I studied Toni Morrison’s *Sula* in my Junior Year literature class, although I hardly ever opened the book. Amidst five rigorous classes, Dance Company rehearsals, SAT prep class, and weekly meltdowns, there just weren’t enough hours in the day to read about something as seemingly mundane as “two friends who become something worse than enemies.” When I arrived at college this fall and was allotted more free time than I knew existed, I savored Toni Morrison’s literary masterpiece for the first time. Most of the scenes were completely unfamiliar to me, but one particular passage brought me right back to my Junior Year English classroom, where I sat in the back row with my friend Kate Judge each day, both of us sipping Earl Grey tea and bullshitting our way through the class discussion. I remember vividly when our teacher pointed us to a passage and read aloud to us in her low, husky voice:

Nel found a thick twig and, with her thumbnail, pulled away its bark until it was stripped to a smooth, creamy innocence. Sula looked about and found one too. When both twigs were undressed Nel moved easily to the next stage and began tearing up rooted grass to make a bear spot of earth. When a generous clearing was made, Sula traced intricate patterns in it with her twig. At first Nel was content to do the same. But soon she grew impatient and poked her twig rhythmically and intensely into the earth, making a small neat hole. (58)

Even though the passage is apparently about two young friends idling on summer’s day, a deep blush crept across my face as my teacher read. The adjectives “smooth” and “creamy” seemed exceptionally inappropriate; perhaps because they recalled the consistency of sperm which I had only recently first encountered. And the image of “Nel poking her twig rhythmically and intensely into the earth, making a small neat hole” had to be about sex, right? The twig was the penis and the hole was the vagina. I looked around the room at my bored classmates and wondered why their libidos were not also woken up by Morrison’s rich language. Sula and Nel’s interaction with the earth was just so sexual, so “intense,” and even violent! Picturing Nel “tearing up rooted grass,” I longed to dig my hands into the earth and do the same. Now, looking back, the primal quality of Sula and Nel’s friendship—cultivated in nature’s fertile soil—reminds me of my friendship with Kate. It may have subconsciously then too, deepening the red of my blush. But Junior Year was the dark era of my friendship with Kate, when Andrew Lavrennicov, the older lacrosse player with the honey-coated voice, asked for Kate’s “digits.” The fatal night that Kate gave Andrew a blowjob in the chemistry classroom and finally understood the grownup ways of the world placed our friendship at the brink of a precipice. Similarly, Sula’s exploitation of her sexuality to sleep with Nel’s husband ruptures Sula and Nel’s friendship. But the real link between Sula’s friendship with Nel and my friendship with Kate emerges much before, at the very origin of our friendships when we were at the cusp of puberty and Kate was still Kater to me.
Ritual marked the beginning of Sula and Nel’s as well as Kater and my friendship. While Nel and Sula walked to Edna Finch’s ice cream habitually even when “it was too cold for ice cream,” Kater and I took the commuter rail back home from high school every afternoon of freshman year (49). Both of our destinations, an ice cream parlor and home, epitomize childhood and safety. But our journeys were far from innocent. Sula and Nel’s route to the ice cream parlor took them through gatherings of men who admired their underdeveloped bodies with “panther eyes” (50). Sula and Nel “moved toward the ice cream parlor like tight ropewalkers, as thrilled by the possibility of a slip as by the maintenance of tension and balance [...] the least sideways glance, the merest toe stub, could pitch them into those creamy haunches spread wide with welcome” (51). I think of a “tight ropewalker” as a slinky woman in a tutu—balancing on the thin rope and even sometimes kicking her leg up, the tight ropewalker executes a skillful yet dangerous craft in order to please her audience. The comparison of Sula and Nel to “tight ropewalkers,” then, suggests that they purposefully and masterfully attract attention to themselves by walking past all the eager men on the way to the ice cream parlor. Their performance puts them in danger of falling into “those creamy haunches spread wide with welcome.” Once again, Toni Morrison’s language oozes with sexuality. There’s that adjective “creamy”; and the word “haunches,” even without looking up its definition, just sounds big, bulky, and bestial to me. The men’s posture, their legs “spread wide with welcome,” invites Nel and Sula to descend from their tightrope and explore “the place where the mystery curled” (50). And indeed the “possibility of a slip” thrills Sula and Nel (51). While many would be horrified by the young girls’ inclination towards crowds of older men, I can relate to Sula and Nel’s desire to escape the confines of their innocent bodies and delve into the sexuality coloring the world around them.

During our daily train rides, Kater and I were also “tight-rope walkers,” balancing over the raging hormones of adolescents after a long day of routine. Kater and I would always sit in booths with freshman boys, whose cracking voices and peach fuzz stubble revealed that they were barely at the cusp of puberty. These boys were no match for the rowdy men lining Sula and Nel’s route to Edna Finch’s ice cream, but there was still that “mystery curled” under their baggy jeans. (50) Kater and I provoked that mystery with our “tight-rope” walking performance: Kater would nuzzle into the nook of my neck and purr bizarre nicknames at me like “minx” of “vixen.” I followed her lead and, together, we delighted in the stunned glances of our baby-faced guy friends. But we wanted more; we wanted to fall into “creamy haunches spread wide with welcome.” (by Esme Valette, printed with permission)

**Final Project for Writing Workshop 0100B:** student applied theory to personal experience in one phase of the assignment, then formulated a research, and then wrote up the findings. This writing workshop supports the First Year Seminar.

With globalization, more and more Asians, like myself, are pursuing higher education at overseas universities (Lewis, 2013). Apart from our studies, the next biggest
issue we face is: How exactly do we healthily integrate into our new culture? Common advice proposes that being “open-minded and culturally sensitive” will “establish connections” and help integrate (Fischer, 2013). But it is really that simple? Would altering my behavior in any form not also be changing my identity in the long run? Can I adapt to American culture without losing much of my identity?

The highly individualized and “multi-dimensional nature” of identity formation, as defined in Beverly Tatum's book, Why Are All the Black Kids Sitting Together In the Cafeteria, requires clarification before any proper discussion can be carried out (Tatum, 2003, p. 18). Tatum lays out the basic elements of one’s identity – “ethnicity, gender, religion, sexual orientation, socioeconomic status, age and physical or mental ability” – but does not include nationality, which in my experience is a major factor of my identity at Middlebury (Tatum, p. 22). A subconscious process, identity formation often does not cross an individual’s mind until it is called into question (Tatum, p. 28): for me, this was my transition from a Chinese-dominated society to a Western world where my nationality, the source of my dominant identity back home, suddenly made me part of the subordinate group. This discussion is framed by my struggle with this suddenly crucial element of my identity – nationality.

As Fischer shows in The Chronicle of Higher Education, Asian international students integrate in three different ways (Fischer, 2013). The first type integrates at a bare minimum. These students keep to themselves and restrict contact to those from similar countries. Relationships with Americans are transactional and comprise solely of either group work or imposed living arrangements. A large proportion of Asians – forty percent - fall into this category (Fischer, 2013). The second type integrates partially; there is a mix of American and culturally similar international friends. This type participates in select school events but mostly engages in activities similar to those back home. At forty-five percent, most Asians integrate according to this type (Fischer, 2013). The third type integrates fully and adopts all the host country’s customs: accent, diet, style, life attitudes, activities etc. Not surprisingly, only fifteen percent of Asians do so (Fischer, 2013). (by Davin Chia, printed with permission).

Another final project example, different style

Our identities are a product of the many different things that make us who we are. These different aspects of identity can be separated into two categories: dominant and subordinate. Dominant characteristics, in the United States, are characteristics that are in accordance with our general consensus of what a person should be: white, straight, financially secure, male, tall, thin, athletic, Christian, extroverted, educated, and a home owner. Subordinate aspects include traits opposite of or different than dominant aspects. Tatum introduces these two categories in the chapter “The Complexity of Identity” in her book Why Are All the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria. In the same chapter, Tatum states that people tend to focus most of their attention on the subordinate aspects of their identity. For example, a straight obese man will probably think more about his disadvantages as an obese American than his advantages as a male.

The first time I read this chapter, I saw that I also was clearly overlooking certain advantages of my own. I am a straight Christian male young athletic kid who happens to be undocumented. I’m not just an undocumented kid. Being undocumented is certainly a subordinate trait. There is always a sense of expected
sympathy that goes along with the mentioning of someone being “illegal.” My dad is undocumented, but he is also a college graduate. My dad’s name is Enrique.

Enrique has a couple of subordinate traits: being Mexican, being undocumented and being poor. There are plenty of Mexicans where my family lives and being undocumented, most often, goes hand in hand with being poor. Financial insecurity has plagued our family since my dad first arrived eleven years ago. However, it is safe to say that my father’s most defining subordinate trait is being undocumented. Does being undocumented overshadow being a college graduate the way being obese might seem to overshadow being straight? How does Enrique’s inability to work in Philosophy and Business Administration, the fields he studied in college, affect his view of himself his family and his future? In order to answer these questions I called Enrique in South Houston, Texas and asked him to expand on his experience.

I asked my dad what he thought of himself (something I’ve never done before). He said that working well below his capacity didn’t bother him and that he’d learned to appreciate the role society handed him. He told me a couple of stories about the few times he’d stopped to think about his degree. My dad used to work in chemical refineries because before the patriot act was passed you didn’t need a green card to work in the U.S. He mentioned a few instances when he’d helped his supervisor resolve some personal financial issues and a couple instances when he’d found a safer and therefore better way of getting a particular task done. Enrique says he is grateful for the opportunity he had to learn, but he doesn’t see the opportunities he had in the past as a reason to grow impatient with his lack of present opportunities. He says it’s silly to think low of yourself when you are being held down by things that are outside of your control.

During the interview I also asked my dad about his family. He said he was happy to have been able to turn some of his family’s disadvantages into advantages. He mentioned a couple of examples of when he’d drawn ideas from his years in college. During the hot Texas summers our house didn’t have air conditioning, so my dad made sure we spent most of our days inside one of the city’s public libraries. My dad’s ability to recognize the importance of reading in general and reading in both Spanish and English made it possible for us to develop an enthusiasm for learning. Before school every day my dad got up early and prepared us a nutritional shake complete with tomatoes, pecans, celery, cranberries, raisins, walnuts, and whatever else was available. On the way out the door, he handed each of us our shake in a thermos and reminded us that while we were at school our mom would be cleaning houses. He’d tell us “if you don’t do well in school then it’s not a problem just stop going and help out at home.” The circumstances in our lives that my dad called our attention to made me want run faster during track practice. My dad’s reminders gave my siblings and me ambition that our fellow undocumented classmates, and maybe even documented kids, didn’t have. (by Daniel Ramirez, printed with permission.)

All three of these writers are Peer Writing Tutors or training to become Peer Writing Tutors.

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