In her important work on trauma, *Unclaimed Experience*, Cathy Caruth points out that the original meaning of trauma is “an injury inflicted on a body” (3). In Freud’s texts, however, trauma refers to “a wound inflicted not upon the body but upon the mind” (3). She then provides the general definition of trauma as “the response to an unexpected or overwhelming violent event or events that are not fully grasped as they occur, but return later in repeated flashbacks, nightmares, and other repetitive phenomena” (91). Kai Erikson expands the definition of trauma to make it a more useful concept. Focusing on the traumatic effects, he insists that trauma can result from both “a constellation of life experiences” and “a discrete happening,” from “a persisting condition” and “an acute event” (185). He stresses that trauma can transform “one sharp stab” into “an enduring state of mind” (185). He also distinguishes “individual trauma” from “collective trauma”; the former means the blow to individual psyche while the latter the damage to the bonds between people (187). Laura Brown broadens the scope of trauma even further by taking into account the private, secret experiences of various minority groups such as girls and women of color, men of color, homosexuals, poor and physically challenged people. She brings up the concept of “insidious trauma” by Maria Root, which refers to “the traumatogenic effects of oppression that are not necessarily overtly violent or threatening to bodily well-being at the given moment but that do violence to the soul and spirit” (107). Stef Craps and Gert Buelens cite Frantz Fanon’s account of black people’s encountering racism, which leads to the “feelings of inferiority, inadequacy,
and self-hatred,” as a classic example of insidious trauma (3). They indicate that trauma studies has one-sided focus since it focuses almost exclusively on the traumatic experiences of “white Westerners” and applies critical approaches “emanating from a Euro-American context” (2). Jill Matus concurs that little work has been done on the “experience of racism as traumatic” (27).

Michelle Balaev, in “Trends in Literary Trauma Theory,” not only provides a useful definition of trauma but also adds another aspect to be examined—the role of place. She notes that there is general agreement among psychiatrists and psychologists that the traumatic experience can “disrupt or alter consciousness, memory, sense of self, and relation to community” (6). She defines trauma as “a person’s emotional response to an overwhelming event that disrupts previous ideas of an individual’s sense of self and the standards by which one evaluates society” (1). Balaev believes that analyzing the role of place—“the locus where nature and culture converge to construct meaning and inform both individual and collective identity”—acknowledges the sociopolitical and cultural forces that cause trauma, so it gives new understating to trauma’s meaning for both the individual and community (8). In “Community and Nature,” Barbara Christian calls attention to the “value system” of the place and stresses the importance of place as “a participant” in African folk tradition (51, 48). In other words, place is regarded as an actor shaping the identity of the characters. The fact that in Sula Toni Morrison begins with the demolition of the place where there was once a neighborhood is a powerful proof that we should historicize and contextualize trauma. In sum, trauma is situated in a specific culture and place and understood through the cultural values and social relationships associated with that particular place.

The first African American writer to receive the Nobel Prize for literature, Morrison states clearly in “Rootedness” that the best art should be “unquestionably
political and irrevocably beautiful at the same time” (345). In her book *Toni Morrison*, Jill Matus reports that Morrison claims being seen as Other is a trauma; that is, racism is a trauma (23). Matus regards Morrison’s novels as literary witnesses to the racial traumas African Americans have suffered, not only slavery but also the ongoing racial inequalities and oppressions. She analyzes them as “a form of historical and cultural memory” functioning both “as the dream work of the traumatized and as bearers of witness to those dreams” (34). In *Sula* traumatic events including death occur throughout the novel and mark the characters. In fact, that *Sula* starts with the death of the Bottom whose origin is a “nigger joke” is a constant reminder of the force and continuing effects of racism; it is the powerful white people who define and determine the fate of the Bottom (4). In the last section “1965,” the sadness of the loss of the Bottom is highlighted through the contrast between “a real place” and “separate houses with separate televisions and separate telephones” (166). As mentioned above, place plays a crucial role in *Sula*, serving as a character with values and moral views affecting the characters in their ways of achieving their identities and dealing with trauma.

In the first titled section “1919,” we encounter Shadrack, a traumatized World War I shell-shocked victim, and learn about his founding of National Suicide Day as a way to make “a disorderly world orderly,” which becomes “a landmark in time and a point of reference” in the neighborhood (Matus 56). Matus emphasizes the significance of the “historical circumstances”; in addition, she links Shadrack with the soldiers on the train Nel and her mother take to New Orleans and Sula’s drug-addicted uncle Plum to highlight “the duplicity of American race relations” (57). Furthermore, in a way, Shadrack’s war trauma is also made present to the community and becomes a part of the communal memory, which manifests the close connection between the individual and the community. In the remaining part of the essay, I will focus on the
title character Sula and analyze how the traumatic events in her life disrupt her perception of herself and affect her relationship with others and how individual and communal trauma is connected.

The traumatic events that Sula has to deal with include being a black female, having a dead father and a distant mother, causing Chicken Little’s death, witnessing her mother’s death, losing Nel’s friendship, and being abandoned by Ajax. Matus is right to observe that Sula is haunted by “sorrow and pain” (63). Morrison describes “experimental” Sula as a “New World black woman” and “sort of an outlaw” (Moyers 269 quoted in Bouson 47). Regarded by the Bottom community as a pariah, an evil, and a witch, Sula has also been interpreted in many ways such as “a rule-breaker,” a “lawless woman” (Stepto 216 quoted in Bryant 739); a “new female being” (Spillers 28); “a misanthrope and shamed social outcast” (Bouson 52). In this essay I intend to show how the overwhelming violent events and the insidious trauma help shape Sula, no matter how one labels her.

Being a black girl growing up at a chaotic low class Peace household at the Bottom means that opportunities are quite limited for Sula and ensures that she would have a “constellation of life experiences.” Even at a very young age, both Sula and Nel know that since they are “neither white nor male,” “all freedom and triumph was forbidden to them” (52). Hence they have “set about creating something else to be” (52). Christian mentions the “effect of insularity on the women of the Bottom” because the neighborhood is high up in the hills and so isolated from the rest of the world (“Community and Nature” 50). She also remarks that due to the insularity and vulnerability of the black community, the crucial defining characteristic of “the class of woman is that she make others” by making babies and supporting men (“Concept of Class” 76). The adult Nel, who has both borne children and made Jude (83), reminds Sula that being “a woman and a colored woman,” she “can’t act like a man”
and “can’t be walking around all independent-like” (142). Even Eva, who has traveled outside the neighborhood, accepts the role of women and accuses the anti-conventional Sula, who only wants to “make myself” and on one else, of being “selfish” (92). It is worth pointing out that for Sula, life and the fate of being a colored woman are similar in the cities. She concludes that “All those cities held the same people, working the same mouths, sweating the same sweat,” which bores her (120). Sula tells Nel that every colored woman in their country is “dying” “like a stump” while she is going down like “red woods” (143). In the picture of the colored women Sula presents, we see the potential trauma victims.

Being fatherless with a distant mother results in a very “solitary” Sula whose “loneliness was so profound it intoxicated” her though ironically all sorts of people drop in her house (51). Overhearing her mother’s words “I love Sula. I just don’t like her,” which give her a “sting in her eye” and send her “flying up the stairs” with “dark thoughts,” when she was 12 years old is a crippling turning point for Sula with severe consequences (57). First, it marks her as a “mother-damaged figure” and shatters her sense of self (Bouson 64) because her mother’s remarks teach Sula there is “no other that you could count on” (118-9). Margaret Schramm suggests that Hannah’s comment “intensifies Sula’s need for Nel’s friendship” as an alternative center to make up her mother’s failure to provide one (173). Second, the overwhelming event leads to Sula’s accidental drowning of Chicken Little, another haunting trauma, which shows her there is “no self to count on” (119). As a result, Sula has “no center, no speck around which to grow” (119). Released from “one major feeling of responsibility,” Sula launches an “experimental life,” giving her “imagination” free rein (118).

The tragic death of Chicken Little, which remains in Sula’s mind even in her deathbed, needs to be analyzed carefully. Matus reads Chicken Little’s death as a
symbol of “Sula’s own childhood hurt and loss” and as the novel’s “central symbol of loss or lack” (4). I think it can also signify the end of Sula’s innocence and childhood, which is short-lived just like the butterflies. In addition, it is telling that when Nel tries to deal with the overwhelmingly traumatic double betrayal of Sula and her husband Jude, she remembers the mourning and screaming women at Chicken Little’s funeral. For Bouson, the death of Chicken Little represents “a displaced enactment of Sula’s dark thoughts and feelings” and “the painful and confusing experience of toxic shame” (64). Christian calls attention to the “beginning of sexual stirring” in Sula and Nel. She believes that the overwhelmed Sula swings Chicken Little when she is overflowed with the “energy of repressed pain and pleasure” (“Contemporary Fables” 35). Sula’s budding sexuality is presented clearly in the chapter with her delight from Ajax’s compliment and the highly sexually implicated game Sula and Nel play. Furthermore, the whole event regarding Chicken Little’s death is also significant in terms of Sula and Nel’s friendship. It is their mutual, unspeakable, and unforgettable memory, which supposedly binds them. Yet, at the funeral they neither touch each other nor keep eye contact; instead, there is “a space, a separateness, between them” (64). It seems to foreshadow the breach of the friendship between Sula and Nel, which, considering their awakening sexuality, prepares and makes room for Nel’s marriage to Jude.

Unfortunately Chicken Little’s death by water is not the only one Sula witnesses. She is traumatized by her mother’s unexpected and violent death by fire and suffers from the symptoms of “the delayed reaction and haunting dreams” (Matus 67). Before she dies, as if to convince the absent Eva of her innocence, who believes that Sula watches Hannah burn because she is “interested” (78), Sula explains, “I didn’t mean anything. I never meant anything. I stood there watching her burn and was thrilled. I wanted her to keep on jerking like that, to keep on dancing” (147). It seems
unbelievable, but for the thirteen-year-old Sula, who has “a mean determination to explore everything that interested [her],” her mother’s burning is an extraordinary event out of the monotonous daily life (55). It triggers her attention, “curiosity,” and probably even “adventuresomeness” (121, 55). Bouson proposes that Sula’s secret pleasure suggests “her desire for revenge against her shaming mother” and her “emotional disconnection from the suffering of others” (65). Thrilled or not, her mother’s horrible and tragic death haunts her, causing the recurrent nightmares from which Sula wakes up “gagging and overwhelmed with the smell of smoke” (148).

Elizabeth Abel states that unlike parental and sexual bonds, friendship is “a privileged relationship” with the potential to blend “perfect freedom with complete involvement” (428). Nevertheless, it is almost impossible to achieve the balance between “growth and identification necessary to friendship” between Sula and Nel because they have different definition and expectation of their friendship. The friendship between Sula and Nel is essential for both since it offers them the “center,” the “intimacy,” the “safe harbor” to grow on (119, 52, 55). Sula treasures Nel, who is the “closest thing to be both an other and a self,” so much that Nel is the last thought in her mind before she dies. Nonetheless, losing Nel’s friendship seems an inevitable trauma for Sula. Nel’s misunderstanding of Sula’s protective act toward her is a blow to Sula’s psyche. Nel is disgusted by Sula’s unintentional self-mutilation in the effort to protect her, believing the fear-stricken Sula cuts herself to “protect herself” (101). Consequently, Sula decides to “let her emotions dictate her behavior,” which is partially to blame for her having sex with Jude (141). For the emotion dominant Sula, Jude “just filled up the space” (144). She also thinks since they are such good friends—“two throats and one eye” and with “no price” (147)—Nel should “get over it” (145). Matus notes that Sula’s seduction of Jude suggests her “detachment” and a “profound lack of, or disregard for, feeling” (62). It is worth mentioning that sex is
where Sula finds “misery and the ability to feel deep sorrow” and “sadness” (122). Ironically, her experiencing misery from bedding down with Jude begets more and appalling misery in Nel. In her analysis, Alisha Coleman regards Sula and Nel as two parts of one psychological self. Nel represents “the superego or the conscience” while Sula “the id or the pleasure and the unconscious desire of the psyche” (151). She suggests that sleeping with Jude, whom Nel also possesses, is Sula’s attempt to “connect with the other part of herself, Nel” and relive the days when they were one (147). However, Nel believes that Sula takes Jude away because she does not love her enough to leave Jude alone and let him love her (145). From then on she no longer considers Sula as a friend but as an “enemy” (138).

In the end of the section entitled “1939,” the free-spirited Ajax, which is actually Albert Jack, leaves Sula after detecting in her the signs of “nailing him,” which I think is the final wound inflicted on her mind (127). Sula thinks that “It’s just as well he left,” otherwise her “tremendous curiosity” might end up hurting him, which very likely would cause the community to blame her for harming him intentionally (121). Sula knows and seems to accept that she is seen as a “pariah,” but that does not mean she is not hurt when being wrongly accused (122). She does not want to be further misunderstood and blamed for something she does not do, for example Teapot’s fall, or does unintentionally. Furthermore, as she tells Nel, she believes that men “ain’t worth more than me” and she will not spend her life keeping one (143). Nevertheless, it is implied that being abandoned by Ajax contributes to Sula’s sickness. The thoughts in her mind then—“There aren’t any more new songs and I have sung all the ones there are”—seem to suggest that she can cease exploring, imagining, experimenting, inventing, or even living now that she has tried everything (137). In addition, it is no coincident that the following section, which is “1940,” begins with her illness. Christian says that Sula’s death is due to both “spiritual malnutrition” and
“physical cause” (“Contemporary Fables” 37). From the above analysis of the traumatic events in her life, it is also likely that Sula is exhausted from the blows to her psyche (Erikson 187). Yet being who she is, Sula is still exploring the new experience—death—at the last moment. Unfortunately Nel is not there to hear her thoughts on death should she be able to express them. That absence is echoed in the end when Sula is not there to share Nel’s epiphany that it is Sula rather than Jude that she has been missing all the years. The loss of a human connection is intensified by Sula’s failure to remember Shadrack as the person who has said “always” to comfort her after her accidental killing of Chicken Little and by Shadrack and Nel’s mutual failure to recognize each other (149). In their final encounter, they move in “opposite directions, each thinking separate thoughts about the past” (174). The word separate is reminiscent of the loss of the community. Thus in the end individual and communal trauma mingles in the bottomless and topless “circles of sorrow” (174).


