and real and fictional personal narratives.

Student Audience

Most students enter my small school because they are involved in the juvenile justice system; others are not "in the system," but they share characteristics that make this the best school for them. We meet our district's great need for a school or program that can accommodate a concentrated number of students with histories of severe discipline problems, chronic and temporary trauma, the challenges of substance abuse, mental health problems, and other dysfunctions that accompany these things and that hinder school success. They tend to face challenges of poverty and race. This is the last stop for most of them academically; they have been suspended too often or were unsuccessful in the district's traditional schools. Not surprisingly, they tend to be older than their grade level and significantly behind in academic achievement. They respond to literature, images, and content that are relevant and engaging. *Sula* is an unpredictable story with characters who share some of life's hardest struggles with my students and their families: poverty, racial conflict, limited life options, and trauma. For my 11th and 12th grade English classes I was looking for a novel that could be taught within one six week semester, expose them to rich literary craft, and teach them historical events and issues to enrich their generally insufficient academic knowledge of our history. The novel does have mature content; it works for my students, many of whom are emancipated from their families or have their own children, but maybe not all 11th and 12th grade classrooms.

Content Matter Discussion

I have two reasons for adding the history element of the study of this novel. First, except for a few history buffs, I find that most of my students hold onto little of their American history taught them in previous years. In efforts to build the body of content knowledge in our students, content at my small site is often interdisciplinary or cross-curricular in nature. Knowledge of their history is empowering and helps them put the conflicts from their world into context. I've presented the historical events or issues and related them to the novel in each section below. The second arose in seminar discussion about teaching biography and fiction of other races and cultures than our own. Teachers face the challenge of having equitable and anti-racist classrooms, and many of us face a steep learning curve. We must ask some of the same questions we want our students to ask: Whose stories do we tell? Where do those stories begin and end? What are the best resources? In her introduction, Morrison asks, "How does a reader of any race situate herself or himself in order to approach the world of a black writer? Won't there always be apprehension about what may be revealed, exposed about the reader?"[2] As a white teacher in a very diverse classroom, I run the risk of presenting a set of quirky characters and circumstances that could be considered derisive to my students. Set in the context of their time and struggles imposed by *de facto* and *de jure* segregation, the characters have the potential to present as creative and resilient. They represent a community that is and affectionate of its race and culture.

The Novel

Teachers who are reading this unit have probably read *Sula,* published by Toni Morrison in 1973, a decade after the last scene in the novel takes place. The chapter names are years marking the passage of time through the plot. The first full chapter begins, after an eight-page untitled pre-chapter, in 1919. The last chapter is *1965*. Most of the novel, though, takes place between 1919 and 1941. Though it is not quickly apparent, the novel is steeped in history that influences the characters, the setting, and significant themes around struggle. The main and title character is Sula, the third in a line of unusual and powerful women. They are not pillars of the community, but their presence is essential to the lives of the citizens of the Bottom, the all-black community where they live. Their influence—and especially Sula's—touches the community like the waves from a pebble dropped in water. Sula's best friend since childhood is Nel, whose mother and grandmother we also get to know and juxtapose with Sula's. Growing up, Sula and Nel have an intense relationship. As young women, they navigate their relationships with boys; they participate in the death of a child together; they feel like two halves of a whole. But while Sula is wild and untethered, Nel marries, has children, and remains anchored in the Bottom. They are the most important things in each other's lives, even after Sula is unfaithful with Nel's husband and he leaves. They are separated for part of their lives when Sula leaves the Bottom, but even after her death they are deeply connected.

As young black women in the middle of the last century, their work and social options are limited, but if they are conventional, they are sustained by the town. For example, Sula's existing eccentricities are known and tolerated, but when Sula leaves and returns in fancy clothes, they turn on her and attribute their misfortunes to her. The town holds place for other eccentric characters, as well. Sula's grandmother Eva takes on the town misfits and random orphans. Her mother sleeps with most of the men. Shadrack, a damaged veteran from World War I, marks time in the novel with his annual Suicide Days. Nel's husband illustrates the frustrations of the limited opportunities for employment and subsequent feelings of emasculation. In 1965 the town seems to be experiencing progress, but at the risk of loss of life, land, and culture.

Black Towns

Sula takes place in the Bottom, an all-black community in Ohio. The narrator calls The Bottom a neighborhood, but it is self-sufficient and geographically separate from the all-white town of Medallion. Oklahoma, where I teach, had 32 black towns around the turn of the 20th century and as many as fifty overall. About thirteen remain; one hosts an HBCU that many of my students have attended over the years. Knowing this and being familiar with Tulsa's historic, once all-black Greenwood community gives my students a connection with The Bottom. Between the late 1800s and 1915, all-black towns sprung up all over Indian Territory and trans-Appalachian states as far as California and including Ohio, where *Sula* is set. Many settlers were seeking financial security, but often these towns were developed by speculators seeking profit. Usually the risk of resettlement was great enough that profit wasn't enough; they waited until they could no longer endure what one historian called "the increasing terrorist attacks, widening disfranchisement, and emerging Jim Crow laws."[3]

In *Sula A* freed slave is given the poorer quality land after being conned by his former owner out of the fertile and more desirable valley below by saying that the Bottom is more precious because it is nearer to Heaven. Many black would-be settlers, like the freed slave in *Sula*, were victims of scams defrauding them of their money. They may have been sold plats that were never for sale. Sometimes fake land agents created, at a cost, memberships in schemes that would provide transportation and land at unreasonably low costs. Other scams were common.[4] Unlike white settlements, black towns tended to be started and promoted with less

capital and sought ways to draw residents by trying to induce railroads and factories to move in. I guess being close to Heaven counts. The substandard economy in the Bottom, in contrast to the white Medallion, mirrors these deficits.

The citizens of The Bottom do find freedom where they can within tight geographical, economic, cultural, and racial parameters. Their greatest conflicts arise when they encounter the white world outside the Bottom, as soldiers or laborers, for example. Barbara Christian writes about history in *Sula*. She questions what kind of individuality and individual rights would be available in a community where the power belongs to the "dominant group as defined by race" and how "how much difference would be allowed within powerless groups if they were to be seen as a people?"[5]   She points out that the Bottom's citizens "can explore the interior landscape of individual black people in their distinct selfhood rather than focusing only on their beings as seen by the other," in this case those down the hill in all-white Medallion, a distinctly different community.[6] The businesses in the Bottom are self-sufficient and reflect the character of the citizens, often ironically, such as the Time and a Half Pool Hall where the unemployed men hang out. There are also Irene's Palace of Cosmetology (hardly), and Reba's Grill "where the owner cooked in her hat because she couldn't remember the ingredients without it."[7]

Black Towns—Resources

I want students to understand the existence and legitimacy of black towns in America to give validity to the Bottom and to help them understand the social, economic, and political challenges—as well as the benefits—of black life in these communities, including Tulsa's historic Greenwood.

Study of Conditions among the Negro Population of Tulsa by Interracial Committee of Y.W.C.A., 1938. Found in the vertical files in our public library, I used this in a different context in a previous unit. It depicts a part of Tulsa that had an all-black population in 1938, still within the scope of our novel. The document is arranged in four sections. (1) Health and sanitation: includes such details as how many beds were available for Negroes at the white hospitals, the higher-than-average rates of tuberculosis, and the lack of city garbage collection and disposal in some areas of North Tulsa; (2) Education in North Tulsa: documents the students and unexpectedly good standards at the few all-black schools. Of special interest may be some of the areas of study available to students including sign-making and maid school, millenary, and home beautification and Negro history; (3) Recreation: documents the lack of parks and playgrounds but a proliferation of public dance halls, pool halls, night clubs, moving picture houses, and recreational parlors. Very few of these exist in North Tulsa today, just as they disappeared in the Bottom by 1965; (4) Delinquency: the presence and job description of a probation officer is little changed and fairly forward thinking; however, the "Areas of Delinquency" page shows that what were safer areas then are more dangerous now, and *vice versa*. It ends with the statement that ordinances not enforced in North Tulsa include those at pool halls, dance halls, beer parlors and marble machines.

Excerpt from James Farmer's *Freedom—When?* Chapter five investigates the virtues of desegregation and integration and comes out in favor of integration—once all the systems have been balanced: education, real estate, labor. Laws are not enough; white people must work towards it, and it cannot be tokenized by an effort here and an effort there. The essay is just long enough to test my students; they will have to be told that we must read to find out what he prefers, desegregation or integration. They will have their ideas about which is better, and we'll apply to the novel in its place and time. We may look at this alongside Zora Neale Hurston's *Letter to the Orlando Sentinel* mentioned later.

Youtube video, *Historic Oklahoma All-black Towns Fight to Survive*. This five minute video about Oklahoma's

remaining and dwindling all-black towns discusses their importance in the state's—and the country's—history. Towards the end it includes a plea to keep them alive in story and film so they are not forgotten. I'll use this to begin or a class to see what students know about Oklahoma's history of all-black towns and movement. Even though it is Oklahoma and not Ohio, the points it makes are worth discussing on the context of the novel.

Stories from *The Union*, an African American newspaper published in Cincinnati in the first part of the 20th century, a newspaper that our characters might have read. The first piece is a letter to the editor called "Rotten Eggs." A reader rhetorically asks the editor if something cannot be done to fix the problem of loose women of his race "allowed to stand on the streets day and night and grab every man that comes along, white or black, and try to entice them in." The letter resonates with the characters of both Hannah and Sula as well as the town's tolerance of and frustration with them. The second piece, which seems to be an editorial, criticizes the changing roles and behaviors of men and women. The writer says that men are becoming weak and effeminate, and their wives are taking control of the households. They insist on headship households, where husbands and fathers "should look after the morals of the whole family." Of course, in the novel, few men are to be found and the women do their best to take care of their own children and others'. The letter ends in hyperbole describing how effeminate men have become: ". . .so, some day, we may read in 'The Union,' William Smith is now the mother of a bouncing baby boy." The last piece from *The Union* is an advertisement for homesteads that we will assume are for and all-black community of some means. We will briefly contrast it with what we've learned about how many black towns were started and the origin story of the Bottom.

Black Soldiers in World War I

The Ninety-Third National Guard Division of black soldiers came together after months of confusion and conflict. The 15th Regiment came from New York, the 8th from Illinois, and the 9th from Ohio, where *Sula* takes place. Secretary of War Newton D. Baker was from the South but had spent his career in Ohio. While still harboring some racist notions from his upbringing, he had ideas of fairness and thought that the black men he knew would make excellent soldiers. The process of recruiting, organizing, and training these soldiers was problematic: there were concerns about black leadership; white Southerners did not want black soldiers training in the South; and when they ended up doing so anyway, the soldiers had to follow Jim Crow laws. But men flocked to recruiting stations, many seeing an opportunity to advance their progress in equality and freedom. Surely, once they'd sacrificed themselves for their country they would earn some of both. At their training camp in South Carolina where they were not welcome, white troops instigated conflict with black troops, who with restraint managed to avoid becoming entangled. They arrived in France in December of 2017 but were not allowed to fight; white soldiers didn't want to fight alongside them, either. Instead, they were sent away from the front lines to work as stevedores. A deal was made with the French, who had lost hundreds of thousands of troops and needed supplement, and the black Divisions went into battle with them in the spring of 2018. In fact, "the 372 Regiment, containing the Ohioans, won the French War Cross.[8] The 15th Battalion from New York became famously known as the Harlem Hellfighters.

The first chapter opens with the character Shadrack running with his bayonet, ducking fire, on the edge of a frozen stream in France. It is December of 1917. He witnesses an explosion that removes the head of a fellow soldier, and he is badly wounded himself. He regains consciousness and suffers hallucinations and severe mental trauma. He doesn't know where he is until he is prematurely released, spends a night in jail and is passed off to a farmer to get him home—22 miles away. The military hospital sends him off with 217 dollars, a suit, and his official papers.

Shadrack is not a main character, but he is an essential one. Chapters that feature him provide the bookends to the main narrative. He establishes crazy as a norm in the Bottom, and he is witness to Sula's darkest misdeed, tying him intimately to her, unknown to her. He marks time in the novel with his National Suicide Days, an invention of his unsettled mind to help cope with death by thinking that he can manage or control the unexpected nature of it. On January 3 of that and each subsequent year, he parades through town telling the citizens that "this was their only chance to kill themselves or one another."[9]

One other character, Plum, is also a WWI vet who faces his return with a heroin addiction and infantile dependence on his mother. He spent a year hitting the big cities—the Harlem Renaissance hot spots—before returning to the Bottom after the war. Jackson points out that he returns not as a renaissance man or city sophisticate, but a scarred soldier still, and once home, his uniform is "traded in for clothes that are 'pointless.'" He is rendered so childlike and incompetent that his own mother murders him with fire. Plum is a less essential character. His presence and relationship with Eva tell us more about her. But his presence does seem symbolic of the perils of serving in the war and staying too long in the world outside of the Bottom.

Even more relevant to the characters in the novel is the treatment black soldiers received back home after their service. In addition to the trauma Shadrack and Plum face in the war itself, black soldiers also faced a new and vicious kind of discrimination back on their own soil, from elected leadership on down. As one historian notes, "Sen. James K. Vardaman of Mississippi demanded that white southerners defend their wives and daughters against 'French-women-ruined Negro soldiers'. . . Instead of marching bands and grateful citizens to welcome them, black soldiers encountered mobs, complete with Ku Klux Klan members, who frequently beat them and stripped them of their uniforms."[10] In Europe, black soldiers had a taste of what life might be like outside of the Jim Crow establishment back home; however, having risked their lives and sanity for their country, they returned to find that many whites were as determined as before to keep them segregated and oppressed. The number of black lynchings increased; some black veterans were even hanged in their uniforms.[11]

In the novel, on the train to New Orleans, upon being reprimanded by a white conductor, a symbol of Jim Crow, Hannah gives him a coquettish smile. The faces of the two soldiers who witness go from "blood to marble." They are reminded of their vulnerability, their faces "bubbling with a hatred. . .that had not been there in the beginning but had been born with the dazzling smile."[12] Neither would have been able to find a place to accept them outside of the Bottom. Except for Plum's mother, the town sustained them without adding further conflict to their lives.

Black Soldiers in WW I—Resources

From these resources, I want students to understand the sacrifices made by black soldiers. While they were fighting for American security, they were also fighting the war on Jim Crow at home. Risking everything, they deserved to return home with the respect due all American soldiers.

First is W.E.B. DuBois's brief essay "Returning Soldiers." He notes the mission of black soldiers as they fought for our allies with shared values of liberty and against Germany. He also points out the irony of returning to a country that flouts the same high values with Jim Crow laws, lynching, and disenfranchisement. In an English classroom, the essay is also worthy of a quick rhetorical study.

An excerpt from Horace Pippin's 1918 memoir. Pippin served with French troops in World War I. This excerpt is in his own hand (which confirms its authenticity to some extent) and includes a transcript. He describes

German snipers and his own injury at the hand of one. After a day alone he is pulled to safety by French troops. He describes having little sustenance, constant rain, and another soldier falling dead on him in his trench. “After that I felt good and I trided to get up a gan. But I were to week to do so. Night were coming on. And it began to Rain. then I tried to get the Blanked from my dead comrad. That I could not do. And I could not get him off me. The rain came more and more ontell I were in water” (Pippin). The language is rough; words are misused and misspelled, but his description is clear-headed.

Excerpts from *Colored Soldiers*, by W. Irwin MacIntyre, published in 1923. This fictional set of narratives is framed by the story of a white man who recruited 300 soldiers to serve in World War I. MacIntyre apparently had a hobby of writing books in African American dialect—or what he supposed it to be. There is a stark contrast between the grammatically correct prose narration of the frame; several stories are introduced with the white narrator. The dialect of the “soldiers” will be interesting to contrast with that of Horace Pippin. The tone is humorous, mostly at the expense of the soldiers. The frontispiece of the book is a photograph of an unnamed young black man missing one arm. We understand him to be a veteran of the war. He is smiling at the camera and smoking a cigarette. We will discuss how we perceive the photo in the context of *Colored Soldiers* and how we would if it accompanied a collection of Horace Pippin’s memoir.

World War I poster: *Colored Man Is No Slacker*. This is at Yale’s Beinecke Rare Books and Manuscripts Library online. The poster is an idyllic image of a young black soldier saying goodbye to his girl. His platoon is marching behind him, upright and proudly carrying the American flag. The Beinecke has another World War I poster by the same artist. Titled *True Blue*, it depicts a black family looking longingly at a picture of their father in uniform over the mantle, bordered by American flags. On the wall are also pictures of Presidents Washington and Lincoln. These images suggest the heroism and patriotism of the soldiers—stark contrast to the treatment they are likely to receive upon returning.

Freedom Soldiers: African Americans and World War I, contains several photographs we will use in class. The book is easy to find in libraries and online. The first image on page 120 is of French children posing with and celebrating a group of black soldiers. The children have brought flowers and are posing affectionately with the men. The second image, on page 132, is of a black soldier being treated at a hospital by a French nurse. White American soldiers are staring at him hatefully. These two photographs illustrate the contrast between the men’s treatment at home and in France. Many soldiers fought hoping their service would advance their equality and respect at home. The final image, page 234, is of a painting by Horace Pippin, whose memoir excerpt we’ll use also. It is titled *Mr. Prejudice.* The image suggests that the equality and respect sought by the soldiers was not found. It has a large V in the middle, indicating the victory they hoped to find on the battlefield and at home. On one side of the V is a white-robed Klansman; on the other is the Statue of Liberty. Other figures represent the complex situation and challenges the men faced.

Black Labor Challenges

Leading up to and during the World Wars, black workers struggled to find equitable jobs in most industries. Government and military occupations were just often just as exclusive in hiring, though they should have been the most accommodating as accountable to the spirit of the law. Nationally and in more local settings, individuals and organizations fought for opportunity for black workers. In 1913 Frank Quillin published *The Color Line in Ohio: A History of Race Prejudice in a Typical Northern State.* He spent decades interviewing all socioeconomic groups of people of color and then of white citizens to gain their perspective on the lives of their black counterparts. He concluded that the law did not parallel or dictate the freedoms and experiences of Ohio’s black citizens by 1908-9, a decade before *Sula’s* opening scene. Regardless of legal opportunity,

Quillin documents these facts: in Cincinnati there were no men of color in the medical school, on the fire department, on the health department staff. Many were able to work at jobs at the amusement parks, but had to ride on the cold, uncomfortable deck of the ferry for six miles to get there; they were not allowed to be visitors.[13] More relevant to the men in *Sula*, who spent much of the duration of the story trying to secure labor alongside white teams but without success, black men were excluded from labor unions. “The bricklayers' union, the carpenters', the lathers', the carpenters', the barbers', the bartenders', the printers' unions, and many others refuse admission to negroes.”[14] Their mechanical skills went to waste. White men didn't want to work with blacks. If there were not enough laborers of color, then they must all be white so as not to be mixed. According to Quillen, even if a white superior wanted to hire black workers, his hands were tied by convention. Some federally funded jobs like those with the post office were the exception. These labor challenges affected not only incomes, but workers' dignity and sense of self-worth and masculinity, as well.

These same issues play out in the novel. In 1927 Nel's young husband Jude can get work as a waiter at the Hotel Medallion, not making enough to support Nel. He risks his sense of self-worth and masculinity on the possibility of being hired with white laborers on a new road through Medallion and a bridge across the river. “He wanted to swing the pick or kneel down with the string or shovel the gravel. His arms ached for something heavier than trays. . .” and “that in the end produced something real, something he could point to. ‘I built that road,’ he could say.”[15] For six days he inquires about jobs, losing out to thin, older white men. Motivated by rage and a need to define his manhood, he presses Nel for marriage. His motivation for marrying does not provide the foundation for a long-lasting marriage. Beginning in 1937, for three years rumors circulate that black labor will be hired to build the river tunnel. “The craftwork—no they would not get that. But it was a major job, and the government seemed to favor opening up employment to black workers.” Finally, most of the town following Shadrack's 1941 Suicide Day parade for the first time, they dance and march on to the tunnel site. Like the layer of ice and melt covering everything, their bottled-up frustrations and anticipation of such desired work crystalize, and they pause before charging into their deaths as the tunnel collapses. “A lot of them died there. The earth, now warm, shifted; the first forepole slipped; loose rock fell from the face of the tunnel and caused a shield to give way.”[16] They have been consumed, literally and figuratively, by their untended dreams of more lucrative, dignified work.

Ironically, 1941 is also the year that President Franklin Roosevelt signed Executive Order 8802 which stated, “There shall be no discrimination in the employment of workers in defense industries or government because of race, creed, color, or national origin.” The order established the Fair Employment Practices Commission to enforce the policy. The product of the order was the Federal Employment Practice Committee. One intention was to get minorities to work in industries that would benefit the war cause. In 1943 the FEPC was buoyed by the office of the President and the policies were expanded to include all federal agencies, providing more and better-paying jobs to many black men, especially. By this time, many of those in the Bottom likely to have benefited from the new policies have died in the tunnel.

Black Labor Challenges—Resources

Young men in the bottom face their own kind of *de facto* discrimination, just as those did who fought in the war. Labor discrimination was a national problem, and nationally, black citizens and labor unions were organizing to improve opportunities for all black laborers.

Letter from A. Philip Randolph to Walter White, secretary of the NAACP proposing a march on Washington by thousands of African Americans to protest inequalities in labor opportunities, especially for defense jobs and the armed forces. After White met with President Franklin Roosevelt, the President agreed to sign Executive

Order 8802, described above. I include this letter to show that change has specific sources, specific people doing specific tasks to make things happen. The letter also backs up the labor problems for the men of the Bottom.

Political cartoons by Theodor Seuss Geisel. The first is titled "The Old Run-Around." In the center of a maze is an industrial building called U.S. War Industries. The entrance to the maze says," Negro job-hunters enter here." A steady stream of men enters the maze, but only a few find their way to the building. On the following page, the second untitled cartoon shows Uncle Sam poking an organist on the back and saying, "Listen, maestro. . .if you want to get real harmony, use the black keys as well as the white. The black and white organ keys are labeled "black labor" and "white labor" respectively. The first cartoon indicates the challenge that black workers face in finding war industry jobs. The second suggests that the war industry could be better served by employing black laborers along with white.

Civil Rights Era

One final chapter takes place in 1965, 24 years after the tunnel collapse. The first sentence of the chapter is "Things were so much better in 1965." Black people had jobs with responsibility handling money, teaching school. But the following sentence, "Or so it seemed," suggests that the past is still in control. Resilience can come from memory. White citizens come to value the beautiful but less fertile hills of the Bottom for their luxury homes and golf course, giving that property more value; black citizens settle into the valley. Gone are the Time and a Half Pool Hall, Irene's Palace of Cosmetology, and Reba's Grill. "It was sad, because the Bottom had been a real place."[17] In 1965 Eva's ugly power still reigns over Nel, and industrial progress has led to the poisoning of the fish that Shadrack depended on. But the community seems more lively and complete during Sula's time.

There is another side to the progress of desegregation. In 1955, speaking out about the Brown decision to desegregate schools, Zora Neale Hurston in her *Letter to the Orlando Sentinel* "argued that White schools were not inherently better because they had White students. Hurston advocated for Black self-association. Self-association would promote the 'self-respect of [her] people'."[18] Hurston, trained as a folklorist and anthropologist, was a preservationist of black heritage and culture. She had affection for the "sealed black world in which she had grown up."[19] At all-black schools students can be their authentic, culturally indoctrinated selves; at white schools, they are questioned about the deviation from norms and measured by stereotypes. One can broaden the scope from schools to communities. Hurston's take on school desegregation is a model for what happens in the Bottom with some of the most beautiful writing in the book:

> "Jesus, there were some beautiful boys in 1921! . . .They hung out of attic windows, rode car fenders, delivered the coal, moved into Medallion and moved out, visited cousins, plowed, hoisted, lounged on the church steps, careened on the school playground. The sun heated them and the moon slid down their backs. God, the world was *full* of beautiful boys in 1921."[20]

The Bottom is an inverted picture of what it was. With a new nursing home, new roads, employed black citizens, it seems improved, but for a few generations of its citizens it was a haven from the battles they fought as black mid-century Americans, a place for the displaced.

Conclusion

The historical events and issues that frame *Sula*—institutional segregation and disenfranchisement on the battlefield, in the workplace, and on their home territory—have always shaped the lives of black Americans. In the novel we see the outcomes play out in the setting, themes, and especially the characters.

The novel's characters, like many of Morrison's characters are eccentric and face complex challenges that often stem from their racial heritage. The varied and sometimes bizarre character traits and unique methods of facing these challenges are just part of being black in their particular time and place in America. In *Sula,* Shadrack manages his relationship with death by holding his National Suicide Day and living alone by the river. Eva manages her economy by cutting off her leg for insurance money, and fills her house with personally chosen misfits, like the white man she calls Tar Baby and the three Deweys. Sula escapes the predictable, minimal lives of the other black women in the Bottom by separating herself physically, sexually, and emotionally. She leaves the community without word, she has a prolific and indiscriminating sex life, she distances herself emotionally from Hannah and Eva, and, except for Ajax and Nel, she eschews personal relationships—and neither of those is conventional. She has created her own sense of agency where her county has denied it, especially to a black woman. In doing so, the community endows her with supernatural powers that are responsible for problems of weather, bad relationships, and deaths. Their limited options lead them to death and destruction in most cases.

Strategies

Doing History

The process of teaching history is fraught with peril: Whose stories do we tell? Where do those stories begin and end? What are the best resources? We run the risk of marginalizing, oversimplifying, and misrepresenting. Rather than presenting history and being vulnerable to these risks, we can lead students to inquire, to explore multiple stories and come to their own critical conclusions. Sam Wineburg suggests that historical expertise is knowing what to ask. Jeff Strickland writes about teaching the WPA slave narratives with activities that encourage debate about their validity. Students are set up to question primary sources, put them in context with secondary sources, and come up with their own interpretations. He calls his activities "doing history."[21] Strickland and Cynthia Lyerly point out that there are likely problems, as with the WPA slave narratives, about the legitimacy of any passed down narratives, especially transcribed ones. Are interviews edited or revised? Are the storytellers of advanced age? Are they representative of many experiences of just that of a few? Does the voice seem true to the subject? Are there contradictions? For several activities, students will be presented a selection of primary and/or secondary sources and asked to answer the questions above.

Text and Image Annotation

Many of the critical reading skills necessary for reading historical documents and primary sources are skills that are already in regular use in the English classroom, where we regularly annotate, question sources and language, and look for other clues within the text. Wineburg, who influenced much of our seminar cited Nancy Boyles: "Close reading exhorts students to 'read and reread deliberately,' enabling them to 'reflect on the meanings of individual words and sentences; the order in which the sentences unfold; and the development of

ideas over the course of a text, which ultimately leads students to arrive at an understanding of the text as a whole.'"[22]

English teachers know the importance of teaching their students to annotate texts, especially those challenged with literacy or critical reading skills. More advanced readers still benefit from the process as it encourages them to do more with challenging texts or find subtleties in their usual reading practice. Whether the documents are literary or historical, the same close reading exercises are essential. Whenever possible I give my students a copy they can write on and keep to refer back to. When I teach my students to annotate a text, I pull out examples from my shelves and files, where I have asked questions, illustrated something, agreed or disagreed with the author or text. I might find an exclamation point or angry face. Different colors of ink may have significance in a text I find especially challenging. There are endless possibilities for the ways in which a reader may interact with a text. To begin, I tell them to mark key words or terms; write brief definitions for words they don't know; react emotionally; seek patterns (especially in poetry or argument) and discrepancies; ask and answer questions of the text; trace lists or processes. What they should not do is use one single highlighter to mark a text. When they have systems, such as circling and underlining for separate purposes or creating their own notations systems, they have to make critical decisions about the text using additional parts of the brain, making them far more likely not only to recall but to make sense and meaning of what they have read.

The same processes may be used to annotate an image. Because I have small classes, I can print color copies of images we use. A larger class or group could also do this activity with an interactive smartboard though intimate, personal interaction with the text would be lessened.

With pencil—or whatever—in hand, students can study an image with the same intensity as a text, by asking questions, making lists, identifying objects, contemplating color—or lack of it, questioning facial expressions, style, or empty space. Facing an image with the intention of interacting physically with it almost forces the viewer to seek details he/she would have missed otherwise.

Understanding Primary and Secondary Sources

For this unit—and any other study of history—students should know the difference between primary and secondary sources of information. The content of textbooks can be polluted by politics or oversimplification and are limited to a single perspective in most cases. Primary sources of are the people, time, and place of an event or situation. The study of biography or history is incomplete without support—or contradiction—from primary sources. Personal letters, newspaper articles, photographs, videos, interviews, original research, and autobiographies are examples of primary sources. Secondary sources are one step removed and include analysis, books, documentaries, biographies. They may include primary sources, such as photographs. I generally give students several selections of documents and have them sort them into the two groups, followed by a discussion about their conclusions. There are other questions to ask of both primary and secondary sources, though? Whose perspective do they represent? Is there bias, as in a political cartoon? An excellent source for both primary sources and resources for teaching them is the Library of Congress. I use their printable handout called *Using Primary Sources* in their section for teachers. The first questions on the page are under 1. Engage students with primary sources. The second is 2. Promote student inquiry. The third is 3. Assess how students apply critical thinking and analysis skills to primary sources. The questions under each heading are excellent.

Online Engagement Platforms

At the time of this unit's creation, most of our school districts are going to be practicing distance learning. These applications might be helpful in engaging students in discussion and critical thinking about content. The first is the Google app/extension Jamboard. This is an interactive whiteboard with pen, laser, and sticky notes. Students can interact from their own computers, and the result is a whiteboard or poster board that looks just like something they could brainstorm alone or collaboratively on at school. Lino is similar to Jamboard. Both can be used during the class or as exit ticket activities at the end. Another is Flipgrid. It allows students to upload short original videos to a topic I select. The design is on the young side for my students, but it is easy to use and engaging—and they love seeing and recording themselves. Dotstorming is another interactive application. Students can vote and a grid shows their answers in dot-on-grid form that shows priorities and trends. Pear Deck is another interactive site that allows student to interact or give feedback with a variety of formats from dot-grid voting to TKW charts. Also more elementary in style, it is an easy way for my high school students to engage in a non-threatening way.

Activities

All of these activities involve at least one of the strategies above, and often more than one. In addition to these activities, which emphasize the use of supplementary primary and secondary sources, we will also have lessons that focus on the literary aspects of the novel. For example, we will do a very close read of the four pages at the beginning of Part I that precede the first chapter, especially the opening and closing lines, which hint strongly at main themes. Page four is an excellent example of Morrison's descriptive, lyrical writing that establishes a sense of place. We will revisit these pages after we read the last chapter of the novel, as well.

I. Doing history with soldier narratives and images.

On the first of two days, students will review what it means to annotate well and will use these skills throughout the unit. They will spend time doing a close read of Horace Pippin's excerpt and annotating both that document and the photograph from *Colored Soldiers*. I will pass out hard copies to each student to write on. On the second day, they will read closely and annotate the brief excerpt from the fictional narrative. In groups of three they'll compare their work and pay close attention to the language of both narratives. Each group will report back with their findings and the answers to these questions: 1) Which is the authentic narrative? Give two reasons why. 2) Which narrative does the photograph go with and why? 3) Give three specific things that you notice about the language of the two soldiers, paying close attention to diction, vocabulary, and content. I'll finish with the big reveal and lead a discussion of the problems associated with the fictional *Colored Soldiers* and its white author, including his possible intentions and the collectability of that book today (good copies are available online for upwards of 265.00).

II. Community newspaper writing

We will have read at least the three pieces from the all-black Cincinnati newspaper *The Union* from the first part of the 20th century. It is a paper that our characters might have read. One is a letter to the editor criticizing the behavior of women. Another is an editorial (probably) bemoaning the changing characteristics of men and women. If we find truth in fiction, then students will show the truths they find in their lives, their

time by writing letters and editorials criticizing or extolling their own society. Done today, they might write about protests, current movements and issues like the BLM or Back the Blue movements. If gender roles were in flux then, they certainly are more visibly so now; this could be a topic for an interested student, as well. Students may write collaboratively or on their own.

III. Primary and secondary sources with Jamboard

It is likely that I will teach at least some of this unit during a period of distance learning during the current pandemic, so this activity is especially intended as an attempt to engage my students so that they might be prepared for a writing assignment that asks them to consider several sources and come to their own conclusions with the support of those sources. Ultimately, they are seeing the answer to this question: are all-black towns viable today? Students will assess *Study of Conditions among the Negro Population of Tulsa by Interracial Committee of Y.W.C.A.* of 1938 and the James Farmer excerpt from *Freedom—When?* along with watching either or both short videos about Oklahoma's all-black towns. We will use three-four Jamboard pages to document our notes (pulled also from our annotations of the written documents). The first Jamboard page will ask students to note the appealing sides of living in this North Tulsa neighborhood in 1938. Each student will have to add at least one original note. On the other side they will do the same noting the drawbacks, both stated and implied. After watching either or both videos, they will do another two-sided Jamboard page with the same practice. This time the two sides are reasons all-black towns may and may not be viable today, based on the content of the video(s) and deductions. Students will have to annotate and carefully consider the content of James Farmer's excerpt about integration. He ultimately favors integration, but that is not clear right away. On this board students will use their notes to do another two-columned board. Sticky notes on one side favor integration; sticky notes on the other favor separation. After completing these boards, students will use them to write an informal but well-supported analysis piece of three paragraphs in which they answer the question above: are all-black towns viable today?

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This short letter to the editor gives some credibility to the loose nature of Sula and illustrates scenes from the novel. the "rotten eggs" of the title are the loose women who grab for men of all colors.

Notes

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[1] Morrison, Toni. Sula, xvi.

[2] Ibid., xii.

[3] Hamilton, Kenneth Marvin. Black Towns and Profit: Promotion and Development in the Trans-Appalachian West, 1.

[4] Ibid., 2, 107.

[5] Christian, Barbara. “The Past Is Infinite: History and Myth in Toni Morrison's Trilogy,” 413.

[6] Ibid., 415.

[7] Ibid., 3.

[8] Griffin, William W. "Mobilization of Black Militiamen in World War I: Ohio's Ninth Battalion," 703.

[9] Morrison, Toni. Sula, 14.

[10] Jackson, Chuck. "A "Headless Display": Sula, Soldiers, and Lynching," 376.

[11] "Returning Soldiers (1919)." Oxford African American Studies Center.

[12] Morrison, Toni. Sula, 22.

[13] Quillin, Frank Uriah. The Color Line in Ohio: A History of Race Prejudice in a Typical Northern State, 126-29.

[14] Ibid., 130.

[15] Morrison, Toni. Sula, 81-82.

[16] Ibid., 162.

[17] Ibid., 166.

[18] Marcucci, Olivia. "Zora Neale Hurston and the Brown Debate: Race, Class, and the Progressive Empire," 15.

[19] Ibid.

[20] Morrison, Toni. Sula, 163-164.

[21] Wineburg, Samuel S. Why Learn History (When It's Already on Your Phone), 41.

[22] Ibid., 99-100.

Appendix on Implementing District Standards

Tulsa Public Schools Learning Expectations, English III. The ELA standards for grades 11-12 vary little from grade to grade. For simplicity, I include the eleventh-grade standards. All are broad and encompass multiple specific skills.

Reading 2. Determine the central ideas or themes of a text and analyze their development; summarize the key supporting details and ideas. Students will do this throughout the unit as they annotate and read critically for literary and informational purposes, both in the novel and accompanying primary sources.

Reading 5-6 Analyze the structure of texts, including how specific sentences, paragraphs, and larger portions of the text relate to each other and the whole. Assess how point of view or purpose shapes the content and style of a text. We will study the structure and form of *Sula*, from its chapter organization to the varied narrators and their purposes. There will be some of this analysis with supporting texts also.

Reading 7 and 10. Integrate and evaluate content presented in diverse media and formats, including visually and quantitatively as well as in words. Read and comprehend complex literary and informational texts independently and proficiently. Students will do this as they study images, film, cartoons, and informational documents throughout the unit, sometimes in groups, often on their own.

Writing 8. Gather relevant information from multiple print and digital sources, assess the credibility and accuracy of each source, and integrate the information while avoiding plagiarism. Though most sources will be provided to students, they will report their findings about he collected sources in writing to be submitted through Canvas or in journals.

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