

Toni Morrison's Quarrel with the Civil Rights Ideology in *Love*

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Toni Morrison's *Love*,¹ in critiquing the American Civil Rights Movement, problematizes both American and African-American history and also uncovers the vexatious interrelationship of history and black identity, a concern that has been in the novelist's foreground since the publication of her historical trilogy comprising *Beloved*, *Jazz*, and *Paradise*.² If, like the trilogy, *Love* reexamines critically the traumatic history of African-Americans, it also is stridently political in articulating certain harsh truths about the Civil Rights movement. *Love* not only reformulates some of the crucial issues that impinge on African-American interests within American politics, but also departs significantly from the normative triumphalist discourses of the Civil Rights movement. This essay, through analyzing the complex family history of the protagonist Cosey, seeks to frame Morrison's *Love* as a critique of the American Civil Rights movement that had a devastating impact on the successful pre-World War II black community.

Set in the American Civil Rights era that corresponds with the period 1930–1990, Morrison's *Love* is about the complex legacy of Bill Cosey, a successful Jim Crow-era black entrepreneur, and the loss of his personal paradise in the wake of integration. As the novel opens, the reader learns that their competing claims for Cosey's property and legacy turn Christine, the protagonist's granddaughter, and Heed, his second wife and childhood friend of Christine, into mortal enemies. Then, there is May, Cosey's daughter-in-law and Christine's mother, who seizes every opportunity to drive a wedge between her daughter and Heed to sustain her supremacy. To some extent, this turbulent and warring world is redeemed by the stable presence of L, Cosey's cook and mediator, who, functioning as the narrator, ably illuminates the historical and social terrain of the novel. As the story unravels through the contrapuntal memory sequences and kaleidoscopic viewpoints of these characters, the novelist weaves and reweaves through the historical fabric, creating arresting vignettes of the intriguing legacies of slavery, racism, and the Civil Rights movement that attest

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¹ Toni Morrison, *Love* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2003). All subsequent references are to this edition and are cited parenthetically in the text following the abbreviation *L*.

² Toni Morrison, *Beloved* (1987; New York: Vintage, 1997); *Jazz* (1992; New York: Vintage, 2001); *Paradise* (1998; New York: Vintage, 1999).

to the temporality of history. Prior to developing a critical approach to these specific issues, however, it would be profitable to consider Morrison's observations on the Civil Rights era of the sixties, which forms the backdrop of *Love*: "In the legitimate and necessary drive for better jobs and housing, we abandoned the past and a lot of the truth and sustenance that went with it. And when Civil Rights became Black Power, we frequently chose exoticism over reality. The old verities that made being black and alive in this country the most dynamic existence imaginable—so much of what was satisfying, challenging and simply more interesting—were being driven underground—by blacks.... In trying to cure the cancer of slavery and its consequences, some healthy as well as malignant cells were destroyed."³

Although this ambivalent stance is dramatized extensively in the novel *Paradise*, it is only with *Love* that Morrison probes the ideological fissures and fault lines of the Civil Rights movement more deeply. In an interview with Carolyn Denard, Morrison categorically states: "I don't think this generation knows at all what was going on in 1947 as far as Civil Rights are concerned. They think it all began in the 60s. It's interesting to me to re-examine that period—50s, 60s, and 70s era."⁴ Likewise, in another interview with Jessica Jernigan, Morrison states that *Love* concerns the "impact [of] the Civil-Rights movement ... on the people who lived through it, [and] how they dealt with the complex questions the civil-rights movement raised." She adds that the transition from segregation to integration "was much more complicated, more deeply interesting than the popular history of the civil rights movement."⁵ Thus, by invoking the Civil Rights era as a backdrop to *Love*, Morrison not only shares its legacies with the present generation but also seeks to reexamine it in "a new way" so that her readers "would not be left with the simple notion that there was some agitation, some pain, and then, pow, everybody moved into whatever neighborhoods they wanted to and there was more access into the corridors of power, there was more money, you know, better jobs, etc."⁶ This revisionist exercise meant neither to convey Morrison's nostalgia for the era of segregation nor her cavalier attitude toward the accomplishments of the Civil Rights ideology. Instead, it testifies to the novelist's uncompromising engagement with the often unacknowledged ills of the movement. The novelist herself, in an interview with Adam Langer, clarifies her fictional vision thus: "It's not about the Civil Rights movement not being a good idea" but "just that there was a price."⁷ Undoubtedly, Morrison compellingly engages the loss or reduction of the Civil Rights project in the

³ Toni Morrison, "Rediscovering Black History," *New York Times Magazine*, 11 Aug. 1974: 14.

⁴ Carolyn Denard, "Blacks, Modernism, and the American South: An Interview with Toni Morrison," *Studies in Literary Imagination* 31.2 (1998): 13.

⁵ Jessica Jernigan, "A Love Story from Toni Morrison." 2 Oct. 2005. Accessed on 8 Dec. 2005 <<http://www.bordersstores.com/features/feature.jsp?file=morrison>>.

⁶ Toni Morrison, "Blues, Love and Politics," *The Nation* 278.20, 24 May 2004: 20.

⁷ Adam Langer, "Star Power," rev. of *Love*, by Toni Morrison, November/December 2003, 22 Jan. 2006 <<http://www.bookmagazine.com/issue31/morrison.shtml>>.

prevailing black nationalist discourses of Black Power that emerged in the mid-1960s.

Thus, Morrison's *Love* is a timely intervention in the ongoing debates on the Civil Rights movement and of the ideologies it imbricates. The novelist has a fellow traveler in critic Peter Applebombe, whose assessment of the Civil Rights era underscored the "mixed blessings" of the southern blacks "who won a measure of integration into a white world at the expense of some of the enduring and nurturing institutions of the old black one."⁸ Similarly, Glenn Eskew, reviewing the scenarios of transformation during the sixties, asserts: "Clearly the Civil Rights movement failed to solve the problems experienced by many black people. The movement ... gained access for a few while never challenging the structure of the system."⁹ Morrison's critique of Civil Rights exposes not only the economic and social implications for African-Americans but also the impact of the changing landscape of race relations in that era.

Emerging out of the Black Codes (1865–1866), the Jim Crow protocols legalized segregation and thus denied Civil Rights for the blacks for well over eighty years (1866–1953, the period encompassing Reconstruction, Post-Reconstruction, Harlem and Post-Harlem). To counter this *de jure* segregation, the blacks developed independent structures for sustaining their sociocultural life such as restaurants, hotels, movie houses, banks, and theaters. Cosey's hotel and resort is one such entrepreneurial venture that benefited from segregation. In the 1930s, when the "whole country began to live on Relief" (L 102) Cosey acquired a "broke-down 'whites only' club" (L 102) and transformed it into the "best-known vacation spot for coloured folk at the East Coast" (L 6). Brandishing the motto "the best good time this side of the law" (L 33), Cosey's resort was a haven where affluent black vacationers "swayed under the stars" (L 34), played whist and reveled in the vintage music of the age. If Cosey with his lavish hospitality enticed the guests, then L with her cuisine simply charmed them. So overwhelmed were the guests by the charismatic Cosey and the dazzling opulence of the resort that they hardly bothered about "disturbances in the service or [the occasional] drowning accidents" (L 33) on the beach. Much of the success also depended on May, Cosey's daughter-in-law. As L puts it: "The two of us [May and herself] were like the back of a clock. Mr. Cosey was its face telling you the time was now" (L 103). Further, this exclusive black clientele, as Morrison states elsewhere, "did not have to be wary or concerned about white people—[but] could just enjoy [themselves]."¹⁰ Thus, this fictional Southern resort, which has a definitive correlation with the actual black owned resorts,

⁸ Peter Applebombe, *Dixie Rising: How the South Is Shaping American Values, Politics and Culture* (New York: Random House Torchbooks, 1996) 17.

⁹ Glenn T. Eskew, *But for Birmingham: The Local and National Movements in the Civil Rights Struggle* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1997) 331.

¹⁰ Jernigan, online.

becomes an emblem, as Morrison would have it, of “all the very successful, profitable black businesses that existed during periods of segregation.”¹¹

Despite “some spotty rancor” (L 41) that prevailed against Cosey, his thriving ownership of the resort infused a “tick of entitlement” and a sense of “longing turned to belonging” (L 42) in his clients as well as in the poor black neighborhood. Even those who couldn’t afford the comforts of the resort, states Morrison, were unequivocally “proud of it.”¹² For instance, “[c]annery workers and fishing families ... housemaids ... laundresses, fruit pickers, as well as teachers in broken-down schools” (L 41–42) all deeply prized Cosey’s hotel and resort. Even Sandler Gibbons, Cosey’s companion and critic, recalls his sense of fulfillment in “watch[ing] the visitors, admir[ing] their cars and the quality of their luggage; [and] ... listen[ing] to the distant music and dance ... in the dark” (L 41). Vida, Sandler’s wife, notwithstanding “the good fortune of her present job” (L 35), cherishes fondly the memory of her previous employment as receptionist at Cosey’s resort. Despite being exclusionist, Cosey always employed the local people and thus redeemed them from the monotonous drudgery of the fish canneries and slave plantations. Morrison’s narrative even alludes to Cosey saving Sandler and Vida from the unenticing prospect of cannery work. True to Sandler’s rumination, “the resort affected them all. Provided them with work other than fish and pack crab; attracted outsiders who offered years of titillation and agitated talk. Otherwise they [common black people] never saw anybody but themselves” (L 39).

With desegregation gaining momentum in the early fifties, the collapse of the resort was inevitable. Paradoxically, even while “the Brown Ruling and the outrage caused by Till’s lynching helped set the stage for the emergence of the modern civil rights movement”¹³ (events that, though not spelt out in Morrison’s text, seem to color its mood), Cosey’s clients started abandoning his resort in search of more inclusive options. The smell of the cannery, feuding women, and “raggedy clientele” (L 36) remain the ostensible causes for the collapse of Cosey’s resort. Morrison, however, contextualizes this fall in underscoring the contingent historical forces that beleaguer the protagonist’s business. Thanks to the unrestricted mobility that Civil Rights made possible by the sixties, the affluent black customers, who earlier “bragged about Cosey vacations in the forties,” abruptly shifted their loyalties to the “Hyatts, Hiltons, [and] cruises to the Bahamas and Ocho Rios” (L 8). If the former patrons found Cosey’s hotel redundant in the wake of integration, then “the new crowd” (L 35), preoccupied with “boycotts, legislation, [and] voting rights” (L 171), did not even feel the

¹¹ Jernigan, online.

¹² Barbara Lipkien Gershenbaum, rev. of *Love*, by Toni Morrison, 15 Nov. 2005 <<http://www.bookreporter.com/reviews/0375409440>>.

¹³ Aldon D Morris, “A Retrospective on the Civil Rights Movement: Political and Intellectual Landmarks,” *Annual Review of Sociology* 25.1 (1999): 522.

need to relate to this resort. This unforeseen “withdrawal” of the affluent “class” of tourists, as Sandler notes, “was hard on everyone” (L 39). And the inevitable collapse of Cosey’s resort signals not only the end of “the best good times” (L 33) but also the weakening of black solidarity and attendant values characteristic of the segregation era. Elaine Showalter reads this typically strong evocation of loss and failure in African-American history in the light of “the Jewish-American experience of the great resorts of the Catskills, or even the Butlins holidays that reassured the British working-class before package tours abroad.”¹⁴ In portraying the fall of Cosey’s resort owing to the forces of integration, Morrison mourns the passing of a legacy that defined the integrity of the black community.

The bizarre turn of events that brings down Cosey’s fortunes leaves May, the dutiful daughter-in-law and daughter of a preacher, “crack-brained” (L 8). Paradoxically, May conceived her life as dependent “on colored people who rocked boats only at sea” (L 96). In trying to console herself, May “forced agreement with the like-minded” and took issue “with those who began to wonder about dancing by the sea while children blew apart in Sunday school; about holding up property laws while neighborhoods fell in flames” (L 80). True to expectations, as the Civil Rights movement “swelled and funerals, marches, and riots were all the news” (L 80), May’s world also steadily crumbles. Thus, in showing May, a female character, register the loss of political focus the Civil Rights movement had suffered, Morrison testifies to how it is the women who always pay the price for the excesses of men.

May also serves to objectify the fear of violence and racial unrest that characteristically incites both the blacks and the whites into seeking “an excuse to hang somebody” (104). Refusing to “adjust ... to whatever gear the driver chose” (L 100), like her daughter Christine, May declares war on the world and fights it alone (L 99–100). Forever frantic and furious, May imagines “rebellion in the waiters” and “weapons in the hands of the yard help” (L 81). Anticipating a possible invasion of Cosey’s hotel, May desperately hides “emergency underwear, photographs, keepsakes, mementos” (L 81). “[F]loating through the rooms, flapping over the grounds, [and] hiding behind doors,” May, like a “minstrel-show spook” (L 82), begins “to stutter” and “contradict” (L 80), confronted with the social turbulence of the 1960s. In the end, “assigning herself the part of the resort’s sole protector,” May pitches herself “beyond discussion” (L 80). Even the hotel’s clientele who were initially sympathetic to May “treated her with the courtesy” given to “a stump” or “just got up and left when she entered their company” (L 81). In depicting the fortunes of May, Morrison interrogates the traditional triumphalist rhetoric of the Civil Rights movement

¹⁴ Elaine Showalter, “A Tangled Web,” rev. of *Love*, by Toni Morrison, *The Guardian*, 29 Nov. 2003. Accessed on 20 Jan. 2005 <<http://books.guardian.co.uk/reviews/generalfiction>>.

and highlights “the ways in which the ... movement ... could be experienced as a threat—not just by white people, but by black people, too.”¹⁵

While May views the political turmoil and affirmative-action legislation of the 1960s as a threat to her class, she also sees in Heed a potential risk to her status. Thus, Cosey’s marriage with Heed, as L recalls, “was the opening day of May’s personal December 7” (L 137). While L’s reference is clearly to the Slavery Protocol signed on 7 December 1953, which abolished segregation in the United States, it is employed here in an ironic sense, for Cosey’s marriage to Heed marked the beginning of the end of May’s authority, leaving her shiftless. To compound the situation, Christine’s joining a radical political organization turns out to be “a big disappointment to her [May]” (L 141). The frequent altercations between May and Christine over affirmative action is a case in point. During a telephone conversation, May persuades Christine to “quiet down” (L 165) her political aims. But Christine, consumed with revolutionary fervor, reacts by screaming: “Three hundred years of quiet not enough for you? We’ll lose everything! All we slaved for!” (L 165). Interestingly, L also recalls the decades of bitterness between May and Christine “over Malcolm X, Reverend King, Selma, Newark, Chicago, Detroit, and Watts” (L 141). Associating Christine with misguided political radicalism, May faults her for betraying the cause of her race and embracing anarchic ways.

Strangely enough, May’s intimate knowledge of the radical shifts within the African-American society in the wake of the sixties’ revolution undermines her will and passion to live leading to her demise. Morrison unmistakably enmeshes the personal life of May into the political turmoil of the sixties, as it were, to map the vexatious ideological restructuring in the African-American community. May’s life not only exemplifies the traumatic impact of desegregation and the lapses of the Civil Rights movement on blacks, but also the polarization of their everyday life. Significantly, in portraying the emotional insecurity of May, Morrison dramatizes the conflict between “the 60’s and 70’s mentality, and an older mentality.”¹⁶ Viewed in this light, May’s personal transition from normalcy to “outright brilliance” (L 97) is symptomatic of the ideological transition and the crisis of values among African-Americans in the late 1960s.

If Morrison registers the ideological shift and racial unrest of the late 1960s through the traumas suffered by May, the novelist gives the reader an insight into the sexual politics of the Civil Rights organizations through Christine. After much nomadic turbulence, Christine, to the dismay of May, joins an autonomous seventeen-member radical group. “Pumped by seething exhilaration and purpose,” Christine enjoys the work of the organization and particularly, admires Fruit, the Civil Rights activist, who strikes her as “fierce, uncorruptible,

¹⁵ Jernigan, online.

¹⁶ Denard 12.

[and] demanding" (L 163). But their relationship is estranged when Fruit placidly accepts the rape of a female student by a fellow volunteer. Though Fruit mourned the "human stupidity and retrograde politics," he neither "got around to" expel nor care to include the immoral behavior of the accused volunteer in the much-touted "list of Unacceptable Behaviour" (L 166).

Appropriately, when the Civil Rights "issues changed" and "moved from streets and doorways" to "offices and conferences in elegant hotels" (L 167), Christine experiences disillusionment with her ideological convictions. Although the later Civil Rights groups would promise across-the-board equality, the black power movement, in its bid for "hip new students with complex strategies," abandoned the common "street-worker-baby-sitter-cook-mimeographing-marching-nut-and-raisin-carrying woman" (L 167). Feeling estranged and hurt, Christine and Fruit "parted as friends" (L 167) after their irreconcilable differences over the rape incident. Christine's emotional withdrawal from her ideological past is evident in the climatic moment of the novel that shows her conversing with Heed:

Was it [Revolution] worth it?
No question.
I called you a fool, but I was jealous too. The excitement and all.
It had that.
You sound sad.
No. It's just. Well, it's like we started out being sold, got free of it, then sold ourselves to the highest bidder. (L 185)

By depicting the ideologue Christine's unsavory experiences, Morrison draws the reader's attention to the social evils of sexism and racism that bedeviled both the Civil Rights and Black Nationalist movements.

To conclude, the novel through its forceful dramatization of the intergenerational conflicts compels a reevaluation of the social history of the Civil Rights era. Immersed in the most divisive and explosive decade, the 1960s, *Love* articulates the trials and the tribulations of this transitional era on the black middle class. Even when Morrison concedes that the Civil Rights movement was "a great social upheaval in the life of black people"¹⁷ with "real and important"¹⁸ consequences, the novelist through her depiction of the collapse of the Cosey family allegorizes "what may be lost [to African-Americans] when the Civil Rights struggle was won."¹⁹ Thus, by reading the downfall of Cosey's heavenly

¹⁷ Toni Morrison, "Unspeakable Things Unspoken: The Afro-American Presence in American Literature," *Modern Critical Views*, ed. Harold Bloom (New York: Chelsea House, 1990) 218.

¹⁸ Toni Morrison, "Blues, Love and Politics" 20.

¹⁹ Lorenzo Thomas, rev. of *Love*, by Toni Morrison, *Houston Chronicle* 30 November 2003. Accessed 20 December 2005 <<http://www.chron.com/CDA/archives/archive.mpl?>>.

resort as an elegy to the passing of an era, Morrison complicates the fight for Civil Rights as “a challenge of communal definition and cultural identity.”²⁰ Further, by tracing the ideological transition from integration and black nationalism to group militancy and bourgeois nationalism through the life stories of May and Christine, Morrison teases out the ideological devolution of the later Civil Rights movement. In the final analysis, *Love* makes a firm statement on “the cost of desegregation and integration” on “the black community’s vitality that historically sustained its ... families in the worst of times.”²¹ Thus, Morrison’s *Love* not only interrogates and deconstructs the traditional triumphalist rhetoric of the Civil Rights movement but also undertakes to rethink the ills of the movement from a black perspective.

²⁰ Richard Schur, “Dream or Nightmare? Roth, Morrison, and America,” *Philip Roth Studies* 1.1 (2005): 28.

²¹ Gerald Anthony Foster, “The Ills of Integration: A Black Perspective,” *Dream and Reality*, ed. Jeannine Swift (New York: Greenwood Press, 1991) 77.